

# Briefing

## What the environment and nature need from **the 2023 King's Speech**

2 November 2023



Political leaders have recently calculated that there may be political advantages to creating dividing lines on environmental policy, even though climate change ranks among the UK public's top [three concerns](#) and [polling suggests](#) anti-environmental policy makes parties less electable.

Following Rishi Sunak's recent review of environmental policy, the amount of carbon emissions required by 2032 to meet net zero targets, but not covered by confirmed policy, rose to 21 per cent from 13 per cent at the start of this year, according to Green Alliance analysis.

Ahead of the King's Speech, we believe that the UK does not need a significant new legislative agenda: it should deliver on the policies and targets that the government has already committed to.

### [Send a clear signal that clean energy is a priority](#)

Why this matters

Recent government announcements delaying key net zero policies risk undermining confidence in the UK's energy transition and deterring the investment needed to make it a success.

The Energy Act 2023 is a major step forward on the path to decarbonising, but the government will need to use the powers it contains to their full potential. For example, the government is not yet in a position to help rapidly scale up onshore wind, even though [80 per cent](#) of the public support its development.

The government recently amended the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) so that applications to build onshore windfarms can't be quashed by a single objection, but they remain harder to build than new coal mines. Decisions still require under-resourced local councils to 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 the 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.

Meanwhile, the UK's climate watchdog has been clear that net zero can't be reached if we keep heating our homes with gas, but 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 it should be 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.

### Make nature recovery integral to policy making

Why this matters

Across the UK, species studied have declined on average by 19 per cent since 1970, and nearly one in six are threatened with extinction.

A new legal duty for policy makers to have “due regard” to the environmental principles policy statement will have an impact on what bills are included in the King’s Speech. But it’s critical that this is taken seriously. For example, the government’s overall legislative programme should support and not undermine principles like the ‘polluter must pay’. Reversing nature decline will require a strong focus on delivering the Environmental Improvement Plan, Environment Act targets and programmes such as biodiversity net gain and local nature recovery strategies, as well as ensuring greater parity for nature protection with climate change in policy making.

### Be serious about curbing waste and using resources well

Why this matters

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

Instead of setting a target for resource use, the government has adopted a single target on residual waste reduction per capita, excluding most construction waste. This 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 increasing repair, reuse and remanufacturing. This should be reconsidered, with a resource use target that demonstrates the government will take ambitious steps towards reducing resource use and waste and creating a more circular economy.

### What to expect in the King’s Speech

The government is expected to announce legislation that would [establish](#) an annual system for awarding licences in a new Energy Bill. 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.

The government is also planning a new ‘[leasehold law](#)’ to tackle the fees imposed on homeowners with specific rights to a property for a fixed length of time through the Renters Reform Bill. We believe the government should introduce minimum energy efficiency standards for people living in the private rented sector, and that this bill is a significant opportunity to do that.

The speech is likely to include measures which limit the powers of local authorities and make it more difficult to introduce policies such as 20mph speed limits or ultra-low emissions zones in a Transport Bill. These transport-focused [announcements](#) may also include the regulation of pedicabs, rules on the use of e-scooters and legislation to deal with driverless cars powered by artificial intelligence.

Finally, there is a suggestion that the speech will contain a new system for the government to assess [water quality](#) standards, after recent reports that the UK may [diverge](#) from the European Union's standards for testing water.

### Does the UK need more oil and gas, and who will benefit?

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

New data from [Uplift](#) shows that hundreds of North Sea licences have been issued in six rounds since 2010. Yet, to date, just 16 days' worth of gas has been produced and half of this has been exported to the Netherlands. Oil and gas produced in the UK belongs to the companies that extract it, not the UK state. This means new oil and gas production here does not affect the market price and, therefore, the price UK consumers pay, as government ministers have made clear (eg [here](#) and [here](#)).

### Does the government need to restrict council powers on transport?

There is little evidence of a countrywide war on motorists. In recent years, the main policies relevant to drivers have been a 12 year fuel duty freeze, which has disproportionately benefited the richest households which drive, on average, [three times](#) further a year than the most deprived households. And a combined [£122 billion](#) in public funds have been spent on new or existing roads.

Driving is still expensive which is probably why those on lower incomes are less likely to drive than their richer neighbours. According to [Onward](#), there is more support for, than opposition to, traffic reduction measures in city centres, alongside a desire for greater investment in public transport, such as electric buses.

### Does the **government's** agenda make sense for the environment and nature?

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 and numerous climate scientists. The Climate Change Committee also confirmed in June that the expansion of fossil fuel production is not in line with the UK's net zero commitments.

In terms of water quality, changing our standards now would make it more difficult to compare the state of the UK's waterways with those in the EU and leave the public in the dark over pollution at a time when sewage is being discharged into rivers [daily](#).

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