Environment Board

It has been a very busy and high-profile year for the Environment Board. I took over as Chair after the meeting in January 2023 so the first thing to say is a big thank you to my predecessor Steve Read who had done the job with such commitment, understanding and good humour. Steve retired from his day job at West Sussex County Council in March and we wish him all the best in his future endeavours. And a big thank you too to Tracey Butcher who as Secretary to the Board gave great service in supporting Steve and keeping the Board well-informed and running smoothly through all the challenges of the last 3 years and the lack of in-person contact.

Our agenda for the year has been driven by the implementation of various aspects of the Environment Act 2021 and the government’s updated Environmental Improvement Plan 2023. While we support the ambitions set out in law and the EIP and are committed to the local delivery of those elements requiring local leadership and action, we are frustrated that progress by government has been slow and patchy – not helped by the national political situation in 2022 that saw repeated ministerial and policy changes.

There have been long waits for government responses to consultation and the publication of secondary legislation and statutory guidance in relation to nature recovery, biodiversity, waste & recycling, and flood risk management. Funding announcements have been late in the day and not helpful in terms of the conditions set out. Local authorities have been hampered by this and by the operational difficulties caused by delay and uncertainty.

The Board had main meetings each quarter with shorter catch-up meetings most other months, all virtual. For the quarterly meetings we usually have guest speakers on current topics, these have included:

* Richard Brockington, Office for Environmental Protection – monitoring the government’s 25 Year Environment Plan
* Sophie Tyldesley, Defra – nature skills and green jobs
* Robert Mason, Defra – national adaptation programme
* Wildlife & Countryside Link – equality, diversity and inclusion in the environment workforce
* Grace Abel, Local Government Association – LGA’s climate support programme for councils
* Andrew Jackson and Lucy Hancock, Defra – the EIP 2023
* Gayle Monk, Anthony Collins Solicitors – extended biodiversity duty; the Retained EU Law Bill.

As well as our local authority members we welcome regular attendance and updates from colleagues at Defra, Natural England and the Environment Agency, these are always valuable. The Board continues to have four active Working Groups – Energy & Clean Growth, Flood & Water Management, Natural Capital & Heritage, and Waste. It’s great that Sheryl French has taken over from me as Chair of the Energy & Clean Growth group. Many thanks to Max Tant, Liz Milne & Liz Small, and Steve Palfrey respectively who continue to chair the other groups. Steve is also now the Deputy Chair of the Board.

We responded to many government consultations over the past year including:

* Nature Recovery Green Paper (May 2022)
* Green Finance Strategy Review (June 2022)
* Charging for DIY waste at household recycling centres (July 2022)
* Net Zero Review – Skidmore (October 2022)
* Air Quality Strategy (April 2023).

Other activities to mention are giving evidence to Parliamentary Select Committees including the House of Lords Built Environment Committee inquiry into environmental protection and development (March 2023); workshops with Defra on the Protected Landscapes Review (National Parks and AONBs); a webinar in March 2023 on the forthcoming Land Use Framework; regional webinars with Defra, Natural England and PAS on the roll out of Local Nature Recovery Strategies (April/May 2023).

Finally, Sheryl and I are pleased to be on ADEPT’s new Climate Change Board which is just getting off the ground as described in the latest newsletter and blog.

Carolyn McKenzie, Chair of ADEPT Environment Board, May 2023