

Prosperous Overview and Scrutiny Committee - Wednesday 13 December 2023

Natural Environment Strategy

Recommendation

I recommend that the Committee:

- a. Considers and provides comments on the draft Natural Environment Strategy to support its consideration by Cabinet.

Local Member Interest:

N/A

Report of Cabinet Member for Environment, Infrastructure and Climate Change

Summary

What is the Overview and Scrutiny Committee being asked to do and why?

1. We value the natural environment and recognise the vital role it plays in Staffordshire: environmentally, socially, economically, and for our health and wellbeing – we want Staffordshire to continue to be a great place to live.
2. The Environment Act 2021 brought in new duties and requirements for local authorities in relation to biodiversity and the natural environment, including a strengthened duty to conserve and enhance biodiversity, the introduction of mandatory biodiversity net gain through the planning system, and the requirement to report on biodiversity delivery.
3. A Natural Environment Strategy has been developed to set out how the Council will deliver its biodiversity requirements and enhance the natural environment.
4. The Committee is requested to consider the draft strategy and provide comments. The Committee's comments will be reported to Cabinet at their meeting on 17th January 2024 for them to take into account in their consideration of this matter.

Report

Background

5. In 2018 Government launched its 25-year Environment Plan to help the natural world regain and retain good health. 2023 saw the first 5-year review of the plan, resulting in a refreshed Environmental Improvement Plan. This also reflects global commitments made at the UN Nature Summit COP15.
6. Key Government commitments are to:
 - a. halt the decline in species abundance by 2030.
 - b. protect 30% of UK land for biodiversity by 2030.
 - c. increase species abundance by at least 10% from 2030, surpassing 2022 levels by 2042.
 - d. restore or create at least 500,000 ha of a range of wildlife rich habitats by 2042.
 - e. reduce the risk of species extinction by 2042.
 - f. restore 75% of our one million hectares of terrestrial and freshwater protected sites to favourable condition, securing their wildlife value for the long term by 2042.
7. The Environment Act 2021 brought in new duties and requirements to support the ambitions of the 25-year plan. In relation to biodiversity this includes:
 - a. Developing Local Nature Recovery Strategies
 - b. A strengthened biodiversity duty
 - c. Mandatory minimum 10% biodiversity net gain through the planning system
 - d. A requirement for local authorities to produce a report on their action for biodiversity.
8. As part of the strengthened biodiversity duty, public authorities must consider what they can do to conserve and enhance biodiversity, agree policies based on their consideration and act to deliver them. Reports should then be published outlining progress and further actions every five years (or more frequently as required) with the end date of the first reporting period no later than 1st January 2026.
9. A Natural Environment Strategy (see appendix 1) has been developed with input from officers across the authority. The strategy takes into account our consideration of our duty and the associated Defra guidance, the national targets agreed by Government, and our existing nature recovery declaration, agreed at full council in February 2022. It reflects

continued efforts to manage protected sites in our ownership, our work to support rare and endangered species and the role we can play as champions for nature with our partners and communities.

10. The strategy sets out a broad mission statement and ten high level objectives that Staffordshire County Council will take to conserve and enhance biodiversity and our wider natural environment. These are:

a. **Mission Statement** - *We will directly support nature recovery in Staffordshire, through targeted action across our land and functions, and as a champion for activity across the county.*

b. **To achieve this, we will:**

- i. Develop and deliver a Local Nature Recovery Strategy for Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent
- ii. Ensure coordinated delivery of biodiversity net gain.
- iii. Ensure our policies, strategies and operations consider biodiversity enhancement and reduce risks to the environment.
- iv. Ensure all designated sites in our ownership have management measures in place to achieve favourable condition by 2042.
- v. Manage and protect 30% of our land (excluding highways) for biodiversity by 2030.
- vi. Develop a wildlife-friendly management approach to roadside verges.
- vii. Develop a suite of species recovery measures for our land.
- viii. Use nature-based solutions for mitigating and adapting to climate change wherever possible, to maximise benefits to both wildlife and climate.
- ix. Enhance and restore landscape character and quality and support landscape-scale nature recovery.
- x. Raise awareness and support the active involvement of communities in caring for our natural environment.

11. The strategy includes actions and milestones to achieve these objectives. The strategy will be reviewed in late 2025 and a progress report and refreshed strategy will be produced by January 2026 to comply with Environment Act requirements. This review will also align the strategy with the local nature recovery strategy, which will provide a framework for nature across Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent and is due to be produced by March 2025.

12. The draft strategy will be considered by Cabinet on 17th January 2024. The Cabinet report will include measurable KPIs; will outline the level of environmental investment within the county and will demonstrate how

the Natural Environment Strategy supports the County Council's approach to land management.

Link to Strategic Plan

13. The Natural Environment Strategy will support delivery of the Council's second strategic priority - *Tackle climate change, enhance our environment, and make Staffordshire more sustainable.*

Link to Other Overview and Scrutiny Activity

14. N/A

Community Impact

15. TBC

List of Background Documents/Appendices:

Appendix 1 – Draft Natural Environment Strategy
Appendix 2 – Community Impact Assessment

Contact Details

Assistant Director: Catherine Mann, Interim Assistant Director for Culture, Rural and Safer Communities

Report Author: Sarah Bentley
Job Title: Head of Environment and Countryside
Telephone No.: 01785 276047
E-Mail Address: Sarah.bentley@staffordshire.gov.uk