

Lochalsh Deer Management Group Deer Management Plan Update- Oct 2020



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Table of Contents

1. Introduction	3
1.1 Introduction	3
1.2 Members of Group.....	3
2. Lochalsh Deer Management Group Deer Population.....	4
2.1 Deer Count Figures	4
2.1.1 NatureScot Group Counts	4
2.1.2 Individual Estate Deer Counts.....	4
2.2 Deer Cull Figures	6
2.3 Other grazing species.....	7
2.4 Supplementary Feeding	7
3. Deer related Infrastructure/Accreditation and Workforce skills	8
3.1 Deer related Infrastructure/Accreditation	8
3.2 Workforce Skills	8
4. Natural History of Group area	9
4.1 Site designations	9
5. Public Access and Public Welfare	9
5.1 Provision on Estates for Recreational Activities	9
5.2 Public Welfare.....	9
6. Future Management of the group area.....	10
6.1 Actions to achieve the ADMG/NatureScot Benchmark	10
6.1.1 Action 1	10
6.1.2 Action 2	12
6.1.3 Action 3	12
6.1.4 Action 4	12
6.1.5 Action 5	13
6.1.6 Action 6	13
6.2.7 Action 10	14
6.2.8 Action 13	14
7.0 Actions to take forward	15

Figures and Tables

FIGURE	INFORMATION	PAGE
1	Spring counts for Achnashellach Estate	4
2	Spring Counts for Attadale Estate	5
3	Spring Counts for Inverinate Estate	6

TABLE	INFORMATION	PAGE
1	Achnashellach deer cull figures	6
2	Arineckaig deer cull Figures	6
3	Attadale deer cull figures	6
4	Inverinate deer cull figures	7
5	FLS - Achnashellach (south of road) deer cull figures	7

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Lochalsh Deer Management Group published their new Deer Management Plan in August 2016. The Plan had a timeframe of five years with a full review due in 2020. In addition to the full review after five years, as it was a live, evolving plan, it was decided that a short annual update should be prepared each year to ensure that the information and updates on actions being worked on were kept current.

Unfortunately 2020 is continuing to be a difficult year as a result of the Covid19 pandemic with a lot of activities halted or slowed down and everybody is struggling financially, therefore it was considered that a brief update will be prepared for this year with a proper review in 2021 when things have hopefully returned to something more like normal.

A copy of all the annual updates will be made available on the Lochalsh DMG website (www.lochalshdmg.deer-management.co.uk).

1.2 Members of Group

The Lochalsh Deer Management Group still consists of four private Estates and an area of land held by Forestry and Land Scotland (formally known as Forestry Commission). The private Estates are Achnashellach (South Beat only as the land on the north side of the A890 is part of the South West Ross DMG); Arineckaig, Attadale and Inverinate (Inverinate itself has three distinct beats known as Killilan, Inverinate and West Benula). Forestry and Land Scotland has an area of land situated centrally within Glen Carron and is bounded in part by the south beat of Achnashellach Estate.

All five members continue to return cull data annually to NatureScot (formerly known as SNH).

2. Lochalsh Deer Management Group Deer Population

2.1 Deer Count Figures

2.1.1 NatureScot Group Counts

No further whole group counts (organised by NatureScot) have occurred.

2.1.2 Individual Estate Deer Counts

Achnashellach Estate

Achnashellach undertook a spring count in 2020. The count was undertaken on foot by the stalker, Chris Mackenzie. The chart below shows the count for the south beat only, as it is the only beat included in this DMG.

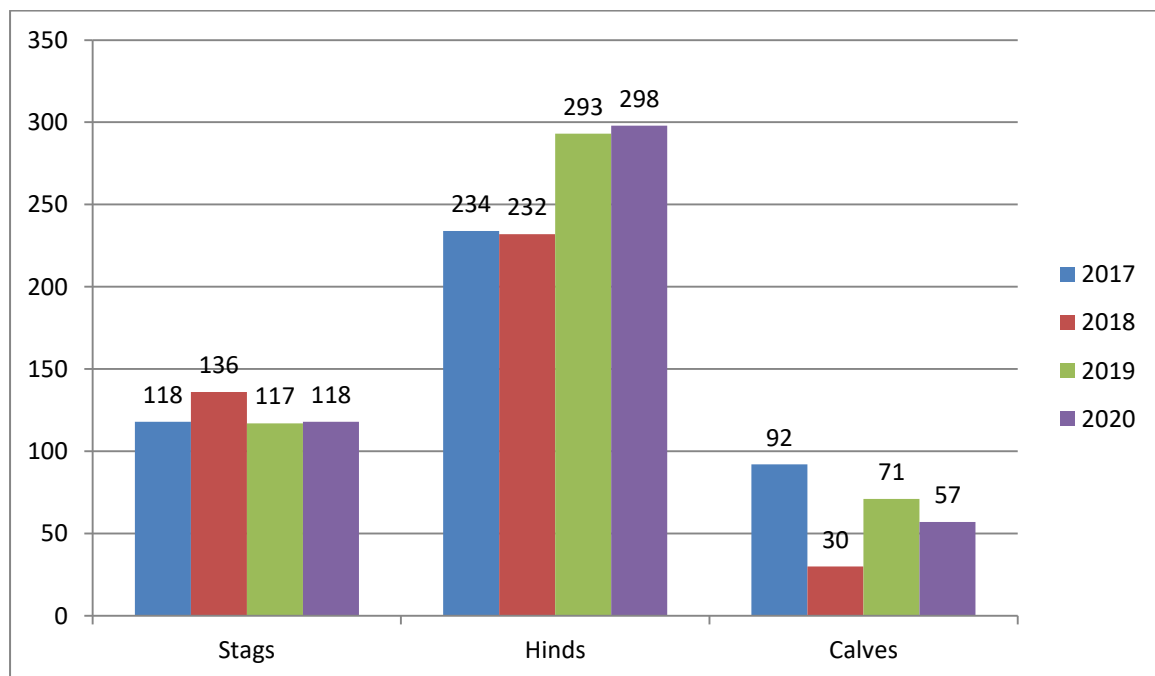


Figure 1- Achnashellach spring counts-south beat only

Arineckaig Estate

Due to the small size of Arineckaig relative to its neighbours, deer numbers tend to reflect weather or other disturbances. Therefore general observations are noted throughout the year as opposed to an organised count and numbers appear to be stable.

Attadale Estate

Attadale undertook a late spring count of the three key deer holding areas in 2020. These counts were done on foot by the Stalker and concentrate on the Far Corries, the slopes of Lurg Mhor above Loch Calavie and on Beinn Dronaig.

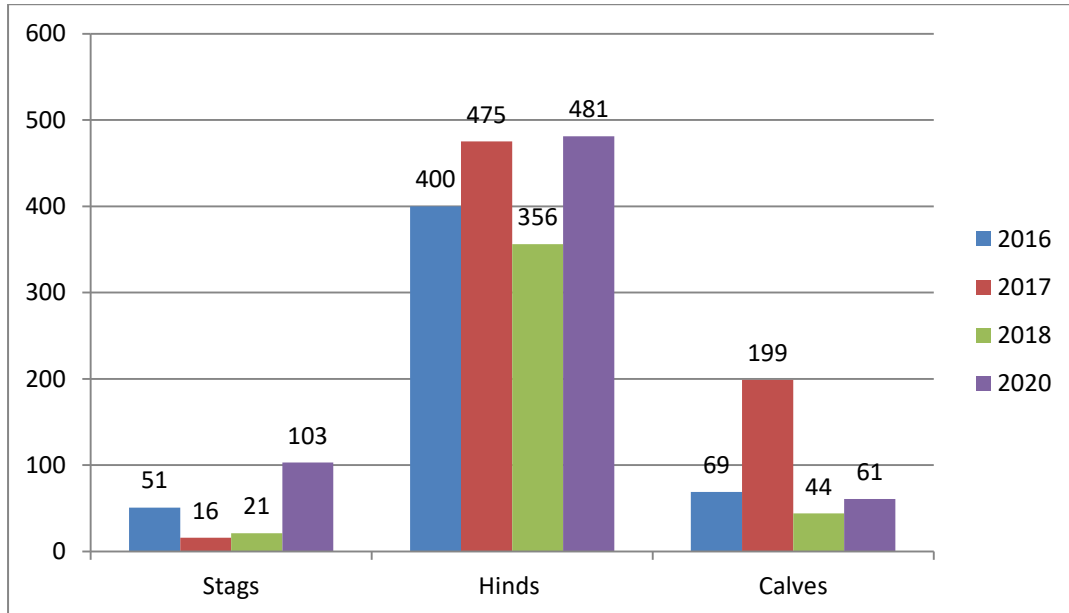


Figure 2- Attadale spring counts

Inverinate Estate

Inverinate Estate normally undertakes counts in the spring, however in 2018; a count was undertaken on 15 December prior to the commencement of the hind/calf cull. Therefore please note that 2018 results for the count were from a different time of year from 2015 and 2016. In addition no count was done in 2019 due to the count in Dec 2018 and no count was undertaken in 2020 due to the Covid19 situation as it is normally done by helicopter.

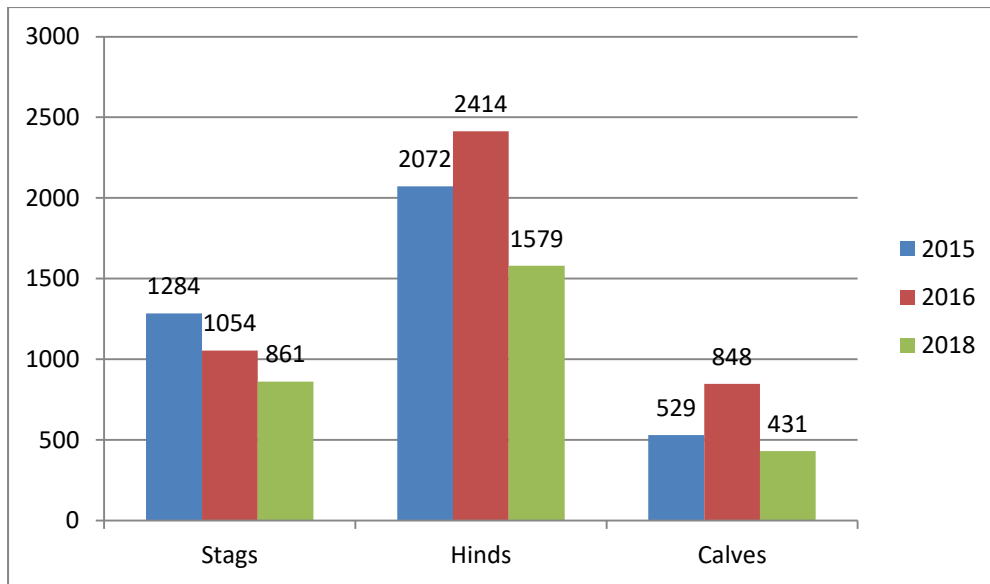


Figure 3- Inverinate spring counts

Forestry and Land Scotland (FLS)- Achnashellach

FLS undertakes dung counting to ascertain its deer levels within the woodland area. The last count was done in 2009 and was estimated at 16 deer per 100ha. However since that time a lot of forestry has been cleared and deer culled and the current estimate provided by FLS is low, 5 deer per 100ha. FLS notes that deer can and do enter and exit the forest through a gorge at the east end of the property.

2.2 Deer Cull Figures

Annual Deer culls to date have been organised at Estate level and cull numbers are decided based on annual count data, annual recruitment levels and annual spring mortality levels.

Cull figures for red deer during the 2019/20 season are shown in the tables below.

Table 1- Achnashellach deer cull figures

Year	STAGS	HINDS	CALVES	TOTAL
2019/20	17	35	8	60

Table 2- Arineckaig deer cull figures

Year	STAGS	HINDS	CALVES	TOTAL
2019/20	5	6	4	15

Table 3- Attadale deer cull figures

Year	STAGS	HINDS	CALVES	TOTAL
2019/20	58	52	11	121

Table 4- Inverinate deer cull figures

Year	STAGS	HINDS	CALVES	TOTAL
2019/20	150	305	71	526

Table 5- Forestry and Land Scotland (FLS) - Achnashellach Forest South

Year	STAGS	HINDS	CALVES	TOTAL
2019/20	8	6	2	16

Table 6- Target cull numbers for 2020/21

Property	STAGS	HINDS	CALVES
Achnashellach	17	25	? depends on hinds culled
Arineckaig	6	6	? depends on hinds culled
Attadale	40	70	30
Inverinate	145	310	? depends on hinds culled
FLS Achnashellach	? subject to deer intrusion to woodland		

Due to the uncertain Covid19 situation and the volatile venison market, there is a lot of uncertainty as to how many deer will be culled this season and the above figures are very rough estimates.

2.3 Other grazing species

Grazing numbers by other species is unchanged from last year.

2.4 Supplementary Feeding

Supplementary feeding remains pretty much unchanged from the 2016 plan, perhaps a slight reduction at Inverinate due to increase in feed costs.

3. Deer related Infrastructure/Accreditation and Workforce skills

3.1 Deer related Infrastructure/Accreditation

The Deer larders at Achnashellach, Attadale and Inverinate (Arineckaig uses Attadale larder) are unchanged and are still annually inspected and 'approved' under the Scottish Quality Venison Assurance (SQVA) Scheme.

Forest and Land Scotland

NatureScot will take over the culling of the FLS property at Achnashellach this year with occasional assistance from FLS staff. The FLS larder will continue to be used for deer processing.

The larder and the procedures undertaken by the deer stalkers in that larder continue to be inspected annually and are 'approved' under the Scottish Quality Venison Assurance (SQVA) Scheme.

3.2 Workforce Skills

The majority of staff members remain the same.

However a trainee stalker, Owen Jack, has joined Inverinate and he will be working through his qualifications via the Gamekeepers course run through Thurso College over the next few years.

Deer culling on the Forestry and Land Scotland property will be undertaken mainly by NatureScot staff rather than Forestry Commission staff. All NatureScot staff must have DSC-Levels 1 and 2, Trained Hunter Status, Fit and Competent status, Quad bike Certification and a First Aid certificate.

Donald Mackenzie of Arineckaig has gained his Food and Hygiene-Level 1 Certificate.

Thomas Watson at Attadale has renewed his Argo and quad bike handling certificates.

Chris Mackenzie has renewed his First Aid Certificate.

Deer Stalking Certificate- Level 2

The following staff members are still working towards their DSC-Level 2 certification.

-Thomas Watson, Attadale Estate

-Ewan Bennett and Dean Baillie and Arran Matheson from Inverinate have now all completed their Level 2.

4. Natural History of Group area

4.1 Site designations

The DMG contains four sites with designations. One *National Scenic Area* (NSA) and three *Sites of Special Scientific Interest* (SSSI). Management of the sites remain unchanged as NatureScot feedback is that the sites are doing well.

5. Public Access and Public Welfare

5.1 Provision on Estates for Recreational Activities

There has been no change to existing facilities and/or information however due to the Covid19 pandemic, the mountain bothies are closed (see section 5.2 below).

All open hill members provided updated details to the NatureScot 'Heading for the Scottish Hills' website in July 2020.

5.2 Public Welfare

Due to the current Covid19 pandemic, Attadale Estate took the decision to close/lock Beinn Dronaig bothy in the spring. The Mountain Bothies Association bothies at Bearneas and Maol Bhuidhe also closed in the spring and to date (Oct 2020) have not been reopened. The bothies have been closed in accordance with government guidance to protect the public. It is not yet known when the bothies will be allowed to reopen.

6. Future Management of the group area

6.1 Actions to achieve the ADMG/NatureScot Benchmark

The DMG outlined a variety of actions in their published Deer Management Plan which they hoped would help the group achieve the 14 Benchmark Criteria prepared by ADMG/NatureScot.

Actions that have begun to be addressed over the past year have been outlined below to show that ongoing progress continues within the group to achieve all the criteria. Please note some of those actions will ongoing throughout the period of the plan (ie Habitat Assessments), while other actions will just be at the planning stage and may not begin until either time or finances become available.

6.1.1 Action 1

Actions to develop mechanisms to manage deer

Deer Population Model

A model was provided to the group to help it plan future deer population figures. The model uses the data in the table below to generate the figures. Density is based on deer numbers per square km and the group has an area of 437.1 square km (43710ha). Cull figures in black are correct and cull figures in blue are 'best guess forecasts' as final culls are still to be determined. Recruitment levels are based on the group's spring counts. Adult mortality and Calf mortality is just the average provided with the model. Exact mortalities are not known, but do generally vary from year to year based on weather conditions, so are likely to be incorrect in the model.

Data table used:

Year	Stag Cull	Hind Cull	Calf Cull	Recruitment	Adult Mortality	Calf Mortality
(2016) 1	239	455	223	0.24	0.02	0.06
(2017) 2	258	636	310	0.36	0.02	0.06
(2018) 3	201	200	64	0.23	0.02	0.06
(2019) 4	238	404	96	0.17	0.02	0.06
(2020) 5	208	411	120	0.15	0.02	0.06

Resulting model predictions:

		Stags	Hinds	Calves	Density
2016	Spring Counted Population	1920	3845	1221	16.0
	Summer Population	2531	4456	1069	18.5
	Cull	239	455	223	
	Mortality	51	89	64	
2017	Spring Population	2241	3911	782	15.9
	Summer Population	2632	4302	1549	19.5
	Cull	258	636	310	
	Mortality	53	86	93	
2018	Spring Population	2321	3580	1146	16.2
	Summer Population	2894	4153	955	18.4
	Actual Cull	201	200	64	
	Mortality	58	83	57	
2019	Spring Population	2635	3870	834	16.9
	Summer Population	3052	4287	729	18.5
	Actual Cull	238	404	96	
	Mortality	61	86	44	
2020	Spring Population	2753	3798	589	16.4
	Summer Population	3048	4092	614	17.8
	Proposed Cull	208	411	120	
	Mortality	61	82	37	
2021	Spring Population	2779	3599	457	15.7
	Summer Population	3007	3828	574	17.0

The cull data for 2016-2019 in the data table and the initial NatureScot spring count in 2016 are accurate. Recruitment levels are based on the group's spring count data, but adult mortality and calf mortality figures are just based on average figures as the group does not have accurate annual counts. Therefore the group feels that actual deer numbers will vary from what is presented on the model. As a result, although useful, it is felt that the model can only be used as a guide in conjunction with actual on the ground counting which generally tends to be done every year.

The group will continue to work on refining the model to try and achieve more accurate forecasts.

6.1.2 Action 2

Actions for the delivery of designated features into favourable conditions

The DMG contains four sites with designations, one *National Scenic Area* (NSA) and three *Sites of Special Scientific Interest* (SSSI). Two of the SSSI's are considered in 'favourable' condition by NatureScot. However in the 2009 assessment, the Affric-Strathglass SSSI was considered in 'mixed condition' and as a result, affected landowners did offer up and work on proposals alongside NatureScot to help return it to a favourable condition.

A reassessment of the SSSI was undertaken in early summer 2016 and the results have shown that there has been considerable change with most of the impact results now in the Low and Low-to-Moderate range with a significant reduction in browsing and trampling. Landowners will continue to work with NatureScot to ensure the improvements continue.

6.1.3 Action 3

Actions to manage deer to retain existing native woodland cover and improve woodland condition in the medium to long term

As part of its long term ongoing Estate Forestry Plan, Attadale Estate plans to expand native woodland cover over the next few years. No further expansion of native woodland has occurred this year as felling on the existing conifer plantations had been scheduled for this year and 149Ha was cleared.

Arineckaig Estate currently has no plans to fence any further native woodland areas.

Achnashellach is still hoping to undertake a regeneration scheme at Creag an Eilein as noted in last year's update, however the Estate is still currently securing funding for the project.

Inverinate is currently looking at doing some small natural regeneration projects; however this is still in the planning stage.

6.1.4 Action 4

Actions to demonstrate DMG contribution to the Scottish Government expansion target of 25% woodland cover

As noted in last year's update, Attadale Estate has produced a new Long Term Forest Plan (LTFP) which was finalised in the summer of 2017. The long term vision for Attadale Estate's woodlands is to increase the quality and extent of native woodland habitat through new woodland creation and the encouragement of natural regeneration within the existing woodlands.

As noted under Action 3 above, Achnashellach and Inverinate are also in the process of expanding native woodland cover.

6.1.5 Action 5

Actions to monitor and manage deer impacts in the wider countryside

The DMG began habitat assessments in the summer of 2016. It was intended that those assessments would be done in early summer for the first three years (to provide good baseline data) and then every few years to monitor any changes. These assessments would follow the recommended process outlined by NatureScot. (Please note the Forest and Land Scotland land is not involved in this project).

The results produced last year showed that between 2016-2019 most sites monitored were in the low or moderate browsing level category. The results were discussed at the group meeting and it was felt that no action was currently needed as the 'standard impact target' for both habitats to achieve a sustainable habitat is that 90% of survey samples are found to be in the Low to Moderate or Low Range. The group results did show that at least 90% of the survey samples were in the Low to Moderate or Low Range. However group members were happy to look at the sites identified as heavy browsing and see if there is anything that can be done to reduce browsing at those locations.

A reassessment of the sites is due to be undertaken in another couple of years.

6.1.6 Action 6

Actions to improve Scotland's ability to store carbon by maintaining or improving ecosystem health.

As noted in the original plan, approximately 550ha of land has been set aside in the past 25 years for natural regeneration/native woodland planting schemes. This is on top of the approximate 3988ha of woodland (which is a mixture of native and commercial coniferous forestry) already found within the Lochalsh DMG. Attadale Estate has begun to action a Long Term Forest Plan which will create 286ha of new native woodland over the next 20 years as well as improve the existing commercial and native forest areas.

Inverinate and Achnashellach Estates are also actioning some Woodland Management/Creation schemes.

These proposed expansions to the woodland area will help improve Scotland's ecosystem health as the habitat within the fenced areas is highly likely to be in good health due to very low grazing pressure and the increase in tree numbers will help store more carbon.

The Habitat Assessment process will assist the DMG in determining the health of the habitat and if necessary the DMG can implement changes to herbivore numbers if it is considered that large areas of habitat is suffering from grazing/trampling pressures which are considered to be 'above' the acceptable impact ranges.

The DMG will continue to work closely with NatureScot to ensure that ecosystem health is maintained (or if required improved) to ensure Scotland's ability to store carbon increases.

The group also has 2229ha of Blanket Bog and as noted in last year's update, the DMG members are aware of the National Peatland Plan and also of the possible funding available via the Peatland Action Project. Some group members have visited other Estates where Peatland Restoration is

currently being undertaken and one option currently being considered is some of the individual group members selecting some trial areas of peat hag to try and reprofile and revegetate. If the reprofiling proves successful, the group may consider going for funding to undertake work on further areas in the future. Due to the Covid19 situation this year, no trial areas have yet been done.

There is no River Basin management currently going on within the group area, however the group members would be happy to contribute in the future if asked.

6.2.7 Action 10

Actions to identify and promote opportunities contributing to public health and well-being.

The DMG members' larders and the procedures undertaken within those larders are still inspected annually and are currently all 'approved' under the Scottish Quality Venison Assurance (SQVA) Scheme. This ensures that food safety is maintained and carcass handling and venison processing is compliant with the Best Practice Guide.

Due to the Covid19 situation this year it has been difficult to identify and promote opportunities contributing to public health aside from ensuring that all staff follow government guidance with regards to social interactions when dealing with the general public and advise the public when necessary.

6.2.8 Action 13

Actions to ensure effective communications on deer management issues

Lochalsh DMG has prepared a Communications Policy which states that *'the group is committed to ensuring that effective communication on deer management issues both within the DMG and throughout the wider community is undertaken'*. This effective communication will be undertaken by the following actions:

- All meeting agendas and minutes will be published on the DMG website
- All Deer Management Plans and Plan updates will be published on the DMG website
- During the main DMP preparations, the group will seek feedback from the public and other relevant bodies
- Contact details of the group Chair and Secretary will be provided on the DMG website
- DMG will actively seek opportunities to promote deer management such as school visits, work with students and other interest groups

Please note, due to the Covid19 pandemic situation this year, public interaction has had to be limited and even the group meetings have had to be held via the internet.

7.0 Actions to take forward

The Lochalsh Deer Management Group published their new Deer Management Plan in August 2016. The Plan had a timeframe of five years with a full review due in 2020. In addition as it was a live, evolving plan, it was decided that a short annual update should also be prepared each autumn to ensure that the plan and its actions are being regularly reviewed.

Due to the Covid19 pandemic this year, it was decided that a full review be delayed until 2021 and just a brief update prepared. This update has provided further information which demonstrates that the group continues to work on the actions (where possible) required to achieve the desired Benchmark Criteria. However due to the Covid19 situation this year, a lot of work has had to be delayed due to government guidelines on social interaction and financial concerns.

It is hoped a full review will occur in 2021.

The summary table below outlines actions that the group intends to work on in the coming year and beyond:

	Benchmark Criteria Action	Actions Lochalsh DMG plans to undertake in coming year and beyond
1	Actions to develop mechanisms to manage deer.	DMP was published in 2016 and annual updates were provided in 2017, 2019 and 2020. Group has also commenced population modelling which will be used in conjunction with the annual spring count to help determine future cull requirements. Model will require more refining to ensure group is confident in its output.
2	Actions for the delivery of designated features into favourable conditions.	Strathglass Complex SSSI was the only designated site that required improvement. A NatureScot review in 2016 indicated good overall improvement to the site with regards to browsing and trampling. Inverinate (group member affected by SSSI) will continue to work with NatureScot to ensure this improvement continues and will provide group with any updates on site.
3	Actions to manage deer to retain existing woodland cover and improve woodland condition in the medium to long term.	Most group members are currently involved in woodland projects with Attadale felling coniferous woodland, Achnashellach is still hoping to fence off an existing area of native woodland to allow regeneration and Inverinate is looking into fencing off some small areas for native regeneration.

		Projects are ongoing and the members will provide feedback to group as projects evolve.
4	Actions to demonstrate DMG contribution to the Scottish Government expansion target of 25% woodland cover.	<p>New areas of native woodland are planned for the next few years and some areas of native woodland are to be expanded. Members will keep group updated as projects progress.</p> <p>Members will provide maps of new areas as they are completed.</p>
5	Actions to monitor and manage deer impacts in the wider countryside.	<p>Three years of Habitat Impact Assessment was completed in 2018 and a summary report was published in 2019.</p> <p>Group members discussed results and agreed that as the browsing levels met the 90% of survey sites in the Low or Low to moderate category recommended by NatureScot, no actions were required. However survey sites would be resurveyed in next few years.</p>
6	Actions to improve Scotland's ability to store carbon by maintaining or improving ecosystem health.	<p>The planned Woodland Expansion across the group will increase Scotland's ability to store carbon.</p> <p>Some group members still hope to undertake some trial sites of peatland restoration in 2021 prior to committing to any funding.</p> <p>River Basin Management Planning currently not occurring in group area, group happy to contribute in ever needed.</p> <p>Group members will provide feedback at meetings as to how trial sites are going.</p>
7	Actions to reduce or mitigate the risk of establishment of non-native species.	Group will continue to share news on non-native species and what actions they are taking.
8	Actions to protect designated historic and cultural features from being damaged by deer eg trampling.	Not considered to be an issue.

9	Actions to contribute to delivering higher standards of competence in deer management.	<p>Group members will continue to work towards all the relevant qualifications and keep existing qualifications up to date. Where possible, the group will try to organise training events together.</p> <p>Group members will provide updates as qualifications are achieved.</p>
10	Actions to identify and promote opportunities contributing to public health and well-being.	<p>Group members will continue to promote awareness of issues such as Lyme's Disease and are always open to assist in research.</p> <p>Any new opportunities to be discussed at meetings with other group members.</p>
11	Actions to maximise economic benefits associated with deer	<p>Recorded in plan.</p> <p>Any changes will be discussed at group meetings.</p>
12	Actions to minimise the economic costs of deer and ensure deer management is cost-effective.	<p>DMG is aware of and responsive to potential negative impacts by deer and undertake a range of work to help minimise these costs.</p> <p>Any new impacts will be discussed with group members at meetings.</p>
13	Actions to ensure effective communication on deer management issues.	<p>Group will ensure that all DMPs, DMP Updates, Meeting agendas and minutes are published on group website.</p> <p>Group will continue to ensure that meeting invites are sent to relevant interested individuals.</p> <p>Group members will look at other ways to communicate on deer management issues and discuss at meetings.</p>
14	Actions to ensure deer welfare is taken fully into account at individual animal and population level.	<p>Welfare is currently safeguarded in DMG through members following the Best Practice Guidance on the Management of Wild Deer in Scotland manual and the existing high skill level in the group.</p> <p>Group members continue to update/renew qualifications</p> <p>Other areas of data may get looked into if the group feels it will help ensure deer welfare is maintained.</p>