

# Title: Next Steps Towards the Corporate Plan 2026-2030

**Date: 9th October 2024**

| **Purpose:** | For Decision |
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| **Which of the current Business or Corporate Plan priorities does this topic drive forward and in what way?:** | This paper presents the outputs from the recent Board Workshop facilitated by Graham Leicester of the International Futures Forum and a suggested high-level overview of next steps to maintain momentum. |
| **Summary:** | This paper presents the outputs from the Board Workshop on 21st August 2024 examining the landscape that NatureScot is currently in as we begin to develop a new, impactful corporate plan for 2026-2030 to address the nature-climate crises. |
| **Actions:** | An indication of next steps to be taken following the Board meeting is provided to enable the work on the Corporate Plan to progress. |
| **Recommendations:** | The Board are invited to review the report provided by Graham Leicester at Annex 1 and approve the next steps outlined in Paragraph 5. |
| **Report Author(s):** | Stephen Coulter, Planning and Performance Manager |
| **Sponsor:** | Stuart MacQuarrie,Deputy Director Business Services and Transformation |
| **Appendices**: Please note all appendices. | Annex 1: Notes prepared by Graham Leicester from Board Workshop |

## Purpose

1. This paper shares the report prepared by Graham Leicester of the International Futures Forum following the Board workshop on 21st August and sets out the high level actions as next steps that are proposed to take the work forward.

## Report Summary

1. Graham’s report is at Annex 1. The report summarises the themes that were discussed and provides a link ([Mural whiteboard](https://app.mural.co/t/iff4240/m/iff4240/1725560063194/1fd7d211afb925b682132ce8134710d79d87c3d9?sender=u3f7356d2ce8faf8ba84a5438)) to a more detailed analysis of how the small groups’ feedback maps on to the three horizon’s model that was used as a framework for the session and will continue to provide the framework for the development of the Corporate Plan.
2. The workshop looked at the challenges and opportunities the Board might see in the changing landscape to 2030 and the overall framing for the strategy and the direction of travel. This was achieved by looking at headwinds and tailwinds that either provide support or hindrance to our future development, the patterns underpinning our aspirations for the future and the longer term currency of Protect, Restore and Value.
3. The work identified that NatureScot is not alone in its aspirations for 2030 and 2045 but that there are a lot of tensions in the environment that need to be addressed such as the balance between economic growth and a just transition, the relationship between protecting nature and restoring nature and the challenges of the medium term financial environment. Graham has noted, again through the link provided, previous work that was done with the Board in 2018. This looked at resolving environmental tensions and the importance of working through dilemmas through the prism of the three horizons model rather than looking at the tensions identified as a series of binary, even Manichean, choices. ([how to work with dilemmas](https://www.iffpraxis.com/3h-navigational-dilemmas)).

## Next Steps

1. Four actions are now proposed to take the work forward and more detail will be developed in due course.

* Refinement of the 4 Areas of Focus. This will be taking place as part of the business planning for 2025/26 in the light of experience of working with the 4 Areas in 2024/25 but also reviewing whether they will, as drafted remain the right guiding principles through to 2030.
* Stakeholder engagement. In the first quarter of 2025/26 we will engage with stakeholders about our aspirations for nature and the role we envisage playing in that. A stakeholder plan will be developed looking at key themes for discussion and identifying the major influencers that we need to hear from and work with.
* Draft for Discussion/Approval. By early Quarter 3 of 2025/26 we will provide the Board with a draft of the new Corporate Plan for discussion and agreement by the end of the calendar year. We will seek appropriate touchpoints to engage with Board members to shape the draft and the strategic principles that underpin it.
* Board and Scottish Government Agreement. By Q4 we will have set up meetings between the Board and the Scottish Government to seek Ministerial approval for the new Corporate Plan and work on our launch strategy.

## Conclusions/Recommendations:

The Board are invited to review the report provided by Graham Leicester at Annex 1 and approve the next steps outlined in Paragraph 5.

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**NatureScot: Towards a new Corporate Plan – first thoughts**

These notes record some reflections on the existing 2022-26 Corporate Plan and on the Board workshop conversation on 21 August which elaborated on a first sketch map of the landscape ahead taking the existing plan as starting point.

**Preamble – the 2022-26 Corporate Plan**

To prepare for the Board meeting I read the current Plan with the two questions posed for the Board in mind:

1. What has longevity from the current Corporate Plan?
2. What are shifts we are currently seeing as they relate to our 2030 and 2045 time horizons that have since emerged?

I was interested in the pattern of thinking, about the present and the future, that appears to underpin the present plan. Changes in the landscape will come from external events (and other actors/forces) and from the organisation’s own change – in eg personnel, ambition and so on. Rather than individual actions or initiatives, I was looking for guiding assumptions – which may need to be re-examined in the light of changes in the landscape.

I noted the following assumptions or statements of fact – some of which may remain sound:

* Natural capital as the trigger for a step change – driven through public agencies leading the market
* Scale and pace as critical (we know what to do, we need to do more and faster)
* Big problems need big bold actions
* “The people of Scotland will prosper if nature is restored” (a bold declaration, an article of faith?)
* Protection is insufficient
* “Land and sea need to be managed for multiple benefits” – the tensions can be managed

I also noted the highlighting of ‘National Nature Reserves’ as what we would call ‘pockets of the future in the present’, places where the full glory of the vision, or at least key aspects of it, might be manifest in practice.

**21 August Conversation**

The workshop conversation looked at the challenge and opportunity we might see in the **changing landscape** ahead to 2030 and beyond; at the **vision**, the destination, the outcomes we want to achieve; the things that might help achieve that vision, the **enablers**; the **tensions** we are likely to encounter in the landscape; and the overall **framing** for the strategy and the direction of travel.

The panels below show the results of looking for patterns in the material generated in a series of smaller group conversations at the Board meeting and also weaving this new content together with content from the current Corporate Plan (the lighter coloured post-it notes in the panels that follow). All this material can be viewed in more detail on this [Mural whiteboard](https://app.mural.co/t/iff4240/m/iff4240/1725560063194/1fd7d211afb925b682132ce8134710d79d87c3d9?sender=u3f7356d2ce8faf8ba84a5438).

Also, as I said in the workshop, these are observations for the first stage of strategy making: drawing the map of the landscape and seeking a sense of the direction of travel. The question of *how* to make the journey is largely absent at this stage. Further, all of the observations should be taken as ‘first thoughts’ – what comes to mind when asked about the landscape ahead and discussing the issue with others closely involved.

**The Changing Landscape – head winds and tail winds**

The view of head winds, what we are likely to be up against seeking to realise a future vision over the coming years, was largely familiar. The IPBES drivers of change, for example, remain relevant and pervasive.

What feels new, certainly since the development of the existing Plan, is concern about societal/cultural shifts that are working against NatureScot’s mission. Fear and anxiety (perhaps a consequence of the challenging global landscape), populist pushback feeding off those fears, the culture of ‘fake news’ energising, enraging, mobilising people. Perhaps this is one driver of the unsteady commitment from government, itself seeking to understand and respond to these diverse forces.

Another factor is the perilous financial position. This too can undermine government confidence and commitment. It also feeds anxiety and instability in the population and in communities.

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It raises for NatureScot, as it does for other organisations, a question about what is *essential* about its contribution? What part of NatureScot’s activities and roles is it essential to carry through the transition (H1 in the future)? If the organisation is ‘cut to the bone’, what is it that must take priority. The regulatory role might be one aspect. Staying on top of the evidence and telling a positive and motivating story about the long term might be another.

A diagram of a company's company

Description automatically generated with medium confidenceWhen it comes to the tail winds, the sources of encouragement and support for future aspirations, the picture is familiar. The importance of continuing to scan the landscape as it changes was noted: there will be opportunities that occur and we need to spot them and be ready to respond. This does not necessarily mean inventing new initiatives to order. But it does suggest knowing when to retrench, when to advance, what to push and when – based on an ongoing reading of the changing landscape of challenge and opportunity.

**Aspirations for the Future – a direction of travel**

The conversation did not challenge the vision in the existing Corporate Plan fundamentally. It was more about adding nuance and ambition. A ‘yes, and’ response.

The points made in the discussion were both about where we want to get to and what might help on the journey. In other words, some of the ideas were really about enablers: nature at the heart of policy, nature seen as an asset, culture change in support of nature, tangible progress to encourage people, energetic and informed voices joining the conversation.

A diagram of a pattern

Description automatically generated with medium confidenceIn terms of a destination, there was a clear desire to look further ahead, beyond ‘restoration’. If nature is restored what is the next level of ambition? This was captured in notions of sustainability, resilience and even regeneration. That same impulse is seen in relation to other aspects of the vision. Good jobs and successful businesses? Yes, *and* they need to be sustainable jobs, resilient businesses. Scotland rewilded? Yes, *and* rewilded in the right places, using smart land management. Nature restored? Yes, *and* restoration is not an end point. Need to think further ahead.

The cluster of points about realism and aspiration, about hope and spirit, is interesting. Given the challenges in the landscape, the head winds, this feels like a necessary enabler: keeping the faith, overcoming the fear and anxiety, providing a different and hopeful narrative – that people can find themselves in.

Finally, there are three other visions referred to in the existing Corporate Plan essentially drawn from other strategies – Net Zero for reducing carbon emissions, Wellbeing Economy for reframing economic activity, Thriving Communities which is a constant in many different strategies. We need to do some work to weave these into the NatureScot narrative if we feel they are important.

**Tensions in the Landscape**

If we use the analogy of a map of the landscape, identifying ‘tensions’ is like drawing in some of the contour lines. These are issues that require some judgement in balancing different priorities and purposes – especially as money gets tight. The Three Horizons landscape will always reveal these tensions, not least between the comforts of the existing pattern that we are reluctant to give up and the attraction of a future pattern that looks and feels more sustainable, viable and fit for the changing world.

It is helpful to see these not as choices but as dilemmas – a choice between two good things, both of which we value but which tend to pull us in different directions. Learning [how to work with dilemmas](https://www.iffpraxis.com/3h-navigational-dilemmas) may be one of the core strategic competencies in the coming years and was one of the approaches we contributed to the SNH Leaders Forum in 2018.

The discussion identified what feel like the core tensions/dilemmas in the landscape. These are the domains for making ‘tough choices’ and ideally looking for a ‘best of both worlds’ approach (resolving the dilemma).

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Description automatically generatedOne that might be missing from the scanning so far, which again is familiar from other organisations, is the requirement both to *regulate* for good performance in the present and to *inspire* better and different practice in the future.

**Enablers – what will help get us to the destination?**

There are few surprises here. Three key themes are evident: communication, working with others, and risk appetite.

Storytelling and communication is clearly a key theme, purely through the volume of individual contributions in this area.

A second theme is the insight that NatureScot is not alone in pursuing and realising these ambitions. It is one amongst many. That same theme came out of the investigation of the four key areas by Board working groups – a call for NatureScot to act as a catalyst and convenor, and to increase ‘co-production’. This may require staff to pick up new skills, eg in mediation, conflict and difficult conversations, negotiation, diplomacy and so on. And for an awareness of NatureScot’s contribution to these wider efforts as legitimate work beyond the organisation, supporting others.

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A close-up of a few signs

Description automatically generatedRisk, ambition and innovation show up again, as they do in most of the domains. But with an underlying assumption, perhaps, that there is a latent capacity in the organisation that could be released. There is an earlier reference to ‘re-wilding ourselves’ and a call here for ‘expanded private bandwidth for thinking’ and releasing the risk appetite. This sense of more to be found in the right operating environment is common in many organisations – an observation which led IFF to design a simple ‘permission slip’ (see below). What might a permission slip look like for NatureScot?

**Overall Frame – Protect, Restore, Value**

Finally, the Board workshop was challenged to take a view on whether ‘Protect, Restore, Value’ remains a good framing for the overall mission and should be retained for the next Corporate Plan? The results were mixed. Some were adamant it needs changed. Others raised points about the evident tensions between ‘protect’ and ‘restore’ that have become apparent since the Plan came into operation. And there were observations about the political context that elevated ‘value’ and a particular reading of ‘natural capital’ as a central plank of policy in adopting the current plan.

A diagram of a project

Description automatically generated with medium confidenceAgain the mood seemed to be one of ‘yes, and’. A desire not to abandon the old frame, and certainly not to move away from natural capital and new ways of valuing as important to pursue, but to revisit the overall frame in light of other observations recorded in this note. What about resilience? What about a shift in values, rather than simply in the financial value of natural assets?

‘Just transition’ also got a number of mentions – as an end and as a means. This feels new: it is not mentioned in the existing Corporate Plan. It is also attractive in bringing in the ‘transition’ word. This sits well with the Three Horizons framework. Transition implies:

* Change *over time*. Which opens up space for managing the tensions of ‘hospice work for the dying culture alongside midwifery for the new’;
* It implies loss as well as progress. Transition requires letting go (over time) of some of what is familiar and valued, to transition to something better. This element feels mostly hidden in the current Plan;
* ‘Just’ transition suggests a transition based on core values and attention to people, not dictated only by ‘the science’ and technical necessity.

Such are the patterns emerging from the ‘first thoughts’ of Board members and others shared in the workshop.

Graham Leicester

6 September 2024