

Recent green infrastructure policy changes and announcements in England

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Introduction

The benefits that green infrastructure can provide are finally being recognised by decision makers and being translated into policy changes on the ground. The recent flurry of policy changes and announcements is very welcome after years of slow progress and inaction, but it has been difficult to keep on top of all the announcements and their timescales, and to understand how this will result in improvements on the ground.

This document aims to briefly summarise the recent policy announcements relating to green infrastructure in England and explain what these will mean in practice for green infrastructure practitioners.

Most environmental policy in the UK has been devolved to the separate nations. However, the [legal commitment to reach net zero carbon emissions by 2050](#), which is driving considerable interest in green infrastructure, is a UK-wide target, introduced through a 2019 amendment to the [Climate Change Act](#) (2008).

In 2018 the Government set out a series of goals for improving the environment including the publication of green infrastructure policy by publishing its 25 Year Environment Plan. Since then, the Government has made further commitments like a [‘10 Point Plan for a green Industrial Revolution’](#)¹ and another [‘to protect 30% of UK land in boost for biodiversity’](#) which support the protection and restoration of our natural environment. In November 2021, the Environment Act was passed, which will set new legally binding environment targets, following many of the goals set out in the 25 Year Environment Plan.

National policies

A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment

The [25 Year Environment Plan](#) sets out the Government’s goals for improving the environment. The Plan sets ten targets, four of which will have a direct impact on the management of green infrastructure. It aims to deliver cleaner air and water in our cities and rural landscapes, protect threatened species and provide richer wildlife habitats, and calls for an approach to agriculture, forestry, land use and fishing that puts the environment first.

¹ Point 9 focusses on Green Infrastructure: *Nature: Protecting and restoring our natural environment, planting 30,000 hectares of trees every year, whilst creating and retaining thousands of jobs.*

Key proposals and outputs for green infrastructure

- Establishing a cross-government project, led by Natural England, that reviews and updates existing standards for green infrastructure by summer 2019 (see [Green Infrastructure Standards Framework](#) below).
- Planting one million trees in England's towns and cities by 2022.
- Working with stakeholders to develop and implement a manual on procurement and maintenance practices for urban trees.
- Strengthening requirements in national planning policy on biodiversity net gain.
- Working with land managers and others to consider the role of a new environmental land management scheme that encourages broad participation and secures environmental improvements.
- Investigating how to roll out a Nature Recovery Network which will provide an additional 500,000 hectares of wildlife habitat building on other plans for landscape-scale recovery for peatland, woodlands and natural flood management (see [Nature Recovery Green Paper](#) below).

Environment Act

The [Environment Act](#) introduces into law several of the commitments made in the 25 Year Environment Plan. Changes will be driven by new legally binding environmental targets, and enforced by a the independent [Office for Environmental Protection](#) (OEP) which will hold government and public bodies to account and will oversee a cycle of environmental monitoring. It sets clear statutory targets for the recovery of the natural world in four key areas: air quality, biodiversity, water, waste, including to reverse the decline in species abundance by the end of 2030.

Key proposals and outputs for green infrastructure

Interventions to protect nature and increase biodiversity, including:

- Biodiversity gain in planning: the introduction of a new requirement on developers to ensure an increase in biodiversity on development sites. This has been extended to include Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project developments and the marine environment (see [Biodiversity Net Gain](#) below).
- Local Nature Recovery Strategies: an England-wide system of spatial strategies that will establish priorities and map proposals for specific actions to drive nature's recovery and provide wider environmental benefits to support a Nature Recovery Network (see [Local Nature Recovery Strategies](#) below).
- Species Conservation and Protected Site Strategies: conservation strategies for species, protected sites and wildlife which will be prepared and published by Natural England in due course to deliver better outcomes for nature.
- Tree felling and planting: places duty upon Local Highway Authorities to consult on street tree felling, increasing fines for illegal felling.
- Use of forest risk commodities in commercial activity: requires regulated businesses to establish a system of due diligence for each regulated commodity used in their supply chain, requires regulated businesses to report on their due diligence, introduces a due diligence enforcement system.

- Conservation covenants: an agreement between a landowner and a responsible body for a conservation purpose which can be used to secure benefits delivered by biodiversity net gain and other measures for the long term.
- Measures to tackle illegal deforestation across the world, including making it illegal for UK businesses to use resources that have not been produced in line with local forest protection laws.

Policies, frameworks and strategies

Further building on the 25 Year Environment Plan and the Environment Bill, the government has published a series of policies, frameworks and strategies on managing, protecting and restoring green infrastructure to reach the targets set out. The most relevant ones for green infrastructure practitioners are outlined below.

Nature for people, climate and wildlife

This paper sets out a vision to protect precious habitats and species on land. It was published as an outcome resulting from the 25 Year Environment Plan. It included the [England Trees Action Plan 2021 - 2024](#) and the [England Peat Action Plan](#). It also made announcements on [species reintroductions](#) and [amendments to the Environment Bill](#) including an additionally legally binding target for species abundance for 2030.

The England Trees Action Plan 2021 - 2024

The [England Trees Action Plan](#) sets out the government's long-term vision for the treescape it wants to see in England by 2050 and beyond. The plan provides a strategic framework for implementing the Nature for Climate Fund and outlines over 80 policy actions the government is taking over this Parliament to help deliver this vision. It aims to at least treble woodland creation rates by the end of this Parliament, reflecting England's contribution to meeting the UK's overall target of planting 30,000 hectares per year by the end of this Parliament, aiming to increase woodland cover in England by 12% by 2050.

England Peat Action Plan

The [England Peat Action Plan](#) sets out the government's long-term vision for the management, protection and restoration of peatlands, so that they provide a wide range of benefits to wildlife, people and the planet, including meeting Net Zero contributions.

Guidance and tools to deliver green infrastructure

National Framework of Green Infrastructure Standards

Natural England's [National Framework of Green Infrastructure Standards](#) will be core in the long-term delivery of GI. The Framework aims to green our towns and cities for health and wellbeing, nature, climate resilience and prosperity, in particular for disadvantaged urban populations. It will be composed of principles and provides tools for setting standards, mapping GI, developing design guides etc.

The Framework will support local authorities and other stakeholders to take a strategic approach to green infrastructure, it provides advice both for existing public spaces and

new housing developments. It will be voluntary and local authorities will be able to select a series of principles to set their vision.

Nature Recovery Network

The [Nature Recovery Networks](#) is a partnership set up by Defra and Natural England to set legislation and funding for nature recovery. It is a major commitment in the 25 Year Environment Plan. The Local Nature Recovery Strategies, Biodiversity Net Gain, Conservation Covenants and Environmental Land Management scheme will help lay the foundation for the national Nature Recovery Network.

The actions and outcomes of the NRN are set out in [the Natural England action plan 2022 to 2023](#) which outlines how to implement new global targets domestically and meet the 25 Year Environment Plan goals for nature.

Local Nature Recovery Strategies

The introduction of [Local Nature Recovery Strategies](#) is a flagship measure of the government's Environment Bill. They are an England-wide system of spatial strategies that will establish priorities and map proposals for specific actions to drive nature's recovery and provide wider environmental benefits to help drive more coordinated, practical action. This new system of spatial strategies will build the national Natural Recovery Network.

The area covered by each Local Nature Recovery Strategy will be set by the Defra Secretary of State, who will also appoint a responsible authority for each to lead its preparation. Pilots ran from August 2020 to May 2021 to better understand how to prepare a Local Nature Recovery Strategy and what it might look like.

Local Nature Recovery Strategies are also tied to funding. For more information about funding, see [here](#).

Biodiversity Net Gain

[Biodiversity Net Gain](#) policy will require developers in England to create an increase in biodiversity of at least 10%, either on the site being developed or, if that is impossible, elsewhere. The aims are to ensure that the loss of biodiversity through development is halted and that ecological networks are restored. The policy is being introduced through the Environment Bill and will become a legal requirement from the end of 2023. Development sites' biodiversity contribution will have to be assessed before work begins in order to provide a baseline measure – the third iteration of a government-developed 'biodiversity metric' was launched in July 2021.

Environmental Land Management scheme

The [Environmental Land Management Scheme](#) (ELMS) sets out the extension to Countryside Stewardship and Environmental Stewardship, new Countryside Stewardship agreements, the Environmental Land Management National Pilot and core elements of our Sustainable Farming Incentive. ELMS will also:

- Help deliver the benefits of England's Peat Strategy by paying for sustainable peatland management and restoration.

- Play a role in supporting the “30 by 30” target, to protect 30% of England’s land for biodiversity by 2030, through habitat creation and restoration, or securing long-term management and protection for wildlife-rich habitats.