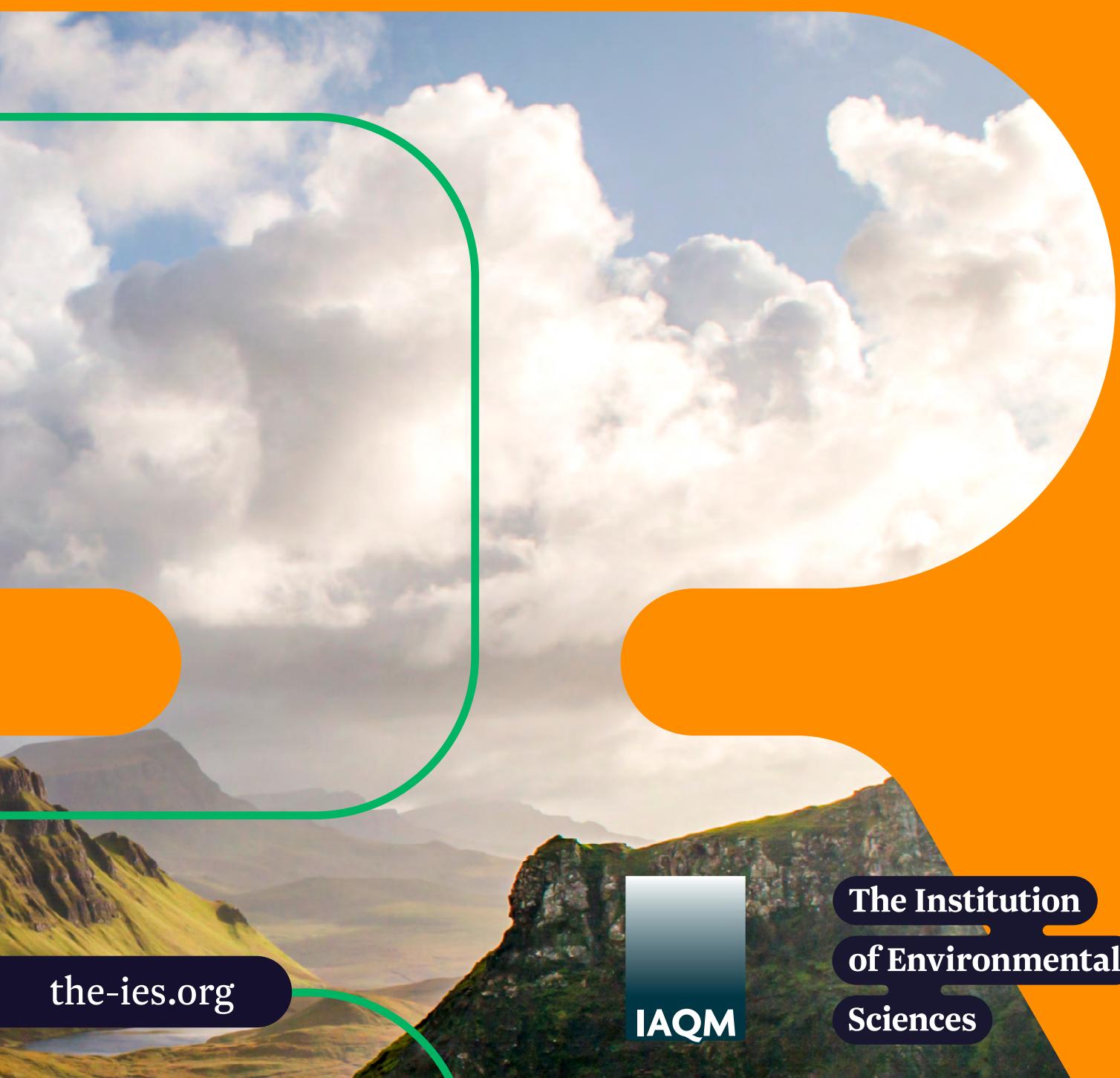


Essential Environment: Clean air policy

Latest developments and
implications for professionals

January 2026



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IAQM

The Institution
of Environmental
Sciences

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Acknowledgements

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Acknowledgements: Special thanks are due to the Institute of Air Quality Management (IAQM), which is our sister organisation and serves as our air quality Community.

The IAQM is a member-led organisation supporting excellence and technical competence in the air quality profession.

As the authoritative voice for air quality professionals in the UK, the IAQM develops sector-leading technical guidance to support a robust, science-based approach to improving air quality. They collaborate with other environmental specialisms as part of the wider IES family, fostering interdisciplinary solutions to air quality challenges.

The IAQM's mission is to empower air quality professionals across sectors by providing a supportive community that fosters knowledge exchange, professional development, and advocacy for clean air.

About the Institution of Environmental Sciences

The Institution of Environmental Sciences (the IES) is at the forefront of uniting the environmental sciences around a shared goal: to work with speed, vision and expertise to solve the world's most pressing environmental challenges, together.

As the global professional membership body for environmental scientists, we support a diverse network of professionals all over the world – and at every stage of their education and careers – to connect, develop, progress and inspire.

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Introduction

Since the election of the new UK Government, environmental issues have seen significant policy developments, so there are plenty of opportunities to engage.

The IES and IAQM have created this briefing paper as an introductory reference on environmental policy relating to air quality and linked issues, including clean air and emissions.

We hope the paper will help IES and IAQM members to stay up-to-date on relevant policy issues, supporting horizon scanning and identifying opportunities for our expert members to engage with decision makers and the public. We publish updates to this paper on an annual basis.

You may also be interested in our horizon scanning paper on water policy, which will be published shortly, and our [paper on land and nature](#), which is available on the IES website.

- For more information about the latest developments in air quality, find out more about the [Institute of Air Quality Management](#).
- For local authorities working in air quality, see our [Environmental Policy Implementation Community](#).
- To find out more about professional membership or chartership, consider [joining the IES](#) and [the IAQM](#).

Where to find out more

- If you want to stay up-to-date with the latest developments, make sure you are subscribed to [Essential Environment](#).

“While policy developments set the regulatory baseline for air quality management, practical outcomes rely on the work of professionals.

The Institute of Air Quality Management produces guidance that shapes practice, improving outcomes for clean air.”



Horizon scanning & new policy developments

In the UK, the new Government has steadily announced updates to air quality policy since the 2024 General Election.

England's Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP)

Most of the new Government's approach to policy around land and nature is set out in its [Environmental Improvement Plan](#) (EIP), though the scope of most policies in the EIP is contained to England.

In December 2025, the new Government published [revisions to the EIP](#), providing new commitments and an overview of the current state of environmental policy and government plans over the coming years.

Most of the policy for air quality in the EIP is set out under its second goal 'We will achieve clean air', which largely consolidates existing policy. Key commitments include:

- The restatement of commitments to meet emissions targets for ammonia, nitrogen dioxide, sulphur dioxide, particulate matter, non-methane volatile organic compounds, and local levels for air pollution set out in the Air Quality Standards Regulations.

- Similarly, the renewed commitment to meet the [legally-binding targets for PM2.5](#) set under the [Environment Act framework](#).
- Measures to support the delivery of targets, including guidance for local authority officers, increased accessibility of data, and plans to address industrial combustion and domestic burning.
- Interventions focusing on transport, agriculture, and planning, which are set out later in this chapter.
- A commitment to improve communication about the state of air quality, including health advice through the [Daily Air Quality Index](#), and public analysis of possible abatements where emissions targets are missed. A new air quality warning system will launch in March 2026 for the most vulnerable people.
- Measures to address climate change with implications for air quality, in line with existing commitments under the [Carbon Budget Delivery Plan](#) and [National Adaptation Programme](#).
- Many other commitments and policies with implications for clean air, air quality, and emissions.

Find out more by reading the [revised Environmental Improvement Plan for England](#).

OEP report on environmental improvement

At the start of 2026, the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) published its [latest progress report on environmental improvement](#) in England.

The report assesses the period from April 2024 to March 2025, which makes it the first assessment of the new Government's progress towards environmental improvement. Naturally, it measures that progress against the Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) [that existed at the time](#).

The overall assessment was that progress has been broadly positive, and better than in last year's report, but the rate of progress is still currently insufficient, because the positive trend is not fast enough to keep targets on track.

The picture for air quality is more positive. Part of that is due to government support for action, including through the [10-year plan for the NHS](#). In that context, it has not been difficult to keep on track, particularly as the UK's targets for air quality are far less ambitious than international approaches such as [WHO Guidelines](#).

Local authorities play a major role in keeping air quality targets on track. The adoption of leading approaches, such as the Environmental Policy Implementation Community (EPIC)'s guide on [integrating action on air quality and climate change](#), has helped to support progress towards meeting targets.

For more information about the report, read our [analysis for Essential Environment](#).

Planning & infrastructure

One of the Government's main areas of focus has been planning reform, which has had significant implications for the environment.

These changes have been primarily realised through the [Planning & Infrastructure Act](#), which is due to become law in early 2026.

The Act aims to speed up the planning process, particularly for new homes and the delivery of critical infrastructure. It contains five core parts:

1. Part 1 on infrastructure, which includes:

- a. Changes to [Nationally-Significant Infrastructure Projects](#) (NSIP) to (i) ensure national policy statements are regularly updated, (ii) increase flexibility around consenting by allowing the Secretary of State to direct some projects out of the NSIP regime, (iii) amend the requirements for consultation reports to make them shorter and simpler, and (iv) further change judicial review and consultation processes to speed them up.
- b. Reforms to electricity network connections with a view to increasing and expediting grid connectivity.
- c. Updates to the Scottish process for consenting around electricity infrastructure, including mandatory pre-application requirements to engage statutory consultees earlier and increased charging powers for authorities to account for costs.

- d. A 'cap and floor' mechanism for long duration electricity storage, providing a minimum and maximum revenue for investor returns to encourage more investment in storage infrastructure.
- e. New consumer benefits for transmission projects near homes, as an increased incentive for communities.
- f. A longer commissioning period for offshore electricity transmission systems, to account for the increased complexity and time delays around projects.
- g. Reforms to several existing laws to facilitate energy generation, transport connectivity, electric vehicle chargepoints, and other important infrastructure.

2. Part 2 on Planning, which includes:

- a. New powers to 'sub-delegate' the setting of planning fees to Local Planning Authorities to cover the costs of applications.
- b. Reform the planning committees with the goal of delegating some activities to planning officers to speed up the process of planning.
- c. The introduction of **Spatial Development Strategies** (SDS), based on London's approach to planning, which will introduce a strategic level of spatial planning, with the goal that local plans will need to align with the relevant SDS.

3. Part 3 on Development and Nature Recovery, which includes:

- a. Significant reforms to the way that nature recovery and environmental protections interact with the planning process, with the goal of speeding up delivery.
- b. A new **Nature Restoration Fund** (NRF), which would allow developers to contribute towards the fund instead of undertaking assessments or carrying out interventions on site, as long as an **Environmental Delivery Plan** (EDP) has been produced by Natural England (or another relevant body) that sets out strategic actions that can be carried out through the fund. This shifts the focus of nature recovery and environmental protections from mitigation and prevention to recovery after the fact.
- c. Commitments were made during the Act's passing that this would not lead to environmental regression, despite the advice of the **Office for Environmental Protection** (OEP).

4. Part 4 on Development Corporations, which includes:

- a. New powers for development corporations, with the intention that this will facilitate the development of new towns.
- b. The basis of a framework for development corporations to unlock housing development in new places and in new ways.

To learn more about how Nutrient Neutrality rules are affected by the Act, [read the](#)

briefing paper from the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology.

The **Planning & Infrastructure Act** has been controversial, especially when it comes to nature recovery.

By deciding to allow developers the opportunity to circumvent on-site interventions, the Act effectively jumps over several steps in the mitigation hierarchy.

This creates substantial risks of regression and poses particular risks for the connectivity of nature and particular habitats and ecosystems.

At the end of 2025, the Government announced further proposals for planning, including revisions to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).

These changes follow a previous [consultation on the NPPF](#) in 2024, which led to a series of updates to planning policy. You can find out more about those changes by reading our [response to the consultation](#) and the [subsequent government commentary](#).

The latest changes make further updates, including:

- Reform to planning processes, with the aim “to make the system clearer, more predictable, and faster to build 1.5 million new homes”.
- A default approval for certain developments, including suitable homes built near rail links and upwards development in towns and cities.
- The introduction of a new ‘medium site’ category with more proportionate restrictions to promote these kinds of development.

- Measures to encourage high density housing and greater diversification of housing.
- Support for new builds to be more nature-friendly, including around the inclusion of swift bricks, albeit without any mandatory requirements, effectively making the policy unenforceable.
- Preferential treatment for developments with social or economic benefits to the local community.
- Changes to Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG), including an exemption for small sites and more details of how BNG will apply on brownfield land and NSIP projects, which are set out in detail later in this chapter.

Learn more about the latest announcements by reading [the Housing Secretary’s statement](#) and the [new consultation on the NPPF](#).

You can find out more about the risks associated with the Government’s new approach to planning by reading:

- The [OEP’s letter on the risk of environmental regression](#)
- The House of Commons Library’s [briefing on the Planning](#)’s passage through Parliament
- A [joint letter, signed by the IES](#), addressing the implications of exemptions to BNG on small sites

For more information about planning in Scotland, consult the [Fourth National Planning Framework](#), which deviates from the new approach being taken in England.

Despite the focus on planning reform and increasing the speed and certainty of planning processes, there are still large questions around **Environmental Impact Assessment** (EIA) that remain unanswered.

In 2023, the **Levelling-Up & Regeneration Act** (LURA) proposed to introduce a new regime: **Environmental Outcomes Reports** (EORs).

These proposals are intended to produce a faster, more effective system of assessing the effects of developments on the environment, from the perspective of specified outcomes and objectives.

The new Government has not fully revealed its plans for implementing EORs, beyond the broad commitment that this is still expected to take place.

It is likely that this would lead to a simpler and expedited process, focused on specific outcomes rather than holistic assessments. Air quality is expected to be one of these outcomes, so for air quality professionals, the transition to EORs is likely to have greater impact on the process of conducting assessments, rather than the subject matter of those assessments.

You can find out more by reading our 2025 article on the state of EORs in **Essential Environment**.

Devolution

The **English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill** (or ‘the Devolution Bill’ in shorthand) began consideration in Parliament in late 2025.

It is expected to become law in 2026 and

applies almost entirely to England.

The Devolution Bill intends to deliver several commitments made in the Government’s **2024 election manifesto**, including its pledge to “transfer power out of Westminster, and into communities, to ensure those places have the strong governance arrangements, capacity, and capability to deliver, providing central support where needed.”

Several of the Government’s most relevant provisions for the environment include:

- **Strategic authorities:** A new tier of local authority would cover all of England, either as a **Mayoral Strategic Authority**, a Foundation Strategic Authority, or an Established Mayoral Strategic Authority.
- **Unitary restructuring:** The Government wants to reorganise local government to restructure all two-tier areas of England, leaving the country entirely covered by unitary authorities. The intention is that new unitary authorities will cover a population of 500,000+, with the goal of delivering high quality public services, meeting local needs, supporting devolution, and strengthening community empowerment.
- **Standardising devolved powers and functions:** The intention of the Bill is to create greater parity between all authorities at the strategic level. Areas of competence would include transport and local infrastructure, skills and employment, housing and strategic planning, economic development and regeneration, environment and climate change, health and wellbeing, and public safety (though not all of these areas receive new powers from the Bill).

- **Environmental powers:** In its 2024 white paper, the Government proposed new environmental powers for strategic authorities, including responsibility for warm homes and public sector decarbonisation grants. The Bill does not provide these powers, but the Government has noted its intention to continue exploring opportunities.
- **Planning powers:** The Bill proposes to provide strategic authorities with development management powers similar to those held by the Mayor of London, such as the power to 'call in' applications that have strategic significance.
- **Integrated settlements:** The Bill includes new powers for strategic authorities to gather funding, including through council tax precepts, transport levies, and permitted borrowing, with the intention to move towards integrated settlements as the default route for grant funding.
- **More power for Mayors:** One of the key themes of the Bill is the transfer of power towards Mayors. Mayors would also be able to propose new powers and receive a public response from the Secretary of State, effectively opening the door to innovative approaches and pilot schemes for new devolved powers.

Many of these proposals present an opportunity for more consistent local governance, with greater empowerment to communities.

There are also risks, particularly that the consolidation of authorities could lead to fewer environmental roles or costs being cut at the expense of the ability for local authorities to carry out their statutory roles.

You can learn more about the Devolution Bill in our 2025 article for Essential Environment on [devolution and community empowerment](#).

Local Air Quality Management (LAQM)

Under LAQM, local authorities assess, monitor, and act upon their local air quality conditions, under the framework of the [Environment Act 1995](#).

One of the key tools for delivering against LAQM is an [Air Quality Management Area](#) (AQMA), which the legislation requires to be set as a designated area where air quality objectives have been exceeded.

Much of the monitoring under LAQM focuses on Nitrogen Dioxide (NO₂) levels and particulate matter. As a result of the [long-term decline](#) in NO₂ levels, many local authorities have begun to revise or revoke AQMAs that were initially set up to address NO₂ levels.

This shift poses risks to the strategic state of monitoring and response to air quality developments.

Though there are several other policies that allow local authorities to continue working towards clean air, limited resources for local government mean that action beyond statutory requirements depends on the priorities for local leadership, which vary from area to area.

Meanwhile, high levels of domestic burning have seen an increase in particulate matter, particularly PM2.5, which has led to a rise in the need for [Smoke Control Areas](#) and public [engagement on domestic burning](#).

At the end of 2024, the Welsh Government consulted on **updates to the Local Air Quality Management guidance** and the **Smoke Control** guidance.

The consultation resulted in **new guidance**, published in July 2025, which updates the general approach to air quality management and soundscapes across Wales.

As a result of these developments, the state of air quality management across local authorities is increasingly diverse.

Some local authorities are only able to adhere to absolute legal targets, whereas others push for higher levels of compliance, all the way up to **guidelines set by the World Health Organization** (WHO).

This has resulted in a complex landscape for air quality experts, who need to adapt to local context and approaches between different authorities.

The **Devolution Bill** (covered earlier in this section) seeks to create a more consistent approach to regulation across different local authorities by bringing their powers and approaching more in line with one another.

It is yet to be seen whether that will have beneficial outcomes for the state of LAQM and local approach to air quality more broadly.

Sustainable transport

Transport is one of the most significant systems for shaping the state of air quality across the UK, especially in cities.

The **revised Environmental Improvement Plan** (EIP) sets out the Government's

current approach to policy around sustainable transport.

It contains the consolidation of existing measures, as well as updated policy, including:

- Implementation of the **Zero Emission Vehicle Mandate** and incentives to support the transition to lower emission vehicles, including the **Electric Car Grant**, though there has been an increased attempt to challenge these policies in the political space.
- The publication of new statutory local transport plan guidance for local authorities.
- Investment in local transport with the goal of improving air quality outcomes, including £616 million of investment in walking and cycling infrastructure, £15.6 billion funding through **Transport for City Regions settlements**, and the £2.3 billion **Local Transport Grant**.
- Measures to support the decarbonisation of HGVs and the transition to zero emissions buses.
- Maintaining existing monitoring of air quality across the rail network and train stations.
- Reiterating the interim decarbonisation commitment under the **Maritime Decarbonisation Strategy**, with a view to setting next steps in 2026.
- Extending air quality controls across UK waters, especially through the **North Atlantic Emission Control Area**.

While these policies represent an overall consolidation of the strategic approach to

emissions from transport, much of the impetus for action remains with local authorities to deliver in practice.

In 2025, a [study by the University of Westminster](#) provided new research on the impact of Low-Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs) in London, indicating that while they may lead to increased cycling, there is insufficient evidence that they reduce car use.

As a result, some local authorities are re-evaluating their approach to traffic and air quality more generally. There has been a strong desire from local authorities to adopt evidence-based approaches.

In 2024, the Environmental Policy Implementation Community (EPIC) published guidance for local authorities on [Integrating Action on Air Quality & Climate Change](#).

The guide sets out several transport policies that can be adopted at a local level to improve outcomes for air quality and climate change.

Airport expansions

Despite a renewed commitment to address emissions caused by aviation in the Government's revised Environmental Improvement Plan for England, airport expansions are still taking place, with considerable consequences.

In particular, the confirmation in 2025 of plans to expand Gatwick Airport pose serious risks for the state of both air quality and noise pollution.

This category of risk will not be fully addressed until policy makers reconcile their ambitions for clean air with the

approval of airport expansion across the country. The current approach does not sufficiently take account of the significant evidence of environmental and social risks.

Environmental permitting

In 2025, [Environmental Assessment Levels for environmental permitting](#) were updated with new methodology. This [updated methodology](#) represents the latest evidence base, though it is substantively similar to previous versions.

As a result of these updates, there have also been updates to Environmental Permitting Regulations offences guidance.

Find out more by reading the latest guidance from [the Environment Agency in England](#), from [Natural Resources Wales](#), from [SEPA in Scotland](#), and on the [Integrated Pollution Prevention and Control system](#) for Northern Ireland.

Air pollution inquiry

At the end of 2025, the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee held a call for submissions, asking for suggested topics for its next inquiry.

The IES and the IAQM submitted [several suggestions for inquiry topics](#). We also supported proposals from other organisations.

In the end, the Committee selected [air pollution in England](#) as the topic for its next inquiry, which will take place during 2026. This presents an opportunity to bring together evidence on air pollution and its effects, with the potential to influence the course of future policy on air quality in the UK.

Across the devolved nations

While these developments are ongoing in England, Northern Ireland published its long-awaited **Environmental Improvement Plan** (EIP) in 2024.

Northern Ireland's Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) was required to publish the plan under the **Environment Act 2021**, but its publication was delayed due to the suspension of the Executive.

The plan is a strategic document setting out Northern Ireland's approach to the environment, so will play a key role in driving delivery of the Executive's commitments.

It draws together existing strategies and policies and grounds the actions it contains in the context of sustainable development and natural capital.

DAERA's EIP also sets six Strategic Environmental Outcomes, which are the primary objectives of the plan. One of these is 'Excellent Air, Water & Land Quality' and several of the others relate to land and nature, such as 'Thriving, Resilient & Connected Nature & Wildlife' and 'Net Zero GHG Emissions & Improved Climate Resilience & Adaptability'.

Many of the goals and policies are already set out in Northern Ireland's existing legislation, which also delivers the protected site network of Special Areas of Conservation, Special Protection Areas, and Areas of Special Scientific Interest.

Commitments highlighted by the EIP include:

- Updates to the Operational Protocol to Assess the Impacts of Air Pollution on

the natural environment, which were made during 2025.

- Ongoing funding improvements for local air quality, as well as improved traffic data for modelling and planning.
- A new Ammonia Strategy following the consultation in 2023, which was due to be published in 2025.
- The ambition to update Northern Ireland's Clean Air Strategy. A consultation is due to be held soon, following **internal government discussion on a draft** of the updated Strategy.

To find out more about Northern Ireland's environmental commitments, read the **Environmental Improvement Plan for Northern Ireland**.

Since the start of 2024, Wales has been working to develop a framework for environmental governance following the UK's exit from the European Union.

The primary policy instrument for these changes has been the **Environment (Principles Governance and Biodiversity Targets) (Wales) Bill**, along with several consultations.

Broadly, these changes will deliver a governance framework that contains many of the classical elements of environmental governance, including targets, principles for decision making, and a governance body.

While the final outcome of the process is yet to be determined, the broad details are set out in the **public notes on the Bill**.

For more information, see chapter two on existing **policy and governance context**.

International developments

Beyond the UK, European efforts to address air quality have continued. 2025 was a key year for the implementation of [European Air Quality Directive \(EU\) 2024/2881](#).

The Directive updates existing EU air quality legislation, seeking to bring it more in line with WHO Guidelines and establish a clearer risk-based framework for addressing some of the most pressing pollutants for human health.

Contained in the Directive are a number of objectives for 2050 (with milestones to achieve by 2030), as well as new limit values for key pollutants.

Even though the UK is no longer part of the EU and is not directly affected by the Directive, there are indirect effects. New policy approaches are likely to be influential, particularly as the UK considers the effects of air pollution. The Directive includes increased monitoring of “emerging pollutants”, which may be particularly relevant for informing the UK’s approach.

Meanwhile, the Directive also makes technical changes to air quality assessment methods, which may be influential in how good practice develops, even without direct influence from policy.

Another key area of international action for air quality has been around the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)’s Convention on Long-range transboundary Air Pollution (CLRTAP).

The CLRTAP includes the Gothenburg Protocol, updated in 2012, which is currently in the process of being renegotiated to set new targets and revise commitments.

One of the goals is to include further reductions in pollutants that have not been sufficiently addressed under the current approach, such as black carbon.

Meanwhile, another development in UNECE has been the increased effort to harmonise regulations around emissions from brake and tyre wear, which have diverged between the UK and Europe following the UK’s exit from the European Union.

The UK Government reiterated its commitment to work towards harmonisation in its revised Environmental Improvement Plan, building on new research with a target of adopting new rules by November 2026.

Developments in professional air quality management

While policy developments set the regulatory baseline for air quality management, practical outcomes rely on the work of professionals.

The Institute of Air Quality Management (IAQM) produces guidance that shapes practice, indirectly affecting those outcomes.

Recently, the IAQM published guidance on [good practice on air quality monitoring for brownfield projects](#).

In the context of active policy change around brownfield land and the increasing drive towards development, this guidance will play a crucial role in shaping the outcomes of recent policy change.

Air quality monitoring for brownfield projects is essential to delivering positive outcomes, so the adoption of this guidance will be a

crucial step towards meeting objectives for air quality.

In 2025, the IAQM also published a [Position Statement on the use of low-cost sensor systems for PM10](#), which have direct implications for both monitoring and interventions around PM10 management.

This Position Statement will clarify the role that low-cost sensor systems can play in addressing PM10, as well as where they can contribute to meeting policy goals for the pollutant.

At the time of the 2024 UK general election, the IAQM and the IES held a discussion event on priorities for the new Government.

That discussion resulted in five headline recommendations:

1. Secure a world-leading governance framework for air quality, raising the ambition of existing strategies and targets, and addressing governance gaps.
2. Back local authorities to deliver on clean air, through increased powers, funding and clear guidance.
3. Raise the profile of indoor air quality in the UK's approach to public health and take immediate action to tackle the sources of poor indoor air quality.
4. Produce ambitious strategies for highly polluting industries and novel contaminants.
5. Expand air quality monitoring and alert networks, facilitating the use of high-quality equipment and best practice to

provide robust data that informs decision making.

Over the year since those recommendations were published, we have been working to promote their uptake.

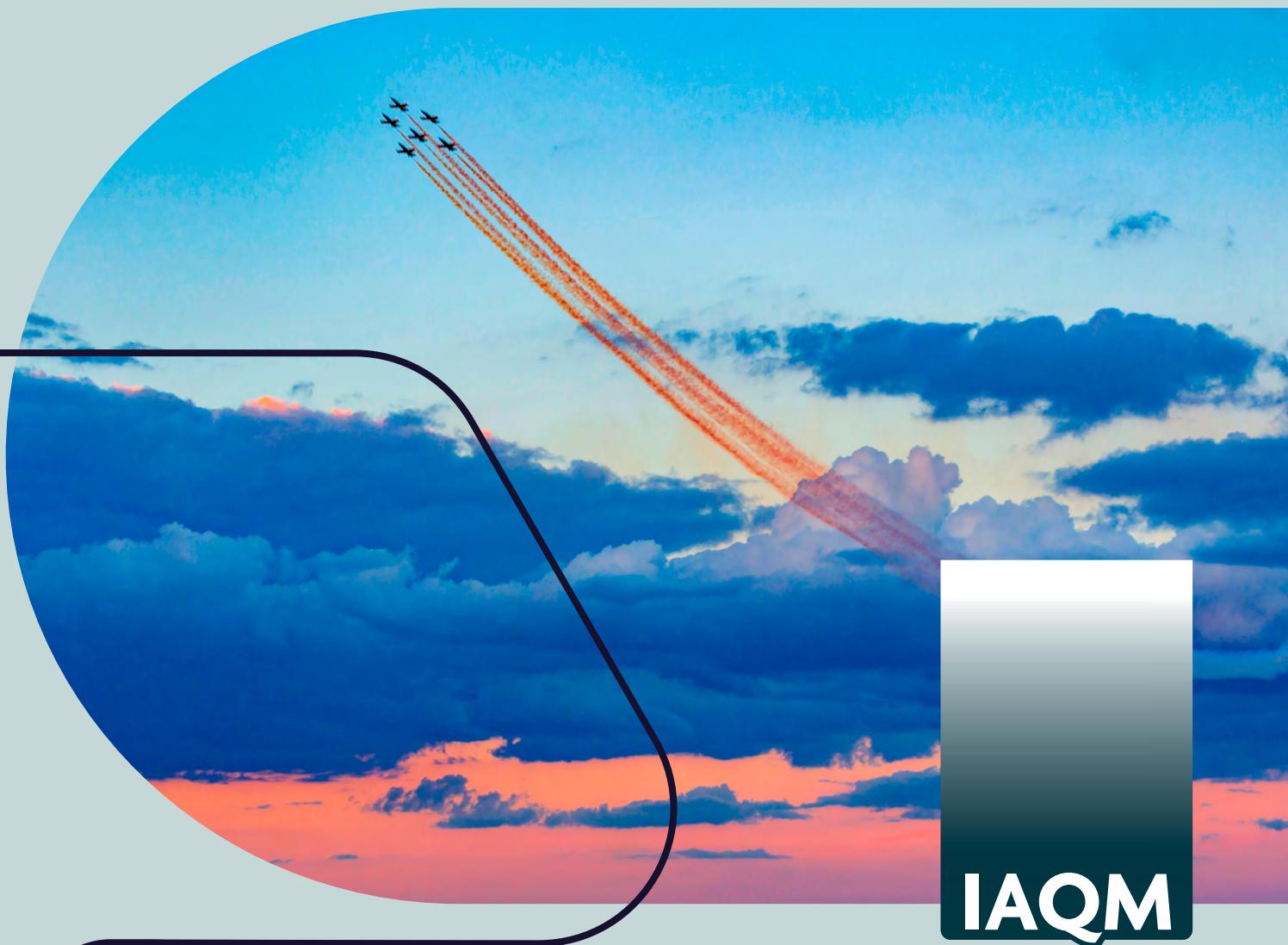
Some of these issues have seen a degree of progress, yet more still needs to be done to deliver effective policy for clean air in the UK.

To find out more about our recommendations, read the air quality chapter of '[Our Shared Mission for Sustainable Wellbeing: 2024-2029 priorities for the UK Government](#)'.

**Professional practice informs guidance,
Guidance shapes policy decisions,
Policy influences the state of our air.**

Let your career shape the air we breathe:

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Policy and governance context

While policy and regulation for air quality are subject to ongoing changes, many existing policies are still important.

This section signposts key environmental policy developments over the past decade, particularly relating to environmental governance changes following the UK's exit from the European Union.

For information on England's revised EIP, and how it governs the approach taken to environmental policy, see the relevant section of [chapter one on recent policy developments](#).

Clean Air Strategy & Air Quality Strategy

In 2023, the Government consulted on revisions to the [Air Quality Strategy](#), particularly relating to the framework for local authority delivery. The revisions only relate to England.

Scotland published its own strategic plan in 2021: [Cleaner Air for Scotland 2](#). This plan is due to be refreshed in 2026. The Welsh Government published its own [Clean Air Plan](#) in 2021. Northern Ireland consulted on its own [Clean Air Strategy](#) in 2020.

By comparison to these, the 2019 [Clean Air Strategy](#) is a separate policy document developed to set out government plans for addressing all forms of air pollution and reducing emissions in England.

In 2024, the new Government [committed to publish](#) "a comprehensive Clean Air Strategy to deliver legally binding targets to improve air quality", as an update to the 2019 Strategy and parts of the Air Quality Strategy as it relates to England.

That commitment was not repeated in the revised [Environmental Improvement Plan](#), nor was it mentioned in the relevant section of the [10-year plan for the NHS](#). This suggests that the Government intends to manage its strategic approach to air quality under the current framework, at least for now.

The two strategies cover similar content, with the 2007 Air Quality Strategy now revised to bring it in line with the Clean Air Strategy, which reflects the Government's current approach.

The Air Quality Strategy holds statutory importance as a result of the [National Emissions Ceiling Directive](#), but both are politically important.

The 2023 consultation received criticism due to the short window for responses, which was only 10 days. This prompted concerns that it was not sufficiently reflective of a broad range of evidence.

Following the consultation, the Government published the revised strategy and its response to the consultation.

The Clean Air Strategy and the revised Air Quality Strategy remain the most important policy documents for air quality in England.

For further information on revisions to the Strategy, see the [response to the consultation](#) from the IAQM, as well as the latest [House of Commons research briefing](#) on clean air policies throughout the UK.

Environmental principles

The [Environmental Principles Policy Statement](#) (EPPS) took effect in 2023, requiring government Ministers to have due regard to a set of environmental principles when making decisions.

The role of the principles is to ensure that environmental considerations are factored into cross-governmental decision making, so that decisions by one department or Minister consider the broader environmental context and do not unnecessarily produce negative effects on the environment.

There are five environmental principles:

- The Integration Principle
- The Prevention Principle
- The Rectification at Source Principle
- The Polluter Pays Principle

- The Precautionary Principle

Ministers are expected to iteratively apply the principles throughout policy development, from the outset through any subsequent stages, subject to a degree of proportionality.

This process should identify potential positive or negative environmental effects with the goal that the principles should inform the design of policy.

Following the application of the principles, the EPPS suggests that Ministers could act by amending or reframing a policy, ensure the future application of the principles by embedding one or more of them in policy, or delay the delivery of a policy to gather more implementation before acting.

Wales has proposed its own approach to applying the same environmental principles, which is set out in the [Environment \(Principles, Governance and Biodiversity Targets\) \(Wales\) Bill](#).

For more information about [the EPPS and its application](#), read the IES's 2023 primer on environmental governance: '[Progressing or regressing: The future of environmental science under new UK governance](#)'.

Environmental targets

In 2022, the Government published a framework of long-term legally-binding environmental targets for England, as required under the [Environment Act 2021](#).

Several of the targets have implications for land and nature, including those which directly address biodiversity. The [revised EIP](#) for England also sets out a suite of interim targets to support progress towards the

long-term targets, and to support the plan's wider goals.

The long-term targets for air quality are:

- An annual mean concentration target to achieve at least a 35% reduction in population exposure to PM2.5 by 31 December 2040 compared to 2018 levels
- A population exposure reduction target that by 31 December 2040 the maximum annual mean level of PM2.5 in ambient air must be equal to or less than 10 micrograms per cubic metre

Interim targets for air quality include:

- An annual mean concentration target of 10 micrograms per cubic metre to be achieved by December 2030
- A population exposure reduction target of 30% compared to 2018 to be achieved by December 2030

Several of the other targets also present the possibility of risks or co-benefits for air quality. These include:

- A target to address nutrient pollution to watercourses from agriculture (specifically from nitrogen, phosphorus, and sediments), which may influence agricultural practices with benefits for air quality
- A target to address nutrient pollution to watercourses from treated wastewater (specifically phosphorus), which may influence waste and its impact on air quality
- A target to increase tree canopy and woodland cover, which may lead to co-benefits for air quality, but which

could also create competing incentives for land use, raising potential challenges and opportunities for air quality

Importantly, these targets act in conjunction with existing targets and limit levels enshrined in UK legislation, as well as equivalent targets outside of England.

Most of these existing objectives are explicitly [listed in the revised EIP](#), including improved communication of air quality information and the commitment to reduce anthropogenic emissions of ammonia, nitrogen dioxide, sulphur dioxide, particulate matter, and non-methane volatile organic compounds.

The updated interim targets for reducing mean concentration and population exposure of PM2.5 represent an increase in ambition over the next five years.

In practice, this raises questions about delivering the targets at the local level through air quality management.

There is still ambiguity around how local authorities handle exceedances and when air quality management areas are declared in practice, which has led to inconsistent approaches in different places.

The Office for Environmental Protection (OEP)

[The 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.

Where environmental laws are implemented, primarily by Defra and delivery agencies, the OEP has a role to ensure compliance with environmental law by government and public bodies, as well as the capacity to investigate suspected serious breaches and take action where needed.

The enforcement role of the OEP is focused on public bodies and regulation of private entities remains the responsibility of the Environment Agency (or other relevant bodies, such as Ofwat).

For more information about the OEP and how its role differs to that of the European Commission, read the IES's 2023 primer on environmental governance: '[Progressing or regressing: The future of environmental science under new UK governance](#)'.

You can also find out more about the OEP's comments on environmental policy by reading recent articles from [Essential Environment](#):

- [Ghosted by government? Responses to the OEP reports](#)

- [Environmental Improvement Plan for Northern Ireland 2024](#)

Governance in the devolved administrations

The devolved administrations of the UK operate under similar yet different systems of governance.

Some elements of the [Environmental Principles Policy Statement](#) apply outside England, though the majority of environmental decisions are devolved to the relevant administrations.

Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland have equivalent duties to consider environmental principles in their governance regime following the UK's exit from the EU.

Equivalent organisations to the [Office for Environmental Protection](#) in the devolved administrations have subtly different remits and approaches.

Air quality in Scotland

Compared to England and the other devolved administrations, Scotland has a more well-established approach to air quality.

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.

Scotland's [second Air Quality Strategy](#) was published in 2021, with key working groups focused on domestic emissions, agriculture

and the environment, place-making, health, and public engagement. The Scottish Government also maintains a list of active legislation on air quality.

The Strategy runs until 2026, so is unlikely to see further revision until after the Scottish Parliament elections in 2026.

Once the next Scottish Government is in place, it is likely that the process for revising the Air Quality Strategy will be able to begin, at which point air quality professionals working in Scotland will be well-positioned to provide evidence and insights.

Air quality in Wales

In Wales, these functions are primarily fulfilled by the [Interim Environmental Protection Assessor for Wales](#) (IEPAW).

At the start of 2024, the Welsh Government consulted on [new environmental governance rules](#).

The proposals set out how environmental principles would be embedded in Welsh law, how environmental targets and biodiversity restoration duties would be introduced, and proposals for a new environmental governance body, the Office for Environmental Governance Wales, which will replace the IEPAW and expand upon its powers and duties.

These proposals will be realised through the [Environment \(Principles Governance and Biodiversity Targets\) \(Wales\) Bill](#). You can find out more information on the Bill in [chapter one on recent policy developments](#).

In 2023, the Welsh Government began the process of reviewing its own Air Quality Strategy, following the [Clean Air White](#)

[Paper](#) which was consulted on in 2021 and the Welsh Government's response to the consultation.

Following that period of review, the Senedd passed the legislation necessary to update the Welsh approach to reaching its long-term objectives.

The [Environment \(Air Quality and Soundscapes\) \(Wales\) Act 2024](#) sets out Wales' revised approach, including:

- Processes for setting, monitoring, and reporting optional Wales-specific targets on ammonia, PM10, ground level ozone, nitrogen dioxide, carbon monoxide, and sulphur dioxide, and a mandatory Wales-specific target on the annual mean level of PM2.5;
- Measures to promote awareness of air pollution and active travel as part of a solution;
- Policies to address air quality as a local level, including Local Air Quality Management, smoke control areas, and vehicle emissions regulations;
- And the requirement to produce a National Soundscapes Strategy to address noise pollution. The first iteration of the Noise and Soundscape Plan was published in December 2023 and runs until the end of 2028.

Air quality in Northern Ireland

After two years of suspension, the Northern Ireland Assembly resumed sitting in early 2024, which was followed by an annual report on [Air Pollution in Northern Ireland](#).

It sets out the state of air quality in Northern Ireland, highlighting key challenges around ultra-fine particulate matter, ozone concentrations, and nitrogen dioxide.

Overall, the report notes that Northern Ireland has generally complied with the limits set under the **Air Quality Standards Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010**, as well as broader objectives under the **Air Quality Strategy**.

Despite this, the Strategy notes ongoing points for improvement, particularly around meeting the higher standards set by the non-mandatory **World Health Organization guidelines**.

The policy approach to air quality in Northern Ireland is also addressed in the **Environmental Improvement Plan for Northern Ireland** (EIP), which was published in 2024.

More information about Northern Ireland's EIP is set out in chapter one on **recent policy developments**.

Outstanding issues

While policy developments are ongoing, there are several key areas of concern for air quality, which may be the subject of further interventions in the future.

Regardless, these issues remain relevant from a horizon scanning perspective, as they are some of the most pressing topics relating to policy around air quality.

Clean air

Recent years have seen a substantial increase in public and political interest in the notion of clean air. While it remains a key theme of environmental and health policy, there is still a big gap between the current state of policy and a country with clean air.

Over recent year, the Ella Kissi-Debrah case has brought the issue to the political sphere and reinvigorated public interest in air quality.

Following the 2020 coroner's report that ruled that air pollution had made a material contribution to Ella's death, her mother, Rosamund Adoo-Kissi-Debrah, initiated legal proceedings, which ultimately ended in a settlement.

It also led to a campaign for a Clean Air Bill, dubbed Ella's Law, which has been discussed in several variations over the last five years.

The most recent version of the Bill is the **Clean Air (Human Rights) Bill**, submitted as a Private Member's Bill by Sian Berry MP.

As it did not complete the parliamentary process during the last term of Parliament, all stages must take place again. The first substantive debate, the Second Reading in the House of Commons, is due to take place on 27th March 2026.

The **Clean Air Bill** includes most of the same provisions as previous versions, including establishing a right to clean air, measures to improve governance for clean air, and additional powers and requirements for oversight bodies and local authorities.

Private Member's Bills do not typically become law. As the Government has a majority of MPs in the House of Commons, legislation tends to pass only when the Government agrees. Additionally, there is limited time to debate such Bills in Parliament, which often leads to a Bill expiring before it can be fully passed into law.

Despite those caveats, the Bill remains a focus point for advocacy by campaigners and other air quality organisations.

For professionals, the Bill will provide opportunities to engage with policy around clean air, offering evidence to inform how clean air policy should be shaped.

Many of these issues are addressed by the **Healthy Air Coalition**, which is a collective working towards a shared vision for UK air. The IES is a member of the Coalition.

Given its nature, the Coalition is often better placed to engage with contentious policy issues than professional bodies like the IES and the IAQM.

In 2025, the Healthy Air Coalition published '**A blueprint for government action on clean air**', setting out recommendations for action to improve air quality.

Stationary sources and cumulative effects

Stationary sources of air pollution have not been a specific focus of UK policy making in recent years.

For example, as climate change and energy insecurity increase the use of backup generators, there may be gaps in the current regulatory approach.

Currently, the Environment Agency handles most of the approach to these sources, but it is increasingly facing challenges for enforcement and monitoring due to resource limitations.

In the context of significant human health risks, particularly from high toxicity sources

such as **Chromium VI**, there may be need for further guidance and policy action from government.

Similarly, policy in the UK does not sufficiently account for the consequences of different emissions mixing, such as where road emissions interact with emissions from agriculture.

Risk-based approaches to regulation have become more popular internationally. These approaches may be useful to inform wider policy making around air pollution.

Many of these considerations are absent in the Government's current strategic approach to energy, so may be points for future engagement.

Agriculture

Agriculture is a crucial system for addressing air quality emissions, particularly in the context of methane and ammonia.

Several unsustainable farming practices make significant contributions to the overall levels of these pollutants, so addressing the context of agriculture is one of several ongoing priorities for achieving cleaner air.

Environmental Land Management Schemes (ELMS) are a key means of driving environmental outcomes from agriculture in England following the UK's exit from the European Union.

Set out under the **Agriculture Act**, ELMS are intended to provide payments to farmers for nature-friendly farming and other public goods achieved through agricultural land.

The **Sustainable Farming Incentive** (SFI) is the primary mechanism for payments,

alongside other schemes which include countryside stewardship and landscape recovery.

Since ELMS were originally proposed, the implementation of the policy has struggled, driven by inconsistent policy approaches, uncertainty around long-term funding and which activities will be rewarded, and poor communication between the Government and farmers.

The **SFI** was temporarily closed to applications between 2024 and 2025 as a result of limited funding, but has since reopened. There is still uncertainty about the extent to which the Government will continue to fund these schemes.

Clarity will hopefully be provided by the **Government's Farming Roadmap**, which is currently being produced and is expected to be published in 2026. The roadmap is intended to outline a shared vision between government and farmers, addressing delivery challenges around funding in the process.

Ultimately, there are still significant questions about ELMS and the SFI, as well as how nature-friendly farming will be supported in the future.

The revised Environmental Improvement Plan for England (EIP) also reiterates the Government's commitment to addressing emissions from agriculture. In addition to ELMS, it highlights:

- Support for farmers to invest in lower emission infrastructure and equipment with the goal of addressing ammonia emissions.
- Monitoring of industry-led incentives to address ammonia, such as assurance

standards and certificate schemes, with the potential to introduce regulation.

You can learn more about Environmental Land Management Schemes in our 2025 article for Essential Environment on **ELMS and English farming**.

Interdisciplinary issues

Policy making tends to be singularly focused: seeking to address a particular problem or altering the current approach to dealing with an issue.

It often struggles to address issues from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Environmental experts can fill that gap, offering policy advice that is informed by multiple disciplines and specialisms.

For example, the Environmental Policy Implementation Community (EPIC) joined with the IAQM in 2024 to publish a guide for local authorities on **Integrating Action on Air Quality & Climate Change**.

The guide is a clear example of the impact that can be achieved with an interdisciplinary approach to clean air in policy design and implementation.

Across the IES family, there are many opportunities for collaboration that have implications for how we engage with policy.

In February 2026, the IES is holding an event to examine **what makes good environmental reporting** from the perspective of different specialisms.

As processes are adapted by policy, the core work of environmental professionals is increasingly impactful, so interdisciplinary

insights are useful for air quality experts hoping to inform their practice.

Find out more about each of the **IES Communities** and their current activities on the relevant pages of the IES website:

- Climate Action Community
- Community for Environmental Disciplines in Higher Education (CEDHE)
- Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Community
- Environmental Policy Implementation Community (EPIC)
- Foundation for Water Research (FWR)
- Institute of Air Quality Management (IAQM)
- Land Condition Community
- Marine and Coastal Science Community

Our annual **Dialogue Between Disciplines** conference will return in 2026. It is the best opportunity to connect with experts across environmental disciplines.

The IES is also **partnering with the ACCESS network** throughout 2026 to promote better links between environmental science and the social sciences.

Further information

Influencing policy decisions

Our IES member briefing note: '[Influencing the UK Parliament](#)' provides an overview of how environmental professionals can influence Parliament and legislation.

For best practice on engaging with policy, see our [collection of case studies](#).

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

In the UK, many issues of environmental policy are devolved.

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](#).

Find out more

Learn more about existing legislation & policy on this topic:

- [Environmental Improvement Plan for England 2025](#)
- [Planning & Infrastructure Act 2025](#)

Read other briefings from the IES:

- [Essential Environment: Land and nature](#)
- [COP30: Climate change](#)
- [Integrating Action on Air Quality & Climate Change: A Guide for Local Authorities](#)
- [Introduction to environmental policy briefing series](#)
- [Priorities for the UK Government, 2024-2029](#)

Is there a policy-related topic which you would like to see covered by the IES or IAQM?

Get in touch with Joseph Lewis (joseph@the-ies.org) to let us know your thoughts on potential topics for future briefings, or with your suggestions for other content.

“Air pollution is the single largest environmental threat to public health ... Healthy air should be a core public health aspiration of the next five years.”

Ellie Savage, IES Policy Lead and Coordinator of the Environmental Policy Implementation Community



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