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REVIEW OF THE JOINT NATURE CONSERVATION COMMITTEE 2001: STAGE 1 REPORT

You wrote to us in March inviting views on the Stage 1 report for the FMPR of the Joint Nature Conservation Committee.

The JNCC is responsible for discharging the 'special functions' of English Nature, Scottish Natural Heritage and the Countryside Council for Wales which relate to GB-wide conservation matters and to the Government's wider international obligations on conservation issues. In our view, these functions are still needed and have become more relevant with the creation of the devolved administrations. The main question is, therefore, how best to discharge them.

The JNCC, as currently constituted, is essentially a partnership between the agencies and the work is done through this partnership. The seconded staff bring a wealth of knowledge and expertise. This approach is basically sound. What needs addressing is:

- a. how the Government should be involved in shaping the work to be done to fulfil the special functions;
- b. in the light of decisions on work programmes, how to secure appropriate funding on a consistent basis.

The first point might be addressed through the GIA letters to the agencies each year, where the Government, following agreement between the different administrations, could direct the agencies about the special functions and priorities within them. We don't accept that this process need be unduly cumbersome. It certainly shouldn't require legislation at a time when the Government has much greater public service delivery priorities.



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

One option to address the second point might be a new agreed formula for top-slicing the GIA for the agencies each year and better accounting arrangements. But in our view, that would be clumsy. There is already plenty of evidence of co-operation between the nature conservation agencies (and others) in such forms as the Land Use Policy Group. Each member takes its own decisions about the value of such collaborative work in achieving its own goals and works out how much it needs to contribute to ensure that its objectives are met. We believe there is no reason why the same principles should not apply to the agencies as they consider how best to discharge their GB wide obligations collectively, and how to weigh those obligations against other priorities. We do not believe the Government is any better placed to reach that view.

It follows that we would be very concerned to see the setting up of a new non-departmental public body. Such a body is:

- not necessary;
- would, unless its duties were very tightly prescribed, want to get involved in all sorts of issues at the risk of trespassing on the territory of the agencies and other bodies; overlaps would need to be negotiated away by bringing the Department in, rather than among the agencies as now.

The report makes a number of references to the involvement of the Countryside Agency and notes that for a number of reasons our Chairman has not played as active a role on the Committee as was possibly envisaged at the outset. This is partly because the meetings are quite time consuming and yet marginal to the Countryside Agency's main interests as present. The two day meeting in North Wales last week, for example, represented a big call on our Chairman's 3 day a week diary. Yet the JNCC have been unwilling to allow our Chairman to delegate this seat to another Countryside Agency Board Member or Officer; nor, unlike the nature agencies, are our officers invited to attend meetings to sit 'away from the table' and contribute where necessary. Ewen has now raised this with Angus Stirling, who has agreed to a more flexible approach.

I have looked back to understand better why Parliament decided to make the Countryside Agency Chairman a member. It seems to turn on a desire to integrate nature conservation with wider Countryside interests. The Welsh and Scottish agencies bring much of that approach since their wider functions embrace the former Countryside Commission agenda - although they do not address the economic and social dimension in quite the way the Agency can.

I am left believing that we need to raise the wider strategic debate about integration of nature conservation in the wider countryside agenda. The need for this has never been greater than now!



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

It follows from this, if I need to confirm it, that this Agency fundamentally disapproves with the conclusions of Mike Baldwin's report as summarised in paragraph 20 of the Executive Summary.

RICHARD WAKEFORD
Chief Executive