

Environment, Energy & Culture

- 1. What environmental conditions should be attached to government support for business during and after the coronavirus crisis?*
- 2. How can national, devolved and local government most effectively redeploy workers to “shovel-ready” green infrastructure projects such as renewables construction, nature conservation and home insulation?*
- 3. What economic reforms and fiscal incentives should the government introduce to ensure that the post-crisis economy is a sustainable one?*
- 4. What new environmental protections should we be pushing for post-Brexit?*
- 5. How can we promote greater sustainability in land use and farming practices?*

Protecting the natural environment after coronavirus

We are living through a global climate and environment emergency. According to the United Nations, we have fewer than ten years remaining to avert the worst impacts of catastrophic climate change. The exploitation of our planet’s natural resources – from the deforestation of the Amazon rainforest to the mining of tar sands – has continued even through the coronavirus pandemic. While government attention remains rightly focussed on public health and economic stability, Labour is clear that the pressing issues of climate and environmental breakdown must be returned to once this crisis eases – and that the recovery must be a green one.

Last May the United Kingdom Parliament endorsed a Labour motion which formally declared a climate and environment emergency – becoming the world’s first sovereign national legislature to do so. Across the globe, campaigns for climate and environmental justice have inspired millions. Ahead of next year’s postponed COP26 conference in Glasgow, polling shows that the public’s appetite for radical climate and environmental action has reached unprecedented heights.

Unfortunately, government action on climate and the environment has frequently fallen short of public expectation and political rhetoric. The UK remains badly off track to meet our existing legal target of reaching net zero carbon emissions by 2050, and the Committee on Climate Change has warned that the gap between aspiration and performance is widening.

Despite lofty talk of a “green Brexit” and building a world-leading environmental protections regime outside the European Union, the current government seems bereft of solutions to problems such as the degradation of our great British countryside, the chronic overfishing of our territorial waters or deadly air pollution

in our major cities and towns.

Labour has a proud record on climate and environmental issues. We created the Department for Energy and Climate Change and passed the landmark Climate Change Act 2008 into UK law. At last year's election Labour put forward the most detailed and comprehensive plan of any British political party for tackling the climate crisis, backed both by our trade union movement and leading environmental NGOs, including a commitment to rapid decarbonisation over the decade. Our task over the next five years is to build on Labour's Green New Deal to meet the demands of the coming crisis, while also challenging the current government not to shy away from the steps that need to be taken in the immediate term.

Tackling the climate and environment emergency is one of the most daunting tasks our country has ever faced. It will require wholesale changes to the way we power our country, heat our homes and travel around. It will mean redesigning our towns and cities, rethinking the way we use our land and transforming our relationship to food. The coronavirus pandemic serves as a warning of what can happen when government is unprepared for tasks of this magnitude. Yet it also shows us what can be achieved when society pulls together and all of our resources are diverted to achieving a common goal.

Climate activists have long argued that bringing about a "just transition" at the required pace and scale will require a level of government action and economic mobilisation that had never been seen outside of wartime – until now. The bravery and resilience shown by the British people in the face of the present crisis should spur us on as we develop a distinctively Labour approach to the existential threat of the climate and environment emergency.

The challenges

Labour's strategy for combatting climate and environmental breakdown must marry a deep commitment to ecological renewal with our party's values of solidarity and social justice. The challenge of transforming our energy, transport, food and farming systems while securing a just transition for workers and consumers must continue to be at the heart of our approach. Our communities still bear the scars of forced deindustrialisation in the 1980s and 90s: protecting our natural environment will be in vain if, once again, they are forced to bear the costs of transition and reap none of its rewards.

Yet our strategy cannot just be about keeping emissions within safe limits while maintaining the economic status quo. The climate and environment emergency is a once-in-a-generation moment to transform our society and economy for the better. Labour believes that the choice between prosperity and climate justice is a false one:

with the right policies we can radically improve living standards, building a Britain that is both low in carbon and rich in good jobs.

Delivering on this vision will require working beyond departmental silos to ensure that the climate and environment emergency is at the heart of Labour's policy offer – from transport and housing to food and farming. It will also mean learning lessons from those in local and devolved government who are already grappling with the practical difficulties of bringing about a just transition within their communities.

The long-term impacts of the coronavirus pandemic on our climate and environment remain to be seen. It is estimated that we will see an unprecedented drop in global emissions over the course of 2020, while the positive side-effects of social distancing measures on air quality and environmental degradation have been widely noted. In the medium-term, however, our transition to a lower-carbon economy is in danger of stalling as a result of this crisis, both as a result of economic weakness and government attention being diverted elsewhere. Labour is clear, however, that the coronavirus should not be used as an excuse for government failure on climate targets – and we continue to believe that rapid decarbonisation over the next decade is necessary to avert climate breakdown.

The government is already talking of supporting a “green and resilient recovery” from the coronavirus crisis, yet questions remain about how we should deal with those companies and sectors in trouble, including those at the forefront of the environmental transition we need. We believe there is a case on the basis of jobs and a just transition for specific action to help sectors in distress, but it cannot be unconditional. It must ensure we advance rapidly towards our goals of tackling the climate emergency as well as protecting jobs and livelihoods. This should include a willingness to take government equity stakes where it is appropriate to advance our climate goals and ensure a return for the taxpayer.

As we move from the “rescue” stage of our response to this crisis and begin to focus on recovery we will need to raise our ambitions beyond targeted bailouts of specific businesses and sectors. The coronavirus pandemic has collapsed demand and investment for entire sectors of our economy, and many industries are unlikely to resume normal operation in the foreseeable future. To avoid mass unemployment government should take a more direct and active role in training and redeploying workers in “green” jobs such as nature conservation, home insulation and wind turbine manufacture. Other potential levers include targeted business support, infrastructure spending and public procurement – all of which can green the economy while creating new, post-recession jobs.

The way forward

As we emerge from the coronavirus pandemic, we should be pushing for reforms that place sustainability and equality at the heart of future prosperity, including a diversification of the measures of national success, beyond simple measures of economic growth. There is now a rich and diverse body of work about the way we should measure the quality of life and wellbeing, and it is time to act on them.

The present crisis has already led to an unprecedented level of state intervention in the economy. This “wartime mobilisation” of national resources is precisely what climate campaigners have long been arguing is necessary to tackle the climate crisis. Labour recognises that the free-market experiment in energy and water has failed.

Common ownership has a vital role to play if we are to meet our ambitious climate targets. Our utilities ought to be accountable to the public and responsive to local communities. The right ownership models to deliver these objectives – while supporting our broader goals of climate and social justice – will be central to the success of Labour’s Green New Deal.

Progress on reaching a post-Brexit settlement for climate and environmental protections seems to have stalled during the pandemic, but the importance and urgency of this task is undiminished. Our great cities and towns are among the most polluted in Europe, while our rural and marine environments face the risk of further damage if more is not done to protect them. Labour believes in maintaining and strengthening our world-leading environmental protection regime, but we need a convincing offer on the level of protection required, and what powers will be needed for enforcing this outside of the European Union.

Beyond the immediate challenges of supporting incomes and preventing hunger during the coronavirus pandemic, pressing issues of long-term food security and sustainability need to be addressed. Our farmers need guarantees that food import and animal welfare standards will remain high after Brexit, so that they will not be forced to compete with unethical and low-quality products from abroad.

Landowners need to be encouraged to take an active role in restoring wildlife habitats and increasing biodiversity while protecting green spaces and ensuring the delights of our great British countryside are accessible to all.