

# Briefing

## Four tests for the 2024 King's Speech: did it deliver for the environment?



17 July 2024

We are in the middle of a critical decade for action on the climate and nature crises, yet action is not progressing at the scale and speed necessary. This government has been elected with a clear mandate to turn the UK into a clean energy superpower and has an opportunity to set the course for a future which prioritises climate and nature.

The King's Speech rightly recognised the centrality of environmental action to not only cut greenhouse gas emissions and demonstrate international leadership, but create jobs, clean our air and tackle the cost of living crisis.

**So did the Kings' Speech deliver? Here's what happened and why it matters.**

### **What we needed: The climate and nature crises are the centre of new legislation**

The King's Speech sets the tone for this parliamentary term and has the potential to shape the climate debate for years to come. Legislation needed to go beyond climate compatibility, ensuring climate and nature are at the heart of policy development.

#### **What did we see:**

Environment was threaded through the speech and several bills were announced which will help deliver on environmental priorities. There will be further opportunities in the drafting of these bills to be clear how they contribute to creating a clean economy and restoring the natural environment.

As expected, Labour launched the **Passenger Railway Services (Public Ownership) Bill** as a first measure to enable public ownership of rail services as existing franchise contracts expire. This will be followed by the **Railways Bill** to set up Great British Railways (GBR), responsible for the operation of the railways, running services and the network. We welcome the establishment of GBR to co-ordinate and improve services and ticketing. We will be looking for a draft bill to entrench climate responsibility into GBR's constitution and planning to maximise the potential of rail to change how we travel. There was also a welcome recognition of the importance of shifting more freight to rail. Alongside these reforms, we saw a commitment to improved rail connectivity in the north of England through repurposing the **High Speed Rail (Crewe to Manchester) Bill**.

Labour brought back and strengthened the **Renters Reform Bill**, which plans to extend **Awaab's Law** and a **Decent Homes Standard** to private rentals. Together,

these plans protect tenants from cold, leaky homes and empower renters to improve the energy efficiency of their homes without fear of eviction.

The sewage scandal has dominated headlines for well over a year. Today's speech outlined Labour's response in a **Water (Special Measures) Bill**, focused on cleaning up waterways and ensuring value for money for bill payers. The bill means water bosses in England and Wales will face personal criminal liability for lawbreaking, whilst Ofwat will be able to ban bonuses for water companies failing to prevent pollution and meet environmental standards. Tackling sewage, agriculture and chemical pollution is vital for the health of both the public and the natural world.

A new **Skills England Bill** was introduced to simplify and improve the skills system, working to develop a single picture of national and local skills needs. This is essential as the UK is facing acute skills shortages across the sectors it most urgently needs to decarbonise. As such, the government should ensure that the number of green apprenticeships grows through their reforms.

As promised, a **National Wealth Fund (NWF) Bill** set out plans to deliver growth and a greener economy. Capitalised with an additional £7.3 billion, the NWF will make investments in priority sectors across the UK. The Fund will deploy funding through the UK infrastructure Bank, aiming to generate £3 of private sector investment for every £1 it invests.

The **Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF) Bill** is needed to kickstart the SAF mandate that requires two per cent of the jet fuel supplied in the UK to be SAF in 2025. To fulfil the "polluter pays" principle, the revenue mechanism should be funded by the industry and should not be used as a basis to expand airports in the short term. There is also a risk that creating SAF from waste streams could lock in high levels of waste generation or simply divert waste from existing treatment plants.

### **What we needed: The planning debate moved from slogans to nuance**

Planning is a cornerstone of both the 2030 clean power mission and tackling the housing crisis. In their manifesto, Labour rightly promised to get Britain building again but this need not come at the expense of nature. The government had to demonstrate its understanding of the nuance needed to strategically and effectively tackle the planning agenda, and ensure reform supports the restoration of the country's natural environment.

#### **What did we see:**

Planning reform was a central feature of the speech, encompassing housebuilding to energy infrastructure, the government set out plans to introduce a **Planning and Infrastructure Bill**. This will streamline the delivery process for critical infrastructure and simplify the rules around National Policy Statements, establishing a review process for them to be updated every five years. These are essential moves, but they must build in measures on nature recovery from the outset, as we cannot tackle the climate crisis or thrive as people without a healthy natural world. The mention of using development to unlock funding for nature's recovery suggests a pragmatic approach to delivering the government's "unwavering" commitment to the environment, which if done well can drive growth, enhance nature and accelerate

housebuilding and infrastructure delivery. We welcome the commitment to do this in partnership with stakeholders, including nature delivery organisations.

### **What we needed: Local authorities empowered to act on climate change.**

Local authorities will play an important role in delivering climate action, including rolling out home improvements and more accessible public transport.

#### **What did we see:**

The announcement of the long-awaited **English Devolution Bill** which will devolve powers to local communities, mayors and council authorities. This will make it easier to facilitate pro-environment decision making, ensuring local decision makers can take on extra powers. However, the bill must be cognisant of the current level of under-resourcing that will continue to hamper councils unless addressed.

The **Better Buses Bill** will offer all local areas the chance to franchise bus services, in a similar way to Transport for London, and allow the creation of new publicly owned bus operators. This would give them the power to set routes and fares and remove poor providers. This is essential as buses remain the most used form of public transport across the country and provide customers with an unrivalled low cost and green option for travel. We welcome plans to reform funding, which should be given in five year settlements to allow local transport authorities to plan and budget for zero emission buses. With the bus fare cap expiring this year, a strengthened £1 bus fare cap would go further to tackle cost of living pressures and prevent a price cliff edge

### **What we needed: Long term certainty for the energy sector**

Years of stop and start investment has left the energy sector reeling, the sector has long been calling for a detailed plan of action to offer clarity.

#### **What did we see:**

After months of debate, the King's Speech finally provided clarity over the set-up of **Great British Energy**, a state-owned company that will oversee investment in green energy. GB Energy was confirmed to have a budget of £8.3 billion over five years and will co-invest to speed up capital intensive power projects. This is essential as private sector investment alone is unlikely to achieve the scale and pace of investment needed to achieve a clean power system.

There had been expectations of a broader energy independence bill which would push for action in other areas including community energy and the North Sea. This bill is now expected to be announced in the next parliamentary term whilst foundations are set through GB Energy and the planning bill. The government also set out intentions to modernise the **Crown Estate** by widening its investment powers and giving it the powers to borrow to invest at a faster pace. This will unlock significant investment in public infrastructure such as marine investment needed to quadruple offshore wind capacity. Whilst accelerating offshore energy infrastructure, the Crown Estate must also ensure it adequately protects the seabed, a vital carbon store and marine habitat which is itself crucial to tackling climate change. A draft bill

should set out how it will take account of environmental principles as it approaches this work.

## What wasn't in the speech?

### **Support for households**

With energy bills still around £400 higher than 2021, commitment to renewable energy and energy efficiency are not enough to support households in the short term. We would have liked to see measures announced to deliver the manifesto commitment on standing charges as well as rebalancing levies on bills. We would also welcome more detail on the Warm Homes Plan, a central component to bringing down bills.

### **Clean Air Bill**

This King's Speech was a missed opportunity for the government to commit to stronger targets that align with World Health Organization guidelines to clean up the air we breathe and reduce the burden of pollution on the NHS.

### **Overdue legislation**

Whilst the King's Speech made some important strides for the environment, it failed to progress important environmental legislation that fell in the previous parliament due to the sudden election. This includes a bill to ban the use of peat in garden compost, which is damaging our peatlands, a huge store of carbon already in poor condition. A bill to ratify the Global Oceans Treaty was also missing, despite previous support from Labour, which could hamper efforts for international marine protection.

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