



Board Meeting Minutes: 14 May 2026 [Public]

Location: Newcastle

MMO Board

Les Philpott (LP), Chair
Tony Delahunty (TD), Deputy Chair
Peter Judge (PJ), PIC Chair
Rob Wilson (RW), RemCom Chair
Mark Ripley (MR), ARAC Chair
Judith Petts (JP)
Terry Jones (TJ)
Laura Dance (LD)

MMO Executive Leadership Team

Elysia McCaffrey (EM), CEO
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

Julia Templeton (JT), Governance Lead and Advisor to Chair
Stace Oliver (SO), Head of Digital and Service Management, MMO (Item 11 only)
Benjamin Jacobs, CapGemini UK (item 11 only)
Matt Vale (MV), Security Advisor; Strategy, Governance, Risk, Operations & Compliance, Defra (item 10 only)
Gareth Baynham-Hughes (GBH), Director of Marine and Fisheries, Defra (Defra Policy Briefing)

Board Secretariat

[Redacted] Board Secretariat

Apologies

None

Governance and Accountability

1 Welcome and Introductory Remarks/Declaration of Interests

- 1.1 The Chair welcomed attendees to the meeting, and introduced EM, LD and TJ to their inaugural Board meeting.
- 1.2 TJ declared his external roles as Trustee of RABI and Director of Chainbridge Associates. LD declared her roles as Trustee of the Scottish Association of Marine Science and Non-Executive at Welsh Rowing (Rhwfo Cymru).
- 1.3 The following concluded external roles were noted:
 - PJ: No longer a Non Executive Director at Inex Microtechnology Ltd
 - RW: No longer Commissioner at the Thames Freeport Social Value Commission
 - LP: Non-Executive role at Benenden Health to conclude in June 2026
- 1.4 All declarations were duly noted and recorded.

2 Previous Minutes and Actions

- 2.1 The minutes of the 5 February 2026 meeting were approved as an accurate record without amendment.
- 2.2 The Board reviewed outstanding actions. Action 35 remains open; a plan to progress and close this will be developed and considered at the June ARAC meeting, with an update to be provided to the July Board. It was agreed that Action 52 will remain in progress while the MMO Strategy is developed, allowing the Board's agenda structure and forward look to be reviewed in line with the organisation's strategy reset.

3 Committee Briefings

Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC)

- 3.1 Since the previous Board meeting, ARAC has met twice, focusing on completion of the 2025/26 Internal Audit Plan, the transition of Accounting Officer responsibilities, and how best to support delivery of the MMO's emerging strategy within the context of funding and risk.
- 3.2 The Committee noted delays in receiving completed audit reports during the reporting period, which will need to be reflected in the 2025/26 Governance Statement.
- 3.3 Subsequent reports have now been received, providing overall moderate assurance, with no significant areas of concern identified. Work is ongoing to complete the remaining reports and to strengthen and simplify the risk and control framework in support of the strategy reset.
- 3.4 ARAC confirmed it is content that appropriate improvements are in progress to audit delivery and risk management arrangements. The Committee Chair also recognised the strong performance of the executive, particularly in relation to data security actions.

Executive and Policy Briefings

4 CEO Briefing

- 4.1 The CEO thanked the Board for their warm welcome and reflected on the constructive strategy workshop held on 13 May. The 2026/27 Chair's letter and the Defra Outcomes Framework were noted as providing a clear foundation for the organisation's strategy reset.
- 4.2 The Board considered and agreed the proposed Chair's letter for 2026/27 as a positive reflection of priorities, subject to further discussion with Defra regarding the inclusion of the MSPri KPI, recognising the need to ensure performance measures align with areas within MMO's control.
- 4.3 The Board noted the EFRA Committee report titled "Resetting the relationship with fishing communities", including its focus on trust, communication and regulatory burden. These themes were recognised as aligning with the organisation's strategic direction and will be reflected in the ongoing strategy reset and wider engagement with Defra. Linked with the EFRA Committee discussion, the Board discussed MMO performance reporting and transparency, particularly in relation to compliance and enforcement activity, and the appropriateness of current KPIs. Further consideration will be given as part of ongoing engagement with Defra.
- 4.4 An update was provided on the East Marine Plan. The Board noted that the April 2026 submission deadline had been missed for reasons beyond MMO's control, with further delay posing a risk to the programme timeline and consultation milestones. It was agreed that this would be progressed outside the meeting to seek assurance and support to mitigate risks.
- 4.5 The Board confirmed that the level of detail in the CEO report was appropriate. It was agreed that future reports should provide a high-level overview of the organisation's budget position.

Actions

- MMOB-53** **East Marine Plan:** EM and GBH to discuss the missed deadline outside the meeting and seek Defra support to unblock the review process
- MMOB-54** **Strategy Reset:** Consider themes emerging from the EFRA Committee report to determine where the MMO Strategy Reset could address these.
- MMOB-55** **MMO Chair's Letter:** Flag MSPri KPI for removal with Defra, recognising MMO has no policy levers to address this

5 Defra Policy Briefing

- 5.1 Defra is progressing a new Outcomes Framework to better align delivery, including a clear focus on achieving “thriving and productive seas.” This will bring closer coordination between Defra and its arm’s-length bodies, with early engagement underway at senior levels.
- 5.2 There is a continued emphasis on strengthening collaboration across organisations, combining clearer governance with more joined-up working at both Board and operational levels to support delivery and tackle shared challenges.
- 5.3 In response to the recent EFRA Committee report, Defra will provide a coordinated, cross-system response, highlighting the scale of activity already underway, strengthening how the system engages with stakeholders, and demonstrating the collective impact of delivery on the ground.
- 5.4 Defra and the MMO are working closely to respond to current pressures facing the fishing sector, including the impacts of the recent octopus bloom in the southwest and wider cost pressures, including increasing fuel prices. Engagement with industry and Ministers is ongoing to ensure a coordinated response, while also learning from similar historic occurrences in EU waters (in respect of the octopus bloom).
- 5.5 Further emerging policy updates were shared with the Board, spanning UK-EU Reset, Stage 3 Marine Protected Areas (MPA) Byelaws and the consideration being given to a long term Fisheries Strategy.

Strategy and Stakeholders

6 Corry and Hancock Review

- 6.1 The Board received a regular progress update on MMO contributions to the Corry and Hancock reviews.
- 6.2 Regulatory reform remains a Defra priority, in keeping with wider government efforts to remove barriers to major energy project delivery in response to energy security pressures. The Lead Environmental Regulator (LER) programme continues to progress, with new pilots including Sizewell C and the Lighthouse Green Fuels project. The MMO is supporting the programme. The Port of Tyne has been confirmed as a further pilot, with formal agreement expected shortly. While onboarding new participants has been challenging, industry interest is increasing and the pipeline is strengthening.
- 6.3 The Board noted that reporting has been largely internally focused. Members requested that future updates to discuss external impact, including stakeholder benefits and delivery outcomes, while noting that the programme is currently in a pilot phase, with evaluation and potential scale-up to follow.
- 6.4 Members highlighted the contribution required from industry partners and the importance of recognising this in programme delivery. The Board supported the overall direction and encouraged the executive to consider how momentum can be maintained and accelerated. The Board also requested insight to the emerging learning, ensuring MMO seizes learning opportunities while the programme is still in progress, rather than waiting for final outcomes.
- 6.5 The executive agreed to reflect on these points and return with further analysis, focussing on building on momentum and applying cross-system learning.

Actions:

- MMOB-56** **Corry & Hancock Reviews:** SC to ensure future Board papers reflect a stronger external focus, including opportunities to promote MMO’s contribution to the Lead Environmental Regulator Programme
- MMOB-57** **Corry & Hancock Reviews:** As contributions to the Hancock and Corry reviews progress, leads to maintain focus on what MMO could do differently, with initial proposals for July Board

7 Business Planning and Savings and Efficiencies

- 7.1 The Board considered an update on the organisation’s approach to savings and efficiencies and thanked the executive for the work undertaken to date, recognising the complexity and challenge of the task. It was noted that further work is ongoing and that formal proposals will be brought forward for decision in July.
- 7.2 Members discussed the approach, acknowledging that while efforts have been made to take a more strategic view, some elements remain incremental. The Board supported continued development of longer-term, transformative

options alongside shorter-term measures.

- 7.3 The Board emphasised the importance of clearly setting out choices for Defra, including associated risks and trade-offs. Members noted the challenging timetable, with significant decisions required over a compressed period, and highlighted the benefits of a longer-term perspective where possible.
- 7.4 Workforce impacts were considered, with the Board stressing the importance of maintaining critical capability and specialist expertise. Members highlighted the need for careful workforce and succession planning.
- 7.5 The Board noted that proposed efficiencies carry inherent risk and agreed that further clarity on risk appetite would support decision-making. It was agreed that input from the ARAC would be helpful ahead of final proposals.
- 7.6 Opportunities for innovation were also discussed, including the potential for more proportionate, risk-based regulatory approaches. The Board encouraged the executive to continue exploring such opportunities.
- 7.7 Members highlighted the value of distinguishing between essential and non-essential expenditure to inform prioritisation. The Board also noted ongoing uncertainty in relation to some funding streams, particularly internationally funded work, which presents additional planning risk.
- 7.8 Finally, the Board discussed the interaction between the savings programme and the organisation's forthcoming strategy. Members requested assurance on how the potential tension between cost reduction and organisational ambition will be managed.
- 7.9 The executive will take account of the Board's feedback and return with further proposals and analysis ahead of the July Board meeting.

Actions

- MMOB-58** **Savings and Efficiencies:** ARAC (MR) to advise the Board on the risk-based decisions it is required to take at the July meeting.
- MMOB-59** **AI:** CEO (EM) to provide assurance on balancing Strategy Reset ambitions with budget constraints.

Delivery Assurance

8 Quarter 4 2025/26 Finance, Risk, Assurance and Commercial

- 8.1 The Board received the Quarter 4 update on finance, risk, assurance and commercial matters.
- 8.2 The Board noted the year-end financial position of £42.8m, representing an underspend of £1.6m (4%) against budget. Members recognised that the organisation had managed an initial over-programming pressure of £1.8m, creating headroom and securing in-year transfers to support priority activity. The majority of the underspend reflected planned activity that did not fully materialise. Discussion focused on forecasting accuracy and lessons learned, including late-year expenditure, contract timing, data transformation costs and capacity constraints. It was noted that this had primarily been a capacity, rather than financial, constraint, and that the organisation had sought to use available funding opportunistically.
- 8.3 The Board also discussed the usefulness of distinguishing between essential and non-essential expenditure, and the role of a value for money lens, noting that targeted investment may at times be required to improve outcomes.
- 8.4 On risk and assurance, the Board noted that a number of principal risks sit outside appetite and that this position will become more challenging in the context of potential future cost reductions. Members highlighted the need for a clear and dynamic articulation of risk appetite and tolerances to support decision-making. The Board noted that further work is underway to review the approach to risk appetite.
- 8.5 The Board also noted themes emerging from recent audit and assurance activity, including capacity and quality considerations.
- 8.6 Overall, the Board welcomed the transparency of reporting and financial management over the year, and supported continued improvement in forecasting, risk alignment and value for money considerations.

9 Quarter 4 2025/26 Ministerial Priorities and Change

- 9.1 The Board received the Quarter 4 performance update against Ministerial Priorities and noted that performance at year end was broadly in line with expectations. The Board thanked the executive for a clear report and commended the organisation on its delivery over the year.
- 9.2 Members noted a number of key achievements, including successful delivery of the Fish Export Service (FES) reforms, preparation and launch of the Fishing and Coastal Growth Fund (FCGF), and continued progress with the Ports "Sandbox" which has been positively recognised by industry. Improvements in the quality and timeliness of IFCA byelaw processes, through closer joint working, were also highlighted.
- 9.3 The Board discussed emerging challenges, including increasing complexity arising from the interaction between policy requirements and regulatory delivery. Members noted ongoing work to refine regulatory approaches,

including more targeted and risk-based interventions. The Board recognised that constraints on staffing, including restricted recruitment, are beginning to have an impact on performance.

- 9.4 In relation to the Marine Protected Areas (MPA) programme, the Board noted that a decision document on Stage 3 byelaws is expected by the end of June. However, members highlighted uncertainty around the timing of Ministerial decisions, which may affect delivery timelines.
- 9.5 The Board discussed the indicator on Organisational Health, noting an increase in reported H&S incidents. It was agreed that this would be reviewed outside the meeting to determine whether this reflects improved reporting or underlying trends.
- 9.6 Overall, the Board welcomed the positive year-end performance position, recognised key achievements, and noted the risks and uncertainties that will need to be managed going forward.
- 9.7 GBH left the meeting to attend a Ministerial commitment.

Action

MMOB-60 **Organisational Health KPI:** PR to explain increase in reported H&S incidents and clarify whether this reflects rising risk or improved reporting

Commercial

10 At Sea Surveillance – Offshore Patrol Vessels Contract Renewal

- 10.1 The Board received an update on the proposed approach to renewing the offshore patrol vessels contract and noted that decisions will be required ahead of engagement with the supplier
- 10.2 [Redacted]

Action/Decision

MMOB-61/28D [Redacted]

Presentations

11 Cyber Risk Awareness

- 11.1 The Board received a presentation on cyber risk and the evolving threat landscape and thanked MV for a clear and informative briefing.
- 11.2 The Board noted that the UK threat level has increased and that public sector organisations, including Board Members, may be of interest to hostile actors. Members also noted the growing use of artificial intelligence in cyber activity, contributing to a more complex and dynamic risk environment.
- 11.3 The Board was briefed on the Government Cyber Action Plan, which aims to strengthen resilience across the public sector, including through more centralised decision-making and a “lead by example” approach. The Plan supports forthcoming legislative changes and reinforces expectations that government organisations maintain strong cyber security standards.
- 11.4 The respective roles and responsibilities of the Accounting Officer and the Board were discussed. Members highlighted the importance of clarity in governance arrangements and assurance processes. The Board noted ongoing work to strengthen assurance, including penetration testing activity undertaken with delivery partners.
- 11.5 The Board agreed that further clarity is required on its responsibilities in relation to cyber risk. It was agreed that the executive will return to Board with a set of proposals to support the Board in discharging its responsibilities effectively.

Action

MMOB-62 **Cyber Risk Awareness:** Bring proposals clarifying Board responsibilities on cyber security, working with ARAC Chair

12 Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) at MMO

- 12.1 The Board received a presentation on the Marine Pioneer Programme, which has explored how data, digital tools and AI can increase efficiency and reduce costs at MMO. Demonstrations of robotics and emerging technologies were also provided. BJ presented the Marine Pioneer findings, while SO provided a demonstration of robotics in practice at MMO.
- 12.2 The Board noted the programme estimated £2m savings opportunity and agreed the importance of quantifying the

benefits for customers, including reduced duplication, manual handling and inefficiency. Demonstrations of agentic AI solutions and robotics highlighted a wide range of potential applications.

- 12.3 Members discussed practical considerations, including system performance in operational environments (e.g. signal strength at sea), accessibility requirements such as digital assistance, and the need to ensure reliability where outputs may inform regulatory or enforcement decisions.
- 12.4 The Board emphasised the importance of robust governance arrangements, including clarity on decision-making, performance oversight, and data management, particularly where AI-generated outputs may be relied upon.
- 12.5 Members highlighted the need for a clear value for money case, balancing upfront investment with demonstrable efficiency gains and improved outcomes. The Board noted that value and cost mapping has been undertaken, and that implementation support is available through Defra DDTS.
- 12.6 The Board agreed that the Planning and Investment Committee (PIC) should oversee this work, including detailed consideration of the recommendations and governance arrangements.
- 12.7 The Board commended the Pioneer team on the quality and ambition of the work and supported further development, including clearer articulation of benefits and governance.

Actions

- MMOB-63** **Marine Pioneer:** Customer Value - Quantify value of Pioneer recommendations for customers
- MMOB-64** **Marine Pioneer:** Draft a governance framework for agreement, including PIC oversight

Meeting Close

13 Meeting Close, Forward Look and AOB

- 13.1 The Board noted that the next meeting will take place on 9 July 2026 in Newcastle (with hybrid attendance available). Members were advised that work will begin shortly to develop the 2027 Board schedule, comprising four quarterly meetings and two strategy workshops. Availability requests will be circulated, with a draft schedule to be presented at the July meeting.
- 13.2 The Board noted that the Board Secretariat would leave MMO at the end of May. Members thanked them for their outstanding service, recognising their significant contribution and the strong relationships they has built across the organisation, and wished them every success for the future.
- 13.3 In reflecting on the meeting, Members agreed that it had been productive, well-paced and constructive. The balance of contributions between Board and executive colleagues was welcomed. Members highlighted opportunities to continue strengthening external perspectives, noting CEFAS would attend the July Board.
- 13.4 The Chair thanked all attendees for their contributions and closed the meeting.

Actions

- MMOB-65** **2027 Schedule:** Secretariat to confirm via written correspondence