



Joint Nature Conservation Committee 125th Meeting Minutes Confirmed

Date: 3 December 2020

Time: 08.45

Venue: Virtually via MS Teams

Present

Professor Mel Austen
Independent member

Mr Charles Banner (items 1-5)
Independent member

Professor Ian Bateman
Independent member

Lord Blencathra
Natural England

Ms Cath Denholm
NatureScot

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

Mr Chris Brooks
JNCC

Dr John Goold
JNCC

Dr Tim Hill
Natural England

Professor Christine Maggs
JNCC

Dr Sara McGuckin
Northern Ireland Environment Agency

Mrs Tracey Quince
JNCC

Ms Eileen Stuart
NatureScot

Mr Lawrence Way (item 13)
JNCC

Dr Clare Whitfield (item 17)
JNCC

Ms Helen Wilkinson
Natural Resources Wales

Dr Steve Wilkinson
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

Observers

Mr Stone (Defra)
Mr Dyson (Defra)

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 125th 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 welcomed Ms Eileen Stuart, Deputy Director of People and Nature in NatureScot, to her first meeting. Ms Stuart gave a brief résumé of her career to date. Mr Dyson and Mr Stone from Defra Natural Environment, Trees and Landscapes Directorate, ALB Relations Team, were also welcomed to the meeting as observers.

2.3 Professor Gilligan gave a summary of his tenure as Chair over the past six and a half years. He noted that JNCC had weathered a number of challenges over his term, but the core mission and focus had been maintained. Two strategic plans had been produced during that time, which were both innovative and effective. JNCC had raised its profile, with "Nature News" and other prominent publications. The format of Joint Committee meetings has changed, with working dinners and engagement events. The use of time limited sub-groups and teleconferencing has increased efficiency. The Committee has been ably supported by ARAC, expertly chaired by Professor Galbraith, and by experienced staff who have sustained delivery during the pandemic. There are many challenges ahead but many opportunities too.

3. Declaration of interests

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

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

4. Confidential minutes of the September 2020 meeting (JNCC 20 45)

4.1 The minutes of the September meeting were confirmed with no further amendments.

5. Matters arising (Official) (JNCC 20 46)

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

6. Chief Executive's report on topical issues (Official-sensitive) (JNCC 20 47)

6.1 This item was taken in confidence.

7. Update on JNCC's response to the Covid-19 pandemic (Official-sensitive) (JNCC 20 48)

7.1 This item was taken in confidence.

8. Report from the MPA sub-group (Official-sensitive) (Oral)

8.1 This item was taken in confidence.

9. Report from the International Reporting sub-group (Official-sensitive) (Oral)

9.1 This item was taken in confidence.

10. Report from the Financial Resilience sub-group (Official-sensitive) (Oral)

10.1 This item was taken in confidence.

11. Report from ARAC on 2 December (Official) (Oral)

11.1 In summarising the key issues discussed at the ARAC meeting on 2 December, Professor Galbraith made the following points.

- i. Two new members of internal audit staff had recently been appointed: Chloe Tyler-Young (Defra Group Chief Internal Auditor) and Dayo Olusesi (JNCC Head of Internal Audit).
- ii. An audit in the governance area had taken place in October. A moderate opinion was received. All recommendations were minor tweaks to systems and processes. Two key recommendations were that all members should attend Joint Committee meetings, and there should be attendance at Joint Committee meetings, as observers, by Defra representatives.
- iii. The external audit strategy and Annual Report and Accounts timetable for 2020/21 had been agreed. Areas of audit focus included Covid-19 and monitoring the impact through year-end. The audit will be completed remotely as last year. The cost of external audit for 2020/21 will increase by £1k (5% increase).
- iv. ARAC had reviewed the significant risk register. The mitigating actions and associated deadlines were discussed. Two new risks on leadership changes and the possible Peterborough office move had been added. ARAC agreed that the addition of a target residual risk rating would provide a useful focus for the risk appetite. ARAC requested a summary of feedback on the “staff pulse” surveys currently being undertaken.
- v. A risk drill-down undertaken by Nigel Reader had concluded that the risks and issues arising from Covid-19 had been effectively managed to date. The drill-down noted that further consideration was required on the effect of continued restrictions on staff wellbeing. ARAC were assured that measures were in place to support NGO partners that JNCC relies on for biodiversity monitoring.
- vi. An additional risk related to organisational culture and cohesion had been added to the Covid-19 risk register. ARAC agreed to remove two risks as they were duplicated in JNCC’s significant risk register. ARAC noted that JNCC continues to advise Government on the links between zoonotic disease and global nature conservation.
- vii. Assurance across the organisation at quarter 2 was good, showing an improvement from quarter 1. Emergency preparedness had been identified as an area requiring additional work. Teams will be asked to re-assess their business continuity plans in the next few weeks.
- viii. ARAC considered a paper on change management. There was a discussion about how JNCC is incorporating change into business as usual rather than identifying separate change projects. Further discussion between ARAC and the executive was required to agree how change should be reported in future and how ARAC should gain assurance on the change management process.
- ix. ARAC discussed preparations for the Joint Committee annual risk management paper to be presented in March 2021 and the ARAC Annual Report due in June 2021. Discussions had provided a steer on the content and format of both papers, which would be circulated intersessionally for ARAC members’ comments.

- x. ARAC noted that health and safety compliance issues raised at quarter 1 had largely been resolved. Six Mental Health First Aiders had been trained and were now ready to provide support to staff. ARAC discussed a fraud issue relating to unauthorised use of JNCC teleconferencing facilities by a third party. ARAC agreed the executive should seek legal advice to resolve the matter. ARAC noted the environmental dashboard which had recently been developed and asked the executive to pursue a date for JNCC to become carbon neutral.
- xi. ARAC noted that Chris Brooks had met with a Deputy Director at the Government Property Agency to discuss JNCC's concerns about the proposed move to Fletton Quays. This meeting was informed of the requirement for JNCC to commit to a move, or not, to Fletton Quays by 16 December 2020. Given the options presented, and considering the risks involved, ARAC could not support a move to Fletton Quays.

11.2 In discussion, the Committee made the following comments:

- i. members were supportive of incorporating change into business as usual. However, members asked Mr Yeo to clarify how the new development priorities would be implemented and reported on. This would help to determine ARAC's role in relation to change management;
- ii. the business plan highlights planned changes to corporate systems next year. Changes to systems can be disruptive, and the executive should ensure that the impacts on staff are carefully managed;
- iii. members were content that Professor Galbraith would continue in the role of ARAC Chair, whilst deputising as JNCC Chair until the end of January. Members agreed to appoint a new ARAC Chair if the arrangement continued for a longer period of time;
- iv. Joint Committee attendance issues should be addressed in the new year; and
- v. members noted the importance of health and safety and giving this area prominence at ARAC and Joint Committee meetings. Members agreed that an annual paper to ARAC might be helpful so members could provide assurance to the Joint Committee.

AP01 Professor Galbraith, Mr Yeo, Ms Denholm and Mr Brooks to meet to discuss managing and reporting change in JNCC.

12. Report from the Chief Scientists Group (CSG) (Official-sensitive) (JNCC 20 49)

12.1 This item was taken in confidence.

13. Contributing solutions to country monitoring programmes (Official-sensitive) (JNCC 20 50)

13.1 This item was taken in confidence.

14. External factors affecting JNCC (Official) (JNCC 20 51)

14.1 Mr Yeo introduced the item and invited comments.

14.2 Professor Ormerod reported that the second State of Natural Resources Report (SoNaRR) for Wales would be available in December. The Green Recovery Taskforce, led by Sir David Henshaw, was reporting today and would emphasise the importance of nature-based solutions. Elections in Wales would take place in May, with the First Minister Mark Drakeford standing down at that time. The legislation for a new environment oversight body in Wales, post EU Exit, would come after the election.

14.3 Ms Denholm reported that the Scottish Government was poised to publish an update on the Scottish Climate Change Plan and a Statement of Intent on Biodiversity. Ms Denholm reported that there were plans in Scotland to introduce licensing for grouse moor management. The Scottish Government had recently published a position statement on the fourth National Planning Framework. A member of NatureScot staff had been seconded into a new JNCC Scottish liaison post. New marine protected areas in Scotland had recently been announced. Beaver re-introduction in Scotland was progressing well.

14.4 Dr Kirkpatrick reported that recruitments were underway for a Deputy Chair and members for the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside. Hopefully, a second Northern Ireland member would be able to join the Joint Committee by the spring.

14.5 Professor Winter reported that Natural England had recently acquired PSRE status. A response from the Government was awaited on the review into the future of National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty undertaken by an independent panel led by Julian Glover. The Nature Recovery Network had been launched in November. The Spending Review had been more positive for Defra than expected.

15. Performance report for Q2 2020/21 (Official-sensitive) (JNCC 20 52)

15.1 This item was taken in confidence.

16. Business plan for 2021/22 (Official-sensitive) (JNCC 20 53)

16.1 This item was taken in confidence.

17. Update on JNCC's readiness for the end of the EU Transition Period (Official-sensitive) (JNCC 20 54)

17.1 This item was taken in confidence.

18. Joint Committee forward programme (Official) (JNCC 20 55)

18.1 Committee discussed the paper and suggested the following topics as potential additional items for meetings in 2021:

- i. use of DNA for biodiversity monitoring;
- ii. big science questions;
- iii. urban environments.

18.2 Committee discussed and **noted** the forward programme.

Action point(s)
AP05 Mr Yeo to review the Joint Committee forward programme for 2021.

19. Any other business

19.1 Members of the Joint Committee thanked Professor Gilligan for his time and work with JNCC.