Save Natural England

Wildlife Trusts Briefing: November 2026

In the autumn of 2026, the UK Government announced plans to review the future of environmental regulator Natural England. Opposition parties are pressing for full abolition. This briefing, published to accompany The Wildlife Trust's Save Natural England intervention, sets out why abolition would be devastating for nature and people.

The work of Natural England

Natural England's genesis can be found in the work of Clement Attlee's Government to create a land fit for heroes after the Second World War. The National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 established the two forerunners of Natural England, the National Parks Commission and the Nature Conservancy, the former to look after the new National Parks set up by the Act, the latter to look after new nature reserves. When announcing the Act and the two new public bodies, Labour Minister Lewis Silkin pledged that they would work *'to preserve and enhance the beauty of the countryside; and, secondly, to enable our people to see it, get to it, and enjoy it.'*[1]

Over the ensuing decades, through a series of mergers and renamings, the National Parks Commission and the Nature Conservancy became Natural England. Nearly 80 years on from Attlee's post-war reforms, Natural England continues to work to preserve and enhance England's beauty, and to increase public enjoyment of it.

In its modern guise, Natural England is responsible for:

- Protecting spaces that are important for wildlife, including England's Protected Sites Network.
- Bringing bring vulnerable species back.
- Connecting nature up across wide areas.
- Supporting wildlife-friendly farming.
- Supporting nature-friendly development and good growth.
- Supporting coastal recovery (up to 12 miles offshore).
- Helping more people enjoy nature close to them.

Natural England's achievements for nature and people

Over the past decades, nature has faced challenges on a scale not dreamt about in 1949. Intensive agriculture, mass development, modern pollution and now climate change have piled pressure upon pressure on England's wildlife, leading to ongoing decline.[2] Without Natural England and its preservation work, we would have even less nature left than we currently have. Natural England's work has not stopped decline, but it has helped slow it. The regulator's work, in conjunction with other public bodies, environmental charities and civil society, has secured redoubts for nature to hang on in, and to start to recover from.

[1] Hansard 31st March 1949, 2nd Reading of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act
[2] State of Nature report, 2023

Natural England's achievements include:

- The preservation and management of England's Protected Sites Network, the 8% of English land strictly protected for nature. Natural England have also created 226 National Nature Reserve (NNRs), to add to the network. These sites and reserves constitute some of nature's last strongholds and provide a base for wider nature recovery, across whole landscapes.
- Targeted interventions to protect the most threatened species. The Natural England Species Recovery Programme has helped stop at least 35 species from dying out in England, including bitterns and hazel dormice.
- The provision of advice to farmers, to help recover nature across farmed landscapes and to help farmers restore their soils to ensure continued food production into the future.
- Increased access to nature for the public, including the delivery of the King Charles III England Coast Path, providing (for the first time in history) secure public access to every part of the English coast.

The attacks on Natural England

The political landscape of the past decade has fuelled successive attacks on nature. Brexit loosened the legal requirements on UK Governments to protect nature, and years of post-Brexit low growth has generated political frustration about a sluggish economy.[3] Desperation for growth, combined with a new capability to lower nature protections, has seen politicians tempted by arguments that less nature can mean more growth.

Corporate voices have been quick to make those arguments, particularly around the Protected Sites Network. Big money could be made from more development in and around the 8% of England currently protected under the network. Less checks and less mitigation requirements for development in these areas would mean more profit for developers and large landowners. As the primary legal custodian for these protected sites, Natural England has become the focus for corporate fire. Corporates know that if Natural England is removed, a key barrier to commercially exploiting the protected 8% of England falls away.

Westminster lobby groups with opaque funding sources have been making the case for the corporates that Natural England should be abolished. Given Westminster's desperation for growth and new post-Brexit powers, these arguments have been accepted by some in politics. In October 2026 both the Conservatives and Reform pledged to abolish Natural England, along with a raft of further measures to weaken protected sites and to attack nature. In November 2026 the Deputy Prime Minister in the Labour Government announced a review of all regulators and singled out Natural England as *'in her sights'*. Someone working in Government briefed the newspapers that this meant Natural England would soon be abolished as block to growth.[4]

The risk for England

Westminster seems poised to remove the primary legal custodian of the last 8% of England left for nature. This risks rolling the dice on whether a country can survive without its wild spaces.

[3] Wildlife Trusts report on Brexit and the environment, 2026
[4] Wildlife Trusts response to Deputy Prime Minister's speech, November 2026

The available evidence strongly suggests not. Whilst the Treasury might capture some of the profits corporates make from a post-deregulation commercial bonanza, the social and economic harm would quickly outweigh the limited and temporary public revenue boost.

Natural England safeguards beloved protected sites, from Chesil Beach to the South Pennine Moors to the oaks of Epping Forest. Damage to or even loss of such sites to newly enabled commercial exploitation would strike a huge blow to the national soul. Polling shows that appreciation of nature sites unites people in joy, pride and a sense of wonder, across all parts of England and all parts of the political spectrum.[5] The diminishment of these everyday joys would be a profound national loss. The end of Natural England's wider work to recover nature and increase public access to it would further exacerbate this social harm.

Loss would also be felt in terms of pounds and pence. The Office of National Statistics measured the socio-economic value of nature through the UK Natural Capital Accounts, a 2023 publication. The ONS put nature-related related tourism as the top of the list, estimating it to be worth £10 billion per year to the economy. This was followed by the health benefits recreation in nature provides to the UK population, which the ONS valued at £8 billion per year. Finally, the ONS estimated that the desirable aesthetics provided by nature sustains an uplift to house prices worth £8 billion annually. Natural England is a primary legal custodian of much of this nature, and as such is the regulatory guarantor of much of the annual £26 billion nature dividend for the UK economy, as measured by the ONS.

The long-term economic effects of the abolishment of this regulatory guarantor will be exacerbated by climate change. No Natural England means less nature to help reduce the impacts of climate change. This will mean:

- More wildfire and drought costs, as healthy wild habitats decline and can no longer retain water in the summer.
- More flooding costs, as healthy wild habitats decline and can no longer slow water down in the winter.
- More water and air pollution, due to wild habitats declining and being less able to provide natural (and free) cleaning services. Reduced crop yields, as fields scorch, soils erode and pollinator and pest predator populations decline.

Abolishment of Natural England and wider environmental deregulation will mean less of natural protection against climate change and acceleration of these environmental harms, rushing faster over the economy.[6]

Abolishing Natural England in the hope of national renewal and economic growth is akin to a camper burning their tent to keep warm at the start of a cold winter night. The costs of such disastrous Westminster short-termism would be felt by all of us.

[5] Strong Roots report, More in Common, 2026
[6] For all stats in this section, see Wildlife Trusts report on the Habitats Regulations, August 2026

The need for an urgent rethink

At a time when nature is in decline, and approaching a tipping point that spells danger for human lives[7], the Government seems to be seriously considering abolishing the primary legal custodian of the last spaces for nature in England.

Ultimately, the vehemence of the commercially driven campaign against Natural England is a compliment to its effectiveness for nature and the public interest. If Natural England wasn't such an effective voice for nature, those who stand to profit from lowered nature protections wouldn't be campaigning so viciously against it.

There is still time for the Government to rethink, and retreat from its ill-advised flirtation with hitting nature and its protectors, in the vain hope that growth will fall out. In September the Prime Minister promised to end years of deregulation and policy being driven by vested interests.[8] Will the same Prime Minister accede to commercial lobbying, deregulate nature and open up protected sites for more commercial exploitation, just months later? The blow that such a betrayal would inflict on nature - and on trust in politics - would be immense.

MythBuster

The below section responds to the key arguments made by attackers of Natural England.

Natural England is not a 'blocker'

One of the favourite claims made by the Westminster lobbyists working to abolish Natural England is that the regulator spends its time 'blocking' projects. This is a gross distortion of Natural England's role.

Natural England is nature's voice at the decision table when plans that would impact protected sites are discussed. It inputs through a variety of legal mechanisms, with varying weight attached to each one. These mechanisms include:

- Sites protected by the Habitats Regulations: When a project could affect a site, the regulations require the local planning authority to complete a Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) to assess the project's likely impacts on the habitats or species the site is protected for, with a focus on the site's ecological integrity. Unless the HRA shows that damage will not occur, the project cannot take place. The only exception is if the applicant can demonstrate to the Secretary of State (the final decision maker) imperative reasons of overriding public interest for the project to proceed (known as the IROPI test). Natural England provides advice on the HRA.
- Species protected by the Habitats Regulations: The regulations require projects that could damage or disturb a protected species to obtain a European Protected Species (EPS) license before going ahead. This requires the regulator, Natural England, to be satisfied, through a license application, that mitigation and compensation activities alongside the project work

[7] Nature Security Assessment, Defra, 2026
[8] Andy Burnham's speech at Labour Party Conference, September 2026

will maintain the favourable conservation status of the relevant species in its native range. This wording allows for some damage to protected species population directly affected by the project, in return for mitigation and compensation to help the species more generally and prevent an overall decrease in its abundance.

- Sites registered as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI): When a planning project could affect a SSSI, the regulations require the local planning authority to take advice from Natural England on likely harms to the site if the project went ahead, and how these harms could be managed by mitigation measures. The local planning authority can disregard Natural England's advice but, in these cases, Natural England can ask the Secretary of State to review the decision. Under separate regulations, landowners and occupiers of SSSI land require written consent from Natural England before carrying out activities that could damage the site.

Through the above mechanisms, Natural England guards the Protected Sites network. In each and every mechanism there is flexibility to recognise when human needs are imperative, An ultimate, electorally accountable court of appeal is provided in the form of the desk of the Secretary of State.

Contrary to lobbyist myth, The Protected Sites Network is bounded not by fixed, unassailable Natural England wall, but by a mesh of flexible advice and mitigation requirements, in which Natural England plays a significant but not exclusive role. This arrangement has for decades worked well to guard England's last nature-rich sites, while allowing appropriate human activity in and around them and maintaining space to accommodate exceptional circumstances.

Natural England's functions cannot be effectively absorbed into Defra

Some advocates of Natural England abolition are clear that they want both Natural England and the above Habitats Regulations and SSSI mechanisms removed, to wholly abandon the idea of having protected sites in the interests of growth. Others try to strike a more moderate tone, and claim that with Natural England removed, the mechanisms could be retained and transferred to Defra.

Such an arrangement would still constitute a huge downgrade in nature protection. Starting with the National Parks and Countryside Act 1949, the laws that successive Parliaments passed to set up Natural England and its predecessors deliberately conferred powers to the regulator. These parliamentary decisions to devolve power were made in recognition of the fact that stewardship of the Protected Sites Network required a degree of independence for those doing the stewarding. Crucially, this included independence from short term political considerations, to allow stewards to make decisions based on the best interests of nature in the long term.

The absorption of Natural England into Defra would remove this vital independence. A Secretary of State responsible for all decisions previously taken by Natural England would be far more exposed than the regulator ever was to pressure to take decisions which are good for politics, but bad for nature. Temptations to choose political benefits (such as profits and taxes generated by a company, or approving headlines about delivering infrastructure) over nature's needs will prove irresistible for many politicians. The call of science is often drowned out in the tumult of political consideration.

The amount of work that would be transferred to the desk of the Secretary of State through a Defra takeover of Natural England would also be overwhelming, impairing good decision making. Absorption and loss of a separate regulatory identity would also mark a clear downgrade in the

importance of nature regulation; when regulators get digested into a larger body, their focus gets digested too.

It is revealing that the stated motivations of those arguing for absorption of Natural England into Defra is not better nature recovery; but rather (allegedly) improved prospects for economic growth. Implicit in this argument is that the current set-up is too effective at ensuring's nature's needs are considered in decision making. Even the advocates of absorption quietly recognise that it would be a downgrade for nature, albeit not on the calamitous scale proposed by those who want to see both Natural England and environmental consideration mechanisms scrapped.

Previous Parliaments knew what they were doing. The arrangement they established of an independent regulator to take the everyday decisions needed to manage a Protected Sites network, with the elected Secretary of State serving as ultimate authority and court of appeal, is broadly working well. Independent expertise for the day-to-day and elected oversight overall is a powerful combination for effective public service delivery.

The truth about Natural England is very different from the caricature presented by Westminster lobbyists. In place of the blocking, anti-democratic organisation of lobbyist myth is a constructive, independent voice for nature working under elected oversight to protect what is left for wildlife, in the interests of the public.

Natural England can be improved whist retaining its core function

Lobbyists often cite the HS2 'Bat Tunnel' and Hinkley C 'Fish Disco' as examples of Natural England's alleged incompetence. Poor outcomes in both cases stem from the developer decisions - to proceed with a bat tunnel without consulting environmentalists in the case of HS2 and to undermine and delay agreed mitigation measures in the case of Hinkley C. In both cases developer mistakes have been projected onto Natural England.[9]

Whilst these charges have no merit, Natural England is not perfect. The regulator was badly hit the austerity of the 2010's, when its budget was cut by over two thirds, with the worst of the damage falling on Natural England work on the ground in communities and on its ability to respond quickly and constructively to enquiries. Recovery from these cuts is not yet complete.

Over the past year Natural England has adopted reforms to make it faster at reacting to planning enquiries and in greenlighting licensing applications. There is significant potential for these reforms to develop further through the English devolution now being implemented by No10. Natural England could operate on a more regional model, with local teams sitting under locally elected leaders, to help them implement nature recovery and support nature friendly, good growth initiatives on on the ground. For this work effectively, Natural England will need to retain its day-to-day independence and focus on long term nature recovery. The Wildlife Trusts has provided Government with recommendations on how such devolution reforms could delivered to benefit nature and local areas.

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[9] See Wildlife Trusts Habitats Regulations report and blog on deregulation arguments