

Nature 2030

Five urgent reforms to meet natural environment targets in the next Parliament

INTRODUCTION

The next Parliament will be a critical turning point for nature. In 2022, the UK signed a global deal to halt and reverse the loss of wildlife and manage 30% of the land and sea for nature by 2030. In England, that promise is backed by a legal duty to stop the decline of species by the end of the next Parliament.

These targets are not easy to meet. Right now, the rapid loss of wildlife shows no sign of slowing. Many ecosystems, from the uplands to the coastline, are in fragile condition, 15% of species are at risk of extinction in the UK, and the UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world.

No Government or political party has yet set out the ambitious economy-wide action needed to set the UK’s environment on the path to recovery. The People’s Plan for Nature found that ‘our current systems are failing to prioritise nature and halt its decline’.

We cannot afford to wait. Our environment supports our mental and physical health, the climate, our economy and the food we eat, and we neglect it at our peril. Air pollution, and lack of access to

greenspace take a terrible toll, with annual costs for the NHS that run into the billions. Businesses and farmers are put at risk by flooding and the loss of pollinators and productive soils, while receiving on average just 9 pence for every £1 of food produced. Wildlife and habitats are at risk of being lost.

Our message to all parties is that nature and climate targets are not ‘nice-to-haves’: they are essential to maintain a habitable planet, rich in wildlife, with a viable, functioning global economy. Action now is essential. Despite a cost of living crisis, global pandemic, and war in Ukraine, environmental concerns have remained a top four issue for voters since at least 2019. As the impacts of climate change and nature loss intensify it is clear the next government will increasingly be judged on their environmental record.

It is clear from the work of the People’s Assembly for Nature that public expectations remain high. Nature 2030 is a challenge to all political parties to take the action needed to face up to the urgent triple challenge of our generation: halting the decline of nature, tackling climate change, and producing healthy food sustainably without causing more harm abroad.

We propose the following urgent actions to get nature-recovery back on track:

1. A major increase in public spending for nature, doubling the nature-friendly farming budget to pay for an increase in ambitious agroecological action and large-scale nature restoration.

2. A Nature Recovery Obligation, legislating for mandatory climate and nature transition plans, and setting new duties to require private sector funding for species and habitats recovery.

3. A 30x30 rapid delivery programme, restoring protected sites and landscapes, and creating a Public Nature Estate to fulfill the promise to protect 30% of the land and sea for nature.

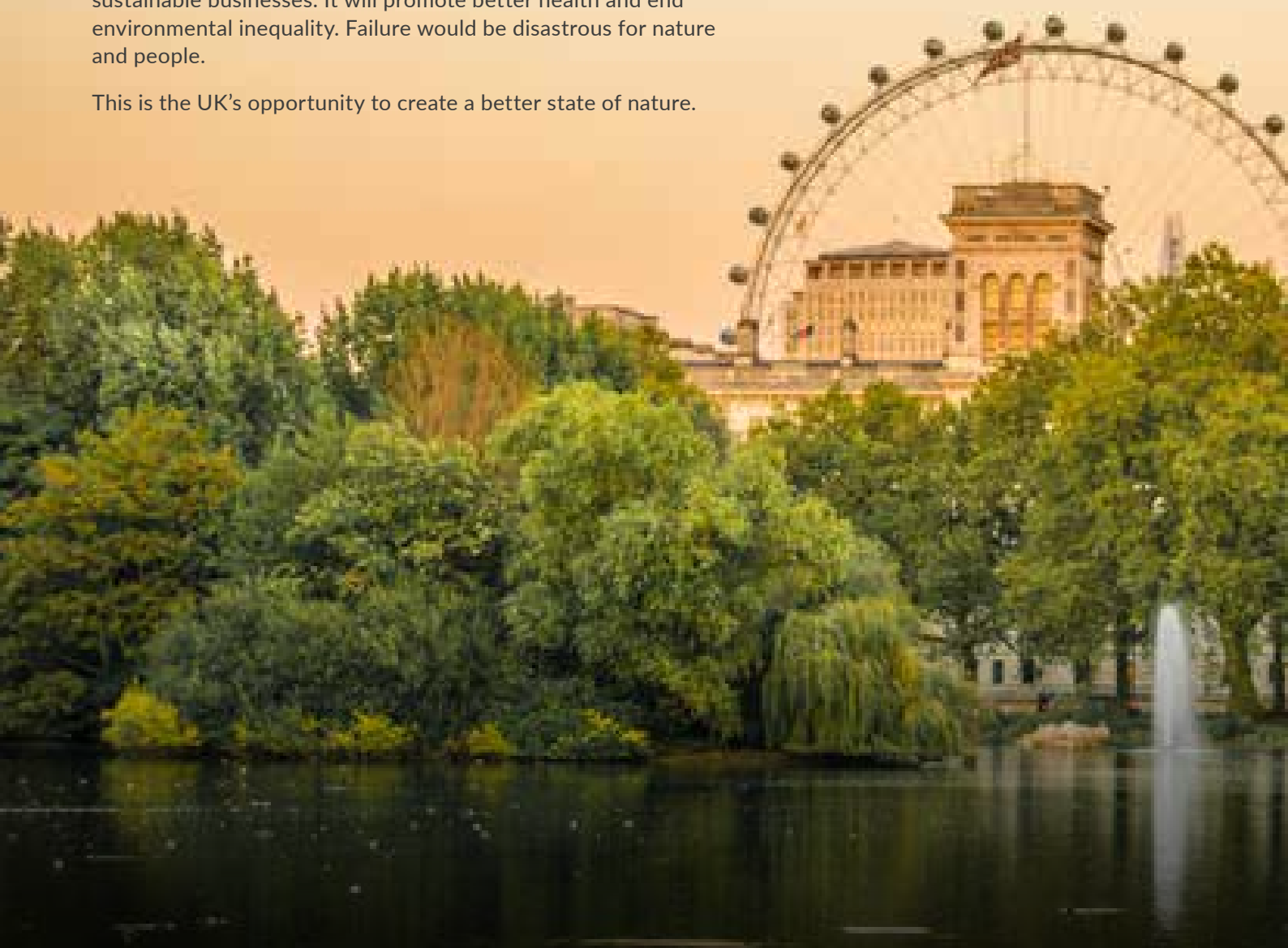
4. A National Nature Service, delivering wide scale habitat restoration and creating green jobs in urban, rural and coastal habitats and in species recovery.

5. A Right to a Healthy Environment, establishing a human right to clean air and water and access to nature.

These proposals would comprise a major uplift in public spending on nature, requirements for private corporations to pay and play their part, renewed incentives and duties for land-management, a boost in green skills, and legal recognition of everyone's right to a healthy environment. Effective delivery would need cross-Government and cross-party commitment to ensure the UK plays its part in tackling the triple challenge of climate change, nature loss, and producing healthy food sustainably. High level political alignment would need to be matched by investment in great science, advisory services, monitoring and enforcement.

Success will create a wonderful environmental legacy for the future, giving hope for species and habitats that may otherwise be lost forever. It will mean an upsurge in green jobs and more sustainable businesses. It will promote better health and end environmental inequality. Failure would be disastrous for nature and people.

This is the UK's opportunity to create a better state of nature.





A PAY RISE FOR NATURE

The policy in brief

Double the annual budget for nature-friendly farming and land management to at least £6 billion a year.

In England, this should fund a major increase in ambition in the Farming Transition, including stronger incentives for ambitious agroecological actions on farms, and a consistent budget for large-scale nature recovery projects.

The rationale

It will be impossible to halt the decline of wildlife, restore healthy ecosystems and achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions without a fundamental transformation in the way land and sea are managed.

At the moment, despite the pioneering efforts of some land managers, farming and forestry in the UK are often unsustainable. Agriculture has been the single biggest cause of biodiversity loss in recent decades.

- The number of farmland birds has fallen by more than half since 1970.
- Over a third of nutrient pollution in rivers is caused by agricultural run-off and 90% of lowland ponds in the UK were lost in the 20th century, many from the farmed landscape.
- Farming produces more than 11% of UK greenhouse gas emissions.¹ If the current trajectory is maintained, agriculture will be the third largest source of emissions in the UK by 2030.
- Only 7% of the UK's woods are in good ecological condition and woodland bird species have declined by 34% since 1970.²

The over-reliance on environmentally harmful approaches like the excess use of synthetic fertiliser and chemical pesticides is also a business liability. Rising costs combine with the risk of falling soil fertility and loss of pollinators to make intensive farmland management a poor long-term business choice.³ Reviving nature and acting on climate change—for example, through species recovery action, healthier soils, more hedges and richer grasslands—is not a problem for food production, but a precondition for it.

There is huge appetite among farmers and foresters to change—to integrate wildlife habitat with growing food and timber, to take targeted action for habitats and species, improve public access to nature, and to shift toward restoring whole landscapes. But in the context of rising prices and narrowing margins, where 40% of farms would be uneconomic without Government support, current policy has not been enough to inspire change at the scale and pace necessary for nature.⁴

There is also great public support for nature-friendly farming, as recognised by the People's Assembly for Nature, which ranked the call “to prioritise sustainable and nature-friendly farming” as one of the most urgent calls to action for Government.⁵

Focusing on farming and woodland management, with the investment necessary to support rapid, widespread change, can deliver the single biggest contribution to meeting the Government's target to halt the decline of wildlife by 2030. It will also bring substantial benefits for water and air quality, protection from natural hazards like flooding, and improve people's access to nature.



Current policy falls short

Unfortunately, while the UK Government has taken initial steps toward better land management, progress has been far too slow to deliver change at the scale and pace needed to meet nature and climate targets.

In England, DEFRA is rightly replacing old-fashioned area-based subsidies with new Environmental Land Management “payments for public goods”, which reward environmental improvements. But the early stages of the policy have been difficult. Farmers have struggled with uncertainty, and some elements of the Farming Transition have been watered down from the positive aspirations set out in the Government’s Health and Harmony proposals.⁶ For example, some of the standards set by the Sustainable Farming Incentive are environmentally unambitious, they do not drive whole-farm change, nor do they offer reward enough to make them attractive for many farmers. Early uptake of new Sustainable Farming Incentive standards has been slow and low.⁷ The Local Nature Recovery element of the scheme has been scrapped altogether and replaced with a less ambitious “Countryside Stewardship Plus” offer.⁸

The current pathway points toward positive but incremental improvement, when major change is needed swiftly to reverse biodiversity loss, and mitigate and adapt to climate change. The problem is that it is impossible to fund a truly green revolution on a shoestring. Agriculture and forestry cover over 75% of England, yet the budget to support this vast area is tiny compared with built infrastructure budgets.

Over 300,000 people are employed on farms in the UK and there are over 50,000 farm businesses in England. Achieving change will require significant investment, especially when cost increases and labour shortages are putting businesses across the farming sector at risk.⁹

In England, £2.4bn annual expenditure on farming is guaranteed until the end of the Parliament, but it is far from enough. This is especially true as inflation causes significant real terms reduction in value.



With low incomes in many parts of the agricultural sector, the promise of decent rewards for environmental investment is needed to give confidence (and attract bank support) to invest. Many rapid changes are needed:

- to support biodiversity, many farms will need to incorporate wildlife habitat into at least 10% of the farmed area as well as wider agroecological changes across whole farms. In other areas, shifts in land-use toward more nature-positive choices will be needed across whole landscapes.
- shifting production toward pulses, legumes, fruit and vegetables and away from intensive meat and dairy production can create jobs and reduce harmful impacts on climate and nature.
- new slurry stores and improved cattle sheds will be needed alongside precision technologies to phase out the reliance on pesticides, herbicides and synthetic nutrients.

Farmers need access to high-quality, independent advice and clear processes to inform their decisions in this new farming landscape.

The scale of the current budget for environmental land management is based on historical allocations under the EU Common Agriculture Policy, rather than an objective assessment of the funding needed to achieve the Government's environmental goals. Analysis by the RSPB, National Trust and the Wildlife Trusts suggests that, if every penny were spent efficiently, the budget needed to meet existing biodiversity targets is at least £4.3bn for Environmental Land Management alone across the UK.¹⁰ We know that (as is the case across all sectors of the economy) every penny will not be spent efficiently, so the real world figure will be even higher. Taking other priorities such as public access into account, as well as the urgency of action, a substantial and sustained increase is needed over current budgets.



A better future for farming

All political parties should commit to an annual budget of £6 billion to pay for a green revolution in farming and land management, supporting businesses and families through years that will be critical both for the renewal of the farming and forestry sectors, and for the achievement of the 2030 nature targets.¹¹

The lion's share of the budget will be needed for Environmental Land Management, which has potential to deliver rapid restoration of species and habitats and nature-based solutions to climate change. The budget should also include support for local economies, prioritising investment in short supply chains and healthy, seasonal high animal welfare produce. These kinds of direct-selling and short routes to market will be increasingly important, especially for those working in the uplands and other unfavourable area. Increased funding should also reward further advances in animal welfare standards. Supporting less intensive practices, such as co-financing infrastructure needed to eliminate the use of cages and crates, will enhance the UK's reputation as a leader in this areas.¹²

A dedicated £500m fund should be ringfenced from the annual budget to support access to nature, opening up new routes and access land, improving existing rights of way, and helping support more equitable access to nature for everyone.

In order to ensure a reasonable balance between widespread changes in practice, targeted ecological improvements, and changes at landscape scale, funding for Environmental Land Management should be roughly evenly split between:

1. a strengthened Sustainable Farming Incentive, supporting a shift to nature-friendly non-intensive farming practices across whole farms, with rising ambition over time;
2. targeted agri-environment contracts for actions such as species and habitat restoration; and
3. landscape recovery, supporting nature across groups of farms and whole landscapes.

This funding should be conditional on well-enforced compliance with a rising regulatory baseline, supporting value for money and setting a clear trajectory to help farmers plan for the future. This level of funding must also deliver high quality advice for farmers and clear processes, to help that planning.

By doubling the budget for nature-friendly farming and land use, we can better support farmers and land managers and accelerate the agroecological innovation and greener land management that will be vital for nature's recovery.

Strong regulators

Strong public bodies have a crucial role to play in regulating nature-friendly non-intensive land management, halting the decline of nature and achieving net zero.

We propose that all public bodies should have an explicit statutory purpose to contribute to the achievement of the targets set in the Climate Change Act 2008 and the Environment Act 2021.

Updating their purposes will ensure that key decisions are aligned with the Nature 2030 mission.

To work effectively, DEFRA agencies must also be properly resourced. Since 2010, Natural England and the Environment Agency underwent real-terms budget and staffing reductions of over 60%.

This led to underperformance in crucial functions: advice, permitting, monitoring and enforcement.

For example, the number of water samples taken by the Environment Agency fell by 51% from

2010-2021, while prosecutions fell by 80%. Meanwhile, between 2006 and 2021, Natural England only issued 14 prosecutions for damage to Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), and the number of warning letters following offences on SSSIs fell by 60% in a decade.

Recent Budgets have increased funding for the Agencies, but much of the focus has been on capital expenditure, leaving critical resource budgets under-funded. To ensure the effective delivery of a nature-recovery agenda, the next Government must commit to well-funded agencies, with a renewed focus on environmental recovery.

In farming, the Agencies should be responsible for enforcing a rising baseline of good practice across the farmed environment. Inspections should be proportionate and targeted, ensuring a level playing field for farming businesses. At the moment, levels of non-compliance with key rules, like the Farming Rules for Water, is high. That must change as a precondition for increasing the rewards for ambitious agricultural reform.





A NATURE RECOVERY OBLIGATION

The policy in brief

Major economic sectors, including finance, infrastructure, development, water, energy and the agri-food sector, all contribute to the decline of nature.¹⁴

These sectors should be subject to a Nature Recovery Obligation. This regulatory requirement should require private sector funding for nature recovery, sharing out the effort required to meet key Environment Act and Climate Change Act targets. This should include:

1. Mandatory corporate disclosure of value-chain impacts and dependencies on nature, including supply, investments, customer use and direct operations.
2. A duty to publish 1.5°C-aligned climate and nature recovery transition plans.
3. Regulatory requirements for companies to fund nature's recovery, based on a sector's impact on nature.

The rationale

In the UK, there is a funding gap of more than £19 billion from 2022 to 2032 for biodiversity when comparing existing funds and Government objectives.¹⁵ This funding gap increases to more than £44 billion for all nature-related objectives. Globally, it is estimated that \$78–91 billion is spent per year on biodiversity from public and private sources, compared with an estimated annual sum of \$500 billion directed towards activities that are potentially harmful to biodiversity.¹⁶

The public sector has a major part to play in filling the gap, but private sector finance will certainly be required to reach the scale of investment needed for nature's recovery.

To create a burst of business capital for nature will require clarity on the impacts of key sectors, requirements for nature-positive planning, and a strong duty to invest in nature's recovery.

Current policy falls short

The 2021 Autumn budget and the Nature Markets Framework included a target to raise at least £500m in private finance for nature's restoration every year by 2027, increasing to £1bn annually by 2030.¹⁷

With a few exceptions, however, the UK Government has relied on voluntary markets for delivery. Private markets for nature often rely on offsetting or Corporate Sustainability obligations, such as the UK Woodland Carbon Code and the UK Peatland Code. Although many businesses are eager to contribute to creating a 'nature-positive' economy and many investors stand ready to finance action, a reliance on good will or marketing is unlikely to amount to more than peripheral change.

Where stronger, compliance-based regulations are in place, they are also usually limited to offsetting—compensating for pollution or habitat destruction. This can be helpful, but offsetting will not drive nature's recovery. At best, it will compensate for some of the on-going harm to the natural world caused by economic activity. At worst, it becomes a green fig leaf for ongoing damage to nature.

Voluntary or limited regulatory regimes are also lacking in strategic planning, missing the best opportunities to deliver on nature recovery, as they tend to instead focus on particular tasks such as tree planting rather than taking a whole ecosystems approach.

For example in England, the main compliance markets expected to drive private sector delivery in nature are Biodiversity Net Gain, which will become mandatory from November 2023, and nutrient neutrality. These markets are limited to "offsetting" part of the harm caused by individual projects. They do not come anywhere near internalising all of the environmental costs caused by a single sector. The total funding from biodiversity net gain is expected to be less than £200m per year.¹⁸ Nor will they make an active contribution to nature's recovery; even the 10% gain offered by Biodiversity Net Gain policy is, in practice, expected to just about offset the damage to habitats caused by developments.¹⁹

A better future

Giving companies explicit regulatory responsibility to restore nature will create the demand for investment needed to meet the Government's climate and nature targets.

Restoring nature will need a great stride beyond offsetting, which is so often little more than greenwash. Major businesses should be required not just to compensate for immediate harm, but to help restore the environment. We propose a new Nature Recovery Obligation for major sectors of the economy. This would set habitat creation and restoration goals for major sectors of the economy, including retail, water, energy, housing and construction.

Major businesses in those sectors would be assigned nature-recovery duties, based on their environmental footprint. Compliance could be based on first reducing direct environmental impacts (e.g. robust regulatory standards for retailers to demonstrate that their supply chain is organic/in higher tier stewardship, or aligned to sustainable standards/certified sustainability schemes in the case of imported commodities and products, subject to the historical failings of certification standards being addressed) and delivering nature restoration responsibilities in line with the mitigation hierarchy.

The level of effort required for each sector should be calibrated by comparing the level of current (and historical) responsibility for pressures on nature, with the overall scale of effort needed to meet relevant Environment Act and Climate Change Act targets.





The three elements of a Nature Recovery Obligation

1. Corporate disclosure could be mandated by meeting and exceeding the proposals of the Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosures (TNFD), as well as more targeted reporting requirements for particular sectors and projects.²⁰ This would require large businesses to consider nature-related risks to their own operations and wider value chain and how direct investment could reduce those threats. Businesses should be required to build a comprehensive picture of their impacts and dependencies on nature (“double materiality”).
2. Nature positive planning is possible once disclosure is in place. Alongside plans to contribute to delivering the Paris Agreement on climate change, corporations should be required to set out how they will align their operations and influence to help meet the goals of the Global Biodiversity Framework. This should build on the work currently being done by the Transition Plan Taskforce, adding nature to its work on private sector climate transition plans.
3. Nature recovery obligations should be placed on responsible sectors, not just to make good the harm they continue to do to the natural world, but to go beyond offsetting and contribute to nature’s recovery. Alongside their obligations to transition their business practices in line with climate and nature recovery requirements, high nature-impact sectors should be required by law to pay a levy or make direct payments towards authenticated nature recovery projects, with the size of the obligation based on each business’s residual impacts on nature.



Change will mean internalising the costs of environmental harm and sharing out the costs of environmental recovery. Without change, however, much greater costs will continue to fall on the general public because of the harm caused by environmental decline. Moreover, environmental costs are also affecting businesses: efforts to manage the growing risks of flooding, fire and crop failure, for example, are already being seen on balance sheets. The choice for politicians is not whether there are costs; it is how great they are and where they will be felt.²¹


Of course, big businesses must not be allowed to pay the levy while continuing to destroy the environment as much as they please. All attempts to avoid damaging nature should be exhausted before any compensatory payments are applied, with clear oversight to ensure that damaging projects cannot proceed. Levy payments would need to be sufficiently significant so as to provide a suitable incentive to reduce damaging activities in the first place. Businesses must be incentivised to transform their business practices to move away from nature-harming to nature-restorative practices, which means understanding where impacts and dependencies on nature lie across entire value chains, and acting to manage those risks accordingly.

When it comes to businesses taking responsibility for their supply chains, many businesses will trace back

to agricultural, forestry and industrial practices that damage nature beyond UK. Where it is not possible to grow or produce products in the UK, as is the case for many commodities grown in tropical countries such as palm oil, coffee and sugar, we have to hold businesses to account for their global impact. A levy system (or a robust requirement to directly fund nature-based solutions) should aim to provide benefits as close to the point of damage as possible, which in some cases this will be in the producer countries.

Change will also mean enormous opportunity, nationally and for individual businesses. Investment in nature often brings a huge benefit to cost ratio, with large scale benefits accruing in mental and physical health improvements, for example, as well as more resilient infrastructure. There are also opportunities for business innovation, with intelligent regulation driving businesses to the forefront of a global green business revolution.

A Nature Recovery Obligation will provide a framework to ensure businesses to play their part in responding to the ecological emergency. We have seen the benefits accrued by economies that have responded early to the climate crisis – that lesson must now be learned for nature.²²



How could a nature recovery obligation be structured?

A Nature Recovery Obligation could be structured in a number of ways to drive investment in nature.

The simplest would be a levy system. This would be our preferred approach and could raise substantial annual sums for strategic nature investment. Responsible sectors could be required to pay a scaled levy into a shared fund, with the size of the obligation relating to the sustainability of supply chains and corporate operations. The levy funds could be invested in strategic, landscape scale nature-recovery projects or species recovery programmes.

Alternatively, a Nature Recovery Obligation could take a more market-based approach. For example, existing schemes like Biodiversity Gain and nutrient neutrality could be scaled up. Gains could be increased beyond 10% to ensure that developers are contributing to habitat restoration; nutrient negativity requirements could ensure that obligations go beyond offsetting additional Nitrogen and Phosphorus pollution, and instead require companies to improve the condition of England's rivers and streams.

MORE SPACE FOR NATURE: A 30X30 RAPID DELIVERY PROJECT

The policy in brief

The next Government should prioritise a new “30 by 30 Rapid Delivery Project” to fulfil its commitment under the Global Biodiversity Framework to protect 30% of the land and sea for nature by 2030 and to secure an environmental legacy for the future. The project would consist of four pillars:

1. Completing and improving the protected site network: New incentives and obligations for landowners to manage important nature sites (SSSIs and other protected sites) in the public interest, so England’s most important nature sites are thriving by 2030.²³ Plus a programme to designate and protect more places and species.
2. Landscapes for the future: Updated purposes, powers and funding for designated landscapes to do more for nature, so that they become beacons of biodiversity restoration.
3. A Public Nature Estate obligation: New duties and purposes for public bodies (such as the Forestry Commission and Government Departments like the MoD) to ensure they care for the land they own and manage for nature’s recovery and climate change mitigation.
4. An expanded Public Nature Estate: An expansion of public and community land ownership, where such purchases, followed by sustained management for nature, could deliver significant ecological improvements.

The rationale

Many people have an idea that National Parks, Sites of Special Scientific Interest, and the Public Forest Estate are packed with wildlife, a backbone of biodiversity around the country.

Unfortunately, the reality is that we effectively conserve and manage too few places for nature. Those that are protected are often in poor condition. Others lie stranded, fragmented, or cut off from wider ecosystems by infrastructure or intensive farmland.

To halt the decline of wildlife, more places are needed for nature, areas that are “bigger, better and more joined up”.²⁴ In response, the Government has committed to protect 30% of land and sea for nature. We applaud the promise, but a huge effort will be needed to achieve it. Both privately and publicly held land must be managed better to contribute to nature’s recovery. At the moment, just 3% of the land and 8% of English waters are properly protected for nature—with long-term legal protection and active management for the restoration of biodiversity.²⁵

Current policies rely on encouraging landowners to manage their land in ways that benefit nature, from the new Environmental Land Management system of farming support to the England Woodland Creation Offer. Such support for landowners is essential, but the modest rewards and varying landowner appetite for sustainable land management can inhibit delivery. This has contributed to sluggish progress on habitat creation goals, such as tree-planting targets, and the persistent poor condition of protected sites for nature.²⁶

A combination of new incentives for private landowners, new legal clarity for designated landscapes, and better management of public land will be needed to achieve change.



Expanding and improving the protected site network

Many of the UK's last pockets of precious wildlife habitats are legally protected, but they have often been neglected and degraded. Although 8% of England is legally protected, just 37% of SSSIs in England are in favourable condition, a score that has not improved for many years. That is why only 3% of England can confidently be called well-managed for nature. It is also why expanding and improving the protected site network is critical to the fulfilment of the 30x30 pledge.

The first priority of the project is to recognise that—whether they are publicly or privately owned—there is a public interest in ensuring that protected sites are thriving. The Government should expand the network and invest in a rapid recovery programme to ensure that sites are in good condition.



Protected sites like SSSIs are notionally safeguarded against damaging operations on the site and should be managed for nature, but support and funding for good site management are limited. At the moment, there is little advice available for owners and managers of SSSIs to help them to grapple with the on-going management needs of these important nature sites, let alone adapt to climate change.

Although there has been some financial support available (for example through agri-environment and Farming in Protected Landscapes schemes), the contracts have not been simple or generous enough to help landowners to take part, so a new funding scheme must be designed to offer real rewards for positive management of SSSIs. This should go hand in hand with improved advice, and regulatory requirements not just to prevent damage in an SSSI, but also to ensure they are well-managed, including for appropriate public access.

In the marine environment, Marine Protected Areas (MCZs, SACs and SPAs) should be managed so that nature can recover. In the quest to meet net zero, development in protected sites should be avoided. Destroying these blue carbon sinks could worsen the climate crisis, releasing carbon captured and stored by marine organisms and ecosystems such as salt marshes, seagrass, and sediments. It is essential that from now on the role of blue carbon is recognised and integrated into marine policies. The sea is becoming an increasingly busy place and only a rigorous approach to strategic planning, prioritising nature recovery and climate change mitigation, can ensure that the marine environment can support sustainable fisheries, decarbonisation and the recovery of biodiversity.

As well as improving existing sites, there are many other important sites for nature that have been identified but not designated, such as Important Plant Areas (IPAs) and Important Invertebrate Areas. There should also be a targeted review of protected sites for taxa with inadequate coverage and representation, such as invertebrates, lichens and fungi, and a rapid programme to extend the protected site network.



Landscapes for the future

England's National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty are an even greater area with potential for nature's recovery. Together, they cover 25% of land in England.

While protected landscapes have the potential to be extraordinary places for nature and efforts are being made to improve National Parks and AONBs for biodiversity, in many cases nature in protected landscapes is in poorer condition than nature in sites outside them.²⁷ Nevertheless, with the right reforms and the right resources in place, there is potential for large portions of National Parks and AONBs to contribute to 30x30.²⁸

The next Government could follow the example of the visionary politicians of the 1940s who first protected National Parks by renewing the purposes of protected landscapes (AONBs and National Parks) to contribute more to nature's recovery. This could be achieved by giving protected landscapes stronger statutory purposes, duties and powers to recover biodiversity, tackle climate change and improve people's access to nature. Clear targets to deliver statutory purposes should be established in the management plans that guide day-to-day decisions in designated landscapes, and other relevant public authorities should be required to further those purposes. Backed by delivery funding, this would revitalise National Parks and AONBs for nature, natural beauty, cultural heritage, climate and people.



A Public Nature Estate Obligation

Government can play a major role in leading improvement of land management. The Government is the single biggest landowner in England (with the public sector owning around 8.5% of England), but it is not currently always a leading environmental steward of the land. Forestry England alone owns over 198,000 hectares in England, the MoD 160,000 hectares, whilst Natural England owns 20,000 hectares.²⁹

Together, these areas offer unrivalled potential for nature restoration and public access to nature. In some areas, like parts of Salisbury Plain, public land can be in good condition for nature. On the other hand, some publicly owned sites are badly degraded.

Forestry England has the potential to restore approximately 100,000ha of ancient woodland and open habitats such as lowland heath that are currently damaged by plantation forestry. This could deliver a fifth of the UK Government's new legal target to restore or create more than 500,000 hectares of wildlife-rich habitat.

To drive change and realise the potential of land owned by the Government to deliver for people, suitable land owned by public bodies should be seen as a 'Public Nature Estate'. Any public land that forms part of the Public Nature Estate should be committed to biodiversity recovery and improving access to nature. This should include long-term management plans and funding in place for nature recovery, and mapping appropriate land for public access under Section 16 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act. This will ensure that these places, held as an environmental legacy for the future, can be at the heart of nature's recovery.

All public bodies owning land, or with an interest in management of the land or sea, should be subject to a Public Nature Estate Obligation. This would provide a statutory purpose (or in some cases a duty) to manage land in their ownership (or sea under their responsibility) to contribute to meeting targets set under the Climate Change Act and the Environment Act. For example, this would include modernising the 100-year-old legal remit of the public forest estate, which was developed during World War One, focused on creating a strategic timber supply.

Of course, many of these areas may not be managed primarily for nature recovery—MoD land will continue to be prioritised for training and manoeuvres, for example—but positive environmental management should become the default for public land wherever possible.





Sale of public land

As part of the Public Nature Estate Obligation, public bodies should also be required by law to consider the interests of biodiversity when considering whether and how to dispose of public land.

In recent years, the size of the publicly-owned estate has dwindled, limiting the scope for public authorities to contribute to nature recovery. Between 2015 and 2020, the UK Government sold off 2,042 sites.

In many cases, these sales are driven by short-term financial needs, without considering whether the land could be put to better use for nature recovery. Assets like council-owned County Farms, which could play a major role in regenerative farming, are being sold off.³¹

The Public Nature Estate Obligation should ensure that before land is sold, public authorities should consider the implications for the connectivity and quality of ecosystems, as well as the opportunities for nature recovery.

If sales proceed, preferential rights to bid by communities and environmental charities should be considered, if this would provide opportunities to contribute to nature recovery and people's enjoyment of the natural world. Where possible, access land should be dedicated and new rights of way established. This would help to involve more people in the stewardship of nature, and capitalise on the great wealth of land management experience and conservation science held by nature charities in England.

The Public Nature Estate at sea

The protected site network at sea aims to protect important habitats and species like seagrass beds, as well as amazing wildlife like the harbour porpoise. Such is the level of the nature and climate emergencies that the England's offshore spaces should be managed to ensure that climate change mitigation and biodiversity recovery take priority over other seabed uses.

Most of the features of England's Marine Protected Areas are not in good condition, threatened by industrial fisheries or energy infrastructure. Most MPAs do not have management measures in place to stop damaging activities from harming protected species and habitats, or the wider environment. They fail to take a whole-site approach, instead focusing on a few features.

The Public Nature Estate should recognise the clear public interest in protecting these sites for the future. The Public Nature Estate obligation at sea would place an obligation on the Crown Estate to prioritise the integrity of the MPA network, the protection of vulnerable habitats and species, and delivery of the UK's climate obligations when considering seabed licensing activities.

The obligation would also require the Marine Management Organisation, as a public body, to apply strong management measures such as an MPA-wide ban on bottom trawling and other damaging fishing techniques. Like other public bodies, the MMO should have a priority purpose in law to contribute to the delivery of Environment Act and Climate Change Act targets, as well as wider environmental recovery.

Such strengthened nature recovery duties for public bodies responsible for key aspects of our sea should be a fundamental part of establishing a Public Nature Estate for the future.

Expanding the Public Nature Estate

One way for the Government to meet the 30x30 target, and create a legacy of land for the future, would be to improve and expand publicly owned land for nature's recovery—creating a Public Nature Estate. In many cases, of course, incentives for better private ownership of natural assets will be an efficient and cost-effective choice. In other cases, however, public purchase of land may be a way to generate opportunities to create and restore habitats, or provide equitable access to nature.

The Government and its agencies regularly buy land for roads and railways, for energy and other infrastructure, often using compulsory purchase powers. These purchases are delivered for nationally-significant infrastructure projects, guided by National Policy Statements. But green infrastructure is not considered to be nationally significant infrastructure and there is no similar approach for nature. On the contrary, publicly owned land that could be important for biodiversity is often sold to raise funds for hard pressed public authorities.⁴²

Guided by a new National Policy Statement for Nature, and by Local Nature Recovery Strategies, public bodies like Natural England, Local Authorities, Forestry England and Government Departments could buy more land to manage for nature's recovery, when land comes onto the market that could deliver significant ecological improvements. Purchases should be guided by opportunities to protect and connect more habitats to form a coherent ecological network and access network, guided by Local Nature Recovery Strategies. In part, they could be funded by the Nature Recovery Obligation levy.

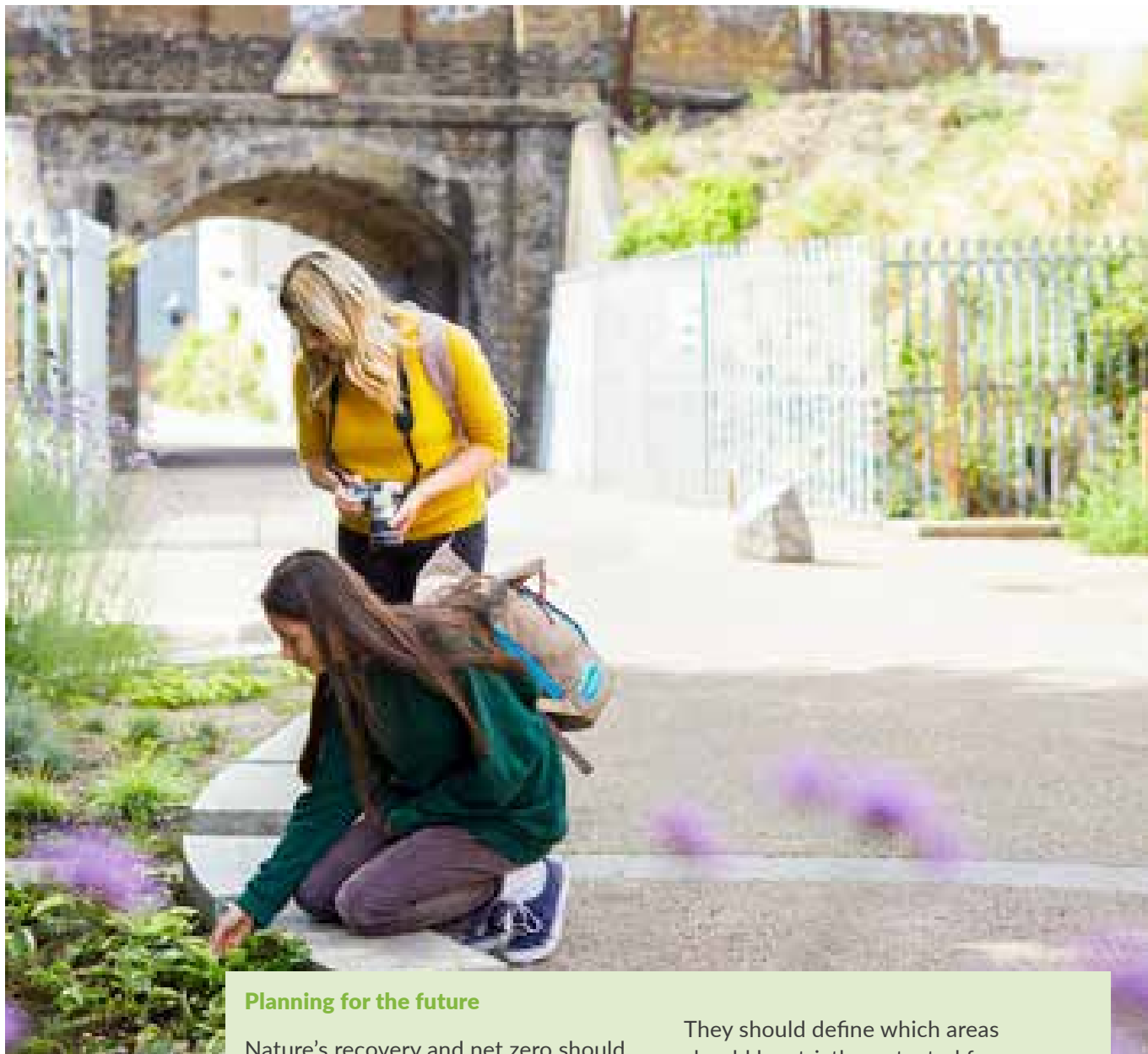
These holdings could be focused on creating opportunities for landscape-scale nature recovery, restoring and repurposing old assets for environmental recovery, or linking up with other land-owners who want to restore nature, or generating opportunities to create green corridors for wildlife and recreation. Restored habitats under public ownership could connect, buffer and expand protected sites, helping these sites achieve good ecological condition and qualify for inclusion in the '30x30' network.³² All land added to the Public Nature Estate will need to be well-managed for nature, into the long term, adhering closely to the Public Nature Estate Obligation (see above).

With security of tenure, clear management plans, and active monitoring for nature's recovery, these areas could make an important contribution to 30x30 as "OECMs", or Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures, whether or not they are formally designated as SSSIs in future.

Communities should also be backed by a facilitation fund to purchase land to add to the Public Nature Estate, where the benefits to biodiversity are agreed in a Local Nature Recovery Strategy. In particular, models of community co-management, co-ownership and stewardship alongside other bodies such as Local Authorities have the potential to combine community knowledge and enthusiasm with wider expertise and governance.³³

Local Authorities are currently seriously under-resourced, however, and under current circumstances most would be unable to provide significant funding for these projects. More funding from central government is therefore essential to support the delivery of this network at scale. This support may prove attractive to communities seeking to preserve cherished natural spaces and to open up access, from rural meadows to suburban woodland, through to stretches of riverbank in urban areas. Land managed with support from the facilitation fund would have to be managed to improve the condition of the site for nature, and to enable greater public access to natural spaces wherever it is appropriate.

Taken as a whole, the 30x30 rapid delivery project will deliver a lasting legacy for nature and people by enabling better management of protected sites, protected landscapes and land in public ownership. The benefits of nature's recovery in these areas will be felt by all of us.



Planning for the future

Nature's recovery and net zero should be at the heart of the planning system.

There is limited space on land and at sea and careful planning will be needed to ensure that enough space is made for nature.

We recommend that achieving net zero and meeting nature restoration targets become explicit goals under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 and the Planning Act 2008.

To navigate the triple challenge of space for nature, climate and nutrition, the UK Government should produce a Land Use Framework and a Sea Use Framework.

These should give clear direction to ensure that choices in the terrestrial and marine environment make enough space for nature and climate, with an effective 30x30 network as a headline goal.

They should define which areas should be strictly protected for nature, which should be focused on farming and fisheries, and establish a conservation hierarchy to guide decisions in areas where production and nature recovery can be combined.

Individual decisions should be guided by thorough local engagement with businesses and communities, for example through the Local Nature Recovery Strategy process.

The Land Use Framework and Sea Use Framework will need to guide more efficient use of land and sea space, so that more areas can safely be taken out of production and managed for nature and climate. Alongside these frameworks, Government should produce a just transition plan to ensure that people are supported in the transition to a sustainable economy.

A NATIONAL NATURE SERVICE

The policy in brief

A National Nature Service should be established to deliver practical experience and hands-on training in green skills and qualifications for thousands of people. It would combine on-the-job skills training with a programme of capital investment in nature-recovery projects around the country, from urban restoration to coastal management.

The NNS would fill the green skills gap, create and support thousands of employment opportunities, and provide a skilled workforce to deliver nature restoration at the scale and pace needed to halt the decline of wildlife by 2030.

The rationale

It will be impossible to restore and create the amount of habitat required to halt the decline in species abundance by 2030, without these key ingredients:

1. Sufficient funding to support habitat restoration at scale.
2. An increase in people with the right skills to restore and create suitable habitats.

By delivering these two conditions for success through new investment and a National Nature Service, the next Government can take a sizeable step towards meeting 2030 nature goals, whilst realising the potential of a significant new source of job creation.

Growing the economy through new green jobs is compelling political narrative, but to date this growth has largely been confined to climate and carbon-related jobs. The potential for jobs in nature recovery has yet to be tapped. The provision of a new on-the-job training programme through a National Nature Service will help meet the considerable public appetite for nature jobs, building confidence in this relatively new sector and helping it to grow.

New funding for a National Nature Service should contribute directly to habitat restoration and creation, and in doing so create new routes for people to gain employment, targeted at marginalised groups.







Current policy falls short

Halting the decline of nature by 2030 will need significant habitat restoration and creation, to both improve the condition of existing wildlife sites and to replenish hundreds of thousands of hectares of woodlands, wetlands, grasslands, hedgerows and peatlands.

This will require substantial investment in habitat restoration and creation, several orders of magnitude greater than the current Government's Green Recovery Challenge Fund. The first round of Green Recovery Challenge Fund investment saw creation and restoration activities on 0.3 million hectares of habitat, funded by £37 million.³⁴ To put this in context, Natural England has recommended creation and restoration activities on a further 1.5 million hectares of habitat over the coming years, as a minimum for meeting 2030 nature goals.³⁵

Such increased investment in nature recovery will create significant job opportunities. However, the skills British workers will need to take up these jobs are currently in short supply.

Across the sectors that a nature restoration workforce will come from, such as regenerative farming and sustainable forestry, skills shortages are already inhibiting growth.³⁶ For example, loss of

traditional farming know-how is seen in challenges facing the proper management of floodplain meadows, which relies on knowing when a hay crop is ready to be cut. As well as practical skills, there is a dearth of ecologists especially in local government, and lack of surveying, identification and monitoring skills. An intervention is required from Government to train people in habitat restoration work, to ensure that skills shortages do not become a barrier to large-scale nature recovery.

The absence of such an intervention is also holding back the potential of nature recovery as source of new employment. A 2021 report from Green Alliance & WPI Economics suggested a potential for at least 16,000 new jobs, from just existing plans for woodland creation, peatland restoration and urban green infrastructure.³⁷ The paper also suggested that the new roles could be delivered in the 20% of constituencies facing the most significant employment challenges, creating work opportunities in the places they are most needed. Work by CPRE has suggested that 25,000 jobs could be created in hedgerow management alone by increasing the extent of hedgerows by 40%.³⁸ Such jobs are also popular; eNGOs report sustained interest from people of all backgrounds keen to build careers in nature but struggling to know how to start.

The benefits of habitat restoration

A study by the Nature Based Solutions Initiative showed that for every £1 invested in peatland restoration, an estimated £4.62 is generated through economic and social benefits, with three temporary jobs estimated to be created for every 100Ha of peatland under restoration. There are also additional, non-monetised benefits including enhanced water quality, improved biodiversity and reduced flood risk.

The situation is similar for many habitat types. For woodlands, where every £1 invested in planting trees is estimated to create £2.79 of economic and social benefits such as through carbon sequestration, biodiversity, and recreation. For hedgerows, where every £1 is expected to deliver £3.92 in returns. For saltmarshes, every £1 invested in restoration is estimated to generate £1.31 in economic and social benefits, with an estimated 14-74 temporary jobs created for each 100Ha of habitat restoration. In the Government's "Future of the Sea: Marine Biodiversity" report, marine biodiversity was given an estimated value of up to £2,670 billion, which could still be a conservative estimate.



A better future

The UK Government can maximise its chances of meeting the Nature 2030 challenge by:

1. Investing in a National Nature Fund to deliver habitat restoration and creation at scale.
2. Establishing a National Nature Service to provide a paid work and training programme to equip people with the skills needed to work to restore and create habitats.

This dual intervention would deliver the funding and the skilled workforce that are pre-requisites for large scale habitat restoration and creation.

A National Nature Fund could be modelled on the Green Recovery Challenge Fund, which was significantly oversubscribed (leading to a second round of funding in 2021).³⁹ The pot would be significantly larger than the Green Recovery Challenge Fund, to reflect the level of ambition required to meet 2030 nature goals, and would be sustained over a Parliament rather than being a one-off fund. Organisations such as charities, eNGOs and communities could bid into the fund, with grants supporting high quality restoration and creation projects, covering a range of natural habitats.

A National Nature Service (NNS) could deliver a one-year paid work and training package for nature recovery, delivered by eNGO, charity and business providers. The on-the-job training of NNS participants would be focussed on habitat restoration and creation, including work on projects funded by the National Nature Fund. The hosting of NNS placements could be a condition of some National Nature Fund grants, to deliver benefits for nature in tandem with benefits for people.





Shorter opportunities could be structured for volunteers and community leaders to help sustain a legacy of positive land management. As well as this core habitats work, the NNS could work with agricultural colleges to foster agroecological farming skills such as hedge-laying or hay meadow management, currently in short supply, building new skills and capacity to support the farming transition. They could help to tackle the growing threat of invasive species, which are one of the top drivers of biodiversity loss and cost the UK economy at least £2bn a year.⁴⁰ Further NNS workstreams could support efforts to boost access to nature in urban areas, and projects to collect data from the marine environments around our coast.

The provision of funding for large-scale habitat restoration, complemented by the provision of training to ensure that there are sufficient skilled people to carry out this scale of work, will help more wild spaces to thrive. As such, this dual intervention will make a direct contribution to the achievement of 30x30, by helping bring more sites into good enough condition to qualify for inclusion, and to the species abundance target, by providing more natural spaces for wild species to recover in.⁴¹

The boost for nature will also deliver tangible benefits for people. Targeting NNS opportunities at marginalised communities, young people and people aged over fifty, could help get economically inactive individuals back into work, and into fulfilling careers. Economically deprived communities stand to benefit the most from growth in nature recovery jobs. A NNS will deliver this growth, developing a sector that has the potential to match the job-creation seen over recent years in the fields of climate mitigation and adaptation.

With an increasingly sedentary workforce contributing to the rise of chronic, non-communicable ill-health, the change to train more people in jobs that deliver physical benefits and therapeutic value also has great potential to improve health and wellbeing.⁴³

A National Nature Fund and a National Nature Service would deliver the necessities for widescale habitat restoration across the country – funding for the work and training to equip people to carry that work out. This is a policy intervention that will simultaneously boost environmental, economic and social health, bringing in people to be a direct part of the solution for nature.

A RIGHT TO A HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT

The policy in brief

The loss of green space and the pollution of the air and water threatens everyone's health and is cutting lives short, especially for the most economically disadvantaged.

A new Environmental Rights Bill would create a human right to a clean and healthy environment for all. Combined with greater investment in environmental improvement, it would address deepening health inequalities and empower people to hold public bodies to account on pollution, climate change and the nature crisis.

The rationale

Human health is shaped by the world around us—from good-quality homes, to stable jobs, social connections, and neighbourhoods with green space and clean air and water.

The 2010 study *'Fair Society, Healthy Lives'* by Professor Michael Marmot shone a light on how poor environmental conditions are detrimental to people's mental and physical health and cutting lives short. There is a renewed awareness that people are dying prematurely from pollution of the air we all breathe, that raw sewage is still legally being pumped into our rivers by private water companies with insufficient regulatory oversight; and that Government action falls far short on climate change adaptation.⁴⁴

A deteriorating environment carries a hefty price tag in terms of public health. In 2021, the House of Commons EFRA Committee identified air pollution as the largest environmental risk to UK public health.⁴⁵ Every year, up to 64,000 of all premature deaths may be linked to air pollution, with up to 40,000 premature deaths linked to exposure to particulates and nitrogen dioxide.

People's wellbeing is also affected by the deterioration of cherished natural spaces. An Environmental Audit Committee inquiry into water quality in 2022 recognised that a 'chemical cocktail' of sewage, agricultural waste, and plastic is polluting the waters of many of England's rivers, with water companies dumping untreated or partially treated sewage in rivers on a regular basis, often breaching the terms of permits.⁴⁶ Similarly, farm slurry and fertiliser run off is choking rivers with damaging algal blooms. Single use plastic sanitary products—often coated with chemicals that can harm aquatic life—are clogging up drains and sewage works and creating "wet wipe reefs" in rivers. Not a single river in England has received a clean bill of health for chemical contamination.

It is the most disadvantaged and the most vulnerable who bear the brunt of pollution and a lack of access to green space.⁴⁷ It crushes economic and human health, widening inequalities and limiting people's aspiration and horizons.





An aerial photograph showing a vibrant green landscape with a network of winding waterways. The water is a deep blue-grey, contrasting with the bright green of the surrounding vegetation. The terrain appears to be a mix of forest and open green spaces, with the waterways meandering through the land.

Current policy falls short

The UK is a signatory to the UN Aarhus Convention, which is intended to guarantee public rights to access to justice, information and participation in environmental matters. Article 1 of the Convention recognises the international law right to a healthy environment for everyone.⁴⁸ It is fundamental and obvious. In 2023 people across the world, including the UK, should be enjoying that right.

Yet despite voting in favour of a recent UN motion recognising the right to a healthy environment for everyone, the UK is the only Aarhus Party to declare the right to be merely “aspirational”, effectively denying its relevance to people in the UK.⁴⁹

The protection of nature and green space should not be considered merely aspirational. These public goods belong to everyone regardless of income or background and must be protected with the seriousness and urgency that requires.

As nature declines, health inequalities are continuing to widen. The total proportion of urban greenspace in England is currently falling and health risks from climate change and poor air quality are increasing.⁵⁰ This is inequitable and also preventable. Creating access to good-quality green space will lead to improvements in physical and mental health, and lower levels of obesity. Nature can help tackle the strain on public services of unhealthy lives cut short by inactivity, poor mental health, poor diets, and poor-quality homes without access to nature.

An aerial photograph of a dense, vibrant green forest. A dark, winding river or stream meanders through the trees, creating a series of loops and curves. The forest canopy is thick and textured, with varying shades of green. The river's path is clearly defined against the surrounding foliage.

An Environmental Rights Bill

A healthy environment enables people to live healthier, happier, more prosperous lives, providing communities with an important sense of pride of place and closer connection with nature.

A new Environmental Rights Bill should be introduced to enable the UK to match its international ambition and commitments with action at home. The Bill should legislate a right to a healthy environment and the tools needed to uphold it. This proposal is clearly in line with the recommendation of the People's Plan for Nature that the right to access nature should be enshrined in legislation and that 'such legislation would require many relevant bodies, from local authorities to developers, to consider how to bring nature closer to everyone'.⁵²

An Environmental Rights Bill could:

- Establish the right to a healthy environment for everyone;
- Require public bodies to act in accordance with that right in their decision making;
- Fully implement the Aarhus Convention, including the right of access to justice, to give people the tools they need to challenge public bodies who infringe their right to a healthy environment.

Access the full Environmental Rights Bill proposal here: www.wcl.org.uk/environmentalrightsbill.asp



A Natural Health Fund

As well as providing new legal tools to help protect the healthy environment we all rely on, the next Government should take steps to ensure more people benefit more from it.

There is now strong scientific evidence of the health benefits of a healthy natural environment.

Spending at least 120 minutes a week in nature leads to a significant increase in wellbeing, and can cut the number of GP appointments, save the NHS money, and build fairer, greener communities.

Polling shows that local green space is the most important thing to foster pride in people's communities, even more than pubs and high streets, better enabling people to feel in control of their communities and become active citizens.⁵¹

To support the mission and ensure a fairer distribution of the benefits of nature, a new 'Natural Health Fund' should be established. The Fund should ensure Local Authorities can address inequalities in access to green space.

Examples such as Allestree Park in Derbyshire, which is being transformed from a golf course into the UK's largest urban rewilding space, demonstrate the support from local residents for projects such as these and the benefits they bring. These include directly helping to mitigate and adapt to the climate crisis, protecting families from flooding, and creating green jobs restoring the habitats we need to safeguard the UK's food and water security. This should be scaled up through greater investment in green spaces for people everywhere, through the Natural Health Fund.

The combination of a Bill to recognise the human right to a healthy environment and a new fund to connect more people to healthy environments on their doorstep will maximise the benefits people derive from nature's recovery.

By recognising and legislating for a human right to a healthy environment the Environmental Rights Bill will protect nature, and our health. These new legal protections for nature and people's enjoyment of it, combined with a Natural Health Fund to connect more people with nature, will help ensure that future generations live in a country where nature-deprived communities, sewage choked rivers and human deaths from air pollution are consigned to history.



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CONCLUSION

Almost every politician and every political party is likely to go into the next election with some environmental promise. Westminster has woken up to the fact that the future of nature is an electoral issue, one that can sway voters, and create real political change, and help to tackle some of the most pressing issues of our age—issues that will only become more ruinous and expensive if we do not tackle them head on today.

But vague promises to “tackle pollution” and “help wildlife” will not suffice this time. The 2030 target to halt the decline of wildlife is a mere Parliament away, and the ecological threat that inaction represents cannot be averted with platitudes. The nature crisis and the climate crisis both need urgent action.

Politicians who are serious about restoring nature should be brave in setting out the transformation needed in our society and economy to achieve it. They will need to spearhead the rapid and transformational delivery programme from day one to get back on track for a net zero and nature-positive future, and guarantee long-term commitment to science-based plans to address the systemic causes of climate and nature loss.

The ideas we present here are an illustration of the detailed and decisive measures that politicians who are genuinely committed to the environment will need to champion. This is about a fundamental social and economic change to address the climate and nature crisis and supporting a fair transition to nature-positive practices in every sector.

Saving nature will need more public money. It will require clear regulation of businesses, driving down pollution and driving up investment in nature. It will need an economy packed with green jobs. It will need a proper protection and management of a nature network on land and at sea. And it must recognise everyone’s right to a healthy environment.

Changes of this scale, pace and ambition will need to be a focus in every sphere of Government without delay. Some of the actions could be taken in the remaining time of this Parliament, the others will need to get underway in the first days of the next Parliament. That is why it is so important that these policy proposals should feature prominently in party manifestos, backed by leaders in all political parties.

Together, our organisations stand for millions of nature-lovers across the country. We present these ideas on their behalf, on behalf of the future generations who will depend on our success, and on behalf of the wonderful wildlife that can yet be saved.





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