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Office for
Environmental
Protection

Office for Environmental
Protection
Wildwood Offices
Wildwood Drive
Worcester
WR5 2QT

03300 416 581
www.theoep.org.uk

Mr Andrew Muir MLA
Minister for Agriculture, Environment and
Rural Affairs
Clare House
303 Airport Road West
Belfast BT3 9ED
By email only

26 November 2025

Dear Minister Muir,

Re: Publication of Review of Environmental Governance and the Environmental Principles Policy Statement

I am pleased to see the recent finalisation of the Independent Panel's report of their Review of Environmental Governance in Northern Ireland. It is encouraging that such a thorough report has been completed within the challenging timescale. I also note the recent progress in respect of the Environmental Principles Policy Statement (EPPS). The OEP previously provided advice on the EPPS, which I trust your officials found useful. The EPPS is an important element of environmental governance, and it, along with the review, are most welcome.

Governance Review

A major focus of the report is the recommendation for the creation of a new regulator. As I noted in our letter to the Panel in May,¹ it is not for the OEP to comment on the detail of this, but I do want to say that we welcome the approach that the Panel has taken. They have clearly engaged widely and listened to the views of stakeholders. As the report itself states, 'Greater independence is not a silver bullet ... (it) is a practice

¹ [Submission to the Panel Review of Environmental Governance in Northern Ireland | Office for Environmental Protection](#)

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which must be sustained over time, demanding effective leadership and an organisational culture of pro-activity and collaboration.'

We are pleased to note that the final report reflects many of the concerns and suggestions which we highlighted in our submission in May. The report contains many sound recommendations, which will, if implemented, have a positive impact on environmental governance in NI.

In our submission to the Panel, we noted some specific issues which I feel are worth sharing with you, as they remain relevant to the next stage of this process.

The Environment Act 2021 (the Act) created a new environmental governance system with the overall objective of achieving significant environmental improvement. The Act contains provisions for the establishment of key foundational elements, namely:

- an EIP, setting out steps to improve the natural environment
- an environmental principles policy statement (EPPS), which officials and ministers must have due regard to when making policy
- the OEP, an independent oversight body to scrutinise the implementation of the above

Achieving significant environmental improvement relies on all of these elements playing their full part. As yet, these are not fully implemented in Northern Ireland. The EIP has only been in place since September 2024 and is not yet accompanied by clear delivery plans. I am pleased to see that the EPPS has now been agreed by the Executive, but it will obviously take some time for this to be implemented fully.

However, we consider that there is a fourth core element of environmental governance – that is the existence of legally-binding targets relating to the environment. These targets should set the direction of travel, and provide impetus for delivery. You will be aware that the mandate for these targets exists in the Act for England, but not for Northern Ireland. We welcome Recommendation 27, for the development of statutory targets for nature's recovery.

When you take the governance aspects of the Act in the round, there is a clear logic to the structure. The targets should set clear and specific goals, which the EIP delivers through setting out the specific steps and actions. The EPPS provides guidance to policymakers across Government, including to support their contributions towards delivering EIP steps and achieving target goals. The final element of this governance structure is the OEP itself. Whatever form NI's environmental regulator takes, we believe it would benefit from being within the scope of our oversight.

I would also like to comment on Recommendation 12, which states that the mission and vision of the new regulator should align with the EIP (once that plan has measurable targets). We noted in our letter to the Panel in May that during our research, we often find issues with the implementation of environmental law and policy. By this we mean that while the law (or the policy) may be sound and even ambitious, it is not translated into reality through sufficient practical action. This points to the need for a bold vision and a purposeful approach to implementation, supported by meaningful environmental indicators and ambitious, measurable goals, targets and actions. Where there are targets, we often find that there is a lack of detail around delivery planning.

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This delivery challenge becomes even more testing due to the breadth of the EIP. To make large-scale environmental programmes a success, governance arrangements need to facilitate collaboration amongst many stakeholders. They also need to provide oversight of whole sectors or policy outcomes, including setting the funding approach, policy design and front-line delivery. Successful delivery of the NI EIP will therefore require strong central leadership, but also effective collaboration across many organisations, and clear lines of responsibility and resourcing.

EPPS

Following the current period of scrutiny by the Assembly, publication of the EPPS will complete the post-Brexit environmental governance framework in Northern Ireland.

I am conscious that the duty to have due regard to the EPPS will come into force 6 months after publication. Here there is an opportunity to use the intervening time to best effect by readying departments and encouraging proactive use of the EPPS. Indeed, for any policy in development, but for which decisions will be made after the duty comes into force, the EPPS will need to have been considered throughout the policy-making process.

In relation to England, we have reflected that a lack of transparency around application of the duty has not been conducive to enabling effective scrutiny as to its impact on policy-making. I would urge that lessons from our early review of implementation,² as well as the [high-level review undertaken by Defra](#), in England inform your approaches in Northern Ireland, so that best practice can be built upon, and pitfalls avoided. We look forward to continuing our constructive engagement with the EPPS team in DAERA as you move into the implementation phase for the EPPS.

Conclusion

The OEP welcomes this review of environmental governance in Northern Ireland as well as the progress in respect of the EPPS.

This comes at an important moment. The pressures that the environment is facing are clear to all. The ongoing crisis at Lough Neagh should be the wake-up call to everyone involved that real urgency is required. Progress is being made; the new EIP provides a long-term roadmap for the protection and improvement of the environment; a new NAP is currently being consulted upon; the Climate Action Plan is nearing completion.

But there continues to be a reticence to deal with the issues, and frequent delay to implementing the changes that are so badly needed. The recommendations set out in the report will go some way to providing the robust system of governance that is essential if NI is to make the step-change needed. I hope that it can be taken forward with the necessary urgency.

² [Positive start to implementation of EPPS but more can be done, says OEP | Office for Environmental Protection](#)

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Please let me know if you have any questions or would like to discuss any further points with me or my team.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'GStacey', written in a cursive style.

Dame Glenys Stacey
Chair
The Office for Environmental Protection