

Board meeting



Minutes of the **Natural England** Board meeting held on 18 January 2023

Attending

Dr Tony Juniper	Chair
Lord Blencathra	Deputy Chair
Rosamund Blomfield-Smith	
Catherine Dugmore	
Dr Clare Fitzsimmons	
Kerry ten Kate	
Henry Robinson	
Kim Shillinglaw	
Peter Unwin	
Professor Michael Winter	

Executive Team

Marian Spain	Chief Executive (and ex-officio Board Member)
Dr Tim Hill	Chief Scientist
Navroza Ladha	Chief Officer, Legal, Governance and External Affairs
Oliver Harmar	Chief Officer, Operations
Rob Cooke	Deputising for Chief Officer, Strategy
James Diamond	Deputising for Chief Officer, Business Management

Guests

David Hill	Defra, Director General, Environment Rural and Marine
Ilana Conn	Defra Group – Director, Communications
Sean Cornall	Director, Corporate Governance
Abdul Razaq	Defra Group – Director, Finance
Caroline Cotterell	Director, Resilient Landscape and Seas
Brad Tooze	Director, Greener Farming and Fisheries
John Holmes	Director, Strategy and Government Advice
Dave Slater	Director, Operations
Kirsten Newble	Boardroom Apprentice Programme
Mick Oliver	Chief of Staff, Legal and Governance
Graham Tibbetts	Principal Adviser, Legal and Governance
Dawn Metcalfe	Principal Adviser, Legal and Governance (Minutes)
Luan Doherty	Senior Adviser, National Operations (Minutes)

Apologies

Andy Clements	Board Member
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Item 1 Welcome from the Chair and declarations of interest

- 1.1 The Chair welcomed the Board, Executive and guests to the 113th Board meeting.
- 1.2 Kirsten Newble was welcomed as Natural England's first boardroom apprentice. Navroza Ladha explained that Kirsten may be included in discussions and encouraged to contribute to meetings, but she does not hold any decision-making power with regard to Board business.
- 1.3 The following declarations of interest were made:
- Tony Juniper has accepted an invitation to join the board of Flora and Fauna International. Tony Juniper is writing a new book looking at social inequality and environmental factors.
 - Kerry ten Kate flagged membership of the RSPB Council and Finance Earth
 - Henry Robinson flagged his membership of the Hen Harrier Brood Management Committee; and that he is a Trustee for Hawk & Owl Trust and licensee for a pair of beavers released into an enclosed area in Norfolk.

Action: Governance Team to record on register

Item 2 Review of November 2022 minutes and matters arising

- 2.1 The Board approved the minutes and noted that they were shorter than previously but captured the key items of discussion. No amendments were requested.
- 2.2 There were no points raised on matters arising.

Item 3 Board sub-group updates

- 3.1. Natural England Science Advisory Committee (NESAC)
- 3.2. Claire Fitzsimmons summarised the recent [NESAC](#) activity and noted the joint meeting between NESAC and the Social Science Expert Panel (SSEP) which had focussed on the [Hen Harrier brood management trial](#) and the Monitoring and Evaluation of [Biodiversity Net Gain](#) (BNG).
- 3.3. The Board stressed the importance of the BNG recommendations being fed back to Defra; and the need to re-convene the BNG Task & Finish Group once the Defra consultation results were known to determine whether delivery expectations on Natural England would be achievable.

Action: Alan Law

3.4. Audit, Risk and Assurance Committee (ARAC)

3.5. Catherine Dugmore provided a verbal update on the current risks. This included: the potential for disruption due to strike action; risks around efficiency savings; concerns around future budget settlements. She recommended that the Board have a substantive session on risk to set its risk appetite.

3.6. The Annual Report and Accounts (ARA) had been signed off and laid before Parliament; and planning was underway for 2022/23 ARA. It was noted that a challenge securing appropriate time with the external auditors would be addressed by Catherine Dugmore.

3.7. It was noted that work was in hand to develop a more sophisticated approach to risk and assurance and that further discussions with Board would be scheduled.

Action: Sean Cornall

3.8. Remuneration Committee (REMCOM)

3.9. Peter Unwin recapped the discussions and outputs from the REMCOM meeting on 7 December. There three topics were:

- Pay Reform and Pay Flex: Noted the potential challenges which would be linked to any changes in conditions. Options were also under consideration for additional one-off payments, with discussions/checks underway to determine what was possible within the rules.
- Staff Framework: Considered the proposed introduction of new Grade 6-equivalent level posts within Natural England; and the potential changes around NNR staff roles and grades.
- People Strategy: Recognised the need for a broader change programme rather than just People Strategy.

3.10. Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC)

3.11. It was recorded that Michael Winter had stepped down from his role on the JNCC and that Board Member representatives were now Claire Fitzsimmons and Lord Blencathra.

3.12. There had been no meeting since the Board last met. However, it was noted that the Biodiversity Community of Practice event in Montreal in December had been very successful, and this should be followed up by continuing to build synergies across the four countries.

3.13. David Hill explained that Defra was working on a post-Montreal implementation plan to strengthen national reporting requirements. He formally thanked Tony

Juniper for the significant contribution which he had made to the Conference of the Parties (COP15)

3.14. Natural England Landscape Advisory Panel (NELAP)

3.15. There had been no meeting since the last Board but a briefing around access, especially in relation to the urban environment had been received.

Item 4 Chief Executive's report

4.1. Marian Spain presented her report to the Board and gave detailed updates on the following topics:

4.2. Business Disruption Forum: noted that PCS union strikes which were scheduled for 1 February combined with school closures may affect around 600 staff (approx. 25%). Mitigation plans and communications were being drawn up.

4.3. Health and Safety (H&S):

- There had been no major incidents since the last report. Stress 'near hits' continued to be high. Business planning and prioritisation were key to bringing numbers down.
- Internal audit (limited assurance) observations on visible leadership driving cultural change had resulted in IOSH training being rolled out to all NExCo, Directors and Area Managers.
- National Nature Reserves H&S focus groups have been created with core message that H&S comes first.

4.4. Board members agreed to ensure that H&S becomes a standing item for discussion at all site visits they undertake.

Action: All Board Members

4.5. It was decided that H&S should be a standing item for all Board meetings and that in future a verbal update will be included alongside the subgroup reports.

4.6. Licensing: It was noted that there may be opportunities to streamline some procedures, which may lead to staff redeployment. David Hill would discuss with his colleagues.

4.7. Climate Emergency Strategy: NExCo had recently reviewed the Natural England Climate Emergency Strategy and noted that this was in step with the recommendations in Chris Skidmore's net zero review. David Hill confirmed that there would be a government response to the Skidmore review and there would be an opportunity to feed in thoughts then.

4.8. Tony Juniper referenced the need to do more on the communications narrative around how net zero and biodiversity recovery drive economic growth; along with the green jobs that are contributing towards meeting Montreal targets. It

was noted that spring refresh of the green finance strategy may be a good communications vehicle.

- 4.9. Nutrient Neutrality: David Hill confirmed that [Nutrient Neutrality](#)
- 4.10. was on the Prime Minister's priority list. Cross-department work was progressing well and demonstrated the joint commitment to unlocking housing while protecting sensitive sites.
- 4.11. Species re-introduction: Tony Juniper highlighted the importance of evidence of the beaver as an agent of ecological recovery and urged that this should be considered in the Secretary of State's decision on the consultation. David Hill confirmed he would ensure the Board's view was reflected to the SoS.
- 4.12. There was discussion around the importance of using evidence to show where species re-introduction had helped achieve Natural England's core goals and boosted the local economy. Graham Tibbetts would work with Ilana Conn to look for suitable communications opportunities that fit with the first meeting of the Species Re-introduction Taskforce date of 15 February.

Action: Graham Tibbetts and Ilana Conn

Item 5 Business planning 23/24

- 5.1 John Holmes appraised the Board of the progress that had been made, including: assumptions; aims; strategic priorities; key performance indicators (KPIs); what to grow, reduce or change; delivery priorities; risks; and the timeline for implementation.
- 5.2 The need for quantitative targets to be added to the KPIs was noted. The Board stressed the need for clarity around which activities would be stopped and the risks associated with this and requested Qualitative Impact Assessment(s) should be carried out (as used in the NHS). The Digital Transformation risk around DDTS delivery was also noted. David Hill set out the need for Ministerial engagement via submission; the priorities, metrics and updates required for the Secretary of State. He cautioned that whilst it was important to develop quantitative targets and metrics, it was necessary to remain responsive to the EIP, plus SoS requirements for reporting which were still being clarified. Finally, he set out the need for savings options likely in 2024/25. The Executive was urged to anticipate the Spending Review beyond the current one.
- Action: Alan Law and James Diamond**
- 5.3 It was understood that whilst business planning provided the structure to determine what can be delivered, it was the Programmes that define the outcomes and tools to be used.
- 5.4 The Board challenged the volume of priorities; the lack of connection to the Programmes; and how to apply a local lens to priorities. It was recognised that Area Managers needed the flexibility and empowerment to determine how to

apply this to their local area. The organisation was investing in leadership capability on managing risk to better enable Area Managers to take decisions.

5.5 Marian Spain stressed the need to: consider how best to engage stakeholders; have ARAC test the benefits realisation regarding efficiencies; keep Defra and Ministers sighted.

5.6 The Board noted: the significant shift in approach which would require good discipline. The Board invited the Executive to consider how solid internal communications would be provided to enthuse and engage staff; to set out a 'golden thread'.

5.7 The Board asked for further updates on aligning NE's KPIs with Defra's Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP).

Action: Alan Law and Matt Heard

Item 6 2030 targets, delivery trajectory and tools

6.1 2030 targets

6.2 John Holmes presented and the Board noted:

- the summary of the opportunities, risks and issues for Natural England's delivery regarding the [Environment Act](#), the Environmental Improvement Plan ([EIP targets](#)), 30x30 and the [Convention on Biological Diversity](#) (CBD) commitments
- Natural England's assessment of the ambition and current trajectories for the targets and the alignment of delivery and reporting to help Government deliver these targets

6.3 It was noted that the document reflected Natural England's contribution to the overall Defra targets, and that there was variability in respect of individual trajectories, milestones and key risks for the different delivery bodies.

6.4 The Board discussed integration with other ALBs whilst recognition of Natural England's particular perspective which was articulated by David Hill as– direct delivery contributions and advice via statutory functions.

6.5 Natural England would be expected to take a view on whether the cumulative efforts towards targets were on track. David Hill would ensure Natural England was drawn into appropriate conversations.

Action: Alan Law

6.6 The Board discussed the importance of a crisp narrative that showed how targets were linked, and how they were affected by wider issues like air/water/soil quality. This would demonstrate dependencies and help form a critical path analysis. It was suggested that there should be a clear visual representation aid understanding of the idea of foundations and building blocks.

Action: Alan Law and Matt Heard

- 6.7 The work going into producing the metrics for 23/24 reporting was highlighted. These would demonstrate performance against six KPIs plus their contribution towards the Environment Act and EIP. The new metrics would also have an area-by-area scorecard showing place-based outcomes for each area, how they aggregate, and the golden thread linking those outcomes to the national picture.
- 6.8 Marian Spain reflected on how Natural England works with Defra in providing robust advice to Government on sensitive policy areas, including on issues like agricultural pollution. The need to be clear with Ministers on what's within Natural England's control was noted.
- 6.9 The Board considered the wider Nature Recovery Network (NRN) delivery partnership beyond the Defra agencies (e.g., water companies, RSPB, National Trust, MoD) and whether targets should include some structure indicating what will be delivered by the 'primary delivery bodies', possibly at the regional level. It was noted that the implementation plan should include skills/capability development and how Natural England may be able to help grow the sector.
- 6.10 Tony Juniper reiterated the urgency of progressing with delivery as soon as the EIP was signed off, to have a chance of achieving the scale of change needed by 2030. David Hill agreed to the need for a follow-up conversation with Natural England once the EIP was published.

Action: Alan Law

- 6.11 Role of SSSI in target delivery
- 6.12 Caroline Cotterell summarised the points in the paper, including the role and importance of protected sites to Government targets; the evolution of the SSSI series; and the current delivery programme. The Board agreed that the main focus should be on improving the quality of the existing SSSIs, noting that this would require addressing off-site pressures, therefore delivering wider nature recovery benefits. New designations should feature, but with a refined designation approach. The Board noted the importance of considering where SSSIs sit within the wider landscape and their contribution to Nature Recovery and that SSSIs are most often not owned by Natural England and consideration is needed to support those who do own them
- 6.13 Incentivising landowners for good management was raised. The Board asked for social-economic studies to better understand the linkages and models of what incentives were sufficient.
- 6.14 It was noted that data modelling was underway to better understand how SSSIs contribute to the species abundance target
- 6.15 Work was underway with Defra to develop the criteria of what would contribute to the 30x30 target, including the definition and assessment of Other Effective Conservation Measures (OECMs).

6.16 The accuracy of SSSI data was expected to be substantially transformed by the introduction of a new digital database. This would provide more granularity at site level. Tim Hill agreed to review the data on factors influencing SSSI condition which were beyond the land managers' control; determine whether this data should be refreshed; and host a Board webinar. The merits of further social economic studies would also be considered.

Action: Tim Hill

6.17 Environmental Land Management (ELM) delivery

6.18 Brad Tooze presented an update on delivery of [ELM](#). There was some discussion around why the level of interest in [Sustainable Farm Incentive](#) (SFI) was not as high as expected. Rosamund Blomfield-Smith suggested that eligibility restrictions had a big part to play and highlighted the risks of reputational damage incurred by Natural England for scheme design restrictions which were outside of Natural England's control.

6.19 It was felt that there was a need to work with the sector more broadly to get a feel for the readiness of applicants for Landscape Recovery and Marian Spain explained that Natural England would not be able to get involved in all scheme applications. Demand needed to be driven with a positive vision to landowners – showing what could be achieved in a place. The Board discussed the need to provide staff with the capability and capacity to offer the inspiration needed. The Board noted the need to deploy staff on a one-to-many basis, and the opportunities to get landowners and farmers to work collaboratively.

6.20 The Board was content with the direction of travel on ELM. The Board requested follow-up sessions on species, water and access.

Action: Alan Law / Sean Cornall

Item 7 Hen Harrier recovery and brood management

7.1 John Holmes presented a recommendation to continue to operate and lead the scientific trial of Hen Harrier brood management. NESAC had recently examined the scientific case and concluded that the gains which had been made would be lost if the option of brood management was removed. The need to build in additional social science evidence on attitudinal change was also noted.

7.2 David Hill flagged up Defra's support for the trial and noted that an evaluation of the Hen Harrier Plan was expected in due course.

7.3 The Board decided to continue with the trial.

Item 8 Forward look

8.1 Sean Cornall confirmed that the February Board meeting would take place in London covering quarterly performance, risk, H&S and climate emergency strategy. The March strategy meeting would be held in Cambridge, with new Board members expected to join this meeting. In future a six-month view with

locations would be provided. The Board requested the receipt of papers five days in advance.

Action: Governance Team

8.2 Tony Juniper closed the meeting.