

**AN OPEN LETTER TO THE Rt. Hon Robert Jenrick, Secretary of State for Housing,  
Communities and Local Government**

**RE: Honouring the Government's Pledges to the Environment**

**We are writing to highlight an unintended consequence of a District Council feeling that it must meet the housing targets set for it at any cost.**

**The designation of land at Buck Barn, Horsham, West Sussex for development, while contributing to the governments housing targets, would completely undermine the credibility of the government's 25 Year Environment Plan.**

**We are therefore writing to ask you to direct and insist that Local Councils balance the Government's objectives for both housing and the environment.**

In 2019 the government's 25 Year Environment Plan singled out the Knepp Estate in West Sussex as a shining example of landscape-scale nature restoration – a pioneering 'rewilding' project that has reversed catastrophic biodiversity loss, provided habitat for numerous endangered species and restored the resilience of natural systems. In the same document the government committed itself to creating a Nature Recovery Network, launched – finally - last November, to fulfil the need for 'more, bigger, better, and joined up' nature in Britain.

Knepp, itself, began this journey over a decade ago, devising a plan with like-minded landowners and farmers, the Sussex Wildlife Trust and "Wilder Horsham District" initiative to connect Knepp and other isolated areas of nature in the region with green corridors.

Knepp is also in discussion with Natural England to become a **National Nature Reserve** and the surrounding region itself, a **Nature Recovery Area**.

It is alarming, therefore, to learn that a site allocated for 3,500 houses on the very border of the Knepp rewilding project will split the potential Nature Recovery Area in two and prevent this connectivity from happening.

Central Government have allocated Horsham District Council a huge target of 1200 new houses every year from 2019-2036 in the local plan. We acknowledge that more homes need to be built in order to meet the housing requirements. But the decision to allocate this site, known as Buck Barn, will be irreversible. Once the bricks are in and the concrete laid,

the potential for any meaningful connectivity for wildlife to neighbouring sites and improvement for natural systems will be gone. Nature needs to be considered as infrastructure, in the same way as roads, railways and housing, because of all the societal benefits it provides. The Council is aware through its work with the Wilder Horsham District Project that this area known as Buck Barn is a key part of the District's Nature Recovery Network, for which the adjacent Knepp Estate performs a critical function as a core area, yet it is still under serious consideration for development.

In its Environment Plan the government pledged: 'New development will happen in the right places, delivering maximum economic benefit while taking into account the need to avoid environmental damage.' Yet, last year, the government's white paper '*Planning for the Future*', aimed at speeding up the planning process, actively increases the threat to nature in England, while doing little to create better, sustainable homes and communities for wildlife and people, according to the Wildlife Trusts.

There is a profound disconnect here. Words of encouragement for nature on paper. 'Build, build, build' on the ground. Nature is in crisis. And not just the birds and bees. Our own prosperity, our future security, health and wellbeing, depends on restoring the natural support systems – living soil, clean water, clean air, biodiversity - on which we depend as a species on this planet.

The Government has committed to properly protecting 30% of the country's land by the end of the decade and setting legally binding and strong biodiversity targets. At the heart of this very approach is the development of Nature Recovery Areas - linked together to improve connectivity across the country.

If the country's planning laws and general planning approach is taking us in the opposite direction, then these broader goals are going to be fatally undermined.

The government must honour its pledge to protect the environment and take into account the incalculable, irreversible loss to wildlife and ourselves when developments in the wrong place block the path to nature restoration.

Please show us your commitment to the environment and climate change, in this year of hosting COP26, by changing planning legislation to prevent development on sites of

essential nature connection, such as the Buck Barn site bordering the Knepp Estate in West Sussex.

We look forward to your reassurance that the government is *fully* committed to protecting wildlife as well as building new housing and that it will intervene when necessary to ensure that the government's environmental objectives for its recovery are met.

Yours sincerely,

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**Dr Craig Bennett** *Chief Executive, The Wildlife Trusts*

**Harry Bowell**, *Director of Land and Nature, National Trust*

**Prof M. J. Crawley**, FRS, *Emeritus Professor of Ecology, Imperial College*

**Prof Alastair Driver**, FCIEEM, *Director, Rewilding Britain and former Head of Conservation, Environment Agency*

**Prof Rob Fuller** *former Science Director, British Trust for Ornithology*

**Prof Sir Charles Godfray** *CBE FRS, Oxford University*

**Ben Goldsmith** *Chair, Conservative Environment Network*

**Prof Dave Goulson** FRES, *Professor Biology, University of Sussex*

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**Prof Matthew S Heard** *National Specialist, Land Use & Ecosystem Services, National Trust*

**Prof David Hill** CBE, *Chair of Plantlife, Chair of the Environment Bank*

**Tor Lawrence** *Chief Executive, Sussex Wildlife Trust*

**Prof Sir John Lawton** CBE FRS

**Dr Michael Maunder** *University of Cambridge*

**Darren Moorcroft** *Chief Executive, Woodland Trust*

**Dr Michael R W Rands**, *Master, Darwin College, University of Cambridge*

**Hugh Raven** *Chair, John Ellerman Foundation, and the Environmental Funders Network*

**Mark Rose** *Chief Executive, Fauna & Flora International*

**Rt Hon Lord Smith of Finsbury**, *former Chair, Environment Agency, and Master, Pembroke College, Cambridge*

**Dr Ken W Smith**, *former Head of Species Research, RSPB*

**Becky Speight** *Chief Executive, RSPB*

**Jonathan Spencer** *MBE, FRSB, FRSA*

**Tanya Steele** *Chief Executive, World Wildlife Fund*

**Prof William J. Sutherland** *Miriam Rothschild Chair in Conservation Biology, University of Cambridge*

**James Thorton**, *Chief Executive, ClientEarth*

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**Dr Frans W.M.Vera** *founder of The Ecological Network, The Netherlands*

**Dr Tony Whitbread** *President, Sussex Wildlife Trust*

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**Baroness Young of Old Scone**