

AGRICULTURE, ENVIRONMENT AND MARINE

Evaluation of the Compliance and Quality of Biodiversity Duty Reports 2015

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The aim of this research was to review biodiversity duty reporting by public bodies in Scotland and to assess the contribution of activities to Scotland's biodiversity strategy. It looks at why some bodies did not submit a report and makes recommendations for the next round of reporting.

Key Findings

- Out of 139 public bodies, 61 (44%) had definitely produced a biodiversity duty report and 35 (25%) had not produced a report. We did not hear from the remaining 43 bodies (31%) and could not find their report online.
- Of the 56 reports reviewed for this research, 42 (75%) were standalone documents and 14 (25%) were published as part of another document. Two thirds of the reports at least partially used the reporting template.
- Specific biodiversity actions recorded within the reports included practical actions, communications work and encouraging staff to volunteer. The recorded activities contributed to 20 of the 32 key steps from the biodiversity strategy, to all Six Big Steps for Nature and 12 of the 20 Aichi Targets.
- Two characteristics that affect the range of biodiversity related activities that a public body can carry out are (a) whether they own or are responsible for land and (b) whether their main responsibilities involve biodiversity.
- The reasons for not producing a report included a lack of awareness of the need to report, a belief that the biodiversity duty was not relevant to them and general apathy towards reporting. Other factors included prioritisation of work, financial and resource constraints, and uncertainty about the reporting requirement.
- The research indicates that some public bodies are looking for guidance on what biodiversity activities to carry out and report upon, particularly activities that could be carried out without significant investment in funding or staff resources.

Introduction

Biodiversity is the variety of life on Earth. It includes living things (animals, plants, fungi, bacteria and other micro-organisms), genetic variation within species, and the variety of habitats and ecosystems.

The Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004 requires all public bodies in Scotland to further the conservation of biodiversity when carrying out their activities. This is referred to as the “biodiversity duty”. The Wildlife and Natural Environment (WANE) (Scotland) Act 2011 requires public bodies in Scotland to publish a report every three years on the actions they have taken to meet their biodiversity duty. The first round of biodiversity duty reports by Scottish public bodies was due to be published by 1st January 2015.

Aims and Objectives

This research reviewed biodiversity duty reporting by Scottish public bodies and assessed the activities undertaken to meet this duty. The objectives were to:

- Assess what approaches have been employed in reporting
- Provide an overview of the biodiversity activities reported
- Assess the contribution of activities to delivery of the biodiversity strategy¹, the Six Big Steps for Nature from Scotland’s biodiversity route map² and the Aichi Biodiversity Targets³
- Identify lessons for the next round of reporting in 2018

Methods

The study used three main approaches to gather information:

1. **A review of biodiversity duty reports.** In total, we identified 56 reports and assessed them for good practice in terms of the activities reported and the format/structure of the report. The reported activities were also compared with 20 of the 32 steps in the biodiversity strategy that were identified as being relevant to most public bodies.
2. **An internet survey** of all the public bodies that were in existence between 2012 and 2014 and so should have published a biodiversity report by January 2015. In total, 81 out of 139 (58%) eligible public bodies responded.
3. **Telephone interviews** with 11 public bodies, including those that had published a report and those that had not. All interviewees were asked about actions the Scottish Government could take to assist with future biodiversity duty reporting.

¹ Scottish Government (2013): [2020 Challenge for Scotland’s biodiversity](#): A strategy for the conservation and enhancement of biodiversity in Scotland

² Scottish Government (2015): [Scotland’s biodiversity: a route map to 2020](#)

³ The Aichi Biodiversity Targets, from the United Nations’ Convention on Biological Diversity, can be accessed at: <https://www.cbd.int/sp/targets/>

Key findings

Reporting rates and approaches to reporting

Out of 139 public bodies, 61 (44%) had definitely produced a biodiversity duty report and 35 (25%) had not produced a report. We did not hear from the remaining 43 bodies (31%) and could not find their report online. Since the WANE Act does not state that reports must be published online, it could be that these reports are available as hard copy or on request.

We located and reviewed 56 reports. Of these, 42 reports (75%) were standalone documents and 14 (25%) were published as part of another document, such as a sustainability report. Two thirds (66% or 37) of the reports at least partially used the template. The most commonly included section was that on biodiversity actions, and the least commonly used section was monitoring.

Activities reported

The reports listed a range of activities to support biodiversity. These included practical activities such as sowing a wildflower meadow, putting up bird boxes and carrying out litter picks on beaches and in public green spaces. The reports also mentioned awareness raising on the internet and communications work with groups such as schools, local residents and those using nature reserves/countryside centres. Supporting activities included producing guides on land use and habitat management, and encouraging staff members to take part in biodiversity related volunteering (e.g. native tree planting).

There were two characteristics that affect the range of biodiversity related activities that a public body can carry out: (a) whether the public body owns or is responsible for land and (b) whether their main responsibilities involve biodiversity. Where public bodies felt they had limited scope to undertake biodiversity actions they generally reported sustainability actions such as waste reduction, carbon and water use and sustainable procurement.

Contributions to Scotland's biodiversity targets

This study focused on the 20 (out of 32) steps in the biodiversity strategy to which a high number of public bodies could actually contribute. (The remaining 12 steps related to only a minority of public bodies). The activities recorded in the reports contributed to all 20 of these key steps. The most common were:

- Establishing plans and decisions about land use based on an understanding of ecosystems. Taking full account of land use impacts on the ecosystems services that underpin social, economic and environmental health – 79% or 44 reports included activities relevant to this key step.
- Government and public bodies, including Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) and Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS), will work together towards a shared agenda for action to restore ecosystem health at a catchment-scale across Scotland - 70% or 39 reports included activities relevant to this key step.

- Supporting local authorities and communities to improve local environments and enhance biodiversity using green space and green networks, allowing nature to flourish and so enhancing the quality of life for people who live there – 63% or 35 reports included activities relevant to this key step.

The reports indicate that Scottish public bodies are carrying out biodiversity related activities that contribute to all six of the Big Steps for Nature (listed in the Scottish Government's biodiversity route map to 2020²) and to 12 of the 20 Aichi Targets³. The biodiversity duty reporting process itself contributes to Aichi Target 1 – 'by 2020, at the latest, people are aware of the values of biodiversity and the steps they can take to conserve and use it sustainably'.

This assessment probably underestimates the contribution of public bodies to the biodiversity steps and targets, because not all activities will have been reported. It should be acknowledged that an organisation that has not published a biodiversity duty report may still have undertaken activities to support biodiversity.

Reasons for not reporting

The online survey and interviews highlighted a number of reasons why some public bodies did not publish a report, including:

- A lack of awareness of the need to report
- Thinking that the duty is irrelevant for their organisation
- General fatigue with reporting and/or the need to report being seen as a 'box ticking exercise'
- The individual responsible for reporting leaving the organisation, with no-one taking their place
- Prioritisation of work against the organisation's core functions, with the biodiversity duty not seen as a priority
- Fear/uncertainty relating to the reporting requirement or a lack of clarity/understanding in terms of what is required.

Some public bodies that did produce a report raised concerns about financial constraints and a lack of resources, which they felt might affect their ability to report in future.

What might help future reporting

Public bodies were asked about actions that the Scottish Government could take to assist with reporting. Their suggestions included:

- **Awareness raising:** Inform public bodies about the need to report in a timely manner. Many recognised that it was not easy to find the right person to contact and suggested that a database of contacts for the biodiversity duty might be required.
- **Advice and guidance (report writing):** Provide public bodies with a basic structure for the report, along with an indication of the areas where it can be

modified dependent on the needs of each type of public body. Provide public bodies with training and/or a named individual at the Scottish Government who could assist with reporting.

- **Advice and guidance (practical activities):** Provide an opportunity for shared learning, and publish and keep up to date information on resources.
- **Feedback following report production:** Acknowledge receipt of reports and provide feedback.
- **Publish reports in one location.**

Recommendations

Drawing on the above points and other evidence gathered, we recommend that the Scottish Government should:

1. Publish the biodiversity duty reports on their own website (rather than including a link to another organisation's website).
2. Acknowledge receipt of all reports/report links from public bodies.
3. Add biodiversity duty reports to the list of documents on the Model Publication Scheme. This scheme is operated by the Information Commissioner and helps public bodies to identify what they need to publish.
4. Raise awareness amongst the general public of the requirement to carry out biodiversity activities and report on them.
5. Improve communication with public bodies about the biodiversity duty, in particular by providing them with an annual update to ensure that biodiversity remains on each organisation's agenda every year. Reminder emails could also be sent out two to three months before reports are due.
6. Publish guidance on the reporting process that includes examples of reports and activities from different types of public body. This guidance should be updated for future reporting rounds as good practice develops.

We have also produced a guidance document and revised the reporting template (available on the Biodiversity Scotland website:

<http://www.biodiversityscotland.gov.uk/>).

Now that the first round of reports has been published, and a new guidance document has been developed, it is thought that public bodies will have a much better idea in future of what is expected in terms of biodiversity activities and reporting.

How to access background or source data

The data collected for this social research publication:

- are available in more detail through Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics
- are available via an alternative route
- may be made available on request, subject to consideration of legal and ethical factors.
- cannot be made available by Scottish Government for further analysis as Scottish Government is not the data controller.



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