

# Climate and Ecological Emergencies Advisory Committee



Report of Acting Deputy Chief Executive – Transformation and Operations

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To: Climate and Ecological Emergencies Advisory Committee

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## AGENDA ITEM

## Ecological Emergency Declaration

### Recommendation(s)

- (a) For Committee to note the progress of and plans for implementing the resolutions set out in the Ecological Emergency declaration which was passed at the Full Council meeting held on 11 February 2021.
- (b) For Committee to recommend to Cabinet the establishment of a joint South and Vale member and officer Biodiversity Steering Group, as part of the implementation of the motion declaring an Ecological Emergency in South Oxfordshire and to assist the Council in scoping projects in the Corporate Plan 2020-24 under Theme – Protect and Restore the Natural World which are currently subject to future discretionary growth.

### Purpose of Report

1. To provide a report to the Committee on the proposed implementation of the resolutions included in the Ecological Emergency declaration passed at the Council meeting held on 11 February 2021.
2. To present the terms of reference for the proposed Biodiversity Steering Group.

### Strategic Objectives

3. This report sets out how we are taking forward the implementation of the Ecological Emergency declaration and how we propose to progress the Corporate Plan objectives for protecting and restoring the natural world.



## Background

4. The full text of the Ecological Emergency declaration is detailed in Appendix A
5. Officers have reviewed each of the resolutions included in the declaration and have indicated the current position towards progressing implementation as follows:

RESOLUTION	ACTION TAKEN / PROPOSED	LEAD OFFICER
Council declaration of an ecological emergency	Press release and social media announcements	Jo Duckles
Rename CEAC the Climate and Ecological Emergencies Advisory Committee, to help Cabinet and council officers address these twin emergencies	Done	Steven Corrigan
Add ecological impact implications alongside those for climate and sustainability in committee and council reports.	<p>The Council's report writing guidance has been updated to include climate and ecological implications.</p> <p>The report templates have been updated to include: "Climate, sustainability and ecological impact implications."</p>	Michelle Wells
Ensure that addressing the climate and ecological emergencies and nature recovery are considered as strategic priorities for planning policies and design guides for new development, including master-planning of sites, by identifying appropriate areas for habitat restoration and biodiversity net gain and ensuring that development limits impact on existing habitats in its process, whilst also working on the principle of increasing equality of access for people to natural, green spaces		Suzanne Malcolm
Establish a Biodiversity Steering Group involving both key officers and members to oversee and develop the Councils	Proposal for a joint South and Vale biodiversity steering group to be considered by CEEAC	Andy Egan, Dominic Lamb



approach to nature protection and recovery	on 12 April and Vale CEAC on 19 April	
Set measurable targets and standards for biodiversity increase, in both species and quantities, seeking also to increase community engagement	Subject to future discretionary growth  To be embedded in future Biodiversity Plan 2021-30	Suzanne Malcolm  Andy Egan
Work with our partners to establish a Local Nature Partnership for Oxfordshire as soon as possible, in keeping with the urgency of this declaration	Two County wide workshops completed, and a draft proposal developed.  Funding for LNP subject to future discretionary growth	Suzanne Malcolm  Dominic Lamb
Work with our partners to develop Nature Recovery Networks and Nature Recovery Strategy for Oxfordshire, again in keeping with the urgency of this declaration	Development of a Nature Recovery Strategy and network is likely to be one of the first priorities for a Local Nature Partnership.  Draft Nature Recovery Network map has been developed for OP2050  Funding for strategy/network subject to future discretionary growth	Suzanne Malcolm  Dominic Lamb
Look for opportunities to work in partnership with local charities and environmental organisations to deliver nature recovery in South Oxfordshire	Opportunities will be reviewed subject to resources available	All
Develop a district wide Tree Planting Policy and Strategy, including having Member Tree Champions, to support nature protection and recovery and carbon sequestration	Tree Policy development in progress  Cabinet appointed two Tree Champions: Cllr. Ian Snowden and Cllr. Peter Dragonetti	Andy Egan



Build on the work of the Thames Champion to improve the ecology of the Thames and its banks and flood plains, a hugely important habitat in our District	The Council currently host the Thames Valley Rivers Network, opportunities and projects will be discussed in this forum	Michelle Wells  Elizabeth Kingdom
Ensure the Strategic Property Review (SPR) considers opportunities for biodiversity enhancements and tree planting on Council landholdings	In progress  Ongoing liaison between Insight and Policy/Property and Planning to ensure opportunities are explored and ongoing review of potential sites.  Suggest Project Board for SPR be created to obtain wider corporate input into findings and recommendations	Suzanne Malcolm  Catrin Mathias
Investigate new approaches to nature recovery such as habitat banking that deliver biodiversity objectives and provide new investment opportunities	Subject to future discretionary growth.  Initial meetings with BBOWT and TOE completed.  To be embedded in future Biodiversity Plan 2021-30	Dominic Lamb
Embed climate action and ecological initiatives within all council work areas, including COVID-19 recovery projects and programmes		Suzanne Malcolm  Michelle Wells
Write to all South Oxfordshire's MPs urging them to support the Climate and Ecological Bill, a private member's bill, in keeping with the declarations of this Council.	Done	Michelle Wells

6. The proposal to establish a Biodiversity Steering Group is detailed in Appendix B.



## Climate and ecological impact implications

7. The implementation of the Council's ecological emergency declaration is explicitly designed to achieve positive ecological, climate and sustainability impacts. It is understood that embedding consideration of ecological impacts across all Council decision making and project development is an important step towards making meaningful progress in protecting and restoring the natural world in South Oxfordshire.
8. The Council currently employs 2 full time ecologist's whose primary role is dealing with ecological issues within the planning system, managing the Great Crested Newt District Licence scheme and managing the councils Countryside Sites. Only very limited capacity is currently available for developing new biodiversity projects or delivering the aims of the ecological emergency declaration.
9. Consideration should be given to the creation of a Biodiversity Lead role that could provide leadership and co-ordination this area of work, given the level of commitment to it in the Council's Corporate Plan 2020-24.

## Financial Implications

10. Any council decision that has financial implications must be made with the knowledge of the council's overarching financial position. For South, the position reflected in the council's medium-term financial plan (MTFP) as reported to Full Council in February 2021 showed that the council is due to receive £4.3 million less in revenue funding than it plans to spend in 2021/22 (with the balance coming from reserves including unallocated New Homes Bonus).
11. This funding gap is predicted to increase to over £5 million by 2025/26. As there remains no certainty on future local government funding, following the announcement of a one-year spending review by government, and as the long-term financial consequences of the Coronavirus pandemic remain unknown, this gap could increase further. Every financial decision made needs to be cognisance of the need to eliminate this funding gap in future years.
12. A number of the projects and actions arising from the declaration may have financial implications for the Council. The Biodiversity Steering Group will identify the costs associated with the projects prioritised for implementation. Before proceeding with any options, a financial evaluation will be undertaken to assess these costs, before recommendations are made to the Cabinet.
13. As work develops and funding is required, projects and activities will be subject to individual business cases as appropriate, and financial scrutiny.

## Legal Implications

14. There are no specific legal implications arising from this report. Legal implications may arise in respect of individual projects included within the subsequent work programme as they are scoped, approved by Cabinet and implemented. These will be subject to identification and appropriate action as required.



## **Risks**

15. There is a significant reputational risk for the Council in not taking action and not allocating or aligning resources to fulfil its Corporate Plan objectives for nature protection and recovery.
16. There is an overriding risk that the state of nature and biodiversity will continue to deteriorate in South Oxfordshire unless the Council takes decisive action to ensure effective protection and recovery.

## **Other Implications**

17. An assessment of the carbon sequestration benefits of the delivery of the nature recovery projects should be carried out to contribute to measuring progress towards the target of becoming a carbon neutral district by 2030.
18. Working in partnership with all relevant stakeholders – landowners, businesses, communities, the County Council, Town and Parish Councils, statutory agencies - in the district will be critical in the delivery of effective nature protection and recovery initiatives.

## **Conclusion**

19. Members are invited to note the active response made in taking forward the Ecological Emergency motion resolutions.
20. Members are invited to take forward a recommendation to Cabinet to establish a Biodiversity Steering Group.

## **Background Papers**

## **Appendix A**

### **Meeting of Council, Thursday, 11 February 2021 6.00 pm (Item 8.)**

#### **Motion proposed by Councillor Sam Casey-Rerhaye, seconded by Councillor David Rouane**

Council has adopted a new Corporate Plan that has as one of its main priorities: 'Protect and Restore the Natural World'. In the consultation exercise on this Plan, this theme was ranked the most important by a high number of respondents. This Council has already, rightly, declared a climate emergency (April 2019).

Council acknowledges that:

- Our societies and economies are intimately linked with and depend on biodiversity and nature. The natural world is essential for the provision of nutritious food (with soil and pollinators having a vital role), clean water, clean air, medicines, and



protection from extreme weather, as well as being our source of energy and raw materials

- The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the relationship between people and nature. When we destroy and degrade habitats, we increase the risk of disease spill-over from wildlife to people
- The State of Nature 2019 report highlighted the critical decline in biodiversity in the UK. Changes in farming practices have had the biggest effect in recent decades and the impact of climate change is now increasing. 15% of UK species are classified as threatened with extinction and 2% are already extinct
- The [State of the World's Plants and Fungi 2020 report](#) from Royal Botanic Gardens Kew estimated that 39.4% of plants are now threatened with extinction. This is a jump from one in five plants thought to be at risk in Kew's 2016 report
- The Environment Bill will require the introduction of a Local Nature Recovery Strategy and Nature Recovery Networks
- Actions to restore nature and biodiversity, as well as being vital for their own sake, often have an important co-benefit of storing carbon, so help address climate change
- People's access to 'green spaces' to understand and appreciate biodiversity and a rich, natural world, private or public, is unequal

Council resolves to:

1. Declare an ecological emergency
2. Rename CEAC the Climate and Ecological Emergencies Advisory Committee, to help Cabinet and council officers address these twin emergencies
3. Add ecological impact implications alongside those for climate and sustainability in committee and council reports.
4. Ensure that addressing the climate and ecological emergencies and nature recovery are considered as strategic priorities for planning policies and design guides for new development, including master-planning of sites, by identifying appropriate areas for habitat restoration and biodiversity net gain and ensuring that development limits impact on existing habitats in its process, whilst also working on the principle of increasing equality of access for people to natural, green spaces
5. Establish a Biodiversity Steering Group involving both key officers and members to oversee and develop the Councils approach to nature protection and recovery
6. Set measurable targets and standards for biodiversity increase, in both species and quantities, seeking also to increase community engagement
7. Work with our partners to establish a Local Nature Partnership for Oxfordshire as soon as possible, in keeping with the urgency of this declaration
8. Work with our partners to develop Nature Recovery Networks and Nature Recovery Strategy for Oxfordshire, again in keeping with the urgency of this declaration
9. Look for opportunities to work in partnership with local charities and environmental organisations to deliver nature recovery in South Oxfordshire



10. Develop a district wide Tree Planting Policy and Strategy, including having Member Tree Champions, to support nature protection and recovery and carbon sequestration
11. Build on the work of the Thames Champion to improve the ecology of the Thames and its banks and flood plains, a hugely important habitat in our District
12. Ensure the Strategic Property Review considers opportunities for biodiversity enhancements and tree planting on Council landholdings
13. Investigate new approaches to nature recovery such as habitat banking that deliver biodiversity objectives and provide new investment opportunities
14. Embed climate action and ecological initiatives within all council work areas, including COVID-19 recovery projects and programmes
15. Write to all South Oxfordshire's MPs urging them to support the Climate and Ecological Bill, a private member's bill, in keeping with the declarations of this Council.

## Appendix B

### Biodiversity Steering Group

#### Purpose of paper

1. To present the proposal to establish a joint South and Vale and joint member and officer Biodiversity Steering Group.
2. To present the proposed terms of reference for the Biodiversity Steering Group

#### Background

3. Both councils have prioritised nature protection and nature recovery and climate emergency related environmental sustainability in their respective Corporate Plans 2020-24. Indeed, both plans are based on a vision of all council activity being shaped by the need to operate within ecological boundaries.
4. Vale has a cabinet member with a portfolio for climate and environment. On 11 February, South unanimously agreed a motion to declare an ecological emergency (see Appendix 1). One of the resolutions commits the Council to:  
*Establish a Biodiversity Steering Group involving both key officers and members to oversee and develop the Councils approach to nature protection and recovery.*
5. The framework for the development of Climate Action Plans for the councils includes the development of long-term Biodiversity Plans (2021-2030). Increasing carbon storage and sequestration through biodiversity enhancement will be an essential element of achieving the councils' carbon neutral targets.
6. The Insight and Policy team are currently leading the development of a new Tree Policy and Tree Strategy for the Councils. South has recently appointed two tree Champions.
7. There are advanced plans to establish an Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership and the Oxfordshire Growth Board is setting up an Environmental Advisory Group.



The planned Ox-Cam Arc includes a set of environmental principles that are seeking to achieve a “*doubling of the area of land managed primarily for nature*” and “*delivering a minimum 20% biodiversity net gain from all forms of development*”. South Cambridgeshire District Council has recently published a Doubling Nature Strategy.

8. It is expected that the statutory duties of local authorities in relation to biodiversity and the natural environment will be strengthened in the forthcoming Environment Bill. (The Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006 currently includes a duty on public authorities to have regard to the conservation of biodiversity). This includes duties to establish a Local Nature Recovery Strategy and to deliver 10% Net Biodiversity Gain from new developments.
9. The councils currently lack dedicated resources to ensure effective delivery of corporate biodiversity objectives and were not in a position to allocate new resources in the latest budget round (21/22). The lack of capacity means that we are limited to an ad hoc and reactive approach. There is understandable shared frustration - from residents, community groups and Members - that the Councils have not yet been able to make significant progress in this area. Significant officer time is currently absorbed in managing this. Dominic Lamb and Andy Egan in consultation with Michelle Wells and Suzanne Malcolm have developed a proposal for a Biodiversity Steering Group as a positive way forward to provide a focus for this activity and help to shape and inform future plans and projects.

### **Main subject of report**

10. Given that much current strategic development of biodiversity and nature recovery work is taking place on a county wide basis, it makes sense from both an ecosystem and strategic perspective to consider how we can best take forward and deliver on our biodiversity commitments on a joint South and Vale basis. With this area very much being one where cross sector partnership working is required, it will be helpful to our partners to adopt a joined-up approach.
11. A single joint member and officer steering group that can report to the South CEEAC and Vale CEAC seems to be the best approach given:
  - our limited capacity to manage and service multiple groups;
  - the advantages of developing a shared understanding between key members and officers
  - providing a streamlined process to channel the high level of interest in this area
12. The proposed purpose of the Biodiversity Steering Group is:  
To advise and help shape the delivery of the Councils' Corporate Plan biodiversity, nature protection and nature recovery objectives.
12. The proposed remit is to:
  - Advise on the development of a biodiversity strategy and plan
  - Consider the councils' approach to nature protection and recovery
  - Identify the resource requirements for the effective delivery of corporate plan biodiversity objectives.



- Consider the potential for carbon offsetting to contribute to the Councils' carbon neutral targets
- Act as a sounding board for specific schemes such as: nature recovery networks, habitat banking and a tree planting policy and strategy
- Make recommendations to the South CEEAC and Vale CEAC with respect to their role to "advise Cabinet on matters relating to the climate emergency and ecological crisis"
- Consider and review the potential biodiversity impacts of major new initiatives such as Oxfordshire Plan 2050 and the Ox-Cam Arc.
- Consider the implications for the Councils of new duties and obligations as proposed in the Environment Bill.

13. It is proposed that the membership of the Biodiversity Steering Group is:

**Core members:**

- Three Councillors from each district; nominated by the Cabinet leads for climate action and the environment
- SMT representative: Suzanne Malcom
- Insight and Policy Manager: Michelle Wells
- Planning Policy Manager: Lucy Murfett
- Specialist Planning Team Leader: Dominic Lamb
- Climate Action Lead: Andy Egan

**Occasional members:** will be invited where they are relevant items on the agenda e.g. from Property, Legal, Parks/ Grounds maintenance

15. It is anticipated that meetings will be held every two months for first six months and then quarterly thereafter.