



Outcome: Learning & Skills

Group case study: TCV Belfast at Ballysillan Primary School

“At the beginning, I was a bit hesitant. I wasn’t sure what the future held for this. Lots of children in our school, and adults including myself, have not had the experience of growing their own vegetables. So I’ve had to upskill myself as well as the children and we’ve had a wonderful learning journey.”

Courtney McWhirter, Teacher

Through the work of The Conservation Volunteers, people improve their confidence, skills and prospects through learning inspired by the outdoors.

Courtney McWhirter is a teacher at Ballysillan Primary School in Belfast who delivers a food growing education programme to students as part of their Eco Club. Throughout the growing seasons and despite having no background or previous interest in gardening or biodiversity, she has guided the students step by step on how to go from seed to table. Thanks to her infectious enthusiasm, the Eco Club regularly takes home vegetables and are now sharing their newly learned skills with parents, grandparents and friends outside of school.

89% of our volunteers have learnt new skills.

Source: TCV impact figures 2021-22





"I think it really develops their sense of community, bringing everyone together and we learn about how we can impact our own environment."

Courtney McWhirter, Teacher

The Eco Club encourages students to plot their own garden and choose what they would like to plant. Courtney has deliberately promoted a bottom-up approach so that the children take ownership of the space while learning skills for life.

Seedlings and produce are planted both for the school and to take home. The children are encouraged to talk about how the school sowing compares to their home sowing, which inspires parents to get involved.

What was a field of grass is now, thanks to Courtney and TCV, a biodiverse refuge for wildlife and an area of exploration for the children. The area now has an apple orchard, with native trees and bug hotels, raised beds and even a polytunnel.



A mindful willow dome was designed to give the children an area to visit if they get upset or want to reflect. This was a deliberate attempt to promote good mental health within the school and disband any mental health stigma, which is especially important as the school is situated in an economically deprived area.

"I joined this club because I wanted to get some fruits and vegetables to bring back home. I feel happy because I get to experience what being a farmer is like."

Child, Eco Club member





"I just love getting out after a day with the kids, getting our wellies on, getting our coats, getting out in the rain. And no matter the weather, we will go out and learn something, and the children just have a blast."

Courtney McWhirter, Teacher

How to get involved

'Green Up' Your Local School

If you are keen to 'green' your local school, we can help by creating a nature garden, explaining issues like recycling and composting, and of course, teaching about conservation and wildlife. . We have even run award-winning Green Gyms in conjunction with some schools to encourage youngsters who might not enjoy traditional sports or exercise to try their hand at something active.

Wild Days Out

TCV understands the importance of supporting children to learn and play in the great outdoors – our natural classroom. Many of our sites run fun sessions in local parks or nature reserves so that young people (and their parents or carers) can enjoy nature 'hands-on' without realising they might be learning something too!

Find out how TCV's projects and volunteers impact on learning life skills and how you can join in by visiting our website.



www.tcv.org.uk

