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The case for closer cooperation with European partners on environmental data and information

The UK, The European Environment Agency and EIONET

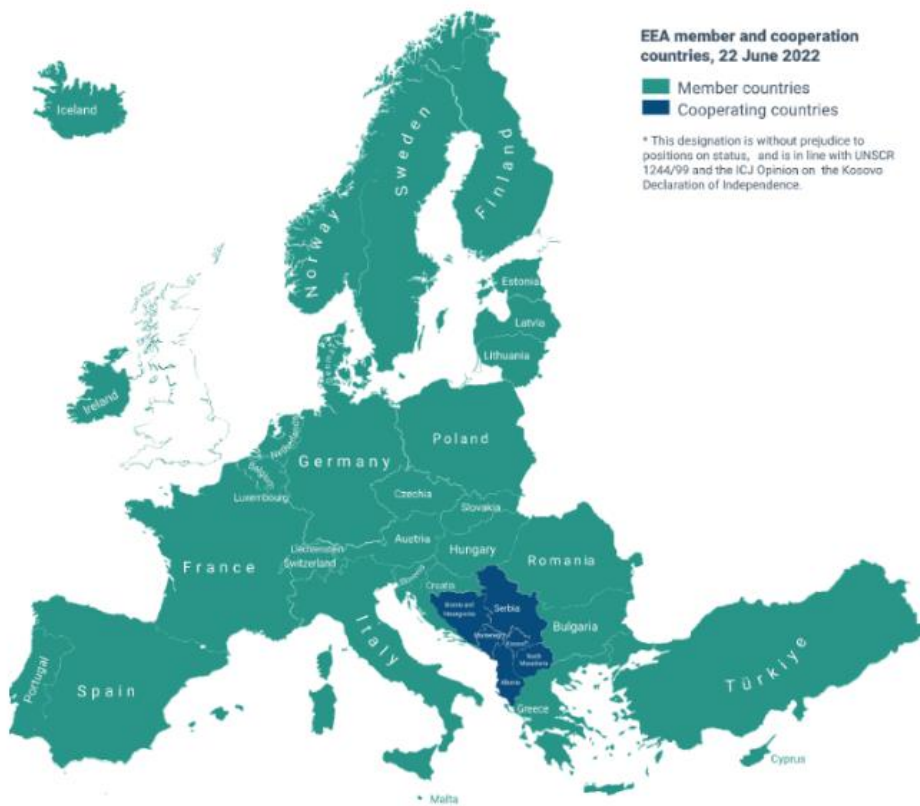
Summary

IEEP UK's work in the past three years has shown that due to disruptions in data, in part from leaving institutions such as the European Environment Agency, a full nationwide picture of the state and trends in the UK environment has been lost in a variety of thematic policy areas. This sits alongside an increased risk of consequential divergence in environmental policy since leaving the EU, the extent to which is difficult to ascertain without this data.



Background

Alongside departure from the European Union, the UK Government did not extend its membership of a number of technical and scientific bodies, despite the opportunity to continue as members. The European Environment Agency (EEA) was one, as was the European Chemicals Agency and the European Integrated Pollution Prevention and Control Bureau. No discernible reasons have been given by the Government as to why this decision to leave these bodies after more than 25 years of close cooperation was made and what the benefits or cost savings of withdrawal would bring.



Environmental data and information in policymaking

Robust environmental data and information underpin the impact and effectiveness of the laws we pass. We cannot know whether the Environment Act or the Fisheries Act is working, or if progress is being made towards long term targets, without adequate evidence. The ability to make a scientific and technical assessment of the UK's environmental performance is incomplete without more fully understanding what is going on at the European level. Exiting the EEA has therefore harmed the UK's ability to draw upon, contribute to and understand wider trends of environmental data and information in the continent of Europe, many of which impact directly on UK environment and climate policy.



A fragmented and incoherent data and information landscape

Each of the four countries of the UK collect and analyse environmental data and information about their own nation. In a limited number of cases (where it is legally required and usually because of international obligations embedded in conventions or because it is a ‘Reserved’ matter) the four nations share or combine that information to produce a national – UK wide outlook – on the state of the environment. IEEP UK’s research has shown that consequently, the impetus to produce a single, full nationwide picture of the state and trends in the UK environment has been lost in a variety of thematic policy areas¹. This has instead been replaced in many circumstances by four separate datasets and reports, none of which are necessarily cognisant of the rest of the UK or wider European state of the environment.

What would cooperation with EEA/Eionet bring?

Cooperation with the EEA and Eionet would mean that the gap in European-wide environmental knowledge is plugged, which is vital with many environmental issues not respecting boundaries. In this wider European context, it will be possible to assess the changes in the UK’s environmental more accurately, comparing and contrasting them with our European neighbours.

Cooperation with Eionet brings multiple benefits. Eionet connects hundreds of environmental institutions across Europe, delivering benchmarking and capacity building, supporting the exchange and uptake of environmental knowledge best practice, thus improving data quality and streamlining of environmental information.

Why now?

With an increasing appetite for closer cooperation with the rest of Europe, environmental policy provides one of the least controversial avenues to achieve this. In a political context, the forthcoming general election provides an opportunity for the next government to explore and benefit from this, with a closer working relationship with the EEA/Eionet being one of the most straightforward avenues to demonstrate

What is the EEA & Eionet?

- The EEA, and its technical network partner Eionet, which it coordinates, focus on gathering and analysing environmental data, developing indicators, methodologies, tools and integrated assessments.
- The EEA’s objective is to collect, “objective, reliable and comparable information at a European level” [Article 1, Regulation 1210/90]. It is therefore open to both EU *and* non-EU member countries alike.
- Its membership comprises 32 countries (27 EU member states and 5 non-EU states) plus 6 ‘Cooperating Countries’ in the West Balkans.
- EEA/Eionet collects data and information on the quality, pressures and sensitivity of the environment in a wide variety of areas such as air and water quality, the state of European soils, land use and natural resources, waste management, noise, chemicals and marine management. Most, if not all of these have a transnational aspect to them and do not respect national borders.

¹ [Bridging the Gap: Understanding UK environmental data and reporting outside the EU. July 2023. IEEP UK.](https://ieep.uk/publications/bridging-the-gap-understanding-uk-environmental-data-and-reporting-outside-the-eu/)



intent and quick results. The recent decision to rejoin the Horizon Europe and Copernicus science and technology programmes¹⁴ is an acknowledgement that cooperation and exchange between scientific and technical experts is a win-win for the UK and EU. This should make the logical decision to seek closer cooperation with the EEA and Eionet easier.

Eight years on from the decision to leave the EU, it is becoming apparent through IEEP UK's work that in many areas of environmental policy, either through a lack of capacity or a conscious decision, the UK is diverging with the EU². Whilst not worrying in itself, this divergence with a handful of exceptions, is characterised by the EU going further and faster. It is notable that the lack of comparable data in some areas, due to the UK's lack of membership of agencies such as the EEA, makes it difficult to provide a proper and full assessment at a time when the need to tackle a climate and nature emergency is growing.

Next steps to closer cooperation

For the UK to have closer cooperation with the EEA/Eionet, there are a number of possible steps to take depending on circumstances and the appetite of all parties involved. Whether the initial approaches from the UK come from agencies (UK-wide or devolved) or through official channels, the likely first step would be to build on existing informal mechanisms and cooperation with European counterparts, such as the meetings of Environmental Protection Agencies (EPAs), towards becoming a 'cooperating country' that was involved in Eionet, but not a full member. Beyond this other levels may be open to the UK, of observer, associate or full member status of the EEA, each with different levels of benefit balanced with commitment, including financial contributions.

For more information

IEEP UK is looking to do more in depth work to look at the case for, and steps towards, the UK forging a closer relationship with the EEA and Eionet. If you are interested in supporting this and exploring joint working, please get in touch.

² [Divergence in UK/EU environmental policy: the state of play. February 2024. IEEP UK.](https://ieep.uk/publications/divergence-in-uk-eu-environmental-policy-the-state-of-play-february-2024/)
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The Institute for European Environmental Policy UK (IEEP UK) is a sustainability think tank with over 40 years of experience. As part of the broader IEEP family, we are committed to advancing evidence-based research, analysis and policy insights in the UK and its interaction with policy in the EU and globally.

CONTACT PERSON

Michael Nicholson
Head of Environmental Policy
mnicholson@ieep.uk