

The Highland Council

Agenda Item	14
Report No	ECI/20/2024

Committee: Economy and Infrastructure

Date: 2 May 2024

Report Title: Biodiversity Duty Report 2021-2023

Report By: Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment & Economy

1 Purpose/Executive Summary

1.1 This paper presents the Council's Biodiversity Duty Report (BDR) for 2021-2023. The BDR has been produced to fulfil the statutory requirement to report on actions taken by the Council over the last 3-year period that have furthered the conservation of biodiversity and as such demonstrate compliance with its Biodiversity Duty.

2 Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to:

- i. **Note** the breadth of work undertaken across the Council to further the conservation of biodiversity; and
- ii. **Approve** the Biodiversity Duty Report 2021-2023 for publication on the Council's website.

3 Implications

3.1 **Resource** – None. The BDR outlines key actions relating to the conservation of biodiversity undertaken across the Council over the last 3-year period.

3.2 **Legal** – All public bodies have a duty under the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004 to further the conservation of biodiversity when carrying out their responsibilities. The Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011 requires that all public bodies prepare a publicly available report every 3 years that demonstrates compliance with this duty. The BDR 2021-2023 fulfils that statutory requirement.

3.3 **Community (Equality, Poverty, Rural and Island)** – Tackling the nature crisis, restoring habitat and reversing biodiversity loss has many positive benefits across all Highland communities. Incorporating nature-based solutions helps tackle sea level rise and flooding and improved biodiversity makes our communities greener, more healthy and attractive places to live, work and visit.

- 3.4 **Climate Change / Carbon Clever** –The twin climate and nature crises are interlinked and reinforcing; a decline in biodiversity will exacerbate the climate crisis, and a changing climate will accelerate the rate of biodiversity loss. A changing climate is, however, only one of the direct drivers of biodiversity loss and the changing use of sea and land; over-exploitation; pollution; invasive non-native species; and habitat fragmentation are all contributing to the steep decline in our biodiversity.

The actions we take to address both the climate and biodiversity crises are fundamental to our wellbeing and survival, and by integrating biodiversity conservation measures into our activities to address the direct and indirect drivers of biodiversity loss, we will achieve our net zero targets sooner.

- 3.5 **Risk** – There are no risks arising from this report.
- 3.6 **Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people)** – No implications.
- 3.7 **Gaelic** – Gaelic headings and sub-headings will be added throughout, in accordance with Council policy.

4 Background

- 4.1 Under the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004 all public bodies in Scotland have a duty to further the conservation of biodiversity when carrying out their responsibilities. The Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011 requires every public body in Scotland to produce a publicly available report that demonstrates its compliance with the Biodiversity Duty. This must be completed once every three years.
- 4.2 Following Committee approval, the BDR will be published on the Council's website and Scottish Government will be notified and provided with a link.

5 The Biodiversity Duty Report 2021-2023

- 5.1 The BDR sets out some of the positive work undertaken by services across the Council to protect and further the conservation of biodiversity over the last 3 years. The BDR is split into sections covering actions to protect biodiversity; mainstreaming biodiversity; nature-based solutions, climate change and biodiversity; public engagement and workforce development; and research and monitoring.
- 5.2 During the reporting period the BDR demonstrates that the Council has undertaken a wide range of activities related to biodiversity and tackling biodiversity loss. These include the development of policy and guidance; accessing grant funding for biodiversity-related projects; providing grant funding to local communities; working in partnership with our communities, local and national government, academia, business and the third sector; liaising with our visitors; and making nature-positive improvements to our own estate.

The BDR contains many positive actions and there are many highlights, a small number of which include:-

- Signing the Edinburgh Declaration, demonstrating the Council's commitment to tackling the biodiversity crisis on a global stage.
- The Flow Country candidate World Heritage Site submission to UNESCO for inscription as a World Heritage Site.

- The Nature Restoration Fund Community Grants Scheme, which has funded over £550,000 of biodiversity improvement projects within local communities, delivered by local communities.
- The Nature Restoration Fund funded Greenspace Officer, which has enabled the Council to start to identify and map opportunities within its own estate to proactively plan and improve the management of Council land and buildings for nature.
- The Highland Council/NatureScot joint-funded Biodiversity Partnership Officer which has left a legacy of a strengthened and more robust Council response to the ecological emergency.
- The Species Champions Initiative which now has 43 of Highland's most threatened species being championed by Council members.

5.3 The work described in the BDR is not intended to be exhaustive but rather demonstrates and highlights the breadth of work undertaken by staff from across the organisation over the last 3 years to further the conservation of biodiversity.

6 Next Steps

6.1 The Council Programme 2022-2027 notes that the Council is ambitious for the future of our environment and recognises the importance of accelerating our response to the pressing climate and ecological emergency. Although the BDR 2021-2023 demonstrates that we are making positive progress across many areas, it is acknowledged that, as an organisation, we still have much work to do if we are to significantly contribute to Scottish Government's target to be nature positive by 2030 and to have restored and regenerated biodiversity by 2045.

6.2 There are many projects highlighted in the BDR that will continue over the coming months and years and many new projects that will come on stream during the next 3 years. We will need to continue to integrate and implement new biodiversity planning policies and we must be agile to adapt to future challenges and opportunities as they arise, including new targets and requirements likely to be included in the forthcoming Scottish Biodiversity Strategy and Delivery Plan and Natural Environment Bill.

As a Council, we must continue to be ambitious in our ability to deliver real and lasting positive change to tackle the climate and ecological crisis and to restore biodiversity for the benefit of our natural environment, our communities and our visitors.

6.3 Subject to Committee approval, the Biodiversity Duty Report 2021-2023 will be uploaded to the Council website and Scottish Government notified.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment & Economy

Date: 20 March 2024

Author: Andrew Puls, Environment Team Leader

Background Papers: None

Appendices: Appendix 1 - Draft Biodiversity Duty Report

Highland Council

Draft Biodiversity Duty Report 2021-2023

Section 1: Introductory information about your public body

The Council introduced its first Biodiversity Duty Report in 2008, with successive reports covering 2011-14, 2015-17 and 2018-2020. This report illustrates some of the highlights of positive biodiversity action undertaken by the Highland Council between 2021 and 2023.

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 and Management

The Council is divided into 8 directorates. The Council's new Chief Executive, Derek Brown, started in his role in September 2023, taking over from Interim Chief Executive, Kate Lackie.



The Climate and Ecological Emergency

The Council declared a **Climate and Ecological Emergency** in May 2019 and signed **The Edinburgh Declaration** in November 2022.

The Climate Change working group was given committee status in 2022 to reflect the importance of the climate and ecological crisis. The new committee had its inaugural meeting in November 2022; the first item heard by the new committee was the proposal to sign **The Edinburgh Declaration**.

2022 also saw the ecological emergency being added to the Council's **Corporate Risk Register** with an **Ecological Strategy** identified as a key output.

The Council's **Net Zero Strategy** was approved at the Climate Change Committee on 29 June 2023. The Strategy sets out the Council's approach to addressing the climate emergency and contributing towards Scotland's national legally binding target to become Net Zero by 2045. The Council has adopted the Scottish Government's Net Zero by 2045 target, aiming to achieve this sooner, with key interim targets to reduce emissions by at least 75% by 2030 and by at least 90% by 2040.

Key Teams

The Council recognises that conserving and enhancing biodiversity is a cross-cutting theme for all services and is applicable to a wide range of Council functions, from the management of roadside verges to housing and infrastructure development. Some examples of the positive work undertaken by services 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.

The Environment Team

The Council's Environment Team, part of the Infrastructure, Environment & Economy Service, is a key provider of environmental advice and services to the Council relating to the natural and cultural environment and countryside. Alongside providing advice on ecology/biodiversity and trees, woodland and forestry, the Team lead on a range of issues that affect the environment, including World Heritage, National Parks, Nature Networks, Local Nature Conservation Sites, Tree Preservation Orders and Conservation Areas, and invasive non-native species. The team are also responsible for the Council's allocation of Scottish Government's Nature Restoration Fund.

The Environment Team have responsibility for public access (including an award-winning Access Ranger service), core path plans and long-distance routes. The team manage a variety of countryside sites, woodlands and assets including, for example, the Old Man of Storr and Kilt Rock on the Isle of Skye and Smoo Cave in Sutherland.

The Environment Team develop relevant policy, guidance and strategy and provide both development management advice and input into strategic planning, including contributing to the Local Development Plan process. The team respond, on behalf of the Council, to consultations launched by Scottish Government, NatureScot and others on a wide range of environmental matters as well as providing specialist input into Council responses on broader consultations. Such consultations have included National Planning Framework 4, Developing with Nature, Land Reform in a Net Zero Nation, Permitted Development Rights Review, Scottish Biodiversity Strategy, National Parks and Tackling the Nature Emergency.

Over the reporting period the Environment Team has recruited a second Assistant Ecologist within its Ecological Consultancy and Survey Team with particular expertise in ornithology to provide more robust and well-rounded advice to services across the Council. Four additional fixed-term posts were created to bolster service delivery in specific areas:

- **Biodiversity Partnership Officer.** A 2-year secondment from NatureScot jointly funded by NatureScot and Highland Council. The post came to an end in October 2023.
- **Environment Project Manager.** A 2-year post funded through the Council's Transformation Programme. The role has a particular focus on nature-based solutions and green finance and has responsibility for developing the Council's Ecology Strategy.

- **Planning Ecologist.** A 2-year post funded through the Council's Transformation Programme. The establishment of this post provides the Planning Authority with access to specialist internal ecological advice for the first time. The post has enabled the Council to start to address the new biodiversity policies introduced through NPF4 and establish processes and procedures for implementing conservation, restoration and enhancement of biodiversity in the planning process.
- **Greenspace Project Officer.** A 2-year post funded through the Nature Restoration Fund to map the Council estate, identify areas that can be managed more effectively for nature and progress biodiversity enhancements across the Council **estate.**

Climate Change Team

The Climate Change Team comprises five Climate Change Coordinators, led by a Net Zero Project Manager. The Team provides guidance/knowledge transfer to support decision-making and the integration of climate change, adaptation, and sustainability measures into Council operations. The Climate Change Team is leading on several workstreams to support the development and delivery of the Council's Net Zero Strategy and Action Plan:

- Undertake a Council-wide Climate Risk and Opportunity Assessment.
- Develop and implement a Climate Change Adaptation Strategy and Action Plan.
- Develop and deliver a Communications & Engagement Strategy and Action Plan, aligned with the Net Zero Strategy and Action Plan.
- Develop and deliver a widespread programme of training and events to develop Climate Literacy amongst council employees and Members.
- Provide quantitative, data driven insights to inform strategic decision making to facilitate the delivery of our Net Zero target.
- Develop a revised baseline to include supply chain emissions.
- Develop and implement carbon budgeting.
- Ensure climate considerations are embedded into Council practices and decision-making processes.
- Review and update Council policies and strategies to ensure alignment with the Net Zero Strategy and Action Plan.

Amenity Services

As a part of Communities and Place, Amenity Services are responsible for Council greenspace, including community food growing, road verges (for roads within **30 mph** speed limits), amenity land and playing fields, playparks, school grounds and other green space on the Council estate.

High Life Highland

High Life Highland are a charitable arm's length organisation of the Council. High Life Highland provide many leisure services including the Countryside Ranger Service who continue to carry out significant work in Highland's communities to benefit nature and biodiversity.

Section 2: Actions to protect and enhance biodiversity

Edinburgh Declaration

At the first Climate Change Committee in November 2022, Members unanimously agreed that the Council should become a signatory of The Edinburgh Declaration. The Declaration was signed on 15 November 2022 by the Council Leader, Councillor Raymond Bremner, who said:

“It was a privilege to have signed the Edinburgh Declaration on behalf of Highland Council. By signing this agreement, the council has reinforced its existing commitment to tackling climate change and biodiversity loss. It will also ensure the continued provision of the nature services on which we all depend, the delivery of net zero targets and allow us to tackle and adapt to a rapidly changing climate.”

To mark the signing a high-level meeting took place between the Council’s Leader, Cllr Raymond Bremner, Chair of the Climate Change Committee, Cllr Karl Rosie and Interim Chief Executive, Kate Lackie, and NatureScot’s Chief Executive, Francesa Osowska, and Director of Nature and Climate Change, Nick Halfhide. Discussions centred around how the two organisations can work effectively together to address the nature crisis and halt biodiversity loss.

Council Greenspace Project

In Spring 2023 a Council Greenspace project officer was recruited to start to deliver biodiversity improvements across the Council estate. This built on a previous project that mapped Council land and assets that had the potential to be managed more effectively for biodiversity. The project looks to build successful partnership working with other Council services, managing the delivery of biodiversity enhancements and assisting the council in adopting new management regimes.

The project is being funded through the Council’s allocation of the Nature Restoration Fund. Ten pilot projects have been identified; over 1,000 trees and a community orchard are being planted at Merkinch Local Nature Reserve, with additional native tree planting programmed to take place at a variety of sites in Caithness with more to be delivered in 2024.

Ecological Survey, Mitigation & Monitoring across the Council Estate

The Ecology Survey Team, part of the Council’s Environment Team, provide ecological survey and clerk of works support to capital projects, undertake protected species survey and provide advice to Council services. During 2021 – 2023 the Ecology Survey Team were involved in a wide range of Council projects including large infrastructure development, building renovations and extensions, bridge works, and pre-development survey where the protection, conservation and enhancement of biodiversity was a key outcome.

Protected Species Surveys

During this period the Ecology Survey Team undertook 66 bat activity surveys as well as badger, otter, pine marten and bird surveys at 176 Council sites, buildings and structures; a number of the projects were completed under licence from NatureScot. The team worked with and provided advice and guidance to other Council services to protect wildlife during project works, including building renovations and extensions, bridge repairs and in advance of and during new development.

Ecological Clerk of Works (ECoW)

ECoW services and watching briefs were provided for a variety of Council projects, including various areas of the Longman in Inverness, Strathconon Primary School, Northern Meeting Park, Riverside Way, Whin Park, Drumnadrochit Flood Protection Scheme, Smithton & Culloden Flood Protection Scheme, Conon Flood Protection Scheme and Raigmore Bus Gate.

ECoW services provided for the Caol and Lochyside Flood Protection Scheme were particularly important due to challenging conditions for invasive non-native species, most notably Japanese Knotweed. Outcomes of this project include a draft INNS policy and potential future survey and work to eradicate Japanese Knotweed from further up the catchment to help stem its spread and prevent continued reinfection.

Amenity Services

Amenity Services are continuing to identify areas of amenity greenspace that can be managed more effectively for biodiversity. Successful initiatives, such as the six wildflower roundabouts in Inverness, continue alongside new initiatives to increase the area of greenspace set aside for nature. These include new ways to manage greenspace, for example, reducing management, only cutting paths through larger greenspaces, reducing verge cutting and creating wildflower and wildlife corridors.

By the end of 2022, the area of reduced management had increased to 92,247m² and many sites evidenced increased biodiversity, including the reestablishment of native wildflowers, including orange hawkweed, wild orchid and cuckoo flower (the food plant of the orange tip and green veined white butterfly caterpillar and meadow longhorn moth caterpillar).

Woodland Management and Creation

The Council owns a number of important woodland sites across Highland, many of which are managed as part of the Environment Team's facilities function. The woodlands are regularly surveyed by the Ecology Survey Team to ensure continued safe public access and to identify opportunities for biodiversity enhancement; 49 Hazard Tree Surveys across 33 Council-managed woodland sites took place during the reporting period.

Opportunities have been taken to leave standing deadwood where appropriate, and selective thinning has allowed for the natural regeneration of native species. In 2024 it is intended to leave piles of dead wood within woodland where possible to do so.

Woodland creation has taken place at The Storr, Isle of Skye where 4,500 native trees have been planted to provide important habitat as part of an ongoing rewilding project and at Merkinch Local Nature Reserve, Inverness, where 1,000 native trees and 80 fruit trees (to function as a community orchard) have been planted.

Inshes Park Phase 2, Inverness

The Council secured £114,000 from the Nature Restoration Fund to create a nature rich greenspace at Inshes Park, an area of Council-owned land previously of little biodiversity value.

The semi-natural woodland watercourse corridors on the edges of the site have been enhanced by the addition of 2,900 native trees including hazel, elder, hawthorn, downy birch, sessile oak and wild cherry. Within the main body of the park 3,776 trees have been planted, comprising pedunculated and sessile oak, field maple, Scot's pine, hazel and wild cherry. The SUDS pond was enhanced with 984 wetland tree species including alder, aspen and willow, with 600 wildflower plugs planted in the pond margins to enhance the wetland habitat.

Invasive Non-Native Species

The Council recognise that the management and control of Invasive Non-Native Species is an important part of the management of our estate. The annual treatment of Giant Hogweed and Himalayan Balsam continues at Kingsteps, Nairn and in 2022, using funding from the Council's allocation of the Nature Restoration Fund, extensive areas of Rhododendron Ponticum were cleared from Falls of Foyers, Inverness-shire.

The Environment Team are currently drafting new Invasive Non-Native Species Guidance to support the Council in managing this issue in a consistent and robust manner that accords with relevant legislation and good practice.

New Zealand Pygmy Weed Removal and Control, Whin Park and Lade, Inverness

In 2022-2023 a project, led by the Ecology Survey Team, was undertaken with the aim of controlling and stemming the spread of New Zealand Pygmy Weed in the boating lake and lade at Whin Park, Inverness. The mitigation plan and method statement were developed with input from NatureScot, SEPA, Scottish Government and the local fisheries trust.

Following survey of the pond for fish the water was drained and the New Zealand Pygmy Weed treated. During the winter of 2022, the pond area was sprayed on successive occasions before being scraped out with all remaining remnants and mud carefully and responsibly disposed of.

A survey in summer 2023 demonstrated that the New Zealand Pygmy Weed had largely been eradicated preventing the spread of the invasive non-native species into adjacent watercourses and enabling the boating pond to be reopened.

Biodiversity Planning Advice

Planning advice on development proposals affecting the natural environment is provided by the Planning Ecologist and Forestry Team. The Planning Ecologist – a new role within the Council – has been in post since November 2022 and has since engaged primarily with major developments including applications for renewable projects. During the reporting period the Forestry Team have provided tree and woodland advice on over 1,600 planning applications and served 11 Tree Preservation Orders at important and under threat woodland sites across Highland.

Section 3: Mainstreaming biodiversity

Biodiversity Partnership Officer

In October 2021 the Council and NatureScot agreed to joint-fund a 2-year fixed-term Biodiversity Partnership Officer to support the Council in the implementation of measures to support biodiversity and to liaise between the Council and NatureScot, improving links and synergies between the two organisations. Prior to the creation of this role, the Council had no dedicated biodiversity officer and no mechanism to access strategic biodiversity advice. The Biodiversity Partnership Officer was seconded from NatureScot to the Council's Environment Team and was in post at a pivotal time, coinciding with the drafting of NPF4 (and associated guidance), the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy and other key initiatives to mainstream biodiversity across the policy landscape.

The Biodiversity Partnership Officer was instrumental in building cross-organisational linkages and facilitating regular liaison and increased communication between NatureScot and Council officers. Even though the post has now come to an end, regular meetings between NatureScot and Council officers continue resulting in a more efficient and effective working relationship on both a strategic and operational level.

The Biodiversity Partnership Officer also helped deliver a number of the actions outlined in this report including providing oversight of the Nature Restoration Fund, providing liaison with the Highland Environment Forum and leading on a number of consultation responses. The Biodiversity Partnership Officer crucially enabled additional capacity in the team, freeing up time for both the Service Lead and Environment Team Leader to move forward on other areas around the biodiversity agenda, including identifying additional resourcing for biodiversity within the Environment Team.

Species Champion Initiative

The Species Champions initiative was originally launched in 2014 in an effort to improve wider understanding of species decline and to shine a light on Highland's most important and at-risk species. The initiative gave Members, during the course of their duties, debates and work with Council officers, constituents, colleagues and politicians, a platform from which to advocate for and raise the profile of one or more of Highland's most threatened species.

On 2 February 2023, following the recent intake of new Members, the Species Champions initiative was relaunched. Members were asked to represent one or more of the animals, plants and fungi from a prepared list and to use their position to champion the cause of their chosen species.

Elected Members are currently championing 43 species, most of which are highly threatened and of most conservation concern. Members are actively engaged in improving public awareness of these species and their habitats and ensuring they are considered in Council decision making wherever possible.

Planning Policy, Guidance and Strategy

This reporting period has seen an increased focus within the Council on matters relating to biodiversity and the Council has responded positively to the introduction of NPF4 and the rebalancing of the planning system toward the climate and ecological emergencies.

Highland-wide Local Development Plan Policies

The Highland-wide Local Development Plan (2012) is currently under review and a new-style Local Development Plan is currently being prepared and will be supported by updated guidance. Until this time, the following policies and supplementary guidance remain relevant to the protection of biodiversity:

- Green Networks Supplementary Guidance (policy 74)
- Sustainable Design Guide: Supplementary Guidance (policy 28)
- Coastal Development Strategy (policy 49)
- Aquaculture guidance (policy 50)
- Trees and Development (policy 51) and Principle of Development in Woodland (policy 52)
- Peat and Soils (policy 55):
- Natural, Built and Cultural Heritage (policy 57)
- Highland's Protected Species: Supplementary Guidance (policy 58)
- Other important species (policy 59)
- Other important habitats (policy 60)
- Geodiversity (policy 62)
- Water Environment (policy 63)
- Flood Risk (policy 64)
- Surface water drainage (policy 66)
- Renewable Energy Developments (policy 67)
- Community Renewable Energy Developments (policy 68)
- Construction Environmental Management Process for Large Scale Projects (policy 72)
- Air Quality (policy 73)
- Open Space (policy 75)

Inner Moray Firth Local Development Plan Policy

The revised Inner Moray Firth Local Development Plan which will be NPF4 compliant is currently being examined by the Scottish Government. It is intended to be adopted in early mid-2024.

Tree Management Strategy

In August 2023, the Council adopted a revised Tree Management Strategy which includes policies for the management of trees and woodland owned by the Council. The Strategy highlights the importance of the Council's tree resource and identifies appropriate and consistent standards for its management across the Council's estate. Concurrently, the Council's website has been updated to help the public with common tree enquiries.

Verge Maintenance Manual

In 2023 the Council adopted a Verge Maintenance Manual which gives provision for the Council, NatureScot and local conservation groups to agree Special Verges (in consultation with the Roads Operation Manager). Special Verges are verges of particular importance or interest for biodiversity and where identified will be recorded and mapped and appropriately managed, i.e. the verge may be cut earlier or later in the year to allow wildflowers to seed.

The Flow Country World Heritage Site Planning Position Statement

The Flow Country World Heritage nomination was submitted to UNESCO on 1 February 2023. As such it has changed from being on the UK's tentative list of potential World Heritage Sites, to being a 'candidate' Site. Recognising the full support expressed from all tiers of government for the Flow Country World Heritage Site (WHS) nomination, the lack of precedent (with no site in Scotland previously nominated for wholly natural World Heritage criteria), and the scale of development pressure, specifically from onshore wind energy and electricity transmission infrastructure, a Planning Position Statement was considered necessary to ensure that new development did not undermine the nomination during this interim phase.

The Planning Position Statement, which was approved by Members of the Economy and Infrastructure Committee in April 2023, sets out the Council's position in relation to new development proposed within the candidate WHS and new developing affecting its setting. The Planning Position Statement requires that all complex, national or major development (including development determined under the Electricity Act) must consider, with appropriate assessments, any potential impacts on the candidate WHS and its Outstanding Universal Value. It will remain in force for the period until the Site is either inscribed on the World Heritage List or rejected.

Forthcoming Strategy and Guidance

Drafted in 2023 and due to be put forward for adoption in early 2024 is Council Biodiversity Planning Guidance and the Council's first Ecological Strategy. The Biodiversity Planning Guidance will clarify for developers how the Council expect NPF biodiversity policies to be delivered in practice. The Ecology Strategy will draw together existing Council biodiversity actions, policies and projects and set out an action plan to deliver future targets.

Highland Nature Biodiversity Action Plan

In May 2021, the 4th edition of the Highland Biodiversity Action Plan, Highland Nature Biodiversity Action Plan 2021-2026, was adopted by the Council. The Plan was drawn up by the Highland Biodiversity Working Group (of which the Council is one of 47 partners) on behalf of the Highland Environment Forum and sets out a series of commitments by partner organisations to take action to improve biodiversity and address issues related to biodiversity/habitat loss over the five-year period.

As part of the Biodiversity Action Plan, the Council has committed to protecting and delivering positive outcomes for biodiversity in both development planning and development management, including securing biodiversity enhancements. The Council have committed to managing its estate more effectively for biodiversity, to safeguard green space, green corridors and networks and to continue to work in partnership to tackle invasive non-native species. The Council committed to review the use of pesticides and herbicides, to continue to support the nomination for UNESCO World Heritage Site status for the Flow Country and to deliver on the objectives outlined in the Highland Forest and Woodland Strategy.

Section 4: Nature-based solutions, climate change and biodiversity

Net Zero Strategy

In June 2023, the Council adopted the Net Zero Strategy which include the target of reducing emissions by *at least* 75% by 2030; and reducing emissions by *at least* 90% by 2040. Key actions related to biodiversity include the delivery of Council and community projects through the Nature Restoration Fund; develop and enhance green/nature networks across Council land; develop a Strategy to address the ecological emergency; map Highland's carbon resource; maximise opportunities to secure green finance; and explore the creation of Local Nature Conservation Sites.

The development and delivery of the Strategy and action plan will be governed by a Programme Board comprising all of the Council's Executive Chief Officers. The Board will oversee progress and direction of the actions and manage risks and opportunities iteratively. The Board will be supported by a Net Zero Strategy Group who will be responsible for operational delivery and will oversee and steer the strategy and action plan implementation across all services, measuring progress towards targets.

There are eight thematic groups that will fulfil a set function, details of which are set by the Net Zero Strategy Group. The thematic groups cover: Built Estate & Energy; Procurement & Community Wealth Building; Social Housing/HRA; Planning, Land Use & Environment; Waste; Fleet & Staff Travel; Circular Economy; and Net Zero Funding Strategy and Capital Programme.

The Flow Country World Heritage Site Nomination

The proposed Flow Country World Heritage Site (WHS) comprises 187,000 ha of blanket bog that stretches across Caithness and northern Sutherland. The Flow Country Partnership – a coalition of a wide-range of partners and stakeholders – oversees the delivery of the WHS nomination with the Council and NatureScot acting as the accountable bodies and co-funding the bid.

The nomination, supported by the Council and the Scottish and UK Governments was submitted to UNESCO on the 1 February 2023; the outcome will be known in mid-2024.

The Flow Country is being nominated for WHS status under criterion ix (carbon storage and sequestration as expressed by the ongoing ecological and biological processes) and criterion x (biological diversity). If inscribed, the Flow Country would be the first peatland site in the world to achieve WHS status and the first to specifically cite its importance in fighting climate change (carbon storage and sequestration) as attributes of its outstanding universal value.

The nomination is supported by extensive public consultation, engagement and promotion (including in person and online consultation events; presentations to local interest groups, scientific conferences and at COP 26; and media coverage) and a range of studies, including a cumulative impact study undertaken by UHI (ERI) to help guide future research targets and development strategies.

Nature Restoration Fund

The Council's allocation of the Nature Restoration Fund (NRF) has been used to fund both biodiversity projects in local communities and projects/initiatives led by the Council.

In 2021 the Council launched the Nature Restoration Fund Community Grant Scheme to fund biodiversity enhancement projects within local communities, delivered by local communities.

In 2021/22 the Council awarded **£243,273.89** of grant funding to 26 projects.

In 2022/23 the Council awarded **£179,406.36** of grant funding to 23 projects.

In 2023/24 the Council awarded **£137,028.00** of grant funding to 11 projects (as of end of 2023).

The Nature Restoration Fund has supported biodiversity projects across the Council area including the creation of wildflower meadows, tree planting, woodland management and improvement, wetland creation and restoration, hedgerow planting, habitat restoration and invasive non-native species removal.

The Council has retained remaining NRF monies to fund improvements across its own estate, including identifying areas that can be managed for biodiversity, purchasing specialist cut and lift machinery to allow reduced management/cutting regimes on Council greenspace, to fund projects to start to identify and map Local Nature Conservation Sites and undertake invasive non-native species removal at key sites.

Castle Heather Park, Inverness: Nature-Based Flood Scheme

The Council partnered with Hilton, Milton and Castle Heather Community Council to secure £250,000 from the Nature Restoration Fund towards the proposed £620,000 Castle Heather Park nature-based flood scheme. The project will open up a culverted watercourse and create a wetland area within the park, improving biodiversity and reducing flood impacts.

B-Lines

The Council partnered with The Bumblebee Conservation Trust, Plantlife Scotland and Buglife on a bid for a £250,000 contribution from the Nature Restoration Fund towards the proposed £300,000 'B-Lines', a pollinator project which follows the NC500 driving route around the North Highlands. The project will put into action the recommendations of Buglife's *Scotland's North Coast 500 B-Line* report, including pollinator-friendly verge and land management, reductions in chemical pesticide use and the installation of communication boards.

The project has been temporarily delayed due to resourcing issues with key partners.

Climate Action Coastlines

Climate Action Coastlines (CAC) was a 2022 pathfinder project funded by The Scottish Government's Green Growth Accelerator fund. The purpose of the pathfinder project was to identify nature-based solutions to coastal flooding and erosion in and around the town of Golspie in east Sutherland. The project drew together expertise from partners including NatureScot, Edinburgh University, The University of Highlands and Islands, St Andrews University and The North Highland Climate Hub to deliver a package of research and community engagement activities which would support green infrastructure investment.

While CAC was ultimately unsuccessful in obtaining full funding from the Green Growth Accelerator, it did succeed in building a valuable research base and engaging local groups in finding a greener solution to flooding and coastal erosion which will benefit local communities and wildlife.

CAC has led to two smaller projects around Golspie, which have/will make valuable contributions to biodiversity enhancement in the region. In early 2023 The Design Council used the research base provided by CAC to host a series of workshops with local communities and key partners to discuss next steps for nature-based solutions to local coastal change.

[Scottish Marine Environmental Enhancement Fund \(SMEEF\)](#)

In mid-2023 the Council partnered with St Andrews University in a successful bid for £25,000 SMEEF funding to continue important saltmarsh mapping activities in and around Loch Fleet, Sutherland. This mapping exercise began during the Climate Action Coastlines project which wound down earlier in the year.

[KIMO](#)

The council is also a member of KIMO and is engaged in the work of that organisation and currently holds the International President position for 23/24. KIMO stands for Kommunernes Internationale Miljøorganisation (Local Authorities International Environmental Organisation) and was founded in Denmark in 1990. It's mission is to prevent pollution and to protect, preserve and enhance the seas and coastal waters of the North-East Atlantic and Baltic regions.

Section 5: Public engagement and workforce development

Skills Development and Training

Biodiversity Awareness talks were delivered by the Ecology Survey Team in 2022 to Amenity Services staff and in 2023 to Roads officers. The Team have been mapping key priority species on the Council estate including the mapping the location of invasive non-native species on the Council's road network to help ensure against accidental spread through strimming or mowing activities.

Ash Dieback information sharing sessions have been held with key officers across the Council, including with the Council's Forestry Officers and Arb Team.

Planning Service CPD/Training

In September 2022, a training day for the Planning, Environment and Low Carbon Transport section of the Infrastructure, Environment & Economy service was held at the Council Headquarters in Inverness. The training day included sessions and presentations by the Environment Team on natural heritage, including natural heritage designations, World Heritage and Forestry.

In May 2023, the Forestry Team and Environment Team Leader led a full day training event for Planning Officers to cover some of the key issues relating to trees and woodlands and planning. The training day incorporated both presentations and practical elements. Site visits led by the Forestry Officers took place in Inverness City Centre to discuss issues relating to the management of trees in urban contexts, and at a housing development site to consider how impacts on trees and woodland are assessed, and what supporting information and surveys may be required to inform the decision-making process.

Weekly Forestry Surgery

The Forestry Team hold weekly drop-in surgeries for planning officers to discuss planning casework where trees are a consideration and/or a constraint. The surgeries have been successful in enabling specialist advice to be provided to planning officers in cases where resources may not allow for detailed written responses. The surgery also provides an opportunity for planning officers to discuss specific tree-related issues, mitigation strategies and conditions which helps disseminate knowledge and understanding throughout the wider planning service.

Invasive Non-Native Species Working Group

The project, funded through the Nature Restoration Fund, to remove New Zealand Pygmy Weed from Whin Park, Inverness and the methodologies employed attracted national interest. This led to the Ecology Survey Team (in partnership with Highland Environment Forum) hosting the Invasive Non-Native Species Working Group at Whin Park. Methodologies to control New Zealand Pygmy Weed, good practice and lessons learnt were shared by the group. The Ecology Survey Team will publish a report on the project in due course.

Public Engagement

Talks have been delivered by the Ecology Survey Team to several organisations during the reporting period including The Nairnshire Naturalists, the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust and Newmore Primary School. Volunteers from the Inverness Bat Group have also been utilised to boost numbers and improve coverage during bat surveys, providing excellent experience and learning opportunities.

Highland Environment Forum

The Highland Council, with partners (including NatureScot and Scottish Forestry), jointly fund the work of the Highland Environment Forum (HEF). HEF forms a cornerstone to the Council's work on the natural environment and the Forum 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 communicates with its members through a regular e-newsletter containing news, consultations, environmental jobs, research and events. Information is also shared through social media.

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.

Over the reporting period HEF have run a number of free online and in person events to engage on a range of environmental matters and topics. The Forum's Board, of which the Council are a member, are responsible for setting the topics and the Council host and chair many of the events. Speakers are drawn from a range of community groups, biodiversity groups and field clubs, national agencies (including Scottish Forestry, Forestry & Land Scotland and NatureScot), environmental NGOs, landowners and others.

Highlights include seminars on:

- Highland Tourism, Landscape and Nature
- Practical Action for Highland Biodiversity
- Getting Deer Management in the Highland Right
- Creating Scotland's Next Biodiversity Strategy
- Protecting our Tree and Forests at a Time of Challenging Diseases

Climate Change Conference

In 2021, The Highland Council hosted its second online Highland Climate Change Conference. This two-day event featured high level speakers such as then Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Roseanna Cunningham MSP. The first of the four themes of this conference, 'Biodiversity and Habitats,' focussed on the work being undertaken in Highland to protect and restore wild spaces whilst ensuring that the regional economy and local communities thrive.

Access to Nature

Seasonal Access Rangers

The Highland Council, with assistance from the Better Places Fund, employed a team of 17 Seasonal Access Rangers in 2021, 22 Seasonal Access Rangers in 2022 and 18 Seasonal Access Rangers in 2023. The Access Rangers were able to engage positively with visitors across Highland, promoting the Scottish Outdoor Access Code and helping manage visitor numbers and pressures. The last year of the Access ranger service was funded through NatureScot, funding which is no longer available.

During the course of the reporting period the Access Ranger team made 5,719 patrols, visited over 60,000 sites and engaged with 77,659 people. The Access Rangers cleared away abandoned tents and rubbish, removing nearly 6,000 full bags of litter from sites across the area, and cleared 20,326 toileting sites. The team removed the remains of more than 10,000 campfires, repairing campfire scars and put out over 500 unattended campfires, often in areas of high fire risk. All of these actions directly or indirectly contributed to protecting biodiversity.

The Access Rangers also undertook vital infrastructure repairs to footpaths and fencing and erected SOAC signs on vulnerable or fragile sites advising of No Fires, No Camping and 'Bag it, Bin it.' A number of habitat restoration zones were marked out and fenced off to allow for the restoration of dune grasses at Traigh Beach and Tougal Beach in Arisaig, and the recovery of the macher at Ceannabeinne, Durness. Two beach boardwalks were upgraded, and path improvements undertaken to prevent dune erosion at Gruinard and Gairloch.

At the 2022 Highland Council's Recognition Awards the Access Rangers won the 'local area responses and working with the communities' category.

Core Paths

There are currently 2,576 kms of core path in the Highland Council area. A further 978 km of core path will be added once the amended Caithness and Sutherland Core Path Plan and West Highland and Islands Core Path Plan are confirmed in 2024.

Long Distance Routes

Both the West Highland Way and Great Glen Way continue to attract growing numbers of whole and partial route users. Although the pandemic affected figures in 2021, in 2023 both Long Distance Routes recorded record numbers with the West Highland Way having 47,576 users and the Great Glen Way 10,359 users.

High Life Highland Countryside Rangers

Since 2017 the Highland Countryside Ranger service has been run by High Life Highland (HLH), a charitable arm of the Council. The HLH Countryside Rangers provide an invaluable connection between people and nature, sharing their expert knowledge about the natural history and culture of the Highlands with communities, schools and visitors. They run a wide variety of events from guided walks to science festivals and family fun days, covering all aspects of Highland cultural and natural history.

There are 13 HLH Countryside Rangers based across Highland with two new Ranger Huts opening in the 2021-23 period. During 2022-23, the HLH Countryside Rangers:

- engaged with over 11,500 customers.
- organised 274 Green Health events.
- undertook 120 school visits.
- engaged with over 3,000 pupils across 71 schools.
- ran 62 community events.
- undertook path maintenance at 5 sites.
- carried out active habitat management at 11 sites.
- recorded 831 volunteering hours.

For more detail see the HLH Countryside Rangers Annual Report: [2022/23 Annual Report](#).

Section 6: Research and monitoring

Council projects that include ecological mitigation are monitored post-works by the Ecology Survey Team. For example, Invasive Non-Native Species monitoring has continued at the Conon Bridge Flood Protection Scheme to identify and remove any reoccurrence of Himalayan Balsam and where installed bird and bat boxes are regularly monitored; at the Inverness West Link bat boxes have shown 85% occupancy and bird boxes have shown 73% occupancy.

Ecology Officers are also engaged with and contributing the Highland Raptor Study Group and National Bat Monitoring Programme.

The Flow Country Green Finance Initiative

The Flow Country Green Finance Initiative seeks to create a financial vehicle which will allow greater private sector financing to be brought into peatland restoration in Caithness and Sutherland. The project has been running since 2020 and is building a valuable evidence base and community and landowner links which will allow it in late 2023 to initiate a small group of pilot peatland restoration projects. The aim of this project is to restore large areas of peatland in the region, at the same time as delivering a fair price to landowners and financial benefit to local communities.

Section 7: Biodiversity highlights and challenges

Highlights

Signing of the **Edinburgh Declaration** demonstrating the Council's commitment to tackling the biodiversity crisis.

Adoption of **Highland Nature: Biodiversity Action Plan 2021-2026**.

The Flow Country candidate World Heritage Site submission to UNESCO for inscription as a World Heritage Site.

The **Nature Restoration Fund Community Grants Scheme**, which has funded over £550,000 of biodiversity improvement projects within local communities, delivered by local communities.

The **Nature Restoration Fund**, which has enabled the Council to start to identify and map opportunities within its own estate to proactively plan and improve the management of Council land and buildings for nature.

The recruitment and assistance of the **Biodiversity Partnership Officer** in delivering multiple benefits and leaving a legacy of a strengthened and more robust Council response to the ecological emergency.

Recruitment of the Council's first **Planning Ecologist** to start to react and respond to NPF4.

Challenges

Delivering **NPF4**, and especially Policy 3, presents significant challenges for the Council. Implementing NPF4 requires access to suitable levels of resourcing of specialist and technical ecological expertise, which the Council does not currently have. Whilst the aspirations of NPF4 are fully supported, it is important that Scottish Government note that this cannot be delivered or fully realised unless local authorities are properly **resourced, staffed and equipped** – including with appropriate tools (including a metric), policy and guidance.

Access to **biological data**, and a robust methodology to allow for the recording, collation and dissemination of data is vital for Highland, and across the north of Scotland. It will enable us to make informed and proportionate decisions and more effectively monitor and measure progress towards 2030 and 2045 targets. It is well understood that the Highland Biological Recording Group, as a volunteer organisation, cannot continue as it currently does indefinitely, and that the majority of data collected (from development proposals for example) is not added to the record; a more sustainable solution to manage data is now required. The Council fully support the Better Biological Data Project but would want to see it progress with more urgency.