

Why and how the government's International Environmental Protection Report should be improved

Legislation and
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Introduction

Section 21 of the Environment Act 2021 requires the secretary of state to publish an International Environmental Protection Report (IEPR), setting out developments in international environmental protection legislation.

This is welcome, since, for the government to lead effectively on the environment, it must understand the international approaches that may help to strengthen the UK's legislative and policy frameworks.

The [first report](#), covering April 2022 to March 2024, was published in April 2025 and provided a useful overview of significant environmental protection developments across the globe. It reiterated the government's ambition to demonstrate global environmental leadership.

However, there was room for improvement in its timeliness, coverage, analytical depth and transparency, which should be addressed in future reports.

Publication timelines

The value of the IEPR depends on timely publication. The first report, covering 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2024, was not published until April 2025.

The Environment Act requires reports to be laid before parliament and published "as soon as reasonably practicable" after the end of the reporting period, which arguably was not the case on the first report.

The next IEPR, covering the period ending 31 March 2026, should be published promptly after that date to maximise its relevance and usefulness for policy development and parliamentary scrutiny.

On timelines, we recommend:

- publishing the next IEPR as close as possible after 31 March 2026 (the end of the reporting period);
- providing greater transparency on the expected publication date to support accountability and confidence ahead of the next reporting cycle.

Improving the report

In line with its stated aim of identifying global best practice, the IEPR covers a wide range of international developments, but on its secondary purpose, informing potential approaches in the UK, it fell short.

The report is largely descriptive and misses opportunities to draw out what the highlighted examples might mean for UK government policy.

In particular, the absence of commentary on whether the UK might seek to align with, diverge from, or exceed examples from other jurisdictions limits the practical value of the report for policy development.

The report content is not organised in a way that clearly signals the relative significance of different developments, instead it reports on the policy areas included in the government's Environmental Improvement Plan.

While this grouping is sensible, greater emphasis on major new or amended international treaties and groundbreaking legislation would help to clarify where international ambition is increasing most rapidly and which developments are most relevant for the UK government to consider for adoption.

The report would also be more valuable if it emphasised developments in areas where UK policy is being redesigned or reviewed; and if it made explicit how international practice could inform those processes and shape policy choices according to current relevance.

Most concerning is the omission of several significant international developments in areas of clear relevance to current UK priorities. It is unclear why they were excluded or what the UK government intends should be inferred.

One trend appears to be that the EU's role as a primary driver of global environmental ambition is not clearly reflected. While the report need not state this explicitly, EU legislation often sets de facto international

benchmarks through its market size, regulatory reach and influence on global supply chains. Omitting these developments risks understating where international standards are advancing most rapidly.

In particular, the absence of the EU's new Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive is striking given the prominence of water quality as a government priority. Similarly, the report omits major European developments on chemicals regulation, notably reforms under EU REACH, despite this being the most influential regulatory regime for chemicals and highly relevant to the UK due to close trading relationships. We would expect to see these included in the next report, especially given the intended direction to align chemicals protections better with the UK's closest trading partners, especially the EU, as outlined in commitment 40 of the new [Environmental Improvement Plan](#).

Other initiatives we would expect to see covered in the next report include the EU Soil Monitoring and Resilience Directive, the Nature Restoration Regulation, the Environmental Crime Directive, the Critical Raw Materials Act, the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive, the revised Energy Performance of Buildings Directive, the Plastic Pellet Losses Regulation and the revisions to the Waste Framework Directive.

On climate, the first report did not reflect recent strengthening of EU legislation on renewable energy, energy efficiency and buildings, nor the creation of the EU Social Climate Fund, which recycles emissions trading revenues into emissions reduction and household energy efficiency measures.

Taken together, and in the absence of accompanying commentary, it is unclear what these omissions were intended to signal, which undermines the relevance of the report and limits its usefulness in informing effective UK government policy.

Our recommendations

- Include a clear summary of all new international environmental treaties, or amendments to international treaties, the UK has signed or ratified.
- Highlight genuinely groundbreaking or far reaching new international legislation.

- Structure the IEPR to signal the relative significance of different developments and identify the most important areas of international action for the UK government.
- Focus on international developments in areas where UK policy is being redesigned or newly developed and clearly set out the implications for UK government policy.
- Include concise analytical commentary on what the highlighted international developments mean for UK government policy, including whether the UK may seek to align with, diverge from, or exceed international standards and lessons learned from other jurisdictions.
- Be transparent about the inclusion or omission of significant international developments, particularly where omissions relate to current UK policy priorities.

Strengthening section 21

In 2026, the government will be conducting post-legislative scrutiny (PLS) of the Environment Act 2021. This is an important opportunity to learn from and build on the first five years of implementation. Section 21, while welcome, could be more effective, for example adding a requirement for the government to consult on the preparation of the report to inform and enrich its evidence gathering.

Strengthening the process could enhance credibility, support learning and ensure the IEPR fully achieves its intended aim.

We recommend the following are considered during the PLS process:

- The merits of adding a government requirement to set out how it intends to use the report to inform policy development.
- How best to increase transparency in the selection of examples to include in the report.
- The potential of a consultation requirement to add value to government evidence gathering.

Parliamentary debate and scrutiny

Section 21 provides a statutory basis for parliamentary consideration of how other legislatures approach their environmental protections, but its impact depends on how effectively the report informs debate.

Parliamentary discussion of international environmental developments, drawing on the IEPR, is important to encourage progressive discourse and support policy development.

Opportunity should be found in the parliamentary calendar to scrutinise and debate international environmental protection developments and their implications for UK government policy. This could be achieved through a one-off hearing of a relevant select committee in each of the Houses of Parliament and included within the annual debate on a climate and nature statement.

For more information, contact

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