

West Lothian schools to create outdoor classrooms to offer pupils experience of biodiversity

West Lothian high schools will create outdoor classrooms to offer pupils first hand experience of biodiversity and ecology.

But some councillors have questioned why all senior schools can't take part in the £18,000 pilot project.

And one suggested that the two Winchburgh schools involved already had the classroom on their doorstep – with the development of Auldcathie Park- destined to be the largest district park and woodland in Scotland.

In a report to the Environment and Sustainability Policy Development and Scrutiny Panel Callum McLaren an ecology and biodiversity officer with the council said: “We propose to increase biodiversity awareness and provide Access to Nature across West Lothian's education facilities by working with the Learning for Sustainability Partnership group to deliver a small outdoor learning environment.

“We are aiming to support practitioners with interpreting and understanding how biodiversity and ecological processes relate to sustainable development goals.

“A pilot project looking at creating a number of Access to Nature spaces within the grounds of up to seven education

facilities that will be of benefit to a total of up to 34 schools. The Access to Nature space will create an area within the grounds of the school which will offer an opportunity for outdoor learning.”

Planting of the sites will be done in connection with the schools supported by Parks & Woodland staff within the planting period of Autumn 2024 & Spring / Autumn 2025.

The report: “To ensure long term success, as part of the maintenance programme for the site, a contractor will be employed to hand weed the site in the summer following planting for a total of five years. This will be paid for from the Ecology and Biodiversity Capital funds.”

The decision on which schools would take part was made by Education officers. Councillor Tom Conn, chairing the meeting, asked why all 12 high schools had not been marked for the pilot project.

Mr McLaren said he understood the decision had been made on the most practicable schools which would benefit the most feeder primaries.

Winchburgh councillor Diane Calder thanked the biodiversity and ecology for their work but added: “I really question this project. Are we overcomplicating things with this?”

She questioned the need for the spend within school grounds, particularly on the new joint campus of Winchburgh and Sinclair Academies. The first phase of Auldcathie Park has been completed adjacent to the schools.

The park will eventually be one of the largest in Scotland—more than twice the size of Princes Street Garden in Edinburgh.

Play areas, Park runs circuits and community growing areas have already been developed. The whole project is a byword

for greening and improving ecology and biodiversity of what was for years a landfill site for the city of Edinburgh.

Councilor Calder said "It's £18,000. We have beautiful parks. We have Auldcathie Park which is going to spring up next to the schools in Winchburgh."

Mr McLaren's report concluded: "Officers will gauge the effectiveness of the scheme and should it be deemed successful, decide how best to expand this more widely in association with Education Services subject to agreement and funds being in place. It is hoped that this will be the first step in increasing biodiversity potential within school grounds and that we foster a nature positive attitude across West Lothian.

"The proposal will help WLC tackle the Climate and Nature crises and reduce inequalities faced by young people through providing a more consistent resource for practitioners to make use of.

"Enhancing school grounds to benefit nature will also support our future Nature Networks as they will provide useful 'stepping stone' habitats for species."

Councillors backed the proposals.

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter