

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a **Special Meeting** of the **Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in the **Council Chamber, County Hall, Durham** on **Monday 14 February 2022** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor B Coult (Chair)

Members of the Committee:

Councillors E Adam, P Atkinson, L Brown, J Elmer, L Fenwick, G Hutchinson, C Lines, R Manchester, I McLean, C Martin, D Nicholls, R Potts, J Purvis and J Quinn

Co-optees:

Mr T Bolton and Mrs P Holding

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J Charlton, C Kay, B McAloon and T Stubbs.

2 Substitute Members

Councillor D Sutton-Lloyd was present as substitute for Councillor T Stubbs.

3 Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made.

4 Items from Co-opted Members or Interested Parties

There were no items from Co-opted Members or interested parties.

5 Consideration of an Ecological Emergency (County Durham)

Members considered a report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change which provided information to assist the Committee in determining whether to recommend to Cabinet that Durham County Council should declare an ecological emergency (for copy of report see file of minutes).

The Chair welcomed Oliver Sherratt, Head of Environment, Stuart Priestley, Principal Ecologist and Chris Woodley-Stewart, Director of North Pennines AONB Partnership and Chair of the Ecological Emergency Workstream of the Environment and Climate Change Partnership, to the meeting.

The Principal Ecologist introduced the presentation (for copy see file of minutes) and referred Members to the Special Meeting of the Committee held on 13 December 2021 which found that whilst global and national data was robust, there were limitations with regard to local data. The Principal Ecologist explained that the presentation aimed to provide local information relating to habitats and species within County Durham and informed Members that, since the meeting held in December, he had engaged with various organisations including Durham University, Durham Bird Club and reptile, amphibian and butterfly recorders to confirm they were happy with the tone of the report.

Information had also been provided by the Teesdale Special Flora and Conservation Trust regarding the Teesdale Assemblage, a collection of rare plants found on two fells in the Teesdale area which are considered to have survived for approximately 10,000 years, since the last glaciation. Data collected from surveys during 1968 to 1977 and 2010 to 2020, found an average 66% decline in species abundance in five key species in the area. A survey carried out on one fell where 19 species were surveyed from 1968 to 1975 and again more recently, the survey found on average, a greater than 50% decline in population on an area of 10 square kilometres where the species were present.

The Principal Ecologist highlighted information relating to designated sites, water framework directives and declines in species. He informed the Committee that evidence suggested that local declines in bird species match the national trend. Members noted that reptiles continue to decline, that the grass snake was probably extinct, red squirrels and water voles had undergone a significant decline and five out of seven priority species of butterfly had declined. The Committee noted that four species of bumblebee had become extinct since 1926, however, some positive news was reported with a new colony of tree bumblebee expanding throughout the country.

The Principal Ecologist introduced the Director of North Pennines AONB Partnership and Chair of the Ecological Emergency Workstream of the Environment and Climate Change Partnership to present information on work undertaken in the county to promote nature recovery. The Director of North Pennines AONB Partnership began his presentation by highlighting the good work in terms of biodiversity throughout the county, including the restoration of Durham Heritage Coast, the management of 160 hectares of grassland habitat for nature conservation and the work being done to extend nature recovery into the marine environment, noting that Durham County Council is leading the Seascapes project.

The Director also highlighted the work of the National Trust, the Heritage Coast Partnership and the Wildlife Trust. Members also noted that the North Pennines hosts 30% of all the species rich upland hay meadows in the UK.

The Director of North Pennines AONB Partnership commented on Durham County Council's promotion of green spaces and the work in conjunction with charities, including the Tees and Wear Rivers Trusts, to promote good soil management and initiatives such as the Coolwaters tree planting. The Committee heard that 16,000 hectares of North Pennines peatlands had been restored by the AONB Partnership which had brought benefits for nature, flood prevention, biodiversity and reduced carbon emissions. Information was also provided on the work to expand tree and woodland cover including the Durham Woodland Revival Project and the Durham Woodland Creation programme.

The Committee noted that County Durham has an active Wildlife Trust and several projects were currently underway, for example, the work with partners to restore water vole populations and the Heart of Durham project to restore arable and forestry land to semi-rural habitats and how this work had assisted to save the small pearl-bordered fritillary butterfly from extinction. The work of Durham Wildlife Trust's Brightwater wetland restoration project was also highlighted.

The AONB Partnership Director informed the Committee of the work of Tees Swale Naturally Connected, explaining that the partnership between North Pennines AONB and North Yorkshire National Park Authority had led to one of the largest restoration projects in the UK to restore, expand and connect habitats, working with farmers, landowners, conservation organisations, volunteers and partner organisations.

The AONB Partnership Director commented on the funding programme to work with farmers to boost nature recovery and access to nature, adding that there was likely to be investment of £1million in the Durham area of the North Pennines AONB of a £2million project that was focussed on nature, climate, people and places. The Director also commented on the work on training and skills to assist farmers to assess habitats, fund new equipment and encourage a new generation of farmers into the industry. The Committee noted the steps taken to increase traineeships and community engagement, including training for volunteers and initiatives such as 'citizen science' projects. The AONB Partnership Director stressed the importance of engaging with communities and continuing the good work to encourage the public to access the countryside.

The AONB Partnership Director concluded the presentation with a slide showing gamekeeper kills from one estate in Scotland during 1837-1840. The slide demonstrated the high number of predators killed within the period and the Director remarked on the vast amount of life that would have existed in the landscape at the time, in order to underpin the amount of predators present.

He cautioned the Committee to be aware of 'shifting baseline syndrome' and explained that although particular species may continue to be observed, it is not always an indication that they are in abundance and he pointed out that declines in species may be gradual, therefore the public may fail to notice the decline.

He provided examples that in this lifetime 60% of swifts had declined, 95 out of every 100 hedgehogs had disappeared, water voles had declined by 97% and 29% of birds are now on the 'red list' of species of conservation concern, including the house sparrow and starling.

The Director of North Pennines AONB Partnership encouraged the Committee to maintain the momentum, connecting habitats and working with communities to engage with nature, as it plays a vital role in health and wellbeing. He emphasised the importance of making smart planning decisions adding that Durham County Council should continue to carefully manage its estate, in the interests of biodiversity. He referred to a lack of political will over recent years to tackle environmental decline and concluded by thanking the Committee for their time. He advised that members of the Ecological Emergency Workstream of the Environment and Climate Change Partnership were very supportive of a declaration of an ecological emergency.

The Chair invited questions and comments from the Committee.

Councillor Sutton Lloyd referred to the survey information and asked the officers how confident were they that data was reflective of the current position. The Principal Ecologist stated that he was confident with the data in the report adding that he had sought opinions from local experts who agreed the data provided a good understanding of the situation. The Principal Ecologist confirmed that he would stand by the data contained within the report.

Councillor Adam observed the officers' passion for their work which was clear from their presentation and commented that he was pleased to hear of the good work being undertaken, not only within County Durham but also regionally, nationally and globally. He asked what more was required by Durham County Council, the Committee and the Environment and Climate Change Partnership to make a significant difference and to assist the Committee to make recommendations. The Head of Environment responded that Members had been presented with survey evidence, however some evidence was incomplete and future plans should aim to address gaps in knowledge. The Head of Environment added that greater awareness should be encouraged to increase public participation in nature and build upon the enjoyment of the natural environment. This, in turn, may lead to greater awareness and an increase in the number of volunteers whose involvement is key, as habitats are largely manmade and require active management to promote their particular elements of biodiversity. He also commented on the important work with charities such as the Wildlife Trust and efforts to improve links with private landowners.

Councillor Elmer stated that whilst he did not wish to pre-empt the decision and future outcomes, at this stage, the Committee was asked to look specifically at whether or not the declaration of an ecological emergency was warranted. A report to Cabinet would then consider what actions should be taken in response, with a potential recommendation being that a cross-service review should take place to identify measures to be delivered in response. Councillor Elmer highlighted that the Environment Act requires the Council to produce an ecological recovery map and he added this would be an opportunity to identify actions for the review and to work with partners to optimise opportunities.

The Director of North Pennines AONB referred to Durham County Council's work in respect of woodlands and grasslands on the estate and he commented that resources and support for organisations in the wider landscape were vital, as work on private land was key to future success. He stated that, if the Council made a declaration of an ecological emergency, this would require the ecological agenda to be incorporated into wider processes such as procurement and planning and he suggested that ecological implications should be considered in all decisions across the Council in the future.

Councillor Quinn commented that more work was required to educate the public about the importance of the ecological emergency and he expressed concern at the number of contacts he had from members of the public requesting that wildflowers planted on road verges and roundabouts be cut back. He asked if there would be scope in the future to increase the number of planters in urban areas to encourage the public to appreciate nature within their communities.

The Principal Ecologist responded that leaving grass to grow on verges may be contrary to public perceptions of 'neat and tidy' communities however these initiatives were gradually helping to increase public awareness. In terms of cost and maintenance, he explained that amenity grass required 14 cuts per year, however, wildflowers required only one cut per year, therefore this measure had a positive impact on the budget. He pointed out that it was clear that a declaration of an ecological emergency would require increased resources and he added that planters had been successfully introduced in several urban areas.

The Director of North Pennines AONB agreed that planters were a good initiative however, he pointed out the distinction between wildflower grasslands and the sowing of annual flowers on land that required spraying to clear it and he commented that where grass was left to grow, this often led to many different flowers and plants appearing. He expressed the view that it was crucial to educate and engage with the public, to encourage them to embrace green open spaces and through educating children, whose enthusiasm and curiosity will often encourage their parents and carers to participate. He added that 'nudge theories' suggest that if a quarter of the population is moved, the remainder will follow.

Councillor Nicholls agreed with the view that an ecological emergency exists and referred to the remarkable effort that had been made in order to cut carbon emissions. He stated that he hoped the same impetus would be given to an ecological emergency, commenting that what is in nature's best interest is likely to be in humans' best interest. He highlighted the importance of community involvement which he had observed in several local projects within his division. He added that Durham should seize the opportunity to become a beacon for other areas, for example through the work done to reclaim the landscape through projects such as the Woodland Revival. He pointed out that these initiatives bring community, health and economic benefits and he referred to life-style changes during the pandemic which had led more people to discover rural parts of the country and to an increasing appreciation of nature. The Director of North Pennines AONB agreed with Councillor Nicholls and stated that economies and supply chains are affected by and rely upon the natural environment, a point which is often overlooked.

In response to a question from Councillor Potts, the Director of North Pennines AONB confirmed that he was of the opinion that an ecological emergency was present, that there was unquestionably a catastrophic decline in nature and that no evidence had been presented to the contrary. He added that all partners were of the same view that this was a time of serious ecological crisis.

Councillor Lines referred to the articulation of the declaration and suggested that it should be written in a way that provides hope for the future, whilst emphasising that urgent action is required. He added the declaration should reassure the public that it is not too late to make a difference and it should showcase initiatives already being undertaken at a local level. He stated the view that all Members could contribute to this within their own divisions, by supporting action locally and he commented that consideration should be given to the criteria for allocating neighbourhood budgets to include support for actions to address the ecological emergency. The Director of North Pennines AONB agreed that it was important to have tangible evidence and that role models are important to prove what can be achieved, for example groups that cultivate their local green space often encourage others to do the same.

Councillor Sutton-Lloyd provided his view that education and communication were vital in a declaration of an ecological emergency and to illustrate the importance of connecting with nature for enjoyment and wellbeing, he quoted a Chinese proverb meaning that as food sustains the body, nature sustains the soul.

RESOLVED:

The Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee received the report and presentation and noted its content.

6 Consideration of an Ecological Emergency – Summary and Next Steps

The Committee considered a report of the Corporate Director of Resources which provided a summary of information provided at the Special Meeting of the Committee held on 13 December 2021, detailing relevant ecological data, to consider whether to recommend to Cabinet that a declaration be made and to determine any further additional recommendations for Cabinet's consideration (for copy of report see file of minutes).

The Overview and Scrutiny Officer explained that when Cabinet asked the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to undertake this work and consider the evidence base in relation to biodiversity decline, Cabinet requested that Overview and Scrutiny respond, with a recommendation to Cabinet, as to whether the Council should declare an ecological emergency.

The Overview and Scrutiny Officer referred members to paragraph 10 of the report and having received evidence, stated that it was now a matter for Members to decide whether the Council should recommend to Cabinet that an ecological emergency is declared and to consider making further additional recommendations to the potential recommendations detailed in paragraph 11. Following the meeting, a detailed report would be prepared, summarising the evidence provided and key findings of biodiversity decline, which would be presented to the Committee at a Special Meeting in April. Members were then asked whether, having received the evidence, they wished to recommend to Cabinet that a declaration be made. Councillor Elmer suggested that unless the Committee wished to discuss the issue of declaration first, there should be a show of hands which would provide an indication of Members' views regarding the declaration.

Members at the meeting were unanimous in their decision to recommend to Cabinet that the Council should declare an ecological emergency.

The Chair then advised that two questions had been received from Mr Owens, a member of the public, and it had been agreed that the questions should be presented to the Committee.

The Overview and Scrutiny Officer read out the questions as follows:

1. Should the scrutiny committee decide to recommend to Cabinet that Durham County Council declare an ecological emergency (which I hope it does!) would the committee encourage those carrying out this work to engage with those County Durham residents and local conservation/nature groups willing to help, beyond just a consultation after a draft plan is produced, to not only to inform the drawing up of a plan or Local Nature Recovery Strategy but also explore how local 'citizen scientists' can help with the longer term monitoring

of the effectiveness of any proposed actions/interventions from that strategy/plan? This could also prove to be a helpful and economical way to improve the data gaps at a county level, particularly over time, that have been identified in the reports provided to the committee.

2. Like climate change, the gradual degradation of the natural environment and the habitats of a number of endangered species of both flora and fauna is not fully appreciated by most residents in County Durham, or in the rest of England. In part this is due to the relatively slow rate of change over the years but also due to the increasing numbers of folk in the current era preferring to be increasingly engrossed with the virtual environments of television or the multitude of platforms available on the Internet rather than engaging with outdoor activities and so possibly noticing these changes for themselves. Would the committee consider recommending that any strategy/plan incorporates effective communication to raise awareness of the issue while also encouraging a healthier, more sustainable lifestyle incorporating activities out of doors for all County Durham residents regardless of age.

Councillor Elmer stated that in relation to the questions posed by Mr Owens he agreed that there was a need for wider community involvement in developing and assisting the delivery of an action plan, as well as raising awareness of this issue within local communities. He suggested a recommendation was required to articulate the need for engagement and consultation with communities and special interest groups in developing and delivering an action plan. In addition the Committee should also consider how to raise awareness of this issue across the county.

The Head of Environment welcomed the questions posed by Mr Owens and referring to the second question regarding awareness, he agreed that this was a prerequisite to increase engagement and support for the Council's efforts with regard to wildlife and conservation. He referred to the projects and schemes mentioned previously during the discussion, adding that future plans would build upon those schemes. The Head of Environment then advised Members that, at the Cabinet meeting held on 9 February 2021, a range of investments were highlighted including extra resources to support the direction of travel for nature reserve management, extra resources in relation to engagement with volunteers and educational outreach work and the appointment of a local nature recovery strategy officer to offer a corporate and countywide approach.

Councillor Elmer commented that by declaring an ecological emergency, this would emphasise the gravity of the situation and elevate the work that was previously conservation, to work that is essential for future survival and that making this point was educational in its own right. He then referred to Councillor Quinn's question and agreed on the need for a step change in education and engagement.

Councillor Elmer referred to the additional recommendations set out in paragraph 11 of the report and asked Members for their views on adding a further recommendation to respond to Mr Owens' questions.

Councillor Adam referred to the next steps and advised that the information presented in the meetings highlighted the situation, not just locally but also nationally and globally. He commented that the information had expanded Members' knowledge as to whether the declaration of an ecological emergency was necessary. He commented that human nature is essentially selfish with actions driven by economic pressures, having little regard to environmental impact. Councillor Adam suggested that, in making the declaration, it was important to have a strategy to apply it, similar to the climate emergency response plan in 2019 and the work in relation to single-use plastics. He suggested that a task force should be established to look at processes and procedures to identify the best ecological practices currently available to services within the Council. He added that all decision-making reports by the Council should include the consideration of ecological emergency implications. He also suggested that the work with partnerships should be expanded to include businesses, communities, the Environment and Climate Change Partnership and landowners. Councillor Adam concluded by suggesting that objectives should be set for future long-term aspirations and the medium term financial plan should provide for dedicated funding and resources.

Councillor Quinn suggested that the recommendations should include financial considerations for an education and communication strategy.

Councillor Elmer added that an analysis was required on the work the Council carries out on its estate, including costings, and to identify further work required to encourage the wider community.

The Chair then referred Members to the second recommendation in the report concerning the declaration and proposed, with the agreement of the Members, that an interim report be prepared and sent to Cabinet for consideration at their April meeting, advising them of the Committee's decision that Durham County Council declare an ecological emergency and that the Committee intends to send the full review report to Cabinet in June, following the agreement of the report by the Committee at a Special Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee to be held in April.

Members agreed that an interim report would be sent to Cabinet recommending that Durham County Council declares an ecological emergency.

RESOLVED:

The Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee received the report and noted its content and:

- a) Agreed unanimously to recommend to Cabinet that Durham County Council declares an ecological emergency and that arrangements be made for an interim report to Cabinet advising of the Committee's intention that a full review report will be presented to Cabinet in June.
- b) Agreed the potential recommendations outlined at paragraph 11 and that a further recommendation was required in relation to awareness raising and education and that individuals, specialist and community groups are involved in the consultation, development and delivery of the action plan.