

Cabinet

6 April 2022

Declaration of an Ecological Emergency

Key Decision No. NCC/03/22



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

Councillor James Rowlandson Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Resources, Investments and Assets

Electoral division(s) affected:

All

Purpose of the Report

- 1 To respond to the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee (ESCOSC) report to Cabinet on the consideration of an ecological emergency.
- 2 To formally declare an ecological emergency for County Durham.

Executive summary

- 3 The considerable work of the ESCOSC in assessing evidence on the state of the environment in County Durham and reported in **Appendix 2** is acknowledged and much appreciated. Their findings show overwhelming evidence for global and national decline in habitats and species, and whilst the local data is understandably less extensive, it not surprisingly strongly mirrors the national and global trends.
- 4 County Durham has a rich tapestry of habitats – from its upland peatland and moorland, to the Wear and Tees lowlands with semi-natural ancient woodland, meadows and wetlands, to the magnesian limestone plateau with its species rich pasture and Heritage Coast. This represents not only a valuable resource for biodiversity, and a store for carbon, but an incredible asset for recreation and wellbeing.

The environment has of course been shaped by farming, industrial heritage and settlements, and as in the past, human influence will hold the key to improvements in the future.

- 5 The ESCOSC report rightly recognises the considerable work being undertaken by the Council and Partners in several landscape scale initiatives, habitat restoration and creation, including tree planting and the management of nature reserves. The new investments announced as part of the Medium Term Financial Plan 2022/23 to 2025/26 provide further impetus for this work through the appointment of two nature reserve officers, and staff to promote education/awareness, volunteer investment and a post of a Local Nature Recovery Strategy Officer.
- 6 One of the recommendations from ESCOSC is for the development of an Ecological Emergency Response Plan mirroring and perhaps in due course merging with the Climate Emergency Response Plan (CERP). Should this be accepted, then just like the CERP it will need to consider not only what the Council can do with its landholdings and services, but also crucially how it can do work with Partners to influence and support countywide activity which benefit habitat and species diversity, including farmers and landowners.
- 7 In a climate of tight resources, it is essential that our work at both a Council level and as a countywide influencer is targeted to those areas where the biggest impact can be had. Future work and investment in this area will therefore be built in to established Council processes including the annual MTFP planning cycle where capital and revenue expenditure will be considered alongside the needs of other services projects and programmes. Resources will be allocated to maximise the benefits from the those available. Additionally external funding will be sought wherever possible to supplement council budgets.
- 8 In response to national concerns of ecosystem decline Government is now requiring through the Environment Act 2021 “responsible authorities” (which Durham County Council has been selected and agreed to be) to prepare Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS). Whilst formal guidance has yet to be produced on its precise form, it is clear that LNRS must culminate in a statement of biodiversity priorities for the strategy area, and a local habitat map, informed by an assessment of opportunities for enhancement or recovery of our habitats and species. It is proposed that the Local Nature Recovery Strategy, when produced, is a key high level guide to influence the priorities in our future action plans.
- 9 Further guidance is awaited from Department of Agriculture Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) on the Local Nature Recovery Strategy but this does not prevent the County Council considering what more it can do in

further enhancing biodiversity from its own landholdings. Whilst the Council already has 31 designated Local Nature Reserves and an additional 61 sites identified as important for local wildlife, it is fully recognised that our plans would need to go beyond the managed sites to consider what more can be done through different services (clean and green management of open spaces, planning for instance) and key relationships with education, awareness and volunteering. This work in compiling an initial plan can commence immediately.

- 10 The decline in natural habitats, species and diversity so well illustrated in the ESCOSC report is a concern, not just for the sake of wildlife, but this loss of nature diminishes something that enriches the quality of all our lives. It is therefore proposed that the recommendations from ESCOSC are accepted in full, with work examining what the Council can do commencing immediately, and the development of a Local Nature Recovery Strategy to further inform action plans in due course.

Recommendation(s)

- 11 Cabinet is recommended to:
- (a) thank ESCOSC for its work detailed in **Appendix 2** in examining evidence relating state of habitats and species across the County, and for its recommendations to Cabinet;
 - (b) declare an ecological emergency for County Durham;
 - (c) ask for an initial action plan on Council activities in response to this declaration be provided within six months;
 - (d) include planning for the ecological emergency in future MTFP planning cycles with a value for money outcome-based focus alongside other projects and programmes;
 - (e) note that the Council is required to prepare a Local Nature Recovery Strategy and that this document, when complete will inform future plans that consider opportunities for enhancing biodiversity both by the Council and countywide Partners.

Background

- 12 County Durham has a rich tapestry of habitats – from its upland peatland and moorland, to the Wear and Tees lowlands with semi-natural ancient woodland, meadows and wetlands, to the magnesian limestone plateau with its species rich pasture and Heritage Coast. This represents not only a valuable resource for biodiversity, and a store for carbon, but an incredible asset for recreation and wellbeing. The environment has of course been shaped by farming, industrial heritage and settlements, and as in the past, human influences will hold the key to further improvements.
- 13 The report by ESCOSC attached in **Appendix 2** provides extensive evidence of global and national loss of habitats and species which are of considerable concern. Whilst the local data is not as comprehensive, it nevertheless provides considerable information on the condition of Sites of Special Scientific Interest, Local Wildlife Sites, habitats (for instance Ancient Semi Natural Woodlands) and a range of species from fish, birds, mammals and insects. Collectively taken, the same signals and trends of decline experienced nationally are also being evidenced locally. This is not a surprise given that County Durham is not an island but influenced by many of the same factors that are experienced nationally.
- 14 The report from ESCOSC rightly acknowledges the considerable work that is being undertaken by the Council and its partners on large scale landscape and habitat schemes from the Work of the North Pennines Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in areas such as Peatland Restoration, through to woodland creation projects such as Durham Woodland Revival and the work of the transformative work of the Heritage Coast Partnership.
- 15 It is of course clear given the evidence, that there is still more to be done. A vital start has already been made with new investments announced as part of the Medium Term Financial Plan 2022/23 to 2025/26 which will provide further impetus for this work through the appointment of two nature reserve officers, and staff to promote education/awareness, volunteer investment and a post of a Local Nature Recovery Strategy Officer.
- 16 In a climate of tight resources, it is essential that our work at both a Council level and as a countywide influencer is targeted to those areas where the biggest impact can be had. Future work and investment in this area will therefore be built in to established Council processes including the annual MTFP planning cycle where capital and revenue expenditure will be allocated to maximise the benefits from the

resources available. Additionally external funding will be sought wherever possible to supplement council budgets.

- 17 In response to national concerns of decline Government is now requiring through the Environment Act 2021 “responsible authorities” (which Durham County Council has been selected and agreed to be) to prepare Local Nature Recovery Strategies. Whilst formal guidance has yet to be produced on its precise form, it is clear that these must culminate in a statement of biodiversity priorities for the strategy area, and a local habitat map, informed by an assessment of opportunities for enhancement or recovery of our habitats and species. It is proposed that the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) when produced is a key high level guide to influence the priorities in our future action plans.
- 18 The LNRS will be a key influence on our work as a Partners on countywide initiatives. Work in overseeing the production of this Strategy has already commenced through the County Durham Environment and Climate Change Partnership. It will be given further impetus through the appointment of an LNRS Officer by the County Council.
- 19 Clearly the development of an LNRS may take some time, but that does not preclude work being undertaken to consider Council activity and actions. This is done in full recognition of the financial climate, and so will concentrate initially on adapting current activity for example training/awareness, grounds maintenance, procurement, built environment design and management of existing nature reserves. Future work will focus more attention and resource prioritisation on the key areas where a difference can be made, influenced by the LNRS.

Conclusion

- 20 ESCOSC has undertaken extensive work detailed in **Appendix 2** and unanimously concluded that an ecological emergency should be declared. This report accepts its conclusions and recommendations in full.
- 21 The Environment Act 2021 requires us to produce a Local Nature Recovery Strategy. Whilst this will be a high level document it will in due course be a heavy influence on our biodiversity action plans, guiding priorities for resource utilisation which will be crucial in the financial climate going forward.
- 22 Whilst the LNRS is in production, this does not prevent us using the declaration as an impetus to see what more corporately can be done, across services to foster greater biodiversity, much of which may be done at low or no cost. Given the recognition of emergency such a report should be prepared within six months, with the entire process

including LNRS development subject to future Scrutiny review as they see fit.

Background papers

- Environment Act 2021 S105 and S106 Local Nature Recovery Strategies

Other useful documents

- Cabinet 13 October 2021 Consideration to Ecological Emergency

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

This report refers to S105 and 106 of the Environment Act 2021 which requires Durham County Council (as a responsible authority) to produce a Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

Finance

The intention of Local Nature Recovery Strategies is to prioritise works for enhancement and recovery to where there will be greatest benefit. This approach will be essential in targeting limited resources to best effect.

Notwithstanding there are also a range of measures at little or no additional cost that the Council with partners could identify in future action plans to foster greater biodiversity.

Future work relating to the ecological emergency will be considered as part of the annual MTFP planning cycle, with associated outcome focussed business cases, and a value for money focus.

Consultation

None.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

Future action plans will consider this as appropriate.

Climate Change

There is considerable linkage between ecological issues and climate change from both an adaption and mitigation perspective. The recommendations from ESCOSC that the Climate Emergency Response Plan and any Ecological Emergency Response Plan may be in due course merged are acknowledged.

Human Rights

None.

Crime and Disorder

None.

Staffing

None. The report refers to recent MTFP investments that will have a staffing element, but there are no additional implications.

Accommodation

None.

Risk

Action plans arising from the declaration will need to be managed within the financial limitations of the Council and partners to avoid over-commitment.

Procurement

There may be opportunity to further opportunities for response to an ecological emergency for instance through social value mechanisms.

**Appendix 2 – Environment and Sustainable Communities
Overview and Scrutiny Committee Consideration of an Ecological
Emergency**

Attached as separate document.