

Levelling up through the National Nature Service: Piloting the next step

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In February 2021 the Environmental Audit Committee's published their report, 'Growing back better: putting nature and net zero at the heart of the economic recovery'. The report included a recommendation that *'the Government should work with conservation charities to pilot the idea of a National Nature Service this summer [2021] to open up conservation opportunities.'*¹

This paper, from England's largest environmental coalition [Wildlife and Countryside Link](#) ('Link') argues that implementing this recommendation would further the Government's levelling up agenda. The paper sets out detailed proposals as to how a pilot could operate.

The prize: Advancing the Government's levelling up agenda through new nature jobs

There is increasing evidence of the economic benefits of intervention to support new jobs in nature. These benefits, which are on a par with the traditionally more recognised benefits of intervention for climate job, are set out in Green Alliance & WPI's new report 'Economics of enhancing the natural environment'.

The GA & WPI report maps out the overlap between areas of high unemployment and locations offering significant opportunities to restore nature, through woodland creation, peatland restoration and urban green infrastructure. It concludes that:

*An expanded programme of nature-restoration could create at least 16,050 jobs in the 20% of [Parliamentary] constituencies likely to face the most significant employment challenges over the coming years.*²

16,050 jobs in the areas of high unemployment targeted by the levelling up agenda is likely to be just the start. The GA & WPI report, and an earlier nature jobs report from Friends of the Earth³, highlight a large number of nature professions with the capacity to create significant numbers of new jobs in areas of high unemployment. These new jobs include:

- Farm workers
- Forestry workers
- Forest managers
- Environmental and conservation professionals
- Countryside rangers

¹ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmenvaud/347/34708.htm>

² https://green-alliance.org.uk/resources/Green_renewal_WPI.PDF p44

³ https://policy.friendsoftheearth.uk/sites/files/policy/documents/2021-03/EMERGENCY_PLAN_GREEN_JOBS_FEB_2021.pdf

- Ecologists
- Horticultural nursery workers

These are net new jobs, in a sector that has the capacity to grow fast. Pages 28 to 40 of GA & WPI report set out this potential in detail, and maps new nature employment opportunities directly to areas targeted by the levelling up agenda.

An expansion of the nature sector would support the levelling up agenda by creating jobs in areas of high unemployment, whilst also boosting the recovery of nature.

As set out in the GA & WPI report, the framework for an increase in nature jobs is partly in place. The Government's 25 Year Plan for the Environment, and its delivery through measures such as Biodiversity Net Gain, Environmental Land Management, the Tree Action Plan & Peat Action Plans and 30x30 (the protection of 30% of land for nature by 2030) provides the policy underpinning for the recovery of nature. As proposed by the report, further rounds of the Green Recovery Challenge Fund, the widening out of the Levelling up Fund to cover environmental projects and expansion of the UK Infrastructure Bank would provide vehicles for investment in that recovery.

One remaining element is required to realise this potential to further the levelling up agenda through new nature jobs – a training pipeline.

The catalyst: Provide a training pipeline through a National Nature Service

There is a gap between an unemployed young person and a rewarding career in nature. That gap is training, knowledge and qualifications shaped. For example, the ability to drive heavy vehicles, an understanding of 'right tree, right place' approaches and the acquiring of a chainsaw license are all required to unlock lasting employment in the forestry sector.

How will this training pipeline be delivered?

Traditionally there would be two options. The first would be to look to the environmental NGOs that deliver much of the nature recovery work on the ground. However, the sector's financial situation has been weakened by the covid-19 pandemic, with Link survey work suggesting sector-wide losses in excess of £88 million.⁴ The furlough scheme and the Green Recovery Challenge Fund has kept environmental NGOs going, but they are in no position to act unilaterally to provide the training required for 16,000 new jobs. Similarly, the parts of the private sector that provide some nature recovery work, principally the forestry industry, has struggled for some time to secure and train up new entrants on its own account.⁵

⁴ <https://www.wcl.org.uk/huge-nature-cost-of-coronavirus.asp>

⁵ <https://www.rfs.org.uk/media/442086/forestry-sector-skills-study-executive-summary-2017.pdf>

A second option is Government intervention to provide this training. However no current Government scheme fits the nature training need. The Kickstart scheme is work rather than training focussed, with placements lasting only six months. Experience has shown it takes a year to fully embed the transferable skills, employability skills and environmental skills a person needs to access nature work.

There is a need for tailored intervention to provide a nature training pipeline, to bring together the expertise of the environmental NGO sector and the financial capacity of Government to unlock a wave of nature recovery jobs in high unemployment areas. The National Nature Service would be that intervention, acting as a catalyst to realising the levelling up agenda through new nature jobs.

The detail: Piloting the National Nature Service

Link is confident that a National Nature Service (NNS) would unlock a range of economic and social benefits. However, to provide proof of concept, we propose that the NNS is delivered initially in pilot form, as recommended by the EAC. The pilot would cover England, in light of the devolved powers over the environment given to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Link understands that the Welsh Government is independently developing a NNS scheme along similar lines to our proposals.⁶

A small coordinating unit could be set up in DWP, with input from BEIS, DfE and Defra, and tasked with setting and overseeing the pilot. An initial cohort of 100 NNS 'rangers' would be recruited through referrals from jobcentres, and from selected youth groups (with a focus on diversity). Rangers would be funded for a year's on-the-job training delivered by environmental NGOs. Early interest in fulfilling this training role has already been expressed by environmental NGOs belonging to the Wildlife and Countryside Link network.

The 100 rangers could be split up into four groups, with five supervision and one training staff members being allocated to each group. Each group could be embedded within a different environmental NGO, who provide oversight, support and expertise to each group.⁷

Training streams could include practical experience and qualifications needed to build careers in nature growth areas. Skills development could include:

- Core transferable skills, including effective communications, data analysis, team working, accountability, problem solving and project management. These skills will help boost employability for rangers across all sectors.
- Environmental skills, including general understanding of ecosystems, climate change and the green economy, as well as project specific skills, like tree planting and care, heavy equipment use and environmental data collection.

⁶ <https://ffcc.co.uk/news-and-press/ambitiousplanforwalesrecovery>

⁷ The scheme design has been informed by the Our Bright Future "[Support for young people to work in the environmental sector](#)" research review

- Relevant qualifications, such as LANTRA Conservation on the Farm, Safe Use of Pesticides and Practical Horticulture qualifications.

Funding model

We have calculated the cost of a year of training per NNS ranger coming to a total of £44,936.

This can be broken down as follows:

Salary

National living wage for each ranger: £19,398

Overheads for environmental charities leading on training

Supervision staff: £4,409 (one supervision staff member for every 6 rangers)

Coaching staff: £1,235 (one training staff member for every 25 rangers)

Training and activity costs: £8,795

HR, insurance, and assorted other overheads: £9,812

Cost of small DWP coordinating unit

£1288

A one-year pilot involving 100 rangers would therefore come to £4,493,600⁸.

By way of comparison, this £4.5 million cost would constitute just 2.25% of the Government's budget for the Kickstart scheme, which is expected to be underspent. The NNS pilot could be usefully viewed as an extension of the Kickstart scheme, drawing on the expertise and structures set up within DWP for Kickstart and adding value through a training-focused extension of the scheme to explore a particular area of strategic opportunity for new employment.

Assessing the impact of the pilot

The impact of the pilot would be assessed at the end of its first year. Criteria for evaluation would include:

- Subsequent employment experiences of NNS rangers.
- Feedback from environmental NGOs as to the value of training.
- Interest from private and third sector organisations in continuation of the scheme.

⁸ These figures come from the October 2020 National Nature Service briefing, with a small increase in cost for the proposed DWP unit, to allow for it to take more of an exploratory role in terms of future nature job creation. Overall, in line with feedback and the EAC recommendation, we are now proposing the NNS as a pilot only: <https://www.nationalnatureservice.org/content/uploads/2020/10/National-Nature-Service-Overview-and-Plan-01.10.20.pdf>

We are hopeful that private finance and charitable funding could help support an extension of the scheme beyond its first year. We expect the need for trained staff to meet new demand for nature recovery work to be such that organisations in these sectors will be prepared to contribute to the continuation of a training pipeline in the form of the NNS. The structure established by the NNS pilot could also readily be scaled up, with environmental NGOs taking on larger groups across the country.

A clear precedent

The NNS pilot we propose would mark a start down a new road of opportunity for people in areas of high unemployment.

In doing so it would follow the precedent of the Teach First scheme, which [started](#) with a pilot programme of just 186 young people in 2003. Government funding allowed the scheme to set up and seize the opportunity its proposers glimpsed; of training up a new cohort of young people to provide a shot in the arm for education, particularly in areas of high unemployment and low opportunity. Over the ensuing two decades Teach First has grown ten times in size. Government funding as a proportion of its financing has shrunk over the same time period, as educational organisations and private companies have [recognised](#) the value of the training the scheme provides and been prepared to pay to sustain the training pipeline.

Faced with a comparable strategic opportunity to open the door to new opportunities for people living in areas of high unemployment, all for the price of the pilot, we hope that the Government will act.

Key recommendation

The Government should set up a National Nature Service pilot, as recommended by the Environmental Audit Committee. Such a pilot would:

- [Advance the levelling up agenda](#) – An NNS pilot will help deliver the training and skills required to unlock new careers in nature for people in areas of high unemployment.

The pilot would also provide the following supplementary benefits:

- Help deliver nature recovery work - The on-the-ground training of 100 NNS rangers, under the supervision of environmental charities, will constitute a significant extra resource for habitat restoration.
- Help to diversify the nature sector - Allowing youth groups to make referrals to the pilot will provide a new route for young people from diverse backgrounds to access careers in the nature sector.
- Be affordable – The £4.5 million cost of a pilot is significantly smaller than comparable schemes. There is also reason to expect the costs of any extension of the pilot to be met in part of organisations benefiting from the role of the NNS as training pipeline.