



Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs

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Dame Meg Hillier MP
Chair of the Committee of
Public Accounts
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31 January 2023

Dear Dame Hillier,

PUBLICATION OF GOVERNMENT'S ENVIRONMENT IMPROVEMENT PLAN 2023

Today we are publishing the government's new Environment Improvement Plan 2023. This includes new interim environment targets, following approval of our long-term statutory targets. Alongside the Environmental Improvement Plan, we are publishing the Significant Improvement Test, our commitment to review its suite of statutory environmental targets at least every 5 years and the Environmental Principles Policy Statement, which will guide Ministers in their legal duty to consider the commitment when making policy.

Environment Improvement Plan 2023

This government is committed to leaving the environment in a better state than we found it. This is no small task. From barn owls to butterflies, hedgehogs to red squirrels, nature has been in free fall for decades, and pressures are increasing due to climate change and population growth.

Nature is a crucial part of our islands' story and our shared future. We rely on our natural capital for a secure supply of food, for clean air, and for clean water, as well as for leisure and genuine joy. However, nature has been taken for granted for too long, used freely as a resource with little thought for the consequences.

Five years ago, the 25 Year Environment Plan set out our vision for a quarter-of-a-century of action to help the natural world regain and retain good health, as control of important areas of environment policy returned to the UK post Brexit. This is a national endeavour: national government, local government, communities and families all have a key role to play.

It is also an international endeavour. The world has acted on tackling climate change but for too long, nature was treated as the Cinderella. The UK brought nature into the heart of action on climate change in Glasgow at Climate COP26 and this was reinforced by the Prime Minister at COP27.

We have already started the journey and we have seen improvements. Our transformation on support for farmers and landowners to prioritise improving the environment, reducing carbon emissions and enabling sustainable food production is absolutely symbiotic and truly world-leading. We are stepping up on tree planting. We have cleaner air. We have cleaner bathing waters, because we have put a spotlight on water quality. We were central to agreeing a new global deal for nature at the UN Nature Summit COP15.

Now, we are building on the vision with this plan for delivery. It details a delivery plan for each of our goals, matched with stretching interim targets to measure progress towards long-term targets. There is much more to do, but taking these actions will help us restore nature, improve environmental quality, and increase the prosperity of our country.

Significant Improvement Test

We have also laid before Parliament and published a report on the first Significant Improvement Test review. Under the Environment Act 2021, government committed to regularly reviewing its suite of statutory environmental targets to assess whether it has the necessary breadth and ambition. Following the first review, as Secretary of State, I consider that the Significant Improvement Test has been met.

Environmental Principles Policy Statement

Improving our environment is the responsibility of all across Government and the Environment Act 2021 places a legal duty on Ministers of the Crown to have 'due regard' to the environmental principles policy statement when making policy. The policy statement sets out how the principles should be interpreted and proportionately applied.

The final policy statement and revised explanatory memorandum have been laid today in Parliament.

The legal duty will come into force on 1 November 2023. We intend to implement the duty effectively and as soon as possible. This implementation period is important to enable policy makers to consider the final version of the policy statement during relevant policy development before the duty comes into force. Defra is working closely with other government departments to support them in this.

Yours sincerely,



RT HON THERESE COFFEY MP