

Planning for Nature and Net Zero: Q&A for Members of Parliament, July 2024

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is the largest nature coalition in England, bringing together 82 organisations to use their joint voice for the protection of the natural world.

Climate and ecological breakdown threaten every aspect of our society. Mitigating climate change and reversing biodiversity loss will require large-scale investment in a range of renewable energy technologies and in species and habitat protection and restoration.¹ These large-scale land and sea spatial demands will have to be accommodated alongside others, such as housing.

Link's '[Planning Ahead on Land and at Sea](#)' report, published in June 2024, explores how these objectives can be achieved, with the backing of thirty nature and climate organisations including the RSPB, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and National Trust. The report sets out proposals for planning reforms to enable urgently needed nature and climate infrastructure to be delivered at scale and in parallel, in a way that aligns with other spatial demands.

This Q&A draws on the Planning Ahead report to answer common questions about how the planning system can be improved to deliver more for the environment, without jeopardising housing delivery and other non-environmental spatial demands. We hope that it provides a useful resource for environmentally minded MPs elected in the 2024 General Election, to help with questions about how the planning system can be constructively reformed to boost green goals.

1. How can we build the affordable homes and renewable energy we need, while also protecting and restoring nature?

Even the most well-designed development is not appropriate everywhere and, in some cases, could harm biodiversity and access to nature. **It is up to the Government to steer development into the right locations through the planning system.**

Currently, there is a lack of join-up across different land uses, sea uses and across different local areas. The strategic identification of locations suitable for different developments should be informed by a National Spatial Plan, the Strategic Spatial Energy Plan, Local Nature Recovery Strategies and a Marine Spatial Prioritisation Plan.

To mitigate climate change and boost biodiversity, we need ambitious and clear national plans for nature, climate and affordable housing (also known as a spatial approach to planning). If well-planned, designed and managed, developments can avoid or limit their impact on nature, and in some cases, even improve it.

¹ We need more nature in better condition (at least 1.5 million hectares of habitat by 2030) and more renewable energy deployed at scale and with speed (with the majority of our power coming from wind and solar energy by 2030).

At the next step down from spatial plans, **national and local planning authorities need more investment in ecological expertise and core planning resourcing** to better scrutinize and advise on individual planning applications. Better quality and more up-to-date environmental data are needed to inform strategic and site-level environmental assessments.

Once consent is given, **all new developments must be designed and delivered in a way that delivers benefits for habitats and species**. Nature-friendly designs for all new development should be made mandatory, including swift bricks in all new homes, the provision of access to nature in all new towns, and setting aside areas for large-scale nature restoration projects alongside each offshore wind lease agreement. Gains for nature should be secured through biodiversity enhancement schemes, which obligate developers to put money towards nature protection and restoration, and mandatory nature-friendly design.

Finally, the increase in the scale and pace of low-carbon infrastructure development must be paired with an equally ambitious plan to increase the scale and pace of “natural infrastructure” restoration and creation. The Government must **actively plan for and invest in natural infrastructure alongside built infrastructure** so we can ensure that climate mitigation and nature recovery are delivered together.

2. Do we need wind and solar farms on land?

Yes. The scale of the challenge to solve the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution is enormous. Quickly increasing the supply of renewable energy to rapidly decarbonise is necessary to preserve the natural world, reach net zero targets, and bring down household bills. Onshore wind and solar farms can be deployed more quickly than other renewables and at lower cost. Alongside deploying onshore wind and solar farms, the Government should also support rapid roll-out of rooftop solar and home energy efficiency measures.

With expert ecological advice, good design and proper management, onshore wind and solar farms can contribute to species recovery and provide habitat benefits. For example, solar farms can deliver biodiversity improvements through measures such as planting wildflowers, introducing appropriate grazing regimes, hedgerow management to promote biodiversity, sowing wild bird seed mix, and stopping herbicide use.

This infrastructure can also bring employment to the local area.² This can be seen through increased demand for engineers and logistics specialists to deliver infrastructure needs and ecologists and land management experts to implement associated nature projects.

3. Can all offshore wind be located out of sight of land?

Development is not appropriate everywhere and, in some cases, could harm biodiversity and access to the marine environment. However, due to the size and scale of the technology available, more and

² [The local socio-economic impacts of offshore wind farms - ScienceDirect](#)



more offshore wind farms are being placed further offshore and will no longer be seen from the coastline.

Strategic marine planning, informed by nature and climate needs as well as other factors (such as grid connections, geography, and more), can help steer necessary development to the right locations and away from sensitive nature sites and protected visual landscapes.

By using a National Marine Spatial Prioritisation Plan and Strategic Spatial Energy Plan, and engagement with local fishing communities, areas for development can be chosen according to the least impact they have on the natural world.

To support site selection, the Government should increase resources and ecological expertise in the Planning Inspectorate (PINs), Natural England and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC). This will mean that the environmental aspects of an applications can be properly and swiftly assessed, alongside consideration of alternative solutions, including alternative sites.

4. Does greater infrastructure for housing, renewables and nature mean planning decisions will be imposed from the top down?

All designing, planning and delivery of housing, renewables and nature schemes must include meaningful community engagement. On land, Local Nature Recovery Strategies and Local Plans should always be used to guide community engagement in development proposals, which in turn will be factored into strategic planning decisions. At sea, community engagement is carried out throughout the planning process, where community ownership options, community-based benefits and are impacts to local industry are considered through a variety of formal consultations. This engagement should be prioritised, alongside additional incentives for management measures which deliver additional ecosystem services such as flood risk mitigation, access to nature, and biodiversity enhancement on land and at sea.

To support site selections which are best for the community and nature, and to evaluate individual planning applications on particular sites, the Government should increase resources and ecological expertise in Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) and the national Planning Inspectorate (PINs).³ This will ensure the environmental aspects of infrastructure applications can be properly and swiftly assessed, alongside consideration of alternative solutions, including alternative sites.

Combined with a nature-led National Spatial Plan, Strategic Spatial Energy Plan and Marine Prioritisation Plan, necessary development can be steered to the right locations and away from sensitive nature sites, heritage sites and protected landscapes and be chosen according to the least impact they have on the natural world.

³ Including any environmental assessments of plans or projects that are required, such as Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) or Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA).



5. Will new renewable energy reduce UK food security?

There is no evidence that the Government's decarbonisation targets will negatively impact farmers and food security in the UK. Current planning policy already directs development proposals to avoid the highest value agricultural land.

The National Farmers' Union supports increasing renewable energy generation on agricultural land, recognizing the potential of renewable energy generation to complement rather than compete with food production, due to its benefits for net zero and farm businesses.⁴ Climate change is the greatest threat to food security. Climate action and nature recovery is needed to head off this threat.⁵

6. Will new renewable energy damage the fishing industry?

There is no evidence to suggest that the Government's offshore renewables targets are going to negatively impact the productivity of the fishing industry. Fishing is essential to food security and the identity of coastal communities up and down this great island. Offshore renewable infrastructure can support sustainable fisheries by creating new areas of protection for young fish to breed. This in turn supports the health of commercial stocks and is beneficial to the industry in the long run. The fishing industry must be included in marine spatial planning and the Government must ensure proper engagement with the sector as it designs these new plans.

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The full Planning Ahead report can be found [here](#).

⁴ <https://www.nfuonline.com/media/ig2plmac/renewable-energy.pdf>

⁵ <https://blog.metoffice.gov.uk/2023/10/09/food-security-under-pressure-from-climate-change/>