

The Wildlife Trusts briefing:

Planning White Paper: “Planning for the Future”



On 6th August 2020, the Government published the Planning White Paper: “*Planning for the Future*”. The Prime Minister described these proposals as the most radical reforms to the planning system since the Second World War and made clear the intention to ‘tear it down and start again’.

A successful planning system is crucial to securing the recovery of nature and creating communities with nature-rich green space on people’s doorsteps. With wildlife continuing to decline across the country, it is clear the current planning system has flaws and needs updating.

But we believe the proposed reforms will only make a bad situation much worse – failing nature, people, and local democracy. The planning system must help us plan for the challenges of the 21st century, to help tackle the climate, ecological and health crises. The current proposals do not give us a system fit for the future. To fix this, The Wildlife Trusts want to see...

1. **Wildlife recovery and people’s easy access to nature at the heart of planning reform.** A Nature Recovery Network must underpin local plans, inform the identification of any zoning and be integrated into all areas.
2. **Nature protection policies and standards must not be weakened**, and assessment of environmental impact must take place before development is permitted.
3. **Address the ecological and climate crises by protecting new land put into recovery by creating a new designation – *Wildbelt*.** A new designation is needed to secure the future of the land that we are putting into recovery so that we can reach at least 30% of land for nature by 2030.
4. **People and local stakeholders to be able to engage with the planning system** at the point where it is meaningful to them and sufficient information is available to understand the impacts – on nature and on local communities.
5. **Decisions based on accurate nature data.** Local Plans, areas and development proposals must be informed by robust, accurate, detailed and thorough ecological information.

What is ‘*Wildbelt*’?

Currently, only about 8% of the land area of England is designated as a protected area for conservation. This is nowhere near enough – if the Government is serious about leaving the environment in a better state for the next generation, we need to ensure active recovery for wildlife across at least 30% of our land and seas by 2030. To achieve this, we need a new designation of land in England that is managed solely for nature’s recovery – a *Wildbelt*.

The benefits of *Wildbelt* would be wide reaching – it would improve resilience by preventing flooding and improving air quality, boost the recreational and tourism economy, create new environmental jobs, and, critically, help tackle the climate emergency by sucking up carbon. It would transform our countryside and our cities – creating communities where people can enjoy nature on their doorstep and ensure we hand over our natural environment in a better state to the next generation.

For more information on this briefing, please contact Elliot Chapman-Jones, Public Affairs Manager, echapman-jones@wildlifetrusts.org

Our concerns about the Planning White Paper proposals:

1. The reforms are highly likely to increase nature's decline

The proposals in the White Paper encourage a data driven and strategic approach, meaning that engagement in the planning system will be “front-loaded” using zonal planning with more permitted development and permissions in principle. The Wildlife Trusts have long advocated for strategic planning for nature, but these proposals fall far short of that idea.

The White Paper proposes land is allocated to one of three areas: *Growth, Renewal, or Protected*. This zoning provide no mechanism for nature’s recovery and amount to three ways in which nature can be destroyed: by being automatically discounted in the Growth area, overwhelmed by densification in the Renewal area and no change to the current approach in the Protected area, which we know is already failing nature. What’s more, the data needed to provide the evidence on which to plan the zones is not yet available and we have no confidence that adequate data can be provided to prevent substantial damage and loss of nature.

It is vital that planning decisions are informed by actual survey of development sites, but in most cases, under this new system, these will not be required. ‘Frontloading’ decision making could create a time lag between the local plan being agreed and the point at which development proceeds. Nature is not static, if the time lapse between the two is too extensive, the ecological data underpinning the permission in principle is likely to be inaccurate and out of date, potentially harming protected species and habitats.

Finally, the Government are planning to design a simpler framework for Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs). We are concerned that these proposals also rely on the existence of environmental data that is unrealistic. There is already insufficient information on which to make reliable decisions and the proposals do not address this. Streamlining could reduce quality and mean impacts on nature are not fully assessed.

2. The reforms fail to integrate nature into people's lives

We know that people value living in places close to nature. Spending time in wildlife-rich places improves our mental wellbeing and physical health. Far from putting nature into people’s lives, the reforms risk a reduction of available greenspace and crowding of remaining spaces. Currently, the White Paper contains no suggestion of including nature, or accessible natural green spaces, into the Growth and Renewal zones. In fact, there is a high risk of direct habitat loss in the Renewal zone due to infilling. The crowding of the few remaining green spaces from densification will lead to further increased pressure on sites and indirect impacts on wildlife.

3. The reforms undermine the democratic process

For decades, The Wildlife Trusts have worked with national and local government, businesses and local communities to influence planning and development to achieve better outcomes for wildlife. We welcome the intention to make it easier for people to get involved in planning to shape the places where they live and work. But these proposals fail that intention.

In our experience, public engagement in planning tends to be when individual detailed development applications are submitted and the impact that these will have on local people, infrastructure and nature becomes clearer. Under the new system, public engagement at this point would not be possible. The extensive use of ‘permission in principle’ through the proposed reforms will also give automatic approval to a large proportion of development across the Growth and Renewal Zones. We fear that the Government is driving these reforms through with little regard for local needs and local opinion.