PUBLIC AUDIT AND POST-LEGISLATIVE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

POST-LEGISLATIVE SCRUTINY: BIODIVERSITY AND BIODIVERSITY REPORTING DUTIES.

Response on behalf of South Lanarkshire Council

Question 1: How well do you believe public bodies understand the biodiversity and reporting duties placed upon them?

Inevitably, biodiversity is better understood by those public bodies, or divisions within public bodies, that deal directly with environmental issues. Within larger public service bodies, such as Local Authorities, there will be staff that deal directly with natural heritage but many areas of what is perceived as “Core service delivery” that are unaware of how their remit can influence or improve biodiversity. When the Duty to further biodiversity was first set out in the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act, it was purposely non-prescriptive and this was in part to drive new approaches to considering and delivering biodiversity enhancement across public service delivery. Generally, the Scottish Biodiversity process, with its emphasis on an Ecosystem approach and making biodiversity protection relevant to government, businesses and communities has transformed the delivery of nature conservation very positively. A downside of this diffuse, cross-sectoral approach has been that much of the ever-growing and innovative delivery against biodiversity objectives is under reported and not fully appreciated. It is also arguable that the most pronounced benefits have been in and around settlements, where Local Government are usually the main landowners and set Planning and Development policies. There is still much work to be done, for example, to integrate improved, consistent, and effective biodiversity planning into Agricultural incentives.

South Lanarkshire Council’s response to the Biodiversity Duty has been to utilise Community Planning structures to improve cross sector understanding of biodiversity and to manage reporting. Under the SL Sustainability partnership, a five year Biodiversity Implementation Plan places local and national biodiversity objectives in the context of Council service delivery. All Council Resources are represented on the Sustainability Officers Working Group, allowing Biodiversity and Countryside staff to engage with and help colleagues across the Council understand where their activities can improve biodiversity protection. Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) has also proved a valuable tool in that all Council Plans, policies and strategies are submitted for scrutiny by a corporate SEA group who can advise on and assist with the inclusion and potential delivery of biodiversity outcomes throughout the strategic development process. The sustainability and SEA working groups report to a Member Officer Group, representing senior Elected Members and members of the Council’s Corporate Management Team.

A development of this approach in recent years has been the Lanarkshire Greenspace Health and Wellbeing Partnership which integrates shared outcomes for biodiversity, health and community wellbeing across North and South Lanarkshire Councils, NHS Lanarkshire and Other partners. This
also reports through the Community planning framework, in this case the Health and Social Care Partnership.

In both these examples, the principle has been to link staff (and NGOs and Agencies) with expertise in biodiversity and natural land asset management with colleagues working across local and regional public services. This means that biodiversity outcomes can be better integrated with core service delivery without adding significantly to overall costs or complexity and to clarify the links between “ecosystem Services,” core service delivery and wider societal benefit.

**Question 2 - Do you believe that public bodies are adequately resourced to comply with the Biodiversity Reporting Duty?**

There is a great deal that can be achieved through improving partnership across public services, NAGOs and other stakeholders. Local Biodiversity Partnerships and their associated action plans (LBAPs) were one of the key developments when the biodiversity process was first established and remain a significant asset in terms of delivery and integration. Arguably, the value of LBPs has not been recognised sufficiently at national reporting level, and they have always been under resourced. To maintain the necessary, local and regional partnerships across Public Services, departments, Agencies, NGOs and community interests, requires considerable dedicated staff time and a Biodiversity Officer is fundamental to managing that process and ensuring effective reporting. Given the continuing, extreme pressures on Local Government funding it is essential that core biodiversity and countryside staff should be used effectively: the greatest benefits come when such expert staff are used to advise, facilitate, support and develop biodiversity outcomes that are seen as part of and add value to core service delivery.

It should be noted that in recent years, across Scotland, there have been quite significant reductions in Countryside Ranger posts and Biodiversity Officers that can be said to represent the “front line” in delivering biodiversity outcomes and integrating them into other service priorities, such as health, learning, Community empowerment and Development Planning. A significant proportion of the funding for such posts came originally from the transfer of core funding from Scottish Natural Heritage and represents quite a significant loss to the overall revenue funding available to the whole public service environmental sector. Capital funding initiatives, such as the Woodlands in and Around Towns programme have driven significant environmental improvements (at least in urban areas), often supported by lottery, landfill credits; lack of access to revenue, however, remains a major challenge and can threaten the long term viability of public land assets that have been so enhanced. Effective community engagement, support for volunteering can all help to mitigate this, especially when allied with resource sharing across services and sectors that potentially benefit. While the principle of cross sector resource sharing is increasingly understood, turning these aspirations into actual revenue streams remains a challenge.

The aim should be to mainstream biodiversity and highlight that this can be cost effective and give wider benefits both organisations and communities. In this way we think that the delivery of biodiversity benefits should balance and often outweigh the immediately perceived “costs.”
**Question 3** – *Do you think the requirement to report on the biodiversity duty leads to effective actions for improving and conserving biodiversity by public bodies?*

It has taken time, but generally we would say that it does. The duty and its associated reporting requirement have acted as an incentive for public services to look at their potential to contribute to biodiversity. It has also given those who understand the biodiversity agenda, and have the requisite expertise, to promote and develop partnership structures that support information exchange, resource sharing and better understanding of the contribution of biodiversity to core social and economic priorities.

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**Question 4** – *Are there any changes that could improve the actions taken by public bodies in respect of the biodiversity and reporting duties?*

A strategic assessment of how the duty has been implemented to date would identify good practice and new solutions and might support updated and perhaps more prescriptive guidance as to how public bodies can continue to improve their delivery of biodiversity benefits and build effective, delivery and reporting partnerships.

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