

25-year environment plan

The Conservative Manifesto includes a pledge “to be the first generation to leave the environment in a better state than we inherited it” and the promise of a “25 Year Environment Plan that will chart how we will improve our environment as we leave the European Union”. **We welcome this important ambition.**

However, it follows similar promises in 2011 and in 2015. Now the Government must bring forward the action and investment needed for delivery. To restore nature in a generation, we need to change the way we value and protect our environment. That means we need to build on the environmental laws we have today with:

- (1) **legally-binding environmental objectives**—for wildlife, water, air and natural assets—each with a delivery strategy, timeline and milestones.
- (2) **green investment**—ensuring public and private money supports greener towns, countryside and seas.
- (3) **accountability across government and the private sector** —applying the polluters pays principle and ensuring government and businesses are held to account for their environmental record.

Leaving the EU gives Government the opportunity to be truly ambitious, leading the world in properly valuing, investing in and conserving nature. However, ambitious action must be built on a green Brexit, with assurances that UK environmental law, product standards, and trade deals will match or improve upon the standards set by the EU. **The plan must be cross-Government and open for public consultation.**

What have we got to lose?

Our natural environment is in a fragile state. If we don't act now, the damage could be irreversible.

- **Wildlife** – 12% of species in England are extinct or threatened with extinction from Great Britain
- **Water** – only a fifth of English water bodies are in good ecological condition
- **Air** – pollution contributes to about 40,000 early deaths a year in the UK

As well as harming wildlife, environmental harm affects people's health, wellbeing and the economy. Flood damage and water pollution alone cost £2.3bn each year. A strong environment plan is vital to turn round decades of decline. Doing so will need input from across Government departments: planning, healthcare, transport, Treasury, as well as environment.

What's the prize?

Our environment matters to millions of people—our members want a greener future for our children. Environmental investment is excellent value for money. Government economic advisers concluded that investment in habitat creation like wetlands can deliver £9 of benefits for every £1 we spend. Annual public expenditure on National Parks equates to less than £1 per head but businesses in these areas, which often rely on a quality environment, contribute over £10bn to the economy. Valued at £108bn a year, the future of food and farming, the UK's largest manufacturing sector, is dependent on a healthy environment.

Nature is also part of the answer to some of society's biggest challenges. For example, environmental improvements can contribute enormously to mental and physical health, potentially saving billions of pounds a year for the NHS, and green infrastructure can help solve problems of flooding, drought and coastal erosion. So it makes sense for all Government Departments to consider environmental risks and opportunities in their plans.

A green Brexit

UK nature protection is interwoven with EU laws, principles and institutions. 80% of the public think we need the same or stronger levels of environmental protection after Brexit.

The 25 Year Environment Plan should not replace the firm foundation provided by EU laws. —The Government should ensure that these laws are maintained and reinforced in the UK, and guarantee that any changes to what was EU law that alter its original scope or intended purpose, are made by only primary legislation. This then gives a full and proper role to the Westminster parliament and, where relevant, the devolved administrations. The Plan should provide the framework and set of goals against which future environmental outcomes and policy decisions can be judged.

To reflect its importance, and the range of risks and opportunities, the 25 Year Environment Plan must be jointly-owned across Government. The starting point for the plan should be public consultation: everyone should have a say in the future of our planet. Below, we set out Wildlife and Countryside Link's proposals for the plan.

A strong plan needs long-term, legally-binding objectives

The 25 Year Plan should commit the Government to long-term environmental improvement. **It should embed international commitments in domestic law and set ambitious, clear and precise new objectives for environmental improvement.**

- **Objectives for wildlife, habitats, air, water and other natural assets should be established in law.**
- The objectives should be developed and updated drawing on independent expert advice. They should be clear and precise, resulting in measurable commitments to better environmental outcomes.
 - **Nature:** objectives should include species conservation status, extent and condition of habitats and extent and condition of protected sites on land and at sea.
 - **Natural capital:** objectives for natural assets which provide services to people, such as critical thresholds for allowing renewable resources (like fish stocks) to recover, or protecting vulnerable but valuable natural assets like carbon sequestering soils, woodland cover, fresh water and green infrastructure.
 - **International goals:** objectives relating to the UK's international obligations and impact on the environment overseas, such as the Aichi targets and Sustainable Development Goals.

A strong plan needs green investment

Meeting the objectives will need investment, both from the public purse and the private sector.

- With farmland covering around three quarters of the country, farmers and land managers can play a central role in restoring the natural environment within a generation. For too long, farm subsidy policy has driven unsustainable agricultural management. As a result, farmland biodiversity has suffered huge declines, despite public expenditure of £3.5 billion a year. **The EU Common Agricultural Policy should be replaced by a rural payments system that rewards environmental results. Instead of payments based on land-holding, the Government should pay farmers and land managers for enhancing the environment and improving access, as well as producing healthy, affordable food.**
- Over 80% of people live in an urban environment, but the poorest people and black, Asian and minority ethnic communities have least access to high quality green and blue natural spaces. **The Government's infrastructure investment programme should put natural infrastructure on the same footing as built infrastructure, with a programme of investment and maintenance spending.**

- We can spend money more efficiently using modern, data-driven mapping techniques. Every catchment and every community is unique, so Government should establish a local approach to ecological investments, identifying where public and private money can do most to create habitats for wildlife and benefits for people.
- But Government cannot be expected to pay for everything. The private sector depends on natural capital, and must contribute to its maintenance. There are many ways that business can be incentivised or regulated to achieve this, such as reporting requirements, Payment for Ecosystem Services schemes, pollution taxes or market-based financing instruments. **The private sector should be actively engaged in the design and development of the Plan.**

A strong plan needs strong accountability

- For the environment plan to make a real difference, providing lasting benefits and giving green businesses the confidence to invest, it must be built on a lasting foundation.
 - **Parliamentary reporting:** Government should report annually in Parliament on progress towards a better environment for the next generation.
 - **Judicial oversight:** Without the European Commission's complaint process, we need an accessible judicial mechanism to challenge public authorities for environmental infringements. The Supreme Court does hear some environmental cases, but extra capacity is needed for expert environmental judges and increasing access to environmental justice for ordinary citizens. Environmental expertise remains limited among judges and the judicial review process is highly restrictive in its scope, expensive and potentially subject to high levels of financial risk.
 - **Expert advice and oversight:** Delivery of the plan should be based on informed advice from scientists and practitioners. Government should establish a new, independent Office for Environmental Responsibility (or strengthen the powers and remit of the Natural Capital Committee) to offer expert advice and make sure that the plan is delivered.
 - **Credible agencies:** Environmental agencies have been weakened by cuts. Defra's budget has been cut by over 50% in a decade. Outside the EU, the Government will need to empower the agencies to act authoritatively, independently, and on the basis of scientific advice.

Taken together, a **strong action plan with clear objectives**, a credible **framework for investment**, and a **firm basis for reporting, implementation and enforcement** can ensure that the Government's Environment Plan lays the foundations for a thriving natural world, flourishing communities and a sustainable economy. These should build on the strong EU-derived laws and standards we have today. **Public consultation** is the first step to ensure that the plan delivers a greener, more prosperous country for the next generation. We look forward to supporting the development of a strong plan.

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