

**From the Office of the
Minister of Agriculture,
Environment and Rural Affairs**



Department of
**Agriculture, Environment
and Rural Affairs**

An Roinn

**Talmhaíochta, Comhshaoil
agus Gnóthaí Tuaithe**

Department of

**Fairmin, Environment
an' Kintra Matthers**

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Dear Dame Glenys

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPROVEMENT PLAN AND STATUTORY DEADLINES

Thank you for your letter of 27 March, in which you set out the Office for Environmental Protection's concerns regarding a number of policy areas where statutory deadlines have been missed or where the speed of progress has been less than optimal.

As you are aware from our recent discussion, I very much share the view that outstanding legal requirements in respect of the environment should be amongst the Executive's highest priorities as the governance of Northern Ireland gets back on track. I have set out below a more detailed appraisal of the specific issues raised in your letter.

Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP)

With regard to the EIP, I fully agree that it is hugely important that Northern Ireland should have in place an ambitious and deliverable plan, supported by relevant evidence. As a key priority, I approved the content of the draft EIP as soon as it was practicable to do so and have expedited as far as possible its consideration by the NI Executive. I remain committed to working closely with all my Ministerial colleagues to address any concerns they might have, with a view to publishing the EIP at the earliest opportunity.

You have quite rightly highlighted that, while the EIP must remain the immediate priority, it is essential that momentum is maintained in the delivery of a number of other outstanding statutory requirements and, indeed, that every effort should be made to meet all future deadlines.

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River Basin Management Plan

Before bringing the draft third cycle River Basin Management Plan to the Executive, I will need time to consider the outworkings of other relevant reports. These include the Northern Ireland Audit Office's report on Water Quality in Northern Ireland's Lakes and Rivers published on 25 March, the forthcoming report on the monitoring project ("Belisama") concerning the Water Environment (Water Framework Directive) (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2017 and related matters from the Office of Environmental Protection and the imminent Water Quality Review on Lough Neagh. Additionally, while always mindful of the budgetary position, I am keen to hear the views of key stakeholders to determine the most appropriate course of action for the River Basin Management Plan. I can assure you that my focus is to complete this programme of work as soon as possible and bring the draft third cycle River Basin Management Plan to the Executive at the earliest possible opportunity. My vision is to have an environment where our water bodies are at "good" status or better and support biodiversity and contribute to the health and well-being of everyone.

Nutrient Action Programme

You are aware that my department is taking forward a review of the current Nutrient Action Programme (NAP) and a timeline for this review was provided to Helen Venn, Chief Regulatory Officer, on 16 November 2023. DAERA continues to work at pace to complete the review with the aim of introducing revised NAP Regulations in 2025.

Climate Change Act Requirements

Addressing the Climate Emergency is one of my key priorities and I will be doing everything in my power to deliver the requirements of our Climate Change Act as I recognise the significant benefits this can bring for the people of Northern Ireland, our economy and our environment.

I have recently obtained agreement from Executive colleagues to make regulations which will establish a climate change reporting framework for some of our key public bodies and I anticipate these regulations will be made and laid in the Assembly this month.

In terms of setting Northern Ireland's first three carbon budgets, I have considered the findings from the consultation exercise which took place last year and will publish the summary of responses in the coming weeks. I will also be engaging with my Executive colleagues to seek their agreement to proposed carbon budgets for Northern Ireland.

Significant cross-government work is also continuing at pace to finalise a draft Climate Action Plan that is evidence-based, informed by internal and external stakeholders and will deliver the emissions reductions required to achieve the first carbon budget. The requirements contained within the Act are extremely challenging and far-reaching - prioritising policies and proposals to meet emissions targets and allocating the necessary levels of investments required will mean tough choices. I will be discussing how best to meet these requirements with Ministerial colleagues imminently and I hope to be in a position to bring forward a draft Climate Action Plan soon. Given the cross-cutting nature of the Climate Action Plan, the draft will need to be approved by the Executive, prior to its publication for consultation.

Environmental Principles Policy Statement

Although the Environmental Principles Policy Statement has no statutory deadline, I am acutely aware that by not having an effective DAERA policy statement in place, the governance gap it was intended to fill after the UK left the EU remains. My department has recently allocated additional resources to this workstream and we are now in a position to move forward at greater pace. Officials are engaging with the other NI departments and the AERA Committee on the draft policy statement, with a view to issuing for public consultation before the summer. I am indebted to the OEP for its expert advice on potential improvements to the draft policy statement and my officials will continue to engage with OEP staff throughout the process. A final policy statement will be subject to Executive approval and the timeframe for final implementation of the statutory duty to have due regard to the policy statement will be dictated to some extent by the statutory scrutiny and lead-in periods.

I look forward to continuing a constructive relationship that I believe has been of mutual benefit to DAERA and the OEP, working in partnership to improve the environment in Northern Ireland.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'A Muir', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

ANDREW MUIR MLA
Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs