



Public Accounts Committee

Tamara Finkelstein CB
Permanent Secretary
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
By email: permanent.secretary@defra.gov.uk

16 June 2023

Dear Permanent Secretary,

Defra recall: environmental protection

Thank you for the evidence that you and your colleagues gave the Committee on 27 April 2023. I am writing with our observations on some of the issues that we discussed.

Facing up to slow progress

I would first like to note that the Committee felt that there is a mismatch between the way that the Department talks about current, and future, progress and the actual evidence of what has been achieved. We expect to hear a more realistic assessment of the current position when you appear before the Committee in future. We saw this in a number of areas:

- On **tree-planting**, you told the Committee that you were on track in 2021-22. In its March 2022 report *Planting Trees in England*, the NAO reported that, by January 2022, you had only reached 31% of your target for 2021-22 with little time left to source trees, appoint contractors and get other necessary planting arrangements in place before the end of the planting season. The more recent statistics published by Forest Research in June 2022 show that under your flagship scheme, the England Woodland Creation Offer, just 81 hectares were planted in 2021-22 against a target of 1,221 hectares. As you observed, a significant jump in tree-planting will be required next year, but we were not persuaded that you had the measures in place to achieve this.
- On the **Sustainable Farming Incentive**, the NAO reported that, in July 2021, Defra expected between 10,000 ("low ambition") and 20,000 ("high ambition") farmers to participate in SFI2022 in the first year following the scheme launch. You now tell us that only 3,000 farmers have signed up so far, way below even your most pessimistic forecast. You told us you are expecting a significant increase in demand following the launch of SFI2023 in the summer, but we are not convinced, given the poor take-up so far, that you will be able to make the progress you need.
- **Farmers** continue to lack confidence in Defra to deliver the new environmental schemes and many still do not believe they have the information they need from Defra



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to plan their businesses. Alarming, a minority of farmers see a positive future for farming. Your regular farmer opinion tracker continues to show very disappointing results and you told us again that you are expecting an 'uptick' next time round. Based on past experience, the Committee can only be sceptical about this.

Please provide an update on each of the above as soon as new data or information becomes available and write to the Committee setting out the contingencies you have in place if progress continues to be worse than expected.

National communication campaigns

The Committee was concerned about Defra's reluctance to use national communication campaigns to support local messages. You told us that local authorities are best placed to tailor communications to their communities and their different needs. However, the Committee's recommendation in its report *Tackling local air quality breaches* (recommendation 3) set out the importance of a strong national message to support local communications in the context of Covid-19.

You have run, or plan to run, national campaigns in some areas such as domestic wood-burning, tree-planting and fly-tipping, but have declined to do so in other vital policy areas such as clean air zones and domestic water consumption. In the Committee's view, the absence of consistent national leadership shown by the Department undermines public support and therefore successful delivery of these policies.

We would ask you to reconsider the case for stronger national messaging and leadership across all the policy areas for which you are responsible. You told us you were looking at the best way to frame messages to the public so that they really understand and act on them. Please write to the Committee to tell us what actions result from these deliberations.

The role of regulation in delivering government policy

Regulation is one of the main tools available to the Department to deliver its environmental strategies and outcomes in areas like water supply, river pollution and air quality. However, Defra cannot completely divest its responsibilities to regulators and your responses in each of these areas led us to a concern that you were becoming over-reliant on regulation and now need to show stronger leadership in order to bring about better outcomes for the public and for the environment. Progress on leakage, storm overflows and water supply infrastructure is too slow and it is clear to the Committee that you cannot rely on regulation to deliver what is needed.



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In particular, the Committee is concerned that Defra is not showing the leadership needed to help Ofwat square the circle of the need for water companies to invest in reducing leakage and other infrastructure to improve water supply and maintaining the affordability of water bills for consumers. We do not believe it is acceptable for water consumers to bear the load of the investment needed to resolve the supply issues and environmental pressures that have accumulated and are worried that the potential impact on consumer bills in 12 months' time will lead to a crisis on a par with what we have seen with energy bills over the last year.

The scale of what now needs to be done is too much for individual water companies to deliver on their own. Again, we expect to see stronger leadership from the Department to encourage more collaboration between water companies on projects that span more than one water company's area and to accelerate major infrastructure projects to produce new reservoirs, desalination plants and transfers between low-stress and high-stress areas. We welcome the Department's Plan for Water, but do not see this as fulfilling the urgent need for a national government-led strategy.

You agreed in the session to write to the Committee setting out what you are doing in this area and what the national strategy is.

We would also like to hear your views on whether the current balance between regulation and direct government intervention is appropriate, given the scale of the problems that need to be addressed.

Behaviour change

The issue of behaviour change was discussed on a number of occasions during the session, in particular, in relation to air quality (questions 67-68 and 75-76) and water consumption (question 82 and 91-92). Behaviour change is clearly a significant aspect of delivering policy objectives across a range of other environment protection areas too including fly-tipping and farmers' adoption of new Environmental Land Management schemes. It is also not a challenge that is unique to Defra. For example, the Committee's reports on net zero have highlighted how much future reductions in emissions will rely on changing individual choices and behaviours, from day-to-day lifestyle choices to one-off purchases.

There would seem to be significant opportunities for Defra and other departments to learn lessons from each other in this interesting area of research and policy formulation.

Please write to the Committee setting out Defra's current research programme on behaviour change and how it is working with other government departments to share and learn lessons from past successes and failures.



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I would be grateful for a reply on these matters by the end of July 2023. I am copying this letter to the Comptroller & Auditor General and to the Treasury Officer of Accounts. It will be published on our website.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Meg Hillier".

Dame Meg Hillier MP
Chair of the Committee of Public Accounts