



House of Commons
Environment, Food and Rural
Affairs Committee

The Annual Report of
the Committee 2003:
Government Reply to
the Committee's
Report

Fourteenth Special Report

*Ordered by The House of Commons
to be printed 8 September 2004*

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and its associated bodies.

Current membership

Mr Michael Jack (*Conservative, Fylde*) (Chairman)
Ms Candy Atherton (*Labour, Falmouth and Camborne*)
Mr Colin Breed (*Liberal Democrat, South East Cornwall*)
David Burnside (*Ulster Unionist, South Antrim*)
Mr David Drew (*Labour, Stroud*)
Patrick Hall (*Labour, Bedford*)
Mr Mark Lazarowicz (*Labour/Co-op, Edinburgh North and Leith*)
Mr David Lepper (*Labour, Brighton Pavilion*)
Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (*Conservative, Bridgwater*)
Mr Austin Mitchell (*Labour, Great Grimsby*)
Diana Organ (*Labour, Forest of Dean*)
Joan Ruddock (*Labour, Lewisham Deptford*)
Mrs Gillian Shephard (*Conservative, South West Norfolk*)
Alan Simpson (*Labour, Nottingham South*)
David Taylor (*Labour, North West Leicestershire*)
Paddy Tipping (*Labour, Sherwood*)
Mr Bill Wiggin (*Conservative, Leominster*)

Powers

The Committee is one of the departmental select committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No. 152. These are available on the Internet via www.parliament.uk.

Publications

The Reports and evidence of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee (including press notices) are on the Internet at

www.parliament.uk/efracom

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Fiona McLean (Acting Clerk), Jonathan Little and Dr Kate Trumper (Committee Specialists), Marek Kubala (Inquiry Manager), Andy Boyd and Louise Combs (Committee Assistants) and Anne Woolhouse (Secretary).

Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, House of Commons, 7 Millbank, London SW1P 3JA. The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 3262; the Committee's e-mail address is: efracom@parliament.uk.

FOURTEENTH SPECIAL REPORT

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee reported to the House on *The Annual Report of the Committee 2003* in its Second Report of Session 2003–04, published on 21 January 2004 as HC 225. The Government's Reply to the Report was received on 29 July 2004.

Government response

Recommendation 2

Once again this year we have not been specifically informed by Defra in advance (or, indeed, afterwards) of any of these appointments to posts in non-Departmental public bodies or elsewhere. We recommend, as we did last year, that the Department put in place procedures to inform us in advance of all major appointments pending and/or made, in line with the recommendation of the Liaison Committee. (Paragraph 15)

The Government's Response to the Public Administration Select Committee Report Government by Appointments: Opening Up the Patronage State made it clear that it would not be appropriate for a Committee to receive any information before an appointment was confirmed or to have any kind of veto or other involvement in the appointments process. Where the Department is issuing a Press Release on an appointment, arrangements will be made to provide the Committee with an advance copy wherever possible. In addition, the Department will provide a regular update listing other major appointments that have been made over the preceding months and for which no press release was issued.

Recommendation 3

We regret that the Government did not invite us to undertake pre-legislative scrutiny of any of these Bills; nor did it make time available to do so. (Paragraph 17)

The Department is mindful that an import role of Select Committees is to carry out pre-legislative scrutiny of Bills and that adequate forward notice needs to be given by the Department if the Committee is to build time into its work programme for this purpose.

Recommendation 4

In general, the Department's account of its expenditure was much improved compared to 2002. Nevertheless, we noted in our report that there are ways in which transparency might be further improved, such as by giving a commentary of

performance against objectives, and by setting out the key financial data relating to each Departmental objective. (Paragraph 20)

The Department accepted the Committee's recommendation that future Reports should provide more financial detail to aid the reader in assessing performance. Although the 2003 report contains more concrete financial information the Department has endeavoured to improve the way that expenditure against particular objectives and programmes will be shown in the spring 2004 Departmental Report.

The core tables within the 2004 Departmental Report will present expenditure by functional area. This will be further analysed by functions and key policies.

The tables will also highlight spend for high profile programmes, for example, the Developing Defra Change Programme.

In addition to the core tables we have also included key financial data setting out the resources allocated during 2003-04 and over the subsequent two to three years in support of some of our key areas of activity, for example those resources to be used in delivering the 'Strategy for Sustainable Farming and Food'.

Recommendation 5

We will continue to pay close attention to the ways in which Defra spends money, and how it accounts for its expenditure. (Paragraph 21)

The Department accepts that this is an important area of the Committee's work.

Recommendation 6

We are grateful to Ministers for attending our meetings so often. We trust that our good relationship with them will continue during 2004. (Paragraph 23)

The Department acknowledges this recommendation and echoes the Committee's desire to continue a good working relationship.

Recommendation 7

Assessment of Defra's performance against its Public Service Agreement targets is a significant part of our work in holding the Department to account. We reiterate the view expressed in past Annual Reports that analysis of performance against PSA targets should be a major part of each annual Departmental Report. We trust that Defra will continue to strive to improve the way it reports its performance against such targets - and in those areas not covered by specific PSA targets. (Paragraph 26)

The Department accepted the Committee's recommendation that future Reports should provide a coherent commentary of performance against each of Defra's objectives. We

tested this approach in our 2003 Autumn Performance Report, which provided a mid-year update of progress against our Public Service Agreement targets. In November 2003, Defra's Ministers agreed five strategic priorities for the Department under Defra's overall aim of promoting sustainable development:

- climate change and energy
- sustainable consumption and production
- natural resource protection
- sustainable rural communities, and
- sustainable food and farming including animal health and welfare.

In addition, the Department recognises that a significant part of its work is concerned with preparedness for emergencies and contingencies.

Following the Committee's recommendation, we have therefore brigaded reporting for each target and area of activity under their relevant Public Service Agreement objective as this relates to these strategic priorities. A summary of progress against each of the Department's outstanding Public Service Agreement targets is provided in the appendices to the report, whilst the main body reports in detail our progress against our 2002 Spending Review targets.

As well as reporting against our Public Service Agreement targets we also report progress, where appropriate, against our Service Delivery Agreement targets, which are internal targets developed to support the achievement of Public Service Agreement objectives. In addition we also report progress against other areas of the Department's work which help us to achieve our aim and objectives.

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
29 July 2004