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The Rt Hon Emma Reynolds MP
Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Seacole Building
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By email only

22 June 2026

Dear Secretary of State.

Thank you for your letter of 27 April to Julie Hill in her capacity as Interim Chair. I thought it would be helpful to respond now, ahead of our meeting on 8 July, so that we can discuss some of the issues raised in your letter then.

As I begin my role, I was pleased to read your recognition of the shared ambition of Defra and the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) to protect and improve the environment. I care deeply about that purpose, and about the OEP's independent role within it. I am determined that we should make our greatest contribution by focusing on the right issues, doing our work well and communicating clearly. That approach should guide a relationship that is constructive, candid and firmly focused on environmental outcomes.

I also welcome your emphasis on the OEP's engagement with government and regulators as you pursue better outcomes for nature alongside economic growth. I have long believed that environmental recovery and sustainable prosperity are not competing objectives. On the contrary, a thriving natural environment underpins long-term prosperity, public health and resilience. The Environmental Improvement Plan rightly reflects that reality. Its implementation must do so too.

The OEP has therefore been closely focused on the outcomes set by government in the Plan, those required by Parliament through legal targets and wider environmental law, and on engaging constructively as work continues on implementation of the Corry review. That is consistent with the view I set out at my pre-appointment hearing: that good regulation should be joined up, proportionate to the risks involved and focused on practical results.

The OEP's statutory role is equally clear. We are here to help protect and improve the natural environment in England and Northern Ireland through scrutiny, advice and, where necessary, enforcement. I want us to carry out that role constructively, rigorously and fairly: supporting change where environmental law or regulation can be designed, applied or enforced more effectively; recognising credible innovation where it can improve

environmental outcomes; and saying plainly where there are serious risks or failures to comply with environmental law. That is not at odds with constructive working; it is essential to an effective statutory relationship.

The OEP's contribution is most valuable where it is focused on the most significant opportunities and risks, underpinned by high-quality analysis and recommendations, and well understood by those who need to respond to them. This is particularly important where they involve difficult judgments about serious environmental risks and the action needed in response. I therefore want our reports and advice to be as accessible and useful as possible for government, Parliament and the public. As I take up this role, I would welcome views from those who use them on how their value and accessibility might be strengthened.

I value and respect the 'no surprises' approach, and I believe that the OEP has played, and will continue to play, its full part in it. For the principle to work as intended, it will also require Defra to engage early on relevant matters and share the information we need in good time, especially where statutory deadlines are fixed and where risks to the environment are most serious. While this has improved, it is not yet consistent.

This is particularly important where our scrutiny relates to the Government's own assessment of progress, including on the Environmental Improvement Plan. Without timely evidence, there is a risk that our analysis gives less credit than is due, or that scrutiny is prolonged simply because relevant information has not been made available. In that context, I welcome your confirmation that the Government's Annual Progress Report on the Plan this summer will respond to our January assessment.

The next step should be to establish a more transparent relationship between our organisations. At the heart of this would be an agreed basis for information-sharing, consistently applied, which appropriately reflects the duty on public bodies to co-operate with the OEP and provide reasonable assistance when requested. That will help ensure our activity remains accurate, proportionate and focused on the most serious matters, with progress acknowledged where it has been made and intervention reserved for matters where it is genuinely warranted.

I look forward to working with you and your ministerial colleagues in that spirit and to our meeting on 8 July.

*Yours sincerely,
Helen Ghosh*

Dame Helen Ghosh
Chair of the Office for Environmental Protection



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