

# **DRAFT Dorset National Park Team response to Dorset Council's Consultation on a draft Climate & Ecological Emergencies Strategy**

## **1. Introduction**

The Dorset National Park Team welcomes the Dorset Council's development of a draft strategy to address the Climate and Ecological Emergencies and the opportunity to comment. We welcome the Council's analytical framework and its recognition that the Council can and should examine what it can and needs to do in relation to its own direct responsibilities, to its ability and responsibility indirectly to consult with and provide leadership to others as appropriate, and to influence others and lobby for relevant policy development and actions, including by central government.

The Team provided an input to the 2019 consultation on the declaration of a climate emergency and suggested that this be extended to include the ecological emergency: <https://www.dorsetnationalpark.com/post/climate-and-environmental-emergency>. We are pleased that the ecological emergency, and the decades-long and continuing deterioration in the state of nature in Dorset, have been recognised. The Team's further input to the Council's February 2020 consultation on the Climate and Ecological Emergency is at <https://www.dorsetnationalpark.com/post/council-consultations>.

The pandemic has helped everyone to appreciate the importance of nature to health and wellbeing, and that we now need to plan for a greener, more sustainable and inclusive way forward which will ensure a thriving future for people and nature, our environment, wildlife, communities and economy.

## **2. Overview**

The draft Strategy marks an important step towards addressing the Climate and Ecological Emergencies in Dorset. However, we note that a number of organisations have suggested that the Council's target timeframes are insufficiently ambitious given the need for urgent action.

We suggest that consideration of the Ecological Emergency, as a key imperative for Dorset, needs strengthening throughout the strategy. Each theme of the proposed strategy needs to be considered from the perspective of the ecological emergency as well as the climate emergency, and the implications of any proposed climate-related actions should be examined for their potential implications for Dorset's landscape, seas, habitats and biodiversity onshore and offshore. The implications of the ecological emergency go far beyond the Natural Assets theme and proposals in the draft strategy.

Dorset's exceptional, nationally and internationally important landscapes, coast and biodiversity are not just spectacular and vital for their own sake. They are Dorset's greatest economic asset and underpin the health, success, future sustainability and survival of our economy. [See research for Dorset County Council: Dorset's Environmental Economy, 2015.] Dorset's exceptional environment, its World Heritage Coast, biodiversity and natural and cultural heritage are widely recognised as meriting National Park designation. [See the Glover Review, 2019, which recommended that Dorset be seriously evaluated for National Park status.]

The Team suggests that the "Leadership and Governance" and "Making it Happen" themes of the draft strategy recognise the important role a Dorset National Park would play, working in partnership, in helping Dorset to address effectively the climate and ecological emergencies, including by helping to develop and deliver sustainable, integrated policies for transport, housing and economic development, energy, tourism, etc. A National Park would work in close and complementary partnership with the lead councils, Dorset Council and BCP, communities, businesses including farmers and land managers, the Dorset LNP, LEP and others including the voluntary sector, and would bring additional resources and expertise to benefit all of Dorset. A Dorset National Park would help Dorset to achieve a thriving, healthy, successful and sustainable future.

### **3. An Integrated Approach is Needed**

The Dorset National Park Team consider that strategies to address the Climate and Ecological Emergencies should be developed in an integrated way. Dorset's communities, residents and visitors need a range of ecosystem services including clean air, healthy rivers and harbours, biodiversity and wildlife, flood risk mitigation, carbon capture in healthy soils and woodlands, good Dorset foods and products and access to green space for health and wellbeing. Addressing the continued degradation of Dorset's natural capital will contribute to the challenges of addressing climate change.

### **4. The Declining State of Nature**

As Dorset Council recognises in the reports which they have commissioned and published, it's easy to be complacent about Dorset's environment and wildlife. Dorset is seen as a relatively wildlife rich county. But the reality is that Dorset has for decades seen environmental degradation and serious loss of wildlife, and this continues. Britain is one of the most nature-depleted countries on earth, and Dorset's environment and natural capital have not escaped the impact of this.

The AONB Partnership does some important work. But they have acknowledged that their resources and effectiveness are limited in the face of the major challenges posed by Dorset's remarkable environment and heritage. The AONB Management Plan states that parts of the landscape are in a poor state. Many habitats are degraded. There has been heavy loss of wildlife. Some of Dorset's rivers and catchments are in a poor state, with implications for water quality and for our harbours and seas. Continuing with business as usual is surely not a credible option.

### **5. The Interactions between Climate and Nature**

The climate and ecological emergencies interact in various ways. For example, the Government's 10 Point Plan for green economic recovery [November 2020] notes the important role offshore wind farms could play in meeting the energy needs of the nation. New proposals may arise for such offshore farms which could contribute significantly to energy self-sufficiency for Dorset/BCP. Proposals for solar farms or onshore wind turbines, while they will not generate the GW of renewable energy of an offshore wind farm, may also be appropriate in some cases and for some locations. However, other locations may raise questions, perhaps because they are proposed for good agricultural land well suited for food production, or may impact in various ways on communities, landscapes and the natural environment.

We suggest that Dorset needs a framework for assessing Renewable Energy proposals, within which stakeholders can take account of and evaluate all relevant considerations, including any associated environmental and biodiversity implications. Such a framework should encompass such factors as forecasts of Dorset's energy needs, what impact energy saving measures can make on energy demand, what energy generation options might contribute to Dorset's energy needs from various sources, and the environmental implications of the various options.

### **6. The Need for Frameworks**

Renewable Energy is not the only area where an integrated framework would be appropriate. A coherent set can encompass sustainable policies for eg transport, housing, and the economy, including tourism.

These Frameworks can reinforce and be set in the context of the priorities set out in the Dorset Council's Plan 2020 – 2024:

- Economic growth
- Conserving Dorset's unique environment
- Providing suitable housing
- Building strong, healthy communities

- Improving the quality of life for everyone.

The Dorset Council Local Plan Consultation document is relevant and has some encouraging words on how the Council proposes to deliver sustainable development while protecting and enhancing Dorset's environment. In particular, it states in relation to the climate and ecological emergency:

*We will take actions to minimise the impact of climate change, including minimising flood risk, and to reduce the impact on the climate, by locating and designing developments to reduce distances travelled and minimise energy use. We will support renewable energy developments appropriate to Dorset. We will ensure that all new development incorporates ecological net gain to help deliver the aspiration to reverse the current decline in protected species and habitats.*

*The impacts of climate change can be reduced by avoiding areas at risk of flooding and building green infrastructure (including space for biodiversity) into developments.*

Dorset Council has the opportunity to go further through developing a suite of sustainable policies. An overarching strategic framework would facilitate a range of sustainable and integrated policies covering all the Council's areas of responsibility. For transport, for example, policies can encourage the use of public transport and the greater provision of cycle lanes, park and ride facilities, an increased use and renewal of bridleways and footpaths. Other policies have the potential to influence vital carbon sequestration through expanding the green infrastructure network, planting trees, and protecting trees and forests which act as important carbon sinks. Sustainable policies for housing and the siting of business parks can similarly affect both the climate and ecological emergencies. We look forward to Dorset Council's sustainability assessment report on the implications of the proposed Local Plan.

Developing and implementing effective policies and actions to address the Climate and Ecological Emergencies is a responsibility shared by us all – we are all partners with the Dorset Council and all stakeholders in Dorset's future. Through a strategic framework and sustainable and integrated policies, the Council can show leadership in addressing how Dorset intends to address climate change, enable nature to recover from decades of degradation, and promote a greener, sustainable future for our communities and all areas of Dorset's economy. An important part of such a strategy will involve helping the land management and farming community to provide the wide-ranging ecosystem services that are needed for a greener future. Less money would then be spent cleaning the public water supply, tackling poor health, dealing with flooding and drought and adapting to climate change. Farming and food security and a healthy and diverse natural environment are mutually interdependent. Without stable and functioning natural systems, farming is less secure; it needs the systems that sustain it, including healthy soils, pollinators and climatic stability.

Policies and actions to address the Climate and Ecological Emergencies must be a 'green thread' that runs through everything that the Council do and every decision made, as well as areas where it has an indirect responsibility and where it can and should exercise a wider influence.

## **7. The responsibilities of a Dorset National Park**

National Parks' statutory purposes and duties are profoundly relevant to enabling the nation to address effectively the climate and ecological emergencies, as National Parks and the government have recognised. National Parks' responsibilities are:

- to conserve and enhance the environment, wildlife and heritage of their areas,
- to promote the health and well-being of those who live, work in or visit their areas,
- and to foster the economic and social wellbeing and vitality of their communities, including a duty to respond to local housing needs.

The Government wants National Parks to work beyond their areas, partnering with communities, businesses, farmers and land managers, and the voluntary sector to bring benefits to communities and

the economy and to contribute actively to the recovery of nature and to the health and well-being of local communities. Working in partnership with lead Councils and others, National Parks bring additional resources and expertise and play a key role in helping to fulfil shared objectives in these increasingly vital areas of policy and national life.

National Parks are funded by central Government and a Dorset National Park would bring additional funding, investment and expertise to help address effectively the climate and ecological challenges Dorset faces. It would work with Dorset Council [which would continue to be the lead council for rural Dorset], communities, businesses, farmers and other stakeholders to help develop and successfully implement a suite of integrated sustainable policies eg for transport, tourism, energy, planning and development.

A NP would strengthen the 'sense of place,' help encourage all residents to be proud of and care for their environment and heritage and encourage visitors to care for, respect and enjoy the countryside, coast and heritage. Though the Dorset AONB does good work with a limited remit and on a low budget, a National Park would enable all Dorset stakeholders to do so much more - to care for and enhance our environment, wildlife and heritage, to invest in and strengthen Dorset's natural capital and vital ecosystem services, to promote the health and well-being of those who live, work in or visit the area, and to foster the economic and social wellbeing and vitality of our communities, for the benefit of all Dorset and indeed the nation.

## **8. Evidence from the South Downs National Park**

Evidence, including from Dorset's relevant comparator – the farmed, working landscape of the South Downs with its many, variously sized communities – suggests a National Park would play a key role in reversing the decline in nature, and in that process benefitting local communities, businesses and other partners. The South Downs National Park (SDNP) works in close partnership with all farmers and land managers in the area, and with the NFU and CLA, to help farmers and land managers to secure funding to improve the state of nature.

The SDNP will play an even more important role in helping farmers access the new Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) farm funding. This will be focused on the provision of public benefits such as creating, managing and restoring habitats, better connecting habitats via networks, creating and better managing woodlands, healthy soils, clean and healthy rivers, catchments and harbours, carbon capture, and restoring coastal habitats. The majority of farmers and land managers in the SDNP have been helped by the NP to work together in farmer-led clusters, increasing their ability to access existing financial support. The proposed new ELMS funding may flow particularly to those who can demonstrate landscape-scale environmental actions. Being in a cluster is one way to demonstrate the likelihood of this being achieved. The South Downs NP assists farmers in appropriate diversification and the re-purposing and conversion of redundant buildings, and also facilitates the provision of affordable homes for young families in local communities. See for example: <https://www.dorsetnationalpark.com/post/farming-and-land-management> <https://www.dorsetnationalpark.com/post/farming-case-studies>

The SDNP is leading a wide-ranging nature recovery partnership for the South East region and says: "*The SDNP and our partners are delighted that creating a healthier natural environment will bring economic benefits for the region, including reducing the financial burden on health and social care, increasing visitor spending and boosting the area's desirability as a location for business.*" The SDNP also has a £375,000 recovery fund which it is using to support communities and businesses within and beyond the National Park to implement actions which benefit the environment and communities. Dorset's environment, communities and businesses would benefit from such resources.

The SDNP's sustainable policies on transport and tourism reinforce their approach to addressing the climate and nature emergencies. Supporting the provision of rural bus services and community shops, promoting integrated transport provision and helping create more cycle ways, and improving, restoring

and creating public rights of way are examples of how additional funds accessed by the NP have been spent in partnership with councils and local communities.

The SDNP also illustrates how, in line with a NP's remit, responding proactively to local housing needs and supporting the provision of local homes, including affordable homes, helps sustain the vibrancy and economic life of local communities as well as reducing the need to travel. The design and construction of local homes helps ensure they are in keeping with their surroundings.

Dorset can benefit from the additional investment and jobs, including in the "green/blue" economy, which a National Park would attract and from the development and implementation, through partnership working, of policies promoting sustainable development, transport, tourism and energy. A Dorset National Park would work with farmers and land managers, as custodians of our landscapes and natural environment, and with their representatives, and help the sector to thrive in changing times. Helping farmers access ELMS public benefit funding, including via farmer-led farm clusters, is key to helping nature recover and enabling important and wide-ranging ecosystem services to be provided. A National Park would help stimulate a green economic regeneration and put Dorset at the forefront of seizing such opportunities in the South West.

## **9. Conclusion**

The Dorset Council is developing policies, including via its draft strategy to address the Climate and Ecological Emergencies and the draft Local Plan, which aim to deliver sustainable development while protecting and enhancing Dorset's environment. We welcome the development of these strategies.

A Dorset National Park would work in close partnership with the Dorset Council (which would continue to be the lead local authority for rural Dorset), and with communities, businesses, farmers and others to build on these plans, to support the recovery of nature, benefit all Dorset's communities and economy, and help address effectively the challenges posed by the climate and ecological emergencies. A National Park would help to develop and deliver sustainable, coherent policies for transport, housing and economic development, energy, tourism etc, and bring additional resources and expertise to support this work.

A Dorset National Park offers the opportunity for a thriving, greener future. The Government has committed to establish new National Parks in its 10 Point Plan for a green recovery. Dorset is widely seen as the outstanding candidate to be England's next National Park. We urge everyone, including the Dorset Council, to be on the front foot in securing as soon as possible a Dorset National Park that will work in partnership to benefit all of Dorset. A step change is needed in how we all address the climate and ecological emergencies. A Dorset National Park should be part of that joint and shared endeavour.

Addressing the climate and ecological emergencies is a global challenge. It requires action at an international, national, county and community level and by everyone. Governments can set a lead and so can the Dorset Council. But unless we all respond and work together with shared aims, the emergencies will not be tackled. Time is not on our side and business as usual is not an option.

*Dorset National Park Team, December 2020. [www.dorsetnationalpark.com](http://www.dorsetnationalpark.com)*