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## **Discussion with the Environment Agency – responding to the environmental challenges of climate change**

### **Purpose of report**

For information.

### **Summary**

The Board has invited the Environment Agency to join the meeting for a discussion on climate change and the environment. Tony Grayling is Director for Sustainable Business and Development at the Environment Agency and his role covers land use planning, energy, sustainable growth and development. His biography is included in the background notes.

Tony will open the discussion with a short presentation. This paper provides a brief update on recent Environment Agency activity on climate change and a recap on LGA policy lines.

**Is this report confidential? Yes  No**

### **Recommendation/s**

*Board members will lead the discussion with the Environment Agency. This paper provides a background note to the agenda item.*

### **Action/s**

For officers to take forward any actions arising from the discussion.

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## **Discussion with the Environment Agency – responding to the environmental challenges of climate change – discussion with the Environment Agency**

### **About the Environment Agency**

1. The Environment Agency (EA) is an executive non-departmental government body, sponsored by Defra. The EA employs over 10,000 staff with offices in Bristol, London and 14 regional locations.
2. In England the EA regulates major industry and waste, and the treatment of contaminated land. The agency also has a role in water quality and resources, and ecology and conservation. Many councils work with the EA at a local level through their responsibilities for managing flood risk from rivers, reservoirs and the sea.

### **Joint working**

3. The Environment Agency and the LGA have regular meetings at officer level including a quarterly catch up. The Board's discussion with the Environment Agency is an opportunity to consider the opportunities for joint working at a strategic level. In our discussions with councils and the EA the following areas have been raised as having potential for greater collaboration:
  - **sharing of expertise and technical knowledge** e.g. of biodiversity, land management and sustainable approaches to development. Could the EA and local government work together to develop these skills, to pool resources and enable greater information sharing and co-operation at the local level?
  - **mobilising green finance and private sector investment:** the EA and the LGA have both recognised that tackling climate change will need action and investment from the private sector. How could the EA and LGA work together to mobilise private investment?
  - **support for communities, including the most vulnerable to climate change:** The EA and the LGA have both highlighted the need to win the “hearts and minds” of communities in climate change. It would be useful to hear the EA's view on whether we have the right incentives to help businesses and communities make the right choices. Councils know their communities and their relationships with the most vulnerable people in society has been strengthened during the Covid-19 pandemic. Has the EA carried out an assessment of the differential impact of climate change

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across the population? What are the strategic opportunities for the EA and LGA to work together on a fair transition to net zero?

- **Opportunities in the Environment Bill** and reform of agriculture and farming subsidy through the new ELM scheme (environmental land management). It may be helpful to ask Tony for his views on the opportunities coming through from new legislation, for example in land use management and how that could support green energy and providing more green spaces and natural habitats.

### **Recent Environment Agency activity on climate change**

- 3.1. In the run up to the UN COP26 climate change conference the Environment Agency published its [third report to Defra on adaptation to climate change](#), with the headline of “Adapt or Die”. Their assessment of the challenges included an estimate that an extra 3.4 billion litres of water will be needed from public water supplies by 2050. The EA note that this will require strategic approach to water management.
- 3.2. The EA report is a call to action on adaptation. They argue that upfront investment in adaptation is cheaper in the long term than dealing with the consequences of severe weather. They note that Environment Agency cannot protect everyone, and communities and businesses will need help and support to become more resilient to climate change.
- 3.3. The report considers the role of the EA as a regulator, and flags that environmental law and regulation will need regular updating to reflect the pace of climate change. For example, lower river levels will intensify levels of pollutants.
- 3.4. EA support the principle that nature and ecosystems are essential to human health and wellbeing. They argue that they must be seen as critical to development, rather than an obstacle.
- 3.5. The report includes a warning that dealing with an increase in the number and severity of climate related incidents will require a stronger emergency response, diverting resources from other activity.

### **Recap on LGA policy on adapting to climate change and restoring nature**

4. The LGA has taken key messages to the COP26 conference on climate change, including the themes of adaptation and restoring nature. The EA and the LGA share a lot of common ground, for example on the need for a strong national and local partnership approach.
5. Our asks of national government are to:

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- Devolve funding for flood defences to local areas, and this must be part of a new national framework for addressing the climate emergency
- Back locally developed adaptation pilots to test out different, integrated approaches, providing useful data on the costs and benefits of different approaches, interdependencies and inequalities.
- Work with local government on renewed and fully funded plans for adaptation.
- Integrate adaptation into current and forthcoming policies such as Building Regulations and National Planning Policy Framework reviews and, the Heat and Buildings and Net Zero strategies.
- The Environment Bill will create powerful new laws to protect and enhance the environment, and it points to a new environmental relationship between local and national government, with potentially greater responsibility sitting with councils. Local government is well placed to take the lead on this agenda but to deliver on these ambitious plans they will need to have appropriately skilled staff and be given adequate resources to deliver new duties through the new burdens process (such as Local Nature Recovery Strategies and Biodiversity Net Gain).
- There is a bigger set of opportunities to deliver change if the Environment Bill is properly aligned with the Agriculture Act and reform of the planning system. Getting land use right is a key factor in protecting nature and meeting net zero targets. We want to work with government to develop a holistic approach to tackling the climate emergency across these key pieces of legislation.

### **Implications for Wales**

6. Wales faces similar climate change challenges. Natural Resources Wales performs a similar function to the Environment Agency in Wales, and is sponsored by the Welsh Government.

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**Biography for Dr Tony Grayling**

**Director, Sustainable Business and Development, Environment Agency**

Tony Grayling is Director of Sustainable Business and Development for the Environment Agency (EA), the principle environmental regulator in England. He leads EA's work on strategic policy issues including climate change, sustainable development and the 25 Year Environment Plan. He previously led the Environment Agency's work on EU exit and the National Flood Resilience Review.

Tony was a special adviser to David Miliband and Hilary Benn, successive Secretaries of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, helping to design the UK's Climate Change Act 2008. From 2002 to 2006 he was an associate director and head of the sustainability team at the Institute for Public Policy Research, a UK think tank, which he joined in 1999 as a research fellow. He was a special adviser to the Minister for Transport, Gavin Strang, from 1997-98 during the development of the UK governments 1998 transport white paper and before that a researcher successively to Labour MPs Ron Davies and Anne Campbell. Educated at Thorpe St Andrew School, Norwich and Fitzwilliam College, he has a first class degree in natural sciences and a PhD in plant sciences both from Cambridge University.