Board Meeting

Minutes of the **Natural England** Board meeting held on 4 March 2026

Attending Board members

Dr Tony Juniper	Chair
Dr Alastair Leake	
Mark Tufnell	
Professor Clare Fitzsimmons	
James Scott	
Professor Mel Austen	
Professor Lynn Dicks	
Cythia 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)

Defra / NE Directors

Sally Randall	Director General, Environment, Rural and Marine
James Diamond	Director, People
Mike Cuthbert	Director, Planning and Performance (items 5&6)
Brad Tooze	Director, Nature Restoration Fund (item 7)
David Lowe	Director, Business Management and Managing the Organisation (item 8)
Ruth Andreyeva	Director, Land Water and Seas (item 10)
Adelle Rowe	Director, External Affairs, Board and Executive Services
David Slater	Director, South West Region (deputising for Alan Law)

Apologies

Peter Unwin	Deputy Chair
Dame Caroline Spelman	Board member
Kim Shillinglaw	Board member
Alan Law	Chief Officer, Operations
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 the132nd Board meeting.

1.2 Apologies were received from Kim Shillinglaw, Peter Unwin, Dame Caroline Spelman, Navroza Ladha and Alan Law.

1.3 The following changes were noted for the Register of Interests

- Removal of Mark Tufnell temporary Board member and ARAC Chair roles for the Rural Payment Agency that ended on 1 March due to their recent recruitment of Board members.
- Addition for Lynn Dicks regarding the Bumblebee conservation fund scheme that she is involved with through her Cambridge University role.

1.4 Sarah Zielicka Edwards reminded Board Members of the need to use their NE email accounts exclusively for all communications due to sensitive nature of the material and associated security risks.

Item 2 Review of 28 January Strategy meeting Minutes and Matters Arising

2.1 The Board approved the minutes, subject to some minor amendments.

Action: Board and Executive Team

Item 3 Annual Report and Accounts 2024-25

3.1 Sarah Zielicka Edwards informed the Board that the latest Annual Report and Accounts had been circulated to them all by email for review. Board members were asked to provide any comments and indicate approval *in principle* by the 12 March. One-to-one sessions are available on request. Any changes beyond version 2.0 will be delegated to the Chief Executive Officer for approval.

Action: Board members to review version 2.0 of the 2024-25 Annual Report and Accounts and provide comments by 12 March.

Item 4 Chief Executive's Report

4.1 Marian Spain presented an overview of the significant and timely issues that had arisen since the last meeting; in particular; the forthcoming national Land Use Framework, work to advise Defra on the new regulatory body for Water and the internal Cultural and Operation Changes.

4.2 Marian advised the Board that the pay offer was issued to Trade Unions on 29 January and both ballots accepted the offer on 23 February, noting that prospect voted 95% in favour and PCS 65% in favour. Payment will be made in March salaries. Further guidance will be issued to staff on how NE will implement changes to terms and conditions, particularly around annual leave.

4.3 In discussions the Board understood the challenges presented on the programme of work on cultural changes, they endorsed using the People and Remuneration Committee to stand over this work, as it is people led. The Board noted how NE staff will be performance measured which will require a reset, reflecting this work and the wider strategy. Marian advised the Board that the annual staff survey has been issued and this will enable the leadership team to check how staff are feeling with the changes NE is going through internally. The Board welcomed these as positive changes and that these topics would return in the Quarterly Performance Reports. In addition, the Board asked that future Board papers have a clear Strategy link to complement the link to Strategic Risks and Risk Appetite.

Action: Ensure that future Board papers have a clear Strategy link to complement the link to Strategic Risks and Risk Appetite. Board and Executive Services and NE Directors

Action: Create a simpler dashboard on change, performance etc that distils the complexity of strategy implementation for board. Kirsty Carter-Brown

4.4 Lynn Dicks shared her concerns regarding some publicly available ecological guidance on species, used by both staff and consultants. In discussion the Board recognised NE's role in making sure the system works and noted planning appeals also rely on this for guidance. Sallie Bailey advised some are fit for purpose however out of date material may exist and needs checking and a wider policy review is needed.

Action: Ecology guidance, stocktake of existing guidance. This should take into account the forthcoming strategic policy statement and the wider complexity of the guidance landscape and involve stakeholders/ users such as CIEEM. Sallie Bailey

Item 5 Quarter 3 (Q3) 2025-26 Business Performance Report

5.1 Mike Cuthbert presented this integrated Report and advised the Board this is an overview of the Quarter 3 (Q3) 2025-26 Business Performance, summarising NEs delivery and addressing key issues covering Finance, People, Key Performance Indicators, Corporate health and key metrics, Health and Safety, in the context of NEs Principal Risks.

5.2 The Board was asked to note:

- at Q3, NE is maintaining delivery momentum broadly in line with its performance forecasts at Quarter 1, despite significant internal and external pressures.
- a full year financial forecast within £0.2m/<0.1% (underspend) of our revised Period 9 budget

The Board was asked to agree that the mitigating actions and Executive Committee scrutiny of its 5 Key Risks are sufficient. NE, in line with actions taken and performance explained, will not achieve its targets for the Key Performance Indicators by the end of March 2026 on: KPI 01 (SSSI Features); KPI 05 (Habitat Creation); KPI 09 (NRF EDPs); KPI 14 (Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier Agreements); and KPI 15 (Catchment Sensitive Farming Engagements).

5.3 The Board noted that overall the position was good, the Board welcomed the new reporting format and expressed appreciation for the clarity with which it was presented.

Item 6 Business Planning and Efficiencies

6.1 Mike Cuthbert took the Board through the position to date on NEs Grant in Aid (GiA) budget allocation, to provide early sight of the 2026/27 business planning process, and outline progress on developing efficiency plans. This is in advance of the Board being asked to sign-off the 2026/27 budget and Action Plan at their 20 May Board meeting.

6.2 Mike asked the Board to note:

- the GiA budget position for 2026/27 to 2028/29 and the overall 2026/27 budget.
- progress on business planning.
- work underway to define efficiency savings for 2027/28 and 2028/29 and to produce an Efficiency Plan by the end of June.

6.3 Mike explained that NE have developed a revised approach to internal business planning, bringing together the NE Strategy and the Target Operating Model (TOM). NEs strategic outcomes and service-based approach will help it to invest in the areas of greatest impact. Business planning aims to prioritise our resources to deliver the Strategy whilst empowering delivery teams to work effectively and innovate.

6.4 Mike turned to Efficiencies and advised the Board that work continues on the development of the NE Efficiency Plan. Whilst savings have been locked in for 2026/27, negotiations are ongoing to agree savings targets for future years. NE anticipate savings being realised from two of its Critical Reforms and continue to work through the findings of two Defra-led consultancy reviews to assess feasibility of savings.

6.5 Mike assured the Board that the NE Audit and Risk Assurance Committee are sighted on the Efficiency Plan being developed to cover all years of the Spending Review so they can provide scrutiny, along with providing regular updates to the Chair, Mark Tufnell, who has accountability for efficiencies on the Board.

6.6 The Board confirmed it is broadly content with the current direction of travel. Members noted the updates on business planning and efficiency savings and agreed that further detail on both areas will be brought forward ahead of the May Board meeting. At that point, the Board expects to consider and approve the full set of proposals for adoption for the coming year.

Item 7 Nature Restoration Fund (NRF) Delivery Update

7.1 Oliver Harmar led the session to provide the board with a delivery update on the NRF; implementation and risks

7.2 The Board was asked to:

- Note the progress being made and the outstanding risks and issues still to be resolved.
- Note that the Executive and ARAC do not yet consider the Accounting Officer (AO) tests to have been met or related financial, legal and reputational risks to have been adequately addressed at this stage.

7.3 Brad Tooze as Senior Responsible Owner confirmed further work was needed with Defra and MHCLG before the programme was ready to seek Audit Risk and Assurance Committee assurance on the AO tests. Brad advised the Board it would return later in the year for approval.

Action: Further report on progress towards resolving issues as "a path to green" to proceed a board decision to consult on first EDP later this spring. Bradley Tooze

Item 8 Target Operating Model Implementation Update

8.1 David Lowe introduced the session and brought the Board up to date on how the Target Operating Model (TOM) has landed with NE staff and how implementation is progressing following on from the Board Webinar in January 2026. David handed over to Amy Hutchins to run through progress to date and next steps. In summary Amy reported:

Phase One Progress & Staff Engagement

Overall Approach

- Three-phase implementation plan designed to manage pace and impact of major organisational change.
- Good progress made on Phase One priorities.

Recruitment & Leadership Alignment

- Recruitment for key roles progressing; portfolio director recruitment underway, aiming for completion by end of March.
- Chief Officers holding 1:1 conversations with directors.
- Executive session in March to confirm alignment and close any role gaps.

Engagement With Trade Unions & Staff

- Continued fortnightly meetings with trade unions, helping shape wider organisational engagement.
- February marked by significant engagement activity, including:
  - Senior Leadership Forum
  - Internal communications (intranet articles, team talks)
  - Briefing packs for senior leaders
  - All Staff Call

Senior Leadership Forum Insights

- Strong attendance: 229 leaders.

- High engagement through questions and answer polls.
- Temperature check showed moderate confidence with a typical bell-curve distribution.
- Key requests from staff:
  - More operational detail
  - Timescales for impacts on teams
  - Practical examples
- Team is developing personas and worked examples (especially for area teams).
- Reinforced message: engagement is early; not all answers yet available.

All Staff Call Insights

- 1200+ attendees, good engagement.
- Temperature check similarly bell-shaped but more positive tilt:
  - 67% confidence rating of 3 or higher.
  - Higher than previous people survey change-management scores.
- Questions focused on:
  - Day-to-day impact of TOM
  - Managing cross-cutting themes (e.g., marine, climate, water)
  - How success will be measured
- Benefits & evaluation framework under development.

Phase One Final Steps

- Aligning TOM with business planning; refining service canvases.
- TOM team rebuilding capacity to support implementation.
- Successfully secured funding through DEFRA's PEP (Productivity and Efficiency Pot) which has allocated £2.6m over two years to fill critical capability gaps (e.g., business architecture, analysts) within the TOM project and the wider Statutory Casework Critical Reform.
- Work underway on detailed implementation planning, focusing on:
  - Pilot services & enabling functions
  - Dependencies (finance, HR, systems)

Phase Two Priorities (Early Focus)

- Establish Portfolio Management Office (PMO) once portfolio director is in place.
- Implement governance changes (merging Portfolio Committee and Delivery Committees).
- Appoint service owners & enabling function owners, then define supporting management layer.
- Develop support/training package for new service-owner cohort.
- Baseline and develop benefits & evaluation plan to measure progress.

8.2 Amy Hutchins then handed over to Sallie Bailey who is leading Executive for this work area. Sallie advised the Board a deep dive "go/no-go" analysis had been undertaken. The Executives concluded that there was sufficient alignment and detail to move forward in good faith, accepting these will be developed through implementation phase. They agreed the need to be up front with staff.

Sallie Bailey then set out the key outstanding areas:

- Clarity needed on what sits under each Chief Officer group (e.g., strategy vs operations).
- Translating services into place-based delivery.
- Supporting directors—both service owners and those without ownership roles.
- Ensuring Chief Officer groups are configured to deliver strategy needs.
- Will adopt an adaptive management approach as the organisation learns from early case studies.

8.3 The Board expressed its appreciation to the team for providing the update. Feedback from members confirmed that the Board is satisfied with the current direction of travel and content with how the work is progressing.

Item 9 Governance Approvals

9.1 **Risk Appetite Statements**
The Board reviewed the development of the new Risk Appetite Statement, which is designed to clearly link the organisation's strategy—health, growth and security—to its approach to risk. The aim is to articulate where the organisation is prepared to take greater risk to achieve better outcomes and where it maintains a low or no-risk appetite.

Action: Risk statement as approved by board to be disseminated internally and externally. Oliver Harmar

9.2 **Operational Statement for the NERC Act amendment**
Oliver Harmar set out the purpose of the paper was to update the Board on the recent amendment to the Natural Environment & Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006, secured through the Planning & Infrastructure Act 2025, and on the proposed approach to the 'Operational Statement' required under the amendment.

Oliver explained that the Operational Statement will give us greater discretion to target advice on high risk/high opportunity development management casework. It must be agreed with Defra's Secretary of State (SoS), and secondary legislation will be laid to bring the amendment into effect. The Statement will last for 5 years before requiring review. It is a requirement of the Non-Financial Scheme of delegation that approval of the operational statement is discussed and decided at NE Board before consultation with Defra's SoS.

9.3 In discussions the Board approved the principle of the changes but asked that the final draft statement return to the Board as it is a change to NE's statutes and the Board need to understand the implications.

Action: Circulate the final draft Operational Statement to Board to confirm CEO can approve and submit to SoS for endorsement. Mike Burke, Sustainable Development Portfolio Director

Item10 Delivering Natural England's Strategy through our marine work - Opportunities and challenges

10.1 Ruth Andreyeva reminded the Board this session was to discuss Natural England's Strategy implementation in NE's marine work, and to discuss which priorities will have the most impact for nature recovery for growth, health and security.

10.2 The Board was asked to note the 5 main priorities:

i. **Marine Protected Areas Network Review:** Marine Protected Areas (MPA) fit for the future: advice to Defra on the MPA Network Review, to deliver an optimised MPA network for nature, growth, clean energy and food security network for nature, growth, clean energy and food security.

ii. **Spatial Prioritisation:** Better planning for high nature, low carbon development through Marine Spatial Prioritisation (MSPri), The Crown Estate Route map. To help Government and The Crown Estate to consider nature up front, to avoid impacts where possible and enable strategic decision making where trade-offs are necessary.

iii. **Achieve more by sustainable development:** Providing a great service to Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects, (NSIPs) and high risk/reward casework to enable growth and energy missions. Advising on legislation and policy to speed up and smooth process. Improving our skills and resilience. Aligning with wider NE critical reforms, explore governance and process improvements to ensure appropriate risk appetite and management of cases within NE, to enable developers, partners, trade-bodies and decision-makers to have more agency.

iv. **Fisheries Vision:** Support Defra to articulate and develop their vision for fishing and fisheries, whilst proactively seeking opportunities for fishing pressure change to enable nature recovery at scale, all through the lens of Ecosystem Based Management.

v. **Building capability for Ecosystem Based Management:** Build capability in Natural England for a shift to Ecosystem Based Management (EBM) to enable outcomes at ecosystem scale. The core of EBM is best described by a set of principles which enable an integrated approach to managing human activities. Successfully making this shift will enable innovation and strategic approaches that would enable economic, societal and environmental outcomes. Skills resilience is a critical challenge that underpins our work across marine (and the wider sector).

10.3 In discussion the Board broadly approved the 5 main priorities and suggested a slight re-ordering of them to bring the last priority ahead of the first 4 stating it would be valuable to position ecosystem-based management—however we ultimately choose to define it—up front as a core framing principle. Establishing this at the outset provides a clear organising framework for all our work. Embedding it in this way allows the approach to flow consistently through our priorities and supports alignment across areas such as risk appetite, capability development, and overall implementation. The Board recognised the significant opportunities there are, particularly on the MPA review, to progress beyond the original purpose of protecting biodiversity, to one that delivers for growth, food production and energy as well. Offshore wind development is a branch of this work that has those opportunities. Data sharing between stakeholders was also noted as something would drive progress.