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Foreword



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Climate change and nature loss are no longer distant threats: they are here, and they are deepening the divide in our communities. In Darlington, where some of the UK's most disadvantaged areas are found, the impacts of extreme weather, rising energy costs, and environmental damage are felt most acutely by those least able to adapt.

At the same time, our natural environment, already under pressure, is facing unprecedented threats. The UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world. This is not just an ecological crisis; it is a social and economic one too.

But there is hope. And there is opportunity.

In 2023, Darlington Borough Council brought forward its net zero target to 2040, recognising the urgency of the climate crisis. Now, we are also declaring a nature restoration emergency, acknowledging that climate and nature are inextricably linked—and must be tackled together.

While the Council directly controls less than 5% of the Borough's emissions and just 13.5 km² of land, our influence is far greater. We can lead by example, convene partnerships, and empower our residents, businesses, and young people to be part of the solution.

By embedding climate and nature action into everything we do, we can build resilience in our most vulnerable communities, reducing flood risk, improving air quality, and creating cooler, greener neighbourhoods. These actions will not only protect lives and livelihoods but also support a healthier, more connected society.

At the same time, we can stimulate our local economy by creating green jobs and developing skills that support a just transition. Investing in energy efficiency, sustainable transport, and nature-based solutions will unlock long-term savings and reduce future costs to public services. These are not just environmental investments—they are economic ones that align with our aspirations for financial growth and prosperity.

We are committed to engaging young people in shaping the future they will inherit, partnering with businesses and academic institutions to drive innovation, and supporting residents with the information and tools they need to make sustainable choices.

This is about more than targets. It's about securing a better future for our children and grandchildren—one that is fairer, greener, and more prosperous for all. Together, we can make Darlington a beacon of resilience and regeneration.

Introduction

1. The 2023 report from the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change concluded that there is a rapidly closing window of opportunity to secure a liveable and sustainable future for everyone.
2. Human activity has led to approximately 1.5°C of global warming since the Industrial Revolution, which is causing damaging impacts on lives, infrastructure and ecosystems that are apparent today. As a result, we need to both rapidly reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to the impacts of climate change.
3. The predicted impacts of climate change in Darlington include:
 - a. more frequent and intense flooding,
 - b. drought,
 - c. episodes of extreme heat and stormier conditions.
4. These impacts are expected to lead to:
 - a. an increase in heat-related deaths, particularly amongst the elderly,
 - b. damage to essential infrastructure,
 - c. reduced availability of drinking water,
 - d. increased cost and scarcity of food,
 - e. disruption to supply chains and service provision, and
 - f. impacts on habitats from rising temperature, weather events and from invasive species.
5. Similarly, since the Industrial Revolution, the UK has lost half of all animals, plants and birds because of agriculture, habitat depletion and climate change.
6. Nature provides vital services to us: the air we breathe, the food we eat, and the water we drink. Nature provides cooling, carbon storage, energy, medicines, and cultural and recreational experiences.
7. Consequently, the Council has declared a nature restoration emergency alongside its existing climate emergency. The two sit alongside each other and cross-over in multiple respects.
8. We therefore have a combined strategy but will have separate action plans. These action plans will have clear indication where an action meets both climate and nature targets.
9. The Council has been on a mission to reduce its emissions since 2010. The actions we have taken so far have successfully reduced the Council's carbon emissions by around 50% (as of 2024/25). Despite these successes, we understand that we need to lead by example and do more, faster.
10. Our more ambitious targets, however, do come with potential pressure on our finances, and we must be mindful of that. At the same time, we must recognise that preventative action will cost less than reactive action in the future.
11. This strategy focuses on our plans to tackle both the climate change emergency and the nature restoration emergency. It includes the principles we have put in place to support the actions we need to take.

12. Alongside the work we are doing internally, we must use our position as a leader in the Borough to help everyone join us on the journey to become a resilient Darlington. Our most vulnerable residents are at greatest risk; climate change has the most impact on those least able to do anything about it. Nature is one of the mechanisms that can help reduce risk. For example, trees and hedgerows decrease risk of flooding, while a natural canopy can reduce the risk of overheating. Furthermore, access to nature is a well-documented path to improved wellbeing. Therefore, our approach will be centred around creating a future that is healthier and safer for *all*.
13. The strategy will be reviewed regularly so that we can embrace improvements in technology and any changes in government policy.

Managing the Council's own emissions

Principles for action

14. There are five core principles which underpin the climate actions within this strategy and are critical to our successful delivery of our goal of reducing emissions and being more resilient. These principles should be considered as an overarching hierarchy for action, and will set the direction for future work, and determine which actions are brought forward first.
15. The actions we choose to take will also see co-benefits, such as cleaner air and improved health and wellbeing. We must ensure that we identify and account for these additional gains, as well as ensuring that whatever actions we take are fair and equitable for all residents.
 - a. Reduce our overall energy consumption
 - i. Increase the efficiency of our estate.
 - ii. Proactively manage our buildings to reduce energy demand.
 - iii. Train staff to be carbon literate so they change their behaviours.
 - b. Reduce our demand for fossil fuel-based energy.
 - i. Move away from gas heating.
 - ii. Increase on site renewables.
 - iii. Support renewables with batteries.
 - c. Contribute to a greener grid
 - i. Increase off-site renewables.
 - d. Sequester carbon
 - i. Offsetting only residual emissions after all efforts to reduce are taken.
 - e. Adaptation
 - i. Ensure the Council adapts its services to climate change.
 - ii. Signpost businesses to information on how they can adapt.
 - iii. Support residents in simple changes they can make.

Managing the Council's nature restoration emergency

Principles for action

16. There are five key principles which underpin the nature actions within this strategy which will ensure an improvement in the natural environment in Darlington and see an increase in species recovery. Professor Sir John Lawton identified the need for connectivity and diversity in our natural environment in 2010¹ and that still holds true today.
- a. Improve the connectivity of habitats through the creation and/or enhancement of wildlife corridors and stepping-stones.
 - i. Identify and map key areas where green corridors can be either enhanced or created.
 - ii. Where a continuous corridor is not possible, create stepping-stones for wildlife.
 - iii. Update Darlington's Green Infrastructure Strategy 2013 – 2026 to reflect the current state of Darlington and the need to enhance and create wildlife corridors.
 - b. Increase the resilience of natural environments
 - i. Create and/or enhance wildlife corridors and stepping-stones.
 - ii. Create a range of diverse habitats.
 - iii. Increase the size and quality of habitats.
 - c. Halt and reverse biodiversity decline
 - i. Deliver targets in Darlington Borough Council's [Tree and Woodland Strategy](#).
 - ii. Create or restore alternative carbon sinks, such as wildflower meadows, grassland, and freshwater bodies and associated habitats.
 - d. Ensure all developments in Darlington are designed for nature and climate
 - i. Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) are the preferred approach to managing surface water runoff from hard surfaces.
 - ii. Encourage the installation of wildlife features, such as swift, hedgehog and bee bricks, nest boxes and hedgehog highways within the landscaping plans.
 - e. Review the environmental management practices within the council's owned land.

Methodology

17. Our climate change target concentrates on those emissions we can measure and have direct control over.
18. The carbon footprint has been built from numerous data sources, with a specified calculation methodology applied to each.
19. Our nature restoration emergency will use data from the Tees Valley Nature Partnerships Natural Capital Report for our baseline.

Our target

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https://www.researchgate.net/publication/268279426_Making_Space_for_Nature_A_Review_of_England's_Wildlife_Sites_and_Ecological_Network

20. The Council will achieve net zero carbon emissions across our own estate by 2040.

21. The Council will set clear strategic goals for nature recovery by 2040.

Scope

22. Carbon reporting includes areas where carbon emissions are significant, where there is the ability to control and directly influence, to deliver change, and where there is robust data to demonstrate progress.

23. The nature restoration emergency will review the Council's environmental management practices.

24. Both climate change and nature restoration emergencies require us to use our position as a leader in Darlington to influence wider action and activity.

Out of scope

25. Emissions from the following sources are currently excluded from carbon reporting due to lack of data:

- a. Energy use in Council housing where we do not retain responsibility for bill payment or management.
- b. Commuting.
- c. Disposal of waste from buildings.
- d. Business mileage using public transport.

26. The following areas are out of scope in our nature restoration plans:

- a. Private land where we have no control over management approach.
- b. Areas where we cannot control recreational activity.

Baseline

27. Our climate change baseline year is 2010/11 as that was the date of our original carbon reduction target and allows us to recognise work carried out from that date.

28. Our nature restoration baseline year is 2020, as we have used the Tees Valley Nature Partnership Natural Capital Account to establish baseline data.

Influencing externally

29. We have a leading role in the Borough, so we have a duty to work with and encourage businesses, third sector, and public sector organisations to reduce emissions, ensure they are adapted, and are taking account of the natural environment.

30. Equally, we must support our residents to do what they can to reduce their own emissions and become more resilient to the effects of climate change. Alongside this, we must encourage residents to do their part in increasing biodiversity in their own gardens and

stress the need to prevent damage while they are enjoying the wider environment.

Communication Plan

31. It is important that there are clear communications paths both internally and externally to inform, engage, and influence.
32. A communications plan will be developed with the Communications Team, using all mechanisms for engaging both with staff and councillors and engaging with businesses and residents. Two dedicated email addresses (climate@darlington.gov.uk & nature@darlington.gov.uk) have been set up.

Reporting

33. An annual report outlining the progress made against both climate and nature targets will be published on the Council's website.
34. Borough emissions are reported through our corporate targets and will be tracked against the government issued emissions inventory.

Governance

35. A strong and robust governance framework for this work is another critical success factor.
36. The scale and magnitude of the change required to deliver these targets means that overall responsibility needs to sit at the Executive Leadership Team level or above. However, a variety of key services need to own and drive forward this agenda. Lead Officers are tasked with delivering actions in their own department.

Existing Governance Arrangements

37. Within the Council, there are robust governance arrangements, both at an officer and member level. This governance structure enables oversight of both key decisions and significant actions, such as procurement and capital expenditure.
38. These existing mechanisms present an opportunity to ensure that alignment with the ambition and actions of this strategy are being realised. A Member-led Climate Change and Nature Restoration Working Group will be established to provide a regular review of activity.