Board Meeting

Minutes of the **Natural England** Board meeting held on 20 May 2026

Attending Board members

Dr Tony Juniper	Chair
Peter Unwin	Deputy Chair
Mark Tufnell	
Professor Clare Fitzsimmons	
Rachel Danemann	
Kate Gibson	
Professor Lynn Dicks	
Cythia Alers	
Kim Shillinglaw	

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	Director (Defra), Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Mike Cuthbert	Director, Planning and Performance (items 4,5&6)
Brad Tooze	Director, Nature Restoration Fund (item 7)
Adelle Rowe	Director, External Affairs, Board and Executive Services
Adam Wallace	Deputy Director, Resilient Landscapes (item 8)
Rachel Fraser	Director, Finance

Apologies

Alastair Leake	Board member
James Scott	Board member
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 the133rd Board meeting.

1.2 Apologies were received from James Scott, Alastair Leake and Navroza Ladha.

1.3 The following changes were noted for the Register of Interests:

- Cynthia Alers has been appointed as Trustee and Chair of the Board of Trustees at Uppingham School.

Item 2 Review of 4 March Board meeting Minutes and Matters Arising

2.1 The Board approved the Minutes and Matters Arising without any amendments.

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; in particular the transition plan for the new water regulator has been delayed to June, with a ministerial decision on scale, scope and size expected imminently. The 2024/25 Annual Report and Accounts (ARA) was laid in Parliament on the 15th of April 2026, The 2025/26 ARA is expected to be laid in the autumn of 2026.

Staff Survey results are positive;

- with the highest-ever staff management score despite past declines; improvements are attributed partly to the announced pay award and, more importantly, strong engagement with the organisation's strategy through workshops, events, and active involvement.
- Employees highlighted a highly positive working environment, including supportive colleagues, teams, leadership, and flexibility—areas that should be maintained.
- The main concern raised is change, with perceptions varying widely; even small changes can be seen negatively, reinforcing the need to carefully manage and communicate ongoing reforms. Although views on change have improved over the past year and are moving in the right direction, they have not yet reached the desired level and remain a key focus area.

3.2 In discussions the Board welcomed the Chief Executive Officer update and requested sight of the 2026 Staff Survey results.

Circulate the 2026 Staff Survey results to Board members. Board and Executive Services Team.

Item 5 Quarter 4 (Q4) 2025-26 Business Performance Report

5.1 Mike Cuthbert presented an integrated Report and advised the Board this is an overview of the Quarter 4 (Q4) 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:

- Overall strong year-end performance (17 of 21 progress metrics rated green or amber-green) with improved Q4 delivery and stable risk profile.
- An improving trend in some core "business basic" metrics but notable underperformance in completion of Display Screen Equipment (DSE) assessments; review of team stress risk assessments (following a stress incident); staff undertaking 10 learning and development days; Government Procurement Card (GPC) verification and office attendance.

5.3 The Board noted that overall the position was good, the Board welcomed the summary report and that in 2025-26, NE has delivered a stronger than forecast year-end position, demonstrating resilience and an ability to recover performance in-year. The organisation is well placed to build on this momentum, with strong foundations, improving performance, and a clear focus for the year ahead. Continued progress in external partnerships, financial planning, and core organisational disciplines will further strengthen delivery confidence and maximise impact in 2026-27.

5.4 The Board noted that much of the required progress is dependent on organisational culture and behaviours. Encouragingly, it was recognised that a strong foundation is in place, with good information being gathered and reforms already underway. This progress has been positively received.

Item 6 2026-27 Business Planning – Budget and Action Plan Review

6.1 Mike Cuthbert led the session and the Board were asked to approve the 2026-27 budget plan and provide guidance on the new 2026-27 Action Plan

6.2 Mike explained delivery updates on the 2026-27 Action Plan will come to the Board via the quarterly performance reports in-year and that subject to the budget approval, the 2026-27 Action Plan would be published.

6.3 The Board approved the full set of proposals for adoption for the coming year. Noting that longer term communications projects needed positive messages.

6.4 In discussion Board emphasised the importance of ensuring the overall plan is greater than the sum of its parts—strategically aligned, clearly articulated, and capable of providing both clarity and inspiration.

The Board acknowledged the inherent challenges of aligning long-term targets within an annual planning cycle and recognised that, while not straightforward, management is taking a pragmatic and disciplined approach to achieving the best possible outcomes.

Item 7 2026-27 Performance Framework

7.1 Mike Cuthbert presented the 2026-27 Performance Framework paper, asking the Board to note the development of the performance framework and how it will align with the NE Strategy through services and enabling functions and to approve the Key Performance Indicators and Business Performance measures for 2026-27.

7.2 The Board endorsed the suite of performance metrics tabled and welcomed the alignment with the NE Strategy balancing sustainable development and housing delivery with nature recovery and climate resilience goal. The Board emphasised the importance of clear and effective communications, ensuring messaging connects with issues that are meaningful and understandable to the public. This includes utilising the King's Series of National Nature Reserves as a key channel for engagement.

Item 8 Nature Restoration Fund (NRF)

8.1 Brad Tooze updated the Board on the current position regarding NRF. The purpose of the session was to update the Board with progress being made with regard to the accounting officer tests and to confirm that NE can proceed with next steps.

8.2 During discussion the NE Board Chair invited the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC) Chair to update the Board as the NRF Risks had been scrutinised during the ARAC meeting on Monday 18 May.

It was confirmed ARAC had considered and recognised the progress being made with regard to the accounting officer tests, framed by NE's five major organisational risks.

8.3 The Board endorsed the decision to proceed with next steps and noted that this will return to ARAC and Board before NE proceeds to consultation.

Extraordinary meetings for ARAC and Board to be scheduled. Board and Executive Services.

Item 9 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)

9.1 Adam Wallace introduced this item and set out a revised Board process for their involvement at notification stage of designating complex Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), as well as a set of prioritisation criteria that will be used to establish a prioritised programme of SSSI designation work. This will define which sites should be taken forward to examine through the designation process first.

9.2 The Board was asked to approve the revisions to the governance changes to the Board Retained Authority and Board Standing Orders, and to note the approach and prioritisation process that is being applied to our programme of SSSI designation going forwards. After discussion, the Board were content with the approach and noted a programme of proposed activity will be provided at the July 2026 Board meeting.

Item10 Governance Approvals:

Framework document (FD)

10.1 Sarah Zielicka Edwards presented this session and reminded the Board they had reviewed the draft FD in November 2025. The updated version presented to the Board addressed points that were outstanding on the November draft and comments raised by Board members and from His Majesty's Treasury review.

10.2 The Board approved the changes.

Board member Roles and Responsibilities

10.3 Adelle Rowe presented the paper and explained due to recent changes in Board membership, and the publication of the new strategy, Board sub-committee structure and membership should be refreshed to align with these changes and support delivery. The Board also noted the proposed Board member links to area teams, recognising their value in strengthening business insight and engagement across Natural England.

10.4 The Board endorsed the changes to the sub committees and area teams, noting it was to take place with immediate effect. During discussions the Board approved the winding down of the Natural England Landscape Advisory Panel Committee, noting the importance for NE to evolve its engagement with landscape partners and expertise in light of new strategy, including with Protected Landscapes Partnership.

Surrey Hills and Yorkshire Wolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) minor boundary changes

10.5 Alan Law reminded the Board that they had already approved the proposed AONBs at previous meetings. In accordance with Natural England's Non-financial Scheme of Delegation (Part 12), for the making and submission of Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) designation Orders to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Board are asked to approve the minor boundary changes set out in the paper.

10.6 The Board approved the changes without any amendments.

Update on Operational Statement for the NERC Act amendment

10.7 Oliver Harmar led this session and as requested at the March 2026 Board meeting the final draft statement returned for Board approval.

10.8 The Board endorsed the final draft statement.

Item 11 Any other Business

11.1 The Board recorded its sincere thanks to Kim Shillinglaw and Peter Unwin for their significant contribution and commitment during their tenure and wished them well for the future.