

Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee

13th December 2021



Consideration of an Ecological Emergency

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

Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide.

Purpose of the Report

1. To present to Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee a summary of international, national, and local information on habitats and species to help inform the recommendations it makes to Cabinet regarding the declaration of an ecological emergency.
2. To outline to Members the statutory requirement in the Environment Act 2021 to prepare Local Nature Recovery Strategies, which will need to be developed regardless of declaration, and for which work has already commenced.

Executive Summary

3. On the 13th October 2021, Cabinet recognised the national and international decline in natural habitats and species and requested that the information for County Durham be assessed, the evidence of which can be utilised to inform a view as to whether an Ecological Emergency is declared by the Council. This view would be reported back to Cabinet within six months.
4. In the first of two presentations (the second will be scheduled for early in the New Year), the Head of Environment together with the Council's Principal Ecologist will outline the task requested by Cabinet and provide an overview of information regarding state of the environment in County Durham.

5. Although national and international data is robust, available local data is not sufficient to provide accurate trends across all priority habitats and species. The local data provided, especially when looking at species data, should generally be regarded as providing 'general guidelines' on trends and examined in the context of national trends.
6. Information on the state of habitats in County Durham is provided with reference to the condition of Local Wildlife Sites (LWS), Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), functionality of ancient woodlands and Water Framework Directive (WFD) Targets. All indicators show that habitats are generally failing to meet condition assessments and conservation targets.
7. The presentation will highlight the links of ecological decline with climate change. Fragmented habitats often mean that migration is not viable, and the pace of change too great for evolutionary adaption processes. On a more positive note there is a role for nature in adapting and mitigating climate change, for instance tree planting in the right areas to slow water run-off and flooding, as well as sequester carbon.
8. Whilst outside the immediate remit provided by Cabinet, Members will be advised of a statutory requirement in the Environment Act 2021 to prepare Local Nature Recovery Strategies. Regulations concerning the detailed requirements in these strategies have yet to be set out but it will need to include a Statement of Biodiversity Priorities and a Local Habitat Map together with plans and actions for arresting decline and promoting recovery.
9. Members will be asked to comment on the presentations and given the limits on local information, consider if it is sufficient to progress to the next stage of considering an Ecological Emergency, the form this should take, and the implications for the Council and Partners.

Recommendation(s)

10. Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee is recommended to:
 - (a) Consider the information presented, and if it is sufficient to progress to the next stage of considering declaration of an ecological emergency.

Background

11. On the 13th October 2021, Cabinet recognised the national and international decline in natural habitats and species and requested that the information for County Durham be assessed by Scrutiny. It is suggested that this evidence be utilised to inform a view from this Committee as to whether an Ecological Emergency is declared by the Council. The report requested that findings be fed back to Cabinet within six months.
12. In the first of two presentations (the second will be scheduled for early in the New Year), the Head of Environment together with the Council's Principal Ecologist will outline the task requested by Cabinet and provide an overview of information regarding state of the environment in County Durham.
13. The presentation will highlight the importance of wildlife, not just for its intrinsic value, but also as a barometer for the well being of our environment as a whole, our physical and mental well-being, its importance to recreation and tourism, and also the benefits of maintaining a wide gene pool for future applications and uses.
14. The main part of the presentation will cover the international, national and local evidence for habitats and species. Local information provided include the following examples for habitat trends:
 - 42% of the 324 Local Wildlife Sites have been resurveyed over the last decade. 70% of habitats compartments fail condition assessments. LWS are designated for their local importance.
 - 81% of SSSI in County Durham are in 'unfavourable recovering' condition, only 15% are regarded by Natural England as being in 'favourable' condition. SSSI are designated for their national importance.
 - The Durham Wildlife Audit (1995) states that 25% of ancient woodlands have been lost since the 1920's
 - 9% of our ancient woodlands are regarded as being ecologically functional, the remainder being too small and fragmented.
 - 9% of the River Wear surface waters meet the WFD target of being in good condition.
 - 15% of the River Tees surface waters meet the WFD target of being in good condition.

15. Local species information is more limited, however the evidence presented include the Summer Atlas of the Breeding Birds of County Durham (2000) provides “guiding statement” trends between 1985 and 1995 for Durham Biodiversity Action Plan species.
- Coastal birds (17 species): 4 species populations were stable or slightly decreasing. 4 species were increasing. No data for 9 species.
 - Farmland birds (18 species): 7 species populations were decreasing with a further 3 species stable or slightly decreasing. 5 species were stable with 2 showing a slight increase. No data for a single species.
 - Upland Birds (9 species): 2 species populations were decreasing with a further 2 stable or slightly decreasing. A single species was stable, and none showed an increase. No data for 4 species.
 - Woodland and Scrub Birds (9 species): 2 species populations were decreasing with a further 2 slightly decreasing. No species showed an increase. No data for 5 species.
 - Urban and Garden Birds (5 species). 2 species showed a probable decrease with a further species decreasing and a single species stable or possibly declining. No species showed an increase. No data for a single species.
16. For Mammals, amphibians and reptiles of the North East (2012) showed clear declines for 5 of the 17 DBAP mammals and herptiles; red squirrel, water vole, great crested newt, grass snake and common lizard. Data generally not sufficient to provide robust trends for other species.
17. Environment Agency fish counts indicate declining salmon numbers in the River Wear and Tees. The River Tees remains ‘at risk’ of failing to meet management objectives for salmon and the River Wear was downgraded from ‘not at risk’ to ‘probably not at risk’ in 2014 and is predicted to be downgraded again in 2025 to ‘probably at risk’
18. For insects, bumblebees of North East England (2019) showed that since 1926 27% of species are extinct, declined or in decline. Atlas of the Butterflies of North East England (2014) indicated that 5 of the 7 DBAP butterfly species have undergone declines during the 1900s and early 2000’s which have not been reversed.

19. The presentation will highlight that this information will be utilised in the preparation of a Local Nature Recovery Strategy, which is a statutory requirement under the Environment Act. Section 106 of this Act provides a requirement to produce a statement of biodiversity priorities within the strategy area, (including measures to promote enhancement and recovery), as well as a local habitat map, not just of existing reserves and protected areas, but also those areas where enhancement and recovery of biodiversity could make a particular contribution to other environmental benefits. Work on this has commenced and will be a key next step which will of course have relevance to any action plans linked to ecological emergency.
20. Climate change clearly has an impact on wildlife habitat and species as well as humans from bleached coral reefs to tundra. The presentation will highlight the links of ecological decline with climate change. Fragmented habitats often mean that migration is not viable, and the pace of change too great for evolutionary adaption processes. On a more positive note, there is a role for nature in adapting and mitigating climate change, for instance tree planting in the right areas to slow water run-off and flooding, as well as sequester carbon.

Conclusion

21. Scrutiny have been asked by Cabinet to review the evidence relating to state of the environment in County Durham. A presentation to Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee provides an outline of available information, and whilst there is a paucity of data, from what is provided it does show a trend of decline that mirrors national evidence.
22. Members of the ESCOSC will be asked to comment on the presentation, and the evidence presented and consider if it is sufficient to progress to the next stage of considering a recommendation to Cabinet for an Ecological Emergency declaration.

Author(s)

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

There is no specific legal requirement regarding declaration of an ecological emergency. Several species listed in this report are statutorily protected, and there is also a requirement in the Environment Act 2021 to prepare a Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) which will be referenced in the presentation.

Finance

There are no specific financial obligations linked to this report, although the LNRS may in due course identify costed actions.

Consultation

Members may wish to consult more widely relating to potential declaration of an ecological emergency.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

Not applicable.

Human Rights

Not applicable.

Climate Change

The adverse impact of climate change on wildlife is addressed in this report as well as the role for nature in adaption and mitigation.

Crime and Disorder

Not applicable.

Staffing

Not applicable at this stage, although the LNRS may have impact.

Risk

Not applicable.

Procurement

An outline of contracts and new procurement will be provided