

9. Conclusions and Recommendations

9.1 Overall Biodiversity Strategy for Floodplains

The UK Biodiversity Action Plan is the key initiative for the reversal of declines in habitats and associated species. All government departments are signed up to the Biodiversity Action Plan as published in 1994. The Steering Group Report which sets out the first species and Habitat Action Plans describes how the targets will be delivered. In most cases, a consortium approach is required, including key government departments, EN and other conservation bodies. This therefore requires effective national and local co-ordination between the responsible bodies. ESAs and other agri-environment schemes were already in place when the BAP was published, and have been acknowledged in individual Habitat Action Plans as having a key role to play in the delivery of the targets. The ESA scheme has three key objectives; the preservation of enhancement of landscape, protection and enhancement of wildlife, and preservation of historic or archaeological sites.

Delivery of biodiversity targets cannot rely on the ESA scheme alone. The ESA only delivers certain land management practices in the areas under agreement. In the case of the floodplain ESAs, biodiversity enhancement relies on a number of other factors being in place, including water quality and quantity, and control of developments.

Land management in a floodplain ESA alone cannot guarantee biodiversity returns, but it is however, an essential prerequisite. It is known that the most important areas for biodiversity are those with high water levels, providing habitats for breeding waders, invertebrates and plant communities. These higher tiers in turn rely on the presence of water which is of sufficient quality to allow species to thrive. The provision of water relies on adequate controls on abstraction, pollution, water management and drainage, and flood defence. Therefore performance of a floodplain ESA in delivering biodiversity relies on the effective implementation of well designed WLMPs, Local Environment Agency Plans (LEAPs) and flood defence measures. This requires a long term vision and an integrated approach. In the course of carrying out this study and after an analysis of the interviews carried out with EN and FRCA staff, it is clear that the required vision and integrated approach is not in place in the floodplain ESAs. In particular, conflicts between different conservation interests need to be resolved and a clear area strategy promoted with FRCA so that officers can encourage landowners to enter into appropriate agreements in the areas of key conservation importance.

Recommendation 1:

That an overall biodiversity strategy or 'vision' is developed for each floodplain ESA. This should involve identification of areas of biodiversity importance to:

- **maintain, and where necessary enhance, conservation activities at existing key sites;**
- **identify areas which require restoration or rehabilitation;**
- **key areas where restoration would result in optimum conservation returns; and**
- **identify areas for habitat creation.**

9.2 Methods for Developing a Vision

It is sensible to use existing initiatives and documents as a starting point in developing a vision, such as Natural Area Profiles, and pull these together, rather than starting a new initiative. There are already a number of initiatives operating within floodplains, that, if pulled together, could deliver alternative biodiversity-rich agricultural scenarios that sustain the rural economy. This would be the application of the recent concept of 'joined up government'. Existing initiatives in floodplains are:

- ESAs;
- Water Level Management Plans (WLMPs);
- Countryside Stewardship;
- Biodiversity Action Plans;
- Local Environment Agency Plans (LEAPs);
- Natural Area Profiles;
- Site designations, e.g.: SSSIs, SACs, SPAs and Ramsars; and
- Flood Defence Plans and Coastal Habitat Management Plans (ChaMPs).

The most appropriate method to be used in order to develop a vision of a biodiversity rich floodplain would be the application of the Geographical Information System (GIS). The application of GIS could flow from Natural Area Profiles, and could be used to develop the idea of building and expanding key sites to develop connecting corridors from these to other key sites. GIS can facilitate the identification of restoration, rehabilitation and recreation opportunities, for example, where reedbeds can be created.

Sea level rise and climate change are important issues for many floodplains. Whilst difficult to predict timescales and extent of future flooding, it is necessary to identify susceptible areas and candidates for future habitat recreation. This could enable options for floodbank re-alignment and washland creation to be examined. Links with CHaMPs would need to be made where appropriate, in addition to development of flood defence assets. There is already experience of GIS in some ESAs, for example the Broads and the Upper Thames Tributaries ESAs, and this has been shown to work well for targeting effort for optimum biodiversity returns.

Recommendation 2:

That the use of Geographical Information Systems (GIS) is investigated to develop a biodiversity vision for each floodplain.

9.3 Developing ESA Objectives and Prescriptions for Biodiversity

Once such a vision has been developed, it will be possible to focus how the ESA and other agri-environment schemes can deliver the management necessary to achieve biodiversity targets. With respect to the current floodplain ESAs, there is a need for more emphasis on targeting resources for higher quality conservation within ESAs, rather than simple expansion and quantity. Over £8 million is spent on the ESA scheme (see Table 2.9), and there is scope for greater value for money in terms of biodiversity returns.

This can be achieved in one or more of the following ways:

- changing the emphasis of the objectives and the management prescriptions in each tier to biodiversity, reflecting relevant BAP targets, in addition to protecting landscape and historical features;
- seeking to secure more land in higher tiers, eg: wet grassland, where such agreements are appropriate and in optimum positions for biodiversity recovery; and
- reviewing payment structures to encourage uptake of higher tier agreements. This needs to be considered in close association with the review of BAP orientated management prescriptions, balancing habitat and biodiversity gains with landowner uptake, and available ESA budgets.

To this end, management prescriptions in ESAs should be reviewed to:

- result in particular habitat quality and to reflect BAP targets and fit into the vision for the area;
- offer flexibility within set parameters to allow landowners to respond to local variations in climatic and other conditions. This may either be set in a fixed list of prescriptions for a tier, or in a menu driven choice of prescriptions, for which there is a comparable payment;
- be individually designed in areas of high conservation importance, taking into account wildlife and habitat targets and needs, whilst ensuring that the land continues to be farmed in a way that is agreeable to the landowner;
- work alongside other agri-environment schemes such as Countryside Stewardship to ensure a co-ordinated, compatible and complimentary approach to enhancing biodiversity to achieve biodiversity targets within the vision for the area; and
- enable the use of land management tools and methods which are cost-effective to the landowner to encourage uptake of agreements, for example for reedbed management.

Recommendation 3:

That ESA objectives, targets, and management prescriptions are set to reflect BAP targets. National BAP targets should be more clearly reflected in local BAP targets. The ESA objectives and targets also need to take closer account of Natural Area Profiles.

Recommendation 4:

That ESA prescriptions need to be more flexible to optimise biodiversity returns in key areas, and should be compatible and complimentary to the Countryside Stewardship Scheme. Key areas need to be targeted to encourage uptake of higher tiers, and payment rates need to be at a level to encourage uptake in order to ensure creation, recreation or rehabilitation of habitats of a quality that meets BAP definitions.

Recommendation 5:

ESA prescriptions and targeting of resources should be based on sound research, in order to optimise biodiversity returns whilst offering value for money and enable economic growth within the floodplain.

9.4 Water Level Management Plans

These recommendations can only be fulfilled if there is appropriate water level management and water quality in the areas where targeting to secure land under higher tiers is to take place. The preparation and effective implementation of WLMPs is critical to this. This will need to involve:

- gaining a baseline understanding of the conservation status of different areas within the ESA. This enables identification of the areas where resources need to be concentrated;
- effective targeting of resources to bring land into higher tiers to ensure that important habitat types are consolidated and to prevent fragmentation; and
- preparation of WLMPs that highlight the water issues and set out a funded implementation plan to overcome these. This would ensure water is available in sufficient quantity and quality in areas where wet grassland is being maintained or in the process of conversion.

Recommendation 6:

WLMPs should be an integral part of the management of an ESA, in particular ensuring that water needs are sufficient to meet wet grassland prescriptions and that water is of adequate quality to enable biodiversity recovery.

Recommendation 7:

WLMPs need to reflect the additional conservation interest of the floodplain, taking into account the broader biodiversity vision, including habitat creation targets.

Recommendation 8:

WLMPs are proving valuable at the local scale at identifying water issues and bringing about action to resolve these. However, a policy should be developed on how these might be extended into the future.

9.5 Biodiversity Monitoring

The implementation of a biodiversity vision requires monitoring regimes which need to be designed to review the effectiveness of the ESA and other agri-environment schemes in contributing to BAP targets. The first recommendation was that an overall vision was developed for each floodplain area. It is not until such a vision has been prepared and agreed that a monitoring plan to measure progress and identify areas for priority action can be prepared and implemented.

Whatever shape the monitoring plan takes, it should focus on habitat quality as well as quantity. Wherever possible, monitoring should be compatible with and complement existing monitoring

regimes, particularly those which are carried out for BAPs. Monitoring responsibilities and costs should be co-ordinated and shared on a local consortium basis. This need not be restricted to within the ESA, but may need to take into account the nearby boundaries of SSSIs, SPAs, SACs, and Ramsar sites. Monitoring regimes need to consider choosing representative indicators of overall habitat quality to be cost-effective. Detailed monitoring could be carried out at longer intervals, whilst indicator-based monitoring could be carried out at shorter intervals. Monitoring should use compatible methodologies and sampling regimes to assist interpretation and comparison between different ESAs.

Recommendation 9:

That monitoring regimes should be put in place, based on the floodplain vision, to measure progress against key BAP targets. Monitoring plans should be designed which enable cost-effective measurements of habitat quality and key species abundance to be made with time, and using comparable methodologies so that comparisons can be made with agreed baseline standards. Monitoring should be carried out on a consortium basis within each floodplain, involving all relevant bodies.

9.6 Staff Resources

The recommendations made in this report are based on the consultants' observations and interviews with key staff. It is considered absolutely essential that initiatives are more closely co-ordinated and trickle down from an agreed overall vision of what each floodplain should or needs to deliver both in terms of biodiversity, and also how it supports a local economy. Such an approach is compatible with the current concept of 'joined up government'. In order to prepare, negotiate and agree such a vision with relevant stakeholders, much closer liaison between relevant bodies needs to be achieved. Inevitably, implementation of this recommendation demands officer time.

It is considered that biodiversity returns will only be achieved through the ESA by more effective targeting of resources and more focussed prescriptions. However, it is clear that, based on the experiences described in the interviews, this requires more staff resourcing. Lack of staff was noted in all the ESAs. It is essential that closer liaison takes place between all relevant stakeholders to implement the necessary changes and monitor progress.

Recommendation 10:

That staff resources are increased in order to prepare and implement floodplain visions to meet Biodiversity Action Plan targets.

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11. Acknowledgements

RPA wish to acknowledge the help and assistance of the following people in carrying out this study, particularly the English Nature and FRCA officers who were interviewed:

Andy Swash (FRCA Exeter)
Howard De Bolla (FRCA London)
Helen Smith (EN Suffolk Local Team)
Tim Sloane (FRCA Bury St Edmunds)
Richard Bradford (EN Somerset Team)
Richard Andrews (FRCA Taunton)
Keith Payne (EN Thames and Chilterns Local Team)
Alistair Helliwell (FRCA Oxford) (and particularly for the useful site visit)
Ian Davidson-Watts (EN Hampshire and Isle of Wight Local Team)
George Gittins (FRCA Guildford)
Clive Doarks (EN Norfolk Team)
Quentin Hill (FRCA Norwich)

Others who assisted in providing information and contacts include:

Michelle Leek (FRCA - Guildford)
R. Land (Conservation Manager - Norfolk Wildlife Trust)
John Hiskett (Biodiversity Officer - Suffolk County Council)
Debbie Wicks (Hampshire Wildlife Trust)
David Westbrook (Somerset Wildlife Trust)
Richard Archer (RSPB - Somerset Levels)
Rob Large (Somerset Environmental Records Centre)
Rob Lucking (RSPB - East Anglia)

Annex 1

Tiers, Payment Rates and Management Prescriptions for Each Floodplain ESA

Environmentally
Sensitive Areas

INFORMATION SHEET

AVON VALLEY AND TEST VALLEY ESA

This sheet contains essential information for farmers about the Avon Valley and Test Valley ESAs. It should be read in conjunction with the booklet *Guidelines for Farmers* (PB 3361/AT).

You will need to refer to this information when making an application for a Management Agreement (form ESA 3) or Conservation Plan (form ESA 4) in the Avon Valley or Test Valley ESA.

MAFF Regional Service Centre: Block A, Government Buildings, Coley Park, Reading RG1 6DT
Tel. No. 01189 581222

Project Officer: George Gittins
Tel. No. 01962 779299/840001

TIERS AND PAYMENT RATES

Tier 1A – Improved Permanent Grassland	£25 per ha	Woodland Tier	£17 per ha	
Low Fertiliser Supplement	£45 per ha	Public Access Tier	£170 per ha	
Tier 1B – Extensive Permanent Grassland	£110 per ha	Tiers and payment rates in former schemes		
Breeding Wader Supplement	£35 per ha	Test Valley:		
Tier 1C – Wet Grassland	£295 per ha	Tier 1A – Improved Grassland		£20 per ha
Arable Reversion to Permanent Grassland	£265 per ha	Tier 1B – Unimproved Grassland		£130 per ha
Buffer Strips	£400 per ha	Avon Valley:		
		Tier 1 – Grassland		£130 per ha
		Tier 2A – Wet Grassland		£180 per ha

CONSERVATION PLAN

For those items with a Standard Payment Rate, payment at the corresponding percentage of actual costs may be given at the Ministry's discretion where the necessary costs of the work are exceptionally high.

MAFF Work Code	Eligible Item	Standard Payment Rates	Percentage Grant
1	Works to protect Historical and Archaeological Features	–	80
2	Tree Planting	£0.65 each	60
3	Planting or gapping of hedges – protective fencing: sheep fencing post and wire fencing	£1.75/m £1.20/m £0.80/m	40
4	Laying of hedges – coppicing of hedges – protective fencing: sheep fencing post and wire fencing	£3/m £1.50/m £1.20/m £0.80/m	40
5	Creation of ponds	–	50
6	Restoration of ponds, pools and lakes	–	50
7	Management of scrub and small groups of trees – 25% density – 25%-75% density – over 75% density	£100/ha £250/ha £500/ha	50

MAFF Work Code	Eligible Item	Standard Payment Rates	Percentage Grant
10	Renovation of traditional farm buildings using traditional local styles and materials	—	40
11	Hedge coppicing — protective fencing: sheep fencing post and wire fencing	£1.50/m £120/m £0.80/m	40
12	Creation of scrapes	—	50
13	Restoration of ditches including provision of fencing to protect the wildlife interest in and around ditches	—	30
14	Provision or restoration of water control structures	—	80
16	Restoration of Reedbeds including Sedgebeds	—	50
22	Provision of water supplies and fencing associated with the reintroduction of grazing — supply — trough — post and wire fencing — sheep fencing	— £0.40/m £25 each £0.80/m £1.20/m	40
25	Re-introduction of willow pollarding	£40/tree	80
35	Provision of cattle drinking bays	—	50
40	Provision and restoration of gates for public access — bridle gate — kissing gate — kissing gate for the disabled	— £100 each £130 each £200 each	80
41	Provision and restoration of stiles for public access — timber stile — ladder stile — step-over stile in stone wall — step-through stile in stone wall	— £30 each £40 each £20 each £30 each	80
42	Provision and restoration of footbridges for public access	£125 each	80
44	Provision of silt traps in watercourses	—	50
48	Purchase of a seed mixture for arable reversion	—	75
50	Other works for the restoration or enhancement of wildlife habitats	—	80

SCHEME PRESCRIPTIONS

AVON VALLEY ESA and TEST VALLEY ESA

NB. If you carry out any work contrary to the scheme's objectives, for example the destruction of features such as walls, buildings or hedges, or the ploughing of valuable grassland, shortly before applying to join or rejoin the scheme, the Ministry is likely to reject your application.

The Ministry may modify the prescriptions set out below, to introduce additional requirements or amend existing ones, where this will help to protect and/or enhance habitats and species which are of importance within the designated area. Such modifications may be made for the lifespan of the agreement or from time to time, by means of a written agreement with you which will form part of your ESA agreement for the term specified.

TIER 1A – IMPROVED PERMANENT GRASSLAND

1. Agree in writing with the Project Officer and implement a grassland management plan which will cover grazing and mowing rotations, stocking densities, fertiliser and manure use, weed control and ditch maintenance.
2. Maintain grassland and do not plough, level or reseed the land. You may use a chain harrow or roller but no other form of cultivation is allowed.
3. Graze with cattle and/or sheep but avoid poaching, undergrazing or overgrazing. Other animals including horses may only be grazed by prior written agreement with the Ministry.
4. If you cut the grass for hay, or silage graze the aftermath.
5. Do not increase your existing application rates of inorganic fertiliser or organic fertiliser and in any case do not exceed 250 kg per ha of total nitrogen per year. Do not apply organic fertiliser within 50 metres of a spring, well or borehole that supplies water for human consumption or within 10 metres of any watercourse.
6. Do not apply any fertilisers within 5 metres of hedgerows.
7. The Ministry will make a supplementary payment if you agree in writing with the Project Officer to restrict application rates of inorganic or organic fertiliser to 50 kg per hectare per year of nitrogen in total.
8. Injurious weeds (spear thistle, creeping or field thistle, curled dock, broad-leaved dock and ragwort) together with nettles must be controlled.
9. Do not use fungicides, insecticides and herbicides, except to control injurious weeds and nettles by spot treatment or weedwiper.
10. Supplementary feeding of livestock must be agreed in advance in writing with the Project Officer.
11. Do not moledrain, use a sub-soiler or install any new field drainage system or substantially modify any existing land drainage system so as to improve the drainage.
12. Maintain existing watercourses and ditches in rotation by mechanical means, not sprays. After drying, spoil must be spread adjacent to the watercourse or ditch. Do not fill in any watercourses or low areas in the field.
13. Retain and manage hedges and regularly pollarded willows. Stockproof hedges must be maintained in a stockproof condition using traditional methods.
14. Maintain ponds, lakes, pools, sedgebeds and reedbeds on a rotational basis. Obtain written advice within two years of the start of your agreement on the management of these features and implement it.
15. Do not damage, destroy or remove any feature of archaeological or historical value or interest.
16. Obtain written advice on siting and materials before constructing buildings or roads or carrying out any other engineering or construction works which do not require planning permission or prior notification determination by the Local Planning Authority.
17. Dispose of sheep dip safely. Do not spread sheep dip where it may affect areas of nature conservation value.
18. You must abide by the Codes of Good Agricultural Practice for the Protection of Soil, Air and Water, published by the Ministry (references PB 0617, PB 0618 and PB 0587) as amended from time to time.

TIER 1B – EXTENSIVE PERMANENT GRASSLAND

Observe all prescriptions 1-18 (Tier 1A) plus additional prescriptions set out below:

19. Do not use a chain harrow or roller during the period 1 April to 30 June.
20. Do not top or cut the grass for hay or silage before 1 July.
21. Do not apply inorganic or organic fertiliser except for farmyard manure (FYM) produced on the farm. Do not apply slurry.
22. Do not apply more than your existing application rate of farmyard manure and, in any event, do not apply more than 12.5 tonnes of farmyard manure per hectare (5 tons per acre) per year.
23. Do not apply farmyard manure during the period 1 April to 31 May and, outside this period, apply it only in a single dressing.
24. Do not apply lime, slag or any other substance designed to reduce the acidity of the soil.

BREEDING WADER SUPPLEMENT

25. Restrict stocking densities to not more than 0.75 livestock units per hectare during the period from 1 April – 30 May on areas specified by the Project Officer to contain breeding wader birds. Stock more heavily in the summer and autumn to create an agreed sward condition for the following year. Sheep may only be grazed in conjunction with cattle.

TIER 1C – WET GRASSLAND

Observe prescriptions 1-18 (Tier 1A) and 19-24 (Tier 1B) plus additional prescriptions set out below:

26. Graze with cattle or cattle and sheep but avoid poaching, undergrazing or overgrazing. The land must not be grazed between 1 April and 31 May and during June the stocking density must be restricted to 0.75 livestock units per hectare. Stock the land in the summer and autumn to create an agreed sward condition for the following year. Do not graze with sheep from 1 September to 30 March.
27. Manage field water tables so that at least 20% of the site is covered in shallow surface water from 1st December to 31 March and shallow pools remain over at least 10% of the site until 31 May.
28. Ditches should be maintained so as to allow the control of field water levels by the operation of appropriately sited water control structures. In order to achieve the surface pools it must be possible to bring ditch water levels up to bank top for short periods of time. At all times of year a minimum of 300 mm depth of water must be maintained in the ditches.
29. No grazing must take place between 1 April and 31 May. During June stocking must be restricted to 0.75 livestock units per hectare. Sheep grazing is prohibited from 1 September to 30 March.

TIER 2A – REVERSION OF ARABLE LAND TO PERMANENT GRASSLAND

30. Cease arable production or ley grassland production. Within 12 months of the start of your agreement establish a permanent grass sward using suitable species chosen from an approved list. Agree in writing with the Project Officer before purchase the seed mix to be used. Seed of native origin and local provenance should be used wherever the Ministry considers it appropriate.
31. During the first 12 months of the start of the agreement do not apply any of the following without obtaining the Ministry's prior written approval.
 - (i) inorganic or organic fertiliser;
 - (ii) lime, slag or any other substance designed to reduce the acidity of the soil;
 - (iii) fungicides, insecticides or herbicides.
32. Cut the grass and remove as hay, but not silage, during the first three years following grassland establishment and graze the aftermath. Do not cut the grass before 1 July.
33. From the start of the agreement follow all the Tier 1A guidelines from prescription 10, "Supplementary feeding of livestock...."
34. After the 12 month period you must also follow the remaining prescriptions in Tiers 1A and 1B, except number 7.
35. On grassland reverted from arable, do not exceed an annual average stocking level of 1.4 Livestock Units (LU) per hectare.

TIER 2B – ARABLE MARGIN BUFFER STRIPS

36. Establish a permanent grass sward over a width of 5-30 metres using an appropriate grass seeds mixture. Agree in writing with the Project Officer before purchase the seed mix to be used. Seed of native origin and local provenance should be used wherever the Ministry considers it appropriate.
37. Do not apply any fertilisers or pesticides on this strip.
38. Agree in writing with the Project Officer appropriate management of the buffer strip. Normally this will involve either taking a hay crop or topping, both after 1 July. In the first years of establishment, topping to control weed growth may be permitted by agreement with the Project Officer. Where the buffer strip adjoins a grazed ley it can be grazed, once it is established, rather than cut.
39. You must abide by the Codes of Good Agricultural Practice for the Protection of Soil, Air and Water, published by the Ministry (references PB 0617, PB 0618 and PB 0587) as amended from time to time.

WOODLAND TIER

40. Retain any woodland, copses or groups of trees. Agree in writing with the Project Officer and implement a programme to maintain and enhance the conservation and landscape value of non net-income generating woodland. All farm woodland on or adjacent to your agreement land must be entered into this woodland tier. Other woodland not on or adjacent to your agreement land may be entered at the discretion of the Ministry.

PUBLIC ACCESS TIER

41. Make the access route available for public access at no charge.
42. Maintain a free passage over the access route.
43. Do not erect new fences on or adjacent to the access route without the prior written approval of the Ministry.
44. Keep the access route and fields crossed by it free of litter and other refuse.
45. Exclude bulls from the access route and fields crossed by it, except for bulls which do not exceed the age of 10 months or are not of a recognised dairy breed and are at large in any field or enclosure in which cows and heifers are also at large.
46. Agree with the Ministry in writing in advance the public liability insurance cover which you will maintain for the duration of the access agreement.
47. Provide and maintain adequate means of entry to the access route.
48. Affix and maintain appropriate signboards and waymarking.
49. Do not permit any of the following activities on the access route or on fields crossed by it: camping, caravanning, lighting of fires, organised games or sports, riding of motor vehicles (except those used for agricultural operations on the land) without the Ministry's prior written approval.
50. Agree with the Ministry in writing whether the riding of horses or cycles may be permitted on the access route.
51. If you wish to apply for temporary closure of the access route you must agree this with the Ministry in writing in advance. Where temporary closure is permitted you must post signs giving notice of the intended closure and the reasons for it at each entry point to the access route at least two weeks in advance of the date of closure.

