

STAFFORDSHIRE MOORLANDS DISTRICT COUNCIL

Community Overview and Scrutiny Panel

18 September 2023

TITLE:	Plan for Nature
PORTFOLIO HOLDER:	Councillor Nigel Yates - Portfolio Holder for Climate Change and Environment
CONTACT OFFICER:	David Smith, Gillian Wright - Head of Communities and Climate Change, Climate Change & Biodiversity Officer
WARDS INVOLVED:	All

Appendices Attached –

**Staffordshire Moorlands Plan for Nature
Appendices to the Plan**

1 Reason for the Report

1.1 To approve the adoption of the Staffordshire Moorlands Plan for Nature.

2 Recommendation

2.1 That the Committee recommends that the Cabinet:

- Adopts the Plan for Nature; and
- Introduces appropriate governance, monitoring and reporting arrangements.

3 Executive Summary

3.1 The Plan for Nature is an opportunity to strategically enhance the natural capital and ecosystem services in Staffordshire Moorlands. Without a strategic, managed approach, good projects can happen, but with limited ability to make the most of opportunities and deliver qualitative, structured outcomes.

3.2 The Council developed a [Green Infrastructure Strategy](#) in 2018 to support development of the Local Plan. The strategy aimed to provide strategically

planned networks designed to link existing (and proposed) green¹ spaces with green corridors running through towns, villages and rural areas. The maintenance, enhancement and extension of these networks can deliver multi-functional benefits for local communities, businesses, visitors and the environment. However, although it was a helpful and detailed document, the strategy lacked a clear delivery mechanism. The Plan for Nature aims to fill this gap by translating the Green Infrastructure Strategy into distinct actions, projects and workstreams to embed in operations and support with adoption through communities and other local stakeholders.

- 3.3 The Plan for Nature is intended to guide the actions that need to be taken to halt and reverse the decline of the natural world across the district by 2050. It draws together data on the current state of nature within the district and offers recommendations on how and where conservation efforts should be prioritised. It contains targets and a timescale for different actions and interventions to ensure the authority can track and measure its progress on an annual basis. Key stakeholders have been involved in the development of the plan, and will also play a vital role in delivering and monitoring its implementation.
- 3.4 The projects and programmes initiated through the plan will support the new Local Authority duties as set out in the Environment Act 2021. These include reporting of biodiversity plans and initiating and recording Biodiversity Net Gain requirements linked to planning applications.
- 3.5 The Biodiversity Net Gain duty places a requirement on certain developments to improve biodiversity by 10% compared to prior to the development. This can be on site or off site but must be managed and monitored for 30 years. Mechanisms to insure compliance will need to be developed.
- 3.6 The Plan for Nature suggests the following overarching vision for the district:
- “In 2050 the Staffordshire Moorlands will be a district where nature has recovered to sustainable levels. Formerly declining habitats and species have been restored; both town and countryside are resilient to climate change, and everyone can access and engage with nature on their doorsteps.”*
- 3.7 The Plan also identifies 7 key targets for adoption by the Council

4 How this report links to Corporate Priorities

Aim 1: To help create a safer and healthier environment for our communities to live and work

- Improved biodiversity, increased natural ground cover and tree canopies can improve air quality and reduce urban temperatures.

¹ ‘Green spaces’ within the strategy include ‘blue spaces’ such as rivers, canals, standing waters, and other water courses.

- Biodiversity abundance will support adaptation to climate change with potentially reduced flooding, reduced excess heat exposure resulting in better air quality and quality of life.
- Community led regeneration activities can support community cohesion

Aim 2: To use resources effectively and provide value for money

- Using a strategic approach, initiatives can be scoped ready to apply for external funding opportunities.

Aim 3: To help create a strong economy by supporting further regeneration of towns and villages

- Enhancements to urban natural spaces support regeneration activities.

Aim 4: To protect and improve the environment and respond to the climate emergency

- Improved biodiversity, ground an tree cover along with improved green corridors and connectivity will support all of these priorities

5 Alternative Options

5.1 None identified

Neil Rodgers
Executive Director (Place)

Web Links and Background Papers

[Green Infrastructure Strategy 2018](#)
[LGA: Get in on the Act: The Environment Act 2021](#)
[Planning Advisory Service: Biodiversity Net Gain for local authorities](#)
[Planning Advisory Service: Nature Recovery for Local Authorities](#)
[DEFRA: Local nature recovery strategies](#)

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6 Detail

6.1 The Council commissioned Staffordshire Wildlife Trust to develop a “Plan for Nature” to guide the actions that need to be taken to halt and reverse the decline of the natural world across the district by 2050.

6.2 The resulting plan, which is attached to this report, draws together data on the current state of nature within the district and offers recommendations on how and where conservation efforts should be prioritised. It contains targets and a timescale for different actions and interventions to ensure the authority can track and measure its progress on an annual basis. Key stakeholders have been involved in the development of the plan, and will also play a vital role in delivering and monitoring its implementation.

- 6.3 The Council had previously adopted a [Green Infrastructure Strategy](#) in 2018 to support development of the Local Plan. The strategy aimed to provide strategically planned networks designed to link existing (and proposed) green² spaces with green corridors running through towns, villages and rural areas. The maintenance, enhancement and extension of these networks can deliver multi-functional benefits for local communities, businesses, visitors and the environment. However, although it was a helpful and detailed document, the strategy lacked a clear delivery mechanism. The Plan for Nature aims to fill this gap by translating the Green Infrastructure Strategy into distinct actions, projects and workstreams to embed in operations and support with adoption through communities and other local stakeholders.
- 6.4 The Plan sets out actions the Council could take or could influence to improve biodiversity across the district. It does not cover Peak District National Park as they are developing their own, similar strategy.
- 6.5 The National Planning Policy Framework, Local Plan and Supplementary Planning Documents set out considerations for both urban and rural biodiversity enhancements. The sections of relevant policy are set out in the appendix of the Plan for Nature.
- 6.6 The Plan suggests collaborative working to realise some of the ambitions. The Council are already supporting Staffordshire Wildlife Trust along with Keele University and local community groups to establish a citizen science programme to enhance biodiversity and encourage local communities to self-manage pockets of public space. A bid has been made to The National Lottery for a 5 year programme. The results are imminent.
- 6.7 Biodiversity Net Gain is a new duty for Local Authorities to ensure developments enhance biodiversity. The mobilising the Plan for Nature will support strategic delivery and monitoring of long-term Biodiversity Net Gain goals. Understanding of where, what and when to enhance a particular area and also supporting developers in their plans to make them more environmentally sustainable are key enablers.
- 6.8 From 2024 all Local Authorities will have to report to central Government on their activities to support enhancing biodiversity. This Plan and its governance will help to drive improvements, seek opportunities, address barriers and monitor success to feed into the reporting duty.
- 6.9 Some developments require Section 106 funds to be used to improve biodiversity. With the Plan for Nature, potential initiatives will be identified and scoped as inception

² 'Green spaces' within the strategy include 'blue spaces' such as rivers, canals, standing waters, and other water courses.

6.10 Staffordshire Wildlife Trust are lobbying local Authorities to declare a Nature Emergency. The Declaration would in the most part have similar objectives as the Plan for Nature but would demonstrate the Council's commitment to the wider environment.

7 Vision and Targets

7.1 The Plan for Nature suggests the following vision:

In 2050 the Staffordshire Moorlands will be a district where nature has recovered to sustainable levels. Formerly declining habitats and species have been restored; both town and countryside are resilient to climate change, and everyone can access and engage with nature on their doorsteps.

1. A third of all land in the Staffordshire Moorlands will be protected and managed for nature, making a beautiful, healthy and resilient environment for all who live and work in the district.
2. In line with recommendations in the Making Space for Nature report 2010 (the 'Lawton principles') there will be more sites designated for wildlife, and sites will be larger, more connected and in better condition.
3. Our most important habitats and wildlife corridors will form a robust network where wildlife can migrate, live and breed. Woodlands, hedges and verges, rivers, species-rich meadows, peatlands and moorland will be flourishing across the Moorlands, with traditional orchards making a comeback in urban green spaces.
4. Landowners in the parish will be aware of, and able to access, a range of funding and advice to manage their land to benefit wildlife and tackle climate change.
5. Iconic species that indicate the health of our environment, such as the curlew, otter and peregrine are plentiful. Our rarest specialists like the dormouse, lesser butterfly orchid and native crayfish are recovering and expanding from their strongholds. Species that were formerly extinct such as beavers and red squirrels are again present in the district.
6. The Churnet Valley is a thriving example of re-wilding and tourism. Sustainable farming, forestry and rivers enable residents and visitors to enjoy an abundance of wildlife in a beautiful landscape.
7. Everyone who lives in the settlements of the Staffordshire Moorlands will have access to enough natural greenspace near to their home, and be able to get involved, or simply enjoy time spent, in a green and healthy environment. All publicly-owned greenspaces and buildings will be more wildlife-friendly. Many new developments will meet Building with Nature standards, delivering best practice for wildlife, water and wellbeing.

8. Nature-based solutions will be tackling the effects of climate change by reducing flooding, conserving soils, cooling urban areas and filtering air and water pollutants. Healthy habitats will be removing and storing carbon in trees, plants and soils.

7.2 The draft plan identifies the following 7 targets:

Target 1

By 2030, we will ensure that 30% of all land in the Staffordshire Moorlands will be protected and looked after so that wildlife can thrive there - focusing particularly on priority habitats and wildlife corridors as identified in the Nature Recovery Network mapping. Caring for our land in this way will provide many benefits for local people too – such as helping to reduce flooding, buffering us from extreme temperatures and making us more resilient to the impacts of climate change.

Target 2

By the end of 2023, we will investigate the opportunities to reintroduce or boost populations of two wild species in the Staffordshire Moorlands that have been identified as being a priority for local conservation efforts. During 2024, we will produce a plan to secure funding to resource the species recovery work.

Target 3

By the end of 2023, we will set a measurable target to restore the rivers, streams and wetlands in the Staffordshire Moorlands that have been identified as being most in need of re-naturalisation, utilising the expertise of the Environment Agency, who monitor the ecological health and pollution levels in our watercourses, and other stakeholders.

From 2025, we will work with the Environment Agency create publicly accessible reports on the ecological health of watercourses in the Staffordshire Moorlands, which will help to inform future conservation efforts.

Target 4

By the end of 2024, we will launch a citizen science project to involve local people in supporting wild species that are at risk in the Staffordshire Moorlands. The project will focus on supporting volunteers to collect data on species which have been identified as a priority by Staffordshire Ecological Record because population data is currently lacking/limited.

Target 5

By the end of 2024, we will set a measurable target to make our Local Wildlife Sites better for wildlife. Local Wildlife Sites are places that have been identified as some of the best wild habitats across the Staffordshire Moorlands. Work to improve them could include, for example, restoring wetland areas, increasing

wildflower diversity on grassland areas and making woodlands better for birds and butterflies.

Target 6

Target To be confirmed - focusing specifically for the Churnet Valley, following on from and supporting the Churnet Valley Masterplan.

Target 7

By the end of 2025, all residents of recognised settlements in the district will have adequate access to natural greenspace in line with the Natural England Green Infrastructure Standards³.

8 Next Steps and Governance

8.1 The Council has recently concluded its recruitment exercise and, subject to final clearances, will have a new Biodiversity Officer to lead on developing the project strands and work with communities, external agencies and landowners to work through barriers and address opportunities.

8.2 Following adoption of the Plan, the Council proposes to take the following action to support its implementation:

- Officially launch the plan and sign-up to Staffordshire Wildlife Trusts' Nature Declaration.
- Create a public-facing, attractive and easier-to-read version of the plan plus a summary document with FAQs using the existing climate change and biodiversity branding. The following FAQs have been identified but further feedback from Members on key questions that should be addressed is very much welcomed:
 - *Why is SMDC creating a Plan for Nature?*
 - *How does this fit in with other authorities' plans such as the Staffordshire County Plan and the Peak District National Park Plan?*
 - *What is the relationship with other SMDC strategies such as that for Green Spaces, Green Infrastructure and Trees?*
 - *Who will manage and govern the Plan?*
 - *Why was the 30% target of 'managed so that wildlife can thrive' chosen?*
 - *What counts towards the 30% target?*
 - *What is the baseline figure in the Moorlands (and the County)?*

³ <https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/GreenInfrastructure/Home.aspx>

- *How will sites be improved and moved through into the 30% target?*
 - *How will the Plan help create joined-up spaces for Nature?*
 - *How will the habitat mapping that lies at the heart of the Plan be made available to stakeholders and the public?*
 - *How will the public, including towns, parishes and community groups be involved in the Plan for Nature?*
- Develop a performance indicator framework and define baselines.
 - Scope and set up project plans to be ready to act when funding becomes available. The council have not been able to respond to funding opportunities as there are no 'shovel' ready projects
 - Create a communications and engagement plan.
 - Further scope out the requirements and prepare for compliance with duties under the Environment Act 2021
 - Introduce a governance structure to oversee delivery of the plan (see below).

8.3 The annual climate change report that was approved by the Cabinet on 8th August 2023, acknowledged that the nature (or biodiversity) crisis links to, but is separate from, the climate change crisis. In that report, the Cabinet agreed that the nature recovery agenda would be delivered and reported separately to action to combat climate change and that the "The Way We Look After Our Environment" aspect of the Climate Change Strategy would be incorporated into the nature recovery governance and delivery arrangements. This arrangement was approved to provide a simpler delivery and reporting structure, ensure that both climate change and nature recovery are given adequate consideration.

8.4 The Council created a board to take forward the Green Infrastructure Strategy but this has not met for some time. We are proposing to re-start but repurpose this board with a broad focus on nature recovery within the district. The board will oversee delivery of the Plan for Nature and also actions to deliver the Green Infrastructure Delivery Strategy. The Council recognises that it can play a leadership and influencing role with respect to nature recovery but that successful delivery will require cooperation from, and collaboration with, key stakeholders including the NFU, Peak District National Park, Staffordshire Wildlife Trust, landowners, conservation charities, local 'green' action groups and others. The board will therefore include representation from these key stakeholder and from the Council.

8.5 We will be bringing forward a green spaces strategy later in the year to ensure that the Council shows leadership through appropriate managements of its own

green spaces. This will include recommendations for Member involvement in the scrutiny of its delivery.

- 8.6 Internally, the existing Climate Change and Biodiversity Deliver Group, which includes the relevant Heads of Service and key officers, will establish and monitor projects and workstreams within the Plan