HOUSE OF LORDS

Land Use in England Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Land use in England

Monday 4 April 2022

4.35 pm

Watch the meeting

Members present: Lord Cameron of Dillington (The Chair); Baroness Bakewell of Hardington Mandeville; Lord Borwick; Lord Curry of Kirkharle; Lord Goddard of Stockport; Lord Grantchester; Lord Harlech; The Earl of Leicester; Baroness Mallalieu; Baroness Redfern; Baroness Young of Old Scone.

Evidence Session No. 8 Heard in Public Questions 87 - 96

Witnesses

I: Tom Lancaster, Head of Land, Sea and Climate Policy, RSPB; Elliot Chapman-Jones, Head of Public Affairs, The Wildlife Trusts; Alec Taylor, Head of Land-Use Climate Programme, WWF UK.

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Examination of witnesses

Tom Lancaster, Elliot Chapman-Jones and Alec Taylor.

Q87 **The Chair:** Welcome to all three of you. Thank you very much for coming to see us. We hope it will not be a too formal, frightening session, as it were. Welcome to Alec Taylor, head of the land-use climate programme at WWF, and Elliot Chapman-Jones, head of public affairs at the Wildlife Trusts. Welcome back to Tom Lancaster, who has been before us in his capacity as a land manager. He now comes before us from an environmental NGO, so there is a difference between your two appearances, Tom.

There are some preliminary statements that I have to make. You have in front of you a list of interests that have been declared by members of the committee. The meeting is being broadcast live via the parliamentary website. A transcript of the meeting will be taken and published on the committee website, but you will have the opportunity to make corrections to that transcript where necessary.

Perhaps I may ask the first question. Are the Government's ambitions for tackling climate change, nature recovery and biodiversity realistic? Do we have sufficient skills and resources in place at national, regional and local level to deliver the Government's agenda in these areas? How are your organisations responding to the Government's agenda, and what lessons have you learned so far?

Elliot Chapman-Jones: The ambitions are realistic in that they are achievable, but the Government need to focus on delivery now. They have the frameworks in place from the post-Brexit Acts, the Environment Act and Agriculture Act. Those give them a strong framework, and over the next few years there needs to be an absolute focus on delivery.

In some areas, the Government could even go a bit further. They published legally binding environment targets that fall under the Environment Act framework. We were very pleased to see that they committed to the 2030 target to halt the decline in the abundance of species, which is a good way of setting a headline target to get us in that direction. Unfortunately, their long-term species abundance target of 2042 said that they will increase biodiversity or nature only by 10% beyond the 2030 level, so at best, in 20 years' time, we might get to where we are at the moment, and it definitely will not meet the commitment made in the 25-year environment plan and the natural environment White Paper before that to leave the environment in a better state for the next generation.

There are a couple of other gaps in their targets framework. A big one is about protected sites and how many of those are in good condition. The Government made a promise in their 25-year environment plan to get to at least 75% of protected sites, our sites of special scientific interest, into a favourable condition, but that target was not copied over into the legally binding framework. We think it should be if we want to get nature on a path to recovery.

The other missing target is on water. It is great that the Government have committed to targets focused on specific pressures on water industries, but we need an overarching water quality target that takes into account the whole water environment. We have the water framework directive, which runs out in 2027, and we are on course to miss that target spectacularly. At the moment, 0% of our rivers, streams and waterbodies are in good overall status, so we need a strong target for our overall water quality as well.

On whether there are sufficient skills and resources in place to deliver those, a really helpful framework is to look at some of the pressures wildlife is facing. They are helpfully identified in the state of nature reports that over 50 wildlife organisations put together. The big one is agricultural management, which has had the biggest pressure on our wildlife over the past 50 years, so making sure that the Government get their new agriculture policy and environmental land management schemes right and properly ambitious is really important, particularly local nature and landscape recovery schemes. It is about getting the details as quickly as possible to ensure that farmers can get them into their long-term planning, and making sure that the budgetary allocations for environmental land management are distributed according to environmental need.

The second big pressure is climate change. Lots of evidence shows us that our protected site network is really important for a species to be able to adapt to climate change. The Government need to get right the nature recovery Green Paper, which looks at how we best look after our protected sites and species. We just need to follow largely the principles that Professor Sir John Lawton set out a decade ago, which is that we need more sites; they need to be bigger, better and joined up; we need properly to invest in the recovery of those sites; and, as I said, we need to have a target to get more of them into a favourable condition.

Lastly, the other big pressure is urbanisation, which counts for a greater impact on species than any other kind of land use change. There, we just need to make sure that the planning system is focused on nature's recovery. It is about making sure that local nature recovery strategies are strong and have a big impact in local plans and the local planning system. Ensuring that they are properly resourced and that local authorities have the expertise to deliver them is absolutely crucial.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Alec Taylor: Elliot gave a very full answer. I do not have much more to add to what he said. The Government's ambitions may be realistic, but whether they are sufficient to deal with the challenges we face may be another question.

We stand at crossroads in the future of our landscapes. We often talk about a climate crisis and a nature crisis, but we increasingly face a food crisis and an energy crisis. Land is where all those issues come together, and they are really felt by the people who live and work in those

landscapes. We in WWF focus at the moment on the integration of climate and nature in agriculture and land use, and we see that there is not yet enough detail in the Government's climate plans, for example through the net zero strategy, on how the agriculture and land use sectors can reduce emissions and capture carbon. All these things come together in a way that needs to be meaningful for the years ahead.

Tom Lancaster: I agree with my colleagues. On the local capacity point, we have a lot of concerns about whether there is capacity to deliver on the ambitions of this Government and future Governments, given the scale of reductions in capacity that have been seen.

We can take two examples. Natural England's local land management teams were the engine of agri-environment scheme delivery in the past. They have seen a big reduction in capacity over the past 10 years or so, so when we are looking ahead to, say, the environmental land management schemes that will be a major part of whether the Government meet the targets they have set for themselves, the absence of those boots on the ground is one of our real concerns. Our concern is partly that it will drive a very transactional and potentially quite bureaucratic approach to the new schemes, rather than a scheme with a human face where advisers can sit around the kitchen table with farmers and land managers to talk about their potential contribution to larger national targets, which often can be quite hard to translate down to local and landscape level without that advisory support.

Secondly, only about 40% of local authorities have an ecologist, so if local authorities are to be given a big role in nature recovery, as they are through the development of local nature recovery strategies and the incorporation of biodiversity net gain in the planning system, we need to do something fairly urgently to address the long-standing decline in local authority capacity in that ecological expertise.

The Chair: Thank you very much. Incidentally, you do not all have to answer every question.

Q88 **Baroness Young of Old Scone:** Your response to the last question was really about how we tackle the nature and climate crisis, but there are lots of other bits of pressure on land. What have you learned from the past about what works in multifunctional delivery of land use rather than monofunctional delivery of land use? To some extent, we had twin tracks in agricultural land use in the past: food production and not doing too much damage. I will not say biodiversity benefits, because there were none, or very few. Tell me what you think we have learned from the past that might be different in the way we tackle multifunctionality, including built development for the future.

Tom Lancaster: I can pick up the agricultural land use point. The RSPB has lots of farms on our estate, including Hope Farm, our arable demonstration farm in Cambridgeshire. We bought it 22 years ago.

Baroness Young of Old Scone: I bought it actually.

Tom Lancaster: Yes, you probably did. That was exactly with a view to demonstrating multifunctional land use in a farmed setting. We set three broad goals, which were to maintain profits, maintain yields and boost wildlife. Over the first decade or so, we did exactly that. We broadly maintained yields within the normal fluctuation, we broadly maintained profitability, and we increased the farmland bird index by over 200% in that time. We also saw some positive response from other things like butterflies and bees.

At the time, that was through a very simple prescription of measures to deliver the big three for farmland birds: safe nesting habitat, winter food and spring food. It was specifically to try to demonstrate that you can do that within a conventional system. We carried on using pesticides and inorganic fertilisers, and to us that was a relatively straightforward example of multifunctional land use.

We are now trying to go a bit further. We have just put in an agroforestry trial to look at the climate agenda. We have trials that look at the combination of green cover and compost to improve soil organic matter and 13 other indices of soil health. We have been part of the Centre for Ecology & Hydrology ASSIST programme. We have just looked at the idea of ecological intensification. If you manage your land quite intensively for nature, do you get more bang for your buck? There was a seminal paper in 2015 from Pywell et al that found that if you manage 8% of your arable area through quite intensive measures such as wild flower margins, you get a 25% increase in yield through your flowering crops, in that case, field beans, and no net loss of yield for barley and wheat. Even though they are winter-pollinated, the crop pest predator benefits are such that you create agronomic benefits as well as environmental benefits.

Hope Farm is a really good example of multifunctional land use. The Pywell paper is a really good example of almost being able to have your cake and eat it when it comes to nature and food production. It demonstrates that, even taking what some farmers would regard as quite a large amount of land out of production, you have the productivity benefits of those habitats as well, through the pollinator and crop pest predator benefits.

Baroness Young of Old Scone: I know what you think about Dimbleby's three-compartment model, Tom, because you told us a couple of weeks ago. Alec and Elliot, what are your views on those proposals? That is not really a multifunctional approach; it is a zoning approach, is it not?

Alec Taylor: At WWF, we set out in our Land of Plenty work that to have a properly nature-positive pathway to meeting our climate and food production targets, we should start with regenerative farming techniques as a first principle. I think there is lots of opportunity if they are supported by some demand-side shifts, such as dietary changes. We can much better use of food production land that was previously used to grow crops for animals or for bioenergy, for example, and start to weave

nature back into the fabric of our agricultural landscapes and restore the complexity of our natural ecosystems. That would be very much our starting principle.

I agree with the national food strategy in the sense of the need to restore nature and carbon-rich ecosystems not just for their potential to grow food but in their own right as important habitats. I am not so convinced by the model of sustainable intensification, as you might call it, which would be the third part of that compartment model. I feel that it is quite reliant on some technology solutions that are yet to be commercially scaled to the extent they need to be.

Having said that, I very much welcome the national food strategy itself as an overall piece of work. It is a very leading, visionary agenda and has a lot of good things to say on land use as it relates to the food system. I very much hope that the Government, although they have delayed their response to the national food strategy, take this time to raise the ambition and set out an action plan for how we can create a resilient food system that is less reliant on things like fertilisers and makes nature a central part of our food production system again.

Q89 **Lord Curry of Kirkharle:** I am interested in how you think farmers will be incentivised to deliver a multifunctional land use strategy. The Government have been clear that they will not apply the income forgone principle in ELMS, yet they need to place a proper value on the incentives required under ELMS to deliver wildlife benefits, biodiversity of ecosystems, et cetera. It will be a tricky balance, when we have food price inflation as it is. Are you concerned that certain geographic areas in Britain might be at risk as a consequence? Do you think government incentives will deliver their multifunctional system?

Elliot Chapman-Jones: What will be really crucial is what we learned in Scotland when it introduced its land use strategy back in 2011 with a lot of fanfare and welcome. A lot of people congratulated the Scottish Government for embarking on it, but it somewhat lost political momentum. I do not think that currently any members of the Scottish Government are working on their land use strategy. One of the big lessons from that is that it did not have bottom-up democratic buy-in.

One of the crucial tools will be local nature recovery strategies, because not only can they try to realise the multifunctional approaches of effectively and efficiently targeting things like biodiversity, net gain payments, environment land management payments and a whole host of other nature for climate payments that the Government are doing, but they can have democratic buy-in through bringing together stakeholders, whether land managers, farmers, wildlife conservation organisations or the wider community—for example, people affected by flooding, or people who want nature on their doorstep.

That may be where some of the land-sparing arguments do not quite work, because you are asking people to live in areas that have no nature because they are highly productive. Everyone should have access to

nature on their doorstep. If we get the democratic mandate for local nature recovery strategies right, and ensure that there is a strong duty to implement them in local plans and planning, or direct funding for environmental land management schemes, that will be a crucial component.

Tom Lancaster: On your concern, Lord Curry, about areas almost pricing themselves out of ELM and other incentive schemes, all farmers can do something for nature and, if they want to, should be supported to do so through one of the three schemes that the Government are developing.

Looking at the basis of that payment, we have talked about a fair return for farmers. Income forgone plus costs is always likely to be one of the main ways in which they calculate those payments. With the increase in prices for farmers in the products they sell, you also get an increase in inputs. What is relevant to the calculation of those payments is not the farmgate price; it is the margin that the farmer can generate. Often, the margin is quite static, because input prices often go up at the same rate as, or even more than, the farmgate prices, so nature conservation in some of these areas might not necessarily become unaffordable for the Government to buy, basically, and we certainly would not want to see that happening.

If it looked as though it was happening, the incentives being offered would need to be reviewed to ensure that they provided sufficient incentive for some of the more commercial and productive farmers still to be able to engage with those schemes. As Elliot said, we want to see nature recovered everywhere. We do not want any white spaces, as they are sometimes described, to emerge through that process.

Q90 **Lord Goddard of Stockport:** Do you think the planning system is up to supporting nature, and delivering on biodiversity net gains and wider environmental net gains? If it needs changing, what do we need to do to make it better and give a better deal and outcome for nature? That is usually the end of the planning system, and I think it should be more at the front end.

Alec Taylor: That is a very good point. I have worked on land planning and marine spatial planning, so I have a salty and terrestrial perspective on how the planning systems have emerged and are joined up, or are not joined up in many cases.

I agree that the planning system could be much more proactive about identifying space for nature. Often, we end up relying on developments making space for nature within their individual development. We have the example of biodiversity net gain to identify how we can make biodiversity better at the end of a development than it was at the beginning. In my view, that has missed the strategic opportunity in the earlier parts of the planning process to identify, for example, where the 300,000 hectares of suitable habitat for woodlands are, or where the saltmarsh that needs to be created to stop our coastal cities being inundated by flooding is, and

then put some sort of protection, through the planning system, on those areas before they are allowed to be developed.

In their nature Green Paper, the Government talked of a landscape designation-type system that could apply to the planning process. That would be a good proactive way of making sure that those areas were, first, not damaged further and, ultimately, were given space to recover in future.

Lord Goddard of Stockport: Is it fit for purpose now?

Alec Taylor: My view is that it is not, and more improvement is needed.

Elliot Chapman-Jones: In response to the Government's planning White Paper, which I think was published in 2020, the Wildlife Trusts produced a report on the five big changes that the planning system needed to make sure that it was fit for nature. I will very happily distribute that to the committee, if you would like to give it a read.

Ultimately, as it has slowly evolved over the last 70 years, the English planning system has evolved to meet some of the things that we need for nature. It has protected some sites in some areas, but it was never designed to tackle the scale of the nature crisis we are facing at the moment, so the planning system absolutely needs reform to be able to live up to that and achieve it.

There are five main points, which I will run through super quickly. As Alec said, you need nature at the heart of the planning system; you need to plan for nature's recovery in the same way that you plan for housing developments. Local nature recovery strategies will be crucial there. Local nature recovery strategies need to have a strong duty in local plans so that you understand where the priorities are for nature, because that will make up the wider nature recovery network.

You need to make sure that some of the protections for nature in the planning system are strengthened; for example, you need an ecological survey at the time a development is put forward. If you do not have that and do not have an understanding of the ecological impact of a proposed development, schemes such as biodiversity net gain will not work because you do not understand the impact they will have. As Alec said, maybe you can strengthen some of the site protection through the nature recovery Green Paper.

The Wildlife Trusts called for a new designation, because there is a big hole in our current landscape of designations. We can protect the spaces that are really good for nature at the moment, the jewels in the crown, but we cannot protect sites that might be low in diversity value at the moment but we are investing in for the recovery of nature. They might be sites that we are investing in through biodiversity net gain funds or environmental land management. We are making sure that we put new sites that are currently of low biodiversity value on a path to nature recovery. Those sites are crucial for the Government to meet their target

of 30% of land protected by 2030. The Wildlife Trusts called for a new kind of wild belt designation to protect those sites, because at the moment the Environment Act sets out that biodiversity net gain sites are protected for only 30 years. If you want long-term nature protection and to get it on a path to recovery, those sites need to be protected in perpetuity. I think that a new wild belt-style designation can do that.

The last couple of bits are about health and well-being. People need access to nature on their doorstep, and the planning system should help to encourage greater access to nature and make sure that people can engage with the system properly. People can engage with the planning system, and local communities can engage with the planning system, when the impacts of development are known. The planning system relies on local knowledge and the consent of the local community, so having that embedded in the planning system is absolutely crucial.

The Chair: Alec, you said that the local nature recovery strategy will be the key to having bottom-up process. The process is not really under way yet in most local councils. How do you see that working? Quite a lot of people probably have a fear that it will become the preserve of environmental NGOs dictating what goes on. How do we make sure that there is a good democratic mandate so that it really works? Is local government strategy a big enough area? Some local councils are quite small.

Alec Taylor: Mandate is the right word in some ways. We are just about to release some public dialogues on land use that show across seven landscapes in the UK that people are genuinely interested and want to be involved in helping to decide the future of the places where they live. They do not yet feel that they have sufficient involvement and support from national government or locally where they live to be able to do that.

Local nature recovery strategies are a good start in that process. I agree that they could be broadened to include some of the wider societal challenges. Ultimately, we want to avoid having a bunch of siloed consultation processes whereby people are consulted about climate change over here, nature over there, food over there, and housing and water quality in some other place. Ultimately, we need to streamline those processes so that farmers and other people who are very time poor have the ability, in language they understand, to help to decide the future of their landscape. I hope that, as part of a national land use strategy, if the Government were to bring that in they would give a mandate to the local nature recovery strategy process in particular to be the integrated consultation and delivery mechanism for the future.

Q91 **Lord Harlech:** Pivoting from biodiversity slightly to climate change, something that we feel acutely in this country is flooding. All three of you have mentioned it already in some of your answers. What are some sustainable and environmentally focused answers to flooding? Where I live in north Shropshire, the Environment Agency's answer was to build a giant concrete dam to hold people upstream under water for six months in order to protect the town centre of Shrewsbury. To me, that does not

seem like a good long-term environmental solution. I would be interested to hear some of your answers on flood prevention and alleviation.

Tom Lancaster: I completely agree. There is huge scope for more natural flood management and nature-based solutions in reducing flood risk for communities. One of the frustrating things about that is that, in a public policy sense, we are still talking about piloting natural flood management, whereas actually we have been doing it quite well for several decades. There is a lot of experience, evidence and literature to tell you how to do it well.

The RSPB's Medmerry reserve on the south coast was an Environment Agency-led project to do some managed realignment on the coast to alleviate chronic flood risk at Selsey affecting particularly the infrastructure serving the town but also a large caravan park, which had a one in one year risk of flooding. They breached the coast wall and built a wall further inland, creating 450 hectares of new habitat—new mud flats, saltmarsh and other coastal habitats—to take the water. Whenever there is a storm surge or a high tide, or a combination of the two, the water goes there now rather than into the caravan park and affecting the infrastructure serving the town. It creates huge amounts of habitat and absorbs huge amounts of carbon, moving the caravan park from a one in one year flood risk to a one in 100 year flood risk.

That is a good example of large-scale natural flood risk management led by the Environment Agency, partnered with us. We designed the scheme with them to maximise the nature benefits and now we manage it on a lease from the agency. It really reveals that natural flood management is not second best to concrete grey infrastructure; it can be done with just as much confidence and certainty. That example appeared in the US Army Corps of Engineers atlas on natural flood management and nature-based solutions. That is something the US Army Corps of Engineers does and specialises in, and I assume they are the most hardcore engineers in the world. To us, it is a really good example of where you can have a great deal of confidence in natural flood management.

The design stage for that scheme goes back a couple of decades. There are other examples where we have done the same thing. At St Aidan's in the Aire valley, there has been a huge amount of flooding in recent years. That was a former opencast coal mine now turned into a washland. Its scale is such that you can quantify the reduction in flood peak that the single site secures for downstream communities. In the big Boxing Day floods a few years ago, St Aidan's alone reduced the flood peak by 40 centimetres for downstream communities. It is saving most of the houses from flooding and providing a high degree of confidence that you can quantify.

The Chair: Do you have similar solutions for the problem of drought, with rivers drying up and not enough water? In southern and eastern parts of England, that is a very serious problem. The water level in rivers is getting so low that biodiversity, particularly in some of our chalk streams, is suffering hugely.

Tom Lancaster: More consideration needs to be given to the creation of storage reservoirs on farms for overwinter abstraction of water when flows in rivers are high, for use during the summer when river flows are low. At the moment, there are barriers in the planning system that prevent that, in the system of abstraction licensing that the Environment Agency uses. Financing for them can be quite difficult to secure, particularly for individual farm businesses, so that is an area where a more joined-up approach by government between planning and regulation and incentives could do a lot to help to reduce abstraction from stressed-out rivers and make farming operations more resilient to climate change.

Q92 **Baroness Mallalieu:** Can I ask about 30x30? I anticipate that all three of you think it is achievable, but what, in the view of each of you, are the things that are likely to cause it to fail? We have already had some answers from Elliot Chapman-Jones, but what would you do, if you had the power, to make sure that it happens?

Alec Taylor: I will kick off with a couple of recommendations. From our side, some of the best examples of protected areas that have been well managed are when the local community has been actively involved in their initiation, not just their management, so they do not feel that it is a top-down imposition. I have examples from the marine environment in places such as Lamlash Bay in Scotland, where the community actively called for protected areas because their fish stocks were being run down.

To go back to what Elliot and Tom said about the democratic role of local communities in the future of their landscapes and how 30x30 interacts with that, it is critically important for people to feel that 30x30 is not just a buzzword, term or target to meet an international commitment but something for the benefit of people where they live. There is a need for a much greater level of support and participation for and by local communities for the purposes of achieving 30x30.

Let us not forget about the other 70%. We do not want to create pockets of protection among areas that have very poor levels of biodiversity; otherwise we will just end up not having the connected network we want to see. As Tom said, we want nature recovery across all landscapes and areas, and 30x30 should be about protecting the crown jewels, the heart and soul of areas. Those would be my initial recommendations. I defer to colleagues for others.

Elliot Chapman-Jones: There are three big things that the Government need to get right if they are to achieve 30x30 properly. Overarching it are Professor Sir John Lawton's principles for a bigger and better joined-up ecological network. There are three big things. The first is expanding and strengthening the network of protected sites. At the moment, we have about 8% coverage of SSSIs in England. Unfortunately, about 38%—just over a third—are in a favourable condition, and we have been languishing at about that figure for almost a decade. In 2021, 78% of our SSSIs had not been monitored in over six years.

It is about making sure that more of those sites have better management plans, getting them into better condition and making sure that we complete the network. The network is not yet complete; it should not just be sites representative of the sample. We should make sure that sites that meet the criteria for that level of protection are protected. That will get us some way there.

The next step they need to take is strengthening the designations for landscapes for nature, making sure that the existing designated landscapes—our national parks and areas of outstanding natural beauty—have a stronger emphasis on nature's recovery. Some of those things were set out in the landscapes review by Julian Glover. Analysis by Wildlife and Countryside Link shows that, if we do that and give them a stronger duty for nature's recovery, almost half of those sites can start to contribute to 30x30. The last piece of the jigsaw is what I talked about earlier: the new designation for nature's recovery and protecting sites that we are investing in for nature's recovery through a new wild belt designation.

There is a right way and wrong way to achieve 30x30. The right way is to do it properly by counting up the figures and doing the hard work to make sure that we get to it properly. The wrong way is to take a lines-on-the-map approach. The Government have claimed repeatedly that we are already at 26%. That figure encompasses many of our national landscapes: that is, our ANOBs and national parks. They are not primarily designated for nature so should not be counted towards 30x30. If they strengthen their duty, they can be, but they are not there at the moment.

If we get this right, we can inspire international action across the globe as well. The 30x30 target will be discussed at the Convention on Biological Diversity, which is the nature COP to what COP 26 was to climate. We can inspire other countries to do the same thing. If we try to cook the books and cut the figures slightly, we might get to the lowest common denominator.

Tom Lancaster: It is all of that. In particular, the abiding problem with protected areas is translating protection into effective management for all the reasons Elliot and Alec have run through. Some analysis that our scientists produced found that in reality only about 4.9% of England and the UK is protected effectively now for nature, largely as a function of some of the things Elliot mentioned, such as lack of monitoring and poor quality condition.

That is one reason why we are so concerned about there not being a condition target in the targets proposals currently out for consultation. Condition targets for SSSIs have been one of the ways we have driven investment in protected areas through schemes such as agri-grant schemes, in particular high-level stewardship. If we do not have a statutory condition target under the Environment Act for SSSIs, it will massively reduce the imperative for Governments now and in the future

to invest in them and, therefore, will exacerbate the problem we have always had in translating protection into effective management.

One of the other specific things on public policy for protected areas is the problem of permanence of change. If we are thinking about designating new areas, or even creating new habitats, and counting them towards the 30x30 target, how do we ensure that it is a permanent protection? Elliot already mentioned the fact that habitats created under biodiversity net gain have a 30-year limit. Sometimes habitats created under agri-environment schemes are counted towards these sorts of targets while they can be guaranteed only for the lifetime of the agreement, which might be three or five years, or 10 years at most.

It is a matter of thinking about how we can use covenants, for example, to ensure the permanent protection of some of the habitats and areas that are counted towards the 30x30 target, and how we can improve the regulatory system within land use, which is pretty threadbare at the moment if you think about how ineffective agriculture and forestry EIA regulations have been. The permanence for change point is a knotty policy problem, but one that cannot be avoided if we are serious about our global leader credentials when it comes to 30x30.

The Chair: How do we achieve local living landscapes around towns? A lot of the national parks are pretty remote. How do we achieve more localised schemes? Is there a way of doing that at the moment?

Elliot Chapman-Jones: One of the important factors will be green infrastructure strategies to increase the amount of local accessible green space. They can work with local nature recovery strategies to map the best areas. We talked earlier about multifunctional approaches. If you took your local nature recovery strategy and overlaid it with indices of deprivation, health inequalities or lack of access to green space, you would clearly see the areas where it was most important to intervene to ensure that people have good-quality access to nature. As we know, this has massive impacts on people's mental health as well as their physical health, such as preventable diseases like obesity and heart disease. The most deprived communities have the least access to green space; they have nine times less access to green space than the wealthiest communities.

You could take areas of existing nature and overlap them with access to nature. One was done by Public Health Dorset, which worked with its integrated care partnership. They used the World Health Organization definition of access to green space standards, which is 0.5 hectares of nature-rich green space within 300 metres of people's homes. They found that only 43% of people in Dorset had that near them, so over half of the community does not have close access to green space. The importance of these spaces to people was shown up massively during the pandemic. Mandating local authorities or local planning authorities to have green infrastructure standards, and to have all public bodies contributing to them, is important, as well as housing developers contributing to green

infrastructure strategies. It aligns with the Government's levelling-up agenda and their future levelling-up and planning plans.

There are a couple of other ways we can do this. One is through the levelling-up funds, making sure that a green infrastructure can be invested in through those funds to ensure that we have more green infrastructure on people's doorstep. The other thing is the re-creation of a target for access to green space. Under the Environment Act targets framework, the Government could easily set a target for naturally accessible green space on people's doorstep to set a long-term driver of how we get nature on people's doorstep.

Tom Lancaster: I think the Government are missing a trick in their levelling-up agenda—nature and nature recovery are almost absent in their levelling-up White Paper—whereas there is a popular policy to be had for them in incorporating better access to nature and green space in their levelling-up agenda. I think that would go down really well with a whole load of voters.

The Earl of Leicester: This is a devil's advocate question. You mentioned that 4.9% of land is well managed. Do you have a percentage for how much land is in nature reserves such as SSSIs, et cetera? Is it more than 4.9%?

Tom Lancaster: About 8% is designated under SSSIs.

Q93 **The Earl of Leicester:** My question is directed at you and those running nature reserves. Would it be true to say that a lot more could be done by organisations like yours where reserves have individual managers who perhaps are failing and are not managing land well? I speak from experience. We have run a national nature reserve at Holkham for 10 years. Although I say so myself, we have some very good managers there and we have arrested the decline of lapwings and things like that by doing lots of different things, not necessarily sticking to strict parameters that were originally given us by Natural England.

Tom Lancaster: I had the privilege of being given a tour of the reserve by your team. It is an incredible place. By no means are all of the RSPB's reserves that are SSSIs in a favourable condition. Those statistics are public, but I can send them to the committee.

A lot of the time the reasons for sites not achieving favourable condition are outside the land managers' or owners' control. A lot of our nature reserve SSSIs are water dependent, and fundamentally the condition of the site is dependent on the quality of the water coming on to the site. Some of our reserves, such as Lake Moss in Cumbria and Marazion Marsh in Cornwall, are chronically affected by poor water quality in the upper catchment. Try as we might through efforts with the Environment Agency, Natural England and others to remedy those pressures in the past, we have not managed to do so thus far. That is partly a function of inadequate regulatory levers being pulled by some state agencies and

partly a failure of the incentives on offer to farmers and land managers to address those pressures.

On your point about taking a more flexible approach, in the right hands flexibility is great and can be used to good effect to improve the condition of SSSIs, but it is not always used to good effect. That is in part where some of our concerns about local capacity would come in, because in order to use flexibility for good, you need capacity within Natural England in particular to work with landowners and land managers to use that flexibility effectively. Where you do not have that capacity, often you get a one-size-fits-all approach, which is obviously frustrating for landowners because they see that if they could do something slightly differently they could get better results. That is why one of our priorities with schemes such as ELM and current schemes such as the higher tier of countryside stewardship is to address some of the capacity issues with Natural England, because it will be good for site condition and good for nature recovery in the wider landscape.

The Chair: Our last two questions are about solutions. We are a land use committee looking at actual land use. In some of your literature you have put forward various solutions, but we will come to those.

Q94 **Lord Goddard of Stockport:** Reflecting on the answers to the previous questions, do you broadly support the development of a land use strategy for England? Could an overarching strategy help or hinder the delivery of better land use for nature?

Alec Taylor: I very much support a land use strategy for England. The absence of one in the context of the crises we face is hindering our ability to treat land as an integrated issue. I very much support having a strategy, not just at national level, which sets out the challenges we need to face, such as net zero, nature recovery, food resilience, with some common metrics, constraints and trade-offs, and perhaps a GIS-based map of those trade-offs and constraints.

We need guidance in the form of a strategy at national level, and, as we have mentioned, we need that strategy to be able to give the mandate to people in those landscapes to help decide how to manage the trade-offs where they are. A lot of the policy processes going on at the moment do not have a higher-level vision or ambition to know what to work towards, and that is ultimately what a land use strategy could help to provide. At local and regional level, it could facilitate conversations about how we best tackle climate change, restore nature, produce enough food and restore our renewable energy infrastructure. How do we do that in the context of what is available in those areas?

The Chair: Alec, in the fifth ambition set out in your Land of Plenty document you say: "Governments must work with communities, local authorities and landowners to develop locally-driven land use frameworks and partnerships, allowing communities to shape the future of their landscapes". Does that mean that local parish councillors will say what is planted where and what is done? That is obviously an exaggeration, but

perhaps you could put it in a better framework.

Alec Taylor: In the variety of landscapes across the UK, the differences between the uplands of the Yorkshire Dales, the fens, Aberdeenshire, Cornwall or places like that, the trade-offs and opportunities in how we use those landscapes will vary dramatically according to local priorities, so it is not appropriate for a single national strategy to apply across the UK in a way that directs decisions on the future of land use. That is why we have done public dialogues in those areas and invested in some exciting projects, such as a project called Wild Ingleborough in the Yorkshire Dales. For the Ingleborough area and the wider Yorkshire Dales landscape, what are the opportunities for capturing carbon, restoring nature, maintaining a productive agricultural community and allowing people the space and time to have a facilitated, participative journey?

That is what we mean by having a local or regional approach to land use decision-making, supported by a national set of targets and directions. It would not be at local parish level in every part of England, but it would be at the level that is appropriate to allow local and regional-level decision-making at a landscape scale.

Q95 **The Chair:** Tom, in your document, *A Nature Recovery Plan*, you talk about reintroducing an effective "larger than local" tier of planning and giving proper weight to it in the planning system. Would you explain how you see that working?

Tom Lancaster: It is there to shine a light on the fact that we have lost the larger than local tier that used to exist between local and national and was so important in trans-boundary concerns, particularly nature and other environmental factors such as water and flood risk management. Local authorities are inherently fixed entities. When we lost the regional tier of government in 2010, it was replaced with a duty to co-operate, but that duty has not driven the sort of co-operation we need, particularly on environmental issues.

I am from Peterborough, which is quite a small unitary authority. It has four or five national character areas within it. Peterborough occupies only a small part of those NCAs. Most of the NCAs sit outside the unitary authority's boundaries, yet when it comes to the development of local nature recovery strategies it is not clear at the moment whether, say, Peterborough as a unitary authority will have its own strategy and, if so, how it will develop actions through that strategy with other local authorities to ensure that they are environmentally coherent. That is where a larger than local entity, or layer in the planning process, could help to ensure that there is a greater degree of alignment and coherence, particularly in environmental action across local authority boundaries.

The Chair: What do you recommend we put in our final document about this? Do we say that the Government should enforce local councils to co-operate on this sort of subject? How do you see us coming up with a solution to the problem you have just outlined?

Tom Lancaster: At the risk of sounding as though I am recommending a new layer of bureaucracy, it is worth looking at a nationally consistent layer in the planning process that sits between national and local. We had those with Government Offices for the Regions under the previous Labour Government. They were abolished in 2010. I think there is a recognition that we lost a degree of regional oversight when we lost the government office regions and the regional development agencies. We could look at a version of that, or whether we can empower local nature partnerships, maybe giving local enterprise partnerships a greater remit in environmental matters. It would be something along those lines.

The Chair: Are the strategic plans that Manchester and other metropolitan authorities are developing useful, or are they too metropolitan?

Tom Lancaster: We have been quite supportive of those regional spatial plans, for the reasons I highlighted. Manchester has examples of green infrastructure cutting across local borough boundaries. When you have regional spatial planning, you can realise opportunities for green infrastructure and habitat creation through biodiversity net gain that are much more strategic and cost effective than would be the case if it was down to just individual local authorities. Whether or not you drive a nationally consistent geography to achieve those regional spatial plans is not necessarily something we have been specific about, hence the relatively open "larger than local" framing in that report.

Q96 **The Earl of Leicester:** Chair, I think you asked half my question and Tom has answered it.

The Chair: I apologise.

The Earl of Leicester: Perhaps Alec and Elliot could come in. What organisation or organisations would be best placed to plan future land use? Is it existing organisations? Is it an amalgamation of the Environment Agency and something else, or, as Tom said, perhaps a regional development agency type of thing?

Elliot Chapman-Jones: It is a bit of a combination of what Tom talked about, with a local authority and regional bottom-up approach. What cannot be ignored is the national government-level approach.

We are talking about agriculture, planning and other pressures on land use. The big one we face, which is causing fragmentation of habitats and loss of habitat, is nationally significant infrastructure projects. We have had about 138 NSIPs enter the process, of which I think seven have been rejected, so there is a high guarantee that NSIPs will be granted consent.

This is happening at sea as well as on land. They are taken on a project-by-project approach, so we are not seeing the cumulative impact of all the national infrastructure projects that are happening across the country. The majority of them are road developments; I think the Government are still committed to investing £27 billion in new road

infrastructure, so they will only increase, particularly if we are increasing onshore wind and solar farms as well.

Making sure we get the NSIP process absolutely right will be the other crucial part. It could be done through a national policy statement for land, probably co-ordinated by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, but it needs to be coherent with all other government strategies, such as the energy national policy statement and the transport national policy statement. That could sit above a strategic land use plan that is fed in through things like local nature recovery strategies, local authorities and the nature recovery network.

Alec Taylor: I completely agree with Elliot. It has to be a cross-government mission at national level, not just a Defra or environmental mission; it needs to involve departments such as housing and transport in the way we think land needs to be managed in future. There is scope to be creative around the kind of land use partnerships that are needed in different areas. I do not think there is necessarily one size that fits all. We have seen some exciting partnerships that have grown quite organically that agencies have supported.

The Earl of Leicester: Can you give an example?

Alec Taylor: [1]In the Ingleborough region that I mentioned, we have the national park, the Rivers Trust, the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust and WWF. They have come together to form a positive example of how we can bring communities and stakeholders into discussions on land use in the future. It does not necessarily need to be a very bureaucratic process led by local authorities. In part, it depends on the communities involved, the circumstances of the area and the opportunities of the area. Probably no one size fits all, but as long as people are clear about the ways in which their areas and land use can help and support in critical national and international fights, such as climate change and nature loss, it will be all the better for that.

The Chair: I thank all three of you very much for coming to see us and giving us your pearls of wisdom. If there is anything you want to add at any time, do let us know. We will be dealing with the subject for most of the rest of the summer.

[1] Alec Taylor has subsequently clarified that the National Park and the River Trust are in the stakeholder group, but are not one of the founding partners of the Wild Ingleborough Project