

# Natural England Board



## Confirmed minutes of the 93<sup>rd</sup> Natural England Board meeting 4<sup>th</sup> December 2019

<b>Members attending</b>	<b>Guests</b>
Tony Juniper, Chairman	Sonia Phippard, Defra Director General Environment, Rural and Marine
Lord Blencathra, Deputy Chairman	David Hill, Incoming Defra Director General Environment, Rural and Marine (Items 1-)
Professor Michael Winter	Amanda Craig, Programme Director, Connecting People with Nature (Item 2)
Teresa Dent	Jim Burt, Principal Specialist, Connecting People with Nature (Item 2)
Catherine Dugmore	Rob Cooke, Programme Director, Greener Farming and Fisheries (Item 6)
Dr Simon Lyster	Angela Newman, Defra HR business partner (item 7)
Henry Robinson	Abdul Razaq, Director Finance
Professor Sue Hartley	Ken Roy, Director Corporate Governance
<b>Senior Leadership Team</b>	Graham Tibbetts, Principal Adviser External Affairs
Marian Spain, Interim Chief Executive (and ex-officio Board Member)	Mick Oliver, Principal Adviser to Chairman
Richard Cornish, Chief Officer Operations	<b>Secretariat</b>
Dr Tim Hill, Chief Scientist	Matthew Wood, Legal and Governance Team
Navroza Ladha, Chief Officer Legal and Governance	
Alan Law, Deputy Chief Executive	
Gleny Lovell, Chief Officer Planning & Performance	

## **Welcome from the Chairman and Declarations of Interest**

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Apologies were received from Andy Clements.

The Chairman extended the Board's thanks to Sonia Phippard who is retiring from Defra and attending her last Natural England ("NE") Board meeting. The Board welcomed David Hill who will take on Sonia's role and portfolio over the coming months.

In response to the Chairman's invitation for any perceived or potential declarations of interest in respect of the Board agenda:

- Teresa Dent declared:
  - The Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust ("GWCT") are contributing to Defra's General Licence consultation;
  - The GWCT are in conversation with Tim Hill with regards consents for a burning and cutting experiment in deep peat.

### **1. Confirmation of November Minutes and Matters Arising (NEB M92 01)**

1.1 The Board confirmed the unconfirmed November minutes with minor amendments.

### **2. Chief Executive's Report (NEB 93 01)**

2.1 The Chief Executive began by informing the Board that NE has secured £1.5 million in LIFE funding for Marine conservation.

2.2 The Chief Executive reminded the Board that NE has a 100% success rate in securing competitive bids. The Board congratulated the team and encouraged NE to continue to progress these opportunities.

2.3 The Board noted the potential, following the UK's withdrawal from the EU, for NE to be part of specific EU funding bids where we are working through EU partners.

2.4 The Deputy Chair provided feedback from the last Joint National Nature Committee ("JNCC") meeting. The strong steer from the meeting was that the four national conservation bodies should meet in January to agree a common approach to the UN Climate Change Conference of Parties ("COP 26").

2.5 Sonia Phippard provided the Board with an update on COP 26. Tim Hill represents NE on the Defra-led Steering Board and we are developing contacts with the planning team.

2.6 The Board agreed that it was important to highlight the links and inter-dependencies with the Biodiversity COP that will take place in China. The Board agreed to include a session on COP planning as part of February's Board meeting.

2.7 The Chief Executive updated the Board on District Level Licensing and confirmed that MHCLG have extended funding and four members of staff are in place.

### **3. Connecting People with Nature Programme update (NEB 93 02)**

3.1 Alan Law introduced the paper to the Board. Amanda Craig and Jim Burt joined to support the discussion.

3.2 The Board were asked to comment on the scope and ambition of the programme, to provide steers on areas of focus and to endorse the specific proposal with regard to social inclusion.

3.3 The Board offered the following initial observations to the programme team:

- There is a clear ask from stakeholders for NE to play a central role in gathering evidence and convening partners in this area of work;
- There is more to do to closely link this agenda to other areas of NE's work – for example in considering how protected sites could be made more welcoming for diverse groups and in exploring options for re-integrating payments for access into future agri-environment schemes;
- There is still a need for a robust and sustainable funding model for this area of activity;
- The real division in the levels of engagement with nature is not necessarily between urban and rural populations but is more closely related to levels of poverty / disadvantage.

3.4 In response Jim Burt confirmed that our relationships with the NHS and Public Health England are well established and evidence that the approach works is strong and will form a serious and large component of health prevention.

3.5 The Board provided the following further steers for the development of the programme:

- We should be ambitious in seeking to make the benefits of the natural environment available to the full diversity of England's population.
- We can only succeed by bringing people together – NE cannot operate alone in this work.
- Our evidence will be central to challenging mainstream thinking on this issue e.g. through communicating the benefits of the English Coastal Path.

### **4. Long term Organisational Aims (NEB 93 03)**

4.1 Alan Law presented the paper and explained the purpose of the discussion; to set a coherent medium term (five year) direction for the organisation that links to our vision and mission.

4.2 The Board was asked to agree the six proposed organisational aims for Natural England and the supporting programme level aims.

4.3 The Board discussed the overall package and:

- Approved the overall approach adopted;
- Restated the importance that in progressing individual programmes aims, the organisations needs to remain conscious of the dangers of falling back into silo working;
- Agreed that an 'elevator pitch' should be drafted which clearly explains what NE's role, unique regulatory and advisory functions and links to the vision and mission for Nature Recovery.

**Action: Draft and circulate ‘elevator pitch’ for comment and agreement by the Board and which can be shared in due course with Ministers (Legal & Governance)**

**5. 2020/21 Business Planning (NEB 93 04)**

5.1 Alan Law introduced the paper. The purpose of this discussion was to update the Board on the planning work done to identify areas of work across Natural England to stop / slow / start / grow within the 20/21 Business Plan.

5.2 The approach had sought to reflect the Board’s earlier steers:

- to strengthen NE’s statutory services;
- (where possible and where funded) to build capacity to deliver the opportunities set out in the 25 Year Environment Plan;
- to be guided by the evolving set of five-year programme objectives.

5.3 The Board were asked to note the context of continued uncertainty about NE’s funding for 20/21 - the current high level financial summary for 2020/21 assumes a flat cash settlement or similar – and the historical context which had seen a sequence of reductions in core funding without any parallel investment (e.g. for invest to save projects).

5.4 The Board discussed the challenges inherent in seeking to deliver the statutory remit of the organisation when insufficient funding was available and explored how to make the most effective decisions in the short term whilst being open about the level of risk that would be linked to the resultant plan – risks related to lost outcomes, to shortfalls against statutory commitments and to potential external challenge.

5.5 The Board also noted the deep tension that had emerged between the need for Natural England to deliver on its statutory functions whilst at the same time also assisting with the delivery of new Government policies, such as commitments made in the 25 Year Environment Plan and the new net zero climate change policy. The tension was seen to raise fundamental strategic questions. The Board agreed that it would be necessary to make a clear and robust case for future funding needs during the expected Spending Review.

5.6 The Board agreed:

- The need for continued detailed conversations with Defra on the details of the 20/21 budget;
- The need for the consequent 20/21 to be deliverable – and hence for the organisation to be transparent about what was being delivered and about areas of shortfall;
- The need for a fuller business case to capture the scale of investment required to address the long-term shortfall in funding – to inform the expected Spending Review process.

**6. Natural England’s future role in farm advice (NEB 93 05)**

6.1 Rob Cooke, Programme Director, Greener farming and fisheries, introduced the discussion to update the Board on the current assumptions for Defra’s Environmental Land Management system (ELMs) and to propose options for NE’s future role in ELMs.

- 6.2 Rob confirmed that in developing the options, Natural England had been working closely with the Environment Agency and Forestry Commission in identifying the best roles for each organisation supporting the new scheme's development.
- 6.3 The recommended option was for Natural England to provide integrated advice across all ELMs schemes in the National Pilot period to support the successful scheme setup and then, at the point of full roll out, to focus ongoing advisory support on high value ELMs schemes (2 and 3) in parallel to supporting standard setting and the certification of private / third sector ELMs advisers.
- 6.4 The Board discussed the full set of options presented and endorsed this proposal.

**Action: Submit Natural England's formal offer to Defra to provide integrated advice across all ELM schemes in the pilot period, and on schemes 1 and 2 after the full roll out (Alan Law/Rob Cooke)**

## **7. Natural England's People Strategy update (NEB 93 06)**

- 7.1 Gleny Lovell introduced the discussion and was joined by Angela Newman, Defra HR Business Partner.
- 7.2 Gleny and Angela provided the Board with an update on the work to implement the NE People Strategy (launched in July 2019).
- 7.3 Angela provided the Board with specific updates on:
- the need to focus on Staff Wellbeing, noting areas of concern from recent Pulse Survey results;
  - the planned refresh of HR policies;
  - the ongoing work with staff and Trades Unions on pay – where we are analysing the detailed comparisons within Defra group, noting that there are some differences in NE terms and conditions;
  - the current Treasury Pay Guidance that NE needs to work within – including the need for any case for pay flexibility (outside normal annual constraints) to be self-funded;
  - the development of the wider "Employee Deal", including the work underway to ensure that Natural England staff take advantage of the wider suite of benefits available, including financial advisory and wellbeing support.
- 7.4 On Staff Wellbeing, Angela summarised recent Pulse Survey results which highlighted more positive responses to questions about wellbeing and work-life balance but reductions in the overall reported levels of mental health. Angela provided an overview of the actions that are being taken to address the issues around mental health.
- 7.5 The Board discussed the overall position of wellbeing, noting concerns around staff isolation caused as a result of increased levels of flexible and home working, in part as a consequence of historical office closures and encouraged the Executive to ensure that there is sufficient funding and support for staff to be able to meet and interact with their colleagues through the year.

## **8. Update on Board Governance Improvement Plan (NEB 93 07)**

8.1 Ken Roy introduced the session, updating the Board on progress to date and set out some further proposals for review:

8.2 The Board:

- Endorsed the proposition for the establishment of one new Board Task and Finish Group on External Funding;
- Approved the updated set of Board Standing Orders;
- Agreed the high level proposition for investment in Board Development in 2020;
- Noted amendments to individual roles, specifically that the Deputy Chair would cover the Thames region and Sue Hartley would cover Northumbria;
- Henry Robinson agreed to become a member of the Audit & Risk Committee

**Action: Amend formal records of Board sub-groups and roles (Legal and Governance)**

## **9. NESAC Update (NEB 93 08)**

9.1 Tim Hill provided an update to the Board on the most recent meeting. The Board requested a formal sub-section for updates from JNCC at future meetings and for sight of Remuneration Committee minutes.

**Action: Co-ordinate a short briefing following future JNCC meetings (Tim Hill)**

## **10. Forward Look (NEB 93 10)**

10.1 The Board noted the current schedule for formal Board meetings in 2020.

## **11. Reflections from Sonia Phippard**

11.1 Sonia Phippard gave the Board a verbal update on current relationship with Defra.

## **12. AOB**

12.1 The Board noted that Teresa Dent would not be attending the Board meeting in February