

# Housing Homelessness and Fair Work Committee

10.00am, Tuesday, 27 August 2024

## Opportunities for nature on HRA land

Executive/routine  
Wards

Routine  
All

### 1. Recommendations

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- 1.1 It is recommended that Housing Homelessness and Fair Work Committee:
  - 1.1.1 Note the intention to provide an annual update on projects delivered through the Environmental Improvement Programme, including details of how these projects have contributed to nature and biodiversity; and
  - 1.1.2 Agree to discharge the [motion](#) agreed at Housing Homelessness and Fair Work Committee on 27 February 2024 on opportunities for nature on HRA land.

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## Opportunities for nature on HRA land

### 2. Executive Summary

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- 2.1 The report responds to a motion approved by Committee on 27 February 2024 on opportunities for nature on HRA land.

### 3. Background

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- 3.1 On 27 February 2024, Committee approved a [motion](#) from Councillor Parker requesting a report related to opportunities for nature on HRA land.
- 3.2 This report responds to the request of the motion for a report to Committee in two cycles to set out:
- A timetable and update for the Living Landscape mapping project concerning HRA land, with specific information about how this output will be integrated into wider workplans within the Housing service.
  - Recommendations for how resources allocated from the Neighbourhood Environment Programme in 24-25 can be better utilised to support aims for nature, including how these projects can dovetail with other Council strategies working on nature and biodiversity, and what additional data ought to be collected against these projects in order to evidence this going forward.
  - Recommendations for what specific outcomes for nature could be included as part of the NEPs programme when it is retendered later this year, including KPIs to be included as part of this.
  - Recommendations for how the above actions can be monitored through committee going forward, including a proposed future reporting schedule around “Opportunities for nature on HRA land” / tackling the Nature Emergency on HRA land, cognisant of the possible overlapping of projects and reporting with Culture and Communities Committee and suggestions about how this should be managed.
  - The cost implications and officer time of taking on this work.

- Notes that Culture and Communities committee has requested a report regarding a 'Right To Grow' strategy on Council-owned land that is deemed suitable for cultivation which may also have implications on HRA land.
- 3.3 There are areas of land in estates throughout the city where the Council was previously the single owner of housing and where open space was developed when the estate was designed. These estates are now largely mixed tenure, with homes sold through Right to Buy over the years, but the areas of open space remain on the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and are the responsibility of the Housing Service to maintain. The land assets vary significantly in nature, size and use, with some well maintained and well used by the community, and others that bring little benefit to the community or the natural environment.
- 3.4 The day to day maintenance and management of open greenspace on HRA land is carried out by the Council's Neighbourhood Environmental Services (NES) team, with the costs recharged to the HRA Revenue budget.
- 3.5 The Estate Improvement Programme (previously the Neighbourhood Environmental Programme (NEP)) is a budget set aside in the HRA Capital budget for investment in HRA land and it aims to provide investment in estates driven by the needs and ambitions of local people for improvements in their local environment. This can just be green space but can also include improvements that are needed to improve access, street furniture, etc.
- 3.6 A review of NEP carried out in 2022 resulted in a re-naming of the programme to Estate Improvement Programme (EIP).

## **4. Main report**

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### **Living Landscapes**

- 4.1 In May 2024, NES introduced a new cutting regime as a pilot in residential plots in three wards (Sighthill/ Gorgie, Forth, part of Pentlands) with the intention that this is gradually rolled this out citywide. In the face of the declared Nature Emergency, the Council has recognised its responsibility to manage grassland for nature in a manner which is balanced with community need. The Living Landscape programme started this shift in management in 2015 and resulted in naturalised grassland verges within many parks in addition to higher numbers of perennial and annual meadows and planted bulbs.
- 4.2 Throughout the grass cutting period, Standard Amenity Grassland is cut more often than is necessary when most of these areas are not used for any specific purpose. This traditional practice is detrimental to biodiversity, specifically our pollinators and nature at a fundamental level.
- 4.3 The trial is due to run to September 2024 and is focused on adapting and refining approaches to relaxing grassland but will also begin enhancing some of these plots through additional planting. The mowing frequency of residential plots identified as

part of this trial has been reduced to approximately once every four - six weeks from the previous practice of every two weeks.

- 4.4 Biodiversity monitoring is being undertaken as part of this trial up until September and will influence next steps. A timeline for rolling this out further across the city is not yet available. However, a report is due to Culture and Communities Committee in October 2024 on this.

#### **Estate Improvement Programme (previously Neighbourhood Environment Programme)**

- 4.5 Projects delivered through the EIP are intended to be community-led, improvement projects on HRA land and assets that bring benefits to local residents. Over the years, the type of projects funded have varied significantly in scale and scope and have included community growing projects, tree planting, soft landscaping, hard landscaping, creation of parking spaces, installation of fencing and have been largely driven by suggestions from local people, groups or officers who have identified opportunities to resolve local issues or improve the local environment. More recently, the funding has also been used to part-fund larger scale improvement projects where other capital funding has been levered in through other funding routes.
- 4.6 Residents' groups, community-based organisations, Neighbourhood Networks, and any other local groups can promote ideas for projects. Officers are also encouraged to identify potential projects through estate walkabouts, which are being re-introduced by Housing Officers across the city.
- 4.7 A new "Proposal Form" (attached as Appendix 1) has been developed and will be used to encourage groups to provide details about their suggested project. It asks them to identify what category or categories best describes their proposal and to set out the project outcomes. The categories include objectives such as: improved biodiversity, community growing, wildflower meadow, children's play equipment, and improvements to dimly-lit spaces.
- 4.8 Promotion of the EIP to encourage groups to come forward with project proposals is planned. Officers are developing a communication plan to raise awareness of the funding and will provide examples of the type of projects that have attracted funding in the past. Through this, examples of projects that contribute to nature and biodiversity will be highlighted and encouraged.
- 4.9 Officers will retain records of all projects delivered through the EIP, the cost of the project and the outcomes they have contributed to. This will allow a summary report to be provided on what investment has been made in projects contributing to outcomes that relate to nature and biodiversity.
- 4.10 Larger scale projects that require planning approval where EIP funding is being used to contribute to development costs (such as the projects being delivered at Moredunvale Greenspace, Northfield Drive and Grove and Southhouse Square) require officers to record the biodiversity net gain as part of the planning application.

A recording process will be developed for these projects to ensure this is captured through the development process where appropriate.

- 4.11 The procurement of a framework provides access to contractors who can deliver projects on the ground. Contractors will not design the projects but will be given a project specification to work to, therefore it is not necessary to include specific outcomes or Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) in the contract related to nature. The projects will be designed by officers with the specialist input and advice of colleagues, both internal to the Council and external partners where appropriate.
- 4.12 By implementing Living Landscape approaches to HRA land through the new 'Managing our Estate for Nature' programme, the Council is contributing to the Edinburgh Nature Network (which is soon to be a statutory requirement as set by the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy). It also ties in to several Edinburgh Biodiversity Action Plan targets by promoting pollinator friendly habitats. Furthermore, the programme also delivers many of the key themes within our Edinburgh Thriving Greenspaces Vision and Strategy 2050.

## **5. Next Steps**

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- 5.1 It is proposed to prepare an annual update detailing all EIP projects delivered in the previous financial year to Committee. This will provide details of the cost of the investment and the key objectives it has contributed to. For larger projects requiring planning, additional detail can be provided on the biodiversity net gain as detailed in the planning application.
- 5.2 Officers will develop a reporting template to enable outcomes of EIPs to be captured to support the annual update to Committee.
- 5.3 Reports on relevant wider Council strategies, including progress with Living Landscapes, will be reported to Culture and Communities Committee as the lead Committee. Where reports also relate to HRA land, officers will include recommendations to refer reports to Housing Homelessness and Fair Work Committee as appropriate.
- 5.4 Officers from NES and Housing will continue to collaborate on opportunities for improving nature and biodiversity on HRA land, whether through the Living Landscapes programme or through potential EIPs.
- 5.5 A communications plan to promote awareness of the EIP will be developed to encourage more engagement and participation from local people and groups in promoting project ideas, with an emphasis on projects that bring opportunities that support nature and biodiversity.

## **6. Financial impact**

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- 6.1 There are no additional costs associated with the recommendations within this report. The budget to support delivery of EIPs is set out in the approved HRA Housing, Homelessness and Fair Work Committee – 27 August 2024

Capital programme and the costs associated with delivering the Living Landscapes programme on HRA land is funded through the HRA Revenue budget as part of the environmental maintenance costs.

- 6.2 The officer time associated with supporting these programmes of work is built in to existing roles. Housing Officers have been largely directed towards prioritising core activities (including dealing with the letting of void properties, supporting tenants with rent arrears and tenancy management tasks) and as a result, supporting estates work has been a lesser priority in recent years. However, as backlogs in voids reduce and vacant Housing Officer posts are filled, it is anticipated that officers will have capacity to support more estates improvement work moving forward without the addition of more posts. This will be closely monitored.

## 7. Equality and Poverty Impact

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- 7.1 Parks and open spaces can have a considerable impact on people's physical and mental health and wellbeing by providing space for exercise, relaxation, social contact with friends and family, and opportunities for children and young people to play.
- 7.2 Provision of good quality open spaces in residential estates is important in creating a sense of a well maintained, cared for communities. This is particularly important in areas where residents experience higher levels of poverty and multiple deprivation.
- 7.3 The EIP budget can be used to support projects that help address issues such as improving pathways for better access, opening up spaces to make them feel safer, etc.

## 8. Climate and Nature Emergency Implications

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- 8.1 As a public body, the Council has statutory duties relating to climate emissions and biodiversity. The Council

*“must, in exercising its functions, act in the way best calculated to contribute to the delivery of emissions reduction targets”*

(Climate Change (Emissions Reductions Targets) (Scotland) Act 2019), and

*“in exercising any functions, to further the conservation of biodiversity so far as it is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions”*

(Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004)

- 8.2 The City of Edinburgh Council declared a Climate Emergency in 2019 and committed to work towards a target of net zero emissions by 2030 for both city and corporate emissions and embedded this as a core priority of the Council Business Plan 2023-27. The Council also declared a Nature Emergency in 2023.

### **Environmental Impacts**

- 8.3 Investment in open space through the EIP, with a focus on nature and biodiversity, will have a positive environmental impact.
- 8.4 It is acknowledged that some of the projects promoted through the EIP may have the potential to have a negative impact (this would include, for example, proposals to change soft landscaping spaces to hard landscaping or create parking spaces to relieve pressures in residential streets). Officers will seek to minimise such projects and explore alternative solutions to resolve local issues.
- 8.5 Benefits from the changes to our grass cutting standards include:
- Responding to the Nature Emergency by taking action to support pollinators, which contributes to higher levels of biodiversity and healthier habitats and greenspaces;
  - Valuable, colourful grassland containing more flowers and abundance of butterflies, bees and other pollinator species; and
  - Lower CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from reduced use of grass cutting machinery.

## **9. Risk, policy, compliance, governance and community impact**

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- 9.1 The recommendations in this report do not impact on any Council policy.
- 9.2 Effective engagement is critical to ensuring that projects and improvements delivered through the EIP meet the needs of local people and are well received by communities. The scope of engagement for each project will be tailored to what is considered proportionate and appropriate but there will be a requirement to demonstrate there has been engagement and there is local support for all projects before they are delivered.

## **10. Background reading/external references**

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- 10.1 None

## **11. Appendices**

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Appendix 1 – Draft Project proposal form for Estate Improvement Programme.

**Estate Improvement Programme**

**Draft Proposal Form**

Name of Person/ Agency Proposing (Tenant/ Ward Cllr/ Housing Officer/ Stakeholder)		Address	
Telephone		Email	
Organisation (If applicable)			
Project suggestion			
Location			
Which category best fits the project?			
<input type="checkbox"/> Improved Biodiversity/ Climate Friendly <input type="checkbox"/> Improved recreation opportunities <input type="checkbox"/> Supports community growing. <input type="checkbox"/> Improves open space visual amenity. <input type="checkbox"/> Improvement to dimly lit spaces/ pathways <input type="checkbox"/> Health & Safety <input type="checkbox"/> Wildflower Meadow		<input type="checkbox"/> Children's Play Equipment <input type="checkbox"/> Improved Parking <input type="checkbox"/> Low Maintenance Landscaping <input type="checkbox"/> Improved drainage / SUDS <input type="checkbox"/> Estate Security <input type="checkbox"/> Trees & Greening <input type="checkbox"/> Street / Estate Furniture (on HRA) <input type="checkbox"/> Other (explain)	
What is the desired project outcome?			
Has this suggestion been made before?			
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes		<input type="checkbox"/> No	
If Yes, to whom and what was the outcome?			
Please add the following to this referral form:			
<input type="checkbox"/> Location Map <input type="checkbox"/> Photographs		<input type="checkbox"/> Google Maps Snip <input type="checkbox"/>	
Has there been any tenant/ resident/ community consultation at this stage? If YES, is there initial support for this project?			YES/ NO
Date			