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By email only

20 May 2024

Dear First and deputy First Ministers

Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) for Northern Ireland

I write to you further to my letter of introduction on 7 February 2024. In that letter I referred to the OEP's interest in the urgent publication of an EIP for Northern Ireland.

As you will know, the EIP is required by the Environment Act 2021, with publication and laying before the Assembly due by 25 July 2023. We previously commented that the Environment Strategy, which was developed under Minister Poots, was suitable for adoption as the basis of the EIP. I would reiterate that it is our view that the EIP should be considered a baseline, and as such there is no room for weakening of the commitments and ambition it contains. From my most recent exchange with Minister Muir (letter dated 9 April¹) I understand the EIP has now been tabled with the Executive. However, it is yet to be laid before the Assembly and published as required.

I know that you, and the wider Executive, share the concerns of many in relation to the pressing environmental matters in Northern Ireland, including the imperative to address the situation at Lough Neagh. I note your recent visit to Lough Neagh, and your assurances that the Executive is committed to taking the necessary action to protect and better manage the lough. I also welcome Minister Muir's commitment to working alongside Executive colleagues to agree the EIP, before bringing forward a further and more specific plan for Lough Neagh.

In this regard the EIP offers an opportunity for the Executive to deliver an overarching strategy that will help address these pressing issues, while setting out its shared ambition on how it will protect and improve Northern Ireland's environment now and for future generations. Given the urgent action needed to tackle the matters being faced, there is no scope for ambition to be weakened, nor time to lose.

¹ Exchange of correspondence between the OEP and DAERA in relation to the NI EIP [Failure to meet NI EIP deadline 'deeply regrettable' | Office for Environmental Protection \(theoep.org.uk\)](#).

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It is now approaching a year since the legal deadline passed, it is more than three months since Ministers returned to Stormont, and we have received two formal complaints in relation to the failure to publish the EIP.

We have been mindful of the political context here, and the time needed to bring forward the backlog of matters requiring the attention of the Executive. However, I would now welcome your assurance that this matter is being addressed by the wider Executive with the degree of urgency required, thus ensuring that the commitments they have made to protecting and enhancing Northern Ireland's environment are met without further delay.

Yours sincerely,



Dame Glenys Stacey

Chair of the Office for Environmental Protection



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Cc

Jayne Brady, Head of Northern Ireland Civil Service
Dame Brenda King, Attorney General for Northern Ireland
Aisling Reilly, Junior Minister
Caoimhe Archibald, Finance Minister
Conor Murphy, Economy Minister
John O'Dowd, Infrastructure Minister
Andrew Muir, Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Minister
Naomi Long, Justice Minister
Robin Swann, Health Minister
Gordon Lyons, Communities Minister
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