

# Natural England Board



## Confirmed minutes of the 96<sup>th</sup> Natural England Board meeting 17 June 2020

<b>Board Members Attending</b>	
Dr Tony Juniper, Chairman	Navroza Ladha, Chief Officer Legal and Governance
Lord Blencathra, Deputy Chairman	Gleny Lovell, Chief Officer Planning and Performance
Dr Andy Clements	<b>Guests</b>
Teresa Dent	Andrea Ledward, Defra Director, Natural Environment
Catherine Dugmore	Abdul Razaq, Finance Director
Dr Simon Lyster	Ken Roy, Director Corporate Governance
Henry Robinson	Ian Fugler, Director – Business Planning and Performance
Professor Michael Winter	Rob Cooke, Programme Director – Greener Farming and Fisheries
Professor Sue Hartley	Brad Tooze, Head of Uplands and Licensing Reform
Peter Unwin	Dr Pete Brotherton, Director Specialist Services
Kerry ten Kate	Dave Stone, Principal Specialist, Specialist Services
Kim Shillinglaw	Ali Odell, Senior Adviser, Risk Management
Rosamund Blomfield-Smith	Graham Tibbetts, Principal Advisor, Legal & Governance
<b>Executive Team</b>	Mick Oliver, Chief of Staff, Legal & Governance
Marian Spain, Chief Executive (and ex-officio Board Member)	Matthew Wood, Governance (Secretariat)
Alan Law, Deputy Chief Executive	
Richard Cornish, Chief Operating Officer	
Dr Tim Hill, Chief Scientist	

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

The Chairman welcomed the Board to the virtual meeting.

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 is applying for 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 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 (pilots)
- 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
- GWCT has just published a report on Peatlands

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

Rosamund Blomfield- Smith declared:

- Participation in a Stewardship scheme

## **1. Confirmation of May Minutes and Matters Arising**

1.1. The Board approved the unconfirmed May minutes with minor amendments:

**Action:** Amend and publish May's minutes (**Governance team**)

## **2. Update from Board sub-committees**

### **2.1. Natural England Science Advisory Committee (NESAC)**

2.2. Dr Andy Clements provided a verbal update on the 3<sup>rd</sup> June NESAC meeting which focussed on the following subjects: peat and the cultural aspects of evidence based decision making.

### 2.3. **Audit & Risk Committee (ARAC)**

2.4. The Chair agreed to combine this item with the Annual Report and Accounts (ARA) item.

2.5. Catherine Dugmore updated the Board on items covered by the 10 June ARAC meeting. These included the end of year financial process (and the Annual Report and Accounts), the Corporate Services review by Internal Audit and the ARAC review of risk and governance related to Covid-19.

2.6. On the Annual Report and Accounts, Catherine noted

- The expected timetable – which envisages that the accounts will be cleared after the July Board meeting for finalisation by early September;
- The consequent asks on the Board – for initial comments (re accuracy and completeness) on the current draft report and thereafter (in July) for delegated authority from the Board for the Chief Executive (with advice from ARAC) to sign off and lay the accounts with the rest of the Defra group; and
- That the provisional Internal Audit opinion on the end of year financial position was “moderate assurance”.

2.7. Abdul confirmed he will circulate the list of contingent liabilities provisions following the meeting and asked the Board to scrutinise the list to ensure the list is comprehensive.

**Action:** Circulate list of contingent liabilities to Board Members – to check for omissions (**Abdul Razaq**)

### 2.8. **Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC)**

2.9. Professor Michael Winter provided an update from the 11 June meeting which focused on nature-based solutions in post Covid-19 world, wildlife trade and zoonotic disease, strategic international advice.

2.10. Michael highlighted that members of JNCC had expressed an interest in Net Gain and the Board requested a briefing webinar on NE’s work in this area.

**Action:** Arrange and schedule a webinar on Net Gain (**Governance team**)

## 3. **CEO report (NEB 96 01)**

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

- Environmental Land Management schemes (ELMS);
- Licensing

3.2. Marian briefed the Board on the emerging policy view re the Environmental Land Management Scheme.

3.3. The Board noted:

- the criticality of ELMs and any parallel schemes to the deliverability of the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan targets and to the Nature Recovery Network;
- the opportunity to provide evidence to Defra to help ensure that any wider 'broad and shallow' scheme delivers both environmental outcomes and value for money;

**Action:** Draft letter for Chair to send to the Secretary of State based on Board steers and following discussions with Defra policy teams. **(Alan Law)**

**Action:** Share ELMS and NRN briefings with Board Members **(Alan Law)**

- 3.4. On licensing Marian updated the Board on Defra's intentions re current General Licences, noting that Natural England is working closely with Defra on this issue, and will be providing independent advice to the department.
- 3.5. On btB Tim Hill updated the Board on the consultation document that Defra has recently published on policy following the publication of the Godfray Review.

#### **4. Covid-19 update (NEB 96 02)**

- 4.1. Richard Cornish provided the Board with an update on the impact (to date) on Natural England of the current Covid-19 crisis and described the organisation's response and the outlook ahead.
- 4.2. In his update, Richard covered:
- The latest position in terms of Covid-19 related reductions to Natural England's workforce capacity;
  - The work to date on the emerging impacts of that capacity reduction on the delivery of the 20/21 Action Plan (a more detailed update will be included as part of the next Quarterly report in July);
  - The continuing crisis management arrangements (with the Business Disruption Forum meetings now moving from five to three meetings per week);
  - The evolving work to enable staff to restart some farms visits and NNR work safely;
  - The ongoing support from, and engagement with, the Natural England Trade Unions;
- 4.3. Abdul Razaq updated the Board on the work that was underway to consider the best and worst case financial scenarios for the organisation in 20/21.
- 4.4. Alan Law provided the Board with an update on the emerging thinking on green recovery across government more widely and the interfaces with government's environmental commitments.
- 4.5. In discussion the Board:
- Asked the Executive to continue to review the potential implications of Lockdown and Restart on staff, taking particular care to understand implications in terms of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion;
  - Asked that the Executive continued to assess potential short to medium term impacts on productivity;

- Noted the importance of providing government with evidence and advice to help develop the green recovery focused policy thinking, and of ensuring that this input captures the scale of the opportunity to link post Covid-19 recovery to wider ambitions re Net Zero and recovering nature.

**Action:** Continue to sight Catherine Dugmore (as chair of ARAC) on the evolving picture in terms of financial scenarios **(Abdul Razaq)**

## **5. Risk Strategy and Corporate Risk Register (NEB 96 04)**

- 5.1. Gleny Lovell introduced the paper and Ian Fugler joined to support the discussion.
- 5.2. The Board were presented with the Risk Management Strategy for Natural England and with a further update on the Corporate Risk Register;
- 5.3. The Board:
  - provided specific feedback on individual risks;
  - committed to a further review of Corporate Risks at the planned strategy session;
  - noted the importance of building an organisational culture where staff were encouraged to be open about areas of risk and to be supported to taking risk-based decisions (avoiding a default of risk aversion); and
  - approved the risk management strategy.
- 5.4. The Board provided detailed steers on the Corporate Risks and agreed to return to this at the workshop in September.

**Action:** Schedule workshop on corporate risks in September **(Gleny Lovell)**

## **6. Peatland Restoration Grant Scheme (NEB 96 05)**

- 6.1. Alan Law introduced the item. The Board were asked to provide formal approval for Natural England to operate and administer a new Peat Capital Grant Scheme on behalf of Defra subject to approval from Treasury.
- 6.2. This item had been preceded by a separate briefing call where Board Members reviewed the proposal, which had been developed in close collaboration with Defra colleagues, and which should make a significant contribution to the delivery of the government's forthcoming Peat Strategy and of targets set in the 25 Year Environment Plan.
- 6.3. The Board noted that further detail about Natural England's role, responsibilities and accountabilities would be developed in accordance with our internal governance processes before being finalised with Defra via a Memorandum of Agreement (MoA).
- 6.4. The Board provided formal approval to proceed.

**7. Natural England Science, Evidence and Evaluation Evidence Strategy (NEB 96 06)**

7.1. Tim Hill introduced Natural England's Science, Evidence and Evaluation Strategy supported by Pete Brotherton and Dave Stone.

7.2. The Board welcomed the draft strategy, offering some final steers to enable completion and publication. These included:

- The need for increased focus on the opportunities that new technology will provide;
- The importance of early investment in implementation, including investment in staff skills;
- The importance of understanding how work in this area could support the organisation's wider ambitions with regard to equality, diversity and inclusion;

**Action:** Schedule a further webinar/briefing on mapping and data (**Governance team/Tim Hill**)

**8. Forward Look (NEB 96 08)**

8.1. The Board reviewed and endorsed the programme of forward business noting the uncertainties about meeting logistics over coming months.