Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs

# Biodiversity Expert Committee: terms of reference

## 1 Aim

The Biodiversity Expert Committee (BEC) is a subgroup of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' (Defra) Science Advisory Council (SAC).

The BEC provides independent expert advice, challenge and scientific support to Defra specialists and policy makers in matters related to biodiversity.

## 2 Remit and role

Members of the BEC provides independent technical and scientific advice in matters related to biodiversity. This includes, but is not limited to:

- advising and supporting Defra in developing and implementing an effective and efficient strategy for obtaining and using evidence and scientific advice relating to biodiversity
- advising on and providing assurance on the process for biodiversity evidence gathering, modelling, and monitoring and evaluation
- providing timely targeted advice and expert judgement where necessary – this includes the option for Defra to commission BEC members to produce short advice papers at pace, or to carry out analysis, quality assurance, evidence gathering exercises and reviews
- providing constructive challenge on Defra's biodiversity evidence, including reviewing evidence and analytical products produced by Defra teams, as well as research work commissioned by Defra or its arm's length bodies
- providing clear guidance on latest trends and hot topics within fields of study
- identifying sources of additional expert external advice to input to Defra evidence

The group's scope covers biodiversity policy across terrestrial, freshwater and marine environments in regions within the remit of Defra and its agencies and public bodies.

The BEC is a forum for providing expert advice and not a forum for lobbying or critiquing policy development.

Expertise within the group is broad across areas relating to biodiversity, including, but not limited to: data analysis; climate change; modelling; agriculture; international; marine;

freshwater; terrestrial; social science; and economics. Specific expertise of members are outlined in the member biographies, published on the SAC GOV.UK page.

If an agenda item benefits from expertise outside of the BEC, the chair can co-opt members of the SAC or its subgroups to attend a meeting.

# 3 Accountability

The BEC is a long running advisory committee that is reviewed periodically by Defra's Science and Analysis Group.

As a subgroup of the SAC, the BEC is accountable to the SAC Chair and reports to Defra's Chief Scientific Adviser.

The BEC Chair provides updates to the SAC Chair on the BEC's activities and advice. Relevant discussions and advice from both committees are reported at meetings to ensure that the SAC remains informed of the BEC's work.

# 4 Membership and operating procedures

## 4.1 Members

Members are recruited as individuals based on their expertise and knowledge of issues relevant to the focus of the Biodiversity Expert Committee. The range of expertise required may change or evolve over time. This means the BEC regularly reviews the balance of skills, expertise and experience of members in light of current and anticipated future work programmes. If necessary, additional experts may be co-opted for a limited period of time to provide specific input.

Members and the chair are appointed for an initial fixed term of 3 years, and may be reappointed for a second term.

## 4.2 Chair

The BEC Chair is responsible for:

- providing leadership to the committee, ensuring that it operates effectively and delivers independent, evidence-based advice within the remit set out in its terms of reference
- chairing meetings and fostering open, constructive discussion, ensuring that all members have the opportunity to contribute and that differing scientific views are considered
- working collaboratively with the secretariat and Defra officials to agree the committee's work programme and meeting agendas
- working with the secretariat to ensure that the BEC's membership provides the breadth and depth of expertise required to meet Defra's advisory needs

- communicating with the Science Advisory Council (SAC) Chair to ensure that the SAC and BEC are informed of relevant activities
- ensuring that actual, potential and perceived conflicts of interest are identified and managed appropriately
- promoting transparency and openness in the committee's work

## 4.3 Secretariat

The BEC has a dispersed secretariat, consisting of Defra staff from the Central Science Division and policy teams across Defra that work on biodiversity.

The secretariat is responsible for:

- promoting the committee and communicating its role within the department
- making sure the committee delivers value for money in line with any independent review
- preparing and circulating agendas and papers for meetings
- supporting the committee by assembling and analysing information and recording conclusions of the meetings

The secretariat is the main contact point for members: biodiversity.expert.committee@defra.gov.uk

## 4.4 Meetings

The BEC intends to hold quarterly meetings: 2 in-person meetings per year, with 2 teleconference meetings in between. As well as these regular meetings, subject to BEC Chair and member agreement, additional meetings may be requested on an ad hoc basis to discuss specific issues raised by policy teams. These may involve a subset of members or individuals with specific expertise. If an ad hoc meeting is required, these are expected to take less than 6 hours per month.

The secretariat endeavours to give as much notice as possible with regards to meeting dates. The agenda items for discussion and supporting papers are sent to members before the meeting. The aim is to send papers to members at least 4 days before the meeting where possible.

Members are provided with a copy of the officials' papers, presentations or questions. Members are expected to have read these documents before the meeting and come with advice prepared. These documents are typically confidential and classified as official-sensitive and must not be circulated outside of the meeting attendees.

On average, the time commitment for BEC members is expected to be less than 16 hours a month. This will be lower on months without a quarterly meeting.

If agreed by the chair, observers, such as from arms-length bodies, may be invited to attend meetings. Observers attend as representatives of their organisation and are given access to meeting papers and can contribute to discussions.

## 4.5 Ad hoc commissions

Additional pieces of work are commissioned on an ad hoc basis, subject to BEC Chair and member agreement. This could include pieces of analysis, written advice papers, and evidence gathering exercises or reviews.

## 4.6 Remuneration and expenses

It is optional for members to claim remuneration and travel expenses for BEC related work.

The current remuneration for committee members is £39 per hour for attendance at meetings, preparation for meetings and time spent on ad hoc commissions. Preparation time for meetings is expected to be half the meeting length.

BEC members can claim travel and subsistence expenses for travel to and from meetings and overnight accommodation, if required, in accordance with Defra policies. Accommodation can be booked by the secretariat or reimbursed if members provide a receipt.

The secretariat provides claim forms and guidance for members to make remuneration and subsistence claims.

The department has due regard to diversity. If any additional costs are required to allow accessibility to meetings, these can be agreed with the secretariat.

## 4.7 Conflicts of interest

The secretariat maintains a register of interests for committee members. If members have any real or perceived conflict of interest that might affect their ability to carry out their role as a member of the BEC, they should share details with the secretariat. Members should disclose information on any relevant business interest, public appointment or position of authority, including any other connection with commercial, public or voluntary bodies.

Members are asked to declare any conflict of interests relating to specific agenda items during meetings. Members should withdraw from discussion of matters in which there may be an existing conflict of interest.

## 4.8 Member standards and behaviour

Members of the committee must at all times:

- comply with their terms and conditions of appointment

- comply with standards and behaviour as set out in the Seven Principles of Public Life
- not misuse information gained in the course of their public service for personal gain or for political purpose, nor seek to use the opportunity of public service to promote their private interests or those of connected persons, firms, businesses or other organisations
- not disclose any information which is confidential in nature or which is provided in confidence without authority – this duty continues to apply after members' appointments have ended

All members are subject to the provisions of the Official Secrets Act 1989. Unauthorised disclosure of any information gained in the course of this appointment, or its use by you or others for personal gain or advancement, could result in the appointment being terminated early, or even criminal prosecution.

## 4.9 Communication with the media

The chair will be the primary spokesperson for any contact with the media unless the chair or the secretariat has made other specific arrangements.

If a member receives an approach for an interview connected in any way to their role on the expert group, the request must be referred to the secretariat. The Secretariat will liaise with the Defra press office, and the chair.

The expert committee will follow a "no surprises" policy when dealing with the media. This is to ensure that Defra remain informed and are able to respond or offer their own input to the media as appropriate.

Neither ministers nor chairs should make announcements on issues relating to expert group advice (including policy announcements where the expert group has been asked to provide advice on the associated evidence) without communicating their intention and the nature of the message to the other.

Chairs and members may be invited to speak to the media independently of their membership and it is their choice to accept or reject such an offer. When speaking in a personal capacity, this should be highlighted at the beginning of any interview and individuals should refrain from commenting on the expert committee operations and outputs.

Social media is a public forum and therefore the same considerations apply. Where any personal social media accounts used by chairs or members make reference to their role on an expert group, they should ensure that it is clear in what capacity they are communicating. Social media biographies should include an explicit line which makes clear that all views communicated via social media are the account holder's own.

## 4.10 Changes to these terms

These terms of reference may be amended at any time with agreement from BEC members.