



Environmental Audit Committee

Rt Hon Steve Reed OBE MP
Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Seacole Building
2 Marsham Street
London SW1P 4DF

Sent by email only

15 April 2025

Dear Secretary of State,

Thank you for attending the Committee's meeting on 24 March to discuss the environmental protection policies of your Department. Committee members appreciated your readiness to answer questions on this issue.

There were several points, set out below, where the Committee would appreciate clarification of the answers given. Citations are given with reference to the relevant question numbers in the published transcript of the hearing.ⁱ

The 2025 Environmental Improvement Plan

You helpfully confirmed that the Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) to be issued later in the year will be a fresh five-year plan running to 2030. However, your answers on this issue gave rise to concerns that the targets and commitments underpinning the current EIP risk being downgraded or watered down when the 2025 EIP is issued. It would be particularly concerning if environmental protection targets were relaxed or limited in scope as a result of the resources available following the Spending Review.

- 1. Please set out in response your plans to maintain current environmental improvement targets, and the date by which you expect the 2025 EIP (a) to be issued and (b) to take effect.**
- 2. Please also confirm the timetable you plan to follow to provide a Government response to the Office for Environmental Protection's assessment report for 2023–24, and your expectation of the maximum time the Government ought to take to respond to subsequent OEP assessment reports.**

The Office for Environmental Protection

You confirmed to the Committee that, on the basis of your Department's current business planning, the Office for Environmental Protection is to receive flat cash settlements in common with your Department's other public bodies (Q11).

- 3. Please clarify (a) whether the 2021 commitment to provide the OEP with a five year indicative budget, with a ringfenced budget for each spending review period, remains in force, and (b) what plans your Department has to vary or remove the headcount restriction applied to the OEP as a condition of continued funding.**

Growth and environmental protection

The Committee is interested to learn more about the Government's strategy to deliver increased growth alongside improved environmental protections (Q66).

- 4. Please set out the indicators you plan to use to monitor trends in the effectiveness of environmental protection measures as a result of changes in regulatory approaches, and the steps you plan to ensure continued protections if the indicators suggest that the measures are not as effective as expected.**

Cross-departmental work

The Committee was encouraged to hear from you that nature underpins everything which the Government does, with particular reference to the Government's five missions (Q62).

- 5. Please set out the arrangements made for (a) Ministers and (b) senior officials of your Department to (i) attend meetings of each current Mission Board at Ministerial or official level and (ii) contribute to the policy formation and delivery plans of each Board.**

Air quality

The Committee noted the current intention to issue a cross-governmental air quality strategy in mid-2028 (Q36). You mentioned that detail on some air quality improvement measures would be included in the forthcoming 2025 EIP, and that your Department was evaluating options for reducing PM2.5 emissions. You also indicated that your Department had supported clean air measures being taken by Greater Manchester and that proposals for support for measures to reduce air quality in Stoke-on-Trent and Newcastle-under-Lyme were under consideration.

6. Please set out the steps you plan to take to improve delivery of current air quality targets, including through regulation and enforcement, while the new strategy is being prepared, and the options currently under consideration for reduction in PM2.5 emissions.

7. Please also set out the criteria your Department is using to assess bids from local authorities for support with measures to improve air quality.

Circular economy

The Committee was interested to hear details of the Government's new approach to developing the circular economy. As you will know, there are significant concerns in the sector about the detail of implementation of current circular economy policies under the Resources and Waste Programme.

8. Please set out any assessment your Department has made of impacts to businesses and operations owing to the time taken in confirming Extended Producer Responsibility fees payable in the current financial year.

9. Please indicate the steps your Department plans to take to mitigate the risk to business of financial disruption arising from the time taken to provide reliable information on EPR costs and their associated liabilities to businesses.

10. Please also confirm the arrangements whereby local authorities will be required to allocate revenue from EPR fees to cover net costs of collecting, managing and recycling and disposing of household packaging waste.

An annual joint Climate and Nature Statement

When the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero appeared before the committee on 27 January, he explicitly supported the proposal for an annual Ministerial statement to Parliament on climate and nature.ⁱⁱ While noting your support for the principles of the Climate and Nature Bill, the Committee was surprised that you did not take the opportunity presented to you to support the proposal for an annual statement (Q54).

11. Please set out the current plans of your Department to contribute to an annual Government statement to Parliament on climate and nature; and what (if any) consideration has been given to aligning the timing of that annual statement with annual reporting cycles on environmental targets.

In addition to responses to the questions raised above, the Committee would be pleased to receive the additional information you undertook to provide in the course of the session:

- Notification of the first instance of legal action taken against a vessel's operator for non-compliance with the landing obligation (Q21).
- Details of the failure to enforce the mandatory implementation of remote electronic monitoring on vessels (Q21).
- Information on arrangements to commence Schedule 17 to the Environment Act, together with a timetable (Q56).
- Copies of articles illustrating how nature underpins each of the Government's current missions (Q63).

We appreciate that you were unable to comment on the expenditure plans of your Department for environmental protection issues, or on the submission to be made to the Chief Secretary of the Treasury, before the publication of the Spending Review. Since these plans have a clear bearing on the capacity of your Department and its associated public bodies, we would like to invite you to appear for a further discussion between the Review's publication and the Summer Recess.

Thank you again for your willingness to appear before us to discuss these matters. It would be very helpful to the Committee to have a response to the points raised above not later than **Thursday 1 May**. We look forward to further discussions after the Spending Review outcome has been published.

Given the substantial public interest in the matters under consideration the Committee has decided to publish this letter on its website, and I anticipate that the Committee will wish to publish any response.

A copy of this letter goes to the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Toby Perkins'.

Mr Toby Perkins MP
Chair, Environmental Audit Committee

ⁱ The transcript of the evidence session is published at <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/15287/pdf/>

ⁱⁱ See Q64 in the transcript: <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/15287/html/>