



## Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [Work of the Committee 2010–15](#),  
HC 942

Wednesday 4 March 2015

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Written evidence

- [Natural England](#)

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Members present: Miss Anne McIntosh (Chair); Richard Drax; Jim Fitzpatrick; Mrs Mary Glendon; Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck; Iain McKenzie; Sheryll Murray; Ms Margaret Ritchie; Mr Mark Spencer

Questions 299–364

Witnesses: **James Cross**, Chief Executive, and **Guy Thompson**, Executive Director for Local Delivery, Natural England

**Q299 Chair:** Good afternoon, gentlemen, and welcome. Thank you both very much for participating in our inquiry and our report into the work of the Committee. Just for the record, could you each introduce yourselves and explain your role?

**James Cross:** I am James Cross. I am the Chief Executive of Natural England. I joined the organisation in September of last year. I joined the organisation from the Marine Management Organisation, where I was the Chief Executive. I joined the MMO in 2010.

**Guy Thompson:** I am Guy Thompson. I am Executive Director of Operations at Natural England.

**Q300 Chair:** Can I congratulate you, Mr Cross, on your appointment, which is still relatively recent?

**James Cross:** Thank you.

**Chair:** What have been your main priorities for Natural England since you took up the role?

**James Cross:** What I found is an organisation that has, at its heart, real top-drawer people, real expertise within its staff, a sense of passion and commitment, a depth of experience that really is impressive and an ambition, with our people, to be focused on outcomes. I found a similar ambition and desire from our partners, who are really interested in outcomes. Yet, I guess, to some degree both have been let down by our systems and our processes, which invite us naturally to focus too much on outputs and sequencing, rather than those outcomes.

The priorities I have had are: looking at the business; looking at opportunities to reform and bring about more innovative ways of working, not so much focusing on what we do but how Natural England do it; bringing about a culture change in our approach; and ensuring that the organisation has a long-term plan in terms of its sustainability moving forward.

**Q301 Chair:** Over the last five years of the work of Natural England, what would you describe as the main achievements, as an organisation?

**James Cross:** Natural England has largely delivered against the priorities it set for itself around the interplay between the agri-environment schemes, how it manages its SSSI sites and NNR sites, and utilising that to improve the condition of habitats and species, with some good success to date. Another area of achievement is around the MCZ work, in terms of the provision of its advice to Government, specifically around tranche 1 and tranche 2 of that advice.

The organisation has made good progress in its work around the coastal path and its delivery of good solid progress to date, which puts it in a strong position to achieve the ambitious targets we have now set ourselves for 2020. The other area of achievement for the organisation is making a good contribution towards the Government's efficiency targets. Broadly, about 20% efficiencies were achieved between 2006-07 and 2010, with 40% efficiencies achieved between 2010 and present day. In broad terms, those are the achievements to date.

**Q302 Chair:** What would you say were your main challenges, as an organisation, equally, over the last five years?

**James Cross:** The challenges that the organisation faces now and over the next five years in particular are probably the same. Natural England has always struggled in terms of showing its workings out. There is an issue in that there are times when Natural England takes decisions that are not necessarily always liked, and, if those decisions are not understood, it can sometimes lead to mistrust of its decisions.

There is a programme of work underway within the organisation, now, to throw open those doors around transparency so, when Natural England give advice or make a decision, we explain that rationale clearly and fairly: "These are the legal drivers; these are the policy drivers; and this is the evidence upon which we have made our decision." That is one of the biggest challenges the organisation has faced and will continue to face, in terms of just showing its workings out.

**Guy Thompson:** James has described the efficiencies that we have delivered over this current spending review: 70% out of our back office and a significant reduction in the number of our offices, down from 65 at vesting to 25 to date. Significant efficiencies have been delivered in our key activities, agri-environment in particular. That clearly has come at a cost, in terms of the organisation's ability to maintain business continuity. I think we have done that extremely well and the organisation has largely become inured to the constant churn and change that those types of efficiencies require. However, it has been a very significant challenge for us over this period.

Secondly, we have now placed a focus in the organisation on providing excellent customer service. We have the accreditation to the Cabinet Office standard<sup>1</sup>, and that has been something we have recognised as a significant cultural challenge for the organisation to come to terms with.

Finally, I think a future challenge for us will be the move from being driven by disparate levers and different programmes of activity to bringing together those different disparate activities and levers in a way that actually focuses on the delivery of long-term environmental outcomes. We have been very focused, as a relatively young organisation, on establishing our licence to operate, and therefore have been driven by the delivery of our key performance indicators around outputs, in particular securing a number of our wildlife sites in favourable condition<sup>2</sup>, for example. We want to get into a place where we are much more focused on driving up the number of those sites that are actually in favourable condition, rather than under agreement towards securing that favourable condition. That would be a very good example of the kind of challenge we now need to come to grips with.

**Q303 Chair:** Given the amount of your work that must stem from environmental legislation, particularly European and international obligations, do you believe you are sufficiently proactive in keeping up to date and trying to influence the content of those framework directives as they are being drafted, from the British point of view?

**James Cross:** I think so. We have a legitimate role to play, in terms of helping Government shape those wider drivers. Certainly, Natural England have a formal seat at the table as the policy formulation cycle happens. Equally, we have a real role to play in ensuring that the execution of the regulation, and the execution of the legal framework as designed by Europe, is as proportionate as possible. That is an area that we have set ourselves. A lot of Natural England's systems and processes are incredibly heavy, incredibly bureaucratic, and do not always lend themselves to the right outcomes.

As Guy has alluded to earlier, one of the reviews that we have carried out over the last six months is around how we approach our SSSI assessment framework. We think, by doing it in a different way, by being much more proportionate, we can strip out about 40% of the load, which is 40% worth of bureaucracy, and move that resource into support and advice for farmers and for landowners. In essence, we can get some more boots on the ground and give that kind of supportive advice. I think there is a dual role for us there, in just making sure we

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<sup>1</sup> Amendment by witness on 12 March 2015: Cabinet Office standard in Customer Service Excellence

<sup>2</sup> Amendment by witness on 12 March 2015: securing agreements that will deliver our wildlife sites into favourable condition

execute the regulation in a proportionate and pragmatic way, as well as giving operational input into the design of those frameworks via Government.

**Q304 Chair:** Do you think that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is sufficiently alert to the earliest stages of these drafts to be in a position to influence them? How many people in the Department do you think occupy themselves with this type of work?

**James Cross:** I do not know the answer to that last question. I know, certainly from experience in this role and in previous roles, we have had good early conversations about the Marine Strategy Framework Directive and the Water Framework Directive before that. I am one step removed from this, at arm's length from core Defra, but my sense is that there is early engagement. As a delivery body, we get brought into those conversations. Whether or not that is sufficiently early in the cycle, I am not best placed to comment, I do not think.

**Guy Thompson:** Could I give two examples of where we could say that Defra is clearly very much on the front foot, and we, as Government's adviser, are very much part and parcel of that process of laying the ground? Certainly, in relation to the new CAP regulations that came into effect at the beginning of this year, we, in common with other Defra network bodies, have been working very closely with Defra policy colleagues to lay the ground for the introduction of those regulations. A more topical example would be the fitness checks for the Habitats Directive and Birds Directive, where clearly the UK has an opportunity, as a member state, to contribute to that consultation. We, as Government's adviser, in common with all the statutory conservation agencies, are part and parcel of preparing the ground for the UK's response to that consultation.

**Q305 Chair:** If you just stay with the Water Framework Directive for a moment, the water unit is largely made up in the Commission of people who are from a continental European background, so they have a completely different understanding of rivers. The Directive probably reflects the fact that the rivers in Europe, such as the Danube and the Rhine, are significantly longer than the rivers in this country. At what stage are you consulted to see that what we are being asked to do is deliverable in this country?

**James Cross:** In terms of the Water Framework Directive, the Environment Agency are Government's primary source of input into those sorts of decisions and advice. I get the sense that the Environment Agency would be best placed to answer that. I am not sited on the stage of those conversations. I am so sorry.

**Chair:** Or the Secretary of State, possibly, as well.

**Q306 Mr Spencer:** You recently started charging for your discretionary services, and, obviously, at the moment, you cannot charge for your statutory services. I just wondered what opportunities there are out there to increase your income and how you see that unfolding.

**James Cross:** That is right. Currently, Natural England charge and cost-recover about 0.5% of our total cost base. The Environment Agency, for instance, which we

mentioned a moment ago, cost-recover in total about 28%. My previous organisation, the Marine Management Organisation, cost-recovered about 10%. In terms of the scope of the marketplace, if that makes sense, there is a huge demand there. We have segmented that opportunity, in terms of discretionary advice and then statutory advice.

We have tested the opportunity there. We think we can realistically achieve a significant increase. From about £500,000 at the moment, we think, between now and 2020, we can get ourselves up to about £12 million a year. These are, as you say, through discretionary advice or engaging with industry much, much earlier, being part of the conversation with them and helping and guiding those early conversations to ensure that developers get what they want, in terms of economic growth, but that we can do it in such a way that helps generate a return for the environment as well.

**Q307 Mr Spencer:** How will you maintain your credibility and independence, then, if you are seen to be being paid by large developers? How are you going to maintain your credibility and independence if that is the case?

**James Cross:** Yes, absolutely. The key thing to say here is that, naturally, a customer would like something in return for a fee. What we are not offering is a guaranteed decision. What we offer in exchange for that is an enhanced service. Again, I have a track record in this area. What usually happens is that, in return for a fee, the customer base demands service excellence and can hold organisations to account in terms of turnaround times, quality of service and standards of service, which within Natural England are already good.

What I noticed in the Marine Management Organisation is that, following the introduction of a charging regime, we brought about a step change in performance, because we were much more easily able to closely match demand and the resources associated with it. You can track your resources according to the demand and the through-flow of cash. There tends to be an improved quality and responsiveness of service that industry gets in return. That allows us to maintain that credibility and that independence in the eyes of our wider customer base, in terms of the quality of the decision.

**Q308 Jim Fitzpatrick:** Can we turn to the Triennial review? Can you just say a little bit about how you found that and how useful an exercise it was? The main conclusion was not to merge Natural England with the Environment Agency. Was that the best outcome, in your view? How does that impact on your relationship with the Environment Agency in being able to operate? Have the Government given any additional resources to each organisation, to allow the conclusions to be able to be efficiently implemented?

**James Cross:** Following the Triennial review, both our organisations put together a joint action plan, with a series of 71 actions contained as a result of the Triennial review. Both organisations take that incredibly seriously. The overview of the action plan is managed at board level. Both boards have come together in the form of a joint group, and they really hold the executives to account in terms of delivery against that. The Secretary of State takes a tremendous interest in the performance against the delivery of that action plan and meets both chairs from both organisations regularly.

**Q309 Jim Fitzpatrick:** Separately or together?

**James Cross:** Together. Indeed, today I think the Secretary of State is meeting with both chairs to have a joint discussion about progress on that very subject. From an operational point of view, it has been incredibly helpful. We have excellent relationships with the EA, both strategically and operationally. I meet their chief executive often. Guy meets with his opposite number often. Our staff have a really close working relationship. The triennial review helpfully teased out, once and for all, with absolute clarity, those respective roles of operation and allowed us to, frankly, drive out operational efficiencies, which is helpful when resources are running down. I think it has been a hugely beneficial process. I did not live through the process itself, so perhaps I will let Guy talk through that.

**Guy Thompson:** If I could add a brief historical perspective, the triennial review between Environment Agency and Natural England was clearly the first very significant Triennial review conducted, and therefore there was a sense in which we were all learning, Government and the bodies themselves, in that process. Looking back, it was probably an over-prolonged process, which exposed both organisations to a level of prolonged uncertainty. That had not been the intention at the outset. That said, the key benefits from our perspective were very close focus on the interface between the two bodies. We now better understand the 15% overlap as organisations and we are driving out the efficiencies that come from better collaboration and better synergy between the work programmes and activities that complement one another at that interface. That has been very much the focus of the action plan James has just described.

The second thing, from our point of view, was that it was a collaborative, open and transparent process, which enabled us to get some very rich feedback from partners and customers on our performance. One of the very significant things that emerged from that was that the organisational model we had adopted, as part of our SR 2010 efficiencies, had come at a cost, in the sense that people were not getting the same level of local responsiveness from Natural England as they had been prior to those changes. We have now moved to a different area-based model as a result of that feedback, which is already getting extremely positive feedback in turn. It gave us that very objective stock-take on our performance and the perception of our stakeholders about our performance.

**Q310 Jim Fitzpatrick:** Was there a driver to demonstrate the need to maintain separate organisations or was it, “We think you should merge. Tell us why you should not”? How have you resolved the 15% overlap that you mentioned, Mr Cross: through joint working, or are responsibilities divided? How does that function?

**James Cross:** My sense was that the Triennial review was entered into with an open mind. I have not got the sense there was a prejudicial driver towards it. I think the conclusion not to proceed with a merger was based on the evidence. In short, the business case did not quite stack up. The operational overlap was small. It has lent itself very well to our organisation. It has teased out a lot of key findings. Natural England’s budget, for example, in broad terms, is about £140 million a year. As part of the Triennial review, it became clear that its back office costs were in the tune of about £52 million a year, which is a big back office cost, of which just £7 million was bespoke to Natural England. The other £45 million was all bought services from Defra.

The focus of the Triennial review shifted from trying to drive out economies of scale and operational efficiency from the merger, to seeing how all of the organisations could work better together, in partnership with Defra, to drive down the cost of its corporate services. As a result, Defra is leading a bold programme of organisational reform around those back office costs to sink and shrink those costs down, rather than necessarily thinking about a merger between the Environment Agency and Natural England.

**Q311 Jim Fitzpatrick:** Has it led to better working relationships with the Environment Agency? You described the fact there are roughly £50 million of back office costs. Are those now being reviewed, and to what end? Will they now be clearly identified as being Defra costs, or are you reducing them because you are going to share bureaucracies with the Environment Agency and Defra? I am not quite clear how that is going to pan out.

**James Cross:** That is exactly right. Those £45 million worth of Natural England's back office costs are all bought services from Defra, in terms of HR and IT, for example. IT is the usual example. I think that clarity has prompted Defra to think that, by unifying these back office costs that exist within Natural England, the Forestry Commission, the Marine Management Organisation, the RPA and the Environment Agency, for example, they can drive out economies of scale. They have appointed a chief executive to lead that work programme.

**Q312 Jim Fitzpatrick:** Sorry, does that mean you have those staff at the moment, but you are now going to share them, and Defra is going to supply the services?

**James Cross:** In essence, yes. There is a migration of staff from Natural England into Defra. Equally, within the Marine Management Organisation and the Forestry Commission, there is this transfer into a central shared services function. Then, from that, there is a Defra internal efficiency programme, with a sole aim of stripping out around 30% of those costs over the cycle of the programme.

**Q313 Jim Fitzpatrick:** You will not, then, have a staff budget for those items. You will be billed by Defra for services, so it will be their budget head, rather than yours.

**James Cross:** Yes, that is right.

**Q314 Jim Fitzpatrick:** One of the claims that the Government have made, and this, I suggest, probably risks being accused of being a party political question, is that they want to be the "greenest Government ever". Taking the politics out of it, do you have a role in assessing the green credentials of Government? Can you determine which is the greenest Government ever? What is your role in holding the Government to account for that claim, or is that not your responsibility at all?

**James Cross:** Natural England tends to operate on a case-by-case basis. We give advice to industry. We give advice to Government, in terms of policy formulation. We issue licences. We give advice to farmers. Our advice on the natural environment tends to come in that form. If Government commissioned a review, we would feed advice into it in that way,

but we would not hold them to account in terms of that claim. We are a delivery agent of the Government in terms of their commitments around the Biodiversity 2020 strategy, and we feed into the delivery on that front

**Q315 Jim Fitzpatrick:** So it is a meaningless political claim that cannot be validated by any Government organisation.

**Guy Thompson:** It is not our role to validate it, one way or the other. We provide evidence and the delivery perspective to advise Government on very specific policy considerations and the design of specific work programmes. It is not our role to provide that kind of analysis.

**Q316 Richard Drax:** Gentlemen, how will you measure the new Countryside Stewardship schemes, and whether they deliver a better deal for the environment than the CAP's agri-environment schemes?

**James Cross:** Guy has been heavily involved in the development and input from Natural England's perspective, so I will let him pick up some points in a second. The focus from our perspective is to, as far as we can, simplify the Pillar 2 offer, to try to make sure that the packages available really do generate a return and a positive environmental impact. A lot of effort has gone on, to make sure that we maximise the return on investment on that front.

**Q317 Richard Drax:** How will you simplify them?

**Guy Thompson:** My answer to your question probably comes in two forms. I will come back to the simplification question. Fundamentally, the agri-environment schemes are there to provide a lever for the incentivisation, on a voluntary basis, of farmers to deliver environmental outcomes. Therefore, the key measure for us and for Government has to be in the delivery of those outcomes.

Primarily for us it will be whether we can deliver on our Biodiversity 2020 objectives. I mentioned earlier, in particular, the target to secure 50% of our sites of special scientific interest in favourable condition. The new Countryside Stewardship scheme will have a very significant role in delivering on that target; ditto the Water Framework Directive objectives. There is a test in respect of whether it is delivering those environmental outcomes. There is a test in respect of uptake, because clearly the scheme has to be attractive to farmers and has to work alongside commercial objectives.

**Q318 Richard Drax:** How do you test an environmental outcome? How do you judge an environmental outcome?

**Guy Thompson:** Based on the monitoring of any suite of outcomes that work alongside the delivery of those programmes, we outsource the monitoring of the delivery of the schemes to other agencies and Department delivery bodies.

**Richard Drax:** Which other agencies do you monitor?

**Guy Thompson:** Bodies like the Centre for Ecology & Hydrology. We work very closely with NGO partners. There is a lot of monitoring that takes place around the delivery of those outcomes, and not all in direct association with the agri-environment schemes themselves, I might add.

**Q319 Richard Drax:** How many of your staff are going to go around all this agricultural land, ensuring that these schemes are being adhered to? Are you going to have the resources to advise farmers to adhere to them?

**Guy Thompson:** In short, the answer is yes. Clearly, the new scheme will come in two forms. There will be a high tier, which is analogous to the current higher-level scheme of the Environmental Stewardship scheme. For that element, there will be a very strong onus on face-to-face contact between our advisers and farmers on the ground. We undertake, at the moment, 30,000 farm visits a year. We will clearly protect that investment, because there is a premium on that type of advice. Our advisors are held in very high esteem by their agreement holders on the ground. The trust and confidence we build up on that individual adviser basis is absolutely critical to securing the environmental outcomes we need from these schemes. We need to protect that investment.

The “middle tier”, as it is known, of the Countryside Stewardship scheme will be a more hands-off offer. It will be more competitive, and yet there will be an element of that scheme that we will want to enable our advisers to support partners and agreement holders on the ground in getting the most from, through one-to-many training programmes and awareness programmes and, in certain priority areas, very specific programmes of work to target that offer to the right options.

**Q320 Richard Drax:** Is this going to be a bureaucratic nightmare, for you and for farmers?

**Guy Thompson:** By no means. Coming back to the simplification question, the schemes on the ground will look and feel very much as they do now. That is the critical point to emphasise. This will be evolution, rather than revolution. We have learnt from 30 years of agri-environment schemes. It has been a process of iterative improvement. We have entered a period now, under the new regulations, where there is a tighter control framework in the Pillar 2 environment, but we believe we can comply with that framework whilst maintaining the type of offer that customers are currently used to. For example, we have slimmed down the number of options available under the current environmental stewardship scheme from 600 to a single menu of 230 items. That is one very obvious example of how this will be, I hope, a much simpler and more transparent scheme offer for customers.

**Q321 Richard Drax:** Presumably, huge sympathy will be given to most farmers and landowners, who already have schemes in place and meet all kinds of environmental obligations already.

**Guy Thompson:** Correct. That is another important point to stress. Whilst the Countryside Stewardship scheme will clearly be the new game in town as far as agri-environment delivery goes, it is nonetheless the case that two thirds of the budget

available for agri-environment over this next programme will go to existing environmental stewardship agreement holders. Our work with existing agreement holders to get the most out of those agreements is therefore also going to be critical to delivering the environmental outcomes I described earlier.

**Richard Drax:** There are many more questions I would love to ask you, but time pushes, and I shall not.

**Guy Thompson:** In this context, it is worth adding that we have learnt from the process we have had through the delivery of high-level stewardship, of targeting the schemes to the highest priorities, and rolled across into the new Countryside Stewardship scheme a targeting framework that will use the best national data sets to ensure we can make it very clear to farmers what options they need to choose to put together an agreement that has the optimum chance of success. It is going to be very clear to farmers how they can put the right options together in the right places, to put together an agreement that will deliver the value for money that we are looking for.

**Q322 Richard Drax:** Pragmatism will lead bureaucracy, I take it.

**Guy Thompson:** Pragmatism is to the fore, here. I hope that has been evident. The trust and confidence of our advisers, their knowhow and their farming expertise—we have, for example, 70 of our own people who are farmers themselves—are absolutely critical, I believe, to the credibility of this organisation.

**James Cross:** Just to underline that point, the mindset within Natural England and our team is, particularly in this new scheme, one of partnership. It is a partnership relationship with the landowners and a partnership relationship with the farmers. In terms of how we measure success, ultimately, we measure success on the ground. We measure it at a micro level, rather than the generic macro level. Each Countryside Stewardship agreement, in essence, will be as follows. There is a sum of cash. There is a financial settlement. There are some outcomes we would like to see. We agree that, and we will work and support with the landowner and the farmer to arrive at those outcomes. If we get those outcomes, this scheme is successful. You are absolutely right. This is Natural England's staff advising, guiding and helping farmers and landowners to work with what could, if we allow it to, end up as a hopelessly bureaucratic scheme. As Guy said, we have worked very, very hard to fix that.

**Q323 Richard Drax:** The predictions are that the number of agri-environmental agreements will fall under the new scheme. Do you agree with that?

**James Cross:** Yes, I think that is right. It has been described as a competitive scheme. One of the differences from perhaps where we were in the past is that it is not a guaranteed scheme, whereby everybody who applies is guaranteed an agreement. We are not in that place. Our advice to landowners, and to farmers and land users, is, if your agreement is coming to an end, or you want to join the scheme for the first time, please talk to us early. Let us help you get on the front foot, and get that application in.

**Guy Thompson:** One of the very significant achievements in Natural England is having secured, with the benefit of the high-water mark of current Rural Development Programme for England funding, 70% of our agricultural land in agri-environment agreements. That is a high-water mark. We currently have 50,000 agreements. Under ELS, we have been in an environment where there has been greater availability of that budget than we will see under this programme. We expect, and we can only project on the basis of expiring agreements, the number of agreements to fall to around 30,000 by 2020, but the point to make is that we would expect those agreements to be delivering far more for the environment, on average, based on the targeting framework I described earlier.

**Q324 Richard Drax:** Do you think there will be winners and losers under this new scheme? Do you see it like that? Who will they be, if you think there will be winners and losers?

**James Cross:** I hope the winner will be the environment, in terms of driving positive environmental outcomes, particularly around the Biodiversity 2020 commitments. I hope the winners will be those customers who are in the scheme and benefit from a scheme that is easier to work with and less complex. Inevitably, there will be fewer people in the scheme than in current schemes. As yet, it is too early to determine whether or not that will be out of choice, or whether or not the demand will outstrip supply. We just do not know at this stage.

**Q325 Richard Drax:** I think you have actually answered this question. How have you helped to simplify the scheme and improve its environmental effectiveness? I think you have already answered that by saying you have reduced the number of options, and by narrowing it down and targeting better, you think.

**James Cross:** We do, and, equally importantly, we have not necessarily reduced the scope of what is on offer. We have just simplified the packages and the number of packages by which they are brought to the marketplace, if that makes sense. Hopefully, it will be easier for our customers and our partners to navigate. Of course, there will still be the ability to talk to Natural England advisers for help in that too.

**Q326 Chair:** I think you said that they would be delivering more, Mr Thompson, for the environment. Does that mean that there are going to be fewer farmers, but those who are successful in claiming will have to put more effort into delivering the environmental benefits and get less reward from the new scheme?

**Guy Thompson:** It is back to my point that it is about getting the right options. We will be working with farmers to ensure that they select the best options in the right places to deliver the outcomes. The targeting framework we have in place will enable us to do that. On that basis, it should not be the case that farmers will therefore find themselves with more onerous restrictions on their farm business. Clearly, that then comes down to the quality of the advice that we can offer, both in putting the agreement together and then on an ongoing basis, to ensure that the agri-environment funding works in harmony with the farm business. It does remain the case that agri-environment funding will be a source of relatively stable income over the long term, which I think is an attractive offer for many farmers and an essential offer in the uplands context in particular.

**Q327 Chair:** You will be aware of the situation that has arisen under existing agri-environmental schemes in the common land, where there is often a difficult situation between the landowner and the graziers. Are you confident that these tensions and problems will not exist under the new schemes?

**James Cross:** The issues you have described are incredibly complex and complicated. Natural England is changing its approach, so that, uniformly across England, we engage and talk to the wider user community and do not make decisions on an isolated basis. Going back to that very first point I made, early engagement, showing the workings out, sharing the rationale and having an early dialogue will give us the best chance of solving these very important and very complex issues. The way to guarantee failure on that front is to make a decision in isolation and make a decision quickly. We are interested more generally, in terms of how Natural England works, in a much more collaborative and partnership approach to some of these decisions that have a landscape-scale impact, often, rather than a farm-by-farm or a site-by-site impact.

**Q328 Chair:** One of the recommendations of the Committee was that there should be a dispute resolution mechanism. Is that something that you could support?

**James Cross:** Yes, it is.

**Guy Thompson:** Yes. There is no panacea for commons. Clearly, these are, by definition, large complex situations, with a number of actors and a number of interested parties. James has rightly pointed to how we can help. We see an important role for our advisers in working on the ground with commoners and interested parties to identify the long-term outcomes all parties want to see from those sites. Inevitably, disputes will crop up. It is inevitable in the commons context, and I think a dispute resolution mechanism could only be helpful in that context.

**Chair:** I would just like to record my personal thanks to the local representative, who has been immensely helpful.

**Q329 Mr Spencer:** Every five years we review the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act, in terms of protected species. I just wondered if, every five years, there is enough to keep that up to date and make sure that is relevant. What would your comments be on that?

**James Cross:** It is important to have a regular review. The conversations we have had with the team suggest that five years is adequate. I have not had any feedback that there is a desire to increase that or move away from that.

**Q330 Mr Spencer:** For example, let us invent a scenario where the fictional disease of the grey squirrel fungus struck. The grey squirrel, clearly, is not on that protected list, but all of a sudden, this disease came in, and within three years had crushed the population of the grey squirrel.

**Richard Drax:** It would be marvellous.

**Mr Spencer:** Clearly, after five years, it would be too late. The squirrels are gone. Is there any facility to step in and review that earlier than the five years, or not?

**Guy Thompson:** Conceivably. As we described at the outset to this session, we believe the priority for Natural England over the next five years needs to lie on practical advice on the ground to land managers and partners who can help improve the condition of our sites and turn around what we are seeing, which are largely quite widespread declines in our species. The risk of a more onerous and regular reporting obligation is that you inevitably draw resource into reporting and away from the practical management and delivery of those outcomes.

**Q331 Mr Spencer:** What about the opposite? Is there any facility to take a species off the protected list? If at the same time the red squirrel became rampant, and there were millions of red squirrels everywhere, is there the facility to remove a species from that list?

**Guy Thompson:** My understanding is that we do have that flexibility, but I would need to come back to the Committee with the detail on that point.

**Q332 Mr Spencer:** Can you think of a single example of a species that has been removed from the protected list in the last 20 years?

**Guy Thompson:** Off the top of my head, I cannot.

**Q333 Chair:** It would be helpful if you could write, because it is a very important point. There does not seem to be a regular review. There seems to be an eternity: some species remain on the list, and other species do not seem to be added to the list.

**Guy Thompson:** We can come back to the Committee on that point.

**Chair:** If you could, in the next week or two, that would be immensely helpful.

**Q334 Ms Ritchie:** Moving onto Natural England's wildlife role, how are activities carried out under wildlife licences monitored by you?

**James Cross:** At the point where we issue a licence for a variety of purposes, we would invariably attach a condition to those licences, and from that, depending on the nature of that condition, there would be follow-up regulatory activity. It could be in the form of a report. It could be in the form of a follow-up visit or observation. Depending on the compliance with those conditions, we would consider follow-up action.

**Q335 Ms Ritchie:** Does Natural England have all the necessary resources, both finance and staff, for regulating all relevant wildlife activities?

**James Cross:** Natural England has found itself in a position where, over the last six or seven years or so, its budget position has shrunk. It has roughly £100 million less cash today than it did in 2006-07, and 1,000 or so fewer people. We have talked today about the need for process reform, process efficiencies, and the opportunity to cost-recover and explore

new ways of shifting the burden from the taxpayer to the beneficiary. I think, by following that strategy, we can ensure the long-term sustainability of the organisation. As it stands at the moment, we have identified the reforms we need to deliver. We have identified the commercial opportunities we need to pursue. Once those two are in place, we will have the resources to deliver Natural England's remit, not just in wildlife licensing, but across its full remit too.

**Q336 Ms Ritchie:** So you are confident that you will be able to execute all your functions, including regulating all relevant wildlife activities, within your shrinking or reduced budget.

**James Cross:** That is right. I will just qualify that again. Providing I deliver on the reform agenda that I have already identified and I am able to pursue those commercial ideas we have talked about, then I have absolute confidence that we will be able to deliver on our full remit.

**Q337 Ms Ritchie:** How are enforcement decisions made when conditions of wildlife licences are breached, or not met?

**James Cross:** We have an enforcement strategy. It is fully compliant with the regulator's code. It is proportionate. The basis of our decisions is open and transparent. Using plain speak, we have tried to educate and persuade. Ultimately, at the other end of the scale, we have elements of prosecution at our disposal.

**Q338 Ms Ritchie:** Under what circumstances can wildlife licences be revoked?

**James Cross:** Under any. If Natural England, as the licensing authority, decide to revoke a licence, usually because one of the conditions has been breached, at some point in that process I talked about we would hit a revocation point and call in that licence.

**Q339 Ms Ritchie:** Has that happened within the last five years?

**James Cross:** I do not have that information to hand. If you will allow me to, I will write and clarify on those specifics.

**Q340 Chair:** That would be very helpful. If you review an ongoing incident involving wildlife, what is the normal length of time taken to report, visit and come to an amicable solution, if you can, with the parties, and the wildlife?

**James Cross:** It really depends. We issue about 4,000 wildlife licences a year, so there is a huge variety and variance in those types of licences, and, of course, those licences affect different species too, so it would really depend on those exact circumstances. The general approach would be that we would hope to bring about an immediate resolution. Of course we would. The feedback I have had from staff is usually it is a matter of education and persuasion: "We have found that x, y and z is happening. Do you realise that is a breach of what we have asked you to do?" Usually, the owner of that licence will happily comply.

If it is more complex or more difficult than that, we will move through education and persuasion and we will consider the revocation point and ultimately lead to prosecution.

**Q341 Chair:** If you look at the specific example, I am sure you will be aware of the incident of the bats in the main church at St Hilda's, Ellerburn. They were doing all sorts of ghastly things that we will not necessarily broadcast. The congregation were not allowed in, but the bats were, and yet there was a solution, which was so obvious: to allow the bats in the upper parts of the church and the congregation in their usual places. Common sense, or, as Mr Drax would say, a pragmatic approach, did not seem to spring into Natural England's steps.

**James Cross:** That pragmatic, common-sense approach is where the organisation needs and wants to be. I am very pleased to see progress, over the last six to nine months or so, with regards to the church you have talked about.

**Q342 Chair:** I think they are both there, so we are getting there.

**James Cross:** We have in place now a methodology to achieve the outcome that I think everybody wants, which is that the bat population can be protected but not at the expense of those using the church. The challenge now is to scale up that technology and that methodology so we can roll it out more widely. The patience of the users of the church has been really impressive. I am incredibly grateful. The onus is now on Natural England to ramp up progress and ramp up how we roll out that technology and the learning that we have been able to have in the church.

**Q343 Chair:** Have other churches been as fortunate?

**James Cross:** We have started to roll out those methodologies in other churches. We are getting good progress. The equipment is expensive. That is the challenge that is on our mind at the moment. We are thinking about how we can help congregations, and the churches in particular, meet those costs. We are working jointly with English Heritage to scope out a grant, which will hopefully mitigate some of the issues around cost. I definitely agree. There is an opportunity for Natural England to demonstrate its change of approach.

**Q344 Chair:** Could you give the Committee an assurance that there are no similar examples involving the habitats directive?

**James Cross:** There are complexities. There are similar issues, frankly. I am not in a position yet where I want to be, in terms of bats in particular. The other example that springs to mind is around newts, as well. I talked about this earlier in my evidence. There is an opportunity for Natural England to really think about how we execute and apply those regulations to make sure that we have systems and processes in place, supported by evidence, that allow the right outcomes to be met, in a common-sense and pragmatic way. That is certainly something that is very high on my agenda and the board's agenda. It is an active piece of work within the organisation at the moment.

**Q345 Jim Fitzpatrick:** Out of curiosity, what was the solution that was so expensive?

**James Cross:** There were bats in the church. It was very difficult to keep bats out, because there were lots of holes and entry and exit points in the church. It would have been really, really costly to do it, and actually could possibly have had a detrimental impact on the fabric of the church. The solution is lighting, and, to some degree, noise, which persuade the bats to use a different route in and out. That is my speak; it is not the scientists' speak, but that is in essence what we are talking about. It costs money to put that gear in situ.

**Guy Thompson:** There are some parallels with the challenges of newts and bats. You have seasonal restrictions in terms of how you can monitor and when you can intervene, and there are some significant evidence gaps. There is a difficulty with understanding what kind of risks you can take with individuals and individual populations. James has touched on the solutions: to be able to invest in the effort we need to understand what the systemic solutions are; better monitoring, so we can understand what risks we can take; and also to take a more risk-based approach in our own processes and systems. For example, through the introduction of class-based and organisational licences, we can free up the system, essentially, so that we are focused on the really complex cases.

St Hilda's church in Ellerburn was very much a case in point, where it just took time for us to understand what the points of entry were for the bats and to come to a pragmatic solution. No doubt we can learn from that experience, as James has said.

**Q346 Chair:** Can you assure us that this would also happen in other European Union countries? I have a hunch that they would just say "huh".

**James Cross:** I do not know. I cannot give that assurance.

**Chair:** If you had any information, it would just be interesting to see.

**James Cross:** I would add one supplementary point to the point that Guy made. In terms of how Natural England can demonstrate its commitment to pragmatism and common sense, as Guy says, where we have these really complex solutions, it is really engaging and being sympathetic to the users, of the church in this example.

The other opportunity we have is just taking people out of the licensing system that, in our view, do not actually need to be there. Guy touched on a fast-track or even what we call a "class licensing" system, whereby people do not need to apply for a licence. That is the area we are really interested in exploring. We have made some changes very, very recently, which would take groups of people out of that licensing regime. We think 16% of last year's customers would not need a licence this year, as a result of those changes.

There are two aspects of our strategy here. It is about making sure we can help with the complexity and complex solutions, and, secondly, making sure that only people who need to be within the licensing regime are there.

**Q347 Mrs Glindon:** I apologise for not being here at the beginning of the session. Could more stringent licence conditions for badger culls address some concerns over humaneness?

**James Cross:** Natural England's role in terms of the trial, as you mentioned, is really around being the licensing body. We consent the activity, and we ensure compliance with those licence conditions. Because it is a pilot, we have a larger role than normal, in terms of collecting the evidence and providing some of the intelligence and evidence for people to make decisions on humaneness. However, that is not our area of expertise. The Chief Vet would be in a better position to help you than I.

**Q348 Mrs Glindon:** It is just because you operate a licence. It is controversial about whether what is happening is humane or not, but there is nothing you would suggest practically that could address the issue. The Chief Veterinary Officer has said that humaneness is a subjective issue.

**James Cross:** In terms of Natural England's expertise as a body of people and an organisation, we would give advice around the principles of the Berne convention, for example. We have a role to play and a body of expertise on that front, and in terms of the licensing authority granting the licence and making sure those conditions are met, providing some assurances around the data, to allow the Chief Veterinary Officer to make those judgments. We certainly have a role to play in that, and I think we do that really, really well. It is beyond our area of expertise to offer a view on that.

**Q349 Mrs Glindon:** Thanks for the explanation. How many cage-trapping licences have been issued for badger vaccination programmes?

**James Cross:** I do not have that information to hand. I would be happy to write and give that data.

**Chair:** If you could write in, again in the next week or two, that would be really helpful.

**Q350 Richard Drax:** Just out of interest, do you agree in principle that, forgetting the disease issue, culling wild animals is a necessary thing to do when there is no natural predator, like deer or foxes? Otherwise, disease does spread. Do you accept the principle that all wild animals in the UK have to be culled to ensure their numbers are appropriate to stop disease?

**James Cross:** Natural England have a role to play, and indeed we do issue licences to enable culling. We do that as a matter of course. I mentioned earlier we issue about 4,000 licences every year. They are not all for culling. In all of those cases, we ask ourselves the same questions. Is it necessary? Are there other options? Will the cull have a significant impact on the integrity of the species population? Provided we are satisfied with those questions, we do issue licences and we have issued licences. To be direct, the answer to your question is, yes, we do, and there is evidence to do that, and Natural England have done that for a long, long time.

**Guy Thompson:** I am not sure I could give you a generic answer to your question, but as James has said, the wildlife licensing regime that has been delegated to Natural England by Defra is predicated on the premise of wildlife management, and certainly there are good examples of the requirement for culling. England's environment is a semi-natural environment. It is a managed environment. As you rightly say, there has been the removal of certain natural predators from that ecosystem. A good case in point would be the increase in roe deer<sup>3</sup> populations in the English lowlands, which we are seeing having a very significant impact on some of our woodland SSSIs, for example. In that instance, we are working very closely with the deer initiative and other partners to ensure that appropriate culling takes place to secure the management objectives for those sites.

**Q351 Sheryll Murray:** I apologise as well for not being here at the beginning. I was on another committee that I could not get out of. I would like to turn to marine conservation zones. The Government told us that just under 25% of the English waters are protected by marine protected areas, and up to 23% were designated in 2003. Do you think that the MPAs cover an appropriate proportion of English waters?

**James Cross:** Natural England's real expertise and role here is to give advice to Government on a site-by-site basis. We have been able to do that really well, in my view, particularly around tranche 1 and tranche 2 of the MCZ programme, and we are well placed to do the same for tranche 3. In terms of Natural England's role, we can look at a site and give advice to Government about the soundness of the science underpinning that site. We are really keen to make sure that that science is good, accurate and clear.

With regards to the question you have asked around whether the end result of that constitutes a coherent network, JNCC have been asked by Government to provide that answer.

**Sheryll Murray:** That is the Joint Nature Conservation Committee.

**James Cross:** That is right. It is a piece of work they are leading at the moment and they will provide advice to Government on that very question.

**Q352 Sheryll Murray:** How does Natural England contribute to the conservation of MPAs? Do regulators such as the MMO have to take your advice into account?

**James Cross:** They do not. In all aspects of Natural England's work, we provide advice. We provide good quality advice, but by its very nature it is one-dimensional. It is environmental advice. Competent authorities like the Marine Management Organisation, a local IFCA, perhaps, or a local authority have the role of considering Natural England's advice, alongside the economic dimension and social dimension, and then making their judgments. Natural England's role is to give advice. It is not our role to make the decision.

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<sup>3</sup> Clarification by witness on 12 March 2015: there is more than one deer species causing over-grazing in the lowlands.

**Q353 Sheryll Murray:** I do not expect either of you to have knowledge of the specific site, but there is a site just off my constituency called the Whitsand and Looe marine conservation zone. It is also bounded by the Natura 2000 site and there is a waste disposal site very close by. The MMO at 2.30pm this afternoon have made a statement public, saying that they have discovered some mud near this site, and they have commissioned a review by CEFAS. Do you think that the future monitoring of these sites should be consistent with perhaps continuing to monitor them on an annual basis, to make sure that the information that is originally available is constant?

**James Cross:** One of the challenges with the marine environment is the paucity of data and evidence. We know a lot less about the sea than we do about the land. My view is that the best we can ever do is make a decision based on the best available evidence. Then it is a question of how you drive up the best available evidence. One of the things that Natural England are able to do is pull together evidence from different sources. There is a challenge for the wider scientific community, with industry as well, to pool, to join up and to really make the best use of evidence that is out there. The world changes; the world changes quickly. Overridingly, at the point when new evidence and new data does become available, it changes the parameters of the decision, and therefore a quick response and a quick change is always the right thing to do.

**Q354 Sheryll Murray:** With the marine licensing for dredging and disposal and the marine conservation zones, is it the same branch of Natural England that would be consulted on both? Would it be that perhaps somebody is making a representation on one, and somebody else on another, and never the twain shall meet? This is quite a good example, because the two are in very close proximity.

**James Cross:** You are right. In the past, it was not quite “never the twain shall meet”, but Natural England was organised around different operational functions. We made changes very, very recently, which transform the whole organisation to local delivery models. In your constituency, you could walk into a local branch and have the conversation with the same people who are working on land management, working on MCZ and working on marine licensing. Here and now, the answer to your question is that it would be the same kind of area and the same people involved in it. I would not quite say, in the past, it was “never the twain shall meet”, but it was organised around different functions, which does not lend itself to operational efficiency. It is one of the changes we have made internally. It is cheaper, but more importantly it leads to better customer service and better decisions, I think.

**Guy Thompson:** I mentioned earlier the benefits we had had from the Triennial review. That is a very good example of the response we have made and the benefits that are already accruing.

**James Cross:** That is right.

**Q355 Sheryll Murray:** With only 27 MCZs out of the recommended 127 sites designated so far, are you satisfied that sufficient progress is being made to form a network, interlinking them with the Natura 2000 sites as well? Will they contribute to the conservation or improvement of the marine environment? Perhaps you could bear in mind these dispersal sites as well when you give me your answer.

**James Cross:** From Natural England's perspective, I have a work programme ahead of me. Natural England have provided advice to the Government on tranche 1. That is the first 27 sites you talked about. We have given our first batch of evidence on the second tranche, which is currently out to consultation. I see tranche 3 on the work programme ahead of me, all of which are targeted to land before 2016. Subject to the quality of the sites having been good enough, I think at the end of that process those expectations will have been met. That is me trying to read the future, but certainly that is the work programme that I have committed to and it is a work programme that Natural England have resourced as well.

In terms of forming a judgment about the extent to which the existence of the coherent network benefits the condition of the environment, we then need to move into a period of monitoring, measuring and testing, and make sure that we have an adequate budget expenditure to do that. Of course, we will be making these decisions across the whole breadth of Natural England in an integrated way. Ecosystems do not exist in isolation. We cannot try to manage an MCZ and ignore different things that happen around it. That ecosystems approach, as referred to, is at the heart of all Natural England's operations.

**Q356 Sheryll Murray:** On the second tranche of 23 sites, is sufficient progress being made? Do you think that the way it is in coming in in phases is sufficient progress?

**James Cross:** I have touched on that already. Our advice has been provided on tranche 2. A consultation is underway. We are primed and ready to respond to that consultation and give our final advice to Government, and then we will start work on tranche 3. At the end of that process, I think there will be a solid coherent network in place.

**Q357 Mrs Lewell-Buck:** In your corporate plan, you have talked about developing wider opportunities for people to engage with the natural environment and having access opportunities. I am just wondering how you manage the success of your engagement and access work.

**James Cross:** We have done some good work to date around the coastal path and our national trails. We have a beautiful nature reserve network in place. We are really encouraging access and people to use those sites. We have developed a programme now to ramp up delivery of the coastal path by 2020. We have secured the funding to do that. We do a survey annually of how often people use green space in those sites, and that data is telling us that more people are using those sites; more people are interested in green space. I think the combination of the coastal path, our NNRs and working much more closely with partners around joining up other sites can bring nature closer to society, making nature much more tangible.

As an organisation, I am keen for us to talk about species of birds, large blue butterflies, and bitterns, for example, rather than SSSI sites and ecosystem services. There is a challenge for Natural England to really bring nature to life and ignite the passion that exists within society to get back in touch with nature and use it. There is a little bit about how we talk about what we do and how we allow people to connect in a non-exclusive form of words, and then to allow people to use the really good network we have in place.

**Guy Thompson:** Can I just add a very brief historical perspective? Access and engagement is part of our statutory purpose, as you have rightly identified. We have gone from a place where we had the programme budget and the resources available to run very ambitious, high volume programmes of delivery, specifically vested in our educational access work through HLS, through our NNR outreach on our own estate and through our Walking for Health programme. We very significantly divested ourselves of those programmes of activity and moved to a more focused, evidence gathering, standard-setting role, whilst also continuing to embed high standards of public engagement on our own NNR estate.

The only thing I would add to James's answer in respect to how we then measure success would be to remind the Committee that public engagement in the natural environment is one objective in the Government's Biodiversity 2020 strategy. We will have a contribution to make to that in turn.

**Q358 Mrs Lewell-Buck:** James, you mentioned the coastal path. There has been criticism about the lack of progress of it. Where is it currently at? How much has been completed? How much is left to complete? What are the challenges in getting that completed?

**James Cross:** In terms of where we are today, there are 163 kilometres of dedicated coastal path that you can put your boots on and walk round. The reality is that two thirds of England has a coastal path in some way, shape or other already; it is just not necessarily joined up or easy to use. We need to get to 4,300 kilometres by 2020, so it is a significant ramping up in terms of resources. We have developed the plan to do that. We know how to do that. We have identified the cash and the resources we need to do that. We have shown the plan to the Treasury and we have secured the funding to deliver it, so we are in a really strong position, and we feel really confident that we can deliver the coastal path by 2020.

**Guy Thompson:** It is primarily a delivery challenge and one that we are relishing. We have the benefit of having had some experience of testing the methodology in a more limited way. The principal challenge for us is now to scale up that delivery. I think we will see over the next year effectively a trebling in the volume of delivery and the resourcing of that programme. It is a big ask, clearly, but one that we are relishing, and very confident, based on the success of our track record to date, that we can take on successfully.

**Q359 Mrs Lewell-Buck:** I was not expecting that answer, so that is good news. Out of what is completed, what are you doing to encourage people to access the completed bits of the coastal path?

**James Cross:** This comes back to the point I made earlier. Really talking to people in an accessible language, promoting the existence of the coastal path and encouraging its use are going to form the backbone of how we talk to our customers between now and 2020. As the coastal path gets bigger and it becomes something that is tangible and recognisable, I think interest will grow. It is a tremendously exciting concept and a huge potential economic benefit, too, in terms of the economies it passes through. There is an example on the south west coast. An existing coastal path brings in over £400 million of income a year to businesses along that coastal path. It is a real opportunity to reinvigorate some coastal communities.

**Q360 Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Do you think the Government are doing enough to encourage public engagement with nature overall?

**James Cross:** The data we gather each year in the report I mentioned earlier shows that just under 3 million people accessed green space last year. It is growing; it is increasing. Most of those people did so on a weekly basis, and most of those people did so within two miles of their home. There is evidence to show that more people are using, and value, countryside. We feel as if we have a statutory role and a statutory purpose to help support that. There is a measure that we are committed to in the Biodiversity 2020 commitments, and we have touched on today how we are trying to do that. Through the combination of coastal path, the NNRs, working in local partnership to make the best of local green spaces, and then promoting them in a more approachable and accessible language, I think we will achieve that.

**Q361 Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Do you think there is more the Government can do? Do you think there is something the Government can do to help encourage that?

**James Cross:** There is certainly more that we can do. This is something that I have talked at length to the teams about. There is certainly something more that Natural England can do and will do on that front, so it follows therefore that, as we are an extension of Government, there is more that Government can do. I see the responsibility as lying very much with ourselves, and that is to build on the assets that are in place, promote them using more accessible language, start talking about nature and the environment in tangible terms, in terms that people can relate to, rather than in terms of ecosystem services or SSSI sites, to make it relevant to families who want to engage with nature on a Saturday or a Sunday.

**Q362 Chair:** Certainly, as an organisation, you are a lot leaner and meaner than when you were merged from three agencies into one. Are you able to look into the crystal ball and see what will happen in the next comprehensive spending review?

**James Cross:** I cannot. What we have been at pains to do is be proactive and take, as far as we can, control of our own destiny. It is certainly true that Natural England has played its part, in terms of helping the Government meet their financial targets. The offer in terms of headcount, and in terms of reduction of budget, has been impressive from Natural England. The reality is that I think we are going to be asked to do more. We can do more. The solution to how we do that is in terms of reform of our systems and our processes. It will require a change in terms of how we work, in terms of our culture, embracing partnership work and being much more commercially rigorous in our approach, so driving down our costs and looking for new opportunities to cost-recover. If we can do that, I have absolute confidence that Natural England can do some really wonderful things for the natural environment.

**Q363 Chair:** There is always debate about whether you sit comfortably alone, or whether you go in with another body, but you have played much on the advisory role. That would be prejudiced if you did not continue to exist as a separate body.

**James Cross:** Yes. Decisions of this nature are well beyond my pay grade, but I think you are right. As I talked about earlier, competent authority can benefit when sources of advice and guidance are separate from it, because it helps confidence in the decisions of that competent authority. That is one view.

**Q364 Chair:** If you were to look ahead, assuming that the next Parliament will last for five years and you were before the successor Parliament, what would you like to say had been your main achievements for the natural environment and coastal communities in the next five years?

**James Cross:** I would very much like our work on Countryside Stewardship to have felt positive, so that we can evidence positive gains in terms of the natural environment. These are tangible gains, such as more birds, better species and better habitats. I would like to have completed our contribution to the Government's marine work, particularly around the MCZ programme. I would like to be very, very nearly complete with the delivery of the coastal path, with thousands of kilometres under our belt already.

I would really like to have delivered on the reform agenda we have in place, around the planning and licensing work. I would like there to be much more earned autonomy and much more delegating authority to other organisations to self-certify work, really reducing that burden on industry and other users. I would really like an organisation that is trusted for the quality of the advice that it gives to Government and the quality of the decisions it makes for the citizenship. I would like an organisation that makes transparent decisions and is much more commercially viable and less reliant on the taxpayer.

**Guy Thompson:** One key test of success, if the Parliament does last the five-year term and if the new Government choose to adopt it, will be the delivery of Biodiversity 2020. We would like to think that would be a very key test of success for us, particularly in respect of our ability to restore the number of our key wildlife sites to favourable condition.

**Chair:** Mr Cross, Mr Thompson, thank you very much indeed. You have both been very generous with your time this afternoon and we are very grateful.