

**Environment and
Sustainable Communities
Overview and Scrutiny
Committee**



13 December 2021

**Question relating to
consideration of Ecological
Emergency**

Report of Paul Darby, Corporate Director of Resources

Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide

Purpose of the Report

- 1 The purpose of the report is to provide members of the committee with background information to why the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee (ESC OSC) is undertaking a focused piece of work to consider as to whether Cabinet should declare an ecological emergency.

Executive summary

- 2 At County Council on 22 September 2021, the Vice Chair of ESC OSC asked a question in relation to Durham County Council declaring an economic emergency.
- 3 At Cabinet on 13 October 2021, the Portfolio Holder Neighbourhoods and Climate Change took a report that recommended that scrutiny include in its work programme activity to consider whether Durham County Council should declare an ecological emergency.
- 4 ESC OSC at its meeting on 24 November 2021 agreed to include in its 2021/22 work programme a focused piece of work to consider as to whether DCC needs to declare an ecological emergency and make recommendations to Cabinet accordingly.
- 5 It was also agreed by the committee that this focused piece of work would initially be undertaken via two special meetings of the committee with flexibility in relation to the number of meetings and the timescale to complete this piece of work.

Recommendation

- 6 That the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee are requested to:
 - a) note the content of the report and comment accordingly

Background

- 7 At ESC OSC meeting on 16 July members considered a report and presentation on the priorities of the County Durham Climate Change Partnership and it was suggested by members the Durham County Council should consider the prospect of an Ecological Emergency.
- 8 At County Council on 22 September 2021, Councillor Elmer, Vice Chair of ESC OSC asked if Durham County Council would adopt the same approach to an ecological emergency as it had in relation to the climate emergency and consider as to whether a declaration of an emergency needed to be made. A copy of the question to County Council can be found at appendix two.
- 9 In response to the Vice Chair's question the Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Environment and Climate Change advised that he would take a report to the October meeting of Cabinet.
- 10 The Cabinet report considered a report entitled 'Consideration of an Ecological Emergency in County Durham' which set out the complex history the County has had with regard to wildlife and habitat. Once the home of mining and 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 through the activities of the Council and partners.
- 11 The report to Cabinet on the 13 October 2021 recommended that scrutiny include in its work programme, examination of the evidence base relating to the decline in natural habitats in County Durham and provide an initial report to Cabinet within six months.
- 12 At its meeting on 24 November 2021, ESC OSC agreed to add to its work programme the Ecological Emergency and that the work would be considered by the committee through initially two special meetings. The Chair agreed to the committee's request that she would inform the Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Climate Change that greater flexibility was required in relation to timescales and that the work may take longer than the six months stated by Cabinet. Members had also indicated they would like a representative from the County Durham

Climate Change Partnership to be in attendance at the special meetings to ensure there was no duplication of effort in relation to the focused piece of work being undertaken by the ESC OSC and the work of the Ecological Emergency Workstream of the Partnership.

Conclusion

- 13 Members of ESCOSC will be aware of the question submitted to County Council, the response by the Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Climate Change and what was agreed at the ESC OSC on 24 November 2021 in relation to the Ecological Emergency focused piece of work.

Background papers

County Council 22 September 2021, agenda item 10

- Agenda item - Questions from Members - Durham County Council

Cabinet 13 October 2021, agenda item 9

- Agenda item - Questions from Members - Durham County Council

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

Not applicable.

Finance

Not applicable.

Consultation

Not applicable.

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

Not applicable.

Accommodation

Not applicable.

Risk

Not applicable.

Procurement

Not applicable.

Appendix 2

Question asked at County Council on 22 September 2021

Councillor J Elmer asked the following question

*On the 30th June 2021 the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee released their report *Biodiversity in the UK: Bloom or Bust?* that states “Since 1970 there has been a 68% decrease in population sizes of mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles, and fish” and “15% of UK species are threatened with extinction. Of the G7 countries, the UK has the lowest level of biodiversity remaining”*

Ecosystems might be considered as the planet’s ‘life support system’. Ecosystems provide the oxygen in the very air we breathe, they ‘host’ the carbon cycle fixing gaseous carbon dioxide, they provide pollination for our food crops and maintain a stable climate. Climate change should properly be understood as the consequence of humans exceeding the natural capacity of the planet’s ecosystems to take in CO₂.

So two crises, inextricably combined, are challenging humanity on a planetary scale. The Climate Crisis is certainly the higher profile of the two, and the Council is already addressing this issue through the Climate Emergency Response Plan. The Ecological Crisis is perhaps less well understood, but its correction is equally urgent and requires profound change.

County Durham, like the rest of the Country and world has suffered a catastrophic crash of species and habitats that collectively form our natural systems. There is no question that we are currently experiencing and ecological emergency. This situation remains, despite the excellent work that the Council has delivered in relation to the North Pennines AONB, the Heritage Coast, coalfields restoration and many other worthy projects.

Cllr Wilkes, will the Council:

- declare an Ecological Emergency; then,*
- review services to ensure cessation of any activities that negatively impact upon ecosystems and to identify opportunities to enhance ecosystems; and,*
- report back to Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny regarding the measures needed to address this emergency and their implications to the Council.*

In short, will the Council adopt the same approach to tackle the Ecological Emergency as it has for the related Climate Emergency?