

<b>Agenda Item</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Report No</b>	<b>CCWG/5/2022</b>

## **THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL**

**Committee:** Climate Change Working Group

**Date:** 28<sup>th</sup> January 2022

**Report Title:** The Highland Climate Change Conference 2021

**Report By:** Executive Chief Officer – Performance and Governance

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

1.1 This report provides a summary of the Highland Climate Change Conference which took place on Thursday 21<sup>st</sup> and Friday 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2021.

### **2. Recommendations**

2.1 Members are invited to:

- i. Discuss and note the contents of the report.

### **3. Implications**

3.1 Resource - There are no direct resource implications arising from this report.

3.2 Legal – there are no legal implications arising from this report.

3.3 Community (Equality, Poverty and Rural) – There are no direct community implications arising from this report. However, the Highland Climate Change Conference 2022 provided an opportunity for various community groups to present actions being taken as well as where additional support is required to meaningfully tackle climate change at a local level. Taking a more coordinated, partnership approach to climate action regionally by identifying areas for potential collaboration through the conference is likely to have significant positive benefits for remote-rural communities, many of which are likely to be disproportionately impacted by the changing climate.

3.4 Climate Change/Carbon CLEVER – There are a number of climate change implications arising out of this report. The Highland Climate Change Conference identified several key areas where attendees highlighted a requirement for more action, for example, improved climate communications, and this will be used in to inform the development of the Council's net zero

strategy over the course of 2022.

- 3.5 Risk – Given increasing public awareness of the issues around the climate and ecological emergency, as well as the increasing frequency of extreme weather events, it is important that the Council plays a leading role regionally in taking, supporting and encouraging climate action. The annual Highland Climate Change Conference presents an opportunity to both showcase the good work happening on the ground whilst also identifying areas where more focus and attention is required.
- 3.6 Gaelic – There are no Gaelic implications arising from this report.

#### **4. Background**

- 4.1 As Glasgow prepared to host COP26, the Highland Climate Change Conference 2021 (HCCC) provided a timely and significant opportunity to bring people together from across Highland and beyond to discuss and propose local solutions to the climate and ecological emergency.
- 4.2 The purpose of HCCC 2021 was to showcase the breadth and variety of work being undertaken across the whole Highland region to address the climate and ecological emergency, whilst giving residents, businesses and the third sector opportunities to discuss and highlight areas where increased focus may be required. This would then help to inform the preparation of the Council's approach to achieving net zero emissions.
- 4.3 HCCC 2021 and its associated workshops took place virtually on Thursday 21<sup>st</sup> and Friday 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2021. Several eminent speakers from a variety of sectors took part in the conference, which explored topics relating to energy, land and sea, net zero and resilient communities. This report summarises the work involved in preparing for the event, the key outcomes as well as indicative plans for HCCC 2022.

#### **5. Preparing for the Conference**

- 5.1 To facilitate the delivery of a meaningful event and to ensure the appropriate speakers were invited, it was important at the outset to set clear themes and focus areas. The Climate Change and Energy team identified and agreed the key themes for the conference in consultation with the Leader of the Council as well as the Chair of the Economy & Infrastructure Committee and Climate Change Working Group. The themes agreed were:
- Energy
  - Land and Sea
  - Net Zero
  - Resilient Communities
- 5.2 Once the themes were confirmed, the team contacted over 100 different potential participants, ranging from politicians to community activists, asking them to contribute short films and presentations to be screened over the course of the event. In addition, a variety of different community groups, local businesses and NGOs were contacted separately to contribute to each day's lunchtime montage in order to highlight some of the wider good practice which is already being undertaken across the region.
- 5.3 The team developed a communications plan to identify clear milestones in the lead-up to the event, including the creation of a webpage, and drafted various press releases to raise awareness and promote the event, which were shared through the Council's Corporate Communications team.

- 5.4 A detailed plan of the structure and delivery of the two days was also developed and acted as a useful reference for all planning meetings ahead of the conference. The agenda was drafted and finalised as key speakers were confirmed and contributions were received, but this was necessarily quite a fluid process given that contributions were digital and pre-recorded rather than live at the conference. As a result, the final agenda was published by the Council's Graphic Design team in the week leading up to the conference.
- 5.5 Additionally, to help assess, predetermine and address potential technological issues, the team tested all systems multiple times prior to the conference to ensure both days ran as smoothly as possible. Microsoft Teams Live Event was used for the themed sessions, branching off to MS Teams meetings for the workshops.

## **6. Topics and Conference Speakers**

- 6.1 Each day of the conference began with a welcome by the Council's Climate Change Coordinators, followed by a keynote speech relevant to the specific theme being discussed. Day 1 opened with an introduction from Cllr Margaret Davidson, Leader of the Highland Council, and this was followed by a keynote speech from Drew Hendry MP, Member of Parliament for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey ahead of the start of the energy section.

### **6.2 Energy**

This section explored the emerging technologies which will help the energy industry reach net zero in Highland. Attendees heard about a variety of topics including; developments in hydrogen in Highland from Joanne Allday, Port of Cromarty Firth; the work of SSE Renewables presented by Andy Sloan, SSER; energy transition research from Professor Susan Krumdieck, Islands Centre for Islands Technology, and many more.

### **6.3 Land & Sea**

Arianne Burgess, MSP for Highlands and Island gave a keynote speech which introduced the next theme, Land and Sea. This section took a closer look at how our land and sea can positively contribute to tackling the climate and ecological emergency. Attendees heard about The Flow Country, from Steven Andrews, The Highland Council; blue carbon from William Austin, St Andrews University, as well as the Highland Good Food Partnership and other relevant topics.

### **6.4 Net Zero**

Day 2 was introduced by Mairi McAllan MSP, Minister for Environment and Land Reform. This section examined what net zero actually means and explored how we can achieve it within Highland. Attendees heard about The Highland Council's journey to net zero from several Council officers including Keith Masson, Nathan Chaplin, and Philip Shannon. It explored Green Finance with Patrick Jean-Martel from NatureScot, and the Landscape Finance Lab from Paul and Graham Neville, both of NatureScot.

### **6.5 Resilient Communities**

The final theme and session of the conference was resilient communities and was opened by a keynote speeches from Cllr Trish Robertson, Chair of the Economy and Infrastructure Committee and the Climate Change Working Group and Richard Lochhead MSP, Minister for Just Transition, Employment and Fair Work. This section celebrated the positive work already being undertaken across Highland to tackle the climate and ecological emergency. Attendees heard from community groups and organisations already taking action including the ROSE Project, presented by Simon Middlemas, Thurso Community Development Trust's efforts by Joan Lawrie, whilst Highland Adapts was introduced by Emma Whitham. Many other projects,

communities and people already taking action were also showcased.

## **7. Summary of Workshop Discussions**

7.1 Over the course of the two days, the Climate Change & Energy team hosted four workshops, one for each theme – Energy, Land and Sea, Net Zero and Resilient Communities. The outcomes from each workshop are summarised below.

### **7.2 Energy**

The first session was chaired by Keith Masson, who challenged the attendees with questions relating to how and what we can do to work better together to move the energy agenda forward in Highland. Attendees highlighted various issues around energy in Highland including the regressive nature of tax hidden within electricity bills, the interest in developing local solutions for local problems, grid restrictions and The Pebble's Trust's Sustainable Renovation Guide. The recurring theme was the need to build local energy resilience which will bring a variety of economic opportunities to local communities. Attendees agreed that energy producers and Government need to be pressured to invest in communities where renewable energy is being generated – the current policies and funding do not go far enough and do little to contribute positively to the region's net zero ambitions.

7.3 The restrictions with the electricity grid were discussed as well as the issue of surplus renewable energy – attendees agreed that we need to look at the many positives Highland has and use this an opportunity to tackle the issue locally. In the future, there is likely to be a significant opportunity to produce green hydrogen from constrained wind, which offers significant economic potential for Highland.

7.4 There was a discussion relating to electric vehicles and associated charging infrastructure in Highland. It was highlighted that to minimise pressure on the grid as we move towards net zero, there could be shift away from the majority of families owning at least one car to a more shared, circular economy-type model to reduce the miles undertaken whilst decarbonising the transport sector. Another topic of conversation was the required improvements to public transport and the switch to hydrogen buses and trains, which again offers significant opportunities for the region from both an economic perspective, but also the decarbonisation of our transport system.

7.5 Closing remarks from the group included a recognition that putting pressure on local politicians is important to promote and enable change in Highland communities, whilst communication plays a significant role in how people respond to the climate and ecological emergency – it is important to take people on this journey if required and sustainable changes are to be made.

### **7.6 Land and Sea**

Joe Perry and Cllr Trish Robertson chaired the session and opened the conversation around Highland's food systems. Attendees discussed various topics relating to ocean plastics, sheep farming, local crofters'/farmers' needs and biodiversity.

7.7 Attendees agreed that it will be impossible to achieve net zero if we don't adequately address issues with food systems. It was agreed that the culture needs to shift to eating more local, in-season food and education is imperative if this is to be achieved. There was a discussion on small, diverse farms with less machinery and increased labour. Additionally, attendees highlighted the need for additional support for regenerative farming that promotes biodiversity. However, it was highlighted that deer management creates an issue with planting trees on food production spaces.

- 7.8 A theme of the discussion was around the opportunities within Highland and how currently we underestimate what land in Highland can be used for. There is a pressing need to think big and be ambitious, and to reimagine what we can grow here. Attendees stated the subsidy system needs to change to reward farmers/crofters for being stewards of the land. The Highland Good Food Partnership can possibly help bridge the gap between the crofters' lifestyle and the demand for fruit and veg, and there is a role for the Crofters Commission to incentivise and make land available.
- 7.9 The issue of food waste was discussed; it was highlighted that communities need help to deal with food waste and there needs to be a more coordinated, Highland-wide approach. It was anticipated that developments around the circular economy will accelerate delivery of a solution, but communities out with Inverness need support for this and can't be expected to be responsible indefinitely.
- 7.10 Attendees also highlighted the importance of education, especially through raising the awareness of biodiversity and pollinators within schools. The Highland Council's verge management was challenged and suggested as a potential positive contributor to better biodiversity, and attendees wished to see the Council commit to a region-wide verge policy that positively supports improved biodiversity outcomes.
- 7.11 The session ended with attendees detailing some key thoughts and aspirations for COP26. Attendees shared their hopes for the conference in Glasgow; to inspire and energise action at all levels, to ensure Highland sequestration capacity was recognised at a national and international level, that COP26 should be a catalyst for action, and a desire to see adaptation and climate justice being more robustly recognised for their importance alongside achieving net zero emissions.
- 7.12 Net Zero  
Keith Masson and Katie Andrews chaired the session on net zero and what it means for the Highlands. The conversation started with the challenge of retrofitting properties in Highland due to the cost and perceived lack of available support and advice. It was also suggested that some certified installers increase their costs unreasonably when quoting for works to install low carbon energy systems such as solar thermal or heat pumps. It was proposed that creating a charitable fund to help others make energy efficiency changes to their homes could be helpful. Attendees highlighted that Home Energy Scotland were a useful source of information in respect of low carbon energy works at home.
- 7.13 Attendees agreed there was too much emphasis on targets, rather than the establishment of a road map on how to achieve net zero. There was a need to better identify areas/items which were achievable and secure funding to make meaningful action. It was queried whether there were going to be clear policies on retrofitting and new builds in the near future within the Highland Council's estate, and it was confirmed that this is currently being developed.
- 7.14 There were questions about the status of the Council's Energy from Waste project and if the carbon footprint of the project had been fully considered. It was noted the possible impacts of this project on community level recycling/waste projects. Education was important in this area and if communities understand the cost and implications of waste, it would likely encourage and promote positive behavioural change.
- 7.15 Communication was highlighted as an issue; in particular, the net zero message needs to be shared and better understood more widely. The message should be led by a Government organisation/body and should provide guidance and education, for example through schools or community projects. One attendee drew attention to the book Project Drawdown

(<https://drawdown.org/>) and described it as a project that brought together national experts and economists to allow comparison of the effectiveness of different methods in managing climate change.

- 7.16 Transport was discussed, with one attendee highlighting that whilst tourism is a major and growing part of the economy, thanks in part to the success of the NC500, it was unfortunate that there is currently no public transport to fully connect the entirety of the route.
- 7.17 Biodiversity highways were discussed, which have the potential to improve active travel networks which run parallel to roads. Attendees referred to the ambitious 200 year plan for Cairngorms Connect and envisaged other areas of Highland where forests were regenerated and people could connect with the land.
- 7.18 Resilient Communities  
Emma Whitham and Katie Andrews chaired the workshop which celebrated the proactive and positive action already taking place in Highland and beyond and discussed what opportunities there will be in our green future.
- 7.19 Attendees opened the conversation by noting the huge role of communities and recognised that there is a disproportionate expectation on community volunteers to push forward the net zero agenda. There is a need to build resilience and sustainability-thinking into community groups, whilst embedding policies is easier to do from the outset. There is a desire and a need to do more to support communities than there had been in the past. The critical role that the Climate Action Hub will play was highlighted by attendees. In addition, attendees noted the important role of employers: the private sector needed to be a key contributor to this, circulating information to the community through employees, pulling businesses together with their community. Customers will influence business if they want to see this change happen, and it was more important now than ever to avoid greenwashing to avoid reputational damage.
- 7.20 The circular economy was discussed at length, and it was noted that evidence of circular economy principles could be seen historically in cultures throughout Highland. However, it was stressed that we have moved away from such principles in recent times. The practicalities of delivering a circular economy are challenging, as it was felt we get tangled up in our own systems. It was recognised that in developing the wellbeing economy and a just transition, it will be important to return wealth to our communities. Various examples of circular economy projects were referenced around Highland – for example, Skye’s repair cafés which are volunteer led and have no funding to operate, whilst Caberfeidh horizons are starting a second-hand shop where they will take in and repair items. Boat of Garten community hall and hub also have a repair café. There is the feeling of a movement starting around ‘repairs cafés’ with a few different models now in operation.
- 7.21 The session closed with attendees looking ahead to 2030. Many reflected on shared experiences of the pandemic and how important community has been – it was accepted that Highland communities are more reliant on each other now and that will likely continue into the future. A vision was proposed whereby, by 2030, every village will have weekly farmers’ markets and it will become part of the local culture for residents to visit to do their shopping and engage with neighbours, whilst also harvesting local produce from community growing spaces. Every community will have an orchard that provides free, nutritious food to the community. Additionally, offshore wind energy comes onshore across our coastline, with energy which is not used by the grid being utilised to address fuel poverty. It was also hoped that land use practices could change to make it easier for communities to buy out land and manage it sustainably.

## **8. Feedback, Outcomes and HCCC 2022**

- 8.1 The feedback about this year's conference has been extremely positive. During each workshop, verbal responses were gathered and the team also pulled together a short survey for attendees to submit their feedback after the event. Respondents recognised the huge amount of work and effort which had gone into arranging the conference, how timeous it was ahead of COP26, whilst highlighting the significant role the Highland region will play in helping Scotland end its contribution to climate change by 2045.
- 8.2 The conference attracted over 200 people across both days from people all over Highland and beyond. Of the people who completed the survey, over 60% said the conference was excellent or very good. One of the survey questions asked, 'What did you like about the conference?' One response summarised, 'The range of topics, the pacing and the workshops were excellent. It was evident that a huge amount of work had gone into the organisation of the event and I came away feeling much more positive about climate action going on across the region.'
- 8.3 The workshops were another success, with over 83% of survey responses rating them excellent or very good. As presented in the section 4 of this paper, the range of discussion was extensive and every session was well attended, with excellent levels of participation from attendees.
- 8.4 In response to the question, 'What did you think of the diversity and range of themes and content?', 56% responded, excellent. However, 22% responded, fair. Survey respondents requested more live sessions as well as improved networking opportunities. It was also suggested that additional items on National Planning Framework 4 and Highland Council's Waste Management would have been beneficial.
- 8.5 Reflecting on the purpose of HCCC, the event demonstrated the range and scale of work to address the climate and ecological emergency pan-Highland, whilst giving local people and businesses the opportunity to better understand some of the challenges which lie ahead. In addition, the workshops gave attendees the chance to constructively critique the Council's approach to climate action, and the feedback received (some of which is highlighted within this report) will be used to shape and inform the Net Zero Strategy that will be developed over the course of 2022.
- 8.6 Looking ahead to next year's conference, attendees indicated a preference for a hybrid event, with both digital and in-person elements. Planning for HCCC 2022 will begin shortly after the local government election in May 2022, and a paper outlining plans for the event will be presented to Members of the Climate Change Working Group later in the year.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer – Performance and Governance

Date: 14<sup>th</sup> January 2022

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