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**Dame Meg Hillier MP**  
**Chair of the Committee of Public Accounts**  
**House of Commons**  
**London**  
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9<sup>th</sup> December 2021

**From Tamara Finkelstein CB**  
Permanent Secretary

**Update on long-term environment objectives**

Dear Chair,

I am writing in response to the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) recommendations of February 2021, that Defra write to the Committee to within a month of the Environment Bill being passed, setting out its timetable for:

- setting coherent long-term objectives for those areas of the Environment Plan that will not be put on a statutory footing by the Environment Bill;
- setting interim milestones for all its environmental goals;
- developing and reporting on a complete set of environmental outcome indicators; and
- Government providing an annual update against this timetable, as part of its environmental progress reports.

Environmental Improvement Plan Review and Refresh

The Environment Act 2021 places the 25 Year Environment Plan (25YEP) on a statutory footing and adopts the 25YEP as the first statutory Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP). Under the Environment Act 2021, the government is required to conduct the first review of its Environmental Improvement Plan (the 25 Year Environment Plan) by January 2023. The Review and Refresh of the Environmental Improvement Plan is now underway and will serve as the first of these statutory reviews. The revised EIP together with a statement setting out the reasons for changes will be laid before Parliament.

This fundamental review must consider what has been done to implement the EIP since publication, whether the natural environment has improved during that period,

and whether further steps need to be taken to improve the natural environment. As part of this first review, the Act requires that the EIP is updated to include interim targets (of up to 5 years) for each of our long term legally binding targets.

The updated EIP will set the path to delivering our environmental ambitions and targets across the breadth of the goals, including both our new legally binding targets and wider goals not subject to legally binding targets.

### Long Term Environmental Targets

The Environment Act's targets framework allows for long-term targets to be set on any aspect of the natural environment, or people's enjoyment of it. The Government's first suite of long-term environmental targets will be laid before Parliament by October 2022. The related interim targets, covering at least 5 years, will be included in the revised Environmental Improvement Plan, to be published by January 2023.

We will be carrying out a public consultation on proposed targets in early 2022. This will provide an opportunity to hear a range of views on our target proposals. Once we have carefully considered the responses to this consultation, we will then bring forward the final, statutory targets.

Each of the long-term environmental targets will be supported by interim targets. All interim targets will make an appropriate contribution towards meeting the relevant long-term target. This will help ensure the government stays on track to achieve its longer-term targets.

As part of the first review the EIP, we will update the plan to include at least one interim target for each long-term target that has been set. These interim targets will cover the following five-year period as a minimum. In each subsequent EIP review, further interim targets covering the following five-year periods will be included.

### Annual Reporting

We published our latest [2020-2021 Annual Progress Report for the 25 Year Environment Plan](#) in October 2021. This report recognised that delivering our vision of a healthier environment requires strong foundations: comprehensive, reliable data; strong governance and accountability; a robust delivery framework, and for all of society to play a role.

The Environment Act 2021 requires the government to lay annual progress reports before Parliament, that will describe what has been done over the reporting period. The Act stipulates that an annual report must describe what has been done, in the period to which the report relates, to implement the environmental improvement plan, as well as whether the natural environment has, or particular aspects of it have, improved during that period.

The first annual report on a subsequent environmental improvement plan must relate to the first 12 months of the period to which the plan relates. An annual report must

consider the progress that has been made towards achieving any relevant targets or interim targets.

Under the provisions of the Environment Act, a statutory annual report must be laid before Parliament before the end of the four month period beginning immediately after the last day of the period to which the report relates. The Secretary of State must publish annual reports laid before Parliament. Progress under the Environmental Improvement Plan will be monitored by the OEP.

### Outcome Indicator Framework

In the latest Outcome Indicator Framework update report, we continued the iterative development of the framework, introducing data for seven new indicators this year. 45 of the 66 planned indicators have now reported valuable evidence insights on changes in our environment and we are continuing towards our intended goal of publishing data for all indicators by 2024. We anticipate continuing to add to the framework annually by publishing additional new indicators and the most recent data in our next update report (2022).

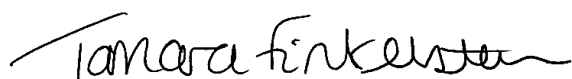
Underpinning our reporting cycle, new scientific research and innovation continues to create and refine the datasets which allow us to report strategic environmental trends. Defra is working to ensure the Outcome Indicator Framework can make best use of complementary government initiatives such as the Natural Capital and Ecosystem Assessment, which in future will offer a valuable data source for enhanced environmental monitoring and surveillance.

In seeking to further strengthen the value of our evidence to a diverse audience, Defra has this year launched [a new online dashboard version of the Outcome Indicator Framework](#).

This interactive tool increases accessibility and clarity and allows users to filter and download indicator data for further exploration. The dashboard complements the annual update report and allows users to engage with and draw insights from the data more easily.

Developed in collaboration with the OEP, this new digital dashboard project was intended to better facilitate informed policy discussions amongst officials and to further open up government data in support of greater evidence transparency and public engagement.

Yours sincerely,



**TAMARA FINKELSTEIN**  
**Permanent Secretary**