



Nature Network

Summary

In 2019, the First Minister declared a climate emergency and linked it to the ongoing nature crisis. Earlier this year, the Scottish Government recognised this interlinkage within the Environment Strategy, with the statement: “We know that significant action is needed to restore the health and vitality of the natural systems that sustain us. In a time of change and uncertainty, we need to ensure that our policy and regulatory framework is robust, so we can foster greater resilience in our natural environment.”¹

The response needs to be a step change in policy, focussed on natural solutions to climate change and biodiversity loss with wide-reaching positive impacts on society and the economy. A Nature Network across Scotland represents an investment in a wide-reaching natural solution with benefits for today’s climate emergency and nature crisis, as well as a thriving and resilient country. A Nature Network is a strategic, long term approach to manage, restore and enhance Scotland’s habitats and landscapes. Its approach builds a nature friendly landscape, which is pervious to nature and provides life affirming wildlife and nature encounters to all people. A Nature Network is not a physical network like a path or hedgerow. It does however link the ecological processes that operate throughout the landscape, across managed landscapes and Protected Areas.

- The National Planning Framework 4 provides an opportunity to set out land use and spatial planning policies that meet Scotland’s climate and biodiversity targets and support a Nature Network that builds resilient habitats and connects ecosystems.
- LINK notes the Scottish Government’s commitment within the 2019-2020 Programme for Government to make regional land use plans and facilitate regional land use partnerships, which would then develop regional land use frameworks. Land use frameworks can play a key role in identifying connectivity bottlenecks and facilitate integration of multiple ecosystem services.
- Scotland’s Infrastructure Commission² recommends including natural assets in the definition of infrastructure. A Nature Network is a key part of Scotland’s green infrastructure, which needs to be part of Scotland’s national infrastructure planning.

Introduction

¹ The Environment Strategy for Scotland: vision and outcomes: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/environment-strategy-scotland-vision-outcomes/pages/3/>

² Infrastructure Commission for Scotland (2020): Phase 1: Key findings report A blue print for Scotland https://infrastructurecommission.scot/storage/247/FullReport_200120a.pdf

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The 2019 IPBES report³ highlighted the vulnerability of our ecosystems globally and called for a local and global transformative change through the conservation, restoration and sustainable use of nature. One transformative change, proposed within the report, which crosses a range of policy areas and can offer significant progress towards resilient ecosystems is a nature network. This effectively manages and connects ecosystems and ecological processes between protected areas and through the wider landscape and, as a Nature Network, restores lost ecological connectivity. There has been much discussion within academia⁴ and practice^{5,6} on restoring our ecosystems⁷ through an ecological network approach. An ecological network can be regarded as a ‘coherent system of natural and/or semi-natural landscape elements that is configured and managed with the objective of maintaining or restoring ecological functions’, where the focus is on conserving biodiversity at the ecosystem, landscape or regional scale⁴. Scottish Environment LINK members support the introduction of a Nature Network in Scotland and recommend that it should be a long-term strategic approach to manage, restore and enhance Scotland’s habitats and landscapes, which offers multiple benefits to wildlife, society and the economy. Nature Networks offer a means of functional and ecological connectivity, where increased connectivity has a positive impact on ecosystem services⁸.

³ Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) Global Assessment Report for Policy Makers (2019): https://ipbes.net/system/tdf/inline/files/ipbes_global_assessment_report_summary_for_policymakers.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=36213

⁴ Benett, G. & Wit, P. (2001) The Development and Application of Ecological Networks: A review of proposals, plans and programmes <https://portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/documents/2001-042.pdf>

⁵ Scottish Environment LINK- Event Report (2019): Nature Connections: benefits of a National Ecological Network in Scotland <https://www.scotlink.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Nature-Connections-Event-Report.pdf>

⁶ Committee on Climate Change (2019) Net Zero: The UK’s contribution to stopping global warming <https://www.theccc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Net-Zero-The-UKs-contribution-to-stopping-global-warming.pdf>

⁷ Harvey, E., Gounand, I., Ward, C. L., Altermatt, F. (2017): Bridging ecology and conservation: from ecological networks to ecosystem function, *Journal of Applied Ecology*, 54, 371-379

⁸ Harrison, Laura Jane , White, Piran Crawford Limond and Odell, Simon (2016): Connectivity and ecological networks : Technical Information Note 01/2016. Research Report. Technical Information Note . The Landscape Institute
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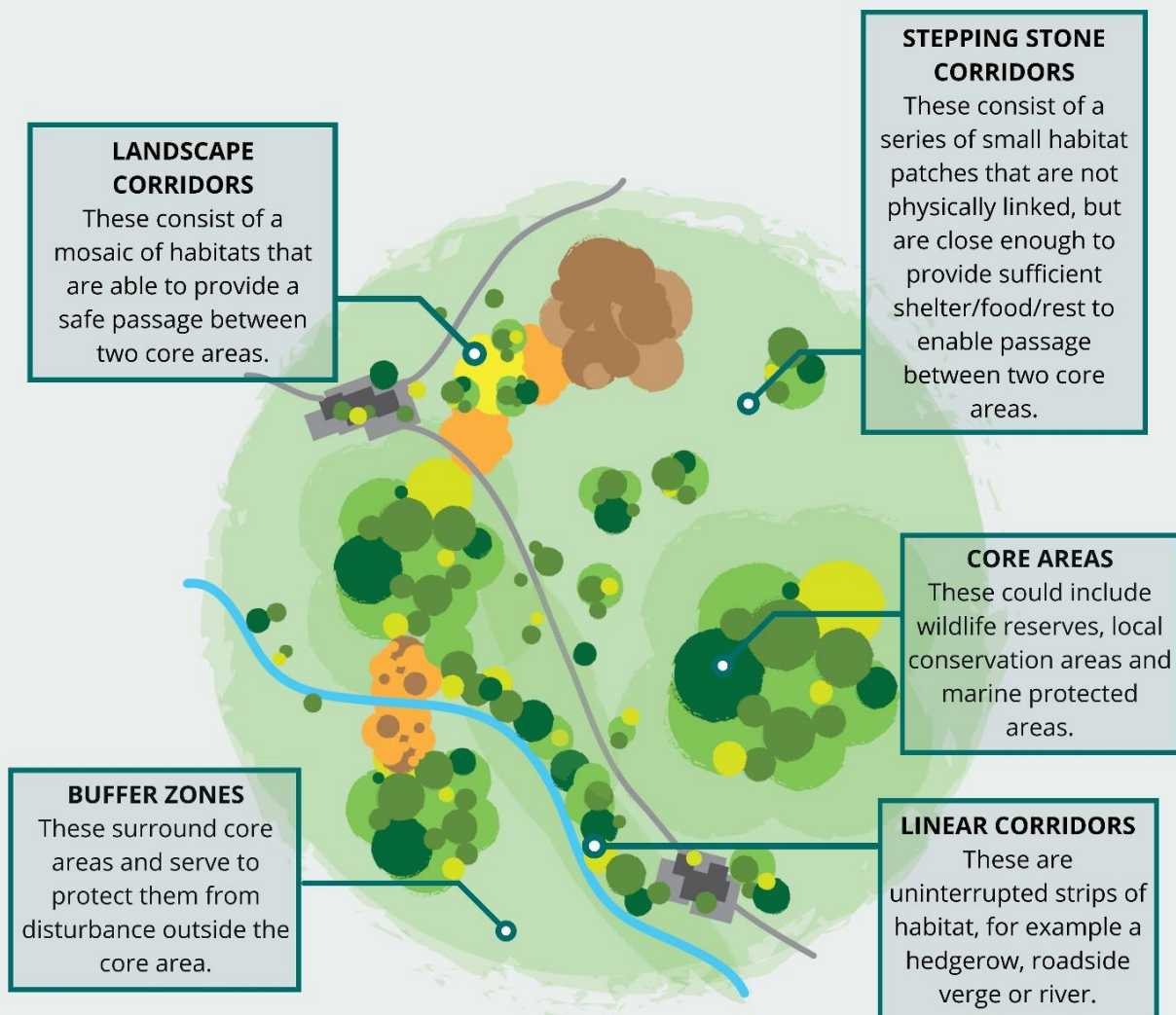
WHAT IS A NATURE NETWORK?

Nature Networks are nature's highways, where areas of good quality habitat are connected, either physically or ecologically, so that wildlife is able to move easily across the landscape. Physical elements can be large or small, natural or man-made- from green infrastructure: urban green roofs, tree-lined streets and cycle ways to restored

peat bogs, protected areas and landscape-scale conservation projects.

By allowing species to move across the landscape, ecological networks decrease the risk of extinction, increase genetic exchange and improve an ecosystems health and resilience to climate change.

WHAT DOES A NATURE NETWORK LOOK LIKE?



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WHAT BENEFITS CAN NATURE NETWORKS BRING TO SCOTLAND?



PEATLANDS

More than 20% of Scotland's land area is peatlands, storing as much carbon as one third of the Amazon Rainforest. Restoring peatlands across Scotland would help fight climate change, provide clean drinking water and protect us from flooding, and support species such as snipe, curlew, golden plover, cranberry and common lizard.



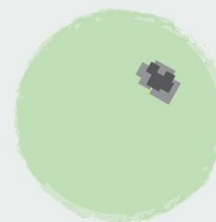
FRESHWATER

With more than 125,000 km of rivers, 220 km of canals and in excess of 30,000 freshwater lochs, our waterways can act as important connections between multiple habitats. Reducing the amount of pollutants entering freshwater would significantly improve water quality, benefiting species such as freshwater fish, otters, water voles and amphibians, making them nicer places for people to enjoy.



WOODLANDS

Scotland was once dominated by woodland, but today only 18.5% of its land area is wooded and less than one quarter of this is made up of native species. What does exist is small and often fragmented, meaning woodland wildlife is marooned in 'islands' of habitat. Transforming some of the large conifer plantations to more mixed woodlands by increasing native trees would help increase the habitat available to woodland species.



URBAN

More than 80% of Scotland's population live in towns and cities, a 'habitat' dominated by man-made surfaces seemingly devoid of nature. Street trees, wildflower meadows, ponds and green walls and roofs are a few ways that we could make these areas much more permeable to wildlife, as well as better and more attractive places to be.



FRAGMENTED LANDSCAPE



CONNECTED LANDSCAPE

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How can nature networks deliver on multiple priorities?

Nature Networks are a nature-based solution that help address some of the effects of the biodiversity and climate crisis and could deliver on the following Scottish Government priorities:

- Biodiversity:** In Scotland, as the recent State of Nature report indicates, our semi-natural habitats and wildlife are under pressure from several drivers: land management, climate change, habitat fragmentation, invasive species and marine exploitation⁹. These pressures are continuing to reduce the resilience and capacity of nature to deliver on essential ecosystem services and are driving ongoing biodiversity decline. Furthermore, pressures such as habitat fragmentation have a detrimental impact on ecosystem health^{10,11}. Measures to restore ecosystem health, through ecological networks must build on habitat connectivity^{12,13}. Scotland's protected areas¹⁴, managed appropriately to help nature recovery and strengthen ecological processes, are integral to ecological networks. Existing protected areas should form the backbone of a wider landscape network, where existing areas of natural habitat are enhanced, new areas of habitat are restored and created, and land managed for other purposes is managed in a way that supports nature.

In the national strategy *Scotland's Biodiversity – a Route Map to 2020*¹⁵ the Scottish Government committed to introduce a national ecological network. However, progress on delivering that commitment has been slow. To rise to the challenges of the biodiversity crisis in the coming decades, much more ambitious ecosystem restoration is required. The UN's declaration of 2021-2030 as the decade on ecosystem restoration, underscores the urgency and scale of action required. As the Convention on Biological Diversity enters the next phase of setting post-2020 global biodiversity targets, restoring ecosystem health through ecological networks would help Scotland deliver on multiple national and international conservation commitments. A fully functioning Nature Network, keyed into green and blue infrastructures is one of the key targets that must be met by 2030.

- Climate Change:** The LINK-WWF report¹⁶ on climate change impacts on biodiversity showed that Scotland's biodiversity is already experiencing a changed climate, which is affecting habitats and key species' abilities to adapt. Restored and healthy ecosystems, including protected areas, are more resilient¹⁷ to climate impacts¹⁸ and can perform critical processes such as carbon sequestration, and climate adaptation¹⁹ effectively. Connected habitats are also important from an adaptation perspective to enable species' movement across different habitats. Today's network of protected areas is not able to support the shift in species range in relation to climate

⁹ State of Nature Report (2019): http://scotlink.org/files/state-of-nature-Report-Scotland_.pdf

¹⁰ Gimona A, Poggio L, Brown I, Castellazzi M (2012) Woodland networks in a changing climate: Threats from land use change. *Biological Conservation*, 149, 93-102.

¹¹ Haddad NM *et al.* (2015): Habitat fragmentation and its lasting impact on Earth's ecosystems. *Science Advances*, Vol.1 (2)

¹² James Hutton Institute- Workshop Report (2017): Nature Connections: working together to enhance Scotland's environment, biodiversity and resilience to climate change. <https://www.hutton.ac.uk/sites/default/files/files/Connectivity%20workshop%20150317%20-%20Report.pdf>

¹³ Staddon, P., Lindo, Z., Crittenden, P.D., Gilbert, F. & Gonzalez, A. (2010): Connectivity, non-random extinction and ecosystem function in experimental metacommunities. *Ecology Letters*, 13, 543– 552.

¹⁴ LINK position paper (2018): Protected Areas Working Group (PAWG) vision and strategic objectives for protected areas <https://www.scotlink.org/publication/link-position-paper-on-protected-areas-working-group-pawg-vision-and-strategic-objectives-for-protected-areas/>

¹⁵ Scotland's Biodiversity- a Route Map to 2020 (2015): <https://www2.gov.scot/Resource/0048/00480289.pdf>

¹⁶ LINK-WWF (2019): Scotland's Nature on Red Alert: Climate Change impacts on biodiversity http://www.scotlink.org/files/documents/Scotlands_Nature_Red_Alert.pdf

¹⁷ Olds, A., Pitt, K., A., Maxwell, P. S., Connolly, R.M. (2012) Synergistic effects of reserves and connectivity on ecological resilience, *Journal of Animal Ecology*

¹⁸ Munang R, Thiaw I, Alverson K, Liu J, Han Z (2013): The role of ecosystem services in climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, Vol 5 (1), 47-52

¹⁹ MacKinnon, K., Ham, C., Reilly, K., Hopkins, J. (2019) Nature Based Solutions and Protected Areas to Improve Urban Biodiversity and Health, *Biodiversity and Health in the Face of Climate Change*, Chapter, 363-380

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change. Nature networks / green infrastructure need to provide capacity for species and habitats to accommodate the loss of climatic cover and adapt to climate change²⁴. A Nature Network could help plan, implement, review and deliver adaptation and mitigation measures at scale and add value to land management approaches. As discussed within the context of planning, the National Planning Framework 4 should provide a spatial planning response to the climate and nature emergencies, where the planning system must deliver on ecological restoration and connectivity through investing in green infrastructure. Scotland's natural assets including woodlands, peatlands and wetlands can be restored and enhanced, to sequester carbon and build resilience to climate change, thus meeting internationally and nationally agreed emission reduction targets. Connecting semi-natural habitats through the wider landscape has the potential to halt biodiversity loss and make nature connections between species, habitats and people.

Ecological connectivity is important not only in joining terrestrial habitats but also marine environment. Recent publications (e.g. IPCC Ocean and Cryosphere 2019 report²⁰) have highlighted the potential for the marine environment to contribute significantly to mitigating the impact of climate change, including the restoration and recovery of 'blue carbon' habitats (of which Scotland has significant reserves). We acknowledge and support the work underway to create an ecologically coherent network of well-managed Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), albeit that progress has slowed and important targets for 2020 will be missed, and envisage that intertidal protected sites such as Site of Special Scientific Interests (SSSI) that are legally part of the developing MPA network, can provide a key part of the linkage between terrestrial and marine site networks. It is important that the need for future intertidal sites is not missed by falling between terrestrial and marine stools, and instead is integrated into both networks as the "zip" between them. River basin management planning under the Water Environment and Water Services (Scotland) Act 2003, which extends to the three nautical mile limit in Scotland, and emerging Regional Marine Plans under the Marine (Scotland) Act 2010, which can extend to the 12nm limit, will also be crucial in delivering integration for nature across the land/sea interface. The terrestrial planning system extends to the Mean Low Water Spring tide level and therefore also provides an important opportunity for enhancement of intertidal "blue carbon" habitats such as seagrass beds, blue mussel (*Mytilus edulis*) beds and native oyster (*Ostrea edulis*) beds, where terrestrial planning policy could also help drive investment into habitat restoration. Since marine licensing covers the marine area up to Mean High Water Spring, we recognise there is an overlap of consenting regimes in the inter-tidal zone²¹.

- **Planning:** Ecological connectivity can be approached from a planning point of view through mapping the natural capacity of ecosystems delivering ecosystem services, identifying core habitats, connections for species and integrating these with green infrastructure²². Green infrastructure can be defined as a network of natural, semi-natural and suitable development areas, delivering a range of ecosystem services in urban and rural settings^{23,24}. Green

²⁰ Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate (2019): <https://www.ipcc.ch/srocc/>

²¹ Planning Circular 1/2015: relationship between the statutory land use planning system and marine planning and licensing <https://www.gov.scot/publications/circular-1-2015-relationship-between-statutory-land-use-planning-system/pages/4/>

²² Liqueste, C., et al., 2015, 'Mapping green infrastructure based on ecosystem services and ecological networks: A pan-European case study', *Environmental Science & Policy* 54, pp. 268-280

²³ BeneDict, M. A. and McMahon, E.T (2002) Green Infrastructure: Smart Conservation for the 21st Century, *Renewable Resources Journal*, 12-17

²⁴ Estreguil, C., Dige, G., Kleeschulte, S., Carrao, H., Raynal, J. and Teller, A., Strategic Green Infrastructure and Ecosystem Restoration: geospatial methods, data and tools, EUR 29449 EN,

infrastructure is currently most often recognised in the urban local setting where from a nature networks context it can be used to identify and assess territorial and ecological coherence within and between urban and peri-urban areas. In rural settings, green infrastructure needs to function through land managed for different purposes including production, nature and sport, providing connectivity in ecosystems and enabling and protecting ecological processes. While green infrastructure is inherently a spatial concept, data on species occurrence, habitats and other ecological indicators can be integrated, producing maps of biodiversity features, that support a holistic nature-based approach to planning^{25,26}. Mapping multifunctional green infrastructure with the objective of well-connected nature networks integrates biodiversity conservation with planning and land-use objectives to secure ecosystem service delivery, thus providing multiple benefits to nature and people^{23,27}.

In order to build and maintain an effective green infrastructure, clearly defined, ecologically coherent regional spatial priorities for land use are required, which sit alongside, and are informed by, local ecological restoration action and ecological connectivity. A spatial approach can help identify the right places to reduce habitat fragmentation, create ecological connections and enable resources such as targeted funding and habitat creation action, inform planning and decision making effectively²⁵. The National Planning Framework 3²⁸ outlined a strategic, spatial approach to green infrastructure in urban and rural landscapes through the Central Scotland Green Network (CSGN). CSGN aims are to deliver on multiple priorities: restore and enhance biodiversity, help absorb carbon emissions and promote active and healthier lifestyles. Programmes such as CSGN show that there is recognition by the government that green infrastructure offers multiple benefits: climate mitigation, biodiversity conservation and human wellbeing. With the National Planning Framework 4²⁹ due in 2021, delivery mechanisms such as CSGN can be used to identify and deliver integrated action on multiple priorities: spatial planning, emission reduction, ecological conservation/ restoration, land use decisions and public health priorities. However, the approach now needs to be applied at a national scale.

- **Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry:** A key driver of biodiversity decline in Scotland is habitat loss⁹. Poor land management is the driver for habitat fragmentation, deterioration and loss in ecosystem services³⁰. These impacts can be reversed with sustainable and integrated land management, which identifies and takes account of, ecological processes within the landscape. Successful integrated land management needs to identify ecological priorities and establish or protect network connectivity through land use that protects local biodiversity and ecosystem services including carbon sequestration, while reducing the role of land as a carbon source^{31,32}.

Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2019, ISBN 978-92-79-97294-2, doi:10.2760/06072, JRC113815.

²⁵ Snäll, T., Lehtomäki, J., Arponen, A., Elith, J., Moilanen (2016) Green Infrastructure Design Based on Spatial Conservation Prioritization and Modeling of Biodiversity Features and Ecosystem Services, *Environmental Management*; 57: 251-256

²⁶ Lanzas, M., Hermoso, V., de-Miguel, S., Bota, G., Brotons, L (2019) Designing a network of green infrastructure to enhance the conservation value of protected areas and maintain ecosystem services., *Science Total Environment* Feb 15;651(Pt 1):541-550. doi: 10.1016/j.scitotenv.2018.09.164. Epub 2018 Sep 13

²⁷ Salomaa, A; Paloniemi, R., Kotiaho, J., Kettunen, M., Apostolopoulou, E, Cent, J (2017) Can Green Infrastructure help to conserve biodiversity, *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*

²⁸ National Planning Framework 3 (2014): <https://www2.gov.scot/Resource/0045/00453683.pdf>

²⁹ National Planning Framework 4- The Essentials! (2019) <https://blogs.gov.scot/planning-architecture/2019/10/08/national-planning-framework-4-the-essentials/>

³⁰ Allan, E *et al* (2015) Land use intensification alters ecosystem multifunctionality via loss of biodiversity and changes to functional composition <https://doi.org/10.1111/ele.12469>

³¹ Jalkanen, J, Toivonen, T, Moilanen, A (2019) Identification of ecological networks for land-use planning with spatial conservation prioritization, *Landscape Ecology*

³² WWF-Vivideconomics (2019): Delivering on net zero: next steps for Scotland https://www.vivideconomics.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/WWF_Report_VIVID_Climate_2019_web.pdf

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In the context of ecological networks, the spatial approach until now has been primarily applied to identify and manage ecological impacts within protected areas. Land use and climate change pressures now require dynamic planning at multiple spatial scales³³. The spatial planning approach can be used to identify ecological networks within land-use planning, where land-use planners work with multiple stakeholders to maintain and enhance ecological connectivity³³. Additionally, the spatial planning approach should also consider scale of the implementation, where small-scale measures can be as effective in terms of functional connectivity³⁴.

Scotland's Land Use Strategy (LUS)³⁵ outlines an ecosystem approach, that aims to integrate, at the strategic level, the management of land, water and living resources in a sustainable and equitable manner. Between 2013 to 2015, based on commitments made in the LUS Action Plan³⁶, pilot projects including the Scottish Borders pilot tested the principles of the Land Use Strategy at the local level, through the integration of local decision-making processes, agriculture, forestry, habitat management and biodiversity conservation considerations. One significant learning from these pilots was that land use in Scotland requires a regional approach. In recognition of the need to employ a regional approach, in the next iteration of the Land Use Strategy in 2016, the government committed to the introduction of regional frameworks and partnerships³⁷. However, progress on the development of regional frameworks and partnerships has been very gradual. In addition to this, the Committee on Climate Change (CCC) has indicated that the current land use approach in the UK is unsustainable and is underpinned by fragmented and incomplete land use policies. To meet our commitments to become a net zero economy, the CCC calls for a transformation in land use across the UK, through measures such as afforestation and peatland restoration³⁸. However, such measures need to balance land use and ecosystem service provision with being locally relevant and ecologically literate.

LINK notes the Scottish Government's commitment within the 2019-2020 Programme for Government³⁹ for Regional Partnerships to emerge by 2021 with each Partnership producing a Regional Land Use Framework by 2023. This commitment also includes an assurance to develop frameworks that will identify where resources will have the most impact in dealing with the effects of climate change. Land use frameworks can play a key role in identifying connectivity bottlenecks³³, facilitate resource allocation and integrate delivery of multiple ecosystem services³². Once the regional frameworks are in place, there will be an opportunity to align with development planning, ensuring Local Development Plans are integrated⁴⁰. For an integrated approach to land use, LINK recommend that the regional frameworks should be based on detailed examination of the evidence base, collating data on land use, trends in habitats and species, ecosystem services, landscape character and quality, as well as information on where public finances are currently allocated⁴¹. LINK believes regional frameworks provide a template to map

³³ Jalkanen, J. Toivonen, T., Moilanen, A. (2019) Identification of ecological networks for land-use planning with spatial conservation prioritization, *Landscape Ecology*, 1-19

³⁴ Grass *et al* (2019) Land-sharing/-sparing connectivity landscapes for ecosystem services and biodiversity conservation, *British Ecological Society, People and Nature*, Vol-1:2, 262-272

³⁵ Scottish Government (2011) Getting the best from our land: land use strategy for Scotland <https://www.gov.scot/publications/getting-best-land-land-use-strategy-scotland/>

³⁶ Scottish Government (2011): Getting the best from our land - A land use strategy for Scotland Action Plan December 2011 <https://www.gov.scot/publications/getting-best-land-land-use-strategy-scotland-action-plan-december/pages/2/>

³⁷ Scottish Government (2016): Getting the best from our land- A Land Use Strategy for Scotland 2016-2021 <https://www2.gov.scot/Resource/0050/00505253.pdf>

³⁸ Land use: Policies for a Net Zero UK <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/land-use-policies-for-a-net-zero-uk/>

³⁹ Scottish Government (2019): Protecting Scotland's Future: The Government's Programme for Scotland 2019-2020

⁴⁰ Climate Emergency Response Group (2019) 12 immediate actions for Scotland's response to the Climate Emergency <https://www.wwf.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-08/Climate%20Emergency%20Statement.pdf>

⁴¹ LINK briefing (2020): Land Use Strategy- Towards Regional Land Use Partnerships <https://www.scotlink.org/publication/land-use-strategy-towards-regional-land-use-partnerships/>

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land use trade-offs and conservation efforts. With spatial and ecological data on current status and processes, regional frameworks can plan to protect and restore ecological connections where lost and can be used to balance trade-offs where land use needs conflict.

CONCLUSION

A Nature Network would help Scotland fulfill a range of national, EU and international obligations. A Nature Network is fundamental, as a natural solution to climate change and biodiversity loss, to meeting these obligations. LINK welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment in the 2019-2020 Programme for Government to implement Regional Land Use Plans to deliver Land Use Strategy Objectives and renew the National Planning Framework 4 and sees these mechanisms as opportunities to deliver on critical multiple priorities. However, much more needs to be done, though effective land use planning which will be driven by NPF4 and Regional Land Use Plans, to meet targets on climate change and nature loss. If Scotland is to retain its green image of a high-quality environment, it is time to live up to that rhetoric and implement systems that protect and restore Scotland's ecosystems. A Nature Network is a very good start.

Following member organisations are signed up to the briefing-

Froglife

Buglife

Marine Conservation Society

RSPB, Scotland

Scottish Wild Land Group

Scottish Wildlife Trust

Plantlife

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