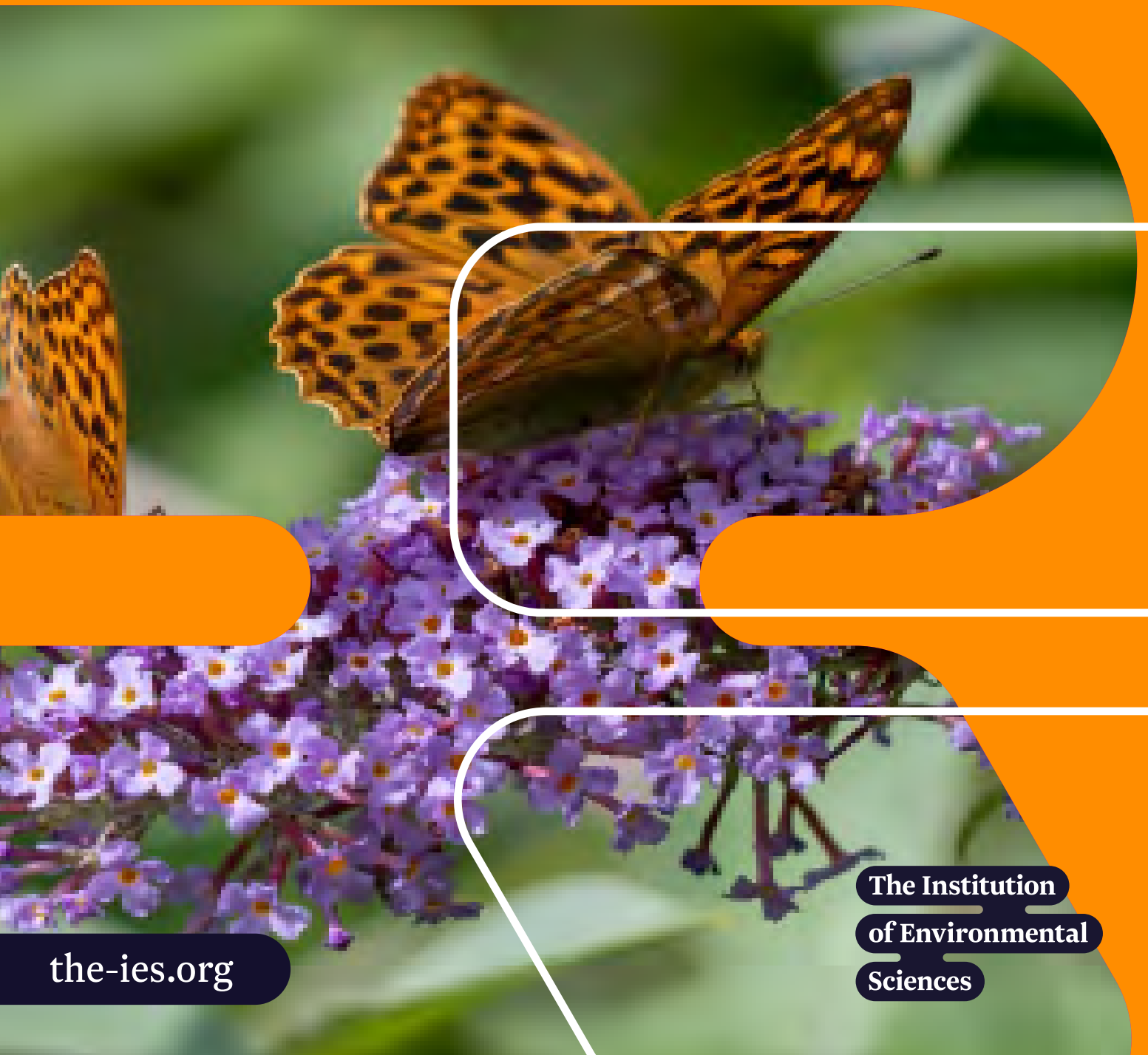


Our shared Mission for Sustainable Wellbeing

2024-2029 priorities for the UK Government,
from the Institution of Environmental Sciences

Reissued November 2025



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Acknowledgements

Authors: Joseph Lewis & Ellie Savage

Design: Bea Gilbert & Lucy Rowland

About the Institution of Environmental Sciences

The Institution of Environmental Sciences (the IES) is at the forefront of uniting the environmental sciences around a shared goal: to work with speed, vision and expertise to solve the world's most pressing environmental challenges, together.

As the global professional membership body for environmental scientists, we support a diverse network of professionals all over the world – and at every stage of their education and careers – to connect, develop, progress and inspire.

Registered charity no. 277611

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Executive summary

Recent decades have seen environmental challenges escalate to the point of crisis across the planet.

In the UK, the situation is no different: climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution all have stark consequences for people across the country.

This era of crisis must end, beginning a transition towards a sustainable society with thriving people, a healthy economy, and a flourishing environment.

Both the Government's strong mandate for environmental action and the widespread aspirations of the public to restore and enhance the environment provide the opportunity to make that vision real.

That ambition is attainable through a clear and urgent course of action: to transform the UK with **a new Mission for Sustainable Wellbeing**.

Transforming the UK for the good of people, the economy, and the environment is a matter of public service.

The natural world is the foundation of all human needs, and we cannot meet our

collective obligation to people now or in the future if we do not sustain it.

Acting now will also save on the exponential costs of delay and unlock the **"economic opportunity of the 21st century"**.

Each aspect of the environment warrants direct intervention and protection:

- **Ambitious and robust governance for clean air**
- **Holistic land use and re-use for development**
- **A long-term approach to clean and sustainable water**
- **Strong leadership on the marine and coastal environment**
- **Transformative action to tackle climate change**
- **Changing the narrative on nature to reflect its value**

At the same time, we cannot succeed until we address the big systems that underpin policy, and the ways they influence the environment:

- Embedding the circular economy in decisions
- Implementation and delivery of policy, particularly at the local level
- A robust, modern, and sustainable planning system
- Sustainable education and skills

This report outlines the priority actions needed to make **transformative**, systemic changes for the benefit of communities and the natural world, without compromising on

the actions needed to solve specific challenges.

Those priorities come from the expertise and evidence of hundreds of scientists, working together across disciplines to solve environmental challenges.

We can accelerate together towards a better future for the UK: one without environmental crisis or communities left behind in the transition, creating a country with thriving people, a healthy economy, and a flourishing environment.



“This era of crisis must end... transition towards a sustainable society with thriving people, a healthy economy, and a flourishing environment.”



Recommendations

These eleven recommendations represent the most pressing priorities identified by IES members and our specialist Communities.

Each specialism's chapter has further recommendations and details of how each can be delivered in practice.

1. Transform the UK through a new **Mission for Sustainable Wellbeing**. Begin the transition from years of crisis towards a sustainable society where people and nature thrive.
2. Secure a **world-leading governance framework for air quality**, raising the ambition of existing strategies and targets, and addressing governance gaps.
3. Take a **holistic approach to the use of land** across the UK to secure multiple benefits for communities and our natural world.
4. Adopt a **long-term approach to water** that acknowledges humans as part of the water system, prioritising strategic network solutions that work with nature.
5. Strengthen leadership and governance on the **marine and coastal environment**, informed by systems thinking for a sustainable ocean.
6. Commit to a 'transformative change' approach to reshaping unsustainable systems, **addressing climate change**, biodiversity loss, and environmental pollution together.
7. **Change the narrative on nature**. From the highest levels of government, make sure we are thinking about and engaging with nature in a way that reflects its value.
8. Promote a **culture of re-use and repair** across the UK, embedding the **circular economy** in decision making and engaging the public on the practical steps everyone can take.
9. **Champion local authorities to deliver** for the environment by clarifying their responsibilities and increasing their powers and resources.
10. Create a **less adversarial approach to planning** and environmental consenting by developing processes which are coherent, flexible, and accessible.
11. Embed **Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)** across all types of education and at all levels, from primary school through to the workforce, with a focus on solutions.

“The priorities in this report are contemporary and evidence-based ... at the IES we know that our members are the experts.”



Our offer to government

While this report contains several crucial priorities for environmental action by the Government, we also recognise that the challenges of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution require the collective efforts of all parts of our society.

The IES and its members want to make clear our offer to play our part to support government in delivering ambitious action.

Background to the project

During the five weeks of the 2024 general election period, the IES held seven discussion events with environmental scientists and other experts, aiming to identify the most pressing priorities for the next UK Government.

More than 200 professionals attended the events, representing voices from industry, research, government, NGOs, and the wider sector.

The priorities outlined in this report represent the outcomes of those discussions. They are contemporary, evidence-based, and reflect a wide range of expert and community perspectives.

What are IES communities?

Communities within the IES are groups of members brought together around a shared professional interest, goal, or challenge. They are an integral part of the IES ecosystem, providing thought leadership for their area of focus and a forum for members to network, collaborate, and shape their sector.

At the IES we know that our members are the experts. Communities are a key tool for directly engaging with our members, channeling their expertise into a unified voice, and informing the development of tailored resources.

How can we help?

The IES is always willing to support the development of environmental policy through briefings, access to experts and evidence, training, or other avenues.

The IES and its members are able to support with the design, delivery, and evaluation of policy, as well as the identification of issues and support for the wider evidence base underpinning policy decisions.

If any of the priorities recommended in this report are unclear or require further exploration, the IES is happy to follow up in whatever form is most useful.

We also have a community of experts dedicated to considering the successful implementation of policies, the **Environmental Policy Implementation Community** (EPIC), which can support government in untangling challenging issues related to delivering on policies in practice.

What is our area of expertise?

The IES is a **professional body** with more than 6000 members. We represent the voices of environmental professionals, sharing insights from the front lines of working with the environment.

The IES is particularly well-placed to represent a multidisciplinary approach to those insights, drawing members working in air quality, land

condition, climate, nature, sustainability, water, education, and anywhere else where environmental work is underpinned by science.

As a member of the Science Council, the IES brings a strong scientific and evidence-based perspective to addressing environmental challenges.

We are not solely focused on the technical aspects of policy, we also raise public awareness of environmental science: we give expert perspectives in the media, we are a UNFCCC admitted observer NGO, and we maintain good relationships with parliamentarians, civil servants, and arms-length bodies.

The IES is uniquely positioned to examine interactions between complex natural and social systems from a scientific perspective. We are a leading voice in ‘**systems thinking**’ perspectives and **transformative** approaches to change.

Conclusion

Often government policy is about managing a muddle of inconveniences. It's the wrong time to make a change; there are too few resources; or there is a lack of political will.

It is rare, therefore, to have the benefit of absolute convenience. This is one of those rare times.

There is overwhelming political will for change in the state of the UK's environment. The resources we need to make change happen are available and will be returned to the UK at the expense of a future where the costs of climate chaos rise.

And the Government is already committed to widespread change across the country, providing a window of opportunity when the policies needed to protect and enhance the environment can be delivered alongside that wider programme of change.

This is an opportunity that cannot be squandered.

The duty of governments to public service applies not only to the loudest voices, but to all people, including future generations who cannot speak for the changes they would demand.

We must provide them with a future where they can make their own choices, and where they have at least as many opportunities as we have today.

Sustainability is not an abstract ideal of environmentalism: it means what it says. If we want to continue to succeed in the future, we need to ensure that the success we pursue can be sustained for future generations.

That need not be restrictive and can increase opportunities and equity if approached in the right way.

When given the opportunity to thrive, people protect the environment that they value, and they become instrumental parts of our economy.

The economy gives people their livelihoods and the security needed to safeguard the environment.

The environment is the fundamental basis of all human needs and ensures the economy can be sustained into the future.

These three pillars are indivisible, and they measure our success at creating a sustainable society where everyone has

what they need: thriving people, a healthy economy, and a flourishing environment.

Those goals underpin what the IES believes would make the UK a great place to live.

The recommendations set out in this report will allow the Government to transform the UK in line with that vision, beginning the transition from years of crisis towards a sustainable society where people and nature thrive.



Glossary and key concepts

Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)

A requirement of development processes in England, which **became mandatory in February 2024**. Under BNG, a development must result in 10% more (or better quality) natural habitat than there was before the development.

Brownfield land

Developed land that is, or was previously, occupied by a permanent structure. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) notes that planning policies and decisions should “give substantial weight to the value of using suitable brownfield land”.

Carbon literacy

“An awareness of the carbon costs and impacts of everyday activities, and the ability and motivation to reduce emissions, on an individual, community and organisational basis.” - **The Carbon Literacy Project**

Change agents

Individuals or groups who seek to bring about positive change in how things are done by an organisation or society.

Circular Economy

An economy where we try to retain as many resources as possible, by re-using them, repairing them, re-purposing them, or recycling them, rather than turning them into waste, requiring something new to replace them.

This kind of approach has a lot of benefits: it is better for the environment, it can be cheaper, and it gives us more control over the resources we rely upon, increasing our security and resilience.

Climate citizenship

Being a participatory member of a community or country’s approach to addressing climate change.

Co-benefits

The additional benefits arising from a policy beyond its primary purpose. For example, public health and reduced congestion could be co-benefits of an active travel policy designed to reduce transport-related carbon emissions.

Co-creation

A participatory process of developing services or policies in collaboration with

the recipients or consumers of those services. In policy making, it often involves community participation in the process of designing policy.

Communities of practice

Groups of practitioners brought together around a shared professional interest, goal, or challenge.

See the [IES Communities](#) for more information.

Competency frameworks

Frameworks that set out the skills, knowledge, and behaviours associated with successful performance for a given profession, specialism, or discipline.

Deep climate skills

A subset of the technical skills necessary for addressing climate change, which will only be necessary for a subsection of the workforce.

These skills include carbon accounting and reporting, knowledge of climate adaptation measures, and a broad understanding of renewable energy, [circular economy](#), low-carbon infrastructure and whole life carbon management.

Double regulation

A scenario where regulations require the same activity to be subject to the same assessment twice, without an additional benefit.

Ecosystem services

“A service that is provided by an ecosystem as an intrinsic property of its functionality (e.g. pollination, nutrient cycling, nitrogen

fixation, fruit and seed dispersal). The benefits (and occasionally disbenefits) that people obtain from ecosystems.” - [IPBES](#)

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)

“A lens that permits us to look critically at how the world is and to envision how it might be, and equips us to deliver that vision. ESD develops competencies (skills, attributes and values) and how they link to subject knowledge and knowledge of sustainable development.” - [QAA](#)

Enabling skills

Skills that support the effective translation of environmental science into action, including communication, problem solving, innovation, leadership, and community engagement. These are often associated with ‘transferable’ or ‘soft’ skills.

Environmental Land Management Schemes

Schemes in England to pay farmers and land managers to protect and improve the environment alongside food production, following the UK’s exit from the European Union. Alternatively ELMS.

Governance

“Environmental governance includes policy, rules and norms that govern human behaviour and it also addresses who makes decisions, how decisions are made and carried out, the scientific information needed for decision-making and how the public and major stakeholders can participate in the decision-making.” - [UN Environment Programme](#)

When this report refers to governance, it is not referring to ‘Environmental, social, and

governance (ESG)' which relates to specific considerations of governance for businesses.

Green jobs

Jobs which contribute to the protection or restoration of the environment, the transition towards a sustainable society, or which function as part of a sustainable and clean economy.

Green skills

The knowledge, competences, and behaviours needed to protect or restore the environment, support the transition towards a sustainable society, or to function as part of a sustainable and clean economy.

Just transition

“Ensuring that no one is left behind or pushed behind in the transition to low-carbon and environmentally sustainable economies and societies.” - [UN Committee for Development Policy](#)

Nature-based solutions

“Actions that protect, sustainably manage, and restore natural or modified ecosystems, that address societal challenges effectively and adaptively, simultaneously providing human well-being and biodiversity benefits.

These solutions can range from planting forests and mangroves to restoring coral reefs and peatlands.” - [UNFCCC](#)

Outcome Indicator Framework (OIF)

“A comprehensive set of indicators describing environmental change that relates to the 10 goals within the 25 Year Environment Plan.

The framework contains 66 indicators, arranged into 10 broad themes” - [Defra](#)

The OIF is intended to show the overall condition of natural capital assets, pressures acting upon them, and the potential to receive benefits from them.

Process literacy

Awareness of how processes work (particularly policy and planning) and the ability and motivation to engage with them, as an individual or community. This includes knowledge of organisational governance and an understanding of the interactions between policy, the public, and science.

Professional bodies

“An organisation with individual members practicing a profession or occupation in which the organisation maintains an oversight of the knowledge, skills, conduct and practice of that profession or occupation.” - [The Science Council](#)

The IES is a professional body.

Science-policy interface

The ways that science interacts with and support policy and decision making. In some cases, science interacts with policy through the public, industry, or research organisations.

Situated learning

An approach to learning which recognises the context in which learning takes place, including learning by example and understanding the social situations that affect the learning environment.

Sustainable Development

“Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” - [Sustainable Development Commission](#)

See the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) for further information.

Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS)

Interventions using nature-based solutions to improve water drainage in developments, which are a legal requirement for new developments.

“SuDS are designed to reduce the impact of rainfall on new developments by using features such as soakaways, grassed areas, permeable surfaces, wetlands. This reduces the overall amount of water that ends up in the sewers and storm overflow discharges.” - [Defra](#)

Sustainable wellbeing

Building on the ideas of [sustainable development](#) and the [wellbeing economy](#), sustainable wellbeing seeks to create a society where benefits for people, the economy, and the environment are collectively achieved, rather than seen as opposing aims.

When this report refers to sustainable wellbeing, it should specifically be understood in the context of three mutually reinforcing pillars: thriving people, a healthy economy, and a flourishing environment.

Systems approach

An approach which recognises how social, economic, and natural systems influence

outcomes, adopting ways of working that address the dynamic and complex nature of systems to effect change and avoid unintended consequences.

Systems thinking

A specific systems approach that incorporates tools, methods, and mindsets to provide insights into how systems work and to inform decisions.

See the [Systems Thinker](#) for more information.

Transformative change

“A fundamental, system-wide reorganisation across technological, economic and social factors, including paradigms, goals and values.” - [IPBES](#)

Transformative change is distinct from incremental change because it seeks transformation, rather than progress within the same basic system.

It is distinct from atomistic change because it seeks to change a whole system, rather than any one element on its own.

Triple crisis

The combined crises of climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental pollution.

Value chain

“The full range of activities which are required to bring a product or service from conception, through the different phases of production ... delivery to final consumers, and final disposal after use.” - [Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership](#)

**“We can accelerate
together towards a better
future: a country with
thriving people, a healthy
economy, and a flourishing
environment.”**



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