

# Sedgemoor, and Somerset West and Taunton, District Councils' Joint Ecological Emergency Vision Document

## Introduction

This Vision sets out our ambitions to address the ecological deterioration within our districts and to lessen our global impact on the natural world. It is accompanied by a comprehensive action plan that provides the practical steps to deliver ecological recovery. It builds on previous work to address the Climate Emergency, but with a specific focus on wildlife and habitats.

## Background

In September 2020 Somerset West and Taunton Council (SWTC) declared an Ecological Emergency (EE) complementing its Climate Emergency declaration made in February 2019. Sedgemoor District Council (SDC) is in the process of declaring an EE and recognises the need to protect and enhance its natural environment. It released its Climate Emergency Strategy and Action Plan in January 2021 which includes nature focussed actions.

Never has the need for change been more critical. Our fragmented habitats and their wildlife are increasingly at risk from human activity including climate change, farming, pollution, land use change, overfishing, pesticide use and deforestation. These activities often occur within supply chains as we seek to satisfy the demand for more goods and services, at the expense of the world's natural resources, habitats and wildlife. Globally mammal, bird, amphibian, reptile and fish populations have declined by an average of 68% between 1970-2016<sup>1</sup>. Freshwater animals have experienced one of the largest declines (88%), with nearly one in three freshwater species being threatened with extinction<sup>2</sup>.

In the UK, our actions continue to threaten species and since 1970, 41% of species are experiencing a decline in numbers, 15% are threatened with extinction and 27% are found in fewer places<sup>3</sup>. Without swift action further decline will continue and iconic species that are vulnerable to extinction such as the hedgehog will disappear from our shores.

In Sedgemoor and Somerset West and Taunton we are blessed with a rich tapestry of landscapes and habitats. These include the coastline along the Bristol Channel, the magnificent uplands of Exmoor National Park, the Mendip, Quantock and Blackdown Hills Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs), the lowland expanses of the Somerset Levels and Moors and our urban centres such as Bridgwater, Minehead and Taunton. Our districts are home to a mosaic of statutory designated sites, designated for particular habitats or species and include Special Protected Areas (SPAs), Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), Ramsar (internationally recognised waterfowl habitats), National Nature Reserves (NNRs) and local nature reserves (LNRs). It is now also home to the UK's second 'super' National Nature Reserve. All deliver

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<sup>1</sup> Lambertini, M., 2020. Living Planet Report 2020: Bending the Curve of Biodiversity Loss.

<sup>2</sup> Collen, B., Whitton, F., Dyer, E.E., Baillie, J.E.M., Cumberlidge, N., Darwall, W.R.T., Pollock, C., Richman, N.I., Soulsby, A.-M., Böhm, M., 2014. Global patterns of freshwater species diversity, threat and endemism. *Glob. Ecol. Biogeogr.* 23, 40–51. <https://doi.org/10.1111/geb.12096>

<sup>3</sup> State of Nature Partnership, State of Nature 2019.

a multitude of functions e.g., flood alleviation and recreation; comprise a range of habitats; and are home to a variety of species.

These important areas, along with wildlife and geological sites play a significant role in supporting wildlife, yet recent studies show that many are in an unfavourable condition. In Sedgemoor, 63% of its terrestrial SSSI habitat which should be in pristine condition is in an 'unfavourable declining' or 'partially destroyed' condition and in Somerset West and Taunton only 11 out of 35 are described as being in a favourable condition.

Our river catchments and waterways including the Rivers Axe, Sheppey, Brue in the north and Cary, Yeo, Tone and Parrett to the south are the lifeblood of our districts' habitats. Yet in 2019, none were in a good condition for nature in Sedgemoor. Similarly, in Somerset West and Taunton, catchments that had been previously rated as good for wildlife before 2013 have deteriorated in condition and more are categorised as moderate or poor for nature according to Environment Agency's classification hierarchy. The plight of our rivers is influenced by human activity, particularly from farming and sewage disposal. The Somerset Levels and Moors (SLMs) is a designated RAMSAR wetland landscape recognised for its internationally important waterfowl, and resident insects, yet it is experiencing high levels of phosphate enrichment which threatens the nutrient balance of its waterways and the wildlife that depend on it.

The loss of habitats and species can have a wider impact affecting our communities and economy. Each species has an ecological role to play within a functioning ecosystem and their decline can negatively influence the ecosystem services that they provide. Insects, for example, are responsible for pollination, which is essential for agricultural and horticultural production, and for sustaining wildflowers. If pollinating insects went into serious decline the health of England's £100 billion food industry would be seriously damaged.<sup>4</sup> Our natural world is essential for us to prosper and thrive and we must take action to protect and enhance it.

The crises of biodiversity loss, ecosystem degradation, and climate change are inter-connected; we cannot have a thriving natural world without a healthy climate. Our environment can play a key role in enabling us to adapt to changes that we are already starting to experience and mitigating the effects of climate change through nature-based solutions. E.g. The Somerset Levels and Moors are one of our most important natural capital, both as a habitat and carbon sink. In an optimal condition, they could store millions of tonnes of carbon, yet it is estimated they emit 300,000 tCO<sub>2</sub>e/yr<sup>5</sup> as a result of peat extraction.

Climate change and biodiversity loss are not considered in isolation from each other, however both Councils recognise the need for a dedicated Ecological Vision and Action Plan (EEVAP). We will build on Somerset's Climate Emergency Strategy, SWTC's Carbon Neutrality and Climate Resilience (CNCR) Action Plan and SDC's Climate Emergency Action Plan which have already identified over 150 actions to support biodiversity enhancement and recovery.

### Time for action

Nature has moved up the international, national and local political agenda. 2021's COP26<sup>6</sup> focussed more on nature than ever before, calling all governments to endorse the *Leaders' Pledge for Nature*. Now over 90 world leaders are committed to reversing biodiversity loss by 2030 for sustainable development. In addition, the Environment Act achieved Royal Assent in November 2021. This will

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<sup>4</sup> Defra, The National Pollinator Strategy: For bees and other pollinators in England Nov 2014

<sup>5</sup> Somerset Wildlife Trust Position Statement, Peat Extraction Feb 2022

<sup>6</sup> The 26<sup>th</sup> United Nations Climate Change Conference held in 2021.

lead to the setting of national targets, plans and policies for improving the natural environment through increasing biodiversity, halting species decline by 2030, restoring habitats, improving air and water quality, and transitioning to a circular economy through better resource efficiency and waste reduction.

Of particular importance will be the requirement for a minimum of 10% biodiversity net gain (BNG) from all new developments (from 2023) and the delivery of the National Nature Recovery Network (NRN) through Local Nature Recovery Strategies which will be delivered in partnership with local government, NGOs, the private sector and the public.

In addition, improvement to water and air quality will over time reduce the risk of pollution and nutrient enrichment. These legally binding commitments provide the statutory framework through which we can help nature recover across our two districts and beyond.

With the charge of political momentum, we have an opportunity to lead change at a local level, setting an example, encouraging and influencing others. This vision and the accompanying action plan will balance the urgency for carbon neutrality and resilience with the need to protect and build wildlife corridors, support natural processes and improve the condition of habitats to enable nature to recover.

We can support our natural environment by:

- Promoting and implementing sustainable land and woodland management,
- Protecting habitats and avoiding land use change that degrades the landscape and its inhabitants,
- Creating connectivity and wildlife corridors to improve species resilience,
- Improving soil, air and water quality,
- Maintaining genetic diversity,
- Reducing invasive species, reducing pollution e.g. plastics, chemicals, excess nutrients and hazardous waste,
- Developing climate resilience in habitats,
- Addressing climate adaptation especially via nature based solutions

## Vision Statement

**Our vision is a district where the needs of wildlife, people, and our local economies are integrated in a way that enables nature and communities to thrive now and in the future.**

## Our Ambitions

There are four pillars through which we will achieve ecological recovery. These focus on wildlife and habitat conservation; managing our own assets in a way that supports wildlife, through our decision making and policies, and through our communities. All our ambitions are underpinned by the need to collaborate with partners at a local, regional and national level.

### 1) Wildlife

***Wildlife flourishes across our districts' designated sites, and wider ecological networks***

To give wildlife the best chance of thriving, the habitats on which they depend need to be in a favourable condition. Our designated sites, such as LNRs and SSSIs, play a key role, along with

wildlife and geological sites, and wildlife corridors such as rivers, roads and urban centres. These will be managed in a way that both protects existing wildlife populations from further deterioration and enhances conditions to help increase the abundance of species that are in decline. Key species including those that are both on the IUCN's Red List of threatened species<sup>7</sup> and are County Notable such as the Hazel Dormouse along with other species will be monitored as indicators of habitat condition. Working with partners will be key in delivering this ambition, particularly through the Somerset Local Nature Partnership (SLNP) – a collaboration of over 20 organisations working together to deliver the statutory Local Nature Recovery Strategy and the NRN.

## **2) Assets and open spaces**

***Our open spaces and buildings are maintained and enhanced to enable wildlife to thrive***

We own and manage a variety of open spaces and properties across the districts and there are many ways in which these can contribute to nature recovery, for example, through pollinator friendly grassland management practices. When carried out appropriately these approaches offer positive ways to support wildlife whilst still delivering other functions such as recreational use.

## **3) Our values**

***We value the natural world and ecosystem services it provides, informing our decision making***

As a Council we appreciate nature for its intrinsic value and for the ecosystem services that it provides, helping to protect against the effects of climate change. We recognise the role it plays in our sense of place and cultural heritage; in providing us with food, in regulating natural processes such as water and air purification and how all these support our local economy. Our policies and procedures reflect this, empowering our staff to make decisions and deliver services that minimise ecological impact both locally and globally to go beyond our statutory obligations to protect nature.

## **4) People and Nature**

***Citizens engage with the natural environment through our well managed, accessible open spaces and through their informed lifestyle choices***

Whilst policies drive the platform for change, ecological protection and improvements can only be implemented at a localised, grassroots level. The more citizens engage and value nature, the more they will take steps to look after it too. Often it is our open spaces that provide the opportunity for people to connect and take action for nature. Equally citizens can make informed choices in the home, whether in the garden or through their purchasing behaviours. We will work with partners to support and inform citizens on how they can get involved and be part of the solution.

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<sup>7</sup> The International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List of Threatened Species is the global standard for assessing the risk of extinction that individual species of animal, fungus, and plant face. It is a critical indicator of the health of the world's biodiversity. Currently, there are more than 142,500 species on the IUCN Red List, with more than 40,000 species threatened with extinction. <https://www.iucnredlist.org/>

## Targets

Targets to be delivered by 2030							
Wildlife		Assets & open spaces		Our values / Influencing		People and nature	
1a	Contribute and support 30% of Somerset being managed positively for nature.	2a	Open spaces are well managed to support wildlife either directly by the Council or through the community groups with the support of the Council.	3a	The environmental and ecological well-being of our district is integrated into all policy decisions made by the Council.	4a	1 in 4 citizens take action for wildlife (aligned with Somerset Wildlife Trust's Team Wilder campaign)
1b	Large scale tree planting and other nature recovery projects across the district and wider area are delivered with partners	2b	All grassland areas are managed in accordance with best practice grassland management to support wildlife where appropriate.	3b	Procurement policies enable the purchase of products and services that support ecological protection and improvement at a local, national and international level.	4b	All pupils complete one term of environmental education by the time they leave primary school.
1c	Habitats across the district including the Councils' designated sites and wildlife and geological sites are in a favourable condition.	2c	The use of chemicals is minimised, and alternatives are used where possible.	3c	All planning decisions consider ecological footprint of all new developments and contribute to a minimum of 10% biodiversity net gain.	4c	All publicly owned open spaces have a community group, good interpretation and signage and are accessible to the public.
1d	Our green and blue infrastructure connect to the wider environment and contribute to Somerset's Nature Recovery Network.	2d	All plants are grown or sourced in peat free growing medium and contribute to climate change resilience and nature recovery.	3d	We collaborate with others and lobby government to ensure policies protect our wildlife and natural environment.	4d	Businesses play their role in supporting wildlife recovery.

1e	Wildlife flourish in our district. In particular, Red List and County notable species (specifically Hazel dormouse, lapwing and Grizzled skipper) thrive in our district and wider area.			3e	Our staff understand the importance that nature plays and have the skills and knowledge to consider it in their decisions making and implementation of their roles.		
				3f	We monitor and communicate our progress towards nature recovery.		

## Mission

We will achieve our ambitions and targets through four overarching activities:

1. Embed nature recovery throughout all our own work within SWTC/SDC
2. Work with partners including businesses to deliver ecological recovery and protection
3. Enable citizens to connect and take action for nature
4. Measure and communicate progress over time

### Embed nature recovery throughout all our own work within SWTC/SDC

AT SWTC/SDC we aim to reverse the degradation of our habitats and loss of biodiversity. We will embed nature in all our decision making and policies to deliver actions that protect and enhance it and build its resilience against climate change. This includes actions within our towns and villages through planning and through the management and maintenance of Council owned assets.

We will:

- Build the business case for nature protection and enhancement by using appropriate methods based on natural capital and ecosystem services to inform all our decision making.
- Develop and implement planning policies to support ecological protection and improvement including +10% biodiversity net gain (BNG) for all new developments as soon as is reasonably possible;
- Develop and Implement a Green Procurement strategy which takes into account ecological impact for all purchases and enables staff to make sustainable choices.
- Embed ecological protection and recovery within all green and blue infrastructure plans including Taunton Garden Town and river and coastal flood mitigation projects to contribute towards the delivery of the NRN;

- Manage our outdoor spaces in a way that supports wildlife enhancement alongside public accessibility and carbon sequestration;
- Prioritise management and maintenance of our LNRs and wildlife sites to create exemplar sites;
- Develop and implement a grassland strategy to support pollinators and invertebrates;
- Use the soon to be created Somerset tree strategy to plant and maintain the right trees in the right place;
- Implement nature-based solutions to support climate mitigation and adaptation including flood and coastal flood management;
- Stop the use of peat-based composts and work with others to restore peatlands, halt peat extraction and reduce emissions.
- Report on ecological implications of all projects, alongside climate and sustainability to Committee and Council.

### Work with partners including businesses to deliver ecological enhancement and protection

At the heart of our efforts is our collaboration with partners across the region. In particular, we will work with the SLNP to develop the LNRS and deliver the NRN, and align with initiatives such as Somerset Wildlife Trust's Wilder Somerset 2030 plan and Exmoor's National Park's Nature Recovery Vision to deliver shared ambitions.

We will:

- Work with partners through the Local Nature Partnership to develop and deliver a Local Nature Recovery Strategy
- Contribute towards State of Nature and NRN for Somerset by identifying opportunities to connect existing Council land assets to create wildlife corridors, sequestration/stores and improve the landscape's resilience and adaptation to climate change;
- Support efforts to secure land that will contribute to NRN and landscape scale projects.
- Work with Somerset Wildlife Trust, Exmoor National Park, the Mendip Hills, Quantock Hills and Blackdowns Hills AONBs, and other Councils across Somerset in a co-ordinated approach to deliver shared goals such as a Peat Action Plan (2021) and Tree Strategy (to be published 2022), the Pollinator Action Plan (2019), and protocols around biosecurity and invasive species control;
- Work with partners to deliver good water and soil quality and healthy aquatic and terrestrial habitats;
- Work with partners to deliver actions which address the issues of nitrate and phosphate loading within the two districts;
- Work with Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership and support businesses to help deliver nature recovery through their operations and supply chains;
- Promote ways to refuse, reduce, reuse and recycle and support initiatives to reduce single use plastics and fly tipping;
- Lobby government to support ecological enhancement and protection.

### Enable citizens to connect and take action for nature

Our communities play a vital role in making the big step change needed to tackle the EE and there are many actions individuals and groups can take at home and within their locality. From

volunteering their time to restore sites for wildlife to making lifestyle choices that support greener living or campaigning for systemic change. The pandemic highlighted how nature has a positive impact on our health, well-being and our sense of place. We will work with community groups to enable people to connect with nature and help them take an active role in engaging with and protecting it. We will also work with our partners to drive behaviour change in our homes, schools, and businesses.

We will:

- Create opportunities to connect the community e.g. ('Friends of' groups/mental health groups/behaviour change/schools/private gardens/businesses) with nature;
- Use our open spaces, wildlife sites and local nature reserves as opportunities to communicate to citizens about the importance of the natural world;
- Develop communications linked with climate change to inform householders of actions taken by the Councils and partners;
- Work with partners to deliver a behaviour change campaign to support householders to make informed lifestyle choices;
- Support campaigns that lobby government to support nature recovery.

#### Governance: Funding, monitoring, and reporting progress over time.

Monitoring progress towards nature recovery is vital in determining the efficacy of the actions taken to deliver it and enables SWTC/SDC to communicate progress and successes to our stakeholders. The Environment Act requires local authorities to produce a Biodiversity Report every five years, describing the actions taken and their impact, including action taken on BNG. Monitoring helps to develop a continuous improvement culture, facilitating a performance review, risk management and change process. We will set targets that will align with local, national, and international ambitions and we will develop KPIs, and objectives. We will work with partners to develop baseline data and agree a methodology so that we have consistency across the county which will enable smooth transition into unitary.

We will:

- Co-ordinate and have oversight of all SDC/SWTC ecological improvement activities so that they can be reviewed and continually improved;
- Monitor our progress against targets and ambitions and intervene where appropriate to ensure we keep on track;
- Work with new and established community groups to deliver best practice monitoring over time;
- Develop a fundraising strategy to deliver actions where there are insufficient funds and/or resources.

We will take action in broadly four ways:

**Delivering** – those actions where the Council can directly deliver a defined outcome;

**Enabling** – those actions where the Council's role is to facilitate delivery of defined outcomes, for instance, funding or officer time;

**Supporting** – those actions where the Council can support or encourage the delivery of a defined outcome, namely working with groups or organisations;

**Lobbying** – those actions where the Council’s primary role is to promote and push for change, e.g., a change to policy, legislation or funding.

## Unitary

Working in partnership, SDC and SWTC are currently joint owners of the EEVAP and responsible for its delivery. As we move into unitary in 2023, this work will continue to be delivered by the new Council. The framework by which this work has been created sets a precedent through which ecological recovery can be delivered and progress monitored by the rest of the county and which can be adapted in accordance with localised needs.

## Definitions

**Ecological Emergency** - organisms, the habitats in which they live are in severe decline and are threatened to the point where they are no longer self-sustaining.

**Ecology** – the study of the interactions between organisms and their environment

**Ecosystem** - the complex interaction of a community of organisms and its environment functioning as an ecological unit

**Ecosystem Services** - the benefits provided by ecosystems that contribute to making human life both possible and worth living. They include:

- Products or provision services e.g. food and raw materials,
- Regulating services e.g. forested ecosystems provide carbon sequestration and climate regulation,
- Supporting services e.g. nutrient cycling,
- Cultural services e.g. recreation, health and wellbeing.

**Habitat** - a place where an organism lives in which all the environmental conditions enable an organism to survive. For an animal, that means everything it needs to find and gather food, select a mate, and successfully reproduce. For a plant, a good habitat must provide the right combination of light, air, water, and soil.

**Nature** - the physical world, its processes and everything in it (such as flora, fauna, mountains, oceans etc.) that is not made by humans.

**Natural Capital** - natural assets in their role of providing natural resource inputs and environmental services for economic production. They comprise three principal categories: natural resource stocks, land and ecosystems.

**tCO<sub>2</sub>equiv** - Tonnes of Carbon Dioxide Equivalent per year used to compare emissions from various greenhouse gases on the basis of their global warming potential.

**Wildlife** – all organisms (fauna and flora) that live or grow wild in an area.