



Media release

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New report says planning reform must make access to nature legal and fair

First anniversary of Wildbelt in PM's keynote speech – when will it happen?

Today, The Wildlife Trusts publish a new report that, for the first time, calls for people's access to nature to be set in law. ***Planning – a new way forward: how the planning system can help our health, nature and climate***, comes at a critical time for the Government's Planning White Paper and the recently announced "pause" on planning reform.

The newly named Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has a huge opportunity to ensure the planning system improves lives by levelling up access to nature.

In the light of recent political developments, The Wildlife Trusts are calling for:

- **A planning system which levels up people's access to nature** by setting a legally binding target so everyone, no matter where they live, can receive the benefits that nature provides. Evidence shows that almost half the population say they are spending more time outside than before the pandemic – but access to nature is deeply unequal and this exacerbates health inequalities, putting more strain on the NHS as it copes with the mental health crisis made worse by Covid.
- **The Planning Bill to ensure that we have more space for nature.** Last October, at his keynote address to the Conservative Party Conference, the Prime Minister said that his vision for 2030 included people "going for picnics in the new wild belts that now mark the landscape." A year on, the Government has the perfect opportunity to keep its promise by including a new way of protecting land reclaimed for nature in the Planning Bill. If the Government is to reach its target of at least 30% of land for nature by 2030, a new designation – Wildbelt – is essential for protecting new land, currently of low biodiversity value, where nature can recover.
- **Planning reforms that deliver the Government's legally binding target in the Environment Bill to halt species decline by 2030.** All Government departments need to consider how they can contribute to nature's recovery – especially those involved in planning. This means a legal requirement for planning authorities to consider Local Nature Recovery Strategies when making planning decisions and ensuring nature protection policies and standards are not weakened.

Craig Bennett, chief executive of The Wildlife Trusts, says:

“It was a relief to hear Michael Gove announce a pause on planning reform because the existing proposals would not have helped the nature and climate crisis. Now he has a chance to address this and create better homes and communities for people and wildlife.

“We know that time spent in beautiful, natural places boosts our health and wellbeing – the pandemic has shown us how important this is. But too many households do not have access to nearby wild places. The sad truth is that the most deprived areas have nine times less green space than the wealthiest – and poorer areas are where people’s health is the worst.

“We want to see accessible natural greenspace standards put into law and not relegated to being just ‘advice’ for local authorities. This way, we can be sure that by 2030, everyone can enjoy wild areas within five minutes of where they live and work – to spend time with family, or to be alone, relaxing in nature and listening to birdsong.

“Designating Wildbelt, new land where nature can recover, will help us achieve this goal. It’s also vital that there’s a legal requirement for planning authorities to consider Local Nature Recovery Strategies when making planning decisions and ensuring nature protection policies and standards are not weakened. Let’s bring nature back for the sake of wildlife, the climate and for people’s health and happiness, no matter where they happen to live.”

‘Planning – a new way forward: how the planning system can help our health, nature and climate’ by The Wildlife Trusts can be downloaded [here](#).

The new report outlines three key concerns with the current planning proposals:

- They are highly likely to increase nature’s decline and fail to tackle climate change
- They fail to integrate nature into people’s lives
- They undermine the democratic process

Dr Sue Young, Head of Land Use Planning at The Wildlife Trusts says:

“The UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world and so protections must be strengthened to reverse nature’s decline. However, the threats are constant, and The Wildlife Trusts are fighting against developments that put important wild areas at risk all over the country.

“At Portsmouth Harbour, for example, a scheme to build 3,500 houses will destroy a legally protected wildlife site. Development like this should never be proposed where it can do such damage – nature needs to be off-limits.

“Planning should be about making great places where people can live healthier and happier lives. This means integrating nature into all areas and ensuring strategic plans really consider how nature helps reduce health inequalities.”

The *Accessible Natural Greenspace Standards* that The Wildlife Trusts want to become law include life-enhancing targets such as requiring natural greenspace to be at least two hectares in size within 300 metres of every home. A recent poll found that 94% of local

residents want to see increased biodiversity in their area, including the planting of trees and protection of green spaces.

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