

- 3.3 While it is regrettable that erroneous reports circulated that such a valued local asset was to be closed as a budget saving, this did have the effect of generating significant local interest in the facility.
- 3.4 The Council was approached initially by the Bute Island Alliance [BIA] with a view to having discussions about the future of the facility. The BIA was established in 2016 to take forward the ambitions of local people, organisations and businesses, developing and delivering collaboratively identified local regeneration projects.
- 3.5 The BIA served the role of facilitator and a new group was formed – the Arden Craig Gardens Interest Group [AGIG]. Council Officers engaged with the AGIG and BIA to discuss possible future options for Arden Craig.
- 3.6 At its meeting in September 2021, the Council considered the following Motion:

The Bute and Cowal Area Committee request that the Council pause, for a period of 18 months from August 2021, the implementation of the decision of the budget meeting of 25 February 2021, regarding the future of Arden Craig Gardens making a saving of £5000 for the council and ask that the relevant service, in the meantime, find that saving from existing budgets. This will enable the community and other interested parties time to develop a business plan to still achieve the savings for the council and allow the gardens to remain open and operate commercially on a basis to be agreed. This would allow an opportunity for a very strong community group to get the required business plan and income revenue in place to continue the running and advancement of the gardens at no cost to the council whilst achieving the savings identified in the budget. This may also provide an income for the council.

The following amendment was proposed:

- (i) *Notes that all Councillors present at the Budget vote on 25 February 2021 voted to save £10,000 by stopping the nursery growing service at Kilmory and Arden Craig;*
- (ii) *Notes that this decision has no impact on the continued operation of Arden Craig Gardens;*
- (iii) *Welcomes the formation of the Arden Craig Garden Interest Group (AGIG) and the engagement of officers from Roads and Infrastructure with that group;*
- (iv) *Thanks AGIG for carrying out their visitor survey and for engaging with the Council over the future of Arden Craig gardens and nursery; and*
- (v) *Requests that Council officers continue their dialogue with AGIG and submit a paper to the December meeting of the EDI Committee with their recommendations regarding AGIG's plans for the gardens and nursery.*

The Amendment was carried by 19 votes to 14 and became the finding of the Council.

- 3.7 Following this decision, Officers met with the AGIG and BIA in October. At that meeting the groups proposed the following terms for a possible future partnership:

We [AGIG] wish to administer an Ardenraig Gardens Friends' Group to undertake such marketing initiatives as will:

- 1. Increase footfall to the Gardens;*
- 2. Enhance its attractiveness as a visitor site; and,*
- 3. Increase its use by both local residents and visitors of all ages and ability levels for education, wellness and leisure activities.*

To this end we [AGIG] would now reform as Ardenraig Gardens Friends' Group and constitute as an unincorporated community association.

- 3.8 The view of Officers is that the above noted proposal provides the basis for a positive and robust future partnership which could provide the opportunity to enrich a key community asset while that asset remains owned and operated by the Council, with the Friends' Group provided complementary activities to augment the overall offering. There are examples of similar such groups at similar facilities across the country, including within the Council area at Hermitage Park in Helensburgh. Although Hermitage Park is different in terms of its offering and scale, the same general principles apply to the partnership there and this proposed partnership. Officers plan to put the two groups in touch to share learning/best practice etc., as well as arranging support and advice to the AGFG from the Hermitage Park Manager.
- 3.9 In terms of the redundant 'nursery' asset adjacent to the Gardens, work on its repurposing was halted while discussions with the AGIG and BIA were ongoing and the Council was about to consider the matter at its September meeting. Officers will now make arrangements to provide an instruction to Estates to progress marketing of the asset. Due to the significant level of local interest in this matter, it would be prudent to bring a further report on the disposal options to the Bute and Cowal Area Committee in due course.

4.0 CONCLUSION

- 4.1 While it is regrettable that erroneous reports circulated that the Gardens were closing as part of the savings proposal RIS01, the interest generated has ultimately been positive. The proposal from the AGFG presents the opportunity to progress a positive partnership which could enrich this key community asset.

5.0 IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Policy – none known

5.2 Financial – the only financial consideration is the Officer time to support this partnership – this will be absorbed as part of the normal course of business via existing staff.

