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Improving local communities through reducing pollution and expanding access to nature



**S**ir Roger Scruton described the conservative instinct to care for our communities as ‘oikophilia’, or ‘love of home.’ This drive explains why conservatives understand intuitively the imperative of protecting and enhancing our local rivers, woodlands, and wetlands, and maintaining a clean, healthy environment. Improving these local natural assets can deliver immediate and tangible benefits to people and enhance their quality of life. During the last parliament, unprecedented action was taken to improve local environments through new legislation and policies. But in this parliament, there is much more to do to safeguard important habitats, clean up our water and air, and widen access to nature, all the while building the many more homes that are needed.



#### **HIGHLIGHTING THE POSITIVE CONSERVATIVE RECORD**

The Environment Act was passed, with new legal targets and principles to drive continuous improvements to the natural environment, a green watchdog to ensure commitments are met, and a suite of new policy levers to deliver the targets.

#### **CELEBRATING CEN CAMPAIGN WINS**

Thirteen of the 18 policy asks from our water manifesto were adopted in the last government’s Plan for Water, including the headline asks of lifting the cap on civil fines and ring-fencing fine revenue for water improvements.<sup>46</sup>

**Restore a network of clean, healthy waterways, tackling all sources of water pollution, enabling more people to enjoy their local rivers and beaches, and ensuring sufficient supplies of water for people, farming, and nature.**

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- **Require new developments to have sustainable drainage systems (SuDS):** in the last parliament, the Plan for Water contained a commitment to require all new homes to deploy environmentally-friendly techniques to manage surface water drainage, rather than connecting automatically to the sewerage network. SuDS improve water quality, reduce flood risk, and create more habitat for wildlife in our towns and cities. They work by using vegetation to slow down and absorb excess water and examples include green roofs, ponds, wetlands, and rain gardens. This commitment should be rapidly implemented.
- **Use water company fines to restore natural river systems:** the top pressure on English watercourses is not sewage or agricultural run-off, but the ‘physical modification’ of natural waterways, for instance through the creation of dams or weirs.<sup>47</sup> Yet there are no schemes to reward land managers who choose to remove these artificial modifications harming our rivers, where they no longer serve an economic purpose. The last government announced that revenue from water company fines would be ring-fenced by the Treasury for environmental projects. In this parliament, the money should fund a nationwide set of projects to restore the natural functioning of our river systems, including the removal of dams, culverts, and weirs and the re-wiggling of rivers.
- **Establish an industry-funded task force for fighting fatbergs:** under a model similar to the chewing gum task force in the last parliament, producers of FOG (fats, oil, greases), wet wipes, and other commonly mis-flushed items should be invited to contribute annually to a funding pot. The pot would be governed by a task force involving industry, water companies, civil society, and experts who would allocate funding for

unblocking pipes and local projects, start-ups, and research that address this pollution source. The task force would also work with the government to devise a more effective and informative product label to raise consumer awareness.

- **Build new reservoirs across the UK:** with hosepipe bans now a regular feature of British summertime and no new reservoir built in the UK since 1991, we urgently need to build more reservoirs. New reservoirs will help us meet rising demand for water, support food security, and protect the natural environment, in the face of a growing population and climate change. Yet they are currently held back by localised opposition, a slow planning process, and uncertainty over whether the regulator Ofwat will authorise the investments. The government should explore letting water firms use novel financing mechanisms to build these reservoirs more cheaply, such as the regulated asset base model used by the Tideway Tunnel, which would require small amendments to the Specified Infrastructure Project regulations of 2013. This model could lower the financing costs by reducing the political risk for investors while spreading the costs over the multiple generations who will benefit from the infrastructure.
- **Require washing machine producers to include a microplastic filter in every machine:** fossil fuel-based materials, such as acrylic and polyester, shed microplastic fibres when they are washed. Technologies are emerging to capture these fibres before they even leave the washing machine, and should be required as standard. This would reduce microplastic pollution in watercourses, which pollute the natural environment and can harm biodiversity and human health.<sup>48</sup>
- **Reform the bathing water regime:** the existing bathing water system is in need of reform. The application process is long-

winded, time-intensive, and lacking transparency, and there is widespread confusion about the purpose of the designation, as bathing waters are not necessarily of swimmable quality. Instead, bathing water status is an important way for those who regularly swim or spend time near rivers or beaches to get accurate information about water quality, but is limited both in the scope of pollutants tested and in length, as testing takes place in the limited bathing water season. The system needs to be improved so that the designation means something more substantive, the application process is clearer and recognises that some biodiversity-rich stretches of water may be inappropriate for bathing, and the monitoring is done all year round to more realistically reflect usage.

- **Adopt more nature-friendly and catchment-based regulation of the water sector:** the government should reform legacy EU water regulation to drive stronger economic growth and more innovation, while improving water quality and nature. Current water regulation is overly prescriptive and output-based, with companies required to develop a vast array of different plans and strategies for the water environment. Moving to a more outcome-based approach to water regulation, with new catchment-level targets, plans, and governance to reduce different pollutants, would increase flexibility, tailor solutions to local priorities, rationalise regulations, reduce the costs of compliance, and encourage innovation, while ensuring the full range of pollutants is reduced.<sup>49</sup> This comprehensive approach will become essential as other, new sources of pollution continue to be uncovered, such as the growing concern and recognition of the threat posed by so-called ‘forever chemicals’ and microplastics. New water regulation should specifically encourage private funding for nature-based solutions, such as

wetland creation, river re-wiggling, and regenerative farming, which enhance wildlife as well as improving water quality. Ministers should ensure regulators have clear guidance that encourages them to authorise nature-based solutions to meet the new outcome-based regulatory requirements.

### Clean up our high streets with new measures to tackle littering and fly-tipping, giving people more pride in place and tackling harm to wildlife from littered items.

- **Replicate the Chewing Gum Task Force for other commonly littered items:** the government should emulate the model of the Chewing Gum Task Force of pressuring private companies to take more responsibility for commonly littered items they produce. Ministers should establish other broad stakeholder task forces to get private sector funding to support councils to tackle other key sources of litter, fly-tipping, and waste that will not be directly dealt with through existing or incoming policies, such as cigarette butts. Cleaning up cigarette butts currently costs taxpayers £40 million a year and they are the single most littered item, making up 68% of the total.<sup>50</sup>
- **Deliver the promised transformation of the waste management system:** holistic improvements to the waste system, such as the introduction of an extended producer responsibility scheme for packaging, the deposit return scheme for drinks containers, and reforms to standardise the waste that can be collected across local authorities in England, have the potential to both drive up plateauing recycling rates across England, making our communities cleaner and tidier and transferring responsibility and ambition for resource efficiency over to the private sector. A UK-wide deposit return scheme

could also help to tackle littering, by incentivising people to return containers to shops rather than discarding them. These reforms should be implemented as soon as possible in consultation with the businesses that will be critical for their successful execution.

- **Introduce extended producer responsibility (EPR) schemes for commonly fly-tipped items, like mattresses:** the cost of cleaning up large fly-tipped items to English local authorities in 2022/23 was over £13 million.<sup>51</sup> Introducing EPR for these products, where the manufacturers would bear the costs of managing the fly-tipped items rather than councils, would reduce financial pressures on the public sector and give manufacturers an incentive to offer collection services.

**Make our gardens, homes, communities, and most treasured landscapes places where wildlife can thrive and where nature is more accessible to people, benefiting our mental and physical health and fostering a love of biodiversity.**

- **Tax the use of artificial grass in domestic gardens:** there is substantial evidence that artificial grass is harmful for soils, insects, earthworms, and other garden wildlife, exacerbates surface water flooding, and creates microplastic pollution. Despite being favoured by some for the lower maintenance requirements, it still needs regular cleaning and must be replaced every 8-15 years.<sup>52</sup> There may be some cases where artificial grass is necessary, so rather than a ban, a ‘polluter pays’ tax on the sale of artificial grass for domestic gardens, at a level that is proportional to the environmental harm it causes, should be developed.

- **Legislate to end the use of peat products in horticulture:** following the failure of the voluntary approach to phase out horticultural peat, legislation for a legal ban should be urgently introduced. This will help to protect the world's largest terrestrial carbon store, storing more carbon than all other vegetation types combined.<sup>53</sup> Harmful practices, including peat extraction for horticulture, mean that 87% of the UK's peatlands are in degraded condition.<sup>54</sup> Given that affordable alternatives to peat compost are already available, a ban would give gardeners confidence when buying pre-potted plants that they are not contributing to harmful peat extraction. While a ban should be brought in as soon as possible for amateur gardeners, it should be phased in over a longer period for the professional horticultural sector, as suitable alternatives for some industries are still in development.
- **Require swift bricks in appropriate new build homes:** iconic cavity-nesting birds are in decline in the UK due to habitat loss and modern building methods, with swift populations estimated to have fallen by 60% since 1995.<sup>55</sup> While not suitable for every home given many buildings do not use bricks, swift bricks could provide important habitat for endangered, migratory cavity-nesting birds like the swift and sparrow, and could be mandated very cheaply with specialist bricks costing around £30.<sup>56</sup>
- **Cut red tape to make it easier to plant street trees:** street trees provide a host of benefits, from keeping cities cool and sequestering carbon, to absorbing air pollutants and improving our mental health. Yet there remain regulatory barriers to councils planting more of them in our towns and cities. The Highways Act 1980 in particular restricts councils' ability to plant street trees and places an overwhelming priority on maintaining



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vehicle flow.<sup>57</sup> This piece of legislation should be reformed, with updated guidance for councils on what types of vegetation are appropriate on which roads. Similarly, interspersing street trees within parking bays should be made easier, by ending the costly requirement for councils to amend Traffic Regulation Orders.

- **Extend ‘full expensing’ to developments on brownfield sites:** building more homes on brownfield sites will help protect green spaces and enhance biodiversity, while also expanding housing supply and creating more communities that are walkable and cyclable. Extending the full expensing policy, announced in the Spring Budget 2023 and made permanent in the Autumn Statement 2023, to brownfield developments would enable developers to deduct the investment costs of new homes from their tax liability, helping make more brownfield sites viable. It is estimated this could lead to an extra 150,000 brownfield houses being started per year, with a long-term gain of £4.3 billion in downstream tax from the growth of the sector and economic development near brownfield sites.<sup>58</sup> Additional housing units on brownfield land would also mean more biodiversity net gain funding from developers that could support local nature recovery priorities.
- **Ensure protected landscapes contribute to nature recovery:** national parks and national landscapes encompass our country’s most treasured areas of countryside and provide one of the main opportunities for people to spend time in nature, yet too often the outcomes for biodiversity are poor inside them. A startling statistic is that 26% of sites of special scientific interest are in favourable condition inside England’s national parks, compared to 39% for England as a whole.<sup>59</sup> The last government made a welcome amendment to the Levelling Up and Regeneration

Act in 2023, which required the park authorities to produce updated management plans and placed a duty on public bodies to support the delivery of these plans. The guidance and secondary legislation to implement these new duties and clarify the biodiversity remit of protected landscapes should be swiftly passed in this parliament, so that the many visitors to these areas can enjoy more biodiversity as well as beautiful landscapes.

- **Create local nature recovery zones around towns and cities:** through new Local Nature Recovery Strategies, local authorities are identifying opportunities for nature recovery in villages, towns, and cities across England, restoring our natural inheritance and ensuring people have access to vibrant and abundant biodiversity near to their homes. The ambitions of these local nature recovery zones should be delivered through blending funding from biodiversity net gain, the community infrastructure levy, the flood defences budget (through natural flood management schemes), water company business plans, and a successor to the Green Recovery Challenge Fund. The zones should encompass not only larger-scale projects, but a range of smaller urban and semi-urban habitats, from roadside verges, street trees, and rain gardens, to old cemeteries, wetlands, and pocket parks. The funding should also be made available to community groups, to support the ‘little platoons’ seeking to deliver the aspirations of Local Nature Recovery Strategies and to improve nature near to their homes. At the same time, statutory guidance for councils should be updated to empower them to manage these green spaces for nature (for instance, by not over-mowing verges, establishing wilder margins around playing fields, rewilding under-used areas of public land, and planting more street trees along local authority-controlled roads).<sup>60</sup>

- **Let community groups buy disused public land at a discount for nature recovery:** local volunteers are the unsung heroes of nature recovery, putting in countless hours to manage and improve local nature reserves and raise funds for conservation projects in their communities. But high land prices can make it prohibitively expensive for local nature groups to start new projects or expand existing sites. That is why they should be given a discount when buying disused public land, which is not suitable for development, for projects with the purpose of restoring nature near to where people live. Furthermore, to help more groups with raising the capital to buy new sites, the Community Ownership fund should be renewed for this parliament, and nature recovery projects should be made eligible to apply.

**Improve air quality across the UK and encourage more walkable and cyclable housing developments, improving people's quality of life, supporting the high street, enhancing our communities, and offering more green transport options.**

- **Create a capital budget for active travel infrastructure:** active travel infrastructure, when it is carefully consulted on with local residents, can expand people's transport choices and make cycling and walking safer and more attractive for people. In cities where land is scarce and expensive, it can be a more efficient way to move people around, with research showing the same 3.5 metre wide lane can move over four times as many people by foot or bicycle as it can by car.<sup>61</sup> Decisions about active travel infrastructure and other traffic management schemes, such as 20mph zones, are best made at the local level by politicians who

know their communities best and who can be held accountable by residents. Councils should be helped to measure resident approval for new schemes to ensure there is local consent. A significant share of new active travel funding should be targeted on building more cycle paths to schools and installing more school street schemes, where roads are closed to polluting cars around pick-up and drop-off times to protect children's health and safety. This targeted approach to active travel infrastructure helps to build local support for schemes, protect a vulnerable group, and embed sustainable travel habits at a younger age.

- **Relax licensing laws around al-fresco dining and devolve powers to councils to set their own licensing fees:** Covid-era relaxation of licensing laws should be made permanent, so that councils can more easily allow local businesses to offer al fresco dining as part of business-friendly pedestrianisation zones. In addition, given there is a lack of capacity in many licensing departments which is slowing down councils from processing applications, councils should be allowed to set their own fees for licensing through changes to the Licensing Act. These schemes were popular during the pandemic and are a pro-business way to clean up pollution on busy high streets, while encouraging more footfall for local shops. Evidence suggests retail sales increase by an average of 30% following projects that improve pedestrian, cycling, or public transport access to shops.<sup>62</sup>
- **Legalise and regulate e-scooters and micro-EVs for use on roads:** expanding trials of e-scooter hire schemes and legalising these zero-emission, micro-mobility technologies for private use would expand transport choice for the 71% of journeys that are under 5 miles.<sup>63</sup> This would also lower transport costs for people, improve air quality, and reduce congestion for motorists.

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However, their usage would need to be regulated carefully, to ensure safety of pedestrians and riders and to tackle the problem of street clutter where they are parked.

- **Improve planning for freight consolidation infrastructure:** vans and lorries delivering goods make a sizable contribution to air pollution in urban areas and to greenhouse gas emissions. Freight consolidation can ease the pollution and congestion impact from vehicles completing ‘last mile’ delivery journeys.<sup>64</sup> Yet they have significant land requirements, and need to be sited next to critical transport infrastructure. Creating a favourable planning policy on freight infrastructure in the National Planning Policy Framework could help secure planning approval for more freight hubs in cities, including consolidation centres for smaller, lighter, and less polluting vehicles to complete the last mile in more densely populated areas and the associated electric charge point infrastructure.
- **Inform people about the sources, risks, and existing regulations around air pollution:** some interventions on air pollution are contentious because of limited public awareness of the health and environmental risks, so the government should have a major national communication campaign, including advertising, signposts, and product labelling, to inform people about the risks of wood burning stoves, idling cars, indoor air pollution, and driving to schools, to name a few examples. Furthermore, existing laws that prohibit idling and the burning of certain polluting fuels in stoves should be better advertised and enforced.
- **Encourage more gentle density housing developments:** there is substantial evidence that gentle density developments, where people can easily move around by walking or cycling,

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are typically more desirable and prosperous.<sup>65</sup> There are some significant opportunities to boost gentle density developments. Post-war estates in the UK are typically built to much lower densities than their European equivalents. Estate regeneration offers a way to increase densities sensitively, enabling more cyclable and walkable communities, while funding higher energy efficiency standards and an increase in social housing units through the sale of additional private housing units on the same site. Similarly, local rules imposing high minimum car parking spaces per dwelling, which hold back densification and limit new housing supply, should be relaxed.<sup>66</sup> Another gentle density measure would be to implement the street votes legislation, which would allow a street's residents to vote on whether to give themselves planning permission to add additional storeys to their property in line with a strict design code. The enabling secondary legislation should be passed as soon as possible.