

No 287

THE NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM

AT A MEETING

ON 20 May 2026

AT 1300

Present

Lord Tony Hall of Birkenhead (Chair)
David Craig
Mark Read CBE
Shahpur Kabraji online
Professor Yadvinder Malhi FRS CBE
Professor Katharine Robson Brown
Dr Sarah E Thomas
Sally MacGregor
Tanuja Randery CBE online
Professor Dame Jane Francis DCMG FRS Apologies

In Attendance

Dr Douglas Gurr (Director)
Helen Whitehouse (Chief Operating Officer)
Siobhán Tighe (Chief Financial Officer)
Dr Tim Littlewood (Executive Director of Science)
Keith Jennings (Director of Estates, Projects and Masterplanning)
Dr Alex Burch (Director of Public Programmes)
Dr Sarah Long (Head of Registry) for item 7

Julia Evans (Board Secretary), Molly Harrison-Edge (Development & Director's Office Project Officer), Siobhan Murphy (Executive Assistant)

Preliminary Items:

2672 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies received from Jane Francis.

2673 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND REGISTER OF INTERESTS (01a)

There were not changes or updates to the Register of Interests recorded by the Board Secretary.

2674 MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 26 FEBRAURY 2026 (01b)

The minutes of the meeting of Trustees held on 26 February 2026 were confirmed as a true record and signed off by the Chair.

2675 CHAIR'S REPORT

The Chair welcomed the Board of Trustees and reported that he had spoken at the all-staff NHM Update earlier that day.

2676 DIRECTOR'S REPORT (02)

The Director (DG) provided a summary and update on recent activity. It was reported that the Natural History Museum was the UK's leading visitor attraction for 2025, recording 7.1 million visitors, and is ranked second globally. Several major events held during the period since the last Board were highlighted, including the *Business of Biodiversity* and *Generation Hope* events, and there were updates on the global coverage of *Wildlife Photographer of the Year* and a cross promotion initiative for WPY marketing campaign featuring NHM branding on TfL hire bikes.

DG also shared updates on developments at Thames Valley Science Park, the Titanosaur on Tour programme, and recent Science news.

The Board discussed the outcome of the Business Rates tribunal appeal for South Kensington, noting that NHM has been successful in its challenge with the Valuation Office and the VO's subsequent decision to drop their appeal of the tribunal decision. The Chief Operating Officer (HW) outlined that NHM was the first national museum to challenge the rates methodology (for nationals) and hoped that it would help others in their subsequent appeals e.g. some others were appealing their 2023 rateable values. HW shared an estimate of the associated rebate and anticipated future savings. .

The Director raised the topic of International Charging. And shared how National Museums are responding following DCMS's announcement to do a review. NHM's Director of Commercial (AF) is involved with a DCMS working group working with those from the other 14 DCMS sponsored museums to provide evidence, analysis and feedback working towards a HMG position on the topic in December 2026. The COO noted that each national Museum has its own operating model and the demographics of visitors was a very mixed picture so difficult to see how a standardised policy position could work. The Director noted that Trustees are responsible for any such decision for NHM and it was agreed that the Executive would update the Board on the working group's progress regularly. There was also a discussion on alternative methods to seek further income e.g. through more targeted donation approaches.

Trustees also enquired on Forward Public Programme updates and National Education Nature Park Programme, shared in the last meeting.

2677 FINANCIAL REVIEW 25-26 Performance & 26-27 Budget Update (03a,03b, 04)

The Chief Financial Officer (ST) gave a summary of the final budget position for 25/26 and clarified points on the Reserves position.

The updated Budget position for 26/27 was shared for information having been approved at the previous meeting and outline three year plan. ST highlighted the need for organisation wide communication, particularly in relation to staffing, resourcing, and the future organisational profile, which is currently aligned to a stretch target. ST also highlighted that most of the projected expenditure falls within the 2027–2031 period and further information on Reserves will be shared with Trustees at the next meeting.

The Board Approved the reserves statement to be used in the National Lottery Heritage Fund application for the 150th Programme.

2678 Developing our Gardens and Galleries (05)

The Chief Finance Officer (ST) presented the Financial Plan to 2031, confirming a total cost envelope of £148m, which the organisation aims to keep flat. ST highlighted an outstanding target of £16m,

noting the need for a nimble approach focused on fundraising, operational prioritisation, and refining the cost profile as the plan develops.

Trustees acknowledged the £66m fundraising target and discussed its implications for the 150 campaign, noting the growing pressure to secure additional income and maintain momentum throughout the period.

Chief Operating Officer (HW) introduced the 150 programme, noting that its early phase has been iterative and focused on building capability within the team, changing ways of working and refining budgets. HW outlined the programme structure, explaining that each project has both a Project Lead and an Executive level Programme Owner, supporting a culture of learning across activities and ways of working.

Director of Estates, Projects and Masterplanning (KJ) updated Trustees on progress across the range of capital works underway on site. Key points included the management of visitor flow through buildings while works are in progress. Trustees asked about interdependencies with the *NHM Unlocked* programme, and KJ confirmed that all works are carefully sequenced to enable change while maintaining the widest possible use of spaces. Trustees also raised questions about staff accommodation; KJ reassured them that the works do not affect back-of-house areas, while noting ongoing considerations around staff-to-desk ratios and evolving ways of working.

Director of Public Programmes (AB) updated Trustees on plans for content development, outlining ambitions to open a new gallery or space each year until 2031, with content aligned to science research themes. AB highlighted visitor interest in the Dinosaur galleries and opportunities to commercialise the space while developing complementary content. Trustees discussed the thematic direction of future exhibitions, including questions from David Craig about the inclusion of Health within exhibition narratives and cultural stories, particularly in *Fixing Our Broken Planet*.

There was further discussion about the visitor offer during periods of capital work. HW noted that the programme is being carefully planned to manage expectations around maintaining visitor flow. AF added that a Guest Experience Working Group is focusing on this issue to ensure a museum-wide approach, supported by the Customer & Visitor Experience team's expertise in managing visitor movement.

Trustees noted that evaluation is being used to inform future exhibitions, with content ideas being co-designed, tested and iterated as new galleries are developed. There was also discussion about the naming of galleries and the need to differentiate clearly between spaces and directions as visitors move through the site and link up with brand and further opportunities.

Trustees explored the use of AI and digital technologies, including digital twins. Kate Robson Brown (KRB) asked how the physical and digital experience is being integrated within the visitor journey. AF reported that significant work has been undertaken—and continues—to improve the digital information provided to visitors in advance of their visit. HW noted that the programme's iterative approach is supporting more agile ways of working, with teams increasingly encouraged to test, pilot and refine approaches. Trustees queried whether it was possible to map audience data on how to engage audiences. There was discussion on the challenges of the website and the digital infrastructure to best align with this work. Communications, Digital Marketing and Publishing teams in particular are adapting to these changes and building capability to work more flexibly to adapt for the visitor and these updates will be brought to the Board in a future meeting. The Director

emphasised that the organisation's digital priorities lie in major scientific and data-infrastructure initiatives, rather than maintaining or expanding front-end digital products.

The Urban Nature (Gardens) Project was shared as a transformative project we have developed lessons from particularly in ways of working. Deep Dives and Correction of Errors have been used as internal tools and strategic meetings to effectively work through any challenges and issues.

Standing Items:

2679 MAJOR PROJECTS UPDATE (06)

The Chief Operating Officer (HW) presented a summary of the major projects report, with particular focus on PBIF. HW confirmed that at the end of the 2025/26 financial year, the organisation delivered on a significant PBIF budget within £1k of budget, noting this as a significant achievement in project and financial management. The Board acknowledged the strong performance and expressed appreciation for the teams involved. HW provided an update on the NHM Unlocked programme. New staff have recently joined the collections move team, strengthening delivery capacity. Operational considerations are being incorporated into forward planning to ensure programme resilience and efficiency. HW reported that construction and programme development activities are progressing at pace, with key milestones currently on track.

The Board discussed the RECODE programme, noting the programme has an ambitious timeline to end March 2027. A transition period is being progressed to support continuity and clarify programme ownership. David Craig has offered time and expertise to support technical aspects and overall ambition. The Board welcomed this support and emphasised the importance of clear governance as the programme progresses.

An update was provided on the National Education Nature Park forward programme with collaboration with the RHS continues to be a central focus and success stories from participating schoolchildren. Trustees offered their support where helpful to advance the programme's objectives.

The Board also received an update on the 150 Campaign. Development continues work to secure philanthropic funding for the future Children's Gallery and Dinosaur Gallery.

The Board noted the update and reaffirmed the strategic importance of securing investment for these flagship galleries.

2680 QUARTERLY COLLECTIONS REPORT (07)

Head of Registry (SL) presented the quarterly Collections Update.

Items to note:

2681 SUBCOMMITTEE REPORTS (08)

AUDIT AND RISK COMMITTEE

Shahpur Kabraji shared an update from the June ARC. The Budget and financial report was shared at the last meeting and the Annual Governance statement was approved. The DiSSCo programme was noted to have a governance review with assurance that over-governance should not be in place.

The Board received an update on organisational assurance levels. Overall assurance was assessed as satisfactory and confirmed to be within legislative requirements. It was noted that procurement compliance remains challenging when measured against published guidance.

The Board was informed that associated risk levels are being actively managed, supported by the establishment of a central registry for contracts, which is now in place and operational. The ARC also discussed continued monitoring of procurement compliance risks and the effectiveness of the central contract registry.

SCIENCE ADVISORY / COLLECTIONS ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Yadvinder Malhi shared that the merged meetings will continue going forwards. Formalising of the Terms of Reference will take place at the upcoming meeting but has been shared with the Board of Trustees for information.

INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Sally MacGregor provided an update on the TVSP programme, including current progress and operation interface between contractors. Alignment on responsibilities and coordination protocols remains a priority. It was noted that contingency funding should be directed primarily toward mechanical and electrical works as well as the fit-out phase. The disposal timeline for the Wandsworth site indicates that FY 28/29 will be the key period affecting this project. A preferred agent has been identified.

The Board was informed of challenges arising with RBKC regarding listed building consent. Issues raised by the local council may require escalation within RBKC to ensure timely resolution. The Board agreed that early escalation should be considered if delays persist. A new permanent home has been secured for the Osteology Store. The Board acknowledged this as a positive development and noted the importance of maintaining continuity of operations during the transition.

2682 EVENT DATES FOR THE DIARY (09a)

Event dates for the diary for 2026 were noted.

2683 AGENDA ITEMS FOR FUTURE BOARD MEETINGS (09b)

The rolling agenda for future meetings was noted.

2684 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

The Chair and Director thanked Mark Read for his tenure as a commercial trustee, with particular acknowledgement of his guidance in the fields of AI and communications, which has materially enhanced the organisation's capabilities. The Director was delighted to announce that Mark had accepted the position of an Emeritus Trustee.

The Board discussed the co-opted trustee role position.

The Chair thanked the Board and secretariat for their time and preparation, and the meeting ended.

2685 DATES OF NEXT MEETINGS

- 2 July 2026
- 15 September 2026 (Strategy Away Day)
- 17 November 2026
- 23 February 2027