

# Balmedie Country Park

Management Plan 2023 – 2027



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# 1 Introduction to Balmedie Country Park

## 1.1 Location

Balmedie Country Park is located on the eastern side of the village of Balmedie, 8 miles north of the city of Aberdeen in Aberdeenshire, as shown in Figure 1 below.



Figure 1 - Balmedie Country Park location

This management plan refers to the area marked within the red line on Figure 1. This is in keeping with the Local Nature Conservation Site boundary, with the inclusion of the car park area to take account of current management responsibilities.

## 1.2 Designations

In 1972 Aberdeen County Council bought Balmedie Farm and designated its seaward part as Balmedie recreation area. Ownership passed to Grampian Regional Council in 1975 and in 1983 the area was accorded Country Park status by the Countryside Commission for Scotland. The area designated as a Country Park is shown on the map in Figure 1.

The Country Park area is included within Aberdeenshire Council's list of Local Nature Conservation Sites, as part of the Newburgh to Balmedie site (Aberdeenshire Council, 2023) Ownership and management

Aberdeenshire Council owns the land within the red line on Figure 1.

To the east of the park is the foreshore, which is believed to be owned by the Crown Estate and to the west lies the village of Balmedie and two fields which are also owned by Aberdeenshire Council.

The Country Park is bounded to the north by land which was bought by Trump International Scotland for the purposes of development. To date that development has taken place away from the park boundaries, but it is likely that development will occur close to the park edge in the near future.

The ground to the south of the park is owned by Taylor Industrial Services.

Aberdeenshire Council's Landscape Services are responsible for the management and maintenance of the Country Park. The council's Ranger Service tackles more specialist habitat management and raises awareness of the site by collaborating with schools, community groups, volunteers and organising events.

Regular meetings (every three months) are held for a group of stakeholders who have an interest in the management of the park. This includes Council officers, Ward Members and representatives of Belhelvie Community Council, Belhelvie Community Trust, Balmedie Leisure Centre and other interested parties.

A Management Plan for 2011-2021 was produced by Aberdeenshire Council's Landscape Services. This set out the current condition of the site and objectives for future management but was limited in terms of specific actions.

### 1.3 Structure of this Management Plan

This management plan has three sections

- **Managing heritage** - this looks at actions needed to manage the habitats, species and archaeology on the site
- **Management for people** – this considers what action is needed to manage and expand the visitor facilities on the site and what action can be taken to promote the park
- **Management of the Country Park** – this looks at what action is needed to manage the site in terms of land ownership, the relationships between those involved in managing the site, the resources needed to manage the site and the money needed to fund the work.

There are management proposals in each section. These proposals are summarised in a table of projects at the end of the section and in Appendix 1 which provides a timeline of actions.

## 2 Managing Heritage in Balmedie Country Park

### Aim – Heritage

**To manage the habitats, species and cultural heritage at Balmedie Country Park for maximum benefit, limiting negative pressures.**

### 2.1 General description – biodiversity

Balmedie Country Park is made up of beach, sand dunes, damp dune slacks, heath land, and wooded areas.

The sand dunes form part of a 15-mile dune system of local and national importance, stretching from the Donmouth Local Nature Reserve at Aberdeen to the Forvie National Nature Reserve at Newburgh.

The dunes themselves are intrinsically unstable and will alter and change shape in response to winter storms, high wind and rainfall events. This is particularly the case on the eastern side of the dune system, where the ground is exposed to the full force of on-shore winds and high tides. As you move back from the coastline the dunes become more stable with marram grass spreading across the ground. In this more stable dune area a more heath-like vegetation starts to develop with species such as heather, harebell and crowberry present. Damper areas are present at the base of the dunes, known as dune slacks, which contain species such as soft rush, meadowsweet and wild angelica.

At the western edge of the park there are some small patches of trees, mostly dominated by willows. There are also a few areas of scrub woodland which have developed in the south of the park. There are several areas of grassland around the car park and entrance which are kept short and used as amenity grassland.

A habitat survey was undertaken by the North East Scotland Biological Records Centre (NESBReC) in 2022. Figure 2 shows the main habitats recorded during this survey.





Figure 2 - habitat map

## 2.2 Sand dunes and beach

### 2.2.1 Beach

**Description and previous management** – The eastern section of the park is an open sand beach. The beach is flat and exposed and high tides can reach up to the base of the dunes. A variety of sea and shoreline birds can often be seen at the water's edge. Two burns exit the sand dunes and cross the beach, but their course will change in response to storm events and high tides. There is no permanent vegetation on the beach, but driftwood, sea weed and other detritus is often washed up. There is no management of the beach area, though it is used by visitors.

**Management proposals** – No actions proposed. The beach is a very mobile environment and will be subject to change over time as climate change affects weather patterns.

### 2.2.2 Dunes

**Description and previous management** – the ground rises up from the beach into a series of dunes and dune slacks. These are mainly vegetated with marram grass, with sand couch and lyme grass also present. Paths are present in the dunes, as well as extensive rabbit activity. Close to the beach the dunes are still quite mobile, and as you move further inland they gradually become more stable, with greater plant diversity, including a number of neutral grassland species. At the base of some of the dunes there are damper areas of dune slacks.

Previous management of the dunes has focused on managing the visitor impact through the development of waymarked paths. The dune habitat is a natural ecosystem, which develops over time and which does not require management to improve. However, there is potential for the extent of shrub growth to increase over time.

The dune habitat is relatively fragile and is at risk from invasive species and damage from recreational activities. The management of recreational activities is covered in section 4.2.

Pirri-pirri burr (*Acaena* sp) is an invasive non-native plant species, originally from New Zealand. It was first noted on the north-east coast in 2012 and has since been recorded at several locations within and immediately adjacent to the Country Park. It can spread rapidly, taking over from native vegetation and its hooked seeds can be easily distributed by humans and animals.

A programme of management of the pirri-pirri burr has been undertaken and has involved recording and spraying plants within the Country Park area. Some additional management has been undertaken by neighbouring landowners.

**Management Proposals** – Managing pirri-pirri burr is a long term project, which will require ongoing vigilance and maintenance. A detailed mapping exercise should be undertaken, recording all locations of the plant on the site, as well as in neighbouring ground. At each location the density of plants should also be recorded, as single plants will be much easier to control than dense stands.

A strategy for management should then be prepared. This will require an evaluation of the control methods used to date and the most effective method(s) should be included within the control strategy. Depending on the precise extent of the plant, it may be necessary to accept that complete removal is not possible. However, once a survey of extent and density has been undertaken, the management strategy can designate areas where a zero tolerance approach can be adopted and all plants removed, and areas where a containment strategy may be required.

**Figure 5 – pirri-pirri burr**

## 2.3 Woodland

### 2.3.1 Shrubs and scrub woodland

**Description and previous management** - As the dunes stabilise, the process of natural succession results in the development of brambles, gorse, broom and other scrub bushes. It is likely that a combination of human footfall and rabbit grazing has slowed shrub development at Balmedie, but there are patches of shrubs and individual bushes found throughout the site.

**Management proposals** - It appears that the spread of gorse and small shrubs into the dunes has been relatively limited at Balmedie. However, this is based on anecdotal evidence and a 'feel' for the site and how it has changed over time. A drone survey should be undertaken every 5 years to map the extent of small shrubs. Over time, this will build up a picture of how the site is changing and consideration can be given to whether or not any shrub clearance is required to help maintain the balance of habitats at the site.

### 2.3.2 Mixed woodland

**Description and previous management** – Around the western and southern edges of the site, there are small patches of woodland. Some of these may have been planted as they contain lodgepole pine, but other trees present, including willow and alder, may have developed naturally. The woodland areas provide additional habitat on the site, as well as helping to screen the park from adjacent houses, which helps to maintain the park's 'wild' feel.

**Management proposals** – Consider whether the woodland areas should be extended / joined up to completely screen the park. A woodland expansion map can then be prepared, setting out areas where additional woodland would be desirable. Areas can then be planted up as and when resources are available, for example, in response to grant schemes which offer free or reduced cost trees. Alternatively, it may be decided that no additional woodland is desired for the

park and this should then form the basis of future management decisions, regardless of the availability of free or reduced cost trees.

## 2.4 Grassland and marsh

**Description and previous management** - There are strips of tall wet marshy grassland alongside the two burns which run through the site. They are dominated by reed sweet grass with some small willow trees.

On the western edge of the site, there are areas of neutral grassland which contain a mix of species and some areas of amenity grassland which is more intensively managed for recreational purposes (e.g. area around car park and football pitches which is cut more regularly).

**Management proposals** - No changes to management are proposed for these areas, though the consideration of recreational activities on the site may lead to a change in management in the longer term (e.g. an increase or reduction in the area of grass which is cut regularly).

### 2.4.1 Watercourses

**Description and previous management** - There are two burns which run through the site before opening out onto the beach. They have not been managed but are bridged to allow access.

**Management proposals** - No management is proposed.

## 2.5 All habitats

The habitats at Balmedie Country Park vary in their sensitivity to damage. Dune systems can be easily damaged by significant footfall, whereas frequently mown amenity grassland is much more robust and can withstand larger volumes of foot traffic.

Organised events have taken place within the Country Park in recent years and have the potential to cause damage to the more sensitive habitats if they are not carefully managed.

**Management proposals** - based on the habitat map produced as part of the NESBReC survey, the areas of more sensitive habitats can be mapped. In particular, the coastal sand dune habitat is sensitive to erosion. An associated listing of activities that should be avoided within this habitat area should be produced. This can then be distributed to event organisers to help limit any damage from events.

## 2.6 Species

### 2.6.1 Mammals

**Description and previous management** - The National Biodiversity Network (NBN) Atlas website has records of sightings of foxes, stoats and rabbits as well as seals.

**Management proposals** - It would be useful if visitors could send wildlife records to NESBReC so that a better picture of site usage by mammals could be established.

### 2.6.2 Birds

**Description and previous management** - The NBN Atlas has records of several bird species at Balmedie Country Park. Given the habitats present on the site, the most notable birds that could be present on the site include several listed in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (UK BAP) such as song thrush, yellowhammer, house sparrow and linnet. Some raptors, such as kestrel, have also been noted on the site.



**Management proposals** - No specific management is needed for these birds, the best way to ensure they can continue to live here is to manage the existing habitats effectively.

### 2.6.3 Reptiles, amphibians, invertebrates

**Description and previous management** – The NBN Atlas includes a sighting of a common lizard at Balmedie Country Park and other reptiles and amphibians may be present, but not recorded. Likewise the site can be expected to contain a range of invertebrates, including butterfly and moth species, but relatively few records currently exist.

**Management proposals** - No specific management proposals but encouraging the submission of wildlife records to NESBReC will help to build up a more detailed picture of the species present on the site.

### 2.6.4 Plants

**Description and previous management** – The NESBReC survey carried out in August 2022 included a list of the plants recorded on the site. This is a reasonably extensive list, which shows that although the site does not have any particularly ‘rare’ plants, it does contain a good range of species.

The presence of the pirri-pirri burr plant is discussed above at section 2.2.2.

**Management proposals** - No special management action is needed for plants at the Country Park, beyond that already proposed for pirri-pirri burr.

### 2.6.5 Cultural heritage

**Description and previous management** - The earliest evidence for human activity in the area dates to the Mesolithic period (circa 8,000BC to 4,000BC) through the survival of small flakes of flint. Finds in the include a prehistoric flint knife, Numerous flint debitage flakes and two anvil stones.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century there were numerous losses of ships along the Aberdeenshire coast and there are several shipwrecks within the general vicinity of the Country Park, all of which may produce material that is occasionally washed ashore:

There are also the remains of a 19<sup>th</sup> Century ice-house near to the southern end of the Park on the landward edge of the dunes. Formerly used by salmon fishers, this brick-built structure, shaped like an igloo, comprises a domed chamber and a west-facing arched porch. The building was restored in 2014, with the base of the ice-house infilled and a stone floor inserted at the level of the original entrance. A modern steel grill has been placed across the entrance.

Defences against invasion were built all along the coastline during both world wars. Within the Country Park there are several remains including a cluster of pill-boxes that may date to World War I; the remains of a World War 2 concrete hut platform with an adjacent gun emplacement and the remains of multiple anti-tank traps, known as ‘dragon’s teeth’, which are situated along the upper beach.

The remains of a trawler, the ‘Fruitful Bough’ which was driven ashore on the 9<sup>th</sup> of December 1961, protrude from the sand just offshore to the south.

**Management proposals** – all cultural heritage at the park should continue to be preserved and future finds should be catalogued appropriately. Aberdeenshire Council staff and public facing volunteers, such as the Sand Bothy volunteers, should have an awareness of the legal reporting mechanisms for material found on the foreshore (which should be reported to Crown

property via the Receiver of Wreck) and archaeological and historic material found onshore (reported to Crown property via Treasure Trove).

**Table 1 – projects to manage biodiversity at Balmedie Country Park**

<b>Project No</b>	<b>Area</b>	<b>Project Title</b>	<b>Priority (L/M/H)</b>
1	Scrub woodland	Complete drone survey of the Country Park and map extent of scrub woodland	Low
2	Woodland	Review habitat map of Country Park and decide if any additional tree planting should take place and if so, where. Prepare a map of proposed woodland expansion areas	Medium
3	Dune management / invasive species	Map pirri-pirri burr locations including density assessment	High
4	Dune management / invasive species	Review treatment strategies for pirri-pirri burr and review density map. Prepare a control plan which designates areas as either contained or zero tolerance for pirri-pirri burr. Ensure that neighbouring landowners are aware of the control plan	High
5	All habitats	Prepare a list of activities which may cause damage (and are therefore not responsible access) to the sand dune habitat areas highlight on the habitat map.	High
<b>Species</b>			
6	All species	Encourage visitors to submit wildlife records to NESBReC.	High
<b>Cultural heritage</b>			
7	All cultural heritage	Continue to preserve cultural heritage and ensure that public facing volunteers / operational staff are aware of reporting requirements for new finds	High

## 3 Managing Balmedie country park for people

### Aim – Managing for People

To manage the park to allow visitors to enjoy their visit, whilst preventing damage to sensitive habitats

#### 3.1 General description

This section is divided into two parts. The first part is about managing the visitor infrastructure including the paths, bridges and information boards. The second part is concerned with promoting and raising awareness of the site.

Balmedie village has grown in recent years and is very accessible from Aberdeen City. That means that the Country Park receives a lot of visitors. Despite this, it has a feeling of wildness, particularly on the open beach with its wide views. However, the area around the car park can become busy, particularly during a summer weekend.

Dune habitats are naturally mobile and often alter in response to extreme weather events. This means that the ground surface is not particularly stable and can be damaged by erosion from machinery or excessive foot traffic. The base of the dunes tends to be more attractive for walking as it is more stable ground, but it is more likely to be subject to flooding during wet periods.

Balmedie Country Park has a number of facilities for visitors, including a toilet block, car park, interpretation boards and waymarked paths with a range of surfaces. The toilet block is owned by Aberdeenshire Council. The Sand Bothy is also located within the park, which is leased from Aberdeenshire Council to Belhelvie Community Trust by way of Asset Transfer. The Sand Bothy provides a space for events throughout the year, as well as seasonal refreshment kiosk. Balmedie Beach Wheelchairs are also managed by the Belhelvie Community Trust and provide a variety of free to hire beach wheelchairs which can be used to access the beach.

#### 3.2 Visitor experience

In summer 2022 a visitor survey was undertaken, which asked visitors a series of questions about their experience at Balmedie Country Park. The majority of visitors said they visited the park to be outside and to walk. The word cloud in Figure 3 below shows the most common responses to the question of what people liked most about Balmedie Country Park.





sports pitches sited to the west of the Country Park area are not within the Country Park boundary it is both, worthwhile and important to consider these as associated with the Country Park including the proposal to develop further pitches here in the future.

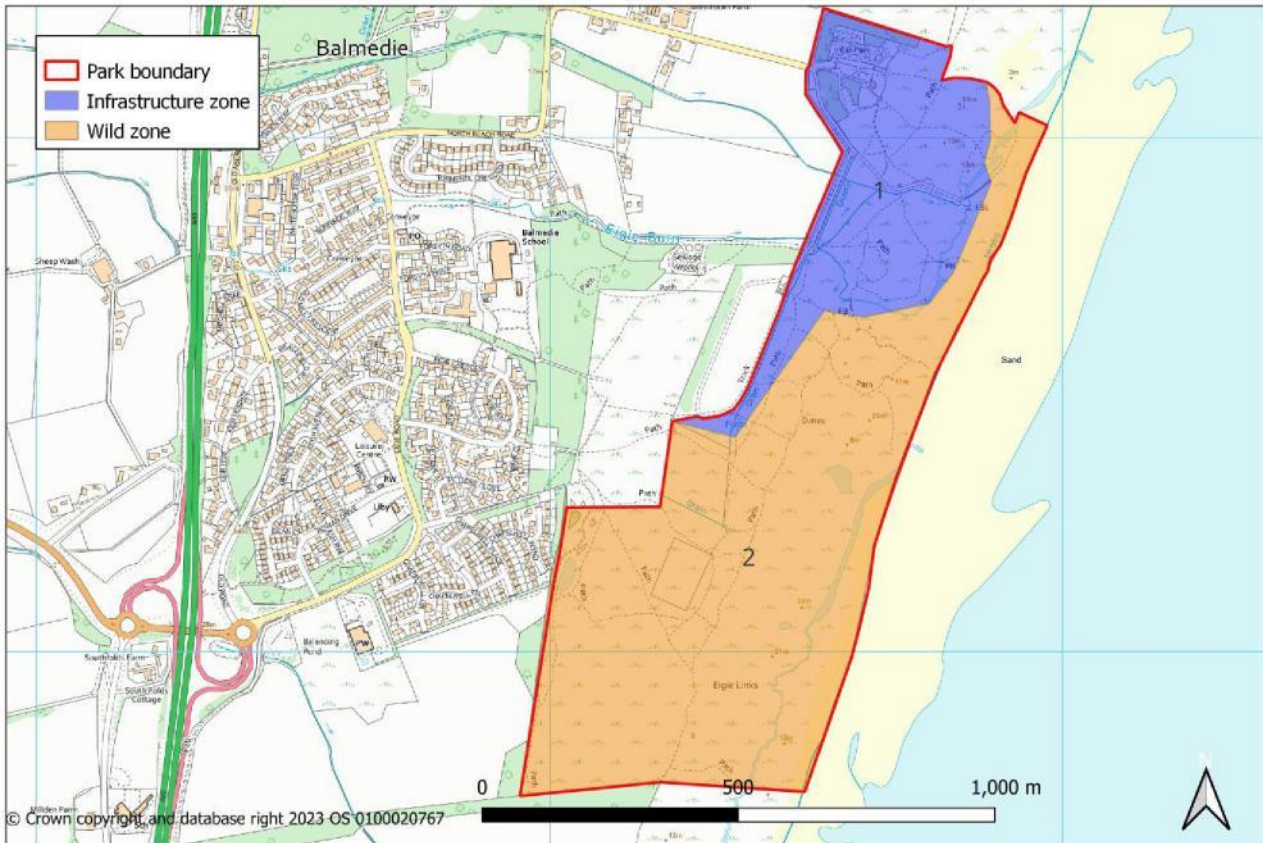


Figure 4 - potential zonation, which can be refined once internal Council discussions are completed in 2023

### 3.3.2 Car park

**Description and previous management** – The car park at Balmedie Country Park is reasonably large and well used. It has a width restriction at the entrance to the car park, which can be difficult to negotiate due to the different marker posts. Whilst this serves its purpose to alleviate any inappropriate use or access to the Country Park, difficulties with this entrance were highlighted by a number of visitors in the 2022 visitor survey. There is currently no charge for use of the car park.

**Management proposals** - The entrance to the car park should be refurbished. The central marker bollard / concrete ring should be removed as it is difficult to see from a car. A taller bollard should be installed, which is also at eye height, so that drivers can more accurately see the gap into which they are moving. Width restriction signs should be maintained so that drivers can make an accurate assessment before driving through the entrance.

Long term income for Balmedie Country Park is limited but the car park provides a potential income stream. A feasibility study should be undertaken into the possibility of charging for car parking. This could follow a similar method to Haddo Country Park, with annual permits available for regular visitors / users, administered by a charitable group. Parking machines would need to be installed and some monitoring of compliance would be required. Alternatively, a donation system could be used, which would require reduced staff input, but realistically, would generate less income. Any charges would need accompanying signage to explain to visitors what the money is being used for and how it is being managed, to encourage payment. Signage will need



to be clearly understandable to avoid generating additional queries for volunteers at the Sand Bothy.

A feasibility study should assess the amount of income any parking charging strategies could bring into the park, whether by regulation or donation. It could also encompass camping potential (see section 3.3.8).

### 3.3.3 Paths

**Description and previous management** - At Balmedie Country Park there are a range of path types, which include:

- unsurfaced, trampled 'desire lines' where sand has been compacted and vegetation growth reduced
- aggregate surfaced paths
- sealed, all abilities paths
- boardwalk

There are five waymarked routes around the site. These are:

- Beach access route – this is fully surfaced and includes a bridge
- Marram path – an 800m route which goes out to the beach
- Icehouse path – an out and back route to the ice house at the southern end of the site
- Thyme path – a longer circular route which goes through the dunes but not onto the beach
- Horse route – access for horses to the beach

Some older paths and routes also exist on the site, which include some sections of boardwalk which was surfaced with chicken wire.

The waymarked paths were established relatively recently and are marked with coloured lines on marker posts. In recent years, the chicken wire boardwalk areas have degraded and are now in a poor state of repair. Large sections of the Thyme path flood in wet weather.

The all abilities path to the beach is maintained by a combination of Council staff and volunteers.

Balmedie Country Park is slightly unusual in that the two burns that cross the site currently flow in a south to north direction for short sections. This forms a barrier which can be difficult to cross. Visitors can take the wrong path towards the beach and end up on the wrong side of a wider channel. Accessing the beach from the car park requires a slightly counter-intuitive walk south-east before walking directly east onto the beach.

Active travel proposals are currently being assessed to develop a route to the Country Park which can be used by people who are not travelling in cars. The most appropriate location for an access route has yet to be decided. When a preferred route is established, the paths and signage within the Country Park may need to be altered to help facilitate use of the route.

**Management proposals** - The waymarked routes are well established. However, the Thyme route tends to flood particularly during cold weather and it is not feasible to prevent that on sandy substrate. The area of the path which floods is within the wilder, low infrastructure zone. Therefore, it is not recommended that additional resources are spent on this section of path, trying to mitigate the drainage issues. Instead, it is recommended that the flooding is accepted as part of the character of this area of the Country Park, and it should be assumed that visitors will form their own desire line paths around flooded areas (as is beginning to happen). However,

to ensure that visitors are not 'caught out' by unexpected flooding, signage should be added to highlight that this path is likely to be wet in the winter months.

The chicken wire should be removed as soon as possible as it is becoming dangerous.

Signage should be installed to highlight the limited access to the beach and to reduce the likelihood of visitors choosing the wrong path. This is likely to require additional signage.

The waymarked routes should continue to be marked. However, when the way markers require reinstallation / maintenance, consideration should be given to using different colour schemes as the current ones are difficult to distinguish in low light levels.

When the active travel route into the Country Park is established then signage and if necessary, paths should be altered to accommodate this route(s).

### 3.3.4 Signs

**Description and previous management** - There are many signs within Balmedie Country Park, including directional information, way markers, safety information and interpretation panels. The finger posts and way markers were installed in 2019 and the information boards were researched and written by Belhelvie Community Trust and installed by Aberdeenshire Council.

In some cases a few signs appear to duplicate one another and in other cases their location could potentially be enhanced to ensure that visitors understand them. The interpretation signs were installed relatively recently and provide useful information on the site. Signs can become tired unless they are maintained and out-of-date information can give the impression that a site is not well cared for, so these signs will need to be checked on a regular basis.

**Management proposals** - Undertake a full inventory of all signs on the site, remove duplicates, ensure that directional signage is accurate (particularly in terms of beach access) and distribute signage to fit within the proposed Country Park zonation policy, including space for temporary / seasonal signage if required. Signage will need to communicate responsible access messages in line with the Scottish Outdoor Access Code.

Maintain the signs, and repair or replace them when they come to end of their life. Ensure information on signs is up to date.

### 3.3.5 Litter and dog waste bins

**Description and previous management** - When a site is covered in litter or dog waste people tend to treat it with less respect, so it is always good practice to keep a site clean. Belhelvie Community Trust volunteers carry out litter-picks in the park, as do Duke of Edinburgh candidates. The Sand Bothy also has a "take 4 for the shore" box to encourage visitors to collect litter items. Visitors can borrow equipment from the box, including pickers and hoops, bags and gloves.

Litter clearance days are helpful and the volunteers who help out with this work should be acknowledged for their efforts. However, Balmedie Country Park has a high footfall and visitors frequently use the site for picnics and barbecues, so there is a greater likelihood of litter being generated. The majority of these picnics will take place within the high infrastructure zone and therefore it makes most sense to place bins in this area. This is also closer to the site entrance so will help facilitate waste collections. Realistically there is little that can be done to prevent people from littering, but advising visitors where bins can be found and ensuring they are close to the areas with the highest footfall will maximise the chances of people using bins. Under the Scottish Outdoor Access Code, responsible access is considered to involve taking litter home if bins are not available.

**Management proposals** - Monitor the litter and organise litter clearance days to keep the site clean and tidy. This could be undertaken by a Visitor Services Officer/Ranger or similar role if funding for staff is available.

Encourage visitors to clean up after their dogs and dispose of dog waste in the bins.

Following the site zonation approach, litter bins should be placed within the high infrastructure zone, with visitors advised to return their litter to this point.

### 3.3.6 Barbecues

**Description and previous management** – many people visit Balmedie to have a barbecue and some facilities have been provided. However, these are not always used and so scorch marks occur on the grass areas. In some cases, this has also resulted in fires spreading into gorse and other vegetation.

**Management proposals** – Using the zonation approach, additional barbecue facilities could be provided within the managed zone. This could be specifically designed facilities, or simple concrete flagstones, installed at grass level. If bins, benches and other facilities are located in this zone, visitors are more likely to congregate here for social events, thereby helping to reduce pressure on other parts of the Country Park.

### 3.3.7 Toilets

**Description and previous management** – There are two sets of toilet facilities at the site, one by the car park and one at the south car park. The south car park set has been closed in recent years. A Changing Places facility was installed by Belhelvie Community Trust and the equipment within this area is owned and serviced by the Trust. Cleaning of the toilets is undertaken on a regular basis by an Aberdeenshire Council employed cleaner.

**Management proposals** - Providing toilet facilities is essential if the site is to avoid becoming heavily littered. Therefore, whilst the toilets could undoubtedly be improved, the current facilities should be maintained. Resources are unlikely to be available for improvements in the near future, but if a specific funding stream becomes available, this could be considered. The addition of an outside tap would help to reduce inappropriate use of the toilets for cleaning equipment / dogs.

### 3.3.8 Camping

**Description and previous management** – There is no formal campsite at Balmedie Country Park, but the site is used by people with tents in the summer months. This has the potential to cause additional litter and other damage but could also provide a source of income for the Country Park.

**Management proposals** - There is scope to set up a small campsite by the south car park toilets. However, this would require additional infrastructure. A feasibility study should be undertaken to investigate options for infrastructure requirements and the potential for charging campers. Examples from continental Europe could be considered, where automated card machines and barriers are used to collect fees from campers. However, this requires careful consideration and hence a separate study, should be undertaken before any work is implemented.

### 3.3.9 Children's play facilities

**Description and previous management** – There is an extensive children's play area near the car park. This contains a good range of equipment and is popular with families. There are two pieces of inclusive play equipment within the play park which are owned and maintained by Belhelvie Community Trust.

**Management proposals** - The play equipment is currently in good condition, but it will need to be maintained and checked on a regular basis.

### 3.3.10 Health and safety

**Description and previous management** - The visitor infrastructure should be inspected regularly and maintained properly. Some risk assessments are also carried out by Belhelvie Community Trust in relation to the services and events they provide.

**Management proposals** - Aberdeenshire Council to continue to implement a health and safety inspection reporting and recording system, so that faults can be identified and remedied quickly.

## 3.4 Awareness and promotion

### 3.4.1 The Public

**Description and previous management** - There have not been any visitor counts at this site, so neither the number of visitors nor their demographics are known. However, anecdotal information suggests that it includes a mix of regular local visitors and one-off visits from family / friend groups visiting the site for a walk / picnic / barbecue / other social event.

As with all Aberdeenshire Council Country Parks, there is no dedicated ranger service for the Country Park, but Aberdeenshire Council's Ranger Service does organise events and school visits so that people can learn more about the wildlife on the site.

The Sand Bothy is located in the building which formerly housed the Ranger Service and provides a community hub including an exhibition about the area and a kiosk selling refreshments. The Sand Bothy is run by volunteers and is mainly open during the summer season. Many visitors will engage with the Country Park through visits to the Sand Bothy. Volunteers at the Sand Bothy also help to deliver some schools education visits, sometimes in conjunction with Aberdeenshire Council rangers.

**Management proposals** - The Country Park already receives many visitors, so promoting it in terms of extra visitor traffic is probably less of a priority. However, promoting appropriate behaviour at the Country Park, and raising awareness of the special characteristics of the site is particularly important. The lack of a ranger presence at the site limits the extent of visitor interaction and guidance.

One option is to seek funding for a Visitor Services Officer/Ranger or similar role. Funding for this type of post has been made available from the Scottish Government via the NatureScot Better Places Fund as part of the Covid response between 2021 and 2023, but there is no guarantee how long this funding stream will continue. For a post to be supported in the longer term, the Country Park would need to generate some form of income. There is potential for this to come from car parking / camping charges, so the feasibility study investigating this process should provide some final recommendations in terms of likely income scales. Once this is known, a Visitor Services Officer/Ranger or similar role could be considered.

In the meantime, the Ranger Service and the Sand Bothy should continue to maintain their programme of events.

The Ranger Service should continue to collaborate with educators to devise the best ways to educate visitors, including local school children and youth groups about the site.

### 3.4.2 Promotional material

**Description and previous management** - As well as the on-site information boards, there is a web page for the Country Park hosted on Aberdeenshire Council’s external website. This includes basic information about the site and a link to some other groups and the Country Park map. The information is basic but provides sufficient detail to allow visitors to organise a visit. Further information about the Country Park is available on a Country Park Facebook page, which is run by a local resident. In general, information on Facebook pages can be quite quickly lost and so this method is more appropriate for short term information such as events and activities.

Belhelvie Community Trust has produced several leaflets about the area, including one focused on the country park, three focused on local wildlife, one providing information on the Sandy Bothy and one providing information on the Beach Wheelchairs.

There are a range of different groups active within the Country Park and that has led to different signage and promotional material for the park, with a range of different branding. Belhelvie Community Trust, The Sand Bothy and Balmedie Beach Wheelchairs all have their own websites and Facebook pages. There is no one logo or brand that is clearly associated with the park.

**Management proposals** – Given the already high visitor footfall, there is no requirement to try and attract additional visitors to the park. However, the Aberdeenshire Council website should be refreshed to provide additional information on appropriate behaviour within the Country Park e.g. including the zonation map in Figure 4 and advising where bins and other facilities are to be found. Individual events can then be added to the Ranger Service Eventbrite and social media pages.

A Balmedie Country Park specific logo / brand should be designed and incorporated into future signage and promotional material, in order to consolidate the park into one entity, rather than the current mix of different messages and groups.

**Table 2 – projects to manage Balmedie Country Park for people**

Project No	Area	Project Title	Priority (L/M/H)
Managing the visitor facilities			
1	All facilities	Complete inventory of all facilities, including signage	Medium
2	All facilities	Finalise park zonation map and decide on appropriate and necessary facilities for each zone, including signage, picnic facilities, bins etc	High
3	Signs	Remove additional / duplicate signs	Medium
4	Signs	Install signs to advise visitors of limited routes to beach	High
5	Signs	Install signs advising of likelihood of path flooding	Medium
6	Signs	Consider recolouring path signs to facilitate use	Low



7	Paths	Remove chicken wire from paths	High
8	Paths	Incorporate active travel recommendations from separate report and alter park paths if required	Medium
9	Litter	Monitor the litter and if necessary organise litter clearance days to keep the site clean and tidy.	Medium
10	Toilets	Continue to maintain toilets, and investigate upgrade and outside water supply	High
11	Car park and camping	Undertake feasibility study into viability of charging for car parking and the provision of camping facilities	High
12	Car park	Replace central concrete bollard with single post	Medium
13	Play facilities	Continue with programme of health and safety checks	High
Awareness and education projects			
14	Public	Complete an inventory of existing interpretation information (signs, web etc). Identify gaps and duplicates in association with the review of infrastructure	Medium
15	Education	Continue to maintain programme of events	Medium
16	Education / public	Seek funding to deliver Visitor Services Officer/Ranger or similar role	High
17	Website	Continue to maintain a Facebook page and update Council website with zonation information	Low
18	General	Develop a Balmedie Country Park logo / brand, which is incorporated into future materials	High

## 4 Managing the Country Park

### Aim – Managing the Country Park

To manage Balmedie Country Park efficiently by following plans , keeping records and helping the public to understand how the Country Park is managed.

#### 4.1 Introduction and threats to the site

Aberdeenshire Council owns Balmedie Country Park and therefore ownership of the site going forward is secure. However, it is likely that extensive development will take place to the north of the site, with the proposed expansion of the Trump International golf course. This will result in changes to the mobility of the dunes in this area of the Country Park and is likely to result in damage to the mobile dune habitat. It is not possible to predict to what extent this will also affect the dunes within the Country Park.

The dunes are also likely to be affected by climate change as the coast can be expected to experience more extreme weather events in future years. Again, it is not possible to predict how this will change the character of the site.

There is also likely to be additional housing development around the Belhelvie Parish which could increase footfall on the site. Therefore, an important part of managing the site will be to retain an oversight of development proposals in the area and ensure their impact on the site is minimised.

#### 4.2 Events

**Description and previous management** – Balmedie Country Park is used for a variety of events and activities. Some of these are organised by the Council and others are organised by external groups. Although event organisers need to contact the Council's Landscape Services Team prior to hosting an event to seek the necessary permission, there have been issues in recent years with events causing damage to the site.

**Management proposals** – the site zonation map in Figure 4 should be used, in conjunction with the list of activities prepared in action 2 above. This information should be packaged together as an events protocol / policy and made available to event organisers, ideally hosted on the Council's website so that event organisers can be clear on exactly what is likely to be acceptable.

#### 4.3 Management Structure

**Description and previous management** - Aberdeenshire Council's Landscape Services have ownership and management responsibility for the Country Park but several other stakeholder groups are active within the site. This includes the Belhelvie Community Trust who manage the Sand Bothy and also manage the Balmedie Beach Wheelchair project. At present the various organisations involved with the Country Park meet on a three monthly basis. This group is not particularly well known and there is no information in the public domain to allow visitors to understand how this group operates.

As there are no permanent Aberdeenshire Council staff in the park, the Sand Bothy volunteers tend to end up fielding questions from the public during busy times. However, it should be noted that the volunteers are separate from Aberdeenshire Council and are volunteering with the Belhelvie Community Trust.

**Management proposals** - The stakeholder group should continue to meet regularly but should be rebranded as a Balmedie Country Park Forum (or similar name), with information on the group included on the Council website. This will increase transparency and help visitors to understand how the site is managed. The group should also consider its remit and ideally establish a clear working protocol so that it is clear how the group works and what it is trying to achieve.

Aberdeenshire Council and the stakeholder group will need to pay close attention to any development proposals in the area, which could potentially impact on the site.

## 4.4 Human Resources

**Description and previous management** - Aberdeenshire Council make use of a variety of human resources to manage the site:

- The Ranger Service collaborates with schools, community groups, volunteers and other educational groups and can also provide advice and guidance on biodiversity and responsible access matters.
- Landscape Services undertake projects such as managing the car park area and maintaining the paths
- Volunteers working regularly with Belhelvie Community Trust and a wider range of 'ad-hoc' volunteers who may help out with specific tasks / events
- Contractors have been employed by the Council to work on larger or more specialist projects.

**Management proposals** – Services within the Council and the stakeholder group will need to agree who takes the lead for each project in this management plan and agree the appropriate resources for each of the projects. They will also need to ensure that actions which involve volunteers recognise the involvement of Belhelvie Community Trust.

## 4.5 Money and Budget

**Description and previous management** - Aberdeenshire Council has obtained money to manage the site from its own resources and from the Formartine Coastal Communities 2022/23 Fund. Additional grant support was also provided by the Scottish Government to cover the costs of a Seasonal Access Ranger in response to increased visitor pressure during and after the Covid pandemic. Belhelvie Community Trust have also bought in significant amount of funding for the Sand Bothy, Beach Wheelchairs and the development of the accessible changing place and play equipment.

There are other funding sources that could be considered for improvement works, however, not all of these will be available to the Council. Funding is always difficult to obtain for ongoing management / maintenance work and therefore the outputs of the car park / camping feasibility study will be particularly important as there are relatively few other options for the park to generate any income.

**Management proposals** – Ongoing funding will be needed for the Country Park, particularly to resource any visitor management activities, such as a Visitor Services Officer/Ranger or similar role. The stakeholder group should review the outputs of any feasibility study into income generation and consider additional funding if any further grant sources become available.

The project plan in Appendix 2 includes an indicative budget for each project in this plan. At the end of the year the budget and work plan should be refreshed, updated and rolled forward for the

year ahead and projects suitable for external funding should be identified and applications submitted.

## 4.6 Reports and plans

**Description and previous management** - Planning and reporting are integral parts of efficient site management. Management plans have been prepared for the site previously but have not been updated on a regular basis.

### Management proposals -

Plans: The management plan sets the overall vision and direction for the next five years. But at the end of every year the plan should be re-visited and refreshed as necessary for the following year. Plans are not static, and in practice new projects will appear and other projects disappear, this is perfectly normal.

Annual Report: Ideally records should be kept about the work completed and money spent on the Country Park. This should be consolidated into a brief report every year. This progress report should be a standing item at stakeholder group meetings

Five year review: A review of this management plan should be undertaken in year 5 (circa. 2027) before the new management plan is prepared. This should review which projects were successful, which failed and why, and consider the future direction for the Country Park.

**Table 3 – projects to manage the Country Park**

Project No	Area	Project Title	Priority (L/M/H)
Whole site			
1	Threat – site changes as a result of development proposals	The Council and the stakeholder group should monitor the impact of new developments and revise site zonation / facilities if required.	Existing
2	Threat – site changes as a result of climate change	Park facilities should be monitored to establish whether storms and other climate extremes have caused damage.	Medium
3	Management of activities	Based on site zonation, establish events protocol which sets out what is / is not permitted. Ensure that protocol is issued to all event organisers, and also available on website	High
4	Management structure	The stakeholder group should be rebranded as the Country Park Forum and consideration should be given to the group's precise remit and working methods.	Medium
5	Management structure	The Council and the stakeholder group should aim to meet formally four times a year to report progress and discuss forward plans. Informal meetings can be arranged as needed.	High

6	Manpower	The Council and the stakeholder group to agree who takes the lead for each project in this management plan and agree the appropriate resources for each of the projects	High
7	Budget and funding	The Council and the stakeholder group to decide who pays for each project in this plan and where funds might be found. One-off funding may need to be sought for some actions.	High
8	Management plan	Update projects in management plan annually	Medium
9	Annual Report	Draft annual report	Low
10	5 year review and next management plan	Evaluate which projects have been completed, assess impacts of climate change and development and prepare new plan	Low

#### 4.7 Did the management plan succeed - measures of success.

The following table proposes measures of success which could be used in 2027 as part of the five year review to evaluate whether or not the management plan delivered effective management at Balmedie Country Park.

**Table 4 – Proposed measures of success for Balmedie Country Park**

Whole Site	The site is protected from external pressures
<b>Biodiversity</b>	
Dunes	The dunes continue to be mobile, with limited infrastructure in the wilder zone. Pressures from neighbouring land uses have been limited so that the Balmedie dunes remain intact.
Scrub and woodland	The extent of scrub on the site has been quantified and there is a clear strategy in terms of any additional tree planting
Species	Species characteristic of dune habitats are thriving within the park Pirri-pirri burr has been contained within specific areas and the spread halted. Containment areas are being gradually reduced over time.
<b>Management for people</b>	
Visitors	Visitors are well informed about the Country Park and satisfied with the visitor facilities. Infrastructure is focused around the car park, with a wilder experience possible out with this zone
Paths	Paths are in good condition, with visitors advised of any potential risks such as flooding. Access to the beach is clearly signed and understood
Signage	Signage is well maintained and limited to what is necessary



Car parking / camping	A clear strategy is in place to decide whether to charge for parking and to manage camping and the car park entrance is easy to use
Litter	Litter on the site is managed effectively.
Promotional material	Visitors are aware of appropriate behaviour on the site
<b>Management of the country park</b>	
Management structure	The stakeholder group is well established and visitors can access information on how the site is managed.
Project and budget management	Plans and reports are accessible so that anyone can see how the park has been managed and how much it cost
Park	The Country Park has a clear brand identity which is displayed on signage and promotional material

## 4.8 Concluding Remarks

Balmedie Country Park is a well-loved and well used resource in northern Aberdeenshire. It is popular with residents of both Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City and is likely to continue to experience high visitor footfall.

The habitats within the Country Park require only minimal management but can be easily damaged by visitor behaviour and the presence of invasive species. They are also at risk from activities on neighbouring land holdings and from climate change.

Most of the management which is required at Balmedie Country Park is in terms of managing visitors to the site. Much of this requires ongoing, long term management, such as the presence of a Visitor Services Officer/Ranger or similar role. This type of management is difficult to fund and therefore opportunities for income generation should be explored fully.

## References

Aberdeenshire Local Development Plan 2021, Appendix 12.

<https://online.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/ldpmedia/LDP2021/Appendix12LocalNatureConservationSites.pdf>

Aberdeenshire Council Balmedie Country Park visitor survey, 2022

North East Scotland Biological Records Centre, 2022. Habitat Survey Report

## Appendix 1 - Timeline

Project No	Area / Topic	Project Title	Lead	2023 Onwards	2024 Onwards	2025 Onwards	2026 Onwards	2027 Onwards	Season	Estimated Cost
<b>Biodiversity and cultural heritage</b>										
1	Scrub woodland	Complete drone survey of the Country Park and map extent of scrub woodland				X			Summer	£1500
2	Woodland	Review habitat map of Country Park and decide if any additional tree planting should take place and if so, where. Prepare a map of proposed woodland expansion areas			X				Any	Minimal
3	Dune management / invasive species	Map pirri-pirri burr locations including density assessment		X					Summer	£600
4	Dune management / invasive species	Review treatment strategies for pirri-pirri burr and review density map. Prepare a control plan which designates areas as either contained or zero tolerance for pirri-pirri burr. Ensure that neighbouring landowners are aware of the control plan		X					Any	Minimal
5	All habitats	Prepare list of permitted / controlled activities within the sand dune habitat areas highlighted on the habitat map.		X					Any	Minimal

Project No	Area / Topic	Project Title	Lead	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	Season	Estimated Cost
				Onwards	Onwards	Onwards	Onwards	Onwards		
6	All species	Encourage visitors to submit wildlife records to NESBReC.		X	X	X	X	X	All	Minimal
7	All cultural heritage	Continue to preserve cultural heritage and ensure that public facing volunteers / operational staff are aware of reporting requirements for new finds		X	X	X	X	X	All	Minimal
<b>Managing the visitor facilities</b>										
1	All facilities	Complete inventory of all facilities, including signage			X				Any	£1,000
2	All facilities	Finalise park zonation map and decide on appropriate and necessary facilities for each zone, including signage, picnic facilities, bins etc		X					Any	Minimal
3	Signs	Remove additional / duplicate signs			X				Any	£500
4	Signs	Install signs to advise visitors of limited routes to beach			X				Any	£750
5	Signs	Install signs advising of likelihood of path flooding		X					Autumn	£300
6	Signs	Consider recolouring path signs to facilitate use				X			Any	£500
7	Paths	Remove chicken wire from paths		X					Summer	£2,000

Project No	Area / Topic	Project Title	Lead	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	Season	Estimated Cost
				Onwards	Onwards	Onwards	Onwards	Onwards		
8	Paths	Incorporate active travel recommendations from separate report and alter park paths if required			X				Summer	£5,000
9	Litter	Monitor the litter and if necessary organise litter clearance days to keep the site clean and tidy.		X	X	X	X	X	Spring / summer / autumn	£600/yr
10	Toilets	Continue to maintain toilets, and investigate upgrade and outside water supply		X	X	X	X	X	All	Ongoing cost
11	Car park and camping	Undertake feasibility study into viability of charging for car parking and the provision of camping facilities		X	X				Any	£6,000
12	Car park	Replace central concrete bollard with single post			X	X			Winter	£5,000
13	Play facilities	Continue with programme of health and safety checks		X	X	X	X	X	All	Ongoing cost
<b>Awareness and education projects</b>										
14	Public	Complete an inventory of existing interpretation information (signs, web etc). Identify gaps and duplicates in association with the review of infrastructure			X				Any	£1,000
15	Education	Continue to maintain programme of events		X	X	X	X	X	All	Variable
16	Education / public	Seek funding to deliver Visitor Services Officer/Ranger or similar role		X	X				Any	Variable

Project No	Area / Topic	Project Title	Lead	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	Season	Estimated Cost
				Onwards	Onwards	Onwards	Onwards	Onwards		
17	Website	Continue to maintain a Facebook page and update Council website with zonation information		X	X	X	X	X	All	Minimal
18	General	Develop a Balmedie Country Park logo / brand, which is incorporated into future materials		X					Any	£1,000
<b>Whole site</b>										
1	Threat – site changes as a result of development proposals	The Council and the stakeholder group should monitor the impact of new developments and revise site zonation / facilities if required.		X	X	X	X	X	All	Minimal
2	Threat – site changes as a result of climate change	Park facilities should be monitored to establish whether storms and other climate extremes have caused damage.		X	X	X	X	X	All	Minimal
3	Management of activities	Based on site zonation, establish events protocol which sets out what is / is not permitted. Ensure that protocol is issued to all event organisers, and also available on website		X					Winter	£750
4	Management structure	The stakeholder group should be rebranded as the Country Park Forum and consideration should be given to the group's precise remit and working methods.		X	X	X	X	X	Any	Minimal



Project No	Area / Topic	Project Title	Lead	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	Season	Estimated Cost
				Onwards	Onwards	Onwards	Onwards	Onwards		
5	Management structure	The Council and the stakeholder group should aim to meet formally four times a year to report progress and discuss forward plans. Informal meetings can be arranged as needed.		X	X	X	X	X	All	Minimal
6	Manpower	The Council and the stakeholder group to agree who takes the lead for each project in this management plan and agree the appropriate resources for each of the projects		X					Any	Minimal
7	Budget and funding	The Council and the stakeholder group to decide who pays for each project in this plan and where funds might be found. One-off funding may need to be sought for some actions.		X					Any	Minimal
8	Management plan	Update projects in management plan annually		X	X	X	X	X	All	Minimal
9	Annual Report	Draft annual report		X	X	X	X	X	Winter	Minimal
10	5 year review and next management plan	Evaluate which projects have been completed, assess impacts of climate change and development and prepare new plan						X	Winter	£3,000