

SERVICE UPDATE

<u>Name of Function:</u>	Operations
<u>Date:</u>	29 April 2022
<u>Title of Update:</u>	Spaces for Nature
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UPDATE:

Nature in Scotland

Nature in Scotland is under threat. In the last 50 years 25% of our wildlife has already been lost with more at risk.

Nature is changing rapidly, with 62% of species showing strong changes. Of the 6,413 species found in Scotland that have been assessed 11% have been classified as threatened with extinction.

Managing open spaces for nature is one of the most effective conservation strategies to protect biodiversity. Ecosystems don't need to be lost forever; it's possible to restore them by reducing grass cutting, planting trees, shrubs, and wildflowers etc.

Protected areas provide habitat for many species, but they also provide essential goods and ecosystem services for human well-being.

Spending time in green spaces like parks and green spaces helps improve our mental and physical health, as well as support the urban environment. Planting more trees alone improves the local air quality and reduce rainwater run-off, meaning less sediments and contaminants enter the drainage systems.

Spaces for Nature Aberdeen 2021

In 2021 Environmental Services adopted a more natural approach to managing some of Aberdeen's greenspaces.

In March 2020 Coronavirus and the associated lockdowns saw Environmental Service stood down. This placed a restriction on much of the work that the service carried out including grass cutting.

When the service resumed, it was seen as a perfect opportunity to trial a different way to manage green space, with a focus to do so in a more natural way, to help with climate change mitigation, increase biodiversity benefits but ensuring the Aberdeen public continued to enjoy access to good greenspaces.

The simplest way to manage these open spaces for nature was to reduce grass cutting and encourage nature to bloom.

Many of the areas were, and remain, popular areas for walking, running, cycling and dog walking, and are away from the surfaced path network. To maintain access for these activities, wide paths have been cut through the areas of longer grass.

Routes for these paths were chosen by following 'desire lines' where usage revealed the natural paths people were taking. This was often a link between points of interest or access to any existing surfaced path network.



Fernielea Green Space showing cut paths.

Several sites were chosen in 2020/21 to be managed in a more natural way.

- Stonehaven Road
- Riverside Drive
- Garthdee Road
- Raeden Park
- Parkway former Trunk Road Verges
- Culter Bypass
- Fernielea Park
- Kingswells Bypass
- Eric Hendrie Park
- The Woodies, Broomhill Road
- Skene Road Verges
- Riverview Drive

A survey of the sites found around 80 species of wildflowers and plants.

The impressive list of flowers that have flourished includes northern marsh orchids, buttercups, hawkbits, dandelions, scentless mayweed, ox-eye daisy, meadowsweet, cow parsley, bugle, sorrel, red clover, white clover, and birds-foot trefoil. A host of insects and small mammals will have benefitted from this floral banquet.

The simple method of reducing grass cutting delivered many benefits – encouraging wildflowers, helping pollinating insects, and creating multi-functional greenspaces that support people and nature.

The management of these spaces has worked well, and the service intends to continue with this management regime in 2022.

Spaces for Nature Aberdeen 2022

Reasons for continuing to manage green spaces in a more natural way.

- Restoring nature and the loss of biodiversity.
- Aligning to our Climate Plan.
- Promote Physical & Mental Wellbeing.
- Aberdeen commitment through our strategies, plans and workstreams to The Edinburgh 'Biodiversity' Declaration as approved at committee.
- Open spaces managed, cared for, and protected.
- Developing skills and confidence around managing land for nature and biodiversity.
- Increased interaction and engagement with other like-minded organisations.
- Building / strengthening green connections and networks between organisations and partners.
- Aligns to the Local Outcome Improvement Plan and Improvement Charters links to nature.
- Aberdeen's Biodiversity Duty Report.
- Links to local and national In Bloom campaigns and initiatives.
- Links to Aberdeen's Food Growing Strategy

- Grant Funding available to help manage and develop these areas for nature.
- Northeast Scotland Biodiversity Partnership.
- UN Sustainable Development Goals pathway of action to 2030.



Fernielea Green Space natural wildflowers.

Managing spaces is still a fairly new way of managing green space and Environmental Services continue to learn what is the best and most beneficial approach to each space. All spaces are different and are not all managed the same way.

The team have taken the lessons learned over 2020 and 2021 and added these to the ongoing plans for 2022.

As well as the areas included in 2021 the team already has sites that are managed in a more natural way. These include, TECA, Heatheryfold, Maidencraig, St Fitticks Park and Westfield Park.

All these areas will receive a maintenance programme that will include a mixture of different regimes from areas being left alone, grass cut and uplifted once a year, grass cut twice, and year and grass paths and access points being regularly cut and maintained.

The service will look to enhance these areas further through additional tree planting and planting shrubs and wildflowers.

Two of the most important lessons learned over the last year and half relate to maintain public access and communication with the public.

Maintaining Public Access

Many of the spaces for nature areas are popular areas for walking, running, cycling and dog walking, away from the surfaced path network. To maintain access for these activities, paths will be mown 2-3M wide, 2-3 times a year during the growing season though the areas of longer grass. In heavily used areas we have found that one cut is sufficient to maintain a defined path.

The routes for these paths become apparent from the desire line paths that develop through use and usually link to points of interest or access points to the sites as well as any existing surfaced path network. The extent of mown paths will be regularly assessed on a site-by-site basis. If more paths are requested the service will look to include them.

The service will also maintain a cut strip along existing surfaced paths to help to keep the paths clear of vegetation and defines the path edges. This also gives the visitor the impression that the area is being managed.

Communication with staff, the public and Elected Members

The service has acknowledged that the new management regimes were not communicated and promoted as well as they should have been. This led to a few complaints.

The service acknowledges that the key to the success of changing the area management regimes is communication, not just with the staff but even more importantly with the public and elected members. A consistent and accurate message is essential across the organisation but presented in a way appropriate to the different groups.

It is always a challenge to communicate change, but the service will look to do so through signage, online means, social media and the print media and radio.

A recent national study showed 99% of respondents believed local authorities should be doing more to support biodiversity. There is nothing to suggest that Aberdeen's public think differently from this and in 2021 the feedback on most of the spaces managed for nature was very positive.

Summer 2022

Summer 2022 will see the beginning of this year's maintenance but will be year 3 of the programme. Areas are now starting to establish themselves as spaces for nature and these areas will continue to improve and develop.

Changing the management regimes of public greenspaces is a move which is gaining momentum up and down the country. From 'No Mow May' to relaxed mowing there is a growing realisation that amenity grassland can work much better for nature with some tweaks.

With increasing awareness of climate change, there is a need to take action to manage greenspaces more sustainably to mitigate and reduce climate change and support biodiversity.

Environmental Services believe that a managing spaces for nature is positive greenspace management and here to stay across Aberdeen. The new natural areas in Aberdeen is evidence that we are moving towards a greener, healthier city, and this has to be good news for Aberdeen's people and its nature.



Wildflowers St Fitticks Park