

Agenda Item	15
Report No	ECI/21/2024

The Highland Council

Committee: Economy and Infrastructure

Date: 2 May 2024

Report Title: Wildfire Working Group (WFWG)

Report By: Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment & Economy

1 Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report provides an update on the Wildfire Working Group (WFWG), highlights the roles and responsibilities of lead agencies, and proposes a series of actions that the Council could consider taking to support the work of these agencies.

2 Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to:

- i. **Note** background to wildfires, roles and responsibilities of lead agencies, the work of the WFWG, and Highland Council;
- ii. **Note** and **agree** the actions arising from WFWG, subject to funding being available to support those actions with a revenue implication; and
- iii. **Agree** to continue liaison with Partners involved in dealing with Wildfire responses.

3 Implications – Update

- 3.1 **Resource** – The availability of resources (financial and staff) will be a factor in influencing what Highland Council can do to support the work of lead agencies. There is no funding available for specific signage, so any additional cost for signs will need to be found from any available underspend from service budgets or from other sources as may be identified. At present, there is no available underspend, but the matter will be kept under review.
- 3.2 **Legal** – Highland Council's role in planning for and responding to wildfires (and other emergencies) must comply with the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 (the Act) and the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 (Contingency Planning) (Scotland) Regulations 2005/Civil Contingencies Act 2004 (Contingency Planning) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2013 (the Regulations) which sets out how UK/Scotland prepares for emergencies.
- 3.3 **Community (Equality, Poverty, Rural and Island)** – Wildfires pose a danger to the safety of local communities and infrastructure and can have a devastating impact on natural heritage/biodiversity.

- 3.4 **Climate Change / Carbon Clever** - Climate change is playing a major role in making wildfires more dangerous. The period where wildfires can happen is extending from Spring into Summer. In April 2019, Scotland's First Minister declared a Climate Emergency. Scottish Ministers require SFRS to continue to work in collaboration with partners and communities to ensure collective resources jointly tackle issues caused by the climate emergency, which relate to inequality and to protect those citizens at greatest risk.
- 3.5 **Risk** – The Scottish Wildfire Forum has provided data on wildfire risks and impacts to the Scottish Government in preparation of the Scottish Risk Reassessment (SRA). Wildfire is rated as a MEDIUM risk in both the SRA and the Cabinet Office's National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA).

The SRA informs and directs the emergency preparedness work undertaken by Scotland's Local Resilience Partnerships (LRPs). LRPs are multi-agency coordination groups established by The Civil Contingencies Act 2004 (Contingency Planning) (Scotland) Regulations 2005, comprising those agencies with a leading or supporting role in emergency response and recovery. Wildfire is included in the current Risk Preparedness Statement for the Highland and Islands Local Resilience Partnership (HILRP), which recognises that large-scale wildfires have become increasingly common and may take days or weeks to extinguish, and could result in the closure of roads, contamination of water courses, evacuation of residential properties and become a significant drain on SFRS resources.

- 3.6 **Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people)** – Wildfires are a growing problem in Scotland. They have a huge impact on property, infrastructure, environment, and the economy. These fires place a drain on resources and pose a significant threat to the safety of our communities and associated infrastructure.
- 3.7 **Gaelic** - we will comply with the Council's policy for use of Gaelic within publications and signs and consider any specific implications for inclusion in any further engagement.

4 **Background to WFWG**

- 4.1 Following the Highland Council meeting on the 29 June 2023 where a motion in respect of *how best to address the issue of Wildfires in Highland* was discussed, a Wildfire Working Group (WFWG), chaired by Councillor Russell Jones was convened. The group met in October 2023 and February 2024 to discuss; wildfires in Highland, roles and responsibilities of partners/HC and actions that could be taken. The group received presentations from: Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, Corporate Communications, the Resilience Team, Outdoor Access Manager and a Roads Operational Manager. The WFWG agreed to take a report back to the Economy and Infrastructure Committee with their findings/recommendations.

5 **Wildfires**

- 5.1 Wildfires are classified as large, uncontrolled outdoor fires exceeding 1,000 square meters of burned area on appropriate land types. These fires are unplanned, uncontrolled, and unpredictable, and occur in areas with combustible vegetation that can fuel rapid spread. Common causes include; unattended flames, glass bottles, controlled burns gone wrong, fire setting, cigarette disposal, weather - hot and dry as well as cold dry and sunny.

6 Role of Lead Agencies/Responders

- 6.1 **Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS)** is the lead agency for wildfire risk and response. Police Scotland have the statutory lead role for warning and informing the public in the response to major emergencies, including for example, road closures or keeping windows closed. This also includes leading on any evacuations and subsequent investigation. In the event of evacuation, NHS Highland lead on Care for People arrangements in their role as lead agency, including emergency support centres and welfare provision. Highland Council act as lead for coordinating the recovery phase of emergencies/incidents i.e., rebuilding, restoration and rehabilitation of the community/environment.
- 6.2 **The Scottish Wildfire Forum (SWF)** brings together representatives from key organisations to develop a mutual understanding of, and a reduction in the number of unwanted wildfire occurrences in Scotland. The SWF is chiefly concerned with the prevention of wildfires, i.e., it does not respond to wildfires. The SWF seeks to develop wildfire initiatives that will reduce:-
- the amount of damage to vegetation;
 - the negative impact on ecosystems services;
 - the risks to firefighters and members of the public; and
 - the costs of firefighting.

In 2022 a Scottish Wildfire Forum Communications Sub-Group was established to enhance the Forum's influence and communications strategy.

6.3 Local Resilience Partnerships (LRPs)

There are twelve LRPs in Scotland. Highland is part of the Highland and Islands LRP (HILRP) which covers the Shetland Islands Council, Orkney Islands Council, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar and The Highland Council areas. LRPs bring together Category 1 and 2 Responders* as defined by the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 (e.g., the emergency services, NHS Highland, Local Authorities, SEPA, and supporting agencies such as BEAR Scotland, Met Office, SSEN, and Scottish Water), as well as voluntary agencies and the military, to prepare for and respond to emergencies**. LRPs aim to maintain effective local liaison, coordination and the prioritisation of resilience activities through developing and managing a local work programme. Preparedness for wildfire incidents is included in the HILRP's 2022-2024 Work Plan, which sets out actions to ensure partner agencies understand the impacts and wider consequences of a wildfire and how they can best work together to bring about a successful response and recovery to this incident type.

Category 1 Responders and regular Membership of Regular HILRP are detailed within **Appendix 1**.

6.4 Role of Highland Council

The Highland Council's role as a Category 1 Responder within the LRP is to support the emergency services, assist NHS Highland as the Care for People lead (e.g., providing accommodation, food and welfare for those affected by an emergency), activate and coordinate voluntary agencies, provide structural safety assessments and other expert advice, and to coordinate the recovery and restoration of normality.

To complement the work of Category 1 and 2 Responders, and to help communities prepare, respond and recover from disruptive challenges, the Council's Resilience Team supports communities in developing Community Resilience Plans.

The Community Resilience Plan development process encourages the public to identify the risks that might impact them, such as wildfire, and to better understand how to harness local resources and to take independent and collective action to make themselves and their communities more resilient.

Highland Council's Corporate Communications team, along with its partner agencies, shares relevant partner advisory materials in relation to wildfire prevention, wildfire risk and wildfire response issued by lead emergency services organisations, including the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and Police Scotland. In particular, the team shares the Firebreak Services' Wildfire Forecast updates on its social media channels, which provide an early warning of wildfire danger in Highland. The Highland Council's Corporate Communications team has been offered a seat on the Scottish Wildfire Forum.

Over the past three years The Highland Council Access Ranger Team have had Wildfire Prevention as part of duties, whilst patrolling they advised people on the suitability of their campfires and extinguished a growing number which were unacceptable. They erected seasonal signs in popular locations where fires were not permitted and displayed magnetic signs on vehicles during periods of high fire risk. In the winter months, the Access Rangers contacted several schools about Scottish Outdoor Access Code (SOAC) resources for teachers which includes guidance on campfires and fire prevention.

Highland Council Roads work with and take direction from the emergency services. This includes the provision of signage, road closures, diversions, and other operational assistance as resources permit. The Team also engages with communities and groups in sensitive Wildfire areas, to assist with planning and preventative works which involve the roads asset.

7 Council Actions

7.1 The Wildfire Working Group's main aim is to explore possible actions Highland Council could take to assist lead agencies/services in the prevention and control of wildfires. The following is a list of suggested actions that were discussed:-

- Write to the Chairperson of the Scottish Wildfire Forum (SWF) expressing any concerns and seeking reassurance on the progress of wildfire prevention measures e.g., the fire danger assessment warnings were deemed an effective system, however it was highlighted that it was challenging for the general public to understand the warning notifications, and this would require further consideration at the SWF.
- Adopt high fire risk signs for all relevant council vans. Services could display available signage on their fleet vehicles during the 2024/25 season, or information could be provided to them to produce their own signs at times of high fire risk.

- Promote use of SFRS asset register to all community councils - the Community Asset Register (CAR) is a mechanism by which local communities /organisations can offer their equipment/services to SFRS in the event of a local wildfire. The WFWG were concerned that there were probably many groups unaware of this facility.
- Circulate /promote Scottish Outdoor Access Code (SOAC) within schools. In addition, the SOAC should be promoted more widely to reach as many visitors as possible.
- Agree range of signage options for roads teams – i.e., temporary high fire risk sign that could be deployed during high-risk fire periods. The roads department take advice from Police Scotland to close roads in the event of a wildfire and put temporary roads diversion in place, local access officers can also close footpaths when required.
- Continue to promote development of Community Resilience Plans (CRPs) to Community Councils - the Resilience Team and SSEN have been working together to promote CRPs to Community Councils and Groups.
- Display high risk fire signage at Council owned public conveniences/notice boards etc.
- It was suggested that all short term let licenced premises could include a wildfire information sheet in their visitor information packs.
- General publications should not encourage images/references to wildfires.

8 Next Steps

8.1 The WFWG has now concluded.

8.2 Members are asked to consider and agree the actions above to steer any future support the Council can take in support of lead agencies.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment & Economy

Date: 27 March 2024

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Background Papers: None

Appendices: Appendix 1 - Category 1 and 2 Responders and Membership of the HILRP

Category 1 and 2 Responders and Membership of the HILRP

* **Category 1 Responders** are defined as the police, ambulance, fire and rescue services, local authorities, NHS Health Boards, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency and Integration Joint Boards.

Category 2 Responders are defined as gas and electricity companies, rail and air transport operators, harbour authorities, telecommunications providers, Scottish Water, the Health and Safety Executive and NHS National Services Scotland.

** **Regular Membership of the HILRP includes:** Police Scotland, SFRS, Scottish Ambulance Service, Maritime and Coastguard Agency, NHS Highland, NHS Shetland, NHS Orkney, NHS Western Isles, The Highland Council, Shetlands Islands Council, Orkney Islands Council, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Scottish Environment Protection Agency, Integration Joint Boards, British Transport Police, Civil Nuclear Constabulary, Dounreay, HM Prison Service, SSEN, SGN, Network Rail, HIAL, Loganair, BEAR Scotland, Amey, CalMac, North Link Ferries, Pentland Ferries, BT, Scottish Water, HSE, NHS National Services Scotland, Met Office, British Red Cross, Military, Forestry and Land Scotland, Animal and Plant Health Authority, Scottish Government