NatureScot
Scotland's Nature Agency

**NatureScot**

**SCIENTIFIC ADVISORY COMMITTEE**

**DISCUSSION PAPER**

# Update on sub-groups

## Purpose

1. This paper updates the Committee on the work of its sub-groups.

## Action

1. **The Committee is asked to note the update and to agree membership of two new subgroups.**

## Preparation of the paper

1. The paper was written by Sarah Hutcheon and Des Thompson.

## Background

1. Committee sub-groups review our work and provide advice from Committee and Expert Panel members on novel, contentious or complex matters. The sub-groups contain at least two Committee members (one of whom chairs the sub-group), two Expert Panel members, and additional expertise as required. A staff member provides the secretariat. Depending on the Terms of Reference, the sub-groups report to the Board, to the Committee, or to members of the Senior Leadership Team.
2. This paper provides an update on existing sub-groups. **Annex A** provides a tracker of all current sub groups.

## Key sub-group updates

**Avian Influenza sub group**

1. This group was set up to advise on issues emerging from handling the avian influenza outbreak in Scotland last summer. Since the last SAC meeting the [final report](https://www.nature.scot/significant-scottish-report-avian-flu-released-today) has been produced and shared with partners. Dan Haydon has presented on the work of the sub group to the NatureScot Board. The report has been very helpful in supporting the development of NatureScot guidance.

**Muirburn sub-group**

1. The group was set up to support staff on science matters in connection with the planned [Wildlife Management (Grouse) Bill](https://www.gov.scot/publications/wildlife-management-scotland-consultation/pages/1/) relating to [muirburn](https://www.gov.scot/publications/wildlife-management-scotland-consultation/pages/5/) issues. The group have now finalised their report. A paper on the work of the group is being taken to the October meeting of the NatureScot Board. Unfortunately, Marion Scott (chair of the group) is unable to attend but will be contributing to the paper.
2. There may be further work required from members of the group as the Bill passes through the Parliamentary process. This is particularly challenging work as so much of the evidence base on muirburn impacts are contested.

**Genetics group**

1. The gene drives workshop that was planned to take place earlier this summer had to be postponed but is being rearranged.

## New SAC sub-groups

**Targets and monitoring**

1. We have recently set up a new sub-group to support work on: a) devising target topics for the Natural Environment (NE) Bill; and b) advising on the monitoring framework for the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy Delivery Plan. The group is working to a tight timeline in relation to task a) to fit with the legislative programme. The Scottish Government Biodiversity Programme Advisory Group is drafting targets for the Natural Environment Bill and has asked if the NatureScot SAC could peer review this work. The group will need to complete task a) in September. Task b) may run for up to a year during the development of the monitoring framework for the SBS Delivery Plan.
2. The chair and members of this group have been confirmed: Professor Marian Scott (chair), Ms Kathy Dale (SAC), Dr Ruth Mitchell (SAC, having chaired earlier related sub-group), Professor Jen Smart (Expert Panel), Professor Rob Marrs (Expert Panel), Dr Penelope Whitehorn (Expert Panel). We may draw on further members to support task b).These two tasks are major pieces of work in areas of great significance for NatureScot.

**Deer sub group**

1. At our March 2023 meeting we discussed the possibility of setting up a sub group to advise on deer. We have been working up the terms of reference for this group and have approached appropriate members to join this group. The group does not need to start work immediately but is needed to assist in considering the evidence base round deer issues which will be required for delivery of the SBS.

## Marine birds – workshops

1. We anticipate needing expert input into two workshops that our marine staff will be running.  Both these workshops will assist with assessing impacts of offshore wind developments on marine birds.
2. *Population viability analysis* - PVA informs our advice on the potential impacts of offshore wind farms on marine bird populations (see [NatureScot Guidance Note 11](https://eur03.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.nature.scot%2Fdoc%2Fguidance-note-11-guidance-support-offshore-wind-applications-marine-ornithology-recommendations&data=05%7C01%7CSarah.Hutcheon%40nature.scot%7C9beecf6dec374899918508dbb2aea0dd%7C074028c0e165499999ad31603ad73bac%7C0%7C0%7C638300235308404692%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000%7C%7C%7C&sdata=Lr2a38btBT9540IfnImPrwq1SGfGaUZNIbtQYMk5oSk%3D&reserved=0)). Where effects (e.g. collision and/or displacement etc.) are predicted to reduce adult annual survival rates by more than 0.02%, developers are required to undertake modelling to establish long-term impacts on population viability (in the context of the relevant SPA breeding colonies). This threshold was set to ensure compliance with protected area legislation, but recent casework and discussions with developers have raised issues around defining appropriate levels of precaution; considering cumulative effects; and accounting for declining populations. We propose holding a workshop later in 2023/24 to explore this topic in more detail, using materials and experience from four recent wind farm proposals. We would welcome input from relevant SAC / Expert panel members at the workshop - helping us to refine our advice and ensure a proportionate approach.
3. *Accounting for HPAI mortality in our advice* - The results of ongoing marine bird monitoring projects need to inform future offshore wind farm appraisal processes as soon as is practicable. Building on the work of the AI sub group, we are keen to engage SAC in the development of NatureScot’s position around HPAI and any associated guidance (which will be informed by wider UK work programmes). Further discussions are required to fully scope this task, and target SAC / Expert panel input.

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**Annex A. Committee Sub-group tracker**

**September 2023**

| **SAC Sub- group** | **Task set** | **Membership** | **Date set up** | **Progress update** | **How advice has been used** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| MPA | Report to PAC as requested on consultations | Jane Reid (Chair), Neil Metcalfe, Ben Wilson, Beth Scott | 2013 | Not met since last SAC meeting | The group last met in November 2021 to advise on Red Rocks and Longay possible MPA. There have not been any meetings and there is nothing to update since the last committee meeting. |
| Genetics | Advise staff on development of novel genetics framework | Pete Hollingsworth, Richard Ennos (Chair), Rob Ogden , Penelope Whitehorn, Laszlo Nagy | March 2019 | No formal meetings this year. | The genetics group will be contacted to be invited to join discussions in an upcoming workshop on gene drives. |
| Capercaillie | To review the evidence and advise on measures for conservation and management of Capercaillie in Scotland | Neil Metcalfe (chair), Jane Reid, Dan Haydon, Rob Marrs, Judith Webb (observer) | August 2021 | Completed | The report has been used to inform discussions on next steps for NatureScot and Cairngorms National Park Authority at Board level. Advice has been provided to Ministers.  In June we received a response from Ministers requesting that NatureScot and CNPA follow up on the recommendations in the SAC report. We have been asked to:   * continue investment in action to achieve landscape scale restoration of pinewood habitat; * work to develop a plan of positive management measures based on the SAC report recommendations and a fundraising strategy which explores public, private and voluntary mechanisms; * undertake a pine marten survey to better understand the size of the population. |
| Avian Influenza | To advise on HPAI impacts, surveillance and research needs | Dan Haydon (Chair), Jane Reid, Anna Meredith, Mark Bolton, Eleanor Watson, Helen Baker, Francis Daunt | August 2022 | Completed. | The final report has been produced. It has been shared with partners and has influenced the development of NatureScot guidance. |
| Muirburn | To provide expert advice to support staff in addressing unclear elements of the muirburn evidence base, to assist in developing a licensing approach to muirburn | Marian Scott (chair),Davy McCracken, Sarah Woodin & Rob Marrs | November 2022 | Completed, though further work may be commissioned | The final report has been produced. The report will be used to guide future work in this area. As the Wildlife Management (Grouse) Bill passes through the Parliamentary stages, staff may seek further advice in relation to muirburn. |