

# The Environment in Focus

Suggested inquiry topics by the Institution of Environmental Sciences, the Institute of Air Quality Management, NCLOG, and the IES Land Condition Community



# The Environment in Focus

## Select Committee inquiry submission

The **Institution of Environmental Sciences** (the IES) is at the forefront of uniting the environmental sciences around a shared goal: to work with speed, vision and expertise to solve the world's most pressing environmental challenges, together.

As the global professional membership body for environmental scientists, we support a diverse network of professionals all over the world – and at every stage of their education and careers – to connect, develop, progress and inspire.

The IES represents the voices of environmental professionals, sharing insights from the front lines of work with the environment. The interdisciplinary background of the IES family makes it particularly well-placed to address interconnected environmental challenges and propose solutions.

Our membership includes over 6000 environmental professionals who are well-positioned to share insights directly from the point of policy implementation.

At the IES, we recognise that our members are the experts, so they are well-placed to identify issues which demand greater scrutiny.

In particular, the IES's **Environmental Policy Implementation Community** (EPIC) has expertise on how to deliver environmental policy in practice.

## Background

In September 2025, the Environmental Audit Committee of the House of Commons announced a new inquiry: 'The Environment in Focus', which would invite "proposals on what the Committee should investigate next and why".

Individuals will be invited to present proposals for inquiry topics to Members of Parliament at a future public session of the Committee, with the winning suggestion adopted as a new inquiry.

The IES policy team worked with several Communities across the IES family to identify the most pressing topics that may not otherwise be suggested as inquiries, yet which were nonetheless in need of public scrutiny.

As a result, three submissions were made from across the IES family:

1. Air quality targets (by the IAQM)
2. Addressing the risks from closed landfill contamination (by NCLOG and the Land Condition Community)
3. The links between social, economic, and environmental outcomes (by the IES)



**“Air pollution is the largest environmental threat to health... Despite mounting evidence, UK air quality limits lag behind international standards.”**

– EPIC and the **Institute of Air Quality Management**



# “Air pollution is often overlooked in planning and policy decisions ... even where health risks persist.”

## Air quality targets

**Submitted by the Institute for Air Quality Management (the IAQM) and the IES**

Air pollution is the largest environmental threat to health. It shortens lives, damages children’s lungs, and contributes to chronic diseases including dementia. The economic cost is estimated at £27 billion annually through ill health, additional NHS care, and lost productivity.

Despite mounting evidence, UK air quality limits lag behind international standards. While the EU adopted a new air quality directive in 2024, the UK continues to rely on thresholds largely derived from a 1999 directive.

The World Health Organization (WHO) issued more stringent guidelines in 2021, yet England’s PM2.5 target - set in 2023 - allows twice the WHO guideline value until 2040. In 2024, only one monitoring site exceeded this lenient target, underscoring how current standards fail to drive meaningful improvement.

Air pollution is often overlooked in planning and policy decisions, since existing thresholds appear to be met in most areas - even where health risks persist.

The Environmental Audit Committee’s 2023 evidence-gathering exercise found that the PM2.5 targets are “not stretching enough” and that local authorities lack the powers, resources, and funding to implement effective air quality measures.

We propose a full, evidence-based inquiry to examine:

- What updated targets are required to protect public health and the natural environment in line with WHO guidance.
- What additional powers, resources, and funding local authorities need to effectively reduce air pollution from all major sources.

## Addressing the risks from closed landfill contamination

**Submitted by NCLOG (the National Contaminated Land Officers Group) and the IES Land Condition Community**

There are approximately 20,000 closed landfills across the UK. If poorly managed, contamination from landfills can pose a serious threat to human health and the environment.

Pollutants can leach into rivers and groundwater, degrade air quality, and endanger communities. Coastal sites are at serious risk from erosion and flooding. Poorly managed sites also release significant amounts of methane, contributing around 4% of the UK's greenhouse gas emissions.

Despite these risks, the extent of contamination from closed sites remains poorly understood. Data is often inaccurate or incomplete and many sites are no longer actively monitored or managed.

Where monitoring does occur, there is no requirement for local authorities or agencies to report risks, though our

members have indicated that closed landfills sites are some of the most complex to address.

Responsibility and accountability for these sites is often unclear, as ownership may have changed over decades, and historical policies on monitoring and maintenance are no longer implemented or funded.

Many local authorities lack the funding, technical expertise, and capacity to investigate or remediate contamination, fostering a reactive and risk-averse culture.

As a result, potentially developable brownfield land remains neglected, often in areas where regeneration could bring major social and economic benefits.

To date, there has been no inquiry into contamination from closed landfills. We propose a new inquiry to examine:

- Responsibility and accountability for the management and remediation of closed landfill sites.
- The powers, resources, and funding local authorities need to effectively identify, monitor, and address contamination from closed landfills.



“Landfills can pose a serious threat to human health and the environment ... yet the extent of contamination from closed sites remains poorly understood.”

NCLOG and the IES Land Condition Community



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## The links between social, economic, and environmental outcomes

Submitted by the Institution of Environmental Sciences (the IES)

The UK faces an unprecedented period of complicated and related social, economic, and environmental challenges:

- Health outcomes are increasingly linked to the state of our environment, such as [the air we breathe](#) and the [land we live on](#).
- [8.5million people](#) have unmet housing needs, but building more homes is [not enough](#) and competes with others uses of land.
- The ongoing effects of the [cost of living crisis](#) make environmentally-conscious decisions more difficult.
- Climate change is currently at a '[record pace](#)' with [clear risks for the UK](#).
- The UK is one of the world's most nature-depleted countries, and nature degradation could cause a [12% loss to UK GDP](#).

For each urgent crisis, we need fast and effective solutions, but we cannot make the right decisions and trade-offs unless we understand how social, economic, and environmental outcomes are linked.

The [Welsh Well-being of Future Generations Act](#) and [the SDGs](#) are good case studies. With a review of the SDGs on the horizon, the UK could take a world-leading position on linking social, economic, and environmental outcomes that would also be a massive benefit at home.

Exploring these links through an inquiry would also support communication with the public, who don't always know how economic decisions help them or how they benefit from environmental protections.

The Institution of Environmental Sciences has proposed a solution the Government could adopt: a [Sustainable Wellbeing Framework for England](#), which would support sensible, fair progress towards a country with thriving people, a healthy economy, and a flourishing environment.



**“The UK faces an unprecedented period of social, economic, and environmental challenges. For each urgent crisis, we need fast and effective solutions.”**

**– Joseph Lewis, IES Head of Policy**

