

Report by: Public Health and Housing Manager
To: Community and Resources Committee
Subject: Biosphere Nature Recovery Plan & Declaration
Date: 6th September 2021

Ref:

PURPOSE OF REPORT:

1. To make Members aware that the North Devon Biosphere have published a Nature Recovery Plan, and to seek approval to sign the Declaration.

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Both nationally and within northern Devon, it is recognised that our wildlife is a shadow of its former glory. Many species are in long-term decline and we have lost many important and keystone species. Today, the UK is among the most nature-depleted countries on Earth. Nature has been, and continues to be, restricted into smaller and smaller fragments of suitable habitat due to the destruction of wildlife habitats and intensification of land use. Climate change is exacerbating these problems.
- 1.2 Our natural environment can no longer guarantee the multiple benefits it provides through ecosystem services, for our food and water security, health and wellbeing and for tackling the immense threat of climate change. Both the rivers Taw and Torridge are failing ecological and chemical standards, revealing that land use and activities in their catchments are not sustainable.
- 1.3 However, there is still an opportunity to support and facilitate nature's recovery. One of the Biosphere Reserve's purposes is to be able to test innovative approaches for living sustainably as an exemplar for sustainable development. As such, a draft Nature Recovery Plan has been prepared by the Nature Improvement Group of the Biosphere Reserve Partnership as its response to the global ecological emergency [accessible at <https://www.northdevonbiosphere.org.uk/nature-recovery-plan.html>].
- 1.4 The plan covers the terrestrial parts of the North Devon Biosphere Reserve, which includes much of the Torridge district. It sets out a Vision for nature's recovery across northern Devon by 2030 (see the Appendix to this report), in line with Government commitments, and the priority actions required from 2021-25 to move towards that Vision. It is proposed that the actions, and progress against them, will be reviewed in 2025. It is a living document that will be updated as new data becomes available.
- 1.5 The plan's focus is on restoring existing nature habitats to good condition, and ensuring connectivity between them, rather than encouraging significant changes in land use (e.g. from agricultural use to wildlife management)

- 1.6 The draft Nature Recovery Plan was published on 6th July and is subject to public consultation until 15th August 2021.
- 1.7 This Nature Recovery Plan sets out to ‘turn the tide’ and facilitate nature’s recovery across northern Devon. It focusses on restoring existing habitats to good condition and to making connections between them, rather than promoting significant changes to land use. It requires a combined effort by everyone in partnership with each other to engage through their choices and actions. This applies to local councils, local businesses, schools and community groups in their roles as land managers and policy makers, as well as to individual consumers. The plan also proposes to prioritise, target and coordinate our combined efforts towards achieving this vision.
- 1.8 A Nature Recovery Declaration has also been prepared (see Appendix) seeking all organisations, businesses and individuals to sign up to actions within their control and responsibility that would contribute towards achieving this vision. **Signing the Declaration does not commit us to achieving a binding recommendation or target but is a pledge to work towards the Vision.**

2 REPORT

Nature Recovery Plan

- 2.1 This Biosphere Nature Recovery Plan focuses on five key land types, which together cover the majority of northern Devon.
 - a) Coast
 - b) Grassland and Arable
 - c) Towns and Villages
 - d) Trees, Woodlands and Hedges
 - e) Wetlands and Waterbodies
- 2.2 Within the section for each land types
 - a) Part I sets out a vision for 2030, followed by a description of the scope and location of the land type;
 - b) Part II identifies priority actions for nature’s recovery, which are split into habitat-related actions, species-related actions and enabling actions, together with monitoring and research priorities; and
 - c) Part III sets out supporting information including the importance of that habitat type for nature, an estimated baseline condition assessment and perceived trends, as well as identifying root causes of decline and potential solutions to address them. Achievements over the last 10 years are also recognised.
- 2.3 For each of the actions listed in Part II, a lead organisation is identified, together with an estimated cost for undertaking or facilitating the work. Some actions have existing resources or are part of existing workloads. The source of any

additional funding to facilitate and undertake these additional actions is not yet identified.

- 2.4 District Councils across the Biosphere Reserve are identified as the lead partner or a supporting partner for several actions, primarily within the Towns and Villages section. In most instances the actions are being undertaken or are planned to be undertaken anyway; or could be accommodated and facilitated within existing workloads, such as the proposed update of the joint Local Plan or emerging Biodiversity Net Gain Supplementary Planning Document.
- 2.5 There are also identified actions for the District Councils in the Coast section relating to reducing disturbance at the high tide roosts around the Taw-Torridge estuary. These could be addressed through a Public Spaces Protection Order (PSPO), or through an education campaign. The Coast Section also incorporates the proposed Nature Recovery Strategy for the North Devon Coast AONB.
- 2.6 Whilst some actions within these sections are already starting to be delivered, the actions are intended to be challenging but achievable. The actions are aspirational but are not set as binding targets that must be met by a partner organisation. Rather they are intended to be aspirational targets or visions to which all partner organisations can seek to contribute towards.
- 2.7 The Nature Recovery Plan is considered to complement and help to deliver some of the objectives in the Council's corporate plan and in our Carbon, Environment and Biodiversity Plan. It will also contribute to achieving the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan "A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment". It will also contribute to the Devon Nature Recovery Strategy that is being prepared in response to the Environment Bill.

Nature Recovery Declaration

- 2.8 The Nature Recovery Declaration accompanies the Nature Recovery Plan. This is not part of the wider consultation, but there is an invitation for any organisation or individual across northern Devon to sign up to the Declaration and to pledge to undertake a small number of actions. The list of actions differs between individuals and different types of organisations. Cumulatively, enough people and organisations undertaking these actions will contribute significantly towards delivering the vision and meeting the actions set out in the Nature Recovery Plan. The number and scope of the declarations made will also provide a good indicator of the level and range of support for the vision and aspirations of the draft Nature Recovery Plan.
- 2.9 For Councils, the list of potential actions that the signatory can pledge to undertake are:
 - 1) Help nature to recover on land over which we have responsibility or influence by creating new habitats and through nature-friendly management of public spaces and verges, working with local communities.

- 2) Seek opportunities for net nature gain in all of our policies, procedures, plans, operations and decisions.
- 3) Ensure the principles of building with nature are incorporated into new housing developments
- 4) Encourage our members, residents and staff to individually pledge their support for this Declaration and share it with their family and friends.
- 5) Carry out our duty to have regard for conserving biodiversity across the Biosphere, aligning with Nature Recovery Plan priorities.
- 6) Lead, support and collaborate as appropriate to help deliver nature recovery plan actions for which we are named and, where necessary, endeavour to utilise resources to do so.

Members can choose which of these actions they wish the Council to pledge support for.

- 2.10 All of these actions are considered to be appropriate and should be achievable for Torridge District Council. For example, the second and third points could be incorporated into and partly delivered through the proposed new Local Plan, if Members agree. Similarly, as other Council strategies such as housing, procurement, corporate etc are reviewed, there will be opportunities to embed these actions within them. Officers consider that the Council could and should be able to sign up to this declaration.
- 2.11 This report has been reviewed and approved by the Member Climate Working Group.

3 IMPLICATIONS

Legal implications

There are no binding actions within the Nature Recovery Plan or Declaration.

Financial and Human Resources implications

There are no direct financial or staffing costs associated with any decision to respond to the draft Nature Recovery Plan consultation and/or sign the Nature Recovery Declaration. The opportunities for addressing the actions in the proposed Nature Recovery Plan should be able to be considered through existing and future workloads, such as the revised Local Plan. Bringing future grounds maintenance back into the Council will provide greater flexibility to accommodate some of the proposed actions on the Council's own land, such as tree planting.

Sustainability/biodiversity implications

The proposed Nature Recovery Plan and the Nature Recovery Declaration would have a positive impact on nature and biodiversity across North Devon.

Other sustainability implications (social, economic and environmental) are likely to be broadly positive (such as health and wellbeing, and opportunities for tourism) or generally neutral.

Equality/Diversity

There are not considered to be any negative equality impacts arising from the nature recovery plan. The plan does not contain any formal policies and focuses on improving nature and biodiversity across the area, which would benefit everyone.

Risk Management

N/A

Compliance with Policies and Strategies

N/A

Data Protection (GDPR) Implications

N/A

Climate Change

The links between biodiversity and climate change are considered in the recently adopted Carbon, Environment and Biodiversity Plan for Torridge. Managing and protecting biodiversity will mitigate the negative impacts of climate change and help humans adapt to it; policies and actions aiming at limiting the effects of climate change will contribute to the protection of biodiversity.

Lead Member Views – Cllr Hames

Studies have revealed that over the last thirty years there has been a 45 per cent decline of once common butterflies in the UK and 80 per cent decline of habitat specific species. Over the same period there has been a decrease of 44 million wild birds and huge loss of vital habitats such as ponds, meadows, woods, hedgerows, wetland and other contributors to biodiversity. The Nature Recovery Plan and Declaration are therefore highly important initiatives designed to encourage the whole community and its organisations to work to reverse this tragic decline in UK wildlife. I look forward to our Council actively participating in this process

4 CONCLUSIONS

4.1 The Nature Recovery Plan offers us an opportunity to progress and deliver a number of commitments made within our recently adopted Carbon, Environment and Biodiversity Plan. It provides a framework of partnership working to achieve our ambitions and an opportunity to work closely with a

globally recognised Northern Devon based organisation committed to enhancing the biodiversity of the area.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 5.1 To authorise the Sustainability and Climate Officer to respond to the draft Nature Recovery Plan by endorsing and supporting the proposed vision and actions within it.
- 5.2 To sign the Nature Recovery Declaration and agreeing to progress the associated actions identified for Councils.
- 5.3 To encourage and invite all members and staff to pledge their support for this Declaration as individuals, and to share it with their family and friends where appropriate.

6 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

- 6.1 Consultations: Operational Services Manager, Major Projects & Estates Manager, Public Health & Housing Manager, Development Manager, Senior Planning Policy Officer, Property Manager, Major Projects & Estates Engineer, Northam Burrows Lead Ranger.
- 6.2 Contact Officer: Janet Williams Public Health and Housing Manager.
- 6.3 The following background papers have been used in the preparation of this report:
 - North Devon Biosphere Strategy for Sustainable Development 2014-2024
 - North Devon and Torridge Local Plan 2011 – 2031 (adopted October 2018)
 - A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment (HM Government, 2018)

Appendix One

Our Vision for nature in the North Devon UNESCO Biosphere

By 2030, nature is recovering across northern Devon. There is more wildlife-rich habitat for us all to enjoy - covering 30% of the land area – in our fields and woods, on the moors and coast, along our rivers and across the sea. Wildlife has the space it needs to flourish. Thriving farming, fishing and forestry are helping nature to recover right across the Biosphere area. Communities, councils and businesses are putting nature back into our towns and villages. Declining species like salmon, hedgehog, cuckoo, skylark, lapwing, swift and house martin are recovering – and once again there are myriads of wildflowers and insects to enjoy in the countryside and marine wildlife is thriving. Ambitious projects have helped bring back icons like beaver, pine marten, chough, white-tailed eagle and osprey. Our quality of life, the economy and our response to climate change are stronger for it. More is required, but we are proud to be playing our part in tackling the global ecological emergency.