

Agenda Item	<b>16</b>
Report No	<b>ECI/37/20</b>

## HIGHLAND COUNCIL

**Committee:** Economy and Infrastructure

**Date:** 4 November 2020

**Report Title:** Biodiversity Duty Report

**Report By:** Executive Chief Officer, Infrastructure and Environment

### 1 Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report presents the *draft* Biodiversity Duty Report 2018-2020. This report has been produced in response to the statutory requirement that all public bodies must provide a publicly available report every three years that sets out the actions they have taken to meet their biodiversity duty.

### 2 Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to:
- i. approve the Biodiversity Duty Report 2018-2020 (**Appendix 1**) for publication on the Council's website by the end of December 2020; and
  - ii. note the content and breadth of work related to biodiversity undertaken across the organisation, accepting that the report still needs to incorporate the work of the High Life Highland Rangers (following return from furlough) and may be subject to a number of presentational and typographical changes prior to publication.

### 3 Implications

- 3.1 **Resource:** None. This report outlines the actions taken over the last 3 years to meet the Council's biodiversity duty. Future resource requirements will be carefully assessed, given the Council's financial position, and the Council will work with external partners to identify opportunities.
- 3.2 **Legal:** This report is produced in accordance with the requirements set out in The Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011. Publication of the

Biodiversity Duty Report towards the end of December 2020 fulfils this statutory duty.

3.3 **Community (Equality, Poverty and Rural):** There are no Community (Equality, Poverty and Rural) implications arising directly from this report.

3.4 **Climate Change / Carbon Clever:** Climate change and biodiversity are inextricably linked and face many of the same challenges. As such, improvements made for biodiversity inevitably result in positive action in tackling climate change, and vice versa.

3.5 **Risk:** There are no risks arising directly from this report.

3.6 **Gaelic:** In line with Council policy, Gaelic headings will be added throughout.

## 4 Background

4.1 Under the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004, all public bodies in Scotland are required to further the conservation of biodiversity when carrying out their responsibilities. The Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011 requires public bodies in Scotland to provide a publicly available report every three years, on the actions which they have taken to meet this biodiversity duty.

4.2 Biodiversity duty reports for the current cycle, 2018-2020, are due for publication by the end of December 2020.

## 5 The Biodiversity Duty Report

5.1 The Biodiversity Duty Report 2018-2020 (BDR) sets out some of the positive work undertaken by the Council to protect and further the conservation of biodiversity over the last 3 years. Of note are the range of projects and actions undertaken, for example, the work of the Environment Team in providing ecological and arboricultural services to Capital Projects; the Council-wide ban of glyphosate; the planting of trees, wildflowers and butterfly meadows; upgrading public access at Merkinch Local Nature Reserve and across Highland as part of the Core Paths Plan review; and including provision for biodiversity at new Council office and school developments.

5.2 The BDR also highlights the work undertaken to progress the Flow Country World Heritage Site and the wide range of projects and organisations in which the Council is a key partner.

5.3 The BDR demonstrates how, following the Climate and Ecology Emergency declared by the Council in May 2019 and changing Government priorities, the issue of biodiversity is increasingly front and centre in strategic planning. This is especially evident in the Council's response to National Planning Framework 4 and our Indicative Regional Spatial Strategy.

5.4 The work described in the BDR is not intended to be exhaustive but demonstrates and highlights the breadth of work undertaken by staff from across the organisation to further the conservation of biodiversity.

5.5 The BDR acknowledges that there are many other opportunities and positive actions that the Council could take to further the conservation of biodiversity over

the forthcoming 3 year period. The BDR recognises that these are challenging economic times and resources remain constrained, and as such the Council will need to work in greater partnership with external partners (NatureScot, Forestry Land Scotland etc) and across services to maximise joint resources and safeguard and enhance biodiversity where opportunities arise.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure and Environment

Date: 12 October 2020

Authors: Andrew Puls, Acting Environment Manager / Conservation Officer

Appendices:

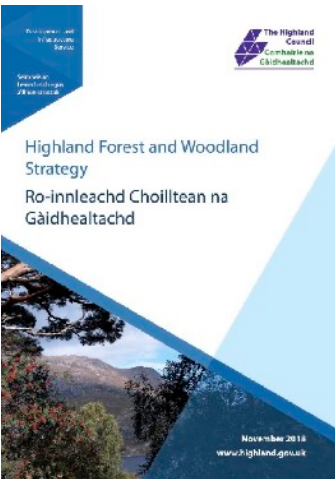
Appendix 1: Draft Biodiversity Duty Report 2018-2020



The Highland Council

# Biodiversity Duty Report

2018 - 2020



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## Section 1: Introductory information

The Council introduced its first Biodiversity Duty Report in 2008, with successive reports covering 2011 - 14 and 2015 - 17. This report illustrates some of the highlights of positive biodiversity action undertaken by Highland Council and High Life Highland from 2018 to 2020.

### Organisational context

The Highland Council is a local authority in the north of Scotland, serving a largely rural and remote population. Inverness is the region's main population centre, and its' only city.

The Council is responsible for delivering a wide range of services to residents across the region, including schools, leisure facilities, waste collection and social and welfare services.

The Highland Council serves a third of the land area of Scotland including the most remote and sparsely populated parts of the United Kingdom.

The region has the 7th highest population of the 32 local authorities in Scotland.

### Governance, Management and Strategy

During the reporting period the Highland Council has moved from four directorates to eight services, each led by an executive chief officer. See diagram below.



## Key Staff

The Council's Environment Team, part of the Infrastructure and Environment Service, is a key provider of environmental advice and services to the Council relating to biodiversity/ecology, climate change, forestry and outdoor access. The team includes two ecologists and two forestry officers.

The ecologists provide ecological survey and clerk of works support to capital projects, they also advise Council services and the public on protected species, trees and woodland management, invasive non-native species and on improving or conserving biodiversity. They hold a range of protected species licences.

The forestry officers primarily provide advice to the Planning Authority, but also undertake projects to manage trees and woodland on the Highland Council estate.

The Council recognises that conserving and enhancing biodiversity cuts across all services and is applicable to a wide range of Council functions, from the management of roadside verges and roundabouts to building new schools. Some examples of the positive work undertaken by staff from across the Council are highlighted in Section 2.

In addition, the Countryside Ranger Service run by High Life Highland, a charitable arm of the Council, continues to carry out significant work in Highland's communities to benefit nature and biodiversity.



Katy Martin and Reuben Brown are the two Highland Council ecologists.

## Section 2: Actions to protect biodiversity and connect people with nature

### Protecting biodiversity

The Highland Council declared a Climate and Ecological Emergency on 9th May 2019, and as a result established a climate change panel. The Council is also a partner in a number of landscape scale actions and with NatureScot (section 4), jointly funds the Highland Environment Forum (section 4) which coordinates the Highland Biodiversity Action Plan and has a range of working groups (section 3).

A selection of actions taken by the Council to protect biodiversity are outlined below.

#### 2.1 Environment Team

During 2018 - 2020 the Environment Team were involved in a wide range of projects where the protection and enhancement of biodiversity was a key outcome. These were in addition to the day-to-day provision of advice to Council services regarding the management of trees and woodland to avoid the unnecessary loss of biodiversity. Forestry officers also provide advice to planning officers to retain trees on development sites, with new on-site planting or off-site compensatory planting secured where necessary.

From March 2020 much of the survey work undertaken by the team was impacted by the Covid-19 virus which required the delay of site visits, survey and mitigation works.

**Inverness Westlink (2018-2020):** Ecological work included survey, provision of Ecological Clerk of Work (ECoW) services – including monitoring during the canal draining and obtaining relevant protected species licences. During the project the ecologists oversaw the demolition of a building with bats and ensured the development did not harm or disturb otters. Bird and bat boxes were installed to compensate for tree felling, and subsequent surveys found good uptake of both. A badger tunnel was installed to allow continued use of the riverside woodlands. Controls were put in place to prevent the spread of invasive species *Crassula helmsii* (New Zealand pygmy weed).



Badgers and a bat box in use at the Inverness Westlink.

**Smithton and Culloden Flood Prevention Scheme (2018-2020):** Ecological work included pre-construction reptile surveys and ECoW services for the construction phase. Additional input ensured that suitable conditions were in place to prevent disturbance of nesting birds during felling operations. Root protection areas were established and water courses were kept clean and free of silt and other contaminants.

The scheme is now near to completion and the ecologists are beginning a phase of community engagement work in the new park.



**Peffery River footbridge installation, Dingwall (2019).** The ecologists advised on how to minimise disturbance of otters, with works being completed under licence from Scottish Natural Heritage (now NatureScot).

**White bridge at Cawdor (2018-2019):** Surveys were undertaken for otter, bat, badger, bird and invasive species with the relevant licences obtained. The surveys and subsequent protection measures ensured minimum wildlife disturbance and the preservation of habitat.



An otter couch is a regularly used bankside resting area – shown front left of White Bridge photograph.

The image of otters using the couch was taken during construction. Otters continue to use this significant couch and seem to have coped with the construction disturbance.



**Caol and Lochyside Flood Scheme (2019-2020):** Ecological advice and support was provided as part of the design phase, particularly in relation to bats, otters and invasive species.

**Jubilee Park, Dingwall:** Forestry officers undertook trees surveys and arranged silvicultural felling/thinning as part of wider flood alleviation measures.

**Longman Waste facility (2020):** Ecology survey and monitoring was undertaken. Measures were put in place to avoid disturbance of mammals (including badgers) during vegetation clearance. Areas of invasive species (including Giant Hogweed) were removed.



**Invergarry Primary School (2019):** A new extension and partial re-roof of the historic section of the school required ecologist input to minimise disturbance and harm to resident bats. These works were completed under licence from SNH.

The roofing contractor removed the slates under close ecological supervision. The photograph shows bat droppings and a bat access point.



The replacement roof includes bat slates and gaps under the ridge tiles suitable for bats to enter and exit the building. The school roof is now secure and watertight, and the bats roosts are protected for the foreseeable future.

**Tomnacross Primary School (2020):** The ecologists supervised work to extend the school to ensure minimal disturbance and harm to resident bats and their roosts. There was an increase in juvenile bats appearing in school buildings, and the ecologists were able to help to keep the bats safe and prevent them becoming trapped in the school.

The juvenile soprano pipistrelle bat (see image) was rescued, and along with twenty others successfully returned to the roost.



**Monitoring of Tree Health (2020):** As part of a project to monitor tree health within the Council estate, Forestry officers led a cross-service project to remove over 300 dead and dying elms in and around Dingwall. This will be followed up with replacement planting of more resilient species in the next few years. Similarly, at Woody Braes, Tain, a large number of dead elms were removed and a selection of resilient native species replanted.

Throughout the period 2018-2020, the following assessments were also carried out:

- **Bat risk assessments** at 22 sites
- **65 Bat surveys** at 34 sites
- **Protected species surveys** at 73 sites
- **Hazard tree surveys** to assess the health of trees at 33 Council-managed woodland sites
- **Woodland management** including selective tree thinning, removal of dead/dying/dangerous trees, planting at a variety of sites

- **Invasive species advice and recording**, responding to multiple enquiries from across Highland. EACT are also in process of developing advice on managing *Crassula Helmsii* (New Zealand pygmy weed) on the Caledonian Canal and in Whin Park pond.
- **Contribution to Highland raptor monitoring** in NW Highlands

## 2.2 Glyphosate Ban

In 2019 Highland Council passed a motion to ban the use of glyphosate-based weed killers, except for invasive species control and at dangerous road junctions. Amenity Services are additionally careful to ensure any alternative weedkillers are not harmful to bees and pollinators.

## 2.3 Fishing for Litter



The Council is a member of KIMO International and Councillor Trish Robertson is junior vice president of the organisation.

Fishing for Litter works with fishing vessels to encourage the deposit of plastic materials at harbours with collection points.

This includes materials caught during fishing operations. Lochinver harbour signed up to the scheme in 2019 joining Scrabster, Kinlochbervie, Ullapool and Mallaig.

The project has secured sufficient funding to enable it to continue until March 2021, and subject to funding, hopes to continue beyond this date.

In addition the Council has carried out a number of biodiversity positive actions through its service delivery:

## 2.4. Sustainable Urban Drainage (SUDS)

The Council encourages developers to design SUDs schemes that are both wildlife and people friendly allowing communities to engage with nature on their doorstep. Of particular note are schemes at Milton of Leys, in which the SUDs is designed as an integral part of the development, and the Smithton-Culloden flood scheme which includes a wetland area with extensive planting and a dipping platform. It also serves as an amenity space for the community.

## 2.5 Local Nature Reserve

In 2007, the Council established Merkinch Local Nature Reserve (LNR). Highland Council is one of the site landowners and is a key stakeholder in the project.

Work at Merkinch LNR has included creating an all-abilities trail to Carnarc Point, a new area of the reserve, under a 10-year lease to the community. The Council also undertook sea wall repairs and the installation of seating, interpretation and signage. Further path improvements were carried out on the route along the sea wall.

There are plans to complete path upgrades to all-abilities level, in partnership with Scottish Canals and Friends of Merkinch LNR, once funding has been secured.

Friends of Merkinch have planted 300 native trees and fruit trees within the reserve and at Carnarc Point, and with Council assistance have created a wildflower meadow over 2ha.



The work at Carnarc Point was completed in Feb 2019, allowing access to nature for all abilities.



## 2.6 Invasive Non Native Species (INNS)

The Council continues to control INNS identified on its own land on a case-by-case basis, and records sightings submitted by the public and signposts them to further information. Resources do not allow for proactive assistance on private land at the present time.

The Council are working with Scottish Canals to control New Zealand pygmy weed (*Crassula helmsii*) on their waterways, with the aim of preventing its spread.



Leaving the riverbank uncut (photo left) benefits wildlife and reduces river bank erosion. Grass can also be left longer at road margins and on steep banks, which reduces costs to the Council and provides good habitat for invertebrates and mammals.

### 2.7 Wildlife parks, corridors and verges

At a number of sites Amenity Services have established wildlife corridors by leaving long grass and creating meadows. They have also reduced the number and width of verge cuts in order to encourage biodiversity. The Council has a policy of only carrying out one annual grass cut on all slopes greater than 30 degrees. This also benefits biodiversity.

Grass cutting on the River Ness, now using a remote mower, leaves a wildlife corridor of unmown grass to encourage wildlife, including freshwater invertebrates and water voles. The increase in vegetation texture also increases friction and reduces erosion.

It is intended that future management of Inshes Park on the outskirts of Inverness will include leaving larger areas of long grass, planting wildflowers and trees..

### 2.8 Green Hive community orchard, Nairn

Highland Council community services supported the local community to establish this project in 2018.

### 2.9 Butterfly meadows:

Community Services have revised management regimes to benefit a wide range of biodiversity at a number of sites including at Bettyhill, Ardersier Common and a quarry site at Castlehill, the latter of which is now managed for the benefit of the small blue butterfly (*cupido minimus*).

The kidney vetch that grows on the bare rocky ground of the quarry is the food plant of the small blue. Encroaching invasive non-native cotoneaster and Chinese bramble have been cleared by a partnership of High Life Highland Countryside Rangers and the Caithness Biodiversity Group, who also grew and planted kidney vetch to help safeguard the future of this uncommon and nationally declining butterfly.



### 2.10 Dune restoration

Dune restoration has been undertaken at Achmelvich beach in Sutherland and at Dunnet Head beach in Caithness. This includes the planting of marram grass and monitoring to ensure that it becomes established.

Board walk was installed at Clachtoll, as part of the dune and machair management programme.

### 2.11 Tree planting at Storr, Isle of Skye

A former commercial woodland site has been felled, the regime has been changed and the site is now managed for native trees. This included the direct planting of c.4000 native trees and allowing natural regeneration.

### 2.12 Improving biodiversity at Culloden Avenue

Highland Council and Countryside Rangers have been working with the Culloden Community Engagement Officer to improve the biodiversity of Culloden Avenue by creating a more varied woodland habitat. Species planted include woodrush, wood anemone, primrose, bluebells and wild garlic

### 2.13 Lamprey Conservation

The lade at Whin Park, Inverness is managed to maintain water levels at a height that benefit lampreys.

### 2.14 The Monadhliath Regional Eagle Conservation Management Plan

Monitoring work led to a Golden Eagle Population Model Report in 2018 - [http://www.glenshero-windfarm.co.uk/media/2636794/eiar\\_volume4\\_technicalappendix72.pdf](http://www.glenshero-windfarm.co.uk/media/2636794/eiar_volume4_technicalappendix72.pdf)

### 2.15 Wildflowers on roundabouts

The three roundabouts on the Inverness southern distributor road have been managed as wildflower meadows for a number of years and have spring crocus for early nectar as part of the species mix. The sites receive positive public comments, as well as benefiting wildlife.

The Council aims to plant wildflower roundabouts in other areas over the coming period.



## Connecting people with nature

### 2.16 High Life Highland Rangers

Since 2017 the Countryside Ranger Service transferred to High Life Highland, a charitable arm of the local authority. Rangers work with communities, schools and visitors. They organise and take part in a wide variety of events from guided walks to science festivals and family fun days, covering all aspects of Highland cultural and natural history. More details in Section 5 - public engagement

### 2.17 Access to nature

There are 2576 kms of core path in the Highland Council area, and once approved, the amended Caithness and Sutherland, and West Highland and Islands Core Path Plans will add a further 1003 km. An amended Inner Moray Firth plan will add additional core paths in the future. Core paths enable people to take access locally and experience biodiversity on their doorstep.

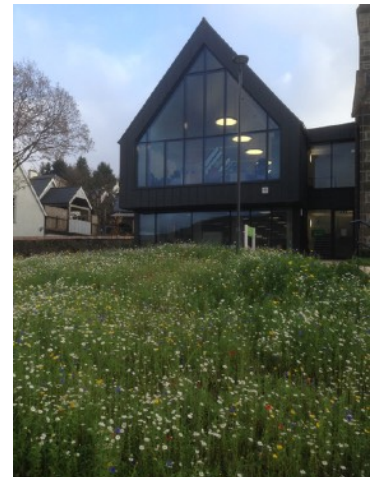
### 2.18 Bringing nature to public buildings

#### **Charles Kennedy Building, Achintore Road, Fort William**

The renovation and refurbishment of the former Achintore School, Fort William as Council offices required the treatment and control of a significant stand of Japanese knotweed and rhododendron and both species are subject to an ongoing programme of treatment to remove any recurring regrowth.

Landscaping around the new offices aims to create an informal woodland setting to the site and curtilage. Low maintenance areas of wildflowers form the transition between the close mown grass and the hedge lined boundaries. On the north and eastern elevations, the planting extends the broadleaf woodland.

The existing woodland on the embankment will be managed to encourage a mixed-age stand of native trees and shrubs. Once the invasive species are under control, the area will be supplemented with tree planting. Native tree and shrub planting includes Birch, Rowan, Wild Cherry, Hazel, Holly and Hawthorn. Scrub planting includes Dog Rose, Elderberry and Dogwood.



## Merkinch Primary School, Inverness

The primary school extension has been developed to meet the Aspect Silver level 4: Biodiversity of the Building Standards Technical Handbook. Aspect Silver Level 4 requires that biodiversity is highly valued in the school estate; the impact of the development on the existing site must be minimised, biodiversity must be enhanced and natural habitats encouraged, as well as increasing the opportunity for pupils to have greater contact with nature.

The Merkinch Primary School extension includes an allotment garden and orchard area (in excess of 5% of the building footprint) and exceeds the minimum 15% requirement of the overall site area to be capable of being designated as habitat. The habitat zone includes native species, habitat planting and species rich grass land consisting of a wildflower seed mix and a site boundary that includes woodland and natural planting.

A biodiversity strategy document, which provides an ecological report and a bespoke user guide for the school, for use by pupils, teachers and the wider community related to enhancing biodiversity and developing ecological understanding will be prepared during this next reporting period.

### 2.19 LEADER funding supporting access to nature

The Council managed the delivery of the European LEADER programme, through which a number of projects with biodiversity and socio-economic benefit were funded. These included:

- **The Forest Access and Enterprise Programme** run by Lochcarron Community Development Company. The community built a wildlife area, pond and a network of trails, including an all abilities trail, that links Lochcarron to long distance hill paths, They also created riverside picnic areas and vantage points as well as developing circular loops.
- **The Green Health Events programme** took place during 2020 and had to rapidly adapt to the restrictions resulting from Covid-19. The aim of the project was to get more people taking part in the health and wellbeing benefits that getting outside can bring. The project set up a virtual walk challenge in association with the Highland Green Health Partnership, taking people through Highland National Nature Reserves and other wildlife-rich locations.
- **Scottish Wildlife Trust – Living Seas Community Project: Fisheries local Action Group (FLAG)** funding supported the purchase of RIB vessels to allow the applicant carry out seabed surveys, to undertake beach cleans in remote areas and provide a safe base to snorkel from and experience the marine environment..
- **Plastic@Bay – Durness Plastic Pollution Remediation:** FLAG helped fund the purchase of a quad bike and trailer to assist with marine plastic removal.

### 2.20 Green Health

The Council recognises the benefit of the natural environment and attractive outdoor space to people's mental and physical wellbeing. This is reflected in a number of ways:

- Planning and development policies to protect the natural environment and encourage green networks (see 3.1)
- Continuing to be an active member of the Highland biodiversity working group and a partner in the biodiversity action plan (see 3.2)
- Continued support of the Local Nature Reserve at Merkinch, Inverness.
- Membership of the Highland Green Health Partnership
- Creation of temporary cycle and walk networks during 2020 in response to Covid-19
- The work of the High Life Highland ranger service
- Encouragement of active travel by the Council's climate change team



## 2.21 Species Champion scheme

This scheme was relaunched in 2018. Eighty-four species were identified, and to date 21 Councillors have championed 24 species.

### Future/ Ongoing biodiversity conservation actions

1. The Environment Team will continue to work in partnership with internal and external partners to further the conservation of biodiversity.
2. The Environment Team will continue to assess and monitor development sites and provide advice and guidance to Council services.
3. The Environment Team's ecologists and forestry officers will continue to advise Capital Projects and provide ecological/arboricultural services where required.
4. The Environment Team will continue to report on the Council's Biodiversity Duty.
5. The Council will continue to support the Highland Environment Forum and deliver key actions under the Highland Biodiversity Action Plan.
6. The Environment Team will lead on a project to reassess how the Council estate is managed and identify opportunities for tree planting or to manage land more effectively for biodiversity. A pilot project is planned with Amenity Services.
7. The Environment Team will continue to lobby for biodiversity gain and great biodiversity improvements in development.
8. An arboriculture team will be established to manage trees across all Council land. This includes an ambition to plant trees on Council land, wherever suitable, as a contribution to CO2 sequestration.
9. The team will host the World Heritage officer for the peatland of Cathiness and Sutherland and partner the development of a nomination pack to UNESCO for World heritage site status.

## Section 3: Mainstreaming

This reporting period has seen an increased focus within the Council on matters relating to biodiversity. This has been especially apparent since the declaration of the Climate and Ecological Emergency in May 2019. Of particular note is the progression of the Flow Country World Heritage Site, considered in more detail later in the report.

### NPF4 and the Highland Indicative Regional Spatial Strategy

Whilst the emphasis of the declared emergency is currently focused on climate change, the ecological crisis is increasingly gaining prominence in the work of the organisation. Climate change, with which the ecological crisis is inextricably linked, now sets the agenda for new and emerging Council planning policy. However, with biodiversity issues highlighted in the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 and the requirement to secure positive effects for biodiversity listed as one of six high-level outcomes to be addressed by the emerging National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4), how we mitigate the loss of biodiversity, and how we can achieve biodiversity improvements has moved further up the agenda.

The Indicative Regional Spatial Strategy (IRSS) for the Highland region demonstrates the Council's commitment to these issues – see [highland.gov.uk/npf](http://highland.gov.uk/npf) – and maps candidate national developments to the high level outcomes to be addressed by NPF4, including positive effects for biodiversity (see below). The IRSS is part of a collection of submissions by the Council to Scottish Government to inform preparation of NPF4. The backdrop to the IRSS – and the Council's other NPF4 responses – includes the declaration of a Climate and Ecological Emergency and collectively, these responses form a comprehensive and robust statement and vision for the Highlands' future for the next 30 years. An [IRSS Storymap](#) has been prepared to enable easy access to the component parts of the IRSS submission.

The Highland IRSS vision is that, by 2050, Highland will be an exemplar carbon action region by optimising its unique, rich and diverse assets to lead national emissions reduction targets. Our unmatched land, coast and water environment and natural, built and cultural heritage – which define the character of Highland – will be safeguarded, enhanced and internationally celebrated.

Highland will have transitioned to a green, circular economy which maximises the value of existing core industries, helps attract new and emerging sectors and diversifies jobs and skills. This will maintain and enhance Highland's role as a global centre of excellence for renewable energy innovation and generation and one of the most attractive sustainable leisure, recreation and tourism destinations in the world.

Highland communities will function as networks of locally resilient and self-supporting places with equality of access to housing, education, healthcare, work, food, energy, transport, culture, recreation, leisure and virtual connections. Optimising how our existing infrastructure supports and sustains the Highland population and the wider Highlands and Islands region will be an ongoing priority.

In delivering this vision, we will collaborate with our communities and partner agencies, recognising the need for a just transition which is fair and equal.

The IRSS outlines 14 candidate national developments which represent strategic development priorities, four of which will promote positive effects for biodiversity, help address climate change and promote the special character of Highland. These are Local Resilient Networks (cND05), Sustainable Tourism Development Infrastructure Plan (cND12), World Heritage Site for the Flow Country (cND13) and the land management, protection and restoration of our natural and biodiversity assets, including out peatland areas and reforestation of Scotland (cND14).

The IRSS also highlights the opportunity to establish a national carbon and ecological “mitigation bank” – in which the Highland area could be anticipated to play a major part, given its area and range of relevant assets, resources and opportunities.

We will be promoting the Highland IRSS to Scottish Government and to the other regions. We are also having a conversation with partners and neighbouring authorities about how our IRSS can complement and align with neighbouring regions, and where there might be opportunities for added value and benefits to be achieved for Scotland.

### **3.1 Planning and development**

Guidelines and policies to protect biodiversity across the region are at the core of the Highland-wide local development plan. Section 3.1.2 details relevant policies.

Planning guidelines also encourage the creation, retention and enhancement of green networks within the Highland built environment, and Highland Council Access Officers work with communities to develop and manage footpath networks. All these measures can contribute to the creation of ecological networks and increase awareness of the need to care for the natural environment.

Scottish Planning Policy states that the planning system should conserve and enhance protected sites and species, take account of the need to maintain healthy ecosystems and work with the natural processes which provide important services to communities.

Further, it requires that the planning system seeks benefits for biodiversity from new development where possible, including the restoration of degraded habitats and the avoidance of further fragmentation or isolation of habitats, as well as support opportunities for enjoying and learning about the natural environment.

#### **3.1.1 Highland-wide Local Development Plan**

The Highland-wide Local Development Plan (2012) encourages a positive and holistic approach to biodiversity by requiring developers to address all species and habitat issues arising from development.

This plan recognises the importance of locally and nationally important species that are outside existing statutory designations. These are used to inform local development plan preparation and planning applications.

The Plan states that where development is to be approved the proposals should seek to conserve and, where appropriate, enhance the biodiversity of a site, through overall site planning, infrastructure, landscape and building design.

### 3.1.2 Planning policies and guidance relating to biodiversity:

#### Highland Forest and Woodland Strategy Supplementary Guidance

In 2018 the Highland Forest and Woodland Strategy was refreshed and updated. The Strategy recognises the importance of safeguarding and expanding the Highland tree and woodland resource and ensuring its integration with other land uses.

The key themes are:

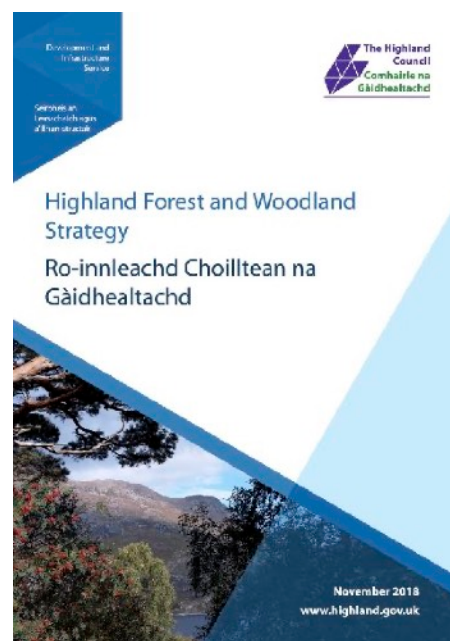
1. Expanding the area of forests and woodland
2. Achieving the economic potential of forests and woodlands
3. Developing resilience to climate change
4. Encouraging community engagement and empowerment
5. Protecting and enhancing Highland's natural capital
6. Integrating with development and tourism
7. Strengthening connections with health, access and recreation and learning
8. Promoting business and skills development

The strategy recognises that helping to mitigate and adapt to climate change will be a key role for Highland's forests and woodlands over the foreseeable future, and includes the vision that:

*'The forests, woodlands and trees of the Highlands will be prized elements of our economic, environmental, community and cultural fabric, fulfilling valued and sustainable roles in realising their productive potential (where relevant) and enriching the quality of life for all who live, work and visit here.'*

Biodiversity policy objectives include:

- Promote woodland management and expansion that restores, enhances and safeguards biodiversity and habitat connectivity.
- Encourage planting that contributes to integration with, and expansion of, native woodland and other woodland habitat networks.
- In conjunction with other partners, promote the benefits of incremental restoration of plantation on ancient woodland (PAWS) sites and other important woodland types including Atlantic woodlands and montane.
- Encourage woodland expansion that delivers 'ecosystem services' relating to mitigation and adaptation to climate change, including flood plan management and protection of deep peat areas.
- Support opportunities for peatland habitat restoration in combination with 'peatland edge' and 'transition' type woodland and habitat connectivity as part of restructuring / long term forest plan proposals.
- Support forestry proposals that enhance environmental and soil protection through sustainable flood and catchment management.
- Encourage a collaborative and balanced approach to deer management that support the Highland economy whilst safeguarding its forests, woodlands and wider environmental interests.
- Support woodland expansion and crofter forestry schemes that help better integrate forestry with farming and crofting through targeted funding and advice.



Relevant Highland-wide Local Development policy and supplementary guidance that relates to biodiversity have been summarised with links below:

- a. [Green Networks Supplementary Guidance](#) (policy 74)
- b. [Sustainable Design Guide: Supplementary Guidance](#) (policy 28)
- c. [Coastal Development Strategy](#) (policy 49)
- d. [Aquaculture guidance](#) (policy 50)
- e. [Trees and Development](#) (policy 51) and [Principle of Development in Woodland](#) (policy 52)
- f. [Peat and Soils](#) (policy 55):
- g. [Natural, Built and Cultural Heritage](#) (policy 57)
- h. [Highland's Protected Species: Supplementary Guidance](#) (policy 58)
- i. [Other important species](#) (policy 59)
- j. [Other important habitats](#) (policy 60)
- k. [Geodiversity](#) (policy 62)
- l. [Water Environment](#) (policy 63)
- m. [Flood Risk](#) (policy 64).
- o. [Surface water drainage](#) (policy 66)
- p. [Renewable Energy Developments](#) (policy 67)
- q. [Community Renewable Energy Developments](#) (policy 68)
- r. [Construction Environmental Management Process for Large Scale Projects](#) (policy 72)
- s. [Air Quality](#) (policy 73)
- t. [Open Space](#) (policy 75)

**3.1.3 Area Local Development Plans** adopt the environmental policies identified in the Highland-wide development plan, illustrating in more detail how they should be applied.

The emerging Inner Moray Firth Local Development Plan Main Issues Report (MIR) recognises the aim in the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 and the emerging NPF4 is to secure positive effects for biodiversity. The MIR considers how this requirement can be delivered in the local development plan, recognising that all development can have implications for biodiversity. It is a challenge to deliver improvements to biodiversity on development sites, especially for small and medium-scale developments. As part of the MIR, we are encouraging debate as to how positive effects for biodiversity can be achieved and delivered through the development process.

#### 3.1.4 Updating Planning Policies

The policies in the Highland-wide Local Development Plan are currently under review, but the review is paused. The Council does not intend to continue further work on the HwLDP review until more is known about the scope of new national planning policies in the emerging National Planning Framework (NPF4). For the first time the national planning framework will incorporate the Scottish planning policies, which are subject of review as part of the preparation of NPF4, and when finalised and passed by the Scottish Parliament will become part of the Development Plan. This will minimise the need for local development plan policy on general topics (as opposed to sites).

The work done so far in reviewing Highland's local development plan policies has fed in to the preparation of the Council's response to the NPF4 'Call for Ideas', including comments on a wide range of policy topics, including those relevant to biodiversity, i.e. the natural environment, preserving peatlands and green infrastructure. These comments have been published on the Council website at: [www.highland.gov.uk/npf](http://www.highland.gov.uk/npf)

**Strategic Environmental Assessment** This is undertaken as part of Local Development Plan preparation and for any policy that is likely to have a significant impact on the environment. The assessment takes full account of the impact of climate change, and land use on the ecosystem services that underpin social, economic and environmental health.

## 3.2 Biodiversity Action Plan

Biodiversity action plans are partnership plans that aim to protect and enhance biodiversity by identifying local issues and actions.

The Highland Biodiversity Action Plan (HiBAP) has been in existence since 2006. The 4th edition (2021-26) is in preparation. The Plan is drawn up by the Highland Biodiversity Working Group (of which the Council is a partner) on behalf of the Highland Environment Forum. See section 4 for more details. The group oversees and monitors the delivery of the plan by all the organisations that have signed up as partners.

Details of the 2015 - 2020 biodiversity action plan, and of biodiversity actions that have taken place during this period are on the Highland Environment Forum [website](#).

## 3.3 Climate Change mitigation and adaption

Climate change presents the biggest overarching threat to Highland biodiversity, and so the work undertaken by the Climate Change team makes an essential contribution to meeting the Council's biodiversity duty.

The Climate Change team has strategic oversight of the Council's progress to reduce carbon emissions. The team acts as a centre of expertise on climate change for the Council and works collaboratively with teams from all Services.

Detail of this work is presented in the Climate Change team's annual report to Scottish Government. Over the course of 2019/20, the Council's total carbon footprint fell by 4,453 tonnes CO<sub>2</sub>e compared to 2018/19, a year-on-year reduction of 10%. This fall can be attributed to a variety of different projects, some of which are summarised below:

- The replacement of sodium streetlights with LEDs. This has reduced the energy consumption from our street-lighting estate from 18.3MWh in 2011/12 to 12.6MWh in 2019/20.
- The Grey Fleet Redesign project has helped to change the way many of the Council's staff travel for business. Since its inception, the project has reduced the number of grey fleet miles travelled by staff from 5,920,212 in 2017/18 to 3,762,164 in 2019/20 – a reduction of 36% with an associated saving of around £800,000. This project has also reduced the emissions associated with staff travel by 670tCO<sub>2</sub>e per year, predominantly achieved through both a reduction in overall travel and the displacement of miles onto low carbon car club vehicles.
- The wide-scale replacement of oil-fired boilers with renewable energy heating systems, which has reduced the carbon footprint from oil consumption from 11,219tCO<sub>2</sub>e in 2011/12 to 4,828tCO<sub>2</sub>e in 2019/20 – a 57% reduction.

As a result of recent changes in legislation and following on from the Council's declaration of a climate and ecological emergency in May 2019, there is a pressing need for the Council to re-examine its own targets around climate change. It is now essential that the Council sets a target date for net zero direct emissions from its own operations, and this will require wide-scale engagement with both Elected Members and senior officers to develop costed, evidence-based scenarios to allow a realistic target date to be set. The Council's Member-led Climate Change Working Group will have a key role in supporting these requirements.

## 3.4 Community Planning

The [Highland Community Planning Partnership](#) (CPP), of which Highland Council is a member, no longer has biodiversity at the core of its actions, however a number of partners have undertaken action to reduce single use plastic consumption.

## Section 4: Nature-Based solutions, Climate Change and biodiversity

### 4.1 Integrating nature based solutions into addressing the climate emergency



Andy Hay, RSPB

#### 4.1.1 Flow Country - Peatlands Partnership

The Council is a member of the Peatlands Partnership alongside NatureScot, Scottish Forestry, RSPB Scotland, Plantlife International, the UHI Environmental Research Institute, Highland Third Sector Interface, the Flow Country Rivers Trust, Northern Deer Management Group and Highland and Islands Enterprise.

##### a. **Flows to the Future**

The 5-year 'Flows to the Future' project (funded by HLF, ERDF, HC, SNH FCs, RSPB, HIE) came to a close in 2019. Flows to the Future is an ambitious project which has:

- restored approximately 7 square miles of blanket bog habitat;
- built an award-winning viewing tower and boardwalk on the Dubh-lochain Trail at Forsinard;
- replaced and updated existing display materials;
- created new interpretation on the Dubh-lochain Trail, at Strathnaver Museum, Caithness Horizons and at four roadside viewpoints. Five walking trails have also been signposted;
- established a peatland science centre of excellence in the field centre through provision of a small laboratory and accommodation.

The project undertook many school visits and hosted 151 events, including walks, talks and workshops. Over 270 volunteers were trained and carried out conservation, people engagement and office work during the project, which also pioneered the first working holidays at the new field centre at Forsinard.

The project has enabled approximately £4.3 million to be spent with Caithness and Sutherland businesses.

##### b. **UNESCO world heritage site application**

The Council provides officer support for community consultation, and the development of a bid for the Flow Country to become a UNESCO world heritage site. In 2020 the area gained technical approval to join the nomination list. A full bid will be submitted in 2023.

#### 4.1.2 Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA)

The Highland Council is one of the partners responsible for delivering the CNPA partnership plan. The board works with partners, business, landowners and communities to develop long term plans for the Park.

### 4.1.3 Highland Adapts

The need for robust adaptation to climate change has become increasingly prudent, given the likelihood of ever more frequent and extreme weather events as a result of 'locked in' change due to historical emissions.

As a public authority, the Council has a key role in preparing Highland for the likely impacts arising from climate change and to minimise impacts to service delivery. To this end, the Climate Change team has developed the *Highland Adapts* initiative with support from Adaptation Scotland and Climate Ready Clyde. *Highland Adapts* will deliver a place-based, partnership approach to climate change adaptation, in collaboration with Community Planning Partners including NHS Highland and NatureScot.

Ultimately, it is anticipated that this will provide a mechanism to identify the key cross-cutting risks that climate change will pose in the coming years whilst developing a strategy and action plan to address these.

## 4.2 Integrating nature based solutions into improving socio-economic outcomes

### 4.2.1 Wester Ross UNESCO Biosphere

The Council is a partnership member and provided officer support to establish the biosphere in 2016; two Highland councillors sit on the board.

The aim of the biosphere is *'to explore how – through education, science, culture, communication and information – we can learn to live in harmony with our environment.'*

The biosphere and Highland Environment Forum worked in partnership to deliver a wildfire awareness week and conference in March 2020. See Section 5.1. Section 5: Public Engagement and Workforce Development



Thank you to Ullapool High School S3 art class for producing these striking lino print images for this growing issue.

**Wildfire !**

Each year accidental wildfires destroy upland and woodland, releasing large amounts of carbon dioxide into the air.

**A conference**

**6th March**  
Kinlochewe Village Hall  
09.30 - 15.00

**Preventing Wildfires**

**Learning from experience**  
Learn about good management practice to avoid out-of-control burning and how to be prepared if there is a wildfire.  
The programme will include presentations and practical workshops.

Find out more and book at  
<https://wildfireconference.eventbrite.com>

Posters to raise awareness of the dangers of wildfires were created by Wester Ross school children working tier High Life Highland ranger, Jenny Grant and National Trust for Scotland Ranger, Gavin Skipper. More can be seen on the Highland Environment Forum [website](#).



## Section 5: Public Engagement and Workforce Development

### 5. 1 Highland Environment Forum

*The Highland Council and NatureScot jointly fund the work of the Highland Environment Forum, which forms a cornerstone to the Council's work on the natural environment.*

The Highland Environment Forum (HEF) provides an arena for discussion, networking and action on environmental subjects. It is a unique vehicle for engaging with the Highland environmental community, successfully attracting people from across the region and representing agencies, third sector organisations, private businesses and interested individuals.

Forum members help to set the agenda for meetings and working groups, which encourage discussion and debate about many environmental issues. Through its growing reputation for stimulating gatherings, and an active membership of more than 300, the Forum has an increasingly strong role in the care of the natural environment of the Highlands.

The Forum contributes to the community planning partners aims of delivering 'better outcomes' for the region, and to the Highland Outcome Improvement Plan aim of reducing inequalities.

The Forum communicates with its members through a regular e-newsletter (every week to 10 days) containing news, consultations, environmental jobs, research and events. Information is also shared through the [website](#), [Facebook](#) and [twitter](#). Members are encouraged to share information that will be of interest to others. Members often comment on how much they value this communication.

There are two main Forum meetings a year in March and September, and an annual biodiversity conference. In addition there are a number of working groups. In the past few years the free biodiversity conferences and Forum events have quickly reached capacity. Members have valued the face-to-face nature of these events - which attract delegates from all across the Highlands. Many Forum members work alone or in small teams, and are often in remote locations, and so the chance to network and exchange ideas, in addition to learning and discussion with the speakers, is particularly valued.

During 2020 the Forum has responded to Covid-19 by an increased web and social media presence and hosting two autumn online seminars about climate change. These have attracted c.100 registrations apiece. The opportunity for informal networking is inevitably lost, but the online meetings have been effective in enabling speakers and attendees from a wide geographical spread to participate.

Meeting notes and presentations from all the Forum meetings can be downloaded from the [Forum website](#).



#### Forum Events

##### Forum gatherings

- 10th and 24th September 2020 : online *climate change* seminars
- 17th September 2019: *Biodiversity*
- 13th March 2019: *Green Health Partnership, and Citizen Science*
- 11th September 2018 *Youth leadership, and visions for Highland land use post 2020*
- 13th March 2018 *Climate Change mitigation and adaptation*

##### Biodiversity Conferences

The Forum has built a relationship with UHI research and works closely with them in organising the biodiversity conferences. Conference notes and presentations can be downloaded from the [Forum website](#).

- 2020: *Preventing Wildfires* - run in conjunction with the Wester Ross Biosphere as the culmination of their wildfire awareness week. Speakers from the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and UHI Environmental Research Institute provided expert content.
- 2019: *Rewilding Highland Rivers* - held in partnership with Inverness College, UHI
- 2018: *On the trail of the lonesome pine* - held in partnership with the UHI Scottish School of Forestry

## Working Groups

### Biodiversity

The focus of the group is to support the work of the Forum organiser in running an annual biodiversity conference, and in creating and overseeing the Biodiversity Action Plan. A review of Highland biodiversity action during the current plan (2015 - 2020) was published in 2020.

Consultation on the 2021- 2026 Action Plan has begun - with members consulted at the September 2019 Forum and at a development day for invited partners held in early March 2020.

### Invasive non-native species

After a short gap in 2018, the annual seminar and field trip was reinstated in April 2019. At the request of people actively involved in invasive non-native species control across the Highlands an indoor discussion meeting was held in November 2019. Members concluded that they wish to continue to have two meetings a year. Notes from past meetings can be downloaded from the [Forum website](#).

- November 2019: North Kessock Hall : Indoor meeting
- April 2019: Drumadrochit Hall and Urquhart Bay Woodland Trust reserve

The spring 2020 meeting at Bonar Bridge was cancelled, due to Covid-19. We will reschedule a field visit when it is safe to do so.



Dr Olivia Lassiere from Scottish Canals drew Highland Invasive Species Forum members attention to the problems caused by invasive non-native plant, *Crassula helmsii*. The Highland Council is now working with Scottish Canals to try and control this species.



### Marine Litter

Forum meetings on the subject of marine life and marine litter were held in 2015 and 2017. The marine litter working group was established following the latter, and has met several times since, and organised the marine conference in Ullapool in October 2018. The conference attracted a full house of 80 delegates representing agencies, community groups, voluntary organisations and interested individuals. Meeting notes can be downloaded from the [Forum website](#).

### Outdoor volunteering

This group arose from the 2015 biodiversity conference on environmental volunteering, and currently has over 40 members. The aim of the group is to allow people to meet, share good practice, look for opportunities for partnership working and discuss future ideas.

An interest in developing green health opportunities was stimulated by Forum meetings and by the 2017 conference 'Wellbeing and the Environment' run jointly with Highland Third Sector Interface. The group has established a close working relationship with the Highland Green Health Partnership since its initiation in 2018. The group has a [Facebook page](#) where members can upload volunteering opportunities.

Meetings are held in different locations, to aid learning and stimulate discussion:

- 4th September 2019 - in association with Cairngorms National Park
- 4th February 2019 in association with the Green Health Partnership
- 12th November 2018 at Evanton Community Woods
- 16th August 2018 at Trees for Life, Dundreggan Estate
- 19th March 2018 at Abriachan Forest Trust

In February 2020 the group held a joint meeting with the Highland Green Health Partnership, which attracted environmental and health organisations to look at what training might help them to provide green health opportunities, and to exchange good practice.

## 5.2 High Life Highland ranger service

Since 2017 the Highland ranger service has been run by High Life Highland, a charitable arm of the Council. Rangers work with communities, schools and visitors. They run, and take part in, a wide variety of events from guided walks, to science festivals and family fun days, covering all aspects of Highland cultural and natural history.



Covid-19 has meant that the ranger service is furloughed at the time of writing this report, and so numbers on ranger achievement will be included at a later date.

Rangers visit schools, supporting the Eco Schools programme, the John Muir Award, school grounds projects and activities in the wider countryside.

They run guided walks and organise many events across the Highlands. The guided walk programme ranges from mountain walks to a family rock pool rummage. Themed events cover a wide range of subjects, including bat evenings, bumblebee safaris, puffin watches, geocaching and wildlife art.

The Highland rangers provide an invaluable connection between people and nature, sharing their expert knowledge about the natural history and culture of the Highlands with school groups, visitors and local groups.

## 5.3 The Council's Environment Team

### 5.3.1 Skills development and training

- The Environment Team ecologists identified and attended a range relevant training schemes and courses thereby increasing effectiveness and efficiency in undertaken ecological work for the capital programme.
- 
- Due to resources and workloads there is limited scope to provide in-house training. However, the ecology officer gave a presentation on the benefits of digital ecology apps to Highland Environment Forum members and High Life Highland Rangers. Biodiversity training was scheduled for seasonal Amenities staff but was postponed due to Covid-19.

### 5.3.2 Partnership Working

- The council ecologists are members of two Highland Environment Forum (HEF) working groups – for biodiversity and invasive non-native species.
- The Environment Team, UHI and NatureScot jointly hosted a visit by delegates from Iceland interested in sustainable urban drainage (SUDs)
- The Team presented the ecology benefits of Smithton flood scheme to a Scottish Parliament committee

### 5.3.3 Public Engagement

As with providing training, opportunities for public engagement are constrained due to resources. However, presentations were given to Canal College (8 per year) and a number of local groups ranging from brownies to conservation groups. The Team have also hosted international study visits, school visits and natural history walks.

## Section 6: Research and Monitoring

Although Highland Council does not undertake any systematic monitoring of biodiversity, the implementation of statutory environmental guidelines are monitored by planning officers.

Data is collected by the Environment Team's ecologists in relation to projects they advise on, for example:

- The use of bird and bat boxes on the Inverness West Link (88% success) and badger monitoring - before, throughout and 2 years after road construction – at which point the badgers were still present.
- Otter monitoring at White Bridge, Cawdor: Otters remained on site after works were completed.
- Ness Islands: bat box checks with Inverness Bat Group, contributing to the National Bat Monitoring Programme.
- Peffery River, Dingwall: Breeding otter holts were found and monitored.
- Contribution to Highland raptor monitoring in NW Highlands.
- Contribution of bat records to Highland Biological Recording Group, and there are plans to forward site based biological records when the team has time available.

High Life Highland rangers are involved in many surveys and submit data to the Highland Biological Recording Group.



The Highland Council ecologists, Katy Martin and Reuben Brown, have helped to identify and protect many sites of biodiversity importance.

## Section 7: Biodiversity highlights and challenges

### Highlights

This report seeks to draw out some of the highlights of the Council's work to meet its biodiversity duties.

We have been particularly pleased to gain UNESCO approval to submit a bid for the Flow Country to become a World Heritage Site.

Partnership working has enabled the continued success of the Highland Environment Forum, with its ever-growing membership base that comes from agencies, NGOs, community groups and interested individuals.

The Council remains a partner in the Highland Biodiversity Action Plan and is a member of the biodiversity working group that oversees the plan's delivery.

The Council's Environment Team continue to make a significant contribution to biodiversity through the provision of planning advice, site survey and monitoring, project work, and by providing support and advice to the Council's Capital Programme.

High Life Highland Countryside Ranger service continues to engage with large numbers of residents and visitors through their varied programme, care and knowledge sharing;

Following the Council's declaration of a Climate and Ecological Emergency in 2019, services across the Council are increasingly recognising the importance of biodiversity and looking at new ways to manage their assets for the benefit of biodiversity.

### Challenges

There are many opportunities to further benefit biodiversity but budget constraints present the Highland Council with some major challenges. As funding streams for all government agencies are reduced it is increasingly difficult to find long term funding for large-scale commitments, such as the management of invasive non-native species.

In order to deliver additional positive actions related to the ecological emergency and further the conservation of biodiversity with the limited resources available, there is a need to both raise the profile of the ecological emergency and for coordinated action across the Council.

Recognising the importance of the Climate and Ecological Emergency, the Council will continue to work in partnership with others to press the case to safeguard and enhance biodiversity.

The absence of a report/system which monitors the state of Highland's biodiversity means that it is not possible to present robust data on either the current state of the natural environment, or the changes that take place. There is a great deal of data collected and held by different bodies, but this is not collated or analysed.

Impetus to collate this data and provide a thorough analysis of Highland Council performance in relation to its biodiversity duty could be encouraged by Scottish Government establishing a reporting mechanism for biodiversity akin to that requested to demonstrate carbon reduction and other climate change commitments. This could take the form of a Highland State of Biodiversity Report, which would provide a key link between local biodiversity work and the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy.

A central support hub for all volunteers involved in biological recording remains an ambition.

## Appendix: The Highland Council's contribution to Scottish biodiversity targets

A number of the Council's biodiversity actions also contribute to the Scottish biodiversity targets. The table below outlines where there has been positive activity, and where further direction is required from Scottish Government.

Outcome	Action
<b>Chapter 1: Healthy Ecosystems</b> Outcome: Scotland's ecosystems are restored to good ecological health so that they provide robust ecosystem services and build our natural capital.	
1.1 Encourage and support ecosystem restoration and management, especially in catchments that have experienced the greatest degradation.	Highland Council supports the work of the Peatlands Partnership.
1.2 Use assessments of ecosystem health at a catchment level to determine what needs to be done.	
1.3 Government and public bodies, including SNH, SEPA and FCS, will work together towards a shared agenda for action to restore ecosystem health at a catchment-scale across Scotland.	The Council is willing to undertake this work, but is awaiting clear direction and support from Scottish Government on land use strategy development.
1.4 Establish plans and decisions about land use based on an understanding of ecosystems. Take full account of land use impacts on the ecosystems services that underpin social, economic and environmental health.	The Council is willing to undertake this work, but is awaiting clear direction and support from Scottish Government on land use strategy development.
<b>Chapter 2: Natural Capital</b> Outcome: Natural resources contribute to stronger sustainable economic growth in Scotland, and we increase our natural capital to pass on to the next generation.	
2.1 Encourage wide acceptance and use of the Natural Capital Asset Index (2012) <sup>12</sup> , including a comparable measure for the marine environment.	
2.2 Use this index to influence decision-making and market-based approaches, so that the wider monetary and non-monetary values for ecosystem services are recognised and accounted for.	
2.3 Undertake a major programme of peatland conservation, management and restoration.	
<b>Chapter 3: Biodiversity, Health and Quality of Life</b> Outcome: Improved health and quality of life for the people of Scotland, through investment in the care of green space, nature and landscapes.	
3.1 Provide opportunities for everyone to experience and enjoy nature regularly, with a particular focus on disadvantaged groups.	The rangers work is focussed on engaging people of all ages and backgrounds in enjoying and learning about nature.
3.2 Support local authorities and communities to improve local environments and enhance biodiversity using green space and green networks, allowing nature to flourish and so enhancing the quality of life for people who live there.	Green networks are identified in the Highland-wide and Local Development Plans. The rangers work is focussed on engaging people of all ages and backgrounds in enjoying and learning about nature.

3.3 Build on good practice being developed by the National Health Service (NHS) and others to help encourage greenspace, green exercise and social prescribing initiatives that will improve health and wellbeing through connecting people with nature.	Highland Council is a member of the Highland Green Health Partnership.
3.4 Increase access to nature within and close to schools, and support teachers in developing the role of outdoor learning across the Curriculum for Excellence.	Rangers visit many schools across the Highlands, providing environmental learning and activities. They continue to provide support to schools, including through Eco Schools.
3.5 Encourage public organisations and businesses to review their responsibilities and action for biodiversity, and recognise that increasing their positive contribution to nature and landscapes can help meet their corporate priorities and performance.	
<b>Chapter 4: Wildlife, Habitats and Protected Places</b> Outcome: The special value and international importance of Scotland's nature and geodiversity is assured, wildlife is faring well, and we have a highly effective network of protected places.	
4.1 Ensure that the management of protected places for nature also provides wider public benefits.	Highland Council supports the work of the Peatlands Partnership.
4.3 Integrate protected areas policy with action for wider habitats to combat fragmentation and restore key habitats.	
4.5 Involve many more people than at present in this work and improve understanding of the poorly known elements of nature.	Ranger events and activities engage people in understanding and enjoying nature. This includes visits to, and conservation work on, protected habitats.
<b>Chapter 5: Land and Freshwater Management</b> Outcome: Nature is faring well, and ecosystems are resilient as a result of sustainable land and water management	
5.1 Promote an ecosystem approach to land management that fosters sustainable use of natural resources and puts biodiversity at the heart of landuse planning and decision-making.	The Council is willing to undertake this work, but is awaiting clear direction and support from Scottish Government on land use strategy development.
5.2 Ensure that measures taken forward under the Common Agricultural Policy encourage land managers to develop and retain the diversity of wildlife habitats and landscape features.	Ranger events and activities engage people in understanding and enjoying nature. This includes visits to and conservation work on, protected habitats.
5.3 Support 'High Nature Value' farming and forestry.	
5.4 Put in place the management necessary to bring Scotland's protected areas into favourable condition and improve the ecological status of water bodies.	
5.5 Ensure that biodiversity and ecosystem objectives are fully integrated into flood risk management plans, and restore wetland habitats and woodlands to provide sustainable flood management.	

5.6 Restore and extend natural habitats as a means of building reserves of carbon and to help mitigate climate change.	Highland Council supports the work of the Peatlands Partnership.
5.7 Provide clear advice to land and water managers on best practice.	
<b>Chapter 6: Marine and Coastal</b> Outcome: Scotland's marine and coastal environments are clean, healthy, safe, productive and biologically diverse, meeting the long-term needs of people and nature.	
6.1 Adopt a Scottish Marine Plan and develop regional marine plans to aid balanced decision-making in the marine environment.	
6.6 Implement a rapid-response framework to prevent colonisation of new invasive species in Scotland's seas and islands.	
6.7 Improve the monitoring of the marine environment to identify changes and guide progress.	
6.4 Achieve good environmental status for Scottish seas.	
6.8 Improve the monitoring of the marine environment to identify changes and guide progress towards the above outcomes	