

What White Paper?

Select Committee reports are a hit and miss thing. Some are safely fudged or miss their target, while others seem unconstrained, focused and hit the bull's eye. We were blessed with the latter in July, when the Environment Food and Rural Affairs Committee (EFRACOM) pronounced on last year's Natural Environment White Paper. We've all been kind about the White Paper. It captured the mood of the times, with its drive to consider all of nature's inherent values and respect the free economic assets which come with a healthy ecosystem. But it's delivery that counts. Political action can quickly crash through the motherhood words of government, and Minister's boasts about the Greenest Government have been undermined in practice. The ideology on the Right of the Coalition now uses the excuse of an ailing economy to threaten core chunks of environmental protection. The Habitat Regulations are being eyed up for treatment if they stymie infrastructure projects, new strands of the planning system may get more permissive, and a nudge from Whitehall may allow swathes of Green Belt to be nibbled at.

So will nature be paved over? Will green policies be rolled back? Our authors in this issue say it's all to play for. Dick Bate shows how the National Planning Policy Framework is not the developer's charter feared at the outset, but it could have downsides, maybe including for woodland, unless conservation groups are vigilant. Likewise Neighbourhood Plans will not automatically favour development over greenspace, but Jeremy Owen asks how the different effects amongst Neighbourhood Plans will be assessed. Where's the overview and what should happen if wildlife is cumulatively taking a knock?

Returning to the White Paper, it is hard to argue with Mike Townsend's assessment in this issue. He worries that it's a sop, with fine words and token gestures. He sees it as "a useful device for deflecting the attention of NGOs than a genuine document of substantial intent. The paltry funding allocated to Nature Improvement Areas and the idea that this handful of projects is somehow going to deliver the Lawton Report's vision of 'bigger, better, more joined-up' is demeaning."

The EFRACOM report has spotted this concern over tokenism too. The Committee wants an action plan for all the White paper's commitments, and proper valuing of nature taken forward by Treasury and the Cabinet Office. Bravely, it challenges the assumption that environmental regulation is a drag on the economy. There is much to capitalise on in EFRACOM's report, across wildlife protection, planning, valuation and wellbeing measures. If we exploit this clever document, the White Paper we wanted could be unlocked.

Geoffrey Wain