

OEP Stakeholder Perceptions Research

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Research context and methodology

Research context

The OEP stands as a crucial independent body tasked with protecting and improving the environment by holding government and public authorities accountable. Through its four core functions – monitoring and reporting on Environmental Improvement Plans, monitoring and reporting on the implementation of environmental law, providing advice to government and investigating potential compliance failures – the OEP plays a vital role in environmental governance across England and Northern Ireland.

As part of its commitment to continuous improvement and effectiveness, the OEP is developing an integrated performance reporting and evaluation framework. This stakeholder perception study establishes essential baseline metrics while providing insights that can inform the OEP's approach across all its primary functions and jurisdictions. YouGov's research approach combines quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of stakeholder perceptions and the OEP's impact.

Quantitative methodology

YouGov's quantitative public sector team used an online method to survey stakeholders between 19th February and 12th March 2025. The team developed a survey in collaboration with the OEP and created unique, anonymous survey links for each participant. The OEP then distributed these links to their stakeholders. The survey was approximately 10 minutes in length and received responses from 121 stakeholders.

The table below outlines a profile of respondents, including their location, organisation type and job role.

Category	Count
Location	
Northern Ireland	56
England	61
Other	4
Organisation type	
NGO	50
Civil Service	22
Local Government	14
Academia	7
Scientific research	5
Agricultural	4

Legal	1
Other	18
Job role	
Strategic	50
Management	13
Evidence	17
Delivery	10
Communications	2
Other	29

Qualitative methodology

YouGov's qualitative team conducted 20 one-to-one interviews with the OEP's stakeholders between 28th February and 19th March 2025. Twelve interviewees opted into follow-up research at the end of the survey through sharing their email address. Eight interviewees were invited to participate through emails from the OEP, of which 38 were sent in total. Interviews were conducted over Zoom, Teams or telephone and lasted between 40 minutes and 1 hour.

The table below outlines a profile of the interviewees, including their location, organisation type and seniority.

Category	Count
Location	
Northern Ireland	11
England	9
Organisation type	
NGO	11
Civil Service	4
Local Government	3
Academia	2
Job title / seniority	
Director	5
Officer	4
Head	2
CEO	2
Professor	2

Ecologist	1
Consultant	1
Other, including senior fellow, environmental representative, deputy secretary	3

Possible limitations

Although all OEP stakeholders selected to take part in the research received a link to provide them with the opportunity to complete the survey and participate in the qualitative interviews, completion relied on a self-selecting methodology. This has the potential to result in a sample that is 'over engaged' (i.e. those who participated in this research could be those who already engage with the OEP the most) in comparison with the wider stakeholder base. Additionally, no quotas were set for nation, job role or sector which could result in over representation from certain groups in comparison with the profile of the OEP's overall stakeholder base.

Executive summary

Strong awareness and familiarity with the OEP was reported by stakeholders; the majority were aware of all OEP roles and responsibilities measured. Most commonly they were aware of the OEP's roles monitoring and reporting on the implementation of environmental law (93%) and investigating failures to comply with the law by public authorities (84%). This was reinforced by strong overall self-reported familiarity with the OEP and its work (77%).

The stakeholders surveyed generally felt the OEP has focused on the right issues so far (70%) but were less likely to feel the powers of enforcement have been effective. Less than half of stakeholders reported they think the powers of enforcement are effective (45%), which was partly due to a significant proportion (36%) saying they did not know whether they were effective or not. This being a knowledge issue rather than an effectiveness issue was also reflected in the interviews. There was a perception that the OEP has demonstrated a willingness to hold both the UK Government and Northern Ireland Executive to account, as evidenced by multiple instances of public criticism and formal investigations.

Generally, stakeholders' perception of the OEP's outputs was positive. The vast majority of stakeholders surveyed used the outputs (83%) and this utility was also reflected in perceptions. The vast majority (91%) felt the outputs are evidence-led and credible (89%). Beyond this, stakeholders reported that they respect (84%), value (75%) and understand (68%) the OEP's outputs.

These positive perceptions of the OEP's outputs expressed through the survey were repeated in the interviews. Stakeholders mentioned that the OEP's outputs are well respected and well utilised across organisation types to inform policy, support communication and feed into strategy. The OEP's reports and analyses are considered reliable and evidence-led, with the presentation of good practice being particularly useful for stakeholders. Although some value outputs for their scientific rigour, others would appreciate more accessible language and for outputs to be delivered at greater speed to have impact and relevance.

The OEP was largely seen as a credible and expert voice on environmental law, however, some would like to see faster and bolder decisions that show they are holding the government to account. While the OEP has shown independence in challenging government policies, some stakeholders expressed concern about its ultimate enforcement powers when compared to previous EU mechanisms that carried substantial financial penalties. Other stakeholders would like to see more flexibility and transparency from the OEP to increase collaboration between individuals and organisations.

Overall, the majority of stakeholders felt the OEP has been successful against its mission and objectives so far. Stakeholders generally perceived the organisation as influential in the environmental system (74%) and to their respective organisations (72%). Furthermore, there was strong belief in the OEP's value as four in five (81%) reported the OEP plays a valuable role in the system (81%) and in protecting and improving the environment (81%).

Stakeholders felt that it is too soon to tell what impact the OEP could have and how it will 'show its teeth'. Many would like to see awareness of the OEP grow among both politicians and the public to increase its impact in environmental protection. Stakeholders also recommended that the OEP could demonstrate greater independence through improved transparency about its evidence sources and more responsive timing of its interventions.

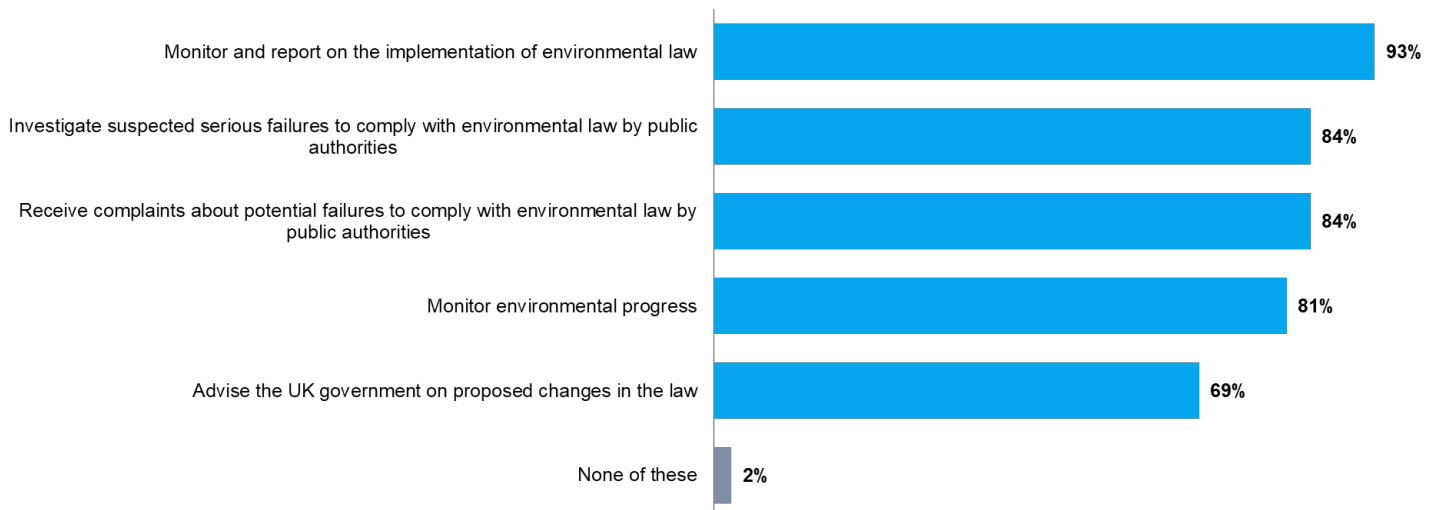
Engagement and interactions with the OEP

Stakeholders were asked about their familiarity with the OEP and its work. When asked which of the OEP's roles and functions stakeholders were aware of, nearly all (93%) identified that the OEP monitors and reports on the implementation of environmental law.

The vast majority of stakeholders surveyed were also aware of the OEP's roles in other areas of environmental protection. Just over eight in ten (both 84%) were aware that the OEP investigates serious failures to comply with the law and receives complaints concerning potential breaches in the law by public authorities. This was closely followed by around eight in ten (81%) stakeholders who reported to have been aware that the OEP monitors environmental progress.

Awareness among stakeholders of the OEP's role advising the UK Government on proposed changes to the law was notably lower than awareness for the other four areas listed, with approximately seven in ten (69%) reporting to have been aware that this was part of the OEP's role. This was particularly evident among stakeholders in Northern Ireland (59%), who were much less likely than those in England (79%) to have been aware that the OEP advises the UK Government on proposed changes in the law.

Figure 1. Perception of the OEP's roles and responsibilities



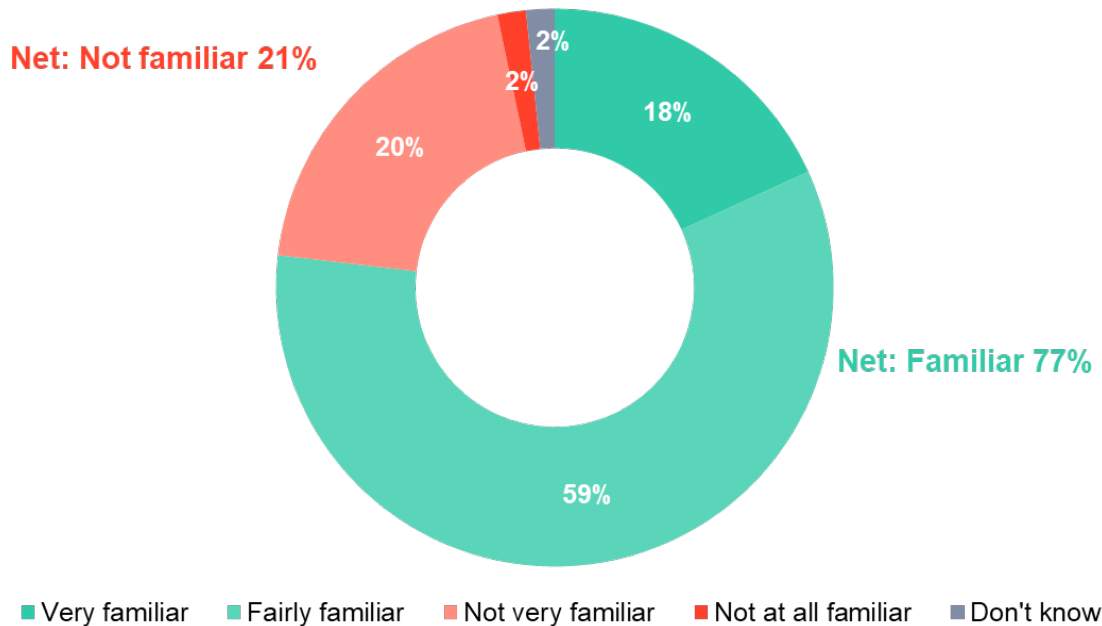
Q2a. Before taking this survey, which, if any, of the following were you aware that the OEP does? Please select all that apply.

Base: All stakeholders surveyed (121)

A high percentage of stakeholders also reported general familiarity with the OEP and its work, with approximately three quarters (77%) reporting to be familiar compared with one in five (21%) saying they were not very or at all familiar. The most frequently selected answer was *fairly familiar* (59%), while a very small minority (2%) of stakeholders reported to not be familiar at all.

Levels of familiarity with the OEP and its work differed by nation, with stakeholders in England (30%) much more likely to report being very familiar than those in Northern Ireland (7%).

Figure 2. Level of familiarity with the OEP and its work



Q5. How familiar are you with the OEP and its work?

Base: All stakeholders surveyed (121)

Consistent with high awareness of the OEP's responsibilities and general familiarity with its work, the vast majority (83%) of stakeholders reported to have used the OEP's outputs. However, this also differed by nation, with stakeholders in England much more likely to have reported using any outputs than those in Northern Ireland (93% vs. 74%).

The most common ways stakeholders reported to have used these outputs was through the Annual Progress Report (50%) and reports on the implementation of environmental law (48%). Those in England drove reported usage of the Annual Progress Report, with eight in ten (80%) stakeholders in England having done so compared with two in ten (21%) in Northern Ireland.

Following this, two in five stakeholders also reported to have engaged with the OEP by using its advice to the UK Government on environmental law (42%) and through the research the OEP has commissioned and published (41%). Meanwhile, stakeholders were least likely to cite that they have used the OEP's investigation reports (36%) or their responses to environmental consultations (34%).

Figure 3. Most frequently used OEP outputs

Q18. Which, if any, of the following outputs from the OEP have you used? (e.g. within your organisation, in your own research etc.)

Base: All stakeholders surveyed (121)

Across the qualitative interviews, stakeholders were positive about the interaction that they had with the OEP. They find the organisation to be available, approachable, and personal in its dealings.

“I wouldn't say I know them especially well, but I have felt from all of my interactions with them and all my dealings with them, like I've really respected their approach and their transparency.”

Coming from a range of different professional settings from within the statutory and not for profit sectors, stakeholders liaise with the OEP for a number of different reasons, including strategy, legislation, and helping to shape professional and scientific understanding of environmental issues.

“They have legal powers, they have legal teeth, and that's something which very few organisations have...especially non governmental organizations.”

For many, the interaction is time limited and relates to a particular project. Often they will interact with just one or two employees at the OEP and manage their relationship that way. Others have more regular meetings.

“We meet on a regular basis with the OEP and have done since it was started. We meet generally to hear of progress that the OEP is making on different subjects. but we've also gone to the OEP and asked them to consider some investigations and recently we had a meeting with them to discuss the review of the environmental improvement plan.”

For others, engagement tends to be inbound and reactive, rather than outbound, helping the OEP with their queries and requests for information – helping them understand and map the environmental landscape better. Some engagement with OEP happens by chance, at conferences and events, where they were felt to have a strong presence.

“On a more face to face level, we would come across with them on a regular basis at events. I personally know very well some of their members of staff from their previous jobs and so on. So, I think there's that kind of high level engagement, but we would also get one to one engagement on occasion.”

The interviews indicated that the OEP is collaborative in its approach, with a sense of shared enterprise in their work with stakeholders. For many, and particularly in Northern Ireland, the environment ‘industry’ is relatively small and as one stakeholder put it, “incestuous”, meaning that the OEP will, out of necessity, be linked into many of the important players in the industry.

“The OEP's work parallels our own scrutiny work and we collaborate closely with it and draw on their work on a frequent basis. It is an absolute pleasure to work with them.”

Some interactions can be informal, though more often they take place in the context of more formal consultations, and coming together to put out press releases etc.

“We work with them on issues where there is total common UK interest...so we may actually join almost formally to have some position statement, but rather more commonly we bounce stuff across them. We work out that if we're both working on a similar area, let's take sewage discharges from water companies, we will be investigating the Scottish water, they will be investigating the English ones and the Welsh one, and we will make sure we know what we're each saying. We won't time the announcements to be the same because we're working on different timescales but also we use them as a very good sounding board for project studies.”

The stakeholders interviewed tended to be in the NGO space and therefore felt strongly that was a benefit to working with the OEP, namely that it would enhance their understanding of environmental issues. Whereas those in the statutory sector, where the OEP's role is more around oversight, feel differently about the relationship.

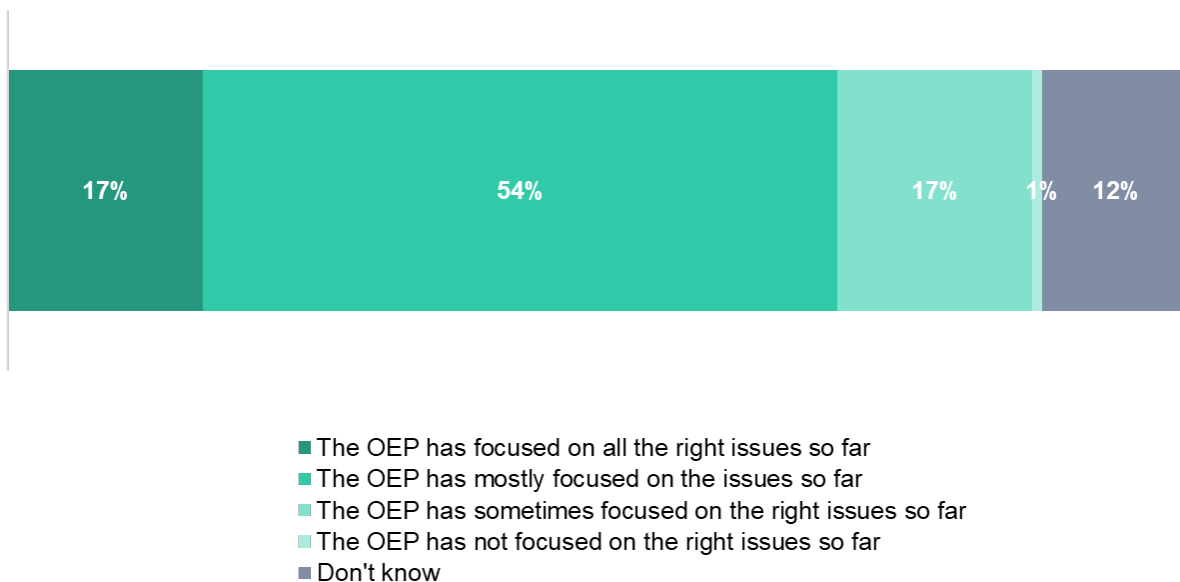
Priorities of the OEP

Perceptions regarding the OEP focusing on the right issues were largely positive. A strong majority (70%) of the stakeholders surveyed believed that the OEP has mostly or entirely focused on the right issues so far. One in six (17%) felt that it has focused on *all* the right issues, while more commonly (54%) thought it has *mostly* done so.

Another one in six (17%) believed that the OEP has *sometimes* focused on the right issues, while 1% felt that it has not focused on any of the right issues so far.

There was also a degree of uncertainty about whether the OEP has focused on the right issues, with 12% of stakeholders having said they do not know.

Figure 4. Perception of the extent to which the OEP has focused on the right issues so far



Q7. The OEP makes its own decisions on its priorities, and which environmental issues it focusses on. Given what you know about the OEP's work, to what extent, if at all, do you think the OEP has focused on the right issues so far?

Base: All stakeholders surveyed (121)

The interviews demonstrated that, despite positivity towards the OEP and its staff, there was often only top-level understanding among participants of what the OEP's priorities are. Much of this was due to the relative novelty of the organisation, which was felt to be 'still finding its feet' in the post Brexit era.

"I think that it is too early at the moment to judge how effective the OEP can be. And by that I mean, okay, so they've challenged the government in court and as far as I'm aware, there is no answer forthcoming on that. But what I'm really getting at is, are the teeth that OEP has effective? And if it's not, that's damn difficult then to know where that takes us."

A lack of clarity could be due to how the organisation interacts with stakeholders, often having a single point of contact in a gatekeeper role, without sharing extensive information about the organisation and how it prioritises areas.

"I suppose it's difficult for me to answer that about the OEP as a whole. I think it's because it's quite a diffuse organization - although it's small, it has different parts, which are performing different functions and engaging with different things"

"Probably have different priorities, but if I had to take the organization at a whole, I suspect its priorities are, holding the government to account for delivery of, environmental improvement plans and the 25 year environment plan and the environment act targets"

There was, however, a sense that the OEP exists to hold government to account to ensure that they are adhering to environmental law at both a central and local level.

"I hope their top priorities are to get government and local government to, in terms of their use of environmental laws, make changes, and improve some of the environmental laws or actually enact laws that we haven't got."

"I think the top priorities are working on the environmental improvement plan, which is the government's plan for how it's going to halt nature decline and improve other environmental goals. That's also a top area for us... and the environment sector more broadly. And it's also one of the other pillars of this new governance system that the environment put in place. So implementation of environmental law and making it work better in the round is one of its other of priorities."

Some stakeholders, however, were concerned that the organisation is driving forward with its own agenda and not taking into consideration the priorities of NGOS in its stakeholder base.

"They decided it's not a priority. And so it feels like they are setting their agenda, but...they're not reacting to our agenda."

"What I found quite difficult is to get them to consider areas of work that we're particularly interested in... we always had hoped that the OEP would actually look into issues that the NGOs would actually bring forward and we've not really had much success with that. It tends to be that they're deciding their work programme rather than us influencing their work programme."

Other comments in the interviews centred on the organisation mainly being scientifically-focused. Many participants were as well – so this was not always a negative association, more a concern that this may be at the expense of a more strategic focus.

“As far as I'm aware, especially from the drivers and pressures reports, there were sort of two key drivers. One being changes in land use and the other one being pollution and ammonia in particular. My impression is that they've acknowledged that the ammonia and pollution issue is something that they can do more with, especially to begin with. So I see that as a bit more of a focus for them going forward..”

Overall, however, despite some disagreements and a lack of certainty, there was a general consensus that the OEP exists as a force for good, making government and the private sector both accountable, and aware of the legal framework in which they are operating.

“So it seems to me like their priorities, from a legal perspective, are responding to breaches of environmental law on the ground... instances of ecocide and things like that.”

“I think the priorities would be improving the quality of environmental law across the UK, and its effectiveness in leading to improve the state of the environment. I think there is some effort to improve not just the law, but how the law is made.”

Independence of the OEP

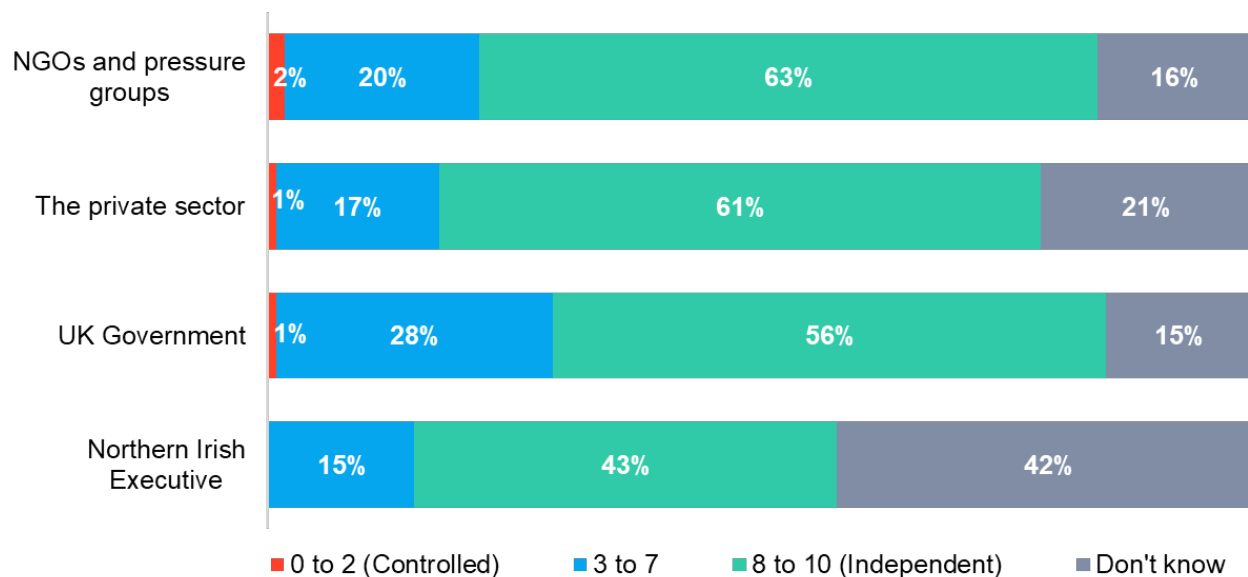
The dominant perspective among stakeholders was that the OEP is independent of the government, the private sector, and non-governmental organisations and pressure groups.

On a scale of zero to 10, where zero was 'Completely controlled by them' and 10 was 'Completely independent of them', three in five (63%) stakeholders surveyed rated the OEP's level of independence from NGOs and pressure groups between eight and 10. This was roughly in line with the private sector (61%), and higher than the proportion who gave the equivalent rating for the UK Government (56%) and the Northern Irish Executive (43%).

It was very uncommon for stakeholders to feel the OEP is heavily controlled by other groups or institutions. Outside of the proportion who gave a rating between eight and 10, the vast majority provided a more neutral response or said they did not know.

Stakeholders based in England were more likely than those in Northern Ireland to believe that the OEP is independent of the UK Government, with 66% having provided a rating between eight and 10 compared with 46% of those in Northern Ireland. Conversely, when thinking about the Northern Ireland Executive, those based in Northern Ireland (57%) were much more likely to give a rating of eight to 10 than those based in England (29%). In the case of the Northern Ireland Executive, this difference was largely driven by the fact that the majority (68%) of stakeholders in England reported they did not know, compared with 18% of those in Northern Ireland.

Figure 5. Perception of the extent to which the OEP is controlled by or independent of various groups/institutions



Q8/Q9/Q10/Q10a. How independent, if at all, do you feel the OEP is from [the UK Government / the Northern Ireland Executive / non-governmental organisations and pressure groups / the private sector]? (Scale where 0 = Completely controlled by them and 10 = Completely independent of them)

Base: All stakeholders surveyed (121)

These findings were supported by the insights obtained from the stakeholder interviews. Many highlighted that the OEP had shown a willingness to hold both the UK Government and Northern Irish Executive to account, with multiple stakeholders noting its readiness to call the government out on environmental issues.

A notable example of independence was the OEP's investigation into combined storm overflows, where it launched an investigation into three public authorities, including DEFRA, the Environment Agency, and the Water Services Regulation Authority (Ofwat). The OEP was praised for its strong stance on the Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP), declaring it 'not fit for purpose' and providing critical feedback that was described as 'very helpful'. In Northern Ireland, the OEP acted swiftly against DAERA regarding an operational protocol on ammonia-emitting projects and challenged the delay in publishing Northern Ireland's Environmental Improvement Plan. Its stance on the nitrates plan for distribution of materials in Northern Ireland was also noted as an example of making strong recommendations against established government practices.

"I think so far, the OEP has acted independently. It hasn't been afraid to call the government out. It does it in its own particular styles. It's not like a public authority looking for press, media columns or that sort of thing. It's got its own way of doing that and so far and by and large, it's been allowed to operate independently by the government. There have been one or two hiccups. One is about funding and one is about something called the duty to cooperate, which is a duty on the government to work with the OEP."

"(...) they've written to the government about good ecological status in the marine environment, for example. So they haven't been afraid to say to the government, we think you could be breaking the law and we want to do something about that."

"I think in terms of things like water quality, river quality and water pollution, I've seen quite a lot of reports there where they've been castigating government and government agencies as well as the water companies about things like not delivering on some of the promises and commitments around water quality and improving it. And I know this is a big contentious topic for a lot of the public as well. So I think the OEP has been very good at saying, look we know your concerns and we ourselves have raised concerns."

However, a few participants also provided examples where the OEP may have been more hesitant to fully exercise its authority or push for more immediate government action. These included cases when the previous government granted derogations for the use of banned neonicotinoid pesticides or weakened laws related to air quality through the Retained EU Law Act.

During the interviews, most stakeholders indicated their beliefs that the OEP maintains objectivity and is not unduly influenced by pressure groups or the private sector. Several participants mentioned the OEP's evidence-based approach, with one noting they are 'led by the science'.

"I don't get the impression there's been any capture or anything like that from any particular group or single set of stakeholders. They seem to treat people kind of with equity, if that makes sense. And obviously they take evidence, they hold consultations."

"I think so far, I've not seen any evidence that's been overtly problematic. If you like, there's always going to be lobbying. There's always going to be talking to people, but I get the feelings that the officers on the ground are quite impartial and will always refer back to a senior manager or to somebody else if they feel they're being overly pressurised."

Stakeholders who did not select 10 on the survey scale for at least one of these groups or institutions – meaning they did not see the OEP as being completely independently of them – were asked how they think the OEP could be more independent or demonstrate its independence. A wide range of feedback was given. Many stakeholders felt it is difficult or simply not possible to be entirely independent from the Government when it is their source of funding. Meanwhile, some others said that more independence could be demonstrated by visibly exercising its powers and holding the Government to account. There were also stakeholders who believed that more prominence in the media could help with reinforcing the OEP's position of independence.

Concerns over the OEP's funding structure were also raised by some stakeholders during the qualitative interviews, noting that they are tasked with holding the government to account while being funded by it, thus creating a conflict of interest. A few participants felt the OEP might be "wary of upsetting the government of the day" and possibly "wary of being shut down", which might influence their actions.

"The scrutiny of environmental law, that's, another stated aim. But that work places a duty on governments and public bodies to respond. It doesn't actually place a duty, or it doesn't go beyond. The OEP by the nature of being a body essentially established by government, so it is not independent to the extent that it can actually, require governments to fundamentally change track. In response the government can, and does simply say, yes, thank you. Yes, we'll agree with you a bit there, we'll agree with you there, and we'll come up with a strategy"

Stakeholders suggested during the interviews that greater transparency about information sources and how evidence is evaluated and incorporated into the OEP's decisions could enhance perceptions of independence. Similar to the survey findings, several participants recommended the OEP develop a stronger media and communications strategy to better inform the public and stakeholders about its work.

“I think one of the areas where there isn't an obvious clarity that, if it were clearer, it would be a good thing, and that is how the evidence or how the information provided by the independent advisors has been woven into OEP's thinking. I'm not totally clear how much, how many people are aware of the independent advisory board?”

“The only other meaningful thing they could probably do to help that is to have financial, total financial independence, which is, probably not realistic. So I think probably it's by continuing to demonstrate that independence in the reports they're making and the way that they're pushing those forward.”

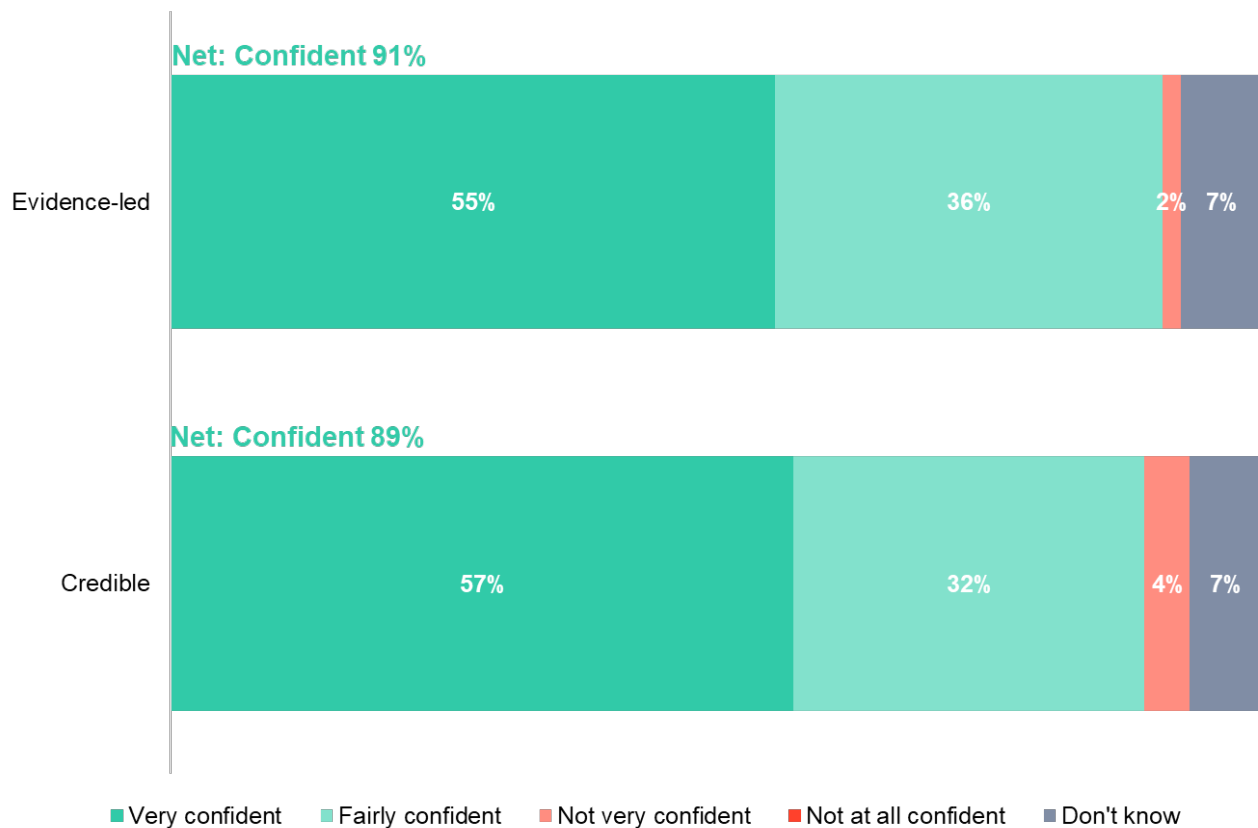
Overall, the findings suggest that the OEP is generally perceived as functioning independently within the constraints of its mandate. Most participants acknowledged that independence is demonstrated both through the OEP's institutional structure and through its actions.

Credibility of the OEP

Stakeholders were asked about their perceptions of the credibility of the OEP, both in relation to their outputs and their powers of enforcement.

The vast majority of stakeholders found the OEP's outputs to be credible. Close to nine in ten (89%) reported that they were confident the OEP's outputs are credible and just over nine in ten (91%) reported the outputs are evidence-led. Stakeholders were more likely to say they did not know whether they were confident that the OEP's outputs are credible and evidence-led (both 7%) than to say they were not confident.

Figure 6. Confidence levels in the OEP's outputs



Q12. The OEP publishes outputs including an annual report, reports on environmental law, consultation responses and advice to the UK government. How confident, or not, are you that the OEP's reports are...

Base: All stakeholders surveyed (121)

During the qualitative interviews, most stakeholders expressed high confidence in the OEP's reports, describing them as methodologically robust, thorough, and evidence led. One respondent noted their work "would certainly pass muster in any academic scientific peer-reviewed journal". The OEP was particularly praised for hiring subject matter experts for specific issues, such as bringing in specialists for fisheries management plan work, which enhances their credibility in areas where they lack in-house expertise.

"I think I'm very confident that's what they're basing their reports on. I think that they're certainly in our experience very much driven by evidence rather than conjecture "

The OEP's reports, particularly on water laws (Water Framework Directive and Bathing Water Regulations), were described as expert, authoritative and comprehensive, with multiple participants mentioning they use the OEP's reports in academic research.

Furthermore, the OEP's assessment of the Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) as not an adequate delivery plan was viewed as a strong, evidence-based position that influenced government action. However, some expressed concern about the time taken to produce reports, with one noting that by the time a report is released, the government may have moved on from the issue, potentially limiting the report's policy impact.

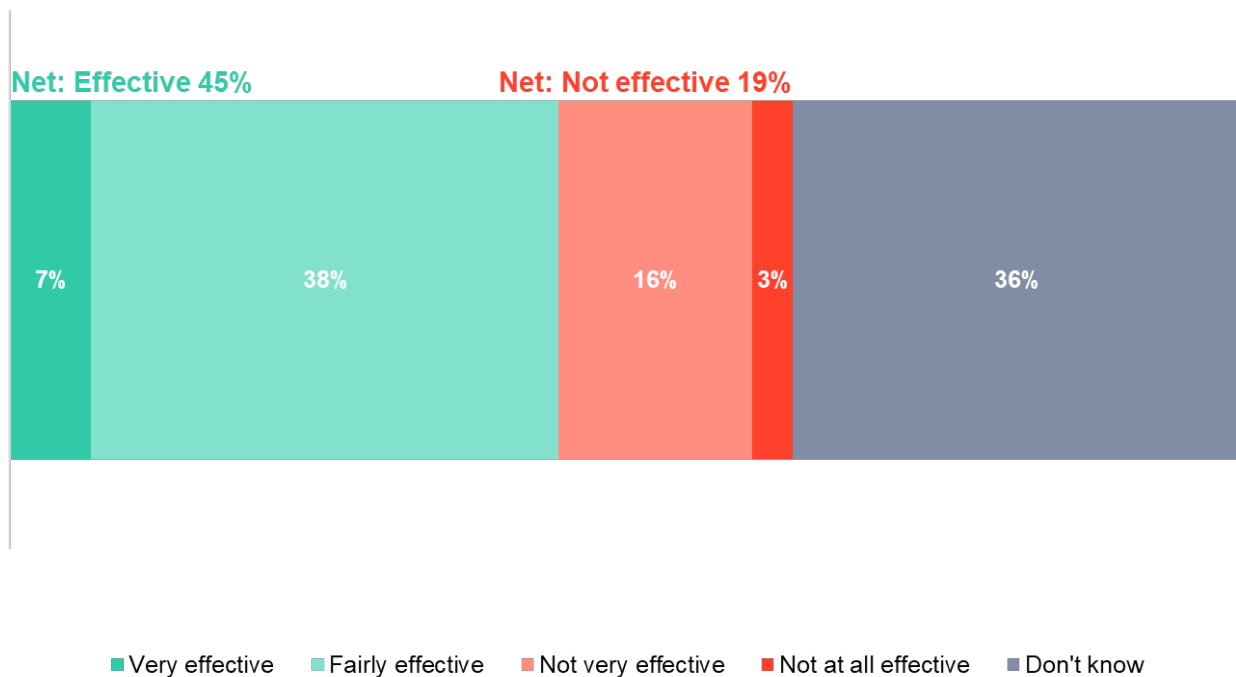
"[The] reports are very credible. Lots of evidence, but just a very slow process. They could do interim responses. So if you think about, the new government has agreed that the EIP wasn't fit for purpose. They announced a rapid review that's going to come out in July. Obviously the OEP needs to look at it properly and stick to the legal obligation, which means it does need to report on the EIP next January. But it could do a rapid review in July, so that we're all talking about it at the same time."

"There are the sites within England that are most highly protected for nature. We all know that they're not working as well as they could because nature's in decline. The OEP has been working on that report for [what] feels like the best part of two years. Meanwhile, the government itself has been deciding and making recommendations and it feels like now that [the] OEP report comes out, I think will no doubt be brilliant and authoritative, but will it be a bit late in the day? So there's maybe more a question of timing and depth rather than that the reports aren't good, which they are."

The fact that the OEP does not take on every case brought to them by environmental groups, but instead follows a clear enforcement strategy with specific thresholds, was also cited as evidence of their objectivity and fairness in selecting cases based on merit, rather than outside pressure. Also, several respondents highlighted that the OEP clearly acknowledges data limitations in their reports, which adds to their scientific credibility rather than diminishing it.

When asked about the effectiveness of the OEP's powers of enforcement, stakeholders tended to feel they were more effective than not. Close to half (45%) reported the powers of enforcement were effective, whereas one in five (19%) felt they were not. Stakeholders were more likely to have said they did not know how effective the powers of enforcement were (36%) than to say they were not effective. This suggests there is a potential lack of knowledge from stakeholders around the OEP's powers and how they are used.

Figure 7. Perceived effectiveness of enforcement powers



Q16. Thinking about the OEP's powers of enforcement. These powers include conducting investigations and commencing legal proceedings where there are suspected serious failures to comply with environmental law. To the best of your knowledge, how effective or not do you think the OEP is at using their powers of enforcement to secure compliance with environmental law?

Base: All stakeholders surveyed (121)

There was some difference in perceived effectiveness between stakeholders in England and in Northern Ireland. While there was no significant difference in perceptions of effectiveness between nations, those in Northern Ireland were more likely to think the powers are *not* effective (26%) than those in England (9%). This comes from an increased proportion in Northern Ireland who felt the powers are not very effective (21%) in comparison with England (7%).

The qualitative interviews revealed that the OEP is perceived by some stakeholders as having insufficient enforcement capabilities, with one explicitly using the term ‘toothless tiger’ to describe the organisation's ability to enforce environmental standards. There was a perception that the OEP can only “write disgruntled letters to the government”, which may not be as effective as the European Commission, which was able to impose significant financial penalties.

However, it was acknowledged that the OEP is a relatively recently established organisation, making it very early to judge its effectiveness, which may explain the high percentage of stakeholders who indicated that they do not know how effective the OEP has been in using its powers of enforcement. This suggests that the organisation is seen as still developing its capabilities and approach.

The general consensus among many participants was that, while initial signs about the OEP's approach and willingness to challenge government are encouraging, a fair assessment of its credibility and enforcement effectiveness requires more time and more examples of cases progressing through its enforcement process.

Outputs of the OEP

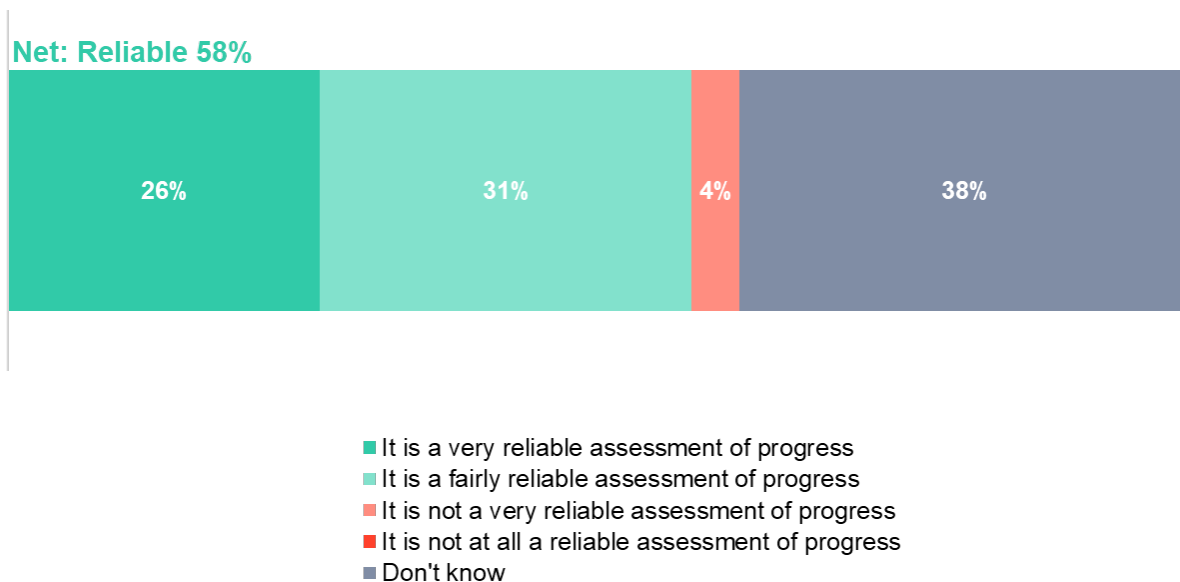
Stakeholders were also asked about their perceptions of the OEP's outputs, both in terms of general views on understanding, value and respect as well as specific views in relation to the reliability of the annual report.

Perceptions of the reliability of the OEP's annual report against the UK Government's Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) were relatively positive. Approximately three in five (58%) stakeholders reported that they believe the report to be a reliable assessment of progress in England, with a quarter (26%) having cited it to be very reliable and three in ten (31%) fairly reliable.

Four percent felt the OEP's annual report is not very reliable as an assessment of progress in England against the UK Government's EIP and no stakeholders indicated that it is not at all reliable. More commonly there was uncertainty expressed, with approximately two in five (38%) stakeholders unsure about whether the report is reliable in this context.

Stakeholders' views differed by nation, with those in England (89%) much more likely than those in Northern Ireland (26%) to perceive the OEP's annual report to be a reliable assessment of progress in England. This national contrast became further evident when noting that just under half (45%) of stakeholders in England reported to find the OEP's report very reliable compared with 7% in Northern Ireland. Importantly, however, the main driver for these differences was that those in Northern Ireland (69%) were significantly more likely than those in England (7%) to say that they did not know.

Figure 8. Perceived reliability of the OEP's annual report as an assessment of progress in England against the UK Government's Environmental Improvement Plan



Q17d. To what extent, if at all, do you think the OEP's annual report is a reliable assessment of progress in England against the UK government's environmental improvement plan?

Base: All stakeholders surveyed (121)

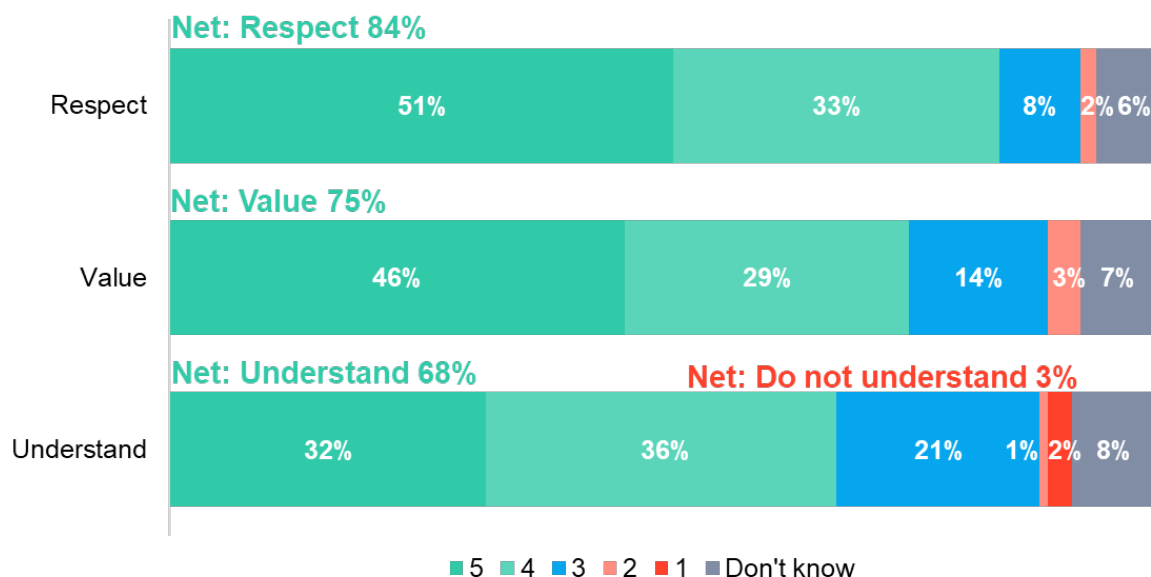
More generally, the majority of stakeholders had a positive view of the outputs the OEP produces in relation to understanding, value and respect.

On a scale of one to five, with 'five' being the highest category, 84% of stakeholders surveyed rated the respect they have for the OEP's outputs as four to five. A much smaller percentage (2%) indicated that they do not respect the OEP's outputs by providing a rating of two, and no stakeholders reported that they do not respect the OEP's outputs at all.

In a similar pattern to respect, the vast majority of stakeholders value the OEP's outputs. Three quarters (75%) of stakeholders reported that they value the OEP's outputs with a rating of four or five, while a small percentage (3%) reported that they do not value the outputs with a rating of two and no stakeholders indicated that they do not value the outputs at all.

While still a majority, understanding of the OEP's outputs was rated lower than perceived respect and value. Approximately two thirds (68%) of stakeholders reported that they understand the OEP's outputs by providing a rating of four or five. This was driven by a higher proportion of stakeholders who selected a neutral score of 'three' (21%) than for the other measures, and a lower proportion in Northern Ireland who reported to understand (59%) the outputs compared with respect (79%) or value (69%). This national difference was further evidenced by those in England (43%) having been more likely to understand the OEP's outputs completely than those in Northern Ireland (21%).

Figure 9. Respect, value and understanding of the OEP's outputs



Q17a_1. To what extent, if at all would you say you understand the outputs produced by the OEP? For example, do you understand the main message, the recommendations, the evidence base used.

Q17b_1. To what extent, if at all, would you say you value the outputs produced by the OEP?

Q17c_1. To what extent, if at all, would you say you respect the outputs produced by the OEP?

Base: All stakeholders surveyed (121)

The interviews revealed that the OEP's outputs are generally respected and widely used across organisations. They are primarily used by stakeholders for evidence, specifically to spread awareness/knowledge, inform/influence policy, underpin advocacy and develop communication strategies around environmental protection.

"We have used OEP reports, letters, etc to inform policy development and lobbying of Government. OEP evidence is also useful for consultation responses."

"Quoted them [OEP] in press releases and letters to government and other decision-makers. Used them in the development of policy position statements"

"To aid own research - useful compilation of existing evidence and provides an overview of gaps but also framing of the importance of achieving the EIP Goals."

The OEP's outputs, particularly the annual report, are used by stakeholders in their work, as the outputs are considered reliable, independent and evidence-led. The OEP's papers are used as background literature in the following use cases;

- the development and implementation of policy,
- referenced as part of organisation's own reports,
- used in investigations and articles,
- referenced in legal cases/interventions, and
- quoted in press releases or in workshops and briefings.

They are used in these varied ways because they tend to be trusted by stakeholders and are therefore used to inform and support policymaking and communication.

"We have referenced findings in annual report and other advisory reports, investigative findings in a range of our interventions, both inside track advocacy but also press releases, legal interventions"

“They [OEP] enable other people to have influence, by bringing out that objective information, like the research into the damage of agriculture, for example, of industrial agriculture.”

The OEP's outputs are also considered useful as they present good and bad practice in the sector by outlining how certain organisations are performing in implementing environmental law. They also highlight where challenges exist in the sector, which is useful for informing reforms, future planning and priorities. That said, many would also like to see more examples of *good* practice in order to understand what this looks like and how it might be achieved, rather than solely focusing on what bad practice looks like.

“The OEP has become very important as a foundation for the status of environmental progress in policy and law. To see the status on progress given in annual reports is a strong basis for prioritising and consolidating areas of focus”

“Guidance, identification and sharing of good practice, that would be an excellent area if they [OEP] could do that across the regions that they have statutory authority”

“I think more briefings and workshops would be nice and I think more of them, but also some case studies or some sort of examples of good practice”

Outputs are used to increase understanding of policy areas, particularly the Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP). While some use these outputs to inform their own research, others use them when sharing their research with others, adding extra context from a trusted and independent source (the OEP) alongside comparing strategy, refining approach and understanding opportunities.

“OEP assessment and reporting has added to the evidence base underpinning our calls for improvements to environmental policy and added further credibility and legitimacy.”

“It is early days but they have created opportunities for minister.”

“They [OEP] put out quite a lot recently but I think there's something around the pragmatic. What is the way forward? Who do we need to do this? Who do we need to hold account? Where are the actual blockages?”

Outputs can also be used for influencing purposes, for example when developing communications with politicians and lobbying government. However, there is some demand for outputs to be more accessible so that they can be shared with the public and have greater impact. Although the thoroughness of reports is appreciated by some, others find them too dense and would appreciate shorter summaries in lay terms.

“There's then something about the presentation of the information, which is incredibly thorough. But again, unless you're really absorbed of the detail of air quality then it's massive to get your head around.”

Some called for the OEP to use clearer language when communicating with audiences who have less experience with legal terminology or are not from a scientific background.

“I think the OEP has to, should be a little bolder about interpreting its evidence. Into really layman's terms, what does this report talks about? They could be bolder about empowerment”

“We are not legal experts. It really needs to be also translated into the kind of lingo that we can understand. And sometimes it can be quite complicated.”

As previously mentioned, some stakeholders would like to see outputs released at greater speed to ensure that they are relevant and can complement urgent work being conducted by various organisations on evolving topics. Others would also like to see updates on the outcomes of outputs to ensure the OEP's advice continues to be relevant, collaborative and impactful.

“Just continue to keep them up to date, review and renew ones that they've done already and keep bringing out new ones and then keep them, accessible for us.”

“I think they've [OEP] probably got to think of their audiences a little more because impact is very much around who is reading it and who's reacting to it.”

Influence and impact of the OEP

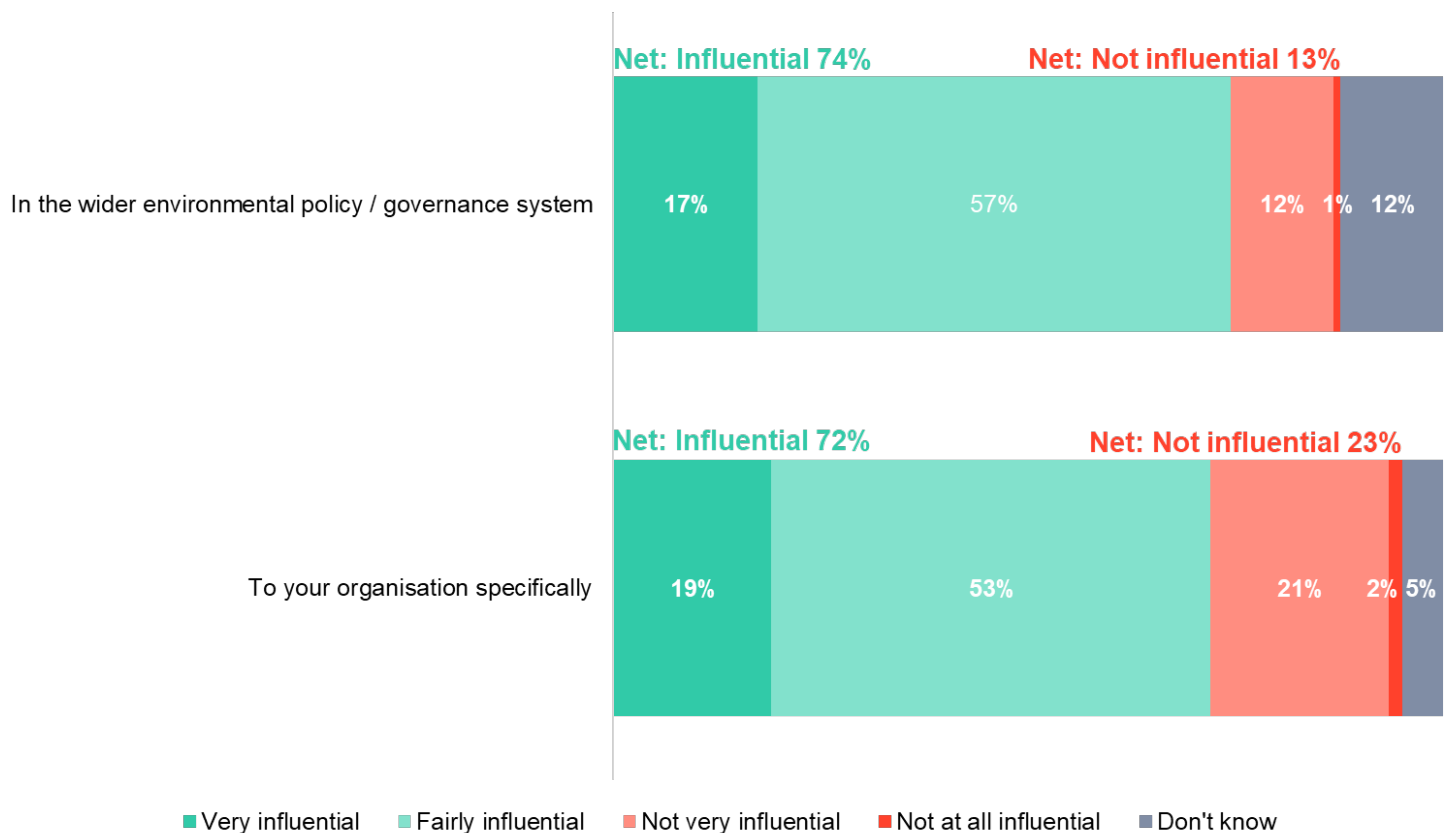
Stakeholders were also asked about their perceptions on the impact and success of the OEP so far.

When asked about the influence of the OEP's outputs, stakeholders generally felt the outputs are influential. Close to three quarters (74%) felt the outputs are influential in the wider environmental policy/governance system and a similar proportion (72%) felt the outputs are influential to their organisation.

Stakeholders were more likely to have reported that the outputs are not influential to their organisation specifically (23%) than to the wider environmental policy/governance system (13%). This came from a difference in the proportion who reported they did not know how influential the OEP's outputs are.

Stakeholders were more likely to have said they did not know how influential the outputs are to the wider system (12%) than to their organisation (5%). This could be because stakeholders felt they had *greater knowledge* of their organisation than the wider system rather than because stakeholders felt the outputs are *less influential*.

Figure 10. Perceived influence of the OEP's outputs



Q20. Thinking generally, how influential or not would you say the OEP's outputs are in the following circumstances?

Base: All stakeholders surveyed (121)

In the qualitative interviews, most stakeholders found the OEP's outputs to be reliable, clear and accessible. They are also perceived to be informative without being too technical. That said, some of those working in government called for clearer, shorter and more strategic reports which outline suggested actions clearly and succinctly.

"They're easy to read, got nice summaries, they're quite accessible to a wide range of people, stakeholders. I think that's really really important.. a lot of kind of government reports are quite technical. I do think most of the OEP ones explained quite well what the challenge is, what they're doing and what they found."

"They [OEP] are definitely an evidence driven organisation. That was the first task that they set for themselves was understanding what are the issues, but more than anything worse evidence for those issues"

Examples of the OEP's outputs having an impact included its investigation into ammonia emissions and the impact this had on government policy, alongside outputs shared on the Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP). With both examples, spotlighting these issues in a credible way has led to more engagement in these specific areas.

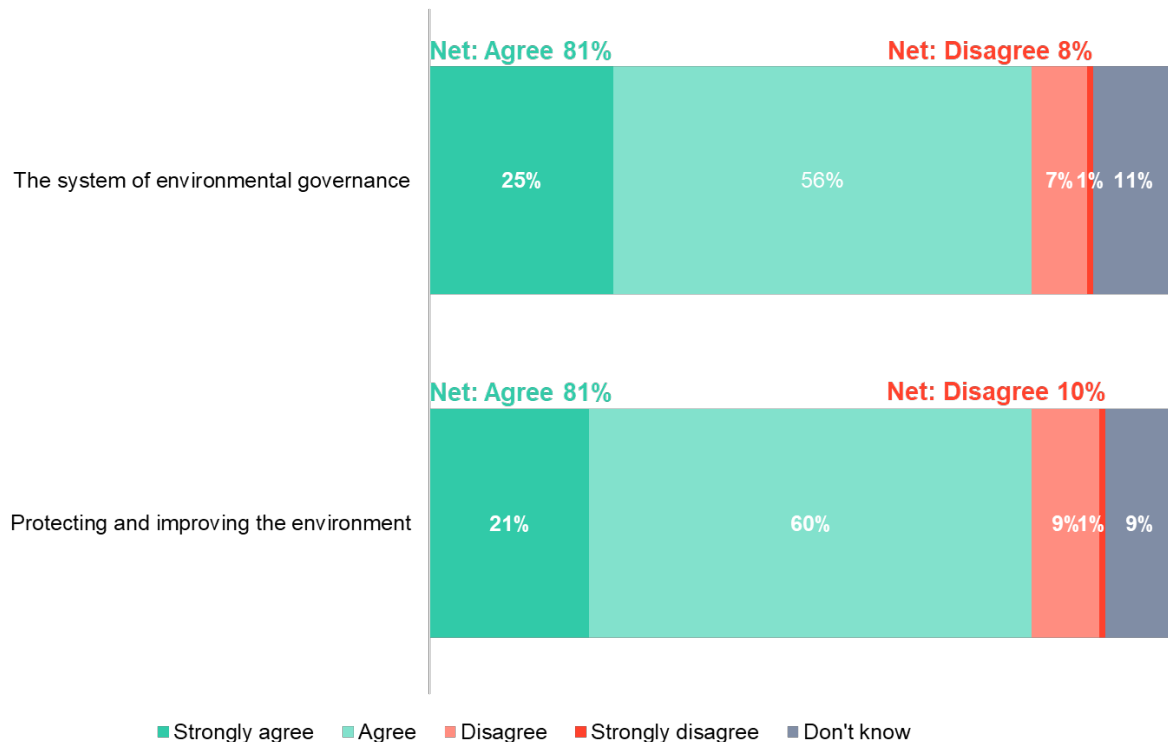
"The OEP helped to drive DAERA to publish an Environmental Improvement Plan and the investigation into ammonia guidance changed DAERAs actions"

Stakeholders felt that the impact of outputs could also be improved by regularly sharing them across different channels, including social media, email communications with stakeholders and speaking at select committees.

"Occasionally people like the chair or the chief exec will give a speech or they might write a blog... They are really useful because they allow them to communicate in a slightly more human way... something that identifies and articulates their impact."

"There's no reason why the OEP can't ask for inquiries and actually give evidence.. it's not going to change the world overnight, but at least it gets people talking about what the OEP thinks about"

Considering the OEP's role, the vast majority of stakeholders agreed that the OEP plays a valuable role in the system of environmental governance and in protecting and improving the environment (both 81%). A relatively small proportion (8% and 10% respectively) disagreed that this is the case. Stakeholders in Northern Ireland were more likely to disagree that the OEP has a valuable role in protecting and improving the environment (16% vs 4% in England), however this was still a minority view.

Figure 11. Perceptions of the value of the OEP's role

Q21a. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the OEP is playing a valuable role in the following?

Base: All stakeholders surveyed (121)

In the interviews, the OEP was undoubtedly viewed as an organisation which has a wide influence on environmental protection and environmental governance. It is viewed as a credible and expert voice in environmental law, producing reliable, thorough and evidence-led reports.

“The OEP's collaborative, inclusive and transparent approach to decision making and strategic prioritisation has set the bar for other UK nation governance bodies”

“[OEP] has forced some administrators and politicians to reconsider or reprioritise their work.”

The OEP is viewed as a serious home of thought leadership which has a unique voice and a unique place in environmental protection. Many stakeholders highlighted the OEP as playing an important role post-Brexit and would like to see its influence grow and expand in the future. They would like to see the OEP continue to raise awareness of issues, alongside taking action and delivering change through stakeholder and public engagement via different channels of communication.

“Just throwing out reports is actually very ineffective, and that's what they do. They need more stakeholder engagement and government engagement, but they need to be thinking about, I think in terms of their staff, they need people who understand how to communicate.”

“More targeted communications to the different stakeholders in terms of what their role is within these pieces of work. I think sometimes there is a bit of gap between how can we actually work together, other than, us giving them evidence of the issues”

“The issue of influencing, informing, and engaging the wider public is absolutely essential if we're going to have the levels of change we need... OEP hasn't filled that void, that space”

Others would like to see the OEP take a bigger role in enforcement and legal interventions, taking more cases to court to increase its influence and impact, in tandem with building awareness of themselves as organisation. This could also mean that the OEP's work might act as a deterrent to have a more preventative approach to environmental protection.

“It's almost that they've set now an expectation that when there's an important environmental law issue in the courts, if there's a value add role they can bring, they'll consider doing it. So I think that should continue. What we haven't yet seen though, is the other route to court is through their enforcement system. And that has not been tested.”

Stakeholders would like to see greater awareness of the OEP among politicians in order to build its influence and reach, particularly within the new Labour government. Awareness has been raised in recent times, with recent references to the OEP's reports mentioned on the floor of the house, however it needs greater salience to jostle for position in a policy landscape currently dominated by defence.

“Environmental law itself will probably be largely set aside or probably more, importantly, superseded by policy and other areas which means that compliance with those previous aspirations and targets in a different world are no longer.”

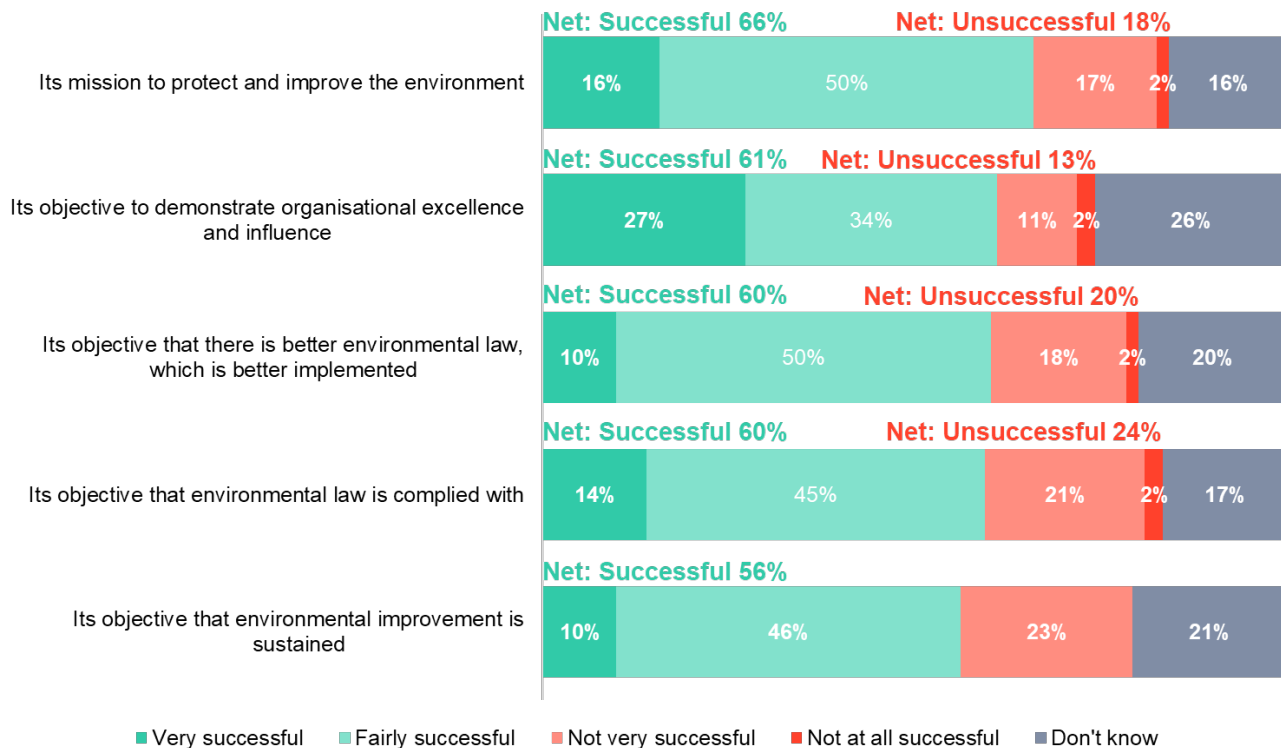
“We still have a young administration that's just less than a year old, I think, as MPs and ministers settle into their roles I think I think they'll become more familiar with the OEP.”

“In the short time within which it has been established it has developed a well-earned reputation as a neutral, evidence-led, expert and trusted environmental watchdog”

Finally, stakeholders were asked in the survey to provide their views on the OEP's success against its missions and objectives. Across all missions and objectives, a majority of stakeholders thought the OEP has been successful. They were most likely to feel that the OEP has been successful in its mission to protect and improve the environment (66%), followed by demonstrating organisational excellence and influence (61%), better environmental law which is better implemented (60%), and ensuring environmental law is complied with (60%). Stakeholders were least likely to feel that the OEP has been successful in its objective that environmental improvement is sustained (56%).

Across each of the missions and objectives asked about, there was a relatively high proportion of stakeholders saying they did not know, suggesting that there is a knowledge gap to some degree. They were most likely to say this about the OEP's organisational excellence (26%) and least likely to say this about its mission to protect and improve the environment (16%).

Figure 12. Perceived success against missions and objectives



Q23. Finally, how successful or not do you think the OEP is in working to achieve the following?

Base: All stakeholders surveyed (121)

In the interviews, there was a sense that it is too soon to tell what the OEP's influence and impact is at present. Many were interested to see what the OEP will focus on in the future and how it will approach holding government to account. Others would like to see how the OEP continues to establish itself and where it chooses to 'show its teeth'.

“I think it [OEP] is highly impactful. It needs a bigger budget and sharper teeth to enforce its findings about government failures.”

“I think it's too early to say, but the OEP has limited powers to influence and take politicians and institutes to task. I think that's the key issue.”

“The jury is out on the OEP's ability to catalyse environmental improvements through assessments and reasoning.”

Others commented that the OEP's role is not yet clear due to the age of the organisation, and that it cannot replicate all the value and diversity of thought offered by the European Commission.

“OEP reports are interesting and widely read but it is hard to say what impact they have. I am not clear on the extent to which government takes on OEP advice”

“The aim of the OEP is positive, but its place in the sector seems to be unclear to me personally. My overall thinking is that OEP has not replaced the value that being in the EU brought to the UK, as it does not bring in resource or diverse thinking from other nations”

Some stakeholders based in Northern Ireland valued the OEP's focus on specific Northern Ireland issues compared to the European Union's, particularly during a period of political upheaval in the country and shortfalls in governance.

“I value that fact that it is a UK regulator rather than the EU which took a very light touch role in relation to Northern Ireland but it needs to raise its profile more and be seen to take more affirmative action particularly in NI.”

“I think the fact that the OEP is there is an extremely welcome development from the environmental sector's perspective in Northern Ireland... how kind of approachable they are... and there's a lot of positive signs in terms of some of the evidence base that they've already produced.”

“The OEP has been a vital voice and source of information on the pressures facing the Northern Ireland environment and what needs to be done to address these, particularly in the absence of a fully independent environment agency in NI”

Stakeholders would like to see government take findings more seriously and for them to lead to action and stronger compliance around environmental protection. Some commented that better public engagement could be effective in spotlighting issues, and leading the public conversation around the environment could then have an impact on how government react to the OEP, rather than relying on a more distracted consortium of government, NGOs, academics and local councils to do that.

“I think the OEP plays an important role as an independent arbiter of environmental compliance and performance against governments environmental targets. My concern is how much the government is listening and the limited extent to which the OEP reports can mobilise the public to care where there are failures”

“I also don't think the OEP is being very effective in terms of how it kind of communicates. And I think that could be a bigger part of its bigger part of its role is communicating in a way that really shapes partly the public conversation around environment.”

“I think sometimes the most powerful weapon is public scrutiny and making it very high profile. And also it means is that not just the politicians, but also other bodies, local residents, action groups, et cetera, are very alert to what's going on.”

Stakeholders commented that the OEP's influence is limited by funding and a necessary focus on its own agenda, given the fact that it is often spread thinly across different organisations and policies. With this in mind, some stakeholders called for the OEP to focus more acutely on areas where it will have most impact and to act with urgency in these cases.

“For public authorities, I mean, it's a challenge, isn't it? Because they haven't got the resource to look at every single public authority in England and think, what are its environmental law issues? It can genuinely, generally only do that where there's a potential breach or a complaint.”

“They [OEP] have limited resource. So they need to be tackling those issues that are the most pressing, but also where they can have that impact.”

“I think it would be better to stay focused and holding government to account on those areas rather than moving and swapping in between things”

“It took an inordinate amount of time and partly that was the government dragging its heels, but what more could the OEP have done to actually go a little bit faster on that, so speed of processing and moving things forward “

“They're setting a work program at the beginning of the year, and they're not adapting to the world, in the last six months, we've had so many changes by this government. They haven't evolved their work program to adapt to that”

Alongside the need for flexibility and urgency, many stakeholders would like to see more visibility around publication schedules to ensure work is aligned for maximum impact, along with more transparency around how reports have impacted government and held them to account. They would like to see more transparency around how the OEP prioritises its work and how it holds government to account.

“We use the outputs that come from the OEP, but I think at the minute, we don't know what's coming, so it's whether it fits with what we're doing or not. If there was a bit more visibility around, the timeline or the priorities, then I think it would have wider reach, from all those pushing the same message.”

“The only concern I have is, it's not always transparent or visible as to kind of what impact the reports and the insights work that they do has in terms of changing government direction.”

“I think it's fair to say the OEP share with us what they're up to, but it'd be really useful to understand more about how the process works for them, how they prioritise what they do, what they think they need to present”

“I'd be very interesting to see, for instance, are there any regional issues that OEP are picking out... with greater incidents of failure to comply with environmental legislation, and what the causes might be”

Finally, some organisations struggle to find time to address the OEP's rulings and make improvements in their policies. These organisations called for a more collaborative and constructive approach, in which advice and guidance could be provided so that organisations can work towards their common goal of environmental protection in England and Northern Ireland.

“Significant number of reports produced which have led to significant time spent on providing information to OEP. Current level of reporting and investigation is unsustainable and is impacting negatively on the ability of staff to take forward improvements in policy.”

“The main things are broadening the [OEP’s] outputs being a bit more visible in terms of where their impacts are, testing the full extents of their powers”

“There is definitely a risk that we end up doing less for the environment, because we focus more on compliance and less on the big picture things that actually will drive large scale, environmental change”