

Control of Mink in Edinburgh

Transport, Infrastructure and Environment Committee

29 November 2011

1 Purpose of report

To respond to a motion from Councillor McInnes remitted from Council on 25 August 2011 calling for a report on the control of mink across the city. Councillor McInnes has been consulted on the content of this report and discussions are ongoing.

2 Summary

- 2.1 The Council does not have any specific powers or responsibilities to undertake a mink eradication or control programme. Mink are not considered to present a concern to public health and the Council has received very few complaints relating to mink.
- 2.2 American mink are classed as Invasive Non-Native Species. However, the circumstances where Scottish Natural Heritage would issue a Species Control Order on a landowner are unlikely to exist locally as mink are already well established in and around Edinburgh's watercourses. Rivers and canals in Edinburgh have approximately 72 kilometres of suitable watercourse habitat.
- 2.3 For mink control to be effective it must be carried out intensively, on a multi-watercourse catchment level, otherwise new animals will quickly re-colonise to replace any mink which are culled. There is currently no strategic mink control programme underway within Edinburgh.

3 Main report

3.1 Background

The American mink was first imported to Great Britain in 1929 with a view to establishing fur farms. It is believed that there were mink farms in Ratho near to the Union Canal and the Balerno area.

Mink are usually associated with aquatic habitats, including coastal areas. The animal is solitary and territorial, occupying territory 1.5 to 2km in length along waterways and shorelines.

It would appear from records held by the Council's Biodiversity Section that within Edinburgh, the mink population has expanded to watercourses throughout the city, including Leith Docks.

- 3.2 Mink are highly adaptable predators and can affect prey species which do not form an essential part of their diet. Consequently, a decline in the population of one prey species will cause mink to switch to an alternative prey. Mink are semi-aquatic carnivores and will prey on species such as water voles and ground nesting birds.
- 3.3 The Council has received very few complaints relating to mink. In the last year, one complaint has been received from the public, and records indicate that a total of only two complaints have ever been received.

Legal requirements and policy framework

- 3.4 Under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and the Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011, it is an offence to release mink from captivity into the wild. However, for animals already established in the wild, there is no clear, specific legal requirement on landowners or public bodies to control mink.
- 3.5 Mink are not considered a pest of public health concern and are not included in pest control legislation. General public health legislation also would not apply to mink.
- 3.6 The Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011 requires Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) to produce of a Code of Practice on Invasive Non-Native Species. In the draft Code for consultation, provision is made for SNH to issue 'Species Control Orders' on a landowner for any invasive species in certain circumstances:
- Where action can prevent an invasive animal or plant becoming established or spreading to new areas; or
 - Where a strategic eradication programme is at risk, due to a landowner or occupier failing to participate or refusing access.

Neither of these conditions could be applied to mink in Edinburgh, as mink are already established across the city and they are a highly mobile species with individual territories extending between one to two kilometres and covering many landholdings.

- 3.7 SNH has a Species Action Framework which identifies mink as a target species for control in priority areas. A small number of partnership projects have been carried out across Scotland through this programme, for example in the Outer Hebrides and Cairngorms National Park. The objective of these programmes has been to protect threatened populations of rare native species. SNH does not currently have any plans to expand mink control programmes to Edinburgh through its national Species Action Framework.
- 3.8 There is a general statutory duty on all public bodies within the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004 to 'further the conservation of biodiversity'. The main delivery mechanism for this locally is the Edinburgh Biodiversity Action

Plan (2010-2015). The Council takes the lead role in implementing the Plan. Other contributors to the Plan include SNH, NHS Lothian, Historic Scotland, Scottish Wildlife Trust, British Waterways and Pentland Hills Regional Park.

- 3.9 There are currently forums in place to review work relating to control of invasive non-native species.

The recently formed Forth Invasive Species Forum will oversee the development and delivery of the Forth District Biosecurity Plan. The Forum is led by the River Forth Fisheries Trust and the Council is represented on this group.

A working group of the Edinburgh Biodiversity Partnership (EBP) has been formed to review invasive species control within Edinburgh. The Council is lead partner for the EBP, and various services are represented on the working group, together with external stakeholders. The remit of this group is to consider which invasive species should be targeted, develop partnership projects and initiatives for which resources can be sought.

Mink control

- 3.10 The Scottish Government 'Draft Code of Practice on Invasive Non Native Species' states that "once a species has become widely established, full scale eradication is possible or cost effective in only a minority of cases". Mink are widespread and well established in Scotland, including the Edinburgh area.

- 3.11 Recent advice from SNH stated that, for mink control to be effective, it must be carried out intensively, on a multi-watercourse catchment level, otherwise new animals will rapidly re-colonise to replace mink which are culled. Control programmes underway in other parts of Scotland have significant levels of funding from European or national funding programmes and are medium-term projects of 3-5 years or longer.

- 3.12 Control of mink would be achieved by trapping, followed by humane killing. Traps would need to be set at regular intervals along water courses and would require regular inspections (a minimum of twice daily).

In view of the likely numbers of mink and their territorial nature, any trapping programme would need to be extensive, as eliminating mink from one location would create a vacuum, which would be filled by mink migrating from elsewhere. An eradication programme would need to be long term for the same reason.

- 3.13 The Council's Pest Control Service currently does not carry out any work involving control or eradication of mink.

There is no specific legislation which provides the Council with the authority and responsibility to initiate or conduct a mink eradication programme. Eradication programmes currently carried out by Scottish Natural Heritage are performed under legislation specific to this body. Any action taken by the Council on private property would require the express approval of the property owner.

- 3.14 Enquiries have been made to determine what activities (if any) are being carried out by other Scottish local authorities to control mink. The replies

indicate that no Scottish local authority has a policy or undertakes mink control and eradication.

- 3.15 If an individual animal is causing problems for a property or landowner, control measures can be taken by the owner using appropriate commercial pest control services and complying with animal welfare legislation. However, as outlined above, the ecology of the species means that, in the absence of a large scale control programme, new animals are likely to re-colonise the area.

4 Financial Implications

- 4.1 Control of mink is likely to have significant financial implications, and require a long term financial commitment. The annual cost to control mink is estimated at £4200 per kilometre length of watercourse. There are 72 kilometres of watercourses within the city, which would equate to an estimated annual cost of not less than £300,000 per annum. For an eradication programme to be successful there would need to be a commitment to continue the programme for at least three to five years.

5 Equalities Impact

- 5.1 This report proposes no change to current policies or procedures and as such a full impact assessment is not required. The contents have no relevance to the public sector Equality Duty of the Equality Act 2010.

6 Environmental Impact

- 6.1 Mink are an invasive non-native species and widely recognised as a significant threat to biodiversity, particularly water vole and ground nesting birds. Species introduced outside of their natural range can have a detrimental impact on native biodiversity, for example via competition or predation.

7 Conclusions

- 7.1 Mink control in Edinburgh should be considered further by the two existing invasive species forums for Edinburgh and the Forth catchment, which allows all relevant stakeholders an opportunity to input. It is proposed that Council representatives raise the issue within these forums, however it is considered unlikely that control of mink would be seen as a priority in securing biodiversity.
- 7.2 The issue of mink control should be considered in the wider context of work on invasive non-native species. The ecology of mink means that to be effective a co-ordinated programme of control on a multi-catchment basis would be required. Significant resources would be required, and in other areas this has been in the form of European or nationally funded projects. The driver for mink control is ecological rather than statutory.
- 7.3 The Council does not have any specific powers or responsibilities to undertake a programme of mink eradication or control. Mink are not considered to present a concern to public health and the Council has received very few complaints relating to mink.

8 Recommendations

- 8.1 The Committee is asked to note the report and discharge Councillor McInnes' motion.

Mark Turley
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Appendices	None
Contact/tel/email	Dr Andrew Mackie - Environmental Health & Scientific Services Manager 0131 469 5925 andrew.mackie@edinburgh.gov.uk
Wards affected	City wide
Single Outcome Agreement	Supports National Outcome 12 - We value and enjoy our built and natural environment and protect it and enhance it for future generations.
Background Papers	Edinburgh Local Biodiversity Action Plan 2010-2015 https://www.edinburgh.gov.uk/downloads/file/1956/edinburgh_biodiversity_action_plan

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