

**NatureScot**

**SCIENTIFIC ADVISORY COMMITTEE**

**INFORMATION PAPER**

# Update on sub-groups and other business

## Purpose

1. This paper updates the Committee on the work of its sub-groups, business from intersessional meetings and potential areas of interest for the Committee.

## Action

1. The Committee is asked to:
* note the update
* advise whether SAC members involved in the initial phase of the futureproofing our ornithology advice work programme are content to engage further on the same ad hoc meeting and intersessional correspondence basis
* to advise what input, if any, it would like to offer in support of work on animal health.

## Preparation of the paper

1. The paper was written by Erin Garner and is sponsored by Eileen Stuart.

## Background

1. Committee sub-groups review areas of work in more detail and provide advice on novel, contentious or complex matters. The sub-groups contain at least two Committee members (one of whom chairs the sub-group), two Expert Panel members, and additional expertise as required. A staff member provides the secretariat. Depending on the Terms of Reference, the sub-groups report to the Board, to the Committee, or to members of the Senior Leadership Team.
2. This paper provides an update on existing sub-groups. Annex Aprovides a tracker of all current sub-groups.
3. The Committee held its first intersessional meeting outwith the biannual meeting schedule on 27 June 2024. Annex B provides an update from this meeting.
4. This paper also highlights recent developments in work on animal health and seeks the Committee’s advice on how, or if, it would like to input to this work.

## Key sub-group updates

### Targets and monitoring

1. A sub-group was set up in September 2023 to support work on: a) devising target topics for the Natural Environment (NE) Bill; and b) advising on the monitoring framework for the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy Delivery Plan.
2. The sub-group met in April 2024 to discuss and review target indicator recommendations from the Scottish Government Biodiversity Programme Advisory Group (PAG) (task a). This followed from a peer review of draft targets for the Natural Environment Bill completed by the sub-group in September 2023.
3. Work is yet to get underway on task b, although scoping meetings have taken place to further scope out the work expected of the group in relation to this task. This work may run for up to a year during the development of the monitoring framework for the SBS Delivery Plan. We may draw on further members to support the sub-group work on task b.
4. There are no future meetings scheduled at this time. The Programme for Government provided clarity on the future of the Natural Environment Bill, which will inform the scope and timing of future work of this sub-group.

### Deer

1. The deer sub-group was set up in September 2023 to consider the evidence base around deer issues which will be required for delivery of the SBS. Since the last full Committee meeting, this sub-group has met twice, in March and June.
2. In March, the sub-group agreed a forward work plan through March 2025 and provided feedback on a deer population model which is under development, focusing on its scope and validity. Work is ongoing by NatureScot staff to finalise the model following feedback from the sub-group.
3. In June, the sub-group focused on Habitat Impact Assessment (HIA) methodologies. The sub-group provided advice on improving alignment and consistency between various HIA methodologies and related guidance.
4. The next meeting of the sub-group will be in October 2024.

### Muirburn

1. The sub-group was set up to support staff on science matters in connection with the Wildlife Management (Grouse) Bill relating to muirburn issues. The sub-group has not met again since the last meeting.
2. Members were anticipated to contribute to further work as the Bill passed through the Parliamentary process. The Bill came into force in July 2024 and no input was requested from the sub-group leading up to this.
3. There is an external stakeholder group working on developing a revised Muirburn Code and the sub-group might be called on to provide input to this work as the detail is developed.

### Marine birds – workshops

1. Ornithologists in NatureScot’s marine energy team held informal workshops with members of the SAC in June and August to explore how we can futureproof our ornithology advice (driven by offshore wind developments but with potentially wider application). Staff found SAC members’ input incredibly helpful and received positive feedback about the work and the format of the interaction with NatureScot staff on this topic.
2. The team will share the final paper with relevant SAC members later in the year and would like to thank them for their constructive and incisive input. Implications for our offshore wind advice will be discussed with NatureScot Senior Leadership Team and shared with the Board as appropriate.
3. The exploration of ‘thresholds’ is still being considered by staff on a case-by-case basis as new project proposals are received with their assessments including emerging evidence. We would like to start discussions with the SAC in the new year as part of the wider futureproofing offshore wind casework advice topic.
4. It would be good to know whether SAC members involved in the initial phase of the work programme are content to engage further on the same ad hoc meeting and intersessional correspondence basis.

## Other updates

### I**ntersessional meeting**

1. The Committee met online on 27 June 2024 to discuss managing uncertainty in giving advice. Following discussion, the Committee advised that a practical example of how to apply this approach would be helpful. An update is provided in Annex B.

### Animal health

1. There has been a recent call from practitioners and policy makers for a more joined-up approach to the management of exotic diseases in wild animals, perhaps triggered by the 2021/22 avian influenza outbreak. This presents an opportunity for NatureScot to ensure that biodiversity and conservation priorities are taken into account in the development of policies around the management of wildlife disease.
2. On 27 July the inaugural meeting of the GB Wildlife Disease Core Group was held. It was chaired by Lara Harrup of Defra’s Exotic Disease Core Group (ECD) Team with representation from Welsh Government; Scottish Government; Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) of Northern Ireland; Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA); Natural England (NE); Cefas, Scotland's Rural College (SRUC); and veterinarians and epidemiologists from Zoological Society of London (ZSL) and animal welfare organisations. Alastair MacGugan attended for NatureScot.
3. The meeting set out existing arrangements for wildlife disease monitoring and surveillance with recognition that these arrangements focus on risks to livestock, largely neglecting risks to wildlife as separate to its role as a vector of livestock disease. The next meeting will be held on 2 October 2024.
4. Following from the Core Group meeting, SG Animal Health Division have called a meeting to discuss the development of a Scottish Strategy for Wildlife Disease. We have been invited to attend and the date is to be confirmed. Our role would be to ensure that any strategy gives due weight to biodiversity priorities; that it is not dominated purely by livestock and human health concerns.
5. The SAC is invited to advise what input, if any, it would like to offer in support of this work.

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## Annex A – Committee sub-group tracker

**September 2024**

| **SAC Sub- group** | **Task set** | **Membership** | **Date set up** | **Progress update** | **How advice has been used** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Targets and monitoring | a) Devising target topics for the Natural Environment (NE) Billb) Advising on the monitoring framework for the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy Delivery Plan | Professor Marian Scott (chair), Ms Kathy Dale, Dr Ruth Mitchell, Professor Jen Smart, Professor Rob Marrs, Dr Penelope Whitehorn | Sept 2023 | Met Apr 2024 to review target indicators as part of task a. | Advice has been used to inform development of targets for the Natural Environment Bill. |
| Deer | Advise on deer related research and evidence requirements | Neil Metcalfe (Chair), Jane Reid, Dan Haydon, Sarah Woodin, Laszlo Nagy, Tom Morrison, Steve Albon | Sept 2023 | Met in March and June 2024. Next meeting in October 2024. | Provided feedback on scope and validity of deer population model and advised on improvements to existing Habitat Impact Assessment methodologies and guidance. |
| Muirburn | To provide expert advice to support staff in addressing unclear elements of the muirburn evidence base, to assist in developing a licensing approach to muirburn | Marian Scott (chair), Davy McCracken, Sarah Woodin, Rob Marrs | Nov 2022 | Completed, though further work may be commissioned. | The Wildlife Management (Grouse) Bill came into force in July 2024. Work to revise the Muirburn Code is ongoing and staff may seek further advice in relation to muirburn. |
| MPA | Report to PAC as requested on consultations | Jane Reid (Chair), Neil Metcalfe, Ben Wilson, Beth Scott | 2013 | Not met since last SAC meeting. | The group last met in November 2021 to advise on Red Rocks and Longay possible MPA. There have not been any meetings and there is nothing to update since the last committee meeting.  |

## Annex B – Update on Identifying and managing uncertainty in giving advice

### Summary

1. This paper provides a brief update on the development of internal guidance in the face of uncertain knowledge.

### Background

1. This paper follows the *Managing uncertainty in giving advice* paper ([SAC/2024/03/02](https://naturescot.nexus.objective.co.uk/documents/A4432156/details)) and the *intersessional* discussion in June, including comments from colleagues and with further meetings planned.

### Identifying and managing uncertainty in giving advice

1. The precautionary principle is the main instrument for making decisions in the face of uncertainty. We have good guidance on this and will continue to use it.
2. We are initially working on guidance on sources and management of uncertainty in two main strands under the umbrella of ecosystem health and a changing climate:
	* Hard engineered (grey) infrastructure, including renewable energy and other activities that are covered by development legislation and policy. This may include some soft engineered (green) infrastructure, including nature-based solutions.
	* Management of the land and sea including more widespread activities not subject to specific development management legislation (EIA etc.) such as farming, forestry, estates and fisheries and associated nature-based solutions.
3. For hard engineered infrastructure, existing guidance will continue, and the new guidance will focus on:
	* consequences arising from a warming but more chaotic climate
	* cumulative impacts, both of developments and, where appropriate, ongoing management
	* changing circumstances, such as potential impacts on healthy versus unhealthy populations (such as the effects of pests and disease, e.g. HPAI)
	* flexibility in design and management, including, for example to enable re-purposing and re-use and reduce the environmental impacts (and costs) of decommissioning (or not decommissioning)
	* ecosystem health and natural (or naturalistic) processes.
4. For soft engineered infrastructure and natural resource management, existing guidance will continue, and the focus will be on:
	* managing multiple and cascading risks and building resilience for a warming but more chaotic climate within and across years
	* characterising resilience (e.g. complexity, connectivity, diversity, agility, flexibility, redundancy), and recognising that these aspects might differ in different places
	* adaptive management and learning, which will be monitored and could be place-specific
	* ecosystem health and natural (or naturalistic) processes.
5. Where possible we will quantify our advice and recommendations, including through adaptive learning from monitored interventions. But in some cases, we may have to rely on more qualitative assessments. Collaboration, co-production and co-design will be increasingly important especially where ambiguity, ignorance and uncertainty dominate.

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