

A New Agenda for UK–EU Energy, Climate, and Environment Cooperation

FOREWORD BY

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Rebuilding the UK's relationship with the European Union must be grounded not only in shared history, but shared purpose. Nowhere is that clearer than in how we respond to the defining challenge of our age: protecting the environment, restoring the natural world, and securing a liveable future – one that's cleaner, fairer, and fit for future generations.

This report sets out a compelling and pragmatic case for a new UK-EU Energy, Climate and Environment Partnership - and could not be more timely. Since the UK left the European Union, we have seen mounting evidence of divergence: in chemical safety, in air and water pollution, in our capacity to respond to climate breakdown. In some cases, the consequences are already being felt in the food we eat, the energy bills households are struggling to pay, and in the protection of nature.

But this report is not about looking backwards - it is about what we can build together now. A new UK-EU partnership would mean making energy cheaper and cleaner, stronger protections for people and nature, and something that has been missing for far too long: a UK seat at the table when vital decisions are made that affect our environment, our economy, and our health.

That is why I am delighted to see the European Movement UK stepping up its leadership in this space. There is a vital role for civil society – and for everyone who cares about the natural world, our shared future and achieving net zero – to help shape a forward-looking agenda for cooperation. This is not only about aligning rules or reconnecting institutions. It is about rebuilding trust, restoring ambition, and showing that international cooperation can deliver for people and planet alike.

The time to act is now. With climate ambition under threat across Europe, and environmental standards slipping at home, we cannot afford delay or division. This partnership offers route back to influence, credibility, and progress - but only if we have the political courage to pursue it.

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Executive Summary

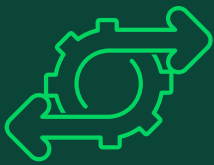
Rising energy costs, air pollution, habitat loss, and chemical safety are just a few examples of the shared challenges the UK and EU now face - and which no country can solve alone. The UK-EU Summit marked a clear turning point: for the first time since the UK left the EU, both sides demonstrated not only a willingness to strengthen ties, but a shared ambition to tackle common challenges together. Nowhere is this more urgent or vital than in energy, climate, and environmental policy, where interests and priorities clearly align.

To turn that ambition into lasting progress - and building on the example of the UK-EU Security and Defence Partnership - both sides should establish a dedicated Energy, Climate, and Environment Partnership. This would provide a similarly structured approach, focused on practical outcomes that deliver for people, communities, and the planet: lowering energy bills and climate emissions, restoring nature and the environment, and securing the UK a seat at the table in shaping decisions that directly affect its future. This is not unprecedented, as the EU already has a Green Partnership with South Korea and green alliances with Norway, Japan and Canada.

The Partnership should also support a fair and inclusive transition – learning from the EU’s Social Climate Fund and ensuring the benefits of climate action are shared. Without visible support for households and communities, public backing for net zero will be difficult to sustain. The greenest option must also be the best, simplest, and most cost-effective choice

The Energy, Climate, and Environment Partnership: A Single Framework Built on Four Pillars

The Partnership should be structured around four practical and mutually reinforcing pillars - each delivering real benefits for households, businesses, and the environment - and supported by a framework of political engagement through regular dialogues.



1. Working together for climate safety and energy security

The UK and EU should move swiftly to implement the Common Understanding agreed at the UK-EU Summit - linking their Emissions Trading Systems (ETS) and enabling the UK to rejoin the EU Internal Electricity Market (IEM). This would reduce costs, avoid carbon charges, and unlock new investment in offshore wind and interconnectors - helping lower bills and drive the energy transition.



2. Building Europe's Grid: Interconnectors and Joint Energy Planning

The UK should seek full membership of the North Seas Energy Cooperation (NSEC) - securing a seat at the table in shaping offshore energy development and grid planning across northern Europe. Deeper involvement would strengthen resilience, unlock investment, and support long-term energy security on both sides of the Channel.



3. Alignment on Environmental Standards where it leads to higher standards

Regulatory alignment in key areas where the EU has adopted higher standards - including chemicals, waste, air quality, and ecodesign - unless robust evidence justifies a different approach, would protect public health and the environment reduce red tape, and support British exporters.



4. Rejoining Strategic Programmes and Agencies

The UK should rejoin the European Environment Agency (EEA) and the European Environment Information and Observation Network (EIONET), restoring access to high-quality environmental data, scientific collaboration, and EU-wide monitoring systems. It should also participate in the LIFE programme to unlock funding and technical support for climate action, biodiversity, and local nature recovery across the UK. In parallel, re-engaging on chemicals regulation would give UK regulators access to vital safety data and reduce duplication and costs for British manufacturers.

The foundations for closer UK-EU cooperation are already in place. What is needed now is the political will to build on them. A new Partnership would turn shared ambition into lasting progress - delivering cleaner energy, stronger environmental protections, and real benefits for households and businesses across the UK.

Introduction

The United Kingdom and the European Union face a shared challenge: accelerating the transition to clean energy while restoring nature, strengthening economic resilience, and enhancing environmental protections. Both sides have made this a political priority. One of the Labour Government's five key missions is to make the UK a "clean energy superpower"¹ - with a target to fully decarbonise the electricity system by 2030. In Brussels, European Commission President von der Leyen is advancing a "Clean Industrial Deal"² to underpin Europe's global competitiveness and meet the EU's climate obligations. While the UK and EU remain aligned in ambition, delivery has yet to catch up and both face pressure from those urging a retreat to short-term economic priorities.

The May 2025 UK-EU Summit³ marked a breakthrough in tone and direction. For the first time since the UK's departure from the EU, both sides signalled a willingness to reset the relationship. That momentum must now be channelled into creating a new energy, climate and environment partnership that delivers lasting impact.

The UK and the EU have a long history of cooperation on climate and environmental policy. For decades, EU membership helped to set clear, enforceable standards that protected air, water, and nature across the UK. For example, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) has stated that "the Nature Directive has provided [the UK with a] much stronger protection for sites than is afforded by national legislative protection alone."⁴

As an EU Member State, the UK was a major player in shaping EU environmental policies, often pushing for higher ambition. The European Commission previously highlighted how the UK was "able to shape EU-wide policy."⁵ One clear example of this leadership was the UK's push to secure an "at least 40%" emissions reduction target by 2030 (compared to 1990 levels) as part of the EU's 2030 Climate and Energy Policy Framework.⁶

The UK was “widely regarded as one of the most influential member states in shaping the EU’s environmental international policies.”⁷ Its experience and longstanding engagement contributed to the EU’s effectiveness in global climate negotiations, particularly through pragmatic diplomacy and leadership on climate ambition.

Rebuilding climate and energy ties is both a practical necessity and a strategic opportunity. The costs of continued divergence are now well understood: inefficiencies in electricity trading, barriers to offshore wind and grid integration, weakening environmental standards and additional charges facing British businesses that trade with the EU on the horizon. Unless the UK moves towards closer cooperation with the EU, it may face up to £10 billion in additional costs this Parliament alone through higher energy prices, reduced investment, and lower tax revenues.

Notwithstanding recent efforts by some actors within the EU to roll back key elements of the European Green Deal, international cooperation on cross-border environmental challenges remains essential. The case for UK-EU alignment does not rest on the EU being a flawless environmental actor, but on the reality that shared problems require shared solutions. Indeed, as political pressure builds on both sides of the Channel, a positive voice and contribution from the UK would be warmly welcomed by the many on the EU side who remain determined to strengthen standards, uphold ambition, and champion science-based policy. Re-engagement would allow the UK not just to follow, but to help shape the future of environmental protection in Europe.

There are a number of practical, realistic, and actionable proposals to strengthen UK-EU cooperation on climate, energy, and the environment. Each is rooted in mutual interest, grounded in political and economic reality, and designed to deliver measurable outcomes while respecting the Government’s existing red lines. These range from market coupling and carbon pricing to greater offshore wind coordination, regulatory alignment, and rejoining key European agencies and programmes - all areas where progress would benefit both sides and reinforce shared values. This work builds on many of the recommendations and research undertaken by the Institute for European Environmental Policy UK, particularly those in *A Fresh Direction: Next steps for the UK towards a new environmental vision for Europe* and *The UK and EU: Recommendations for an Environmental Reset*.

The Trade and Cooperation Agreement: A Limited Foundation for Climate and Energy Cooperation

The Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) provides the formal basis for UK-EU relations on energy, climate, and environment since the United Kingdom left the European Union. While it includes a chapter on energy and acknowledges the importance of climate action, its scope and ambition fall well short of what is now required.

The TCA was the first trade agreement to identify climate change as an “essential element”⁸ - a powerful statement of intent. Yet in practice, the mechanisms it establishes are largely technical, with engagement confined to official-level dialogues. Without structured political oversight or senior-level participation, the partnership lacks momentum. Important issues are parked or delayed, rather than resolved.

The agreement is shaped primarily by a trade-centred framework. The energy chapter focuses on market access, interconnection efficiency, and fair competition. Provision on non-regression and non-discrimination are designed to uphold level playing field rules - important, but not sufficient to drive forward a modern climate, energy, and environmental partnership.

Since the TCA was signed, the strategic landscape has changed. Energy security, net zero delivery, and industrial resilience are now deeply interconnected. The UK and EU face common challenges around supply chains, investment in renewables, environmental standards, and regulatory alignment. Yet the TCA offers no structure for joint planning, shared investment, or strategic coordination.

Addressing these shared challenges requires a shift in approach. The current fragmented relationship provides only limited tools to manage shared risks or seize common opportunities.

A UK–EU Energy, Climate, and Environment Partnership

The UK and the EU need a more strategic, structured, and closer relationship - one that goes beyond trade to reflect the full - and necessary - scope of the energy, climate, and environmental cooperation. Institutions that once enabled joint planning, investment, and scientific collaboration have been weakened or lost. The UK has stepped back from key frameworks - such as EU emissions trading and the European Environment Agency - that once underpinned common progress.

Yet the need for coordination has never been clearer. The two sides are each other's closest energy partners. Their climate, environmental and biodiversity targets are mutually reinforcing. And the pressures they face - such as energy shocks, air and water pollution, extreme weather and species decline - do not respect borders.

To rebuild a coherent and resilient partnership, the UK and EU should now commit to a formal Energy, Climate, and Environment Partnership: a single framework, complementing the Trade and Cooperation Agreement, that brings together the key pillars of cooperation and creates a platform for long-term progress.

A Single Framework

The Partnership should be structured around four pillars:

1. Working together for climate safety and energy security

Deliver on the commitments in the Common Understanding agreed at the UK-EU Summit on 19 May by:

Linking the UK and EU emissions trading systems, to avoid unnecessary CBAM charges for UK exporters and create a more stable, liquid carbon market.

Rejoining the EU Internal Electricity Market, to restore efficient cross-border trading, reduce energy costs, and support investment in offshore wind and interconnectors

2. Building Europe's Grid: Interconnectors and Joint Energy Planning

Move from observer to full member of the North Seas Energy Cooperation (NSEC), enabling the UK to co-shape Europe's offshore grid and hybrid project strategy.

3. Regulatory alignment on environmental standards

Establish regulatory alignment with EU environmental regulation where it has higher standards than the UK since leaving the European Union - starting with chemicals, waste, air quality, and ecodesign.

Promote shared approaches to enforcement, compliance, and scientific assessment

4. Rejoining strategic EU programmes and agencies

Rejoin the European Environment Agency (EEA) and European Environment Information and Observation Network (EIONET), the LIFE funding programme, and the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) as an associate member - to reconnect UK institutions with scientific, technical and financial support and to strengthen data sharing and access to best practice.

Closer involvement would also allow the UK to help coordinate the next generation of cross-border interconnectors – essential to unlocking offshore wind potential, improving energy system efficiency, and enhancing security of supply on both sides of the Channel.

Like the new UK-EU Security and Defence Partnership,⁹ an Energy, Climate, and Environment Partnership could introduce a structured framework for political dialogue and consultation - including an annual energy, climate, and environment dialogue, underpinned by regular working-level engagement and the establishment of thematic sub-dialogues on specific areas of cooperation. This would provide the political structure often required to complement technical decision-making, unblock difficulties, and inject new momentum into the relationship.

Linking Emission Trading Systems



From 2026, UK exporters of carbon-intensive goods will face new charges at the EU border under the bloc's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM). CBAMs are designed to address carbon leakage - where companies move production abroad or switch to imported goods from countries with weaker climate rules.

This would come at a real cost. In 2021, nearly £7 billion of UK exports would have been covered by CBAM.¹⁰ Between 2026 and 2030, UK businesses could face up to £800 million in additional charges.¹¹ These costs could be avoided by formally linking the UK and EU Emissions Trading Systems (ETS), which would exempt each side from the other's CBAM regime.

An ETS - also known as a cap-and-trade scheme - is a policy tool used to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in a cost-effective way.¹² It sets an overall cap on emissions from key sectors such as energy, manufacturing and aviation. Within this cap, companies receive or purchase allowances, which are tradable, creating a carbon market. Companies that cut emissions below their allocation can sell the surplus; those that exceed it must buy extra permits. Over time, the cap tightens - driving down total emissions and encouraging cleaner investment.

While a Member State, the UK participated in the EU's Emissions Trading System (ETS) - a framework originally modelled on the UK's own system introduced in 2002.¹³ This arrangement ended on 1 January 2021, when the UK launched its own domestic ETS, which mirrors the EU's core design but operates independently.

Under the Trade and Cooperation Agreement, both sides committed to "give serious consideration" to linking their respective carbon pricing systems. Although this provision was not acted upon at the time, the UK-EU Summit revived the prospect of linkage. The Common Understanding confirmed that they "should work towards establishing a link" between the UK ETS and EU ETS.

The strongest case for linking the UK and EU ETS is to avoid the cost and complexity of CBAM. However, the advantages of a combined carbon market are broader. The UK ETS is significantly smaller than its EU counterpart, limiting liquidity, increasing price volatility, and weakening investment signals.¹⁴ Integration would create greater market stability, reduce compliance costs, and drive more efficient emissions reductions. For the UK, it would support faster, more predictable progress towards net zero - and enhance international credibility on climate.

There are potential short-term trade-offs. With the UK carbon price currently lower than the EU's, alignment could initially lead to higher electricity bills¹⁵ - at least without government intervention to support households and businesses - as increased costs for fossil-fuel generators are passed through the wholesale market to consumers. However, these effects are likely to be temporary - and outweighed by the medium- and long-term benefits economic and climate gains of integration into a larger carbon market, a stronger, more predictable investment environment, and the avoidance of CBAM charges.

Unlike the EU-Switzerland linkage process, which took nearly a decade,¹⁶ this agreement would be easier to deliver. The UK and EU systems remain closely aligned in scope, design and operation.

As part of linking its ETS, the UK should consider modelling the EU's new Social Climate Fund (SCF. Established under the ETS to help manage the social impacts of the transition to climate neutrality, it will channel roughly €86 billion between 2026 and 2032, raised from revenues generated by the auctioning of ETS allowances.¹⁷ This absence represents a growing policy gap - and a political risk. Without targeted support for vulnerable households and communities, the public mandate for net zero could weaken.

The UK should now look to mirror the SCF's objectives - ensuring that a portion of its own ETS revenues is ring-fenced to support a fair and inclusive energy transition, especially for those most at risk from rising costs. This would send a clear signal that climate action will also lower bills and improve lives.

Both sides should aim to conclude a formal agreement to link their Emissions Trading Systems before the EU's CBAM is fully implemented in 2026. If that time line cannot be met, the EU should consider granting a temporary exemption or interim agreement for the UK while negotiations are finalised - to avoid disruption and maintain confidence in the system.

Participating in the EU's Internal Electricity Market (IEM)

Electricity trading between the UK and EU has become slower, more fragmented, and more expensive since the UK left the EU's internal energy market in 2021. Previously, power was traded through a single, integrated system - the EU's Single Day Ahead Coupling (SDAC) mechanism - which matched supply and demand across borders in real time.¹⁸ That system ensured electricity flowed where it was needed most, at the lowest cost.

Despite strong physical links - ten operational interconnectors between Great Britain and continental Europe - the current trading system is underperforming.¹⁹ Electricity is now traded through separate, explicit cross-border auctions outside of the EU's integrated platforms. This decoupling has added cost, complexity and inefficiency. According to Energy UK, it is adding between £120 million and £370 million a year to UK electricity costs - a burden ultimately passed on to households and businesses.²⁰

The current model was only ever intended as transitional. The Trade and Cooperation Agreement committed both sides to develop a new system - known as Multi-Region Loose Volume Coupling - but four years on, it has yet to materialise. Regulatory complexity and a lack of political will have stalled progress.

However, there is now a clear political opening to reset the approach. At the UK-EU Summit, both sides agreed to "explore in detail the necessary parameters" for the United Kingdom to participate in the IEM. This is one of the most significant breakthroughs in energy cooperation since the United Kingdom left the European Union.

Rejoining the IEM market would restore efficiency, reduce costs, and support investment. This would not entail rejoining the wider single market. Rather, it would involve dynamic alignment with EU rules where relevant, an arbitration-based dispute resolution mechanism, an appropriate UK contribution to decision-shaping, and regular dialogue between regulators. Estimates suggest that re-establishing implicit trading could cut up to £13 billion from the cost of meeting offshore wind targets in the North Sea by 2050.²¹

The commitment in the Common Understanding for the UK to rejoin the EU Internal Electricity Market (IEM) must now be implemented. Doing so would restore full market coupling, eliminate current trading inefficiencies, reduce costs, and provide a stable basis for investment in interconnection and offshore wind. The sooner agreement is reached, the greater the benefits for households, businesses, and the transition to clean power.



North Seas Energy Cooperation (NSEC)

The North Sea is one of Europe's most valuable clean energy assets - and a critical strategic resource for the United Kingdom. Offshore wind has the potential to power millions of homes, reduce emissions at scale, and enhance long-term energy security. Realising this potential, however, cannot be done by any single country in isolation. It requires joint planning, shared infrastructure, and aligned regulation across borders.

That is the purpose of the North Seas Energy Cooperation (NSEC) - the intergovernmental forum through which the European Commission and ten countries coordinate offshore deployment, electricity interconnectors, and marine grid development. The UK was previously a full participant but stepped back following its departure from the EU. A Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2022 now permits UK officials to attend as observers but without access to decision-making or the technical groups that shape long-term strategy.²²

That absence is becoming increasingly difficult to justify. NSEC countries have committed to a joint target of 120 gigawatts of offshore wind by 2030, rising to 300 gigawatts by 2050.²³ With nearly 15 gigawatts already installed, the UK is Europe's offshore wind leader.²⁴ Yet without a seat at the table, it cannot influence critical decisions on cable routes, port upgrades, or the connection of hybrid wind projects. UK developers are excluded from strategic grid planning, project sequencing, and joint investment frameworks - increasing uncertainty and driving up system costs.

At the UK-EU Summit, both sides committed to "strengthen cooperation on planning the development of North Seas energy networks," with a ministerial meeting expected later this year to agree next steps. There is now broad recognition that the UK cannot afford to remain on the sidelines of the North Sea energy transition.

The UK should now move from observer to full member of NSEC - with access to working groups, strategic infrastructure planning, and cost-sharing mechanisms. This would allow the UK to help shape the North Sea energy grid, co-develop offshore projects, and coordinate cross-border connections. It would also send a clear political signal: that the UK is serious about climate leadership, and ready to work with its European partners to deliver it. Rejoining the EU's Internal Electricity Market would remove the final technical barrier to full NSEC participation and enable deeper, more effective cooperation.

As a full member of the NSEC, the UK should use its influence to ensure that the development of the North Sea takes full account of its impacts on nature and the marine environment. This means embedding robust environmental assessments from the outset and promoting measures that mitigate against negative effects on wildlife and habitats — ensuring that the drive for offshore energy goes hand in hand with the protection and restoration of the North Sea's ecosystems.



Rejoining the European Environment Agency (EEA) and the European Environment Information and Observation Network (EIONET)

The UK cannot meet its environmental ambitions alone. From tackling pollution and protecting biodiversity to adapting to climate change, these challenges cross borders and require shared data, expertise, and monitoring. Yet since 2020, the UK has remained outside two of Europe's most important environmental cooperation networks: the European Environment Agency (EEA) and the European Environment Information and Observation Network (EIONET).

The EEA is Europe's central hub for environmental data and analysis, supported by EIONET - a network of national agencies, institutions, and scientists. Together, they provide the evidence base for effective policymaking, helping governments track progress, assess risks, and benchmark performance across Europe.

For many years, UK institutions were central to shaping how Europe monitored environmental progress - developing indicators, contributing to expert groups, and supporting the evidence base that informed policymaking across the continent. That collaboration has ceased. The UK no longer has access to the tools, data flows, and analytical insights that underpin environmental governance in much of Europe. As a result, gaps are emerging - in air quality management, water regulation, nature restoration, and climate adaptation - with the UK increasingly out of step with how its neighbours measure and manage environmental risk.²⁵

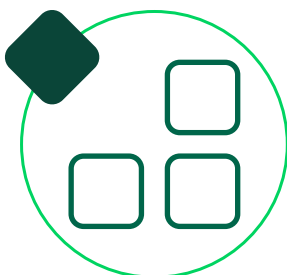


Rejoining the EEA and EIONET would address this. It would restore the UK's role as a contributor to Europe's collective environmental intelligence, allowing UK experts to share best practice, improve monitoring systems, and help shape the methodologies that underpin regulation across multiple sectors. This would not only enhance domestic policy - it would strengthen the UK's influence in setting international benchmarks

The case is not only scientific, but strategic. In a global context where environmental standards increasingly affect trade, investment, and public legitimacy, credibility matters. If the UK aims to lead on climate and nature, it must demonstrate alignment with high-quality, internationally recognised data and frameworks.

There is precedent. Non-EU countries including Norway, Switzerland and Turkey already participate in the EEA and EIONET.²⁶ The UK has the expertise, the institutional links and the regulatory capability to do the same - and in many areas, to lead.

The UK should seek to rejoin the European Environment Agency and reintegration into the EIONET expert network. This would restore access to shared environmental intelligence, strengthen the evidence base for regulation, and reinforce the UK's credibility as a climate and nature leader.



Cooperation on chemicals

The UK chemicals sector is one of the country's most globally integrated industries - and one of the most exposed to regulatory divergence following the UK's departure from the EU. Since 2021, the UK has operated its own regulatory system, UK REACH, separate from the EU's REACH regime and the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA). This duplication has led to significant cost, complexity, and uncertainty for businesses on both sides of the Channel.²⁷

Under EU REACH, companies benefit from a centralised system for registering, authorising and restricting chemicals, supported by ECHA and backed by its extensive scientific committees and data-sharing infrastructure. By contrast, UK REACH requires separate registration through the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and does not permit access to the ECHA chemicals database. The estimated cost to industry of duplicating EU registration data in the UK has been placed at over £2 billion, with no added environmental or health protection.²⁸

These costs are already having an impact. Some companies have indicated they may withdraw products from the UK market due to the burden of dual registration and uncertainty around future divergence. Small and medium-sized enterprises are particularly at risk. The absence of access to ECHA's vast chemical safety database weakens the ability of UK regulators to assess hazards and keep pace with emerging risks.

Since 2020, the EU has added 38 new substances to its Substances of Very High Concern (SVHC) list. The UK has added none.²⁹ This growing gap undermines confidence in the UK's regulatory system and puts human health and the environment at risk.

The UK should rejoin the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) as an associate member and adopt dynamic alignment with the EU's REACH system. This would restore access to the chemical safety database, reduce costs for business, and allow the UK to participate in scientific committees that shape global best practice.³⁰

This would not require rejoining the EU or the Single Market. It would simply mean re-establishing the UK's place in the cooperative system it helped design - a system that safeguards public health, enables clean innovation, and supports frictionless trade.



Regulatory alignment with the EU where it leads to higher standards

Since the United Kingdom left the European Union, environmental regulation has increasingly diverged. While both sides remain committed to climate and ecological goals, the EU has moved further and faster - raising standards across pesticides, chemicals, air quality, waste, and biodiversity - as documented by IEEP UK's tracking of divergence in environmental law.³¹ By contrast, the UK has fallen behind in several key areas, weakening long-standing protections and stalling the adoption of modern environmental safeguards.

This divergence carries real-world consequences. It undermines public health and environmental quality, creates uncertainty for businesses, and introduces barriers to trade with the UK's largest export market. In some cases, it also risks reputational damage - with the UK seen less as a leader in green regulation and more as a jurisdiction marked by deregulation or delay.

The case for regulatory alignment where it leads to higher standards

A policy of committing to match EU environmental standards where they go further, unless there is a clear, evidence-based reason not to, would deliver wide-ranging benefits for the UK's economy, environment, and global standing.³²

The EU explicitly recognises in the Common Understanding scope for the UK to be consulted in areas where it will be dynamically aligning, which could be extended to other areas of regulation, including environmental standards.



1. Protecting Public Health and the Environment

Many EU environmental standards - particularly in areas such as air pollution, pesticide use, and chemical safety - are based on rigorous scientific evidence. Aligning with these higher standards would reduce public exposure to harmful substances, protect ecosystems, and support the UK's wider climate and nature goals. In doing so, it would help safeguard lives and improve long-term environmental quality across the country.



2. Reducing Trade Frictions and Compliance Costs

Regulatory divergence raises barriers to trade. UK exporters - especially in sectors like food, chemicals, batteries, and packaging - face additional compliance costs and complexity when rules diverge from those in the EU. Alignment would lower these frictions, ensure smoother access to the UK's largest export market, and avoid the duplication of regulatory processes.



3. Supporting Business Confidence and Investment

Consistency with European standards offers businesses regulatory certainty - a key factor in unlocking investment in clean technologies, sustainable product design, and circular economy infrastructure. Divergence increases risk and uncertainty, which discourages long-term investment. In contrast, alignment would provide clarity for planning and innovation.



4. Preserving Influence and International Credibility

Britain once helped shape the EU's environmental acquis. Maintaining alignment with rising EU standards would demonstrate that the UK remains committed to high-quality, science-based regulation - reinforcing its credibility as a global leader on climate and nature. Without such alignment, the UK risks being seen as a rule-taker, adopting EU standards informally without the benefits of formal cooperation or influence.



5. Avoiding the Costs of Unmanaged Divergence

The alternative to structured alignment is not regulatory freedom, but costly and fragmented divergence. UK-specific rules would force manufacturers to redesign supply chains and adapt production processes solely for the domestic market. This is especially true in sectors like chemicals and ecodesign, where different technical standards mean different components, extra paperwork and new border checks.

In reality, most businesses would continue following EU rules to preserve market access - but with none of the efficiencies or strategic benefits that come from cooperation.

A Widening Gap

As Prime Minister, Boris Johnson pledged that the UK would “maintain the highest standards in these areas - better, in many respects, than those of the EU”³³ and stated his ambition for “the UK to go further than the EU and set improved environmental standards, animal welfare and product safety.”³⁴ **However, in area after area, UK environmental protections are falling behind.**



Pesticides

Pesticide residue limits in UK food have been significantly relaxed since leaving the EU. For example, the permitted level of glyphosate - classed by the WHO as a ‘probable human carcinogen’ - is now 7.5 times higher in UK beans than in the EU. The limit for penthiopyrad in blackberries has risen over 1,000-fold¹. Since 2020, the EU has banned 36 harmful pesticides - including neonicotinoids such as thiamethoxam - to protect pollinators.³⁵

The UK has not followed suit and has repeatedly issued emergency authorisations for substances banned in the EU.



Air Quality

The EU is tightening air pollution limits, including aligning PM2.5 thresholds with WHO guidance by 2030.³⁶

The UK has adopted a weaker deadline of 2040 and is proposing to remove legally binding emission ceiling planning duties.³⁷



Waste and Circular Economy

The EU’s new Battery Regulation (2023)³⁸ introduces digital product passports, recycled content targets, and producer responsibility schemes.

The UK is still consulting. The EU has also advanced legislation on packaging waste and banned many single-use plastic items.

¹ For current EU Maximum Residue Limits (MRLs), see the EU Pesticides Database. For UK MRLs, see the Health and Safety Executive Pesticide Residues Database.



Ecodesign

The EU adopted the Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation (ESPR) in 2024,³⁹ covering durability, repairability, and recyclability across multiple product groups.

The UK has not proposed a parallel framework.



Water Pollution

The EU is modernising its Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive,⁴⁰ applying it to smaller areas and introducing binding microplastic and pharmaceutical controls.

The UK has proposed weakening protections in some areas and has no equivalent microplastics strategy.



Nature and Biodiversity

The EU's Nature Restoration Law, agreed in 2024, sets legal targets to restore 20% of degraded land and sea by 2030 and ultimately all ecosystems in need of restoration by 2050.⁴¹ The UK has no binding equivalent.

The targets set out in the UK's 2021 Environment Act are less ambitious, lack clarity on delivery mechanisms, and are already off track.⁴²

The UK should adopt a policy of regulatory alignment with EU environmental standards where they are demonstrably higher - unless there is clear, robust evidence to justify a different approach. That evidence must show not only that UK standards are more ambitious or better grounded in science, but also that the benefits of diverging in a given area are significant enough to outweigh the inevitable downsides - particularly the increased trade friction that comes with having different rules from the EU. This approach should begin with pesticide regulation, chemical safety, air quality, ecodesign, water, and biodiversity. Restoring alignment in these areas would protect the public, unlock investment, and rebuild trust.

The LIFE Programme



The LIFE Programme is the EU's flagship funding instrument for environment, nature, and climate. Since its creation in 1992, it has provided over €7 billion in support for environmental protection and climate resilience across the continent. Through its four core strands - Nature and Biodiversity, Circular Economy and Quality of Life, Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation, and Clean Energy Transition - LIFE funds projects that deliver on-the-ground results, build capacity, and support regulatory implementation.

The UK was previously a full participant in the programme. Between 1992 and 2020, the UK received over €350 million in LIFE funding, supporting 271 projects and unlocking significant co-financing from domestic sources.⁴³ Projects ranged from peatland restoration in Scotland to species protection in Wales and floodplain recovery along English river systems. For many conservation NGOs, local authorities, and environmental agencies, LIFE provided both funding and a framework to deliver long-term nature-based solutions.

Since the UK left the EU, access to LIFE funding has ended - and no domestic scheme of comparable scale has been established. While a number of projects initiated before 2021 remain active, the UK can no longer participate in new funding calls, form cross-border partnerships, or lead future LIFE initiatives. This has significantly reduce opportunities for UK organisations at a time when demand for nature restoration and climate resilience projects is increasing.

The UK's exclusion is not inevitable. Third countries can associate with the LIFE Programme via agreement with the European Commission. Iceland, Moldova, North Macedonia and Ukraine are already associated, allowing their domestic organisations to apply for and participate in LIFE-funded projects.⁴⁴ There is no legal or technical reason why the UK could not seek a similar agreement - and doing so would deliver immediate benefits

Rejoining the LIFE programme would require a proportionate financial contribution from the UK, but the returns would be significant. It would restore access to substantial EU funding for high-impact projects aligned with UK priorities - including peatland restoration, pollinator conservation, local net zero initiatives, and climate adaptation.

The added value of LIFE is not only financial. The programme helps bridge the gap between innovation and implementation - supporting the scale-up of new techniques and approaches. For local authorities, it offers tools and funding for community-led climate action. For civil society and the research sector, it supports long-term planning and connection to EU-wide knowledge networks. For government, it creates delivery capacity for meeting statutory climate and nature commitments.

As demonstrated by the UK's successful re-association to the Horizon Europe research programme, participation in EU frameworks brings more than just funding. It enables UK organisations to form partnerships with peers across Europe, share expertise, and co-develop solutions to shared environmental challenges.

With the UK expected to update its Environmental Improvement Plan, and with nature-based solutions becoming a national policy priority, the case for rejoining is timely. The current LIFE programme runs to 2027 with a total budget of €5.4 billion. The opportunity to reconnect is real - and the longer the UK remains outside, the more difficult it becomes for UK-based organisations to maintain expertise and networks that were once world-leading.

The UK should negotiate an agreement to associate with the EU LIFE Programme. This would restore access to vital funding, support nature recovery and climate resilience, and re-open channels for practical cooperation with European partners. As part of a wider strategy to rebuild environmental capacity and credibility, rejoining LIFE would be a pragmatic and cost-effective step forward.

Conclusion

The UK and EU face a shared challenge - and a shared opportunity - in reshaping their relationship around the defining issues of our time: energy, climate, and the environment. Far from being peripheral policy areas, these are central to economic security, public health, industrial resilience, and indeed to our collective future. They are central to economic security, public health, industrial resilience, and the future of the planet.

The UK-EU Summit marked a turning point, setting the tone for a renewed partnership based on shared ambition. That momentum must now be translated into a formal Energy, Climate, and Environment Partnership that provides clarity, commitment, and direction. The EU's existing Green Partnership with South Korea and alliances with Norway, Japan and Canada demonstrate a clear precedent for meaningful green cooperation, but both the UK and the EU should be more ambitious.

A Partnership built on four practical pillars - working together for climate safety and energy security, building Europe's grid through interconnectors and joint planning, regulatory alignment, and rejoining key European programmes and agencies - would offer a credible, forward-looking path. These proposals are realistic, deliverable, and rooted in mutual interest. They would cut costs, accelerate decarbonisation, protect nature, and restore the UK's voice in decisions that directly affect its future

Political momentum within the EU is also under pressure. Parts of the Green Deal are being rolled back, and enforcement gaps remain in areas like air and water quality. However, these risks only make the case for renewed partnership stronger. A closer UK-EU relationship on climate and the environment could help both sides stay on track, raise ambition, and hold one another to account.⁴⁵

The case for action is urgent. Up to £10 billion in unnecessary costs are at stake this Parliament alone.⁴⁶ But the risks are broader: a slower energy transition, missed climate targets, fragmented pollution control, and weakened environmental governance. From flooding and air quality to nature loss and chemical safety, the UK's environmental challenges demand deeper international coordination - and the EU is its most natural and strategic partner.

The foundations are already there. The political space has opened. What is needed now is the will to act - delivering cleaner power, lower energy costs, and a healthier, more resilient environment for future generations.

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Who We Are

The European Movement was founded by Winston Churchill in 1949 to promote European unity. For over 75 years, we have worked to build a closer relationship with our European neighbours. The European Movement is a cross-party, single-issue organisation. We are powered by our 26,000 members, over 250,000 campaign supporters, over 100 local groups, and our strong networks in Westminster and the EU.

The European Movement Presidents are Caroline Lucas and Dominic Grieve, and our Chair is Dr Mike Galsworthy. The Movement's strategy is determined by our National Council – a 100 strong body of campaigners from across the UK. Sir Nick Harvey, CEO, leads the staff team and oversees operational delivery of the strategy.

What We Believe

The UK shares deeply held values and a common history with our European neighbours. The EU and its member states are natural trading, security, diplomatic and cultural partners for the UK and, together, we can exercise powerful influence on the world stage.

It is becoming increasingly clear that Britain's decision to leave the EU is not working out well in practice and isn't going to. The UK's economic and political interests, and the global pursuit of our shared values of peace, freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law are best achieved through the UK rebuilding closer ties with the European Union.

Our History

Over 75 years, we have worked to build a closer relationship with the rest of Europe. We played a significant role in securing the UK's membership of the European Community in 1975. Today, we are tracking and spotlighting, with grave concern, the practical impacts of the UK's decision to leave. We are continuing that long legacy of pro-European campaigning.

Our Strategy

The European Movement's mission now is to address head-on the issue that UK politics is avoiding: acknowledging and highlighting the damaging impacts of Britain's decision to leave the European Union. It is in the UK's national interest to reverse that damage and build back our relationship with the EU.

www.europeanmovement.co.uk

JOIN OUR MOVEMENT TODAY

Become a member of the European Movement today, and help us shine a light on the impacts of Brexit, and build the case for positive changes to our relationship with the EU.



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If you are a member, you can get more involved by reaching out to your local activist group. You can find a map of our groups and their contact details at our website:

<https://grassroots.europeanmovement.co.uk/local-groups-map>