



# The Wildlife Trusts' preliminary analysis of the Planning White Paper

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September 2020



# Introduction

The Planning White Paper: [Planning for the Future](#), was published for 12 weeks' consultation on Thursday 6 August 2020. In his foreword, the Prime Minister described the proposed reforms to the planning system as the most radical since the Second World War and made clear the intention to 'tear it down and start again.'

The Wildlife Trusts recognise that any long-running system will need review and updates. The English planning system has been in place for over 70 years. During this time, it has been tested, reviewed and fine-tuned. It has been developed to meet many of the aims set out in this document, and where this fails, it is often in the implementation and underfunding, not the system itself. Planning is a complicated practice, which engages many different sectors and processes.

The current planning system is not perfect, and there is certainly room for improvement, but trying to oversimplify it risks making it even less perfect - it is not the cause of the problems that government faces.

There are some interesting ideas in the story the White Paper starts to tell, but the details of these ideas are tantalisingly out of reach. We welcome the intention to make it easier for people to get involved in planning and shaping the places where they will live, work and play. But these proposals fail that intention. We agree that planning should promote the stewardship and improvement of our natural environment, but the proposals will fail to achieve that.



The planning system must help us plan for the challenges of the 21st century, to help tackle the climate, ecological and health crises, which also contribute to the economic difficulties the country faces. Much more thinking needs to go into these proposed reforms before they are fit for that purpose.

## What needs to happen?

The planning system must deliver truly sustainable development without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It must enable society to live within environmental limits; ensure a strong, healthy and just society; achieve a sustainable economy; promote good governance; and use sound science responsibly.

## 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.

**The Wildlife Trusts are urging the public to back our principles and add their own views to the consultation before it closes on 29 October. [Take part in the consultation.](#)**

# Our concerns about the Planning White Paper Proposals

**There is insufficient detail to understand the full impact of the proposals, but we believe they will not result in sustainable development and will lead to losses and damage to the natural environment that will exacerbate the climate and ecological emergencies and growing health inequalities.**

Our concerns are interlinked. The data-driven and strategic approaches mean that engagement in the planning system will be “front-loaded” using zonal planning which fails to properly integrate nature.

“Front-loading” means that zones suitable for development in two of the three new areas will be determined up-front in the local plan. When the local plan is approved, all areas identified as suitable for substantial development (Growth areas), will have outline permission for the principle of development. In those identified as renewal areas, there will be a general presumption in favour of development and widespread use of “permitted development”. This means that once the local plan is adopted most development sites can be considered approved.

Thereafter, the focus of planning decisions will be on outstanding issues of things like design and not the principle of development.

The extensive use of permission in principle, much more permitted development and a lack of integration of nature in developed areas will risk damaging existing natural sites and do nothing to plan for nature’s recovery.

The proposed reforms undermine the democratic process and provide little opportunity to influence individual development proposals. All of this is underpinned by a lack of adequate data and resources.

## Our top three concerns

### The reforms are highly likely to increase nature’s decline

The data-driven and strategic approaches to the zonal planning fail to integrate nature into two of the areas, and offer less protection than is available under the current system. The data needed to provide the evidence on which to plan the areas is not available and we have no confidence that adequate data can be provided to prevent substantial damage and loss of nature.

A proposed weakening of the Environmental Impact Assessment through streamlining, and changes to the systems of wildlife and environmental protections pose a further risk - insufficient information is provided to assess this.

Despite a section on stewardship and enhancement of the natural environment, the proposals contain little tangible detail for this. No explanation is given on how planning will contribute to nature’s recovery, beyond tenuous nods to net gain. More detail is needed on how Local Nature Recovery Strategies, as set out in the draft Environment Bill, are to be integrated into the planning system to provide the foundation of a Nature Recovery Network. They are the means of integrating policy delivery, including: targeting habitat creation for Biodiversity Net Gain, natural solutions to climate change adaptation and mitigation; and addressing the health inequalities stemming from lack of access to natural green space. The White Paper fails to capture that mechanism, even though it does propose spatially-specific policies in the National Planning Policy Framework on mitigating and adapting to climate change and maximising environmental benefits.



TERRY WHITTAKER / 2020VISION

**The reforms fail to integrate nature into people's lives, something that is now recognised as essential for our health and wellbeing**

There is no suggestion of including nature, or accessible natural green spaces, in the Renewal areas: those areas where people already live. In fact, there is a high risk of direct loss of accessible nature-rich green space in the Renewal zone due to infilling and developments at the perimeters of the towns and villages. Densification will lead to increased recreational pressure on existing sites and other indirect impacts on wildlife. This won't put nature into people's lives; it will lead to a reduction of available green space, and crowding of remaining spaces.

**The reforms undermine the democratic process and provide little opportunity to influence individual development proposals**

The opportunity to comment on specific development proposals as they pass through the planning system has been an essential way for people to have a voice in when developments could directly affect them. It is also a vital mechanism by which The Wildlife Trusts help to get the best possible outcomes for wildlife.

The Planning White Paper reforms remove some of the ways in which people can engage in the planning system, and mean that for most development, there would now be only one point at which people can have a say: during the preparation of the local plan.



TOM MARSHALL

# Preliminary analysis

## Front-loading the planning system - the dangers of making all the decisions up-front

### Ecological information

We support and encourage a spatially informed, strategic approach to protecting and enhancing nature by mapping a [Nature Recovery Network](#). To achieve this, however, the Nature Recovery Network and Local [Nature Recovery Strategies](#) would need to be in place before the local plan is developed, in order to inform the zoning. Even then, this only provides a strategic picture, rather than removing the need for a site survey, which might identify that a site is not suitable for development because it is of high value to nature.

However, under the new proposals the implications are that a site survey will not be required before zoning takes place. Yet if a site survey later in the process identified the presence of, for example, endangered wildlife, it still would not be enough to halt development.

The Lodge Hill development in Kent is an example of the risk of relying on incomplete data: under threat from a housing development, Lodge Hill went on to be designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest because a site survey revealed a nationally important population of nightingales.

The amount of detailed information needed to create the local plan – to provide ecological information to ensure that nature is protected, and space identified for its recovery is not currently available. The Local Authority has just 12 months to gather the evidence necessary to inform and justify the proposed plan. This means that, in all likelihood, this evidence will not be gathered, and vital areas for wildlife and people could be lost.

Even if this was achievable, we are concerned that making all the big planning decisions up-front within the local plan presents a significant risk to nature. Firstly, the ecological complexities of individual sites will be missed through a front-loaded approach, which does not require site surveys when determining areas of development. And secondly, due to time lag

between the local plan being agreed and the point at which development proceeds, it may be years before development occurs on land that has been categorised as Renewal or Growth. 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. In simple terms, an area of land may be designated as a Growth zone. Five years may pass between that designation and the commencement of development. In that time the wildlife present may change drastically - but development would still be allowed due to the original designation.

The consultation promotes an open-data approach. While on the surface this could be viewed as a good, transparent approach, our experience shows that making all ecological data open is not that simple because of the restrictions placed on some data agreements.

Instead it is likely to result in a reduction in data availability (particularly for protected species), erosion of data quality (particularly in cases where local data is not comparable at the national level) and a reduction in the resources from fees for provision of data, which are currently used to verify and validate data and support ongoing survey work and volunteers.



CHRIS GOMERSALL / 2020VISION

## Design guides and codes

Local plans will be supported by local design guides and codes. Design codes are potentially a good thing - we advocate similar development principles through Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust's [Building with Nature project](#), local Green Infrastructure Frameworks and other locally developed codes and standards. They set out certain elements and features that new development should include, or processes they must undertake.

We welcome the proposal that local communities must be involved in their development, but it is vital that communities are supported by sufficient, clear information and evidence so that they are aware of all the issues and opportunities their community faces – including climate and ecological challenges.

## National Planning Policy does not provide definitive rules

Streamlined local plans will have limited policy content so the National Planning Policy Framework will become the primary source of policies. But national policy is too generic to guide local circumstances and nuances. It would need to provide clear definitive rules to avoid ambiguity.

Having a definitive national framework is not only important to inform the development of local plans, it could also help with the process of public engagement, providing clear, unequivocal expectations of what is and isn't permitted.

However, while the concept of rules is a good one, it all depends on the rules. We would want to see requirements for nature's protection and recovery strengthened and not weakened through such an approach.

## Loss of local democracy

We are very concerned about the loss of opportunity to challenge damaging development at the point where the actual development proposals come forward and become evident to the public. Currently local people can respond at this stage. However, under the proposals local people would only have the opportunity to respond to what happens at their district level, right at the beginning of the process during the development of the local plan, and not to individual planning applications that happen further down the line.

Consultation questions ask whether people get involved in planning decisions, and the barriers to this. But the consultation does not ask what would make people get involved. In our experience, engagement tends to be when individual development applications are submitted, that local people consider to be potentially damaging. Under the new system, public engagement at this point would not be possible.

Government is also considering whether the automatic right to be heard at the examination process for the local plan could be removed, so that participants are only invited at the discretion of the inspector. This would remove the only opportunity for public and third-party organisations such as The Wildlife Trusts to challenge planning proposals. They may even remove the need for an independent examination of the local plan altogether – relying on Local Authorities to self-assess.

## Zoning and Permission in Principle

### Zoning

Zoning is an interesting approach with mixed success in other countries. It has the potential to work but this depends on how it is done. The paper proposes land is allocated to one of three areas:

- Growth, suitable for “substantial development”
- Renewal, suitable for “development - gentle densification”
- Protected, applying development controls.

The areas provide no mechanism for nature's recovery and three ways in which nature can be destroyed: by being automatically discounted in the Growth area, overwhelmed in the Renewal area and unprotected in the Protected area. The Protected zone may sound suitable, but what it appears to mean in practice is no change to the current approach, which we know is already failing nature.

There is no suggestion of including nature, or accessible natural green spaces into Growth and Renewal areas. In fact, there is a high risk of direct habitat loss in the Renewal area due to infilling and developments at the perimeters of towns and villages, which usually contain high value sites (actual and potential) for nature. Densification will lead to increased recreational pressure and other indirect

impacts on wildlife. This fails to put nature into people's lives; it will lead to a reduction of available green space and crowding of remaining spaces.

It is unclear what the decision-making process would be in these areas and whether impacts on the natural environment would be identified and addressed. Insufficient information is available in the White Paper to identify risks to the environment, no detail is given about what might be considered a constraint to inclusion in a Growth area – except flood risk.

Furthermore, areas of constraint are only excluded if the risk cannot be mitigated, but it is not explained how this mitigation is to be achieved. This means that potentially inadequate or unsuitable mitigation could be used to allow damaging developments to go ahead.

We have two main concerns about the Protected area.

The first is that this is an outdated approach to the environment that Government itself has moved away from. The 25 Year Environment Plan and the draft Environment Bill both support the development of Nature Recovery Networks, based on the principle of creating more, bigger, better and joined-up wild places.

Nature doesn't fit in boxes, protecting fragments of wild land is not enough. The Protected area appears to be made up of sites and areas designated for their natural or cultural importance. We are pleased to see Local Wildlife Sites included in the list of the existing valuable areas to be protected, but concerned that it fails to include Ancient Woodland.

The Protected area should be a network linking existing important sites and identifying those areas that provide opportunities for nature to recover in future.

If all land within a plan area must be allocated to one of the three categories, there is a risk that land adjacent to designated wildlife sites will be allocated for development with no consideration of the indirect damage that this might inflict on the designated site.

Furthermore, nature is needed everywhere; protection and enhancement of nature should not be exclusive to this zone.

Secondly, the Protected area is not fully protected. Development proposals can still be made, and will be measured against a definition of sustainable development, with nationally defined development restrictions. Until the revised National Planning Policy Framework is published we don't know whether these are adequate to protect nature. We do not support the current National Planning Policy Framework definition of sustainable development.

Any future planning reform should include a clear definition of sustainable development that incorporates the five principles established in [Securing the Future](#) and recognise the role of the planning system in delivering the Government's commitment to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Agenda 2030).



## Permission in Principle

Through the proposed reforms, a large proportion of development will have automatic approval or outline permission to develop in principle. This includes:

- All development in a Growth area – allocated for substantial development including whole new towns and villages. Any proposal in these areas would automatically have outline permission
- Development in a Growth area which has permission in principle would get automatic detailed permission if it met the criteria set out in a Local Development Order, or an area masterplan and site-specific design code
- Consideration is being given to including particularly large developments in the National Infrastructure Projects Regime with a Development Consent Order, removing the need for any planning permission
- ‘Pre-specified’ development in a Renewal area will get automatic consent if the scheme meets design code and other prior-approval requirements
- Development in a Renewal area that complies with a “pattern book” of standard building types
- Development in a Renewal area where there is a Local or Neighbourhood Development Order in place.

Under existing rules for permission in principle, there are examples of poor developments coming forward, without specified requirements for nature and access to green space.

With permission in principle being agreed at the local plan stage, there is the added concern it will significantly reduce the scope for public engagement (as discussed above under loss of local democracy).

It is not clear exactly how these proposals would relate to the requirements for Biodiversity Net Gain, currently being considered under the Environment Bill, although we do know that any development approved via a Development Order is currently exempt from the Biodiversity Net Gain requirements.

This would imply that the proposed reforms for zoning in the White Paper would exempt a significant amount of development from the Biodiversity Net Gain requirement.

## Changes to Environmental Impact Assessment

Government will design a quicker, simpler framework for assessing environmental impacts and enhancement opportunities, that speeds up the process – a consultation on this is expected in the autumn.

Whilst we agree that the Environmental Impact Assessment process should be reviewed and duplication removed, we are concerned that these proposals rely on an unrealistic assumption that there would be an adequate level of environmental data without further survey.

There is already insufficient information on the presence of habitats and species across any local authority on which to make reliable and evidenced decisions. The proposals do not address this shortfall. The cost of providing robust data over whole Local Authority areas is huge, which is why development decisions are currently informed by targeted survey.

Streamlining could reduce quality and mean impacts on nature are not fully assessed, therefore not avoided, or mitigated. Will the assessment be based on a desk survey, i.e. available data, no matter how poor or inaccurate? And how does this fit with Biodiversity Net Gain – will the metric be applied to the inadequate assessment?

If so, there is significant risk that the Biodiversity Net Gain approach will result in a reduction in habitat value and overall biodiversity loss, as this is reliant on the application of a metric informed by accurate data and information.

It is not clear at which point the assessment of impact will take place. Will it be after permission has been automatically given, when it is too late to avoid some impacts? It is also not clear what measures will be imposed on planning applications that have permission in principle and have followed a strict design code.



## Changes to levels of protection for sites and species

There is a suggestion of strengthening some environmental protections, but there is no clear commitment to avoid building on existing protected sites, whereas this is explicit in the section on build heritage which states: “Local Plans will clearly identify the location of internationally, nationally and locally designated heritage assets.” We believe the same assurance should be provided for the protection of natural heritage. There is also a presumption that the international, national and local protections we have are all we need for nature. This fails to recognise that many of our protected sites are in unfavourable condition and even if these weren't, these alone will not support nature's recovery. **Nature is in freefall – we need more space for it.**

The consultation states that the planning reforms should be accompanied by a ‘deep dive regulatory review to identify and eliminate outdated regulations which increase costs for local planning authorities, especially to the decision-making process’. This may not be about species but based on past experience and the Prime Minister's remarks, we are concerned it may be yet another review which seeks to cut “environmental red-tape” even though previous reviews have found no unnecessary regulations.

This statement, along with proposals for a simpler Environmental Impact Assessment process, and reduction in site-specific surveying, suggests there is a real risk that the White Paper could be an opening gambit in a drive for a reduction in environmental standards.

## Proposals do not address the climate and ecological emergencies

Despite a section on stewardship and enhancement of the natural environment, the proposals contain little tangible detail for this. No explanation is given on how planning will contribute to the enhancement of nature, beyond tenuous nods to net gain.

More detail is needed on how Local Nature Recovery Strategies, as set out in the draft Environment Bill, are to be integrated into the planning system to provide

the foundation of a Nature Recovery Network. They are the means of integrating and targeting policy delivery, including habitat creation for net gain and natural solutions to climate change adaptation and mitigation, and addressing the health inequalities stemming from lack of access to natural green space.

The White Paper fails to capture that mechanism, even though it does propose spatially-specific policies in the National Planning Policy Framework on mitigating and adapting to climate change and maximising environmental benefits.



PAUL HOBSON

There is a lack of ambition in how planning should help address the climate crisis and no mention is made of the ecological emergency. Such detail is left to future revision of the National Planning Policy Framework.

The role that natural habitats can play in climate change mitigation and adaptation is not well addressed, mentioning only street trees and woodland creation. Revision of the National Planning Policy Framework must consider how to plan for and protect space for nature's recovery, which includes consideration of a designation.

## Other issues

### Consolidated Infrastructure Levy

The reforms propose that the existing developer contributions (planning obligations – Section 106; and Community Infrastructure Levy) will be replaced with a new, consolidated 'infrastructure levy' charged as a fixed proportion of the development value, which is levied at the point of occupation.

The current approach to developer contributions has not been without problems. Consideration needs to be given to what the Consolidated Infrastructure Levy will mean for biodiversity compensation and enhancements and their long-term maintenance. Could it result in biodiversity slipping further down the list of priorities? This may also have implications for Biodiversity Net Gain, as Section 106, was being considered by Government as a route to securing net gain.

### Duty to Cooperate

Under the proposed reforms, Government intends to abolish the Duty to Cooperate, which places a legal duty on local planning authorities, county councils in England and public bodies to engage constructively, actively and on an ongoing basis to maximise the effectiveness of Local Plan preparation in the context of strategic cross boundary matters.

While this is not a duty to agree, it is a route by which Local Nature Partnerships can ensure engagement on cross boundary issues for nature. It can also be important in ensuring consideration is given to the direct, indirect and cumulative impacts of nature at a strategic, cross-boundary level.



BERTIE GREGORY / 2020VISION

### Local authority resources

There is no apparent additional funding for already over-stretched local planning authorities to implement the reforms. Instead, the paper suggests that the reforms will free planners from existing planning obligations allowing local authorities to 'reassign' resources so they can focus on the enforcement of planning design, standards and decisions. We do not agree that reassigning already insufficient resources will be the silver bullet planners and Local Planning Authorities need.

### Assessment of housing need

The proposals are based on a national housebuilding target of 300,000 new homes annually, an amount that is already considered to be an over estimation of requirement based on the more recent Office for National Statistics figures, and the undersupply in the least affordable places.

This is a nationally-imposed target that may not accurately reflect local need or the capacity (including environmental) for areas to absorb certain levels of development.

There needs to be a much stronger steer in future policy to ensure that the delivery of housing and other development that has already got planning approval is enforced, in order to bring sites forward as planned.

### Renewed focus on brownfield

The paper does not differentiate between concrete-covered brownfield sites and those that have developed significant wildlife value and have become important community assets since being abandoned.

The Wildlife Trusts support the principle of prioritising development on 'suitable' brownfield sites, but the emphasis is on 'suitable'. To provide certainty for planners and developers there should be a clear definition of the types of brownfield sites that should be considered from the outset as high environmental value.

In addition, before allocating any brownfield site for permission in principle it must be surveyed to assess the ecological value. Without such safeguards we are likely to see the continued loss of, and damage to, important brownfield sites.



TOM HIBBERT

# What needs to happen?

## The Wildlife Trusts believe that:

- 1. Wildlife recovery and people's easy access to nature must be at the heart of planning reform.** Strategic planning for nature, in which the network of space needed for nature's recovery is identified, mapped and integrated into the planning system, must be applied across all areas. This Nature Recovery Network map must be upheld by law and should inform Local Plans.
- 2. Nature protection policies and standards must not be weakened, and assessment of environmental impact must take place before development is permitted.** Currently the reforms appear to suggest that in most cases this takes place after permission has been automatically given.
- 3. Address the ecological and climate crises by protecting new land put into recovery by creating a new designation – *Wildbelt*.** This would enable land that is currently of low biodiversity value to be designated for nature, and so speed the creation of the Nature Recovery Network to which the Government is already committed. It must reach into every part of England, from rural areas to towns and cities, securing the future of the land

that we are putting into recovery so that we can reach at least 30% of land in recovery by 2030 and address the climate and biodiversity emergency. *Wildbelt* would form a central part of the National Planning Policy Framework review.

- 4. People and local stakeholders must be able to engage with the planning system** at points where it is meaningful to them and sufficient information is available to understand the impacts – on nature and on local communities. It is vital that communities are made aware in the consultations of all the issues and opportunities their community faces – including climate and ecological challenges.
- 5. Decisions must be based on accurate nature data.** A full program of investment is required to establish high quality ecological data. This will take time, so a transition program is needed to ensure that any fast turn over to new systems doesn't destroy natural places in the process. As strategic data does not provide the site-level detail necessary to ensure nature is properly taken into account, 'permission in principle' in the areas should still be able to be revoked. Timely, site-based survey work is crucial for accuracy and will recognise that nature changes and moves around.



KATRINA MARTIN / 2020VISION

The Planning White Paper and future policy changes need to address the following points:

- Local Plans must be underpinned by the Local Nature Recovery Network Strategy
- Any proposals for zoning must be informed by a Local Nature Recovery Network map which identifies existing natural features and habitats, alongside areas where new habitat is needed to restore ecosystems and help wildlife recover
- Development should:
  - be targeted in areas that avoid impacts to the features of the local Nature Recovery Network map and;
  - contribute positively to help achieve landscape scale restoration and recovery
- Nature is needed everywhere. All development, whatever the zone, should be designed to integrate natural green space - for both people and wildlife – which connects to the surrounding urban or rural landscape and contributes to the wider Nature Recovery Network. This should be informed by the Local Nature Recovery Network map.

**You cannot achieve any of the above without detailed ecological data to inform Local Nature Recovery strategies and maps.**

- Government must ensure the gaps in ecological data to inform local plans and zoning decisions are addressed with the same urgency as the proposed planning reforms – economic growth must be fully integrated with environmental and societal needs and such significant planning reforms should not be permitted without the data to inform them.

**At the same time protection policies and standards must not be weakened and protection should be secured for land in recovery. This means:**

- Protection policies must be retained and strengthened with a presumption against development that will directly or indirectly result in loss of protected sites, priority habitats and protected species
- The National Planning Policy Framework must contain policies that require the identification and protection of land put in recovery for nature.

This **Wildbelt** would be the step change needed to enable nature's recovery and the planning system is the key mechanism by which investment of time and resource in nature's recovery on this land can be protected for the future

- Undesignated sites of biodiversity value (greenfield and brownfield sites) should not be subject to permission in principle without prior ecological assessment and effective consultation
- All development should adhere to the mitigation hierarchy and contribute to Biodiversity Net Gain regardless of the route by which it is permitted
- Any new framework intended to assess the environmental impacts of a proposed development must be informed by current ecological site survey data and expertise in order to make reliable and evidenced decisions
- Ecological experts who know the local area must be engaged at the earliest stages of plan making and development proposals
- Design codes must ensure that all new developments and the buildings themselves integrate space for both wildlife and people, reduce carbon emissions, and minimise water usage.



PAUL HOBSON

No matter where you live in the UK, there is a Wildlife Trust inspiring people about the natural world. Each day we work to save, protect and stand up for the wildlife and wild places near you.

Supported by more than 850,000 members, we take action for insects on our 2,300 nature reserves, through our work with landowners, farmers and policy makers, and by encouraging everybody to look after insects where they live. We hope that you will join us.



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