



Corporate Plan 2026/27 to 2027/28

August 2026



Office for
**Environmental
Protection**

Corporate Plan 2026/27 to 2027/28

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The Office for Environmental Protection is a non-departmental public body, created in November 2021 under the Environment Act 2021. Our mission is to protect and improve the environment by holding government and other public authorities to account. Our work covers England and Northern Ireland. We also cover reserved matters across the UK.

www.theoep.org.uk/what-we-do



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Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at

The Office for Environmental Protection

Wildwood

Wildwood Drive

Worcester

WR5 2NP

www.theoep.org.uk

03300 416 581

enquiries@oep.org.uk

E03636411

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Foreword

The OEP has a specific role in national environmental governance in England and Northern Ireland. We scrutinise, advise, report and investigate so it is more likely that plants, wildlife and places for nature can thrive as each government intends, and so nature supports growth and national prosperity, enhances national security and resilience and enables people's health and wellbeing in the ways each government aims.

This plan sets out our programme of work for the year ahead, and the part we aim to play to make these outcomes more likely: to protect and improve the environment, by holding government and other public authorities to account.

The context in which we have decided them remains sobering. In both England and Northern Ireland, our latest assessment of progress finds government off track to secure the restored and thriving natural environment described in its targets and commitments.

But progress is being made and there are opportunities to be grasped. In England, government has published a refreshed Environmental Improvement Plan, and set out more clearly the steps it proposes so that key targets for the abundance of plants and wildlife, and the protection of the places on which they depend will be met. In Northern Ireland, the first Environmental Improvement Plan is now in place, an Environmental Principles Policy Statement has been published and a Nature Recovery Strategy has been drafted. The time to implement well is now.

We will scrutinise key pillars of what government must get right if nature is to recover, and what it must not get wrong – building on our work in recent years. In England, this means that nature friendly farming, protecting space for nature, and the pace of action in the marine environment remain keen areas of focus. In Northern Ireland it is hard to look beyond the need to tackle nutrient pollution, where our work remains focused on the range of contributing pressures from waste water to agriculture. This year, we have a new statutory duty to report annually on progress towards the Environmental Improvement Plan, and no additional resources, so our planned activity in Northern Ireland is narrower than we would wish.

Government has ambitions to reform environmental laws to restore nature, and support development, growth and other policy aims. We will monitor key reforms proposed for water regulation, for how the environment is considered in the planning system and for nutrient regulations in Northern Ireland. Good reforms, which draw on the lessons of what makes for good implementation today will be crucial to success.

We look forward to working with the many organisations and individuals interested in our work in delivering the priorities set out here. We aim that our work supports government meet the environmental challenges and opportunities with the pace, scale, coherence, and focus on effective implementation needed if ambitions for environmental improvement are to be made reality.



Dame Helen Ghosh
Chair



Natalie Prosser
Chief Executive



Introduction and context

The Office for Environmental Protection was established by the Environment Act 2021. We are a public body with powers to advise ministers and Government departments and to hold them and other public authorities to account against their environmental responsibilities and the law. Our independence is protected in law.

Our principal objective is to contribute to environmental protection and the improvement of the natural environment. Our work covers England and Northern Ireland, as well as UK-wide environmental matters where reserved to Parliament.

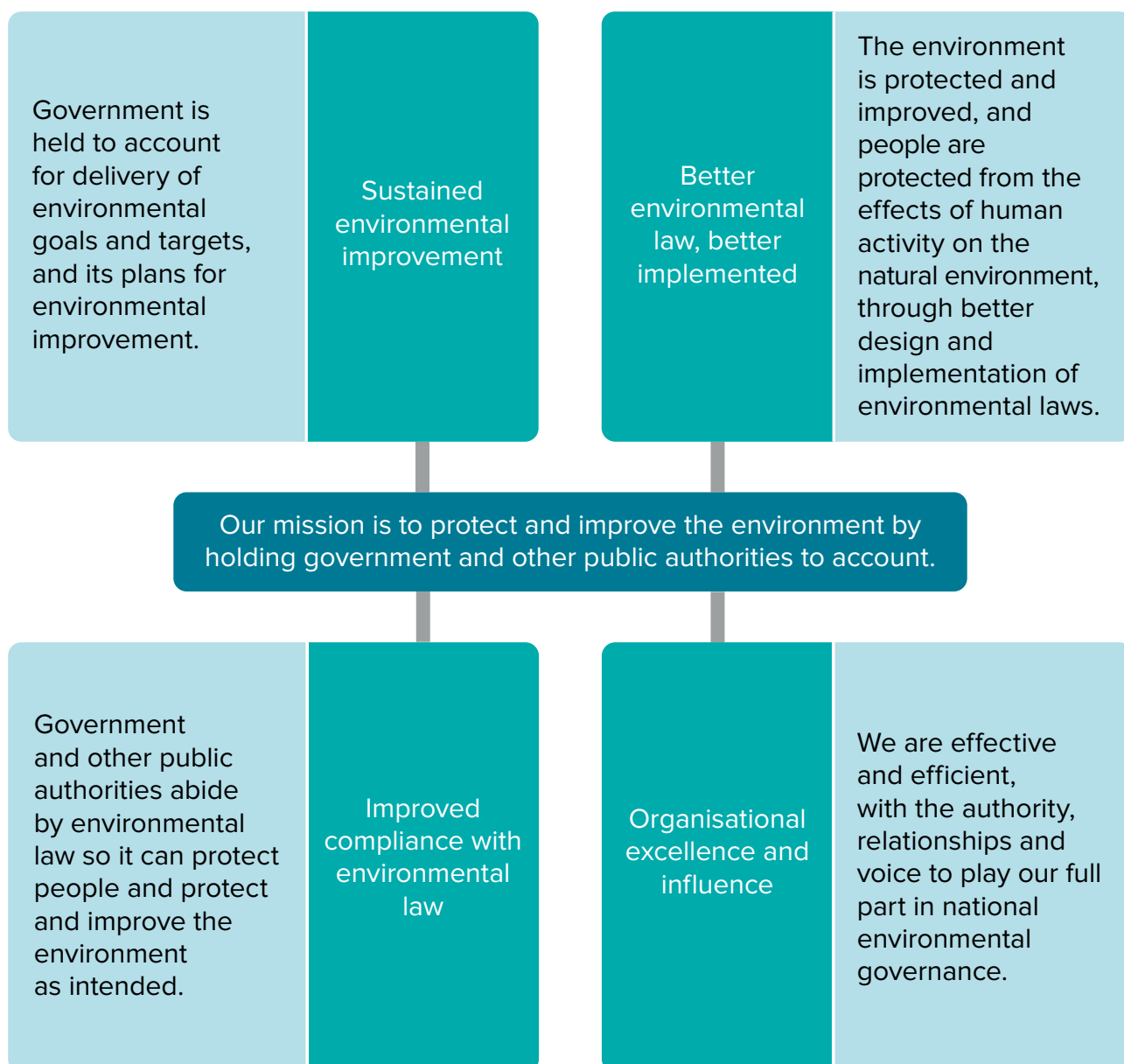
Our strategy and approach

Our mission

Our mission is to protect and improve the environment by holding government and other public authorities to account.

Our strategic objectives explain the contribution we make to environmental protection and improvement.

We aim to be excellent and have influence, so we can play our full part: to hold government to account for its long-term goals and targets for the environment, contribute to better environmental law, which is better implemented, and improve compliance with environmental law by public authorities. In doing so, we contribute to environmental protection and to improvement in the natural environment which can be sustained.



To deliver our strategic objectives and mission, we take an issue-based approach to our work. This means we:

1. gather information and evidence relevant to our work to identify issues which might be addressed or improved through our activities
2. take active decisions about whether and how we respond to the issues we identify
3. take action in the way we consider will achieve the most for environmental protection and improvement.

In this way, we seek to ensure that our work is purposeful, proportionate, and effective and enables us to make the most difference we can.

We have a number of specific functions which contribute to our mission and objectives, within this issue-based approach.



Receive complaints

We receive complaints about potential failures to comply with environmental law by public authorities.



Monitor environmental states and trends

We monitor progress in improving the environment towards EIP goals and targets.



Monitor environmental law

We monitor the implementation of environmental law.



Report on environmental progress

We report on progress towards delivering environmental improvement plans, goals, and targets.



Report on environmental law

We report on the implementation of environmental law.



Advice

We advise government on proposed changes to environmental law, and matters related to the natural environment.



Enforcement

We investigate suspected serious failures to comply with environmental law by public authorities and enforce compliance where needed.

[Our strategy](#) explains more about how we work. It explains how we prioritise, the approach we take within each of our main functions, how we work with our equivalent and other public bodies in all the nations of the United Kingdom, and how we engage with a wide range of stakeholders to fulfil our role. It also sets out our enforcement policy.

About this plan

This plan sets out the work we will do in the year ahead, and indicates the work we will undertake in the longer-term. We prioritise each year to set an outline work plan, which we publish in this, our corporate plan. To inform our priorities, we consider evidence from the complaints we have received, our analysis of progress in improving the environment,

and our monitoring of the effective implementation of environmental law. We engage with stakeholders, and review issues of concern to Parliament and the Assembly. We undertake horizon scanning activities, including through our College of Experts, on how this evidence may change in coming years.

We also regularly assess our plans throughout the year in light of events and information we receive, including from complaints. Our priorities may therefore change within the period of this plan. Where we judge we can make a greater difference and secure better value for the resources provided to us by stopping or pausing work set out in this plan to pursue an issue of greater need, we will. For example, we may prioritise further investigation and enforcement activity in light of potential failures to comply with environmental law which emerge, or we may pursue additional scrutiny or advisory activity where government sets new legislative priorities which may have significant consequences for environmental protection, or offer prospect for significant improvement.

In this way we aim to ensure we are responsive, and for our effort to always be targeted to where we can make the most difference. We will explain the choices we have made in our annual report and accounts.

Sustained environmental improvement

We aim that Government is held to account for delivery of environmental goals and targets, and its plans for environmental improvement.

Government is uniquely placed to protect and improve the environment, through its own activities and ability to influence others. Under the Environment Act 2021, government in England and in Northern Ireland must prepare an Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) to set out how each intends to significantly improve the natural environment. The current EIPs were published by government in England in December 2025, and by the Northern Ireland Executive in September 2024.

In the period covered by this corporate plan we will publish our first report of progress in improving the environment in accordance with the Northern Ireland EIP, and our first report in England covering a period which includes the current government's revised EIP.

We will also publish specific assessments considering some of each government's plans in areas of these EIPs, and develop the evidence base that underpins our work to support us to focus on the specific issues where we can make the most difference in future years.

What we will do each year

	ENG	NI	Theme
i. Publish a report assessing progress in improving the natural environment in accordance with England's EIP	✓		EIP monitoring
ii. Publish a report assessing progress in improving the natural environment in accordance with Northern Ireland's EIP		✓	EIP monitoring

What more we plan to do in 2026/27

	ENG	NI	Theme
iii. Assess the legal and evidential frameworks for key legally binding targets that will fall due in the period of government's EIP	✓	✓	Governance
iv. Further develop our approach to assessing the prospects of achieving long-term environmental goals and targets	✓		EIP monitoring
v. Scrutinise the UK Marine Strategy, and its potential contribution to the UK Government's commitments to achieve Good Environmental Status in marine waters	✓		Marine
vi. Evaluate the actions taken under the Lough Neagh Action Plan		✓	Nutrients
vii. Develop a modelling framework to monitor the Northern Ireland Executive's progress in reducing nutrient pollution to terrestrial and aquatic habitats		✓	Nutrients
viii. Publish our assessment of what is needed to get nature friendly farming right	✓		Nature
ix. Gather evidence on issues which might be addressed or improved through our activities in future years, with a focus on chemical pollution and regulation, waste management and the circular economy	✓	✓	Other evidence

What more we plan to do in 2027/28

	ENG	NI	Theme
x. Gather further evidence on issues which might be addressed or improved through our activities in future years	✓	✓	Other evidence

What success looks like

- Environmental trends related to EIP goals and targets will improve
- The prospects of achieving EIP goals and targets will increase
- Our annual reports will be recognised as definitive assessments of progress by Parliament, the Assembly and others

Better environmental law, better implemented

We aim that the environment is protected and improved, and people are protected from the effects of human activity on the natural environment, through better design and implementation of environmental laws.

To be effective, environmental law must be designed well to require or incentivise behaviours that can deliver the intended outcomes for the environment and people's health and wellbeing. Most critically, it also needs to be implemented well to achieve these outcomes in practice.

Through our work, we aim to improve the effectiveness of existing environmental laws and support the good design and implementation of new ones.

We will gather evidence on the effective implementation of environmental law in prioritised areas. In the period of this plan, we will publish studies of the effective implementation of existing environmental law in England and Northern Ireland.

We will also monitor proposals to reform key areas of environmental law, and provide advice to ministers and evidence to Parliament and the Assembly, in prioritised areas where reform is proposed or underway. Our contributions will draw on evidence of what is effective now, so that lessons can be drawn for the future.

What we will do each year

	ENG	NI
i. Monitor the implementation of environmental law including by engaging widely with those who design, implement and are affected by it	✓	✓
ii. Provide advice to Ministers and evidence to Parliament and the Assembly on proposed changes to environmental law for matters we prioritise	✓	✓
iii. Apply to intervene in priority judicial review proceedings brought by others where our intervention can help clarify or determine an important point of environmental law	✓	✓

What more we plan to do in 2026/27

	ENG	NI	Theme
iv. Publish a report on the implementation of inspection regimes in the waste operations and installations sector	✓		Governance
v. Publish a report on the implementation of environmental laws relating to by-catch	✓		Marine
vi. Publish a report on the implementation of the Nutrient Action Programme regulations currently in place and scrutinise proposals to change the Nutrient Action Programme Regulations, providing advice to DAERA and evidence to the Assembly as appropriate		✓	Nutrients
vii. Scrutinise the implementation of reformed environmental law relating to planning, in particular the implementation of Environmental Delivery Plans and Environmental Outcome Reports	✓		Planning
viii. Monitor changes to environmental law proposed in relation to water regulation providing advice to government and evidence to Parliament as appropriate	✓		Water
ix. Scrutinise the implementation of environmental laws relating to diffuse pollution from agriculture	✓		Water
x. Contribute evidence to the post-legislative scrutiny of the Environment Act 2021	✓	✓	Governance
xi. Monitor changes to environmental regulations in light of the Corry review, providing advice to government and evidence to Parliament as appropriate	✓		Governance
xii. Monitor the implementation of the Environmental Principles Policy Statement by departments across government and communicate any observations to inform good practice	✓	✓	Governance
xiii. Gather evidence on the implementation of environmental law critical to government's plans for nature's recovery, including the implementation of protected landscapes laws, other conservation designations, and the regulation of invasive non-native species	✓		Nature

What more we plan to do in 2027/28

	ENG	NI	Theme
xiv. Publish reports on the implementation of environmental laws critical to government's plans for nature's recovery, following evidence gathered in 2026/27	✓		Nature
xv. Publish a report on the implementation of environmental laws relating to licensable activities in marine waters	✓		Marine
xvi. Publish a report on the implementation of environmental law relating to the control of contaminants in sewage sludge	✓		Water
xvii. Scrutinise the implementation of the revised biodiversity duty established under the Environment Act 2021	✓		Governance

What success looks like

- There will be improvements to the design of environmental law as a result of our scrutiny and advice
- Public authorities will act to improve the implementation of environmental law, where we identify weaknesses or opportunities to do so
- Significant risks to environmental protection and improvement identified in our work will be recognised by Parliament and the Assembly when making law

Improved compliance with environmental law

We aim that government and other public authorities abide by environmental law so it can protect people and protect and improve the environment as intended.

Government and public authorities should always meet all their obligations in environmental law, so that the intended outcomes of the law can be achieved. Our aim is to improve compliance with environmental law, by holding government and other public authorities to account, and challenging and correcting serious failings.

Our work will be responsive to information we receive that public authorities may have failed to comply with environmental law, from complainants and other sources.

In the period of this plan, we expect to conclude a number of the investigations we currently have, and that we may begin new ones as evidence of potential non-compliance with environmental law emerges.

What we will do each year

	ENG	NI
i. Receive and assess complaints about potential breaches of environmental law by public authorities	✓	✓
ii. Work with public authorities to resolve failures to comply with environmental law which we prioritise	✓	✓
iii. Investigate serious failures to comply with environmental law by public authorities we prioritise and take steps using our enforcement powers to secure resolution where necessary	✓	✓

What more we plan to do in 2026/27

	ENG	NI	Theme
iv. Decide the next steps for issues of compliance identified through our investigations into the designation of special protection areas for wild birds by Defra and Natural England in England, and DAERA in Northern Ireland	✓	✓	Nature
v. Decide the next steps for issues of compliance identified through our investigation into the emergency authorisation by Defra of pesticides containing neonicotinoids	✓		Nature
vi. Decide the next steps for issues of compliance identified through our investigation into measures taken by Defra to achieve Good Environmental Status in UK marine waters	✓		Marine
vii. Decide the next steps for issues of compliance identified through our investigation into how Defra and the Environment Agency have implemented the Water Framework Directive regulations	✓		Water
viii. Progress our investigation into how DAERA, the Department for Infrastructure and the Utility Regulator have regulated untreated sewage discharges into Belfast Lough		✓	Nutrients

What success looks like

- Public authorities' compliance with environmental law overall will improve as we undertake our role
- Where we identify failures to comply with environmental law, public authorities will take the necessary steps to remedy them
- Stakeholders will have confidence in our enforcement functions as an effective route to secure compliance with environmental law

Organisational excellence and influence

We are effective and efficient, with the authority, relationships, expertise, and voice to play our full part in national environmental governance.

Our ability to succeed depends on how we work as much as what we do. The environment and people's health and wellbeing are best served when we use our broad remit and powerful tools to their greatest effect – strategically, purposefully, expertly, and independently.

Our aim is to operate as effectively, efficiently, and influentially as we can, to deliver the most for environmental protection and improvement.

In the period of this plan, we expect to complete the implementation of our current strategy, and complete our next strategy review. We will also continue to focus on improvements to our efficiency to maintain and improve our effectiveness and impact with tightening resources.

What we will do each year

	ENG	NI
i. Actively keep the public and stakeholders informed about our work	✓	✓
ii. Prioritise our activity to where we judge we can make the most difference, and publish our corporate plan and annual report and accounts setting out how we have made good use of public funds	✓	✓
iii. Operate efficient corporate services and governance which underpin our effectiveness, deliver for our staff, support our independence and are tailored to our size	✓	✓

What more we plan to do in 2026/27

	ENG	NI
iv. Enhance our operational efficiency, including through securing the benefits of technology and streamlining of our processes	✓	✓
v. Review our operating approach and evaluate how to optimise it in light of the medium-term funding settlement we have received in England	✓	✓
vi. Review the membership of our College of Experts to support us access the expertise we will need in future years	✓	✓
vii. Survey stakeholder perceptions of our impact and effectiveness	✓	✓
viii. Agree, publish and implement a framework document, setting out the governance, accountability and funding arrangements within which we work	✓	✓

What more we plan to do in 2027/28

	ENG	NI
ix. Take further prioritised steps to improve our effectiveness and efficiency	✓	✓
x. Publish a refreshed strategy after consultation	✓	✓

What success looks like

- Those who work for environmental protection and improvement will respect our work and value the role we play in each of England and Northern Ireland
- When we speak, those we are speaking to will hear, understand and act on what we say
- Our staff will be engaged and motivated to deliver our mission

Our resources and prioritisation choices

Our resources

We are funded by Defra in England and DAERA in Northern Ireland. We pursue our objectives and implement our functions independently, objectively and impartially. The priorities and allocation of resources we set out in this plan have been determined independently, by us.

Defra has provided us with a budget for our work in England for the period to 2028/29, at the same level as our funding in the last two years. We apply annually to DAERA for the resources to deliver our functions in Northern Ireland, and will receive the same level of funding for 2026/27 as we have for the last two years. In total, we expect our funding to remain stable through the period of this plan, and so to reduce in real terms. This is likely to mean we are able to do less in future years than we have in past.

£m	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	2028/29
Defra revenue	8.54	8.60	8.54	8.54	8.54
DAERA revenue	1.90	1.90	1.90		
Depreciation	0.27	0.27	0.30	0.30	0.30
Capital					
Total resources	10.71	10.77	10.74		

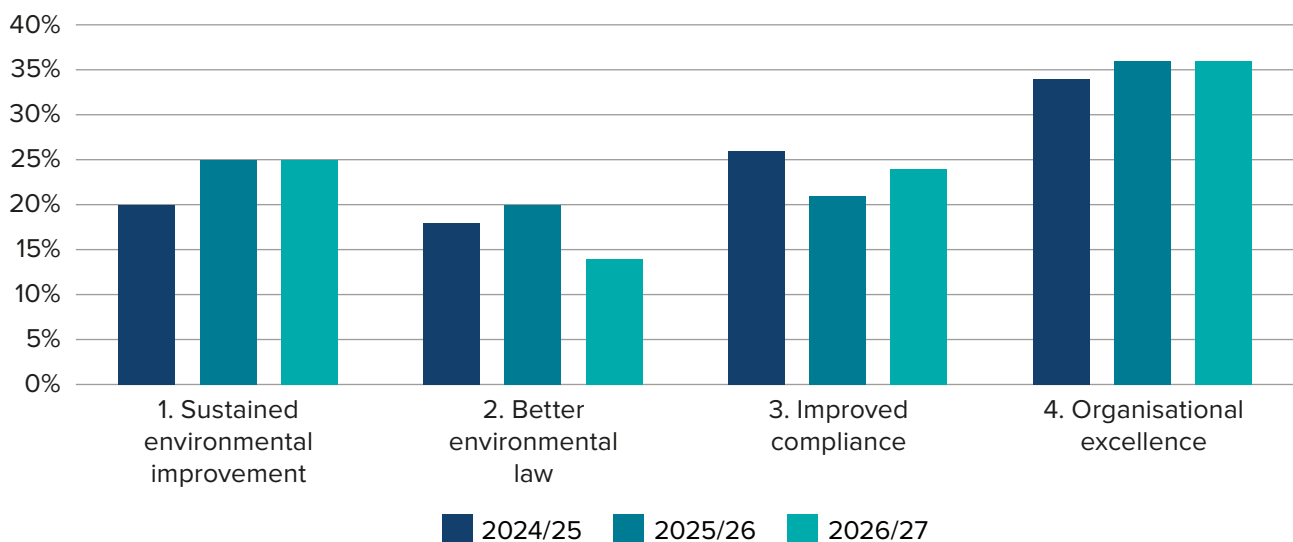
Allocation of resources to priorities

Through our detailed business planning, we estimate the indicative allocation of resources to our priorities in 2026/27 is as follows.

% of our total resources applied to each strategic objective	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27
Sustained environmental improvement	20%	25%	25%
Better environmental law, better implemented	18%	20%	14%
Improved compliance with environmental law	26%	21%	24%
Organisational excellence and influence	34%	36%	36%

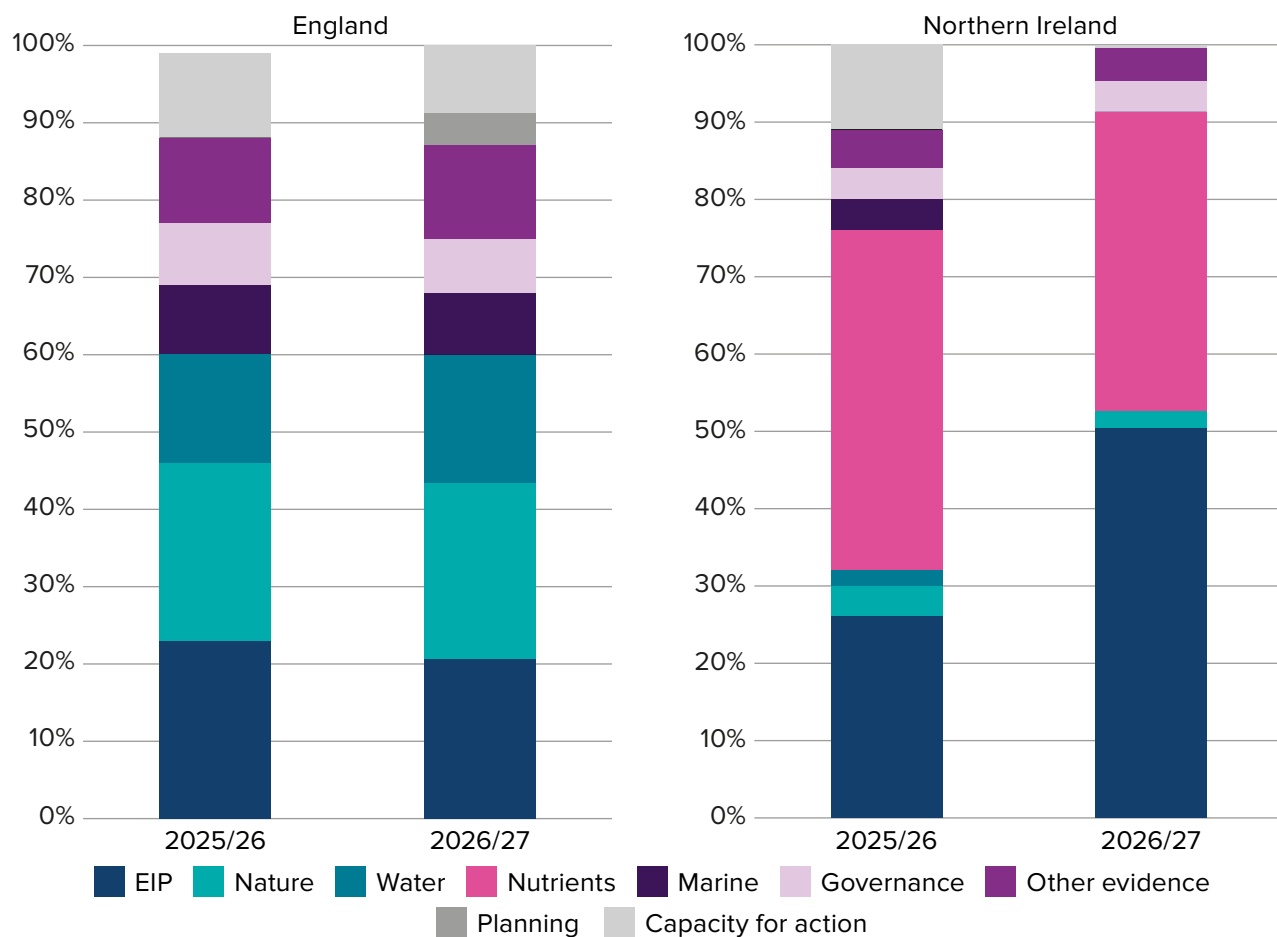
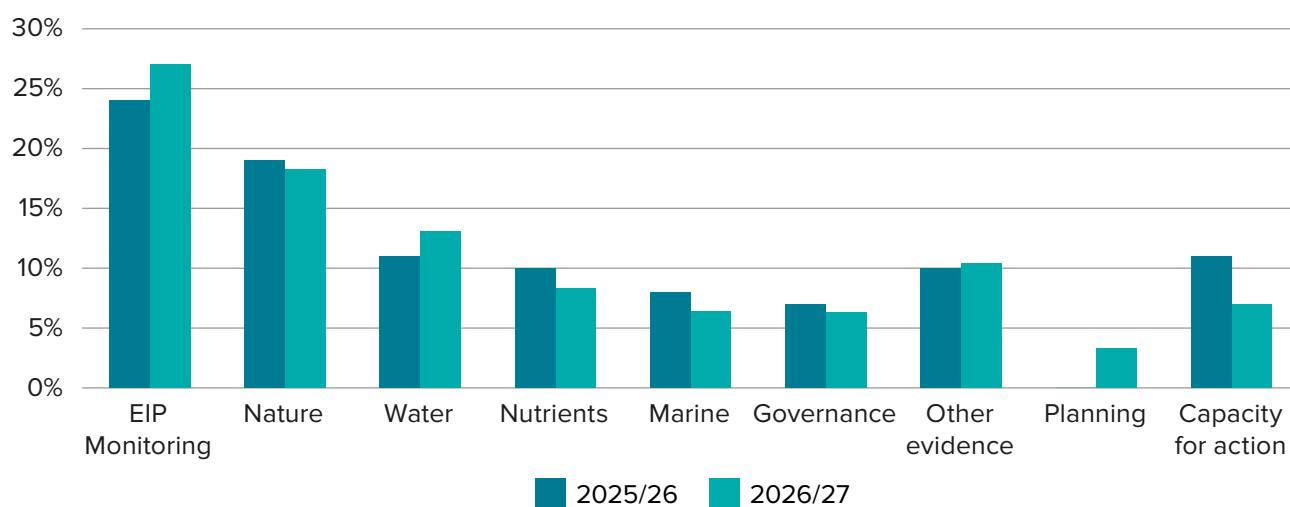
We must prepare to report on progress in improving the natural environment in Northern Ireland from this year and must apply more of our resources to our objective for sustained environmental improvement as a result.

We expect the proportion of resources we apply to organisational excellence and influence to reduce, as we embed the efficiencies from operational experience and our specific efficiency plans.



Our strategy sets out how develop our work within connected programmes of activity, so that specific outputs of our work support and reinforce other activities and together lead to better outcomes. We illustrate below how we have made choices to allocate resources to the main themes of our work in each of England and Northern Ireland – in each case excluding resources we spend to run and improve our organisation.

2026/27	EIP	Nature	Water	Nutrient	Marine	Governance	Other evidence	Planning	Capacity for other action
England	20%	22%	16%	0%	8%	8%	12%	4%	9%
NI	50%	2%	0%	39%	0%	4%	4%	0%	0%
Total	26%	18%	13%	8%	6%	8%	10%	3%	7%



This information is intended as an illustration and is inevitably a simplification. For example our work towards clean water can support nature to thrive and biodiversity to recover; our activity towards mitigation of the impact of nutrients on the environment in Northern Ireland, can contribute to water quality. We allocate expenditure only to one category, to improve understanding of the choices we have made.

We also indicate the capacity we reserve for matters not yet identified or prioritised. This includes the resources we retain for future investigation or compliance activity, to respond to requests for advice and other similar activities.

Our prioritisation choices

We prioritise to make the most difference we can, in each of England and Northern Ireland with the resources we have. We are committed to be transparent about the prioritisation choices we make.

Beyond our work to monitor progress in relation to the whole EIP, our work in England, as last year, is predominantly in two of the ten goal areas of Government's EIP – water and restoring nature. In Northern Ireland, our plan is concentrated in the strategic environmental outcomes of excellent air, water, land and neighbourhood quality and thriving, resilient and connected nature and wildlife.

We will monitor environmental progress and environmental law and may respond to potential failures to comply with the law related to any environmental issue. However, we do not plan to expend significant resources in most areas of the UK or Northern Ireland governments' plans to improve the natural environment. This includes important areas such as air quality, resource use, waste and soil management, climate change, biosecurity, and the public enjoyment of nature. We would do more, with more resources.

Within those areas we have prioritised, we must prioritise the specific issues where we judge we can make the most difference. There are therefore important areas of work that we would pursue this year and others we would progress more quickly, had we been provided with more resources. This is particularly true in Northern Ireland. Some of the important choices we have made include:

- to reduce the capacity we hold to support investigations and other actions to respond to potential failures to comply with environmental law in Northern Ireland
- to reduce the scale of scrutiny of the Environmental Principles Policy Statement and Climate Change Act in Northern Ireland
- to limit further planned work in relation to environmental governance beyond the work we began in prior years
- to defer planned work in relation to water scarcity
- to limit the extent of our activities to improve our efficiency and implement our people strategy to the highest priority activities only
- to defer some of the evidence we gather to support our future work to future years

We continually assess our priorities in light of information and evidence available at the time. We explain any change to our activity in our annual report and accounts.

Measuring our performance

Our strategic objectives set out the contribution we expect to make towards environmental protection and improvement. They provide a framework which shows how our work improves environmental law, the implementation of that law by public authorities and the delivery in the long-term of government's plans for environmental improvement. In our strategy, and this plan, we set out what success looks like if this is true in practice.

We embed a focus on the impact and outcomes of our work throughout our activity, and monitor whether these are achieved in practice. Our board and senior leaders regularly review whether we have achieved the outcomes we intend overall, and in our key work programmes, and whether we did so in the manner we expected.

We publish a survey of stakeholder perceptions survey every two years, and gather case studies which are indicative of where we have and have not had the impact we intend. We gather monitoring information to indicate whether we are performing as we intend. We monitor indicators of how our work is used by Parliament and the Assembly and viewed by the media. We also monitor our activity including the extent to which we deliver the priorities set out in this plan (and its predecessors), the timeliness of our reporting and advice to government, and how we handle the number of complaints and enquiries we receive.

We publish information about our performance in our annual report and accounts so that the public and other stakeholders can see the contribution we make to protecting and improving the environment. Our website includes information on the status and outcome of cases we have progressed through our investigations and enforcement functions. In our annual report and accounts, we also make information public about the efficiency of our operations, and the effectiveness of our financial management and other controls as well as our impacts on the environment, and the progress we have made in implementing our sustainability strategy.

