

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

16 January 2025

**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. A countywide ecological emergency was declared by the council on 6th April 2022. In response, officers prepared and delivered against an Ecological Emergency Action Plan (referred here on as EEAP) which identifies activities and outputs, and monitors their delivery.
3. The EEAP enables officers to review and revise the management of council land assets and put in place activities to promote and achieve best ecological practice.
4. Following on from this, members of the ESCOSC requested that regular updates on the plan's progress be provided to enable them to consider progress in relation to the actions within the key themes of the plan. This report therefore presents an overview of activity undertaken for year 2020/25 to date. A copy of the latest EEAP action log is attached as Appendix 2.

Recommendations

5. That Members of Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee:
 - i. Receive the 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 2025/26 work programme.

Background

6. An Ecological Emergency was declared by the council in April 2022 and in December of that year Cabinet received and agreed an initial EEAP which outlined council activities in response to the declaration. The report was referred to the ESCOSC in April 2022, where it was agreed that the committee would regularly monitor progress in relation to the plan's future development and delivery on an annual basis.

Scope of the Plan

7. The EEAP is built on a detailed review of the key services who directly impact or influence the council's impacts and interests in the natural environment. The plan identifies areas for action against relevant service leads and monitors ongoing progress which is subject to a quarterly review by a cross-service officer working group. The latest version of the EEAP is attached as Appendix 2.
8. The EEAP is focussed on what can be achieved through the agreement of objectives, policies, and delivery mechanisms to conserve and enhance biodiversity across all council activities in response to the Ecological Emergency declaration. This is part of a wider upcoming ecological strategy, the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS), which aims to drive nature-based environmental action and investment by various landholders and stakeholders across the county. The strategy is being produced by council ecologist leads through the direction of the County Durham Partnership's Environment & Climate Change board.
9. The council is also to consider steps it can take to safeguard and enhance biodiversity as part of a 'biodiversity duty' which was introduced through the Environment Act 2021. The duty means we must:
 - a. Consider what we can do to conserve and enhance biodiversity.
 - b. Agree policies and specific objectives based on our consideration.
 - c. Act to deliver your policies and achieve our objectives.

The council is required to report its progress in response to this duty, and the EEAP has been recognised by lead officers as forming a sound basis to fulfil this.

10. The EEAP is comprised of 26 outputs within three key themes of 'Land Management', 'Education, Awareness and Communication' and 'Policies and Strategies'. It is important to note that in line with Cabinet wishes, the EEAP is being developed within existing resources and is primarily focussed on delivering for biodiversity by doing things differently wherever possible.
11. Outcomes from the preceding version of the EEAP were considered by this committee in November 2023 which was focussed on building

capacity and governance to deliver projects through joint delivery across services, as well as monitoring progress being taken forward.

Summary of Key Areas of Progress against the 2024/25 EEAP:

12. **In relation to the theme of land management** the current plan has identified the following areas of action and outputs:
 - a. Habitat surveys and assessments for designation of Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) for Countryside-managed sites underway with 11 of 20 sites completed. Assessing sites against new LWS criteria so they can be considered for approval by North East LWS partnership when met.
 - b. Running of trials for diversifying grasslands through naturalistic management of 45 meadow areas, now being maintained and will be recorded into BNG and LNRS documents.
 - c. Running of non-herbicide trials for weed control over selected sites and no issues have been raised, meaning the regime is to be more widely rolled-out across the county.
 - d. Consolidation of entire council woodland and forestry estate taking place through legacy provisions and single management structure for all tree planting and maintenance matters now in place following closure of externally funded Woodland Revival programme.

13. **In relation to the theme of education, awareness and communication** the current plan is achieving progress in:
 - a. Effective stakeholder and partnership building across a range of landscape scale projects including the National Trust, inter-authority delivery of Seascapes, key contributions to the Brightwater partnership for the River Skerne.
 - b. Agreement to inclusion of ecological implications in all decision making reports as part of a current full corporate implications review by Democratic Services.
 - c. Baseline surveys and assessments carried out with a Spatial Policy lead to enable nutrient neutrality mitigation measures on council and developer's land to be identified, with similar modelling underway for managing sites to deliver Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) on appropriate council sites.
 - d. Ensuring that eco-emergency priorities are aligned to and are part of those in the current Climate Emergency Response Plan (CERP3) including embedding this within the CERP website.
 - e. Engagement with 47 schools on issues identified in the LNRS with findings feeding into the consultation process and promoted and administered take DfE biodiversity improvement grants for over 40 schools.

- f. Delivery of natural environment activities across the Parks and Countryside estate including volunteering days, health and leisure walks and activities for young people. This includes continuation of X3 temporary engagement co-ordinator posts now funded to April 2026.
14. **In relation to the theme of policies and strategies** the current plan identifies progress in:
- a. Recognising and embedding ecological impacts as part of the existing social impacts scoring that apply to all procurement contracts (Themes Opportunities and Measures).
 - b. Ongoing preparation of the countywide LNRS through engagement with regional leads and consultation with landowners and wider stakeholders. Evidence gathering by Opportunity Mapping completed and Measures in response to this are currently being finalised ahead of a final consultation round.
 - c. Completion of Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) to guide developers in process of making biodiversity contributions and working on formula for sale of biodiversity credits through use of council land to this end.
 - d. Continued development and effectiveness of corporate officer working group to consider all opportunities to conserve and enhance biodiversity alongside other related outcomes such as low carbon installations.
 - e. Strategy under development for naturalistic land management regimes on amenity grasslands.
 - f. Corporate Environmental Statement reviewed and revised to include responding to Ecological Emergency declaration as a corporate priority.

Conclusion

15. The report highlights progress being made to promote the adoption of ecologically based practices across the council estate and related services in response to the declaration of the Ecological Emergency. Most of these are progressing through policies and changing practices out-with new dedicated resource.
16. A key driver for the continued development and strengthening of the EEAP lies in its emerging role as the council's response and reporting mechanism for the biodiversity duty under the Environment Act. In particular the opportunity for linking up to and feeding into the priorities of the LNRS.
17. The EEAP will therefore continue to evolve as more policies and programmes come on stream, and further updates shall follow.

Background papers

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

Authors

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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 of 31.12.24 attached under separate cover
