

## Briefing

# Government review of the Environmental Improvement Plan

## July 2024

### Recommendation

We support a government review of the Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP). This should prioritise actions for delivering Environment Act targets, and ensure that the scale, pace and delivery of those actions is capable of meeting the targets. It should not entail a full scale review of the plan's goals.

The review should be done as a policy sprint, concluded within three months of being announced and with rapid stakeholder engagement with those groups who are experts in delivery. The review must be conducted and completed swiftly because of the urgent need to make progress towards achieving the 2030 species abundance target and the risks that a lengthy and convoluted process would present to this timetable.

The desired outcome of the review would be a credible and transparent delivery plan to accompany the existing EIP.

### Environment Act framework

The [Environment Act 2021](#) created a new environmental governance system for England. This has four components: a framework for setting legally binding targets in four priority areas (air quality, water, biodiversity, and resource efficiency and waste reduction); an Environmental Improvement Plan; a duty on policy makers to have due regard to the Environmental Principles Policy Statement; a new oversight body, the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP), to monitor the effectiveness of environmental law, and investigate and enforce non-compliance by public authorities.

The current [EIP](#) was published on 31 January 2023 and is central to the governance of meeting the set of legally binding targets. The Environment Act requires the EIP to be a plan for “significantly improving the natural environment” in the period to which the plan relates. The plan must last for at least 15 years. The first EIP builds on and contains similar goals to the [25 year environment plan](#), published in 2018.

The Environment Act also requires the EIP to set out the government's actions to improve the natural environment in the period to which the plan relates. This is where the EIP falls short, as we explain below.

## **Progress on delivering the EIP and Environment Act targets**

The government is legally responsible for halting the decline of species by 31 December 2030, and for meeting the other targets set out on page 3 of this note.

The government must report on progress each year, including against the Environment Act targets. The OEP also reports on progress annually and the government is obliged to respond to its report within a year. The EIP must be reviewed every five years or sooner and updated in the light of progress made towards targets.

In its [2023 report](#), the OEP said progress had, “fallen far short of what is needed to meet Government’s ambition to leave the environment in a better state”.

In its [2024 report](#), the OEP said that “Government is largely off track to meet its stated ambitions, statutory targets and other commitments”. It went on to say that the government “must speed up and scale up its efforts, to restore, protect and enhance the environment at the level required” and that the government had not adequately responded to the recommendations in its 2023 report.

The government’s annual progress report is due by 31 July 2024. This is a chance to set out more transparently the government’s assessment of where good progress has been made, where further action and effort is needed and what the barriers to effective implementation are.

The Environment Act targets should also be reviewed, as they are not ambitious enough to deliver the improvements needed to address the triple crises of climate breakdown, nature decline and unsustainable resource consumption. But that should be a separate and more involved process than this initial review of the EIP and should involve full public consultation.

## **Review of the Environmental Improvement Plan**

Steve Reed [said](#) that he would “ensure the existing environmental improvement plan is fit for purpose” and Toby Perkins [pledged](#) that Labour would address nature’s decline by reviewing the EIP “to get Britain back on track to Env[ironment] Act targets”.

As progress on delivering the Environment Act targets and goals are off track, we think such a review is both timely and necessary. However, we would caution against a root and branch review which takes a long time to deliver, as this would put the delivery of the already off-track Environment Act targets further at risk.

We suggest that the review should be announced immediately and conclude within three months, conducted via a policy sprint, with rapid stakeholder engagement with groups who are experts in delivery. Engagement should be structured around the targets, carefully considering the delivery barriers identified by the OEP. We suggest that full public consultation is not necessary because of the urgent need to make progress towards achieving the 2030 species abundance target in particular, and the risks that a lengthy and convoluted process would present to this delivery timetable.

The desired outcome of the review would be a credible and transparent delivery plan to accompany the existing EIP. This should set out the actions needed to meet the Environment Act targets, with a clear timetable and responsibilities allocated for delivery. Where those actions must be implemented by farmers, the delivery plan should set out how the incentives available in the Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes, including the budget split across its component schemes, will be sufficient to achieve the required scale and pace of change.

**This is a joint briefing from Green Alliance and Wildlife and Countryside Link.**

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## **Legally binding Environment Act targets**

### **Biodiversity**

1. To halt the decline in species abundance by 2030.
2. To ensure that species abundance in 2042 is greater than in 2022, and at least 10% greater than 2030.
3. Improve the Red List Index for England for species extinction risk by 2042, compared to 2022 levels.
4. To restore or create in excess of 500,000 hectares of a range of wildlife-rich habitat outside protected sites by 2042, compared to 2022 levels.
5. 70% of the designated features in the MPA network to be in favourable condition by 2042, with the remainder in recovering condition.

### **Water quality and availability**

6. Abandoned metal mines target: Halve the length of rivers polluted by harmful metals from abandoned mines by 2038, against a baseline of around 1,500 km.
7. Agriculture target: reduce nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P) and sediment pollution from agriculture into the water environment by at least 40% by 2038, compared to a 2018 baseline.
8. Wastewater target: reduce phosphorus loadings from treated wastewater by 80% by 2038 against a 2020 baseline.
9. Water demand target: reduce the use of public water supply in England per head of population by 20% from the 2019-20 baseline reporting year figures, by 2037-38.

### **Woodland cover**

10. Increase total tree and woodland cover from 14.5% of land area now to 16.5% by 2050.

### **Resource efficiency and waste reduction**

11. Reduce residual waste (excluding major mineral wastes) kg per capita by 50% by 2042 from 2019 levels.

### **Air quality**

12. An annual mean concentration target for PM<sub>2.5</sub> levels in England to be 10 µg m<sup>-3</sup> or below by 2040.
13. A population exposure reduction target for a reduction in PM<sub>2.5</sub> population exposure of 35% compared to 2018 to be achieved by 2040.

## Summary of the Office for Environmental Protection’s findings

This [annual progress report](#) provides an assessment of the government’s progress towards the legally binding environmental targets and the goals of its Environmental Improvement Plan. It covers the period 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023.

Environmental Improvement Plan 2023 areas	Environmental Improvement Plan 2023 goals	Past trends	Progress	Overall prospects of meeting ambitions, targets and commitments
<b>The apex goal</b>	Goal 1: Thriving plants and wildlife			
<b>Improving environmental quality</b>	Goal 2: Clean air			
	Goal 3: Clean and plentiful water			
	Goal 4: Managing exposure to chemicals and pesticides			
<b>Improving our use of resources</b>	Goal 5: Maximise our resources, minimise our waste			
	Goal 6: Using resources from nature sustainably			
<b>Improving our mitigation of climate change</b>	Goal 7: Mitigating and adapting to climate change	Mitigation		
		Adaptation		
	Goal 8: Reduced risk of harm from environmental hazards			
<b>Improving our biosecurity</b>	Goal 9: Enhancing biosecurity			
<b>Improving the beauty of nature</b>	Goal 10: Enhancing beauty, heritage and engagement with the natural environment			
<b>Assessment rating</b>	<b>Past trends</b>	<b>Progress</b>	<b>Overall prospects</b>	
	Improving trends dominate	Good progress	Largely on track	
	Trends show a mixed picture	Mixed progress	Partially on track	
	Deteriorating trends dominate	Limited progress	Largely off track	
	Not assessed			