



Future-proofing our economy

Nature, growth and resilience

2026 | Briefing note for senior leaders - Hampshire and the Solent





Beaver at Blashford Lakes Nature Reserve © Chris Fairhead

INTRODUCTION

Hampshire and the Solent stand at a defining moment. Devolution creates a one-off opportunity to hardwire nature into the region's economic model from the start, supporting growth that is resilient, inclusive and future-proof.

This is not an environmental add-on. It is a core economic strategy.

The condition of nature across the region will determine whether we can attract investment and talent, deliver sustainable housing and infrastructure, and remain resilient to climate and water shocks.

Get this right, and Hampshire and the Solent can become a national leader in nature-positive growth. Get it wrong, and the region will face rising costs, stalled development and increasing risk.

When we talk about nature, we mean the natural assets that underpin the economy: rivers, coastlines, wetlands, soils, woodlands, meadows, green spaces and wildlife. These assets help secure clean water, manage flood risk, store carbon, support food production, improve health and attract investment.

Nature is not a 'nice to have' -- it is critical infrastructure

Nature underpins the systems on which the economy depends:

- Protecting homes, infrastructure and business from flooding
- Securing water supply and quality
- Enabling food production and supply chains
- Sustaining tourism and quality of place
- Improving public health and workforce productivity

Environmental decline is already creating economic risk and cost. Water stress, nutrient pollution, habitat loss, flooding and coastal change are no longer abstract future threats; they are direct constraints on growth, development and resilience.

NATURE IS CENTRAL TO SUCCESS

For regional leaders, nature is central to success, not an additional agenda. For the Hampshire and Solent Combined County Authority, it supports delivery across every priority: transport & infrastructure, skills & employment, housing & strategic planning, economic development & regeneration, health & wellbeing, environment & climate change, public safety, culture, and rural & coastal.

1 Transport & Local Infrastructure

Country parks, active travel networks and low-carbon transport links can connect people to nature, jobs and everyday services close to home, while reducing car dependency, congestion and air pollution.

Rivers, wetlands and saltmarsh already help protect the region's core infrastructure. Investing in nature now can reduce future repair costs, disruption and pressure on sensitive sites.

£10 return

for every £1 invested in natural flood management

1 in 6 deaths

linked to physical inactivity, costing £7.4bn a year

2 Skills & Employment

Nature recovery is a major labour market opportunity, particularly in land management, restoration, marine and environmental services. Demand for environmental skills is projected to double by 2030, with nature restoration identified as one of the fastest growing fields.

700,000

jobs in the natural environment sector in the UK

10:27

every 10 green jobs create 27 more in the wider economy

2x

environmental vacancies doubled since 2021

3 Housing & Strategic Planning

Nature-led planning is not a barrier to growth; it unlocks and sustains development. The region is already showing how nature-based solutions, including nutrient neutrality schemes, can support new homes while restoring the environment.

Embedding Local Nature Recovery Strategies in spatial planning reduces risk and cost while creating high-quality places to live, work and invest.

Access to green space

supports stronger places, healthier communities and local economic value

Nutrient neutrality

unlocked thousands of new homes while reducing pollution and delivering biodiversity gains

4 Economic Development & Regeneration

The region's natural capital, from rivers and coast to soils, wetlands and green spaces, is a competitive advantage. It supports tourism, supply chains and inward investment, positioning Hampshire and the Solent as a potential leader in nature-positive growth.

40%+

of industry inputs locally sourced – higher than average

12% GDP

at risk from nature degradation in the UK

£41bn

annual economic value from UK nature

5 Health & Wellbeing

Unequal access to green space deepens social and economic inequality. Nature supports physical and mental health, reduces pressure on public services and helps communities adapt to rising heat and climate risk.

Access to nature is preventative public service infrastructure, not a luxury.

£2.1bn

NHS savings from green space access

£6.2–£8.4bn

health benefits from recreation

20m people

gain health benefits from nature annually

6 Environment & Climate Change

The region includes internationally important habitats and landscapes, from the Solent coast and chalk streams like the Test, Itchen and Meon, to the Isle of Wight Biosphere, the New Forest, the Wessex and South Downs and the Thames Basin Heaths.

These vital natural assets are under increasing pressure. Biodiversity is declining, many species are at risk, fewer than half of our core wildlife sites are in good condition, and degraded landscapes leave us more exposed to flooding, drought and climate impacts.

Landscape-scale nature recovery is a powerful climate solution, restoring resilient and connected ecosystems that help wildlife thrive whilst strengthening our ability to adapt to a changing climate.

37%

UK species abundance vs 1970 levels

< 50%

Hampshire and Isle of Wight protected sites in good condition

Restoring biodiversity

more biodiverse landscapes are more resilient, functional and ecologically secure

7 Public Safety

Flooding, wildfires, heatwaves and coastal change are growing risks across the region, affecting communities, infrastructure and insurance costs. Restoring wetlands, reconnecting rivers, increasing tree cover and enhancing coastal habitats provide long-term protection.

Well-designed green infrastructure creates places where people want to spend time, increasing footfall and informal surveillance, and strengthening community cohesion.

£2.2bn

annual UK flooding costs and rising

Greener public spaces

linked to lower crime, improved wellbeing and stronger social cohesion



Seagrass seed planting at Seaview, Isle of Wight © NOSY

8 Culture

Our National Parks, Island Biosphere, nature reserves, chalk streams, coast and waterways are central to the region's identity and sense of place. They support recreation, tourism, creative industries and pride of place for residents and businesses – creating significant economic value. They need recognition and investment, like any vital asset.

2bn+ visits

to urban green spaces each year

£10bn

contribution of recreation and tourism to UK ecosystem value

£126bn

UK creative industries sector, often inspired by nature

9 Rural & Coastal

Rural Hampshire and the Solent's coastline are economically and ecologically interdependent. Agriculture, fisheries, tourism, commoning and food production all rely on healthy soils, clean water and functioning ecosystems.

Sea level rise and coastal squeeze are causing the gradual loss of saltmarsh and mudflat habitats across the Solent, reducing natural protection from flooding and erosion.

The New Forest's unique commoning system helps manage over 200 square miles of internationally important landscape, supporting nature, rural businesses, food production, heritage and tourism.

~£211bn

natural capital value of UK marine habitats

36.6 tonnes carbon

stored per hectare per year by saltmarsh

£5bn

contributed by New Forest rural economy

Nature is not a constraint on success. It is the foundation of it.



The region is ready for a nature-positive future

In a recent survey of private and public sector stakeholders conducted by Arup for the Wildlife Trust:

- 94% stated that nature is important for the long term success of the region
- 94% said nature is vital for tourism
- 77% believe food security depends on nature's recovery
- 90% agreed nature restoration provides opportunities for skills and employment
- 89% said nature should be at the heart of the region's vision for the future

SIX SHIFTS

To seize this opportunity, six immediate shifts are needed:

1 Put nature at the heart of decision-making

- Require nature risk assessment in all major investment and infrastructure decisions
- Embed environmental leadership within governance, investment and delivery boards – drawing on the region's expertise
- Set clear, measurable nature targets and hold delivery partners to account

2 Adopt a clear, region-wide Nature Positive Strategy

- Commit to a bold, shared vision for nature-positive, inclusive growth
- Align spatial planning, economic strategy and infrastructure investment with the Local Nature Recovery Strategy
- Make this a defining pillar of the Combined Authority's identity and vision for the region

3 Treat nature as core infrastructure

- Recognise nature and natural assets as core underpinning infrastructure
- Plan and invest in nature-based solutions alongside transport, housing and utilities
- Shift from reactive 'repair' to strategic, proactive planning and investment

4 Raise the bar – go beyond minimum compliance

- Set ambitious regional standards for Biodiversity Net Gain, nutrient neutrality and other environmental delivery
- Enable strategic, large-scale delivery rather than piecemeal mitigation
- Use planning and investment powers to drive high-quality, nature-positive development

5 Future-proof rural and coastal economies

- Back regenerative farming, commoning, sustainable fisheries and nature-led tourism
- Protect the natural assets that support jobs, food, visitor economy and quality of life
- Help communities adapt to drought, flooding, coastal change and climate risk

6 Unlock investment and delivery at scale

- Establish a regional natural capital investment pipeline
- Crowd in private finance alongside public investment
- Build cross-sector partnerships to turn strategy into delivery
- Demonstrate early delivery to create momentum, confidence and investable opportunities



A DEFINING TEST OF LEADERSHIP

**The choices made now will shape
Hampshire and the Solent for decades.**

This is not about choosing between growth and nature.
It is about using nature to help the region thrive.

With the right leadership and powerful partnerships, the region can build a stronger, more resilient economy, attract investment and innovation, and deliver healthier, more prosperous communities.



Your opportunity

Nature-positive growth requires coordinated action. We are inviting regional leaders to work with us to deliver it. Contact us.



**Hampshire &
Isle of Wight**
Wildlife Trust

Sources and evidence

Evidence and statistics in this document are drawn from the Office for National Statistics, Environment Agency, Natural England, Defra, Office for Environmental Protection, Sport England, NHS England, Green Jobs Taskforce, Local Government Association, PwC UK Green Jobs Barometer, University of Southampton and Hampshire & Isle of Wight Local Nature Recovery Strategy. Figures reflect the latest available evidence at the time of publication.

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