

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Environmental Audit Committee

Oral evidence: Work of the Department and its arm's-length bodies, HC 415

Tuesday 28 April 2026

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Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee members present: Mr Alistair Carmichael (Chair); Sarah Bool; Juliet Campbell; Charlie Dewhurst; Terry Jermy; Jayne Kirkham; Josh Newbury; Jenny Riddell-Carpenter; Tim Roca; Henry Tufnell;

Environmental Audit Committee members present: Julia Buckley; Jonathan Davies; Carla Denyer; Barry Gardiner; Sarah Gibson; Sojan Joseph; Mr Toby Perkins; Martin Rhodes; Dr Roz Savage; John Whitby.

Questions 666 - 722

Witness

I: Dame Helen Ghosh, Candidate for Chair of the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP).

Examination of witness

Witness: Dame Helen Ghosh.

Q666 **Chair:** Welcome to this joint meeting of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee and the Environmental Audit Committee. The purpose of meeting jointly this morning is the pre-appointment hearing for the Chair of the Office for Environmental Protection. We have one witness, Dame Helen Ghosh. We welcome you to the Committees and invite you to introduce yourself for the benefit of our own record and for those who are following our proceedings.

Dame Helen Ghosh: Thank you. I am Dame Helen Ghosh. I was for 30 years a civil servant in a variety of Departments, latterly as the Permanent Secretary at DEFRA and then at the Home Office. I left the civil service in 2012 and moved to become Director General of the National Trust, building on my origins as a historian as a student and the experience I had had in a variety of Departments since then on the environment. I was at the National Trust for six years—a very enjoyable time—and left there in 2018 when I moved to higher education to become the Master of Balliol College in Oxford University. I step down from that role at the end of this university term at the end of June, after eight years in that role.

Q667 **Chair:** Thank you very much. You are very welcome. Just to be clear, this is a pre-appointment hearing, so we are not here to rerun the interview process. To borrow the parlance of the Church of Scotland, you are here to preach as sole nominee. You are coming into a four-year term, in the first instance at least. What do you want to do with the job? What difference will you make at the end of those four years?

Dame Helen Ghosh: Thinking about what I was going to be doing in the next phase of my life, I was attracted to the job for two reasons. I felt that it was a very worthwhile thing to make my contribution to a set of issues about which I personally feel extremely strongly—and indeed emotionally deeply—and that I could bring to it the experience I have had on the government side in policymaking and on the National Trust side and broadly in my community life, in terms of the impact it has on land managers and land users, the public and the enormous benefits there are of a healthy natural environment. I think that explains what I am hoping to achieve from this.

The end of my four years will, of course—or would be if my appointment is confirmed—be in the magic year of 2030, when significant commitments from the Government have to be achieved. I would hope that the Office, and I as Chairman, would have contributed to significant improvements in the broad range of natural environment issues with which the Office deals, that the pace of change, the pace of improvement, thanks to our advice, our investigations and our challenge, has quickened, and that politicians and the public are confident that it is possible with appropriate resourcing, planning, governance and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

appropriate regulation for a healthy environment to thrive alongside a thriving economy, communities and individuals.

Q668 **Chair:** As Committees of the House of Commons, we have had some concern about the way the recruitment process was handled. You will be aware that the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee wrote to the Minister for Nature expressing our frustration that the Government sat on this for six months before they advertised the job and we were given days to comment on it. Likewise, your name was only given to us at very short notice. We don't expect you to comment on that necessarily but, from your end of the telescope, how do you feel the recruitment process worked?

Dame Helen Ghosh: I should say now that I am well on the other side of the fence. I think public appointment recruitment processes, for obvious reasons, are always to do with the involvement of Ministers and the fact that the process is intended to give Ministers a wide range of options and control over the process, always take a long time. They take a longer time than normal appointment processes in other sectors of the economy would take, and I suppose I was expecting that.

I felt that I was very well supported, as I assume the other applicants were, by the appointments team in DEFRA. There were long periods of silence between application and interview invitations and meetings with Ministers, but overall I felt that it was well run. I thought that the criteria were clear. I know that one of the Committees was involved in some of the wording of the criteria. Obviously, I am delighted that I was the successful candidate in the end.

Q669 **Chair:** The actual job description says for time commitment you are expected to make, "up to two days per week". When the job was first set up it was going to be at least two days a week. Do you think this is enough time to do the job properly?

Dame Helen Ghosh: I will see as and when I start doing the job properly from 1 June. One always looks at those estimates of the time commitment with some—not cynicism, that is not the right word. Let's just say that I am expecting that it may well be, for a number of good reasons, sometimes more than that but I am fully prepared for that as necessary.

Q670 **Chair:** Indeed, we are all used to cynicism here. That is two days a week. What will you be doing with the rest of your time?

Dame Helen Ghosh: I am moving into that stage that is sometimes called a portfolio career, sometimes called a braided career. I quite like "braided career". This will be my main commitment. I am not taking on any other paid roles. I have retained two or three non-executive roles in some local institutions. I believe I will be continuing as a trustee of the Ashmolean Museum, and I will be continuing as a trustee of the Oxford Preservation Trust. I am the chair of the Tablet Trust, which publishes a



HOUSE OF COMMONS

weekly journal. None of those are significant time commitments to match this one. This will be my main role.

Q671 **Chair:** There is nothing that could constitute a conflict of interest.

Dame Helen Ghosh: None of those would represent a conflict of interest.

Q672 **Chair:** Right, and there are procedures to follow if that were to change, I guess.

Dame Helen Ghosh: Of course.

Chair: Thank you very much. I will pass on to the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee.

Q673 **Mr Toby Perkins:** Thank you very much Chair, and welcome Dame Helen. You explained a bit about what motivated you to take on the role, and clearly you bring that welcome experience of government and people and maybe organisations on the outside that are somewhat frustrated by government on occasions. To what extent were you encouraged to apply, either by DEFRA Ministers or senior officials? Did anyone from within the Department speak to you in advance of your application?

Dame Helen Ghosh: As you may well be aware, DEFRA has an appointments team, which I think has a sort of headhunting function without having the cost of external headhunters. It drew the application to my attention and when the deadline for applications was extended it pointed that out to me too, but it did not go in any way beyond anything that a normal headhunter function would do. Thereafter, I assume, it appeared to me, that I was treated in exactly the same way as any other applicant.

Q674 **Mr Toby Perkins:** That is quite interesting because the role of a headhunter is usually external to the main organisation. I have been in the recruitment industry for many years myself. You have a recruitment company that goes out and seeks people and places them in front of the people ultimately deciding, but you were—to use your phrase—headhunted by the organisation that was ultimately going to decide who took you on. That seems an unusual process for a public appointment. Had you already applied in advance of the extension of the application process?

Dame Helen Ghosh: I had not already applied. I knew I was moving on to a new phase in my career and from scanning the Cabinet Office public appointments pages, it appeared that the deadline was two days thence, so I thought that is a pity, it might not be for me, and I was not proposing to apply.

I think it would be for DEFRA to reply on this, but I am assuming that what it does, in the same way that a headhunter does, is contact a number of people who it knows, from previous contact or having applied for previous roles, might be interested in the role and assemble a group



HOUSE OF COMMONS

of potential applicants, but anyone can apply. The Cabinet Office public appointments page advertised it, and I believe that DEFRA advertised it on its website. As I said, I don't believe it gave me or any of the other contacted applicants, were there others, any advantage in the actual process.

Q675 Mr Toby Perkins: No, but people might look at it and think that you were potentially a favoured candidate, as we understand it. The position was advertised; you had not applied; they brought it to your attention. They then extended the deadline—

Dame Helen Ghosh: For other reasons.

Mr Toby Perkins: —and encouraged you to apply. You then applied and were appointed. If I had been one of the alternative candidates who had applied on time, I might be hearing this and be somewhat disappointed that they felt the need to not only extend but also to headhunt potential candidates.

Dame Helen Ghosh: Again, it would be for DEFRA to answer on that. I don't believe there was any connection—and I can look back at my records—between the fact that I said that I had not applied because the deadline was imminent and their extension of the deadline. I assume that was for completely different reasons and it may be that the original deadline had passed before that conversation happened.

Q676 Mr Toby Perkins: Yes, okay. You are right, it is for DEFRA to answer on that. However, given that this is a role in which somebody is going to come in here and hold the Government to account, we all recognise that the Government ultimately are appointing that person. What do you think it was about your background that meant that it appears DEFRA really wanted your application? How can you provide assurance that in that role you will still retain real independence?

Dame Helen Ghosh: I assume that I was successful because, as I say, if you look back at my CV, I have extensive experience, understanding and knowledge of most of the big environmental policy issues of the last 20 years—gosh, probably longer than that—30 years, going right back to my early days as a civil servant working in Michael Heseltine's Department of the Environment in 1979, also in 2 Marsham Street incidentally. I have been there and I have seen a lot. Up to the moment when I left the civil service, I know how the system works and the relationship. I understand the way Ministers think and the way politics works, but equally I am someone who has stepped outside.

I have stepped outside to work in one of the largest and most influential environmental NGOs in the National Trust, which is not just a campaigner. It actually does stuff because it has its own land. It deals with farmers. It was, for example, a pioneer in some of the nature-based solutions for flooding, for peatland restoration—all of those sorts of things. I know how it works to be regulated and I know what kinds of



HOUSE OF COMMONS

activities need to take place to add up to the particular and challenging agenda that, as a nation, we have to deal with in our decreasing natural environment.

Q677 Mr Toby Perkins: Are there any specific gaps in your knowledge that you are conscious of going in there?

Dame Helen Ghosh: Of course the specific gaps are the things that have happened since I left the National Trust eight years ago. I think of my career in three stages. The third is being in higher education and working alongside, among other things, very distinguished environmental scientists.

Also, as you may have seen from my CV, I do quite a lot of work with the Centre for Science and Policy in Cambridge and the Royal Society, working with senior civil servants on the one hand and scientists on the other, to discuss the implications for policy issues of new technologies, new discoveries, and many of those are in the environmental space. I have kept up with the science side.

I don't think anybody who knows me from any of the stages in my career would think for a moment I was not someone who would stand up for what they believe to be the right thing to do. Why would I?

I hope I can convey to the Committees that I am doing this because I really care about the outcomes. I am not doing it for any personal advancement or to please DEFRA or to enjoy the kudos of having a public appointment of this kind. I am doing it because I care and I think I have a good record of standing up for things I believe in against opposition and media attacks.

Q678 Mr Toby Perkins: We will explore that in more detail in a moment. The Chair mentioned our concerns about the recruitment process and one of those was that an understanding of environmental policy and practice was not initially in the job description. It was included in the criteria following our intervention. Did you feel that that inclusion enhanced your application or made it more difficult to be successful?

Dame Helen Ghosh: The inclusion of the environmental? I assume it was helpful, as I say, because I have both policy experience and the experience of my time in government, hands-on in a regulated body, experience of putting environmental improvements into action and some scientific knowledge maintained of subsequent developments in more recent issues. I assume that was an advantage.

Chair: We will come on to the question around the independence of the Office but before that, I will bring in Tim here because there is a little bit of a "Yes Minister" vibe about this. I am reminded of that part where Sir Humphrey takes on the job of chairing the campaign for the freedom of information.

Q679 Tim Roca: Thank you, Dame Helen. You will know that our predecessors



HOUSE OF COMMONS

on previous Parliament Committees were concerned about the governance model of the OEP—it being a ministerial appointment, so independence is very important to us. It is also very critical at this stage because of the clash or certainly the competing priorities of infrastructure, planning, energy and protecting the natural environment. Can you talk a little bit more about how you will safeguard the independence of the OEP?

Dame Helen Ghosh: I think there are statutory—I am going to say—bureaucratic, safeguards but there are also safeguards in how the Office takes forward those very important policies. In reading the Act, the emphasis on the independence of the Office is remarkably strong. For example, the powers of the board are stronger than for many others. I have not done a survey but experts on arm's length bodies would say that it has a remarkably strong assigned set of powers.

I also have looked at the draft framework document, which I think is moving slowly, in the way these things do, through the machinery of government and will shortly be published. Again, there are very specific and very striking references in there to independence.

The DEFRA civil servants behind me may suck their teeth but in particular in the framework document there is a paragraph that says, "Subject to its legal duties and the provisions of the Environment Act, the OEP has discretion over its work programme and delivering its functions. This extends to structuring its business, delivering its activities and priorities, determining its judgments and deciding the content of its analytical publications and work programme. These will be determined independently and free from ministerial interference". That is quite a big statement for a framework document, which normally involves ministerial supervision, so I was very reassured by that. I will absolutely wish to continue in the same vein.

Looking back at the statements that Dame Glenys has made and in the findings of the Office—relevant when it comes to the issues about infrastructure, planning and the environment—there have been, I suppose one would say, no holds barred in the willingness of the Office to criticise and suggest improvements to any attempt to water down what I and the Office believe to be important protections.

For example, I thought the comments that Dame Glenys made on the Planning and Infrastructure Bill were very powerful. They were positive on the one hand about some developments about joining up the environmental delivery plans and the local nature strategies and the EIP, but do these things actually water down the protection of individual sites and undermine the idea of a network of sites, and the Government responded.

I think that is a really good example of the respect with which the Office is held and the fact that if you give good evidence-based advice, it should be listened to. I know that Glenys also added that the Office is still



HOUSE OF COMMONS

concerned—and I would be concerned—that there is some element of weakening of protection, but I liked her quote, “However, the amendments make a win-win a more likely prospect”. I think that is a really good example.

The other area at which one needs to look—and I think this picks up the recommendations of the Corry review—is that it is good regulation that can support growth but also alongside that or as part of that the infrastructure that we need; good regulation, regulation that focuses on outcomes and not inputs, which is very much in the spirit of OEP, and are proportionate to various risks and that join up.

Perhaps other members are going to ask questions about this but the thing about joining up is not just now a question of—there are many new sets of initials in this field since I left it and that is something I will have to work on, the alphabet soup of all the initials, acronyms, pathways and so on, and I will have to get my head around that.

Joining those up is one thing, for example in the planning system, but I think that making sure that across government, all Government Departments are joined up in the same way is fantastically important. That is why, as you know and as DEFRA is currently doing some work, the issue of environmental principles policy statements, EPPS, being really embedded and ideally would become more transparent, is also very important. I think that joining up is a big issue in infrastructure and nature.

Q680 Tim Roca: I think that my colleague might explore the 2030 targets a bit more with you in a moment. Looking at independence again, for me there are two aspects here that are important. I very much welcomed what you did at the National Trust around equality and diversity. You got some flak on that from elements of the press, but I thought it was really important. In an era when the consensus around climate change and the environment is fracturing, are you willing to stand up for those things and demonstrate independence in that way?

Perhaps you could comment on that and then in a second sense on independence, I was re-reading at the weekend your comments a number of years ago about David Cameron’s style of government and not enough women at the top of the service, particularly in the Cabinet Office. You clearly were very straightforward then. Can you give us some examples of how you have spoken truth to power and how you will continue to do that in this job, please?

Dame Helen Ghosh: To go back to my National Trust days, one of the things I am very proud of—I am sure it is in my CV, which I know you have—was taking a lead in creating the 2015 strategy for the Trust called “Playing our Part”. That effectively shifted the dial, not away from in any damaging way focusing on the built environment that we looked after but very much towards nature. It was to say if you look back to 1895 and our foundation, what would Octavia Hill and Robert Hunter and co. say was



the real threat to our charitable purpose now, and it was nature and the degradation of the natural environment.

Climate change—and remember this was 2015—was one of the most threatening elements for habitats and loss, literally cliffs falling off into the sea, and the weather effects on our ancient buildings. That was regarded as a very political thing to say in 2015 and perhaps we are coming back round to some of that, but that was quite a brave thing to do, and I got quite a lot of flak on that, particularly from certain sectors of the media.

Soon after the Brexit vote in 2016, as you may be aware, and alongside—but again taking a lead—the Green Alliance, the environmental NGOs and others, I put the argument in the media for public money for public goods, pretty strongly put the argument for a total reform of the CAP, which in a slightly watered down sense has come through, but that was not popular with the many farming tenants, for example, that the Trust had. That is another example.

In my current role, there is defending freedom of speech. Students feel very strongly and personally about some issues and ensuring that in an institution like mine we enable people to speak with different views about things like gender and some of the current geopolitical issues I think requires some bravery, even within a small institution.

The lesson I learnt from the David Cameron reference is never speak to what appears to be a student group when someone from the *Evening Standard* is there, who will then completely misinterpret it.

Chair: I was a Minister in that Government. We can swap David Cameron stories later. We have gone so far into independence, we might as well just stick with it and then I promise we will come back to our plan. Carla, do you want to come in?

Q681 **Carla Denyer:** Yes, thank you, Chair. I will dig a bit more into the independence point because the OEP has warned that meeting the 2030 target is now largely a matter of political choice. How willing would you be to publicly say that the Government have chosen not to meet legally binding environmental targets if that proves to be the case in your tenure?

Dame Helen Ghosh: I think that the Office has been completely consistent in saying most of the failures are about resources, as you say political will, governance and so on. Those are choices and I suspect as we get closer and closer to 2030 we are more likely to say, "The reasons are X, Y and Z" but I see no reason why we would not say, "It is too late now. By not dealing with the issues about resourcing and governance and sensible delivery plans, you have chosen not to do this." I would see no problem in doing that.

Carla Denyer: Thank you. I am aware of time, so let's move on.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Chair: Thanks, Carla. I appreciate that. Moving on then to the question of a vision for the OEP, Barry will lead our questions here.

Barry Gardiner: It is nice to see you again.

Dame Helen Ghosh: It is very nice to see you again.

Barry Gardiner: It has been about 20 years, hasn't it?

Dame Helen Ghosh: You were really interested in sustainable timber.

Barry Gardiner: And I got it.

Dame Helen Ghosh: You got it; you did.

Chair: Well done, both of you, Now get on with the questions.

Q682 **Barry Gardiner:** You will have seen, read, marked and inwardly digested the report that the OEP produced, that was published in January of this year. What do you think its most significant recommendation was?

Dame Helen Ghosh: I think its most significant recommendation—and I suppose this to some extent comes back to talking about my experience at the National Trust—is getting nature-friendly farming right, because that has impacts on so many things that are part of the 10 goals, whether that is abundance of nature, dealing with nutrients and water pollution, better use of resources, finding nature-based solutions to things like flooding.

I think there is a win-win in there for the environment and indeed for farmers if the right resources are put into particularly higher tier elements of the new systems. I would put that as my No. 1. I think that because of the 30x30 issue, acting on the various weaknesses in the current protected sites regimes, partly resources, partly governance, and our 2025 report highlighted those, would probably be the second. It is very hard to—

Q683 **Barry Gardiner:** The Government's response on that, though, was fairly weak, wasn't it? It said that Natural England should keep them actively under review.

Dame Helen Ghosh: Yes, it was pretty feeble.

Q684 **Barry Gardiner:** On how the OEP then moves on from that, it makes these recommendations. It gets, compared to this, which is the Government's response, the flimsiest of responses. How do you move on to challenge when they have made such lackadaisical responses to the recommendations that you, as an organisation, have made?

Dame Helen Ghosh: One of the things that I think is impressive about what the OEP has done so far is that it has been given by Parliament a quite wide set of tools it can use. It has quite a big toolbox for dealing with trying to achieve its ultimate aim, which is of course protection and



improvement of the environment. I think it uses that toolbox very effectively. Thus far, but perhaps what I am going to describe is a sort of model for what might happen next—and of course, since I don't have my feet under the table, there are many things I do not know.

The model for that was the review that we did on the water framework directive, actually stimulated by, I think, among other things, complaints that had arisen into it. Also as part of highlighting the issues around the water framework directive, we also used our power to intervene in a judicial review in the Pickering upstream fisheries case.

In a sense too, at that point, the public interest in the water framework directive and the failure of successive Governments in meeting the challenge of water in a good state, produced a very positive response in the Cunliffe review, the proposed legislation and all of those sorts of things.

There is something about how we can use a number of parts of our toolkit in that way. We have done one investigation into the case of the SSSIs but that is not to say that we could not use some of our other tools in picking up complaints or advice or whatever it may be in building on that.

Q685 Barry Gardiner: The report actually said, "We still do not consider the evolution of the Government's monitoring programme for the water environment is transparent". It said that the recommendations that had been made in 2022-23 had not been fulfilled.

I am not clear that anybody thinks that the state of our water companies—given the inquiry that the EFRA Select Committee has been undertaking and that the EAC did in the last Parliament—is in any way a satisfactory state, but let's break it down. I think you were right to identify environment-friendly farming and what we do there. Water pollution, air pollution, chemical pollution are three key chapters in this report. How will you drill down and press them on where the OEP has made it clear that in all of these areas' targets are being missed or are not being set? What is your vision for these areas?

Dame Helen Ghosh: Inevitably, and perhaps we will also come on to talk about the issue of resources, one of the things I think the Office has been very good at so far is the issue of prioritisation: what do you prioritise for activity and for your focus? The intelligence collected, as I understand it, is in a variety of ways, from complaints from the public, observation, intelligence—we have just set up a small intelligence collecting function; what are the big issues that are going to come along—but also from our deep dives in particular areas. We have to set priorities.

For example, if you look at that wonderful coloured—sadly, all too red—infographic of achievements against the EIP 23, there are a few that are green and air quality happily is one of those—past tense.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q686 Barry Gardiner: Again, on air quality the recommendation says, “The Government have rejected our recommendation to consider a review of statutory air quality standards to improve public health outcomes”. We know that 38,000 people a year are dying from polluted air in this country and, therefore, I don’t think anybody can be satisfied. As you know, the EAC is now conducting an inquiry into air pollution and what we should be doing about that. These are key areas identified in that January report.

I suppose what I am asking you for is your sense of the overall mission that the OEP has in just ramming these home to DEFRA—and we both know, not only to DEFRA but to the Treasury—that they can be allowed to get on with the job that they know needs to be done and that you set out clearly in your report needs to be done.

Dame Helen Ghosh: Yes. I completely accept that. I don’t think the OEP lacks the appetite to be doing that across all fronts, but it does, given that it has inevitably limited resources—well, I say “inevitably”, it has limited resources—and a relatively small staff compared with what was envisaged when it was set up, you have to prioritise.

Q687 Barry Gardiner: It was 85; what is it now?

Dame Helen Ghosh: No, I was citing I believe at the time of the Bill, the Act and setting up the Office, DEFRA estimated that it would need about 125 staff and it is currently about 85, a unit in Northern Ireland and, of course, the Worcester base. I think we will have to prioritise on the things that we feel in our overall mission—protection and improvement—are the things that need most attention. That is not to say we will take our eye off the ball completely with the other things.

Q688 Barry Gardiner: Your top three?

Dame Helen Ghosh: My top three are nature-friendly farming, protected sites and—well, of course these are all interrelated things, but I think seeing through—it is not so much related to the EIP targets but the issue of infrastructure, planning and protection of habitats is something where we will need to keep our eye very clearly on what is going on.

For example, we will need to be looking at the Fingleton review where there are murmurs about a new approach to the habitats directives, I believe. I think that will take up quite a lot of our time as a cross-cutting issue.

Chair: We need to try to keep the evidence fairly tightly focused on your approach, if we can, please, Dame Helen. We all know the background, the structures and the set-up. You have already touched on the question of resourcing, which leads us very nicely on to how you will be balancing the challenge of the vision on the one hand and the resource to deliver on the other. Our questioning on that will be led by Sarah Gibson.

Q689 Sarah Gibson: Thank you, Dame Helen. You touched on resourcing



HOUSE OF COMMONS

earlier and that was going to be one of our questions. The OEP is facing real-terms cuts in its budget, and the CEO told us that as a result there are programmes that won't be taken forward. How do you decide which programmes you are going to cut?

Dame Helen Ghosh: I know that the team is doing some modelling now on what the options are in the likely projections of real-terms cuts. I think we come back to salience: what are the areas of work that we are doing and that we might need to do when we use our intelligence function to predict what those are, which have the most impact on the overall outcomes? I think it comes back to the discussion with Barry. At the moment, I don't yet know what the outcome of that will be, but I suspect it will be along the lines that I indicated earlier.

Back to the Chairman's challenge, one of the frustrations I find—both observing the political world and thinking back to my time as a civil servant—is the issue about the absolute importance of focusing on what is the most important problem that you have to solve and, in a sense, ignoring the rest.

What is the problem you are trying to solve when you set up a new agency or put in place some programme? So often the fundamental problem has not been thought through, and a solution is found to a problem that doesn't exist. Photo ID for voting is an absolutely brilliant example of that. I feel generically incredibly passionate about that, and I think this will be the same issue. Of the areas on which we can concentrate, which have the most cross-cutting impact on meeting the vision that is in the EIP, the 30x30 and the statutory targets, and the kind of natural environment we want to see, will be my approach.

Q690 **Sarah Gibson:** Do you have past experience of delivering cuts while maintaining service levels? Have you had to do that before?

Dame Helen Ghosh: Indeed, yes, I do. It relates exactly to that. Particularly when I was at DEFRA, so that was around the 2008 Budget economic challenges, we were regularly having to reduce our staff by 20% and then another 10% and so on.

You come back to: what is the main purpose of why we are here? What are the things that we have to do, that the Government have to do—just using that as a model—or that someone else can do, and what will not matter at all if we don't do it? That is the way I would approach it.

The issue about what only we can do is a very important one in the OEP, given our particular set of powers. There are some things that only we can do in the way that we can set up. I think keeping an eye on that is very important.

Q691 **Sarah Gibson:** I appreciate that. That is kind of what we wanted to hear, I think. Do you believe that the OEP's current headcount is sufficient? Would you make the case for more resources?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Dame Helen Ghosh: Until I get there, I don't think I can really say that because I have not had the discussions and I have not looked at the material that the team has produced on what the options are and where we might step back a bit.

Again, back to the things that only we can do, I believe we are very energetic in responding to consultations on relevant issues. Perhaps there are plenty of other people who can respond to consultations. It is using our powers properly that is the important thing. Those are the things that only we can do.

Q692 **Chair:** We come on now to my favourite topic, which is organisational culture. Roz Savage will lead the questioning. Just before she does, I am struck by the fact that in everything you answer you say, "We are doing this. We are going to do that". You obviously see yourself already as being part of the Office. Do you see yourself as being a disrupter or continuity?

Dame Helen Ghosh: You have picked up, Chairman, a characteristic that I have. If we were talking about National Trust, I would start talking about "we" there. I feel a natural, when I am committed to something—

Q693 **Chair:** It is not the job of the chair to be part of the team. As we have seen in the water industry, sometimes the job of the chair is—

Dame Helen Ghosh: Is not to be part of the team, yes.

Chair: To give the team the hard truths that they don't want to hear.

Dame Helen Ghosh: I agree absolutely. I think when I say "we"—let's talk about it in this context—I was using it as a short term for the Office, the Office, the Office.

Chair: Sorry, we have got questions from Roz around this.

Q694 **Dr Roz Savage:** Thank you, Dame Helen, for being here. Clearly, the head of an organisation has a really important role to play in setting the cultural tone of that organisation. What thoughts have you had about the culture at the OEP and what sort of culture you would like to build there?

Dame Helen Ghosh: Going back to the Chairman's opening remarks, I only knew 10 days ago that I was going to be appearing today, and I have been able to make one visit to the Office in Worcester last week. I know very little about—I have not had the chance to pick up the culture of the organisation.

One of the things I believe very profoundly as a leader is culture is not what you write down and not what you stick up on the walls; it is what you see people doing every day. That is what creates culture: manners maketh the man: "What do you do? We just don't do things like that round here."



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The impression I get of how the Office appears to go about doing things is that it is pretty faithful to its principles of integrity, evidence-based, proportionality, all of those sort of things. It does appear to convey that kind of culture and so, in that sense, I think that is a good thing. I know nothing yet about the nature of the relationship between the Chair and the board—I have not had the chance to meet the board yet—and then how the Chair and the board relate to other staff daily, when they are visiting, when they are meeting, all of those sorts of things.

I believe, as a leader, profoundly in two things. One of your most important roles as a leader is to what I call set the tone: what kind of organisation do I want this to be? I undoubtedly want it to be all those things that are the values of the organisation and its statutory purposes. I want it to be inclusive. I want to empower people, delegate to people as far as it is possible to do so. I want to be visible. I want staff to play a full part in the big decisions about the organisation—all of those sorts of things.

I want to be, as one management expert put it, very conscious of the importance of closeness and distance. That is one of the biggest challenges of being a leader. You want to be close in the sense that you understand your staff, you appreciate their concerns, you have that kind of emotional intelligence, but equally there comes a point, as the chairman said, when you might have to sack them or you might have to say, “I am sorry, we are cutting”, or “I am sorry, we are moving”. As the leader of an organisation, you cannot afford to get so close that you cannot make those sorts of decisions. It is setting the tone. I am sorry, I am not trying to turn it into a leadership seminar.

The other thing that is very important in leadership is to be prepared to play different roles. You are not always the same person. There was a very different context in the Home Office from the National Trust, and I had to respond to a different expectation of what a leader would be. You have to play different parts in the same role; sometimes you are being tough, sometimes you are being encouraging. That is still authentic leadership, and you have to be prepared to do it.

Q695 Dr Roz Savage: Just to press a bit further on that, as a leader often it is leading by example. It is the way that you are in the organisation that really establishes—

Dame Helen Ghosh: What you do is much more important than what you say.

Dr Roz Savage: Indeed. As you have been at the head of quite a number of organisations, have you observed or had feedback about what people take away from the way that you are in that role?

Dame Helen Ghosh: Yes. In many of my organisations, I have had 360° reviews and reports. They feel that I am inclusive in relationships with staff. I have always made a very strong point, partly because it is so



enjoyable, of spending time with staff where they are, whether that is Border Force at Heathrow or a National Trust shop at Hardwick. I really enjoy that and staff appreciate that, so it is being alongside. They like the fact that I am intellectually quite incisive and interested, curious in what they do. One of my favourite quotes in any 360° report that I got was, "She doesn't put up with rubbish", which I think is true, but I hope in a nice way.

One of the things I have learnt very strongly through leadership experience is that, because of my particular personality type, I have had to learn how to express emotional connection. It is not a very civil service thing. It was called for much more at the National Trust, the sense that some messages you have to send are tough ones. Making sure that you show the right kind of emotional intelligence in that is something I have learnt more and more over the years.

Q696 Dr Roz Savage: I will make this my last question, Chair. The former chair of the OEP noted its propensity to "lift every stone and follow every avenue and then write extensively". It is not entirely clear from here whether she saw that as a good thing or a bad thing, but what are your reflections on that?

Dame Helen Ghosh: I couldn't agree more and I think I said in one of my interviews, "Gosh, we write lots of words". Sorry, "The Office writes lots of words". I was so relieved—and this is my other visual aid—you suddenly get an infographic like this, which is on the protected sites report, and you think "phew". I think we need to have some targets about fewer words, fewer initials, although we have to use initials because they are in the world in which the Office operates. I think that would increase our impact actually.

Q697 Dr Roz Savage: And more infographics.

Dame Helen Ghosh: And more infographics, like this excellent one.

Dr Roz Savage: I would certainly welcome that. Thank you very much.

Q698 Chair: To stay with this question of emotional intelligence, which I think was the term you used earlier, in your time at Balliol you had to handle some quite difficult, challenging stuff around the investigation of sexual harassment complaints. What lessons did you take from that?

Dame Helen Ghosh: Obviously I won't go into the detail.

Chair: No, there was nothing attached to you.

Dame Helen Ghosh: No, indeed, there was nothing in that case attached to me.

Chair: It is leadership at the top of the organisation.

Dame Helen Ghosh: It is leadership at the top of the organisation. As members of the Committees will be aware, the issues around welfare,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

harassment and so on have become more and more live in higher education in recent years because, to some extent, people are more willing to report but also, quite rightly, the concern is greater and the Office for Students is reflecting that.

The lessons that I learnt were that it is very important to make sure that your policies and procedures are up to date, reflect current expectations in whatever area they are operating in, in this sense in a disciplinary area, and that they are applied without fear or favour. As is true across society as a whole, one should not consider the reputational impact on the organisation or an individual in taking them forward. I think those are the two issues that have come out of that for me.

Chair: Thank you for that. The next questions are on working with the devolved legislatures.

Q699 **Henry Tufnell:** We have a memorandum of understanding between the OEP and the Interim Environmental Protection Assessor for Wales and Environmental Standards Scotland. In 2024 the OEP launched the investigation into special protected areas in England and Northern Ireland, and we have seen similar investigations launched in Scotland and Wales. What experience will you bring in establishing and maintaining these links in working in a devolved context?

Dame Helen Ghosh: Technically speaking, I bring the experience of working in DEFRA where, of course, by the time I was there, many of the issues relating to the natural environment were devolved. Contact and communication and dealing with pride, learning lessons from what was happening in the devolved Administrations, was absolutely part of that. That is my first experience.

Although Scotland was not part of my remit at the National Trust, Wales and Northern Ireland were. For example, planning issues or regulatory issues in Wales and Northern Ireland were things that the National Trust had to deal with.

I also had the pleasure of many visits to look at the particular issues facing—of course this is more relevant in this role—Northern Ireland, but also Wales, the particular cultural, political and physical outcome issues in the natural environment. I understand the difference. I understand the cultural issues, that the politics are very different and the importance of respecting that. Obviously, I will be very keen to encourage the OEP staff to continue in that vein, which I believe they already do.

Q700 **Henry Tufnell:** Can I ask about the effectiveness of the OEP in Northern Ireland? You have the requirement of at least one board member to represent Northern Ireland, but I think that is the only provision that explicitly states how the OEP is meant to operate in Northern Ireland.

Dame Helen Ghosh: Happily, assuming I am confirmed in this role, my first trip will be to Northern Ireland towards the end of June when the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Office is delivering its response to the first Northern Ireland EIP. I will get the chance to talk to some stakeholders and our staff there.

We have an office in Northern Ireland, a part of whose function is to liaise with DAERA and local stakeholders there, but I believe we have also ensured—which seems to be very sensible—that there are cross-cutting issues with which they deal, which are not just Northern Irish issues. The Northern Ireland office and the Worcester office are integrated in having cross-cutting policy responsibilities. I will be able to answer your question must better by the end of June.

Chair: We will move on to some of the issues about the UK-EU relationship, which you will know are under negotiation. Sarah will lead the questioning and then we will bring in Sojan.

Q701 **Sarah Bool:** Dame Helen, thank you for your answers so far. As the Chair alluded to, the future of our relationship with the EU is coming into a sharp focus, especially for the EFRA Committee with the SPS negotiations coming forward, which is likely to involve dynamic alignment. Given that concept and the Government seemingly moving ever closer in their relationship with the EU, I want to explore with you what challenges and opportunities you think a closer relationship with the EU might present for the OEP, or otherwise.

Dame Helen Ghosh: I have to say immediately that, because I have not been in this world for some time, I do not know the details of the negotiation on alignment. I do know that in the pre-Brexit and post-Brexit period, the National Trust, alongside all the other green NGOs—as indeed was true to a significant extent with the farming community—argued very strongly that continued alignment was essential in order to ensure that there was no diminution in protection but, also, that the UK could still take the lead that it had always taken in international agreements that we should, as far as possible, stay in step with EU environmental legislation.

The environment respects no borders, even with the English channel and the North sea. Many of the issues, particularly the SPS and SACS and Ramsar sites, we are still very much in the international space for many of those things. The idea of dynamic alignment—dynamic sounds a bit challenging given the pace that laws and regulation can be changed, but it is something that we would welcome.

Q702 **Charlie Dewhirst:** Given that the OEP was born out of that post-Brexit environment in many ways, from your perspective, is there a concern that a closer alignment in the regulatory sense would mean that your operational work is diminished and you would need to scale back your resources?

Dame Helen Ghosh: The OEP was set up and argued for by the same group of green NGOs that I was referring to, because there needed to be someone like the Commission who could hold people to account. Not issue the vast fines that the Commission could do, so it was not quite the



same regime, but the OEP is a substitute for the Commission in some of its main purposes. It is possible, if we reached a stage where the Commission took back some of those powers, or took back some of those roles, we would have to perhaps consider how we operated in a complementary way to a commission, but that does seem a long way away in every sense.

- Q703 Sarah Bool:** In talking about the independence, the Government will obviously have one priority going one way and there will be that balancing side. One of the concerns that we have with the SPS agreement is it says, “sanitary and phytosanitary”, so it is the movement of animal and plant products.

Also around other elements, for example, in the UK we are trying to push forward with precision breeding, which is something the EU is not necessarily adopting. We are concerned about certain regulations, particularly for the Scottish market, around mycotoxins. There is this element of understanding how you are going to approach with an independent view about balancing that. If that is not the question now, something we might plant in your mind for how to apply.

Dame Helen Ghosh: This is an issue that we would need to look into as it became more salient. That is interesting.

Sarah Bool: Yes. That dynamic alignment point will become a big issue to think about.

Dame Helen Ghosh: Yes.

- Q704 Sojan Joseph:** Thank you Dame Helen for your answers. As the OEP has the legal powers to scrutinise the Government and to advise on environment, you have the enforcement powers to hold the local authorities and other statutory bodies accountable. How important do you think OEP’s accountability to Parliament will be, and what should the Committee expect beyond your statutory report? You talked about that you write a lot. What are the other actions, for example enforcement actions against the water companies who pollute our rivers or industry-scale dumping of rubbish? What can we expect from you?

Dame Helen Ghosh: As you know, the role of the Office is to hold the statutory authorities to account. In the examples you cite, the Environment Agency on waste, DEFRA, or Natural England on countryside issues, or Ofwat on water pollution. We are not the direct regulator. That is something that we have to remember.

Were I to be confirmed in the role I would learn much more, but my impression is that there is a steady stream of publication of reports from the Office, wearing our various hats, on issues—either ones we have chosen to pursue or that we have been invited to pursue by Ministers—that the EAC in particular has picked up vigorously.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Our ultimate accountability is to Parliament, which is the way we were set up. This kind of appearance and transparency with Parliament and the two Committees on what we have been doing is important and we will be very happy to continue with that.

Q705 Sojan Joseph: What more could OEP do to engage with Parliamentarians?

Dame Helen Ghosh: I don't know what they do already, so I am not sure what more. There is a lot of contact between the EAC and the Office. I don't know how that balances with the EFRA Select Committee. There are all sorts of social and more formal ways that that stakeholder relationship can be kept up, and I would be delighted to make sure it is a very healthy one and a very two-way street.

Q706 Martin Rhodes: Dame Helen, you have talked and we have discussed with you about your experience both in government, in the civil service and also outside. In terms of being outside of government and the civil service, what have you learned with regards to your interaction and relationship with government and across government in terms of across different Departments and parts of government? What experience have you had of that in terms of working and building relationships with different parts of government when you have been in those external roles?

Dame Helen Ghosh: If you take the National Trust, which is an organisation that has relationships with different parts of government, because of the nature of its holdings, both in terms of the assembly and the senate, it had relationships with DCMS because of the heritage side; DEFRA because of the environmental side; DESNZ because of its interest in various forms of renewable energy and its objection to some forms of extraction. I had experience of those cross-cutting connections from that.

Q707 Martin Rhodes: From that experience, what did you learn about how to make those cross-cutting relationships effective?

Dame Helen Ghosh: I don't know whether it is as much from the time I was working within government as externally, but a generic learning that I see is reflected in some of the approach that the Office takes, which I would support, is that the OEP is not a campaigning body. It is not Friends of the Earth or Greenpeace or any campaigning NGO of any kind. That is not what it is, not what it is set up to do and that is something it should not be doing. One of the things that people feel uncomfortable about is that, for example, in its time the Office has not initiated an environmental review. It has chosen to operate, and operate very successfully, in a more organic way.

If you can get to the stage of issuing a decision notice and then negotiating with DEFRA or the Environment Agency or Ofwat, or whoever it may be, to get a satisfactory outcome, you should do that rather than make a big bow-wow campaigning statement about it. That is something I have learnt about working successfully with Government Departments



and politicians, inside and outside of government. The thing you should focus on is getting the outcome, not getting lots of credit, particularly given the status of OEP.

Q708 Martin Rhodes: In terms of your time within government and the civil service, do you think your experience of having worked in DEFRA will be a help or hinderance in this new role?

Dame Helen Ghosh: The politics and the politicians have changed a great deal since I left DEFRA in 2010. Understanding something about the political process and what motivates politicians and is likely to persuade them or not is very valuable. An awful lot about the culture and the motivations will have changed.

Q709 Josh Newbury: The OEP has consistently highlighted the critical importance of getting nature-friendly farming right in order to achieve our environmental targets. You mentioned that as a barrier as one of your top three priorities. If confirmed, what would you want to do to further that aim?

Dame Helen Ghosh: I hope I am not mis-quoting my predecessor, but the Office has consistently made the point that, although the structures for the future support and investment arrangements for farming are, in theory, good ones, they have to be backed up with resources. The stop-start that has been going on with some of the stewardship schemes is not helpful in terms of confidence and the confidence of farmers in their ongoing economic position. That is something I am sure we will keep talking about as an office. One of the things that I hope we would be able to do is to champion good examples.

My observation from working with a wide range of farming tenants when I was in the National Trust—obviously, I also met farmers in my DEFRA days, but more hands on with the National Trust—is that it is easier to talk in theory about what nature friendly farming looks like. To be able to show people who perhaps trained decades ago what it means in practice now, how the good examples could be imitated, is a very important thing.

I am not sure how the Office would play a part in that, but that seems to me to be one of the key issues. We keep talking about resources, governance, and how whatever we are doing to invest in farming, it joins up with all the other environmental and farming issues. The farming road map should help with that. Doing our bit in terms of showing what good looks like is important.

Q710 Josh Newbury: The structure and form of some of these support schemes is critical, so I would like to put one other example to you. In her recent farming profitability review, Baroness Minette Batters said that she feels that landscape recovery can currently be characterised as, in her words, “diamonds in paper crowns”. Significant resource goes into nature restoration in a relatively small area and then you have huge swaths of the country that are not benefitting from that funding. Drawing



HOUSE OF COMMONS

on your time at the National Trust, which is obviously a key landowner in landscape recovery, do you have any thoughts on that as to how we could administer those schemes more effectively?

Dame Helen Ghosh: I mentioned earlier the theme of joining up. They have to be joined up with the local nature recovery scheme and species schemes. You are right and that is what you are doing, creating the famous more better habitats, more joined up concept of nature recovery. You are not going to achieve anything—there is no point, as you say, having an island of good practice and then wasteland and then another island. I am hoping and assuming that the local nature recovery strategies are supposed to do exactly that.

I am very excited by the new land use framework. We did our own version of that post 2015 at the National Trust: what should we be doing with our land where—woodland, agriculture, arable and so on. It was an interesting tool; how the country is brought to life in planning and those kinds of things is vital.

Q711 **Josh Newbury:** I am glad you mentioned land use because that is something that I also wanted to pick up. I am sure you would agree that trust with the farming community is critical to the OEP being effective?

Dame Helen Ghosh: Yes.

Q712 **Josh Newbury:** They need to feel that the shift that we are all on—farmers included—is something that they are an active participant in and not just something that is just being done to them. It is fair to say that the National Trust has faced some criticism on that front for a number of years, including during your time as director general. We have heard about visitor information that implied they had a right to roam and picnic on tenanted passages; fireworks displays being planned right next to where cattle are housed; tenant's land being dug up without their permission; tenancies that have lasted for generations being abruptly ended to pave the way for large-scale re-wilding. I believe in 2016 you made a remark that prompted some backlash from certain farming groups.

Clearly, as director general, you would not be directly responsible for much of that, but I am sure you can appreciate that against that backdrop, the farming community might be sceptical of how the OEP's work will impact them. What will you do in this role to build trust with the farming community?

Dame Helen Ghosh: The 2016 thing is the reference that I made earlier to standing up for public money for public goods speech. Those are all some bad examples. There are a lot of good examples where the National Trust worked very effectively with their tenant farmers and had some exemplary relationships.

I note that even James Rebanks, the Lake District farmer, has moved over the years from being very opposed to what we did at the National



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Trust in terms of some land acquisition—I remember having a very painful tea in his farm kitchen when I was there—to being much more supportive of some of the things that the National Trust is doing in the Lake District, for example with tree planting and so on.

There are bad examples, and all of those examples did indeed sound bad, but the National Trust did and continues to do overall a good and inclusive job with the majority of its farm tenants and is doing some good stuff on what good looks like. I suspect that the very fact that I have visited farms, know about farming to that extent, will, I hope, instil some trust in me in this role.

Q713 Chair: It brings us back to the emotional intelligence question. How do you read the mood of the farming community that you are going to be engaging with?

Dame Helen Ghosh: I have only been an observer for the last few years, but they seem to me that they are still distrustful. As we now see the geopolitical confusion, they are rightly confusing on food security and the importance of food production. They are doubtful that there genuinely is a way of maintaining or ideally increasing our food security alongside making improvements for nature. The job of the Office and of all the people in the system—

Chair: You are not really describing a mood here. I asked you, what was the mood of the farming community?

Dame Helen Ghosh: They are distrustful. They don't believe that the Government, the OEP, green NGOs or the environmentalist lobby understand the realities of the economics of farming or the challenges that face them in nature friendly farming. That is the job of the system.

Q714 Chair: You have a lot of work to do there. They are not going to look at you and say, "There is Dame Helen, she is a former Permanent Secretary at DEFRA. She worked and headed up the National Trust. She is going to be on our side".

Dame Helen Ghosh: I don't think the OEP is supposed to be on anybody's side. It is supposed to understand how—

Q715 Chair: This is where the emotional intelligence comes in. I am asking you how you will be seen by them. Have you considered that?

Dame Helen Ghosh: I may be seen by some of them—back to 2016—as someone who will always put the environment ahead of the economy. But it would be my job to both point out the extent to which I never was that thing and, also, that I am not that thing now.

Q716 Chair: The Prime Minister says food security is national security. Do you think he is right?

Dame Helen Ghosh: He also says—as the Government do say—that a healthy, natural environment is also part of our national security. One of



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the jobs of the OEP is to help with the argument that both are perfectly possible.

Chair: I will move on noting that there was not a no or a yes there. Jonathan, you are going to lead us in the stakeholder relationships with environmental sector and the public.

Q717 **Jonathan Davies:** Thank you, Chair. Compared to a great many regulators, the OEP is held in quite high regard by its stakeholders, including environmental groups. That is perhaps its leadership has been willing to push back where it has felt necessary. Having a change of chair may present an uncertain time for some of those stakeholders. What are you doing to engage and reassure those people?

Dame Helen Ghosh: Clearly, as the Chair has just pointed out, the range of stakeholders is quite a wide one. Some of the stakeholders—for example, the green NGOs—are organisations that I know from my past lives and some of the people involved, the chief executives, are people I know. The same is true of the Environment Agency, Natural England, and others. I hope that many of those people will have felt that there is nothing to fear from me, but that I genuinely have demonstrated a commitment to the purposes of the OEP over many years, personally and professionally. I hope they will find that reassuring and will perhaps even welcome my appointment from that point of view.

As the Chair pointed out, there are some who will look at me and think that I will not be sufficiently understanding of issues around infrastructure, growth or the challenges that face the farming community. I suspect, and hope, with the support of those in the Office who do more stakeholder connection and are familiar with them, that I will be able to focus my early efforts on those people to reassure them.

Q718 **Jonathan Davies:** In terms of the public, my perception is that many of them will not know about the Office for Environmental Protection, its remit, its role, or how they might be able to engage with it. Do you have any thoughts or plans about how you might engage the wider public in the Office's work?

Dame Helen Ghosh: Yes, it is a tricky one. When you look at the stats for how many public complaints we take up and pursue, it is a pretty small number because that is the way it is set up. It is set up for complaints about a local issue to go up through the Environment Agency, Natural England or whoever it is. You can see that people will think, "What is the point of complaining to the OEP? There is no point complaining to it". To some extent, it is better to use your local complaint process. What is worth doing is the cumulative effect of complaints to the OEP that can then produce a pattern and lead to a specific inquiry. Inquiries can obviously lead to regulatory action.

It is tricky to explain to the public exactly what our role is. I gather we get about 500 inquiries from the public a year about what we do when they are interested in the idea of a complaint, and we no doubt signpost



them in the right direction. I need to discover a bit more about that. I don't know the answer to the question, what would it be useful to tell the general public more about that they can use and that they can put into operation in a useful way.

- Q719 **Jonathan Davies:** Compared to some other regulatory bodies, where the public can engage them to raise an issue, can you think of anywhere you might want to draw upon good examples from other similar organisations? Similarly, are there other regulators that are falling short in that space that you might identify as ones that you would not want to use?

Dame Helen Ghosh: I honestly don't know enough about the current state of complaints systems in the other main regulators. It is a good idea to have a look and see if there is anything we can learn from them. I will take that up.

- Q720 **John Whitby:** What more can the OEP do to give more timely and clearer warnings for when targets go off track, rather than just relying on retrospective annual reporting?

Dame Helen Ghosh: Our individual investigations do that to some extent, although it is not quite the same as the comprehensive report that we give on the EIP. The timetable process for commenting on EIPs is dignified but not necessarily ideal. There is a long pause, but we are commenting on something that happened at least 12 months before—I don't have the timetable in my head—but by the time the Government have reported and then we are reporting, you are a long way away from events.

One thing that might speed that up, which DEFRA has certainly suggested, is that they should put its response to our last commentary in its report on the current year, if you see what I mean, so that we don't have to wait for a separate response from DEFRA on our previous set of recommendations. That would speed things up a bit.

- Q721 **John Whitby:** The reality is that at the moment, by the time the Government respond, it is two or three years, and the data has died off. Would you support a change to the Environment Act to change those timescales and make the Government's response and your reporting a bit quicker?

Dame Helen Ghosh: Yes, because there is going to be a five-year review of the operation of the Act this coming year, is that right? There is a review every five years. That would be an opportunity to do that. I would need to take away a piece of paper to sketch out exactly how it would work, but I agree with the principle of the thing. Getting those reports through the system more quickly would be a good idea.

- Q722 **Barry Gardiner:** What surprised me in our discussions is that you have not said at any stage how excited you are to be working with such professional people. I think many of us would feel that Natalie Prosser



HOUSE OF COMMONS

has been an excellent director and chief executive of the OEP. It is picking up on what the Chair was asking you there: how do you regard these prospective colleagues, because I was surprised that you did not express that excitement to be working with them?

Dame Helen Ghosh: I regard working with them with enormous excitement. The Office has come on, performed, and established itself incredibly well over the last five years since its establishment. It has shown professionalism, effectiveness and made real changes and so on. I am very excited about doing that. Sorry, it is one of those things that I take as implicit in one of the reasons why this is an organisation that I very much want to be a part of. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to say that.

Chair: Thank you very much, Dame Helen. We have exhausted the curiosity of the Committees. We will now proceed to sit in private, and we will produce our report in early course. That is our work to be done. For the moment, yours is finished. We thank you very much for your attendance, co-operation, and engagement. It has been enormously helpful and is very much appreciated. For the moment, we conclude this joint meeting.