



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

Minutes of meeting, 20 December 2023

Actions arising

Action number	Action	Owner
01	Ways of working: Share SSEG ToR and membership with BEC.	BEC secretariat
02	Ways of working: Consider amending the ToR to clarify the international scope of BEC, social science expertise and consideration to Defra's reporting requirements.	BEC secretariat
03	Ways of working: Request an observer from JNCC. Review in 6 months.	BEC secretariat
04	ODA: Team to share presentation slides with BEC.	ODA team
05	Horizon scanning: BEC to view future Defra horizon scans, to consider if this assists with proposing agenda items.	Defra Futures/ BEC
06	Potential items: Approach Defra Water team regarding potential engagement with BEC.	BEC Secretariat



1. Welcome and apologies

The Biodiversity Expert Committee (BEC) Chair welcomed attendees, apologies are recorded in Annex A. Attendees were invited to introduce themselves and their role.

2. BEC ways of working

The BEC discussed the updated Terms of Reference (ToR) for the group. The BEC agreed for meetings to be held every quarter, with one meeting held in-person every 6 months, one of which will be a longer meeting.

The BEC agreed the scope of the group within the ToR required further broadening, covering biodiversity in England, the UK, UK overseas territories and internationally. The BEC suggested that the remit should also consider how the group will contribute to Defra's reporting requirements, including reporting against global biodiversity targets.

The BEC noted that social science should be included in the list of expertise and acknowledged the ability of the group to call upon expertise within the Social Science Expert Group (SSEG), if needed. The group requested sight of the SSEG ToR and membership.

The BEC suggested representation from the devolved administrations would be useful. The BEC agreed an observer from the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) could be a useful contribution to the group.

The BEC questioned how Defra's expert committees and groups are formed, and suggested there could be potential gaps in areas such as deep sea and peatland. The BEC were informed that the Science Advisory Committee (SAC) has a broad, overarching focus and that other committees are formed when a need for them is identified. Defra also has the ability to access expert advice through other means, outside of committees. The BEC were encouraged to make Defra aware of gaps.

Action 01: Share SSEG ToR and membership with BEC.

Action 02: Consider amending the ToR to clarify the international scope of BEC, social science expertise and consideration to Defra's reporting requirements.

Action 03: Request an observer from JNCC. Review in 6 months.



3. Biodiversity targets in England

In December 2022, four legally binding targets for biodiversity in England were set. A wide range of policies and programmes will support delivery of these targets, as set out in the Environmental Improvement Plan published in January 2023. Defra is reviewing the approach used to assess the contribution of different delivery mechanisms to achieving the targets, and the BEC was asked to provide feedback on Defra's proposed framework.

The BEC recommended that the criteria used to assess the contributions of delivery mechanisms should include a focus on alignment of delivery mechanisms with the biodiversity targets, and the potential scale of impact. In addition, the BEC noted the benefits of considering the strength of evidence, and uncertainty around whether a mechanism will deliver.

The BEC highlighted that there will be interdependencies between delivery mechanisms, and the importance of ensuring that these different actions align with and are complementary to each other. The BEC also noted that it could be beneficial to widen the scope of this exercise to pressures beyond the Defra Group.

4. Deep sea mining

In October 2023, the UK Government announced its support for a moratorium on granting deep sea mining (DSM) exploitation licenses by the International Seabed Authority (ISA). This means the UK will not sponsor or support the issuing of any such licences until sufficient scientific evidence is available to assess the potential impact of DSM activities on marine ecosystems. The UK is an advocate for the highest possible environmental standards and has been pushing the ISA to develop strong and enforceable standards and guidelines on DSM. Defra updated the BEC on the work they are carrying out to support better understanding of the environmental effects of DSM, including launching a UK DSM environmental science expert network, and invited input from the BEC on approaches to dealing with potential biodiversity changes in deep sea environments resulting from DSM.

The BEC supported Defra's plans to support research in this area, and noted the value of social science and economic considerations, as well as environmental science, in decision making. Members highlighted additional topics that require further research, including around defining good conservation priorities and scientific evidence for management.

The BEC asked whether government could play a role in facilitating join up between stakeholders who may be willing to fund research and the institutions that are conducting relevant projects. Defra highlighted the new DSM network's purpose of creating a space to foster strategic partnerships in the UK DSM environmental research space.



Defra introduced to the BEC the work being carried out, both internationally and domestically, relevant to vulnerable marine ecosystems (VMEs). This includes building relationships and negotiating with international partners, and the roll out of Fisheries Management Plans and Highly Protected Marine Areas. The BEC welcomed Defra's intention to bring further information on this and a fuller topic on marine, fisheries and biodiversity to the BEC in 2024.

5. Update on Defra's ODA portfolio and results monitoring approach

Officials from Defra's Official Development Assistance (ODA) Hub introduced the BEC to Defra's ODA portfolio and planned approach to monitoring results across the portfolio. Defra gauged the BEC's interest in engaging further with Defra's ODA plans for the next Spending Review and development of key indicator methodologies in early 2024.

The BEC were keen to be involved in advising and supporting Defra's ODA portfolio and monitoring/indicator development work, and suggested this should be part of the BEC's core programme of work.

With reference to the UN's new statistical standard for ecosystem accounting, the BEC recommended having a statistical body involved for integration and efficient data management.

As the UK is not the only donor country considering these issues, and the Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) and monitoring framework establishes common demands on monitoring, the BEC encouraged Defra's efforts on monitoring plans to join up with other countries and to align to use data that recipient countries are collecting where possible.

The BEC emphasized the importance of having stronger integration between UK domestic and ODA work.

The BEC is likely to be interested in all the ODA biodiversity indicators and monitoring, as well as the portfolio in general, and would welcome and encourage further ODA items.

Action 04: ODA team to share presentation slides with BEC.

6. Introduction to horizon scans

The BEC were introduced to how horizon scanning is carried out within Defra with examples of horizon scan projects and how they can be used to help inform decisions within Defra.



The BEC were asked if they would like to carry out a horizon scan and how they would want to go about this. The BEC agreed that prior to a horizon scan, they would need to establish what they would want to get out of it, what the scope should be, and therefore whether it would be beneficial to the BEC's work. The BEC noted that the long-term goals of the Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) may be useful to inform the scope. The Defra Futures team confirmed they would be happy to help the BEC at any stage in this process, whether the initial scoping and exploratory stage or helping to find a useful approach.

The BEC were asked to consider how horizon scanning could help the group think more broadly when identifying potential agenda items. It was noted that the Defra Futures team's scope when carrying out horizon scans was likely to include biodiversity-related issues, and therefore it would be unnecessary for the BEC to duplicate this effort. The BEC proposed to see future horizon scans carried out by Defra, in order to view them through a biodiversity lens.

Action 05: BEC to view future Defra horizon scans, to consider if this assists with proposing agenda items.

7. Potential agenda items and any other business

The BEC noted their concern that the government was not utilising biodiversity targets within the Environment Act as a mechanism that benefits policy.

A BEC member who attended a meeting organised Defra recognised there were questions being asked relating to freshwater biodiversity that should be brought to the BEC as soon as possible.

The chair welcomed suggestions of pertinent people to invite to present to the group at future meetings.

Action 06: Approach Defra Water team regarding potential engagement with BEC.



Annex A - Attendees

BEC Members

- Rosie Hails (Chair)
- EJ Milner-Gulland
- Mark Dickey-Collas
- Nathalie Pettorelli
- Ian Dickie
- Andy Purvis
- Darren Evans
- Andrew Stott
- Nick Isaac
- Martin Wilkes
- Daniel Jones

Defra

- Defra officials relating to specific agenda items
- BEC secretariat

Apologies

- Nathalie Seddon