

Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee
Tuesday 25 February 2025
8th Meeting, 2025 (Session 6)

Evidence session – Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA)

Introduction

1. The Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee has agreed to take evidence from SEPA to take stock of the organisation's most recent [Annual Report](#) and to discuss issues relating to its role as Scotland's principal environmental regulator.

Background

2. The Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) is Scotland's principal environmental regulator, established in 1996 by the Environment Act 1995. SEPA's primary role is to protect and improve Scotland's environment, ensuring that natural resources are used sustainably and contributing to sustainable economic growth.
3. SEPA regulates activities that can cause pollution, monitors the quality of air, land and water, and provides guidance to businesses and industries to help them comply with environmental legislation. Additionally, SEPA is responsible for national flood forecasting, flood warning, and strategic flood risk management.
4. The agency operates as an executive non-departmental public body of the Scottish Government and employs around 1,300 staff across various specialist areas. SEPA's mission is to be an effective and influential authority on the environment, supporting the Scottish Government's overall environmental objectives.

Meeting on 25 February

5. The Committee will take evidence from SEPA at its meeting on 25 February. The Committee will hear from:
 - Lisa Tennant - Chair
 - Nicole Paterson - Chief Executive Officer
 - Kirsty-Louise Campbell - Chief Officer, Governance, Performance, and Engagement
 - Alex Flucker - Chief Operating Officer, Data, Evidence, and Innovation
 - David Harley – Head of Regulation, Business, and Environment

6. This will be a wide-ranging session, covering all issues within SEPA's roles and functions that relate to the Committee's remit. The Committee will also take this opportunity to discuss information presented in SEPA's Annual Report as well as its strategic priorities for the coming year. The Committee may also discuss any other topical issues relevant to SEPA.
7. SEPA has provided written evidence on a number of issues relevant to its remit in advance of the evidence session (see Annexe).

Clerks

Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee



For the future of our environment

Annexe A– Information to support SEPA evidence at NZET Committee 25th February 2025

Information to support SEPA evidence at NZET Committee 25th February 2025



Context

Scotland's environment is at the heart of our identity, success and development as a nation. It is fundamental to our culture, economy and quality of life. It is precious and valuable. As the nation's principal environmental regulator, our statutory purpose is to protect and improve Scotland's environment in ways that as far as possible also create health and well-being benefits and sustainable economic growth¹.

In 2024 we published our new Corporate Plan² which was a significant step in our new leadership team's ambition of fundamentally transforming and resetting SEPA to focus on delivering the greatest possible environmental benefit for the people of Scotland. The Corporate Plan shares its vision with the [Environment Strategy for Scotland](#) and the strategic direction it sets is fully aligned with the Programme for Government, Scottish Government priorities and policies, and the National Planning Framework.

Our plan provides the framework for everything we do. It identifies five strategic priorities:

- **Net Zero:** Playing our part in helping Scotland become a net zero country by 2045.
- **Climate Resilience:** Reducing the impacts of floods and droughts.
- **Water Environment:** Protecting and improving our rivers, lochs, wetlands and seas.
- **Resource Efficiency:** Playing our part in helping Scotland transition to a circular economy.
- **Business Environmental Performance:** Securing good environmental performance from those that we regulate.

While our Corporate Plan identifies our priorities for the years ahead to 2027, SEPA's broad range of roles and responsibilities require us to deliver day to day services across a wide range of issues that touch upon every community in Scotland. We describe these core activities as "what we do"³. We work together to **Protect, Improve, Adapt, Avoid and Warn** as we deliver for Scotland.

¹ For more information about SEPA see Annex 1

² See Annex 2 for our Corporate Plan on a Page

³ See Annex 3 for details.

SEPA has new leadership at Board and Corporate levels driving transformational change to ensure that now and into the future our exceptional people are enabled to achieve our aims with the systems and tools in place that they need in order to focus on delivering for the people of Scotland.

Delivering for Scotland

The December 2020 cyber-attack had a profound impact on SEPA. To be clear: we didn't simply lose access to a few important files – we lost access to the vast majority of our systems and our data. It is difficult to overestimate the scale of the challenge: SEPA was faced with having to rebuild - largely from scratch - a complex organisation that is responsible for delivering a huge range of vital, statutory and, in some cases, life saving services.

The fact that we now largely have is a huge testament to our team of 1300 people. They have worked tirelessly to help rebuild new systems that enable us to deliver the services communities and businesses need and expect. We have done this in a way that doesn't build back what existed before, but which takes the opportunity for a digital transformation.

Our most recent Annual Report and Accounts was published in December 2024 and highlights the significant progress made across the year 2023/24. This has continued into the current year, where we continue to focus on our service delivery alongside our organisational transformation aimed at supporting ongoing improvements in delivery and in customer and colleague experience. For example,

- In 2023/4 we issued 953 flood alerts and warnings, the highest ever. This service provides trusted advice that keeps people and communities safe from harm. So far in 2024/25⁴ we have issued 519 alerts and warnings.
- Going into the 2025 season, Scotland will have 89 designated bathing waters, of which 87% are at excellent or good status (50 are classified as excellent and 27 as good).
- In 2024 the Water Environment Fund spent £3.6m on the preparation, survey, design and construction of river restoration projects across Scotland. Projects delivered in 2024 re-opened 105km of river to migratory fish and restored river quality in projects on the Leven in

⁴ Data from 1 April to 31 December 2024.

Fife and the Nith in East Ayrshire. These projects improve habitats in ways that also make local environments more attractive both for communities and for investment. We have an investment pipeline of 41 future restoration projects.

- In 2023/24 we concluded 136 enforcement actions and so far this year⁵ we have undertaken 103 and are on track for our annual highest number. In 2023/24 we reduced the number of illegal sites in Scotland by 65 and thus far this year we have tackled another 81. We are on track to issue more Final Warning Letters, more Fixed Monetary Penalties, more Enforcement Undertakings and significantly more Variable Monetary Penalties than the previous two years. Our work this year is building on successive years of enhancement since the creation of a dedicated enforcement unit.
- To support a just transition to net zero in Grangemouth and the work of the Grangemouth Future Industry Board [footnote], SEPA is leading a Grangemouth Regulatory Hub workstream. Including successfully piloting an innovative regulatory approach called Outcome Based Collaborative Regulation, in which stakeholders work together to achieve shared aims and outcomes, and aimed at regulating in a way that better supports delivery of net zero and that effectively facilitates innovation whilst continuing to protect communities and the environment.
- SEPA has developed a new capability to provide satellite mapping services (SEMS) during emergencies, revolutionising the way Scotland responds to emergencies such as floods, wildfires, landslides, and oil spills. The service forms part of the International Charter Space and Major Disasters, a global network of over 270 satellites from 17 Charter members around the world, working to support disaster relief. SEPA is the only organisation in Scotland able to activate the Charter and give emergency responders access to critical satellite imagery. This allows them to assess the full scope of damage, find critical hotspots, and prioritise areas for intervention - even in areas where weather or hazardous conditions make ground assessments impossible. The service will also contribute to future crisis preparedness, using baseline data collected by satellites to model potential scenarios, inform long-term resilience planning, and develop more effective response strategies.

⁵ All enforcement data from 1 April to 31 December 2024

These are just a snapshot of some of the successes we have delivered, but to provide a more comprehensive assessment of our delivery, we are currently developing a brand-new performance framework and reporting mechanism to enable effective scrutiny. This will result in a more comprehensive and transparent suite of outcomes, performance measures and progress indicators.

Agency transformation

The agency has faced multiple challenges over recent years which are being tackled head on by the senior leadership team. A widespread transformation programme is underway which directly supports public sector reform and drives our customer, delivery focussed agenda. The changes we are making across governance, performance, safety, digital and data will help us to be more effective and efficient in delivering our statutory purpose and making a difference for the people of Scotland.

We are focusing on:

- Supporting our customers and delivering the right mix of services to balance their needs with statutory requirements.
- Using data and evidence effectively to tackle complex environmental challenges.
- Being accessible and innovative using technology to adapt to future challenges.
- Being efficient, effective and optimising our services for our customers and colleagues.
- Ensuring our people are engaged and empowered to lead change.

To deliver these outcomes we are implementing programmes of change, including:

- work to completely overhaul our website, embed our new customer hub and improve the accessibility of our services for our customers
- making our regulatory approach fit for the complex environmental challenges of our time, for example IAF, rolling out digital services that make it quicker and simpler to apply for authorisations, a new public register and introducing a brand new environmental performance assessment scheme
- work on how we use data to better support all of our work, including business intelligence, data sharing and modelling

- enhancing resource planning, continuous learning, job evaluation and career frameworks, establishing a strong set of shared values as a powerful way to bring us together as an organisation
- improvements to our digital capabilities across the Agency including to our digital estate, capabilities and training so that all of our people are using new technologies to support achieving the best outcomes
- using innovation to deliver service improvements
- developing a new long-term vision and strategy for SEPA under this programme, setting out our vision for the Agency and for Scotland's environment and the enabling strategies needed to help us to get there.

SEPA is fully committed to leading key areas of the public sector reform agenda in Scotland, collaborating with partners to deliver joined up environmental solutions. Our senior team lead the Procurement, People and Streamlining Consenting Environment & Economy Public Sector Reform groups. We actively share our assets and estates with partner organisations, including the Sir John Murray boat laboratory and satellite emergency mapping system (SEMS) with all emergency responders. Our aim is to continue delivering on the Scottish Single Estate model by optimising colocation and reducing emissions.

Annex 1 – About SEPA

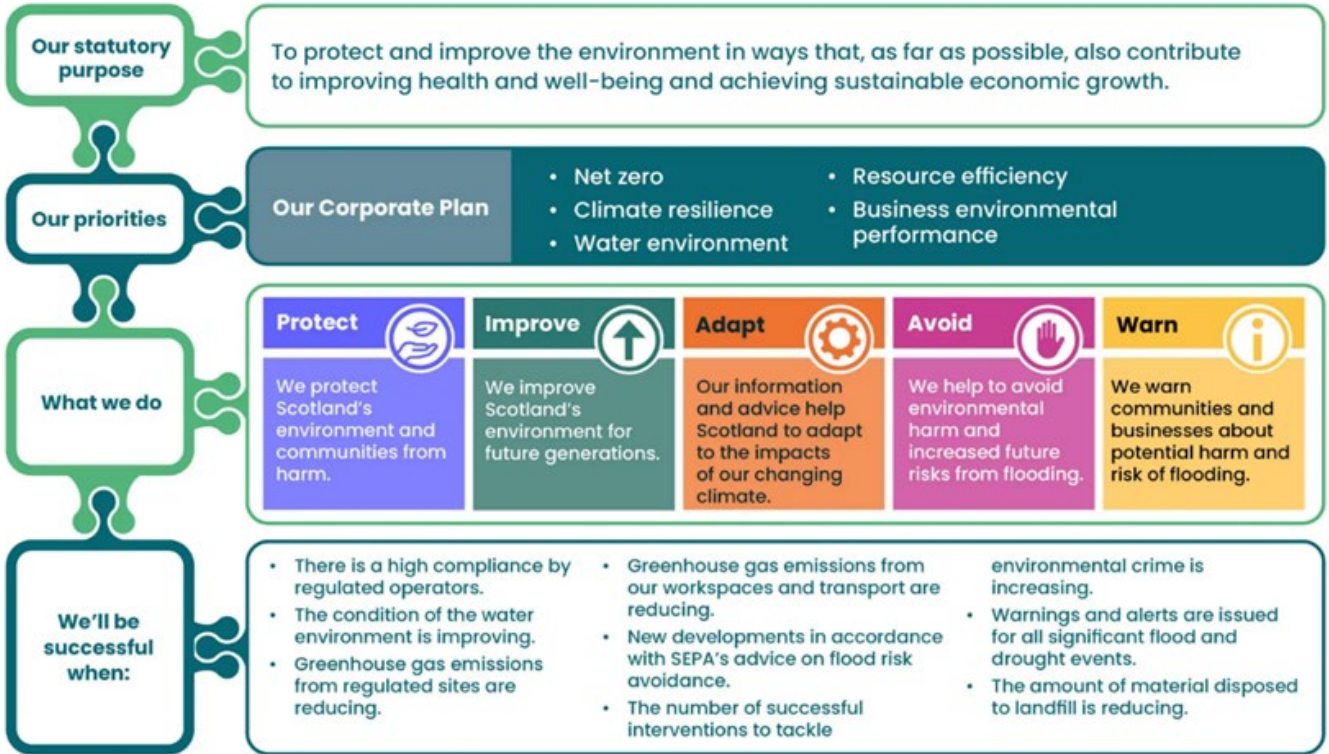
We are a non-departmental public body and independent advisor on the environment, accountable to Scottish Ministers and the Scottish Parliament. The broad framework in which we operate is set out in the [Framework Document](#), which also defines key roles and responsibilities which underpin the relationship between SEPA and the Scottish Government. While this document does not confer any legal powers or responsibilities, it forms a key part of our accountability and governance framework.

We have an Agency Board (the Board), supporting committees and a Corporate Leadership Team (CLT). The CLT is responsible for the delivery of SEPA's services, including the implementation of the high-level strategy of the organisation as set by the Board. The CLT reports directly to the Chief Executive, who is also the Accountable Officer for SEPA. Our purpose is to protect and improve the environment in ways that, as far as possible, also contribute to improving health and well-being and achieving sustainable economic growth

Our Corporate Plan and Annual Operating Plan set out our work which is delivered through five portfolios under our CLT: Data, Evidence, and Innovation; Finance, Modernisation and Digital; Governance, Performance, and Engagement; People, Workspaces, and Development; and Regulation, Business, and Environment. We work collaboratively across the organisation focusing on continuous improvement to maximise our efficiency and effectiveness.

Annex 2 – SEPA Corporate Plan






Our plan on a page



Annex 3 – What we do

What we do

Our purpose: To protect and improve the environment in ways that, as far as possible, also contribute to improving health and well-being and achieving sustainable economic growth.

Protect 	Improve 	Adapt 	Avoid 	Warn 
<p>We protect Scotland's environment and communities from harm.</p>	<p>We improve Scotland's environment for future generations.</p>	<p>Our information and advice help Scotland to adapt to the impacts of our changing climate.</p>	<p>We help to avoid environmental harm and increased future risks from flooding.</p>	<p>We warn communities and businesses about potential harm and risk of flooding.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We regulate to protect the environment and communities from harm. • We plan for and respond to incidents and emergencies. • We tackle environmental crime. • We provide information to help people make decisions that protect the environment. • We monitor our environment to understand changes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We regulate industry to improve energy efficiency and reduce emissions. • We work with others to help to restore land, water and air quality. • We inspire environmental excellence through awards and advice. • We reduce our own environmental footprint. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We help communities and businesses adapt to the increasing risks of flooding. • We provide flood maps that help people to make resilient choices. • We help businesses adapt to the increasing risk of drought and water scarcity. • We provide future forecasts to help people to become more resilient. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We provide information that helps to avoid new development in areas at risk of flooding or where it may cause environmental harm. • We require businesses to reduce their resource use, to re-use and recycle resources and to reduce waste and water use. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We warn when flooding is imminent so people can take action. • We warn the public when it is not safe to use bathing waters. • We warn when incidents pose a threat to the environment and communities. • We provide information to help people make choices that keep them safe.