

Farming in urban schools: Phoenix High School

Phoenix High School is very far from a rural idyll. Located right in the middle of the socially deprived White City Estate in west London, with the six lane A40 roaring in the background, our school is perhaps the last place on earth you would expect to find a farm.

Yet here, in a large plot behind the sixth form block, are carrots, leeks, onions and herbs growing in neatly-tended vegetable beds. We have greenhouses and abundant fruit trees, as well as rabbit hutches, a hen coop and a colony of bees.

Our farm was the brainchild of Sir William Atkinson, the executive head teacher. He wanted to give the children something that very few were getting at home: an intimate understanding of nature.

Phoenix's 1,100 children mostly come from disadvantaged backgrounds: 60% receive free school meals, 65% speak English as a second language and 65% have special needs. "Many of our children live in very cramped flats," says Sir William. "To some, vegetables come in plastic bags from the supermarket, not out of the ground."

Working on the school farm – planting, weeding, harvesting, caring for the animals – gives our pupils a uniquely hands-on education. They learn about seasonality, the life-cycle of plants and where food really comes from. For those who want to it further, we have introduced a City and Guilds qualification in Landbased Studies (horticulture and animal care).

Some of our produce is used in school meals, much to the children's excitement, and we run a pop-up fruit and vegetable stall three times a week, selling to the public.

Even so, our farm is expensive to run. We employ two full-time gardeners, as well as a small army of community volunteers. It costs around £70,000 a year to keep the venture going, money that comes from the Big Lottery Fund. But the benefits to Phoenix High, its pupils and the wider community have been worth every penny.