

The Golden Thread of Governance

Reconnecting environmental targets with credible outcomes

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Executive summary

Governance matters. Too many grand ambitions end up languishing in process or politics, without ever achieving real outcomes.

When we want to see our aspirations through to action, governance should be the **golden thread** that ties everything together. Even as we set targets, we should know how they will be delivered, monitored, and evaluated.

That golden thread has broken. There are several steps missing between environmental targets and the outcomes we want.

This project has drawn on the views of more than 50 experts in environmental governance convened at workshop events in 2025 and early 2026. Participants were drawn from all four nations of the UK. They represented government, arms-length bodies, academia, NGOs, business, local authorities, and other delivery organisations. Each workshop focused on delivering environmental targets in one of two areas, biodiversity and Circular Economy, with a focus on case studies and what works in practice.

For biodiversity, England is off track to meet its legally-binding targets set under the Environment Act.¹ Other countries are still formulating their targets. For the Circular Economy, while there are some targets for recycling, residual waste minimisation, and producer responsibility to recover materials, there are no comprehensive legally-binding targets across the UK.

A renewed push to reconnect environmental targets with credible outcomes is both urgent and essential. It is frequently cited that the UK is one of the world's most nature-depleted countries,² with hundreds more species under threat over the next two decades.³ The UK could be 12% poorer in the next decade due to biodiversity loss, a bigger hit than either the 2008 financial crisis or COVID-19.⁴ Degraded global ecosystems also threaten UK national security.⁵ Over extraction of natural resources is a contributor to biodiversity loss, yet Circular Economy measures could reduce that effect and deliver an estimated £25 billion of growth to the UK, along with 170,000 new jobs.^{6,7} There are significant gaps in the delivery plans needed to meet targets and realise those benefits.

Meanwhile, the public mandate for environmental action has held strong. Three quarters of people think that politicians should be doing more to reverse the decline of nature in Britain, while roughly 80% support specific Circular Economy policy changes.⁸

There is a strong and enduring public mandate for environmental action as long as it is fair, sensible, and effective. That's why sound governance matters. Once the environmental aspirations of the public have been translated into goals and targets, they must be seen through to outcomes. It is a matter of public service for people living today, and a fundamental responsibility to future generations.



The IES has seven recommendations to repair the broken thread of governance:

1. Start with clear, simple targets underpinned by a unifying vision
2. Produce actionable and specific delivery plans
3. Convene government, partners, and practitioners for delivery
4. Provide sufficient resources to ensure delivery
5. Use strong accountability frameworks at the programme or project level
6. Monitor with a purpose and make better use of data
7. Ensure monitoring and evaluation result in feedback to refine plans and delivery

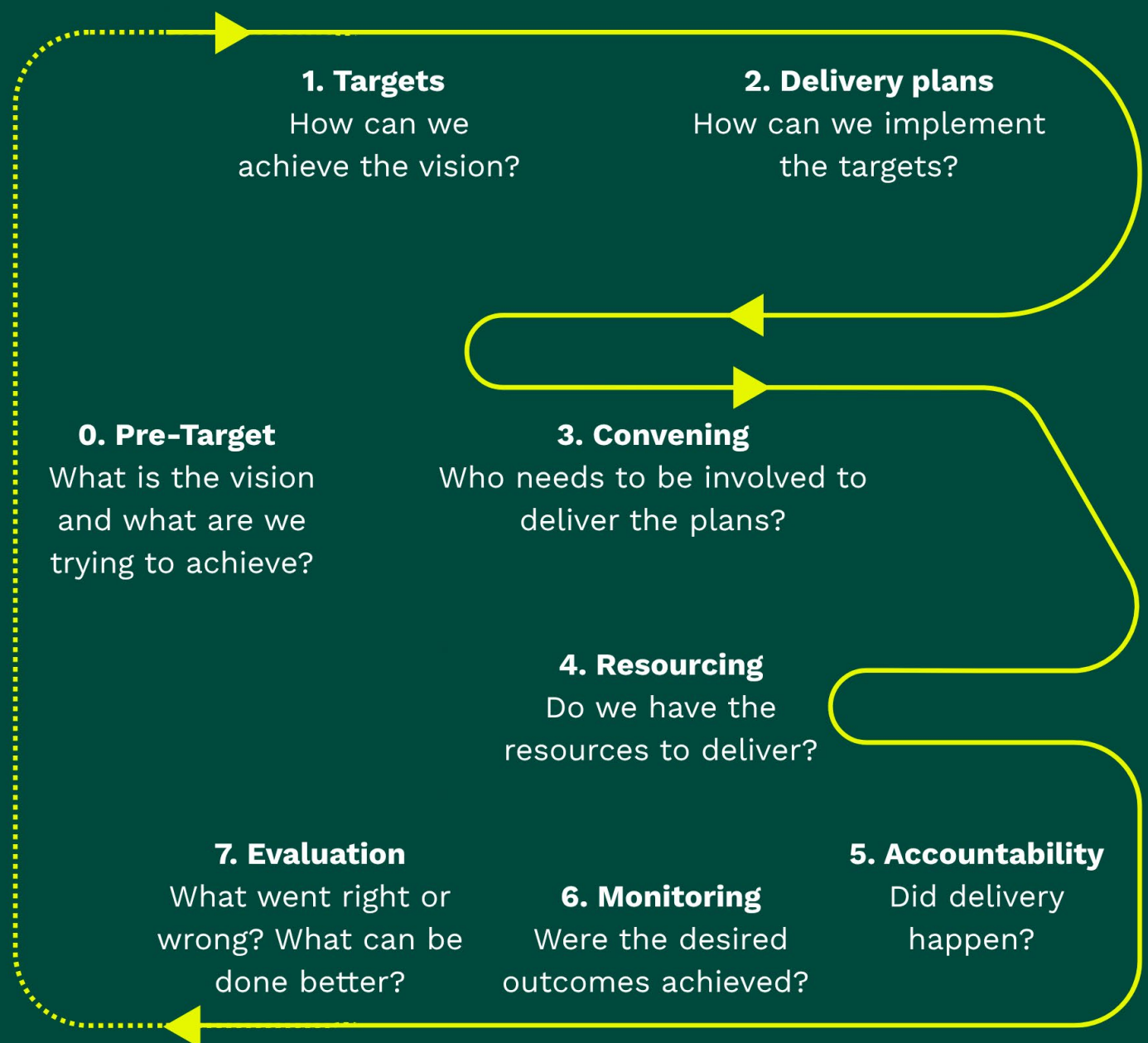
These seven actions can be adopted across the UK. As England reviews its environmental targets and approach to governance, these actions can revitalise the delivery of its objectives. In the countries where legally-binding targets are being developed, the golden thread can serve as a blueprint for making those targets effective from the start.

Environmental targets represent some of our society's most fundamental hopes for the future. Reconnecting targets to credible outcomes is one crucial step towards restoring confidence in government to deliver a country with thriving people, a healthy economy, and a flourishing environment.



The Golden Thread of Governance

Environmental governance is a challenging topic. It varies considerably by jurisdiction, and often by individual issues. To support a clear conversation about recommended actions, the IES has produced an idealised outline of ‘the golden thread of governance’.



The golden thread of governance identifies eight steps in an iterative process:

0. A unifying vision to underpin targets:

Before targets are created, leaders consult widely and agree the vision and goals that those targets are trying to achieve.

1. Clear, simple targets: Targets are developed to turn those goals into tangible objectives that can be measured as successes or failures. The targets are broken down into actions that support progress towards meeting them.

2. Actionable and specific delivery plans: Plans are put in place for the delivery of those actions, including partnership agreements and ways to engage the stakeholders necessary for implementation.

3. Convening for delivery: Relevant stakeholders are convened to execute delivery plans across government, local government, and beyond, including through partnerships.

4. Resources for delivery: Sufficient resources – time, money and skills – are allocated to ensure that delivery is successful.

5. Strong accountability frameworks:

Accountability mechanisms, such as oversight and enforcement, are used to ensure that the necessary actions take place.

6. Monitoring with a purpose: Decisions about monitoring are made with a purpose, to see whether the desired outcomes are being realised and to adapt approaches as needed.

7. Evaluation and feedback to refine plans and delivery: Following monitoring, evaluations are made alongside the changing context of baseline conditions to refine plans and to inform the objectives underpinning targets. These may remain relevant or may need to be updated.

This is one of many models of governance and policy delivery and does not fully capture the complexity of the processes involved, which are rarely linear. The ‘Golden Thread’ analogy is designed to prompt an aspiration to make the whole system work more effectively to make change on the ground, and to make the governance conversation more tangible.

Recommendation 1:

Start with clear, simple targets underpinned by a unifying vision

We need a unifying vision that links targets to a public consensus for what we want the future to look like and the objectives we want the targets to achieve. Targets should be clear, simple, and directly linked to their core objective. The most important targets should be legally-binding, and it should be clear whether or not they have been met.

Why?

Environmental targets are not always sufficiently underpinned by a vision of the future they seek to create, and so there is a disconnect between the targets and their public mandate. The perspective of the governed is not adequately taken into account in the governance.

Without a clear publicly-articulated vision, we risk losing public will. The framing around biodiversity often starts from the position of depletion, focusing on risks and costs, which arguably gives people little stake in fighting for nature. Positive visions can build conditional optimism for public action.⁹ Circular Economy is still an unfamiliar and abstract concept to many people, so targets for achieving it either lack resonance, or revert to a singular focus on recycling rates.

Clear targets are essential so that all policy makers and stakeholders have shared goals to work towards. Simple targets are essential to ensure policies actually contribute and can be easily adopted. Where targets become too detailed, they can become overly complex or meaningless in practice.

Case studies

The Welsh Well-being of Future Generations Act and Scotland's National Performance Framework provide a strong underpinning political context for their country's environmental objectives. By providing a unifying vision, they have mobilised stakeholders to support delivery and created a link between governance structures and public accountability.

Scottish Government has committed to designing new Circular Economy Targets by 2027, following on from developing a monitoring and indicator framework. This will consider what is most important to measure to assess progress towards a Circular Economy and where there are gaps in measurement. There is recognition that targets need to focus on areas of highest impact.¹⁰

The Aichi Biodiversity targets are a good case study of targets which did not lead to action. They have been viewed as ambiguous,¹¹ not clearly measurable,¹² and insufficiently linked to specific outcomes.¹³

Recommendation 2:

Produce actionable and specific delivery plans

Targets should have delivery plans, including the specific contributions needed from different agencies and actors. To be effective, biodiversity targets in particular may need to be broken down by geography and timescale, as different conditions may demand different delivery approaches. They also demand different levels of attention, or already good areas may get better while worse ones get worse. These delivery plans need to be integrated: upwards to objectives, down to monitoring and evaluation, and across to other policies so that delivery in many places adds up to a coherent whole.¹⁴

Why?

Delivery plans are essential to achieving outcomes. Without a clear plan for who is responsible, what they are responsible for, and how it will be done, targets do not carry

through to outcomes. Every strategy should have a linked delivery plan and resources attached to realise its goals. These plans should proactively recognise and address the potential barriers to implementation.

A good delivery plan provides clarity, increases uptake, and makes the right actions happen in the right places at the right time. That requires a clear delivery pathway, integrated with other plans and policies, both locally and nationally.

Plans need integration across organisations to support action now and they need integration into the long-term to support legacy delivery, so that action survives beyond the tenure of specific individuals. Delivery should be high-priority with clear support from leadership. Plans should be integrated, so that delivery across a range of places adds up to a coherent whole.

Case studies

Throughout the project, the UK's Climate Change Act and Carbon Budgets were referenced by a range of stakeholders as a good example of governance. While not perfect, the Carbon Budget and Growth Delivery Plan is a case study for how a robust process can produce detailed and actionable delivery plans for meeting specific environmental targets.

The Scottish Biodiversity Strategy is supported by iterative Delivery Plans with specific actions for a given period.¹⁵ These plans support coordination and collaboration, while sustaining activity towards delivery.

Recommendation 3:

Convene government, partners, and practitioners for delivery

From the start of the process, the necessary stakeholders should be convened to support delivery. Engagement should be driven by a specific purpose and should contribute towards integrated and joint action plans for delivery. Stakeholders should be identified with the knowledge of how agencies, local authorities, partner organisations, and practitioners can best support delivery.

Why?

Environmental issues are often dealt with in silos. Operational teams are not reliably taking integrated or system-based approaches, so linked issues are not coordinated, which gets in the way of delivery. Where relevant agencies and stakeholders agree on joint actions for delivery, those actions are more likely to succeed because they can avoid inadvertently blocking one another.

Many environmental objectives require action beyond government, so buy-in from key delivery stakeholders is crucial. For example, biodiversity targets in England rely considerably on actions by farmers, who need to be willing to participate in Environmental Land Management Schemes for change to happen.^{16,17}

Stakeholders should be involved in the process where they are necessary or add clear value, yet engagement cannot become a barrier to action: if delivering outcomes is everybody's responsibility, it's nobody's responsibility. Any stakeholder engagement should be strategic, so should be driven by purpose and specific individuals should be accountable for taking actions forward.

In many instances, environmental policies will be implemented by the actions of environmental practitioners, so environmental professionals should also be convened early to identify how policy delivery can be improved, particularly where delivery has been especially challenging.

Case studies

There are many examples of successful partnerships for delivery. The 'Team Wales' approach for joined-up collaboration shows that purpose-driven partnerships can expedite action.¹⁸ Successful partnerships can also be led from outside government, such as the Northern Ireland Species Recovery Partnership and Scotland's Climate Emergency Response Group.¹⁹

Coordinating local authorities for integrated delivery can be especially effective. Examples of successful partnerships include the Caru Cymru partnership model used by Keep Wales Tidy,²⁰ ReLondon's Cross Authority Collaboration Group on Circular Construction,²¹ and the Scottish Climate Intelligence Service, which helps local authorities to deliver action on climate change.²² These partnerships have been successful in delivering action by convening the right people to deliver specific actions.

Recommendation 4:

Provide sufficient resources to ensure delivery

Money alone cannot solve all the challenges for delivering targets, yet it is a necessary condition for delivering targets effectively. When delivery plans are created, realistic budgets need to be part of that process, with a view to multiple years of implementation and what resources are needed, not just to deliver, but to deliver well.

Why?

Many of the delivery bodies that are necessary for delivering targets in practice are substantially underfunded for their responsibilities. Local authorities are a clear example. Attempts to save money by underfunding delivery in the short-term will only increase costs in the long-term when actions need to be repeated or where inaction leads to substantial costs.

Reliable long-term funding creates certainty, as well as the investable conditions needed

for businesses to align themselves with environmental objectives. Private investors in nature markets need to rely on stable conditions, while delivery stakeholders need certainty to make upfront investments, such as farmers being partners in biodiversity measures or producers seeking to meet Circular Economy aspirations. Short-term funding sends the message that plans and regulations may change in the future, making timely action less likely.

There are other resources which are crucial for effective delivery. Delivery budgets should include dedicated staffing capacity, with those people given specific roles in the delivery process to ensure resources are deployed effectively.

Those responsible for delivering also need skills and support from leadership to get things done. Particular skills gaps include implementation skills, data literacy, monitoring and evaluation skills, and programme management.

Case studies

Resources are particularly important to secure the opportunities for innovation at a local or devolved level, as often the actions needed for delivery need to take account of local context. Well-resourced delivery also creates the possibility for coordinated delivery approaches, such as the Metropolitan Glasgow Strategic Drainage Partnership.²³

The Climate Change Committee's report 'Local Authorities and the Sixth Carbon Budget' highlights the importance of local authorities in delivering environmental outcomes but emphasises the need for "appropriate long-term financing to support local authorities in delivering net zero."²⁴ The National Audit Office reached a similar conclusion in its report on Local government and net zero in England.²⁵

Local Nature Recovery Strategies are another clear example where uncertainty around future funding has undermined the potential for effective delivery.²⁶

Recommendation 5:

Use strong accountability frameworks at the programme or project level

Governance structures should be supported by internal frameworks for accountability for delivering against targets, at both programme and project levels. Accountability mechanisms should be pragmatic, neither too timid nor too bureaucratic, to ensure a balance between a stable policy landscape and sustained environmental improvement.

Existing delivery bodies or partnerships need clear responsibilities for delivering specific targets, backed by demonstrable incentives for success and penalties for failure. Bespoke delivery units should be purpose-driven, integrated, and transparent. Either model should be led by an individual with clear accountability for delivering outcomes.

Why?

Governance arrangements since the UK's exit from the European Union are showing positive signs of working, according to a stocktake from Green Alliance.²⁷

While they can be effective, these checks and balances can take a long time to influence outcomes, so more immediate accountability at the programme and project level is also crucial to delivering targets in practice.

Day-to-day accountability relies on a governance structure that strikes the balance between continual sustained improvement and long-term signals that allow business investment in the delivery of targets. This is particularly needed to deliver a more Circular Economy, given the significant shifts in business and consumer behaviours that will be needed. An approach with stable leadership that is directly accountable for outcomes helps to manage this balance, supported by a robust delivery plan.

Accountability can be best assured by a framework that provides clarity of purpose, responsibilities, incentives for success, and penalties for failure.

Case studies

A clear example of a successful programme management approach to accountability was the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency's work to implement the Flood Risk Management (Scotland) Act 2009.²⁸ The programme had a well-defined mission with clear targets, deadlines, and lines of accountability, as well as a named individual who was personally accountable for failure and empowered to take the action necessary to create lasting change.

Another model of programme-level accountability is the infrastructure approach to delivery. In the Netherlands, the Long-Term Defragmentation Programme is an example of a strategic multi-year programme for reconnecting nature through Nature Investment Zones.²⁹ In the UK, Rebuilding Nature is seeking to take a similar approach to delivering a Strategic Nature Network in practice.³⁰

Recommendation 6:

Monitor with a purpose and make better use of data

A purpose-driven approach to monitoring is essential and must start from the perspective of what evidence is needed to support the understanding of progress towards, and delivery of, targets, now and in the future. Monitoring should be supported by a system of institutions, indicators, and evaluation that provides a sufficiently broad and actionable baseline of evidence.

Why?

Evidence shapes outcomes. Monitoring against specific indicators shapes the scope of potential solutions and can be limiting. Monitoring is also used to determine whether policies have been successful, so if we monitor against imperfect proxies, those imperfections can get in the way of properly understanding environmental outcomes.

For example, where national air quality objectives are used as an indicator for reducing the health impacts of air pollution, action declines as limit values are reached. As some forms of air pollution have no safe levels, there is still a substantial negative effect on human health.³¹ Another example is Norway's approach to climate change, which has led to substantial decarbonisation of production, yet has been

funded by oil revenues because indicators focus on production at the expense of thinking about wider impacts.³²

These kinds of trade-offs are inevitable in monitoring, so deliberate choices about environmental monitoring and evaluation are essential. A purpose-driven approach means that the information needed to make decisions about delivery is available. Smart decisions about monitoring also prepare us for the future, creating a sufficiently broad and actionable baseline of evidence.

The world has never had more environmental data than it has now, yet using that data as evidence requires us to utilise it better. Much potential evidence is locked behind intellectual property, is fragmented or not standardised, or only reaches decision makers years after it is generated. Resources need to be deployed to centralise data and make it accessible to be used as evidence.

Learning lessons from failure is often seen as politically undesirable. Candour and honesty are essential to improving approaches to make progress, so the evaluation process must be supported by genuine reasons to accept and explain failures, rather than hiding from them.

Case studies

The Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC)'s terrestrial monitoring schemes³³ are a clear example of the ways that broad monitoring can strengthen the availability of evidence and provide long-term systems that support effective evaluation.³⁴ The EU indicator framework for chemicals³⁵ is an example of a purpose-driven monitoring framework designed to support progress towards the specific environmental objectives under the Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability.^{36,37}

Organisations outside government can support standardisation of metrics and indicators to increase the reliability of solutions, such as the Circular Economy metrics for the built environment developed by the Ramboll Foundation and ReLondon.³⁸

Recommendation 7:

Ensure monitoring and evaluation result in feedback to refine plans and delivery

The evaluation process for environmental targets should include deep analysis of delivery challenges. Integrated assessments that evaluate progress and success across different scales, times, and the whole environment should be used to bring together evidence for evaluation, and as the basis of changes to how targets are delivered. Analysis should also include the changing context of climate change and environmental degradation which may affect baseline conditions for meeting an objective.

Why?

Targets routinely fail to be delivered, yet not enough is done to understand root causes

and adapt implementation plans to address them. Approaches like integrated assessments are increasingly helping with the iterative process of making delivery more effective. Where these approaches are used now, they produce strong analysis of barriers to delivery, yet this evidence is not always actioned by government.

Often, such analysis can apply across contexts, making new targets and policies more effective from the outset. For example, analysis of Environmental Land Management Schemes could provide insights into the uptake of voluntary schemes, which may be applicable in the context of designing policy for the Circular Economy.

Case studies

The Office for Environmental Protection takes an integrated assessment approach “to provide an assessment within and across environmental domains, across geographic scales, and over past, present and future timescales”.¹ By assessing past trends, recent progress, future prospects, and potential responses, these assessments are able to reach a synthesis that reflects a more complete summary which is immediately useful for decision making.

Other assessment approaches provide a clear pathway for evidence-based action, such as the Species Recovery Curve, which follows a process of diagnosis, solutions testing, recovery, and long-term legacy;³⁹ and SEPA’s Environmental Performance Assessment Scheme which follows a process of measuring indicators, assessing action, collating, evaluating, and then adapting.⁴⁰

The Environmental Policy Implementation Community (EPIC)’s implementation science working group is working on an ongoing project to develop the evidence base on environmental implementation and support practitioners to improve delivery.⁴¹ EPIC has also produced a Guide to Environmental Implementation for Local Authorities.⁴²

About the project

In 2024, Julie Hill MBE became President of the Institution of Environmental Sciences. As part of her work as President, she launched an initiative focusing on the challenge of translating environmental targets into change on the ground, asking how to construct a 'golden thread' to make environmental governance work in practice.

The primary objective of the project was to bring together key actors, across the four nations of the UK, particularly those who might not normally come together, to agree why the thread might be broken and debate possible solutions.

As President, Julie led the work with the support of the IES policy team and input from IES members. As preparation for the workshops, the current state of delivery against environmental targets was discussed with a small set of experts who had experience working in delivering environmental outcomes at different stages along the 'golden thread'.

Early discussions led to the production of a scoping paper which set out two exemplar areas where the project would focus to allow for deeper analysis within subject areas: (a) resources and the Circular Economy; and (b) biodiversity. Governance for each of these issues and their

associated targets involves considerations around regulation, policy, behaviour, supply chains, markets, and technical knowledge, so they were seen as particularly comprehensive topics to use as examples. Different approaches to governance have been used in each case, which provided the opportunity for comparison throughout the project.

Following the scoping paper, dialogue resulted in a series of diagnosis statements of the challenges for delivering targets in practice:

- The process of selecting and developing targets is faulty
- Targets are not broken down into specific contributions needed from different agencies and actors
- Targets are not broken down by geography or timescale when they need to be, such as targeting to areas where change is needed most
- Issues are siloed from the legislation-level downwards (carbon, nature, agriculture, water, waste) and are passed to agencies in a siloed manner, with little emphasis on systems thinking, so operational teams rarely take an integrated, multi-disciplinary approach

- Agencies and stakeholders are rarely effectively convened to agree an integrated action plan
- The perspective of ‘the governed’ is not sufficiently taken into account
- Money and resources are a barrier, but more funding would be insufficient to solve delivery challenges

To establish a wider evidence base, we held a series of semi-structured interviews which were framed using the diagnosis statements. The participants were six high-level individuals with experience of environmental governance across government, think tanks, businesses, NGOs, and arms-length bodies. Each interviewee had been involved with the translation of targets through to delivery and they represented perspectives from different points across ‘the golden thread’.

As a result of these interviews, supplementary evidence, and ongoing secondary research, the initial diagnosis statements were refined and a series of potential solutions to the governance gap were identified as a provocation for further discussions:

- Clearer purpose underpinning targets
- Convening across government and stakeholders
- Opportunities in devolution and local governance
- Deeper analysis of delivery challenges
- Governance for stable yet continual improvement
- Utilising data and proxy metrics
- Convening practitioners to support delivery

More than 50 experts in environmental governance and each exemplar area were convened at workshop events in 2025 and early 2026. Participants were drawn from government, arms-length bodies, academia, NGOs, business, local authorities, and other delivery organisations. Each workshop focused on delivering environmental targets in one of the exemplar areas, with a focus on case studies, what works in practice, and confirming or rejecting the diagnosis and solutions.

The workshops demonstrated a strong consensus for action to improve the delivery of environmental targets, broadly confirming the diagnosis and proposed solutions. Case studies and examples of both successful and unsuccessful solutions were presented, which were subsequently analysed by the project team to establish that commentary was more than anecdotal. An outcome paper was produced for each workshop, covering specific points of discussion and analysis.

Evidence from the workshops, interviews, outcomes papers, and other sources was used to identify several additional gaps in the ‘golden thread’:

- Internal frameworks and structures to promote accountability in delivery
- Full coherence across delivery plans, as implied by the initial diagnosis, yet not fully captured in the proposed solutions
- Managing the change context of climate change and biodiversity loss where it could lead to changes in baseline conditions or required actions during the delivery of targets

- A clearer and more comprehensive approach to resourcing the delivery of targets, including beyond financial resources

At this stage, the project team also scoped out a hypothetical ideal of the ‘golden thread of governance’, which supported the analysis of where gaps had emerged.

Bringing together all the evidence from the project, the original diagnosis, draft solutions, additional gaps, and idealised ‘golden thread’, the recommendations that appear in this report were compiled. An initial draft of the report was shared with external stakeholders to further test their robustness and appropriateness.

The feedback provided gave support for the recommendations and supported a further process of refinement ahead of the report’s final publication.



What comes next?

The recommendations in this report will be immediately relevant to ongoing conversations about environmental governance and targets already taking place.

In particular, the passing of the Welsh Environment (Principles, Governance and Biodiversity Targets) Act 2026⁴³ presents a key opportunity to produce targets that are credible and well-supported from the outset, maximising the chance of achieving their objectives.

The ongoing governance workstream in Defra is another opportunity to advance the delivery of environmental outcomes through these insights, as are similar conversations in Scotland and Northern Ireland. In each case, policy makers must seize the opportunity to enhance what already exists, improving the current governance landscape without abandoning it completely.

Next steps for the IES

The IES and its members want to make clear our offer to play our part to support government in delivering ambitious action. Achieving environmental aspirations is an inherently collective effort, because the environment touches every aspect of society.

While we continue to work with partners across government and delivery agencies to realise the recommendations of this report in practice, we will also take direct action to

advance the state of implementation on environmental objectives.

Our Environmental Policy Implementation Community (EPIC) brings together experts from across government, academia, local authorities, and professional practice to combine the knowledge of those who shape and formulate policy with that of those who implement policy in practice.⁴⁴ Over the next 12 months, EPIC's implementation-minded policy making workstream will focus on the question of how policy can be designed with implementation in mind, picking up on many of the challenges and opportunities raised in this report.⁴¹

In the second half of 2026, the IES will also address two of the major drivers identified in this report:

1. How collective visions for wellbeing can unify society and underpin environmental actions, including the possibility of a Sustainable Wellbeing Framework for England, and
2. The values that drive people and the ways people value the environment

The IES is a professional body with more than 6800 members. We represent the voices of environmental professionals, sharing insights from the front lines of working with the environment. The IES is particularly well-placed to represent a multidisciplinary approach to those insights,

drawing members working in air quality, land condition, climate, nature, sustainability, water, education, and anywhere else where environmental work is underpinned by science.

We provide evidence for decision makers, support our members to engage with policy through training and resources, and work with policy to speak up for the voice of science, scientists, and the natural world.

Environmental scientists are ready to play our part in the transition to a sustainable society. Together, we can reconnect environmental targets with credible plans for realising the urgent and essential outcomes they represent.



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