

Best practice guide for IDBs on accessing environmental and other specialist expertise



Introduction

It is essential for Internal Drainage Boards (IDBs) to have access to the right specialist expertise on environmental as well as other relevant local issues. As competent authorities, IDBs have responsibility for ensuring compliance with environmental legislation (e.g. in regard to protected species and protected areas that are located within their boundaries). IDBs should also have regard to relevant environmental policies (e.g. as set out in the National Planning Policy Framework and the biodiversity strategies of England), and are therefore encouraged to consider biodiversity targets, habitat targets, and influence wider sustainable development in their region.

In view of the above, ADA has created this best practice guide to assist IDBs. This best practice guide:

- sets out options IDBs are encouraged to consider when accessing environmental and other specialist expertise;
- details key activities where environmental factors and biodiversity must be considered; and
- in support of the two points above, provides best practice examples from IDBs nationally.

To create this guide, ADA has researched best practice amongst IDBs, and utilised questionnaire responses from a Defra/ADA investigation into the membership, representation and partnership connections of Boards (see annex).

Sources of environmental expertise

The responses from the membership questionnaire raised a plethora of different ways that Boards currently access environmental expertise. This section sets out the various options Boards are currently utilising to access environmental expertise, thereby also providing examples and guidance for Boards looking to access further expertise. At a minimum, all Boards should have access to personnel with a professional level of environmental expertise.

Broadly, the access Boards have to environmental expertise can be placed into five categories: through the membership on Boards; through staffing and employing conservation/ environmental officers or contracting consultants; through partnerships and working relationships with relevant organisations or agencies; through environmental committees; and through resource sharing with other IDBs. A Board wishing to increase its environmental expertise may therefore wish to analyse its current utilisation of these different approaches.

In addition to expertise within the categories explained below, there is published guidance that IDBs can acknowledge. Most notably in 2008 [The Drainage Channel Biodiversity Manual: Integrating wildlife and flood risk management](#) was published by ADA and Natural England. This principally

provides advice for staff and members of IDBs operating in England on channel management techniques that are sympathetic or beneficial to biodiversity and wildlife.

1. Membership on Boards

Elected members:

Elected members are landowners who stand for election and are voted onto the Board.

Elected members can themselves bring environmental expertise to the Board. Where IDBs have land owned by RSPB, local Wildlife Trust, National Trust, Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust, and other groups with an environmental remit, these bodies may have members on the Board. In some IDBs where land is a protected site (e.g SAC/ SPA/ Ramsar/ SSSI) representatives may be drawn from organisations such as wild life trusts who are involved with the operations in these areas. Alternatively in occasional circumstances, a landowner may have a professional qualification giving them recognisable environmental expertise.

Appointed members:

Appointed members are individuals chosen to represent local authorities (District/ Borough/ Unitary Councils).

Local authorities may choose to appoint a person with environmental interests and expertise. From the responses to the membership questionnaire it is apparent that there are much fewer appointed members carrying environmental expertise than elected members across all IDBs. Local authorities are not obliged to select councillors to fill their places on Boards and may consider a wider basis for their appointments, including those who specialise in the environment and conservation.

Co-opted members:

Co-opted members are people who are chosen to represent a specific area of interest or issue of consideration on the Board. These representatives are not elected members and are appointed because of their level of knowledge and experience. Co-opted members do not have voting rights.

Boards have the opportunity to co-opt members onto the Board for their environmental expertise. A good example could be to co-opt individuals that have already been appointed onto Regional Flood and Coastal Committees (RFCCs) by the Environment Agency (EA) for their environmental/ conservation expertise (all RFCCs have an environmental specialist appointed by the EA). Currently across all IDBs in England and Wales, co-option is a method rarely used, with only six Boards having any co-opted members at the time of the questionnaire survey. One Board has a co-opted member from Natural England. There is potential for more Boards to utilise co-opted members and for them to attend all Board meetings.

2. Staffing and employing conservation/ environmental officers or contracting consultants

Another solution to acquiring environmental expertise for a Board may be to access it through its staff and directly employed officers, or by contracting consultants. These specialists can provide the relevant skills for a particular project and should be invited to attend Board meetings, providing advice for the Board. Many of the larger Boards have full-time officers but some access consultants

on a temporary basis when necessary. Officers working on Boards often have membership to environmental groups. As well as advising and reporting for the Board they may go further such as producing a regular newsletter updating members on conservation issues and work.

3. Partnerships and working relationships with relevant organisations or agencies

A good way of accessing specialist environmental expertise demonstrated by a number of Boards is through partnerships and working relationships with relevant organisations or agencies. Organisations or agencies include (not exclusively) wildlife trusts, Natural England, the EA, NFU, and RSPB. For example some Boards have worked in partnership with groups on particular projects, delivering joint water level and habitat improvements. By creating good working relationships, Boards are able to seek advice from specialists and can also use them for more specialised work such as undertaking biodiversity surveys (working with local wildlife trusts).

4. Environmental committees

The membership questionnaire indicated that eight Boards have a separate conservation committee in place. These sub-committees monitor the delivery of the Board's maintenance programme to ensure compliance with environmental legislation, review environmental policies and risk assessments, and explore opportunities of acquiring grant for environmental stewardship. These committees often have a wide range of co-opted members ensuring coverage of environmental issues, and these committees feed back to the Board therefore influencing the Board's decision making. One Board stated that members of the IDB conservation group have a works manual covering the conservation aspects of their operations.

5. Resource sharing with other IDBs

Many of the larger Boards are able to employ officers with environmental expertise or generally have access to a greater depth of expertise (e.g Boards with environmental committees in place). There is the potential for other Boards, particularly those nearby in terms of geography, to share some of the resources of the larger Boards. For example Lindsey Marsh Drainage Board, one of the largest IDBs in the country in terms of income and expenditure, employs an environmental advisor who also engages with other IDBs including those in Yorkshire. Groups of IDBs can get together to discuss environmental issues or the ADA branches can provide a forum for discussing and sharing advice on key issues.

Best practice example – response received to the membership questionnaire

The following is an example of a Board which has a high level of access to environmental expertise through a variety of means. This may be an example of best practice although it is important to take into account that an appropriate level of access to environmental expertise will vary between Boards depending on specific factors relating to that Board.

“The Board has a separate Conservation Committee which comprises of 10 members of the Board and 10 members from relevant Conservation Groups from within the Board’s area (Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust, RSPB, Heritage Lincolnshire, Society for Lincolnshire History & Archaeology, Local Bat Group etc). The Committee has been running for the past 12 years and has proved extremely successful.

The Board also has one member with considerable environmental experience who produces environmental reports for presentation at Board Meeting. There are also several members with experience through high level stewardship and other environmental schemes.

The Board also works in partnership with several local nature groups in various environmental schemes.

Consultants are contracted if the Board does not have the relevant skills for a particular project.”

Welland & Deepings IDB

Expertise for key environmental activities

As further guidance, the following illustrates how environmental expertise may be accessed for four key activities where environmental factors and biodiversity must be considered. For each activity, examples of best practice are given from IDBs nationally.

1. Writing/reviewing BAPs, WLMPS and Eel plans

It is vital for Boards to have Biodiversity Action Plans (BAPs), Water Level Management Plans (WLMPS) and Eel Plans (especially in light of eel regulations) in place. In helping an IDB to write or review their plan, expertise can be sought from (but not limited to):

- IDB environmental officers
- IDB staff, particularly land drainage operatives (e.g involved in data collection)
- Local wildlife trusts
- Contracting the services of ecological or environmental consultants
- Support from the Environment Agency (e.g eel specialists)
- Support from Natural England (e.g. in developing/reviewing WLMPS, biodiversity plans)
- County/area Nature Partnerships guidance (e.g on protected species, invasive species, priority habitats and species)
- County/area record centres

“The Environmental Officer has written three IDB BAPs for the Water Management Consortium and under contract for two IDBs in Yorkshire. These draw on the expertise of a wide range of colleagues and organisations as the Environmental Officer is a Chairman of Lincolnshire’s Rivers and Wetlands BAP habitat group. IDB BAP reporting is included within the county BAP report, and enables projects to be developed with the Greater Lincolnshire Nature Partnership which is developing GIS based water vole recording, for IDBs across the county for IDB staff”.

Lindsey Marsh Drainage Board

2. IDBs managing water levels around sensitive SSSIs & Natura 2000 sites

IDBs must manage their activity to take into account SSSIs and Natura 2000 sites. Expertise with regards to this may be accessed from (but not limited to):

- IDB environmental officers
- Working with Natural England. Natural England provides guidance on requirements of WLMPs for SSSIs. Most IDBs engage with Natural England on the issue of SSSIs and Natura 2000 sites.
- Contracting the services of ecological or environmental consultants
- Working with the Environment Agency
- Working with the RSPB and wildlife groups
- Working with Nature Partnerships

“Epworth Turbary SSSI, is a lowland raised bog, sited within an area of intensive arable farming in close proximity to housing. Development and acceptance of the Water Level Management Plan which needs to deliver the conflicting requirements for ground water levels has required the input of specialist hydrologists, ecologists and liaison with a wide range of stakeholders to develop the most complementary approach to water level management”.

Isle of Axholme and North Nottinghamshire Water Level Management Board

3. WFD Work: Setting mitigation measures and the involvement in the RBMP

Compliance with the Water Framework Directive (WFD) is important whether Good Ecological Status or Good Ecological Potential is sought. Expertise may come from (but not limited to):

- IDB environmental officers
- Working with the Environment Agency (e.g working to find out how WFD categorisations are generated). Most IDBs engage with the EA on the issue of the WFD.
- The work of IDB staff (e.g in the controlling of invasive species, habitat creation, maintenance of waterways to enhance the environment)
- Contracting the services of ecological or environmental consultants
- Working within CaBA (catchment based approach) partnership

“The Board has worked in partnership with Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust to deliver a Restoration Project for Fairham Brook. The work has involved modelling, engagement with a wide range of organisations and undertaking hydromorphological improvements”.

Trent Valley IDB

“The Board is a founder member of the River Idle Management Partnership, which is delivering the Catchment Based Approach for the River Idle and its tributaries. Already the partnership has evaluated the Idle Pilot one of the original 7 river maintenance pilots. The Partnership helped the Environment Agency to secure funds for a silt survey, and has seen landowners offer access and land for the silt to be spread on, while generating a wide consensus that silt removal must be linked to a long term maintenance plan, which includes; operation of the pumping station, ongoing maintenance of the channel alongside a catchment wide approach to tackling diffuse pollution to deliver WFD objectives”.

Isle of Axholme and North Nottinghamshire Water Level Management Board

4. Habitat condition and creation: setting targets under the England Biodiversity Strategy and consideration in any major projects

IDBs are encouraged to consider habitat condition and creation in their activities and consider biodiversity targeting when conducting major projects. Expertise may come from (but not limited to):

- IDB environmental officers
- IDB staff - when a Board undertakes large projects, habitat creation and mitigation for works can be considered as an integral part of the process
- Engagement with landowners – important because of land ownership issues
- Contracting the services of ecological or environmental consultants
- Wildlife Trusts Nature Partnerships

“The Board is a member of the Humberhead Levels Partnership. This is delivering the DEFRA funded Nature Improvement Area while developing a complementary Heritage Lottery Funded project to continue habitat management and creation across the National Character Area.”

Isle of Axholme and North Nottinghamshire Water Level Management Board

“The Board were partners in the Lincolnshire Coastal Grazing Marshes Project which enabled the maintenance of 1,018 hectares of grazing marsh, the restoration of 206 hectares and the creation of 162 hectares of new grazing marsh. The project enabled the development of the complementary Coastal Country Park Project.”

Lindsey Marsh Drainage Board

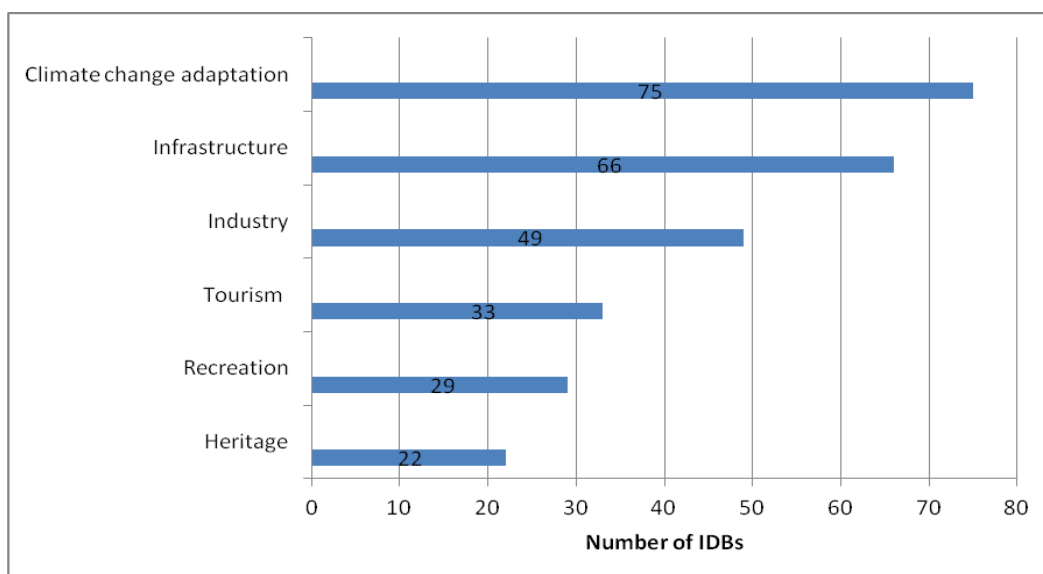
“In 2014, as part of conservation initiatives built into its Biodiversity Action Plan, Upper Witham IDB conducted a project aimed at enhancing kingfisher populations within its area. The IDB’s Environmental Intern worked alongside the Environment Officer from the Middle Level Commissioners. They carried out a plan to enhance kingfisher populations which involved finding suitable locations for nesting holes. It was determined that pumping station inlets could provide prime locations for artificial nesting holes. This project was an example of a low cost action carried out by the IDB which adds to the Board’s conservation efforts towards its Biodiversity Action Plan.”

Upper Witham IDB

Other beneficial expertise for Boards to fulfil wider role in delivering sustainable development

The membership questionnaire also asked Boards for information on the ways they are currently accessing or could plan to access other expertise that assists them in fulfilling their wider role in delivering sustainable development.

Graph below: Types of expertise beneficial for Boards to fulfil their role in delivering sustainable development



The graph provides a count of the different types of expertise Boards feel would be beneficial. 96 Boards supplied information.

Accessing other expertise

With regards to accessing expertise, the following summarises approaches IDBs are currently utilising as well as ways they state could be used, thereby providing guidance for accessing further expertise. The approaches are very similar to accessing environmental specific expertise.

Boards may have the expertise and knowledge required amongst their membership (elected and appointed). **One Board has conducted an audit of the skills the membership holds therefore defining what areas of expertise the skill set of the Board covers.** In order to access further expertise, appointed members from local authorities are an important consideration. As is also the case for seeking environmental specific expertise, specialist expertise (for example in tourism and recreation) can be sought by appointing officers from local authorities with the relevant industry experience. In order to achieve this, it is important for local authorities to consider a wider basis for their appointments, not restricted to councillors.

As well as utilising elected and appointed members, a source of expertise may be officers employed by the Board. Co-option of members is a further source, currently in limited use across IDBs in England. Co-option can be particularly appropriate for sourcing skilled personnel when a particular project is established or important developments occur impacting a specific issue. In a similar vein, Boards may seek specialist knowledge on a project by project base by contracting consultants.

Partnerships and working relationships with relevant organisations or agencies can also be a way of accessing other expertise. Such organisations or agencies may include the Environment Agency, RFCCs, heritage trusts, local authorities or LLFAs, and Natural England. One Board involved in the Great Fen Project states that it accesses additional specialist knowledge it may require by working with agents of the Project, made possible through the links forged during interaction on the Great Fen Project.

Annex

In July 2012, Richard Benyon, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (at the time), wrote to all IDB Chairmen stating that it was important for Boards to consider their membership and representation and to ensure that they have access to expertise in place in order for them to fulfil their wider role in delivering sustainable development. Consideration of environmental issues formed a part of this. Following the letter from Richard Benyon, Defra and ADA conducted research via a questionnaire to assess a number of issues relating to IDB membership, representation and working arrangements with key partners. Parts of the questionnaire aimed to investigate the extent to which Board meetings were attended by personnel with environmental or other important expertise or the extent to which Boards had access to this expertise.

Full analysis of the questionnaire responses is available to view on the ADA website:

[Internal Drainage Board Membership and Representation Survey Analysis](#)

89% of IDBs in England and Wales (in 2012) responded to the questionnaire. The analysis of the responses has been used to help write the advice within this guide that sets out options IDBs are encouraged to consider when accessing environmental and other specialist expertise.