

ABERDEENSHIRE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT TEAM NATURAL ENVIRONMENT STRATEGY ANNUAL REPORT 2020/21

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The Environment Team has the role of protecting, enhancing and promoting the natural heritage of Aberdeenshire. The Environment Team's work on natural heritage is driven by Aberdeenshire Council's Natural Heritage Strategy 2019-22 which provides a structured approach to service delivery over the three-year period.
- 1.2 Despite the challenges presented by Covid-19, the Environment Team continued to deliver its core natural heritage business activities over the last year without significant interruption. Moving to an online provision of consultation responses to Development Management ensured continuity of service. It was notable that the activities of the community groups supported by the Team did reduce. There was an impact on the Council's Leader funded Greenspace Project and Invasive Non-native Species Project with both successfully modifying their plans for the year, with an emphasis on public messaging and information sharing, to counteract the reduced opportunities for on the ground works. Community and project support did however continue throughout the period and will continue to be provided in the most appropriate forms as we move out of lockdown and beyond. The lockdown restrictions and modification to people's behaviors did provide the opportunity to increase engagement via social media with the Team supporting partners in messaging on issues such as grassland plants and pollinators.

2 Aim 1 – Protection of Natural Heritage

- 2.1 **Use statutory powers and provide advice to manage and protect Aberdeenshire's natural heritage in recognition that it is a valuable and irreplaceable asset to the region.**
- 2.2 The Environment Team have continued to assist in the preparation of the Proposed Aberdeenshire Local Development Plan with reviews undertaken of the Aberdeenshire Forestry and Woodland Strategy, which is currently supplementary guidance in the 2017 Plan. Natural heritage policy wording was also reviewed.
- 2.3 During the course of the year the Environment Team provided 443 natural heritage surgery consultation responses to Development Management through weekly surgeries. Twenty-six formal responses were also provided, with 100% of them provided within the 14-day consultation period. Both measures were down from 2019/20, possibly reflecting a change in application type and a reduction in applications generally throughout the period. The response to the pandemic resulted in a significant change to the surgery process which had included a face-to-face element prior to March 2020. Surgeries moved online; however, the allotted weekly time slots were kept, and weekly reminder and update emails went out from Environment Planners so as to keep the contact

levels high and to maintain a close working relationship with Development Management.

- 2.4 The impacts of the pandemic restrictions also saw Environment Planners modify the training support they provide to Development Management. 1 online Development Management Agents Forum was supported, and a quarterly Sway natural heritage newsletter was produced which highlighted key issues in each edition. Feedback from Development Management on the newsletter is good and this communication tool will continue going forward.
- 2.5 Support and advice relating to protected species was provided to Housing, Structures, Property, Landscape Services and Flooding Teams on a range of issues including bats, swifts and invasive non-native species.
- 2.6 Responses to Forestry Plans and Forestry Applications were very similar in number to last year at sixty-one. There was a reduction in Works to Protected Trees applications, down to eighty-two from ninety-four last year. With the completion of the Tree Preservation Order (TPO) Review process in late 2020, the focus moved to the designation of new TPO's with eight made.

<i>Provide input to national policy guidance and development</i>	<i>2020/21</i>	<i>2019/20</i>
Number of national consultations responded to	5	1
<i>Provide input to Local Development Plan process</i>	<i>2020/21</i>	<i>2019/20</i>
Input into Local Development Plan process	3 text reviews	11
<i>Provide consultation advice and support to the Development Management process</i>	<i>2020/21</i>	<i>2019/20</i>
Total number of informal surgery responses	443	564
Total number of formal consultation responses	26	43
Percentage of formal consultations to planning applications responded to within 14 days	100%	79%
Number of Development Management training days supported	5 (including 4 Sway newsletters)	0
Number of Development Management meetings attended	4	1
<i>Consultation advice and support for forestry applications</i>	<i>2020/21</i>	<i>2019/20</i>
Number of forestry consultations	61	58
<i>Protect trees of visual and cultural importance</i>	<i>2020/21</i>	<i>2019/20</i>
Number of Tree Preservation Orders made	8	3

Number of Tree Preservation Orders reviewed	0	15
Number of applications processed for works to protected trees	82	94
Percentage of applications for works to a Tree Preservation Order, determined within 8 weeks	85%	95%
<i>Protect locally significant sites for Nature Conservation</i>	<i>2020/21</i>	<i>2019/20</i>
Up to date list of Local Nature Conservation Sites	Yes	Yes
Number of New Local Nature Conservation Sites	Consultation ongoing relating to the 14 identified in 2019/20	14
<i>Support other Council Teams in the protection of natural heritage and landscape</i>	<i>2020/21</i>	<i>2019/20</i>
Number of responses/support/advice provided to other Services	20	12

3 Aim 2 – Enhancement of the Natural Heritage

- 3.1 **Use available resources, and attract new resources, to enhance Aberdeenshire natural heritage assets to provide social, environmental and economic benefits.**
- 3.2 The Environment Team continue to explore innovative ways to engage with the local community and support the Council to enhance the natural environment on its land. Support continued to community groups and projects including Huntly Meadows Community Group; Portlethen Moss Nature Conservation Group; Inch Meadows Community Group; Arnhall Moss Advisory Trust and Ury Riverside Park Community Group. The coronavirus pandemic did impact on the activities of these groups with no external project money accessed and fewer volunteer session delivered. However, all groups remain active and value the support of the Environment Team.
- 3.3 The actions in Aberdeenshire Council Pollinator Action Plan 2019-21 were also impacted by the coronavirus pandemic. Despite this, pandemic driven grass cutting reductions during 2020 provided a significant opportunity to educate and engage the public on pollinators, wildflowers and meadows, such as the grass watch project. The Environment Team supported the Ranger Service, NESBReC and Landscape Services Greenspace Officers on this.
- 3.4 Environment Team spending on cross Service and cross organisation natural environment projects throughout Aberdeenshire remained similar to last year with £19,680 spent. This was predominately core support to projects and organisations such as the North East Scotland Biodiversity Partnership, Dee Catchment Management and East Grampian Coastal Partnership. The

Environment Team budget secured, or assisted towards, partnership project funding of £295,500. The river restoration project on the Beltie burn, managed by the Dee Catchment Partnership, secured significant funding.

- 3.5 The period saw the formal close of two Leader funded projects strongly supported by the Environment Team - the Aberdeenshire Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS) Project and the Aberdeenshire Council Greenspace Project. The final years of both projects were impacted by the pandemic, with less on-the-ground works taking place than planned. Despite this, 20 days of volunteer time were still delivered through the INNS Project and both projects swiftly moved to the provision predominantly of information and education through websites and social media.

<i>Use Council managed land to enhance natural heritage and engage communities</i>	<i>2020/21</i>	<i>2019/20</i>
Number of community groups or projects supported on Council managed land	6	5
External funding secured by community groups	0	£4,807
Number of separate volunteer sessions delivered	6	24
Number of sites enhanced	0	6
<i>Protection and enhancement of pollinators in Aberdeenshire</i>	<i>2020/21</i>	<i>2019/20</i>
Pollinator Action Plan reviewed and up to date	Yes	Yes
<i>Creation and management of woodlands in Aberdeenshire</i>	<i>2020/21</i>	<i>2019/20</i>
Number of woodland project sites supported by the Environment Team	2	3
Total expenditure (all external funding) for Council woodland project sites	0	£5,608
Aberdeenshire Forestry and Woodland Strategy reviewed and up to date	Yes	Yes
<i>Promote, protect and enhance Aberdeenshire's natural heritage through cross team and organisation partnership working</i>	<i>2020/21</i>	<i>2019/20</i>
Number of cross organisation partnership projects supported	2	6
Environment Team budget to support cross team and organisational partnership projects	£19,680	£18,500
Total partnership, cross team and organisational expenditure (including Environment Team budget)	£295,500	£164,704
Number of people trained	0	10

Number of volunteer days	20.5	19
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4 Aim 3 – Promotion of Natural Heritage

4.1 Promote the natural heritage of the region to residents and visitors, so that the benefits of this valuable asset are fully realised.

4.2 2020/21 saw a significant re-refresh of the Council Biodiversity Champions process. A survey was sent to Champions and thereafter expert contacts made available for each topic. There was significant enthusiasm for the process, but more regular contact and support was requested by Councilors. As a result, the number of active champions was reduced to 5 to allow for more focused activity, delivered through a program of scheduled meetings and updates, on prioritised topics over the next couple of years. Topics currently not active will be a focus for activity in future years on a rolling program basis.

4.2 Although opportunities to promote the work of the Team at training sessions and other events were more limited due to the pandemic, promotion of the Environment Team's work continued with a topic discussion at the Development Management Agents Forum and an item in the Council's Green news. Reporting to the Scottish Government on the Council's work in relation to the biodiversity duty (see below) provided a significant opportunity to promote the environmental work of the Council generally.

4.3 Promotion and awareness raising of the natural environment is embedded in the delivery of all cross organisational partnership project work. 2020/21 saw further increases in the use of social media in particular with the Environment Team supporting messaging from the Greenspace Project, the Ranger Service, the North East Scotland Biodiversity Partnership and Invasive Non-Native Species Project. This increased focus was partially driven by the lockdown restrictions. The popular North East Non-Native Invasive Species Forum was able to be held online with at least sixty-five attendees logging on to the event.

<i>Aberdeenshire Council engages in and promotes key natural heritage issues</i>	<i>2020/21</i>	<i>2019/20</i>
Number of Councillor Biodiversity Champions	10	23
Number of events/projects/processes involving Councillor Biodiversity Champions directly by the Environment Team	4	3
Number of Ranger Service events supported by the Environment Team	0	5
Number of Green News items	1	2
Number of sessions delivered promoting the work of the Environment Team in relation to the natural environment	1	6
<i>Ensure that people can access good quality information and advice</i>	<i>2020/21</i>	<i>2019/20</i>

Number of press releases, social media posts	0	6
Number of views of natural heritage web pages	5,039	2,378
Number of attendees at annual Invasive Non-Native Species Forum	65	Cancelled due to Covid-19. Previous year had 85

5 Aim 4 – Continuous Improvement

5.1 Ensure the Environment Team’s work in natural heritage is high quality, efficient, responsive to customer needs and continually improving.

5.2 The development and implementation of the Natural Heritage Strategy 2019-2022, and associated Annual Action Plan, provides a structured approach to service delivery for the Environment Team in relation to the natural environment of Aberdeenshire.

5.3 2020/21 saw the development and completion of an Environment and Development Management Consultation Protocol. The Protocol clearly sets out the consultation processes between the Environment Team and Development Management. The introduction of a monitoring process for Environment Team consultations ultimately led to improved consultation response times being achieved.

5.4 The creation of a Planning and Environment Training Database during 2020/21 created a “one stop shop” for all training opportunities relating to the work of the Environment Team in relation to the natural environment. With significant numbers of training courses being made available online during the pandemic, participation on training courses by staff was up this year albeit practical elements and the valuable ‘in person contact’ was limited.

5.5 The three-yearly reporting to the Scottish Government on the Council’s contributions towards the Nature Conservation Act’s ‘biodiversity duty’ was collated by the Team, gathering contributions from across the Council, and reported to Sustainability Committee on 17 February 2021 before forwarding to the Scottish Government. The Report was used as a basis for communication of the Council’s work on biodiversity by the Communications Team with social media and press releases being issued.

5.6 Tackling climate change is one of the Council’s priorities. As a reflection of this, the Environment Team has begun to develop an Environment Team Climate Change Plan. This is due for completion in 2021.

<i>Develop and Monitor the Natural Heritage Strategy and Action Plan to ensure the Team's work meets the need and expectations of customers</i>	2020/21	2019/20
Up to date Strategy and Action Plan	Yes	Yes
Feedback from customer reviews	Ongoing	Ongoing
<i>Carry out annual monitoring and produce performance reports</i>	2020/21	2019/20
Completed annual performance report	Yes	Yes
<i>Ensure consistency and best practice across the Environment Team</i>	2020/21	2019/20
Up to date Environment Team Best Practice Manual	Ongoing	Ongoing
Number of cross team meetings	6	4
<i>Ensure that staff have the correct and up to date knowledge and skills in order to give proper advice and deliver projects as required</i>	2020/21	2019/20
Completed Personal Performance	Completed	Completed
Staff training completed by the Team	37	21
<i>Be exemplar in the protection and management of protected and designated species on the Council estate</i>	2020/21	2019/20
Number of protected species projects on the Council estate	6	2
<i>Consistent and effective working with neighbouring planning authorities and statutory agencies</i>	2020/21	2019/20
Number of meetings/engagements/projects with neighbouring authorities and statutory agencies	6	11
<i>Report on natural heritage work to the Scottish Government</i>	2020/21	2019/20
Scottish Government reporting every three years	Completed	Not due until January 2021
Annual report to Sustainability Committee	Reported February 2021	Reported to May 2019
<i>Build resilience and mitigate against the impacts of climate change throughout the work of the Environment Team</i>	2020/21	2019/20
Completion of Environment Team Climate Change Action Plan	Currently being developed	To be developed during 2020/21