MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE of the Conservation Board for the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty HELD ON Tuesday 19th May 2026 at Chinnor Village Hall, Chinnor OX39 4PQ commencing at 10.00 AM.

Present:

Cllr Philip Spicer	Board Member
Cllr Charles Hussey	Board Member
Cllr Gavin McLauchlan	Board Member
Cllr John Griffin	Board Member – Chair
Baljit Dhillon	Board Member
Nicola Thomas	Board Member
Matthew Stanton	Board Member

In attendance:

Elaine King	Chief Executive Officer
Andy Brock-Doyle	Head of Operations
Kathryn Foster	Senior Finance Manager; S151 Officer
Annette Weiss	Head of Engagements and Partnerships
Lorna Coldwell	Clerk to the Board and Minute taker

25/26.15 Standing Items
15.1 Apologies for absence
Board Members:
Cllr Hector Sants – Buckinghamshire Parish Councils
Cllr Sue Rowland – Oxfordshire Parish Councils
Cllr Louise Price – Three Rivers District Council

Officers:
Matt Thomson, Head of Strategy and Planning; Monitoring Officer
Kate Heppell, Head of Landscape

Introductions were made by all.

15.2 Declarations of interest
No declarations of interest were made.

15.3 Chair's Announcements
No announcements were made.

15.4 Notice of Urgent Business
All items covered on the agenda.

HW

15.5 Approval of Minutes of the previous meeting 26th February 2026
The minutes of the meeting 26/02/26 were approved as a true record and signed by the Chair.
It was noted that two new representatives from Buckinghamshire Council are needed, the Chief Executive Officer has written to them advising.

15.6 Matters Arising
All items covered on the agenda.

15.7 Consideration of Motions Submitted by Members
None at this meeting.

15.8 Public Questions
No members of the public were present.

25/26.16 Items for Decision
16.1 Quarter 4 Finance Report
The Senior Finance Manager, Kathryn Foster, reported on the accounts to 31st March 2026. These are draft figures, with further work to be carried out before the completion of the AGAR. Highlights include:

1. There is a Core deficit of £6k for the full year end 31st March 2026. This is a significant improvement on the original budget forecast deficit of £118k, achieved due to a combination of better than anticipated interest income, improved recovery of Core costs against projects, and better utilisation of CDEL funding against Core costs following extensive work to determine what CDEL can be used against. Savings were made against staff costs with the use of consultants rather than employing additional team members.
2. The organisation was allocated £348k of Capital Funds by Defra for financial year 2025/26. A small amount of £5,750 was returned unspent at the end of the year, and £105,750 of funds were returned in respect of the value of the capital lease which will be released annually, effectively meaning that rent costs are funded for the next 4.5 years.
3. Local Authority contributions, as discussed at the March Board meetings, have unfortunately decreased. Officers continue to engage with the LAs to demonstrate where the required contributions are spent in their areas.
4. Project income is £2.566m, costs are £3.122m and there is a deficit of £555k overall. Much of this deficit is driven by the Mend the Gap programme where all funds were received in advance and taken to reserves. The project is now progressing with high levels of expenditure.
5. As of 31st March 2026, cash balances held are £4.6m with £3.76m of these funds held in higher interest earning accounts, the remaining £764k held in instant access accounts.
6. Officers continue to evaluate other options and are in the process of opening a savings account with Unity Trust Bank and are mindful that future funding needs to be invested carefully to ensure the maximum interest is achieved for the benefit of the project.
7. Officers are completing the paperwork for a VAT 33 refund scheme for submission to HMRC and will be completed by Q2 of 2026/27.
8. A business rate exemption application for the office that was made to South Oxfordshire District Council was rejected. Cllr Mclauchlan offered to share contacts to discuss this further with SODC.

It was noted that the summary costs are different to the budget due to funding by CDEL, redeployment of funds and some transformational costs. Officers are mindful to spread monies between different banks and not have it all in one. More work needs to be carried out with regards to month to month forecasting.
With regards to Local Authority and Defra funding, the organisation is most vulnerable in terms of staffing costs. Contingencies are in place, and there is a degree of flexibility within this. Some

operations improvement work is ongoing, with the Data Protection Officer and HR and IT Policy/Improvements falling into this category.

1. **The Committee OFFERED FEEDBACK as detailed above and APPROVED the Q4 Finance report to 31st March 2026**

16.2 2026/27 Budget
The Senior Finance Manager, Kathryn Foster, provided a detailed paper to set out a proposed 2026/27 core budget. Since the original budget envelope was presented to the Board at the Match meeting, there has been a £176k one year RDEL uplift from Defra, which relieves pressures on what was originally forecast to be a deficit budget. The RDEL funding will be used in part for the Head of Programmes role, which will be recruited this year, rather than CDEL as originally planned.

The significant reduction in Local Authority contributions has meant that additional funding has needed to be identified to support the budget.

Transformation works (IT and HR) were approved last year to be funded from reserves. The CEO advised that the one-off RDEL uplift from Defra will be in part used to give additional staff the opportunity to attend the National Landscapes Association conference for training and networking purposes, with team development sessions another part of continuing to invest in the team.

The budget includes provisions for external support from a Data Protection Officer, a necessary role that cannot be performed by existing staff in-house, along with enhanced training provision for staff.

Cllr Spicer suggested that with elections in upcoming years across the various Local Authorities, that to contact all parties to educate who the Chilterns National Landscape are and the work that they carry out would be a good idea so that the organisation is known to all should there be a change in power in the future. Kathryn Foster, Senior Finance Manager, confirmed that the CEO is writing to all LAs to set out our expectations for their contributions over the next three years. it was suggested that the letters cc the S151 Officers.

The CEO, Elaine King, advised that Defra is planning to send to all LAs a letter explaining what they need to do and what is expected of them in relation to National Landscapes. This should help explain Conservation Boards, which were set up to provide services so the LAs do not have to deliver the statutory purposes of the designation themselves. The National Landscapes Association has agreed to advocate for Conservation Boards in this regard.

It was noted that aspects of the budget feel uncertain, which is an accurate reflection of the current situation. Funding is often provided or offered at short notice, which is helpful nevertheless, with income this year being greater than had been anticipated.

1. **The Committee OFFERED FEEDBACK as detailed above and APPROVED the updated 2026/27 Budget for recommendation to the Board in June**

16.3. Quarter 4 Delivery Report
The Head of Operations, Andy Brock-Doyle, had provided a paper which was taken as read to update the Executive Committee on the progress of the CCB team between January and March 2026 against the financial year 2025-26 Delivery Plan. In Q4:

- 47 (54 in Q3) delivery lines reported as completed or progressing on track
- 31 (28 in Q3) delivery lines reported as being slightly delayed / slightly limited in effectiveness
- 9 (16 in Q3) delivery lines reported as being significantly delayed / significantly limited in

UWD

effectiveness

- 0 (0 in Q3) delivery lines have not yet started
- 1 (2 in Q3) delivery lines have been placed on hold
- 16 (8 in Q3) delivery lines have been postponed
- 5 (1 in Q3) delivery lines have been cancelled

The Head of Operations commented that, in line with risk around capacity, there has been increased focus on identifying and making clearer decisions around delivery lines to postpone and reconsider in next year's planning (see number of items that have been postponed). Apart from this there is no significant change from Q3 in terms of work being on track or delayed, and the Head of Operations emphasised the significant amount of amazing work being delivered.

The knock-on impact of delays in some delivery lines was also highlighted with the delay in the delivery / publication of the Management Plan, which has absorbed a lot of time for various teams. At the start of the year, it was underestimated how much time even the "light touch review" would take and this has therefore had an impact, for example on the Communications Team, in delivering other elements of their work.

HR compliance continues to progress, but at a slower rate than originally planned. To this, there has been a focus on addressing high-risk areas along with key points of the employee cycle such as recruitment, onboarding and offboarding. Additional time is being taken to test these processes to make sure that templates and guidance are improved to ensure successful embedding when implemented.

Cllr McLauchlan asked whether certain areas of work could be replicated from other agencies or shared with others on a consultancy basis for a fee. The Head of Operations advised that this had been explored previously but that this generally ended up being more time consuming and that the way that the CNL Team functioned was different from larger organisations. However, the CCB does exchange information with the Cotswolds National Landscape team.

It was identified that an Administration Officer is being recruited to enable fuller coverage across all operational areas, and that the new Head of Programmes role will also free up capacity for the Head of Landscape and Head of Operations.

An external Data Protection Officer has been appointed and is currently carrying out a gap analysis to identify areas where the Chilterns National Landscape is not compliant or work needs developing.

It was confirmed that by the end of March 2027 the majority of the HR process work should be completed, with only a few items remaining.

Cllr Hussey proposed the use of AI as staff capacity is and remains a problem. It was discussed that a policy and guidance regarding the use of AI within the organisation would be needed, as well as identifying the benefits it would provide. Cllr Hussey will forward guidance for the use of AI within central government. It was noted a "human touch" is always needed, and strong security measures to guarantee safety, along with assessing any ethical issues staff may have concerning its use.

It was identified that cyber training and the need for all staff to be aware of the issues would be addressed in the training programme for the organisation with such training becoming mandatory for all staff going forward.

1. **The Committee OFFERED FEEDBACK as detailed above and APPROVED the Q4 Delivery report**

25/26.17 Items for Noting

17.1 Annual Planning

Elaine King, CEO, circulated a paper to show the progress in developing a four-year strategic plan. She flagged to the Executive Committee that collaboration takes time, and the Senior Leadership Team want to make sure that all staff are involved in the planning process including being clear how their objectives are linked to the Management Plan. Once this process has been completed, subsequent years should be quicker and result in a robust and well understood plan where staff can see how they contribute to the organisation's priorities.

Matthew Stanton asked how it was decided which areas would stop, as this may affect staff morale. The Head of Operations advised that a prioritisation exercise was being undertaken, and a "top down" strategic look would take place alongside a "bottom up" resource led review.

1. **The Committee OFFERED FEEDBACK as detailed above and NOTED the update**

17.2 Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Update

Annette Weiss, Head of Engagement and Partnerships along with Board Member Baljit Dhillon, EDI Advisory Group Co-Chair, presented the key priorities for EDI in the organisations Business Plan to 2030.

Baljit Dhillon reported encouraging discussions by the EDI Advisory Group on supporting the Board following the appointment of new members. She proposed, time permitting, a breakout session at the June Board meeting to reflect in small groups on how Board Members work together, contribute in meetings and feel able to ask questions. This would sit alongside existing EDI training and opportunities for Board Members to be involved.

It was noted that this exercise will work better in person, so all Board Members are encouraged to attend the June meeting in person, which is also the AGM so an important meeting regardless. Breakout rooms can be organised for anyone who is only able to attend online.

Cllr McLauchlan detailed his experiences in a previous role to identify and implement ideas from staff for them to input into thought processes and will share with the CEO further.

1. **The Committee OFFERED FEEDBACK as detailed above and NOTED the update and AGREED the inclusion of a more substantive EDI discussion at the June Board meeting**

17.3 Funding Report

Elaine King, CEO, had circulated a paper to update on progress regarding the delivery of the Funding Strategy, which was taken as read. funding from Defra to create Wildlife Rich Habitats has been secured and will be announced publicly next week.

The CEO is investigating diversifying income and exploring corporate funding in collaboration with the National Landscapes Association. Further research is needed to identify suitable opportunities.

This financial year is the first of a three year flat cash settlement from Defra with year one figures confirmed and indicative for subsequent years. Local Authority contributions, as previously discussed, have decreased this year and staff will continue to engage with LAs to ensure they are aware of the requirement to contribute financially to reflect the Chilterns National Landscape's role in delivering their statutory duties.

1. **The Committee OFFERED FEEDBACK as detailed above and NOTED the update**

17.4 Chief Executive Officer's Report
Elaine King, CEO, provided a paper updating on key work carried out since the last Executive Committee meeting in February. Highlights included:

- The Senior Leadership Team continue to oversee the organisation's operations and strategic priorities, coordinating delivery across all areas of work with a significant focus on budget setting and business planning.
- Engagement with local MPs and Local Authorities, liaising on a wide range of subjects such as chalk streams protection, water quality, planning, nature recovery, and airport expansion.
- There have been a number of staff changes, with various staff members leaving and new recruits. The job specification for the new role of Head of Programmes will be shared to all Executive Committee members for comment prior to going out to recruitment
- We are supporting Defra in circulating recruitment information for two new Secretary of State roles has been circulated, with existing Board Members offering to discuss the role with prospective candidates.

1. **The Committee NOTED the update**

25/26.18 Any Urgent Business
None at this time.

25/26.19 Next Executive Committee meeting
Thursday 1st September at 10am, at The Village Centre, Chinnor.

Further meeting Dates:

Planning Committee	Executive Committee	Board
		Thursday 26th June 2026 (including AGM) 10am Gateway Offices, Buckinghamshire Council, Aylesbury
No meeting	Tuesday 1st September 2026 10am, The Village Centre Chinnor	Thursday 1st October 206 10am Gateway Offices, Buckinghamshire Council, Aylesbury
Thursday 29th October 10am CCB Offices, Chinnor	Thursday 19th November 2026 10am, The Village Centre Chinnor	Thursday 10th December 2026 10am Gateway Offices, Buckinghamshire Council, Aylesbury

The meeting was closed at 13.00.

The Chair...   Date 1/04/26