

Board Meeting

Minutes of the **Natural England** Board meeting held on 30th July 2025

Attending Board members

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

Executive Team

Marian Spain	Chief Executive (and ex-officio Board member)
Kirsty Carter-Brown	Chief Officer, Business Management
Sallie Bailey	Chief Scientist
Oliver Harmar	Chief Officer, Strategy
Matt Heard	Director, National Delivery (Deputising for Alan Law)

Defra Group

Sally Randall	Director General, Environment, Rural and Marine
Rachel Fraser	Finance Director
Teresa Kitchener	Defra group Human Resources (Deputising for Jen)
Ilana Conn	Deputy Director, Operational and Local Communications
Gabrielle Edwards	Deputy Director, Access Landscapes, Peatland and Seas (item 6)

Guests

Anita Chib	Director, Legal and Governance
David Drake	Director, Connecting People with Nature (item 4)
Amanda Craig	Director, Resilient Landscape and Seas (item 6)
John Holmes	Director, Strategy (items 7 & 8)

Apologies

Alan Law	Chief Officer, Operations
Cynthia Alers	Board member
Jen Garrett	Deputy Director, Human Resources
Navroza Ladha	Chief Officer, Legal, Governance and External Affairs

Item 1 Welcome from the Chair and Declarations of Interest

- 1.1 The Chair welcomed the Board, Executive and guests to the 128th Board meeting. Apologies were received from Alan Law, Chief Officer, Operations and Jen Garrett, Defra group Deputy Director of Human Resources.
- 1.2 Board Members requested the following amendments to the Register of Interests.
 - Lynn Dicks – To add: Nature-Based Systems lead and Committee Member for Fenland SOIL
 - Mark Tufnell – To remove: Resigned from Chair and Trustee of Royal Agriculture Society of England and resigned from the Institute for Agriculture.

Item 2 Review of 28th May 2025 Minutes and Matters Arising

- 2.1 The Board approved the minutes, subject to one amendment:
 - It was agreed by the Board that the Social Science Expert Panel (SSEP) would be merged into Natural England Science Advisory Committee (NESAC) going forwards.

Action: Board and Executive Services Team to amend.
- 2.2 The Board approved the Matters Arising Report without any amendments.

Item 3 Chief Executive's Report

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

Board recruitment

Defra is recruiting two new board members, including a Deputy Chair. Last year, two members left and were not replaced due to a pause in recruitment. Two more terms end in May 2026. This round may be followed by another next year, though timings are unclear.

In discussion the Board was asked to share the opportunity widely, keeping in mind the importance of improving board diversity and to let Chair know if they would like to extend their term.

Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier risk

The Rural Payments Agency (RPA) has contacted 1,000 priority farmers, with Natural England inviting 538 to date. Of these, 400 have responded positively, and 300 have received advisory visits. A further 700 invitations are pending. The scheme is not yet officially open and there is a significant reputational risk to Natural England if the scheme is perceived as poorly communicated or under-delivered, particularly considering past issues with delayed payments.

Capacity constraints remain a critical concern. The digital interface is cumbersome, and the scheme is complex to administer. There is a risk Natural England will be unable to meet demand if applications surge, especially with projections of 3,000–4,000 farmers entering higher-tier schemes next year.

Annual Report and Accounts (ARA) lessons learnt

Since the last board meeting, the 2023-24 Annual Report and Accounts have been laid without any questions regarding the content. Government Internal Audit Agency (GIAA) has completed a deep dive lessons-learned review, which will be presented at the Audit Risk and Assurance Committee (ARAC) extraordinary meeting in September.

Audit Key Recommendations:

- need to treat the ARA as a rolling process with quarterly review of the assurance process.
- greater clarity is needed around accountability and decision-making processes
- senior Natural England leaders will take more ownership of the ARA, rather than delegating to more junior staff

In her update Marian highlighted additional minor concerns. The Board was asked to note:

- strategic solution accounting treatments remain complex; Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) income will appear in this year's accounts for the first time.
- energy and nutrient mitigation risks remain significant.
- the need to progress work on the Nature Restoration Fund (NRF).

It was confirmed both ARAC and Board will receive quarterly reports as a progress update.

Action: ARAC and Board will receive quarterly ARA reports as a progress update. Rachel Fraser

High-risk cases

Interest in high risk cases is increasing every month due to the political climate. Steps are in place to move the way Natural England and Defra operate to be more in line with current government. Natural England's messaging should be clear, and our guidance needs to be equally clear to help members of the public. The Board agreed that the format and wording of our guidance needs to be user friendly and use non-technical language. It was noted that a guidance review is under way.

Cunliffe Report

Published by: Independent Water Commission, chaired by Sir Jon Cunliffe

Purpose: To address systemic failures in the UK water sector and propose a comprehensive overhaul of regulation, governance, and planning.

Oliver Harmar introduced this item and explained a landmark report was launched in July, with recommendations for stronger integration between regulators including Environment Agency and Water Companies.

He explained the recommendation was a national integration of regulators with a single integrated water regulator for England, replacing Ofwat, the Drinking Water Inspectorate, and incorporating relevant functions from the Environment Agency and Natural England.

The report also recommended creating nine new regional water system planning authorities in England and one in Wales. These bodies will develop water investment plans aligned with local priorities, integrating water with economic growth, public health, and environmental goals. There will be stronger emphasis on nature's role in water management and clarity on where Natural England's remit begins and ends.

Oliver confirmed this would return to the September Board meeting to discuss Natural England's position and its input to the Government response to the Cunliffe recommendations.

Action: A paper on Natural England's response to and implications of the Cunliffe review will be presented at the September board. Oliver Harmer

Planning and Infrastructure Bill /Nature Restoration Fund (PIB/NRF)

Key Developments:

- Legislative Progress: A strengthened package of amendments has been tabled, following extensive engagement with Defra and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). This provides a more robust foundation for the NRF.

- Cross-Government Collaboration: A joint surge team has been established across Natural England, Defra, and MHCLG, with shared workspace now operational.
- Natural England Delivery Team: A dedicated team is being transitioned from the Greener Farming and Fisheries Portfolio to lead NRF delivery.

Strategic Risks and Challenges:

- Expectation Management: Current perceptions of what NRF can do might not meet stakeholder expectations once delivery commences.
- Financial Model Uncertainty: Need to understand further where funding will sit and how risk will be managed. Assurance needed on first income tranche by June 2026.
- Digital Delivery: Discovery phase is commencing, but definition of ownership and funding alignment between Natural England and Defra is ongoing.
- Deliverability Gap: Time lag (2–3 years) between scheme launch and visible outcomes poses reputational risk, especially under new legislative timelines.
- Resourcing: Ensuring that staff capacity and capability are sufficient for the scale and pace required. Upskilling needs are likely to be significant.

Governance and Oversight

- ARAC To provide assurance that Natural England is equipped to take on the new duties, not just accountability. Regular updates to be provided.
- Board Engagement: Proposal for fortnightly contact with Caroline Spelman and James Scott as Board members to maintain strategic steer and oversight.

In discussion the Board agreed to:

- endorse formal letter from Chair to the Secretary of State outlining delivery risks, funding concerns, and digital ownership.
- support continued cross departmental engagement to clarify roles, funding flows, and digital ownership.
- agreed to enhance Board oversight via ARAC and nominated members.

Action: Chair to write to the Secretary of State outlining delivery risks, funding concerns, and digital ownership.

Action: Board Engagement: PIB/NRF Board reference group, James Scott & Caroline Spelman, to be formed for fortnightly contact to maintain strategic steer and oversight. Brad Tooze, Mike Burke, Oliver Harmer

Action: PIB/NRF: NRF to be given proper attention through ARAC and provide assurance on finance, legal and delivery risks. Rachel Fraser

Item 4 Q1 Performance Reports

- 4.1 Rachel Fraser introduced the session and explained this is the first attempt at a combined new report to provide the Board with an overview of business performance for the first quarter of 2025/26.

The paper and annexes summarise delivery covering Finance, People, Corporate Delivery and Health and Safety. It sets out key issues and actions being undertaken to address them. In the future, this paper will include our risk reporting.

- 4.2 The Board was asked to:

- note Q1 Business Performance.
- take assurance that the Executive is putting in place the right scrutiny and actions to mitigate issues.
- comment on the content, make up and level of information provided

- 4.3 In discussion the Board noted Natural England has made encouraging progress across all performance areas, with positive momentum evident in the first quarter. However, several red and amber-rated metrics highlight areas requiring action and close monitoring. The Board noted the following key performance issues and risks:

- workforce pressures: FTE levels are currently driving pay pressure. Resourcing is uneven, with some teams overstaffed relative to the business plan and others understaffed.
- policy and legislative changes: Ongoing uncertainty and funding dependencies linked to external changes are impacting organisational stability.
- staff wellbeing and engagement: Stress-related concerns have been noted, alongside low uptake of Learning and Development opportunities.
- digital transformation: Progress continues, though challenges remain.

The Board raised the need for clearer insight into how Natural England evaluates its own effectiveness—particularly productivity, policy impact, and service delivery.

The Board acknowledged:

- work is underway to refine the performance scorecard, with a focus on outcomes, reputation, and relationships.
- the Executive is exploring broader productivity metrics beyond transactional efficiency, including benchmarking and impact assessment.
- a need was identified to better capture customer satisfaction, not just transactional metrics.

Action: Performance: develop proposals for how Natural England evaluates its own effectiveness and productivity for inclusion in future reports. Mike Cuthbert

Finance

Rachel Fraser set out the finance position and forecast to date and asked the Board to note:

- Current year to date pressure: £4m.
- Projected annual pressure: £16m if trends continue, but this is not final—funding streams and other factors may reduce this.
- Budget confirmation pending; VES (Voluntary Exit Scheme) impacts still to be factored in.
- Work on risks and opportunities is ongoing to better understand the final outturn.

Rachel asked the Board to note a risk around financial pressure in Landscape Recovery due to the scheme moving to the next phase and the ongoing conversation with Defra relating to the accounting treatment of unsold Nutrient Mitigation Scheme credits.

In summary the Board agreed there was a need for continued dialogue with Defra and HM Treasury on risk sharing arrangements, accounting flexibility, and long-term models. The Board suggested Natural England could explore with other Government organisations how they manage similar risks. The National Infrastructure Bank that supports Homes England could be a model to consider.

Health and Safety

Following the recent change in government, Natural England like many others has experienced a period of significant transition. This has brought about new priorities, evolving policies, and a shift in the external landscape that directly impacts its work.

The Board formally acknowledged the resilience, adaptability, and professionalism demonstrated by all staff during this time of change. The Board recognise that navigating uncertainty requires not only operational agility but also emotional intelligence and teamwork. In follow-up the Board asked that the Internal Communications team campaign to give staff a clear narrative around changes, their purpose, and how they are interlinking to take us to a better place.

Item 5

Risk Update

- 5.1 Oliver Harmar introduced the item and advised this session provides an update on the organisation's evolving approach to strategic risk management, reflecting recent board discussions and progress made across two key areas:

1. Strengthening Risk Management Culture and Process

- Following the risk appetite session and the May 2025 Board discussion on embedding a stronger risk culture, we are now presenting a more developed—though not yet final—framework.
- Risk has transitioned into Oliver’s group, with a new Deputy Director (DD) of Risk Management being appointed.
- Steps have been taken to embed risk management across governance structures and the wider organisation, maintaining strategic focus while improving clarity on risk impact and mitigation confidence.
- A refined strategic risk register now aligns to nine agreed categories with improved clarity and consistency in risk articulation, including pre/post mitigation scoring.
- The Board welcomed a reduction of risks from 38 to 21 following consolidation and review and the Introduction of the “three lines of defence” model with tangible examples.

2. Focus on Key Strategic Risks

- Five priority risks were identified: NRF delivery, cybersecurity, staff capability/capacity, annual report and accounts, and organisational change due to funding reductions (e.g. Spending Review)
- These are being actively mitigated and integrated into governance and performance monitoring.
- The Board discussion highlighted the need for systematic cross-referencing of risks in management papers to ensure integration, not isolation.
- There is recognition that while the framework is improved, embedding it into operations and performance conversations is the next critical step.

The Board are asked to note progress and support the continued integration of strategic risk management into organisational performance and governance.

In discussion the Board recognised this is work in progress and that it is moving in the right direction.

Item 6 **How can Natural England support Protected Landscapes to deliver 30by30.**

- 6.1 Amanda Craig and Gabrielle Edwards introduced this session. The Board was asked to agree what Natural England's role is in maximising the contribution of the protected landscapes family to 30by30 and test how that works with Strategic Outcome 1 of the new Natural England Strategy

In discussion the Board noted the priority proposals which are:

- 6.1.1 Delivery: support Protected Landscape bodies and initiatives such as the [National Estate for Nature](#) to align and allocate land management resources

and funding to deliver gains for nature contributing to 30by30 whilst reinforcing landscape character and natural beauty within Protected landscapes. An example of this could be fast tracking Landscape Recovery scheme bids that join up 30by30 delivery in Protected Landscapes.

6.1.2 Leadership: Use the [s245 Duty in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act](#) to ensure all Relevant Authorities actively demonstrate delivery of the new duty to 'seek to further' the purposes of all Protected landscapes, and in so doing maximise the value to nature recovery. This will involve Natural England working with Defra to ensure they and other relevant authorities are complying with the duty and to establish a mechanism for monitoring and reporting the effects of the duty to Secretary of State.

6.1.3 Evidence and monitoring: Coordinate actions through the Protected Landscape Partnership to upgrade the existing patchwork approach to environmental monitoring to establish a consistent standard for monitoring nature recovery in Protected Landscapes. Prioritise condition monitoring and action to improve Special Sites of Scientific Interest in Protected Landscapes amongst other priority areas and tell the story of progress and achievement.

In discussion the Board agreed the next steps for Natural England are to:

- actively promote the new national management plan guidance to all Protected Landscapes, partners and relevant authorities. This will help embed the targets and outcomes framework contributing to 30by30 and LNRS implementation.
- proactively support Protected Landscapes to ensure they have up to date management plans setting out a clear strategic direction and delivery pathway for nature recovery appropriate to their place.
- align with the [Corry Review](#) to unblock Natural England regulatory barriers in delivering landscape scale nature recovery delivery and seeing Protected Landscape bodies as a trusted partner.

The Board agreed the next Government steps should be:

- support the strengthening of Protected Landscape purposes and governance arrangements to ensure they are well designed, well governed, and effectively managed in ways that lead to effective conservation outcomes through e.g. International Union for Conservation of Nature.
- seek a slot for secondary legislation (regulations) for the s.245 Protected Landscape Duty as soon as possible. These regulations will strengthen the role that public bodies, including water companies, must play in delivering better outcomes for nature, water, climate and access to nature. Regulations would support public bodies and Protected Landscape organisations to work more closely together in delivering Management Plans.
- enable flexibility to respond and tailor agri-environment schemes, working in collaboration with landowners and managers who know what measures are required for optimal outcomes. It is also essential to consider local circumstance and the needs of each Protected Landscape consistent with their management plans.

The Board expressed satisfaction following the successful stakeholder engagement event relating to this item. The focus on protected landscapes was noted and appreciated. Amanda was acknowledged for her significant preparatory work, which contributed to a productive discussion. Further work is expected as she refines and translates the group's input.

The Board asked for a thank-you note to be circulated, to include a summary to the stakeholders who attended the workshop dinner the evening before, acknowledging their contributions and outlining key discussion points.

Action: The Board asked that Amanda and her team continue developing outputs from the discussion and to write to the stakeholders acknowledging their contributions and outlining key discussion points from today's meeting.

Item 7 Review of Strategic Outcomes in the New Natural England Strategy.

7.1 John Holmes led this session, and the Board was reminded of progress to date. The Board was asked to review the Strategic Outcomes as proposed for the Natural England Strategy and provide steers on the implications for the organisation.

7.2 In discussion the Board noted the Strategy is framed through four strategic outcomes:

Outcome 1: Recovering Nature

Increased scale and quality of places where Nature thrives.

Outcome 2: Building Better Places

Housing and infrastructure development are driving Nature recovery and vice versa, for communities that are more prosperous and resilient to climate change.

Outcome 3: Improving Health and Well-being

Everyone can choose to enjoy the outdoors - no matter where they live – to maximise the benefits of being in Nature.

Outcome 4: Delivering Security through Nature

Nature underpins enhanced security and climate resilience through more nature-positive practices across land and sea-based industries.

The Board noted each strategic outcome links to and amplifies the others, and together they address environmental, social and economic actions that will contribute to thriving nature for growth, health and security.

7.3 The Board welcomed the revised draft of the Outcomes, recognising that feedback from Natural England Landscape Advisory Panel and NESAC had been considered. Board fed back on various sections where clarity, expansion, or increased ambition were needed. John Holmes took away detailed notes for consideration in the final drafting. Key points raised on each outcome were:

Outcome 1: be clearer on spatial prioritisation, and new partnerships for nature recovery

Outcome 2: ensure *quality of life* and *landscape led development* are reflected, and Growth is referenced along with the rewards of good environmental stewardship.

Outcome 3: bring more tangible aspirations and actions

Outcome 4: reflect food, water and climate security more simply. Mainstream investment in nature for security.

Item 8 role.

Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs): Our strategy and Board

8.1 John Holmes took the Board through the purpose of the session and the Board was asked to:

- note the implementation of the lessons learnt recommendations.
- agree outline changes to the Board's role in SSSI notification and confirmation decisions, with detailed proposals to be tabled at a future meeting if agreed.
- reflect on the place of protected sites in our strategy.

8.2 John Holmes explained the proposal going forwards is:

- for the Board to periodically consider the programme of cases to be considered for SSSI notification. This would comprise a programme of notification for the current spending review period, annually updated through business planning.
- for those cases agreed by that consideration to be likely contentious and/or complex, the Board would retain the authority to **approve notification**, providing earlier understanding and awareness of sites and any related matters. Any considered non-contentious would be delegated to the Chief Executive.
- the Board would continue to be the decision maker for all contentious confirmations, but through a new **two-stage confirmation meeting process**. This would hear objections in a public meeting (as currently) but then introduce a separate closed Board meeting for the decision to confirm or not.

8.3 In summary the Board broadly approved the proposals and welcomed the refresh of process, particularly early sight of contentious issues, handling plans for landowners and stakeholders, and how notifications would drive support for nature recovery.

Action: Following endorsement by Board on two-stage confirmation meeting process Board and Executive Services to implement the necessary arrangements.

SSSI pipeline to be brought to board in due course, ensuring transparency/consideration of overlaps with areas likely to be developed

Item 9 National Nature Reserve Declaration Committee (NNRDC) update.

- 9.1 The Board noted the NNRDC decision to declare Ingleborough and Seven Sisters as National Nature Reserves.
- 9.2 The Board noted that we are over halfway through the King's series of National Nature Reserve declarations.

Item 10 Any Other Business.

- 10.1 Adelle Rowe took the Board through a forward look plan for the September Board meeting. The Board was asked to note that the meeting will be in the Newcastle Defra office and focus on Board Effectiveness review, Annual Report and Accounts for 2024-25, Government Reviews and to approve the new Natural England Strategy.
- 10.2 **Meeting review points:**
 - The Board thanked Rachel Fraser for highlighting Quarter 1 budget pressures and emphasized the importance of the strategy discussion and SSSI.
 - Highlighted valuable conversations around risks and National Nature Reserves
 - The Chairman acknowledged the significant internal and external changes, including government shifts and staffing reductions. He commended the organisation's resilience and the executive team's leadership.