

From the Permanent Secretary
Katrina Godfrey

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Dear Natalie

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPROVEMENT PLAN FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

Thank you for your letter of 26 July 2023 about the statutory deadline for DAERA to lay an Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) for Northern Ireland before the Assembly.

I agree entirely that statutory deadlines are important and appreciate your understanding of the extremely difficult position in which civil servants here are having to operate. Like you, I am keen to ensure that the EIP is finalised and implemented as soon as possible and I can assure you of my commitment to applying fully to our decision-making in the absence of ministers the principles and requirements set out in the guidance published by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

As you know, the draft Environment Strategy that it is intended will become Northern Ireland's first EIP received approval from the former DAERA Minister but did not receive Executive approval as required under the Ministerial Code. It remains the Department's intention, subject of course to the views of returning ministers, that a finalised Environment Strategy should be adopted as Northern Ireland's first EIP.

I also agree that our advice to ministers when they return must be such that it leads to a plan that is robust, evidence-based, and takes account of the OEP's earlier advice and that it will be important for the EIP to show coherence with other strategic plans and programmes and with the requirements of the Climate Change Act.

In the meantime, we as officials are continuing to work through the steps required to determine what action it is possible and appropriate for us to take in the absence of ministers and to do so as quickly as we possibly can. This includes engaging with other departments responsible for policies and actions within the draft strategy. My team will continue to keep you informed of progress.

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Your letter also referenced and asked about the Nutrient Action Programme (NAP). I can confirm that, while it has not been possible in the absence of ministers to complete the four yearly review. the current NAP Regulations, which came into operation on 11 April 2019, are still in effect and compliance with the Regulations is a 'cross compliance' requirement for farmers in relation to the Basic Payment Scheme. The current programme remains in place.

As you may be aware, some significant additions were made to the current NAP following the last review. These included requirements for larger farms and contractors to use Low Emission Slurry Spreading Equipment (LESSE) and further controls on the use of chemical fertilisers containing phosphorus and manures with a high phosphorus content. In addition, we are taking forward, reflecting the direction set by previous ministers, a range of policies and actions which will directly or indirectly align with the aim of the NAP to reduce excess nutrient inputs to the environment. These include the Soil Nutrient Health Scheme (SNHS); work on a draft Ammonia Strategy; an innovation challenge fund for projects on the Sustainable Use of Livestock Slurry (SULS); and the development of Farm Sustainability Standards as part of the new Agricultural Policy Framework. We are also mindful of new obligations with respect to nutrients such as the Convention on Biological Diversity Kunming-Montreal declaration.

I hope this update is helpful and am happy for our teams to meet to discuss further its content if that would be useful.

Yours sincerely



KATRINA GODFREY

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