



New Government: New priorities for parks and greenspaces?

To: England
For info: Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

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1 Purpose of the briefing

The outcome of the 2024 General Election will bring big changes to local authority parks and greenspace strategies. In addition to announcing a commitment to delivering 1.5m homes over the next five years, the Labour Party also launched its Countryside Protection Plan in the run-up to polling day on 4 July.

On 19 July, an online roundtable was convened for APSE Members with responsibility for parks and grounds maintenance. The session was designed to examine the proposals set out in the King's Speech and the potential impact on the local authority greenspace services.

This briefing will provide an overview of the existing environmental legislation, the pre-election and post-election commitments made by the new Government, as well as the issues raised in APSE's online roundtable ahead of a new UK legislative programme.

2 Existing UK environmental legislation

2.1 25 year Environment Plan (2018)

In 2018, Theresa May's Government published the 25 Year Environment Plan which set out 10 goals for improving the environment within a generation.¹ These goals covered clear air; clean water; wildlife conservation; reducing environmental hazards; minimising waste; and, generally, combatting climate change.

2.2 Environment Act (2021)

Three years later, the Environment Act 2021 received Royal Assent.² For the first time this Act set clear statutory binding targets for the recovery of the natural world in four priority areas: air quality, biodiversity, water and waste. The legally binding targets of particular interest to local authority parks professionals included commitments to:

- Halt the decline in species populations by 2030, and then increase populations by at least 10% to exceed current levels by 2042.
- Deliver our net zero ambitions and boost nature recovery by increasing tree and woodland cover to 16.5% of total land area in England by 2050.

The Act committed the Government to refreshing and revising its Environment Plan every 5 years.

The Environment Act also established the creation of new Office for Environmental Protection. The OEP monitor, critically assess and report on Government progress in improving the natural environment in line with their Environmental Improvement Plans goals and targets.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/25-year-environment-plan>

² <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2021/30/contents>

2.3 Environmental Improvement Plan (2023)

Pursuant to the Environment Act, the Government published its first revision of the 25 Year Environment Plan in 2023, the statutory Environmental Improvement Plan.³ The Improvement Plan sets out the progress made against all 10 goals in the Environment Plan, the specific targets and commitments made in relation to each goal, and the Government's plan to continue to deliver these targets and the overarching goals.

As of January 2024, the OEP reported the Government was failing on almost all of its environmental targets; showing only four of forty targets in England were likely to be achieved.⁴

3 Pre-election commitments

In April 2024, the then Shadow Environment Secretary, Steve Reed MP, explicitly agreed to uphold the nature and biodiversity targets of the previous governments.⁵ There is no indication that there will be any big changes to the existing environmental legislation outlined in 2. This includes mandatory biodiversity net gain (BNG) and nature recovery strategies.

3.1 Countryside Protection Plan

In June, the Labour Party unveiled its Countryside Protection Plan.⁶ Key policies include:

1. Three new national forests in England.
2. Create more "nature-rich habitats", including wetlands and peat bogs.
3. Increase access to nature by creating nine new national river walks.
4. Community Right to Buy: Labour announced councils will be given new guidance to help local groups take over derelict buildings and degraded land under a community right to buy. People have the right to bid for such land when it comes on the market but critics have said the six-month window in which to raise the funds is often too short, and the right is rarely used. Labour believes that by lengthening the time to 12 months and encouraging councils to use it, many more urban and countryside sites can be restored for local use.
5. Setting up a Flood Resilience Taskforce and a Tree Planting Taskforce.
6. Introduce a Land-Use Framework. This involves mapping out how land can be used for nature recovery, food production, and other purposes.

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/environmental-improvement-plan>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/jan/18/nature-in-england-at-risk-due-to-government-failures-says-environment-watchdog>

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/apr/25/labour-says-uk-nature-under-threat-and-pledges-to-halt-decline>

⁶ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/labour-steve-reed-british-conservatives-lake-district-national-park-b2558476.html>

3.2 Labour Manifesto: Housebuilding 'golden rules'

In their manifesto, Labour committed to building one and a half million new homes within the first five years of a Labour government; reversing the scrapping of mandatory local housebuilding targets for councils.

On the issue of the green belt, the Manifesto committed Labour to *"...preserving the green belt which has served England's towns and cities well over many decades... Without changing its purpose or general extent, Labour will take a more strategic approach to greenbelt land designation and release to build more homes in the right places. The release of lower quality 'grey belt' land will be prioritised and we will introduce 'golden rules' to ensure development benefits communities and nature."*

The term "grey belt" is used to describe poor-quality land that makes up part of the green belt, such as wasteland and disused car parks.

Labour's 'golden rules', as mentioned in the Manifesto, are designed to ensure that affordable housing is built in a way *"that protects natural green spaces and doesn't put undue pressure on public services and infrastructure."* One of the rules includes the following:

*"Improve genuine green spaces: Labour rules out building on genuine nature spots and requires plans to include improvements to existing green spaces, making them accessible to the public, with new woodland, parks and playing fields. Plans should meet high environmental standards."*⁸

It should be noted that the existing Environmental Improvement Plan already includes a commitment that the public should be able to access green space or water, such as woodlands, wetlands, parks and rivers, within a 15-minute walk from their home.

4 King's Speech

The 2024 King's Speech was held on 17 July 2024 and opened the first session of the new parliament since the general election.⁹

The flagship announcement in the Speech was the Planning and Infrastructure Bill. The Bill is designed to *"speed up and streamline the planning process."* This involves simplifying the consenting process. The Bill will also *"use development to fund nature recovery."*

The Speech also spoke of the new Government's desire *"to reset the relationship with European partners and work to improve the UK's trade and investment relationship with the European Union"*.

⁷ <https://labour.org.uk/updates/stories/labours-housing-plan-how-well-protect-our-natural-spaces-and-free-up-grey-belt-land-for-building/>

⁸ <https://www.theplanner.co.uk/2024/04/22/labour-sets-out-golden-rules-housebuilding>

⁹ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6697f5c10808eaf43b50d18e/The_King_s_Speech_2024_background_briefing_notes.pdf

We await further details on what a 'reset' constitutes, and the implications this may have on Border Control Posts (BCPs) and the new post-Brexit plant inspection regime.

The Speech also announced a Skills England Bill: *"Skills England will work with industry, the Migration Advisory Committee, unions and the Industrial Strategy Council to build and maintain a comprehensive assessment of current and future skills needs. This will also inform the Department for Education's policy priorities."*

4.1 Draft new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) for England

On 30 July, Angela Rayner MP, Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, announced the draft new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) for England to the House of Commons.

According to this new draft: *"If local authorities can't meet their housing targets, they will need to look to brownfield land in the green belt and their grey belt, prioritising land near stations and existing settlements... Grey belt sites will only be built on if they meet the Government's 'golden rules' that half of homes are affordable, the plans enhance the local environment and the necessary infrastructure is in place, such as schools and GP surgeries."*¹⁰

Under the new regime all local councils will have a duty to deliver more homes and, unless they produce a clear plan for how this will happen, ministers can step in and take over the process. The new NPPF also makes clear the Government's expectation that all local authorities have up-to-date Local Plans.

5 Roundtable: Views from the frontline

At APSE's online roundtable on 19 July, the issue of funding dominated discussions.

Local authorities have faced substantial budget cuts over the past decade. This reduction in overall funding has led to cuts in non-statutory services, including parks. APSE's State of UK Public Parks 2021 Report found that a total of £690 million was lost from parks budgets between 2010 and 2021.¹¹ These cuts have occurred despite the increased footfall – and increased maintenance demands – parks have experienced in a post-COVID world.¹²

Though all in attendance agreed that the local government sector requires serious investment if it is to stave off further S.114 notices, attendees were quick to add that exceptional financial support for a council does not necessarily equate to parks and greenspace teams receiving their fair share.

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/our-plan-to-build-more-homes>

¹¹ <https://www.apse.org.uk/apse/index.cfm/research/current-research-programme/state-of-uk-public-parks-2021/>

¹² <https://apse.org.uk/index.cfm/apse/members-area/briefings/2024/24-14-state-of-the-market-on-parks-and-greenspaces/>

On the issue of grant funding, there was agreement that their inconsistency and competitive nature can be highly frustrating. However, some in the meeting did acknowledge grant funding can provide a useful source of “ringfenced” investment for parks teams; containing specific stipulations that prevent the local authority from diverting that money to other council services, namely statutory ones.

When discussion turned to the Government’s commitment to building one and a half million new homes within the next five years, attendees emphasised the importance of ensuring greenspaces are not just an afterthought in negotiations with developers. There were concerns raised about the restrictions on S106 planning obligations as well as the effectiveness of the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) in securing plenty of good quality open space.

6 How can APSE help?

Upholding the Environment Act (2021) targets of halting biodiversity decline and protecting 30% of the UK’s land and seas by 2030 will mean almost all of this will have to take place in Labour’s first term of government, as the next parliament runs from this year to summer 2029. As of January 2024, the OEP reported the then Conservative UK Government was failing on almost all of its environmental targets; showing only four of forty targets for England were likely to be achieved. Suffice to say, the new Government has its work cut out.

Local parks and greenspace teams have a huge role to play in securing those Environment Act targets. Whether it is through their extensive knowledge of biodiversity and local conservation, meaningful action on climate change mitigation as well as their success in community engagement and education, the new UK Government has to recognise local authority parks and greenspace teams are the keystone of any successful environmental programme.

APSE will be at the forefront of advocating on behalf of local parks and greenspace at the very highest levels of UK government. If you would like to help shape APSE’s research programme and contribute to our campaigns, please get in touch.

All APSE members can sign up to APSE’s Parks, Horticulture and Grounds Maintenance Advisory Group network, which is an online network providing four learning events across the year, with expert speakers from across local government and the wider parks and greenspace sector. You can sign up to the network using [this link](#).

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- Parks, Horticulture and Grounds Maintenance
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