



Parliamentary
Forward View



OEP Progress report on England's EIP

Implications for policy and environmental science



February 2024

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Implications for policy and environmental science, February 2024

This is a briefing paper on the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP)'s recent report, '[Progress in improving the natural environment in England 2022/2023](#)'. The report was published in January 2024 and assesses England's progress towards improving the natural environment through the Government's [Environmental Improvement Plan](#).

The report concludes that "while some progress has been made, very substantial challenges remain, and that government is largely off track to meet EIP23 ambitions, Environment Act targets and other commitments."

[Read the full report](#) to find out more.

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1. Specialism-specific relevance

The content of the [OEP's annual progress report](#) (and therefore this briefing) has ramifications for all specialisms of environmental science.

For more information about how the Government's [Environmental Improvement Plan](#) for England affects specific specialisms of environmental science, read the [IES briefing on the Environmental Improvement Plan](#), published in June 2023.

The OEP's progress report applies exclusively to England, so members working outside the UK or in other devolved nations may find the content of this briefing less relevant to their work.

If you want to support the work of the IES, you can join as an [affiliate](#), or if you're a professional in the environmental sector working with science, consider [becoming a member of the IES](#).

2. What is the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP)?

The [Office for Environmental Protection](#) (OEP) is an Arms-Length Body responsible for protecting and improving the environment in England and Northern Ireland, which it achieves by holding to account public authorities and the Government.

It was created by the [Environment Act 2021](#) as part of the

environmental governance arrangements which emerged from the UK's exit from the European Union (EU).

Covering a range of functions, the OEP is responsible for scrutiny and advice to the Government, monitoring and reporting on environmental plans and law, and investigations and enforcement in cases where public bodies fail to comply with environmental law.

Despite this array of functions, the OEP is not a direct successor organisation to the roles played by the [European Commission](#) during the UK's membership of the EU, with limited functions by comparison.

Equivalent organisations in the devolved administrations have subtly different remits and approaches. In Scotland, [Environmental Standards Scotland](#) (ESS) plays the same role as the OEP, though the [Scottish Environmental Protection Agency](#) (SEPA) serves as Scotland's primary environmental regulator and functions alongside ESS in Scotland's environmental governance landscape.

In Wales, these functions are primarily fulfilled by the [Interim Environmental Protection Assessor for Wales](#) (IEPAW). In January 2024, the Welsh Government published long-term [plans for its environmental governance arrangements](#), subject to a consultation.

As part of its duties under the Environment Act 2021, the OEP is responsible for producing an annual report on progress in improving the natural environment in line with the current [Environmental Improvement Plan](#), as well as for progress towards long-term and interim targets set under the [Environment Act](#).

The annual progress report has the scope to include how progress could be improved, as well as the adequacy of data provided by the Secretary of State. The [most recent report](#) covers the period from 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023.

Now that the report has been published, the Government is under a duty to respond and address the recommendations set out in the report.

For more information on the role of the OEP within the UK's environmental governance framework, read '[Progressing or Regressing: the future of environmental science under new UK governance](#)'.

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3. What does England's Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) cover?

The [Environmental Improvement Plan](#) (EIP) is the UK Government's primary policy document for meeting its strategic environmental commitments in England. The current edition, published in January 2023, is the second EIP, following the [25 Year Environment Plan](#) published in 2018.

Across the EIP, the Government sets out its progress, targets, and commitments across 10 strategic environmental goals, bringing together measures to secure environmental improvement, as well as consolidating and cross-referencing existing strategies and international commitments made elsewhere. As such, the EIP sets out the positive vision for improving England's natural environment but also includes many elements of a framework to deliver on that vision.

Details of the measures laid out in the current EIP are available in '[Progressing or Regressing: the future of environmental science under new UK governance](#)'.

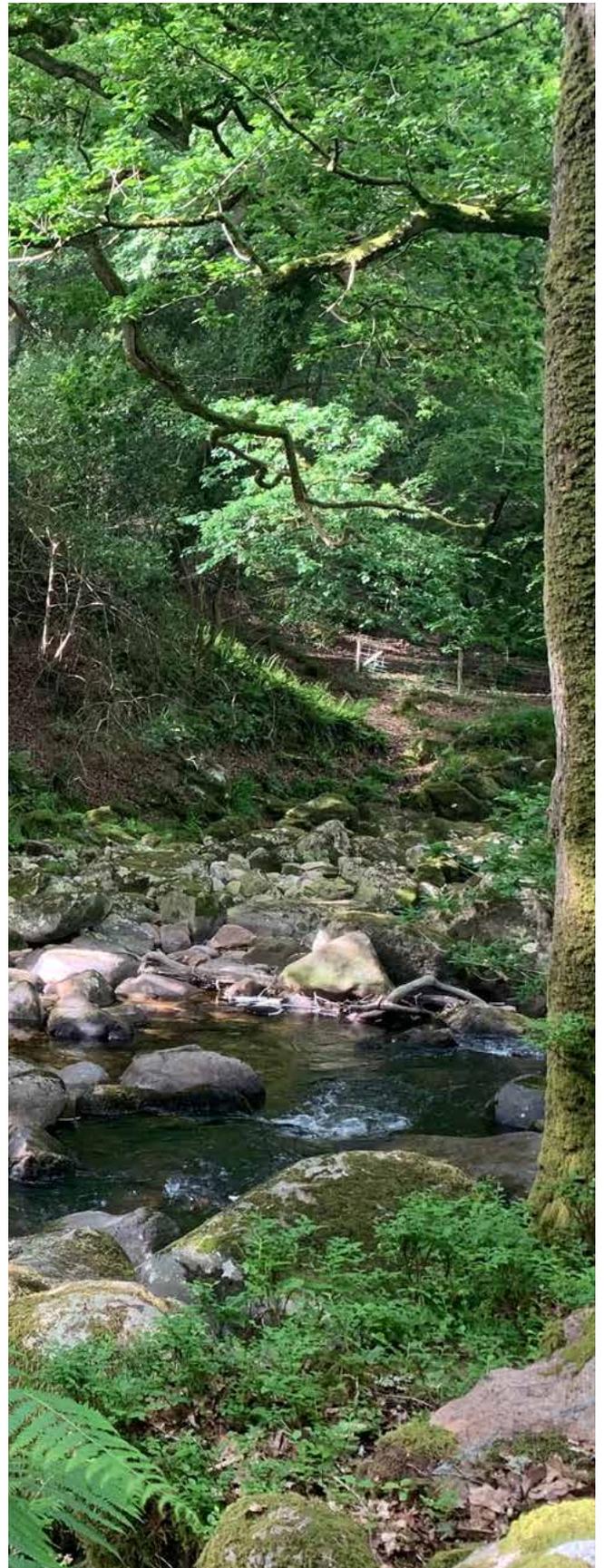
The EIP's 10 Goals are:

1. Thriving plants and wildlife
2. Clean Air
3. Clean and plentiful water
4. Managing exposure to chemicals and pesticides
5. Maximise our resources, minimise our waste
6. Using resources from nature sustainably
7. Mitigating and adapting to climate change
8. Reduced risk of harm from environmental hazards
9. Enhancing biosecurity
10. Enhancing beauty, heritage, and engagement with the natural environment

The Devolved Administrations have equivalent policy documents for addressing their environmental ambitions. Scotland progresses these commitments through its [Environmental Strategy](#), supported with [reports to Parliament](#) on environmental governance arrangements.

Wales primarily handles its strategic environmental objectives through the [Wellbeing of Future Generations](#), but also has subject-specific strategies on issues across the environment, such as [Net Zero](#), [Air Quality](#), and [overflows](#). Further plans for [environmental governance in Wales](#) were announced as part of a consultation in January 2024.

Northern Ireland has its own [Environment Strategy](#) (subject to final approval by the Executive) and has committed to produce an Environmental Improvement Plan, with the former [likely to serve as the basis for the latter](#).



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4. What are the report's conclusions?

The report's executive summary concludes that: "Viewed against government's long-term vision, our summary assessment ... is that, while some progress has been made, very substantial challenges remain, and that government is largely off track to meet EIP23 ambitions, Environment Act targets and other commitments."

In addition to its overall assessment of whether England's natural environment is improving, the OEP report measures progress against trends, targets, and the 10 goals in the EIP. These are supported by a full in-depth assessment, with full evidence provided or cited in the report.

The OEP's analysis of trends (consisting of indicators from the [Outcome Indicator Framework](#), [Environment Agency](#), [Joint Nature Conservation Committee](#), and similar sources) concludes that:

- 25/51 trends are improving (49%)
- 10/51 trends are static (20%)
- 8/51 trends are deteriorating (16%)
- 8/51 trends lack sufficient data for reporting (16%)

The OEP's analysis of the Government's progress towards targets (both the [legally-binding targets](#) set under the [Environment Act](#) and the [interim targets in the EIP](#)) concludes that:

- 4/40 targets are largely on track (10%)
- 11/40 targets are partially on track (28%)
- 10/40 targets are largely off track (25%)
- 15/40 targets have insufficient data to be assessed (38%)

As a result, the OEP's analysis of the Government's progress towards meeting the EIP's 10 goals for improving the natural environment in England concluded that seven trends had mixed progress and three had limited progress:

1. Thriving plants and wildlife (**Mixed progress**)
2. Clean Air (**Mixed progress**)
3. Clean and plentiful water (**Mixed progress**)
4. Managing exposure to chemicals and pesticides (**Limited progress**)
5. Maximise our resources, minimise our waste (**Mixed progress**)
6. Using resources from nature sustainably (**Limited progress**)
7. Mitigating and adapting to climate change (**Limited progress**)
8. Reduced risk of harm from environmental hazards (**Mixed progress**)

9. Enhancing biosecurity (**Mixed progress**)

10. Enhancing beauty, heritage, and engagement with the natural environment (**Mixed progress**)

Reflecting on the limitations for progress towards the Environmental Improvement Plan, the report sets out five key recommendations to support environmental improvement, which build on the recommendations issued in the OEP's last progress report:

1. **Implement the Environmental Improvement Plan 2023** effectively
2. Develop and implement **clear and effective governance**
3. Develop and implement **delivery plans**
4. Set and vigorously pursue **clear and achievable interim targets** that are as ambitious as possible in the areas needing most attention
5. Develop and implement an **effective monitoring, evaluation and learning** framework

These recommendations highlight the importance of delivering on environmental targets and ambitions from the strategic level down to the level of implementation in practice.

Find out more about the work of the IES to support robust policy implementation and delivery through the [Environmental Policy Implementation Community](#) (EPIC).

5. What other key messages are in the OEP's report?

In addition to the report's conclusions on progress towards environmental improvement, it also provides supporting analysis, including on some of the EIP's 'cross-cutting themes', as well as attributes that the OEP believes would make for an effective new EIP.

Nature-friendly farming

The first cross-cutting theme analysed in the report is [nature-friendly farming](#), which the OEP links directly to five of the ten goals of the EIP. The report identifies several areas of uncertainty, both for assessing the contribution of nature-friendly farming towards environmental improvement, as well as for farmers and land managers hoping to adopt nature-friendly approaches.

Areas of uncertainty for policy include a lack of clarity about the contribution of nature-friendly farming to some goals and targets (particularly where the Government has not formally quantified the expected contribution), whether land in nature-friendly farming schemes will count towards [the 30x30 nature target](#), and whether schemes will be targeted with the necessary spatial prioritisation (nationally and within given areas of land).

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Questions around the spatial uncertainties will be particularly pertinent for the development of the forthcoming [Land Use Framework](#).

Much of the uncertainty around nature-friendly farming is associated with challenges for uptake, which are exacerbated by uncertainties for farmers.

The report also identified doubts for farmers and land managers associated with the need for one-on-one advice and the ongoing development and updating of agri-environment within [Environmental Land Management Schemes](#), creating potential ambiguity about whether or not nature-friendly farming in the short term will be rewarded in the long-term.

The OEP identified three priority recommendations on nature-friendly farming:

1. **Transparent reporting** of the number of schemes in place and amount of land covered
2. Integrated **spatial prioritisation** to support the right schemes in the right places
3. Promotion of schemes and **one-to-one advice** for farmers

Green jobs and finance

The report also analyses cross-cutting themes around green jobs and finance, reflecting on skills needs and the Government's [Strategy for Mobilising Green Investments](#) (as well as the [Nature Markets Framework](#)).

The report identifies significant opportunities to mobilise green finance, though recognises that a number of uncertainties remain, which may serve as a barrier to investment, particularly through nature markets.

It also highlights research from the [Green Finance Institute](#) which demonstrates a [significant finance gap](#) of roughly £56billion over the next 10 years. These gaps are exacerbated by a lack of transparency and clarity around committed finance in the EIP.

For green jobs and finance, the OEP identified four priority recommendations:

1. Clearer **objectives for green jobs**, supported by

statistics for key sectors and a clear methodology for monitoring progress

2. A more **robust evidence base for monitoring** finance gaps for each EIP goal
3. Clearer **governance arrangements for mobilising** and developing green finance
4. Systematic **review of skills gaps** for each EIP goal

Other implications for future EIPs

The other cross-cutting themes of the EIP do not have specific recommendations in the OEP's progress report, though the report reflects on the need for a greater focus on enabling green choices to support progress on the EIP's goals, as well as the need for the cross-cutting themes to be more directly explored, applied through specific strategies and policies, and used during monitoring and evaluation.

The report also identifies eight attributes which the report suggests would be crucial for an effective new EIP:

1. Clearly **translate vision into policies**, commitments and actions for the whole of government
2. Establish **clear governance arrangements** that drive delivery on the ground
3. Have a **unifying overall delivery plan** and one for each goal area
4. Set and pursue **clear and achievable interim targets** that are as ambitious as possible in the areas needing most attention
5. Make clear use of **robust and current data and analyses** that are well aligned with all targets
6. Establish an **evaluation framework** and use it to generate feedback on actions and progress, to learn, and to improve delivery
7. Diagnose the cause of adverse trends, **identify the most urgent, harmful or widespread concerns**, and develop effective and timely responses
8. Develop **assessment regimes** that look more to the future, anticipate trends and project outcomes



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These attributes reinforce the report's overall assessment of current progress towards environmental improvement, as well as the OEP's concerns about the existing EIP. They also help to provide clarity on what the OEP views as the key elements of the strategic delivery of environmental improvement.

As a result, they will provide a crucial reference point for further updates to the [Environmental Improvement Plan](#), potentially by future governments.

6. Implications for environmental science

One of the key recurring themes of the report is the need for [effective implementation and delivery](#). Four of the five key recommendations in the report highlight the importance of implementation, with the effective implementation of the [Environmental Improvement Plan](#) as the headline recommendation.

Environmental professionals are often on the front lines of delivering on policy commitments, so environmental scientists will have a critical role to play in driving forward the implementation of the EIP.

Best practice by local authorities and consultants will be essential to ensure that regulations actually lead to environmental improvement, while knowledge communities such as the [Environmental Policy Implementation Community](#) will be well-placed to promote knowledge sharing and to translate national policy ambitions into local action.

Although all environmental scientists have a crucial role to play in delivering the EIP, key specialisms for the 10 goals will include:

- Air quality
- Climatology and carbon management
- Conservation and ecology
- Land condition
- Waste management
- Water

Environmental scientists working in these specialisms need to be prepared to collect and communicate the evidence of what works so that policies can be implemented in the most effective ways. In the process, evidence can increase certainty and encourage more widespread adoption of good practice.

The OEP report highlights particular gaps in data associated with:

- The condition of [Marine Protected Areas](#) and the achievement of marine '[good environmental status](#)' (where environmental scientists may seek to engage through collective networks such as the [IES Turning the](#)

[Tide project](#) or directly, such as through the OEP's [recent call for evidence](#) on the ecological status of UK marine waters)

- [Chemical status of surface waters](#)
- [Soil health](#) (where an indicator is [under development](#) as part of the [Outcome Indicator Framework](#), which is likely to be a critical source of data with [substantial implications](#) for land and water environments)
- Water company security of supply performance (where environmental scientists will have a less direct role to play but will be well-positioned to support scrutiny over commitments)
- Accessibility of green spaces (where the evidence base is currently under development, so environmental scientists will have a role in scrutinising the evidence as it is produced)
- Environmental attitudes and health and wellbeing benefits of environmental policies (where environmental scientists have a role to play in the communication of evidence and engagement with the public)

Environmental science is well-placed to contribute to the gaps in knowledge around these critical evidence areas. In some instances, direct data collection, research, and engagement will be necessary to improve the evidence base.

In others, the role of environmental science will be to provide scrutiny as those evidence bases are developed, ensuring that the approach is sufficiently robust to ensure real environmental improvement.

The report also presents a number of policy implications where environmental science will be well-placed to contribute towards evidence-informed policy making.

The most important implication is the need for stronger governance and evaluation frameworks to ensure the effective implementation of the EIP. The IES [Environmental Policy Implementation Community](#) (EPIC) is currently engaged in work around implementation science to determine how to bring scientific insights on the delivery of policy into the environmental context.

Contact [Ellie Savage](#) (ellie@the-ies.org) to find out more.

Several key policy instruments will also play a vital role in delivering on the ambition of the EIP. Policies linked to land and nature will be especially important, such as [Local Nature Recovery Strategies](#), [Environmental Land Management Schemes](#), and the forthcoming [Land Use Framework](#).

The delivery and roll-out of these policies will be critical for environmental improvement, so professionals should be ready to offer their expertise to support delivery.

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7. What are the next steps for improving England's natural environment?

2024 will be a key year for environmental policy, as political uncertainty and policy implementation present the possibility of a period of action.

Throughout those uncertainties, the role of scrutiny from the environmental sciences will be particularly pertinent as a means of ensuring an evidence-informed approach which leads to meaningful environmental improvement in practice.

The IES will continue to stand up for the voice of science, scientists, and the natural world in policy, helping people to solve environmental challenges and co-creating a sustainable society where people and nature thrive.

8. Find out more about influencing Government decisions

Our member briefing note: '[Influencing the UK Parliament](#)', first published in 2011 and most recently re-issued in 2022, provides an overview of some of the ways that environmental professionals can influence Parliament and legislation.

The IES also runs training to help environmental professionals learn more about policy, how it affects them, and how they can influence policy decisions. Regular training sessions are available for sign-ups [on the IES website](#).

In the UK, many issues of environmental policy are devolved to national administrations. If you live in Scotland, you can contact your [Member of Scottish Parliament](#) or [learn more](#) about influencing Scottish legislation.

If you live in Wales, you can [contact your Member of Senedd Cymru](#) or learn more about the [business of the Senedd](#).

If you live in Northern Ireland, you can [contact your local Member of the Legislative Assembly](#) or learn more about the [Assembly's work](#).

9. Other relevant links & resources

Find out more about existing legislation on this topic:

- [OEP progress report](#)
- [Environmental Improvement Plan](#)
- [Environment Act 2021](#)
- [Agriculture Act 2020](#)

Read other relevant resources from the IES:

- [Transforming the planet: Our vision for the future of environmental science](#)
- [Environmental Policy Implementation Community](#)
- [Horizon scanning: policy issues for land and nature](#)
- [Progressing or regressing \(Environmental governance\)](#)
- [Briefing: Environmental Improvement Plan](#)

Is there a policy-related topic which you would like to see covered by the IES? Get in touch with [Joseph Lewis](#) (IES Policy Lead) at joseph@the-ies.org to let us know your thoughts on potential topics for future briefings, or with your suggestions for other content.

If you want to support the work of the IES, you can join as an [affiliate](#), or if you're a professional in the environmental sector working with science, consider [becoming a member of the IES](#).





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