

# Tory MPs back mandatory swift bricks in all new homes to help declining birds

**Calls grow for legislation requiring developers to include hollow bricks for endangered nesting species**

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Thu 6 Jul 2023 10.00 BST

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Conservative MPs are joining calls for a new law to guarantee swift bricks in every new home to help the rapidly declining bird and other endangered roof-nesting species.

Pressure is growing to amend the levelling up bill so that developers are required to include a hollow brick for nesting birds in all new housing, with MPs to debate the issue in parliament on 10 July.

A **petition for swift bricks**, which are also used by other endangered species such as house martins, house sparrows and starlings, was launched by the writer **Hannah Bourne-Taylor** and gained more than 100,000 signatures.

The swift migrates from Africa to Europe every summer, nesting in roofs and bringing its distinctive screaming calls to cities and towns, but it has **declined by at least 60%** since 1995. Its decline is linked to drastic losses in the airborne insects it feeds on but also to home improvements and energy efficient new houses sealing up the crevices where it once nested.

“The swift is an urban bird that comes right into your own territory and shares it and brings infectious joy,” Bourne-Taylor said. “This is the perfect policy. It exists, it’s proven to work and there are no real cost implications. This is arguably the most simple and cost-effective environmental and biodiversity measure in existence.

“We can help these birds that have existed for 65m years with a brick, and in return they will scream in delight.”

Conservatives are urging a new national policy of **mandatory swift bricks** for new homes, which campaigners want the government to insert into the levelling up bill.

Duncan Baker, the Conservative MP for North Norfolk, said: “Swift bricks are a straightforward and inexpensive convention that can be used to save this declining species, through safeguarding their habitat with everyday building materials. Frankly, I cannot see a better use

made of the levelling up and regeneration bill than leveraging its potential to introduce a national policy to protect this iconic British bird.”

Zac Goldsmith, the former Foreign Office minister who **resigned last week**, said: “This is such a simple step for government to take, costing virtually nothing but giving a meaningful boost to struggling species. I urge [the secretary for levelling up, housing and communities] Michael Gove to take it.”

Sam Hall, the director of the influential **Conservative Environment Network**, said: “Mandatory swift bricks in new homes could provide many more safe nesting places for swifts and other cavity-nesting birds. It’s a quick, simple, and cheap measure to restore nature, which would not conflict with important housebuilding targets. I hope ministers listen to Conservative Environment Network MPs calling for this measure.”

Robert Courts, the Conservative MP for Witney, said: “Our planning system should encourage nature, not work against it, and the government should think carefully about how we can integrate more swift bricks into new developments.”

The government has so far resisted calls for mandatory swift bricks, arguing that local authorities can make their own planning conditions to require them.

According to local authorities, however, it is difficult to insert such requirements into local plans that are revised only once in a decade, and councils are often overruled by the Planning Inspectorate if they attempt strong environmental measures.

Only eight local authorities have what campaigners describe as effective swift brick measures, with fewer than 20,000 swift bricks installed across the country. Campaigners report multiple instances where developers have promised swift bricks in new homes and then failed to deliver them.

Even if swifts are not attracted to the bricks – some enthusiasts play swift calls to successfully encourage them – dozens of other species use the nesting cavities, including blue tits, wrens and invertebrates. Starlings, house sparrows and house martins, which are all on the **red list of most endangered British birds**, are particular beneficiaries of the bricks, which are unobtrusive and cost as little as £29. Bourne-Taylor decided to start a campaign for swift bricks on Britain’s hottest ever day last summer, when she was trying to help heat-stricken birds. She launched the campaign at Speaker’s Corner

in Hyde Park painted in feathers and wearing only a thong on the anniversary of swifts being added to the red list.

She said: “I started the campaign naked and alone – I’m an introverted nature writer – and I had no idea any media would turn up. To see the petition whoosh past 100,000 – now I’m not naked and not alone. The environmental crisis is so overwhelming, I’ve felt so helpless but this has proven that people care and are willing to work together. It proves that passion is a superpower and it’s making people realise that they can make a difference.”

The Green MP Caroline Lucas, who will speak in support of the campaign in **the parliamentary debate**, said: “Swift bricks and boxes are such an easy, practical solution to tackle our declining bird population. They are by no means limited to swifts – they can be used by sparrows, starlings, blue tits, great tits and many others, all vital to a rich and biodiverse natural world.

“Brighton and Hove has already got the ball rolling by making them a requirement for the vast majority of new developments in the city, but we desperately need these regulations to be replicated across the country – and I sincerely hope this parliamentary debate will spur the government on. We mustn’t let future generations miss out on the wonders of nature.”

**Mark Cocker**, the author of **One Midsummer’s Day**, a new book celebrating the swift, said a national swift brick policy would be a welcome positive step but it must not become a token gesture by governments who fail to address insect decline caused by pesticide use.

“Let’s not overlook 80 years of agricultural poison and intensive factory farming which has caused massive insect declines,” he said. “These are international birds and they live in a world of international jeopardy