



Department
for Environment,
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27 April 2026

Dear Julie,

Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) Chair's Letter – Financial Year 2026/2027

Thank you for stepping into the role of interim Chair of the OEP, while the campaign for the next Chair appointment concludes.

I am writing to all Defra group arms' length bodies (ALBs) at the beginning of the financial year to set out my annual priorities. In doing so, I am of course mindful of my statutory responsibility to have regard to the need to protect the OEP's independence.

Defra and the OEP share an ambition to protect and enhance the environment. I share your predecessor's view that nature is at the very foundation of growth, as nature's recovery is a prerequisite of prosperity, health and wellbeing. It is my urgent priority to secure better outcomes for nature while accelerating growth, including through sustainable infrastructure development. I welcome your engagement in this agenda.

My department continues to prioritise the implementation of the Corry Review of Environmental Regulation, in order to move towards a more outcomes-focused model of regulation. Our environmental regulators must shift their approach to one that is proactive and solutions focused. To that end, I have recently issued Strategic Policy Statements to Natural England and the Environment Agency. I trust that, as the OEP carries out its statutory functions, it will support and reinforce the shift to outcomes-focused regulation across the system, including through constructive engagement with regulators and Defra policy teams.

I was pleased to see the OEP welcome the revised Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP25). To streamline reporting, I intend that our annual EIP progress report this summer should include a response to your January progress report, several months earlier than the statutory deadline. I hope that our teams can work together to streamline information sharing and look forward to your proposals on ensuring that the format of your future EIP reporting is as user-focused and impactful as possible.

I welcome the continued work between our organisations to strengthen ways of working, enhance efficiency, and commit to a 'no-surprises' approach. I encourage continued dialogue and early engagement to ensure that OEP activity is proportionate and does not unduly divert resource away from, or slow, crucial reform work, particularly where work is already underway to address issues. It is also important that the OEP's substantial expertise is applied in the most impactful way. I discussed plans with your predecessor to increase the timeliness, accessibility, and usability of reports.

Defra retains oversight responsibilities for the OEP's performance and its stewardship of public funds and resources. I have allocated a budget of £8.541m to the OEP for financial year 2026/27-2028/29, protected from reductions during those three years.

I expect the OEP to maintain strong budgetary discipline in line with the CEO's Delegated Authority Letter (Annex A) and ensure that Defra funding is used for activities in England and matters reserved to the government. On headcount, we expect the OEP to live within the agreed financial year 2026/27 headcount allocation of 85 FTE. Any necessary changes to this allocation must be confirmed as within budget and agreed with Defra. As Chair, I expect you to hold the CEO and Board members to account to ensure that resources are focused on the areas of greatest impact to deliver the OEP's agenda.

Annex B sets out expectations regarding the OEP's engagement with Defra group Corporate Services and its responsibilities in relation to Functional Standards.

I look forward to continuing to work with the OEP to help meet our shared ambitions to restore, protect, and improve the environment, alongside delivering for the government's growth agenda. Minister Creagh will continue to meet the OEP Chair regularly to support this constructive relationship.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'E Reynolds', with a large, stylized initial 'E'.

THE RT HON EMMA REYNOLDS MP

List of Annexes

A) Delegated Authority Letter (separate attachment)

B) Defra group Corporate Services (DGCS) and Functional Standards

Annex B – Defra group Corporate Services (DGCS) and Functional Standards

Provision of Corporate Services

- The DGCS model works on a collaborative, partnership approach and it is expected that your organisation adheres to this way of operating. You should designate a senior officer who acts as the key coordination and escalation point into DGCS and to champion the model and services back into your organisation.
- The Director General Delivery & Group Chief Operating Officer holds the centralised group corporate services budgets and is accountable for the delivery of services associated with Functional Standards as set out in the DGCS Partnership Agreement and outlined in the DGCS Service Catalogue. This responsibility for service provision extends to demonstrating value for money for the services provided.
- At year-end a corporate service cost (the notional recharge) will be allocated, so that your Annual Report and Accounts show the cost of corporate services received by your organisation, where applicable. In cases of growth taking place during a spending review (SR) period, cost recovery will be applied in accordance with an agreed formula, as part of the standard departmental business planning.
- We expect Defra bodies to focus on efficiency and excellent user experience, including service improvement and automation. I expect you to have a senior leader accountable for this agenda within your organisation, to work with DGCS to develop a service transformation and automation efficiency plan.

Functional Standards

- Where you receive a service from DGCS, the relevant Head of Function in Defra is accountable for the implementation of Functional Standards. Where you do not receive services related to a Functional Standard the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of your organisation is accountable for meeting the key requirements and the relevant Head of Function may provide support and advice for developing an approach to implementing the standards in your organisation.

Digital, Data & Technology Spend

- All digital, technology and data related spend, whether delivered through DGCS or otherwise, needs to demonstrate alignment with Defra group's service transformation agenda and maximise opportunities for efficiency and improved user experience. This includes adopting a digital first approach, reducing manual processing and failure demand, exploiting common platforms and components and protecting Defra infrastructure from cyber threat and legacy debt. Compliance is expected with Government Digital Standards for public facing services, (<https://www.gov.uk/service-manual>) and the Technology Code of Practice.
- For those who receive DGCS IT services, you should engage at the earliest point with Defra's Digital, Data, Technology and Security function (DDTS) on new policy initiatives and services to ensure design and delivery is optimised for value for money from the outset.