

Minutes of the Natural England Board meeting held on 25th September 2024 in Bristol

Attending

Dr Tony Juniper	Chair
Lord Blencathra	Deputy Chair
Prof Mel Austen (absent 11-1pm)	
Cynthia Alers	
Prof Lynn Dicks	
Catherine Dugmore (absent 10-11.30)	
Prof Clare Fitzsimmons	
Kim Shillinglaw	
Dame Catherine Spelman	
Mark Tufnell	
Peter Unwin	
Lizzy Campbell	Board Apprentice

Executive

Marian Spain	Chief Executive (and ex-officio Board Member)
Sallie Bailey	Chief Scientist
Kirsty Carter-Brown	Chief Officer, Business Management
Oliver Harmar	Chief Officer, Operations
Navroza Ladha	Chief Officer, Legal, Governance and External Affairs
Alan Law	Chief Officer, Strategy

Guests

Mike Rowe	Defra, Director General
Illana Conn	Defra Communications
Jen Garrett	Defra Group, Director Human Resources
Abdul Razaq	Defra Group, Director of Finance
Vicky Gaillard	Director, Assurance & Corporate Governance
David Lowe	Director, Change
Josie Allen	Deputy Director, Managing the Organisation
James Diamond	Director, People
Jermaine Hutchinson	Principal Officer, Equality, Diversity and Identity
Joe Hillier	Director, Analysis
Matt Vile	Deputy Director, Digital Transformation
Amy Hutchins	Deputy Director, Change
Dawn Metcalfe	Principal Officer, Governance
Josh Snape	Principal Officer, Private Office
Matthew Wood	Senior Officer, Governance (Minutes)

Apologies

James Scott	Board Member
Alastair Leake	Board Member
Henry Robinson	Board Member

Item 1 Welcome from the Chair and Declarations of Interest

- 1.1 The Chair welcomed the Board, Executive and guests to the 125th Board meeting.
- 1.2 Board Members were asked to confirm any declarations of interest. Lord Blencathra confirmed he had recently been appointed to the role of 'President (Lords) Conservative Friends of the Overseas Territories' (not remunerated).

Action: Update the Register of Interests. **Governance team**

Item 2 Review Minutes of 31st July 2024

- 2.1 The draft minutes of the meeting held on 31 July 2024 were accepted as a true record with the following minor change.

Action: Paragraph 4.2 should be revised to state that discussions with specific Board Members about marine targets must include Clare Fitzsimmons.
Matthew Wood

Item 3 Review Matters Arising

- 3.1 The Board reviewed the Matters Arising and identified that the Board webinar on Environmental Land Management Schemes (ELMS) had not taken place as stated.

Action: Redefine the board webinar programme: set monthly slots for the year ahead and add topic as needed, including ELMs in November/December and a revised process for Sites of Special Scientific Interest designation in January.
Governance team

Item 4 Chief Executive's Report

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

- 4.2 **Proposed Regulation Review.** Marian updated the Board on an impending Review of regulation. Mike Rowe provided an overview of the Review's scope and encouraged Natural England to share its views. The Board agreed to invite Board Members to self-nominate to join a rapid Task and Finish group, led by Alan Law, when the Review's Terms of Reference has been received.

Action: Share the Secretary of State's letter with Board Members. **Josh Snape**

Action: Share the Terms of Reference with Board Members when it is received.
Matthew Wood

- 4.3 **Farming Schemes:** Alan Law explained that the Portfolio Board had provisionally approved the introduction of the first of the Landscape Recovery schemes, pending the confirmation of available budget. Marian Spain stressed

importance of ensuring that ELMS was used to address all environmental goals and not just farming-related goals.

- 4.4 **Spending Review (SR):** Matt Heard provided a substantive update on the SR that included both phases one and two. Matt advised that Natural England's budget for 2025/26 is unlikely to be known until after October's budget. The Board gave its views on how to approach the SR including to pursue investments to save, seeking more flexibility to our funding from Defra Group, with less being ring-fenced, in order for Natural England to achieve the Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) and 30 x 30 targets.

Item 5 Overview of Key Performance Indicator (KPI) F

- 5.1 David Lowe and Josie Allen led the discussion. The focus of the session was for the Board to have a deep dive into KPI F which addresses how Natural England invests in wellbeing, development and the diversity of staff.
- 5.2 The Board were asked to note the deteriorating position in the context of reducing budgets, increasing workload pressures and the introduction of recruitment controls.
- 5.3 The Board were also asked to note the risk of Natural England being unable to meet its Diversity and Inclusion and Data & Digital ambitions and these would be addressed in subsequent sessions during the day.
- 5.4 The Board discussed feedback from staff that reflected how staff consistently emphasised that excessive levels of process impede their ability to deliver outcomes. The Board recognised that processes would always be necessary and advised the Executive to review those that the organisation own and to think about how best the friction can be removed from the system.
- 5.5 The Board encouraged the Executive to drive culture change across the organisation to reduce risk aversion, share innovations and embrace change.

Item 6 Making NE an inclusive place to work

- 6.1 James Diamond and Jermaine Hutchinson presented the session. The purpose of the session was to facilitate a discussion on Natural England's current position with regards to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) performance, ambition and delivery. The Board were also asked to explore its role in creating more inclusive organisation.
- 6.2 James began the session by outlining why diversity is EDI matters in both legal and moral terms and then described the activity that had taken place in the last six months within the organisation.
- 6.3 James asked the Board to note:

- The Organisational Risk Register carries a risk that Natural England does not develop a suitably inclusive and diverse workforce.
- The Corporate Risk register carries a risk on Board diversity that recognises the risk that Natural England may be seen to lack the diversity of thought, perspective and lived experience at Board level.
- An EDI Board subgroup had been created in 2024/25 with Prof Clare Fitzsimmons in a lead role.
- The EDI Performance Measure under KPI F that sets a target of reaching 5% minority ethnicity by March 2025. The position at the end of quarter one 2024/25 was 3.9% and the forecast for the year end is red.
- Highlighted data from recent Pulse and People Surveys including that only 5% of respondents felt that EDI was a priority and only 5% believed EDI activities were relevant to them.
- Data shows that staff retention is low, with ethnic minority staff leaving at higher rates, indicating a non-inclusive culture.

6.4 The Board were asked to provide their reflections and made the following comments:

- Agreed that the statistics were appalling and that this is an issue that needs to be addressed with leadership from the Board.
- Recognised and agreed that there must be a fundamental and radical rethink about the way we recruit including removing unconscious bias and barriers such as degree requirements for roles and by targeting recruitment in priority places.
- Expressed deep concern reading staff retention and agreed that more must be done to understand the sense of isolation that staff from minority backgrounds experience and we must recognise that support is needed that goes far beyond what other colleagues need.
- Recognised that more must be done to improve the diversity of the Board – although a political appointments process, Board were keen to explore what else may be within our gift e.g. addition of ex-officio members.
- Agreed to refuse to sit on panels that are not diverse.
- Agreed to join the reverse mentoring programme.

6.5 The Board thanked Jermaine Hutchinson for all the work she has done in this area whilst on secondment from the Environment Agency.

Action: Develop a plan to remove/reduce barriers to recruitment, e.g. through replacing the degree requirement with an effective training programme for suitable candidates. **James Diamond** *deadline: May 2025*

Action: Develop a plan to increase NE Board diversity, e.g. through having ex-officio members or shadowing. **James Diamond**

Action: Sign the Executive and Board Members up for 'reverse mentoring'. **James Diamond**

Item 7 Improving effective use of Digital and Data

- 7.1 Joe Hillier and Matt Vile led the discussion. The purpose of the session was to update the Board on the progress within KPI F Progress Metric 29 (PM 29) and the development of the NE strategy and action plan titled 'Destination Digital'.
- 7.2 Joe began the session by giving the Board a high-level overview of the progress made. Matt then took the Board through a presentation and commented that the goal is to improve digital capability to enable nature's recovery.
- 7.3 Matt explained Destination Digital will guide our strategy for building digital capability. The next steps will include finalising it and connecting it to ongoing spending review planning and the launch of the new Strategy.
- 7.4 In discussion the Board made the following comments:
- Questioned whether we have the right level of resources in the current budget. Joe confirmed that there is currently limited resource and funding is dispersed. A key part of the strategy will be to bring budgets together to get better outcomes.
 - Catherine Dugmore, as Chair of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC), reflected that the outcome of internal audits highlighted that the quality of our current data and record keeping is inadequate and we are waiting for solutions from Defra DDTs. The new strategy presents an opportunity to improve the quality of our performance and records.
 - Questioned how we will interact with staff and reflected on the organisation's digital maturity.
 - Advised that in terms of the Spending Review, investing to save would be the best approach and that we make the case that digital investment will deliver greater outcomes.
 - Reflected on the complexity of governance and decision making within the Defra Group Services model.
 - Advised that a big driver for the improving our capability is to release staff from transactional work.
- 7.5 Joe Hillier summarised the following three areas,
- On communication we will continue to spread the message that improving Natural England's digital capability is linked to better outcomes for nature and services and value for money for the public.
 - Consistency of investment and training will be key to achieving this.
 - Natural England is actively working to enhance its relationship with DDTs and is currently participating in an audit, with feedback expected in December.

Action: Improve narrative to staff to better promote fundamental importance of digital skills capability to make the best use of the tools we already have to deliver NE outcomes and seek to make use of training resources we can access for free. **Joe Hillier** *deadline: March 2025*

Action: Make the case for additional digital investment as a key enabler to development of NE strategy. **Joe Hillier** *deadline: March 2025*

Action: Feedback to Board the findings of the Digital audit (which is expected in December). **Joe Hillier** *deadline: March 2025*

Item 8 **Investing in Organisational Change**

8.1 David Lowe and Amy Hutchins led the discussion. David began by highlighting the drivers for change and explained how the organisation is investing in creating and resourcing a change management office.

8.2 The Board were asked to provide feedback and views on how to manage the risks, whether anything is missing from the investments and what should be prioritised, how the Board would like to be receive progress updates and whether the People & Remuneration Committee (PRemCom) would be a suitable governance group to provide oversight and challenge.

8.3 In discussion the Board made the following comments and recommendations:

- Advised and agreed that communications with staff will be the key to success. A narrative should be written that explains to staff how change will enable the organisation to get to a better place to deliver outcomes for nature in tangible and concrete terms.
- Agreed that staff need to be engaged and the energy that has been created in the internal strategy workshops needs to be harnessed.
- Advised David and Amy to consider whether any external expertise and capacity is required.
- Agreed that in terms of governance, this will be a broad piece of work and board would want to keep close to this therefore PRemCom wouldn't be the appropriate escalation body.
- Noted that the process is at an early stage and the platform can be iterated to deliver change.

Action: Review the branding and language used to describe the approaches to change, suggested Change Support Team/Service. **David Lowe** *deadline: Nov 2024*

Action: Update the Board on the potential for external support to be funded via bid made to Spending Review. **David Lowe** *deadline: Nov 2024*

Action: Provide the Board with detailed plans for change once they have been co-created with colleagues, including how Change Support Team will work in partnership for delivery. **David Lowe** *deadline: Feb 2025*

Action: Consider what additional change is required to deliver the new strategy and how to harness the energy being created by linking change to achieving even more for Nature. **David Lowe** *deadline: May 2025*

Item 9 Reflections

- 9.1 Kirsty Carter-Brown reflected that as the Board concludes its KPI journey, achieving KPI F stands out as crucial. This process ensures we're focusing on the right areas and addressing complex issues effectively. KPIs A-E are unattainable without it. Our approach centres on how we engage people; improving digital capabilities is challenging yet essential. Change is integral to Natural England's vision and mission—embracing it requires collective effort. Addressing barriers in EDI and fostering diversity with mentoring will reduce recruitment and retention issues. Natural England must champion digital skills, ensuring readiness for digital investments. Supporting change, especially within critical teams will be key. This complex task demands unified action.

Item 10 Governance:

- 10.1 Board sub-group updates

PRemCom: Peter Unwin provided an update on the most recent meeting at which the Committee discussed the 2024/25 pay deal. The Committee also discussed stress reduction, business planning and reducing stress. Future agenda items will include workforce planning and future pay strategy.

ARAC: Catherine Dugmore provided an update on the most recent meeting at which the Annual Report and Accounts was discussed.

Natural England Science Advisory Committee (NESAC): Mel Austen and Lynn Dicks highlighted that the Committee is currently going through the process of refreshing its membership and questioned whether the Board would support creating an early career researcher category for promising candidates. The Board agreed.

Action: Develop a plan to draw NESAC and Social Science Expert Committee together into one committee (rather than the later be a sub-committee of the former). **Sallie Bailey** *deadline: February 2025*

- 10.2 NNR approvals

Action: The Board agreed to establish a new Board sub-committee to oversee proposals for new NNRs and to make recommendations to the full Board. **Oliver Harmor** *deadline: November 2024*

- 10.3 Forward Look

Victoria Gaillard explained the timeline for the Board Effectiveness Review and asked the Board to note that two proposed NNR approvals would be presented to the Board at its meeting in November. At that point the new Committee to oversee proposals would be stood up.