

Project Speed

Project Speed: heading off in the wrong direction

To reignite the economy, the Government aims to speed up housing and infrastructure development. In his Dudley speech, the Prime Minister said Project Speed would reduce delays to building.

The compatibility of development with a truly green recovery is debatable; the utmost care must be taken to ensure that infrastructure does not hasten destruction of the environment and compound environmental risks to the economy.¹ However, one thing is for certain: the Prime Minister's insinuation that "newt-counting" environmental laws are responsible for development delays is completely without foundation. There is no evidence to suggest that environmental planning laws or the tools which can help to inform better decisions, such as Habitats Regulations Assessment, Strategic Environmental Assessment and Environmental Impact Assessment are a major constraint on the speed of development. In particular, there is no evidence that protected species are a problem, nor that site designations need to be simplified.

On the contrary, there has been a succession of reviews—including the [2019 Oliver Letwin-led Red Tape Challenge](#), EU-mandated reviews of the Birds and Habitats Directives (2015), and the [2012 Review of the Implementation of the Birds and Habitats Directives in England](#)—which found that well-implemented environmental planning laws are compatible with successful development. In fact, a review by Sir Oliver Letwin found that build out rates were slowed by the "homogeneity of the types and tenures of the homes on offer", which often saturate the market.

Evidence-based proposals for speeding up the system

By contrast, there is strong evidence that investment in better implementation of the environmental aspects of the existing planning system would help to speed up the process. In particular, implementation could be improved by better monitoring and mapping of the state of nature.

There is a serious dearth of up-to-date information on [the condition of protected sites](#) (statutory and non statutory), and the location of important habitat types that imposes costs and delays on development. This is exacerbated by a high proportion of applications of poor quality which omit required environmental information, leading to delays and additional costs for Local Authorities. The system could be sped up by:

1. Improving Local Authority access to ecological expertise, aiming for every Authority to have access to in-house ecologists and environmental planners
2. Increasing the number of strategic planners and development management officers so environmental issues can be built in early, while improving monitoring and enforcement
3. Increasing funding for Natural England to review and improve how it performs its statutory planning functions and provides environmental advisory services
4. Clarifying the quality of information required by Planning Authorities to validate applications

¹ When discussing a green recovery, it is essential to remember that nature, and the resources and services it provides, is the foundation of our social and economic well-being. It needs to be at the heart of our recovery if we want an economic system which does not continue to cause significant damage to our planet and people. It is important to understand that green construction jobs are only sustainable and green by definition if they do not trade off one environmentally positive impact (e.g. climate change mitigation) for a negative impact on ecosystems and biodiversity, through poor siting or design.

5. Updating the Ancient Woodland Inventory, the Ancient Grassland Inventory and the Priority Habitat Inventory
6. Updating the Open Mosaic Habitats Inventory
7. Updating designation information on historic features including Ancient Scheduled Monuments.
8. Mapping other critical, irreplaceable habitats such as peatlands, including shallow and degraded peat
9. Improved spatial planning both for the land environment and in the marine environment
10. Increasing support for Local Environmental Records Centres and Historic Environment Records

A strategic approach: helpful in combination with site-specific work

Filling these data and capacity gaps could help environmental considerations to be taken into account earlier in the planning process to avoid costly delays later. We support proposals for investment in geospatial planning and satellite imaging, which could help to provide a much more granular baseline of data across the country, improving targeting of more specialised survey work. Alongside these technical approaches, further information could be provided by an ecological census, potentially undertaken by a National Nature Service or other participative scientific projects.

At the strategic level, these improvements in data-gathering could be used to inform a mandatory national spatial plan for the environment, designed to maximise environmental opportunities and guide both the town and country planning system and major infrastructure development. In particular, a nature recovery network, showing existing valuable areas for nature and important opportunities for nature's recovery, would allow development to be planned at a strategic scale in a way that reduced the risk of conflict.

Investment in a robust England-wide habitat map, and in spatially mapping the nature recovery network, would help strategic planning and developers and by enabling them to avoid the most obvious risks.

It is important to recognise, however, that these techniques cannot replace the importance of specialised, site-specific surveys that take into account ecology, heritage and landscape. They can be a valuable addition, but not a substitute. Strategic scale assessments cannot be the only assessment of risk. Strategic spatial planning does not provide sufficient information at the site level to fully assess the risk to biodiversity, heritage or landscape. In most places there is insufficient information about the presence of threatened habitats and species for the impact of development to be assessed without site survey. Even testing this approach with a single species has been difficult and the process remains unproven.

At the same time, the Government could improve some planning designations to serve a clearer, more effective purpose, rather than weaken existing protection. For example, there should be much stronger requirements to enhance nature in National Parks and AONBs.

The Environment Bill

The Environment Bill should not become a vehicle for sweeping changes to the planning system. This could quickly undermine its core purpose of leaving the environment in a better state for the next generation. There are, however, important planning provisions already included in the bill which should be strengthened to help speed up and improve the planning system.

Done well, both biodiversity gain and Local Nature Recovery Strategies have the potential to reduce costly delays for developers and delays in the planning system at the same time as contributing to environmental improvement (providing local authorities have the expertise and wherewithal to support proper implementation). If new planning reforms—such as broader permitted development rights—were rushed through, they could become parallel provisions that undermine these important Environment Bill proposals before they even begin. Instead of introducing new proposals, the Government should concentrate on strengthening the important foundations already included in the Environment Bill.

- Remove loopholes which could undermine biodiversity net gain

The Government's proposals for biodiversity gain have the potential to provide consistency and certainty for developers across the country, reducing the complexity of the current patchwork of provisions. This benefit could easily be undermined if there are gaps in the system. The bill already excludes major infrastructure from the net gain system. Major infrastructure is responsible for significant environmental damage, but net gain could be achieved at negligible cost compared with overall project budgets. Including major infrastructure in the mandatory system would help to clarify environmental expectations for these projects.

In addition, permitted development and some brownfield sites are exempt from the requirement to deliver biodiversity gain. In combination with these loopholes, Government plans to extend permitted development rights for new housing and the renewed focus on brownfield sites are concerning and could significantly undermine the biodiversity gain policy outcomes. Brownfield sites are often important for biodiversity, and include culturally important sites or buildings at risk. For the system to be most effective, development exemptions should be strictly limited.

- Strengthen duty on Local Nature Recovery Strategies and links to statutory plans

LNRs can help to map out important environmental constraints and opportunities and identify where development can be most compatible with environmental improvement. Done well, the strategies can ensure that bottom-up local concerns are knitted together with expert information and evidence, to help create an ecologically coherent Nature Recovery Network at the same time as informing planning decisions.

At the moment, however, the bill only includes very weak duties for the use of LNRs. An authority simply has to have regard to a relevant LNR in making plans and policies under an amended duty to enhance biodiversity. This risks making LNRs functionally redundant, as there is no clear requirement to factor them into planning and spending decisions. To maximise the potential for LNRs to improve implementation of the planning system, the bill should be amended to make sure that LNRs apply in day-to-day decision-making and that they directly inform statutory planning documents.

Green infrastructure investment

The Government should also question the assumption that conventional infrastructure investment is the best way to stimulate the economy and should look to invest in projects that help nature and the economy recover together. As the [Dasgupta Review](#) and the [World Economic Forum](#) have indicated, the twin hazards of biodiversity decline and climate change pose serious threats to the global economy, and early investment in mitigation is a rational economic strategy.

Investment in green infrastructure could provide a similar scale of business boost, while making our society more equitable and making our economy more resilient to future environmental risks. Nature-based solutions should be an integral part of the package of measures to mitigate and adapt to climate change and other risks. The Government's announcement of £40million does not replace the deep

financial losses that the environment sector has experienced during lockdown, let alone fund a green recovery.

- Environmental NGOs could rapidly begin habitat enhancement projects at a cost of £315million that would support 10,000 jobs, create or restore 200,000 hectares of priority habitat, “level up” access to nature across the country (setting right some of the huge inequalities in access revealed during coronavirus lockdown) and sequester millions of tonnes of carbon, but this is just the beginning.
- [National Trust research](#) has found that spending £5.5bn on making urban areas greener would deliver £200billion in health benefits - and secure 40,000 jobs in initial construction and over 6,000 permanent jobs for ongoing maintenance.
- A National Nature Service employment programme—accompanied by a funded project pipeline and investment in personnel training and management in partner organisations—could employ and train thousands of young people, protect homes and businesses, and help turn round nature’s decline.

The planning system is not just there to facilitate development, it is there to facilitate the creation of healthy, sustainable communities and environments. The statutory purpose of planning, set out in section 39 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, is to achieve sustainable development. Project Speed should give equal weight to the speedy creation and restoration of natural infrastructure.

A response to Project Speed

The Government is looking for swift action to unlock investment. Actions that Project Speed could implement immediately include:

1. A programme of environmental mapping and monitoring to improve strategic risk management in planning and ensure applications can include high quality assessments to support decision making.
2. Investment in public authorities to ensure that any logjam in advice from Natural England is unblocked, that every Local Authority has an in-house ecologist, environmental planner and archaeologist and that strategic planning and monitoring and enforcement is bolstered in planning departments.
3. Return the Environment Bill to Parliament without delay, strengthening existing provisions for comprehensive biodiversity gain and Local Nature Recovery Strategies that inform statutory planning documents.
4. Establish a National Nature Service to support employment and training in green jobs, alongside a programme of large-scale investment in the natural environment, aiming to provide equitable access to a quality natural environment in urban and rural areas all around the country.

It would be wrong to imply that the planning system is perfect, but wider planning reforms should be considered at a measured pace, incorporating full expert advice and public consultation on the basis of scientific evidence.

For further information, please contact Wildlife & Countryside Link

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