

**The Highland Council**

**Caithness and Sutherland Area Committee**

**20<sup>TH</sup> MAY 2013**

**North West Highlands Geopark**

**Report by Director of Planning and Development**

Agenda Item	<b>5.</b>
Report No	<b>CS-14-13</b>

### **Summary**

This paper considers recent developments supporting the North West Highlands Geopark. These include the Council becoming a signatory to the Scottish Geodiversity Charter, a recent joint approach (with Geopark Shetland) to the Scottish Government seeking financial support for a comprehensive programme of actions in the Geopark, and subsequent correspondence between the Leader of Highland Council and the Finance Secretary supporting the joint approach. A brief summary of how the Highland Council has previously supported the North West Highlands Geopark is also provided for information. Committee is invited to:

- a) welcome the recent developments supporting the North West Highlands Geopark, and
- b) agree any additional short term actions they may wish to recommend to the Highland Council in support of the Geopark.

## **1. What is Geodiversity?**

- 1.1 Scotland's geodiversity is the variety of rocks, minerals, fossils, landforms, sediments and soils, together with the natural processes which form and alter them. It is the link between biodiversity, landscape, people and their culture.
- 1.2 Geodiversity is important because it is the foundation upon which plants, animals and people live, a source of basic raw materials, and a vital component of our cultural and built heritage. It is a unique teaching and scientific resource, fundamental to our understanding of issues such as climate change and rising sea levels.

## **2. Background on the North West Highlands Geopark**

- 2.1 A 'Geopark' is an area or territory with geographical heritage of international significance. Across Europe Geoparks use their heritage to promote sustainable development, mainly via tourism and educational activities.
- 2.2 The North West Highlands Geopark (NWHG) was the first in Scotland. It was awarded UNESCO Geopark status in 2004. It features some of the oldest rocks in Europe, some of which are around 3,000 million years old. The park contains many notable geological features, such as the Moine Thrust belt and Smoo Cave, within an area of around 2,000 square kilometres.
- 2.3 Since 2003 NWHG has been managed by the Sutherland Partnership, a community planning partnership. The Geopark has received variable funding and support for initiatives from the British Geological Survey (BGS), The Highland Council (THC) and Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH).

- 2.4 More recently, the lack of sustainable financial support has forced the Geopark board to re-organise its activities. It is now operated as a limited company (North West Highlands Geopark Ltd) and is seeking charitable status. The Company was established in April 2012 and supersedes the earlier multi-agency steering group.
- 2.5 In practical terms the NWHG is now managed by a transition committee which includes one director elected from each of the 4 community councils covering the Geopark area (Coigach, Scourie, Kinlochbervie and Durness). The fifth director (and chair) is Cllr George Farlow, Highland Councillor for North West and Central Sutherland and Vice Chair of the Planning Environment and Development Committee.
- 2.6 NWHG is a member of the Global Geopark Network, the European Geopark Network, the UK Geopark Network, the Scottish Geopark Partnership and the Scottish Geodiversity Forum.
- 2.7 NWHG has registered the Geocentre Scotland Ltd following the successful outcome of a feasibility study recommending that NWHG consider hosting a Scottish centre of excellence for earth sciences and geo-tourism. Fundamental to the establishment of the centre of excellence is the purchase and display of the Orcadian Stone Collection, which has been described as a world class and priceless collection of internationally significant rocks, minerals and fossils.
- 2.8 Meanwhile the Sutherland Partnership has established a social enterprise, a company limited by guarantee with charitable status to direct the strategy of the NWHG. This aims to:
- seek funding to retain membership of the EGN and GGN with UNESCO accreditation and recognition;
  - develop fully geotourism and become a model for best practice internationally;
  - seek funding to deliver a business plan for the construction of a Geocentre in Scourie for the housing of the Shelley Collection (Orcadian Stone) and a centre of excellence for education in earth sciences;
  - work with partners to promote economic growth in the NWHG area and in supporting the Sutherland Summit plan, increase the capacity for sustainability in remote and rural west coasts.

### **3. The Scottish Geodiversity Charter**

- 3.1 On 13<sup>th</sup> March 2013 the Planning, Environment and Development Committee considered the Scottish Geodiversity Charter and agreed that the Highland Council become a signatory. Signatories to the Geodiversity Charter agree to maintain and enhance their local geodiversity, recognising its contribution to Scotland's:
- Natural heritage valued landscapes and sea-bed features
  - Habitat and species, and the essential benefits it provides society
  - Climate change adaptation and sea levels via sustainable management of landscape and ecosystem scale processes
  - Sustainable economic development via tourism for example
  - Historical and cultural development
  - Public health, quality of life and national well-being

3.2 A copy of the Scottish Geodiversity Charter can be obtained at: [www.scottishgeodiversityforum.org](http://www.scottishgeodiversityforum.org)

#### 4. Links to the Scottish Government's five strategic objectives

4.1 Conservation of Scotland's geodiversity aligns with, and supports, the Scottish Government's purpose of increasing sustainable economic growth and its five strategic objectives:

<b>Strategic Objective</b>	<b>Contribution of Geodiversity</b>
<b>Wealthier Scotland</b>	<p>Scotland's industrial development during recent centuries has been founded on its geological resources. Today, these are fundamental to economic development as a source of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• soil and water resources;</li> <li>• energy and minerals;</li> <li>• contributions to tourism and the growing area of geotourism, including geoparks;</li> <li>• construction materials for new building projects;</li> <li>• materials for the restoration of the built heritage;</li> <li>• collectable items (e.g. rocks, fossils, minerals, and stones).</li> </ul>
<b>Safer &amp; Stronger Communities</b>	<p>Geodiversity contributes to better quality of life and stronger local communities through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• supporting services (e.g. soil formation, water cycling);</li> <li>• provisioning services (e.g. fresh water and building materials);</li> <li>• regulating services (e.g. natural flood management, erosion control, coastal protection and water regulation);</li> <li>• cultural services (e.g. recreation and aesthetic experiences and a 'sense of place').</li> </ul>
<b>Smarter</b>	<p>Geodiversity has educational values and provides opportunities to enhance learning achievements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• across the spectrum of schools (supporting the Curriculum for Excellence), colleges, universities (underpinning world-class research into how the Earth works) and life-long learning;</li> <li>• through enhanced understanding of natural Earth surface processes such as erosion and flooding.</li> </ul>
<b>Greener</b>	<p>Geodiversity contributes to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• understanding the drivers and effects of environmental change (e.g. climate change, sea-level rise and carbon dynamics);</li> <li>• planning for adaptive management in response to climate change and rising sea-level, based on understanding and</li> </ul>

	<p>working with natural processes (e.g. through development of river basin management plans and natural flood management);</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• linking people, nature and landscape: geodiversity supports habitats, species and environmental quality and contributes to cultural heritage; Geoparks and other tourism can help to sustain living and vibrant communities.</li> </ul>
<b>Healthier</b>	<p>The management of Local Geodiversity Sites contributes to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• improving environmental health through soil and water quality;</li> <li>• improving the quality and ‘liveability’ of local environments and greenspace, and providing recreation opportunities;</li> <li>• fostering pride in the distinctiveness of local natural heritage and the aesthetic value of landscapes;</li> <li>• fostering healthier lifestyles through the support of physical activity, such as recreation and adventure sports.</li> </ul>

## 5. Local authority actions identified within the Scottish Geodiversity Charter

5.1 The Charter sets out what needs to be done to achieve its vision. Where local authorities, public agencies and government departments are concerned the following actions are identified. They are not statutory or time limited:

- Acknowledge the value of geodiversity in policy and guidance documents at national and local level.
- Promote Scotland’s geodiversity as a tourism asset that adds value to the visitor experience.
- Form partnerships with local geo-conservation groups and develop geodiversity action plans involving local communities.
- Encourage developers to allow access to temporary exposures to record and sample geology.

## 6. Other signatories to the Charter

6.1 A number of organisations have already become signatories to the Geodiversity Charter, agreeing to support the vision and to work towards relevant actions. At the time of writing there are 29 signatories including:

- SNH
- John Muir Trust
- Cairngorms National Park Authority
- Glasgow City Council
- City of Edinburgh Council
- East Dumbartonshire Council
- North West Highlands Geopark
- Lochaber Geopark

## **7. Further actions supporting the North West Highlands Geopark**

7.1 Since The Highland Council agreed to become a signatory to the Scottish Geodiversity Charter the Council has been involved in further actions supporting the NWHG. The Council Leader and Chief Executive have written to the Finance Secretary supporting a joint NWHG and Geopark Shetland submission setting out a programme of proposed actions and seeking financial support during the period 2013/14 – 2015/16. The actions proposed for the NWHG include:

- appointment of a project officer (3 years term);
- marketing and communication activities;
- Geopark projects – including work to develop the ‘Geocentre’.

Generally these align well with the actions identified as appropriate for local authorities and should lead to greater promotion of the Geopark, enjoyment and understanding of its significance.

7.2 A copy of the joint NWHG and Geopark Shetland submission can be obtained on the Committee information bulletin.

7.3 Historically NWHG has enjoyed the support of the Council in a variety of ways including via the provision of Countryside Ranger support, project funding provided from the Council’s Tourism Development Budget, and discretionary funds administered by Ward Managers. Similarly, future short term actions which the Committee may wish to recommend include:

- the provision of seasonal Ranger support within the Geopark if additional resources can be found within the Planning and Development Service;
- the provision of advice and management support for a ‘Geopark’ Ranger employed by the Geopark itself;
- the provision of project support to deliver the programme of actions within the joint submission to the Scottish government for consideration. This could take the form of match funding Geopark projects that help deliver the Highland Council Programme;
- the provision of advice via Highland Council board members going forward; and
- assistance with project funding applications.

The success of the Geopark could be reported to the Planning, Environment and Development Committee, where support provision could also be reviewed.

7.4 The joint submission mentioned above lists a number of achievements already delivered by the NWHG, including conferences, marketing activities, small business development , extending the tourist season via ‘shoulder month’ events, website development, ‘Entry to the Geopark’ signage and the employment of 2 fulltime Geopark officers. A number of educational events have also been run by the Geopark since 2004.

## **8. Resource implications**

8.1 Committee members may wish to consider the activities of the NWHG and how in the short term the Council can support the Geopark in the North West going forward. Any

additional resource implications arising as a result will be reported to the appropriate Planning, Environment and Development Committee for consideration and approval.

## **9. Fit with the Programme for the Highland Council 2012 – 2017**

- 9.1 Promoting geodiversity via the Charter and the NWHG will assist the Council deliver a number of Programme commitments across a range of themes, including for example:
- Creating quality employment
  - Maximising tourism potential
  - Supporting sustainable rural communities

## **10. Fit with the Single Outcome Agreement**

- 10.1 Supporting geodiversity in the Highlands will assist the Council deliver SOA outcomes for the environment.

## **11. Equality, climate change, legal and risk implications**

- 11.1 There is no equality, climate change legal or risk implications arising from this paper.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

Committee is invited to:

- (i) welcome the recent developments supporting the North West Highland Geopark; and
- (ii) agree any additional short term actions they may wish to recommend to the Planning, Environment and Development Committee in support of the Geopark.

Designation: Director of Planning and Development

Date: 9th May 2013

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### Background papers:

- Scotland's Geodiversity Charter; Scottish Geodiversity Forum; June 2012
- Submission to the Scottish Government - 'Scottish Geoparks – The Case for Funding' – Geopark Shetland and North West Highlands Geopark – March 2013