SDG Accord Case Study

The SDG Accord

The University and College Sector's Collective Response to the Global Goals

UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Planting activities for some of the 65,000 trees planted at the new Gair Wood in north Leeds.

Integration of SDGs in

☐ Institutional governance/strategic level
☒ SDGs in research
☒ SDGs in campus operations
☒ SDGs in curriculum development
☒ SDGs in student engagement activities
☒ SDGs into community activities
☐ SDGs at a whole-institution level

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Focus on

☐ Goal 1 - No poverty
☐ Goal 2 - Zero hunger
☒ Goal 3 - Good health and wellbeing
☒ Goal 4 - Quality education
☐ Goal 5 - Gender equality
☐ Goal 6 - Clean water and sanitation
☐ Goal 7 - Affordable and clean energy
☐ Goal 8 - Decent work and economic growth
☐ Goal 9 - Industry, innovation and infrastructure
☐ Goal 10 - Reduced inequalities
☒ Goal 11 - Sustainable cities and communities
☐ Goal 12 - Responsible consumption and production
☒ Goal 13 - Climate action
☐ Goal 14 - Life below water
☒ Goal 15 - Life on land
☐ Goal 16 - Peace, justice and strong institutions
☒ Goal 17 - Partnerships for the goals

Summary:

Gair Wood is one of the most significant woodland creation projects in the North of England. Previously leased as agricultural grazing land, the 36-hectare site in north Leeds was identified through the University's Climate Plan as an opportunity for tree planting that in time would help balance some of the most difficult to avoid greenhouse gas emissions from University operations. However it was crucial that it would not be just a functional carbon sink. The woodland was designed to boost biodiversity, act as a Living Lab for research and teaching, and have a positive impact on the local community including providing new public access.

Following a period of design, consultation and approvals, over 65,000 regionally appropriate broadleaved trees were sourced from Leeds City Council's Arium nursery and planted in early 2023. Around 15 hectares of new tree planting have been added to 4 hectares of existing tree cover, with the remaining space a mix of scrubland, open spaces and natural regeneration to create a mosaic of habitats. Students conducted baseline measurements across the site prior to planting, to enable research into the woodland's impact on biodiversity, soil composition and air quality.

Involving our community in the new woodland was crucial, and 186 local residents, 102 staff members and 36 students (324 people in total) planted more than 5,000 trees at volunteer sessions during January and February 2023. Their contribution allowed for a more rigorous approach to data collection during planting within specific areas, meaning that researchers will be able to study complex questions about UK woodland creation for decades to come.

Gair Wood is a collaboration between the University of Leeds, the United Bank of Carbon and the White Rose Forest initiative, with funding through DEFRA and the Forestry Commission.

Outline the 3 key benefits of integrating this theme:

1. Maximising the co-benefits from climate action on University land, including biodiversity, research and teaching, and community engagement.

2. Enables the provision of scalable research and teaching close to the University, with benefits for students, staff, local community members and organisations, and wider society.

3. Builds resilient local communities, providing local benefits to wildlife, wellbeing and health in urban areas.

Outline the barriers or challenges encountered in integrating this theme and how you overcame these:

1. The conversion of the site from agricultural farmland to woodland required consultation with local stakeholders and a range of permissions from relevant bodies. Working together with partners and the local community and ensuring that the project team incorporated a variety of skills was important to delivering this.

2. Planting 65,000 trees within a short time period required high levels of collaboration between multiple internal and external partners.

3. The scale of the woodland meant that we were unable to source plastic-free tree protection. We have mitigated this by sourcing products that are recycled and recyclable, and have committed to ensuring that the protectors will be collected and reused or recycled when they are no longer required at Gair Wood.

Please outline your conclusions and recommendations to others (Max 200 words):

Projects of this scale and complexity require a great deal of planning, co-ordination, time and patience to ensure that they can deliver on the potential co-benefits that they offer. Having sound objectives and deliverables that can be delivered by a solid and committed project team that can bring a variety of experiences is vital in ensuring that the project is delivered on time and to best effect. This should include experts in the research, but also in the planning process, legal frameworks and practical delivery of the project.

Involving the local community was key to delivery – from the initial consultation and design phases through to delivery on site through volunteer tree planting sessions. Dedicated resource to manage these sessions and ensure that all had a positive experience was important.