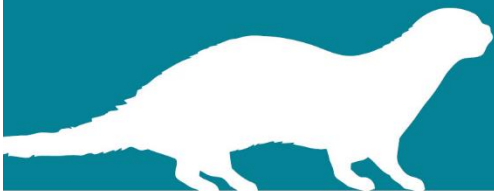




The  
**Wildlife**  
Trusts

# Wildbelt

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The Wildlife Trusts' policy briefing



## Wildbelt: A designation for renewal

Nature is vital to us all – for the food we eat, the water we drink, the air we breathe, and the space we need to feel secure, happy, and healthy.

It is the best tool in our toolbox to mitigate and adapt to a changing climate and support communities and farmers to be resilient to extreme weather, such as flooding. Recent research has also demonstrated nature's importance to economic growth. Studies show damage to the environment is slowing UK growth, undermining prosperity, and could lead to an estimated 12% reduction in GDP. Protecting and recovering nature makes sense – and is critical to the delivery of the Government's five missions.

However, the UK is one of the most wildlife depleted counties in the world. One in six species in Great Britain is now at risk of extinction. Numbers of many species are in freefall and wildlife-rich habitats are fewer, smaller and less connected than they've ever been. The consequences of decade after decade of nature's decline are already playing out across the country, with significant impacts for our health, our ability to produce food, and our capacity to withstand floods, drought, and heat.

We know that the status quo for protected sites is not enough to achieve nature's recovery. England's collection of wildlife sites are too small and too isolated. To meet the Government's legally binding target to halt nature's decline by 2030, more space is needed for nature.

A new Wildbelt designation can ensure positive outcomes for nature's renewal through the planning system by delivering more natural infrastructure alongside one and a half million new homes and accelerated infrastructure delivery.

## Achieving 30x30 on land

Currently on land in England, the only site designations which provide long-term protection from harm and require positive management for nature are Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), Special Protection Areas (SPAs) and Ramsar sites, which cover 8.45% of England's land. Many of these are also not adequately supporting nature, with only 34.68% of SSSIs in good condition. In addition, Local Wildlife Sites often have the same nature value as legally designated sites but have no explicit long-term protection.

The UK Government have committed to meeting the international target to effectively conserve and manage 30% of the world's land, coastal and marine areas by 2030 (30x30). This is the biggest and boldest conservation commitment the world has ever seen, with more than 190 countries committed to achieving the global goal.

To help us achieve this target, we need to think more and bigger. Alongside stronger and more explicit planning protections for Local Wildlife Sites in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), we need a new designation of land in England to support nature's recovery. One that goes beyond protecting the nature we have, to protecting the space nature needs for the future.

None of the conservation and landscape designations in England exist for this explicit purpose. The Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) designation is critical for preserving those areas of land that have been identified as currently most important for wildlife. National Parks and National Landscapes are focused on protecting landscape value and natural beauty. They, along with Green Belt, do not directly consider biodiversity value.

**We need a way of protecting sites that are being managed to create new habitats and to enable nature to recover**, as it will be years or even decades before nature on these sites has recovered sufficiently for them to meet the strict criteria for current designated sites protection.

A new nature recovery designation – a Wildbelt – would be a robust and permanent designation to enable land that is currently of low or degraded biodiversity value to be protected for nature’s recovery at small or large scale. It would in no way compete with existing designations, as in some circumstances it could overlay these, in the same way that National Landscapes, National Parks and SSSIs can overlay each other. This can create an opportunity for designations like Green Belt to contribute to nature’s recovery and improve access to nature for the urban areas it surrounds, whilst helping the UK to meet environmental targets.

## Putting people and nature at the heart of planning

Changes to the planning system can ensure a win-win for housebuilding and nature; urgently accelerating the delivery of new homes and infrastructure, whilst rapidly making more room for nature. The early decisions made by the Government will set the tone for changes to come and The Wildlife Trusts want to work in partnership to deliver positive change for people and nature.

A successful planning system is crucial to securing nature’s recovery and creating communities with nature-rich green space on people’s doorsteps. We believe a Wildbelt designation, alongside stronger protection for Local Wildlife Sites, could put nature’s recovery at the heart of planning and take advantage of the win-wins for housebuilding and nature.

To deliver this, local habitat restoration targets should accompany local housing targets to ensure we are on track to meet 30x30 and legally binding Environment Act targets, which should be a purpose of planning in a revised NPPF, Town and Country Planning and other major infrastructure plans. National planning policy should then introduce the concept of Wildbelt and outline strong protections from development in the NPPF and encourage Local Planning Authorities, through local and neighbourhood planning, to identify and protect Wildbelt sites.

A Wildbelt would therefore support the planning system to meet environmental targets, help Local Planning Authorities implement their statutory biodiversity duties and support the delivery of habitat targets through Local Nature Recovery Strategies.

For years, The Wildlife Trusts have been working with landowners, farmers and developers, local communities and local authorities to establish new wild spaces and restore habitats. We’ve created some of the best areas for nature - providing millions of people with places to connect with nature, exercise and relax. Wildbelt would protect the significant public, charitable and private investment in nature restoration for the long-term.

The Wildbelt is a chance for a new designation to capture the public’s imagination, inspiring and empowering communities to create new Wildbelt parks and green spaces through the Government’s introduction of a new Community Right to Buy. The benefits would be wide reaching for people and for nature, contributing to improvements in wider society by enhancing nature’s ability to prevent flooding and improve air quality, tackling the climate crisis, and creating more places for people to exercise and enjoy nature right on their doorstep. It would set a world leading example as the UK looks ahead to the next round of international conferences for nature and climate change this autumn.