

Agenda Item	5iii
Report No	CCC/13/26

The Highland Council

Committee: Climate Change

Date: 12 August 2026

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

Report By: Assistant Chief Executive - Place

1 Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 The report provides an update on the work being progressed through the Planning, Land Use and Environment Thematic Group and specifically focuses on key areas where work is underway to address the climate and ecological emergencies across the Council estate and wider.
- 1.2 This report serves as an overview of relevant actions only, and more detailed reports on actions by relevant teams would be reported separately to the Economy and Infrastructure Committee and Full Council.

2 Recommendations

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

3 Implications

- 3.1 **Resource** - Delivery of activities outlined within this report is supported through a combination of existing service budgets, the Council's Capital Programme and external funding sources, including Scottish Government grants.

During 2026/27, additional Scottish Government funding of £3.413m has been allocated to support flood risk management activity. The Council has also benefited from external funding to support ecological enhancement and restoration projects, including the Nature Restoration Fund and funding previously received for coastal change adaptation planning.

Future progress on a number of activities, particularly coastal change adaptation and nature restoration initiatives, will be dependent upon the availability of continued external funding and associated staff resources.

- 3.2 **Legal** – The activities outlined in this report support the Council in meeting a range of statutory duties and responsibilities, including those arising from the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009, Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004 and Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

The identification of Nature Networks supports implementation of National Planning Framework 4 requirements, while preparation of the Highland Local Development Plan is being undertaken in accordance with the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 and associated regulations.

The Council also has statutory responsibilities relating to flood risk management and biodiversity reporting, including the preparation of Biodiversity Duty Reports and compliance with relevant environmental assessment requirements.

- 3.3 **Risk** - Climate change, biodiversity loss, flooding and coastal erosion present increasing risks to communities, infrastructure, Council assets and service delivery across Highland.

While progress is being made through the actions outlined in this report, delivery of a number of measures remains dependent upon external funding, partnership working and staff capacity. In relation to coastal change adaptation, the absence of confirmed funding beyond the initial Scottish Government allocation will constrain the preparation of Local Coastal Change Adaptation Plans and limit the Council's ability to respond at the pace and scale required.

There is also uncertainty regarding future Nature Restoration Fund allocations and the associated timescales for commitment and expenditure. Failure to secure sufficient resources may delay implementation of biodiversity enhancement, flood resilience and adaptation measures.

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

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

4 Impacts

- 4.1 In Highland, all policies, strategies or service changes are subject to an integrated screening for impact for Equalities, Poverty and Human Rights, Children's Rights and Wellbeing, Climate Change, Islands and Mainland Rural Communities, and Data Protection. Where identified as required, a full impact assessment will be undertaken.
- 4.2 Considering impacts is a core part of the decision-making process and needs to inform the decision-making process. When taking any decision, Members must give due regard to the findings of any assessment.
- 4.3 This is a monitoring and update report and therefore an impact assessment is not required.

5 Addressing the Ecological Emergency

- 5.1 A key aim of the Ecology Strategy is to increase organisational capacity and resources to address the ecological emergency.

An additional externally funded Ecology Officer was recruited into the Ecology Planning Team in October 2025, increasing capacity from two to three Planning Ecology Officers. During 2025/26, the team provided specialist and technical advice on 130 major and national planning applications, helping to ensure that impacts on biodiversity were avoided or minimised, that mitigation strategies were appropriate and deliverable, and that biodiversity enhancement was secured, in line with the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 and National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4).

The Ecology Survey Team continues to provide expert consultancy service for internal Council projects. This includes protected species surveys, biodiversity enhancement advice and ecological clerk of works provision. This ensures that Council developments take cognisance of biodiversity and are delivered in accordance with relevant legislative requirements, including the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. During 2025/26, the team undertook almost 100 surveys to support Council projects and operations, including preliminary ecological appraisals, protected species surveys and hazard tree surveys, and provided ecological advice throughout project development and construction.

In December 2025 a Nature Conservation Officer, jointly funded by the Environment Team and Amenity Services, was recruited to support delivery of several of the actions outlined in the Ecology Strategy and Scottish Biodiversity Strategy. Significant progress has been made on the development of a Greenspace Biodiversity Management Strategy. The Strategy seeks to identify opportunities to deliver nature-positive management across the Council estate, including parks, roadside verges and cemeteries, and establishes management principles, actions and targets to support biodiversity enhancement. It will also provide a framework for the development of site management plans for key Council-owned greenspaces across Highland.

The draft Strategy has been developed with input from Members and a range of Council services. Authority to undertake a 6-week public consultation will be sought from the Communities and Place Committee in August 2026.

Over the coming months, priority work will include completion of the Council's statutory Biodiversity Duty Report for submission to Scottish Government and development of the next Biodiversity Action/Nature Recovery Plan for Highland.

An additional part-externally funded Forestry Officer was recruited in January 2026 to support the Forestry Team, particularly in relation to major and national-scale developments and securing compensatory planting. Work commenced in June 2026 on development of the new Highland Forestry and Woodland Strategy, with Land Use Consultants engaged to draft the Strategy in line with statutory requirements and Scottish Government guidance. Member engagement will form part of the Strategy development process, with a workshop anticipated in Autumn 2026.

5.2 Nature Networks

In accordance with NPF4, the Council is required to identify and map Nature Networks across Highland to strengthen ecological connectivity. The first phase of Nature Network mapping has now been completed, identifying connections between all '30 by 30' sites across Highland, including Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), Special Protection Areas (SPAs), Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and Ramsar sites.

The mapping process has been informed through extensive stakeholder engagement, including workshops with national agencies, environmental NGOs and other partners. Current work is focused on identifying potential woodland-based Nature Networks that align with woodland creation opportunities emerging through the new Highland Forestry and Woodland Strategy.

5.3 Local Nature Conservation Sites

Alongside the development of Nature Networks, work is underway to identify Local Nature Conservation Sites (LNCS). These sites provide an important mechanism to highlight and protect sites of local importance and value for nature from harmful development and to ensure appropriate mitigation where impacts cannot be avoided. LNCS designation can also assist landowners in accessing external funding opportunities.

Sites currently under consideration include areas supporting rare and threatened habitats that are not otherwise designated, such as remnants of native Caledonian pinewood, Atlantic rainforest and machair. Other potential sites support Highland species, including the Great Crested Newt, Great Yellow Bumblebee, and Small Blue Skipper. Survey work to inform designation will be undertaken during 2026.

Further engagement on both Nature Networks and Local Nature Conservation Sites will form part of the formal Local Development plan consultation process.

5.4 Ardersier Common Local Nature Reserve

In May 2026, the Economy and Infrastructure Committee agreed to declare Ardersier Common as Highland's second Local Nature Reserve (LNR), alongside Merkinch.

The new LNR comprises land owned by the Council, Scottish Water, the Secretary of State for Defence and a number of private individuals. The proposal has been supported by the newly established Ardersier Common LNR Management Group, which includes representatives from the Council, Community Council, landowners and managers, High Life Highland, environmental NGOs and other local stakeholders. NatureScot also provided full support for the designation.

The declaration represents an excellent example of collaborative, cross-sector and community-led action to support nature recovery. A management plan, funded through the Nature Restoration Fund, will be developed to guide the site's future management.

5.5 Nature Restoration Fund

The Nature Restoration Fund (NRF) is a Scottish Government multi-year capital and revenue funding programme that supports projects that deliver nature restoration, safeguard wildlife and tackle the causes of biodiversity loss. Funding has been divided equally between a community grant scheme and internally delivered Council projects.

Between 2021 and 2025, a total of £918,707.10 was committed through the community grant scheme. This funding supported 96 projects delivered by 45 organisations. A summary of projects supported during the first three funding rounds is available within the [Highland Restoration Fund Brochure 2021-2024](#), while grant allocations for 2025/26 are detailed within **Appendix 1**.

The remaining NRF allocation has supported a range of Council-led projects including:-

- recruitment of a Nature Network Officer;
- development of Woodland Management Plans for key Council woodlands, including Chapelton Wood, Strontian Wood, Foyers Wood, Ellen Wood, Tradespark Wood and Loch Imrich;
- development of a management plan and delivery of essential works, including removal of invasive non-native species and habitat restoration, at the newly declared Ardersier Common Local Nature Reserve;
- planting of a native tree avenue along the road between Dingwall and the Maryburgh Roundabout to provide better ecological connectivity, scheduled for planting during October-November 2026;
- purchase of cut and lift machinery to enhance Amenity Services' capacity to manage greenspace more effectively for nature;
- purchase of tree management software for Amenity Services; and
- hydrological assessment to establish whether water levels at Loch a'Chleidh, Muir of Ord (an important breeding site for Great Crested Newt) can be stabilised during the summer months, alongside other potential hydrological benefits, including rewetting of historic wetlands.

Although a formal announcement has not yet been made, it is anticipated that NRF funding will continue to be available to local authorities during 2026/27. Current indications suggest that funding criteria will remain broadly consistent with previous rounds.

6 Flood Risk Management

- 6.1 A report on Flood Risk Management was presented to the Council's Capital Programme Board on 1 July 2026, setting out proposals for the use of increased Scottish Government funding of £3.413m to support delivery of actions within the Council's Flood Risk Management Plans.

The funding must be allocated within the 2026/27 financial year; however, delivery will be programmed across 2026/27 and 2027/28.

- 6.2 The report sets out a range of activities, including low-cost, shovel-ready flood protection schemes, capital maintenance, coastal flood resilience, property-level resilience measures, and the development of modelling and studies to support future schemes. It also includes proposals for nature-based solutions to flood management, blue-green infrastructure, and community flood warning systems.
- 6.3 Capital Programme Board approval was sought for the proposals to enable the planning and implementation of actions during 2026/27 and to support forward planning for 2027/28. A further report will be presented to the Economy and Infrastructure Committee on 20 August for approval.

7 Coastal Change

- 7.1 Coastal change is an increasing risk across Highland, with evidence indicating growing impacts from coastal erosion, sea level rise and more frequent severe weather events affecting communities, infrastructure and assets.
- 7.2 The Council's Regional Coastal Change Adaptation Plan (CCAP) provides an important evidence framework to support the Council's response to these risks. It identifies areas of vulnerability, including communities and assets least resilient to climate change, rising sea levels, coastal erosion and flooding.
- 7.3 The Regional Plan prioritises where Local Coastal Change Adaptation Plans (Local CCAPs) should be developed to provide more detailed, place-based assessments of coastal risks and set out potential adaptation responses for individual communities and assets.
- 7.4 Initial funding supported the development of the Regional CCAP and early Local CCAP activity. However, no further funding has been secured for 2026/27 onwards and progress on Local CCAPs preparation is therefore likely to be constrained. Future delivery will be dependent on prioritisation and availability of funding.

- 7.5 The Regional CCAP is intended to underpin future planning and decision-making, including informing the Local Development Plan and supporting a more proactive approach to managing coastal risk. This includes steering development away from areas at risk, while identifying opportunities for adaptation, including asset relocation or space for coastal retreat where appropriate.
- 7.6 As set out in the Climate Change, Energy and Community Resilience Strategic Paper considered by Council in March 2026, an action was agreed to write to the Scottish Government seeking clarity of the future funding model for flood protection schemes and engineered flood defence infrastructure, recognising the increasing climate risks facing Highland communities, including those identified as being at risk from coastal erosion.
- 7.7 A letter has subsequently been issued as detailed within **Appendix 2** highlighting the need for a revised, long-term funding approach. This sets out several key issues, including the lack of a dedicated funding stream for coastal change adaptation, that national funding for flood protection has not increased since 2016 despite a significant increase in both the scale of climate risk and the supporting evidence. There is also a lack of multi-year funding certainty to support long-term planning and delivery.

The letter highlights the need for a more strategic, multi-year funding model to support delivery of flood and coastal resilience activity at the scale required across the Highlands.

8 Highland Local Development Plan

- 8.1 The Highland Local Development Plan (HLDP) Evidence Report represents the first statutory stage in preparing a new, single Local Development Plan for Highland, which will replace the existing four plans. The full Evidence Report was considered and approved by the [Highland Council at its meeting on 25 June 2026](#) and was submitted to Scottish Ministers for Gate Check on 1 July 2026. Gate Check assesses whether the evidence base is sufficient to inform preparation of the Plan.
- 8.2 The HLDP Evidence Report Chapter 4 is most pertinent to net zero and includes information on emissions reduction (mitigation) and adaptation to climate change, alongside evidence on the energy sector, including opportunities to decarbonise heat, improve energy efficiency and address fuel poverty. The potential for carbon sequestration and storage, including through natural systems, is also highlighted, alongside national policy requirements to support nature recovery and restoration as part of climate objectives. The report also references the role of nature-based solutions in supporting resilience to climate change impacts, including in coastal environments. Further detailed evidence is provided in topic-specific chapters, including coastal development (Chapter 6) and flood risk management (Chapter 7).

- 8.3 The Evidence Report is a technical document and does not set policy but provides the evidence base to inform the proposed HLDP. Further details on the HLDP process and timetable are set out in the [Council's Development Plans Newsletter 2026](#).

When the Evidence Report clears its Gate Check, the subsequent plan preparation stage will formally progress. This will include development of a spatial strategy, site-specific proposals and Highland-specific policies to be used alongside National Planning Framework 4. The plan preparation will be informed by a Strategic Environmental Assessment and Cumulative Transport Appraisal. The Proposed Plan will require approval by Full Council before it is published for formal public consultation.

Once adopted, the HLDP will sit alongside National Planning Framework and form the primary policy framework for planning decisions in Highland over a 10-year period. It will also shape public and private investment decisions across the area.

Designation: Assistant Chief Executive - Place

Date: 13 July 2026

Author: Nicole Wallace, Service Lead – Environment,
Development and Transport Planning
Andrew Puls, Environment Team Leader
Alan Fraser, Principal Engineer
Fiona Daschofsky, Programme Manager
Meredith Dale, Principal Planner

Background Papers: Highland Local Development Plan: Evidence [Report](#)
Regional Coastal Change Adaptation Plan [Report](#)

Appendices: Appendix 1 – Nature Restoration Fund Grants 2025/26
Appendix 2 – Flood Protection, Coastal Change
Adaptation and Long-Term Resilience Letter to Scottish
Government

Appendix 1

Nature Restoration Fund Grants 2025/26			
Lochaber	Community Association of Lochs and Sounds	Lochaline Native Oyster Restoration Project (LNOP)	£25,000
Lochaber	Scotland the Big Picture	Torlundy Wild Connections	£21,480
Speyside	Butterfly Conservation Scotland	Re-establishing a population of Dark Bordered Beauty	£20,164
Nairn	NICE Nairn	Dune Resilience Project Nairn (Phase 2)	£20,110
Lochaber	Arisaig Community Trust	Reviving Nature in Arisaig	£17,238
Inverness	Friends of Merkinch LNR	Merkinch Warden Programme	£16,650
Black Isle	RSPB	Tern Raft Revival	£16,569
Lochaber	National Trust for Scotland (NTS)	Gleann Leac na Muidhe INNS eradication partnership	£16,000
Speyside	Speyside Fields for Wildlife	Glenbeg Habitat Restoration	£15,388
Black Isle	Go Flourish	Fungi, Flora, Fauna - North Kessock's Biodiversity Boost	£14,426
Lochalsh	Balmacara Community Trust	Balmacara Woodland Park Regeneration Project	£13,798
Lochaber	John Muir Trust	Rainforest Restoration in Britain's Last Wilderness	£12,315
Ross-Shire	Scottish Wildlife Trust	In-Stream River Restoration at Ben Mor Coigach	£11,287
Easter Ross	Butterfly Conservation Scotland	Restoring Habitats for Priority Lepidoptera in Easter Ross & Sutherland Coastal Landscape	£11,219
Caithness	Wick Development	Wick Riverside Biodiversity Improvements – Phase 2	£9,100
Inverness	Culduthel Woods Group	Pond Improvement Project	£9,000
South Skye	Broadford and Strath Community Company	Nature Restoration, Broadford Community Woodland	£8,500
Inverness	Strathdearn Community Developments	Wildflower Meadows & Orchard Creation	£8,151
Ross-shire	Aultbea Community Council	Himalayan Balsam Removal in Laide/Aultbea	£7,600

Ross-Shire	Farmer Jones Academy CIC	Gro For You - Ross-Shire Nature Pond	£7,500
Inverness	Knocknagael Ltd	Creation of a species rich wetland SuDS at Knocknagael	£7,000
Inverness	The Boleskine House Foundation SCIO	Community Tree Planting and Wildflower Seed Sharing	£6,625
Inverness	Beaully Fishery Board	R. Beaully: Improving Atlantic salmon smolt survival	£6,263
Highland	High Life Highland	Nocturnal Forage restoration	£5,365
Sutherland	West Sutherland Fisheries Trust	Eels in Loch Assynt	£4,330
Inverness	Knocknagael Ltd	Creation of a species rich meadow	£4,270
Wester Ross	Laide and Aultbea Community Woodland	Newt Pond Restoration	£3,439
Skye	Broadford and Strath Community Company	Biodiversity Enhancement, Broadford Community Garden	£2,620
Sutherland	Rogart Development Trust	Restoration of the Mart Site – wildflower meadow	£2,177
Total			£323,584



Gillian Martin MSP
Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Rural Affairs
The Scottish Government
St. Andrew's House
Regent Road
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

25 June 2026

Dear Gillian

Flood Protection, Coastal Change Adaptation and Long-Term Resilience

We wanted to take this opportunity to highlight the need for a revised long-term funding model for flood protection, coastal change adaptation and climate resilience that reflects the scale of risk facing Highland communities and their wider national significance.

As you know, climate impacts are already affecting communities, infrastructure and public services across the Highlands and are expected to intensify over coming decades. The region has the longest coastline in Scotland, alongside dispersed rural and island communities, nationally significant infrastructure and limited alternative routes, resulting in high response costs and increased vulnerability.

The latest regional evidence base further demonstrates that climate impacts in the Highlands are material, interconnected and accelerating, with risks that are systemic and cross-cutting across infrastructure, communities and the economy. Given the region's national significance in supporting Scotland's energy transition, infrastructure networks and rural economy, these risks are not confined locally but have wider strategic implications.

The Highlands play a key role in delivering Scotland's climate and energy ambitions; however, the costs associated with climate adaptation and resilience remain disproportionately local. This creates an increasing imbalance whereby national economic benefits are realised more widely while local authorities and communities bear the costs of climate impacts.

While we welcome the increased flood resilience allocation for 2026/27, this highlights a wider strategic issue. Since the current national funding baseline was established in 2016, there has been a significant shift in the evidence base and national understanding of climate risk.

The Highland Council
Glenurquhart Road
Inverness
IV3 5NX

However, the national allocation for flood resilience has remained at £42 million per annum since 2016, resulting in a real-terms reduction in investment despite increasing risk. This has created a clear misalignment between the level of risk now understood and the scale of response current funding arrangements enable.

This is compounded by the short-term nature of current funding, which provides no certainty beyond the current year and limits effective planning and delivery of inherently multi-year programmes.

We are also concerned about the position on coastal change adaptation. The previous programme provided an important foundation; however, its discontinuation leaves a gap in both funding and strategic direction.

The Council's Coastal Change Adaptation Plan identifies 29 communities at heightened risk; however, this represents only a subset of wider exposure across the Highland coastline. National evidence demonstrates that a significant proportion of at-risk assets are concentrated within a small number of local authority areas, including the Highlands, reinforcing the need for targeted investment.

There is a growing gap between the ambition set out in Scotland's National Adaptation Plan and the funding currently available to support delivery at the pace and scale required. This creates a risk that continuing to rely on short-term and fragmented funding approaches will result in higher long-term costs and increased disruption, rather than enabling planned, preventative adaptation.

We therefore seek:

- A multi-year, integrated funding programme for flood and coastal resilience, providing greater certainty on funding levels and allocations
- Alignment of funding structures with the current national evidence base on climate risk, enabling delivery at the pace and scale required
- Recognition of rurality, remoteness and infrastructure exposure
- A stronger emphasis on preventative, place-based adaptation aligned with national infrastructure and resilience priorities

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss how a more strategic and sustainable funding model could be developed in partnership.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely



Councillor Raymond Bremner
Leader of The Highland Council



Councillor Bill Lobban
Convener of The Highland Council