

New biodiversity plan means fewer cuts and more wildflowers

Grass cutting in West Lothian's open spaces is to be carried out less frequently as part of a new plan to help make the county greener.

Councillors on West Lothian's Executive agreed to the new five-year biodiversity project which means a later start to the cutting season and fewer grass cuts to react to changing weather patterns.

Councillor Sally Pattle, who first raised the concept of "No mow May" a year ago, described the move as "fantastic."

It's a step back from the controversial re-wilding schemes of a few years ago where roadside verges and large tracts of parkland and public open space went uncut for the the season.

In a report to the council's Executive Callum McLaren, Ecology & Biodiversity Officer, highlighted the changes planned.

They include increased cutting, two rather than one a season, on roadside verges and roundabouts; a reduction in herbicide spraying and the changing management of grassland areas, where cuts are reduced to one a season to encourage greater biodiversity.

A lengthy report on the changes stressed that: "Areas will be carefully selected to ensure they are appropriate and there

remains a good balance of land receiving the service standard cut regime and the NATURE management regime as to not affect the usability of the space.”

The need to encourage biodiversity in the county has coupled with the need to respond to changing weather patterns to prompt the development of the new plan. Cemetery maintenance will be brought into the plan to align with parks management.

Answering a question Mr McLaren stressed there would be no change to the cutting regime in place for cemeteries where regularly mown grounds would continue to be maintained. Biodiversity would be enhanced in burial grounds by using different grass seed mixes.

Councillor Danny Logue asked about how areas of grassland in housing estates would be managed. “Would that be cut or would that be left.” he asked.

NETS manager Andy Johnston said the intention is to have a working group with partners in departments such as housing.

“It would not be one size fits all. It would involve consultation with residents.” added Mr Johnston.

Councillor Pauline Orr suggested that the two cuts per season for verges could be more flexible- starting later in the season given the growth spurts in early summer. Mr Johnston said that flexibility was built into the plan

Linlithgow’s Lib Dem councillor Sally Pattle had last year encouraged NETS land and countryside staff to consider adopting the No Mow May policy. This is a campaign encouraging people to refrain from mowing their lawns during the month of May to boost wildflower growth and support pollinators like bees and butterflies.

She told the meeting: “I think it’s fantastic to see biodiversity is at the heart of the maintenance schedule. I

know that I mentioned No Mow May about a year ago. I do hope it will be a formal policy. I think it's great, especially for laissez faire gardeners like myself."

Councillor Pauline Stafford depute SNP group leader, welcomed the report and said: "I think that attitudes are beginning to change and the importance of biodiversity and supporting wherever can as a council.

"I think more we can do in education and communication with the public so they understand what's behind the decisions is really really key because there are lots of benefits that can come from lower maintenance. I know that on a domestic level No Mow May is quite a big thing now.

"It's good to hear there's flexibility in service levels here. We know the changing weather patterns are only going to increase."

By Stuart Sommerville Local Democracy Reporter