

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Special Meeting of **Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in Council Chamber, County Hall, Durham on **Monday 13 December 2021 at 9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor B Coult (Chair)

Members of the Committee:

Councillors J Elmer, E Adam, P Atkinson, L Brown, J Charlton, L Fenwick, C Lines, R Manchester, D Nicholls, J Purvis, J Quinn, T Stubbs and S Townsend

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors G Hutchinson, C Kay, B McAloon, I McLean and Mrs P Holding.

2 Substitute Members

There were no substitute Members in attendance.

3 Declarations of Interest

Councillor D Nicholls informed the meeting that his spouse worked for the British Ecological Society.

4 Items from Co-opted Members or Interested Parties

There were no items from Co-opted Members or Interested Parties.

5 Question to Council on 22 September 2021 - Ecological Emergency

The Chair welcomed Oliver Sherratt, Head of Environment and Stuart Priestley, Principal Ecologist to the meeting.

Ann Whitton, Overview and Scrutiny Officer introduced the report outlining that the review activity was as a result of a report to Cabinet on 13 October entitled 'Consideration of an Ecological Emergency in County Durham' and asked Councillor Elmer, Vice Chair to provide context to the question.

Councillor Elmer highlighted that this was a very important area hence the question to Council in September asking that the authority consider declaring an emergency and take the same approach as it had in declaring a climate emergency. He continued that the collapse of ecosystems was item four on the World Risk Register and was fundamental to our survival as a human race and that not protecting ecosystems could lead to global incidents such as a pandemic.

Councillor Elmer advised that there was evidence of a global and national decline of ecosystems but data as to whether this constituted a countywide emergency was less definitive. Councillor Elmer added that based on global and national data it was warranted to justify an ecological emergency but it was less clear whether the data available was sufficient to justify a countywide emergency. He continued that the Environment Act 2021 placed responsibilities on the County Council to map habitats at a county level and look at the gaps but did not ask the County Council to look across council services to address and identify actions to help repair and develop habitats in the county.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

6 Consideration of an Ecological Emergency

The Committee considered a report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change regarding the declaration of an ecological emergency (for copy see file of Minutes) and received a presentation from the Head of Environment and the Principal Ecologist (for slides see file of Minutes).

The Head of Environment referred to the report to Cabinet on 13 October which was an overview report looking at the national picture and requesting Scrutiny to look at this issue and examine the available evidence to determine whether an ecological emergency needed to be declared with Scrutiny providing a response to Cabinet with recommendations within a six-month period. The Head of Environment highlighted that the information had limitations and that the Committee would need to determine whether it had enough information to make a decision. The Committee may wish to provide feedback to Cabinet in relation to the evidence available at a local level and defer making a decision or decide whether based on the information available they were either going to declare or not declare. The Head of Environment highlighted the decline in species and gave an example of looking at wildlife living in a stream and the closer the stream got to sewerage outlets the wildlife became less and that when wildlife became depleted this could tell us a lot about ourselves as wildlife had benefits for all as everybody was dependent on healthy resilient ecosystems. Once wildlife had gone it had gone for good.

The Head of Environment advised that wildlife was a key feature in tourism and recreation and gave an example that Sea Eagles on the coast could increase visitor numbers. Wildlife enriched the quality of life. There were strong links to climate

change because the loss of wildlife could be an indicator of pollutants in either water courses or the earth.

The Principal Ecologist informed the Committee that the presentation included readily available data with international and national data based on United Nations and UK Government reports, local data based on previous audits, species atlases, Durham County Council green mapping, Ancient Woodland and data from Natural England and the Environment Agency. In addition, discussions had been held with various organisations including Durham Wildlife Trust, Durham Bird Club and the Environment Agency. In relation to global data the data available was summarised and was taken from global sources such as the Living Planet Index which was key and gave information on thousands of populations and indicated an alarming decline in species due to development and deforestation. More than 85% of area of wetlands had been lost, which was very significant. National data was taken from a variety of UK government reports and provided a similar picture to global data which showed a decline in wildlife. The 1970s baseline showed changes in wildlife and habitats that gave a clear national picture. However, this decline in habitats and species predated the 1970's baseline and the baseline was already low when tracking of the decline started in 1970's.

The Principal Ecologist outlined that moving from national data to regional and then local data resulted in the picture becoming less clear and there was less confidence in the data, so local data gave a picture that came with a health warning. Local information had been collated from Sites of Significant Scientific Interest (SSSI) data from Natural England, re-survey of the Local Wildlife Sites, information from Durham County Council Green Infrastructure Mapping and Ancient Woodland Inventory and the Environment Agency.

In relation to habitats in SSSIs the data was good. Data from Natural England on SSSIs indicated that a large proportion of sites were in an unfavourable condition. SSSIs were of national importance for biodiversity. The County Council had carried out condition assessments of 42% of local wildlife sites and of those approximately 70% failed due to compartments being in unfavourable condition, usually due to inappropriate management. There was good data to show condition of Local Wildlife Sites which were designated as they were locally important for biodiversity.

In relation to woodlands, there had been a loss of a quarter of Durham's ancient woodland since the 1920s and the ancient woodland left was usually located adjacent to watercourses with steep valleys where it was impossible to plough. The functionality of woodlands was 10 hectares or above and the majority of County Durham's woodlands were too small to be regarded as functional. Small areas of woodland allowed more light and wind into the core therefore the smaller the woodland area the more impoverished it became. Ancient Woodland was categorised into two types, Broadleaf and Planted Ancient Woodland (PAWS) that were planted with non-native species. Although PAWS were regarded as ancient woodland (soils and woodland cover retained), they could not be regarded as being

in good condition and a significant proportion of ancient woodland was impoverished PAWS.

The Water Framework Directive was intended to achieve a good status of all waterbodies. This was EU legislation that was still viable, and the Environment Agency carried out water quality improvements with the aim to get waterways in good condition. There were no high-quality waterways in County Durham. The vast majority of both the Wear and the Tees were classified as being in a moderate to poor condition and were not reaching the respective targets in the Water Framework Directives.

Data on habitats was good and supported the national data, but data on species was less so as there was often no clear data to show trends across periods of time, The records were ad hoc.

The Principal Ecologist informed the Committee that in relation to Durham priority birds the atlas provided 'guiding statement' trends between 1985 and 1995. In relation to coastal birds data which was available that showed an increase in 4 species of bird, a slight decrease in 3 and a stable population in 1 species, however there was no data available for 9 species of coastal birds. There was more data available for farmland birds which indicated that 7 species had decreased plus a further 3 species had experienced a slight decrease. There was a clear decrease in Farmland birds. Similarly, the data available showed a decline in upland and scrub and woodland birds although data was not available for 4 species of upland birds and 5 species of woodland and scrub birds. There was also a decline in the number of urban and garden birds although there was no data available for 5 species.

In relation to priority mammals, there were 17 priority mammals and herptiles in County Durham and there were clear trends for five species. There had been a catastrophic decline in Water Vole numbers in County Durham and this followed the national trend with a loss from approximately 90% of range in the late 1990's and a further 30% loss between 2006 and 2015. The other species included the great crested newt, grass snakes, common lizard, and red squirrel all of which had seen a decline in populations or distribution.

The first recorded data of Bumblebees was from the 1800s, and there was now a four species that were extinct and two others were declining or had declined.

There were seven priority butterfly species in County Durham and key butterfly species were declining. However, in relation to the Small Pearl Bordered Fritillary and the Dark Green Fritillary active management had been undertaken, working with farmers to create breeding areas and increase numbers, although the declines had not been reversed.

The salmon population which had increased when issues with pollution were resolved, but fish counter data on the Wear and Tees indicated a recent decline.

The assessment of populations and probability of achieving management objectives in relation to the salmon population was at risk in the Tees with less than a 5% chance, the prognosis for the Wear was slightly better currently they were not at risk with a 50 -95% but the projection for 2025 is that they would probably be at risk (5 - 50%) of not achieving management objectives.

Members were advised of positive information in relation to some species declines being reversed such as otters and small pearl bordered fritillary but there was a need for caution as the numbers were not at the level they previously were. Work had been undertaken in the county to create habitats and to restore habitats with work undertaken by Durham Heritage Coast, NPAONB and Woodland Revival projects.

The Head of Environment informed the Committee that even the most protected sites were showing signs of decline and these trends in County Durham were being reflected nationally. There was strong evidence of international and national decline and although the local data was not perfect it did mirror this. Although the Environment Act 2021 had details for Durham County Council to follow it did not state about determining whether there was a need to declare an ecological emergency. Durham County Council was a major landowner in County Durham that included 92 local wildlife sites and a wide estate of public open space and that even on SSSI sites there is a decline in species. Members were advised that any declaration would be more effective if it was declared on a partnership basis.

The Head of Environment added that there were links between climate change and an ecological emergency as there was a lot of scientific evidence that both species and habitats were impacted by climate change. Good work had been carried out in relation to restoration of peatlands, which had stopped the erosion of peat bogs. Local Nature Recovery Strategies were a requirement of the Environment Act 2021, but the Act provided little detail and the service was awaiting additional information.

The Head of Environment advised that the committee had taken an interest in the work of the Environment and Climate Change Partnership and the work of the Ecological Emergency Workstream which had started work on a Local Nature Recovery Strategy and this would fit well and work in tandem on an ecological emergency.

The Chair thanked the Head of Environment and the Principal Ecologist for their joint presentation and sought comments from the Committee.

Councillor Brown did not consider that conifers should be planted on ancient woodlands (PAWs) because they were not a native species. Councillor Brown highlighted the decline in birds such as starlings, the rise in disease through climate change and was horrified at the lack of available data which needed to be rectified. She supported the view that there was a link between an ecological emergency and climate change.

The Head of Environment replied that there was a need to properly understand the state of the environment by using data that was comprehensive and solid. The Committee may wish to raise issues with Cabinet about improving both data and knowledge of the environment to inform the development of future plans.

Councillor Quinn considered that the public should be educated in relation to the importance of habitats and wildlife. Councillor Quinn gave an example in his Electoral Division where the public had requested that woods be cut down and suggested that an education package was required to help the public understand what the Council was doing and the reason for doing it. Councillor Quinn asked whether there were changes in wildlife numbers during the pandemic.

The Head of Environment replied that education was vital and fell into two areas, firstly the need to explain why the Council was doing certain actions and activities and secondly the need to improve signage. He gave an example of work the Clean and Green team had done in cutting around the edge of verges to show that it was a deliberate action. He continued that many habitats on SSSIs were on land in private ownership and there was a need to educate landowners. With reference to the pandemic the Head of Environment considered that there had been an increase in wildlife and also that people had become more aware of their surroundings and noticed wildlife more.

The Principal Ecologist advised that habitats needed to be managed and not left to their own devices. In relation to an increase in wildlife during the pandemic, the Principal Ecologist advised that although information was not available there was no doubt that people had more time to notice wildlife and there were reports of more wildlife being seen in urban areas. There was also less noise from traffic which had allowed people to hear birds more than usual.

Councillor Adam suggested that at this moment an ecological emergency could not be declared as there was insufficient detail. He continued that he thought there was a need to hear evidence from partners and get their views. Councillor Adam suggested that by doing small actions this could help stop the decline in habitats and species and suggested that the Council should look for some quick wins. He advised that he had noticed that there were small areas of woodland and that some of the trees were dying. Habitats were being destroyed at a rapid pace and various species could not adapt to the change at the pace it was happening. Biodiversity, ecology and climate change were intrinsically linked, and ecological emergency should be linked with climate change as pollution of air and water all fed in to this. Councillor Adam suggested that ecology needed to be strongly built into the planning application process and added that more needed to be done around peatlands, limestone escarpments and coastal waters and sand dunes. It was essential to invite partners to be involved in any work to be undertaken in relation to the Ecological Emergency.

The Head of Environment noted Members comments in relation to the data but advised that the collection of data would take a long period of time.

The Principal Ecologist advised that work was undertaken with partners such as the Environment Agency and Natural England and it was a case of managing expectations with regards to what local data was available. The Principal Ecologist referred to the local wildlife sites and advised that for them to reach a 100% of sites surveyed would take years.

The Head of Environment added that the Service valued input from partners and that the Service heard first-hand from the County Durham Environment and Climate Change Partnership's Ecological Emergency Work Stream.

Councillor Lines supported the representation made by Councillor Adam and added that ecology needed to be embedded into the culture of the Council and a consideration when decisions were made. He continued that if it was decided to make a declaration then the Council needed to identify urgent actions to be undertaken to prevent any further loss of habitats or species.

The Head of Environment agreed that ecology needed to be embedded into the culture of the Council. He added that ecology issues were currently considered as part of the planning process, but this was mostly linked to developments. He continued that there would need to be an action plan developed, identify what elements would be included and clear actions against each of those elements. The Council would need to ensure that it managed its own land properly to encourage the habitats for breeding and would need to review the plans for Countryside sites.

The Principal Ecologist advised that in relation to planning process measures were in place and in relation to marine, the LNRS did not make provision therefore the Council was planning on a marine bolt-on to the LNRS extending 6 miles off the coast

Councillor Charlton referred to water discharge from former colliery sites into watercourses and asked whether there was any interaction with partners regarding this.

The Principal Ecologist replied that while the Environment Agency led on statutory issues around discharges the Service did work with Northumbrian Water in relation to the Wear and Skerne catchments and other catchments.

Councillor Nicholls advised that his partner had worked on over 100 sites with Mammals Web and Durham University, but work with the University had not been mentioned during the presentation to the Committee. Councillor Nicholls considered there was a lack of understanding and awareness and felt frustrated that the Council was not working with more partners. Councillor Nicholls asked whether Council officers had access to academic journals to do their research.

The Head of Environment apologised that the service had not picked up on the agencies referred to by Councillor Nicholls that they the Service would be happy to engage more widely and would be interested in the information from the survey of 100 sites.

The Principal Ecologist advised that he was meeting with Durham University prior to Christmas and commented that Mammal Web did not provide the type of data that was needed to identify trends. All staff had access to academic papers.

Councillor Potts informed the Committee that Hamsterley Forest was within his Electoral Division and asked about the impact on habitats from tourism. He added that there were planning applications for log cabins in the area and asked about what processes were in place or proposed for dealing with the impact of tourism on this area of the County.

The Head of Environment replied that the service encouraged people to access to the area and added that visitors needed information which should be done in a managed way. If the site was primarily wildlife then this should take precedence, if the site was mixed use then this should be managed to ensure a balance in trying to achieve the objectives of the plan for the specific area.

The Principal Ecologist advised in relation to planning the impact of the lodges would require an environmental impact assessment which would feed into the planning process and confirmed that objections relating to recreational, or tourism impacts had previously been fed into the planning process.

Councillor Potts then commented that partners had already established an Ecological Emergency Group and had started to undertake work and asked whether it was worth the Council declaring an emergency as well.

The Head of Environment replied that there was undeniable national evidence to suggest that there was an ecological emergency, and it was his view that this there had been such an emergency for a long period of time. There was a need to develop an action plan and ensure it was resourced so that it had impact at base level.

The Principal Ecologist agreed and considered that the Country was in a state of being a green desert. Wildlife was rarely seen and expectations of what a biodiverse landscape looked like were low and the baseline had changed. Documents from 100 years ago showed that wildlife was significantly more abundant.

Councillor Elmer advised that this was the initial trawl and there was more work to be done. The Committee would receive more data at the next special meeting. He continued that a precautionary principal should be used in that gathering data may

take too long and would not progress matters very much. Global and National data was more definitive than local data and there was a need to embed a point of purpose in the work of the Council going forward. That was the reason for declaring an emergency so that this important issue progressed at the pace it deserved.

Councillor Townsend highlighted the work in her Electoral Division of AAPs and Parish Councils and suggested this was an effective way to disseminate information. She then asked if bird flu was a recurring issue that was affecting wildlife in the county.

The Head of Environment replied that bird flu was affecting wildlife populations and the Service was notifying DEFRA of the number of diseases affecting various wildlife populations in the County.

The Principal Ecologist confirmed that AAPs and Parish Councils were a fundamental part of integrating countryside and urban areas and were vitally important in local delivery. The Service had worked with both AAPs and Parish Councils and believed that was the best way to engage.

Councillor Nicholls asked how much could be done for free as that would be a huge benefit to Council.

The Head of Environment confirmed that there were willing groups and volunteers doing good work which the service fully recognised and part of the plan was to build on this.

The Chair thanked the Committee for their input and comments.

Resolved:

That the report and presentation be noted and that further information be considered at the next special meeting of the Committee to be held on 14 February 2022.