

Briefing: second reading of the Environmental Targets (Public Authorities) Bill



17 October 2024

Legislation and
Governance Unit

Introduction

The [Environmental Targets \(Public Authorities\) Bill](#) is a very timely vehicle to discuss how to bolster the role of public authorities in contributing to the delivery of legally binding nature and climate targets.

The government's approach on this to date has been fragmented and piecemeal. In the last Parliament, it agreed to amend a small number of bills to equip a handful of public authorities with new duties, but this was done by exception.

For example, the founding legislation for the UK Infrastructure Bank (earmarked to become the National Wealth Fund) was [amended](#) to bring nature-based solutions within the scope of the Bank's activities, while many other opportunities to future proof or update legislation affecting public authorities were not taken up.

We strongly support the policy intent of the bill to ensure that all relevant decisions made by public bodies contribute towards achieving targets set under the flagship [Climate Change Act 2008](#) and [Environment Act 2021](#).

Why the bill is needed

The new Defra Secretary of State [recently issued](#) a rallying cry for action across government, the public and business sectors and civil society:

"I recognise that we face a crisis – nature is dying, our rivers are polluted, and urgent action is paramount. But this decline is reversible and with the right approach I am confident we will change course. This approach involves collaboration and working in partnership".

Other Cabinet ministers have made similar commitments, with the Foreign Secretary [pledging](#) that "action on the climate and nature crisis will be central to all that the Foreign Office does".

These commitments are very welcome, but need to be translated into tangible action, including by the many delivery bodies established by the government to implement its policy goals, as well as by other public sector actors.

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The Office for Environmental Protection has [found](#) that government progress on improving the environment is largely off track. It has called on the government to speed up and scale up its efforts.

Expert reports on the state of the UK's environment present stark findings. For example, the 2023 [State of Nature report](#) found that one in six (16 per cent) of the over ten thousand species studied in Great Britain are at risk of becoming extinct. Natural England's State of Natural Capital [Report](#) published in October 2024 calls for action across all sectors.

With just over five years remaining for the UK to meet its legally binding targets of halting the decline of wildlife and ensuring that 30 per cent of land and sea are effectively protected for nature, urgent action is needed to turn around repeated environmental under-delivery.

The delivery of environmental targets sits within the broader context set by the government's [missions](#), which include economic growth. As the Chair of Natural England has [said](#), the benefits provided by nature make it vital to national prosperity. Meanwhile, the Foreign Secretary has [reminded](#) us that "...nothing could be more central to the UK's national interest than delivering global progress on arresting rising temperatures."

Tackling these interconnected crises at pace will need a collaborative approach across sectors, as the government has called for. But this must be fixed in law, so that public authorities understand their role and are required to contribute, rather than this being viewed as optional.

Enshrining a public authority duty in law would also ensure that local authorities were properly resourced to play their full part, as the duty would be funded under the new burdens assessment.

We note that the bill would apply to over 40 agencies and government departments —including Ofwat, The Forestry Commission, and National Park Authorities. All of these bodies will play a pivotal role in tackling environmental decline and recovery, including to improve water quality, restore degraded habitats and plan nature friendly developments.

Providing public authorities with a clear purpose and duty to help save nature and mitigate and adapt to climate change will ensure that economic growth goes hand-in-hand with environmental recovery, as the government has [recognised](#) is the best path to progress.

It would also help to address the backseat role which nature has historically played in many public decisions and align the functions of public authorities with the government's environmental goals, updating what is in many cases decades old legislation, written before the scale of the environmental challenge was known so clearly.

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