

GENERAL SYNOD

Land and Nature Motion

Summary

This motion is intended to bring biodiversity up the agenda of the Church of England's overall Environment Programme so that it is given equal consideration with net zero recognising the need to respond urgently to the ecological crisis, in line with the global scientific consensus that the climate change and biodiversity loss crises are intricately linked and with our desire to care for creation.

Unprecedented changes in climate and biodiversity, driven by human activities, have combined and increasingly threaten nature, human lives, livelihoods and well-being around the world. Biodiversity loss and climate change are both driven by human economic activities and mutually reinforce each other. Neither will be successfully resolved unless both are tackled together.¹

Background to the Motion

1. This motion is intended to strengthen and give focus to the existing commitment expressed by General Synod to achieve Net Zero by 2030. The Route Map agreed in 2022 by Synod did not set out to cover issues of biodiversity and habitat. However, it did join biodiversity explicitly with net zero in the section on land. Land and biodiversity are also in scope for the wider Church of England Environment Programme, along with worship and teaching on the environment, community engagement, and more.
2. The Government has agreed to the Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) at the COP 15 conference in Montreal, which includes a global commitment to halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030 and to protect 30% of land and oceans by the same date.² The Environment Act sets the Government targets of how it will deliver on this promise for England. We need to recognise how protecting biodiversity is intrinsic to our environmental ambitions and set out how we intend to address this on our land.

Land and the Church of England

3. Church of England land broadly falls into three categories: land held or managed at a parish level, diocesan glebe and the national and international holdings of the Church Commissioners.

Parish Land

4. At the parish level the most common area where there is notable biodiversity potential is within the churchyard. These places carry significance for the communities that surround them and are likely to be managed by the parish or in concert with the Parish Council. Their significance and primary role as burial grounds mean that increasing biodiversity within churchyards needs to be balanced with public access and consideration for mourners.

¹ <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2021/06/tackling-biodiversity-climate-crises-together-and-their-combined-social-impacts/>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-deal-to-protect-nature-agreed-at-cop15>

5. These are well served in terms of guidance for wildlife management by Caring for God's Acre who have 25 years of experience in training and supporting parishes to care for the biodiversity in their churchyards.
6. The Churches Count on Nature (CCoN) is a partnership between the Church of England and the Church in Wales, with Arocha UK and Caring for God's Acre to bring communities in to these places and look at the biodiversity they contain to create a public record.
7. In the last two years, 900 counting events took place across churches in England and Wales, and over 27,000 wildlife records were submitted. Feedback from the survey in 2022 indicated that 62% of churches said that taking part in CCoN has increased their communities wider understanding and awareness that caring for nature is central to Christian faith and mission.

Diocesan Land

8. To support diocesan managers of glebe land a task and finish group made up of a land manager, diocesan environmental officers with experience of land related issues, members of the Church Commissioners Rural Team and staffed by officers from the NCI's has put together a guidance document for managing land for biodiversity and climate.³
9. Within the document are a range of sensible suggestions that help with the long term sustainability of holdings focusing on the specific situation in which diocesan land is held. These also will enable diocese to take steps on the path to reaching Silver standard for land in the Ecodiocese programme.
10. It also considers the multiple calls on our land and, for example, is complementary to the intentions set out in the *Coming Home Report* to better use our land to provide housing – for example how using some land for biodiversity net gain can enable development on other land. The document considers the role this land has had across generations for tenant farmers and in producing food as well as its potential with increasing biodiversity. In addition there are options with carbon sequestration and flood prevention that can add additional value to what can be delivered on the land.
11. The Synod motion will task dioceses to make an action plan for the land they hold and put in place policies that will deliver for biodiversity and climate.

National Holdings

12. At the national level the Church Commissioners for England (CCE) manage land that has historically been kept to augment the income for the Church of England, particularly in less well-off areas. They have a portfolio of approximately 85,000 acres of agricultural land and 23,000 acres of forestry in the UK. The agricultural land is almost entirely under the management of tenants with a mix of Agricultural Holdings Act and Farm Business Tenancies administered by the Rural Team for the CCE in concert with land agents from Savills and Strut & Parker.
13. As part of the CCE's wider environmental, social and governance aims there has been a steady movement of policy, practice, and partnerships towards increasing biodiversity

³ <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/environment-and-climate-change/land-and-nature>

alongside evaluating and reducing carbon emissions on land holdings. This work must be within the framework of tenancy agreements and by engaging positively with tenants who have the day-to-day management over the land. The CCE have undertaken an initial baseline exercise to look at carbon and biodiversity, and now are encouraging tenants to undertake a full carbon audit as well as requiring carbon and biodiversity considerations to be built into new tenancy bids. They are also partnering with other major landowners through the formation of the Future Land Forum, signatories with the Nature Based Solutions Compact organised by the National Trust and in the Blue Recovery Leaders Group organised by the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust.

Other Church Property

14. In addition to these general three categorisations of Church of England land there are also other Church properties that have land such as cathedrals, Theological Educational Institutes (TEIs) and NCI offices. While overall the area covered by these is small they are significant places, often at the centre of cities or instrumental in the formation of ministers. It is intended with this motion that they also make sure biodiversity is considered as part of their environment programme and that it is included in the management plans for their land.
15. For schools The Department for Education (DfE) Sustainability Strategy, published in April 2022 has a strong focus on biodiversity.⁴ Local authorities (working with Local Authority maintained schools – Voluntary Controlled and Voluntary Aided) also have a public duty to ensure they have regard to conserving biodiversity as part of policy or decision making.

Timing

16. This motion is designed to complement the developing net zero work that has already been agreed by synod and which dioceses are beginning to implement. The timing in July will seek to embed biodiversity as part of dioceses environment work as they grow their plans, supported by guidance that will be published shortly on managing glebe land for nature. It will also build on the policy/public interest generated about the subject through the People's Plan for Nature and the BBC Wild Isles series.⁵⁶

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⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sustainability-and-climate-change-strategy/sustainability-and-climate-change-a-strategy-for-the-education-and-childrens-services-systems> (see also the National Education Nature Park <https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2022/11/10/what-is-the-national-education-nature-park-and-how-are-we-working-with-the-natural-history-museum-to-teach-children-about-climate-change-your-questions-answered/>)

⁵ [People's Plan for Nature](#)

⁶ [BBC Wild Isles](#)

Land and Nature Motion

That this Synod, recognising the need to respond urgently to the ecological crisis, in line with the global scientific consensus that the climate change and biodiversity loss crises are intricately linked

- a) *Welcome the work being done by the Church Commissioners, the NCIs, and many dioceses, parishes, cathedrals, and schools to manage all or part of their land for climate and nature, in urban and rural communities alike.*
- b) *Request Diocesan Secretaries to task a named person / committee in their dioceses to create an action plan to achieve the 'Land' section of Eco Diocese at Silver level by 2026 at the latest.*
- c) *Request Chairs and Secretaries of all diocesan property/finance committees to incorporate nature-positive objectives into their asset management policies within the next 6 months.*
- d) *Call on all parishes, cathedrals, TElS, NCIs offices with land they manage or influence to:*
 - i. *create a simple land management plan, with reference to the guidance and examples from Caring for Gods Acre,*
 - ii. *work towards an increasing level of Eco Church, including the actions in the 'Land' section, and*
 - iii. *record the biodiversity of their green spaces, through taking part in Churches Count On Nature each year.*
- e) *Call on all DBEs to work in accordance with the Department for Education Sustainability Strategy.*