

A dark, modern building with a large glass window and a group of people sitting outside. The building has a steep, dark roof and a large glass window that reflects the surrounding environment. In front of the building, a group of people are sitting on the ground, some on chairs and some on the ground. The scene is dimly lit, suggesting dusk or dawn.

Regaining Paradise? Sustainability in the Early Years (ECEY6005/C)

Ridwaan Ahmed

Student NO: 2316325

Discover



I grew up and currently still live in Grangetown Cardiff, and one place that always stood out to me as a child was Grange Gardens. Back then, the Grange Pavilion was located at the back of the Gardens and was known more for its quietness and the regular sight of older men enjoying a slow-paced game of bowls on the old green. I remember walking past it, not fully understanding its purpose, but recognising that it was a calm, peaceful space tucked away in the middle of a busy community.

Over time, things changed. The bowling green closed down and for a while, that whole space felt forgotten—empty and unused. It was strange to see something that was once a part of the community just sitting there. But then came the transformation. That same space is now home to the Grange Pavilion community centre—a hub for people of all ages, backgrounds, and interests. What used to be a quiet bowling field is now alive with activity: community gardening, sports, reading sessions, wildlife spotting and general appreciation for nature.

Taking part in the John Muir Award for this assignment gave me a reason to stop and really reconnect with this place that had always been in the background of my childhood. I realised how much nature there actually is in the middle of Grangetown Pavilion—flowers blooming in the beds, bees buzzing around the herbs and vegetables, birds swooping down from the rooftops, and even the occasional ducks taking a dip in the pond.



Discover

I chose the green space surrounding Grange Pavilion in Grangetown, Cardiff. This used to be a bowling green but has now been transformed into a thriving community and nature space, open to everyone. It's home to a beautiful wildflower meadow, raised beds, a pond, and plenty of insects, birds, and local wildlife.

What makes this location even more special is that it has been developed with a sustainability lens—encouraging people to reconnect with nature through gardening, learning, and community-led conservation.

The area is easy to locate on a map; it's situated behind the Grange Gardens park, close to Clare Road and Corporation Road, which are busy parts of Cardiff. The Pavilion is part of a wider regeneration project and supported by local residents and organisations. This makes it not just a beautiful green space, but a symbol of community ownership, change, and a commitment to sustainability. I chose this site because it's close to home, both physically and emotionally. I see it through different eyes now as an early years student who understands the importance of local environments for child development, learning, and wellbeing.

I chose this area because it's close to where I live and I'm already familiar with it as a local community hub. It's a peaceful, accessible space that encourages people of all ages to connect with nature. I've often seen children, families, and older adults engaging with the environment here, whether through gardening, watching wildlife, or just relaxing in the flower meadow. It's a brilliant example of how urban spaces can promote sustainability, wellbeing, and biodiversity.



Explore

As part of the 'Explore' element of the John Muir Award, I spent time examining the various natural features of Grange Pavilion's outdoor space. With the images I gathered and from walking past the area regularly I began identifying the wildlife, plant life and sustainable practices already taking place in the garden. Living close to the area and my long-term familiarity with Grange Gardens allowed me to make meaningful observations.

One of the first things I noticed is the variety of plant life growing in the raised beds and flower patches. Herbs like rosemary, thyme, and mint grow alongside vegetables such as tomatoes and leafy greens. These plants not only serve as a food source but also help to support local pollinators such as bees and butterflies. I also noticed many flowering plants such as marigolds, lavender and daisies. These flowers attract a wide range of insects and give the garden bursts of colour and fragrance, which makes it appealing for children, families and the local community.

As for wildlife, birds are among the most regular visitors. House sparrows, starlings, black birds, and robins are commonly seen hopping across the green or feeding from scattered seeds. Sometimes, if you're lucky, you might spot some ducks taking a casual swim in the small pond or resting nearby. These observations of ducks are backed by photos I have collected showing how the area has been gradually repopulated by wildlife.







Image courtesy of Wikipedia

Blackbirds are commonly seen around Grange Pavilion, especially in the early mornings and late afternoons. The males are black with yellow beaks, while females are brown. They feed on insects, worms, and berries, often foraging in the grassy areas and garden beds. Their presence highlights the growing biodiversity of the space, showing how the Pavilion supports local wildlife.



Image courtesy of BTO

Robins can sometimes be spotted at Grange Pavilion, particularly near hedges or low shrubs. Recognised by their red chests, they are small, active birds that feed on insects and seeds. Their visits are a sign of a healthy, welcoming green space

Explore



Insects also play a major role in the ecosystem of the Pavilion garden. Bees buzz around the flowers, and ladybirds crawl along the leaves in search of aphids. I spotted butterflies in photos shared by local community gardeners, including small tortoiseshells and cabbage whites. These small but essential creatures contribute to pollination and overall biodiversity, showing that even in an urban location, ecosystems can thrive when given the chance.

Exploring the area has helped me understand the link between urban green spaces and education for sustainability. It also made me reflect on how young children can benefit from connecting with nature in everyday environments. Observing insects, growing food, and watching birds can encourage curiosity, empathy, and environmental responsibility which are lifelong values.



Image courtesy of PBS



Image courtesy of Jeevoka

Conserve

Conservation is one of the most important pillars of the John Muir Award, and this part of the experience made me reflect on my personal responsibility as a local resident, student, and future early years practitioner. The question I asked myself was: “What can I do—however small—to protect and care for this space?”

While I may not have directly built a bug hotel or planted new flowers, I’ve taken steps to educate myself on how the Grange Pavilion’s garden can be preserved and enhanced through small community-driven actions. One idea that inspired me was creating bird feeders using old plastic bottles and filling them with seeds. This is an easy, child-friendly activity that promotes recycling and supports local bird populations—especially during colder months when natural food is scarce.

Conserve



Another simple yet effective way to contribute to conservation is to support pollinators. Bees are essential for many of the fruits and vegetables we grow, and planting bee-friendly flowers such as lavender, foxglove, and marigolds can help provide them with nectar and shelter. Encouraging the planting of wildflower patches in less-used corners of the green would improve biodiversity and require little maintenance. Community gardening groups could lead workshops on how to do this using recycled containers, compost and seeds.

I also reflected on the importance of composting. Food scraps and garden waste from community events or gardening days can be used to enrich the soil, reduce landfill waste and teach children about life cycles and sustainable practice. Many settings like the Pavilion already promote composting, but raising awareness through posters, leaflets, and child-friendly signage could increase participation.

I believe that conservation doesn't always have to be physical—it can also be educational. Sharing stories, running workshops, and involving children in garden maintenance can help embed sustainability into everyday life. As early years practitioners, we have a role in modelling respect and care for the environment, and this award helped me realise that conservation can be integrated into both professional practice and community life.

Share

It has been a transformative experience discovering and exploring Grange Pavilion. Not only in reconnecting with nature but in recognising the importance of sharing that journey with others. As part of this process, I have chosen to share my learning and experiences through a digital scrapbook, allowing my family, peers, tutors, and members of my community – to see Grange Pavilion through a sustainability lens.

Grange Pavilion is more than just a repurposed space. It is a living, evolving environment that supports biodiversity, social connection, and wellbeing. By collecting and presenting evidence of the site's natural features – from common birds like robins and blackbirds to the insects that pollinate its flowers – I've aimed to highlight how urban green spaces can be essential learning environments for young children and adults alike.

Sharing this project supports the core values of the John Muir Award: encouraging others to appreciate the environment, consider their role in conserving it, and reflect on how these experiences support broader learning objectives. Through conversations, small events, social clubs, summer camps, and potentially presenting this work within a professional early years context, I hope to raise awareness of how even small-scale natural areas like the one surrounding Grange Pavilion can contribute to children's environmental education, sustainability awareness, and community engagement.

As future educators or practitioners, recognising the power of local, accessible nature is crucial. I intend to use this knowledge in future settings – encouraging children to observe, question, and respect their environment, just as I've done throughout this award. This reflection and communication of my experience completes the John Muir Award's four-part journey: Discover, Explore, Conserve and Share.



John Muir

John Muir (1838–1914) was a Scottish-born naturalist, writer and early advocate for the preservation of wilderness in the United States. He is widely regarded as the "father of national parks" and played a key role in establishing protected areas like Yosemite and Sequoia National Parks.

Muir believed deeply in the spiritual and educational value of nature. His writings and activism influenced environmental thinking worldwide, and his legacy continues through environmental education movements such as the John Muir Trust and the John Muir Award. He campaigned passionately for the conservation of wild places, arguing that nature should be preserved not just for its beauty, but for the wellbeing of all living things.

Including Muir's values in this project reinforces the importance of sustainability and conservation in early years education. His philosophy — that people connect more deeply to nature through personal experience — aligns with current pedagogies such as Forest School and play-based, outdoor learning. By participating in this award, I have embraced those same values, exploring how children and educators can work together to discover and protect local natural environments, no matter how urban or modest they may seem.



“In every walk with nature one receives far more than he seeks.”

— John Muir (1915)