



IT was probably no accident that Theresa May put Michael Gove, one of the chief architects of the Brexit vote, in charge of a Government department that would arguably be the most affected. When he took the helm at Defra last June, some conservationists questioned the Secretary of State's Green credentials and farmers were concerned about his enthusiasm for cheap food, but all were united in welcoming a big hitter to what can be a Cinderella department. A year on, and he seems to have won over many of his critics. The consensus is that Mr Gove has made an excellent start and now needs support from the rest of the Government to deliver the right policies for the countryside.

You win some...

Mr Gove has made an enormous effort to turn the countryside and the environment into a Government priority. He's 'a class act', according to NFU president Minette Batters, who sees him as 'a reformer who doesn't

hang around. He has breathed new life into Defra, he's well respected by the Cabinet and, as a consequence, the environment has risen up the political agenda'.

It's a view that resonates with both Paul McNamee of the Green Alliance and Abigail Bunker of the RSPB, with Mr McNamee noting that 'the environment is now often on the front pages of national newspapers'. Mr Gove, argues Dr Bunker, has 'taken on and rejected the old fiction that we have to choose between the environment and the economy and seems to be up for grasping the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reform farming policy, to ensure that public money is paid in exchange for public environmental goods'. He's also taken 'prompt and significant decisions on salient issues such as banning neonicotinoid pesticides and tackling plastic waste'.

Shane Brennan, speaking for the CLA, also highlights how swiftly Mr Gove got on top of an intricate remit that's proved a banana skin for others: 'He's shown an

immediate mastery of the complex issues in his brief and set a clear direction of travel for post-Brexit environmental and land-use policy.'

The Defra Secretary has certainly heard a lot of opinions. 'He's adopted a policy of taking views in,' points out Andrew Wraith, who heads the food and farming team at Savills. 'He's done a good job of bringing everyone together—[including] groups that were not necessarily on the same page.'



... and lose some

Although Mr Gove pledged to maintain Britain's high welfare and production standards after Brexit, farming champions believe he should have paid more attention to food security and the future of food production. 'He has left many farmers nervous about



A year in the hot seat

Carla Passino assesses Michael Gove's first 12 months at Defra



Good week for

The planet

Plastic has been dubbed Children's Word of the Year by Oxford University Press, showing the influence of Sir David Attenborough and others

Hen harriers

Eight chicks, the first seen on the site since 2015, have hatched on the Bowland Estate, Lancashire

Wine at the seaside

Oxney Organic Estate, outside Rye, East Sussex, is now the UK's largest organic vineyard after planting an extra 15 acres

Bad week for

Bored flyers

Windows could be removed from aircraft to make them more fuel-efficient; 'virtual windows' would beam images onto the inside of the cabin, which is not the same thing

European roads this summer

Some 89% of British drivers don't understand road signs used in Europe, claims a new survey

Feeding cats

A 79-year-old woman was handed a community protection notice for feeding her neighbour's cat. The local police force has admitted its actions were 'heavy handed'

whether he is giving sufficient priority to food,' comments the CLA.

From an environmental perspective, the consultation on a new Green watchdog—intended to shore up environmental protection after Brexit—left conservationists disappointed. 'Far from being world leading, what it proposed will leave the environment with less protection than it currently has,' admonishes Mr McNamee. However, he concedes that this appears to be due to resistance from other Government departments rather than lack of vision on Mr Gove's part.

Dr Bunker also thinks that Mr Gove could do with more Cabinet support: 'It's not yet clear that his colleagues, particularly at the Treasury, have made the same strides in understanding the vital role that our natural environment plays in underpinning national prosperity.'

Where the Defra Secretary himself has perhaps fallen short is in working out the specifics. 'There's still a lack of necessary detail in how the broad policy he has set out will work in practice,' argues the CLA. This

is equally true for environmental policy, according to Mr McNamee, who contends that 'short-term delivery isn't getting enough attention'. In particular, Mr Gove could do more to help reduce waste beyond plastic.

What's next on the Defra agenda?

It's hoped that Mr Gove's next move will be to flesh out his plans. Mr McNamee says: 'He has said that he wants to introduce a new act in the Queen's Speech of 2019 and this needs to include ambitious and measurable goals for Nature's recovery and a healthy environment, strong principles to underpin fair and far-sighted decision-making and independent governance bodies to uphold environmental law, champion citizens' rights and prevent the roll-back of existing environmental protections.'

For farmers, more detail will undoubtedly emerge from the autumn's Agricultural Bill. Expectations are that it will be 'relatively light touch,' according to Mrs Batters. She

would like Mr Gove to grasp this opportunity and lend the industry his full support. 'A grocery code adjudicator with teeth and a wider remit covering the whole supply chain would help enormously, as would ensuring that the current voluntary codes of practice for meat and dairy are made mandatory. He should also look to legislate food safety in the autumn's agriculture bill—allowing cheap food into the UK that's produced to lower standards will throw the industry under the bus.'

The verdict

Mr Gove has a reputation for taking everyone by surprise—apparently, reveals Mrs Batters, he's a great poker player—and this, combined with the twists and turns of the Brexit negotiations, makes it hard to predict what's in store for the countryside.

'If—and it's a big if—Michael Gove can put his plan into action and ensure it has a lasting impact,' says Dr Bunker, 'he could be seen as the first great environment minister of this century.'