

Minutes of the 127th Natural England's Board meeting held on 28 May 2025

Attending

Dr Tony Juniper	Chair
Peter Unwin	Deputy Chair
Cynthia Alers	Board Member
Alastair Leake	Board Member
Mark Tufnell	Board Member
Professor Clare Fitzsimmons	Board Member
James Scott	Board Member
Kim Shillinglaw	Board Member
Dame Caroline Spelman	Board Member
Professor Mel Austen	Board Member
Professor Lynn Dicks	Board Member

Executive Team

Marian Spain	Chief Executive (and ex-officio Board Member)
Kirsty Carter-Brown	Chief Officer, Business Management
John Holmes	Director, Strategy, (for Oliver Harmar)
Peter Brotherton	Director, Science (for Sallie Bailey)
Alan Law	Chief Officer, Operations

Defra Group

Sally Randall	Director General, Environment, Rural and Marine
Rachel Fraser	Finance Director
Jen Garrett	Human Resources Director
Ilana Conn	Deputy Director, Operational and Local Communications

Guests

Vicky Gaillard	Director, Corporate Governance & Assurance
Hannah Wood	Deputy Director, Strategy (items 9 & 10)
Mike Cuthbert	Director, Planning & Performance (items 4,6,8 & 9)
Mike Burke	Director, Sustainable Development (items 11 & 12)
Pamela Mills-Cooke	Senior Officer, Governance (Minutes)

Apologies

Navroza Ladha	Chief Officer, Legal, Governance and External Affairs
Sallie Bailey	Chief Scientist

Item 1 Welcome from the Chair and Declarations of Interest

- 1.1 The Chair welcomed the Board, Executives and guests to the 127th Board meeting. Chair also welcomed Katie Dillon from KPMG who was observing the

meeting as a part of the Board's Effectiveness Review process that KPMG is currently undertaking.

1.2 The following was noted for the Register of Interests and Conflicts of Interest:

- Mark Tufnell advised there were minor amendments and asked for the template so that he could provide an update to his Register of Interests.
- Mel Austen reminded the Board about her association with diving at the University of Plymouth.
- James Scott advised that as host he has provided venue facilities for both the Board's Stakeholder engagement event and the Board's meeting, free of charge. It is to be noted for the formal records that Urban and Civic as hosts do this for all Stakeholder's engagements. Natural England has procured and paid for the transport, Stakeholder's dinner and Board's meeting refreshments. The Board thanked Urban and Civic for providing meeting facilities and hosting the Stakeholder's engagement event.

Item 2 Minutes and Matters Arising

- 2.1 The Board approved the minutes of the 126th meeting subject to a minor amendment required at 9.10 on page ten to say *"NESAC recommended that any conservation licence should include community engagement and monitoring activities, preferably through tagging and tracking birds and communicating about their locations"*.
- 2.2 The Board approved the closing of all 'recommend close' in the outstanding Matters Arising from previous meetings.

Item 3 Chief Executive's Report

- 3.1 Marian Spain presented the Chief Executive's report to the Board and provided updates on the following topics:

Sandeels – Following arbitration between the UK and the EU, an international tribunal found that the UK, strongly supported by Natural England, successfully demonstrated that the measures taken to close English waters off the North Sea to industrial sandeel fishing were based on the best available science and had sufficient regard to the principle of non-discrimination.

Paulownia - Ministers have asked for measures which, if implemented well, will substantively mitigate potential risks posed to nature recovery associated with invasiveness and ground water impacts. Defra's officials are drafting a policy statement, which the regulators (including Forestry Commission) will need to give material consideration to when reaching decisions. Once drafted Defra will put this back to Ministers.

British Steel – Licence issued swiftly to resolve issues with bird nests on 16 May, following a joint site visit with Natural England's Wildlife Licensing Service

and British Steel earlier in the week. The licence means there will be no disruption to British Steel's plans and enables Scunthorpe Steelworks to continue operating.

Devonport Licensing – Positive feedback from Royal Navy representatives on 15 May at **His Majesty's Naval Base (HMNB) Devonport** following a swift and pragmatic response from our Wildlife Licensing team to nesting birds when a high-profile event was almost jeopardised.

Efficiency savings plan – As outlined in the Secretary of State's Environment letter to the Chair, Natural England is expected to look at options for savings in the areas of environment planning; grants administration; monitoring and regulatory compliance; and licensing and administration of National Nature Reserves. This efficiency plan will be sent to the Secretary of State by the end of July 2025.

Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) - Ministers are planning to ease BNG requirements for the developers of small sites, which account for around three-quarters of residential planning applications, as the Government strives to deliver 1.5 million new homes this Parliament. A consultation on these proposed changes will be open for eight weeks.

3.2

In discussion, the Board noted the following:

- Natural England will need to reply to the recent Government's Planning and Infrastructure BNG announcement, including the [opening review](#) on this subject. Natural England's draft response will be shared with the Board and the Board should feedback to Oliver Harmar on this matter.
- The Chair asked for a Board member to volunteer as Board Champion to lead on Natural England's efficiencies plan. Mark Tufnell has accepted this role working closely with Mike Cuthbert, Director of Planning and Performance.
- The Board was delighted with how quickly Natural England's teams responded with the HMNB Devonport and British Steel incidents and congratulations should be passed to the teams responsible for dealing with these in a short turnaround.

Action: Draft response to the Government's BNG announcement; Board members to feedback directly to Oliver Harmar on the draft response.

Action: Mike Cuthbert to contact Mark Tufnell on the Natural England's Efficiencies plan and response to Secretary of State.

Item 4 **Quarter 4 Performance Report**

4.1 Mike Cuthbert introduced the report which sets out Natural England's summary performance position for the year-end 2024/25 against the 2024/25 Action Plan.

Mike asked the Board to note the following key points:

- Overall, year- end performance was better than forecast at the start.
- Natural England's Delivery Committee had raised concerns that Natural England has prioritised 'nature' priorities over 'business' priorities with worse than expected performance around H&S, staff engagement and Learning and Development. However, Natural England has seen really good performance in our budget management.
- A learning review will be held to understand the correlation between shifts in performance and the reasons for our improved performance against forecast. Natural England will learn lessons on how it can improve its deliverability assessment and forecasting for next year.
- Natural England will face ongoing pressures on its performance in 2025/26 with increasing core budget reductions, but Natural England should maintain its ambition around targets (as it did at this point last year).

4.2 In discussion, the Board congratulated the team on the end of year result. The Board noted the efforts made by staff to reduce budget spend through travel and subsistence restrictions, programme spend and the impact of achieving these would have made on staff morale.

Item 5 **Quarter 4 Finance Report**

5.1 Rachel Fraser introduced the Quarter 4 Finance Report. The report set out Natural England's summary financial position for Quarter 4 against the 2024/25 Action Plan.

Rachel drew the Board's attention to the following key points:

- Natural England's final outturn (subject to audit) was £3.2m underspend, 1.2% under budget.
- It is a great achievement that Natural England was able to manage a material pressure down and outturn in line with budget. However, looking forwards, areas to target for improvement include accurate forecasting from earlier in the year, over-optimism, better understanding of macroenvironment and impact on its business, deep dives to scrub numbers at key points in the year, and early visibility of potential 'non-firm' risks and opportunities.
- There was a huge improvement in Orion time recording compliance this year and will require careful monitoring and corrective action taken as early as possible in 2025/26 if needed.

5.2 With regards to the year ahead, the financial landscape is shaping up to be challenging. Natural England will need to optimise financial performance.

Natural England is undertaking a lessons learnt review to identify causes of forecast volatility and process improvements and strengthen financial management.

- 5.3 Rachel outlined considerations for 2025/26 which are:
- Natural England should focus on ways of achieving full budget utilisation, across all funding streams and within the constraints.
 - The staffing levels are going to continue to present a challenge, and the existing recruitment controls and reassignment processes need to remain in place.
 - Natural England should continue to develop its financial management capability.
- 5.4 In conclusion, the Board thanked Rachel for the quality of the data that had been provided.

Item 6 Quarter 4 Health and Safety (H&S) Report

- 6.1 Mike Cuthbert led this session and explained this is the end of the Quarter 4 report and the end of the year report. Mike advised their top priorities remained the same as previous quarters.
- 6.2 Mike advised the Board that they continued to focus on managing their high-risk activities (including a task and finish working group looking at chainsaw activities on National Nature Reserves), H&S leadership culture and improving their performance on the basics of H&S.
- 6.3 Mike outlined that high-profile strategic projects such as the new Strategy roll out and stress management continue to receive high levels of engagement demonstrating growth towards a more mature H&S culture.
- 6.4 Mike reported there is a lack of consistency in the day-to-day elements of H&S, which is evident in the number of teams scoring red on not completing investigations within the 10-working day limit. Their efforts to build and encourage active leadership is critical for them to make this shift change. They are engaging and reminding leadership teams to influence their prioritisation of H&S basics. These basics are now part of performance measures for all Directors and Chief Officers from 1 April 2025.
- 6.5 Comparison of the number of incidents by category over the last three years shows that stress remains the highest reporting category, but numbers are significantly lower than in Quarter 4 in the previous year. Reasons for the decline are being evaluated against results of the 2025 staff's pulse survey. The stress reduction working group will quantify if this is a positive reduction of stress or other causes, such as under reporting.
- 6.6 In summary, the Board was pleased to see the information and that it was good to see a reduction in stress related incidents.

Item 7 Quarter 4 Risk Report

- 7.1 Vicky Gaillard introduced this session and advised it was a combination of the Quarter 4 report and a full year review. She asked the Board to note that as the Public Appointments Team (PAT) was progressing Board's member recruitment, the PAT team had flagged the lack of diversity (ethnic, socio-economic, age and disability) in the Board was still a risk.
- 7.2 Vicky advised the Board that the Board's Risk subgroup - had been set up and Cynthia Alers and James Scott had met with Vicky, Oliver Harmar and Kirsty Carter-Brown for the first time in the middle of May.
- 7.3 Vicky outlined that Risk was moving to the Strategy Group and Risk Appetite was on the September Board's agenda where Board would be presented with Risk Appetite statements for endorsement.
- 7.4 In discussion, the Board was reminded there is an Ethnicity, Diversity and Inclusion champion in Natural England and their Chair sits on the Board selection panel. The Chair asked if Board members could consider who in their networks they could signpost the Board's member recruitment opportunity to.

Action: Board members to consider who in their networks they could signpost the Board's member recruitment opportunity to.

Item 8 2025/26 Business Planning – Budget and Action Plan Sign Off

- 8.1 Mike Cuthbert introduced this session and outlined this was a culmination of Business Planning and Action Plan sign off. The Board was asked to approve in principle and delegate sign off to the Executive team.
- 8.2 Mike advised they have aligned the Action Plan and their performance framework around the new Strategic Direction. The six priorities are the key architecture for both the Action Plan and their performance framework (to enable alignment in Natural England)
- 8.2 The Board was asked to note:
- The residual risks/issues to the 2025/26 Budget and be assured that any significant developments will be brought back to the Board.
 - That updates on the 2025/26 Action Plan delivery will come to the Board via the quarterly performance reports in-year.
- And to approve:
- The 2025/26 Budget and that they have an affordable plan.
 - The deliverability of the Action Plan, noting there will be risks to delivery in some areas even after mitigating actions taken.
- 8.3 The Board acknowledged this a good piece of work and endorsed the plan. In doing so they asked that the Action Plan clearly states that Natural England is here to conserve and restore the natural environment and asked for clarity in language and to think about options for improving.

Item 9 Strategic Direction to Strategy

- 9.1 Hannah Wood joined to lead the discussion and updated the Board on developments since the last reviews in February and April and provided a steer on strategy skeleton structure.

A brief overview of the services approach was given to the Board setting out how they will describe all Natural England does through a services lens.

Staff's strategy workshops are being prepared for this summer, and a list of locations and dates will be circulated to the Board as their attendance and engagement will be valuable.

- 9.2 Hannah outlined the ask of the Board for this meeting which was:

- Support the plan for development of the full strategy which will build on the success of the Strategic Direction and provide the strategic underpinning for the organisation in the coming years.
- To provide steers on the outline of the full strategy based on the new strategic outcomes set out in this paper, which will then be developed into the full draft document.
- To acknowledge the Board's engagement plans and use the Strategic Direction lines to take for future conversations.

- 9.3 The Board was reminded that the new strategy will recast the six priorities from the Strategic Direction as four strategic outcomes for people and nature. The importance of nature for Health, Wealth and Security still stands, as captured by the title and grounding around Growth, Health and Security. Natural England will build on the clarity in the strategic direction, be clear through these outcomes what it wants to achieve, and what Natural England's role is within it.

- 9.4 Hannah stated the six priorities in Natural England's Strategic Direction were developed to focus on business planning and change in this current year, ahead of the strategy bringing the full picture. Recasting them under four strategic outcomes provides a more relatable and useable approach. These capture the priority actions in a more strategic framing, raise ambition and set a clear destination for Natural England's work.

- 9.5 Hannah outlined the four strategic outcomes as:

- Outcome 1: Nature recovery across land and sea
They will accelerate large-scale nature recovery - restoring ecological function and creating resilient, joined-up landscapes. They will tackle the root causes of nature's decline such as pollution, climate change and degrade soils.

Includes:

- i. Priority 1: Drive nature recovery at a greater scale and faster pace than before by supporting large scale projects and making it easier for landowners to get permissions for Nature positive change, and;
 - ii. Priority 2: Tackle the root causes of Nature’s decline working with Defra’s partners to ensure cleaner air, clean and plentiful water, healthier soils and rich, productive seas.
- Outcome 2: Better places to live and work.
 They will shape places where nature and people thrive together, embedding nature into planning, housing, and infrastructure. They will drive sustainable growth by designing and developing places that work with and for nature, not against it.

 Includes:
 - i. Priority 3: Partner with planners and developers on “high nature; low carbon” houses, energy and transport infrastructure and introduce strategic solutions so development can also protect and restore nature, and;
 - ii. Priority 5: Shape better places for people to work and live by providing clear evidence and advice to our partners, using spatial plans for nature as a framework for investment and joined up action.
- Outcome 3: Improved health and wellbeing through nature
 They will ensure that everyone can access, benefit from, and contribute to nature recovery wherever they live.

 Includes:
 - i. Priority 6: Connect communities with nature and create nature close to people’s homes, ensuring everyone gains from the health benefits Nature can bring.
- Outcome 4: Nature, positive land and sea use
 They will enable land and sea use that restores nature, builds climate resilience, and supports a resource-secure economy into the future.

 Includes:
 - i. Priority 4: Support food security and sustainable farming, forestry and fishing through targeted advice and the right mix of public and private finance.

9.6 In discussion the Board welcomed the update and the four strategic outcomes. The Board was happy with the direction and that the next interaction at the July Board meeting will provide them with the opportunity to comment on the full draft Strategy.

9.7 The Board endorsed the strategy structure and plan in advance of the full draft at the July Board.

Item 10 Measuring our Success – Key Performance Indicators in future

- 10.1 Mike Cuthbert introduced this session, which was to seek the Board’s input on the proposed approach to developing Natural England’s future corporate performance reporting framework. This includes transitioning to a new Key Performance Indicator (KPI) structure aligned with their emerging strategy, the Defra’s Outcomes Framework, and the phased rollout of performance scorecards.
- 10.2 Mike set out the key changes that will happen in line with their new strategy and will fully take hold in 2026/27. While Natural England redevelops the metrics and framework to support its new strategy and Defra’s outcomes framework, this approach sets principles for the future performance framework and takes a stepping stone approach for 2025/26.
- 10.3 In discussion Mike outlined the key principles which are:
- For 2025/26, Natural England will use the six priorities in the Strategic Direction document as an interim basis for KPI alignment.
 - From 2026/27, Natural England’s corporate performance framework will align with the four Strategic Outcomes defined in the new strategy.
 - Performance data will be consolidated into a unified suite, ensuring data is collected once and reused effectively. Emphasis will shift from data presentation to integrated insight.
 - Natural England will continue reporting key management and activity metrics. These will be aligned with the four Strategic Outcomes and embedded in the DEFRA’s Outcomes Framework and the Environment Improvement Plan (EIP).
- 10.4 The Board endorsed this approach and welcomed the joined-up link to both the strategy and how the KPIs align with them.

Item 11 Natural England's role and priorities for securing nature recovery through the planning system.

- 11.1 Mike Burke led this item which was to build on Day1 stakeholder’s engagement event that was a session to gather insights from Board’s members and stakeholders on the opportunities and risks associated with planning reform and the unique role Natural England could play in the future.
- 11.2 Day1 focused on the questions - Where are we now? How well is the current system working for nature or growth? Where is it working? Where is it failing? And where do we want to be? (We want to see nature recovery and growth).

- 11.3 The Board was asked to consider what Natural England's unique role was. What could its destination service look like? In five year's time our planning service could look like:
- As Government's statutory advisor, Natural England offers strategic advice on how national and local policies can be best aligned to secure the environmental resilience needed to enable economic growth, nature recovery and improved public health (including via land use framework).
 - Natural England provides a simplified customer's journey whereby developers make one payment into a single fund that funds mitigation/compensation and links to restoration (Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) / Protected Sites Strategies). Development funding is targeted better to drive nature's restoration.
 - Vast majority of planning advice is self-serve by Local Planning Authorities and Government's departments (for National Significant Infrastructure Projects) drawing on.
 - Consistent proactive strategic planning offer on Local Development Plans that enables decision makers to avoid environmental harm or where needed strategic solutions linked to LNRS.
 - Natural England's bespoke service is focussed on small number (100s) of high risk/high opportunity cases – cost recovered.
 - Natural England has more sustainable funding base that enables them to provide consistent advice to secure nature and growth outcomes. Natural England has the skills and capability to deliver.
 - All enabled by new digital platform across Defra's Arm's Length Bodies/Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government.
- 11.4 In discussion the Board agreed that Natural England has a unique role to play. It could bring different stakeholders talking together, coming to the same agreement nature and development working alongside. The key will be how they deploy this strategy. It is important that they focus on integrity and transparency and consider how sites are maintained after developers have moved on. The Board reflected that Environmental Development Plans are key to reduce impact of climate change mitigation, nature-rich spaces and reducing pollution but they are not the only solution. Natural England needs a different approach, and to use plain English as its Unique Selling Point, what success looks like should be included in evidence-based analysis.
- 11.12 In summary the Board agreed that site visits and follow-up discussions strengthened the platform for partnership working across sectors on this lively but critical agenda for Natural England and thanked Urban and Civic for hosting and bringing together key stakeholders to help drive this work forward.

Item 12 Nature Restoration Fund

- 12.1 Mike Burke took this session and asked the Board to provide a steer on how they best use their advisory and delivery roles to ensure that, as part of a package of wider planning reforms, the Nature Restoration Fund protects and restores nature, as well as accelerates growth.
- 12.2 Natural England would then have a role to play in responsibility for securing positive environmental outcomes that infrastructure developers are not able to implement independently. These could be delivering a reduction in pollution affecting the water environment or securing nesting habitats to increase the population of a protected species, for example.
- 12.3 In principle, the Board was content with the approach, and was further assured that this session was to bring the Board up to date on its role and that the Natural England's Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC) was looking closely at the risks associated with this statutory delivery role and would advise the Board further later in the Autumn on its outcomes.

Item 13 Governance update

13.1 Audit Risk and Assurance Committee (ARAC)

Cynthia Alers updated the Board on the 29 May Defra's ARAC meeting. The meeting had reviewed the Defra's ARAC Progress Report and Cynthia highlighted some recent internal group audit reports of potential interest to Natural England, including:

1. Research and Development
2. Key financial controls - Management Reporting
3. Biodiversity Net Gain - Defra/Natural England joint lessons learnt

Regarding the National Audit Office (NAO) Value for Money update, the Board was asked to consider four options for possible future Value for Money assessments by NAO and recommended the following:

1. Food security and resilience.
2. **Protecting 30% of land for Nature by 2030 – Natural England's request, 4th priority.**
 - a. Could look at meeting the target, how protected areas are defined, what impact/benefit protection has had.
3. **Defra's contribution to reducing carbon emissions – Natural England's request, 2nd Priority**
 - a. Could look across various functions or focus specifically on agriculture and land use (farming practices, tree-planting, etc).
 - b. Builds on wider NAO work on innovation to achieve net zero and decarbonisation.
4. Waste, recycling and circular economy.
5. **Measuring progress towards environmental goals - Natural England's request, 3rd priority.**
 - a. Is there a robust system in place for measuring and monitoring progress against the EIP in light of upcoming refresh and the emerging outcomes-based framework.

- b. Could be a lessons learnt insight piece.
- 6. **Nature restoration & biodiversity – Natural England’s request, 1st priority.**
 - a. Nature’s Restoration Fund, setting and collecting appropriate levies on developers and using these to fund strategically important mitigations to protect nature.
 - b. Will be an audit alongside a BNG progress audit, but in shorter term, this could set out risks, challenges and good practice based on past National Audit Office work on similar funds to support implementation.

13.2 **People and Remuneration Committee (PRemCom)**

Peter Unwin advised that the group had not met since the last Board meeting and the next session was at the end of June.

13.3 **National Nature Reserve Declaration Committee (NNRDC)**

Kim Shillinglaw sought support from the Board on the proposal to join up with the National Trust under their trusted partner’s scheme. It was agreed that the Annual Report on NNRs would be circulated to the Board.

13.4 **Natural England’s Science Advisory Committee (NESAC)**

Lynn Dicks advised that the new NESAC membership was now in place. Prof Michael Winter had stepped down as Social Science and Expert Panel (SSEP) Chair. The Board thanked Prof Michael Winter for remaining on this subcommittee following his end of term as a Natural England’s Board member. It was agreed by the Board that the SSEP would be merged into NESAC going forwards.

14 **Any Other Business**

- 14.1 Vicky Gaillard advised that her temporary promotion had ended, and she was taking up a new role in Operations. The Board thanked Vicky for her leading role in the Board’s Governance updates and the risk refresh.