

Highland Biodiversity Partnership

Draft Minute of Meeting held on Tuesday 28 June 2005
2.00pm, Council Chamber, Inverness

Present:

Ian Ross, Chair of the Sustainable Development Select Committee, The Highland Council (Chair)
Bill Taylor, Highlands & Islands Enterprise
David Glass, Caithness Biodiversity Group
David Jardine, Forest Enterprise
Eileen Stuart, Scottish Natural Heritage
Fran Lockhart, Highland FWAG / Ross & Cromarty (East) Biodiversity Group
George Hamilton, The Highland Council
Gillian McKnight, Scottish Agricultural College
Ian Milne, Scottish Environment Protection Agency
James Fenton, National Trust for Scotland
Janet Bromham, Highland Biodiversity Officer
Lloyd Gudgeon, Wester Ross Environment Group
Lorna Anness, Lochaber Biodiversity Group
Margaret Davidson, PRIN Biodiversity Group
Mark Foxwell, Scottish Wildlife Trust
Murdo Macdonald, Highland Biological Recording Group
Richard Wallace, Forestry Commission Scotland
Ro Scott, Scottish Natural Heritage
Una Lee, The Highland Council

Apologies:

Adhair McIvor, Scottish Executive Environment & Rural Affairs Department
George Campbell, RSPB Scotland
Hugh Insley, Forest Enterprise (David Jardine attending instead)
Iain Turnbull, Skye & Lochalsh Environment Forum
Ian Strachan, Lochaber Biodiversity Group (Lorna Anness attending instead)
Jeff Watson, Scottish Natural Heritage (Eileen Stuart attending instead)
John MacRae, Highland Council Harbours Department (TECS)
Robbie Kernahan, Deer Commission Scotland
Stephen Corcoran, Cairngorms Biodiversity Steering Group
Terry Keatinge, Sutherland Biodiversity Group

1. Welcome & Introduction

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting and summarised the aims of the meeting as to secure agreement on the aims, membership and working procedures of the Highland Biodiversity Partnership and secondly, to secure commitment in principle from prospective members.

He said that the Nature Conservation Act and Scottish Biodiversity Strategy have given a biodiversity duty to public bodies and we hope that by working together, the Partnership can help agencies & bodies to deliver this. He drew a distinction between the role of representatives from public bodies and representatives from local groups, and emphasised the importance of giving the local groups a seat at the table and an opportunity to feed into the process.

2. Minute of Last Meeting

The minute of the last meeting held on Tuesday 26 April in the Maple Court Hotel was accepted as a true record of discussion with one amendment:

Page 3, Para 3: A start has been made on the records database by HBRG and SNH.

Action Points:

1. Discharged – Paper 1
2. Discharged – the Sub Group met on 9 June, aims and membership listed at Annex 1 of Paper 1
3. Discharged
4. Ongoing – Eileen Stuart reported that the Wellbeing Alliance Community Planning Officers Group meeting discussed the possibility of provision of support to the local groups through the community planning process. There was recognition that whilst some groups had managed to align themselves with community planning partnerships, it may take some time for the relevant structures to be rolled out across Highland and therefore this was not a feasible option for all local biodiversity groups. The issue of the delivery of community planning and links with local networks is to be discussed at a future meeting of the Wellbeing Alliance in September, and Eileen will update the Partnership on progress at its next meeting. **(API)**
5. Discharged – Included within Paper 1
6. Ongoing – Ro Scott reported that she had spoken with SNH's external funding adviser. There are many kinds of funding sources that can fund different elements of biodiversity action in Highland. If the Partnership can come up with a proposal, SNH will try to locate appropriate external funding for it.
7. Ongoing – Bill Taylor reported that capacity building amongst local groups was common to many initiatives in their infancy, e.g. community land unit, community energy companies. We need to find out what are the local groups needs, and then help them secure this help with funding or advice. The issue of funding was discussed further under Item 5.
8. Discharged – The Chairman reported that a letter had been sent to Ross Finnie, and has been acknowledged. A more detailed response is awaited. Copy of letter at Annex 1.

3. Role, Membership & Working Procedures

The Chairman summarised the desired outcomes for the discussion under Item 3:

- Agreement to establish the Highland Biodiversity Partnership
- Amendment / agreement on the 8 aims
- Agreement on the membership & the roles of individual members
- Agreement on the working procedures of the Partnership

Discussion:

There was agreement to establish the Highland Biodiversity Partnership.

Aims:

There was considerable discussion over the aims of the Partnership. The following four were identified as primary aims, and it was suggested that the others could either be amalgamated into one of the primary aims, or represented delivery mechanisms or operating principles for the

Partnership.

- To identify and address large ‘thematic’ and / or pan-Highland biodiversity issues.
- To review and monitor biodiversity actions contained within the seven Local Biodiversity Action Plans, with reference to the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy.
- To provide a link between local groups and national biodiversity strategies, action plans and reporting procedures.
- To raise awareness and promote biodiversity by championing individual LBAPs and biodiversity issues generally.

It was agreed the Sub Group would work on the text of the four primary aims and a list of operating principles / delivery mechanisms and report back to the Partnership at their next meeting. (AP2)

Membership:

Some attendees felt the Partnership’s membership ought to be expanded to cover various groups and bodies with an interest in biodiversity in the Highlands. Whilst the Chairman was keen to be as inclusive as possible, it was pointed out that to achieve a workable Partnership that was able to make progress on pan-Highland issues, it was important to keep the number of members to a minimum.

It was agreed to expand the membership of the Partnership to incorporate a representative from the Scottish Rural Property and Business Association (formerly Scottish Landowners’ Federation) and the Community Woodland Association, and that the membership would be reviewed in 12-18 months. (AP3)

It was further agreed that one representative would be invited from each local biodiversity group, and that when that person could not make the meeting, a substitute from amongst the group’s members would be welcome. The ratio of agencies to community groups will never exceed 2:1.

Those present recognised that there are many other clubs, groups and fora (e.g. Scottish Ornithologists Club) currently working on Highland biodiversity issues, and it was agreed that the Highland Biodiversity Forum would be the opportunity for them to feed into the process. The membership of the Forum will be open to all, and its aims and working procedures can be agreed at a later date. Members were content with an annual workshop / seminar and twice yearly newsletter to keep everyone up-to-speed on progress.

Working Procedures:

Margaret Davidson and several other members stressed the importance of clarity over decision making and governance (both financially and in terms of accountability), which was something that was not addressed in Paper 1. The importance of a simple system that members can sign up to was highlighted. It was agreed that the Sub Group would work on this issue and draft a short agreement covering the Partnership’s aims and operating principles (including governance) for discussion at the next meeting. (AP4)

The principle of meeting frequently at the outset (i.e. every 3-4 months), dropping back to a meeting once or twice a year was agreed. It was also agreed to make travelling expenses available to those members who can’t already claim them back.

The importance of feeding information back to the Wellbeing Alliance was accepted, but the link between the Partnership and other groups such as the Council's Sustainable Development Select Committee and the Scottish Biodiversity Forum was questioned. The Chairman said that the Select Committee, along with other relevant Council Committees, will get feedback through the Council officers as appropriate. Although the officer support structures in the Scottish Biodiversity Forum are currently changing, it was agreed that there ought to be a single contact representing the Partnership on the Scottish Biodiversity Forum. **(AP5)**

There was some discussion on the Highland Biodiversity Action Plans, and it was suggested that there was a need for a Highland Biodiversity Strategy or Action Plan to draw out the relevant pan-Highland issues from the local plans, which would then act as a strategy for the Partnership.

4. Role of Local Biodiversity Groups

The Chairman recognised the important role of local biodiversity groups in terms of delivering local biodiversity action, and asked for discussion on the feasibility of asking the local groups to undertake a review of their LBAP, prioritise actions and produce targets if funding or officer support can be found to help them with administration, expenses, etc.

Discussion:

Only five of the eight local groups (including the Cairngorms) were represented at the meeting. Those present agreed that it was of crucial importance that local groups are fully engaged with the Partnership. Bill Taylor pointed out that a key role for the Partnership was to give communities the tools they need to deliver local biodiversity action and then stand back and let them get on with it. It is important to strike a balance between recognising the autonomy of local groups and providing guidance to them.

David Glass from the Caithness Biodiversity Group said that they had approached the Caithness Partnership for support, but that they were unable to provide assistance at the required level – i.e. administrative support and advice regarding future funding, constitutions, etc. The Chairman suggested that there may be merit in investigating this further. **(AP6)**

Margaret Davidson pointed out that although some Rural Partnerships can provide some support, there is still a real need for an administrative role to help local groups convene meetings, handle paperwork, manage finances, help source professional advice, etc. Those present recognised that different solutions would be needed in each of the seven different areas, and it was suggested that the Partnership ought to provide a pot of money for local groups to apply towards to help them function. This capacity building element is identified in the suggested budget (Agenda Item 5).

It was suggested that the Community Voluntary Services network could help support local groups in areas where Rural Partnership support is not available. CVS can provide advice to local groups who wish to constitute themselves and examples of good practice. It was agreed that the Partnership should help local groups make these local contacts and provide a range of options to them by way of best practice. **(AP7)**

Lorna Anness highlighted the importance of awareness-raising on Highland biodiversity issues, and said that the local groups could play an important role in this regard. She also emphasised the importance of the website, the fact that there may be opportunities in working with other groups and the need to strengthen the links between local groups in each area. Margaret Davidson also highlighted the importance of a website where minutes, newsletters, etc. are

available, as well as an e-based network to ensure we are as approachable as possible. (AP8)

It was agreed that the Partnership needs to review the LBAPs, and pick out the truly local issues, the Highland-wide issues and the larger issues. It was felt that the local groups could prioritise and start to address the local issues emerging from their plans, perhaps with some support from local agency staff; whilst the pan-Highland issues common to many plans could be drawn together to form an action plan for the Partnership.

Those present were broadly supportive of a review of the LBAPs and the role of local groups in this process, but it was felt that more work was required on the capacity of the local groups to take on this work. The Sub Group was asked to look into this further and report back at the next Partnership meeting. (AP9)

5. Budget & Funding

The Chairman introduced Item 5 by emphasising that the figures listed in Paper 1 were purely indicative to stimulate discussion, and by asking for discussion and agreement on the budget headings (listed below) as well as a mandate for the Sub Group to work up a more detailed proposal for the next meeting.

Implementation Scheme: 7 areas @ £5,000 per area	£35,000
Implementation Scheme: Pan-Highland projects	£15,000
Biodiversity Surveys / Information Capture	£15,000
Support to Local Groups: 7 areas @ £2,000 per area	£14,000
Highland Biodiversity Network: 1 event, 2 newsletters, website updates	<u>£ 3,000</u>
Total	<u>£82,000</u>

Discussion:

There was some concern that £82,000 per annum was not enough, and a key question that needs to be addressed early on is how the Partnership is going to bankroll the money.

George Hamilton said that the Council has allocated funds of £11,000 towards biodiversity-related projects this financial year, and that it was the intention to make this available on an annual basis. He was flexible as to which elements of the proposed budget that this was used to fund, but keen to match it with funding from other agencies as well as industry or grant-giving bodies in due course.

Bill Taylor highlighted the importance of training and capacity building, and said that if this part of the budget were given some more work HIE would be able to contribute towards it. He also asked the Group to identify items that area budgets of SNH, the Council or Local Enterprise Companies could fund.

David Jardine suggested that there may be merit in separating the project budget from structural and pan-Highland issues, as different organisations may be able to contribute towards different elements of the budget. For example, the Forestry Commission could support woodland related projects, but not those with an agricultural focus. He went on to say that Forest Enterprise and the Forestry Commission Scotland could provide some seed-corn funding, and to suggest that their external funding adviser Nicky Whittaker may be able to help source additional funding. (AP10)

Ian Milne said that in the past, whilst SEPA have been able to contribute towards projects such as this in terms of staff time, due to the nature of their funding they were unable to contribute financially. However, with the new biodiversity duty on public bodies this situation may have changed and he agreed to check their position and report back to the Partnership. The Chairman asked if the representatives of all public bodies could do the same, liaise with Janet and bring this information to the next meeting. **(AP11)**

The Sub Group was asked to investigate funding for future biodiversity work in Highland, and to work up a more detailed proposal for the next meeting. **(AP12)**

6. AOCB

Interviews for the Council's Biodiversity Officer Job-Share position were held on Monday 27 June, and Jonathan Willet has been appointed as the second Officer. Jonathan is currently working as a Biodiversity Officer with North Lanarkshire Council, and previously held a similar position with Stirling Council.

7. Date of next meeting: Monday 24 October, 2.00pm

Action Points:

- AP1: Eileen Stuart to update the Partnership on the outcome of the Wellbeing Alliance meeting in September, in relation to the delivery of community planning and links with local networks.
- AP2: Sub Group to work on the text of the four primary aims and a list of operating principles / delivery mechanisms and report back to the Partnership at their next meeting.
- AP3: Janet Bromham to write to the Scottish Rural Property & Business Association & the Community Woodland Association to invite a representative to join the Highland Biodiversity Partnership.
- AP4: Sub Group to draft a short agreement covering the Partnership's aims and operating principles (including governance) for discussion at the next meeting.
- AP5: Sub Group to identify a single contact to represent the Partnership on the Scottish Biodiversity Forum.
- AP6: Janet Bromham to liaise with the Caithness Biodiversity Group, identify what types of support they require and secure assistance at the appropriate level.
- AP7: Sub Group to look investigate the issue of support to local groups and provide a range of options by the next meeting of the Partnership.
- AP8: Highland Council to place the Partnership papers, minutes and future newsletters on the website www.highlandbiodiversity.com, and to initiate an e-based network along the lines already discussed.
- AP9: Sub Group to investigate the capacity of the local groups to undertake a review of their LBAPs and report back to the next meeting.
- AP10: Janet Bromham to invite Nicky Whittaker to attend the next meeting of the Sub Group.
- AP11: Representatives from public bodies (Archie MacNab (CC), Robbie Kernahan (DCS), Hugh Insley (FE), Richard Wallace (FC), George Hamilton (THC), Bill Taylor (HIE), James Fenton (NTS), George Campbell (RSPB), Ian Milne (SEPA), Adhair McIvor (SEERAD), Eileen Stuart (SNH), Mark Foxwell (SWT)) to investigate whether they can contribute financially towards the delivery of the Highland Biodiversity Action Plans, to liaise with Janet Bromham and report back to the next Partnership meeting.
- AP12: Sub Group to investigate funding for future biodiversity work in Highland and work up a more detailed proposal for the next meeting.

Annex 1:

Ross Finnie MSP
Minister for the Environment and Rural Development
Scottish Executive
Pentland House
47 Robb's Loan
EDINBURGH
EH14 1TY

June 2005

Dear Minister

DELIVERING BIODIVERSITY ACTION IN HIGHLAND

The Highland Council is in the process of initiating a Highland Biodiversity Partnership to help deliver action for biodiversity across the area. The first meeting of this Partnership was held on 26 April, I attach a list of those present. As Chairman, I was asked to seek your advice on obtaining support to safeguard and enhance biodiversity in the Highlands.

I am particularly interested in whether it would be possible to secure funding for Highland biodiversity initiatives from the proceeds of the Aggregates Levy. You will be aware that the Council has a strong track record in campaigning to secure a fair deal for Highland communities from Levy proceeds. Whilst we are pleased with the level of support delivered to Highland communities through the CERS grant scheme, we consider that the Scottish Executive could do more to ensure that our share of sustainability funding is proportionate to the significant contribution that Highland mineral sites make to the Levy.

We are encouraged that SEERAD is allocating £300,000 annually from Aggregates Levy proceeds to the national Biodiversity Action Grant Scheme. It is widely accepted, however, that this scheme is oversubscribed and Highland projects face stiff competition in bidding for funds. Given the sheer quantity and quality of the Highland biodiversity resource - much of which is of national or international significance - and the corresponding challenge set by the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy, I wonder whether there is any scope to allocate a separate share of Aggregates Levy funding to Highland biodiversity initiatives?

To make a meaningful contribution to the delivery of the Scottish Strategy, the Highland Biodiversity Partnership faces a formidable challenge, particularly in terms of recording habitats and species and reporting on action. For example:

- **We do not have an audit of the habitats and species present within the Highland area.** Although there is a Biological Records Centre in Inverness, it is drastically under-resourced and limited in terms of its coverage, both geographically and taxonomically.
- **The number of individuals with sufficient specialist knowledge of our plants and animals to undertake accurate recording is drastically low, with the result that large parts of the area are un-surveyed.** As you will be aware, the Highland Council area is the largest and most diverse in Scotland, with 33% of Scotland's land area (26,484 sq km) and a coastline that is 21% of the Scottish total (4,905 km). It is also the least densely populated,

at 8 persons per sq km compared to the national average of 66. We neither have the resources nor means to raise sufficient funds to undertake biodiversity surveys or action at the level aspired to in the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy, its Implementation Plans or Reporting Scheme.

- **We are finding it impossible to feed into the national recording scheme (BARS).** Because of the way the seven LBAPs were drawn together, using a community-led approach in the absence of a habitats and species audit, we do not have the necessary data or monitoring system to feed into BARS. To do so would require a significant additional piece of work that we do not have the funds to undertake, particularly as we still have very limited knowledge of what habitats and species exist where, and how threatened they are.
- **Our network of seven community groups have nowhere near the level of support or resources they require to secure local action and help deliver national biodiversity targets.** Over the last three years we produced seven Local Biodiversity Action Plans (LBAPs) and delivered a series of community-led projects through grant schemes, awareness-raising programmes and a Marine Innovation Award scheme. The seven LBAPs were produced by local groups all comprised of committed volunteers who give their time freely to draft the plans. Last year, we were successful in attracting Leader + funding to undertake a modest Implementation Programme and we are currently using the local groups to help us deliver action on the ground. The Council employs one permanent Biodiversity Officer, with some funding from SNH, to help it meet its obligations under the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act but to deliver tangible results our communities need considerably more help than can be provided by one officer.

Should we be successful in securing additional support, we would hope to be able to start to address some of these issues by targeting resources towards information capture, biological surveys and training, and support for local groups through strengthening the input of the existing community planning network.

I hope this sheds some light on the scale of the task ahead of us and the shortage of Highland resources in contributing to the delivery of the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy. What is clear so far is that within our communities there is a significant pride in the Highlands outstanding natural heritage and a remarkable level of commitment and enthusiasm to safeguarding and enhancing biodiversity for the benefit of communities, businesses and tourists. I hope the Scottish Executive will be able to help the Highland Biodiversity Partnership to capitalise on this groundswell of support through, for example, the allocation of Aggregates Levy funding.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

CLLR WILLIAM ROSS
Chairman, Highland Biodiversity Partnership
Chairman, The Highland Council's Sustainable Development Select Committee

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