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 M01: Confirmed minutes of the 146th meeting of the Joint Nature Conservation Committee

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Minutes of the 146th meeting of the Joint Nature Conservation Committee
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JNCC 26 M01

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

CONFIRMED
Minutes of the 146th meeting of the Joint Nature Conservation Committee

The Committee members present were: Melanie Austen (Natural England), David Cooper (Chair), Dan Ebanks (Independent Member), Colin Galbraith (NatureScot) (items 1-8; 24 March only), Rachael Garrett (Independent Member), Pete Higgins (NatureScot), Julia Jones (Independent Member), Rhys Jones (NRW), Sara McCracken (CNCC), Tom Meagher (Deputy Chair), Steve Ormerod (NRW), Marsha Ramroop (Independent Member), Peter Unwin (Natural England).

Also in attendance were: Natalie Askew (JNCC) (item 7), Sallie Bailey (Natural England) (items 1-11), Peter Brotherton (Natural England) (item 2) (25 March only), David Collins (JNCC), Pip Day (JNCC), Silas Gairdner (JNCC), Abi Gardner (GYBN UK), Gemma Harper (JNCC), Lynn Heeley (JNCC), Joseph Hillier (Natural England) (item 13; 25 March only), Gwawr Jones (JNCC), Stuart MacQuarrie (NatureScot) (items 1-9), Hannah McGrath (JNCC) (25 March only), Sara McGuckin (NIEA), Sam Morgan (25 March only), Willow Outhwaite (25 March only), Emma Peake (Defra), Tracey Quince (24 March only) (items 10-11) Nigel Reader (ARAC Chair), Harveet Singh Purewal (GYBN UK), Emily Songer (JNCC), Beth Stoker (JNCC) (items 1-7), Dave Stone (JNCC), Chris Tuckett (JNCC).

Apologies were received from: Mary Lewis (NRW), Sara McCracken (CNCC) for 25 March, Colin Galbraith (NatureScot) for 25 March.

24th March 2026, 14:20, Welsh Government Offices, Cathays Park and virtually via MS Teams.

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

1. Chairman's opening remarks

1.1 David Cooper welcomed members to the 146th meeting, noting the publication of the 7th National Report (7NR) to the Convention on Biological Diversity and the recent meeting of the interministerial group.

2. Declaration of interests

2.1. Marsha Ramroop declared she had been appointed to the Board of the Marine Management Organisation, starting from November 2026.

2.2. Steve Ormerod declared that he is supporting the Bank of England's work on animal shortlisting for banknotes.

2.3. Rachael Garrett declared that she is undertaking consultancy work for Defra on smallholder baselines for Environment Act deforestation provisions.

2.4. Mel Austen declared her position of President of the British Ecological Society as of 1 January 2026.

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

3.1. Members **approved** the draft minutes of the February intersessional meeting (JNCC 26 05D, Official-Sensitive) subject to small amendments to item 3, member updates.

3.2. Members **noted** the Matters arising paper (JNCC 26 04D, Official-Sensitive) and **approved** that the six completed actions, marked in yellow, could be removed from the next iteration.

4. Chief Executive Officer's Report

4.1. Gemma Harper introduced her report (JNCC 26 06P, Official-Sensitive), which contained updates on Q3-Q4 delivery performance, ongoing National Security work (noting that further discussion with members is scheduled for June), JNCC's new partnership and Memorandum of Understanding with the Climate Change Committee. Gemma highlighted significant international engagement such as JNCC's contributions to the 12th Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), the publication of the UK's Overseas Territories' Biodiversity Strategy and preparations for Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) COP17. She outlined the current UK biodiversity status and trends, noting the 7th National Report to CBD shows that the UK is only on track to meet 3 of the 23 2030 Global Biodiversity Framework targets. She also noted the upcoming Business & Biodiversity Summit in July, which JNCC is arranging with the UK Business and Biodiversity Forum and NatureScot. She emphasised the importance of organisational visibility, thanking members already amplifying JNCC's work on social media and encouraging others to do so.

4.2. Members sought clarification regarding the intended primary audience for JNCC's engagement work, including whether communications should be directed primarily at the public or specific sectors. Members asked how JNCC's messaging aligns with the organisation's wider communications strategy and how members can confidently and authentically communicate JNCC's evidence.

4.3. Members **noted** the developing relationship with the Climate Change Committee and were keen to know how this will operate in practice. Several members stressed the importance of co-ordinated and consistent messaging across the Country Nature Conservation Bodies (CNCBs), enabling a more unified UK-wide voice. Members welcomed the upcoming Biodiversity & Business Summit, requesting further details on the programme and how they can support by securing the right attendance.

4.4. Gemma confirmed that JNCC will review its communications strategy to ensure it meets ministerial expectations for greater visibility and impact. She noted the need to broaden engagement beyond existing networks, particularly by strengthening relationships with devolved governments and sector-specific stakeholders. She stressed the importance of positioning JNCC clearly within the wider climate-and-nature narrative, ensuring that the organisation is recognised as a trusted partner in these spaces. She also noted that work is underway on several targeted areas of engagement being led by Chris Tuckett, through which this work will be expedited.

4.5. Members **noted** the CEO report, welcomed the progress achieved and congratulated Gemma and staff for the achievements.

Action point(s)
Mar26_AP01 Executive Office to circulate further details on the Business & Biodiversity event, taking place on 15th July 2026 to members. [4.3] Mar26_AP02 ExCo to review JNCC's Communications strategy in line with the nature narrative and ministerial expectations for visibility. [4.4] Mar26_AP03 Chris Tuckett to expedite JNCC stakeholder engagement work. [4.4]

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

5.1. Nigel Reader, ARAC Chair, introduced the report from ARAC (JNCC 26 18P, Official-Sensitive), noting it presented a positive analysis. He noted that, at its future meetings, ARAC will be considering emerging risks identified by the CEO

as a standing agenda item). Nigel informed members of a recent fraud incident but noted it was promptly detected and well managed. Nigel also highlighted that the annual cyber-security report was positive and risks are being well mitigated. David Collins confirmed that JNCC's strong cyber-security position is a result of multi-year investment in IT resilience, strong vigilance (including staff phishing tests) and the replacement of most legacy platforms. David Collins confirmed the cyber-security report will be circulated to members.

5.2. Marsha Ramroop, People & Culture Committee Chair, introduced the report from the committee (JNCC 19P, Official-Sensitive). She highlighted that the new Director of People & Infrastructure, Liz Amartey, had made an excellent and proactive start, including the implementation of a month-long Human Resources reset, enabling the team to focus on strategic priorities. This reset also enabled a timely response to the Civil Service pensions issue.

5.3. Members **noted** both reports.

Action point(s)
Mar26_AP04 Executive Office to circulate the cyber-security report to members. [5.1]

6. Chief Scientists Group (CSG) update

6.1. Julia Jones, CSG Co-Chair, introduced the CSG report (JNCC 26 07P, Official-sensitive), outlining the recent refresh of the group and noting its intention to support deeper examination of shared cross-country scientific issues.

6.2. Julia highlighted the outcomes of the first deep dive, which reviewed the flexibility of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) / Area of Scientific Interest (ASSI) citations. Julia highlighted the CSG's proposal that JNCC lead a refresh of part 1 of the guidelines with a view to incorporating ecosystem-based approaches as an explicit consideration for protected sites, in collaboration with the CNCBs.

6.3. Members welcomed the work and agreed that JNCC has a legitimate role in coordinating SSSI guideline development, stressing that any future framework must remain grounded in nature conservation purposes. They also recognised shared cross-country sensitivities around SSSIs and Areas of Scientific Interest (ASSI), the need for legal robustness, and the importance of understanding site condition drivers. Members **endorsed** the proposal to revise Part 1 of the SSSI guideline.

6.4. Members **noted** CSG's support for the emerging JNCC "Signpost" report series and ongoing spatial prioritisation and land-use work, recognising associated sensitivities and capacity constraints. Members also **noted** the importance of broader stakeholder input into future national reporting processes.

6.5. Julia reported that CSG in line with the request of the Committee to establish a clearer process for coordinating responses to Imperative Reasons of Overriding Public Interest (IROPI) referrals, CSG had developed the proposal shared in the paper for endorsement by Joint Committee. Members supported the approach, encouraging a focus on evidence and high-level principles rather than localised solutions.

6.6. Members **endorsed** the proposed process for notifying CNCBs and coordinating responses on IROPI. This will be communicated to CNCBs through their Chief Scientists.

6.7. Julia noted two items planned for the next CSG meeting: a review of the preparation process for the National Report to the Convention on Biological Diversity, including data challenges and opportunities for wider stakeholder involvement; and a deep dive on the People and Nature Survey, including Economic and Social Research Council funded work exploring how greater value could be derived from existing datasets. All four CNCBs had expressed strong interest in this.

6.8. Members **noted** the planned data-focused work and the forthcoming deep dive and also **noted** the addition of the Spireslack Surface Coal Mine to the Geological Conservation Review register.

6.9. Abi Gardner highlighted that GYBN UK were one of eight respondents to the 7th National Report evidence collation and that it would be helpful to discover whether there were barriers that could be overcome for those that had not responded, in preparation for the next report.

Action point(s)
Mar26_AP05 CSG to lead development of refreshed SSSI guidelines (part 1) and bring back to Committee. [6.3] Mar26_AP06 CSG Chair(s) to recirculate the IROPI paper to CSG members for them to communicate to their organisations. [6.6]

7. Report from the International & Overseas Territories sub-group and oral update from the Marine Committee sub-group

7.1. Steve Ormerod, sub-group Chair, and Beth Stoker introduced the update on the International & Overseas Territories (I&OT) Sub-group (JNCC 26 08P, Official-Sensitive). Members **noted** recent discussions with the UK Overseas Territories Association (UKOTA), ongoing updates on CITES and staffing changes linked to

the closure of the Ocean Country Partnership Programme had been well managed. UKOTA expressed appreciation for JNCC's continued support.

7.2. Mel Austen provided an oral update on the Marine sub-group, following its meeting on 13 March. The sub-group reviewed and provided assurance on two key deliverables to be submitted to Defra:
(i) Pre-consultation advice on potential compensatory MPAs
(ii) An interim review of the MPA network undertaken jointly with the SNCBs.

Both were noted as scientifically robust and suitable for submission, subject to minor clarifications. The sub-group supported submitting advice jointly with Natural England.

7.3. David Cooper thanked the team involved with the compensatory MPA work, noting that he would be approving this work on behalf of the Committee in line with standard practice, and confirmed that the final advice would be circulated to Committee for transparency.

7.4. Members **noted** both updates.

Action point(s)
Mar26_AP07 Executive Office to circulate finalised compensatory MPA advice to Committee. [7.3]

8. The future arrangements for the Committee and any sub-groups

8.1. Chris Tuckett introduced the paper (JNCC 26 09P, Official), highlighting the original reasons for forming the thematic sub-groups and the changes to the proposed schedule of meetings from January 2027.

8.2. Members **noted** the existing sub-groups had completed their original purpose and **agreed** the proposed way forward. An interim, focused marine group will continue to provide independent expert assurance in particular regarding work related to marine protected areas. A discussion on whether this function could transfer to the CSG once sufficient marine expertise is in place would be considered in due course. The Chair noted that the Joint Committee would include a session focussing on marine activities at a meeting this year.

8.3. Members **endorsed** the need for regular engagement with UKOTA and **noted** ongoing discussions with UKOTA leads to agree the timing and format of future engagement.

8.4. Members **reviewed** and **agreed** the new meeting dates proposed.

9. Q3 Performance Report and update on programme of change

9.1. David Collins introduced this paper (JNCC 26 11P, Official-sensitive).

9.2. David confirmed that delivery remained strong and JNCC was on track to meet all milestones by year end. A forecasted underspend had led to the return of £800k to Defra at the end of Q3, with the final year end position expected to show a surplus of between £0.5m–£1m which would be added to reserves, subject to discussion with Defra. Progress on HR and people-strategy work was noted, and emerging risks continue to be monitored.

9.3. Members **noted** the report.

10. Risk Management in JNCC

10.1. Tracey Quince introduced the paper (JNCC 26 12P, Official-sensitive), outlining progress made in 2025/26, including a refreshed risk management strategy, improvements to the Significant Risk Register (SRR) and clearer escalation pathways.

10.2. Members discussed the draft SRR framework and risk appetite for 2026/27, welcoming the focus on opportunities as well as risks and emphasising the need to avoid over-complexity. Members noted that the need to provide sufficient granularity in the overall ser of risk management frameworks to be clear that JNCC should remain risk-averse, in areas such as health and safety and data protection.

10.3. Members **noted** the overview of the Corporate Risk Register, the science risk drill-down, and the planned work for 2026/27. The Executive confirmed that the final SRR and appetite, for approval by the Committee at the intersessional meeting, will reflect Committee steers, including clearer treatment of health and safety, data and visibility, alignment with the nature narrative, and improved transparency of ratings. Outcomes of the year-end assessment completed by ExCo will be shared with ARAC and Committee in June.

10.4. Members expressed broad support for the SRR framework and the direction of travel on the risk appetite. Members **endorsed** the proposal to adopt a more

structured approach for 2027/28, including a Delphi-based process to be co-led by Rachael Garrett and Tracey Quince.

Action point(s)
Mar26_AP08 Tracey Quince to amend the SRR and Risk Appetite to reflect Committee's discussion, strengthening the articulation of nature conservation and incorporating where JNCC is risk averse, for approval at the May intersessional meeting Mar26_AP09 Tracey Quince and Rachael Garrett to develop the Delphi-based approach for 2027/2028.

11. Joint Committee and JNCC Support Co. Board Standing Orders

11.1. Tracey Quince introduced the paper (JNCC 26 12P, Official-sensitive), outlining the revised Standing Orders for discussion and approval.

11.2. Members **agreed** that the wording should be revised to clarify the status and attendance of the ARAC Chair at Joint Committee and JNCC Support Co. meetings.

11.3. Members **agreed** that the wording regarding quoracy should be clarified to state that to be quorate requires representation from each CNCB.

11.4. Members **approved** the revised Standing Orders, subject to the two amendments noted above.

Action point(s)
Mar26_AP10 Tracey Quince to adjust the wording in the Standing Orders with regard to the ARAC Chair's attendance at Joint Committee and JNCC Support Co. meetings. [11.2] and with regard to quoracy to clarify that representation from each CNCB is required. [11.3]

12. Any Other Business

12.1. Dave Stone shared a presentation, providing a brief update on his analysis on the Future of Conservation, based on a survey of Joint Committee members.

12.2. Members **noted** the surveys headline findings, recognising a shared values profile within the Committee and the need to engage beyond the conservation community.

Action point(s)
Mar26_AP11 Executive Office to circulate Dave Stone's presentation on the Future of Conservation to Committee. [12.1]

Day 2

25 March 2026, 09:30, Welsh Government Offices, Cathays Park and virtually via MS Teams.

13. Science Strategy

13.1 Dave Stone introduced the draft Science Strategy (JNCC 26 14P, Official).

13.2 Members welcomed the overall direction and intent of the Strategy and considered how it could best support delivery of *Together for Nature*. Members **noted** the need for clear articulation of impact, ensuring that the final strategy balances its focus on developing internal processes with our ambition to support positive real-world outcomes for people and nature.

13.3 Members commented that the document should more clearly distinguish strategic intent from operational delivery, integrate natural and social sciences, better reflect the research needs of SNCBs and the Overseas Territories. and address gaps such as freshwater and responsible innovation.

13.4 Members recommended strengthening the executive summary, clarifying the overarching framing.

13.5 Members highlighted the importance of a more strategic communications approach to ensure the Strategy resonates externally and **noted** JNCC's strengths in synthesising evidence, recommending that this be reflected more explicitly.

13.6 Dave Stone confirmed that all country bodies contributed to identifying research interests and that these will continue to evolve. He noted the need to distinguish organisational impact from conservation impact and avoid duplicating *Together for Nature*.

Action point(s)
Mar26_AP12 Dave Stone to refine the draft Science Strategy in line with members feedback, including strengthening the executive summary and ensuring alignment with *Together for Nature,* ^for approval of the committee at the intersessional meeting. [13.2-13.4]

14. Pathway to Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) 17th Conference of the Parties (COP17)

14.1 Beth Stoker introduced the paper (JNCC26 15P, Official-Sensitive), providing an update on preparations for Convention on Biological Diversity COP17 and progress on the 7th National Report (7NR). Members noted that the report had been submitted to the CBD on time, that an accessible pdf version of the report has been published and a summary of the report is currently being produced. Members further noted ongoing work on indicators, preparations for the 8th National Report, and plans for the Business & Biodiversity event with the UK Business and Biodiversity Forum and NatureScot in Edinburgh on 15 July.

14.2 Members **considered** advice to support the UK Government's COP17 position, including strengthening indicators, clarifying measures of success, improving synergy across the Rio Conventions, and drawing on wider scientific, economic and societal networks.

14.3 Members reflected on their own role and engagement in the lead-up to COP17, noting opportunities to help amplify UK progress, support stakeholder engagement and contribute to key communication moments.

14.4 Members **noted** the importance of widening engagement with NGOs, youth groups, business and finance, and supporting stakeholders in navigating emerging sustainability requirements.

Action point(s)
Mar26_AP13 Executive Office to circulate the summary of the 7NR with Committee members when finalised (expected end of April). [14.1]

15. Prioritising nature within broader land use

15.1 Chris Tuckett introduced the paper (JNCC26 16P, Official-sensitive), providing an update about JNCC's land-use work and noting that JNCC's approach emerged from experience with working with Natural England and with DAERA Northern Ireland. She also noted the recent publication of Defra's Land Use Framework, and Scotland's existing land use strategy.

15.2 Hannah McGrath outlined the challenges arising from increasing demands on land, the potential for increased multifunctional land use, implications of land use change for the balance between production (e.g. of food, water, ecosystem services) and consumption, and impacts of this in terms of biodiversity change overseas and exposure to supply chain risks. She presented a tool for spatial

prioritisation using multi-criteria analysis to identify options for multifunctional land use for parcels of land.

15.3 The Committee also considered a draft "Signpost" publication which set out a proposal for an operating model to facilitate multifunctional land use across the four countries of the UK, howland-use change and externalities can be assessed, and how cross-border dependencies can be incorporated.

15.4 Committee members discussed the ongoing and potential future role of JNCC in this area. Noting that land use is a devolved issue, members generally agreed that JNCC's role should focus on UK-wide effects of land use change and its transboundary impacts (across the four countries of the UK and internationally), including biodiversity change overseas, exposures to supply chain risk, and other issues related to national security.

15.5 Members appreciated the usefulness and further potential of the spatial prioritisation tools developed by JNCC, and of the value of facilitating evidence-based dialogue

15.6 Members **noted** the importance of scenario analysis, and consideration of the impacts of and adaptation to climate change. In this context they noted the relevance of the IPBES Nexus Assessment which will be addressed in a forthcoming internal webinar.

15.7 Members noted that the recommendations in the Signpost document to get a UK plan for land use, agreed by the four countries was a challenging one, and that further discussions with the CNCBs would be essential for success.

Action point(s)
Mar26_AP14 Executive Office to circulate Hannah McGrath's presentation on land use to Committee members. [15.2] [The Executive] to review the approach and the signpost document in light of the discission in the Committee

16. Strategic priorities

16.1 Chris Tuckett introduced the paper (JNCC26 17P, Official), outlining JNCC's strategic priorities for 2026/27. Members **supported** these priorities and **noted** the intention for JNCC to adopt a more cross-cutting, thematic approach in 2026/27, with stronger integration across directorates and clearer links to international work, including IPBES and COP17.

16.2 Members **commented** on the importance of strengthening communication and engagement, including the need for a clearer organisational identity and consistent messaging. Members emphasised that, whilst priorities and the 'what' are clear, fully developing the "how" of delivery will be essential. External factors,

such as elections and JNCC's influence across wider government portfolios, must also be recognised.

16.3 Members **supported** accelerating work on stakeholder engagement as part of managing organisational risks and opportunities. A number of members with expertise in communications, and building stakeholder engagement and organisational profile management kindly offered their support in this regard.

Action point(s)
Mar26_AP15 Chris Tuckett to accelerate development of stakeholder engagement work, liaising with members including Dan Ebanks, Sara McCracken and Marsha Ramroop as part of managing organisational risks and opportunities. [16.3] Mar26_AP16 Chris Tuckett to present an update on progress on stakeholder engagement to June Committee meeting. [16.3]

17. AOB

17.1 Members were reminded that the online mandatory fraud-awareness training session will be held on 31st March, 11:00-12:00, with a recording available for those unable to attend.

18. Review of meeting

18.1 Members noted the positive tone of the meeting, the quality of papers and presentations, and the value of the cultural intelligence session delivered by Marsha Ramroop ahead of the meeting. Members emphasised the importance of aligning future work with JNCC's values, maintaining institutional memory, and continuing to include short learning or context-sharing sessions.

18.2 Members welcomed the effective hybrid format and the contributions from observers, noting the value of wider perspectives and continued engagement with youth and cross-organisational colleagues.