

The Highland Council

Biodiversity Duty Report

2015 - 2017



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Section 1: Introductory information

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 collections 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 operated to five directorates, see right. In October 2017 the Council restructured to four directorates.

The Council introduced its first Biodiversity Duty Plan in 2008, with successive plans covering 2011 - 14 and 2015 - 17, each approved by the Planning, Development and Infrastructure Committee.

Care and Learning, Community Services, Development and Infrastructure, and Countryside Rangers all had their own action plans which contributed to the overall Biodiversity Duty Plan. Reports on progress against these were submitted to committee annually up to 2015. Staff changes in 2016 have resulted in a short reporting gap.

Biodiversity achievements of this reporting period are detailed in Section 2 and 3.

Staff

Environment functions are carried out by an environment team at council headquarters and by area staff. Relevant responsibilities include biodiversity, climate change, forestry, access and the ranger services (up to autumn 2017).

Between 2002 and 2016 the Highland Council employed a biodiversity officer, who sat within the environment team in the Development and Infrastructure Service. The officer provided support to all Council Services, and led on delivery of the Highland Biodiversity Duty Plan. In 2016 the Environment Team was restructured and a new Environmental Advice and Consultancy Team (EACT) was created.

EACT includes two ecologists providing ecological advice to Council services. This includes protected species, trees and woodland management. The team continue to report on the Council's Biodiversity Duty and contribute to the Biodiversity Action Plan.

EACT now provide a fully operational in-house consultancy service that has advised on over 900 planning applications.

The team won the Convenors Award at Highland Council Quality Awards 2017.

Section 2: Actions taken to improve biodiversity conservation

Section 2 highlights some of the Council's key initiatives that supported practical biodiversity actions over the last three years:

2.1 Local biodiversity support (2002 to 2016):

Since the Highland Biodiversity Project started over £850,000 of new funding has been spent on biodiversity action and planning in Highland. Over two-thirds the funds were targeted at local biodiversity projects. Seven Local Biodiversity Action Plans have been produced with over 130 projects delivered and over 300 awareness-raising events held across the seven Local Biodiversity Action Plan (LBAP) areas. In addition over 50 projects directly targeted Highland priority species through habitat improvements e.g. provision of nest boxes and rafts, and training volunteers in survey methods.

2.2 Countryside Rangers (2002 to 2017):

Highland Council has supported a network of Countryside Rangers across the region who 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. In 2017 the ranger service was transferred to Highlife Highland, an arms-length organisation of the Council.

2.2.1 Some of the key practical projects undertaken by the Rangers in partnership with local groups are listed below:

- **Culloden Avenue:** Working with the Culloden Community Engagement Officer to improve the biodiversity of Culloden Avenue by creating a more varied habitat. Species planted include woodrush, wood anemone, primrose, bluebells and wild garlic.
- **Removal of non-native skunk cabbage** in collaboration with Nevis Partnership.
- **North American Signal Crayfish monitoring:** A five-year monitoring programme, carried out at Ballachulish quarry in partnership with Lochaber Fisheries Trust was successfully completed in 2017.
- **Wellside Meadow creation, Balloch** (0.04 ha): Since 2012 the cutting regime has been adjusted to help create a wet meadow habitat and additional wildflower planting has taken place resulting an improved habitat with potential for increased biodiversity.
- **Foyers Falls rhododendron control** (13.15 ha): Rhododendron control was carried out in association with Inverness High School.
- **Grassland management** for the scarce great yellow bumblebee at Farr Glebe in association with the Caithness Biodiversity Group.
- **Grassland management** for small blue butterflies at Castlehill.
- **Machair management** for wildflowers at Clachtoll.

- Rangers undertook 519 days of **site management** to maintain, encourage and restore native species and habitats.

2.3 The Highland Seashore Project (January 2013 to December 2015):

The Highland Seashore Project ran events and training courses for three years. It offered a diverse range of activities designed to reach a wide audience, and encouraged people to get involved in learning and caring about the wildlife to be found on Highland shores. The project was hugely successful and more than doubled its engagement targets.

The seashore events attracted huge audiences:

- 1,597 people attended 7 Festivals
- 2,528 people took part in 8 Roadshows
- 1,065 people participated in 16 biodiversity days

Eighty-six seashore surveyors were trained and submitted records throughout the lifetime of the project. These were verified by 12 seashore specialists. Details of all the recording, events and field guides produced by the project can be seen on the seashore [website](#).

The project was initiated and administered by the Highland Council, with funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, SNH, Highland Council and the Crown Estate Marine Stewardship Fund.

2.4 The Monadhliath Regional Eagle Conservation Management Plan: Introduced in 2014, in accordance with a Section 75 Agreement under the Town & Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997. SSE committed to funding provision and management assistance within Natural Heritage Zone (NHZ) 10 to enhance the conservation of breeding golden eagles. A dedicated Golden Eagle Project Officer was appointed in February 2015 and the work is guided by an Advisory Group.

2.5 Giant hogweed (2009 to 2015): The Council coordinated the successful control of giant hogweed along the Wick River, River Nairn and on the Black Isle.

2.6 Wildflower-friendly road verge maintenance:

Trials began in Caithness where the public were encouraged to submit information where good wildflower verges exist and encouraged the Council to change its cutting regime.

Nearly 40 sites were identified. In 2013 the Council issued a wildflower verges operator's manual for council staff. In 2014, the Council agreed to reduce verge mowing in rural areas (outwith 30mph restrictions).

2.7 Wildflowers on roundabouts (2009 to date):

Created along the Inverness Southern Distributor Road and have received very positive public feedback.



Photo: Wildflower verge, Angus Corby

2.8 Inshes Primary school: Highland Council community services are working with the school to establish a “wild area” within school grounds to encourage flora and fauna. Trees are being planted over the winter period.

2.9 'Green Hive' community orchard, Nairn: Highland Council community services are working with Green Hive to establish an orchard. In addition the banks of the adjacent river were left uncut to encourage wild flowers, invertebrates and other wildlife.

2.10 Sustainable Urban Drainage (SUDS) Graduate Intern: HC in partnership with SNH recruited a graduate intern to identify and survey SUDS sites in Inverness. This resulted in the identification of 40 sites, 75% of which were being used by amphibians. These results were highlighted at a Highland Council sharing best conference in 2015. This demonstrated the potential biodiversity gains that can be achieved by well designed SUDS.

.11 Local Nature Reserves: In 2007, the Council established Merkinch LNR in association with local residents and British Waterways. Highland Council is one of the landowners of the site and is a key stakeholder in the project. Involvement includes providing advice and financial support, and assisting with plans to create a meadow area in 2018.

Rangers are consulting on community support for a LNR at Ardersier Common and considering if Farr Glebe in Sutherland has LNR potential.

2.12 Local food/allotments: The Highland Council makes land available for community allotments and ran a small grant scheme for groups wishing to develop local food growing.

Future/ Ongoing biodiversity conservation actions

1. EACT will continue to assess and monitor development sites and provide advice and guidance to Council services.
2. EACT will continue to report on the Council's Biodiversity Duty and look to revise its Biodiversity Duty Action Plan.
3. The Species Champion scheme will be relaunched in 2018.
4. Via the Climate Change team the eco officer network (run by Council staff) will be relaunched in 2018, and will include actions to benefit biodiversity.
5. The Environment Team will continue to work in partnership with internal and external partners to further the conservation of biodiversity.
6. The Council will continue to support the Highland Environment Forum (HEF) and deliver key actions under the Highland Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP).
7. EACT involvement in future flood schemes will ensure appropriate ecological assessments and mitigation strategies are adhered to, e.g. Smithton / Culloden flood scheme (construction due to start in 2018) includes a wetland area with extensive planting and a dipping platform, which will also serve as an amenity space for the community.

Section 3: Mainstreaming

Introduction

The work of the Biodiversity Officer (2002 - 2016)/EACT (2016 to present) have ensured that biodiversity measures are integrated into the work of the Council service directorates, as outlined in the report introduction.

Guidelines and policies to protect biodiversity across the region are at the core of the Highland-wide local development plan. Section 3.1 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, use and care of the natural environment.

3.1 Development Plans

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 seek 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 plan preparation and planning applications.

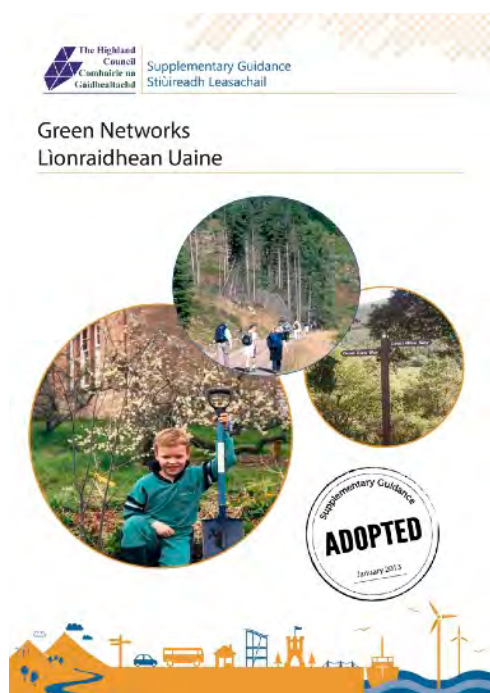
The Plan states that where development is to be approved the proposals should seek to conserve and, where appropriate, enhance the biodiversity of a site, through overall site planning, infrastructure, landscape and building design.

Policies and guidance relating to biodiversity:

1. **Adapting to Climate Change:** This document, updated in 2012, has provided guidance on actions to be taken at a regional level to prepare for, and adapt to, the anticipated effects of climate change.
2. **Green Networks Supplementary Guidance:** The guidance was adopted in January 2013 and states that green networks must be identified in major development areas and around all the major settlements in the Highlands. It requires developers to safeguard green networks and to identify suitable new networks.

The A96 Green Network from Inverness to Nairn has been fully mapped and initial work has been undertaken on the Inner Moray Firth Green Network. The Inverness East Development Brief included a requirement for green networks.

Green networks have been included in the Caithness and Sutherland Plan and the West Highland Local Plan. These plans were produced with input from SNH.



3. **Sustainable Design Guide: Supplementary Guidance** (policy 28): This highlights the importance to people and wildlife of green networks and spaces in developments.
4. **Coastal Development Strategy** (policy 49): Adoption in 2010, it provides a vision for the sustainable use and development of this major resource.
5. **Aquaculture guidance** (policy 50): The guidance directs development to those locations that are considered to have more opportunity with fewer constraints or to where those constraints can be

mitigated through, for example, sensitive equipment design or working practices.

6. **Trees and Development** (policy 51) and **Principle of Development in Woodland** (policy 52) and supplementary guidance : Ensures that applicants seeking planning permission effectively consider and manage existing trees and woodlands, as well as identifying opportunities for planting and management of new trees and woodlands.
7. **Highland Forest and Woodland Strategy:** The policy recognises the importance of safeguarding and expanding the tree and woodland resource and its integration with other land uses. The current strategy includes expansion of native woodland amongst its five key themes, and has sought to identify areas of potential new community woodlands, in line with the Scottish Forestry Strategy aim 'to ensure that Scotland's trees, woods and forests make a positive contribution to the environment'. The Highland strategy contributes to these aims by identifying opportunities for:
 - Planting productive woodland in marginal farming areas
 - New native woodlands to improve habitat networks
 - Farm and crofter forestry to further diversification
 - Planting of new community woodlands around settlements
 - Riparian woodland schemes to improve water quality; flood control; river fish stocks; biodiversity
 - Amenity planting to enhance landscape character

The Council is currently working on an update of the strategy.

8. **Peat and Soils** (policy 55): Proposals should demonstrate how they have avoided unnecessary disturbance, degradation or erosion of peat and soils. In the forthcoming Highland-wide Local Development (2018) this will be strengthened to state that disturbance to peat and carbon rich soils should be avoided
9. **Natural, Built and Cultural Heritage** (policy 57): This states that the outstanding natural, built and cultural heritage of the Highlands has to be fully considered. The new Highland-wide Local Development (2018) will include a dedicated policy related to the natural environment and will state that damage caused by non-native invasive species can be irreversible and that proposals, where possible, will prevent their spread.

10. **Highland's Protected Species: Supplementary Guidance** (policy 58): The guidance sets out the key species to be aware of, the varying levels of protection afforded to them and how they should be dealt with to avoid breaking the law and to further the conservation of biodiversity.

11. **Other important species** (policy 59): Ensures the protection of other important species where not protected by legislation.

12. **Other important habitats** (policy 60): Designed to safeguard the integrity of features of the landscape which are of major importance because of their linear and continuous structure or 'stepping stones' for the movement of wild fauna and flora. The Council will also seek to create new habitats which are supportive of this concept.

13. **Geodiversity** (policy 62): Development proposals that include measures to protect and enhance geodiversity interests of international, national and regional/local importance in the wider countryside, will be supported.

The Highland Council has signed up to the Scottish Geodiversity Charter, and will be working with partners to raise awareness and integrate it into its decision making.

14. **Water Environment** (policy 63): The Council will support proposals for development that do not

compromise the objectives of the Water Framework Directive (2000/60/EC), aimed at the protection and improvement of Scotland's water environment.

15. **Flood Risk** (policy 64): Development proposals should avoid areas susceptible to flooding and promote sustainable flood management.

16. **Surface water drainage** (policy 66): Includes recommendations for reserving development-free riparian buffer zones to allow watercourses room to move naturally and exploring de-culverting opportunities where possible.

17. **Renewable Energy Developments** (policy 67): The Council will support proposals where it is satisfied that they are located, sited and designed so that they will not be significantly detrimental, either individually or cumulatively with other developments, on natural, built and cultural heritage features.

18. **Community Renewable Energy Developments** (policy 68): In line with policy 67, above.

19. **Construction Environmental Management Process for Large Scale Projects** This guidance note ensures that all appropriate legislation is complied with and the environmental impact of a development is minimised.

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

Strategic Environmental Assessment This is undertaken as part of Local Development Plans 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.

3.1.3 Updating Development Policies

The Policies in the Highland-wide Local Development Plan are currently under review. The updated Highland-wide development plan should be completed during 2018. The Development Plan team instigates a review cycle to ensure the plans remain up-to-date, incorporating new national and regional legislation and any changes in relevant local issues.

3.2 Biodiversity Action Plans

3.2.1 Highland Biodiversity Action Plan

BAPs are partnership plans that aim to protect and enhance biodiversity by identifying local biodiversity issues and actions. The Highland Biodiversity Action Plan (HiBAP) has been in existence since 2006. The third edition (2015-20) was launched in November 2015. The Plan was drawn up by the Highland Biodiversity Working Group on behalf of the Highland Environment Forum (HEF).

The Council is a key partner in the Highland Biodiversity Working Group. The group oversees and monitors the delivery of the plan by all the organisations that have signed up to support this work. The Council undertakes to meet its commitment to the plan through the actions outlined therein.

The objectives of the plan are to:

- Encourage and promote land management for biodiversity.
- Take biodiversity into account during building and maintenance works.
- Encourage and help communities, local groups and volunteers to carry out practical biodiversity projects.
- Raise awareness of biodiversity and related issues, and help children and young adults to learn about local nature and wildlife.
- Tackle invasive non-native species by undertaking practical projects and promoting good practice.
- Improve the management and sharing of biological records, and encourage the collection of new records, specifically targeting under-recorded species.

Highland Nature:
The Biodiversity Action Plan
Nàdar na Gàidhealtachd:
Plana-gnìomh Bith-iomadachd

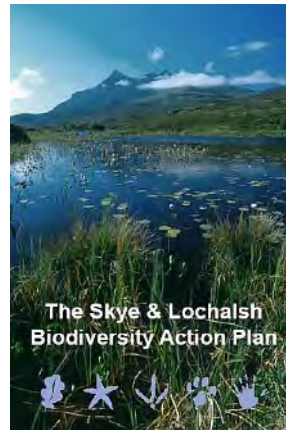
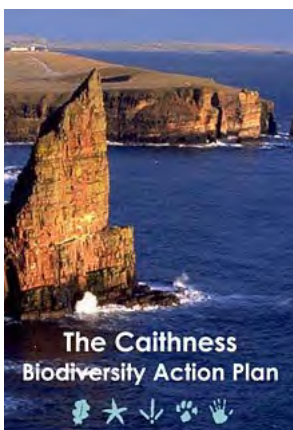


Highland Environment Forum
Foram Arainneachd na Gàidhealtachd 2015 – 2020

3.2.2 Local Biodiversity Action Plans:

LBAPs have been produced for seven areas (Caithness, Sutherland, Easter Ross, Wester Ross, Skye & Lochalsh, Lochaber, and Inverness & Nairn). The LBAP for Badenoch & Strathspey is covered by the Cairngorms Nature Action Plan and is being taken forward by the National Park Authority.

Between 2014 and 2017 the Sutherland Partnership Biodiversity Group, Caithness Biodiversity Group and Skye & Lochalsh Environment Forum updated their LBAPs. The intention is to update the remainder for incorporation in the next Highland Biodiversity Action Plan (2020 onwards).



3.3 Climate change Team, and carbon emission reduction

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.



In 2014 the Climate Change team won the SEPA SCDI Award for Excellence in Environmental Sustainability, and in 2017 won a Highland Council Quality Award for the Carbon CLEVER Community Grant Fund.

The team focuses on several key areas:

Reduction in energy use:

In 2016/17 the Council achieved a 6% reduction in its year-on-year carbon emissions, equivalent to a saving of over 4,000 tonnes of CO₂.

The Council manages its carbon emissions through its Carbon Management Plan, which was last updated in 2013. During 2018 there will be a review and update of the plan, to ensure the Council has a robust, up-to-date strategy in place to meet its emission reduction obligation.

Adaptation to climate change:

The Council has a duty to work with communities and partners to mitigate against and adapt to climate change, whilst raising awareness around sustaining and improving the natural, built and cultural environment.

Eco Officer Network:

The Council has recently refreshed its green ambassador network and rebranded this as an Eco Officer network. The network will support the climate change team to embed and deliver low carbon practices across the Council estate and wider. Campaigns will include waste reduction, energy efficiency and staff travel. Reducing staff travel will have a positive net impact on the environment.

Allotments and Community Food Growing strategies

These schemes are beneficial to biodiversity and reducing CO₂ emissions through enhancing sensitive use of green spaces. The Council will also revise its Food Growing Strategy in line with requirements under the Community Empowerment Act by end 2019.

3.4 Community Planning

Over the reporting period additional mainstreaming of biodiversity action took place through the Highland Community Planning Partnership (CPP), of which Highland Council is a member. The partnership produced a 'Single Outcome Agreement' that described how they would work together to meet the Scottish Government's 16 national outcomes while taking Highland priorities, including an additional environmental theme, into account.

This environmental theme focused on three key long term actions:

- The environment will be managed sustainably in order to optimise economic, health, natural heritage and learning benefits.
- The effects of climate change in the Highlands will be minimised and managed.
- People will have greater outdoor access and volunteering opportunities across Highland.

Actions to meet these targets were agreed by community planning partners. The Council was the lead for the following actions:

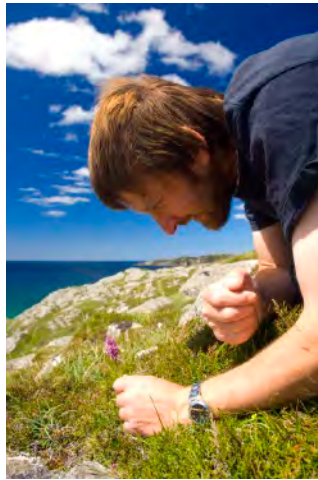
1. increase the number of access/health related projects (section 2.2, 2.3, 2.8, 2.11)
2. Support the establishment of new allotments on Highland Council land. (section 2.9, 2.12)
3. Ensure delivery of the projects in the Highland Biodiversity Action Plan (section 3.2)
4. Increase the development and use of renewable energy (section 3.3)
5. Achieve a carbon neutral Inverness in a low carbon Highland by 2025 (section 3.3)
6. Look at the feasibility of a Highland Land Use Strategy (section 5.1)
7. Carry out projects to tackle invasive non-native species (section 5.1)

Progress was reported annually to the Community Planning Partnership board. In 2017, the SOA was superseded by the Highland Outcome Improvement Plan (HOIP).

Section 4: Monitoring

Although Highland Council does not undertake any systematic monitoring of biodiversity, the Council does undertake some collection of biological data, including:

- **Rangers** are involved in many surveys and submit data to the Highland Biological Recording Group.
- Data is collected by the **Environmental Advice and Consultancy Team** in relation to projects they advise on - for example the Inverness west link road.
- The implementation of statutory environmental guidelines are monitored by **planning officers**.



- **The Highland Seashore Project** (2012 - 2015) submitted all records from volunteer surveyors to the Highland Biological Recording Group, whose own volunteers made them available to the National Biological Network.



- **Japanese Knotweed** observed along road verges was notified to the Biodiversity Officers and the Environmental Advice and Consultancy Team have continued that role. Website information will be updated in 2018, and will include information on how to report and control invasive plant species.

Section 5: Partnership working



Partnership working has become increasingly significant for the Highland Council. This is partly driven by financial constraints, but also reflects a growing recognition that partnership working can be an effective way of sharing good practice and delivering a wide range of shared objectives.

In association with other government agencies and third sector organisations the Council supports the Highland Environment Forum. HEF now forms a cornerstone to the Council's work on the natural environment.

5.1 Highland Environment Forum

The Highland Environment Forum was established in 2009 and reinvigorated in 2013 to support the work of the community planning partners in delivering the environmental theme of the Single Outcome Agreement. This had the aim of ensuring that 'Our natural heritage is protected and enhanced enabling it to deliver economic, health and learning benefits'.

The secretariat support for the Forum is jointly funded by Highland Council and SNH. Membership of the Highland Environment Forum has risen from nearly 50 organisations, groups and public bodies to over 170 in 2017. The website holds information on all the Forum activities, and shares news and events with its members.

The aims of the Forum from 2013 to 2017 have been to:

- Foster and coordinate activity on environmental matters, both within and at the Highland level.
- Take forward relevant actions identified in the Single Outcome Agreement, and be a valuable source of practical advice on the joint delivery of SOA outcomes.
- Identify and respond to emerging environmental agendas, and provide a link between local groups and national strategies, action plans and reporting procedures.
- Raise awareness and promote good practice on environmental issues across Highland.

In Autumn 2017 the new Highland Outcome Improvement Plan (HOIP) was signed off. The plan has been redefined to focus specifically on reducing inequality, and does not include 'environment' as a separate theme. The future work of the Highland Environment Forum is currently being reviewed and agreed by members in light of this. Biodiversity will remain one of the Forum's key work streams, and progress in delivering the Highland Biodiversity Action Plan will be monitored by the Biodiversity group.

HEF members meet biannually with several working groups covering a broad range of biodiversity issues:

1. **Biodiversity** (2006 to date): This group of partners oversees the delivery of the Highland Biodiversity Action Plan Projects, and runs an annual conference.
2. **Highland Invasive Species Forum** (2006 to date): The steering group meets annually to network, share information, identify gaps in operation etc. An annual invasive species forum engages with a broader audience to share experience and good practice.
3. **Outdoor volunteering** (2015 to date): Established after the 2015 Biodiversity Conference to promote volunteering events and opportunities. The Highland Outdoors Volunteers facebook page run by working group members is key to promoting their volunteering opportunities.
4. **Marine Litter** (2017): A working group was established following the September 2017 Forum meeting. It is in the process of identifying priorities for future action.
5. **Reducing carbon use** (2014 - 15): Advised and supported the delivery of the Carbon Clever declaration, which was signed up to by Highland businesses and organisations.
6. **Wildlife crime**: Discussion and workshops at the Highland Environment Forum in September 2014 contributed to the establishment of a Highland Partnership Against Wildlife Crime. An initial meeting of a Highland PAW Group was held in September 2015, with the strategy to tackle wildlife crime in Highland launched in March 2016.
7. **Wildfire**: Now undertaken by by Sottish Fire and Rescue Service.
8. **Land use strategy**: This group looked at how Highland might develop a land use strategy. The work of the group is currently on hold, until a clear direction and funding support is available from Scottish Government.

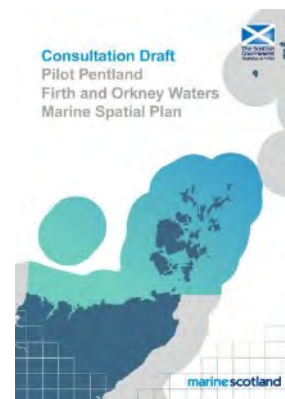
5.2 Pilot Pentland Firth and Orkney Waters Marine Spatial Plan

The pilot Pentland Firth and Orkney Waters Marine Spatial Plan was a joint project between Highland and Orkney Councils.

In 2016 the partnership won an award in the Partnership category at the Scottish Awards for Quality in Planning, and in 2017 they were winners of the ‘Excellence in Plan Making’ award from the UK Royal Town Planning Institute.



The team receiving their Scottish Quality in Planning Award



5.3 Peatlands Partnership

Highland Council is a member of the Peatlands Partnership. The Peatlands Partnership includes Scottish Natural Heritage, Forestry Commission (Scotland), The Highland Council, RSPB Scotland, Plantlife International, the Environmental Research Institute (University of the Highlands and Islands), Highland Third Sector Interface, the Flow Country Rivers Trust, Northern Deer Management Group and Highlands and Islands Enterprise.

The current activities of the Partnership include delivering the Flows to the Future project, an ambitious project which aims to restore areas of blanket bog in the heart of the Flow Country, promote and develop our knowledge about the role of peat and carbon storage, and involve and connect people with this precious habitat, delivering real economic benefits for one of the least densely populated areas in Scotland.

5.4 Wester Ross UNESCO Biosphere

The Wester Ross Biosphere was created in April 2016 when UNESCO formally recognised the area as a Biosphere Reserve. The Council is represented on the Board by a local Councillor. The Council also part-fund the project officer, who oversees the development of a 10-year plan for the biosphere. The Biosphere aims to promote the development of a sustainable economy and society in Wester Ross based on the outstanding natural heritage.

5.5 Nevis Landscape Partnership

The Nevis Landscape Partnership is made up of a collective of environmental organisations, local and national, working together to protect and enhance the land. The Council is one of the funding partners for this landscape scale work, which is undertaking a number of biodiversity conservation projects - including tree nurseries, pinewood restoration and a botanical survey of the north face of Ben Nevis.

5.6 Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA)

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



Photo: Wester Ross, from the [Unesco website](#)

Section 6: Communication

As part of the previous Biodiversity Duty Plan a communication plan was established which included the provision of talks and training to council staff, generating press releases and regular news and information updates for the Highland Biodiversity website. In early 2014 Highland Council members were given the opportunity to become Species Champions and 22 Councillors signed up to promote a UK priority species across the Highlands. This scheme is due to be relaunched in 2018.

Some of the key actions undertaken to promote and communicate the benefits of biodiversity are highlighted below:

6.1 Highland Biodiversity Conferences

These have been held annually. A diverse programme attracts expert speakers and a full house.

- **Pollinators and other Highland biodiversity (2017):** The conference was attended by 60 delegates (venue capacity).
- **Highland Wildlife Fair (2016):** Held in the new Inverness College building, more than 300 visitors attended a series of talks and had the opportunity to visit 34 stalls run by voluntary organisations involved in Highland biodiversity.
- **Environmental Volunteering in the Highlands: Do we need a Collaborative Approach? (2015):** The conference had a range of speakers and delegates from the environmental and volunteering sectors. The Highland Environment Forum Volunteer Working Group has taken actions from the conference and continues to meet to promote joint working.



Ranger-led walk in the North West Highlands Geopark

6.2 Countryside Ranger activities

6.2.1 Ranger-led events

From 2014 - 17 the Rangers have run 862 guided walks and events across the Highlands. These were attended by 10,007 people. In addition the Rangers led another 410 specially requested guided walks for local groups, attended by 11,800 people. 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 and puffin watches, geocaching, wildlife art and the John O'Groats walking trail.

Rangers have also run biodiversity-themed events in partnership with other organisations including Flows to the Future, North West Highlands Geopark, Highland Archaeology Festival, Geology Month etc.

Rangers have worked in partnership with the Caithness Science festival each year focusing on peatland (2016) and bats (2017).

6.2.2 Rangers work in schools

From 2014 - 17 rangers have undertaken 1,693 school visits including supporting the Eco Schools programme; the John Muir Award; 'Catch me if you Cam' - an Earth Watch project involving schools and wildlife trail cameras; school grounds projects and activities in the wider countryside.

The Scottish Countryside Ranger Association Wildlife Champions Challenge has been used at a number of schools, and rural skills development has taken place at Ardnamurchan High School.

In the future rangers hope to work in partnership with Trees for Life delivering school activities about red squirrels, prior to their reintroduction to nearby woodlands.



Ranger-led walk at Faraid Head

6.3 Press releases (2005 to 2016): These were produced regularly through the Highland Council Press Office.

6.4 Highland Council Planning Officers training (2010 to 2016): Annual training was provided by the Biodiversity Officer. These will be resumed in 2018.

6.5 Biodiversity talks (2013 to 2016): These were held monthly in the Council Chamber and were open to all.

6.6 SNH Sharing Good Practice events (2005 to 2016): The Biodiversity Officer regularly attended relevant training courses.

6.7 LBAP Coordinators meeting (2005 to 2016): The Biodiversity Officer regularly attended the the bi-annual meetings.

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.

These range from developing guidance to support Development Plans and development management including mapping of green network priorities along the A96 corridor between Inverness and Nairn to ensure robust guidance for developers.

Successful partnership working has enabled the continued success of the Highland Environment Forum, ongoing support to several large landscape partnerships delivering biodiversity gains on the ground and the completion of the highly successful Highland Seashore Project.

The Council continues to work in partnership with SSE to deliver a regional Golden Eagle Conservation Management Plan in the Monaliadh. Through this significant research has been undertaken and there will be ongoing work with local communities to highlight the importance of this species.

The Countryside Ranger service made a significant contribution to biodiversity in Highland and continue to engage with large numbers of residents and visitors through their varied public engagement programme.

Appendix 1 also summaries how the Council's activities have contributed to the Scottish Government's Biodiversity targets.

Challenges

Budget constraints present the Highland Council with some major challenges, and the opportunity to review how to work most effectively to fulfil its biodiversity duties. This will be partly met by ensuring council staff continue to mainstream biodiversity responsibilities through service delivery and through the work of the Environmental Advice and Consultancy Team.

As funding streams for all government agencies are reduced it is increasingly difficult to find long term funding for large-scale commitments - eg the management of invasive non-native species. The ability to increase involvement in activities that are beneficial to biodiversity or to support local biodiversity projects are similarly affected.

The Highland Council will continue to work in partnership to maximise its contribution within this challenging financial climate.

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 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 ensure that local authorities achieve their 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 the local biodiversity process and the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy.

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

Appendix 1: 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.

Targets/key steps from Chapter 1 (Healthy ecosystems) of the “2020 Challenge for Scotland’s Biodiversity”	Action?	Justification
(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, the Nevis Landscape Partnership and the Wester Ross Biosphere.
(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.
Targets/key steps from Chapter 3 (Biodiversity, health and quality of life) of the “2020 Challenge for Scotland’s Biodiversity”	Action?	Justification
(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.	√	<p>Green networks are identified in the Highland-wide and Local Development Plans.</p> <p>The rangers work is focussed on engaging people of all ages and backgrounds in enjoying and learning about nature.</p> <p>Highland Council and SNH fund the Highland Environment Forum, where partners are working to create a Green Health Partnership for the Highlands.</p>
(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 and SNH fund the Highland Environment Forum, where partners are working to create a Green Health Partnership for the Highlands.
(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.	√	Highland Council and SNH fund the Highland Environment Forum, which includes members from agencies, the voluntary sector and private businesses. Responsibility for biodiversity is at the heart of the Forum's work.
Targets/key steps from Chapter 5 (Land and freshwater management) of the "2020 Challenge for Scotland's Biodiversity"	Action?	Justification
(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.	N/A	
(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.	N/A	
(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.	√	The Highland and Argyll Flood Risk Management Plan follows the principles presented in the Flood Risk Strategy - both have been signed off by SEPA.
(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.	N/A	
Targets/key steps from Chapter 4 (Wildlife, habitats and protected places) of the "2020 Challenge for Scotland's Biodiversity"	Action?	Justification
(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, the Nevis Landscape Partnership and Wester Ross Biosphere.
(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.