

One year on from the Leaders Pledge for Nature: Is UK Government action matching rhetoric?

One year on since the UK signed up to the globally ambitious Leaders Pledge for Nature (LPN), words have failed to turn into tangible action. The RSPB's analysis shows that for 9 of the 10 LPN commitments the UK Government has been "talking the talk" but not doing enough to "walk the walk" and take the action that nature needs at home.

- The below table includes high-level analysis of the extent to which the UK Government, at a Westminster level, has taken action towards delivering the commitments under the LPN. Full text for each LPN commitment can be found [here](#).
- We focus on Westminster given that the UK Westminster Government signed up to the pledge. Hence action in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland is not in scope in this analysis. However, given that the environment is a devolved competency, it is essential that action is taken in all four countries of the UK to ensure effective delivery.
- Where relevant, this has been split between an assessment of implementation at the global level and domestic (Westminster/England) level
- Assessment RAG ratings: **Red = Significant and rapid improvements urgently required**; **Amber = Some progress but much more action required**; **Green = On track with good progress**

Leaders Pledge for Nature Commitment	RSPB Assessment of UK Government progress	Assessment
<p>Headline Goal United to Reverse Biodiversity Loss by 2030 for Sustainable Development</p>	<p>Globally: The Prime Minister, other ministers and officials have repeatedly said they are committed to halt and reverse biodiversity loss to become nature-positive by 2030. They have advocated for this ambition globally within the CBD process and committed to it through the G7 Nature Compact. Now they need to ensure that robust legislation and action gives substance both globally and domestically to this positive rhetoric. In terms of the UK's impact on driving biodiversity loss overseas, the UK Government must go further to take action on our consumption footprint (especially in terms of deforestation and conversion) and to ensure public and private finance are nature-positive internationally.</p>	<p style="background-color: yellow;"></p>
	<p>At home: We strongly welcome that the Westminster Government has taken steps to enshrine this LPN commitment in law through amendments to the Environment Bill for England, namely by including a legally binding target to halt species decline in England by 2030. Despite this success, we remain concerned at the government's reluctance to support binding interim milestones for the other long-term biodiversity targets.</p>	



<p>1. Ensure the recovery from COVID-19 is green and fair Commitment to ensure that responses to the health and economic crisis is green and just, with biodiversity and climate at the heart of COVID-19 recovery strategies and investments and of our pursuit of national and international development and cooperation</p>	<p>At home: We've heard good words about a Green Recovery, and the Prime Minister's 10-point plan was promising¹, but we have yet to see positive outcomes for nature fully materialise. The UK Treasury has not prioritised environmental measures at either of the spending reviews or budgets since the pandemic started, and often announcements of new financing are part of already standing commitments, e.g. the £40 million for the Green Recovery Challenge Fund announced under the PM's 10-point plan was allocated from existing funding under the Nature for Climate Fund. In its Plan for Growth, the UK Treasury recognises the need to 'green' government spending and this Autumn's Spending Review is the ideal time to put funding in place to achieve the UK's domestic nature ambitions. We estimate a need of £6.8bn per year in total - an estimated £4.6bn greater than estimated current annual spend. To achieve priority habitat and species objectives alone, we estimate an annual scale of need of £1.8bn.</p>	
<p>2. Agree ambitious global biodiversity targets backed by science Commitment to the development and full implementation of an ambitious and transformational Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework for adoption at the 15th Conference of Parties of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD COP 15)</p>	<p>Globally: During the negotiations of the CBD's Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), the UK has been a constructive participant championing several key issues including accountability. We also welcome their role in bringing together countries to build consensus and raise ambition through coalitions, such as the Global Oceans Alliance and the Leaders Pledge for Nature.</p> <p>At home: To have credibility in global leadership, the UK must demonstrate by delivering action for nature at home, ahead of the CBD GBF being adopted. While the UK Government has already started to translate global ambitions to the national level in England, such as announcing its 30% land and sea protected by 2030 ("30 by 30") commitment (which relates to the current Target 3 of the draft GBF), we're yet to see that rhetoric translate into action on the ground. A recent paper² by RSPB has found that as little as 5% of land is being effectively protected for nature across the UK – far from the 28% currently claimed by the UK government. And at sea, despite 40% of English Seas being within Marine Protected Areas, only 4% are effectively managed³. Restoring and expanding the UK's protected wildlife sites is essential to delivering "30 by 30" but the evidence⁴ shows their condition is worsening, which is unsurprising given the significant declines in monitoring, resourcing, staffing and enforcement for these sites across all four countries of the UK over the past decade.</p>	
<p>3. Integrated action on biodiversity, climate and other challenges Commitment to end siloed thinking and tackle the biodiversity and climate crises in an integrated way, ensuring accountability and robust and effective review mechanisms, and lead by example through actions in our own countries</p>	<p>Globally: The UK has started to take good steps towards this commitment by making nature a key theme of the COP26 Presidency and organising a Nature Day at COP26, a much-needed opportunity to bring nature into the climate conversation. However, this needs to translate into meaningful policy action, not simply be a communications exercise; it should foster investment and action for truly integrated solutions and underline the role of nature in achieving our 1.5°C target.</p> <p>Ahead of COP26, there are several key submissions that the UK has made or will make which are key opportunities to ensure that nature is effectively integrated into climate strategies. Existing biodiversity commitments were highlighted in the NDC and the role of nature was integrated into the UK's Adaptation Communication. The upcoming release of the Net Zero Strategy will be another key moment to ensure that the role of nature is robustly embedded.</p>	



	<p>At home: At the same time, the UK is undermining its credibility in this space by failing to adequately protect high carbon-high nature habitats across the UK (66% are unprotected) and allowing the continued burning and degradation of the UK’s peatlands, a substantial contributor to UK GHG emissions. Protected landscapes can play an important role in delivering integrated action for biodiversity and climate across large areas. Many of the reforms needed to make this happen in England were identified two years ago by the Glover Review but the Westminster Government has so far failed to act on them.</p> <p>Another example of a lack of robust integrated thinking is the UK’s current approach to upscaling offshore wind technology. While RSPB supports offshore wind as part of the UK’s effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and tackle climate change – itself a major threat to wildlife – the current approach jeopardises both nature and net zero. It is urgent that we improve understanding to ensure we get the right renewables in the right place and ensure our seas are effectively spatially planned to avoid conflict between biodiversity and renewable energy infrastructure. The cumulative impacts of the 2030 pipeline of projects alone are predicted to have significant adverse impacts on our seabirds. To prevent irreversible wildlife losses from the unprecedented and necessary upscaling of offshore wind, we need to transform how we plan this technology. Better planning needs a robust evidence base.</p> <p>Furthermore, if the UK Government is to “ensure accountability and robust and effective review mechanisms” under this commitment, it must not continue to allow the economy to be an excuse for failing to comply with environmental law. For example, the new enforcement body (the Office of Environmental Protection) must be truly independent, able to consider all matters which may affect the environment and have robust enforcement powers to fully hold the government to account.</p>	
<p>4. Sustainable production and consumption Commitment to transition to sustainable patterns of production and consumption and sustainable food systems that meet people’s needs while remaining within planetary boundaries including through action on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a) Transition to circular economy and sustainable growthb) Sustainable supply chainsc) Shifting land use and agricultural policies away from...	<p>Globally: The UK Government has set sustainable production and consumption high on its international-facing agenda, with the launch of the FACT Dialogue (Forest, Agriculture and Commodity Trade) as part of its COP26 Presidency. This brings together producer and consumer countries to promote more sustainable land-use practices and agriculture while protecting forests. This is a much-needed initiative, but success will depend on the ambition and implementation of the roadmaps for sustainable and fair commodity trade.</p> <p>The UK Government has also taken steps to introduce due diligence legislation to address the deforestation footprint of forest-risk commodity supply chains through the Environment Bill. But the current provisions would need to be strengthened considerably if they are to genuinely reduce deforestation. To be truly world leading, the provisions would have to cover all deforestation (not just that deemed illegal in producer countries), establish equivalent obligations for financial institutions, include protections for human rights, and strengthen the review procedure and include a mechanism to progressively improve the framework.</p>	

...environmentally harmful practices for land and marine ecosystems

- d) Eliminating unsustainable uses of the ocean and its resources
- e) Significantly enhancing our efforts to reduce the negative impacts of invasive alien species
- f) Significantly reducing pollution in the air, on land, in soil, freshwater and the ocean (plastics, chemicals)

At home: there is much work to do to ensure that we achieve truly sustainable production and consumption.

In terms of agriculture, each of the four UK countries needs robust farming and land management legislation and policies that help transform the way we farm and manage land. In England, the Agriculture Act (2020) provides a strong foundation to help achieve this, enshrining in law the principle of ‘public money for public goods’ such as wildlife and clean water. We also welcome Defra’s announcement of a forthcoming soil health action plan for England. However, the tests of success will hinge on funding for the new Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes matching the scale of environmental need and ensuring that each scheme is sufficiently ambitious to drive the interventions needed to halt and reverse the decline of nature and help mitigate and adapt to the climate crisis. Government has yet to set out a clear vision and set of objectives for ELM, or a roadmap for delivery, and the ambition of the schemes remains in question. As agriculture is currently the biggest driver of biodiversity loss, the failure of the UK government to fully grasp the opportunities made possible through the Agriculture Act (2020) represents not only a gap between rhetoric and action, but a major obstacle to addressing nature’s decline this decade.

In terms of sustainability in the marine realm, concerningly no suitable equivalent scheme exists or is under discussion to support sustainable fishing practices, hence the UK Government has a long way to go to “eliminate unsustainable uses of the ocean and its resources” as stated in the pledge. Our seas are degraded from decades of human activity, exploitation and the impacts resulting from climate change and yet maintaining ocean health is vital if we are to successfully address both the climate and ecological emergency. The UK government is not taking this seriously enough: all but one of our offshore MPAs designated to protect the seabed are being damaged by bottom trawling and dredging, amongst other activities such as cabling routes and offshore developments. Whilst positive steps have been taken through consultation on four offshore sites to prohibit fisheries management (March 2021), delivery of management remains slow progress and fails to capture the full network needs. Stronger management measures are required in particular for the sandeel fishery. And while we welcome recent steps taken to progress Seabird Conservation Strategies across the 4 countries, these must be delivered in a timely and well-resourced manner and must include strong and effective action to minimise and where possible eliminate accidental bycatch of sensitive species in fishing gear (including by establishing timebound targets for reductions in bycatch, testing and rolling out mitigation measures and effective at-sea monitoring).

In terms of invasive species, despite the fact that they cost the UK economy an estimated £1.8bn each year, solutions are substantially underfunded by the UK Government. A commitment is needed to increase investment in invasive species to £6 million⁵ and implement the recommendations of the Environmental Audit Committee.



<p>5. Ambitious climate policies Commitment to raising ambition and aligning domestic climate policies with the Paris Agreement</p>	<p>Globally: The rapidly approaching COP26 means the eyes of the world are on the UK to show climate leadership, hence the UK Government cannot afford to take this commitment lightly. The UK has pledged to end financing for overseas fossil fuel projects , and its updated Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) was consistent with scientific advice and is among the most ambitious released yet.</p>	
	<p>At home: Although the Government’s recent commitment to supporting a net zero target is welcome, we are still awaiting the strategy to deliver this. In the meantime, high-level commitments to climate ambition threaten to be substantially undermined by reality on the ground at home, with the government looking to develop a new oil field at Cambo, and a public inquiry into the possible opening of a new coal mine in Cumbria, risking making net zero unattainable. On top of this, government advisors have warned that the UK is “woefully unprepared” to deal with the effects of climate change.</p> <p>One example of where far more work is needed is in developing climate-smart fisheries (fisheries contribute to greenhouse gas emissions through the disturbance of blue carbon habitats in marine systems, the extraction of fish, disruptions to ecosystem function and industry-wide fossil fuel use). To ensure our fisheries are climate-smart, the UK government must make good on the commitments made in the Fisheries Act 2020, and adopt a ‘climate-smart’ strategy, that would reduce the carbon emissions that come directly from the UK fishing fleet and increase the potential for UK seas to act as a carbon sink by helping protect blue carbon habitats.</p>	
<p>6. Environmental crimes Commitment to ending environmental crimes (including illegal wildlife and timber trade)</p>	<p>Globally: The UK Government has made commendable efforts at the global level to combat environmental crimes, especially the international illegal wildlife trade. The Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund continues to be a welcome investment and a strong signal was given through the G7 Nature Compact to step up efforts to tackle IWT, including through a commitment to support the provision of better access to information to law enforcement agencies to tackle illicit finance⁷.</p>	
	<p>At home: However, insufficient attention has been given to environmental crimes domestically, notably the ongoing and systematic illegal killing of birds of prey, especially on land intensively managed for gamebird shooting. The RSPB’s latest Birdcrime report⁶ shows that self-regulation has failed, and urgent action is needed.</p>	



	<p>In other areas, the UK Government has shown it is serious about prosecution of illegal pollution acts, with a record £90m fine imposed on Southern Water for the deliberate dumping of billions of litres of raw sewage into the sea. However, most polluters of the water environment are not held to account for the impact of their damage, and the Government needs to ensure there is capacity, and appetite, to enforce existing regulation. The recent amendment to the Environment Bill requiring water companies to monitor and publish the water quality impact of sewage discharges is a welcome step but more action is needed overall.</p>	
<p>7. Mainstreaming biodiversity Commitment to mainstreaming biodiversity into relevant sectoral and cross-sectoral policies at all levels</p>	<p>Globally: The UK Government stated in their response to the Dasgupta Review (which they commissioned pre-LPN launch), that they agree with the main finding that the whole of society, including our economies, livelihoods and well-being are dependent on nature. This recognition is a key foundation to mainstreaming biodiversity and was followed by welcome commitments such as working with the ONS to improve the incorporation of nature into national accounts and commitments to develop a new green taxonomy to assess the nature impacts of spending and investment. Reforms to the UK’s appraisal guidelines to improve valuing biodiversity is also a positive development. The Government has also made a welcome commitment to ensure that all new UK bilateral aid spending is nature-positive.</p>	
	<p>At home: However mainstreaming biodiversity goes beyond finance and guidance – it means ensuring all decision making and policies takes biodiversity into account. To truly achieve a ‘nature-positive’ future as the Government has committed, every government department should ensure that their policies support nature. The Environment Bill does take steps towards this in relation to policy, by including the important environmental legal principles of integrating the environment into wider policy making, applying precaution in those policies along with preventing harms and ensuring that polluters pay. But it does not ensure that these are considered across government at early stages in order to lead to more holistic policy, and does not include decision making. The key Integration Principle requires just that and instead all have been watered down to mere policy considerations.</p>	
<p>8. One Health Commitment to integrating a “One-Health” approach in all relevant policies and decision-making processes as all levels, that addresses health and environmental sustainability in an integrated fashion</p>	<p>At home: The UK Government has shown some steps towards implementing a One Health approach (which recognises that the health of people is connected to the health of our environment, the importance of which has been starkly revealed by the Covid 19 pandemic) such as through its investment in cycling and walking infrastructure. However, it’s clear that much more needs to be done; a recent Environment Agency report⁸ found that air pollution remains the single biggest environmental threat to health in the UK.</p>	



<p>9. Finance Commitment to strengthen all financial and non-financial means of implementation, to transform and reform our economic and financial sectors to achieve the wellbeing of people and safeguard the planet.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a) Incentivize the financial system to align financial flows to environmental commitments and the SDGsb) Enhance mobilisation of resource from all sourcesc) Eliminate or re-purpose harmful subsidiesd) Improve efficiency, transparency, and accountability in the use of existing resources	<p>Globally: The UK has committed £3 billion of the UK’s International Climate Finance to be spent on outcomes that benefit nature. It has also provided key funding for initiatives to support businesses to better address nature-related risks, such as through the Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosures, for which the UK Government has recently committed an extra £3 million. The UK is also taking steps, through the Just Rural Transition, towards building consensus on how agricultural subsidies can be reoriented from environmentally and socially harmful practices towards socially just and environmentally responsible ones. But until words turn into action, there is no guarantee that change will come.</p> <p>At home: However, the UK Government’s own figures show that public funding for nature declined by 33% between 2012/13 to 2018/19. At last year’s Spending Review, there was very little truly new money for nature. We estimate a need of £6.8bn per year in total, which includes getting on track to halt the decline of nature by 2030; contributing to meeting climate change mitigation targets; and providing equitable access to a healthy natural environment. This is an estimated £4.6bn greater than estimated current annual spend. To achieve priority habitat and species objectives alone, we estimate an annual scale of need of £1.8bn.</p>	
<p>10. Science-based and inclusive approaches Commitment to approach design and implementation of policy in a science-based manner, engaging the whole of society</p>	<p>At home: The UK Government has shown a strong scientific basis with respect to the design and implementation of policy. Their science-based approach is well-structured with independent review and they have responded well to constructive criticism and are open to integrating stakeholder views. For example, the UK’s NDC followed scientific advice from the Committee on Climate Change.</p> <p>There is still work to do to overcome issues of knowledge and data gaps, to engage the whole of society and improve inclusivity and transparency (especially in terms of being clear about the format of public consultations, and publishing minutes of independent expert group meetings). It will also be important to ensure that a dynamic approach is used to account for changes in scientific understanding while avoiding delays to vital policy making. Despite need for improvement, progress towards this commitment is going in the right direction.</p>	

References

1. Vivid Economics (2021) Greenness of Stimulus Index https://www.vivideconomics.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Green-Stimulus-Index-6th-Edition_final-report.pdf
2. Starnes, T. et al. (2021) The extent and effectiveness of protected areas in the UK, *Global Ecology and Conservation*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gecco.2021.e01745>
3. Wildlife and Countryside Link (2021) Achieving 30x30 in England on land and at sea https://www.wcl.org.uk/docs/WCL_Achieving_30x30_Land_and_Sea_Report.pdf
4. RSPB (2020) A Lost Decade for Nature http://ww2.rspb.org.uk/Images/A%20LOST%20DECADE%20FOR%20NATURE_tcm9-481563.pdf
5. Wildlife and Countryside Link (2020) Prevention is Better than Cure https://www.wcl.org.uk/docs/Prevention_is_Better_than_Cure_Report_2020.pdf
6. G7 (2021) G7 2030 Nature Compact <https://www.g7uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/G7-2030-Nature-Compact-PDF-120KB-4-pages.pdf>
7. RSPB (2019) BirdCrime Report 2019 <https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/advice/wildlife-and-the-law/wild-bird-crime/birdcrime-report-2019/>
8. Environment Agency (2021) State of the environment: health, people and the environment <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/state-of-the-environment/state-of-the-environment-health-people-and-the-environment>