

Agenda Item	11
Report No	CP/21/26

The Highland Council

Committee: Communities and Place

Date: 13 August 2026

Report Title: Draft Greenspace Biodiversity Management Strategy 2026-2030

Report By: Assistant Chief Executive – Place

1 Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 This paper presents the Council's *draft* Greenspace Biodiversity Management Strategy 2026-2030. The *draft* Strategy provides a structured set of principles, objectives and targets to be applied to the management of Council-owned greenspace to conserve, protect and enhance biodiversity.
- 1.2 Approval is being sought to take the *draft* Strategy out to a 6-week public consultation, after which the Strategy will be finalised and presented to Members at a future Communities and Place Committee for adoption.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to:-
 - i. **Note** the content of the *draft* Greenspace Biodiversity Management Strategy 2026-2030; and
 - ii. **Approve** the *draft* Greenspace Biodiversity Management Strategy 2026-2030 for a 6-week public consultation.

3 Implications

- 3.1 **Resource** – Implementation of the strategy will rely on a broad operational workforce across multiple Council services, including seasonal and fixed-term staff. There is currently no available additional budget to supplement existing resources, however, grants such as the Nature Restoration Fund may become available. Existing resource across key services provides a strong foundation for the delivery and implementation of the Strategy. Recent investment through the Council's Nature Restoration Fund allocation has secured essential assets and enhanced capacity, whilst key personnel involved in the Strategy's development and oversight are in place. The management strategy will require ongoing staff training and support to ensure consistency and continuity in delivery. Delivery of the proposed changes must be managed carefully, particularly where services are operating within tight resource and capacity margins. However, the approaches set out are designed to be low maintenance over time, with a phased implementation programme to support a smooth and manageable transition.
- 3.2 **Legal** – All public bodies have a statutory duty under the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004 to further the conservation of biodiversity when carrying out their functions and the Council has a statutory requirement under the Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011 to report against its biodiversity duty every three years. The Scottish Biodiversity Strategy to 2045 sets ambitious targets for Scotland to be nature positive by 2030 and to have restored and regenerated biodiversity by 2045. Action 13 of the Scottish Biodiversity Delivery Plan 2024-2030 seeks to ensure that by 2030 every park, reserve and publicly owned greenspace has a management and maintenance plan that reflects open space and local biodiversity outcomes.
- 3.3 **Risk** – Failure to proactively address the ecological and climate emergencies across all service delivery areas carries reputational risk, particularly considering the increasing political ambition at both local and national level around the nature recovery agenda. In addition, failing to utilise the public estate to halt and reverse biodiversity loss would mean missing an opportunity to increase ecological and climate resilience, as well as to unlock the ecosystem services benefits.
- 3.4 **Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people)** – Some health and safety risks are involved with the proposed changes to greenspace management. Longer grass and grass arisings may pose higher risk of fire during extended dry periods and potentially exposure to ticks. Changes to some machinery and maintenance protocols will require updated risk assessments for operational staff to ensure ability to work safely under changes in routine.
- 3.5 **Gaelic** – The Strategy will adhere to the Council Gaelic Language Plan and Gaelic headings, and sub-headings will be added throughout.

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 **Integrated Impact Assessment – Summary**
- 4.3.1 An Integrated Impact Assessment screening has been undertaken on 24 June 2026. The conclusions have been subject to the relevant Manager Review and Approval.
- 4.3.2 The Screening process has concluded that there is no impact assessment needed at this stage. Members are asked to consider the summary in **Appendix 1** to support the decision-making process.
- 5 **Background**
- 5.1 Over recent years, Highland Council has committed to taking action on the biodiversity crisis; a climate and ecological emergency was declared in 2019, the Council became signatories to the Edinburgh Declaration on Biodiversity in 2022 and the importance of accelerating our response to these twin reinforcing emergencies was recognised in the Council's Administration Programme for 2022-2027.
- 5.2 The Council's Ecology Strategy and Action Plan (2024) was developed to identify key actions the Council could take to make progress on the commitments made for biodiversity and to link in with national targets and actions in relation to nature recovery. A number of the actions identified, particularly under Goal 2: Making Space for Nature, involve protecting and enhancing biodiversity across the Council's estate. Whilst some progress has been made to manage select areas for biodiversity, it has become clear that a strategic approach is necessary to a) enable consistent and effective biodiversity enhancement at scale, b) provide a clear rationale and transparent roadmap as to how and why management of Council greenspace may change and evolve over time and c) be fully accountable with measurable goals.
- 5.3 The *draft* Greenspace Biodiversity Management Strategy 2026-2030 (**Appendix 2**) sets out a structured and ambitious set of principles, objectives and targets that will guide management for biodiversity across the entirety of the Council estate in response to the ecological and climate emergencies. The Strategy recognises that many Council greenspaces have the potential to accommodate a variety of both large and small-scale improvements to benefit biodiversity. Equally, it acknowledges that change will not be suitable or appropriate for every site and each site must be considered in the round and on a case-by-case basis. The Strategy will act as an umbrella document from which more detailed operational management plans for key areas of Council greenspace will be developed.
- 5.4 The *draft* Strategy has been developed in collaboration with multiple services across the Council, most notably the Environment Team, Amenity Services and the Roads Team to ensure it is both ecologically sound and operationally deliverable. Members have also provided valuable input through a targeted workshop held on 23 June 2026. Should Members agree the recommendations set out in this report, we will also seek the views of the public. There will be further opportunities for the public to input as site-specific management plans are developed for larger parks and greenspaces.

- 5.5 In addition, 'Growing our Future', the Highland Council's Community Food Growing Strategy (2022-27), which was agreed in February 2022, identifies land in Highland which could be used for local food growing. The *draft* Strategy will support how the authority intends to increase the availability of land where there is an identified need.

6 The *Draft* Greenspace Biodiversity Management Strategy 2026-2030

- 6.1 The *draft* Greenspace Biodiversity Management Strategy sets out eight key objectives, with several measurable targets set for each objective to streamline delivery and monitoring. The timeframe for delivery of the targets for this first iteration of the Strategy is 2030, which aligns with Scottish Government targets and relevant actions set out in the Scottish Biodiversity Delivery Plan 2024-2030 and provides a realistic amount of time to adapt to changes whilst maintaining a sense of urgency.

- 6.3 The Strategy classifies the Council estate into a series of asset types, enabling tailored and practical management actions to be established. Each asset type provides a clear framework to ensure that the entirety of the Council estate can be considered in terms of its ability to contribute positively to biodiversity enhancement. The eight asset type categories are:-

- Public parks and amenity greenspace
- Burial grounds
- Roads and transport network
- Countryside sites
- Schools
- Buildings
- Streets and civic space
- Allotments

- 6.4 Basic management principles and aspirations are set out in the Strategy for each asset type with more detailed operational habitat management plans being developed for amenity greenspaces, burial grounds, and roadside verges. The amenity greenspaces habitat management plan is included as an example in **Appendix 2**. These will help guide practical implementation on the ground by Council operational teams and contractors and set out a range of options that may be available at each site to deliver biodiversity improvements. Many larger parks will have site-specific management plans developed in due course in collaboration with relevant Council services, local Members and in consultation with local communities.

7 Next Steps

- 7.1 Subject to Committee approval, the *draft* Greenspace Biodiversity Management Strategy 2026-2030 will be released for public consultation. In parallel, other relevant Council services will also be consulted. Following the conclusion of the public consultation, all comments will be collated and considered.

7.2 The finalised Greenspace Biodiversity Management Strategy 2026-2030 will be presented to the Communities and Place Committee for formal approval and adoption.

Designation:	Assistant Chief Executive – Place
Date:	18 June 2026
Author:	Oliver Jenkins-Boobyer, Nature Conservation Officer
Background Papers:	None
Appendices:	Appendix 1 – Integrated Impact Assessment Greenspace Biodiversity Management Strategy 2026-2030 Appendix 2 – <i>Draft</i> Greenspace Biodiversity Management Strategy 2026-2030 and 2a Amenity Greenspaces HMP

Integrated Impact Assessment Screening

About proposal

What does this proposal relate to? Strategy, Action or delivery plan

Proposal name: Greenspace Biodiversity Management Strategy 2026-2030

High level summary of the proposal: Strategy that sets out objectives and targets for biodiversity enhancement across the Council estate and provides practical management guidance for delivery on the ground.

Who may be affected by the proposal? Highland Council staff, residents and visitors.

Start date of proposal:

End date of proposal:

Does this proposal result in a change or impact to one or more Council service? Yes

Which Council services will be impacted by this proposal? Place

Does this relate to an existing proposal? No

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Service: Place

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Sign off date: 2026-06-24

Equalities, poverty, and human rights

Protected characteristics

Select what impact the proposal will have on the following protected characteristics:

Sex: No impact

Age: No impact

Disability: No impact

Religion or belief: No impact

Race: No impact

Sexual orientation: No impact

Gender reassignment: No impact

Pregnancy and maternity: No impact

Marriage and civil partnership: No impact

Protected characteristics impact details: Biodiversity enhancement across the public estate will have no impact upon protected characteristics.

Poverty and socio-economic

What impact is the proposal likely to have on the following?

Prospects and opportunities: No impact

Places: No impact

Financial: No impact

Poverty and socio-economic impact details: Biodiversity enhancement across the public estate will have no socio-economic impacts.

Human rights

Which of the below human rights will be affected by this proposal?No human rights will be affected

What impact do you consider this proposal to have on the human rights of people?No impact

Human rights impact details: Biodiversity enhancement across the public estate will have no impact on human rights.

Equalities, poverty and human rights screening assessment

What impact do you think there will be to equalities, poverty and human rights?No impact

Is a Full Impact Assessment required?No

Children's rights and wellbeing

What likely impact will the proposal have on children and young people? Children and young people will have greater access to nature and have opportunities to input on the management of their local greenspace.

Which of the below children's rights will be affected by the proposal?

Explain how the children's rights selected above will be affected: Children will have opportunities to input on the management plans for their local greenspaces through consultation events.

Children's rights and wellbeing screening assessment

What impact do you think there will be to children's rights and wellbeing? No impact

Is a Full Impact Assessment required? No

Data protection

Will your proposal involve processing personal data? No

Data protection screening assessment

What change will there be to the way personal data is processed? No personal data will be processed

Is a Full Impact Assessment required? No

Island and mainland rural communities

Does your proposal impact island and mainland rural communities? Yes

Could people in island and mainland rural communities be affected differently? No

Have any negative impacts been identified? No

Island and mainland rural communities screening assessment

What impact do you think there will be to island and mainland rural communities? No difference

Is a Full Impact Assessment required? No

Climate change

Does the proposal involve activities that could impact on greenhouse gas emissions

(CO2e)? Yes

Does the proposal have the potential to affect the environment, wildlife or biodiversity? Yes

Does the proposal have the potential to influence resilience to extreme weather or changing climate? Yes

Provide information regarding your selection above: The Strategy will help the Council make progress on tackling the twin climate and nature crises. Enhancing biodiversity across the Council estate has potential to sequester carbon in the soil and through tree planting as well as reduce emissions from reduced machinery use. Increasing biodiversity and providing habitat connectivity is the primary objective of the strategy. Increased biodiversity has potential to increase resilience to extreme weather and changing climate. At this stage the Strategy is still at Draft stage in preparation for public consultation.

Climate change screening assessment

Have you identified potential impact for any of the areas above or marked any as not known? Yes

Is a Full Impact Assessment required? No

Appendix 2 - Draft Highland Council Greenspace Biodiversity Management Strategy 2026-2030

1. Executive Summary

This Greenspace Biodiversity Management Strategy sets out how Highland Council will respond to the ecological and climate emergencies across its open and built estate. It provides a clear framework to guide the sustainable management of all Council-owned greenspaces and assets, ensuring that opportunities to protect, enhance and restore biodiversity are consistently identified and delivered.

The Strategy classifies the Council estate into a series of asset types, enabling tailored and practical management actions to be established. This structured approach ensures that all Council-owned land is considered to contribute towards halting biodiversity loss and restoring nature by 2030, in alignment with Scottish Government targets as set out in the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy.

Given the breadth of Council operations and the diversity of greenspaces, successful delivery will require coordinated action across multiple services at both strategic and operational levels. The Strategy also emphasises partnership working with local communities and stakeholders to ensure that actions are deliverable, locally appropriate and aligned with wider priorities.

Overall, this Strategy demonstrates Highland Council's commitment to enhancing biodiversity across its estate. It recognises greenspaces as vital assets that provide multiple benefits, supporting nature recovery and tackling climate change while improving the health, resilience and wellbeing of Highland's communities.

2. Introduction

2.1 Background

As the extent of the ecological and climate emergencies continue to intensify, the severity of the matter is being recognised more widely, and the evidence base has grown considerably. Addressing these twin reinforcing crises is now a high priority on local, national and international levels, reflected in global commitments such as the Convention on Biological Diversity, adopted by 196 countries. Highland Council recognises the need for action, declaring an ecological and climate emergency in 2019 and becoming a signatory to the Edinburgh Declaration on Biodiversity in 2023.

Highland is internationally renowned for its landscapes and iconic species, and contains an extensive network of designated sites, including 368 Sites of Special Scientific Interest, 90 Special Areas of Conservation, 52 Special Protection Areas, 12

National Nature Reserves, the Flow Country World Heritage Site and part of the Cairngorms National Park. This underscores Highland's significance for nature and places a clear responsibility on the Council to protect and enhance biodiversity across the region.

The Council is a major landowner within settlements and more urban areas. Naturally, these areas are where people are located, making the greenspaces here amongst the most accessible in Highland, and their relative value far exceeds their size alone. For a proportion of the population, these greenspaces will be their primary access to nature and the outdoors. Enhancing the biodiversity value of the Council's greenspaces across Highland will help to aid the resilience of our communities to the rising impacts of climate change, such as flooding, urban heating and air quality.

The State of Scotland Greenspace Report found that two thirds of people feel strongly that greenspaces should provide opportunities to see nature but only one third of people feel that their local greenspace provides this. Indeed, the UK saw 97% of its wildflower meadow habitat lost between 1935 and 1985. Against this backdrop, a strategic and coordinated approach is essential to ensure that Highland Council's estate is managed effectively to support nature recovery, now and into the future.

"Here in the UK, 40% of species are in decline, more than 40 million birds have been lost from our skies over the past 50 years, and a quarter of mammals are threatened with extinction including many once common species, such as the hedgehog. These ongoing declines, on top of earlier losses since the industrial revolution have led to the UK becoming one of the most nature-depleted nations on Earth. We still have many important habitats and species, and beautiful patches of nature to enjoy, but these are a shadow of what we would have if we recovered nature." – Nature Positive 2030 summary report, JNCC 2021.

2.2 Asset Types

The purpose of this strategy is to improve the management of the Council estate for biodiversity across all Council-owned and managed assets. To achieve this effectively, assets are grouped into several categories that reflect their differing functions, contexts and management responsibilities across the authority. This approach enables the application of consistent management principles, while allowing for tailored and practical actions appropriate to each asset type.

The asset types provide a clear framework to ensure that every category of Council asset is considered to contribute towards biodiversity enhancement. It also supports more efficient collaboration with relevant teams and stakeholders by aligning actions with existing responsibilities. Each of the eight asset types are set out within this strategy, with supporting context and a summary of the methodology for improving management and enhancing biodiversity. More detailed habitat management plans are

provided for parks, amenity greenspaces, roadside verges and burial grounds to support practical delivery.

Table 1: Asset Types

Asset Type	Description
Public Parks and Amenity Greenspace	Public parks are larger, accessible open spaces within settlements with opportunities for recreation and exercise, and amenity greenspaces are the smaller open spaces within settlements such as grass areas near housing.
Burial Grounds	Cemeteries and churchyards both active and closed for new burials which usually serve a settlement.
Roads and Transport Network	Roadside verges which are managed by the Council as well as other paths and routes such as active travel routes and transport infrastructure such as bus stops.
Countryside Sites	Portfolio covering a wide range of more rural sites including woodland, beaches, picnic areas, car parks and tourist attractions managed by the Countryside Projects Team.
Schools	Primary and secondary schools including the buildings themselves as well as the school grounds.
Buildings	All council owned buildings which include Council offices, public buildings such as libraries, and Council housing.
Streets and Civic Space	Hard surfaced areas for pedestrians within urban areas including pavements, pedestrianised streets and public hardstanding open space.
Allotments	Community growing spaces on Council land which are managed by local allotment associations.

2.3 Benefits of Green Infrastructure

There is now substantial evidence of the physical and mental health benefits of spending time in nature, with the NHS increasingly recognising this through initiatives such as ‘Green Prescriptions’. Access to nature can enhance quality of life and overall wellbeing, supporting creativity, cultural connection, and opportunities for reflection and mindfulness. Quality greenspaces close to where people live are also fundamental to placemaking and social cohesion, strengthening communities and pride in their local area, with many people appreciating the aesthetic value of green features. Further information on the health benefits and wider ecosystem services provided by greenspaces is available through the Highland Green Health Partnership.

Community greenspaces also present valuable opportunities to support health and wellbeing alongside biodiversity enhancement through initiatives such as local food growing. Producing food locally can provide affordable, healthy and sustainable produce while fostering social interaction, skills development and community resilience. The Highland Community Food Growing Strategy 2022–2027 sets out actions in this area, and this Strategy will support its delivery through initiatives such as community orchards. Additional resources and mapping of active food growing initiatives are available via the Highland Good Food Partnership.

Nature is one of Highland’s greatest assets, making a significant contribution to the regional economy. Natural capital supports approximately 53,900 jobs and contributes around £8 billion annually to the Highlands and Islands economy. Tourism is a key sector, employing around 21,000 people, nearly 18% of the total workforce, and continues to grow, with 8.4 million visitors generating £1.68 billion in direct spending in 2023. Highland’s internationally renowned landscapes and wildlife are central to this success, underlining the importance of their protection and enhancement. As a major landowner, particularly within settlements, the Council has a unique opportunity to lead by example and set a high standard for biodiversity management across the region.

Highland’s wildlife has evolved over millennia as interconnected systems, with species relying on one another to maintain functioning ecosystems. Enhancing biodiversity helps restore this balance, strengthening Nature Networks and increasing the resilience of habitats to pressures such as climate change and fragmentation. Highland is home to many specialist species assemblages and increasing green infrastructure will provide opportunities for them to disperse across the landscape. Many species once common in urban areas have experienced significant declines. For example, European hedgehog have declined in number by 96% since 1950 in the UK. This highlights the need to enhance biodiversity within and around settlements, recognising that nature is not confined to the wider countryside but is an integral part of where people live. Improving the quality and extent of urban habitat can help to conserve many declining species and is an essential part of restoring biodiversity.

Ecosystem services are another key benefit that can be harnessed by implementing green infrastructure and enhancing biodiversity. These are direct and indirect benefits from nature and include provisioning, regulating, cultural and supporting services. These services are worth billions of pounds annually in Highland and are essential to the region but can go largely unnoticed. Critical regulatory services include carbon sequestration, flood management, water purification, pollination, disease control and air quality. As pressures from climate change and biodiversity loss increase, so does the importance of enhancing biodiversity to harness the many benefits of ecosystem services.

2.4 Public Estate Overview

Highland Council own and manage a broad range of greenspaces and assets with potential for biodiversity enhancement. Several services are responsible for different elements of this estate, and many sites will receive input operationally and strategically from various teams to deliver a multitude of functions simultaneously. The list below provides an overview of key figures to illustrate and briefly summarise the extent of Highland's public estate at time of writing. This Greenspace Biodiversity Management Strategy provides guidance with the aim of enhancing biodiversity across a significant proportion of the assets listed below.

- Over 1000 hectares of grassland.
 - Over 800 hectares routine maintenance.
 - Over 100 hectares seasonal maintenance.
 - Over 70 hectares high maintenance.
 - Over 20 hectares set aside.
- Over 240 Burial Grounds spanning over 140 hectares.
- Around 200 Schools spanning around 150 hectares.
- Over 300 Play Areas spanning around 40 hectares.
- Over 80 Countryside Sites spanning nearly 400 hectares.
- Nearly 7,000km of Adopted Roads.
- Over 1,700km of Footways.
- Over 2,500km of Core Paths.
- 3 Designated Long-Distance Routes.
- Over 100 Car Parks.
- 2 Local Nature Reserves spanning around 75 hectares.
- 7 Allotment sites with over 300 Plots.
- Roughly 14,000 Houses.
- Over 2,000 Bridges and Culverts.

3. Strategic Context

This Strategy has drawn from legislation and policy to ensure that it is well-informed and addresses key issues with consistency. It has also been developed to align with many other Highland Council strategies, ensuring synergy between priorities where multiple outcomes are achievable. The key literature has been noted below for both legislation and policy, and local strategy.

Table 2: Legislation and Policy

Name	Relevance
Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004	All public bodies in Scotland have a statutory duty to further the conservation of biodiversity.
Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011	Requires all public bodies in Scotland to report on their compliance with the biodiversity duty through publication of biodiversity reports every 3 years.
Scottish Biodiversity Strategy to 2045	Sets goals for Scotland to have halted biodiversity loss and be nature positive by 2030, having protected 30% of its land and sea, and to have restored and regenerated biodiversity by 2045.
Scottish Biodiversity Delivery Plan 2024 to 2030	Action 13.1 “ensure that by 2030 every park, reserve or publicly owned green space has a management and maintenance plan that reflects the Open Space Strategy and Local Biodiversity Action Plan outcomes.”
Pollinator Strategy for Scotland 2017-2027	Aims to maintain and increase abundance, diversity and distribution of native pollinators across Scotland through sympathetic management of greenspaces and road verges.
Edinburgh Declaration on Biodiversity	Highland Council declared an ecological and climate emergency in 2019 and became a signatory to the Edinburgh Declaration on Biodiversity in 2023.
Highland-wide Local Development Plan	Policy 74 and 75, “green networks should be protected and enhanced”, “fit for purpose greenspaces and sports facilities that support and enhance biodiversity.”

The UK Forestry Standard	Sets out the approach of the four governments of the UK, on how to practise sustainable forest management in the UK including a detailed section on biodiversity.
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Table 3: Local Strategy

Name	Relevance
Highland Local Biodiversity Action Plan 2021-2026	Action 2.8 “Highland Council will assess its own estate and identify opportunities to manage it more effectively for biodiversity.”
Ecology Strategy and Action Plan	Many actions are directly addressed from the Ecology Strategy, particularly under Goal 2: Space for Nature.
Tree Management Strategy	Addresses policy 11 by increasing planting of native trees on Council estate.
Verge Maintenance Manual	Directly addresses section 4.2 Special Verges for Biodiversity through working with Roads Officers to designate and manage Special Verges.
Play Park Strategy and Action Plan 2023-33	Objective 2 to be environmentally sustainable, increase biodiversity and increase natural play opportunities.
Community Food Growing Strategy 2022-2027	Aims to provide more opportunities for sustainable, nature-friendly food growing such as community orchards.
Net Zero Strategy	Contributes to net zero goal by reducing fossil fuel emissions from machinery, increasing Carbon sequestration, and increasing resilience to climate change.
Inverness Strategy	Addresses several aims, chiefly “development of a grassland management plan to maintain public green space and support increased biodiversity where suitable.” And “expansion and creation of green networks and corridors across the city.”

Highland Forest and Woodland Strategy	Guidance and support for well-designed and sensitive woodland management and expansion proposals that will complement and restore Highland's native woodland.
Integrated Weed Control Strategy and Action Plan	Enhances biodiversity by reducing use of herbicides such as Glyphosate and mentions biodiversity management such as meadow creation as methods to reduce the need for weed control.
Local Transport Strategy 2025-2035	Addresses Policy 1.13 to integrate blue-green infrastructure into the design of transport schemes.

4. Objectives and Targets

The aims of this Strategy have been broken down into eight objectives, with each broken down further into several targets. These targets are designed to be deliverable and quantifiable, ensuring that action is well guided and progress is monitored.

Table 4: Objectives and Targets

No.	Objectives	Targets	Timeline
1	Increase diversity and abundance of native wildlife in Council-managed greenspaces.	1.1 Sampled sites to show increase in diversity of native plants with species lists growing over time.	2026-2030
		1.2 Abundance of a number of indicator pollinators to increase on sampled sites.	2026-2030
2	Increase resilience to pressures such as climate change and disease.	2.1 Preference for native, local provenance plants and trees to be introduced to sites, with other plants of high biodiversity value considered where appropriate.	2026-2030
		2.2 Invasive non-native species and other invasive species to be under effective treatment regime and biosecurity guidance included in management plans with awareness raising and training for biosecurity delivered to operatives.	2026-2030

		2.3 Increase species and structure diversity within woodland to increase resilience, with regard made to climate change adaptation.	2027-2030
3	Improve ecological connectivity across Highland.	3.1. Special Verges to be identified (location and extent) and management principles to be agreed and implemented.	2026-2030
		3.2. At least 15 core sites within Urban Nature Networks to be enhanced.	2027-2030
		3.3. Blue-green infrastructure to be implemented where possible into new transport routes such as active travel, and existing travel infrastructure such as bus shelters.	2026-2030
4	Improve people's access to and engagement with nature-rich greenspaces.	4.1. At least 18 sites to have bespoke interpretation panels. Signage and information to be sensitively installed across managed sites.	2027-2030
		4.2. Engage with schools and community groups to advise upon greenspace enhancements for site-specific management plan parks.	2026-2030
		4.3. Host annual biodiversity-themed public events such as the Highland Biodiversity Conference and bioblitzes in partnership with High Life Highland and other organisations.	2026-2030
5	Increase provision of quality habitat to support native pollinators.	5.1. At least 5% of available land across all public parks and amenity greenspaces managed effectively for biodiversity.	2026-2030
		5.2. Sites managed for biodiversity to provide greater forage for pollinators throughout the season and shelter for over-wintering.	2027-2030

		5.3. Herbicide use to be reduced in line with the Integrated Weed Control Strategy.	2026-2030
6	Further the conservation of priority species and habitats.	6.1. Important features for biodiversity such as veteran trees, old stone walls and deadwood to be preserved where possible.	2026-2030
		6.2. Opportunities to further the conservation of Highland Biodiversity Action Plan priority species will be sought such as planting the food plants of priority invertebrates.	2026-2030
		6.3. Opportunities to work in partnership with NGOs and others to tailor management of greenspaces for priority species and habitats will be sought.	2026-2030
7	Expand the utility and multifunctionality of community greenspaces.	7.1. Develop 20 site-specific management plans in collaboration with local communities.	2026-2030
		7.2. Support and encourage community orchards and other sustainable food growing schemes in greenspaces.	2026-2030
		7.3. Identify and implement improved ecosystem services such as carbon sequestration and air quality.	2026-2030
8	Show leadership and set an example for tackling the nature and climate emergencies, raising the profile of these twin crises.	8.1. Accreditation such as Green Flag Awards will be investigated to demonstrate high standard of practice.	2027-2030
		8.2. Promote biodiversity across communication channels such as signage and social media.	2026-2030
		8.3. Opportunities to reduce carbon footprint and increase circularity such as local production of plants and sustainable use of grass arisings will be sought.	2026-2030

5. Risks and Opportunities

Potential risks to management changes should be identified as early as possible to ensure that they can be avoided or mitigated. The main risks have been noted below. Where there are risks, there are also opportunities, and each risk has an equivalent opportunity identified.

Table 5: Risks and Opportunities

No.	Risk	Opportunity
1	Financial constraints could hinder projects initially if machinery and equipment needs cannot be met.	Grant funding could be utilised for capital costs of machinery and equipment and provide long-term investment in assets.
2	Financial constraints could impact projects if funds for ongoing costs such as wildflower seed become unavailable.	Management changes could become financially sustainable by requiring minimal input once established and recovering costs from less intensive maintenance.
3	Disposal of grass arisings will present challenge on many sites as no local facility is currently viable for disposal and public greenspace arisings are considered a waste product.	Many sites will provide opportunities to recycle arisings in-situ such as mulch under trees. Local facilities should continue to be explored for arising disposal opportunities.
4	Turnover of staff within operational teams could lead to inconsistencies and the need to repeat training and guidance to new inexperienced staff.	Key staff likely to retain posts could be trained on biodiversity management and simple methods such as printed flowcharts can guide staff.
5	Staff capacity changing over time could undermine the strategy as it will need to be continually reviewed and sites will require ongoing monitoring.	Necessitates commitment of officer time and resource towards enhancing biodiversity across Council estate and retains strong links between services.
6	Operations on site may increase risk of spreading Invasive Non-Native Species.	Biosecurity can be improved through staff training and developing a biosecurity methodology.
7	Changed management can cause public perception issues in individuals who prefer neat and tidy grass areas.	Awareness raising is prioritised through information boards, social media posts and community engagement.

8	Supply issues could delay projects if local provenance trees and plants cannot be sourced timely.	Several local suppliers can be identified and seed can be bought in bulk. Opportunities could be explored for a Council run plant nursery.
9	Long grass can increase risk of fires and vandalism across sites.	Fire breaks to be kept cut around all meadows to minimise risk and any installed features to be vandal resistant.
10	Additional health and safety risks may result from changes such as long grass housing ticks and potential litter.	Risk assessments to be undertaken to factor in new risks and awareness to be raised of ticks and Lyme disease.
11	Extreme weather such as flooding and droughts which can impact the effectiveness of management and increase risks such as fires.	Management strategy to have flexibility built in to enable proactive decisions to be made such as cutting grass early during a summer drought.
12	Where contractors are used to manage sites, there is a risk that they will not adhere to the same principles set out.	Strategy to be shared with contractors and embedded as a requirement of any contract.
13	Tree planting can present future risk if location or species was not well thought out.	Ensure tree planting across Council estate follows right tree, right place principles.

6. Public Green Infrastructure

6.1 Public Parks and Amenity Greenspace

When people think of greenspace, parks and open spaces are often the first thing that comes to mind and for good reason. These spaces have long existed in the hearts of settlements and play a major role in shaping the identity of a place. Communities use these spaces to meet, play, exercise, relax, and learn. They link generations of people together whilst also dynamically evolving to cater for changing needs. Critically, they support not only communities of people but also ecological communities, bringing people and wildlife together in a way few other assets can.

Highland Council owns and manages a diverse range of parks and amenity spaces across the region. Although these vary in size, character and function, they share a common role as accessible, community-focused spaces within settlements. While many are primarily designed for amenity uses such as sports pitches and play areas, there is significant scope to enhance their biodiversity value alongside these functions.

Given their prominence and the range of benefits they provide, most large parks will be supported by site-specific management plans. These will be developed in collaboration with local communities and stakeholders from an early stage, ensuring that proposals reflect local priorities and are both practical and deliverable. Community involvement and a sense of ownership are central to long-term success, and this strategy aims to provide the guidance and tools needed to empower communities to actively support and shape their local greenspaces.

Parks and amenity greenspaces represent some of the greatest opportunities for biodiversity enhancement, often comprising relatively large areas with limited existing ecological value, that can be transformed. The site-specific management plans will explore more complex features and provide detailed instructions tailored to each park on how to protect and enhance biodiversity. For greenspaces without a site-specific plan, a widely applicable habitat management plan has been developed to guide biodiversity enhancement on the ground.

Site-Specific Management Plans: Custom plans will be developed for select parks across Highland due to their unique sets of opportunities and challenges. These plans will follow the same template and will be reviewed regularly.

- Firstly, sites will be agreed internally between the Nature Conservation Officer and Amenity Services. Selected sites will all have several opportunities to enhance biodiversity and people's engagement with nature. Initially, only sites in settlements with over 1000 population will be considered, before opening the scope in subsequent iterations. The wider context will also be factored into site selection, with sites within or adjacent to Nature Networks prioritised for their ecological connectivity.
- The next stage involves consulting widely with stakeholders and the local community. Community consultation events will be held for each park selected to allow local people to input on the management plan for their park. This will ensure that any conflicts are able to be considered as well as to generate and gauge the popularity of ideas. This stage should also build community ownership and identify any individuals or groups that could be more actively involved.
- The management plans will be developed following a template and will include an annotated GIS map, maintenance schedule table, opportunities and challenges, and a monitoring plan. These will all be reviewed every 3 years and adapted when appropriate.

Grasslands make up the vast majority of habitat in parks and amenity spaces, and their effective management is key for enhancing biodiversity across the Council estate. Depending on the site, the scope to enhance grassland will vary. These have been broken down into 3 levels:

- **Wildflower Meadows:** Sites with the greatest freedom to enhance biodiversity can become wildflower meadows. Reducing soil fertility should be prioritised with arisings removed or recycled on site. Meadows will be cut once or twice a year with desire lines and perimeters kept shorter. On sites where the seed bank needs supplementing, a carefully selected seed mix which includes key species such as food plants for Highland priority invertebrates will be used. These sites should all contain signage to indicate that the space is being managed for biodiversity.
- **Wild Margins:** Sites which are used more often for activities such as ball games and family gatherings may need to retain a large area of regularly mowed grassland. These sites can be enhanced around the margins, with areas of longer grass and wildflowers forming linear features and natural corridors around the more intensively managed space.
- **Low Flowering Meadow:** In more formal or heavily used sites, there may be no opportunity to introduce longer grass and wildflowers. These spaces can still be enhanced and provide valuable biodiversity services such as food for pollinators. The grassland can be overseeded with a herb mix which includes short, tolerant species such as white clover, birds foot trefoil and selfheal. These grasslands can continue to be managed as before, with only the cutting height increased slightly.

In addition to changing grassland management, other opportunities to enhance biodiversity such as tree/shrub planting and natural regeneration, as well as improved awareness through signage should be implemented wherever possible. Key enhancement opportunities include:

- **Tree/Hedgerow Planting:** Highland is set to lose a substantial number of trees due to diseases such as Ash Dieback, and opportunities to plant native trees should always be considered. It is crucial however that any planting follows the right tree, right place principle. Native hedgerows can also offer significant biodiversity value, a variety of species should be planted, and planting should focus on connectivity.
- **Natural Regeneration:** This can be used to great effect at minimal cost, but the location must be carefully selected. Where a park borders woodland, a strip between the field and woodland could be allowed to naturally regenerate which will create an edge habitat, very high in biodiversity.
- **Scrub Management:** Invasive non-native species (INNS) and other overly competitive plants such as bracken should be managed routinely alongside other management practices as they can form monocultures, reducing the biodiversity value of a site.

Table 6: Site-Specific Management Plan Sites

Site-Specific Management Plan Sites

North

Thurso – Riverside East and West

Thurso – Viewfirth Park

Wick – Riverside Park

Wick – Bignold Park

Tain – Links Park

Dingwall – Ferry Road Park

Alness – Crawl Park

Brora – Lower Brora Radio Station

Evanton – Teandallon Place Park

South

Nairn – Riverside Park

Fort William – Victoria Road Play Area

Kingussie – Ardvonie Park

Grantown-on-Spey – Kylintra Park

Smithton – Smithton Park

Culloden – Duncan Forbes Park

Inverness – Drakies and Inshes Park

Inverness – Castle Heather Park

Inverness – Culduthel Park

Inverness – Torvean Park

Inverness – Whin Park

6.2 Burial Grounds

Burial grounds have long been an integral part of settlements, providing places for remembrance, reflection and quiet contemplation. Like parks, they hold deep cultural and community value, and many have remained largely unchanged for generations. As a result, they often retain historic features such as old stone walls, veteran trees and species-rich grasslands, which can be highly valuable for biodiversity. These spaces can act as important sanctuaries, not only for those commemorated within them, but also for wildlife. Indeed, some of the UK's most threatened species, including bats, fungi and lichens, are now strongly associated with burial grounds.

Highland Council manages around 250 burial grounds across the region, collectively representing a significant area of greenspace. Of these, about 100 are closed for new burials. While all burial grounds present opportunities to enhance biodiversity, closed sites often offer the greatest potential. With reduced expectations for intensive maintenance, and typically greater age, these sites frequently contain well-established ecological features such as historic gravestones supporting rare lichens and long-established grasslands that can support important fungal assemblages, including waxcap species.

In general, closed burial grounds tend to support higher baseline biodiversity than many other greenspaces. Although there are similarities in management approaches, such as reducing nutrient inputs and managing scrub, the emphasis in burial grounds should be on protecting and enhancing existing ecological features rather than creating new ones. These sites also vary considerably in their setting. Many are located in rural and remote areas, while others, such as Chapel Yard and Old High Church cemeteries in Inverness, provide vital pockets of greenspace within urban environments where alternatives are limited.

In many burial grounds, grazing by animals such as rabbits, deer or sheep can play an important role in determining sward height. Where this occurs, opportunities to exclude grazing mammals by blocking entry points will be considered, to allow the development of longer grass and wildflowers, however where this is not feasible, allowing grazing to continue can be beneficial. Grazing maintains a consistently short sward, improving accessibility and reducing the need for active management, while still presenting a well-kept appearance. From a biodiversity perspective, this approach is particularly valuable in supporting waxcap grasslands, which are of international importance and require short grass in autumn to facilitate fruiting and effective spore dispersal.

An alternative approach is the establishment of longer grass or wildflower meadows, which may be especially appropriate in closed burial grounds. Where this is the desired outcome, management principles similar to those applied in parks can be adopted. Select areas within the burial ground will be allowed to grow longer whilst ensuring that paths are maintained for access. This typically includes cutting once or twice annually,

with the removal of arisings where possible to reduce soil fertility. Additional measures, such as introducing hemi parasitic plants like yellow rattle and allowing existing vegetation to flower and set seed, can help diversify swards before introducing appropriate seed mixes where necessary.

Burial grounds are often more structurally complex than other greenspaces, containing a wide range of features such as gravestones, walls and mature vegetation. This diversity of structure creates a variety of niches, supporting a high level of biodiversity. Management should therefore prioritise the protection and enhancement of these existing features, maintaining the burial ground as a mosaic of microhabitats. Given the age and sensitivity of many of Highland's burial grounds, operations should be carefully planned and undertaken with caution, as the ecological communities they support may have developed over decades or even centuries, and damage is often difficult or impossible to reverse. The sensitivity of these sites also expands beyond ecology. Management regimes will take into account the historic built environment, ensuring that historic features are protected and preserved.

6.3 Roads and Transport Network

Collectively, roadside verges across the UK cover an area comparable to the remaining extent of lowland species-rich grassland, with substantial potential for biodiversity enhancement. As linear features designed to connect places, road networks also offer significant potential as ecological corridors, enabling species movement and supporting and contributing to Nature Networks. Given their scale and relatively low intensity of use, well-managed verges represent a major opportunity to contribute to reversing biodiversity loss at both local and national levels.

As Roads Authority, Highland Council has a statutory duty under the Roads (Scotland) Act 1984 to maintain roadside verges. The Council manages roughly 7,000 kilometres of adopted road network, the majority of which includes verges on one or both sides. The Council's Verge Maintenance Manual provides the framework for managing rural roadside verges, recommending an annual cut using machine-mounted flails, typically beginning in May and continuing through the growing season, alongside a three-year scrub management cycle between September and February. This approach is designed to maintain the functional integrity of the verge and control scrub encroachment in a consistent and efficient manner. There are however verges of particular importance that require a more tailored management approach.

While the standard maintenance regime could support biodiversity depending on the timing of the cut, the Verge Maintenance Manual also provides for the designation of 'Special Verges', where management is specifically tailored to maximise biodiversity value in areas already identified as being of biodiversity value such as within designated sites. These sites will be identified and recorded through a maintained GIS map and

spreadsheet, with bespoke management prescriptions applied to protect and enhance key habitats, species, and ecological connectivity. Initially, a number of Special Verges will be selected, concentrating on designated sites and verges with high existing biodiversity value, allowing staff to build experience and refine practices, with the network expanding progressively over time.

Similarly to parks and open spaces, Special Verges will have site-specific plans, with scope to tailor management such as the timing of mowing and flailing specifically for the verge in question. This is beneficial as roadside verges in, for example, the Morvern Peninsula will have a different species assemblage, soil type and microclimate to verges in Assynt. The human pressures on verges will also vary by location, with the NC500 and other tourist hotspots seeing far greater pressures on roadside verges which may affect the ideal management. Some areas may be important for priority species, for example, the Great Yellow Bumblebee, which is found in Caithness and Sutherland, depends on late flowering plants and so a later cut is needed.

The key management principles for Special Verges are set out below:

- Special Verges will be identified by the Environment Team and agreed with the Operations Manager. They will be selected based on their existing biodiversity value, and/or their contribution to enhancing Nature Networks. A GIS map and spreadsheet will be developed and maintained to detail where Special Verges are located as well as their specific maintenance regime.
- Special Verges represent the most important roadside verges for biodiversity in Highland and should be the highest priority for timing of mowing, and sensitive management of roadside trees and shrubs. In most cases, grass should be cut either once or twice a year, with one cut after the summer season from late August to October, with another optional cut added before summer in March or April if grasses are particularly vigorous.
- Trees and shrubs have an important role and increase the number of wildlife species that use roadside verges as corridors and provide food and shelter. Except where there are reasons such as risks to the safety of road users or operational assets, native trees and shrubs will be protected and opportunities for natural regeneration and planting will be considered.

The wider transport network includes other forms of transport such as active travel routes and core paths. The Local Transport Strategy commits to integrating blue-green infrastructure into the design of transport schemes, and opportunities to enhance existing and new routes will be sought.

6.4 Countryside Sites

Highland Council owns and manages a wide range of countryside sites across the authority area, including woodlands, beaches, visitor attractions, picnic areas, car parks and Local Nature Reserves. These sites are managed by the Countryside Projects Team (part of the Council's Environment Team), with management plans in place or currently being developed for many locations. Many countryside sites are already being managed proactively for biodiversity, with the Ecology Team providing additional specialist input to ensure that biodiversity is protected and enhanced wherever possible.

As many operations are delivered by contractors, it is essential that project briefs and maintenance specifications clearly identify any ecologically sensitive habitats, features or species. This ensures they are safeguarded during works and that appropriate management practices are applied. The principles set out in this Strategy, particularly those established for parks and amenity spaces, should inform the design of management regimes across countryside sites, including picnic areas and land surrounding car parks. However, each site is unique and will continue to be managed on a case-by-case basis through site-specific plans that integrate biodiversity objectives.

Countryside sites may have a high number of visitors, presenting both opportunities and challenges. These locations provide a valuable platform to promote biodiversity, raise awareness and encourage positive behaviours. Interpretation and signage should be incorporated at key locations to support education and engagement, helping to strengthen people's connection with nature. Local Nature Reserves in particular will be managed with biodiversity as a priority and an emphasis on partnership working, and the Council will consider opportunities to increase the provision of Local Nature Reserves across the region.

There is also considerable scope to enhance biodiversity around visitor infrastructure. Targeted habitat creation, such as establishing wildflower meadows, planting native trees, or introducing hedgerows and pollinator-friendly planting, can improve habitat quality while enhancing the visitor experience. For example, car parks could be softened through meadow or hedgerow margins. Through sensitive and well-designed interventions, countryside sites can demonstrate best practice in integrating biodiversity, access and visitor management.

Key challenges associated with high footfall include habitat disturbance and erosion, as well as the spread of INNS. These risks can be mitigated by encouraging visitors to remain on designated paths, clearly identifying sensitive areas, and using signage and interpretation to raise awareness. The spread of INNS is a particular concern, as seeds and plant material can be unintentionally transported between sites by visitors. Effective management, in line with the Council's INNS guidance, should therefore be

prioritised. It is equally important that staff and contractors are aware of any INNS present on site and follow appropriate procedures to prevent their spread. Clear communication within work specifications and adherence to best practice will help ensure that maintenance and operational activities do not inadvertently expand the extent or distribution of these species.

6.5 Schools

Highland Council operates around 200 schools across the region, ranging from large, urban campuses to small, remote schools. As places where young people spend a significant proportion of their time learning and developing, schools offer a valuable opportunity to connect pupils with nature. Enhancing biodiversity within school grounds can help foster environmental awareness and stewardship in the next generation, while also delivering well-established physical and mental health benefits.

While school grounds vary in size and layout, all sites present opportunities to enhance biodiversity and incorporate green infrastructure. Many schools already support biodiversity through high-quality outdoor spaces or partnership working, including projects delivered with High Life Highland Rangers. This support will continue, with rangers providing practical input and the Nature Conservation Officer offering additional advice, alongside guidance on accessing funding and resources for tree planting, habitat creation and installation of features like bird boxes. Schools will also be engaged when opportunities to involve the children in biodiversity activities and projects present themselves in the local area such as for development of site-specific management plans.

6.6 Buildings

Highland Council owns and manages a wide range of buildings across the region. While buildings typically offer fewer opportunities for biodiversity enhancement than open spaces, they nonetheless present important and scalable opportunities, particularly for species that rely on built structures, such as swifts and house martins.

Opportunities will be sought to embed biodiversity enhancement within standard practice, including requirements for features such as nest boxes within new developments and refurbishments. There is also potential to improve existing buildings through interventions such as green roofs and living walls, where these can deliver meaningful ecological benefits. Targeted projects, such as the installation of swift boxes, may be initiated by Council services or in partnership with community groups. The Council will take a proactive approach to identifying and supporting such opportunities, working collaboratively to deliver enhancements across the estate. Areas immediately surrounding Council buildings such as car parks and gardens will

also be targeted for biodiversity enhancements, with opportunities to introduce native or pollinator friendly plants, and improvements to current management practices of green features sought.

6.7 Streets and Civic Space

Streets and civic spaces are, for most people, the most immediate public spaces outside their homes. They form part of everyday life, providing routes to work, school and local services, while civic spaces serve as focal points for social interaction, events and community activity. Historically, the urban realm has been dominated by hard, utilitarian landscaping. However, growing recognition of the multiple benefits of green infrastructure has led to increasing efforts to introduce greener, more attractive and more functional urban environments.

Given their close proximity to large populations, enhancing biodiversity and integrating nature-based solutions within streets and civic spaces can deliver significant benefits. For example, street trees can provide shade, cooling and shelter, while improving air quality, helping to mitigating flooding, supporting biodiversity and enhancing the visual quality of an area. The Council also recognise the importance of improving access to and connectivity with existing greenspace both in the urban environment as well as the surrounding and wider peri-urban and rural environment. Highland Council will therefore seek opportunities to incorporate green infrastructure across these spaces, including the use of street trees, pollinator-friendly planting, rain gardens and sustainable urban drainage systems. Through such interventions, streets and civic spaces can become more resilient, attractive and ecologically valuable, while continuing to serve their core functions.

6.8 Allotments

Many settlements across Highland are served by allotments, with Highland Council owning seven sites comprising a total of over 300 plots. These sites are all leased to allotment associations, which are responsible for the day-to-day management and tenancy arrangements. Typically located within or on the edge of settlements, allotments function as valuable multi-purpose greenspaces and have significant potential as strongholds for urban biodiversity. While their primary purpose is food production, biodiversity plays a key supporting role by providing essential ecosystem services such as pollination and natural pest control.

Through its Rules and Regulations for Allotments, Highland Council encourages sustainable practices and biodiversity enhancement. This includes promoting the use of peat-free growing media, prohibiting genetically modified crops, supporting composting, and encouraging rainwater harvesting. The Council will continue to work

collaboratively with allotment associations to identify further opportunities to enhance biodiversity, both through everyday management practices and through targeted improvement projects. This will include engaging with allotment associations to encourage a more nature-friendly approach to gardening such as reducing artificial pest control and use of chemicals. Opportunities will also be sought to extend the network of allotments where there is demand within a community.

7. Implementation

This Strategy provides an overview of the Council estate and sets out the approach to enhancing biodiversity through improved management practices. The Strategy is supported by a suite of habitat management plans for parks and amenity greenspace, roadside verges and burial grounds, which provide more detailed, practical direction to inform implementation.

Highland Council has strengthened its commitment to delivering ambitious environmental objectives in recent years, with a growing number of actions from the Ecology Strategy being addressed. This includes the delivery of tree planting projects, the establishment of trial wildflower meadows, and the appointment of key staff to lead on biodiversity enhancement across the Council estate.

Despite increasing financial pressures on local authorities, investment in environmental and ecological work has been maintained and used effectively. A significant proportion of funding is secured through the Scottish Government's Nature Restoration Fund, supporting both project delivery and capacity building. This has included the purchase of specialist equipment, such as cut-and-collect mowers, to improve the Council's ability to implement biodiversity-focused management at scale.

While this Strategy focuses primarily on changes to the management of Council greenspaces and assets, the role of local communities and other stakeholders is fundamental to its success. Delivery will involve both structured engagement, such as consultation on site-specific management plans, and more informal collaboration, where communities work alongside Council officers to deliver projects, such as installing swift boxes or undertaking habitat improvements.

The need for flexibility to meet changing priorities and opportunities which may arise will be an intrinsic characteristic of the Strategy and all elements of the Strategy will be monitored and reviewed regularly to ensure that opportunities and challenges are identified and can be acted upon proactively. Through measuring the targets set out in the Strategy, data will be collected that will enable officers to measure effectiveness of implementation such as tracking diversity and abundance of plants and pollinators and make changes when necessary.

The objectives and targets set out in this Strategy are intended to be achieved by 2030, in alignment with national policy, including the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy. This timeframe provides a clear period for planning and delivery, while maintaining a sense of urgency. The Strategy will be reviewed at the end of this period, with learning used to inform future priorities and the next phase of biodiversity management across the Council estate.

8. Conclusion

Nature is at the heart of Highland, shaping our landscapes, supporting our communities and defining our sense of place. This Biodiversity Management Strategy sets out how Highland Council will play its part in protecting and restoring that natural heritage, ensuring it continues to enrich the lives of people today and for generations to come.

Across our towns, villages and countryside, even the smallest changes can make a meaningful difference. From parks and school grounds to roadside verges and streets, every part of the Council estate has a role to play in creating a richer, more connected natural environment. By working with nature, we can transform everyday spaces into places where wildlife can thrive, and people can feel more connected to the world around them.

The Strategy also recognises that successful delivery depends not only on internal coordination across services, but on strong partnerships with local communities, stakeholders and organisations, whose involvement will be critical in shaping, delivering and sustaining biodiversity enhancements and green infrastructure improvements.

Looking ahead, the period to 2030 represents a crucial window for action. Delivering the ambitions set out in this Strategy will require sustained effort, adaptability and a willingness to learn from experience. By doing so, Highland Council can help to restore nature networks, enhance the resilience of its communities to climate change, and ensure that biodiversity is recognised and valued as a fundamental asset across the region.

Ultimately, this Strategy aims to ensure that nature is not only protected but actively restored and integrated into the places where people live, work and spend their time, securing lasting benefits for both people and wildlife across Highland.

Appendix 2a - Draft Amenity Greenspaces

Habitat Management Plan

1. Overview

This Habitat Management Plan (HMP) provides practical, standardised guidance for operational staff, contractors, and volunteers to enhance biodiversity across Highland Council's amenity greenspaces. It supports delivery of the Greenspace Biodiversity Management Strategy by translating strategic objectives into clear, consistent site-level actions.

The Plan applies to smaller parks and amenity greenspaces that do not have site-specific management plans. It should be used to:

- Identify opportunities for biodiversity enhancement
- Select appropriate habitat management interventions
- Guide practical implementation and ongoing maintenance
- Ensure a consistent and coordinated approach across the Council estate

The Plan adopts a whole-estate approach, recognising that while individual enhancements may be relatively small in scale, their cumulative effect across a large number of sites can deliver substantial and measurable biodiversity benefits. By integrating biodiversity considerations into routine greenspace management, Highland Council can create a more connected, resilient and nature-rich network of habitats throughout its estate.

Amenity greenspaces offer opportunities for enhancement at multiple scales and levels of intervention. Measures may include diversifying short-mown grassland, creating areas of species-rich wildflower meadow, implementing perennial shrub planting, managing scrub habitat, and planting native trees and hedgerows. Together, these interventions can increase habitat diversity, support a wider range of species, and improve the ecological value of greenspaces while maintaining their recreational and amenity functions.

2. Site Assessment and Selection

The first step in enhancing biodiversity is to recognise and assess the potential of a site. While many amenity greenspaces offer opportunities for improvement, it is neither practical nor appropriate to manage all sites in the same way. Achieving an effective balance between biodiversity enhancement and amenity use is essential, and careful site selection is key to delivering meaningful outcomes.

Most amenity greenspaces considered for enhancement are likely to consist of improved grassland. These areas are typically managed through frequent mowing to maintain a short, uniform sward dominated by competitive species such as perennial ryegrass (*Lolium perenne*), with limited presence of herbs and wildflowers. While important for recreation and visual amenity, these sites often require relatively high management input and support limited biodiversity.

Transitioning suitable areas of improved grassland to more diverse habitats presents a significant opportunity to increase biodiversity across the Council estate.

However, not all sites fall within this category. Areas of rank grassland and under-managed scrub are not uncommon. Although these habitats may appear semi-natural, they are often structurally uniform, species-poor, and underused by the community. As such, they can also present valuable opportunities for targeted biodiversity enhancement.

Although biodiversity enhancement should be progressed across the whole estate, it is necessary to prioritise effort where it will deliver the greatest impact. This is particularly important where multiple greenspaces occur in close proximity. In such cases, sites should be assessed collectively to determine which locations offer the greatest potential to contribute to local biodiversity.

Site selection should be informed by the following considerations:

- **Wider ecological context**
Consider the role of the site within the surrounding landscape. Larger, more isolated greenspaces could be important as strongholds for local pollinator populations, while smaller sites can function as corridors or stepping stones that enhance connectivity within wider Nature Networks. Understanding this context helps identify how a site can contribute at a landscape scale.
- **Site history and soil conditions**
Where available, historic land use and management information should be reviewed to help determine soil fertility and seed bank potential. For example, intensively managed or fertilised sites may require a period of nutrient reduction before wildflowers can establish, whereas more semi-natural sites may retain a viable seed bank capable of natural regeneration.
- **Current condition and existing features**
Sites with existing biodiversity value, such as remnant wildflower populations should be prioritised. Valuable habitats, including mature trees, native hedgerows, and marshy grassland, should be retained, protected, and enhanced where possible. Constraints such as Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS) should be identified early and appropriately removed as a priority.

- Species records

Where available, species data should be reviewed to inform management decisions. Sources such as the NBN Atlas and the Highland Biological Recording Group (HBRG) may provide useful records, including the presence of protected species or Highland Nature Biodiversity Action Plan (HNBAP) priority species. Priority species often depend on specific habitat features, such as bare ground or food plants, which should be maintained or enhanced through appropriate management.

The most suitable sites for biodiversity enhancement should be identified through a combination of the factors outlined above, alongside consideration of the level and type of public use.

3. Grassland Management

Biodiversity enhancement on grassland sites is categorised into three distinct approaches, arranged in a hierarchy from highest potential for ecological benefit:

1. Wildflower Meadows
2. Wild Margins
3. Low Flowering Meadows

A combination of the above approaches should be used to create a mosaic habitat that balances biodiversity enhancement with amenity and recreational use.

Generally, the overarching objective of grassland enhancement is to increase the diversity of native plant species, thereby supporting the ecosystem as a whole including invertebrates, birds, and mammals. This is typically achieved through a combination of:

- Reduced mowing frequency to allow plants to flower and set seed
- Removal of arisings to reduce soil nutrient levels where possible
- Creation of structural diversity (e.g. through rotational mowing)
- Introduction of appropriate seed or plug plants where necessary

The specific management actions required will vary depending on the selected enhancement approach. The relevant sections of this HMP should therefore be consulted to inform site-specific implementation.

3.1 Seed Sourcing

In most cases, increasing species diversity will require the introduction of seed. The method of seed sourcing is a critical factor influencing the success and long-term resilience of grassland enhancement.

Where possible, seed should:

- Be of local provenance to support genetic resilience
- Contain a diverse mix of native species appropriate to the local context
- Be of high quality and freshness to maximise germination rate

Particular emphasis should be placed on including:

- Grass hemiparasites: yellow rattle (*Rhinanthus.minor*), eyebrights (*Euphrasia.spp*), red bartsia (*Odontites.vernus*)?lousewort (*Pedicularis.sylvatica*);
- Food plants for HNBAP invertebrate priority species: devil's-bit scabious (*Succisa.pratensis*), common dog violet (*Viola.riviniana*), common rock-rose (*Helianthemum.nummularium*)?kidney vetch (*Anthyllis.vulneraria*)?wild thyme (*Thymus.polytrichus*)?meadow vetchling (*Lathyrus.pratensis*)?purple moor-grass (*Molinia.caerulea*)?mat-grass (*Nardus.stricta*);

Local suppliers of high-quality, native seeds such as Scotia Seeds can be used to source wildflower seed mixes, several of which are ideal for achieving the goals set out in this Plan. Generic seed mixes from a wider geographic area should be avoided. Opportunities for sourcing local provenance seed such as manual harvesting, green hay, or growing plants on at facilities such as the nursery in Wick are often the best options ecologically and financially and should be sought where feasible.

Below is a list of recommended seed mixes from Scotia Seeds:

- Flowering Lawn Mix: For creation of low flowering meadows.
- MG5 Meadow Mix: For creation of wildflower meadows and wild margins on typical amenity grassland.
- Highland Grassland Mix: For creation of wildflower meadows and wild margins on upland, acidic soils.
- Dry Meadow Mix: For creation of wildflower meadows and wild margins on steep banks or thin soils which are dry in summer.
- Get Nectar-rich Quick Mix: For creation of wild margins in high-visibility areas where a strong impression is needed.
- Yellow Rattle: Bought in bulk for wildflower meadow and wild margin creation.

3.2 Wildflower Meadows

Wildflower meadows represent the highest biodiversity value grassland option and should be prioritised where site conditions, available space, and amenity use allow. Wildflower meadows require low nutrient conditions, so they should only be created where arisings can be removed.

Initial establishment can be more intensive, however once established, ongoing management is typically less demanding than regularly mown amenity grassland.



Creation

Some sites may already have a good starting point to become wildflower meadows if soil nutrient levels are low enough, with existing plant diversity being the main indicator. If coarse grasses make up less than 80% of ground cover, and native herbs and wildflowers are already present, the creation phase can be skipped, and the site can proceed into ongoing management. These sites will likely already have a diverse seed bank which will react to the change in maintenance regime.

In cases where a new space is being created, wildflower meadows can be created more easily as there is no need to compete with coarse grasses and high soil fertility.

- Prepare soil
Topsoil and subsoil should be mixed (about 50:50) to achieve relatively low soil fertility and ground should be raked or harrowed to prepare for seeding.
- Sow seed (early autumn/spring)
Using the correct seed mix is crucial and a mix with both wildflowers and fine meadow grasses should be used such as Scotia Seeds MG5 Meadow Mix. Seed can be sown in spring or early autumn at a rate of roughly 3g/m² and lightly trampled or rolled in.
- Include key species
Food plants for HNBAP priority invertebrates (listed above) should be prioritised.
- Install signage
Provide clear, simple signage to inform the public that the area is being managed for biodiversity.

In most cases, however, amenity grassland will already exist, and soil nutrient levels will be too high. The site will need to be prepared before the wildflower meadow can be created, to reduce the soil fertility and suppress competitive grasses.

- **Reduce nutrient levels**
Mow every 4-6 weeks for several months until early autumn or spring using cut and collect machinery, removing arisings to progressively reduce soil fertility. Alternatively, yellow rattle could be sowed in early autumn a year in advance of wildflower seed to reduce vigour of grasses. To be effective, a large enough amount of yellow rattle will need to be introduced, sown at roughly 1g/m^2 on a prepared seedbed.
- **Prepare the seedbed (early autumn/spring)**
Cut grass on the lowest setting, remove accumulated thatch, and scarify the soil (using a harrow or rakes) to expose at least 50% bare ground.
- **Sow seed**
Ideally, sow seed in early autumn for best results. Alternatively, sow seed in early spring if conditions don't allow in autumn. Seed should be applied at approximately 2g/m^2 and trampled or rolled into the soil to ensure good contact.
- **Include key species**
Yellow rattle should be included as a priority, with emphasis on the seed being as fresh as possible. Food plants for HNBAP priority invertebrates (listed above) should also be prioritised.
- **Install signage**
Provide clear, simple signage to inform the public that the area is being managed for biodiversity.
- **Winter management**
Undertake one or two additional cuts over winter down to around 10cm, removing arisings to further reduce nutrient levels and create favourable conditions for spring growth.

Routine Management

Wildflower meadow management should be approached as a consistent annual cycle. Maintaining this continuity is essential to increase species diversity and prevent dominance by coarse grass species. Meadows develop and mature over time, with different plant species establishing gradually over many years. Some species, such as orchids, rely on mycorrhizal fungi that can take considerable time to develop and are indicators of a high-quality meadow. While visually striking wildflowers are often expected, less conspicuous species, including many grasses, play an equally important role in supporting biodiversity.

The following actions set out the annual maintenance regime:

- **Maintain access and edges**
Perimeter edges and desire lines should be maintained at a short sward height (6-10 cm) across a machine-width strip (approximately 1–2 m). This enables access, maintains a managed appearance, and provides firebreaks. This can be achieved through mowing every 4-6 weeks from spring to autumn. Winter mowing is not required. These perimeters and desire lines could be managed as low flowering meadows for further biodiversity enhancement.
- **Annual cut (late summer/autumn)**
The meadow should be left uncut throughout the growing season to allow flowering and seed dispersal. A single cut should then be undertaken after late-season flowering species have seeded, typically from late August to October. Arisings must be collected and removed. Where available, cut and collect flail mowers should be used, set to a cutting height of 6-10cm. Mowing should begin at one side, slowly working across in parallel lines to allow wildlife to disperse, avoiding an inward circular approach from the perimeter.
- **Retain refuge areas**
A section of long grass should be retained to provide winter refuge for wildlife, particularly pollinators. This area should be rotated annually.
- **Optional spring cut**
Where grass growth is particularly vigorous, particularly in the first few years after meadow creation, an additional cut may be undertaken in early spring (March-April). This should follow the same cut and collect approach and is useful in managing coarse dominant grass species and reducing soil nutrient levels.
- **Manage scrub and invasive species**
Encroaching scrub and INNS should be controlled as required through cutting, rolling, or bruising. Herbicide use should be avoided except where necessary for the control of INNS such as Japanese knotweed. Where there is potential for birds to nest, scrub management should be undertaken between September and February, outside the bird nesting season, unless the ecology team can undertake a bird nesting survey not more than 24 hours prior to works.

3.3 Wild Margins

Wild margins provide a flexible, lower-intervention approach to enhancing biodiversity within amenity grassland. They are particularly suited to sites where full wildflower meadow creation is not appropriate due to higher levels of amenity use, visibility requirements, or other site constraints. Although they deliver lower overall biodiversity gains than full wildflower meadows, they can be applied more widely and make a valuable contribution to pollinator habitat, structural diversity, and ecological connectivity across the Council estate.

Wild margins involve allowing selected edges of grassland to grow longer through reduced mowing, supported where appropriate by the targeted introduction of native species. This approach can create valuable transitional habitats (ecotones), particularly where margins adjoin features such as woodland, scrub, or hedgerows. In more fragmented urban settings, wild margins can also function as linear corridors, improving habitat connectivity and supporting urban Nature Networks. Combined with low flowering meadows, wild margins can create a wildflower-rich mosaic habitat, whilst retaining space for amenity use.



Creation

Wild margins are often created within existing amenity grassland areas and follow a similar approach to wildflower meadows on a smaller scale. Wild margin creation produces less arisings and so can be implemented in areas not suitable for full wildflower meadows.

The following steps should be undertaken:

- Define margin extents
Clearly identify and mark the extent of the margin. This may include edges along paths, boundaries, fences, or less frequently used areas. Margins should be wide enough (typically 1.5-3m) to provide meaningful habitat.

- **Reduce nutrient levels**
Mow every 4-6 weeks for several months until early autumn or spring using cut and collect machinery, removing arisings to progressively reduce soil fertility. Alternatively, yellow rattle could be sowed in early autumn a year in advance of wildflower seed to reduce vigour of grasses. To be effective, a large enough amount of yellow rattle will need to be introduced, sown at roughly 1g/m² on a prepared seedbed.
- **Prepare the seedbed (early autumn/spring)**
Cut grass on the lowest setting, remove accumulated thatch, and scarify the soil (using a harrow or rakes) to expose at least 50% bare ground.
- **Sow seed**
Ideally, sow seed in early autumn for best results. Alternatively, sow seed in early spring if conditions don't allow in autumn. Seed should be applied at approximately 2g/m² and trampled or rolled into the soil to ensure good contact.
- **Include key species**
Yellow rattle should be included as a priority, with emphasis on the seed being as fresh as possible. Food plants for HNBAP priority invertebrates (listed above) should also be prioritised.
- **Install signage (where appropriate)**
In high-visibility areas, simple signage should be used to indicate intentional biodiversity enhancement and manage public expectations.

Routine Management

Wild margins should be managed as part of a consistent annual cycle, balancing biodiversity benefits with continued amenity use. Management is generally less intensive than for meadows but still requires consistency to maintain diversity and prevent scrub encroachment.

The following actions should be applied:

- **Annual cut (late summer/autumn)**
Margins should be left uncut throughout the growing season to allow flowering and seed dispersal. A single cut should be undertaken in late summer or early autumn (ideally late August-October), with arisings removed from the margins.
- **Optional rotational cutting**
Where appropriate, margins can be cut on a rotational basis (e.g. alternating sections each year) to provide continuous habitat structure and refuge for wildlife during the winter and early spring.

- Control scrub and INNS

Scrub encroachment and INNS should be managed as required. Scrub management should be undertaken between September and February, outside the bird nesting season, unless the ecology team can undertake a bird nesting survey not more than 24 hours prior to works. Herbicide use should be avoided except where necessary for INNS such as Japanese knotweed.

3.4 Low Flowering Meadow

Low flowering meadows provide a pragmatic approach to enhancing biodiversity within areas that must continue to function primarily as amenity space. It is particularly suited to highly used greenspaces where maintaining a short sward is important for recreation, access, and visibility, but where there is still an opportunity to increase botanical diversity.

This approach delivers more modest biodiversity gains than full wildflower meadows but provides valuable habitat for pollinators and can be applied widely across the estate. It focuses on introducing and maintaining low-growing, resilient wildflower species within a regularly mown sward. They can be combined with wild margins to create a wildflower-rich mosaic habitat, high in biodiversity whilst retaining amenity function.



Creation

Low flowering meadows are typically created within existing amenity grassland and is designed to integrate with continued mowing. As such, establishment is less intensive than other grassland enhancement approaches.

The following steps should be undertaken:

- Assess existing sward condition
Identify areas where there is potential to introduce additional plant diversity.

Sites with some existing herbs or less intensive management may respond particularly well.

- Ground preparation (if required)
Where grass is dense or dominated by coarse species, scarification may be undertaken in early autumn or spring (by raking or harrowing) to create patches of bare ground and improve seeding conditions. Aim for at least 50% bare ground before sowing seed for best results.
- Sow seed (early autumn/spring)
Introduce a suitable native seed mix composed of low-growing, mowing-tolerant species such as Scotia Seeds Flowering Lawn Mix. Seeding can be undertaken in early autumn or spring and should be sowed at a rate of roughly 2g/m² with light rolling or trampling to ensure good ground contact.

Routine Management

Low flowering meadows should be managed to maintain a balance between amenity function and biodiversity value. A consistent mowing regime is essential to retain a short sward while allowing low-growing species to persist and spread.

The following actions should be applied:

- Maintain regular mowing
Grass should be mown regularly to 10cm to maintain a short sward, with frequency of mowing determined by growth rate and site use. This is consistent with existing amenity mowing regimes.
- Allow flowering during summer (where possible)
Where feasible, mowing should stop during the peak flowering periods of July and August to allow plants to flower and provide resources for pollinators.
- Overseed as required
Periodic overseeding may be undertaken to reinforce species diversity, particularly where establishment has been patchy or where desired species have declined.
- Control invasive species
Invasive species and encroachment should be managed as required through appropriate methods. Herbicide use should be limited to INNS such as Japanese knotweed.
- Avoid additional inputs
Fertilisers and pesticides should not be applied, as these will favour competitive grasses over wildflower species.

4. Scrub Management

Scrub management should be undertaken to maintain a balanced mosaic of habitats, preventing scrub from dominating while retaining its value for biodiversity. Works should focus on selective, phased intervention rather than wholesale clearance, ensuring continuity of habitat for wildlife.

4.1 When to Use this Approach

Scrub management is appropriate where:

- Scrub is encroaching into grassland or reducing amenity use
- Vegetation is dense, uniform, and species-poor
- There is an opportunity to improve structural diversity

4.2 Operational Method

The following steps should be applied when undertaking scrub management:

- Define management areas
Clearly identify the extent of scrub to be managed. Prioritise encroachment, spreading fronts, and areas of dense, uniform growth.
- Undertake pre-works checks
Inspect the site for hazards, litter, and signs of wildlife. Particular attention should be given to nesting birds, mammals, and reptiles.
No works should be carried out during the bird nesting season (March–August) unless confirmed safe through ecological checks not more than 24 hours prior.
- Determine approach
 - For managing large areas of scrub such as bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*), machine-mounted bruising is often the best approach.
 - For smaller stands or encroaching scrub, brush cutters are highly effective.
 - In sensitive areas or where volunteers are available, hand tools such as shears and billhooks are the best option.
- Selective cutting and thinning
 - Cut back young and encroaching scrub to maintain open areas.
 - Thin dense stands to create variation in structure and light levels.
 - Retain mature and well-structured native shrubs.

- Arisings management
Create small habitat piles out of arisings in appropriate quiet areas of the site, away from properties and footpaths.
- Control invasive species
Identify and treat INNS as a priority. Herbicide use should be limited to targeted application where necessary (e.g. Japanese knotweed), in line with the Integrated Weed Control Strategy and INNS Guidance.

5. Tree and Hedgerow Planting

Tree and hedgerow planting provides a long-term opportunity to enhance biodiversity, improve habitat connectivity, and deliver wider ecosystem benefits across amenity greenspaces. Well planned planting can support a wide range of species, contribute to climate resilience, and enhance the area's aesthetic value.

Planting should be undertaken in a targeted and proportionate manner, complementing existing habitats and maintaining the balance between biodiversity, amenity use, and visibility, with emphasis on planting the right tree in the right place.

5.1 When to Use this Approach

Tree and hedgerow planting is appropriate where:

- There are opportunities to strengthen habitat connectivity (e.g. linking woodlands, hedgerows, or scrub)
- Open grassland areas can accommodate planting without significantly reducing amenity value
- Sites lack structural diversity or woody vegetation
- There is a need to replace lost or declining tree cover

5.2 Key Principles

- Right tree, right place
Select species appropriate to site conditions and constraints (see list below).
- Prioritise native species
Priority should be given to native trees and shrubs of local provenance where available. A variety of native species should be planted together.
- Plan for long-term management
Consider growth, maintenance, and safety over the long-term.

- Maintain visibility and access
Planting should not negatively impact on visibility or access, especially near paths and roads.

5.3 Planting Approach

The design and layout of planting should reflect the site context and intended function:

- Scattered or specimen trees
Suitable for open spaces where retaining grassland character or amenity function is important.
- Tree groups
Small clusters can create shelter, habitat diversity, and visual interest.
- Mixed hedgerows
Useful for defining boundaries, creating shelter, and providing food sources for wildlife.
- Edge planting
Strengthens transitions between habitats (e.g. grassland to woodland or scrub).

5.4 Operational Method

The following steps should be applied when undertaking planting:

- Site selection and preparation
 - Identify suitable planting locations, avoiding underground services, overhead lines, and areas of high amenity use.
 - Ensure sufficient space for mature growth.
 - Obtain necessary consents and consult with appropriate groups.
 - Prepare planting areas by removing turf or competing vegetation where necessary.
- Species selection (see list below)
 - Use a diverse mix of native species suited to local conditions.
 - Include a range of flowering, fruiting, and structurally varied species.
 - Avoid non-native or ornamental species unless there is a clear justification.
- Planting process
 - Plant during the dormant season (typically November–March) avoiding periods where soil is frozen or waterlogged.

- Use appropriate stock (e.g. bare-root whips, transplants, or standard trees depending on site).
- Ensure roots are protected from drying out prior to planting.
- Firm soil around roots to eliminate air pockets.
- Protection measures
 - Install biodegradable guards where needed to protect from grazing.
 - Use stakes as necessary for larger trees.
 - Clearly mark planted areas to prevent accidental damage.
- Mulching (if appropriate)
 - Apply mulch or a mulch mat around the base of plants to suppress weeds and retain moisture, avoiding contact with stems.

5.5 Aftercare

Successful establishment depends on appropriate aftercare:

- Watering
Water newly planted trees and shrubs during dry periods, particularly in the first growing season.
- Inspect guards and supports
Adjust or remove when no longer required to prevent damage.
- Replace failures
Inspect annually and replace any failed planting to maintain intended coverage.

5.6 Routine Management

Once established, trees and shrubs require ongoing management:

- Formative pruning
Undertake light pruning where necessary to establish good structure and remove damaged growth.
- Maintain visibility and safety
Ensure clear sightlines along paths, roads, and open spaces.
- Manage interaction with other habitats
Prevent excessive shading or encroachment into species-rich grassland or other priority habitats.
- Retain habitat value
Where safe to do so, retain features such as deadwood for wildlife.

5.7 Recommended Tree Species

- Silver birch (*Betula.pendula*)
Versatile tree suited to being planted as a specimen tree or part of a group. White bark and weeping canopy provide aesthetic interest. Highly valuable for local biodiversity with many invertebrates and fungi reliant on birch. Medium sized tree reaching up to 30m in height. Require sunlight and grow quickly.
- Downy birch (*Betula.pubescens*)
Similar to silver birch but hardier and more tolerant of extreme Highland conditions. Supports similar range of species as silver birch. Also grows to a height of up to 30m and can be used as a specimen or group planting tree. Better than silver birch for wetter soils or exposed sites.
- Rowan (*Sorbus.aucuparia*)
A hardy tree, well-suited to the Highland climate. Suitable for planting as a specimen tree or as part of a group. Flowers and bright red berries provide visual interest and biodiversity value for much of the year. Smaller tree that grows up to 15m in height.
- Bird cherry (*Prunus.padus*)
Excellent option for planting as a specimen tree or as part of a group, bird cherry has striking aesthetic appeal and provides an important early nectar source for pollinators. Later in the year, the cherries are a valuable food source for a wide range of birds and mammals. Medium sized tree reaching up to 25m in height, preferring moist soils.
- Sessile oak (*Quercus.petraea*)
Best suited as a specimen tree due to its long lifespan and impressive size, sessile oak are instantly recognisable and appreciated by many people and offer very high biodiversity value supporting hundreds of species. Can tolerate a range of soils and conditions. Grows up to 40m in height and with a large canopy.
- Hazel (*Corylus.avellana*)
Highly versatile species that can be used as a tree in group planting, as part of a mixed native hedgerow or for edge planting. Hazel provides an early nectar source for pollinators, produces highly valuable hazelnuts and associates with many species of moss and lichen on its rugged bark. Growing up to 8m in height, they are a manageable size for use in smaller greenspaces.

- Hawthorn (*Crataegus.monogyna*)
Another versatile species that can be planted as a tree in part of a group or incorporated into a mixed hedgerow as well as being ideal for edge planting. Hawthorn is prized for its biodiversity value, supporting hundreds of species with its striking white flowers and bright red berries. The thorns should be considered on choosing locations to plant but provides benefits as nesting habitat for wildlife. Grows up to 15m in height and tolerates a wide range of soils and conditions.
- Blackthorn (*prunus spinosa*)
Shares many similarities with hawthorn in being a highly valuable tree for biodiversity, produces white flowers early in spring and berries later in the year and has sharp thorns which create ideal nesting habitat. Blackthorn is smaller than hawthorn, growing up to around 4m in height and so are most suitable for edge planting or as part of a mixed hedgerow.
- Crab apple (*Malus.sylvestris*)
Hardy and versatile trees that can tolerate a range of soils and conditions and are suited as smaller specimen trees, group planting or can be used in a mixed hedgerow. Providing early nectar and aesthetic value with its flower blossoms, later producing small apple fruits which are valuable for many bird and mammal species. Can reach a height of 10m.
- Elder (*Sambucus.nigra*)
Fast-growing and versatile, elder can be planted as part of a group of trees, in a native mixed hedgerow or on edge habitat. They are valuable for local wildlife providing an abundance of flowers which develop into small dark berries eaten by many birds and mammals. Elder grows to about 15m so can be a good size for planting in smaller greenspaces as a tree or managed as part of a hedgerow.
- Holly (*Ilex.aquifolium*)
A versatile species that is suitable for planting as part of a group, in a native mixed hedgerow or on edge habitat. Useful where evergreen foliage is desired. They are highly valuable for biodiversity, providing year-round shelter and nesting habitat, important late season nectar source and provide berries for birds and mammals. Long-lived species of up to 300 years that grows up to 15m.
- Alder (*Alnus.glutinosa*)
A larger tree that is suitable as a specimen or for group planting in damp areas, alder is very tolerant of nutrient-poor soils and can thrive in waterlogged conditions where other trees cannot. They are good trees for biodiversity, offering early nectar for pollinators and seeds that are valuable to many species of bird.

Alder grow to around 28m and grow quickly so care must be taken when selecting planting locations.

- Goat Willow (*Salix.caprea*)

A smaller alternative to alder that also thrives in wet conditions. Suitable for planting as a small specimen tree, group planting or edge planting. Goat willow is a food plant for many species of butterfly and moth and can live up to 300 years. They grow to about 10m so are a versatile size for many greenspaces, they can however spread rapidly, which should be taken into consideration.

6. Shrub, Bulb and Plug Planting

Shrub, bulb and plug planting provides an opportunity to enhance biodiversity within highly visible and intensively managed amenity greenspaces where wildflower meadows or other less formal enhancements may not be appropriate. When thoughtfully designed, shrub beds and bulb displays can provide season-long nectar and pollen resources, increase structural diversity, improve visual appeal, and support a range of pollinators and other wildlife. The approach is particularly valuable in town centres, parks, housing greenspaces, and around public buildings where biodiversity enhancement must be balanced with a well-maintained appearance.

6.1 When to Use this Approach

Shrub, bulb and plug planting is appropriate where:

- Areas of intensively managed amenity grassland offer limited biodiversity value.
- Existing ornamental beds require refurbishment or replacement.
- There is a need to provide pollinator resources throughout the growing season.
- High-visibility locations would benefit from attractive biodiversity-focused planting.
- Plug plants can increase diversity or supplement existing wildflowers.

6.2 Key Principles

- Prioritise pollinator-friendly planting
Select species that provide nectar, pollen, berries, seeds, or shelter for wildlife throughout the year.
- Use native species where appropriate (see list below)
Native species should be preferred where site conditions and aesthetic requirements allow. In highly ornamental settings, carefully selected non-invasive ornamental species may also provide biodiversity benefits.

- Provide seasonal succession
Combine spring bulbs, summer-flowering perennials, autumn fruiting shrubs, and winter structural features to maximise year-round biodiversity value.
- Plant in groups
Planting species in drifts or clusters increases visual impact and makes resources easier for pollinators to locate.
- Reduce maintenance requirements
Avoid designs requiring intensive seasonal bedding replacement where perennial planting can achieve similar outcomes.

6.3 Operational Method

The following steps should be applied when undertaking shrub and bulb planting:

- Site selection and preparation
Select locations that complement existing habitats and amenity use.
Opportunities may include entrances, path edges, and existing planting beds.
Remove competitive vegetation where necessary and prepare the planting area by loosening the soil to around 30cm depth.
- Planting shrubs
 - Use a mixture of species to create structural diversity and resilience.
 - Arrange plants informally in groups rather than formal rows where biodiversity enhancement is the primary objective.
 - Apply mulch around newly planted shrubs where appropriate to suppress weeds and conserve moisture.
- Planting bulbs
 - Plant bulbs during autumn (September-October).
 - Plant in large drifts or naturalistic groups rather than evenly spaced rows.
 - Where possible, establish bulbs within low flowering meadows, beneath scattered trees, or in shrub beds to create additional seasonal interest and extend nectar availability.
- Planting plugs
 - Plant plugs during spring or autumn.
 - Plant in small groups with the same species or alongside existing plants if adding plugs to supplement.
 - Plug plants can be used to add new native species to areas where they are missing or to supplement low populations.

6.4 Routine Management

- Maintain flowering opportunities
Shrub pruning should be undertaken on a rotational basis to maintain flowering and fruiting potential, avoiding annual hard cutting of all plants at once.
- Manage weeds selectively
Control invasive and aggressive weeds around new planting, particularly during the establishment phase.
- Retain bulb foliage
Following flowering, bulb foliage should be left intact for at least six weeks before mowing or removal to allow energy to return to the bulb.
- Replace failures
Inspect annually and replace failed shrubs or bulb displays as required to maintain planting objectives.
- Monitor biodiversity outcomes
Where practical, monitor pollinator use and establishment success to inform future planting schemes across the Council estate.

This approach can be particularly effective when combined with low flowering meadows, wild margins, and tree and hedgerow planting, creating a layered habitat structure that provides food and shelter throughout the year while maintaining a tidy and attractive appearance suitable for amenity greenspaces.

6.5 Recommended Bulb/Plug Species

Bulbs:

- Wild daffodil (*Narcissus.pseudonarcissus*).– Flowers March-April
- Lesser celandine (*Ficaria.verna*).– Flowers February-May
- Wild garlic (*Allium.ursinum*).– Flowers April-June
- Snakes-head fritillary (*Fritillaria.meleagris*).– Flowers April-May
- Wood anemone (*Anemone.nemorosa*) – Flowers March-April
- Lily of the valley (*Convallaria.majalis*).– Flowers April-June

Plugs:

- Harebell (*Campanula.rotundifolia*).– Flowers June-October
- Devils-bit scabious (*Succisa.pratensis*).– Flowers July-October
- Common dog violet (*Viola.riviniana*).– Flowers April-June
- Common rock-rose (*Helianthemum.nummularium*).– Flowers May-September
- Kidney vetch (*Anthyllis.vulneraria*).– Flowers May-September
- Wild thyme (*Thymus.polytrichus*).– Flowers June-September
- Meadow vetchling (*Lathyrus.pratensis*).– Flowers May-August

7. Biosecurity

Biosecurity measures are essential to prevent the introduction and spread of INNS, pests, and diseases during habitat management works. Poor biosecurity can damage habitats, reduce biodiversity and increase long-term management costs. All staff, contractors, and volunteers must follow good biosecurity practice as a standard part of operations.

The actions below should be followed to ensure good biosecurity practice:

- **Check before works**
Identify any known or suspected presence of invasive species or plant diseases prior to starting work. Affected areas should be clearly noted and communicated to all operatives on site. If unrecorded INNS are discovered, this should be reported to managers.
- **Clean equipment and machinery**
All tools, footwear, clothing and machinery should be clean before arriving on site and before moving between sites. Particular attention should be given to removing soil, plant material, and water.
- **Avoid transferring materials**
Soil and plant material should not be moved between sites unless it is known to be free from invasive species and disease. Arisings should be managed on-site wherever possible.
- **Source responsibly**
Seed and plants must be sourced responsibly and, where possible, be of local provenance and free from pests and diseases.
- **Manage invasive species carefully**
Where INNS are present, an appropriate treatment plan should be implemented with works following agreed control methods as set out in the Integrated Weed Control Strategy and INNS Guidance.