



Office for
Environmental
Protection

Office for Environmental
Protection
Wildwood
Wildwood Drive
Worcester
WR5 2QT

03300 416 581
www.theoep.org.uk

Minister Muir
DAERA Private Office
First Floor
Clare House
303 Airport Road West
Sydenham Intake
Belfast
BT3 9ED

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By email only

Dear Minister Muir,

Environmental Improvement Plan and Statutory Deadlines

Firstly, thank you for taking the time to meet with me and my OEP colleagues on 21 March. It was good to hear more about your priorities, many of which resonate with those of the OEP.

In my earlier introductory letter of 7 February, I referenced the OEP's concerns in relation to statutory deadlines. Whilst I appreciate that there will be many competing demands on the newly returned Executive, it is our view that matters relating to outstanding legal requirements should be given a high priority. This is not simply a matter of lawfulness and good administration. It is also essential for driving delivery of the steps needed to tackle the environmental challenges that face Northern Ireland. The lack of a long-term ambitious integrated strategy risks further environmental and societal costs such as those seen at Lough Neagh, which will be paid for by generations to come.

We have welcomed your repeated commitments to prioritising publication of an Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP), as required by the Environment Act 2021. As you know, we have a longstanding, and continued interest in seeing that a suitably ambitious evidence-informed environment strategy is established. It is reassuring that you share our view that this is a priority for the environment of Northern Ireland.

Requirements of the Act are that an EIP should have been published by 25 July 2023. Nearly 12 months on, the EIP remains outstanding. The Executive is now established and, whilst I am conscious that due process takes time, the lack of a clear timeline for when we might expect to see the EIP brought before the Assembly gives cause for concern. I am,

therefore, compelled to write again to stress that the EIP be published as soon as possible and not be subject to any further delays.

The EIP is not an isolated case. We have previously written to your department in relation to other unmet statutory deadlines, including for the third round of River Basin Management Plans, and in relation to the Nutrient Action Programme review. We are also conscious of the various requirements under the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, and missed deadlines associated with these. In addition, we are awaiting an Environmental Principles Policy Statement (EPPS) for Northern Ireland. Like the EIP, the EPPS is a key component of the environmental governance introduced by the Environment Act 2021. Whilst there is no hard deadline for EPPS publication, this remains a statutory requirement, which we hope to see promptly fulfilled.

So, whilst we agree that the EIP needs to be prioritised, I would urge that focus not be lost in respect of these and other statutory requirements.

We are grateful for the constructive engagement we have enjoyed both with yourself and your department and look forward to this continuing as work to progress your priorities takes shape.

Yours sincerely,



Dame Glenys Stacey
Chair of the Office for Environmental Protection



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