

## Chapter 5 : Nature and Environment

<p><b>Information required by the Act regarding the issue addressed in this section</b></p>	<p>Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997 as amended: Section 15(5)(a):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the principal physical, cultural, economic, social, built heritage and environmental characteristics of the district.</li> <li>• the principal purposes for which the land is used</li> </ul>
<p><b>NPF4 LDP Requirements</b></p>	<p>NPF4 Policy 3:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• LDPs should protect, conserve, restore and enhance biodiversity in line with the mitigation hierarchy.</li> <li>• LDPs should also promote nature recovery and nature restoration across the development plan area, including by:</li> <li>• facilitating the creation of nature networks and strengthening connections between them to support improved ecological connectivity.</li> <li>• restoring degraded habitats or creating new habitats; and</li> <li>• incorporating measures to increase biodiversity, including populations of priority species.</li> </ul> <p>NPF4 Policy 4 requires:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• LDPs will identify and protect locally, regionally, nationally and internationally important natural assets, on land and along coasts. The spatial strategy should safeguard them and take into account the objectives and level of their protected status in allocating land for development.</li> <li>• Spatial strategies should also better connect nature rich areas by establishing and growing nature networks to help protect and restore the biodiversity, ecosystems and natural processes in their area.</li> </ul> <p>NPF4 Policy 5:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• LDPs should protect locally, regionally, nationally and internationally valued soils, including land of lesser quality that is culturally or locally important for primary use.</li> </ul> <p>NPF4 Policy 6:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• LDPs should identify and protect existing woodland and the potential for its enhancement or expansion to avoid habitat fragmentation and improve ecological connectivity, helping to support and expand nature networks.</li> </ul>

- The spatial strategy should identify and set out proposals for forestry, woodland and trees in the area, including their development, protection and enhancement, resilience to climate change, and the expansion of a range of types to provide multiple benefits. This will be supported and informed by an up-to-date Forestry and Woodland Strategy.

### Links to Evidence

(**THC003**) IMFLDP2  
 (**THC048**) NOMIS BRES  
 (**THC049**) NOMIS BRES – Data zone Level  
 (**THC050**) Nature Network Draft Methodology Paper  
 (**THC051**) Nature Networks Mapping Data List  
 (**THC0039**) RSPB Response to Evidence  
 (**THC035**) HES Response to Evidence  
 (**THC088**) NatureScot Response to Evidence  
 (**THC089**) SEPA Response to Evidence  
 (**THC090**) Homes for Scotland Response to Evidence  
 (**THC040**) Council response to ScottishPower Renewables and Scottish Renewables Feedback on Chapters 4 and 5.  
 (**THC041**) Scottish Renewables Response to Evidence  
 (**THC042**) Scottish Power Response to Evidence

Ref no.	Online Resources	Date Accessed
<b>THC350</b>	<a href="#">EUNIS Habitat Map of Scotland (HabMos)</a>	16.12.25
<b>THC351</b>	<a href="#">Scottish Invasive Species Initiative</a>	16.12.25
<b>THC352</b>	<a href="#">SEPA Scottish Wetland Inventory</a>	16.12.25
<b>THC353</b>	<a href="#">Birds of Conservation Concern 5</a>	16.12.25
<b>THC354</b>	<a href="#">Botanical Society of British Isles Plant Atlas</a>	16.12.25
<b>THC355</b>	<a href="#">The Breeding Bird Survey 2022</a>	16.12.25
<b>THC356</b>	<a href="#">2023 State of Nature Report</a>	14.05.26
<b>THC357</b>	<a href="#">THC Ecology Strategy and Action Plan</a>	14.05.26
<b>THC358</b>	<a href="#">The Flow Country Planning WHS Planning Position Statement 2</a>	14.05.26
<b>THC359</b>	<a href="#">The Flow Country World Heritage Site Draft Management Plan</a>	21.10.25
<b>THC360</b>	<a href="#">Research into Approaches to Measuring Biodiversity in Scotland</a>	21.10.25
<b>THC361</b>	<a href="#">Highland Biodiversity Enhancement Planning Guidance</a>	14.05.26
<b>THC362</b>	<a href="#">The risks to Scotland's soils: Scoping Report</a>	21.10.25
<b>THC363</b>	<a href="#">National Development Plan for Crofting</a>	21.10.25

<b>THC364</b>	<a href="#">Scottish Government Report to Parliament: Economic Condition of Crofting 2019-2022</a>	21.10.25
<b>THC365</b>	<a href="#">Reforestation Scotland's New Hutting Developments: Good Practice Guidance</a>	21.10.25
<b>THC366</b>	<a href="#">The Value of Crofting Report</a>	21.10.25
<b>THC367</b>	<a href="#">Policy on Control of Woodland Removal</a>	21.10.25
<b>THC368</b>	<a href="#">THC Trees, Woodland and Development Supplementary Guidance</a>	14.05.26
<b>THC369</b>	<a href="#">Crofting Commission Annual Report 23/24</a>	21.10.25
<b>THC370</b>	<a href="#">Scotland Forestry Strategy Implementation</a>	21.10.25
<b>THC371</b>	<a href="#">Scotland's Forestry Strategy 2019-2029</a>	21.10.25
<b>THC372</b>	<a href="#">Scottish Biodiversity List</a>	21.10.25
<b>THC373</b>	<a href="#">IPBES The Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services</a>	21.10.25
<b>THC374</b>	<a href="#">Highland Biodiversity Action Plan 2016-2026</a>	21.10.25
<b>THC375</b>	<a href="#">Scottish Biodiversity Strategy to 2045</a>	21.10.25
<b>THC376</b>	<a href="#">Scottish Government Draft Planning Guidance: Biodiversity</a>	21.10.25
<b>THC377</b>	<a href="#">Highland Natural Heritage Designation Map</a>	15.07.25
<b>THC378</b>	<a href="#">Highland Soils Map</a>	15.07.25
<b>THC379</b>	<a href="#">Highland Forestry Woodland &amp; Trees Map</a>	15.07.25
<b>THC380</b>	<a href="#">THC Tree Management Strategy</a>	14.05.26
<b>THC381</b>	<a href="#">Highland Forest and Woodland Strategy</a>	14.05.26
<b>THC382</b>	<a href="#">NatureScot Developing with Nature guide</a>	28.07.25
<b>THC383</b>	<a href="#">Meeting 30 by 30 biodiversity commitment: Terrestrial &amp; Freshwater sites consultation</a>	18.07.24
<b>THC384</b>	<a href="#">HabMos EUNIS Land Cover Map</a>	24.06.25
<b>THC385</b>	<a href="#">Ramsar sites   NatureScot</a>	24.06.25
<b>THC386</b>	<a href="#">Special Protection Areas (SPAs)   NatureScot</a>	24.06.25
<b>THC387</b>	<a href="#">NatureScot Special Areas of Conservation</a>	24.06.25
<b>THC388</b>	<a href="#">National Nature Reserves   NatureScot</a>	24.06.25
<b>THC389</b>	<a href="#">National Scenic Areas   NatureScot</a>	24.06.25
<b>THC390</b>	<a href="#">NatureScot Sites of Special Scientific Interest</a>	24.06.25
<b>THC391</b>	<a href="#">Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)</a>	24.06.25
<b>THC392</b>	<a href="#">Local Landscape Areas   NatureScot</a>	24.06.25
<b>THC393</b>	<a href="#">Discover your Local Nature Reserve</a>	24.06.25
<b>THC394</b>	<a href="#">Wild Land Area guidance</a>	24.06.25
<b>THC395</b>	<a href="#">NatureScot Natural Designations Map</a>	07.07.25
<b>THC396</b>	<a href="#">Highland Statutorily Protected Species Supplementary Guidance</a>	14.05.26
<b>THC397</b>	<a href="#">Nature Networks Framework</a>	28.07.25

<b>THC398</b>	<a href="#">Nature Networks Toolkit</a>	28.07.25
<b>THC399</b>	<a href="#">NW Highlands UNESCO Global Geopark</a>	24.06.25
<b>THC400</b>	<a href="#">Wester Ross Biosphere</a>	24.06.25
<b>THC401</b>	<a href="#">The Flow Country WHS Nomination Dossier</a>	28.07.25
<b>THC402</b>	<a href="#">Scotland's Soils - Carbon and Peatland Map</a>	24.06.25
<b>THC403</b>	<a href="#">Scottish Government Onshore Wind Policy Statement</a>	14.05.26
<b>THC404</b>	<a href="#">Scotland Soil Land Capability for Agriculture</a>	24.06.25
<b>THC405</b>	<a href="#">Landslide Areas on Scotland's Trunk Roads</a>	24.06.25
<b>THC406</b>	<a href="#">National Landslide Database - BGS</a>	24.06.25
<b>THC407</b>	<a href="#">UK Forestry Standard</a>	24.06.25
<b>THC408</b>	<a href="#">Ancient Woodland Inventory</a>	24.06.25
<b>THC409</b>	<a href="#">Native Woodland Survey of Scotland</a>	24.06.25
<b>THC410</b>	<a href="#">Scotland's Native Woodlands</a>	24.06.25
<b>THC411</b>	<a href="#">Economic impact of forestry</a>	02.07.25
<b>THC412</b>	<a href="#">Protected Sites in Favourable Condition</a>	02.07.25
<b>THC413</b>	<a href="#">Tree Protection Orders, Conservation Areas</a>	02.07.25
<b>THC414</b>	<a href="#">Crofters' duties</a>	30.07.25
<b>THC415</b>	<a href="#">Capercaillie Action Plan</a>	19.09.25
<b>THC416</b>	<a href="#">NatureScot - Minor woodland types</a>	22.09.25
<b>THC417</b>	<a href="#">Dumfries &amp; Galloway Dark Skies Friendly Lighting Supplementary Guidance</a>	17.04.26

In order to avoid repetition of content contained elsewhere within the Evidence Report, this chapter should be read in conjunction with other chapters. We recognise that there are relevant crossovers between Nature and Environment and other topics including:

- **Chapter 4: Climate Change and Energy**
- **Chapter 6: Coastal Development and Aquaculture**
- **Chapter 7: Flood Risk Management**
- **Chapter 8: Economy, Business, Tourism & Productive Places**
- **Chapter 9: Housing**
- **Chapter 10: Transport**
- **Chapter 12: Historic Assets, Brownfield Land & Empty Buildings**
- **Chapter 13: Design, Wellbeing, Local Living and Placemaking**

Where apparent, the Council has referenced relevant linkages between policies areas throughout the chapter.

## Summary of Evidence

5.1 This chapter sets out the evidence the Council has considered in relation to nature and the environment within the Highlands. The Council considers it has undertaken thorough engagement with stakeholders for this chapter and collected sufficient evidence on the topic for the Proposed Plan development. This Summary of Evidence focuses on information relating to:

- **Biodiversity**
- **Natural Places**
- **Soils**
- **Forestry, Woodland and Trees**

### **Biodiversity**

#### *Habitats and Species*

5.2 The Scottish Biodiversity Strategy defines biodiversity as the variety of all living things and the ecosystems where they live (on land or in water). It comprises the living organisms in a particular space, whether in a window-box, garden, park, meadow peatland, river, loch, estuary, ocean, beach or mountain top. Biodiversity inspires people and has enormous value in its own right but it is also central to our survival as a species. Globally there is much recognition on the importance of biodiversity [IPBES The Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services](#) presents a critical assessment of the status and trends of the natural world, the social implications of these trends, their direct and indirect causes, and, importantly, the actions that can still be taken to ensure a better future for all. The report concluded that biodiversity loss is happening faster than at any time in human history, with ecosystems deteriorating worldwide. Around 75% of land environments and 66% of marine environments had already been significantly altered by human activity.

5.3 The [2023 State of Nature Report](#) identified significant declines in Scotland's biodiversity with Scotland and the UK having some of the poorest biodiversity intactness ratings in the world. It shows that the number of species, and their geographic spread in Scotland, has declined overall with 1 in 9 species threatened with extinction. Headline figures from the report include the following:

- An average 15% decline in species abundance
- A 49% decline in average abundance of 11 species of Scottish seabirds
- 11% of species are threatened
- A 57% decrease in plant and lichen distributions

5.4 The report goes on to identify the following key pressures on biodiversity:

- Changing use of sea and land
- Direct exploitation of organisms

- Climate Change
- Pollution
- Invasive non-native species
- Indirect drivers – such as people’s disconnect and lack of recognition towards the value and importance of nature

5.5 There is increasing recognition that the climate and nature crises are intertwined. Climate change driven by greenhouse gas emissions is causing biodiversity loss through habitat destruction and rising temperatures, altering the geographical suitability for many species. Conversely the degradation of natural ecosystems like deforestation, reduces the planet’s ability to absorb carbon dioxide, further exacerbating climate change. Addressing both crises requires integrated solutions that protects and restore ecosystems while reducing carbon emissions. Implementation of NPF4 policies as a whole should underpin the response to the intertwined climate and nature crises, and it is important that the plan seeks to minimise greenhouse gas emissions and identify benefits for biodiversity where possible.

5.6 The [Scottish Biodiversity Strategy to 2045](#) identifies the following six objectives that will aid the delivery of high-end goals, aiming to halt the loss of biodiversity by 2030:

- Accelerate restoration and regeneration
- Protect nature on land and at sea, across and beyond protected areas
- Embed nature-positive farming, fishing and forestry
- Protect and support recovery of vulnerable and important species and habitats
- Invest in nature
- Take action on the indirect drivers of biodiversity loss

5.7 In April 2024, ‘[Meeting our 30 by 30 biodiversity commitment on Terrestrial and Freshwater sites](#)’ consultation was published, which refers to a commitment set out to protect 30% of land and seas for nature by 2030 as reflected in the Global Biodiversity Framework. NatureScot has identified five types of natural heritage designations (outlined in Natural Places) that are currently being considered as contributing to the terrestrial element of 30X30:

- Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs)
- Special Protection Areas (SPAs)
- Special Areas of Conservation (SACs)
- Ramsar Sites
- National Nature Reserves (NNRs)

5.8 [EUNIS Habitat Map of Scotland \(HabMos\)](#) brings together in one place and in one classification system all available habitat and land use data. It is this ability to view

a range of data from different sources, making it a powerful tool for analysis, planning and policy development at national and local levels. HabMoS sets a new standard for collaboration within Scotland. Organisations spanning the government; voluntary and private sectors have supplied data in an informal, willing and collaborative partnership. This tool will help The Highland Council to protect and support locally important habitats and land uses from inappropriate development.

### *Local Priorities*

- 5.9 The Highland region supports over 75% of UK priority habitats and from the [Scottish Biodiversity List](#) over 1,500 of 2,000 species.
- 5.10 On the 12 December 2022, Highland Council became signatories of the Edinburgh Declaration to underline the Council's commitment to tackling the joint climate and nature crises.
- 5.11 [Highland Nature: Biodiversity Action Plan 2021-2026](#) brings together 46 partners, including the Council, to identify actions that can be taken locally to conserve and enhance biodiversity in the Highland area. The Action Plan identifies priority species and habitats and sets out nine key actions:
- Planning and development decisions provide biodiversity protection
  - Landscape-scale nature conservation and restoration work
  - Identify and conserve priority species
  - Control invasive non-native invasive species
  - Wildlife crime is deterred and prosecuted
  - Participation in green and blue activities to benefit health is increased
  - Public engagement using knowledge, skills sharing and training is continued and expanded
  - Biodiversity data gathering and sharing is improved
  - Long-term research into environmental change continues to expand
- 5.12 The Council's [Ecology Strategy and Action Plan](#), adopted in 2024, is a Council wide programme that sets out a suite of actions to tackle the ecological emergency and contribute to Scotland's target to be nature positive by 2030 and to have restored and regenerated biodiversity by 2045. It aims to deliver on the ambitions sets out in the Council Programme 2022-2027 to accelerate our response to the pressing climate and ecological emergency.
- 5.13 The implementation of the [Ecology Strategy and Action Plan](#) will see Council manage its estate more effectively for biodiversity, influence others through policy and guidance, and work with communities and stakeholders to engage in collective action to tackle the ecological emergency together.

- 5.14 The actions are grouped under six themes and will:
- Demonstrate leadership through the development of joined up and ambitious policy and guidance
  - Create space for nature by taking action across the Council and with partners
  - Ensure that our planning system supports the Council's ambition to protect, restore and enhance nature
  - Reduce pollution through waste management's strategies
  - Improve communication, training and education to communicate the value of biodiversity
  - Improve our data collection and management to ensure data is accessible
- 5.15 As per the [Ecology Strategy and Action Plan](#), the Council are currently in the final stages of drafting a guidance document on the appropriate management of invasive non-native species on Council land. [Scottish Invasive Species Initiative](#) will support actions set out in the Council's Ecology Strategy, as an ambitious partnership project set up to tackle invasive non-native species alongside rivers and watercourses in northern Scotland.
- 5.16 The recently adopted IMFLDP2 (**THC003**) has set out a clear policy framework for all proposed development within the Inner Moray Firth area in response to policy 3 of NPF4.
- 5.17 The Council shall be reviewing and updating the [Highland Statutorily Protected Species Supplementary Guidance](#) in 2026.

### *Nature Networks*

- 5.18 The Council is in the process of identifying and mapping existing and potential nature networks across the region. A nature network mapping methodology is in the process of being finalised and nature networks to link 30x30 sites have been drafted. This work has been informed by the [Nature Networks Framework](#) and [Nature Networks Toolkit](#), alongside a series of workshops with key stakeholders including both national agencies and environmental NGOs. Nature network mapping has incorporated and been cognisant of a wide range of mapping data as detailed in Nature Network Mapping Data List (**THC051**) and Nature Network Draft Methodology Paper (**THC050**).
- 5.19 Nature Network mapping will be an iterative process and, in an area the size and diversity of Highland, will take time. The HLDP will need to reflect that Nature Networks will change and evolve during the lifetime of the plan in response to changing circumstances and to ensure that connections are strengthened, degraded habitats are restored and/or new habitats created.
- 5.20 An example of how habitats may be supported could be through using data information such as the [Birds of Conservation Concern 5](#), the latest assessment of

the status of birds in the UK, Channel Islands and Isle of Man. It is commonly known as the UK 'Red List for birds' presents data on bird species at most concern. In addition, The Breeding Bird Survey 2022, produced by the British Trust for Ornithology with the Joint Nature Conservation Committee and RSPB, is the UK's main annual assessment of trends in common breeding birds. These sources combined can support the development of habitats to support these species present in Highland through the development of Nature Networks.

- 5.21 Further data sources to support the development of Nature Networks could include [Botanical Society of the British Isles \(BSBI\) Plant Atlas 2020](#) or [NBN Atlas](#) and more.

### *Securing Positive Effects for Biodiversity*

- 5.22 Planning has an important role in protecting and enhancing biodiversity. The [Scottish Government Draft Planning Guidance: Biodiversity](#) sets out expectations for implementing and delivering NPF4 policies which support the cross-cutting NPF4 outcome 'improving biodiversity'. The importance of following the mitigation hierarchy when considering impacts on biodiversity is noted. The NatureScot Developing with Nature Guidance is aimed at local-scale developments (Policy 3c) and provides guidance on enhancement measures that may be incorporated into development.
- 5.23 The recent [Research into Approaches to Measuring Biodiversity in Scotland](#) commissioned by the Scottish Government recommends the creation of a biodiversity metric framework as a tool for assessing biodiversity at the site or project scale which enables consistent and comparable assessment of losses or gains in biodiversity across sites. NatureScot has commenced work to develop an adapted biodiversity metric suitable for use in supporting delivery of NPF4 Policy 3b. The latest update came in June 2025 where guidance was published on the use of existing biodiversity metrics in the Scottish planning system. NatureScot expects to be able to consult on a draft metric tool and guidance in 2026. The implementation of a metric tool brings perceived benefit to the planning system, such as providing a consistent and transparent approach to calculating changes in biodiversity with a clear assessment criterion and easy to interpret outputs.
- 5.24 In 2024 the Council published [Biodiversity Enhancement Planning Guidance](#) to further support the delivery of NPF4 Policy 3 at a Highland level. The Council will continue to keep under review the requirement for a minimum 10% biodiversity enhancement and will review our [Biodiversity Enhancement Planning Guidance](#) once the Scottish Metric is available. Our guidance, at paragraph 4.24, explains the Council's current approach and expectation ahead of the Scottish Metric becoming available.

- 5.25 The Council will consider whether there is a need to develop a policy to secure a range of mandatory high nature value but low maintenance, low-cost biodiversity enhancement measures for all new developments across Highland to ensure positive effects for biodiversity are secured. Measures may include swift bricks, bee bricks, bat boxes, amphibian ladders etc. The measures sought or required should be appropriate to the development and its context and location. The selection in any particular case will be informed by understanding of the site, by national and local guidance and experience.
- 5.26 The Council recognise that not all Habitat Management Plan and enhancement areas have been fully mapped and have started to develop mapping of both historic and new HMP and enhancement areas. This will continue to develop to ensure the protection of areas from harmful development in the future, through the consideration of the effects of development proposals with understanding of the purpose of the particular HMP or enhancement area. Impacting on these could undo, reduce, or set back as of yet undelivered benefits. Where development can be justified in such areas, we will consider the requirement for substantial enhancement measures to off-set impacts.
- 5.27 The Council recognise that not all developments are able to deliver biodiversity enhancements on site and that off-site enhancement is often required. We will consider developing a list of possible enhancement opportunities that developers can deliver in partnership with other stakeholders within Highland. We will also investigate a mechanism for taking a financial payment from developers where off-setting is proven to be unachievable.
- 5.28 The Council will consider how to make best use of nature-based solutions in both urban and rural contexts. The value of policies that encourage increased use of rain gardens, trees to reduce flood risk and urban cooling, green roofs, permeable surfaces and wet sustainable urban drainage systems (SuDS) that have high biodiversity value will be considered as outlined in **Chapter 13: Design, Wellbeing, Local Living and Placemaking**, which considers the subject of blue and green infrastructure. The Council will consider the potential of the Urban Greening Factor (UGF) planning tool to improve the provision of on-site green infrastructure that new developments are expected to provide. Whilst not a tool which is specifically targeting biodiversity, good design of the urban greening created will deliver benefits for biodiversity, including the creation of new habitats; ecologically informed and inspired design can ensure that new urban greening provides functioning habitats where biodiversity can exist alongside development and augment existing nearby habitats.

### **Natural Places**

- 5.29 The Highland region supports over 75% of UK priority habitats with 27.4% of the Highland Council under natural heritage designation. The HLDP area is home to an array of international, national and local natural heritage designations, including the recently established Flow Country World Heritage Site that is of global significance for its blanket bog ecosystem.
- 5.30 The Council's [Highland Natural Heritage Designations Map](#) provides an open data mapping resource where all natural heritage designations mentioned within the Evidence Report can be identified, and illustrates the scale of coverage where NPF4 Policy 4 applies. It is evident that many natural heritage designations overlap, requiring multiple NPF4 and LDP policies to be complied with to ensure that the natural heritage designations are suitably protected from development.
- 5.31 The Highland Council area faces huge development pressure to accommodate major and national energy infrastructure projects, many of which are within or adjacent to designated areas, the proposed population influx required to facilitate the Inverness and Cromarty Green Freeport (ICFGF) Project and expansion of settlements across the highlands. It is therefore of importance that, in accordance with NPF4, natural places and landscapes are safeguarded, restored and managed in a sustainable way that maintains and grows their essential benefits and services.

### *International Natural Heritage Designations*

#### *Ramsar Sites*

- 5.32 [Ramsar Wetlands of National Importance](#) are classified under the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance. The majority of Ramsar sites in Scotland are linked to the European designations network – either as a Special Protection Area (SPA) or Special Area of Conservation (SAC). All of Highland's Ramsar sites are underpinned by Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), which are national but not international designations. Further wetland data can be found on [SEPA's Scottish Wetland Inventory](#).
- 5.33 Until July 2025 Ramsar sites were protected via their underlying designations as SSSIs and/or European sites (SPA/SAC). As of July 2025, the Scottish Government's [updated Ramsar Sites policy position](#) considers that all listed Ramsar sites in Scotland should be treated as if they were European designated sites for the purposes of land use change decision making. Compliance with this policy means that any plan or project which could affect a Ramsar site will involve undertaking a Habitats Regulations Appraisal (HRA) to determine whether the proposal is likely to have a significant effect on the notified natural features of the site.

- 5.34 Scotland currently has 51 Ramsar sites covering a total area of about 313,000 hectares. Highland accommodates 13 Ramsar sites covering an area of 155,933ha as depicted in the [Natural Heritage Designations Mapping](#):

#### *Special Protection Areas*

- 5.35 Land designated as a [Special Protection Area \(SPA\)](#) for ornithological significance under the European birds directive is to protect one or more rare, threatened or vulnerable bird species, or certain regularly occurring migratory species. Scotland is internationally important for many species of wild birds due to our location in North-West Europe and the range of wild and semi-natural habitats here. NPF4 identifies protection measures and considerations for SPAs through Policy 4b. In total, there are 162 classified SPA's covering around 2.75 million hectares of Scotland's land and sea. Highland accommodates 53 sites which cover an area of 437,000 ha (approx.) as depicted in the [Natural Heritage Designations Mapping](#).
- 5.36 [Birds of Conservation Concern 5](#) the latest assessment of the status of birds in the UK, Channel Islands and Isle of Man. It is commonly known as the UK 'Red List for birds' presents data on bird species at most concern. In addition [The Breeding Bird Survey 2022](#), produced by the British Trust for Ornithology with the Joint Nature Conservation Committee and RSPB, is the UK's main annual assessment of trends in common breeding birds. These sources combined can support the development of habitats to support these species present in highland through the development of Nature Networks.

#### *Special Areas of Conservation*

- 5.37 A [Special Area of Conservation \(SAC\)](#) protects one or more special habitats and / or species. The SAC is designated under the Habitats Directive. Scotland has 243 designated SAC's that collectively cover 3.84 million hectares of Scotland's land. Highland has 92 SAC's that cover an area of 384,700 ha. (15% of Highlands land area) as depicted in the [Natural Heritage Designations Mapping](#).

#### *The Flow Country UNESCO World Heritage Site*

- 5.38 The [Flow Country World Heritage Site](#) is an important designation that will require careful management to ensure it is not compromised by development proposals. The Flow Country, located across a large swathe of Caithness and Sutherland, was inscribed by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee on July 26<sup>th</sup>, 2024. It is the only peatland World Heritage Site, and the first in Scotland to be inscribed purely for natural criteria. The Flow Country was inscribed under criterion ix as the most extensive and diverse example of an actively accumulating blanket bog landscape found globally. It displays a remarkable diversity of blanket bog features not found anywhere else on Earth and is an outstanding example of carbon sequestration and

long-term storage on a massive scale. It provides an incredible record of blanket bog formation and is important for helping us understand the functioning of this and blanket bogs globally. The Site also contains an exceptional example of the biodiversity found within a blanket bog landscape, providing a diversity of habitats and home to a distinct combination of bird species. The entire area of blanket bog across Caithness and Sutherland stretches some 400,000 ha of which the Flow Country World Heritage Site covers just under half (190,000 ha) and comprises seven discrete areas, as depicted in the [Natural Heritage Designations Mapping](#).

- 5.39 It is imperative that this asset is protected against development pressures to fully benefit from its environmental qualities and economic potential as a catalyst for increased sustainable tourism and inward investment to The Highlands. There must also be a clear strategy in place to ensure that local people feel the benefit of this highest of heritage accolades. In addition to the applicability of NPF4 Policy 4 a) , and the definition of WHS in Annex F of NPF4 , the Councils position is that the provisions of NPF4 Policy 7 l) are appropriate to and are to be applied to natural WHS (as well as cultural WHS ) .
- 5.40 All degraded areas of peatland within the Flow Country WHS should have the potential to be restored to good quality condition. All degraded peatland within the WHS boundary must therefore be considered for restoration in the first instance and not as an opportunity for development. This broadly reflects management priorities for the site with further advice available within the Planning Position Statement and the Management Plan. The updated [Flow Country Planning WHS Planning Position Statement 2](#) was prepared and subsequently published in June 2025 by the Council. It sets out how World Heritage should be factored into the consideration of proposed developments for which effects on the inscribed site are likely to be a consideration. HLDP can consider whether additional policies are required to protect and enhance The Flow Country WHS. The FCWHS is not a barrier to development, and it is not intended to make it so. It is however a site for which there should be significant weight given to protection and preservation. Outstanding Universal Value (OUV), integrity, and setting are all important. Setting is a consideration, not only for cultural WHS but also for natural ones. A setting study being undertaken will define setting, for the purpose of the FCWHS specifically. This will be influenced by the criterion for which the WHS is inscribed, not by those for which it is not inscribed, noting that the site is not identified for natural beauty under criterion vii.
- 5.41 [The Flow Country World Heritage Site draft Management Plan](#) was submitted to UNESCO as part of the [nomination dossier](#), it explained how the World Heritage Site will be looked after collaboratively upon attaining globally important status. Now that the Flow Country WHS is inscribed, a programme of work is underway to further update and start to deliver the plan

*Northwest Highlands UNESCO Global Geopark*

- 5.42 [The Northwest Highlands Global Geopark](#) hosts a wide range of rock formations covering two thirds of the Earth's history. Within the Geopark there are mountain landscapes, clean sandy beaches, peatlands, ancient settlements and thriving communities. The Northwest Highlands is one of only ten UNESCO Global Geoparks in the UK, and one of only three in Scotland.

*Wester Ross Biosphere*

- 5.43 One of the most popular visitor spots in the Wester Ross area, the Beinn Eighe National Nature Reserve (NNR) became a Biosphere Reserve in 1976. Whilst initially being a site for solely conducting collaborative scientific research, the NNR began to focus more on sustainability, covering wider areas and given more consideration to human activities. By 2016, the [Wester Ross Biosphere](#) grew to over 100 times its original size and now covers 5,200 sq. km of Wester Ross and Lochalsh as depicted in the [Natural Heritage Designations Mapping](#). Wester Ross itself a very sparsely populated area of the Highlands, with just 1.6 people per km<sup>2</sup> / 8000 people in 5,200 sq. km. The natural landscape is a huge asset, dominated by spectacular mountains, forests, waterfalls, seascapes and lochs accommodating a wide variety of biodiversity.

*National Natural Heritage Designations**National Nature Reserves*

- 5.44 In Scotland, a [National Nature Reserve \(NNR\)](#) is an area of land or water designated to protect its unique habitats and species, and managed by NatureScot. Most reserves contain nationally or internationally important habitats and species, so the wildlife is managed very carefully. Scotland has 43 NNR's covering just under 2% of Scotland's land area. Across Highland, there are 21 NNR designations, covering a collective area of 90,200 ha (approx.) as shown in the [Natural Heritage Designations Mapping](#).

*National Scenic Areas*

- 5.45 Legislation defines [National Scenic Areas \(NSAs\)](#) as areas "of outstanding scenic value in a national context" for which special protection measures are required. There are 40 NSAs in Scotland, primarily in remote and mountainous areas, covering a total of 13% of Scotland's land. In Highland, there are 16 NSA's covering a total area of 529,100 ha (approx.) equating to 20.6% of the land area of Highland, as shown in the [Natural Heritage Designations Mapping](#).

*Sites of Special Scientific Interest*

5.46 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) are areas of land and water that are considered to best represent natural heritage in terms of their flora, fauna, geology and geomorphology. Some SSSIs are also designated as European protected areas, whether SACs or SPAs. Scotland has 1,422 SSSIs, covering around 1,011,000 hectares (12.6%) of the Scottish land area. There are 357 designed SSSIs in Highland that cover a total area of 520,000 ha (approx.) equating to 20.3% of the total area of Highland as shown in the [Natural Heritage Designations Mapping](#).

*Wild Land Areas*

5.47 Wild Land Area (WLAs) are areas identified as wild land in the NatureScot Wild Land Areas map and are the most extensive areas of high wildness. Scotland contains 42 WLAs, 25 of which are in Highland covering a total area of 1,060,000 ha (approx.) as shown in the [Natural Heritage Designations Mapping](#).

*Marine Protected Areas*

5.48 Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) protect a wide range of habitats, species, geology and undersea landforms in Scottish waters. Scotland's network of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) now consists of 247 sites, covering 37% of our seas. Highland has 6 Nature Conservation MPAs and 4 Historic MPAs.

*Local Designations**Local Landscape Areas*

5.49 Local Landscape Areas (LLAs), following Scottish Government policy, is the name used for the local landscape designation. A previous name Special Landscape Areas (SLAs) is the name currently given to those identified in Highland. Highland has 28 LLAs covering a total area of 616,630.41 ha as shown in the [Natural Heritage Designations Mapping](#). 2017 data identifies 502 LLAs across Scotland as a whole, covering 27% of the land area and totalling 2,210,832 hectares.

*Local Nature Reserves*

5.50 A Local Nature Reserve (LNR) is an area of natural heritage that is at least locally important. There is one LNR in HLDP area – Merkinch LNR situated at the north end of Inverness and is home to a wide variety of important local species. There are numerous areas of high wildlife value such as the Muirtown Pools, a diverse set of habitats set around a number of pools partially connected to the sea. The total size of the reserve is 54.7 hectares.

- 5.51 The Council is currently considering designating other LNRs across Highland. On 28 May 2026 the Economy and Infrastructure Committee agreed that the legal process be concluded for an area at Ardersier Common and it be declared as a LNR.

#### *Local Nature Conservation Sites (LNCS)*

- 5.52 The Council currently has no LNCS sites but is undergoing a process to identify potential LNCS through community consultation and local expert knowledge. A scientific panel will ratify candidate LNCSs in advance of public consultation through the LDP process. It is anticipated that the first tranche of LNCSs will be prepared by 2026 with additional LNCSs added throughout the lifetime of the plan.

#### *Geological Conservation Review Sites*

- 5.53 Geological Conservation Review (GCR) sites contain geological and geomorphological features of national and international importance – selected through a process known as the Geological Conservation Review. There are nearly 900 GCR sites in Scotland, most of which have statutory protection through designation as Earth science features in Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). Some GCR sites are 'unnotified' and have no SSSI designation status and are also Local Nature Conservation Sites (LNCS). Features selected by the Geological Conservation Review include (GCR) include rocks, minerals and fossils, landform features formed during the Ice Age, and modern rivers and coasts. There are 419 GCR sites within the Highlands, covering an area of 138,623ha

#### *Dark Skies*

- 5.54 While no NPF4 Policy 4 Natural Places policies relate specifically to dark skies designations, the Council has one currently on the Isle of Rum and is at early stages of scoping further more dark sky areas in Highland for the benefit of wildlife and ecosystems, health, energy, and night sky heritage. Any community wishing to bid for Dark Sky status requires to demonstrate active local authority support for reducing light pollution. Currently in Scotland under the Environmental Protection Act 1990 and Public Health etc (Scotland) Act 2008, there is no legal justification for controlling light pollution that does not constitute a statutory public nuisance.
- 5.55 Existing national and Highland planning policy doesn't address the issue of light pollution in any detail. NPF4 policy 23 health and safety makes no reference to light pollution. The only NPF4 reference to light pollution is Annex D which describes the 6 qualities of successful places one of which is headed "Pleasant" and includes reference to a pleasant place as one protected from light pollution and other adverse effects. The HwLDP Policy 72 Pollution requires that planning applications for significant light polluting developments submit an assessment report on the levels, character and transmission of and receiving environment of

the potential pollution to show how the pollution can be avoided and if necessary mitigated. England's NPPF contains a specific encouragement for local policies that "limit the impact of light pollution from artificial light on local amenity, intrinsically dark landscapes and nature conservation. Dumfries and Galloway Council produced relevant guidance in 2020 which references the now designated Galloway Forest Dark Sky Park and also includes model planning conditions. In the absence of a specific policy contained within NPF4, a form of HwLDP Policy 72 may be required for progression in HLDP and this may specifically need to address light pollution and the current dark sky designated, cognisant of future dark sky bids

5.56 A summary of Highland's natural heritage designations and the extent of coverage is provided in Table 5.1.

*Table 5.1 Summary of Highland's Natural Designations*

<b>Designation</b>	<b>Number of Designations</b>	<b>Area within Highland – land only (ha)</b>	<b>% of Area within Highland – land only</b>	<b>% of Land Area in Scotland</b>
Ramsar Sites	13	155 933	6	2
Special Protection Areas	53	436 926	17	5.5
World Heritage Sites	1	187 023	7.2	2.4
National Nature Reserves	21	90 182	3.5	1.1
National Scenic Areas	16	529 145	20.6	6.7
Sites of Specific Scientific Interest	357	519 522	20.3	6.6
Special Areas of Conservation	92	384 728	15	4.9
Wild Land Areas	25	1 058 925	41.2	13.4
Marine Protected Areas	12	417 970	16.3	5.3
Local Nature Reserves	1	20.9	<1	<1
Geological Conservation Review Sites	419	138 623	5.4	1.8

## Soils

- 5.57 The Highlands has an array of various of soil classifications that benefit from policy protections. Highland is home to globally recognised peatland habitats, which require protection from inappropriate development and are enhanced wherever possible. As we prepare HLDP, we must be able to identify where different soil types are located, as well as the capability of our land for agricultural purposes. The Council's [Highland Soils Map](#) compiles all relevant soil classifications and consideration into one location, including:
- Peat and Carbon Rich Soils,
  - Prime Agricultural Land,
  - Landslides and Soil Erosion, and
  - Crofting Within the Highlands
- 5.58 NPF4 seeks to minimise disturbance to soils from development, and it is recognised that effective prioritisation of brownfield sites as detailed in **Chapter 12: Historic Assets, Brownfield Land and Empty Buildings**, plays a significant role in this regard. Proposed development may be temporary or permanent, which may affect the view of the proposals and nature of any impact. NPF4 has raised the profile of the importance of protecting locally, regionally, nationally and internationally valued soils, including land that is of lesser quality that is culturally or locally important for primary use.

### *Peat and Carbon Rich Soils*

- 5.59 Organo-mineral and peat soils are known as carbon-rich soils, as defined in NPF4. A peat soil is defined in Scotland as when soil has an organic layer at the surface which is more than 50cm deep. Organo-mineral soil or peaty soil is soil which has an organic layer at the surface less than 50cm thick and overlies mineral layers (e.g. sand, silt and clay particles). There is also a relatively rare group of soils in Scotland known as humose soils. These have organic rich layers with between 15 and 35% organic matter. These are mineral soils but also considered to be carbon rich.
- 5.60 The Council's [Soils Mapping](#) incorporates the [Carbon and Peatland Map \(2016\)](#) which illustrates the distribution of carbon and peatland across the whole of Scotland. The map legend shows separate soil classifications, whereby Class 1 and Class 2 land is indicative of a nationally important quantity of carbon rich soils, deep peat and priority peatland habitats. The scale of each individually mapped area is 1:250,000 for most upland areas of Scotland and 1:25,000 elsewhere. Analysis of the map highlights that the highest prevalence of Class 1 and 2 Soils are in Caithness and Sutherland, unsurprisingly in and around the area of land inscribed as a World Heritage Site for its significant peatland properties. The Isle of Skye also contains an abundance of Class 1 soils, while the West Coast is generally Class 2 soil with a greater Class 3, 4 and 5 soils in the Lochaber area. There is also a

large area of moorland Southeast of Loch Ness across the Monadhliath Mountains that contains Class 1 soils, whilst almost the entirety of the land categorised as Inner Moray Firth, within IMFLDP2 is Mineral Soil and Class 4 soil.

- 5.61 By altering the layers on [Scotland's Soils](#) mapping tool, the generalised soil type for each area can be identified. This provides a greater overview into the presence of peat across Highland as well as mineral, montane and alluvial soils. Peaty gleys cover the greatest land area, whilst peat and mineral gleys account for the majority of Northeast Highland's land. The majority of the Moray Firth, Cromarty Firth and Dornoch Firth area comprises of mineral podzols.
- 5.62 Highland provides substantial opportunities for peatland restoration as a contribution towards national targets. This will rely on both public and private funding if the full ambitions are to be met. Significant experience has built up in peatland restoration including through Peatland ACTION (the national programme offering funding to improve the condition of degraded peatlands across Scotland). There is also a range of national guidance and good practice examples such as those referred to within [Scottish Governments Onshore Wind Policy Statement](#), specifically Chapter 3 (para 3.37 onwards) together with key corresponding outputs from the Onshore Wind Sector Deal work streams. Renewable energy developments provide one significant route to delivery of peatland restoration. It is important however to differentiate between areas that are not designated for their peatland interests and those that are (such as the FCWHS), with the designated sites requiring protection of the designated interests within the sites themselves, including consideration of site integrity.

### *Prime Agricultural Land*

- 5.63 Prime agricultural land is that identified as being Class 1, 2 or 3.1 in the land capability classification for agriculture developed by Macaulay Land Use Research Institute (now the James Hutton Institute). The [National scale land capability for agriculture](#) (LCA) provides information on the types of crops that may be grown in different areas dependant on soil and environmental characteristics. The map provides observations at a scale of 1:250 000 and 1:50,000 where the 1:50,000 scale map information is seen as the definitive mapped assessment, albeit coverage of Highland is not complete at this scale.
- 5.64 The extent of prime agricultural land across Highland is shown within the Council's [Soils Mapping](#). The majority of Highland land is classified as '6.3- land capable of use as rough grazing's with low quality plants', whilst large areas across Sutherland are classified as '5.3- land capable of use as improved grassland (pasture deteriorates quickly). There is a very limited area of Highland land classified as '1- land capable of producing a very wide range of groups' which is situated between Cawdor and Ardersier directly South of the A96. The majority of the Black Isle and

immediate East and West surroundings of Inverness are classified under '2- land capable of producing a wide range of crops' and '3.1 – land capable of producing consistently high yields of a narrow range of crops and/or moderate yields of a wider range (short grass leys are common).

- 5.65 A large area of Caithness is '3.2-land capable of average production through high yields of barley, oats and grass can be obtained (grass leys are common). Land classified as '7-land of very limited agricultural value' is located in remote upland areas where it can be envisaged that applications will be for the renewables sector.
- 5.66 Protecting agricultural land from development is important in safeguarding the economic assets that agriculture brings. Agriculture-related activities form a key source of employment in the Highlands, with crop and animal production alone estimated to provide 11,000 jobs according to NOMIS Business Register and Employment Survey (BRES) data **(THC048)** which equates to 8.6% of the Highland workforce, while the same sector provides for only 2.7% of Scotland's workforce nationally. Ancillary supporting sectors such as veterinary services, and agricultural machinery likely make the total agricultural-related workforce considerably higher.

#### *Landslides and Soil Erosion*

- 5.67 Downslope movement of materials, such as a landslide or rockfall may cause damage, such as a loss of support to foundations or services or, in rare cases, impact damage to buildings and infrastructure. The British Geological Survey (BGS) [National Landslide Database \(NLD\)](#) is the most extensive source of information on previous landslides in Great Britain, holding over 18,000 records which are continuously updated. The data has been derived from geological maps and active surveys, as well as various other commissioned and research studies. The Council's [Soils Mapping](#) indicates the locations of these across Highland clearly demonstrating an abundance of areas susceptible to this natural process. There is however a greater risk in the Southwest of the region in and around Lochaber, as well as Northwest Skye. Key transport networks such as the A82, the A890, A9 and the A87 are all vulnerable, whilst popular walking routes within Glencoe and Ben Nevis, Knoydart, Glen Affric and Skye, in addition to others are also at risk.
- 5.68 The BGS GeoSure 5km hex grid shows a generalised overview of the future susceptibility to six naturally occurring geohazards in Great Britain, including potential landslides and slope stability, through a vector map of 65km<sup>2</sup> hexagonal cells. For landslides (slope stability), hex cells are classified as low, moderate or significant. The Council's [Soils Mapping](#) incorporates this resource and shows that extensive areas of Highland are subject to significant landslide and slope stability risks. These includes areas with substantial lengths of transport infrastructure and the energy transmission network, which are potential vulnerable.

- 5.69 Transport Scotland has published information on known [landslide areas alongside trunk roads](#). Areas identified in the Highlands are:
- A82 Glenfintaig, near Glen Goy
  - A835 Tarvie
  - A82 Loch Lochy
  - A82 Glen Righ, near Corrychurrachan Bridge
- 5.70 Transport Scotland defines a landslide as a movement of a mass of rock, earth or debris down a slope. They can be divided in to topples, slides and flows and involve rock, debris or earth.
- 5.71 Soil erosion is a natural process where soil particles become detached and are transported by rivers and streams to the sea, a process often accelerated by modern land management techniques. Soil erosion in Highland is not occurring at the same severity as in some parts of the world, however there are still environmental and financial costs to soil erosion such as the loss of valuable nutrients and pollution of several waterbodies and watercourses.
- 5.72 Mapping provided by Scotland Soils is incorporated within the Council's [Soils Mapping](#) to identify the areas of land most susceptible to soil erosion risk. This mapping only illustrates partial cover, and the majority of the Highlands has not been included. The Black Isle, Easter Ross, a section of Caithness and Nairnshire are included and present a variety of different soil types with differing erosion risk. Moorland areas Southeast of Inverness are at a high risk of soil erosion along with land West of Wick. The majority of land on the Black Isle is moderate risk mineral soils, whilst the land along the A96 from Inverness towards Nairn is predominantly low risk mineral soils. From the areas that have been included on the mapping, there are no high-risk locations, only low to moderate risk areas.
- 5.73 Environmental Standards Scotland's [The Risk to Scotland's Soils: Scoping Report 2024](#) outlines the risks to Scotland's Soils. Degradation of soils has a negative impact on Scotland's economy. Soil erosion and compaction costs in the region of £75 million per year, in addition to a loss of between £16 million and £49 million per year due to reduced crop yield caused by a loss of water retention. The report features a map that colour codes areas based on their favourability for agricultural production. As observed from the 'landscape capability for agriculture map', there are little areas favourable for agriculture in Highland, primarily on the East Coast around The Black Isle, Easter Ross and Nairnshire.
- 5.74 Scottish Government's Scotland Environment Maps – [Geomorphic Risk Buffer](#) show places at risk of river erosion due to waters flowing faster, or silt deposition from water flowing slower. New development should avoid these 'areas of change', as they could be at risk from being washed away or silted up. **Chapter 7: Flood Risk Management** provides further detail on river flooding and erosion.

*Crofting Within the Highlands*

- 5.75 While not often equating to prime agricultural land, NPF4 provides that land of lesser quality that is culturally or locally important for primary use (i.e. for example food production, flood management, water catchment management and carbon storage) should be recognised in decision-making. NPF4 Policy 5 b (ii) states that, *Development proposals on prime agricultural land, or land of lesser quality that is culturally or locally important for primary use, as identified by the LDP, will only be supported where it is for: ii. Small-scale development directly linked to a rural business, farm or croft or for essential workers for the rural business to be able to live onsite [...].* It is in this context that evidence has been considered in relation to crofting as reflective of land that is culturally or locally important for primary use.
- 5.76 Crofting is a land tenure system of small-scale food producers unique to the Scottish Highlands and Islands. It provides tenants with security provided they pay their rent, live on or near their croft and work the land. Crofting provides many benefits (as supported by [the Value of Crofting Report](#)), supporting local food production while protecting cultural heritage and the natural environment within these areas. Crofting has helped to maintain population and economic activity in remote rural areas for over 100 years and crofts are in great demand once listed on the market. For tenancy to take place, the consent of the crofting commission is required to avoid any new owner-occupier becoming liable to scrutiny.
- 5.77 [Scottish Government Report to Parliament: Economic Condition of Crofting 2019-2022](#) highlights this demand, providing a record of crofters survey results which state that there is an increase in the number of crofters who have been crofting for less than five years. The Crofting Commission has reported there are approximately 500 new entrants into crofting each year.
- 5.78 The average size of a croft is usually 5 hectares, but some are only 0.5 ha while a few extend to more than 50 ha of land, often with a share in hill grazing which is held in common with other crofters in a township. Crofts are often unable to support a family or provide full time employment, and as such crofters have subsequently diversified into small-scale tourism and off-croft employment. The main form of land use is growing cattle for lamb and beef product, whilst some winter keep, and potatoes may be grown across the area as well as horticulture providing a wide range of fruits, vegetables and plants.
- 5.79 The Crofting Commission states that there are around 20,000 crofts across the Highlands & Islands and in designated areas in Scotland. More than 750,000 hectares of land in Scotland is in crofting tenure with approximately 33,000 people living in crofting households, which equates to around 10% of the population of the Highlands and Islands. Highland has 10,197 registered crofts as of their [2023/24 Annual Report](#). The highest extent of crofting land is in Skye where more than 50% of the land is covered by crofting. There are also large pockets of land

across Caithness, Sutherland, Wester Ross and Lochaber, whilst the areas with the least crofting land are central parts of the region such as Glen Affric and The Flow Country. Many registered crofts are however, within Inverness-shire, in highly pressurised areas of countryside within commuting distance of Inverness.

- 5.80 Crofting, whilst being integral, is often a poorly understood part of life in the Highlands and Islands. Crofting adds £588 million GVA/year to the Scottish economy and supports around 30,385 jobs. Four fifths of the economic value added by crofting and 88% of the jobs it supports are retained in and around the crofting counties: sparsely populated rural areas – often far removed from Scotland’s main centres of economic activity.
- 5.81 Beyond local benefits, several social and economic priorities are delivered that matter to wider Scottish society; regenerative agriculture is important in society’s battle against climate change and biodiversity loss. Population retention provides an important counterbalance to economic inequality, and rich cultural and environmental landscapes can be enjoyed by everyone.
- 5.82 Crofters duties to be ordinarily resident on, or within 32 kilometres of their croft has often formed a component of rural housing applications in the Highlands, which has regularly clashed with rural housing planning policies (such as HwLDP Policy 35) which seek to restrict suburbanisation of pressurised areas of countryside such as the Inner Moray Firth Hinterland. While housing and rural homes evidence is detailed within **Chapter 9: Housing**, it is recognised that there is often a tension between rural homes and the fulfilment of crofter’s duties. This has often resulted in proposals being assessed according to the agricultural operational need for a full-time presence on the site to justify a new rural home. As crofting is often a small-scale mix of crop cultivation and livestock rearing, it is common for croft-related housing proposals to fail to meet the operational requirement of one labour unit, relative to traditional agricultural farms. A need to provide clarity on the policy support that can be afforded to new rural homes and other development on registered croft land is recognised to simplify the policy landscape within HLDP.

*Table 5.2 Summary of Highland Soils*

Designation	Number of Designations	Area within Highland (ha)	% of Area in Highland	% of Area in Scotland
Land Capable for High Quality Agriculture	86	8134	<1	<1
Class 1 and 2 Peat Soils	6061	1,156,476	45	14

### **Forestry, Woodland and Trees**

- 5.83 [Scotland's Forestry Strategy 2019-2029](#) proposes a 2070 vision, where Scotland will have more forests and woodlands, sustainably managed and better integrated with other land uses. These will provide a more resilient, adaptable resource, with greater natural capital value that supports a strong economy, a thriving environment, and healthy and flourishing communities. The [Scotland's Forestry Strategy Implementation 2022-2025](#) is used to help build on existing success since the [Scotland's Forestry Strategy 2019-2029](#).
- 5.84 Highland is home to a variety of woodland habitats, including internationally and nationally important Caledonian pinewoods and Atlantic oakwoods. Highland's woodlands deliver significant environmental, social and economic benefits.
- 5.85 Highland has a significant resource with around 350,000 hectares (13.5% of land area) covered by woodland. This is, however, below the national average of 18.5%, which in turn is below the European Union average of 43%.
- 5.86 In Highland there are three broad types of forest and woodland:
- **Commercial Forestry**, which includes growing coniferous trees for timber in areas like the Inner Moray Firth, Strathspey, and the Great Glen, but has expanded to include more native woodland restoration and multi-functional approaches. The industry provides significant employment and economic benefits, with a strong market driven by investor demand and a limited supply of commercial forests.
  - **Native Woodland** (including irreplaceable ancient woodland), which includes forests made up of naturally occurring tree species like Scots pine, birch, and oak, with key habitats including ancient Caledonian pinewoods and western Celtic rainforest. These woodlands are vital for biodiversity, providing homes for wildlife and acting as refuges for native species. Efforts are ongoing to protect and restore these woodlands.
  - **Urban Trees and amenity woodland**, which includes areas of woodland situated on low value ground in and next to urban centres, designed for use by a wider range of community interest groups
- 5.87 Creation and management issues and priorities will vary, but there are common themes around supporting expansion of woodland coverage in line with national targets; promoting and supporting the forest industry; and promoting woodland creation and management practice which protects and enhances environmental quality, biodiversity, landscape and historic assets. The [UK Forestry Standard](#) defines the government requirements for forestry in the UK. It provides a basis for regulation and monitoring, including national and international reporting.
- 5.88 There are numerous data sources relating to the existing trees, woodland and forests including the National Forest Inventory, [Native Woodland Survey of](#)

Scotland and the Ancient Woodland Inventory. Combining these datasets, the Council's Forestry, Woodland and Trees Mapping shows the extent of existing woodland cover in Highland, alongside locally important areas protected for trees, including Tree Preservation Orders and Conservation Areas.

### *Highland Forest and Woodland Strategy*

- 5.89 The most recent Highland Forest and Woodland Strategy (HFWS) was prepared to support the Highland-wide Local Development Plan (2012) and was adopted in November 2018. The HFWS sets out policies for the creation and management of forestry and woodlands. It presents the key issues, challenges and opportunities, together with strategic aims and visions for the future expansion and sustainable management of Highland forests over the next 20 years. The HFWS spatial mapping identifies the main categories for woodland creation: preferred, potential, potential with sensitivities and sensitive. In addition, land over 550m has been identified as potentially suitable for montane woodland creation. The HFWS highlights the role of trees and woodland in climate adaptation, including within Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SUDS), reducing flood risk (stabilising slopes, slowing water flow and forming riparian corridors) and consideration of species selection for enhance woodland adaptability and resilience to climate change.
- 5.90 HFWS asserts that Highland's forests, woodlands and trees should be regarded as one of its most highly prized natural resources which deliver a wide range of economic, social and environmental benefits. These range from access and recreational facilities, opportunities to promote and encourage health and wellbeing to the protection and enhancement of biodiversity including the restoration of some of Scotland's most iconic ancient native woodland landscapes. In addition, by capturing carbon and helping to protect Highland's infrastructure by stabilising soils and regulating water flows, forests, woodlands and trees also play a vital role in helping Highland adapt to a changing climate, and to meeting Scotland's climate change targets. It is also appreciated that the role of woodland carbon sequestration can be an effective mechanism for ensuring any proposed development aligns with Policy 2a of NPF4. The subject of carbon sequestration is extensively covered throughout **Chapter 4 (Climate Change and Energy)**.
- 5.91 In response to NPF4, the new Highland Forest and Woodland Strategy will be refreshed over the next 18 months. There will be an enhanced focus on opportunities for woodland creation and expansion, including increasing canopy cover in urban areas, improving woodland habitat connectivity to support biodiversity, contributing to Nature Networks, riparian corridors to facilitate Natural Flood Management (as discussed in **Chapter 7: Flood Risk Management**). Other considerations will include woodland removal associated with large-scale energy

developments and infrastructure, the increased prevalence of tree pests and diseases and the impacts on trees of a changing climate.

#### *Control of Woodland Removal*

- 5.92 [The Scottish Government Policy on Control of Woodland Removal](#) includes a strong presumption in favour of protecting woodland resources and identifies only limited circumstances where removal without compensatory planting is acceptable.
- 5.93 The Council strongly seeks to develop a HLDP policy that details how compensatory planting will be delivered in Highland. For example, ensuring that wherever practicable, like-for-like woodland type to ensure an equivalent forestry-related net public is achieved (to protect the viability of the local forestry industry and support remote rural economies); developing a system to calculate an enhanced area of compensatory planting for woodland removal including productive, native and ancient woodland; and as per the [Council's Trees, Woodland and Development Supplementary Guidance](#), require compensatory planting to take place within the HLDP area and as close to the development as possible.
- 5.94 The Council recognise that not all compensatory planting areas have been fully mapped and have started to develop mapping of both historic and new compensatory planting areas and will continue to develop this dataset to ensure the continued protection of areas being managed as compensatory planting.

#### *Commercial and Other Woodlands*

- 5.95 Commercial forestry is a significant land use in the Highland region, with woodlands covering approximately 13% of the land area. It is a key source of employment, particularly in woodland management and timber processing, estimated to provide 1,500 jobs according to NOMIS BRES data (**THC048, THC049**) which accounts for 1.2% of the Highland workforce spread throughout the region, helping support employment in remote and often fragile areas.
- 5.96 The availability of timber across the UK is predicted to steadily increase until the late 2030's. However, a sharp decline in timber supply is anticipated thereafter which will have serious implications for future security of softwood timber supplies and with it, the potential for job losses, reduced inward investment and reductions in meeting climate change targets.

#### *Woodland Crofts and Huts*

- 5.97 The [National Development Plan for Crofting](#) acknowledges that recent changes to crofting legislation have also encouraged woodland creation and that the Scottish Government will support woodland expansion that helps integrate woodland with

traditional crofting activities, otherwise termed agroforestry. A woodland croft is largely or wholly covered with trees. It may be on land that has been wooded for a long time, or where new planting has been designed to create a resilient, productive system. It might also have been created from an existing woodland. Woodland management is likely to be a key part of the croft business and may include income streams from wood fuel or small-scale timber processing.

- 5.98 Previous planning applications have been considered within Highland for housing in relation to woodland crofts, which have been hindered by the lack of an explicit policy framework for them, nor any mention of them in NPF4. Differences are apparent between proposals involving the loss of an area of woodland to accommodate a dwellinghouse and instances where a new woodland would be created in conjunction with the proposed dwellinghouse. As woodland crofts are not explicitly mentioned within NPF4, HLDP may assist decision making by offering a clearer policy interpretation on these aspects.
- 5.99 While tourism matters are more fully detailed in **Chapter 8: Business, Economy, Tourism and Productive Places**, there are crossovers between tourism policy and huts where NPF4 Policy 30d refers to provision of huts where the nature and scale of the development is compatible with the surrounding area and the proposal complies with relevant good practice guidance. The Council has received enquiries and development proposals for huts, often in forest or woodland settings. The Council will consider developing additional policy and guidance to support the development of huts (as per Policy 30d) in or around woodland, with reference to good practice guidance produced by [Reforestation Scotland's New Hutting Developments: Good Practice Guidance](#).

### *Tree Protection*

- 5.100 There are three layers of tree protection – Tree Preservation Orders, Conservation Areas and planning conditions. The Council's [Tree Management Strategy](#) provides further information on the management of these trees. A Tree Preservation Order (TPO) protects individual trees and woodlands that make a significant contribution to the appearance of an area or are of historical importance. The majority of TPOs within the Highlands are based in the Inner Moray Firth area as shown in the Council's [Forestry, Woodland and Trees Mapping](#), with some other sites through the Cairngorms, Skye and Southern Sutherland. Large pockets of woodland within Inverness such as Loch Ness Golf Club, Lower Drummond and Ness Castle have enforced Tree Protection Orders. Nairn similarly has several areas of land where trees and woodland are protected by this order.

## Summary of Stakeholder Engagement

5.101 A full breakdown of all stakeholder engagement undertaken to support the Evidence Report is provided within **Chapter 3: Statement of Engagement**. A summary of the key stakeholder engagement activities undertaken for this chapter include:

### *Stakeholders and Key Agencies*

5.102 All meetings and engagement exercises with stakeholders and key agencies are detailed within the Log of Engagement (**THC001**). Prior to the drafting of the HLDP Evidence Report an early engagement exercise HLDP Evidence Consultation was undertaken from 31<sup>st</sup> Jan – 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2025. Responses to the HLDP Evidence Consultation (including from key agencies) are included in **THC006**. Drafts of the evidence presented in this chapter were then circulated to key agencies and other stakeholders on 31 July 2025, which included:

- NatureScot
- SEPA
- Scottish Water
- Crofting Commission
- Historic Environment Scotland
- Scottish Land and Estates
- James Hutton Institute
- Scottish Forestry
- Forestry Land Scotland
- National Trust for Scotland
- RSPB
- Scottish Renewables
- Scottish Power
- Homes for Scotland

5.103 Responses were received from NatureScot (**THC088**), SEPA (**THC089**), Historic Environment Scotland (**THC035**), RSPB (**THC0039**), ScottishPower Renewables (**THC042**), Scottish Renewables (**THC041**) Scottish Forestry (**THC047**), and Homes for Scotland (**THC090**). A summary of feedback received includes:

- Historic Environment Scotland (**THC035**) Satisfied with the chapters content and do not wish to seek amendments as a result.

### NatureScot (THC088)

Main views raised	Requested the inclusion of Geological Conservation Review (GCR) Sites context within the Chapter. Clarification was sought as to whether the
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	issues of storms and wildfires were being considered. Welcome the approach taken for the nature network methodology.
Council's response	Storms and wildfire context has been covered substantially throughout <b>Chapter 4</b> and that for the purpose of brevity, this has not been reiterated across multiple chapters. The Council have actioned request for inclusion of GCR context.
Outstanding issues	No outstanding issues.
Is agency content with the evidence?	Yes, statement of agreement provided in <b>(THC088)</b> .
Proposed plan implications	No implications have arisen from these comments.
Actions for proposed plan stage	The Council actioned the prior request for the inclusion of GCR context, NatureScot later confirm that GCR sites have been included within the updated Chapter. These sites will be included as part of the evidence base during the site selection stage of HLDP.

### SEPA (THC089)

Main views raised	<p>SEPA's response (4<sup>th</sup> Sept 2025) sought clarification as to whether the Nature Networks Mapping Data List <b>(THC051)</b> includes the SEPA water environment evidence sources required. Supports the method of presenting soils information. Requested amendment within the 'HLDP evidence consultation' section where SEPA's comment was conflated with NatureScot's.</p> <p>SEPA's response (15<sup>th</sup> Oct 2025) support's Highlands decision to adapt AECOM tool. Sought clarification on whether datasets within Appendix 2 of NN Methodology will/have been used to formulate the network. Requested amendment to Appendix 2 of NN methodology by adding missing water environment evidence from <a href="#">Planning Advice Note Achieving Sufficiency of Evidence</a>. Request whole catchments identified as part of NN's where water environment habitats are identified as core sites.</p> <p>Suggest benefits of identifying watercourses and waterbodies as opportunities for connectivity. Mapping the water environment as a NN opportunity opens up the potential for discussion of betterments with developers in relation to NPF4 Policy 3.</p>
Council's response	The Council have actioned points raised to make it clear that the NN methodology includes SEPA water environment data sources.

	Amendments have been made to summary of stakeholder engagement to clarify distinct comments made by NatureScot and SEPA. Awaiting comments of THC Environment Team.
Outstanding issues	No outstanding issues.
Is agency content with the evidence?	Yes, statement of agreement provided in <b>(THC089)</b> .
Proposed plan implications	<p>The Council will review IMFLDP2 carbon – Nature, Restoration and Enhancement states that all development must enhance biodiversity and where relevant restore degraded habitats and build and strengthen nature networks around them. Specific guidance is provided for development of differing scales – from local to national, major and EIA development. Within this policy reference is given to the mitigation hierarchy and delivering biodiversity enhancement. HLDP will require to develop a policy framework in adherence to the mitigation hierarchy and biodiversity enhancement.</p> <p>HLDP will spatially define Nature Networks, which will continue to expand and improve throughout the development of HLDP and beyond. Nature Network mapping will be an iterative process and HLDP will reflect that Nature Networks will change and evolve in response to changing circumstances during the lifetime of the plan. HLDP will ensure that nature networks will retain the connectivity and integrity between existing habitats. HLDP should facilitate, encourage and support the creation of nature networks and that connections are strengthened.</p>
Actions for proposed plan stage	NN methodology amended to include the SEPA water environment data sources. Continued discussions with THC Environment Team to make requested amendments and address points raised.

### RSPB (THC0039)

Main views raised	<p>Agree with initial evidence and suggest amendments/additions to certain sub-sections within the chapter.</p> <p>Support the approach taken to developing NN, and sections regarding the Flow Country World Heritage Site.</p> <p>Agree with the commitment to support requirements for biodiversity enhancements in the HLDP.</p> <p>Suggest reference to Capercaillie emergency plan.</p>
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	<p>Offer linkages between NN and biodiversity enhancement, account for NatureScot's wader strategy and potentially update on 'hidden data' collected to inform onshore wind and powerlines.</p> <p>Disputed elements of the evidence and did not consider that their comments provided within the earlier HLDP Evidence consultation had been adequately incorporated in relation to the biodiversity value of like-for-like compensatory woodland planting and the detrimental impact of inappropriate plantations in the World Heritage Site.</p>	
Council's response	<p>The majority of woodland removal in Highland relates to productive conifers. In order to safeguard the timber industry, it is important that productive timber continues to be part of the Highland economy, delivering the wide range of environmental, economic and social benefits as set out in the Evidence Report (5.83-5.87). The Council therefore strongly supports the principle of like-for-like Compensatory Planting, with scope to take a flexible approach should specific circumstances occur.</p> <p>We fully acknowledge the benefits of native woodland creation, and natural regeneration, but there is an expectation that this will be secured separately through biodiversity enhancement measures rather than through Compensatory Planting, particularly where this involves the loss of good quality productive woodland.</p> <p>We agree with the comments that there will be certain circumstances where Compensatory Planting is not required (as set out in the CoWR policy implementation guidance (February 2019) Annex 3). The Council fully supports forest to bog restoration (without Compensatory Planting) in cases where commercial woodland has been previously planted on deep peat. The refreshed Highland Forest and Woodland Strategy will go into more detail on this issue, especially in light of the recently designated Flow Country WHS.</p> <p>We concur that new woodland has the potential to have adverse impacts on certain species and habitats. It is important to note, therefore, that new Compensatory Planting schemes will go through the same due diligence as any woodland creation scheme, and these issues will be picked up as part of this process in accordance with UKFS as well as the right tree in the right place.</p> <p>Noted regarding the Caledonian Pinewood Inventory – this will be included as an online resource</p>	
Outstanding issues	No outstanding issues.	
Is agency content	Yes.	

with the evidence?	
Proposed plan implications	The Council will consider whether there is a requirement for a policy specifically related to the delivery of compensatory planting. This may, for example, seek to ensure that, wherever practicable, compensatory planting is delivered on a like-for-like basis to ensure that an equivalent net (environmental and economic) public benefit is achieved. It will also consider circumstances where an enhanced level of compensatory planting may be required and how that would be calculated.
Actions for proposed plan stage	Consideration on the need for additional biodiversity enhancement whilst planting like-for-like compensatory planting.
<b>Scottish Power Renewables (THC042)</b>	
Main views raised	<p>Seek further clarification as to the notion of harmful development as outlined in 5.28 / 5.23 regarding the protection of areas from 'harmful developments.'</p> <p>Suggests HLDP is underpinned by the extensive national guidance on appropriateness of development to avoid ambiguity, such as deemed to be displayed within the context of 5.52 regarding the terminology 'inappropriate development.'</p> <p>States that landscape and visual impact do not form part of the designation of the FCWHS and should therefore not be treated as a material consideration.</p> <p>Raises concerns with approach to biodiversity enhancement and the 10% uplift requirement, due to issues of proportionality, evidence-based, and alignment with national guidance.</p> <p>Supports recognition in 5.24 that not all developments can deliver biodiversity enhancements and opens a wider opportunity for enhancements in alternative suitable locations.</p> <p>Suggests that swift and bee bricks as tools for enhancement are constrained by limited ecological evidence and risk being perceived as superficial.</p>
Council's response	Matters noted, clarifications made and additions to the chapter where additional evidence has been identified. A number of matters will be considered at plan preparation stage.
Outstanding issues	No outstanding issues.
Is the agency content	Yes, statement of agreement provided in <b>(THC042)</b> .

with the evidence?	
Proposed plan implications	No implications have arisen from these comments.
Actions for proposed plan stage	The Council will consider the appropriateness of 10% biodiversity uplift.
<b>Scottish Renewables (THC041)</b>	
Main views raised	<p>Raises concerns about how the Council is considering onshore wind project proposals in and around the FCWHS – the Council should not use setting as a planning tool to reject onshore wind proposals in the FC on the basis that UNESCO doesn't acknowledge setting as a consideration for natural OUV.</p> <p>States that UNESCO's approach to natural OUV does not support THC working in defining setting and corresponding planning guidance for the FCWHS.</p> <p>Suggests that it is a misuse of the planning system to attempt, after inscription, to make the WHS into a barrier it wasn't meant to be, and that biology is the only consideration for OUV for the FCWHS.</p> <p>States that THC has ignored the financial realities of restoring peat and misses an opportunity to restore peatlands in the FC that is not in line with UNESCO, NPF4 or Scottish Renewables work with the Flow Country Partnership.</p> <p>Requires amended context on Wild Land Areas so as not to state them as a national designation and confirm they are not a planning constraint for renewable energy developments.</p> <p>Cautions against using LNCS as a barrier to renewable energy development as this would conflict with NPF4 and would be missed opportunity to work with renewable energy developers to support local efforts.</p>
Council's response	Matters noted, some clarifications made and additions to the chapter made where additional useful evidence has been identified. There are a number of matters raised that are for consideration at plan preparation stage. Full council response can be found in <b>(THC040)</b> .
Outstanding issues	No outstanding issues.
Is agency content with the evidence?	Yes.

Proposed plan implications	No implications have arisen from these comments
Actions for proposed plan stage	No further actions have arisen from these comments
<b>Scottish Forestry (THC047)</b>	
Main views raised	Suggest better linkage between Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 on matters relating to carbon sequestration opportunities.
Council's response	Clearer signposting to <b>Chapter 4: Climate Change and Energy</b> has been added, which extensively covers the context relating to carbon sequestration in paragraph 5.82. While we do not repeat this information in Chapter 5, it is recognised that the refreshed Forestry and Woodland Strategy would provide an operational basis to act on areas identified for potential carbon sequestration.
Outstanding issues	No outstanding issues.
Is agency content with the evidence?	Yes, follow up meeting with Scottish Forestry confirmed sufficiency <b>(THC047)</b> .
Proposed plan implications	No implications have arisen from these comments
Actions for proposed plan stage	No further actions have arisen from these comments
<b>Homes For Scotland (THC090)</b>	
Main views raised	Suggests that the Council refer to a wider variety of evidence sources as listed within their response. Suggests an addition of wording under the forestry, woodland and trees section as stated within their response.
Council's response	Suggestions has been noted, evidence sources have been incorporated and comments have been added.
Outstanding issues	No outstanding issues.
Is agency content	Yes.

with the evidence?	
Proposed plan implications	No implications have arisen from these comments.
Actions for proposed plan stage	No further actions have arisen from these comments.

### Summary of Local Place Plan Priorities

5.104 Ardgour Local Place Plan (THC010) has identified the following priorities relating to Nature and Environment:

- Habitat restoration through tree planting and removing rhododendrons round Clovullin and North Corran
- Conserving the natural environment
- Facilitating environmental and ecological improvement projects like regeneration of Scotland's rainforest, peatland restoration, planting native woodlands, expanding riparian woodlands, rhododendron removal, and stimulating diverse wildlife on Kingairloch Estate.

5.105 Black Isle Local Place Plan (THC011) has identified the following priorities relating to Nature and Environment:

- Supporting habitat restoration through the development of farm clusters
- Independent environmental baseline survey and long term monitoring at Green Freeport Sites.
- Create nature networks within river catchments from sources to coastal zones, including the River Conon (a salmon breeding river) on the western edge of the Black Isle.
- Consider opportunities for community woodlands

5.106 Broadford and Strath Local Place Plan (THC012) has identified the following priorities relating to Nature and Environment:

- Encourage natural regeneration of native woodlands
- Identify and protect areas of pristine peatlands.
- Restore and protect valued natural environment and landscape from threats including human pressure (inappropriate development and over-tourism) and invasive species.
- Concerns over impacts of renewable energy developments and associated 'work camps' on local environment and community.

5.107 Caol Local Place Plan (THC024) has identified the following priorities relating to Nature and Environment:

- Regular maintenance of greenspaces throughout summer months.

5.108 Croy and Tornagrain Local Place Plan (THC026) has identified the following priorities relating to Nature and Environment:

- Environmental heritage of the area needs safeguarding

5.109 Dores and Essich Local Place Plan (THC013) has identified the following priorities relating to Nature and Environment:

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5.110 Duror and Kentallen Local Place Plan (THC014) has identified the following priorities relating to Nature and Environment:

- Rewild river and coastal habitats
- Build education centre to educate people about flora/fauna and natural heritage.
- Reinststate areas of native planting in our area as they fell the existing commercial forests.

5.111 Fort Augustus and Glenmoriston Local Place Plan (THC022) has identified the following priorities relating to Nature and Environment:

- Encouraging renewable power development to include measures to conserve wildlife, regenerate woodland and enhance biodiversity

5.112 Gairloch Local Place Plan (THC015) has identified the following priorities relating to Nature and Environment:

- Protect green spaces from overdevelopment
- Maintain aesthetic appeal of the area
- Maintain safeguarded natural designations

5.113 Garve and District Local Place Plan (THC016) has identified the following priorities relating to Nature and Environment:

- Nature preservation in partnership with landowners
- Sustain biodiversity

5.114 Glen Urquhart Local Place Plan (THC029) has identified the following priorities relating to Nature and Environment:

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5.115 Golspie Local Place Plan (THC021) has identified the following priorities relating to Nature and Environment

- Enhance and promote existing natural assets within the community
- Develop an integrated, diverse and multi-functional shoreline that can unlock the natural heritage

- Forming an integrated land management area which prioritises biodiversity enhancement

5.116 Kinlochleven Local Place Plan (THC017) has identified the following priorities relating to Nature and Environment:

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5.117 Kyle of Sutherland Local Place Plan (THC028) has identified the following priorities relating to Nature and Environment:

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5.118 Lochalsh Local Place Plan (THC018) has identified the following priorities relating to Nature and Environment:

- Conserve nationally significant natural habitats
- Protect biodiversity and landscapes for future generations

5.119 Morven Local Place Plan (THC027) has identified the following priorities relating to Nature and Environment:

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5.120 Nairnshire Local Place Plan (THC023) has identified the following priorities relating to Nature and Environment:

- Ensuring that design approaches incorporate biodiversity considerations, through creating on-site improvements.
- Ensuring developers make a contribution to an established fund for making biodiversity enhancements throughout Nairn.
- Preserving natural habitats through conservation strategies
- Improving the features of Tradespark Woods and generally safeguarding woodland spaces for appropriate uses such as tree top trails
- Designating the Victoria spa town with conservation area status

5.121 Sleat Local Place Plan (THC025) has identified the following priorities relating to Nature and Environment:

- To protect and enhance the natural environment
- Address the need for invasive species management
- Promote wildlife corridor development
- Promote a long-term comprehensive nature restoration programme including woodland regeneration projects
- Environmental education programme and integrated environmental education centre (possibly at Tormore).

5.122 Stratherrick and Foyers Local Place Plan (THC019) has identified the following priorities relating to Nature and Environment:

- Conserve key elements of our natural heritage, including Inverfarigaig Site of Special Scientific Interest.
- Wish to acquire a community woodland.
- Restore Boleskine House as heritage and nature hub.
- Develop community-led growing space, outdoor play and nature education, including enabling maintenance access to the communal septic tank in Inverfarigaig.

5.123 Torridon and Kinlochewe Local Place Plan (THC020) has identified the following priorities relating to Nature and Environment:

- To protect and restore biodiversity, natural places and carbon rich soils through nature-based solutions
- To protect and expand forests, woodland and trees.

### Summary of Implications for the Proposed Plan

5.124 This section sets out the implications for the HLDP Proposed Plan relating to Biodiversity, Natural Places, Soil, and Forestry, Woodland and Trees. These recommendations are in line with NPF4 Policies 3, 4, 5 and 6, and have been informed by the analysis and outputs of evidence in this report.

#### **Biodiversity**

5.125 Protecting biodiversity, reversing biodiversity loss and delivering positive effects for biodiversity from development will be a key theme for HLDP and its delivery. HLDP will have an influence on the five key drivers of biodiversity loss listed by NatureScot (land use change, climate change, pollution, invasive species and conservation action). HwLDP Policy 57 – Natural, Built and Cultural Heritage is the core policy at hand for matters relating to the natural, built and cultural heritage. It states that all development proposals will be assessed taking into account the level of importance and type of heritage features, the form and scale of the development, and any impact on the feature and its setting, in the context of the policy framework. Owing to the range of considerations across these matters which have evolved and expanded considered since HwLDP was adopted, HLDP would benefit from greater alignment with NPF4 and the development of separate policy frameworks for both natural environment features as distinct from historic assets and places.

5.126 HLDP will integrate relevant commitments from the Local Biodiversity Action Plan/s, and commitments made in future LBAPs and the Council's Ecology Strategy and Action Plan, taking into account relevant policy and guidance. Action to support habitats and species on the Scottish Biodiversity List will, where relevant, be prioritised.

- 5.127 HLDP shall detail the requirements for biodiversity enhancement. This will include, for example, considering specifying a minimum threshold for biodiversity enhancement for all new development; developing a policy to secure a range of mandatory low cost but high impact biodiversity enhancement measures in all new development; ensuring nature-based solutions are delivered as appropriate; specifying a biodiversity enhancement level for acceptable development within an HMP area; and considering whether a financial payment or financial contribution to an appropriate projects is acceptable where off-site biodiversity enhancements are unachievable.
- 5.128 The Council will review existing HwLDP policies to identify whether these are still required in light of NPF4. We will for example consider whether a policy is required for species and habitats of conservation concern not afforded protection under relevant legislation, including those listed in the [Scottish Biodiversity List](#) and LBAP.
- 5.129 The Council will review IMFLDP2 carbon – Nature, Restoration and Enhancement states that all development must enhance biodiversity and where relevant restore degraded habitats and build and strengthen nature networks around them. Specific guidance is provided for development of differing scales – from local to national, major and EIA development. Within this policy reference is given to the mitigation hierarchy and delivering biodiversity enhancement. HLDP will require to develop a policy framework in adherence to the mitigation hierarchy and biodiversity enhancement.
- 5.130 HLDP will spatially define Nature Networks, which will continue to expand and improve throughout the development of HLDP and beyond. Nature Network mapping will be an iterative process and HLDP will reflect that Nature Networks will change and evolve in response to changing circumstances during the lifetime of the plan. HLDP will ensure that nature networks will retain the connectivity and integrity between existing habitats. HLDP should facilitate, encourage and support the creation of nature networks and that connections are strengthened.

### **Natural Places**

- 5.131 HLDP will recognise international, national and local designations so that a policy framework can be applied in conjunction with NPF4 Policy 4. Natural features and designations in Highland will have their characteristics safeguarded and enhanced where possible to maximise their benefits to the region and biodiversity.
- 5.132 HLDP will identify the first tranche of Local Nature Conservation Sites in Highland. HLDP will recognise that the identification and designation of LNCSs is an iterative process and HLDP will reflect that LNCS's will be kept under constant review with new LNCSs designated in accordance with agreed Council processes during the lifetime of the plan.

- 5.133 We will consider whether the Flow Country WHS and its setting requires additional HLDP policy to supplement Policy 71 to ensure its Outstanding Universal Value is protected and preserved.
- 5.134 As Local Nature Reserves are not specifically referenced in NPF4 Policy 4, we will consider including additional policies to protect existing and any new LNRs designated during the lifetime of HLDP.
- 5.135 HLDP will have to consider whether natural heritage designations are already satisfactorily safeguarded by NPF4 policy framework, and whether additional policy provision may be required to further protect and enhance these assets in a Highland context.
- 5.136 The Council shall continue to review LLAs and notes comments from NatureScot and SSE Renewables on this matter. Any update to the assignment of a LLA shall inform HLDP if undertaken timeously within the timescale of the Plan.
- 5.137 The Council will make consideration of the many protected areas that developments associated with the ICFGF are located within and near to.
- 5.138 The Council will consider the retention of a form of HwLDP policy 72 Pollution which may require to be adapted to consider light pollution aspects specifically within current and future dark sky sites.

### **Soils**

- 5.139 HLDP's policy framework will adhere to the mitigation hierarchy in alignment with NPF4 Policy 5a, where development proposals will only be supported if they are designed and constructed by first avoiding and then minimising the amount of disturbance to soils on undeveloped land; and in a manner that protects soil from damage including from compaction and erosion, and that minimises soil sealing.
- 5.140 HLDP will be informed by evidence on known locations of prime agricultural land so that a policy framework can be applied in conjunction with NPF4 Policy 5b. Where higher resolution data extends to increased areas of coverage, HLDP shall reflect this.
- 5.141 HLDP will consider adopting a formal interpretation of locally and culturally important soils for primary use to include registered croft land and will require to develop a policy framework that provides clarity on these matters without adding undue complication with other policies in the plan. HwLDP has previously contained policies 47 and 48 in relation to protecting croft land. HLDP will require to update the policy position on these matters in a matter that aligns with NPF4.
- 5.142 HLDP will be informed by evidence on known locations of peatland, carbon-rich soils and priority peatland habitat so that a policy framework can be applied in conjunction with NPF4 Policy 5 c and d. For rural development across Highland,

Policy 5 c) of NPF4 allows development of these areas where it is for essential infrastructure, generation of renewable energy, small scale development directly linked to a farm or croft or is required to support a fragile community. It will have to be assessed in the preparation of the new plan where housing development is proposed on peat and carbon rich soils to support fragile communities, however development on alternative sites is a preferred where feasible.

### **Forestry**

- 5.143 HLDP will ensure that trees and woodland are identified and protected and wherever possible enhanced and cover expanded. HLDP will identify and set out proposals for forestry, woodland and trees. This will be supported and informed by a refreshed Highland Forest and Woodland Strategy, which will be completed in the next 18 months.
- 5.144 The Council will review existing HwLDP policies to identify whether these are still required in light of NPF4. For example, we will consider whether there is a need to replicate the existing HwLDP Policy 57 to deliver protection for TPOs and Inventory Gardens and Designed Landscapes and whether HwLDP Policy 51 should be replicated in some form to provide protection for non-native trees of amenity value.
- 5.145 The Council will consider whether there is a requirement for a policy specifically related to the delivery of compensatory planting. This may, for example, seek to ensure that, wherever practicable, compensatory planting is delivered on a like-for-like basis to ensure that an equivalent net (environmental and economic) public benefit is achieved. It will also consider circumstances where an enhanced level of compensatory planting may be required and how that would be calculated.
- 5.146 The Council will consider whether specific policies in relation to woodland crofts and huts to provide a clearer framework on where these would be appropriate, and any criteria that ought to be met to ensure that proposals enhance woodland creation with greater opportunities for on-site management, rather than providing widespread opportunities for cumulative loss of woodland to accommodate housing.

### **Statements of Agreement / Dispute**

#### **Agreement on Evidence**

- 5.147 Agencies who responded and agreed with the evidence and content presented include HES (**THC420**)

### **Disputes with Stakeholders**

- 5.148 Disputes raised include those highlighted from RSPB (**THC0039**), Scottish Renewables (**THC041**) and Scottish Power (**THC042**) to which the Council has provided the above response in **Summary of Stakeholder Engagement**.

### **Information Gaps**

- 5.149 As mentioned, incomplete Nature Network mapping at this stage will be progressed over the remainder of 2025 and 2026, which will inform the proposed plan. Collaboration with the Council's Environment Team will continue in this regard to ensure integration of Nature Network mapping within HLDP.
- 5.150 As mentioned, the Council has not yet undertaken an updated Forestry and Woodland Strategy but has committed to doing so within the next 18 months.
- 5.151 It is considered that community-led Local Place Plans would be informative evidence sources of relevance to this section of the Evidence Report, and several are understood to remain in production at the time of writing. To date, 22 communities in Highland have formally registered Local Place Plans. Any Local Place Plans registered will be considered in the production of the LDP if timeously available.