Representing Drainage Water Level & Flood Risk Management Authorities

Internal Drainage Board Biodiversity Action Plan

Guidance Document

November 2020

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Introduction

Contributing to biodiversity is an important part of an Internal Drainage Board's role as a modern public authority. Through their water level management activities, each Internal Drainage Board (IDB) is uniquely placed to conserve and improve freshwater and wetland habitats, and to forge partnerships to ensure sustainable water level management in lowland areas.

Biodiversity Action Plans (BAPs) provide IDBs with a formal mechanism to demonstrate and record their contribution to biodiversity. While biodiversity conservation thinking has evolved and some new approaches are being taken to protect and enhance our nature, the IDB BAP approach remains the most suitable tool to help IDBs meet their statutory conservation duties.

Never has there been greater focus on protecting and enhancing our biodiversity as there is today. All aspects of our daily lives are being urgently scrutinised to identify ways of improving sustainability and lessening their negative impacts on our environment. The public services provided by IDBs are no exception and IDBs will increasingly be expected to implement more sustainable approaches to water level management.

ADA has taken the opportunity, supported by leading industry experts, to review and update the BAP template to ensure that it contains the most up to date legislation, policy and approaches. By refreshing their IDB BAPs with new objectives and action targets to conserve and enhance biodiversity, IDBs will be well placed to contribute to the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan and meet the associated new legislative requirements.

New Approaches to Biodiversity Conservation – The Environment (Act) Bill

The legal requirements for IDBs to conserve and enhance biodiversity whilst carrying out their water-level management responsibilities, will be strengthened when the Environment Act (Bill) 2020 is enacted. Throughout this guidance document we have included grey boxes like this one containing further information about relevant aspects of the Environment Act (Bill) 2020.

ADA has reviewed the most recent information available regarding the Environment Act (Bill) 2020, and how it is expected to impact upon IDBs and their conservation activities. The approaches that the new IDB BAP template recommends aligns with the approach that we expect to be taken. Particularly in regard to the new Local Nature Recovery Strategies that will be produced under the Environment Bill.

The government is also incorporating biodiversity net gain requirements in the planning system and embracing a natural capital approach to valuing the benefits of nature to society. The IDB BAP process enables an IDB to understand the quantity, quality, condition and location of habitats that they interact with and how they could be improved by an IDB. A future step could be to identify what ecosystem services those habitats provide in order to value their natural capital for society.

Biodiversity Action Planning for IDBs

An IDB's Biodiversity Action Plan identifies the issues facing the habitats and species of its drainage district and describes the actions needed to bring about a more sustainable situation by integrating biodiversity management into the IDB's flood and water level management activities.

Biodiversity Reporting Requirements

The Environment Act (Bill) 2020 introduces a "general biodiversity objective" – "the conservation and enhancement of biodiversity in England through the exercise of functions in relation to England"

The Act will strengthen the duty set out in Section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006, requiring every public body to enhance, as well to conserve, biodiversity in exercising its functions. The Act requires them to actively carry out strategic assessments of the actions they can take to enhance and conserve biodiversity. Public authorities will be required to produce a report on the actions taken to comply with the enhanced duty and it is anticipated that some of this data will need to be quantitative.

The revised and updated BAP template has been drafted to serve as the tool that IDBs can use to further the general biodiversity objective and meet these strategic assessment and biodiversity reporting requirements under the Environment Act (Bill) 2020.

Principles

The development and implementation of an IDB BAP should help each IDB achieve the following:

- Review the biodiversity present, or that has the potential to thrive within the drainage district.
- Identify appropriate objectives and actions that will help conserve and enhance biodiversity.
- Identify a programme to achieve these objectives by integrating biodiversity management throughout the IDB's various activities: planning, maintenance, capital works, and training.
- Increase knowledge of the valuable biodiversity of drainage channels and associated habitats through appropriate habitat and species records undertaken by the IDB.
- Develop and maintain an awareness of its biodiversity objectives among staff, Board members, other environmental managers and partners.
- Establish productive partnerships and cooperation with local organisations and land managers to achieve biodiversity improvements.
- Establish systems to help monitor and report the IDB's work on biodiversity.
- Communicate and promote the IDB's work on biodiversity with local authorities, rate-payers, the Government and the public.

Process

Each drainage district is different in terms of area, physical character and its potential for biodiversity improvement. Whatever the scale of the Biodiversity Action Plan, the same five-stage process should be followed using this guidance and the accompanying plan template:

1. **Conducting a Biodiversity Audit**
2. **Evaluating and prioritising habitats and species**
3. **Defining Objectives and Actions – Habitat and Species Action Plans**
4. **Implementing**
5. **Monitoring and Reporting**

Before you begin – Engaging expertise

When preparing to develop a plan, IDBs should consider the environmental expertise that they currently employ and those of partners that they engage with who may be able to assist. There may be merit in working together with neighbouring IDBs to produce a single, joint Biodiversity Action Plan that covers a sub-catchment or discrete part of a drainage system. Similarly, IDBs that are part of a group or consortium may wish to join together to produce a single IDB BAP.

There may be good reasons for producing a joint plan:

- A group of IDBs may manage an area that is a coherent ecological or hydrological unit.
- Planning, funding and delivering actions in a particular area may be more efficient under a single plan.
- Considerable efficiencies and cost-savings in data collation for the Biodiversity Audit.
- Above all, delivery of biodiversity objectives and targets may be maximised.

Future opportunities - Biodiversity Net Gain

Biodiversity net gain is set to be made mandatory for all new developments through the Environment Act (Bill) 2020. In practical terms this means that the biodiversity value of a development must be 10% greater (or more) than the value of the undeveloped site and the net gain “sites” must be maintained for 30 years.

Where it is not possible for a development to achieve net gain on-site, a biodiversity credit purchase system is being created through which developers will be able to fund off-site biodiversity enhancement.

The BAP process should help IDBs to determine the current and potential biodiversity value of any IDB managed habitats and to identify the actions needed to enlarge or enhance them. Assembling this information could help IDBs to identify and put forward shovel-ready net-gain projects which are attractive for support by developers or their biodiversity credits.

1. The Biodiversity Audit

This is a desk based exercise that should be undertaken with the assistance of an environmental expert knowledgeable in the sources of such information. The audit focuses on identifying the habitats, species and important wildlife sites present within the IDB's sphere of operation using data already held by the IDB and data that is readily available from external sources.

It requires an assessment of the relative importance of these species and habitats, including priority habitats and species within the IDB's area of operation. This helps to determine which habitats and species will be prioritised for action within the BAP (see next section).

The template sets out the types and detail of information that is expected to be assembled through a biodiversity audit. Further information may also be included if desired, for instance as additional annexes to the BAP. The BAP document is a template which can be altered where necessary to ensure information is presented in a way that best suits the IDB for which it is being completed.

In identifying species and habitats of importance for the IDB, the Board should give consideration to all those national priority habitats and species that have been identified as occurring locally or that have the potential to occur within the IDB district. Plans should also address habitats and species that are of regional or local conservation, locally threatened, locally rare, locally distinctive/characteristic or locally popular. Liaising with local conservation and environmental partners such as local Nature Partnerships will help to define these priorities.

It is important to consider the possibility of reversing past losses, where this is practical to do so. The distribution and extent of habitats and species may have changed, or they may have disappeared from the local area. Including them in the Biodiversity Audit allows for consideration to be given to their potential to return if the appropriate conditions could be recreated.

Repeat audits

Much of the BAP process and information will already be known to those IDB that have undergone the same steps to develop previous versions of their BAPs. This gives an IDB a strong starting point for a more streamlined process. Updates should focus on including any more up to date biodiversity information from, for example, species and/or habitat surveys, Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs), engaging with local conservation partnerships, as well as the outcomes of actions from previous BAPs.

2. Evaluating and Prioritising Habitats and Species

Once the biodiversity audit is complete, the next step is to prioritise the habitats and species identified for action by the IDB. Each habitat and species prioritised for action should be presented in the habitat and species summaries, each with some further context relevant to the IDB setting.

The introduction section within the BAP template provides some guidance on how to undertake this prioritisation, but each IDB should tailor their own approach whilst aligning to both national (e.g. priority species & habitats, 25 Year Environment Plan etc.) and local priorities (e.g. Local Nature Partnerships, River Basin Management Plans [RBMPs] etc.). It is appropriate to first concentrate on the habitats and species which an IDB has the opportunity to enhance and conserve through their own work such as those associated with aquatic, riparian and coastal environments.

Many environmental organisations would be pleased to share their expertise and knowledge around local biodiversity priorities and initiatives in order to help develop an IDB BAP, and most would be grateful for the support of the IDB (see Partnership Working below).

Partnership working

Nature does not respect management boundaries and IDBs are likely to be but one of several managers working within a given hydrological unit. We urge IDBs to seek an understanding of the priorities of other local environmental partners in order to help align and contribute to wider local initiatives wherever relevant and possible.

Many local biodiversity partnerships have working groups dealing with wetlands and waterbodies. IDB involvement in these groups can greatly assist information exchange, coordination of activities, and identification of new opportunities. By participating in collaborative biodiversity enhancement IDBs may be able to make a bigger impact than where they simply operate independently, for instance by offering specialist watercourse management skills. Such partners may include: Local Nature Partnerships, Wildlife Trusts, Environment Agency, water companies, Rivers Trusts and the Catchment Based Approach (CaBA) groups, Canal & Rivers Trust, as well as many others.

Many individual local landowners will also be working to conserve and enhance valuable habitats and species on their land through environmental stewardship schemes. Where appropriate it is valuable to understand how the IDB could support and compliment these efforts when developing IDB BAPs.

Local Nature Recovery Strategies

The Environment Act (Bill) 2020 makes provision for Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS), a new system of spatial strategies for nature, covering the whole of England. Locally led by an appropriate ‘responsible authority’, each LNRS will identify and map the opportunities and

priorities for enhancing biodiversity and supporting wider objectives such as mitigating or adapting to climate change in an area.

As a public authority, IDBs will have to have regard to the relevant LNRS when considering the actions they can take 'to further' the conservation and enhancement of biodiversity, and so will be expected to align the IDB BAP with those priorities set out in the LNRS.

LNRS are expected to take a wider natural capital benefits approach to managing the environment. Critically, as well as considering improvements to core wildlife sites, each LNRS will also prioritise improving the 'permeability' of the surrounding landscape for the movement of wildlife, and the creation of corridors or stepping stones of connecting habitat (e.g. drainage ditches and hedgerows).

Current thinking is that some habitats that are less likely to be specially protected and are anthropogenic in origin, such as drainage channels, still have species that rely on them that still need sufficient habitat and food resources to maintain their populations. This consideration should serve to increase the recognition that many habitats managed by IDBs are valuable despite the absence of priority species in some areas.

For further insights into the LNRS, the "Nature Networks Evidence Handbook" was published by Natural England in March 2020 to help responsible authorities to develop their strategies (http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/6105140258144256).

At the time of writing it is not known when these LNRS are expected to be published. Until they are, IDBs will not be able to take those priorities into account. However, by ensuring that new approaches and requirements are included in the new IDB BAP template, and by liaising with existing environmental partners such as Local Nature Partnerships, IDBs will be well-placed to respond to the LNRS process and define how they provide their contribution.

3. Defining Objectives and Actions

Having prioritised the habitats and species of importance present, appropriate objectives and actions can be established by an IDB. These should take into account the IDB's current and future resources, the water level management and flood risk management requirements of the drainage district, existing IDB maintenance and capital works programmes, and any legal obligations (e.g. toward health and safety, designated sites etc.).

Objectives, and actions for habitats and species should be developed for each of the IDB's targeted habitats and species and entered in the appropriate action plan tables within the IDB BAP template.

Objectives

Objectives are the high-level aims of the IDB BAP for each species or habitat. The objectives will provide the overall direction and focus for the plan and should realistically fit within the short to medium-term capabilities of the IDB within the period of the BAP. Objectives should be defined to reflect outcomes (e.g. recovery in species population/range or enhanced sustainable management for habitats), rather than the outputs (e.g. operations carried out, surveys undertaken, or management plans written).

While the objectives should realistically be within the capabilities of the IDB within the period of the BAP (i.e. five years), IDBs should be ambitious in their visions and consider including some projects that they would like to undertake, but would require further external funding, collaboration or resources. Support for such projects can only be gained where they are made known. Considering and communicating these ambitions clearly within the IDB BAP will further raise the profile of the IDB, increase local support, enable grant and charitable funding opportunities to be targeted by the IDB, and may also attract resources from other partners for such initiatives.

Actions

Actions required to achieve those objectives should then be defined and listed. Actions need to consider ecological priorities and timing of related management activities alongside the necessary resources, staff availability and partner contributions required. Each action defined within the IDB BAP should therefore be **SMART**:

S – Specific Targets should be clear, meaningful and well-defined. Will you know when you've reached it? Targets should represent a quantitative milestone towards meeting a viable and sustainable long-term objective.

M – Measurable It must be possible to monitor and report progress towards the target.

A – Achievable Targets should be achievable both biologically and practically, and be based on reasonable assumptions about the availability of IDB staffing, resources, locations, etc..

R – Relevant Targets and actions should be appropriate to the IDB and its sphere of operation. Will they help you achieve your biodiversity objectives?

T – Time-limited Targets should be time-limited – i.e. achievable within a specific timeframe – to help prioritise and plan actions. They may incorporate a series of milestones.

Procedural Action Plan

An IDB should also develop a Procedural Action Plan that sets objectives, targets and actions for cross-cutting IDB activities to conserve and enhance biodiversity such as training, communications or planning. This part of the BAP is important and should set out how the IDB will integrate biodiversity considerations into IDB practices and procedures more widely. A procedural action plan table can also be found in the IDB BAP template.

Actions could include choosing contractors and suppliers with “greener” credentials, developing/improving a best practice manual for IDB operations, or providing biodiversity training to IDB board members, staff, and contractors to improve their awareness of the value of habitats and species relevant to the IDB.

Indicators / Measurables

Indicators are the tangible evidence which can be obtained and presented to prove that the action has been progressed or completed. It is important to set appropriate indicators for each of the Actions in order to measure progress and to allow reporting of results.

Good indicators should be:

- Relevant
- Simple
- Easy to measure
- Easy to communicate
- Meaningful
- Encouraging of action on the ground

Establishing effective indicators will help the IDB to both quantify and report on the success of work programmes and check it is on track to deliver plan objectives and targets. They can be useful for communicating progress by the IDB to partners, other stakeholders and the public.

National IDB Biometrics

ADA is preparing a limited number of biodiversity indicators (biometrics) that will enable quantitative data to be recorded and reported annually by IDBs. By recording such data ADA aims to further support IDBs to deliver against any new legal duty, as a public authority, to report quantitative data regarding biodiversity conservation and enhancement under the Environment Act (Bill) 2020.

Once published, ADA would encourage each IDB to consider how it could contribute towards ADA’s national biometrics for IDBs. Some consideration should be given within the actions and indicators of how the relevant information can be gathered towards these metrics.

4. Implementation

The BAP template enables biodiversity actions to be fully integrated into an IDB's existing systems and management regimes so as to maximise efficiency and manage costs. This will ensure that valuable opportunities to achieve biodiversity net gain are not missed. Often the first thoughts for opportunities to enhance biodiversity occur when undertaking capital works, but planned maintenance and repair programmes can offer broader opportunities throughout the drainage district and should be given equal, if not greater, consideration for IDB BAP actions.

Actions to deliver an IDB's BAP targets may involve simple amendments to existing routine maintenance activities (e.g. retaining some marginal habitat during weed cutting, or encouraging sward diversity through removal of cuttings), or within non-regular works (e.g. using more diverse native seed mixes when re-seeding following the repair of bank slippages). Some actions may require more detailed planning to incorporate biodiversity gain within new capital works to demonstrate a contribute towards the Water Framework Directive and other environmental outcomes (Outcome Measure 4) for schemes receiving Flood & Coastal Erosion Risk Management Grant in Aid (e.g. removing/mitigating barriers to fish and eel passage, creating flood storage, or establishing berms during bank profiling).

The following publications, available from the ADA website (www.ada.org.uk/environment), contain recommended guidance for the biodiversity management of lowland watercourses. These can help to identify techniques that are appropriate for delivering IDB BAP actions:

- ADA/Natural England Drainage Channel Biodiversity Manual (2008),
- Middle Level Internal Drainage Board Biodiversity Manual – 'Giving Wildlife an Edge',
- EA/ADA Guide to Good Ecological Potential in Fenland Waterbodies (2017).

Best Practice Manuals

Many IDBs have developed their own best practice manuals, which set out how each of their watercourses should be regularly managed to ensure that the required water levels and flows can be maintained and the important habitats and species associated with them can be protected and enhanced. This is done by first categorising watercourses by seasonal risk (i.e. low, medium or high risk). Then the generic management activities required to maintain the desired water levels and flows in each category are identified.

Using the BAP to understand the habitats and species reliant upon the IDB's watercourses, and their ecological requirements, the generic management activities can then be adapted, or their timings altered, to maximise the support and enhancement of those species and habitats.

Where an IDB has already set out the activities required to protect or enhance a particular habitat or species within their best practice manual, it is acceptable to simply reference the location of the actions within the manual rather than duplicate the action within the plan. However, if this approach is used, the best practice manual must be either be made available alongside the BAP at all times or relevant sections included as an appendix to the BAP.

Allocating Responsibilities and Assigning Resources

An IDB BAP may include actions to be carried out by different groups – IDB staff, contractors or land managers within the drainage district. It is important that responsibility for leading on actions is clearly defined and that the BAP objectives, targets and actions are communicated to all relevant parties.

Publishing the IDB BAP

The biodiversity role of IDBs needs to be better understood and valued, and IDB BAPs provide a mechanism for recording current biodiversity delivery and future aspirations. It is important that a record of this contribution is placed in the public domain and made available to other organisations and the general public.

An IDB should publish the BAP on their website and ensure that relevant partners, including land managers, contractors, and local partners, are aware of its location.

5. Monitoring and Reporting

Arguably the most important stages of any biodiversity action planning are monitoring and reporting. The new BAP template is designed to be used as working document, and should be regularly referred to, reviewed and reported on. By taking such an active approach, the biodiversity enhancements delivered through the BAP will be better integrated and it is more likely that an IDB will unlock wider indirect benefits, including enhancing the IDB's public profile.

Each IDB is responsible for ensuring that progress against the IDB BAP is regularly reported, at least annually, at Board meetings to allow the Board to discuss BAP activity and to modify the BAP and actions to meet the objectives where necessary. Regular BAP progress reviews will offer the opportunity to identify obstacles and adapt approaches quickly in order to achieve the best and most efficient outcomes. Each IDB BAP should be thoroughly reviewed and updated at least once every five years.

Annual summary progress reports should detail which actions have been progressed according to the plan, any new opportunities identified, risks and issues affecting the objectives or actions, and the contribution actions have made towards achieving the objectives. Such reports should be published on the IDB's website, ideally alongside the IDB BAP.

It is important that successes and failures are shared with colleagues, the Board, and the general public. In particular, other environmental managers and stakeholders should be kept informed of the outcomes of IDB actions such as surveys and habitat creation and restoration. This information will help partners to build an accurate local and national picture of the status of many habitats and species associated with the lowlands that IDBs manage, and the effectiveness of the measures being utilised to protect and enhance them.

One simple and recommended way of contributing towards the national and local picture is by submitting information such as sightings, survey results or similar to the local biodiversity records office (see the Association of Local Environmental Records Centre [ALERC] – www.alerc.org.uk).

Communicating the work of IDB projects will not only be beneficial for the IDB in terms of raising their profile and increasing local support for the IDB and its work but may also attract support and resources for future projects as well as increase the perception of IDBs as being competent custodians of our valuable natural capital.

Further Assistance

If you would like to discuss any aspect of this guidance document or the BAP template, please do get in touch with us at ADA and we will be happy to assist.

Contact details

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