

# **General Election 2024**

## Climate change priorities for the next UK government

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# Introduction

This year's General Election in the UK takes place against a backdrop of worsening climate change impacts at home and around the world, with heatwaves and more intense storms already affecting lives and livelihoods across the country and increasing pressure on vital public services like the NHS.

As the window of opportunity to limit the worst effects of climate change narrows, the next government will need to put the UK firmly on track to deliver the near-term emissions reductions needed to meet domestic carbon budgets and international commitments to keep global temperature rise to 1.5°C and should double down on efforts to promote a more resilient economy and society. This will not only avoid the worst climate impacts, but it will also deliver widespread economic, social and health benefits for households and businesses and will reassert the UK's climate leadership on the global stage.

## **To meet this challenge, the next UK government should:**

1. Put the UK firmly on track to meet its emission reduction commitments, to deliver a stronger economy and benefit communities across the country
2. Boost resilience and reduce the vulnerability of UK communities, businesses and infrastructure to the increasing impacts of a warmer climate
3. Ensure a just transition for workers, consumers and citizens
4. Ensure that decision-making about climate change policies is informed by the best available expertise and advice
5. Ensure the UK demonstrates international leadership on climate change

# Put the UK firmly on track to meet its emission reduction commitments, to deliver a stronger economy and benefit communities across the country

In 2019, the UK was the first major economy to adopt a net zero target in law. Despite progress to meet the first to fourth carbon budgets, the latest progress report by the Climate Change Committee (CCC) states that the current policy programme is insufficient to meet the fifth (2028-32) and sixth (2033-37) carbon budgets. Failure to meet future carbon budgets imperils the UK's statutory target of cutting its emissions to net zero by 2050. Failing to deliver on net zero would undermine the UK's ability to contribute to global efforts to limit the dangerous impacts of climate change and threaten the long-term resilience, productivity and competitiveness of the UK economy.

Putting the UK back on track to meet its domestic and international emission reduction commitments requires a focus on delivering the necessary policies that accelerate action, particularly those that offer multiple benefits, such as reduced air pollution and restoration of ecosystems.

## **The next government should:**

**1. Scale up public investment and crowd private investment into the sustainable economy to promote the transition to net zero emissions, alongside adaptation and the mitigation of biodiversity loss and environmental degradation.** The Independent Review of Net Zero led by Chris Skidmore MP made a strong case to grasp 'the growth opportunity of the 21st century' (Skidmore, 2023). Recent research from the Grantham Research Institute and others estimates that the UK should increase annual public investment by the equivalent of at least 1% of GDP (£26 billion at current prices), as part of a rise in annual overall public and private investment equivalent to at least 3% of GDP (£77 billion), in order to make up for decades of underinvestment, achieve the country's environmental objectives, and to make it a productive and competitive economy in the future (Zenghelis et al., 2024).

Evidence from the first year of the USA's Inflation Reduction and CHIPS acts suggests that in excess of \$224 billion has been crowded in to clean

technology and semiconductor manufacturing projects (Chu et al., 2023). Such evidence exemplifies the benefits of a clearly-signalled industrial strategy, with transparent and attractive incentives. The UK has policy support in place for individual technologies that are important for net zero, such as carbon capture, utilisation and storage (CCUS), hydrogen and small modular nuclear reactors. However, it lacks a coordinated overall strategy to ensure the country is able to maximise and capture economic opportunities from the demand for these technologies that is set to grow both domestically and internationally on the way to net zero.

**2. Set out a comprehensive policy programme to secure delivery of decarbonisation solutions this decade.** Many of the solutions required to meet net zero are well-known – but require significantly more uptake. While continuing to support the development and deployment of more innovative technologies such as CCUS, greenhouse gas removal and hydrogen to promote net emission reductions in the 2030s and 2040s, the Government must also focus on the deployment of proven interventions, such as upgrading buildings with electric heat pumps and improved insulation, and incentivising the uptake of zero-emission vehicles and more accessible public/active transport options.

Alongside targeted public investment, scaling up these actions will require a combination of improved regulations and measures to address skills and labour market constraints, which are known to hamper the retrofitting sector (Valero et al., 2021), and strategic infrastructure upgrades (CCC, 2023a).

In particular, the CCC (2023a) indicated that clear and consistent regulation, along with an improved planning system, is essential for timely completion of infrastructure projects for zero-emissions energy, from renewable generators to transmission lines, with much of the investment expected to come from the private sector. Similarly, the current planning system is slowing down the development of zero-emissions houses and infrastructure, largely due to excessive control by landowners (Zenghelis et al., 2024).

**3. Ensure all Departments, Agencies and levels of government contribute appropriately to the achievement of emissions targets.** The CCC (2023a) has singled out the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) as failing to achieve priority recommendations and making insufficient or no progress on a large majority of non-priority recommendations. For example, the Carbon Budget Delivery Plan is significantly less ambitious on agriculture and land use than for other sectors (CCC, 2023a). This must change, with all parts of government effectively contributing to the delivery of climate action.

Regional and local governments are essential to delivering climate action that aligns with local needs. UK central government must empower regional and local governments to deliver their net zero ambitions, for example by reforming local planning and simplifying the funding landscape (Skidmore, 2023; Blueprint Coalition, 2021).

# Boost resilience and reduce the vulnerability of UK communities, businesses and infrastructure to the increasing impacts of a warmer climate

Climatic changes, spurred by historical emissions, are already causing growing impacts in the UK, such as sea level rise and more intense and frequent extreme weather events, including heatwaves and heavy rainfall. Scientific studies have shown that human-induced climate change is making events like the UK 2022 summer heatwaves and the heavy rainfall from winter storms experienced in 2023/24 more likely and more intense (Zacharia et al., 2022; Few et al., 2024).

The impacts of extreme weather are already serious: the 2022 heatwaves were associated with almost 3,000 excess deaths in England (Zacharia et al., 2022; Howarth et al., 2024). This year's storms resulted in flooding, transport disruption and losses of crops and livelihoods.

Climate change impacts pose numerous threats to the health of UK citizens, including increased risk of infectious vector-borne diseases, heat exhaustion and heatstroke during heatwaves and mental health impacts following flooding and heatwaves. The increased frequency and intensity of these impacts can have knock-on effects for the wider economy as greater pressure is put on already-stretched resources such as the NHS and productivity is reduced through greater levels of work absences due to sickness. Indirect effects also include reduced food security, particularly for fresh fruit and vegetables that are imported from climate-vulnerable countries (UK Health Security Agency, 2023).

The impacts of climate change will continue to worsen until nations globally achieve net zero emissions of greenhouse gases. So, it is essential that the next government takes more ambitious action to build resilience and protect people from the resulting risks to health, wellbeing, property and livelihoods, brought on by climate change now and in the future. These ambitious efforts must be integrated and aligned with the UK's broader aim to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero and parallel efforts to halt and reverse environmental degradation so as to ensure alignment, avoid maladaptation and unintended consequences.

## **The next government should:**

**1. Recognise the full economic benefits of enhanced climate change adaptation and resilience.** These include not just the protection of outputs, capital and jobs, but also the contribution to lower risk environments for investment and the wider economic benefits from, for example, enhanced ecosystems that provide other services in addition to improved resilience.

**2. Strengthen the National Adaptation Programme.** The current programme (NAP3) is insufficient to address climate risks in the UK and does not fully align with commitments on adaptation agreed at COP28 last year (CCC, 2024a). An enhanced and more ambitious NAP3 should contain clearly defined goals including setting out desired levels of resilience, ownership of climate risk preparedness across government departments and other stakeholders, sufficient resource and responsibilities allocated to deliver on these goals (Stojkovic et al., 2024), and alignment with the new Framework on the Global Goal on Adaptation agreed at COP28 (CCC, 2024a).

**3. Produce a National Heat Risk Strategy to ensure the UK is fully prepared and able to respond to the increasing impact of heat risk and overheating.** The growing risks from heat have been particularly neglected by successive governments. A new National Heat Risk Strategy should address the full range of impacts from more extreme heat episodes, including its contribution to wildfire risk, and considering the impacts of higher temperatures throughout the year. This should be integrated with a strengthened National Adaptation Programme, with preventative measures, such as building retrofit measures to boost resilience of the existing building stock and awareness raising, as well as emergency response plans (Howarth et al., 2024).

**4. Commit to increase green and blue infrastructure in all towns and cities.** Vegetation and water in urban areas – such as green roofs, grassed areas, rain gardens, trees, parks, rivers and ponds – bring multiple benefits, such as improved water regulation, cooling effects, improved air quality, and improved physical and mental health (Brown & Milic, 2019). Such infrastructure can be affected by extreme weather and therefore must itself be designed to be resilient to the impacts of climate change.

**5. Commit to protecting public health and ensuring that health systems are resilient to climate-related impacts.** This includes consideration of the comparatively neglected impacts of extreme weather on mental as well as physical health (Lawrance et al., 2021), including by considering existing health inequalities and opportunities for adaptation policy to help support those who are most vulnerable, alongside the development and implementation of adverse weather plans (Faculty of Public Health Special Interest Group) at different scales, to ensure the quality and continuity of service provision.

# Ensure a just transition for workers, consumers and citizens

The transition to a zero-emissions and climate-resilient economy requires a structural transformation of the UK economy, with the potential to create economic winners and losers. How these changes are managed will be critical to their acceptability. A 'just transition' ensures that the structural changes are as inclusive as possible and bring about transformative and positive social and environmental impacts for workers, consumers and citizens.

## **To achieve this, the next government should:**

**1. Create and implement an explicit green industrial strategy for the UK.** This should be informed by carefully considering the UK's pre-existing relative strengths in technologies, goods and services that are relevant for net zero and climate resilience, and the extent to which these strengths can be built upon to accelerate domestic deployment of related technologies as well as unlocking export opportunities. To deliver this, the government should establish a new growth and productivity institute that can provide evidence and advice to successive governments (Valero, 2024). Research shows that regions characterised by historically low levels of productivity and growth could particularly benefit from opportunities in green technologies, including Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, Cornwall and Lincolnshire (Curran et al., 2022). Furthermore, green jobs can provide good quality employment for UK workers, paying higher wages and at lower risk of automation than non-green jobs, especially for middle- and low-skilled workers (Valero et al., 2021).

An industrial strategy should include transition plans for workers and communities in or near high-carbon sectors, such as the domestic oil and gas industry, that may be affected by an accelerated phase down in production. Workers at risk of being displaced will need support in terms of skills upgrading or retraining for the green economy. Innovation can create new green jobs, and good planning and clustering of SMEs in areas where workers are available will create economic growth and provide jobs in a just manner.

**2. Ensure there is a strong focus on equity and fairness in policy design.** Measures to support the transition to a zero-emissions and climate-resilient economy need to take into account their distributional impacts, considering both costs and benefits. For example, the continued use and expansion of carbon pricing is likely to lead to moderate increases in costs for all households in the short term, with effects most pronounced for lower-income households (Burke et al.,



2021). Government should ensure the impacts of carbon pricing are distributed fairly – for example, explicitly using carbon pricing revenues to correct undesirable distributional outcomes, and ensuring carbon pricing is part of a broader set of policy measures, such as incentives and regulations, that promote the switch to clean and resilient alternatives without unfairly burdening lower-income households. Targeted support should be considered more generally in designing policy to promote the switch to clean and resilient alternatives.

The impacts of climate change will not affect everyone equally. People who are already most vulnerable in society will be disproportionately at risk. Adaptation policy should therefore ensure targeted support to those who are most vulnerable.

Finally, greater attention must also be paid to the distribution of the multiple benefits of climate action, such as improved air quality and lower energy bills. This can support a just transition by benefiting marginalised communities as ethnic minorities and lower-income communities are currently exposed to higher levels of air pollution (Fecht et al., 2015) and are more likely to be living in fuel poverty (UK Government, 2022) compared to white and more affluent communities.

**3. Develop and publish a public engagement strategy that enhances and sustains support for mitigation and adaptation policies.** At the heart of this should be measures to strengthen public engagement, for example, through deliberative democratic processes (e.g. citizen juries and citizen assemblies). Such deliberative processes can maximise the chance that climate action is designed in a way that enjoys broad public support and is aligned with other issues that the public are concerned with. Doing so provides an opportunity to develop a fair and enduring policy framework for climate action that fosters high levels of public legitimacy.

More effective public engagement can also help maximise and build understanding for the role of climate action in realising a range of benefits, about which, in some cases, there is limited awareness and a degree of scepticism that they will be delivered in practice (Jennings et al., 2024).

# Ensure that decision-making about climate change policies is informed by the best available expertise and advice

The UK has been at the forefront of efforts to establish effective climate governance architectures and has a well-established process for promoting evidence-based decision-making by the Government about climate change. This includes the Climate Change Act and statutory Climate Change Committee, which has a strong track record of rigorous, independent analysis, alongside Parliamentary scrutiny and review processes, and internal advisory systems, such as the network of chief scientific advisers and the Council for Science and Technology.

The UK also has a wide range of expert organisations and networks that can provide evidence and advice to government, including the national academies, learned societies, academic institutions and networks of academic experts (such as the UK Universities Climate Network). The UK's scientists have played a pivotal role in the work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

**To continue to advance evidence-based action on climate, the next government should:**

**1. Respect and act on the expertise and advice of the Climate Change Committee to ensure UK plans on mitigation and adaptation action are credible and comply fully with the Climate Change Act.**

The CCC has put forward a wide range of policy recommendations for government to consider to deliver on the Fifth and Sixth Carbon Budgets – recommendations that the new government should take into account as it produces a legal net zero strategy. The new government should also consider and act on the CCC's recommendations on the Seventh Carbon Budget, due to be legislated by mid-2025, and the UK's Fourth Climate Change Risk Assessment (CCRA4), due to be presented to Parliament by January 2027. The government should also make sure to thoroughly consider and respond in detail to the Committee's annual progress reports and other advice.

**2. Ensure the prompt appointment of a new Chair and new Chief Executive of the Climate Change Committee.** The effectiveness of the UK's Climate Change Committee rests on having a strong leadership role and adequate resources to be able to fulfil its duties. The last Chair of the Committee, Lord Deben, ended his extended term in June 2023, and

the Chief Executive stepped down in spring 2024. While the Committee has excellent interim post-holders in these positions, an extended period without appointments will undoubtedly hinder its vital work. The Government should act swiftly to secure permanent appointments to these vital roles.

**3. Promote greater transparency about how the best available evidence and advice from the natural and social sciences has been factored into decision making processes.** The announcement of new policies should be accompanied by information about the evidence and advice that has been taken into account. It should explain the basis for any policy decisions that are not aligned with the available evidence and advice, especially where government decisions go against the advice of the Climate Change Committee, and ensure that the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser and Departmental Chief Scientific Advisers play an appropriate role in the formulation of climate change policies.

**4. Champion the role of the natural and social sciences and evidence in UK and international decision-making processes.** The UK should be a world-leading champion for evidence-based climate policy by investing in and capitalising on the diplomatic influence it has in the world's most authoritative climate science forum, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

# Ensure the UK demonstrates international leadership on climate change

The next government should firmly reassert the UK's leadership by example in global efforts to tackle climate change.

The Global Stocktake, which concluded at COP28, highlighted the shortfall in global climate action, with country plans currently committing the world to warming of well beyond 2°C (UNEP, 2023). As countries are due to come forward with a new set of nationally determined contributions (NDCs) ahead of COP30, it is essential to significantly increase the urgency and scale of global action to put the world on track to deliver on the Paris Agreement's goals.

The UK should play a strong role in raising ambition globally – leading by example by taking action at home, as well as promoting wider efforts by championing climate action and by being at the forefront of global efforts to scale up finance from the public, private and third sectors for mitigation and adaptation action in developing countries.

## **The next government should:**

**1. Put forward an ambitious and credible 2035 NDC, well in advance of COP30, alongside a strengthened 2030 NDC.** The UK should set out a robust policy and investment plan to deliver on its decarbonisation commitments, addressing policy shortfalls in the current 2030 NDC and outlining plans to drive stronger mitigation and adaptation action across all parts of the economy to 2035 (Rogelj et al., 2023; CCC, 2024b). As a developed nation, the UK should also take the lead in delivering on the COP28 commitment of “transitioning away from fossil fuels in energy systems, in a just, orderly and equitable manner, accelerating action in this critical decade, so as to achieve net zero by 2050 in keeping with the science”, putting an end to new fossil fuel licencing and rapidly scaling down existing production and consumption, and accelerating the deployment of zero-emissions energy. The NDC should also outline ambitious action on adaptation, in line with the new Framework for the Global Goal on Adaptation agreed at COP28, and set out an ambitious climate finance contribution (CCC, 2024b). Finally, the UK should ensure that plans to deliver on sectoral commitments made at recent COPs, such as the Global Methane Pledge, are reflected in its NDC. Crucially, submitting the 2035 NDC and updated 2030 NDC well in advance of COP30 will be essential to raise ambition and promote transparency of national plans, in keeping with the commitments made at COP21 (UNFCCC, 2016).

**2. Champion climate action on the international stage.** The UK should be a vocal and effective advocate for climate ambition at fora such as the G7, G20 and UN General Assembly, to build momentum for climate action beyond the UNFCCC negotiations and stimulate progress amongst high-emitting nations, including on delivery of the COP28 commitment to transition away from fossil fuels. It should ensure it champions evidence-based climate policy by being a strong voice in science-policy fora, including the IPCC, and by advancing climate action in line with the best available scientific evidence. The UK should also leverage its position as a global financial hub and World Bank shareholder to drive forward efforts aimed at scaling up climate finance for developing nations, including advancing discussions around reform of the international financial system (Songwe et al. 2022; Bhattacharya et al. 2023). And it should ensure a strong ministerial presence at international climate action summits to demonstrate climate as a top priority for the UK Government.

**3. Strengthen action on nature in the lead up to the biodiversity COP.** Recent international climate summits have started to explicitly acknowledge the link between the impacts of and solutions to climate change and natural systems, and the importance of preserving and restoring nature. The UK should put forward an ambitious national biodiversity strategy and action plan ahead of UNCBD COP16, with action effectively joined up with its 2030 and 2035 climate NDCs and concrete plans to deliver on the UK's afforestation and peatland restoration commitments (CCC, 2024b).

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