

Ratified Minutes

COUNCIL FOR NATURE CONSERVATION AND THE COUNTRYSIDE RECORD OF ISSUES COVERED BY CORRESPONDENCE (188th MEETING)

Friday 29th Jan 2021

Papers were issued to CNCC members on 24th Nov 2020 and the business was conducted by correspondence and virtual meeting. The minutes reflect this way of working.

<p><u>Members</u></p> <p>Dr. A.H. Kirkpatrick (Chair)</p> <p>Prof. J. Orford</p> <p>Prof. S. Christie</p> <p>Dr. A. C. Cooper</p>	<p><u>Officials</u></p> <p>Ms. Hilary Downey - Secretariat</p> <p>Ms. Oonagh Murray – Secretariat</p> <p>Mr. Ken Bradley - DAERA</p>
<p>1. Apologies Ms. E. Smyth, Mr. O Murnion, Ms. H Anderson, Dr. S McGuckin, Mr. C Armstrong.</p>	
<p>2. Declarations of interest</p> <p>2.1 Members were asked for declarations of interest before 16.00 on 16th Sept 2020. There were no declarations of interest.</p>	
<p>3. Minutes of last meeting</p> <p>3.1 Dr. Cooper and Ms. Downey indicated by correspondence that the minutes of the last meeting were a correct record and the other members indicated this at the virtual meeting.</p>	

4. Welcome, Chair's report and JNCC update

- 4.1 The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting. Members were informed that the last JNCC meeting of 2020 had taken place virtually on 2nd - 3rd December. The engagement event on 2nd December looked at 'Contributing solutions to country terrestrial monitoring programmes'. The aim was to consider perceptions of how monitoring needs are changing and to see some of the innovation that could help meet country needs as well as discussing where JNCC can make the biggest difference for the countries. The Chair referred to Dr. Cooper's attendance at the engagement event and noted he would be given an opportunity to comment on the event during agenda item 6. The UK Joint Committee met on 3rd December. The agenda included a report from ARAC and the business plan for 2021/22. It was the final meeting for the JNCC Chair, Prof. Chris Gilligan. The JNCC support company CEO, Marcus Yeo, is leaving and the interim CEO will be Dr. Gemma Harper who is currently Deputy Director for Marine Policy in DEFRA. She will take up her new post in the spring. Dr. Harper is a social scientist by training and was DEFRA's Chief Social Scientist from 2010 - 2017.
- 4.2 Members were informed that the next JNCC meeting will be held on 10th-11th March 2021 and that the engagement event on 10th will focus on nitrogen.
- 4.3 The Chair drew the Council's attention to a meeting of the DAERA Stats User Group on 27th November and said Council should note the increasing focus on greenhouse gas and carbon statistics. The Chair had also attended an EU-exit stakeholder group on 4th December 2020.
- 4.4 Members were informed that over the past few weeks there had been work undertaken to progress recruitment of a Deputy chair and new Members. The Chair thanked all those in secretariat, DAERA Public Appointments team and CPANI for their dedication to ensuring the paperwork was progressed in a timely manner and noted that public health guidance would be followed in relation to the interview process so at this stage it was not clear whether interviews will be via video-link or in person.

5. Matters Arising - Chair

5.1 The Chair advised that matters arising from previous meetings were being progressed with some to be addressed when the relevant person returns from leave.

6. Meeting Reports – Chair

6.1 The Chair give a brief verbal update on meeting reports as these were provided before the meeting. All members were happy with these.

6.2 Prof. Christie expressed concern about how the proposed timetable for recruitment of new Members would impact on CNCC's representation on groups such as the EU Monitoring Committees. She wanted it recorded that she felt that INTERREG should not be left with no-one on the panel and she was happy to bridge the gap.

Action 6.2 Chair/Hilary Downey to take this forward with relevant officials.

7. Departmental Update – Hilary Downey

7.1 Hilary Downey started her report by saying that due to leave Senior Management were unable to attend this meeting but work started before Christmas was continuing with public consultations underway. Letters were out in relation to the environmental fund. She noted the Department was still involved with work on EU-exit matters.

7.2 Prof. Christie and Prof. Orford noted their concerns about delay in the progress of the UK Environment Bill.

Mr. Bradley joined the meeting at 10.40.

8. Proposed access/recreation legislation – Ken Bradley

8.1 Mr. Bradley stated this consultation has been in the pipeline for 2-3 years. Consultation would be a two stage process with key stakeholders including CNCC, followed by a wider public consultation around May 2021. He noted the current legislation was around thirty years old and there was a desire to make it up to date and user friendly. He referred to the general duty on public bodies to open land for recreation and also noted that permissive paths were seen as easier to administer and more agreeable to landowners. The intention is to take a Bottom-up approach. He also noted that the pandemic had resulted in more people out walking. He also drew Council's attention to potential synergies with other Department's policy areas such as health and tourism.

8.2 Mr. Bradley noted that a progress report on the Biodiversity Strategy would be required as well as developing the post 2020 strategy.

8.3 Members considered the proposed consultation on access and recreation to be timely. They stressed that it was important that outcomes for recreation, tourism and wellbeing should be achieved without unintended adverse impacts on the environment. Pressure of numbers accessing the natural environment could be an issue in certain sensitive environments eg peatlands. The need for local councils and contractors to be aware of potential adverse environmental matters and their mitigation was raised eg path installation to good ecological standards.

8.4 Prof. Christie asked about external input to the next Biodiversity Strategy and Mr. Bradley responded that no decision had yet been taken on this but a 'Task and Finish' Group was one option.

9. Consultations – Chair

9.1 Members reviewed the current public consultations.

10. CNCC 29th January 2021 Quickfire Discussion Topic: Expanding tree cover in Northern Ireland – what are the opportunities and the risks in relation to the

conservation of biodiversity?

10.1 Members held a short discussion on this topic.

10.2 They noted a range of drivers such as the Minister's announcement, greenhouse gas issues and nature-based solutions as well as funding availability.

10.3 Possible areas for planting included public land owned by Forest Service, other public land, land owned by environmental organisations and as part of Green Infrastructure in urban areas. Private farmland could also be used.

10.4 Members stressed that there needed to be consideration of the opportunities and the risks to the conservation of biodiversity and focus should not be entirely on greenhouse gas issues at the expense of potential damage to biodiversity if there is a speedy roll-out of planting without safeguards of inspection and audit. Concern was expressed about whether smaller sites might not be caught in these processes. Assessment and monitoring were key to ensuring there was no disconnect between high level policy outcomes and what actually happened on the ground. They raised the issue of the risk to some semi-natural habitats of nature conservation interest if private landowners targeted this land to retain their intensive grassland. There is a need for work at the policy level to get no loss of existing native woodland or other important habitats. The system needs to ensure the right tree goes in the right place with aftercare. There is a need to think carefully about what public good is in the context of future payments.

11. Thanks to Members – Chair

The Chair paid tribute to the Members whose period of public service was drawing to a close, highlighting their achievements and contribution to the work of Council and thanking them for their service.

12. Date of next meeting – 26th March 2021
