

Cabinet

13 October 2021

**Consideration of an Ecological
Emergency in County Durham**

Ordinary Decision



Report of Corporate Management Team

**Alan Patrickson, Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and
Climate Change**

**Councillor Mark Wilkes, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for
Neighbourhoods and Climate Change**

Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide

Purpose of the Report

- 1 This report is to consider the establishment of a working group to investigate the merits and consequences of Durham County Council declaring an ecological emergency, including the evidence base for the decision at a local level and the expected outcomes.

Executive Summary

- 2 In March 2019, Durham County Council declared a climate emergency and quickly prepared an emergency response plan this plan continues to evolve and develop as the council focuses on its carbon commitment targets. Climate change can overwhelm the capacity of ecosystems to mitigate extreme events and disturbance, such as wildfires, floods, and drought.
- 3 A recent report from the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee concluded that since 1970 there has been a 68% decrease in population sizes of mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles, and fish across the globe and in the UK 15% of species are threatened with extinction. It also noted that of the G7 countries, the UK has the lowest level of biodiversity remaining and that to reverse the trend of biodiversity loss requires urgent transformative change.

- 4 The global loss of wildlife habitat, the reduction in a wide range of species of both flora and fauna is of considerable concern to such an extent that it may be considered an emergency situation alongside the changes to the world's climate.
- 5 County Durham has a complex history with regard to wildlife and habitat. Once the home of mining and other heavy industry, which left a legacy of contamination and landscape degradation, the county has seen significant restoration over recent decades improving habitat, and land, water and air quality. This work continues both through the activities of the Council and others. The North Pennine uplands and the Durham Coast and associated Magnesian Limestone grasslands, in particular support rare and threatened species and both have been the subject of considerable conservation effort. This positive progress over decades must be set against the continuing pressures placed on the natural landscape from development and other human activity.
- 6 On 22 September 2021, at a meeting of the County Council, a question was raised seeking Cabinet's view on the declaration of an ecological emergency in County Durham. Arguments were presented for both declaring an ecological emergency and preparing ecological emergency response plan in parallel to the existing climate emergency response plan, which itself will be refreshed in 2022.
- 7 In response to the question the Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Climate change committed to bring forward a cabinet report recommending the establishment a working group to make a thorough assessment of the issues pertaining to an ecological emergency declaration particularly in the context of County Durham, including a thorough analysis of the evidence and data available through the work of the Council and others, including ongoing work by the Environment and Climate Change Partnership, alongside as assessment of the potential outcomes of such an initiative.

Recommendation(s)

- 8 Cabinet is recommended to:
 - (a) recognise the national and international decline in natural habitats and species,
 - (b) make a request to the Chairs of Scrutiny that this work be included as part of the scrutiny work programme and that a working group is established to examine the evidence base relating to the decline in natural habitats in County Durham.

- (c) make an additional request that an initial report to come to Cabinet on the findings of the working group referred to in (b) above within 6 months.

Background

- 9 In March 2019 Durham County Council declared a climate emergency and quickly prepared an emergency response plan. This plan continues to evolve and develop as the council focuses on its carbon commitment targets. Climate change can overwhelm the capacity of ecosystems to cope and contend with extreme events in disturbance from fires to flooding.
- 10 The global loss of wildlife habitat, the reduction in a wide range of species of both flora and fauna is of considerable concern to such an extent that it may be considered an emergency situation alongside the changes to the world's climate.
- 11 In 2018, the Government published its 25 Year Environment Plan, setting out its ambition to improve the natural environment. More recently, it announced a 'state of nature' target aimed at halting the decline in nature in England by 2030 and has plans to implement a number of environmental policies to achieve these goals including: establishing Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS), biodiversity net gain for new developments, a Nature Recovery Network and the proposal to protect 30% of the land area for nature by 2030 (the so called '30 x 30' commitment). These go alongside supporting nature-based solutions to climate change like tree planting and protecting and restoring peatland. The UK is also leading the Global Ocean Alliance to protect at least 30% of the global ocean by 2030.
- 12 On 30 June 2021 the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee released its report 'Biodiversity in the UK: Bloom or Bust?' which stated that since 1970 there has been a 68% decrease in population sizes of mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles, and fish globally and that 15% of UK species are threatened with extinction. The report also noted that of the G7 countries, the UK has the lowest level of biodiversity remaining and that urgent actions was needed. Damaging changes in the planet's biodiversity, it concluded are not being treated with the same urgency and ambition as changes in the planet's climate.
- 13 The Government's Environment Bill, currently passing through Parliament, recognises the need to restore ecosystems across landscapes. The Act will give councils the legal responsibility to produce a 'Nature Recovery Strategy', showing opportunities for protecting, enhancing and recovering biodiversity.

County Durham

- 14 County Durham, as with many other areas, has a complex history with regard to wildlife and habitat. Once the home of mining and other heavy industry, which left a legacy of land and water contamination and

landscape degradation, the county has seen significant restoration over recent decades improving both natural habitat, and land, water and air quality.

- 15 The North Pennine uplands and the Durham Coast and associated Magnesian Limestone grasslands, in particular, support rare and threatened species and both have been the subject of considerable conservation effort. The post-industrial environmental improvements in County Durham have also led to cleaner rivers, improved associated habitat for fish and mammals and significantly improved air quality.
- 16 Sites that are designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) represent the best examples of our national heritage of wildlife habitats, geological features and landforms and these are notified under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 by Natural England. There are 91 SSSI wholly or partly in County Durham.
- 17 Perhaps the most striking example of this work in County Durham is the internationally recognised restoration of the County Durham coastline, which has been transformed as part of the Heritage Coast initiative. The Turning the Tide (TTT) partnership programme consisted of over one hundred projects delivered along the Durham Heritage Coast. The Durham Coast hosts 92% of the total area of para-maritime Magnesian Limestone grassland habitat in Britain and the TTT partnership has recovered over 225ha of land for habitat creation. Such is the success of the programme that much of the area has subsequently been designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest and National Nature Reserves.
- 18 On a larger scale, the North Pennines AONB Partnership has led the restoration of approximately 16,000ha of peatland in the county over the last 16 years, (as part of restoring an area of peatland over three times the size of Newcastle within the AONB as a whole). This work is continuing and expanding through the AONB team's leading role in the Great North Bog initiative.
- 19 The County Council, Durham Wildlife Trust, the AONB Partnership, the Heritage Coast Partnership, Rivers Trusts and other bodies are all delivering significant action for nature recovery in the county, with an ever-increasing degree of collaboration.

County Durham Environment and Climate Change Partnership

- 20 The ecological emergency has been recognised by the County Durham Environment and Climate Change Partnership. In November 2020, the partnership reviewed its structure, membership, and governance arrangements as part of a wider partnership review triggered by the

revised county Durham Vision 2035 document. As part of this work the potential for a locally declared ecological emergency was recognised and reflected in the partnership structure as one of the principal sub-groups to the board.

- 21 The Ecological Emergency Sub-Group is chaired by Chris Woodley-Stewart of the North Pennines AONB Partnership and is currently engaged in preparatory work for the development of a Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

Action by other Local Authorities

- 22 While all councils across the UK are considering issues around biodiversity, ecology and the diminishment of local habitat, the concept of an ecological emergency, paralleling that of the Global Climate crises is not currently being widely implemented. It has been reported that while 123 of 149 county and unitary authorities have declared a climate emergency, only 22 have currently declared some form of ecological emergency, whether linked to Climate change or as a stand-alone resolution.
- 23 Brighton and Hove became the first council to declare a climate and biodiversity emergency in December 2018 and Bristol was the first council in the UK to specifically declare an ecological emergency, with a standalone declaration passed in February 2020.

Declaration of an Ecological Emergency

- 24 On 22 of September 2021 at a meeting of the County Council, a question was raised seeking Cabinet's view on the declaration of an ecological emergency in County Durham. Arguments were presented for both declaring an ecological emergency and preparing ecological emergency response plan in parallel to the existing climate emergency response plan, which itself will be refreshed in 2022.
- 25 In response to the question, the Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Climate Change committed to bring forward a Cabinet report recommending the establishment a working group to make a thorough assessment of the issues pertaining to an ecological emergency declaration particularly in the context of County Durham, including a thorough analysis of the evidence and data available through the work of the Council and others, including ongoing work by the Environment and Climate Change Partnership, alongside as assessment of the potential outcomes of such an initiative.

Summary

- 26 The global decline of natural habitat, biodiversity and the threat to species is well documented and evidenced and there is growing concern over how this decline is reflected in the UK.
- 27 The Government has initiated a number of initiatives, one of which will be implemented through legislation in coming months to address the issue. However, whether these initiatives will go far enough to reverse the decline is under question and a recent report by the Environmental Audit Committee suggests that more needs to be done.
- 28 To fully understand how the issues, evidence and data relate to County Durham further work should be done, looking specifically at this issue and working with the Environment and Climate Change Partnership, who have recently established an Ecological Emergency workstream as part of the board's governance structure.

Background papers

None.

Other useful documents

None.

Author(s)

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

The report identifies forthcoming Environment Bill, which will impact of the activities of the council by establishing new duties to recover and enhance biodiversity. The main recommendation of the report to establish a working group to report back to Cabinet within a time period has no additional legal implications.

Finance

The report does not seek any additional budget allocations to support the establishment of the workstream and report.

Consultation

The working group that will be established as a result of the recommendations will be required to collect evidence and data from external sources, by request. No further formal consultation is envisaged at this stage.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

Not applicable.

Climate Change

There is a wider link between habitat restoration and climate change, however the recommendations of the report have no direct implication.

Human Rights

Not applicable.

Crime and Disorder

Not applicable.

Staffing

The recommendation the report will have no staffing implications.

Accommodation

Not applicable.

Risk

Not applicable.

Procurement

Not applicable.