

Cabinet Meeting on Wednesday 17 January 2024

Natural Environment Strategy



Councillor Simon Tagg, Cabinet Member for Environment, Infrastructure and Climate Change said,

“Staffordshire is a stunning rural county but, like much of the UK, nature is under pressure here too. We must act now to help nature recover.

“That is why we have developed this Natural Environment Strategy, which sets out the actions we will take in the coming years to care for nature on our land and through our activities. This will form part of wider efforts across Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent, which will be identified through the local

nature recovery strategy we are leading with our partners and stakeholders.

“By helping nature, we are also helping ourselves. Nature provides important goods and services that support our wellbeing and quality of life. From the insects that pollinate our food crops, to trees storing carbon, nature is essential to us.”

Report Summary:

Staffordshire’s natural environment is one of its greatest assets. It is what makes Staffordshire a great place to live, and a vibrant part of our offer to visitors. As a council, we recognise and value the vital contribution it makes environmentally, socially, economically, and for our health and wellbeing – we want Staffordshire to continue to be a great place for nature and people.

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.

A Natural Environment Strategy has been developed to set out how the Council will deliver its biodiversity requirements and enhance the natural environment.

Recommendation

I recommend that Cabinet:

- a. Considers and approves, with any amendments, the natural environment strategy.



Cabinet – Wednesday 17 January 2024

Natural Environment Strategy

Recommendation of the Cabinet Member for Environment, Infrastructure and Climate Change

I recommend that Cabinet:

- a. Considers and approves, with any amendments, the natural environment strategy.

Local Member Interest:

N/A

Report of the Director for Economy, Infrastructure and Skills

Reasons for Recommendations:

1. Staffordshire has a rich and varied natural environment. This is one of our greatest assets and makes Staffordshire a great place to live, work and visit. With so many pressures on the environment, and the major threats to our wildlife, taking action for our natural environment is essential to sustain our communities, economy, health and wellbeing.
2. 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.
3. 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.

4. 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.

5. 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.

6. 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.

7. 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. Champion biodiversity, raise awareness and support the active involvement of communities in caring for our natural environment.
8. 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.
9. The following key performance indicators are proposed to monitor performance against the objectives:
- a. Condition of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in council ownership – % in favourable condition and unfavourable recovering condition.
 - b. Hectares of council land designated as County Wildlife Site and in positive management.
 - c. Number of trees planted and percentage woodland cover.
 - d. Length of roadside verge managed for biodiversity.
 - e. Percentage of county farm and other leased land in an environmental management scheme for biodiversity.
 - f. Measures for species installed in council properties.
 - g. Status of target species on council key sites (TBC).
 - h. Volunteer hours on environmental management and awareness-raising.
 - i. Number of children engaged in environmental activities, e.g. on the countryside estate and via the HAF programme.
 - j. Social media followers / engagement on the council's environmental pages.

Legal Implications

10. The Natural Environment Strategy sets out how we will deliver our legal obligations in relation to biodiversity under the Environment Act 2021 and takes into account other environmental legislation.

Resource and Value for Money Implications

11. Grants have been provided to support delivery of some elements of Environment Act biodiversity delivery, including £436,000 for development of the local nature recovery strategy over three financial years 2022-5 (we received £48,000 in 22/23, £207,000 in 23/24 and the balance £181,000 to be received in 24/25) ; and £37,000 received to date to prepare for biodiversity net gain. The council also receives around £361,000 per year in agri-environment grants to support environmental management on country parks.
12. Other initiatives are accounted for in existing budgets and via external grant bids. For example, much current activity for species conservation at Cannock Chase is supported through the AONB Partnership. Some further external funding bids will be required to support delivery of the natural environment strategy.

Climate Change Implications

13. The Natural Environment Strategy links to delivery of the council's climate change action plans for net zero and adaptation. Management of natural habitats supports carbon sequestration and storage which will be essential elements of achieving the council's net zero target by 2050. Natural habitats also support adaptation by providing benefits such as urban cooling and flood amelioration.

List of Background Documents/Appendices:

Appendix 1 – Natural Environment Strategy.

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 & Countryside
Telephone No.: 01785 276047
E-Mail Address: Sarah.bentley@staffordshire.gov.uk