IPPR Fair Transition Unit

DRIVING 'NATURAL' RENEWAL

THE PROGRESSIVE CASE FOR RESTORING THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

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SUMMARY

Our natural environment is in crisis. The UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world. With just half (53 per cent) of its biodiversity intact, the UK sits in the bottom 10 per cent globally for remaining biodiversity (Ashworth 2021). 41 per cent of our species have experienced a long-term strong or moderate decline in population since 1970 (State of Nature Partnership 2023).

Nature is currently in a state of managed decline. Four years on from the commitment to protect at least 30 per cent of the UK's land and sea for nature by 2030 and with less than six years left to meet it, the area of England effectively protected for nature is only around 3 per cent on land and 8 per cent at sea (Wildlife and Countryside Link 2023). As a result, the new government has inherited a series of pressing policy challenges.

Restoring nature is vital for meeting our climate and environmental targets. Protecting biodiversity and ecosystems is critical to countering the interconnected climate and ecological crises and allowing nature to begin to recover. To meet the UK's climate targets, emissions from agriculture and land use must decrease; delivering this transition will require a transformation in the way we use land. Around 9 per cent of agricultural land will be needed for actions to reduce emissions and sequester carbon by 2035, rising to 21 per cent needed by 2050 (CCC 2020). This does not mean harming food production, since the least productive 20 per cent of our land produces only 3 per cent of our calories.

By meeting the challenges of nature recovery, the new government can drive progressive change across the country. Protecting nature and opening it up to ordinary people has a strong progressive history: working-class people campaigned for greater access to Britain's landscapes between the world wars and formed a movement which led to the creation of our National Parks and early conservation areas. Progressive governments have since expanded access to nature for ordinary people at the same time as protecting the UK's natural environment.

Protecting nature and increasing biodiversity has the potential to drive progressive change across three vital areas and should therefore be a central priority for the new government. Restoring nature can achieve the following.

1. **Enhance security:** The way land is currently managed to produce food is contributing to the very biodiversity and climate crises that undermine the UK's food security in the long term. The UK will also be increasingly exposed to climate impacts which are likely to negatively impact our ability to grow food. Strengthening the UK's food security long term requires us to cut emissions and meet environmental targets now. As a result, farmers will have to make significant changes to the way they use the land, and the government must put in place fair ways of supporting them to do so.
2. **Improve fairness:** Conserving and restoring nature is a question of fairness. Access to nature is unequal – people who are more disadvantaged have worse access to green space and there is no public right of access to most of the countryside – so restoring nature should go hand-in-hand with improving access to green space for ordinary people. The other side of 'fairness' is that not everyone shares an equal responsibility for restoring the natural environment. Water companies and agri-businesses

are predominantly responsible for polluting the UK's waterways, while the decisions of landowners, public and private, will ultimately determine whether we can meet our environmental commitments. We should expect those who are responsible for pollution, or have the power to restore nature, to take action.

3. **Drive national renewal:** People in Britain are proud of the natural landscapes of the UK's four nations. Prudent politicians can harness this support by delivering policies which restore nature and cut emissions. In doing so, nature conservation should form part of the new government's project of national renewal. By placing nature restoration at the heart of its agenda, the government can spread the economic benefits of natural environment enhancement around the country, improving economic productivity, reducing economic and social damage, and creating green jobs across the UK.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE NEW GOVERNMENT

- **A robust delivery plan** for meeting environmental targets.
- **Additional investment in a fairer, more sustainable farming sector.**
- **A planning system which shapes targeted nature restoration**, including a national spatial strategy.
- **Stronger targets for tackling pollution** and nature degradation.
- **Expanded rights of responsible access** to the English countryside.
- **Incentives for public and community ownership of land** which drives nature's recovery.

1. INTRODUCTION

THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT IS AT CRISIS POINT

Nature is in crisis. The world has crashed through the 'safe limit for humanity' for biodiversity (Ashworth 2021). Globally, we are consuming 1.56 times more natural resources than the Earth can regenerate: the ecological footprint of our lifestyles has overstretched the Earth's ability to restore itself by at least 56 per cent (Almond et al 2020).

The UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world. With just half (53 per cent) of its biodiversity intact, it sits in the bottom 10 per cent globally for remaining biodiversity (Ashworth 2021). Forty-one per cent of species have experienced a long-term strong or moderate decline in populations in the UK since 1970 (State of Nature Partnership 2023). Meanwhile, as ecosystems lose resilience, crop failures and invasive species disrupt supplies of food, energy and materials.

People depend on nature for health, happiness and prosperity. In 2021, the Dasgupta Review made the case for a seismic shift in how we value and protect our natural world on economic grounds (Dasgupta 2021). A recent report by Nicholas Stern and other economists outlined the productivity benefits that come from investing in tackling climate change and biodiversity loss (LSE 2024). In contrast, failure to address damage to the natural environment could result in a 12 per cent hit to GDP in the coming years (Avery 2024).

Climate and nature are two sides of the same coin. Action to protect and restore nature, such as improving soil management, restoring wet peat and blanket bogs, protecting seagrass meadows, saltmarsh and heathlands, and establishing native woodland, can all support natural carbon storage and increase resilience to a changing climate (Environmental Justice Commission 2021).

RESTORING NATURE MEANS CHANGING HOW WE USE THE UK'S LAND

UK land is an overall carbon emitter, but it has the potential to be a net sink of carbon (CCC 2020). The CCC estimates that around 9 per cent of agricultural land will be needed for actions to reduce emissions and sequester carbon by 2035; and by 2050, 21 per cent will need to change function in order to meet our net zero commitments (ibid).

Emissions from agriculture represent 11 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions in the UK, the fourth largest contributor by sector (CCC 2022).[1] The UK faces a twin challenge: reduce the emissions from agriculture while maintaining food production, at the same time as creating and protecting landscapes that lock in carbon.

Agricultural production dominates the UK's landscape, taking up around 70 per cent of land in the UK (Defra 2023). The way that we farm matters: current agricultural

1 Over half of agricultural emissions (53 per cent) are derived from animals, predominantly from the digestive processes of cattle, sheep and goats (Albanito et al 2022). Agriculture accounts for around 71 per cent of UK nitrous oxide emissions and 49 per cent of methane emissions (Defra 2019). Methane and nitrous oxide have far greater global heating potential than carbon dioxide. Agriculture also accounts for 88 per cent of UK emissions of ammonia (ibid), which contributes to health-damaging air pollution as well as damaging sensitive natural habitats.

practices are the main driver of biodiversity change in the UK (Burns et al 2016). The UK's rivers are also impacted, with intensive livestock and poultry farming contributing to the poor ecological state of the UK's waterways. The build-up of high levels of nutrients such as phosphorus and nitrogen from sewage and animal waste is choking rivers with algal blooms which reduce oxygen levels, suffocating fish, plants and invertebrates (EAC 2022a). Virtually every UK river is polluted beyond their legal limits (EAC 2022b). Water pollution has dominated headlines in recent years and has a tangible impact on many people's lives (Vaughan 2023).

Currently, 85 per cent of UK farmland is used for feeding and rearing livestock (National Food Strategy Independent Review 2021). About 55 per cent by weight of the UK's cereal production and almost all oilseed rape and maize production goes on animal feed (Plewis 2022). This is carbon intensive; it is also inefficient for the calories produced. Growing plants for human consumption generates around 12 times more calories per hectare than using the land for meat production (National Food Strategy Independent Review 2021).

The changes needed, if implemented strategically, should not result in significant reductions in food production. The National Food Strategy Independent Review (2021) finds that by reducing food waste by 50 per cent, sustainably increasing farm yields by 15 per cent, and reducing meat consumption by 30 per cent, we could produce the same amount of calories as we do now from 30 per cent less land: the most productive third of English land produces around 57 per cent of the total agricultural output of the land, while the least productive third only produces 15 per cent; meanwhile, the least productive fifth of land produces less than 3 per cent of food (ibid). We can give over a significant amount of current agricultural land to nature with only a small reduction in agricultural output. The UK's least productive farmland overlaps with areas most suited to carbon sequestration and biodiversity restoration (ibid).

We can get the best outcomes for people, climate and nature by working with the different characters of UK landscapes – using land for what it is good at, and sometimes for more than one thing at once. Some land that is currently used for agriculture would be better as a purely natural resource that provides habitats, biodiversity and/or locks in carbon. However, it is not always such a binary choice. Farmland can also create space for nature alongside agricultural production, when farming practices prioritise this. Similarly, land used for energy generation, for example solar or wind farms, can also be used for food generation or nature restoration (Singer Hobbs et al 2023).

A NEW APPROACH TO LAND USE FOR PEOPLE, CLIMATE AND NATURE

The government has a clear mandate and support for action on nature. Labour won the election on manifesto commitments to meet the UK's environmental targets, make the system of Environmental Land Management schemes work properly, and improve responsible access to nature (Reed 2024). Helpfully, the public already supports action on nature; polling in England tells us that 84 per cent of the public support the idea of increasing the number of nature-rich areas in the UK (Marsh 2020).

The government has an opportunity to meet environmental targets while driving progressive change. While substantial problems remain in protecting the environment, meeting the challenges of nature restoration can strengthen the UK's food security, improve access to green space for ordinary people and leave a better natural inheritance for future generations. This report provides a guide for achieving these outcomes by:

- outlining the challenges that the government has inherited
- recounting the progressive history of nature restoration which government ministers and parliamentarians can tap into
- exploring how nature recovery policies can contribute to wider progressive change.

2. NATURE IS IN MANAGED DECLINE

In recent years, the UK has made steps towards restoring the natural environment. The UK has signed up to domestic and international commitments to reverse the decline of nature and now has a governance framework to achieve those commitments. The previous government also introduced a series of Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes designed to incentivise environmentally friendly agricultural practices in England.

However, substantial problems remain in protecting the environment. The UK is still not on track to meet the overall ambition of reversing nature's decline and the new government has inherited a series of pressing policy challenges. These challenges indicate that, despite the introduction of a new governance framework and statutory targets, the UK's natural environment is in a state of managed decline.

PROGRESS SO FAR

The following steps have been made towards restoring the UK's natural habitats, which the new government looks set to build on:

The '30x30' pledge: The government has recommitted to protecting nature in 30 per cent of the UK's land and sea by 2030 (known as the 30x30 target) (Reed 2024).

Environmental targets: A new framework of environmental targets was established by the previous parliament under the Environment Act 2021, including the objective to halt the decline in species abundance in England by 2030 to which the new government has also committed. The Environment Act established a new governance framework for the environment, with four main provisions:

- legally binding, statutory targets
- a long-term Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) to explain how government intends to improve the natural environment
- an Environmental Principles Policy Statement applicable across government
- a new oversight body, the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP 2024).

Incentivising environmentally friendly land use: England's post-Brexit system of agricultural policy and subsidy includes Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes. ELMs consist of three headline schemes – the Sustainable Farming Incentive, Countryside Stewardship and Landscape Recovery – which together aim to incentivise food production which goes 'hand in hand with the environment' (Baker 2024). Devolved administrations are in the process of developing their own funds to incentivise sustainable agriculture: Scotland has retained a direct payment scheme; and Wales will introduce a revised version of its Sustainable Farming Scheme in 2026.

BIODIVERSITY IS STILL DECLINING

Despite these advances, the UK's key ambitions, targets and commitments on environmental improvement are not on track. Four years on from the 30x30 pledge and with less than six years left to meet it, the area of England effectively protected for nature is only around 3 per cent on land and 8 per cent at sea (Wildlife and Countryside Link 2023).

The Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) judges that the previous government's progress towards meeting its apex target of halting biodiversity decline was 'mixed' and that the overall prospects of meeting this ambition were 'largely off track'. Although the broad consensus among conservationists consulted by the OEP is that the 2030 species target is achievable, the OEP concludes that the previous government developed insufficient detail on delivery (OEP 2024).

Habitats and species remain increasingly isolated and at risk in protected areas (Environment and Climate Change Committee 2023a). In England, 25 per cent of the landscape is designated for 'protected landscapes': around 10 per cent as National Parks and 15 per cent as 'National Landscapes'. Protected sites in England are often in a poor condition and in many cases inadequately monitored, meaning that no management plans for improvement can be made. National Parks and National Landscapes cannot currently be included in 30x30 because they do not have a statutory purpose to protect nature in the long term (Environment and Climate Change Committee 2023b).

ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE TARGETS ARE BEING MISSED

The previous government largely failed to meet the UK's wider ambitions and statutory targets on nature restoration and emissions from agriculture and land use. The Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) warned that the last government was 'largely off track' in 7 out of 10 areas of environmental improvement (OEP 2024), while the Climate Change Committee (CCC 2022) found that UK government policy was 'not credible' on reducing food and farming emissions in line with the Paris Agreement.

On nature restoration, the OEP warned that the detail provided in the previous government's 2023 Environmental Improvement Plan was 'not commensurate with the essential task of driving delivery at the scale and pace needed' in environmental improvement (OEP 2024). Key policies, strategies and regulatory frameworks, like the UK Chemicals Strategy and a Land Use Framework, were announced but not developed or delivered. Actions on vital areas of environmental improvement did not address all areas of major pressure, for example on water quality, where investment was provided in addressing combined sewer overflows but not in tackling diffuse pollution. Finally, the OEP judged that positive actions, such as tree planting, were not being implemented with sufficient urgency (ibid). The Environmental Audit Committee also warned that it is extremely unlikely that current tree planting targets for England or the UK will be met (EAC 2023).

On tackling emissions from agriculture and land use, recent reports suggest that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) is the furthest department behind in meeting its emissions reductions, 24 per cent behind its official target (Helm 2023). The CCC's most recent progress report judged that action to reduce emissions from land use and agriculture remains behind target, particularly in the case of land-based measures such as tree planting and peatland restoration. The CCC warned that delays in implementing such measures "will severely jeopardise the land sector's ability to become a net sink by the mid-2030s, which is necessary to start offsetting residual emissions from other sectors of the economy" (CCC 2023). As the head of the government's clean power mission,

Chris Stark, said when he was chief executive of the CCC: “We can’t meet the government’s 2050 net zero target without major changes in the way we use the land, the way we farm, and what we eat” (Harrabin 2020).

UNCERTAINTY IS HARMING INCENTIVES FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

The farming sector knows the importance of managing agricultural production in a way which preserves and restores the UK's natural environment. Tom Bradshaw, a farmer and president of the National Farmers Union, has said: “We are not just producers of food; we are the backbone of our rural communities and custodians of our natural landscapes” (Brayford 2024). Martin Lines, an arable farmer and CEO of the Nature Friendly Farming Network, has pointed out that “if we get the balance between food production and nature right, we get the best value out of our landscapes and farming businesses are more profitable” (NFFN 2023). Polling shows that awareness of the need to reduce emissions is reasonably high among farmers: six in 10 think it is important to consider emissions when making farm business decisions and more than half of farmers reported that they were taking actions to reduce emissions (Defra 2024a).

Despite this growing awareness, the government is not incentivising sustainable land use at sufficient pace. The CCC has warned that there are significant gaps in agri-environment policies and reliance on mainly voluntary measures is stalling progress. The OEP also warns that the rollout of ELM schemes has been slow and marked by uncertainty and concern among farmers (OEP 2024). According to the CCC, uncertainty is affecting the uptake of low-carbon measures in the farming sector, which requires stability and confidence in policies before making changes to land management (CCC 2023). In the case of the Welsh government’s Sustainable Farming Scheme, the failure to provide a positive vision for the food system and to commit to sufficient investment sparked concern among farmers and delayed implementation by another year (Institute of Welsh Affairs 2024).

3. THE PROGRESSIVE HISTORY OF NATURE RESTORATION

Clearly, the new government must act swiftly to put the protection of nature back on track. There is a strong precedent for this: progressive governments in the UK have historically responded to demands from ordinary people for greater access to green space, and in doing so have enhanced nature's protection.

NATIONAL PARKS

Demands from working-class people for public access to the countryside grew in the early 20th century. In April 1932, 400 walkers from Manchester and Sheffield took part in the Kinder Scout Trespass, a landmark moment in the campaign for greater access to the countryside (Ramblers 2024). Campaigners formed the Standing Committee on National Parks in 1936 to argue the case for national parks. Nine years later, the newly elected Labour government produced the 1945 white paper on National Parks as part of its programme of postwar reconstruction, leading to the passage of the National Parks Act in 1949. The legislation aimed to "conserve and enhance their natural beauty and provide recreational opportunities for the public" (National Parks UK 2024).

The legislation led to the introduction of 10 new national parks in the 1950s: the Peak District, the Lake District, Snowdonia, Dartmoor, the Pembrokeshire Coast, the North York Moors, the Yorkshire Dales, Exmoor, Northumberland and the Brecon Beacons. The 1949 Act also established the Nature Conservancy, a state agency tasked with classifying and acquiring National Nature Reserves, designating Sites of Special Scientific Interest, and advising local and national government on the consequences for nature of any planning proposal (Kelly 2015). The Nature Conservancy has since evolved into Natural England, Natural Resources Wales and NatureScot.

COUNTRY PARKS

Harold Wilson's first Labour government introduced the Countryside Act in 1968 to further improve access to green space. It expanded the remit of the National Parks Commission to the countryside as a whole and empowered local authorities to create country parks. The renamed Countryside Commission could offer grants for these and other recreational facilities.

Local authorities could also provide services for the enjoyment or convenience of the public on commons with public rights of access. In the following 10 years, 150 country parks were established, with 220 by 1988 and 250 by 1998 (Open Spaces Society 2024).

RIGHTS TO ROAM

Access to green space was improved further at the turn of the 21st century, but devolution resulted in divergent approaches in England and Scotland. Tony Blair's government passed the Countryside and Rights of Way Act in 2000, introducing a statutory right to responsibly access most heaths, downlands, mountains and moors in England, which ultimately covered about 8 per cent of land (O'Hara 2023).

Three years later, the Labour-led government in the Scottish parliament passed the Land Reform Act of 2003, establishing a universal right of responsible access to nearly all land in Scotland (Scottish Government 2024). These divergent approaches mean that access rights are now much more expansive in Scotland than in England.

HOW NATURE RESTORATION POLICY AND PROGRESSIVE CHANGE INTERSECTS

The new government has an opportunity to build on this history by introducing policies which restore nature while driving progressive social and economic change. Protecting nature and increasing biodiversity has the potential to drive progressive change across three vital areas.

Restoring nature can:

1. **enhance security** by incentivising environmentally friendly agricultural practices which also strengthen the UK's food security
2. **improve fairness** by creating more green spaces for those who are deprived of it and ensuring that those with the broadest shoulders are restoring nature
3. **drive national renewal** by boosting productivity, driving job creation and leaving a better natural environment for future generations.

The following three chapters of this report address these intersections between nature restoration policy and progressive change.

4. ENHANCING SECURITY BY RESTORING NATURE

Biodiversity loss and climate change threaten food production in the UK. Cutting emissions and restoring nature is vital for improving the UK's long-term food security, so the new government must outline a robust delivery plan for meeting the UK's domestic and international commitments. Given that agriculture accounts for 11 per cent of the UK's carbon emissions and is the main driver of biodiversity loss, part of that plan must include a carefully designed and properly resourced plan to encourage farmers to make changes to the way they use the land.

NATURE'S DECLINE THREATENS THE UK'S FOOD SECURITY

Biodiversity loss and climate change threaten the UK's future food security (Defra 2023). The Dasgupta review of the economics of biodiversity identified biodiversity loss as a risk to the world economy in general and to food security specifically (Dasgupta 2021). Risks to food security from climate change include extreme weather events causing damage to crops, livestock, and fisheries, damaging farming infrastructure, and adversely affecting productivity. Climate change is also likely to result in greater volatility in domestic food prices unless the UK is able to adapt to these changes: the Climate Change Committee has warned that climate change could lead to a 20 per cent (mean) rise in food prices globally by 2050 (CCC 2019). These changes will have a real impact on ordinary people: rising food prices disproportionately impact poorer people (Butler 2022) and will push up headline inflation rates, with broader implications for macroeconomic policy (Savage 2024).

These effects are already starting to materialise. As a consequence of unusual weather patterns linked to climate change, wheat yields in 2018 were 7 per cent below the 2016 to 2020 average. In 2020, UK wheat yields dropped by 40 per cent because of heavy rainfall and droughts (Defra 2023). A third of the food price increases in the UK in 2023 were down to climate change, according to the Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit (Smeeton 2023). Fruit and vegetable production this year plummeted after the UK experienced the wettest 18 months since records began across the 2023–24 growing year (Horton 2024). Based on modelling by the Met Office, significant future risks to UK food production include heat stress to livestock, drought, pests and pathogens, and increased soil erosion (Defra 2023).

Recommendation: A robust delivery plan for meeting environmental targets

Meeting the UK's climate and environmental targets is crucial for ensuring long-term food security. The government has already launched a rapid review of the Environmental Improvement Plan (Defra 2024b). **The review will need to fill the gaps left by previous administrations by introducing a robust delivery plan for meeting the UK's domestic and international commitments on nature recovery.** To do so, the plan should transparently demonstrate how nature recovery policies and strategies will be effectively implemented and how actions, individually and together, will significantly improve the natural environment and meet Environment Act targets. It should also include mechanisms for disclosure and transparency to ensure that there are avenues for public scrutiny and government accountability (OEP 2024).

GOVERNMENT MUST DELIVER A FAIR TRANSITION FOR FARMERS

Many farmers will need to adjust the way they manage land if the UK is going to meet environmental and climate targets. What would fair support for them look like? There are a number of risks to mitigate. These vary according to factors such as the type of land being stewarded, what is being produced, the size and profitability of the business, and the tenure of the land manager. For example, there is a risk that land price increases – reflecting land valued more highly for its natural assets – could lead to smaller farms being sold to industrial farming enterprises or to corporate owners, resulting in a further concentration of land ownership in the hands of fewer people and companies (Massey-Chase et al 2023). Evidence suggests that 1 per cent of the population already own around half of the land in England (Shrubsole 2019). Tenant farmers, who manage a third of all farmland in England, are especially vulnerable to fluctuating land value and changes of ownership (Farming and Countryside Programme 2024).

Many farming businesses currently rely on government subsidies for their financial viability. Farms on lower-yield land could struggle to be profitable without current subsidies. Government can support these farms to be viable through publicly funded nature restoration alongside private farming income: paying farmers and land managers for carrying out actions that provide environmental and climate goods and services. Paying farmers on the poorest quality land to create semi-natural habitats could see their incomes increase, while enabling them to continue to farm (Collas and Benton 2023).

Thankfully, there is a fortuitous overlap between some of the areas that produce the least food and those which are best suited to nature restoration and carbon removal. The independent National Food Strategy estimates that the least productive 20 per cent of our land produces only 3 per cent of our calories (National Food Strategy 2021). If we properly incentivised farmers on this land, making environmental projects more attractive than conventional farming, we could meet the government's targets for both carbon sequestration and nature restoration. Most of this land could still be used for low intensity farming (ibid).

A key challenge for many farmers is that it is difficult to change their practices, grow different crops, regenerate their soil, and reduce their impact on nature while their produce gets such poor economic returns (Massey-Chase et al 2023). The profit margins are insufficient for the investment needed in changing farming practices. It is hard to get a fair return and then invest in higher standards with current pricing structures, supermarket deals such as price promotions and discounts, and product specification requirements such as no wonky vegetables (Sustain 2022). However, research by Sustain finds that farmers can often be paid more without the price for the consumer going up. For many products "an increase in farmgate price, even a doubling, would not have a huge impact on shelf price given the very small portion of the costs that relate to farming" (ibid). International competitors present another challenge, as domestic producers are undercut by global producers who work to lower environmental standards. This risks undermining climate and nature efforts domestically and off-shoring the UK's true ecological footprint (Nyman et al 2021).

Recommendation: Investment in a fairer, more sustainable farming sector

The UK needs a food system which bolsters food security, provides a stable income for farmers and works in harmony with the natural environment. **Farmers will be key agents of change in this transition, and they need a fair deal in return for driving nature restoration on their land.** The starting point must be ensuring that farmers are rewarded properly for the food they produce. IPPR has previously proposed a 'whole systems' approach to food in the UK, underpinned by a new statutory body for overseeing the food system, a right to food, and legally binding objectives and targets for food policy (Nyman et

al 2021). The government must also provide a fair financial package for farmers which drives nature restoration. Nature charities are calling for a budget of £3.1 billion per year for England (as part of a £5.5–5.9 billion budget for the UK as a whole) to ensure carbon and wildlife outcomes meet climate and nature commitments and policy priorities (Rayment 2024). We recommend that Defra undertakes its own assessment of the investment required to meet environmental targets and that the government takes tangible steps towards meeting this requirement.

MANAGING COMPETING LAND USE PRIORITIES

Labour's missions to deliver 1.5 million homes and decarbonise the grid by 2030 will place pressures on UK land. Without sufficient oversight, these pressures could affect the UK's food security, as well as access to and improvement of nature. Decision-making on these objectives currently takes place in governmental silos, with no oversight or strategic view to identify co-benefits or trade-offs.

Recommendation: A national spatial strategy to manage competing land use demands

A national spatial strategy should provide strategic overview of competing pressures on the land use system. The Land Use Framework for England, delayed multiple times by the previous government, is the obvious host. **Nationally set targets for housing and energy infrastructure will need to be integrated to ensure that land is used most effectively, and that areas are designated for nature protection.** This framework should constitute a national spatial plan that outlines the different types of land use, led by a cross-government committee on which all relevant departments are represented. It should also encompass the Local Nature Recovery Strategy and the Crown Estate's 'Whole of Seabed' work.

5. IMPROVING FAIRNESS BY RESTORING NATURE

Nature recovery policies can address two dimensions of inequality. The first is inequality of access: spending time in nature is associated with improved health and wellbeing, but access to green space is unequal and shaped by wider inequalities of class, race and ability. This means that those who are on lower incomes, are from ethnic minority backgrounds or who live with disabilities are less able to access the benefits of the natural environment. Restoring nature should go hand-in-hand with tackling these inequalities so that the benefits of restoring the natural environment are shared fairly. The second dimension is inequality of responsibility for restoring nature: companies and organisations which are guilty of polluting and degrading the natural environment should clearly be expected to reverse the damage they have caused, while landowners – public and private – should be expected to contribute to the challenge of restoring nature.

THE BENEFITS OF GREEN SPACE SHOULD BE SHARED EQUALLY

Access to nature is not shared equally. People in the most deprived areas tend to have significantly less accessible green space in their locality than those living in wealthier areas (Defra 2018). Those on lower incomes are much less likely to spend time in a natural environment (Natural England 2023) or to consider their local green space to be of a high enough standard to spend time in (Chapman & Phagoora 2021). People from black and ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely to live in areas with the worst access to open green spaces with wildlife value: almost 40 per cent of people from ethnic minority backgrounds live in areas most deprived of green space, compared to 14 per cent of white people (Friends of the Earth 2020).

Unequal access to the natural environment contributes to wider inequalities, especially in health. Poorer people often live and work in the most polluted environments. They also have higher rates of underlying health conditions that may make them more vulnerable to the effects of pollution (Environment Agency 2023). Analysis has shown that areas of highest deprivation and those with higher proportions of ethnic minority residents are disproportionately affected by high levels of air pollution (ibid). Climate change is likely to make these health inequalities worse, with deprived communities more at risk due to poorer housing conditions. These communities are often in areas more likely to suffer from flooding and urban heat island effects (ibid).[2]

There are clear connections between good access to the natural environment and better health outcomes. Natural England estimates that parks and green spaces in England deliver £6.6 billion annually of health, climate change and environmental benefits (Environment and Climate Change Committee 2023c). Evidence suggests that living in or near to greener environments reduces mortality rates and improves mental wellbeing (Lovell 2018). A study

2 'Urban heat island effects' are where urban developed areas retain heat and experience higher temperatures than nearby rural areas.

of more than 19,000 people in England looked at the effects of spending two hours or more a week in or around open green spaces: the results showed a significant increase in the likelihood of people reporting good health or high wellbeing (White et al 2019). People with good access to the natural environment are estimated to be 22 per cent more likely to be physically active (Natural England 2011). Some studies have found that access to the natural environment increases social contact and community cohesion, which could be having a significant positive impact on health and wellbeing (Lovell 2018).

Recommendation: A planning system which shapes targeted nature restoration

Improving access to green space, especially in urban areas where there are competing demands over land use, will require a strategic approach to how we use land. **Local plans and local nature recovery strategies should be aligned to ensure proposed developments align with nature recovery plans** (Singer Hobbs 2023). Likewise, housing development should take a nature-positive approach to build space for nature into the design of new developments themselves. **The government should consider adding specific duties on developers to account for access to green space** and should account for access to nature in the cross-government national spatial strategy.

POLLUTERS MUST BE HELD RESPONSIBLE FOR RESTORING NATURE

Tackling the pollution of the UK's rivers and seas is an urgent priority. Pollution from sewage discharge has dominated headlines in recent years and has a tangible impact on many people's lives (Vaughan 2023). Water companies clearly bear a large portion of the responsibility for this pollution: sewage and wastewater dumps affect 36 per cent of all water bodies (EAC 2022b). To clean up the UK's rivers and seas the new government has pledged to strengthen Ofwat's role, threaten water bosses with criminal charges and introduce fines for water companies which illegally dump sewage (Labour Party 2024). While these commitments are vital, given that pollution from farming affects more than 40 per cent of water bodies – that is, even more than raw sewage dumps – on their own they will not clean up the UK's polluted waters (EAC 2022b).

The clearest example of this is the ecological collapse of the River Wye, which was largely caused by industrial farming of more than 24 million intensively raised chickens in its catchment area (Fisher 2024). It is estimated that just 10 large agri-businesses are responsible for the bulk of this waste (Food for the Planet 2024). The government needs a plan to tackle water pollution driven by agriculture in addition to its proposals to crack down on pollution by water companies.

STRONGER TARGETS ARE NEEDED TO DRIVE NATURE RESTORATION

Beyond water pollution, public bodies and landowners must also contribute to the challenge of restoring nature. Protected sites in England are often in a poor condition and in many cases inadequately monitored, while land in National Parks and National Landscapes does not currently meet the requirements of 30x30 because there is no statutory purpose to protect nature in the long term (Environment and Climate Change Committee 2023b). Landowners must also be asked to contribute to nature restoration: this is vital for sequestering carbon, given that most of England's two largest natural carbon sinks – deep peat and woodland – are owned by just over 1,000 landowners (Land Use in England Committee 2022).

Recommendation: Stronger targets for tackling pollution and restoring nature

The government's powers to crack down on polluters must include **legally binding targets to ensure that all polluters are held to account**. This should include legally binding nutrient targets for each river catchment area and strengthened powers and funding for the Environment Agency to sanction polluters (EAC 2022a). Beyond water pollution, **public bodies that are major landowners** – such as the Forestry Commission and National Park Authorities – **should be given a statutory purpose to prioritise nature's recovery**, and the government should explore the possibility of introducing legal obligations for large private landowners to reach 30x30.

6. DRIVING RENEWAL BY RESTORING NATURE

Nature recovery should be part of the new government's project of 'national renewal'. People in the UK are already proud of Britain's natural landscapes. According to a poll by Future Countryside, when asked what makes us most proud to be British, we rank the countryside second only to the NHS (Future Countryside 2024). At the same time, 93 per cent of people polled believed that the British countryside should be regarded as part of our national heritage (ibid).

Nature restoration policies can contribute to the new government's promise of 'national renewal' by simultaneously expanding the benefits of access to nature, boosting productivity and job creation, and delivering high-quality natural space for people to enjoy. To connect the urgent need to restore nature to its project of 'national renewal', the new government should introduce policies which build the public's stake in nature's recovery.

NATURE HAS ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL BENEFITS

Investing in the natural environment can increase economic productivity, reduce economic and social damage, and boost economic activity around the UK's regions. Environmental enhancement has a direct impact on productivity through activity like tourism, as well as indirect impacts such as urban cooling, improved air quality, reduced sickness absence from work, and better physical and mental health. Nature-based solutions can reduce the impact of climate change and events such as floods – for example, through forest cover or through 'blue infrastructure' such as reconnecting floodplains to their rivers. Natural environment enhancement generates activity both directly in sectors involved in environmental conservation and boosts economic activity in sectors that benefit from a healthy natural environment (Edgar et al 2021).

Investing in restoring nature can also drive entry-level job creation around the country. Investments in 'nature-based solutions' create jobs that typically have low training and education requirements, are fast to establish and require relatively little produced capital for each worker (Dasgupta 2021). Jobs in nature restoration in the UK are available at entry and graduate level, improving prospects for local economies and individuals around the country (Alvis and Avison 2021). The Dasgupta review argues that moving towards nature-based economic development will lead to greater returns to human capital, in turn leading to a greater demand for investment in human capital and for employment (Dasgupta 2021).

GIVE BRITISH PEOPLE A STAKE IN NATURE RESTORATION

To share the benefits of nature restoration, the new government should introduce measures that create more opportunities for British people to access and enjoy the natural environment. Giving ordinary people a stake in nature's restoration can create a virtuous cycle for support for environmental policy: substantial evidence indicates that overall time spent in nature leads to stronger pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours (DeVille et al 2021).

Recommendation: Open up opportunities for ordinary people to enjoy nature by expanding public rights of access

To give ordinary people a stake in nature's recovery, **the government should tap into the progressive history of expanding access to nature for ordinary people by expanding responsible access to the countryside in England**. The majority of the English countryside is out of bounds for most of the population: 92 per cent of the countryside has no right to roam and 97 per cent of rivers have no uncontested rights of navigation (Right to Roam 2024). An expanded right of responsible access to England's countryside, covering areas like rivers, woodland, green belt and downland, would improve opportunities for people to access the green spaces and waterways close to where they live. The government can look to what the Labour-led Scottish government achieved in 2003, when it passed the Land Reform Act – part 1 of which created this right of responsible access in Scotland. Expanded access rights should also be paired with an updated Countryside Code outlining the responsibilities of access.

Recommendation: Give ordinary people a stake in nature's recovery by encouraging public and community land ownership

Alongside expanded rights of access, **the government should give the public a stake in nature's recovery by encouraging public and community land ownership**. This will help to achieve 30x30 and other environmental targets. The UK's National Park Authorities currently have limited control over the way land in their jurisdiction is managed because they do not own much of the land (Campaign for National Parks 2024). **Taking land in national parks into public control can help drive nature's recovery**, as demonstrated by the recent acquisition of Buckfastleigh Moor by the Dartmoor National Park Authority using a grant from Defra (DNPA 2024). **The government should also incentivise community ownership of land for nature's recovery by ensuring that land is included as a community asset under the remit of the new community 'right to buy' scheme** (Prime Minister's Office 2024).

7. SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

ENHANCING SECURITY

A robust delivery plan for meeting environmental targets

Meeting the UK's climate and environmental targets is crucial for ensuring long-term food security. The government has already launched a rapid review of the Environmental Improvement Plan (Defra 2024b). **The review will need to fill the gaps left by previous administrations by introducing a robust delivery plan for meeting the UK's domestic and international commitments on nature recovery.** To do so the plan should transparently demonstrate how nature recovery policies and strategies will be effectively implemented and how actions, individually and together, will significantly improve the natural environment and meet Environment Act targets. It should also include mechanisms for disclosure and transparency to ensure that there are avenues for public scrutiny and government accountability (OEP 2024).

Investment in a fairer, more sustainable farming sector

The UK needs a food system which bolsters food security, provides a stable income for farmers and works in harmony with the natural environment. **Farmers will be key agents of change in this transition, and they need a fair deal in return for driving nature restoration on their land.** The starting point must be ensuring that farmers are rewarded properly for the food they produce. IPPR has previously proposed a 'whole systems' approach to food in the UK, underpinned by a new statutory body for overseeing the food system, a right to food and legally binding objectives and targets for food policy (Nyman et al 2021). The government must also provide a fair financial package for farmers which drives nature restoration. Nature charities are calling for a budget of £3.1 billion per year for England (as part of a £5.5–5.9 billion budget for the UK as a whole) to ensure carbon and wildlife outcomes meet climate and nature commitments and policy priorities (Rayment 2024). We recommend that Defra undertakes its own assessment of the investment required to meet environmental targets and that the government takes tangible steps towards meeting this requirement.

A national spatial strategy to manage competing land use demands

A national spatial strategy should provide strategic overview of competing pressures on the land use system. The Land Use Framework for England, delayed multiple times by the previous government, is the obvious host. **Nationally set targets for housing and energy infrastructure will need to be integrated to ensure that land is used most effectively, and that areas are designated for nature protection.** This framework should constitute a national spatial plan that outlines the different types of land use, led by a cross-government committee on which all relevant departments are represented. It should also encompass the Local Nature Recovery Strategy and the Crown Estate's 'Whole of Seabed' work.

IMPROVING FAIRNESS

A planning system which shapes targeted nature restoration

Improving access to green space, especially in urban areas where there are competing demands over land use, will require a strategic approach to how we use land. **Local plans and local nature recovery strategies should be aligned to ensure proposed developments align with nature recovery plans** (Singer Hobbs 2023). Likewise, housing development should take a nature-positive approach to build space for nature into the design of new developments themselves. The government should consider adding specific duties on developers to account for access to green space and should account for access to nature in the cross-government national spatial strategy.

Stronger targets for tackling pollution and restoring nature

The government's powers to crack down on polluters must include legally binding targets to ensure that all polluters are held to account. This should include legally binding nutrient targets for each river catchment area and strengthened powers and funding for the Environment Agency to sanction polluters (EAC 2022a). Beyond water pollution, **public bodies which are major landowners** – such as the Forestry Commission and National Park Authorities – **should be given a statutory purpose to prioritise nature's recovery**, and the government should explore the possibility of introducing legal obligations for large private landowners to reach 30x30.

DRIVING NATIONAL RENEWAL

Open up opportunities for British people to enjoy nature by expanding public rights of access

To give ordinary people a stake in nature's recovery, **the government should tap into the progressive history of expanding access to nature for ordinary people by expanding responsible access to the countryside in England**. The majority of the English countryside is out of bounds for most of the population: 92 per cent of the countryside has no right to roam and 97 per cent of rivers have no uncontested rights of navigation (Right to Roam 2024). An expanded right of responsible access to England's countryside, covering areas like rivers, woodland, green belt and downland, would improve opportunities for people to access the green spaces and waterways close to where they live. The government can look to what the Labour-led Scottish government achieved in 2003, when it passed the Land Reform Act – part 1 of which created this right of responsible access in Scotland. Expanded access rights should also be paired with an updated Countryside Code outlining the responsibilities of access.

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