

**Written evidence from the Office of Environmental Protection (OEP)
(NIT0064)**

Baroness Sheehan
Chair, Environment and Climate Change Committee
Houses of Parliament
LONDON
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30 June 2025

Dear Baroness Sheehan

Thank you for the opportunity to consider further the question of a new national target for nitrogen in wastewater. In my letter of 11 April, I set out our understanding of the targets to tackle pollution from nitrogen, and how any new national target relating to nitrogen from wastewater might contribute in that context.

On the particular issue of a wastewater target for nitrogen to protect waters at higher risk, I referenced the existing standards for nitrogen within the Water Framework Directive (WFD) Regulations, which support the objective for Good Ecological Status in surface waters set out in those regulations.

The nitrogen standards for lake, estuarine and coastal waters developed by the UK Technical Advisory Group (UKTAG) are detailed and specific. For example, the nitrogen standards for lakes vary according to the depth and colour of the lake, while those for coastal waters vary according to salinity and turbidity. Nitrogen pollution in these waters should already be managed in a way that considers upstream inputs, including from wastewater where that is a relevant pressure. These standards also directly align with biodiversity outcomes.

As your inquiry has heard, there are many complex routes by which nitrogen and other pollutants reach waterbodies. Our view is that these need to be considered comprehensively, and the most locally relevant action taken on the major sources as required in each water body.

Therefore, in terms of the standards and approaches themselves, the current WFD approach appears well-designed and could be effective if implemented well. In particular, the WFD creates a requirement and provides a mechanism for spatially targeting action to the specific ecological pressures on each water body, including those at highest risk. These specific mechanisms sit in a context where there is a national target to address the largest source of nitrogen pollution in the water environment, that is agriculture.

However, as we have discussed with your Committee, implementation is lacking. Plans fail to specify how and when nitrogen loads will be decreased and without detailed delivery plans for all sectors it is unlikely the overall objective of Good Ecological Status will be met anytime soon. In our view, the most pressing need is for an increased pace of delivery.

While we agree a national target for reduction of nitrogen from wastewater could contribute to the protection of our waterways by reducing the overall level of nitrogen discharged into water, a national sector-based reduction target may not drive prioritised and targeted action where it matters most, in the way that the WFD regulations, properly implemented, should.

Our concern is that urgent, local action may not be driven by a national target but might, in practice, be obscured by one. Taken together, this means that we have not so far advocated for new national targets relating to nitrogen in wastewater.

However, in light of your Inquiry, and the final report of the Independent Water Commission expected before summer, the Government may take the opportunity to review the environmental objectives for the water environment. If it does so, it may be a good opportunity to review the suite of nutrient targets and standards, and we would expect to see a full consideration of nitrogen from all sources in any such review.

We continue to be of the view that targets are crucial for directing action and supporting accountability. There are a large number of targets for the water environment, and we believe that government needs to make sure they are coherent with one another.

Thank you once again, for the invitation, and for the Committee's continued interest in our work.

Yours sincerely,

Dame Glenys Stacey

Chair, Office for Environmental Protection

30/06/2025