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Planning reform must protect the environment, say conservation groups

Leading conservation bodies have formed a new coalition to call on the Government to protect and restore threatened wildlife habitats and landscapes, and really empower local people ahead of the biggest shake up of UK planning laws in decades.

The Government's Localism Bill is expected to go before Parliament this month and will set out reforms to the planning system. The Government claims that the reforms will give local communities a bigger say in how development takes place. The coalition questions whether this will be a meaningful change.

Members of all the UK's leading environmental groups are urging ministers to ensure the bill has proper safeguards in place to protect vital landscapes and habitats, ensure the sustainable management of natural resources and give people a real say in planning issues. The new coalition has formed involving 22 groups*, with the combined support of over 6.5 million members, and today it publishes Our Vision for the Future of Planning, a manifesto of its aims.

The document calls for a national planning framework which sets a benchmark for development and protects and restores threatened habitats and green belt land. The new framework should ensure that development respects environmental limits locally and globally and helps meet climate change objectives.

Providing the public with an effective say and the right of appeal against decisions not in line with agreed plans, are also key objectives for the coalition.

Simon Marsh, the chair of the new coalition, said: "This bill is the opportunity to create a genuinely sustainable planning system which minimises the impact of much needed development on our natural environment and allows us to successfully mitigate and adapt to climate change.

"This requires planning strategically across different local authority areas so that we see the bigger picture, avoid the risk of losing some of our most beautiful and important landscapes and help secure a low carbon, wildlife rich future.

“Following the recent biodiversity summit at Nagoya the UK Government has committed itself to halting the decline in wildlife by 2020. That is a serious aim and it won’t be easy. Development must be sustainable and planned responsibly if we are to have any hope of meeting this target, so we will be following the progress of this bill with great interest.”

An ideal example of joined up strategic planning was the Thames Basin Heaths Delivery Plan. The process saw a unique partnership of 13 local authorities working together to deliver housing and other development without harming the area’s valuable heathland which is home to threatened species including nightjars, woodlarks and Dartford warblers. Without a strategic framework plans like this are unlikely to get off the ground.

Mr Marsh added: “We need development to support our communities and stimulate our economy – but that cannot be allowed to happen at the expense of our natural environment. The Localism Bill could be a great opportunity to create a sustainable planning system – there is now a powerful force which will be engaging with Government to ensure that happens.”

* The groups involved in the coalition are

- Amphibian and Reptile Conservation
- Badger Trust
- Bat Conservation Trust
- British Mountaineering Council
- Buglife – The Invertebrate Conservation Trust
- Butterfly Conservation
- Campaign for Better Transport
- Campaign for National Parks
- Campaign to Protect Rural England
- Council for British Archaeology
- Environmental Law Foundation
- Friends of the Earth England
- The Grasslands Trust
- The Mammal Society
- National Trust
- Plantlife
- Open Spaces Society
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
- Town and Country Planning Association
- The Wildlife Trusts
- Woodland Trust
- WWF - UK

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Notes to editors:

1. The Localism Bill will be a significant landmark in the coalition Government's planning reform agenda. In order to be the 'greenest Government ever', the bill should:
 - Reiterate that sustainable development, delivered within environmental limits, is the purpose of planning
 - Provide a statutory basis for the national planning framework
 - Introduce new arrangements for strategic planning across local authority boundaries
 - Ensure that local plans provide a fair and transparent approach to community participation
 - Provide a limited (third party) right of appeal
 - Establish robust criteria for the new local green space designation

2. The Government claims that its planning reform will give local communities a greater say in decisions affecting their area. The coalition questions whether this will result in a meaningful say over plans for significant developments because the reforms will also make it easier for major infrastructure schemes, many of them potentially damaging to nature and carbon intensive by design, to gain approval irrespective of local views.

3. Simon Marsh is Head of Planning and Regional Policy at the RSPB. He chairs the environmental planning coalition and also the Land Use Planning Working Group of Wildlife and Countryside Link.

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