

Restore nature

The pandemic has shone a light on the deep interconnections between our lives and that of the natural world. It has made clear the importance of restoring and renewing nature and our green spaces. We must prioritise the protection and repair of nature and the green infrastructure needed to keep people healthy and our economy thriving.

Challenges and risks in the recovery

In the aftermath of the pandemic, there may be pressure to relax environmental protections to help industries get going again. Similarly, as new global trade deals are decided on, environmental standards may be undercut to reach an agreement. However, environmental regulations [have been shown](#) to boost economic growth by encouraging innovation from businesses and they also have been shown to have little effect on global competitiveness. The benefits of environmental regulations, such as the avoided health costs of pollution, [vastly outweigh](#) costs to business.

Even if protections were removed for a short period of time in recovery, the damage that could be done to the environment - to soil, water, wildlife, green spaces and important habitats - could take decades to recover, and much of it could be irreversible. Rolling back environmental protections now would be short sighted and damaging to the economy in the context of the deepening nature and climate crises.

Opportunities in the recovery

- **Protect the environment.** Provisions in the Environment Bill and new trade agreements must be robust enough to position the UK as a world leader on the environment, as the government has promised in its [25 year environment plan](#).
- **Invest in nature.** Expanding private and public investment in nature programmes will not only support increased UK resilience, through climate mitigation and adaptation, but also contribute to the improved mental and physical health of UK citizens.
- **Develop a healthy food system.** A food system that works in harmony with nature, including rewarding farmers for the public goods they provide, such as healthy soil,

boosting beneficial insects, storing carbon and flood resilience, will ensure food supplies long term, restore biodiversity and protect against the impacts of climate change.

- **Widen access to green spaces.** Providing communities across the UK with high quality green spaces, especially in deprived urban areas, will improve mental and physical health, reduce air pollution and help to mitigate against the effects of extreme weather events.

Investment and policy to restore nature

Deliver gold standard legislation

There is a risk, in trying to reboot the economy after the pandemic, that environmental regulations will be rolled back: but reducing environmental protections would only increase the UK's vulnerability to the climate and ecological crises in the long term and create further uncertainty for businesses and farmers.

The government should ensure the swift return to parliament of the Environment Bill and strengthen it to ensure it creates a world leading environmental watchdog, operationally ready from 1 January 2021, and gold standard legislation to drive nature's recovery. This should [include](#) a stronger framework within the bill to set ambitious targets that are science-led and enforceable, based on independent advice and engagement with stakeholders and the public.

The government should also take this opportunity to tackle the UK's global environment footprint by including mandatory due diligence within the bill, as recommended by the [Global Resource Initiative Taskforce](#).

Raise investments in the environmental services

Effective management and restoration of forests, peat, wetlands, rivers and grasslands can play a part in making the UK resilient to extreme weather events like heatwaves, storms and floods. This natural infrastructure can also help to filter out damaging pollution of air, water and soils.

The UK government can raise some of the investment it needs from private finance if it guarantees a level of demand for the ecosystem services described above. One way to mobilise that private investment is through [Natural Infrastructure Schemes](#). Through these, landowners could be rewarded for activities which reduce flood risk, improve water quality and sequester carbon, like planting trees, creating wetland habitats and slowing the flow of water. This would be paid for by those who benefit from those services, like water companies, local infrastructure providers or companies looking to offset the impacts of their business activities.

Alongside government funded schemes, private investment could help to deliver 42,000 hectares of new woodland each year - this is the area of new forest that [our analysis](#) shows is needed to meet the government's fourth and fifth carbon budgets - and other actions required to meet climate targets, like extensive peatland restoration. However, early schemes are likely to need some level of government funding, such as match funding private investment to reduce investment risk, and supportive policy to create local and national demand for the purchase of environmental benefits, like flood mitigation or carbon sequestration.

The government should also support the formation of new markets by introducing formal accreditation of independent brokers of the services required. For example, we propose that a [new office for carbon removal](#) should be created to manage the growth of UK carbon removal capacity and put in place the policies, rules and frameworks needed to regulate and guarantee the quality of carbon offsets used.

Speed up development of a transformative Environmental Land Management system

The Agriculture Bill sets up an essential framework for investment in public money for public goods and futureproofing the farming sector by investing in the natural resources which underpin it. Farmers and land managers now need greater certainty about what the new Environmental Land Management scheme will look like, to enable them to start planning their role in providing new green services. The new scheme needs to represent a clear break with the schemes and approaches of the past, to deliver the transformative environmental improvement envisaged in the government's 25 year environment plan. A long term commitment to provide enough funding to achieve environmental ambitions and ensure farmers are properly rewarded will be an important to making the reform of the agricultural system a success.

The development, funding and implementation of the Environmental Land Management Scheme should be part of a green recovery package, supporting the agriculture sector to play a vital role in enhancing the environment and boosting the economy.

Create nature corridors

The UK's green spaces have become increasingly important throughout the lockdown but, even before this, it was estimated they provided health and wellbeing benefits worth over [£34 billion a year](#) in the UK. However, access is not shared equitably: 2.69 million people do not live within a ten minute walk of a green space, and this could get worse as it is projected that green spaces are likely to be reduced by [7.6 per cent](#) per person over the next two decades. There is also [evidence](#) that the most deprived communities have much poorer access to green spaces, contributing to worse long term health outcomes.

The government should invest in urban green space, creating new shared spaces, increasing the number of street trees and maintaining high quality existing nature reserves and parks in urban areas. This could build on the experience of developing '[pocket parks](#)', where communities lead the greening of their neighborhoods.

Don't undermine environmental protections in trade agreements

New trade relationships could undermine environmental conditions and protections, both here in the UK and abroad. If high environmental standards are not upheld, trade agreements can drive a race to the bottom and contribute to an unacceptable global environmental footprint as well as lower standards at home, putting the environment, animal welfare and people's health and safety at risk. Instead, trade policy should support effective regulation that makes the UK more resilient. It should be compatible with the action that is needed to address the climate and nature crises.

This is one of five briefings supporting our publication [Blueprint for a resilient economy](#)

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