

Labour Party Rural Policy



Introduction

The Labour Party has recently concluded consultation processes on its policies for energy, food and rural affairs and has started making policy commitments ahead of its 2024 general election manifesto. Still running substantially ahead of the other parties in polling and only 5% behind the Conservatives in England's 100 most rural constituencies (as of 28 May), it is time for the rural sector to consider what a Labour government might deliver for them. This note summarises what has been said so far and considers what impact these commitments might have.

A mission to govern differently

A lengthy period in opposition has given the Labour Party time to reflect on the institution of government as well as the politics of power. A 'mission paper' published in February 2023 set out five long-term aspirations for the country around which Labour says it will organise government activity, with the aim of reflecting the transformative investment needed to meet core challenges in health, energy, growth and public order, and ensuring that politics is focused on fixing root causes rather than symptoms. Flowing from these five missions, Labour's general principles of governance appear to be to break down departmental silos, set out long-term goals that hold government to account but are built from people's needs and aspirations, and to devolve decision-making to local levels. There is much in these principles that the rural economy could benefit from.

From mission to commitment

Labour has six policy commissions that have each concluded an annual policy consultation over the last four years. The "green and digital future" commission has most relevance to rural businesses. Its most recent annual policy consultation document published in September 2022 (the last one before the manifesto is confirmed) focussed on energy and transport, with policy statements made on research and development budgets, energy security and rural transport. The results of these consultations are not published, but will be used to inform a meeting of Labour's National Policy Forum (NPF) in July 2023, in which the final policy documents will be discussed.

A draft manifesto

Earlier in May and ahead of the NPF meeting, the Labour party released a draft manifesto to members. Reports suggested it was based on the commissions' work and consultation feedback, and that it contained relatively few new policy commitments but more detail on some. Set out below are the headline policy statements that are of most relevance to the rural sector grouped together by loose topic area; for full details see the reported draft manifesto [here](#). Highlights such as the pledge to 'buy it, make it and sell it' in Britain have featured in key speeches to rural audiences, playing on the long-held notion that domestic production such as farming does better under a Labour government compared to a free-trading Conservative one.

Building ambition

Notable press attention has been placed on Labour's ambitions to kick-start housebuilding, including pledges to give local authorities more power to build on green belt land and allow them to acquire land through compulsory purchase at close to existing use value for development; the aim being to avoid paying any 'hope value' on the land. This would go further than the current government's proposals to adjust Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) rules. The government's consultation response in April 2023 confirmed that measures to reform CPOs to support regeneration would be included in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, which is currently progressing through Parliament. The Bill proposes that certain public sector bodies such as local authorities, Homes England, Development Corporations and the Greater London Authority will be able to seek from the Secretary of State, on a scheme-by-scheme basis, directions that the assessment of land value as part of a CPO claim for compensation should not account for hope value where the scheme relates to affordable (including social) housing, education provision or health facilities. Labour's proposal would mean that local councils could exercise these powers directly, rather than having to seek approval from the Secretary of State. These stronger powers are intended to help deliver a reinstated 300,000 homes per year target, which has recently been dropped by the government.

Mission climate

Sir Keir Starmer made a keynote address in Leith, Scotland on 19 June 2023 to launch the Labour party's 'national mission' on clean energy. The speech focussed on the employment and consumer energy opportunities associated with a clean energy transition, with the detail of the policies being consistent with what had been trailed in the draft manifesto. Notably, the pledge to transform the electricity grid would be achieved by 2030 and planning reforms

would also enable communities to share in renewable energy projects. An accompanying [policy document](#) shows how the Labour party is drawing inspiration from Wales and Scotland as well as the socialist Nordic countries in how community and shared ownership models can deliver energy infrastructure and jobs, playing to the trade union (and Scottish) concerns that a net zero transition and retreat from North Sea oil and gas would impact negatively on already struggling manufacturing sectors and regions of the UK. The Mission Climate document also promised that Labour would deliver “our nation’s food security and tackle and reverse nature’s decline in every part of the country to cut carbon emissions and accelerate to net zero”, suggesting that English agricultural policy will begin to more formally align behind a net zero ambition (Wales and Scotland being more explicit on this already).

Summary of the draft manifesto, with our emphasis on notable issues

Energy: Deliver clean electricity by 2030; **more than double onshore wind capacity**, triple solar capacity and quadruple offshore wind capacity; tackle planning barriers to renewable energy projects, getting planning decision timelines down from years to just months, and remove the obstacles that are currently preventing businesses from investing in the UK; fundamentally reform the system of energy supply, generation and transmission and distribution so that it delivers cheaper bills for consumers and businesses, clean energy and energy security.

Food and farming: Deliver a land-use framework in England that supports sustainable farming, enables the country to reach our climate goals, and improves our national biodiversity; seek to secure a veterinary agreement with the EU and mutual recognition of professional qualifications, as well as improving scientific collaboration through Horizon.

Environment: Improve people’s access to both urban and rural green space; consider expanding national parks and creating new ones and ensure the **public has the right to experience, enjoy and explore nature**; ensure that there are sufficient responsibilities and protections to manage and conserve our natural environment for all; pass a Clean Air Act, establish a legal right to breathe clean air; close loopholes in the fox hunting ban, outlaw trophy hunting (including imports from overseas) and ensure animals are treated with respect; **introduce tougher penalties for fly-tippers**, establishing clean-up squads so that offenders have to clear up litter and fly-tipped rubbish.

Trade: Protect British standards in trade deals, rather than watering them down; aim to strike trade deals that prioritise jobs, businesses and livelihoods while promoting Labour values around the world, including human rights, workers’ rights, trade union freedom, equality, **protecting our environment** and ensuring the highest standards for consumers; seek to boost exports from, and investment into, every region and nation of the UK; work closely with devolved governments, trade unions, and local authorities, and introduce new binding responsibilities for trade negotiators to deliver for the whole of the UK.

Business and supply chains: Examine the best way to prevent environmental harms and human rights abuses in supply chains; ensure corporate governance frameworks embed long-termism, enable investment and ensure businesses act in the interests of their workers, customers and the environment; encourage private finance to align its investments with the goals of the Paris agreement; introduce a range of measures to help improve the world of work and tackle job insecurity, stagnant pay and the growth of in-work poverty.

Employment: Bring forward an employment rights bill within 100 days of entering office; sort out the points-based immigration system; any movement in the points-based migration system will come alongside new conditions to boost skills and more training, provide better pay and conditions and invest in new technology. When a sector is already heavily reliant on immigration, it will be required to develop these plans through dialogue and negotiation involving employers and trade unions.

Government procurement: Labour’s plan to **buy, make and sell more in Britain** is a commitment to use strategic procurement for industrial strategy; ensure more home-grown sustainable food is bought, made and sold, through public procurement targets; ensure that 50% of all food purchased by the public sector is locally produced or certified to higher environmental production standards; use government procurement to support local businesses, cutting red tape and streamlining the bidding process to level the playing field for small businesses.

Housing: **Upgrade every home that needs it to EPC standard C** within a decade by installing energy-saving measures such as loft insulation, going street by street in locally delivered programmes; set the target of a homeownership rate of 70%; help first-time buyers onto the ladder with a new, comprehensive mortgage guarantee scheme. Under this scheme, the state will act as guarantor for prospective homeowners who can afford mortgage

*repayments but struggle to save for a large deposit; **fundamentally reform the private rented sector**, giving tenants greater security through a powerful new renters' charter, which will include longer-term tenancies as standard, the right to reasonable alterations, ending Section 21 'no fault' evictions and introducing a national register of landlords; introduce a legally binding 'Decent Homes Standard 2' updated for the next decade that will apply to all buildings in the private rented sector; consult on how best to ensure tenancies are affordable and the effective implementation of no-fault evictions.*

Development: Build more high-quality homes across the country and ensure more of these are genuinely affordable; bring the present leasehold system to an end through fundamental reform of the tenure as soon as possible; reform planning and arcane land purchase rules to get Britain building, while fixing the country's development model; enable local authorities to acquire land at closer to existing use value.

Transport: Deliver Northern Powerhouse Rail and High Speed 2 in full; ensure a rolling programme of electrification to improve services and decarbonise our transport system; encourage more people to walk and cycle wherever possible by supporting local authorities to provide safe, accessible walking routes and cycling infrastructure.

Tax: Crackdown on tax evasion and tax avoidance; scrap and replace the current system of business rates in England and Wales with a fully costed and funded system of business property taxation.

United Kingdom: Deliver a better, deeper devolution settlement for our devolved parliaments; abolish the House of Lords and establish a second chamber that is smaller, offers the taxpayer better value for money, and is reflective of the regions and nations with elected representatives rather than political appointees; not support a new referendum on Scottish independence; begin to develop long-term structures to ensure cooperation between the UK and EU in key areas such as the green just transition, energy and food security, protecting supply chains and tackling cross border crime.

The Rural Labour team

Shadow Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs: Jim McMahon MP, Oldham West and Royton: Mr McMahon has been an MP since 2015, holding a substantial majority in his constituency. He held roles as Shadow Transport Secretary and Shadow Minister for Local Government and Devolution before taking on the shadow Defra role in 2021. Mr McMahon has not been particularly visible on farming or rural affairs issues, but in press briefings he has leant on his personal passions to plant trees and improve his local environment; this has manifested as policy to ensure that both rural and urban dwellers have access to green space. He has suggested his independence from the rural sector is an asset in balancing a wide range of farming, environmental and fishery interests.

Shadow Farming Minister: Daniel Zeichner MP, Cambridge: Mr Zeichner has been an MP since 2015 and has held the role of Shadow Minister for food, farming and fisheries since 2020. He describes himself as a 'life-long environmentalist, with an enduring interest in agriculture and food'. He has delivered high profile speeches including to the Oxford Farming Conference 2023 and been quoted widely in the farming press.

Other policy comments

- The draft manifesto commitment to spend £28 billion per year investing in the green economy is eye-catching but has more recently been downplayed due to the impact on national debt.
- Shadow Energy Minister Ed Miliband has been fiercely critical of the Conservative-led government's proposals in the Energy Bill which is currently before parliament and fails to lift the de facto ban on on-shore wind, despite 78% of the public supporting it.
- Labour has yet to publish a detailed policy document for farming, but its shadow ministers are supportive of Defra's ELM scheme reforms in England. Both Jim McMahon and Daniel Zeichner have criticised the government for delaying the roll out of the schemes.
- In an interview with the Farmers Guardian (5 May), Mr Zeichner confirmed that Labour remained committed to eradicating bovine TB but ending the badger cull, and to embarking on a 'good dialogue' with farmers and landowners on giving people better access to nature and the environment 'without causing problems for the people who live and work there'.
- In an interview with the Farmers Weekly (23 April), the Shadow Minister committed to ongoing funding for the food system in order to maintain food security and said he had 'some sympathy' with the idea of retaining an element of direct support payments for farmers in vulnerable areas.
- The Shadow Minister was critical of the recent 'Farm to Fork Summit' held at Downing Street (Twitter, 17 May), describing it as a 'PR stunt', but previously he has advocated for intervention in food supply chains,

one of the main announcements made at the summit, arguing that the Groceries Code Adjudicator needs enhanced powers.

Analysis

As Lord Mandelson noted at the recent Future Countryside event at Hatfield, the rural vote is very much up for grabs if Labour can unite voters over key rural issues rather than stoke division, through a perceived urban bias to its core voter base. Some of the Labour party's pledges will be a red rag to farming businesses, particularly on increasing public access to land. However, the actual pledges made in the draft manifesto and in public statements by the Shadow Minister do not go as far as a 'right to roam', words used by Labour leader Keir Starmer at the NFU conference in February 2023. Improving people's access to both urban and rural green space is a laudable aim that many rural businesses already champion and could take many more forms than open access.

Much else in the draft manifesto could be of interest to rural businesses, including long-term goals to achieving electrification and reforming the grid, supporting renewable energy generation onshore and reform planning policy, including reinstating the 300,000 homes per year building target, a toxic topic for Conservative politicians. The proposal to enable local authorities to CPO development land without paying hope value is embryonic, and will be watched closely as it raises questions about the local plan making process and capacity within local authorities if the private sector is no longer incentivised to promote sites. Development land values and increasing the value captured for society has also been on the agenda of the current government over the last five years, although its proposed expansion of CPO powers is more limited in scope. Significant reform of the private residential rented sector is already underway via the Renters (Reform) Bill but there are aspects that Labour would take further.

The commitments to supporting British farming businesses through procurement practices and a progressive trade policy is a marked difference from the non-interventionist Conservative approach, but a hint that English agriculture will drive net zero should begin to crystallise investment planning for farm businesses. The really good ideas no doubt will be picked up whichever party takes office next year, and of course the devil will be in the detail on how these principles are brought into force, if at all.

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