

**United Kingdom statement on Geneva Declaration on Environmental Democracy
for Sustainable, Inclusive and Resilient Development:**

It is the UK's policy to avoid specific references to individual countries' connectivity initiatives, including the Belt and Road Initiative, in multilateral documents.

been the subject of significant consideration by the Parties during the course of developing the text, and that its inclusion stems from a commonly held view that this is the most effective way of ensuring Aarhus and PRTR Protocol principles are met – given the Belt and Road Initiative's wide-reaching impact and the fact that a majority of Parties interact with it.

Therefore, in this instance we propose a nuanced approach, which retains the reference to the Belt and Road Initiative but clarifies that it is a policy initiative of one country. The proposed language does not represent a very substantial departure from the current version and we believe that it is more precise and clear, whilst preserving the intent of the original draft.

We apologise for raising this issue at a late stage and hope that this additional clarification will be acceptable to all Parties.

We would therefore ask the Parties to accept our proposed revisions, and that they are reflected in the final agreed text.

United Kingdom statement on Item 6 (a): Draft decision VII/1 on promoting effective access to information:

The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland would first like to thank the Bureau for its work on preparing Draft decision VII/1.

We welcome that the Draft decision recognises that effective public access to environmental information is critical for the implementation of a number of Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Sustainable Development Goal 16 target 10. We recognise the need to utilise modern information and communication electronic tools effectively, which should help to safeguard the effective implementation of the Aarhus Convention's access to information pillar. We are supportive of the Convention's efforts towards the dissemination of environmental information and the use of electronic information tools to provide public access to environmental information.

We note the request in the draft decision to provide examples of good practice of effective access to information and providing electronic information tools, such as through the Parties' respective National Implementation Reports. The United Kingdom has a long history of proactively sharing environmental data. Data held by organisations across the UK Defra Group has been reused across the public sector to support land use planning, town planning, flood risk management and incident response.

Recent developments in moving to an open data model have enhanced this further, by allowing sectors including construction, conveyance, insurance and agriculture to make greater use of environmental data. As a result, this has enabled the delivery of more innovative products and services, reduced the cost and bureaucracy of interfacing with government. This is in line with the emphasis placed by the Task Force on Access to Information on the benefits to be gained from making more environmental information available proactively. Greater accessibility will reduce the need to submit information requests to public authorities under the Environmental Information Regulations and the related Freedom of Information Act to unlock this sort of data

Challenges remain around the costs of making data open, but we plan to address these by improving our knowledge of the economic impact of open data. Through our positive experiences of utilising open data principles and mechanisms, we encourage Parties to proactively share environmental information as per our obligations to the access to information pillar and call for Parties to promote the usage of these systems – as outlined in paragraph 9 of the draft decision.

United Kingdom statement on Genetically modified organisms (GMOs):

We would like to thank the Chair of the third Joint Round Table on Public Awareness, Access to Information and Public Participation regarding Living Modified Organisms (LMOs) and Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) for its reporting on activities related to GMOs since the sixth session of the Meeting of the Parties held in 2017.

The United Kingdom is supportive of the right of the public to participate in environmental decision-making and the right to have access to environmental information. Regarding GMOs, as a matter of course Competent Authorities across the four UK administrations publish applications for the deliberate release of GMOs on their respective websites; invite representations from any member of the public or organisation making comments on potential risks of damage being caused to the environment by a proposed release; and publish advice from the UK's independent statutory Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment – including decisions on applications to release GMOs. The UK also holds information relating to the deliberate release of GMOs on a register – which is open for public inspection.

United Kingdom statement on Belarus compliance:

The United Kingdom is concerned by the findings outlined in Decision VII/8c and elsewhere regarding the alleged non-compliance of Belarus, with regards to Article 3 (8) of the Aarhus Convention concerning the protection of human rights defenders working in environmental matters, referred to as environmental human rights defenders. The UK has raised reports of human rights violations within Belarus previously in international fora, such as our invocation alongside sixteen other OSCE participating states of the Moscow Mechanism, on 17 September 2020. The Moscow Mechanism established a subsequent mission of experts to investigate reports concerning human rights violations within Belarus. We note that the subsequent report that was established from the Moscow Mechanism has not been addressed by Belarus. It is within this context that we raise our concern that the draft findings within Decision VII/8c have had to be reaffirmed by the Compliance Committee. We are further troubled by the statements in the Compliance Committee's report that the situation for persons exercising their rights in conformity with the Convention is in fact rapidly deteriorating.

We call for the findings and recommendations originally outlined in Aarhus communication [ACCC/C/2014/102](#), and in Decision VII/8c, to be disseminated to senior officials and relevant authorities in Belarus as a matter of urgency, in order to raise awareness of their Aarhus obligations concerning Article 3 (8). It is of crucial importance that members of the public are made aware of their rights of public participation in decision-making, and that those rights are not further restricted, as outlined in Article 1 of the Aarhus Convention.

United Kingdom statement on Draft decision VII/8s concerning compliance with its obligations under the Aarhus Convention:

We would like to thank the Bureau for the preparation of draft Decision VII/8s concerning compliance by the United Kingdom with regards to its obligations under the Convention. We would also like to thank the Compliance Committee for its preparatory work ahead of the Seventh session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention, and the Secretariat for its clarity in conveying next steps ahead of the Meeting of the Parties (MoP), and throughout the upcoming intersessional period that will follow the close of this session.

We have considered the findings and recommendations in draft Decision VII/8s, specifically, in relation to Decision VI/8k, and Communications ACCC/C/2013/90, ACCC/C/2015/131 and ACCC/C/2016/142. Our comments are outlined as follows.

Decision VI/8k:

We note the findings of the Compliance Committee on Decision VI/8k. During the verbal hearing on the draft findings in July 2021, we expressed our disappointment with the Compliance Committee's conclusions that in some areas the UK has not demonstrated that the requirements in the Decision have been met. We would like to again reiterate our disappointment at this.

ACCC/C/2013/90:

With respect to ACCC/C/2013/90, the United Kingdom notes the findings and recommendations and will work across the four nations to implement the recommendations as appropriate, including where relevant in line with the UNECE Maastricht Recommendations on Promoting Effective Public Participation in Decision-making in Environmental Matters.

ACCC/C/2015/131:

Regarding ACCC/C/2015/131, we would reiterate the concerns the United Kingdom has raised previously regarding an apparent misunderstanding of the law and procedure of England and Wales, and an upsetting of fundamental, carefully considered and long-standing legal principles.

ACCC/C/2016/142:

With respect to ACCC/C/2016/142, the United Kingdom notes the findings and recommendations.

Concluding remarks:

In conclusion, whilst we would ask the Meeting of the Parties to take note of the UK's disappointment at some of the findings concerning Decision VII/8s (including as raised in our responses to the previous respective draft findings), we nevertheless continue our full support of the Aarhus Convention and the importance of the work of the Bureau, Secretariat and the Compliance Committee with regards to the implementation of the

Convention, and overall upholding of environmental governance standards internationally. As such, the UK will continue to work towards the effective implementation of the Aarhus Convention under its obligations.

United Kingdom statement on Draft decision VII/9 on a rapid response mechanism to deal with cases related to article 3 (8) of the Convention:

We would like to thank the Bureau for its preparation of the draft decision concerning a rapid response mechanism to deal with cases related to article 3(8) of the Convention.

The United Kingdom shares with the Convention its alarm at the serious situations faced by environmental defenders. It is unacceptable that such persons are subject to threats as reported by United Nations member states, as well as intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations and stakeholders.

We support the proposal both for a rapid response mechanism that responds to cases related to Article 3 (8) of the Aarhus Convention, and for the implementation of a Special Rapporteur that works in a complementary function alongside the Compliance Committee. We further support the proposed proactive role of the Special Rapporteur in raising awareness of Parties' obligations under Article 3 (8), as well as through awareness raising international events and sessions outside of the Convention.

United Kingdom statement on the promotion of Convention principles:

We would like to thank the Bureau for the preparation of the draft decision VII/4 on promoting the application of the principles of the Aarhus Convention in international forums.

The United Kingdom is supportive of the Convention's aims of promoting its principles in international forums and welcomes the increased number of requests for good practices and knowledge-sharing from interested international forums. We welcome the call for Parties to continue their engagement on promoting the Convention's principles in international forums and highlight examples of its good practice and implementation.

We also welcome the entry into force of the Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean, also known as the Escazú Agreement. In July 2021, the UK had the opportunity to participate in the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) side event "Empowering people to protect the planet in a COVID-19 context: the contribution of SDG 16 and environmental access rights to sustainable and resilient recovery", alongside other Parties and officials from the Escazú Agreement. The meeting provided a valuable opportunity to discuss areas of good practice with fellow Aarhus parties and members of other international and multilateral conventions. As with our statement at the July meeting, which concerned how the Aarhus Convention supported environmental management within the United Kingdom and our views on the Escazú Agreement, we would like to reiterate our support for similar agreements to Escazú, in order to further the promotion of the Aarhus Convention's principles.