The one hundred and forty-seventh meeting of the Joint Nature Conservation Committee held on 23 and 24 June 2026 in Belfast

Paper JNCC 26 33D: Business Plan 2026/27

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Business plan 2026/27
Lead Author: Chris Tuckett
Lead Director: Chris Tuckett

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Joint Nature Conservation Committee

Turning science into action for nature, people and the planet.

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Joint Nature Conservation Committee

Business plan 2026/27

Paper by Chris Tuckett and David Collins

1. Proposal

1.1 The JNCC business plan for 2026/27 is presented below. The plan sets out our strategic priorities for science delivery, as discussed with the Committee at the March meeting. Also included are the plans for our Corporate Services objectives, our critical milestones, that serve as our key performance indicators, and plans for our Programme of Change.

1.2 As you expect, the business plan also sets out our overall budget for 2026/27, including a breakdown of the key sources of income, and our plans for our headcount. In this context it is worth noting that, subject to final checks and audit, we expect to post an operating surplus of around £1.6m for 2025/26 which will increase our retained income/reserves to around £3.3m in our year end accounts.

1.3 As stated in our reserves policy, which was agreed by Joint Committee in November 2024, we should aim 'to keep reserves within the range of no less than £1m but no more than £3m'. Taking broader financial management and accountability matters into consideration, we have developed the 2026/27 business plan on the basis of a balanced budget but with plans to target investment where it will drive efficiency in our operations, overprogramming high priority projects and a more aggressive and proactive approach to forecasting so that we are able to move resources quickly to where they are needed.

1.4 The Joint Committee is asked to **note** and **approve** the JNCC business plan for 2026/27.

2. Business plan 2026/27 - Introduction

2.1 The JNCC strategy, Together for Nature: 2023 to 2030, sets out the challenges we all face in responding to the intertwined crises of pollution, ecological collapse and climate breakdown and describes a shared vision for the work that JNCC will undertake to help nature to recover. In implementing the strategy, JNCC is taking account of the changing world around us and the importance of aligning social, economic and environmental factors.

2.2 This year, we are especially focused on generating and applying our evidence and advice to bear down on the key pressures on biodiversity by enhancing our stakeholder engagement and science communications to influence the main decision-makers who can affect change. This is to be carried out through a thematic approach focussed on the direct drivers of change (see next paragraph) as well as two additional critical components:

(a) continuing to assess the state and change of nature across the UK, developing our metrics to better predict biodiversity change, and to assessing what is needed to meet the targets of the Global Biodiversity Framework and the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan; and

(b) further building our role in ecosystem resilience and risk assessment to inform security considerations.

2.3 JNCC is adopting a thematic approach (previously discussed with Committee) to setting objectives and milestones, utilising themes derived from our Strategy that cut across organisational functions to enhance integration and prioritisation. These themes are also consistent with the direct drivers of environmental change outlined in the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) conceptual framework (Ref: Decision IPBES-2/4: Conceptual framework for the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services).

2.4 The themes and our priority areas of work for 2026/27 under these themes, are listed in Table 1.

Table 1 Themes and Priority Work

Theme	Output and Priority Work
Climate Change	Providing evidence on how climate change affects nature recovery, how action on nature can take climate change into account and where action on climate and nature can align. **2026/27 priorities** - Engagement with the Climate Change Committee; impact of climate change on the Protected Area Network; growing the International Partnership on MPAs, Biodiversity and Climate Change; co-leading on the climate pillar of the Blue Belt Programme supporting the UK Overseas Territories.

Exploitation of Natural Resources	Providing advice on the impacts of business, finance and commercial activity on nature and how nature recovery can occur alongside development (includes licensing and management of ongoing activity). **2026/27 priorities** – Advice on the impact of offshore industries; fisheries byelaw advice; advising on CITES licensing and illegal wildlife trade.
Invasives and Disease	Assessing impacts of invasive and non-native species and disease on the natural environment. **2026/27 priorities** – Continued engagement with the cross-HMG One Health programme and the UK Programme Board for Non-Native Species and GB Non-Native Species Committee, work on biosecurity, including predator controls, and seabirds; and supporting Darwin Plus Local projects in the UK Overseas Territories focussed on tackling invasive non-native species.
Land and Sea Use	Strategic input, collaborative engagement and technical advice on prioritising allocation of land and sea to enable recovery of nature alongside sustainable growth of the economy (includes strategic planning of infrastructure development). **2026/27 priorities** – Land Use Framework; Compensation for offshore wind; Marine spatial prioritisation (including MPA network review, marine planning).
Pollution	Synthesising the evidence on pollution impacts at a transboundary level across the UK and internationally; defining what is needed for nature recovery and developing tools to aid strategic decision-making. **2026/27 priorities** - Roll-out of the Air Pollution Assessment Service (APAS) now known as "Get an Air Pollution Assessment".
State of the Natural Environment	Collating and maintaining the evidence base to support understanding of not just the state of nature, but also the causes of change and projections of policy and other impacts. **2026/27 priorities** - Evidence on biodiversity loss and ecosystem vulnerability, resilience and collapse to inform national security; Indicators, including headline indicator reporting and development of natural capital/societal benefit indicators, assessing what is needed to ensure UK is on track to meet all 23 targets of the Global Biodiversity Framework and National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan.

2.5 In addition to the priority work listed above, there is extensive monitoring, evidence and advisory work across our science directorates. All of our planned science work has been assigned to one of the six themes. Before planning for 2027/28 begins we will review our work under each theme, across our science directorates, to strategically shape our future direction. This will form the basis of a three-year corporate plan for JNCC.

2.6 Delivering high-quality, timely and trusted corporate and cross-cutting services is essential to JNCC's continued success in turning science into action for nature. These services underpin our ability to deliver our mission effectively and confidently. Over the course of this year, we will continue to meet and where possible exceed the standards set out in our service level agreements. We will continually seek ways to deliver services more efficiently and effectively, working closely alongside our Programme of Change to improve services and user experiences while reducing overheads through optimisation, simplification and the smart use of emerging technologies. Our delivery model recognises the value of strong in-house capability, but we remain open to new approaches and partnerships where they offer opportunities to learn, innovate or share functions in ways that benefit JNCC.

2.7 The following objectives (in Table 2) describe our focus across corporate and cross-cutting functions this year but do not cover the full breadth of our outputs, especially in relation to our operational, compliance and risk management work, which are fundamental to maintaining our licence to operate as a trusted authority on nature in the UK and internationally.

Table 2 Corporate service objectives

Area	Objective
All areas	**Service design and efficiency** - Improve services and reduce overheads by optimising and simplifying what we do, and by making effective use of emerging technologies. **Supporting self-service** - Develop and deploy more user-friendly systems and processes supported by refreshed policies and clear routes to experts so staff can get help quickly and confidently
Communications	Refreshed **communications and stakeholder engagement** activities, approaches and resources to further develop our external profile and impact Improved **staff engagement and inclusion** including through launching a new intranet
Human Resources (HR)	Deliver key priorities from our **People Strategy** (launched in 2025), including strategic workforce planning and our 3-year L&D plan, so all staff and their managers have the capability and capacity to achieve our goals.

	Simpler and quicker **recruitment and resourcing** processes with more flexible resourcing options An **engagement action plan** that addresses priorities from staff feedback including staff development, wellbeing and workload
Operational services	Implement our **Health and Safety** policies and strategy to promotes a strong culture where all staff are aware and accountable for Health and Safety. Promote a healthy balance between **wellbeing** and workload to reduce pressure points, support resilient teams and embed consistent wellbeing practices across the organisation
Digital services	Maintain a robust and responsive IT service with investments in modernised infrastructure able to support integration with partners and shared platforms, to meet the needs of all staff and to make the most of **emerging technologies** including AI to enhance delivery and productivity. Further strengthen **cybersecurity** capability and embed secure-by-design practices into project delivery and operational workflows
Finance and Governance	Embedding refreshed **governance, risk and assurance** functions that support improvements in key internal controls and integration with core risk management procedures including fraud prevention, risk management and assurance Maintain our robust **financial control** framework while enhancing support for budget holders to manage within their **delegated limits,** improve the accuracy and timeliness of their forecasts and flex and prioritise resources while securing best value for our funders.

3. Measuring performance

3.1 Our milestones for 2026/27 are outcomes aligned with our themes. Delivery of measurable outputs will be used to track progress against each milestone (Table 3).

Table 3 – Organisational milestones for 2026/27, with completion dates by quarter.

Theme	Milestone	Measures	Quarter
Climate Change	Integrate data and evidence on climate and biodiversity to future-proof JNCC advice and to seek solutions for both climate, nature and people.	1. Develop an initial proof of concept for efficiently assessing coherence of protected areas across the UK including considering the impacts of climate change.	Q4

		2. Deliver a stocktake of climate change work relevant to the UKOTs to inform the Blue Belt Programme's climate pillar and work with partners to develop an implementation plan. 3. Deliver agreed analytical input to Defra and DESNZ to support UK Government Climate and Nature Moment 2026.	
Exploitation of Natural Resources	Use our evidence base to advise relevant authorities and decisions makers on marine industry activities to facilitate nature recovery, sustainable development and the maintenance of ecosystem service provision.	Advice to competent authorities is delivered within statutory timeframes and advice to offshore industries is delivered via agreed discretionary mechanisms.	Q4
Invasives and Disease	*No Milestone*	*No Measures*	
Land and Sea Use	Utilise our specialist knowledge and skills to provide strategic advice on future impacts of human activities in the marine environment, trade-offs, risks and potential solutions to ensure nature recovery alongside sustainable development.	Provide evidence-based advice on marine protected areas (MPAs), specifically: 1. Advancing ecologically meaningful compensatory MPAs in our formal pre-consultation advice to Defra (Q3). 2. Supporting Welsh Government in the public consultation on possible MCZs (Q2). 3. Working collaboratively with Defra and its SNCBs to advise on future-proofing the English MPA network (Q4).	Q4
Pollution	Maintain co-ordination across the country conservation agencies on air pollution.	Test and facilitate the uptake of the UK Air Pollution Assessment Service (UK APAS).	Q4
State of the Natural Environment	Support the UK Government regarding negotiations under, and implementation of, global and regional multilateral environmental agreements to	Provide expert evidence, advice and leadership on 15 multilateral environmental agreements and multilateral environmental	Q3

	seek global consensus for transformative action on nature recovery.	bodies, including at CBD COP17 (October 2026).	
	Integrate evidence sources to assess ecosystem risks potentially impacting the UK's national security and determine possible mitigation strategies.	National Security UK & European ecosystem assessment delivered to scope, including case studies, workshops support, synthesis, and analytical extensions.	Q3
	Support the UK Government and the UKOTs on coordination of implementation of the OT Biodiversity Strategy to promote nature recovery in the OTs, and to report on progress towards this.	1. Manage governance mechanisms for implementation of the OT Biodiversity Strategy, including a cross-HMG group and an OT Scientific and Technical Working Group, and report progress on implementation ahead of the annual JMC. 2. Develop and update, as required, the dedicated UK Overseas Territories indicators in the Defra Environmental Indicator Framework (K3 and K4).	Q4
	Working with the four Country Biodiversity Group, further develop the UK biodiversity indicators to a suite which is more responsive to impacts of country level policies.	Assess the feasibility of projecting the UK biodiversity indicators by linking scenarios and policies, with an initial focus on species and air pollution.	Q4
	Support the four Country Biodiversity Group (4CBG) to determine thresholds of success and to assess what is needed to ensure UK is on track to meet all 23 targets of the Global Biodiversity Framework and National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan.	Provide an end of year report to the 4CBG, updating on work to undertake a target assessment review to agree success thresholds for a subset of KMGBF targets, and an implementation gaps review.*	Q4
			Q4

	Working with partners deliver marine monitoring programmes to provide an evidence base to inform UK-wide assessments and policy needs.	1. Deliver 3 MPA offshore surveys. 2. Prepare for the 5th multi-national Small Cetaceans in the North Sea survey in 27/28. 3. Continue collection of seabird data via the volunteer seabirds at sea initiative"	
	Maintain the UK signal for species surveillance.	Publish updates to all the major schemes and refresh the partnership arrangements for birds and pollinators.	Q4
Supporting Delivery	Ensure JNCC has an effective science and evidence system that supports UK and devolved government outcomes and optimises the value of JNCC's science and analytical capability.	1. Science Strategy: JNCC will implement a time bound strategy that sets out science and analytical needs and how they will be delivered. 2. Provision of high quality rigorous and timely science advice: JNCC will operate an Evidence Quality Assurance process that embeds quality practice and research integrity standards and principles, assessed through regular audits with a target of at least 80% compliance.	Q4

*Note: The scope of this work is subject to confirmation of available funding.

4. Programme of Change

4.1 JNCC's Programme of Change continues into 2026/27 to ensure the organisation remains effective and impactful in a rapidly changing environmental, political and funding landscape. Against the backdrop of a challenging Spending Review settlement and wider public sector reform, the Programme of Change provides a clear framework to move from JNCC's current operating model to a future target operating model, strengthening how we organise our people, processes, data, technology and governance. It enables greater integration across programmes of work and places a stronger focus on stakeholders and end-users to maximise impact.

4.2 Through the Programme of Change, we are reconsidering how we design and deliver evidence and advice, operating within our financial constraints while building a higher-performing organisation whose insights are trusted by

customers and influential with decision-makers, in support of the Together for Nature vision. The Programme of Change will oversee strategic investments, including funding from Defra's Productivity and Efficiency Programme, designed to support the delivery of savings and efficiencies across our science and corporate operations. The Programme of Change is sponsored by our Chief Operating Officer and overseen by our Executive Committee and our Change Board which includes our ARAC Chair, Nigel Reader and independent Joint Committee member Dan Ebanks.

5. Resources

5.1 Total forecast income for 2026/27 stands at £27.7m. As shown in Table 7 this is formed of baseline Grant in Aid from Defra, additional transfers of Grant in Aid confirmed at the start of the year and forecast through further transfers during the year. Finally other forecast income includes projects in collaboration with other government and non-government partners and our discretionary advice service.

5.2 This £10.3m baseline Grant in Aid for 2026/27 forms the first year of the SR25 settlement and includes a target of £0.2m in efficiency savings. Indicative allocations for baseline Grant in Aid have been set at £10.1m in 2027/28 and £9.9m in 2028/29, inclusive of further savings targets. Our baseline Grant in Aid includes the contributions from all 4 UK governments in support of our core functions as described in table 8.

Table 7 Funding forecast for 2026/27

Funding (£m)	2026/27
Baseline Grant in Aid (GiA) Total *	**10.3**
Other GiA allocations and adjustments at start of year	9.4
Delegated Authority Letter total	**19.7**
In year GiA transfers (forecast)	3.0
Total GiA	**22.7**
Other income (forecast)	5.0
Total funding	**27.7**

Table 8 Contribution to core functions by UK governments in 2026/27

Funding (£m)	2026/27
Defra	2.5
Scottish Government	1.3

Welsh Government	0.6
DAERA	0.3
Total contributions	**4.6**

5.3. Over the last two years we have reduced and stabilised our headcount to manage pressures on pay budgets and to ensure that resource levels matched our portfolio of projects and programmes, including the planned close-down of a significant multi-year programme. Over the next year we are planning for a small increase in our target headcount compared to last year to allow for more flexibility in moving resources to support emerging priorities, to support the development of our cross-cutting science capability in our Chief Scientist directorate and to support investment in our Programme of Change which will, with improved workforce planning, allow for a sustainable reduction in staff supported by our baseline GiA.

Table 9 Target Headcount

	2026/27
Target headcount (full-time equivalents)	291

5.4. We have assessed that 291 full-time equivalents (FTE) is an affordable and sustainable target headcount for the year. Directorate headcount targets will be delegated in line with this overall figure and monitored by our Finance Committee monthly and by our Delivery and Assurance Board each quarter.

5.5. JNCC colleagues in science, management and corporate roles work flexibly across projects and functions and are not constrained rigidly to working only one source of funding. However based on our funding and resource allocation model, analysis of time recording records and our income forecast for the year we estimate that around

- 108FTE are supported through our baseline GiA allocation
- 130FTE are supported by other GiA funding directed via our Defra sponsors
- 53FTE are funded through other income