



Board Critical Friend

The OEP Board has unusual responsibilities. It makes decisions on key steps within each investigation, and approves each of our reports, and advice. It is unusually hands-on in our day-to-day work, alongside the conventional roles of challenge, assurance and oversight of any Board.

The Board can only make its decisions based on the analysis and informed by the recommendations of staff. They act at the culmination of purposeful, evidence-led and diligent work by the OEP's teams, who draw on a wide range of evidence and perspectives. The Board relies on OEP staff's expert interpretation of the evidence, sound analysis and judgment.

We have found the role of Board Critical Friend to enable our efficiency and effectiveness by connecting the Board's role to this underpinning work. A Board Critical Friend can encourage good relations between staff, the Executive and the Board. It can give confidence to staff and Board. It connects staff to the Board, makes them visible and so can motivate.

We do not have or need a Critical Friend for each project. It is optional, depending on the needs and nature of a project and interest of the Board and its members.

Purpose of this guide

This guide aims to clarify the role of a Board critical friend, so that Project Leads and Board Members have clear expectations and can deliver effectively together. A Board Critical Friend can relate to a project, thematic programme or function of the OEP. This guide uses Project Lead as shorthand for the relevant leadership role.

Role of a Board Critical Friend

The role of the Critical Friend **is** to support and offer counsel to the Project Lead as they aim to secure the intent and outcomes of the project.

In doing so, their role **is** to use their experience, skills and broad, external perspective to:

- Connect the project with the Board and the Board with the project, and so:
 - Understand the project, its objectives, approach, delivery and challenges sufficiently well.
 - Advise on the likely questions, concerns and interests the Board may have as it makes its decisions so these can be considered and pre-empted.
 - As necessary assure the Board in relation to the project, its development and delivery.
- Advise or act as a sounding board to the Project Lead on matters relating to the project, as the Project Lead decides.
- Connect the project to the broader context, drawing on their broader experience and perspective including:
 - The context of environmental science, policy and law.
 - Project stakeholders, their likely views and how to engage them
 - The project's story, key messages and how this relates to the wider context..
 - The political context.
 - 'Corporate memory' in relation to the development of science, policy, law and politics.
- Participate in decisions of the Board in relation to the project as an ordinary Board member alongside their peers.

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The role of the Board Critical Friend **is never to** make any decision or give any definitive steer in relation to any matter. Their opinion does not carry any particular weight in the decisions of the Board, or (where delegated) staff in relation to the project.

The role of the Board Critical Friend **can be to:**

- Bring domain expertise relevant to a matter, and so give feedback on evidence, analysis and conclusions reached. **[NB** this domain expertise does not substitute for the evidence and expertise of staff, stakeholders, the College of Experts and others engaged in the duration of the project – it does not take precedence.]
- Add gravitas to our engagement in relation to a project, and so attend, participate in or chair a discussion, workshop or similar.

A Board Critical Friend **may usually but need not** endorse the recommendations of the project and advocate for them to the Board. **[NB** the Board Critical Friend should assure the Board on how the project has reached its conclusions but may take a different view. It will often be valuable but is not necessary for a Project Lead to ensure that a Board Critical Friend agrees with a recommendation being presented to the Board for decision.]

To perform well, the Board Critical Friend is expected to:

- Engage with a project through the Project Lead taking a lead from the Project Lead in relation to how and where their contribution can be most effective.
- Be curious about the design, delivery, challenges experienced and key judgments made in relation to a project, and understand how and why recommendations have been reached.
- Be constructively challenging of the Project Lead.
- Offer their opinions, and make their views and any concerns known to the Project Lead
- Recognise their position of authority, that their opinions may be given material weight, particularly by more junior staff, and so calibrate their interactions accordingly.

The Project Lead is expected to:

- Lead and manage engagement between the project and the Board Critical Friend and so
 - Actively consider how a Board Critical Friend can support the project achieve its intent and objectives.
 - Engage with the Board Critical Friend purposefully with a view to the particular contribution they can make.
 - Recognise this role description and so not seek that the Board Critical Friend contribute in ways not intended by this guide.
 - Keep the Board Critical Friend informed about how their feedback has been taken into account

Processes in relation to a Board Critical Friend

- The Board Secretary will maintain a log of projects supported by a Board Critical Friend, so as to ensure a balance of demand across the Board. They should be consulted before a Board Critical Friend is approached in relation to any project.
- The Chair shall be consulted ahead of a Board Member being approached to act as a Board Critical Friend. Project Leads are encouraged to form a view of which Board Members may be best suited to the needs of the project.
- Conflicts of interest should be carefully considered in relation to the role of any Board member. Advice should be sought from the Head of Business Strategy and Planning in respect of any queries or concern.

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- Private Office can support administration of engagement with Board Critical Friends, but need not.

Case Studies

Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS)

In late 2023 we set about scoping a new project under our nature programme. Once we had identified LNRS as being the focus of our work, we considered the value of engaging a Board Critical Friend. Knowing that Paul Leinster was involved in the preparation of his local LNRS he became a logical candidate, and happily he took on the role.

Throughout our work on this project, we periodically updated and checked in with Paul. He was able to provide us with intelligence, situational awareness, named contacts, and also crucially strategic oversight and scrutiny of our work before we shared it with a wider audience.

One of the most valuable attributes of a good Board Critical Friend, from a Project Lead perspective, is that I can take material to a Board meeting, knowing that I have a Board ally around the table.

Protected Sites

As Project Lead for our protected sites project, I greatly appreciated the input of Dan Laffoley, our Board Critical Friend. Above all, he brought constructive strategic challenge at the right points. For example, making sure we had identified the most important themes and testing our thinking. This gave us additional confidence in the messages that we were developing even where, in some cases, they were contrary to existing Natural England practice.

Dan also put us in touch with international stakeholders that we would otherwise have missed. This provided us with broader perspectives and allowed us to have impact beyond the UK. His expertise in science communication was also invaluable. It helped us present our report in a more positive, solutions-focussed way and informed our use of an infographic, which proved highly effective.

Environmental Principles Policy Statement (EPPS)

For our work looking at implementation of the EPPS duty, we were keen to have strategic oversight and input from those with more direct expertise in environmental governance and policy. Whilst we were also engaging with an Advisory group, made up of external experts, we wanted someone with whom we could explore our work in a 'safe space'.

Julie Hill agreed to be our Board critical friend for our project looking at early implementation, and then Liz Fisher, who was previously on the Advisory group for this earlier work, became a Board member. This means we are now in an unusual but fortunate position of having two Board critical friends.

Here the role of the Board critical friend(s) has been invaluable in providing insights into the worlds of environmental governance and policy-making – testing our thinking, and bringing different perspectives (such as that of the academic) to the development of our approach to ongoing scrutiny of the duty.

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