

Agenda item 6

For decision - Declaration of Ecological Emergency

Author: Nikki Brain, Resilience Officer

Summary

The recommendation is that Frome Town Council declares an Ecological Emergency alongside the existing Climate Emergency declaration and, recognising the strong links between the two issues, addresses the two together in a Climate and Ecological Emergency Strategy. This paper sets out the implications of declaring an Ecological Emergency for FTC's forward work programme and resources.

Why declare an Ecological Emergency?

We are a nation of nature lovers and access to wild spaces is critical to people's health and wellbeing, but beyond that biodiversity is also the steward of our life support systems. Without pollinators, healthy soil, and flourishing ecosystems the very fundamental systems humans rely on for survival are at threat of collapse.

The 2019 State of Nature report showed that from a UK perspective:

- 41% of all UK's species have declined since the 70s (hedgehogs have declined by 95%)
- 26% of the UK's mammals are at a very real risk of becoming extinct
- A third of the wild bees and hoverfly species have sustained losses, likely due to pesticides, habitat loss and climate change
- 97% of the UK's wildflower meadows have been lost in the last century

Frome Town Council was one of the first Councils to declare a Climate Emergency (CE), before other Councils began to include an Ecological Emergency alongside their CE declarations. This does not mean that FTC is not already doing a lot to support biodiversity and ecology in our parks and open spaces. Including a declaration or acknowledgement of the Ecological Emergency in our revised Strategy at the last Council meeting would bring us in line with other Local Authorities and give us an opportunity to ensure we are doing all we can to protect and enhance biodiversity in our town.

Potential barriers and conflicts of interest

It is also important to consider that there might be challenges associated with declaring an Ecological Emergency in the context of how this is then weighted against other local priorities and commitments. To give three examples:

- Land use in the context of both commercial developments providing employment and housing developments, in particular, affordable housing sites, are likely to be on existing green spaces given that brownfield sites and affordable land will have been snapped up by developers.

- Infrastructure developments such as widening roads for cycle lanes could mean removal of grass verges and hedges
- Felling of trees on health & safety grounds on our own land

Biodiversity Net Gain and planning

The Environment Bill when passed into law will require all developments receiving planning permission to achieve a 10% “biodiversity net gain” against a baseline survey. Developers will be able to achieve this onsite, offsite or by purchasing credits through an offsetting mechanism. Onsite measures could include green corridors, mixed woodland, parkland, meadows, bramble, or hazel scrub or forming local nature reserves. FTC should work with the community to identify areas suitable for onsite and offsite biodiversity projects, so that Frome sees the benefit rather than developers choosing to offset with credits.

FTC has developed draft Climate Emergency Planning Guidance (to be considered later on this meeting’s agenda) that will give a clear message to developers of the standards we expect to see for new development in Frome, commensurate to the climate and ecological realities we are facing.

What an Ecological Emergency strategy might look like

- Managing more of our land with wildlife and ecology in mind, expanding our Wild about Frome project to increase biodiversity and managing our land with less interventions, potentially, with measurable targets and standards for biodiversity increase
- More tree and hedgerow planting as part of Wild about Trees project, potentially with measurable targets and with a commitment to native tree planting in all but exceptional circumstances with clear communication around decision
- More diverse and bee-friendly planting in our parks and green spaces, with more flowers and flowering shrubs planted generally and more flowers and shrubs in newly created formal beds
- Pollinators in all our town centre planters
- Creating a greater variety of habitats to support native wildlife
- More information about planting choices on our website and on signage in our parks and green spaces e.g. This new bed is planted with xxx because it’s great for bees
- More of our land identified for local food production and community growing, supporting local food production, organic and regenerative practices and encouraging more people to buy local food, reducing global ecological footprint
- Green and blue corridors to join places and spaces
- Increased tree canopy coverage, potentially with measurable targets
- Reduced use of chemicals (or sourcing products that are less impactful on climate & ecology)
- Reduced use of non-renewable energy (e.g., electric tools like strimmers and chainsaws)
- A written commitment to deadwood and dying wood as part of our Tree Policy
- More grassed areas cut by scythes (rather than strimmers and mowers)
- Include ecological impact implications alongside those for climate and sustainability in committee and council reports – to inform decision making

Projects

- Community plant and wildlife surveys in our spaces – beginning with a baseline survey led by an organisation with relevant expertise e.g., Somerset Wildlife Trust
- Wildlife pond in Rodden Meadow
- Developing guidance and practical workshops for managing biodiversity in peoples' homes and gardens, linking with initiatives like the Future Shed
- Developing local food web to increase local production, buy local campaign and support organic and regenerative practices

Engagement

There are lots of groups and individuals in Frome with expertise in ecology and conservation. This expertise should be brought in, through a working group or similar, to develop our Ecological Emergency strategy.

FTC will need to engage with Mendip District Council on management of public land including school and church grounds, verges, and pocket parks.

Resources

Delivering this work will require additional resources including funding for projects.

Taking a different approach to managing FTC's green spaces could mean greater demands on the Ranger team; certainly, in terms of time – but also skill and knowledge.

There could be a need for a combination of the following:

- More training
- More Rangers
- A larger operational base
- New tools and equipment
- More work over weekends (to support community stewardship)

Recommendation

Declare an Ecological Emergency and, recognising the significant links between to the two issues, develop an updated Climate and Ecological Emergency Strategy.