

Cabinet

14 December 2022

Ecological Emergency: Outline Strategy and Action Plan



Key Decision No. NCC/04/22

Report of Corporate Management Team

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Councillor Mark Wilkes, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Climate Change

Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide

Purpose of the Report

- 1 To outline an initial strategy and action plan for Council activities in response to the declaration of an ecological emergency made by Cabinet on 6 April 2022.
- 2 To note that further iterations of these plans will be integrated into a wider Local Nature Recovery Strategy for County Durham, as well as future Climate Change Emergency Response Plans.

Executive summary

- 3 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 Council, working with partners, has done considerable work in enhancing these assets, for example in several landscape scale initiatives, habitat restoration and creation, including tree planting and the management of nature reserves.
- 4 The overall trend internationally, nationally and locally is one of biodiversity and habitat decline. This was examined in detail by the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny

Committee (ESCOSC) and responded to by Cabinet with the declaration of an Ecological Emergency on 6 April 2022. Cabinet asked for an initial action plan on Council activities in response to this declaration be provided within six months. This report fulfils this request.

- 5 The Ecological Emergency Action Plan (EEAP) is a corporately derived and cross-Council action plan which responds to the ecological emergency through activity across three proposed key themes: 'Land Management', 'Engagement, Education, and Behaviour Change', 'Policies and Strategies'. New investment, announced as part of the MTFP 22-26, provides 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. Most are now in post and have commenced their work.
- 6 In recognition of the tight financial climate, the action plan focusses on what can be achieved using existing resources, as well as potential income from the planning system. This is an important first step, with any additional requirements in future plans, being subject to the usual Medium Term Financial Plan processes. Most of the actions are therefore centred around the potential to streamline and improve existing work programmes, such as biodiversity interventions on open space, or by expanding existing programmes, such as awareness around climate change to further include the ecological emergency.
- 7 Actions are also proposed that will improve biodiversity delivery within new built development and ensure that Council land holdings can benefit from biodiversity-focused financial contributions arising through the planning system.
- 8 Systems are also proposed to ensure that procurement and decision making within the Council considers the impact on biodiversity in a similar manner to the processes in place for responding to the climate emergency.

Recommendation

- 9 Cabinet is recommended to:
 - (a) approve the Ecological Emergency Action Plan (EEAP) as set out in the report.

Background

- 10 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. Working with partners, the Council has a strong track record of conserving and enhancing these assets, for example in several landscape scale initiatives, habitat restoration and creation, including tree planting and the management of nature reserves.
- 11 The Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee (ESCOSC) recognised these natural assets and accomplishments, but utilising evidence such as condition of designated semi-natural habitats in County Durham, data from Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) and Water Framework Directive (WFD), data on surface waters as well as atlases produced by relevant specialists, concluded that many of our habitats and species are in decline, mirroring international and national trends.
- 12 The meeting of Cabinet on 6 April 2022 considered the report from the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee and agreed to declare an Ecological Emergency for County Durham; requesting that an initial action plan on Council activities in response to the declaration be provided within six months. This report responds to that request.

Ecological Emergency; Strategy and Scope of Action Plan

- 13 A copy of the subsequent Draft EEAP is attached as **Appendix 2**.
- 14 The Ecological Emergency is focussed on the initial actions of the Council and the EEAP aims to identify key areas of Council activity which is required to deliver against the emergency. A wider ecological strategy, a Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS), for the county will be produced by the County Durham Partnership, specifically the Ecological Emergency workstream of the Environment & Climate Change Partnership.
- 15 The Environment Act places a duty on the Council to publish 'biodiversity reports' which summarise actions the Authority has taken plans to take to be compliant with the 'general biodiversity objective' of the act which is centred on the conservation and enhancement of biodiversity through the exercise of the Authority's functions. The actions within the umbrella of the Ecological Emergency will therefore feed into these future biodiversity reports.

- 16 The EEAP was developed within certain parameters; these incorporate recent staffing investments, such as nature reserve wardens and education officers however delivery of the plan at this stage would focus on the benefits of being more joined up in our approach (across several Council services) as well as doing things differently rather than new additional resources. The attached draft plan therefore sets out current (already underway) and proposed areas of activity within three key themes as summarised below:
- 17 **Land Management** is regarded as the main area within which the Council should deliver for biodiversity. Land use change and alterations in the way land is managed are key drivers of changes in biodiversity at global, national and local scales. These drivers are cited as one of the major reasons for biodiversity losses, especially in the UK which is one of the most biologically impoverished countries in the world.
- 18 Actions held within the action plan aim to result in significant improvements in the management of the estate for biodiversity. In order to achieve this, various objectives will need to be set, including: gaining a clear understanding of the Council's landholdings, the potential for these landholdings to be used to deliver for biodiversity and the development of mechanisms to deliver against that potential.

The plans incorporate the following headline measures:

- A programme of re-wilding undertaken by Clean and Green services for central reservations and selected open spaces with reduced or no grass cutting in these areas;
 - A programme of environmental condition survey and improved management of the Councils nature reserves;
 - An on-going programme for improvements to the Council's woodland estate, as well as utilising opportunities through Durham woodland Revival and Great North Forest for tree planting in appropriate locations.
- 19 **Engagement, Education, and Behaviour Change** is essential for the sustainable and equitable use of biodiversity and its conservation. A lack of awareness of biodiversity and its importance through the ecosystem services it provides to our wellbeing and quality of life is a common occurrence. The future of biodiversity will depend on the collective action of an educated society and a key challenge will be to draw attention to the importance and urgency of the biodiversity emergency to the residents of County Durham.
- 20 Actions within the action plan therefore aim to raise awareness of the issues surrounding our biological resource enabling individuals to

develop a deeper understanding and knowledge to make informed and responsible decisions.

The plans incorporate the following headline measures:

- Continue important education programmes such as the Trees for Children scheme, and environmental education activities based from the Council Parks and bolstered by recent investments;
- Improve site signage and community awareness to explain changes in land management (for instance reduced cutting frequencies);
- In recognition of the strong links to climate change, the incorporation of ecological aspects in all appropriate marketing initiatives.

21 **Policies and Strategies** shall require further development to ensure there is rational decision making with regards to biodiversity, whilst strategy documents are likely to be needed to achieve specific aims or objectives. These policies and strategies could be used to guide development and our approach to procurement and land management. The action plan sets out to identify any policies and strategies required to deliver against the Ecological Emergency.

The plans incorporate the following headline measures:

- Producing supplementary relating to ecological matters/species protection to guide sustainable development;
- Build ecological emergency into procurement processes including maximising opportunities in social value contributions;
- Consideration of Ecological Emergency as an implication for all Council reports (similar to that of Climate Change currently).

22 The Council continues to react proactively to new legislative requirements pertaining to the environment; most recently the need for most developments within the catchment of the Teesmouth and Cleveland Coast Special Protection Area (SAC) to be nutrient neutral. The SAC is protected under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017, because of these regulations and European case law, Natural England has advised that projects and plans should only go ahead if they will not cause additional nutrient pollution to the protected site. This means that, for example, new residential development can only happen if the nutrient load created through additional wastewater from the development is mitigated. The Council is working with partners, including Natural England, Northumbrian Water, Environment

Agency and Durham Wildlife Trust to develop mitigation strategies to enable development to proceed without negatively affecting the protected site.

Conclusion

- 23 The proposed EEAP, outlined above and set out as a draft plan for approval in Appendix 2, is intended to provide an initial response to cabinet's declaration of an Ecological Emergency in April 2022 by means of a delivery plan within 6 months of the declaration being made.
- 24 Following approval, officers from across key services listed in the report will commence delivery against the plan's objectives and monitor and report progress going forward. A progress update will be provided to cabinet members twelve months hence.

Background Papers

- Cabinet 6 April 2022 Ecological Emergency Declaration

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

The EEAP is to operate within existing legal provisions.

Finance

The plans include recent investments made as part of MTFP 22-2r including nature reserve officers, woodland creation, community/education and Local Nature Recovery Strategy Officers.

There are no additional budgetary requirements associated with the plan as these are focussed more on joining up the work across services as well as doing some things differently (for instance grass cutting).

If additional resources are required through future iterations of the plan these will be considered through the MTFP planning processes.

Consultation

Members of Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee have been consulted throughout on preparations for declaring the Ecological Emergency and EEAP.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

None identified.

Human Rights

None identified.

Climate Change

This is a key issue addressed throughout the report.

Crime and Disorder

None identified.

Staffing

Delivery of the EEAP is to be met from within existing staffing resources.

Accommodation

None identified.

Risk

If the EEAP is not adhered to, then the commitment to respond to the ecological emergency will not be met.

Procurement

Provisions for the procurement of Council goods and services that benefit nature and natural habitats are integral to the EEAP.

Appendix 2: Ecological Emergency – Action Plan

**ECOLOGICAL EMERGENCY – AN INITIAL PLAN FOR
COUNCIL ACTIVITIES**

October 2022



Note from Portfolio holder

The Council has been doing a lot to support biodiversity, habitats, and landscapes, not just for the benefit of wildlife, but for people and communities as we are all enriched by contact with the natural world. Our activities range from a host of landscape wide initiatives, through to the management of nature reserves and community conservation and education projects.

It is evident however that more work needs to be done , as we have not been immune to national trends of biodiversity decline. This report focuses initially on what the Council can do through a more joined up approach and doing some things differently. In due course our Local Nature Recovery Plan will examine what more can be achieved working with partners on a countywide scale, and this initial plan will put the Council in good shape to play an active exemplar role in this important work.

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Purpose

- 1 To outline an initial Ecological Emergency Action Plan for Council activities in response to the declaration of an ecological emergency made by Cabinet on 6 April 2022.
- 2 The Ecological Emergency Action Plan (EEAP) is focussed on the actions of the council and aims to identify key areas of Council activity which is required to deliver against the emergency. It is a corporate approach drawing across all Council services that impact and can influence the state of our environment.
- 3 The EEAP is structured around key areas or themes which will deliver the most benefit, these being: 'Policies and Strategies', 'Land Management', 'Engagement, Education, and Behaviour Change'
- 4 A wider ecological strategy, a statutory Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS), for the county will be produced by the County Durham Partnership, specifically the Ecological Emergency workstream of the Environment & Climate Change Partnership. The timescales for production of this document will be an estimated 12 to 24 months but this dependant on the detailed requirements set out in Government guidance which is currently not yet available.

Background

- 5 In the Cabinet meeting on 13 October 2021, national and international declines in natural habitats and species were recognised and a working group was established to examine if this was also reflected in the evidence-base for biodiversity within County Durham. On 14 February 2022 a summary of available information and trends for habitats, species and conservation management was presented for consideration by the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
- 6 The report concluded that in common with patterns country-wide, data for our terrestrial and aquatic habitats clearly shows that semi-natural habitats in County Durham are failing to meet their condition assessments and targets: 85% of SSSIs are in unfavourable condition, 70% of LWS compartments are failing condition assessments and 90.6% of surface waters are failing to meet the required ecological standards.

- 7 As habitats are in poor condition and being gradually lost due to a lack of, or inappropriate, management, then it follows that our species are also being negatively impacted upon.
- 8 Some of our most iconic species have suffered declines or are declining, water voles were lost from 90% of their range by the late 1990's and further survey work showed a further loss of 30% percent between 2006 and 2015. The red squirrel was lost from the east of the County by the early 2000's and although some species, such as otter, have bounced back from historical declines the picture is one of further reductions or local extinctions. The dingy skipper butterfly has been lost from around 30% of its known sites and many of our reptile species are showing evidence of declines with coastal populations of slow worm under threat from extinction.
- 9 The report stated that although local species data does not allow trends to be produced over the same time periods as used by the national audit of species and habitats: 'the State of Nature Report', all the local evidence, across the species groups points to the conclusion that the local declines are comparable with the global and national picture.
- 10 The national picture of declines in Priority Species is echoed at a local level across all species atlases whilst more recent anecdotal and survey evidence supports the interpretation provided by these publications. Consequently, at a special meeting of the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 14 February 2022, Members agreed that an interim report be sent to cabinet recommending that Durham County Council declares an ecological emergency.
- 11 The meeting of Cabinet on 6 April 2022 considered the report from the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee and agreed to declare an Ecological Emergency for County Durham; requesting that an initial action plan on Council activities in response to the declaration be provided within six months.

Resources

- 12 The EEAP focuses on how more can be achieved by through a joined up Corporate approach to the challenge, and where appropriate (for instance in land management) by doing some things differently. It builds in the additional investments from 22/23 announced as part of the Medium Term Financial Plan for instance staffing for Local Nature

Recovery Strategy, Rangers and Environmental education staff in Countryside services, as well as support for woodland creation.

- 13 The Council is already making use of new funding streams and opportunities to diversify biodiversity on selected areas of amenity green space, for instance successful rounds on Urban tree Challenge Fund, as well as a recently awarded Parks Levelling up Grant.
- 14 External funding streams can be used to deliver action held within the EEAP, most notably developer contributions for biodiversity net gain (BNG) to deliver habitat enhancement on Council land. These developer contributions can be used to restore habitats back to good condition.
- 15 The forthcoming Environmental Land Management (ELMs) scheme, which will replace current agri-environment schemes, should provide a mechanism to fund positive land management for biodiversity on parts of the Councils rural landholdings.

Summary of Current activity in support of an Ecological Emergency

i Policies and Strategies

- 16 A raft of policies supporting the wider protection and enhancement of biodiversity across the county is held within the County Durham Local Plan. Specific policies include:
 - Policy 41. Trees, Woodlands and Hedges;
 - Policy 42. Biodiversity and Geodiversity;
 - Policy 43. Internationally Designated Sites;
 - Policy 44. Protected Species & Nationally and Locally Protected Sites;
- 17 All relevant policies within the local plan aim to protect and enhance our biological resource and be cognisant of the level of protection afforded to designated sites. Amongst other relevant policies include a Tree Management Policy which sets out a corporate approach towards tree management; inspections, maintenance, and replanting.
- 18 The Council continues to react proactively to new legislative requirements pertaining to the environment; most recently the need for most developments within the catchment of the Teesmouth and Cleveland Coast Special Protection Area to be nutrient neutral. The Council is working with partners, including Natural England, Northumbrian Water, Environment Agency and Durham Wildlife Trust to

develop mitigation strategies to enable development to proceed without negatively affecting the protected areas.

- 19 The Council's Environmental Statement also references the Ecological Emergency and states that the Council will seek to protect and enhance natural capital across its estate, highways, woodlands and green and blue spaces. It commits through its decision-making to ensure that net gains in biodiversity are achieved through the adoption of the most environmentally beneficial management regimes and that pollution is prevented.
- 20 The County Durham Vision 2035, which was developed together with partner organisations and the public, sets out what we would want the county to look like in 15 years' time. This vision is structured around three ambitions which are: More and better jobs, People live long and independent lives and Connected Communities. Biodiversity is referenced under the More and better jobs ambition where the vision states that "we will protect and enhance our core heritage and natural assets". Other references to biodiversity and the natural environment come under People live long and independent lives where the vision says that "we will maximise the quality of our local environment".
- 21 The Climate Emergency Response Plan recognises that the county's natural environment has a vital role to play in tackling climate change and includes key measures to work towards including the protection and restoration our coastal and marine habitats, protection our existing semi-natural habitats and the utilisation and targeting of nature-based solutions.

ii Land Management

- 22 **Parks and Countryside.** The services with a major, active land management role within the Council are Parks and Countryside, Clean and Green and services involved with the woodland estate (CPAL and Landscape).
- 23 Parks and Countryside have been delivering for biodiversity through active land management of the Countryside Estate for over 40 years. Although variable in approach and extent due to levels of resource, there is a clear ethos of considering biodiversity in all their activities.
- 24 The countryside estate is approximately 1300 ha, comprising a suite of sites from the highest local, regional, and international wildlife designations to recreational assets such as the railway path network. The estate covers land across the county, with a bias towards central and eastern areas. All sites contribute to the biodiversity of County

Durham and receive some intervention depending on site characteristics and available resource.

- 25 Much of the work on the countryside estate is carried out by the professional members of the Parks and Countryside service. Further to this, volunteers play a huge role in assisting with the delivery of management aims and have contributed work valued at many millions of pounds.
- 26 With the reductions over a number of years of site-based staff, more emphasis has been placed on the use of contractors to deliver larger targeted actions on sites, particularly those that have Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) support payments from DEFRA agreements. These works are covered by the payments received and have minimal financial impact on core Council budgets. Parks and Countryside are awaiting confirmation of Defra review of the HLS regime and what this means for financial support of high value site management moving forward.
- 27 Recent investments in Parks and Countryside staff, do allow for a re-focus of activity to address DCC's Climate and Ecological Emergency declarations.
- 28 With regards to land management, the new staff roles will allow the team to direct resources onto Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) currently held within the countryside estate. These sites will require survey effort to establish a baseline condition assessment which will then be monitored regularly to check progress against agreed targets. Where appropriate, the sites team will engage and support community and education outreach staff to provide a holistic approach to land management.
- 29 The Parks and Countryside Service have identified barriers to biodiversity delivery including a lack of baseline ecological data and condition assessments, a decline in available management resources over the last 20 years and larger scale restoration requirements beyond current provisions. Given the specialist knowledge held within the service and the size of the estate, there is potential to deliver significant biodiversity benefits through the restoration and creation of wildlife habitats should resources be found.
- 30 Both the Ecology and Parks and Countryside services are currently working on a system to tap into Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) requirements through the planning system; a financial mechanism to deliver certain habitat enhancement works within the estate which is likely to lever in some additional necessary resource.

- 31 The wider Clean and Green team are responsible for providing a variety of services including grounds maintenance of parks, open spaces, school grounds, cemeteries, and closed churchyards.
- 32 The Clean and Green Service has implemented a suite of biodiversity enhancements on open spaces ranging from habitat creation to changes in cutting regimes. The largest of the habitat creation projects has been the seeding of a hectare of open space in Durham to create a species rich grassland supporting a range of wildlife. Other interventions include overseeding grasslands with wildflowers at the Durham Coast and reducing cutting regimes on amenity grasslands across the county to allow wildflowers to set seed and spread. The service has also planted scrub woodland and installs and maintains all the Urban Tree Challenge Fund (UTCF) sites, with around 800 trees being planted per year under this scheme.
- 33 The Clean and Green Service currently maintains 37 areas of meadow and wildflowers with a further 28 sites identified for potential future biodiversity interventions. These sites will be subject to consultation and detailed design work to ensure any interventions are appropriate to the location. A recent report by Clean & Green, 'Rewilding, July 2022' showcases these potential sites and is an example of how Clean and Green are currently approaching biodiversity interventions on open spaces.
- 34 Other notable achievements include the continual reduction in the use of fungicides, pesticides and herbicides and investigations into further reductions in herbicide use are planned. The reduction in peat use is now well advanced with trials on several peat free composts for the annual bedding and Morrison Busty nursery on-going. The service has committed to be peat-free by 2025.
- 35 Clean and Green are continuing to roll out biodiversity interventions across all sites and are developing a strategic document to improve the rate that sites can be brought under more wildlife friendly management in conjunction with input from Ecology.
- 36 Once the approach has been defined and potential sites agreed in principle, the Ecology Service intend to assess potentially funding the interventions via BNG.
- 37 The Ecology and Clean and Green services both acknowledge that there are constraints to the delivery of biodiversity interventions, including staff time to develop the site plans, undertaking consultations, and delivering the required interventions within the appropriate seasonal windows. These constraints and practical solutions will be explored

further within the more strategic approach towards interventions under development.

- 38 **Tree Initiatives.** Since 2000, the Council with partners, has planted nearly a million trees on over 500ha of land as well as planting or restoring nearly 200 miles of hedgerow. Several more recent improvements and initiatives that are continuing to build on this work including: Durham Woodland Revival (DWR), the Urban Tree Challenge Fund (UTCf), the Durham Woodland Creation (DWC) programme, a comprehensive management of Council-owned woodland and the recently launched North East Community Forest (NECF).
- 39 The DWR programme is led by the Council and supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and other partners with the aim of restoring and reconnecting woodlands in County Durham. The programme is to run for a further 18 months with a dedicated team who are giving landowners and communities opportunities to learn about, enjoy and re-imagine a purpose for their woodlands. It is also establishing 60ha of new woodland across three major sites; planting is complete at 2 sites and a final 32ha will be planted in 2023/4.
- 40 All of the woodlands owned by the Council have Forestry Commission approved management plans which can tap into a Woodland Improvement Grant Scheme, a DEFRA grant of almost £1 million for approved schemes. A member of staff has been recruited to manage this five-year work programme which will help to bring neglected woodlands back into management and improve the condition of ancient woodland. The Council was also successful in attracting UTCf over its three funding rounds to date with almost £850,000 being awarded.
- 41 Resources from the Climate Emergency Response Plan (CERP) are now supporting a four-year countywide woodland creation programme (DWC) to establish 10,000 trees across the county's 14 AAPs. A Trees for Children initiative has also been introduced to plant a tree for each of the county's 69,000 school children to help tackle climate change, engaging support from the OASES service (Outdoor and Sustainability Education Specialists), who are enabling school planting activities over the period of the DWC programme.
- 42 A new Community Forest has been established; the North East Community Forest (NECF), which Newcastle City Council is leading in conjunction with the County Council as well as South Tyneside, North Tyneside, Gateshead, Sunderland Councils. A national funding pot, 'Trees for Climate' has been secured to fund an initial 5-year planting programme at a rate of £17k/ha. Durham County Council will benefit from this resource to meet a commitment of planting up 300 ha of trees over the next 4 years on both private and Council owned land.

- 43 The Durham Hedgerow Partnership has been giving grants to landowners to plant and restore hedgerows for over twenty years and transformed many areas throughout the county with these traditional, naturalistic boundary treatments. To date this restoration and planting is equivalent in length to the distance between Durham and Leeds, and the programme is ongoing.
- 44 **Landscape Scale Partnerships.** The Council is directly involved with various landscape scale delivery providers these include SeaScapes, North Pennines Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (NPAONB), Land of Oak and Iron and the Durham Heritage Coast.
- 45 SeaScapes is hosted by the Council and consists of a consortium of partners united in their collective mission to influence support for, and increase the protection of our sea and coastline. Its focus and main geographical area of work is the England Coast Path along the shore and cliff tops from the Tyne to the Tees, covering an area up to six nautical miles out to sea. Funding has been awarded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and partner contributions for a four year engagement programme to reveal the hidden heritage of this unique seascape and engage its communities in the stewardship of this unique coastline.
- 46 SeaScapes is delivering sustainable land management through close working with the National Trust at White Lea Farm (Easington) to create and restore a valuable coastal habitat for species such as the Durham Argus Butterfly, a subspecies unique to the Magnesian Limestone cliffs. This is largely being done through volunteer days. A section of beach at Seaton Carew has also been more actively managed for migratory little terns, with over 80 chicks fledging in 2022; noted as a resounding success.
- 47 Designated as an area of national habitat significance is the Durham Heritage Coast and a key purpose of the DHC area is to connect, protect, and expand natural and semi natural habitats from the Ryhope Dene in the north to the boundary of Hartlepool headland in the south.
- 48 Works to protect valuable habitats have included the closure of the capillary of paths through the dunes system at Crimdon, protecting Sites of Scientific Interest and areas designated as both Special Protection Areas (SPA) and Special Areas of Conservation (SAC). Impacts on habitats are currently being managed by fencing coastal meadow areas protecting them from being used as ad hoc car parks.
- 49 Easington Local Nature Reserve has received Area Action Partnership (AAP) funding to improve paths and further funding has been received

to enhance the site through tree planting and limit access by illegal users. The site is an alternative to visitors using the protected coastal areas and so acts to reduce impacts on sensitive coastal habitats and bird populations.

- 50 Further AAP funding has been received by the Heritage Coast to improve signage from Horden station to the village and to the English Coastal Path National Trail; this encourages the use of Public Rights of Way and directs people away from more sensitive areas.
- 51 The Durham Heritage Coast is also working with Sunderland City Council's Coast project to monitor both habitat quality and food availability as well as recreational usage of the SAC and SPA. The Heritage Coast also supports and funds Newcastle University for Blue Carbon research into help for its carbon and biodiversity benefits.
- 52 The North Pennines Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (NPAONB) Partnership team delivers directly on work to address the biodiversity crisis, and convenes, supports and enables others to do so.
- 53 The team is into its 17th year of direct delivery on peatland restoration, addressing the blocking of moorland drains and the restoration of bare and eroded peat. The team is directly responsible for over 42,000ha of restoration, an area three times the size of Newcastle. As well as its biodiversity benefits, this has avoided carbon loss benefits of the emissions from over 1m UK homes or the equivalent of taking 7000 cars off the road.
- 54 The NPOANB team is directly involved in increasing the area of tree and scrub cover across the AONB. This includes direct delivery through programmes such as Tees Swale – Naturally Connected, and the Heart of the Pennines Forest project, supporting landowners to increase tree cover through our woodland officers, or providing grant aid, crucially to support tree establishment following the principles of the 'right tree, in the right place, for the right reason'.
- 55 Hay meadow restoration has been a focus of the team for many years, with thousands of meadows surveyed and the species richness of around 500 hectares restored.
- 56 The management of rivers and wetlands includes work with the coal authority on minewater pollution remediation to support biodiversity. The team is currently engaged in the creation of a series of scrapes and small wetlands across farmland. The team is continuing to work with the Environment Agency and Wear Rivers Trust on natural flood management in Weardale. Species-specific work has included a focus on curlew, water voles and waders; the team is represented in the

national Raptor Persecution Priority Delivery Group, as many other fora and partnerships aimed at recovering biodiversity.

- 57 The team is actively engaged in delivering the LNRS across 3 counties and is helping to lead the work in County Durham through Chairing the Ecological Emergency Board of the County Durham Environment Partnership.
- 58 The Land of Oak and Iron is a National Lottery funded landscape scale partnership extending over 177 square miles in and around the Derwent Valley, part of which is in County Durham with the remainder in Gateshead and Northumberland. In 2016 the three authorities joined forces with Groundwork NE to successfully bid for Lottery funding to develop a four-year programme worth over £5 million to promote and improve the areas rich natural and cultural heritage; ranging from woodland regeneration to restoring historic early industrial structures and a state of the art visitor centre.
- 59 Now in a legacy phase, there is a trust in place to manage and maintain the programme going forward which includes the founding lead partners including the Council. Amongst recent achievements are arrangements for extension of contract to summer 2023 for a dedicated woodland manager working on woodland regeneration and community projects within the area.
- 60 Discover Brightwater began as a £3.3 million Landscape Partnership programme with the aim to 'reveal, restore and celebrate life around the River Skerne' in County Durham. Largely funded initially by the National Lottery Heritage Fund (£2.7 million) it covers a 200 sq km area of the Tees Lowlands from the Trimdons in the north east to Shildon in the west and Darlington in the south. The concept was created by the Local Nature Partnership and is led by Durham Wildlife Trust working in close partnership with a wide range of partners.
- 61 Discover Brightwater has already delivered approximately 20km of improved in-river and riverbank (riparian) habitats, through the use of natural techniques including flow deflectors and using brash bundles to encourage the river to re-meander to improve oxygenation in low-flow sections of the river.
- 62 Delivery is currently focussed on approximately 80 ha of restored wetland which will be completed before the programme ends in March 2024. One location, Bishop's Fen, centres on an area of DCC land which has been leased to Durham Wildlife Trust to create a wetland nature reserve between Hardwick Park and Bishop Middleham.
- 63 Discover Brightwater has also successfully leveraged in an additional £1.1million (from Veolia Environmental Trust, the Environment Agency,

DCC, National Highways and Northumbrian Water) to help with habitat and climate mitigation projects, including the purchase of Ricknall Carrs near Newton Aycliffe as an additional site for wetland creation. The river and wetland projects will deliver extensive benefits to wildlife and help to restore natural processes in the Skerne catchment.

- 64 Discover Brightwater's legacy includes the development of proposals for the creation of the Great North Fen, a vision for a 500ha patchwork of wet grasslands, carrs, fens and ponds at the centre of the Skerne catchment. Large projects of this type can provide both significant nature restoration and climate change mitigation and adaptation. The benefits this might generate for key national infrastructure, such as the East Coast Mainline and the A1M, which bisect the project area, is one of the elements that will be examined. The potential for using integrated wetlands to remove excess nutrients from the Skerne is another topic for consideration and an assessment of all the services the catchment can provide - carbon capture, nutrient removal, biodiversity net gain - will be at the centre of the Great North Fen legacy plan.

iii Engagement, Education, and Behaviour Change

- 65 Parks and Countryside and Children & Young Peoples Services (CYPS) are the services with a defined remit under this theme.
- 66 A core function of the Parks and Countryside service is to promote the Council's countryside estate, ensuring work is delivered with value to communities by having high quality outdoor space nearby. A Parks and Countryside programming team are delivering biodiversity/climate change themes through school education events and activities, as well as through a programme of guided walks. The service also supports a range of initiative and projects through partnership working across the county.
- 67 Members have recently agreed to resources and provisions for two new staff members as Parks and Countryside Awareness and Community Engagement Officers who are focussing on site-based nature recovery activities with local communities across the countryside estate. This will provide valuable additional resources for engaging the community in the Ecological Emergency response going forward.
- 68 New investment in the Parks and Countryside area has allowed for further community outreach. Specialist community projects and volunteering opportunities will connect the ecological emergency to communities on a more personal level. The projects aim to develop a greater sense of ownership by giving people the opportunity to see the

direct local impact of negative environmental behaviours and increase their understanding of the biodiversity value of countryside sites in their own neighbourhoods, whilst promoting awareness of wider nature recovery strategies and climate change impact. The new investment will also support continuing environmental education programmes.

- 69 The promotion of the eco-emergency is interlaced throughout the outdoor learning programme, incorporating climate change issues during all workshops including KS1/2/3, encouraging positive and sustainable changes to reduce our individual impact. New workshops have been designed that explore the eco-emergency in our locality including activities focused on biodiversity, ecology, food, energy and weather/ landscape changes. Older students will be engaged through the John Muir Award which encourages a responsibility for our environment and promotes individual well-being.
- 70 In 2012, CYPS engaged in a formal partnership with the charity Outdoor and Sustainability Education Specialists (OASES) which has led to a wide range of education projects and programmes that have benefitted schools across the county over the years. These have been delivered through a range of funding streams – some national, including organisations such as Learning Through Landscapes, the National Lottery or more local funders such as AAPs' and Members' budgets.
- 71 Current nature-based projects delivered through this partnership working include:
- The Trees for Children initiative (referred to in paragraph 39) – funded by the CERP – working with 70 schools over 3 years to plant over 10,000 trees and collect and plant tree seeds in collaboration with the Woodland Creation Team and Education;
 - OASES bringing the Forest Schools programme to County Durham in 2003. A hugely successful initiative, it has trained hundreds of teachers/ Early Years practitioners in woodland activities and enabled many of them to become accredited Forest School Leaders;
 - Forest Bathing – an accredited programme to bring the wellbeing benefits of woodlands and trees to teachers and young people;
 - Accredited Active Learning - supporting schools to take their learning outside to use the local environment as a learning resource;
 - Beach Schools – encouraging schools to explore coastal environments;

- A learning licence for Hamsterley Forest to support education visits;
 - Work with Seascapes and the Heritage Coast Partnership across Durham and Sunderland to engage schools with the coastal environment.
- 72 CYPS has an appetite for new initiatives and opportunities to engage schools and young people but these need to be resourced appropriately. Key drivers have been identified that could provide additional impetus for the expansion of the environmental education portfolio should further resources be identified. These could potentially include the Department for Education's Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy, a National Education Nature Park and a new Natural History GCSE to be launched in 2025.
- 73 Raising awareness and engagement is a key part of the Climate Emergency response plan and although there is no specific reference to an ecological emergency within the current programme, there are obvious synergies between the two emergencies given the interdependence between climate change and biodiversity, with negative consequences for human health and wellbeing should this continue to be harmed.
- 74 Biodiversity through the ecosystem services therefore provides an important contribution to both climate-change mitigation and adaptation. A nature, adaptation and land theme within the CERP's climate change marketing strategy highlights the important role biodiversity can play in tackling climate change with actions to promote the issue.
- 75 SeaScapes delivers under this theme and in the first year of the project 3,754 people were involved in 230 different learning, events and participation activities. This includes 113 beach cleans, clearing over 1300 bin bags of rubbish and bulky items such as tyres and shopping trolleys from our beaches.
- 76 Volunteer Beach Clean Leaders are also trained in the impact of micro plastics on the marine environment. Durham Wildlife Trust has established a Citizen Science project to train volunteers to survey coastal habitats, reporting results to the Environmental Records Information Centre for the North East of England. Data paucity was recognised as an issue in protection of the marine environment; by training volunteers we can better address the lack of protection particularly beyond the intertidal zone. A regular group of young people – 'Beach Rangers' have produced a short film highlighting concerns about climate change on the coast and learned how to record sounds of rockpools to better understand these habitats. Beach Tots sessions for

pre-school children and their parents are very popular, running weekly in the summer.

- 77 Pupils in primary and secondary schools are given opportunities to join SeaScapes on the beach, or even in the sea. The Royal Yachting Association (RYA) has a contract to deliver its 'Green-Blue' sailing programme for secondary school pupils, resulting in basic sailing skills with an overarching theme of environmental awareness. Presentations have been made to college students about the impact of human behaviour on the marine environment, for example flushing wet wipes down the toilet. Many of these students have also joined us on beach cleans so they can see the impact for themselves.
- 78 The NPOANB recognises the importance of education, awareness and communication; the team's work on citizen science has delivered over 300 training events for the public and generated over 50,000 new wildlife records.
- 79 'Farming in Protected Landscapes', a national programme co-designed by a group including the AONB Partnership Director, is delivering £2.7m of support on farms in the North Pennines over 3 years as part of a £52m package from Defra. This is enabling woodland and hedgerow creation, grassland restoration and support for nature-friendly farming practices. Work more generally with the farming community is partly focused on developing farmer clusters and encouraging large-scale work across multiple-holdings.
- 80 The Durham Heritage Coast aims to encourage and help the public to enjoy, understand and appreciate the Durham coast. AAP funding is being used to deliver interpretation and engagement materials at the Dunes café at Crimdon with delivery in conjunction with SeaScapes.
- 81 The partnership is working in conjunction with SeaScapes on a Towns and Villages AAP application for 'Connecting the Coast' to improve considerate access to the coast. It is also involved with access rationalisation around Castle Eden Dene mouth and encouraging understanding by local people of their environment.
- 82 It plays a key coordination role in areas such as acting as Secretariat for NE England Coastal Path National Trail (South Shields to Stockton) and administer funds via Natural England, and engaging with the destination management organisations for sustainable tourism along the DHC area.

Future Development of the Ecological Emergency Action Plan

- 83 This current iteration of the EEAP was written within the parameters of existing budgets and external funding streams. It is acknowledged that expansion of the EEAP will be dependent on taking opportunities that arise from any new funding streams and new resources being potentially made available.
- 84 The development of the strategies within the current EEAP will start to bring into focus the potential for Council land holdings to deliver for biodiversity and may lead to proposals for more in depth work in future iterations of the EEAP. Understanding the amount, type and location of Council land available for biodiversity enhancements will enable efficient use of developer contributions and agri-environment schemes.
- 85 Developing a strategic approach to biodiversity interventions on open spaces that delivers on a County-wide basis allows Clean and Green to not only maximise delivery in the short term; but also identify constraints to the long-term expansion of the programme and any resources required to alleviate the situation.
- 86 The directing of resources to the assessment of Local Wildlife Sites by Parks and Countryside service areas will provide clarity on the condition of designated site within the estate. An understanding of the management required to maintain or enhance these sites will inform future resource and funding requirements and bring into focus the financial implications of any further enhancements across the wider Parks and Countryside estate.
- 87 CYPS and other services delivering education and awareness raising will continue to explore available funding streams and develop new programmes were possible. New drivers for the expansion of the environmental education portfolio may result in innovative project proposals that could be developed either through the provision of new resources or any additional funding streams.
- 88 The LNRS will provide a county wide strategic approach to nature conservation and will highlight the habitats and species of concern and provide a guide as to where resources should be directed. The EEAP will need to be mindful of the recommendations of the LNRS especially in relation to land management and the enhancement and creation of semi-natural habitats.

- 89 Integrating the CERP and EEAP should be considered in future, given the linkages between the Climate and Ecological Emergencies and that nature-based solutions are a fundamental mechanism for addressing climate change (and delivering wider social and economic benefits).
- 90 The current iteration of the EEAP identifies the development of strategies that will streamline our activities leading to improvements in our delivery; for example, those around the use of Biodiversity Net Gain funding, Clean and Green's management of open spaces and CPaL's work on land allocations and availability. These will provide the baseline information, evidence and learning to support the development of an Ecological Emergency Strategy that will further focus and improve our approach to biodiversity.
- 91 Not with standing this, the current EEAP will help the Council focus its resources to improve the state of nature within County Durham. As the Council refines its approach to the Ecological Emergency future editions of the EEAP will improve upon and refine the current actions using the learning from the actions to target extant resources and requests for further resources to the most beneficial areas.

Further activity in support of an Ecological Emergency

This section sets out what further action can be taken, and which area of service is responsible for delivery.

i Policies and Strategies

| Service | Action | Potential Outcomes | Lead | Timescales |
|------------------------|--|--|---------------------|---|
| Environmental Services | <ul style="list-style-type: none">Produce an overarching Ecological Emergency Strategy: co-ordinating all the policy and strategy outcomes of the EEAP at a corporate level. | Provide a framework for more co-ordinated and effective action around the EEAP themes. | Head of Environment | <ul style="list-style-type: none">December 2023 |
| Environmental Services | <ul style="list-style-type: none">Commit to the continuous development and engagement with partners and stakeholders in the delivery of landscape scale programmes. | Tangible improvements to biodiversity at a landscape scale. | Head of Environment | <ul style="list-style-type: none">On-going |

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| <p>Environmental Services</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of a Local Nature Recovery Strategy with the County Durham Partnership | <p>The LNRS; a strategic document guiding nature conservation in County Durham.</p> | <p>The County Durham Partnership; The Ecological Emergency Board</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On-going |
| <p>Ecology / Spatial Planning</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Produce a Biodiversity Supplementary Planning Document (SPD), concentrating on delivery of biodiversity within urban and industrial developments. • Produced Contributions SPD, which clarifies the process and options available to developers to deliver biodiversity net gains. | <p>Delivery for biodiversity through the planning process is enhanced.</p> | <p>Principal Ecologist and Senior Policy Officer</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • July 2023 • November 2022 |

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| <p>Ecology, Countryside, Clean and Green & Corporate Property and Land</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a methodology that enables developer contributions for BNG to be delivered, where appropriate, on currently available Council land. <p>The methodology will concentrate on directing financial contributions towards restoring priority habitats and designated sites to good condition.</p> | <p>Enables the funding of biodiversity enhancements on available Council land from BNG.</p> | <p>Principal Ecologist and Senior Asset Strategy Officer</p> | <p>March 2023</p> |
| <p>Corporate Property and Land</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Examine the need for and the potential to develop or change systems and policies so that the system for identifying and allocating land for biodiversity purposes is optimised. <p>This action should be cognisant of other objectives (such as development requirements) and aim to provide a balanced approach to land allocation which is aware of the need to deliver against an ecological emergency.</p> | <p>The need for any changes to internal systems are identified.</p> | <p>Senior Asset Strategy Officer</p> | <p>March 2023</p> |

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|--------------------------------------|---|--|--|-----------------------|
| <p>Procurement</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Produce systems in relation to an Ecological Emergency using the model employed by the Climate Emergency. • Options include a PASS/FAIL system, detailing specifications, and standards for procured services. | <p>Ensures that the Council's procurement seeks to avoid negative impacts on biodiversity.</p> | <p>Chief Procurement Officer</p> | <p>March 2023</p> |
| <p>Legal and Democratic Services</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examine the potential to include ecological impact implications alongside those for climate and sustainability in committee and Council reports. | <p>Ensures that the Council's decision making does not result in negative impacts on biodiversity.</p> | <p>Democratic Services Manager</p> | <p>September 2023</p> |
| <p>Clean and Green / Ecology</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Produce a strategy document to define the approach to biodiversity interventions on public open spaces managed by Clean & Green and identify constraints to delivery as the programme continues to be rolled out across the county. | <p>Delivery of biodiversity interventions will be optimised within current resource availability.</p> | <p>Technical & Service Development Manager and Principal Ecologist</p> | <p>March 2023</p> |

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| <p>Development Planning / Spatial Planning / CPAL / Ecology / Drainage & Coastal Protection Management</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none">Engage with partners, especially Natural England, to assist in developing a strategic solution for Nutrient Neutrality. | <p>Legal obligations under Conservation of Species and Habitats Regulations 2017 are met and nitrogen pollution into the SPA is reduced.</p> | <p>Planning Development Manager</p> | <p>On-going</p> |
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ii Land Management

| Service | Action | Potential Outcomes | Lead | Timescales |
|-----------------------|---|--|--|---|
| Parks and Countryside | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Undertake condition assessments of designated sites (i.e., Sites of Special Scientific Interest and Local Wildlife Sites) within the estate. Instigate appropriate long-term management to restore designated sites to good condition when resources are made available. | All designated sites within the Parks and Countryside Estate will be managed appropriately. | Principal Parks and Countryside Ranger | 2023 – 2028 (a rolling programme of condition assessments) |
| Clean and Green | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Run trials on reduced cutting regimes on amenity grassland with a view to reducing cutting and encouraging a greater floral diversity on sites where ceasing management or a single annual cut is not a viable option. Run trials on non-herbicide use in conjunction with Councillors who have expressed an interest in this subject. | <p>Grass cutting regimes on sensitive sites are balanced between amenity and biodiversity.</p> <p>The extent to which herbicide use can be reduced across the county will be understood.</p> | Clean and Green Manager | December 2023 |

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| <p>Trees and Woodland Management (Cross-Service)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Consolidate and build on current activity to ensure Council woodlands assets are managed and maintained through current project development with a view to robust legacy and renewal provisions being in place following existing projects | <p>Legacy planning and resources sought and secured from key funding partners & stakeholders: e.g., North East Community Forest, Forestry Commission and National Lottery</p> | <p>Environment & Design Manager</p> | <p>On-going</p> |
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iii Engagement, Education, and Behaviour Change

| Service | Action | Potential Outcomes | Lead | Timescales |
|---------------------------------|---|--|---|------------|
| Climate Change & Sustainability | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce and promote the Ecological Emergency within the CERP Marketing Plan under the theme Nature, Adaptation and Land. • Determine the extent to which relevant articles relating to the Ecological Emergency can be hosted on the Climate Change website. • Investigate the potential to include an Ecological Emergency icon and relevant links within the Intranet page. | Greater awareness of the Ecological Emergency. | Communications & Engagement Strategy Officer and Sustainability Education Development Advisor | On-going |
| CYPS | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify ecological improvement opportunities for County Durham schools and settings through the Department for Education Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy • Monitor available funding opportunities with a view to taking advantage of any new funding streams that become available. | <p>Enhancement of school grounds for nature and learning</p> <p>Greater delivery of environmental education programmes when new funding opportunities arise.</p> | Sustainability Education Development Advisor | On-going |

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| Clean and Green | <ul style="list-style-type: none">Develop standard site signage to use when undertaking biodiversity interventions on public open space | Greater awareness of the Ecological Emergency within local communities. | Clean and Green Manager | March 2023 |
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