



Department
for Environment,
Food & Rural Affairs

Government response to the Office for Environmental Protection's (OEP's) report on progress in improving the natural environment in England from January 2025

October 2025



Department
for Environment,
Food & Rural Affairs

Government response to the Office for Environmental Protection's (OEP's) report on progress in improving the natural environment in England from January 2025

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

October 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.

Defra is a ministerial department, supported by 34 agencies and public bodies.



© Crown copyright 2025

This information is licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0. To view this licence, visit <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/>

Where we have identified any third party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

This publication is available at www.gov.uk/defra

Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at defra.helpline@defra.gov.uk.

ISBN - 978-1-5286-5670-2

E03345221 10/25

Printed on paper containing 40% recycled fibre content minimum

Printed in the UK by HH Associates Ltd. on behalf of the Controller of His Majesty's Stationery Office

Contents

Introduction	2
Overview	3
The government response to the OEP's recommendations	4

Introduction

The UK government welcomes the Office for Environmental Protection's (OEP's) report 'Progress in improving the natural environment in England 2023 – 2024'. The OEP play an important role monitoring and reporting on progress towards goals in the Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP).

The UK government will publish a revision of the EIP to protect and restore our natural environment. This will include delivery information to set out how the UK government will meet the ambitious Environment Act targets. It will be a clearer, prioritised plan for achieving environmental outcomes such as reducing waste across the economy, planting more trees, improving air quality and halting the decline in species.

The UK government's number one mission is to kickstart economic growth. We know that the natural resources that underpin our economy are finite and under increasing pressure. The natural environment is amongst our most valuable national assets.

The revised EIP will set out the approach to improving the natural environment we need to take to grow our economy, build 1.5 million homes, boost food security and meet our environment and climate targets with nature as the enabler, driver and protector of growth.

The OEP report provides a detailed assessment of government progress up to March 2024 and consideration of requirements for environmental improvement. The UK government largely accepts these recommendations, and this response covers each of the 44 recommendations. These recommendations have fed into our work on revising the EIP to create a clearer, prioritised plan.

Our revised EIP will be a document that guides action and decision making, with achievable delivery plans for restoring nature and improving the natural environment.

Defra agree with the OEP that our regulation must be efficient, common sense and independent. This is in line with the Prime Minister's plan to drive efficiency in government and missions in the UK government's 'Plan for Change'.

Defra is progressing work to improve the regulatory landscape, including the steps taken as part of the [Corry review](#). Regulation and further improvements to our regulatory system can help to drive nature recovery and economic growth, supporting the EIP and Environment Act targets. Regulation can also encourage innovation and investment from businesses while also meeting the UK government commitment to cut the administrative cost of regulation by 25% over the course of this Parliament.

Defra look forward to continuing productive engagement with the OEP, as we develop and implement the revised EIP.

Overview

The Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) published its [‘Progress in improving the natural environment in England 2023-2024’](#) report in January 2025 in accordance with section 28 of the Environment Act 2021. This report sets out our response in accordance with section 28 of the Environment Act 2021.

This response firstly addresses the 8 key recommendations and then addresses the remaining recommendations under each Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) goal in turn.

Defra has categorised its responses to the OEP’s recommendations to reflect the level of agreement and the stage of response. The categories are defined as follows:

- **Accept:** we broadly agree with the OEP’s recommendation
- **Accept and defer a full response:** we broadly agree with the OEP’s recommendation but cannot provide a full response at this stage.
- **Partially accept:** we agree in part with the OEP’s recommendation
- **Reject:** we believe that the recommendation is beyond the scope of the OEP’s remit, consider it duplicative of existing policy, or do not agree with the underlying evidence or analysis
- **Defer:** we defer our response as we cannot provide a full response at this stage.

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 15 January 2025.

The government is currently undertaking a statutory review and revision of EIP23. An interim statement on the key findings of a rapid review of the EIP (which forms part of the wider statutory review) was published in January 2025. The advice on the statutory review provided by the OEP to the Secretary of State in September 2024, alongside the key findings of the rapid review, will inform the revision of the EIP. The OEP’s annual reporting will also be considered in the revision of the EIP.

The [EIP 2023 annual progress report on](#) was published in July 2025. This included information on the delivery of the EIP and Environment Act targets from April 2024 to March 2025, as required by the Environment Act.

Several of the recommendations made by the OEP will be addressed as part of the revised EIP. In this report, Defra have specified where the recommendation will be addressed through the revised EIP.

Data, evidence and analysis

Defra welcomes the support offered by the OEP’s independent scrutiny and analysis of progress in achieving the ambitions of the EIP. Defra welcomes the opportunity to continue to work with OEP officials on alignment of analytical approaches taken in respective organisations’ EIP reports.

The government response to the OEP's recommendations

This section outlines each of the 44 recommendations made by the OEP and the government's response. This addresses the 8 key recommendations first, with the remaining 36 recommendations addressed under each corresponding Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) goal in turn.

Get nature-friendly farming right

OEP recommendation 1

It is essential that the government strengthens engagement with farmers and landowners if it is to achieve Environment Act targets and many other environmental ambitions and commitments. Our analysis shows the latest Environmental Land Management schemes are promising with respect to recovery of landscapes and halting the decline in species abundance on land. However, this is conditional on a significant increase in the uptake of the more environmentally ambitious aspects of Countryside Stewardship and Landscape Recovery schemes, and by making greater use of spatial prioritisation, farm advice and guidance. We identify limited capacity for reducing water pollution, supporting the government's environmental priority of cleaning up rivers and lakes, without changes to how land is used, the current schemes and regulatory approach, and greater collaboration between delivery partners.

Government's response to recommendation 1

The government **partially accepts** this recommendation.

The government recognises that to deliver new infrastructure and housing whilst making space for nature and water and emissions reduction, an integrated cross-government approach is required. The Land Use Framework will provide a long-term view of land use change and how different uses can be balanced. The UK government [consulted on land use in England](#) from January to April this year. The responses to the consultation and feedback from supporting workshops, are being analysed and will inform the preparation of the Land Use Framework. The Land Use Framework is expected to be published in due course.

Defra agree that it is crucial to get nature-friendly farming right. But there are a wider range of levers available than identified in this recommendation. The levers include Environmental Land Management schemes as well as advice and guidance. There are also opportunities for improved regulation, greater emphasis on supply chains and peer to peer collaboration. The revised EIP will clarify Environment Act target delivery plans.

Maximise the contribution of protected sites for nature

OEP recommendation 2

Protected wildlife sites contribute towards achieving the set of national biodiversity targets and international commitments, such as 30 by 30, as well as providing wider environmental, economic and social benefits. However, the current framework is not working well enough and the government should enhance and enforce levels of legal protection. Further steps should be taken urgently to correct underinvestment in site designation and management including implementation of conservation measures; improving monitoring and strengthening overall governance and engagement with partners

Government's response to recommendation 2

The government **defers** a full response to this recommendation.

This recommendation will be addressed through the UK government response to the OEP's monitoring report on protected sites. Defra are expecting the OEP report later this year and in accordance with section 29 of the Environment Act, Defra will respond formally within 3 months.

Speed up action in the marine environment

OEP recommendation 3

The government has not met its commitment to ban all damaging activities in Marine Protected Areas in 2024. The latest data from OSPAR confirm the UK will more than likely not have met the legal requirement of marine good environmental status. The government should deliver the current steps to achieve targets and commitments more rapidly. Overdue Marine Protected Area byelaws urgently need to be put in place. The government should implement a new UK Marine Strategy that focuses action on those descriptors not yet at good environmental status, to maximise progress and minimise the delay in achieving that overall objective

Government's response to recommendation 3

The government **partially accepts** this recommendation.

Defra agree that action in the marine environment is key to environmental improvement and are making progress in this space.

The commitment in EIP23 was not to ban all damaging activities in our marine protected areas (MPAs) but to put in place offshore byelaws by the end of 2024. As this report is published, 60% of MPAs have fisheries byelaws in place. Defra is considering next steps for managing fisheries in MPAs, taking into account our domestic and international nature conservation obligations and the needs of the fishing sector. To confirm, future byelaws would be consulted on.

The timetable for the UK Marine Strategy (UKMS) is defined in regulation, with each part requiring an update every 6 years.

Defra published an update to the programme of measures on 29 January 2025 which had been delayed under the previous administration. Defra also launched a [consultation on the UKMS Part 1](#) on 20 June 2025. The consultation is about Defra's updated assessments on the state of UK Seas and progress toward Good Environmental Status (GES). This will form the next update to UKMS part 1.

Set out clear mechanisms for reconciling competing demands for use of land and sea

OEP recommendation 4

The ways in which land and sea are used are among the biggest drivers of biodiversity loss. Environmental pressures will become more acute with the need to develop essential clean energy infrastructure and housing, while delivering the government's environmental priorities of food security and protecting communities from flooding. The government needs to progress Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRs), a Land Use Framework, and detailed catchment and marine spatial plans. These can secure coherence between environmental and other priorities but need to be expedited and effectively integrated into planning decisions in practice. However, plans on their own are not enough without resources to implement them.

Many issues are context specific, so a place-based approach is also needed to complement national frameworks and guidance. To ensure that infrastructure development enhances rather than degrades nature and people's engagement with it, key spatial tools need to work together. In addition to recent changes to the National Planning Policy Framework concerning LNRs, the government should also make the Green Infrastructure Framework and emerging LNRs material considerations for local planning.

In addition, as many environmental pressures are related to how we produce and consume food, the government should use the revision of the food strategy to develop more coherent policy interventions to reduce environmental pressures along the whole supply chain going beyond a sectoral approach.

Government's response to recommendation 4

The government **accepts and defers** a full response to this recommendation.

We agree that there is a need to reconcile competing demands for use of land and sea and have several workstreams in place to do so.

Defra is working closely with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ) to deliver much needed planning reforms to support the UK government's Growth and Clean Energy missions. Our vision is for a better system that will unlock the housing and infrastructure this country urgently needs while improving outcomes for nature.

The Land Use Framework will set out the evidence, data and tools needed to prioritise our most productive agricultural land and environmental opportunities. This evidence will also inform energy and housing spatial plans.

Taking this approach will support the building of 1.5 million new homes, and the energy infrastructure needed to achieve Clean Power by 2030.

LNRS will identify the best areas and actions for nature recovery. Their rollout is progressing well. The first 9 LNRS have been published, with plans in place to roll out the remaining 39. Defra's "LNRS delivery policy update" sets out how LNRSs will be used by other policy and delivery priorities, such as Environmental Land Management, to drive delivery of the actions the LNRS propose. The UK government published LNRS planning guidance in February 2025.

This highlights that planning authorities should consider whether LNRSs are a material consideration in planning decisions as well as their important role in local plan preparation. Our response to the [OEP's report on LNRSs](#) will be published shortly.

Our ambitious food strategy will set and deliver clear long-term outcomes that create a healthier, fairer, and more resilient food system.

The Marine Spatial Prioritisation programme has looked at how to use data to better understand the growing interests and pressures on the sea, how to improve colocation and strategic decision making.

This work builds on existing marine plans which, among other aims, informs the sustainable use of marine resources.

Develop a circular economy framework

OEP recommendation 5

Progress in this area has been too slow. The government should update the Resources and Waste Strategy to establish a framework for a circular economy. This would deliver economic benefits and improve environmental outcomes across many areas, including nature recovery, but it requires the efforts to go beyond waste management. This includes the acceleration of a new UK policy and regulatory framework for chemicals, since clean material cycles and products being sustainable by design are crucial steps to achieving residual waste targets and progress towards the government's environmental priority of a zero-waste economy. In developing a circular economy framework, the government should consider the EPPS principles, particularly integration, prevention and polluter pays, to help identify opportunities, with extended producer responsibility an important mechanism for securing the resources needed to implement measures. In addition, there are three cross-cutting areas where government can take steps to enable progress and secure effective implementation of the Environment Act targets and a revised EIP.

Government's response to recommendation 5

The government **accepts** this recommendation.

The UK government has committed to transitioning towards a circular economy where resources are kept in use for longer and waste is designed out. The former Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Steve Reed set this as one of Defra's top 5 priorities.

In November 2024, the former Secretary of State Steve Reed convened a Circular Economy Taskforce of experts from across government, industry, academia, and civil society, to help us develop a Circular Economy Strategy for England. The UK government plans to publish proposals for consultation in the coming months.

This is a cross-government effort that will support economic growth, deliver green jobs, promote efficient and productive use of resources, minimise negative environmental impacts and accelerate to Net Zero. The environmental principles will be embedded in the work of the taskforce.

To support this transition, the Circular Economy Taskforce has started with 6 sectors:

- agri-food
- built environment
- chemicals and plastics
- electrical and electronic equipment
- textiles
- transport

Mobilise investment at the scale needed

OEP recommendation 6

The government's target of private investment for nature recovery is a key enabling step to close the finance gap, alongside continued and well targeted public investment. Given the scale of the challenge, to achieve this the government needs to provide strong incentives, oversight and regulation, to create the market confidence to deliver rapid, substantial growth in investment, as well as the capability and capacity of the environmental sector to make the most of that investment. In addition, local authorities are a key delivery partner, and they need support to build and maintain the capacity needed to mobilise investment. The government should improve transparency and accountability by publishing sectoral pathways that define the scale and direction of investment required to become nature positive and develop monitoring capability for tracking investment flows over time, from funding sources to desired outcomes. Investment choices have long-term implications so there is a need to ensure that they do not lock society into pathways that limit future options. In addition, the government should generate resources for public investment through application of the EPPS polluter pays principle and actions taken to achieve the Kunming Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework Target 18 on environmentally harmful subsidy reform.

Government's response to recommendation 6

The government **partially accepts** this recommendation.

Defra agree that additional incentives are needed to mobilise private investment towards our environmental targets. [Defra's recent Call for Evidence](#) on increasing private investment in nature recovery closed in August 2025. This received a wide range of detailed responses from businesses, organisations and individuals across multiple sectors.

Defra are analysing this evidence and will publish a summary of responses in due course. Further information on next steps will be provided as soon as possible.

Defra are already working to build the capacity of the environmental sector, and local authorities, through our Natural Environment Investment Readiness Fund and Local Investment in Natural Capital programme respectively.

Defra are supporting the Green Finance Institute, WWF and other delivery partners, to develop sectoral Nature Positive Pathways. These Nature Positive Pathways will articulate clear, actionable steps that businesses in key nature-relevant industries can take to contribute to the revised EIP.

We are building our monitoring capability for tracking investment flows. We are discussing with relevant partners in and outside government cost-effective and feasible means of gathering data.

We are exploring innovative ways to generate resources for public investment, which could include the application of the polluter pays principle and actions taken on environmentally harmful subsidy reform.

Regulate more effectively

OEP recommendation 7

Full implementation and enforcement of existing regulations would accelerate progress towards targets and commitments.

To achieve this the government should ensure the availability of sufficient resources, build capacity and improve engagement of businesses and citizens as well as coordination of relevant authorities.

Effective regulation is all about knowing in sufficient detail how things stand and then using regulatory tools and approaches in a considered way to get people to act in ways they may not otherwise choose, for the purpose of addressing root causes or consequences of activities that affect the environment.

Effective regulation is essential to address the numerous market and other failures that have led to environmental degradation at a significant cost to society. It is also needed to ensure economic growth is sustainable, given the reliance of the economy on natural resources, ecosystems and biodiversity.

We note Defra's review of its current regulation and regulators; however it should ensure there is regulatory coherence and efficiency in delivering the government's environmental goals, alongside its wider mission on economic growth.

Government's response to recommendation 7

The government **accepts** this recommendation.

The UK government agrees that delivering more effective regulation is important. It will enable us to uphold environmental protections and take enforcement action where it is needed. Businesses will also benefit from proportionate compliance requirements and predictable outcomes, driving investment and sustainable growth. Effective regulation is an important tool in delivering our 'Plan for Change', and we believe that our ongoing actions are coherent and efficient.

As commissioned by Defra's former Secretary of State Steve Reed in October 2024, Dan Corry has now completed a ['short, sharp' review of Defra's regulatory landscape](#) and this was published on 2 April 2025. The review examined whether the inherited regulatory landscape is fit for purpose and developed recommendations to ensure that regulation across Defra is driving economic growth whilst protecting the environment.

The review puts forward 5 strategic themes which are supported by 29 recommendations. These are designed to improve how the regulatory system operates in the short term, while pointing to where longer-term reform of underpinning regulations is needed.

The UK [government's Regulation Action Plan](#) published in March 2025 included regulator-specific commitments, reforms to the Environmental Permitting Regulations and seven of Dan Corry's recommendations.

The former Secretary of State Steve Reed fast-tracked delivery of 9 of the recommendations, including:

- trialling a lead environmental regulator approach for major projects where multiple regulators have an interest
- a new approach to earned regulatory autonomy for trusted partners, looking at opportunities to improve our compliance guidance
- a rolling programme of regulatory reform to pinpoint rapid actions, quick wins, and longer-term areas for improvements to regulation

The UK government is actively considering the remaining 20 recommendations and identifying next steps.

Harness the support needed to achieve ambitions

OEP recommendation 8

The government needs to provide clear leadership at the highest level to ensure cross-government delivery and wider stakeholder buy-in. Directly linking the EPPS to statutory targets and their delivery plans and the revised EIP can help secure cross-government delivery of environmental ambitions alongside the government's other priorities. A revised EIP should be far more transparent and better communicated. It should explicitly state who will do what, how and by when and detail what the intended outcomes of actions are. The government should couple its implementation with greater engagement with non-government bodies and the public to harness their willingness to contribute. There is support for action on the environment with the majority of adults reporting climate change and the environment as an important issue for the UK. Steps in the EIP to enhance engagement are important in building public support for action.

Government's response to recommendation 8

The government **accepts and defers** a full response to this recommendation

Defra agree that clear government leadership is needed to ensure cross-government delivery and wider-stakeholder buy-in. Therefore, the UK government's EIP revision will include a more streamlined and effective plan of action linking government actions and the role of key delivery organisations. The revised EIP will also seek to give clarity on the role of cross cutting enablers for environmental delivery. This will consider actions across government and wider society and how these actions interface as part of a system to improve the natural environment.

Defra are committed to working closely with other government departments and stakeholders to achieve our environmental goals. The Environmental Principles Policy

Statement duty (EPPS) is an essential tool to ensure new policy and strategy is developed, factoring in climate and environment.

Effective application of the EPPS duty will firmly embed climate and environment in policy making across government and support delivery of the UK government's revised EIP.

The EPPS duty also plays an important role in supporting our 'Plan for Change', helping to guide policymakers towards opportunities that will help deliver our clean energy mission and achieve net zero.

Thriving plants and wildlife

OEP recommendation 9

Defra, working with devolved policy authorities, should urgently publish and implement a fully evidenced, resourced and time-bound delivery plan that sets out how the good environmental status of marine waters target will be achieved as quickly as possible.

Government's response to recommendation 9

The government **partially accepts** this recommendation.

This work is already underway as part of the regulatory requirements of the Marine Strategy Regulations 2010. We are in the process of updating our assessments on the state of UK seas and considering new targets. The [Marine Strategy Part One: UK updated assessment and Good Environmental Status Consultation](#) closed on 15 August 2025. We are currently in the process of analysing the consultation responses and developing a government response to the consultation and finalising update to UKMS Part 1 subject to Ministerial clearances.

The good environmental status (GES) status of marine waters target is the collective responsibility of all 4 UK administrations and developed collaboratively. The timescale and pace at which good environmental status is to be achieved is for the 4 nations to agree.

See our response to recommendation 3 for further information on progress made in the marine environment.

OEP recommendation 10

Defra should improve prospects of meeting EA21 targets in the Environmental Targets (Biodiversity) (England) Regulations 2023 and the Environmental Targets (Marine Protected Areas) Regulations 2023 by clearly defining in a revised EIP a set of interim targets which together are consistent with the overall trajectory of environmental improvement required to meet the relevant EA21 targets

Government's response to recommendation 10

The government **defers** a full response to this recommendation.

The revised EIP will clarify Environment Act target delivery plans and update their corresponding interim targets.

OEP recommendation 11

Defra should increase confidence in the methodology for measuring the 2030 species abundance target (EA21 target) by inviting further scrutiny and engagement on the indicator in development that underpins the species abundance index, through a public consultation.

Government's response to recommendation 11

The government **accepts** this recommendation.

This statistic is already published as an official statistic in development, which means stakeholders can find contact details for the responsible team if they wish to engage with it: [Indicators of species abundance in England – official statistic in development](#).

Clean air

OEP recommendation 12

The government should assess and remove barriers to improvements to local air quality by working collaboratively with local authorities to carry out and publish a comprehensive audit of barriers to local authority delivery of air quality improvements, as committed to in the EIP23. The audit should ensure that the necessary structures and forums are in place to foster effective partnerships, monitoring, evaluation and learning, and that sufficient powers and resources are in place to enable effective action

Government's response to recommendation 12

The government **partially accepts** this recommendation.

We are continuing to work collaboratively with local authorities. As outlined in our [response to the OEP's 2024 report](#), we have undertaken a series of visits with local authorities to understand how Defra might better support them with their existing powers.

As a result of this, we are continuing to host webinars aimed at upskilling local authorities. Defra has also taken on ownership of the Local Air Quality Hub, and we continue to make improvements to it.

It is now easier to navigate, and we have provided a series of factsheets based on the feedback from the visits in areas where local authorities required more guidance. Through our ongoing engagement with local authorities, we continually seek feedback from them on what is working and not working.

OEP recommendation 13

The government should further support achievement of the five national emissions reduction commitments that apply from 2030 by updating the Clean Air Strategy. As part of this review, the government should consider how it will maintain the levels of transparency and accountability that were previously provided by the National Air Pollution Control Programme, if weakening of levels of environmental protection is to be avoided

Government's response to recommendation 13

The government **defers** a full response to this recommendation.

The UK government continues to provide high levels of transparency and accountability through the annual publication of data. This annual update sets out whether the UK has achieved its emission targets and whether it is on track to achieve future emission targets on the basis of firm and funded policies and measures.

No decisions have yet been taken about any replacement of the National Air Pollution Control Programme. We will provide an update in due course.

OEP recommendation 14

If legal air quality standards are to better protect public health, the government should consider reviewing those standards set out in current legislation and appraise options to bring them more in line with World Health Organization guidelines and equivalent legal standards recently adopted by the EU. This review could also consider whether the two EA21 targets on PM2.5 annual mean concentrations and reduction in population exposure set sufficiently ambitious deadlines to drive improvement, given the two EA21 interim target levels have been met.

Government's response to recommendation 14

The government **rejects** this recommendation.

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

Further, the revised EIP will clarify Environment Act target delivery plans and update their corresponding interim targets. It is acknowledged that EA21 interim targets for PM2.5 annual mean concentrations and population exposure reductions were met in 2023.

Clean and plentiful water

OEP recommendation 15

Defra should improve the prospects of meeting EA21 targets for water by clearly setting out in a revised EIP interim targets that are consistent with the overall trajectory of environmental improvement required to meet those targets and the steps for meeting them – more specifically: interim targets to complete metal mine catchment monitoring studies by 2030, reduce non-household water demand, and create or restore wildlife-rich open-water and river habitats

Government's response to recommendation 15

The government **defers** a full response to this recommendation.

The revised EIP will clarify Environment Act target delivery plans and update their corresponding interim targets.

OEP recommendation 16

Defra should publicly set out how delivery plans and investment align with meeting key targets and commitments, including WFD Regulations environmental objectives, Global Biodiversity Framework Target 7, and the 2030 species abundance target and long-term target to reverse the decline of species abundance

Government's response to recommendation 16

The government **defers** a full response to this recommendation.

The revised EIP will clarify Environment Act target delivery plans and update their corresponding interim targets.

The UK's National Targets and the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan were published on 1 August 2024 and 26 February 2025 respectively. These commit us to achieving all 23 targets of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework including [Target 7 on pollution](#).

In relation to the reference to the Water Framework Directive (WFD) Regulations part of the recommendation, the strategic planning framework under the WFD Regulations is in scope of the Independent Water Commission. [The Independent Water Commission issued its final recommendations](#) in July 2025.

The UK government's full response to the commission's recommendations will be outlined later this year through a White Paper.

Managing exposure to chemicals and pesticides

OEP recommendation 17

To remain largely on track towards its commitment to reduce land-based emissions of mercury by 50% by 2030, Defra, working with the devolved governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, should adopt and publish as soon as possible an updated crematoria process guidance note (5/12) with the requirement that, subject to certain exemptions, all cremators will be fitted with flue gas treatment that includes mercury abatement from 1 January 2027.

Government's response to recommendation 17

The government **defers** this recommendation.

Defra are working to update the [crematoria process guidance note \(5/12\)](#). Ministers are reviewing associated policies, which will be announced in the usual way.

We are progressing the related consultation response and resulting guidance, and we will publish them in due course.

OEP recommendation 18

Defra should improve the prospects of achieving the commitment to reduce the overall risk posed by pesticides by at least half by 2030 by targeting other drivers beyond that in ELM schemes, such as changes to both the authorisation process and post-authorisation monitoring, thus mitigating the current risk associated with high dependency on a few key actions.

Government's response to recommendation 18

The government **partially accepts** this recommendation.

Defra published [the UK National Action Plan \(NAP\) for Pesticides](#) in March 2025. This sets out the actions we will take to reduce the risks and impacts of pesticides on human health and the environment. This plan had been delayed under the previous government. At the heart of the NAP is a range of actions designed to support farmers, growers and other land managers to increase their use of integrated pest management (IPM).

We will also increase access to low-risk pest management tools and tools to support precision application by reducing barriers to innovation, and innovation and supporting manufacturers to bring more biopesticides to market.

OEP recommendation 19

Defra, working with the members of the UK Chemicals Governance Group, should publish a UK Chemicals Strategy setting out how the UK will develop and implement a coherent and credible UK policy and regulatory framework for chemicals and pesticides. This should balance the need to take a precautionary approach with the flexibility to advance policy alongside scientific innovation and take regulatory action quickly when tackling chemical risks to the UK environment.

Government's response to recommendation 19

The government **defers** a full response to this recommendation.

The UK government's approach to chemicals management will be set out in the revised EIP. The UK government will continue to use our chemicals regulation, including UK REACH, to evaluate and manage the risks posed by chemicals to human health and the environment.

OEP recommendation 20

To understand chemical pathways and exposure in the environment, the government should deliver a transparent terrestrial chemicals and pesticides monitoring programme, including spatial soil or invertebrate data. This should aim to provide evidence of ecosystem impacts, support land managers and allow policy decisions to target the greatest risks and improve environmental outcomes.

Government's response to recommendation 20

The government **accepts** this recommendation.

Defra are working towards delivery of research and development (R&D) for terrestrial monitoring. Defra have provided funding to Natural England workstreams relating to developing monitoring of red foxes, metals and perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), and through analysis of pathological and residue data for birds, foxes and beavers.

OEP recommendation 21

To meet its priority of working towards a zero-waste economy, the government should consider the whole life cycle of chemicals when designing new policy and regulation, including a circular economy framework. Incorporating safety and sustainability by design across chemicals policy and regulation is a crucial step towards clean material cycles

Government's response to recommendation 21

The government **accepts** this recommendation.

Defra has been working with the Circular Economy Taskforce and officials across government to develop the Circular Economy Strategy for England, which will set out the interventions that the UK government will make in 6 priority sectors, one of which is chemicals and plastics. The Circular Economy Taskforce (see recommendation 5) will consider the evidence for action right across the economy and evaluate what interventions may be needed in the chemicals sector as it develops the strategy.

Maximise our resources, minimise our waste

OEP recommendation 22

Defra should, in transitioning to a circular economy, implement the delayed digital waste tracking scheme and collection and packaging reforms along with further supporting measures, including waste minimisation, reducing the use of hazardous chemicals and promoting green choices. These measures should be designed to deliver the EA21 target on residual waste, ensure the waste hierarchy is applied in priority order for materials and wastes throughout their life cycles, increase innovation and investment, support delivery of effective and proportionate waste regulation, and drive further progress with tackling waste crime.

Government's response to recommendation 22

The government **partially accepts** this recommendation.

Defra agree that the introduction of a digital waste tracking service will play an important role in supporting our transition to a Circular Economy that protects our natural resources and mitigates the effects of their extraction and disposal.

The launch of the digital waste tracking service has been deferred to April 2026, following waste sector feedback and a review of our plans. This timeline gives users time to prepare and ensures the service is effective and user-friendly.

The phased roll-out begins with waste receiving sites entering data on all incoming waste. By digitising waste records, the system aims to streamline compliance processes and significantly reduce illegal waste activities.

Legislation has come into force for the deposit return scheme for drinks containers (DRS) in England, Northern Ireland and Scotland. A new organisation called UK Deposit Management Organisation Ltd (UK DMO) will run the scheme. It's a not-for-profit group, led by businesses. They were officially appointed in May 2025 (England and Northern Ireland) and June 2025 (Scotland).

Simpler Recycling regulations are in force and require a consistent set of core waste streams to be collected from workplaces and households in England for recycling.

This will lead to consistency across England for workplaces and households in the materials they can recycle. Read our [Simpler recycling: workplace recycling in England](#) guidance for more information.

The Packaging Extended Producer Responsibility (pEPR) came into force on 1 January 2025. From 1 April 2025, the producers of packaging which ends up in household waste streams are required to fund the full costs of local authority collection and recycling.

Defra is reforming the Carriers, Brokers and Dealers and the Waste Exemptions regimes to further tackle waste crime.

OEP recommendation 23

Defra should accelerate progress to a zero-waste economy by developing a circular economy strategy that addresses barriers to and incentivises circular material use. This should be supported by including in a revised EIP material-specific interim targets that are consistent with the overall trajectory of environmental improvement required to meet the EA21 residual waste long-term target and steps that support delivery of that target and of the transition to a circular economy. Defra should implement actions identified in a circular economy strategy that provide the greatest opportunities to develop circular material use and minimise waste and environmental pressures in priority sectors and material flows

Government's response to recommendation 23

The government **accepts** and **defers** a full response to this recommendation.

Defra agree that a circular economy strategy is essential for progression to a zero-waste economy. Defra has been working with the Circular Economy Taskforce and officials across government to develop the Circular Economy Strategy for England

The taskforce will consider the evidence for action right across the economy and evaluate what interventions, including the application of targets, may be needed across the economy.

Part of this work will consider metrics with which the government could measure progress towards a more circular economy.

Updated interim targets will form part of the revised EIP.

Using resources from nature sustainably

OEP recommendation 24

Defra should address the significant gap in its environmental regulatory framework for delivering sustainable soil management, such as through an effective soil protection regulatory framework, as recommended by the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. This should maximise beneficial functions, such as carbon sequestration, and support nature's recovery, while also addressing key challenges such as erosion, compaction and contamination

Government's response to recommendation 24

The government **defers** a full response to this recommendation.

Defra will maintain a balance between regulation and incentives. By encouraging farmer engagement with environmental land management schemes, for example, and promoting high compliance with standards that ensure land management agreements deliver outcomes beyond basic regulatory requirements.

The [Farming Rules for Water](#) regulations aim to standardise good farm practices.

They require farmers and land-managers to take reasonable precautions that prevent soil erosion, such as establishing cover crops and grass buffer strips. As well as requirements to prevent or limit agricultural diffuse pollution of inland or coastal waters from farming and horticultural activities.

Defra will continue to review and consider all legislative and non-legislative measures that support healthy, functioning and resilient soils across England.

OEP recommendation 25

Defra should ensure that sustainable soil management practices are more cohesive and coherent by expanding the provision of voluntary sustainable soil management schemes, training, best practice guidance and advice

Government's response to recommendation 25

The government **accepts** this recommendation.

In 2024, new soil actions were introduced under the Sustainable Farming Incentive scheme, focusing on improving soil health, structure, organic matter and biology. These actions were developed with input from farmers, agricultural organisations, and other stakeholders.

To support sustainable land management, the Environment Agency launched Agricultural Land and Environment Risk and Opportunity Tool (ALERT). This is a free mapping tool designed to help farmers, agronomists, and advisors manage soil and water more effectively.

Free educational events and initiatives on sustainable soil management are available through organisations and initiatives such as The Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB) and Catchment Sensitive Farming.

OEP recommendation 26

The Cabinet Office should catalyse and support action to improve the sustainability of supply chains and contribute to delivery of its targets and commitments by enhancing and reporting on its approach to green public procurement.

Government's response to recommendation 26

The government **accepts** this recommendation.

Public procurement plays a key role in supporting the UK's decarbonisation efforts, and the UK government's mission to be a clean energy superpower and accelerating to Net Zero.

The new National Procurement Policy Statement (NPPS) has been published. The NPPS incorporates the UK government's missions and has actions for the public sector to consider how their procurement activity can minimise environmental impacts. This includes reducing greenhouse gas emissions and minimising waste in their own operations and those of their suppliers.

There are a range of policy measures in place to enable sustainable procurement across government. These include:

- requirements in major procurements for suppliers to publish a Carbon Reduction Plan, detailing their net zero commitments and emissions - [PPN 006: Taking account of Carbon Reduction Plans in the procurement of major government contracts](#)
- bespoke contract terms and conditions that support decarbonisation efforts throughout the delivery of the contract, including emissions reduction targets, key performance indicators and contract level emissions reporting - [PPN 016: Carbon Reduction Contract Schedule](#)
- Defra has established minimum sustainability standards and requirements for core goods and services. These are already in place through the [Government Buying Standards](#) which will be consulted upon during 2025 and 2026
- following the new National Procurement Policy Statement, [the Social Value model](#) has been updated to align with government's missions. This requires a mandatory 10% minimum evaluation weighting be given to Social Value, including options to deliver additional environmental sustainability benefits within the contract

Mitigating and adapting to climate change

OEP recommendation 27

To guard against future climate risks undermining the government's ability to meet the EA21 targets, on each occasion that Defra reviews an EIP and considers whether to set, revise or replace any targets, it should undertake an assessment of climate risk and incorporate its findings into that review. Defra should consider the cascading effects of multiple climate threats and the implications on both the government's ability to meet targets and the metrics used to assess this, and it should define the criteria for where adaptation is necessary

Government's response to recommendation 27

The government **defers** a full response to this recommendation.

Defra are committed to strengthening the nation's resilience, including in our approach to managing climate risks. The primary framework for managing climate risks is through National Adaptation Programmes. The third [National Adaptation Programme \(NAP\)](#) was published in 2023. It includes several actions relevant to managing climate risks to terrestrial and marine environments.

Defra expect to publish the next National Adaptation Programme in 2028.

OEP recommendation 28

To improve the management of surface water flooding, the lead local flood authorities should work with stakeholders to produce and deliver publicly available joint delivery plans that show how the risk of surface water flooding will be reduced to meet agreed local targets and follow the solutions hierarchy

Government's response to recommendation 28

The government **accepts** this recommendation and **defers** a full response.

The UK government will address this recommendation in the response to the National Infrastructure Assessment. Lead Local Flood Authorities are required to have a local flood risk management strategy which must include an assessment of local flood risk and objectives for managing risk. Lead Local Flood Authorities work closely with other flood risk management authorities to develop strategies and manage local flood risk.

OEP recommendation 29

To reduce the number of properties at risk of surface water flooding, Defra should bring into force Schedule 3 of the Flood and Water Management Act 2010 and update its technical standards for sustainable drainage systems

Government's response to recommendation 29

The government **defers** a full response to this recommendation.

The UK government is strongly committed to requiring standardised Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) in new developments. These systems should be designed to cope with changing climatic conditions as well as delivering wider water infrastructure benefits. It will also reduce run off and help to improve water quality, amenity and biodiversity. Appropriate adoption and maintenance arrangements will also be in place.

The UK government believes that these outcomes can be achieved through either improving the current planning led approach using powers now available or commencing schedule 3 to the Flood and Water Management Act 2010. A final decision on the way forward will be made in the coming months.

The UK government has made some immediate changes to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) to support increasing SuDS. The NPPF now requires all development to utilise SuDS where they could have drainage impacts. These systems should be appropriate to the nature and scale of the proposed development.

Updated non-statutory technical standards for SuDS were published on 19 June 2025.

OEP recommendation 30

The government should change how it enables and measures the benefits of actions to reduce the risk of harm from flooding, by using the indicators it has developed to measure progress against a wider range of flood resilience actions to set new measurable targets to reduce flood risk.

Government's response to recommendation 30

The government **partially accepts** this recommendation.

The current headline metric for the Environment Agency's flood investment programme is 'properties better protected'. This metric is simple and widely understood.

However, it has drawbacks for example, it does not adequately recognise the benefits from more innovative flood mitigation measures such as natural flood management and sustainable urban drainage.

Another key metric for flood risk management is the 'percentage of Environment Agency high consequence assets at target condition'.

Defra and the Environment Agency are currently considering how to measure progress on flood risk management for the next investment programme due to start in April 2026.

OEP recommendation 31

To reduce the risk and impact of extreme heat, the government should develop a heat resilience strategy that further develops green infrastructure in towns and cities and sets out a clear governance structure to provide leadership and drive forward co-ordinated action across national and local government, communities and the private sector

Government's response to recommendation 31

The government **rejects** this recommendation.

Developing a separate heat resilience strategy would be duplicative of the work already done by government to address climate risk in the National Adaptation Programme.

Defra is committed to managing the impacts of climate change on our built environment, including those from heat. Under the Climate Change Act 2008, Defra's Secretary of State is legally required to set out an assessment of climate change risks, and to lay a programme before parliament which sets out how government will address the risks.

The UK government's proposed actions to tackle those risks are set out in the [National Adaptation Programme \(NAP\)](#).

Within the NAP, specific actions are identified to address heat risk to the built environment, and to communities. Action ownership is also clearly identified, with departments named for each action.

OEP recommendation 32

To mitigate the risk of harm to the environment from wildfires, the Home Office should use its forthcoming Wildfire Strategy and Action Plan to set clear targets for wildfire reduction, implement adaptive and preventative measures, enhance public awareness and strengthen the evidence base.

Government's response to recommendation 32

The government **defers** a full response to this recommendation.

The Prime Minister announced in February 2025 that the Home Office's fire functions, including its responsibilities as lead government department for wildfire response would, from 1 April 2025, transfer to the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG).

In the Third National Adaptation Plan (2023) the previous government committed to scoping a strategy and action plan. The Home Office convened several stakeholder workshops to identify policy options for wildfire. The outcomes of this work are currently being considered to inform next steps.

Since 2024, the UK government has funded a National Resilience Wildfire Advisor to assess what additional national capabilities might be needed to increase resilience to wildfire risk. The role also supports coordination of approaches across the sector.

Enhancing biosecurity

OEP recommendation 33

Defra working with the devolved governments in Scotland and Wales should strengthen the partnership approach at the core of tackling INNS and enable stakeholders to play their part in delivery by publishing an implementation plan for the GB INNS Strategy

Government's response to recommendation 33

The government **accepts** this recommendation.

Defra recognise the importance of a partnership approach in tackling invasive non-native species (INNS) and reducing pressures on domestic biodiversity.

Within the Great Britain INNS Strategy, Defra committed to drafting and publishing an implementation plan. We have published a plan which sets out key actions and timings for delivery of the strategy. This will support stakeholders to contribute to delivery of the strategy in England.

OEP recommendation 34

Defra should increase the effectiveness of PAPs by carrying out a public consultation so that they can be finalised and implemented fully.

Government's response to recommendation 34

The government **accepts** this recommendation.

The establishment and implementation of pathway action plans (PAPs) is a requirement under the Invasive Alien Species Regulation (EU 1143/2014).

Work is underway to finalise these plans to address the highest risk pathways of entry for invasive non-native species. [Public consultation on the PAPs](#) ran between 23 June to 18 August 2025 on CitizenSpace (Defra's online consultation platform). The government response is due by December 2025.

Enhancing beauty, heritage, and engagement with the natural environment

OEP recommendation 35

To ensure housing and infrastructure development improves, rather than impedes, people's access to nature, MHCLG should in addition to recent changes in the NPPF make sure that the Green Infrastructure Framework is a material planning consideration

Government's response to recommendation 35

The government **partially accepts** this recommendation.

Defra already expects local planning authorities to plan for development incorporating green infrastructure, for which they can draw on Natural England's Green Infrastructure Framework and the National Model Design Code. The framework provides guidance on national standards for green infrastructure. The design code provides detailed guidance on the production of design codes, guides and policies to promote successful design, including for green infrastructure and access to nature.

OEP recommendation 36

To plan for and deliver the commitment that everyone should live within 15 minutes' walk of green or blue space, the government should use the new access to green space indicator to direct interventions where they are most needed and monitor progress.

Government's response to recommendation 36

The government **accepts** this recommendation.

Defra are already using the green space indicator to identify areas of greenspace deprivation and target interventions. For example, the 9 new national river walks included in the UK government's manifesto commitments, in areas with limited green space access currently.

The [access to blue space in England indicator](#) is now in development to complement this. Defra published this as an [official statistic in development](#) in May 2025.

OEP recommendation 37

The government should harness synergies between its departments' objectives and remit and minimise competing priorities between planning and access to nature to maximise the health and education benefits associated with engagement with nature

Government's response to recommendation 37

The government **accepts** this recommendation.

The UK government has been very clear that nature and development can go hand in hand. Our vision is for a better system that will unlock the housing and infrastructure this country urgently needs while improving outcomes for nature. We are currently developing policy to improve access to nature, working closely with other government departments and key stakeholders. We intend to share further detail later this year.

EIP23 cross-cutting themes

OEP recommendation 38 - Green jobs and finance

To ensure that investment is directed efficiently and effectively, to promote economic opportunities and growth, and to provide a critical path for new interventions, Defra should define sectoral pathways for nature recovery and publish these alongside a revised EIP. This should cover, as a minimum, the agriculture, forestry, water, resources and waste sectors, as committed to in the GFS 2023.

Government's response to recommendation 38

The government **accepts** this recommendation and **defers** a full response.

Defra agrees that it is important that investment be directed effectively and efficiently. We are therefore testing the development of 'nature positive' sectoral pathways to articulate how high-nature impact priority systems can contribute towards meeting the Environment Act targets. This will focus on the water, agriculture and the built environment systems as a starting point.

We are engaging with the Green Finance Institute, WWF, and Aviva on their work on this, alongside wider private, third sector and academic institutions. We expect to include more detail on this work in the revised EIP.

OEP recommendation 39 - Green jobs and finance

To enable independent scrutiny of progress in mobilising investment at the scale necessary and the targeting of that investment, Defra should develop a monitoring and evaluation framework for tracking investment flows, gather project investment and outcome data on a public platform, and report on progress annually. This should provide transparency over investment flows, from funding sources (private and public) to desired outcomes.

Government's response to recommendation 39

The government **accept and defers** a full response to this recommendation.

We agree that it is important to monitor the growth private finance into nature's recovery. We intend to report on progress within the UK government's annual reporting on the Environmental Improvement Plan.

We are engaging with external partners and the Office for National Statistics to set up a mechanism to monitor and report on economy-wide expenditure on nature's recovery. Alongside this, we are working with the Green Finance Institute, which hosts data and information on nature project performance on its 'Hive' platform.

This includes the Natural Environment Investment Readiness Fund Community of Practice case studies, showcasing where action has already been taken to leverage in private finance.

OEP recommendation 40 - Green jobs and finance

Defra should support the growth of nature markets and stimulate greater investment in nature by systematically reviewing the risks and opportunities for such markets and investments, publishing an action plan to address these and reporting on progress annually. This should consider demand side, supply side and local authority capacity constraints.

Government's response to recommendation 40

The government **partially accepts** this recommendation.

We agree that it is important to monitor the growth of nature markets.

We will continue to consider the risks and opportunities for these markets, as part of the Environmental Improvement Plan monitoring and reporting framework rather than a separate action plan. This will help ensure that investment is considered as part of the overall strategy development and reporting and will avoid unnecessary duplication of resources.

OEP recommendation 41 - Green jobs and finance

Government departments should catalyse change, from system level to individual level, by applying the green choices principles holistically to strategies and policies, avoiding overreliance on information provision to affect consumer choices.

Government's response to recommendation 41

The government **accepts** this recommendation.

As part of the revision of EIP23 we are considering the role of behaviour change to support delivery of our environmental goals and targets. This includes looking at behavioural change at an individual and system level and across upstream, midstream and downstream interventions.

We are engaging with policy teams, stakeholders and across other departments to ensure the role of behaviour change is fully considered as part of broader EIP delivery.

OEP recommendation 42 - Green jobs and finance

Defra should revise the food strategy to make better use of all green choices principles and explain how it helps deliver the actions necessary to meet government's environment targets and commitments, while providing food and nutrition security.

Government's response to recommendation 42

The government **partially accepts** this recommendation.

Defra's food strategy is the process by which we move from the food system we have now, to the food system we want to see in the future. Defra published [our vision of a Good Food Cycle](#) and outcomes to deliver it in July 2024.

This strategy will act to maintain our food security – which is national security – by building resilience in the face of climate shocks and geopolitical changes, strengthening the supply chain which operates so effectively to keep us fed.

It will reduce the impact of farming on nature and biodiversity while supporting the sector through that transition. The green choice principles are part of our strategy.

OEP recommendation 43 - Nature-friendly farming

Defra should increase prospects of meeting the 2030 species abundance target and the long-term target to reverse the decline of species abundance (EA21 targets), by ensuring that incentives are sufficient to deliver a significant increase in the uptake of the more environmentally ambitious aspects of Countryside Stewardship and Landscape Recovery schemes, and by making full use of spatial prioritisation, farm advice and guidance.

Government's response to recommendation 43

The government **accepts** this recommendation.

Defra agrees that spatial prioritisation, farm advice and guidance is key to ensuring the success of nature friendly farming. We believe that ongoing work does this sufficiently.

Environmental Land Management Schemes have been co-designed with farmers and land managers to increase participation and encourage greater ambition. Schemes will continue to evolve as we review and improve them to optimise outcomes. This approach fully recognises the ongoing importance of providing advice and guidance to farmers which we view as integral to scheme delivery.

OEP recommendation 44 - Nature-friendly farming

The government should ensure that the Environment Agency takes the action necessary to significantly increase rates of compliance with farming regulations so as to support the government in reducing water pollution and meeting the EA21 target on agriculture water.

Government's response to recommendation 44

The government **accepts** this recommendation.

The Environment Agency works with farmers through an advice-led approach to enforcement to improve compliance with the regulations. Nonetheless, if farmers do not heed this advice, the Environment Agency will not hesitate to proceed to sanctions if they deem it necessary.

The Environment Agency has carried out 4,862 farm inspections in the 2023 to 2024 financial year, resulting in more than 4,000 actions completed to improve practices. These inspections are targeted to areas of the greatest risk, including the catchments of protected sites. We are confident that the Environment Agency are taking the necessary actions to significantly increase rates of compliance with farming regulations.

E03345221

978-1-5286-5670-2