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 M02: Confirmed minutes of the 147th meeting of the Joint Nature Conservation Committee

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Minutes of the 147th meeting of the Joint Nature Conservation Committee
Lead Author: Pip Day

Official
Circulation: External
Share with CLP's: Yes

JNCC26 M02

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

Minutes of the 147th meeting of the Joint Nature Conservation Committee

The Committee members present were: David Cooper (Chair), Dan Ebanks (Independent Member), Colin Galbraith (NatureScot, online), Rachael Garrett (Independent Member) (24 June only, online), Kate Gibson (Natural England, online), Pete Higgins (NatureScot), Julia Jones (Independent Member), Rhys Jones (Natural Resources Wales), Sara McCracken (CNCC), Tom Meagher (Deputy Chair), Marsha Ramroop (Independent Member), Neil Sachdev (NRW) (23 June only, online).

Also in attendance were: Amy Arnott (JNCC, 24 June only), Natalie Askew (JNCC, Item 13, 24 June only), Laura Bellingham (Defra, online), Sarah Blanchard (JNCC), Dominique Boatswain (JNCC), Peter Brotherton (Natural England, online), David Collins (JNCC), Pip Day (JNCC), Tracey Elliott (JNCC, Items 5-6, 23 June only, online), Emily Forbes (JNCC), Gemma Harper (JNCC), Lynn Heeley (JNCC), Stuart MacQuarrie (NatureScot, 24 June only, online), Thomas Maguire (JNCC, online), Sara McGuckin (NIEA, online), Kirsty Meadows (JNCC, Item 13, 24 June only, online), Emma Peake (Defra, online), Tracey Quince (JNCC, Item 8, 23 June only, online), Nigel Reader (ARAC Chair, online), Emily Songer (JNCC), Beth Stoker (JNCC, Item 13, 24 June only, online), Dave Stone (JNCC), Nikki Taylor (JNCC, Items 5-6, 23 June only, online), Chris Tuckett (JNCC), Steve Wilkinson (JNCC, 24 June only), Susan Zappala (JNCC, Item 12, 24 June only, online).

Apologies were received from: Alistair Leake (Natural England), Mary Lewis (Natural Resources Wales), Sallie Bailey (Natural England).

23rd June 2026, 09:20, Europa Hotel, Belfast and virtually via MS Teams.

Day One

The meeting was preceded by a closed session, attended by Committee members, the ARAC Chair, and the CEO, in which confidential matters were discussed.

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1. Chairman's opening remarks

1.1 David Cooper welcomed members to the 147th meeting, expressing his pleasure to be in Northern Ireland. David thanked those from the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) and Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) for hosting the meeting and organising the field trip.

1.2 David welcomed Neil Sachdev, newly appointed Chair of Natural Resources Wales and Kate Gibson, newly appointed Deputy Chair of Natural England to their first Joint Committee meeting. David also noted the appointment of Alistair Leake as Natural England's representative on Joint Committee for future meetings.

2. Declaration of interests

2.1. No new declarations of interest were raised.

3. Minutes of the May 2026 intersessional meeting and Matters arising

3.1. The Committee **approved** the minutes of the May 2026 intersessional meeting (JNCC 26 22D, Official).

3.2. The Committee noted the Matters Arising paper (JNCC 26 23D, Official-Sensitive), including the update from the Chief Scientists' Group and **approved** the closure of actions highlighted as complete.

3.3. David Cooper highlighted that some Committee competency assessments remained outstanding and that these would also be needed for the newly appointed members (see action point under agenda item 8).

3.4. Members noted that invitations had been issued for the Business and Biodiversity event in July and agreed the related action could be closed.

3.5. The Committee noted that ARAC had now considered the Strategic Risk Register and that the final version would be circulated to members shortly. **(AP01)**

3.6. Members noted the suggestion that long-standing actions should be reviewed periodically to determine whether they remained relevant and proportionate to complete.

Action point(s)
June26_AP01 Executive Office to circulate the final Strategic Risk Register to Committee members. **[3.5]**

4. Chief Executive Officer's Report

4.1. Gemma Harper introduced her report (JNCC 26 24P, Official-Sensitive), highlighting a strong year of delivery across governance, finance and organisational development. She updated members on progress in work on nature risk and resilience in follow up to the UK Government's 2026 report on "Global biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and national security" ;. She also noted work relating to JNCC's partnership with the Climate Change Committee, engagement through the UK Business and Biodiversity Forum, and JNCC's contributions to IPBES-12. She highlighted the forthcoming Business and Biodiversity event being co-hosted by JNCC, NatureScot and the UK Business and Biodiversity Forum. She recalled the deep dive on biodiversity by the Inter-Ministerial Group in March which had highlighted support for a coordinated evidence led approach to nature recovery, and outlined plans for JNCC to work with the four countries biodiversity group on a Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) implementation gaps project, in light of the finding from the UK's Seventh National Report that only three of the twenty-three GBF targets as currently on track for delivery by 2030.

The Committee welcomed the report and congratulated Gemma and JNCC staff on the progress and achievements delivered during the year.

4.2. The Committee was briefed on the outcomes of the recent meeting of the Chairs and Chief Executive Officers of the Statutory Nature Conservation Bodies (SNCBs), hosted by Natural Resources Wales. At that meeting, the Chairs and CEOs had agreed on a number of follow-up actions to explore how the SNCBs could further support nature recovery within existing legislative frameworks and the potential for new approaches, to develop a common narrative across the four countries on KMGBF target 3, to share best practices, and to engage the respective governments during the lead up to CBD COP-17. The next meeting, in 2027, would be hosted by NatureScot.

4.3. Members discussed opportunities to strengthen collaboration across the SNCB system and other relevant Arm's Length Bodies, and highlighted the opportunity of developing a shared, evidence-based approach to supporting nature recovery and biodiversity objectives across the UK. Members also discussed the need for accelerated action to support delivery of the 2030 biodiversity targets, including

identifying interventions with the greatest potential impact, assessing progress collectively across the UK.

4.4. Members noted the close alignment of discussions in the Committee, the SNCBs meeting, and the Inter-Ministerial Group, the need to maintain momentum and the opportunity to bring these strands to do so. One option suggested was to set up a task and finish group.

4.5. Gemma Harper welcomed the discussion in Committee and proposed to bring options for JNCC's future contribution and priorities back to the Committee in September **(AP02).**

Action point(s)
June26_AP02 Chris Tuckett/Dave Stone to map relevant biodiversity, nature recovery and resilience initiatives to inform development of proposals on future priorities, timelines and JNCC's strategic contribution for consideration at the September meeting. **[4.5]**

5. People and Culture Committee and Audit & Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC) reports

5.1. Marsha Ramroop, People & Culture Committee Chair, introduced the report from the committee (JNCC 26 25I, Official-Sensitive). She highlighted the significant impact of the change in provider for Civil Service pensions on some staff and noted the considerable work undertaken by the People Team to support affected colleagues. Marsha also noted ongoing work to manage competing organisational priorities, workforce pressures and staff wellbeing.

5.2. Nigel Reader, ARAC Chair, introduced the report from ARAC (JNCC 26 26I, Official-Sensitive). He highlighted the year-end underspend for 25/26 and ongoing improvements in governance, risk management and financial management. Nigel also noted ARAC's consideration of JNCC's developing digital strategy and the forthcoming re-procurement of the internal audit contract.

5.3. Members discussed findings from the internal audit report and noted that recurring themes were generally associated with implementation and compliance with established processes rather than weaknesses in strategic planning or governance arrangements.

5.4. The Committee **noted** both reports.

6. ARAC Annual Report

6.1. Nigel Reader introduced the ARAC Annual Report (JNCC 26 27P, Official-Sensitive), highlighting another positive year for ARAC in providing challenge and support to Joint Committee and continuing to strengthen governance, assurance and financial management arrangements.

6.2. Members noted an amendment to the report following ARAC's meeting on 10 June 2026, with the Internal Audit opinion updated to reflect the agreed wording of "generally satisfactory with improvements required in some areas" to ensure an accurate reflection of the opinion provided by the Head of Internal Audit. Members noted that the opinion reflected the findings from the audits undertaken during the year and recognised the positive progress made in strengthening governance, risk management and control arrangements across the organisation.

6.3. Gemma Harper thanked Nigel Reader for his leadership of ARAC and support to the Executive. She welcomed the report and highlighted progress in governance, risk management and financial control during the year.

6.4. Members noted that preparations for the Annual Report and Accounts were on track, with mitigations in place to manage any risks arising from wider audit timetables.

6.5. Members discussed staff wellbeing, the year-end reserves position and findings from the internal audit programme. Members noted that wellbeing would continue to be considered through ARAC and the People & Culture Committee. Members also discussed the evidence quality assurance audit, which had been commissioned to review a recognised area for improvement, and were reassured by the actions underway to strengthen the processes.

6.6. The Committee **noted** the ARAC Annual Report.

7. Q4 Performance Report and update on programme of change

7.1. David Collins introduced the Q4 Performance Report (JNCC 26 28P, Official-Sensitive) and provided an update on the Programme of Change.

7.2. David Collins reported that delivery had progressed largely as planned throughout Q4, with strong delivery against organisational objectives and positive feedback from sponsors on performance during the year.

7.3. Members discussed the year-end financial position, workforce planning and recruitment challenges. It was noted that the underspend reflected a combination of factors including additional income, over-programming against planned expenditure and delays to some planned investments. The discussion highlighted ongoing work to further improve financial forecasting and resource planning, and the importance of maintaining organisational capacity while ensuring resources remained focused on priority areas.

7.4. The Committee **noted** the report.

8. 8a. Report on Committee Working Objectives 2025/26

8.1. Lynn Heeley introduced the report on Committee Working Objectives (JNCC 26 29D, Official-Sensitive). She highlighted strong delivery against most objectives during 2025/26, with scientific capability, horizon scanning and stakeholder engagement identified as areas requiring further development.

8.2. The Committee **agreed** the assessment of progress against the 2025/26 objectives set out in Annex 1.

8.3. The Committee discussed the proposed Working Objectives for 2026/27. The Committee agreed that: the issues reflected under item 4 should be reflected in the Objectives; strengthening collaboration among the SNCBs should be considered as an issue of strategic planning; and that broader risks and opportunities associated with artificial intelligence, as well as other emerging technologies, beyond sustainability, should be considered, noting the relevance in this regard of ongoing work on JNCC's digital strategy. The Committee also emphasised that the Strategic Risk Register should be considered alongside the Working Objectives.

8.4. The Committee **agreed** the Committee Working Objectives for 2026/27 based on the draft set out in Annex 2, subject to the amendments reflecting the points identified during discussion **(AP03).**

Action point(s)
June2026_AP03 Lynn Heeley to update the 2026/27 Committee Working Objectives to reflect Committee comments and to provide the revised version to the Committee. **[8.5]**

8. 8b. Effectiveness Review

8.5. Lynn Heeley introduced the Effectiveness Review (JNCC 26 30D, Official-Sensitive), noting that the review identified strong overall Committee effectiveness, supported by established governance arrangements and effective Committee operation.

8.6. Members discussed the competency assessment and noted that future assessments could benefit from clearer competency definitions, assessment categories and presentation of results.

8.7. Members noted the identified gaps relating to marine expertise, understanding of EU funding mechanisms and experience of alternative funding models. Members also discussed opportunities to further strengthen Committee oversight, including whether a similar annual reporting approach to ARAC could be considered for the People & Culture Committee and Chief Scientists' Group.

8.8. The Committee **agreed** the recommendations arising from the Effectiveness Review and **noted** the Competency Framework in Annex 2. The Committee noted the need to complete competency assessments, including from newly appointed members to support a more complete assessment of Committee. **(AP04)**

Action point(s)
June26_AP04 Governance Risk and Assurance Team to request outstanding competency assessments from Committee members and newly appointed members and to circulate the updated competency framework summary to members upon completion. **[8.8]**

8. 8c. Appointment of ARAC Chair

8.9. The Committee **approved** the appointment of Karen Balmer as ARAC Chair from 1 January 2027, following the completion of Nigel Reader's term.

8.10. The Committee **noted** the ARAC Chair role description at Annex 1, recognising the role's contribution to Committee assurance and oversight and noting that the Chair of ARAC would participate in Joint Committee discussions ex officio. The Committee also **noted** the importance of longer-term succession planning to maintain appropriate financial and audit expertise within ARAC.

8. 8d. Forward Programme

8.11. The Committee **noted** the Joint Committee Forward Programme (JNCC 26 32I).

8.12. The Committee **noted** that the programme would continue to be updated to reflect emerging priorities and future strategic discussions.

9. Business Plan

9.1. Chris Tuckett introduced the Business Plan for 2026/27 (JNCC 26 33D), setting out the proposed priorities, outcomes and delivery focus for the year ahead.[1]

9.2. Members discussed the importance of clearly linking priorities, milestones and intended outcomes, and highlighted the role of communications and stakeholder engagement in supporting delivery of the Plan and maximising impact.

9.3. Members emphasised the importance of maintaining flexibility to respond to emerging priorities and opportunities during the year and continuing to work as a system across the SNCBs, ensuring alignment among them where appropriate. Members also discussed opportunities to identify shared priorities and outcomes across the SNCBs and consider how future business planning could better reflect areas of common focus.

9.4. Members also reviewed the end year reserves position and noted the proposed approach to reducing reserves towards the range set out in the Reserves Policy through targeted investment, over-programming and improved financial forecasting

9.5. The Committee **approved** the Business Plan subject to minor amendments to ensure a strong focus on outcomes, effective communications and stakeholder engagement, and continued alignment across the SNCB system. Members also noted the potential value of considering links between future JNCC and CNCB business planning processes to support a more coordinated system-wide approach. **(AP05)**

Action point(s)
June26_AP05 Chris Tuckett to finalise the Business Plan to reflect Committee comments and to circulate once finalised. **[9.4]**

[1] Consideration of this item began on day 1 but was concluded on day 2.

10. Any Other Business

10.1. Sara McGuckin provided an overview of the afternoon field visit to Lough Neagh: Slievenacloy Nature Reserve and Rea's Wood.

Day 2

11. Nature resilience and risk

11.1. Dave Stone introduced the paper for this item (JNCC 26 34P, Official-Sensitive), which outlines JNCC's work on nature risk and resilience in follow up to the UK Government's 2026 report on "Global biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and national security".

11.2. The Committee welcomed the increasing recognition of the strategic risks associated with biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation and Members highlighted the importance of mainstreaming consideration of these issues across governments and of embedding nature resilience and risk within national risk planning, including the National Risk Register. Members also highlighted opportunities for collaboration across the UK nature conservation system, the value of a resilience-focused and solutions-based narrative, the need for response actions globally as well as nationally, both short term and longer term, and the need to consider the global impacts of domestic measures. Members also underlined the need for a strong scientific evidence base to support future risk assessments and policy development.

12. Pollution strategy and UK opportunities

12.1. Steve Wilkinson introduced the paper (JNCC 26 35P, Official), highlighting pollution as a significant driver of biodiversity loss and outlining JNCC's proposed approach to supporting nature recovery and delivery of Global Biodiversity Framework Target 7.

12.2. Members welcomed the paper and also **noted** the value of the field visit to Lough Neagh which had highlighted the pollution challenge as well as potential solutions.

12.3. Members discussed the challenges associated with tackling different forms of pollution, including nutrient pollution, air pollution and plastics. Members also noted the importance of understanding both individual and cumulative impacts on ecosystems, particularly in the context of climate change and other

environmental pressures. Members also highlighted the importance of sustainable production and consumption, to address the underlying causes of pollution upstream.

12.4. Members highlighted the importance of identifying and communicating practical solutions to support pollution reduction and nature recovery, including sharing effective approaches across the UK and supporting action at local and catchment scales. Members noted the instrumental role of the Air Pollution Assessment Service (APAS) tool, developed by JNCC, its roll out in Northern Ireland and the need for support across the four countries to ensure sufficient funding is available for its continued viability.

12.5. Members noted the value of JNCC's convening role in bringing together evidence, partners and expertise from across the four countries. Members discussed opportunities to develop an overview of the relevant organizations engaged, strengthen coordination, share learning and promote common approaches to accelerate progress in tackling pollution across the UK.

12.6. Members emphasised the importance of understanding recovery of nature from pollution, including the development of indicators, identification of measures that can demonstrate progress and evidence for the effectiveness of interventions over time.

12.7. The Committee supported the proposed direction of travel for JNCC's pollution programme and welcomed its continued focus on supporting nature recovery through evidence, convening, coordination and working across partnerships.

13. JNCC Communications and stakeholder engagement

13.1. David Collins introduced the paper (JNCC 26 36P, Official-Sensitive), outlining proposed improvements to JNCC's communications and stakeholder engagement activity. Chris Tuckett provided further detail on the proposed approach, including work to strengthen strategic communications, stakeholder prioritisation and targeted engagement.

13.2. The Committee welcomed and **endorsed** the proposed approach, recognising the importance of communications and stakeholder engagement in supporting JNCC's strategic objectives and increasing the reach, engagement and impact of its work. Members highlighted the importance of identifying and prioritising key audiences and stakeholders, ensuring activity remains aligned with organisational priorities and intended outcomes.

13.3. Members discussed the importance of understanding the impact of communications and engagement activity, whilst balancing greater visibility with JNCC's role as a trusted, evidence-led adviser. Members highlighted the importance of effective stakeholder engagement, clear messaging and maintaining strong relationships across government, the Country Nature Conservation Bodies and other partners.

13.4. The Committee **noted** the importance of ensuring communications capacity and capability are aligned with JNCC's strategic ambitions and supported the Executive's plans in this regard.

13.5. Members briefly discussed the branding of JNCC's work and agreed to consider this further at a future meeting. Members thanked Marsha Ramroop for her substantive contribution (Annex X to JNCC 26 36P).

14. AOB

14.1. No other business was raised.

15. Review of meeting

15.1. Members and staff observers reflected positively on the meeting and welcomed the opportunity for in-person discussion of strategic issues facing JNCC and the wider nature conservation sector.

15.2. Members highlighted the value of the field visit and associated discussions, noting the benefits of considering environmental challenges in a practical context. Members also recognised the contribution of informal engagement to relationship-building, collaboration and system-wide thinking.

15.3. Members thanked DAERA, NIEA and JNCC staff for organising and supporting the meeting programme and field visit.

15.4. David Cooper thanked members, observers and staff for their contributions throughout the meeting.