

ABERDEENSHIRE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT TEAM NATURAL ENVIRONMENT STRATEGY ANNUAL REPORT 2019/20

1 Aim 1 – Protection of Natural Heritage

- 1.1 **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.**
- 1.2 The Environment Team have continued to assist in the preparation of the Proposed Aberdeenshire Local Development Plan in terms of assessing bid sites for their potential impact and opportunities in relation to Aberdeenshire’s natural environment.
- 1.3 During the course of the year the Environment Team provided 564 informal natural heritage advice consultation responses to Development Management through weekly/fortnightly surgeries. This increase in informal consultations consequently reduced the number of formal consultations. Forty-three formal written consultation responses relating to larger and more complex applications were provided. The introduction of improved monitoring processes and the change of emphasis to provide informal consultations has considerably improved response times.
- 1.4 There was no specific demand or need for the delivery of a training session for Development Management staff relating to natural heritage issues. A training session was delivered the previous year. This will be monitored during 2020/21 with the option of delivering a future tailored session based on emerging needs. Support and advice relating to protected species was provided to Housing, Structures and Property Teams.
- 1.5 Fifty-eight natural heritage consultation responses were undertaken in relation to Forestry Plans and Forestry Applications and ninety-four applications for Works to Protected Trees were processed by the Team. The Aberdeenshire Council Tree Preservation Order Review was completed with the review of fifteen Tree Preservation Orders and three new designations during 2019/20. Fourteen new Local Nature Conservation Sites (LNCS) were designated as part of the ongoing review of LNCS for inclusion in the Proposed Aberdeenshire Local Development Plan.

<i>Provide input to national policy guidance and development</i>	<i>2019/20</i>
Number of national consultations responded to	1
<i>Provide input to Local Development Plan process</i>	<i>2019/20</i>
Input into Local Development Plan process	11 feedback sessions or responses with Local Development Plan Team

<i>Provide consultation advice and support to the Development Management process</i>	2019/20
Total number of informal surgery responses	564
Total number of formal consultation responses	43
Percentage of formal consultations to planning applications responded to within 14 days	79%
Number of Development Management training days supported	0
Number of Development Management meetings attended	1
<i>Consultation advice and support for forestry applications</i>	2019/20
Number of forestry consultations	58
<i>Protect trees of visual and cultural importance</i>	2019/20
Number of Tree Preservation Orders made	3
Number of Tree Preservation Orders reviewed	15
Number of applications processed for works to protected trees	94
Percentage of applications for works to a Tree Preservation Order, determined within 8 weeks	95%
<i>Protect locally significant sites for Nature Conservation</i>	2019/20
Up to date list of Local Nature Conservation Sites	Yes
Number of New Local Nature Conservation Sites	14
<i>Support other Council Teams in the protection of natural heritage and landscape</i>	2019/20
Number of responses/support/advice provided to other Services	12

2 Aim 2 – Enhancement of the Natural Heritage

- 2.1 Use available resources, and attract new resources, to enhance Aberdeenshire natural heritage assets to provide social, environmental and economic benefits.**
- 2.2** The Environment Team are always looking at innovative ways to engage with the local community and support the Council to enhance the natural environment on its land. Five community groups were supported, including; Huntly Meadows Community Group; Portlethen Moss Nature Conservation Group; Inch Meadows Community Group; Arnhall Moss Advisory Trust; Ury Riverside Park Community Group. The groups delivered twenty-four group volunteer sessions and brought in £4,807 of external funding. External funding

from Forestry and Land Scotland assisted the enhancement of three Council woodland project sites.

- 2.3 The Environment Team developed the Aberdeenshire Council Pollinator Action Plan 2019-21. This cross service document, which was approved by the Sustainability Committee, aims to address the cause of decline in populations, diversity and range of Scottish pollinator species. It identifies key objectives to make the region a more pollinator friendly area.
- 2.4 During 2019/20 the Environment Team managed a £37,500 revenue budget to deliver service, cross service and cross organisation natural environment projects throughout Aberdeenshire. The Environment Team budget secured, or assisted towards, partnership project funding of £127,204.
- 2.5 Partnership projects included: Aberdeenshire Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS) Project, which involved working with agencies, river trusts, Aberdeen City Council and community groups to take action to control invasive species; North East Scotland Biodiversity Partnership, which brings together three Local Authorities and a range of conservation, farming, forestry and land agencies to provide a framework for local action on national priority species and habitats; Dee Catchment Partnership, which brings together two Local Authorities and partner agencies to improve the water quality, habitat and amenity of the river; Greenspace Enhancement Project, to develop a long-term sustainable model for managing Council greenspace with communities and to improve biodiversity.

<i>Use Council managed land to enhance natural heritage and engage communities</i>	<i>2019/20</i>
Number of community groups or projects supported on Council managed land	5
External funding secured by community groups	£4,807
Number of separate volunteer sessions delivered	24
Number of sites enhanced	6
<i>Protection and enhancement of pollinators in Aberdeenshire</i>	<i>2019/20</i>
Pollinator Action Plan reviewed and up to date	Yes
<i>Creation and management of woodlands in Aberdeenshire</i>	<i>2019/20</i>
Number of woodland project sites supported by the Environment Team	3
Total expenditure (all external funding) for Council woodland project sites	£5,608
Aberdeenshire Forestry and Woodland Strategy reviewed and up to date	Yes

<i>Promote, protect and enhance Aberdeenshire's natural heritage through cross team and organisation partnership working</i>	2019/20
Number of cross organisation partnership projects supported	6
Environment Team budget to support cross team and organisational partnership projects	£18,500
Total partnership, cross team and organisational expenditure (including Environment Team budget)	£164,704
Number of people trained	10
Number of volunteer days	19

3 Aim 3 – Promotion of Natural Heritage

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

3.2 Twenty-three Councillor Biodiversity Champions were supported with Pollinators, Swifts, Community Tree Planting, Hedgehog and INNS being the initial focus for promotion. A promotion plan, involving the Champions, is being developed for the duration of the Strategy period.

3.3 The Environment Team has continued to promote topical natural environment issues with the Ranger Service and disseminate this through their Facebook page. Promotion and awareness raising of the natural environment is embedded in the delivery of all cross organisational partnership project work. This has involved the increasing use of social media channels, organising events, talks, articles in publications and delivery of public forums. This collaborative approach with partners, to promote natural heritage issues, has proven to be the most successful way of reaching a larger audience. Unfortunately, a planned North East Non-Native Invasive Species Forum had to be cancelled due to Covid-19. Previously, the Forum had been popular with 85 attendees.

3.4 To ensure that more people can access good quality information and advice, improvements have been made to the “Natural Heritage” web pages.

<i>Aberdeenshire Council engages in and promotes key natural heritage issues</i>	2019/20
Number of Councillor Biodiversity Champions	23
Number of events/projects/processes involving Councillor Biodiversity Champions directly by the Environment Team	3
Number of Ranger Service events supported by the Environment Team	5
Number of Green News items	2

Number of sessions delivered promoting the work of the Environment Team in relation to the natural environment	6
<i>Ensure that people can access good quality information and advice</i>	2019/20
Number of press releases, social media posts	6
Number of views of natural heritage web pages	2,378
Number of attendees at annual Invasive Non-native Species Forum	Cancelled due to Covid-19. Previous year had 85

4 Aim 4 – Continuous Improvement

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

4.2 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.

4.3 The Team continues to work towards improving performance. Following on from last year’s Customer Survey with Development Management, an improved monitoring process was introduced and a change of emphasis to provide more informal consultation responses rather than through formal requests. This has improved consultation response times.

4.4 The completion of the Tree Preservation Order Review Project during 2019/20 culminated six years work to review 128 Tree Preservation Orders made by five different Councils (Aberdeenshire predecessors) over the years. Over 100 new Orders were served and confirmed as part of the review process, collectively protecting over 1,700 individual trees, more than 60 groups of trees and 143 areas of woodland. The project has ensured that all Aberdeenshire’s Tree Preservation Orders are accurate and defensible.

4.5 Work continued in producing and updating a Best Practice Manual for all generic natural heritage processes. Good practice guidance was developed to support other Council teams in relation to protected species and habitats. Partnership working with other Local Authorities and agencies continued to be the most efficient and effective method of delivering natural environment projects.

4.6 Tackling climate change is one of the Council’s priorities. As a reflection of this, the Team will develop an Environment Team Climate Change Plan. This will be a focus during 2020/21.

<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>	2019/20
Up to date Strategy and Action Plan	Yes
Feedback from customer reviews	Ongoing
<i>Carry out annual monitoring and produce performance reports</i>	2019/20
Completed annual performance report	Yes
<i>Ensure consistency and best practice across the Environment Team</i>	2019/20
Up to date Environment Team Best Practice Manual	Ongoing
Number of cross team meetings	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>	2019/20
Completed Personal Performance	Completed
Staff training completed by the Team	21
<i>Be exemplar in the protection and management of protected and designated species on the Council estate</i>	2019/20
Number of protected species projects on the Council estate	2
<i>Consistent and effective working with neighbouring planning authorities and statutory agencies</i>	2019/20
Number of meetings/engagements/projects with neighbouring authorities and statutory agencies	11
<i>Report on natural heritage work to the Scottish Government</i>	2019/20
Scottish Government reporting every three years	Not due until January 2021
Annual report to Sustainability Committee	Reported to May 2019
<i>Build resilience and mitigate against the impacts of climate change throughout the work of the Environment Team</i>	2019/20
Completion of Environment Team Climate Change Action Plan	To be developed during 2020/21