

Natural England Board



Confirmed minutes of the 95th Natural England Board meeting 6th May 2020

Members Attending	Guests
Dr Tony Juniper, Chairman	David Hill, Defra Director General Environment, Rural and Marine
Lord Blencathra, Deputy Chairman	Abdul Razaq, Finance Director
Dr Andy Clements	Ken Roy, Director Corporate Governance
Teresa Dent	Graham Tibbetts, Principal Adviser
Catherine Dugmore	Mick Oliver, Chief of Staff
Dr Simon Lyster	Sarah Dawkins, Head of Spending Review Programme
Henry Robinson	Matthew Heard, Area Manager – Wessex
Professor Michael Winter	Sally Moore, Principal Adviser, Governance
Professor Sue Hartley	Matthew Wood, Governance (Secretariat)
Executive Team	
Marian Spain, Chief Executive (and ex-officio Board Member)	
Alan Law, Deputy Chief Executive	
Richard Cornish, Chief Operating Officer	
Dr Tim Hill, Chief Scientist	
Navroza Ladha, Chief Officer Legal and Governance	
Gleny Lovell, Chief Officer Planning and Performance	

Welcome from the Chairman and Declarations of Interest

The Chairman welcomed the Board.

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

Henry Robinson declared:

- His farming operation has a Higher Level Stewardship Scheme
- He is Chair of the Hawk and Owl Trust who are a member of the Hen Harrier Recovery project
- He has District Level Licence Newt Ponds installed on his farm
- He is a member of the Deer initiative
- He a Director of a company that is a customer of Natural England's specialist licensing service.

Teresa Dent declared:

- The Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust ("GWCT") involvement in the new environmental land management scheme
- GWCT involvement in discussions on General and Individual licences
- GWCT involvement (as a contractor) in Natural England's scientific review of the environmental impacts of gamebird release

Andy Clements declared:

- The British Trust for Ornithology ("BTO") has received a request from Tom Langton in relation to bTB evidence.

Professor Michael Winter declared:

- The University of Exeter's involvement in Natural England's scientific review of the environmental impacts of gamebird release

1. Confirmation of February Minutes and Matters Arising (NEB M9) and March Strategy Session

1.1. The Board confirmed the unconfirmed February minutes with the following minor amendment:

- Simon Lyster clarified the correct title of the Essex County Council climate commission

1.2. Confirmed the informal notes of the March Strategy session.

Action: Amend previous minutes (**Governance team**)

2. Update from Board sub-committees

2.1. **Audit & Risk Committee (ARAC) - NEB 95 01**

- 2.2. Catherine Dugmore, as ARAC Chair, provided updates on ARACs most recent meeting. Catherine highlighted the workshop that had taken place with Richard Cornish on Business Continuity and that following advice from the Defra Audit Committee on 30th April, the annual accounts will be laid after recess in September.
- 2.3. Catherine commented that the financial implications for 21/22 year will need to be explored and a further item will be brought to the Board meeting in June on the impact on income for the year following discussion at ARAC.
- 2.4. Catherine also confirmed a paper will be brought to the next ARAC meeting on any changes to organisational governance or delegations that have taken place during the Covid crisis.
- 2.5. Marian Spain confirmed that there have been no changes to the scheme of delegation to date during this period and noted the support received from Internal Audit in reviewing Natural England's response to date.

Action: Ensure that the initial Internal Audit report on the Natural England Covid-19 response is circulated to the full Board (**Ken Roy**)

Action: Report to the Board in June (after ARAC) on 20/21 financial implications of Covid-19, including any increased risk of fraud (**Abdul Razaq**)

2.6. **Natural England Science Advisory Committee (NESAC) - NEB 95 02**

- 2.7. Dr Andy Clements provided the Board with an update on NESAC's most recent meeting which focused on Natural England's draft Science and Evidence Strategy, soil and land capability mapping and brood management for Hen Harriers. The focus of the discussion was the social science element of the Hen Harrier Recovery Plan (HHRP). Andy informed the Board that Professor Ken Norris joined the meeting in his role as Chair of the Plan's Scientific Advisory Group. The output of discussion informed how Rose O'Neill (Natural England's Principal Specialist for Social Science) and colleagues will design the later stages of the trail.
- 2.8. Andy also updated the Board on a shorter virtual meeting with Dr Ruth Waters, who had been seconded to the Treasury, on the Dasgupta Review.
- 2.9. Teresa Dent asked if it was possible to view the Theory of Change paper referenced in the minutes. Andy confirmed he would share a copy document.
- 2.10. Alan Law confirmed that there is an action to update Ministers and stakeholders on the overall HHRP plan following a report to the Upland Stakeholder Forum. Alan updated the Board that a decision on the licence would take place soon and Natural England will be updating the Minister on this and wider issues.
- 2.11. The Chair mentioned attending a recent Cambridge Zero forum on soil health and metrics which was also attended by Matthew Shepherd. Sue Hartley suggested that Sheffield University should link in with the ELMs team to test soil indicators and include Matthew in the discussion.
- 2.12. The Board requested a deep dive session on soils.

Action: Schedule / deliver a Board webinar / vc on soils (**Tim Hill**)

Action: Share Theory of Change document with Teresa Dent. **(Tim Hill)**

3. CEO report (NEB 95 03)

3.1. Marian Spain introduced the item which focused on topical issues, specifically;

- The continued focus on licensing work and the need for a future review of strategy and resources
- The future support anticipated from Natural England to Defra re delivery of elements of the Peat Strategy
- The plan for further work to provide advice to Ministers re beaver re-introduction

Action: Provide a formal update to the Board re the Peat Strategy role and the financial implications **(Alan Law)**

3.2. Richard Cornish provided an update on the current Covid-19 situation and pulled out the following key messages:

- the Business Disruption Forum (“BDF”) continues to work well and has responded at pace;
- We have had very good support from Defra Corporate Services.
- In terms of staff absence the planning assumption was for 25% staff absence. The number has never risen that high and are currently at 10%.
- In terms of prioritisation the Executive identified 35% of the business to free up capacity and protect core services. 206 members of staff have been redeployed internally and we have over 40 members of staff who have responded to the request for volunteers to support wider Covid-19 response work in Defra and in other Government Departments

3.3. The Board commended the work the Executive had done to handle the situation. They fed back that Area teams had appreciated the rhythm of communications and the videos from the CEO.

3.4. The Board were asked to note the performance report and note the work that had been done to end the year with a 100% financial outturn.

4. Corporate Risk Register Update (NEB 95 04)

4.1. Ken Roy introduced the discussion the item to present the latest iteration of the Corporate Risk Register to the Board for comment and steers. The register included the core 7 risks that the Board agreed at the start of 19/20 together with the additional Corporate Services related risk discussed at February Board.

4.2. The Board noted the need for the risk register to continue to reflect the range of additional uncertainties related to the Covid-19 crisis, including:

- The impacts on recruitment;
- The impacts on income

4.3. The Board asked for a further session on 20/21 risk at the June meeting where the implications of Covid-19 could be further assessed and the full register reset. The Board asked for further consideration to be given to:

- The scale of the longer term risks related to the current group-based Corporate Services model
- The organisation's longer term positioning and relationships – both with government and with external stakeholders
- The potential for increased risks of fraud in some areas
- The huge implications of the public and policy debate re a “green recovery”

Action: Provide a full update to the Corporate Risk Register for the Board review in June (Gleny Lovell)

5. 20/21 Action Plan (NEB 95 05)

5.1. Gleny Lovell introduced the item. The Board were presented with a summary of Natural England's delivery plans for 2020/21 as reflected in the proposed 2020/21 Natural England Action.

5.2. The Board were asked to:

- note the 2020/21 Action Plan;
- indicate their support to its communication with staff and selected external stakeholders;
- note and accept the risks to underfunded work outlined in the paper.

5.3. The Board discussed the draft plan and:

- Commended the work that had taken place to shift the KPI framework to outcomes not outputs;
- Advised that more work needs to be done to highlight the priorities within the overall plan and the links to wider Government priorities – e.g. the 25 Year Environment Plan and the Net Zero framework.
- Offered some specific suggestions re: wording, for example related to those areas of statutory work where, in 20/21, Natural England would have to do less.

Action: Share a revised version of the 20/21 Action Plan with the Board for final comments (Gleny Lovell)

6. Natural England 5-year plan (NEB 95 06)

6.1. Alan Law introduced the item. The Board were asked to provide steers to guide the way the 5-year plans developed by the Natural England programmes were taken forward in engagement with external stakeholders

6.2. The Board:

- noted the conclusion of the current phase of the 5-year planning work;
- offered steers on the best mechanisms for engagement, noting the short-term challenges

6.3. The Board asked the Executive to progress work on publishing its 5 year strategy aimed at stakeholders, partners and customers to show what we do and why.

6.4. Separately the Board recognised the need for further work to clearly set out the longer term public policy goals that Natural England can and should support (e.g. re health, green recovery, net zero etc) and on what more it needs to make that wider contribution.

Action: Develop an NE publication setting out the 5-year strategy – aimed at stakeholders, partners, customers (Alan Law)

Action: Develop a separate document to be reviewed with (but not owned by) Defra setting out Natural England's value in the delivery of key current public policy goals (health, green recovery, net zero etc), setting out our stall and informing key elements of the Defra group SR narrative (Alan Law)

7. NNR Strategy (NEB 95 07)

7.1. Richard Cornish introduced the item and then Matt Heard covered some of the key points of relevance to Natural England's future strategy in this area of work, including:

- The scale of the opportunity for the NNR Estate which welcomed 3 million visitors last year with little promotion or marketing;
- The fact that the estate is in good, but not exemplary ecological condition;
- The 1700 plus highly skilled and committed volunteers work on the Estate;
- The good examples of successful delivery and local engagement e.g. Purbeck Heath and the new urban NNR in South London;
- The financial challenges - the NNR Estate has seen a 20% reduction in staff and 60% (need to check) in capital budgets in the last 10 years;

7.2. The Board endorsed the paper and made the following comments:

- The need to develop momentum, in part by making big interventions and boosting partnership work
- The need to make the best use of approved body status and to further develop commercial operations.
- The need to recognise the role of the NNR Estate in connecting people to nature.
- The need for future strategy to align with the Glover review and landscape designations
- The need for more ambition on ecological status
- The opportunity to do more where we have clusters of sites and local land in ELMS – to connect them up and deliver Lawton's recommendations;

Chair concluded that the NNR Estate is central for us to achieve our organisational mission. They are an asset for the entire country.

Action: Ensure that the different choices re NNR funding are wrapped into the wider work on future Funding Strategy (Gleny Lovell).

8. Forward Look (NEB 95 08)

- 8.1. The Board reviewed the programme of forward business which comprised a mix of virtual meetings and webinars.
- 8.2. The Board confirmed that the webinars are very useful and work well.
- 8.3. The Board requested additional new (virtual) meetings with new Board Members once their induction is completed.
- 8.4. The Board noted the continuing technical work to maintain secure meeting facilities moving forward.