

MALVERN HILLS AONB JOINT ADVISORY COMMITTEE 8 NOVEMBER 2019

ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE EMERGENCY AND NATURE RECOVERY

Recommendation

- 1. The Committee is recommended to:**
 - a) comment on and discuss the three central themes identified;**
 - b) participate in a discussion to identify good practice, recommendations to partner bodies and priority actions.**

Background

National

2. In May 2019 the House of Commons declared an Environment and Climate Emergency, following the finding of the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change that to avoid a more than 1.5°C rise in global warming, global emissions would need to fall by around 45 per cent from 2010 levels by 2030, reaching net zero by around 2050. The declaration recognises the devastating impact that volatile and extreme weather will have on UK food production, water availability, public health and through flooding and wildfire damage. It also notes that the UK is currently missing almost all of its biodiversity targets, with an alarming trend in species decline, and that cuts of 50% to the funding of Natural England are counterproductive to tackling those problems. It calls on the Government to increase the ambition of the UK's climate change targets under the Climate Change Act 2008 to achieve net zero emissions before 2050, to increase support for and set ambitious, short-term targets for the roll-out of renewable and low carbon energy and transport, and to move swiftly to capture economic opportunities and green jobs in the low carbon economy while managing risks for workers and communities currently reliant on carbon intensive sectors. It further calls on the Government to lay before the House within the next six months urgent proposals to restore the UK's natural environment and to deliver a circular, zero waste economy.

Local

3. Table 1 summarises the position of the five local authority (at Unitary, County and District level) members of the Malvern Hills AONB Partnership with regards to declaring an Environment and Climate Emergency.

Table 1

Local authority	Emergency declared?	Date of declaration	Target/commitment
Forest of Dean District Council	Yes	06/12/18	Council and District carbon neutral by 2030
Gloucestershire County Council	Yes	15/05/19	80% reduction in the Council's corporate carbon emissions by 2030. Carbon neutral county by 2050.
Herefordshire Council	Yes	08/03/19	Council aspires to be carbon neutral by 2030
Malvern Hills District Council	Yes	23/07/19	To move as quickly as possible to net zero carbon emissions across the district (hopefully by 2030)
Worcestershire County Council	No		Aim to be carbon neutral by 2050

4. Whilst the majority of local authority partners have declared an Environment and/or Climate emergency few if any of these declarations make reference to nature decline.

National Association for AONBs (NAAONB)

5. At its annual conference in July 2019 the National Association for AONBs launched the Colchester Declaration on nature recovery in AONBs – see Appendix 1. This sets out a firm intention to significantly step up the scale and pace of action on nature recovery in the context of the Environment and Climate Emergency. The National Association and staff from AONB teams are now working up the detail of how the declaration will be delivered.

Questions

What role does the AONB Partnership have, should we raise our game and if so, how?

6. The Malvern Hills AONB Partnership has been championing nature recovery for a long time. The AONB Management Plan also states the importance of reducing carbon emissions through mitigation and by supporting environmental adaptations to make the area more resilient to changing conditions. Many policies in the AONB Management Plan contribute to nature recovery and to lowering carbon emissions. Over the years the AONB Sustainable Development Fund has supported a number of projects which aim to address these issues.

7. The AONB Partnership has the roles of delivery and of influencing. The AONB staff team's own direct delivery is relatively small and targeted. It depends on the capacity of the team, the effectiveness of what we do and our priorities. Individual partner organisations also have a lot of delivery capacity. How we work effectively together is an important factor. To influence well, clear thinking and positions and effective engagement will be vital. The recently published Glover Review (see paper 7) should help to reinforce our role by raising our expectations, influence and capacity.

How do we best harness the energy of Partnership members?

8. Partnership members can bring their knowledge and also take back things from the Partnership to their organisations and/or communities. They can introduce the staff team to people they know locally and involve them in discussions.

9. Conversations on topics like climate change can lead to people feeling powerless. It is worth thinking about where and how we best fit in. Action is needed from governments, businesses, communities and individuals. These layers interconnect – as individuals we can do things directly ourselves, as well as join groups and with others in our communities, and exercise our influence on businesses as consumers and workers, and on governments as voters and citizens. Government can influence businesses and individuals. Our government can influence those of other countries.

10. Action planning can help us to focus on what needs to be done next. We can say what we're already doing, but we know this isn't enough. We need to keep an eye on the targets and timescales and challenge ourselves as to whether we are doing enough. If we can't see all the steps ahead to get to a target we should move towards it anyway with our best knowledge. The later steps are likely to become more obvious when we have made the first ones.

Central themes

Nature recovery

11. For many people nature decline is as threatening an emergency as climate change and both are inextricably linked. This needs to be recognised, alongside the fact that nature recovery and restoring ecosystems provide some of the essential solutions to reaching zero carbon emissions, as well as addressing many other factors vital for our survival and quality of life. These are not just distant global issues, they are the main challenges now facing us.

12. *"The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) assessment has shown the strong interrelationship between climate change, the loss of biodiversity and human wellbeing. Climate change has been identified as a primary driver of biodiversity loss, already altering every part of nature. Likewise, the loss of biodiversity contributes to climate change, for example when we destroy forests we emit carbon dioxide, the major "human-produced" greenhouse gas. We cannot solve the threats of human-induced climate change and loss of biodiversity in isolation. We either solve both or we solve neither. As policymakers around the world grapple with the twin threats of climate change and biodiversity loss, it is essential that they understand the linkages between the two so that their decisions and actions address both."*

13. From article "Loss of biodiversity is just as catastrophic as climate change" 6th May 2019, Sir Robert Watson - Chair of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), and former Chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

14. There is a need to halt and reverse the (often historical) loss of good quality habitats in the Malvern Hills AONB, something often associated with land management practices though development is also a factor. To reverse nature loss we also need to restore and recreate habitat networks across the landscape. Local Nature Partnership and county Biodiversity Partnerships need proper resourcing if they are to raise their influence and activity, working with the Local Enterprise Partnership and other sectors.

15. A whole range of mechanisms for looking after nature need to deliver more, including:

- planning decisions and enforcement action by various regulators to prevent direct harm;
- agriculture and land use policy supporting sustainable activity;
- government schemes for farm conservation with good incentives and minimal barriers, and good advice for private landowners;
- ownership of key sites by conservation bodies and trusts and linking them with the wider landscape;
- ambitious projects to recreate and restore habitats, needing public, private and third sector finance and partnership working; and
- grassroots action by communities and individuals.

16. Like climate change, loss of nature can be subtle and not very visible. Our landscape still looks pretty and may not appear to be in emergency. But we have lost and are losing 'bio-abundance' as well as biodiversity. As well as some extinctions, once common species are becoming rare. Baselines shift and people may not notice or worry about these changes. Some 'keystone' species have an especially vital role in ecosystems, such as pollinators which enable crops and flowers to reproduce, earthworms which aerate soil, trees which bind river banks. Many species are already in decline but they can recover. Recent changes in land management practices at places such as the Knepp Estate in Sussex provide a dramatic reminder of just how much wildlife can be supported when management approaches are altered, though such dramatic shifts in management are not expected to become the norm. The Environment Bill introduces provisions requiring local authorities across England to develop Nature Recovery Strategies.

17. We need big programmes to engage and re-engage young people and adults with nature, to harness their energy and improve their wellbeing. Services need to join up to improve provision.

Farming and land management for zero carbon and nature recovery

18. Making change here will be vital to achieving net zero carbon emissions and nature recovery. Agriculture accounts for 10% of greenhouse gas emissions in the UK, through methane and nitrous oxide as well as CO₂. A recent report by the NFU sets out a plan to get UK agriculture to net zero by 2040, based on productive efficiency, carbon storage and bioenergy and renewables. The high anticipated contribution of bioenergy in this may not be compatible with allowing enough capacity in the land for nature recovery. The RSA's Food, Farming and Countryside

Commission calls for a farming and land policy which addresses climate and ecosystems while also delivering much better for health (see Appendix 2).

19. Land management also has a vital role in carbon management, to help us reach net zero. Planting trees has a place in this, but this is about much more than carbon offsetting. Soils are a vital means of carbon storage and they need better management. Pastures store carbon, some of which is lost when the land is cultivated. Increasing the organic matter in soils will store more carbon as well as help with water retention and natural fertility, reducing the need for artificial fertilisers (the main source of nitrous oxide greenhouse gas). On pasture, soil organic matter can be raised by techniques such as mob grazing where stock are put at high densities for a short period onto tall sward pastures aiming to graze some of the vegetation, leave some and trample some into the soil. This can also be beneficial for biodiversity.

20. More trees and woodland will help with carbon offsetting as well as providing many other benefits, but offsetting shouldn't be seen as an easy way to avoid challenges of reducing emissions in other sectors. To be effective, trees planted need to be of suitable species for the location and the landscape – 'the right tree in the right place' - and will need proper maintenance. There are many examples of new trees having been planted but not properly cared for with the end result being dead or unhealthy trees. The current need to plant more trees is also challenged by a growing raft of tree diseases which can lead to uncertainty about what will survive, as well as what is appropriate to plant in any given area. The availability of land can also be an issue with many farmers understandably cautious in the current climate about making decisions which commit themselves in the long term. That said, a great many trees can be planted in areas such as along stream lines and in hedgerows, in places which are not used for or which are suboptimal for other farming practices and where they will reinforce landscape character and assist in nature recovery.

21. Some calls to cease livestock farming because of methane production and to convert grazed land to growing food for direct human consumption or for nature may be too simplistic. Especially in the hills, land which is less fertile may not grow human food directly and ploughing sloping land may result in loss of soil and harm to rivers. It is also important to consider that land can deliver multiple benefits – for example low intensity grazing on the Malvern Hills provides a food output whilst also helping to maintain a high value area for nature conservation and for human enjoyment, contributing to health and wellbeing. High quality pasture-fed livestock from nature-friendly low input systems is likely to have an important place in a low carbon agriculture and is not the same thing as intensive livestock rearing on arable-grown feeds.

22. The steps needed to reach zero carbon and nature recovery may alter the character of our landscape – but, if carefully managed, these changes can enhance it. Ecosystem functions matter, natural beauty is not static and the AONB designation should not be seen as a barrier to the right kind of change. More work is needed on what that change looks like in this area. The New Environmental Land Management System (NELMS) will be a vital tool and needs the best thinking and engagement in its development to make sure it works well. There could be a collaborative programme of visits and workshops about zero carbon and nature friendly farming, as well as demonstration farms and links with universities.

Development, energy, transport & tourism for zero carbon and nature recovery

23. Net zero and nature recovery cannot be achieved if the political and corporate focus is on economic growth at all costs. The goals of net zero and nature recovery need to be built into partners' visions at the highest levels. Doing this can deliver better quality of life for people as well as new forms of economic activity which are sustainable. On energy and transport managing demand as well as changing supply will be important. This means people consuming less and travelling less. Planning policy and decisions are aiming to support sustainability, e.g. by providing homes close to services and where people work, but this isn't currently adequate to achieve carbon targets. More needs to be done with regards to planning and development. Mandatory biodiversity net gain is included in the new Environment Bill.

24. 'Local Plans in England are not dealing with carbon dioxide emissions reduction effectively, nor are they consistently delivering the adaptation actions necessary to secure the long-term resilience of local communities. This inaction is partly due to a chronic lack of resources in local government, which had contributed to a loss of skills on energy and climate change.'

RTPI 2019, Rising to the Climate Crisis – A Guide for Local Authorities on Planning for Climate Change

25. Natural Capital – a key tenet of the 25 year Environment Plan - needs to become a central principle in planning and economic development. The potential of natural flood management techniques and biodiversity net gain need to be maximised. The Malvern Hills AONB Unit has recently trialled use of the Natural Capital Planning Toolkit (NCPT) in the area. A report on this work can be found at:

<http://www.malvernhillsaonb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Malvern-Hills-NCPT-Assessment-Report-N19-MH-XX.pdf>

26. Renewable energy is a challenge for protected landscapes and a potential conflict between conserving natural beauty and other environmental goals. Policies in the AONB Management Plan are against industrial scale developments in the AONB whilst being positive about small scale renewables, especially where they support the management of core elements of the AONB landscape.

27. The House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee is running an enquiry on sustainable tourism. Some key issues related to this subject may include:

- The need for structural change in the tourism industry as in every other part of the economy, whilst recognising there are growth opportunities in expanded domestic markets and high-quality sustainable tourism products.
- Sustainability remains a fairly fringe consideration in many parts of the industry, and greater incentives and guidance are needed from government.
- Sustainable tourism needs to be planned in a collaborative way between the industry and public sector bodies on a location-specific basis. Much good practice exists, but many Destination Management Organisations may not be equipped to lead on sustainability.

28. Local authorities may need to provide more support and leadership for tourism businesses on sustainability– addressing energy and transport, supporting plastic-free initiatives and managing as well as promoting our areas as environmentally

sensitive destinations. Previous attempts by the AONB Unit to support partners in recognising and promoting sustainable tourism practices, e.g. through accreditation, have come to very little due to lack of interest from the sector.

29. The emergency we have reached is partly the result of some excesses. However, it is also created by lots of 'normal' behaviour – 'normal' agricultural practices, 'normal' amounts of travel and energy consumption. The majority of evidence suggests these norms cannot now be sustained.

30. There isn't absolute consensus about the problems or the solutions. So alongside action it is important to keep raising these topics and challenging ourselves and others. Natural processes dictate that to restoring nature within the AONB it will also be necessary to look outside of it. The 2017 report 'Zero Carbon Britain' contains some worthy ideas, and extracts from this are provided at Appendix 3.

Group discussion

Key themes:

1. Nature recovery
2. Farming and land management for zero carbon
3. Energy, transport and tourism for zero carbon

Possible questions:

1. What's going well in the Malvern Hills AONB in these areas?
2. What further things can you or your organisation do right now?
3. What support do you need from the AONB Partnership to do this?
4. What should we be recommending partners to do?

Supporting Documents

Appendix 1 - The Colchester Declaration 2019

Appendix 2 - Our Future in the Land

Appendix 3 – Zero Carbon Britain

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Appendix 1 - The Colchester Declaration 2019

Set against a backdrop of unprecedented concern for the future of the natural world, and intergovernmental reports that the current global response to the effects of human impact on nature is insufficient – the National Association for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty believes that now is the time to significantly increase the scale and pace of nature conservation activity in AONBs. Using our unique network and partnership model, we are making a collective Declaration on Nature in AONBs, setting out our strategy for change.

With many AONB host authorities having taken the step of declaring a Climate Emergency we are demonstrating our readiness to act to redress declines in species and habitats within the context of a wider response to climate change.

We believe

1. Natural Beauty has intrinsic value and means so much to people
2. AONBs should be places of rich, diverse and abundant wildlife
3. Nature recovery is central to the conservation and enhancement of natural beauty
4. Climate change is the biggest threat to humanity and one of the greatest threats to biodiversity. Designated landscapes offer some of the most powerful solutions to the challenges of climate change
5. The network of AONBs and National Parks, their teams, partnerships, authorities and stakeholders offer a unique solution to tackling environmental challenges

We pledge

By July 2020

1. To enable an approach that creates opportunities within AONBs for people to make an emotional connection with nature.
2. To prepare a Nature Recovery Plan for each AONB

By 2024

1. To embed an ecosystems services approach into all AONB Management Plans
2. To ensure all AONB management plans include meaningful measures around climate change mitigation and adaptation, including clear, measurable targets to support Net Zero

By 2030

1. That at least 200,000 ha of SSSIs in AONBs will be in favourable condition
2. That at least 100,000 ha of wildlife-rich habitat outside of protected sites will have been created/ restored in AONBs to further support the natural movement of plants and animals
3. That at least 36,000 ha of new woodland will have been planted or allowed to regenerate in AONBs following the principle of the right tree in the right place
4. That, by each AONB immediately adopting a species on the threatened list and by preparing and delivering a Species Action Plan, at least thirty species relevant to AONBs will be taken off the list by 2030.

We call on Westminster and Welsh Governments to provide the power and resources to make these targets achievable