RHS Garden Wisley elevates accessibility and

The Wellbeing Garden is one of the many spaces with improved accessibility at RHS Garden Wisley. Photo: Helen Yates. Courtesy of RHS Garden Wisley.

Wisley set out to increase the physical accessibility of their spaces, but with commitment and help from partners their journey led them down a much more ambitious path.

The transformational Inspiring People to Grow project launched in 2016 with £4million in support from the Heritage Fund. Building on the relevance and accessibility of the horticultural heritage site, it also aimed to deepen relationships with existing visitors.

> The project has expanded to be so much more
>
> *Julia Evans*

An early step in the project was commissioning an access audit from the Centre for Accessible Environments. Julia Evans, Heritage Fund Project Delivery Manager at RHS Garden Wisley said: “The audit focused on new hubs being built, restored and transformed at Wisley, with an initial focus on making it physically accessible wherever we could. The project has expanded since then to be so much more than that.”

Two individuals from Understand Us – a consultancy led by Sunnybank Trust – are helping test a new visitor exhibition experience in the Old Laboratory. Photo: Understand Us Consultants, Sunnybank Trust.

Wisley Access Forum

Wisley set up an access forum to work closely with a number of partners with expertise or first-hand experience of disabilities, to work together towards improving access and inclusion.

Consulting with partners saw major changes to RHS Hilltop and The Old Laboratory, including:

- revised heights of exhibits, better contrast and simpler fonts, and large print guides
- accessible electric visitor assistance vehicle and free-to-hire wheelchair/mobility options, complete with accessible electric vehicle charging point
- sensory map and wheelchair route made available for the Wellbeing Garden
- changing places toilets at Hilltop and Welcome Building
- accessible potting benches and working raised beds in learning gardens
- new accessible entrance and platform lift for the Grade II listed Old Laboratory

With the support of experts in learning disabilities – such as the National Autistic Society (NAS) and Sunnybank Trust – RHS Garden Wisley gained insight into further barriers that they may have not considered before.

After NAS participated in testing the impact of noise and lights in the Old Laboratory, the organisation responded to their feedback. It introduced quieter sessions for events, social stories and more sensory information such as sensory backpacks that include ear defenders, fidget toys and coloured overlays.

The RHS Communities Team and volunteers build a garden at Guildford Fire Station, Surrey. Photo: Luke MacGregor. Courtesy of RHS Garden Wisley

Sharing knowledge for better and broader inclusivity

As well as building a network through the Wisley Access Forum, the Community Outreach Work, which commenced with six local partners, has engaged over 120 organisations to date.

The Community Outreach Team – which was established with support from the Heritage Fund – have worked with people with a long-standing illness or disability in many ways throughout this project.

From partnering with Surrey Fire and Rescue to support mental health and stress within the community, to working with Dove House School – a specialist school for young people with special educational needs and disabilities – to engage residents and young people to learn new horticultural and entrepreneurial skills and prepare for future careers through a number of projects.

A member of staff from Dove House School said: "I was really impressed at how much content was tailored for our learners: careers, wildlife garden, attracting pollinators, water collection and more. You even managed to get one of our non-gardeners talking about gardening, as he began to realise the relationship between gardening and wildlife."

Looking to the future

The organisation has high hopes for further improving accessibility in future. In 2023 the organisation launched their new RHS Strategy which builds on the momentum and knowledge gained from the £4m project with the Heritage Fund.

Investing in disability heritage

Esther Fox is the National Lottery Awards Heritage Winner for 2023