

Parks and Open Spaces

Bringing Nature into our Parks and Greenspace

Aberdeen City Council

Background

Aberdeen City Council has developed three linked projects to bring more nature into the city's parks and greenspaces: Parks for Pollinators, Aberdeen B-Lines and Aberdeen Nectar Networks. Delivered sequentially over three financial years, the projects expanded from demonstration sites in major parks to a wider network incorporating parks, open spaces, river corridors, coastal locations and land owned by partner organisations. The programme aimed to address fragmented urban habitats by creating connected corridors and stepping-stone sites where wildlife could feed, shelter, nest and move more easily.

The work supported national ambitions for biodiversity restoration, habitat recovery and nature networks, while aligning with Aberdeen City Council's Natural Environment Strategy and Local Outcome Improvement Plan. Delivery involved collaboration between council services, Buglife, community organisations, schools, volunteers and other landowners. Each stage built on the relationships, knowledge and habitat improvements established through earlier activity, supporting the development of a more connected citywide approach.

Key activities

1. Creating Diverse Habitats

Aberdeen City Council and its partners created and restored wildflower meadows, enhanced wetlands, planted native bulbs and plug plants, and introduced more wildlife-friendly grassland management. Measures included reduced mowing, cut-and-collect regimes and targeted control of dominant plant species. Approximately 22 hectares of land were created, restored, enhanced or managed more effectively for pollinators across the three projects, including areas of wetland habitat.

2. Providing Nesting Features

The physical work extended beyond providing flowering plants. Bee banks, bee posts, scrapes and bee hotels were introduced to create nesting opportunities for ground-nesting and aerial-nesting pollinators. Combining sources of food with suitable nesting space and ongoing management was intended to create functional habitats rather than temporary floral displays.

3. Tailoring Individual Sites

Seed mixes, plants and management methods were selected according to local soil conditions, moisture, exposure, existing vegetation and the wildlife that each location could support. Wet areas received suitable wetland mixes and plug plants, while exposed coastal sites were planted with species adapted to those conditions. At Torry Battery, common rock-rose and kidney vetch were planted to provide habitat that could support the northern brown argus and small blue butterflies, alongside other pollinators.

4. Involving Local Communities

Community participation included BioBlitzes, moth nights, guided pollinator walks, school sessions, public events, seeding and planting days, wetland work and bee bank construction. Aberdeen B-Lines involved 190 volunteers and recorded more than 13,000 volunteer hours. It also delivered educational activities to 11 classes across four schools and attracted around 140 people to its launch event. Aberdeen Nectar Networks delivered 23 habitat events and recorded approximately 300 volunteer hours, alongside nursery sessions and wider public engagement.

Benefits and impact

Stronger Habitat Connections

The combined programme improved approximately 22 hectares of habitat and increased the permeability of Aberdeen's urban landscape. The interventions provided more opportunities for pollinators and other wildlife to move between parks, river corridors, coastal locations and other greenspaces. The benefits extended beyond the introduction of wildflowers to include more varied grassland structures, wetland improvements, bare-ground nesting areas and altered cutting regimes. Together, these measures created a broader range of conditions capable of supporting invertebrates, birds and small mammals. The progression from demonstration sites to a wider network also showed how successive projects can expand the geographical reach of earlier work rather than treating each site as an isolated intervention.

More Sustainable Habitats

Site-specific design increased the likelihood that habitats would become established and remain suitable for local conditions. The use of native seed mixes tailored to coastal, wet or urban locations avoided reliance on a single standard approach. Early-flowering bulbs provided resources for emerging bumblebees, while yellow rattle and cut-and-collect management helped reduce grass dominance and soil fertility, allowing a greater variety of wildflowers to develop. Nesting features complemented the availability of food across the seasons. This combination of planting, habitat structure and management supported a more sustainable approach than focusing on appearance alone.

Improved Experience of Greenspace

More varied and attractive greenspaces created additional reasons for people to walk, spend time outdoors, learn and volunteer. Feedback gathered through Aberdeen B-Lines indicated that 82% of respondents agreed that attending events had improved their wellbeing. Everyone who provided feedback through Aberdeen Nectar Networks reported feeling more connected to nature after taking part. The strength of the responses suggests that combining habitat improvements with participatory activities can contribute positively to wellbeing, social connection and people's relationship with their local environment.

Foundations for Lasting Stewardship

Management plans were prepared for the project sites to help preserve the environmental gains beyond their initial establishment. For Aberdeen Nectar Networks, agreements were secured for all participating sites, including those outside council ownership, to be managed in accordance with the agreed plans for at least ten years after completion. The continued involvement of community partners and friends groups provides further capacity to observe changes, help maintain features and report emerging issues. This creates a practical foundation for longer-term stewardship while recognising that newly established habitats require continuing attention.

Learning and reflections

Partnerships Enable Continuity

Successful urban habitat creation is a long-term partnership task involving council teams, environmental organisations, landowners, contractors, schools, volunteers and community groups. Different partners brought technical expertise, operational knowledge, access to land, funding and local understanding. Relationships developed during one project also made subsequent phases more achievable. This experience indicates that partnership working should be treated as part of the programme's core delivery model, rather than as an additional engagement activity.

Establishment Requires Patience

Wildflower habitats do not always produce visible results immediately. One site initially appeared to have been unsuccessful as relatively little flowering emerged during the first year, but the planted mix subsequently established and began to thrive. This demonstrated the importance of assessing success over several growing seasons and avoiding premature conclusions based on early appearance. It also reinforced the need for follow-up management during the establishment period.

Weather Needs Contingency

Prolonged dry weather affected planting and establishment, particularly during Aberdeen Nectar Networks. Seasonal conditions cannot be controlled, but their effects can be anticipated through flexible scheduling, contingency arrangements and resources for remedial work. Future programmes would benefit from plans that allow activity to move in response to weather and include sufficient follow-up capacity when planting is delayed or establishment is weaker than expected.

Communication Prevents Setbacks

Accurate maps, mowing plans and clear communication with operational staff and contractors are essential. An accidental cut caused by an out-of-date map removed a newly created wildflower area and required it to be replanted. Although the area recovered, the incident demonstrated how quickly an entire season's work can be disrupted. Habitat locations, management requirements and changes to cutting schedules therefore need to be clearly recorded, routinely updated and accessible to everyone responsible for site operations.

Interpretation Builds Understanding

Signage and interpretation help explain why areas are being managed differently and can reduce trampling while vegetation becomes established. This is particularly important for features such as bee banks, which may initially look like bare earth or unfinished work. Temporary fencing may also be useful at vulnerable locations. Clear public information can reduce misunderstanding, encourage support and show that less frequent mowing or exposed soil forms part of an intentional habitat approach.

The Council's approach demonstrates how site-specific habitat creation, community involvement and sustained partnership working can support urban nature recovery. By consolidating the habitats already created, maintaining effective management and continuing to address gaps in the network, Aberdeen City Council has established a positive foundation for strengthening benefits for wildlife and communities over time.

Contact for enquiries

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