

Moray Council Biodiversity Duty Reporting 2015-2017

Introduction

Under the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act (2004), all public bodies are required to further the conservation of biodiversity when carrying out their responsibilities. The Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011 requires public bodies in Scotland to produce a publicly available report every three years. This duty is aimed at connecting people and their environment and not about protecting specific species or sites.

The information contained within this report sets out the work Moray Council has undertaken to meet biodiversity duties from 2015 to 2017. The report is structured around actions, mainstreaming, partnership, highlights and challenges.

Section 1: Introductory Information

Moray benefits from a wealth of natural heritage and areas of importance to nature conservation. The challenges facing biodiversity in Moray are similar to those across Scotland. Moray's use of land and natural resources support our economy through agriculture, forestry, fisheries, tourism and sporting estates. It is recognised that biodiversity is crucial to attracting investment and marketing of our food and drink and adds variety to our urban green spaces and contributes hugely to our health and wellbeing.

Biodiversity is not referenced in the Moray Local Outcome Improvement Plan (LOIP) that sets out the strategic priorities for Moray. There are no targets or milestones identified for biodiversity and therefore it is deemed to be a lower priority than those outcomes in Moray that demonstrate disadvantage for communities compared to the rest of Scotland or the wider Moray community.

Section 2: Mainstreaming

Planning

Mainstreaming biodiversity into new development is seen as the Council's main means of achieving positive outcomes in terms of biodiversity. The Council as Planning Authority has a remit to embed biodiversity into new development through the determination of planning applications taking account of Local Development Plan policies, supplementary guidance, masterplans and development briefs.

Land Management Activities

Moray Council's Lands and Parks Services are responsible for large areas of natural habitat, man-made parks and general greenspaces. Of all Council services they have the greatest direct physical impact on biodiversity simply by their day to day activities. Many of these activities are beneficial to biodiversity.

Section 3: Actions taken to improve biodiversity conservation

A number of actions have been undertaken by the Council to conserve and enhance biodiversity and are set out below.

Actions

- Completion of a pedestrian/cycle network along the Elgin flood scheme that runs to the edge of the settlement promoting improved access to the countryside.
- The Core Paths Plan has been reviewed and is being issued for public consultation in 2018.
- The Council approved Open Space Strategy Supplementary Guidance in 2017 which sets out a strategic vision for protecting, enhancing and managing publicly usable open space in Moray. The guidance will be used when making planning decisions related to open space and assist in promoting and enhancing biodiversity in new developments.
- Moray Woodland & Forestry Strategy was approved in 2017 and encourages a greater diversity of tree species and management practices. The Strategy will ensure that new woodland creation and restructuring proposals are resilient to the negative effects of climate change and tree disease. Our woodlands and forests are recognised as being vital in terms of contributing to protecting and enhancing biodiversity and securing a future for rare and protected species and habitats.
- Masterplans have been produced for large expansions to the north and south of Elgin and Dallas Dhu in Forres and identify green corridors, allotments and new habitat creation in the form of wetlands and wildflower meadows across the various areas.
- The Council continues to manage non-native species such as Giant Hogweed, Japanese Knotweed and Himalayan Balsam on sites in its ownership.
- The Council's Ranger section runs a series of educational workshop events which are open to the general public and liaises closely with the local secondary schools and their curriculum. Within its available budget the Council works with communities to involve them more in decisions about their environment.
- As part of its woodland management the Council aims to ensure continuous cover in all its woods and that they are available at all times for amenity access. Much of the green waste produced by the Council is re-used as compost material, mulch or footpath surfacing.

Future Action

Protecting and enhancing biodiversity is an identified main issue for the Moray Local Development Plan (MLDP) 2020, which is currently being prepared. The MLDP aims to support healthier ecosystems, connect people with nature to improve health and wellbeing, maximise the benefits of a diverse natural environment, contribute to sustainable economic growth and promote green corridors and planting for biodiversity in new developments.

It is proposed to focus on embedding biodiversity within the MLDP 2020 in the following ways.

Adopt a specific policy on biodiversity and geodiversity seeking the creation of new natural habitats for their ecological and amenity value. Developers must demonstrate that they have included habitat creation in the design of the development and provided links into existing green and blue networks wherever possible. There is also a policy promoting health and wellbeing and supporting Mobility, Mood, Place initiative.

Embed provision of green networks within policy and support this with green network mapping for main towns identifying linkages to create habitat connectivity and link people with the wider countryside and nature.

Continue of quality audit process with SNH providing input on effective ways of embedding biodiversity enhancement into new developments.

Funding has been secured for a first phase of health walks at Roseisle and Culbin Forests and a feasibility study investigating upgrading of the Moray Way.

Section 4: Partnership working and biodiversity communication

Moray Council works closely with Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) in particular on the preparation of the Moray Local Development Plan. This partnership includes working together in the preparation of a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), Habitat Regulations Assessment requirements and providing detailed input on proposed allocations to ensure the plan supports the protection and enhancement of biodiversity.

SNH is participating in the Council's quality audit process which is being undertaken to ensure design quality in new housing developments, they will have a specific role in identifying opportunities to protect and enhance biodiversity. There is also a close working relationship to ensure the conservation and management of any Sites of Special Scientific Interest in the Council's ownership.

The Council is part of the North East Scotland Biodiversity Partnership with representatives drawn from a range of organisations including local authorities, conservation, environmental and research organisations, statutory agencies, local businesses and individuals. The aim of the Partnership is to work together to protect and enhance local biodiversity through the delivery of a Local Biodiversity Action Plan (LBAP).

Moray Council has worked closely with the Forestry Commission, Scottish Natural Heritage, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and Moray Speyside Tourism in the preparation of the Moray Woodland and Forestry Strategy. The strategy sets out the vision of the partnership for our forests and woodlands as follows.

Moray has a network of multi-benefit sustainably managed woodlands that produce high quality timber to support jobs, enhance and promote biodiversity attract visitors, provide educational and recreational opportunities and contribute to the health and wellbeing of our communities.

The Countryside Ranger assists communities and other public bodies as part of the Scottish Mink Initiative that aims to protect native wildlife by removing breeding American mink from north Scotland and the Highlands. The Council also works with other public bodies as part of the Findhorn Bay Nature Reserve management committee.

Section 5: Biodiversity highlights and challenges

Highlights

Completion of a cycle/pedestrian path along the Elgin Flood Scheme will allow enhanced access to the countryside and allow more people to access and connect with nature. The addition of Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) to the Council's quality audit panel will assist in identifying meaningful ways to embed biodiversity into new developments through blue and green networks, green walls and roofs and wildflower meadows and verges.

Challenges

At a time of significant financial constraint the Council has very limited resource to allocate to biodiversity beyond the mainstream work associated with the Local Development Plan and its associated policies. Direct action associated with Lands and Parks will continue to reduce under the current financial forecasts. There is also a lack of local data available to monitor biodiversity and evidence that actions are having a beneficial impact.

Section 6: Monitoring

Moray Council does not collect or collate data specifically relating to biodiversity and it is therefore difficult to undertake monitoring activities. A State of the Environment Report has been produced to support the Moray Local Development Plan 2020 Main Issues Report which provides an environmental baseline. This baseline will be used to monitor policy actions and where possible impact on biodiversity and will be undertaken as part of monitoring the Local Development Plan.

Section 7: Contribution to targets

Targets/key steps from Chapter 1 (Healthy ecosystems) of the "2020 Challenge for Scotland's Biodiversity"	Contribution to key step?	Justification
(1.1) Encourage and support ecosystem restoration and management, especially in catchments that have experienced the greatest degradation	Yes	Moray Council manages the Wards Wildlife Site an identified local nature reserve in Elgin. A management plan has been prepared to raise awareness of the sites importance in terms of natural heritage value and community benefit.
(1.2) Use assessments of ecosystem health at a catchment level to determine what needs to be done		
(1.3) Government and public bodies, including SNH, SEPA and FCS, will work together towards a shared agenda for action to restore ecosystem health at a catchment-scale across Scotland		
(1.4) Establish plans and decisions about land use based on an understanding of ecosystems. Take full account of land use impacts on the ecosystems services that underpin social, economic and environmental health	Yes	Moray Council has prepared a State of the Environment Report and Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) providing an environmental baseline to assist in making land use planning decisions through the identification of significant environmental impacts.
Targets/key steps from Chapter 3 (Biodiversity, health and quality of life) of the "2020 Challenge for Scotland's Biodiversity"	Contribution to key step?	Justification
(3.1) Provide opportunities for everyone to experience and enjoy	Yes	

nature regularly, with a particular focus on disadvantaged groups		The Council has approved an Open Space Strategy, Woodland and Forestry Strategy and Masterplans. These documents are supplementary planning guidance and highlight the health and wellbeing associated with connecting people with nature. There is specific reference to improving accessibility for all to access greenspaces and woodlands in and around towns.
	Yes	<p>Moray Council has participated in a Planning for Real Exercise focusing on greenspaces and public buildings. The community identified issues and aspirations for greenspace leading to creation of an action plan identifying key priorities.</p> <p>Within its available budget the Council works with communities to involve them more in decisions about their environment.</p>
(3.3) Build on good practice being developed by the National Health Service (NHS) and others to help encourage greenspace, green exercise and social prescribing initiatives that will improve health and wellbeing through connecting people with nature	Yes	The Council has received funding for first phase Health Walks at Roseisle and Culbin Forests to encourage increased use and activity in woodlands.
(3.4) Increase access to nature within and close to schools, and support teachers in developing the role of outdoor learning across the Curriculum for Excellence	Yes	The Council's Ranger section runs a series of educational workshop events which are open to the general public and liaises closely with the local secondary schools and their curriculum.
(3.5) Encourage public organisations and businesses to review their responsibilities and action for biodiversity, and recognise that increasing their positive contribution to nature and landscapes can	Yes	Moray Council has a Cycle to Work Scheme and has pool bikes for staff to use for short journeys. Council wide food growing competitions and walking challenges have been held to engage with staff on the linkages between health and wellbeing and

help meet their corporate priorities and performance		nature.
Targets/key steps from Chapter 4 (Wildlife, habitats and protected places) of the "2020 Challenge for Scotland's Biodiversity"	Contribution to key step?	Justification
(4.1) Ensure that the management of protected places for nature also provides wider public benefits	Yes	Moray Council manages the Wards Wildlife Site an identified local nature reserve in Elgin. A management plan has been prepared to raise awareness of the sites importance in terms of natural heritage value and community benefit.
(4.3) Integrate protected areas policy with action for wider habitats to combat fragmentation and restore key habitats	Yes	The Moray Local Development Plan (MLDP) has a suite of policies that safeguard the environment. Currently there is no specific policy regarding biodiversity or green networks however this is identified as a key issue for the next plan to address.
(4.5) Involve many more people than at present in this work and improve understanding of the poorly known elements of nature		
Targets/key steps from Chapter 5 (Land and freshwater management) of the "2020 Challenge for Scotland's Biodiversity"	Contribution to key step?	Justification
(5.1) Promote an ecosystem approach to land management that fosters sustainable use of natural resources and puts biodiversity at the heart of land-use planning and decision-making		
(5.2) Ensure that measures taken forward under the Common Agricultural Policy encourage land managers to develop and retain the		

diversity of wildlife habitats and landscape features		
(5.3) Support 'High Nature Value' farming and forestry	Yes	<p>The Council has approved a Woodland and Forestry Strategy and one of the key aims is to promote biodiversity and safeguard the environment.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote woodland practices that protect and enhance environmental quality and biodiversity • Promote the conservation of species and habitats • Support woodlands that restore, maintain and enhance biodiversity through the creation of habitat networks • Encourage sustainable forest management that meets the UK Forestry Standard
(5.4) Put in place the management necessary to bring Scotland's protected areas into favourable condition and improve the ecological status of water bodies	Yes	The Council continues to manage non-native species such as Giant Hogweed, Japanese Knotweed and Himalayan Balsam on sites in its ownership
(5.5) Ensure that biodiversity and ecosystem objectives are fully integrated into flood risk management plans, and restore wetland habitats and woodlands to provide sustainable flood management	Yes	<p>The Woodland and Forestry Strategy promotes natural flood management through the creation of new woodlands</p> <p>The Elgin flood scheme has a shared footpath/cyclepaths that provide connections the wider countryside.</p>
(5.6) Restore and extend natural habitats as a means of building reserves of carbon and to help mitigate climate change	Yes	Climate change is a primary policy in the Moray Local Development Plan and is supported by Climate Change Supplementary Planning Guidance that requires new developments to demonstrate that climate change has been taken

		account of within proposals. This includes provision of connected greenspaces and integration of green and blue networks within and out with the development site. There is a specific policy seeking to minimise disturbance of carbon rich soils.
(5.7) Provide clear advice to land and water managers on best practice		
Targets/key steps from Chapter 6 (Marine and coastal) of the "2020 Challenge for Scotland's Biodiversity"	Contribution to key step?	Justification
(6.4) Achieve good environmental status for Scottish seas		