



Board Meeting Minutes: 24 September 2025 [Public]

Location: London

MMO Board

Les Philpott (LP), Chair
Tony Delahunty (TD)
David Lyall (DL)
Peter Judge (PJ), PIC Chair
Rob Wilson (RW), RemCom Chair
Mark Ripley (MR), ARAC Chair
Judith Petts (JP)

MMO Executive Leadership Team

Michelle Willis (MW), Acting CEO and Accounting Officer
Trudi Wakelin (TW), Director of Marine Development (Domestic and International)
Pete Clark (PC), Director of Operations
Paul Errington (PE), Acting Director of Finance and Resources
Michael Coyle (MC), Acting Director of Digital and Analysis
Pete Redfern (PR), Acting Director of Planning and Change

Additional Attendees, by invitation

Gareth Baynham-Hughes (GBH), Director of Marine and Fisheries, Defra (from item 4)

Apologies

Jenny Stewart (JS), Lead Director, Hancock and Corry Reviews (substantively Director of Planning and Change)
[Redacted] Board Secretariat

Board Secretariat

Julia Templeton (JT), Governance Lead and Advisor to Chair

Governance and Accountability

1. Welcome and Introductory Remarks/Declaration of Interests

- 1.1 The Chair welcomed attendees to the meeting.
- 1.2 There were no new declarations of interest.
- 1.3 Apologies were noted from JS and HP.
- 1.4 The minutes of the 15 May 2025 meeting were accepted as a true record.
- 1.5 Outstanding actions were reviewed and discussed; it was agreed that an outstanding action relating to Grants Evaluation would be resolved in writing.

2. External Board Effectiveness Review 2024/25

- 2.1 The Chair introduced the Board Effectiveness Review Action Plan, noting that the report had been accepted by the Board at the 9 July meeting. The Board recognised that it is in a period of evolution, with some recommended actions requiring execution by Defra. It was emphasised that the Board has a role to collectively own and support the action plan, ensuring the right skills are represented to meet future business needs.
- 2.2 It was proposed that a Task and Finish Group (T&FG) be established under the Chair's leadership, with SRO support from PE as Director responsible for Governance. The T&FG will steer delivery of the recommendations and report progress back to the full Board. Delivery of individual actions will be assigned to other executive colleagues. The full Board will retain ownership of the action plan.
- 2.3 Discussion highlighted the need for transparency and engagement with Defra. The Board agreed to write to Defra outlining the review and agreed action plan, seeking departmental buy-in for recommendations that pertain to Defra directly or indirectly.
- 2.4 The Board agreed the proposed approach to implement the recommendations through the Task and Finish Group, maintain ownership of the process, and engage proactively with Defra. The discussion reinforced the importance of open communication, constructive challenges, and collaborative working between the Board and Executive to support the organisation's success.

Actions and Decisions

- MMOB-09D** **BER:** The Board agreed to take forward the BER Action Plan presented at the 24 September meeting. The plan will be overseen by a Task and Finish Group, Chaired by LP, which will report formally to the Board on progress.
- MMOB-28** **BER (Defra Engagement):** LP to write to Defra Senior Sponsors to share the completed Board Effectiveness Review and resulting Action Plan

Briefings

3. Inshore Vessel Monitoring Systems (I-VMS) Briefing

- 3.1 The Board received a detailed briefing relating to commercial arrangements with I-VMS suppliers, following the I-VMS soft launch through a licence condition earlier in 2025. [Redacted]

Actions and Decisions

- MMOB-10D** **I-VMS Strategic Review:** [Redacted]
- MMOB-29** **I-VMS Commercial Arrangements:** [Redacted]

4. CEO Briefing

- 4.1 MW briefed the Board on key external and operational matters;
- 4.2 **Pre Action Protocol (Brighton Marina):** A recent update on the case was provided [Redacted].
- 4.3 **Fish Export Service (FES) Industry Readiness:** An update on industry engagement and MMO systems readiness in preparation of new EU IUU export requirements was provided. MMO have launched a pilot test with an exporter to assess operational readiness. It was noted that devolved administrations are responsible for supporting their own export markets. The board acknowledged the importance of ongoing monitoring and engagement to mitigate compliance risks.
- 4.4 The Board were briefed on further engagement challenges with industry stakeholders, noting attendance at key

workshops and regional fisheries group meetings has been low. The Board discussed the value of an independent stakeholder survey to better understand perceptions of MMO and the needs of key stakeholder groups. The CEO agreed that this should be considered as part of a refreshed stakeholder map which would set out priority relationships and partner networks. This item is to be presented for discussion at the November Board meeting.

- 4.5 **Environmental Compensation Reforms – Marine Recovery Fund (MRF):** The CEO reported ongoing engagement with Defra to manage planning timetables. It was confirmed that the reforms aim to tackle offshore wind development only, a key challenge being to identify sufficient strategic compensation measures, which MMO may then be responsible for discharging, such as the designation of new Marine Protected Areas (MPAs). TW confirmed that MMO had been unable to respond formally to the external consultation on the MRF, but have been fully engaged internally throughout its development; GBH confirmed this was a welcome form of engagement, noting that seamless collaboration between MMO and Defra is more critical than external visibility, unless this is deemed necessary for any other reason.

Actions

MMOB-30 Brighton Marine PAP: [Redacted]

MMOB-31 MMO Stakeholder Map: PR to produce a stakeholder map setting out MMO's priority relationships, for inclusion on the November Board Agenda

5. Defra Policy Briefing

- 5.1 GBH provided a series of policy updates, including the recent Cabinet Reshuffle which has confirmed that Dame Angela Eagle MP is the Minister Responsible for MMO.
- 5.2 Defra's current focus on enabling growth was emphasised, it was confirmed that policies should facilitate and not constrain this.
- 5.3 Further discussion to compensation reforms through the Marine Recovery Fund (MRF) was had; this remains a policy priority [Redacted].
- 5.4 The Board discussed offshore wind development, particularly in the Celtic Sea, where emerging projects differ significantly from existing installations in technology, scale, and stakeholders; JP declared her interest in this as Chair of the Great South West Energy Programme Board. GBH noted the need for careful assessment of environmental and fisheries impacts and ongoing strategic engagement with The Crown Estate and developers.
- 5.5 An update was given on the recently published government response to the Environmental Audit Committee discussion on Governing the Marine Environment; consultation with Ministers has confirmed there is currently no appetite to update the Marine Policy Statement 2011, which was a key recommendation of the review.
- 5.6 Finally, the EU reset was discussed, with impacts on MMO expected. Further work is required to unpack the implications for MMO, which particularly relate to electricity access and marine agreements.

Strategy and Stakeholders

6. Savings and Efficiencies

- 6.1 The Board considered the proposed approach to contributing to Defra Group-wide savings and efficiencies targets, recognising the scale of the challenge which requires a £461m group-wide spending reduction over the SR25 period.
- 6.2 PE outlined a strategy focused on long-term efficiencies above short-term cost-cutting, acknowledging that investment in technology and capability may require upfront expenditure but deliver long-term value. Three priority pillars were identified: service transformation, data transformation, and regulatory assurance.
- 6.3 Service transformation aims to modernise MMO's approach to licensing and regulatory delivery. Flagship programmes, such as marine licensing, have been identified as beacons for investment, with a focus on culture, capability, role clarity, and service design. Members stressed that leadership, digital skills, and cultural change will be critical to success, and that a clear plan is needed to demonstrate how business-as-usual activities will be maintained alongside transformation.
- 6.4 Data transformation is required to address MMO's fragmented, outdated, and siloed data systems. Without investment, the organisation cannot access, validate, and use information in real time, undermining operational efficiency and regulatory assurance. Members agreed that modernisation of systems is essential for MMO to function effectively as a regulator and service provider.
- 6.5 Regulatory assurance work is required to address the complexity of fisheries regulation, which currently inhibits efficiency and digitisation. Early work has mapped areas where simplification could create tangible savings. The

Board welcomed the approach and noted that efficiencies may need to include stopping low value-added activities, not just improving processes, in partnership with Defra.

- 6.6 Members raised concerns regarding organisational capacity, noting the challenge of delivering transformation alongside core operations.
- 6.7 Questions were raised about the proportion of savings attributed to MMO relative to other Defra bodies, with a call for clarity on whether savings are fairly distributed across the baseline or concentrated disproportionately. Figures presented were skewed due to MMO funding arrangements with Defra, with a high portion of MMO's operational costs received through in-year transfers. GBH advocated for MMO to receive a larger portion of its baseline up front, ensuring accountability is not undermined.
- 6.8 The Board endorsed the principles underpinning the savings and efficiencies approach, noting that assurance will be required that the transformation programme can be delivered without undermining core operations. The Board outlined expectations that MMO's business plan should provide clarity on capacity, leadership, cultural change and the derivation of savings and efficiency targets MMO is asked to meet as part of Defra Group.

Decision

- MMOB-11D Savings and Efficiencies:** The Board endorsed the executive proposed approach to generating savings and efficiencies. The resulting business plan should provide assurance that the transformation programme outlined is deliverable alongside business as usual. The business plan should provide clarity on MMO capacity and leadership capability to drive the necessary cultural change, as well as to confirm the derivation of the spending reduction Defra have asked MMO to meet.

7. Hancock and Corry Review Update

- 7.1 The Board received an update on the MMO's input to the Hancock and Corry Reviews.
- 7.2 MC noted that while early activity had been intense, the programmes have now stabilised with a clearer focus and improved engagement approach. Progress remains at a rapid pace, although it is still early days in terms of seeing tangible outcomes. Evaluation exercises are running alongside the work to support continuous learning and refinement.
- 7.3 A key area of focus has been the MMO's response to the Corry Review recommendation to create a Lead Environmental Regulator (LER). MMO is taking forward an LER project for the marine, convening stakeholders, facilitating roundtables, and addressing licensing difficulties collaboratively. Proof of impact is expected to emerge in the autumn and winter as the pilot progresses. Board members noted that not every project is suitable for an LER approach and alternative models may warrant further consideration.
- 7.4 Of the 59 recommendations across the Reviews, priority has been given to a critical subset of 15 for early impact. The Board discussed the importance of aligning departmental and MMO risk appetite to ensure a proportionate, pragmatic, and legally robust regulatory approach. It was noted that Defra had recently held an away day on risk; the ARAC Chair offered support in resetting group wide risk appetite. Members stressed the risk of friction if departmental and MMO appetites are not aligned, with implications for delivery confidence.
- 7.5 Cross-government collaboration was emphasised as crucial. Challenges include dependencies on other Defra arms-length bodies (ALBs) and local planning authorities, bringing the need to streamline pre-application engagement to avoid duplication and delays.
- 7.6 Board discussion underlined the need to support licensing teams in adopting a risk-based approach. Ensuring processes are robust, decisions are well-documented, and risk appetite is clearly defined will reduce friction, provide confidence in decision-making, and allow systemic improvements in regulatory practice over time.

8. MMO Chair's Letter and Performance Metrics 2025/26

- 8.1 The Board reviewed the Chair's letter and the accompanying performance framework. Members advocated for the KPIs to be tightened, prioritising genuine management indicators above operational data. It was agreed that the indicators selected should be concise, demonstrating high-level delivery against outcomes with the ability to show trends, provide assurance and confidence that MMO is in good operational health. With this in mind, it was recommended that MMO reduce its reporting to concentrate on 20 effective high level performance indicators.
- 8.2 Members considered the need for a specific indicator on organisational health, to provide assurance that MMO can sustain its delivery. This should sit alongside outcome-focused KPIs to provide a balanced view.
- 8.3 There was agreement that qualitative indicators (e.g. value of exports, value of grants awarded) should be enhanced to demonstrate wider economic impact where possible.
- 8.4 Three categories of change were identified by PR;

Activities that require clarification from Defra policy to define specific deliverables and budget delegation. These should not be reported against but instead marked “to be developed.”

Activities flagged for removal, which duplicate existing reporting and/or relate to cross government responsibilities, where MMO is not accountable to Defra. It was agreed that these indicators would be removed from Defra reporting.

Licensing indicators, where Ministers would like MMO to work to a 90% target. This target is not achievable without the investment required through the Marine Planning and Licensing Programme (MPLP) which will deliver service transformation. MMO put forward that the target should be ready for the 2026/27 reporting year. On this basis, the Board agreed to retain the existing 85% target for this year, while preparing to achieve 90% through MPLP.

- 8.5 The Board agreed that the current metrics will be refined for the remainder of the year, removing duplication and clarifying scope, while longer-term work is undertaken with Defra to design a streamlined framework for 2026/27.
- 8.6 The proposed indicators are to be reassessed taking account of Board feedback, ensuring a rounded picture of MMO’s delivery and capability is provided.

Actions and Decisions

- MMOB-12D** **Performance Metrics 2025/26:** The Board agreed that the current metrics will be refined for the remainder of the year, removing duplication and clarifying scope, while longer-term work is undertaken with Defra to design a streamlined framework for 2026/27. Action MMOB-32 outlines the further work requested.
- MMOB-32** **Performance Metrics:** PR to refine MMO Performance Metrics taking account of Board feedback and steers to date, including;
Development of a subset of 20 high-level management indicators, including an indicator on organisational health. Indicators should be enhanced to demonstrate impact where possible.
Removal of all metrics where MMO is not accountable to Defra, or reports separately to other government departments
Retain current marine licensing targets until required service transformation is delivered through MPLP

Delivery Assurance

9. Quarter 1 2025/26 Finance, Risk, Assurance and Commercial

- 9.1 PE provided the Board with an update on the Quarter 1 position, focusing on finance and risk. It was noted that an integrated approach to risk management is being developed through the ARAC, this will see the Board in receipt of routine reports against MMO principal risks once products are ready.
- 9.2 PE reported that MMO is broadly on track to deliver a balanced budget position for 2025/26, though MMO continue to manage a financial pressure which is being addressed primarily through a recruitment freeze outside of priority business areas. [Redacted]. Harbour order fees and charges were discussed noting MMO’s cost recovery is significantly lower than required, there is ongoing consultation with DfT on this matter.
- 9.3 Looking ahead to 2026/27, risks were highlighted around efficiency requirements and top-slices, which may place additional pressures on MMO’s baseline. Board discussion noted that the future business planning process will require careful management of transfers and efficiencies to ensure sustainability, and that actions taken this year will shape MMO’s entry point into 2026/27.
- 9.4 The Board discussed the dynamic risk environment. Key risks relate to fisheries legislation and compliance, including the I-VMS programme, FES readiness and industry adaptation to new compliance requirements, and fisheries data challenges. While these risks are significant, they are mirrored by opportunities particularly through the MMO’s agreed savings and efficiencies approach, which could mitigate long term vulnerabilities.
- 9.5 There was further discussion regarding data transformation, where MMO has received an allocation, but work has not progressed, capacity constraints across supplier and DDTS capacity were signaled. The Board commented that multi-year certainty would enable MMO to make more strategic investment decisions, rather than tactical enhancements.
- 9.6 The Board took assurance from the Q1 position but recognised material risks ahead, particularly around further spending reductions in 2026/27, recruitment pressures in specialist areas, and the delivery of transformation programmes.

10. Quarter 1 2025/26 Ministerial Priorities and Change including current position, MPLP and FES

- 10.1 PR provided an update on Quarter 1 performance focussed on ministerial priorities and major change programmes.
- 10.2 PR reported that a number of key policy priority programmes are now progressing following the change in government (Fisheries Management Plans and Marine Protected Areas). Each carry significant industry engagement requirements, the risks around industry consultation fatigue were revisited, necessitating a more strategic, joined up approach to industry consultation.
- 10.3 PR confirmed positive progress in preparing system changes to the FES ensuring the system will be compliant by the TAC deadline in January 2026. As discussed throughout the agenda, industry readiness is now the principal challenge; MMO have launched a compliance communications programme, Fish, Trace Ship, to support industry engagement including across devolved administrations, noting again that devolved governments are responsible for their own industry readiness. MMO are undertaking further targeted work for the English sector to support industry readiness.
- 10.4 The discussion particularly focussed on high level delivery indicators surrounding uptake of key fish stocks at 66%. Opportunities for MMO to support industry to maximise uptake were explored, including communications efforts which could emphasise the mechanisms in place to enable 100% uptake. The Board requested further narrative to support high level delivery indicators to inform such discussions.
- 10.5 A discussion on the risk-based approach to assurance inspections was had, the Board requested detail of how inspections convert to enforcement action, and the specific outcomes determined for activities that have caused environmental harm.
- 10.6 The Board requested that MMO provide a drill-down of specific indicators at future meetings, highlighting opportunities to improve insight, performance and seek Board endorsement for targeted interventions.

Actions

- MMOB-33** **HLDI Drill Downs:** Future performance reports to drill down on particular high level delivery indicators for targeted Board discussion and intervention. When assurance inspections are considered, this should include further detail on how inspection findings lead to enforcement action, including outcomes for activities causing environmental harm.

11. Annual Report and Accounts 2024/25

- 11.1 The Board received an update on progress with the Annual Report and Accounts, which has been subject to review by the ARAC.
- 11.2 No significant issues were reported regarding the timeline. The final version is expected to be presented to ARAC on 16 October, with a target parliamentary laying date of 25 November. The final version will be submitted to the Board for clearance by correspondence.
- 11.3 The ARAC Chair requested sight of Defra's laying date to inform when the MMO submission could be made.
- 11.4 The Board recorded its thanks to the teams for their work on the ARA, noting that it provides a valuable window into the organisation.

Actions

- MMOB-34** **ARA:** PE to share the 2025/26 draft ARA with Board for approval by written correspondence after ARAC review (16 October)

Closing Matters

12. Meeting Closure and AoB

- 12.1 No substantive items of other business were raised by members.
- 12.2 The Chair requested that attendees submit feedback on the effectiveness of the meeting to the secretariat.
- 12.3 The Board will reconvene on 12 November in Newcastle.
- 12.4 The meeting was formally adjourned.