

East Lothian Biodiversity Report 2015 – 2017

Fulfilling the Council's obligation to report on actions to conserve biodiversity

Section 1: Introductory information

East Lothian Council is responsible for delivering many aspects of public life, including: education; land use planning; social care; housing; management of parks, open space and countryside sites. Some Council functions relate to land use change and land management and could have a direct impact on biodiversity. Other Council functions have a less obvious impact on biodiversity but conservation initiatives can still be developed.

Local authorities, as with all public bodies in Scotland, have a legal duty to help conserve biodiversity, and must publish a report to describe the actions they have undertaken. These requirements derive from the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004 and the Wildlife & Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011 respectively.

This report summarises biodiversity-related work across all sections of the Council and describes work that has been delivered since the previous report in 2014. The report follows a standardised template, which will help with analysis of biodiversity action across the public sector in Scotland. A table at the end summarises how this work contributes to national and international targets.

For more information about any of the work described here, please email ranger@eastlothian.gov.uk. An annual report of the Council's Countryside Team is also available on request.

Section 2: Mainstreaming

For land management see section 3

Single Outcome Agreement

Much of the Council's work is supervised by the East Lothian Partnership, which also involves health, fire and police services, business groups, charities and community groups. This is known as community planning and is supported by the Scottish Government through a process called the Single Outcome Agreement (SOA). This is a high level process, involving senior managers and local councillors.

The SOA lists a set of priorities that the Partnership needs to deliver, assessed through a series of indicators. In East Lothian, Priority Outcome 8 is directly related to biodiversity and aims to ensure that East Lothian has 'high quality natural environments'. This is split into two sub-outcomes, reflecting the quality of the wider countryside and urban landscapes:

- 8.1 We have a healthy, connected natural environment that is protected and enhanced.
- 8.2 We have quality attractive greenspace that is valued and enhances the well-being of our communities.

Delivery of these outcomes is monitored using a series of indicators. Indicators for the wider countryside include the quality of river habitats (monitored by SEPA) and the condition of Council-managed countryside sites such as Yellowcraig and Traprain Law. Urban biodiversity indicators include the quality of urban greenspace and the area of wildflower landscaping created annually. Public use and satisfaction with urban greenspace are also reflected in the indicator.

Nature Designations

Areas of land and sea can be designated as some form of 'nature reserve' if they contain significant habitats or species. A series of nature designations exist in East Lothian. There are two Special Protection Areas in East Lothian (Firth of Forth and the Forth Islands) with a third being proposed recently. The Firth of Forth is also a Ramsar Site. These are the highest-level designations and reflect wildlife of international importance.

Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) are designated to protect the best example of habitat, species composition or geological feature in a region. SSSIs reflect areas of international, national or regional importance.

The above sites are designated by national government. Local Authorities can also designate different types of 'nature reserve'. The Tyne estuary, for example, is designated as a Country Park. The new Local Development Plan also designated a network of Local Biodiversity Sites, to protect key habitats and the essential ecological linkages between them.



SSSIs (blue) and Local Biodiversity Sites (green) in East Lothian. Note SSSIs out with East Lothian are also marked.

Planning and Development

For many years, the Council has had an arrangement with an organisation called The Wildlife Information Centre to screen planning applications for their impact on biodiversity. This identifies those proposals that are likely to affect a designated site or protected species. Discussions between the Council and applicant can then seek to resolve issues.

The East Lothian Local Development Plan was approved in September 2016. This included policies relating to species protection, nature designations and landscaping.

Principal development sites identified in the LDP were assessed for their impact on designated sites, protected species and wider biodiversity. The LDP as a whole was then assessed for its likely impact on the two Special Protection Areas. This concluded that there would be no impact of the LDP overall on the SPAs, although some mitigation and site-specific assessments were advised.

LDP 2016 also included a Green Network Strategy. This strategy collates information on various environmental assets, such as Local Biodiversity Sites, Core Paths and Rights of Way. Principles for enhancing the environment were identified, particularly around communities that could be affected most by development.

Forestry Applications

The Council reviews applications to Forestry Commission Scotland for felling and woodland creation, particularly with regard to landscape and biodiversity impacts. Influence is more limited with these

applications than for planning proposals but some amendments are possible, to protect or enhance certain habitats or features.

Education and Research

Biodiversity is taught as part of the school curriculum. The Ranger Service supplements this formal education through visits to the classroom and by acting as 'specialists in their field', facilitating educational trips to the countryside. Rock pooling and bushcraft with a Ranger are particularly popular. Wildlife surveys are also being translated into education packs so that wider ecological concepts can be explained in a locally relevant manner.

School grounds are often improved for biodiversity, as part of classroom projects or after-school clubs. Fruit trees and flowerbeds work well in school grounds.

Research projects have been developed in partnership with local universities over the last few years. They contribute directly to our understanding of biodiversity issues at Council sites, and often result in improved site management.

Section 3: Actions taken to improve biodiversity conservation

Countryside Management

The Council manages many of the best-loved countryside sites in East Lothian. These sites are also some of the best areas of wildlife in the county and include habitats such as sand dunes, grassland, woodland, wetland and heathland. Some habitat types are particularly rare, e.g. calcareous grassland, and effective management is essential to maintain this biodiversity asset. Many of the Council-managed sites are designated for their wildlife value, reflecting international, national and local importance of these sites.

12 sites are managed through a formal Management Plan that is reviewed every five years. An advisory group oversees management at five of these sites. These groups are composed of landowners, community representatives, nature and heritage charities and government agencies.

Conservation grazing was established at one site in 2008 and at a further three sites in 2012, to offer better and more sustainable habitat management. Volunteers have monitored vegetation quality since then and results suggest a progressive improvement in grassland quality.

Sea buckthorn has been removed from many areas of coastal grassland. Sea buckthorn is considered to be a problem species because it can dominate large areas of habitat and shade out the wildflowers that should flourish in sand dunes. Other problem species of our sites include piri-piri bur, Japanese knotweed and giant hogweed. These species are controlled as much as possible.

Volunteers are an important asset in managing countryside sites. Regular volunteer groups meet monthly at four sites and other groups contribute to management at many different sites. This work includes cutting and raking of grassland habitats, woodland management, litter pick up from beaches, drystone dyke repair and many other tasks.



Volunteers erecting a temporary fence to protect nesting birds.

Urban Greenspace

The Parks Department (known as Amenity Services) manages parks, residential open space, flowerbeds, shrub beds, street trees and other aspects of public landscaping. Over the last 10 years, Amenity Services has replaced many areas of bedding plants with perennial garden species that benefit pollinators. This brings a permanent benefit to pollinating insects and reduces the amount of peat used to grow bedding plants.



Fig 3. Park landscaping designed to help pollinating insects.

In addition, areas of amenity grassland have been converted into 'wildflower areas' by sowing mixes of hardy annuals. This is a cheap and cheerful means of encouraging wildlife, whilst creating a stunning visual display. Again the species used, whether native wildflowers or garden varieties, are known to benefit pollinators, especially hoverflies. Some of these areas have been maintained with wildflowers for over 15 years and so have become an important and permanent feature for urban wildlife.

Where possible whole areas of grassland have been converted into another landscape style to improve the visual amenity, to encourage biodiversity and to reduce maintenance costs.

Torness Nuclear Power Station

Torness Power Station produced a Biodiversity Action Plan for their estate. East Lothian Council contributed to the development of the plan, which has been implemented over the last few years. The plan enhances the estate for wildflowers, birds and butterflies, and keeps staff informed of progress.

Section 4: Partnership working and biodiversity communications

The biodiversity process in East Lothian is supervised by a partnership that includes different Council departments, government agencies, nature charities and landowning representatives. As discussed in Section 3, advisory groups oversee the operations of five of the Council-managed sites.

Biodiversity communication is important to promote good land management and responsible behaviour by the public. An Ranger Service newsletter called Mud in Your Eye promotes the conservation effort and of the Council and its volunteers to the wider public and describes seasonal wildlife features to watch for. Volunteers are also supported by their own newsletter called Best Boot Forward.

A biodiversity article is written in the local county magazine (East Lothian Life) and a Ranger article is included each month in the local newspaper (East Lothian Courier). The Ranger Service also use Facebook and Twitter to promote their work.

Section 5: Biodiversity highlights and challenges

Local Biodiversity Sites. Nature designations often relate to individual sites, which means that surrounding habitats are not protected, and that protected areas are isolated from each other. The

Local Biodiversity Site designation is really a network rather than a series of individual sites. The designation also recognises the value of community nature sites, even if they lack significant biodiversity value. This ensures each community in the county has an area of protected wildlife.

The challenge for the future will be to deliver or encourage conservation management across more of this ecological network. This is necessary to make the most of the 'natural' areas that remain, and to prevent a continual decline in quality through a lack of appropriate management.

The Edinburgh city region, and East Lothian in particular, will experience a significant increase in population over the next 10 to 20 years. The East Lothian coast and other sites are popular destinations and will become even more so as the population expands. Maintaining and enhancing the current nature quality of our sites will be a challenge as the use of the countryside expands and diversifies. Ensuring that the public continues to receive a quality experience from the countryside is essential for maintaining our tourist industry as much as our environment.

Section 6: Monitoring

A number of aspects of biodiversity are monitored, in addition to the vegetation monitoring described in section 3.

Wading birds around the coast are counted as part of the Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS). This provides important information about the populations of migratory birds within the Firth of Forth Special Protection Area.

Pink-footed geese arrive in East Lothian in large number from September onwards. The geese are an important feature of the Firth of Forth SPA but they often feed and roosts in certain arable fields. These fields therefore, need to be protected, as part of the wider function of the SPA.

The distribution of pink-footed geese is recorded each year, to identify fields that are of significance to the species. This ensures that planning applications can be assessed against their potential impact on this species and hence the wider Special Protection Area. Survey results suggest that pink-footed goose numbers have increased significantly since the SPA was designated, demonstrating the importance of this designation for the conservation of migratory birds.

Different species are monitored across different countryside sites according to their local significance. Butterfly transects, bee surveys and plant distribution can all help monitor the wider quality of a site. These surveys are used in the wider assessment of countryside sites, described in section 2 (Single Outcome Agreement).



Volunteers learning about plant surveys

Section 7: Contribution to targets

The work of East Lothian Council is important locally but it also helps deliver the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy ([2020 challenge for Scotland's biodiversity](#) and the [Six Big Steps for Nature](#)) and the international [Aichi Targets](#). The table below indicates how the work of East Lothian Council helps to implement national and international conservation aims.

Targets/key steps from Chapter 1 (Healthy ecosystems) of the "2020 Challenge for Scotland's Biodiversity"	Contribution to key step?	Justification
(1.1) Encourage and support ecosystem restoration and management, especially in catchments that have experienced the greatest degradation	Yes	Conservation Grazing at 4 designated sites, totalling 120 ha.
(1.2) Use assessments of ecosystem health at a catchment level to determine what needs to be done		
(1.3) Government and public bodies, including SNH, SEPA and FCS, will work together towards a shared agenda for action to restore ecosystem health at a catchment-scale across Scotland		
(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	Yes	LDP 2016 was based on environmental evidence and assessed against impacts to the Special Protection Areas.
Targets/key steps from Chapter 3 (Biodiversity, health and quality of life) of the "2020 Challenge for Scotland's Biodiversity"	Contribution to key step?	Justification
(3.1) Provide opportunities for everyone to experience and enjoy nature regularly, with a particular focus on disadvantaged groups	Yes	Ranger events focussed on particular community groups, e.g. young mums, dementia sufferers. Beach wheelchairs now available at North Berwick. LDP 2016 included Local Biodiversity Sites in all local communities to protect wild spaces close to people. Creation of new paths and upgrading of existing paths to encourage all people to explore the countryside.
(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	Yes	Wildlife-friendly landscaping established in all towns. Path creation and enhancement to improve access to the countryside.

(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	Yes	Wildlife-friendly landscaping established in all towns. Path creation and enhancement to improve access to countryside. Ranger Service working with health and education groups to target those in greatest need.
(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	Yes	Ranger Service work with schools and other groups, both in school grounds and at countryside sites.
(3.5) Encourage public organisations and businesses to review their responsibilities and action for biodiversity, and recognise that increasing their positive contribution to nature and landscapes can help meet their corporate priorities and performance	Part	Countryside sites used for company team-building events such as litter picking. Working with Scottish Power and EDF Energy on estate management.
Targets/key steps from Chapter 4 (Wildlife, habitats and protected places) of the "2020 Challenge for Scotland's Biodiversity"	Contribution to key step?	Justification
(4.1) Ensure that the management of protected places for nature also provides wider public benefits	Yes	Public access facilitated at all countryside sites and actively encouraged at the more robust sites.
(4.3) Integrate protected areas policy with action for wider habitats to combat fragmentation and restore key habitats	Yes	LDP 2016 includes Local Biodiversity Sites, which specifically protects a network of habitats, not just isolated sites. The challenge is to encourage conservation management within privately-owned sites.
(4.5) Involve many more people than at present in this work and improve understanding of the poorly known elements of nature	Yes	Volunteers make up a strong and essential part of our team, with about 150 active members. Wildlife recording is encouraged, to broaden and deepen our understanding of wildlife. Volunteers have organised a Nature Study Group to explore specific aspects of local biodiversity, e.g. change in butterfly populations over the last 50 years.

Targets/key steps from Chapter 5 (Land and freshwater management) of the "2020 Challenge for Scotland's Biodiversity"	Contribution to key step?	Justification
(5.1) Promote an ecosystem approach to land management that fosters sustainable use of natural resources and puts biodiversity at the heart of land-use planning and decision-making		
(5.2) Ensure that measures taken forward under the Common Agricultural Policy encourage land managers to develop and retain the diversity of wildlife habitats and landscape features		
(5.3) Support 'High Nature Value' farming and forestry	Yes	The Council comments on forestry grant applications to prevent planting on areas of wildlife value and encourage 'high nature value' woodland designs. There is no requirement for landowners to implement a 'high nature value' application so influence is limited.
(5.4) Put in place the management necessary to bring Scotland's protected areas into favourable condition and improve the ecological status of water bodies	Part	Many Council-managed countryside sites are designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest. We aim to deliver favourable status in all sites.
(5.5) Ensure that biodiversity and ecosystem objectives are fully integrated into flood risk management plans, and restore wetland habitats and woodlands to provide sustainable flood management		
(5.6) Restore and extend natural habitats as a means of building reserves of carbon and to help mitigate climate change		
(5.7) Provide clear advice to land and water managers on best practice	Yes	Council-managed sites have been used to demonstrate good practice for whole-site management and for management of individual habitats.
Targets/key steps from Chapter 6 (Marine and coastal) of the "2020 Challenge for Scotland's Biodiversity"	Contribution to key step?	Justification
(6.4) Achieve good environmental status for Scottish seas		

Note: this revised template has been developed from the original version produced by the LBAP officer network.