



Board Meeting

Minutes of the **Natural England** Board meeting held on 26 November 2025

Attending Board members

Peter Unwin
Dr Alastair Leake
Mark Tufnell
Professor Clare Fitzsimmons
James Scott
Dame Caroline Spelman
Professor Mel Austen
Professor Lynn Dicks
Cynthia Alers

Deputy Chair

Executive Team

Marian Spain
Kirsty Carter-Brown
Sallie Bailey
Oliver Harmor
Sarah Zielicka Edwards
Alan Law

Chief Executive (and ex-officio Board member)
Chief Officer, Business Management
Chief Scientist
Chief Officer, Strategy
Chief Officer, Legal, Governance and External Affairs (Acting)
Chief Officer, Operations

Defra Group

Sally Randall
Rachel Fraser
Paul Leat
Jen Garrett

Director General, Environment, Rural and Marine
Director, Finance
Deputy Director, Communications
Director, Human Resources

Guests

Mike Cuthbert
Brad Tooze
David Renwick

Director, Planning & Performance (items 4&5)
Director, Nature Restoration Fund (item 6)
Regional Director, North (item 9)

Apologies

Tony Juniper
Kim Shillinglaw
Navroza Ladha

Chair
Board member
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 130th Board meeting.
- 1.2 Apologies were received from Tony Juniper, Kim Shillinglaw and Navroza Ladha.
- 1.3 Mark Tufnell asked that the Register of Interests be updated to include that he is an interim non-executive director member of the Rural Payments Agency 's's Agency Management Board and Rural Payments Agency Audit and Risk and Assurance Committee- remunerated and to remove his membership of the Songbird Survival Trust.
- 1.4 Lynn Dicks stated she is a Member of Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture Research Portfolio Scientific Advisory Board, Scottish Government and that should be reflected under 'Other memberships'

Item 2 **Review of 24 September 2025 Minutes and Matters Arising**

- 2.1 The Board approved the minutes, subject to a minor amendment.
Action: Board and Executive Services
- 2.2 The Board were provided an update from Alan Law regarding the action from September 2025 Board relating to Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier. Alan reported that regular meetings with Mike Rowe, Defra Director of Farming and Countryside Programme are now taking place. The action is now closed.
Action: Governance Team

Item 3 **Chief Executive's Report**

- 3.1 Marian Spain presented an overview of the significant and timely issues that had arisen since the last meeting:
- Pay Flexibility Case is awaiting approval from HM Treasury and Cabinet Office
 - Annual Report and Accounts 2024-25 is in good shape, and a first draft review is due on 1 December 2025.
 - Environmental Improvement Plan relaunch is next week; a written briefing will be sent to the Board and Marian to provide assurance it aligns with the Natural England Strategy.

Item 4 Quarter Two (Q2) Performance Reporting

4.1 Mike Cuthbert introduced the item, and the Board were asked to note that:

- at Q2, Natural England is maintaining delivery momentum despite significant internal and external pressures.
- there remains pay pressure arising from above average full time equivalent, uneven resourcing and low turnover and that the Executive Committee have escalated a pay overspend risk to Defra group Finance.
- there is a delivery risk for Key Performance Indicator 14 Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier (CSHT), specifically that the current target of 700 agreements is unlikely to be achieved by March 2026.

and to agree that:

- the mitigating actions and Executive Committee scrutiny of its Key Risks are sufficient.
- the content and level of detail in this Quarterly Business Performance report meets Board expectations.

4.2 In discussion the Board noted the current position as at the end of Q2, overspend challenges and the steps being taken through internal strategic assignment to get people in the right place.

4.3 The Board welcomed the new report format and in discussion asked for identification of Risks that could be cross referenced to the Quarterly Report through a service lens. In response to the discussions Mike Cuthbert confirmed the Board will see a slightly different report for Q1 in 2026-27 that takes these changes into account.

Action: Ensure the Quarterly Report includes identification of Risks that could be cross referenced to the Quarterly Performance Report through a service lens. Mike Cuthbert, David Drake and Adelle Rowe.

Item 5 Business Planning and Efficiencies update

5.1 Mike Cuthbert set out that the purpose of the session was to give the Board an early sight of the emerging Grant in Aid (GiA) budget allocation for the next three financial years (2026-27 to 2028-29), including the indicative efficiency targets.

5.2 The Board was asked to note:

- the indicative GiA budget position for the next three financial years (2026-27 to 2028-29).
- the ongoing work to reset our baseline GiA.
- our proposed revised efficiency savings target and action underway to develop plans to deliver these savings.

- 5.3 In discussion the Board noted the current position, were assured that the next three years would be relatively stable in terms of year-on-year budget, and that this subject would return to them at their March 2026 Board meeting after the Executive Committee have reviewed and checked alignment against the Natural England Strategy.

Item 6 Nature Restoration Fund

- 6.1 Brad Tooze introduced this item and explained the purpose of the session is to set out the progress and key risks associated with the ongoing rapid development of the [Nature Restoration Fund](#) (NRF) and implementation of Environmental Delivery Plans (EDPs).

Brad's team presented recommendations for Board to approve proposals for Board Retained Authority relating to NRF and the strategic approach Natural England are taking to developing an initial suite of EDPs for nutrients and Great Crested Newts (GCNs). The team sought Board's steers on how best to manage the risks associated with a possible June 2026 launch, recommending Board resolve to notify the Secretary-of-State (SoS) that Natural England is preparing EDPs at the earliest opportunity after the commencement of the Planning and Infrastructure Bill (PIB)/Act.

The Board was asked to:

- Approve the governance proposal that Board retains authority on notifying the Secretary of State that Natural England is preparing an EDP.
- Note the content and approach of the EDP prototype for nutrient pollution.
- Agree that Natural England will initially prepare EDPs to cover nutrient neutrality catchments and GCNs.
- Consider the risks and inter-dependencies associated with a proposed June 2026 delivery timeline and provide a steer on the Minimum Viable Product to be worked up for June to inform further conversations across government.
- Consider and resolve to notify SoS that Natural England is preparing EDPs at the earliest opportunity after the commencement of the Planning and Infrastructure Bill/Act.

- 6.2 In discussion the Board expressed appreciation to the team for their significant efforts, approved Annex A, the EDP prototype was noted; and it was agreed that the first EDP will focus on Nutrient Neutrality (NN), with GCNs to follow.

- 6.3 The Board noted the need to balance Ministerial ambition with practical deliverability. It was agreed that the Chair should write to the Secretary of State (SoS) assuring her that Natural England was working as speedily as possible to deliver the Government's ambition. He should also point out the risks involved and the steps that were necessary to ameliorate these. It was vital for the long term success of the scheme that the first EDP's were seen to deliver housebuilding and environmental improvements.

Action: Tony Juniper to write to SoS on behalf of the Board with endorsement of the position set out in Item 6, above.

Item 7 Defra Strategic Policy Statement

- 7.1 Oliver Harmar introduced this item and set out [Recommendation 2](#) from the 2025 independent review of Defra's regulatory landscape by Dan Corry which suggested these Strategic Policy Statements.
- 7.2 Natural England have identified concerns regarding ambiguity of language in the draft statement and a question about the legal underpinnings. Oliver impressed the urgency for responding to this task and Board members James Scott and Peter Unwin volunteered to help with the draft response.

Item 8 Audit Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC) Chair

- 8.1 Resolution to remove ARAC chair, Cynthia Alers. Resolution to appoint ARAC chair, Mark Tufnell.

Item 9 Proposed Designation of a new Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in the Yorkshire Wolds

- 9.1 David Renwick led this session, the Board was asked to consider in accordance with Natural England's [Non-Financial Scheme of Delegation \(Part 12\)](#):
- the final technical assessments of whether Natural England should designate a new Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in the Yorkshire Wolds; and
 - a draft Order with regard to the designation of a new AONB in the Yorkshire Wolds; and
 - to proceed to a formal period of Notice.
- 9.2 The Board expressed appreciation for the concise and well-delivered presentation. Thanks were extended for the significant effort invested prior to this meeting, including the recent site visit and the comprehensive webinar provided under the supporting papers. These contributions have been instrumental in informing today's discussion and ensuring clarity on key points. The Board approved the recommendations and instructed the team to move to the Notice Period.
10. **Any Other Business**
- 10.1 The Board noted that it was the last meeting for the Board Apprentice Julie Castell and they wished her well in her next adventures.
- 10.2 Board member James Scott raised the clash of dates with the May 2026 Board meeting and the UK Real Estate investment and infrastructure Forum <https://2026.ukreiiif.com/> event in Leeds and asked if it would be possible to consider the Board meeting date/location to aid attendance at both events.