

Agenda Item	<b>9</b>
Report No	<b>ECI/30/22</b>

## HIGHLAND COUNCIL

**Committee:** Economy and Infrastructure

**Date:** 10 November 2022

**Report Title:** Flow Country World Heritage Site Nomination Update

**Report By:** Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment & Economy

### **1 Purpose/Executive Summary**

- 1.1 This report provides a summary of the progress being made on the Flow Country World Heritage Site Nomination as it reaches its final stages.

### **2 Recommendations**

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

### **3 Implications**

- 3.1 **Resource** – The current phase of work, including the production of the nomination documentation and administering the submission process, has been supported by a Project Officer, co-funded by a range of partners including The Highland Council. If the nomination is successful there will be a need for all partners to commit resource to the management of the site, as is required by The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). This will form the basis of a separate paper to the relevant committee.
- 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 **Community (Equality, Poverty, Rural and Island)** – 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 would undoubtedly 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.
- 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 Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) by September 2022 for onward delivery to the UNESCO World Heritage Committee in Spring 2023.

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 CO<sub>2</sub> region.

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

## 4 Background

- 4.1 The Flow Country peatlands are being nominated to become Scotland’s only UNESCO World Heritage site inscribed for purely natural criteria, only the second in mainland Great Britain (for natural criteria) and the first site listed internationally for the exceptional value of its peatlands.
- 4.2 Work on the nomination dossier and consultation covering the proposed site boundary and management plan have been the focus of much of the last 6 months with the nomination documentation to be submitted by mid-December. The nomination document alone is 80,000 words long and is to be accompanied by a similarly weighty management plan.
- 4.3 The Flow Country World Heritage Nomination is being led by a steering group comprising an extensive group of stakeholders including Highland Council, NatureScot, RSPB, Wildland Ltd and UHI. The work undertaken on the nomination documentation has drawn heavily from expertise within these organisations.

## 5 Consultation & Engagement

- 5.1 An initial consultation on the concept of a Flow Country World Heritage site was held in 2009, resulting in the recognition of broad support (80%) for the project. Since then updates on the progress of the project have been provided through press releases, widely picked up in the local and national press (Northern Times, John O’Groats Journal, Press and Journal, Scotsman, Herald and Times), TV and radio coverage, social media and the Flow Country Website. ‘Soft’ consultation has also been undertaken through presentations and round table discussions provided to a wide range of stakeholders and interest groups including Deer Management Groups, Fisheries Trusts, Tourism Groups, etc.

- 5.2 Public consultation (16 in-person events and an online portal) on the site boundary concluded in August and the responses are currently being compiled. Indications from face to face drop in events are for a similar level of public support as recorded from previous consultations (80%). Consultation on the management plan concluded in September and again the responses are currently being collated. Useful input has been gained through this process, with the majority of contributions on the management plan coming from the renewable energy sector.
- 5.3 Political engagement has become a greater focus within the project with the development of the 'Keep us Covered' campaign, which has seen endorsement from MPs and MSPs from across the political spectrum. This has culminated in a parliamentary reception hosted by the Secretary of State for Scotland at Dover House which was attended by a number of Highland Council Members.

## **6 Finalisation timeline**

- 6.1 A draft nomination dossier was submitted to UNESCO for a completeness check on the 30 September, following sign off and approval from both DCMS and the project Steering Group. On receipt of feedback any changes required will be incorporated and the documentation will be fully drafted and design formatted before final sign off from the project Steering Group as well as Scottish and UK Ministers in early December, with final submission to DCMS scheduled for mid-December.
- 6.2 DCMS will then submit the nomination to UNESCO on the 1<sup>st</sup> of February. Following initial consideration UNESCO/IUCN will visit the site. A decision will then be made by mid-2024. In the intervening period significant work is required to prepare for inscription, particularly in terms of potential economic benefits which World Heritage inscription can bring to the region.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment & Economy

Date: 4 October 2022

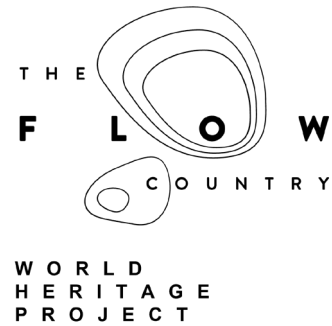
Authors: Dr Steven Andrews  
(Flow Country World Heritage Bid Coordinator)

Background Papers: Appendix 1 - Flow Country World Heritage Project

# Flow Country World Heritage Project |

Background Paper

E&I Committee | 10th November 2022



## OVERVIEW | Flow Country World Heritage Nomination

The Flow Country is being nominated to become Scotland's only UNESCO World Heritage site inscribed for purely natural criteria, only the second in mainland Great Britain (for natural criteria) and the first site listed internationally for the exceptional value of its peatlands.

The Flow Country is being nominated on the basis of the world class nature of the blanket bog environments it contains (criteria ix: ongoing ecological and biological processes) and the biodiversity they sustain (criteria x: natural habitats and biological diversity).

## NOMINATION TIMELINE

The Flow Country bid for World Heritage status passed the UK technical evaluation stage in 2020, giving the go ahead for a full nomination to be prepared. The full nomination, which consists of an extensive dossier and accompanying management plan is to be submitted to DCMS in December 2022. This will be passed to UNESCO in February 2023 and a decision will be made in mid-2024. In the intervening period a UNESCO delegation will visit the proposed site.

## MERITS

A Flow Country World Heritage site has the potential to deliver significant benefits to the region and, when considered alongside the NW Highlands UNESCO Geopark and the Easter Ross UNESCO Biosphere would demonstrate the massive natural capital held within the Highland Region on a global scale.

Studies of the impact of other World Heritage designations in the UK have highlighted a range of benefits, including raised profile, increased investment, new infrastructure and services, new business start-ups and products, new employment opportunities, improved education linkages and increasing sustainability of the tourism product. Alongside green finance initiatives in the Flow Country, World Heritage status could also contribute to premium carbon investments and related jobs and training (restoration and monitoring). This is particularly well aligned with the Scottish Governments pursuit of a 'Just Transition'.

## **POLITICS & SENSITIVITIES**

The Flow Country World Heritage project has so far received positive community support.

Potential tensions exist in the region between developments and conservation but the broad stakeholder group that make up the steering group is designed to balance these interests. The main areas of potential conflict exist around wind farm developments, forestry and space port Sutherland. These are also played out in a policy context (peatland protection, renewable energy, woodland expansion and the path to net zero).

To ensure conflict is minimised the project steering group agreed that only those developments that would affect the outstanding universal value (OUV) of blanket bog within the proposed site should be opposed. It should be noted that this approach aligns with the protection provided by existing SSSI/SAC/SPA/Ramsar designations, which cover much of the proposed site. Therefore, scope is retained for further developments around the proposed site, and furthermore the management plan very much lays out a vision for a peopled and vibrant landscape.

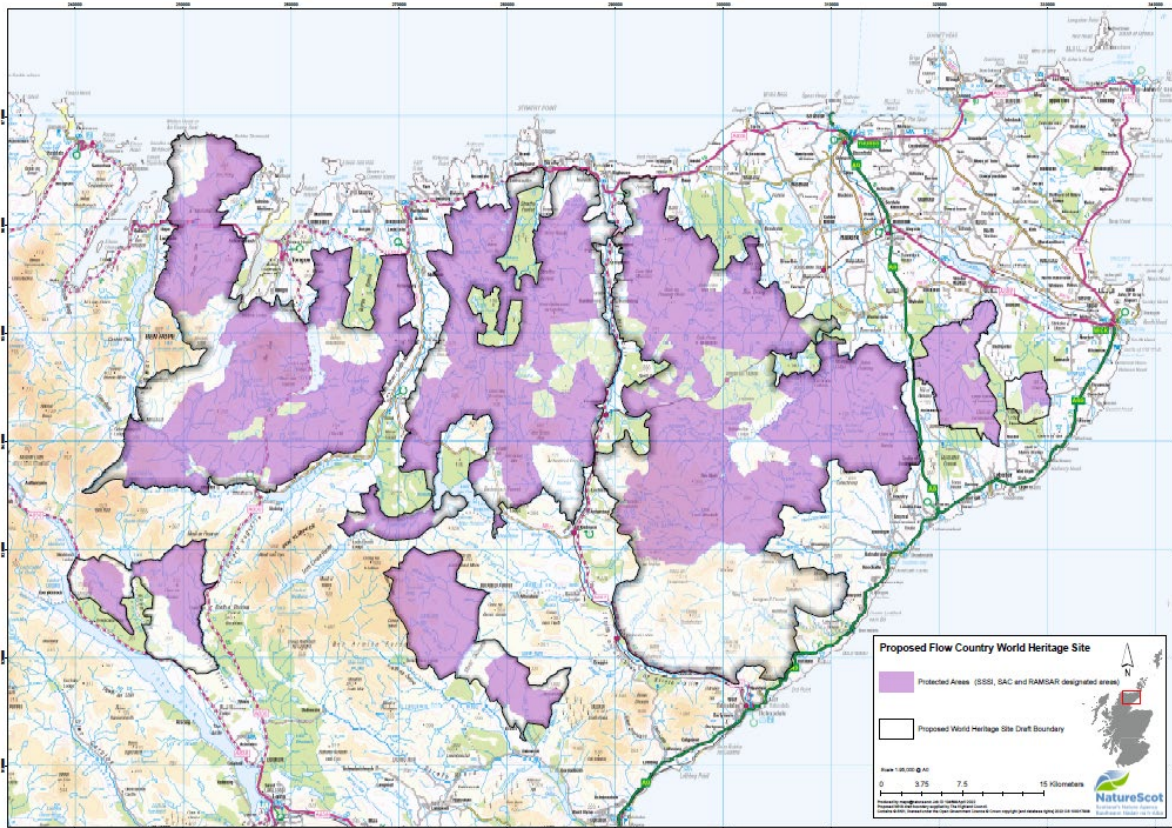
Some further sensitivities exist around common grazing's which lie within the site boundary, but World Heritage status would have no impact on current grazing levels or peat cutting rights.

## **CONSULTATION & ENGAGEMENT**

An initial consultation on the concept of a Flow Country World Heritage site was held in 2009, resulting in the recognition of broad support (80%) for the project. Since then, updates on the progress of the project have been provided through press releases, widely picked up in the local and national press (Northern Times, John O'Groats Journal, Press and Journal, Scotsman, Herald and, Times), TV and radio coverage, social media, and the Flow Country Website. 'Soft' consultation has also been undertaken through presentations and round table discussions provided to a wide range of stakeholders and interest groups including Deer Management Groups, Fisheries Trusts, Tourism Groups, etc.

Public consultation (16 in-person events and an online portal) on the site boundary has just concluded and the responses are currently being compiled. Early indications from face to face drop in events are for a similar level of support as recorded from previous consultations (80%). Following the initial in-person consultation events answers to frequently asked questions were prepared and have been appended below.

**Proposed site boundary (black line) and already designated areas (SSSI/SAC/SPA/Ramsar in purple).**



4 October 2022

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## Flow Country World Heritage Project frequently asked questions 6 June 2022

### How might a Flow Country World Heritage Site benefit me?

The potential benefits of World Heritage Status can be wide ranging and will be there to take advantage of if desired:-

- **Branding of produce** and marketing opportunities facilitated by the World Heritage project.
- Potential to **add value to carbon investments**, working alongside the developing Flow Country Green Finance Project.
- **Jobs and training** boost around peatland restoration work.
- Profile of the region elevated, bringing **increased potential for investment**: 'putting the Flow Country on the map'.
- **Drawing tourism away from the periphery** and slowing down those that visit: the Flow Country is a shy landscape that needs time to be appreciated.
- World Heritage is often seen to be a **catalyst for investment in infrastructure**.
- On a global scale, World Heritage Status for the Flow Country will promote the importance of peatlands around the world, helping other areas to gain more protection from degradation and ultimately helping the **fight against climate change**.

Find a wider summary here: <https://www.hie.co.uk/our-region/casestudies/flowcountry/>

#### *Case Study - The Jurassic Coast*

*It is recognised that World Heritage inscription of the Jurassic Coast **stimulated the creation of a new identity** for the coastal region. It has also been found that the coastal region has **become more dynamic** as a result of this new identity, which is demonstrated in the following ways:*

- *increased investment*
- *better partnership working*
- *increased media recognition at a national and international level*
- *new infrastructure and services*
- *new business start-ups with new products*
- *new employment opportunities*
- *the increasing sustainability of the tourism product*
- *improved education linkages nationally and internationally*

From: An Economic, Social and Cultural Impact Study of the Jurassic Coast (2008)

The annual financial benefit of UNESCO designations to the UK is a minimum of £151 million.

## **Will a Flow Country World Heritage site bring extra restrictions?**

For areas of the land that are already covered by environmental designation for peatland interests (76% of the proposed site is covered by SSSI/SPA/SAC/Ramsar designations), inscription as a World Heritage Site will bring no extra restrictions. In the remaining 24% of the proposed site World Heritage status will not prohibit any developments but will be a material consideration. This will be particularly relevant if the proposed development would negatively impact the Outstanding Universal Value of the site (blanket bog landscape or the biodiversity it holds). In practice though this is more likely to be a significant consideration for larger scale developments than for smaller ones – and often such developments already need to consider potential impacts on the nearby designated areas and on peat generally.

### *Examples:-*

- No changes to levels of livestock grazing.
- No change to peat cutting rights.
- No change in deer management

## **Will World Heritage Status fossilise the landscape and stop developments?**

No. World Heritage commits to protect, conserve, present and convey the values of sites inscribed to future generations and UNESCO recognise that World Heritage Sites are where, or near where people live and work, so understand that development happens. UNESCO require that protection is already in place, which it already is for the Flow Country through the existing designations and the planning system. The Flow Country Partnership recognises that the Flow Country is a living landscape that has been home to people for the last 8 thousand years: the people have shaped the landscape and the environment has shaped the people. The draft vision for the Flow Country World Heritage project states that *'World Heritage Status for the Flow Country will ensure that its world-class blanket bog, associated biodiversity and carbon storage ability is protected and enhanced, that it is an unparalleled and accessible natural resource for education and well-being, and that the status is beneficial both for our vibrant communities and our visitors'*.

## **Who is leading the bid for World Heritage status?**

The bid for World Heritage status for the Flow Country was initiated by the Flow Country Partnership, a body comprised of the main stakeholders in the peatlands and adjacent communities across the region. The Flow Country Partnership is, in essence, well established – it was formed in 2006 (then the Peatland Partnership) with the aim of enhancing and promoting the special values of the peatlands of Caithness and Sutherland, through the promotion of sustainable land management, the encouragement of sustainable community and economic development, and through co-ordinated action. More information about the Flow Country Partnership can be found here: <https://www.theflowcountry.org.uk/about-us/the-peatlands-partnership/>



## **What is the Flow Country being nominated for?**

The Flow Country is being nominated to UNESCO for criteria ix and x as defined in the UNESCO World Heritage Convention. These relate to outstanding examples of ongoing ecological and biological processes (ix) and outstanding examples of natural habitats and biological diversity (x). More simply put, the blanket bog landscape (ix) and the biodiversity it contains (x). The Cultural history is also a key component within the bid but does not coincide with the natural criteria for which it is being nominated. More information can be found here: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/criteria/>

## **How is the Flow Country defined?**

Everyone has a slightly different conception of where the Flow/Flowe/Flough Country is. The proposed World Heritage Site is being nominated on the basis of the blanket bog landscape which stretches across much of Caithness and Sutherland.

Therefore, the proposed World Heritage Site attempts to take in all of the diversity in peatland landscapes which can be found across this region, based on (but not limited to) the already recognised Peatlands of Caithness and Sutherland SPA/SAC/Ramsar designations. This includes the wetter and more broken blanket bog found in the west and the more rolling and continuous examples found to the east.

## **What is the rationale behind the boundary?**

The rationale for the boundaries is that they contain areas of the *blanket bog landscape* in the most natural condition and containing the full range of diversity found across the region, the majority of which is contained within SSSIs and other designations.

The boundary also includes areas adjacent to the blanket bog landscape that are functionally important, and provide protection, to the property's values. This will include areas that are otherwise surrounded by blanket bog and form part of the *blanket bog landscape*.

Areas under restoration will also be included in the property as there is sufficient evidence to suggest that over time, they return to naturally functioning blanket bog; except where additional infrastructure, such as tracks, etc. causes excessive disruption to the blanket bog hydrology.

## **Will the proposed World Heritage site have a buffer zone?**

The proposed site will not have a buffer zone. These are not considered as appropriate for natural sites in Scottish Planning Policy given the protection already afforded by SSSI/SPA/SAC/Ramsar designations.

## **How are we talking to communities and stakeholders?**

An initial consultation on the concept of a Flow Country World Heritage site was held in 2009, resulting in the recognition of broad support (80%) for the project. Since then, updates on the progress on the project have been provided through press releases, widely picked up in the local and national press (Northern Times, John O’Groats Journal, Press and Journal, Scotsman, Herald, Times), TV and radio coverage, social media, and the Flow Country Website. Presentations have also been given to a wide range of stakeholders and interest groups including Deer Management Group, Fisheries Trusts, Tourism Groups, etc.

Further public consultations have been held during 2022: on the draft boundary (May – July) and on the draft management plan (July – September). Increased participation has been recorded and early indications from face to face drop in events are for a similar level of support as found during the 2019 consultation (80%). The formal consultation has now closed but we will continue to engage with local communities to keep them informed of the bid progress and are always happy to take on views and answer questions.

## **How will The Flow Country World Heritage Site be looked after?**

The main body that will oversee the World Heritage Site, should it be inscribed, is a partnership-based Steering Group. This group, which currently exists to oversee the bid process, has representatives from all of the different stakeholders who would have a role in looking after the Site. This includes community representatives as well as landowners and agencies. In addition, there will be a small professional team to oversee the Site, and a range of technical working groups to focus on specific subjects. All of these bodies will be focused on delivering the vision set out above.

## **When will we know if the bid has been successful?**

We hope that we will know in summer 2024, when the World Heritage Committee meet and make the decision.