

## Board Paper

**Date**

08 May 2026

**Title**

Report of the Chief Executive

**Report by**

Natalie Prosser, Chief Executive

**Paper for information and decision****Open in part**

### Summary

1. This is a particularly active time for our work in Northern Ireland. In this report, I outline the reception to our work on the Nutrients Action Programme regulations. The Board will separately consider advice the Minister has sought on his developing proposals to mitigate ammonia reduction, and our progress report to be published in June.
2. We have been similarly active in implementing the business plan the Board agreed in March, and I update on the initiation of a number of projects within the plan the Board agreed. This is in the context of continuing uncertainty on our resourcing in Northern Ireland, where we are taking steps to mitigate new suggestion that we may receive less than we assumed.
3. We are also taking steps in readiness for Dame Helen Ghosh beginning her term as Chair, following the announcement of her as preferred candidate for the position by the Secretary of State and DAERA Minister.

### 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. The Board will separately consider our progress report in Northern Ireland.
6. We held a workshop with Defra to discuss information requirements for the EIP progress report and to shape the development of an effective APR. As Defra and we are both at an early stage in strengthening how we monitor progress against the EIP25 and its targets, the timing of this session was particularly helpful. We agreed to engage with one another in a more structured and purposeful way, and we confirmed clear next steps to support this, including adopting a more discursive approach to information sharing.

7. I have agreed the initiation of a project for the evaluation of the Lough Neagh Action plan that the Board agreed within the draft business plan. The project will scrutinise progress towards delivery of the Programme for Government's (PfG) commitment to protect Lough Neagh during the period 2024–2027,<sup>1</sup> by evaluating the actions taken through the Environmental Improvement Plan, Northern Ireland's River Basin Management Plan and the Lough Neagh Action Plan and assessing the prospects of achieving the intended outcomes.
8. I similarly agreed the initiation of the planned project in relation to Nature Friendly Farming. The project will outline the OEP's view on the strategy, design and implementation of nature friendly farming schemes, and identify issues Government must address to meet biodiversity targets and 30 by 30 commitments. In doing so, it aims to develop a view of what it means to get nature friendly farming right and so influence the development and implementation of nature-friendly farming and land management policies in England.
9. In each case, we aim to create published products, which will align with our functions but not be statutory reports under our functions of reporting on progress in the natural environment, or on the implementation of environmental law. This reflects the Board's steer to evolve and experiment in our approach to our findings, and how we engage in relation to our work. In each case, the products will scrutinise key targets and commitments we have highlighted in our reports on progress. We may present written materials as addendums to our progress reports.

## Research and evidence

10. We have had presentations on several of last year's research projects, including persistent organic pollutants (POPs) in waste and marine contaminants. These are recorded and accessible to the Board.

## Better environmental law, better implemented

### Nutrient Action Programme and related issues

11. We published our report on the Nutrient Action Programme regulations in Northern Ireland on 30 April. Activities supporting publication included meetings with the DAERA Minister, the AERA Committee, and members of the NAP Task and Finish Group from both the Environment and Agri-food sectors. Two well-attended online stakeholder events were also held. The infographic we published alongside our report was particularly helpful in disseminating key messages.
12. The Board will recall the careful deliberations on the timing of this report, in the context of the NAP development process. The reception was muted from the DAERA Minister and environmental NGOs, while stakeholders in the agri-food sector did not welcome our intervention at this time. There remains a significant risk that what is proposed to the Minister by the Task and Finish Group will deviate significantly from the recommendations in our report, and in particular, may not fully address issues around compliance and enforcement. *This section has been redacted as its publication would be prejudicial to the effective conduct of public affairs.*
13. Minister Muir has separately asked for our advice on a proposed Strategy for Ammonia Reduction Programme (SARP) and balancing the sustainable development requirements of farm business with the legal obligations of Article 6 of the Habitats Directive. We will consider this as a separate agenda item.

## Other activities

14. Our report on inspection regimes in the waste and installations sector was published on May 14. Publication followed extensive engagement with the Environment Agency both in the development of the report and to ensure ‘no surprises’ around our findings and key messages. The report received significant coverage on Channel 4 News, including an interview with Interim Chair, as well as in the Times and ENDS. The EA response pointed to the age of the data considered in the report and work already undertaken to address issues raised in the report. We had been keen to recognise progress made in our communications, but also point to what improvements were still needed in the future.
15. We will respond to a request from Defra officials with assistance for their memorandum to Parliament for post legislative scrutiny of the Environment Act 2021. Ministers have not sought our advice in this regard. We intend to use the opportunity to reiterate key messages from our work on effective implementation of the Act to date, as well as answer factual questions on implementation. There may be future opportunities as Parliament considers the memorandum later in the year.
16. The Environmental Audit Committee has begun an inquiry examining the role of HM Treasury in ‘shaping the UK’s response to climate change, nature loss and wider environmental sustainability’. Given the relevance of this to our work on EPPS, and ongoing work concerning cross-government mechanisms for supporting achievement of environmental ambitions, we are considering whether we might submit evidence by the deadline 21 May.

## Other activities

17. I have agreed the initiation of the project relating to our monitoring of the progress of water reform, with a view to influencing elements of the reform and upholding existing environmental law in the interim. This represents a major area of activity of potentially strategic significance. The project initiation document is therefore attached at Annex A for the Board’s information.

## Improved compliance with environmental law

### Complaints and enquiries

18. Since my last report we have received 11 new complaints, significantly higher than the monthly average of around 5. We are not aware of a specific catalyst for this change. We expect our processes and capacity will allow us to deal with this workload across the team, noting that a number appear small scale, individual grievances.
19. *This section has been redacted as it relates to information recorded for the purposes of OEP’s functions relating to investigations and enforcement and it contains personal information.*

### Progress of investigations

20. *This section has been redacted as it relates to information recorded for the purposes of OEP’s functions relating to investigations and enforcement.*

## Organisational excellence and influence

## Framework document and Chair's letter

21. We understand that the Framework Document continues to progress through the departments, with the expectation it will be agreed. We anticipate publication towards the end of May.
22. A feature of governance of arm's-length bodies is an annual letter to the Chair from the Secretary of State, setting out their priorities for the period. Given the degree of our independence, our Chair's letters differ from most, and the Secretary of State has not always chosen to issue one. This year's letter is at Annex B. We intend to write in response, as we did last year, and publish the correspondence. We consider this should come from Dame Helen Ghosh once her appointment has commenced.

## Financial performance, and audit update

23. We have closed the last financial year with a small underspend of £46k, subject to year-end audit. A separate financial outturn report is within the Board's agenda. The year-end external audit continues to progress well to allow laying of our accounts before summer recess.

## Corporate plan, business plan and budget

24. *This section has been redacted as its publication would be prejudicial to the effective conduct of public affairs.*
25. As the Board agreed, we are pressing ahead with implementation of the draft business plan, but we are acting now to ensure we hold back initiation of sufficient financial commitments in Northern Ireland to mitigate a lower outturn. This may include, for example, deferring initiation of the review of the Lough Neagh Action Plan set out above. We have written to Defra to confirm that we are utilising Defra's resources for Northern Ireland activity until such time as resourcing is provided by DAERA.
26. We are otherwise initiating new projects to plan, the most significant of which are highlighted in this report. The Board is asked to consider the draft Corporate Plan separately on its agenda.

## People matters

27. Dame Helen Ghosh was announced by ministers as their preferred candidate for the position of Chair and attended a pre-appointment hearing before the Environmental Audit and Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committees of the House of Commons. The Committees confirmed they were content with her appointment the next day. A formal announcement is awaited, but I and our Interim Chair have met to discuss induction, which will include early meetings with Board members.
28. Since the Board's last meeting, we have welcomed one new joiner on secondment. *This section has been redacted as it includes personal data.* Jamie Sawyer-Merchant has been appointed Acting Head of Litigation and Casework whilst Kate Tandy is Acting General Counsel.

## Improving the OEP

29. The 2026/27 Programme is being established in line with the draft 2026/27 business plan. This comprises continuing implementation of our People Strategy considering the results of the 2026 People Survey; completing the procurement, design and implementation of a new finance system; completing our planned work on efficiency; a new project to optimise our resources so that we continue to improve our impact while living within our funding; a new project to replace

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the current civil service recruitment system when that is withdrawn as expected; and the review of our strategy required by 2027.

30. As part of our work on efficiency, we held a session with staff at our all staff event in March intending to challenge cultural barriers to our efficiency and help staff more readily understand when 'good enough' is 'good enough'. Feedback was positive. We are developing a 'good enough' playbook for the OEP, and communications activities from the Executive to reinforce key messages.
31. The Board will note that some of its papers are in an amended format. This is one change following a review of the efficiency of our decision-making. It includes a (maximum) one-page summary, whilst retaining the broad structure the Board is familiar with, and we are encouraging all staff to use the new structure to distil key points more clearly for the Board, and so, potentially make board papers more succinct.

### Selected Stakeholder Engagement

32. We hosted a meeting between representatives of our communications and legal teams and colleagues from the EA, Natural England and the Forestry Commission to progress discussions over agreeing a 'Ways of Working' document. The meeting was productive and addressed a number of issues, including clarity of language and understanding around early engagement on new projects and topics, and the need for clarity around whether information is from an individual's or organisation's perspective. A further draft is being developed following the discussions. Defra are interested in the outcomes of this work, which may have wider applications.
33. Helen and I attended the Rivers Forum event last week, which has become an important fixture in the water sector calendar and was attended by a number of important stakeholders.
34. We are invited to address the Northern Ireland Environment Forum (NIEF) on 20 May. The NIEF is Northern Ireland's main annual environmental conference; the Chief Scientist will present on our Nutrient programme including our recent report on the Nutrient Action Programme. Our Interim Chair will also be in attendance, ahead of speaking at the Northern Ireland Waste and Resource Management conference the following day.

## Impact Assessments

### Risk Assessment

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

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|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 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: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• publication would harm relations between UK and NI governments (s.28)</li></ul> |

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|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 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)</li> <li>• publication would reveal information subject to legal professional privilege (s.42)</li> <li>• publication would harm the OEP's commercial interests (s.43)</li> </ul> |
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## ANNEXES LIST

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

*Annex B – This section has been redacted as it contains information available elsewhere.*