

Written evidence submitted by the Environment Agency (EA0011)

Written Evidence by the Environment Agency for Parliament's Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee's hearing on the work of the Environment Agency, 14 March 2023.

Date: 8 March

Who we are

The Environment Agency (EA) is a Non-Departmental Public Body with a broad and complex remit to regulate business, reduce flood risk, and improve the environment for the communities that we serve. The EA exists to create a better place and has been doing so for years: making the nation more resilient to climate change through its flood defence, planning and placemaking work; making our air, land and water healthier through its regulation, habitat creation and nature enhancement; and supporting green growth and a sustainable future through its work on development and to tackle the climate emergency.

We build a nation resilient to climate change

The EA is arguably the single most important organisation in this country now tackling the climate emergency: we play a major role in mitigating the extent of climate change by regulating down most of the greenhouse gas emissions in this country; and a major role in reducing the impacts of climate change by helping the country adapt, including by building and maintaining the country's 22,000 flood defences, reducing the risk of drought, and helping design places for people to live and work which are more resilient and better places to live.

The EA has also made a commitment to make the Environment Agency itself and our whole supply chain Net Zero by 2030. The organisation has already reduced a third of its own carbon emissions last year compared to its baseline in 2019/20. We are also using the power of our £4.5 billion Pension Fund to generate strong financial returns by investing in companies that contribute to a sustainable economy.

We are also a Category 1 emergency responder and when flooding threatens we warn and inform the public. Our flood warning system directly alerts over 1.6 million users at the touch of a button when flooding is expected and we deploy our teams and equipment to help protect communities. In the winter of 2015/16, we responded to some of the most severe flooding in the North of England in recent memory, when about 17,000 properties flooded and our flood defences protected 23,400 properties.

We have achieved progress since the 2015/16 floods. The EA delivered the government's last £2.7 billion Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management Capital Investment Programme on time, on budget and on target, and is now delivering the new £5.2 billion capital programme. We have seen more flooding since, but our flood defences now protect many more properties – 35,000 properties were protected when 372 flooded during Storm Dudley, Eunice and Franklin in 2022. In total and to date the

EA and our local partners have enhanced the level of protection for more than 353,000 properties in England with these two capital programmes – many in the very communities affected in 2015/16.

We also seek to think big and act early. In 2020, we published the Environment Agency's National Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management Strategy for England, setting out a vision of a nation resilient to flooding and coastal change up to the year 2100. A year later, we published our third adaptation report that describes the risks we face from climate change and the actions we are taking to prepare for them.

We protect and create healthy air, land and water

The EA improves and protects the quality of our air, land and water by preventing and tackling pollution. The Environment Agency has responded to more than 3,600 serious environmental incidents and dealt with an incident every 33 minutes since 2015, protecting the environment and people.

Overall water quality in our rivers, estuaries and coastal waters has improved greatly over the last few decades. Since the 1990s there has been a big increase in the numbers of sensitive macroinvertebrates (snails, worms and insects) in our rivers and otters have returned to every English county - all indicators of the improving health of England's waters. This is to a large part down to robust regulation by the EA and investment by the water companies.

But more needs to be done. Progress in improving water quality over the last few decades has slowed and, in some cases, stopped because of growing pressures on the water environment and continued pollution, mostly by water companies and farmers. We have taken robust action against water companies and others who don't follow the rules and pollute our rivers. Since 2015, we have concluded 58 successful prosecutions against the water and sewerage companies, securing fines of over £142 million and in November 2021 we launched major investigations into potential widespread non-compliance by water companies at wastewater treatment works.

We actively improve the environment ourselves, tackling the climate and nature emergency. The EA enhanced more than 14,000 km of rivers and coastal waters and created or restored more than 7,600 hectares since 2016, creating new habitats for England's wildlife and beautiful places for people to enjoy.

We regulate for green growth and a sustainable future

The EA drives sustainability and helps to grow the economy, both through our delivery and regulation. Our flood and coastal risk management activity created 9,800 jobs and avoided £4.6 billion in damages in 2019/20.

Waste crime harms people, places and the economy, including by undercutting the legitimate waste industry. In January 2020, the government and the EA launched the Joint Unit for Waste Crime, a new taskforce bringing together environmental regulators and law enforcement agencies to better tackle serious and organised waste crime. We have stopped more than 6,300 illegal waste operations, preventing the illegal disposal of 6.6 million tonnes of waste since December 2015. Every £1 million spent on waste crime regulation provided an estimated £3.5 million in economic benefit.

Strong regulation needs strong regulators: if regulators are going to do their jobs they need the right powers, the right resources, the right laws and the right support.

An EA ready for the future

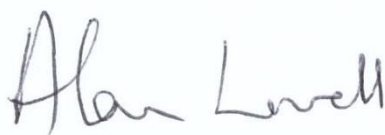
It is the professionalism and passion of our staff which enables us to make a difference. In our last all-employee survey in autumn 2021, 80 per cent of our staff said they were motivated by the organisation's goals and 77 per cent felt strongly committed to the organisation itself. We believe this puts the organisation in a good position to tackle the challenges of the future.

Like the public sector generally, the EA has recently struggled with recruitment and retention of staff and to compete with the private sector on pay. We have actively managed this and for the first time in a while, we are recruiting more people than we have lost, but there remain challenges.

The EA needs to represent all the communities we serve. We value difference and believe we achieve more for people and the environment when we bring our different talents and abilities together. We have made some progress with Equality, Diversity and Inclusion over the last years. 43 per cent of our executive managers are women today, up from 34 per cent in 2016. The executive leadership team has moved from an all-male executive team to full gender balance. The organisation has also embraced action on race with a plan to promote greater diversity in its workforce. The proportion of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic staff rose from 3.8% in 2016 to 5.1% last quarter.

We will continue creating a better place

The EA will continue to focus on delivering outcomes that benefit the people and places we serve and to implement our strategic business plan, EA2025. We will also now play a central part in delivering the government's Environmental Improvement Plan published in January 2023.



Alan Lovell
Chair



Sir James Bevan
Chief Executive