

NATURAL ENGLAND BOARD

Meeting # 1
17 October 2006



Item [M4]

Title: Natural England Science Advisory Committee: Terms of Reference

Introduction

On the 27th July, in response to a paper drafted at the request (30/5/06) of the Skeleton Board by David Macdonald, Michael Depledge, David Hill and Lynn Crowe, Natural England's Skeleton Board agreed that a sub-group of the Board should be constituted as a Natural England Science Advisory Committee (NESAC). This sub-group would advise the full Board.

A brief reminder the arguments leading to that decision is as follows:

A central plinth of Natural England's strategic direction is that advocacy, regulation and policy should be evidence based. Modern environmental approaches are inescapably inter-disciplinary and necessitate mastery of complex information drawn from the natural, social and economic sciences. A strong evidence base in these sciences is functionally and reputationally essential to the performance of NE as a leader. Natural England must also utilise and influence the research agendas of other organisations. NE's voice will carry weight only if it acquires a reputation for understanding and applying cutting-edge scientific evidence to address environmental issues. Clearly, the entire Board of NE will be dedicated to an evidence-based, interdisciplinary approach, which attaches great importance to the natural and social sciences. The Skeleton Board agreed that it would be strengthened by being able to call upon a small, specialised group to be vigilant on its behalf, analysing and advising on material that will ultimately be assessed by the Board and upon which the Board will be required to take important decisions. As an expert resource for NE's staff, this group would also be a mechanism to ensure vigilance of existing research issues and horizon scanning for emerging issues, networking throughout the wider research community.

It is worth remembering some historical precedents when considering the terms of reference for the SAC. First, the NCC had an Advisory Committee on Science, Chaired by a member of its Council, but populated entirely by distinguished outsiders. This Committee was disbanded on creation of the Country Agencies. Subsequently, in EN, a) the Director of Science has intermittently assembled ad hoc groups of external experts as necessary whereas b) the Director of Policy has been advised by the Socio-Economic Advisory Group, a panel of c. 6-7 senior academics, plus invited speakers and co-opted visitors, meeting twice annually. Because the NE-SAC will explicitly embrace both natural and social sciences, its external members (and invitees) will be drawn from both the populations of authorities that might previously have been split between the science and the socio-economic advisory groups.

Having agreed the creation of the NESAC, the Skeleton Board asked the original working party, chaired by DWM, to advance a new paper on the terms of reference and *modus operandi* of the NESAC. That is the function of this document, for consideration on 13th Nov 2006.

Terms of reference

The remit of the group would be to:

- Form an efficient conduit between the Board, staff and the wider research community, to ensure that Natural England is vigilant to current and emerging relevant issues in the natural and social sciences (including environmental economics), thereby to help ensure that high level decisions can be taken by the Board on the basis of full analysis of comprehensive and rigorous evidence. Complex issues will therefore be afforded more time and scrutiny than is currently possible by the general Board;
- Identify gaps in Board's understanding and knowledge which can be illuminated by access to new and on-going research;
- Provide accessible analysis of research findings with balanced appraisal of conclusions
- Provide a mechanism whereby external stakeholders could appropriately feed into NE's thinking on research issues, thereby increasing the Board's insight and external leverage;
- Consider the implications for Natural England of issues identified by the Board or staff or the NESAC as meriting NESAC scrutiny, and to suggest to the Board possible mechanisms for addressing any emerging need for action;
- Working with the Executive Director for Science and Policy, scope issues it discerns on the horizon with the objective of enabling NE to anticipate topics on which it should be prepared.

Structure:

The structure of the SAC would be

- Nominated specialists from current membership of the Board (currently David Macdonald, Michael Depledge, David Hill and Lynn Crowe).
- Up to six external members, judged by the representatives of the Board to be of high calibre and offering appropriate expertise (an exploratory list of candidates has already been developed).
- Invited/co-opted members recruited for one or more meetings to discuss a particular topic. NB There is thus a clear distinction between permanent and temporary members of this advisory committee to the Board.
- The Executive Director Science and Policy and the Director Science and Evidence.
- Secretarial support.

Modus Operandi:

The *modus operandi* of the SAC would be

- The NESAC would meet as often as necessary (or as feasible), at venues selected as convenient. As a guide, we anticipate in the order of 4-6 meetings annually.
- Topics for the NESACs consideration would come from diverse sources, including the Board, the executive and staff, the latter through the Executive Director Science and Policy and from the NESACs own considerations. The process of prioritising them would involve discussion between all these parties (the ultimate responsibility for prioritisation would lie with the four Board members taking responsibility for the work of the NESAC).
- The Chairman of the NESAC would report to the full Board regarding any conclusions that had been reached, and would generally do so at the next available Board meeting.
- Of the c. six external NESAC members it is probably realistic to expect 4 generally to be available to attend each meeting.

- Preparations for, and organisation of, meetings would be handled by Board services in discussion with the Chairman of the NESAC.
- Meetings would be minuted and a short written report would be submitted to full Board meetings.

Annex: Illustrative Issues:

Although it is not intended to pre-empt the deliberations of the NE-SAC, it may help Board members if we list here some topics that have been suggested as potential candidates for consideration given the serious potential impacts in the coming 2 years:

- Up-coming wildlife disease issues – not only badgers and bTB
- Scientific issues in up-coming development ‘conflicts’– Thames Basin Heaths
- Evaluation of the economic consequences of the effects on health and well-being caused by contact with nature and recreation in the natural environment.
- Generic conservation biology issues – issues of scale eg value of ecological networks linked to farm payment objectives for wider environment/ biodiversity benefits
- Evaluation of the factors affecting the disparity between people's apparent willingness to take personal action to mitigate the causes of climate change as opposed to their actual levels of action.
- Refining models of the consequences of landscape change in the context of the subjective values placed on different landscape types by diverse stakeholders.
- Delivery of conservation benefits – will SSSI's deliver the requirements of conservation in the 21st Century?
- Predator issues – raptor conservation

We also felt that NE might judge it urgent, in its early days, to be taking the initiative in a ‘good news’ story. One possibility could be to take a lead on beaver reintroduction (a topic that the SAC could scope). Such an initiative could reassure those constituencies of the founder bodies who are anxious about NE's commitment as a champion of nature.