

Environmental Audit Committee

Oral evidence: Environment in Focus, HC 1310

Wednesday 17 December 2025

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 17 December 2025.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Mr Toby Perkins (Chair); Julia Buckley; Jonathan Davies; Carla Denyer; Barry Gardiner; Sarah Gibson; Alison Griffiths; Manuela Perteghella; Martin Rhodes; Dr Roz Savage.

Questions 1 - 9

Witnesses

I: Sally Nex, Advocate for the Peat-free Partnership; Dr Chris Nichols, Head of Conservation Evidence & Outcomes, the Woodland Trust.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Written submission from The Peat-free Partnership \(EIF0063\)](#)
- [Written submission from Woodland Trust \(EIF0115\)](#)
- [Written submission from Oliver Ratcliffe \(EIF0194\)](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Sally Nex and Dr Chris Nichols.

Q1 Chair: Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to an Environmental Audit Committee meeting with quite a difference. Today's meeting is around our Environment in Focus programme. We have invited the sector and other interested parties to make recommendations about what a future Environmental Audit Committee review might look like. Almost 200 applications have come in, and we are extremely grateful to everybody who contributed.

A previous meeting of this Committee narrowed the recommendations down to the five pitches that we have in front of us today. This is what will happen. Each of the organisations making a pitch will have 10 minutes to make their pitch. They will then be subjected to almost exactly 10 minutes of questions on their pitch. We will go through the five applications in that order. At the end of that process, we will go to a private Committee meeting and members will make their case in support of the pitches that they most admired. Ultimately, the Committee will produce a report detailing what we have decided. That is how this unusual panel event will take place.

The first pitch we are going to hear is on the subject of ancient woodlands and peatlands. There were two applications that the Committee requested to be turned into one to raise, maybe, a greater breadth of issues. We will hear from Sally Nex, advocate for the Peat-free Partnership at Plantlife, and Dr Chris Nichols, Head of Conservation Evidence & Outcomes at the Woodland Trust.

I will hand over to you now, Dr Nichols and Ms Nex. You have 10 minutes to make your pitch.

Sally Nex: Thank you so much for inviting us here today. We are delighted to be given this opportunity. I am Sally Nex, advocate for the Peat Free Partnership. This is Chris Nichols, who is Head of Conservation Evidence & Outcomes for the Woodland Trust.

We are here to highlight the urgent need to protect the UK's most important irreplaceable habitats, including ancient woodland and peatland, at a time when the Government are largely failing to do so. We are asking the Committee to investigate whether the Government and their arm's-length bodies are taking the necessary steps to ensure adequate care of these vital nature-based carbon sinks and havens for biodiversity.

The Government's commitments to increase tree canopy and restore peatlands are seriously undermined if we simultaneously plunder or fail to look after the carbon stocks and habitats that we already have. It makes no sense, for example, to commit £85 million in public money, as the Government recently did in the revised Environmental Improvement Plan,



for restoring peatlands, while also allowing lowland peat bogs to be dug up wholesale for use in horticulture.

Dr Nichols: It also makes no sense to plant new trees and woodland while failing to take care of our precious ancient woodlands. In the face of conflicting pressures on land use, protecting irreplaceable habitats that deliver a host of benefits at the same time and in the same place on relatively small areas of land is necessary if we are to manage resources well into the future. Offsetting the destruction of irreplaceable habitats elsewhere is ecologically impossible, but restoring what is left, even when in poor condition, is possible, and doing so delivers significant benefits.

The proposed inquiry will demonstrate the gap between Government rhetoric and Government practice, through the lens of two of our most precious natural ecosystems. Its recommendations will inform how the Government can use nature-based solutions to deliver a triple win for growth, nature and net zero.

Sally Nex: Carbon-rich natural resources, when properly looked after, offer ecosystem services worth billions of pounds. The ONS has valued the potential savings from returning the UK's peatlands to a healthy condition at £109 billion in carbon reduction emissions alone. Our peatlands and peaty soils should be treated as a national asset, our frontline defence against climate change. Because of the depth of peat, usually 3 to 9 metres, peatlands are able to sequester huge amounts of carbon for the small land area they occupy. Peatlands also absorb excess rainwater, protecting local communities from flooding and helping the UK's resilience to climate change. They also improve water quality and they are biodiversity hotspots, providing important habitats for dozens of highly specialised and often endangered plant and animal species. These are not benefits we should be giving up lightly.

Dr Nichols: Similarly, ancient woodlands have existed for hundreds if not thousands of years, allowing unique plant, animal and fungal communities to develop. Today, ancient woodlands support more endangered species than any other terrestrial habitat. Not only are they vital reservoirs of biodiversity in a changing climate, but their structures also help us adapt to it. Trees sequester carbon, filter our air, and the stable, undisturbed soils of ancient woods reduce flooding and prevent erosion. Although ancient and long-established forests account for only 25% of woodland, they hold 36% of all woodland carbon. If existing ancient woods are adequately protected and restored, it is estimated that the carbon they hold will double to 150 million tonnes in the coming century. In addition, research suggests that official accounts may be underestimating the carbon of long-established woodlands by up to 80%. Both habitats make an outsized contribution to multiple government targets on a small percentage of the UK's land.

Sally Nex: Yet despite all these clear benefits, both peatlands and ancient woodlands are under threat as never before.

Dr Nichols: Ancient woodlands face a range of threats including development, invasive species and, crucially, historic planting of



HOUSE OF COMMONS

monocultures over those sites, also known as plantations or ancient woodlands or pores. The new Environmental Improvement Plan announced the development of a new target in 2026 to increase woodland management in a way that improves woodland condition, resilience and biodiversity. Threats to ancient woodland need to be urgently raised up the agenda to ensure that the development of this target adequately addresses them.

Approximately 40% of ancient woodlands are negatively impacted by timber plantations that were planted in the post-war period. Many will be harvested before 2030 and replanting those sites with conifers for timber could destroy their irreplaceable biodiversity value forever. It is perfectly legal to keep felling and replanting these sites until the ancient woodland plants and remnant features are lost forever, along with any potential for restoration. Landowners are therefore facing a choice between restoring their sites to their former glory or replanting with more conifers. But without Government support, replanting another timber crop is often the most economical option. Only 15% of ancient woodland in Great Britain is designated as a site of special scientific interest or other conservation designation. The remainder, including 14 of the 46 largest ancient woods in Great Britain, has no statutory protection at all. The Woodland Trust estimates that over 1,000 ancient woods are under direct threat from development across the UK and the Government's planning agenda now looks set to worsen what existing planning protections we have.

Sally Nex: Only about half of our deep peat and just one quarter of our peaty soils are currently under protections such as SSSI designation, leaving half of all deep peat and three quarters of peaty soils vulnerable. These unprotected peatlands are now gradually disappearing, along with their potential to help us combat climate change. Housing and infrastructure development, wind farms and agriculture are draining peatlands, destroying their ability to sequester carbon and offer flood protection to the very communities that are expanding on to them. Worst of all, deep peat is still being dug up out of the ground wholesale. The UK horticulture industry got through 760 cubic metres of peat in 2023. That is enough to fill 300 Olympic-sized swimming pools. Since peat only reforms at a rate of a millimetre a year—so that is one metre every 1,000 years, on any human timescale this is an irreplaceable resource. You cannot just recreate it somewhere else. Once it is gone, it is gone.

Over 80% of our peatlands are now damaged and degraded and this is often given as a reason for development. The argument goes, if it is already damaged, it does not really matter if we damage it a little bit more. But this is about valuing what is left and its ability still to help us combat climate change and the biodiversity crisis. It is damage limitation. Even the diminished amount of peat we have remaining has a value in carbon retention and climate resilience and we would like the EAC to investigate whether this is adequately reflected in Government decisions.

Dr Nichols: It is the primary function of the EAC to assess the roles Government Departments and public bodies are playing in contributing to climate targets and nature recovery. These bodies are falling short. In



2022, DEFRA pledged to get most damaged ancient woods on the path to recovery by 2030. By now, an area of privately owned ancient woodland roughly the size of Oxford should have been restored. Instead, the Government have reported delivering less than 1% of that, and time is running out. The Government cannot meet its legal target to halt and reverse nature loss without prioritising our most biodiverse habitats. Yet existing regulations elsewhere undermine this. For example, forestry regulations do not adequately protect our most precious habitats.

Sally Nex: The previous Government first pledged in 2022 to end peat sales by 2024, but they did not achieve this before the general election in 2024. The current Administration have now given a public commitment in the revised Environmental Improvement Plan that it will legislate, but without any indication of a timescale, saying they will act “when parliamentary time allows”. This is the exact same phrase used by their predecessors. This lack of clear direction means peat extraction is continuing so we are losing hundreds of thousands of cubic metres more peat with every year of inaction that passes.

It is also very bad for business. The horticulture industry has been left in limbo with a vague threat of legislation but without any firm timetable to work towards. It is perhaps not surprising then that the most recent figures for peat use in 2022-23 show the industry’s voluntary progress in reducing its own peat use has dramatically slowed and looks in danger of stalling altogether.

The failure to act decisively on ending peat sales has implications for both DEFRA, with primary responsibility for this policy and for peatland recovery, and DESNZ, with carbon savings pinned on a legislated end to peat sales in its recent carbon budget and growth delivery plan. The Department for Business and Trade might also consider the effect on business confidence in an industry contributing an estimated £38 billion to the UK’s economy.

Dr Nichols: There is a strong case for change. Protecting and restoring remaining ancient woodlands and peatlands can play a significant role in hitting the Environment Act’s targets on nature. For example, restoring paused sites, as I mentioned before, alone, a mere 10% of our total woodlands, could contribute almost 30% of the Government’s legal target to create and restore 500,000 hectares of wildlife-rich habitat by 2050. Restoration will maintain these habitats as stable carbon sinks and allow for additional carbon sequestration. Woodland restoration can also create more local jobs.

Chair: Thank you. We have reached the 10 minutes, so thank you very much for those excellent presentations. We will now head over to questions.

Our self-image is of us as “Dragons’ Den”. I have not quite decided which one I am—I am definitely not Michelle Mone.

It is now an opportunity for members to ask the panellists questions for a maximum of 10 minutes, although if we run out earlier, that is fine. We



HOUSE OF COMMONS

will start with Alison Griffiths, and then Manuela Perteghella.

- Q2 **Alison Griffiths:** Thank you, Chair. I am a Conservative member of the Committee, so I was very interested in what you had to say about the last Government, who did at least set a time target, and we all know that objectives need to have time integrated in them.

What was your analysis of why, apart from the fact that a general election came along, the previous Government failed to hit their specific target?

Sally Nex: A good question. I think that it was going very well for quite a while. Rebecca Powell, whom I happen to know personally, was very much in favour of this, and I understand that DEFRA also completely backed the policy. So, it is a matter of where the block was, and I think that there was a block further upstream.

Alison Griffiths: May I ask one supplementary, Chair?

Chair: Yes.

- Q3 **Alison Griffiths:** The second question that I was interested in also related to the phasing out of peat sales. What is the alternative, if you have one? I am speaking from a position of lack of knowledge on this. Is there a ready-to-go alternative to the use of peat for the horticulture industry?

Sally Nex: Absolutely. The RHS, funded by DEFRA, is currently undertaking a series of five-year trials. In those trials, they have been trialling with eight or nine wholesale nurseries—so big producers of plants—a number of different peat-free mixes to establish that peat-free can do as well as peat. There are lots of different blends of different substrates. I will not go into the details of all of that. But the fact is that across these commercial nurseries, they have been raising 145 million plants a year in peat-free, every single one of them of marketable quality. Some of them did better in peat-free than in peat-based, so there are now excellent peat alternatives. This is the other reason why it is so frustrating that we cannot get delivery on this policy.

- Q4 **Sarah Gibson:** Is there a massive cost difference between them all?

Sally Nex: There is a small cost difference. It has been estimated by the RHS to be around two pence per plant. So, when you are buying a plant at the garden centre, you will pay a couple of pence more.

Interestingly, the cost differential has disappeared for bagged retail compost. Because we are down to about 16% by volume in retail peat—so that is bagged compost that you buy—that is actually enough of a volume to mean that the economies of scale start to kick in. I went down to my local garden centre not so long ago and found only one line left of peat-based compost, £1 per bag more expensive than the peat-free. Thank you very much.

- Q5 **Manuela Perteghella:** I want to put on the record that I am a member of the APPG on woods and trees.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

My question is about best practice elsewhere. Can the UK learn from other countries about protecting, restoring, and managing peatlands and ancient woodlands? Do you have any examples that you can share with us today?

Dr Nichols: I will take that, as Sally Nex answered the previous question. Yes, absolutely.

In the context of our place in Europe, we have focused on woodland creation to try to almost catch up with Europe. We are a very nature-depleted and woodland-depleted country. We have also lost our connection to the woods in the sense of cultural use and wood products that are harvested in a sustainable way and with local communities, which I think is a lot more prevalent in countries across Europe.

We favour the larger-scale, high-throughput extraction, clear-fell model, which does nothing for the biodiversity in those woodlands. If you look to the continent there are practices such as continuous cover forestry, where you aim to always keep a canopy in place and selectively remove trees, which is definitely taking off in the UK, and it has been talked about for a long time, but there are always barriers in terms of return on investment, and logs at the head side where you want to maximise the throughput to a sawmill. That is about supply chains and also the downstream use of wood and we can learn from Europe, most definitely.

Q6 **Chair:** Thank you. Dr Nichols, you were highlighting—I think both of you highlighted this— a sense of perversity in Government having an approach around new sites without the same preservation for ancient woodlands. Is it your contention that the Government's policy is wrong or that they are not following the policy that they have articulated previously? Does that make sense?

Dr Nichols: There have been some fantastic policy commitments, but the follow-through is severely lacking. I mentioned in the presentation that less than 1% of those ancient woodlands have been restored, but it is so achievable. It is on the public forest estate. It is owned by our public bodies that should be prioritising conservation, but there seems to be no incentive to put it first.

Q7 **Barry Gardiner:** Can you quantify the amount of biodiversity that one finds in ancient woodlands and the different ways in which ancient woodlands can and should be managed? I am thinking of the work of Oliver Rackham and people who have spent years looking at this.

Dr Nichols: Yes, Oliver Rackham—the grandfather of ancient woodlands, and researching and categorising them. It is very challenging to quantify the amount of biodiversity in ancient woodlands because there are quite a lot of different variables there. But in both peatland and ancient woodland, it is the below-ground, which is hidden from view, that is so important often for the functioning of the ecosystem, the cycling of nutrients and support. The woods are facing an existential threat, and that does not allow for any kind of complacency.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

For best practice management in an Oliver Rackham sense, we are not talking about shutting the gate and walking away. They need to be actively managed by local communities so that there can be dynamic turnover and regeneration of plants to allow for diverse habitats and also to allow these woods to track climate change. They need the opportunity for survival of the fittest to take place so that they can grow and adapt over time and continue to support us. Currently they are in such a condition that that is just not possible.

Q8 Barry Gardiner: Could you maybe comment on the difference in biodiversity between a monoculture Sitka spruce forest plantation and an ancient woodland?

Dr Nichols: I was directly involved in some research that we published recently. It looked at the biodiversity associated with the most common conifer monoculture species, which is Sitka spruce. We found that around 700 species use Sitka spruce, and that is in contrast to previous research, on oak trees, commonly seen in our ancient woodlands, where there were 2,300 species. There is a clear differential in the value for biodiversity of the different species that should be present and are currently present in a lot of these ancient woodlands.

Chair: Alison Griffiths, did you want another go?

Alison Griffiths: I am fine, thank you.

Chair: Any final questions? No?

Alison Griffiths: If there really are no other questions, I do have one.

Chair: We have a minute and a half.

Q9 Alison Griffiths: In the last minute and a half, if I may go back to the ancient woodlands, what would be the first step that you would want to see the Government take to try and make a step change right now?

Dr Nichols: To enforce its own policy and to compel the public forest estate to restore the ancient woodland in its care, the duty of care that we are so sorely missing at the moment.

Chair: Dr Nichols, Ms Nex, thank you very much indeed. You have set a standard, and we will see how the others match up to it; an excellent first presentation. Thank you very much indeed for joining us.

Sally Nex: Thank you very much.