

Greener, better, faster

Countryside solutions to
the climate emergency and
for a green recovery

The challenges we face

As councils and countries declare a climate emergency, the impact is already clear in our daily lives. The seasons are on the move, crops grown for generations fail and some species hover on the brink of extinction. Our countryside is changing – and we need to make sure it does so in a way that helps mitigate the impacts of the climate emergency and creates a countryside that we can all cherish.

But this is not the only crisis we face. Ecosystems are facing collapse and the biodiversity of our countryside is declining unabated. The coronavirus pandemic is the biggest public health crisis we've faced for generations, while the resulting lockdown and social distancing measures look to be the cause of an economic crisis far greater than that of the financial system's collapse in 2007-2008.

The government will now start making choices about how to support our society in its recovery from the coronavirus pandemic. Tackling the climate emergency, restoring nature, helping the economy recover and building resilience within our systems to prepare against future shocks should be inseparable.

The transformational change needed across society to reach net-zero emissions will touch every sector and every community. The places we live and the ways that we travel around, our livelihoods, the food we eat, and the countryside itself – the landscapes, habitats and wildlife living within it – are all going to change.


'Greener, better, faster' sets out how the countryside itself can provide many of the solutions to tackling climate breakdown, while supporting rural communities and economies to thrive.

Thriving landscapes

We need to maximise our landscapes' ability to capture carbon through natural processes. This should be done in ways that complement and enhance their unique character, respect nature and support sustainable local economies.

Policy recommendations to the government

- Invest in the restoration and planting of England's hedgerows, to achieve at least a 40% increase in their length by 2050.
- Target efforts to make the diverse range of landscapes in England more resilient to the climate emergency, in a way that reinforces landscape character.
- Empower people to get involved in making their local areas more resilient to climate change through the creation and funding of training and event programmes.



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Food and farming

Land should be valued in a way that respects the multiple jobs it can do – including and beyond producing food. Policies must support farming that stores carbon, puts back habitats for wildlife, provides fresh air and clean water, and looks after our precious landscapes.

Policy recommendations to the government

- Introduce an action plan for the land use sector to rapidly re-wet and restore peatland, expand woodland and agroforestry, drive uptake of agroecological practices to boost soil health and drive down emissions from inefficient use of synthetic nutrients.
- Commit to implementing an ambitious national food strategy to alter food demand to support improved health and sustainable low carbon land use.
- Urgently resource and commission a comprehensive national evidence base of land capability including properties of soils, land and other natural assets.

Planning and building

We need development to meet local needs, while contributing to efforts to mitigate and adapt to the climate emergency. Sustainable development needs to be redefined to focus on living within environmental limits and the importance of addressing the climate emergency.

Policy recommendations to the government

- Ensure that all planning decision makers, including local authorities and the Planning Inspectorate, are held to account regarding compliance with the climate change duty.
- Optimise the recycling of land that's already been used for buildings by adopting a truly 'brownfield first' policy.
- Radically tighten up building regulations to ensure that new buildings meet zero carbon standards. Existing buildings should also meet zero carbon standards in terms of heat and space.

Transport

We need a transport system that has healthy active travel such as walking and cycling at its heart, and ensures that everyone has easy access to reliable, convenient, affordable and comfortable public transport, whatever their level of personal mobility.

Policy recommendations to the government

- Introduce a legally binding national carbon budget and reduction pathway to 2045 for the transport sector. Projects that do not contribute towards it should not go ahead.
- Follow a clear hierarchy for all future transport investment, with money to be spent first on active travel options such as footpaths and cycle lanes, then provision of public transport, and lastly car travel.
- Create a ringfenced rural transport fund to support public transport services for rural communities that need to be better connected.

Energy

We need to transition to a decentralised, zero-carbon energy system that empowers and benefits local communities and is delivered in harmony with our natural environment and landscapes. Local authorities, local people, and more democratically engaged bodies must be empowered to positively shape their energy futures.

Policy recommendations to the government

- Immediately disincentivise all exploration and development for coal, oil and gas, and apply a strict energy hierarchy to future supply, prioritising demand reduction and energy efficiency and then renewables.
- Invest in a new generation of renewables, done in a way that benefits the rural economy; is supported by local communities; benefits wildlife; and minimises impacts on landscape, tranquillity and cultural heritage.
- Empower local communities to shape their energy future, both financially and through the introduction of participative approaches to planning for rural energy schemes.