

Environmental Audit Committee

Oral evidence: Biodiversity and Ecosystems, HC 636

Thursday 12 November 2020

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Philip Dunne (Chair); Duncan Baker; Feryal Clark; Barry Gardiner; Mr Robert Goodwill; Ian Levy; Marco Longhi; Caroline Lucas; Jerome Mayhew; John McNally; Dr Matthew Offord; Nadia Whittome.

Questions 47 - 117

Witnesses

[I](#): Professor Kathy Willis, Member, Natural Capital; Julian Glover, Chair, Landscape Review, and former Associate Editor, London Evening Standard; Craig Bennett, Chief Executive, Wildlife Trusts; and Dr Ruth Little, Lecturer, University of Sheffield.

[II](#): Philip Glanville, Member, Local Government Association's Environment, Economy, Housing and Transport Board, and Mayor of Hackney; Kari Sprostranova, Health, Safety, Environment and Sustainability Director, Balfour Beatty; Caroline Knox, Member, National Farmers' Union Environment Forum; and Ben McCarthy, Head of Nature Conservation and Restoration Ecology, National Trust.

[Written evidence can be found on the committee's website](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Professor Kathy Willis, Julian Glover, Craig Bennett and Dr Ruth Little.

Q47 **Chair:** Good morning and welcome to the Environmental Audit Committee for our second session of our inquiry into biodiversity and ecosystems. Today, through two panels, we will be looking at policy and implementation.

I am delighted to welcome our first set of panellists, whom I am going to ask to introduce themselves briefly, starting with Professor Willis.

Professor Willis: Good morning. I am Kathy Willis. I am Professor of Biodiversity at the University of Oxford. I have also been a member of the Government's Natural Capital Committee for the last five years.

Julian Glover: Good morning from Derbyshire. I am Julian Glover. I led the landscapes review for the Government, which reported just over a year ago, into how we run national parks and areas of outstanding natural beauty.

Craig Bennett: Good morning. I am Craig Bennett. I am Chief Executive of the Wildlife Trusts.

Dr Little: Hi, I am a social scientist in the Geography department at the University of Sheffield and I lead an Economic and Social Research Council grant on post-Brexit agri-environmental policy conducted between the University of Sheffield and Dr David Rose at Reading University.

Q48 **Chair:** Thank you, Ruth. I gather it is your birthday today. Happy birthday. Thank you for spending it with us.

I would like to start with you, Kathy, on the work that the Natural Capital Committee has been doing. How does that Committee assess the Government's 25-year environment plan?

Professor Willis: Looking at the 25-year environment plan, we most recently published our final report looking at how we have been doing over the last eight years since the Government said they wanted a bigger, better and more joined-up environment, and how that linked to the Government's Biodiversity 2020 plans. When we looked at the datasets, from which we can assess how we are getting on with our environment, we realised there were some significant problems.

There were problems in terms of the spatial coverage of the datasets. For example, if you look at urban air, you will find that although we are quite good at measuring air quality around cities, we have little understanding about air quality across the countryside. When we looked at the spatial



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resolution, again, we found huge gaps in the amount of data there is to be able to determine how our environment is.

There is a big gap in soil data. We have very little understanding of the true quality of our soils.

The third thing is the temporal resolution. We found that when we were trying to see trends—how we are doing in biodiversity, whether it is getting better or worse and what has happened to our natural capital—we found that with most of the datasets the Government currently have, we cannot assess the trends. For example, the last time we assessed the coverage of hedgerows in the UK was in 2007, so we do not know about connectivity from hedgerows across the landscape because we do not have the datasets to do it.

A lot of the datasets that we have in this country also give a snapshot of a single year and then you have to wait seven years for another snapshot. If we are serious about improving our environment, we have to make sure that we measure on a regular basis, both spatially and temporally. This came through from the Natural Capital Committee.

When we tried to look at the targets that had been set not only in our Biodiversity 2020 strategy but also in the 25-year environment plan, all the trends that we could pull out from the datasets show decline rather than improvement. Whatever we are doing, we are nowhere near there yet.

Q49 Chair: What you say about the lack of baseline data or consistent monitoring of data is disturbing. What would you recommend the Government do to put that right?

Professor Willis: We need to start to think at a much more whole-country scale and also start to think about doing an environmental census. In the same way that we do a citizen census, we should be thinking about how we can take a broad approach. It doesn't have to be complicated, but what key assets do we need to measure and at what spatial scale? Once a year or once every three years, we need to measure them each and every time so that we properly start to build up this dataset to look at what is happening with our trends.

Q50 Chair: Are you clear about which datasets we should be prioritising? Some of the evidence we received suggested that there is a host of datasets—66 indicators under the outcome indicator framework. Is it feasible? If they are not monitoring anything properly, what things should we be prioritising?

Professor Willis: We should be prioritising those natural capital assets that we know provide the essential ecosystem service flows that provide the public benefits we all want. This is not a complicated list. It is because we have so many different people all trying to do the right thing, but all measuring their own assets, that we are ending up with 66 different indicators. We need to measure the soils. We need to measure



the distribution of trees, the heights of trees and the species of trees, because all of those are critical for understanding carbon, for example. We need to understand where our important biodiversity areas are, where our protected areas are, and so on. There are six different assets that we need to measure from the quality of the air to the quality of the water.

If I can give you one example in terms of quality of water, we also have these big gaps there. The water framework directive, which measures the quality of our rivers and our streams, is a good programme because the Environment Agency goes back every year and measure the quality, but 88% of our wetlands and lakes are not included in that.

Let's just fill the gaps. Let's see where those gaps are and fill them up, rather than starting completely from scratch. We have these excellent arm's-length bodies in the Government, but we should now be much more directional in what people measure, rather than just letting everyone do their own thing

We have fantastic NGOs. We have one organisation here, which can help fill these gaps if we bring the citizens and NGOs on board, rather than always treating them as second-class citizens. We have to be joined up both in people and in resources to get to that point.

I do believe we can get there—that's the thing. We must be positive about this. It is a fantastic opportunity, but we absolutely now have to be clear in our direction.

Q51 Chair: Water quality is a specialist subject of mine. At the moment, the laboratory analysis that has to be done to undertake assessment of water quality is both time-consuming and costly. The Environment Agency would say that it does not have the resources to do that. Are technologies emerging that will allow more continuous monitoring remotely rather than requiring specific samples to be taken to a lab and reidentified with a location? Can we use technology to help us here?

Professor Willis: Absolutely. This is where we need to link to many of the universities. You can use your phone to determine stream biodiversity by the noises in the stream. There are sensors you can now use to attach to your mobile phone to give you an estimate of the various nutrient loadings in the rivers.

This is true of me as well: everyone who is a biodiversity scientist still likes to go out with a clipboard and a pencil into the field, because everyone likes to do that fieldwork element. We need to move away from that. Technology can help us with biodiversity assessments and natural capital assessments. We now need to ask what those new emerging technologies are and embrace them to quickly improve our ability to measure water.



Soils is another area where there are some good online mobile soil-measuring kits that we can use. Bring in that technology. I think every landowner would be pleased to be shown that technology as well.

Q52 Chair: Thank you. Julian, you produced a report just over a year ago looking at the national landscape plan. You came to my constituency and I took an interest in the work you were doing looking at designation. Could you give us your topline review and recommendations to the Government about the management of designated landscapes?

Julian Glover: Very briefly, the review was into more than just biodiversity; it was into people and nature. We called in our topline message for more for people and more for nature. We are unashamedly positive and massively ambitious. We argue that if you connect people with the landscape, allow people to understand it, respect the people who live in and who help shape it, you will in the end support nature. Seeing the two as separate will not help nature in the end.

We did also focus on what needs to be done for nature and for biodiversity. I would echo a lot of what we have just heard from Kathy. We do not know the state of nature in our protected landscapes, although we have some ideas. We know that things are not as good as they could be. You can see the evidence with your own eyes. You can see it from the state of SSSIs, although that is an imperfect measure. There is no baseline. There is no state today. Very crudely, you could certainly say that the state of nature is less good than it was 70 years ago, when protection came in. It is sad that we have devoted seven decades to protecting landscapes but nature has gone backwards.

Much of that is because of things outside the control of landscapes—things like farming policy, urbanisation—so we cannot just blame national parks and AONBs for it. But we argued in the report that they need to focus much more heavily on nature; they need to make it much more the core of what they do. They need to be helped to do that with things like ELMS and the new farming policy and hopefully be given some more resources. They need to change the way governance works so that they think about nature more. At the moment, national park board meetings rarely focus purely on nature; they think of other things first.

We want a bigger, more ambitious focus and we want some strategic leadership. We think they need to work together. We want to break down barriers between different types of designations and work with non-Government things—this is not just a state problem. Organisations, NGOs, charities, the wildlife trusts we have today and the National Trust are all supportive of the review and are a great part of it. We need to work together with some big, clear ambitions. We need to know where we are starting and where we want to get to.

Finally, I hope the review will be positive. This is not a review into a despairing situation, saying there is nothing we can do. With some clear, simple moves, we can rapidly improve the state of nature in our country.



We cannot solve everything—there are huge challenges like climate change—but we can put these landscapes at the service of the country. They are there to help the country and to help people who live in them. They are not there just for themselves; they are there to do a job, and we want to assist them to do the job.

Finally, although it has been a year since the review came out, it was in the Labour manifesto and in the Conservative manifesto; it has had backing at elections. I have had strong support from officials inside DEFRA working on it now, and I have ministerial support. Although we have not had an immediate response from the Government, I feel encouraged by the likelihood that we will get a good response and we can do things, but everybody has to work together and look upwards and outwards about change. It is not enough just to defend a small series of attempts to protect things that are not quite working as they could.

Q53 Chair: No indeed. We have had one response from the Government and that was the Prime Minister's announcement of the 30/30 pledge to increase the designation to 30% by 2030. Was that a recommendation of your review?

Julian Glover: We did not specifically say that, but we were pleased to hear the Prime Minister talk about designations. He mentioned the review in the House of Commons the other day. I always take it as a good sign when the Government pick up on things and they don't get buried.

We want designations to make a difference, of course. It is no good designating something and then not being able to help improvement. A debate goes on with some people saying, "English designations in particular are not the same as in other countries, because they are populated places." I am in a national park as I speak, and it is farmed and visited and successful in many ways. It is not just a biodiversity designation. That is a strength if we get that right. If we link people and link nature, we can make our places special for nature and amazing for people and for the strength of our country. We can bring people in from cities and give them an education into the countryside. They can get pleasure, exercise, health and fitness, and we can get biodiversity right. We should not see that as an either/or battle. I am pleased that the Prime Minister said that. He now needs to back it up with support for those designations, for funding.

Finally, this is not just about inside the boundaries of the places we have declared to be special. It is fantastic to say that the Cotswolds or the Yorkshire moors or the Derbyshire peaks are special, but it is also about how we work across the countryside and how we join things up. Nature recovery networks can help us a lot. It is about going through boundaries and different types of designation, not just about protecting a few places and then letting the rest of the country go hang. This is a cross-national thing, but the parks and AONBs—or landscapes, as we hope they will be called—should be the exemplars. If they cannot do it better than



anywhere else, what is the point of them? We want them to be the very best in serving the country.

Q54 **Chair:** Thank you. Ruth, Julian referred to the environmental land management scheme as a key tool for the future as the funding mechanism for farming moves towards public goods. How well developed have these been? Are you optimistic that this is a tool that will help improve biodiversity?

Dr Little: Absolutely. Everybody is starting to sing from the same hymn sheet in saying that we are potentially on the cusp of something quite exciting, especially with the Environmental Land Management Scheme as this delivery mechanism. If we are talking about joining up places, 72% of the entire land area of the UK is managed under agricultural landscapes. This is potentially a gamechanger in being able to join up these different landscapes to deliver biodiversity gains.

It is important to note that the devil will be in the detail of how this is designed and delivered and what it can do. If we take a little step back and look at the scale of what we are proposing here, this is the biggest change in agricultural policy for a generation, a big change away from paying people based on the amount of land they manage to delivering public good, which is quite complicated. At the point we voted to leave, 42% of farms didn't make any money over and above the basic payment scheme. We are not just talking about nature here. We are talking about landscapes and livelihood implications here in this transition towards a new system.

DEFRA is proposing that we will have 82,500 farms within ELMS. That is for England only. Currently, with agri-environment schemes, about 20,000 are part of that, so we are talking about a massive scaling-up challenge. There are potentially huge gains in joining up landscapes and using agricultural landscapes, but there are big challenges in how it is implemented.

Luckily, we are all singing from a positive hymn sheet here and there are ways that we can address this. As a social scientist, I will point to the fact that, thankfully, we have 35 to 40 years' worth of evidence on what encourages farmers to participate in agri-environment schemes. We should be using that evidence to help inform the buy-in of farmers to it as well as participation and uptake of these schemes, which will contribute towards biodiversity gains. We need to get the foundations of ELMS right in terms of design and engaging with farmers.

The second thing we need to do is to scaffold it. We need the foundations but we need the scaffolding to enable farmers to transition from one form of management into more nature-friendly farming management systems. These are going to be big changes for a lot of farmers across the country. A seven-year transition may seem like a long time, but in agricultural timescales it is not a long time to transfer from the old CAP system to this brave new world of nature-friendly farming.



Q55 **Chair:** I think that is one biblical rotation, isn't it?

Dr Little: It is one biblical rotation to try to turn around the leviathan that is the common agricultural policy and we shouldn't underestimate that, but we do need the scaffolding to help farmers do that. That comes in the form of joined-up, holistic and effective advisory systems.

Lastly, there is this idea of designing these schemes with stakeholders instead of for stakeholders, so that we come up with manageable negotiated solutions. ELMS will have to be a negotiation between the ideals of generating environmental gains and the practicalities of implementing it in the field.

Chair: We are going to have some more questions on ELMS in a minute. Thank you very much.

Q56 **Nadia Whittome:** Despite the Government recognising that biodiversity is key to the survival of life on Earth, we know that the Government have failed to meet their targets in the Biodiversity 2020 strategy. That is very concerning. What lessons can be learned from this?

Craig Bennett: Good morning. Thank you for the question. There was a lot to learn over the last decade on this.

First, there is not always the understanding that is needed about what we are talking about and the importance of wildlife compared to other concerns. This has been seen clearly recently, in September, when the Prime Minister signed up to the leader's pledge of putting 30% of our land and sea into nature's recovery by 2030. That was very welcome. The real problem is that the Downing Street press release that went out with that announcement suggested that we are currently at 26%. The only way that Downing Street could get to that figure was by assuming that all national parks and AONBs are directly delivering on biodiversity commitments. With the best will in the world, AONBs and national parks are useful designations, of course, but they are cultural landscape designations. They are not designations primarily for their wildlife value, so to equate them with delivering on nature's recovery is entirely wrong. About 10% of our land across the UK as a whole is designated SSSI, and 50% of that is in a poor condition. We are actually closer to 5%. It is a big gap from 5% to 26%. If we are going to get to 30% by 2030, we have a mountain to climb there.

I completely agree with Julian Glover that we have to look at it in the round and look at people and nature together. There is no disagreement on that, but let's not pretend that national park designations and AONB designations are something they are not, particularly when we consider that by some measures wildlife is in a worst state in our national parks than outside them.

Secondly, we must not forget the marine environment here. It is an even worse situation with our marine biodiversity. Some people quip that around half of the UK's biodiversity is found in the marine environment.



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Around 30% of our marine environment is designated as marine protected areas, but those are paper parks and are pretty much meaningless. We are still seeing extractive activities taking place in those areas.

Thirdly, let us also look beyond our designated areas. This point has been made. The appalling decline of insects that we have seen in my lifetime, since the early 1970s, illustrates it perfectly. We have lost around half the abundance of our insects in this country and of course they are at the bottom of the food chain for other species.

The lack of progress on this agenda over the last 10 years suggests little political will or desire to meet those targets. We need legally binding targets. We need the long-term targets but we need interim targets as well and those need to be legally binding. This needs to be underpinned by policy, by legislation and by the financial resources to deliver.

I have spent most of my career working on climate change. There is so much we can learn from the debate around climate change. We in this country introduced a Climate Change Act, which was world-leading, but of course we have put the institutions in place to then help deliver on that. The Climate Change Committee is an independent body. We have the interim targets. We have the climate change budgets. We need something comparable to that infrastructure if we are going to turn this around and put nature in recovery.

Finally, we need a real sense of urgency. There are so many issues that I could point to that show how we are just not seeing that level of urgency that is needed. Today the Prime Minister has again said there is no time to waste on tackling climate change and that is welcome. Thirteen months ago DEFRA committed in Parliament to bring in legislation to ban peat burning. The Prince of Wales has called our peat bogs the UK's equivalent of the tropical rainforest because they are so important for wildlife and for climate change as a carbon store, but 13 months later we are no closer to banning the burning of our peatlands in this country. If it has taken 13 months to get nowhere on an issue that is so simple and about a habitat that is that important for wildlife and is that important as a carbon store, we are never going to put nature into recovery by 2030. We have to move much faster, we need the institutions to deliver on this and we need the budget to support it.

Q57 Nadia Whittome: Thank you, Craig, that was extremely comprehensive. I hope that the Government take note and act.

Professor Willis and Julian Glover, speaking of the Climate Change Act, would binding interim targets help in a similar manner to those carbon budgets in the Climate Change Act?

Professor Willis: I will follow on from Craig's point, because one of the things we need to be doing is joining up climate change and biodiversity targets. If we are going to plant all these trees for carbon sequestration,



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please make sure that we have a network across the UK and that we are not just planting eucalyptus, which is invasive and dreadful for the soil, because it is fast-growing. We need to be thinking about biodiversity, wildlife and climate change under that one umbrella. If we set those targets, we have a real possibility of achieving both our climate targets and also our biodiversity targets. It is about joined-up thinking of those two critical policies and we are still seeing them as totally separate. If we bring agriculture into it as well, then we finally will get a proper joined-up system, which will benefit all three aspects.

Julian Glover: I absolutely agree about joining things together. On the question of targets, I fear that they risk being tokenistic. We can pass some legally binding targets and everyone will say, "That is jolly good," and when we fail to meet them in a few years' time, nobody will work out why we did not do something.

I agree with Craig. Our designated landscapes are not just there for nature. That is a good thing. They are part of the soul of our country. They do many things. We certainly need to strengthen them for nature. It is no good passing a series of targets and then hoping that that will make them do things differently. They need resources. They need different leadership. They need strategic leadership, which we called for. They need local leadership that focuses much more on nature recovery. They need to work with other organisations and beyond boundaries and not see themselves as closed worlds.

I am more positive than Craig that designated landscapes can be the bedrock of the recovery in our country, AONBs as much as national parks. Things like the signatories to the Colchester declaration want to do this. They are waiting, but their total budget is about £7 million from the Government, and national parks have about £50 million across 24% of England. It is a limited resource. They need more money and they need the ambition and the drive to do it.

Would passing a series of legal targets suddenly make them wake up and do it? No, they want to do it anyway. There are lots of organisations that do. I am sceptical of having too many targets because we will start to fail them all. We have to be careful. The climate change ones are important because there are demonstrable and measurable things that we need to meet. Particularly when we don't have good baselines and don't know where we are beginning from, how can we have a target to enforce by law if we don't know where we are starting?

I would measure what we have, be clear about what we are missing and then set up the structures to get the rapid improvements we need, linking that into agriculture and climate change. Kathy is completely right. We need to look after our soils as much as we need to think about trees. We can do a lot on carbon in soil, too. But when we do trees, we do not want to take some of the diverse aspects of our countryside and make it less diverse in the hope that that is chasing a climate change



target. That is one of the problems of targets. There is a danger that sometimes they drive you in the wrong direction.

Professor Willis: The difference with the climate target is that it has a clear objective. We are trying to achieve a reduction in atmospheric CO₂.

In the Government's 25-year environment plan, the targets for nature were set to bring about public good: clean water, clean air, soil erosion protection and land for recreation. When we set those targets, we should be looking at those targets. What are we asking of nature? What are the services that we want nature to provide? Thriving wildlife is one but there are a number of others in there. It is about joining those targets up to actual outcomes. That is the sort of target we should be setting rather than that 25% of the land should be more biodiverse. Biodiverse for what? Which aspect of nature are we talking about, the birds or the plants? That is where targets start to fall down.

Craig Bennett: There are a couple of important points to put here, which are very top-level but very important to understand.

The reason we need these interim targets and they are so important right now is that over the last 10 years, we have gone through a shift in the framing of what we have to do here. Historically, for 100 years of the nature conservation movement in the UK, we have been about trying to slow the decline of nature. The Wildlife Trusts have more nature reserves than McDonalds has restaurants in this country. It is an amazing effort by us and by other organisations to try to protect the very best bits of nature, but it is not enough. Wildlife is still in decline..

We have to change the framing from slowing the decline of biodiversity in this country to putting nature into recovery. To do that, to turn our institutions around and to turn the whole mission and purpose around with the Government working together with the public sector and the not-for-profit sector, we need those targets focused on putting nature into recovery.

The other way to illustrate this is with our designations. I agree with Julian that national parks and AONBs could be updated so that they are putting nature into recovery. But let us be clear: at the moment there is a huge gap in our landscape designations. We don't have a designation at the moment that is focused on putting nature into recovery. We only have SSSIs and even that designation is about protecting a representative example of the best of what we have, keeping it as it is and not putting it in recovery.

As the Wildlife Trusts, we have proposed a new designation called wild belt, which could overlay other designations like national parks, AONBs and even SSSIs. It would be focused on taking land of low biodiversity value and putting it into nature's recovery and, critically, close to where people live. I would agree with Julian about national parks and AONBs. One of the best co-benefits we can get is to put nature into recovery



close to where tens of millions of people live, in and around our towns and cities, connecting our cities up with nature in the countryside, overlaying with green belts, to make sure we can get all the benefits for people's physical and mental wellbeing by bringing nature close to where people live. That will be critical.

Chair: Thank you, that is a nice segue into our next set of questions from Caroline Lucas on the impact of planning on biodiversity.

Nadia Whittome: I wanted to ask one more, Chair, if I may.

Chair: We have had a very discursive set of answers to those questions, so we are going to have to move on. Thanks, Nadia. We may be able to get you in at the end. Caroline?

Q58 **Caroline Lucas:** My question is around biodiversity net gain rather than planning straight away. My first question was to Kathy Willis. How should biodiversity net gain be refined to ensure nature's recovery?

Also, briefly, could you address the principle of net gain at the same time? It is quite a controversial principle. Many in the environment movement are deeply sceptical. They would say that it feels like the net gain proposal is a threat, and if we are not careful it can make it easier for developers to get their way, rather than requiring schemes to be less damaging in the first place. Could you address that principle at the same time as telling us how we can make the most of them to promote nature's recovery?

Professor Willis: I will do it very briefly because I am aware that this has been very discursive. With the biodiversity net gain, there is a mitigation hierarchy in planning. If a planner has a particular area where they want to build new housing, they try not to destroy biodiversity; they do a biodiversity assessment in that area, and they will see which areas they want to develop have high biodiversity value. If they cannot move the housing or if they are going to destroy some biodiversity, then they need to demonstrably create another bigger area so that we are getting a net biodiversity gain somewhere else to compensate for the biodiversity they have destroyed or damaged in the process of the planning.

Q59 **Caroline Lucas:** Do we know enough to make those comparisons, though? Is a meadow here the same as a meadow there?

Professor Willis: There are two problems. One is being able to compare. A lot of biodiversity is specific to an area. Do we know enough?

The second problem is a big issue. If we are looking at biodiversity per se—for example, there is a wetland meadow there and we are going to create a much bigger area of wetland meadow elsewhere—then possibly we can shift. But if we are looking at biodiversity for the ecosystem services it provides, most of those services are spatially restricted. Think about the upland part of a river with forests. The forests there are stopping floods and so there is a flood risk reduction further downstream.



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You cannot, therefore, remove those forests and put them elsewhere because the flows they are providing will be removed.

It is also true of recreation. If you have an area of biodiversity that is an important local area for people to walk and get the mental and physical wellbeing benefits, you cannot pick that area up and put it somewhere else and think it is okay because people can move over to that other area.

The only biodiversity benefit that is not spatially restricted is that for carbon because it doesn't matter where you plant those trees for carbon sequestration. But if you list all the other services we want from biodiversity, the vast majority are spatially constrained. We would argue—through the Natural Capital Committee—that when you are doing ought to be net environmental gain but also be realistic that some areas of biodiversity and the flows from those areas cannot be moved.

It comes back to which you value more. Do you view your nature as an infrastructure on a par with housing, or are you always going to put nature as the afterthought? That is happening with the biodiversity gain. When you look at the developers right now and the frameworks we are giving them, they are going to run circles around us on this.

Q60 Caroline Lucas: Presumably there are also real concerns that habitat is not an adequate proxy for all of those other things.

Professor Willis: There is a real muddle emerging here about habitats and focusing on habitats as if habitats provide ecosystem service flows. They do not. Habitats are not ecosystem services. Therefore, we need to look at the landscape and very much at what the overall drainage basin provides and the landscape provides rather than to look at habitat alone.

I have given one example in your papers of the Evenlode Valley in Oxfordshire. If you map the important areas for biodiversity and the important areas for waterflow regulation—such as reducing flood risk in Oxford—the two do not overlap. The idea that the habitats and the waterflow regulation services are all wrapped up in one is completely wrong. We are missing some critical data in there and a critical approach to what we should protect.

Q61 Caroline Lucas: Craig, should priority be given to off-site or to on-site biodiversity gains in particular?

Craig Bennett: I have a number of things to say. First—and if I can also answer the previous question—is that of course there is suspicion around net gain, but that is principally because sometimes it is used to talk about replacing habitats that cannot be replaced. We need to understand that there needs to be a mitigation hierarchy in all of this if we are going to build trust around net gain to get it to work.

First and foremost, we need to recognise that sometimes it is not going to be appropriate and sometimes there will be habitats that we absolutely



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need to protect. A good example of this is HS2. The route of HS2 is ploughing through over 100 ancient woodlands. You cannot replace ancient woodlands with a few saplings. It is extraordinary to think that if there was a suggestion that you could demolish Warwick Castle to enable HS2 to go through and replace it with a fibreglass version of it 30 miles away, people would realise that that is not equivalent to Warwick Castle. In the same way, destroying ancient woodlands and replacing them with a few saplings many miles away is not equivalent, either. There will always be habitats that we absolutely need to protect and that net gain will not be appropriate for.

Having said that, there will be plenty of areas where net gain can deliver and make a real difference. We think strongly at the Wildlife Trusts that it needs to be as close as possible to the original habitat and so absolutely on-site. This is relevant to the planning White Paper, which is proposing three zones of growth, renewal and protect. Critically, at the very least, when you have net gain associated with development, it needs to be in the same planning zone. The net gain associated with a development in the growth zone has to be in the same zone, not 10 miles away in a protect zone.

We need that if it is going to be good for biodiversity and also if it is going to be good for people and if it is going to protect people's physical and mental wellbeing where new houses are being built. Why on earth would we want to lock future generations into housing estates that don't have nature preloaded with them? We know that is crucial for people's health. It is crucial for protecting the NHS, a phrase we have heard a lot these last few months. Putting nature's recovery close to where people live is crucial for protecting the NHS.

Q62 Caroline Lucas: Is there enough capacity and enough commitment to make this principle work? I am struck, for example, by the fact that the mandatory gains need to be maintained for only 30 years, which is just a flash of the eye, and the fact that we do not necessarily have the baseline data and so we do not know what we are comparing, and the fact that local councils have had their ecological officers completely slashed and so they do not have the capacity to monitor. It feels like we are betting an awful lot on a mechanism that we know we do not necessarily yet have the capacity to properly implement.

Craig Bennett: That is a fair observation. We have seen net gain work in a handful of examples where organisations like the Wildlife Trusts have worked closely with housing developers who want to get this right. It has taken a lot of work and a lot of rolled-up sleeves to make it work. But the idea that we can then assume it is going to work in every circumstance, unless we have tight controls and the right infrastructure and investment from the Government and local authorities to make it work, is a risky assumption. It has to come with the proper enforcement, infrastructure and investment in public bodies to enable it to work.

Q63 Caroline Lucas: Kathy, I know we are short on time, but I want to ask



you about the shift from biodiversity net gain to environment net gain. We have all been talking about until now the fact that we need joined-up green spaces, not just fragmented green spaces. If we are not careful, could this end up being a patchwork rather than the joined-up landscapes that we have all said we need to see?

Professor Willis: Absolutely. We are going to end up with a patchwork if we are not careful. The tools that developers are being given to make decisions on this are qualitatively based. What would you like to do? How will you move this over? We need to be much clearer and quantitatively based. What are the important parts of this environment, for both biodiversity and the services they provide? Then we need to properly compare and contrast between regions. Right now, the tools we have and the tools coming through are simply not fit for purpose.

Q64 **Dr Matthew Offord:** Dr Little, you mentioned a few minutes ago the use of the ELMS and how you wanted practitioners to have some buy-in to that. You should be aware that I have relatives who are farmers and that there are some people on this Committee who are active farmers now. During your research, have you identified any barriers to ensuring that the success of the environmental land management scheme can be achieved by those same practitioners?

Dr Little: Yes, absolutely. I should declare an interest here. I come from farmers on both sides of my family and you will find that a lot of agricultural researchers are in the same boat.

We have 35 to 40 years of evidence about why farmers do and do not participate in agri-environment schemes. We need to use those understandings to design an effective scheme that is workable at the farm level and also delivers environmental benefits. We should have big ambitions, but a lot of this is going to be evolution, not revolution. I say that because moving from about 22,000 to 82,500 to take this up is going to be a challenge.

There are different reasons why farmers have not engaged in agri-environment schemes. There are demographic issues around age and also land tenure and their ability to take part in agri-environment schemes that need to be addressed. Also, to bring in quite a lot of the social science, it is about farmers' identity. A lot of farmers like producing food. They like producing good stock. They like producing good arable crops on tidy fields. That has been engrained as a hangover from the common agricultural policy. We need to recognise that productivist approach to agriculture that can't be turned around in the series of seven years. There needs to be a movement towards a pro-environmental agenda that does not alienate farmers or turn them off engaging with it because it is seen to be completely at odds with productivity.

We can address that by identifying some of the win-wins of productivity gains as well as environmental benefits to draw in those farmers who have not engaged before because they see the scheme as too complex



and that it does not fit with their current management practices, for example, and to draw them in to understand that there are multiple gains from this. There are other farmers who have been engaged in this for some time and we can build more ambition into ELMS through the proposed tiered system. That is where we can build collaborations between landowners to join up parcels of land and deliver on these benefits.

One win-win is with grass-clover leys, for example. Putting leys into the system is one way of generating win-wins. You can have a yield gain, but that will take time to embed, and you can also have soil structure that is restored. A lot of this research is being done at Sheffield by my colleague Jonathan Leake. There are things we can identify that are win-wins that can start farmers on a trajectory to buying in more pro-environmental behaviour but that do not completely compromise their reason for being in many cases, which is to produce food. They take pride in the landscapes in which they live. We need to do that.

As a last point, I talked about the foundations of getting ELMS right. There needs to be the scaffolding of advice because we are talking to farmers about things that they have not had to consider as much prior to now. There needs to be a good, joined-up, holistic advisory system that can provide the complexity and the type of monitoring needed and can provide farmers with a prioritisation of the environmental gains that need to be achieved both at a farm level and also at a catchment level if we are going to start to join these areas up. There needs to be decent advice that is supportive for the first years. That is for the short term.

From a longer-term perspective we need to support agricultural colleges, for example, to embed these knowledges about environmental gains from agricultural productivity or farming for nature into those curricula so that they become part of the cultural process as producing food has become part of the cultural process from the common agricultural policy to take that forward in a more positive light. I see this as a long-term strategy. We can have gains in the short term, but we need to put in the infrastructure that will benefit a longer-term process to farm for nature and with nature and not see that as a bad thing or as a dualistic thing between productivity and nature.

Q65 Dr Matthew Offord: We are moving from a productivist environment to, in some ways, a consumer economy in the rural areas and agricultural areas. That is a huge change both in the perception and minds of people who work in the agriculture industry and also in the mind of the general public and the way they view rural landscapes and the countryside.

The ELMS tier structure and timeline needs to be pretty ambitious if it is going to seek that fundamental change in the perceptions of rurality between this and the next generation. Have the Government been ambitious enough to enable that to be achieved?



Dr Little: That is a big and challenging issue. What land is for is a huge issue and we do need to include members of the general public in discussing and understanding that this is still a landscape of both production and consumption. What do they feel that landscape is for? That might seem like we are blowing this even wider, but it is important that we don't consider agricultural landscapes are preserved in aspic. There is this old view of agriculture. There are reasons why agriculture has changed to be more productivist, and that is a big hangover from the common agricultural policy. We need to understand that it costs more money to provide food that may be taking more account of good animal health and welfare practices as well as nature-friendly farming. There are reasons why food costs less if you compromise animal health and welfare and if you don't follow good conservation practices. That needs to be built into the conversation about what land is for. The public need to be involved in that discussion.

Q66 **Dr Matthew Offord:** Brilliant. Mr Glover, this is not only about agricultural areas and farms, however big they are, but what role do national landscapes play in the new ELMS?

Julian Glover: I hope they are right at the centre. If national landscapes are going to be the exemplars and lead the way in nature recovery and meet that challenge that Craig rightly sets that they have to be special and improving, then the way farming operates and is supported is fundamental. If we don't get that right, we will not see the nature recovery. As Ruth says, quite rightly, that means a system that works, that farmers feel they can be part of, that is not so ambitious that it falls over in the face of its own demands, and that basically pays farmers the things they have been promised and does not leave it for two or three years. I heard that repeatedly when I talked to lots of farmers during the review. Many of them said they didn't understand what they were being told to do, systems became more and more complex and payments were late.

Ruth talked about the big ambitious future and the evolution. She is right because the transition is fundamental. Where I am now in the Peak District, farmers are dropping out of agri-environment schemes because they are complex, because they don't know where they are going and because ELMS is coming in the future. But what they do in the next two or three years will have a huge effect on biodiversity in the future. It is all very well hoping for a perfect tomorrow. We have to get today right, too. We can get landscapes at the core of that. They want to be; they hope to be, but it has not seemed to them to be the focus. It has been run from elsewhere. I don't mean necessarily that they start awarding the money but they should be much more central in local areas to thinking about the overall aim for the landscape and how agri-environment money assists in that change.

It will go well in some places. It will probably go less well in other places. I met farmers in Exmoor who were coming together and were keen to do



something impressive. They want to get going. I have met them in the South Downs national park. They are the same. We can get farmers together in Shropshire together as well. Getting farmers to work together as a starting point is sometimes a challenge. This transition can make some of those things happen. We have an elaborate Government plan from the centre with good intentions—and we should be excited that we have an Act that wants to improve nature and do good things and this is a positive moment—but to make the opportunity work, the system has to work on the ground. It can't be something that only a few giant landowners understand how to be part of. Small farmers will not get it, it will be too complex and they will give up and not take part at all. There is a risk of that.

Dr Little: This is critical and we need to think about the role for Government and the role for DEFRA in this. They need to enable organisations that are more in touch with landowners. We have to admit that DEFRA does not hold the greatest reputation among farmers. It is still seen to be mainstream.

Dr Matthew Offord: That is an understatement.

Dr Little: Exactly, but we should learn from that. That is a clear sign about the trust and confidence in DEFRA to deliver this. That shows a role for DEFRA to facilitate intermediary organisations to have these conversations with their members and with the people they interact with to see the implementational challenges and how we can proactively solve those within policy developments. We use the language of “codesign” so that we enable organisations with linkages to those landowners to have these productive conversations about what a successful ELMS looks like and also to be involved in the test, learn and adapt system that has to take place. We are not going to get the right system straight off the bat and we will have to review the evidence of how this will be done and then revise it to create a better system.

Craig Bennett: I would like to make an important point, again, about the overall framing. For too long, there has been a false dichotomy between food production and security and looking after nature. Yet the science is absolutely crystal clear and it shouldn't surprise us that of course you cannot have increased food security and productivity if nature is in decline.

The problem is that for several decades now we have had an overall approach to agricultural policy that has made our food security entirely dependent on the inputs of fossil fuel-based chemicals and pesticides. We have seen declining pollinators and declining soil fertility across our country and big questions raised about what that is doing for our long-term food productivity.

To be clear here, even if you are just looking through a narrow focus of food security, we need to put nature into recovery. We need to make sure that our agricultural policy is doing that.



My concern is that I thought that debate had been won. Over the last year or so, we at the Wildlife Trusts have been concerned that DEFRA has started moving backwards on some of that. We have seen tier 1 being talked about as the sustainable farming incentive. It is disappointing that DEFRA is still to develop the final set of priorities for ELMS this close to when it is to be implemented, which is leaving both farmers and groups like ours rather concerned that the detail does not exist yet. In our conversations with DEFRA officials, we get the sense that tier 1, being now called the sustainable farming incentive, will be much closer to the old-fashioned public money for subsidising food production and then thinking about nature recovery just in tiers 2 and 3. I hope we are proved wrong. We will see when the detail comes out. There has been movement backwards on this over the last year or so and that is very concerning.

Q67 Dr Matthew Offord: You make an interesting point about the recovery of nature and food production. But my recollection is that ever since Rachel Carson wrote "Silent Spring", we have been having that debate. We do not seem to have moved on to improve biodiversity in nature while we know that food production has increased. For me—and I could be proved incorrect—we seem to still be in a position where we do have a decline in biodiversity. That was just an observation on what you said.

Craig Bennett: I will give way to Kathy Willis because I can see she is champing at the bit to speak on this item.

Chair: We are going to have to move on very shortly, so very quickly.

Professor Willis: It was just to build on these other two points about the question on what the land is for. That question also now needs to come back to, if you live in an urban area, what the land is for. Effectively, farmers are custodians of the landscape. Therefore, how are you farming the landscape for the benefits that are being provided? That is the public money for public good approach. But we seem to be sliding back towards set-asides, which picks up on Craig's point. For the landowners I have worked with, a big problem is that nobody has given the landowners the tools to check and make those decisions themselves. You need a Google Earth type of tool to draw around your area to show you which parts of your landscape are important for what. Then you, as a farmer, can start to make those decisions and demonstrate through ELMS that you are providing flood risk protection and carbon sequestration and that is what you need the money for. But we are moving a long way away from that right now. We need to bring it back to the outcomes and focus on the outcomes we are trying to achieve through the management of land. We are going the wrong way.

Chair: Thank you very much. That leads us nicely into the last set of questions for this panel from Barry Gardiner on the role of nature recovery networks.

Q68 Barry Gardiner: Yes, it does. I want to focus on nature recovery networks. In a sense, they are the outpouring of the dream that John



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Lawton had about 15 or 20 years ago about being bigger, better and more joined up. I have to admit that I am confused about them. I am not clear how planning interfaces with them. It is certainly not clear how they are going to be funded and how the implementation is going to follow. I am seeking clarity from you about that.

First, it is in the Environment Bill that we will create these national recovery networks and the local nature recovery strategies. What legislation is going to be needed to make these networks a reality?

Professor Willis: I can start from a natural capital framework way of thinking about this. If you are talking about bigger, better and more joined up, you have to work out where the bigger bits are and how to join them up. You cannot do that on a county-by-county or farm-by-farm level. You need to start at the top. It is completely possible to do it. There is fantastic modelling. We can already do it for different landcover types and different nature reserves. Then we use a method that is used regularly by our town planners, graph theory, which shows the best way of joining this bit of nature reserve with that. That is the framing and then you can start to ask who is going to do the joining up and how to pay them to do it.

Q69 **Barry Gardiner:** Can you to clarify something here for me? Clause 97 talks about local nature recovery strategies being the driver and clause 98 says that the Secretary of State will set a national programme. I do not know which it is. Can you enlighten me?

Professor Willis: It is the other way around. It should be 98 first of all saying where it is and then 97 identifying which landowners, which nature networks and which reserves can realistically do this. The funding goes to them to do just that. That way, it will work.

Q70 **Barry Gardiner:** All of it will be driven by the Natural Capital Committee's public goods as the building blocks and the targets. You identify the major areas that can produce those building blocks and you then ensure that is joined up from the bottom of the scale with the local information.

Professor Willis: Absolutely. We talked about targets and ambition before. It would be fantastic if we could go from Land's End to John o' Groats on a nature recovery network. The Dutch have done this. They have joined up their Natura 2000 sites across the whole country. When they hit a road, they build an eco-duct so that things can move over the road. They don't say, "It is a road. It is a problem." They say, "How are we going to get around it?"

Q71 **Barry Gardiner:** We used to call them biodiversity corridors. The nature recovery network is that writ large. It is not just a corridor. It is a network. It should be providing that at a national scale.

Professor Willis: We have to understand nature itself. Often people think, "Hang on. Nothing is moving across it," but it needs to be there so



that when things do need to move, they can. You do not expect to see wildebeests going across them all the time. We tend to think, "No, that is not going to work. Nothing is moving." It absolutely is.

Q72 Barry Gardiner: Craig Bennett, would you like to add to that? I have lots more questions for our other panellists as well.

Craig Bennett: Most certainly. Thank you. The Wildlife Trusts was first articulating the concept of a nature recovery network 10 years ago, long before the time that I was involved and so I am not taking any credit for it there. The point is exactly as Kathy says: we need that bigger, better and more joined-up approach. One way to think about it is that it is connecting the best bits of land that we and others already have in the nature reserves and creating a lace lying across the landscape so that we have that network.

To your point, there is still confusion about how this is going to be delivered. It is going to be highly dependent on local nature recovery strategies. We need the national perspective on this. We need the regional perspectives on what it would look like. We also need the local nature recovery strategies. We need to see those strengthened in the Environment Bill. We need to have specifically a duty to use these strategies. We need a requirement to take these local nature recovery strategies into account in the exercise of public functions by public bodies, including in the statutory planning system. We were concerned that in the Planning White Paper there was no mention of nature recovery strategies, which seems to be an odd omission.

We are also proposing this new designation of wild belt because the other point here is that all this jargon makes it complicated for the public to engage and get excited about this. I am positive and optimistic about what we can do here in turning around the decline of nature. We need to get excited about what can be done over the next 10 years if we have a decade of restoration. But to do that, we have to excite and enable the public to get engaged.

We need absolutely the strong protection measures and we need the public to understand this. Just in the last hour we have talked about all of these phrases like the nature recovery network, ELMS, tier 3 and local nature recovery strategies. The English tree strategy, hopefully, will support tree planting and even better natural regeneration. To cut through all of that and make sense of all these areas that are created through that, we could call them the wild belt and protect them in perpetuity, which is essential. Otherwise, we are wasting public money in the long term in that investment. Then the public can get their heads around it and see the improvements over time, can see nature being put into recovery and can engage in it. This will be critically important.

I am going to use perhaps a little bit of a naff phrase but it needs a sense that this is the people's nature recovery network. If this is done to people, it will backfire. If we can involve local communities alongside



ecological experts in setting where we need this nature recovery network to be, then we will put nature into recovery and will be rebuilding the connection between communities and people and nature as well, which is almost as important.

- Q73 **Barry Gardiner:** Thank you very much. That leads me to a question for Julian Glover. Thank you for your work on the landscape review and in particular thank you for your recommendation that every child should be given a night under the stars in a natural landscape, which was one of the best recommendations I have seen coming out of any review for a very long time. That was inspired.

To follow on from what Craig was saying, at what level should the management of those strategies be happening? There are two clear views here. One is that local authorities are the natural planning authorities but they have boundaries. Then there is the view that talks about landscape scale and catchment scale. Give us your thoughts on that.

Julian Glover: It happens at all levels. You encapsulated something that I wondered about too at the beginning. I have often said the phrase "nature recovery networks". Who is against that? That sounds great. Let us have them. But as I said it, I wondered who is doing these things, what they are, whether I can see them on a map and how I know I am in one. It has to happen at different levels if it is to be real.

National landscapes have a good potential role in helping to shape them, partly because they cover lots of land. They have a strategic overall vision. They are not doing it at the moment very much. They could.

There is a role for infrastructure providers. We talked briefly about roads. Even if you go to Knepp, the famous embodiment of rewilding, at the edge of the wildest bit of Knepp there is a busy A road that nothing can cross and then you get to the rest of the estate. Knepp has failed to get any support to build a green bridge across that. We need road authorities and Network Rail to start thinking they are parts of networks in our country and they can play a good role in some of this. It is not just for environmental organisations.

- Q74 **Barry Gardiner:** You have made an interesting point and I want to push on that a little. Should there be a statutory responsibility on such organisations like the rail authority and so on to have a role in developing the network?

Julian Glover: It does not need to be statutory at the start. They just need to be encouraged to be part of the conversation. I am sceptical of waiting for laws to change things. It is about getting people together and starting work soon. I have helped a bit with Network Rail on sustainability and it is beginning to think about the resources it has and the routes it has and how it can start to link into some of this. Where are the barriers? It is no good having a network if there is an A road as a barrier in the middle of it that nothing can cross.



Also, state organisations and NGOs need to work together. Just up the road from where I am now is a wonderful limestone valley called the Lathkill Dale. Part of it is a national nature reserve and hugely visited. At the bottom is a private estate that is doing a good job of tree planting and nature recovery. That is the whole focus of the landownership. They have shifted. Not too far away, the National Trust has land going down into Dovedale, but there are patches in between that do not link and are in pretty intensive dairy farming. There is no sense, even in a 10-mile link of very high nature value, that there is a joined-up plan to connect these places through public access and through environmental gain.

It does not take a revolution to do that. It does not take even taking it off the current landowners or telling them what to do. It just takes getting them together to work together, to think of the gaps, to think of the few patches of fields that are not in agri-environments. That perhaps could be a priority for joining them. That is a role for the landscape bodies. Think about practical small places where you can do things like that and then start to think about how you can join those together over a long distance. Work with all sorts of organisations.

We don't need a law to do it, we don't need targets to do it. That is a waste of time. We need people to be together, to see the potential and to feel excited. Lots of organisations want to do that. Often, they just need a convenor to draw them together, get them going and we will see some amazing things happen.

Q75 **Barry Gardiner:** I am slightly sceptical of your optimism about how everybody will engage.

Julian Glover: Not everyone will but enough people will start to do it. If you simply say that it has to be done through legislation, which is an important thing and I am not against laws, we could wait four or five years for another piece of legislation to come through. In the meantime, let's start making it happen. Let's have a programme to define what these networks mean and how we make them real.

Q76 **Barry Gardiner:** Let's get on with it. I totally support that. I saw Professor Willis and Craig Bennett wanting to come in as well.

Professor Willis: I would slightly disagree with Julian on this. We need more firm legislation about this because land use change is the biggest driver of biodiversity loss in the country and across the world. It is not the farmers, it is actually land use change for other infrastructure development that is driving biodiversity loss. Until we get some legislation in place that does make it clear where it is not acceptable to develop because of the biodiversity, we will carry on having this problem. Are we going to then create the network for a housing development or are we going to think about it in a more joined-up way in the beginning? That requires legislation.

Barry Gardiner: Thank you. Craig Bennett, you also wanted to come in?



Craig Bennett: The way to understand this is to recognise that we need to urgently rebuild our natural infrastructure. That is the job we have to do here. Just like when we are building any infrastructure, if we are hosting the Olympics or something, we need a project plan to deliver on that with Gantt charts and clear timelines and milestones about when we are going to deliver them. If we have to rebuild our national natural infrastructure to at least 30% and make sure it is in recovery by 2030, we need to imagine ourselves in 2030 and back-cast from there about how we get there and identify those interim targets and milestones, just like any project planner would do, and then hold ourselves to account on delivering it. This has been lacking in the need to do this in the last decade or so and why we have not delivered. Just like if we were building the infrastructure for the Olympics or something like that, we absolutely need a project plan to hold people to account for delivering it. Critically, we need the policy, the legislation, the financial resourcing and the interim targets and milestones to get us there and to hold everyone to account for what happens.

Q77 Barry Gardiner: The other thing we need, of course, is the funding and the resource. That is the other area of my mystification about the agenda at the moment with the recovery networks.

I phoned the chief executive of my local authority this morning and said, "I am told that DEFRA has been liaising closely with local authorities about how this should be done and the funding for it. Have you heard anything?" There was an emphatic no. When we talked about an ecology officer, she said, "Look, we used to have not an ecology officer but three conservation officers. They are gone. We now have one. I had to scrape the budget last year to keep that because the pressures were so great."

Yes, we need legislation and, yes, we may need the targets you talk about, but if we don't have the funding there to ensure that there is the skills base to implement it, how is this going to be done?

Craig Bennett: I completely agree. Of course we need the funding there. Sir John Lawton and his panel wrote to the Prime Minister in September this year, 10 years on from his report, saying that we need at least an additional £1 billion a year to make sure that we are rebuilding our natural infrastructure. In a country where we can find £100 billion for HS2 and £20 billion for Crossrail, surely we can find £1 billion to help rebuild our natural infrastructure, particularly when that will reduce pressures and costs on the NHS, improve people's physical and mental wellbeing, reduce soil erosion, reduce flooding and all those other co-benefits that you can put pound signs on as well. We are absolutely going to save money if we find that minimum £1 billion to invest in natural infrastructure every year.

Chair: We need to wrap up, Barry.

Q78 Barry Gardiner: Yes, indeed. If I can finally ask about the impact of the planning White Paper: how do you think that is going to impact on the



success of the nature recovery networks? Craig again?

Craig Bennett: We are very clear at the Wildlife Trusts that as it is currently framed we have real concerns about the planning White Paper. We are not saying that the planning system is currently perfect. There are problems. We have seen this decline in nature over the last few decades and the planning system has not stopped that, but what we need to do fundamentally is strengthen it to make sure that nature is protected and that it can put nature into recovery. The idea that we just have three zones of growth, renewal and protect, we need to see nature being in recovery in all three zones, not just the protect zone.

Finally, an important point is this issue about local democracy because the Wildlife Trusts engage in thousands of local planning discussions and debates every year. We know that local people—it is a great idea to engage at the strategic plan level, of course we want people to do that, but it is human nature that you engage in a planning proposal when it is essentially next to your house and—

Q79 **Barry Gardiner:** Do you agree with the linked proposal that there should be a highly protected zone and a nature recovery zone incorporated into the planning system?

Craig Bennett: Yes, absolutely, we do. It is good to have a zone called protect but if that is the only place where we think nature is going to be in recovery it is not going to be additional. We absolutely need to make more space for nature—that is clear—and we need a planning system that delivers on it. It is important to—

Chair: Thank you very much, Craig. Barry, I think we are going to have to move on to our next panel where we get into planning issues with other practitioners.

I would just like to conclude this panel by thanking our witnesses, Kathy Willis, Julian Glover, Craig Bennett and Ruth Little for a really fascinating discussion. Thank you very much indeed for joining us.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Philip Glanville, Kari Sprostranova, Caroline Knox and Ben McCarthy.

Q80 **Chair:** Now we move to our second panel to discuss implementation challenges, of which there are several. I would like again to ask our panellists to introduce themselves briefly, starting with Philip Glanville.

Philip Glanville: Thank you, Chair. Philip Glanville elected Mayor of Hackney and LGA representative on the Environment, Economy, Housing and Transport Board.

Kari Sprostranova: Good morning. I am Kari Sprostranova, Health, Safety, Environment and Sustainability Director for Balfour Beatty.



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Caroline Knox: Hello, I am farmer on the Isle of Wight and a member to the NFU Environment Forum.

Ben McCarthy: Hello, I am Head of Nature Conservation and Restoration Ecology at the National Trust.

Q81 **Chair:** Thank you very much and I should have declared that I am a farmer, a member of the NFU, a member of the National Trust and a member of Shropshire and Herefordshire Wildlife Trusts, so apologies for not doing that earlier.

We are now going to talk to practitioners about the implementation of many of these Government proposals. I would like to start with Philip as the local government representative. We already heard earlier from the first panel about the host of potentially overlapping schemes that will be introduced through the ELMS for funding to farmers from the nature recovery networks and specific policies for restoring biodiversity. Do you think, sitting where you are in a local authority, that these policies are going to come together in a coherent set to help resolve the challenges of restoring nature that we all want to see?

Philip Glanville: I hope that they do. We have quite a lot of concerns—as I think the last exchange between Barry Gardiner and Craig illustrated—that we have an Environment Bill that has been going through Parliament now for two years. I gave evidence on behalf of the Local Government Association to the Environment Committee back in March. When we are talking about biodiversity and the role of local government, I think it is still quite vague.

I articulated very clearly that issues such as biodiversity credits, I believe they should be local. I am a localist. I represent the LGA but I don't just do that as a sector representative. The previous discussion about involving residents, having that granularity about place, our role as custodians. Whether we are a planning authority or somebody actually managing the environment and green landscape, there is a crucial role for local government and I do not think it is put correctly—certainly in the Environment Bill.

Then we have been talking about the planning White Paper. I don't think there is that clear connection back into what the aspirations are around biodiversity. If anything, there is a withering role for planning authorities in terms of planning applications, the three zones that we talked about—assuming growth—that planning permission will be basically granted without having to go to committee and all of that process. I don't know when that local debate about where biodiversity net gain will actually take place. If it only happens afterwards, in some sort of building control regulatory function, I think we are going to miss out on a huge set of opportunities.

It is clear in all the submissions that the LGA make that we have had 10 years of funding challenges. We face a significant funding gap as we go



forward. Planning authorities have borne the brunt of that. Nearly 40% of funding loss is at planning authorities. That expertise around biodiversity, conservation, ecology has fallen away. Only 90% of planners have those skills and two-thirds of authorities do not have an in-house capacity on this, so if local government should and needs to have that role, it also needs to be invested into new burdens considerations obviously here.

I come to the point about biodiversity credits. A flourishing mechanism to allow a planning authority to fulfil its functions but also see that invested in local communities where there might be loss or where net gain has not been achieved, I think is incredibly important.

Q82 Chair: Thank you. Ben, the National Trust is one of the largest landowners in the country and has obviously facilities right across the four nations of the UK. How do you see the interaction between individual farm support through ELMS working with nature recovery networks across a much larger area?

Ben McCarthy: It is crucial that we get it right and, despite a good start in the 25-year plan, we do not have a coherent framework that ties together the various different levers and mechanisms available from the Environment Bill, the Agriculture Bill and now of course the planning White Paper. Without that join-up, we risk failing to deliver the Government's ambition to leave the environment in a better state than when they inherited it.

It is clear—and we heard from the first panel—that nature is not evenly distributed across the country and that the services, the ecosystem services, that natural capital offers are not equally distributed. Therefore, we need to be very clear and specific about where we think we can get best public benefit from which parts of the land. We need to ensure that we are targeting our efforts, and certainly targeting public money, to reward those land managers, those farmers, for delivering the public benefits that more sustainable land management clearly offers. There is a very clear and vital role to support farmers to collaborate together to deliver better public benefits and when they do so they should be rewarded accordingly.

In terms of the nature recovery network specifically, we know where the richest places are and we know from people like John Lawton and his view that the priorities are about getting our existing sites better and making them bigger, and that is the least risky approach to restoring nature for the benefit it delivers.

We need to ensure that the ELMS scheme is adequately resourced, such that we can be targeting our resources, our public funding in those places where we will frankly get the biggest bang for our buck, which is where the nature recovery network should be mapped on to.

Q83 Chair: Caroline, as a practising farmer, given what Ben has just said, do you think that farmers are able to look beyond the confines of their



boundary hedge? If we move towards supporting the areas, the richest environmental areas rather than bringing new ones into a higher status of biodiversity, will that lead to many farmers becoming parkland operators and other farmers in other parts of the country producing food?

Caroline Knox: The whole landscape has to be looked at as one. It cannot be divided into rich and poor. Within each farm you can divide the land into rich and poor. I think our focus would have to be for farmers to be able to produce food on the good, high quality, productive land but perhaps bring in some regenerative farming techniques, which we are all looking at now.

Solar generation and co-cropping bring huge benefits within the land we are actually farming—benefits for run-off, for soil organic matter, for carbon capture, for microbes and everything happening in the soil to feed the web. If we can do that—within the lab we are actually producing food fibre and energy from—let's take the other land and put that into the higher value wildlife to create a network, which we are all hoping for, which links everything together. It is not a silo. Everything has to be interactive. No farmers are going to want to stop producing food. It is what they understand and do.

Q84 **Chair:** What is the NFU's view about the interaction between these different strategies, ELMS and nature recovery strategies? Is there any clarity at this point about how they might fit together?

Caroline Knox: I will first of all just reply to that as a farmer on the ground. Certainly, when I speak to my co-farmers on the Isle of Wight and say, "Are you going to engage in a webinar on ELMS tonight?" I often hear the answer, "ELMS, what is that, a tree?" Sadly, while a lot of farmers are connected and understand change is happening, a lot of farmers are not. Whatever does happen has to somehow take everybody with them and that is very difficult. Sorry, if you can just repeat that question because—

Q85 **Chair:** It was really about whether you have clarity as to how the ELMS scheme is likely to dovetail with nature recovery networks or other Government biodiversity schemes.

Caroline Knox: That is one of the huge questions. There are so many schemes that it is really difficult for me to understand how they all come together. I know the NFU has put together a sustainable farming scheme with 10 other industry bodies, which we believe will set out the way to produce food and care for the environment. It has put that together and it is available as a White Paper from the farming bodies. I think that is how we see the way forward. ELMS, as it stands, does not quite tick all the boxes.

Q86 **Chair:** Ben, we heard in the earlier panel about the challenges of monitoring wild life and habitats with absence of baselines. Do you think that this is important? Are you seeing any strides by Government to try to recognise that this is an issue that they need to get on top of?



Ben McCarthy: Yes. To be fair to the Government there have been some slow improvements. I have been involved in various different capacities in some of the big national surveillance schemes that cover the country. We are not going fast enough and I would certainly echo Kathy Willis's point about having robust quantitative data, such that we can monitor and track progress and the impact of our interventions. At the moment that is inadequate.

If you look at our protected sites, our sites of special scientific interest, which we know are the cornerstone of biodiversity in the UK, most of those have not been assessed for over seven years. That means we have lack of confidence and evidence to demonstrate that the interventions the Government are putting in place are having the effect that they want.

Data and monitoring are absolutely crucial and the obstacles are within our gift to resolve. It just needs clearer leadership from the Government and our agencies to set forth a path where there is better integrated and more consistent methods, including the technologies that we—

Q87 **Chair:** Thank you. I would just like to bring in Kari before moving on to the next set of questions. Kari, Balfour Beatty is one of the largest construction firms in the country. Do you routinely do any monitoring of sites for biodiversity before you launch a scheme and is it build and go? Do you ever go back to an existing estate that you have built and check what is happened?

Kari Sprostranova: Yes, absolutely. We will work with the local planning where we are involved in the design, to make sure that there is adequate biodiversity plans in place. That is done jointly, not just in terms of biodiversity but in terms of carbon and holistic social value plans. If we invest in a biodiversity scheme, such as a living wall or a forest, we will certainly go back and be part of that monitoring.

Q88 **Chair:** Do you do that off your own initiative or because you have an incentive to do so from some part of government, local or national?

Kari Sprostranova: It is probably joint; sometimes our customer will ask us to go back but also we have a vested interest. That is how we learn. As we are introducing these schemes, perhaps a living wall, we want to go back and understand how they are working so we can take those on to our next plans and projects.

Q89 **Marco Longhi:** My first question is for Kari Sprostranova. We were talking about the construction industry and—as someone who actually worked in the sector for a number of years building petrol filling stations and then decommissioning them, horror of horrors—how do you believe the construction industry is best placed to deliver biodiversity net gain on the ground?

Kari Sprostranova: Our advice is that the contractors are involved at very early stages in the planning and design stage, and we do need the local plans to holistically look at biodiversity and see how we, when we



are doing our project, can give the best gain in that area. As I said before, that might be in a number of ways.

Our challenge is to get in early. If we come in at a later stage and then try to work backwards working with a customer, it can become challenging in terms of the design, so we do not get the benefit and it can be costly. By embedding biodiversity into the planning stage, and making sure it is right through the planning programme and design that is where we will see the best benefit.

- Q90 **Marco Longhi:** Do you think there is a danger, and, if so, how can we prevent net gain rules from being simply another tick-box exercise? How can we encourage meaningful compliance with developments?

Kari Sprostranova: Again, it sits in that planning stage, so we need to have a level playing field. Currently at the moment we will always offer a project net gain or a wider environmental gain, but our customers do not always take us up on that because it is perhaps seen as being costly or not a requirement.

If we can set it out at the planning stage that it is a requirement then there is a level playing field and that is where we will get the best benefit. If we cannot treat it as a silo project but look at a project in terms of a local plan, so making sure that we are not just getting perhaps a 10% gain here but how that fits in and works together with other projects that are ongoing, we can see even greater gains that way.

- Q91 **Marco Longhi:** Would you support extending the biodiversity net gain requirement to all public infrastructure projects as well?

Kari Sprostranova: Absolutely we would. We feel that local and public spend it is imperative that we support the biodiversity, along with other things like net zero so we can see that we are leading the way. The public purse wants to see those net gains. It wants to see the wider environmental benefits and, as I say, that is in terms of also the health and wellbeing that comes from having biodiversity in the local area.

- Q92 **Marco Longhi:** Thank you very much. Philip Glanville, what problems do you foresee in implementing mandatory net gain and how can these be addressed?

Philip Glanville: I come back to resourcing of planning authorities, which presents a series of challenges. What I do not want to come across is that councils are not ambitious, because I think local authorities are. A lot of the developing local plans have been aware of the requirements around biodiversity and net gain. I know Hackney where our mayor has done that, and we have incorporated that in the new local plan that that just been adopted.

Thinking about biodiversity, we have been thinking about enhancements in a really holistic way, so we have been looking not just at flora and fauna but also swift boxes, how green roofs operate. Do they enhance



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biodiversity or are they, in effect, that tick-box exercise? It is really important that we see that happening at local level around developments, so the planning authority has a crucial role.

It is my concern—and I think the LGA's concern—that where we land with the Government's White Paper around planning is: do we still have that crucial role for planning permission and planning authority, not just in designated zones but also looking at individual developments and whether they meet these objectives? Otherwise, if it is just a national framework, I do not think you are going to see the type of gain that we want to see.

We are all politicians—you are as MPs and I am a leader. We know with planning applications that if the environmental improvement, if a section 106 agreement, does not speak to the local area, residents feel the process has disturbed them. If we are going to be introducing biodiversity in a more enhanced way into those discussions, the expectation will be we want to see that improvement on site and, if not on site, in the zone or in the immediate local area. That is why I think having those credits at the local level allows us to see that reinvestment. That is what we do with carbon credits at the moment if a development does not meet our carbon targets, and that gets invested in environmental improvements within the local community.

There is still some work to do to take the ambition both in the Environment Bill and the references to the Environment Bill in the planning White Paper and join that up, and make sure that local government is resourced to do that and that they have the skills to do it and there is that crucial role in local communities to see it happen on the ground.

Chair: I think Caroline wanted to come in on the back of this.

Caroline Knox: It is important to recognise that farmers can often be the provider of the net gain. There is obviously almost a market there but we are not clear; there is a lot of lack of clarity to address. We would ask that the Environment Bill makes it clearer that net gain—the contract that is entered into—is not really a contract, it is more of a conservation covenant. That is a very different thing from a contract. It is underplayed and farmers need to understand the significance of entering into a conservation covenant rather than a contract.

We do not understand who paid who, who has the money. Is it the developer? Is there a planning authority holding the conservation covenant? Is there a broker? There is no clarity in how this developing market is going to work.

If I am allowed to say one more thing, about a negative effect of net gain on farming. Is that okay, Chair?

Chair: Sure.



Caroline Knox: After the point of the clarity, if you are a national park you do not have the same rules where you are allowed a permitted development, say, a cattle shed. They already have an extra cost of 30% because they have to get planning permission. If you do the development outside the national park you are exempt from net gain but in the national park they still have to pay for the net gain. If they are building on semi-improved grassland, it is very difficult for them to then—they have to go and buy that land elsewhere. We would ask for it to be looked at. That the exemption for net gain on permitted development outwith a national park can also be applied to farming businesses within the national park to allow farmers in national parks to be competitive with their UK farming neighbour.

Chair: Thank you very much for that. Thank you, Marco, for your questions. Now I would like Duncan Baker to move towards some of the planning reform issues.

Q93 **Duncan Baker:** First to Philip Glanville. As the Chair says, I want to come on to more of the fit between the planning reforms and nature recovery more specifically. I think as we have perhaps already expressed, from my point of view, yes, planning needs reform and there is a debate going on about that in its own way. Within those reforms, yes, arguably there are moves to legislate for more environmental protection, but to what extent are the Government's plans to reform the planning system consistent with its policies to encourage nature recovery?

Philip Glanville: As I articulated, I think there are some concerns there whether they truly are. We know that there were very positive moves in terms of tree-lined streets, the planning for beauty programme, the references back to the Environment Bill and the incorporation of high environmental standards. I think it is how they then play out on the ground in local communities in those planning decisions and are then delivered. Unless there is a consistent role for local authorities between these two pieces of policy that are developing, we won't see it actually delivered and that is my biggest concern.

The ambition is definitely there, absolutely. I suppose as both the policy development and the legislation moves through and we move into regulation afterwards, we just need to make sure that the Government are talking to the LGA and are thinking about how it is to be implemented on the ground.

There is a real risk if you look at the way the Secretary of State's powers are defined in the Bill that this is a sucking up to Whitehall of powers and responsibilities. Those credits will go to central Government; they will not sit in local communities to enhance local biodiversity.

Yes, there is absolutely a role for national targets and ambition and we need to work out how, especially when we are connecting networks and thinking about national parks and things that go beyond borough and even country boundaries, how those things connect. That need to place



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the planning authority and local government at the heart of implementing this is incredibly important.

Q94 Duncan Baker: I would tend to agree with much of what you say, still sitting as a local councillor myself and as an MP. Certainly putting local government at the heart of it is important. You mentioned at the beginning tree-lined streets. There are some good elements in there. Also, the prioritisation of brownfield developments as well, trying to stop unnecessary building on valued green space is also important, but thank you for your contribution. I certainly agree with much of it.

If I can just come on to the next question, which is to Ben McCarthy: there certainly does seem to be a disagreement among environmental stakeholders over whether to prioritise delivering net gain through on-site or off-site investment. In your view, does the focus on on-site biodiversity gains potentially miss ways to deliver more significant boosts for nature recovery elsewhere? For instance, did we start to get habitat fragmentation? We will focus on site. What do we miss going on behind our backs in other core areas of the country?

Ben McCarthy: Thanks for the question. We know that access to high quality green space is skewed at the moment, with large parts of our communities not able to access what many of us are able to. There are demonstrable and evidence impacts on wellbeing and health, which has real cost, both at an individual personal level as well as a wider societal level in terms health costs.

I would always argue that we need to be able to deliver net gain locally for the benefits that provides to the communities that have been affected by that development. That is slightly different from trying to understand what the best way is of recovering nature, which we know has got its back to the door. We know we are kind of in the last-chance saloon and we need to ramp up our efforts to reverse the declines, to realise the benefits that our ecosystems can provide us. In order to do that, the priorities need to be around making our better sites, our protected areas truly favourable. Under 40% of our SSSIs are in good condition. We need to make those same sites bigger, so that they are more resilient, and start forming bigger contiguous blocks of semi-natural habitats.

That is quite difficult to do in an urban context, so we need to understand what our motivations and drivers are and what the outcomes are that we are trying to achieve. We need to stop the dichotomy of it is either/or. Frankly, we need both. We need high quality natural environments accessible to people for the benefits that that delivers. We also need to ensure that we are adequately resourcing the ELMS so that it can reward land managers—farmers among them—to deliver the ecosystem services that underpin our society and our economic outlook.

Q95 Duncan Baker: Thank you. I certainly agree. We need that joined-up thinking and it can't be isolated. Agriculture and farming play an important, intrinsic role in that.



That brings me nicely to my final question, which is to Caroline Knox. I will declare a slight interest because I am the MP for North Norfolk, which probably has one of the greatest surface areas of agriculture going on and you can't move around it without knowing many people who are in agriculture. My sister is married to a farmer and friends are all farmers. It is an incredibly important way of life and I think that is the first thing to say here. As we heard earlier on, farmers are custodians of the land. It is not just a job; it is a way of life, and they have to evolve and adapt their business models, certainly with the changes that are coming down the line now. The NFU has expressed some concern that the net gain principles have been designed with developers in mind and could potentially impact negatively on farmers when they are applying for planning permission. What is your view on that? Has net gain been designed with developers in mind, and will those proposals potentially impact farmers who are trying to secure planning permissions and make alterations and adaptations to the way they run their business?

Caroline Knox: There are cases in the NFU where I understand that farmers have been asked under regulation to improve their, say, cattle shed or their slurry storage, but because of the Dutch nitrogen case, planning permission has been refused. That is a mismatch between regulation asking for environmental improvements and planning preventing it through nature recovery for net gain. I probably don't have enough information to give you from my perspective as a farmer on the Isle of Wight but I am pretty sure that I could find someone to give you more information of specific help.

Q96 **Duncan Baker:** It seems to me that we can't get into that situation, that planning authorities have to allow a certain degree of flexibility and common sense in passing applications. At the end of the day we can't be penalising those who are probably at the forefront—from my knowledge I think 72% of our land mass is farmed and they are the custodians of the land who are going to help drive so much of our biodiversity going forward.

Caroline Knox: To have an interest in a green economy, you have to have your bank account in the black and not in the red, and to be a progressive farmer you have to develop your business. You have to be able to evolve—perhaps put in a different potato store, progressive cold storage, move with the times—because unfortunately our original farm buildings are not big enough any more. We can't fossilise the countryside. It has to be allowed to progress and be profitable, and it is profitability that brings the time, energy and emotional connection with the biodiversity that we are farming alongside.

Chair: As a farmer who has never had a bank account in the black, I would like to move on to another farmer, Robert Goodwill.

Q97 **Mr Robert Goodwill:** That reminds me of the farmer who won the lottery and they asked him what he was going to do. He said, "I will keep farming until it has all gone." As a farmer myself I know some of those



problems. Turning to Philip and the issue of nature recovery networks, we have talked a little about the role of local authorities as planning authorities, but what else does local government need to do to devise and implement local nature recovery strategies?

Philip Glanville: I will bridge something from the last question as well. I think it is connecting these strategies together. You have a local plan but sitting underneath that there needs to be the local nature recovery strategy. In Hackney we have a green infrastructure strategy and so we are thinking, whether we are acting as a planning authority or as a local authority managing green spaces ourselves or connecting up green spaces, what we want to see in the urban environment. Sustainable urban drainage is incredibly important. The tree-lined street needs to not just be fantastic when it is planted but needs to enhance local biodiversity, capture carbon and be manageable into the future. I think there is a concern in some of the debate that we just take a tree being planted as positive and then move on without thinking about how climate change can impact on that planting and how we create an urban and a rural environment that lasts into the long term. In the development industry as custodians, as parts of green spaces and as residents, our expectations are shifting. Civic society and the active system was talked about in the first evidence session.

I think the importance of the local is not just a question of me here as the LGA, as a sector advocate asking for more resources. It is also because we are closer to those campaigners, whether it is people who want a peat bog restored in a rural area or rewilding in a rural urban or in an urban area. We have seen a big debate about the use of glyphosate in managing the environment and creating natural habitat and rewilding urban areas. If you are going down the street and seeing wild grasses rather than ornamental flowerbeds, that is the type of debate that we are having. Unless local authorities that understand their local environment are at the heart of these discussions you won't get that granularity in those interventions.

Our tree planting programme in Hackney is thinking about how we add to the diversity of trees—we have 50% native species, 50% non-native—and what are the types of trees for the climate we might have in 10 years' time. I think that is why it is really important to have it anchored in the local environment. In the LGA evidence we have submitted already and what we are seeing come forward in local nature recovery strategies, whether it is in Cornwall or Manchester, local government are really excited about this agenda and stepping up despite the financial challenges that we have.

Q98 **Mr Robert Goodwill:** That is very interesting indeed. Most of this evidence session has been about the rural environment and the important urban environment where people have acted. We are very keen to promote brownfield development as opposed to greenfield development. Do you think that creates a perverse disincentive to



landowners in urban areas not to green the land too much otherwise they might find they have some sort of preservation order slapped on them?

Philip Glanville: What you can have challenges around is meanwhile use where you have complex, long-term regeneration and development and land assembly in urban areas. I think the wish to see more greening can lead local authorities, developers and landowners to create new green spaces and then, when they come forward with development, think about where that green space ends up next. Quite rightly, the residents that have been involved in those projects often want to hold on to them. That can bring challenges if you have a mature planning system and an engaged local authority and you recognise that what may have been community growing spaces, expansion of allotment spaces, new community gardens, have economic value.

Incorporating that in development is good for developers and good for local communities, but I think you are seeing all too often an urban environment where you have new spaces that are private spaces but open to the public and you get an over-ornamentation of those spaces. It is the perfect tree with the perfect mowed lawn underneath and that is not enhancing the biodiversity. I think all of us in local government in looking at these issues in an urban environment have to change our expectations about what those environments look like. Sustainable urban drainage ultimately stops urban flooding, so it is really important for our climate resilience and also saving money long term. Urban flooding is a very expensive thing to recover from, whether it has been caused by a burst water main or flash flooding.

Q99 **Mr Robert Goodwill:** In the first session, Julian Glover talked about engaging local communities in local nature recovery strategies. Do you see that primarily as being local people expressing their views through the ballot box or should we farm this out to wildlife trusts or smaller community groups? How best can we deliver that at a community level? Is it the mayor's job or is it somebody lower down the food chain?

Philip Glanville: I think there is the strategic level back to the key core documents, whether that is a planning strategy. We are, at local level here, about to go out for a new parks and green spaces strategy. That is really important and the council is custodian of that, but I think once you get down below that to a ward level—I take another Hackney example because it is something I am very familiar with. There was a project around postcode gardening, which took Friends of Earth and the local community to crowd fund for a postcode gardener in one of the wards in Hackney. That was a really local, bottom-up response, buying into ideas about reducing glyphosate use, urban tree planting and foraging and the community response. We have seen new partnerships developing across London with Trees for Cities, with wildlife trusts and thinking about bringing new spaces back into use.

Again it is a Hackney example but there are examples in west London as well of new areas of wetlands brought back into use—Woodberry



Wetlands, Barnes, Walthamstow—and connecting those spaces together, spaces that were previously fenced off. The important thing with funding is that they often come alongside regeneration and renewal, so there is the connection between progressive planning, local developers that get it, local communities and then some of those other agencies are incredibly important to making all this work on the ground. There are other examples in Manchester as well.

Q100 Mr Robert Goodwill: Thank you. I will turn to Ben McCarthy now. In the first session there were some quite dismissive comments made about just because it is in a national park or just because it belongs to the National Trust we shouldn't colour it in as being a protected area. How can our protected national landscapes help deliver our nature recovery networks?

Ben McCarthy: If you were to look at the evidence that is available to us about where to invest public funding to recover nature, you would quickly recognise a map that is pretty similar to a map of our protected landscapes. They have higher concentrations of semi-natural habitats and higher concentrations of protected areas within their boundaries. The great pity is that they fail to deliver that statutory purpose, so in fact they have a smaller proportion of their designated sites in good condition in the wider countryside. I think that is now recognised.

The challenge is how we turn that around. Part of the challenge in that is that the system as it currently plays out is contradictory and poorly aligned. To give you a simple example, one of the major drivers of biodiversity loss is land use management, particularly eutrophication, and the main source of that is the agricultural sector. The challenge for protected landscapes is that they have no adequate means of controlling the management of that field to avoid the negative impacts of management spilling out and impacting on other protected habitats by way of air pollution or through our water courses by way of water pollution.

How do you square this circle such that the best places for nature recovery are supported and enabled to max out public benefits? I think that very simply it needs to be better targeting of public resources such that ELMS, especially tiers 2 and 3, are focused in the places where the taxpayer will have the greatest rate of returns. Quite often, but not exclusively, that is in our protected landscapes. We need to enable those natural parks and AONBs and all of the landowners within those boundaries, farmers and National Trust included, such that we can be rewarded for delivering ecosystem services through public funding, through things like ELMS tiers 2 and 3.

At the moment there is a mismatch. Protected landscapes don't have any effective mechanism to control the very drivers of the biodiversity loss within their boundaries. This is not about bashing farmers. That couldn't be further from the truth. This is about understanding how we best use our land and in those protected landscapes they have some of the richest natural capital. I would argue that land managers should be rewarded for



managing, conserving and enhancing those attributes such that they max out the public benefit that we all benefit from.

Q101 Mr Robert Goodwill: You have probably touched on one of the key challenges of ELMS: to what extent do we get individual farmers to respond to incentives, and to what extent do organisations like national parks or other types of big landowners engage themselves? Would there be some degree of coercion if you are the only farmer in that patchwork that does not want to deintensify and wants to continue farming the way you have done for generations?

Ben McCarthy: I am really keen to move away from an “us and them”, good/bad cop kind of thing. Caroline Knox has already eloquently explained the increasing recognition of the whole farm systems of regenerative agriculture, of managing your land well. If you look after your natural capital asset you are going to be able to farm better; your soil is going to stay on your land and is not going to be washed down the river. We need to be supporting, through things like ELMS and certainly the tier 1 of ELMS, that kind of whole farm system approach. But what we also need to be alive to is that we can’t afford to reward compliance requirements, not what is already good practice, because I don’t think it is good value for money and the risks are limiting resource available for tiers 2 and 3.

The National Trust position is that tier 2 should be the powerhouse of ELMS, which would be locally-targeted environmental outcomes. There is a huge opportunity to win some complementary private finances through things like biodiversity net gain. Tier 3, the top tier, should really be about landscape scale, land use change, which is what is going to be necessary to reverse the decline of biodiversity and, indeed, enhance biodiversity, which is crucial to us all. We all know this and the challenge is getting that coherent framework between Environment Bill, Agriculture Bill and Planning Bill, such that we have tangible actions and statutory targets to drive us forward and to reward people for delivering the public services that we are all so dependent on.

Q102 Mr Robert Goodwill: Thank you. Finally, I will turn to Kari. Do you think that developers understand their role in developing these local nature recovery strategies?

Kari Sprostranova: I can only speak for Balfour Beatty. I think we understand our role in that and work as closely as we can with our customers. As I said before, it is also about enabling the local councils. We are really clear on how we can best support the biodiversity net gain in the area, either within the project or external to the project. To give the best outcome, we need to work very closely with other stakeholders and be involved in the design stage.

Q103 Mr Robert Goodwill: Caroline, you are indicating that you want to add something.



Caroline Knox: I would like to give an example of something that has happened locally. We formed a group to protect our river and we had a talk from a soil scientist. The result was one farmer in the catchment has this massive set of cover crops, which are a 10-species, multi-coloured cover crop, all over the farm. Farmers don't farm under a roof. We are an open platform for everyone to see. As a result of this, the whole of our parish, half of the Isle of Wight, is now literally covered in some form of multispecies mix that will be here until next year. I am coming back to you what you were saying, Ben. I wanted to follow you because if you have good farming practices and it is proven to work, it can flow on and give you the answers you need on a large scale.

Chair: That is music to Robert's and my ears. Thank you, Caroline.

Q104 **Ian Levy:** I will direct my first question to Philip. Being the MP for Blyth Valley, I feel very fortunate that we have a fantastic mix of urban and rural landscape as well as a gorgeous coastline in Blyth Valley. Philip, could you expand on what quick, nature-based solutions we could do by implementing at a local level to restore habitats, to reduce carbon emissions? Could we bring in the use of schools and schoolchildren and community groups?

Philip Glanville: As I have indicated before, I think active citizenry, whether it is new organisations, grass roots-based organisations or working with more well known partners, is incredibly important to this. It is not going to be a "do too" agenda. It is not going to be a national government top-down "do too". It is not going to be local authorities planting every single tree or rewilding every meadow and it is going to be the development industry or farming that does it. It is a collective action and why we need the national framework but why I think we need to be grounded in locality. I think that goes back to things that have failed in the past. If you plant a tree and then you don't water it and it dies—and I have experience of that as a local authority—or you get somebody to adopt that tree and engage with it or maybe they have even planted it, that is a really different outcome.

Also it is how we use the environments we create. I think things like the forest school movement about taking classrooms out—whether it is a rural area with the night under the stars that we heard about earlier or an adventure playground working with the local primary school using the local forest to talk about nature and the importance of these things—are the opportunities that this agenda gives us and we will have greater mutual respect for it. There is a huge movement around urban gardening and connecting as well, and I think we have seen during Covid the opportunities to use the urban environment to think about mental health and wellbeing. It is making sure that this is not just one issue. It is not just a sustainability issue, it is a public health issue. It can save money in the long term because you are not having to pick up the pieces after violent floods and degradation of the environment and also the mental health and wellbeing piece. I think it can be a really positive virtuous



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circle and everyone can be involved whether it is a rural, coastal or urban setting.

Q105 **Ian Levy:** Thanks, Philip. Yes, I totally agree with that and on the use of forest schools in particular, I have been fortunate to visit a few forest schools in and around Blyth Valley and it has been fantastic to see how involved the children want to get in that.

I will direct my next question to Caroline and Ben. In your opinion, do you think we should be paying farmers in some parts of the country to turn farmland back into woodland?

Ben McCarthy: If it is providing public benefit and it is not served by private markets, it is clear that there needs to be intervention. We know that some of these interventions are good value for money as long as they are strategically planned and evidence-based. As Kathy Willis explained previously, the distribution of these ecosystem services is not equal. If you want to stop the flooding downstream you have to plant your trees or establish your trees in the best places to achieve that effect. It is about understanding and being able to justify why public taxpayers' money is being paid. It can only be justified if it is delivering public benefit. There are lots of examples where I can see there is huge benefit in rewarding farmers, land managers to plant trees.

The difficulty is where there is apply for benefit, which is why the National Trust is arguing that we need, as we come out of the CAP, a brand new contract between society and land managers so that we can understand what the best use of any particular landscape is. There is a sweet spot in having productive farms that are based around regenerative agriculture and other places where maybe food production is better seen as a secondary output and carbon or wildflowers and pollinators are a better output for those landscapes. Understanding the output we want to achieve from the different landscapes is going to be so crucial.

Can I quickly mention a point from your previous question? To echo Philip's point about the importance of active citizenry, our own resource showed that where people have had positive experiences of the natural environment it is more likely to lead to them adopting positive environmental behaviours, everything from reducing glyphosate use or putting up a birdbox on the windowsill. That is all fantastic and it is something that we all need to be taking an active part in, but we need to be really clear and honest with ourselves. The scale of biodiversity decline is such that we are not going to achieve nature's recovery without a very significant strategic investment of resources and we know that that will be good value for money.

Other research that we have been involved in suggests that a £2 billion investment in green and blue infrastructure would deliver a £200 billion return on health and wellbeing benefits alone. This is good economic sense and we need to realise that. It begs the question: why haven't we been doing this up to now? This good practice is not new; SuDS, green



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infrastructure, blue infrastructure have been around for a long time. Part of the problem is that there has been inadequate enforcement of good standards and regulation. If you get the regulation right, it enables and provides confidence for the private sector to play their part because they are more confident of the rules of the game. In developing this kind of coherent framework of tangible actions and statutory targets to deliver the ambition that the Government set out in the 25-year plan, we need it to be led by different levers so that we have a complementary approach to restoring biodiversity.

Ian Levy: Caroline, would you mind if I directed my next question to you?

Caroline Knox: I was actually going to answer that question. You asked whether farmers should be paid to put trees on to land. If you think that land is farmers' only asset and if they can't produce an alternative food crop, they have to be paid to have the trees, but within farming there is a lot of space for trees and hedges. We could develop our hedges to have the same positive effect as trees. For selling it to the public, if you are planting trees you are capturing carbon, reducing runoff, potentially reducing nutrient runoff. It has so many benefits. I don't think the sell for that idea is very difficult, but management of our existing woodland should not be underestimated either. There is very little of our woodland actively managed and it could be improved by being so.

Q106 **Ian Levy:** I will direct the next question to you, Caroline. I would like your opinion. Do you support the proposed ban on peat burning? I will bring in my colleague Robert Goodwill because he has a couple of points that I think he wants to bring out on this one too, and maybe Barry as well.

Mr Robert Goodwill: To add to that question, in my own constituency we have two-thirds of the North Yorkshire Moors national park and the national park authority has stressed how important it is to maintain the traditional rotational burning, not only to allow sheep and grass to flourish but also many important ground-nesting birds. Very damaging fires have tended to be on moors like Saddleworth and others where there had not been management of this sort and they had been very prone to these big fires because of no natural firebreaks. There still seems to be quite a discussion between environmentalists and land managers on what is the best way forward on this.

Caroline Knox: I am from the Isle of Wight—I may have mentioned that previously. I can measure how much peat is on the Isle of Wight on my computer screen, I think. My reply would come from the NFU, who are speaking for land managers, with the same answer again: if you don't want the land to be farmed for sheep for fleece or whatever, you have to reward them appropriately for a change in land use. I think Robert has put the point across very well. There are different types of burning in place in the different regions and a lot of it is to prevent the risk of wildfire. Even in the transition of moving land into bogs it is perhaps



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possible that some burning will have to continue, but farmers have to be rewarded properly for a change of land use.

Chair: We are running rather late because of a technical malfunction at my end and I want to check that our witnesses are okay for the last set of questions from Jerome Mayhew. If anybody has to rush, please indicate. If not, I will hand over to Jerome.

- Q107 **Jerome Mayhew:** I am going to dip back into the last question with you, Caroline, to develop the idea that if you are a farmer you have a single asset which is your land. If you are then paid to plant trees, is there a concern from the NFU, and you as a landowner yourself, that if you accept a grant for an activity that is to be carried out in perpetuity it challenges this concept of land ownership? There is quite a strong disincentive as a loss of control of your own land, isn't there?

Caroline Knox: Farmers in the main want to produce food on an annual rotational basis. You can see an income coming if you are able to control what you do on your land. If you plant trees, and like you have just said it is for ever, it is very hard to know how that can be rewarded. There are people who will want to do that. I think the people who would be the most concerned are the tenant farmers. If a landowner decides he wants to take a grant to reforest a large area of land, a lot of tenant farmers will suffer as a result of that and basically will be displaced from their income. I don't know how to elaborate on that, to be honest.

- Q108 **Jerome Mayhew:** I think that is a good answer and it identifies the difference between the public goods that we are all wanting, which is increased planting, and what that means to real people who own land.

Caroline Knox: One little addition is that the only profit in agriculture has been the CAP, the basic farm payment. Farming is not hugely profitable. People entirely rely on that single farm payment. It is a very unfortunate situation and one we would love to see changed in farming, for food to become a viable way to make a living off our land. I think some people might enjoy tree planting and take the grant for it. It might be an exit policy for some, unfortunately. We want to be food sustainable in this country and we want to be relying on our own country producing our own food.

- Q109 **Jerome Mayhew:** That brings me very neatly on to ELMS. From your perspective and the perspective of the temperature that has been taken by the NFU of farmers around the country, do you think there is a concern that the ELMS project is going to encourage us to not grow our own food? We beautify and improve our biodiversity but all we end up doing from a global perspective is importing high carbon food from abroad.

Caroline Knox: I think that is exactly what we don't want to do. If you have a chance to look at our own industry's proposed sustainable food and farming scheme, that is all about farming the land and managing the boundaries, the networks that we can piece together for biodiversity. We



have to be very careful that policy in this country does not almost force us to export our food production. We used to grow 2 million tonnes a year of oilseed rape and now, because of the legislation that has come regarding neonics, unfortunately we can grow only 1 million tonnes a year and we are importing it from countries that are still using neonics. It is a global market and we are not able to afford, with the income you get from oilseed rape, to bring in the new systems and schemes that would let us grow it without neonics, which are quite complicated sustainable farming techniques with a cost. We have to be very careful that we don't disadvantage our farmers in the journey to quite rightly improving our biodiversity. We have to reward them enough that they can take things forward and grow the food we want to eat in this country under sustainable schemes.

Q110 Jerome Mayhew: Chair, I apologise. I should draw specific attention to my register of interests. I am a director of a farming company and a shareholder in a farming company and I represent an area that has a large sugar beet and rape production.

Moving on to Mr McCarthy and the National Trust, we have seen in the written evidence that the trust has undertaken a whole farm plan, test and trial project. Can you explain what that has been in reality? Can you give us a flavour of what is involved in that and then lead on to the key findings that you have reached?

Ben McCarthy: This was a test and trial based in Shropshire, where we worked with our partners, including Natural England and the Shropshire Hills AONB, to work with farming groups to understand how a whole farm approach and looking at it as a closed system might work and how it could reduce the external inputs and the very significant costs for sustaining that farming business. It was one of four test and trials that we have been actively involved in. It demonstrates that with the right support and advice, farmers are very well placed to manage their land and reduce their environmental impact by adopting the regenerative systems that are so good at reinvesting the natural capital on which the farm business is based. That goes for everything from agri-forestry to better soil management and water pollution. What is really crucial is that the advice that farmers get is trusted, well co-ordinated and very firmly grounded in the strong evidence base of what works.

Q111 Jerome Mayhew: I want to clarify two things on that. First, what do you mean by a closed system? Could you briefly clarify what that means?

Ben McCarthy: Reducing artificial inputs.

Q112 Jerome Mayhew: I understand. Okay. Was the advice provided by the National Trust or by other agencies?

Ben McCarthy: It was provided by a collaboration of the project partners.



Q113 Jerome Mayhew: We heard from a previous witness, Kathy Willis, that there is a real need to have an evidence base that shows farmers how they can best improve biodiversity on their land, specific to their land, that gives them the agency to take ownership of the soil improvement and the land improvement. Was that your experience too from the trial that you undertook?

Ben McCarthy: Yes, very much so. I think there is a growing body of farmers who are recognising the value of investing in the natural capital. Caroline Knox gave a nice example of cover crops and how once the benefits have been realised that is being adopted by other farmers. The critical thing here is that that is good for their own farm businesses. We need to be signposting farm managers on good farm practice that is not depleting their natural assets and equally is not causing environmental impact off-site. One of the challenges as we go forward is to what extent they get rewarded for adopting practices that are beneficial to their own business and reduce their pollution footprint or not. The big concern is how much money is in the pot and we need to ensure that tiers 2 and 3 are adequately resourced because that is where we will get best value for money.

Q114 Jerome Mayhew: You made reference in one of your previous answers to a concern about public money being spent on what would also create a private benefit, but what is wrong with that? If public money is spent and it has the desired outcome, isn't it even better that it has private advantage as well? Isn't that the kind of market signal that is more likely to effect the change that we want rather than having top-down regulation and grants to make people do things that are not in their own interest?

Ben McCarthy: When the financial purse is restricted, as it is, I think there are hard choices to be made. It is incumbent when spending taxpayers' money that it is good public value and that is why the National Trust is arguing that the new ELM scheme should be public money for public goods and services. The challenge is that a lot of the good practice is now pleasingly being adopted across the country, and is to be welcomed as such, but if you start paying everybody for it there is going to be very little money left. This is the first time that agri-environment funding is in direct competition with the NHS, potholes on the road, schools and all of those other things that you need to tackle as parliamentarians.

If I may just flag on the burning peat point that I don't think that was a fair description of the challenges of restoring our uplands, most of which have peat soils. Our experience at the National Trust is that burning is not necessary for the restoration of those peatlands, which the previous panel was describing as akin to our own rainforests with the carbon locked up in the peaty soils.

Q115 Jerome Mayhew: Caroline, going back to you, from the NFU's perspective it is obviously important to get the buy-in of farmers, but what do you think is the best way to ensure that farmers are engaged in



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the ELMS process and the wider recovery agenda that we have spent this morning talking about?

Caroline Knox: I think someone described it as a scaffolding system. I might call it a tier system. Keeping it very simple, as a starting point we will get everybody engaged and then add to it, not being too prescriptive. Even in farming people can be prescriptive and say, "You shouldn't plough, you must direct drill," but there are very solid reasons that somebody ploughs and somebody else direct drills. You cannot be too prescriptive to farmers or they will disengage if they can afford to disengage. It is getting people in at the start.

There was a scheme from about 15 years ago called the entry level scheme. It had an absolutely enormous uptake of about 75% of farmers because it was straightforward. On our farm we still have corridors of enlarged hedges and field corners that have basically been left to nature because that was a relic of the entry level scheme. If you can get people to engage on something simple you will then gather the more complicated and more effective things on top of that, engagement and listening to the stakeholders: us, the farmers who are working with our bodies, the Tenant Farmers Association, the sheep farmer, cattle farmer, the NFU, the CLA. We are engaging with them to try to shape the sustainable farming scheme that is from the stakeholders for the stakeholders, which we really believe will give more than what ELMS is currently giving.

From my own point of view, I have spoken about our work on soil. The recent ELMS paperwork I saw had improvements on soil on grassland but not on arable land, and I would have thought it should be the other way around. Why would you not want to improve soil quality on arable land? Listen to us; we want to engage and help.

Q116 **Jerome Mayhew:** Talking of simple schemes, the countryside stewardship scheme is likely to be with us for a while yet. What improvements would you like the Government to make to streamline that scheme now, so that we get the maximum benefit out of it for the remaining years?

Caroline Knox: To streamline it? We are not in it. We have chosen not to be in the countryside stewardship scheme, partly because it is just so complicated and so prescriptive. There is no flexibility on dates and things and if the weather works against us—the climate has not been our friend these last few years especially—we can't get to the dates that we are told to do things by so we would be fined. If I was in for five years and the climate made a mess of things this year, I would be fined for the preceding five years. A simpler system, more flexibility around the farming calendar, not a date, more rapid payments—people are currently being paid a year after they have incurred their costs, at best. There needs to be more rapid payment. There is a simplified offer and a speeding up of processing to let the RPA make quicker payments but that



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needs to be improved and with less bureaucratic consequences of making a mistake. It is too overwhelming for farmers.

Q117 **Jerome Mayhew:** Ben McCarthy, is there anything you disagree on in that last answer?

Ben McCarthy: No, I don't think so.

Jerome Mayhew: Thank you both very much. I have really enjoyed this session and your answers particularly.

Chair: I would like to echo that. My thanks to all the members of this panel and the predecessor panel. It has been an absolutely fascinating morning and my apologies to you all for keeping you glued to your computers for quite as long as we have. Thanks to Mayor Philip Glanville, Kari Sprostranova, Caroline Knox and Ben McCarthy, and a quick word of thanks to Medha Bhasin who prepared our brief for today, and all members of the Committee who joined us for this session.