

Briefing

Planning reform in England: National Planning Policy Framework

The Wildlife Trusts believe the land-use planning system is fundamental to securing nature's recovery. This is an objective that we champion and which the Government has adopted in its Natural Environment White Paper (NEWP), published in June 2011. This emphasised the intrinsic, economic and social value of the natural environment. It also endorsed the need for a landscape-scale approach to securing nature's recovery.

In principle, The Wildlife Trusts support the consolidation of planning policy outlined in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). But its purpose should remain to secure the long term public interest, and also reflect the Government's scale of ambition for the natural environment set out in the NEWP. However, the draft NPPF is dominated by a weighting in favour of economic growth.

The Wildlife Trusts believe the Government should:

- **remove the primacy given to economic development in the draft NPPF** and reinstate the importance of the natural environment;
- **require local plans to identify Nature Improvement Areas (NIAs)**. The NEWP introduced the concept of NIAs: large areas where nature's restoration would have greater priority. Land use planning will be critical to achieving NIAs and yet they have no mention in the draft NPPF;
- **protect Local Wildlife Sites (LWS)** – there are 40,000 LWS in England – an area 4.5 times the size of Greater London. Having had some protection to date through planning, these sites would no longer have specific protection.

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Key quotes

'We will retain the protection and improvement of the natural environment as core objectives of the planning system'

The Natural Choice (Natural Environment White Paper), Defra, June 2011

'We will expect all bodies involved in planning decisions to prioritise growth and jobs'

Rt Hon George Osborne MP, March 2011

'Planning policy and practice should: provide greater protection to other priority habitats and features that form part of ecological networks, particularly Local Wildlife Sites'

Making Space for Nature report to Defra, September 2010

'We will maintain national Green Belt protection, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, National Parks, Sites of Special Scientific Interest and other environmental designations which protect the character of our country's landscape'

Rt Hon David Cameron MP, April 2010

Questions and answers

What is the value of the natural environment?

The natural environment provides us with the food, water and air that are essential to life and the minerals and raw materials needed for industry and our consumption. The recent UK National Ecosystem Assessment (NEA) confirmed the critical importance of the natural environment to our well-being and economic prosperity. The NEA report states that 'government and society need to account better for the value of nature, particularly the services and resources it provides'.

How can the planning system help improve the natural environment?

The planning system is vital for protecting important wildlife sites and identifying where the potential exists to restore habitat and ecosystems. The NPPF is a key opportunity to drive positive planning for nature, including across local authority boundaries.

What should be the definition of sustainable development in the NPPF?

The NPPF should draw on the UK's 2005 Sustainable Development Strategy, *Securing the Future*. It identified five clear principles of: 'living within environmental limits and providing a just society by means of a sustainable economy, good governance and sound science'.

Why should Nature Improvement Areas be included in the NPPF?

A key Government policy in the Natural Environment White Paper is the establishment of Nature Improvement Areas (NIAs). Partnerships of local authorities, local communities and landowners, the private sector and conservation organisations are developing proposals for NIAs, based on a local assessment of opportunities for restoring and connecting nature on a significant scale. The NPPF must support the development of NIAs with guidance on their identification within local plans.

Why do Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) need protection?

Alongside sites with statutory protection, eg National Nature Reserves and Sites of Special Scientific Interest, LWS represent the minimum habitat in need of protection to maintain current levels of wildlife. Across England, LWS account for over 710,000 hectares of wildlife habitat but the planning system is their only protection.

How should the transition to the NPPF be managed?

Local authorities must be given sufficient opportunity to develop new local plans once the NPPF is adopted. The removal of national policy guidance means that local plans will need to be developed in a wide range of areas.

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There are 37 individual Wildlife Trusts in England. They are actively engaged in the planning system, promoting opportunities to improve the natural environment and reviewing more than 70,000 planning applications last year. The Wildlife Trusts have more than 740,000 members in England including members of our junior branch Wildlife Watch. Our vision is to create A Living Landscape and secure Living Seas. Each Wildlife Trust is working within its local communities to inspire people about the future of their area: their own Living Landscapes and Living Seas.

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