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14 October 2022

Dear Edward,

Thank you for your letter of 6 October requesting information on a number of matters that I agreed to write to the Committee on at the Programme for Government evidence session on 27 September.

I have provided below, responses to each of the points outlined in your letter:

### **Revised Forestry Grants Scheme**

In the Programme for Government 2022, we set out plans to improve the Forestry Grant Scheme (FGS) to deliver better community engagement, improved biodiversity and increased value for money. The FGS is already securing a wide range of public goods, helping to deliver against Scotland's Forestry Strategy and supporting economic, environmental and social outcomes. There is strong support for the scheme from our stakeholders, and we regularly make changes to improve how and what it can deliver. For example, earlier this year we announced enhanced grant rates for native woodland planting in the crofting counties.

We are working with stakeholders to develop further improvements to the scheme which will meet the three aims specified in the Programme for Government, and expect to implement several enhancements for the new grant year beginning in April 2023, within a programme of continuous improvement.

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## Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs)

A table containing key dates is included below:

Formal Public Consultation on HPMA Policy Framework and Site Selection Guidelines	winter 2022/23
HPMA Policy Framework, Site Selection Guidelines and Consultation Report Published - <b>Site Selection and Assessment Begins</b>	summer 2023
Series of Stakeholder Workshops to inform development of initial HPMA draft site proposals and consideration of third party proposals.	summer to winter 2023

Our commitment to designate and protect at least 10% of Scotland's seas as HPMAs by March 2026 requires a broad programme of work to be carried out over a highly ambitious timeline.

Before the end of 2022, the Scottish Government intends to launch a formal public consultation on a Policy Framework and Site Selection Guidelines for HPMAs. After a 14-week consultation period followed by a thorough analysis of responses, we intend to publish final versions of the Policy Framework and Site Selection Guidelines by mid-2023. These will then be used as guiding documents as we work with partners such as NatureScot and JNCC to conduct a site selection and assessment process. This will include a series of workshops, engaging a wide range of stakeholders, and providing opportunities for third party proposals. We intend to produce a first draft of HPMA proposals by the end of 2023, which will be subject to further refinement through stakeholder engagement.

### Public consultation on 'Land Reform in a Net Zero Nation'

As of 12 October there have been 207 responses to the consultation. The consultation closes on 30 October.

### Circular Economy Bill Procurement Requirements

We did not consult on specific procurement proposals in the Circular Economy Bill consultation. However, the consultation set out that we are looking to identify areas where regulations under section 82A of the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 could enhance circular economic opportunities in relation to the procurement of goods, works or services. The Waste Route Map consultation, which was consulted on at the same time, also set out a range of proposals in relation to procurement.

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## **Criminalisation of Ecocide**

During topical question time on 27 September, I responded to questions from Monica Lennon to say that I am aware of the growing international campaign to see a fifth crime being added to the Rome statute of the International Criminal Court, with a view to making provision for ecocide. I said that I am more than happy to engage with colleagues from across the chamber on how we can develop that further and to accept the invitation from Ms Lennon to engage with her and other stakeholders on the issue of ecocide. I will, of course, continue to work with my Ministerial colleagues to determine the appropriate position for the Scottish Government on these issues.

## **The Community Bus Fund**

The Community Bus Fund was a commitment within the 2021 Programme for Government which covered the whole Parliamentary session. The aim of the Community Bus Fund will be to support local transport authorities to improve local public transport in their areas. The fund will support local transport authorities to explore the full range of options set out in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019, including municipal bus services.

The Community Bus Fund for 2022/23 was allocated £1 million, and was due to be released to seven local transport authorities this month (October 2022) based on levels of rural deprivation. However, the fund does not meet the criteria on essential spend this year, and allocations have not yet been made to local authorities. Given the scale of financial challenge to close the resource gap and address the cost crisis, the allocation for 2022/23 has been paused as part of the emergency budget review.

Officials have contacted the relevant local authorities to discuss the current position, acknowledging that the ability to spend any allocations within the financial year becomes more difficult with less remaining time. Local transport authorities were receptive to the news, as they currently have limited time to consider pilots and are dealing with issues around maintaining existing services.

Allocations for future years are expected to increase, and to include Capital funding, and are therefore subject to the COSLA governance process. Work is underway to create options for future years of the Community Bus Fund, with a view to being able to make rapid progress in the next financial year and optimise the time local authorities will have to develop and initiate projects.

I hope this is helpful.

**MICHAEL MATHESON**

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