



Board Meeting Minutes: 5 February 2026 [Public]

Location: Newcastle

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
Stephanie Campbell (SC), Leading Director, Regulatory Reform (inc. Corry and Hancock responses)

Additional Attendees, by invitation

Geraint Evans (GE), Chief Executive Officer, UK Major Ports Group (Ports Sandbox)
Alex Pepper (AP), Policy Director, UK Major Ports Group (Ports Sandbox)
Leanne Stockdale (LS), Head of Marine Licensing Service Delivery (Ports Sandbox)
Julia Templeton (JT), Governance Lead and Advisor to Chair

Board Secretariat

[Redacted], Board Secretariat

Apologies

Gareth Baynham-Hughes (GBH), Director of Marine and Fisheries, Defra (Defra Policy Briefing)

Governance and Accountability

1.0 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 since the November board meeting.
- 1.3 Apologies from Gareth Baynham Hughes were noted.
- 1.4 There was discussion to Board session recordings, with agreement that MMO Board meetings will be recorded. Agenda leads to signal to the secretariat in advance, any items that are too sensitive to be recorded; the Board agenda will provide a clear indication to these items.

Decision

MMOB-21D **Session Recordings:** It was agreed that MMO Board meetings will be recorded, with agenda leads to signal to the secretariat in advance, any items that are too sensitive to be recorded; the Board agenda will provide a clear indication to these items.

2.0 Previous Minutes and Actions

- 2.1 The minutes of the 12 November 2025 meeting and the extraordinary board meeting of 16 December were accepted as a true record, with a minor amendment to be taken outside of the meeting.
- 2.2 Outstanding actions were reviewed and discussed noting that the majority are now completed and can be closed. Action 35 remains open and will be brought forwards to the next ARAC for discussion.

3.0 Committee Briefings

Planning and Investment Committee (PIC)

- 3.1 The PIC Chair noted opportunities to strengthen PIC's ability to provide assurance in an agile delivery environment, reflecting recent feedback. While confirming strong executive–non-executive relationships and that PIC functions well, he stressed the need to ensure the Committee has the right skills to meet Board expectations. The Secretariat will develop recommendations for upskilling, training, or added support. PIC will oversee this work, and the Chair will update the Board once satisfied with the improvements.

Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC)

- 3.2 **Annual Report and Accounts (ARA):** The Committee noted that the ARA process was well-managed, including smooth Defra clearance, with positive feedback from the NAO. Opportunities remain to streamline the document and improve insight; this NAO will support this.
- 3.3 **Risk Register:** The Committee reviewed progress on principal risk reporting and agreed that clarity and alignment have improved, ; an updated report will return to the committee in March.
- 3.4 **Fisheries Regulation:** The Committee undertook a deep dive into the principal risk concerning fisheries regulation, highlighting current risks and opportunities to develop a more efficient, effective and enforceable regulatory framework. This will remain a strategic priority and must be revisited when devising a new approach to 'regulatory transformation' as discussed at the recent board strategy workshop.
- 3.5 **GIAA:** Concern continues regarding the internal audit programme, particularly regarding timeliness and quality. Engagement is ongoing to secure deliverables for the March ARAC and to establish a revised delivery model for 2026/27. An ARAC effectiveness review will now commence, including consideration of internal audit performance, with findings to be reported to ARAC in the summer and subsequently to the board.

Decision:

MMOB-22D **Internal Audit Programme Delivery/GIAA:** [Redacted]

Executive and Policy Briefings

4.0 CEO Briefing

- 4.1 The CEO briefed the Board on key operational matters, noting ongoing work to ensure regulatory decisions are well-evidenced, legally robust and aligned with the organisation's risk management framework.
- 4.2 **Dredging – Judicial Reviews and Case Management:** The Board received an update on current legal challenges [Redacted].

- 4.3 **Fees and Charges:** Fees and charges for Harbour Revision Orders continue to be discussed, in line with wider strategic planning.
- 4.4 **Fisheries Data and Annual Negotiations:** The Board discussed challenges arising from the timelapse between MMO landing data, and the slower availability of scientific evidence which supports annual negotiations. The MMO must continue to balance socio-economic considerations with risks of overfishing, while noting that CEFAS data will underpin ICES advice. Members highlighted the importance of reflecting stakeholder-related risks in the MMO risk register.
- 4.5 **Internal Audit:** The Board noted ongoing concerns about internal audit delivery and the work underway to consider alternative suppliers. Further assurance updates will be provided via ARAC. This decision is reflected in MMOB-22D.
- 4.6 **Policy Context:** The Board recognised the pressures created by multiple emerging policy requirements (with reference to the Office for Environmental Protection review of the Environmental Improvement Plan, and forthcoming policy measures linked to Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) and EU Reset). Ongoing briefings were welcomed by the Board, to support prioritisation and assure that organisational capacity remains aligned to statutory obligations.
- 4.7 **I-VMS Suppliers:** The Board ratified an out-of-committee decision taken by the Chair, Deputy Chair and ARAC Chair on 22 January 2026. It was agreed among the Board that out-of-committee decisions may be taken in exceptional circumstances, recognising such decisions will be rare and in accordance with the authority granted through the MMO Scheme of Delegations and Board Terms of Reference. The Board agreed an approach to communicating out-of-committee decision requests which is to be reflected in the Board Terms of Reference.

Actions and Decisions

- MMOB-23D** **I-VMS Suppliers:** The board ratified the decision as outlined in Annex 1: IVMS Decision Note
- MMOB-24D** **Out-of-Committee Decisions:** Out-of-committee decisions will be recorded via a personal memo from the Chair to the board, citing the delegated authority and explaining why a small group acted urgently, with a rationale for taking that action. In addition to this, out-of-committee decisions will continue to be ratified through the Board schedule.
- MMOB-47** **EFRA Committee:** Secretariat to circulate the EFRA Committee recording link to the board for information.

5.0 Defra Policy Briefing

- 5.1 GBH sent apologies due to illness and will circulate a post meeting update in due course.

Strategy and Stakeholders

6.0 Ports Sandbox – MMO/UK Major Ports Group (UKMPG)

- 6.1 The Chair welcomed GE, AP and LS to the meeting. Following introductions, GE provided an overview of the role of UKMPG against historical and current contexts. GE championed the significant value of Ports to the UK Economy.
- 6.2 GE emphasised that regulatory frameworks will become increasingly significant over the next five years due to the growing dual-use function of ports, which support critical commercial activity, and several ports have now committed to providing military capability. This evolution is essential to maintaining resilient trade flows and support national security.
- 6.3 The Board noted the strong collaborative work developed by LS and AP, which has created a trusted environment for discussing and testing complex regulatory and operational issues. Their joint work programme, aligned to the Hancock and Corry review, Marine Planning and Licensing Programme (MPLP) and UKMPG initiatives, has attracted significant external interest. The partnership is progressing work to identify near-term improvements and refine the Sandbox methodology through an “Argue, Adopt or Adapt” approach to support effective outcomes.
- 6.4 GE outlined the ongoing challenges affecting the delivery of growth-related infrastructure in the UK. He observed that major projects can be hindered by “drag” associated with the complex regulatory frameworks in place, in contrast to competitor countries that can coordinate investment at pace. This issue can only be fully resolved through cross-government working.
- 6.5 The Board discussed MMO’s role in enabling ports-related development, noting that MMO is generally involved once proposals have advanced, particularly for multi-use ports with potential Harbour Order implications. The Board agreed that MMO should adopt a broader system-wide perspective to better identify how early engagement can add value, with this to be considered within Phase Two of the Sandbox.
- 6.6 GE reiterated that a single weakness in the wider system can impede progress. PJ encouraged continued constructive challenge of MMO processes, emphasising that clarity of intended outcomes and two-way engagement are essential. AP confirmed that Phase Two of the Sandbox will draw in wider stakeholders. MW noted that this

programme should be viewed as a strong example of collaborative success.

6.7 The Chair commended the quality of the supporting paper and the collaborative work underpinning it. He highlighted four areas for continued focus:

- Ensuring actions reflect the intended direction for the wider system.
- Encouraging appropriate challenge to MMO, with GE to determine the most suitable channels.
- Building on the strong partnership foundations already established and supported by the MMO Board.
- Applying the “Argue, Adopt or Adapt” methodology as an effective working tool.

Decision:

MMOB-25D **Ports Sandbox report:** The Board endorsed the report, subject to reinforcing the need to apply pressure across the wider government system to improve effectiveness.

7.0 Business Planning and Savings and Efficiencies

- 7.1 PE updated the Board on the latest position regarding Business Planning for the Spending Review period 2026/27-2028/29 and progress on efficiencies work. He outlined the key areas of organisational transformation required to deliver the necessary savings and performance improvements, including; engagement with Public Digital on the transition to a service-led operating model, collaboration with Defra Digital and Technology Services (DDTS) on the Marine Pioneer, and the detailed review of the fisheries regulatory landscape to inform future system design.
- 7.2 MMO have submitted a Productivity and Efficiency Pot (PEP) bid for £4million to support these, Defra support is anticipated, subject to clear evidence of benefits realisation.
- 7.3 The Board emphasised the need for clearer definition of several business-planning areas, including the DDTS Marine Pioneer, to understand Defra’s expectations, track workstreams, and set measurable objectives and efficiencies that can inform capability needs and costed proposals. Members also noted the importance of aligning this work with the priorities set out in the Chairs Letter.
- 7.4 Discussion turned to Fees and Charges, where concerns were raised about the feasibility of expectations, with a noted mismatch between required cost recovery (particularly for new technologies) and what is realistically achievable.
- 7.5 The Board discussed the potential role of artificial intelligence in improving efficiency and delivering savings. The Chair emphasised the importance of positioning AI as a potential strategic enabler within the organisational strategy and it was agreed that the next Board meeting should include a dedicated 45-minute awareness session to consider AI in greater depth and how it could support the organisation in moving towards greater efficiency by 2030. MC suggested the use of robotics in relation to the FES outages, which could provide a relevant example and context within this wider discussion.

Actions

- MMOB-48** **Savings and Efficiencies:** A paper outlining savings and efficiencies to be brought to the May Board, providing a strategic-level view based on the outcomes of current discovery work (expected mid-March) but with objectives against timeline detailed.
- MMOB-49** **AI:** Schedule an AI-focused awareness session at the next Board meeting. PE/MC to think about a suitable external AI expert/speaker with a Public Sector focus we could invite. A paper should also be prepared.

8.0 Outputs from the Board Strategy Workshop

- 8.1 The Board agreed to an indicative timeline for the MMO’s Strategy Reset. This will see the organisation continue its work on the reset and alignment with strategic delivery plans until April, returning to the Board in May to check process. It was suggested that the Strategy reset is completed by June, returning to the Board for approval in July and launching in September.

Decision

MMOB-26D **Strategy Workshop:** The Board endorsed the readout from the 13 January 2026 Strategy Workshop as an accurate record and subsequently endorsed the indicative timeframe.

Delivery Assurance

9.0 Marine Planning and Licensing Programme (MPLP) Full Business Case

- 9.1 TW presented the MPLP Full Business Case (FBC) to the Board for approval, outlining the work undertaken since its review by PIC in December and the recommendations implemented following the January review by Defra’s

red-team. TW acknowledged the significant support to the FBC from across the MMO, including the development of a guidance video and walk-through to support the PIC assurance process. TW noted that the Accounting Officer assessment has been completed and sought the Board's endorsement to submit the FBC to the Defra Investment Committee for financial approval.

- 9.2 In scrutinising the proposal, the Board sought further clarity on the distinction between Phase One and Phase Two, with confirmation that Phase One seeks investment for the first and most critical phase of service transformation, focusing on the need to deliver a new digital system, while Phase Two will deliver service transformation and optimisation. In keeping with this, it was noted that SR25 funding covers only Phase One and that full transformation will extend beyond March 2028.
- 9.3 The Board explored the delivery options set out in the economic case and sought assurance that the recommended DDTS solution had been robustly assessed. The team confirmed that two independent alpha assessments reached the same conclusion, identifying the selected platform as the lowest-risk and most reusable approach. The Board noted improvements in collaborative working with DDTS and the strengthened joint delivery arrangements now in place.
- 9.4 The Chair requested approval from the Board that the MPLP FBC should progress to Defra Investment Committee, agreement was unanimously given.

Decision

MMOB-27D **MPLP FBC:** The Board duly approved the business case to go forward to the Defra Investment Committee.

11.0 Quarter 3 2025/26 Finance, Risk, Assurance and Commercial

- 10.1 PE highlighted key themes from Quarter 3, with confirmation that MMO's financial forecast is to deliver ahead of budget, with a manageable £200k pressure. Key risks relate to back-loaded spend, including planned investments in the next phase of work with a commercial supplier, and several evidence projects due to commence spending from March.
- 10.2 Reporting on grants, it was confirmed that all eligible FASS applications have been offered funding, with total commitments of just over £5.8m against a £6.1m budget. Activity is now focussed on maximising delivery of projects by end March, with close monitoring in place around this.
- 10.3 MMO are forecasting a £2m CDEL underspend on MPLP, reflecting a move to a smaller delivery team. This position is being managed centrally to maintain full transparency of underspends and opportunities across the system.
- 10.4 Work on principal risks this period has focused on developing detailed corrective action plans to strengthen mitigation and bring risks back within tolerance. PE has also noted an improvement in organisational risk culture, with clearer language, better discussion, and stronger understanding of the approach. The Board considered rising risk scores and noted the importance of recognising cross-cutting challenges, particularly capacity and capability pressures, within the principal risk framework. It was agreed that these issues affect multiple risk areas and should be subject to Board-level assurance discussion.
- 10.5 The Board discussed the need for greater alignment in how the organisation describes its ambition for economic growth and environmental protection, noting differences between the risk register and MPLP narrative. Further work will be taken forward through the strategy reset to ensure a coherent approach that reflects MMO's dual role.

Action

MMOB-50 **Grants:** A request by the board was made for PE/the responsible team, to provide an analysis of the distribution of grant awards, detailing how FASS grants are allocated by activity type and geographic spread, to help support transparency.

11.0 Quarter 3 2025/26 Ministerial Priorities and Change

- 11.1 PR provided a quarterly update to the Board, noting that overall delivery remains stable, with progress resuming across several projects following the approval of business cases and confirmation of funding. As MMO delivery staff are also involved with delivering change, the Board were invited to reflect on organisation capacity and access to technical expertise, noting the need to manage the impact of competing priorities on available resources.
- 11.2 Fisheries data remains subject to reconciliation, with final figures expected following completion of the February data processes. Initial indications of under-utilisation of stocks largely relate to quota swaps and reduced activity in the under-10m fleet influenced by economic pressures and poor weather.
- 11.3 MW reminded the Board of the EFRA Committee's interest in transparency of inspections, highlighting the importance of consistent, high quality data to support public accountability. This includes clearer measures of fleet activity and standardised reporting on inspection volumes, findings, and outcomes. It was suggested that next year's planning should set out a transparent baseline of inspection capacity, identify where the organisation is prepared

to take risk, and establish a shared view with policy colleagues on deployment and expected outcomes.

- 11.4 MR referred to the NAO's report on environmental regulation which was commended for its articulation of a range of regulatory approaches, from full intervention to self-regulation, which could support a clearer communication of MMO's regulatory approach. PR confirmed that work is progressing on this, with delivery planned to reflect capacity. The Board discussed the organisation's approach to managing infringements and sought assurance on consistency and proportionality, noting that 43% of the 132 identified infringements involved direct harm. It was noted that cases involving environmental or regulatory impact are managed through an established, graduated enforcement framework, enabling responses to be tailored to the nature and severity of the offence, while ensuring that serious or intentional non-compliance is addressed appropriately.

12.0 Hancock and Corry Review Update

- 12.1 SC provided the Board with an update on progress since November 2025. Government scrutiny continues to focus on regulatory reform and simplification, with DEFRA taking forward work on the Regulatory Action Plan and simplification agenda. MMO has secured £0.5m through SR25 to support delivery of the LER programme, including resourcing for the Lower Thames Crossing and improved coordination of pilot activity. DEFRA is planning a programme of pilot activity over the next three years. The principal delivery challenge remains the identification and development of suitable pilots, though developer engagement and MMO-led activity continue to progress.
- 12.2 The Board discussed the government's increasing emphasis on economic growth within regulatory frameworks. Recent scrutiny from the NAO and Public Accounts Committee on "regulating for growth" has highlighted that MMO is formally within scope of the government's growth duty, although its practical implications for MMO have not been clearly defined. This raises key strategic questions about how the MMO should contribute to both the growth target and the government's 25% regulatory simplification ambition. Understanding our legal obligations will be essential. The Board agreed that clarifying the MMO's role in meeting the growth duty is critical to shaping our strategic direction and should be addressed in the May strategy session.

Action

- MMOB-51** **Strategy Workshop in May:** The Board will unpick and define MMO's role in the growth duty share and obligations, as outlined by the DBT and align with strategic objectives and timeframes as part of the Strategy deep dive in May.

Closing Matters

13.0 Meeting Closure and AoB

- 13.1 The Chair gathered meeting feedback from Board and Executive members, noting improved materials, effective strategic discussion and a strong contribution from all members. Summaries and clear action setting by the Chair were valued, with further enhancement expected once strategic objectives are defined.
- 13.2 The Board agreed that inviting partner organisations enabled more candid and productive discussion. Improvements to meeting timing, breaks, and agenda structuring were discussed to maintain appropriate scrutiny, with the potential use of below the line papers for items not requiring in-meeting decisions. The Chair and Secretariat will consider all the points raised for future meetings.
- 13.3 The Chair specifically thanked DL and acknowledged his excellent input to the MMO Board over the years, today being his final Board meeting. The Board will reconvene on 13 May for a strategy workshop, the main Board meeting will follow on the morning of 14 May 2026.
- 13.4 No other substantive items of other business were raised by members.
- 13.5 The Chair thanked attendees for their contributions and formally adjourned the meeting.

Action

- MMOB-52** **Board Agenda:** Secretariat to consider opportunities to redesign the Board agenda in keeping with requests from members.