



UNIVERSITY
of York

THE SUSTAINABILITY CLINIC

HIGHLIGHTS REPORT 2024-2025

SUSTAINABILITY CLINIC

A hands-on interdisciplinary module for all students.

The Sustainability Clinic is an elective York Interdisciplinary Module (YIM) offered in partnership between Environmental Sustainability at York (ESAY), Careers and Placements, and the Department of Environment and Geography. The Sustainability Clinic brings together students and our local community to tackle pressing sustainability issues. Working in interdisciplinary teams, students are given a project brief that has been co-produced with an organisation, business or charity, focusing on a sustainability challenge.

All projects are designed to develop students' employability skills while helping organisations find solutions to a real-life sustainability problem that matters to them. The Clinic contributes directly to the University's mission to create a community without limits and provide all students with an education that empowers and equips them to become leaders of change.

A module for all

Running since 2023, the Sustainability Clinic is available as an elective module to undergraduate and taught postgraduate students from all Departments and Schools across the University, enabling all students to experience real-life problem solving, teamwork and partnership working.

Community Engaged Learning (CEL)

The Sustainability Clinic adopts a Community Engaged Learning (CEL) approach, bridging the gap between theory and practice. Through CEL, students work collaboratively with community partners to address real-world sustainability challenges, creating meaningful outcomes while developing the knowledge, skills, and values needed to become socially-engaged and responsible citizens.

Environment and Geography: embedding in programmes

The Sustainability Clinic runs both as an interdisciplinary elective module for all students and as a core module for all 3rd year students within the Department of Environment and Geography. The inclusion of the Sustainability Clinic within this department's curriculum demonstrates a true commitment to advancing sustainability efforts within and beyond the University community.



Explore the Sustainability Clinic by visiting our webpage or scan the QR code:

tinyurl.com/sustainability-clinic

BIODIVERSITY

The Biodiversity strand of our Sustainability Clinic involves both field-based and desk-based work, supporting a wide range of projects focused on understanding and enhancing the natural environment. This might include designing and conducting ecological surveys, creating baseline biodiversity data, and developing practical recommendations. Desk-based projects could explore topics such as the impact of climate change on land and flood management, the effects of specific technologies or behaviours on ecosystems, or identifying potential funding opportunities for biodiversity initiatives.

Project spotlight:

BIODIVERSITY SURVEYING FOR FOSS FAIRY TRAIL

Enhancing urban biodiversity through pond and plant surveys on a community woodland trail.

Project summary

Our student team partnered with Foss Fairy Trail, a small community group maintaining a scenic woodland walking trail running through the centre of York. While this magical trail is popular with families, its biodiversity hasn't been formally explored. Our students conducted a series of ecological surveys focused on the pond area, identifying opportunities to support more local wildlife and plant life.

Key discoveries

The students conducted a survey of the Foss Fairy Trail to determine what organisms are currently living on the trail and to provide recommendations for how to increase biodiversity. Key findings of the survey showed that the most prevalent plants are leaf litter, nettles, hedge parsley, wood avens and annual bluegrass. Insects found at the trail include butterflies, bees, snails, ladybirds and beetles, and there is a prevalence of various different bird species at the trail.

Top recommendations

1. Increase pond water quality (protective covering, water cleaning).
2. More raised beds and potential wildlife habitats.
3. Implement a pond drainage system.



“This module teaches you to be very professional and proactive with the way you talk to your partner and the way you undertake the project. I’ve come away with lots of skills that I wouldn’t have had if I hadn’t done the module, such as communication, productivity, and teamwork.”

Guy, Sustainability Clinic student



WATER DEPTH PENETRATION STUDY FOR LOCAL FARM

Investigating soil water penetration to support sustainable land management practices for Crambe Grange Farm.

Project summary

Crambe Grange is a 110-acre mixed farm on the edge of the Yorkshire Wolds, managed with a strong focus on sustainable, low-impact agriculture. With new DEFRA guidelines recommending 2-metre buffer margins around hedgerows, the student team was invited to investigate water penetration depth across the farm's fields, particularly how it varies between open areas and the hedgerow margins.

What the students did

- Conducted soil water penetration surveys across multiple farm locations over three visits.
- Collected comparative water absorption data at varying distances from hedgerows.
- Developed a repeatable methodology in consultation with the farm's lead contact.
- Assessed how land use and soil structure impacted drainage and retention.
- Produced a report with practical, cost effective recommendations to improve water penetration.
- Explored planting, soil management, and low-impact drainage options for long-term sustainability.

At the end of the project, the students provided a report detailing findings from investigations conducted into the water penetration depth. The report gave specific recommendations for improving and alleviating water penetration at Crambe Grange Farm.

THREE PROJECTS WITH ROWNTREE PARK

Three projects were undertaken by our students for the Friends of Rowntree Park, focusing on water, land and tree management.

About Rowntree Park

Rowntree Park is a 10-hectare public park on the south side of York city centre. Managed by City of York Council and supported by the charity Friends of Rowntree Park, it combines formal gardens, play and sports facilities, duck ponds, and wildlife walks. The park sits in the River Ouse floodplain and is increasingly affected by flooding and climate change, which threatens its landscape, horticulture, and long-term sustainability.

The Friends of Rowntree Park invited students to support them in planning for the park's future by exploring strategies for water management, land management, and tree management. Together, these projects contribute to shaping a more resilient, biodiverse and sustainable park.

Project 1: Flood management

The park regularly floods, often taking weeks to drain, with growing severity due to climate change. Students were asked to explore whether changes to landscape or management could help mitigate flooding or lessen its impact.

The students provided the Friends with evidence-based recommendations to inform future planning, balancing immediate mitigation with long-term adaptation.

Project 2: Land management

Climate change and frequent flooding threaten the horticulture and design of the park, while limited resources pose challenges for rewilding ambitions. Students were tasked with reviewing how the landscape could be managed in light of these pressures.

The students offered clear, site-specific ideas to help the Friends plan for climate adapted land use while retaining the park's character.

Project 3: Tree management

Flooding stresses the park's trees, leading to increasing losses each year. Without intervention, the park faces long-term decline in tree cover. The Friends sought a long-term tree planting and management strategy (50–100 years).

The students produced a forward-looking tree strategy that the Friends can present to City of York Council, supporting adoption of a proactive, sustainable plan for the park's canopy.



EDUCATION AND AWARENESS

The Education Strand of our Sustainability Clinic explores environmental sustainability through a wide range of educational approaches. This could include working with schools to improve their environmental practices, developing teaching resources and lesson plans, or creating awareness campaigns aimed at specific audiences, organisations or initiatives.

Project spotlight:

FOREST SCHOOL WITH HOLLBANK TRUST

Designing an inclusive and sustainable Forest School for learners with complex needs.

Project summary

A team of six Environment and Geography students collaborated with Hollybank Trust to help shape a new Forest School for children and adults with complex disabilities. The project focused on reviewing and enhancing the charity's early plans, and providing creative and sustainable recommendations for developing an inclusive outdoor learning space at their Mirfield site.



What the students did

- Discussed initial ideas with staff and Forest School experts.
- Conducted an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) of the area.
- Proposed a range of accessible and engaging features, such as wildlife ponds, raised beds, a mud kitchen and sensory garden, accessible seating, shelter spaces, and plant suggestions.
- Developed a 3-year site management plan, which included CSR activity ideas for corporate partners.
- Presented their recommendations to the Senior Leadership Team & stakeholders.

The students' recommendations fell within the budget parameters set by Hollybank Trust, and the student team showed a real interest in the work that Hollbank was doing.



"THE STUDENTS HAVE DONE THE WORK TO AN INCREDIBLY HIGH STANDARD, AND THEY ARE A JOY TO WORK WITH. WE ARE NOW LOOKING AT FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES WITH THE UNIVERSITY OF YORK AND A NEW COHORT OF STUDENTS."

James Hook, Hollybank Trust

Project spotlight:

SUSTAINABILITY STORYTIME

Engaging early years children and families with sustainability storytelling at York Explore.

Project summary

In Semester 1, a team of Environment and Geography students teamed up with York Explore Libraries to help develop engaging Sustainability Storytime sessions. The students created a series of session plans, along with a curated list of sustainability themed books, rhymes, songs and activities. Their work, supported by a research-based report, will help the Explore team deliver Sustainability Storytimes across all their libraries.

Sustainability themes

The students created 6 sustainability storytelling themes that would be accessible for younger children. Themes included: under the sea, snack time, in the garden, in the trees, on the farm, and polar. A variety of books, rhymes and songs were chosen for each theme.



Impact and next steps

York Explore now have a bank of age-appropriate sustainability storytime sessions complete with curated booklists, rhymes and simple activity ideas. Once funding is secured they plan to develop these resources into a series of themed Story Sacks – free, loanable packs that bring each topic to life. These Story Sacks will allow families to explore the themes together at home in a fun and accessible way.

“COLLABORATING WITH STUDENTS WAS A REWARDING EXPERIENCE, AND I APPRECIATED THEIR PROFESSIONALISM AND OPENNESS TO FEEDBACK. THEY BROUGHT FRESH IDEAS AND THOUGHTFUL APPROACHES TO DEVELOPING STORYTIME MATERIALS THAT WILL BE VALUABLE TO EXPLORE LIBRARIES”.

Lyndsay Glover, Service Developer, York Explore Libraries



Read about this project from a student perspective!

Project spotlight:

HEALTHIER LIVING WITH HUNTINGTON PRIMARY



Empowering pupils to lead a whole-school Healthy Living campaign using home-grown food.

Project summary

An interdisciplinary team of students worked with Huntington Primary Academy's Eco Committee to design a Healthy Living campaign that connects environmental sustainability with wellbeing. The school had recently built raised beds for growing food, and the student team helped create a clear plan to make the most of this resource, linking growing, learning, and healthy eating.

What the students did:

- Ran an idea-generation workshop with the pupil-led Eco Committee.
- Designed a set of curriculum-linked activities across science, PSHE & PE.
- Created a planting plan for seven raised beds, including seasonal produce and crop rotation guidance.
- Developed session plans to support the school's Healthy Living campaign and empower pupils to lead it.
- Engaged with teachers and kitchen staff to align growing plans with real school meals.

Project outputs:

Classroom wall planner

Created a visual wall planner to be displayed in the classroom.

Recipe cards for parents

Seasonal recipes featured in the half-termly newsletter. The recipes use vegetables from the raised beds and encourage family involvement.

Growing guide for teachers

A detailed plan featuring vegetable planting instructions, plus tips for crop rotation, spacing and maintenance.

IMPACT: GREEN FLAG AWARD

Huntington Primary Academy was awarded a Green Flag Award in 2025. Judges said: “We loved reading that the collaborative project with the Sustainability Clinic was a great success and that all year groups were involved in the gardening initiative. Growing fruit, vegetables and herbs is one of the best ways to get young people into gardening and help them connect with nature.”

CONSULTANCY

The Consultancy strand of our Sustainability Clinic supports organisations in tackling specific sustainability challenges. Projects might involve conducting sustainability audits and providing tailored recommendations, developing action plans or exploring best practices to inform strategic decision-making. Students work collaboratively with partners to research solutions and co-create strategies that address real-world environmental and social sustainability issues.

Project spotlight:

SUSTAINABILITY WITH THE RUGBY FOOTBALL LEAGUE

Consulting for sustainability education in sport.

Project summary

An interdisciplinary team of students collaborated with the Rugby Football League (RFL) to strengthen its communication around environmental and social sustainability. The students produced a comprehensive set of internal and external resources, including social media and newsletter templates, designed to raise awareness and showcase the RFL's sustainability initiatives.

Developing resources

Students worked in consultation with the Rugby Football League (RFL) to develop a suite of resources that support effective communication of its ongoing social and environmental sustainability initiatives. This work included:

- 1. Internal and external resource templates:** designed to streamline the dissemination of key sustainability information to various stakeholders.
- 2. In-depth research report:** summarising project findings, outlining actionable sustainability recommendations, and providing evidence-based support for their proposals.
- 3. Greenwashing risk research:** ensuring the RFL's communication aligns with relevant legislation and ethical best practices.

Key recommendations

Key findings from the project indicate that the RFL had developed good sustainability practices but struggled with visibility and engagement. To address this, the project recommended regular internal meetings to share updates, creating a supportive network among clubs, and developing innovative outreach campaigns, such as "green games" and reusable cup schemes at matches.



"This project has enabled me to develop not only my personal knowledge of social sustainability but also environmental sustainability. It has been invaluable for us to have an opportunity to consult with a real world organisation, facing the challenges and opportunities this gave us."

Charlotte Beale
BSc Ecology student



Read Charlotte's interview sharing her experience working with the RFL!



Project spotlight:

URBAN GREEN SPACES WITH THIRTEEN GROUP

Enhancing biodiversity in low income urban areas to create sustainable and inclusive communities.

Project summary

A team of six students from the Environment and Geography Department collaborated with Thirteen Group to enhance biodiversity in low income urban areas. Their research-led project provided valuable insights and recommendations to support Thirteen Group's commitment to sustainable and inclusive communities.

Addressing biodiversity loss in urban development

Biodiversity plays a crucial role in ecosystem health, climate regulation and community wellbeing. However, urban development often leads to habitat loss, particularly in areas facing socio-economic challenges. To tackle this issue, students focused on three key sites in Middlesbrough — Pallister Park, Dyke House, and Hemlington.

Students used these sites to develop a comprehensive report to guide Thirteen Group's next steps in improving green spaces across its housing estates. By reviewing biodiversity initiatives from similar organisations, the student team identified evidence-based strategies tailored to each site. Their recommendations balanced ecological improvements with social and economic benefits, ensuring that urban green spaces support thriving, inclusive communities.



The student group attended a site visit to MiddleMarsh Reserve, a former housing estate transformed into a thriving biodiversity corridor, led by environmental specialist John Woods. The visit demonstrated the real-world impact of urban habitat restoration and the potential for re-wilding initiatives in housing estates.

Key recommendations

Through extensive research and site analysis, the students proposed three core green space initiatives for Thirteen Group:

- 1. Communal and edible gardens:** enhancing community engagement and accessibility to green spaces while providing fresh produce.
- 2. Green landscaping:** incorporating wildflower meadows, tree planting, and pollinator-friendly environments to boost biodiversity.
- 3. Green roofs:** installing vegetation on bus shelters to improve insulation, manage rain water runoff, and create wildlife habitats.

Presenting to industry leaders

The students had the opportunity to present their findings in-person to senior leaders at Thirteen Group, including CEO Matt Forrest. Their report was well-received, sparking discussions on the practicalities of implementing the recommendations. The students were also invited to attend Thirteen Group's internal Environmental Champions Meeting, where they engaged in discussions on biodiversity net gain legislation, carbon footprint tracking and sustainability funding opportunities.

Samantha Bradley, Environmental Impacts Advisor at Thirteen Group, praised the students' contributions: "The Sustainability Clinic matched us with six dedicated and enthusiastic students who delivered a thorough and insightful project. We would gladly collaborate with York students again."

CEO Matt Forrest also commended the team's professionalism, saying: "I was hugely impressed by how articulate and considered the students were."

"The project allowed me to become more knowledgeable on the real issues that challenge sustainability. I really enjoyed the nature of the project research with my team, but also appreciate the opportunity to consult the company in one of their boardrooms and create professional relationships within the industry."

Emma Ralph
Environment and Geography student

Next steps: turning research into action

As a direct result of the students team's recommendations, Thirteen Group's estates team is conducting a feasibility study on installing green roofs on storage garages across Teesside - an expansion of their original idea for bus shelter green roofs. Moving forward, Thirteen Group remains committed to integrating biodiversity strategies into future housing developments, using student research as a foundation for meaningful change.



Students presenting their findings to senior leaders at Thirteen Group.

BEYOND THE MODULE

Beyond the module, the Sustainability Clinic has made a lasting impact on students, partners, and the wider community. From students presenting at conferences and showcasing their work at the York Festival of Ideas, to the Clinic space serving as a hub for sustainability and environmental events, the Clinic is far more than just a module.

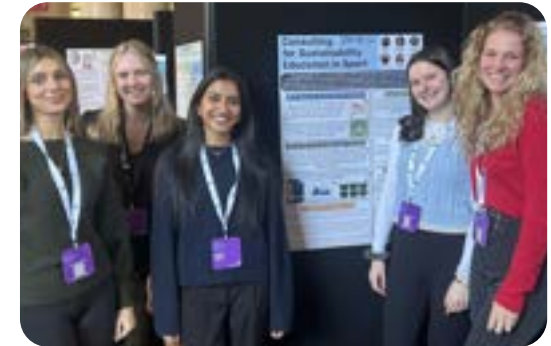
STUDENTS PRESENTING AT SSRC25

A number of our Sustainability Clinic teams presented their projects at this year's Student Sustainability Research Conference at the University of Leeds.

Organised annually in March, the conference offers students the opportunity to present their work in a friendly and supportive environment. Three of our Sustainability Clinic teams presented their projects, including:

Consulting for Sustainability Education in Sport

Working with RLF to develop sustainability strategies within the sports sector (Safiya Hussain, Charlotte Beale, Hannah Murray, Sakshi Rajeev, Emma York, and Emily James).



Transforming Low-Income Areas with Environmental Initiatives

Partnering with Thirteen Group to enhance biodiversity in low-income urban areas (Emma Ralph, Eleanor Tullet, Abbie Moore, Josh Proctor, Dylan Shale, and Alec Joly).



Sustainability Story Time

Collaborating with York Explore Libraries to engage children and families with sustainability storytelling (Katie Lamy, Abbey Reardon, Violet Wingfield, Harriet Preston, Nicole Swinnerton, and Jake Bennett).

“SSRC25 provided the opportunity to present our team's work as student consultants for the RFL. It was incredibly rewarding to share our findings and engage with attendees about how we can drive sustainable practices within the sporting world. I'm so proud of my team and how well we presented!”

Charlotte Beale, BSc Ecology student

YORK FESTIVAL OF IDEAS 2025

Discovery Zone: Super Sustainability and Wonderful Windmills

Students from our Sustainability Clinic module ran an interactive session as part of the Festival of Ideas Discovery Zone in June 2025. Members of the public came along and had a go at making their own windmill, with over 100 made at the session. The session was designed to explore where our energy comes from, and what we mean by 'clean' or 'renewable' energy.



Panel discussion: The Future of Higher Education in a Climate Crisis

An online panel event was hosted by the Sustainability Clinic and chaired by Stephen Levett, Director of the Clinic. It explored how collaboration across sectors can drive action in response to the climate crisis. Experts from higher education, environmental, and legal fields discussed innovative approaches to tackling sustainability challenges and shaping the future of higher education.

Speakers highlighted initiatives at the University of York, including the Sustainability Clinic, which support both students and the local community in addressing pressing sustainability priorities. The international panel featured Steve Levett (Director of the Sustainability Clinic) and Francesco Pomponi from the University of York, Federico Bortoletto from KaosPilot in Denmark, Tony G. Reames from the University of Michigan, and Sue Willman KC from King's College London.



VOLUNTEERING AWARDS

Each year, the University's Community Engaged Learning and Volunteering Team host the Community and Volunteering Awards to recognise and celebrate the achievements, commitment and lasting impact of our University of York students in the wider community; locally, nationally or internationally. One of our Sustainability Clinic Teams were successfully nominated in the Community Engaged Learning Category by their partner, Thirteen Group, for their Urban Green Space Management project in 2024/25.

Our partner organisations are invited to nominate individual students, or teams of students, who have made a difference. If you are one of our current partners look out for future opportunities to celebrate your team's work!

SUSTAINABILITY CLINIC SPACE ON CAMPUS

The Sustainability Clinic has a physical space on Campus West. Beyond teaching, this vital space allows students to meet with their partners and fellow teams in a professional setting. Outside of the Clinic, the space is used to regularly host a wide variety of sustainability related events and activities, including game nights, open days, action days, and book launches.



ABOUT THE MODULE

As part of a multidisciplinary team, students have the opportunity to work with local and regional organisations, government, community groups, charities or small businesses to help them find a solution to or better understand a real-life sustainability problem that matters to the organisation. Problems focus on a wide range of topics, including: biodiversity; education; sustainable business, policy and regulation; and heritage and culture.

Our student teams are supported throughout their projects by dedicated training, a project facilitator and access to a team of experts who are available to provide advice and specialist knowledge throughout the module. Students are then assessed by creating a reflective report on their project outcomes, and on their individual contribution to the project.

Learning outcomes

By the end of the module, our students should be able to:

- Work collaboratively in multi-disciplinary teams on pressing local or regional challenges.
- Define, plan and undertake a 'live' real-world sustainability project.
- Work professionally to understand the needs of a client, manage expectations and provide realistic, accurate and clear outputs.
- Analyse and evaluate complex information to provide outputs which consider all facets of sustainability and are designed to bring about positive change.
- Reflect on their own personal development, their role as social leaders and working for the public good.



BENEFITS FOR STUDENTS

Interdisciplinary skills

By working with students from different disciplines, students develop interdisciplinary skills crucial for addressing complex sustainability issues.

Collaboration & teamwork

The module encourages collaboration and teamwork among students from diverse academic backgrounds, which will develop students' communication skills and the ability to work effectively in multi-disciplinary teams.

Hands-on learning

The Clinic provides project-based learning, allowing students to engage directly with sustainability issues through research, data analysis, fieldwork, and practical problem-solving activities.

Making a real difference

Students work with a real partner organisation on a sustainability challenge that matters to them. This gives students the opportunity to make a real difference in the organisation they work with.

OUR EXPERT ADVISORS

Our Sustainability Clinic Expert Advisors are available to support our student groups throughout the module, providing subject-specific expertise and general assistance to all staff and students engaged in the module. The module is also supported by a dedicated team of Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs), and strand leads within the Department of Environment and Geography.



Georgia Ramsay, Department of Education

Georgia Ramsay's background is in geography education, where she has 24 years experience of teaching in secondary schools. Sustainability has become an increasingly important aspect of education and through her work Georgia has developed a considerable amount of links with schools and local communities around York.



Dr Kelly Redeker, Department of Biology

Kelly Redeker is a lecturer in the Department of Biology. He works on implications of land-use change and management on ecosystem function and climate, specifically focusing on land-use change, climate change, biogeochemistry, metabolomics, and volatilomics.



Dr Charlotte Love-Smith, School of Arts and Creative Technologies

Catherine Love-Smith is a lecturer in Theatre. She is interested in the role of the arts in responding to climate and ecological crises, exploring different creative strategies and sustainable practices within theatre-making. Her recent work has also looked at the intersection between science, art and environmental activism.



Dr Judith Krauss, Department of Politics & International Relations

With a diverse team of colleagues, Judith works on global value chains, conservation and the Sustainable Development Goals, highlighting how environmental concerns such as limiting carbon and protecting biodiversity intersect with economic questions of who benefits, and socio-political issues of justice and decoloniality.

“The Sustainability Clinic is an amazing opportunity for students to come together from different backgrounds and disciplines, to learn with each other about how much they have to contribute to driving a sustainable future.”

Professor Stephen Levett
Director of the Sustainability Clinic



Meet some of our Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs)!



HOW TO GET INVOLVED

FOR UG / PG STUDENTS

Want to explore sustainability beyond your current degree programme?

Find out how you can apply for the Sustainability Clinic and work on real, impactful projects with local, regional, or national organisations.

FOR ACADEMIC DEPARTMENTS

Looking to expand your sustainability options for students to study?

Consider adding the Sustainability Clinic in your list of optional modules available for students from your Department or School.

FOR ORGANISATIONS & BUSINESSES

Want to make your business or organisational practices more sustainable?


Find out how the Sustainability Clinic can help by pairing you with a student team to tackle a sustainability challenge that matters to your organisation.




Explore the Sustainability Clinic
by visiting our webpage or scan
the QR code:

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