

Plants with Purpose

Growing healthy, connected urban ecosystems for people, climate and nature

A knowledge exchange event connecting research and practice for urban Scotland

Monday 26th October 2026

09.00 – 09.30 Arrivals with tea and coffee

Location: Conference Room

Day 1 – Creating healthy, connected urban ecosystems

09.30 – 12.00: Morning Plenary: Where are we now? What have we learned?

Location: Lecture Theatre

The morning session will explore how nature-based solutions have been integrated into Scotland's urban environments over the last five years and how they have contributed to healthy, connected urban ecosystems. Plenary speakers will provide (inter-)national perspectives bridging research and practice, including case studies from across Scotland's towns and cities and participant engagement will be central to the session.

09.30 – 10.00 Introduction

- Housekeeping (Eloise Fenton)
- Welcome (RBGE)
- Plants with Purpose (Emma Bush, Caitlyn Johnstone)
- **Interactive:** *Mentimeter*

10.00 – 10.30 Opening Speaker

- “Working with Plants for People” (John Little, remote presentation)

10.30 – 10.50 Break (Conference Room)

- *PhD research posters in the conference room*

10.50 – 11.40 Case Studies

- Rebecca Lewis (Buglife)
- Alexandra Combes (Scottish Water)
- Graham Stone (University of Edinburgh) & Alex Hunter (City of Edinburgh Council)
- James Murray (Glasgow City Council)
- Guy Harewood (Forth Climate Forest)

11.40 – 11.50 PhD Showcase Lightning Talks

Posters viewable in the conference room.

- Andrada Opris (Edinburgh Napier University)
- Isla Kendall (RBGE; Durham University)
- Emma Plant (University of Glasgow)
- Jess Akerman (University of Dundee)
- Shahrzad Zeinali (University of Strathclyde)
- Lindis Kipp (RBGE; University of Stirling)

- Madeleine Geddes-Barton (RBGE; Heriot-Watt University)
- **Interactive:** *Mentimeter*

11.50 – 12.00 Introducing the Scotland NbS Hub and Scottish Planning Biodiversity Metric

- Shahrzad Zeinali (University of Strathclyde)
- Stuart Bence (NatureScot)

12.00 – 13.15: Lunch

Lunch will be served in the Conference Room

Board Room Annexe available as co-working space

12.15 – 13.00: Lunchtime Sessions

- The Scotland NbS Hub will launch its new Lunch & Learn series with Prof. Husam Al Waer (University of Dundee) **Conference Room**
- Stuart Bence (NatureScot) will be available for a drop-in session to discuss the *Scottish Biodiversity Planning Metric* and *Developing with Nature* guidance **Board Room**

13.15 – 16.00: Afternoon Thematic Sessions

Locations: Lecture Theatre, Conference Room, Board Room, Board Room Annexe, Garden

Through site visits, case studies, and facilitated activities, these workshops will build a detailed picture of current knowledge and best practice from real-world settings, review needs and priorities across sectors and identify opportunities to trial and scale innovative solutions.

- **Planting for Pollinators:** *Building a biome-positive city from the bottom up*

Session Leads: Caitlyn Johnstone (RBGE), Nicholas Balfour (RBGE), Rebecca Lewis (Buglife), Andrada Opris (Edinburgh Napier), Graham Stone (University of Edinburgh)

Location: Board Room and Board Room Annexe, Garden

Break: 14.15

- **Working with Water:** *Restoring the water cycle through healthy urban ecosystems*

Session Leads: Isla Kendall (RBGE; Durham University), Daniel Green (Durham University), Lucy Broadie (Scottish Water), Deryck Irving (Hydro Nation Chair)

Location: Conference Room, Garden

Break: 14.45

- **Seeing the Trees:** *Designing an Urban Forest Observatory for Scotland*

Session Leads: Emma Bush (RBGE), Eloise Fenton (RBGE), William Hinchliffe (RBGE), Elisa Fuentes-Montemayor (University of Stirling), Lindis Kipp (RBGE; University of Stirling).

Location: Lecture Theatre, Garden

Break: 14.45

16.00 – 16.15: Closing

Location: Lecture Theatre

Workshop facilitators present the main outcomes of thematic sessions

Reflections and Feedback: *Mentimeter*

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Tuesday 27th October 2026

09.00 – 09.30 Arrivals with tea and coffee

Location: Conference Room

Day 2 – Sustaining and scaling healthy, connected urban ecosystems

09.30 - 11.00: Morning Plenary: Where Are We Going? How Do We Get There?

Location: Lecture Theatre

The day opens with reflections, recommendations, and gaps identified from each of the Day 1 workshop themes. A practitioner panel spanning horticulture, education, enterprise, community engagement, and the built environment discusses and provides real world perspectives. The panel will focus on cross-over themes for how we get where we need to be.

09.30 - 10.00 Plenary: presentation on outcomes

- Housekeeping (Eloise Fenton)
- *Planting for Pollinators*
- *Working with Water*
- *Seeing the Trees*

10.00 - 11.00 Panel session (chaired by Caitlyn Johnstone & Dr Emma Bush)

- Karen Pickering (Head of Estates, RBGE)
- Ivan Clark (NatureScot)
- Joanne Glennie (Green Action Trust)
- Eleanor Kinross (Edinburgh & Lothian Greenspace Trust)
- Joe Clancy (Nature Recovery Coordinator, CEC)

11.00 - 11.30 Break (Conference Room)

- PhD research posters in the conference room

11.30 - 12.30 Morning Thematic Sessions: Walking conversations

Location: Garden

The session focuses on what it takes to sustain, care for, and scale healthy, connected urban nature-based solutions. Facilitated conversations at RBGE's demonstration sites will be followed, after lunch, by roundtable discussions.

- ***Community-based Solutions: How do communities engage with and benefit from healthy, connected ecosystems?***

Session leads: Amy Leach (RBGE), Jenny Foulkes (RBGE), Emma Bush (RBGE)

- ***Green jobs, skills and opportunities: Building employment pathways and horizon scanning.***

Session leads: Will Ritchie (RBGE), Laura Cohen (RBGE)

- ***Urban Ecosystems in Practice: How do we design, deliver and measure healthy, connected urban ecosystems?***

Session leads: Caitlyn Johnstone (RBGE), Ivan Clark (NatureScot), Harry Watkins (Urban Plant Lab)

12.30 - 13.30 Lunch

Lunch will be served in the Conference Room

Board Room Annexe available as co-working space

- PhD research posters in the conference room
- Please feel free to visit our *Earth Matters* exhibition at Inverleith House Gallery

13.30 – 14.15 Afternoon Thematic Sessions: Roundtables

Locations: Conference Room, Board Room, Board Room Annexe

- ***Community-based Solutions: How do communities engage with and benefit from healthy, connected ecosystems***

Location: Board Room Annexe

- ***Green jobs, skills and opportunities: Building employment pathways and horizon scanning.***

Location: Board Room

- ***Urban Ecosystems in Practice: How do we design, deliver and measure healthy, connected urban ecosystems?***

Location: Conference Room

14.15 - 14.40 Break (Conference Room)

14.40 - 16.00 Afternoon Plenary: Where Are We Going? How Do We Get There?

Location: Lecture Theatre

The event will close with speakers reflecting on the establishment and long-term maintenance of nature-based solutions and collective next steps for healthy, connected urban ecosystems.

14.40 - 14:50: Reflection

Roundtable facilitators present main outcomes of thematic sessions.

14:50 – 15:30: Case Studies

- Ian Mackenzie (NHS Lothian Green Health)
- Anna Perks (Woodland Trust)
- Neil Clapperton (Buglife)
- David Treanor (Tree Wise)

15:30 – 16:00: Closing

- Key listener reflections - Jess Akerman (PhD student, University of Dundee); Emma Plant (University of Glasgow); Clive Mitchell (Head of Terrestrial Science, NatureScot)
- ***Reflections and Feedback: Mentimeter***
- Closing (Caitlyn Johnstone & Emma Bush, RBGE)

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Day 1 Biographies

Introduction

John Little

Ecological designer and public horticulture advocate, Grass Roof Company, Care not Capital

John argues:

- Put the best gardeners in the poorest places
- Move money from capital into care
- Understand that gardened places are best for biodiversity and people
- Move novel landscapes higher up the BNG metric
- Understand that a modern public space gardener is much more than a horticulturist
- Keep waste on site and use it to make places beautiful and biodiverse
- Put soil and plants on roofs

Contact John on Instagram @grassroofco

Case Studies

Rebecca Lewis

Scotland and Northern Ireland Manager, Buglife

Rebecca has been working in the field of ecology for over 20 years with a range of taxa. Last 6 years specialising in freshwater habitats, the invertebrates that inhabit them and citizen science monitoring. Currently managing a team of 12 entomologists as Scotland and Northern Ireland Manager for Buglife – the invertebrate conservation trust. Joint deputy of the Scottish Freshwater Group and Chair of the Midlothian Climate Emergency Group she is also currently completing a PhD in Biology at the University of St Andrews with a focus on freshwater invertebrates and citizen science.

Alexandra Combes

Principal Ecological Engineer, Scottish Water

Graham Stone

Professor of Ecology, University of Edinburgh

Graham is Professor of Ecology at the University of Edinburgh. He works on plant-insect biodiversity, with particular interest in plants and pollinators, and oak woodlands. For the last 15 years, he has worked with the City of Edinburgh Council to plant urban wildflower meadows, using native wildflower seed mixes developed with Scotia Seeds.

Alex Hunter

Greenspace Development Officer (Ecology), City of Edinburgh Council

James Murray

MGSDP Manager, The Metropolitan Glasgow Strategic Drainage Partnership

James Murray has spent 30 years working on wastewater, flooding and water quality projects. Since 2006 he has been the Programme Manager for the Metropolitan Glasgow Strategic Drainage Partnership (MGSDP) – a non-statutory, partnership of organisations with an interest in flood risk, water quality, adaptation and resilient economic development in the Glasgow area, and with the aim to Sustainably Drain Glasgow.

James is an advocate for the transition from traditional ‘grey’ infrastructure to more sustainable balance of approaches utilising blue-green infrastructure to deliver multiple benefits.

Guy Harewood

Development Officer, Forth Climate Forest

Guy has worked as the development officer on the Forth Climate Forest since June 2023. He works closely with landowners and communities to encourage tree planting and woodland creation.

He is an ecologist with over 20 years of experience. He spent most of his career working within local authorities, developing environmental policy and providing guidance on ecological matters.

NbS Hub Launch and NatureScot Guidance**Husam Al Waer**

Chair in Urban Design, University of Dundee

Shahrzad Zeinali

PhD Researcher, University of Strathclyde

Shahrzad Zeinali is a PhD researcher in the Department of Architecture at the University of Strathclyde and coordinator of the Scottish Nature-based Solutions (NbS) Hub. Her research develops and tests an eco-centric assessment framework for urban nature-based solutions, recognising the intrinsic value of ecosystems and non-human life alongside human wellbeing. Drawing on literature review, Scottish case studies and expert interviews, the framework integrates option appraisal, assessment of change and detailed monitoring. It addresses biodiversity, water, climate resilience and human-related challenges, with ecological integrity, justice and long-term stewardship guiding assessment across planning, implementation and the ongoing care of Scottish urban ecosystems.

Stuart Bence

Operations Officer – Nature and Climate Change, NatureScot

Stuart has been with NatureScot for 6 Years, first starting as a project officer working on supporting the delivery of Positive Effects for Biodiversity as part of NPF4. This includes working on the Developing with Nature Guidance and Scottish biodiversity metric development. In 2023 he moved into operations, working on protected sites and supporting Local Development Plans and Nature Network development in the Upper Forth. While continuing to sit on the Positive Effects for Biodiversity team. Previous to NatureScot he studied a PhD at the Scottish School of Forestry at UHI in Inverness.

PhD Showcase

Andrada Opris

PhD Researcher, Edinburgh Napier University

Emma Plant

Urban Ecologist and Entomologist, University of Glasgow

I am an urban ecologist and entomologist at the University of Glasgow. I recently completed my PhD which investigated how private urban green spaces can support pollinator diversity within cities. This project was part of the GALLANT project which aims to find climate resilient solutions to sustainable cities and is based in Glasgow.

<https://www.gla.ac.uk/research/az/sustainablesolutions/ourprojects/gallant/>

Isla Kendall

PhD Researcher, Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh and Durham University

I am a PhD student at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh (RBGE) and Durham University, investigating rain gardens with a focus on plant selection, the functioning of rain gardens with different planting combinations, plant health, and the biodiversity benefits that rain gardens provide.

Lindis Kipp

PhD Researcher, Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh and University of Stirling

Lindis is a PhD researcher based jointly at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh and the University of Stirling, where her studentship explores how urban forests can support nature recovery at landscape scale. She came to ecology by a non-traditional route, returning to study after an earlier career in teaching, and completed a degree in Environmental Science and Outdoor Education. Before starting her PhD, she worked as an ecological field technician on woodland surveys across central Scotland. Her broad research interest is in supporting ecosystem resilience and biodiversity through nature-based solutions, combined with effective science communication to inspire positive climate action.

Jess Akerman

PhD Researcher, University of Dundee

Jess is a landscape architect and PhD researcher at the University of Dundee. Her research is part of the Leverhulme Doctoral Scholars Programme for Regenerative Innovation and explores the role urban design can play in the societal transition towards an ecological worldview. By examining the values and assumptions underlying how nature is designed and experienced in city centres, her research aims to develop urban design tools that optimise experiences of deep ecological awareness. Her approach draws on the environmental philosophy of deep ecology, urban design theory, and nature connectedness research.

Shahrzad Zeinali

PhD Researcher, University of Strathclyde

Madeleine Geddes-Barton

PhD Researcher, Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh and Heriot-Watt University

Day 2 Biographies

Panel

Karen Pickering

Interim Head of Estates and Sustainability, Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh

Karen studied Architecture at the Glasgow School of Art and has worked in the construction industry for 35 years. She is an architect and has been involved with the delivery of over 30 building projects.

She is a specialist in conservation architecture and sustainable design. After 30 years of working at Page/Park Architects, Karen joined the University of Edinburgh in 2022, where she led the City Centre Campus development team.

Karen joined RBGE in May 2026 as interim Head of Estates and Sustainability. She leads the teams that maintain the RBGE estate, over the four gardens, and the RBGE Biomes projects.

Ivan Clark

Greenspace and Blue-Green Infrastructure Manager, NatureScot

Ivan Clark is an Ecologist and Chartered Town Planner with an interest in how we can use blue-green infrastructure to make our towns and cities more liveable and resilient places. Ivan has worked for NatureScot, Scotland's Nature Agency for over 25 years, with additional secondments with Edinburgh Council and West Lothian Council focussing on spatial planning and open space. He is currently working with the NHLF Nature Towns and Cities programme to establish a new accreditation scheme in Scotland to recognise places that put nature at the heart of what they do.

Eleanor Kinross

Woodland Engagement Officer, Edinburgh and Lothians Greenspace Trust

Eleanor works for Edinburgh and Lothians Greenspace Trust. She facilitates the Craigmillar Castle Park Engagement Programme. This is an ongoing project in its 10th year, working to build connections between the woodlands of Craigmillar Castle Park and the people and communities who live alongside them. The project is funded by Scottish Forestry and City of Edinburgh Council. The key components of the project are working with schools, a public programme of events and collaborations with community organisations, activists, third sector organisations and public bodies within the area.

Jo Glennie

Head of Landscape, Green Action Trust

I started my relationship with plants as a fourteen-year-old weekend girl in my local garden centre. This was followed up by a year out in another garden centre, a degree in Horticulture and a Masters in Landscape Design. My working life has generally been at the sharp end of landscape design and implementation with local authorities in Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire and a near 20-year stint with North Lanarkshire Council as a Landscape Architect and Team Manager. For the past two and a half years I've been the Head of Landscape at Green Action Trust making practical improvements on the ground for people and the environment.

Joe Clancy

Nature Recovery Co-ordinator, City of Edinburgh Council

Nature Recovery Co-ordinator for the City of Edinburgh Council, investigating opportunities for nature investment portfolios, community municipal investments, nature buyer's clubs, ocean recovery and performance of nature recovery strategies.

Case Studies

Ian Mackenzie

Green Health Programme Manager, NHS Lothian

Ian Mackenzie is Green Health Programme Manager with NHS Lothian Charity, leading projects that use nature and greenspace to improve health, wellbeing and environmental sustainability across NHS Lothian. He works in partnership with NHS staff, local authorities, charities, community organisations and volunteers to develop therapeutic gardens, biodiversity projects, volunteering opportunities and nature-based activities that benefit patients, staff and communities. Ian has a particular interest in the role of healthcare greenspaces in supporting recovery, reducing health inequalities, addressing climate resilience and enhancing biodiversity. He is passionate about creating healthier, more sustainable healthcare environments for all.

Anna Perks

Tree Equity Lead, Woodland Trust

Anna is Tree Equity Lead at Woodland Trust Scotland, responsible for developing and delivering its tree equity programme across Scotland. She believes passionately that everyone should be able to live in a place where ample trees and green spaces contribute to a healthier, more resilient neighbourhood. So, tree equity, with its focus on securing more equitable access to the benefits of urban trees and woods, is right up her street.

Prior to moving to the Woodland Trust, Anna worked for over 25 years in Scottish local government, championing biodiversity conservation and collaborating with colleagues, eNGOs and local communities to create nature-rich spaces to benefit people and the environment.

Neil Clapperton

Conservation Officer, Buglife

David Treanor

Arborist, Tree Wise

David Treanor is a professional arborist, founder of Tree Wise Tree Surgeons and an advocate for the conservation of urban trees. With over 15 years' experience, his work combines practical arboriculture with community engagement, ecological education and a growing interest in how people develop meaningful relationships with trees.

David led the campaign celebrating Glasgow's Argyle Street Ash, UK Tree of the Year 2025, and received the Sir Tom Hall Literary Award for his article Iconicity in Isolation. Through his involvement with University of Glasgow in community tree mapping and citizen science, he champions a more thoughtful approach to urban tree stewardship.

Closing

Jess Akerman

PhD Researcher, University of Dundee

Emma Plant

Urban Ecologist and Entomologist, University of Glasgow

Clive Mitchell

Head of Terrestrial Science, NatureScot

Emma Bush

Nature-based Solutions Research Lead, Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh

Emma Bush is a research scientist bringing expertise in social-ecological science with a special interest in climate change, urban nature restoration, forest ecosystems and participatory research. She leads The Good City project (2020-) exploring young people's values and experiences of urban nature, translating findings into policy and practice through engagement with inter-disciplinary stakeholder teams. At RBGE Emma is the Research Lead for Plants with Purpose (2024–2029), an interdisciplinary action-research programme enhancing multifunctional urban ecosystems for people, climate and nature. Emma is a member of the Royal Society of Edinburgh's Environment Community of Interest and is the Environment lead for the Young Academy of Scotland.

Caitlyn Johnstone

Nature-based Solutions Innovation Lead, Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh

Caitlyn Johnstone is an ecosystem scientist, educator and speaker investigating interconnections of the natural and built environments, with special interests in the world of lichens and the complex spaces where different lifeforms interact. She applies the lessons of nature to the human world and our actions to improve ecosystem health and biodiversity, deepen scientific understanding, and address the dynamic impacts of climate change. Caitlyn leads nature-based solutions strategy and actions for the Botanic landscapes and is the Innovation Lead for Plants with Purpose (2024–2029), an interdisciplinary action-research programme enhancing multifunctional urban ecosystems for people, climate and nature. Her international, interdisciplinary work covers sustainable management of natural resources, education, consultation and advising to transition evidence into applied action, behaviour change, programme development, and improving resilience through nature- and community-based solutions and adaptive management.