

# Title: Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC) Annual Report 2021-22

**Date: 18 May 2022**

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| **Purpose:** | For information |
| **How does this link with our corporate priorities of improving biodiversity or delivering nature-based solutions to climate change:** | Our Corporate Plan requires a foundation of sound science underpinning NatureScot policy. The SAC provides peer review of complex areas of science as a ‘critical friend’, draws on expertise in the natural and social sciences, and synergistically works with staff to provide robust advice and evidence. |
| **Summary:** | This paper presents a summary of the activities of the Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC) between April 2021 and March 2022. The SAC met in plenary on 13 September 2021 and 3 March 2022. They also held a joint meeting with the Board on 3 February 2022. Sub-groups addressed issues relating to marine protected areas, genetics, capercaillie and digital aerial survey. SAC members also reviewed a number of draft NatureScot Research Reports. |
| **Recommendations:**  | Note the ongoing activities of the SACand its subgroups.  |
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| **Sponsor:**  | Pete Higgins |

## Purpose

1. This paper summarises activities of the Scientific Advisory Committee in 2021-22.
2. The aim of the report is to brief the Board on the work of the SAC.

## Changes to the committee

1. A number of changes to the members of the Committee have occurred during the year with members’ terms coming to an end and recruitment taking place for replacements. Professor Bob Furness left the Board at the end of March 2021 and was replaced as Chair of the SAC by Professor Pete Higgins. Professor Jeremy Wilson also left at the end of March 2021. The new members recruited during the year were Professors Jane Reid and Marian Scott.

## Meetings

1. Following the usual plan, the SAC met in plenary on 13 September 2021 and 3 March 2022 (both meetings by videoconference). [Minutes](https://www.nature.scot/about-snh/who-we-are/scientific-advisory-committee/scientific-advisory-committee-meetings) of the plenary meetings of the SAC are available on our website.
2. The papers at the **September 2021 meeting** included: Making the most of environmental data; Connecting People and Nature – survey and evidence needs; An update on sub groups; Update on the Scottish Biodiversity Programme; SAC subgroup on Capercaillie conservation and management; Chough conservation; Non – Lead ammunition; Identifying rivers in Scotland important for conservation; An update on Conservation of Genetic Diversity.
3. The papers at the **March 2022 meeting** included: The environment strategy and indicators; Carbon-biodiversity synergies; How should we create more woodland in Scotland?; SAC subgroups update; Report from the February Board/SAC meeting; Update on COP15 and development of the new Scottish Biodiversity Strategy; Avian Influenza and impacts on wild bird populations; Development of a strategy on the conservation of herpetofauna.
4. The SAC held a **joint meeting with the Board** in February 2022 to discuss the forward programme of work for the SAC and how it can contribute to the implementation of the new Corporate Plan.
5. The SAC currently has, or recently had, **several sub-groups**, which delve deeper into specific issues. Sub-groups are set up in a time-limited format depending on the topic, and may include members of SAC’s Expert Panel and/or external experts, as well as normally at least two members of SAC.
6. **Marine Protected Areas**: Aileen Mill has taken over as chair of this sub group from Bob Furness. Jane Reid agreed to join the group, working alongside Beth Scott and Ben Wilson (Expert Panel). The group met this year to review the scientific advice to Ministers on a possible Marine Protected Area.
7. **Genetics:** Set up in March 2019, the Genetics group comprises five members of the SAC Expert Panel (Pete Hollingsworth, Richard Ennos, Rob Ogden, and joining this year – Penelope Whitehorn and Laszlo Nagy). There have been no formal meetings of the group in 2021, however members have provided advice on conservation genetics.
8. **Capercaillie**: A sub-group (Neil Metcalfe (chair), Jane Reid, Dan Haydon and Rob Marrs) was set up in August 2021 to review the evidence and advise on measures for conservation and management of capercaillie in Scotland. The group met three times and have now completed their work with the report being published on the 25th February. The sub group has now closed, with the work being taken forward by NatureScot and the Cairngorms National Park Authority.
9. **Digital Aerial Survey:** This sub group was set up in December 2021 to advise staff on methodology. Marian Scott (Chair), Ruth Mitchell, Rob Marrs (expert panel), Aly McCluskie, Francis Daunt, Tom Evans. The group has met twice on the 21st January and the 4th February with a workshop held in March.
10. **Fish Eating Birds:** This sub group has not yet been set up but has been proposed to advise staff on evidence needs. Neil Metcalfe (Chair), Kathy Dale, Steve Campbell (SASA), John Armstrong (MS) and Anje Branding (RESAS).

## Other SAC activities

1. Individual members of the SAC and Expert Panel review drafts of scientifically novel or contentious NatureScot-commissioned research reports as part of our editorial Quality Assurance process.
2. Xavier Lambin (former Expert Panel member) is a member of the Technical Advisory Group supporting the Orkney Native Wildlife Project, which is funded largely by the National Heritage Lottery Fund.

## Reputational risk

1. The reputational risks to NatureScot are significantly reduced through the SAC and Expert Panel members, collectively and individually, advising on the work and reports undertaken or commissioned by staff. NatureScot has a strong reputation for its deployment of evidence-based advice in support of government and its own policies and good practice and the SAC and Expert Panel contribute to maintaining that reputation.

## Recommendations

1. Board members are invited to:

• note the wide range and deep reach of on-going activities of the SAC.