



House of Commons  
Environment, Food and Rural  
Affairs Committee

---

# Appointment of the Chair of Natural England

---

**First Report of Session 2009–10**

*Report, together with formal minutes, oral  
evidence*

*Ordered by the House of Commons  
to be printed 25 November 2009*

## Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and its associated bodies.

### Current membership

Mr Michael Jack (Conservative, Fylde) (Chairman)  
Mr Geoffrey Cox (Conservative, Torridge & West Devon)  
Mr David Drew (Labour, Stroud)  
Mr James Gray (Conservative, North Wiltshire)  
Patrick Hall (Labour, Bedford)  
Lynne Jones (Labour, Birmingham, Selly Oak)  
David Lepper (Labour, Brighton Pavilion)  
Miss Anne McIntosh (Conservative, Vale of York)  
Dan Rogerson (Liberal Democrat, North Cornwall)  
Sir Peter Soulsby (Labour, Leicester South)  
Dr Gavin Strang (Labour, Edinburgh East)  
David Taylor (Labour, North West Leicestershire)  
Paddy Tipping (Labour, Sherwood)  
Mr Roger Williams (Liberal Democrat, Brecon & Radnorshire)

### Powers

The Committee is one of the departmental select committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No. 152. These are available on the Internet via [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk).

### Publications

The reports and evidence of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee (including press notices) are on the Internet at:

[www.parliament.uk/efracom](http://www.parliament.uk/efracom)

### Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Richard Cooke (Clerk), Joanna Dodd (Second Clerk), Sarah Coe (Committee Specialist—Environment), Clare Genis (Senior Committee Assistant), Jim Lawford and Mandy Sullivan (Committee Assistants) and Hannah Pearce (Media Officer).

### Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, House of Commons, 7 Millbank, London SW1P 3JA. The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 5774; the Committee's e-mail address is: [efracom@parliament.uk](mailto:efracom@parliament.uk). Media inquiries should be addressed to Hannah Pearce on 020 7219 8430.

# Contents

---

<b>Report</b>	<i>Page</i>
<b>Summary</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
Pre-appointment hearings	4
<b>2 Background to the post</b>	<b>5</b>
Natural England	5
The role of the Chair	5
<b>3 The recruitment process</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>4 The candidate</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>5 Our questioning</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>6 Conclusion</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Appendix 1</b>	<b>11</b>
Letter to the Chairman from the Rt Hon Hilary Benn MP, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	
<b>Appendix 2</b>	<b>12</b>
Extracts from the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006	
<b>Appendix 3</b>	<b>15</b>
Extracts from information pack provided for applicants to the position of Chair of Natural England	
Role Description	15
Role Specification	16
Terms and Conditions	17
<b>Appendix 4</b>	<b>19</b>
Curriculum Vitae: Poul Adrian Christensen CBE	
<b>Formal Minutes</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Witnesses</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament</b>	<b>22</b>



## Summary

---

On 25 November 2009 we held a pre-appointment hearing with the Government's preferred candidate for the Chair of Natural England, Poul Christensen.

On the basis of the evidence provided by Mr Christensen at this hearing, we have concluded that he is a suitable person for the post.

# 1 Introduction

---

## Pre-appointment hearings

1. Government proposals for pre-appointment hearings were set out in the 2007 Green Paper *The Governance of Britain*. The Government sought to “involve Parliament in the appointment of key public officials” to “positions in which Parliament has a particularly strong interest because the officeholder exercises statutory or other powers in relation to protecting the public’s rights and interests”.<sup>1</sup> The paper continued:

The hearing would be non-binding, but in light of the report from the committee Ministers would decide whether to proceed. The hearings would cover issues such as the candidate’s suitability for the role, his or her key priorities, and the process used in the selection.<sup>2</sup>

2. The Liaison Committee subsequently produced a set of guidelines to ensure pre-appointment hearings are conducted appropriately, and in order to “maintain an appointments process which is proportionate and continues to attract high-quality candidates”.<sup>3</sup> The Liaison Committee also consulted with select committee chairmen on which posts should be subject to such hearings.<sup>4</sup> The post of Chair of Natural England is one of the positions to which this procedure applies.

3. The Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Rt Hon Hilary Benn MP, wrote to the Chairman on 8 August 2009 indicating that Poul Christensen had been identified as the preferred candidate for the post of Chair of Natural England.<sup>5</sup> We were pleased to have the opportunity to question Mr Christensen prior to his appointment.

---

1 Ministry of Justice, *The Governance of Britain* (Cm 7170), July 2007, p 28

2 As above, p 29

3 House of Commons Liaison Committee, First Report of Session 2007-08, *Pre-appointment hearings by select committees*, HC 384

4 As above

5 See Appendix 1

## 2 Background to the post

---

### Natural England

4. Natural England was established on 1 October 2006 under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006. It is a Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB) under the sponsorship of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). It was formed by bringing together English Nature and parts of the Rural Development Service and the Countryside Agency.

5. Natural England is charged with the responsibility to ensure that England's unique natural environment including its flora and fauna, land and seascapes, geology and soils are protected and improved. Its purpose as outlined in the NERC Act is to ensure that the natural environment is conserved, enhanced, and managed for the benefit of present and future generations, thereby contributing to sustainable development. The Act states that this purpose includes:

- promoting nature conservation and protecting biodiversity;
- conserving and enhancing the landscape;
- securing the provision and improvement of facilities for the study, understanding and enjoyment of the natural environment, and
- promoting access to the countryside, open spaces and encouraging open air recreation, and contributing in other ways to social and economic well being through management of the natural environment.

### The role of the Chair

6. The Board of Natural England comprises a Chair and no more than 15 members. The Chief Executive is currently an ex-officio member of the Board. The vacancy for a Chair was created by the untimely death of Natural England's first Chair, Sir Martin Doughty, in March 2009. Poul Christensen has been acting as Chair during the vacancy period, having been a Deputy Chair since April 2006. Appendix 2 provides an extract of the NERC Act 2006 setting out the legal basis for the appointment of Chair.

7. The job specification states that the appointments for this post will initially be for three years on a part-time basis, with the Chair expected to work three days a week on Natural England business for a salary of £71,665 per annum. Appointments are normally restricted to a maximum of two terms. Re-appointments may be made subject to satisfactory performance assessment and will be at the discretion of Ministers.

8. The Board of Natural England has collective responsibility for determining the organisation's strategic direction and policies; ensuring that the body discharges its statutory duties within the framework specified by Ministers; ensuring that the body is properly and effectively managed, to safeguard propriety, economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its operation; and providing stewardship for the public funds entrusted to the organisation.

9. In addition to Chairing the Board of Natural England, the Chair will:

- oversee the efficient delivery of Natural England's strategic outcomes ensuring the effective management of the executive and providing challenge to the Senior Management Team;
- provide visible leadership and direction for the vision and values of Natural England;
- represent Natural England to Ministers, stakeholders and those who can help deliver Natural England's objectives, and
- cultivate excellent working relationships with Defra, other Government Departments, NDPBs, agencies within the Defra family and with other stakeholders and partners.

10. A full description of the role of the Chair, together with a role specification and terms and conditions extracted from the information pack for candidates, is attached at Appendix 3.

### 3 The recruitment process

---

11. The Chair of Natural England is appointed by the Secretary of State in accordance with the provisions of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006. The appointment is regulated by the Commissioner for Public Appointments and the process was conducted in line with the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments (OCPA) requirements and the Commissioner's Code of Practice.

12. Defra has provided the following information about the process followed for the recruitment of the Chair of Natural England:

- The post was advertised in the Sunday Times on 27 April 2009 and posted on the recruitment consultants (Veredus), Defra and Public Appointments Unit's websites from Monday 28 April. The deadline for receipt of completed applications was 10 am on Monday 18 May. Defra also asked Veredus to undertake an executive search.
- 22 applications were received, nine were long listed and subsequently interviewed by Veredus on 8 or 12 June. The OCPA accredited assessor sat in on some of these interviews. Four of these were shortlisted for full panel interview which took place on 26 June. Decisions on the long and short list sift were made by the interview selection panel which comprised:
  - Peter Unwin (Director General, Environment and Rural Group, Defra);
  - Dame Fiona Reynolds (Director General, National Trust);
  - Andrew Wells (Director of Planning, Department for Communities and Local Government), and
  - Judith Alderton (the OCPA accredited Independent Public Appointments Assessor).

13. The OCPA process recommends that normally names of two suitable candidates are put forward to Ministers. Following the interviews only one candidate was considered to be appointable. Ministers were advised of the relevant OCPA code which covers this eventuality. The submission to Ministers was dated 3 July 2009. Ministers did not interview the candidate, however, the Secretary of State met Poul Christensen on 8 July 2009, with the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Huw Irranca-Davies MP, and the OCPA accredited assessor present, prior to making a final decision.

14. A letter offering the post subject to endorsement by the Select Committee was sent on 8 August 2009, once approval had been received from the Prime Minister to make the offer (in accordance with Cabinet Office guidelines).<sup>6</sup>

---

6 Cabinet Office, *Making and Managing Public Appointments: A Guide for Departments*, February 2006, p 85

## 4 The candidate

---

15. Poul Christensen has a farming background, as a partner in a family farming partnership in Oxford since the 1960s and with a National Diploma in agriculture. He has held a variety of advisory posts on agricultural issues from the 1970s onwards and chaired a number of groups including Defra's Rural Development Service from 2005–06, the UK Federation of Milk Groups from 1998–2000 and was president of the UK Federation of Agricultural Co-operatives from 1998–2003. He has served the South East of England Development Agency in a number of capacities from 2002–08.

16. Mr Christensen has been Acting Chair of Natural England since early 2009, following the untimely death of the first Chair, having held the position of Deputy Chair since 2006. He has been a member of the Defra Management Board since May 2007.

17. He was awarded a CBE in 1994 for services to agriculture and the commercial development of ADAS. Poul Christensen's full curriculum vitae is attached at Appendix 4.

## 5 Our questioning

---

18. Mr Christensen's track record with Natural England establishes that he has been able to lead a large organisation effectively. He also has experience in other public sector posts of relevance to the work of Natural England and is experienced in the ways of working of such organisations. However taking responsibility for the leadership of Natural England, to deliver its mission, utilising public funding of over £274 million and working with an extensive range of stakeholders, requires outstanding skills and personal qualities. Our questioning was therefore designed to test in a robust manner the extent to which he possesses these qualities. We questioned Mr Christensen about his independence, professional competence and the recruitment process. We also discussed key policy issues surrounding Natural England's mission. Areas of questioning included:

- his suitability for the role, including his previous experience with Natural England;
- his personal independence, including potential conflicts of interest arising from his business interests in agriculture, and
- the current and future priorities for Natural England.

19. A transcript of the hearing is printed with this report.

## 6 Conclusion

---

20. We are satisfied that Poul Christensen has the professional competence, rigour and integrity required for the post of Chair of Natural England and that he will be well-placed to lead the organisation. We therefore welcome his nomination and encourage the Secretary of State to make the appointment. We wish Mr Christensen every success in his new post.

# Appendix 1

---

## **Letter to the Chairman from the Rt Hon Hilary Benn MP, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs**

### **Chair of Natural England**

I am writing to advise you that, following a recruitment process conducted in accordance with the Commissioner for Public Appointments Code of Practice for Ministerial Appointments to Public Bodies, Mr Poul Christensen CBE is the Government's preferred candidate as Chair of Natural England. Mr Christensen has been Natural England's Acting Chair since the untimely death of Sir Martin Doughty in March.

In line with the pilot announced in January 2008 for scrutiny of key positions in which Parliament has an interest, I now invite your Committee to hold a public scrutiny hearing on Mr Christensen's suitability for this appointment at the earliest opportunity (and I understand that a provisional date of 21 October has already been set for this). I look forward to receiving the Committee's report in due course.

I am copying this letter to Alan Williams in his role as Chairman of the Liaison Committee.

August 2009

## Appendix 2

---

### Extracts from the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006

#### Chapter 1

#### Natural England

##### *Constitution and general purpose*

#### **1 Constitution**

- (1) There is to be a body known as Natural England.
- (2) Natural England is to have the functions conferred on it by or under this Act or any other enactment.
- (3) Except where otherwise expressly provided, Natural England's functions are exercisable in relation to England only.
- (4) English Nature and the Countryside Agency are dissolved and their functions are (subject to the provisions of this Act) transferred to Natural England.
- (5) Schedule 1 contains provisions about the constitution of Natural England and related matters.

#### **SCHEDULE 1, Section 1**

#### Natural England

##### *Status*

- 1 Natural England is to be a body corporate.
- 2 Subject to paragraph 22 (nature reserves), Natural England is not to be regarded—
  - (a) as a servant or agent of the Crown, or
  - (b) as enjoying any status, privilege or immunity of the Crown, and Natural England's property is not to be regarded as property of, or held on behalf of, the Crown.

##### *Membership*

- 3 (1) Natural England is to consist of—
  - (a) a chairman appointed by the Secretary of State, and
  - (b) not less than 8 nor more than 15 other members appointed by the Secretary of State.

- (2) The Secretary of State must consult the chairman before appointing the other members.
- (3) In appointing a person to be a member, the Secretary of State must have regard to the desirability of appointing a person who has experience of, and has shown some capacity in, some matter relevant to the exercise of Natural England's functions.
- (4) The Secretary of State may by order amend sub-paragraph (1)(b) so as to substitute a different number for a number specified there.
- (5) The power to make an order under sub-paragraph (4) is exercisable by statutory instrument.
- (6) A statutory instrument containing such an order is subject to annulment in pursuance of a resolution of either House of Parliament.

4 The Secretary of State may appoint one of the members to be deputy chairman.

*Term of office*

5 Subject to paragraphs 6 to 8, a member holds and vacates office in accordance with the terms of his appointment.

6 A member may resign by giving written notice to the Secretary of State.

7 The Secretary of State may remove a member who—

- (a) has been absent from meetings of Natural England for a period longer than 6 months without the permission of Natural England,
- (b) has become bankrupt or has made an arrangement with his creditors or has had his estate sequestrated in Scotland, or
- (c) in the opinion of the Secretary of State is otherwise unable or unfit to carry out his duties.

8 A person ceases to be chairman or deputy chairman if he—

- (a) resigns that office by giving written notice to the Secretary of State, or
- (b) ceases to be a member.

9 A person who—

- (a) ceases to be a member, or
- (b) ceases to be chairman or deputy chairman,

is eligible for reappointment to that office.

*Remuneration and pensions etc.*

- 10 Natural England may pay to the members such remuneration and allowances as the Secretary of State may determine.
- 11 If required to do so by the Secretary of State, Natural England must—
  - (a) pay such pensions, gratuities or allowances to or in respect of any member as the Secretary of State may determine;
  - (b) pay such sums as the Secretary of State may determine towards provision for the payment of pensions, gratuities or allowances to or in respect of any member.
- 12 (1) This paragraph applies if—
  - (a) a person ceases to be a member, and
  - (b) it appears to the Secretary of State that there are special circumstances which make it appropriate for the person to receive compensation.
- (2) The Secretary of State may require Natural England to pay the person such amount as the Secretary of State may determine.

## Appendix 3

---

### **Extracts from information pack provided for applicants to the position of Chair of Natural England**

#### ***Role Description***

**Post title: Chair**

**Location: Natural England has a small HQ at Sheffield, with offices located throughout the English regions, including a small office in London on Victoria Street.**

**Salary: £71,665 per annum**

**Reports to: Secretary of State**

The Board of Natural England has collective responsibility for:

- determining the organisation's strategic direction and policies;
- ensuring that the body discharges its statutory duties within the framework specified by Ministers;
- ensuring that the body is properly and effectively managed, to safeguard propriety, economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its operation, and
- providing stewardship for the public funds entrusted to the organisation.

In addition to Chairing the Board of Natural England, the Chair will:

- oversee the efficient delivery of Natural England's strategic outcomes ensuring the effective management of the executive and providing challenge to the Senior Management Team;
- provide visible leadership and direction for the vision and values of Natural England;
- represent Natural England to Ministers, stakeholders and those who can help deliver Natural England's objectives;
- cultivate excellent working relationships with Defra, other Government Departments, NDPBs, agencies within the Defra family and with other stakeholders and partners.

## **Key Responsibilities**

The post holder will be expected to:

- command the respect of the Natural England Board and staff, and of those organisations and people from national, international, regional and local level with whom it deals;
- provide strategic and inspirational leadership;
- understand the work which Natural England undertakes and the institutional environment in which it operates;
- foster constructive partnership working, both within Natural England and the broader stakeholder community;
- foster an appropriate, supportive and vibrant management style and corporate culture within the organisation;
- provide an impartial and independent input to the Board's discussions; and
- ensure Natural England delivers outcomes agreed with Defra and its objectives are consistent with those of Defra whilst maintaining the traditional independence of an NDPB.

## **Role Specification**

As a candidate you will be required to provide in your application form concrete examples of your proven experience and activities in the criteria listed at 1 to 6 below. This will help the panel assess your suitability for this position.

If you are successful in proceeding to the next stage of the process you will be invited to participate in a preliminary interview with the Veredus where the evidence you have provided in your application form will be explored further.

## **Essential Criteria**

Candidates must demonstrate the following competencies through the application form and at interview (if selected to attend)

1. strong interpersonal skills, including the ability to communicate, negotiate, influence and build relationships at all levels;
2. the ability to provide impartial, objective and pragmatic advice;
3. an ability to conceptualise and to think creatively at a strategic level;
4. an understanding of and commitment to the conservation, enhancement and management of the natural environment and the principles of sustainable development

5. proven leadership qualities at a strategic level in either an executive or non-executive capacity preferably within a large organisation, and
6. a good understanding of organisational, management, business planning, financial accountability and propriety issues.

### **Desirable**

It would also be desirable for candidates to be able to demonstrate:

- a. an understanding of the public sector framework within which Natural England operates;
- b. experience as a non executive chair of a large organisation, and
- c. experience across the range of Natural England's responsibilities.

## ***Terms and Conditions***

### **Period of appointment**

Appointments are normally for up to three years and restricted to a maximum of two terms. The length of these terms will be determined by any statutory constraints or be a matter for a decision by Ministers. In total, though, an appointee cannot serve more than a total of ten years.

Re-appointments may be made subject to satisfactory performance assessment and will be at the discretion of Ministers.

Appointment for this vacancy will be initially for three years.

### **Board working methods and procedures**

The Chair is expected to spend 3 days a week on Natural England business. This time commitment includes time preparing for meetings and travelling time.

The Board normally meets 6 times a year, in February, April, June, September, November and December with some meetings at Natural England's Headquarters in Sheffield and others at other locations throughout England.

Board members are treated as working from home.

### **Conduct**

The Chair is expected to observe the highest standards of impartiality, integrity and objectivity in relation to stewardship of public funds and management of Natural England. Appointees should not use information gained in the course of this

appointment for personal gain or to promote other interests. The appointee will be directly responsible to Defra Ministers. Any appointment can be terminated early by the Secretary of State if the appointee fails to perform his or her duties to a satisfactory standard.

### **Availability**

It is anticipated that the successful candidates will take up post in December 2009.

### **Qualifications**

Candidates may come from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences and a variety of age groups. No specific academic or professional qualifications are specified. Candidates are expected to be highly accomplished within their chosen field or discipline.

### **Remuneration**

The current remuneration for Natural England Chair is set at £71,665 per annum, on the basis of a time input of 3 days per week. Reasonable travel expenses are also paid.

This appointment is pensionable.

### **Location of Offices**

Natural England has a small HQ at Sheffield, with offices located throughout the English regions, including a small office in London on Victoria Street.

## Appendix 4

---

### Curriculum Vitae: Poul Adrian Christensen CBE

#### Current Activities:

Natural England (NDPB)	Acting Chair	25/1/2009–
Natural England (NDPB)	Deputy Chair	1/4/2006 (suspended)
Defra	Member of Management Board	1/5/2007–
Agricultural Central Trading (Agricultural supply co. turnover £60m annum)	Board Member	1/12/2002–
Kingston Hill Farm (Rented dairy farm)	Partner	1968–
Quadrant (S. Oxon development area)	Chair	1/5/2007–
Hindhead Together (A3 tunnel/community project)	Chair	1/6/2007–

#### Positions held:

Chair of Rural Development Service (Defra)	(2005–2006)
South East of England Development Agency Board Member, Deputy Chair and Chair remuneration committee	(2002–2008)
South East of England Development Agency Chair – Rural Committee	(2002– 2008)
President of UK Federation of Agricultural Co-Operatives	(1998–2003)
Chairman of UK Federation of Milk Groups	(1998–2000)
Chairman of Milk Marque and Axis Milk co-operatives	(1995–2000)
Member of BBC Rural Affairs Advisory Committee	(1992–95)
NED of Agricultural Development Advisory Service (ADAS)	(1986–94)
Member of Minister of Agriculture’s CAP reform group	(1994–95)
Member of School of Agriculture Advisory Committee, Royal Agricultural College	(1994–97)
Member of Board of Governors – Witney College	(1993–96)

Chairman of Minister of Agriculture's Regional Panel (South East Region)	(1983–86)
Demonstration Farms Project	(1979–91)
Joint Founder of Tenant Farmers Association	(1981)
Chairman of local National Farmers' Union (NFU)	(1970)
Chairman of Oxfordshire NFU Milk Committee	(1975)
Vice Chairman of Oxford Farming Conference	
Chairman of Governors of John Blandy Primary School	(1976–80)

**Farming activities:**

Senior partner in a family farming partnership. Kingston Hill Farm, rented from St John's College, Oxford. 1050 Acres carrying 600 dairy cows & 400 dairy replacements.

Kingston Hill Farm co-operated with the Countryside Commission in a project studying and demonstrating wildlife conservation techniques on an intensively managed farm. (Demonstration Farms Project 1979–91)

**Other business related interests:**

Involved with the BBC in pioneering interactive video technology for the study of conservation costs and benefits, for use by students and schools. Co-operated with the Open University in making a series of videos for environmental courses. (1975–80)

**Qualifications:** National Diploma in Agriculture (1964)

**Other Interests:** Family—wife, Margaret, and four grown up children with their wives and partners and 8 grandchildren.

Sailing and golf.

**Awards:** Appointed CBE in 1994 for services to Agriculture and the commercial development of ADAS.

# Formal Minutes

---

**Wednesday 25 November 2009**

Members present:

Mr Michael Jack, in the Chair

Mr Geoffrey Cox	Miss Anne McIntosh
Mr David Drew	Mr Dan Rogerson
Mr James Gray	David Taylor
Patrick Hall	Paddy Tipping
David Lepper	Mr Roger Williams

\*\*\*

Draft Report (Appointment of the Chair of Natural England), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

*Ordered*, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 20 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

*Resolved*, That the Report be the First Report of the Committee to the House.

*Ordered*, That the Chairman do make the Report to the House.

*Ordered*, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No.134.

[Adjourned till Wednesday 2 December at 2.00 pm

# Witnesses

---

**Wednesday 25 November 2009**

Page

**Mr Poul Christensen CBE, Acting Chair, Natural England**

Ev1

## List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

---

The reference number of the Government's response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

### Session 2008–09

Sixth Report	The Draft Flood and Water Management Bill	HC 555-I (CM 7741)
Fifth Report	Ofwat Price Review 2009	HC 544-I (HC 1023)
Fourth Report	Securing food supplies up to 2050: the challenges faced by the UK	HC 213-I (HC 1022)
Third Report	Energy efficiency and fuel poverty	HC 37 (CM 7719)
Second Report	Work of the Committee in Session 2007–08	HC 95
First Report	The English pig industry	HC 96 (HC 391)

### Session 2007–08

Fifth Special Report	Energy efficiency and fuel poverty: written evidence	HC 1099
Eleventh Report	The potential of England's rural economy	HC 544-I (HC 155, 08–09)
Tenth Report	Badgers and cattle TB: the final report of the Independent Scientific Group on Cattle TB: Government response to the Committee's Fourth Report of Session 2007–08	HC 1010 (HC 1178)
Ninth Report	Draft Marine Bill: Coastal Access Provisions	HC 656-I (CM 7422)
Eighth Report	British Waterways: follow-up	HC 438 (HC 1081)
Seventh Report	Implementation of the Nitrates Directive in England	HC 412 (HC 1080)
Sixth Report	The Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966	HC 348 (HC 1011)
Fifth Report	Flooding	HC 49-I (HC 901)
Fourth Report	Badgers and cattle TB: the final report of the Independent Scientific Group on Cattle TB	HC 130-I (HC 1010)
Third Report	The work of the Committee in 2007	HC 250
Second Report	Climate change: the "citizen's agenda": Government response to the Committee's Eighth Report, Session 2006–07	HC 189
First Report	The UK Government's "Vision for the Common Agricultural Policy: Government response to the Committee's Fourth Report, Session 2006–07	HC 48

**Session 2006–07**

Eighth Report	Climate change: the “citizen’s agenda”	HC 88-I (HC 189 07–08)
Seventh Report	British Waterways	HC 345-I (HC 1059)
Sixth Report	The Implementation of the Environmental Liability Directive	HC 694 (HC 1058)
Fifth Report	Draft Climate Change Bill	HC 534-I (CM 7225)
Fourth Report	The UK Government’s “Vision for the Common Agricultural Policy”	HC 546-I (HC 48 07–08)
Third Report	The Rural Payments Agency and the implementation of the Single Payment Scheme	HC 107-I (HC 956)
Second Report	Defra’s Annual Report 2006 and Defra’s budget	HC 132 (HC 522)
First Report	The work of the Committee in 2005–06	HC 213

**Session 2005–06**

Eighth Report	Climate change: the role of bioenergy	HC 965-I (HC 131 06–07)
Seventh Report	The Environment Agency	HC 780-I (HC 1519)
Sixth Report	Bovine TB: badger culling	HC 905-I
Fifth Report	Rural Payments Agency: interim report	HC 840
Fourth Report	The Departmental Annual Report 2005	HC 693-I (HC 966)
Third Report	The Animal Welfare Bill	HC 683
Second Report	Reform of the EU Sugar Regime	HC 585-I (HC 927)
First Report	The future for UK fishing: Government Response	HC 532

# Oral evidence

## Taken before the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee on Wednesday 25 November 2009

Members present

Mr Michael Jack, in the Chair

Mr Geoffrey Cox  
Mr David Drew  
Mr James Gray  
Patrick Hall  
David Lepper

Miss Anne McIntosh  
Dan Rogerson  
David Taylor  
Paddy Tipping  
Mr Roger Williams

*Witness:* **Mr Poul Christensen**, Government's preferred candidate for Chair of Natural England, gave evidence.

**Q1 Chairman:** May I welcome those who have come this afternoon to the Committee's first pre-appointment hearing session, this time to talk to Poul Christensen, who is presently the Government's preferred candidate for the Chair of Natural England and, in fact, the organisation's current Acting Chairman. You are very welcome to come along to a bit of groundbreaking work as far as the Committee is concerned. Before we start to talk to you about your hopes and aspirations, can I put on record the Committee's appreciation for the work of Sir Martin Doughty who, sadly, died. He did the pioneering job of taking Natural England from the start to an organisation which, without doubt, has got an excellent reputation in its chosen field of work in looking after natural England in all the ways that manifests in habitat protection and other matters. It would be remiss of us not to record our appreciation of the work that Sir Martin did and our sadness at his passing. That means that there is a job there now for the Chair of Natural England and, Poul, you have applied for the job and are Defra's preferred candidate. Why do you want the job?

**Mr Christensen:** Because I have a real passion for the purpose of Natural England as it is laid out in its core purposes in the Act. I think conserving and enhancing our natural environment is absolutely vital for the long-term future of us as a species, but also in terms of the landscape that is delivered from that and the biodiversity that comes out of it. We are going to need to go back to our natural environment for a whole raft of the raw materials that currently we are using that are finite. It must be the best job in the world.

**Q2 Chairman:** In terms of the work that you have been doing as the Acting Chair, what have you learnt so far about the organisation in terms of defining the challenges that you are going to face if you are fully confirmed into this post?

**Mr Christensen:** First of all that they are many. Our natural environment is under pressure from a whole variety of sources. Some of that is conscious and some of it is unconscious. The scale of that challenge is bearing in on me; not in an oppressive way but in a way that I understand a lot of work needs to be done.

Also, the main purpose for Natural England, to conserve and enhance our natural environment, is a massive challenge in getting the public at large to understand and accept that as something which is important. It is really essential that people understand and, therefore, hopefully value the natural environment. We have got an awful lot of work to do to get that up into people's consciousness. There are major challenges there. May I absolutely amplify your comments about Sir Martin Doughty and what he did to set up Natural England. We owe him a great debt of gratitude. In terms of how Natural England are approaching the challenges, we have a very, very clear strategy and it is focused on outcomes and I have been really impressed by the way our executive team have organised Natural England around the four outcomes and have challenged their staff to deliver on those, and that is delivering now in spades across many areas of our work.

**Q3 Chairman:** You went through a competitive process for this job. It was advertised publicly and a firm of recruitment consultants were involved. Given that you already had, if you like, as the Deputy Chair of the organisation, I suppose the inside track in terms of knowledge, how did you actually find the process of recruitment? Did you find it challenging or demeaning? How did you find it?

**Mr Christensen:** I found it extremely challenging. This is my fourth interview, so the whole process has been challenging. At no stage did I feel the fact that I was Acting Chair gave me an inside track. I filled in the application form, which itself was quite a challenge, and I was then interviewed by the headhunters. I did not actually meet them until my application went in. I took the application off the website. After that fireside chat with the consultants I then had a full interview across in Nobel House, which was an extremely challenging interview, and that was then followed up by what I assume was an interview with the Secretary of State and the Minister, and of the three that was the most challenging, I have to say, but I enjoyed that one

25 November 2009 Mr Poul Christensen

because it gave me an opportunity to put over some of the views that I had about the natural environment.

**Q4 Chairman:** You have got some other interests that perhaps for the benefit of the Committee you might be able to clarify. Your CV tells us that you are a board member of an organisation called Agricultural Central Trading.

**Mr Christensen:** Yes.

**Q5 Chairman:** Is that something which is a continuing activity?

**Mr Christensen:** I think that will be a continuing activity, Chairman.

**Q6 Chairman:** You think it will be or it will be?

**Mr Christensen:** It will be unless someone tells me there is a real conflict of interest, which I do not know about at the moment or I cannot see.

**Q7 Chairman:** Just for our education, what actually is Agricultural Central Trading?

**Mr Christensen:** Agricultural Central Trading is a company permitted to act as a co-operative. It is a plc but acts as a co-operative in the way it operates. It is a £100 million turnover agricultural supply business that operates right across the country, and when I say "right across" I mean from Cornwall up to the Shetlands. We are largely a fertiliser and feed supply company, but we also supply other commodities to farmers.

**Q8 Chairman:** Your role in that organisation?

**Mr Christensen:** I am a board member.

**Q9 Chairman:** How long does that take per month?

**Mr Christensen:** Not per month. We meet six times a year and I suppose that would be eight or nine days a year in total.

**Q10 Chairman:** Are there any other continuing activities which are going to be a call on your time, because I gather the contract for this job calls for you to work three days a week? I cannot believe, knowing you as I do and knowing the organisation, that three days will be enough.

**Mr Christensen:** I would agree with that, it is not enough. The fact that it is not is not a problem to me, I know what is required and am prepared to give the time up. The other jobs that I currently do, I serve on the Management Board of Defra and I have advised the Permanent Secretary that should you confirm my appointment here today I would step down immediately from that post. That is for three reasons. There is a conflict of interest, which I believe can be managed. There is also a perceived conflict of interest, which is just as important, which I do not think can be managed as Chair. I think you can manage that as Acting Chair or Deputy, but as Chair I do not think you can and, therefore, I have written to the Permanent Secretary and advised her that I would be stepping down. The other thing escapes me but it will come back in a moment.

**Q11 Chairman:** Coming back to the Agricultural Central Trading, you do not see any conflict of interest there in that that company clearly has an important role to play in the retailing of various agrichemical products.

**Mr Christensen:** Yes.

**Q12 Chairman:** Some of the agri-environment schemes are devised to minimise the use of the aforementioned products and you might be involved, for example, in promoting policies that could be minimal application of agrichemicals or no application, yet you are in a business that is selling them and survives or falls by its commercial success in that area. How do you feel about that?

**Mr Christensen:** I do not see that as a conflict in terms of the policymaking role in Natural England and my role on that board. I am a non-executive of that board. We are mainly concerned with the strategies and development of the business. If a conflict was ever pointed out to me and arose then I would view that at the time, but right now I just do not see that as a conflict.

**Q13 Chairman:** Some people might comment that £71,665 per annum for a three day week seems to be quite a generous level of remuneration, but if I got the drift of your opening observations this is perhaps a role that you might even do for love. Do you think that is a reasonable amount of money to be paid for a three-day week for doing something that you would probably do for nothing?

**Mr Christensen:** I do not think I would do it for nothing, Chairman. The rate was advertised and I have not sought to negotiate that rate whatsoever. I presume it is a market rate. I have not sought to increase it or decrease it, it is there and that is the basis on which I applied for the job. Certainly I would not do it for love, but I am happy with the remuneration. I do not think I have got any other comment. It is for other people to decide whether that is the right rate for the job.

**Q14 Miss McIntosh:** Just on the basis of your previous experience, can you relate the work you have done in farming and how you believe that would have a bearing on your position?

**Mr Christensen:** Yes, I can. If I can give a bit of history maybe. I was a farm manager in Cheshire in a previous foot and mouth outbreak, 1968 as it happened, and we wanted to go farming on our own account, so we tendered for a farm in Oxfordshire in 1968, which is the farm that our son currently farms with us, and we developed a farming enterprise there. I was 24 when I took the tenancy of the farm, which was young. I think the main reason I got the farm tenancy at that age was because the farm was derelict, it was run down, and there were not many people tendering in 1968. We went there with very limited capital and bags of enthusiasm and developed the farm from that. We now have 1,100 acres of rented land with a 600 dairy cow herd, 450 followers and a few beef cattle. I have got experience of starting a business from scratch with very limited capital and that impacts very much on one's business

---

25 November 2009 **Mr Poul Christensen**

---

psyche, which I have taken through into other companies I have been involved with. In 1976, which was 33 years ago, we co-operated with the then Countryside Commission in a project called the Demonstration Farms Project which was looking at how you could embody conservation and intensive farming together without impacting on the business but having maximum impact on the environment. Remember, that was 1976 so that predated any of the current agri-environment schemes and much of the methodology that was used in that project, and we were the lead farm in that project of ten farms across the country, is what is used today in many of the agri-environment schemes, so we had a big input into agri-environment schemes 30 years ago. That is the leaflet we had done in 1976 and there was a reprint in 1982 or something. I have had a real involvement in that over a long period of time.

**Q15 Miss McIntosh:** How would you demonstrate an understanding of the public sector framework within which Natural England operates, which I understand was desirable criteria?

**Mr Christensen:** I should have looked at the application form! By experience. The first time I came in contact with government and MAFF, as they were then, was when I chaired the Minister of Agriculture's regional panel back in the early 1980s, so you very quickly got an understanding of the relationships between politicians, parliamentarians, the government decision-making process and the industry because the role of the regional panels was to fill that gap. If you like, that was my first exposure to bureaucracy. I am still learning about bureaucracy. Having had that basic experience, following on from that I was asked to help in the privatisation of ADAS. ADAS was a government department, it was taken out of the public sector and there was a board formed and I was asked to serve on that. Again, I had experience with that process and also, incidentally, experience of taking an outfit out of government into the private sector which was very useful. Subsequent to that I have been involved with a regional development agency and, again, you get that tension or relationship between the public and private sector. I have had a lot of background to that. And then, of course, three years of getting Natural England off the ground. I have been particularly involved in that part of the process in terms of the transition programme that is moving, as it says, from A to B and we had a lot of cultural changes to make, three organisations into one. I was very much involved in representing the board in that process.

**Q16 Miss McIntosh:** Would you say there are any gaps in your experience and, if there are, how would you seek to fill them?

**Mr Christensen:** I am sure, Miss McIntosh, there are lots of gaps in my experience. I am struggling to think what they are, but if I find any, as I have done, I will go and get some training or I will find out. I believe that is incumbent on anybody, whether a chairman or whoever he is in an organisation, if he finds gaps in his knowledge he needs to fill them.

There are lots of things, thinking of your question. Some of the areas of work around, for example, access legislation. There is a raft of legislation around that that, frankly, I did not know very much about, but I know an awful lot more about it now. I went out and sought help in terms of what that was and our legal people in Natural England helped me with that. The other area that I was completely naïve about was the designation of Sites of Special Scientific Interest. I had to chair a very big hearing on that and, therefore, you do need to have some tuition. The point I am making is I am very open and happy to go out and get help if I feel I cannot cope or do not have the background.

**Q17 Miss McIntosh:** What particular skills and experience do you think you can bring to bear in the work on improving England's habitats and biodiversity, particularly in the marine environment?

**Mr Christensen:** Me personally?

**Q18 Miss McIntosh:** Yes.

**Mr Christensen:** I think I am a good listener. One thing that is absolutely apparent to me is that Natural England can deliver nothing on its own, absolutely nothing. We need to work in partnership with a whole raft of people: people who use the natural environment, not just because it is pretty or they like going out into it or it is good exercise, but because they make their living out of it, and that applies to farmers and fisher folk and a whole range of other people. If we are to influence those people to change the way they behave in some cases then you have got to go out and talk to them and meet them and understand what their issues are. I think I am quite good at that. I have had quite a lot of experience and background in changing organisations and setting organisations up which require you to go out and listen and talk to people. That is what I think I can bring.

**Q19 Miss McIntosh:** Thank you. In terms of promoting access to the countryside, which is a principal task of Natural England, what do you think you are bringing to the table there?

**Mr Christensen:** Again, it is about going out and talking to people on the ground. Of course, the big issue right now is coastal access. That is a massive issue for us. Some people are not particularly happy about that legislation. I have got to go out there and lead the organisation into agreeing with people, landowners and land managers, how they can embody and, if possible, embrace that so there is a win-win situation. We have got to look for wins for everybody. I know win-win is a bit trite, but something that delivers something for them so it is not just seen as an imposition. I can do that in a way from personal experience because on our farm in Oxfordshire about seven or eight years ago we had a brand new footpath established across our farm. We are tenants and our tenancy agreement states, "You shall not allow rights of way to be established across your land", so we went and said, "Look, this is happening" and there was a full public inquiry around that and a lot of objections were put up by

25 November 2009 Mr Poul Christensen

our landlords with us sitting there. The experience I can bring there personally is that actually the concerns they had about that footpath have never materialised, so we now have a path, which any of you are very welcome to come and walk along, just south of the River Thames. It is beautiful and people really enjoy it and we have coped with it too. I have personal experience which helps as well.

**Q20 Miss McIntosh:** Finally, what would you say is the most striking example to date of your personal “leadership ability and strategic vision”?

**Mr Christensen:** It is not to do with Natural England, but I was Chair of Milk Marque at a time when the Monopolies and Mergers Commission decided to instruct us to break it up. I had spent five years going round the countryside wearing out shoe leather telling people how important it was to co-operate and work together, and I still believe that fundamentally, that is why I am on the board of ACT, but then we had to change and that meant me going round persuading these people to actually support the breaking up of Milk Marque. We had a memorable meeting at Malvern when we had about a thousand farmers there, 99 per cent of who were very unhappy about what was happening. I had to stand up in front of them and persuade them to vote to break Milk Marque up. After two hours I had a unanimous vote. If you think about that, that was a massive call on the board of Milk Marque and me particularly. Following on from that, organisationally the Office of Fair Trading said to us, “It will take you two years to break Milk Marque up into three co-operatives”. I knew that if we took two years to break Milk Marque up there would be nothing left. I said to him at the time that we would do it in nine months, and he said, “That’s impossible, you can’t. You have so many contracts, so many relationships, you have a pension fund, you can’t do it in nine months”, but we did it in nine months. You do that simply by focusing the business and you keep everyone’s nose to it, including lawyers.

**Q21 Mr Williams:** Just going back to access, which is a key task for Natural England, the coastal path obviously will be a great improvement in terms of public access but in Scotland they have taken a rather more radical line where, as I understand it, they have done away with the law of trespass on agricultural land and there is a presumption that people can go on agricultural land as long as they are not doing damage. That seems to me to open up the countryside to lots of the public. Has Natural England had any thoughts about a more radical approach to access?

**Mr Christensen:** Mr Williams, we are taking it one stage at a time and that is probably a bit radical. This was some time ago before I was involved with Natural England, but I did go to see Sweden where there is no trespass law there either. I am thinking aloud really, but I think what differentiates Scotland and Sweden from England is population density. There is a fundamental difference. To think that through now at this point in time would probably be

one step too far. If you look at the problems around the urban fringe, you can see how much damage and aggro that causes to people who are trying to make a living or produce food in those areas and I do not think it would be appropriate in England at this time. What is important is that what access there is is of high quality: clearly signed paths, circular routes and so on. If you get that right then you take a lot of the pressure off the calls for general access.

**Q22 Chairman:** Natural England has got quite a toughie as its Chief Executive in Helen Phillips. She has always got good, clear, straightforward ideas and clearly stated views. She is somebody who you have to get up quite early in the morning to deal with in debate and questions. How do you get on with her?

**Mr Christensen:** Brilliantly.

**Q23 Chairman:** Why?

**Mr Christensen:** I think we give each other space. We are very different individuals. Helen Phillips is an extremely—

**Q24 Chairman:** She is not sitting behind you, you can speak freely!

**Mr Christensen:** I would not mind if she was, she could sit here beside me. I have dealt with quite a lot of chief executives and have chaired big organisations and in my opinion Helen Phillips, and this is why I hesitate to say this, is head and shoulders above anyone in almost every respect. To have someone like that to take Natural England through the first three years and ongoing has been a huge, huge help to us. If you think about the challenge that we faced three years ago of three organisations coming together with fundamentally different cultures and backgrounds, and a lot of relationships with stakeholders—government, NGOs, hundreds of stakeholders—how do you do that. The one thing that I think I really helped Helen to do was to take a view that this was not to be a cobbling together of three organisations, this was not to be a takeover of two by one or whatever, this was to be a fundamentally new organisation. That is something I believe I helped Helen a great deal with. Our personal relationship is good. We give each other space to operate. It is absolutely essential for a non-executive chair to understand the difference between the executive and non-executive roles. Coming from a farming background, many farming organisations have failed because they have not recognised what that difference is. I will be insistent on making sure that the board understand that difference too. We decide policy, we decide the direction and strategies, and then the executive delivers. If you give someone like Helen that to just go away and do it, and you are not breathing down her neck all the time, then it will work. You had better ask Helen about our relationship, but I think it is brilliant.

**Chairman:** She is not here, but you are.

---

25 November 2009 Mr Poul Christensen

---

**Q25 David Taylor:** Two loose-end questions, if I may. The first is going back to the most important objective of Natural England of promoting access. You have got one and a half square miles of rural Oxfordshire for which you are partly responsible, but to what extent is the public network of footpaths in that area developed? You mentioned one new one. Is it a land that is criss-crossed by footpaths to any extent?

**Mr Christensen:** Yes, it would be. It could be described as that. The River Thames is the northern boundary of our farm, so there is a Thames path, a long-distance trail for which Natural England is responsible, but that is on the other bank from where we are. One of the reasons for suggesting that a path comes on the south side of the river where we lie is to make a circular route.

**Q26 David Taylor:** Do you have any contact with the Ramblers Association, the Oxford division, or anything like that?

**Mr Christensen:** Not directly, no.

**Q27 David Taylor:** Would you not anticipate that you would have in your role as Chair of Natural England in respect of that particular objective?

**Mr Christensen:** No, not really. Maybe I should, but there are lots of things that happen locally that I ought to have an in to and do not. The Wildlife Trusts have got reserves and so on. Maybe I should but, no, I do not.

**Q28 David Taylor:** Following the Chairman's question, the relationship between the part-time Chair and full-time Chief Executive of a public body like Natural England is crucial to its success, and that is stating the obvious, but how can you avoid the necessarily close working relationship developing into something that is too cosy? You need some distance for objectivity to be able to comment critically, if necessary, on the day-to-day operation. How do you avoid closeness becoming cosiness?

**Mr Christensen:** That is an extremely valid point, and I am not being patronising in saying that. That is a risk. The better the personal relationship, the bigger risk it is. That is where the board comes into its own. That is where the board is really important. That is where I rely on the board. I am very fortunate with the board I have got. They are very—not aggressive—forthright in expressing views around what Natural England do and on one or two occasions they have pointed out that maybe I ought to take a stronger view about something or other, and I find that very helpful.

**Q29 David Taylor:** You said right at the very start that your previous role as Acting Chair had not given you an inside track in relation to the appointment here, and I would accept that and I am sure the Committee would accept that, but in the world outside there is a healthy cynicism about Government and public bodies, and they may look at your CV and see East of England Development Agency, Defra's Management Board, and you said

from the 1980s you chaired the Ministry of Agriculture's regional panel, so you could understand if someone felt this was a classic example of cronyism, could you not, that someone who is on the inside knew all the right people and was therefore appointed because he or she was a safe pair of hands? How would you refute that? Would you accept that is a possible perception?

**Mr Christensen:** Yes.

**Q30 David Taylor:** How would you refute that either now or in how you intend to deliver on the job?

**Mr Christensen:** I would like to think they are quite a safe pair of hands anyway. Leaving that aside, I would point to the fact that I was not just involved in the internal politics of this place but I was involved in commercial as well and had commercial business experience and had been involved in a whole variety of other activities, not just around central Government. I would also point to the fact that I assume this whole process has been validated and checked by Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments, the parliamentary standards people, so the process itself is above board. You are right about perception, of course, and that is a risk we always have to take. I would say just judge me as I am. I would say just watch me and see that I will deliver an impartial—I will challenge Government and will challenge the Secretary of State, if necessary, if there are things that I think Government are doing that do not actually fit with our core purpose which Parliament has decided.

**Q31 David Taylor:** That is a point I want to develop a little. The other relationship that is almost as important is the one that develops between the Chair of Natural England and the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs as it presently is. There may be a different occupant in six months' time, we shall have to see. How often have you had face-to-face meetings with either the Secretary of State or one of his colleagues in your period as Acting Chair?

**Mr Christensen:** We have had two performance reviews with the Secretary of State, and at least one minister has been there and in some cases two. We have been subject to that scrutiny against our corporate plan and what we are doing. I have also had meetings with ministers. I have met Mr Irranca-Davies on two occasions. I have met with fishery ministers on two occasions, and I will reveal that on two of those occasions it was because I was being particularly critical of some of the policies that I could see being developed and I saw it as part of my role.

**Q32 David Taylor:** So you have had to tell some unpleasant truths to ministers, have you?

**Mr Christensen:** I have had to tell them as I saw it.

**Q33 David Taylor:** Give one or two examples of things that you brought up within the meetings that were not necessarily consistent with the direction of government policy as you saw it.

25 November 2009 Mr Poul Christensen

**Mr Christensen:** I think it is probably no secret, I am sure it is a matter of public debate, the designation of Marine Conservation Zones was a concern to me, that ministers had the power to designate no-take zones for 20-odd years and in that time they had designated 0.01 per cent. When you think of the areas concerned, the importance of those areas, that did not seem to me to be a particularly good track record. I wanted Natural England to have that power to designate. We did not win that argument, but in that process we now have a system in place whereby we advise in a very vigorous and robust way where Marine Conservation Zones should be. I think it is very important that an NDPB has that arm's length relationship with a government to be able to do that.

**Q34 David Taylor:** You were pretty assertive on that. How well rooted did you feel you were in that you had many years stewarding 1,000 acres of an inland farm? How well prepared did you feel to talk about marine conservation from that background?

**Mr Christensen:** The principles are absolutely the same. The fundamental difference with the marine environment is that you cannot see it. You can see what goes on on my farm and, therefore, in a sense it is easier to demonstrate what is going on in a terrestrial environment than it is in a marine environment. I felt very grounded, very confident in what I was saying based upon my experience on our own farm, but not just that but in terms of what is being delivered right across the piece by agri-environment schemes and all the other designations that exist.

**Q35 David Taylor:** The area of interest of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs can be something of a political battleground and there will be times in the years that lie ahead perhaps when two opposing parties will want you to be promoting different objectives or both being critical of you in respect of how Natural England has implemented particular policies. How do you think you would stand up to political pressure given that you depend on the confidence to an extent of the government of the day? You have talked about arm's length relationship, can you just develop that a little bit more?

**Mr Christensen:** In direct answer to your question about standing up to it, I have had some pretty robust experiences through my working life about standing up to all sorts of things. Standing up to a thousand angry farmers in South Wales can be quite an interesting experience. That is not being flippant. You needed to go fully prepared and absolutely confident in what it was you were trying to get over. I know that people retreat behind evidence, but if you have got the evidence that what you are suggesting, or saying, or promoting is right and you have the confidence that you have your organisation and your board behind you then you have no fear or favour and you can go in fully confident and stand your ground with ministers or whoever it is in defending the position that you have.

**Q36 David Taylor:** At 10pm on 6 May 2010 it is not impossible that the political wind will blow from a different direction and black will become white, up will become down. How do you think you will be able to handle that as the key figure in a major public organisation like Natural England?

**Mr Christensen:** It will require what is required in getting Natural England going and ongoing and it will require developing relationships with different people and understanding what the policies are and how they are driven. The relationship that Natural England has with our sponsoring Department is a contractual one around money and a programme of delivery, but also around our core purposes. I would seek a very, very early meeting with whoever was there, if it was not the current incumbents, to go through what our core purposes were, how it fitted in with their policies, what they wanted to deliver and, let us be absolutely frank --- Is it 10 May, the election?

**David Taylor:** 6 May.

**Chairman:** You heard it here first!

**Q37 Miss McIntosh:** 10pm might be a bit late!

**Mr Christensen:** The point is there is going to be a different financial arrangement whoever is in.

**Q38 David Taylor:** That is correct, yes.

**Mr Christensen:** And that is going to impact very much on what everybody does and how they do it. That is going to have its challenges. If you are a dairy farmer you are quite used to having your milk price halved or whatever it is. You really do just have to say, "Right, that is the contractual arrangement" and you fight like hell to get the best deal you can for the natural environment and when you have done that then you have to make it work.

**Q39 David Taylor:** Is it important to develop reasonable relationships with the spokespeople in opposition parties to be familiar with their thinking before any change takes place? Who knows, it could be a hung Parliament that did not give very clear signals as far as policy direction was concerned.

**Mr Christensen:** I think it is crucial to talk and convey our purpose to all parties, and that is what we do.

**Q40 David Taylor:** Is that what you are doing?

**Mr Christensen:** That is what we are doing.

**Q41 David Taylor:** You are doing that now?

**Mr Christensen:** I am doing that now.

**Q42 Chairman:** You mentioned the marine environment. In your discussions with the Secretary of State, did you put in a bid to take over the new Marine Management Organisation?

**Mr Christensen:** No.

**Q43 Chairman:** Did you think that was something you ought to be doing?

25 November 2009 Mr Poul Christensen

*Mr Christensen:* No.

**Q44 Mr Drew:** I am interested in these relationships within the different strata of government. Clearly you have got various organisations that impinge on the marine environment and I think Natural England needs to have greater status in that area. Let us take another organisation, English Heritage, which surprisingly also has a relationship with you on the marine environment. How do you see yourself playing with regard to these organisations? I have got a lot of time for Natural England, as you know, and I think your style, meaning the proverbial “yours” rather than yours personally, as an organisation is very important and some other organisations could learn from you. How will you persuade them that you have got it right and they have not necessarily?

*Mr Christensen:* First of all, you have got to demonstrate that what you are doing is achieving results. I did say at some stage much earlier in this interview that one of the strengths I have found in my ten months as Acting Chair has been a very clear strategy and I would encourage anybody in a delivery business, which is what we are in, delivering for the environment, to have a clear strategy about what it is you want to do and all your staff and stakeholders know what that is. You have to demonstrate it to start with. It is no good telling people how to do things unless you can do it yourself. Having done that, you do need to talk to people. As it happened, I met the new Chair of English Heritage just last week to talk about issues around what they are doing and we are doing and some of the common interests that we have around the natural environment. A lot of natural heritage is very much involved in the stuff that we are interested in in terms of the natural environment. You have to go out there, wear out your shoe leather and talk to these people to persuade them that there are different ways of doing things.

**Q45 Mr Drew:** Can I just come back in on that? The marine environment particularly does need some clearer strategy with the Bill now an Act. We do need to recognise that there are going to be some turf wars. This is the great strength of Natural England, that you are a very transparent organisation. Some of the other players in this field in the marine environment are not nearly as transparent and that must be quite frustrating.

*Mr Christensen:* I think, Mr Drew, we concentrate on our agenda and we do not worry too much about turf wars, frankly, because if we get drawn into that then we are distracting ourselves from our core purpose. Clearly, relationships with the new MMO, the Coastguard Agency, a whole raft of them out there, are crucial but we have a clear strategy laid out, we have divided the seas into four areas and are going out to look at what is important there. We are working with all of the agencies involved, wind energy people, tide energy people. I said earlier on that you cannot deliver anything without other people on-side and we have invited—I cannot say everybody with a marine interest because there seem

to be millions of them—all the main players in the marine business to talk to us and we have been to talk to them. We have a dedicated member of our staff now going round the coast talking to fishermen and other people who are involved in it as we develop where Marine Conservation Zones can be, where they can have maximum impact on the environment and minimal impact on people’s livelihoods. That is what we are doing, that is our core business. The turf wars are going to happen and we do not have to be distracted by them but we have to be aware of them, that is for sure.

**Q46 David Lepper:** This is just a point of fact arising from the discussion you had with David Taylor about listening to what the other parties have to say on policy. Leaving aside your involvement with the NFU in the 1970s, I think it was, have you any history of active political involvement?

*Mr Christensen:* In general terms?

**Q47 David Lepper:** Yes.

*Mr Christensen:* No, none at all. My politics go in the ballot box.

**Q48 Mr Williams:** Talking about political accountability in a way, how do you balance accountability to the Minister or Secretary of State and accountability to Parliament? Do you see those in different ways?

*Mr Christensen:* There is always going to be a tension round that, Mr Williams. I think I understand the relationships in a legislative sense. The Acting Chair of Natural England, whoever it is, is accountable to Parliament but through the Department and, therefore, the Secretary of State. I am also aware that I can be held up here as Acting Chair before you or PAC or other committees, so there is a direct relationship but we can be scrutinised by you, quite rightly, at any time about anything. I understand that. If we personalise this, the current Secretary of State has told me personally, and in public, that he expects Natural England to challenge his Department, and he has done that in a very open way I have to say. That brings particular responsibility on me as Acting Chair of Natural England in how you discharge that. There are always going to be personal relationships here as well, but I am quite clear in my view that Parliament has set up Natural England with its core purposes, the first of which is to conserve and enhance our natural environment for this and future generations, and that is why it gets me out of bed in the morning and that is what I will deliver against, whoever happens to be Secretary of State at the time.

**Q49 Mr Williams:** If we take the Marine Bill as an example, Natural England will have been advising and you will have had robust meetings with the Minister. On a different level, employees of Natural England, and the Countryside Council for Wales for that matter, will have been talking to members occasionally and perhaps suggesting appropriate

25 November 2009 Mr Poul Christensen

amendments to the Bill. How do you see that working? Apparently, Defra were a little bit unhappy at one time about that approach.

**Mr Christensen:** One of the core purposes of Natural England is evidence, the gathering together of evidence. To me, that evidence is paid for by the public purse and should be in the public domain. There are going to be times when governments do not like that. I am not talking specifically now about the Marine Bill, but in general terms there will be occasions when governments are unhappy about that sort of evidence coming into the public domain. I would resist any attempt to stop us doing that. I suggest an implication in your question, Mr Williams, and perhaps you will confirm if this is not true, that Natural England somehow were trying to intimidate or brief against Government. We never do that.

**Q50 Mr Williams:** No.

**Mr Christensen:** That is not what we are there to do.

**Q51 Mr Williams:** No. Natural England has been working with NGOs and other people and they will be taking a view on the legislation and how it can be improved, not in a negative way but in a very positive way. I am just trying to get the relationship between Natural England, the people who work for you, you as Chairman and the board. How much freedom would you give employees to engage in that sort of operation?

**Mr Christensen:** I would give our employees a lot of freedom, frankly, but they must not overstep the mark. It would not be for me to manage that; it would be for our Chief Executive. If they stepped over the mark I am absolutely certain that she would come down on them like a ton of bricks. Our biggest asset in Natural England is our staff. The more I meet them, the more I go out and see them at work and delivering, the more impressed I am. We do need to give them as much freedom to operate as possible. Of course, with that goes responsibility to do it in a proper manner. In general terms, I would always seek to give our staff as much freedom to operate as possible because they are just phenomenal.

**Q52 Mr Williams:** Have there been any occasions in your professional career when you have had to resolve conflicts between your private interests and the wider corporate or public interest?

**Mr Christensen:** No. I cannot think of one, Mr Williams.

**Q53 Mr Williams:** Have there been any times when your life or actions you have taken have been the subject of public scrutiny?

**Mr Christensen:** If you are Chairman of Milk Marque, you seem to be --- The answer is yes, on many occasions and in many guises.

**Q54 Mr Williams:** You are confident of coping with that scrutiny and being able to carry out the context of your job at the same time?

**Mr Christensen:** Yes. It is like being here now, when I have to face scrutiny of any description I am always apprehensive about it, of course I am, which means I put a lot of effort and time into trying to make sure I have got the facts right and, therefore, have the confidence to do it. Where I have been exposed to that in the past, in most cases I feel I have operated effectively. It is certainly not a new area for me.

**Mr Williams:** I am just going to go back to Agricultural Central Trading, and I would just say I am not a member of it so I do not declare an interest.

**Q55 Chairman:** There is a chance to get a customer!

**Mr Christensen:** I will have a word with you afterwards!

**Q56 Mr Williams:** I am a little amazed that you seem determined to keep on that interest. You have got a job here that lots of people would die for as Chairman of Natural England and I am not saying there will be any conflicts of interest but would it not be better to just be seen to be focused entirely on that job? Why are you so keen on maintaining the contact with ACT?

**Mr Christensen:** There is a very good reason actually that may not be immediately apparent. I think this applies to a lot of people in office. Exposure to something pretty different from what you are doing, particularly in a commercial and very competitive field, is good. It gives you a different dimension and makes you think about things in a different way. It also gives you a feel for what is going on in an industry that you actually depend on. Natural England works with farmers and the health of that industry is important to us in terms of delivering the natural environment. Therefore, to understand what is going on there is important. It is more fundamental than that, it is being involved in a different business operating to a different model and you pick up ideas and stuff you can cross-fertilise in what you are doing. I think not just to say, "I'm only going to do one thing", and I am only doing one other thing, although I am still involved in Kingston Hill Farm—my son would not agree—is important otherwise you tend to become very introvert. I understand some of the broader issues and that is why it is important to do something else. If it is not going to be ACT then it is going to be something else.

**Q57 Mr Williams:** You said you are going to stand down as a member of the Management Board of Defra if confirmation of your appointment is made.

**Mr Christensen:** Yes.

**Q58 Mr Williams:** Defra has had some criticism from many people, including this Committee at times, about the way it is delivering. Do you think it is good to come from an organisation like that that has had criticism? Do you think it is good in terms of lessons you might have learnt or do you think perhaps people will not have the same confidence in you coming from that type of organisation?

**Mr Christensen:** Defra has suffered from adverse publicity. That is probably the understatement of the day. A lot of that is around one part of the

---

25 November 2009 **Mr Poul Christensen**

---

organisation, if you analyse it, which has had particular problems, and I understand that. I have been a non-executive director of Defra for two years and have seen some very significant improvements in the corporate governance of that organisation. By the way, I have been one of their biggest critics internally as well as externally. You have only got to ask the Permanent Secretary as to some of my interventions, they have been very critical. It has improved enormously in its governance arrangements. You do learn from being in that sort of environment. It does inform you about a lot of the issues facing larger organisations, particularly around IT systems, governance, accountability and accountability lines, and that does help you.

**Q59 Patrick Hall:** Can I follow up on a point raised by you, Chairman, and also Mr Williams? Earlier on you said that you were going to resign or were in the process of resigning as a non-executive member of the Defra Management Board.

**Mr Christensen:** Yes.

**Q60 Patrick Hall:** Not because there was any actual conflict of interest but because you conceded that equally important is a possible perceived conflict of interest, so you understand that very well. I still do not follow why it is that with regard to your directorship of the Agricultural Central Trading Limited, the point that Mr Williams made, even if there is not an actual or material conflict, and I do not know whether there is or could not be, surely there is a good chance that there is a perceived conflict of interest. Could I invite you again to tell us why do you resist? Is that a remunerated position?

**Mr Christensen:** It is, yes.

**Q61 Patrick Hall:** What is the remuneration?

**Mr Christensen:** Currently it is just under £10,000 a year.

**Q62 Patrick Hall:** Okay. You have answered the question before, I just lay it on the table. I do not understand why you think there may not be a perceived conflict of interest.

**Mr Christensen:** At the time I said if that became an issue then I would resign, but I do resist it for the reasons I gave to Mr Williams. I think it is very important to do something else, and I am currently doing that. You get a feel for how an industry is performing because the first thing you see when you are trading with them is the trading patterns, and that is important I think. I have also said, and leave it on the table, if anyone raises it as a real problem then I will do so because Natural England is where my main interest will lie.

**Q63 Chairman:** Can I just move on. Let us assume that this process goes as you would like, everything is in order, you are confirmed as the official Chair of Natural England, what is going to happen on day one when you arrive in the office, stamp of approval from the Select Committee if it were to be given, stamp of approval from the Secretary of State, and you think, "Right, this is it, I am in post"? What is

going to be different from acting as the Acting Chair where you just keep the wheel ticking over until the new Chairman, possibly you, gets into post?

**Mr Christensen:** I hope the wheel continues to turn, yes, if it did not the wheels would fall off. It is a very interesting role to be Acting, particularly for a long period of time, because although you are Acting, and I have given it my all, and personally I have behaved as a Chair would, you still do not have the authority that goes with a Chair, and neither does the organisation. The organisation is not led by a Chair; it is led by an Acting Chair. That may be rather pedantic, it may be rather semantic, but it does make a difference. I look forward to the day when Natural England has a Chair for those reasons, whoever it is. Now, if it is going to be me, on day one is there going to be a revolution, no; can there be a revolution given that I have been Acting Chair for ten months, no, but it will give me the authority to continue where I think I have made changes since I have come in. This is no criticism of what has gone before, Natural England was at a natural point when it was going to need to look at itself and maybe change some of the way it performed.

**Q64 Chairman:** What are the priority issues you are going to be looking at now you have got the authority? You are there and you have got the stamp of approval.

**Mr Christensen:** For me, the main priority for Natural England, and I think I said this at the beginning and I will say it again, Chairman, is to increase people's awareness of how important the natural environment is to them. We are here to conserve and enhance our natural environment and we have other purposes lying underneath that, which are to promote the natural environment, get people to access it and to enjoy it, to get people to earn their living from it, you know them as well as I do, and that is where I am going to be. The priority to me is to ensure that people value the natural environment, or understand the natural environment and then they would value it, and then we can go on improving it for everybody's benefit long-term. That is number one priority. Following on from that, and this is a word I do not like particularly because it is not very well understood, I think our biodiversity, the species that exist in our natural environment, we do need to ensure that we keep on maintaining them at something like where they are now. If we go on seeing species declining across the globe and across England, and many people have responsibility for it at the moment, we will be short-changing future generations. I see that as a major, major priority.

**Q65 Chairman:** One of the things you have not mentioned is addressing some of the problems which you outlined. You sent me, very kindly, a copy of your publication *Agri-Environment Schemes in England 2009, a Review of Results and Effectiveness*. I read the review and, for example, it talks about "the entry level scheme has not yet delivered the scale of intervention required to address the declines of widespread species of farmland birds". We have

25 November 2009 Mr Poul Christensen

debated that on many occasions in the Committee. It goes on in the helpful summary on page six, which you will be abundantly familiar with, in putting forward some quite critical performance appraisal of some of the agri-environment schemes. You did not say improve the performance as one of your top three priorities, you ended up with two things that you would do. Do you not think that improving the performance of these schemes ought to be one of your top priorities?

**Mr Christensen:** I talked about biodiversity and that is very much part of that process. That is precisely where it is, that is a delivery mechanism for delivering the priority I talked about and I think agri-environment schemes will continue to evolve and they will need to evolve. They will need to evolve in the face of climate change but they will need to evolve anyway as we learn more about them and their effectiveness. In terms of where I think it is important, there is a whole raft of actions in terms of delivering better biodiversity, and agri-environment schemes are but one, others go into the marine environment, others go into urban areas, all of which are designed to increase biodiversity and maintain it.

**Q66 Chairman:** Are you going to review this area? Here is another one, it says, “evidence is emerging that the popular hedgerow option in ELS may not be delivering the full benefits anticipated”. It sounds like there is a bit of sorting out to be done, is there not?

**Mr Christensen:** Yes, there is, absolutely there is, yes indeed.

**Q67 Chairman:** Are you going to have an action plan sorted out with your Chief Executive to get this stuff right?

**Mr Christensen:** Yes, and that is what we are doing. One of the areas that we are looking at is around the Campaign for the Farmed Environment, which is another part of that process. It is to get more people involved in developing agri-environment schemes on their farms that will deliver real benefit, and they will change over time. That is precisely what we will be doing. That will be part of the Campaign for the Farmed Environment.

**Q68 Mr Williams:** The ethos of some of these agri-environment schemes is that a prescription is devised between Natural England and the farmer and the farmer gets paid for delivering the prescription. Do you think there would be some benefit, if there were a slightly different ethos, if at least some of the payment was only to be paid on delivery of a result, for instance, lapwing, curlew or whatever? We can do the preparatory work but still the lapwing does not come there. Would it not really focus the farmer’s attention on getting a success if some of it was paid on outcomes rather than just delivering the prescription?

**Mr Christensen:** It sure would. It has been one of the big challenges for me to try and encourage our people to look at how we can better shape some of our agri-environment schemes. Paying on outcomes of course would be a huge step forward in terms of

getting results because there is nothing like being paid for results to do it. However, if you look at the mechanisms that you would need to put that in place and to monitor it and to agree it, and then to pay for it, the mind boggles. That was my first reaction, “For goodness’ sake, how many skylarks do you want? 50? Well, let’s pay for 50 skylarks”. Who counts them? You are going to have an army of people—there are enough people now running around the countryside—going out counting skylarks and deciding whose land are they on. Are they on this bit of land or the next door? It would be an absolute nightmare. I do not see that as an easy solution, Mr Williams, but I do think that we need to look at how we shape our agri-environment and a lot of what we do, including our agri-environment schemes, to measure it in different ways. The cost of some of our schemes is higher than I would like it to be, so I think we need to look at the cost of them as well.

**Q69 David Lepper:** Coming on from that point, Chairman, over the next three years, whatever your priorities might be, whether they are the same as they are at the moment or whether you are going to go forward with different strategies, are you confident that Natural England will have the resources to do its work properly?

**Mr Christensen:** I do not think anyone can be confident about any resources. Anyone who says to me, “We are not going to be impacted by what is going on in the wider world” is living in a different world from me. Clearly that is going to be a main driver in terms of what we do. We are already anticipating that. We have, for example, put the entry level scheme—I presume you know a little bit about the basic scheme we have for farmers—on-line to make it easier for farmers to access and cheaper for us to administer. I think that is the sort of thing that we are going to have to do an awful lot more. No, I am not confident that we are going to have as much money as I would like to deliver our core purpose but, having said that, as I said earlier on, it is a contractual arrangement, you then have to decide what your priorities are with reduced resource and how effective they are, and that may mean some fundamental changes in some of the things that we do and how we do them, but we have to face up to that. That is what a board is for, that is why we exist.

**Mr Drew:** So much of the delivery of Natural England is actually commissioned through wildlife trusts and similar local bodies now working in partnership, I am not pretending you just pass the money over. One of the difficult birth pains that Natural England had in the changeover from English Nature was that was when there were budget cuts. The point I would make is for wildlife trusts to have the sort of impact you would want them to have they need security of funding and they need long-term funding. What arguments are you going to have up the line with Treasury to actually make the point that in all the areas the natural environment is not one where you can turn budgets on and off, even over a three year period? This takes decades sometimes to really have the impact you want. What is your preparation for that?

25 November 2009 Mr Poul Christensen

**Q70 Chairman:** As witnessed by the problems with Sites of Special Scientific Interest which always seem to be edging towards being in good condition right across the piece but never, ever seemingly getting there.

**Mr Christensen:** Thank you for that! I think, to answer Mr Drew's question as best I can, and you mentioned the Treasury, we have just produced a report called *No Charge*—it is a play on words—which demonstrates the actual value of the natural environment and large parts of it to society. I think in the past we have rather relied on the fact that governments will put money into sustaining the natural environment because it is a nice thing to do, it is a bit cuddly, whatever, and there has not been a hard edge to it, which the Treasury always look for. If you are a guy in the Treasury you are going to say, "What is in it? What is the pay off?" That report is one of the first attempts to put a value on what the natural environment brings to society as a whole. We have done other work around that and one of our purposes is to get people to access and enjoy and benefit from the natural environment and there is our Walk your Way to Health initiative. We have got a lot of people now, every week, going out and walking in the natural environment. We have now got evidence to show that every pound we spend on that initiative saves the Treasury £7 in terms of healthy people. At Natural England we are very proud of that because we are working across Government. This silo mentality has got to go. This silo mentality in terms of Government cannot actually survive long-term when you are talking about a natural environment because it impacts on everything. We are beginning to demonstrate to Treasury that there is a real value in looking after our natural environment. Will that bring in sufficient funds, going back to Mr Lepper's question, that remains to be seen but it is very important indeed that we go on making that point, and we are doing that right now.

**Q71 Mr Drew:** Do you now understand the Environmental Liability Directive and how it relates to Natura 2000 and, if you do, can you explain it to me?

**Mr Christensen:** I do not, Mr Drew. I will find out and I will explain it to you when I know.

**Q72 Mr Drew:** If you do then you are a better man than most civil servants who have tried.

**Mr Christensen:** There is a whole raft of things. Someone asked me earlier on areas of weakness and some of this legislation is another area of weakness.

**Q73 Chairman:** Let me just bring you back to how much independence you think Natural England should have. You alluded earlier to the pressures on resources in Government. Let us say hypothetically somebody said, "Let's bring all of Defra's family of bodies that deal with environmental issues under one roof within the overall control of the Environment Agency" and you were one of them, what are you going to do if somebody comes up with a revolutionary idea like, "Let's make you, if you like,

a subordinate part of the Environment Agency, they do the environment, you do the environment, let us bang the Rural Payments Agency in as well because you hand out money to farmers, they do as well, rationalise to save back office money, maintain the veneer of respectability at the front of the office"? Do you see that as a matter of principle upon which as a Chair you would say, "No, I am not having any of this, it is either independence or bust" or are you going to say, "Okay, fine, thank you very much, jolly good idea"?

**Mr Christensen:** Neither. Clearly there is scope for rationalisation of activities across not just Defra family but across Government and this is why I mentioned health, for example. I think there is an opportunity to rationalise across the piece. If I was presented with that as a sort of area that needed consideration I would be duty bound to look at delivering for the natural environment, that is what Natural England's purpose is. In any discussion of that sort that would be what drives me. Now, Natural England may not exist in 10, 20, 30 years' time, I do not know, I have no idea, there may be better ways of delivering it. I am open to those ideas and anyone who closes their mind to it is not living in a real world, frankly. I would need to be absolutely sure that the core purposes for which we were established were reflected properly in a structure that delivered for the Natural Environment. I think you are asking me where I would fight the corner and that would be the corner I would fight in. To say that Natural England is sacrosanct and we have got to fight forever, there may well be other ways of doing it that deliver better value for money and we would be stupid to turn our backs on anything like that.

**Q74 Chairman:** You are quite happy to have an element of what I call creative tension in what you are doing because I see from the *Farmer's Guardian* that you have managed to upset the tenant farmers who say that Natural England's misguided policy on dramatically reducing upland stocking is something you have upset them about. You seem to have also managed to upset people in the uplands by your Upland Vision which seems to have caused some criticism. You believe in a bit of creative tension to try and stimulate the debate in sometimes controversial areas?

**Mr Christensen:** Not for its own sake, no. I do not believe in creating tension just for the sake of it or to stimulate debate. I went up to the launch of the Upland Vision at Malham at which the NFU, the TFA, the CLA and the Moorland Association all had an opportunity to speak. The press reports to which I think you are alluding were not reflective of what was said on that day, I have to say. That Upland Vision is the first real attempt to overcome the problems that bedevil farmers and land managers in policy terms because most of them are short-term, three years, five years, and if you take the natural environment how long is five years, it is not the blink of an eye. We have taken what some people think is a pretty bold step to say, "Well, what would we like it to look like in 50 years' time?" We had a series of montages showing what it could look like

---

25 November 2009 Mr Poul Christensen

---

and that was part of the beginning of a process. That was our vision and from that will stem a lot of the actions that will fall out in terms of new agri-environment schemes to deliver the vision. We are going to attract criticism. When I say I do not actively go out to seek criticism, I do not seek to avoid it either, if we are being proactive and taking a long-term view. I do not like it when people criticise us, of course, but there are times when that is going to happen and we have to be bold enough to accept when that is and address it and go on talking to people.

**Q75 Mr Williams:** One thing we have not touched on is Natural England and National Parks. Could you say something about your role but specifically in terms of new designation, where designation of the New Forest and South Downs has taken such a long time, a huge amount of energy has gone into it. Some people are very happy now, some people not quite so happy. What about new designations?

**Mr Christensen:** The Secretary of State, did he not, announced three weeks ago a review of all designations and I am not absolutely clear whether that includes National Parks, to be quite frank, but certainly a review of all other designations, SSSIs, NNRs, the whole raft of them, and we welcome that. I think that is helpful, particularly as we are going into a new way of doing things maybe with the Campaign for the Farmed Environment. There are particular challenges in that campaign but I do really welcome that because it does mean that for the first time an industry is saying, “We want to deliver for

the natural environment” and we are absolutely behind that, we want to make that work. Lots of designations, Mr Williams, which are going to change over time and the review will point the direction of some of that. Specifically National Parks, National Parks are funded pretty much directly by the Department, Natural England have a particular locus in chairing the selection panel for some members that are the Secretary of State’s Members on National Parks. I hope that answers the specific question. In general terms, National Parks are iconic, they are stunningly beautiful places that inspire a lot of people and actually a lot of people make a lot of money out of National Parks. I know we hear all the talk about them constraining business, but actually in many places they promote it. My wife and I have been—not in my capacity as Chair of Natural England, I am sorry to personalise this now—in four National Parks this year and you feel better every time you go there. I think they are stunningly important to our national economy.

**Chairman:** Good. Thank you for ending our first pre-appointment hearing on a positive note. Can we thank you very much indeed for answering our many and varied questions. We now have a procedure to follow so I am going to draw the public part of our proceedings to a conclusion. May I thank Poul Christensen very much for coming before us. We now have to agree a report. To members of the public, thank you very much for your interest in coming, but now is the time if you would be kind enough to vacate your seats because we have to go into deliberative session about the report on this appointment. Thank you all very much indeed.