

Agenda Item	6iii
Report No	CCC/20/25

The Highland Council

Committee: Climate Change

Date: 13 August 2025

Report Title: Net Zero Thematic Group Update – Planning, Land Use and Environment

Report By: Assistant Chief Executive - Place

1 Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 The report provides an update on the work being progressed through the Planning, Land Use and Environment Thematic Group and specifically focuses on key areas where work is underway to address the climate and ecological emergencies across the Council estate and wider.
- 1.2 The paper does not cover all actions identified within the Ecology Strategy or those undertaken by the Development Plans and Flood Risk Management Teams. These actions will be reported separately to the Economy and Infrastructure Committee and Full Council.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to **consider** and **note** the progress of actions by the Planning, Land Use and Environment Thematic Group.

3 Implications

- 3.1 **Resource** - Funding and staff time for works undertaken across this thematic group are drawn from a variety of sources, including service budgets, the Capital Programme and external grants including funding from the Scottish Government.

In 2024/25, the Council received £250k from the Scottish Government to develop a Coastal Change Adaptation Plan (CCAP). A further £400k has been allocated for 2025/26 to support the progression of related projects. Additionally, the Scottish Government has recently relaunched the Nature Restoration Fund.

- 3.2 **Legal** – The Thematic Group works within the following legal framework that underpins and supports the Council’s responsibilities in addressing the climate and ecological crises. This framework includes the National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4); The Town and Countryside Planning (Scotland) Act 1997; the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 (which underpins NPF4); the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009; the Flood Risk Management (Scotland) Act 2009; the Scottish National Adaptation Plan (SNAP) 2024-2029; and the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004, as amended by the Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011.

There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

- 3.3 **Risk** - The Regional CCAP has identified many potential communities at risk of coastal flooding and erosion. Whilst officers will seek to progress the understanding of the risk and develop potential solutions, this will only be feasible for a small number of communities based on current available budget.

With regard to the Nature Restoration Fund, the primary risk remains the short timeframe to secure commitment and spend, as has been the case in previous years.

- 3.4 **Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people)** – There are no direct H&S implications arising from this report; however, the Council is obliged to meet all necessary H&S requirements for any projects taken forward.

- 3.5 **Gaelic** - There are no Gaelic implications arising from this report. However, in keeping with agreed Council policy, Gaelic will be promoted where relevant projects are subsequently progressed.

4 Impacts

- 4.1 In Highland, all policies, strategies or service changes are subject to an integrated screening for impact for Equalities, Poverty and Human Rights, Children’s Rights and Wellbeing, Climate Change, Islands and Mainland Rural Communities, and Data Protection. Where identified as required, a full impact assessment will be undertaken.

- 4.2 Considering impacts is a core part of the decision-making process and needs to inform the decision-making process. When taking any decision, Members must give due regard to the findings of any assessment.

- 4.3 This is a monitoring and update report and therefore an impact assessment is not required.

5 Planning

- 5.1 The next Highland Local Development Plan (HLDP) will be a new-style LDP, the first in Highland to be prepared from inception to adoption under Scotland’s reformed planning regulations and National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4). It will play a crucial role in directing future development in Highland in a way that supports the transition to Net Zero as addressing the climate emergency, mitigating and adapting to climate risks are embedded within the spatial strategy. HLDP will work in tandem with other Council strategies to reduce carbon emissions and adapt to current and future risks of climate change by promoting nature recovery and restoration in the area. HLDP will have a lifespan of 10 years and is anticipated to be adopted in 2028.

5.2 The Council's Development Plans Team are progressing the HLDP in accordance with the Local development planning guidance and new regulations, in close collaboration with our statutory key agencies, wider Council services, the development industry and our local communities. The first mandatory milestone is the submission of the HLDP Evidence Report which is subject to an independent assessment by the Scottish Government's Department of Planning and Environmental Appeals (DPEA). This assessment known as the Gatecheck will determine whether the Council has demonstrated sufficient baseline information on which to progress the preparation of HLDP. Work on the HLDP Evidence Report is well underway and the Council anticipates that this will be finalised by the end of 2025. Most authorities in Scotland are also at this stage and are working to adopt new-style LDP's by 2028.

Progress on the HLDP will be reported through the Economy and Infrastructure Committee and Full Council.

6 Environment

6.1 Resourcing

A key aim of the Council's Ecology Strategy was to increase resourcing to address the ecological emergency. In support of this, the Council's new ecology planning advice service, comprising two Ecology Planning Officers and supported by a Senior Ecology Officer, has been operational for nine months. This team provides advice to the planning authority on understanding and minimising the impacts of major and national developments on biodiversity, as well as ensuring opportunities for biodiversity enhancement are maximised, in line with the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 and NPF4.

The Ecology Survey Team, established in 2016, continues to provide an expert consultancy service for internal Council projects. This includes protected species surveys, biodiversity enhancement advice, and ecological clerk of works provision. This ensures that Council developments take cognisance of biodiversity and are delivered in accordance with relevant legislative requirements, including the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, whilst enabling faster and more cost-effective access to specialist advice compared to the external market.

To further strengthen capacity, the Environment Team is currently recruiting a Biodiversity Officer - a new post jointly funded between the Environment Team and Amenity Services. This role will support a wide range of duties across the Council estate and with local communities, including actions outlined in the Ecology Strategy and the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy. Key priorities will include delivering nature-positive management for the Council estate (e.g., grassland management, verge maintenance, weed control and community food growing) assisting in the management and delivery of NRF funded Council projects, and developing the next phase of Biodiversity Action Plan/s.

Following the approval of the 'Biodiversity Enhancement and Compensatory Planting – Upfront Scheme Endorsement for Developers' paper at the Economy and Infrastructure Committee in May 2025, the Council is recruiting an additional Forestry Officer (part-externally funded) and an additional Ecology Officer (fully externally funded). These posts will assist in the upfront delivery of biodiversity enhancement and compensatory planting projects to secure landscape-scale environmental improvements across Highland.

6.2 ***Policy & Guidance***

In line with the Ecology Strategy, the Environment Team continues to develop policy and guidance. Guidance on Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS), focusing on terrestrial plants, is currently at an advanced draft stage. Its purpose is to ensure the Council complies with its environmental duty under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 to act in the public interest regarding INNS and provides information and advice on the best management and control practices to follow during the development of Council sites where terrestrial INNS have been identified. Member approval for the guidance will be sought at a future Climate Change Committee/Economy and Infrastructure Committee.

The newly appointed Senior Arboricultural Officer, based within Amenity Services, is developing an Ash Dieback Plan for the Council. Work on a revised Forest and Woodland Strategy is scheduled to commence in late 2025/26.

6.3 ***Nature Networks***

In accordance with NPF4, the Council is required to identify and map Nature Networks across Highland. The Nature Network Project Officer, appointed on a two-year fixed term basis, is now six months into this process. Current efforts are focused on identifying and mapping nature networks to connect 30 by 30 sites (sites designated for nature) across Highland.

To inform this work, three stakeholder workshops focused on the Inner Moray Firth area have been held. These sessions brought together key agencies, environmental NGOs, and specialist conservation groups and charities to provide advice and feedback on the draft Nature Network mapping. Participants have included NatureScot, Forestry and Land Scotland, RSPB, High Life Highland, the Highland Environment Forum, Buglife, Butterfly Conservation Trust, Trees for Life, National Trust for Scotland, among others. Similar workshops are scheduled for Caithness and Sutherland and the West Highlands and Islands in the coming months.

6.4 ***Local Nature Conservation Sites***

In parallel with the Nature Network mapping, sites that meet the criteria to be considered as Local Nature Conservation Sites (LNCS) are being identified. These are an important mechanism to highlight and protect sites of local importance and value for nature from harmful development and where impacts cannot be avoided to ensure appropriate mitigation is put in place. LNCS designation can also be used for landowners to lever in additional funding.

Sites currently under consideration include rare and threatened habitat not otherwise designated, such as remnants of native Caledonian pinewood and Atlantic rainforest, and machair, as well as discrete areas supporting important Highland species, including the Great Crested Newt, Great Yellow Bumblebee, and Small Blue Skipper.

6.5 ***Nature Restoration Fund (NRF) 2025/26***

Subject to the successful recruitment of an additional officer by the Community Regeneration Team, and with support from the Environment Team, the Council plans to relaunch its Nature Restoration Fund Community Grant Scheme. This scheme will offer approximately £200-£250k in grants to local groups, charities, and NGOs delivering nature-positive projects across the Highlands.

The remaining NRF allocation will be directed to internal Council-led projects. Delivery of these projects will, in part be, dependent on the successful recruitment of the new Biodiversity Officer.

Projects currently under consideration include:-

- Developing ambitious Woodland Management Plans for key Council woodlands where there is scope to deliver both significant biodiversity enhancements and improved access to nature for local communities and visitors.
- Following an approach from Ardersier and Petty Community Council, the Council will look to fund initial works to support the establishment of a new Local Nature Reserve at Ardersier Common.
- Funding a study to develop a wetland area near Strathpeffer, in partnership with the Flood Risk Management Team, to deliver both biodiversity benefits and help mitigate flooding effects further down the catchment.
- Supporting a new design study and public consultation for Bignold Park, to incorporate areas of nature-rich grassland.
- Urban tree planting to restock areas where mature trees have been lost through age or disease, or where the addition of urban street trees would enhance amenity and biodiversity.

7 Coastal Adaptation/Flooding

7.1 The Regional Coastal Change Adaptation Plan (Regional CCAP) was agreed at the Economy and Infrastructure Committee on 29 May 2025.

Within the Highland Council area, the coastal zone is home to a significant proportion of the population and contains critical infrastructure, including roads, railway lines, bridges, and harbours. The Regional CCAP provides an overview of the risks across the Highland Council area, identifying communities and assets that are least resilient to climate change, rising sea levels, coastal erosion and flooding.

The Regional CCAP provides a framework and flexible adaptive pathway approach to address these risks over time, enabling the Council and coastal communities to be more resilient to climate change, coastal erosion and flood risk now and in the future. The report also recognises that the Highland Council is not responsible for all assets, and this will require a collaborative approach with other asset owners and neighbouring Local Authorities, where appropriate.

The Regional CCAP has identified 29 high-risk locations for further investigation and the development of Local Change Adaptation Plans (Local CCAPs). Approximately £1m is currently allocated in the Capital Programme, including project-specific case study funding, to support the development of Local CCAPs over the next five years. While not all high-risk locations will be addressed within this timeframe, the Regional CCAP identifies where any additional future funding should be focused, whether through the Capital Programme or by other partners. The Flood Risk Management Team has secured £130k of case study funding which has already helped to develop projects. An additional £400k has been secured for 2025/26 to continue progressing projects.

7.2 Progress to date:-

- **Nairn** – Adaptive Pathway Approach plan developed and £300k case study funding secured from Scottish Government to progress detailed study into beach replenishment options. This builds on £105k of previous case study funding.
- **Golspie** – The Flood Risk Management Team has worked extensively with the local community Flood Group to support them to progress actions, including securing £100k case study funding from Scottish Government this year, to develop detailed design and obtain necessary approvals for a new groyne at the Old Pier. The community/local partners have also successfully sourced funding to progress the project. A share of previous case study funding for relic defences was used to develop the initial groyne proposal.
- **Avoch** – Tenders have been issued for a Coastal Erosion and Flood Risk Assessment which will lead to a Local CCAP for Avoch.
- **Core Paths** – Building on earlier case study funding, the Flood Risk Management Team supported the Access team to secure funding for a coastal core path project.

The Highland Council coastal case studies, undertaken to date, have contributed to Scotland's national understanding of coastal processes, impacts and opportunities.

Designation: Assistant Chief Executive - Place

Date: 8 July 2025

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Background Papers: None

Appendices: None