Office for Environmental Protection

# Minutes

Meeting of the Board
Tuesday 19 May 2026
Worcester

## Members

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| Malcolm Beatty OBE | Board Member |
| Professor Liz Fisher | Board Member |
| Julie Hill MBE | Interim Chair |
| Professor Dan Laffoley | Board Member |
| Dr Paul Leinster CBE | Board Member |
| Caroline May | Board Member |
| Natalie Prosser | Chief Executive Officer |
| Helen Venn | Chief Regulatory Officer |

## OEP Attendees

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| REDACT | Principal Strategy and Performance Manager (items 26.30 and 26.31) |
| REDACT | Finance Manager (item 26.29) |
| Dr Donnacha Doody | Head of Analysis – Northern Ireland (item 26.27) |
| Neil Emmott | Head of Monitoring Environmental Law and Advice (item 26.31) |
| Mike Fox | Head of Communications and Strategic Relations |
| Helena Gauterin | Head of Environmental Law (item 26.27) |
| REDACT | Principal Analyst (item 26.27) |
| Richard Greenhous | Chief of Staff |
| REDACT | Principal Lawyer (item 26.27) |
| REDACT | Finance Manager (item 26.29) |
| Angel Lai | Head of Finance and Corporate Services |
| Andy Lester | Head of Business Strategy and Planning |
| Professor Cathy Maguire | Head of Assessments (Item 26.26) |
| Professor Robbie McDonald | Chief Insights Officer |
| REDACT | Board Secretary and Private Office Manager |
| Kate Tandy | Acting General Counsel |
| REDACT | Management Accountant (item 26.29) |

## 26.23 Apologies for Absence and Declarations of Interest

Apologies were received from Helen Venn and Caroline May. Malcolm Beatty was absent from items 26.28 and 26.29.

There were no new declarations of interest.

## 26.24 Minutes and Matters Arising

The minutes from the 12 March Board meeting were approved. The matters arising were noted.

## 26.25 Report of the Chief Executive

The Chief Executive reported on an active period in relation to our work in Northern Ireland, including the items the Board will consider in its meeting. This is in context where our funding in Northern Ireland remains to be confirmed.

We have held a productive session with the Defra team responsible for the Annual Progress Report. This may signal opportunities to engage differently in relation to environmental progress, relying less on written information requests. *This section has been redacted as its publication would be prejudicial to the effective conduct of public affairs.*

The Board noted and commented on the initiated projects in relation to nature friendly farming, and the Lough Neagh action plan, including how these are intended to respond to the Board's feedback and encouragement to innovate in our products. The Board encouraged a consistent way to describe such products, so they are understood.

The Board discussed the issue of water scarcity in the context of water reform. ACTION Chief Regulatory Officer to engage Paul Leinster in relation to water scarcity stakeholders.

The Board was updated on the reception to our report on the Nutrient Action Programme Regulations in Northern Ireland, and how this relates to the NI stakeholder task and finish group which is considering these regulations. It was updated on our latest understanding of progress with that review. It noted the issue of derogations is likely to remain the key area of our interest.

The Board was similarly updated on the reception to our report in relation to inspections in the waste and installations sector, and reflected on the media coverage.

The Board noted the Chair's letter received, and that a response will be drafted for Dame Helen to consider on arrival. It noted the continuing risks in relation to the terms of Board members and the continuity risks to the Board, and Audit and Risk Committee in particular.

The Board requested that in future acronyms be summarised at the front of each Board paper. ACTION Head of Business Strategy and Planning.

## 26.26 EIP – Northern Ireland Report

The draft report was introduced to the Board. It was noted that the timeline for this report is constrained, given the window between the production of DAERA's annual progress report, and the Assembly recess.

The amendments that had been incorporated in light of the feedback provided in the discussion in the Board's prior meetings were outlined. These have been mainly in the framing of the 'Setting the Scene' and 'Taking Stock' chapters.

The Board provided further feedback in relation to the Foreword, Executive Summary and recommendations. It discussed how wastewater treatment should be reflected in the recommendations, given its centrality to the outcomes the Northern Ireland EIP aspires to but its absence from the EIP. An amendment to recommendation 1 was proposed to reflect this.

The Board discussed the positioning of the report. It recognised the very significant scale of challenge, which affects the wellbeing of people in Northern Ireland and the environment. It is a daunting prospect for politicians, and the Board encouraged that final edits to the Foreword and Executive Summary emphasise the progress the Minister has sought and been able to achieve, and the cross-Executive responsibility for the outcomes.

The Board commended the report. Given the limited and non-material nature of the Board's comments, it agreed the report subject to non-material amendments to reflect its discussion. It agreed to delegate agreement of the final report to the Chief Executive, in consultation with both the Interim Chair, and the incoming Chair.

**26.27 Advice on Article 6 issues relating to agricultural ammonia emissions**

The Board considered the proposed advice, which it noted had been prepared at pace given the recency of the Minister's request for advice on this matter.

The Board queried the balance between technical and legal content in the advice. It noted the fundamental 'legal' nature of it but judged it important to be clearer that this is statutory advice from the OEP based on the law, and not legal advice to the Minister or department.

The Board sought clarity on the underlying regulations in Northern Ireland, and how these relate to the equivalent regulations in England. It noted the practical context, where application of the current regulations is viewed as a barrier to development, and that development is often regarded by proposers as contributing to the reduction of nutrient losses into the environment from agriculture. It was reminded of the overall context in Northern Ireland, in which excess nutrients from a range of sources is a chronic environmental challenge.

The Board recognised the advice includes positive proposals which could, in principle, create headroom that might allow for some developments to be permitted in Northern Ireland. The advice emphasises the opportunity to undertake proactive work at scale, which could allow specific developments to proceed in a context where, the cumulative impact of proactive work and development is expected to lead to a reduction in nutrients.

It noted the risk that the proactive work necessary for overall environmental improvement may not be implemented, or implemented well. There may be resourcing, capacity, and other implementation risks. The Board encouraged an emphasis on effective monitoring and enforcement in the advice, and wider communications with DAERA officials.

The Board noted the wider context, and the proposed revisions of the Nutrient Action Programme Regulations. The Board encouraged our ongoing interest in the implementation of any proposals as well as the wider suite of issues to be clear, including relationships to derogation issues.

Given its discussions, the Board requested that the advice be circulated for consideration in correspondence, once updated. This will occur before the required deadline of submission of advice on 29 May. ACTION Head of Environmental Law

**26.28 Corporate Plan**

The Board considered the draft corporate plan making a small number of suggestions in relation to the drafting of certain commitments. It recommended that the long-term reduction in our resourcing be made clearer in the section on resources, as it is in the earlier sections of the plan.

The Board welcomed the 'plan on a page' but judged that it should be improved so that the symbols are clearer, and the relationship between each thematic area and the scale of work we plan to undertake is clearer.

The Board agreed the corporate plan, and that it should be published ahead of confirmation of our Northern Ireland resources if needed. The corporate plan will not be published ahead of the Chair's commencement, so that her view on its presentation can be sought.

**26.29 25/26 Financial Outturn Position**

The Board noted the 2025/26 financial outturn reported, and that this was again a very small underspend in context of our overall resources. The Board welcomed the strong financial management throughout the reporting period that enabled this outcome.

It was confirmed that underspend risk had been mitigated through improved resource utilisation, with staffing levels increased to support delivery of the corporate plan. Staff sickness remained below average and attrition was slightly lower than budgeted.

Members noted that while external research spend may have reduced, this was likely to reflect the use of internal, temporary and seconded staff, in lieu of external contracts, with associated staffing costs increasing.

**26.30 Our performance in 2025/2026**

A range of evidence was presented for the Board to consider and reflect on how effectively the OEP performed in the prior year. The Board discussed these, in the context both of how this should inform our future strategy and priorities, and how we set out our performance in our annual report and accounts. The discussion was wide-ranging.

The Board noted that the range of evidence suggests an organisation that is well run, delivering against the priorities set out in the corporate plan, and which secures good coverage for many of its outputs with influential stakeholders, Parliament and in the media. We have an open and supportive internal culture, and there is evidence of commitment to improving effectiveness.

The Board noted that influence is inevitably harder to objectively assess. There is good evidence of influence through the case studies, and other evidence suggests we are progressing on the journey we aimed for in relation to influence and success. The Board reflected that the priorities it had identified likely remained right in this context – namely to ensure our products are proportionate and timely in relation to opportunities for impact and to seek out opportunities for them to be more efficiently produced.

In considering influence and impact, the Board re-emphasised its view that causation will be very challenging to identify and prove. Correlation and association is important evidence. For example, it noted that the investigations show a sustained picture of changes happening as a result of, or alongside, our influence. It noted that the public authorities are likely to have different views of the 'causation' and 'correlation' of change which happens, in the context of our work.

The Board noted the focus in its discussion on environmental change that happens. This is understandable – we exist to contribute to environmental protection and improvement. But we are an oversight body, creating accountability for the progress towards goals, target and outcomes government decides, as well as the law. The Board debated this distinction, and the importance of accountability as an outcome to be identified and celebrated. The Board noted this is an important discussion in respect of our overall theory of change – whether our emphasis is accountability for what is happening, or advocacy for change that is needed. We have emphasised these facets of our role differently at different times, and between England and Northern Ireland. This is a strategic discussion to return to. ACTION Head of Business Strategy and Planning

The Board encouraged all opportunities to be taken to celebrate the impact of the organisation and tell our performance story. A key one is our annual report. The Board noted examples of the emergency authorisations investigation, our work on combined sewer overflow regulation, the changes made during the preparation of our report on waste inspections, and revisions to the EIP as examples which could be celebrated.

The Board noted that influence and impact are challenging to identify in metrics, not least because how we influence differs over time. We recalibrate our approach as Ministers and officials change and depending on how we establish relationships and broader conditions for influence. Some of work remains steady and consistent, other is more context specific. We also have impact by existing, but that is hard to quantify.

The Board noted that the balanced scorecard does not frequently drive its decisions, and that we should take stock of how we judge and monitor progress and performance, in the context of our strategy review.

**26.31 The influence and impact of our water programme**

The Board considered a visual map of the influence and impact of our water programme. This was with the aim of considering how our influence aggregates through our work in ways which may not be as apparent when considering one activity or project. The Board's discussion was again wide-ranging.

The Board reflected that the activity in our water programme has been undertaken as the OEP has developed and become more confident in its role and tools. Some lessons have been learned, and the picture presented is not one we would likely replicate today. This is particularly true of our issue-based working approach, and how this matured in the period. Our intelligence function has made us more able to identify and respond to issues which arise.

The Board noted influence that was apparent, including in relation to the Pickering intervention, our work on combined sewer overflows and in relation to Farming Rules for Water. These follow on from earlier work, and reuse the evidence, findings and recommendations of our earlier work to aggregate influence over time.

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

The Board welcomed this presentation of the OEP's work programme as a helpful way to consider our impact.

**26.32 Any other business**

The Board gave its thanks to Julie Hill for her time as Interim Chair