

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Pre-Appointment Hearing for Chair of the Environment Agency, HC 649

Tuesday 13 September 2016

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Neil Parish (Chair); Jim Fitzpatrick; Simon Hart; Dr Paul Monaghan; and Angela Smith.

Questions 1 - 54

Witness

I: Emma Howard Boyd, Government's preferred candidate for Chair of the Environment Agency.

Examination of witness

Witness: Emma Howard Boyd.

Q1 **Chair:** You are very much welcome to our hearing. I assure you it is not an inquisition; we are here to get the very best from you, so we very much welcome you. Many of us met you when we went on the visit to Somerset, and we appreciated you coming to that. We are going to drill down today on who you are, what you are and where you see the Environment Agency going in the future. You have been acting chair since January this year, so you have had time to prove yourself a little.

I will start off. You have an impressive CV and it is evident from the range of board-level positions you hold that your expertise in governance is valued across the finance and sustainability sectors. How are you going to balance those responsibilities with becoming the permanent EA chair, along with all your other interests?

Emma Howard Boyd: If I may, I will go back to the role I have been fulfilling over the last eight or nine months since I became acting chair. I wanted to keep my options open throughout that period because I was not sure whether I was going to be sitting here in this place today. I am delighted to be here, but I think it has become very clear to me over the last few months that I have been able to balance those responsibilities.



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Working with the chairs of the other organisations that I am involved with, it is very clear, both to me and to them, where my priorities lie. Certainly, I have been able not just to fulfil a three-day commitment, but, where necessary, to spend more time with the agency over the last eight months or so. I have already been able to show that I have the time commitment to be able to fulfil this role alongside my other roles.

Q2 Chair: You seem to have had a slightly calming effect on the weather, because it has not been flooding quite so much since you have become acting chairman.

Emma Howard Boyd: Long may that last!

Chair: We cannot rely on that in the future, so my next question is: how flexible will your current commitments be and, if you have an urgency to represent the EA in a time of national crisis, will you be able to do it? You will be aware that there was a problem with your predecessor. I will not go into all the details, but are you going to be ready and available? Do you feel you need to be available? He almost felt that he did not necessarily need to be available at a time of flooding. It is something we need to clear up right at the beginning, really.

Emma Howard Boyd: Absolutely. If I go back to January when I was appointed acting chair, I was able to focus entirely on my role as acting chair. I spent a lot of time every week with the organisation. The organisation had already been through, at that point, two months of being in incident mode and, arguably, was still in incident mode. Our staff had spent a lot of time and energy over the Christmas period, and I felt it was really important in those early weeks not just to spend time with our staff, who had done a brilliant job, but also to get out to visit those communities that were affected during the winter floods.

Again, if I can go back to that early period as acting chair, I think I have been able to show that I have the time and was given the blessing from those other organisations I am involved with to focus on the Environment Agency. I believe that, should we find ourselves in incident mode again, that will absolutely be my priority.

Q3 Dr Monaghan: Your predecessor famously said that, in the event of an emergency, he would be one of the first ones there with his wellie boots on. I think that probably led to his downfall. Are you making that same claim?

Emma Howard Boyd: It is important to remember that the chair has a specific role within the Environment Agency and that we are working as a team. The operation—the incident—is actually run by the chief executive and the other executive directors, plus the huge team of staff across the country who are working round the clock to help those communities that have been flooded. I also understand how important it is to be present, be visible and take part in visiting those communities that have been affected by the flooding.



However, it has to be put in balance with understanding the difference between the role of a chair as a non-exec and those in executive roles. I hope you understand that I absolutely appreciate the need for the chair of the Environment Agency to be as visible as possible as soon as possible, given other arrangements or other things that I might be involved with.

- Q4 **Chair:** You will be the face of the Environment Agency in a crisis. We understand that the chief executive has a management role, but you almost have, dare I say it, a ceremonial role in as much as you will need to be seen to be there. That is what was proved in the last crisis and that is something we will be asking you to do: to have a presence. I am pretty certain that you are a very intelligent woman and you will have worked out by now some of the problems past. You are being very supportive of the last chairman and I would not expect you to be anything else, but we need to learn perhaps from some of the things that did not go quite right.

Emma Howard Boyd: My diary is managed quite closely with the team that support me to make sure that we are looking at the weather and the flood forecasting activities that the Environment Agency and the Met Office are responsible for, so that we can plan accordingly.

- Q5 **Chair:** That is fine, thank you very much. We look forward to seeing your face there when there is a crisis. Hopefully, we are not looking for a crisis at the moment, but, if there is one, we will know that you have the interests of the Environment Agency and the country at heart. Now, you have been on the EA board since 2009 and have been acting chair since January 16. What makes you want to take on the role permanently?

Emma Howard Boyd: Well, I have had, as you said, a number of years' experience sitting on the board and I think it is a fantastic organisation. If I look at the challenges the country faces and the role that the Environment Agency can play in helping with those challenges, I would be honoured and privileged to take on the role permanently.

The next few years bring some interesting challenges, not least from a business as usual perspective. We will, no doubt, be dealing with strategic issues around flood and drought, and other resilience-related issues. However, there is also the work following the recently published national flood resilience review, which sets the scene for thinking more long term and strategically around resilience.

There is also the resilience of the organisation in terms of increasingly working with Defra and, not least but more recently, the whole issue of how the country prepares for exiting the EU. That gives a very full and important agenda for the Environment Agency, working with Defra, to make sure that we are still fulfilling our responsibilities.

- Q6 **Chair:** We will be asking questions particularly about the EU and Brexit in a minute. Yes, we have had the NFRR—it rolls off the lips, doesn't it?—



but we ourselves will also be putting together a report on resilience. We are going to try to make it a little bit further reaching. We will also be looking at ways in which perhaps the Environment Agency can adapt.

It is very good perhaps at the top of the organisation, but sometimes, when we need to deliver aspects of drainage or flood protection at a local level, it could be done more locally. I do not know whether you are open to those sorts of ideas and looking at that in the future—doing more work through drainage boards and the like.

Emma Howard Boyd: I think you will be aware, from the visit that we carried out to the Somerset Levels, of that evolution: we are working more with local communities and working with a range of different techniques for managing flood risk. I understand that you were up in York and at Pickering looking at some of the “slow the flow” techniques that are being used elsewhere in the country. We were also up at the Moors for the Future project in the summer, looking at the different ways that we can work with communities.

We should recognise that it is also important to work across Departments. One of the absolute strengths of the national flood resilience review was the fact that it was a cross-government exercise working with others. It has certainly become clear, in the many visits that I have had around the country, that it is those communities that have recently flooded and have perhaps flooded again that have got most used to responding to flood risk. Yet, the flood risk is across the country as a whole, so we need to make sure that that strength of working in partnership and in collaboration is something that is as consistent as it can be throughout the country.

Q7 **Chair:** If I dare say it, one of the challenges of the Environment Agency, if I can relate it to an empire, is the propensity to build up the empire rather than necessarily to allow others to do some of the work. I think that will be the challenge now for the Environment Agency: to do what you do well and then to be able to devolve not only powers, but also perhaps money, down to a more local level. I know that is probably a management tool of the chief executive, but I imagine you probably talk to him about that.

Emma Howard Boyd: Absolutely. We are seeing increasing examples where we are working locally with drainage boards. I was at an event in the Commons last week with the Greater Lincolnshire LEP, working very locally with members of the community and members of the farming community.

There are examples—such as the work with the regional flood and coastal committees, whose membership is made up of local authority and local council members—of how we are working more closely with communities. I see this as an evolution and I know that Sir James Bevan, our chief executive, working alongside John Curtin, is very keen to make sure that



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we are working strategically at a national level, but also that we are delivering options at those local levels.

- Q8 **Simon Hart:** I have to go at 3 o'clock unfortunately, so I apologise for leaving in advance of the end. I have two questions, really. First of all, obviously your appointment has straddled two Secretaries of State. I think you were appointed by Liz Truss and are now in close liaison—or I presume so—with Andrea Leadsom. Have you had a transitional conversation with the new Secretary of State to ensure seamlessness?

Emma Howard Boyd: Absolutely, and I was really pleased that Andrea Leadsom, the Secretary of State, came to a commitment that our previous Secretary of State had made to meet with the board of the Environment Agency in her first week as Secretary of State.

I have had at least two or three other occasions to meet with her, both on a one-to-one level but also on other levels, to discuss how priorities have changed. Really, the one area that is different is preparing for leaving the EU. My board was pleased to hear in the opening conversation with us that her plans in relation to leaving and ambitions for what happens next are not about rowing back on environmental standards.

- Q9 **Simon Hart:** Quite. In terms of the relationship that exists, either on a personal level or at an operational level, it is business as usual subject to the Brexit caveat.

Emma Howard Boyd: Absolutely: business as usual—we have a very full agenda—subject to arrangements around the EU.

- Q10 **Simon Hart:** On a separate note, we have a slightly different arrangement in Wales. Natural Resources Wales is the EA equivalent. It has a different array of responsibilities, having been the result of an amalgamation—I suppose that is the best way of putting it. Do you look at the Welsh model and think, “That is what I would like” or do you look at the Welsh model and think, “Not on my watch”?

Emma Howard Boyd: It is very clear what the priorities are for how the Environment Agency fits within the Defra group for the immediate and foreseeable future. There is a distinction between where we are a delivery body working on flood risk, where we are a regulator and making sure that we are working at arm's length from our Department—

- Q11 **Simon Hart:** Sorry; I do not think I expressed myself clearly. The point is that that is what NRW is: it is exactly the same thing but it is a Welsh version. I was trying to ascertain whether you, as the new chair of the Environment Agency this side of Offa's Dyke, look at that model in terms of all the things that you have just described about the English version and think that that is a better or a worse model than the one you are currently in charge of. What can we learn from Wales by way of mistakes and/or assets?



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Emma Howard Boyd: The Environment Agency when I joined the board included the Environment Agency Wales, so we went through a process of the Environment Agency Wales separating out, joining with other bodies and becoming Natural Resources Wales. We still have the deputy chair of Natural Resources Wales sat on the board of the Environment Agency as the Welsh representative, as when we were still one organisation. There is still very close working between the two organisations, not least as those assets were transferred.

- Q12 **Simon Hart:** My final point on this was just on the question of flooding, which obviously was raised earlier on, and the extent to which there is cross-border co-operation between the Environment Agency and Natural Resources Wales, given that there are significant cross-border flooding issues in relation certainly to big rivers like the Severn. At operational level, how do the two distinct organisations operate together? Are you happy with the arrangements for that?

Emma Howard Boyd: Absolutely. You also raise a really interesting and important point in relation to how we work with the other agencies, particularly as we work out arrangements for leaving the EU. We need to be working so that those companies or organisations that are working cross-border within the UK have a degree and element of consistency in their understanding of regulatory matters. For all sorts of reasons, it is important for us to—

- Q13 **Simon Hart:** If a flood originates with abnormal rainfall at the head of the river Severn and has flooding consequences in England, who will be on the telly—you or the chairman of Natural Resources Wales? Who is going to be dealing with the operational element of that and the front of house bit? Is that you, them or is it just a combined effort?

Emma Howard Boyd: It is a combined effort and it depends on which communities are flooded. I would imagine that both chairs would be very present were there to be flooding there.

- Q14 **Angela Smith:** The job advert stated the need for the chair to provide overall leadership and strategic vision. Could you explain to us what your vision is for the Environment Agency—how you see it developing, what you see its strategic vision being?

Emma Howard Boyd: Absolutely, thank you. The vision I have for the organisation relates back to words I have already used around resilience. It is how we work to help protect the environment, promote sustainable development and make the country more resilient. Similarly, it is about the resilience of the organisation as a whole to fulfil those responsibilities. That is where thinking about innovation and partnerships is absolutely key to continuing to evolve and develop our response.

- Q15 **Chair:** Could you elaborate a bit more on what you mean by innovation and partnership? It rolls off the tongue but what does it mean?



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Emma Howard Boyd: Innovation is about new ways of working and new—

Q16 **Chair:** But with whom?

Emma Howard Boyd: With as many different organisations as possible: at the local level, with communities, with businesses, with local authorities; and with other Departments. If I think of some of our regulatory responsibilities, it would be working with the waste sector and the energy sector. It is really important that we are working not just with those bodies that we are regulating but with other Departments, because, if you think of energy policy and climate change policy, there are the unintended consequences of decisions made in one Department and how they may affect others.

Chair: I am conscious I took over Angela's question, so carry on.

Q17 **Angela Smith:** I do not know whether you wanted to add anything to what you said about strategic vision, but you were talking about resilience. Was there anything further you wanted to add in terms of resilience of the organisation and the environment?

Emma Howard Boyd: In terms of collaboration, that is also about how we work with other parts of the Defra group. How we interact with or how people perceive the Environment Agency and other bodies within the Defra group as consumers of those services is important. That is where we continue to evolve and develop our thinking as to how best to serve those organisations. That is another important aspect of collaboration.

Q18 **Angela Smith:** Resilience is important and it is most often associated with flooding and water management, but the brief for the Environment Agency is much wider than that, so the word “resilience” that you use is interesting. We are covering water quality, conservation and ecology. There has been a lot of focus on flooding, but nothing said so far about conservation, ecology, biodiversity, management of waste or the regulation of industry. In the end, that is one of the Environment Agency's biggest tasks: the regulation of industry and waste. I wondered if you would like to elaborate on and broaden out the work that the agency does and your role within that.

Emma Howard Boyd: Absolutely. We have talked about the word “resilience” very much in relation to flood, but the flipside to that, which is particularly pertinent on a day like today, is the whole drought side of things. This is where thinking as laterally as possible around resilience is really important. From the other areas that we regulate, this also links into some of the agenda we will now have in relation to exiting the EU. There is an opportunity to make sure that regulation—

Chair: We will deal with that in a future question, if you do not mind—on Brexit.

Emma Howard Boyd: Okay. There is a real opportunity to make sure that regulation delivers from an environmental perspective, but is still



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delivered in an efficient and effective way. One of the things that my experience working in the private sector on the investment side has shown is how sustainability, environmental issues and a focus on the importance of environmental issues for the economy are things that increasing numbers of businesses recognise.

Some of the leadership I will bring will make sure that we recognise that trust between us as regulators and those businesses that really see that environmental issues are at the heart of their own strategy as well.

Q19 Angela Smith: In a sense, you have anticipated my second question around the experience you have in the private sector and what that can bring to the post. Would you like to add anything to that? You have, to an extent, already commented on it, but is there anything else you think you can bring from your private sector experience?

Emma Howard Boyd: Working at an early stage with representatives of business to understand their ambitions for environmental issues is something we could do more of. I am not underestimating the strength of the regulation that we need to deliver, but very often it is at the edges of business, where you are almost seeing criminal activity, that is perhaps where we need to be focusing more of our activity, understanding that those businesses that have built up their brand and their value on delivering environmental benefits will want to make sure they are doing the right thing for the environment.

Q20 Angela Smith: To drill down a little and get some hard-nosed idea of where you are going, what are your immediate priorities for the Environment Agency for the next three years?

Emma Howard Boyd: The immediate priority is to continue the work we have already got going in terms of preparing for major incidents and being flood-ready. That is something we have been focusing on since the start of my year as acting chair, moving from being in incident mode into recovery mode. In the weeks and months to come, as I have travelled more recently around those parts of the country that were flooded, that reassurance needs to be given to communities. Indeed, we have our next board meeting up in Leeds next week and we will be visiting the Calder Valley and communities there to see the recovery work, but also to reassure them in terms of the steps that we have taken as an organisation to be ready for the next incident.

A priority beyond that is how we work with Defra on the 25-year environment plan, which I understand will be published shortly. That will provide some of the framing that is necessary to help deliver some of the work—I am sure you are going to shut me down again, Chairman—in relation to changes around how we prepare for leaving the EU.

Chair: You will be able to answer that in a minute; don't worry. You will get there.



Emma Howard Boyd: It is fulfilling business as usual. It is some of the manifesto commitments, which include things like the 25-year environment plan, and then that focus on how we, as an organisation, continue to be resilient and respond to the changes in the environment and what comes our way.

Q21 **Angela Smith:** What have you learned from your period as acting chair and has your perception of the role changed in that period at all from what you have learned?

Emma Howard Boyd: Ahead of being acting chair, I was deputy chair, but there is no doubt that becoming chair is different. It is how you are working with the Department, and the breadth and importance of really getting out and seeing the work of the agency as a whole. Over the summer, we have transitioned to 14 areas; we now have boundaries in line with Natural England.

Over the months since January, I have been to at least every single area and to some areas many more times. It is that whole ambassadorial piece that we were referring to earlier, not just in incident mode but as part of the leadership. I have focused on and learned that difference between being deputy chair and taking on the role of acting chair. It is something that I would very much want to continue, should I be appointed as the permanent chair.

Q22 **Angela Smith:** You visited Moors for the Future; I think you were there at the launch of MoorLIFE. The lessons of Moors for the Future are focused on the integration, the work to restore the natural environment and the other priorities that you have around flood prevention and water management. How would you respond as chair if you thought that the Environment Agency was failing to follow an integrated approach to ecosystem management, flood management, water management and water quality? How would you respond to that if you thought the Environment Agency was falling into what are commonly known as silos?

Emma Howard Boyd: I would raise it in a number of different ways, but so far, from what I am seeing, hopefully it is something that I would not have to deal with. It is about how you lead by example in terms of the meetings I host and who I welcome in, with that sense of how we are going to do things in an integrated and collaborative way. That is something that I had already started doing in terms of some of the joining up and breaking down of the silos, making sure that I am doing that in a way that I think the organisation will benefit from as well. Some of it is around that sense of how you are leading an organisation yourself.

A huge amount of effort has also gone into our various management structures around sharing best practice. You can fall into a trap that, every time you have been in an incident, you are focusing on the lessons learned through that more negative lens. It is just as important to understand what has gone particularly well and how you share that. That is something that I know our staff are very keen to do more of.



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We also have people who move from one discipline to another. I know at the Moors for the Future project you met one of our members of staff who, until very recently, was involved on the flood side and is now working on the water quality side. That is another way that we can share different ways of thinking. In the way that we organise some of our internal boards, we are now making sure that we have representatives from both sides: the environment and business side, which is where we are looking at the water quality; as well as our flood and coastal risk management side. A lot of this is already taking place and we probably need to shout about it a bit more and give more visibility to the extraordinary work that is already being carried out by the organisation.

- Q23 **Chair:** I have one more question before we pass over to Paul. We were talking about working with the private sector. Do you feel that you have a close enough relationship with the water companies, both in flood and in drought? Do you feel there is a greater opportunity for more interconnection between the Environment Agency and the water companies or not?

Emma Howard Boyd: There is always more we can do, and certainly that is a discussion I would want to continue. Indeed, we will be talking more about that. The water companies through Water UK have today published a report focusing more on the drought side of their work. Again, the challenge is to make sure that we, as well as they, are thinking about resilience and interconnectedness across the piece. There is always more that can be done.

- Q24 **Chair:** Okay, because there is a role for water companies to hold water in the winter in order that they can release it in the summer, and that helps on both. Sometimes perhaps there is not always as close a relationship with the Environment Agency as there needs to be. Is that something you are considering?

Emma Howard Boyd: It is something that we are already working on. In the last settlement for the water companies, there was a greater emphasis on environmental issues. The challenge will be, as we approach the next one, to make sure that we are seeing how best to deliver on this agenda. Indeed, I think it is later this month that we are getting together with Water UK and the water companies to talk more generally about how we are planning for the future. It is about having that long-term strategic lens and making the most of where there is a five-year plan or a six-year plan to ensure we are having those conversations.

- Q25 **Dr Monaghan:** In answering some of the questions you have been asked already, you used the phrase "business as usual", but I think the job description for the post is looking for more than just business as usual; it is looking for better for less. Would you like to tell us what experience you have had in steering complex organisations through significant programmes of change?



Emma Howard Boyd: If I have, inadvertently, by using the phrase “business as usual”, made you feel that I was not thinking about the significant organisational change that the agency needs to go through, then I apologise for that. Part of it comes through the work we are already doing with Defra to integrate some of the ways we are working, particularly on corporate services. I have also referred to how we are working with organisations like Natural England and the Forestry Commission to produce those consistent boundaries.

I have been on the board now since 2009. We, as an organisation, have evolved and been through a number of transformations already. A couple of years ago, we moved from a three-tier organisation to a two-tier organisation.

One of the lessons I have learned around those significant transformation projects is about making sure that there is adequate time given to them; that they are delivered well; that there is very good clarity in the way that they are delivered; but also that there is good communication. Typically, when the Environment Agency is going through a significant change programme, like the ones we have delivered already and like the ones we have and will continue to do, it is about making sure that there is clarity on that direction and that a good amount of communication takes place.

My experience elsewhere is more as a member of the investment community, observing those sorts of changes as part of an investment team in businesses, but I have had a lot of experience seeing the Environment Agency deliver those sorts of change programmes.

Q26 **Dr Monaghan:** What would be the objective of the programme of change that you will initiate?

Emma Howard Boyd: Again, this is where we are working very closely with Defra in terms of the overall departmental budget being reduced, to make sure we are streamlining our work as much as possible. It is about making sure we are being just as great an organisation as I believe the Environment Agency is and doing that as efficiently as possible. That, for me, is very clear. This is about making sure that, ultimately, what we are delivering from an environmental perspective is the priority of the organisation.

Q27 **Dr Monaghan:** You have been very keen to talk about the European Union so far, so how do you think the outcome of the referendum vote on 23 June will affect the Environment Agency?

Emma Howard Boyd: I go back to the comments I made when we first, as a board, met with our new Secretary of State in terms of setting her ambition: this is not about rowing back on environmental standards. I think we have to wait.

We know that there is going to be a complex negotiation and that that obviously will be led by Government. But, as Defra is one of those



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Departments that is most affected in terms of environmental regulation and a lot of that affects the work of the Environment Agency, we will be very much a part of the discussions that take place at a departmental level.

The conversations I have had with our stakeholders—I have met with other regulators, members of the environmental NGO community, waste operators, trade associations, energy companies, where, again, we are seeing that crossover between the work of Defra and other Departments—have highlighted the need for stability in terms of regulation, to allow them to continue to invest in a way that they understand, so that it does not drive inertia into either the investment decisions that they will make as companies or, indeed, those their investors will make. While there is still an opportunity for reform of some parts of the—

Q28 Chair: Could I just interrupt you there? Do you see a lot of environmental legislation just being taken from European legislation and put into UK law, or do you actually see an opportunity on, say, the nitrates directive or on the IPPC, with the poultry and pig industry, to look again at it? Do you think, “They are all fine and we are just going to park them across”? In a way, that is what the Environment Agency has to deal with on a day-to-day basis.

Emma Howard Boyd: There is an opportunity for reform, but we have to make sure that, in addressing reform, we do not inadvertently send the wrong signals to business communities. It is with the understanding that this is about progress and making things better, as opposed to getting rid of that regulatory framework. That is certainly the way that we, as the Environment Agency, will be approaching our involvement in those discussions.

Q29 Dr Monaghan: The Environment Agency’s approach to all of that will be led by you, so what will your role be in negotiating the terms of the exit from the EU?

Emma Howard Boyd: I think my role will be how I feed into the Department as opposed to any specific negotiating position; that will be led by Government. We, as the Environment Agency, will play a very strong part and have already allocated members of our staff to focus specifically on this agenda, working very closely with the—

Q30 Dr Monaghan: Can I just take you back: what will your role be? What I think people are looking for in terms of a chairperson for the Environment Agency is a strong, powerful leader with good ideas and clear direction. The negotiation to leave the EU is clearly going to be a significant event. You are talking about leadership and what we would like to hear is what you are going to do autonomously within the Environment Agency, rather than being some kind of passive recipient of direction from Defra, to make sure that the Environment Agency gets what it needs to get in terms of protecting the environment through this whole process of



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negotiation.

Emma Howard Boyd: One of the things we have already done is to hold a series of discussions with our stakeholders, very much in listening mode, to make sure that we are understanding from their perspective both the risks and the opportunities. That is me as chair leading those discussions on behalf of the Environment Agency, working very closely with James Bevan. We are at the start of a process and, as chair of the Environment Agency, I will also be an ex-officio member of the Defra board and will be able to raise issues of concern, but also opportunity at those meetings. I suppose what I am saying is that I will be very much involved in those discussions, but it is still very early to articulate precisely what those might be.

Q31 **Dr Monaghan:** Thinking about the role that you are highlighting there, I think Defra itself will have to transform as a result of the negotiations to leave the EU, whenever they might take place. Again, what will your role be in working within that environment to help transform Defra from what it is at the moment to what it needs to be in the future?

Emma Howard Boyd: I think that is about the seat I have in an ex-officio capacity at the Defra board table, but also how I work collaboratively, not just with the ministerial team, but also with the non-executive directors that we have. It is very early, but there is a board meeting later this week on how we as non-execs of Defra will be able to help with some of those conversations.

I go back to one of the points I made earlier: it is also going to be key to be as collaborative as possible in those discussions and to make sure not just that we are joining up the conversations we are having as the Environment Agency within the Defra group, but that we are having those conversations with other Departments where we also have programmes of work.

Q32 **Dr Monaghan:** With respect, you have been quite keen to talk about Brexit. That answer does not seem to give a particularly strong vision of your role in the negotiations for Brexit in terms of representing the Environment Agency, everybody who works for the Environment Agency and all the stakeholders that the agency has. Is there anything that you would like to add to the vision of your role in terms of negotiating and transforming both Defra and the Environment Agency?

Emma Howard Boyd: It is about articulating the ambition that this is not about rowing back on environmental priorities. There is an opportunity, through the framework of the 25-year environment plan, to make sure that there is a comprehensive discussion and ambition for how the environment fits into the Government's priorities, but I still think it is too early. I know that we will want to play a very full part in how those policies are set, but, beyond that, I do not think I have anything further to add at this point.

Dr Monaghan: Okay—change of subject. Let's talk about technology.



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As we all know, technology has changed the way that all organisations do business—

Chair: Before you go on, Paul, Angela wants to raise a point.

Q33 **Angela Smith:** Just on the EU—thank you. To test this a bit further, withdrawal from the European Union will set all sorts of challenges for the Government when it comes to the environment in terms of—we have already explored this—how we embed standards in domestic legislation and whether we do that.

Sometimes, we will hopefully be improving on standards; I do not know. However, if it came to the crunch and the Government did, for some inexplicable reason, want to lower standards relating to an environmentally sensitive area, do you see the role of the Environment Agency as challenging the Government or defending the Government?

Emma Howard Boyd: The Environment Agency is an arm's length body. This is part of our regulatory role and that is one of the areas where it is going to be key to make sure that the regulation is set at the most appropriate and highest level. I hope that we will not get to that stage.

Angela Smith: So do I.

Emma Howard Boyd: That is certainly my ambition. Again, I go back to—

Q34 **Chair:** But you would be able to challenge the Government, would you, if you thought they were going in the wrong direction?

Angela Smith: If all the evidence from the Environment Agency's experts suggested that the Government were in danger of breaching all the advice available, yes, exactly, would you challenge?

Emma Howard Boyd: That is certainly the role of the chair of the Environment Agency. As to how it is done, I suppose, my early way of challenging it would be in private but, if necessary, if enough progress was not made—but I go back to the role of the Environment Agency in providing that evidence and in working with those other organisations that see the strength of environmental regulation in delivering their business. If you have held those conversations in the right sort of way, you should not find yourself in the position where you are challenging that.

That would be my ambition, but, obviously, we have quite a bit of work. This is going to take days, weeks, months and years to unravel and find a way forward.

Everything I have heard to date from both Andrea Leadsom but also Therese Coffey—I had the opportunity to travel with her to Cumbria a few weeks ago—is that this is an opportunity to do things better from an environmental perspective. Going back to the 25-year environment plan, that is about embedding the environment at the heart of government



decision-making. There is an increasing understanding, certainly from a large number of the stakeholders I have met—in this role but through other roles—that it is not a choice. The two go hand in hand because of the bigger challenges that the environment faces, not least from climate change and the raft of other issues that we have touched upon.

Angela Smith: It depends on the reasonableness of the Minister.

Q35 **Chair:** Indeed, that is right. It will vary. I hope you are able to negotiate behind the scenes, but there may be a time where you have to face the Government.

Emma Howard Boyd: Absolutely, but that is also where parliamentary scrutiny and working very closely with Committees such as yours is important and is something that we welcome.

Chair: Flattery will get you everywhere.

Q36 **Dr Monaghan:** Returning to technology, as I was saying earlier, technology as we know is changing the way that organisations operate and interact with the general public. How do you see technology being used within the Environment Agency as the organisation develops and grows?

Emma Howard Boyd: This is where we are already beginning to look at a whole range of different technologies. Whether it is IT or, indeed, the way that we are working through our joint venture with the Met Office around flood forecasting, there are huge opportunities to look at the technology.

We, as a board, also need to encourage our staff to take the right kind of risks in terms of using technology. That does not mean putting our staff or the community at risk, but it is about making sure that they feel emboldened to look at new technology where it can deliver better results. We see it not just on the flood side, but also on the monitoring side. The whole focus on opening data up to others will also allow others to innovate on the back of the evidence that our staff are putting together through their monitoring programmes.

There is a lot more that can be done with technology and sometimes the way to be able to deliver that is through investing, so that you can then deliver efficiencies and progress on the back of new technological developments.

Q37 **Dr Monaghan:** I agree with all of that. As an organisation, it is good to see staff being able to apply their creativity to the development of technologies, new systems of working and so on and so forth. That does, however, often create risks.

The organisation—particularly the people that are governing the organisation—needs to mitigate these risks by putting in place structures and systems to control innovation. Within the Environment Agency, as the chair, how would you go about managing innovation to make sure



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that technology is used appropriately and never exposes the public to significant risks?

Emma Howard Boyd: It is about setting the framework and governance structures correctly to allow that innovation to take place. It is not just about looking at things through the lens of “lessons learned”, but having that freedom within a framework to allow people to take risks. That is where, either through the area working—this is where teams are working in specific localities—or, indeed, through the issues that are being regulated, there is an opportunity to look at new technologies. I am confident, having spent time chairing the audit and risk assurance committee as well as still being a member of that committee, that there is a very rigorous governance programme in terms of looking at the risks at every level of the organisation.

This is one of the things that, culturally, we are working on: how you free up or allow people to feel emboldened to take a few more risks while understanding that framework. This is not about putting either the public or, indeed, themselves at personal risk through some of these technologies. I was at a meeting of our national operational teams yesterday and I think there is a sense from our staff that they feel very keen to take those risks, but within a framework that makes sense from a governance perspective.

Q38 **Dr Monaghan:** If it all goes wrong, who is accountable for that framework?

Emma Howard Boyd: Ultimately, it feeds up through the organisation, but the sorts of risks we are talking about are about not putting people and lives at extreme risk.

Q39 **Dr Monaghan:** If it goes wrong, you are saying that you will be accountable and responsible.

Emma Howard Boyd: This is about understanding the different types of risks that we are prepared to take and the different examples. Yes, if you are going to ask people to innovate, you need to have an understanding of the scale of risk that you are accepting. It is a really difficult balancing act to get that.

Q40 **Dr Monaghan:** Let’s be specific, though. I think we all understand that there are different kinds of risks, that they apply in different situations and that they need to be managed within the organisation, as do innovation and creativity. The question is really quite a simple one: ultimately, if that all goes wrong, are you going to be accountable and responsible for what the organisation has done?

Emma Howard Boyd: Ultimately, as chair, absolutely.

Q41 **Chair:** That leads me quite nicely on to my question—we dealt with this quite a lot at the beginning—about needing to be visible and seen as a leader, as the chair of the Environment Agency. What lessons have you



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learned from the previous chair, particularly about handling the media? In this day and age, media is very important and, in a time of crisis, there is a huge spotlight. What is your expertise and how do you believe in dealing with the media?

Emma Howard Boyd: Over the years, I have had quite a bit of experience with the media, but we are talking about a completely different type of media that took place over the Christmas period. I would like to recognise, again, the fantastic work that our staff carried out throughout that Christmas period—

Q42 **Chair:** That is not the question. The question is: how are you going to deal with the media if they become hostile? It may not be your fault; the staff might be working extremely well. The pumps did not work, the river flooded and the houses are flooded: how are you going to deal with that situation, because it does happen?

Emma Howard Boyd: It is about being visible and prepared to have those conversations with the media. It is something that will be shared with the chief executive, but, again, ultimately, as chair you need to be visible and taking part in those conversations with the press. Yes, that is something I have thought long and hard about.

Chair: Jim might want to come in, perhaps with a little previous ministerial experience.

Q43 **Jim Fitzpatrick:** Forgive me; I have not got my brief and therefore I did not want to interfere, because I was not sure where all the questions were going, but this begs the question that I am asking. Your predecessor said, following the criticism of his predecessor, that he would get his wellies on and he would be available 24/7, and of course that is where he came a cropper.

I am not asking you to say that you would be available 24/7 and get your wellies on, but you recognise the pitfalls of, first, making the commitment but, secondly, not making the commitment. How do you negotiate between the two positions?

Emma Howard Boyd: It is about making very clear to you that I understand that aspect and the importance of it to the role. It is about managing my diary and understanding that, if I am out of the country, my commitment will be to come back. I think I am entering this fully—

Jim Fitzpatrick: Open-eyed

Emma Howard Boyd: Absolutely: open-eyed. I am not going to promise I will stay in the country throughout the next period of time; I have left the country. However, it is also being absolutely mindful of what is going on in the background that may come into the foreground and making those choices. I am going in with my eyes wide open, and I work very closely with my team in terms of understanding whether it makes sense to go ahead.



- Q44 **Chair:** Perhaps I, as a politician, should not say this, but perhaps one of the problems the last chairman had—and it may not have been all his fault—was that there was a certain amount of spinning that went on as to where he was or was not. Perhaps you are a much more straightforward person, but you probably need to learn from that experience. It was not just the fact that he was not here, but he was not in quite the place that he alluded to being in. That is probably something that needs to be learned from.

It is nothing against you at all but, when dealing with the media, even if it is a country that is 1,000 miles away, there is very often some link between the media and they can find out exactly where you are, and that is what happened on this occasion. I know you do not want to criticise the last chairman; I accept that. However, it is something we need to be clear about in the future.

Emma Howard Boyd: Absolutely, and I think that is understood.

Chair: I look forward to you handling the situation in a good way in the future.

- Q45 **Angela Smith:** There is a focus in the job description, within the remit of the EA, on building consensus with a range of bodies and agencies; and integrating the agency's work into the Defra group. How do you think you will do that, as chair of the agency?

Emma Howard Boyd: It is about working closely with not just our executive team but also the executive team of Defra and being very clear about the priorities of transformation. I have had the experience over the last eight months or so of seeing some of that transformation and integration take place.

Having discussed it as a board and with our executive directors team, we can see where we can deliver. I suppose the backdrop is: if we can see this is going to be beneficial for the environment, while being absolutely mindful of the different roles that we play—the regulatory role being arm's length—then why would we not work more closely on some of our corporate services, for example? With the focus on how we are delivering for environmental outcomes, that is the way we have prioritised the transformation that we have already taken part in.

- Q46 **Angela Smith:** That is a very pragmatic response and what I think I would expect, in a way. Can I just go back to the point about the media and media relationships? One of the problems with an agency that is built on delivering monitoring, and is built on expertise and professional staff, is that it is very easy for the media, and indeed members of the public, to turn on agency staff and accuse them of failing them, of not doing their job properly, of not delivering, sometimes because of a lack of understanding of what is involved.

How would you respond to that, if asked by the media or faced with confrontational members of the public who accuse your staff of not doing their job properly? How would you respond to something like that? How



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would you defend your staff if you thought they were being unfairly attacked? I have seen quite a lot of this and from parliamentarians as well.

Emma Howard Boyd: There are different ways. Something that we have already begun working on, using social media, is making sure that we are telling our story. One thing I have learned across my career is that you do not wait until you are in an incident or in difficulties to build those relationships. Whether it is with the media or with local communities—and our staff put a huge amount of time and effort into working with communities—you are best to build those relationships in peacetime.

We must also understanding the value of different forms of media. Through the advent of social media, there are different ways of telling your story. To your question earlier about innovation, we have really been working on how we become more visible and how we make sure we are telling our story. Sometimes it is one member of the community who does not necessarily have the entire community behind them. However, community engagement is something that we think is so key to the way we work and make progress that we will continue to prioritise it.

Angela Smith: Despite a lack of resources.

Q47 **Dr Monaghan:** How would you describe the culture of the Environment Agency when you took over as acting chair?

Emma Howard Boyd: The culture of the Environment Agency has certainly evolved in the time that I have been on the board.

Dr Monaghan: We will come to that, but when you took over what was the culture?

Emma Howard Boyd: The overriding culture is around “yes, if” and working very closely to find solutions. That is a way of working that was introduced some years ago and it continues to evolve. It is a culture of wanting to find solutions and being pragmatic, and often it is when you end up being in the middle and the criticisms or challenges from both sides have roughly abated to a de minimis level. As I visit different parts of the country, something that comes across loud and clear is the desire from staff to work on solutions while being absolutely clear of the boundaries, particularly when it comes to the regulatory side of our work.

These are individuals who are very dedicated to the organisation and have strong ambitions around the environment. That comes across, whether we are meeting with our field services teams or those running significant infrastructure projects. It is about whether we can find a way forward, and I continue to be amazed by those staff who have put up with—Angela, you mentioned it earlier—in certain circumstances really quite abusive behaviour from some people at the edges of the industries that we regulate or, indeed, members of the public. I feel very humbled as I go about. We saw a little bit on our visit to the Somerset Levels how



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there are also quite diverse views within communities. Steering and navigating your way to a point of equilibrium involves a huge amount of time and effort. That, to me, is the culture of the organisation.

Q48 Dr Monaghan: Under your leadership, is there any aspect of the culture that you would seek to change?

Emma Howard Boyd: It is about enhancing that. It is about, perhaps, as an organisation, feeling more comfortable, notwithstanding what I have just said about being visible and visibly helping other organisations or communities to come up with solutions.

I would like to think diversity is also important for the organisation, not just from a gender-diversity perspective, which is something that I have spent quite a bit of time working on, but also in how we represent, as an organisation, the communities in which we are working. That whole inclusiveness is something that I am very focused on, I know members of my board are very focused on and I know Sir James Bevan and members of the executive directors team are very focused on. That is something that I will work on, I will lead and we will continue to work on as a team.

Q49 Chair: This afternoon, you have been talking quite a lot about the way you can collaborate and you have been very good. What I want to ask you really is this: what do you see as the role of the Environment Agency? Where do you see it in the pecking order?

You talk a lot about Defra. As far as you are concerned, if Defra decrees, do you do? What is your ability to say to Defra, "Well, on this occasion, I can see why you want to do this, but you may actually be doing it in slightly the wrong way"? Do you just take a command from Defra or are you able to influence Defra's and the Government's decisions? What is your role in that?

Emma Howard Boyd: It is about working closely with Defra in a way that shows the leadership and the importance of the organisation across the whole group. We are a very important delivery body, an important part of Defra, and it is by getting involved in those discussions at an early stage that we can help shape thinking.

Take, for example, the governance arrangements that have been put in place recently, such as having the chairs of Natural England and the Environment Agency sitting at the board table in an ex officio capacity, and our chief executive being part of Defra's executive committee. We have encouraged that that is replicated from an audit and risk perspective, through the chairs of the audit committees of the four main delivery bodies. There is a way of being part of those discussions from an early stage, and that is where you are best able to influence the outcomes.

Q50 Chair: What about working with the Forestry Commission and others? Do you find that useful and easy to do?



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Emma Howard Boyd: Absolutely. There are opportunities to meet and work on projects at many different levels around the country. It is about getting the right combination of parties, because it goes beyond the Defra group as well. That is something that we encourage, but each city, each catchment, will have a different combination of people and organisations that need to be included in those collaborations.

Q51 **Chair:** From your experience so far, having been acting chair for eight or nine months, do you feel that Defra is listening to the Environment Agency and vice versa? Do you think there is a good collaboration or what would you like to see differently?

Emma Howard Boyd: I think there is a good and ongoing collaboration with Defra group.

Q52 **Chair:** The advertisement for the post specified the need for commercial acumen. Your experience largely is in governance and sustainability. Can you tell us about a time when you had to negotiate a key commercial decision for a large public body? Have you had that sort of experience?

Emma Howard Boyd: Not directly, but it is about the expertise you surround yourself with, and I have a very competent and full board. Through the leadership roles that I have played on the Environment Agency board, I understand the implications of getting those contracts right.

Q53 **Chair:** Do you think you also need to involve yourself in making sure commercially that the money—it may be government money, but it is still taxpayers' government money—is spent well and we are getting a good deal? How do you see your role?

Emma Howard Boyd: Through our audit and risk assurance committee, which I was chairing up until January, the value for money lens was the perspective that I brought to those discussions, working very closely with the National Audit Office, which sits in on all of our meetings. That attention to value for money is something that has always been present in the meetings that I have had.

Q54 **Chair:** Would you be prepared to say that, if you thought that the Environment Agency could not actually deliver that project and value for money, someone else could? Would you be prepared to say that?

Emma Howard Boyd: We have, at a small-scale level, started working with more locally based organisations, like some of the IDBs, to deliver on those contracts. Going back to having a strategic vision nationally but working in the best way at the local level, there may be others who are better able to deliver those maintenance contracts or other ongoing contracts. Yes, I am very much up for that sort of evolution.

Chair: Thank you very much for that answer and for being so forthright with us this afternoon. We will deliberate, and thank you very much for coming before us.



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Emma Howard Boyd: Thank you very much.