

Environment & Climate Change Partnership Update

Report of John Hewitt, Chief Executive

Purpose of the report

- 1 To provide Members of the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee (ESC OSC) with background information in advance of a presentation from Jim Cokill, Director of Durham Wildlife Trust, and Chair of the County Durham Environment & Climate Change Partnership (ECCP), and Stuart Priestley, Ecology Manager, Durham County Council (DCC). The presentation will focus on the activity of the partnership over the past year, national policy highlights, future plans and an overview of the development of the County Durham Local Nature recovery Strategy. A copy of the presentation is attached as Appendix 2.

Executive summary

- 2 The ECCP have developed and agreed the new ECCP Plan 2025-28, which details the key actions planned to achieve the partnership's vision. The ECCP will continue to support the delivery of the new Climate Emergency Response Plan 2024-27 (CERP3) and the development of the County Durham Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS).
- 3 The partnership has also supported a wide variety of projects, examples of which are detailed in the presentation. Plans for this year include increased collaboration with the Health and Wellbeing Board and the Economic Partnership, and the launch of the County Durham Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

Recommendations

- 4 Members of the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee are asked to:
 - a) note and comment upon the information provided within the report and presentation.
 - b) include a further update from the Environment and Climate Change Partnership in its work programme for 2025/26.

Background

- 5 2025 marks the fifth year of the ECCP, and this year sees the introduction of a revised Environment and Climate Change Partnership plan which sets the direction for the partnership till 2028, with the aim of achieving our vision for 'a better County Durham: sustainable communities, resilient to climate change, richer in nature'.
- 6 The ESC OSC invited the Chair of the ECCP to discuss with members of the committee; activity undertaken over the past year, key national policies identified following the change in government in 2024, what is planned for 2025 and an overview of the development of the County Durham Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

Current position

Environment and Climate change Partnership Plan 2025-28

- 7 The Environment and Climate Change Partnership's strategic plan was reviewed and revised in the Summer/Autumn of last year to reflect the outcomes of the Emergency Summit held in the Spring. It sets the strategic direction for the partnership till 2028. However, it will be reviewed yearly to include any emerging issues. The new plan has six strategic priorities identified:
 - (a) Develop and action the LNRS.
 - (b) Action the partnership elements of CERP3.
 - (c) Coordinate engagement across communities to improve understanding of the environmental and climate change challenges facing County Durham.
 - (d) Increase finance available to invest in solutions that tackle the climate and ecological emergencies and overcome the negative impacts on people and communities.
 - (e) Influence the North East Combined Authority (NECA) to ensure the environmental and climate change issues of County Durham are a significant part of their agenda.
 - (f) Increase cross thematic partnership collaboration with the Economic Partnership and Health & Wellbeing Board and influence strategic planning.

Climate Emergency

- 8 The Climate Emergency workstream's main function has been supporting the development of the of countywide elements of CERP3,

which was launched at a citizen's forum in Durham Town Hall on 17 October 2024, with over 100 people attended. Workstream partners have also been supporting the ongoing delivery of various projects, including:

- (a) Completing a detailed project development stage of feasibility for Horden Minewater project which saw a project with around a 12 % social Internal Rate of Return.
- (b) The ongoing work of the Local Electric Vehicle Infrastructure project (LEVI), working with delivery partners to instal 250 EV charge points in County Durham following the award of 4.35 million pounds of funding.
- (c) The Business Energy Efficiency Project (BEEP), who are providing fully funded energy audits for businesses across the county, having completed over 60 audits from over 100 referrals via a shared prosperity funded Durham Business Growth programme.
- (d) Commissioned a study, with a grant of £50,000 from NECA's energy accelerator fund, on the potential for deep geothermal in Durham city which could see the heat related emissions for the whole county decrease by 10 %. This would target 250-degrees Celsius hot dry rock at a depth of 6km to generate electricity and/or distribute heat at 80-120 degrees Celsius.
- (e) Carried out a heat mapping study to identify potential heat network zones across the county. Results identified the potential of Peterlee, Seaham, Newton Aycliffe, Durham City and Chester-le-Street. Further investigative work is being undertaken to look in more detail at Durham city and Newton Aycliffe heat networks viability. These studies are at very early stages.

Place, Health and Community

- 9 The Place, Health and Community (PHC) workstream refreshed their delivery plan and identified four priority themes:
- (a) Planning, housing and transport.
 - (b) Health.
 - (c) Economy.
 - (d) Culture and education.

- 10 The group has been assigned a role of monitoring and overseeing key community-based activities in relation to CERP3, and for reporting performance against these actions to the Net Zero Carbon Board. Partners are also informing and contributing to the formulation of planning policy, particularly through debating Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs) and similar policy documents; having recently met with planners on content of the draft Housing and Homelessness Strategies, and monitoring their adoption, and more recently inputting to the County Durham Sustainable Cycling and Walking Development Plan.
- 11 Partners are engaging in community regeneration projects by liaison and dialogue with project leads across different organisations. Recently, the group has worked on:
 - (a) Integrating the environment into the social values of procurement.
 - (b) Refreshing the Living Neighbourhoods concept.
 - (c) Healthy lifestyle initiatives through the council's active travel agenda.
 - (d) Engagement in County Durham together programme enabling communities to shape their local areas.
 - (e) Supporting the planning and running of the 2024 County Durham Environment Awards, culminating in a winner's ceremony which took place at Hardwick Hall hotel on 13 February 2025. A fuller report on the Awards programme is covered in this agenda.

Ecological Emergency

- 12 The Ecological Emergency Workstream's (EEW) work is centred around the production of the Durham Local Nature Recovery Strategy. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) extended the deadline till the end of 2025 for production of the LNRS.
- 13 Work is focused on in three areas: the development of the draft priorities and measures, habitat mapping and consultation.
- 14 Fourteen draft priorities and associated measures were agreed by the Ecological Emergency Strategic Board in February 2025. They cover a range of habitats and species. They are:
 - (a) Grassland and Heathland.
 - (b) Woodland, Hedgerows, Scrub and Trees.

- (c) Running Waters and Wetlands.
- (d) Coastal.
- (e) Urban.
- (f) Day-Flying Moths.
- (g) Northern Brown Argus, Small Pearl-Bordered Fritillary, White-letter Hairstreak, Brownfield lepidoptera.
- (h) Bumblebees.
- (i) Willow Tit, Black Grouse, Farmland Birds, Wading Birds.
- (j) Fish.
- (k) Adder.
- (l) Slowworm.
- (m) Plants.
- (n) Water vole and Rea Squirrel.

The fourteen draft priorities and their associated measures, which provide the detail for each priority area, can be seen in Appendix 3.

- 15 Partners have been working with the Environmental Records Information Centre North East (ERIC) to progress the habitat mapping. Meetings have been held between the Climate Emergency workstream habitat sub-group leads and ERIC to discuss the fundamental principles of mapping the measures. The first draft of the habitat mapping should be completed by the end of March/early April with meetings planned with the sub-groups to sense-check the first versions. Partners are planning on starting the species mapping in April.
- 16 Consultation on the draft priorities and measures is underway. Consultation will be taking place with the following:
 - (a) Via DCC Consultation.
 - (b) National Farmers Union (NFU).
 - (c) Country Land and Business Association (CLA).
 - (d) Consultee list.

- 17 The consultation will include a 'mapping' tool for landowners and farmers, so they can identify areas that can be considered for inclusion within the LNRS mapping.
- 18 This early stage of consultation is designed to 'head-off' any issues with the priorities and measures before the group get too advanced with the mapping.
- 19 There will be a formal consultation on the draft LNRS, which will include the mapping, before final publication. Partners are aiming to publish the final document in the autumn, but this may be delayed depending on progress with the mapping.

National Policy Highlights

- 20 Following the change of government and the Autumn Statement last year some key takeaways have been highlighted in three areas; energy and decarbonisation, transport, and agriculture and the environment.
- 21 In energy and decarbonisation, the following were identified:
 - (a) The UK shared prosperity fund will continue this year but at a reduced rate.
 - (b) Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme will continue, with over £1 billion of funding over three years.
 - (c) £3.4 billion will be allocated towards heat decarbonisation and household energy efficiency over the next three years. Including £1.8 billion to support fuel poverty schemes, helping over 225,000 households reduce their energy bills by over £200, the boiler upgrade scheme in England and Wales, and funding to grow the heat pump manufacturing supply chains in the UK to support the plan.
 - (d) There will also be £350 million of additional funding across 2024-25 and 2025-26 to support energy efficiency, decarbonisation, and technological innovation.
- 22 In transport, the following were identified:
 - (a) A continued commitment to phasing out new cars that rely solely on internal combustion engines by 2030 and that from 2035 all new cars and vans sold in the UK will be zero emission.

- (b) Investment of over £200 million in 2025-26 to accelerate EV ChargePoint rollout, including funding to support local authorities to install on-street ChargePoints across England.
- (c) Provision of £120 million in 2025-26 to support the purchase of new electric vans via the plug-in vehicle grant and to support the manufacture of wheelchair accessible EVs.
- (d) Maintaining tax incentives to purchase electric cars through Vehicle Excise Duty First Year Rates and the Company Car Tax regimes, as well as by extending 100% First Year Allowances for electric cars and ChargePoints for a further year.

23 And in agriculture and the environment the following were identified:

- (a) £5 billion over two years to support the transition towards a more productive and environmentally sustainable agricultural sector in England and over £400 million of support for tree planting and peatland restoration.
- (b) Investment of £2.4 billion over two years in flood resilience.

ECCP Priorities and Challenges for the Year Ahead

24 The key priorities that the ECCP have identified are:

- (a) Continuing to support the delivery of the CERP3 action plan.
- (b) Continuing to support the development of the LNRS.
- (c) Improving cross thematic partnership collaboration to identify and raise awareness of joint priorities with the Health and Wellbeing Board and the Economic Partnership, to support and strengthen each other's agendas. A joint development session has been organised with the Health and Wellbeing Board members on 7 April, and plans are being made for a joint development session with members of the Economic Partnership board in the autumn.
- (d) Working with partners to improve engagement across County Durham to improve understanding the of the environmental and climate change challenges we face.
- (e) Working with partners to increase the finance available to invest in solutions that tackle the climate and ecological emergencies to overcome the negative impacts on people and communities across the county.

Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

Not applicable

Finance

Not applicable

Consultation

Not applicable

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

Not applicable

Climate Change

Climate change is a key area identified in this report.

Human Rights

Not applicable

Crime and Disorder

Not applicable

Staffing

Not applicable

Accommodation

Not applicable

Risk

Not applicable

Procurement

Not applicable

Disability Issues

Not applicable

Appendix 2: Environment & Climate Change Partnership Presentation

Presentation under separate cover.

Appendix 3: LNRS Draft Priorities and Measures

Attached as a separate cover.