



## Defra's Science Advisory Council (SAC) sub-committee: Biodiversity Expert Committee (BEC)

Minutes of meeting, 27 September 2023

### Actions arising

Action number	Action	Owner
01	BEC Ways of Working: Secretariat to produce a paper on how the SAC and SSEG work and the relationship with BEC.	BEC secretariat
02	BEC Ways of Working: Secretariat to produce a paper on how the BEC fits with relevant policy boards and the UK level responsibilities.	BEC secretariat
03	BEC Ways of Working: BEC to review the Terms of Reference at a future meeting.	BEC secretariat
04	IPBES: Send invitation to the BEC members to join the IPBES stakeholder network, and request members to share the network with other interested contacts	IPBES
05	IPBES: Send request for nominations for current IPBES opportunities to BEC members, and request members to share these opportunities with their contacts.	IPBES



## **1. Welcome and apologies**

The Biodiversity Expert Committee Chair, Professor Hails, welcomed the attendees to the first meeting of the Biodiversity Expert Committee (BEC). Attendees and apologies are recorded in Annex A. Each member introduced themselves, including their role on the committee. Member biographies will be published alongside the terms of reference of the group. Dr Dickey-Collas will be an observer until he has stepped down from his role as chair of the International Council for the Exploration of the Seas (ICES) advisory committee later in the year, when he shall become a full member. The BEC has a good spread of relevant expertise however there are no specific social science representatives. The BEC will be able to draw upon the Science Advisory Council's (SAC) Social Science Expert Group (SSEG) when needed.

Members were given the opportunity to raise any conflicts of interest and reminded that these can be raised at any time. Dr Isaac highlighted prior involvement in the species abundance target work.

## **2. BEC ways of working**

The BEC's remit will cut across many teams and policy areas in Defra. Defra officials provided an overview of the key challenges facing each area.

International Biodiversity and Climate have an overarching goal to halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030. Guided by a range of international directions and strategies the multidisciplinary team advise, co-develop and challenge policies and programmes to ensure Defra is informed by the best possible evidence. Five strategic priorities underpin this work and the evidence strategy aims to prioritise them.

Marine Biodiversity has a centralised team of experts, natural and social scientists and economists, providing advice and expertise across policy areas. Their vision is for an ocean that is effectively governed, clean, healthy, safe, productive and biologically diverse. They work very closely with Centre for Environment Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (Cefas), Marine Management Organisation (MMO), Joint Natural Capital Committee (JNCC) and Natural England (NE). The portfolio covers both domestic and international biodiversity commitments. Defra officials therefore work closely with other government departments such as the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

National Biodiversity's work is framed by the national biodiversity targets in the Environment Act and the Environmental Improvement Plan, in particular the species abundance target to halt the decline by 2030 and reverse the decline by 2042. Defra also has a wider habitat creation restoration target, a target to reduce the extinction list on a subset of the GB red list, protective sites restoration and goals related to invasive species.



Significant growth of the evidence base is needed as Defra develops in this space. This is an area BEC advice and support would be particularly welcomed.

Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) is an approach to development and/or land management to leave the natural environment in a measurably better state than it was beforehand. This is measured by a metric using habitat as a proxy for biodiversity. BNG aims to create a new market forcing the demand for nature recovery to encourage land managers, owners and agents. Defra would welcome BEC's input into the monitoring and evaluation and the evidence and analysis underpinning BNG policy and the direction of travel.

The Natural Capital and Ecosystem Assessment (NCEA) programme is providing insights on how and why our environment is changing and the impact of this, through comprehensive monitoring, innovative measurement and the development of tools and guidance. Terrestrial NCEA (tNCEA) has projects set up to support many environment policies across Defra's portfolio and is designed to plug the major gaps in the existing biodiversity portfolio. The BEC can support tNCEA in helping to bring fragmented work in this space together.

The BEC were invited to comment on the committee's Terms of Reference (ToR):

- clarification on the scope is needed as the remit is currently limited to England but the BEC has international expertise and biodiversity is a cross-border issue
- the expertise should be updated to reflect the membership
- the ToR should reflect the broader view of the members on how policies work together
- the ToR should reflect how the subgroup will work with the SAC

The BEC agreed to review the ToRs once these changes are made and that greater understanding is needed on how the BEC fits with the SAC, SSEG and other policy boards across marine, international and BNG.

**Action 01: Secretariat to produce a paper on how the SAC and SSEG work and the relationship with BEC.**

**Action 02: Secretariat to produce a paper on how the BEC fits with relevant policy boards and the UK level responsibilities.**

**Action 03: BEC to review the Terms of Reference at a future meeting.**



### 3. IPBES forward look

The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) is an intergovernmental body with the aim to strengthen the science-policy interface for biodiversity and ecosystem services for “the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, long-term human well-being and sustainable development.” The BEC were presented with opportunities to engage with IPBES and asked whether it is interested in engaging with IPBES expert nominations, assessment reviews and advising on submissions.

The BEC recognised the high impact work of IPBES and support Defra’s proposals for engagement. The BEC proposed it could draw on its networks to increase breadth and diversity of experts participating in development of assessments. This was welcomed by Defra as it acknowledges the importance of capturing crucial expertise, including from underrepresented expert pools.

The BEC highlighted the importance of avoiding duplication of effort and the need to build on other similar assessments, including those of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

The BEC was interested in supporting how the assessments are used and taken through to action. Due to requiring bespoke action, Defra suggested the BEC could review findings and share ideas after approval of an IPBES assessment. The BEC agreed this would be a good approach.

**Action 04: Send invitation to the BEC members to join the IPBES stakeholder network, and request members to share the network with other interested contacts**

**Action 05: Send request for nominations for current IPBES opportunities to BEC members, and request members to share these opportunities with their contacts.**

### 4. Biodiversity Policy Analysis Tool (BPAT)

Now that the Environment Act targets for biodiversity are set in law, there is a focus on delivery of these targets. Defra has commissioned a project to develop a top-down policy-facing tool that aims to bring together evidence on the relationship between key actions and policies and changes in species abundance. The BEC was asked to provide feedback and comments on the methodology and continued development of this policy analysis tool.



The BEC noted that this tool is trying to achieve something very complex and there therefore is a need to balance robustness with pragmatism. The BEC also highlighted the importance of transparency and the need to ensure that users of the tool are aware of its limitations.

The BEC suggested alternative approaches that could be considered, and highlighted other tools and research of relevance to this project. In particular, the BEC suggested that Defra consider the work of Ian Bateman (University of Exeter), Mike Clark (University of Oxford), and researchers working on counterfactuals for similar projects. The BEC also highlighted potential approaches to represent the impact of water pollution and other pressures on species.

The BEC recommended that this tool is linked to existing habitat indicators in the Outcome Indicator Framework, and suggested several options to expand the scope of the tool in future.

## **5. Species abundance target – indicator methodology**

Progress towards the Environment Act targets for species abundance will be measured using a composite indicator that tracks changes in the relative abundance of species in England. Work is ongoing to update the abundance indicator ahead of its publication. Defra asked for the BEC's expert input on questions around the methodology and publication of the abundance indicator.

The BEC generally supported Defra's planned approach for publishing the indicator, particularly the need for clear communication about the methodology and how to interpret overall trends.

The BEC considered specific technical questions on the indicator methodology, and options to deal with incomplete data. Members provided recommendations for additional approaches that could be considered and incorporated into the indicator over both the short and longer term. The BEC highlighted similar work that has been done by academics and in other countries for Defra to consider.

## **6. Wrap up, any other business, future BEC discussion proposals**

The BEC were invited to suggest future discussion topics. Suggestions included:

- a deeper discussion on ecosystems and monitoring, to understand how the red list will be compiled for the UK ecosystem



- Defra's engagement with the deep sea ecosystem community on vulnerable marine ecosystems
- Biodiversity Net Gain, the biodiversity credits framework and the interface with the taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosures (TNFD)
- how international and national biodiversity are linked, including indicators and the global biodiversity monitoring framework
- accounting and assessment of species migration due to climate change
- observational campaigns and monitoring approaches to help prioritise species and habitat interventions that are feeding into the indices, including in the marine, terrestrial and freshwater environments, to understand which habitats and species are critical to improve on
- understanding of how Defra works with other government departments and how science can be best utilised to inform policy



## **Annex A - Attendees**

### **BEC Members**

- Rosie Hails
- Nathalie Pettorelli
- Darren Evans
- Andy Purvis
- Nick Isaac
- Andrew Stott
- Daniel Jones
- Nathalie Seddon
- EJ Milner-Gulland
- Martin Wilkes

### **Observers**

- Mark Dickey-Collas

### **Defra**

- Defra officials in relation to specific items
- BEC secretariat

### **Apologies**

- Ian Dickie