

PERTH AND KINROSS COUNCIL

Environment Committee

9 November 2016

Update on Actions to Promote the Red Squirrel Population on Council Land

Report by Director (Environment)

<p>This report updates the Committee following a further review of possible actions to promote the red squirrel population in specific locations on Council managed land.</p>

1. BACKGROUND/MAIN ISSUES

- 1.1 The issues relating to the protection of the red squirrel population were first outlined in a report to the Environment Committee in November 2013 (Report No.13/543 refers). It was agreed at that Committee to undertake a series of surveys on Council owned land across Perth and Kinross to establish the location of red and grey squirrel populations.
- 1.2 The report advised that grey squirrels pose a threat to red squirrels by competing with them for food and habitat resources. In areas where red and grey squirrels coexist, the presence of grey squirrels results in reduced survival rates amongst red squirrel young, and also reduced reproductive rates, causing the gradual decline in red squirrel populations over time.
- 1.3 It also noted that targeted grey squirrel control is not the sole solution and should be considered along with other measures. These include habitat management, such as creating large areas of linked woodland habitat to favour red squirrels.
- 1.4 The feedback on the outcome of the surveys undertaken on thirteen Council managed sites, along with recommendations for action to protect the red squirrel population on land managed by the Council were reported to the Environment Committee in March 2015 (Report No.15/149 refers).
- 1.5 Only six of the sites surveyed were found to have grey squirrel populations. The six sites were in and around Perth and Crieff, with other sites in Blairgowrie and Alyth having healthy and sustainable populations of red squirrels. The report made a series of recommendations on the control of grey squirrels on the six sites and actions to support red squirrels generally. However, the report was deferred to allow for further information on two options in relation to a) the appointment of a Pest Control Contractor and b) engaging volunteers. Further work has been undertaken since March 2015 on both options as noted below:

Option (a) – Pest control contractor

- 1.6 This option involves the Council employing a pest control contractor for a period of 5 years to trap and remove grey squirrels in accordance with the nationally agreed Grey Squirrel Trapping Guidelines. There would need to be 5 trapping sessions per annum over the spring and summer seasons, from March to August, when the availability of natural food sources is reduced.
- 1.7 The cost of this was previously estimated in March 2015 as being up to £22,050 per annum, based on rates from the Tayside Procurement Consortium. Since then, the Pest Control Contract was tendered in the spring this year and a new 3 year contract was let on 2 May 2016 to Graham Pest Control, a local contractor based in Blairgowrie. The tender was for all pest control activities across Perth and Kinross but included specific priced rates for grey squirrel control measures. The equivalent overall cost for just controlling grey squirrels using Graham Pest Control, if this was to be done, would amount to £16,830 per annum. There is no funding within the Environment Service, to pay for this activity.

While this is a welcome reduction on the previously estimated contract rates, it is still more than three times the amount of the funding available from the Scottish Rural Development Programme (SRDP) Forestry Grant Scheme (FGS).

- 1.8 The level of FGS grant payable for this option has increased slightly since the previous report although, being a European Union fund which is currently underwritten by the Government, it may be reviewed in due course. The grant is currently based on £200 per trap and at £5,400 per annum in total, is still significantly less than the full cost of trapping and disposal. The grant of £200 per trap is less than a third of the actual costs per trap of undertaking the control as it does not fully allow for all the associated labour and travel elements. This option is therefore not financially viable for the Council. The grant is, however, more suited to estates with directly employed staff undertaking these sorts of land management activities.
- 1.9 In order to ensure the rates are as low as possible, Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels (SSRS) undertook to have direct discussions with the new contractor to see if the methods and techniques being employed were the most effective in meeting the guidelines. Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels (SSRS) is a project that has been running since 2009 with the aim to stop the decline of Scotland's Red Squirrel population. Council officers have been in contact with SSRS on 12 occasions over this period to see if progress has been made with these discussions. They have, however, not yet been concluded and as they are essentially a private and commercially sensitive matter between SSRS and the pest control contractor, the Council has been unable to get involved.

Option (b) – Engaging volunteers

- 1.10 This option involved the Council entering into an agreement to allow Perth & Kinross Red Squirrel Group (PKRSG) to trap, remove from Council land and dispatch grey squirrels, to the same standards required by the relevant guidance. PKRSG is affiliated to SSRS and is a group of likeminded individuals who want to see red squirrels return to being the dominant species in Perth & Kinross. PKRSG previously indicated that it would be too onerous to expect volunteers to reliably undertake the significant number of visits to the various sites, particularly for the full 5 years that the programme would receive FGS support. The Council would also have to invest resources to regularly monitor the volunteer activities to ensure these are carried out appropriately. As a result, there are risks that the programme would have to be stopped prematurely. As a result, this is not a feasible option to take forward now.
- 1.11 SSRS have been supporting a programme of voluntary grey squirrel trapping in private gardens in Aberdeen City by lending traps to residents and undertaking training. In addition, they have been undertaking professional trapping on sites maintained by Aberdeen City Council by agreement, although that has been funded externally. It would be up to SSRS as to whether they were able to fund and introduce such schemes in Perth and Kinross. While the Council have no objection to the scheme for residents, further details of any culling programme on public land would be required for approval.

Aberdeen City Council's direct interventions to encourage red squirrels on land they manage are mainly focused on habitat improvement and creation. They also encourage volunteers to monitor red and grey squirrel populations.

2. PROPOSALS

- 2.1 As neither Option (a) the appointment of a Pest Control Contractor or Option (b) engaging volunteers appears to be viable, it is recommended that the Council continue to encourage wider habitat management, where appropriate, to support red squirrel populations. This proposal would not directly control grey squirrel populations on Council managed land, but would:
- Mitigate any future risk to the red squirrel population
 - avoid any additional costs
 - avoid potential adverse reaction from some sectors of the community, and
 - ensure no legal consequences of non-control
- 2.2 This approach can be undertaken through implementation of the Council's Forest Plan, with volunteers continuing to monitor squirrel populations on these sites using the feeders, should they wish to do so. Examples of activities that have been undertaken include the removal of non-native beech saplings on sites such as Alyth Den, the Birks of Aberfeldy and Kinnoull Hill which reduces a food source favoured by grey squirrels. New planting, for example at Piggy Lane pitches in Blairgowrie, uses tree species which will provide a good habitat for red squirrels. Grant applications have already been successfully made to the Forestry Commission and will be ongoing to continue delivering this type of work through our Forest Plan.

- 2.3 Habitat improvement is important with a recent report highlighting that the number of red squirrels in Scotland is increasing as they begin to return to their former habitats. This has been most notable in the Borders, Dumfries and Galloway, Ayrshire, and the north-east of Scotland. SSRS is also continuing to try to prevent the spread of grey squirrels and squirrelpox northwards via a programme of grey squirrel control in a zone running coast to coast along the Highland Boundary Fault.
- 2.4 Tayside is still home to widespread red squirrel populations and the work by SSRS over recent years has started to reverse the previous trend of declining numbers in this area. Analysis of trapping results has also shown both a decline in grey squirrel numbers (almost to zero in some places) and the beginnings of a recovery in red squirrel populations in many parts of Tayside. There is now no evidence of the spread of grey squirrels northwards into Highland Scotland which has been partly achieved through the SSRS red squirrel protection network. They are, however, still spreading northwards in eastern Angus, towards the border with Aberdeenshire.

3. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 The Council has obtained a new rate for grey squirrel control through a competitively tendered pest control tender. The contract has been awarded and the rate for undertaking the control to the appropriate standards has been reduced since previously reported. It is, however, not within the Environment Service budget and is still significantly more than the possible funding available through the FGS grant and therefore is not being undertaken at present.
- 3.2 The option to encourage volunteer trapping has also been looked. While this is considered to be appropriate for private ground, it is not something which could be undertaken satisfactorily on public land. The Council would not object to any initiatives by SSRS to encourage local residents to take action on their own property.
- 3.3 In the meantime, the Council is continuing to manage habitats for the benefit of red squirrels on all appropriate sites through the approved Forest Plan. In addition, the Council would welcome volunteers continuing to monitor the squirrel populations on the sites it manages, should they wish to do so.
- 3.4 It is recommended that the Committee approves:
- (a) The continued monitoring of squirrel populations on Council land through volunteers.
 - (b) Management of habitats to encourage red squirrels to colonise them naturally, and discourage grey squirrels by reducing the extent of their preferred habitats through the Forest Plan.

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Approved

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1. IMPLICATIONS, ASSESSMENTS, CONSULTATION AND COMMUNICATION

Strategic Implications	Yes / None
Community Plan / Single Outcome Agreement	Yes
Corporate Plan	Yes
Resource Implications	
Financial	None
Workforce	None
Asset Management (land, property, IST)	Yes
Assessments	
Equality Impact Assessment	None
Strategic Environmental Assessment	None
Sustainability (community, economic, environmental)	Yes
Legal and Governance	None
Risk	Yes
Consultation	
Internal	Yes
External	Yes
Communication	
Communications Plan	Yes

1. Strategic Implications

Community Plan / Single Outcome Agreement

- 1.1 In terms of “Creating a Safe and Sustainable Place for Future Generations” this proposal aims to provide an enhanced and protected natural environment.

Corporate Plan

- 1.2 The Council’s Corporate Plan 2013 – 2018 lays out five outcome focused strategic objectives which provide clear strategic direction, inform decisions at a corporate and service level and shape resources allocation. They are as follows:
- i) Giving every child the best start in life;
 - ii) Developing educated, responsible and informed citizens;
 - iii) Promoting a prosperous, inclusive and sustainable economy;
 - iv) Supporting people to lead independent, healthy and active lives; and
 - v) Creating a safe and sustainable place for future generations.

2. Resource Implications

Financial

- 2.1 There is no funding available for the trapping of grey squirrels within The Environment Service budget. As funding will be sourced externally there are no financial implications arising from this report.

Workforce

- 2.2 The proposals in this report have minor workforce issues arising from grant funding applications and monitoring and procurement and contract administration. These activities would need to be undertaken within existing staff resources.

Asset Management (land, property, IT)

- 2.3 The proposals in the report will take place on land under the control of the Council. The Head of Legal and Governance have been consulted, and have indicated agreement with the proposals.

3. Assessments

Equality Impact Assessment

- 3.1 Under the Equality Act 2010, the Council is required to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations between equality groups. Carrying out Equality Impact Assessments for plans and policies allows the Council to demonstrate that it is meeting these duties.
- 3.2 This section should reflect that the proposals have been considered under the Corporate Equalities Impact Assessment process (EqIA) with the following outcome:
- (i) Assessed as **not relevant** for the purposes of EqIA

Strategic Environmental Assessment

- 3.3 The Environmental Assessment (Scotland) Act 2005 places a duty on the Council to identify and assess the environmental consequences of its proposals. The proposals have been considered under the Act and no further action is required as it does not qualify as a PPS as defined by the Act and is therefore exempt.

Sustainability

- 3.4 Under the provisions of the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 the Council has to discharge its duties in a way which contributes to the achievement of sustainable development. In terms of the Climate Change Act, the Council has a general duty to demonstrate its commitment to sustainability and the community, environmental and economic impacts of its actions.

- 3.5 The proposals have been assessed in terms of the requirements to manage the Council's Greenspace assets long term in a sustainable way.

Legal and Governance

- 3.6 The Head of Finance and the Head of Legal and Governance have been consulted on the report.

Risk

- 3.7 There is a risk that members of the public could witness distressed animals in traps if the approved guidelines are not followed. These risks will be eliminated by employing experienced contractors to undertake the proposals. The Council is able to support the proposals as there is a requirement under the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004 and the UK Biodiversity Action Plan to protect Red Squirrels, and the Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011 to stop the spread of Invasive non-native Species.

4. Consultation

Internal

- 4.1 The Head of Finance and the Head of Legal Services have been consulted in the preparation of this report.

External

- 4.2 Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels have been consulted during the preparation of this report.

5. Communication

- 5.1 Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels, Perth and Kinross Red Squirrel Group and the Council will be involved in publicising the recommendations in the report.

2. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 2.1 Report to the Environment Committee on 20 November 2013, Report Number (13/543) considers proposal to undertake surveys.
- 2.2 Report to the Environment Committee in March 2015 Report Number (15/149) considers actions to promote the red squirrel population on Council land.

3. APPENDICES

- 3.1 None.