

## Briefing

# What the King's speech 2023 said (and did not say) about the environment and nature

7 November 2023



Just weeks away from the UN Climate Summit, COP28, the King's speech was an opportunity for the government to set out a clear vision for a greener future. Instead, with one of the lightest legislative programmes in a decade, the government missed a vital opportunity to set out a positive agenda that delivers for people and planet.

### What was in the speech and why does it matter?

As expected, the government announced an **Offshore Petroleum Licensing Bill**, establishing an annual system for awarding licences. These licences are an agreement between a company and the government that give a company the right to explore and plan for oil and gas developments.

**Why this matters:** New oil and gas developments put the goal of the Paris Agreement to limit the global average temperature increase to 1.5°C at serious risk, according to the International Energy Agency, UN Environment Programme, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and numerous climate scientists. The UK's Climate Change Committee (CCC) also confirmed in June that the expansion of fossil fuel production is not in line with the UK's net zero commitments.

The central problem facing the UK is not one of energy supply, but energy affordability. Energy bills are still twice what they were two years ago, and an estimated six million households are in fuel poverty as we head into winter.

The government also announced a **Tobacco and Vapes Bill**, looking to restrict the sale and supply of disposable vapes (and restricting the sale of tobacco so that children aged fourteen or younger can never be sold cigarettes).

**Why this matters:** While we welcome the government looking at the issues around vaping, with [five million](#) disposable vapes thrown away every week in the UK, this does not begin to tackle the environmental damage caused by single use devices. Every single use vape contains a rechargeable battery, made from finite critical raw materials like lithium and copper. In the past year enough lithium has been disposed of to create 5,000 batteries for electric cars. The government should bring in a full prohibition on the sale of disposable vapes.

The government also announced a **Leasehold and Freehold Bill**, aiming to make it easier for leaseholders to extend their lease, buy their freehold, and take over the management of their building.

**Why this matters:** There are huge issues around the quality and affordability of housing in the UK, with the UK branded as having the worst insulated

housing stock in Western Europe. The terms of leases can often [prevent necessary energy efficiency improvements](#) going ahead, one of many contributing factors to the prediction that there will be 11 million households in fuel poverty this winter. Alongside this leasehold reform, the government should introduce minimum energy efficiency standards for people living in the private rented sector. The **Renters Reform Bill** is a significant opportunity to do that.

## What wasn't in the speech?

While it is possible for the government to introduce other new bills during the parliamentary session, there were a number of anticipated bills that were conspicuous by their absence in the King's speech.

On the transport side, the speech didn't include the briefed measures that would limit the powers of local authorities to make it more difficult to introduce policies such as ultra-low emissions zones or 20mph speed limits but did include plans for an **Automated Vehicles Bill** and a **Rail Reform Bill**.

## What should have been in the speech?

### Prioritising clean energy generation

The government risks undermining confidence in the UK's energy transition and deterring the investment needed to make it a success. Instead, it has focused recent announcements on delaying key net zero policies and expanding the role of oil and gas in the transition.

- **Onshore wind farms remain harder to build than new coal mines.** Decisions on development still require under-resourced local councils to proactively set out where onshore wind turbines can be built, and investors and developers can't be confident the same approval process will be followed each time. To meet our 2035 target for decarbonising the UK electricity supply and reduce energy costs for households and businesses, the government should continue with its broader reform of the planning system and allow councils to treat onshore wind like any other piece of infrastructure.
- **We can't reach net zero if we keep heating our homes with gas.** However, last year [the UK installed](#) the lowest number of heat pumps per capita among comparator countries. A clean heat market mechanism would create incentives for companies to install heat pumps, but [the government is yet to respond to consultation over the policy](#) when we need to start implementing it. If this is done effectively and fairly, it will reduce the upfront cost of heat pumps, kickstart the supply and installation markets, and expand heat pump manufacturing in the UK.
- **Reducing methane emissions will be central to reaching net zero.** Methane emissions have accounted for around a quarter of the net rise in global average temperatures since the pre-industrial era. the UK must show leadership, taking concrete actions to lower emissions at home and

supporting other countries to do the same. That means implementing easy changes right now, like supporting farmers to use methane suppressant feed for livestock; ending routine venting and flaring of methane in the North Sea; and requiring landfill operators to capture 80 per cent of methane emissions.

### **Making nature recovery an integral part of policy making**

The King's speech is a missed opportunity for nature's recovery. Across the UK, species studied have declined on average by 19 per cent since 1970, and nearly one in six are threatened with extinction in Great Britain.

- **The government is running out of time to enact its commitment to end retail sales of peat by 2024.** Peatlands are our largest natural carbon stores, locking away over 580 million tonnes, and provide many other public benefits including helping to reduce flood risk, produce clean water and provide a home for many important species. A ban on the sale of peat-based compost is an essential step toward protecting and restoring these valuable natural assets. The government must now explain how it will meet this commitment which is an essential component of achieving net zero and the goals of the 25 year environment plan.

### **Get serious about curbing waste and using resources well**

Delays to the resources and waste strategy for England and watering down of ambitions mean we continue to consume around twice as many resources per person as the UN says is sustainable.

- **We need binding targets on resource use.** Instead, the government has adopted a single target on residual waste reduction per capita, excluding most construction waste. The target ignores the upstream impacts of resource use and lacks ambition, as it is based on achieving a recycling rate by 2042 which has already been achieved in parts of Wales, and which will not provide any incentive for reducing resource use overall, or for increasing repair, reuse and remanufacturing. This should be reconsidered, with the government making use of its powers under the Environment Act 2021 to set a resource use target. This would demonstrate that the government remains committed to ambitious action to reduce resource use and waste and create a more circular economy.

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