



Joint Nature Conservation Committee 123rd Meeting Minutes Confirmed (non-confidential)

Date: 11 June 2020

Time: 08.45

Venue: Virtually via GoToMeeting

Present

Professor Mel Austen
Independent member

Mr Charles Banner
Independent member

Professor Ian Bateman
Independent member

Lord Blencathra
Natural England

Ms Cath Denholm (from item 15)
Scottish Natural Heritage

Professor Colin Galbraith
Independent member

Professor Chris Gilligan
Independent Chair

Dr Hilary Kirkpatrick
Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside

Professor Stephen Ormerod
Natural Resources Wales

Professor Marian Scott
Independent member

Professor Michael Winter
Natural England

In attendance

Dr Jessa Battersby (item 18)
JNCC

Mr Chris Brooks
JNCC

Dr Chris Cheffings (item 19)
JNCC

Dr Vin Fleming (item 18)
JNCC

Dr John Goold
JNCC

Dr Tim Hill
Natural England

Professor Christine Maggs
JNCC

Professor Kathryn Monk
Natural Resources Wales

Mrs Tracey Quince
JNCC

Mrs Sally Thomas
Scottish Natural Heritage

Dr Steve Wilkinson
JNCC

Mr Lawrence Way (item 18)
JNCC

Mr Marcus Yeo
JNCC

Apologies

Members

Dr Mike Cantlay
Scottish Natural Heritage

Sir David Henshaw
Natural Resources Wales

Attendees

Ms Helen Anderson
Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Mr Colin Armstrong
Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Ms Ceri Davies
Natural Resources Wales

Dr Sara McGuckin
Northern Ireland Environment Agency

1. Closed session

- 1.1 There are no minutes for this item.

2. Chairman's opening remarks

- 2.1 Professor Gilligan welcomed everyone to the 123rd meeting, which was taking place as a virtual meeting in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Members approved recording the meeting for minuting purposes.
- 2.2 Professor Gilligan advised members that his appointment as Chair of JNCC, which had been scheduled to conclude at the end of May, had been formally extended until 4 December 2020. The extension would allow for continuity during the changed period of working brought about by Covid-19.
- 2.3 Professor Gilligan thanked the executive for their professional response to the challenges presented by Covid-19. Regular, bi-weekly, meetings between the Chair, Deputy Chair, Chief Executive and Director of Finance and Resources had taken place since the beginning of the pandemic, with the non-executives acting as a sounding board for issues as they arose.
- 2.4 Professor Gilligan asserted the need for JNCC to set out a clear vision of how the organisation wishes to position itself over the next three to four years. Maintaining and developing partnerships would be critical. Continuing to build consensus with Defra, the devolved administrations, country nature conservation bodies and non-governmental organisations should be a priority.
- 2.5 Professor Gilligan and Professor Galbraith had recently met the Natural England Chair, Mr Juniper, to discuss links between the Covid-19 pandemic, wildlife trade and human pressures on wildlife populations.

3. Declaration of interests

- 3.1 No new declarations were declared. Professor Gilligan emphasised the importance of keeping declarations up to date.

3.2 Members were reminded to advise Mrs Elliott of any new declarations.

4. Confidential minutes of the March 2020 meeting (JNCC 20 13)

4.1 The minutes of the March meeting were discussed. Amendments received intersessionally from members had been incorporated into the paper presented.

4.2 The minutes were **agreed** with the correction of one minor typographical error.

5 Matters arising (JNCC 20 14)

5.1 There were no matters arising for this meeting. The Committee **noted** the report of outstanding actions in Annex 1.

6 Re-appointment of a JNCC Deputy Chair (Official-sensitive) (JNCC 20 28)

6.1 This item was taken in confidence.

7 Chief Executive's report on topical issues (Official-sensitive) (JNCC 20 16)

7.1 This item was taken in confidence.

Action point(s)
AP01 Mr Brooks to provide an intersessional paper on requirements for the new Peterborough office space, including sustainability factors, and proposals for a long-term operating model.

8. JNCC's response to Covid-19: current position and forward look (Official-sensitive) (JNCC 20 15)

8.1 This item was taken in confidence.

Action point(s)
AP02 Mr Brooks to share with ARAC the risk assessment for the return of staff to the Peterborough office.

9 Report from ARAC on 10 June (Official) (Oral)

- 9.1 In summarising the key issues discussed at the ARAC meeting on 10 June Professor Galbraith informed the Committee that:
- i. risks associated with Covid-19 were diverse and would manifest themselves over a range of timescales. The current circumstances were challenging but JNCC had maintained its focus. Divergences in approach to releasing lockdown across the UK could create challenges for JNCC as a UK body;
 - ii. positive and negative issues arising from the experience of working from home during the pandemic are being captured and would be used to consider working arrangements for JNCC post Covid-19, particularly in relation to the new Peterborough office;
 - iii. a recent payroll processes audit had returned a 'limited' assurance rating, meaning significant risks and issues had been identified. ARAC noted the poor performance by the payroll provider, and asked the executive to take a robust contract management approach to ensure improvements were realised;
 - iv. the annual assurance opinion for 2019/20 was 'moderate', meaning systems of internal control and governance were good, but some improvements were required. The rating was a 'healthy moderate'. The rating gives an indication of where JNCC sits in relation to others in the Defra Group;
 - v. ARAC had considered the draft Annual Report and Accounts (ARA), noting the challenges presented by Covid-19, with staff working from home and a virtual audit being undertaken by the National Audit Office (NAO). Two areas of improvement for next year included the sections on equality and diversity and sustainability. ARAC were content with the draft and recommended that the Company Board approve the ARA;
 - vi. the new significant risks register for 2020/21 was discussed, with ARAC noting the addition of a Covid-19 risk. Two additional risks to be considered for inclusion were climate change and the Peterborough office move;
 - vii. Nigel Reader had presented a report on lessons learnt for NRW's ARAC on the letting of long-term timber contracts. The report highlighted where greater challenge and more scepticism from ARAC might have addressed some of the issues that arose. ARAC noted the need for a healthy relationship between the CEO and ARAC Chair;
 - viii. equality and diversity had been discussed with an oral update on plans in this area over the next couple of months. A full review of JNCC's equality, diversity and inclusion policy would be undertaken. A staff working group would be established to drive forward actions and embed changes into the culture of the organisation. ARAC emphasised the urgency of this work to ensure policies and ethos were up to date and progressive;

- ix. actions from ARAC’s strategy session last November had been agreed for implementation;
- x. assurance across the organisation at quarter 4 was good. Some improvements had been identified in the data security area by Team Leaders that would be addressed over the coming weeks; and
- xi. compliance across the organisation was good, with audits on documentation in the evidence quality assurance area continuing at an appropriately rapid pace. A larger number of fruitless payments had been reported in quarter 4 than normal, all related to cancellations due to Covid-19.

9.2 The Committee thanked Professor Galbraith for a comprehensive report of the meeting the previous day. The Committee noted the need for trust between executives and non-executives and the important role of non-executives in challenging and holding the Chief Executive to account. The Committee welcomed the broad remit of ARAC and the value it adds for the organisation and the Joint Committee.

10 Annual report from ARAC for 2019/20 (Official-sensitive) (JNCC 20 20)

10.1 This item was taken in confidence.

Action point(s)
AP03 Mrs Quince to add climate change considerations and a risk assessment for the Peterborough office to the ARAC forward programme.

11 Report from the MPA sub-group (Official-Sensitive) (Oral report)

11.1 This item was taken in confidence.

12 Report from the Wider Markets sub-group (Official-sensitive) (Oral report)

12.1 This item was taken in confidence.

13 Report from the International Reporting sub-group (Official-sensitive) (Oral report)

13.1 This item was taken in confidence.

14 Report from the Chief Scientists Group (CSG) (Official-Sensitive) (JNCC 20 21)

14.1 This item was taken in confidence.

Action point(s)
AP04 Professor Maggs to present a list of strategic topics considered by CSG to a future meeting.

15 External factors affecting JNCC (Official-Sensitive) (JNCC 20 07)

15.1 This item was taken in confidence.

16 Performance report for year ending 31 March 2020 (Official-sensitive) (JNCC 20 23)

16.1 This item was taken in confidence.

17 JNCC business plan for 2020/21(Official-sensitive) (JNCC 20 24)

17.1 This item was taken in confidence.

Action point(s)
AP05 Professor Gilligan to sign off the business plan for 2020/21 on behalf of the Committee.
AP06 Mrs Elliott to circulate the final business plan for 2020/21 to members and attendees.

18 Developing JNCC's strategic international advice function

(Official-sensitive) (JNCC 20 19)

18.1 This item was taken in confidence.

19 Update on the National Biodiversity Network (NBN) (Official-sensitive) (JNCC 20 25)

19.1 This item was taken in confidence.

20 Joint Committee working objectives for 2020/21 (Official) (JNCC 20 26)

20.1 Mrs Quince introduced the item, explaining that the paper provided a draft set of working objectives for the Joint Committee for the 2020/21 financial year. Mrs Quince explained that it was good governance for non-executive boards to develop a small number of performance objectives that were aligned with selected organisational goals. Mrs Quince explained that this year, the working objectives included tasks to monitor, advise and support the organisation during and after the Covid-19 pandemic as well as tasks relating to the induction of a new Chair. The tasks in working objective 5 'external relations' were also a key focus area, adding value to income generation activities.

20.2 Members agreed that the objectives represented the key areas for focus in the coming year with external relationships a priority. Members agreed that bullet point 2 of objective 5 (to facilitate collaboration between JNCC, CNCBs and other partners) should be expanded to include all Committee members.

20.3 Committee **discussed** and **agreed** the working objectives for 2020/21.

Action point(s)
AP07 Mrs Quince to amend objective 5 and circulate the final version of working objectives to members.

21 Joint Committee forward programme (Official)

21.1 Committee **noted** the forward programme and **agreed** that the next meeting in September would be a virtual meeting.

22 Any other business

22.1 No business was discussed.