

Ever green

How one setting in Kent's sustainable ethos takes in everything, from the building it operates out of to the way the children eat their meals. By **Nicole Weinstein**



Since opening its doors in April last year, the eco-friendly Abacus Nursery and Childcare building in New Romney, Kent is going from strength to strength in terms of how it educates its children and families to live a more sustainable life.

Not only does the wood-clad building feature 15 'sun pipes', which are tube-like devices that allow natural light into the rooms, but the windows also stretch from

floor to ceiling, which means that the lights rarely need to be switched on. A rainwater harvesting system feeds water around the nursery for use outdoors in the mud kitchen, water feature, vegetable garden and the beach area.

Staff are now in the process of reinstating the greenhouse, which was knocked down during the rebuild.

Lisa Evans, manager and managing director of the 60-place Early Years Alliance pre-school, which first opened on the same site

A story chair is the central focus of a communication-friendly space

of St Nicholas CE Primary Academy in 2005, says, 'We've always been interested in environmental issues and children have grown their own fruit and vegetables to eat for snacks and at lunchtime for many years. But when we received capital funding under the 30 hours free childcare scheme to build a new nursery to provide more places, we wanted to ensure that it was in keeping with our ethos and our aspiration to go even greener, which is why we decided on an eco-friendly building. 'Energy efficiency is woven

into the fabric of the building, which both cuts down on running costs and naturally stimulates environmental awareness. We also have solar PV panels, which generate energy from the sunlight and feeds it back into the grid.'

A JOINT AFFAIR

But it's not just the eco-friendly building that is helping to pave the way to a greener way of living.

'There's no use having such a building and not looking at the wider practices involving looking after the planet,' explains Ms Evans. 'Which is why sustainability is embedded into our practice. For example, nappies are incinerated at our local hospital through a company called Ecosan, and staff access training in sustainable development from Kent County Council's Early Years and Childcare Service, which we feed back to parents in workshops.'

'We have clothes swapping days

and toy- and book-swapping days, and we've developed a bee- and butterfly-friendly garden.'

'Children plant their own fruit and vegetables and eat them at snack time, and all our vegetable and fruit peelings and waste are used on our compost heap. The local community is also involved in sourcing recycled materials for our projects and they often donate plants and vegetables.'

GAINING GROUND

Since moving into the building, staff and children have worked hard to re-establish the garden area. Not only have they developed a small strip of land into a wild garden and growing patch, using recycled vegetable delivery boxes as planters, but they have also planted carrots, onions and cabbages.

Each mealtime, the children recycle the waste from their snack times into the composter and they are encouraged to only take what

MORE INFORMATION

- **TG Escapes for information about the eco features within the Abacus building,** <https://www.tgescapes.co.uk/general-about-us>
- **Bird feeders,** www.rspb.org.uk
- **How to build a bottle greenhouse,** <http://bit.ly/2E9N4Cy>
- **Kent County Council's Early Years and Childcare Service (The Education people),** <https://www.theeducationpeople.org>
- **Education for sustainable development workshops,** <https://bit.ly/30g1omF>

they need to eat and drink so waste is kept to a minimum.

'Sadly, all the birds left when the old building was knocked down, but we've managed to re-introduce them back into the garden. During one workshop with parents, we built bird-feeders and bird boxes from recycled materials. The children now sit on logs and watch the birds during snack times.'

'They know the importance of having birds in the garden and they understand that the seeds they eat in our garden are transported to other places through their droppings.'

'We've also planted yellow and purple buddleia to attract the bees and butterflies. The children know that they should not disturb the bees and that they have an important job to do.'

BUILDING A BOTTLE GREENHOUSE

The idea to build a recycled bottle greenhouse grew out of not having enough space to grow the vegetables that needed extra protection through their growing cycle. Practitioners asked families to donate clean, two-litre plastic bottles in order to construct the greenhouse.

When the first greenhouse was built in 2010, the setting was the local Sainsbury's Charity of the Year, so employees promoted saving plastic bottles and then joined in alongside children and parents to construct the greenhouse using very simple instructions downloaded from Pinterest. A timber frame was completed and the plastic bottle wall added alongside the roof.

It was positioned within the garden to give it maximum protection from the elements. It survived five winters, including substantial snowfall. The second greenhouse, constructed this month, with a new cohort of families, is located in the new wild garden.

Ms Evans says, 'We will grow raspberries, strawberries, pumpkins, tomatoes, peppers and chilli – many of which will be donated to us from neighbours and the local community. Our chef will use the produce in vegetable pasta bakes and for snacks.'

'All our meals are prepared using fresh ingredients and are locally sourced. We are also very

Children take responsibility for watering vegetables





fortunate to have links with a local food manufacturing business who donates surplus fruit and vegetables to the setting that we can then further distribute to our families and the local community.'

She adds, 'We usually get seven or eight huge baskets that are placed on a table for parents of the nursery or children's centre, which are also on our site.'

Parental involvement is also

paying off as parents themselves are bringing ideas into the setting. One family donated bamboo, vegan-friendly and biodegradable toothbrushes for each child.

EDUCATING FAMILIES

Through the workshops, families are recognising the importance of sustainability and how what we do today affects what happens in the future.

A rainwater harvesting system feeds water around the nursery

Ms Evans says, 'By establishing a culture through our children and their learning, we can effect real change. We do this in a way that children can easily understand.'

She adds, 'It's interesting to see how things are changing. Ten years ago there was a stigma attached to getting second-hand clothes; today, it's seen more from a recycling perspective and all families are on board.' ■

green flag status

Eco-Schools is the largest environmental schools programme in the world. Operated by the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE), it was launched in 1994 as a response to the 1992 UN Rio Earth Summit. The international scheme runs in more than 60 countries.

In order to attain Green Flag accreditation, both nurseries and schools must first obtain Bronze and then Silver status based on an online self-assessment process.

Settings must demonstrate project work on at least three of the listed topics below, and show that they have followed all stages of the seven-step programme.

Settings must form an 'eco-committee' made up of staff and children to help focus activities on a chosen Eco-School topic. Bronze and

Silver statuses can be gained by displaying work on one of the ten topics on offer, which are:

- Marine
- Biodiversity
- Energy
- Litter
- Waste
- Transport
- Water
- School grounds
- Healthy living
- Global citizenship.

Eco-Schools also provides settings with a seven-step programme to follow. Bronze status requires settings to cover steps one to three; and Silver four, five and six.

The seven steps are:

1. Forming an eco-committee.

2. Carrying out an environmental review of the setting's performance.
3. Creating an action plan based on the review.
4. Making the links between the school's environmental activity and the curriculum.
5. Informing and involving the rest of the setting and wider community in the committee's progress.
6. Measuring change and finding out what works and what doesn't.
7. Creating an eco-code to unite the setting.

Once an application for Green Flag status is submitted, an assessor will visit the setting to meet the eco-committee and evaluate the work done.

→ To register with Eco-Schools, visit <https://www.eco-schools.org.uk/get-involved/register-my-school>