

Growing with Nature

Highlights through Green Minds



Produced by Tess Wilmot & Ian Smith
(Food Plymouth Core Enabling Team)

Growing with Nature Highlights through Green Minds Report

Produced by Tess Wilmot & Ian Smith (Food Plymouth Core Enabling Team)

August 2023

Contents

Summary	2
Context	3
Illustration - The Green Minds and Growing with Nature Collaboratory relationship...	4
Reach and Impact	4
Growing with Nature in Numbers	5
<i>The Wilding Principles</i>	
<i>Support people and nature together</i>	6-9
<i>Develop co-stewardship for land management</i>	10-13
<i>Create resilient local economies</i>	13-16
<i>Deliver nature recovery at multiple scales</i>	16-17
<i>Secure benefits for the long-term</i>	17-18
Opportunities going forward and Reflective Learning	19-20
Appendices	21-24
Individual case study - A.B.	
Community case study - Blockhouse Park	
Community case study - Snapdragons	
Groups, organisations and businesses attending Growing with Nature events and training	

Summary

This report covers the ***Growing with Nature (GWN) Collaboratory*** involving the Plymouth City Council and Partners ***Green Minds*** project, ***Food Plymouth*** - the city's local sustainable food partnership, ***Plymouth Octopus Project (POP)*** - Plymouth's VCS infrastructure organisation, and ***The Data Place*** digital mapping team. *Growing with Nature* launched in June 2022 in response to shared aims and challenges, identified opportunities and potential synergies. Connecting individuals and community groups with Plymouth's green and blue spaces and each other, mapping spaces and initiatives, supporting growing projects with people and nature in mind, facilitating action and capability building around preparing community groups for engaging in co-stewardship of natural spaces were key aims.

Stuart Jones from Plymouth Octopus Project explains: "POP found after COVID a rise in groups forming around growing and nature. This resulted in an increase in requests for advice, of which POP is not an expert. However, across the city we had Plymouth City Council's Green Minds initiative and Food Plymouth network of groups and projects, in which there was expertise to answer such questions. It made complete sense that we utilised the local expertise from the sector to support these new groups and to bring in existing groups so they could make links with the knowledge base in the city to support and enhance their own projects. The GWN network members are now able to contact each other for advice, ideas and support without the need for POP, thus becoming more independent. The new network is a great example of when statutory and VCSE (Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise) collaborate to boost each other's projects."

During the period June 2022 to August 2023: Five Growing with Nature Learning and Networking events, five All Ways Apples project activities, and two Permaculture training and development courses were delivered; 682 people took part in Growing with Nature activities and events, with 352 taking part in more than one; Growing with Nature Network events attracted people from 59 community groups, organisations, agencies, social enterprises and businesses; 109 green and blue spaces and projects and / or the groups and organisations associated with their care and management were mapped (as part of an on-going exercise); and the Food Plymouth *Growing Community Abundance* Facebook page was extended to include Growing with Nature.

This report incorporates the **Wilding Principles**, based on Rewilding Britain's principles: Support people and nature together; develop co-stewardship for land management; create resilient local economies; deliver nature recovery at multiple scales; and secure benefits for the long-term. It outlines significant impact and outcomes in each of these domains, for example: Participants remarking that GWN had provided them with a much clearer overview of eco and growing projects in and around Plymouth; people reporting that engaging with GWN had reawakened their passion for nature; individuals connecting with each other and staying in touch outside of GWN activities; community groups supporting and informally mentoring each other; people and organisations growing in confidence and capability in various ways, including around co-stewarding spaces; and participants perceiving and reporting significant benefits to their physical and mental health.

The Green Minds funded phase of Growing with Nature has created a living legacy through the impacts and outcomes delivered to date, the online GWN map and the expanded Growing Community Abundance + Growing With Nature Facebook groups being a high-profile outward-facing expression of this. In addition to delivering against the Wilding Principles, GWN has made significant contributions to Plymouth's drive towards **Sustainable Food Places Silver standard**, which is facilitated by Food Plymouth. Going forward, The Data Place are maintaining the GWN online map for two years, Plymouth Octopus Project have pledged on-going support, and Food Plymouth has committed to continue running the GWN Network events on a quarterly basis for the next 12 months.

Context

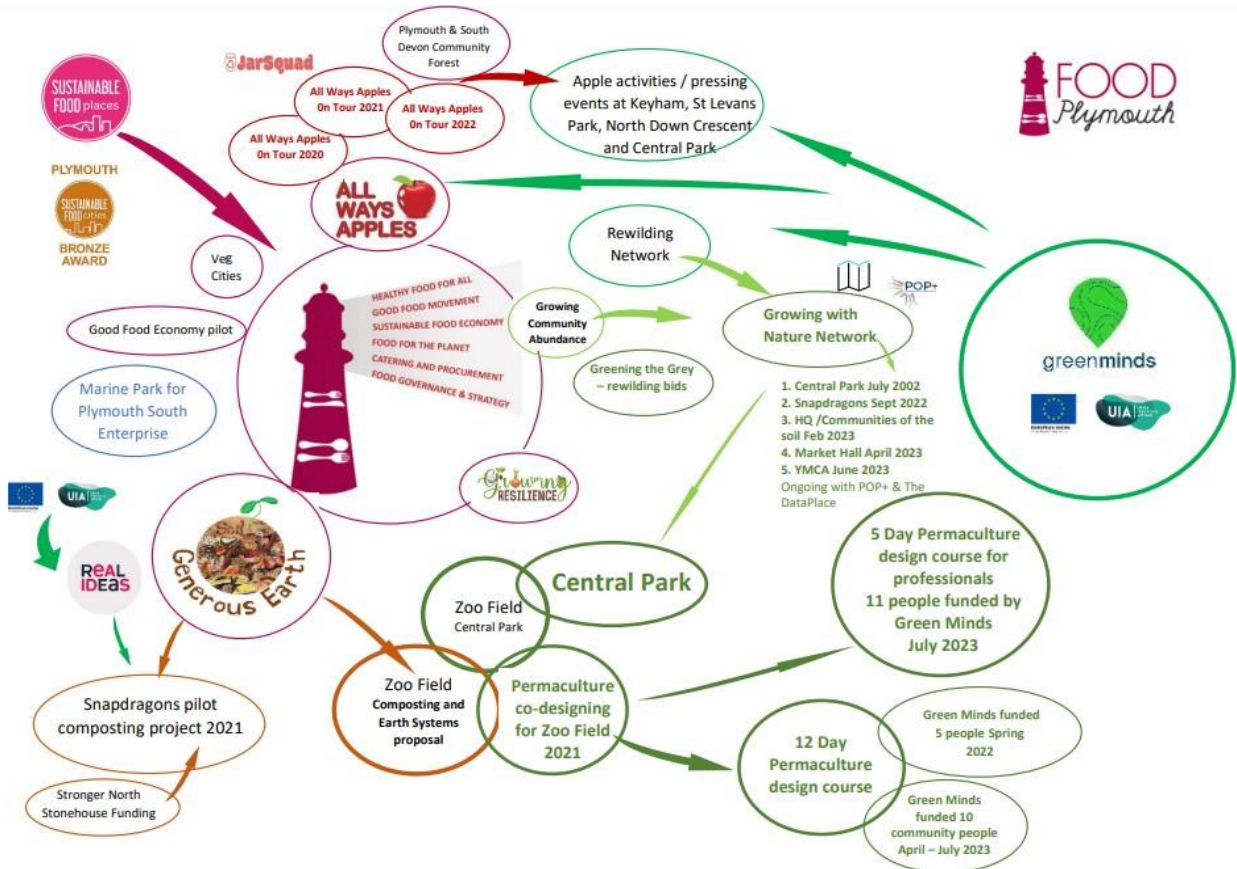
Across Plymouth, individuals, community groups and organisations are taking action to support biodiversity by wilding grass verges, creating new habitats, planting trees, inspiring connection with nature and much more. Following the first ***Plymouth Rewilding Network*** workshop in December 2020 with Green Minds, needs were identified to connect people who wanted to take wilding action and provide guidance on how to complete wilding projects. Throughout 2020 and 2021, a ***Green Minds*** team (primarily drawn from Plymouth City Council and Devon Wildlife Trust) ran a series of networking events and produced online resources to support wilding action. All of these updates and resources can be found on the Green Minds [Growing with Nature](#) and [Knowledge Hub](#) webpages.

In June 2022, Green Minds (in this case primarily ***Plymouth City Council*** and digital specialists ***The Data Place***) teamed up with Plymouth’s local sustainable food partnership ***Food Plymouth*** and the city’s community and voluntary infrastructure organisation ***Plymouth Octopus Project (POP)***, who were working to achieve the common aims of connecting people, facilitating action, mapping spaces and initiatives and supporting growing projects with people and nature in mind. This led to the Plymouth Rewilding Network evolving to become known as the ***Growing with Nature (GWN) Collaboratory*** – involving a series of seasonal events run by the partners identified above. As part of this collaboration, Food Plymouth was commissioned to lead on the GWN Networking events and to create additional opportunities for connectivity, learning and increased sense of wellbeing through connection to nature. These included five ***seasonal networking events*** all of which were held in different parts of the city, five ***All Ways Apples*** events focused in Green Minds project areas and a ***12 day Permaculture Design course*** for community growers and green space guardians, plus a special ***five day Introduction to Permaculture course*** for Plymouth’s Community Builders, Plymouth City Council staff and other professionals. The permaculture courses were facilitated by permaculture designer, teacher and edible landscape specialist Tess Wilmot from Food Plymouth and international permaculture specialist Klaudia van Gool. To demonstrate the impact of the five day introduction to permaculture course, an [evaluation film](#) was produced to complement this report.

Another key element of the GWN initiative has been to extend and collate digital mapping to show growing and green and blue spaces across the city. The mapping has been led by ***The Data Place*** with input from participants at the networking events and from the teams at Green Minds, Food Plymouth and Plymouth Octopus Project. This is creating a useful and easily accessible online tool which will make it simpler for people to find out what is happening in their locality and get involved. The map includes organisations supporting this work, examples of wilding projects, community food growing, community gardens, orchards and different aspects of green and blue spaces in and around Plymouth:

[Growing with Nature - a map of Plymouth's nature spaces and groups](#)

The Green Minds and Growing with Nature Collaboratory relationship



Reach and Impact

The following pages demonstrate the reach and impact of GWN since Food Plymouth’s involvement from June 2022 to August 2023, illustrating how this work links with the *Urban Wilding Principles* and how the different strands support a more natural growing movement in the city. The report also demonstrates alignment with the three domains of **Sustainable / Regenerative Development – Environmental, Social and Economic** – and five of the six strands of the **Sustainable Food Places** framework, in particular **Food for the Planet; Healthy Food for All; Good Food Movement; Sustainable Food Economy; and Food Governance and Strategy** (the latter notably around the co-stewardship of green and growing spaces). The collaborative nature of the work also accords with Food Plymouth’s **Collective Impact** model.

Growing with Nature in Numbers

Origins - before Growing with Nature:

Plymouth Rewilding Network - December 2020 – October 2021 (held mainly online owing to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions)

Six online events: three workshops, one focus group, one Q&A sessions plus one social event. 188 participants

One face to face event: a social gathering in Blockhouse Park. 18 participants

During Growing with Nature:

682 people attended the entire Growing with Nature mix of activities outlined below, of which 352 took part in more than one.

Growing with Nature Network events – June 2022 to August 2023

Five face to face Learning and Networking events in five different locations. 243 participants from 59 different groups / organisations / businesses. 107 people taking part in more than one event.

All Ways Apples on Tour – Autumn 2022

Four face to face apple pressing events and one tree care session. 411 participants, 229 of whom took part in more than one event.

12 day Permaculture Course for Community Growers – April to July 2023

15 participants, 12 of whom were new to Growing with Nature. 10 places were funded by Green Minds, three places were self-funded by participants and two places were funded by community organisations.

Five day Introduction to Permaculture Course for Professionals – July 2023

13 participants, all of whom were new to Growing with Nature.

Online platforms

In August 2023 the existing Food Plymouth [Growing Community Abundance Facebook](#) Group was extended to encompass the Growing with Nature Network and has grown from 143 members to 169.

The [digital mapping](#) element of the project has mapped 109 green and blue spaces and projects and / or the groups / organisations associated with them.

Health, wellbeing and nature connection

Hosting the activities in green spaces encouraged nature connection. Feedback from participants showed their health and wellbeing benefitted as a result. Evaluation responses from participants revealed the following impacts: 28 strongly agreed and 121 agreed with the statement 'Spending time in nature was good for my physical health', with the same numbers reporting benefits to their mental health too.

The Wilding Principles

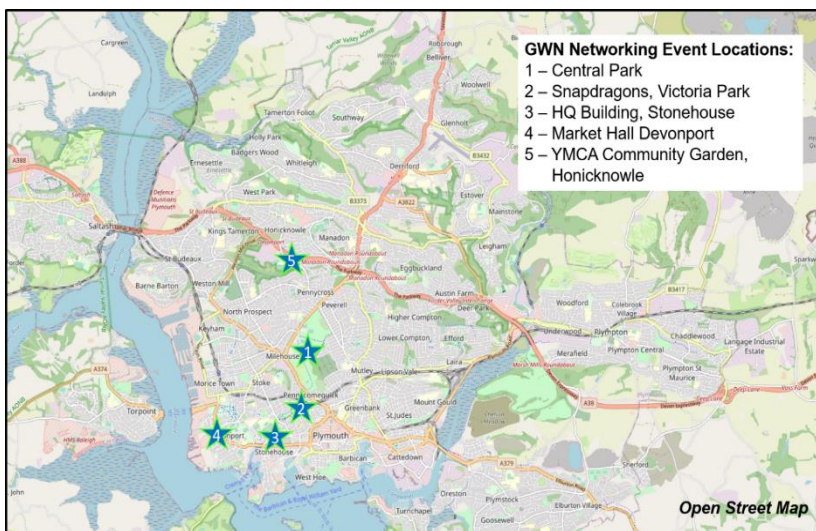
Support people and nature together

The **Growing with Nature (GWN)** initiative has grown out of the **Green Minds Rewilding Network**, Food Plymouth’s long-standing work around **edible landscapes, foraging** and the **Growing Community Abundance** project, and Plymouth Octopus Project’s involvement with **communities** and **neighbourhoods** across the city, many of which have or are starting community gardens. This has created additional opportunities for participation and involvement beyond the Green Minds specific target areas. So GWN has reached a wider audience and is for groups with a broader range of interests. Furthermore, GWN is quietly influencing the drive towards more nature-friendly gardening and growing.

Multiple feedback gathered at GWN events, the Green Minds conference and engagement across sectors indicates that many people are unaware of the number and quality of green space and growing projects in and around Plymouth. This has been addressed to some extent by GWN and the project will continue to make it simpler for people to find out about and / or get involved in local initiatives. Each GWN networking event has been at a different venue and to date, all of these have been at community growing settings.



GWN also shares a [Facebook group](#) with Growing Community Abundance, its older sister project. GWN has enabled people to connect and share with each other, learn about opportunities and exchange knowledge and skills. The growing projects visited embodies different characteristics, experiences and challenges. Feedback has shown that meeting and talking with other growers has been of huge benefit to GWN Network members. Indeed, some of the groups have supported others in the Network with advice and funding bid writing. An example of this is **YGrowers** and **Plymouth YMCA** supporting **Woolwell in Bloom** around project design and funding applications.



The GWN Collaboratory has organised events in Central Park, at Snapdragons, Communities of the Soil / Diversity Business Incubator, Devonport Market Hall and Plymouth YMCA. A variety of individuals, community groups and organisations attended the GWN networking events. Many groups attended multiple events and most groups had an environmental background; however many groups were focused on health and wellbeing, and some were education focused or social enterprises.

- To date a total of 243 people have attended the first five GWN events, 136 of whom were unique participants
- 13 of these people said that they considered themselves to be disabled

- 43 people lived close to the venues
- Topics included a guided walk in Zoo Field in Central Park to see the changes there through permaculture design, composting, community growing, microgreens in winter, plant and seed sharing, growing in inner-city spaces using African vertical grow bags and employing the national Good to Grow Harvest-ometer online produce measuring tool.
- Seven community gardens have signed up to the Good to Grow network and Plymouth Community Homes – the city’s majority Housing Association - is also interested in implementing it across all their green spaces and community growing projects.
- Each event has had natural ecosystems at the heart, encouraging growing with nature and valuing the wild to encourage more wildlife in the city.

The **All Ways Apples on Tour** events were held at five green spaces. They included four apple pressing events and one orchard tree care session. There were 411 people involved in the Always Apples events and 33% were children. Over 200 litres of juice were produced at these events. The juice was enjoyed by people helping and passers-by plus the wide variety of apples were sampled and shared. Keyham Green Places saved the juice for sharing via their food bank.

The venues were:

- Poole Farm
- Central Park (by the Family Tree Field)
- Keyham Green Places
- St Levan Park Community Orchard
- North Down Crescent Park, Keyham



The All Ways Apples events were an opportunity to bring local people together, get to know their local orchards and meet people already involved. The apple pressing activities helped to engage new audiences and provide opportunities for conversations about nature to happen. This was particularly important while co-designing the **Keyham Greenspace Improvements** alongside the community, including two new community orchards. People learned how to identify and care for apple trees, the apple pressing process, and the benefits of growing these trees for food and wildlife. Some participants brought apples to be pressed into juice for sharing. The benefits included sharing skills, reducing waste, enjoying the diversity of local apples and supporting the community orchards.



The **Central Park** event was next to the Family Tree Field which was an ideal place to engage lots of people out enjoying the park on a Saturday. The press was busy making lots of juice with apples brought by locals from allotments and gardens. There was lots of interest in the local varieties including the Plympton Pippin growing in the Family Tree Field and the two orchards in Central Park at Zoo Field and beside the Swarthmore Allotments.

North Down Crescent Park is a key part of the [Keyham Green Space Plan](#) with fruit trees being part of a larger scheme of tree planting. The apple pressing activities created the ideal opportunities for residents to talk about the park and find out about the benefits of the new trees which have been planted for both wildlife and people to enjoy.



St Levan Park

This event involved caring for the apple and pear trees with the local Neighbourhood Watch community orchard group and children from nearby Ford Primary School. The children enjoyed the fresh apple juice and sampled different varieties of apples. Practical work included mulching and pruning the trees. The children were delighted when we found two lovely toads under the trees while mulching the soil. BBC Spotlight joined us to film our activities as part of a series about local orchards:

[Click here to watch the event segment on local news.](#)



The **Permaculture training courses** arose out of the need to support people involved in community projects, co-stewardship and green space management. This encompassed many aspects of nature-friendly growing, including helping groups to work well together thus enabling thriving community projects.

Permaculture is very much about reconnecting with nature and learning from and working with natural systems, including allowing wild spaces to thrive in cities and smaller urban spaces. It therefore aligns with and delivers on the wilding aspect of the Green Minds work.

“It has been a truly profound experience for me to begin to understand the importance of Permaculture Design and its principles and ethics.”

Community growers from the GWN networking events were invited to apply for Green Minds funded places on the 12 day Permaculture Design course. The five day Introduction to

Permaculture course was adapted to support professionals working within communities. The two courses were custom designed to enable participants to take their learning back to their projects and workplaces and share their new skills. Please see the Blockhouse Park mini case study in the appendix.

The Permaculture Design Course had 15 participants, 10 funded by Green Minds funding, one participant was disabled (partially sighted), seven were local to the main teaching site in Victoria Park and five people identified themselves as Asian, Chinese or Mixed ethnicity.

The Introduction course had 15 participants who are working in communities in the city. Seven live locally near Victoria Park. The feedback at the end showed how they had really connected with nature and gained confidence. One participant said it had reawakened his passion for nature. There was also a feeling of connection with the other people on the group and the ongoing group support after the course finished.



Participants on the Permaculture Design Course learning about the ecological principles

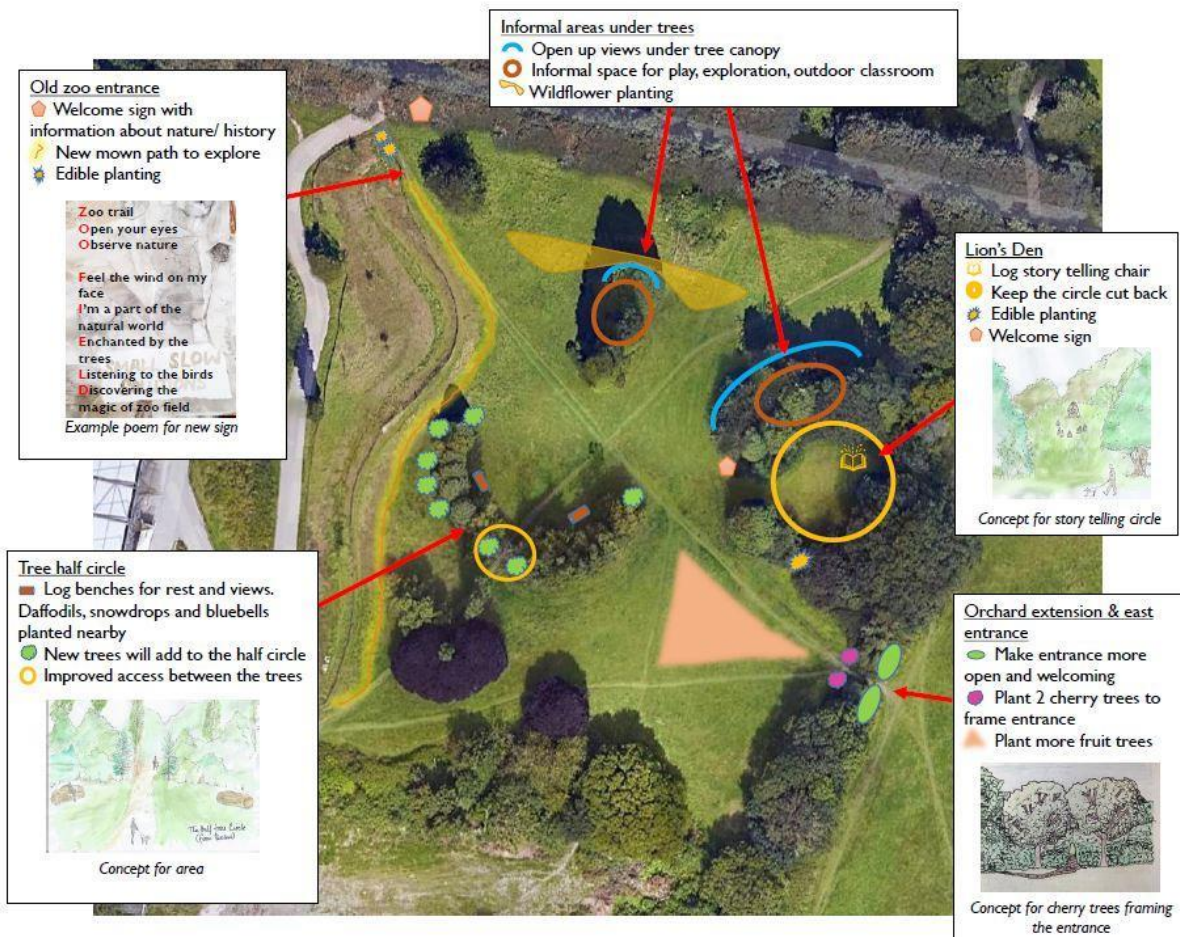
Develop co-stewardship for land management

Across Plymouth there are many diverse examples of nature being supported to thrive and associated creative ways to encourage people to appreciate, learn from and adopt best practice – much of this was originally seeded by **Stepping Stones to Nature**, **Active Neighbourhoods** and enhanced by **Green Minds**. These inspirational land-based projects and the people who care for them are an amazing resource for the city to encourage even more to happen. Growing with Nature has evolved to support and grow this movement and help it flourish.

The name **Growing with Nature** came about partly due to different perceptions within communities to the word **'rewilding'**, with some people considering this to mean untamed, neglected and untidy, or unrelated to gardening or growing. We wanted to be inclusive, bring people with us and support a wider range of participants, helping them on a journey towards more nature friendly approaches and practices. Our rationale was to educate and persuade, helping people to incrementally see the advantages and accept more 'wildness', thereby creating the conditions to introduce more wildlife friendly spaces and methods within their projects.

"I have been in parks for 33 years keeping things tidy, pruning and cutting. Now I understand. Taken my head space out of the formal Victorian park. Never thought I would feel this way. Huge change. Amazing."

Holding the **permaculture training courses** at Green Minds project sites, **Snappdragons** in Victoria Park and **Poole Farm** city farm, allowed participants to immerse themselves in nature and **'see with new eyes.'** Using permaculture design skills, people were empowered to observe, analyse, research and find solutions in a wide range of settings and scales for their design exercises. Every permaculture design is different, designed to be appropriate for the people involved and also taking into account that **'earth repair'** is needed for the site and the wildlife. The permaculture course has contributed to the Green Minds approach of upskilling and training council staff in innovative land management approaches that are better for people and wildlife.



Training in Land Management – Capacity and Capability building

In 2021 (prior to GWN) Food Plymouth worked with a group to observe, survey and co-design **Zoo Field** in Central Park to increase the diversity of planting through a series of permaculture design sessions. The design team included apprentices from Plymouth City Council, students from the Arts University Plymouth, a National Trust worker, and local residents. This pilot project has supported a gentle adaptation and improvement of diversity in Zoo Field, working with nature with an evolving design and contributing towards [Plymouth's Climate Emergency Action Plan](#). The participants came up with lots of creative ideas to feed into the final design and this has been useful in their ongoing work as well. Part of the design was how to manage the southern end of Zoo Field with an exciting proposal developing around composting and creating an Earth Systems project with the council and Food Plymouth's Generous Earth project. In early 2022 there was a series of activities in Zoo Field to implement elements of the design.

Permaculture design for Zoo Field

The first GWN network event in June 2022 featured a guided walk around Zoo Field.

Building on the success of participants from Poole Farm and Green Minds Landscape Technician apprentices attending the Zoo Field permaculture co-design course in 2021, and the Permaculture Design Course in 2022, GWN organised two bespoke permaculture courses, one for communities and one for professionals in 2023. These were designed to create more capacity and capability in individuals, communities and organisations. The aim was to encourage and develop skills around working with people and managing land more effectively for wildlife and people, and to encourage co-designing and co-stewardship.

"This was so well organised and a great event, it's been so useful. I've connected with so many people. I had no idea how much was happening across the city and will be following up with a lot of people after tonight!"



Guided walk in Zoo Field

The **12 day Permaculture Design Course for Communities** took place over three months during the spring of 2023, based at Snapdragons in Stonehouse (one of the Green Minds grant winners) with visits to Poole Farm and [Pentiddy](#), a permaculture project in Cornwall. The Green Minds GWN funding enabled 10 places to be free of charge to participants and their organisations. The places were allocated to community growers and people wanting to support their communities, care for green spaces and be equipped for co-stewardship. An additional place was paid for via different funding for another community member from Blockhouse Park in Stoke. Plymouth's central museum, The Box, also funded one of their team to attend the course. Three individuals paid for their own places, bringing the total participants to 15 people. The participants were a diverse group of people ranging in age from their 20s through to their 60s with five people from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

The **Five Day Introduction to Permaculture for Professionals 'Practical Permaculture Skills for Professionals building communities'** was designed to share inspirational permaculture methods and practical tools to inspire and resource professional people and workers, equipping them with knowledge and skills to better support communities involved in food growing and environmental projects. The course was an expanded and specially tailored version of the standard two-day introduction to permaculture course, by including additional community building / people care elements of

permaculture to reflect the needs of the participants and their organisations. It took place over five full days in July 2023, comprising two days at Poole Farm and three days at Snapdragons in Stonehouse and included a site visit to Blockhouse Park.



Learning about the Web of Life with participants on the Introduction to Permaculture for Professionals at Poole Farm

“I have seen myself through the mirror of this group. This has helped me feel clearer on all my questions of myself in my family life, my work and my bigger purpose in life.
The problems are the solutions!”

Motivations for attending the course from Real Ideas:

“I think this course would be of great benefit to us personally, through our new roles as Community Lead and Programme Lead in the Nature and Neighbourhoods Business Unit at Real Ideas and in particularly the wider groups, communities and organisations we work with. The core purpose of the Nature & Neighbourhoods team is about making positive, local level change happen in and from Devonport, including improving the natural and built environment around Devonport Guildhall, looking at community leadership and the facilities, activities, and opportunities available. From this we will work with and help other communities make local level change happen for themselves, in their neighbourhoods. Our work has always centred around communities and developing enterprising ideas and in the last few years has included the natural environment within this. By taking part in the permaculture course, I think this will further improve our individual skills sets and wider systems thinking approaches to the work we do. Whether that's supporting the development of green community led businesses, partnership work with communities to create people-led nature-based solutions to green spaces or supporting young people with the skills they need for the future green jobs.

Personally, I have wanted to undergo permaculture training for a while now, having picked bits up from delivering the green thinker's programme and experiencing the benefits of applying the principles of permaculture, looking at a whole systems approach and sitting back and observing over time."

The participants included:

- Four horticultural gardeners from Plymouth City Council's Street Services team
- Three people from Plymouth's new team of Community Builders
- Two people from Real Ideas Organisation (RIO)
- One person from Plymouth Environmental Action (PEA)
- The Whitleigh Green Connector (from Whitleigh Big Local)
- Two directors of a new environmental and educational social enterprise called *Wise Roots CIC*

This diverse group of people brought significant knowledge and skills, creating a rich environment to learn together. An additional guest tutor, Sid Hill, was invited to present his permaculture experience with his landscape business creating ecological garden designs. This was especially appreciated by the Plymouth City Council parks team.

A **film** about the Introduction to Permaculture Course was made by social documentary makers Fotonow to help record and disseminate the learning and feedback from the course. [Click here to watch the film.](#)

Create resilient local economies

The GWN events and training courses have involved and benefitted self-employed facilitators, businesses, and larger organisations. The businesses include ***Snapdragons, Wise Roots, JarSquad, Inner City Seeds, Plymouth Environmental Action*** and partner organisations like the ***Real Ideas Organisation*** and the ***Diversity Business Incubator***. Please see the appendix for a list of the many organisations and community groups who have engaged with GWN.

"Feeling really excited. Felt I knew nothing when we started. Much more knowledge now and it feels more achievable."

The ***direct and indirect economic (and other) benefits*** have arisen through: the seasonal networking events; the provision of information, advice and support; signposting; the permaculture courses; hiring venues; and appointing and paying people to facilitate activities.

One of the results of the GWN permaculture training is that we have a larger, more skilled range of people with improved knowledge and practical skills returning to their communities and businesses, sharing with their co-workers, volunteers and friends. This includes knowing where to get local support and information when needed and a supportive network of allies to offer advice and practical help. The permaculture training and developmental opportunities were designed to support learning, build capacity and capability in communities and in the participants' organisations and highlight the beneficial connections between us all. This creates opportunities, capacity and skills to share the knowledge to the communities and enterprises across the city via *community engagement, nature friendly, growing activities and training opportunities*.

Participants reporting widening personal and professional horizons, up-skilling and accessing enhanced economic opportunities through the permaculture courses and associated links include:

A.B. is now employed by Plymouth City Council as a Natural Infrastructure Assistant at Poole Farm. She is also joining the new Green Community Hubs team. She found out about the Permaculture Design Course along with another participant via the **Green Thinkers Programme** with Real Ideas Organisation.

Inner City Seeds was facilitating some of the sessions sharing permaculture ideas and tools. Inner City Seeds transforms neglected community spaces through growing projects and trained in Permaculture at the Plymouth Permaculture Design course in 2018.

A.B. reports finding the skills gained on the permaculture course very useful for the practical and community aspects of her work. She has also continued to connect with the other participants on the course and participate in activities in some of the other growing projects. For example, along with two other course participants, A.B. has been active at the Village Hub and Blockhouse Park.

J.J. joined the Permaculture Design course as a volunteer with Plymouth Environment Action and grew in confidence during the course. She is now due to start her career with the legacy project of Green Minds, Green Communities, as an Urban Ranger, employed by the National Trust.

“I think it really put the importance of community in front of me which made me feel more connected to Plymouth as my home. As someone finding my career path, it really showed me that Plymouth is where I want it to be. Also, it gave me new confidence in myself to go for the things that make me feel inspired and happy, with the mindset of community first - which, as it turns out, is the main objective of the Green Communities Project!” J.J.

The Plymouth **Community Builders** made really good use of the opportunities on the course:

The Community Builder for Devonport area has found the connections made on the course really helpful in her role in Devonport. On the last day she commented: “So glad I came [to the introduction to permaculture course]. I was hesitant to come as I am really outside my comfort zone. I learned so much. How to talk with the community and family members. I now feel I can hold my own. Loved meeting everyone. I feel confident that if I have any questions, I can ask any of you [the other Permaculture course participants]”. Since the course they have kept in touch with the other participants, met up with the Parks team where they led a history walk about Devonport Park and joined Joanna Ruminska (Green Connector for Whitleigh and a forager) with her foraging walks.

The Community Builder for Efford and Estover: “Felt I knew nothing when we started. Much more knowledge now and it feels more achievable. I can now guide the group [Elm community garden]. Great to be part of this group”.

Debbie Burton, Plymouth City Council’s Community Empowerment Manager, with responsibility for the Community Builders initiative observed: “I have heard some great stories and connections being made between the Community Builders and the Parks guys that were at the Permaculture course – this has led to sharing of skills and expertise, a history walk around Devonport Park and commitment for them to support improvements that the community want to make within the Marlborough Street planters. Apparently, lots of learning, sharing together. Feedback at the end of the sessions was really emotional apparently! Really nice to hear.”

The advice and support from **Plymouth Octopus Project** (POP) – which is tailored for grassroots community groups - is a great resource at all the GWN Networking events and also for individuals, small charities and social enterprises setting up their projects / businesses. Signposting to funding opportunities, training and business support by POP has also been appreciated and valued by participants.

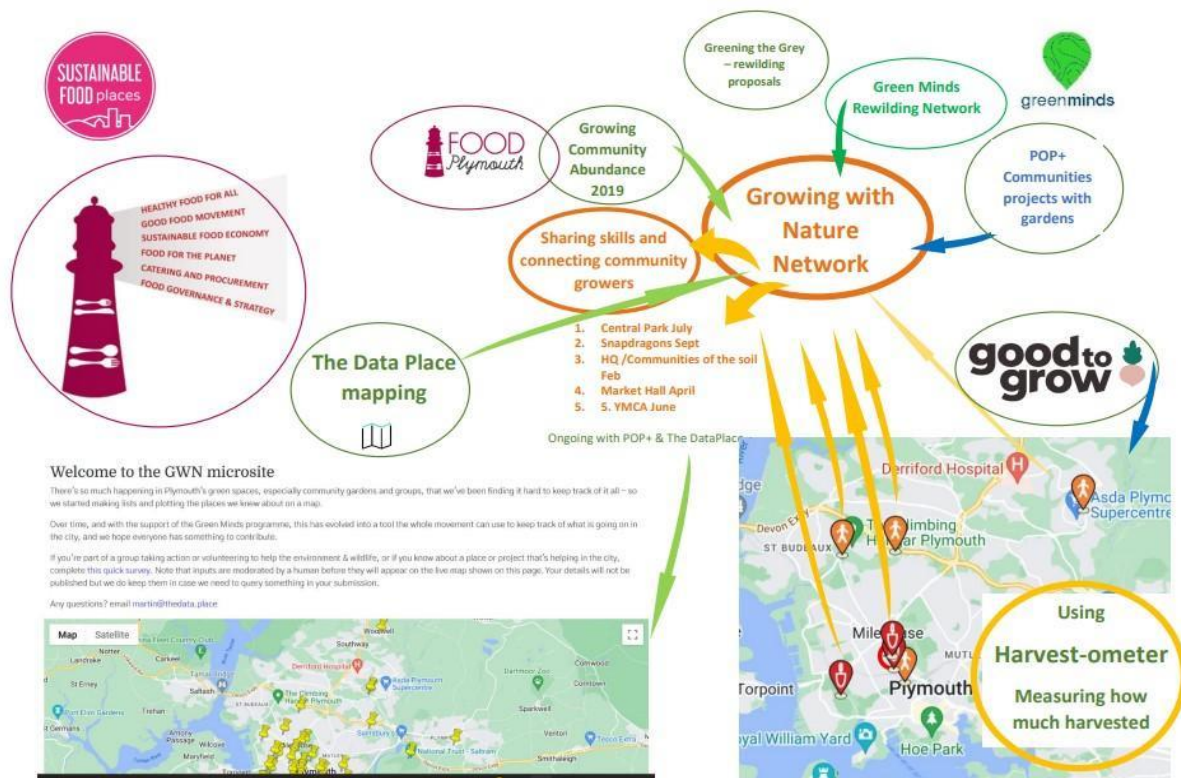
The work of **Devon Wildlife Trust** (DWT) in the city has also created kudos, opportunities and useful resources (e.g. [Action for Insects campaign](#)) to equip individuals, groups and businesses to bring nature into their planning and management of green spaces.

The **Good to Grow Harvest-ometer** is a useful tool to measure the financial value of the food grown. It is one of a range of useful resources on the [Good to Grow website](#). It has been highlighted at the GWN Network events. In the last year, seven community growing projects in Plymouth have signed up to Good to Grow – **Routeways Devonport Activity Centre, Snapdragons, Wingfield Community Garden, Horticultural Therapy Trust, Mill House by Ham Woods, YGrowers (YMCA) and Elm in Estover**. This excellent resource from [Sustain, the Alliance for Better Food, Farming and Fishing](#), is a tried and tested online tool which is easy to use and measures the value of the fruits, vegetables and other plants grown and harvested – weight, financial, carbon saving etc. At [YGrowers](#), the team measures their harvests with the Harvest-ometer, much of which is given to local food redistribution charity **Provide Devon** to give out to people in need. Good to Grow also supports community food growing groups through online resources for running projects, linking up volunteers and an online map to help promote and connect projects.

59 groups, organisations and businesses attended Growing with Nature events and training:

One government department; seven Plymouth City Council teams and projects; two housing associations; three educational establishments; two health organisations; 27 community groups; and 17 social enterprises / businesses.

The Growing with Nature Network and Digital Mapping



In November 2020, Green Minds funding with Real Ideas Organisation support pump-primed Food Plymouth’s **Generous Earth** project with a pilot site at Snapdragons, Victoria Park, along with the permaculture design for Zoo Field in Central Park. This has led to a proposal for an Earth Systems and Composting project in Central Park, which will be developed through Green Minds’ project legacy, Green Community Hubs. This developing project was a useful asset displaying composting methods at

Snapdragons through COVID-19 and at the second Networking event in September 2022 and during the permaculture courses in 2023. Generous Earth is in discussions with Plymouth City Council to develop the project in Zoo Field.

“I appreciate the people connections and we have built a team of allies. I feel strengthened in many ways and I think it has strengthened Plymouth. Going from ground zero (knowing nothing) and now with this support network.”

The ‘People Care’ part of the Professionals Introduction to Permaculture Course aimed to help people and communities. As part of this, one activity was a **Community of Dragons** local food entrepreneurs session. This was played out with the Wise Roots CIC, inviting the two directors to ‘pitch’ as a mini version of the annual Food Plymouth Community of Dragons event with the aim to show just how community supported businesses work. Unlike the well-known **Dragons Den** format – which can be rather adversarial – everyone attending is a ‘dragon’ and can offer resources such as practical support, pro-bono advice, sharing / loans of equipment, gifts of cash and / loans of patient capital to

support the businesses after listening to their pitches. The support offered has been ongoing since the course ended in July 2023 as the whole group continues to support Wise Roots CIC and each other via their ‘Community of Dragons’ WhatsApp group. Wise Roots reports making lots of useful connections and valuable offers to support their very new organisation. Furthermore, Wise Roots CIC can apply to pitch at the official Food Plymouth Community of Dragons event in November 2023, along with other local sustainable food businesses. This will support their aspirations to develop the Forest Gardens and educational aspects of their work.

Real Ideas Organisation have been actively involved in the Green Minds projects and linking with Food Plymouth with various projects including Generous Earth and hosting events like the Growing With Nature event along with the Green Minds film launch. Two members of staff attended the permaculture course for professionals in July which directly relates to their Nature and Neighbourhood strand of work and the Greening Devonport project. The core purpose of the Nature & Neighbourhoods team is about making positive, local level change happen in and from Devonport, including improving the natural and built environment around Devonport Guildhall, looking at community leadership and the facilities, activities, and opportunities available. Their aim is to work with and help other communities make local level change happen for themselves, in their neighbourhoods: “I am feeling really positive and much more confident [having completed the permaculture course] to attempt to include permaculture in my practice – a really good foundation.”

Deliver nature recovery at multiple scales

The **Communities of the Soil (COS)** project hosted the third GWN Networking event in February 2023 at the Diversity Business Incubator (DBI) offices and garden in the HQ building in Stonehouse. They shared how they have been creating abundance in three dimensions in harsh inner city urban spaces, transforming small barren backstreet spaces into green growing spaces with their special African grow bags. This project is very much about connecting displaced people to the soil, feeling at home and growing food that they are familiar with. These grow bags are very abundant and could be used in ‘meanwhile use’ projects or places where there is only hard concrete and tarmac.

Plymouth has lots of allotment sites to help people grow food, but it has been observed that many people get overwhelmed and give up their plot within a couple of years. Food Plymouth associate **Dorothea**



Communities of the Soil growing patch in a back street outside Jabulani

Orme has worked with the Swarthmore Allotments Association (within Central Park) and the Allotments team at the Council to set up a series of workshops aimed at people on the waiting list to equip them with the skills to succeed with their new plots. Tess Wilmot supported Dorothea by giving introduction to permaculture workshop on her allotment course and encouraged her to apply for one of the places on the Permaculture Design Course. Dorothea is already skilled in landscape design but found the course very useful especially around working on community projects and involving people in the design process. She used the design exercise as an opportunity to develop the plans for a community space at Swarthmore and the compost toilet at Snapdragons has influenced the design of a new compost toilet which is important for people using the new community garden.

The Plymouth City Council Horticultural Team who attended the permaculture course have said how much the course has influenced their work and given them tools and enthusiasm to use them especially around allowing wilder areas and creating more varied habitat for wildlife and people to thrive. They also wanted to find ways to share this with the people they meet in the parks.

Plymouth Community Homes (PCH) has been involved in GWN and staff attended some of the networking events. Conversations are continuing about using the Good to Grow Harvest-ometer to help calculate the harvesting of the fruit trees growing across the lands and community gardens that they manage. Wingfield Community Garden is a PCH project with local residents, and one of whom attended the permaculture design course.

All the GWN work ties in with **the Devon Rewilding Network** and the **Local Nature Recovery Network** and also connect with the Devon wide work that Food Plymouth has been doing across the Ceremonial County. In addition, the connections with the **Plymouth and South Devon Community Forest** initiative works really well in providing opportunities for community groups to get involved with planting more trees and creating more tree cover in the city.

Secure benefits for the long-term

The Growing with Nature (GWN) legacy – The collaborative team which has been organising the networking events with Green Minds, has evolved to carry the legacy on. Led by Food Plymouth CIC and supported by Plymouth City Council, Plymouth Octopus Project and the Data Place, the network team is planning the next two years of events and onwards. The need for people and communities to connect and learn together is key to the long-term future of the network and the viability of many projects.

Each Networking event will be designed to include a wilding / gardening with a nature aspect so it does not get hidden behind traditional gardening, food growing and ornamental plantings. Health and wellbeing will be a key part of planning events. It has been good to hear appreciative comments from GWN attendees about GWN continuing, which has been positive. Comments included appreciation that it was “nurturing nature-based practices,” and the “realisation we are not working in isolation!”

The legacy of Green Minds will continue to be helpful for individuals, communities and organisations and will be shared at the GWN events and communications. The **Green Minds website** has very useful resources in the [Knowledge Hub](#) section which includes films, webinars and reports. These include resources for wilding and growing with nature in urban areas. Examples include workshops run by Plymouth Octopus Project (POP) to support communities [setting up a new community green space](#) and how to [rewild an area](#) with Devon Wildlife Trust (DWT).

This report and the GWN film about the professional permaculture course will be a useful resource on the [Knowledge Hub](#), showing the importance of nature, co-designing and co-stewardship on large or

small scale. It will help foster a more nature-friendly land management and inspire creativity and joined up thinking. Plans are in progress for sharing more permaculture courses and training and other skills in the next few years to train up more people in communities, organisations, businesses and with the city council land management teams. One potential future activity is around engaging with and supporting **self-employed gardeners** and **landscaping companies** to acquire more nature-friendly knowledge, skills and methods as they collectively have a huge influence on **biodiversity** on sites ranging from tiny gardens to large scale projects right across the city. This will support more people wanting to have green jobs and encourage sustainable livelihoods. Supporting this sector will encourage more people and businesses to actively adapt their gardens and grounds to be maintained to be more nature friendly. All this will add to the ripple effect and influence others to change. More **wildlife corridors** and **bee-lines** will be created and good examples of working with nature could cover much of the city, thereby setting a **new standard**. Professional gardeners attending GWN events have already shown willingness to engage in such an initiative. One of the GWN gardeners has already been connected with a family in Plymstock to regularly help manage their garden for wildlife and also to care for their 15 fruit trees. Supporting this sector could be a focus with recommendations for nature friendly gardeners and connections made through GWN.

Permaculture course for professionals – the participants became an amazing community of practice which is continuing although the course has ended. Their WhatsApp group, called ‘*The Community of Dragons*’, continues to create some excellent exchanges of knowledge, skills, sharing of events and practical help on projects / activities.

Learning from GWN

The Green Minds wilding work has been a city-wide endeavour and there is lots to learn from the many examples on different scales and from various parts of the city. The balance between allowing the wild back into our cities and the polarised views of local residents – some for, some against, can be challenging. However, much is being learned about how to manage expectations and adapt practices to create a win – win situation. When working with the horticulture team from the parks on the permaculture course, they shared how much they had learned and how it was changing their thinking on how to manage the areas they look after. By the end of the course, they were far more willing to allow more wild edges by creating a mosaic of different habitats. Supporting the parks teams through this transition is fundamental to allowing the change to grow across the more managed areas of the parks. One of the comments made by one of the parks team was wanting to share the reasons for more wildlife friendly maintenance schemes with the people who use the park so they can understand the issues and benefit from the interactions.

The experience of different community growing projects evolving over the past few years is creating a wide range of examples to inspire and support new initiatives. There are many more people to support wilding projects and groups like the Rebel Botanists who are awakening the appreciation of wild plants wherever they grow. The community members who took part in the permaculture courses are also sharing the design skills, people skills and nature connection to their projects along with co-design, co-stewardship and sustainability of projects. Already in the city there are excellent examples of community groups managing green spaces including Collings Park Trust, Friends of Down Horn Park, Snapdragons, Blockhouse Park and Friends of Ham Woods. Each community group is very different but all are keen to improve diversity and wildlife habitats for nature and also for the health and wellbeing of the people using the green spaces.

The GWN Network offers opportunities for beneficial connections and exchanges across the community projects and with the wide range of organisations who have engaged with the network. An example is



GWN can liaise with the Plymouth and South Devon Community Forest, supporting them with advice and also connecting them with groups who may want to plant trees in their communities. In addition, GWN can help connect community members with the best people to talk to at the council or to organisations like POP+ for advice and support. Having these contacts is helpful for new projects getting going. An example is Friends of Down Horn Park who have been learning to co-steward their space. They have connected with and learned from other community groups like Collings Park Trust and Friends of Ham Woods. They also have a close working relationship with the local GP surgeries and Age UK as one of their aims is to have a welcoming and healing space for everyone. This has resulted in a very vibrant community group who have been enhancing their park, planting trees, expanding the orchard and creating a space with wild edges that is much more diverse and interesting to visit.

The Green Minds broader work and the GWN strand links well with Food Plymouth's sustainable food strategies and the work towards the Silver Award for Sustainable Food Places. By including food growing into any project there will always be a wildlife benefit and will also give participants a healthy reward for their active support. Much more food can be grown in cities with the support of creative design to the benefit of wildlife across the local area and the wider bioregions and further. By growing and sharing fruit and vegetables from green spaces in the city, we reduce the food carbon footprint and can share skills, recipes and food and build resilience and community. By sharing knowledge and skills, GWN can support the best ways of growing food without the use of pesticides, herbicides and fungicides and help to heal the soils and create healthy ecosystems.

Opportunities going forward

GWN provides opportunities for other nature-based projects, such as Plymouth and South Devon Community Forest, to work with community groups to enhance and green the city. Also growing the skills of people within the permaculture community will be useful for helping to choose the best trees and shrubs to include in planting schemes. Forest Gardening is a useful permaculture method to increase both diversity and abundance. By collaborating, the GWN Network can help identify potential planting sites and the community groups that can work with the Community Forest team. Their support package includes funding to enable the community group to design a planting plan, consult with locals, order the trees, plant them and to care for them afterwards. This is an exciting new initiative which will really ensure that the trees thrive and support the community groups to develop and prosper as well.

The legacy project of Green Minds, Green Communities, will be working in Central Park, Devonport and west of Plymouth (particularly in Keyham and Weston Mill) which will create continuity in these areas and support the growing projects too. One of the Permaculture course participants will be working with the Green Communities team, bringing the skills and learning into this new initiative (see appendix for case study). It will build on the work of Green Minds, especially around Keyham where the parks have been enhanced through co-design and co-delivery with the community. There are also healthy links with the Community Builders across the city, creating a network of support and connections. Presenting opportunities around links and shared activities between Growing with Nature and the Plymouth Social Isolation Forum are also being explored and will be developed.

In the research, monitoring and evaluation arena, the expansion of the Determinants of Public Health research collaboration between the University of Plymouth (notably Dr Rebecca Carter-Dillon) and Plymouth City Council's Public Health team (principally Rachel Silcock), presents real opportunities around increasing capabilities and capacity.

Reflective Learning

As outlined earlier in this report, Growing with Nature (GWN) was a coming together of three independent networks. This Collaborative work between Green Minds (Plymouth City Council and The Data Place), Food Plymouth and POP has made the work truly city-wide, increasing the reach and benefits of the support we can offer community groups and individuals. By collaborating and pooling resources we have created a broad platform of knowledge and skills and made it easier for community groups to learn from the project partners and each other.

Working with **The Data Place** and the development of the GWN Map has been a huge step forward and makes it much easier for new people to find out what is happening in their neighbourhoods and get involved. It has brought together a diverse range of people involved in ornamental gardening, food growing, caring for green and blue spaces and wilding. It is opening up opportunities for skill sharing and helping a wide range of growing projects manage their projects in more nature friendly ways and help more people connect with nature for human health and wellbeing.

Participants in all the different expressions of GWN have enjoyed the relaxed, friendly but structured and purposeful nature of the activities. We will strive to maintain these qualities going forward.

Growing with Nature has reinvigorated the Food Plymouth Growing Community Abundance network which started in 2019 but had gone quiet through the Covid pandemic period.

Growing with Nature has also made permaculture teaching more visible and accessible in Plymouth to a wider range of people as individuals or as part of their work.

The ‘can do’, ‘learning by doing’ approach demonstrated by all the partners throughout the collaboration has many advantages, the benefits of which outweigh the disadvantages.

One area we will strive to do differently in future is to build more robust and accessible data collection methodologies into the work from the outset (rather than fitting this in while the work is in progress).

In the same vein, opportunities to introduce robust academic research into the work will be explored as part of GWN’s on-going development.

Appendices

Individual case study - A.B.

“The permaculture course has been really valuable in my new job as the course helped me understand how natural systems work together. I am able to make decisions with confidence about natural infrastructure with the tools the course taught me (observe & interact etc), and I have made important connections in Plymouth that have been really useful for bringing together the wider green estate of the city.

My job involves a lot of conservation work as well, so understanding how nature works as a system has been so valuable and has made the transition into this field so much easier than it would have been without it - managing the grass and meadows in Parks and talking to Street Services team about urban space for wildlife.

I also feel like it's made me more confident in giving my input in conversations/ decisions at work, for example:

- Working on leaky woody dam building with the National Trust and making suggestions to the team whilst we decided the best way to build without hindering the fish population
- Talking about permaculture with community groups and volunteers at Poole Farm and making the community garden more permaculture
- I have been part of the permaculture course run by Inner City Seeds at the Village Hub! Helen is creating a wildlife corridor and I have been to a few sessions to learn and help.
- I have been involved in the Green Minds project and will be part of the Green Communities project come October.” A.B.



Community Case study - Blockhouse Park / The Village Hub



Blockhouse Park in Stoke is an excellent illustration of Green Minds supporting the growth and preparedness of a local community group, designing and managing areas of their park over several years. European funding through Green Minds catalysed this initiative. This paid for surveying the park and creating some initial plans for improving the areas the group was planning to co-steward. One of the earlier Green Minds Rewilding Networking Events was held in [Blockhouse Park in 2021](#).

The Village Hub community group in Stoke supports and enables the gardening group at Blockhouse Park. When the offer of a free place to the Permaculture Design Course was made, two members of the group wanted to take part. One was paid for by Green Minds GWN funding and the other with some additional funding available for the gardening group. Therefore, two people worked together on a collaborative permaculture design for the park. These participants particularly appreciated and benefitted from the sessions on how to work in groups and the people care aspects of the course.

Throughout the course they shared their learning and new facilitation skills by involving the other volunteers in their group in the different stages, so they were part of the design process.

Blockhouse Park is a great example of how council land can be co-stewarded by the local community. The impact of the initial Green Minds funding followed by funding the permaculture places has clearly been a significant factor in this.



"I found the permaculture course extremely helpful - it helped us to think about our project in a more holistic way and to understand how to look after the people involved as well as the wildlife and soil."

The group have continued to share their learning, for example, during August 2023 they ran series of practical events around rainwater collection systems, sharing skills and tips on saving water in the landscape and links to the [Building Resilience in Communities \(BRIC\) project](#) which is working in the area around flooding issues.



BRIC had a stand and activities at the summer GWN Networking event at YGrowers (YMCA Community Garden).



Blockhouse Park has become a magnet to other community people coming to join in with events and get inspired to try innovative ways of developing their own projects.



"JW and JD attended the permaculture course to support work in Blockhouse Park that the Village Hub is involved with. Whilst both of them had different expertise at the beginning of the course, they have both developed greater skills that are already benefiting the Hub. JD was already highly skilled in agriculture and growing and has added to that great personal and people skills; and JW who had been a senior leader in a primary school and very used to dealing with angry parents and other people

type conflicts, has grown considerably in her horticultural and garden design skills. A combination of practical and people skills is proving invaluable to the work the Village Hub is doing in the Blockhouse Park and its connected growing projects and places." KP

“In terms of how we are moving forward, I would just add that Permaculture design plans were shared with the group, survey results are being used to determine aims and principles and we now have a better working practice model. Work in progress!” J.W.

Community Case Study – Snapdragons

There are lots of synergies with Snapdragons and Green Minds and Food Plymouth over the last few years. Snapdragons has had a long journey developing their site at the old bowling green in Victoria Park. Particularly challenging has been dealing with the contaminated soils to make their site safe for growing food and designing the site to be functional for the project but also a wildlife friendly space. In 2020 Green Minds has supported both Snapdragons and Food Plymouth’s new Generous Earth initiative. Generous Earth supported the Snapdragon team with the ‘earth repair’ aspect by collaborating and setting up a pilot project in 2021 and offering advice and skills sharing on composting and permaculture design. One of the directors of Snapdragons joined the Zoo Field permaculture co-designing sessions in 2021 and has been involved in the GWN Networking events. The second GWN Networking event in September 2022 was hosted at Snapdragons and been the venue for the 2022 and 2023 Permaculture Design Courses. Two of their volunteers had free places on the courses. This supports their core groups activities developing the site, growing food and the groups facilitation skills.



September 2022 – GWN Networking event at Snapdragons

Groups, organisations and businesses attending Growing with Nature events and training:

Government Departments: Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

Plymouth City Council: BRICs (Building Resilience in Communities); Green Community Hubs; Plymouth Community Builders; Plymouth and South Devon Community Forest; Poole Farm Community Farm; Street Services; The Box.

Housing Associations: Colebrook SW Ltd, Plymouth Community Homes.

Educational establishments: City College Plymouth, Ford Primary School, Schumacher College.

Health organisations: Active Devon; Mewstone PCN (connected with Friends of Down Horn Park).



VCS Groups and Organisations: Adelaide Street Angels Gardening Group; Character Creation Roleplay; Devon Living Churchyards Project; Devonport Activity Centre; Devon Wildlife Trust; Efford Community Network; 1st Keyham Scouts Group; Friends of Blockhouse Park; Friends of Paradise Road Field; Gardening at the Towers (supported by Plymouth Community Homes); Grown That Way; Improving Lives Plymouth; Little Local Gardens Community; Onward Community Group (Greenbank); Plymouth Environmental Action (PEA); Plymouth Octopus Project (POP); Rebel Botanists; Rumbullion Farm; St Levan Neighbourhood Watch; Seeds 'n' Feeds Community Garden; Swarthmore Allotments Community Garden project; The Intersection; Totus; Whitleigh Big Local; Wingfield Community Garden; Woolwell in Bloom; YGrowers at YMCA.

Social Enterprises: Art & Energy; Arts Therapy Devon; Cliik Community Creative; Community Life and Wildlife; Creative Arts Therapy Devon; Diversity Business Incubator (DBI); Down Stage Write CIC; JarSquad; Millfields Trust; Real Ideas Organisation (RIO); Seawyld; Snapdragons Plymouth; Sparrows and Sycamores Forest School; The Data Place; Tulgey Woods Sanctuary.

Businesses: YGS Environmental Consultants, Cura Designs.