



# Office for Environmental Protection

## About the OEP

Parliament created the OEP in 2021 to protect and improve the environment in England and Northern Ireland, by holding government and other public authorities to account.

We report independently to inform Parliament and the Assembly on progress in improving the environment, and the prospects of long-term targets being achieved. We advise Government on changes to the law and investigate and enforce where there are serious failures of environmental law by Government or other public authorities. And we report independently to Parliament and the Assembly on how effectively environmental law is being implemented. All our work is to make environmental improvement more likely.

We are funded by Defra and DAERA.

## Our work

We plan our work to make the most difference we can. This year, we are focussed on four areas. We'll assess and report on the most pressing issues needed to improve nature and stop the decline in species. We are scrutinising the laws to protect our rivers, lakes and inland waters. We're examining what must be done to ensure our seas meet good environmental status, and we are assessing critical parts of how the environment is governed. We'll also present our annual report on progress in improving the environment to Parliament.

Much of our work is provided to Parliament, to support it in its scrutiny role. You can find out more about our role, and [our reports, investigations and other work](#) below.

## How to contact us

Please contact our Chief Executive's office if you would like to discuss our work further.

**Website:** [www.theoep.org.uk](http://www.theoep.org.uk)

**Email:** [privateoffice@theoep.org.uk](mailto:privateoffice@theoep.org.uk)

**Telephone:** [03300 416 581](tel:03300416581)

## More about our current work

We aim for our work programme to make the most difference to environmental protection and improvement.

### Scrutinising environmental progress in England



Our annual progress report to Parliament provides a comprehensive and independent review of progress made towards Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) goals and long-term environmental targets, and the prospects of these being achieved.

[Our last report](#) found progress largely off track to meet ambitions. We made five key recommendations: to implement the EIP effectively; develop clear and effective governance; develop and implement delivery plans; set and vigorously pursue achievable and ambitious interim targets; implement an effective monitoring, evaluation and learning framework. Government must respond to Parliament on our

report and recommendations.

We will publish our next progress report in January 2025. This will include a deep dive into progress towards the legal target to halt the decline in species abundance by 2030, with a focus on the role nature friendly farming schemes are expected to play.

Our prior progress reports in [2022](#) and [2023](#) have included our assessments of the necessary building blocks of a successful EIP. Government is now conducting a rapid review of the EIP and has asked for our advice. We will publish this in due course.

### Clean Water



In May, we laid an [independent evidence-based report](#) before Parliament on key legislation regarding water quality and how it is being implemented by Defra and the Environment Agency. We found deeply concerning failures to properly implement regulations designed to protect rivers, lakes and coastal waters in England mean key targets for improvement by 2027 will be missed.

Government must respond to Parliament on our report and its nine recommendations in August. In the autumn, we will also lay a report in Parliament on the laws relating to bathing waters.

Separately, we are investigating the regulation of combined sewer overflows by Defra, Ofwat and the Environment Agency to establish whether each has complied with environmental law. We expect to take the next steps in the coming months. This will be to close our investigation with resolution, or to take further steps through our enforcement process.

## Delivering for Nature



Improving nature is the apex goal of the current EIP in England, with an associated apex target to halt the decline in species abundance by 2030. Progress is not on track, but this demanding goal can be achieved. In our view, effective implementation of existing policy would get government a long way towards achieving its objectives.

We have designed our work programme to scrutinise key areas that make achieving the target more likely. Our next EIP progress report will include a detailed focus on the contribution nature friendly farming is expected to make. In the spring, we will report to Parliament on how protected sites can deliver more for nature and are looking at Local Nature Recovery Strategies to ensure they contribute as effectively as

intended.

We also have two related investigations. We are investigating Defra and Natural England's potential failure to comply with laws in relation to Special Protection Areas for wild birds. We are also investigating Defra's emergency authorisation of a pesticide containing neonicotinoids in 2023 and 2024. Both of these investigations began earlier in 2024.

We have provided Government with a range of advice in relation to the laws protecting nature. Parliament has found our advice useful, in considering changes to the law. For example, we provided [advice to the Government](#), warning that proposals to amend the Habitat Regulations which underpin 'nutrient neutrality' in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill would reduce the level of environmental protection provided for in environmental law. This informed debate in the House of Lords, which voted against the changes.

## Assessing environmental impacts of development



In the long-term, economic growth depends on and is underpinned by our natural resources and a recovered natural environment.

Planning reform is a priority for the Government. We have [published a detailed assessment of how the system that protects the environment in planning can work better](#), identifying significant underlying practical issues preventing effective implementation: access to information, the extent of post-decision monitoring, evaluation and reporting and access to expertise.

We [provided advice on the previous Government's early proposals for change](#), identifying the factors that must be in place if the proposals are to succeed.

Clarity in the law is particularly important in this area, if developers and others are to plan effectively for what is needed. [We intervened in the Supreme Court](#) case of Finch v Surrey County Council, to support the Court give clarity on the correct means to assess the 'downstream' greenhouse gas emissions from new oil development. The Court stated our intervention was particularly helpful to its [ruling](#).

## Environmental Governance



Environment Act 2021

It is essential the new framework of environmental governance Parliament created in 2021 (see below) succeeds if the environment is to be significantly improved as Parliament intended. Alongside our progress report, we are scrutinising implementation of the Environmental Principles Policy Statement and how effective it is at driving environmental protection across Government – we will report in the Spring. The last Environmental Audit Committee of the House of Commons recommended that Parliament undertake post legislative scrutiny of the implementation of the Environment Act. We agree.

We also monitor the implementation of environmental governance more broadly. In 2025, we will report to Parliament on how effectively environmental inspection regimes are being undertaken in practice, with a focus on the waste sector.

## More about our national governance for the environment

We are central to a new system of national environmental governance implemented in the Environment Act 2021. This system aims to deliver a significant improvement in the natural environment in England and Northern Ireland. The system has four cornerstones: long-term environmental targets in law; environmental improvement plans (EIPs) which set out how a significant environmental improvement is to be achieved; an Environmental Principles Policy Statement which must be taken into account when making all policy, and; the OEP as a new oversight body.



## More about the OEP and Parliament – what to expect

### Our independent role in this system is designed to help Parliament in its role of scrutiny.



We report annually to Parliament on progress towards EIP goals and targets, and prospects of long-term targets being achieved. We currently report in January in England.

Government must respond to Parliament within 12 months on our report and its recommendations.



We plan a series of reports to Parliament to examine whether environmental law is effectively implemented and what should be done to improve it. This year these will include on the management of our rivers and lakes, on bathing waters, on the management of protected sites for nature and on how well the environmental principles are being implemented.

Government must respond to Parliament within three months on our reports and their recommendations.



We can advise Ministers when a change to environmental law is proposed, or on any other matter connected to the environment when we are asked.

We publish our advice, analysis and evidence so it can be useful to others. Parliamentarians have used it when considering changes to law proposed.



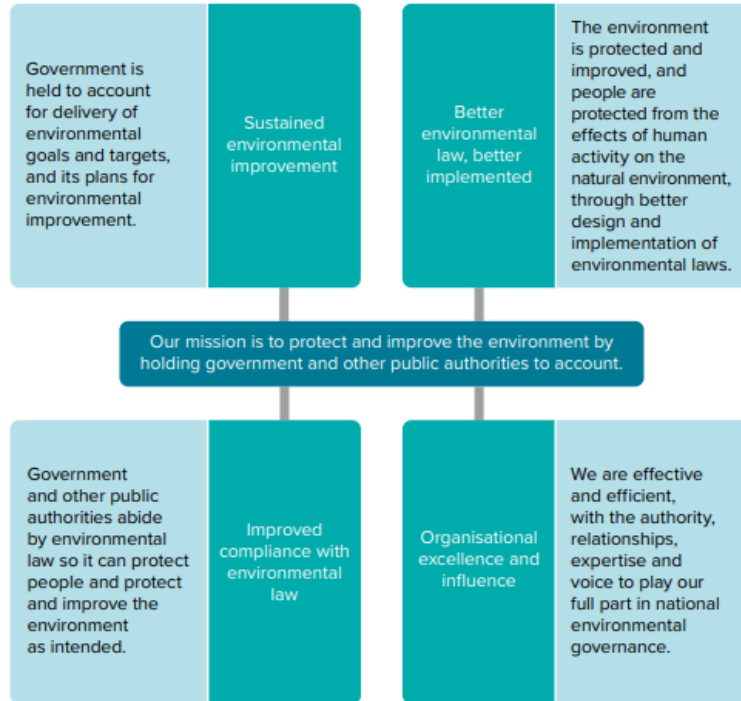
We keep our website up to date with progress on our investigations and other compliance activity. We have four investigations underway in England on compliance issues connected to clean water and nature.

We publish investigation reports or other notices when we conclude our work on a matter, so that our findings and evidence can be useful to others.

### More about our role and organisation

Our mission is to protect and improve the environment by holding government and other public authorities to account. Our work covers England and Northern Ireland. We also cover matters on which only the UK Parliament in Westminster can make legislation.

**We have four strategic objectives:**



The Environment Act sets out our powers and duties. **We have seven main functions:**



## Who we are

We are around 80 people, based in Worcester and Northern Ireland – scientists, lawyers, regulators and others. By law, our Board takes our most important decisions.

### Dame Glenys Stacey, Chair



Dame Glenys Stacey was appointed Chair of the OEP in December 2020, and has led the Board through the legal establishment and first years of the OEP. She has a wealth of CEO and regulatory experience, having led the start-up or development of several public-sector organisations. She has previously served as HM Chief Inspector of Probation, Chief Executive at Animal Health, Chief Executive of the Criminal Cases Review Commission and Chief Regulator at Ofqual. In 2019, she chaired an independent review of farm regulation at the request of the then Secretary of State for Defra.

### Natalie Prosser, Chief Executive Officer



Natalie Prosser was appointed Chief Executive of the OEP in February 2021. She is a solicitor specialising in public and regulatory law, regulatory operations and governance. Her previous roles have included General Counsel at the Gambling Commission, Director of Operations, Vocational and Technical Qualifications and Director of Legal at Ofqual and regulatory and policy lead on the independent Farm Inspection and Regulation Review.

## Our Board

Our [Board members](#) each bring significant sectoral and professional expertise: Julie Hill MBE, Professor Richard Macrory CBE, Dr Paul Leinster CBE, Professor Dan Laffoley and Malcolm Beatty OBE (*l-r*).

