

Agenda Item	4
Report No	CCWG/7/21

The Highland Council

Committee: Climate Change Working Group

Date: 18 August 2021

Report Title: Flow Country World Heritage Site Nomination – Update

Report By: Executive Chief Officer – Performance & Governance

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

1.1 This report provides a summary of the background and the progress being made on the Flow Country World Heritage Site Nomination.

2. Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to note the contents of this report.

3. Implications

3.1 Resource – there are no additional resource implication arising out of this report. The bid process is already supported by a Project Officer, a post co-funded by Nature Scot, RSPB, Wildland Ltd. and The Highland Council.

3.2 Legal – there are no legal obligations arising from this report. Any additional future legal liability would depend on what further involvement The Highland Council seeks in respect of the site, once inscribed, and would be governed by a separate agreement.

3.3 There are no direct Community (Equality, Poverty and Rural) implications arising from this report. However, completion of the nomination pack, which if accepted and approved will lead to achieving UNESCO World Heritage Status for Caithness and Sutherland, an international accolade for Highland, which could attract future investment and safeguard a site of local and international importance.

3.4 Climate Change/Carbon CLEVER – Climate change and biodiversity are inextricably linked. Securing UNESCO World Heritage status will help safeguard this internationally important peatland site for the benefit of both biodiversity and carbon sequestration and result in positive action in tackling the global climate and ecological emergency. Working towards this Status aligns closely with the stated aims of the Council’s climate and ecological emergency i.e. safeguarding our natural heritage and repositioning Highland as a low CO₂ region.

3.5 Risk – Failure to deliver the bid in time may negatively impact the organisation’s reputation and the Council’s commitment to the declared climate and ecological emergency. The nomination folder needs to be completed and with DCMS by September 2022, for onward delivery to the UNESCO World Heritage Committee in Spring 2023.

3.6 Gaelic – There are no Gaelic implications arising from this report.

4. Background

4.1 The Flow Country peatland, which stretches across Caithness and Sutherland in the north of Scotland, is progressing towards inscription as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. A huge step forward was achieved in 2020 when the UK Government approved a technical evaluation, moving the Flow Country to the top of the UK tentative list, and giving the go-ahead for a full nomination to be prepared. The Flow Country is being nominated on the

basis of the world class nature of the blanket bog environments it contains (ongoing ecological and biological processes) and the biodiversity they sustain (natural habitats and biological diversity). Furthermore, the Flow Country is increasingly being recognised as the UK's most important carbon store, and sink, which is also of global importance.

- 4.2 If successful, the Flow Country will join the likes of the Great Barrier Reef and the Grand Canyon as natural World Heritage Sites and the region will be able to take advantage of this accolade through the educational, environmental, social and economic benefits it can bring.

5. Progress Update

- 5.1 The Highland Council, alongside NatureScot as lead partners, have appointed a Project Co-ordinator and made further time commitments from existing staff. Contributions are also being made by RSPB, UHI and Wildland Ltd. who are amongst the wider Steering Group which also includes community, landowner and business representatives. This group, along with an associated Technical Working Group, has been formalised to provide a longer term, post-inscription management structure.

- 5.2 Key tasks currently being undertaken are:

- finalising the proposed Site boundary and establishing the associated protective and planning framework
- engaging with experts to contribute to the nomination dossier
- developing a management plan for the Site
- planning for engagement with the local communities to ensure that they can shape how the Site can bring the greatest benefits to the area.

There is a lot of work to be done and we are working towards submitting the nomination by the end of 2022, with a final decision being made by UNESCO in mid-2024. This is a long process but one for which the continued support of communities, agencies and government is greatly appreciated.

6. Documents being prepared

- 6.1 **Nomination Dossier** - This is the key document in the nomination process and will ultimately be submitted to UNESCO for scrutiny. It will contain: a detailed description of the proposed Site, highlighting its Outstanding Universal Value; a justification of its global significance; its state of conservation; the protective and management measures in place; and what monitoring will be undertaken to ensure it continues to be a resource for future generations to draw upon. It will also likely form the basis for a guidebook to the site. As well as drawing on the expertise we have within the steering group, some elements are being commissioned from external experts.

To provide some indication of the scale of the nomination dossier, and the detail required, a good example (Ningaloo Coast, Western Australia) can be accessed through the following link: <https://whc.unesco.org/uploads/nominations/1369.pdf>

- 6.2 **Management Plan** - This document, which needs to be submitted alongside the Nomination Dossier, sets out how the proposed Site will be looked after into the future. As well as discussing the context and key management issues affecting the proposed Site, it will identify a Vision, Strategic Aims, and a set of Management Policies that show how the area will be protected for its natural value, and optimised to be of most benefit for the local community. This document will go to public consultation in early 2022, and will be subject to a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA).

7. Next Steps

- 7.1 Whilst substantial progress has been made in putting in place structures for governance and identifying the expertise needed for input, the next stages are going require significant time commitments from those involved. It is anticipated that the writing of the documents outlined in section 6 of this report will be completed by December 2021, and a further, more detailed update will be taken to a meeting of the Climate Change Working Group shortly thereafter. The completion of these documents will allow us to begin consultation on the site boundary and the management plan, which is a critical step in the process. Planning is already underway to make sure this process reaches all the key groups and is as effective as possible.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer – Performance & Governance

Date: 14th July 2021

Author: Dr Steven Andrews, Flow Country World Heritage Bid Coordinator