



Department  
for Environment,  
Food & Rural Affairs

Saxton Bampfylde

## **Candidate Briefing Pack**

**Director General, Group Chief Operating Officer  
Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs**

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## Opening Message from Paul Kissack

Permanent Secretary at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

I am delighted to invite applications for the role of **Director General, Group Chief Operating Officer (COO)** at Defra.

Defra's work is central to the Government's mission to grow the economy and raise living standards. From reforming the water system and strengthening food security, to showing how economic growth and nature recovery go hand in hand, to supporting profitable farming and resetting our trading relationship with the EU, our work underpins everyday life, national security and resilience.

Working with Defra's executive team and the CEOs of our arm's-length bodies, the Group Chief Operating Officer ensures the group is supported by high-quality corporate services. The role leads key functions including digital and data, finance, commercial, HR and property for the core department and Defra's main arm's-length bodies through a shared services model.

This is an exciting and significant leadership opportunity as Defra accelerates its transformation into a digitally enabled organisation, delivering responsive, high-quality and efficient services for stakeholders and the public.

The Director General, Group Chief Operating Officer will join the leadership team of a department of over 6,200 people and a wider Defra Group of more than 34,000, helping create the conditions for colleagues to deliver their best for the public.

The role calls for exceptional leadership and the ability to deliver major operational improvements across organisational boundaries, making a meaningful contribution to public service, the environment, the economy and national security.

If you share our ambition to strengthen Defra's operational excellence and ensure the department is ready for the decade ahead, I look forward to receiving your application.

To hear more please [click here](#).

## About Defra

Defra is a ministerial department with a clear and expanding mission: to **restore nature, support economic growth and enhance national security and resilience**.

At its core, Defra sees water, food, land, seas and nature not as adjacent to the economy, but as the infrastructure on which economic prosperity depends. A thriving farming sector, clean and reliable water systems, productive seas and effective trading relationships are fundamental to long-term growth and livelihoods across the UK.

Defra also plays a critical role in national security and resilience. The department leads on major risks including biosecurity, food security, flood resilience and protection from environmental hazards. As geopolitical instability and climate volatility increase, these responsibilities are growing in strategic importance.

Alongside this, Defra is a science-led organisation of national significance, with one of the largest research and development portfolios in government, thousands of scientists, and major investments in world-leading capability, including biosecurity.

Together, this positions Defra as a department with real-world impact, shaping outcomes that people feel directly in their everyday lives.

This is underpinned by our Secretary of State's four priorities:

- Restoring nature while supporting development
- Reforming our water system so it drives growth, protects consumers and enhances the environment
- Backing British farming and food industry to boost production
- Resetting trading relationships, including with the EU

Defra is a ministerial department with principal locations in London, Bristol, York, and Newcastle. Defra currently employs 6,200 civil servants, but has a broader workforce of 34,000 across its agencies and public bodies.

Find out more online [Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-environment-food-and-rural-affairs)

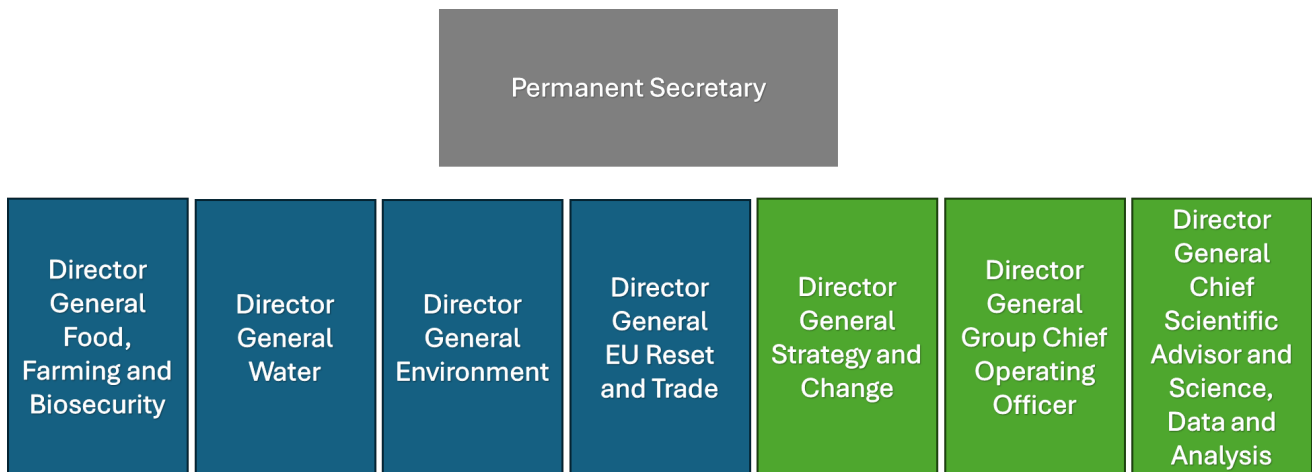
## What does the role involve?

The Director General, Group Chief Operating Officer will be the strategic leader responsible for delivering and modernising Defra’s corporate services. They will champion digital transformation, and position Defra as a leader in technology-enabled public service delivery.

This is a role of exceptional scale and influence, leading a broad suite of corporate services across a system of over 34,000 people and multiple agencies that underpin the UK’s economic and national security. This includes digital and data, finance, HR, commercial and property for a breadth of organisations on different terms and conditions including the DEFRA (6,200 civil servants), the Environment Agency (13,000 public servants), Natural England (2,500 public servants), the Animal Plant and Health Security Agency (3,000 civil servants) and Rural Payments Agency (2,000 civil servants), in addition to smaller arm’s-length bodies. They will also be responsible for delivering major programmes including the National Biosecurity Centre, a new world-leading science facility that will protect the UK from animal disease, and the Defra’s rollout of “Synergy”, a shared services transformation programme that will transform how business critical functions are delivered across Defra, DWP, Ministry of Justice and the Home Office, to allow the Department to focus on delivering outcomes for the public.

The Group Chief Operating Officer will drive innovation and modernisation, from embedding automation and artificial intelligence to delivering shared services integration and digital transformation. They will support fellow Directors General and arm’s-length body CEOs to position Defra as a leader in operational excellence across government.

As a member of Defra’s Executive Committee, they will provide visible leadership, influencing cross government operational strategy and representing Defra at the most senior forums. They will inspire senior leaders, foster inclusion, and build capability to ensure the organisation thrives through change. This is a role for an outstanding strategic leader, someone who combines intellectual rigour with operational mastery, who can navigate complexity with confidence, and who has the credibility and resilience to lead transformation at the highest level.



**Key elements of the role include, working closely with the Defra executive team and arm's-length body CEOs to:**

- Shape and deliver the strategic vision for corporate services, setting priorities for HR, finance, digital and data, property, and commercial across the Defra Group to ensure these functions enable delivery of Defra outcomes.
- Drive digital and data transformation at scale, from tackling Defra's legacy IT to digitising services for stakeholders and customers to improve efficiency and service quality, to embedding automation and artificial intelligence.
- Deliver a high-quality financial management and advice function across Defra and its arm's-length bodies, providing clear, timely and authoritative advice to Ministers, Accounting Officers and senior leaders, including oversight of financial strategy, budgets, and governance to ensure compliance and value for money.
- Deliver a HR service that enables staff to perform at their best and develop future-focused workforce strategies to build a high-performing, inclusive culture that attracts, retains and develops talent.
- Shape commercial and property strategies, ensuring procurement delivers value and sustainability, and leading property planning to provide safe, modern, and cost-effective workplaces aligned with government property standards.
- Oversee the National Biosecurity Centre (NBC) Weybridge programme, Defra's investment to rebuild and modernise the UK's critical animal disease laboratories, securing the nation's ability to prevent, detect and respond to animal and zoonotic disease threats.
- Play a leadership role in the cross-government Synergy programme and oversee the delivery of, and the rollout in Defra, a project which will transform how business critical services such as people, finance and commercial functions are delivered across DWP, Defra, the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office.
- Champion customer-centric service delivery, embedding a service-oriented mindset across corporate services to ensure responsiveness to ALBs and internal stakeholders while driving efficiency and value for money.
- Promote a culture of innovation and agility, driving continuous improvement and embedding agile decision making to respond effectively to emerging challenges in a complex, high-pressure environment.
- Play a full role in the Defra executive team, creating an empowering and inclusive environment in which people are able to do their best work in pursuit of Defra's outcomes.

## What capabilities will you bring?

To be successful in this role you will need to be an outstanding leader. We will assess your capability against the following criteria:

- A proven track record of driving large-scale and complex organisational modernisation, shaping and delivering coherent corporate services that enable a large, complex organisation to achieve better outcomes for stakeholders and customers.
- High credibility and demonstrable experience leading transformation and helping organisations become more digitally enabled, including redesigning services, embedding technology and data-driven ways of working, and delivering sustainable organisational change across corporate functions.
- Outstanding people leadership, actively shaping a positive, inclusive culture and building high-performing teams. Commitment to diversity and inclusion, fostering an environment where talent thrives and different perspectives are valued.
- Outstanding stakeholder engagement, influencing skills and resilience with the ability to operate confidently at the highest levels of the public and/or private sectors. Able to build alliances, resolve conflict and secure consensus on strategic priorities, while balancing political, operational and reputational risk with integrity and composure in high-profile, pressurised contexts.
- Finance and resource leadership at scale, with experience overseeing significant budgets, investment portfolios, and prioritisation decisions that enable strategic outcomes and demonstrate value for money.

## Detailed Terms

- This role is being offered on a **permanent, loan, or secondment** basis.
- The salary for this post is **£170,000 per annum**. Salary will be agreed in line with the civil service pay rules in place on the date of your appointment.
- Applications are welcome from both full-time and part-time candidates. All flexible working arrangements will be considered (including job-share arrangements), noting there is a requirement for a minimum of 0.8 FTE for the role. We operate an expectation of working at least 60% of time in the office.
- You can be based in one of our Defra Hubs **Newcastle, Bristol, York, or London**, or non-hub locations **Birmingham, Exeter, Reading, Leeds, Nottingham or Warrington** noting the role will require regular attendance in the London office but much of the role can be done from any of these hubs.

Please note that:

- **Civil Service pension** arrangements will apply, and you will have the option of joining the Civil Service Alpha Pension Scheme, a defined benefit (DB) pension scheme. The current employer contribution rate for this salary level is just under 30% of salary as explained at [Civil Service Pension Scheme](#)
- The role includes **25 days annual leave**, increasing on a sliding scale to 30 days after five years' service. (This is in addition to eight public holidays and one privilege day).
- The level of security clearance for this role is Security Clearance (SC). More information about the vetting process can be found [here](#).
- You will need to hold the right **immigration status and nationality requirements for this role** - please ask [maria.dodson@saxbam.com](mailto:maria.dodson@saxbam.com) if you have any questions.
- Unfortunately, we will not be able to reimburse you for any **expenses** incurred as part of this recruitment process.

## Selection Process

We design our recruitment processes to reflect our values-based approach to HR and to ensure that shortlisted candidates have the opportunity to meet key stakeholders for the role, before they join us.

Our recruitment process is underpinned by the principle of recruitment based on fair and open competition with decisions made based on merit, as outlined in the Civil Service Commissioners' Recruitment Principles. More detailed information about the Civil Service Commission and their role can be found [here](#).

If you feel your application has not been treated in accordance with these principles and you wish to make a complaint, you should contact [maria.dodson@saxbam.com](mailto:maria.dodson@saxbam.com) in the first instance. If you are not satisfied with the response you receive, you can contact the Civil Service Commission, which regulates all civil service recruitment.

The Selection Committee for this role will be **Chaired by Elizabeth Hambley**, a Civil Service Commissioner and will include **Paul Kissack**, the Permanent Secretary of Defra, together with a **member of the Civil Service Senior Leadership Committee (SLC)** and one other. We expect the process for this role to be as follows:

- **The closing date for applications will be 23:55 on Thursday 11 June**
- A longlist of the application will take place during w/c 15 June
- Preliminary interviews with Saxton Bampfylde will take place during w/c 22 & 29 June
- A shortlist of the applications will then take place during w/c 6 July
- Shortlisted candidates will then be invited to the following sessions during weeks commencing 6 & 13 July:
  - an **Individual Leadership Assessment**; and
  - **Supplementary stakeholder meetings** with the Secretary of State for Defra (accompanied by a Civil Service Commission representative), a roundtable with key customers of the post and may also include an informal conversation with Paul Kissack (Permanent Secretary).
- Inputs from all these elements of the selection process will be incorporated into the interview process. **Interviews will be held in week commencing 20 July in person.** Candidates may be asked to give a presentation at the start of the interview.

Full details about the assessment phase will be provided to shortlisted candidates. We recognise that there are a number of steps in this process and, whilst we plan to conduct this phase in face-to-face sessions, we will do our best to arrange the sessions in a way that works for you.

## How to Apply

Saxton Bampfylde Ltd is acting as an employment agency advisor to Defra on this appointment.

**The closing date for applications will be 23:55 on Thursday 11 June.**

Candidates should apply for this role through our website at **roles.saxbam.com** using code **OFRN**.

Click on the 'apply' button and follow the instructions to upload the following:

1. **A CV** (no longer than 2 pages) setting out your career history, with key responsibilities and achievements. Please ensure you have provided reasons for any gaps within the last two years.
2. **A Statement of Suitability** (no more than 1000 words) explaining how you consider your personal skills, qualities and experience provide evidence of your suitability for the role, with particular reference to the criteria in the person specification.
3. **A declaration of interest form.**

Applications will be sifted on CV and statement of suitability.

As part of the online application process, you will be asked a number of diversity-related questions. If you do not wish to provide a declaration on any of the particular characteristics, you will have the option to select 'prefer not to say'. The information you provide when submitting your application will help us monitor our progress towards the Civil Service becoming the most inclusive employer.

Please note that references and open-source due diligence checks (including into social media accounts) will be undertaken for all short-listed candidates.

This vacancy is part of the [A Great Place to Work for Veterans](#) initiative. For further information on whether you are eligible to apply under this scheme please follow the link above.

***If you would like to discuss the role in more detail before submitting an application, please contact [maria.dodson@saxbam.com](mailto:maria.dodson@saxbam.com) in the first instance.***

### GDPR personal data notice

According to GDPR guidelines, we are only able to process your Sensitive Personal Data (racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, trade union membership, genetic data, biometric data, health, sex life, or sexual orientation) with your express consent. You will be asked to complete a consent form when you apply and please do not include any Sensitive Personal Data within your CV (although this can be included in your covering letter if you wish to do so), remembering also not to include contact details for referees without their prior agreement.

## Benefits of Working for Defra

Defra is a rewarding place to work, offering:



**Meaningful work with real impact.** Defra staff help protect the environment, support food production, enhance rural communities and tackle climate change.



**Competitive salary and benefits package**



**Generous annual leave allowance**, typically 25 days on entry rising with service, plus public and privilege holidays



**Civil Service Pension Scheme.** Your pension is a valuable part of our reward package with contribution rates currently up to 28.97%



**Family friendly policies**, including maternity, adoption or shared parental leave available with up to 26 weeks full pay



Learning and development opportunities



An equal and diverse workplace



Flexible Working Options

## Equality, Diversity & Inclusion

In an ever-evolving world, Defra is always looking for people with different experiences, perspectives, skills and ideas.

Defra is committed to enabling an inclusive culture with thriving workplaces where all colleagues are valued and empowered to bring their best selves to work. This maximises our potential to innovate, collaborate and deliver first-class outcomes for our citizens.

We passionately believe in equality of opportunity and fairness, and we match this belief with action, as recognised in our inclusive accreditations such as Disability Confident, Carer Confident and White Ribbon.

We are actively cultivating a workplace that is free from discrimination, harassment, bullying and victimisation. Maintaining a workplace that is truly open, respectful and welcoming starts at a senior level. It also begins within our recruitment process.

As a Disability Confident employer, we positively welcome applications from individuals with disabilities and ensure that anyone who meets our minimum criteria is eligible for interview. We make adjustments wherever possible, to include everybody in our recruitment and selection process and consider adjustments to the requirements of each post, where necessary.

Through talent schemes, internships and reverse mentoring, we support career development at every level. We also champion flexible working patterns, helping colleagues balance their responsibilities at home and at work.

It is only through having a mix of ideas and ways of thinking that we are able to have a culture that delivers our ambitious outcomes and makes Defra a great place to work.