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[REDACTED]
By e-mail: [REDACTED]

Our ref: EIR2026/02184
24 February 2026

Dear [REDACTED],

REQUEST FOR INFORMATION: Secretary of State meetings relating to water

Thank you for your request for information of 28 January 2026 about Secretary of State meetings relating to water. We have handled your request under the Environmental Information Regulations 2004 (EIRs).

The EIRs apply to requests for environmental information, which is a broad category of information defined in regulation 2 of the EIRs. Public authorities are required to handle requests for environmental information under the EIRs. They give similar access rights to the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA).

Your information request and our response are set out below.

1. *On 24th September 2025, Emma Reynolds had a meeting with Water UK. The meeting's purpose is described as "Introductory call". For this meeting, I would like to request:*

- *A full list of attendees, including the full names and titles of each attendee, as well as who each attendee represents*
- *A description of what exactly was discussed*
- *A copy of the agenda*
- *Materials that were handed out, shown and received during the meeting, such as presentation slides, reports, data, and papers*
- *Ministerial briefings and readouts*
- *Minutes taken during the meeting, as well as any accompanying briefing notes and papers*

We can confirm that we hold information in scope of your request, namely a briefing note which contains the agenda, a readout and the list of attendees. We enclose a copy of the briefing note and readout at Annexes C and D respectively.

The names of junior staff members in Annex C are being withheld under regulations 12(3) and 13(1) and (2A) of the EIRs as the information constitutes personal data relating to persons other than you. These regulations exempt personal information from disclosure if that information relates to someone other than the applicant, and if

disclosure of that information would breach any of the data protection principles in Article 5(1) of the UK General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

We consider that disclosure of this information is likely to breach the first data protection principle, which provides that personal data must be processed lawfully, fairly, and in a transparent manner. Disclosure would not constitute 'fair' processing of the personal data because the junior staff involved would not reasonably expect their names to be disclosed in relation to this request for information,

We have also decided that some of the information in Annex C should be withheld as it falls under the exception at regulation 12(4)(e) of the EIRs, which relates to internal communications. The exception is engaged in this instance as the information has not been shared outside Defra.

Regulation 12(4)(e) – Internal communications

In applying this exception, we have had to balance the public interest test in withholding the information against the public interest in disclosure. In considering the exceptions we have also applied a presumption in favour of disclosure, as required by regulation 12(2) of the EIRs.

We recognise that there is a public interest in disclosure of information about water company performance. We understand that release of this information aids accountability and transparency in government.

However, we believe that, in this case, the public interest remains in favour of withholding the information. This is because we consider that disclosing the information held by Defra would undermine effective government by discouraging frankness and candour in internal communications. It is important that government officials should have the necessary space to think in private and to formulate their decision-making. Releasing information within the scope of your request would risk inhibiting officials from having full, frank and open discussions as part of the process of formulating policy, particularly if they felt that speculative information relating to live policy issues would be released before final decisions were made on those issues.

Therefore, we have concluded that in all the circumstances of the case, the information should be withheld.

We can also confirm that we do not hold a description of what was discussed, minutes or any materials that were handed out at the meeting. The exception at regulation 12(4)(a) of the EIRs, which relates to information which is not held at the time when an applicant's request is received, therefore applies to the information you have requested.

Regulation 12(4)(a) – Information not held

Regulation 12(4)(a) is a qualified exception, which usually means that a public authority is required to conduct a public interest test to determine whether or not information should be disclosed or withheld. However, the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO), which is the independent regulator for requests made under the EIRs,

takes the view that a public interest test in cases where the information is not held would serve no useful purpose. Therefore, in line with the ICO's view, Defra has not conducted a public interest test in this case.

2. *On 8th September 2025, Emma Reynolds had a meeting with Water UK (Ruth Kelly). The meeting's purpose is described as "Introductory call". For this meeting, I would like to request:*

- *A full list of attendees, including the full names and titles of each attendee, as well as who each attendee represents*
- *A description of what exactly was discussed*
- *A copy of the agenda*
- *Materials that were handed out, shown and received during the meeting, such as presentation slides, reports, data, and papers*
- *Ministerial briefings and readouts*
- *Minutes taken during the meeting, as well as any accompanying briefing notes and papers*

We can confirm that we hold information in scope of your request, namely a briefing note which contains the agenda. We enclose a copy of the briefing note at Annex E.

We have also decided that some of the information in Annex E should be withheld as it falls under the exception at regulation 12(4)(e) of the EIRs, which relates to internal communications. The exception is engaged in this instance as the information has not been shared outside Defra. Please see the paragraph above for details of the public interest considerations relating to use of this exception.

We can also confirm that we do not hold a full list of attendees at the meeting, a description of what was discussed, any materials that were handed out at the meeting and any readout or minutes of the meeting. The exception at regulation 12(4)(a) of the EIRs, which relates to information which is not held at the time when an applicant's request is received, therefore applies to the information you have requested. Please see the paragraph above for details of the public interest considerations relating to use of this exception.

3. *On 21st July 2025, Emma Hardy had a meeting with Unison. The meeting's purpose is described as "To discuss general conditions in the water sector." For this meeting, I would like to request:*

- *A full list of attendees, including the full names and titles of each attendee, as well as who each attendee represents*
- *A description of what exactly was discussed*
- *A copy of the agenda*
- *Materials that were handed out, shown and received during the meeting, such as presentation slides, reports, data, and papers*
- *Ministerial briefings and readouts*
- *Minutes taken during the meeting, as well as any accompanying briefing notes and papers*

We can confirm that we hold information in scope of your request, namely a readout which contains the list of attendees. We enclose a copy of the briefing note at Annex F.

We can also confirm that we do not hold a description of what was discussed, a copy of the agenda, any materials that were handed out at the meeting, minutes or any Ministerial briefing documents. The exception at regulation 12(4)(a) of the EIRs, which relates to information which is not held at the time when an applicant's request is received, therefore applies to the information you have requested. Please see the paragraph above for details of the public interest considerations relating to use of this exception.

4. *On 16th July 2025, Emma Hardy had a meeting with Northumbrian Water. The meeting's purpose is described as "To discuss water company performance." For this meeting, I would like to request:*

- *A full list of attendees, including the full names and titles of each attendee, as well as who each attendee represents*
- *A description of what exactly was discussed*
- *A copy of the agenda*
- *Materials that were handed out, shown and received during the meeting, such as presentation slides, reports, data, and papers*
- *Ministerial briefings and readouts*
- *Minutes taken during the meeting, as well as any accompanying briefing notes and papers*

We can confirm that we hold information in scope of your request, namely a briefing note which contains the agenda, and a readout. We enclose a copy of the briefing note at Annexes G and H.

We have decided that some of the information in Annex G should be withheld as it falls under the exception at regulation 12(4)(e) of the EIRs, which relates to internal communications. The exception is engaged in this instance as the information has not been shared outside Defra. Please see the paragraph above for details of the public interest considerations relating to use of this exception.

We can also confirm that we do not hold a full list of attendees at the meeting, a description of what was discussed, any materials that were handed out at the meeting and any readout or minutes of the meeting. The exception at regulation 12(4)(a) of the EIRs, which relates to information which is not held at the time when an applicant's request is received, therefore applies to the information you have requested. Please see the paragraph above for details of the public interest considerations relating to use of this exception.

Information disclosed in response to this EIRs request is releasable to the public. In keeping with the spirit and effect of the EIRs and the government's Transparency Agenda, this letter and the information disclosed to you may be placed on GOV.UK, together with any related information that will provide a key to its wider context. No information identifying you will be placed on the GOV.UK website.

We attach Annex A, explaining the copyright that applies to the information being released to you, and Annex B giving contact details should you be unhappy with the service you have received.

If you have any queries about this letter, please contact us.

Yours sincerely

Information Rights Team

InformationRequests@defra.gov.uk

Annex A

Copyright

The information supplied to you continues to be protected by copyright. You are free to use it for your own purposes, including for private study and non-commercial research, and for any other purpose authorised by an exception in current copyright law. Documents (except photographs or logos) can be also used in the UK without requiring permission for the purposes of news reporting. Any other re-use, for example commercial publication, would require the permission of the copyright holder.

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Copyright in other documents may rest with a third party. For information about obtaining permission from a third party see the Intellectual Property Office's website.

Annex B

Complaints

If you are unhappy with the service you have received in relation to your request you may make a complaint or appeal against our decision under section 17(7) of the FOIA or under regulation 11 of the EIRs, as applicable, within 40 working days of the date of this letter. Please write to Damian Lynch Head of Information Rights via email at InformationRequests@defra.gov.uk and they will arrange for an internal review of your case. Details of Defra's complaints procedure are on our website.

If you are not content with the outcome of the internal review, section 50 of the FOIA and regulation 18 of the EIRs gives you the right to apply directly to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) for a decision. Please note that generally the ICO cannot make a decision unless you have first exhausted Defra's own complaints procedure.

The ICO can be contacted using the following link:

<https://ico.org.uk/>