



**REPORT TO: ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND INFRASTRUCTURE
SERVICES COMMITTEE ON 6 SEPTEMBER 2022**

SUBJECT: NATURE RESTORATION FUND

**BY: DEPUTE CHIEF EXECUTIVE (ECONOMY, ENVIRONMENT AND
FINANCE)**

1. REASON FOR REPORT

- 1.1 To inform the Committee of the delivery of projects under the Scottish Government's Nature Restoration Fund grant in 2021-22 of £101,000, and of this year's allocation from the same fund of £124,000, and to ask the Committee to agree proposals for 2022-23.
- 1.2 This report is submitted to Committee in terms of Section III (F) (11) of the Council's Scheme of Administration relating to exercising functions in relation to parks, open spaces and woodland management and maintenance.

2. RECOMMENDATION

2.1 It is recommended that the Committee:-

- i. Note the delivery of the Scottish Government's Nature Restoration Fund grant allocation in 2021/22;**
- ii. Note receipt of the £124,000 grant from the same fund for 2022/23;**
- iii. Agree the proposed projects for 2022/23 as set out in para 5 of this report and that any changes to costs across these projects can be authorised by the Head of Economic Growth and Development; and**
- iv. Agree that a further report be submitted on 15 November 2022 setting out a longer term plan.**

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The Scottish Government's Nature Restoration Fund was introduced last year in response to the biodiversity crisis. The purpose of the fund is to support actions that help nature recover by enhancing biodiversity and local

ecosystems and/or using nature based solutions to mitigate and adapt to the climate emergency and its impacts.

- 3.2 The fund will run for five years across several streams, one of which has allocated £5 million each year in the first two years in direct capital grants divided between all Scottish Local Authorities.

4. DELIVERY OF 2021/22 GRANT

- 4.1 Moray Council received a direct grant from the fund of £101,000 in August 2021. All projects were required to be completed by the end of the financial year.

- 4.2 The following projects and budgets were approved by the Planning and Regulatory Services Committee on 16 November 2021 (para 4 of the minute refers):

Clovenside rain garden £15,000

Wildflower plantings £10,000

Site management plans and minor biodiversity enhancements £66,000

Education £10,000

- 4.3 The wildflower areas and Clovenside rain garden were both existing projects being delivered by Environmental Protection. The grant was extremely beneficial to the department in supporting delivery of the wildflower program through additional labour and meeting the cost of materials. A mix of sites now include 'living lawns' with reduced grass cutting to allow a taller grass sward, and sites prepared with over sowing of wildflower seed. These are very important habitats for pollinators and other insects which have suffered a catastrophic 28% decline in Scotland in the last twenty years.
- 4.4 Clovenside rain garden was a significant project designed and delivered by Environmental Protection with input from Consultancy. The rain garden has already notably helped to manage large volumes of surface water during extreme weather events which are an increasing problem due to climate change. Minor improvements are still in progress, and once the new plants have settled in the rain garden will provide an enhanced habitat for wildlife in addition to reducing the impact of high rainfall events.
- 4.5 Consultants were engaged to produce management plans for Millbuies woodland and the Wards wildlife site. Recommendations included various habitat improvements, and also public access improvements which will be progressed separately as funding becomes available. Some path improvements and invasive non-native removal (rhododendron ponticum) were also undertaken at Millbuies. Due to tenders coming in under budget and the very short time available before the end of the financial year to engage contractors, approximately £10,000 was unspent; funding restrictions meant this money was unable to be carried over.
- 4.6 12 schools were supported with grants of between £450 and £1,200: Cluny Primary, Dallas Primary, East End Primary, Hopeman Primary, Keith Primary, Logie Primary, Milne's High, New Elgin Primary, Speyside High, St Gerardine Primary, St Sylvester's Primary, St Thomas R. C. Primary. Projects included

improvement of outdoor learning environments with plants, pond restoration, gardening equipment and access improvements. Co-ordinating the grant allocation for schools resulted in significantly higher resource implications than expected.

5. PROPOSALS FOR 2022/23 GRANT

- 5.1 On 26th May 2022 the Scottish Government wrote to Moray Council detailing the allocation of another direct capital grant from the fund of £124,000, for financial year 2022/23.
- 5.2 The criteria remains broadly the same as the 2021/22 grant, with specific focus on restoration and connectivity of habitats, freshwater restoration, eradication of invasive non-native species and measures to enhance coastal and marine environments. There is an increased expectation that projects deliver demonstrable biodiversity enhancements on the ground.
- 5.3 The allocation of this year's grant has been discussed between officers from Strategic Planning and Development, Environmental Protection, Consultancy and Education and it is proposed that the following projects be supported.
- 5.4 Please note that figures listed are only estimates that are available at this time and are subject to change. Given the short timescale to arrange contracts, it is proposed that authority be delegated to the Head of Economic Growth and Development for decisions on any cost changes for the identified projects or use of the fund for the contingency projects listed.

Delivery and expansion of wildflower areas £62,000

- 5.5 The introduction of wildflowers plays an important part in improving the biodiversity of our open spaces and in turn helps wildlife, people and the environment in general and is supported by the Moray Local Development Plan and wider legislation.
- 5.6 The Economic Growth, Housing and Environmental Sustainability Committee approved the introduction of new wildflower and living lawn sites across Moray on 1 December 2020 (para 19 of minute refers). Using feedback received through consultation with Community Councils a draft 3 year programme was developed and shared with Community Councils. Environmental Protection are working to ensure there is a wide geographic spread of locations across Moray, and supporting community led projects in addition to council managed sites. Existing sites are located in Aberlour, Buckie, Craigellachie, Dyke, Elgin, Forres, Kingston, and Rothes.
- 5.7 The contribution from the Nature Restoration Fund will provide an important boost to the project through resourcing labour and materials. Increased management in the short term will support expansion of the project to increase the square metres of wildflower areas across Moray. The funding will also enable closer monitoring of its impact at existing trial sites and exploration of ways to embed wildflower creation into everyday maintenance regimes, as well as engagement with the public. Purchase of maintenance equipment will ensure that long term benefits can be achieved.

Enhancement of nature sites £50,000

5.8 A number of actions to enhance biodiversity and public enjoyment were identified in the management plans for the Wards wildlife site and Millbuies woodland that were funded through last year's grant. It is proposed that the Nature Restoration Fund support the progression of actions that meet the fund's criteria. Some public engagement will be undertaken to promote the plans and highlight the work that will be undertaken.

5.9 Millbuies actions include:

- Improving the mix of native plants and trees
- Completing summer ecological surveys
- Installing nesting areas for key bird species
- Continuing the removal of invasive *Rhododendron ponticum*
- Minor public access improvements

5.10 The Wards actions include:

- Restoration of the existing pond
- Progress plans for new pond in lower area of the site
- Additional planting of wetland plant species
- Minor public access improvements

Removal of invasive non-native plant species £12,000

5.11 Invasive non-native species are a primary threat to biodiversity. Certain plant species that were introduced to Scotland in the last few centuries are particularly invasive, spreading quickly and reducing biodiversity by outcompeting native plants. Habitat loss and climate change are intensifying the loss of native plants and the spread of these problem plants at an increasing pace.

5.12 Species of most concern locally include; giant hogweed, which can cause serious harm to humans and animals; Japanese knotweed which can cause significant damage to riverbanks and built structures; and *Rhododendron ponticum* which spreads fatal disease to various tree species and damages ecosystems.

5.13 Significant work is ongoing across Scotland to eradicate these species, but given the invasive nature of these plants, their existing spread across Moray and the compounding impact of climate change, decisive action now is required to reduce the cost of managing their spread in future years.

5.14 The proposed funding will support expansion of the existing programme of removal undertaken in Moray by the Scottish Invasive Species Initiative (SISI). SISI co-ordinate removal at catchment scale to ensure lasting benefit can be achieved, reducing harm to people and nature along the Spey, Lossie and Findhorn rivers.

Contingency projects

5.15 It is intended that the majority of 2022-23 funding will go towards the three projects listed above to ensure those existing projects are progressed and to reduce direct costs to the council in future. As projected costs are estimates only and some actions may be delayed due to unforeseen circumstances, the following areas have been identified that would be supported or progressed with any underspend this year, and will be considered as opportunities for the fund in following years:

- School conservation projects. This would support schools to deliver meaningful Learning for Sustainability experiences, while providing an introduction to land based work/ green skills. Priority would be given to schools and pupil groups with less access to this type of activity or that would benefit most from it.
- Community led nature projects. Groups undertaking community nature or gardening projects focused around biodiversity could be supported, for example through the purchase of equipment or plants, thereby enhancing shared greenspace for nature.
- Marine litter and beach cleans. Support could include new collection points to encourage the public to collect marine litter, along with engagement and education / interpretation.
- Rain gardens. Existing plans for rain gardens could be partially supported through remaining funds, for example seeking advice on the selection of appropriate plants. Rain gardens help manage runoff and localised flooding caused by extreme weather events, in addition to creating new habitats through additional planting.

6. FUTURE DELIVERY OF THE FUND

- 6.1 There are indications that the remaining three years up to 2025/26 will see a reduced direct grant allocation as the Scottish Government encourage local authorities to work with partners on larger projects to bid for grants competitively.
- 6.2 Initial discussions are ongoing with departments across the council and with our partners in neighbouring local authorities regarding potential ideas for larger scale projects that could be applied for through the competitive stream of the fund in future. A report on the longer term plan for the remainder of the fund will be returned to committee later this year.

7. **SUMMARY OF IMPLICATIONS**

(a) Corporate Plan and 10 Year Plan (Local Outcomes Improvement Plan (LOIP))

Enhancing local biodiversity delivers a wide range of social and environmental benefits that will support the corporate and community planning objectives.

(b) Policy and Legal

The Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004 places a duty on public bodies in Scotland to further the conservation of biodiversity when carrying out their duties.

The projects outlined in paragraph 5 will contribute to the Council meeting its biodiversity duty and align with the Council's Climate Change Strategy aim to 'Work to retain, protect and enhance biodiversity across Moray'.

(c) Financial implications

All projects are designed to minimise future maintenance costs. Any ongoing maintenance issues will be managed by Environmental Protection and Strategic Planning and Development within existing budgets.

(d) Risk Implications

If the proposed allocation of funding and delegation of decision making is not agreed, there is a real risk that this money will not be fully used due to the limited time available to spend it within the financial year.

(e) Staffing Implications

Officers from Strategic Planning and Development will manage the budget and work with officers from Environmental Protection, and other departments where relevant, to deliver the projects.

All costs for two seasonal gardeners associated with the wildflower areas will be covered by the fund.

(f) Property

Proposals are considered to enhance land owned and/or managed by the Council.

(g) Equalities/Socio Economic Impact

By increasing biodiversity, projects should also contribute to community health and wellbeing and reduce inequalities of access to nature.

(h) Climate Change and Biodiversity Impacts

All proposals will chiefly and directly support mitigation of, and adaptation to, the climate and biodiversity crisis.

(i) Consultations

The Depute Chief Executive (Economy, Environment and Finance), the Head of Economic Growth and Development, Legal Services Manager, Open Space Manager, Principal Accountant, L Rowan, Committee Services Officer and Equal Opportunities Officer have been consulted and comments received have been incorporated into the report.

8. CONCLUSION

- 8.1 Last year the Scottish Government's Nature Restoration Fund supported progression of four nature restoration projects that have enhanced biodiversity and benefitted communities.**
- 8.2 The Committee are asked to note the £124,000 grant for 2022-23 and agree the proposed allocation of this as outlined in this report and to delegate authority for any cost changes within the agreed projects to be authorised by the Head of Economic Growth and Development.**
- 8.3 The Committee are also asked to note the need for a longer term plan and agree that a report will be brought back in November to detail this.**

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Background Papers:

Ref: