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Document Title	Nature Restoration Fund 2021/22: East Lothian Council's Grassland Habitat Restoration Project

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REPORT TO: Members' Library Service

MEETING DATE: November 2021

BY: Head of Infrastructure

SUBJECT: Nature Restoration Fund 2021/22: East Lothian Council's Grassland Habitat Restoration Project

1 PURPOSE

- 1.1 To advise members of the Scottish Government's Nature Restoration Fund capital allocation 2021/22 to East Lothian Council and the Grassland Habitat Restoration Project underway to restore and manage grassland and support pollinators at various sites in East Lothian.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 Members are asked to note the provision of Nature Restoration Funding, enabling the progression of a Grassland Habitat Restoration Project across East Lothian's coastal corridor sites during 2021/22.
- 2.2 Members are asked to note that, in addition to addressing biodiversity loss and supporting pollinators, this project supports and contributes to wider policy priorities around climate change mitigation and adaptation, a Green Recovery from Covid-19, improving health and wellbeing and a place-based approach to enhancing community engagement and wellbeing.

3 BACKGROUND

The Scottish Government's Nature Restoration Fund

- 3.1 The Scottish Government (SG) has established a Nature Restoration Fund (NRF) which includes capital funding allocated to Scottish Local Authorities to be spent in 2021-22 to support new, or to enhance existing, approaches to restoring biodiversity. The purpose of the NRF is to support actions that help nature recover across Scotland. East Lothian Council has received a NRF allocation of £109,000 for 2021/22.

- 3.2 The SG has specified that the NRF allocation is to provide additional funding to support a wide range of projects that will deliver nature restoration, safeguard wildlife and tackle the causes of biodiversity loss especially climate change. To deliver this the NRF will run across two themes: 1) Making Space For Nature (urban focused nature based solutions for biodiversity and climate change); and 2) Helping Nature Recover (rural focused biodiversity enhancement, climate resilience and reinstatement). Projects are required to be completed within this financial year (2021-22).

The Council's NRF project: Grassland Habitat Restoration Project

- 3.3 East Lothian Council already has a proven track record in natural habitat management, particularly on our coastal and countryside sites but also through working in partnership with land owners, land managers and communities to deliver benefits and enhancements for wildlife and people.
- 3.4 Accordingly, the project selected for progression, to be funded by the NRF funding allocation this financial year, is a Grassland Habitat Restoration Project to restore and manage grassland and support pollinators at various sites in East Lothian. This project is deliverable in the short timescale, with positive outcomes around biodiversity, community and Covid recovery.
- 3.5 This grassland management project meets the Scottish Government's NRF criteria for both 'Making Space for Nature' and 'Helping Nature Recover'. The project involves restoration of grassland, and associated improvements for pollinators (i.e. insects essential to plant pollination).
- 3.6 This project will undertake a comprehensive programme of coastal habitat restoration and enhancement to benefit wildlife, address biodiversity loss and improve habitat connectivity along our coastline, with a particular focus on grassland habitat.
- 3.7 Key sites where this project will be focused include Levenhall Links, Longniddry Bents, Aberlady Bay Local Nature Reserve, Gullane Bents, Yellowcraig Turf Nursery and Whitesands / Barns Ness, which are all owned or managed by the Council. These sites have been affected by the recent increase in visitors resulting from Covid-19 restrictions, so this is an opportunity to contribute to the recovery of the sites and the nature and wildlife which depend upon them.
- 3.8 Works which are planned include a change in management of these sites to improve species diversity, through purchase of machinery (e.g. 'cut and lift') with additional sowing of native wildflower seed as required. The purchase of other capital items is also under consideration, such as fencing and equipment to build the evidence base to inform further restoration and recovery work.

Benefits of this Grassland Habitat Restoration Project

- 3.9 This project will have a positive impact in helping to restore East Lothian's natural resources and supporting and enhancing the natural environment

at a time of ecological and climate crises, and is a good example of a nature-based solution.

- 3.10 In accordance with the SG's NRF objectives, this project will:
- Deliver positive effects for biodiversity and enhance local ecosystems;
 - Address the climate emergency and its impacts through mitigation and adaptation and by promoting nature-based solutions;
 - Promote the health and well-being of local communities by creating diverse and healthy greenspaces for local people to enjoy.
- 3.11 Working in partnership with East Lothian Countryside Volunteers, local landowners and our communities, we will undertake targeted direct action, building on previous habitat management work, addressing the impact of pollution and scrub encroachment by adopting nature-based solutions to expand and sustainably manage these fragile ecosystems.
- 3.12 As a result of this project, our coastal grasslands will be connected, supporting a diverse range of pollinator and plant species. Well managed species-rich grasslands have increased resilience to climate change, and can intercept and slow down flood waters, thereby reducing the likelihood and impact of climate change induced flooding. Grasslands also support healthy soils, prevent soil erosion and absorb pollutants for cleaner air and water. These natural habitats also play a significant role in climate change mitigation by sequestering carbon, particularly when in a favourable condition.
- 3.13 Ongoing monitoring and evaluation of these grassland sites will take place to measure the benefits of work undertaken, led by the Council's Biodiversity Officer and Countryside Ranger Service, working in partnership with the local community and East Lothian Countryside Volunteers.
- 3.14 It is also the intention to extend the project into urban areas to improve the connectivity of grassland / pollinator corridor along the coast, involving local communities in assisting with the identification of areas suitable for enhancing grassland and wildflowers (including re-wilding areas of greenspace and parkland where appropriate). It is hoped that this will bring opportunities for longer term engagement of local communities, including young people, with grassland and re-wilding enhancements, creating learning opportunities in addition to the well-documented health and wellbeing benefits of being outdoors in nature, close to where people live.

4 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 This project delivers actions in the Council's Climate Change Strategy 2020–2025 relating to restoring and enhancing East Lothian's natural environment, and supports the strategic Outcome 6: 'A Healthy and Resilient Natural Environment and the route to Carbon Neutral'.

- 4.2 This project also supports actions in the East Lothian Local Biodiversity Action Plan and Countryside Site Management Plans, and objectives in the Open Space Strategy. The management of grassland and planting of pollinator friendly species align with actions in the Green Network Strategy and contribute to Buglife's John Muir Pollinator Way.
- 4.3 The project is compatible with and helps to implement Local Development Plan proposal MH16 for the Levenhall Links area, improving the availability of suitable habitat for qualifying interests of the Firth of Forth SPA.
- 4.4 Nature-based solutions such as this project also support and contribute to other wider Local Government policy priorities, including tackling climate change and biodiversity loss, recovering from Covid-19, improving health and wellbeing, and adopting place-based approaches, as set out in the Elected Member Briefing Note on 'Nature-based Solutions' (refer to 7.1).

5 INTEGRATED IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 5.1 The subject of this report has been through the Integrated Impact Assessment process and no negative impacts have been identified.

6 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 Financial – The provision of external capital budget in the form of Nature Restoration Fund allocation 2021/22, without match funding requirement, will enable this project to be undertaken without Council capital funding. Minor revenue burdens generated from the maintenance work will be covered by existing service provision.
- 6.2 Personnel – None. This project will be delivered with existing personnel resources within Sport, Countryside & Leisure.
- 6.3 Other – None.

7 BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 7.1 Elected Member Briefing Note: 'Nature-based Solutions' (July 2021), produced by the Improvement Service with the Sustainable Scotland Network, NatureScot and COSLA
https://www.improvementservice.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/26434/EM-Briefing-Nature-Based-Solutions.pdf
- 7.2 East Lothian Council Climate Change Strategy (2020–2025)
https://www.eastlothian.gov.uk/downloads/download/13283/climate_change_strategy_2020-25
- 7.3 East Lothian Council Green Network Strategy (2018)
https://www.eastlothian.gov.uk/downloads/file/30113/green_network_strategy_spg

7.4 Local Development Plan (2018)
https://www.eastlothian.gov.uk/downloads/download/13023/local_development_plan_2018

7.5 East Lothian Council Site Management Plans:

- Levenhall Links – Draft (2020–2025)
- Longniddry Bents (2017–2021)
- Aberlady Bay Local Nature Reserve (2017–2021)
- Gullane Bents (2016–2020)
- Archerfield & Yellowcraig (2017–2021)
- John Muir Country Park – Draft (2020–2025)
- Barns Ness Coast (2016–2020)

AUTHOR'S NAME	Jennifer Lothian Catherine Cumming
DESIGNATION	Team Manager – Strategy, Policy & Development, Amenity Services Biodiversity Officer, Countryside Service
CONTACT INFO	jlothian1@eastlothian.gov.uk ccumming1@eastlothian.gov.uk
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