# Critics warn UK’s nature levy in planning bill could licence habitat destruction



The newly introduced section of the UK Planning and Infrastructure Bill proposes a contentious "nature levy," whereby developers would pay Natural England for any environmental damage caused during development projects. This approach has attracted significant criticism from economists, environmental experts, and local campaign groups, who argue that it may effectively permit the destruction of natural habitats in exchange for financial payments, potentially undermining environmental protections and adding complexity to the planning process.

A letter expressing concern about the bill has been signed by over 40 prominent individuals including leading economists, former government advisers, and nature specialists. Among the signatories are noted figures such as Dr Caroline Lucas, former leader of the Green Party; Professor Sir Partha Dasgupta, emeritus professor of economics at the University of Cambridge and author of the influential 2021 government report on the economics of biodiversity; and Professor David Hill, who previously chaired Natural England.

The Planning Oxfordshire’s Environment and Transport Sustainably (POETS) group, comprising professionals and academics with expertise in planning, environment, and transport, has urged Oxfordshire Members of Parliament to oppose the bill. Chris Cousins, a spokesperson for POETS, highlighted the warnings from Sir Partha Dasgupta, stating to The Oxford Times: “Dasgupta ... has warned that the way the bill is currently drafted would allow developers to bypass environmental safeguards and 'trash nature'.” Cousins further emphasised that this would not only be detrimental to nature but also economically harmful, noting that nature is a crucial asset underpinning both the economy and wellbeing.

Councillor Liam Walker, who serves on West Oxfordshire District Council and Oxfordshire County Council, voiced deep concern about how the «nature levy» might impact local green spaces. He said: “The proposed 'nature levy' risks giving the green light for developers to simply pay to damage or destroy habitats that should be protected.” Walker stressed the local value placed on countryside preservation and warned against measures that could erode those principles, calling instead for strengthened environmental protections and development reforms that deliver genuine sustainability.

The open letter to MPs critiques the proposal's assertions that the levy will simplify planning, accelerate housing delivery, and improve natural habitats through an overall improvement test. It describes the proposal as a “blunt instrument” that permits companies to “buy out” legal responsibilities to nature, dismantling longstanding environmental safeguards. The letter also raises concerns about the potential conflict of interest inherent in Natural England both writing conservation plans and relying financially on levy income for enforcement.

Supporting voices include Estelle Bailey, CEO of the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust, who criticised the government’s framing of the environment as a barrier to growth and highlighted the economic opportunities offered by green investment. “Nature and the economy are two sides of the same coin,” Bailey said, cautioning that failing to recognise this threatens future generations’ inheritance. Professor Dame E.J. Milner-Gulland of the University of Oxford, who leads the Interdisciplinary Centre for Conservation Science, echoed this viewpoint, pointing out that the bill’s vague guidance and permissive measures are “a licence to trash” nature and contradict scientific evidence and past progress. She emphasised that nature underpins prosperity rather than obstructing it.

The bill comes amid heightened local concerns about threats to Green Belt land in Oxfordshire, particularly regarding plans for new housing developments on the 'Kidlington gap'—an area that separates Oxford from neighbouring villages and which campaigners fear may be lost. Further worries have also been raised about housing expansion in other areas including Freeland and North Leigh.

Councillor Walker is currently a candidate in the Oxfordshire County Council local elections for the Hanborough and Hailey division, standing against candidates from Reform UK, the Green Party, Liberal Democrats, and Labour.

The Oxford Times is reporting that the debate over the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, especially its nature levy proposal, represents a significant moment in UK environmental and planning policy, highlighting tensions between development aims and nature conservation objectives.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.ft.com/content/7a971bac-981d-447d-853e-d215f183594d> - This article discusses concerns that the UK Planning and Infrastructure Bill's 'nature restoration fund' could undermine ecological protections and delay habitat restoration, potentially causing local extinctions and hindering the UK's goal of protecting 30% of its land and sea by 2030.
2. <https://cieem.net/cieem-responds-to-planning-and-infrastructure-bill/> - The Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM) criticizes the bill, stating it could cause unnecessary and irreparable ecological harm while imposing additional costs, uncertainty, and delays on developers due to the uncertainty around the proposed Environmental Delivery Plans (EDPs).
3. <https://www.local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-responses/planning-and-infrastructure-bill-second-reading-house-commons> - The Local Government Association (LGA) expresses concerns that the bill places new complex responsibilities on Natural England, potentially leading to conflicts of interest and requiring additional resources and support to effectively implement the proposed measures.
4. <https://www.politicshome.com/news/article/labour-mp-warns-planning-reforms-could-overwhelm-natural-england> - Labour MP Mike Sobel warns that the proposed planning reforms could overwhelm Natural England, which may struggle to oversee the new 'nature restoration fund' due to budgetary pressures and cuts, potentially leading to legal challenges from developers over the fees imposed.
5. <https://www.independent.co.uk/climate-change/news/england-research-government-keir-starmer-friends-of-the-earth-b2663692.html> - Environmental groups call for nature-friendly planning reforms to support local authorities in meeting UK nature recovery targets by 2030, emphasizing the need for adequate resources and support from Westminster to protect natural spaces amid development pressures.
6. <https://www.ft.com/content/c4cedc55-f654-4abf-8f1f-5231b3abef20> - This article highlights local resistance to new electricity infrastructure projects, including wind farms, due to concerns over ecological impact, local tourism, and the proposed large substations and converter stations, reflecting tensions between development and environmental protection.
7. <https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/25127364.oxfordshire-group-call-planning-bill-disastrous-nature/?ref=rss> - Please view link - unable to able to access data