

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

14 February 2022



**Consideration of an
Ecological Emergency –
Summary and next steps**

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 Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee with a recap of information provided at the special meeting of the committee held on the 13 December 2021 detailing relevant ecological data, to consider whether to recommend to Cabinet that a declaration is made and to determine any further additional recommendations for Cabinet's consideration.

Executive summary

- 2 At its Special meeting on 13 December members of Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered a presentation providing ecological data at a national, regional and local level. A summary of the narrative of the presentation is appended to this report at appendix 2.
- 3 Following the information given at today's meeting members will be asked whether an ecological emergency should be declared and if they wish to make other specific recommendations to Cabinet.

Recommendations

- 4 That members of Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the content of the report.
- 5 That members of the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee consider the following:

- Whether to recommend to Cabinet that an Ecological Emergency is declared.
- Whether any further additional recommendations are made to Cabinet.

Background

- 6 Members will recall at the special meeting of the committee on 13 December 2021, they received a presentation from the Head of Environment and the Principal Ecologist. The presentation provided information and data on the state of ecology from a global, national and local perspective. It also highlighted key considerations, including the Environment Act 2021, the Local Nature Recovery Strategy and how an ecological emergency links to climate change and ultimately next steps.
- 7 To assist members in their decision making attached at appendix 2 is a summary of the narrative of the presentation provided at the special meeting held on the 13 December 2021.
- 8 At the special meeting members of the committee requested that partners be invited to the next special meeting of the committee on 14 February to get their views as to whether there is a need to declare an ecological emergency.
- 9 In accordance with the above request arrangements have been made for the Chair of the Environment and Climate Change Partnership and Director of Durham Wildlife Trust together with the Chair of the Ecological Emergency Workstream of the Environment and Climate Change Partnership and Director of the North Pennines AONB Partnership to attend the meeting and share further information with members.

Next Steps

- 10 Following the presentation and discussion, members will be asked to consider whether they recommend to Cabinet that Durham County Council declares an ecological emergency. If members decide not to declare then they will need to give reasons as to why they have made that decision.
- 11 Should members decide to recommend that a declaration is made then members need to consider as to whether they make any further recommendations to Cabinet. Members may want to consider the following additional recommendations:
 - That DCC undertakes a cross service review and produces an ecological emergency response plan (a similar process as

undertaken in relation to the development of the Climate Emergency Response Plan (CERP)).

- That the ecological emergency response plan is a standalone plan initially and then over time, as the plan develops, it is merged with the Climate Emergency Response Plan.
- To progress the development of the plan, Cabinet ensures that adequate resources are available, with the appointment of a dedicated officer at the appropriate level/grade to work across all council services.
- That the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee receives regular updates on the development of the plan and once developed, monitors progress against the actions contained in the plan, on a regular basis.

12 Following this meeting, subsequent recommendations to Cabinet will be formulated and sent to the members of the committee for consideration and agreement.

13 Once the recommendations have been agreed a detailed report will be prepared which will include information provided during the two focused special meetings, together with key findings and recommendations. The report will then be considered by members at a further special meeting to be held in April, the date of which will be confirmed shortly. Following members consideration of the report and agreement at the April meeting, the report will then go to Cabinet for consideration.

Conclusion

14 Members will have received a summary, attached as appendix 2, of the information provided to the committee at the special meeting held on the 13 December, showing the decline in habitats and species across the county and will assist members to determine as to whether there is a need to declare an ecological emergency.

15 Members, if they decide to declare will have the opportunity to make further recommendations to Cabinet should they wish to do so, with possible additional recommendations identified in the report.

Background papers

- None

Contact:	Diane Close	03000 268141
	Ann Whitton	03000 268143

Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

Not applicable

Finance

Not applicable

Consultation

Not applicable

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

Not applicable

Human Rights

Not applicable

Climate Change

There is a wider link between habitat restoration and climate change which is highlighted in the report.

Crime and Disorder

Not applicable

Staffing

Not applicable

Accommodation

Not applicable

Risk

Not applicable

Procurement

Not applicable

Appendix 2: Summary of Presentation Narrative

The Head of Environment and the Principal Ecologist were in attendance to present to members information to aid them in their consideration as to whether there is a need for DCC to declare an ecological emergency.

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 as to whether an ecological emergency needs to be declared with O&S responding to Cabinet with recommendations within a 6 month period. He highlighted that the information did have limitations and that members would need to determine if they had enough information to make a decision, and that members may want 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 becomes less and less and that when wildlife becomes depleted this can tell us a lot about ourselves as wildlife has benefits for us all as we are all dependent on healthy resilient ecosystems. He highlighted that once wildlife has gone it has gone for good.

The Head of Environment advised that wildlife is a key feature in tourism and recreation and gave the example that Sea Eagles on the coast could increase visitors; wildlife enriches the quality of our lives. Members were also advised there were strong links to climate change as the loss of wildlife can be an indicator of pollutants in water courses or the earth. He concluded by highlighting that wildlife enriches the quality of our lives, it gives us perspective.

The Principal Ecologist advised 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, DCC green mapping, ancient woodland and data from natural England and the Environment Agency. In addition, discussions have 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 indicates the alarming decline in species due to development and deforestation. He Highlighted that more than 85% of area of wetlands has been lost, which is very significant. National data was taken from a variety of UK government reports and provides a similar picture to global data showing a decline in wildlife. 1970s baseline shows changes in wildlife and habitats that

gives a clear national picture however it was highlighted that this decline in habitats and species predate the 1970's baseline, the baseline was already low when tracking of the decline started in 1970's.

The Principal Ecologist outlined that as you move from national data to regional and then local data the picture becomes less clear and there is less confidence in the data therefore local data does give a picture that comes with a health warning. Local information had been collated from SSSI data from Natural England, re-survey of the Local Wildlife Sites, information from DCC Green infrastructure Mapping and Ancient Woodland Inventory and the Environment Agency.

In relation to habitats in Sites of Significant Scientific Interest (SSSI) the data was good. Data from Natural England on SSSIs indicate that a large proportion of sites are in unfavourable condition. SSSI are sites of national importance for biodiversity. DCC had carried out condition assessments of 42% of local wildlife sites and of them approximately 70% fail, due to compartments being in unfavourable condition usually due to inappropriate management. Again, good data to show condition of LWS which were designated as they are locally important for biodiversity

In relation to woodlands, members were informed that there has been a loss of a quarter of Durham's ancient woodland since the 1920s and of the ancient woodland left this 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 woodland were too small to be regarded as functional. This was clarified as small areas of woodland allow in more light and wind into the core therefore the smaller the woodland area the more impoverished it becomes. Ancient Woodland is categorised into two types, Broadleaf and Planted Ancient Woodland (PAWS) that were planted with non-native species. Although PAWS are still regarded as ancient woodland (soils and woodland cover retained), they cannot be regarded as being in good condition and a significant proportion of our ancient woodland are impoverished PAWS

Members were advised the Water Framework Directive was in place to achieve good status of all waterbodies. This was EU legislation that was still viable, and the Environment Agency carries out water quality improvements with the aim to get waterways in good condition. The Principal Ecologist emphasised that there were no high-quality waterways in County Durham. The vast majority of both the Wear and the Tees were classified as in a moderate to poor condition and were not hitting the respective targets in the Water Framework Directives.

Data on habitats was good and supports 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 adhoc.

The Principal Ecologist advised that in relation to Durham priority birds the atlas provides 'guiding statement' trends between 1985-1995. In relation to coastal birds the data which was available showed an increase in 4 species of bird, a slight decrease in 3, 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 in numbers, 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 are 17 priority mammals and herptiles in County Durham and there were clear trends for five species. It was highlighted that in relation to the Water Vole the decline had been catastrophic in the county and follows the national trend with a loss from approximately 90% of range (late 1990's) and a further 30 % loss 2006-2015. The other species include the great crested newt, grass snakes, common lizard, and red squirrel all of which have seen a decline in populations or distribution.

The first recorded data of Bumblebees was from 1800s, and there are now a number of species (4) that are extinct, and two others were declining or had declined.

Members were advised there were seven priority butterfly species in County Durham and that key butterfly species were declining however in relation to the Small Pearl – bordered Fritillary and the Dark Green Fritillary active management has been undertaken, working with farmers to create breeding areas and increase numbers, although the declines have not been reversed.

The Principal Ecologist provided information in relation to the status of the salmon population which had gone up when issues with pollution were resolved, but fish counter data on the Wear and Tees indicates 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 has been undertaken in the county to create habitats/restore habitats with work undertaken by Durham Heritage Coast, NPAONB and Woodland Revival projects.

The Head of Environment advised that even the most protected sites were showing signs of decline and these trends in County Durham were being reflected nationally too. There was strong evidence of international and national decline and although the local data was not perfect it did mirror this. He emphasised that the Environment Act 2021 has details for DCC to follow but does not state about determining as to whether there is a need to declare an ecological emergency. DCC 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 lots of scientific evidence that both species and habitats were impacted through climate change. He advised that good work had been achieved 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.