

## Purpose

This note sets out our current communications, media relations and stakeholder engagement strategies; the progress we have made to date with implementing them; what we have learned from that; and how we might develop them further. It aims to provide context to the Board's discussion on key choices for how we develop our communications and stakeholder engagement strategies in advance of our wider revision of the OEP Strategy.

## Background

Communications, media relations and stakeholder engagement are critical elements of our theory of change, through which we aim to have the influence and impact we need to deliver our mission. This is set to be an interesting year for OEP communications, with a need to demonstrate continued transparency and accountability to Parliament and the Assembly, influence government, and maintain and build wider stakeholder confidence in uncertain political times. *This section has been redacted as its publication would be prejudicial to the effective conduct of public affairs.* With a restored and functional government in Northern Ireland, we are working closely to adapt to the new political arrangements. In England we await the general election, with significant changes possible by the end of this year.

## Our current communications, media and stakeholder engagement strategies

The Board approved our current communication, media relations and stakeholder engagement strategies on Wednesday 27 April 2022 (see Annexes 1, 2 and 3 below).

## Implementation

Through our current communications strategies, the OEP has an established profile and good relationships with many important stakeholders across government, parliament, NGOs, the media and wider audiences in both England and Northern Ireland. We continue to receive strong support from most, such as that seen at select committees and media coverage last week. Almost all media remains positive or neutral. Where there is criticism, it has been largely to urge us to increase and accelerate our work on enforcement. We have been successful in influencing parliament in England and DAERA in Northern Ireland. Defra remains harder to influence. Inevitably, we are only just getting going with ministers and the assembly in Northern Ireland, but initial signs are positive.

The OEP has been established as an evidence-based organisation, that is seeking to hold government and other public bodies to account and influence them and parliament to improve and better implement environmental law. Our approach to achieving this has been focussed largely on promoting the OEP's own activities and the substance of our outputs (e.g. our annual EIP monitoring reports, monitoring environmental law reports, advice), less so reacting to others', with some notable exceptions (our advice and correspondence on nutrient neutrality, and on Retained EU Law).

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When we have something to say we carefully decide, what our messaging is; when we want to say it and who will we say it to, in order to achieve maximum influence and impact. We have always played things with a straight bat, relying on the substance of our work to 'do our talking.'

The success of this communications approach was seen in our impact on the important issue of nutrient neutrality. Government proposed an amendment in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill on nutrient neutrality rules that we identified as a 'regression' in environmental law. Our core messaging on the issue was widely quoted in the media, parliamentary debate and by NGOs before the amendment was voted down in the House of Lords. Our influence was significant.

Similarly, in our communication of *This section has been redacted as its publication would be prejudicial to the effective conduct of public affairs*. the ongoing CSOs investigation, we have deliberately delivered the facts as we have found them at important junctures of the investigation, such as when we released a public statement about the issuing of Information Notices to public authorities. Our communications approach of declining media interviews not only meant we helped protect the integrity of the investigation, but we successfully avoided being accused of 'being political' or 'chasing headlines.' The extensive media coverage that largely carried our key messaging validated this approach.

We use our current capacity to embed a communications function that directly supports our role, purpose, and immediate business priorities. We have been careful not to establish ourselves as a campaigning organisation, and more as champions of environmental law than of the environment itself (a space already well occupied by others, such as environmental NGOs). To date we have done little aimed at communicating directly with the public, or deliberately to build a public profile. This is something we are keen to explore, starting from why we might want a public profile and what role would it play in achieving the influence and impact we intend.

We have been successful in establishing who we are and what we do, gaining media coverage and profile, with two-way dialogue on important activities. This has been largely the product of sustained effort but has been boosted by occasional high-profile events, such as our advice on nutrient neutrality for the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill and launching our investigation relating to ammonia in Northern Ireland. In that latter case, we chose the launch of our first investigation in Northern Ireland into DAERA's ammonia advice as a vehicle to successfully engage and platform the OEP as an organisation to the media and NGOs. This resulted in extensive media coverage promoting our core messaging as well as a positive response from the NGO community in Northern Ireland.

Much effort has been put into carefully tailoring messages to engage and seek input from our growing key stakeholder audiences, with a system created to support the whole organisation manage stakeholder engagement, capture intelligence, and develop this work further, at both specific project and OEP-wide levels.

We currently have in place monthly meetings with Defra and with Defra Arm's Length Bodies that include a 'forward look' meeting now scheduled every quarter to enhance our transparency and predictability as an organisation and visibility in our potential 'asks' of this stakeholder group, to maintain good working relationships. Similar arrangements exist with DAERA and NIEA. There is engagement with other government departments too, but this is less developed.

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We also have a meeting between Environmental Standards Scotland and the Interim Environmental Protection Assessor for Wales every six weeks in which we identify common areas of work to improve synergy. Recognising the value of engaging with the NGO sector we now have quarterly sessions scheduled that discuss topics such as OEP business planning and our strategy review.

These regular stakeholder engagements are just the tip of the iceberg. A significant proportion of senior and other staff's time is invested in stakeholder engagement. We have been working hard to make this as purposeful and efficient as we can. At an organisational level, stakeholder engagement and stakeholder 'asks' are now recorded in team trackers across the OEP, providing structure and a 'forward look' in the management of our stakeholder engagement.

There is also a tracker in place at director and private office level that is used to record stakeholder meetings and events. Information captured within this tracker coupled with intel gathered within and outside the OEP provides the basis for the quarterly stakeholder engagement reviews with senior management. Our stakeholder engagement has become more strategic at a senior level thanks to the forward-looking focus of these reviews.

While we have a social media profile on X (formerly Twitter) and LinkedIn this is still nascent and used only to point people to our publications, events and job advertisements. We steer clear of debate. Nonetheless, our tweet on nutrient neutrality was viewed 246,000 times.

## **Having more influence and impact – where next?**

The communications team continually reflect on the outcomes of our work and adapt activity accordingly, to enhance OEP's ability to have the influence and impact we intend, by producing the right message, for the right audience, in the right way at the right time.

For example, we have put increasing weight on post publication stakeholder engagement to try to increase the reach and influence of our work, as is currently being implemented for our latest EIP monitoring report, through direct engagement, seminars, speeches, articles and social media.

In Northern Ireland, we have invested significantly over several months in preparing well for the return of the Assembly and Executive and the big ramp up now required in political engagement with new ministers, the AERA committee and wider Assembly members.

Work is ongoing on how best to integrate the existing stakeholder engagement trackers; master stakeholder directories/lists with the new Intelligence Management System. We believe the housing of all the stakeholder engagement collateral, created to date, within this new system will further enhance OEP stakeholder engagement management by delivering such benefits as providing a greater analysis of OEP stakeholder engagement overall, within directorates and at project level. This should facilitate better prioritisation, consistency, efficiency and effectiveness; and ultimately influence and impact.

Our website development project, which has involved user testing to make navigation and other content improvements, has now been completed.

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## Having more influence and impact – taking it further

Our ambition for OEP communications is not to radically revise but build on current activities, looking to be more strategic and proactive where possible, to extend the reach of our voice and ultimately our influence and impact on protecting and improving the environment. More significant change, if desired, might be possible in the longer term.

Whatever we do, must be at the right level and profile to support OEP's work as we continue to develop and mature, in line with our evolving overall mission strategy. The resourcing context requires that we make choices, rather than just add to the list. We start from the assumption that we must prioritise within the communications and stakeholder engagement resources that we have. More radical changes might require wider reprioritisation of OEP resources.

The following ideas feature in our thinking on how to develop our communications, media and stakeholder engagement strategies and their implementation further:

- Longer term strategic planning of all OEP communications together, and the influence and impact we intend throughout the year, better to identify tensions and synergies across our own activities and relevant others. This is likely to be especially important in an election year in England and as the Executive and Assembly reforms in Northern Ireland.
- Earlier and more proactive engagement with OEP projects to plan key messages and how best to communicate them from the outset, to help shape the whole project and prioritise the work within them as necessary to achieve the intended influence and impact.
- Sustain longer-term communications and stakeholder engagement campaigns for our key messages, such as those from our recent EIP monitoring report: speed-up, scale-up, stack-up.
- A more thematic or issues based (e.g. nature, water, marine) that helps make our work more relevant to our many stakeholders who are themselves more thematic or issues based, thereby making it easier for them to amplify our work, or act on our recommendations themselves.
- Work to improve knowledge and understanding of Parts 1 and 2 of the Environment Act amongst parliamentarians and other key audiences, to promote it as the foundation for all our work and strengthen implementation of its key components: the EIP, Statutory Targets (in England) EPPS and OEP.
- Further develop our voice by develop existing material into appropriate blogs, opinion editorials and other content, drawing attention to our key messages and activities.
- Enhance our presence on our existing social media channels by more regular and scheduled content publishing.
- Enhance horizon scanning to spot and identify OEP speaking opportunities, with more proactive and planned participation and engagement on relevant platforms.

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**The discussion proposed in the associated paper, on reaching the right people, our public profile, and use of our convening power, will inform the choices we must make to maximise our influence and impact through our communications and stakeholder engagement activities, both now and as part of our wider strategy review.**

**Annex A** – *This section has been redacted as its publication would be prejudicial to the effective conduct of public affairs.*

**Annex B** – [Current OEP Media Relations Strategy](#)

**Annex C** – *This section has been redacted as its publication would be prejudicial to the effective conduct of public affairs.*

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