
NORTH AYRSHIRE COUNCIL

28 March 2023

Audit and Scrutiny Committee

Title:	Petition: West Kilbride Glen Extension Grass Cutting
Purpose:	To advise the Committee of the terms of a petition with regard to grass cutting at the West Kilbride Glen Extension.
Recommendation:	That the Committee considers the terms of the petition and agrees, or otherwise, to make a recommendation to Cabinet.

1. Executive Summary

1.1 In terms of the Scheme of Administration, the Audit and Scrutiny Committee has a remit:

“To receive all petitions and deputations submitted to the Council except those relating to the Council’s planning functions, which shall be considered by the Planning Committee. The arrangements for receiving petitions are as set out in Appendix B to the Standing Orders relating to Meetings and Proceedings of the Council and Committees”.

1.2 This report sets out the background to the receipt by the Council of 251 individual letters addressed to the Chief Executive in relation to grass cutting at the West Kilbride Glen Extension which were acknowledged as equivalent to a petition in terms of the Council’s Deputations and Petitions Procedure on 26 January 2023.

2. Background

2.1 The wording of each individual letter forming the petition is detailed below:

*“Would you please, for one **final** time, instruct your senior members of staff in Streetscene to continue the 100% grass cutting schedule in the Glen Extension, as it is their intention to begin another 50% cut in 2023 season.*

*It is only **2 years** since this was last attempted, with the result the whole field was in such an unsightly/unacceptable state local residents no longer used the facility.*

It took over 150 letters of objection to address the issue.”

- 2.2 In response to a request for supporting information, the lead petitioner has indicated that a previous approach was made by West Kilbride Community Council in 2020 to the Council's Streetscene section to only cut paths through the extension, to allow wild flowers to grow, but that, by Autumn of that year, the whole area was overgrown with three foot high dock weeds, ragwort etc. This resulted in 150 letters of objection being submitted. The lead petitioner advises that they and another objector met with the then Head of Service, who gave instruction to have the whole area cleared and normal maintenance restored. However, in Autumn 2022, the Council was again intending to cut 50% and let wild flowers grow in uncut area, which prompted the current petition.
- 2.3 The Head of Service (Commercial) has provided a briefing note on the background to this matter, which is detailed at Appendix 1 to the report.
- 2.4 In terms of the procedure for petitions and deputations set out in Standing Orders, representatives of the petitioners have been invited to attend the meeting to address the Committee. Spokespersons should be restricted to addressing the specific points raised in their petition.
- 2.5 The spokespersons have, collectively, 10 minutes to address the Committee. This may be extended at the discretion of the Chair.
- 2.6 Once the Committee has heard from the spokespersons for the petitioners, the Chair will invite Members of the Committee to ask questions of the spokespersons.
- 2.7 While it is for the Chair to decide the stage at which officers should speak to their briefing, previous Committee practice has been for the Cabinet Member or Officer to speak to this after the Committee has heard from the petitioners. The Cabinet Member or Officer will then respond to any questions that Members of the Committee may have.

3. Proposals

- 3.1 It is proposed that the Committee considers the terms of the petition and agrees, or otherwise, to make a recommendation to Cabinet.

4. Implications/Socio-economic Duty

Financial

- 4.1 The Streetscene revenue budget has financial pressures and relaxed grass cutting initiatives, in appropriate areas, will help mitigate against this.

Human Resources

- 4.2 None arising from this report.

Legal

- 4.3 None arising from this report.

Equality/Socio-economic

4.4 None arising from this report.

Climate Change and Carbon

4.5 None arising from this report.

Key Priorities

4.6 None arising from this report.

Community Wealth Building

4.7 None arising from this report.

5. Consultation

5.1 The Head of Service (Commercial) has been consulted and made aware of the terms of the petition and has provided a briefing note which is attached as Appendix 1 to the report.

Aileen Craig
Head of Service (Democratic)

For further information please contact **Diane McCaw, Committee Services Officer**, on **01294 324132**

Background Papers

Correspondence with lead petitioner

Briefing Note – West Kilbride Glen Extension

Background

Over a period of many years, West Kilbride has been divided on how the community wishes to see the Glen maintained with Environmental Groups wishing to see more relaxed grass cutting/re-wilding and others wanting the status quo to remain and grass being cut as usual.

In June 2019, Streetscene and Connected Communities commenced a programme of consultation as part of Participatory Budgeting (PB) and responses received for the locality priorities were as follows:

<u>NORTH COAST LOCALITY</u>	Count
I would like to see more fruit trees or alternative food planting	20
We should encourage wildlife and provide environmental benefits through relaxed grass cutting	29
North Ayrshire council should encourage and support litter picks in towns and woodlands	41
I would like to see wild and native flowers introduced to selected areas	35
North Ayrshire council should make planters or bedding areas available to adopt	8
Locality total	133

An initial trial of planting was undertaken during summer 2020 although the success of this was curtailed by the COVID pandemic.

During 2021 a wildflower meadow project was established in Lochshore which has been very successful and well received. This data has been used to inform options for the Glen Extension.

Historic Maintenance duties at West Kilbride Glen

- Glen extension cut
- Glen entrance down to 2nd bridge cut and strimmed
- Grass at side of football pitch cut and strimmed
- Kirktonhall house cut and strimmed
- Swing park area litter picked and blown before cutting
- Shrubs cut (winter work)
- Railway bridge entrance path cut
- Flail work on access road to football park
- Paths blown (winter work)

Kirkton Glen Meadow Makers

The Kirkton Glen Meadow Makers are a local group with environmental interests. They contacted the Head of Service (Commercial Services) in Autumn 2020. The group undertook their own local consultation and provided evidence of 200 responses to their consultation. The groups proposal was a compromise between a complete 'rewilding' of the area and

continued utility for a wide range of local residents and visitors. The group provided a rough sketch which is detailed below. The proposal was that two discrete areas of the field are developed into wildflower meadows; additionally, the existing 'desire paths' around and across the field would be widened and an additional East-West path cut between the two meadow areas, allowing the easy passage of, for example, buggies and/or wheelchairs.



Communication with those against the environmental proposals

The Head of Service (Commercial Services) communicated with those against the environmental proposals on 12 April 2021 and stated that he 'agreed to continue to maintain the Extension area regularly this year', which was the summer season 2021.

Furthermore, a review of the outcomes from the Lochshore Project would be used to determine if a similar pilot could be undertaken at West Kilbride Glen.

I have been in further communication with those opposed to the environmental proposals and in October 2022, I informed them of the following:

'As it stands, Streetscene continues to bear the brunt of hearing both sides of the argument, with parties contacting Streetscene requesting relaxed grass cutting and yourself and others wanting the grass cut. Given the climate emergency and the drive towards biodiversity and saving the plant, all large scale grass cutting has to be reviewed and evaluated to consider its appropriateness and to see what more can be done to help the environment.

There were similar arguments to the one you're now making when relaxed grass cutting was proposed for Stevenston Shore. However, a compromise was reached whereby areas of flat land used for football, kite flying etc were cut as usual and areas with hills/mounds left uncut. This has been really successful and has delivered environmental benefits thanks to the compromise agreed from both sides of the argument. I'm not aware of any complaints since this was implemented.

We have also established a successful wild meadow at Lochshore. Year 1 was a mix of annual and perennial flowers to create an immediate impact, with the perennials being the predominant species from year 2 onward. Streetscene are working with the local schools around harvesting seeds and then sowing at the appropriate time and they are also working towards the creation of information boards to educate the public on the type of plant and wildlife they can expect to see and what the benefits are to the local environment.

The plan therefore is for a pilot to be undertaken for the 2023 grass cutting season with approximately 50% cut/uncut. This can be achieved by leaving kidney shaped areas uncut with wildflowers on the hill and cutting the areas surrounding it. This will create nectar corridors and natural habitats for wildlife and help meet our environmental ambitions. Following the summer season there will be an opportunity for review, feedback and evaluation of the pilot.'

Note: The 50% cut/50% uncut is only for the hillside at the Glen, all other maintenance will be delivered as per the existing schedules.

Assessment from NAC Biodiversity Officer

Currently we are faced with the twin reinforcing crises of declining biodiversity and the ongoing climate crisis. The loss in biodiversity is driving climate change and in turn the changing climate is accelerating the rate of biodiversity loss. In Scotland, the evidence around the scale and nature of the biodiversity crisis is strong and continues to mount. This evidence base points consistently to a natural environment that has already been heavily degraded, with continued declines across much of our land and seascapes. The [Biodiversity Intactness Indicator](#) indicates that Scotland has retained just over half of its historic land-based biodiversity. Scotland ranks 28th from bottom in the Biodiversity Intactness Index (BII), a global analysis of how much human activity has impacted nature.

As an outcome of COP15, the connection between biodiversity loss and climate change has been formally recognised and gives international recognition for the role of local government in addressing the nature crisis and giving effect to the Edinburgh Declaration. In response to the Edinburgh declaration the Scottish Government has published the draft of the Scottish Biodiversity strategy to 2045. [Biodiversity strategy to 2045: tackling the nature emergency - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/biodiversity-strategy-2045).

The goals for the strategy are very ambitious with a 2030 milestone of halting biodiversity loss and being Nature Positive. It sets out a vision that encapsulates three core ideas:

- that urgent action is needed at scale across our land and seascapes.
- that we are looking to the future – regenerating biodiversity and building resilience to climate change.
- and that people and communities are central to a nature positive future.

The ambitions for the plan are for Scotland to be Nature Positive by 2030, and to have restored and regenerated biodiversity across the country by 2045. The strategies vision is set out as:

- By 2045, Scotland will have restored and regenerated biodiversity across our land, freshwater, and seas.
- Our natural environment, our habitats, ecosystems, and species, will be diverse, thriving, resilient and adapting to climate change.

- Regenerated biodiversity will drive a sustainable economy and support thriving communities, and people will play their part in the stewardship of nature for future generations.

To deliver the Vision, the strategy has identified a detailed set of Outcomes which help to define and understand what success will look like by 2045:

- Across our land and seascapes
- On land
- In rivers, lochs, and wetlands
- In marine and coastal environments

These Outcomes will be achieved through detailed actions set out in Delivery Plans. This Strategy contains 26 of the most urgent Priority Actions which will aim to put Scotland on track for halting the loss of biodiversity and being nature positive by 2030. All 26 of these actions will have an impact on how North Ayrshire Council (NAC) delivers on biodiversity and climate change, but the three that will have the most immediate effect are:

- The introduction of statutory nature restoration targets.
- The introduction of a programme of ecosystem restoration.
- The increase and safeguarding of space for coastal habitat change.

Currently there are no statutory targets for nature restoration and their introduction could have far reaching consequences for our service delivery, and the way NAC would manage its wider estate. A clue to what will be expected on NAC in the future is shown in the continuation of the Strategy to 2045's vision statement. It states that "Towns and cities will include nature-rich environments close to all communities, contributing to Nature Networks and measurable increases in urban biodiversity, and "Multi-functional urban nature-based solutions will enable people and biodiversity to adapt to our changing climate by cooling the urban environment and managing extreme rainfall events, with blue and green infrastructure designed and managed to benefit biodiversity, provide habitats, and allow wildlife to move through urban areas". By 2045 the strategy expects that the target driven approach will have delivered an urban environment in which:

- Patches of species-rich grassland and wee forests have replaced short amenity grassland, with an increase in insect populations benefitting bird species such as blackbirds and robins. Grassland sown with native wildflowers and grass species is not mown until the flowers have either set seed or been eaten by birds such as house sparrows.
- Children enjoy the urban outdoors both as a place to play and an outdoor classroom. New urban ponds and existing ponds are colonised by wild plants and animals such as yellow iris and dragonflies. Gardens are enjoyed for flowers, wild birds, animals, and insects which control pests, entertain, and pollinate. Community gardens allow people to grow and pick their own food and connect with nature.
- Buildings incorporate nest boxes for swifts, house martins and bats; green walls and roofs; rooftop gardens; and window boxes. Vertical rain gardens and ponds help reduce flash flooding and make neighbourhoods more attractive. Green areas join up to allow pollinators and larger animals such as hedgehogs and frogs to travel across the urban environment.
- Trees and other plants help clean the air and provide shade reducing the urban heat island effect. Impermeable surfaces have been replaced with species-rich grassland and urban woodland to increase soil biodiversity and capture carbon within the soil. People benefit from clean air and access to species-rich green or blue spaces.

The delivery of the proposed project at West Kilbride will help to meet NAC's current commitment to biodiversity action. NAC's commitment to biodiversity action is laid out in the Environmental Sustainability & Climate Change Strategy 2021-23. In the strategy NAC acknowledges the threat posed by net biodiversity loss and confirms its commitment to have a response to biodiversity loss. The primary vehicle intended for delivering on biodiversity in North Ayrshire is the Local Biodiversity Action Plan (LBAP). The LBAP highlights high quality public greenspace as being a key component of NAC's biodiversity commitment. An aim of the LBAP is to create Quality Greenspace for Health and Education Benefits. This is to be delivered by the implementation of priority biodiversity actions from the current North Ayrshire Open Space Strategy (2016 – 2026). The biodiversity aims of the Open Space Strategy are expressed through two strategic objectives:

- Strategic Objective 1: Open Space will be promoted as a resource for tourism and recreation, economic development & biodiversity.
- Strategic Objective 6: Respond to climate change through the delivery of a connected and integrated network, incorporating water management, woodland area, and biodiversity benefits.

To be able to meet the prospective targets being introduced and deliver “measurable increases in urban biodiversity”, NAC will have to go far beyond the current levels of habitat creation in its public green spaces and wider estate. Grassland sown with native wildflowers, along with relaxed cutting, will have to become the standard way of managing green space along with an array of other habitat creation methods. The creation of wildflower meadows and the implementation of relaxed grass cutting regimes, such as the current project at West Kilbride Glen, will need to be the cornerstone of NAC's response to the Biodiversity Strategy to 2045. They are the platform that all other NAC actions towards halting net nature loss in North Ayrshire by 2030 and being nature positive by 2045, will be built on.”

Summary

This issue has been ongoing for many years with two strong sets of polarised opinion on this matter.

The PB exercise demonstrated support for relaxed grass cutting and for wild and native flowers to be introduced to areas. The Kirkton Glen Meadow Makers had 200 consultees supporting their proposal and the objectors to this have now delivered a number of letters against the proposal.

The proposal is a compromise as it is a pilot, for a lesser piece of land, only the hill area, and offers a review of its success, or otherwise, at the end of the season.

Relaxed grass cutting has been established successfully in Stevenston and Lochshore and the plan is to increase this given the Climate Emergency and competing budget priorities.

Thomas Reaney
Head of Service (Neighbourhood Services)
21 March 2023