

Midlothian Council 2nd Biodiversity Duty Report - November 2017

(In relation to the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004 and the Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011)

1. Introductory Information

1.1 Under the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004, all public bodies in Scotland, including Midlothian Council, are required to further the conservation of biodiversity when carrying out their responsibilities. The Act further requires public bodies in Scotland to provide a publicly available report every three years on the actions which they have taken to meet this biodiversity duty.

1.2 Midlothian Council published its first Biodiversity Duty Report in November 2014. It can be viewed at <https://www.midlothian.gov.uk/info/1231/environment/290/biodiversity>

Midlothian Council Strategy and Management

1.3 Political leadership and responsibility for biodiversity at Midlothian Council lies with its Cabinet. The lead service for reporting duty is Communities and Economy within the Education, Communities and Economy Directorate. Reporting occurs via the Head of Service to the Directorate Management Team, Corporate Management Team and Cabinet in turn.

1.4 The Single Midlothian Plan 2017/2018 contains Environment priorities and actions. These include the establishment of a Midlothian Green Network. Details of which are set out in the table below.

Action	Due date	Indicator	Target	Ownership
Develop and deliver the Midlothian Green Network	31/03/18	Identify a Midlothian Green Network in draft supplementary guidance for public consultation	Yes (annual target)	Planning/ Federation of Community Council's
	31/03/18	Secure and deliver components of the green network through new development, Council work programmes, and where relevant from accessing external funding sources	Yes (annual target)	Sustainable Growth Group

1.5 Midlothian Council elected local Councillors and officials are involved with the following external bodies which have a remit incorporating biodiversity:

- Cllr Russell Imrie and Cllr Peter Smaill are Board Members of the Edinburgh and Lothians Greenspace Trust.

- Cllr Russell Imrie, Cllr Kelly Parry and Cllr Pauline Winchester are members of the Pentland Hills Regional Park Joint Committee. Cllr Andrew Hardie is a member of the Pentland Hills Regional Park Advisory Group.
- Cllr Jim Muirhead is a member of the Gladhouse Reservoir Advisory Committee.
- Midlothian Council is a partner in the Lothians and Fife Green Network Partnership, and a senior official represents the Council on the Partnership Group.

2. Mainstreaming

Midlothian Council Service Plans

- 2.1 In line with the Council's Planning Department's Service Plan, a new Midlothian Local Biodiversity Action Plan (MLBAP) is to replace the current 2006 document. Work has also started to reinvigorate the Midlothian Biodiversity Partnership (MBP). Both of these areas of work have been taken forward with initial contact with Midlothian Community Planning Partners. The MLBAP and MBP will focus on establishing and implementing Midlothian environmental priorities.
- 2.2 The production and implementation of a new MLBAP will be an Environment priority for future iterations of the Single Midlothian Plans.
- 2.3 Service plans for Midlothian Council's Land and Countryside Services, which includes the Ranger Service, identify work to be undertaken with direct and significant benefit to biodiversity. As with other parts of Land and Countryside Services, the Ranger Service demonstrates significant leadership in taking forward biodiversity conservation on the ground in partnership with organisations outside the Council. Details of this work are provided in the next section of this report.

Sustainability Impact Check

- 2.4 A Sustainability Impact Check has been developed which aligns with the Council's Sustainable Development Policy Statement. The check can be applied to most Council actions from the strategic to project/practice level. The Council's corporate report and service plan templates have a 'Sustainable Development' section and applying the check is encouraged to generate the necessary commentary, including in relation to biodiversity impacts.

Strategic Environmental Assessment

- 2.5 Biodiversity is one of the environmental issues referred to in the Environmental Assessment (Scotland) Act 2005. Under the Act the Council is required to carry out a process of 'Strategic Environmental Assessment' ('SEA') when developing or updating certain policies, strategies, plans, programmes, etc. The process is intended to ensure a more thorough consideration of environmental impacts. The Council's corporate reports' template requires the SEA position to be clarified.

- 2.6 SEA and sustainable development information and resources have been brought together for staff on the Council's intranet.

Midlothian Local Development Plan

- 2.7 The current Midlothian Local Development Plan (2017) sets out a framework of policies for the preservation of the natural heritage of Midlothian which includes protection for internationally, nationally, regionally and locally important nature conservation sites, species protected by law, and habitats outwith designated areas. It contains a requirement for any development proposals to demonstrate compatibility with the aims and objectives of the MLBAP and related plans, by identifying appropriate measures to protect, enhance and promote existing habitats and/or the creation of new habitats, and provide for the effective management of these habitats. It also contains protection for local nature conservation sites that have been accepted by Midlothian Council as proposed sites but have not been formally designated. The policies of the Plan are the basis for the assessment of planning applications submitted to the Council. The application of these policies helps to safeguard and enhance biodiversity value in Midlothian.

Midlothian Local Biodiversity Site System

- 2.8 In 2009 Midlothian Council set up a new system of Local Biodiversity Sites to replace the former Local Wildlife Site system. This change was made in line with the 2006 *Guidance on Establishing and Managing Local Nature Conservation Site Systems in Scotland* which requires sites to be assessed against in terms of species diversity, species rarity, habitat rarity, habitat naturalness, habitat extent and connectivity.
- 2.9 The Midlothian Local Biodiversity Site System is administered by The Wildlife Information Centre on behalf of the *Council* through a service level agreement reviewed on an annual basis. The Wildlife Information Centre is a registered charity separate from the Council.
- 2.10 The Wildlife Information Centre maintains records for the Council of:
- flora and fauna records across Midlothian, including those identified in proposed and designated Local Biodiversity Sites in Midlothian; and
 - details of proposed and designated Local Biodiversity Sites, including site boundaries, site survey and site assessment information.
- 2.11 With the assistance of the Wildlife Information Centre, a methodology for considering and assessing potential Local Biodiversity Sites (LBS) and operating the LBS system in Midlothian has been established by the Council.
- 2.12 The LBS system is overseen by a Midlothian Local Biodiversity Site Steering Group which is chaired by Midlothian Council. Its other members include The Wildlife Information Centre and acknowledged volunteer local botanical experts, including representatives of the Scottish Wildlife Trust and Botanical Society of

the British Isles. Scottish Natural Heritage is a corresponding member of the Steering Group.

- 2.13 The Steering Group assesses surveyed proposed LBS to determine if they pass the Council's established criteria in the LBS methodology in order to achieve status as a LBS. This group also has the responsibility of considering whether sites promoted to become LBS merit the status of becoming a proposed LBS; the Midlothian Local Development Plan (2017) affords the weight of protection to both proposed and designated LBS. In order to be identified as a proposed LBS, the site must be supported by the Steering Group and considered by that group as having reasonable prospect or potential to meet the assessment criteria for becoming an LBS. Sites can be promoted for consideration to the Steering Group by the Midlothian Local Biodiversity Partnership.
- 2.14 In administering the Steering Group, The Wildlife Information Centre on behalf of the Council also:
- co-ordinates and undertakes site survey and assessment of proposed LBS; through an agreed methodology;
 - circulates site assessments of proposed LBS to Steering Group members in advance; and
 - acts as a liaison and point of contact between Steering Group members.

Midlothian Green Network

- 2.15 Midlothian Council's Planning Service is producing draft supplementary guidance on the Midlothian Green Network that will be published for public consultation in early 2018. Green Networks serve a variety of functions including biodiversity and habitat protection. The supplementary guidance identifies the green network and the requirements of new developments that can contribute to biodiversity value. The policy framework of the Midlothian Local Development Plan (2017) sets out strong protection of the Green Network.

Development Management

- 2.16 As mentioned above, there are development management policies in the adopted Midlothian Local Development Plan (2017) which seek to promote biodiversity conservation.
- 2.17 The Major and Local application sections of the Council's Planning Team have the following biodiversity services provided through a service level agreement with The Wildlife Information Centre – a local wildlife records centre:
- screening of all planning applications received by Midlothian Council and reporting back to flag up potential biodiversity issues from development proposals; and
 - interpretation of and comment on biodiversity information submitted in support of a planning application by an applicant.

- 2.18 Since December 2014 after the first Biodiversity Duty Report over 2000 planning applications have been screened by The Wildlife Information Centre. The Wildlife Information Centre provided comment on over 800 of these planning applications.
- 2.19 This service level agreement helps to ensure that biodiversity matters are taken into account in the assessment of all planning applications submitted to Midlothian Council.
- 2.20 The Council's Landscape Officers (a single job share post) work with planning officers and developers in the assessment and implementation of proposals. The incorporation of particular plant species and landscape schemes help to enhance the biodiversity value of a site and the wildlife connectivity of a site to adjacent areas. This is a particular feature of implementing the requirements of the Midlothian Green Network draft supplementary guidance.

3. Actions Taken to Improve Biodiversity Conservation

- 3.1 A very significant and important on the ground contribution to biodiversity enhancement in Midlothian is undertaken by Midlothian Council's Land and Countryside Service. The Council's Planning Service through its statutory function has an important role and function in the promotion and safeguarding of biodiversity. Details of this work are provided below in this section of the report.

Land and Countryside Service

- 3.2 Midlothian Council Ranger Service manages the countryside for the benefit of people and wildlife at the following sites: Vogrie Country Park, Roslin Glen Country Park, Springfield Mill, Gore Glen Woodland Park, Straiton Pond Local Nature Reserve and the Penicuik to Dalkeith Walkway.
- 3.3 Since 2014 the Ranger Service has undertaken the following actions which have directly supported biodiversity:
- management of Vogrie Country Park, Roslin Glen Country Park and Springfield Mill to achieve Green Flag status, which has 8 criteria including achieving standards in Conservation and Heritage (which are largely relating to biodiversity);
 - provision of environmental education to over 21,600 (approximately) participants (nursery, primary, secondary and tertiary education groups);
 - provided volunteer conservation tasks to enhance biodiversity with community groups, 'green' charities and Friends groups. Total number of groups – 150 (approximate). Total number of participants – 18,800 (approximate). Volunteer groups and partner hours – 121,500 (approximate) or £875,000 (approximate) in-kind contribution;
 - delivery of an environmental events programme to the public including many biodiversity based events. Total number of events – 105. Total number of participants – approximately 5400);
 - facilitation of survey work including annual bat counts, badger surveys and one off projects through Edinburgh University;

- working with Sustrans to enhance the biodiversity value of the Penicuik-Rosewell walkway (National Cycle Route 196);
- working with the Earl of Roslin (Roslin Chapel Trust) to save two veteran sweet chestnut trees;
- undertaking a programme of removal of invasive species, such as Japanese Knotweed and Giant Hogweed; and
- expansion of the approximately 30 hectares of wildflower grassland planting and management highlighted in the 2014 first Midlothian Council Biodiversity Duty Report.

Education

- 3.4 The Ranger Service continues to organise and lead free curriculum based education for schools and groups. They teach and inspire pupils about nature, their local environment and the world around them. This is based on the Curriculum for Excellence from the Early through to the Senior phase:

Nursery and early years:

- nature and history walks;
- exploring the seasons;
- identifying and using senses;
- mini-beast hunting; and
- naming basic plants and animals.

Primary:

- pond and river system studies;
- woodland and invertebrate studies;
- habitat and biodiversity of your school grounds and local area;
- landscape studies (basic human and physical geography); and
- local history guided walks incorporating industrial and cultural heritage.

Secondary:

- geography and biology field studies including techniques for covering land use and conservation management and river systems and woodland ecology.
- advice and assistance with Advanced Higher projects.

Self-led activities:

- the Ranger Service has three resource boxes which are free to borrow; these allow teachers to lead environmental activities themselves. They cover pond and river dipping, woodlands and mini-beasts, environmental games, and include bug boxes, nets, trays, ID keys books etc.

In-service training

- the Ranger Service can arrange training days to teachers interested in developing topics and activities based in the countryside.

- 3.5 These actions have sought to enhance biodiversity itself in Midlothian and increase understanding and involvement in it across different groups and age ranges in Midlothian.

Doors Open Day

- 3.6 As part of Doors Open Day 2017 which is run by the Council's Planning Service, two bat walks took place and they were heavily oversubscribed. The events in 2017 were held at Vogrie Country Park and Straiton Pond Local Nature Reserve. For a number of years a bat walk has been undertaken at Vogrie Country Park as part of annual Doors Open Day which has always been heavily oversubscribed. Other bat walks are arranged at different times outside of Doors Open Day.

4. Partnership Working and Biodiversity Communications

- 4.1 Working in partnership with the Council, the Lothians & Fife Green Network Partnership produced five woodland management plans for rolling out over the next three years.
- 4.2 Midlothian Council's website has a specific page on biodiversity, providing contacts and sources of further information on biodiversity in both the local and wider context. The website page also provides access to advice for developers on increasing opportunities for biodiversity in new development.
- 4.3 The revitalisation of the MBP and production of a new MLBP will greatly assist with communication about biodiversity issues and enhancement in Midlothian.

5. Biodiversity Highlights and Challenges

Highlights

- 5.1 Midlothian Council's Ranger Service work on:
- management of three country parks and Springfield Mill to achieve Green Flag status and biodiversity enhancement National Cycle Route 196,
 - provision of environmental education, events and facilitating volunteer conservation work;
 - work to save two veteran sweet chestnut trees;
 - undertaking a programme of removal of invasive species, and
 - expansion of the approximately 30 hectares of wildflower grassland planting and management highlighted in the 2014 first Midlothian Council Biodiversity Duty Report.

Challenges Ahead

- 5.2 Producing and maintaining support for the Midlothian Local Biodiversity Action Plan and Midlothian Local Biodiversity Partnership
- 5.3 Increasing the variety of age groups coming forward to volunteer in conservation projects.

- 5.4 Wildflower grasslands require ongoing review, including in terms of public acceptance of such features in place of regularly mown playing fields/parkland and formal planting schemes.

6. Monitoring

- 6.1 Programmes for monitoring a variety of species and habitats are undertaken largely by volunteers and often facilitated through the Ranger Service and the Wildlife Information Centre. This work contributes to national and local monitoring programmes as appropriate. Species include birds, bats, badgers, amphibians and meadow grassland species.

7. Contribution to Targets

Targets/Key Steps from the 2020 Challenge for Scotland's Biodiversity	Contribution to Key Step	Justification
1.4 Establish plans and decisions about land use based on an understanding of ecosystems. Take full account of land use impacts on the ecosystems services that underpin social, economic and environmental health	✓	See Section 2
3.1 Provide opportunities for everyone to experience and enjoy nature regularly, with a particular focus on disadvantaged groups	✓	See paragraphs 2.1 - 3.6
3.2 Support local authorities and communities to improve local environments and enhance biodiversity using green space and green networks, allowing nature to flourish and so enhancing the quality of life for people who live there	✓	See paragraphs 2.16 and 3.2 - 3.6
3.3 Build on good practice being developed by the National Health Service (NHS) and others to help encourage greenspace, green exercise and social prescribing initiatives that will improve health and wellbeing through connecting people with nature	✓	See paragraphs 2.16 and 3.3 - 3.6
3.4 Increase access to nature within and close to schools, and support teachers in developing the role of outdoor learning across the Curriculum for Excellence	✓	See paragraph 3.4
3.5 Encourage public organisations and businesses to review their responsibilities and action for biodiversity, and recognise their positive contribution to nature and landscapes can help meet their corporate priorities and performance	✓	See paragraphs 2.2 and 4.1 – 4.3
5.7 Provide clear advice to land and water managers on best practice	✓	See paragraphs 2.8 – 2.20