

Petition 626737: Make swift bricks compulsory in new housing to help red-listed birds
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Swifts have declined by over 50% in the UK. Adult swifts, known for site-fidelity, return to the same nests. We want swift bricks to be required in all new housing, to provide homes for these birds. Surveys show these are used by red-listed swifts, house martins, starlings and house sparrows.

Swifts spend more time airborne than any other bird, sometimes only landing when returning to their nests in our walls, from Africa. They're tidy and quiet neighbours but modern building methods block swifts out.

The metric for calculating Biodiversity Net Gain doesn't include existing nest sites in buildings, or swift bricks, which are only included as a recommended but not legal requirement as a 'species feature'. Swift bricks can be designed into buildings without conflicting with insulation, and should be made a requirement for new housing.

Iconic and irreplaceable, swifts define our summers. Please help them. The RSPB supports this petition.

Petition's Aim: to lead to a national policy based on extensive guidelines from building, ecological and conservation bodies in order to halt the decline and restore national populations of 4 red-listed, cavity-nesting, urban birds, in conjunction with the Environment Act and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Targets.



Swifts spend more time airborne than any other bird on earth, yet when they come home, they come home to us. Along with all other cavity-nesting, urban birds, our home is their home.

Summary:

4 red-listed cavity-nesting, urban birds face national extinction, with sharp declines over the past twenty years, united in the unprecedented and national scale of the loss of their natural cavity nesting sites due to house repairs, insulation and demolition. The installation of swift bricks on a national scale would significantly help halt their declines and restore their national populations, aligning with the Environment Act and Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework targets. Swift bricks are an existing, low cost, proven conservation measure but nowhere near enough of them have been installed to be effective on a national scale. Leading experts in ornithology, sustainable building, ecologists, planners and even a major developer, actively support the petition's aim of creating a national policy because without swift bricks in new development, there is no nesting habitat for these red listed birds, species that are running out of time, especially the swift, with only 59,000 UK breeding pairs remaining (BTO) after a 60% breeding decline between 1995-2020. Remarkable birds, swifts fly from our house walls all the way to Africa and back, crossing the Sahara desert twice every year, not landing until they return to the exact hole they left 9 months before, year on year. Spending more time airborne than any other bird on earth, when they come home, they come home to us. Living for 20 years, they are long standing members of our communities, bringing joy through their unrivalled aerobatic displays and iconic screams, dubbed our 'icons' and 'heralds' of summer and have been flying over our skies for over 65 million years, yet now face national extinction.

This petition and wider campaign, The Feather Speech, created by author and bird conservationist Hannah Bourne-Taylor, and supported by the RSPB, Rewriting Extinction and Wild Justice, has captured the hearts and minds of the general public with 109,894 signatures, and the national and international media sparking the highest nationwide awareness around the plight of urban birds. The birds who share our walls are quite literally our very closest neighbours, and the general consensus is, when the environmental crisis feels overwhelming and often hugely complex, this petition's aim offers a straight-forward solution that will help safeguard the nature right on our doorsteps.

Overall wildlife and bird context:

The UK is listed as the worst in the G7 for the amount of wildlife and wild spaces loss due to human activity as measured by the Biodiversity Intactness Index. According to the State of Nature partnership's 2019 report, the total number of breeding birds in the UK fell by 44 million between 1967 and 2009, a figure equivalent to the current adult human population of England and Wales. The results of a 37 year survey of birds across the UK and Europe, published this spring by The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences states that modern architecture is a main reason for a 27.8% decline in urban birds.

The timing of this debate is very welcome, as we are in the United Nation's Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, the time when there are global and national efforts to change trajectory from a time of biodiversity loss to one of nature recovery, creating a nature positive future. Redressing the loss of nesting sites is a key factor in helping red listed urban bird populations recover. However, action is urgent, as any policy change takes time to filter through to individual development sites, as major developments such as multi-phase housing sites, can take many years between planning permission being granted and the last of the phases to be built.

When these birds are also effected by climate change and insect decline, the element of securing their home is something that is simple to fix.

However, timing is urgent. If a national policy was decided, it would probably take a few years to see action on the ground, due to parliament process and then the planning/construction process after that. If you think about the 60% loss of breeding swift pairs in the past 20 years, to halt that loss and prevent national extinction, every breeding pair counts, every breeding season counts, and every nesting site counts. There is no time to lose.

Why do urban birds need a national policy?

Four cavity-nesting, urban birds (House martins, Common swifts, Common starlings and House sparrows) are on the red list of highest conservation concern, a term defined by the need for ‘urgent action’ due to red listed species facing national extinction. There are many factors around the decline of these species but the increasing loss of existing cavity-nesting sites unites cavity-nesting, urban bird species.

Without swift bricks there is no nesting habitat in new developments for these birds.

A national policy for the inclusion of swift bricks would: significantly halt and restore populations of red-listed urban bird species, provide an opportunity to meet specific Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework government targets (see below) and would be the necessary next step in the existing extensive recommendations.

Contrary to the government’s response to this petition, the RSPB’s Migrant’s Recovery Programme Manager, Guy Anderson, states

‘I can’t see any reason why Swift bricks would be ‘inappropriate’ in any development in the UK. There might be some buildings where the design of the buildings themselves makes it less likely that Swift bricks would ever be used by Swifts, for example bungalows may be too low. However, even if Swift bricks are not used by Swifts, plenty of other wildlife e.g. red-listed house sparrows, red-listed starlings, red-listed house martins may use them.’

***Full itemised rebuttal at the bottom of this document**

Loss of nesting sites

Swift bricks are not part of the new Biodiversity Gain methodology and while the government recommends the need for swift bricks is a matter for the Local Planning Authorities to implement, based on the extensive guidelines of industry bodies, advice has not been followed on a national scale and without this conservation measure, these red-listed cavity nesting birds will find it increasingly harder to nest and therefore breed. This is due to the loss of cavity nesting sites on an unprecedented scale: since 2013, the government’s ECO scheme has insulated 2.4 million homes including External Wall Insulation (EWI – like soffits) and combined with 50,000 old buildings being demolished annually, and homeowner’s improvements and repairs, the loss of cavity nesting sites has been acknowledged as a factor in the decline of urban birds as far back as 2002 (British Trust for Ornithology) when House sparrows and Common starlings were added to the red list. The conservation world reacted through the invention of the swift brick, of which there are now

an array of commercial options available on the market. Swift bricks are also known as a ‘universal brick’ due to the wide range of species it supports including invertebrates. Local volunteer-led swift conservation groups have made a positive impact to localised swift colonies, but no national measure has actively conserved these birds and despite efforts across the country, the birds continue to decline, especially in places where there aren’t active swift conservation groups.

Site loyalty

Especially for swifts and House martins, both added to the red list in 2021, their existing nesting sites are extremely important because these species are site loyal. This means that adult birds return to the exact nesting site year on year but despite this, their homes are not protected all year round so they often return from their migration from Africa to find their nesting sites blocked off or destroyed: after their perilous 8,000 migration and 9 months on the wing, they desperately try to get in but many fatally break their wings, or surviving, fail to find new sites in time to breed, thus preventing them from contributing to the population. With no mitigation in place, this policy would help counter the huge and increasing losses of nesting sites across the country. Once a swift brick is installed, there will be a permanent, zero maintenance, legacy, that no longer relies on the awareness and action of individual homeowners, so this is a unique opportunity for DLUHC to create a unique legacy: without new developments including swift bricks, the populations of all target species are likely to continue to decline because eventually all old buildings will be repaired, insulated or demolished, leaving next to no cavity nesting sites.

Therefore, a national policy here would be a small and straight forward solution for small urban birds. While the need for new developments and the push for more wildlife friendly farming practices are progressing, the issue of actively supporting red-listed, urban birds in the form of cavity nesting birds is lagging. This national policy would have great impact not just on the birds but on us: urban birds live so close to us, they provide us with an invaluable connection with nature which is even more relevant when the majority of people in the UK live in urban areas (56.6 million of our UK population, in 2021 – Statista).

Government targets:

Swift bricks are a bespoke, necessary and cost-effective way of halting both general and specific-species biodiversity loss, and provide connectivity, maintaining biodiversity within urban environments.

The solution of swift bricks and the proposed policy therefore links to Goals A and B, and Targets 4, 8, 21 and directly to Target 12 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework that states ‘ensure biodiversity-inclusive urban planning’.

The Environment Act’s first target is ‘Halt the decline in species populations by 2030, and then increase populations by at least 10% to exceed current levels by 2042.’

This is reiterated in the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. Target 4 states, ‘Ensure urgent management actions to halt human induced extinction of known threatened species and for the recovery and conservation of species, in particular threatened species, to significantly reduce extinction risk.’

HM Government’s Environmental Improvement Plan 2023’s goal 1 ‘thriving plants and wildlife’ and goal 10 ‘enhancing beauty, heritage and engagement with the natural environment’ also directly apply.

Swift bricks could therefore be justified as being included in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill. Once a swift brick is installed, there will be a permanent, zero maintenance legacy, that no longer relies on the awareness and action of individual homeowners, while also presenting no insulation conflict with the wall.



Swift bricks are highly suitable for developments since the majority of houses are built out of bricks or blocks, with brick or rendered facings. For cladding facades, there are also options available allowing the house builders to comply with their strict aesthetic requirements and sustainable changes in building materials. Pictured in swift bricks here: Common swift, House martin, House sparrow.

What would the proposed policy be based on?

A proposed national policy would be based on the work of leading Local Planning Authorities such as Cornwall, and industry bodies such as the UK Green Building Council, the NHBC Foundation, and the British Standards Institute, the latter already recommending a 1:1 ratio for swift bricks and every new dwelling.

Do swift bricks work?

Yes. Localised surveys from the largest installations of swift bricks on the Duchy estates, Barratt Homes developments, and localised swift box installation to mitigate loss of nesting sites, all show strong occupancy rates (up to 96%), increasing over time, from a range of cavity-nesting, urban bird species and invertebrates proving that swift bricks are a ‘no regrets’ conservation measure. More detailed information including full reports are available – please email me: hannahbournetaylor@gmail.com

Why are swift bricks needed on a national scale?

Because red-listed, cavity-nesting urban birds are in sharp decline. Swift conservation expert and inventor of the S brick (a type of swift brick) estimates that to significantly restore the swift population nationally, at least 270,000 swift bricks would need to be installed on the basis of 100% occupancy, to target just this one species, so catering for 4 cavity-nesting, urban birds, would need more. This tally fits well into the annual target of 300,000 new houses per year while also reiterating the need for a national policy to ensure the installation of swift bricks on a national scale. For context, the current total amount of swift bricks installed in the UK by all developers is between 10,000-20,000 (more likely to be 10k) which just is no where near enough. These birds bring joy to communities, schools and groups welcoming swifts home with parades and banners across the UK and as they live and breed in the same hole each year for a remarkable 20 years, they are long standing members of our communities. This policy would create a legacy for our closest wild neighbours, as well as us, and allow our children and future generations to have the special connection with the nature on our doorstep that we have had.

Legacy, ESG, Homeowner Wellness and Heritage

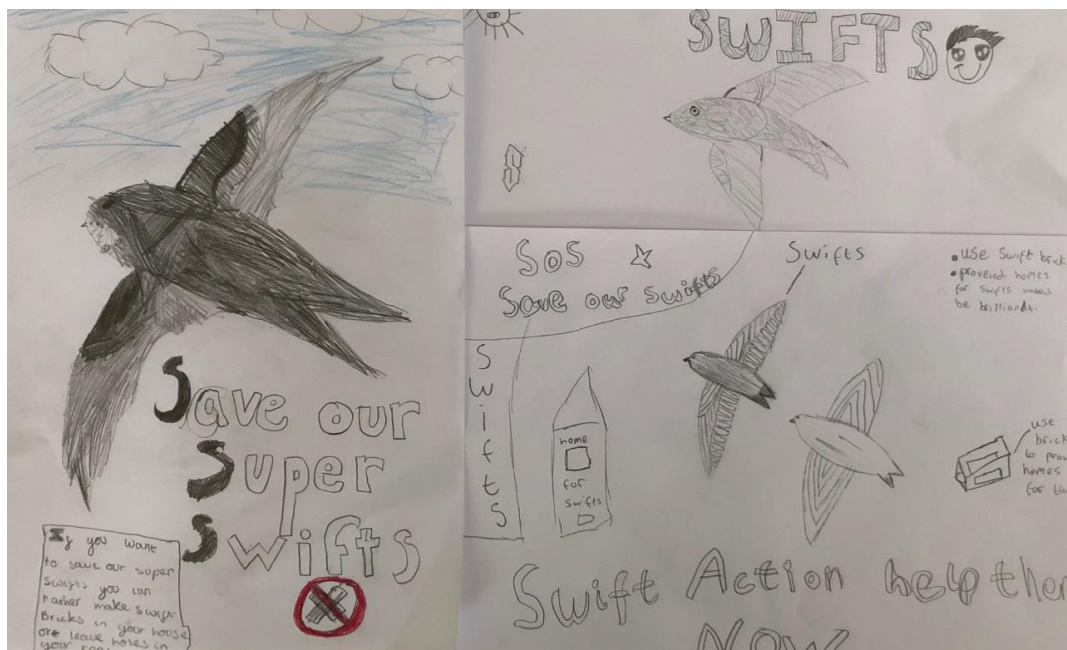
Reactions of residents to bird bricks and boxes in their homes are overwhelmingly positive (Roberts 2017). Scientific evidence of eco anxiety effecting younger generations in particular is alarming, with a 2021 study ([Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: a global survey - The Lancet Planetary Health](#)) revealing almost 60% of young people say they feel ‘extremely’ worried about climate change and more than 45% of saying their feelings about climate change negatively affected their daily lives. Birds and birdsong have now been scientifically proven to be a mental health benefit to people. A 2022 study ([Smartphone-based ecological momentary assessment reveals mental health benefits of birdlife | Scientific Reports \(nature.com\)](#)) led by academics from King’s College London found that everyday encounters with birds boosted the mood of people with depression, as well as the wider population. The findings also highlighted the need to better protect the environment and improve biodiversity in order to preserve bird habitats. This policy would help counter eco anxiety by action helping red-listed birds, and create a valuable opportunity for homeowners to connect with urban birds and species who have been cherished within communities for generations.



Swifts are true urban birds. Thérèse Coffey, pictured with members of the Suffolk swift conservation group, in April 2023 who supports this petition.

Cavity-nesting urban birds have lived alongside us since we settled. House sparrows were a Greek mythology symbol for love, while Common swifts are dubbed ‘icons’ and ‘heralds’ of summer with communities across the UK throwing welcome home parties and school parades for them every May.

Swifts spend more time airborne than any other bird on earth, spending nine months on the wing, leaving our walls in August returning the following May, crossing the Sahara twice, and sleeping in the sky, yet they nest and breed in our walls. Once a pair of swifts find a new nesting site in the form of a swift brick, it will remain their home for life which for swifts can be twenty years, becoming long standing members of our communities. The maximum legacy for just one swift brick and one pair of breeding swifts equates to over fifty offspring. Swift bricks provide a safe home, without any conflict to our own insulation needs, to birds who have existed for 70 million years. As urban birds, swifts are well loved members of the community, flying through villages and towns in astonishing aerobatic displays (fighter jet design was inspired by swifts’ speed and how their wings allow them to manoeuvre). With over 100,000 signatures, this petition showcases the support, and need, for the government to help protect British biodiversity in the form of, literally, our closest wild neighbours.



Many schools have been involved in The Feather Speech campaign, adults acutely aware that their children and grandchildren could miss out on the valuable nature connectivity these birds bring to our everyday lives.

Rebuttal to government response

The DLUHC petition response justified not changing anything for reasons based mainly on ineffective/inappropriateness of swift bricks in some developments and due to it being a matter for Local Planning Authorities. The following summary myth busts the government’s reasoning to not change anything, from Jon Day, RSPB’s Urban Land Management Advisor, Michael Priaulx, an expert on Planning Issues for the Swift Local Network and sustainable building assessor, and Guy Anderson, RSPB’s UK Migrants Recovery Programme Manager.

In summary:

Government says: this is a matter for Local Authorities

Experts counter:

- Local Authorities often have no resource to check developers have implemented the swift bricks in their buildings.
- Despite extensive guidelines, many ecologists are still unaware of the need for swift bricks, especially since none of the birds swift bricks cater for are protected species which means that many ecologists don't know about these species' needs.
- Despite swift brick options on the market, many developers aren't aware of this option as a measure.

Government says: swift bricks are not inappropriate for high-density schemes

Experts counter:

- Connectivity to wildlife is largely irrelevant for swift and House martin nesting sites because they can fly significant distances to feed and therefore do not require connecting habitat in proximity to their nesting sites. Swifts and House martins are true urban birds. From the most high-density urban city through large towns to the smallest village, they are almost completely reliant on buildings in which to nest.
- When swift bricks are included in new housing developments, all the evidence shows that they are beneficial not only for swifts, but other wildlife, including other red-listed bird species and invertebrates.
- Crucially, without swift bricks, new developments will offer no connectivity or nesting habitat for cavity nesting urban birds. With invertebrates using swift bricks as a winter shelter, there is no instance where a swift brick would be inappropriate. Over time, as the new development's BNG measures of vegetated habitat develop, surveys show that occupancy rate and diversity of species, increases.

Cost implications for developers:

Currently swift bricks cost between £29-150 each, making them one of the most cost-effective conservation measures. A major developer has been interviewed on Channel 4 news, a feature that will broadcast the week before the debate, stating the cost is no problem and they would actively prefer a national policy around swift bricks.

Statements of support this petition

Housebuilder

'Thakeham support the campaign's call for an industry-wide commitment to delivering support for this red-list species. As a housebuilder, Thakeham recognise the opportunity we have to support nature recovery through the landscape-led masterplanning, but also within the homes we build.' – Josie Cadwallader-Hughes, Sustainability Director, Thakeham Homes Ltd.

Ecology consultants:

Atkins from leading ecologist: [swifts statement of support Claire Wansbury.pdf](#) (worth reading and potentially quoting)

Environment Consultancy Middlesbrough:

‘The installation of swift bricks is a vital step in helping this charismatic species to thrive in our nature-depleted urban spaces. The development of our towns and cities has seen a huge number of traditional nesting sites lost, creating a hostile environment for swifts and other declining cavity-nesting birds. Swift bricks in all new housing developments would be a significant step towards reversing the alarming trend for localised extinctions of bird populations and would provide an important contribution towards national and international targets for the recovery of biodiversity, including the ‘30 by 30’ aim enshrined in COP15’s Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. In 2022, over 12% of land in the UK was occupied by the built environment and residential gardens (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022 [Land use statistics: England 2022 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)), which underscores how essential it is that our urban spaces are not neglected when designing strategies to achieve the nature recovery aims to which the UK Government is a signatory. Alongside our political obligations, the return of these species to our urban skies, parks and gardens would also greatly enrich the natural environment that is so vital for our health and wellbeing. For these reasons, amongst many others, the importance of taking proactive steps to safeguard and restore our declining urban biodiversity cannot be understated.’

RSPB

Swifts are a true urban bird. From the most high-density urban city through large towns to the smallest village, they are almost completely reliant on buildings in which to nest. They often breed close together in the same buildings where a number of boxes/bricks or cavities are available.

While other house-nesting bird species may require connected habitat in proximity to nest boxes from which they can glean invertebrates, seeds and fruits, Swifts on the other hand, do not forage on or in vegetation. They are specialist aerial feeders who can travel 40 miles or more in a round trip from their nesting colonies to gather airborne insects on which to feed their young.

When Swift bricks are included in new housing developments, all the evidence shows that they are beneficial not only for Swifts, but other wildlife, including other red-listed bird species.