



Minutes of the **Natural England Board** meeting held on 6 November 2024 in Bradford

Attending

Dr Tony Juniper	Chair
Lord Blencathra	Deputy Chair
Prof Mel Austen	
Cynthia Alers	
Prof Lynn Dicks	
Catherine Dugmore	
Prof Clare Fitzsimmons	
Kim Shillinglaw	
Dame Caroline Spelman	
Mark Tufnell	
Peter Unwin	
Henry Robinson	
Alastair Leake	
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

Sally Randall	Defra, Director General, Environment
Charlotte Armitage	Defra, Communications
Jen Garrett	Defra Group, Director Human Resources
Edel McGurk	Director, Southeast Region
Allison Potts	Deputy Director, Thames Solent
Jim Seymour	Deputy Director, Sussex and Kent
Vicky Gaillard	Director, Assurance & Corporate Governance
Matt Heard	Director, Strategy
Hannah Wood	Deputy Director, Strategy
Claudia Chambers	Director, Operations

Apologies

Abdul Razaq	Defra Group, Director of Finance
Ilana Conn	Defra, Communications

Item 1 Welcome from the Chair and Declarations of Interest

- 1.1 The Chair welcomed the Board, Executive and guests to the 126th Board meeting.
- 1.2 Board Members were asked to confirm any declarations of interest. There were no declarations of interest recorded, and Lynn Dicks, Mark Tufnell and Lord Blencathra reported changes to their Register of Interests.
 - 1.2.1 Lynn Dicks confirmed that she is no longer a trustee of the Entomological Society and that she has a paid role at Selwyn College, Cambridge University.
 - 1.2.2 Mark Tufnell outlined that he is no longer the main shareholder in Upper Coln Farm & Stud Limited, having given the shares to his son in October 2024.
 - 1.2.3 Lord Blencathra stated that he is now Chair of the Expert Observation team.

Action: Secretariat Services team to update the Register of Interests.

Item 2 Review Minutes of 25 September 2024

- 2.1 The draft minutes of the meeting held on 25 September 2024 were accepted as a true record, subject to amending the names of Dr Clare Fitzsimmons and Dr Lynn Dicks to Professor.

Action: Secretariat Services team to update the minutes template from the 25 September 2024 meeting.

Item 3 Review Matters Arising

- 3.1 The Board reviewed and approved the Matters Arising.

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 **The Nature Recovery Strategy report** will be launched on Thursday 7 November 2024, at the West of England Nature Partnership conference. This strategy will be the first of its kind in England to be published.
- 4.3 **30x30** - Last week the government launched new criteria for nature protection targets.
- 4.4 **Loveluck Judicial Review** – Mr Loveluck was not given permission to pursue a judicial review challenge of Natural England in relation to the Penwith SSSI designation decision. He is appealing that decision, and Natural England has submitted a response arguing against this.
- 4.5 **Game Bird Licences**. Defra are proposing that Natural England resume their role as a licensing authority for individual licences.

- 4.6 **Spending Review.** Alan Law noted that in terms of the political context, the Budget will restore economic stability and begins a decade of national renewal. It outlines the foundations to deliver change by fixing the NHS and rebuilding Britain, while ensuring working people don't face higher taxes in their payslips.
- 4.7 The budget will be the largest in DEFRA's history to deliver the Secretary of State's priorities and the Government's missions.
- 4.8 Natural England are prioritising action that directly supports the Secretary of State's priorities; to clean up our rivers, lakes and seas; to create a roadmap to move Britain to a zero-waste economy; support farmers to boost our food security; ensure nature's recovery; and protect communities from flooding.
- 4.9 The Board praised the excellent work by the Secretary of State for the Environment, who worked to ensure that the DEFRA budget increased from £7.3 billion in 2024-25 to £7.5 billion in 2025- 26. This is equivalent to a real-terms growth rate of 2.7% from 2023-24 to 2025-26.

Action: Alan Law to send the Terms of Reference for the Dan Corry review to all the Board members.

Action: Alan Law to share the joint letter to the Secretary of State from the ALBs with the Board members

Item 5 Q2 Performance Report

- 5.1 Oliver Harmor presented the report, and the Board was reminded that measures and targets were agreed at the May Board meeting. In discussion at that meeting and to maintain our ambition, it was recognised there would be significant stretch in the Action Plan for this year.
- 5.2 The Board were asked to note the following performance update:
- There has been a decline from Q1, but this was expected as impacts around affordability, recruitment controls and pace of our reforms and digital investments start to materialise. Current performance is in line with the expected full year performance, which was agreed with the Board in May.
 - The end of year outlook includes 18 Progress Metrics with Green or Amber Green outturn and a relatively stable delivery position. In general terms, our Red and Amber Red metrics are due to either; a conscious shift of limited resource to other priorities; a dependency upon another organisation; or a delivery risk that was identified at the start of the year being realised.
- 5.3 In discussion the Board noted that a third of the absences from work are due to mental health issues and they asked what accommodations are made to help people with neurodiversity. Jen Garrett and Kirsty Carter Brown confirmed that neurodiversity is being considered by the Natural England Disability network, the organisation's mental health advisers and the trade unions. However, one

of the difficulties with monitoring these conditions, is that sometimes people are not diagnosed until later in life.

- 5.4 The Board also discussed the challenges around digital IT and the impact of the reduced budget on the organisation, such as risk of data breaches and losses and reputational risk.

Action: Board agenda to include more time for the performance reporting where possible – Secretariat Services team before 19 February 2025 Board meeting.

Action: To include more specifics on Biodiversity Net Gain in the next Chief Operating Officer report before the 19 February Board meeting - Mike Cuthbert, Claudia Chambers and Heather Rennie.

5.5 Finance Report

- 5.6 Oliver Harmar presented the paper and asked the Board to note the following:

On budget and Full Time Employees (FTE), Natural England are forecasting a full year revenue pressure of £7.3m. There are mitigations in place to reduce this pressure to £3.6m and we are working with budget managers to bring this forecast down further over the coming months.

- 5.7 The September forecast was agreed as the revised performance measure. Our budget holders are working hard to meet this and will continue to seek further opportunities to reduce the overall RDEL pressure, to a tolerable level (+1%). Directors continue to manage FTE using the strategic assignment process, and recruitment controls. This will help Natural England manage down FTE pressures by the end of March. We are undertaking a deep dive on Capital, to understand risks and opportunities for maximising ringfenced budgets and landing on budget. Sally Randall confirmed that Defra would welcome a Capital underspend this year.

- 5.8 The Board discussed the number of staff that are leaving the organisation, and it would be important to clarify the reasons why, as this could lead to a shortage of skilled staff. Oliver Harmar confirmed that the organisation has addressed the risk of unmanaged staff movements by operating a strategic assignment process with the relevant Directors.

Item 6 Q2 Health and Safety Report

- 6.1 Claudia Chambers introduced this session and asked the Board to note the following:

- The Q2 reporting figures are lower than last year, mainly due to low near miss reporting.
- The organisations performance on timely incident investigations has dropped to 80% or amber red. The latter part of the quarter indicates some improvement, but Natural England are not yet achieving their desired performance.
- Stress remains the highest reporting category representing 23% of all reports for Q2.

- 6.2 In discussion the Board said the quality of reporting is in a much better place than two years ago and this is reflected in the detailed report they are seeing at the Board meetings.
- 6.3 The Board noted the safeguarding issues, and that guidance is being prepared to help senior leaders to manage these conversations.
- 6.4 The Board discussed the issue of stress and wonder whether the reason for the increase is due to a range of factors including both related to workloads and societal pressures such as the cost-of-living crisis.

Action: Oliver Harmar to consider a safeguarding Board lead and to ensure robust processes around reporting and learning from cases.

Action: Performance Remuneration Executive Committee to periodically review the stress reduction action plan to obtain data which would identify the causes of stress within the organisation.

Item 7 Q4 Risk Report

- 7.1 Victoria Gaillard introduced this item and reminded the Board that we are currently developing our Risk Framework which includes reviewing how corporate risk reporting is undertaken, and how risks escalate through the organisation. This will ensure better join up between our top-down and bottom-up approaches to risk management in Natural England. Until improved ways of working are established, we are continuing current risk reporting processes.
- 7.2 The Board also liked the risk heat map, as it was useful for trajectory and to outline the key risks.
- 7.3 The Board felt that the risk review requires a further in-depth discussion, and it should be aligned to the organisation's strategy.

Action: To bring this back to the 19 February 2025 meeting as a workshop agenda item - Victoria Gaillard before 19 February 2025

Action: To ensure that risk management is factored into agenda setting meetings and more time is provided to discuss performance and risk, at the next Board meeting – Vicky Gaillard/Rob Caschetto/Secretariat Team by 1 April 2025.

Item 8 potential National Nature Reserve Declarations

8.1 North Kent Woods and Downs pNNR

Edel McGurk and Jim Seymour introduced this session and in discussion the following was agreed:

- **Decision: The Board endorsed and approved the declaration of North Kent Woods and Downs National Nature Reserve which would become a part of the Kings NNR series.**
- **Decision: The Board endorsed and approved Plantlife, West Kent Downs Countryside Trust and Vineyard Farms Ltd as new approved bodies to hold and manage land within the NNR.**

8.2 The Board discussed the benefits, such as the proposed declaration would be the first NNR in England to incorporate farmland notified for its rare arable plants. It would also unite disparate parcels of land, managed by multiple parties into a cohesive and collaborative 'super' NNR, promoting habitat connectivity and climate change adaptation.

8.4 **Wealdon Heaths pNNR**

Edel McGurk and Allison Potts introduced this item and in discussion the following was agreed:

- **Decision: The Board endorsed and approved Wealden Heaths as a new National Nature Reserve which would become a part of the Kings NNR series.**
- **Decision: The Board endorsed and approved Surrey Wildlife Trust, Waverley Borough Council and Hampton Estate as new Approved Bodies to hold a National Nature Reserve.**

8.5 The Board discussed the benefits to the pNNR declaration, such as the NNR will support internationally important and nationally rare lowland heath and rare species and a range of breeding and wintering birds. It will also enhance public access and build long-term conservation partnerships.

Item 9 New Natural England Strategy

9.1 Matt Heard and Hannah Wood attended the Board meeting to present the first draft of the New Natural England Strategy, and the Board were asked to:

- note the progress in developing the Strategy
- note the internal and external engagement and feedback received
- provide steers to inform further development of the Strategy:
 - Is the messaging and framing right?
 - Does the strategy provide clarity on the priorities over the next 5 years?
 - Does the strategy signal the right level of change to staff and partners?
- note the risks and delivery constraints
- provide steers on the proposed design layout
- provide a steer on timeline for the finalisation and launch of a new strategy.

9.2 In discussion the Board provided the following steers to be addressed in the next iteration of the New Natural England Strategy:

- Join up with Defra on their growth strategy and language – use the Dasgupta Review for language around 'wealth'
- Link the strategy to the government missions.
- Think about where existing language/theories/ideas will help us i.e. Dasgupta review definition of wealth, 'one nature'
- Seek endorsement of the new strategy from external partners and pitch it right
- Set out more clearly strategic choices that underpin the strategy
- Defining who the customer is environment, taxpayer or future generations
- Testing with a non-nature audience

- Review the language - this is what we are going to do rather than what we are going to do differently.

Action: Matt Heard and Hannah Wood to work with the Secretariat Services team to find a suitable date in January 2025, for a Board webinar.

Item 10 Governance

10.1 Annual Report and Accounts

10.1.1 Catherine Dugmore (Chair of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee) gave the Board a short verbal update on the current position.

10.1.2 Catherine asked the Board to read the email containing provisions and contingent liabilities report and confirm there are no other cases known and provide a written response to Kirsty Carter-Brown and Navroza Ladha by the 16 November 2024. A response is required, to enable a record of 'nil' responses.

10.1.3 A revised recent version of the 2023/24 Annual Report and Accounts will be circulated ahead of the next Audit and Risk Assurance Committee meeting on the 11 December 2024, it will highlight any significant changes since the Board viewed the last version in July 2024. Board members will need to write back to say they are content with the new version.

Action: Board members to respond, to enable a record of 'nil' responses.

10.2 Board Effectiveness Review

10.1.2 Vicky Gaillard asked the Board to consider the options for the procurement of a Board Effectiveness Review and decide on the procurement approach to be used.

10.1.3 **Decision: The Board approved the procurement through a Defra Framework contract noting that it meets all the Managing Public Monies guidance, and it is likely the quickest route to complete the review.**

10.3 Board sub-group updates

10.3.1 Natural England Landscape Advisory Panel (NELAP)

Caroline Spelman (Co-Chair of NELAP) led this item and asked the Board to decide the next priorities for the Panel to advise upon, in context of the new Government's emerging priorities and the direction of Natural England's new Strategy.

10.3.2 The Panel have advised they would like to consider landscapes for health and the future of the uplands (in context of agricultural transition and the forthcoming Land Use Framework) at their next meetings.

10.3.3 The Board **endorsed** the approach and said it is important to look at how Protected Landscapes fits into the Government 30x30 targets and to investigate as much as possible the Natural Landscapes.

10.3.4 **Natural England Science Advisory Committee (NESAC)**
Lynn Dicks (Chair of NESAC) confirmed that no meeting had taken place since the September Board meeting. Lynn reminded the Board to respond to the email setting out the ask for the Board members to agree to appoint the proposed members to the NESAC.