

## The eco groups ready for battle over Keir Starmer's climate plans

Ben Spencer, Science Editor  
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Sir Keir Starmer will undermine his own climate plans if he trashes the countryside in his drive for wind and solar power, green groups have warned.

Nature charities are concerned that Labour's plan to decarbonise the power grid by 2030 and build thousands of homes on the green belt are not accompanied by sufficient protection for nature.

They also complain that Steve Reed, the shadow environment secretary, is yet to outline detailed policies for reform of farming, which is a bigger emitter of greenhouse gas than the power sector.

Britain's biggest rural charities — which have nearly eight million members between them — called for a far more ambitious policy to protect and regenerate nature. Beccy Speight, chief executive of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, said: "Absolutely we have got to get to net zero — but we have to do it in a nature-positive way."

Labour has said it will change planning laws [to allow more onshore wind and solar power](#), to try to eradicate gas and coal from power generation by the end of the decade. That transition will require rewiring the electrical network, with a vast network of pylons expected. Green groups said that while they backed renewable energy, it must not be installed at the expense of nature.

Ingrid Samuel, director of placemaking and heritage at the National Trust, said: "The climate crisis does not exist in isolation. Our politicians have a choice. Do they decarbonise our energy system in a way that respects and restores nature, coast and countryside, or will they push through development irrespective of impacts on our landscapes, communities and our natural environment? The next government must get it right."

Richard Benwell, chief executive of Wildlife and Countryside Link, a coalition of 83 nature groups, said: "Sir Keir's mission for better insulated homes and clean power by 2030 would make a brilliant contribution to climate action. However, that ambition would be totally undermined if Labour were to forge ahead with low-carbon infrastructure in a way that heedlessly harms nature. At the moment, the balance is way off."

If Labour forms the next government, those problems could come to a head early in its first term. Decisions on huge new energy schemes, such as the unpopular Botley West solar farm near Oxford, could end up on the desks of ministers trying to balance the need for green power with preservation of rural areas.



Botley West near Oxford would be the largest solar farm in Europe, covering 3,400 acres  
PHOTOVOLT DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS (PVDP)

Last week Reed attempted to ward off criticism in [The Guardian](#), promising for the first time to stick to targets laid out in the 2021 Environment Act and honour an international agreement signed last year to reverse species loss and protect 30 per cent of land and seas by 2030.

Green groups greeted the article as a welcome statement of intent, but called for Labour to go further. “It’s good that Labour have committed to those targets but we need a lot more than warm words,” said David Walsh, head of public affairs at World Wide Fund for Nature UK.

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Craig Bennett, chief executive of the Wildlife Trusts, said Labour would not have time to obfuscate. “There is a huge job to do in the first term of a Labour government if they win the election. They are going to have to hit the ground running — they need a really detailed plan about what’s needed to meet our legally binding domestic and international targets.”

He added: “We haven’t seen any detail from any of the parties. Whichever party forms the next government has got to stop treating nature something that’s bolted on and separate from everything else. It has got to be integrated into the renewal of Britain that people are talking about.”

Labour has overtaken the Conservatives in many of its traditional rural strongholds for the first time in two decades, according to polls. Starmer’s party has been bullish about converting that into electoral success, pledging to “park our tanks on the Tories’ fields”.

But that support is fragile. A Survation poll earlier this year of England’s 100 most rural seats — 96 of which are held by the Tories — put Labour at 37 per cent

against the Conservatives on 34 per cent. But only 25 per cent of respondents said they would trust Labour to revamp the rural economy, behind 30 per cent for the Tories.

Joss Garman, executive director of the European Climate Foundation, said if Labour made progress in some contested areas it might win support for its other priorities. “Starmer may find he can deliver his planning reforms with less resistance in the countryside if he can win support in these places with a strong package that supports nature protection and farmers,” he said.

The Labour leader has attempted to court the National Farmers Union as part of its wider campaign for rural votes. He has pledged to stick with the environmental land management schemes, first proposed by Michael Gove to pay farmers to protect the environment, but detail has been lacking and green groups want Labour to go further.

Starmer has also pledged to “get tough on the blockers” to release far more land for housing. This would include rewriting green belt rules to create a new category of “grey belt land”, which would allow development of “ugly” land including “poor quality scrubland”. Speight said this language raised immediate red flags. “What is ugly? And some scrubland is really good for nature.”



Steve Reed, the shadow environment secretary, insists Labour will embrace “a decade of national renewal with the countryside at its heart. VICKI COUCHMAN FOR TIMES MEDIA

Roger Mortlock, chief executive of the CPRE, the countryside charity, said: “What we are fearful of is that in the race to build new infrastructure, we miss the input of communities, and that input isn’t always nimbyish. We also need a detailed land use framework, which is really critical when we’re looking at big-ticket items like new infrastructure and housing.”

But Reed defended his policies. “Labour will embrace a decade of national renewal with the countryside at its heart,” he said. “We will put money directly into the pockets of our farmers by lowering energy bills and slashing trade barriers to get our great food exports flowing again. And we will turbocharge nature’s recovery by cleaning up our water and air, and growing nature-rich habitats for wildlife to thrive.”