



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

Defra response to OEP report: Taking stock: protecting, restoring and improving the environment in England

Presented to Parliament pursuant to Section 29 of the
Environment Act 2021



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

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Dame Glenys Stacey
Chair
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House of Commons
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July 2022

Dear Dame Glenys,

Defra response to OEP report: Taking stock: protecting, restoring and improving the environment in England

As part of government's statutory duties established under section 29 of the Environment Act 2021, I am pleased to be able to set out our response as part of our long-term commitment to improving the environment. We intend to provide a more comprehensive response to a number of the recommendations you have set out through our revised Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP).

I agree with the OEP recommendations to take a comprehensive and systemic approach across the environmental agenda. The Environment Act 2021 designated the 25 Year Environment Plan as the first Environmental Improvement Plan, and Defra is required to review it and publish a revised version by 31 January 2023. The revised EIP will be a long-term delivery plan, setting out the path to meeting environmental goals and targets. As we develop our policy pathways, we will be assessing whether there are any policy gaps and which policies should be prioritised for implementation to have the biggest impact. I intend for the EIP to become the main environmental work programme for the department, and wider government, to drive outcomes and focus on delivery.

This work will be supported by our new Natural Capital and Ecosystem Assessment, providing data on the condition and change over time of England's ecosystems and natural capital and their benefits to society. The capability of the programme, now in its first year and run out in partnership with Defra Group Arms-Length Bodies, will underpin the management of our natural capital, transform the way we make policy decisions and ensure that we invest in environmental reforms that achieve maximum benefit. Furthermore, the monitoring and evaluation framework for the 25 Year Environment Plan includes annual progress checks, periodic comprehensive assessments, policy evaluations, international comparisons and ongoing publication of data and statistics.

I also agree with the OEP that there is a need to bring order to our existing suite of 'legacy' targets, which are currently outside of the Environment Act. I have already said publicly that I intend to review these targets over time to bring them into the Act's framework, where appropriate. This will ensure they are also subject to robust reporting and accountability mechanisms, including via the OEP. It will also help to create a holistic approach to environmental delivery through the EIP rather than separate plans and strategies. I am conscious that we need time to get this right and build the appropriate evidence base, and

so will be carrying out an internal exercise to agree next steps on this review process. The natural environment is complex, and we see target-setting as an iterative process, built upon over time as our evidence base and understanding develops.

Additionally, interim targets will help the government stay on track by setting the trajectory towards long-term targets and allow for an ongoing assessment of progress. At least every 5 years we will also conduct the Significant Improvement Test to assess whether the suite of targets we have in place has the necessary breadth and ambition.

Alongside the formal statutory EIP assessment and progress reporting mechanisms, the 25 Year Environment Plan Outcome Indicator Framework will continue to be used to demonstrate nuances of environmental change and to explore progress towards the long-term vision of Environmental Improvement Plans. The latest report set out detail on 50 indicators looking across the overarching goals of the plan and we are working toward publishing data for the full set of 66 indicators by 2024.

We are continuing to work with ONS to explore how the statistics and data we produce can add new insights on the environment and how it interacts with our economy and society. We will develop a shared vision which includes improving the interoperability, coherence, and accessibility of cross-government statistics and data on the environment.

Lastly, on the environmental principles. In May 2022 we published our draft Environmental Principles policy statement, and we are currently considering the feedback from Parliamentarians. We are already supporting government departments in understanding and applying the requirements of the new duty in their policy-making, and will set out the next steps regarding the implementation period shortly.

We look forward to continuing to work with you to help meet our shared ambitions of leaving the environment in a better state than we found it.



RT HON GEORGE EUSTICE MP



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