

25 year environment plan briefing paper January 2018

On 11 January, the Prime Minister launched a 25 Year Environment Plan, fulfilling the Government's 2015 manifesto pledge to publish a plan to "chart how we will improve our environment". We welcome the publication of the plan including and the continued commitment to leaving the environment in better condition.

The plan is a welcome starting point for a policy programme fit to deliver the Government's environmental ambition. However, many elements of the plan remain under-developed. Most of the plan reiterates current commitments and highlights areas of concern, rather than making substantive new commitments. In other areas, the plan will need primary legislation to be sufficiently robust to deliver over 25 years.

To start the implementation process, we recommend the UK Government should:

- **consult on a new Environment Act to establish the main elements of the plan in law; set out its process for further development of objectives and metrics, their legal status, and its framework for reporting in public and in parliament;**
- **work collaboratively with the devolved governments to address the UK-wide governance gap that will emerge across all four nations as a result of Brexit.**

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

A successful plan requires clear objectives, both to guide Government action and investment and to enable accountability. We welcome the commitment in the plan for metrics to measure progress. However:

1. **Some objectives are unambitious:** for example, the target for water quality appears to be weaker than the current target in the Water Framework Directive because it does not set a date for achieving good ecological condition (compared with the WFD target of 2027). The plan simply aims for good water quality "as soon as practicable". All targets should include realistic delivery dates, with milestones for delivery.
2. **Many of the objectives are weak:** without statutory force, targets remain aspirational. The Government has already missed non-binding objectives for halting biodiversity decline (2010), phasing out horticultural peat (2010), achieving good ecological status for water (2015) and others. To make a difference, the plan's objectives should be binding across Government.
3. **Other metrics are under-developed:** the plan includes a commitment to publish further metrics. It is not clear what status these metrics will have, whether accompanying targets will be set, and how they will be developed. Nor are there milestones for delivery of long-term targets.
4. **The plan is largely focussed on England:** the plan should form part of a new collaborative approach to addressing shared environmental challenges across the four nations of the United Kingdom.



Questions for the Minister:

- **When will DEFRA set out the process for developing further objectives and milestones for delivery?**
- **What standing will those objectives have in law? If the objectives are voluntary, what assurances can he give the House that the plan will be delivered?**
- **What discussions has he had with devolved administrations about new, shared UK environment goals?**

A strong plan needs site and species protection

Despite strong protection for Natura 2000 sites under the Birds and Habitats Directives, UK biodiversity is in long term decline and only a third of sites of special scientific interest are in good condition. The plan includes some welcome measures with potential to restore habitats:

- (a) restoring 75% of one million hectares of protected sites to favourable condition;
- (b) creating or restoring 500,000 hectares of wildlife-rich habitat outside the protected site network;
- (c) a “net environmental gain” principle for development to deliver environmental improvements.

It also reiterates Mr Gove’s commitment to a new agricultural policy based on public money for public goods, which has the potential to improve farmland wildlife and natural capital benefits like flood relief. However, clarity will be needed about the future of public funding after the Brexit transition period and how that will be allocated across the UK.

Successful implementation will require improved spatial planning for nature to ensure that ecological networks are functioning and coherent. It will also require mandatory standards for developers. These standards must not sidestep the current mitigation hierarchy, or weaken protection for sites and species and ensure a net gain approach is focused on species and habitats. Improved access to independent ecological expertise for local planning authorities is essential to underpin the net gain approach.

The plan has a welcome commitment to completing an ecologically coherent network of marine protected areas and to managing these more effectively through a whole site approach.

The goal of recovering fish stocks to sustainable levels in the shortest time is to be welcomed. However, we should be aiming to fish below maximum sustainable yield and fisheries should be set on a level playing field alongside other development within marine planning.

Questions for the Minister:

- **Can the Minister confirm that the mitigation hierarchy will be central to any environmental net gain approach, with a net gain in biodiversity secured before considering other environmental benefits?**
- **How will the objectives be included in legislation like the Agriculture, Fisheries and Trade Bills?**
- **Will allocation of public money for land management be based on an objective assessment of environmental need after Brexit? And how will that money be shared across the UK?**

A strong plan needs strong accountability

For the plan to last, it should be accompanied by robust mechanisms for reporting and accountability. We welcome the commitment to annual reporting on delivery of the plan. We also welcome the announcement of a consultation on a new statutory body to hold Government to account. However, Brexit risks a UK-wide governance gap opening up, but the plan includes no reference to working with the devolved governments to address this potential gap on a collaborative basis via the co-design of a new joint body.

Successful delivery will depend on the detail:

- The new statutory environment body must have the independence, expertise, powers and resources to oversee the implementation, compliance and enforcement of environmental law and policy by governments and all relevant public bodies. This should ensure an effective complaints mechanism for civil society and access to effective remedies.
- Reporting to the relevant legislatures must be clear and consistent. Annual reports must not be a “pick and mix” of metrics, overly-complex, or published quietly. Reports should be:
 - delivered to each legislature at the same time each year (e.g. alongside the annual budget);
 - in the same format each year;
 - clearly accessible, with “headline” indicators for progress on air, water and wildlife;
 - made publically available and scrutinised by the new independent environment body.

Questions for the Minister:

- **What format will the annual progress reports take in public and in Parliament?**
- **Does he expect the new statutory environment body to have the power to bring a legal challenge if the UK Government fails to meet the objectives of the 25 year environment plan?**

A strong plan needs to take account of international impacts

The 25 year plan is predominately focussed on England but it does set out the government’s commitment on nature, biodiversity and climate change internationally. According to the Natural Capital Committee’s findings, England has been gradually transferring the degradation of its own natural assets to those abroad.

Taking account of the extent to which we deplete the natural capital of other countries can radically alter assessments of sustainable use.

In addition to addressing domestic matters, the 25 year plan should account for the impact the UK has on nature overseas through its imports. Otherwise we might simply “export” more environmental damage to other countries undermining the UK’s global leadership role. That would be neither ethically acceptable, nor in the UK’s interests. The UK economy is enormously dependent on natural resources embedded in the products we import from other countries: for example, an estimated 70% of all the water consumed in the UK is embedded in imports and approximately one third of the biomass used by the UK comes from overseas. The UK’s “land footprint” is at least one and a half times the size of the nation.

If these natural resources are not managed sustainably, there is a fundamental and growing risk of increasing global competition and conflict over natural resources, posing serious challenges to the achievement of the

sustainable development goals, and threatening access to these resources. This will potentially have direct consequences for the UK economy and corporate sector.

We welcome the commitments in the plan on protecting and improving the global environment. It will be particularly important that the Government:

- Retains high standards and encourages sustainable management of natural resources abroad through the environmental provisions included within UK trade deals;
- Supports improved resource governance and natural capital management through UK aid spending and cooperation to improve the sustainability of international supply chains;
- Takes a leading role in developing an ambitious post-2020 international biodiversity strategy; and,
- Incentivises business to manage their environmental impacts down the supply chain.

Questions for the Minister:

- **How will the UK Government guarantee sustainability and high environmental standards in future trade deals?**
- **How will the UK promote international cooperation to address unsustainable natural resource use and environmental degradation?**
- **Will HMG lead by example in setting targets for sustainable sourcing of imports, for government procurement?**

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) brings together 47 environment and animal protection organisations to advocate for the conservation and protection of wildlife, countryside and the marine environment. Link is the biggest coalition of environmental and animal protection organisations in England.

Our members practice and advocate environmentally sensitive land management, and encourage respect for and enjoyment of natural landscapes and features, the historic and marine environment and biodiversity. Taken together we have the support of over eight million people in the UK and manage over 750,000 hectares of land.

This briefing paper is supported by the following organisations:



For further information, please contact: Dr Richard Benwell, co-chair, Wildlife and Countryside Link 25 Year Plan working group, and Head of Government Affairs, WWT, Richard.Benwell@wwt.org.uk, 07900 607596
Karen Ellis, co-chair, Wildlife and Countryside Link 25 Year Plan working group, and Acting Director of Science and Policy, WWF-UK, +44 (0)1483 412421, kellis@wwf.org.uk