

CEN briefing: Nature recovery

Nature in the UK

- **The UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world.** Populations of our key species have declined by 19% since 1970, with one in six species threatened with extinction. We have lost 97% of our wildflower meadows since the 1930s. Up to 70% of our ancient woodlands and 85% of our salt marshes are destroyed or degraded, along with 87% of our peatlands, a key habitat for tackling climate change.

There are three types of land designation which can be categorised as those that seek to:

- **Recover nature.** There are 13 National Parks and 46 National Landscapes (formerly known as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty) in England and Wales. Both now have legal duties not just to preserve but to improve the quality of the natural environment. The 2023 Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023 has provided legal duties for nature recovery for these two designations.
- **Conserve nature.** With conditions ranging from 'favourable' to 'destroyed', Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) seek to conserve a specific species or a habitat for a specific species. There are over 4,000 SSSIs in England. Outcomes for nature inside protected areas are poor, with only 38% of SSSIs in a favourable condition in 2023.
- **Prevent urban sprawl.** The Green Belt is unrelated to the quality of the natural environment and, as a result, a lot of the Green Belt is not actually green. Currently, 1.6 million hectares of land is designated as Green Belt (12.6% of England).

Action taken during this Parliament

- **The UK has transformed its system of farm payments to reward more environmentally resilient agricultural practices.** The EU's Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) distributes payments based on the amount of land a farmer manages. In the UK, this resulted in 50% of the budget spent on just 10% of farmers, disproportionately benefiting larger landowners. This has undermined the UK's long-term food security and damaged the natural environment. The new Environmental Land Management schemes (ELMs) created through the 2020 Agriculture Act rewards farmers for actions to improve the quality and resilience of their land. With food already rewarded on the market, the new schemes spend public money on the provision of public goods that the market does not already reward, such as improving the quality of water and soil. The £2.4 billion farming budget has been maintained in order to deliver this and there are currently over 50,000 ELMs agreements in place with farmers across England.
- **The UK has set legally-binding targets to halt the decline of biodiversity loss and to clean the natural environment.** This target is for 2030 and then to increase species abundance by at least 10% by 2042. This is accompanied by a target to protect 30% of nature on land and sea by 2030. The 2021 Environment Act also includes legally-binding targets to improve air and water quality and resource efficiency.
- **Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) will ensure new developments across England will benefit nature.** Developers must now deliver BNG of at least 10%. This will ensure that

nature is left in a measurably better state than it was before the development and increase access to nature in the places where people live.

- **A £650 million Nature for Climate has been created to deliver tree planting and peatland restoration.** Underpinned by a national target to increase England's tree cover from 13.3% to 16.5% by 2050, this fund has included: £9.4 million to support tree nurseries and their workforce; £12.8 million for peatland restoration; £2 million to help level up local parks; and £25 million for the England Woodland Creation Offer which pays land managers to establish woodlands on their land. Tree planting is at its highest rate in almost a decade, with 15 million trees planted in England since 2020.
- **A legal duty to reduce the harm caused by storm overflows has been created.** The 2021 Environment Act also included targets to reduce specific water pollutants and a Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan to unlock £56 billion of capital investment and to ensure that there is no local adverse ecological impact by 2050.
- **A Water Restoration Fund using water company fine revenue has been created.** The [£250,000 cap](#) on civil penalties has been removed, meaning civil *and* criminal fines imposed on water companies for environmental harm are now unlimited. The first round of the fund made £11 million available to communities. Fines are already paid out of water company operating profits, not customer bills. Ofwat, the water sector regulator, has also been given new powers to strengthen the rules on water company dividends so that people's bills never reward environmental damage.
- **Outside the EU, the UK has started protecting marine areas from damaging fishing practices, enabling fish stocks and habitats to recover.** The Common Fisheries Policy prevented the UK from protecting its waters from damaging fishing practices undertaken by other EU member states in UK waters. As a result, damaging fishing practices such as bottom trawling were allowed to take place. Just 6% of suspected bottom trawling activity in our waters is carried out by UK vessels, whilst over a quarter is suspected to be done by just ten EU vessels. The 2020 Fisheries Act has ended EU vessels' automatic right to fish in UK waters. The UK now has the power to prevent damaging fishing activity from taking place in offshore marine protected areas (MPAs) which it is taking in a growing number of them. In an effort to protect species such as puffins, the UK government has prohibited the fishing of sandeels, a vital food source for them, in English waters in the North Sea. This, along with MPA fishing restrictions, has prompted a backlash from the EU.
- **The [Bathing Water Regulations were passed in 2013](#).** In the early 1990s, just 28% of bathing waters met the highest standards in force at that time. Last year, 90% of bathing waters in England were rated as 'good' or 'excellent', up from 76% in 2010, despite the classification standards becoming stricter in 2015. In May 2024, the government designated [27 new in-land bathing waters](#) in England.
- **The government is reducing the risk of illegal deforestation.** Through the 2021 Environment Act, new legislation has been introduced to ensure supermarket essentials, like beef and soy, are not produced on land linked to illegal deforestation. As President of COP26, the UK led negotiations for an agreement to end illegal deforestation which was supported by over 100 countries.