

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee
and Environmental Audit Committee

Pre-appointment hearing for the Chair-designate of the Office for Environmental Protection

Ninth Report of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Committee and Tenth Report of the Environmental Audit
Committee of Session 2024–26

HC 1864

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 its associated public bodies.

Current membership

[Mr Alistair Carmichael](#) (Liberal Democrat; Orkney and Shetland) (Chair)

[Sarah Bool](#) (Conservative; South Northamptonshire)

[Juliet Campbell](#) (Labour; Broxtowe)

[Charlie Dewhurst](#) (Conservative; Bridlington and The Wolds)

[Sarah Dyke](#) (Liberal Democrat; Glastonbury and Somerton)

[Terry Jermy](#) (Labour; South West Norfolk)

[Jayne Kirkham](#) (Labour; Truro and Falmouth)

[Josh Newbury](#) (Labour; Cannock Chase)

[Jenny Riddell-Carpenter](#) (Labour; Suffolk Coastal)

[Tim Roca](#) (Labour; Macclesfield)

[Henry Tufnell](#) (Labour; Mid and South Pembrokeshire)

Powers

The Committee is one of the departmental select committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No. 152. These are available on the internet via www.parliament.uk.

Publication

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Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA. The Committee's email address is efracom@parliament.uk.

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Environmental Audit Committee

The Environmental Audit Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to consider to what extent the policies and programmes of government departments and non-departmental public bodies contribute to environmental protection and sustainable development; to audit their performance against such targets as may be set for them by His Majesty's Ministers; and to report thereon to the House.

Current membership

[Mr Toby Perkins](#) (Labour; Chesterfield) (Chair)

[Olivia Blake](#) (Labour; Sheffield Hallam)

[Julia Buckley](#) (Labour; Shrewsbury)

[Jonathan Davies](#) (Labour; Mid Derbyshire)

[Carla Denyer](#) (Green Party; Bristol Central)

[Barry Gardiner](#) (Labour; Brent West)

[Sarah Gibson](#) (Liberal Democrat; Chippenham)

[Alison Griffiths](#) (Conservative; Bognor Regis and Littlehampton)

[Chris Hinchliff](#) (Labour; North East Hertfordshire)

[Sojan Joseph](#) (Labour; Ashford)

[Manuela Perteghella](#) (Liberal Democrat; Stratford-on-Avon)

[Martin Rhodes](#) (Labour; Glasgow North)

[Dr Roz Savage](#) (Liberal Democrat; South Cotswolds)

[Blake Stephenson](#) (Conservative; Mid Bedfordshire)

[John Whitby](#) (Labour; Derbyshire Dales)

[Sammy Wilson](#) (Democratic Unionist Party; East Antrim)

Powers

The constitution and powers are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No 152A. These are available on the internet via www.parliament.uk.

Publication

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1 The Office for Environmental Protection

1. The Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) was legally established under the Environment Act 2021. It has its headquarters in Worcester. It covers England and Northern Ireland, as well as reserved matters relating to the environment. There are equivalent bodies in Wales and Scotland. On 31 March 2025, the OEP employed 94 staff (88.7 FTE – audited).¹
2. The OEP has legal powers to scrutinise government departments and their arm’s length bodies, local authorities, and some private bodies in relation to their public duties (e.g. water companies). In practice, the OEP’s main activities are:
 - a. Annual reporting on the progress made in relation to Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) targets;
 - b. Scrutiny of environmental law through calls for evidence and other work;
 - c. Advising on environmental law;
 - d. Receiving complaints from whistleblowers and taking enforcement action.
3. It published its second Strategy and Enforcement Policy in November 2024. This document explains how it will fulfil its statutory role under the Environment Act 2021 to protect and improve the natural environment in England and Northern Ireland by holding government and other public authorities to account. The strategy responds to persistent and long-term environmental degradation, including biodiversity loss, water pollution, unsustainable resource use and the impacts of climate change, and reflects lessons learned during the OEP’s first two years of operation.

1 [OEP Annual Report and Accounts 2024/2025](#)

2 The recruitment process

Recruitment campaign

4. The inaugural Chair of the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP), Dame Glenys Stacey DBE, stood down in January 2026. She was succeeded by an Interim Chair, Julie Hill MBE, who is an OEP board member. A competitive recruitment process for her replacement ran from 26 November 2025. It closed for applications on 13 January 2026 (extended from 18 December 2025).²
5. In total there were 34 applications for the role. Of these, nine were invited to interview: four were considered appointable. Further information on the application process and recruitment can be found in Appendix 3.
6. Defra announced on 17 April 2026 that Dame Helen Ghosh DCB was the preferred candidate for appointment to the role of Chair of the Office for Environmental Protection.³
7. The post is one of the positions to which the procedure for pre-appointment parliamentary scrutiny applies.⁴ The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee and the Environmental Audit Committee held a joint hearing with the candidate on 28 April 2026.
8. Pre-appointment hearings scrutinise the quality of ministerial decision-making, which is a proper part of ministerial accountability to Parliament. Although the outcome of the hearing is not binding on the government, a committee's view should inform the ministerial decision on whether to proceed with an appointment.

2 [Appointment details: Chair of the Office for Environmental Protection \(OEP\)](#)

3 [“Dame Helen Ghosh named as preferred Chair for the Office for Environmental Protection”](#), Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (Northern Ireland), 17 April 2026

4 The full list is Chair of the Environment Agency; Chair of Natural England; Chair of the Office for Environmental Protection, and Chair of the Water Services Regulatory Authority (Ofwat).

Government's preferred candidate

9. Dame Helen is currently Master of Balliol College, Oxford University. She is due to step down in June 2026. Before this, she was Director-General of the National Trust, from November 2012 to March 2018. She has also held a range of senior civil service positions, including Permanent Secretary at the Home Office (November 2010 - September 2012) and Defra (2005 - 2010).
10. The candidate's full CV is available in Appendix 1.

3 The pre-appointment hearing

11. Dame Helen gave evidence to us at a pre-appointment hearing on 28 April 2026. We questioned Dame Helen on several areas including her professional background, her vision for the OEP, and her plans for engaging with stakeholders including the environmental sector, the farming sector, and Parliament.

12. **RECOMMENDATION**

We are satisfied that Dame Helen has the professional competence and personal independence required of the Chair of the Office for Environmental Protection and that the recruitment campaign and her selection as the government's preferred candidate were conducted in accordance with the Cabinet Office's Governance Code on Public Appointments.

13. **RECOMMENDATION**

We are content with Dame Helen's appointment and look forward to future robust engagement with her during her tenure as Chair of the Office for Environmental Protection. It is essential that Dame Helen continues to reinforce her and the OEP's independence from Government, given our concerns about the timing and nature of the recruitment process. Dame Helen must also continue to build and improve relationships with key external stakeholders such as environmental groups and farmers, and further increase public awareness of the organisation.

Appendix 1: Candidate's CV

Professional career

April 2018 – present (stepping down in June 2026): Master of Balliol College, Oxford University. As well as day-to-day leadership of the academic and operational life of the College, I have had various senior roles in the governance of the University as a whole. I recently stepped down as Chair of the Conference of Colleges, which coordinates and represents College interests in University decision-making.

November 2012 – March 2018: Director-General of the National Trust. There are two things of which I am most proud from my time at the National Trust. The first was initiating and shaping a new 25-year strategy, “Playing Our Part”, with the natural environment at its heart. The second was the reform of the financial regime and delivery systems essential to the strategy’s delivery. In the face of the decline in species, the destruction of habitat and the likely impact of climate change, as a landowner and influencer, the Trust had a vital role to play in showing what sustainable, nature-friendly land management might look like, working in partnership with our tenant farmers, and alongside other green NGOs and organisations with a common interest. This strategy was not uncontroversial with some of our more traditional supporters, but our growing number of visitors and members (to 5 million by my departure) enabled us to invest more each year in all aspects of conservation. I took a leading and high-profile role in arguing for a “public money for public goods” approach to a post-Brexit farming support system, launching the concept in August 2016. Implementing our strategy included specific and stretching commitments for the restoration of degraded habitats and landscape in our ownership, as well as creation of new habitat, which have been restated and reinforced in the Trust’s 2025 Strategy.

November 2010 to September 2012: Permanent Secretary at the Home Office. My time here was dominated by security preparations for the 2012 Olympics, the operational and policy response to the 2011 summer riots, and various aspects of counter-terrorism policy. I worked closely with senior Police Officers on policing issues, and with the Security Agencies.

2005 – 2010: Permanent Secretary at the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. I found the Department with shaky finances, a collapsing Rural Payments Agency, and a poor reputation in Whitehall,

but with staff with an extraordinary depth of commitment to its purpose. I introduced new financial disciplines and conceived and led a programme to remodel the Department into a project-based, professional services organisation. From being regarded as a problem case, we became a Treasury exemplar and a model which others imitated. I reshaped my Executive Board and identified, imported and promoted new talent, including the appointment of an outstanding Chief Scientist in Bob Watson. The Department's policy activity in my time included the passage of the Climate Change Act; continuing scientific and policy work on Bovine TB; the launch of the first National Ecosystems Services Assessment; and the UK response to EU Infraction on the Urban Waste Water Directive. At least half my time was spent on operational issues, attempting to improve the service to farmers from the RPA, and leading the Departmental response to floods, avian flu and Foot and Mouth. The latter required close working with scientific and technical specialists and the relevant NDPBs and Executive Agencies.

2003–2005: Director General, HM Revenue and Customs (Corporate Services) . his gave me hands on experience of the management of HR, Finance and IT services in a very large delivery organisations. The merger of the Inland Revenue and HM Customs and Excise took place in this period, from which I learned a great deal about the delivery of organisational and cultural change.

2001–2003: Director General, Cabinet Office (Machinery of Government). This role included advice to the Cabinet Secretary and No 10 on legislation relating to the Civil Service, on ethics and propriety questions, and on specific Machinery of Government issues as they arose.

1999–2001: Director of the Children's Group, Department for Work and Pensions. Besides learning about the challenges of delivery of national, large-scale benefits, I worked with specialists and colleagues across Government to define, measure and coordinate action on child poverty.

1991–1999: a variety of Senior Civil Service roles of which the most transformative for me were as Director of Regeneration for East London in the Government Office for London (1997–99); and as lead (in what is now DHCLG) for shaping and piloting the national New Deal for Communities programme.

1979–1991: a range of roles in the Graduate Fast Stream and as a Policy Advisor in the Department of the Environment, including two periods in Private Offices (those of the Secretary of State, Michael Heseltine, and Minister of State for the Environment, William Waldegrave).

Non-executive experience

- Trustee, The Rhodes Trust, 2011–2023
- Trustee, Ashmolean Museum Oxford, 2014– present
- Trustee, Action for Conservation, 2017–2024 (a charity involving young people/teenagers in hands-on environmental activity)
- Trustee and Chair of The Tablet Trust, 2020–present
- Trustee and Deputy Chair of the Oxford Preservation Trust, 2021–present.

Other relevant experience

Cambridge Centre for Science and Policy (CSAP): I chair their regular dinners at the Royal Society, for senior civil servants and distinguished scientists, exploring current scientific developments with significance for policy. These have included everything from neural interface and green chemistry, to carbon capture and Artificial General Intelligence.

The Royal Society: I was a member of the Royal Society’s Science Policy Advisory Group (2015–2019). I currently chair the selection panel for their Science and Policy Programme, for early career researchers seeking a secondment in Whitehall. UKRI: Chair of the “Building a Secure and Resilient World” Advisory Board (2024 present): advising on one of the Strategic Themes for their research programme, including work on supply chains, defence technology and community resilience.

Chair of the Centenary Commission on Adult Education and Lifelong Learning (2019): its report [<https://www.centenarycommission.org>], emphasised the importance of lifelong adult education, for societal as well as economic reasons.

From 2017–20, I was Project Coordinator for a Community Group sponsoring the settlement of a Syrian refugee family in Oxford.

Education

BA in Modern History (First Class), St Hugh’s College, Oxford University 1976;
MLitt Medieval History, Hertford College, Oxford University (1981).

Other distinctions

Dame Commander of the Order of the Bath (2008); Hon Doctor of Letters, University of Reading (2018); Hon Doctor of Laws, Nottingham University (2023); Hon Bencher of the Middle Temple (2018).

Leisure / personal interests

Walking in the country, ballet, exploring historic churches, gardens, looking forward to having the time to join an amateur choir.

DOB: 21.02.1956. Married with two grown-up children.

Appendix 2: Candidate's declaration and clarification of interests

Declaration of relevant interests made by the candidate

- None
- Other roles listed as – Master, Balliol College, Oxford – no conflict with the role applied for. (Helen is stepping down from this role in June 2026).

Declaration of relevant political activity made by the candidate required under paragraph 9.2 of the Governance Code on Public Appointments

- None

Appendix 3: Role specification, diversity information, and recruitment campaign

DEFRA: role description, accountabilities and appointment criteria

See: [Appointment details – Chair of the Office for Environmental Protection \(OEP\) – Apply for a public appointment – GOV.UK](#)

Appointment description

The Chair of the OEP will provide leadership and strategic vision for the board, ensure good governance and, with the board, hold the executive to account. The chair will promote a positive and constructive relationship with everyone that works with the OEP, including Parliament, government ministers, departments, and public authorities, along with a wide range of interest groups as well as others, while consistently upholding and demonstrating the OEP's institutional independence and impartiality.

Specifically, the Chair will:

- lead the board's oversight and direction of the OEP to ensure that the OEP implements its strategy, delivers its corporate plans and in doing so achieves its objectives and maximises its contribution to environmental protection and the natural environment;
- lead the board to take significant decisions, including decisions relating to investigations and enforcement, and approving all reports laid before Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly;
- lead the board to take significant decisions, including decisions relating to investigations and enforcement, and approving all reports laid before Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly;

- lead the board in its own work, and its interaction with the executive, so that it and its members perform effectively, that the balance and diversity of skills is appropriate to direct the OEP's business, that it is supported by and supports the executive to deliver and that it receives the evidence and information it needs;
- represent the OEP to Parliament, the Northern Ireland Assembly, ministers, partner and stakeholder organisations and the general public as an independent, evidence-led and purposeful organisation.

Organisation description

The OEP is an independent statutory body with the principal objective to contribute to environmental protection and the improvement of the natural environment. It was established by the Environment Act 2021 as part of a new approach to national environmental governance in England and Northern Ireland and has functions to hold government and public authorities to account for their goals for the environment and their commitments under environmental law.

The Board also takes many of the OEP's most significant decisions, including approving decisions on investigations and enforcement, and signing off all formal reports laid before Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly. These responsibilities require the Board to exercise sound judgement, uphold high standards of governance and ensure the OEP maintains its independence and credibility.

As Chair, you will lead this Board. You will be responsible for guiding its deliberations, ensuring it functions effectively, fostering a culture of constructive challenge and maintaining high standards of integrity and transparency. You will work closely with the Chief Executive to ensure a clear strategic vision for the organisation and to support the delivery of the OEP's statutory functions.

The Board of the OEP includes a non-executive Chair and between five and ten other members, with the majority being non-executives. Non-executive members play a vital role in providing constructive challenge and holding the executive members to account. The Chair is central to ensuring that this balance works well and that the Board as a whole operates with cohesion, clarity and independence.

Essential criteria

Knowledge: A clear understanding of the OEP's statutory remit and the broader environmental and regulatory landscape or the ability to attain that understanding swiftly.

Experience: A proven track record of strong leadership within a complex regulatory organisation, underpinned by an objective and evidence-based approach.

Relationship Building: An ability to build and maintain effective relationships with Ministers, Parliament, senior government officials and key external stakeholders. The successful candidate must manage OEP's accountability to Parliament while maintaining the OEP's independence and advancing the organisation's objectives.

Communication: The ability to communicate effectively, listen actively, engage constructively, lead a group to take complex decisions, and provide clear, respectful, and authoritative challenge as an ambassador of the OEP.

Judgement: The ability to exercise sound, evidence-informed judgement in analysing complex information to make objective decisions that support the organisation's statutory responsibilities.

Collaboration: A proven track record in fostering an inclusive culture of collective contribution and working collaboratively with the executive and stakeholders to provide appropriate challenge, support, and assurance.

Desirable criteria

Understanding of environmental policy and practice, particularly in areas relevant to the OEP's oversight functions.

Experience in economic policy and/or infrastructure development to support the Government's ambition for sustainable growth and development.

Remuneration & tenure

The remuneration for the role is £ 56,784 for a time commitment of up to 2 days a week. Expenses are payable for expenditure reasonably and necessarily incurred on behalf of the Office for Environmental Protection and in accordance with the travel and expenses policy.

The appointment is expected to be for four years. In accordance with the Governance Code on Public Appointments, Ministers may extend the terms of public appointees for a second term. However, any reappointment will be subject to a good performance assessment by Ministers and will be at the discretion of the Secretary of State and the DAERA Minister. The appointee may resign by giving three months' notice in writing to the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State may terminate the appointment under certain conditions, which will be notified to the successful candidate on appointment.

Recruitment diversity information

Gender	Percent Male	Percent Female	Percent Identify another way	Percent Not declared
Applicants	65%	32%	0%	3%
Shortlist (applicants invited to interview)	56%	44%	0%	0%

Ethnicity	Percent White	Percent Ethnic Minority	Percent Not declared
Applicants	73%	18%	9%
Shortlist (applicants invited to interview)	78%	22%	0%

Disability	Disabled	Non-disabled	Not declared
Applicants	3%	91%	6%
Shortlist (applicants invited to interview)	11%	89%	0%

Formal minutes

Tuesday 28 April 2026

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and Environmental Audit Committees met concurrently, pursuant to Standing Order No. 137A(1)(b).

Members present

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Mr Alistair Carmichael, in the Chair

Sarah Bool

Juliet Campbell

Charlie Dewhirst

Terry Jermy

Jayne Kirkham

Josh Newbury

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter

Tim Roca

Henry Tufnell

Environmental Audit Committee

Toby Perkins

Julia Buckley

Jonathan Davies

Carla Denyer

Barry Gardiner

Sarah Gibson

Sojan Joseph

Martin Rhodes

Roz Savage

John Whitby

Alistair Carmichael was called to the Chair (Standing Order No.137A (1)(d)).

Pre-appointment hearing for the Chair-designate of the Office for Environmental Protection

Draft Report (Pre-appointment hearing for the Chair-Designate of the Office for Environmental Protection), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the Chair's draft Report be considered concurrently, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 137A(1)(c).

Ordered, That the Chair's draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 13 read and agreed to.

Papers were appended to the Report as Appendices A to C.

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

The Environmental Audit Committee withdrew.

Mr Alistair Carmichael, in the Chair

Sarah Bool

Juliet Campbell

Charlie Dewhirst

Terry Jermy

Jayne Kirkham

Josh Newbury

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter

Tim Roca

Henry Tufnell

Draft Report (*Pre-appointment hearing for the Chair-Designate of the Office for Environmental Protection*) proposed by the Environmental Audit and Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, brought up and read.

Resolved, That the draft Report prepared by Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and Environmental Audit Committees, be the Ninth Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That the provisions of Standing Order No. 137A(2) (Committees working together; joint reports) may be applied to the Report.

Adjournment

Adjourned till Tuesday 19 May at 9.30 a.m.

Environmental Audit Committee

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee withdrew

Toby Perkins, in the Chair

Julia Buckley

Jonathan Davies

Carla Denyer

Barry Gardiner

Sarah Gibson

Sojan Joseph

Martin Rhodes

Roz Savage

John Whitby

Draft Report (*Pre-appointment hearing for the Chair-Designate of the Office for Environmental Protection*) proposed by the Environmental Audit and Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, brought up and read.

Resolved, That the draft Report prepared by Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and Environmental Audit Committees, be the Tenth Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That Mr Alistair Carmichael make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That the provisions of Standing Order No. 137A(2) (Committees working together; joint reports) may be applied to the Report.

Adjournment

Adjourned till Monday 18 May at 3.45 a.m.

Witness

The following witness gave evidence. A transcript can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Tuesday 28 April 2026

Dame Helen Ghosh, Preferred candidate to become Chair of OEP

List of Reports from the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Session 2024–26

Number	Title	Reference
7th	Resetting the relationship with fishing communities	HC 680
6th	Erosion of trust: the impact of coastal erosion on communities	HC 1317
5th	UK-EU agritrade: making an SPS agreement work	HC 1661
4th	UK-EU trade: towards a resilient border strategy	HC 1279
3rd	Biosecurity at the border: Britain's illegal meat crisis	HC 1296
2nd	Priorities for water sector reform	HC 10001
1st	The Government's vision for farming	HC 906
5th Special	UK-EU agritrade: making an SPS agreement work - Government Response	HC 1833
4th Special	UK-EU trade: towards a resilient border strategy (Government Response)	HC 1496
3rd Special	Biosecurity at the border: Britain's illegal meat crisis: Government Response	HC 1490
2nd Special	The Government's vision for farming: Government Response	HC 1255
1st Special	Pet welfare and abuse: Government response	HC 581

List of Reports from the Environmental Audit Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Session 2024–26

Number	Title	Reference
9th	Addressing the risks from Perfluoroalkyl and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances (PFAS)	HC 852
8th	The Seventh Carbon Budget	HC 1327
7th	Environment in Focus	HC 1310
6th	Environmental sustainability and housing growth	HC 439
5th	Airport expansion and climate and nature targets	HC 831
4th	Flood resilience in England	HC 550
3rd	The UK and the Antarctic environment	HC 499
2nd	Governing the marine environment	HC 551
1st	The role of natural capital in the UK's green economy	HC 501
8th Special	Environmental sustainability and housing growth: Government Response	HC 1785
7th Special	Airport expansion and climate and nature targets: Government Response	HC 1600
6th Special	Flood resilience in England: Government Response	HC 1591
5th Special	The UK and the Antarctic environment: Government Response	HC 1273
4th Special	Governing the marine environment: Government Response	HC 1272

Number	Title	Reference
3rd Special	The role of natural capital in the green economy: Government Response	HC 1242
2nd Special	Net zero and UK shipping: Government Response	HC 705
1st Special	Enabling sustainable electrification of the economy: Government Response	HC 564