

The Cherwell School (secondary school)

Large urban state secondary school has developed an “ecology garden” and a well attended “Young Ecologists” after school club.

The garden is also being used to support students with additional needs.

The project has attracted funding from a number of charities, and from parents.

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This practice-led case study is part of a research project looking at Nature-based programmes in secondary schools for mental health and wellbeing. Four case studies were produced in 2025 with secondary school teachers which use nature-based programmes.

The Cherwell School is a large mixed state secondary school, with a sixth form, in Oxford, UK. The school has a split site, both with large green spaces.

A Young Ecologists Club, and an Ecology Garden

This school, like many others, has one particular teacher who is passionate about sustainability and puts a huge amount of effort into sustainability initiatives in school. This includes enrolling in the National Education Nature Park, and creating a Climate Action Plan. The role has been formalised in alignment with the DfE requirement for a sustainability lead in every school.

Having spent many years on different projects in school, in 2022, the teacher initiated some planting schemes on site with some grant money, from the Community Infrastructure Levy, free hedge plants from the Woodland Trust, enthusiastic sixth form students, and lots of willing year 7s. In the first year they planted over 600 plants along the school boundaries and have subsequently added more trees and hedgerows.

The Young Ecologists Club is one of the most popular in the school with students from all year groups attending weekly.



These visible initiatives were greeted with enthusiasm by students and staff. Encouraged and supported by the Head Teacher and the Site Manager, an after-school club “Young Ecologists” Club was established, run by teachers with support from parents and local volunteers. Over a couple of years they turned a 45m² patch of land in an unused part of the playing field into an “ecology garden”, and growing garden.

The club is one of the most popular in the school with students from all year groups attending weekly. With the help of the school’s fundraiser, the garden project has attracted funding from local wildlife charities and the school “Friends” organisation. The garden now has a large pond, an orchard, raised growing beds at different heights, and a pergola for shade.

Trees for shade, hedges for noise and pollution reduction

The school already has some wonderful trees that students and staff use for shade in the school grounds, but with the warmer summers the staff have realised that the school needs more trees to shade the buildings, for sports days, and for respite during PE. They have planted a number of trees and are finding spaces for more.

A busy road bisects the school site. There are hedges on both road boundaries which had been kept closely trimmed. A change in approach, working with the grounds contractor, has reduced the trimming and allowed the hedges to thicken and grow, noticeably reducing road noise, possibly reducing air pollution on the school site, and increasing the natural, relaxed, feel of the whole school field.

Nature education and teacher training

The school has plans to initially teach the GCSE in Natural History as an additional option taught out of core school hours. This plan will enable the school to monitor and develop student and staff enthusiasm for the subject, and work out how to deliver it, using support from local nature educators, before going through a major adjustment to the way they currently deliver subjects across the curriculum. In order to lead up to the GCSE, and give some structure to the Young Ecologists after school club, they are creating a set of termly certificates for the Young Ecologists to recognise their learning and engagement.



As well as the weekly club, the school runs an annual “bug day” for all year 8s – every class has one class outside with a local expert, using different methods to find bugs in the garden and the school field margins, and learning to identify them.

The intention going forward is to encourage all subject departments to explore the opportunities for enhancing learning through using the garden, as they have seen done at other schools.

With the development of the garden space adjacent to the playing field and a school building, the school has been able to collaborate with both the local university teacher training organisation, and School Centred Initial Teacher Training organisations, to run courses on how to work with students in school grounds, targeting both existing teachers for CPD, and trainee teachers.

Wellbeing and community connection

Once the garden was established with growing beds, the school started using it for activities with students who receive extra support from the Communication and Interaction Resource Base (CIRB) in school, and the intention going forward is to expand the use of the garden for further wellbeing interventions for students. There is also a plan to create more secluded areas that could be used for student counselling, or parent teacher meetings, again taking inspiration from other schools, showing the powerful spreading of ideas.

It is remarkable that the more teachers that come to the garden, with or without students, the more the news spreads that this is something important that is happening at schools – for the wellbeing of students and teachers alike.

The school has been extremely effective at harnessing both community volunteers, in kind support and funding. The school has a public footpath that goes past the garden, and as local people see and applaud the developments, these relationships are strengthening; an opening event for the garden in July 2025 attracted counsellors, parents, former students, teachers, local people, proudly led round the garden by the Young Ecologists.

Methodology

Kim Polgreen has visited the school on many occasions and worked closely with them on the development of the school grounds and the nature education initiatives. A semi-structured interview with Steve Cappleman was conducted as part of a wider project on nature education in December 2024. The study has been approved by the Head Teacher. This case study is a descriptive example based primarily on interviews and stakeholder discussions. It offers an illustrative, practice-led snapshot of school-based nature initiatives. This study received ethics approval from the Medical Sciences Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee (MS IDREC 688330).

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<https://www.agile-initiative.ox.ac.uk/sprints/is-nature-a-policy-solution-to-mental-health-in-schools/>



Natural
Environment
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Published February 2026, University of Oxford | This document was produced as part of a Sprint research project with the Agile Initiative at the Oxford Martin School, with funding from the Natural Environment Research Council as part of the Changing the Environment Programme – NERC grant reference number NE/W004976/1.