



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

Government response to the Office for Environmental Protection's report on progress in improving the natural environment in England from January 2023

Presented to the Parliament pursuant to Section 28 of the Environment Act 2021

We are the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. We're responsible for improving and protecting the environment, growing the green economy, sustaining thriving rural communities and supporting our world-class food, farming and fishing industries.

We work closely with our 33 agencies and arm's length bodies on our ambition to make our air purer, our water cleaner, our land greener and our food more sustainable. Our mission is to restore and enhance the environment for the next generation, and to leave the environment in a better state than we found it.



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Introduction

The Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) published [‘Taking stock: protecting, restoring, and improving the environment in England’](#) on 12 May 2022 in accordance with Section 29 of the Environment Act 2021. We responded with [‘Defra response to OEP report’](#) on 19 July 2022 with the intention to provide a more comprehensive response at a later stage. The OEP subsequently published its [‘Progress in improving the natural environment in England’](#) report on 19 January 2023.

This report sets out our response in accordance with Section 28 of the Environment Act 2021. This requires the government to respond to an OEP progress report as part of its duties to monitor and report on environmental improvement plans and targets. As required by the Act, where the OEP report contains a recommendation for how progress could be improved, we have set out our response to address the recommendation. Where there are common themes, we have grouped recommendations together, providing a single response against all similar recommendations.

It is important to note that these recommendations were made prior to the setting of the [Environment Act Targets](#) and the publication of the [Environmental Improvement Plan](#) in January 2023. Many of our responses reflect that.

Our response satisfies the requirement to lay the report in Parliament no later than 12 months after the OEP progress report that was published on 19th January 2023.

Environmental Improvement Plan

OEP recommendations

1 – May 2022 report: In preparing its next Environmental Improvement Plan, government should carry out a comprehensive stocktake of the condition of the environment, environmental pressures, and their drivers. This needs to embrace not just current issues but also emerging ones that need to be fast-tracked into delivery. The trajectories of environmental changes should also be assessed. This will enable government to take a systemic and comprehensive approach across the whole environmental agenda, and to include issues that may not previously have received the required focus.

2 – May 2022 report: Having developed a comprehensive understanding of the environment, government must identify the most important environmental concerns. It should be transparent about what it intends to do across all aspects of the environment. It should take account of environmental tipping points, to ensure actions will be timely.

3 – May 2022 report: The overarching vision of the 25 Year Environment Plan, and for key areas of the environment, should be clear, coherent and evidence based. Where there are competing priorities, the vision should support putting the environment first. Once established, statements of vision should be promoted clearly and consistently in successive EIPs, key strategies and policy documents.

Government response

Since the OEP published its first report (referenced above) we published a revised Environmental Improvement Plan 2023 (EIP23) on 31 January 2023. This is in addition to the Statutory Instruments for the Environment Act Targets (the consultation for which included detailed evidence and impact assessments) and the [Significant Improvement Test](#).

EIP23 sets out a comprehensive plan to deliver environmental improvements in England. EIP23 includes how we will deliver our long-term Environment Act targets, alongside their associated interim targets which measure and demonstrate progress over the short term. It builds on the ambitions in the [25 Year Environment Plan](#) (25YEP) and sets out delivery of the comprehensive set of commitments across the ten 25YEP goal areas.

Each goal has a clear list of targets which have monitoring and evaluation plans. In addition to target monitoring, we also use the [Outcome Indicator Framework](#) (OIF) to describe the wider environmental change related to the ten goals. Where appropriate the indicators include an assessment of change. The Environment Act 2021 requires government to review and revise its EIP every 5 years. We will iterate it as our understanding and underpinning evidence progresses so that we can adapt it to best respond to changing environmental pressures.

Governance

OEP recommendations

4 – May 2022 report: The environment and environment strategy should be a responsibility of all government departments. Government must gain active support for its vision across all departments, to the same level and extent as Net Zero.

12 – May 2022 report: Government should establish strong EIP governance arrangements including the involvement of other government departments, as well as within Defra and among its delivery partners and local authorities. Defra's ALB reconfiguration should be designed to ensure greater integration and clearer accountabilities for delivery of EIPs.

2 – January 2023 report: Develop and implement clear governance. Government should make clear who is accountable, how decisions are made, and how delivery of the new EIP will be assured across government. In our view, the Cross-Government 25 Year Environment Plan Delivery Board could have full authority to oversee, co-ordinate and drive forward action to implement the new EIP and should be accountable for ensuring delivery. Publication and application of the Environmental Principles Policy Statement remain indispensable in this regard.

Government response

The EIP23 is a unifying delivery plan that articulates 10 goal areas, and how they will be delivered through Environment Act targets, other statutory targets and wider government commitments and actions.

We have well established oversight groups within Defra, its Arms-Length Bodies and cross-government which are responsible for driving forward action to deliver EIP23, associated Environment Act 2021 requirements and [Greening Government Commitments](#).

The 25 YEP Board is and will continue to be the central authority for cross-government delivery, taking account of the new statutory framework. Issues requiring ministerial decision can be escalated from the 25 YEP Board as needed to the appropriate Cabinet Committee.

The [Environmental Principles Policy Statement](#) was published on 31 January 2023, and the duty came legally into force on 1 November 2023. A cross government working group has been established to support effective implementation of Environmental Principles duty.

Environment is a cross-government strategy and ties in with the cross-cutting outcome for the environment that we lead across departments with specific contributions from Department for Transport (DfT) and Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (DLUHC). Government [priority outcomes and metrics](#) covering 2022- to 2025 were published alongside the SR21 outcome.

Environmental targets

OEP recommendation 5 – May 2022 report

Government must clarify how multiple targets in individual policy areas relate to each other and to existing commitments in national legislation and internationally, in order that they become mutually supportive and have synergistic effects and impacts.

Government response

We have set stretching statutory targets to tackle some of the biggest pressures facing our environment. As set out in the Significant Improvement Test, they complement our existing suite of statutory targets and will ensure progress on clean air, clean and plentiful water, less waste and more sustainable use of our resources, a step change in tree planting, a better marine environment, and a more diverse, resilient, and healthy natural environment.

The impact assessments and detailed evidence reports supporting the new statutory targets provide further information about the benefits of meeting those statutory targets as well as the interactions between Environment Act target areas.

OEP recommendation 6 – May 2022 report

Government must demonstrate how targets are intended to work together towards the achievement of overarching goals and objectives by ordering them into a clear hierarchy and taxonomy. This should include challenging apex targets for all EIP goals and a clear line of sight between relevant complementary interim and longer-term targets, policies, delivery measures, and indicators for monitoring progress.

Government response

The EIP23 sets out how the Environment Act targets; existing statutory targets; and wider non-statutory commitments will deliver our environmental goals. The EIP23 also explains how targets and commitments will work together towards the achievement of our overarching apex target to halt and then reverse the decline in nature. We took a systems approach in our considerations to develop and now deliver targets, to make sure that they can be achieved through complementary actions across multiple target areas.

In January 2023, we also published our Significant Improvement Test, to assess whether meeting our Environment Act targets and existing statutory targets would significantly improve the natural environment in England.

We will publish delivery information alongside the first EIP23 Annual Progress Report in 2024.

OEP recommendation 7 – May 2022 report

Given the scale of change now necessary, we press government to set ambitious long-term statutory targets. Interim targets will benefit from a greater level of specificity and achievability, so as to provide short-term direction and stimulus. Government's annual progress reports should include an assessment when a target is not achieved.

Government response

The suite of Environment Act targets that we have set was the result of four years of significant scientific evidence collection and development that included input from evidence partners and independent experts, supported by detailed published evidence.

EIP23 sets out our stretching interim targets which will help ensure we are on track to deliver our long-term targets. We will report on progress in the Annual Progress Report.

OEP recommendation 8 – May 2022 report

Government can give a legal underpinning to its targets under the Environment Act 2021. A legal basis compels action and will help Defra gain support across government departments. We recommend government take full advantage of this opportunity, prioritising apex targets first.

Government response

Following detailed consultation, 13 environmental targets were all in force by 31 January 2023. These are all long-term and legally binding targets.

OEP recommendation 4 – January 2023

Set and vigorously pursue clear and achievable interim targets that are as ambitious as possible in the areas needing most attention. All targets will require prompt and concerted effort. To ensure adequate progress, Government should now set interim targets that will drive immediate action, enable nature's recovery, and allow assessment of progress.

Government response

The EIP23 includes stretching interim targets for each of the long-term legally binding targets set under the Environment Act 2021.

Delivery

OEP recommendation 9 – May 2022 report

All key government strategies and policies that affect the environment must be aligned with, and follow from, the ambitions of the 25 YEP and future EIPs.

Government response

The Environment Act 2021 embeds environmental considerations across government policy making by placing a legal duty on ministers to have due regard to the environmental principles policy statement when making policy.

OEP recommendation 10 – May 2022 report

Government should ensure the delivery plans for all environmental strategies and policies are designed and implemented in an integrated and effective way, removing silos, and making the most of opportunities for transformational change.

Government response

The EIP23 set out the strategy and actions we will take to deliver environmental improvement and described how different actions will work together in an integrated way to drive change. As described in the EIP23, we will use a systems delivery approach to ensure that actions to achieve targets and EIP23 outcomes recognise connections and interactions between different areas, breaking down silos.

We will publish delivery information alongside the Annual Progress Report in 2024.

OEP recommendation 3 – January 2023 report

Develop and implement unifying delivery plans. Government should establish a unifying delivery plan for the new EIP, and a delivery plan for each of its goal areas. Each plan should build on an understanding of drivers and pressures, define outcomes, set out all targets and their means of assessment, establish clear governance, and identify the specific policies and activities that contribute towards their achievement.

Government response

The EIP23 is a unifying delivery plan that articulates ten goal areas, and how they will be delivered through Environment Act targets, other statutory targets and wider government commitments and actions.

The Environment Act 2021 includes a statutory cycle of monitoring, planning, and reporting that ensures government can be held to account. The statutory cycle to drive short-term progress sets out that:

1. The government must have an Environmental Improvement Plan which sets out the steps it intends to take to improve the environment and review it at least every five years.
2. The government must report on progress towards achieving targets and implementing the Environmental Improvement Plan every year.

We will publish delivery information alongside the first EIP23 Annual Progress Report in 2024.

OEP recommendation 1 – January 2023 report

Government should take the opportunity to jump start the next Environmental Improvement Plan immediately after publication. We have identified eight attributes of a new and effective Plan that should address the shortcomings of the previous plan. Government should drive bold, prompt action where most needed, for example in relation to species abundance. It should use all tools at its disposal, and work at pace and at scale.

Government response

The EIP23 is delivery focussed, setting out the actions to drive us towards reaching our long-term targets and goals. It also includes interim targets to be achieved by the next review of the EIP23.

Through the Spending Review 2021, there is significant investment to help achieve the goals of the plan alongside a target to raise over £500 million annually of inward private investment toward nature by 2027 and £1 billion by 2030.

Following publication of the EIP23, we reviewed and strengthened our governance and reporting arrangements to provide oversight and accountability across EIP23 goals, Environment Act targets and associated delivery plans.

Monitoring and evaluation

OEP recommendation 11 – May 2022 report

The increasing ambition in environmental strategies and policies must go hand in hand with timely evaluation of implementation, iteratively building on evidence to find remedies for areas where delivery remains slow.

Government response

The [25YEP supplementary evidence report](#) sets out a monitoring and evaluation framework for the plan, which is intended to track progress and provide feedback to enable policy and delivery to be adapted, ensuring we learn lessons from what works. The key questions for monitoring and evaluation are: How are the pressures on our natural assets changing? How well are our interventions working? Has our natural environment improved? How have our natural assets and the benefits they provide changed?

[Defra's evaluation strategy](#) sets out Defra's vision and overarching goals for evaluation from 2022 to 2025.

OEP recommendations

14 – May 2022 report: Government should identify and fill critical data gaps, focusing firstly on the issues of greatest environmental concern. Government's monitoring, assessment and reporting framework should provide the data, information and knowledge needed to understand if environmental goals and targets are being met; and capture the influence of pressures and their drivers.

5 – Jan 2023 report: Implement an effective monitoring, evaluation and learning framework. Data must be made available that are adequate for understanding underlying drivers and trends in environmental protection, as well as monitoring improvement and assessing progress towards targets. By the time of government's next annual reporting period, data should be comprehensive, current, and consistent with the standards detailed in targets. Predictive assessments should underpin government's plans and actions. Government should establish an evaluation framework for the EIP to enable learning and feedback that will ensure effective delivery in the long-term. Government's reporting should combine quantitative assessments with evaluation evidence to provide more rigorous accounts of progress.

Government response

Our Annual Progress Reports will provide data and information to measure progress towards achieving the Environment Act targets and whether the natural environment, or aspects of it, have improved. This will include Outcome Indicator Framework data as well as other data and information where necessary. Further details on our approach to monitoring the condition of the natural environment are set out in our policy statement published in 2022, fulfilling requirements under Section 16 of the Environment Act 2021. This statement will continue to be periodically reviewed and updated, as needed.

We will publish delivery information alongside the Annual Progress Report in 2024.

The Outcome Indicator Framework (OIF) assesses progress against the aims of the 25 YEP and future EIPs. It is dynamic and kept under regular review so that it continues to be relevant and uses the best and most cost-effective ways of assessing environmental data.

Whilst the OIF already reports data for 85% of indicators, some indicators are drawing upon new data collection and analysis to reflect the breadth of the ten goals of EIP23. There are plans to incorporate further new data being delivered through the Defra's Natural Capital and Ecosystem Assessment programme, which will collect data on the extent, condition and change over time of England's ecosystems and natural capital assets.

The latest OIF update includes an improvement to the historical data for the A2 indicator related to emissions of greenhouse gases from natural resources to better account for peatlands in calculations of national greenhouse gas emissions. Additionally, several indicators are now taking advantage of fresh data insights available from the new People and Nature Survey, replacing the previous reliance on the (now discontinued) Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment Survey. The 2023 update to the OIF included data for 6 previously unpublished indicators, reflecting the ongoing iterative growth of the framework with each successive publication.

The technologies for monitoring and assessing change in the environment are advancing rapidly and offer new cost-effective methods (such as Earth Observations, DNA methods, citizen science/mobile apps and new sensor technologies). We will look to update indicators to reflect these developments when appropriate whilst ensuring the

environmental parameters used for reporting indicators are consistent, retaining the trend time-series where possible.

OIF indicators now report the direction of environmental trends over various time periods where appropriate time series of data is available:

- short term (5 years)
- medium term (10 years)
- long-term (full time series of all available datapoints)
- since launch of 25YEP (2018)

Across these time periods, indicator trends are reported as representing improvement, deterioration or little or no change”, with these categories based on quantitative analysis and consistent statistical standards. Likely linkages of effect between individual indicators are also discussed. Considering the best method for assessment of environmental change is included within regular reviews of the framework, to ensure that the best possible evidence is made available with each update.

OEP recommendation 15 – May 2022 report

Environmental improvement is a cross-departmental responsibility. Given this, we see a greater role for the Office for National Statistics in overseeing the environmental statistics in issues of greatest environmental concern, viewing them alongside relevant socio-economic information.

Government response

We are continuing to work with the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to explore how the statistics and data we each produce can add new insights on the environment and how it interacts with our economy and society. For example, in the past year we have worked together to enhance the environment domain of the UK Measures of National Well-being using Defra statistical indicators. ONS also continues to produce and develop Environmental and Natural Capital Accounts and statistics from ONS surveys, which put environmental statistics into their social and economic context. This includes producing the first England Natural Capital Accounts alongside a Defra policy insights paper.

OEP recommendation 16 – May 2022 report

Defra should develop and publish, ahead of the Environmental Improvement Plan refresh, an assessment methodology to measure and report progress in achieving the objectives of EIPs. The methodology should be evidence-based, accessible, consistent, and transparent.

Government response

The Environment Act 2021 required us to conduct a review of the first Environmental Improvement Plan (the 25 YEP) and publish an updated plan by January 2023. This informed the development of EIP23.

Environmental principles

OEP recommendation 13 – May 2022 report

Government should publish the final policy statement on environmental principles as soon as possible and set out how it will support and monitor their due regard.

Government response

The Environmental Principles Policy Statement was published on 31 January 2023 and the legal duty came into force on 1 November 2023. This puts the environment at the heart of policy making across government. The statement guides ministers across government towards opportunities to protect and enhance the environment, whilst supporting innovation and sustainable development, in line with five internationally recognised principles (*integration* of the environment in policy making, *prevention* of harm to the environment, *rectification at source*, *polluter pays*, and the *precautionary principle*).

Defra is supporting government departments in applying the requirements of the new duty in their policymaking. A toolkit of resources and an online training package have been launched and are supported by a cross-government working group and senior leadership in the departments, as well as formal oversight via the cross-government 25 YEP Board. The new duty is being reflected in government policy guidance documents, such as the Treasury's Green Book, guidance on Enabling a Natural Capital Approach, the Cabinet Office Guide to Making Legislation, and guidance on the collective agreement (write-round) process.

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