

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

24 November 2023

**Ecological Emergency
Update**



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

Purpose of the Report

1. To provide members of Environment and Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Committee (ESCOSC) with a progress update regarding the Ecological Emergency Action Plan (EEAP).

Executive Summary

2. Responding to the pace of decline in habitat and species diversity, the committee recommended to cabinet that a countywide ecological emergency be declared, which was consequently ratified on 6th April 2022. Officers were tasked to take this forward by means of an Ecological Emergency Action Plan (referred here on as EEAP) to identify how council services should respond to the issue. Its purpose is to review and revise the management of council land assets and put in place activities to promote and achieve best ecological practice.
3. In December 2022 Cabinet received an initial version of the EEAP, which was subsequently considered by the ESCOSC in April this year. In receiving the report, the committee requested that regular updates on the plan's progress be provided to enable them to consider and review progress against key actions. This report presents a first overview of progress per activity to date. A copy of the latest EEAP action log is attached as Appendix 2.

Recommendations

4. That Members of Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

- i. Receive an overview of progress to date of the Ecological Emergency Response Action Plan outlined in the report to review its progress and,
- ii. Agree that a further progress update is presented to a future meeting of the committee as part of the 2024/25 work programme.

Background

5. At its meeting on 14 December 2022, Cabinet received an initial EEAP outlining council activity in response to its declaration of an ecological emergency. The report was referred to the ESCOSC in April 2022, who agreed to regularly monitor progress in relation to the plan's future development and delivery; commencing with a six month update, as fulfilled by this report.

Scope of the Plan

6. Producing the EEAP commenced by officers conducting a fully detailed cross service review of key services who directly impact or influence the council's interests in the natural environment. This has led to the identification of areas for action through a cross-service plan which identifies service leads, resource implications and monitors ongoing progress. Delivery is reviewed and updated at quarterly meetings. The latest EEAP action log is attached as Appendix 2.
7. In line with members wishes, activities are also identified that recognise opportunities for raising awareness about biodiversity decline through wider promotional of educational activity that the council can lead to tackle this issue with its partners and the community.
8. Although the council is promoting its environmental activity widely, the main focus of the EEAP is however on key areas of its own activities that can deliver a response to the declaration. A wider ecological strategy, the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS), is being produced by the council through the County Durham Partnership's Environment & Climate Change board.
9. The LNRS is to be a strategic document which aims to drive nature-based environmental action and investment across the county. In line with statutory requirements, the council is the 'responsible authority' for its production, and so the EEAP is being developed whilst being cognisant of the aims and objectives of the LNRS throughout its production over the next two years. A report on progress regarding the LNRS which includes reference to the impact of the councils' own activities as set out in the EEAP is to be considered as a separate item on the meeting agenda.

10. The council must consider what it can do to conserve and enhance biodiversity in England, which is now formalised and strengthened as a 'biodiversity duty' by the Environment Act 2021. Consequently, the council is required to report against this duty, and the EEAP will form the basis for this by specifying what it considers it can do to conserve and enhance biodiversity through the agreement of objectives, policies, and delivery mechanisms.
11. The EEAP is being developed within certain parameters; notably that Cabinet deemed that delivery of the plan would not be incumbent on new resources at this stage. Therefore the emphasis is on achieving improvements by doing things differently wherever possible, and the plan is focussed on 26 actions that can be delivered from within current resources. The document is based on three key themes under which outputs are being delivered: 'Land Management', 'Education, Awareness and Communication', 'Policies and Strategies'.

Key Themes

12. **In relation to land management**, six key areas of practical action are identified, which are listed below, accompanied by a brief overview of respective progress against each to date:
 - i. Undertaking condition assessments of designated sites such as Local Wildlife Sites within the estate.*
13. We have identified 20 sites within the Countryside Estate for these to date, located previous citations and will look to carry out condition assessments against all 20 over the next few years.
 - ii. Instigating appropriate long-term management to restore designated sites to good condition when resources are made available.*
14. We have started the process in relation to the above and are on track to complete 2 assessments by end of November '23.
 - iii. Running 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.*
15. We have commenced consultations for progressing 28 sites whilst considering alternative locations including former school sites. Implementation has progressed for 8 sites with no adverse public response noted to date (equivalent to 64 acres planted). These are to be promoted to assist in rolling-out the programme.

- iv. Running trials on non-herbicide use in conjunction with Councillors who have expressed an interest in this subject.*
16. Six sites were being considered but four have been confirmed to date. The aim is to double this number into next season. A councillor's briefing note is being prepared, however very few complaints have been noted to date.
- v. Developing a strategic document to define the council's approach towards biodiversity interventions on its public open space and outline key process to ensure its roll out.*
17. Work has started on this document with main headlines in place, working up detail for a draft version to be completed by November, for circulation to the EEAP officer working group. The standardised approach will be accompanied by information and awareness raising such as site signage when biodiversity interventions are commencing on public open space.
- vi. Consolidating and building 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.*
18. Legacy provisions are being drawn up for the Durham Woodland Revival woodland planting programme which ends in April 2024, in line with National Lottery funding obligations. Woodland management plans are being put in place for the long-term management and maintenance of sites, subject to Forestry Commission agreement and support.
19. **In relation to the theme of education, awareness and communication**, four key areas of delivery are highlighted as listed below, and accompanied by a brief overview of progress to date against each:
- i. Committing to the continuous development and engagement with partners and stakeholders in the delivery of landscape scale programmes.*
20. All key landscape scale schemes are incumbent on third party landowner commitments. A green corridor pilot project centred on Crook Hall house and gardens is underway with the National Trust and now embarking on consulting with other landowners to seek their buy-in to the project. A partnership agreement with the Trust is being finalised to give clarity on land holding opportunities.

21. We are fully engaged in landscape legacy provisions. The Seascapes programme ends in autumn 2024 and its board is now engaged in evaluation and legacy provisions whilst the Heritage Coast partnership is bidding into the Lottery's Species Survival Fund to enable grassland habitat restoration from Blackhall to Noses Point. The River Skerne wetlands landscape recovery is a key outcome of Brightwater project and central to legacy provisions in process for its wrap-up in Mar 2024.
 - ii. *Engaging with partners, especially Natural England, to assist in developing a strategic solution for Nutrient Neutrality.*
22. Launched in October, Natural England are delivering a habitat mitigation scheme (based on land use change / selling credits to developers) in partnership with Durham Wildlife Trust. The Council's role in delivering mitigation measures for both council and private developments is being determined by CPAL.
 - iii. *Introducing and promoting the Ecological Emergency within the CERP Marketing Plan under the theme Nature, Adaptation and Land.*
23. Future opportunities for linkages between the Climate Emergency Response Plan (CERP) and nature recovery programmes and sites are being explored, including through the development of the LNRS.
 - iv. *Determining the extent to which relevant articles relating to the Ecological Emergency can be hosted on the Climate Change website.*
24. Marketing and comms of the ecological emergency and the evolving response plan are being put forward for inclusion in the marketing plan for the CERP, feeding into the current development of the website and promoting it as part of the events programme scheduled for March 2024.
25. **In relation to the theme of policies and strategies**, four key areas of action are identified from the plan as listed below, accompanied by a respective overview of progress against each to date:
 - i. *Developing a Local Nature Recovery Strategy with the County Durham Partnership*
26. The compilation and mapping of a robust evidence base on natural assets is being progressed alongside provisions for wide stakeholder and public consultation including a consultation plan and the development of a dedicated website hosted by the council. Engagement with schools is also a priority area.

27. The pursuit of regional links across all neighbouring authority LNRS areas is under way. Meetings between the 4 NE LNRS groupings have been agreed and continue to take place, including regular liaison with the government's lead body, Natural England.

ii. Producing a Biodiversity Supplementary Planning Document (SPD), concentrating on delivery of biodiversity within urban and industrial developments.

28. A postponement on issuing of regulations for the implementation of Biodiversity Net Gain requirements until January 2024 means that the timescales for producing a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) on this are being deferred from a planned Cabinet approval for February 2024 to a date to be determined.

iii. Producing procurement systems in relation to an Ecological Emergency using the model employed by the Climate Emergency

29 Some scoping work is underway in aligning the recognition and measurement of ecological impacts to existing social impact scoring of procurement contracts (TOMS) This is in need of more progress to take forward.

iv. Examining the potential to include ecological impact implications alongside those for climate and sustainability in committee and Council reports.

30. This is yet to be progressed with officers involved in the constitution working group, drawing on the processes employed to measure climate impacts of report decisions as established through the CERP. It would necessitate the introduction of corporate training and learning programmes.

Conclusion

31. The report identifies how the initial activities listed in the EEAP are being taken forward in key areas of County Council service who can lead in delivery of a response to the declared ecological emergency, and who can influence the state of our environment. The report shows where and how new ecologically based practices are being adopted out with new dedicated resource. This will continue to evolve as more programmes come on stream, and further updates will follow.

Background papers

- [Ecological Emergency: Outline Strategy and Action Plan Cabinet 14 December 2022](#)

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

Not applicable

Finance

Not applicable

Consultation

Consultation is taking place throughout plan development, aligned to internal comms plans and community engagement activity.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

Not applicable

Human Rights

Not applicable

Climate Change

All EEAP activity is strongly aligned to tackling climate change, primarily through mitigation provisions but also through adapting to the adverse effects of climate change.

Crime and Disorder

Not applicable

Staffing

Not applicable

Accommodation

Not applicable

Risk

Not applicable

Procurement

All procurement provisions are being reviewed to include ecological impacts within contract assessment processes.

Appendix 2: EEAP Action Log 09.10.23 attached under separate cover
