

The Highland Council
Planning, Development and Infrastructure Committee
4 November 2015

Agenda Item	20
Report No	PDI 75/15

Highland Council's Biodiversity Duty Delivery Plan

Report by Director of Development and Infrastructure

Summary

This report presents the annual progress report on the Biodiversity Duty Delivery Plan 2015/17. Members are invited to consider and approve the Highland Council's Biodiversity Duty Delivery Plan Report 2015/16 (**Appendix 1**).

1. Background

- 1.1 Biodiversity is the variety of all life on earth and all the places where it is found. It is also the name given to a process of focusing conservation efforts on the rarest, most important, or most threatened species and habitats in an area.
- 1.2 All public bodies have a statutory duty to "further the conservation of biodiversity". Three successive plans have been drawn up to help the Council's Services deliver this duty, covering the periods 2008/10, 2011/14 and now 2015/17.
- 1.3 The current Highland Council Biodiversity Duty Delivery Plan 2015/17, was approved by the Planning, Development and Infrastructure Committee on 5 November 2014.

2. Report on the Council's Biodiversity Duty Delivery Plan 2015/17

- 2.1 **Appendix 1** provides details of the Delivery Plan across four agreed sections. The first section focuses on the delivery of biodiversity-related policy across the Council, whilst the second provides action plans for different areas of work within Council Services. The remaining sections deal with communication and reporting. Progress is briefly summarised below.
- 2.2 Biodiversity Policy Delivery
Five of the policies are being delivered with ongoing actions. One policy has not been progressed due to a lack of a national policy and delivery plan.
- 2.3 Service Action Plans
There are four service action plans to consider:
 - Countryside Rangers: This is progressing well with four actions being delivered, one action with limited progress;
 - Community Services: One action is on target, two with limited progress and two with no progress;

- Development and Infrastructure: One action is being delivered. Two have limited progress and two are not being delivered at present; and
- Care and Learning: The single action has limited progress to date.

The delay in delivering some of the above actions is due primarily to the availability of resources and competing demands for officer time. All of the outstanding actions will be carried forward, however where it becomes apparent that actions cannot be achieved a further report will be brought to committee.

2.4 Communication Strategy

The communication strategy is part of the Biodiversity Duty Delivery Plan. The delivery of this is progressing well.

Key successes:

- 27 Councillors have become Species Champions; and
- 25 Biodiversity talks have been delivered over 2 years to 250 staff and members of the public.

2.5 Reporting and Review

The cycle of reporting and review of the plan is aligned with the Committee report cycle, with an annual report given to the Planning, Development and Infrastructure Committee.

3 Conclusions

- 3.1 The Highland Council's 2015/17 Biodiversity Duty Delivery Plan has delivered a number of valuable outcomes. Although a few actions have been delayed, it is anticipated that they will all be delivered over the duration of this plan.

4. Fit with the Single Outcome Agreement

- 4.1 Delivering the Biodiversity Duty Delivery Plan and strengthening the Highland Environment Forum will help the Council deliver SOA National Outcomes 1, 10 and 12. The local outcome is "Our natural heritage is protected and enhanced enabling it to deliver economic, health and learning benefits". In the Highland SOA 2013-19 the Biodiversity Duty Delivery Plan helps to address actions in the "Health Inequalities and Physical Activity" and "Environmental Outcomes" chapters.

5. Implications

5.1 Equality and Gaelic:

There are no equality or Gaelic implications arising from this report.

5.2 Climate change/Carbon Clever:

The implementation of the Biodiversity Duty Action Plan will support a wide range of long-term benefits in relation to the climate change and Carbon Clever aspirations via the safeguarding and enhancement of biodiversity.

- 5.3 Rural:
The implementation of the Biodiversity Duty Action plan will have a positive impact on the rural environment.
- 5.4 Legal and risk:
Without the Biodiversity Duty Delivery Plan there is a risk that the Council will be found in breach of its statutory duties under the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004.
- 5.5 Resource:
Most of the actions in these plans are delivered at no additional cost to existing operations or create better partnerships to improve service delivery. If there are future resource implications these will be the subject of a future paper for Committee consideration and approval.

Recommendations

Members are invited to consider and approve the Highland Council's Biodiversity Duty Delivery Plan Report 2015/16 (Appendix 1).

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Date: 14 October 2015

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Background Papers:

Appendix 1: Report on Highland Council's Biodiversity Duty Delivery Plan 2015/16

Appendix 1: Highland Council's Biodiversity Duty Delivery Plan 2015-16 Report.

Summary of the Report

Biodiversity

Biodiversity is the variety of all life on earth and all the places where it is found. It is also the name given to a process of focussing conservation efforts on the rarest, most important or most threatened species and habitats in a particular geographical area. There are three tiers of biodiversity action planning in the UK; Local Biodiversity Action Plans (there are 8 covering Highland), the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy and the UK Biodiversity Action Plan.

1. Introduction.

The Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004 states, "It is the duty of every public body and office-holder, in exercising any functions, to further the conservation of biodiversity so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions.

The Wildlife and Natural Environment (Act) Scotland 2011 requires all public bodies to report on their delivery of the Biodiversity Duty by December 31 2014.

To this end the Council has produced 3 Biodiversity Duty Deliver Plans (2008 -10, 2011–14 and 2015 -17) and last reported on delivery to the Scottish Government in November 2014.

The Biodiversity Duty Delivery Plan is divided into 4 sections:

- Biodiversity Policy Statement.(section 2 below)
- Service Action Plans.(section 3 below)
- Communication Strategy(section 4 below)
- Reporting and Review.(section 5 below)

The majority of the plan concentrates on the Service Action Plans. The relevant services are Care and Learning, Community Services and Development and Infrastructure.

In addition to these services the Countryside Rangers have created an action plan specifically for their activities. Rangers are one of the key on-the-ground operatives delivering the Biodiversity Duty.

Finance and Corporate Development do not have specific action plans, their engagement in the Biodiversity Communication Plan and participation in the Council's Sustainable Development is seen as the best way of engaging them in the process.

2. The Biodiversity Duty Delivery Plan - Biodiversity Policies.

There are six policy headings that the Council reports under.

2.1. Supporting Biodiversity Action.

Action

The Council will promote the biodiversity of the Highlands and ensure that the aims and objectives of the 8 Local Biodiversity Action Plans, the Highland Environment Forum and the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy (SBS) are, where appropriate, delivered through its services.

Current Status

Highland Council continues to support the activities of 8 local biodiversity groups and with SNH, facilitates and supports the Highland Environment Forum (HEF). The support of these groups and the Scottish and UK plans are vital to conserving Highland's biodiversity.

Since 2008 the Landfill Communities Fund (managed by the Council) has disbursed nearly £300,000 to biodiversity projects. It remains a prime source of funding for local short-term biodiversity projects.

The Council employs a full-time Biodiversity Officer. In the past the post focussed on external partnership working and supporting local biodiversity groups. In 2010 the focus of the post was altered to spend a greater time working on biodiversity matters within the Council. The Biodiversity Duty Delivery Plan is the framework for this.

Future/ Ongoing Actions

- The Council will continue to support local groups and the Highland Environment Forum as resources allow.
- The Council will continue to support the delivery of the Highland Biodiversity Action plan where appropriate.
- The Council will seek funding for projects to deliver biodiversity action locally.
- Delivery of the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy where appropriate.
- The Landfill Communities Fund will continue to remain available for biodiversity projects.

2.2. Development.

Action

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.

Current Status

Policies 58 to 61 in the Highland-wide Local Development Plan highlight this requirement. The following guidance also contributes to this e.g. The Sustainable Design Guide: Interim Supplementary Guidance, Green Networks: Interim Supplementary Guidance, Construction Environmental Management Process for Large Scale Projects Guidance Note and Highland's Protected Species: Supplementary Guidance.

The Policies in the HwLDP are currently under review to ensure they are fit for purpose and delivering what they set out to do.

Future/ Ongoing Action

- Biodiversity input into the HwLDP Policy review.
- The need for further supplementary guidance will be considered and if required new supplementary guidance will be produced.
- Planning Officers training days on biodiversity issues will be organised on demand.
- The Biodiversity Officers will input to new planning policy and plans as required.

2.3. Green Networks.

Action

The Council will work with stakeholders and statutory bodies to identify "green networks" in the major development areas and around all the major settlements in Highland.

Current Status

As stated in the Green Network: Supplementary Guidance, "A green network comprises the network of greenspaces and green corridors within and around settlements, linking out into the wider countryside, helping to enhance the area's biodiversity, quality of life and sense of place. A green network provides the setting within which high quality, sustainable growth can occur."

The A96 Green Network is the only one to have been fully mapped to date. Developer's contributions are seen as the key mechanism to create and manage Green Networks on the ground, however due to the economic slowdown activity has been limited.

Future/ Ongoing Action

- Work with colleagues in the Countryside Service, Planning and SNH to map out a Green Network opportunity map. Initially for the A96.
- Work with the Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SUDS) Graduate to identify existing and potential linkages between these wetlands and other areas of habitat and greenspace in the City of Inverness boundary.
- Seek to extend the SUDS Graduate Post to survey the Inner Moray Firth development area in 2016.
- Organise a SUDS conference in November 2017 to highlight best practice and how to deliver it on the ground.

- Invite Planning Officers to the above conference as part of their ongoing biodiversity training.
- Work with the developers of the new A96 to integrate the above into the delivery on the ground.
- Seek to deliver the A96 Green Network.
- By 2017 identify and analyse the Inner Moray Firth, South East Sutherland, Thurso-Wick, Fort William and Portree Green Networks and seek a delivery mechanism and funding for this.

2.4. Local Nature Reserve (LNR) Network.

Action

The Council will support local communities if they desire to develop Local Nature Reserves.

Current Status

Merkinch LNR is the only one in Highland at the moment. Expressions of interest have been made from other areas but as yet have not led to any new LNRs.

Future/ Ongoing Action

- Continue to promote LNRs and provide advice and support to interested local groups.

2.5. Ecosystem Approach.

Action

The Council will, where appropriate, support ecosystem-scale projects to conserve and restore native biodiversity and help Highland's biodiversity adapt to climate change.

Current Status

At present no such multi-agency project has been proposed in Highland.

Future/ Ongoing Action

- When an Ecosystem Approach Project is proposed Highland Council will consider its role in such a project.
- Use the Green Network mapping as the basis for delivery of the Ecosystem Approach in the urban/ suburban areas of Highland when a project is proposed.

2.6. Data Sharing Partnerships.

Action

The Council will work with statutory bodies and local stakeholders to develop an environmental data-sharing partnership for Highland.

Current Status

A 3-year application for funding has been secured from SNH to continue the validation, verification and mobilisation of biological data collected in the Highlands and to continue managing the Highland Biological Records Database. A small partnership of organisations including Highland Council has agreed to provide match funding until 2017. As part of this funding the

Outer Hebrides Biological Recording Group, Highland Biological Recording Group and the Lorn Natural History Group have started working more closely together with a view to formalising this relationship as a biological data hub covering these areas.

At the national level a Scottish Biological Information Forum (SBIF) has been created. This forum could be of great benefit to developing further an environmental data-sharing partnership for Highland. SBIF is progressing slowly in its actions but until there is a national policy or agreement on Local Data Sharing Partnerships which outlines how national organisations will contribute locally, it cannot be fully delivered in Highland.

Future/ Ongoing Action

- Attend partnership meetings to manage the Highland Biological Records Database.
- Support this partnership as resources allow.
- Organise a stakeholders meeting to look at developing a local biological data hub with the Outer Hebrides Biological Recording Group, Highland Biological Recording Group and the Lorn Natural History Group.
- Support the Scottish Biological Information Forum's action plan wherever possible.

3. Service Action Plans

The Care and Learning Service, Community Services and Development and Infrastructure Service have developed Biodiversity Action Plans.

In addition to these the Countryside Rangers have also created an action plan specifically for their activities.

Finance and Corporate Development in the Biodiversity Communication Plan and their participation in the Council's Sustainable Development work is seen as the best way of engaging them in the Biodiversity Duty process.

For schools the strong uptake of the Eco-schools programme and the new Curriculum for Excellence provide strong links to biodiversity as does the continued work of the Countryside Rangers with school groups.

3.1. Countryside Ranger Biodiversity Action Plan.

Action	2014 Action Status	Information	Lead Partner	Action taking place in		
				2015	2016	2017
1. Educational work in schools	Ongoing	Includes Eco Schools programme, John Muir Award, school grounds projects, activities in wider countryside, all aspects of natural heritage and aspects of cultural heritage that relate to the countryside.	Rangers	•	•	•
2. Guided walk and events programme	Ongoing	Programme in place	Rangers	•	•	•
3. Site management on Ranger managed sites.	Ongoing	Overall management to maintain/encourage/ restore native species and habitats, and coherent ecosystems	Rangers	•	•	•
4. Identify one area of greenspace managed in each of the main population centres of the Highlands (10 towns over 2,000 inhabitants) to be selected for a trial change in its management to maximise its biodiversity.	Some progress	Meeting required with senior rangers to progress this.	Biodiversity Officer Senior Rangers/ TECS			•
5. To identify any areas with existing or potential community interest or involvement, which would be suitable as a Local Nature Reserve.	Ongoing. Currently there is no interest from other communities to do this.	It is an aspiration within the Council's Biodiversity Policy that there should be an LNR in each of Highland's ten, large population centres.	Rangers	•	•	•

3.2. Development and Infrastructure Service Biodiversity Action Plan

Action/ Target	Action Status	Information	Lead Partner	Action taking place in		
				2015	2016	2017
1. A rolling series of annual training events on planning and biodiversity.	On Target	Training has taken place annually 2011 on Bats, the Sustainable Design Guidance, EPS and Invasive Species	Biodiversity Officers/ D&I	•	•	•
2. Green Networks for the Inner Moray Firth development corridor mapped.	Some progress	Some opportunity mapping has taken place by the Countryside Team.	D&I/ SNH	•	•	•
3. Enhancement of the Inner Moray Firth development corridor Green Network	Some progress	Now planning work for biodiversity.	D&I/ SNH	•	•	•
4. Enhancement of the A96 Corridor Green Network	Some progress	Now planning work for biodiversity.	D&IP/ SNH	•	•	•
5. Identify and analyse the South East Sutherland, Thurso-Wick, Fort William and Portree Green Networks.	Some progress	D&I has undertaken some work.	D&I/ SNH	•	•	•

3.3. Care and Learning Biodiversity Action Plan.

Action/ Target	Action Status	Information	Lead Partner	Action taking place in		
				2015	2016	2017
Ensure all large care homes have bird table(s) and feeders and biodiverse landscaping.	Some progress	Issue around who pays for the bird feed has still to be addressed.	Biodiversity Officer	•	•	•

3.4. Community Services Biodiversity Action Plan.

Action/ Target.	Action Status 2014	Information	Lead Partner	Action taking place in		
				2015	2016	2017
1. When clearing ditches only clear one side in any one year. Over-dig that side to maintain water flow.	On target		CS	•	•	•
2. Give a talk to the grounds maintenance teams about invasive plants in the area and best practice in managing them.	On target	Delivered and ongoing since 2009. Focussing on Japanese Knotweed, Giant Hogweed and Himalayan Balsam	Rangers/ Biodiversity Officers	•	•	•
3. Identify one area of greenspace managed in each of the main population centres of the Highlands (10 towns over 2,000 inhabitants) to be selected for a trial change in its management to maximise its biodiversity.	Some progress	Biodiversity Officer to meet with Senior Rangers to progress this.	Rangers/ CS		•	•
4. Map the Japanese Knotweed on the road verge network to confirm its range.	On target	Database being populated and shared with CS	CS			
5. Continued involvement in and support of the Highland Invasive Species Forum	On target		TECS	•	•	•
6. Leaflet pack to all Council Tenants.	Some progress	Planned for Spring 2016.	Biodiversity Officer		•	
7. Deliver training to key staff on protected species and biodiversity	Some progress	Planned for 2015.	Biodiversity Officer	•	•	•

4. Communication Plan

Background:

The Biodiversity Duty Delivery Plan has engaged directly with a limited number of Council staff on specific biodiversity projects. This means that the vast majority of staff have no contact with the Biodiversity Officers or are aware of the projects that have been or are being delivered. To rectify this situation a Communication Plan was drafted in early 2014 and now forms part of the Biodiversity Duty Delivery Plan.

Aim:

This Biodiversity Communication Plan aims to raise awareness and understanding of Highland biodiversity, the issues affecting it and the actions needed to increase both staff and elected members involvement in practical action to conserve biodiversity.

Audience:

Elected members, Highland Council staff and Highland Council tenants.

Communication Plan 2015

Action	Group	Information	Action Status
1. Biodiversity Talks	For Members of Staff	These talks give staff the opportunity to hear about a specific species group or biodiversity issue from an expert in the field and hear what they could do to get involved should they wish to do so. These are currently held in the Council Chamber, it is planned that they will be webcast from November 2014 onwards.	Completed in June 2015. 25 talks in total.
	For Elected Members	There will be the initial offer of three short, 30 minute, talks on Highland's Biodiversity, Protected Species and Planning and Invasive Species. These subjects were chosen as they are issues that many elected members are dealing with on a regular basis. After the initial talks the elected members will be asked if they wish further talks on other subjects.	Delivered on the 27 March 2015. Further planned after the next Council election.

2. Species Champions	For Elected Members	The elected members will be invited to become a species champion. This follows on from the successful initiative that Scottish Environment Link undertook with MSPs. The choice of species will come from a list of over 70. The role of a species champion will be to take an interest in “their” species and act as an advocate for it, highlighting its importance and/or the issues affecting it in relevant debates or other opportunities that arise. The current list can be seen in Appendix 2.	27 Species Champions to date.
3. Leafleting Tenants	Council Tenants	All Council Tenants will receive a suite of SNH leaflets highlighting nature on their doorstep and also what can be done to garden for wildlife. It is understood that not all tenants have gardens. Tenants will be asked what the Council can do to make their area better for biodiversity.	Spring 2016
4. Biodiversity Awareness Survey	All	Determining how successful the Communication Plan is is very important. This will be done through a short, annual questionnaire for both elected members and staff. The first survey will take place in February 2014 and will form the baseline from which to measure progress. This will be repeated each Autumn. The questions can be found at the end of this paper.	Each January. Decided to undertake the survey every two years to avoid consultation fatigue. Due Jan 2016
5. Review	Biodiversity Officer	The results of the annual survey will be reviewed when the results are available and any changes required to the Communication Plan will be made then.	Each October
6. Reporting	Biodiversity Officer	The Communication Plan will be reported on as part of the annual Biodiversity Duty Reporting cycle and the triennial Biodiversity Duty Reporting cycle for the Scottish Government.	Each November
7. Newsletter	All	After each Biodiversity Duty Reporting Round an annual	Each Autumn. Not

		Highland Council biodiversity newsletter will be published. It will highlight the work undertaken by the Council for biodiversity, the results of the questionnaire and also interesting news from the world of Highland Biodiversity. The first newsletter will appear in Spring 2014 and then each subsequent Autumn.	produced in 2014. Newsletter due in November 2015.
8. Website	Biodiversity Officer	Keep the news section of the Highland Biodiversity website up to date and publicise relevant events.	Ongoing
9. Email	Biodiversity Officer	Publicise events through the email contact lists.	Ongoing.
10. Press Releases	Biodiversity Officer	Ensure all events are well advertised and have pre and post publicity if appropriate.	Ongoing.

5. Reporting and Review

The cycle of reporting and review of this plan is aligned with the Committee cycle. An annual report is prepared for the Planning, Development and Infrastructure Committee. The report is made publically available at 3 yearly intervals beginning in 2015.

Jonathan Willet
October 2015