

A Greener Approach

James Blake from James Blake Associates discuss ways in which we can create greener developments and ultimately a more successful and sustainable world

James Blake Associates (JBA) is a multi-disciplinary consultancy in Bury St Edmunds, advising landowners and developers on matters of landscape, ecology and arboriculture, amongst other related services. The team had a vision that as an environmental practice they could help developers achieve best value by creating greener developments, working together to create a more successful and sustainable world.

The false premise that has become the root of many beliefs is that development has a negative impact on climate change and the environment. JBA challenge this view, stating they don't believe that the two objectives of saving our planet and developers delivering profitable new projects are mutually exclusive, in fact far from it.

Commenting, Chairman of JBA James Blake, said: "At JBA, we not only recycle, drive electric cars, eat less meat, run a paperless office - and all the things we can personally do to reduce our carbon footprint - but we pioneered a nature-



Landscaping for the future

first approach to landscape design in new developments. This has become our standard green infrastructure approach for new development.

"The site that embodies this pioneering approach was a scheme we were involved with for over 20 years - the development of Red Lodge, Suffolk. This included safeguarding existing habitats, enhancing and creating new habitats and natural approaches to play design, as per the guidance in Design for Play published in 2008 by Play England. The site highlighted bespoke play elements including opposing fortresses, rocks with sand pools and for climbing slopes: all engendered to inspire role play games and imaginative play in a way that was fun and attractive for the adult residents and their children alike."

James went on to reveal: "There were new sustainable drainage swales too, and these offered damper areas with different plant mixes to the otherwise dominant, arid, sandy heathlands. The Red Lodge site to the west of Turnpike Road was an abnormal site for the developer with a difficult planning context due to costly infrastructure and logistics problems.

"The landscape, ecology and sound attenuation issues required considerable consultant involvement throughout the process of delivering the scheme and regular contact to ensure all parties could avoid delays from breaches of wildlife legislation and indeed, any habitat damage. What the developer did not realise then, but certainly does now, is that their 'problem site,' actually foretold a new biodiversity-led approach that saves them, as developers, a considerable sum of money. What we demonstrated to them was in fact a far greener, more bio diverse and sustainable landscape setting than they were used to delivering in their previously more manicured external spaces."

With the project at Red Lodge completed close to a decade ago, it heralded a new approach to creating sustainable, highly bio diverse, low maintenance, user-friendly and attractive landscapes in new development. These landscapes now act as giant inset reservoirs, thriving on wildflower rich grassland, woodlands and



JBA's pioneering approach to playing fields

margin land. They are managed without the use of residual nicotinoid pesticides and herbicides which are often used in agriculture but which are controversially blamed for devastating bee and other invertebrate populations since their usage became widespread.

"The Red Lodge project was a large mainstream development, but one that inadvertently paved the way for a new approach: an approach of better, greener schemes, with no affects on profit margins," added James. "At JBA, we believe that this approach ensures healthier communities, for people and wildlife. We felt that the higher biodiversity approach should be the model for the designers and developers alike. It was a novel theory. The assumption was from the developer that anything green means money, delays and problems. Now we had evidence, statistics and costs that disproved their fears."

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Since pioneering this approach in Suffolk, the Environment Bill has been ratified and is now an integral part of the development legislative background. All development must achieve a 10 per cent net biodiversity gain, ideally on the site, or from offsetting arrangements i.e. paying for biodiversity enhancement work off site.

JBA is proud to achieve 20-30 per cent on the sites they are involved with. "Unlike Kermit the frog's lament in his song, "It's not easy being green" - the truth is that being 'green' is both easy and fun: but it is also profitable," laughs James.

JBA green scheme at Red Lodge, Suffolk



Red Lodge has proven testament, with residents talking favourably about the wildlife areas. Signs throughout the village encourage children and adults to look for the special and more common species the site harbours, whilst also detailing the value of the natural environments. A mown margin has been added to the wild area to clearly frame the look and avoid misunderstandings.

James comments: "This innovation is about understanding perceptions and how to introduce the benefits of nature into the heart of our ordered human world; the heart of the development. Such detail is of enormous importance to the success of such schemes."

Working with developers to restore Red Lodge's qualities of lowland heath, JBA were able to safeguard habitat and existing trees, offer species protection and translocation, before embarking on habitat restoration, drainage swale formation and landscape works. Together a successful greener approach was applied and now leads the way for many more developments. Looking after our habitats will ultimately make them last, and that's exactly what we need to do.

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