For information

Title: **Consultation on Scottish Planning Biodiversity Metric**

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Purpose

This paper is intended to inform members of NatureScot's consultation on a proposed Scottish Planning Biodiversity Metric, raise awareness of the likely use of the metric tool to support the assessment of future planning applications for major and national developments, and outline the approach proposed by officers for responding to the consultation.

Recommendations

The Committee is asked to:

a) Note the consultation and the potential use of the Scottish Planning Biodiversity Metric tool to support the assessment of future planning applications; and

b) Note the approach proposed by officers for responding to the consultation.

Background and strategic context

1. A Scottish Planning Biodiversity Metric (SPBM) is being developed to support the implementation of National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4) Policy 3: Biodiversity.

2. Amongst other things, NPF4 Policy 3 aims to deliver positive effects for biodiversity from new developments. In particular, Policy 3b states that: *"Development proposals for national or major development, or for development that requires an Environmental Impact Assessment will only be supported where it can be demonstrated that the proposal will conserve, restore and enhance biodiversity, including nature networks so they are in a* ***demonstrably better*** *state than without intervention... To inform this,* ***best practice assessment methods*** *should be used"*

(emphasis added). The policy goes on to state that proposals within these categories must provide **significant** biodiversity enhancements.

3. NPF4 does not require a particular assessment approach or methodology to demonstrate the delivery of significant biodiversity enhancements, and the assessment may be qualitative or quantitative. In the absence of an established Scottish assessment approach, a range of methods have been used to measure biodiversity at a site level. This lack of a standardised approach could lead to inconsistencies in implementation of the policy. NatureScot have been commissioned to develop the SPBM in order to help address this and to offer a consistent, best practice quantitative approach for use across Scotland.

4. The current consultation, which runs until 30 November 2026, sets out NatureScot's proposed SPBM tool and seeks views from interested parties.

How will the Scottish Planning Biodiversity Metric work?

5. The proposed SPBM is an adaptation of the statutory biodiversity metric currently used in England and has been designed to better fit the Scottish environmental and policy context. Its use will be different to the English metric, reflecting Scotland's policy-led approach to delivering positive effects for biodiversity, which differs from England's statutory approach.

6. The SPBM comprises:
   a) a user guide
   b) the SPBM calculation tool (an Excel spreadsheet)
   c) habitat condition assessment sheets (also in Excel format)

7. The proposed SPBM tool enables a quantitative biodiversity assessment by calculating the habitat-based changes that would result from a development proposal. The tool uses habitats as a proxy for wider biodiversity value and derives Biodiversity Units (BUs) based on certain inputs and multiplication formula. The tool will work by calculating and comparing the number of pre-development (baseline) BUs with the expected number of post-development BUs to help show whether a development proposal will deliver positive effects for biodiversity.

8. In practice, the proposed SPBM tool will therefore first be used to calculate the baseline value of a development site. This requires the user to add information about each habitat parcel on site, based on initial field survey data. The tool then calculates a baseline BU value for each habitat parcel using an automatically assigned 'distinctiveness' and manually derived 'strategic significance' score for each habitat.

9. Once the baseline value across the site is established, the predicted BU value post-development can be calculated. This involves considering predicted direct or indirect habitat loss / change within each habitat parcel as a consequence of the development, as well as any proposed improvements (eg through habitat restoration or creation of new habitats). For the post-development calculations, the SPBM tool applies a series of risk multipliers to account for the potential uncertainty and time lag involved in delivering habitat improvements, and the spatial relationship between the location of proposed improvements relative to where any adverse impacts associated with the development occur.

10. After inputting baseline and post-development information, the SPBM tool helps to show whether a balance (or 'offset') is reached between the BUs lost through development and the predicted post-development BUs achieved through proposed habitat improvements. The tool will also help to show how many additional BUs are proposed to be delivered beyond the offset level to achieve 'enhancement'. In this way, the SPBM will help to show whether the development would meet the NPF4 requirement of leaving biodiversity in a demonstrably better state.

11. The SPBM does not identify a numerical target or threshold to indicate whether a development proposal would provide 'significant' biodiversity enhancements in line with NPF4 Policy 3b. Rather, this will be a matter of judgement for the planning authority based on the individual circumstances of any planning application.

Potential benefits and limitations

12. The main anticipated benefit of the proposed SPBM is that it should help to provide a more consistent and transparent approach to calculating changes in biodiversity for large scale development proposals, and thus help to better implement NPF4 Policy 3b. The proposed BU approach is intended to be understandable for both

ecologists and consenting authority officers, and it is expected that BUs can act as a useful means of communication between developers, ecologists, engineers and planners, leading to better siting and design of development proposals.

13. However, it is important to note that metrics are subject to limitations. In particular, the proposed SPBM (in common with other metrics) deliberately applies a relatively broad-brush approach to calculating changes in biodiversity. Also, as the SPBM tool takes a habitat-based approach, impacts on protected species and other conservation priority species are likely to require separate consideration. It will therefore remain important for professional ecological judgement to be applied alongside any metric outputs when assessing development proposals.

14. It is also important to note that the SPBM does not change existing statutory protections (Special Areas of Conservation, Special Protection Areas, Sites of Special Scientific Interest etc) or assessment requirements (Habitats Regulations Appraisal etc) in relation to the natural environment.

The consultation and proposed response

15. The consultation documents are largely technical in nature, and the consultation response form is a substantial document which seeks views on detailed, operational aspects of the SPBM methodology and assessment process.

16. It is proposed that Officers will submit a response which broadly welcomes the proposed SPBM as a tool to improve consistency in decision making whilst acknowledging the limitations of its use, and which draws on specialist Officer input in relation to detailed questions on the SPBM methodology.

Next steps

17. Officers will respond to the consultation by the deadline on 30 November 2026.

18. Thereafter, it is understood that NatureScot will produce a summary of consultation responses together with an outline of how they will be used to refine the SPBM, which is expected to be launched in Spring 2027.

19. Once launched, it is proposed that Officers will deliver a training session to Planning Committee members on the SPBM and its expected use in the assessment of future planning applications.

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