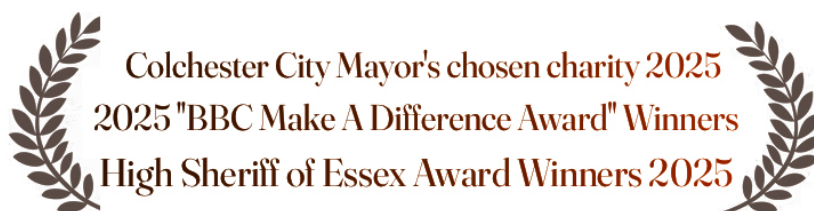




A Natural Meadow Restoration and Citizen Science Sanctuary

“A living landscape where nature restores people, builds confidence and reconnects communities with the natural world.”

Healing Meadows is a **community nature sanctuary** developed within a long-untouched meadow landscape behind Underdog Crew Studios. The project focuses on **environmental stewardship, wildlife observation and nature-based wellbeing**, preserving the meadow while carefully enhancing habitats for pollinators, birds and aquatic life.



The Underdog Crew CIC

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Project Philosophy

Protect the meadow. Learn from nature. Leave the landscape largely untouched. Healing Meadows is built on the belief that nature itself provides the most powerful therapeutic and educational environment. Rather than constructing buildings or introducing noisy activities, the project focuses on:

- protecting a historic meadow habitat
- restoring pollinator ecosystems
- creating wildlife observation opportunities
- enabling quiet nature learning
- encouraging community stewardship of the land

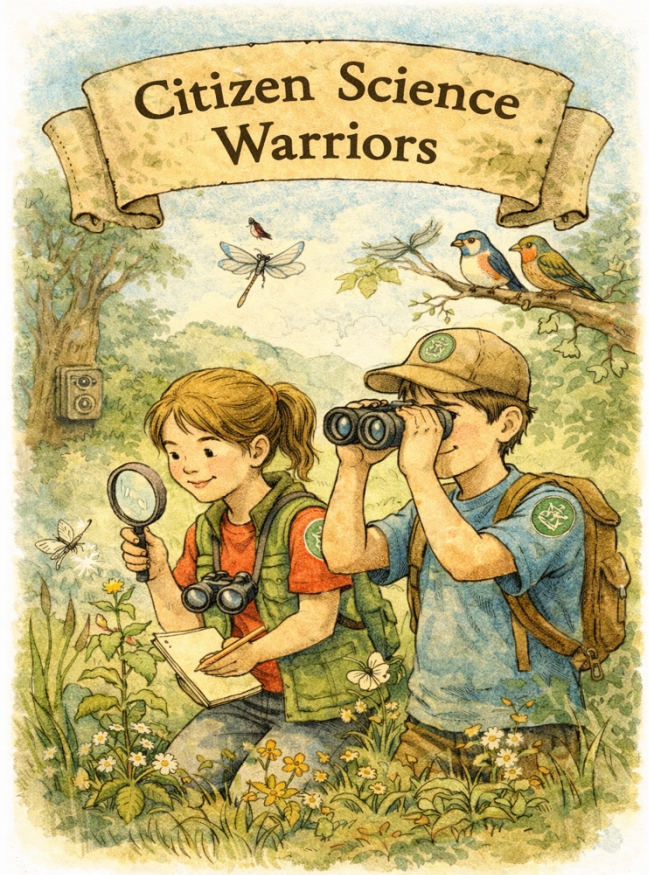
“The British meadow as a sanctuary and living classroom.”



‘Citizen Science’ - Environmental Focus

Citizen science empowers everyday people to contribute to real environmental research. At Healing Meadows, young people and community volunteers will work alongside nature by observing, recording and monitoring local wildlife. From identifying pollinators and tracking badger activity on trail cameras to surveying birds of prey at the White Cone Raptor Observatory and studying pond life in the restored stream pool, participants will gather valuable ecological data that helps build a clearer picture of local biodiversity.

This approach transforms curiosity into meaningful contribution. Young people are not just learning about nature - they are helping to protect it. Citizen science builds confidence, scientific thinking and environmental responsibility, while creating a deeper connection between people and the landscape around them. For many participants, this will be their first opportunity to take part in real-world conservation research within their own community.



Kingfisher Stream Restoration & Flood Pool

The ecological heart of the project is the restoration of the small stream running along the rear of the meadow. A **6-metre section** of the stream will be carefully widened to create a shallow wildlife pool which will:

- **improve natural water flow**
- **support flood management during heavy rain**
- **create habitat for amphibians and aquatic insects**
- **provide a safe area for pond life investigation**

This flood pool will become the **main citizen science zone**, allowing participants to study:

- **dragonflies**
- **aquatic insects**
- **amphibians such as newts**
- **water plants and wetland ecology**



Learning activities include:

- **pond life surveys**
- **water ecology monitoring**
- **amphibian observation**
- **environmental recording**

The aim is to **restore natural water habitat while increasing biodiversity.**



The Kingfisher Stream Restoration & Flood Pool offers a calm, sensory-rich environment that is particularly beneficial for children with Special Educational Needs. The gentle sounds of flowing water, wildlife movement and open natural space provide a soothing setting that supports emotional regulation and reduces anxiety. Hands-on activities such as pond dipping, observing aquatic life and recording wildlife encourage curiosity, focus and confidence without the pressures of a classroom environment. For many SEN children, nature provides a safe space to explore at their own pace. The stream environment encourages sensory engagement, patience and discovery, helping young people build independence, resilience and a deeper connection with the natural world.


White Colne Raptor Observatory



Rare birds of prey, including a **White-tailed Eagle** (March 2026) and a **Red-footed Falcon** (May 2025), have recently been spotted in the Colchester and Colne Valley area. Other notable sightings in the vicinity include a male **Marsh Harrier** at Colne Point and **Red Kites**, which are frequent in the region.

Specialist Commentary

“The Colne Valley landscape provides an unusually rich mosaic of habitats - open meadow, hedgerows, river corridor and mature woodland. This combination creates exceptional hunting conditions for birds of prey. It is rare to find such a compact area that can support multiple raptor species including red kites, kestrels, buzzards and occasional visiting falcons.

For the birdwatching community, locations like this are incredibly exciting because they allow observers to witness natural hunting behaviour and migration activity within a relatively small landscape. Establishing a quiet observation point here will not only support local wildlife monitoring but could become a valuable citizen science location for recording raptor activity across the wider Colne Valley.” - Regional Ornithological Commentary 

A dedicated wildlife observation area focusing on birds of prey.

The meadow sits within an active raptor corridor where species such as:

- **Red Kite**
- **Buzzard**
- **Kestrel**
- **Sparrowhawk**

Minimal infrastructure will include two or three raptor perch poles, binocular and photography viewing point, several trail cameras and rustic wildlife observation seating in a natural ‘boma’ style viewing area.

Participants will learn:

- **bird identification**
- **flight behaviour**
- **migration patterns**
- **ecological balance**

Citizen science data will be shared with organisations such as Essex Wildlife Trust, RSPB and British Trust for Ornithology.

Squirrel Observatory



The meadow supports a healthy population of squirrels. The Squirrel Observatory allows visitors to observe their **remarkable intelligence and dexterity**.

Using simple natural rope routes and branches between trees, squirrels can be seen navigating aerial pathways as they search for food.

Visitors will learn about:

- **animal problem-solving**
- **memory and food caching behaviour**
- **woodland ecology**
- **predator awareness**

Quiet observation areas allow children and families to watch squirrels naturally exploring their environment and using their amazing skills to access food as part of their daily natural play.

[Check out this amazing Youtube video where man attempts to outsmart Squirrel.](#)



Wildlife Monitoring & Trail Cameras



The meadow already supports a variety of wildlife including badgers, foxes and small mammals.

Trail cameras will be installed along known wildlife routes to monitor:

- **badger activity**
- **nocturnal wildlife**
- **seasonal behaviour**

This initiative will form an engaging **citizen science wildlife monitoring programme**, giving young people the opportunity to take part in real environmental observation and species recording. Footage captured by the trail cameras will be shared through a dedicated page on the Underdog Crew website, allowing participants to review new sightings, identify species and contribute to ongoing wildlife records.

By sharing these moments online, the project creates a sense of anticipation and discovery, with supporters able to check in regularly to see what wildlife has visited the meadow. In many ways it will capture the same spirit as programmes like **Springwatch**, bringing the hidden life of the meadow to a wider audience and allowing people locally and further afield to remain connected with the project.



Trail camera observation provides a powerful way for children with Special Educational Needs to experience wildlife even when physical access to outdoor environments may be difficult due to mobility needs, allergies or sensory sensitivities. Through the '**Healing Meadows online hub**', young people can remotely observe badgers, foxes, deer and other nocturnal wildlife captured on our discreet trail cameras.

This approach creates an inclusive pathway into nature-based learning. Children can log in, review new footage and take part in identifying species, recording behaviour and contributing to simple wildlife monitoring projects. The anticipation of checking what may have been captured overnight builds excitement and curiosity while encouraging patience and observation skills.

For many SEN young people, this slower and structured engagement with nature can support focus, emotional regulation and confidence. It also introduces early scientific thinking, allowing participants to feel part of real environmental discovery even from home or classroom settings.

🌻 Wildflower Meadow Stewardship

Large areas of the meadow will remain untouched, with small sections enhanced through careful wildflower restoration.

Activities include:

- **sowing native wildflower seeds**
- **supporting pollinators such as bees and butterflies**
- **monitoring plant diversity**
- **learning meadow management techniques**

The goal is to increase biodiversity while **preserving the natural character of the landscape.**



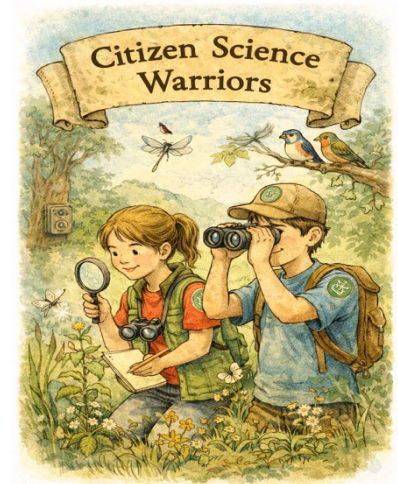
Citizen Science Programme

Healing Meadows will host a **community wildlife monitoring programme** where participants help record local biodiversity.

Areas of study include:

- **birds of prey surveys**
- **pollinator monitoring**
- **pond life recording**
- **wildlife camera analysis**

This programme encourages people to **actively contribute to environmental knowledge and conservation.**



"Keep close to Nature's heart... and break clear away, once in a while, and climb a mountain or spend a week in the woods. Wash your spirit clean." -The Ladybirds' Adventures

"There's no Wi-Fi in the forest, but I promise you'll find a better connection."

Nature Ranger Training Programme

Participants can build environmental skills through accredited learning using **Training Express courses**.

Recommended courses include:

- **Environmental Awareness**
- **Environmental Science**
- **Horticulture Fundamentals**
- **Sustainable Gardening**
- **Ecology & Conservation**
- **First Aid Awareness**

These courses allow participants to develop **real environmental and land stewardship skills**.



Engagement with Young People

Healing Meadows will engage **50 young people during the first year**, including those who benefit from calm outdoor environments such as young people with Special Educational Needs.

Participants will take part in:

- **wildlife observation**
- **environmental monitoring**
- **meadow stewardship**
- **citizen science projects**

At least **20 participants will complete accredited Training Express courses**, gaining recognised learning certificates in environmental and safety subjects.

Expected Outcomes

Healing Meadows will deliver measurable benefits:

- **improved biodiversity within the meadow**
- **increased pollinator habitat**
- **better flood resilience through stream restoration**
- **community participation in conservation**
- **environmental education for young people**
- **improved wellbeing through nature connection**

The meadow will remain a **protected natural landscape first and foremost**, while becoming a space where people can quietly reconnect with wildlife and the environment.

Community Support and Evidence of Need

During the development of Healing Meadows, we have undertaken informal consultation with local families, home education groups and community members. These conversations clearly demonstrate a strong demand for calm, nature-based environments where young people can explore, learn and regulate outside of busy or technology-dominated spaces.

Many families highlighted the growing challenge of **digital dependency among young people**, and the need for safe outdoor environments where children can reconnect with nature.

Michelle H., a local parent of a young person with Special Educational Needs, explained how important outdoor spaces are for wellbeing:

“Having somewhere calm and natural where my son can spend time outside and away from his phone would make a huge difference. When he’s in nature he becomes much more relaxed and focused. A space like Healing Meadows would give him the chance to explore and reset away from screens.”

Claire M., another local parent, spoke about the importance of **safe environments where neurodivergent young people can regulate and explore their interests**:

“My son has a huge fascination with insects and wildlife. Having a controlled, quiet space where he can explore that safely would be amazing for him. When he’s able to focus on nature and small creatures it helps him regulate and feel calm.”

There has also been strong interest from local alternative education networks. **Charlotte B.**, who coordinates a local home education group, emphasised the potential impact of the project:

“For our home education group of over 20 young people, having access to a space like this would be a game changer. Opportunities for outdoor learning and wildlife exploration are incredibly valuable and difficult to find locally.”

These early conversations demonstrate clear community demand for a project that provides safe outdoor learning, environmental engagement and nature-based wellbeing opportunities for young people and families across the **West Colchester, Colne Valley parishes and Halstead area**.

Healing Meadows aims to respond directly to this need by creating a calm, natural space where young people can reconnect with the environment, develop confidence and take part in meaningful citizen science activities.

Local Authority and Youth Service Support

Early discussions with members of the local parish council have highlighted that there are currently **no dedicated nature-based educational environments within the Colne Valley parishes** offering structured opportunities for young people and families to engage with wildlife, environmental stewardship and outdoor learning.

Although the area is surrounded by countryside, much of this land is privately owned farmland or unmanaged rural space and is **not designed for safe public engagement, educational activities or citizen science programmes**. As a result, schools, home education groups and youth groups have limited access to spaces where young people can meaningfully connect with nature.

Parish representatives have been highly supportive of the Healing Meadows concept, particularly because of its **low-impact environmental approach**. The focus on protecting the meadow, restoring pollinator habitats, improving the stream ecosystem and creating opportunities for wildlife observation aligns closely with local priorities around environmental stewardship and community wellbeing.

In addition to parish support, early conversations with **Essex Youth Service teams operating in Halstead and Stanway** have highlighted significant enthusiasm for the project. Youth workers identified the growing challenge of **digital addiction among young people**, particularly the impact of excessive screen time on mental wellbeing, concentration and social confidence.

Youth Service representatives recognised that Healing Meadows could provide an important **alternative environment for young people**, offering calm outdoor experiences centred around nature observation, environmental learning and quiet therapeutic engagement with the natural world.

They highlighted that projects like Healing Meadows could become a valuable resource in helping young people **disconnect from digital environments and reconnect with nature**, supporting wellbeing, resilience and positive mental health through what is increasingly recognised as **nature-based therapy**.

Together, the support expressed by parish representatives, local families, home education groups and youth service providers demonstrates a clear and growing demand for a project that offers **accessible outdoor learning, environmental engagement and nature-based wellbeing opportunities for young people across the Colne Valley area**.

Healing Meadows has the potential to become a **unique environmental learning resource for West Colchester, Earls Colne and Halstead**, helping young people build confidence, curiosity and a lifelong connection with the natural world.

Demonstrated Community Need

Taken together, discussions with local families, parish representatives, youth workers and home education groups clearly demonstrate a strong and immediate need for a project such as Healing Meadows.

Parents of young people with Special Educational Needs have highlighted the importance of calm natural environments where children can regulate, explore their interests in wildlife and take a break from screen-based lifestyles. Home education groups have identified a significant lack of accessible outdoor learning environments within the Colne Valley area, while early conversations with Essex Youth Service teams working in Halstead and Stanway emphasised the growing challenge of digital addiction and the need for nature-based activities that support mental wellbeing.

Parish council representatives also confirmed that there are currently no dedicated environmental education spaces of this kind within the Colne parishes. The consistent feedback across all discussions has been overwhelmingly supportive of the Healing Meadows vision: a quiet, restorative meadow landscape where young people and families can reconnect with nature, participate in citizen science, and develop confidence through hands-on environmental learning. Collectively, these voices demonstrate clear local demand for a project that protects the meadow while transforming it into a shared community resource for wildlife observation, environmental education and nature-based wellbeing.

Why Underdog Crew Are the Right Organisation to Deliver This Project

Underdog Crew Studios is often recognised for its creative work in filmmaking and media, but the true strength of the organisation lies much deeper. At its core, Underdog Crew is built on lived experience and a deep understanding of how to re-engage marginalised young people who have become disconnected from education, community and opportunity.

For many years the team has worked directly with young people facing challenges including anxiety, school avoidance, social isolation and digital dependency. Through innovative, trauma-informed and empathy-led interventions, Underdog Crew has consistently helped young people rediscover confidence, curiosity and a sense of belonging.

Creativity has always been one pathway into that process - but it is not the only one. The real expertise of Underdog Crew lies in creating safe environments where young people feel seen, valued and able to explore the world again at their own pace.

Healing Meadows is a natural evolution of this work. The project builds on Underdog Crew's proven ability to connect with young people who often struggle in traditional settings, offering a calm outdoor environment where curiosity, exploration and wellbeing come first.

By combining nature-based learning, citizen science and quiet environmental stewardship, Healing Meadows will extend the organisation's existing digital detox and youth empowerment work into a landscape where young people can slow down, reconnect with the natural world and rebuild confidence through discovery.

This approach reflects Underdog Crew's core belief that meaningful change happens when young people are given space, trust and the opportunity to explore their own potential.

Partnerships and Strategic Collaboration

Healing Meadows builds on the established work of The Underdog Crew CIC and 'Underdog Crew Studios', strong track record of delivering youth engagement projects focused on wellbeing, creativity and digital detox. Through previous programmes, Underdog Crew has supported young people to step away from screen-based environments and reconnect with hands-on learning, community activity and the natural world.

Our many recent awards show our status as innovative and pioneering during a mental health crisis and wide acknowledgement that SEN care and education need a complete overhaul. This experience forms a strong foundation for the development of Healing Meadows as a calm, restorative nature environment for young people and families.

Established Partnerships

Angling Trust

Underdog Crew already has an established relationship with the **Angling Trust**, the national governing body for angling and freshwater conservation. Their expertise supports the ecological approach behind the **Kingfisher Stream Restoration and Flood Pool**, ensuring that improvements to the stream habitat promote healthy freshwater ecosystems while also providing valuable educational opportunities around river health, aquatic biodiversity and responsible stewardship of waterways.

iCARP CIC – Dr Mark Wheeler 

Healing Meadows will also benefit from the expertise of **Dr Mark Wheeler and iCARP CIC**, whose work focuses on freshwater ecology, fish welfare and environmental education. Through this partnership the project will gain access to specialist knowledge around aquatic habitats and citizen science monitoring, helping young people and volunteers understand the delicate balance of freshwater ecosystems while contributing to real environmental observation and data collection.

Together these partnerships help ensure that the stream restoration and wildlife observation elements of the project are guided by **credible environmental knowledge and best practice**.

Strategic Affiliations and Future Collaboration

As the project develops, Healing Meadows will also seek to collaborate with a range of organisations whose work aligns with environmental stewardship, youth development and citizen science.

Potential collaborations include:

- **Essex Wildlife Trust** – biodiversity advice and wildlife education
- **RSPB (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds)** – bird monitoring and raptor observation initiatives
- **The Mammal Society** – support for trail camera wildlife recording and mammal observation
- **Buglife – The Invertebrate Conservation Trust** – pollinator conservation and meadow biodiversity
- **Essex Youth Service** – connecting local young people with outdoor wellbeing programmes
- **Local schools and home education networks** – outdoor learning opportunities for young people

Through these partnerships and affiliations, Healing Meadows will become part of a wider network of organisations working to **protect biodiversity, support youth wellbeing and encourage responsible engagement with the natural environment**.

Long-Term Vision

Healing Meadows aims to become a **model for community-led environmental stewardship**, demonstrating how a small natural landscape can support biodiversity, education and wellbeing without heavy development or disturbance. It will remain: **a meadow first — a place where wildlife thrives and people learn gently from nature**.

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