

Queens Speech 2021

A key theme of the Queens Speech is 'A Bright Future for the Next Generation'. A bright future means a nature-rich future.

Research published this week by Mental Health Foundation shows that 70% of UK adults state that being close to thriving nature boosts their happiness.¹ 45% of adults cited nature as a key resource that helped them through the Covid-19 pandemic. Put simply, an abundance of wild places makes people feel better and brighter.

We also know from the Dasgupta Review of the Economics of Biodiversity that "we have degraded the biosphere to the point where the demands we make of its goods and services far exceed its ability to meet them on a sustainable basis". So, investing in nature is essential for a bright economic future. And, of course, we must invest in nature for its own sake.

With 15% of species at risk of extinction in the UK, a bright future will need urgent action to halt biodiversity loss by 2030. Three Bills in the Queens Speech, if amended, could support a recovery of nature that will lead to an abundance of wild places and unlock significant benefits for people, nature, and climate.

The Environment Bill

The Environment Bill lays the foundations for a new approach to reverse nature's decline. This includes a Nature Recovery Network, a framework for legally binding environmental targets and a new domestic environmental governance system.

The Environment Bill has been plagued by delays, being first introduced in October 2019 - this is the Bill's third Queens Speech. We welcome the Government's commitment to making sure that the Bill receives Royal Assent by COP26. This commitment must be met. The climate crisis cannot be solved without nature's recovery and the failure of the COP host to put in place long-promised laws for nature recovery would undermine efforts to agree international high-ambition action on climate.

The content of the Environment Bill also needs to be enhanced to halt nature's decline and provide clear UK leadership on nature recovery ahead of COP. The Bill must be amended to include:

- A State of Nature target to halt the decline of biodiversity by 2030 at the latest. Along with binding milestones to tackle air, water and waste pollution, this "net zero for nature" is critical to guide action and investment and to give credence to the Government's international commitments in the Leaders' Pledge for Nature.²
- A robust Office for Environmental Protection, which is genuinely independent and equipped with the resources and powers to hold government and public authorities to account.
- Strengthened environmental principles to put the environment at the heart of policy making.

¹ https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/MHAW21_NATURE%20REPORT_ENG_web.pdf

² <https://www.wcl.org.uk/state-of-nature-campaign.asp>

The Planning Bill

Planning reform focused on the speed and quantity of development poses a risk to nature's recovery.

The core proposal of the Planning White Paper, to divide the country up into 'growth', 'renewal' and 'protection' zones for planning purposes, could weaken environmental protections. Permission in principle for new development in the growth zone would allocate land for development upfront and limit Local Planning Authorities' discretion to refuse individual projects. The protection zone offers no additional environmental protection, being comprised of greenbelt, AONB and other designated land, where decisions will continue to be made on a case-by-case basis. In a nutshell, if the Planning Bill takes forward the White Paper's plans, in the growth zone it will be easier to build over nature habitats, in the protection zone, nature habitats will have the same (insufficient) protections they have now.

Significant amendment is required to re-orientate the planning system to become a net contributor to nature's recovery. Link is calling³ for the following three priorities to be built into the Bill:

- The creation of a new planning designation to protect land for nature's recovery, to apply across all zones. This designation, which could take the form of a wild belt as proposed by the Wildlife Trusts⁴, would protect land to improve it for wild species, nurturing a new generation of nature-rich sites and growing the Nature Recovery Network.
- Strengthening protections for sites already designated for nature. Current protections are far from watertight, with local wildlife sites regularly being built over and nationally protected sites like AONBs having their utility for nature comprised by inappropriate development. Only by strengthening our existing designations can we protect these sites for future generations.
- Increasing developer contributions to nature's recovery. Development inflicts a huge cost on nature, and a commensurate restitution is required. The Biodiversity Net Gain proposals in the Environment Bill are a start, but developers should have to go beyond this, funding nature positive developments and creating accessible nature-rich sites for people to enjoy.

Amendments to strengthen protections for our existing network of wild spaces, and to deliver new protections and funding to add new sites to this network at a significant scale, will ensure that the Planning Bill creates great places for people to live *and* contributes towards nature's recovery.

Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill

We welcome the introduction of the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill to meet the strong public demand⁵ for animal sentience to be recognised in UK law. The Bill introduced to the Lords on 13.05.21 represents the third attempt to do this, and we particularly welcome a significant lesson learnt from earlier attempts – the Bill as proposed covers all parts of UK Government policy, with no department exempt from the recognition of animal sentience. Link's full response to the Bill can be read [here](#).

³ https://www.wcl.org.uk/docs/assets/uploads/The_Planning_Bill_Link_priorities_to_recover_nature_1.pdf

⁴ <https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/Wildbelt%20briefing%20September%202020.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.wcl.org.uk/better-deal-for-animals.asp>

To deliver the required protections for companion, farm and wild animals, the Bill should:

- Place sentience duties directly on Ministers. The Bill places two duties on Ministers – to establish and maintain an Animal Sentience Committee (ASC), and to lay a response in Parliament in response to ASC reports. This effectively outsources the bulk of animal sentience responsibilities to the ASC, a body that can make recommendations to decision makers but has no decision-making powers itself. We propose the addition of an additional duty for the Defra SoS to create and maintain a cross-Whitehall Animal Health and Welfare (AHAW) Strategy, tying Ministers more closely into animal sentience responsibilities.
- Create a robust Animal Sentience Committee. The ASC has the potential to be a powerful and effective body, provided it is sufficiently empowered undertake its work. The Bill, and accompanying guidance, should make it clear that ASC will be independent (with a full-time chair), diverse (including an ethicist and lay members), transparent (publishing its advice to Government in full) and is given the resources it needs to do its job well.
- Recognise cephalopods & decapod crustaceans as sentient animals. The Bill defines “animal” as any vertebrate other than homo sapiens. There is ample evidence to show that cephalopods & decapod crustaceans invertebrates are sentient, and indeed this definition expansion was agreed by the Scottish Animal Welfare Commission earlier this year. We urge Defra to expedite publication of the evidence review it commissioned in 2020, to ensure that these animals can be added to the Bill during its passage through Parliament.

Key recommendations

Link recommends that three bills announced in the Queen’s Speech be strengthened in order to recover nature, unlocking significant benefits for people, nature and climate and delivering a bright future.

Recommended Environment Bill amendments:

- Include a 2030 State of Nature target to reverse biodiversity decline.
- Deliver a robust and independent Office for Environmental Protection.
- Strengthen environmental principles to put the environment at the heart of policy making.

Recommended Planning Bill amendments:

- Create a new planning designation to protect land for nature’s recovery.
- Strengthen protections for sites already designated for nature.
- Increase developer contributions to nature’s recovery.

Recommended Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill amendments:

- Place sentience duties directly on Ministers.
- Create a robust Animal Sentience Committee.
- Recognise cephalopods & decapod crustaceans as sentient animals.