



Internal Drainage Boards: IDB board membership and board governance



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs



Key findings from research into the factors
affecting board membership and their
impact on board governance – 2019



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Why did we do this project?

The overall aim of this research is to understand how to better support Internal Drainage Boards (IDBs) in establishing and maintaining a **wide board membership** including **specialist expertise** and how to encourage and support **active engagement** by members in board meeting.

The research aims are:

Research aim 1

Identify and assess how local authorities can support greater IDB accountability via their role in appointing IDB board members.

Research aim 2

Understand the factors which influence IDB governance. In particular, understand how some boards have a wide and diverse membership with active engagement by members.



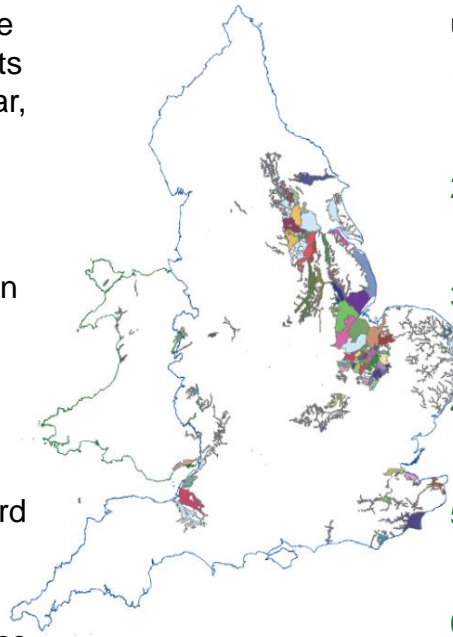
Background

IDBs are independent public bodies responsible for managing water levels in areas where there is a special drainage need. They are funded mainly through drainage rates paid by landowners and farmers, and levies on local authorities.

Previous research has identified areas requiring further investigation related to IDB governance and accountability in order to ensure IDBs are well governed, representative of local interests and able to meet future demands. In particular, previous research has found that:

- Local Authorities find it challenging to secure the participation of local authority elected members and specialist officers in IDBs
- 20% of IDBs have appointed member vacancies in excess of 50% and low attendance at board meetings
- There is no statutory governance standard for IDBs and limited oversight of IDBs' operations
- Requirements for oversight and assurance of IDBs maybe insufficient.

Figure 1: Map showing IDB location in England and Wales



In response, this research has been carried out by Defra, in collaboration with the Association of Drainage Authorities (ADA), to understand:

1. How do local authorities make decisions about appointing representatives to the IDBs?
2. What is the make-up of IDB membership across elected, appointed and co-opted members?
3. Why are there differences between the number of elected, appointed and co-opted members between IDBs?
4. What role does a wide and diverse board membership play in the performance and effectiveness of IDBs?
5. What are the factors that influence active engagement, including attendance at meetings, by members?
6. What good practice can be identified in establishing and maintaining a wide IDB membership including specialists and encouraging a high attendance at meetings?



What did we do?

The research involved three main strands of fieldwork undertaken between September 2018 and April 2019 involving Internal Drainage Boards in England. The following slides summarise the findings of the research.

Method

1. Scoping interviews and document review
2. Online survey
3. Interviews with 15 case study IDBs
4. Reporting including full report and this summary

Scoping interviews and document review

To inform the research design and understand key issues, scoping interviews with strategic partners and a systematic review of key documents including guidance, research and annual returns was undertaken.

Online survey

A mainly quantitative survey was created, designed to generate an outline understanding of the key issues relevant to local authority engagement with IDB governance. It was circulated to all 102 IDBs in England with an 86% response rate. The survey informed the sampling of IDBs for interviews in the next stage.

1 to 1 interviews

Semi-structured interviews were held with 15 case study IDBs. This included four interviews per IDB case study area with a range of stakeholders for a full picture of experiences and issues.

The primary sampling approach is shown in Figure 2 and was used to select IDBs with a focus on two main types:

1. Good governance foundations and track record of engaging LA and co-opted members
2. Less strong governance foundations and less success engagement.

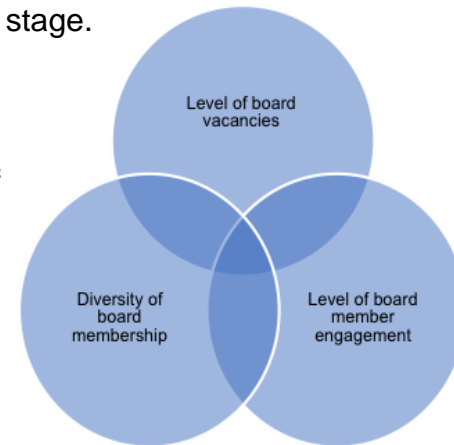
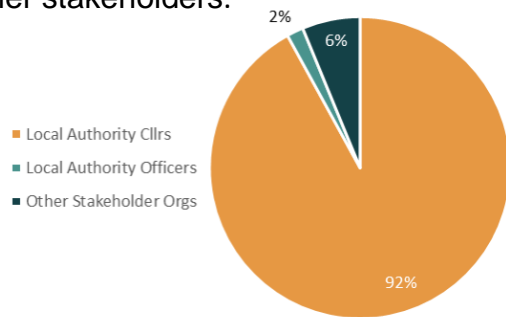


Figure 2: Primary case study selection criteria



What are the key characteristics of boards?

92% of **appointed members** are local authority councillors. 2% are local authority officers and 6% other stakeholders.



60% of IDBs are managed as part of a **consortium**. Most boards have fewer than 24 seats with the average number 19.

Board meeting frequency varies from once a year to quarterly

Board **vacancies** are higher for appointed members. 38% of boards have vacancies for elected members and 45% boards for appointed positions.

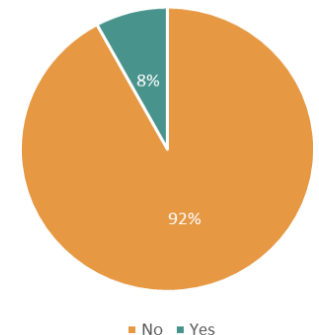


Average attendance at board meetings is 60% but a significant number of IDBs reported lower or much lower levels of attendance.

50% of IDBs find **engaging** local authority councillors in the management of IDBs challenging. Time constraints is reported as the principal reason for this.

Incidences of flooding and a higher IDB profile can make it less challenging to engage local authority councillors in the management of the IDB.

8% of boards have **co-opted** additional (non-voting) board members.



Findings: Role of Members

Research aim 1: Identify and assess how local authorities can support greater IDB accountability via their role in appointing IDB board members

Overview

The research found some evidence of tensions between the role of appointed members on IDB boards and their responsibilities as a councillor.

The role of appointed members in facilitating information exchanges between IDBs and their authorities was seen as important, but many interviewees reported that in practice it was often ineffective.

Role in financial oversight

Board members are expected to act in the best interests of the IDB rather than the local authority. The research found concerns that appointed members do not always follow this principal.

In particular, the research identified examples of tensions between the need to ensure that the IDB has access to the funding it requires and local authorities desire to avoid increases in the special levy

Communication

Board members are expected to bring relevant local issues to the attention of the IDB and this was identified as an important function of appointed members.

Appointed members were seen as effective in making IDB boards aware of matters of concern to local communities. However, a number of interviewees suggested that they were much less effective at facilitating the exchange of information between IDBs and their local authority, and this was seen as leading to missed opportunities for joint working.

“Elected Members have expressed concern, they consider the appointment of Local Authority Officers to be in a “policing” role, to reduce expenditure where possible thereby reducing the special levy impact on local authorities irrespective of £100,000 year on year budget increase for EA/IDB precept.” – Quote from Survey



Findings: Recruitment & Retention

Research aim 1: Identify and assess how local authorities can support greater IDB accountability via their role in appointing IDB board members

Overview

IDBs face a challenge to fill both appointed member and elected member board seats and it is becoming increasingly difficult to address. Local authorities are taking a range of approaches to securing appointed members and some IDBs are adopting alternative ad-hoc arrangements.

Recruitment

Local authorities find it hard to identify sufficient councillors to fill their allocated seats. This is particularly acute for local authorities with multiple IDBs. Board membership was reported as often being an unpopular duty owing to the nature of the business, lack of understanding of the role and low political profile.

Non-councillor members

Some local authorities have appointed parish councillors to address shortages. Aside from ensuring representation, they are well placed to identify and report on local issues and views.

Elected members (EM)

Whilst currently EM participation is generally perceived to be good, it appears to be reliant on the goodwill of an aging generation of landowners. Many are longstanding board members and often retired or semi-retired. A common concern is where replacement EMs will come from.

Ad-hoc arrangements

Some IDBs have accepted that they are unable to fill vacancies and have chosen to 'carry' vacancies. Some suggested that vacancies were not a pressing concern as smaller boards enable more efficient decision making. Conversely, some interviewees report concerns that smaller boards lose access to local knowledge and expertise.

"I think one of the valid points that some of our members make is that they don't really understand what it's about so they don't feel they are going to bring much to the process if they are appointed – Quote from local authority officer interview



Findings: Attendance & Engagement

Research aim 2: Understand the factors which influence IDB governance. In particular, understand how some boards have a wide and diverse membership with active engagement by members

Overview

Attendance rates are on average 60% but a significant number of IDBs report lower or much lower attendance. 50% of IDBs report appointed member engagement is challenging or very challenging. A number of contributing factors are reported and best practice identified.

Contributing Factors

The research found that a distinction was often made between appointed members who attend and whose contribution is valued, and those who do not attend or do not contribute when they do. Some appointed members are reported as having never attended a board meeting.

An important factor influencing non-attendance and engagement is a perceived **lack of interest**. However, some appointed members reported they found it challenging to get to grips with discussions and unclear how they were meant to contribute. Some appointed members noted that, whilst initially cautious, they had become more confident and active over time.

Scheduling

Scheduling clashes with council meetings or holiday may prevent attendance. Some suggested meetings scheduled during the day are a barrier to working appointed members.

Reporting systems

A small number of interviewees indicated that they reported on appointed member attendance or had considered this as a mechanism for encouraging attendance.



Findings: Diversity and Skills

Research aim 2: Understand the factors which influence IDB governance. In particular, understand how some boards have a wide and diverse membership with active engagement by members

Overview

Board members provide IDBs with access to a wide range of skills and expertise alongside local knowledge and experience. Business/industry and land management are the most commonly reported areas of specialism covered by board members.

Skills gaps and diversity

The appointment process for appointed members rarely takes account of the skills and expertise of appointees, or IDB needs, with appointment primarily being determined by geography. This may mean that opportunities are missed to fill gaps in board skills and expertise. Local authorities are well placed to help IDBs address such gaps, and to expand the range of skills and experience on IDB boards, as they are able to appoint non-councillors, including members of external bodies, as board members. However, local authorities and IDBs rarely engage with one another when considering board appointments.

“Usually board members sit on boards that fit within or overlap with their area.” – Quote from
Appointed Member

Regulatory requirements

Some IDBs report they struggle to implement regulatory requirements, such as health and safety, data protection etc and may not be able to meet future demands. In response, some IDBs reported that they may need to merge or enter into consortia with other boards.

Skills and expertise

The majority of IDBs report they have no major skills or experience gaps on their board. However, 40% of IDBs reported they would benefit from access to more expertise in biodiversity and ecology. Such expertise is normally procured from external bodies but local authorities could help to meet this need by the selection of suitably qualified appointed members.



Suggested actions

The following actions address specific issues identified in the research to improve governance arrangements. In many cases they are consistent with and reinforce existing guidance provided by the Association of Drainage Authorities.

Raise the profile of IDBs amongst councillors and the general public to increase interest amongst potential board members.

Ensure local authorities are aware that they have the option to appoint non-councillor appointed members to fill vacancies.

Encourage greater engagement between IDBs and local authorities when considering how best to fill AM vacancies and skills gaps.

Strengthen the role of appointed members as facilitators of local authority/IDB engagement and introduce formal two-way reporting systems.

Enable participation through convenient scheduling of meetings. In particular avoid daytime meeting to avoid deterring working appointed members.

Ensure that councillor appointed members, are aware of their responsibilities to the IDB and provide training to assist them to identify and manage the tensions between these roles.

Support and encourage IDBs to provide structured induction and training for members where not already provided.

Local authorities should consider the introduction of attendance records linked to internal scrutiny processes to encourage attendance.

Support IDBs to identify responses to recruitment and retention challenges through consideration of consortia, reducing board size or other arrangements.

Provide support to IDBs to deal with regulatory requirements and legal obligations.





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Access the full report 'Internal Drainage Boards: Research into the factors affecting IDB board membership and their impact on board governance' [here](#).



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