House of Commons

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

# Soil Health: Government Response to the Committee's First Report of Session 2023–24

## Second Special Report of Session 2023–24

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## The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and associated public bodies

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# Second Special Report

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee published its First Report of Session 2023–24, Soil Health (HC 245), on 5 December 2023. The Government response was received on 8 March 2024 and is appended below.

# Appendix: Government Response

## Government response to the Committee's recommendations

The Government thanks the Committee for its report, "Soil Health". As the Committee recognises, healthy soil is vital for food production, water regulation, biodiversity, and carbon storage, and needs to remain resilient to the impacts of climate change, such as increased flooding and drought. We share the Committee's concerns regarding the challenges facing soil health in England and are committed to taking action to address them.

The Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) 2023 sets out our ambition to deliver a high quality, resilient food system through our new farming schemes. This ambition includes protecting and enhancing our natural environment, and soil health is a key element of this goal. By 2028, we will bring at least 40% of England's agricultural soil into sustainable management through our new farming schemes, increasing this to 60% by 2030. In January 2024, we published an update on the Agricultural Transition Plan which introduces actions focused on improving soil health, such as the adoption of cover cropping and no-till farming, to add to the suite of actions currently available.

Recognising the potential risks posed by contaminated land, and the importance of healthy, functioning soil in an urban setting, we are committed to integrating its management into our overall approach to soil health. Poor urban soil health can be addressed through better use and management of existing soil. We are updating the Construction Code of Practice for the Sustainable Use of Soils on Construction Sites and developing a Soil Re-use and Storage Depot Scheme. This will help prevent soil that would otherwise be classified as waste going to landfill and encourage reuse of soil.

We are also committed to improving our understanding of soil health. In 2022, we began national soil monitoring under the terrestrial Natural Capital Ecosystem Assessment (tNCEA) programme. The data will inform ambitious, proactive, and sustainable policy decisions to support the government's goal to improve the state of the environment within a generation.

We welcome the Committee's recommendations and are carefully considering them alongside our existing initiatives. We are confident that, through working together with farmers, landowners, and other stakeholders, we can make significant progress in improving the health of our soils, ensuring a healthy and productive environment for generations to come.

## Soil data

**Recommendation 1:** ***The Government must ringfence the funding for the soil health monitoring programme to ensure a long-term commitment to this precious national resource. This funding should be on the same scale as funding for the monitoring of other critical assets such as water and air quality. The Government should also finalise the soil health indicators by December 2024 at the latest.*** (Paragraph 16)

Improving soil health is a priority for government. To achieve this, establishing robust baseline data is essential to monitoring changes over time. National soil monitoring is currently being undertaken within the tNCEA programme, yielding valuable new data to aid improved understanding of national soil condition. The tNCEA is a three-year programme, aided by substantial government investment (£140 million funding over three years for the whole NCEA programme, both tNCEA and marine NCEA). The tNCEA is setting up long-term monitoring capability at a national/regional level.

National soil monitoring under the tNCEA Programme began in 2022. Up-to-date and comprehensive soils data is a priority of the programme. Provisional updates will be produced from 2024, with the immediate phase using current capital investment to achieve two years of the five years needed for a soil health baseline. The next phase of capital investment, needed to complete the baseline for soil health by 2028, will be included in Defra's R&D Spending Review.

'Soil health' is one of the 66 indicators of environmental change in the Outcome Indicator Framework of the 25 Year Environment Plan. Defra will publish a progress report on the development of the indicator by June 2024. Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) published a concept model in June 2023, and we intend to develop a more comprehensive model by 2025. The completed indicator will be published when sufficient data have been collected through the tNCEA programme. The indicator will use data currently being gathered on soil characteristics (physical, chemical and biological) and land use to show how different soils are contributing to different ecosystem services as a measure of soil health.

**Recommendation 2:** ***By 2025, Defra should adapt the Environmental Land Management schemes to fund the testing and assessment of all key physical, chemical and biological soil attributes decided by the soil health indicators project. These schemes should only support tests that are easy to use, cost-effective, and meet an approved standard, to collect more robust and comparable data. This must involve working with industry on suitable tests and assessments and collaborating with supply chain assurance standards to ensure farmers need only produce data for one common set of soil health tests. The ELM schemes should incorporate mechanisms to feed publicly funded data back into the soil health monitoring programme. This data and analysis should be anonymised, aggregated, secured and not be used to monitor progress on individual farms.*** (Paragraph 25)

We encourage farmers to establish their own soil health baseline and monitor any changes in soil properties. Under the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) scheme, farmers can currently get paid to assess soil, produce a soil management plan, and test soil organic matter (SOM). Our Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes are being designed

and piloted extensively with farmers and we are making them as straightforward, fair, and flexible as possible. We will continue to evaluate the success of ELM schemes as they develop, to make sure the offer continues to work for users, provides value for money, and helps us to achieve our outcomes.

Future developments may include asking farmers and land managers to provide information about their soil assessment and SOM testing results during their SFI agreement. Any data collected would be used to assess the condition of England's soils at a national or regional level.

We intend to publish further tools and guidance later this year to enable farmers to collect consistent and comparable information about the health of their soil.

**Recommendation 3:** ***In order to gain an insight into recent trends, the Government should also, by 2026, commission and publish an analysis of existing soil health data held by third parties This should be used to inform future policy development, including incoming iterations of ELM schemes.*** (Paragraph 26)

Analysing existing soil health data is valuable but concerns about data quality and standardization require careful consideration. The tNCEA combines two approaches that together provide a holistic and joined-up view of our natural environment, enabling us to identify connections, dependencies, and trade-offs between policy ambitions and to make better-informed decisions that benefit people and nature. As part of this, up-to-date and comprehensive soils data is a priority of the programme and being measured through projects such as the strategically sampled England Ecosystem Survey and the England Peat Map. The data, evidence-based insight and understanding that tNCEA will deliver will inform ambitious, proactive, and sustainable policy decisions to support the government's goal to improve the state of the environment within a generation.

The Environment Agency launched the Big Soil Stocktake in November 2023, to encourage data transparency and accessibility on soil data across all sectors. The Environment Agency continue to work with Defra, Natural England, and others to achieve this.

## Soils strategy and leadership

**Recommendation 4:** ***By May 2024, the Government must publish the new National Action Plan for Sustainable Use of Pesticides and its Land Use Framework. The Framework should provide clear guidance and leadership to stakeholders on the most effective uses for types of soils, and the trade-offs between different outcomes, such as increased biodiversity and improved food security. Once established, the Land Use Framework should be frequently updated to incorporate the latest data and also should be integrated into other government incentive schemes, such as ELMs, to reward sustainable decision-making.*** (Paragraph 38)

The Secretary of State for Defra has written to the Chair of the House of Lords Land Use in England Committee to confirm the Government's commitment to produce a Land Use Framework in 2024. A Land Use Framework for England will help to inform how we maximise co-benefits and manage any trade-offs, supporting the delivery of resilient, multifunctional landscapes, which will be dependent on the local context and national needs.

The purpose is to inform the development of land use policy and to provide additional information for the decision makers who work and own the land to make efficient decisions based on local knowledge and strategies. For example, Local Nature Recovery Strategies will help to steer nature restoration projects by proposing locations where they can be most beneficial.

We are currently considering whether further publications would contribute to ensuring that advice for land use decision makers remains up to date and accessible to all.

We also hope to publish the National Action Plan for Sustainable Use of Pesticides shortly.

**Recommendation 5:** ***Once a soil baseline and health indicators are in place, the Government must work with industry and academia to develop a set of binding and measurable targets for improving soil health in England, based primarily on the agreed soil health indicators, and giving a clear but realistic indication of how the use of agricultural inputs will be reduced over time. By the end of 2028, the Government should have amended the Environment Act 2021 section 1, subsection 3 to explicitly mention soil health, put soil on an equal, harmonised footing with water and air, and to bind future governments to these targets.*** (Paragraph 39)

National soil monitoring under the tNCEA Programme began in 2022. Provisional updates will be produced from 2024 contributing to a comprehensive and robust baseline for soil health by 2028, subject to further capital funding. This baseline will inform the consideration of the most effective and appropriate future commitments for soil – for example new commitments in the Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) or development of any future environmental target for soil.

Long-term statutory targets can be set under the provisions of section 1 of the Environment Act 2021 in relation to the natural environment and people's enjoyment of it at any time. We see target-setting as an iterative process, built upon over time as our evidence base and understanding develops. We will continue to keep our targets framework under review.

The next review of the EIP, and any revision of it, is due in 2028 as required by the Environment Act 2021. This could include new commitments, or updates to existing commitments. It will also include the next suite of interim targets (which begin from 2028) for all long-term Environment Act 2021 targets, and interim targets for any new statutory long-term targets that have been set before that date.

**Recommendation 6:** ***The 2028 Environmental Improvement Plan should incorporate and develop these new soil health targets and ensure that soil improvement features across all related sectors, particularly construction, planning and agriculture. Goals for biodiversity, waste, food security, land use and net zero should ensure that soil health plays a role in their delivery. The EIP should also aim for nearly all farmers and growers (90% or more) to be part of an ELM scheme by 2040, and work with the agricultural sector to develop clear, reasonable and measurable definitions of "sustainable soil management" within ELMs, which are adaptable to different contexts and that all participants should be strongly incentivised to adopt.*** (Paragraph 40)

The Government agrees that soil health contributes to goals in vital areas such as biodiversity, waste management, food security, land use, and net zero. The current EIP sets out these interlinkages, along with the actions we must take to restore nature, tackle environmental pollution, and address climate change.

The current EIP also includes the commitment to bring at least 40% of England's agricultural soil into sustainable management through our new farming schemes by 2028, increasing this to 60% by 2030. We are developing a delivery pathway for this commitment.

We will work towards a review and revision of the EIP in 2028, informed using an evidence-based approach as well as appropriate stakeholder engagement. This will consider how the current EIP23 may need to be revised to best drive action against the 10 goals included within the plan.

By 2028, we plan to cover 70% of farmed land and 70% of farms in our Environmental Land Management schemes. Farmers can choose the combination of actions that works for their farm setting to achieve a range of environmental outcomes. We want to continue to be flexible, fair, and pragmatic, and adapt our schemes to enable as many farmers and land managers as possible to deliver, alongside food production, significant and important outcomes for the climate and environment.

## Incentivising sustainable soil management

**Recommendation 7:** ***By 2025, the Government should commission and publish a review considering what financial barriers, including upfront investment costs, are preventing more sustainable farming systems. Based on these findings, the Government should develop, alongside the industry, measures to combat the problem. These could include enabling access to more upfront grants, more Government-funded advisory services, low-cost finance or encouraging the sharing and pooling of resources.*** (Paragraph 50)

The Agricultural Transition Plan Update published in January 2024 set out the Government's approach to identify and addressing barriers to farmers adopting environmental land management activities.

**Recommendation 8:** ***By 2026, payment rates for the Sustainable Farming Incentive and Countryside Stewardship schemes should be increased and calculated on the basis of income foregone, costs and an additional uplift for the public goods potentially provided. These payment rates should be developed using data collected under the Natural Capital and Ecosystem Assessment Programme and ELMs. Underlying methodologies used to calculate payment rates should be made publicly available.*** (Paragraph 51)

Payment rates are currently calculated using income foregone plus costs. Payment rates for 11 of the 23 SFI actions increased on 1 January 2024 for new and existing agreement holders to reflect the latest cost and income data. The updated rates will be applied to existing SFI agreements from the first day of the month the agreement started and from the start of new agreements.

Payment rates for 101 of the 138 Countryside Stewardship (CS) actions also increased on 1 January 2024 for new and existing agreement holders to reflect the latest cost and income data.

On average SFI and CS agreement values will increase by around 10%. We published a full list of updated payment rates alongside the latest Agricultural Transition Plan update in January 2024. The approach to calculating the updated payment rates has been independently verified.

In 2024, we intend to introduce the first set of payment premiums to encourage farmers and land managers to deliver high value actions needed to achieve our environmental outcomes, including on designated sites such as SSSIs and along watercourses. This will be offered by increasing payment rates from 1 January 2024 for 21 high priority actions where increased uptake is important to achieve our environmental outcomes. We will also encourage farmers and land managers to carry out combinations of actions that deliver greater environmental benefits when done together and at scale.

We will continue to develop these payments further in future years, so we are increasingly encouraging farmers to undertake the actions we need them to take to achieve our ambitious legally binding targets. We will keep these premium payments under review as we continue to improve and expand schemes over time, so we can adapt them to best achieve our target outcomes.

**Recommendation 9:** ***We are also concerned that significant numbers of farmers may struggle to access ELMs and so be unable to improve their soils. We are concerned about access for non-arable farmers, small-scale farmers, the horticultural sector, those with common land grazing rights and, in particular, tenant farmers. While we welcome the progress made for tenant farmer access to the SFI, we encourage the Government to continue the monitoring of uptake amongst different types of farmers and take steps to remove barriers to all ELM schemes when identified.*** (Paragraph 54)

We have introduced the SFI Management Payment which provides £20/Ha up to the first 50Ha to cover the management costs particularly for smaller farms. This is working and we have seen an increase in the number of smaller farms applying for our offers.

We know that tenant farmers can face additional barriers when accessing environmental schemes. We're continuing to make progress, adapting our policies and schemes so that tenant farmers can access them. SFI has been designed to remove the barriers that tenants previously faced. For example, SFI offers 3-year agreements. This is in line with the average length of farm business tenancies. We designed the rules so that tenants who expect to have management control for 3 years (even if their formal tenancy agreement or license does not extend that far) can still apply. This means that many farmers with annual rolling tenancy agreements can access SFI. We have also changed the rules so that penalties are no longer applied for tenants who may have to exit a scheme early if their tenancy ends unexpectedly.

In addition, SFI does not require the tenant to gain landlord consent to enter the scheme. However, tenants should check the terms of their tenancy agreement before applying to SFI and, in the spirit of collaboration, they should communicate with their landlord about the SFI activities they will carry out. These changes have had a real impact with thousands of tenant farmers applying for SFI agreements.

We are working closely with the new joint Defra/industry Farm Tenancy Forum (representing tenants, landlords and professional advisors) using their expertise to help us consider when landlord consent might be needed. For example, when a permanent

land use change is required. As a result, we will introduce 16 new actions with a 3-year duration. We are exploring whether we can offer further actions of 3-year duration to make them more accessible to tenant farmers in 2024.

**Recommendation 10:** ***Using an analysis of recent soil health trends, the Government should set out, by 2026, long-term plans for how ELM schemes will become more ambitious for soils. This should include:***

***a) Putting all basic actions known to improve soils into the SFI if evidence suggests that the economic drivers are lacking to adopt such measures.***

***b) Adapting CS so that it provides more attractive options which expand upon the basic soil actions in the SFI and offer a way for farmers to easily rachet up their soil health ambitions.***

***c) Working with the agricultural sector to develop a common understanding of "sustainable soil management". By 2030, ELM scheme participants should be incentivised to combine SFI and CS actions that meet this definition. This definition should be flexible enough to allow for local innovation, experience and geodiversity.***

***d) Setting a target for more than 90% of agricultural land to meet a definition of "sustainably managed" by 2040.*** (Paragraph 60)

We believe the recent expansion of the SFI in 2024 already incorporates many well-established actions for soil improvement. We will continue to monitor the scheme's effectiveness and, based on ongoing data and research, consider adding further actions if evidence suggests specific economic barriers are hindering their adoption by farmers.

As part of our ongoing review of CS, we will explore ways to offer options that build upon the actions under SFI, for example if analysis of soil health trends identifies areas where additional support is needed.

We recognise the value in establishing a shared understanding of "sustainable soil management" within the agricultural sector. We aim to define this concept in a clear, practical way that recognizes regional variations and individual farm contexts, including appropriate stakeholder engagement. The actions under SFI and CS will be vital to achieving our ambition to have 60% of agricultural soil under sustainable management through our farming schemes by 2030. We will continue to track progress towards this target and keep the targets framework under review.

**Recommendation 11:** B***y the end of 2024, the Government should publish an evaluation programme for ELMs. This should be designed alongside the soil health indicators so that they can consistently measure progress on soil health. It should also use anonymised and aggregated data collected by farmers and enable them to feedback into the system directly and regularly. The Government should also publish an annual report detailing: levels of uptake for each scheme; which actions participants are undertaking; how farmer feedback is influencing the development of ELMs; the impact on the environment, including soils; and how this is driving progress towards a set of measurable national targets for soils.*** (Paragraph 64)

There is a commitment in Part 1 Chapter 1 Section 6 of the Agriculture Act 2020 to report on the impact and effectiveness of Agriculture schemes including ELM. We are currently reviewing how best to meet that commitment.

We are developing a comprehensive indicator for soil health in England that will display soils' ability to contribute to the delivery of selected ecosystem services. Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) published a concept model in June 2023, and we intend to develop a more comprehensive model by 2025. Given the long timescale over which soil properties change, it is unlikely that we will be able to report annually on the impact from our farming schemes on soil health.

**Recommendation 12 and 13:** ***By mid-2025, the Government should develop an action plan setting out how it will make organic inputs a more economical choice for farmers. This should include measures that boost the availability and diversity of organic inputs to achieve soil health targets and ensure the organic recycling and agricultural sectors have the facilities and technologies to produce, store and spread a diverse range of organic inputs, including compost, digestate and biosolids. The Government also needs to support research into novel fertilisers and new technologies that can enable more use of organic inputs.*** (Paragraph 71)

***The next Environmental Improvement Plan, due by 2028, should incorporate this action plan. It should also set out how the Government will address other drivers in the wider food supply chain that encourage poor soil management. These include a lack of profitability in the sector and unsustainable consumer and retailer demands. To support this, the Government should work with industry to develop a common understanding of sustainable soil management that assurance standards and retailer-supplier agreements can adhere to. The Government should also ask the Food Data and Transparency Partnership to consider how this definition could be part of a future ecolabelling system in the future.*** (Paragraph 72)

Currently the Environment Agency has a strategy for safe and sustainable sludge use (biosolids) and a review programme for its compost, anaerobic digestate and poultry litter ash Quality Protocols.

The Government is making substantial investments to improve the management of organic nutrients. In 2022 Defra launched the Slurry Infrastructure Grant, which committed to spending £200m over 3 years on grants to improve the storage and management of slurry on farms.

The Government has a long-term plan to support the development of novel fertilisers. Last year Defra announced a new £25 million Nutrient Management Theme under the Farming Innovation Programme, aimed at supporting the development and adoption of novel techniques for improving nutrient management, including the development of novel fertilisers. The theme will launch in spring 2024.

Additionally, Defra will consult on the reform of the fertiliser regulations later this year with the intention of providing a clearer route to market for products that may be created using inputs from organic sources.

The government's Food Strategy published in June 2022 sets out the government's approach to delivering a prosperous agri-food sector that seeks to reduce the environmental impact

of the food system. Defra and the Environment Agency engages with the agri-food industry throughout the supply chain to support an increase in farming standards, with soil health as one of the main priorities. We will continue to work with the Food Data Transparency Partnership to share knowledge and ideas for positive environmental outcomes.

We will work towards a review and revision of the EIP in 2028, informed using an evidence-based approach as well as appropriate stakeholder engagement. This will consider how the current EIP23 may need to be revised to best drive action against the 10 goals included within the plan.

## Soil regulations

**Recommendation 14 and 15:** ***Using improved soil health and soil management data, as well as its evaluation of the success of the ELM schemes, the Department should work with industry, academics and regulators on a more robust regulatory baseline for soils. These regulations should be in line with any future soil health targets and any future definition of 'sustainable soil management'. This new regulatory framework should be consulted on, legislated for and clearly communicated before 2030, with provisions coming into force by 2035, to give land managers and owners time to prepare. The new laws would preferably take a combined approach with other areas, such as water and air quality but could take the form of a soil-specific regulatory framework. While agriculture should be an important focus, we would also like to see a framework offering protections for all types of soils.*** (Paragraph 80)

***In the agricultural sector, the regulatory baseline should be designed to work in tandem with ELM schemes. Initially it should incorporate most of the soil health actions in the Sustainable Farming Incentive, with all ELM schemes becoming more ambitious on soils. As the ELM schemes become more ambitious, so too should the regulatory baseline: we recommend that regulations and ELMs are reviewed every five years to ratchet up soil protections and incorporate the latest evidence on what works. In the long-term, the Government should aim for a situation where regulations prevent soil degradation and ELM schemes focus on soil and habitat restoration.*** (Paragraph 81)

The role of regulation in the agricultural sector is to protect the environment, public health, and animal and plant health and welfare. All farmers are subject to regulatory standards, and we are working to enable high levels of compliance against these standards that will ensure environmental land management agreements fully deliver outcomes for the environment over and above the regulatory standards.

In The Plan for Water, Defra committed to work with farmers to review and improve our farming laws to make them clear, simple, and effective at improving the environment.

We are currently reviewing the regulatory baseline for soil health to further understand the scope and impact of current regulations and where further regulatory cover may be required for soils. As we move from the EU Common Agricultural Policy, we will keep the balance between regulation and incentives under review and learn how farmers engage with our environmental offers.

We are aware that the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) is reviewing the current regulatory and governance frameworks supporting the sustainable management of agricultural soils in England. We will review any findings and consider carefully any recommendations put forward by the OEP.

**Recommendation 16:** ***By the end of 2025, the Government and Environment Agency should review the current regulations for the production, testing and application of organic inputs to make sure that are delivering enough protections against soil contamination. This review should set out a plan for closing any gaps in protections by 2026/27.*** (Paragraph 93)

The Environment Agency's Materials to Land Sector Group enables safe and sustainable land spreading of manures and waste derived soil conditioners. The Group engages nationally with Trade Bodies, locally with operators, and works with producers (Biowaste Treatment Sector) and the main users (Agriculture Sector). The Environment Agency is investigating sludge quality through the water industry's Chemical Investigation Programme.

The Environment Agency is reviewing its regulatory delivery for several areas including: use in agriculture of sewage sludge and septic tank sludge; composts, digestates and ashes which have end of waste; and wastes which are spread to land under Environmental Permitting Regulation (EPR) controls. New 'end of waste' Resource Frameworks and amended EPR permits and exemptions are due by 2026/27.

**Recommendation 17:** ***The national soil monitoring programme should aim to gain a better understanding of the scale of soil contamination. To spur progress on nature recovery targets, this information should identify problematic areas that local authorities and developers are encouraged to remediate. Contamination data should also be used to develop Extended Producer Responsibility for products that pollute agricultural inputs, soils and water as soon as possible. The Government should publish a timeline for delivery by 2026, which should then be incorporated into the Environmental Improvement Plan update scheduled for 2028.*** (Paragraph 94)

To address soil affected by contamination, Part 2A of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 provides local authorities with statutory powers to inspect and seek remediation of potential contaminated sites.

Under Defra's Plan for Water, we are developing a £78m Land Remediation Pathfinder Scheme (LRPS) to provide a grant to Local and Combined Mayoral Authorities in England to alleviate the costs of Landfill Tax where the tax may act as a financial barrier to the remediation and redevelopment of contaminated land.

LRPS was announced in the 2023 Autumn Statement. The date from which public bodies will be able to apply for funding will be announced in due course. Subject to applications received, it is expected a number of sites will be selected, with the aim of piloting the scheme in urban, coastal and industrial locations, and on variously sized sites.

The tNCEA is using current capital investment to achieve two years of the five years needed for a soil health baseline. In this immediate phase, the tNCEA is collecting data on some inorganic contaminants, such as Arsenic, Lead, Nickel and Cadmium and other potentially toxic elements. Data on organic contaminants such as pesticides and

microplastics are not currently being collected within the national monitoring. Soil and DNA samples are being archived and possible small-scale studies using these samples to improve understanding of contaminants and anti-microbial resistance in soils are being explored, with one study using these samples to explore the analysis of 'microfibres' in the soil.

**Recommendation 18 and 19:** ***The Government should set up a soil remediation taskforce in 2024 to tackle the barriers to soil remediation. This should consider the role that new technologies can play with hard-to-remediate soils, as well as the provision of funding to either developers, local authorities or regulators to tackle the cases that the planning system and private sector are incapable of improving. The Taskforce's proposals should inform the updated Environmental Improvement Plan due by 2028, which should set out how soil remediation will help the Government make progress towards its nature recovery targets.*** (Paragraph 95)

***By 2027, the Government should review progress with the Soil Reuse and Depot scheme and revised construction codes of practice. This should include a consultation with stakeholders on whether these voluntary codes should become mandatory and regulated by an independent body or the Environment Agency. The revised 2028 Environmental Improvement Plan should incorporate any further actions the Government will take.*** (Paragraph 100)

Government is committed to integrating the management of urban soil and contaminated land into its overall approach to soil health. The EIP included a commitment to publish a revised 'Code of Practice for the sustainable use of soil on construction sites'. Input was received from a technical advisory group made up of industry experts, and technical expertise provided by the Environment Agency and Natural England. We currently anticipate the revised guidance to be published by summer 2024, and plan to carry out user testing and evaluation to assess the effectiveness of its uptake.

We also intend to pilot a Soil Reuse and Depot scheme by December 2026, and assess the effectiveness of that pilot scheme before any potential expansion. The Environment Agency commissioned a report into the feasibility of a soil bank system in England in 2023, which put forward a potential model for such a scheme. The Environment Agency anticipates it will publish the report in the Spring.

These reviews will assess the effectiveness of voluntary approaches, with appropriate stakeholder engagement, before considering any regulatory models, or the need for a specific taskforce on soil remediation.

**Recommendation 20:** ***The EA and the RPA should continue with the "supportive" approach to compliance monitoring. By the end of the agricultural transition in 2028, however, Defra and these institutions should publish a clear and transparent regime of comprehensive site visits and other actions that they will take to help farmers comply with rules, prevent fraud and ensure that compliance actions issued are followed. To ensure that any new regulatory soil framework is effective, and let farmers benefit more from the "supportive" approach they are taking, the EA and RPA should be adequately resourced so that farms can expect routine visits every few years. To achieve this, the Department and the EA will need to develop ways to increase funding for compliance monitoring.*** (Paragraph 109)

We agree that advice-led approaches help tackle soil damage by poaching of livestock and risks from soil erosion and compaction. Enforcement action will only be taken when advice isn't acted on or pollution incidents occur.

Technology is enabling more efficient inspections. We can use earth observation techniques to identify land management risks such as bare soil over winter and soil erosion. The Environment Agency can then target advice to highlight the risks of diffuse pollution from these practices. This was successful in a 2023 River Wye catchment pilot project which identified over 400 farms with bare soil over winter and we will continue this approach this year.

## Local skills and guidance

**Recommendation 21:** ***By 2026, the Government should publish a review into the skills and training available to support key initiatives for nature recovery across all relevant sectors. This review should analyse the training, guidance and advisory services available in the agricultural sector and set out a plan for improving their quality by ensuring that they are based on robust scientific and impartial evidence. It should also ensure that they are accessible and affordable to all that need them.*** (Paragraph 119)

We are mandating industry recognised standards as part of the SFI funding offer to ensure farmers receive quality assured, specialist expertise that they need to implement nutrient management and integrated pest management actions. Over 18,000 farmers have received business advice through the Farming Resilience Fund, and we will continue to fund free business advice until March 2025 to help increase profitability and deliver on environmental outcomes, access carbon audits and natural capital assessments.

We are supporting feasibility and planning for more complex activities with targeted financial support and are working with relevant arms-length bodies (ALBs) to develop the roles of Defra group ALB advisers to improve local join up and consistency. This will enable them to aid understanding and uptake of funding opportunities in their local context, supported in tandem with the improved facilitation fund to provide farmers with joined up access to expertise, advice and support.

We are working with the Institute for Agriculture and Horticulture (TIAH) to support the agricultural sector in understanding and meeting its own skill and training needs. We are introducing a T-Level for agriculture so young people can access the skills and information they need to move into the agricultural sector.

Furthermore, we are working with DESNZ, DfE, DWP, IfATE and sector leaders to develop and publish a Green Jobs Plan. The Plan will set out government and industry actions to help ensure the UK has the skilled workforce required for the green transition. A number of sectoral task and finish groups have contributed evidence on skills and employment needs and are working across their sectors to drive action. This includes a task and finish group focussed on Nature, chaired by the Chartered Institute for Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM). The Plan will be published later this year.

**Recommendation 22:** ***The review should also identify where guidance documents for sustainable farming—including sustainable soil management—could be better synthesised and made more specific to particular settings. Working closely with respected***

***organisations such as the AHDB, the Government should invest in research projects to develop guidance and decision-making support tools for the delivery of future ELM objectives, ones that encourage a "whole farm" approach. ELM schemes should also subsidise collaborations between farmers and academics as well as events that facilitate knowledge exchange in the agricultural sector.*** (Paragraph 120)

All our advice and guidance are subject to user testing and refinement to ensure it is as accessible and useful as possible. The SFI Handbook has been well received, as it brings all the relevant information into one place.

In response to feedback, we are developing supplementary products, such as summaries of what is available to specific sectors, so farmers can more easily access information relevant to them. We have also developed and are testing online tools to enable farmers to filter out actions that are not relevant or eligible on their farm.