Office for Environmental Protection

Paper 26.47

Board Paper

Date

04 Aug 2026

Title
Report of the Chief Executive

Report by
Natalie Prosser, Chief Executive

Paper for information and decision
Open in part

Summary

1. Since the Board last met, a new Prime Minister has been appointed, and a reshuffle taken place. The Chair and I had a first introductory meeting with the new Secretary of State (SoS), Dame Angela Eagle on 30 July. *This section has been redacted as its publication would be prejudicial to the effective conduct of public affairs.*
2. Emma Hardy has been promoted to Minister of State at Defra with responsibility for circular economy and waste crime, the EIP and targets, and is our sponsoring minister. Stephen Morgan MP and Baroness Hayman of Ullock return, and Jenny Riddell-Carpenter joins, as Parliamentary Under Secretaries of State. Their portfolios are farming and food; trade, biosecurity and animal welfare; and nature, biodiversity and climate adaptation respectively.
3. At Minister Muir's request, the Chair, Robbie McDonald and I met him on 3 August. *This section has been redacted as its publication would be prejudicial to the effective conduct of public affairs.*

Recommendations

4. The Board is recommended to consider and comment on progress against our strategic objectives.

Sustained environmental improvement

Monitoring and reporting on environmental improvement

5. Defra published its Annual Progress Report for the year 2025/26 on 16 July, alongside its formal response to our last report on the year 2024/25. We put out a brief statement in response. Minister Creagh wrote to us (Annex A) to highlight aspects of progress made and made a Written Ministerial Statement to Parliament.

6. Defra's APR is more systematic and transparent than previous reports, particularly in linking progress updates to commitments and categorising actions by status. It helpfully identifies

around 90 commitments and targets and approximately 300 supporting actions, and some chapters provide a clearer narrative of progress supported by indicators, trends and evaluation evidence. While the new reporting approach improves transparency, more than 85% of actions are simply classified as “in progress”, encompassing a very wide range of activities and levels of maturity. It remains difficult to judge whether delivery towards targets is on track. Defra is still not making this assessment itself, and further scrutiny is needed to assess progress. The report remains largely Defra-centric, offering limited insight into cross-government responsibilities. We put out a statement to this effect.

7. Defra’s response to our last progress report presents a mixed but broadly constructive picture. Of our 54 recommendations, Government accepted 27, partially accepted 15, accepted and deferred two, deferred four, rejected three and marked three as complete. This is fuller engagement with the OEP’s findings and recommendations but leaves important questions about the pace of delivery and the extent to which government action is sufficient to meet environmental targets. Rejections rest on understandable policy or practical considerations, including those relating to powers for the Non-native Species Inspectorate, the alignment of fisheries policy with Good Environmental Status and development of a heat strategy.

8. The ministerial statement to Parliament on the nature and climate crises was given by Minister Creagh, rather than the SoS, on 16 July. The statement offered a broad account of government intent on climate and nature, highlighting cross government action, new frameworks and investment. The recognition of escalating climate and ecological risks, and the commitment to plan for at least 2°C of warming, were welcome. However, from an OEP perspective, the gap between intent and delivery remains. Many cited initiatives—land use reform, protected area action, biosecurity measures, digital tools—are still in development, lack timelines, or show limited evidence of implementation. The CCC’s adaptation findings underline issues directly relevant to the OEP: inadequate readiness for heat, water scarcity, flood risk and ecosystem resilience. The statement did not set out concrete steps to close these gaps.

Our approach to monitoring and reporting on environmental improvement

9. Emma Pinchbeck, Chief Executive of the Climate Change Committee will join the Board’s meeting to discuss with us lessons from our respective roles in monitoring progress towards long-term environmental outcomes. Baroness Brown will also present the Committee’s report, ‘A well-adapted UK’. As reported to the Board in July, the report provides a hard-hitting and sobering assessment of the state of adaptation, finding that current plans are insufficient to address the scale of the challenge. It also sets out a comprehensive package of solutions. The priority risks identified are directly relevant to us, including risks to the state of nature, the viability of farming, and water availability. These risks will impact the effectiveness and delivery of the England and Northern Ireland EIPs, as well as the prospects of meeting environmental commitments. A short briefing note is available here.

30x30 target delivery plan

10. Government has published its plan to deliver its target for 30x30 on land. We made a statement in response. In brief, the delivery plan lacked clear plans for delivery at the scale and pace needed to meet the targets.

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11. The assessment of the Lough Neagh Action Plan is progressing well, and the report remains on track for delivery in February 2027. There has been positive engagement with DAERA, as well as an online stakeholder workshop, which provided the starting point for further engagement. A presentation on progress and key findings will be given to the Board during its visit to Northern Ireland at the end of September.

Research and evidence

12. We have published our areas of research interest (ARI) on our website, and they will shortly be published on Government Office for Science's database. We are developing a system of critical review for our research reports, will be permanently archiving our research outputs, and improving publication on our website.
13. After scoping, we decided not to progress a research project in relation to illegal waste sites, in light of the work of the Environment Agency and others, on which we are engaging. We have, in lieu of this topic, developed two smaller research projects on erosion of coastal legacy landfill sites, and on litter and fly-tipping.
14. Recruitment is underway for a second tranche of members of the College of Experts. The majority of existing members have agreed to be reappointed, so we sought specific expertise to fill current gaps in expertise in the college. We received over 120 applications, with some very strong candidates.

Better environmental law, better implemented

Nutrient Action Programme and related issues

15. DAERA issued its response on 29 July to our Nutrient Action Programme (NAP) Regulations 2019 report. DAERA is also currently consulting for a second time on revision of the NAP Regulations for 2027-2030. Welcoming our report, Minister Muir said 'The OEP's recommendations will be a valuable contribution when I consider the consultation responses to these proposals and the next steps regarding the regulations.' In large part, therefore, the substance of the response is deferred until that consideration completes. In broad terms, however, the response to our report and the parallel consultation suggest that DAERA agrees in principle on the need to take additional action, at least to some extent, in relation to 9 of the 12 areas covered by our recommendations. This includes a commitment to reduce the nutrient surplus by 30%, increased advisory support, stronger reporting and enforcement of slurry movements, increased inspection rates, and an acknowledgement of the need to bring currently non-compliant farms into the system of regulation.

16. Following discussion at the last Board meeting, we are also progressing our analysis of the proposals for the revised NAP regulations. This is focusing on the compliance of the proposals with environmental law, their technical effectiveness, and reiterating key points from our previous report which are not covered in the consultation. We will provide our view as formal advice, rather than as a consultation response. The Board will be asked to agree our advice in this respect at the diarised extraordinary meeting on 2 September.

Other activities

17. Board will recall the Corry recommendation in respect of the OEP, which was that we might support others in government to arrive at positive outcomes through efficient and effective regulation. One such mechanism for this is “earned autonomy”, whereby regulators enable leeway on the part of trusted operators for widespread, positive activities. We are testing our role in this area by highlighting the scope to reduce administrative barriers to large-scale habitat creation activities by using a derogation within the Environmental Impact Assessment (Agriculture) regulations. *This section has been redacted as its publication would be prejudicial to the effective conduct of public affairs.*

18. EPPS – We continue to track government action in response to our EPPS report in 2025. Earlier this year HM Treasury updated the Green Book to include reference to the EPPS duty and wider context in respect of legally binding environmental targets. Further to this, on 30 June 2026, HM Treasury published updated Business Case Guidance, which now includes reference to the EPPS duty. We consider the direct recommendations to HMT in our report as met, and their commitments honoured. We have agreed to remain in touch with officials with a view to opportunities presented by potential new guidance / publications resulting from recent changes in leadership.

Improved compliance with environmental law

Complaints and enquiries

19. Since my last report we have received 4 new complaints, primarily focussed on the topics of nature and pollution control. In total we have 8 complaints currently being considered at eligibility stage, and 9 under full assessment. In the same period, we have closed 8 complaints.

20. Enquiry numbers have plateaued and are trending downwards. The vast majority remain signposted to other organisations. We expect that continuous improvements to the information we make available to the public on our website, and our approach to engaging and supporting enquirers has improved understanding of our role and played a part in this reduction.

Progress of investigations

21. Progress in our investigations is noted below. *This section has been redacted as it relates to information recorded for the purposes of OEP’s functions relating to investigations and enforcement.*

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Organisational excellence and influence

Financial performance

24. The financial position for the first quarter (Q1) is reported in Annex D.

Corporate plan, business plan and budget

25. Following Board approval of the corporate plan at May Board, the Chair has now reviewed and approved the document. It will be published imminently.

26. The Board is separately asked to consider a final business plan and budget, following confirmation of our resources in Northern Ireland. Small amendments have been made to account for performance in the first quarter, changes to our expected headcount, and as we have scoped projects.

27. We have tracked delivery against the draft plan for the first quarter. With 65% of the projects green or complete, and 20% not yet due to start, we are where we expect to be at this point in the year. A small number of minor changes to the draft business plan presented to the Board in March are proposed. These proposals do not change the overall substance and priorities of the plan the Board agreed in March. All are within the scope of the final adjustments which the Board agreed in March should be delegated to the Chief Executive. These are noted in the business plan and budget paper.

Strategy refresh 2027

28. We must review our strategy ahead of the third anniversary of our November 2024 strategy, as mandated by the Environment Act. I have approved the initiation of the project to do so, with the project initiation document at Annex B. Notable for the Board is that:

    a. Discussions have been diarised with individual Board members in August to discuss what the OEP should aspire to achieve in its next five years, and how. These will inform a discussion at the Board's September meeting in relation to our vision and objectives.

    b. We will then also discuss a consolidation of the Board's reflections on our performance, impact, context and prospects held over the last two years. The Board will also be updated on our progress in reviewing our approach to our EIP progress reporting functions, and our enabling functions, as it agreed last Autumn.

    c. We aim that these three discussions will frame the scale and scope of our strategy review, and identify any additional areas of focus we will consider, beyond those the Board has already decided.

    d. We have brought forward our biennial stakeholder perceptions survey and aim that this is complete to report to the Board by November. We aim that this forms a foundation for more specific consultation with key stakeholders over the winter and spring, as the Board deliberates on our future strategy and approach.

29. There is close linkage between our strategy refresh, and our deliberations on how we optimise our ways of working and capabilities to our future resources. The Executive has held a number of workshops to progress its thinking in this regard, some of which will inform the Board's considerations in September, and some later, as our strategy develops.

People matters

30. The People strategy action plan, updated to reflect the 2026 People Survey results, is submitted as a separate paper for Board information.

31. We received two resignations from permanent employees in July (EO in HR and Senior Intelligence Analyst in CRO). We filled a 1-year Senior Analyst – Chemicals role in Insights. Recruitment planning is in progress for the SCS1 General Counsel vacancy.

Corporate Services

32. Finance - The OEP's 2025/26 Annual Report and Accounts were laid before Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly on 8 July 2026. The Finance team is now focused on testing Sage Intacct, the new finance system, and remains on track for implementation in September 2026.

33. IT - We have begun implementing Secure by Design, the mandated new approach to managing cyber security throughout the delivery lifecycle. We are currently assessing our level of compliance and identifying any gaps. A paper will be brought to ExCo setting out the proposed implementation plan.

34. We are also progressing a project to streamline our Microsoft-hosted cloud architecture. This is expected to reduce our cyber security attack surface and lower ongoing costs. The project cost is estimated at £12k, funded from within the existing IT budget, with a projected return on investment within 18 months.

Selected Stakeholder Engagement and Communications

35. The Chair and I attended a meeting with the new Secretary of State for EFRA Angela Eagle on Thursday, 30 July. *This section has been redacted as its publication would be prejudicial to the effective conduct of public affairs.* We also met Dan Corry. *This section has been redacted as its publication would be prejudicial to the effective conduct of public affairs.*

36. I attended the away day of the Environmental Audit Committee, alongside officials from the Climate Change Committee. This provided opportunity for the Committee to take stock of progress in the environment and climate and inform its future approaches.

37. I have also attended events of the Office of Rail and Road, and participated alongside Dame Claire Moriarty, Lord Gove and the Director General for Regulatory Reform at the Department of Business on Trade in the Institute for Government's conference on regulation in a changing world.

Impact Assessments

Risk Assessment

38. This section has been redacted as its publication would be prejudicial to the effective conduct of public affairs.

Paper to be published	In part
Publication date (if relevant)	With meeting minutes
	FOIA/EIR exemptions for which we propose not to publish this paper in full are: • publication would harm relations between UK and NI governments (s.28) • publication would harm the effective conduct of public affairs, including the Board's ability to receive candid advice and engage in free and frank discussion (s.36)

	• publication would reveal information subject to legal professional privilege (s.42) • publication would harm the OEP's commercial interests (s.43)

ANNEXES LIST

Annex A – Correspondence from Minister Creagh

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

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

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