Office for Environmental Protection

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Minutes

Meeting of the Board
Wednesday 12 August 2026
MS Teams

Members

Professor Liz Fisher	Board Member
Dame Helen Ghosh	Chair
Julie Hill MBE	Board Member
Professor Dan Laffoley	Board Member
Dr Paul Leinster CBE	Board Member
Caroline May	Board Member
Professor Robbie McDonald	Chief Insights Officer
Natalie Prosser	Chief Executive

OEP Attendees

REDACTED	Principal Strategy and Performance Manager (item 26.49)
Dr Donnacha Doody	Head of Northern Ireland Analysis
Mike Fox	Head of Communications and Strategic Relations
Andy Gill	Head of Insights Operations
Richard Greenhous	Chief of Staff
Joe Hayden	Head of Complaints, Investigation and Enforcement (item 26.48)
Angel Lai	Head of Finance and Corporate Services
Andy Lester	Head of Business Strategy and Planning
Professor Cathy Maguire	Head of Assessments (Meeting with the CCC)
REDACTED	Board Secretary and Private Office Manager
REDACTED	Human Resources Manager (item 26.50)
REDACTED	Board Secretary and Private Office Manager
REDACTED	Principal Comms and Engagement Manager (item 26.51)
REDACTED	Acting Head of Litigation and Casework (item 26.48)
REDACTED	Principal Complaints and Investigations Manager (item 26.48)
REDACTED	Senior Investigations Officer (item 26.48)
Kate Tandy	Acting General Counsel
Helen Venn	Chief Regulatory Officer
REDACTED	Senior Environment Specialist (Meeting with the CCC)

26.44 Apologies for absence and declarations of interest

Apologies were received from Natalie Prosser and Robbie McDonald.

There were no new declarations of interest.

26.45 Minutes and Matters Arising

The minutes of the 8 July meeting were approved.

The matters arising were noted.

26.46 Report of the Audit and Risk Committee

The Chair of the ARAC reported on the Committee's last meeting. Finances remain in excellent order, with only a small and insignificant underspend, reflecting strong financial management.

The Committee had considered the risk report including a deep dive on cybersecurity, and discussed the adoption of secure-by-design processes. *This section has been redacted as its publication would be prejudicial to the effective conduct of public affairs.* It was noted that Board members should be included in future phishing email tests.

The Committee had also discussed business continuity arrangements and the need to ensure effective contact routes for staff if our IT systems are unavailable.

26.47 Report of the Chief Executive

The Chair updated the Board on recent ministerial and other meetings with Defra, noting similar themes in discussions regarding the perception that the OEP is focused on process over outcomes.

Members considered that it would be helpful to understand specific examples, and noted the importance of explaining that the enforcement aspects of the OEP's work are directed towards achieving environmental outcomes. Members emphasised the importance of understanding Defra's concerns before responding.

The Board discussed the need to explain the OEP's approach more succinctly, and to develop clearer ways to demonstrate how our work focuses on environmental outcomes.

Members reflected on the OEP's purpose and remit. It was noted that ministerial priorities can differ from the OEP's focus on legally binding targets. The Board highlighted the importance of the strategy refresh in setting out clearly what the OEP will do, and noted that delivery against that strategy would be an important form of communication. The Board discussed the need to consider how the outcomes the OEP is working towards align with wider priorities such as economic growth.

The Chair updated the Board on a recent meeting with Minister Muir. *This section has been redacted as its publication would be prejudicial to the effective conduct of public affairs.*

Members discussed the political context in Northern Ireland, including in relation to the Nutrient Action Programme, noting its links to SoRPI. The Board was informed that the team was progressing on the OEPs letter of advice in relation to the Nutrient Action Programme consultation.

The Chair described an opportunity for the OEP to demonstrate support for innovation to achieve environmental outcomes, and how this was being actively progressed in one example.

Members also considered other examples of how our support for innovation could potentially be demonstrated, including in relation to the Marine Bycatch work.

26.48 Investigation into protected sites in Northern Ireland

The Board was asked to consider the launch of a new investigation of DAERA's compliance with protected sites laws, focused on Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) and Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI), recognising these as important tools for nature recovery.

This section has been redacted as its publication would be prejudicial to the effective conduct of public affairs and it relates to information recorded for the purposes of OEP's functions relating to investigations and enforcement.

26.49 2026/27 Budget and Business Plan

The Board considered the updates to the business plan and budget following confirmation of funding from DAERA. The Board had previously considered the business plan and budget proposal on 12 March 2026, before funding confirmation.

The Board agreed the business plan at Annex A, considering the changes made since the Board considered them in draft in March at paragraphs 14 to 16. The Board also agreed the budget and allocations to each Directorate at paragraph 17.

26.50 People strategy update

The Board was updated on progress and was asked to note the findings in relation to staff engagement, the areas for improvement and the proposed next steps.

Engagement levels are high across the organisation, and the scores are similarly high across England and Northern Ireland. Engagement across the junior levels was reduced compared to previous years.

Six priority areas were discussed, noting that some represented new areas of action while others sought to improve existing activity. It was noted that personal accountability was a new area of focus, while also recognising the roles of both Human Resources (HR) and leadership. It was noted that culture is a responsibility for all staff. The Board positively noted staff engagement levels and welcomed the focus on culture and response to areas for improvement.

Members discussed career progression within a small organisation, noting the importance of supporting personal development where upward progression is not always possible.

The Board considered the concept of being ‘proportionate not perfect’, noting that a playbook had only recently been shared with staff but had been well received, and that Board members and senior leaders had an important role in modelling this approach and encouraging staff to make use of available tools and resources.

The Board discussed the role it could play in setting the tone for the organisation. It was noted that these themes could be explored further through the Board’s Development plan and during discussions on the OEP’s future Strategy. **ACTION** Head of Business Strategy and Planning

The Board also considered the implications of being a hybrid organisation. Members noted the need to create opportunities for learning and experience sharing and considered that this should be reflected in the action plan.

The Board considered the important role of middle management and noted the work underway regarding line manager training and defining the role of Project Leads to help get this right. Members also discussed how to balance planned activity with creating opportunities for staff innovation. The Board discussed the challenges of maintaining this in the context of reduced resources.

The Board was informed that the staff survey was currently planned to take place annually.

26.51 Engaging for impact

The Board was presented with a revised approach to stakeholder engagement. The proposed approach sought to establish a joined-up, strategic approach across the OEP underpinned by clear principles and enabling tools.

The stakeholder directory had been established, and this had already had a positive influence on events and messaging. Stakeholder groups had been convened to discuss key areas of work, with further roundtables planned. The Board was informed that work was underway to establish key stakeholders, to support specific projects such as nature-friendly farming, that we had not previously engaged with.

The Board discussed the importance of engaging stakeholders from the beginning of projects. It was noted that this would require staff to adopt new ways of working, and that support from leadership would be important.

The Board considered the intended outcome of the approach, noting the ambition to move towards more purposeful engagement.

The Board was updated on the action from the Board effectiveness review for Board members to be more involved in stakeholder engagement.

The Board was encouraged to consider this approach as part of the upcoming strategy work. Members reflected on previous discussions about OEP engagement with stakeholders and how this was perceived, noting that the proposed model of engagement should continue to be considered.

The approach will be shared with staff. It was agreed that the approach should be framed as strategic and purposeful engagement, rather than increased engagement, and that it should be understood as an approach for relevant projects under our advice and scrutiny

functions, as different approaches to relevant stakeholder engagement are appropriate for our enforcement functions.

26.52 AOB

The Board requested an email update on the progress of Board recruitment. **ACTION** Chair

Meeting with the Climate Change Committee

The Board met with the Chair of the Adaptation Committee, Baroness Brown of Cambridge and Chief Executive, Emma Pinchbeck of the Climate Change Committee (CCC). The Board was informed of the findings of the CCC's latest adaptation report 'A Well Adapted UK'. They discussed shared areas of interest and shared experiences.