

UK Biodiversity Partnership
Standing Committee

UKBSC/02/1/1
Government Response to the MBR

5 September 2002

Government response to the
UK Biodiversity Group Report
*Sustaining the variety of life:
five years of the
UK Biodiversity Action Plan*

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Contents

Introduction	5
Guiding principles, aims and objectives and indicators	6
The structure of delivery	8
Progress with Habitat and Species Action Plans	9
Availability of resources	10
Local Biodiversity Action Plans	11
The influence of other policies on biodiversity	11
Large-scale influences on biodiversity	11
Information for biodiversity	12
Research for biodiversity	13
Annex: The UK Biodiversity Partnership's aims and objectives	14

Introduction

1. In March 2001 the UK Biodiversity Group's report, *Sustaining the Variety of Life*, was published. It looked back over the first five years of implementation of the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (UKBAP), the UK national strategy giving effect to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). The report has become known as the Millennium Biodiversity Report (the MBR).
2. The Report was prepared by the UK Biodiversity Group, a body bringing together the main players in biodiversity policy from the public, private and voluntary sectors, and was formally submitted by them to the UK Government. This present document is the formal response by the UK Government.
3. The Government recognises the enthusiastic work of a wide range of partners involved in implementation of the UK Biodiversity Action Plan and wholeheartedly supports continuation of the process.
4. At the time of the adoption of the UK Biodiversity Action Plan, there had been no devolution to administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Devolution has fundamentally changed the way that biodiversity policy in the UK is implemented. The Report clearly recognises that the processes of supporting, managing and implementing the UKBAP, originally driven primarily at the UK level, needed to be adjusted to take better account of the fact that most of the policy instruments for implementation had been devolved. Even since the MBR's publication in March last year, it has become increasingly apparent that much action to take forward implementation of the UKBAP is focused primarily at the country level, co-ordinated by the relevant Country Biodiversity Groups. The Government therefore endorses the proposal made in the report that the UK Biodiversity Group should be replaced by a UK Biodiversity Partnership, which is discussed in more detail in paragraph 16 below.
5. The UK Government also recognises that many of the policy issues and recommendations raised in the MBR are being taken forward by the countries themselves in accordance with devolved responsibilities and the paragraphs immediately below give brief summaries of the main developments in biodiversity policy in the four countries. The rest of this response concentrates primarily on the processes that are needed for co-ordination of the UKBAP and related policy development at the UK level.
6. In England, the England Biodiversity Group is co-ordinating the preparation of a Biodiversity Strategy for England to be published by the Government later in 2002. The Strategy will bring together the important strands of policy that influence biodiversity and develop a programme for the next five years to achieve the overall goal of

conserving and enhancing biodiversity in England, complementing action within the Habitat and Species Action Plans

7. In Scotland the establishment of a Scottish Biodiversity forum to succeed the Scottish Biodiversity Group was agreed by Ministers late in 2001. At the first meeting of the Forum, Ministers requested the development of a Biodiversity Strategy for Scotland. The draft Strategy will be published for consultation in early 2003 and will encompass proposals for habitat types and species of priority importance in Scotland.
8. The Wales Biodiversity Group has presented advice to the National Assembly for Wales on future directions for the biodiversity process in Wales following the MBR. The Group's advice will form the basis of consultation by the Welsh Assembly Government later in 2002 on a framework for future biodiversity action in Wales. Consultation has also taken place on proposals for habitat types and species of principal importance for biodiversity conservation that are to be included on the list to be published by the National Assembly under s.74 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.
9. The Northern Ireland Biodiversity Group made a number of recommendations to government for the protection and conservation of biodiversity. The Executive, as part of the Programme for Government, is committed to publishing a Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy and this is expected to issue by the summer. In the meantime, the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS), an Agency of the Department of the Environment, has set up a new Biodiversity Unit. EHS has drawn up its own Implementation Plan for protecting and conserving Northern Ireland's biodiversity. Actions planned include taking the lead in the UK and the NI Action Plans for which Northern Ireland is responsible, preparing NI habitat and species action plans, conducting an all-Ireland review of introduced species in conjunction with the Republic of Ireland and encouraging the development of local biodiversity action plans.

Guiding principles, aims and objectives and indicators

10. The Government endorses the essential principles of the UKBAP, set out in the MBR:

Partnership – involving the range of statutory, voluntary, academic and business sectors nationally and locally.

Actions and targets – addressing the priority biodiversity needs by establishing clear actions, measurable outcomes and accountability.

Policy integration – recognising that significant shifts in policy are needed to reverse declining trends in UK biodiversity and to support sustainable development in all sectors of society.

Information – recognising that sound science and knowledge should underpin decisions and that new approaches are needed to fill information gaps and understanding.

Public awareness – recognising that the changes needed to maintain biodiversity in the long-term must be supported by people's actions, attitudes and understanding.

11. The Government is happy to adopt the **aims and objectives** proposed in the Report for the UK Biodiversity Partnership, and which flow from these essential principles. The aims and objectives are in Chapter 4 of the MBR and are set out at Annex A to this document for convenient reference.
12. The Government also supports the adoption of the broad **indicators** of progress with the Habitat and Species Action Plans proposed by the UKBG. These are:
 - The proportion of Action Plans making progress towards their targets;
 - Numbers of BAP priority species and habitats showing signs of recovery, those which are stable and those still in decline; and
 - The proportion of action plan targets achieved.

The Government will incorporate these into its series of indicators of Sustainable Development, the *Quality of life counts*, and will rely on the UK Biodiversity Partnership and its supporting bodies to maintain appropriate mechanisms for regular reporting of the Action Plans so that the indicators can be used as measures of the success of this important policy area.

13. The Government considers that the additional indicators proposed by the UKBG – coverage of Local Biodiversity Action Plans, numbers of organisations involved in biodiversity partnerships and public membership of biodiversity conservation organisations – are useful current measures of the scale of the biodiversity process and, to some extent, of the relevance of biodiversity issues to the general public. The Partnership might wish to use them and others in the future for their purposes. Country Groups may also want to develop indicators for their own use. They do not however have the long-term robustness to form part of the UK Government's *Quality of life* indicators.

The structure of delivery

14. The involvement of a wide range of partners in the preparation and implementation of the UKBAP has been one of its great strengths. The Government strongly hopes that that partnership will continue.
15. From its origins in 1995, the UKBAP has had a strong UK-wide direction, although it was always recognised that the separate countries in the UK would develop their own approaches, through the individual Country Biodiversity Groups, that reflected their different priorities. Since devolution, many of the policy instruments lie with the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and with the UK Government for England. At the same time, the UK as a whole is committed to the obligations of the CBD and nature does not recognise administrative boundaries. So the Government believes strongly that a continued UK-wide approach in some areas is essential. The report's reflections on the impact of devolution are welcomed, as are its proposals for maintaining appropriate co-ordination and policy development at the UK level for those functions and operations where it makes sense to do so, in particular the common set of UK Habitat and Species Action Plans and common support and information systems. The Government also welcomes the increased emphasis placed in the Report on delivery through the Country Biodiversity Groups, with a lighter touch at the UK level.
16. The MBR makes a number of recommendations for a new structure of delivery for the UKBAP, which the Government accepts. With the help of our partners we expect the revised structure to be as follows:
 - An extended UK Biodiversity Partnership to replace the UKBG will be established. Membership will be open and flexible and include all those organisations that currently participate in the UKBAP process (at UK, country or local level), extending to those which might potentially participate in future as implementation and influence expand. The Partnership should meet annually at a conference to discuss themes and issues of common concern to the UK. Attendance at partnership conferences will vary according to the issues under discussion. The Partnership could potentially also discuss wider questions of UK implementation of the CBD, which have not hitherto been part of the UKBAP process.
 - A small UK Biodiversity Standing Committee, will be set up and chaired by the Director of Wildlife, Countryside and Flood Management of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. The Standing Committee should prepare issues for consideration by the UK Partnership, and steer and provide the context for the work of any sub-groups and other supporting mechanisms, such as the Biodiversity Information Service of the JNCC and the Secretariat. The Chairs of the four Country Biodiversity Groups should be standing members of the Committee,

as should representatives of the four country nature conservation agencies. This core membership should ensure that the views of the country partnerships are represented and that the group retains its strong biodiversity focus. A small number of other representatives from the partnership as a whole should be invited to join the Standing Committee. It will be important for the Standing Committee to ensure that the UKBAP remains relevant and dynamic, and so the Committee should ensure that its membership, whilst remaining small enough to be business-like, is appropriate and necessary according to the current business of the partnership.

- The Standing Committee is likely to want to commission sub-groups to undertake specific time-limited tasks as necessary. The MBR saw a continuing role for the Biodiversity Information Group and the Biodiversity Research Working Group and, as appropriate to guide the process of selection, management and review of the common list of Species and Habitats Action Plans, the Targets Group and the Costings sub-group. It will be for the Standing Committee to take an early view of whether these groups and their scope and terms of reference remain appropriate and to set any new arrangements in place.
- The UK Biodiversity Secretariat in DEFRA's Biodiversity Policy Unit will continue to service the UKBAP and will support the UK Biodiversity Partnership, the UK Biodiversity Standing Committee and the sub-groups as appropriate. In line with the MBR's recommendations, the Secretariat will be the focal point for information and communication and work closely with the Biodiversity Information Service of the JNCC and with the Country Secretariats.

Progress with the Habitat and Species Action Plans

17. The MBR gave a comprehensive overview of the state of implementation and achievement of the Species and Habitat Action Plans for which reports had been submitted (358 out of the 436 Action Plans), and concluded that there were already some signs of progress and success. The MBR looked back over the period from 1995 and the data were gathered in 1999. Thus, for many of the more recently-published Action Plans (1998 and 1999), it was rather early for significant progress to have been recorded. So it is pleasing that the analysis showed that five habitats and 33 species were already showing signs of recovery and one habitat and 58 species were thought to be stable. The analysis also showed that one habitat and 44 species were still thought to be in decline. A particularly important finding was that there was insufficient information to make a judgement about biological status in 71% of habitat and 55% of species plans, but that survey work was already underway for the vast majority of these to provide baseline information for future action and monitoring.

18. Overall, therefore, the early findings of the MBR are encouraging: they indicate that the Action Plan process is working. It is clear that the earlier plans have already made good progress towards their targets. The Government continues to have faith in the Action Plan process and we wish to reinforce our support for its implementation through the Partnership. We anticipate that the next full round of reporting later in 2002/3 will show more substantial progress. We are encouraged that the UKBG indicated its determination to facilitate reporting on the Action Plans by the relevant Lead Partners and Agencies through a flexible web-based information system which will also allow Local Biodiversity Action Plans to report on their own contributions and that this is expected to be ready by 2005. This data will also provide the opportunity for further consideration of the targets and whether they remain challenging and achievable.

Availability of resources

19. The MBR found that the need for additional funds and staff resources was the constraint to implementation that was most frequently identified by Lead Partners. The Government notes, however, that the research commissioned by the Government to investigate BAP costings and funding sources drew no generally applicable conclusions as to where the pressures were most keenly felt. As the Report points out, substantial funding streams have been made available to the implementation of the Action Plans through the National Lottery and Landfill Tax, EU Structural Funds, agri-environment schemes and direct grants, mainly through the nature conservation agencies. From this year, the Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund will provide a significant new source of funding to reduce the local effects of aggregate extraction, including biodiversity impacts. The Country Agencies continue to identify ways of making effective contributions to local and national biodiversity priorities.
20. Although it will always be necessary for specific resources to continue to be available to deliver action plan targets, we believe that, as biodiversity is increasingly integrated into policies, these other programmes should become the major source of funding to achieve biodiversity objectives.
21. We also agree in the light of the research findings that the Partnership should encourage and facilitate Lead Partners to develop more transparent systems of work planning and costing so that funding sources and any resource gaps may in future be clearly identified.

Local Biodiversity Action Plans

22. The MBR rightly gives considerable prominence to the importance of Local Biodiversity Action Plans in helping to deliver the national priorities and ensure that the consideration of biodiversity needs penetrates through all parts of society. It is clear that considerable energies are devoted to LBAPs and there have been many important achievements. The further development and encouragement of LBAPs is primarily the responsibility of the Country Biodiversity Groups, but the UK Biodiversity Partnership must take the lead in establishing mechanisms for effective communication between the local players and the Lead Partners and Agencies of the UK Action Plans. It is essential that LBAP partnerships are enabled to play a full part in the UK implementation strategy as substantial members of the UK Biodiversity Partnership.

The influence of other policies on biodiversity

23. The MBR gives a full account of the range of policies that impact on biodiversity. It draws on the evidence of the Lead Partner reports and other sources, such as Countryside Survey 2000, to describe the main factors affecting the state of biodiversity in sectors such as agriculture, forestry, water management and in the marine environment. It also looks at cross-cutting issues such as the involvement of business and the importance of public awareness. Many of these issues are being taken forward by the Country Biodiversity Groups.

Large-scale influences on biodiversity

24. The MBR draws attention to air pollution which gives rise to acid rain and nutrient enrichment and recommends research to increase understanding of how future emissions are likely to affect biodiversity. The Government is considering research requirements in this area, building on existing studies to differentiate the eutrophication effects of atmospheric pollution and fertilizer use, to establish the best means of quantifying the impacts of atmospheric nitrogen deposition on biodiversity. Reducing the impacts of air pollution on sensitive ecosystems continues to be a main driver for European agreements on emission reductions.
25. The MBR outlines the need for more work on the likely impact of climate change on our species and habitats. The report highlights the original Government publication on climate change and UK nature conservation and draws attention to more quantitative studies underway, MONARCH and REGIS. Both studies have now published the full findings of their work as part of the Government's UK Climate Impacts Programme. Both show how the wildlife of this country might

be affected by climate change. It represents threats for some species but opportunities for others. The distribution of plants and animals may change and some rare flora and fauna on the edge of their range may eventually be lost from the UK. Some types of habitat are likely to be more vulnerable than others. On 26 April 2002, the Government launched its new Climate Change Scenarios for the United Kingdom – 2002. These replace an earlier set from 1998 and represent a step forward in our understanding of possible consequences of climate change for the UK. They will provide a basis for future work on the impacts of climate change on UK biodiversity.

Information for biodiversity

26. The Government agrees that good information is vital to the success of HAPs and SAPs. It is just as important for biodiversity as a whole. Good information requires survey, collation, synthesis and dissemination.
27. Systematic surveillance and monitoring of biodiversity must include widely occurring habitats and species as well as rare species and protected sites. For species, good progress is being made in current projects such as the Plant Atlas, the Butterfly Monitoring Scheme, the Atlas of Freshwater Fish and the Mammal Monitoring Scheme. For habitats good progress has been made in Countryside Survey 2000 and assessment of special sites. For the future, more work will be needed to compile and update habitat inventories and establish networks for monitoring change and the UK Biodiversity Partnership should play an important part in contributing to the development of these activities across the UK.
28. Once collected, biodiversity information needs to be collated and shared. The Government recognises the huge potential offered by e-science to manage biodiversity data and acknowledges the rapid progress being made to establish the National Biodiversity Network (NBN) linking national and local record centres with their users. The Government is firmly persuaded of the value of these tools to help fill the information and communication gaps that were so clearly identified by the Lead Partners and which run as a recurrent theme throughout the MBR. We have so far committed around £540,000 to the development of the NBN.
29. To maximise its use in a policy context, biodiversity information needs to be selected and organised to illustrate important trends. Considerable work is underway internationally to develop indicators of biodiversity within the framework of the CBD and other international institutions such as the OECD and the European Union. The UK has played a leading part in contributing to this development and will continue to do so. The Government has established a Biodiversity Indicators Forum which has scoped the range of work that is being

undertaken in the UK and internationally. We look to that group – within the scope of the UK Biodiversity Partnership – to provide the focus of expertise both for the development of practical UK indicators and to feed into international efforts.

30. The Government was pleased that the UKBG was able to launch the UKBAP website at the same time that the MBR was published. This site, together with the JNCC database built from the Lead Partner reports of the Action Plans and the NBN will form a hub linking the core information sources for the UK Biodiversity Partnership. We expect the JNCC to continue to support and develop the UKBAP website and the Action Plan reporting database to make them inter-active, user-friendly and current.

Research for biodiversity

31. After the publication of the MBR, the Biodiversity Research Working Group held its 'Science in Action for Biodiversity' seminar in November 2001. This event brought together the conclusions of the BRWG's work and sought to identify the cross-cutting research programmes that should be a priority for research funding. The follow-up to this work, to promote and facilitate the development and co-ordination of specific priority areas and projects is being taken forward by JNCC and DEFRA. The Government agrees that there will be a continuing need for the co-ordination of biodiversity research requirements to be facilitated by a high-level UK group – a UK Biodiversity Research Platform, and considers that this should be chaired at a senior level. The UK Biodiversity Standing Committee should take an early opportunity to constitute this Research Platform and appoint a Chair.

Annex:

The UK Biodiversity Partnership's aims and objectives

The UK Biodiversity Partnership's aims:

- To maintain and enhance biological diversity within the UK, paying particular regard to:
 - a) Overall populations and natural ranges of native species and the quality and ranges of wildlife habitats and ecosystems.
 - b) Internationally important and threatened species, habitats and ecosystems.
 - c) Species, habitats and natural and managed ecosystems characteristic of local areas.
 - d) Biodiversity of natural and semi-natural habitats where they have been diminished over recent past decades.
- To contribute to the conservation of global biodiversity.
- To increase public appreciation and enjoyment of biodiversity and recognition of its value wherever it occurs.
- To integrate biodiversity fully into policies and programmes as part of sustainable development.

In pursuing these aims we have the following objectives:

- To maintain and keep under review an overall strategy for the conservation and enhancement of UK biodiversity in the light of the biodiversity priorities of the four countries of the UK.
- To bring together all relevant sectors to work in partnership.
- To develop, implement and keep under review targeted action plans for the most important species and habitats.
- To take direct measures to conserve species and habitat diversity, in particular through the conservation of threatened or protected species and important sites, and through the management or control of non-native species.
- To encourage the preparation, implementation and review of Local Biodiversity Action Plans to support national biodiversity objectives and to take forward local priorities for action.
- To take steps to minimise the adverse impacts of human activity on biodiversity, both direct and indirect.

- To take steps to understand the effects on biodiversity of large-scale influences such as ozone depletion and climate change and determine appropriate responses.
- To integrate biodiversity considerations into public policies and programmes.
- To encourage more integration of biodiversity considerations into business policies and practices to support the delivery of biodiversity objectives.
- To take steps to increase public awareness of biodiversity issues.
- To identify, undertake and keep under review research and monitoring to support implementation of other objectives.
- To develop and maintain comprehensive and accessible biodiversity information systems linking national and local records.

