

**The Highland Council**  
**Caithness and Sutherland Area Committee**  
**9 December 2014**

Agenda Item	3.
Report No	CS/43/14

**North West Highlands Geopark – Progress Report**

**Report by Director of Development and Infrastructure**

**SUMMARY**

This paper considers recent progress made in the North West Highlands Geopark, including the award of Scottish Government funding to assist the Geopark attain financial sustainability. The report also briefly summarises progress made since the funding was awarded.

The Committee is invited to agree continued Area Member support for the promotion and understanding of the North West Highlands 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. Geoparks seek to deliver scientific knowledge transfer via geo-tourism and economic development.

**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 and features some of the oldest rocks in Europe, some of which are around 3,000 million years old. The territory contains many notable geological features, such as the Moine Thrust and Smoo Cave, within an area of around 2,000 square kilometres.
- 2.3 Historically the Geopark has received funding and support for various initiatives from the British Geological Survey (BGS), The Highland Council (THC) and Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH).
- 2.4 The Geopark is now operated as a community company limited by guarantee (North West Highlands Geopark Ltd) and is seeking charitable status. During March 2013 the lack of sustainable financial support forced the Geopark to re-organise its activities and,

in partnership with Geopark Shetland, a successful application for additional funding support was made to the Scottish Government. The result was an award of £186K on the basis of a three year business plan, the preparation of which was supported by the Highland Council.

- 2.5 NWHG board comprises 5 community directors, one from each of the community councils within the Geopark, who work alongside the other office bearers, directors and 3 members of staff. The Geopark is chaired by Cllr George Farlow.
- 2.6 NWHG is a member of the Global Geopark Network (GGN), the European Geopark Network (EGN), the UK Geopark Network, the Scottish Geopark Partnership and the Scottish Geodiversity Forum. This networking structure is democratic although it is becoming burdensome. Scottish Geoparks are now working together to streamline continuous inspection processes.
- 2.7 The Geopark has registered the Geocentre Scotland Ltd following the successful outcome of a feasibility study recommending that HWHG 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 NWHG has agreed to:
  - seek additional funding to match that provided by the Scottish Government and to help ensure it retains membership of the EGN and GGN with UNESCO accreditation and recognition;
  - fully develop 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; and
  - 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 then 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; and
  - public health, quality of life and national well-being.

- 3.2 A copy of the Scottish Geodiversity Charter can be obtained at:

#### **4. The Scottish Government's five strategic objectives**

- 4.1 Conservation of Scotland's geodiversity aligns well with, and supports, the Scottish Government's five strategic objectives:
- Wealthier
  - Safer and Stronger Communities
  - Smarter
  - Greener
  - Healthier

Appendix 1 indicates the contribution geodiversity can make towards delivery of these objectives.

#### **5. Local authority actions identified within the 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; and
  - encourage developers to allow access to temporary exposures to record and sample geology.

#### **6. Recent progress within the North West Highlands Geopark**

- 6.1 Following Highland Council agreement to become signatories to the Scottish Geodiversity Charter in 2013 the Council became involved in further actions supporting the NWHG. At the time the Council Leader and Chief Executive wrote to the Finance Secretary supporting the joint NWHG and Geopark Shetland submission which set out a programme of actions and sought financial support during the period 2013/14 – 2015/16. The actions proposed for the NWHG included:
- appointment of a project officer (3 years term)
  - marketing and communication activities; and
  - geopark projects – including work to develop the 'Geocentre'.

Generally these actions 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.

- 6.2 The joint NWHG and Geopark Shetland submission resulted in the award of £186K over the period 2013/14 – 2015/16 (2.4 above).
- 6.3 Since the award of Scottish Government funding NWHG has made good progress in a

number of areas, including:

- improvements made in the promotion of the Geopark with re-validation anticipated in 2015;
- UNESCO recommendations that Global Geoparks become World Heritage Sites and Biosphere Reserves – essential for sponsorship and future sustainability;
- additional match funding (7%) from public and private sources for project delivery. Project match funding continues to be sought by staff;
- ‘Geotours’ including rock climbing events. ‘Pebble routes’ are planned in community council areas to encourage enjoyment and a greater understanding of the Geopark;
- leading for the Sutherland Partnership on the delivery of the Cape Wrath Trail;
- developing a web presence – including newsletter contributions, a donations facility and exploration of social media opportunities;
- an EU funding application has been submitted (‘Drifting Apart’) which seeks to explore commonalities across the North Atlantic. Partners include Norway, Iceland, Canada and Shetland;
- NWHG business planning for the Scottish Government is underway with assistance from Social Enterprise Academy. The business plan was endorsed by the board on 1<sup>st</sup> November for submission. NWHG is now contracting to gather baseline tourism visitor information to assist progress measurement going forward;
- NWHG staff now provide essential expertise in geology, geo-archaeology and the promotion of the Geopark; and
- close working relations with Highland Council rangers continues to help promote events within the Geopark.

## **7. Resource implications**

7.1 There are no additional resource implications anticipated as a result of this paper.

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

8.1 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

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

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

## **10. Equality, legal and risk implications**

10.1 There are no equality, legal or risk implications arising from this paper.

## **11. Climate change and Carbon Clever implications**

11.1 There are no additional climate change or Carbon Clever implications arising from this paper. NWHG plans to become a signatory to Carbon Clever Highland.

### **Rural and Gaelic implications**

**12.**

12.1 The North West Highlands Geopark seeks to promote and enhance sustainability within rural north west Sutherland and actively supports the Gaelic language.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

The Committee is invited to agree continued Area Member support for the promotion and understanding of the North West Highlands Geopark.

Designation: Director of Development and Infrastructure

Date: 24 November 2014

Author: George Hamilton, Head of Environment and Economic Development  
(Ext 2252)

### 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
- Paper to Caithness and Sutherland Area Committee – 'North West Highlands Geopark' – 20<sup>th</sup> May 2013 (Ref CS-14-13)

**Links to the Scottish Government’s five strategic objectives**

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; and</li> <li>• materials for the restoration of the built heritage.</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); and</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; and</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 working with natural processes (e.g. through development of river basin management plans and natural flood management); and</li> <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>

**Healthier**

The management of Local Geodiversity Sites contributes to:

- improving environmental health through soil and water quality;
- improving the quality and 'liveability' of local environments and greenspace, and providing recreation opportunities;
- fostering pride in the distinctiveness of local natural heritage and the aesthetic value of landscapes; and
- fostering healthier lifestyles through the support of physical activity, such as recreation and adventure sports.