

Westminster Hall debate on the future of the planning system 15.07.21

Briefing: The choices for nature

The future of planning system will have significant consequences for nature. The choices the Government will make over the coming months will determine whether those consequences are negative or positive.

The wrong choice: A planning system that accelerates nature's decline

Nature is in trouble. The State of Nature index shows a decline of 13% in average abundance of UK species since 1970, with a 6% fall over the past 10 years. 15% of species are threatened with extinction.¹

Unsustainable development is a driver of this decline. In the words of the latest State of Nature report: *"development for housing, industry and infrastructure projects such as road and rail result in a loss of natural habitats, as well as fragmentation and change to those that remain"*. The natural habitats that development destroys are the habitats that wildlife species need to live, feed and breed in. Two habitats have been hit particularly badly - 2,505km² of grassland (an area the size of Dorset) and 1,121 km² of arable farmland (an area the size of Bedfordshire) have been lost to urban development in Great Britain since 1990.²

The current planning system is failing to manage development's harmful impact on nature. The Government's current proposals for the future planning system look set to make a bad situation worse.

The core proposal of the August 2020 Planning White Paper, to divide the country up into 'growth', 'renewal' and 'protection' zones for planning purposes, would weaken existing environmental protections. Permission in principle for new development in the growth zone would allocate land for development upfront and limit Local Planning Authorities' discretion to refuse individual projects. The protection zone offers no additional environmental protection, being comprised of greenbelt, AONB and other designated land, where decisions will continue to be made on the current case-by-case basis. In a nutshell, if the upcoming Planning Bill takes forward the White Paper's plans, in the growth and renewal zones it will be easier to build over nature habitats, in the protection zone, nature habitats will have the same (insufficient) protections they have now.

The consequences of such weakening of environmental protections could be grave. Nature and the climate cannot afford acceleration in its decline, and neither can our economy. As noted in the Dasgupta Review *"continuing down our current path – where our demands on Nature far exceed its capacity to supply – presents extreme risks and uncertainty for our economies"*.³ UK sectors at particular risk from ecological and climate breakdown including our £257 billion tourism sector, and our £122 billion food and farming sector. The accumulation of environmentally damaging development will have impacts far beyond the local, lasting far beyond the short term.

¹ <https://www.rspb.org.uk/our-work/state-of-nature-report/>

² <https://www.ceh.ac.uk/press/almost-2-million-acres-gb-grassland-lost-woodland-and-urban-areas-expand>

³ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/957629/Dasgupta_Review_-_Headline_Messages.pdf

The right choice: A planning system that boost nature's recovery and delivers for people

The planning system can change for the better. It can become a powerful lever with which to tackle the interconnected crises of biodiversity loss and climate change. To be such a lever, the planning system must go beyond minimizing environmental impact and actually contribute to nature's recovery. The upcoming Planning Bill can re-orientate the planning system to become a net contributor to nature's recovery by:

- Strengthening protections for nature. Existing designations such as Local Wildlife Sites, AONBs and National Parks continue to be vulnerable to development. They should be strengthened to protect these sites for future generations. This strengthening of protections for protected sites must be complemented by fit for purpose environmental regulations across all sites, including early and expert-led on-site ecological assessment.
- Ensuring development contributes to the provision of nature-rich locally accessible green spaces for everyone. There are major socio-economic and ethnic divides in access to quality greenspace, with major implications for health and wellbeing. New standards should be introduced to ensure everyone can access thriving green and blue spaces.
- Giving Local Nature Recovery Strategies material weight in the planning system. By giving Local Nature Recovery Strategies formal weight in the planning system these plans will be able to coordinate nature's recovery, connecting vital wildlife habitats. A new planning designation to safeguard land for nature's recovery, to be applied by Local Nature Recovery Strategies, would grow the network of land available for nature.

The inclusion of measures to strengthen protections for our existing network of wild spaces, to add new sites to this network and to deliver strategies capable of connecting existing and new sites together, will ensure that the Planning Bill contributes towards nature's recovery.

The benefits of this would go beyond nature, from creating great places for people to live to increasing access to nature. The benefits of greater access to nature are particularly relevant, as we emerge from the pandemic with a new appreciation of healthcare challenges. Access to green space boosts mental health⁴ and encourages physical activity, making it a doubly powerful preventative healthcare tool. Current green space provision results in estimated savings for the NHS of at least £100 million a year from fewer GP visits⁵. Public Health England have estimated that these savings could rise to £2.1 billion a year if everyone in England had good access to greenspace⁶. The Planning Bill could be the means of achieving a transformational levelling up of access to green space⁷, bringing the benefits of nature to every community, with positive consequences for people, the health service, and the wider economy.

This briefing has been created by Link's Planning for Nature Sub-Group, part of the [Land Use Planning Group](#). A fuller paper on the how the planning system can deliver for the environment can be read [here](#).

⁴ https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/MHAW21_NATURE%20REPORT_ENG_web.pdf

⁵ <http://www.fieldsintrust.org/revaluing>

⁶ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/904439/Improving_access_to_greenspace_2020_review.pdf

⁷ <https://policy.friendsoftheearth.uk/insight/englands-green-space-gap>