



Minutes of the **Natural England** Board meeting held on 28 January 2026

Attending Board members

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

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
Sarah Zielicka Edwards	Chief Officer, Legal, Governance and External Affairs (Acting)
Alan Law	Chief Officer, Operations

Defra / NE Directors

Edward Barker	Defra, Director, Natural Environment Trees and Landscape
Jen Garrett	Defra, Director, Human Resources
Rachel Fraser	Director, Finance
Aidan Lonergan	Deputy Director, Funding Development (item 4)
James Diamond	Director, People (item 5)
John Holmes	Director, Strategy (item 5)
Adelle Rowe	Director, External Affairs, Board and Executive Services

Apologies

Kim Shillinglaw	Board member
Sally Randall	Defra, Director General, Environment, Rural and Marine
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 131st Board meeting.
- 1.2 Apologies were received from Kim Shillinglaw, Navroza Ladha and Sally Randall.
- 1.3 There were no updates requested on the Board Register of Interests.

Item 2 Review of 26 November 2025 Minutes and Matters Arising

- 2.1 The Board approved the minutes, subject to a small amendment to the Nature Restoration Fund text. Peter Unwin committed to provide the secretariat team with revised wording to reflect the magnitude of the discussion.

Action: Peter Unwin and Board and Executive Team

Item 3 Chief Executive's Report

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

[The Water White Paper](#)

This was published on 20 January, with Natural England's input helping to secure stronger commitments on nature recovery and climate resilience. Natural England will continue to work with Defra to further strengthen key aspects, particularly the nature remit of the proposed new regulator, to ensure that environmental outcomes remain at the heart of the reforms. This topic will return to a Board meeting later in the year for a steer on Natural England's response and its role.

[Defra report on status of species and habitats](#)

This is the first England-specific report on the condition of European sites and species, which Natural England wrote on behalf of Defra. Findings are stark, but the report also highlights positive measures undertaken by Natural England and its partners e.g. [Species Recovery Program](#), [Protected Sites Strategies](#), [LIFE projects](#), Natural England's work on agri-environment and innovative approaches like [District Level Licensing](#) and [Nutrient Mitigation Scheme](#).

[House of Lords Committee on Industry and Regulators](#)

Marian attended the Regulator's Council meeting on 7 January 2026, hosted by the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Business and Trade, alongside 11 regulators. The discussion focused on how regulators and government can better work together to support growth. Marian raised points on setting appropriate risk appetite, opportunities under the Planning and Infrastructure Act, and the need for a system-wide approach to environmental resilience. She highlighted expectations for regulators to contribute to growth; preparation for

Public Accounts Committee lines of questioning; ensuring legislation remains fit for purpose; improving digital effectiveness, and addressing issues related to farming, SSSIs and the planning system.

Environmental Land Management Schemes

Marian advised the Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier delivery is being affected by uncertainty, with only around 25% of the pipeline of 900 schemes progressing to application. The Landscape Recovery Scheme continues to progress and Multiple Mid-Tier, Higher Level Schemes and Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier schemes finishing at the end of 2026 will add to delivery and budget pressures. Natural England is working with Defra and Rural Payments Agency to seek solutions.

Pay Reform

The 2-Year Pay Flexibility Case was approved by Her Majesty's Treasury and Cabinet Office on 12 January. Natural England have commenced Trade Union negotiations with the aim of a pay award significantly above the standard 3.25% for this financial year and the next. This includes harmonisation of Terms and Conditions.

The Board asked that their gratitude for the huge amount of work that has gone into this be relayed to the Human Resources team and Natural England People Team who have gone above and beyond to get this over the line.

The 2024/25 Annual Report and Accounts

This is progressing well and Natural England is working through queries raised by the auditor's initial review which will enable production of Version 2.0 to be shared with the Natural England Audit and Risk Assurance Committee in February. It will then go to Defra Ministers on 16 March, as per the schedule agreed by Board.

Civil Service Pension Scheme

The Civil Service Pension Scheme provider changed in December 2025. There are some issues following this change and some members of the Civil Service pension scheme are currently experiencing delays and slow responses in accessing services from the pension administrator. In some cases, this has led to late pension payments and very delayed responses to employee queries and enquiries. Marian asked the Natural England Board to note that this remains a Risk and that there are mitigation meetings with Defra taking place.

Nature Restoration Fund (NRF)

Marian asked the Board to note that there are still several risks associated with the NRF implementation plans. The digital process requires further testing, and there are concerns regarding liquidity risks and whether Investment Equity funding from developers will flow quickly enough. Developers will be expected to commit before planning permission is granted, which presents a risk should planning permission subsequently be refused.

Natural England, as an organisation entering into agreements for the collection of income or payments, will also need to act in effect as a debt-collection agency to enforce these financial instruments.

Constructive Losses

Marian advised the Board of two constructive losses relating to the Sustainable Development Digital System (SDDS) and the Nature Recovery Management System (NRMS). Constructive losses arise where expenditure no longer provides the intended benefit. The Board were asked to note Natural England has reviewed its project governance and delivery processes and is capturing lessons learned to strengthen assurance, decision making and oversight for future programmes.

In line with the Natural England Financial Scheme of Delegations the Board was asked to approve reporting the losses to His Majesty's Treasury for final clearance.

Action: Board members to approve reporting the losses to His Majesty's Treasury.

Item 4 Nature Finance

- 4.1 Oliver Harmar, Chief Officer for Strategy gave an update on the current scope and focus of Natural England's activities to grow Nature Finance. Barriers to progress were outlined, as well as a summary of Natural England's position, which is to strengthen its capacity to engage more widely and proactively on regulatory drivers, policy frameworks, sectoral pathways (with DEFRA) and voluntary market standards, working across government.

The Board was asked to consider whether this is an area of activity that Natural England should invest in, noting that outcomes may be uncertain and potential returns, particularly those linked to changes in business behaviour. may be difficult to quantify.

- 4.2 The Board approved the approach, recognising this both as an ongoing area of strategic work and the need to strengthen the system-enabling role of Natural England in Nature Finance. The Board agreed that this work should return to the Executive Team in April in the form of a roadmap to set out, prioritise and drive next steps.

Item 5 Workshop: Strategy

- 5.1 John Holmes, Adelle Rowe and James Diamond led a Strategy Workshop with a focus on culture and behaviours. The Board were asked to consider this topic through the lens of the implementation of the Natural England Strategy and provide a steer on Natural England Brand, reputation and actions needed to sustain changes.

Item 6 Any Other Business

- 6.1 There was no other business to report but the Chair noted in summary that Board understood the Risks to Natural England regarding the Nature Restoration Fund and that this will return to the Board in March. In final comment the meeting was agreed to have gone very well, with useful discussions set up by good quality, concise papers.