



House of Commons

Environment, Food and Rural
Affairs Committee

Species Reintroduction: Government response to the Committee's Fifth Report

**Fifth Special Report of Session
2022–23**

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The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and associated public bodies

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Fifth Special Report

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee published its Fifth Report of Session 2022–23, *Species Reintroduction* (HC 849), on 11 July 2023. The Government response was received on 17 October 2023 and is appended below.

Appendix: Government Response

Introduction

The Government thanks the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee for its report, “Species Reintroduction”.

As the committee recognises, species reintroduction has generated much interest. As part of our commitment to increasing biodiversity, we have supported the reintroduction of recently lost former native species when it has been appropriate to do so, like the large blue butterfly, red kite and pool frog. We have also supported the translocation of species including hen harriers. Reintroduction also applies to flora as well as fauna. The Government has looked to ensure best practice, improve standards and build consensus on matters related to reintroductions through publication of our ‘Reintroductions and other conservation translocations: code and guidance for England’.

However, the committee should note that the reintroduction of species is not a priority for the government. Our priority in achieving our ambitious targets on biodiversity is our focus on habitat restoration and creation, and improved connectivity of biodiversity corridors to tackle pressures on species including pollution, unsustainable use of resources and climate change, with targeted action to recover specific species.

Government environmental targets: the role of reintroductions

The Government should introduce clear interim species abundance targets and reporting mechanisms to record progress every two years towards species abundance goals outlined in the Environment Act. It should inform us of those targets by December 2024 (Paragraph 13)

The Environment Act 2021 required that the long-term targets will be supported by interim targets, of up to 5 years in duration. These set the trajectory towards long-term targets and allow for an ongoing assessment of whether government is on track to meet them. The interim targets were published in the Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) in January this year. When setting the interim targets, we considered a target to reduce the decline in species abundance by a specified percentage by 2028 using the same metric as the statutory species targets. However, it would be difficult to accurately assess the appropriate level to set such a target, based on the evidence and analysis provided within the biodiversity evidence pack published during consultation. The time taken for data collection and reporting makes reviews every 2 years impractical. We are currently reviewing available data across Defra and Arms Length Bodies (ALBs) to identify other short-term metrics that can help measure our progress towards meeting the targets.

Strategic Vision

The Government should produce a list of priority species for reintroduction as part of a long-term strategy on species reintroduction in tandem with the England Species Reintroductions Taskforce. This will allow stakeholders to plan applications ahead of time and have a more strategic, coordinated approach to projects to benefit nature recovery. This strategy should be published by January 2024. (Paragraph 19)

Using evidence from the England Species Reintroductions Taskforce and its Stakeholder Forum, the Government should agree on the plant and animal species it is willing and able to support the reintroduction of in England and bring this information together in a register. This register should be included in the Strategy and should be reviewed by the Taskforce every 12 months. This register should also contain details of the species the Government does not support the reintroduction of in England. The Strategy should include a long-term vision for each species the Government supports, and justification for the reasoning behind those it explicitly does not. (Paragraph 20)

We recommend that the register contained within the new Strategy should include species categorised according to the risks related to their reintroduction. Of those that it has not ruled out, the Government should categorise regularly requested species into low, medium and high risk and create differentiated channels and processes for the proportionate management of cases in each risk stream. (Paragraph 32)

The Government should create an online species reintroduction hub by June 2024, supported by the England Species Reintroductions Taskforce and Stakeholder Forum, for parties interested in the reintroduction of species. The hub should be a one-stop shop for good practice and collaboration and its advice should be aligned with a national reintroduction strategy. The hub should display the Government's species reintroduction register and clearly outline the licensing conditions and classification relating to each species. It should also directly connect landowners and managers interested in introducing species with groups able to support them in doing so. (Paragraph 37)

Given that reintroduction is not a priority for the government, we will not be producing a strategy or a list of priority species for reintroduction. Proposals for reintroductions, and the suitability of the species proposed and associated risks, are highly dependent on the specific circumstances in which they are made. For example, the existing species assemblage, environmental conditions and socio-economic circumstances will all be factors and significantly influence decisions as to whether it is appropriate to reintroduce a species in a particular location or locations.

We have set out best practice guidance in the government's Code for Reintroductions which has been published on gov.uk alongside information on applying for a licence as appropriate.

Urgent stakeholder engagement is required to build relationships with key individuals; these stakeholders should have an open invitation to join the Stakeholder Forum and be able to feed into Taskforce decisions through it. The Government should be clear when the Taskforce is expected to provide advice and the influence of that evidence. In cases where the Taskforce's recommendations are not followed, there should a clear explanation and rationale published by the Government so as to not undermine the Taskforce's credibility and scientific authority. The Government should publish a protocol with clear guidelines stating when the Taskforce will, and will not, be consulted on reintroduction decisions. (Paragraph 26)

A sign-up opportunity and terms of reference for the Stakeholder Forum should be publicised by October 2023 with the first meeting taking place before 2024. The Stakeholder Forum should inform the risk-based categorisation of species and be consulted before changes are made to classifications. (Paragraph 27)

The Reintroductions Taskforce was established in 2021 and a chair appointed in September 2022. It intends to meet six times in 2023. Its terms of reference agreed in 2022 have been published online in a dedicated website

<https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/england-species-reintroductions-taskforce>

The taskforce does not play a formal role in licensing decisions. The taskforce is able to use the knowledge and expertise of its members to identify where advice related to translocations may be needed. We consider the role of the taskforce is to provide technical advice on approaches taken and cross-cutting matters regarding translocations, as set out in their Terms of Reference. For example, the group are looking at ways to improve the understanding and use of the Reintroductions Code by stakeholders to promote best practice, as well as developing understanding of the impacts of predator species reintroductions.

With regard to engagement of stakeholders by the taskforce, as an observer member, Defra is aware of the taskforce's ambition to improve engagement. The Chair has already been in contact with a number of stakeholders who have made representations. The group has further plans to hold meetings with key groups of stakeholders, including landowners and managers, this autumn. The aim is to understand how further wider engagement can be shaped to be most beneficial to those interested and to make best use of any communication or events, such as a forum.

We recommend that the Government should be clear how the classification of species determines the requirements for stakeholder consultation and involvement of the Department. We recommend that all species categorised as high-risk reintroductions should be subject to a national, independent impact assessment assessing their potential benefits and risks, including to food production, infrastructure and disease implications. Local communities and land managers should be consulted in which species are translocated, and how and where this happens. (Paragraph 33)

Assessing applications for release licences on a case-by-case basis allows for the nature of the species, along with the circumstances and risks of release, to be comprehensively considered in response to a specific proposal. Further, an assumption of a species being of low risk without sufficient evidence may undermine efforts to ensure best practice

and result in unintended consequences or impacts being found at a later date. Individual assessment allows for the impacts of a specific proposal to be understood, and requirements for consultation and consideration of impacts to be applied proportionality.

Promoting good practice

The Government should revise the species reintroduction code and guidance by January 2024 and reissue it alongside the new Strategy. The revised code and guidance should be available via the species reintroduction hub when it is launched. (Paragraph 46)

The government's 'Reintroductions and other conservation translocations: code and guidance for England' is based on international best practice guidance, and was first published in 2021. We do not consider the need to revise it at this time.

Management plans and rapid responses

The Government should implement localised control and management systems by forming and funding a network of rapid response consultants by 2026. The rapid response consultants should be members of the local community and be empowered to make prompt decisions on the remedial action to be taken where problems caused by reintroduced species are identified. The framework for creating these networks should be included in the strategy called for above. (Paragraph 54)

Those affected by the reintroduction of species, including farmers and land managers, must have access to sufficient support and funding to prevent and deal with potential negative impacts. Budgetary provision should be made for this as part of the Government's reintroduction strategy. The framework for this provision should be included in the strategy outlined above. (Paragraph 55)

We would expect any release proposal in England to demonstrate how it will ensure appropriate management through the provision of staff or funding, and engagement. We also see management groups and local stakeholder involvement as a key part of successful reintroductions. That is why we have encouraged the establishment of management groups where a species, such as beaver, has a significant interaction with land managers. These management groups provide the strategic and coordinated support required for communities to live alongside the species, maximising the benefits they can bring, and enabling targeted mitigation work where conflicts occur.

With regard to funding, the government's focus remains on incentivising delivery of wider environmental benefits through our environment land management schemes. Actions that deliver wider biodiversity benefits, such as buffer zones along watercourses and provision of space for nature, can play a role in helping to manage the impacts of reintroduced species. Again, where it is clear that a proposal to reintroduce a species will impact upon land managers we would expect an applicant to provide sufficient funding to manage these impacts appropriately.

If a reintroduced species is to be given protected status (as in the case of beavers), a risk assessment and management plan should be in place in advance of the protected status being granted. The protected status of beavers should be reviewed by the England Species Reintroductions Taskforce in consultation with the Stakeholder Forum. (Paragraph 56)

The government's approach to the management of beaver was informed by a programme of work over five years, including a trial to investigate the impacts of wild living beavers, and a public consultation on our approach to management. In this consultation the government outlined proposals for a management hierarchy and intention to protect the species. Natural England engaged with key stakeholder groups on this management hierarchy. Ahead of beaver protection being introduced, the Government published management and licensing guidance for the species. This included a management hierarchy outlining what actions land managers can undertake with and without a licence, and the licenses available. Given beavers were given protected status last October, it is too soon to review this. As such, it would not be appropriate for the taskforce, which has no formal role in decisions of this nature, to undertake a review of the protected status of beaver.