

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Species Reintroduction, HC 849

Wednesday 26 April 2023

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Members present: Sir Robert Goodwill (Chair); Ian Byrne; Dr Neil Hudson; Robbie Moore; Julian Sturdy; and Derek Thomas.

Questions 233 to 317

Witnesses

I: Trudy Harrison MP, Minister for Natural Environment and Land Use, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; and Richard Pullen, Head of National Biodiversity Policy, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs](#)



Examination of witnesses

Trudy Harrison and Richard Pullen.

Chair: Welcome to our latest evidence session in the report we are compiling on species reintroduction. We are very fortunate to be joined by our favourite Minister from DEFRA, Trudy Harrison, and Richard Pullen, one of her officials. Perhaps you would like to introduce yourselves to the Committee and then we will start with the questions, thank you.

Trudy Harrison: Thank you very much, Chair. I am the Minister in DEFRA responsible for the natural environment, international biodiversity and land use.

Richard Pullen: I am Joint Head of National Biodiversity Policy in DEFRA.

Q233 **Chair:** Welcome. We are presumably not reintroducing species just for reintroduction's sake; it is part of the overall environmental picture. What role does species reintroduction have within your Department's wider environmental objectives?

Trudy Harrison: Reintroductions are certainly part of the toolkit we have to reduce the decline of nature, which is the apex target set out in the Environmental Improvement Plan, recently published on 31 January, and very much building on the Environment Act. The main focus, if I was to choose one, would be habitat. Restoring habitat, creating habitat and protecting habitat is absolutely the key that we see is necessary to restore nature and prevent its further decline, which is declining at the moment around 2% every year.

Q234 **Chair:** Which species are you prioritising for reintroduction and why are those being prioritised?

Trudy Harrison: I would not say that there is a hierarchy of species. If a person or an organisation has a particular passion or a purpose, there is a process of eliminations and then risk assessments that Natural England will undergo to determine whether that particular reintroduction is suitable.

Q235 **Chair:** Understood. It is early days, but do we have any successful projects that you could point to and say, "This is the way it should be done; this is achieving our objectives"?

Trudy Harrison: There are certainly a number of projects covering various plants and animals. The least controversial are certainly the plants—the lady slipper orchid, for example—and a number of butterflies and spiders. The more controversial are probably the beavers, but successful in many ways. Success is deemed by different people in different ways, but we are particularly proud certainly of the wildflower reintroductions.

Q236 **Chair:** They tend not to kill farmers' livestock or damage drainage



HOUSE OF COMMONS

systems in a negative way as well as in a positive way. The Committee has recently been to Bavaria, where there are 25,000 beavers. Bavaria has been massively successful in introducing them, but we will come on to that.

You said at the very start, Minister, that we are seeing a 2% year on year reduction. Many would ask why we are looking at reintroducing things that have disappeared when we should be trying to stop the things that are still here disappearing, and that if things have disappeared, there is a reason why, maybe the environment, the climate or the type of habitat changed. Are we in danger of becoming a little bit distracted by things like beavers and lynx and wild cats et cetera when there are many species that are declining and maybe we are on the point of losing them?

Trudy Harrison: The fundamental facts of life in the Environmental Improvement Plan focus on restoring the necessities of life, improving the quality of water, the quality of air and certainly protecting soil as well. With those three things in mind, we then go on to increasing tree canopy, for example, up to 16.5%. That will require about 400 million trees to be planted by 2050—about 10,000 hectares a year—to ultimately get to that 250,000 hectares needed, which is creating habitat, hedgerow protection and creation as well. Those are what we see as the most important aspects, the most important actions that we can take in government to incentivise that.

That is why we have moved away from the Common Agricultural Policy, which was an area-based scheme that did little for farmers and little for nature, towards instead an environmental stewardship role with ELMS across three strands: Countryside Stewardship plus the Sustainable Farming Incentive and Landscape Recovery. That is certainly our focus in DEFRA.

Should a person or an organisation want to reintroduce a native species back into England, then we would certainly welcome that. There is a code of practice, principles and published information on our website for those individuals to follow. I think there is something perhaps very nostalgic in doing so, but there are also nature-based solutions, which beavers, for example, perhaps have been able to achieve, which we are certainly minded to support, with the checks and balances. I also recognise some of the challenges that you no doubt saw in Bavaria when those beavers were introduced in 1996. There are also consequences.

Chair: Certainly in Bavaria we heard that if a beaver dam is upstream of your village, that is very good news because it will slow down the floodwater. If it is downstream of your village, it is very bad news because the flooding will get worse, but maybe we will come on to that more later. Julian Sturdy, do you have a question?

Q237 **Julian Sturdy:** Just a quick question, following up. Who will make the ultimate final decision on any reintroduction? Will it be Natural England or will it be basically you, Minister, in DEFRA?



Trudy Harrison: I will bring my colleague in to cover that in more detail, but essentially by a process of elimination, if you like. If the species being proposed is something that is not ordinarily resident in and not a regular visitor to Great Britain in a wild state, then under schedule 9 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act that would be unlawful.

Schedule 9 includes native species such as the Eurasian beaver, wild boar and white-tailed eagle as well as non-native species, such as American mink and alpine newt and non-native plants, like Japanese knotweed and montbrecia. Assuming that none of the species proposed for introduction are on that list, then the checks and balances are made by Natural England, following the principles. The vast majority of reintroductions occur without the intervention of DEFRA because there is a code of practice that Natural England would determine.

Chair: We will delve more deeply into that because I know Dr Hudson has a question later on that specific—

Julian Sturdy: On Natural England?

Chair: Yes, on that specific subject.

Julian Sturdy: I would like to come back in on that, if I can.

Chair: Yes, by all means. Derek Thomas.

Q238 **Derek Thomas:** Thank you, Minister, for coming along. We were pleased when the targets were set out in relation to species abundance. We are interested to know what steps you are taking to achieve the target of ensuring species abundance in 2042 is greater than now—2022, last year—and at least 10% greater than 2030. It is quite a target. It is quite an ambition; it is a welcome ambition. What plans do you have to achieve that?

Trudy Harrison: Yes, certainly. It is obviously multifaceted. It isn't just one particular thing that we think will be the solution, but in a nutshell it is habitat, creating the conditions: cleaner water, better air quality, looking after our soil, fundamentally, and then protecting. 30x30 is a global ambition that we agreed at the Kunming-Montreal COP in November, but domestically we have a commitment to create 500,000 hectares of protected space. We have that commitment to increase tree canopy cover to 16.5%. We have pledged to improve the condition of the SSSIs. We have well over 1,000 SSSIs, covering around 1 million hectares, and to improve the quality of the characteristics on those SSSIs is also important.

As we live in a country that is densely populated, which is farmed to the extent of 70%, we cannot do this without our farmers. We hope that 70% to 80% of farmers will engage in ELMS and environmental stewardship, because that will make a huge difference to the chance that nature will have to thrive. That is why we have moved towards Countryside Stewardship, the Sustainable Farming Incentive and Landscape Recovery.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Landscape Recovery is the big one because that encourages farmers to collaborate. We anticipate that somewhere between 10 and 50 farmers will come together where they share a common interest, perhaps a river catchment or other geographical feature covering an area of up to 5,000 hectares, to make a transformational difference for the wildlife in that area.

Q239 Derek Thomas: That is good to know, because I am working with some people in west Cornwall to put forward a Landscape Recovery exactly as you have described, possibly even more ambitious, so any support that we can get from you would be very welcome, and a visit.

In terms of how you measure it, you are absolutely right: in creating habitat, the obvious conclusion would be that the species would recover. We have seen on the Isle of Scilly with the Manx shearwater exactly what has happened, but you have to do more than create habitat. Presumably you need to monitor and have interim targets, so at what year maybe in the near future will you be able to say, "Yes, we are making the right kind of progress to deliver what we hope for in 2030 and then 2042"?

Trudy Harrison: We have interim targets. They are set out across 262 pages of the EIP for various different mechanisms of evaluation. Farmers, as part of their ELMS, will be encouraged to monitor soil health.

I went on a farm visit recently and it was as simple as taking some earth out of the ground and identifying if there are many earthworms in there, how long the roots are, because we would encourage the grass roots to be as long as possible. That would indicate good soil health. I feel that farmers are being asked like never before to satisfy the need to feed a nation, but also the role that they play in environmental stewardship and embracing technology and reporting back to us in DEFRA their findings.

We know what is working because this will be an iterative process. Some of the things that we think might be a good idea today may well prove in five years to have not been as successful, so we will continue to learn. It is quite complex, as you can imagine, to monitor biodiversity improvement.

Q240 Derek Thomas: Exactly. What is the reporting mechanism to monitor and keep on track and to, as you say, adapt and adjust, if needed? Is there a mechanism in place for that?

Trudy Harrison: There is. There is a delivery unit across DEFRA that is monitoring the actions that are set out in Environmental Improvement Plan, across the many. There are about 56 plans across DEFRA, most of which include some aspect of improving the environment. Our delivery unit monitor those, but much of this is for our partners to do, Natural England especially, and the Environment Agency, Forestry Commission and Forestry England, all of our arm's length bodies that are working with us.

Q241 Derek Thomas: I am going to just press the reporting bit once more. If



HOUSE OF COMMONS

this Committee wanted to find out how we are doing and if we are getting to where we need to get to, when in the future do you think is realistic that we get you back—or Natural England or another agency—to tell us how we are doing? How soon do you think, realistically, until we have proper data?

Trudy Harrison: For something like tree-planting, we have regular updates. Last year, for example, was our best year for a long time and we managed to plant 2,700 trees. For something like that, an annual—

Q242 **Derek Thomas:** Yes, but that doesn't deliver species abundance; it creates habitat. When can the Department come back and say, "This is the kind of progress we are seeing on actual species abundance and recovery"?

Trudy Harrison: Again, that is happening all the time, particularly with our partners, Natural England. If there is a more helpful response—

Q243 **Derek Thomas:** In a year from now, would DEFRA be able to say, "This is what we have seen in relation to this bird or that worm or that bug"?

Richard Pullen: Dare I say it, it depends on the species, as some species you will see progress more quickly than others. As the Minister said, in the EIP there is an interim target, including on Sites of Special Scientific Interest, which does say to improve and strengthen the monitoring and assessment of the condition of those. That will feed into that process and we are working obviously within the Department and with Natural England on the monitoring system.

Derek Thomas: I say it because obviously we are concerned about the level of species loss. We want to see recovery. The public are very engaged and interested in it. Most of all, we need to get accurate data because we all know, depending on which side of the House we sit on, how painful it is if we don't have accurate data that corrects the record sometimes. Thank you, Chair.

Q244 **Dr Neil Hudson:** Minister, thank you for being before us. Quite rightly, you said that farmers and land managers are pivotal in this area and you mentioned the target that this Committee is very much strongly behind, in that you want 70% of farmers and land managers to be enrolled or partaking in the ELMS scheme. Do you have a feel now for the current state of play, where we are at in terms of the pathway to that 70% target? What are the current figures in terms of uptake?

Trudy Harrison: Nowhere near 70%, that is for sure, but the prospectus came out for ELMS—you will forgive me; I am not the farming Minister, but I will do my best to represent—maybe about three months ago and we have had a run of pilots on the Sustainable Farming Incentive. We have a roadshow of events, agricultural events, and engagement opportunities with farmers.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

I have personally engaged with about 200 farmers in my own constituency, which has been enlightening. I would say the complexity of the system is part of the challenge. We are continuing to work on that in DEFRA to make sure that Natural England, again as an organisation that will be supporting farmers, has the right information and that we also encourage farmer-to-farmer opportunities as well for the sharing.

There are other organisations: the NFU, the CLA, the Nature Friendly Farming Network, the Rivers Trust and the Woodland Trust. There are many, many organisations providing information to farmers at the moment but it is still a complex landscape and it is a changing landscape. New standards continue to be added to the pick and mix selection that is ELMS at the moment, but we need to do much, much more to achieve anywhere near that 70%, that is absolutely correct.

Q245 Dr Neil Hudson: I agree that we need to do a lot more, DEFRA need to do a lot more, but I think also constituency MPs have a role. As you say, you have been doing roadshows. I have been doing the same in Cumbria as well. It is so important that we bang the drum to get more people.

For our Committee, it may well be useful if DEFRA could write to us just with a snapshot of the latest data in terms of how many people enrol for SFI, Farming in Protected Landscapes and the Animal Health and Welfare Pathway, those side of things, so that we know what the path is towards that 70%. Then we will know that the Government and also Committees and MPs need to bang the drum louder, because we need to get more people enrolled. Could we get that from your Department? Could we get something in writing from the Department, do you think?

Trudy Harrison: Certainly. I would just make the point that we can do it on a percentage or we can do it about the amount of land. If you think about that 13,000 hectares of land, is that more important than the number of farmers? But I will put it both ways and I will certainly endeavour to write to the Committee with that information.

Q246 Chair: Certainly one of the concerns that we have picked up is that the £20 a hectare for the SFI scheme may not be enough to incentivise farmers, particularly those with small fields, because the soil testing is quite expensive. You are not just testing for nutrients, but for carbon as well. If you have 10 10-acre fields, you have to do a test in each field, but if you have a 100-acre field, you just have to do the one test.

I think that some of the farmers with smaller fields are wondering whether it will be worth their while, but it will be interesting to have updates from DEFRA to see how this is rolling out and whether it is the big arable men that are signing up or the hill farmers, for whom I think support is absolutely vital to retain those farms and keep people farming on that land.

Trudy Harrison: Yes. Hill farmers are already engaged perhaps more than other farmers in environmental stewardship, so that should bode well, but we certainly need to see our hill farmers. I share a passion with



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Neil, living in Cumbria in the Lake District, and the need to protect the Herdwick sheep to make sure that that is the case.

Q247 Dr Neil Hudson: Following up on that point, we did ask the farming Minister about this. I don't know whether you are picking this up in your roadshows as well, but anecdotally there is a perception that large landowners are potentially not renewing contracts for their tenant farmers, so the tenant farmers are getting off the land and large landowners are then saying, "Look, it is going to be better for me to plant trees on my property". That is a real worry for farming across the country, but especially in our parts of the world, where small tenant farmers are the lifeblood of rural communities. Are you picking that up in DEFRA and are you picking that up in your roadshows—the perception that tenancies are not being renewed?

Trudy Harrison: I haven't picked up that specific. I am aware of Swindale, for example, where farmhouses or farms are now being managed by the RSPB and United Utilities, so there are some examples. I would say the number one factor preventing farmers from engaging in ELMS at the moment is the complexity and perhaps the communications job we need to do to help them understand and to make it easy, because they are very, very busy, hardworking, brilliant people. There can be no other industry where the knowledge and expertise of how to look after the land is passed down the generations.

Chair: We are also working on reports on soil health and the future of tenant farmers, which will start quite soon, so all that should dovetail in quite well. Ian.

Q248 Ian Byrne: A couple of questions, Minister, on the Secretary of State's comments. I think we would all be keen to hear your assessment. What assessment have you made of the potential matter of reintroducing lynx and wolf to the UK?

Trudy Harrison: I haven't made an assessment as such. I haven't been asked to make an assessment, but I am aware that they feature on the list of dangerous wild animals and so therefore on that basis they couldn't be released into the wild.

Q249 Ian Byrne: I will just confirm what the Secretary of State said, saying she wouldn't support, "We just don't need to and we won't do" with regard to supporting the introduction of species like lynx and wolves. That is the line, yes.

Trudy Harrison: That is because those specific animals feature in that list. I suppose it is back to the process of elimination. First you have to identify whether the species are suitable. If they are on that list currently, that would suggest they are not. After that, it is identifying the principles of whether it would be appropriate to release a particular species into an area and all of the considerations that one would need to make about the community and whether the environment would be suitable, whether the organisation is suitably resourced.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q250 **Ian Byrne:** That sort of flows into one of the next questions. How is the Government using evidence to guide decision-making about species reintroduction? What is the framework?

Trudy Harrison: The framework is essentially headed up by Natural England. I think Richard, as an official on the ground, is probably best placed to talk through the technical aspects of the regulatory framework and what considerations have to be taken into account and perhaps the timescales of taking those into account. Is that okay, Richard?

Richard Pullen: Yes, thank you. In answer to a previous question as well, the responsibility for making decisions on applications for licences for those species for which licences are required, that falls to Natural England. Picking up the question you asked, a key document is the code for reintroduction, which has been published, and that sets out quite a logical way forward in terms of what the applications should cover. The first question would be, "What are you trying to achieve and what is the conservation status of the species?" and then assuming that action is required, "What action is required?"

That doesn't necessarily mean reintroduction. It could be and it may well be the case that, as the Minister said earlier, restoring and creating new habitat may be a more cost-effective, efficient way of doing it. If you have passed that and are still saying reintroduction is required, then the applicants need to do an assessment of the risk, the benefits, what consultation needs to be carried out and, looking forward, what is the management regime going forward and who they can consult and what sort of monitoring and evaluation is in place. All that needs to be set out and assessed.

Q251 **Ian Byrne:** Just on that, Professor Alastair Driver, Director of Rewilding Britain, told us that placing lynx and wolves in the same sentence shows, "a certain level of ecological illiteracy". Do you agree? Because he is obviously disagreeing with what you are saying regarding the expertise around what we should be reintroducing. Who are you listening to?

Trudy Harrison: They are on the same list. I think that is—

Ian Byrne: Being the dangerous animals list?

Trudy Harrison: Yes.

Q252 **Ian Byrne:** When he is talking about the reintroduction of these species, could they come off the list? Are there arguments for it or they are on the list and that is it, there is nowhere to go with that? Obviously there is a drive for certain animals and I just want to know basically what chances you have, because the Secretary of State said no.

Trudy Harrison: I am sure you can appreciate that the resources available for DEFRA are not a bottomless pit and our priority is absolutely the Environment Act, the Environmental Improvement Plan, the incredibly stretching targets that we already have and the legal targets



HOUSE OF COMMONS

that we must meet. Quite frankly, we have enough on our plate to create the habitat and prevent the decline of existing species in the country. That is our priority.

Q253 Ian Byrne: That is a good answer. Yes, that is fine.

Just to finish, the Secretary of State's strong views that we have touched on about not reintroducing lynx and wolves due to concerns about livestock preservation, is that compatible with the Government's lack of action on sheep worrying and the slow process of the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill?

Trudy Harrison: We have increased the budget for wildlife crime considerably, so I would say we are taking action to look after the livelihoods of the countryside. There will always be more to do, but I don't see the link between wildlife crime and the reintroduction of a species that features on the dangerous wildlife list.

Ian Byrne: That is a good answer.

Q254 Chair: Talking about dangerous animals, when we were in Kent looking at the bison reintroduction, which is a dangerous animal, the fencing here in the UK is much more onerous than in Holland, where a similar scheme was taking place. They were saying that the fencing was to keep people out rather than keep the bison in, but they explained that red deer were also on the list and that red deer are in Richmond Park and parts of the uplands. Is that right, Richard? Are red deer on the same list and they are being released without too much concern?

Richard Pullen: To be honest, I am not familiar with all the list of dangerous animals, but I would take your word for it, Chair.

Chair: We were taking the word of the people in Kent, but it is interesting, because I think they felt a bit aggrieved. They have spent £1 million on fencing this massive area of land where the bison were being released when other animals like red deer were running wild on Richmond Park being pursued by Labradors from time to time, I recall, if you have seen that particular film. Maybe you could get back to us as to whether regulations are being complied with in terms of red deer.

Julian, I think you were going to ask about the plants. We have fixated on animals, haven't we?

Q255 Julian Sturdy: Yes, just to touch on plants, Minister, you talked about priorities of restoring habitat and preventing further decline in habitat, which I think is very admirable. I am not going to ask about what role you think plant reintroductions have because I think you have already stressed that, but what I would like to ask is have you identified any priority plant species and could you touch on any sort of Department successes in reintroductions?

Trudy Harrison: I would say that the lady slipper orchid is a particular success that we would refer to. DEFRA don't prioritise particular species



HOUSE OF COMMONS

that I am aware of. We do have a red list of species that are at risk and we certainly prioritise our funding towards species recovery. We have various funds and Natural England has had a fund for about 30 years, which would support species reintroduction et cetera. But no, the answer is that in DEFRA, to my knowledge—unless I am wrong, Richard—we don't highlight particular species of plants or animals for reintroduction.

Q256 **Julian Sturdy:** Again, that falls to Natural England?

Trudy Harrison: Nor do Natural England. It may take a slightly more interventionist approach, but this broadly falls to organisations with a particular passion or purpose for that particular species and then they would apply, following the set of principles that we have discussed earlier.

Q257 **Julian Sturdy:** We have taken evidence saying that the system that you just described is slightly too bureaucratic. Do you think that that is the case?

Trudy Harrison: I haven't tested it myself, if I am honest. I would say most people say any application for anything is too bureaucratic, but it comes down to us being able to be sure that the reintroduction is the right thing to do. I hope we take a proportionate approach, based on the level of risk, and it is a risk-based approach. Also I hope that we gather enough evidence to be able to monitor and evaluate and share good practice as well. The bureaucratic point is something I haven't heard before. Where we can, I am certainly keen to cut down on unnecessary bureaucracy. Richard, have you heard that before? You will probably be more familiar with the systems that people need to go through.

Richard Pullen: I have heard that some people feel it is bureaucratic, but I have also heard a counterview that things should be tightened up. As is often the case, it is striking the right balance. What the Minister said about proportionality is very important in terms of the approach that would be taken for one of the more contentious species, which might well need to be quite a lot more rigorous than one that is maybe very localised and presents very few risks and quite a lot of benefit.

Chair: I think often the problem with so-called bureaucracy is when you are making an application for the first time, it can be quite difficult. If you are a person that does it every day—that is why I think many people have to rely on specialist people to do it for them. I think that is often the problem. You have set up a system that is fairly easy to work if you are using it all the time, but if it is just a once in a lifetime thing that you are doing, you can fall into all sorts of pitfalls. The more user friendly you can make things, then obviously the more likely people will be able to do it themselves without having to pay somebody to do it for them. Neil.

Q258 **Dr Neil Hudson:** I think the level of bureaucracy in my question has been covered in that previous discussion, but a recurrent theme in our inquiry is that it is a very polarised debate. There are some people really



HOUSE OF COMMONS

in favour of this and there are some people passionately opposed and we are not seeing a lot of middle ground. I guess from your Government perspective, where do you see Government sitting in terms of the level of precautionary approach, to making sure that we get this right, but also facilitating people who do want to do it the right way? Where is that landing strip? Because we have not found it so far, I don't think, in our inquiry.

Trudy Harrison: As I said, we don't see this as being the answer to nature's decline in isolation. Absolutely there is a role for reintroduction and I agree that that is something very nostalgic and special. On the subject of beavers, for example, they are ecological warriors and can do great good, I am sure. In my experience, where there is a proposal to release beavers in Wild Ennerdale, there is huge concern about what that would mean if they were released down the River Ehen catchment, which could be an area as great as 200 hectares.

Therefore it is absolutely right that we, in government, have the checks in place to consider the wider impacts because, yes, there will be certain people and certain organisations who absolutely are passionate about a particular species. It is our job in government to bear in mind all the other consequences of that action and make sure that we have taken a holistic and risk-based approach to that release for the animals' sake as well as other environmental factors, the survival of other species and the livelihoods of the people living there in that area.

Q259 **Dr Neil Hudson:** In terms of a risk-based approach, I am going to come on to the risks in terms of some of the potential negatives from species reintroduction or introduction. Richard, you mentioned that Natural England would have the sign-off in terms of some of these decisions, but ultimately, if there is a significant risk, can there be ministerial override of that? Looking at checks and balances, looking at a holistic approach, can DEFRA Ministers say, "Sorry, Natural England, you are wrong. No, this is not happening"?

Richard Pullen: It would be nice to have a lawyer in the room at this point, but I believe that there is a power available to the Secretary of State, a general power of intervention/direction.

Q260 **Dr Neil Hudson:** Thank you; that is helpful. Natural England has told us that more species should be licensed under the Wildlife and Countryside Act to improve project planning and public and stakeholder confidence in terms of some of these reintroduction projects. Do you concur with that? Is that something that is a good idea from Natural England?

Trudy Harrison: It is not something that we are considering at the moment that I am aware of. Our efforts are really about the habitat creation. I think Natural England is responsible for 1,041 SSSIs that we have. Many of them are not in favourable condition, so that needs to be the focus, along with creating the 500,000 hectares of protected space for nature, along with biodiversity net gain—that is going to be



fundamental—and challenges with nutrient neutrality and making sure we have wetlands to allow the developments to go ahead. I think Natural England is kept quite busy.

Q261 Dr Neil Hudson: We heard earlier about the significant investment for animals covered under the Dangerous Wild Animals Act—animals such as elk, bison and potentially wild boar, which require significant investment to separate those species from harming people potentially out walking their dogs. Are you comfortable with that situation, that you have the protection within that Act? Is that a good thing to keep going with that line of attack?

Trudy Harrison: The experts in the field—no pun intended—will understand the likelihood of that particular animal. As far as I am aware, that is satisfactory at the moment. If we were, to your point, looking at other animals, then we would have to take an approach that is proportionate and tailored to that particular animal and that particular environment. I do think it needs to be a very bespoke approach, based on risk.

Dr Neil Hudson: Horses for courses.

Trudy Harrison: That's the one!

Q262 Dr Neil Hudson: Natural England has identified potential policy gaps relating to the reintroduction of large predators and herbivores, disease risks and assisted colonisation in the code and guidance on species reintroductions. Do you recognise those gaps? If you think there are gaps, what is DEFRA doing to try to plug those gaps?

Trudy Harrison: Richard, can you speak to the specifics of the disease aspect? The Minister in DEFRA that presides over this is—

Dr Neil Hudson: I will come on to disease specifically in a second, but are there gaps that you are aware of and are you trying to fill them?

Richard Pullen: I am aware that Natural England has registered a number. We would need to think quite carefully about what action would be required and whether it is proportionate and the resource implications of it. I don't think at this point we have reached a conclusion.

Q263 Dr Neil Hudson: Minister, you mentioned disease. As a veterinary surgeon, I am passionate about the animal health and welfare of this country and the biosecurity of our country. There is the worry with species potentially being reintroduced or introduced: are we compromising that in any way? We have African swine fever progressing up the continent of Europe and if that potentially got into the pig population in this country or the wild boar population, it would be catastrophic. Is DEFRA on this case? Are you very vigilant that our disease status in this country will not be compromised by any of these potential projects?



Trudy Harrison: We absolutely value the health of wild and kept animals and so we have to ensure the fact that only healthy animals are introduced. That would be a process of quarantine, if necessary. We have those pretty world-class systems already in place to guard against disease coming into the country. Any application for a licence to release a species into the wild will need to demonstrate that they have undertaken the appropriate health screening and disease risk assessment. That is what the code for reintroductions outlines.

As part of Natural England's Species Recovery Programme, the Institute of Zoology and the Zoological Society for London have undertaken the disease risk analyses and health surveillance for conservation translocation projects. I have not been made aware of particular problems, so as far as I understand, the system that we have in place is doing what it needs to do.

Q264 **Dr Neil Hudson:** As far as you are concerned, you would have checks coming in, you would have quarantine, but the bison project that we looked at in Kent—ultimately this is quite a new project, but periodically, every few years, those animals have to be corralled in for say TB testing. That is not an easy process in some of these semi-wild animals. Potentially, yes, you can screen coming in, but if something goes wrong with a species reintroduction and these animals get out, then is DEFRA aware of that and taking a precautionary approach in terms of the decisions that are being made moving forward?

Trudy Harrison: We are certainly not aware that any of the bison have been able to escape. Obviously we have zoos in the country and a good—

Q265 **Dr Neil Hudson:** No, this is very new, but I am talking hypothetically. If you take animals in and then periodically you might need to keep testing them, that is not a simple process.

Trudy Harrison: Yes. Is this something, Richard, that you want to talk to?

Richard Pullen: I would hope and expect Natural England will look at that and consider that as part of the application process, consider what arrangements are in place for monitoring going forward.

Q266 **Dr Neil Hudson:** I guess what I am getting at is the concept of unintended consequences, the unknowns if you bring animals in. Think about what has happened to the red squirrels—we are passionate in Cumbria about our red squirrels—and what has happened to them over the last 150 to 200 years because of the grey squirrel pox and the unintended consequence of that. People have been saying in this inquiry pine martens could be a good species to potentially take out some of the greys and help the reds, but in Scotland the debate is that the pine martens might be taking out the capercaillie birds.

A recurrent theme from this inquiry is, "Careful what you wish for". What I am trying to get to with my obtuse line of questioning, is this: is DEFRA



on it and being very careful that we get this right? We just don't want catastrophes moving forward.

Trudy Harrison: I think we absolutely are. I think we have taken a very cautious approach; a risk-based approach. It is for those reasons of learning from the past, the rhododendron ponticum and the Japanese knotweed.

The grey squirrel I think is the best example of why we should not introduce species into this country without extremely careful consideration and thinking beyond just that species, but what this could do to other native wildlife, the environment more generally, lives and livelihoods. That is why I am pleased that there is that overarching decision that the Secretary of State can take. We have certainly learnt an awful lot from the grey squirrel situation.

Q267 **Dr Neil Hudson:** It is not just disease; it is potential effects on other animals who are predated upon potentially by some of these animals coming in. The code and guidance on species reintroduction, when do you think we can expect an updated version of the code? Are you potentially consulting on that?

Trudy Harrison: We have the reintroductions taskforce. I think it has met twice now, has it? It will be looking at that, advising us and DEFRA, Natural England, and when we need to we will update. At the moment there are no plans to do that, but it will be an iterative process because we will update the Environmental Improvement Plan every five years. This is the first update, if you like, following the Environment Act and we will continue to do that. Information that we receive, experiences we can learn from will all feed into that.

Q268 **Dr Neil Hudson:** Finally, Chair, what level of discussion do you have across the United Kingdom? We are introducing and reintroducing wild animals that don't necessarily respect borders between our countries as well. What level of dialogue do we have with Scotland and our other countries? There does seem to be a differential direction of travel in terms of the pace of reintroduction.

Scotland is pushing forward on the Scottish wildcat project as well, but as I said with my pine marten example, there is a differential argument north and south of the border. What level of dialogue is there? These animals and diseases and risks need to have a UK perspective, don't they?

Trudy Harrison: They do, but I don't think it is a bad thing to have some diversity, because that enables us to learn from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and vice versa. I don't necessarily think that that divergence is entirely unhelpful. Certainly part of the terms of reference of the reintroduction taskforce is to liaise with our devolved Administrations. It is England-based, but it is required to work with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and at official level certainly that happens as well.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

When you look at Scotland, it has so much more land available and a much less dense population than we have in England. Although we are all part of the UK, we do have different characteristics and a different environment and therefore different considerations and different risks.

Q269 Julian Sturdy: Minister, you have talked about DEFRA having a cautious and risk-based approach, which I would fully support, but my concern is that it seems from what we have heard so far and from the inquiry that Natural England seem to hold all the cards and all the power. That is a statement rather than a question, I do accept.

My question is—which I think I know the answer to, but the Committee want me to put it, so I will put it anyway—who is responsible for the monitoring and compliance and enforcement with the code? This is very important because it touches on what Dr Hudson said about disease status, where something like that could be put at risk.

Trudy Harrison: That would be Natural England.

Q270 Julian Sturdy: Of course I knew the answer to that question, yes. Are you worried about that? Are you worried about Natural England having this sort of power over this policy?

Trudy Harrison: My greater concern for Natural England is it becomes akin to margarine—spread too thin and rather ineffective—because we have such a busy agenda to protect nature. When I meet, as I did yesterday, with Tony Juniper and Marian Spain in particular, who I think are doing a very good job, I am acutely aware of the pressure that they are under with the finite resources they have and the huge task ahead of them. I think my priority is to ensure that where their world-class scientists are most helpful, they are deployed, but they can't be everything everywhere. There are 262 pages of actions that we must do, because nature needs us to step in here, and the next generation, we have a responsibility to them. That is what Natural England need to focus on.

Q271 Julian Sturdy: I would say it is not like margarine, but more like Marmite myself. But do you have the power to rein it in, if required?

Trudy Harrison: Yes.

Julian Sturdy: You do?

Trudy Harrison: We do, yes, in DEFRA. It is an arm's length body. We have regular reviews; we set priorities. It has key performance indicators and ultimately we hold the purse strings.

Q272 Julian Sturdy: You will not hesitate to do that, if required?

Trudy Harrison: We are already acting. To be honest, I think Natural England recognise that there are huge changes and huge asks of it. They are people who I think are excellent in the main at recognising the challenge that we have in solving the environmental crisis, but perhaps



HOUSE OF COMMONS

there aren't enough people to work as closely as they need to with farmers, for example, to really make sure that that farm can be the best it can be, that that farmer is as supported as they can be.

I am not sure that would be the job of Natural England, to be honest. That is part of the considerations that myself and Minister Spencer are making at the moment. Where Natural England has the expertise, we are very pleased and we are very keen to support it, but it cannot do everything all of the time.

Q273 Robbie Moore: My question is just focusing on Species Recovery Capital Grant Scheme. How is the Species Recovery Capital Grant Scheme supporting the Department's species reintroduction goals?

Trudy Harrison: That is a very good question, Robbie. I am going to defer to Richard to explain how much of the budget we use on reintroductions. We only have a couple of people devoted to reintroductions in DEFRA. The vast majority of the focus and where our budget goes is on habitat protection and creation.

Richard Pullen: Thank you, Minister. I don't know how Natural England explained it, but obviously it is the grant regime. I believe it is £18 million over two years and it is a capital grant. It can be used for, for example, enhancement and restoration of habitats as well as infrastructure. That is where the focus is.

Q274 Robbie Moore: Just expanding on that, are you, as a Department, taking steps to allow that scheme to support wild releases of beavers, for example? Would this scheme apply to the reintroduction of beavers?

Richard Pullen: I think at this point in time, Natural England is not considering applications for the wild releases of beaver. At this point, no, it would not be considering beaver reintroduction under that grant regime. That is my understanding.

Q275 Robbie Moore: I suppose one of the concerns from a landowner or a land occupier's perspective will be how the scheme works in terms of mitigating the potential impact, whether it is for beavers or whether it is for some other species reintroduction. How do you envisage the scheme working in terms of providing that mitigation where a species has been reintroduced and the impact that it may have on food production or on the landholding itself?

Richard Pullen: You are probably stretching me a little bit in terms of my knowledge of this grant regime, but just picking up something that the Minister was keen to emphasise earlier is looking at the Environmental Land Management Scheme and the relative budgets that are available. That may not be what you were looking for in terms of mitigation, but it is certainly incentivising the land management actions, for example, buffer strips for beavers, which would help.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Trudy Harrison: Yes, but beavers aren't eligible for this particular capital grant scheme. We would look for the application to demonstrate wider benefits for habitat and a population persisting for at least a year. That is part of the criteria, but the particular species that this fund is helping are things like the lady slipper orchid, water vole, natterjack toad, the wart-biter cricket and curlew. Those are the species that it is particularly focused on. In terms of what that fund could pay for, as you say, it is capital. That might be things like siting for a structure or equipment, research and development or habitat enhancement. It is those kind of things.

Q276 **Robbie Moore:** As part of the application process, is there impact assessments that form part of that strategy so that the capital grants can be awarded? Just talk through—

Trudy Harrison: Because Natural England undertake the administrative role here, I am not familiar with the kind of proportionate information we ask for, dependent on how much an applicant would want to do what with. Very happy though to send the methodology and criteria for that fund to the Committee and write to the Committee with more in-depth information about the application process and what monitoring and evaluation we require.

Chair: That would be helpful, thank you.

Q277 **Robbie Moore:** This builds on maybe the point that Julian was making. Obviously Natural England is the lead organisation, the lead body that is taking control of the Species Recovery Capital Grant Scheme being implemented, but as a Department, let's assume there will be tweaking that needs to be done on Natural England's part to make sure that it is deliverable, that it is workable at a practical level.

Will you, as the Minister, and the Department be involved in that process and in terms of auditing how the grant is working, whether it is practically being utilised in terms of mitigating those negative impacts that are likely to occur? What level of interaction will the Department be having with Natural England to make sure that the grant scheme works practically on the ground?

Trudy Harrison: Natural England has been at this for 30 years. It has been involved with schemes for species recovery for three decades. The processes I undergo are regular meetings with the chair, Tony Juniper, and the chief executive, Marian Spain—as I say, we met yesterday—and regularly interacting with Natural England. It will organise visits quite often, where I can go out and see for myself the work that it has been supporting. Then it has a set of KPIs, where I will evaluate its progress or not, and we have a very frank conversations where improvements need to be made. I do work very closely with Natural England and on the whole I think it does an excellent job for us.

Q278 **Robbie Moore:** Before I hand back to the Chair, just in terms of that auditing process, yes, it is important to have that level of interaction with



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Natural England, but does the Department directly interact with landowners/occupiers themselves that are impacted by the species reintroduction, positively or negatively, rather than just the direct interaction with Natural England? Is the Department reassured that, yes, Natural England may be doing its job or not doing its job, but that level of reassurance comes from those that are being practically impacted, positively or negatively, on the ground?

Trudy Harrison: Certainly from a constituency MP's perspective, in my own community, where there is the prospect of this catchment-wide beaver release, the amount of consultation that the partners, Forestry England, United Utilities, the National Trust and Natural England have undertaken has been quite extensive. As all Ministers are also MPs, we are in tune with communities.

In terms of the monitoring and evaluation with communities after the reintroduction, that is maybe something that we need to do more of because, if I am honest, that is not something that I have engaged with.

Q279 **Ian Byrne:** Minister, this is about the species reintroduction taskforce. I just want to touch on the relevance of it. Is it a tick-box exercise or is something that has a bit of sway and a bit of teeth? We will go through some questions as we progress. Why did it take almost two years for the taskforce to publish its terms of reference?

Trudy Harrison: It took a wee while to secure the right chair, then when we got the right chair, they were not available for a meeting immediately. I think there was a fairly extended period of leave that we had to work around.

The taskforce has now met twice. I think it involves 16 other organisations and it is very much an advisory group. We welcome that advice and also the fact that it can work with not just devolved Administrations, but global best practice to understand how reintroductions have worked or haven't worked, and when they have worked well, what have been the guiding factors of that successful reintroduction. Quite frankly, it is helpful to have another group of people with a passion for this subject feeding information to Natural England and DEFRA. It is not a regulator, it is advisory and we welcome its enthusiasm.

Q280 **Ian Byrne:** I am sure that they are all delighted to hear that on the taskforce, but from the inquiry we have heard that stakeholders are not aware of the arrangement for proposed species reintroduction for the stakeholder forum and a lack of transparency around the taskforce has undermined their trust in it. Obviously it is in its infancy, but are we addressing those issues to reassure the people on it?

Trudy Harrison: It is very transparent in that the terms of reference are published, the meeting notes are published, so we are certainly not hiding anything there. But this is early days because it has only met a couple of times.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q281 **Ian Byrne:** No, I make allowances for that, but I think there was a fear—certainly from my perspective, listening to the evidence—that it was potentially just a tick-box, it is just there giving you the views. I was trying to understand what role it has in informing DEFRA the decision-making process. We don't use "recommend", we use "view", so is it just giving you a view? You listen to the view, but what strength does it have within that process, within those people, within those experts in shaping DEFRA decision-making?

Trudy Harrison: I am sure that if a decision was controversial and it came to the Secretary of State for an ultimate decision, she would take the advice of the taskforce, but hopefully we don't get to that stage. The process for Natural England taking that advice, it is part of the taskforce, so I would say it is a far more collaborative engagement rather than particularly formal advice.

Q282 **Ian Byrne:** So it is just a collective group of voices to inform the Secretary of State, but obviously she can overrule it any time she wants to?

Trudy Harrison: It is more positive than that, I think. It is, "How can we make this work?" rather than a regulatory thing. If there were examples from other parts of the world, in particular Europe, in particular countries with similar climates, similar environments and similar challenges to us where this has worked very well, that is what we want to know about. We want to do this well and I would say it is a far more positive collaboration than a regulatory stick approach.

Q283 **Ian Byrne:** Those animals under the Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976 we touched on before, if it had a view that that potentially should be challenged, could that be challenged and taken off the Act? Is there that sort of dialogue; is there the ability for that taskforce to influence decision-making to that degree?

Trudy Harrison: Given the information then informs decision-making, absolutely, yes.

Q284 **Ian Byrne:** Just on the advice that has been given so far, is there anything that the Department has followed?

Trudy Harrison: I am not aware of any.

Ian Byrne: You are not aware of any advice, okay.

Trudy Harrison: Richard, am I wrong there—is there anything that I have forgotten about?

Richard Pullen: No, you are right. As you say, it took a while to establish, so it has just got going, but yes, following up what the Minister said, this is about best practice.

A comment made earlier I thought was valid is this point about sometimes it can be a very polarised debate and this technical advisory



HOUSE OF COMMONS

taskforce could help build best practice and try to bring in stakeholders and develop evidence that helps that debate.

Ian Byrne: It is probably a fundamental plank of the success of the whole project because of the people that are on it and the expertise that they have across the sector. Okay, thank you.

Q285 **Chair:** Thanks so much indeed. We were just saying that when we had the engagement with the taskforce, we got the impression that the Secretary of State would pretty much always side with the taskforce advice, but we heard that it was not consulted about the announcement on lynx and wolves. It created a little bit of concern among this Committee that Ministers might make announcements, either in favour or against, without using the taskforce that was set up for that specific purpose.

Trudy Harrison: I think what the Secretary of State was doing was just stating a fact: that those animals feature on that dangerous wildlife list and they are there for a reason.

Q286 **Chair:** Last year the Government gave beavers protection, which surprised quite a few in the farming community and even in the conservation community. Was the taskforce asked for advice or was it even in existence at that point before that announcement was made by the Government last year?

Trudy Harrison: I do not know.

Richard Pullen: I don't think the taskforce was in existence at that point. The legal protection was fulfilling an international obligation under what is called the Bern Convention.

Q287 **Chair:** Certainly I had a meeting with the Woodland Trust, who said, "Well, beavers are great. You will get somebody very enthusiastic, they will introduce them in location A, but the beavers will have a different view and go to location B, where maybe the landowner isn't as keen, or maybe there is a drainage channel at risk".

Although you are saying you are complying with the Bern Convention, I don't think there is any timescale for that having to be done. Would you take the view that enough evidence was taken, particularly as the taskforce wasn't yet meeting, before that decision was made to protect beavers?

When we were in Germany, we heard how, for example, if a dam is almost as high as the bank of a stream, then you can then very quickly get authorisation to reduce that so that you don't have a flooding incident. But under the protection that has been given, you can't even lay a finger on a beaver dam without having specific authorisation, which could then be challenged in the courts by people like Wild Justice. Is that a concern in the Department?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Trudy Harrison: Just to answer the question, the first meeting of the taskforce was February this year, so that kind of answers the question, that it wasn't in a position to provide that advice.

The protections in place for beavers I would say are proportionate to the number of beavers. It is just one place, isn't it?

Richard Pullen: That has been licensed, yes.

Trudy Harrison: In Dorset.

Richard Pullen: In Devon.

Trudy Harrison: Devon, sorry. It is not a concern at the moment. Reintroductions are not a huge focus for our apex target to reduce nature's decline. If it were the case that it became a serious or significant consideration, then we would act accordingly.

Q288 **Chair:** You could reverse that decision; I would say good luck with that one. Is that compliant with the Bern Convention, if you were to, for example, allow farmers to relocate beavers if they were in a place that was going to cause flooding? We saw that in Germany, that it was fairly straightforward if you have a beaver in a place that was going to cause flooding, flood a village, you could relocate that.

Trudy Harrison: Relocate, yes. The options available are protect particular trees or remove the dam, but subject to—

Richard Pullen: Yes, I think without the need to apply for a licence. I think landowners will be able to remove a newly established dam and then there is a hierarchy as you move through in terms of the more interventionist actions we would need and an approval under a licence.

Q289 **Dr Neil Hudson:** We touched on some of this a little bit earlier, but just in terms of impact assessments, the NFU very much said that the impact assessments are absolutely fundamental in any species introduction or reintroduction project. Do you concur with the NFU's view on that?

Trudy Harrison: That is part of the process, dependent on the risk of releasing the species, most certainly, yes.

Q290 **Dr Neil Hudson:** If you concur with that, then who will be responsible for creating and evaluating those impact assessments? Will it be the taskforce or will it be Natural England or who will be doing that?

Trudy Harrison: Natural England.

Richard Pullen: Where you have a particular application for release, it will be for the applicant to do an assessment and then that will be assessed by Natural England.

Dr Neil Hudson: But in my question to you earlier, Richard, ultimately the Secretary of State could out-trump that, potentially, yes.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Richard Pullen: Ultimately there is a general power of direction.

Q291 **Dr Neil Hudson:** If there was a query about it. So it is for the applicant to do the impact assessment, put it in and then Natural England would look at that. If it is a weakly done impact assessment, it will be just dismissed out of hand then, will it? The onus is on the applicant then to do the hard yards?

Richard Pullen: Yes. The onus is on the applicant to do it properly.

Q292 **Dr Neil Hudson:** How will you balance the societal and environmental advantages of reintroductions that potentially have localised risks? How do you balance it? Again, it comes back to my point that this is a very polarised debate. Some people will say, "Look, this is going to be good for society, good for the environment" but then other people locally will say, "Well, hang on a minute. This is going to be catastrophic for us". How do you balance that?

Trudy Harrison: Again, from my experience in my constituency, the consultations that have been undertaken have been pretty extensive. It is not just the Secretary of State or Natural England that have a voice in all of this, it is absolutely the community, the parish council and the local farmers, and quite right too, because the implications on them could be significant.

Q293 **Dr Neil Hudson:** But DEFRA is picking up the data coming in, if there are reports of adverse consequences? For instance, what is your perception of say the white-tailed eagles taking young farm livestock? Is that something that DEFRA is getting information on and is going to make a decision on or is this something that is, "Oh, we will leave it up to the local communities"? I am seeing a bit of a disconnect there, because surely you should be collecting data and then being able to make holistic decisions.

Trudy Harrison: Yes. What perhaps would be helpful is the rate of applications and how many of them are turned away because what we know about are the successful applications. What I don't know about—I am not able to tell you today—is how many are discounted because of all the reasons that you and others are setting out very eloquently.

Q294 **Dr Neil Hudson:** Could you give the Committee maybe in writing any perspective that DEFRA has on things that have happened out in the environment? Again, I use the white-tailed eagle example and young lambs. Is that something where you are picking up a real phenomenon?

Trudy Harrison: I haven't yet. I have not received correspondence that I can recall that—

Dr Neil Hudson: Maybe you can follow up in writing if your Department has that, because I think it is—

Trudy Harrison: Yes, certainly. Richard, if you want to feed in.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Dr Neil Hudson: Richard, do you feel that your Department is collecting data on this?

Richard Pullen: We obviously look to Natural England as closer to the application process to provide information on that, yes.

Q295 **Dr Neil Hudson:** If you could follow up, thank you. That is great. Finally, Minister, given the current concerns within this country and nationally and internationally on food security and the need to be able to produce food, I think the pandemic and the war in Ukraine has brought that into sharp focus. What weight will the Government and DEFRA be giving to protecting food-producing land when assessing the viability of one of these projects?

Trudy Harrison: You raise a particularly topical point, as I am the Minister for land use. Self-sufficiency of our food is a red line, certainly for the food security Minister, Minister Spencer, and all of us in DEFRA. How we ensure that we use the 30 million hectares in England most effectively to feed a nation, but also to help nature's recovery is quite a challenge when we also consider all of the other conflicts for the amount of land that we have. I don't think there is really any land in England that is unproductive; it is all used for something.

That is something that we have committed to in the Environmental Improvement Plan, to publish a land use framework this year, so you can appreciate all of the land uses are being understood, what is intensive, extensive, what can be inclusive, what needs to be exclusive. There are some uses for land where you can mix multiple benefits and others where you can't. That is something that we are prioritising in DEFRA and it is set out as a commitment.

In terms of reintroductions, because we don't have—other than that one exception—experience of beavers, for example, being released into the wild, it is not something that I have focused on yet.

Q296 **Dr Neil Hudson:** I think that concept that you can produce food while looking after the environment, the two go hand in hand, but very interesting to hear you say that food security is a red line—

Trudy Harrison: Absolutely.

Dr Neil Hudson: —so that you, as the land use Minister, work hand in glove with the food and farming Minister because food security is paramount in that, while we are also looking after the environment. Food security is very much high up on DEFRA's agenda is what you are telling me?

Trudy Harrison: Absolutely, absolutely.

Q297 **Dr Neil Hudson:** Perfect, thank you. Relieved to hear that, Minister.

Trudy Harrison: Also it would be foolish if our environmental stewardship led to higher imports because then that would lead to higher



HOUSE OF COMMONS

food miles, so supporting our UK sovereign food producers is a total priority for the food security Minister, the farming Minister, which is Mark Spencer. While my role may be land use and natural environment Minister, we work extremely closely together because the two have to go hand and hand and they can.

Q298 Dr Neil Hudson: That is reassuring to hear. I think that they do have to go hand in hand and we must applaud our farmers and land managers who produce our food, but also at the same time look after and nurture our environment. That is so important for us and our future generations, but also for things like, in our part of the world, the tourist economy as well, so the two go hand in hand. Thank you.

Trudy Harrison: I would also just add on that, Neil, the fact that the climate is changing. There are going to be environmental factors that farmers have not experienced previously—hotter, dryer, wetter, windier and higher sea temperatures—and all of that needs to be factored into our future land use strategy as well to make sure that farmers can produce for our nation and we use nature-based solutions where we can. That may or may not be beavers upstream. It is one of the considerations, it is one of the tools in the toolkit, but the fundamental aspect of improving the environment is that water, air and soil and that is what we are focused on.

Q299 Chair: Thank you very much. I would like to ask a little bit about engaging more widely with stakeholders. Obviously the situation is that we have some very enthusiastic landowners or local nature trusts who identify species they would like to introduce—it might be a plant or an animal—and Natural England then get involved. If there is no problem it can identify, then that can go ahead, but obviously there will be neighbouring landowners and neighbouring farmers.

I was talking to a very big landowner in Caithness, who was very disappointed because although he had some white-tailed eagles, they had driven away the golden eagles that they like to see on his land. That was something he couldn't really do anything about.

How do you think we should try to give species reintroduction a good name by engaging with people? Because if it is successful, those new species will spread. Certainly animals can spread quite a long way; beavers can travel a long way. How can we do that in a more joined-up way to ensure that there is wider acceptance within the farming community in a particular area so that they will be part of the project, rather than thinking, "Oh, he is all right. He has plenty of money, but he has these animals. What happens when they come on my farm"?

Trudy Harrison: I think this is something that the taskforce will be looking at, but how to ensure that the wider community are part of this project and ideally that the wider community is motivated to apply as a community, and it is not just one organisation or one applicant, it has been done through very good collaboration and consultation with the local community. That is always when things work out best.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q300 **Chair:** I would like to ask you a little bit about money. We have talked about the capital grant that might be there, but certainly in Bavaria I think there was €500,000 a year that was there to compensate farmers, because beavers are very fond of sugar beet, they are very fond of maize, silage maize and grain maize. There was a fairly easy to use compensation scheme to allow farmers to be compensated for the damage to their crops. If we successfully reintroduce beavers in this country, will we need a compensation scheme?

Trudy Harrison: If beavers are deemed to be a nature-based solution to alleviating flooding, the amount of money we spend on flooding—which in this particular catchment in my constituency has recently been £19.6 million in Egremont on the River Ehen—that kind of budget could potentially be utilised for nature-based solutions, but we are not considering a compensation scheme at the moment.

Q301 **Chair:** We also heard that although beavers can be very useful in protecting communities and land from flooding upstream, both downstream dams, but also they don't live in their dams, they dig burrows. We saw situations where to prevent them digging their burrows under drainage banks, they were having to put large amounts of rock at water level to deter them from doing that.

This was a massive undertaking, millions of pounds had been spent to protect their vital drainage infrastructure. If we are going to have beavers more widely, has DEFRA looked at some of this expenditure that will need to be done to protect places like the Somerset Levels, places like the Sea Cut in my constituency, which protects a number of villages and does need to be kept as an integral part of our drainage systems?

Trudy Harrison: It certainly seems that your visit to Bavaria as a Committee has been incredibly informative. What I will ask the taskforce to undertake, if it doesn't already have plans to do this, is a close look at Bavaria to see whether the systems we have in place need to be further considered, based on those experiences. I think they were initially released in 1966 in Bavaria, so I will certainly instruct that.

Q302 **Chair:** That is very helpful indeed. Certainly if you get a chance to go and visit and see it first-hand; there is no real substitute for seeing something. We didn't see any beavers because they are nocturnal, but my goodness, we could see the evidence where they had been and how they were. They were really quite welcomed by the communities there because they had a network—I don't know whether we should think about that in this country—of what we could describe as beaver ambassadors, about 500 people.

It could be farmers, it could be parish councillors or other experts, and they had a rapid response force to come and say, "Well, you have a beaver here, but it is not a good place. We need to sort out your problem". Is that something that DEFRA need to look at as well, how we can get people in local communities involved, maybe not just with beavers, but with other species where they are being introduced to



ensure that we can support that and support landowners?

Trudy Harrison: Supporting “can do” people in our communities who know their area best will always be my number one priority in life. If I can encourage more volunteerism and also support the passions of people with a purpose to help nature recover, that is absolutely what I would want to do. It is why I am so keen to support and significantly increase the capacity of people that are looking after red squirrels. I think it is a fine example.

We have a number of organisations in Cumbria and Northumbria that protect the red squirrel, to the extent that I don’t think we would have red squirrels if it were not for these volunteers, who day in, day out go out there, manage grey squirrels and feed the red squirrels.

I think if we look at that model, then it is certainly something that I think perhaps the taskforce could look at, how we capacity-build, how we reduce the confrontation and conflict and increase the collaboration and ensure that these applications are coming from the community for the community, not an isolated organisation with a passion that is very disconnected from what the community needs and wants.

Q303 **Robbie Moore:** I want to focus on the risk-based approach and the assessment process to do with the reintroduction of species. In your view, Minister, should the consultation process for reintroducing a species be proportionate to the anticipated benefits and risks or an identical process being used and adopted for all reintroduction projects?

Trudy Harrison: I think it needs to be proportionate. The devil is in the detail there though, and understanding the implications is something that we need to get a grip of. That can best be done by people who have already experienced this, so with Bavaria and your experiences, I am increasingly thinking I need to pay close attention to Bavaria’s experiences.

Q304 **Robbie Moore:** I am sure the likes of the NFU will welcome what you have said because when we took evidence from it, it was outlining that obviously some species have high conflict compared to others, which are not controversial at all. Obviously that impacts what the current landholding scenario may be within a particular area for species reintroduction.

Just expanding on your answer, how should species be categorised, in your view? For example, do you foresee any role that the species reintroduction taskforce could have as part of this process in terms of categorisation?

Trudy Harrison: I don’t. I think it needs to be bespoke, because I don’t see reintroductions as forming a major part of nature’s recovery. When these applications come forward from individuals or organisations, I think following that kind of flowchart, the process of elimination and then the risk assessment, following the principles, once all of that is got through, it



does need to be a bespoke approach because a species in one area would be very different to a species in another area. I am not sure whether species to species is the correct way to differentiate and therefore determine the risk. I think it is far more nuanced than that.

Q305 Robbie Moore: Who would have a likely play then in determining the categorisation, for example, of how much a different species has in conflict with the advantages and disadvantages of their reintroduction? Which organisation, which body would be involved in that categorisation?

Trudy Harrison: Natural England. There already is an example of that because the beaver requires an extra set of checks. Yes, it is Natural England. Richard, have I covered that?

Richard Pullen: As we referred to earlier, the applicant needs to do the impact assessment and that could vary, as the Minister says, not just according to the species, but the location of where it is being put and the impact it has in that locality.

Trudy Harrison: And the number. If you are introducing a couple of beavers, that is entirely different to 20 beavers.

Q306 Chair: Do you think it might be helpful to the Committee if you could give us—or maybe Natural England or the taskforce—a list of animal, plant and insect species that are on the list of possible reintroductions? I think a lot of farmers might be quite keen. I know certainly on my farm we were very keen to make it a bit of a hedgehog sanctuary, but unfortunately the hedgehog society said because we have a lot of badger setts they wouldn't last five minutes because they would be killed. But there must be species that maybe we don't even know about where we would be keen to try to do that. I am a farmer myself, as is Julian.

Maybe as part of our report we could produce an exhaustive list of all the species that you think could be candidates—ones that have been introduced successfully and maybe even some indicators of what sort of topography, what sort of climate, what sort of land types would suit that. I suspect there are a lot of farmers up and down the country that would quite like to host a rare butterfly or a rare plant, even if they are not very keen on beavers.

Trudy Harrison: I asked exactly this question; I asked for a specific list. We don't have one. Do you want to expand on why we don't have a particular list, Richard?

Richard Pullen: It probably relates to some of the answers we gave earlier around the fact that is case by case, coming up from individual applicants. I think there is probably a role for, for example, the taskforce in terms of looking at what sort of species maybe offer the benefits without necessarily major risks, in generalities. It is quite difficult to do it without getting into case by case because it does vary, as we said, in terms of the impacts.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Chair: It would be great if we could maybe have a list.

Trudy Harrison: Yes, I agree. I am certainly happy to ask the taskforce for any emerging thinking, on the understanding that that isn't a DEFRA policy to necessarily reintroduce those species, but perhaps that that looks like what might be sensible.

Chair: We do spend far too much time talking about lynx and wolves and beavers when there are an awful lot of species that would be simple to introduce, certainly easier to control and not have impacts on your neighbours to the same extent.

Trudy Harrison: Certainly, yes.

Chair: Neil, a final question.

Q307 **Dr Neil Hudson:** Just to clarify on that, you are saying that potentially, if we could get something, it would be the taskforce that would do that rather than DEFRA?

Trudy Harrison: I think so.

Q308 **Dr Neil Hudson:** You have been asking for it, but your civil servants have not been able to provide it for you, so the taskforce would do it; is that what you are saying?

Trudy Harrison: Ultimately we have a couple of people in DEFRA that are in the reintroductions team, small but perfect.

Dr Neil Hudson: There are about 15 people on the taskforce, I think.

Trudy Harrison: Sixteen organisations, so many, many more people, and also with much more experience, perhaps lived experience and perhaps an enjoyment of the research that they have undertaken. I think we will get a much more wholesome view from the taskforce.

Q309 **Dr Neil Hudson:** If you are asking them to do that on your behalf and on behalf of the Committee, how long do you think it would take them to get something like that?

Trudy Harrison: What would be helpful to the Committee, I suspect, is the more sensible deadline.

Dr Neil Hudson: In terms of our timeline—

Chair: Yes, what is our timescale?

Q310 **Dr Neil Hudson:** How quickly would a list help us?

Chair: We are hoping to launch the report at the Yorkshire show. We would need it certainly in June, and include trees, because we are losing many of our natives. The elm has gone, the ash is under threat, oak and larch similarly have problems, so certainly trees.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q311 **Dr Neil Hudson:** I think it would be very helpful. I know one of your earlier answers, Minister, was that there isn't a hierarchy of species in terms of what you are thinking, but equally so, if you could ask the taskforce the question with this list that it is producing, "How seriously are people thinking about these certain types of animals or plants?" That would be helpful to you and very much to us, and also people in the wider world.

Trudy Harrison: I think that is entirely sensible, a kind of compare and contrast on species, both plant and animal, given what we know so far, and perhaps if any of those species are keystone species, if you like—if you take that brick out of the arch, the arch falls down, which the beaver is certainly in that category—to make that clear in the information that we provide. I am happy to commit to that.

Q312 **Dr Neil Hudson:** Sorry, I am digressing a bit, but are you confident in the taskforce, the spectrum of people you have in there? Do you have enough people in there that can address some of our concerns about disease risk and biosecurity? Are you confident in that and the capabilities of the taskforce?

Trudy Harrison: I don't think that is the taskforce. I think those systems are already in place across DEFRA.

Q313 **Dr Neil Hudson:** Surely the taskforce should be looking at some of the potential risks when it is giving advice to Ministers about species reintroduction though.

Trudy Harrison: I am sure it is a consideration, but ultimately we have world-class systems in this country to protect against disease, to ensure quarantine processes.

Dr Neil Hudson: I take your point, Minister, but equally so, some of the species that they are talking about, if these academics and groups could pass an opinion on, "Hang on, you shouldn't be even thinking about this because of X disease". Yes, you are talking about our control mechanisms here, but equally so, when people are talking about introducing some of these animals and plants, it would be useful to know that the taskforce is looking at, "These should be a non-starter because of X, Y, Z unintended consequence". That would be helpful, yes.

Trudy Harrison: Yes, certainly.

Q314 **Dr Neil Hudson:** Are you confident that the taskforce is adequately resourced and equipped? To give you an example, with the Trade and Agriculture Commission our Committee had serious concerns about how that was resourced in terms of the amount of work it had to do. This taskforce has a lot of work to do. It met for the first time in February; it has met twice. From what we are saying today, it has a lot of work to do. Are you confident it has the resources to do what it needs to do for you?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Trudy Harrison: The budget is moderate, £50,000, which pays for the chair and some of the organisation. Given that, as I keep stating, reintroductions are not a significant part of DEFRA's approach to the situation for nature—that is far more about creating habitat, protecting habitat and ELMS—I don't see a huge role for reintroductions going forwards. What I do want to make sure of, because in some cases it feels like we are righting the wrongs of the past, is that never again should we hear the words that a native species has been hunted to extinction.

Saying that, I absolutely think that hunting, shooting and fishing and the organisations such as BASC and GWCT play an incredibly important role in conservation and reducing the decline of nature. I think they are very, very important, those organisations in particular that I work closely with.

But when a species has been hunted to extinction or there have been other reasons for its decline or even extinction, it is understandable that passionate people with a purpose will want to do something about it. If they have the desire and the means and if they follow our processes, then I would hope we can enable that, but it isn't the biggest tool we have in our toolkit.

Dr Neil Hudson: Just a final question—

Chair: I think we are on the edge of the quorum, but yes.

Q315 **Dr Neil Hudson:** I will quickly ask the final question then. I think I might know the answer to this in terms of the risks and unintended consequences. Has DEFRA, your Department, made an assessment of the potential merits or otherwise of introducing non-native species, the concept of assisted colonisation, and is that something that is a bridge too far or is that something that again the taskforce would be looking at?

Trudy Harrison: I will let Richard come in, but I would just say that when we think about climate change and the need to have more resilient trees, for example, we are looking at species that have survived droughts in other parts of Europe in particular because it is a changing climate. We may need to look at more disease-resilient species in order to protect nature in this country. Richard, if you want to—

Q316 **Dr Neil Hudson:** Is this something you would consider for plants rather than animals?

Trudy Harrison: I am not aware of any non-native introductions.

Q317 **Dr Neil Hudson:** Are there any candidates that you are thinking about?

Richard Pullen: The answer is no, we haven't made an assessment on that, but again, the point about restoring and creating habitats, if you create bigger and better connected habitats, that will allow at least more mobile species to move in the light of climate change, but we haven't made an assessment specifically on assisted colonisation.

Dr Neil Hudson: Potentially a better path of travel would be using



HOUSE OF COMMONS

technologies like genetic breeding, the Precision Breeding Bill, which gives people the capability to make climate-resistant plants or whatever, so that might be a better course of action. Anyway, I think we are running out of time.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. I have talked to people who want to plant trees to sequester carbon and the eucalyptus is one that they were keen on, as it would be likely, with global warming, to be better here than it has been in the past.

Trudy Harrison: It is doing very well in my garden in Cumbria. My gunnii plant is doing extremely well, roaring away.

Dr Neil Hudson: People introduce gum trees all the time.

Chair: Minister, thank you very much indeed for your time and for the very useful evidence you have given. Mr Pullen, thank you as well for coming along. It has been a useful session, thank you.