

Board Paper

Date

8 April 2026

Title

Report of the Chief Executive

Report by

Natalie Prosser, Chief Executive

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

Summary

1. It is four short weeks since the Board last met. This report presents a summary of progress since, in what has been a particularly active period for government policy announcement in England and Northern Ireland.

Recommendations

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

Sustained environmental improvement

Monitoring and reporting on environmental improvement

3. The Board will separately consider proposals in relation to our progress assessment in England and Northern Ireland.

Research and evidence

4. We have completed a [critical evaluation of how landowner and farming activities impact the natural environment](#) and, how effective existing regulations are in mitigating impact. The findings fed into business planning. The research produced an assessment of around 80 farming regulations, generating clear evidence on where environmental risks are highest and how effective existing regulations are at mitigating them. The findings enable for sharper prioritisation of both regulatory and environmental areas to focus on, and clarity on which functions would be most effective in achieving impact. This underpins our work on diffuse pollution, and nature friendly farming in the year ahead.

Better environmental law, better implemented

Environmental law reports

5. We are on track to publish our report on the nutrient action programme regulations in Northern Ireland. The report will be published on 30 April. We are planning media activity as well as engagement with the DAERA Minister and officials, agri-food interests and environmental NGOs. The Chief Scientist will be in Belfast as media spokesperson and will lead the OEP's presentation of the report, as well as meetings with key stakeholders.
6. *This section has been redacted as its publication would be prejudicial to the effective conduct of public affairs*
7. We are continuing our engagement in anticipation of the publication of our work on waste inspections in England, and have now met with the Chair and Chief Executive of the Environment Agency. Continued media and Parliamentary interest in waste crime sets the context in which this report will be received.

Advice, evidence and consultations

8. **Post legislative Scrutiny of the Environment Act 2021** – *This section has been redacted as its publication would be prejudicial to the effective conduct of public affairs.* We will draw on our work over the last five years in providing this advice, which must be framed in the context of the purpose and scope of Defra's memorandum. We are considering how we can effectively contribute further in the winter, as Parliament considers the memorandum and conducts its scrutiny – that may be a better opportunity to signal key opportunities for improvement.
9. **NI Climate Action Plan** – Following further engagement with DAERA, officials have shared revised draft targets for the natural environment (soil quality, biodiversity and air quality) required under the CAP. [In providing our response to the first proposal](#), we argued the targets should be strengthened to meet legal requirements. We consider there is still a need to strengthen and improve the targets, and have urged that this opportunity be taken before the CAP is finalised. We may need to apply a degree of pragmatism given that the targets are for the current carbon budgetary period (2023-2027) and time is short.
10. **National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)** – We [responded to the government consultation on the NPPF](#). Government is proposing wide ranging changes to this key piece of national guidance affecting planning and the environment. We have welcomed some changes, whilst highlighting where some policies can be strengthened to assist government in its stated aim of achieving a win-win for development and nature recovery. We will continue to engage with MHCLG in relation to this consultation so that we might better understand how they have applied the EPPS duty, and opportunities for improved transparency.
11. **NI draft Nature Recovery Strategy** - We have submitted a [response to NI Government's consultation in relation to its statutory Nature Recovery Strategy](#). We used the opportunity to emphasise existing positions, including on protected sites. We found there was a lot to welcome in the strategy but it needs to focus much more on delivery and implementation, and be clearer on what specific outcomes are intended to be achieved. At present there is an over-reliance on developing further new strategies and plans, exploring options and carrying out reviews, without the requisite degree of tangible actions for their implementation.

Announced policy and reform

12. Government in England and Northern Ireland has made a series of announcements relevant to our priorities, and remit. This includes:
- a. **Natural England and Environment Agency strategic position statements (SPS)** – The SPS, whilst not affecting the statutory role, powers and duties of these bodies, sets out more detail as to how they are expected to use constrained discretion and roll out ‘earned autonomy’ to speed up regulatory processes linked to development and growth. It also formally establishes the new approach of having a lead regulator for significant infrastructure projects. At the same time as announcing the SPS, Defra also announced the creation of a new infrastructure unit and Infrastructure Board, as well as a Development Industry Council.
13. **Government response to the Fingleton review** – Government responded to the Fingleton review. Whilst this relates to regulatory reform for nuclear power and defence, this might act as a test-bed for wider reform. The original report discusses streamlining of environmental assessments, speeding up of planning processes and constraining of the protected landscapes duty contained in the Levelling up and Regeneration Act 2023, though the response was less profound in its ambition. Later statements from the Chancellor then expounded a largely deregulatory agenda and so there remains uncertainty how far reform will go. Much of this relates to areas we will maintain an active interest in through our planning programme, such as Environmental Outcome Reports, Environmental Delivery Plans and the Nature Restoration Fund introduced by the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025. It also links to work in our Nature programme related to the Habitats regulations and protected landscapes.
- a. **Environmental Outcome Reports (EORs)** – In 2023 we [responded to government’s consultation on a new environmental assessment regime to replace environmental impact assessments \(EIA\) and strategic environmental assessments \(SEA\)](#). On 13 March government published its report on the consultation, and a roadmap for its introduction, which they have committed to having in place by December 2027. We will have an active interest in the legislation and guidance linked to this through our planning programme.
14. **Land Use Framework (LUF)** – Government published the long-awaited Land Use Framework for England. This follows a consultation last year, which we responded to. The Interim Chair and I attended the launch. Overall we consider there is much to welcome. The LUF is relevant to a number of our thematic programmes, including monitoring of the EIP. We will continue to engage with Defra and the new Land Use Unit, which is being established to oversee implementation and ongoing development of the LUF.
- a. **Offshore wind compensatory measures** – Government has published the statutory instrument under powers provided by the Energy Act 2023 to allow wider compensation measures to mitigate the impact of offshore wind developments, and remove the need to maintain network coherence. [We responded to the consultation on these reforms last September](#). These are the first changes to the habitats regulations and will therefore set a precedent for future changes under the Planning and Infrastructure Act or the Environment Act. The details on how this will work in practice will be contained in guidance which has not yet been published, though Government has made several commitments to what will be contained in it. We expect to scrutinise this guidance and its implementation, when published.

- b. **NI Environmental Principles Policy Statement (EPPS)** – On 2 March 2026 the EPPS was published for NI. The duty to have due regard to the EPPS will come into effect in 6 months, on 2 September 2026.
15. DAERA asked the OEP for advice on an early, pre-consultation version of the NI EPPS, which we provided as formal advice in August 2023, and through ongoing engagement with DAERA officials. All 16 of the OEP’s recommendations have been fully (9) or partially (7) reflected in the final EPPS, which differs from the England EPPS in a number of respects. This reflects both Northern Ireland’s distinct legal context and the earlier advice of the OEP.
16. The NI EPPS places greater emphasis on “due regard” as a legally enforceable duty, anticipates judicial scrutiny more explicitly, and sets clearer expectations around scope, proportionality, monitoring, reporting and evidencing application of the principles. It also more clearly links the principles to wider Northern Ireland frameworks, including environmental improvement, climate and Programme for Government objectives, and reflects ongoing EU alignment.
17. In our advice we emphasised that the EPPS should be embedded early in policymaking, applied proportionately, and used as an enabling tool for better policy rather than as a compliance exercise or administrative burden, and the NI EPPS reflects this more clearly than the England EPPS. Overall, we consider the NI EPPS adopts a more legally cautious but also more structured and integrated approach than the England EPPS, building on our findings from evaluating early implementation in England, with clearer mechanisms to support effective and transparent application over time.
18. We look forward to continued positive engagement with DAERA officials as they develop a toolkit and support implementation across NI government. In due course we will incorporate consideration of implementation

Improved compliance with environmental law

Complaints and enquiries

19. Since the start of this calendar year we have received 13 complaints and 98 enquiries. The above average number of complaints in the first few months of the year coincides with a busy period across the OEP for publications. We currently have 4 complaints and 2 whistleblowing submissions under assessment.

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

Financial performance, and audit update

21. We have reported a fully spent forecast position to Defra as at the end of February 2026. The finance team is now working closely with the rest of the organisation on the year-end closedown, with an indicative outturn position expected by the end of April 2026.

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22. The National Audit Office interim audit commenced in February 2026 in preparation for the year-end financial audit, which is scheduled to conclude in early May 2026 ahead of laying the accounts before Parliament prior to the summer recess.
23. We have signed the contract to begin the finance systems replacement project, transitioning from the current Sage 200 platform to Sage Intacct. Implementation of the new system is scheduled for late June or early July 2026.
24. Our counter fraud policy has been updated in March 2026 and now includes our fraud response plan and potential red flags to alert staff for further investigations.

Business plan and budget

25. As advised in the Board's last meeting the Executive met to consider any minor adjustments to the business plan and budget. I agreed a small number of non-material adjustments to draft budget lines.
26. I also agreed to prioritise two small additional activities with the expectation they will commence in the second half of the year, should funding be available as expected.
27. The net effect of these changes is to reduce the small amount of headroom (£117k) in the draft budget the Board agreed. We expect the final budget proposed to be broadly fully allocated. We retain the flexibility to stop, slow down or otherwise reprioritise in year.

Temporary accounting officer

28. Our delegation policy provides for the Chair to delegate my authority to another Executive Director in the event that I am unexpectedly unable to discharge my duties. This does not extend to my appointment as Accounting Officer which can only be made by the Defra Principal Accounting Officer, its Permanent Secretary.
29. The NAO alerted the Audit and Risk Committee to a change in Managing Public Money, which encourages arm's-length bodies to appoint a temporary Accounting Officer to cover these circumstances. However, Defra prefer not to make such arrangements. Instead, and as they suggest, I have notified Defra that Richard Greenhous, Chief of Staff, should be appointed as temporary Accounting Officer should an unexpected and temporary need arise. The NAO has noted this outcome.

People matters

30. Since the Board's last meeting, we have extended seven temporary posts as part of 2026-27 resource planning, welcomed one new joiner, and two colleagues have left the OEP. *This section has been redacted as it includes personal data.*
31. We have received the results of the 2026 staff survey, with a response rate of 93% and staff engagement remaining strong at 86%. An initial presentation is at Annex B. Learning and development, effective ways of working and inclusive recruitment were identified as areas for improvement. Targeted actions to address these are included in the 2026–27 business plan and further interventions will be worked up, as appropriate, via Directorate-specific review sessions.
32. We held a virtual staff event, allowing us to engage staff in relation to our people survey, to reflect on our values, our culture of collaboration and how we identify and ensure when our work can be 'good enough'. Initial feedback has been positive.

Improving the OEP

33. We have launched a consistent approach to identifying, collating and sharing lessons from our projects, so that they can be learned for future delivery. This is one of the final deliverables in our work to improve project management at the OEP, alongside approving the assurance model to test and sustain the intended benefits over time, including after the benefit of an internal audit now concluding.

Selected Stakeholder Engagement

34. In the last weeks I have attended the City Water Debate hosted by the Worshipful Company of Water Conservators, which discussed water supply and demand and featured contributions from Environment Agency Chair Alan Lovell and our own Board member Paul Leinster, in his role as Chair of Water Resources East, among others. I also attended the Supporting Wounded Veterans Rivers Dinner.

35. The Interim Chair and I also attended the launch of government's Land Use Framework, which provided opportunity to speak with a lot of senior stakeholders.

36. I also had the pleasure of attending the Institute of Regulation Annual Conference, at which our Intelligence team were presented with an award for innovation. This award recognises the quality of our intelligence function, which was set up quickly and efficiently and now ensures the organisation is well informed of developments across multiple sectors and that the information is easily accessible by staff.

Impact Assessments

Risk Assessment

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

Equality Analysis

38. No material equality implications have been identified in this paper.

Environmental Analysis

39. This report gives an overview of strategic organisational developments which support the OEP's principal objective. Consideration has been given in each case to how the activity contributes towards environmental protection and enhancement, and to ensuring the OEP meets relevant duties in environmental law. No specific proposal in this paper has a direct bearing on those duties.

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)
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ANNEXES LIST

40. Annex A – *This section has been redacted as it relates to information recorded for the purposes of OEP's functions relating to investigations and enforcement.*

41. Annex B – People Survey 2026 – *This section has been redacted as its publication would be prejudicial to the effective conduct of public affairs.*