



INSIGHT

Achieving environmental improvement and responding to climate change: enablers for success

Cross-government

Introduction

1 The government has long-term, legally binding obligations to achieve environmental improvements and respond to climate change. This includes four legally binding targets required by the Environment Act (2021) covering biodiversity, air pollution, water quality and waste and resources. In 2019, Parliament updated the Climate Change Act (2008) to require a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions to 'net zero' by 2050. The Climate Change Act also provides the legal basis for the UK's approach to adapting to climate change. It requires the government to assess and adapt to climate change risks. The government's legal targets link to multiple international treaties that it has signed and are part of its international diplomatic efforts to contribute to and encourage wider global change. There is scientific consensus that without rapid significant and sustained global action, climate change and nature loss will have severe consequences for people in the UK and around the world.

2 The government sees achieving its environment and climate change targets as part of its work to protect and increase wider public value. Successive governments have, for example, identified new markets for clean technologies as a source of economic and job opportunities. In July 2024, the government established a new Mission Board for clean energy, which has objectives to deliver clean power and accelerate net zero, boost energy independence, protect consumers and support jobs. Local environmental improvements, such as to air quality and access to green spaces, can contribute to improved health and quality of life. Building the UK's resilience to climate change risks that are already inevitable – such as increased frequency of extreme weather events like heatwaves and flooding, and changes to food supply – helps protect people's health, avoid harm to the natural environment, and damage to houses and infrastructure.

3 Meeting the government's environment and climate change targets is a significant challenge. Achieving net zero by 2050 will require changes that are unprecedented in their scale and scope, including changes to the way electricity is generated, how people travel, how land is used and how buildings are heated. Achieving the government's wider environmental targets and responding to climate risks adds another layer to this challenge, requiring the government to handle related and complex transitions over similar timeframes.

About this report

4 In 2020, we carried out two broad reviews of how the government is organised to achieve net zero and its wider environmental goals, including its goal to adapt to a changing climate.^{1,2} Since then, we have examined many of the interventions that it has established to help meet these goals. This has covered individual projects and programmes, for example, on energy efficiency grants and tree-planting, as well as broader portfolios of government’s work such as those to decarbonise home heating or improve air quality.

5 This report draws out learning from this body of work and identifies enablers that we see as particularly important for tackling the challenges that government faces in its environment and climate change work (**Figure 1** overleaf). We present two sets of enablers:

- **Part One:** Enablers for ensuring strong leadership from lead departments and the centre of government for achieving the government’s environment and climate change ambitions.
- **Part Two:** Enablers for designing and implementing successful environment and climate change interventions that deliver best value.

This reflects a pragmatic decision to target our findings towards two audiences: those responsible for government’s approach as a whole (for whom Part One is particularly relevant); and those responsible for particular interventions (for whom Part Two is particularly relevant). However, the issues involved are intrinsically linked and have broad relevance across government.

6 As part of the analysis that informed this report, we:

- Reviewed 38 reports published by the National Audit Office (NAO) on government’s environment and climate change work.
- Reviewed information that departments have provided, as part of our ongoing process of tracking recommendations, on whether and how they have responded to the recommendations in these reports.
- Conducted 31 workshops and interviews with officials from central government departments and their arm’s-length bodies, local government, scrutiny bodies and other relevant stakeholders.

1 Comptroller and Auditor General, *Achieving net zero*, Session 2019–2021, HC 1035, National Audit Office, December 2020.

2 Comptroller and Auditor General, *Achieving government’s long-term environmental goals*, Session 2019–2021, HC 958, National Audit Office, November 2020.

Figure 1

Enablers for the government to improve the delivery of its climate change and environmental goals

This figure summarises the enablers for success that we include in this report

Enablers for ensuring strong leadership from lead departments and the centre of government

Create a culture of shared commitment to delivery of climate change and environment goals

To achieve this, the government should:

- ensure effective arrangements to coordinate across government and secure buy-in from senior leaders;
- embed environment and climate change in business planning; and
- ensure arrangements for effective joint working with local government.

Integrate climate change and environmental ambitions with each other and wider policy objectives

To achieve this, the government should:

- manage the links between different policy areas; and
- support integration with a land use framework.

Provide clear strategic direction through overarching long-term plans

To achieve this, the government should:

- clarify roles, responsibilities and the timing of key decisions;
- support long-term, strategic planning in delivery bodies; and
- support long-term investor confidence.

Enablers for designing and implementing successful environment and climate change interventions

Proactively plan for the resources and skills needed

Support the people and organisations involved with the changes required to make progress

Develop approaches that support well-managed risk taking

Collect, use and evaluate information to understand what is working and when to change course

Notes

- 1 In this report, we took a pragmatic decision to present two sets of enablers targeted at different audiences, but the issues involved are intrinsically linked and have broad relevance across government.
- 2 Enablers for ensuring strong leadership from lead departments and the centre of government are shown in purple, enablers for designing and implementing successful environment and climate change interventions that deliver best value are shown in green.

7 This report includes illustrations of how the government's arrangements for achieving its environment and climate change goals have developed but does not seek to give a comprehensive account of these. While our recommendations take account of the new government's priorities, we have not sought to carry out a full assessment of the extent to which the new government's plans are likely to help it make progress against the enablers we identify. In line with the NAO's remit, this report does not give advice on what the government's environment and climate change interventions should be and does not assess whether the government is on track to meet its overall targets, which the Climate Change Committee and Office for Environmental Protection provide as part of their annual progress reporting to Parliament.

Concluding remarks and recommendations

8 Achieving the government's legislative climate change and environmental targets requires sustained and coherent action over successive parliaments, and substantial progress over the next five years. This means that the leadership role of the centre of government and lead departments – the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) and the Department for Energy Security & Net Zero (DESNZ) – is critical. Strong leadership will ensure that the government develops a coherent set of interventions that together succeed in putting the UK on track to achieve its overall targets. Strong leadership also creates the conditions for securing most value from the public and private investment involved. The scale and complexity of improving the natural environment and responding to climate change means that the government's approach to leadership on these issues needs continued focus and attention. Our work shows that this should include building its approach to culture, strategic direction and integration.

9 It will be important that government identifies tangible opportunities to test and develop its approach to these enablers. As part of this, over the next six months, HM Treasury, Cabinet Office, Defra and DESNZ should work together towards the following goals:

- a** Ensure that the reviews which they are carrying out of the government's overarching plans to reach its environment and climate change goals lead to significantly greater clarity over roles and responsibilities, the timing of key decisions, and where the most important shared opportunities and tensions are likely to be. The new government has committed to review plans for environmental improvement in 2024 and is required to publish an updated strategy for reaching net zero in 2025.
- b** Ensure an effective and coherent effort across the government to embed environment and climate change considerations into the forthcoming Spending Review. The government plans to conduct a multi-year Spending Review in Spring 2025 through which it will make decisions about its spending priorities.

- c** Work with other parts of government to secure a shared view of how to make the most of shared opportunities and manage trade-offs as the government takes forwards its wider priorities. This should include working with the new Growth Mission, chaired by the Chancellor, to secure a shared view of the main links between the government’s environment and climate change objectives and its ambition to boost growth and make every part of Britain better off. It should also include working with the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) to secure a shared view of the main links with government’s plans to increase house building. The government has announced that it wants to enable 1.5 million new homes to be built over the current parliament.
 - d** Develop a shared view of how it expects the new ministerial level Mission Board for clean energy to interact with other environment and climate change governance arrangements to ensure a coherent approach to decarbonisation, climate resilience and environmental improvement. The Energy Secretary chaired the first meeting of the Mission Board in July 2024.
 - e** Use the introduction of requirements for climate-related disclosures in annual reports and accounts to embed environment and climate change considerations in departments’ business planning. From 2025-26, new sustainability reporting requirements will require government departments to demonstrate how they are considering climate-related risks in their organisational strategies. This includes risks associated with fulfilling their role in influencing the transition to net zero, as well as how their operations may be affected by climate change.
- 10** Our work also shows that there are four enablers that senior officials across government responsible for environment and climate change interventions are likely to need to focus on. These reflect the importance of having the right skills in place, enabling well-managed risk taking, carrying out effective monitoring and evaluation, and supporting those involved with the changes.