

## General Committee of Council

### Confirmed minutes of the thirty-eighth meeting of the General Committee of Council held on 15 March 2006 at the Stoodleigh Court Country House

**Present:** Dr M Moser – Acting Chair  
Dr A Brown – Chief Executive  
Ms S Burton  
Dr R Clarke  
Mrs L Crowe  
Mr H van Cutsem  
Dr K Duff – Director  
Mrs S Fowler  
Prof E Gallagher  
Prof M Hart  
Mr S Hockman QC  
Mr D Hulyer  
Prof D Macdonald  
Mr P Newby – Director  
Mr C Pennell  
Dr A Powell  
Dr T Tew - Director  
Ms C Wood – Director  
Mrs E Leck – Minuting Secretary

**In attendance:** Dr T Collins (item 4)  
Mr Alastair Burn (item 4)  
Mr David Young (item 6)

**Apologies:** Ms S Collins

#### 1. Welcomes

- 1.1 Chair **opened** the meeting and **welcomed** members and staff in the audience. **Warmest thanks were expressed** to Mr Wren and Ms Thomas and their colleagues for a successful programme and Council visit.
- 1.2 The staff of English Nature's Head Office Team were congratulated for the organisation of the Council meeting, and further thanks went to Dr Duff, specialist staff and guest speakers involved the Climate Change Workshop. A CD of all presentations would be prepared and sent to all Members.

**AP1:** presentations to be compiled on CDs for circulation.

Action: Committee Support Unit

- 1.3 The Committee **expressed its appreciation** to Dr Clements for his past achievements within English Nature and **congratulated** him on his recent appointment to the *Natural England* Executive Board. Dr Tew was **welcomed** as English Nature's Director of Protected Sites to replace Dr Clements.

## **2. Minutes of thirty-seventh meeting of the General Committee held on 6 December 2005**

- 2.1 The minutes were approved.

### **3. Matters arising**

- 3.1 Item 4.6 Denotifications under exceptional circumstances. Prof Hart asked for a definition of such exceptional circumstances.

**AP2:** Sites & Surveillance Team to email an explanatory note to Council members.

Action: Dr Tew

- 3.2 Item 4.8 Revision of the Guidelines for the denotification of Sites of Special Scientific Interest.  
Dr Clarke asked whether this was in hand and was assured by Dr Tew that a revision was currently being prepared and the final document would be brought to Council in due course.

- 3.3 Item 11.10. EEAC Conference Proceedings. Dr Powell asked for the web address to be emailed to her. An earlier email from the team may have been lost.

**AP3:** European Unit in English Nature to email Anne Powell the address details again.

Action: European Unit

- 3.4 Item 11.11 Closure of Centre for Ecology and Hydrology (CEH) research stations. Prof Hart expressed concern over the potential loss of long-term databases established by CEH. Dr Duff reported that English Nature had already provided clear messages to this effect during the CEH consultation process and just learnt that CEH will proceed with these planned closures but, for the time being retain an additional 40 staff. Funding had also been secured to safeguard long-term data sets in the Biological Record Centres. English Nature would monitor the situation carefully.

## 4. Managing change at the coast

- 4.1 Dr Tew **introduced** the paper. He referred to the preceding Climate Change Workshop that had already set the context for changes on the coastline and provided a significant step forward in policy setting and operational practice.
- 4.2 English Nature needed to focus on what to take forward into *Natural England*. As already set out in the paper, Council was asked to agree the principles for decisions where freshwater habitats were at risk, and where this was the case, the need to engage fully with partners and local stakeholders.
- 4.3 Mr Burn explained the paper's approach. While some freshwater habitat sites could be lost, the strategy favoured allowing natural processes to take place, such as managed realignments and, where possible, reverse the loss of coastal habitats.
- 4.4 Sea level rise also affected land away from the coast. In cases where valuable freshwater habitats were not replaceable, English Nature would need to weigh up the type of advice necessary in such circumstances very carefully, including the socio-economic context. English Nature's decision needed to be underpinned by our obligation for the safeguarding of features and achievement of conservation objectives within designated sites, based on national and international legislation.
- 4.5 Dr Collins widened the discussion and drew the Committee's attention to the importance of engagement with local communities, referring to the examples listed in Annex 3 of the paper. It was of great importance to invest resources in staff training to manage some of these contentious situations, building up confidence to communicate our 'approach' to the public.
- 4.6 The General Committee of Council **very much welcomed** the paper and **discussed** the issues.
  - 4.6.1 Amongst the key issues was education to develop wider public acknowledgement that sea level rise and climate change were taking place. Communication and better engagement with local stakeholders, as well as development of staff skills in terms of socio-economic issues were also seen as important.
  - 4.6.2 The Committee also regarded the issue of compensation as important, both in terms of habitat re-creation and also people's livelihood.
  - 4.6.3 The Committee:
    - a) **agreed** the broad principles for decision making;
    - b) **supported** the need for staff development to deal with these principles;
    - c) **confirmed** the long-term approach of compensatory habitat replacement, working in parallel with key authorities and stakeholders;
    - d) **supported** the proposal to develop recommendations for improved stakeholder and partner engagement. This would need close attention from *Natural England*.

## 5. Performance Report April 2005-December 2005

- 5.1 The Chief Executive **introduced** the paper; he referred to its changed format which provided a more detailed report on the organisation's performance. As expected, the claw-back from Defra of approx. £ 3M had affected the overall performance.
- 5.2 As predicted at the end of the second quarter, the level of disruption to targets as a result of redirecting resources to the transition to *Natural England* had adversely affected delivery. However, the impact had not caused major concern. Out of sixty-seven targets, only nine were shown red, which meant they had not been **fully** achieved.
  - 5.2.1 Within the Protected Areas Programme a decision had been made to slow down other targets such as the conservation objectives in order to free capacity to achieve the revised target of 71 % of sites in favourable or recovering condition. This target had now been exceeded and was a substantial achievement, given the situation through the year.
  - 5.2.2 Much of the recorded under-achievement within the marine SPA targets was beyond English Nature's control.
  - 5.2.3 On the spotlight reserves, English Nature had not quite reached the 95 % target.
  - 5.2.4 Within the Wider Environment and the People and Policy Programmes, for example, progress had been made in producing 95 out of 110 Natural Area Profiles. However, due to insufficient resources, they had not been made accessible through the internet.
  - 5.2.5 External funding was not fully achieved at this stage. However, English Nature had a leading role in the consortium with the Big Lottery Fund.
- 5.3 The Committee **welcomed** the paper and the following issues were considered:
  - 5.3.1 The Committee **acknowledged** that red areas flagged up in the performance report were predictable under the circumstances: Defra's claw-back, the recruitment freeze and significant staff time diversion towards the establishment of *Natural England* all had a major impact on delivery.
  - 5.3.2 The General Committee of Council **also acknowledged** that English Nature's Audit and Risk Management Committee had already looked at the organisation's performance and was content with the risks identified. The internal audit report was regarded as encouraging.

- 5.3.3 The conservation objective target was a major task and much of it would need to be handed over to *Natural England*.
- 5.3.4 Members unanimously felt the report was very satisfactory and **congratulated** the Chief Executive, Directors and all staff for the exceptional achievements under very difficult circumstances.

## **6. Draft *Natural England* Corporate Plan 2006-2009**

- 6.1 Chair **introduced** Mr Young, who had recently been appointed to the *Natural England* Executive Board as executive Director of Strategy and Performance. Mr Young's current responsibility was the development of strategy and the *Natural England* Corporate Plan 2006/07. He was attending today's meeting to gather input from Council members on the circulated 2<sup>nd</sup> draft of the Corporate Plan.
- 6.2 Dr Brown and Mr Young **introduced** the paper of which an earlier version had been circulated to the Committee in December 2005. The current version should be regarded as a transition document as well as a communication tool with partners. It also included some of English Nature's mission critical targets over the next six months and progress of these would be tracked through the organisation's established monitoring systems.
  - 6.2.1 Final confirmation from the Department on the Grant in Aid was still awaited. Therefore, financial information had not been incorporated; however some reduction of resources was already built into the programme.
  - 6.2.2 Because of the tight deadline for completion of the final Corporate Plan document, the Committee was asked to focus on:
    - a) the introductory section and the presentation of the Corporate Plan itself, and
    - b) the targets for English Nature over the next 6 months.
- 6.3 The Committee **noted** the paper and **raised** the following points in discussion:
  - 6.3.1 Communicating the purpose of *Natural England* was regarded as important, and the amalgamation of three organisations should be brought out more in the introduction.
  - 6.3.2 The introductory section needed to be more uplifting and should help inspire staff and others.
  - 6.3.3 Insufficient reference to partnerships with outside organisations and stakeholders was also noted.
  - 6.3.4 The learning agenda needed to be given greater emphasis in the final version.

- 6.3.5 The Committee felt that the marine environment and climate change issues needed to be given a higher profile. Objectives and targets on the sustainable use in fisheries needed to be included.
- 6.3.6 It was seen important to include delivery of the England Biodiversity Strategy.
- 6.3.7 The special functions delivery through the Joint Nature Conservation Committee was missing, and a brief note should be included to make the link.
- 6.3.8 The objectives of Natural England as an excellent Non-Departmental Public Body lacked any information on statement of internal control and governance.
- 6.3.9 More attention should also be given to priorities and resources.
- 6.4 Dr Brown and Mr Young **welcomed** Members' comments that would be considered for the final document.
- 6.5 Chair **concluded** the discussions and on behalf of the Committee **asked** for the final version to be emailed to all members before signing off.

**AP4:** A revised draft to be emailed to Committee members for final comment before sign off by Chair.

Action: Mr Young

## **7. Unconfirmed Minutes from the Sixty-Ninth Meeting of the Joint Nature Conservation Committee**

- 7.1 The Committee noted the minutes.
- 7.2 item 7 – Millennium Ecosystem Assessment – Prof Hart referred to the importance of the work and efforts that had been invested to date into the Assessment and suggested it as an item for future Council debate. Members unanimously agreed.
- 7.2.1 Dr Brown suggested that a slot for debate on the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment should be built into the agenda for the June Council event, which will be held jointly with the Joint Nature Conservation Committee.

**AP5:** An item will be added to the June agenda

Action: Committee Support Unit

## **8. Acting Chair, Chief Executive & Directors' Topical Report**

- 8.1 The Committee noted the report and raised the following points:

- 8.1.2 Item 9.2.2 – *BBC Gardeners World/Easy Gardening* magazines  
Mr Newby reported that a cover mount would be put together by the confederated partners, and with 400,000 copies of our *Wildlife friendly gardening: a general guide* and *Gardening with Wildlife in Mind* CD would be distributed with the *BBC Gardeners World/Easy Gardening* magazines in June.
- 8.1.3 Item 10.3.3 – *Vision for the CAP*, published by Defra/Treasury.  
Members were interested to see the response from the confederated partners to the Defra/Treasury *Vision for the CAP*.

**AP5:** Request copy of response from the agriculture team

**Action:** Committee Support Unit

- 8.1.4 Item 11.1 – Appointment of Dan Laffoley as Vice-Chair Marine, World Commission on Protected Areas, IUCN  
The Committee **congratulated** Dr Laffoley on his appointment.
- 8.1.5 Item 12.1 - Joint Water and Wetlands Vision for England  
The Committee **congratulated** Mr Burn and the staff of the Water and Wetlands Team for their engagement and input into the Joint Water and Wetlands Vision.
- 8.1.6 Item 12.4.1 Evidence for Parliamentary Select Committees inquiries–  
Dr Powell felt that the response to NERC was missing from this section and should be included.
- 8.1.7 Item 13.6. South West Report  
Prof Hart noted that the World Heritage Site Bid for the Mining Heritage of Cornwall and West Devon, that has now entered its final round for approval, was missing from the report.
- 8.1.8 Item 13.9.1 The Committee **congratulated** the North West team on the work on the Interim Draft Regional Spatial Strategy and associated Draft Implementation Plan in co-operation with Defra.
- 8.1.9 Item 16.2 – English Nature’s new handbook, *Geological conservation – a guide to good practice*. Prof Hart had just received a copy of this publication and on behalf of Members **congratulated** Dr Prosser and colleagues for a very informative document.
- 8.1.10 Annex 2 - Acting Chair’s Summary to Council  
Chair informed members of two listed events he had not attended:
1. The NESG Planning meeting 8/9 March – due to other urgent commitments
  2. South West Regional meeting in Taunton 13 March – date has been postponed

**9. Any Other Business**

There was no other business for discussion.

Signed ..... Date .....