

JNCC Interim CEO appointed

News story

Gemma Harper has been appointed as the Interim Chief Executive of JNCC following an open competition.



Gemma Harper has been appointed as the Interim Chief Executive of JNCC following an open competition. Currently Deputy Director for Marine Policy in core Defra, Gemma will take up her new role in March 2021 once Marcus Yeo steps down.

Earlier in 2020, Gemma co-led the Food Vulnerability Directorate for several months as part of Defra's coronavirus response. Gemma is a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences, and external advisor to both the European Centre for the Environment and Human Health (ECEHH) and the Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement partnership (CAPE).

A social scientist by training, Gemma spent eight years in criminal justice research at the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice prior to joining Defra in 2010. From 2010 to 2017, Gemma was Defra's Chief Social Scientist. She has been awarded the Defra Leadership Award twice and co-led the Food Vulnerability Directorate to win a Defra Team Award and to be shortlisted in the current Civil Service Awards. Gemma is a University of Cambridge Centre for Science and Policy Fellow and a graduate of the Civil Service Senior Leaders Scheme.

On hearing of her appointment, Gemma said:

I am delighted to be appointed as JNCC's Interim Chief Executive. It is a brilliant time to be joining JNCC given the unparalleled opportunities in 2021 to take action globally and within the UK to tackle biodiversity loss and the climate crisis. Evidence is in my DNA and I am delighted to be able to lead this world-leading science-based organisation. I bring my love of nature and passion for inclusion to JNCC. I am really looking forward to taking up this exciting role.

Permanent Secretary Tamara Finkelstein said:

Congratulations to Gemma on her appointment as JNCC's Interim CEO. Gemma has not only done outstanding work as Defra's Deputy Director of Marine Policy. She has also done a huge amount to promote equality, diversity and inclusion as Defra's Deputy Race Champion, as well as founding and co-chairing the Civil Service Network for Nature. I'd like to thank her for all her hard work and wish her all the best at JNCC on behalf of everyone here in Defra.

Director General for Environment Rural and Marine, David Hill said:

I'm delighted that Gemma will be taking up this important role at such a pivotal time, when the JNCC's work is critical to our delivery of the ambitions in the 25 Year Environment Plan and the Government's environmental aspirations at home and internationally. I'm also hugely grateful to Marcus Yeo for his service as Chief Executive and his massive contribution to the work of Defra Group.

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Jimmy Lai: Foreign Secretary's statement

Press release

Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab comments on the charging of Jimmy Lai under the National Security Law in Hong Kong.



Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said:

The Hong Kong National Security Law breaches the internationally-binding Joint Declaration, and is now being used to charge Jimmy Lai. This highlights the authorities' continued attacks on the rights and freedoms of its people.

We have raised this case with the authorities in Hong Kong and call on them to end their targeting of Lai and other pro-democracy voices.

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Intimidation in Public Life: letters from Impress

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UK 'comet chaser' to go where no probe has been before

Thales Alenia Space, who have three sites in the UK and employ nearly 200 highly skilled engineers and scientists, have won the contract to design the mother ship for the Comet Interceptor mission, which will see one main spacecraft and two smaller robotic probes – built by the Japanese Space Agency – travel to an as-yet unidentified comet, and map it in three dimensions.

Comets are what is left over when a planetary system forms and in each ancient object is preserved information about the formation of the Solar System 4.6 billion years ago.

Once in space, Comet Interceptor will wait in a parking orbit – possibly for years – until a suitable target has been spotted by astronomers. It will then set out on an intercept course, deploying the two smaller probes, which will make extremely close passes of the comet's nucleus and beam their data back to the main craft.

This new ambush tactic is the first of its kind. The fly-by of the two probes, which are roughly 30cm in length, is likely to take just a few hours but could illuminate conditions that prevailed more than 4 billion years ago.

Science Minister Amanda Solloway said:

The UK's space industry is thriving and this out-of-this-world mission is testament to our world-leading expertise.

I am very proud that scientists and engineers in Bristol and Harwell will be designing the Comet Interceptor spacecraft – their incredible work will not only further our understanding of the evolution of comets but help unlock the mysteries of the Universe.

The scientific mission was originally proposed by an international team led by UK academics from University College London and the University of Edinburgh, among others.

Previous missions have studied comets trapped in short-period orbits around the Sun, meaning they have been significantly altered by our star's light and heat. Breaking from that mould, Comet Interceptor will target a pristine comet on its first approach to the Sun.

The scientists are likely to target a comet travelling from the Oort Cloud – a band of icy debris that lies about halfway between the Sun and the next nearest star.

This debris was formed during the conception of the Solar System, but was rapidly ejected to its outermost edge. Unlike more familiar comets, their surface will not have been vaporised by the Sun's energy – a process that leads to dust building up on a comet, obscuring its original state.

Once the probes reach a pristine comet, they will study and scrutinise the chemical composition of it, with one aim being to evaluate whether similar objects may have brought water to planet Earth in the past.

Andrew Stanniland, CEO of Thales Alenia Space in the UK commented:

I am delighted ESA has once again placed its trust in our scientists and engineers at Thales Alenia Space in the UK who have excellent heritage from previous scientific missions such as Giotto and Rosetta.

We all look forward to supporting this exciting and unprecedented scientific mission to uncover more information about the origins of our Universe

The comet interceptor is the first of the European Space Agency's new class of what it calls "fast" missions. Each mission must weigh less than 1,000kg

and launch within eight years of selection, so they can hitchhike into space on an already scheduled launch.

Comet Interceptor will launch in 2028 alongside the Ariel space telescope – the UK-backed ESA mission to study the atmospheres of exoplanets orbiting other distant stars.

In 1986, the UK-led mission to Halley's Comet became the first to observe a cometary nucleus.

Change of Her Majesty's Ambassador to Japan

Press release

Ms Julia Longbottom CMG has been appointed Her Majesty's Ambassador to Japan.



Ms Julia Longbottom CMG has been appointed Her Majesty's Ambassador to Japan in succession to Mr Paul Madden CMG who will be retiring from the Diplomatic Service. Ms Longbottom will take up her appointment in March 2021.

Full name: Julia Longbottom

Married to: Richard Sciver

Children: Three (two daughters, one son)

2020 FCO, Director, Coronavirus Task Force

2016 to 2020 FCO, Director for Consular Services, Consular Directorate

2012 to 2016 Tokyo, Minister and Deputy Head of Mission

2009 to 2012 FCO, Head, Far Eastern (later China) Department

2006 to 2009 UK Trade & Investment, Director, Strategy and Human Resources

2003 to 2006 Warsaw, Director of Trade & Investment and Consul General

1998 to 2002 The Hague, Head of Political and EU Section
1994 to 1997 FCO, Section Head, Nationality and Immigration, Hong Kong Department
1990 to 1993 Tokyo, Second Secretary – Political
1988 European Commission Brussels, Stagiaire in Office of Lord Cockfield
1987 New York, UK Permanent Mission to the UN, Second Secretary – UNGA Team
1986 Joined FCO

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