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Dame Meg Hillier MP,
Chair, Public Accounts Committee
House of Commons
London, SW1A 0AA

From Tamara Finkelstein CB

Permanent Secretary

PAC Recall Session: Follow-Up Response

Dear Chair,

Thank you for the opportunity to attend the Public Accounts Committee session on 27th April to discuss our work on environmental protection.

We committed to follow up with further detail on a number of areas and our responses are below.

Defra's tree-planting programmes

The committee asked whether nursery grant schemes are open to Local Authorities. To increase tree production in our domestic nursery sector, there are several grant schemes available under the Nature for Climate Fund designed to enable tree nurseries to enhance the quality, quantity, diversity, and biosecurity of planting stock available for planting in England. Local Authorities are permitted to apply for all of these schemes. Below are the current grants available:

Tree Production Innovation Fund (TPIF) is a grant to encourage the development and adoption of innovative technologies and ways of working in tree production. It is supporting a wide range of projects such as overcoming seed germination issues, automation of labour-intensive processes, and development of sustainable weed

control solutions. The scheme awarded £4.5 million to successful applicants last year and an additional £2 million has been made available under the 2023 round of funding. Successful projects include collaborations between researchers, nurseries, and seed suppliers.

Tree Production Capital Grant (TPCG) provides capital support to nurseries and seed suppliers to modernise facilities and help adapt mechanisation and automation. This will improve the quantity, quality, diversity, and biosecurity of planting stock available for planting in England. To date £2.8 million has been awarded to successful applicants. The grant requires 50% match funding from applicants.

Seed Sourcing Grant (SSG) provides support for activities that enhance the quality, quantity, and diversity of tree seed stands and orchards across England. To date, the scheme has awarded £771,000 to successful applicants and is currently scheduled to reopen for applications in late May.

Finally, in celebration of HM the King's Coronation, Defra announced a new **Coronation Living Heritage Fund**. This will provide up to £2.5 million of funding for Local Authorities for projects involving trees, to provide a permanent reminder of the Coronation in their local areas. This funding will cover various tree planting projects, as well as capital grants for small and community-run tree nurseries.

Local Authorities will be able to bid for capital funds to run their own local grant schemes for setting up, expanding, or improving nurseries (e.g., investments in biosecurity improvement). These grants will also be available for local authority-run tree nurseries. The grant is expected to open for applications later this year and will help to increase and improve the quality of local tree production.

Exportation of trees from IE to GB and their risk assessment

The committee discussed how trees grown in the Republic of Ireland are assessed when entering the UK and if there are subject to any checks. I can confirm trees will be considered as plants for planting, so will be classified as high-risk if they are being exported IE to GB. This means they will require pre-notification and phytosanitary certification as set out in our Target Operating Model. This has been the case since 1 January 2021. Trees moving IE to NI can continue to be moved under the EU plant passporting scheme if they meet protected zone requirements.

The number of applications and exemptions for the partial moorland burning ban on deep peat.

I can confirm that since May 2021, a total of seven applications have been made for a licence to burn under the Heather and Grass, etc. Burning (England) Regulations

2021. One has been approved, one was refused, and two are currently under consideration. Three applications were not progressed as they had provided insufficient detail and evidence to consider the applications.

Over the same time, Defra has received several reports of unlicensed burning on protected deep peat, with a small number progressing to a full investigation. To date, one case was referred for prosecution which resulted in a fine of £2,645, and one case resulted in a formal warning - owing to the minor nature of the identified regulatory breach. A small number of cases remain under investigation.

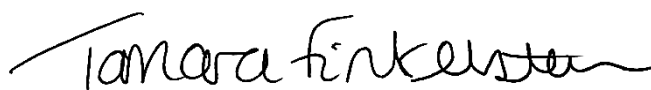
Arrangements to craft regulations supporting miners and their widows who are given some payment in coal.

Ex-mining employees (and their widows or widowers) qualify for a fuel allowance under the National Concessionary Fuel Scheme. The Air Quality (Domestic Solid Fuels Standards) (England) Regulations 2020 introduced the phasing out of traditional house coal used for domestic burning.

When these Regulations were introduced, over 90% of the concessionary fuel recipients were receiving fuels that complied with the new Regulations. When the Regulations were introduced, people who received concessionary coal had one year to switch to an alternative fuel. We worked with fuel suppliers to ensure a smooth transition to alternative fuels (available to recipients at no extra cost) that complied with the new legislation or offered a switch to the cash-in-lieu rate alternative.

Finally, we are aware that rural households using coal as their primary fuel are more likely to buy loose coal. That is why sales of loose coal via approved coal merchants were allowed until May 2023. We worked with the Solid Fuel Association to ensure that all coal merchants who signed up for the Approved Coal Merchants' Scheme were provided with relevant support to help them assist their customers' transition to cleaner fuels, such as manufactured solid fuels, by that time.

I hope you find this information and update helpful.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Tamara Finkelstein'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

Tamara Finkelstein CB
Permanent Secretary