

Pre-appointment hearing:

Chair of Natural Resources Wales

June 2025

1. Introduction

The pre-appointment hearing process

- 1.** Welsh Ministers make a range of public appointments across all aspects of public life. These appointments are high profile and offer the opportunity to shape and inform many of the public services accessed by the people of Wales. Welsh Ministers must make regulated public appointments in accordance with the principles set out in the Governance Code on Public Appointments. The Commissioner for Public Appointments is responsible for providing independent assurance that appointments comply with the Code.¹
- 2.** Welsh Government and the Senedd agreed to introduce pre-appointment scrutiny by Senedd committees of certain public appointments which are of significant public interest or which will have a significant impact on the public. The aim is to further improve the scrutiny and transparency of the public appointment making process.
- 3.** Pre-appointment scrutiny generally takes the form of a public pre-appointment hearing with the preferred candidate. For appointments to these

¹ The Commissioner for Public Appointments



agreed roles, it is for the relevant committee to decide whether it wishes to carry out a pre-appointment hearing.

4. While appointments are ultimately a matter for the Welsh Ministers, a Senedd Committee may make recommendations in relation to the appointment and the Welsh Ministers must take account of the Committee's views when reaching a decision on whether to proceed with the appointment.

2. Natural Resources Wales

5. The Welsh Government created Natural Resources Wales (NRW) on 1 April 2013, merging three bodies; the Countryside Council for Wales, Environment Agency Wales, and Forestry Commission Wales. It also incorporated several Welsh Government responsibilities and, from 1 April 2016, the functions of the three Internal Drainage Boards operating wholly or partly in Wales.

6. NRW is the principal Welsh Government adviser on natural resource issues, alongside a wide range of operational and regulatory responsibilities.² As a Welsh Government Sponsored Body, it's accountable to the Welsh Ministers through the Sponsorship Minister (currently the Deputy First Minister) and subject to scrutiny by Senedd committees. NRW's Board is responsible for ensuring it exercises its statutory functions appropriately and effectively. It is also responsible to the Welsh Government for the ways in which it delivers against its annual remit letter.³

NRW's remit

7. The information for candidates document, which accompanied the advertisement for this role set out that NRW is the largest Welsh Government Sponsored Body, focussed on:

- nature's recovery
- resilience to climate change
- minimising pollution through the sustainable management of natural resources.

8. The document explains that NRW is:

² Natural Resources Wales (NRW): [Our roles and responsibilities](#)

³ Welsh Government: [Natural Resources Wales: term of government remit letter](#), Feb 2023.

- a category One emergency responder under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, working with partners to keep people and wildlife safe from environmental incidents 24/7.
- an advisor, consultee and regulator, working with industry to help them comply with regulations.
- Wales' largest land manager, supporting the timber, renewable energy and recreation sectors.
- a designator of protected and special sites, such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs).

NRW Chair and Board responsibilities

9. The NRW Board currently consists of the Chair and ten members with backgrounds in the environmental, finance, and business sectors.⁴

10. NRW's Board is responsible for defining and approving the long-term vision and strategy for NRW to meet its statutory and delegated responsibilities within the wider context of the Welsh Government's aims and policies. The Board is led by the Chair, and it usually meets six times per year.

11. The Welsh Government provided information pack for applicants says the Chair is required to work a minimum of 104 days per year, and at least one day a week. The initial appointment is between two and four years with a pay of £67,600 per year, plus expenses.⁵

12. The Deputy First Minister said the Chair will:

*"ensure that Natural Resources Wales' activities are conducted efficiently and effectively and will promote high standards of public finance, upholding the principles of regularity, propriety and value for money."*⁶

⁴ NRW: [Members of our Board](#).

⁵ Welsh Government: [NRW Appointment of Chair Information Pack for applicants](#), January 2025.

⁶ Welsh Government: [Written Statement: New Chair to the Board of Natural Resources Wales: preferred Ministerial candidate selection](#), 22 May 2025.

3. The recruitment process

13. Sir David Henshaw has served as NRW's Chair since 2018 and his appointment expires after 31 October 2025. On 31 January 2025 the Welsh Government – Public Appointments Team advertised for a Chair, NRW Board.

14. The Welsh Government engaged recruitment consultants to assist with the campaign, with the aim of attracting a large and diverse pool of candidates with the necessary skills.

15. Following a five week advertisement period, the advert closed on 7 March 2025 and 13 applications were received.

Role and person specification

16. The Welsh Government set out its expectations of how the Chair will perform in the information pack for applicants. The key responsibilities of the Chair were listed as:

- Providing vision and strategic leadership to the NRW Board.
- Facilitating Board meetings creating space to explore complex issues and encourage active engagement by all board members.
- Ensuring systems are in place to provide Board Members accurate and timely information of good quality to allow the Board to consider properly all matters before it.
- Ensuring that a Board effectiveness review is performed annually, with independent input at least every three years, and that results are acted upon.
- Demonstrating NRW's values in their leadership, modelling behaviours consistent with that values framework.
- Taking responsibility for the development of the Board, ensuring an appropriate balance of skills and experience to undertake its role and the work of its committees. Supporting continued professional development and enhanced and undertaking regular performance reviews.

- Lead the Board in establishing the vision and well-being objectives of NRW and approving a Corporate Plan, Annual Business Plans and other strategic plans and the budget to deliver these commitments.
- Promoting high standards of public finance, upholding the principles of regularity, propriety and value for money, respecting the Chief Executive's role as Accounting Officer.
- Demonstrating high standards of corporate governance and integrity, ensuring there are effective arrangements in place to provide assurance on risk management, budget management and effective internal control.
- Ensuring NRW operates within its statutory and delegated authority, that it discharges its statutory duties and operates within the parameters of the Framework Document agreed with Welsh Government.
- Overseeing the work of the Chief Executive, providing appropriate support as necessary, and holding them to account for the organisation's performance and delivery against strategic and business plan priorities, objectives and budget.
- Representing NRW in discussions with Ministers and in forging strong relations with the Senedd and other relevant parties, and fostering close partnership working and healthy relationships with key stakeholders.
- Ensuring that the Board gives sufficient consideration to Board member and executive team succession planning;
- The Chair will be responsible for ensuring that himself and the Board, collectively and individually, adhere to the Nolan seven principles of public life.⁷

Assessment Advisory Panel membership

17. The panel members were:

- Claire Bennett, Director of Environmental Sustainability, Welsh Government (Chair)

⁷ Welsh Government: [NRW Appointment of Chair Information Pack for applicants](#), January 2025.

- Aaqil Ahmed – Senior Independent Panel Member
- Craig Stephenson – Independent Panel Member.

18. The Welsh Government informed the Committee that a total of 13 applications were received. The panel recommended five of the 13 candidates for interview.

19. Interviews were conducted over two days (30 April and 2 May 2025). Following interview, the Advisory Assessment Panel considered there to be two appointable candidates.

Our view

We note that the recruitment exercise attracted 13 applicants, although only two of whom were ultimately deemed to be appointable. This is an acceptable response to the recruitment exercise.

4. The preferred candidate

20. The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Climate Change and Rural Affairs, Huw Irranca-Davies MS (the Deputy First Minister) announced Nilesh (Neil) Sachdev as his preferred candidate to take up the role as the new Chair of Natural Resources Wales' Board in a Written Statement on 22 May 2025.⁸

21. Neil Sachdev currently holds several other public and private sector positions, including:

- Chair of the East West Railway Company since 2021;
- Chair of the HM Land Registry Board since 2022;
- Commissioner for the Forestry Commission since 2025;
- Chair of the Defence Infrastructure Organisation Board for the Ministry of Defence since 2020;
- Director of Network Rail Property Limited since 2016;

⁸ Welsh Government: Written Statement: New Chair to the Board of Natural Resources Wales: preferred Ministerial candidate selection, 22 May 2025.

- Chair of Arnolfini Arts, a Contemporary Art Centre in Bristol, since 2025;
- Director of London & Continental Railways (LCR) Property since 2021.
- He will assume the role of Chair of the University of Warwick in July 2025.

22. He has formerly worked in a variety of roles, including as Chair of Hornby Plc (2024-2025); a Governor for Nuffield Health (2018-2024); Chairman of the Energy Saving Trust (2019-2022); Property and Commercial Director for Sainsburys (2007-2014) and Tesco (1979-2007).

23. In his response to the pre-appointment questionnaire, he outlines his priorities in the role, including:

- supporting NRW's CEO transition;
- engaging with the Welsh Government on NRW's financial challenges;
- positioning NRW as a national leader in nature recovery; and
- enhancing NRW's capacity, morale, and resilience.

24. He identifies financial pressures, loss of public trust, and operational strain as key risks to delivering NRW's objectives.

5. The pre-appointment hearing

25. The Committee is grateful to the Deputy First Minister for ensuring that it had the opportunity to undertake this hearing.

26. In advance of the hearing, the Welsh Government provided the Committee with:

- a briefing on the process⁹
- the information pack for applicants¹⁰
- Mr. Sachdev's CV¹¹ and his supporting statement.¹²

⁹ Welsh Government: Briefing for pre-appointment hearing, May 2025.

¹⁰ Welsh Government: NRW Appointment of Chair Information Pack for applicants, January 2025.

¹¹ CCEI Committee: Preferred candidate's CV.

¹² CCEI Committee: Preferred candidate's supporting statement, February 2025.

27. In addition, the Committee asked the preferred candidate to respond to a questionnaire, which is included at Annexe A.

The hearing

28. On 11 June 2025, the Committee held a pre-appointment hearing with Neil Sachdev. The meeting transcript is available on the Committee's website.¹³

29. In line with the guidance on pre-appointment hearings agreed between the Welsh Government and the Senedd, our role is to set out our views on the suitability of the Welsh Government's preferred candidate.

30. During the hearing, which lasted around an hour, the Committee asked Neil Sachdev a range of questions about how he would fulfil the role of Chair of NRW.

31. The session covered:

- Personal background;
- long term and short term challenges;
- managing relationships;
- the public perception of NRW; and
- organisational management.

Our view

NRW has faced considerable challenges ever since its creation and arguably, never more so than at the current time. In the Committee's recent report following our annual scrutiny of NRW we commented that:

"it is clear that NRW is an organisation facing un-paralleled challenges. It does so during a period of change in its leadership team. NRW recently announced the retirement of its Chief Executive Officer, whilst the Chairman's term of office will come to an end in October 2025."

NRW is an organisation undergoing significant change. The Case for Change programme will involve widespread redundancies and redeployments and impact on front line services across the organisation, just as it deals with the fall out from the £19m bill for unpaid tax liabilities to HMRC. Looking forward to the

¹³CCEI Committee, Record of proceedings, 11 June 2025.

next year, the outgoing Chair, Sir David Henshaw, commented to the Committee, “it’s going to be a rough old 12 months or so”¹⁴. Against this backdrop, this is a highly significant appointment in Welsh public life. The incoming Chair must provide strategic leadership to the Board in its role in supporting a new Chief Executive to deliver the organisational improvements that are needed.

The Committee notes that Neil Sachdev has an impressive CV and undoubtedly brings a range of relevant skills and experience to this challenging role. His experience in non-executive positions, in both the public and private sector, suggest that he has the management and governance experience for a role of this stature.

The Committee also notes that Mr. Sachdev was able to demonstrate a long-standing engagement with environmental issues from various positions that would be beneficial as he embeds himself within the organisation.

However, Members of the Committee also had concerns around the appointment in a number of areas.

Mr. Sachdev’s current roles are many and will be demanding of both his time and his energy. The Committee’s expectation is that the Welsh Government, in making this appointment, will have established beyond doubt that Mr. Sachdev will be able to devote the time and the intellectual space to providing the leadership that this post demands. We question how that could be achieved without a rapid reassessment of his current commitments.

The Committee was also concerned by a lack of knowledge and experience of working within Wales and the social fabric of the country, its people and organisations. This is a challenging role, and we believe Mr Sachdev must continue to familiarise himself with the ecosystem in which he will be working. Further, we believe Mr Sachdev demonstrated a lack of understanding of NRW’s recent history. We would not expect Mr Sachdev, at this stage, to have a deep understanding of such matters and gaining an understanding of the lessons learnt from NRW’s recent Case for Change exercise should be a priority.

The Committee would urge the Welsh Government and Neil Sachdev to reflect on these points.

¹⁴ CCEI Committee, Record of proceedings, 12 March 2025, paragraph 27.

For the reasons set out, there was a difference of opinion within the Committee about whether to endorse Mr Sachdev. Nevertheless, a majority of the Committee, felt that, on balance, the appointment should be endorsed.

6. The Committee's conclusion

32. On the basis of the evidence received, a majority of the Committee concluded that, on balance, they endorse the Welsh Government's preferred candidate, Neil Sachdev for the role of Chair of Natural Resources Wales.

Annexe A: Questionnaire response

Personal background
Do you have any business or financial connections, or other commitments, which might give rise to a conflict of interest in carrying out your duties, or impact on the time you are able to commit to the role?
I have no business or financial interests that would conflict with the responsibilities of Chair of Natural Resources Wales (NRW). I currently serve as Chair of East West Railway Company, a Commissioner at the Forestry Commission, and will assume the role of Chair of the University of Warwick in July 2025. I am confident I can dedicate the time and focus necessary to fulfil the responsibilities of Chair of NRW. I am accustomed to managing complex portfolios and would prioritise the needs of NRW in line with public service expectations and ministerial accountability. Should any potential conflict arise in the future, I would proactively declare and manage it in line with governance best practice.
Have you ever held any post or undertaken any activity that might cast doubt on your political impartiality?
No. I have never held any elected political position, nor undertaken any activity that would call into question my impartiality. I have worked constructively with ministers and governments across political parties, and have consistently upheld the principles of public service and impartial governance.
How were you recruited: were you encouraged to apply, and if so, by whom?
I applied in response to contact from a head hunter acting on NRW's behalf and through the open public appointments process. I was aware of the role through public service networks and through my work as a Commissioner at the Forestry Commission. The role aligns closely with my skills and values, and I felt strongly motivated to put myself forward.
Please explain how your experience to date has equipped you to fulfil your new responsibilities.
I bring over 30 years' experience leading large, complex organisations across public and private sectors. My executive career at Tesco and Sainsbury's included operational leadership, transformation, and capital investment at scale. More recently, I have chaired East West Railway Company (a government-owned infrastructure body), contributed to environmental governance as a Forestry Commissioner, and led organisational development in higher education, health, and property sectors. In some cases, I have had to manage turnrounds of improving performance and board effectiveness too. I am experienced in governance, financial oversight, public accountability, and stakeholder engagement – including with ministers, civil servants, regulators,

industry groups, communities, and NGOs. At the ALBS I work with, I have worked directly on climate, land use, biodiversity, and public access issues — giving me a strong foundation to support NRW's statutory and strategic objectives. I also bring calm, values-driven leadership under pressure, and a genuine personal commitment to Wales.

Performance of the role

What will be your key priorities in your new role?

In the first instance:

- Supporting a successful CEO transition and strengthening board cohesion.
- Engaging constructively with Welsh Government on NRW's financial challenges and long-term sustainability. Delivering the Business plan and Strategy.
- Listening to staff and stakeholders to understand how NRW can rebuild trust and deliver confidently.

Over the longer term:

- Positioning NRW as a national leader in delivering nature recovery, climate resilience, and land stewardship. Ensuring there is real public Value being delivered.
- Enhancing the organisation's capability, morale, and resilience to meet its growing responsibilities.
- Ensuring NRW's regulatory role is risk-based, proportionate, and clearly understood by the public and partners.

What criteria should be used to judge your performance over your term of office?

- The effectiveness of the Board in setting/delivering its strategy, supporting the executive, and providing accountability.
- Strengthened relationships with Welsh Government and stakeholders.
- Improved organisational confidence, clarity of purpose, and staff engagement.
- Progress in NRW's delivery against its core duties: nature recovery, environmental regulation, flood resilience, and community engagement.
- Public trust and perception of NRW's leadership and responsiveness.

The organisation
What criteria should be used to judge the performance of NRW as a whole?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Delivery against statutory functions and ministerial objectives. - Tangible progress in climate adaptation, biodiversity restoration, water quality and land management. - Financial stability and efficiency. - Public engagement and trust, especially in rural, underrepresented, and at-risk communities. - Responsiveness and resilience as a Category 1 responder during environmental crises.
What do you see as the key risks to delivering NRW's objectives?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Continued financial pressure limiting the organisation's ability to invest in core delivery and staffing. - Loss of public trust due to reduced services or delayed progress on environmental targets. - Operational strain from growing responsibilities without matched resourcing. - Complexity in stakeholder landscapes (e.g. farming, regulation, land access) that can delay or derail implementation without strong engagement. - Climate-related emergencies that could stretch NRW's capacity.
What do you consider to have been the main successes and failures of NRW? What lessons can be learned from the failures?
<p>Successes include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Designation and protection of Wales's most important natural sites. - Delivery of peatland restoration and woodland expansion projects. - Resilient flood and emergency response under difficult conditions. - Maintenance of its role as a trusted environmental regulator. <p>Failures/Challenges include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Repeated financial pressures leading to public criticism around service reduction. - Delayed biodiversity targets and concerns over NRW's delivery capacity. - Communication challenges with stakeholders during controversial planning or designation processes. <p>Lessons:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The importance of financial resilience and early planning for resource pressure.

- A need for more proactive and consistent public and stakeholder engagement.
- Supporting staff morale and capability through change is critical to long-term delivery

What is your assessment of the public profile and reputation of the organisation?

NRW is widely recognised as a critical environmental body in Wales – but its reputation has at times been shaped more by its challenges than its achievements. Public concern over flooding, pollution, and service cuts has made trust fragile in some areas, despite strong work by frontline teams.

There is a clear opportunity – and a public expectation – for NRW to lead confidently, communicate clearly, and demonstrate visible progress. As Chair, I would support the organisation in being a trusted, expert voice on nature, land and climate, while strengthening relationships with communities, government, and delivery partners.