

SIXTY FIRST MEETING OF THE SCIENTIFIC ADVISORY COMMITTEE HELD ON MONDAY 1st MARCH 2021

AT: Held by virtual VC due to Covid 19 restrictions

OPEN SESSION

MINUTES

Present

Professor Bob Furness (Chair)
Dr Aileen Mill
Dr Ruth Mitchell
Professor Martin Price
Professor Jeremy Wilson
Professor Dan Haydon
Professor Neil Metcalfe
Dr Jackie Hyland (Board Observer)

Apologies: No apologies

In attendance

Paul Robertson (minutes)
Sarah Hutcheon (SAC Secretariat)
Dr Clive Mitchell
Eileen Stuart
Professor Des Thompson
Matthew Bird (Scottish Government)
Professor Andrew Millar (Chief Scientist RESAS)
Iain Sime (Item 4)
Patricia Bruneau (Item 5)
Cecile Smith (Item 5)
Duncan Stone (Item 5)

ITEM 1. Welcome, apologies for absence and declarations of interest

1. The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and in particular Andrew Millar (Chief Scientist, RESAS) and Matthew Bird (Biodiversity Team Leader in Scottish Government). No apologies have been received.
2. This is the last SAC meeting with Professor Furness as Chair. The Chair thanked everyone for their contributions to the work of the Committee. The Chair updated members on the current round of recruitment for Board members. Once appointments are confirmed, a new Chair of the SAC will be announced, and the recruitment of new SAC and Expert Panel members can proceed. The Chair asked members to encourage colleagues to apply to join the SAC and Expert

Panel. This is also Professor Jeremy Wilson's last meeting as a SAC member. The Chair thanked him for the care, energy and enthusiasm he has put into the work of the Committee.

3. There are staffing changes in NatureScot, with Nick Halfhide returning today as Director of Nature and Climate Change. Eileen Stuart will be the member of the Senior Leadership Team working most closely with the SAC, and will be devoting more time to science leadership, working with NatureScot colleagues on this.
4. Since the last meeting the Scottish Government has published the Biodiversity Statement of Intent, the updated Climate Change Plan and Scotland's Marine Assessment 2020. The Government's response to Alan Werritty's Grouse Moor Report is also significant. The Chair reminded the Committee of the work that Alan undertook when he was a member of the SAC. He chaired the Sustainable Upland Management Review Group, which reported in 2015 – and which provided a strong base for his commission from Government. Shortly, the Government will publish its response to the Deer Working Group.
5. The Chair noted that the latest issue of the *Science Newsletter* has been published, and thanked Lynne Clark for pulling this together so efficiently.
6. The Chair noted recent stories on social media round cloning. In particular, reference to the US Fish and Wildlife Service successfully cloning a highly-endangered black-footed ferret using DNA from an identical animal that has been frozen since 1988. This species has been a focus of intense and complex conservation intervention over many years now, and so it's very interesting to see the work has now reached this point.
7. For the benefit of the attendees from Scottish Government, the Chair asked each Committee member to briefly introduce themselves.

Declaration of interest

8. Professor Wilson declared an interest in the paper on SBIF, as his partner is involved in taking forward this work.

ITEM 2. Minutes, action points and matters arising from the meeting held on 21st September 2020

9. There were no further changes suggested to the minutes of the September 2020 meeting.

Action Points

10. The action points were reviewed: there were no further comments on the actions and the Action Log has been updated with the most recent comments.

Matters Arising

11. Martin noted that the report of the Foveran SAC sub group was submitted to the PAC. The Chair confirmed that the report had been very helpful in assisting the PAC in reaching their decision on the denotification.

Discussion Papers

ITEM 3. Science Leadership in NatureScot

12. Eileen introduced the paper, seeking the Committee's advice on current science leadership and capability within NatureScot and on our work moving forward.

13. The Committee is asked for:

- Views on developing science leadership in NatureScot, noting the proposals set out.

14. The Committee discussed:

- NatureScot's important role in commissioning scientific work and synthesising research work for a wider audience.
- NatureScot's work on developing guidance which has been influential, in particular the Committee referred to the work that had been produced in relation to wind farms.
- The potential to increase NatureScot's inputs into the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) Notes and to contribute to Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe) briefings.
- The potential for graduate placements to carry out reviews for POST or SPICe as part of their training.
- The use of social media to ensure that current work is seen by as many people as possible.
- The need to be clear on communications and the audience for messages on science.
- Making time for staff to contribute to science leadership and to have time for critical thinking.
- Exploring similar programmes in other research institutes and organisations.

15. In conclusion, the Committee:

- Felt that this was an excellent paper for the Committee to discuss and the Committee was very supportive of the broad approach and look forward to working with NatureScot on this work.
- Reiterated their offer to mentor staff in the development of scientific papers for publication.

ITEM 4. SBIF & Citizen Science – next steps

16. Iain Sime introduced the paper, looking at proposals for the infrastructure supporting biological recording in Scotland.

17. The Committee is asked to:

- Note the Scottish Biodiversity Information Forum review and its recommendations for implementation; and
- Advise on actions to raise the profile of biological recording within the local citizen science community.

18. The Committee discussed:

- The need to record effort as well as presence in biological recording.
- The need to identify the most important gaps to fill in biological recording.
- The importance of Citizen Science and of making it clear to everyone how the data is used and its value.
- The importance of getting access to data gathered by consultants in relation to planning cases and licencing.
- The need for the business model to consider access to data.

19. In conclusion, the Committee:

- Agreed that this is a significant proposal to support biodiversity recording and data management in Scotland and welcomed the development of the SBIF proposals.

ITEM 5. Soil Health & Carbon Budgets

20. Patricia Bruneau introduced the paper which had been prepared with a number of NatureScot colleagues. This is a significant and complex area of work at the moment.

21. The Committee is asked to:

- To consider the significance of uncertainty attached to development and implementation of soil health and soil carbon accounting framework;
- What the priority development areas for soil health and soil carbon budgeting by NatureScot should be?

22. The Committee discussed:

- The complexity in this work area, and difficulty in communicating the important aspects clearly.
- The need to plug evidence gaps moving forward including on effects of climate change and changes to soil biodiversity.
- The possibility of developing a review/synthesis of work in this area for non-specialists.
- The need to work across the public sector organisations, using science to inform policy decisions.

23. In conclusion, the committee:

- Agreed that this was an area where we should try to attract an expert to join the Committee or Expert Panel in the current recruitment process.
- Agreed that this is a good example of where NatureScot could show science leadership, and should consider developing a synthesis to increase awareness of the important role of soils.

ITEM 6. Information Papers

Grouse Moor Review – next steps

24. Des Thompson summarised the paper, describing work underway following the Werritty review.

AP01/21 – Aileen to pass details from conference on use of traps to Des.

Review of Fossil Code

25. The Committee noted the need to have guidance to prevent damage to important fossil sites. Scientists still need to have access to sites for research purposes.

Slender Naiad

26. The Committee agreed that eDNA would be a useful technique for surveying this species.

SAC Recruitment

27. The recruitment process to replace one SAC member and add to the Expert Panel is due to start shortly and we would like the Committee to encourage others who they feel may be interested to apply. The recruitment will be promoted on social media.

AP02/21 – All to pass any ideas for organisations/associations to contact for the SAC/Expert Panel recruitment to Des.

SAC Sub Groups – Update

28. The Chair passed on his thanks to the members of the sub groups for all of the helpful work that they have done.

ITEM 7. AOB

29. The members of the Committee would like to record their thanks to the Chair and to Jeremy for all of the work that they have done on the Committee.

30. Professor Andrew Millar asked us to note thanks to the staff at NatureScot, for full and timely help in the development of the invitations to tender for the upcoming RESAS funding cycle, and also in the recent provision of advice to support the “farmer led groups”.

END OF OPEN SESSION