

The future for environmental standards in the UK

Checked against delivery

Good morning,

Just over a year ago I spoke at this forum on this very same topic – the future of environmental standards, principles and governance. Back then the first draft of the environment bill had been unveiled and the first meaningful vote on Brexit had just been lost.

In some ways a lot has changed – last week we left the EU and the full Environment Bill was published by a new government.

But perhaps the biggest change is the sizeable and welcome shift in public concern about climate change and the natural environment. It was great to see the PM recognise this launching the Year of Climate Action on Tuesday.

This can kick-start the decade of climate delivery that we need. Because the one thing that hasn't changed is the urgent environmental challenges we face.

A year ago I quoted tennis player Billie Jean King who said that pressure is a privilege.

Right now there are enormous pressures on our environment – I doubt nature sees it as a privilege.

Later this year the UK will host COP26 – in the run up the government has an incredible opportunity to show the bold leadership required to begin to ease the pressure.

It has already started with the legal commitment to reach Net Zero by 2050 last year.

Demonstrating its firm commitment to the highest environmental standards would show the scale of our ambition.

Because we should never underestimate the value and importance of having high environmental standards and strong and effective regulation.

With the UK inside the EU we have seen massive improvements in the quality of bathing waters in this country, whilst product efficiency standards have helped cut energy use.

Domestically, over the last decade the Environment Agency's own regulation has helped: reduce greenhouse gas emissions from sites we regulate by 47 per cent; reduce air pollutants like sulphur dioxides by 81 per cent and nitrous oxides by 65 per cent; and reduce serious pollution incidents by 14 per cent.

All of this helps create a better environment for people to live in.

It is also good for businesses, giving them certainty over the rules and allowing them to invest for the future. It drives resource efficiency and innovation and creates new markets.

Over the next decade the standards that are set in this country, and the regulation we do, can help tackle the climate emergency, prepare for its impacts, restore nature and help UK PLC.

So we welcome the Environment Bill – an ambitious and potentially transformative piece of legislation for the natural environment.

It sets out the new legal framework for environmental governance in this country and aims to put environmental thinking at the heart of policy making.

Environmental issues should never be seen as a nice to do, a cherry on top – they should be baked into government decision making – essential to building a better world.

We look forward to responding to the consultation on the policy statement on environmental principles to make sure the Bill achieves these aims.

So yes, let's bank the improvements that have been made,

But if we are going to meet the twin challenges of restoring the natural world and tackling the climate emergency we must do better than to simply maintain the status quo.

Our goal should not be to keep hold of what we currently have but to make it better.

And if the UK wants to be a global leader on the environment, it needs to set consistent standards internationally – we can't have one rule at home, while turning a blind eye to environmental degradation overseas.

The Bill requires the government to set legally binding targets on air quality, water, waste reduction, and nature recovery.

On Tuesday the Prime Minister rightly spoke about the global toll the impacts of climate change were having around the world. This is a description I recognise from my role as the UK Commissioner to the Global Commission on Adaptation.

But we also feel the impacts of climate change in this country. Our communities can experience the toll of both too little water and too much.

I would like to see the targets set under this Bill help us adapt to a changing climate.

Making us fit and ready to face the impacts of an increased risk of flooding, drought and heatwaves. Seeing nature as a friend to work with not a foe to fight against.

For example; restoring saltmarshes not only provides a habitat for diverse lifeforms, it also increases resilience to flooding by protecting the coastline.

As the government regains the powers to legislate for future environmental standards a broad and transparent framework which fosters a collaborative approach is the best way forward.

Standard setting should not sit in a small office in Whitehall, being decided by a small number of people.

The inclusion of business, government, regulators, NGOs and the public – will mean we can get effective standards – to protect and enhance the environment – that everyone can sign up to and support.

Shortly you're going to hear in depth views on the new Office for Environmental Protection.

With the right leadership we believe it will have the powers it needs to fulfil its role. It's good to see climate change included within its remit. Climate and the environment are inextricably linked.

We will welcome the scrutiny of the OEP and look forward to working with it.

However, for it to be truly effective it must look across the whole of government, and not just at those organisations it sees as doing 'Environment'.

It's also correct that it doesn't duplicate the functions of what we already have.

The second part of the Bill also has very welcome provisions.

It will help improve regional planning on water resources to help ensure water resources, flooding and pollution are better managed in a changing climate. It will also allow us to stop damaging, unsustainable abstraction.

The powers on waste crime will help us take more effective enforcement action against those breaking the law.

A new addition, on stopping the export of plastic waste to developing countries, will also help signify the UK's global leadership role.

We support the focus on air quality in the Bill, and the aim for the Environment Agency to work more closely with local authorities.

Legislating to mandate biodiversity net gain is welcome and we believe it can be a stepping stone to a longer term ambition of Environmental Net Gain.

As always, with all these provisions, the devil will be in the detail. We look forward to working with Defra to make sure we have the resources required to fulfil the ambitions set out in the Bill.

We know that without a healthy environment we cannot have a stable economy.

As abstract and distant from people's lives that discussion on principles and governance can sound the consequences are not. Dangerous air pollution, degraded bathing waters, increased flooding all have real world health and economic impacts.

If we are to meet people's growing expectations of environmental action, then the delivery bodies, doing the work on the ground, need access to the resources required to undertake complex and sometimes controversial work.

The environmental challenges we face are fundamentally connected to one another. Climate change is causing damage to ecosystems, whilst environmental degradation is leading to emissions that cause climate change.

With our role to regulate for the environment across sectors as diverse as farming, nuclear power, chemicals and water, the Environment Agency is well placed to provide expert advice to government on the challenges of the future.

I mentioned earlier some of the successes we have had – but we are always looking at how we can do better.

We will always be tough on those who break the rules, damage the environment and undermine trust in legitimate business trying to do the right thing.

But good regulation also involves collaboration – helping those we regulate perform better to achieve better outcomes for the environment.

By focussing on the 'what' – the standards we want to achieve – rather than a prescriptive 'how', good regulation creates the space for businesses to innovate, and innovate in the right way.

We are also making better use of modern technology and investing in digital systems. This will make it quicker and easier for people to apply for permits, and it will improve our ability to detect and disrupt those who act illegally.

This is important – because it means high standards and strong regulation won't mean more bureaucracy for businesses doing the right thing.

But just as importantly it will also enable the public to easily find out about their local environment, and the environmental record of the businesses that operate near their homes.

It creates more accountability and roots operators in their community. As people become more climate conscious and environmentally aware developing this connection will be important.

I started this speech reflecting on what had changed in the last year and talking about pressure.

Pressure can cause extreme reactions – it can burst a pipe or create a

diamond.

The pressure on our natural environment is no different.

As we look ahead to what might change in the next year, and the next decade, let's work together, use the opportunities in the Environment Bill, and in hosting COP26, so that just as we value the wonder of a diamond, we value the wonder of the natural world.

Thank you.