



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

Government response to the Office for Environmental Protection's report on progress in improving the natural environment in England from January 2024

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Presented to Parliament pursuant to Section 28 of the Environment Act 2021

January 2025

We are responsible for improving and protecting the environment. We aim to grow a green economy and sustain thriving rural communities. We also support our world-leading food, farming and fishing industries.

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Executive summary

The Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) published its [‘Progress in improving the natural environment in England’](#) report in January 2024 in accordance with section 28 of the Environment Act 2021. The act requires the government to respond to an OEP progress report as part of its duties to monitor and report on environmental improvement plans and targets. As required by the act, where the OEP report contains a recommendation for how progress could be improved, we have set out our response to address the recommendation.

This report firstly addresses the 5 key recommendations, which are outstanding from the OEP’s 2023 [‘Progress in improving the natural environment in England’](#) report, published 19 January 2023. For the recommendations provided under each Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) goal, we have grouped recommendations together, providing a single response.

Our response satisfies the requirement to lay the report in Parliament no later than 12 months after the OEP progress report that was published on 18 January 2024.

To note, since the publication of the OEP’s 2024 report, the Secretary of State (SoS) announced a rapid review of EIP23. This will form part of a wider statutory review and revision of the EIP. SoS wrote to the OEP in August requesting advice on that review and revision. The advice provided by the OEP will inform the revision of the EIP, alongside the key findings of the rapid review. The OEP’s annual reporting will also be considered in the revision of the EIP, including the forthcoming OEP annual progress report.

Where possible, this report includes detail of how the OEP’s recommendations will be addressed in the review and revision for the EIP. Otherwise, we have flagged that the recommendation will be addressed through the revised EIP.

Key recommendations

Implement the Environmental Improvement Plan 2023 effectively

1. Government should drive bold, prompt action where it’s most needed, particularly in relation to the Environment Act targets, to first halt and then reverse the decline in species abundance. It should use all relevant tools at its disposal, provide adequate resources, and work at the pace and scale required to meet Environment Act targets and EIP23 goals. It should attend particularly to rapid and effective implementation of major initiatives, primarily nature-friendly farming, where late, slow or partial delivery will lead to overall failure. It should build support and capacity by raising public awareness and empowering businesses, communities, and citizens by removing practical barriers to action.

Government response

The previous government published a revised Environmental Improvement Plan 2023 (EIP23) on 31 January 2023. The new government are now undertaking a review and revision of EIP23 and setting new interim targets. The EIP will provide clearer delivery information and a system-view recognising the interdependencies between interventions. We will aim to bring out more clearly the links across major delivery mechanisms such as nature-friendly farming and coordinated efforts to meet our legally binding Environment Act targets.

The post-legislative review of the Environment Act 2021, which underpins the EIP, is scheduled for 2026.

We are also exploring a wide range of potential delivery levers to help us meet the targets and goals of the EIP. We are working closely with a range of external stakeholders to create the new EIP. The revised EIP will be a collaborative plan to deliver our targets and goals. It will consider and incorporate contributions from:

- businesses
- eNGOs
- local authorities
- land managers
- citizens
- communities

Develop and implement clear and effective governance.

2. Delivery of the EIP23 will require leadership from government at the highest level. Government should make clear and make public who is accountable, how decisions are made, and how delivery of the EIP23 will be assured across all levels of government and wider society. The remit and work of strategic governance forums, such as the Cross-Government 25 Year Environment Plan Board and Defra's Environment Committee, should be reported transparently. This should include reporting on the implementation of the Environmental Principles Policy Statement. Ultimately, greater leadership by central government is required to catalyse and cohere action towards achieving the ambitions of the EIP23.

Government response

The revised EIP will set out an overarching framework for delivery. A review of our internal governance for the EIP is being undertaken, and the revised EIP will reflect any changes.

Within Defra, we continue to have well established oversight of our arms-length bodies and teams in government departments which are responsible for driving forward action to deliver:

- EIP23
- associated Environment Act 2021 requirements
- greening government commitments

Accountabilities are in place for all environmental outcomes and are reviewed annually through Defra planning processes with significant focus on performance and risk management review and action.

Cross-government, the Environmental Improvement Plan board (EIP board) is the central authority for implementing the 25 YEP and subsequent Environmental Improvement Plans, and associated requirements set out in the Environment Act. These include the:

- environmental principles policy statement (EPPS)
- legally binding environmental targets
- statutory reporting and periodic review

The EIP board (initially set up as the 25 Year Environment Plan board) includes membership at Director and DG level for all contributing departments. It:

- has considered a range of cross-cutting policy issues since being established in late 2020
- has driven the development of a cross-government portfolio approach to manage delivery
- continues to review implementation of EPPS and take steps to improve delivery

Alongside the EPPS working group, the EIP board also links with climate and sustainability governance across government. Issues requiring ministerial decision can be escalated from the EIP board as needed to the appropriate cabinet committee.

A key component of environmental governance is the duty on ministers to have due regard to the EPPS. The duty came into force on 1 November 2023. The duty ensures that nature and environmental considerations are proactively factored into policy development across government, supporting delivery of government's environmental commitments, including the Environmental Improvement Plan and targets. A cross government working group has been established to support effective implementation of the Environmental Principles duty and reports to the cross-government EIP board.

Develop and implement delivery plans

3. Since the required delivery detail is absent from the EIP23 itself, government should develop and publish a detailed delivery plan for the EIP23 and for each of its goal areas. It should do this swiftly, and in any event by the time it publishes its next annual progress report. These plans should explain how government intends to meet Environment Act targets, deliver each EIP23 goal, and achieve the overall EIP23 objective of significantly improving the natural environment. Plans need to identify specific policies and activities and make explicit their contribution,

individually and together, towards achieving the specified outcomes. It should be clear how much progress is expected to be made, and by when government's plans must be shown to stack up.

Government response

We recognise the importance of having robust delivery plans for how we intend to deliver our Environment Act targets and meet the EIP goals. We plan to set out further delivery information as part of the revised EIP.

Assessing whether the activities set out in the EIP23 will be sufficient to deliver the EIP23 goals is challenging. This is because there is inherent complexity and uncertainty about how ecosystems will change over time in response to specific interventions.

Understanding how each of the goals in the EIP23 will contribute to the apex goal of thriving plants and wildlife is especially challenging. Biodiversity is complex; it has multiple dimensions (such as interactions between species and ecosystems) and multiple scales (such as local, regional and national). Evaluating cause and effect relationships across this open, adaptive, and interdependent system is difficult, as outcomes of different actions tend to be complex and hard to predict.

Nevertheless, work is underway to:

- strengthen the evidence base to improve the ability to quantify the expected contributions of activities towards commitments
- establish transparent and robust monitoring, evaluation, and reporting, to ensure we can track and understand our progress towards delivering the Environment Act targets and adapt our delivery where needed
- continue to refine delivery plans to ensure these are evidence-based and consider the latest learnings

To note, delivery plans are 'live' documents and will need to be continuously reviewed and adapted as new evidence and learning becomes available. The revised EIP will set out information on how we intend to deliver our Environment Act targets.

Set and vigorously pursue clear and achievable interim targets that are as ambitious as possible in the areas needing most attention

4. Interim targets are important for driving early action, avoiding complacency, and ensuring cost-effective delivery. These targets should be informed by an understanding of optimal pathways over time towards longer-term targets, and they should set important milestones to ensure this pathway is followed. The EIP23 now includes Environment Act interim targets. However, not all have been set with sufficient context or an explanation of how meeting them will make an appropriate contribution to meeting associated targets. For example, the interim targets relating

to the condition of sites of special scientific interest (SSSIs) do not bear a clear relation to the Environment Act targets for species abundance or extinction risk.

Government response

We agree that interim targets are important for the delivery of Environment Act targets. The forthcoming revised EIP provides an opportunity to:

- clarify how Environment Act targets will be delivered
- update the supporting interim targets to cover the 5-year period from completion of the review, in line with statutory requirements.

We want to ensure that the revised EIP clearly demonstrates the contributions and links between interim targets and their associated statutory targets where possible.

Updated interim targets will be established with full consideration of the available evidence base, with a view to them supporting the achievement of the intended outcomes of statutory targets.

Develop and implement an effective monitoring, evaluation and learning framework.

5. Lessons learned from monitoring and evaluation need to be reported transparently and inform adaptive management of delivery of the EIP23, via a well-established monitoring, evaluation and learning framework, which is also needed for informative annual progress reporting. Government has an opportunity to improve its annual progress report (APR) from 2024 onwards as it moves to reporting progress on the EIP23. We have identified 7 attributes of a new and informative APR that should be included in future APRs, so they provide robust assessments of progress, relative to expectations, rather than simply reporting actions. Since the Secretary of State is legally required to make arrangements to obtain data considered appropriate to monitor environmental improvement and progress towards Environment Act targets and interim targets, refinement of the outcome indicator framework presents an opportunity to improve links between indicators and EIP23 goals.

Government response

A wide range of monitoring and evaluation is conducted across the EIP goals and environmental targets. Findings from the monitoring and evaluation of activities which support the EIP are reported in our annual progress reports (APRs). The 2024 APR included progress updates and evidence to support the monitoring of progress towards the legally binding Environment Act targets where possible.

The outcome indicator framework (OIF) was designed through extensive consultation to describe environmental change in relation to the 10 goals of the 25YEP. It was not designed to be the sole reporting mechanism for the EIPs or Environment Act 2021 targets. The framework shows how the environment is changing over time, so it supports

the assessment of policies and other interventions. This includes how we are delivering on international and domestic commitments and satisfies the requirements of section 16 of the Environment Act.

The OIF works on a process of continuous improvement and indicators are updated where more appropriate or better aligned data sources become available (for example, updates to the J4 indicator in 2024 and planned updates to the A3 indicator in 2025). We are looking at whether we can make a clearer demonstration of links between OIF indicators and EIP goals and commitments.

The OIF is one component of a wider evidence base that the EIP draws on to report progress. For example, we are also working with the Natural Capital and Ecosystem Assessment programme (NCEA) to assess and include, where appropriate, environmental monitoring data from the programme. This will improve reporting of progress towards:

- targets
- actions
- overall environmental improvement

NCEA is creating a baseline reporting assessment of England's natural capital. This can be used to benchmark improvements or potential declines in the future and to refine developing indicators and targets. We welcome further close collaboration between Defra and OEP evidence teams to further develop a shared, robust approach to monitoring and reporting progress towards the goals and targets of the EIP.

Alongside the EIP review, we are also reviewing the EIP goal-level theories of change and evaluation framework to inform the future development and delivery of the EIP. A longer term EIP evidence strategy is ongoing to further develop the robustness and transparency of the evidence base. For example, through embedding systems thinking and evaluation into the regular EIP reporting cycle.

Thriving plants and wildlife

6. Government should ensure that EA21 interim targets directly relate to and provide assurance of progress towards achievement of the following EA21 Targets: 2030 species abundance target, the long-term target to reverse the decline of species abundance and the long-term species extinction risk target. Government should explain how meeting the 2 EA21 interim targets linked to SSSIs is intended to support the achievement of the EA21 targets. Government should also develop further, suitably ambitious EA21 interim targets that will form direct milestones on the route towards species recovery.
7. Government should provide timely, transparent, and accessible evidence to enable assessment and evaluation of nature recovery. Immediate priorities include publishing the overall relative species abundance index, wider up-to-date data on species abundance in England, clarifying participation in agri-environment

schemes, and filling major gaps, including expansion and regular collation of marine monitoring data.

8. Government should clearly articulate how national targets and commitments align with international commitments, specifically global targets 2 and 3 of the Kunming-Montreal GBF and set out plans where gaps in delivery arrangements exist, including how OECMs are expected to contribute.
9. Government should publish a more detailed delivery plan over the long term that shows how actions come together to achieve the targets, including the EA21 targets and interim targets, explaining what is required of delivery partners and how implementation will be adaptively managed.
10. Government should identify and mitigate risks associated with the high dependency on a few key actions, such as nature-friendly farming, for achieving the thriving plants and wildlife targets.
11. Government should scale up and accelerate spatial prioritisation actions, such as Local Nature Recovery Strategies, the Land Use Framework, and marine spatial plans, to optimise implementation of key policies and ensure local and national scale activity is harmonised.
12. Government should adopt more explicit and granular monitoring and evaluation to support assessment of both target delivery and real-world improvement. This may require a separate marine indicator, disaggregation of species abundance and extinction risk indices into meaningful groups, with line of sight to relevant drivers and pressures. Developing long-term agreements with data providers will ensure government has the evidence required.

Government response

We recognise that there are currently difficulties in quantifying the expected contributions of specific activities towards meeting commitments. Through the revised EIP, we will seek opportunities to strengthen the evidence base to improve the ability to quantify expected contributions of activities.

The Environmental Targets (Biodiversity) (England) Regulations 2023 set out how to measure progress towards the species abundance and species extinction targets. Having a single indicator to measure each target is important to be able to clearly demonstrate whether a target has or has not been met:

- the '[Indicators for Species Abundance in England](#)' were published as an official statistic in development in May 2024. They include taxonomic breakdowns to demonstrate trends within different groups of species. Once fully developed, the all-species abundance measure will be used to track the government's progress towards meeting the statutory target
- the indicator for [species extinction risk](#) published by Natural England in October 2022 also sets out a taxonomic breakdown

However, to help us understand what actions we need to take to achieve the targets, these indicators should be considered alongside the wider suite of indicators available. For example, the [England Biodiversity Indicators](#).

We also have several indicators in the OIF that describe marine species and habitat. In addition, our scientific advisers (Natural England and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee) are developing an MPA monitoring strategy to assess progress towards meeting the statutory MPA target. This includes whether the necessary management measures are in place.

As we develop the forthcoming revised EIP, we will consider how we can clarify the relationships between the Environment Act targets and our international global commitments. This includes our commitment to protect 30% of the UK's land and seas for nature by 2030 (30by30), to support target 3 of the global biodiversity framework.

Delivering our 30by30 commitment on land in England means ensuring that our most important and wildlife-rich habitats are benefiting from effective, long-term conservation and management for nature. This includes existing habitats as well as those being created or restored as part of a long-term project. There will, therefore, be necessary overlaps with our implementation of wider international commitments including target 2 of the global biodiversity framework, focussed on the effective restoration of degraded ecosystems. Crucially, 30by30 will recognise where these habitats are safeguarded and effectively managed, for the long term.

In October 2024 we confirmed our vision for delivering 30by30 on land in England and the criteria for land and inland water areas which can count towards this target. We will continue work with landowners, land managers and wider partners to begin recognising additional areas that meet the 30by30 criteria. We began piloting the 30by30 assessment and reporting process in Autumn 2024 and intend to launch it nationwide later in 2025.

We are also developing a 30by30 delivery strategy which will set out our pathway to achieving this target. Supported and informed by EIP development, this strategy will consider the potential contribution to 30by30 from existing protected areas, and from wider areas which could be recognised as 'other effective area-based conservation measures' (OECMs). We intend to finalise and publish this delivery strategy this year.

We recognise risks related to the delivery of the thriving plants and wildlife goal, caused by high dependencies on a few key delivery mechanisms. For example, we are highly dependent on voluntary participation through environmental land management schemes (ELMs) to deliver the change we need in the farmed landscape. This includes a range of actions to support nature friendly farming alongside other measures to improve the environment. We are working to make these schemes accessible and attractive to applicants. We are also exploring a wide range of other delivery levers outside of ELMs that will contribute towards target delivery, including:

- regulation
- other public funding sources
- leveraging private finance

Local nature recovery strategies (LNRSs) are an important new mechanism for spatial prioritisation, and these are progressing well across the country. The first LNRS was published by the West of England Combined Authority (WECA) on 7 November 2024. The remaining 47 LNRSs are expected to be published during 2025. The government also plans a consultation on land use this year. The consultation will inform the publication of a Land Use Framework for England in 2025.

See response to key recommendations 3 for further information on delivery plans.

See response to key recommendation 4 for information on interim targets.

Clean air

13. To safeguard vulnerable groups and encourage behaviour change, government should ensure information on air quality and the actions being taken to improve it are accessible, fully transparent, and co-ordinated with local level communications.
14. As committed to in the Air Quality Strategy, government should work more collaboratively with local authorities to carry out a comprehensive audit of barriers to local authority delivery of improved air quality, to ensure that structures and forums are in place to foster effective partnerships, and to enable effective monitoring, evaluation and learning.
15. Government should put oversight mechanisms in place to ensure that air quality delivery plans are reviewed and consulted upon when national emission reduction commitments have been exceeded, or emissions projections show that emissions are at risk of exceeding a national emission reduction commitment, to maintain current levels of transparency and accountability after revocation of the provisions of the National Emission Ceilings Regulations 2018 relating to the National Air Pollution Control Programme.
16. Government should review all limit and target values for pollutants in ambient air and consider bringing them more in line with World Health Organization standards.

Government response

We are conducting a comprehensive review of how we communicate air quality information to ensure members of the public, and vulnerable groups, have the information they need to protect themselves and understand their impact on air quality. The [Air Quality Information System Review](#) steering group is currently finalising its recommendations, and it is expected that the final report will be published soon.

We are working collaboratively with local authorities. We undertook a series of visits with local authorities to understand how we might better support them with their existing

powers. As a result of this, we are currently hosting a series of webinars aimed at upskilling local authorities. Defra has also recently taken on ownership of the [Local Air Quality Hub](#) and has made changes to improve the site. It is now easier to navigate; and has provided a series of factsheets based on the feedback from the visits in areas where local authorities required more guidance.

We will continue to monitor national emissions in line with our statutory obligations. We will continue to publish data setting out whether the UK has achieved its emission targets and is on track to achieve future emission targets on the basis of firm and funded policies and measures. No decisions have yet been taken in respect of the national air pollution control programme or any replacement.

We do not plan to adopt the World Health Organisation (WHO) air quality guidelines. They are intended to inform the setting of air quality standards and are not ready-made targets for direct adoption, as they do not consider achievability or individual countries' circumstances. However, we will consider WHO guidelines as part of an evidence-led process when considering future targets.

Clean and plentiful water

17. To ensure that all major pressures on the water environment are addressed proportionately, government should address imbalances in delivery and scale up actions across all major pressures.
18. Government should publish a transparent monitoring programme for the water environment, setting out how all its monitoring programmes work together to fulfil its monitoring obligations under the WFD Regulations. It should also maintain adequate monitoring of current and emerging major drivers and pressures and fulfil wider ambitions in evidence base development.

Government response

The OEP have developed these recommendations further in their report on the water framework directive (WFD). In the government's response to that report, we explained that the issues behind these recommendations will be included in the work of the Independent Commission into the water sector regulatory system led by Sir Jon Cunliffe, as set out in its [Terms of Reference](#). The government will address these issues in the context of the Commission's findings and will formally respond to it in due course.

Managing exposure to chemicals and pesticides

19. Government should work across departments to bring together policy and regulation affecting chemical use and exposure, and develop and implement a transparent, integrated, and coherent governance framework to improve stakeholder confidence and delivery.

20. Government should address the risk of a skills shortage and loss of the resource needed to implement and manage an effective UK policy and regulatory framework for chemicals, without foregoing health and environmental protection.
21. Government should promote innovation towards a circular economy by considering the whole life cycle of chemicals, and by incorporating safe and sustainable by design as a key principle in policy development.
22. Government should provide multi-annual funding to deliver a robust terrestrial chemicals and pesticides monitoring programme that spans different chemicals and different trophic levels, including soil data, providing evidence of ecosystem impacts to support policy and improved environmental outcomes.
23. Government should set additional commitments on chemical management in the water environment that will complement the existing commitment to restore 75% of water bodies to good ecological status.

Government response

We are committed to working with departments which have a chemicals policy responsibility, such as through our chemicals, pesticides and hazardous waste board. This governance framework has been in place for some time and includes similar boards with DG counterparts.

As outlined in our response to the OEP's clean and plentiful water recommendations, we will address issues relating to water quality through the Independent Commission into the water sector regulatory system. Recommendations 20, 21 and 22 will be addressed through EIP25.

Maximise our resources, minimise our waste

24. Government should develop a coherent approach that connects resource use, product design, material flows and waste management and through the update of the Resources and Waste Strategy develop and implement more effective policy.
25. Government should review and evaluate the effectiveness of current resources and waste policies and implement actions to reverse the current stagnation moving management of waste up the waste hierarchy.
26. Government should add a target that addresses resource efficiency and the associated environmental impacts of consumption, including embodied carbon, to drive progress towards a circular economy.
27. Government should deliver greater focus on developing green choices and positive behaviours towards waste, recycling and waste crime.

Government response

We are committed to transitioning the UK to a circular economy. This is an ambitious goal, requiring major changes throughout the economy. To achieve this goal, we are establishing a circular economy taskforce, bringing together industry, academic and policy

experts with central and local government to develop an evidence-driven and actionable circular economy strategy.

The strategy will be underpinned by a series of roadmaps for reform in different sectors of the economy and their supply chains. It will focus on how we use our resources in the best way and to the best possible effect, deriving from them the maximum possible value before they become waste, while also reducing emissions.

Using our resources in this way will require major changes in behaviour and capability across the UK, generating opportunities to invest in capital, technology, and jobs – and to align that investment completely with our environmental objectives.

We are committed to the effective monitoring and evaluation of waste policy. Part of the circular economy taskforce's work will be to identify metrics with which government can:

- measure progress towards a more circular economy
- propose commensurate targets
- detail the policy pathway that will deliver those targets most efficiently, with a view to driving economic growth as well as environmental benefit

The OEP report referenced a resource efficiency target specifically; a resource productivity metric was considered in the initial Environment Act target setting process. At that time, our research had not identified a clear policy pathway for significantly reducing the effects of resource extraction and use on the natural environment, which we assessed through a resource productivity metric. The then Secretary of State could therefore not set a long-term target and be satisfied that it could be met, a key requirement of the Environment Act.

We agree that behaviour change is a key focus for resources and waste across all policy areas, including the collection and packaging reforms. We will continue to embed the behavioural aspects of green choices in resources and waste through the development of a new circular economy strategy led by the circular economy taskforce, once it has been established. This will help us continue to improve our understanding of how we can develop positive behaviours in these areas.

Using resources from nature sustainably

28. Government should clearly articulate how national commitments align with international commitments, specifically both global targets 5 and 10 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and set out plans to address gaps in delivery arrangements.
29. Government should publish the secondary legislation needed for implementation of the scheme for due diligence on forest risk commodities.
30. Government should develop and publish a detailed plan for woodland and tree planting schemes beyond 2025 and ensure appropriate weight is given to planting schemes in nature-friendly farming.

31. Government should accelerate actions to enable assessment of whether soils are being managed sustainably including defining sustainable management, development of indicators, and evaluation of current regulatory and governance frameworks to support policy development and implementation.
32. Government should ensure that fisheries management is integrated in plans to achieve good environmental status of marine waters, and that fisheries management plans contain credible and coherent delivery plans and take a more precautionary approach to fisheries management.

Government response

In due course, we will set out our strategic aims for trees and woodland planting, and details of the schemes and activity we will support to pursue these objectives. We will continue to make strong links between tree planting delivery mechanisms and nature friendly farming to support the outcomes needed to meet our legally binding 2050 tree canopy and woodland cover target.

National soil monitoring is currently being undertaken within the Natural Capital Ecosystem Assessment (NCEA) programme. The programme is building long-term monitoring capability and yielding valuable new data to aid improved understanding of national soil condition, including nitrogen. NCEA is creating a baseline reporting assessment of England's natural capital, which can be used to benchmark improvements or potential declines in the future and to refine developing indicators and targets. We are collecting and analysing soil data over a 5-year period and plan to publish soil data from 2025.

See our response to recommendation 45 under the 'enhancing beauty, heritage, and engagement with the natural environment' goal for further information on the NCEA's work.

Fisheries management plans (FMPs) support the achievement of good environmental status (GES).

Detailed environmental reports for each fisheries management plan describe the likely environmental impacts. They make recommendations on how possible negative environmental effects arising from implementation of FMP policies and measures may be mitigated. In line with the Fisheries Act, a precautionary approach is adopted for stocks where there is insufficient scientific evidence to assess maximum sustainable yield (MSY). Where evidence is lacking, and we have concerns about the sustainability of the stocks or the marine environment, we have proposed measures that are mindful of the precautionary principle. An implementation programme has been established for published FMPs.

In reference to recommendation 29, this government recognises the urgency of taking action to ensure that UK consumption of forest risk commodities is not driving deforestation. We will set out our approach to addressing UK consumption of forest risk

commodities in due course. In the forthcoming revised EIP, we will better articulate the relationships between our domestic and international commitments.

Mitigating and adapting to climate change

33. Government should look to increase the speed and scale of delivery of adaptation and mitigation actions to ensure the UK is resilient to future climate change and interim emissions reductions on the pathway to Net Zero are met.
34. Government should clearly demonstrate how key actions to deliver the EIP23, for example nature-friendly farming schemes, have delivery plans that include effective steps to cope with multiple future climate change scenarios.
35. Government should strengthen the risk-reduction goals of the National Adaptation Programme to enhance their impact, ensuring they are specific, measurable, accepted, realistic and time-bound. Progress towards these goals should be monitored and reported on to ensure all relevant actions across government are contributing to climate adaptation.

Government response

We recognise that preparing for the future not only means tackling the climate and nature emergencies, but also adapting to the changes they will bring. We are committed to strengthening the nation's resilience, including in our approach to managing climate risks to the UK. We are considering a range of options to achieve this and will set out our refreshed approach in due course. This will include information relating to the delivery of Environment Act targets.

Risks and pressures continue to be considered and factored in as part of delivery planning. Environment Act target delivery plans are kept 'live' to respond to pressures, and we will look to continue to publish information at the best possible point within the reporting and publication cycle.

We will continue to work alongside the Cabinet Office and with HM Treasury as part of the cross-government climate resilience steering board. The board will ensure that climate adaptation is embedded into policy- and decision-making across government, including through spending reviews.

We have commenced work to review and strengthen the effectiveness of the existing goals, objectives and delivery plans in the cross-government third National Adaptation Programme. We are exploring options for improving the government's climate adaptation vision, which would provide the basis for future National Adaptation Programmes.

Reduced risk of harm from environmental hazards

36. Government should look to maximise long-term value for money by committing to a longer-term flood and coastal erosion risk management investment programme to

2050 which allows funding to be allocated towards the maintenance of existing assets as well as the delivery of new ones.

37. To deliver and fund the right projects in the right places, government should provide further support for programmes that deliver ecologically coherent nature-based solutions and improve their integration and coherence.

38. Home Office should fulfil its commitment to scoping a Wildfire Strategy and Action Plan by mid-2024, with delivery soon after, and publish a similar strategy on how it intends to reduce risk from high temperatures.

Government response

We recognise the importance of long-term flood and coastal erosion planning. Long-term planning will be informed by new flood risk data, published as part of the Environment Agency's updated national flood risk assessment. It will also be informed by the Environment Agency's next long-term investment scenarios due to be published in 2025, which sets out the optimal investment level to manage flood risk in England.

Future funding decisions on flood risk management will be made in the next spending review and will consider how funding is allocated towards maintaining existing assets and building new ones.

We agree that nature-based solutions (NbS) are key to tackling climate change and averting its impacts, as well as providing habitats which support our native species and functioning ecosystems. Spatial prioritisation through LNRSs will help ensure these solutions are deployed in the best places. We use data and products published by NCEA to inform decision making on spatial prioritisation of interventions. For example, through the use of:

- living England map
- green infrastructure map
- ancient woodland inventory
- botanical value and heat maps
- LNRS national habitat map and data viewer
- priority habitat inventory

We are committed to adapting to the changes that nature emergencies will bring to our environment. A coordinated approach is essential to mitigate the impact on:

- people
- property
- habitats
- livestock
- natural capital
- wildlife

It also allows us to plan the most effective response to incidents.

The Home Office, as the lead government department for wildfire response, have been working with us, our agencies, and other stakeholders to identify policy options for wildfire. A number of stakeholder workshops have concluded with outcomes being considered by the Home Office. In addition, in 2024 to 2025 the Home Office is funding a national resilience wildfire advisor to consider whether additional national wildfire capabilities might be needed within the Fire and Rescue Services and to increase the coordination approaches across the sector.

Enhancing biosecurity

39. Government should increase resourcing for prevention, early detection and rapid response to invasive non-native species and implement the EAC recommendation to set up a rapid response biosecurity fund for delivery bodies to provide short-term funding when needed to prevent an establishment.
40. Government should focus on improving compliance with invasive non-native species legislation by expanding the remit and increasing the capacity of the Non-Native Species Inspectorate.
41. Government should strengthen the integration of invasive non-native species and other biosecurity regimes and harness synergies by avoiding overlaps, improving collaboration on surveillance and facilitating shared learning.
42. Government should provide longer-term resources to support invasive non-native species local action groups and increase public awareness, skills, capacity and engagement so citizens and local groups can more effectively contribute to tackling invasive non-native species.

Government response

We recognise the continued importance of prevention, early detection and rapid response to invasive non-native species in reducing pressures on domestic biodiversity.

Accordingly, we have committed to stretching targets in response to the global biodiversity framework, EIP and within the Great Britain invasive non-native species strategy (INNS) 2023 to 2030.

Work is underway to finalise pathway action plans to address highest risk pathways of entry for invasive non-native species. The rapid response working group are reviewing the approach to contingency planning and responses. An MoA has been put in place with partners in the UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology (UKCEH) for continued running of the GB non-native species information portal (GBNNSIP), which is integral to our ability to identify and act upon threats.

The Non-native Species Inspectorate (NNSI) was established to address a critical gap in GB biosecurity for non-native species. Since 2021, it has since undertaken more than 3,000 inspections and identified widespread non-compliance with key non-native species

legislation. Non-compliance has dropped from 16% in 2022 to 7% in 2024. The NNSI continues to gather data on the risk of INNS introduction through the UK border, helping shut down illegal online trade in invasive species. It is integral to national eradication efforts.

As NNSI continues its activities as a formally established Inspectorate within APHA, attention is paid to the building and utilising of an evidence base to undertake effective prioritisation of existing resource and further understand opportunities to enhance this. For example, to ensure a more rapid resolution of non-compliances involving permitting under the IAS regulation, in October 2024 the NNSI remit was expanded to include permitting.

We are committed to harnessing synergies across the invasive non-native species and other biosecurity regimes. In developing the NNSI, the approaches and learnings from other biosecurity regimes provided a positive blueprint for designing an effective and efficient NNSI. Sharing information and best practice between the regimes is routine.

We continue to support strategic local action by providing coordination between local action groups, the government and wider experts. Work is ongoing to build upon the success of existing awareness raising campaigns such as Check, Clean, Dry and Be Plant Wise. A media and communications working group brings together government bodies and industry representatives to developed multi-pronged approaches to communications.

To note, decisions about future resourcing are subject to spending review outcomes and ongoing business planning.

Enhancing beauty, heritage, and engagement with the natural environment

43. Government should provide an assessment demonstrating that its current funding and actions will fulfil the commitment that everyone should live within 15 minutes' walk of green or blue space.
44. Government should align resources with ambition and continue support for actions linking the environment, health and wellbeing, such as green social prescribing and active travel, and should introduce dedicated actions to increase public awareness.
45. Government should better integrate environmental, economic and social data, and use spatial mapping and targeting mechanisms, to address environmental inequalities regarding access to green and blue spaces and also, more broadly, in relation to exposure to noise, air pollution and vulnerability to environmental risks and hazards.

Government response

In the 2021 spending review, the government committed £140 million to its Natural Capital and Ecosystem Assessment (NCEA) programme. NCEA is delivering a nationwide survey of England's land, coast, and sea. The marine component completes in 2025 and the terrestrial component, which includes freshwater and estuaries, will complete in 2028.

Together, the programmes are mapping the location, extent and condition of our natural capital and ecosystems, the pressures affecting them and the environmental, economic, and societal benefits they provide. This enables NCEA to provide a holistic view of our natural environment.

NCEA is developing and employing several scientific developments and technologies for gathering environmental data. This includes:

- satellite and aerial photography
- remote sensing
- acoustic samplers
- environmental DNA (eDNA)

It is also trialling innovative monitoring methods, such as autonomous systems and AI to reduce field effort. These innovations are trialled in tandem with comprehensive and extensive field surveys by professional, practitioner and citizen scientists.

NCEA is providing a whole-system evidence base, enabling the government to better understand environmental pressures and their regional distribution to inform a wide number of policy areas addressing environmental inequalities. Some of NCEA's products, such as the green infrastructure map (GI Map), combine social and environmental data to provide evidence on access to green and blue spaces. The GI Map is an open data product and supports the green infrastructure framework, as well as providing data for the G3 OIF Indicator. Additionally, NCEA marine work has integrated environmental, societal, and economic data to:

- explore the value communities place on marine and coastal environments
- develop place-based natural capital approaches for nature recovery and climate adaptation and mitigation.

On recommendation 43, we are continuing to develop our official statistic to monitor the number of people who have access to nature close to home. This is an important first step in ensuring that our work will make nature accessible for everyone.

On recommendation 44, we are committed to enhancing public access to nature, including through the manifesto commitment to deliver 9 new national river walks. We will be sharing more information on our future policy in this space in due course.

EIP23 cross-cutting themes

- 46. Nature-friendly farming recommendation:** To enable progress towards EIP23 ambitions, targets (including EA21 targets and interim targets) and commitments to be assessed, government should transparently report on the number of schemes and the area of land covered in each in current and previous years.

47. **Nature-friendly farming recommendation:** Government should integrate spatial prioritisation into nature-friendly farming to ensure the right schemes are adopted in the right places, delivering cost-effective environmental improvement.
48. **Nature-friendly farming recommendation:** Government should invest in making nature-friendly farming attractive and an easy choice for farmers through promotion of schemes and provision of one-to-one advice underpinned by local knowledge.
49. **Green jobs and finance recommendation:** Government should clarify its objectives for green jobs and publish its methodology for monitoring progress, including further development of the statistics needed across key sectors (for example agriculture, planning, forestry, water, resources and waste).
50. **Green jobs and finance recommendation:** Government should build the evidence base to robustly assess the finance gap for each of its EIP23 goals, and EA21 targets and interim targets. This should include compiling statistics on the total levels of investment and show how investment from private and public sources varies over time.
51. **Green jobs and finance recommendation:** Government should clarify the governance arrangements for mobilising green finance and maturing developing nature markets. This should clarify the role and the responsibilities for government, environmental and financial regulators, delivery partners and other stakeholders.
52. **Green jobs and finance recommendation:** Government should systematically review the skills gaps associated in delivering each of its EIP23 goals and develop a plan for addressing these gaps.

Government response

Nature-friendly farming

We agree that transparent reporting is important to enable progress towards EIP23 ambitions. Through the Farm and Countryside Programme (FCP), we now publish the area and number of agreements in schemes including ELM, as well as option level uptake data. Data is published annually or quarterly in accordance with timelines published on GOV.UK. In the future, we aim to publish additional material providing greater clarity and transparency into how FCP schemes are contributing to expected targets and outcomes.

We are exploring greater use of spatial prioritisation and targeting across our ELM schemes. Within ELM, Countryside Stewardship and Landscape Recovery schemes currently include features within their service design to ensure actions are adopted in appropriate spatial locations. This includes eligibility criteria and the utilisation of expert advice from Defra's arm's length bodies (for example, Forestry Commission and Natural England), to ensure actions are adopted in appropriate spatial locations.

We are committed to encouraging widespread participation in nature friendly farming through ELM schemes. We plan to optimise ELM schemes, so they produce the right outcomes for all farmers while delivering food security and nature recovery in a just and equitable way. The Sustainable Farming Incentive is currently open for applications and

the Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier will open in 2025 with a rolling application window. Round 2 Landscape Recovery projects are now in their project development phases, and details of round 3 will be released in due course.

Advice and guidance remain an integral part of ELM delivery. We know that farmers value advice from local advisers who understand the context of their businesses, and who help them to solve problems and improve their businesses' profitability, resilience, and environmental impact. We continue to keep farmers and land managers informed of the latest information and next steps for ELMs.

Green jobs and finance

Green jobs and skills are crucial for delivering the actions necessary to achieve our targets. We have engaged with industry and other government departments to identify which policy areas to develop to:

- better support green jobs and skills
- outline the tackle the challenges and barriers to the workforce
- provide options to mitigate such challenges

The green jobs delivery group, which was established during the last parliament, is a good example of how stakeholders from a variety of backgrounds can work together to identify and outline long-term strategies to resolve key issues. The food and drink sector council (FDSC) created a subcommittee following detailed skills and workforce recommendations published in the independent review into labour shortages in the food supply chain.

As detailed in response to recommendations 24 to 27, we are developing a circular economy strategy for England and a series of roadmaps setting out the interventions that the government will make on a sector-by-sector basis. The outputs will aim to:

- support economic growth
- deliver green jobs
- promote efficient and productive use of resources
- minimise negative environmental impacts
- accelerate to net zero

To note, decisions about future resourcing related to EIP goals and EA21 targets and interim targets are subject to spending review outcomes and ongoing business planning. We are exploring options for leveraging non-government funding and alternative delivery levers.

We aim to be transparent around spending. We publish an official statistic on funding for biodiversity: the England [biodiversity funding indicator](#). Part of this indicator provides real-term, public sector spending on biodiversity in England. It tracks overall funding for biodiversity. The figures presented are likely underestimates of the total biodiversity spending by the public sector. This is due to limitations in data availability and the

challenges of data collection. However, they do provide a clear trend of increasing expenditure on biodiversity since the time series began. The indicator is currently under review and more information on the review of the government's biodiversity indicators is provided in the [Indicator development plan - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/118421/Indicator_development_plan_-_GOV.UK.pdf).

Defra has also commissioned an overarching evaluation framework for the biodiversity targets programme. This will strengthen our understanding of our progress towards meeting our biodiversity targets and will follow [Magenta Book guidance](#). We are also developing a reporting framework to track private finance flows into nature's recovery in England. We are working with internal and external providers to develop metrics and collect data.

We are committed to mobilising green finance and maturing developing nature markets. The UK government published 6 principles for voluntary carbon and nature market integrity, to support organisations engaged in discretionary action towards net zero and nature positive transitions. Later in 2025 we will consult on how these principles could be applied to support the high integrity use of markets as finance and ambition raising measures.

We are working with industry and across government to improve the evidence bank and to better identify skills and workforce gaps. For example, the Nature for Climate Fund has invested £4.9 million to help upskill and upsize the forestry sector. As part of this, Defra commissioned and published the 2024 forestry workforce and skills research which is supporting a joint government and forestry sector skills plan. The Defra-led '[Skills gaps and opportunities in sectors and occupations of interest to Defra](#)' report highlights the skills and workforce gaps across a variety of roles, including the nature sector, and advice to policy on how best to overcome these. We have also conducted internal skills and workforce gap research across all sectors, which has influenced government's policy development.

We are working with industry, including through The Institute for Agriculture and Horticulture (TIAH) and the Forestry Commission, to identify gaps and implement policy solutions. For example, in the forestry sector we are working to develop new educational routes and career opportunities. Our proposals include:

- upskilling the current workforce
- developing and strengthening apprenticeships
- delivering short training courses for people wanting to move careers or improve their skills

We are also working with the Department for Education and the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) to support the delivery of a comprehensive suite of technical qualifications and apprenticeships for the nature sector, such as L7 ecologist and L6 environmental practitioner roles.

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