

Natural England Board



Confirmed minutes of the fifteenth Natural England Board meeting 11 February 2009

<u>Members attending</u>	<u>Executives:</u>
Peter Allen (item 1 only)	Tom Tew
Sarah Burton	Guy Thompson
Poul Christensen (Acting Chair)	Robin Tucker
Lynn Crowe	Dave Webster
Catherine Graham-Harrison	Andrew Wood
Tony Hams	
David Hill	
Doug Hulyer	<u>Secretariat</u>
Christopher Pennell	
Helen Phillips (CEO)	Becky Jones
Pam Warhurst (in part)	Roy Hymas
Andy Wilson	

Prior to the Board meeting, a Board briefing was held at which Board members were updated on Natural England's work in the following areas:

- Corporate Plan 2009 to 2012 and 2009/10 Budget briefing;
- External Affairs Plan 2009/10;
- Natural England's Transition Programme: Ways of Working;
- Briefing on Foresight and Natural England Scenarios
- Species Reintroduction

Welcome from the Chair

Apologies were received from Martin Doughty, David Macdonald, Michael Depledge and Jim Smyllie.

There were no additions to the Register of Interests.

The Chair welcomed Catherine Graham-Harrison and Andy Wilson to the Board. He also welcomed Mr Tyrell (Ely Marine Ltd) and his legal representative, Mr Holmes, Natural England members of staff and members of the public. Visitors were requested to sign the Visitors Book.

1) Ely Pitts and Meadows Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) – confirmation of notification

Copies of the Notification and all the supporting paperwork had been sent to the Board and the objectors prior to the meeting. A number of documents that were received after the Board packs were sent out were tabled on the day, including a letter submitted by the objectors the day before the Board meeting. The Board were given an opportunity to read these documents prior to hearing any oral evidence.

The Board:

- received presentations from Natural England officers outlining the reasons for notification;
- heard representations from Mr Holmes, on behalf of the objector, Ely Marine Ltd;
- debated the merits of confirming the notification;
- in light of all the evidence and representations they had received confirmed the notification without modification.

A full transcript [of the proceedings] is available on request from Board Services.

2) Stakeholder Engagements

The Board:

- noted the engagements conducted by Chair and Deputy Chair in the period between the December and February Board meetings and the appointments scheduled before the May Board meeting, and;
- considered progress on the implementation of the External Affairs Plan over the previous quarter and plans for the next quarter.

Key discussion points were:

- the Board is highly supportive of the scope and ambition outlined in the Plan and asked that the minutes record their thanks to all involved;
- the Board was particularly pleased with the quantity and quality of media coverage that Natural England is receiving, especially in view of the current economic climate.

3) Chief Executive's Report

The Board:

- a) noted our current strategic issues, in particular that:
- work continues with Government and stakeholders to agree a way forward to mitigate for the loss of benefits of set-aside. We are not convinced of the merits of a voluntary initiative, as previous experience has shown that this can be ineffective;
 - our Climate Change Character Area reports will be published shortly;

- we have discussed with the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR) the merits of incorporating agri-environment delivery under the auspices of their Business Simplification Programme and agreed that it would not be advantageous. However, we did agree to explore other opportunities for working together to improve delivery;
 - we have reviewed and refreshed ELG roles and responsibilities and this has resulted in a number of changes. We will communicate the changes to key stakeholders in a planned way and will put in place transition arrangements.
- b) noted our delivery performance on our monthly exception reporting targets;
- c) noted progress on the 2009/10 Corporate Plan, in particular:
- the target relating to Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is red due to Partnership Agreements not yet completed. However this work is progressing well with AONB sharing our intention for these to be completed in the near future;

Action: Board Members to be provided with guidance to support their advocacy with AONB Partnerships.

- work to fast-track our strategy for NNRs is being initiated;

Action: Board Outcome Group 2 to discuss the NNR strategy at a future meeting.

- d) considered our financial position as at October 2008 and forecast outturn for 2008/09, in particular, that we are on track to deliver the Grant In Aid (GIA) budget at year end.
- e) noted the spend and commitments made on the RDPE budget, in particular:
- the Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE) spend is on target for this year. Next year is subject to completing negotiations with Defra, but the indications are that we will have an achievable target. Going forward, agri-environment agreement volumes are dependent on i) clarity of economics for farmers in the current economic climate, in particular decisions regarding the future of set aside; ii) front-office team efficiency in delivering agreements. The Board noted that work is underway on these.
- f) noted that the transfer of operational control and management of Genesis is complete.
- g) noted changes to the Scheme of Delegation made by the Chief Executive to increase levels of delegation at all levels of the organisation.

4) Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) Strategy

The Board noted the current review of JNCC Strategy, endorsed the changes to the JNCC vision, mission and strategic objectives, and affirmed Natural England's continued representation on the JNCC strategy working group.

5) Natural England's Draft Policy on Spatial Planning

The Board approved the draft policy for external stakeholder consultation and subsequent sign off by Chair.

Key discussion points were:

- we need to work with Local Planning Authorities (LPA) and professional planning bodies to embed our policies at the regional and local levels;
- the policy should seek to describe what we mean by needs and demands in relation to development and infrastructure;
- in the current economic climate, it will be important to understand the extent to which plans are delivered to achieve actual environmental benefits on the ground;
- the policy should make it clear that we also value landscapes outside of protected areas.

6) Natural England's Draft Policy on Ecosystems Approach

The Board approved the draft policy for external consultation and subsequent sign off by Chair.

Key discussion points were:

- the policy should highlight not only the benefits of a healthy natural environment but also the costs of a degraded natural environment;
- it should note that it may not always be appropriate to allocate a monetary benefit to environmental assets, should distinguish between value and cost, and refer to non-financial attributes of personal 'wealth', (including a healthy natural environment);
- we need to position ourselves within the debate to accurately reflect our role to get key message out;
- this is a technical subject and as such is not easy always to understand from a lay perspective. We will need to focus on clarity of language and clear, high quality evidence to influence people more widely;
- we should maintain dialogue with the New Economics Foundation to help improve our collective understanding of wealth and wellbeing.

7) Natural England's Draft Policy on Food Security and the Environment

The Board agreed that the paper be consulted on informally as a discussion document.

Key discussion points were:

- the draft policy is thought provoking but somewhat unfocused and may be better considered as a discussion document at this stage;
- we should be clear that it is not a document about sustainable agriculture although it is clearly related;
- food security issues in a global context are very different to those that might be considered from a national perspective and the policy should make the distinctions very clear;
- the wording of Policy 1 should be amended to elevate the point that a healthy natural environment is essential to enable our land and seas to produce food.

8) Natural England's Draft Policy on Biotechnology in the Environment

The Board approved the draft policy for external consultation and subsequent sign off by Chair.

Key discussion points were:

- the development of this policy will enable Natural England to take a more strategic view in relation to biotechnology in the environment, and thereby take account of a wide range of social, economic and environmental factors;
- Natural England's Science Advisory Committee is very supportive of this approach which it considers to be well evidenced and researched. The Committee advocates a case by case analysis but also recommends that a framework is developed to facilitate consistent and appropriate decision making. It also believes that there is benefit in being more explicit about where biotechnology developments could proceed to the benefit of the natural environment;
- the policy should be carefully cross-referenced with our work on food security, focus on using clear language that can be widely understood, and ensure that any statements about the relative merits, or otherwise, of biotechnology, are substantiated by reliable evidence;
- it should also take account of the wider political perspective and socio-economic debate surrounding the introduction of biotechnology into the environment.

9) Audit and Risk Committee: Report on meeting held on 3 December 2008

The Board noted the report on the Audit and Risk Committee meeting on 3 December and the unconfirmed minutes.

10) Confirmation of minutes

The minutes of the fourteenth Natural England Board meeting held on 10 December

2008 were confirmed.