

## **Aberdeenshire Council Biodiversity Work Collation 2023**

Every three years, Aberdeenshire Council report to Scottish Government on its works in relation to the 'public sector biodiversity duty'. The biodiversity duty was introduced in the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004 and states 'It is the duty of every public body and office-holder, in exercising any functions, to further the conservation of biodiversity so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions.'

This is the third year of the current 3 year reporting period and we are due to provide information to Scottish Government in early 2024 on the period 2021 to 2023. Data for 2021 and 2022 has been gathered and provided in previous years to Sustainability committee via bulletins. Below is a collation of biodiversity related work in 2023. The collation for 2023 will be added to that for 2021 and 2022 in compiling the report to Scottish Government.

### **Countryside Ranger Service programme 2023**

Countryside Ranger Service strategy objectives relating to biodiversity. Please note that one session may cover more than one objective.

Ranger Team Objective 10 - Provide volunteer opportunities for communities and organised groups in biological recording, practical conservation, biodiversity enhancement and climate change actions.

65 sessions

1208 attendees.

Examples include sessions on invertebrate surveying, creation of invertebrate habitats and homes, piling dam building sessions, surveying for non-native invasive species.

Ranger Team Objective 11 - Enhance the condition of natural and historic features through site and countryside management; raise awareness of climate emergency and biodiversity loss at Ranger Service public and group sessions.

138 sessions

3244 attendees

Examples include, removing invasive species, tree planting in local woodlands and wildflower and bulb planting in school grounds and community spaces.

Ranger Team Objective 12 - Encourage and support positive action by the public to address the climate emergency and biodiversity loss.

72 sessions

1839 attendees

Examples include sessions on indicator species, nest box building and non-native species removal.

## Ranger Team Objective 13 - Support partner organisations to combat biodiversity loss and climate change and support the enhancement of biodiversity

27 sessions

975 attendees

Examples include sessions in partnership with Social Work, Education, and Branching Out (mental health group).

The Countryside Ranger Service also responded to 298 requests from individuals, schools, local businesses and community groups seeking advice and guidance biodiversity topics, including protecting and enhancing biodiversity.

During this period, the Countryside Ranger Service promoted awareness of biodiversity on subjects such as fungi, birds, invertebrates, amphibians, mammals, pollinators, non-native invasive species jellyfish and wildlife gardening through social media.

### **Trees and Woodlands**

#### Woodland Management

Woodland management in areas affected by the winter storms of 2021/22 has continued throughout 2023. Most of the storm damage woodland has now been cleared. Work has now begun on the recovery phase with replanting schemes comprising of predominately native trees to provide biodiversity benefits and a more diverse species mix to build resilience in responding to the impacts of climate change. Of the 30.5ha of woodland which has been harvested 17.2ha will be replanted as native woodlands. To date 1.4ha has been planted with another 3ha scheduled to be planted during this planting season.

Following the storm events Aberdeenshire Council have taken the opportunity to review and update existing woodland management plans in line with the principles of sustainable woodland management. The comprehensive plan for all woodland owned and managed by Aberdeenshire Council seeks to ensure woodlands are managed in a manner which protects and enhances the environment, biodiversity and local culture, benefits and supports the local economy, provides value and enjoyment to residents and visitors and are resilient to the effects of climate change.

#### Wood Pasture, Haddo Country Park

As part of the wider work undertaken within the historic landscape of Haddo Country Park, new trees were planted within the Deer Park to ensure the continuation of tree cover and enable restoration of the depleted areas of ancient wood pasture.

81 individual standard trees of species which included oak, cherry, Norway maple, Scots pine and elm, were planted within the open parkland. Protection from livestock was provided with the use of traditional wood pasture crate fencing.

It is hoped that this area of wood pasture and the associated biodiversity habitat can be extended and enhanced in future years.

### Protected Trees

Seven new TPOs have been served during 2023, together protecting 37 individual trees, 9 groups of trees and 11 areas mixed woodland. While the TPO designation is primarily utilised to protected trees and woodland areas in the interests of visual amenity, the resultant impact of long-term protection of these mature trees and areas of woodland is a biodiversity gain.

### Small Grant Scheme

Development of a small grants scheme for tree and hedge planting within Aberdeenshire is progressing and has gained wide support from the local forestry and woodland sectors. The aim of the scheme is to provide opportunities to deliver low effort, high impact, small scale tree planting schemes of a size below the threshold for existing forestry grants. A pilot project is underway focussing on achieving biodiversity improvements within the primarily agricultural landscapes of the River Ugie catchment.

### Ash Dieback

An Ash Dieback Action Plan is being developed in response to the identification of corporate and strategic risks arising from the impact of the disease. The plan includes actions to:

- Quantify extent and spread of disease through on the ground tree surveys.
- Develop a strategy for managing privately owned roadside trees.
- Develop a comprehensive communication plan.
- Develop a prioritisation strategy for tree management.
- Develop a recovery plan focussed on effective establishment of replacement trees.

Widespread loss of the species ash will result in a detrimental impact on the biodiversity of Aberdeenshire woodlands and therefore action will be taken to ensure unaffected trees identified and monitored. Communication messages will promote the importance of retaining unaffected ash trees and also of not felling affected and dying ash trees in low risk locations where appropriate. Retention of dead wood and appropriate pruning will be encouraged to maximise protection of existing biodiversity value. The recovery plan will consider appropriate species for replacement planting, seeking to create woodlands and groups of trees which will be resilient to the impact of climate change and provide positive contributions for biodiversity.

### North East Biological Records Centre (NESBReC)

- **191,302** new species records added to the database in 2023.
- Recorders' Forum event held in person in March with 90 attendees
- Promoting wildlife recording through nine wildlife recording training events focusing on identification skills and how to submit records. These were mixture of online and face to face events with good attendance.
- LNCS habitat monitoring carried out in Aberdeenshire

- **2792** data searches carried out for planning applications (2696), environmental consultants (73), organisations (10), students (1) local authorities (10) and the general public (2).
- Regular postings on the NESBReC Facebook page to highlight issues and events concerning local biodiversity.
- Participation in NE Scotland Biodiversity Partnership and Climate Ready Aberdeenshire

### **Aberdeenshire Invasive Non-Native Species project**

Continued support was provided to community groups to allow them to undertake INNS control work through assisting with advice, insurance and the supply of equipment.

Continued working with the community to progress discussions on the issue of giant hogweed on the River Ury, and following community consultation, fenced an area of land and introduced sheep grazing as a more sustainable means of control. Monitoring of this work was carried out with the local community.

Promoted awareness of harm caused by pirri pirri bur and how it can spread. Undertook some control of pirri pirri bur with contractors and with volunteers in Deeside. Volunteer effort to survey this species.

Maintained NENNIS website to provide source of information on issues relating to INNS and provide newsletter to update members of the NE INNS Forum on related news and topics of interest.

### **Aberdeenshire greenspace enhancement**

Greenspace Officers continued to work with promoting and enhancing biodiversity on the Aberdeenshire Council land that is being maintained by the Landscape Services, in partnership with other council departments and local communities.

Examples of this include planting Scottish heritage fruit trees and bushes, native trees and shrubs, creating wildflower habitat, meadow-making, sowing yellow rattle and adding bulbs and wildflower plugs to grassland.

We have launched specific projects that are open to communities across the region. In 2023, we completed the spring phase of **'Growing Living Greenspaces'**, an initiative that provided community group applicants with a selection of native trees, shrubs, fruits, wildflower plugs, and pollinator-friendly bulbs to be planted on Council-owned land.

We completed the second year of the **'Perennials for Pollinators Project 2023'**. **76 groups** received and planted **5189** herbaceous perennials. In March, we supported the creation of the second 'Wee Forests', in Banchory.

In addition, this autumn, we ran a campaign **'The Big Bulb Plant 2023'**, which provided and facilitated the planting of **316,750** native or pollinator-friendly bulbs in greenspace across the region, completed by **101 community groups'** monumental volunteer efforts.

We continue to work directly with individuals and community groups who are keen to brighten up their local environment, making use of amenity grassland that is underused. Such projects have led us to trial different methods of establishing a species-rich grassland, including turf-stripping, low-cut and scarifying with yellow rattle, plug planting into the grass, and use of a biodegradable fleece - all of which support the move away from herbicide use.

We have supported 'No-Mow May' and in some areas 'Let it Bloom June' on prominent sites in settlements. We put up signage to explain the change and its value. This is a critical step towards implementing sustainable changes to the grass-cutting regime that enhances biodiversity.

### **Nature Restoration Fund**

In July 2023, all Local Authorities and National Parks were awarded capital funding from Scottish Government's Nature Restoration Fund with Aberdeenshire Council receiving £445,000. This was a significant increase on the previous two years of funding where £212,000 was granted in 2022 and £268,000 in 2021.

The grant is 'capital funding to be spent in 2023-24 to support new, or to enhance existing, approaches to restoring biodiversity, complemented this year by an additional ... specific focus on creating Nature Networks'.

Spending timescales are tight with money to be spent by 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024. The money was spent on a wide range of enhancement and communication projects including:

- Support Landscape Services modification and improvements to greenspace management for biodiversity by purchasing new equipment
- Supporting community groups and schools to improve public greenspace by purchasing bulbs, trees and herbaceous perennials for them to plant
- Continuation of the very successful B-Lines project in north Aberdeenshire in 2022, with further material purchased for schools to plant
- Development of plans to enhance the biodiversity benefits of the Formartine and Buchan Way
- Supporting further roll out of green roofs on new bus shelters across Aberdeenshire
- Countryside Ranger Service worked in partnership with colleagues in the Natural Environment team to deliver to 97 wildflower seed ball kits and planters to schools across Aberdeenshire
- Purchase of Swift and Bat boxes to enhance the Council estate at various locations
- Bat survey equipment for Nesbrec
- Supporting Denman Park Ponds Westhill water treatment wetland project to filter the central Westhill area surface water drainage outfall into the park's ponds and downstream into the Elrick Burn to prevent contaminated discharges wiping out the biodiversity in the ponds and downstream burn.

## **Partnership projects**

### The Dee Catchment Partnership

- ongoing work on the Easter Beltie Burn restoration project involving habitat enhancement, monitoring and interpretation. Development of a new 5 year Delivery Plan
- Awareness raising on a wide range of issues related to the River Dee through press releases and in particular its biodiversity through Naturewatch.
- Ongoing development of river restoration proposals including those relating to the CNP Heritage Horizons Project.

Ugie Peatland Partnership - Aberdeenshire Council continues to support the work of the Ugie Peatland partnership and in particular advising on issues relating to planning and the protection of important peatland sites through identification as Local Nature Conservation Sites.

Ury Riverside Park – Aberdeenshire Council and the NEINNS Project have continued to work with the SCIO in 2023 to deliver control of giant hogweed within the park using a variety of means including grazing.

### North East Scotland Biodiversity Partnership (NESBiP)

- Ongoing development of funding proposals to secure resources for taking forward the 2022-25 Strategic Plan..
- Continued support for community delivery of wildlife gardening projects.
- Ongoing collaboration on biodiversity projects through the NESBiP Awareness Network formed from the previous Awareness and Involvement group.

## **Strategy and Policy**

The Environment Team continued to provide input to planning applications in 2023, commenting on issues ranging from protected species and sites, woodland and trees, greenspace enhancement and protection of the water environment.

A review of the Councils existing Local Nature Conservation Sites commenced in 2023 with 8 biological sites and 5 geological sites reviewed. Data from previous habitat survey was assessed to identify further potential LNCS.

The Climate Change Risk Register was updated after a Local Climate Impact Profile (LCLIP) was completed for 2019-2022. The outputs of the LCLIP helped to enhance the Risk Register. Biodiversity sits within the Risk Register as 'Damage to ecosystems and damage to and loss of biodiversity due to climate change and extreme weather events'.

The Council's Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA) includes Climate Change and Sustainability. Within this assessment there are several questions requiring a response on the impacts in relation to Biodiversity. Positive, neutral and/or negative impacts are assessed on the quality of environment, quantity of the environment,

wildlife and biodiversity. Guidance has been prepared to support officers in completing IIAs to ensure due regard is considered to the impacts on biodiversity.

## **Engagement**

The Aberdeenshire Council Sustainability Champions programme was launched in the summer of 2022. The programme aims to lead and support teams and Services in understanding and aligning with the Council's various sustainability aspirations and commitments, including biodiversity. The Champions meet informally every month to discuss ideas, opportunities and challenges. They have also engaged in a number of litter picks and some native/wildflower planting on Council grounds.

Throughout 2023 internal biodiversity messaging and discussions have continued through our internal online tools Engage and Viva Arcadia. A 'Biodiversity and natural heritage' section can also be found on the Council's external facing '[Climate change and sustainability](#)' web page with a link to the Council's Natural Heritage web information.

In 2023 [Climate Ready Aberdeenshire](#) completed the final draft of their Strategy after short term working groups supported gathering more detailed information on Mitigation and Net Zero, Sustainable Economy & Communities, Adaptation and Resilience, and Enhancing and Protecting Biodiversity. The group are now focusing on the development of an Activity Log which is capturing activity in the 4 themes across Aberdeenshire by the different member groups of CRA. Enhancing and protecting biodiversity is very much a core theme of Climate Ready Aberdeenshire. More information can be found here:  
<https://www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/environment/green-living/climate-ready-aberdeenshire/>

## **Schools and Education**

All schools in Aberdeenshire have signed up to the Eco-Schools Programme. 123 schools have achieved the bronze award, 14 schools have silver awards and 69 have Green Flag awards.

Education and Children's Services have developed a Sustainability and Climate Change strategy with extensive input from pupils:  
<https://online.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/apps/news/release.aspx?newsid=8320>

## **Housing**

Nesting boxes for swifts put up at 6 roof replacement projects in Council housing Inverurie, with a total of 36 boxes and nest entrance holes provided into corner soffits at 12 locations.