

**Countryside and Outdoor Activity Services Manager: Anneke Freel**

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Public Audit and Post-legislative Scrutiny Committee

Scottish Parliament

Holyrood

Edinburgh

EH99 1SP

Dear Sir/Madam

**CALL FOR EVIDENCE: BIODIVERSITY DUTY ON PUBLIC BODIES**

Further to the call for evidence on Post-Leg Scrutiny of Biodiversity Duty on Public Bodies, I would like to confirm that East Ayrshire Leisure Trust through a Service Level Agreement manages the biodiversity duty on behalf of East Ayrshire Council including the preparation of the Biodiversity Duty Report and associated Biodiversity Delivery Action Plan. The first East Ayrshire Biodiversity Duty Report was published on the 1<sup>st</sup> January 2015 covering the period 1<sup>st</sup> January 2012 until 31<sup>st</sup> December 2014. The second report, covering the subsequent period to 31<sup>st</sup> December 2017 was published on the 1<sup>st</sup> January 2018.

The following comments are being made on behalf of East Ayrshire Council and East Ayrshire Leisure Trust and reflect the situation as it pertains to East Ayrshire.

**Understanding Biodiversity and Reporting Duty**

East Ayrshire Council has always had a relatively strong commitment to the conservation and enhancement of nature conservation through core funding to a district countryside ranger service, partnerships and projects. Since 2001, East Ayrshire Council has worked with the other 2 Ayrshire Local Authorities and key local and national stakeholders on a range of partnership initiatives including the Coalfield Environment Initiative, East Ayrshire Woodlands, Ayrshire Rivers Trust, Biosphere Reserve and the recent development of a Landscape Partnership Scheme.

However, it wasn't until the enactment of the Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011 and the publication of the Biodiversity Duty Report in 2015 that integration of nature conservation became embedded across most service areas. In the last 3 years, there has been a positive change in the priority given to nature conservation and a number of mainstreaming measures are now common practice. These include:

- European Protected Species Surveys for all planned maintenance and capital programmes
- Enhanced protection through planning and building standards
- Integration into policy including supplementary guidance for open space and the Green Infrastructure Strategy.

There is also a greater focus on monitoring with investment in a local records centre and an annual audit of greenspaces.

### **Resourcing for Biodiversity and Reporting Duties**

With many competing demands on local authority services, budgets and priorities, the challenge will be to ensure that nature conservation remains an integrated function, particularly within Roads, Housing, Property, Outdoor and Planning Services. However, as the services across East Ayrshire Council are gaining an understanding of the duty and their responsibilities, there is a greater reliance on the ranger service to provide support particularly in carrying out EPS surveys.

Since the removal of the Scottish Natural Heritage Funding for Countryside Ranger Services, there has been a marked decline in FTE posts. This is mirrored across Scotland. At the same time, there has been a greater emphasis on outdoor recreation, outdoor learning and nature conservation. Whilst, East Ayrshire Council has made every effort to deliver this work through partnerships and projects, it is becoming increasingly difficult to support the various services across the local authority, particularly around survey work, training, advice and monitoring. Since 2001, the East Ayrshire Countryside Ranger Service has been reduced from 8.5 FTE post to 4 FTE posts.

### **Reporting Leading to Effective Action**

The requirement to report every 3 years is an effective way to ensure that nature conservation remains integrated into service delivery. It also provides an opportunity to raise awareness of the work being undertaken by officers with elected members and the general public. The inclusion of a delivery plan published alongside each duty report is also a valuable tool in highlighting the future priorities, projects, opportunities and partnerships.

### **Suggestions for Improvement**

The focus for improvement in respect of the biodiversity and reporting duties should focus on resources for training for non-nature conservation staff and improved systems for monitoring and recording that are nationally consistent.

It is also disappointing to note the statistics for public body reporting and hopefully this review will give an indication of why biodiversity duty reports were not published throughout Scotland.

I hope that this information is of assistance and I am happy to be contacted further if more information is required.

Yours sincerely

ANNEKE FREEL  
Countryside and Outdoor Activity Services Manager