



## Agenda

Meeting of the Board

Tuesday 11 March 2025 15:30

Wednesday 12 March 2025 09:30

National Brownfield Institute, Wolverhampton

## Members

|                               |                        |
|-------------------------------|------------------------|
| Malcolm Beatty OBE            | Board Member           |
| Julie Hill MBE                | Board Member           |
| Professor Dan Laffoley        | Board Member           |
| Dr Paul Leinster CBE          | Board Member           |
| Professor Richard Macrory CBE | Board Member           |
| Professor Robbie McDonald     | Chief Insights Officer |
| Natalie Prosser               | Chief Executive        |
| Dame Glenys Stacey            | Chair                  |

## OEP Attendees

|                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
| Peter Ashford     | General Counsel  |
| REDACTED          | Principal Analyst (Item 25.13)                               |
| REDACTED          | Principal Complaints and Investigations Manager              |
| Mike Fox          | Head of Communications and Strategic Relations               |
| Richard Greenhous | Chief of Staff   |
| REDACTED          | Principal Lawyer (Item 25.13)                                |
| Angel Lai         | Head of Finance and Corporate Services                       |
| Andy Lester       | Head of Business Strategy and Planning                       |
| Craig McGuicken   | Northern Ireland Lead (item 25.13)                           |
| REDACTED          | Principal Communications and Engagement Manager (item 25.13) |
| REDACTED          | Principal Lawyer (item 25.11)                                |
| REDACTED          | Board Secretary and Private Office Manager                   |
| REDACTED          | Senior Investigations Officer (item 25.11)                   |
| Kate Tandy        | Head of Litigation and Casework (item 25.11)                 |
| Helen Venn        | Chief Regulatory Officer                                     |
| REDACTED          | Principal Lawyer (item 25.11)                                |

## Observers

|               |                      |
|---------------|----------------------|
| David Lambert | Boardroom Apprentice |
|---------------|----------------------|

## 25. 08 Apologies for Absence and Declarations of Interest

There were no apologies for absence.

Malcolm Beatty declared an interest in agenda item 25.13 due to his work in relation to Northern Ireland agri-environment schemes for the period from 2009-2011.

## **25.09 Minutes and Matters Arising**

There were no minutes for approval.

The Board noted the matters arising report.

## **25.10 Report of the Chief Executive**

The Board was updated on progress in delivering our strategic objectives.

Dame Glenys and Natalie had appeared before the Environmental Audit Committee to speak about our EIP progress report. The session had included a large range of specific questions with depth, but the committee was generally very welcoming of the OEP and the work we are doing.

Beyond this, we continue to set out the key messages of our EIP report with appearances at a variety of conferences and at stakeholder engagement meetings, including with Minister Creagh. A meeting is scheduled with Minister Zeichner, and will be with Minister Hardy.

A paper would be presented to the Board at the next Board meeting on our approach to future EIP progress assessment reports, following the Board's recent workshop.

Our Environmental Principles Policy Statement (EPPS) report has been published. The day after our EPPS report was published, the Government updated guide to policy making, as we had recommended.

The Board were made aware of further engagement in respect of the review of Environmental Governance in Northern Ireland. The review is taking a keen interest in the independence and nature of independence of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. The Board discussed that good governance is the important factor rather than independence as an end. The Board will consider advice we may provide to the review at a future meeting.

The Chief Regulatory Officer had attended the Independent Water Commission's call for evidence event. A large number of stakeholders are providing input to the review. It is intended that an interim report will be produced in May with the full report in June.

Dame Glenys has written to both Angela Rayner and Steve Reed regarding the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's working paper set out ahead of the introduction of the Planning and Infrastructure Bill. This topic will also be discussed further at a future Board meeting.

The Board was updated on the progress of our on-going interventions and investigations. We have received a whistleblowing case which is being assessed and if deemed necessary, will be reported to the Board in due course.

Our forecast underspend has increased since the last report to the Board. The latest forecast underspend is £203,000.

The context of public spending decisions for future years appears to be ever more challenging. We are still to be informed of our funding for 2025/26. The indications we have received suggest a likely outcome of flat cash.

Our stakeholder perception survey has begun and the survey and interviews are underway. The results will be reported back to the Board in due course.

The staff survey has also now concluded. Initial findings indicate that high staff engagement has been maintained. The full results will be provided to the Board in a future Board meeting.

A trial of Microsoft's AI tool, Copilot, has concluded. Staff who took part identified opportunities for the tool to assist in a variety of ways, and areas of work and it will therefore be rolled out as a functionality for all staff. An AI policy is being developed, and a training programme will be released to ensure the tool is used correctly by all members of staff.

The Board requested an update on our engagement with other Government departments following on from a discussion at the Audit and Risk Assurance committee regarding our engagement and cooperation with Defra. ACTION Head of Communications and Strategic relations and Head of Business Strategy and Planning.

**25.11** *This section has been redacted as it relates to information recorded for the purposes of OEP's functions relating to investigations and enforcement.*

## **25.12            2025-26 Budget Setting and Annual Planning**

The Board considered the scenarios developed and the impact of different scenarios on our long-term resources. Each of the scenarios suggests more constrained resources in future, and diminishing resources available for external consultancy (including research), legal and professional fees if we retain our current headcount.

The Board discussed the financial risks that might result and how these may be managed. There will need to be very careful control of headcount and the Executive is maintaining close scrutiny of each post, including where vacancies arise, including whether the post should be temporary or permanent. There is very limited ability to increase permanent headcount, given the medium-term financial position.

The Board was reminded of the intention for multi-year budgeting and planning as one way to avoid the backloaded spending experienced during the 2024/25 financial year.

The Board considered the draft business plan. The plan largely reflects continuity of work as the Board had agreed in previous discussions.

The Board discussed the Executive's conclusion that there should be no near term expansion of our work in relation to the circular economy, and noted the work of the circular economy task force. It is intended to take stock of this work in a future Board meeting.

The key prioritisation choices proposed by the Executive were highlighted to the Board. These included particularly aspects of the marine activities, some elements of the governance programme, and the pace at which we consider further activity in relation to waste, chemicals, soils and other issues beyond our current priority areas. The Board endorsed this prioritisation, noting the investigation into Good Environmental Status in the marine environment as the most critical.

The Board discussed the proportion of resources held for reactive work. It welcomed this, but cautioned against potential future underspend risks if these are not actively management. These decisions have been proposed to allow the organisation to still remain agile and to be able to respond to urgently arising issues.

The Board agreed the draft business plan, and draft budget.

#### **25.13            Protected Sites: NI Report**

The paper and draft report were presented to the Board, highlighting the changes made to the draft report since it had last been presented to the Board.

It was confirmed to the Board that the report, if approved, will be published on the 3 April 2025 and Dame Glenys will speak about the report on the 8 April 2025 at the Northern Ireland Environment Forum.

The Board noted the time that has passed since the last comparable report on this issue in Northern Ireland, from the NIAO in 2003. It suggested this should be highlighted as part of the communication plan, once the report has been published.

The Board asked the report authors to further consider the wording surrounding civil sanctions. This should highlight the use of the sanctions and how useful they are, particularly in relation to Protected Sites.

The Board was made aware of the communication strategy for the report. The Board agreed with the recommendation to approve the report in substantially the form at Annex A (subject to only non-material amendments) and to delegate to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Chair, ensuring that the final report has satisfactorily incorporated such amendments as are necessary in light of the Board's discussion.

#### **25.14            Any other business**

There was no other business.