The one hundred and forty-sixth meeting of the Joint Nature Conservation Committee held on 24 and 25 March 2026 in Cathays Park, Cardiff

Paper JNCC 26 09P: The future arrangements for the committee and any subgroups

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Lead Author: Chris Tuckett
Lead Director: Chris Tuckett

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JNCC 26 09P

Joint Nature Conservation Committee

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

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Joint Nature Conservation Committee

The future arrangements for the committee and any subgroups

Paper by Chris Tuckett

1. Proposal

1.1. This paper addresses two issues relating to the functioning of the Committee and its subgroups, i.e.

- The future of the thematic subgroups of the Committee; and
- the scheduling of main and intersessional meetings of the Committee with respect to the quarterly review of performance and forward planning.

1.2. The Committee is invited to consider the paper and the proposals set out therein.

2. Future arrangements for the work of thematic subgroups

2.1. The Joint Committee has a number of sub-committees and other subgroups to support its work. These include the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC), the People and Culture Committee, the Renumeration Committee and the recently revamped Chief Scientists' Group. They also include 3 subgroups that are the subject of discussion in this paper: the UK subgroup (dealing with terrestrial and fresh water, but not marine, issues); the Marine subgroup and the International and Overseas Territories subgroup.

2.2. In their present form, these three subgroups were established to oversee and guide the development of the roadmaps for the three respective JNCC programmes of work. These tasks have now been completed.

2.3. The Marine subgroup also inherited the task of the previous marine protected areas subgroup (established in 2009) to provide advice and assurance to the Joint Committee with regard to JNCC's work on the designation of marine protected areas.

2.4. The International and Overseas Territories subgroup also provided a channel for engagement with representatives of the UK Overseas Territories Association (UKOTA).

2.5. Now that the primary tasks for the three subgroups have been completed, it is time to reconsider the need for such groups. The Chair has consulted with the chairs of the three groups (Tom Meagher, Mel Austen and Steve Ormerod respectively) and with relevant members of the Executive. These discussions have resulted in a number of conclusions, proposals and next steps as set out in the following paragraphs.

2.6. There is broad agreement for the recommendation that the sub-groups should not continue in their current form. While there is an ongoing value of strategic discussion and challenge to the Executive of the issues related to the work of the three subgroups, it is generally felt that this can and should be provided by the Committee itself and/or by the Chief Scientists' Group. Further, the Committee's work can also be supported, as necessary, by 'task and finish' groups mandated to address specific time-limited tasks (for example, as was recently done for the Nature Narrative).

2.7. JNCC has specific responsibility for offshore statutory marine nature conservation advice to the governments of the UK. However, the effectiveness of the Joint Committee on marine issues is currently limited by the small number of members with expertise on these issues on the Committee, as well as in the Chief Scientists' Group.

2.8. To increase the knowledge and awareness of JNCC's work on marine issues among Committee members, time for an in-depth briefing and reflection on these issues will be organised for an upcoming meeting of the Committee in the current year. This will also provide the opportunity for the Joint Committee to discuss the most appropriate arrangements for ongoing engagement with marine issues.

2.9. Meanwhile, an interim expert advisory group on marine protected areas will continue the work of the current subgroup with regard to advice on the designation of marine protected areas. The membership of the group will be based on the existing subgroup, but will include additional marine experts as needed (e.g. a member of the NatureScot Board has been suggested). The ongoing need for such a group will be kept under review, in light of possible future transfer of responsibilities to the Executive, the Chief Scientists Group and/or the Committee itself, taking into account also role of the inter-agency technical MPA group that ensures join up across the SNCBs on technical issues.

2.10. It is imperative to continue and strengthen cooperation between JNCC and the Overseas Territories, particularly given the need to support the implementation of the UK Overseas Territories Biodiversity Strategy. Accordingly, the Chair is meeting representatives of UKOTA on March 16th to consider possible modalities to further enhance channels for engagement between the Committee and OT representatives. The Chair will report on the outcome of these discussions at the March Committee meeting.

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3. Scheduling of Joint Committee meetings

3.1. The Joint Committee currently meets four times a year in its "main" meetings (three in person meetings held at various locations rotating among the four countries each with two roughly three hour sessions held over two days, and one virtual meeting (usually held over the course of a single day), and also in four "inter-sessional" meetings (held online, usually for 90 minutes).

3.2. With their current timing (towards the end of each quarter), main meetings are held too late to consider the quarterly performance reports ahead of the reporting by the Executive to Defra. To allow for Committee input, quarterly performance reports have also been provided to intersessional meetings, but generally there has been insufficient time at these meetings to allow considered reflections by Committee with the result that essentially the same papers are being considered twice each quarter leading to duplication, inefficiency and crowding of agenda items.

3.3. It is proposed therefore, from 2027 onwards, (i.e. the fourth quarter of the 2026-27 financial year) to adjust the timings of Committee meetings such that the main meeting are held earlier in each quarter to allow for more timely and efficient review of the quarterly performance reports. Adjustments to the timing of meetings of the sub-committees will also be necessary, and consultations with the chairs of those committees are underway. A draft schedule will be made available to the Committee at or before its March meeting.

3.4. With a view to improving timeliness and to freeing up time at main Committee meetings, the review and approval of minutes of main meetings and consideration of matters arising now take place at the intersessional meetings.

3.5. It is hoped that these changes will further improve the efficiency of Committee meetings and the effectiveness of the Committee.