

Middle Level Commissioners

Biodiversity Action Plan Report 2020-21

Note on 2020-21 report

In November 2020 ADA published the new updated IDB Biodiversity Plan along with guidance and a press release here:

<https://www.ada.org.uk/2020/11/ada-launches-updated-biodiversity-action-plan-for-idbs/>



Internal Drainage Board Biodiversity Action Plan

Guidance Document

November 2020

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The Conservation Officer will begin moving Board reports into this new format as soon as possible and keep the Board informed of progress. The new reports are good news for the drainage industry as they reflect years of work by many people to ensure that the most up to date legislation, policy and approaches are accessible and practicable for those involved with water level management and, by extension, wildlife conservation. The existing BAP reports provide a good foundation on which to build and update as necessary.

Report Summary

Invasive species

None noted on main rivers during regular visits.

Floating Pennywort continues to be found sporadically at the fringes of the Middle Level system but has not currently found its way in. All Boards are being asked to keep an eye out for large rafts of a 'lily-leaf type' mass floating in the main channels as this is likely where it will turn up first. An information sheet will be shared separately and a training session has been suggested for later in the year. A funding application to the Anglian Water invasive species fund is currently pending. If successful this would pay for an awareness raising video and a social media campaign.

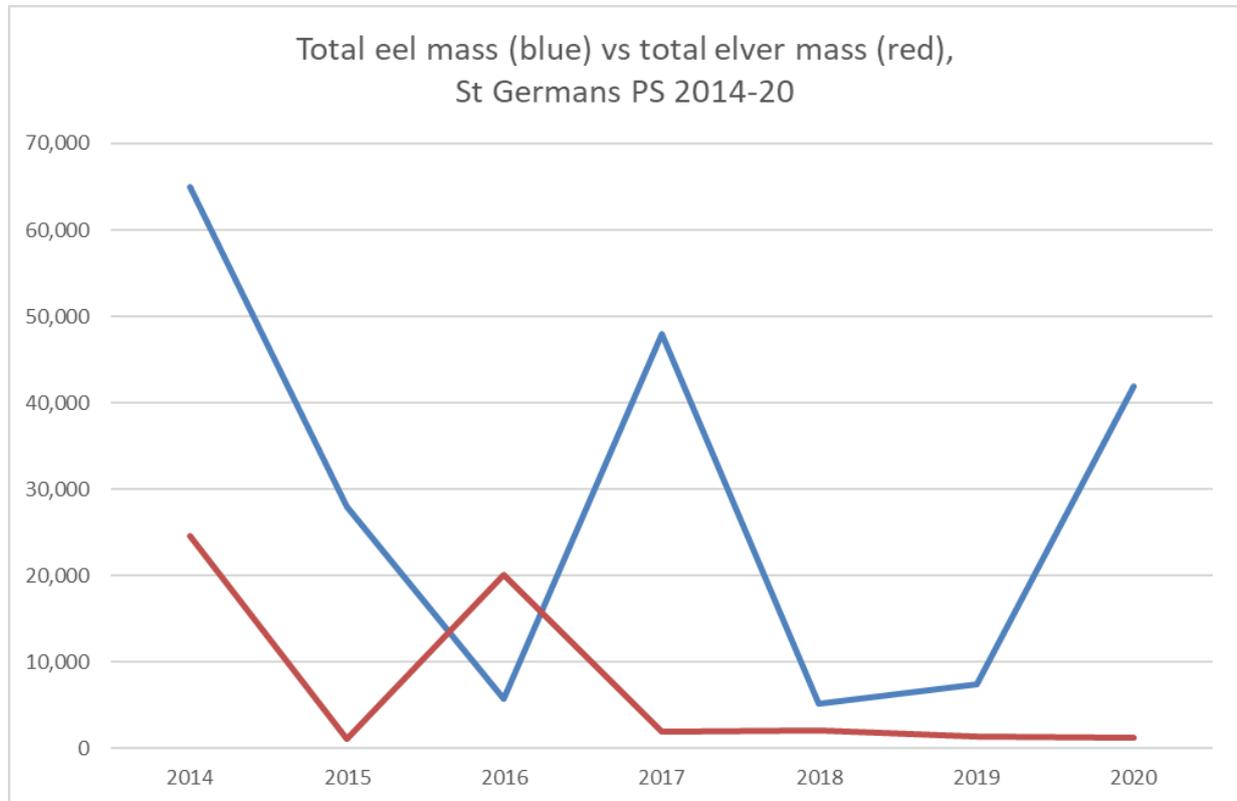
See note on mink below.

Barn Owls

2020 was an exceptionally poor year across the region. A number of boxes provided by the Commissioners need replacing, these have now been delivered and will be put up during the year.

Eels

2020 was a good year overall for eels moving through the pass, with a total mass of c42kg recorded. However, the proportion of this which consisted of glass eels or 'pigmented elvers' was low and the overall trend for elvers here, since 2016, is low and has declined slightly. The graph below roughly illustrates these trends, the overall mass is shown in blue and the trend for glass eels in red.



Water Voles

Most of the main drains are suitable water vole habitat and water vole signs are routinely found. The CO is working to develop a monitoring approach building on data from c2010. The CO is also working with the engineering team to ensure bank slip repairs are water vole compliant. All boards have been reminded of their duties regarding water vole legislation and the importance of maintaining sensitive management techniques.

Mink

The Middle Level Mink project has had a successful year with a total of 21 mink caught from Middle Level and associated IDB rafts equipped with remoti devices. The number of rafts has increased and as a result there is a much-improved coverage across the Level. Cambridgeshire now has a dedicated mink officer, a funded position hosted by the Countryside Restoration Trust and Waterlife Recovery East (WRE). The CO has contributed to discussions among partners and WRE have kindly loaned several more rafts to the Middle Level's efforts. A more comprehensive update is available in the 2020 Natural Level newsletter. All sightings of this and other invasive species are important.

The CO thanks the Board for their contributions. For the first time, in March 2021, a water vole was safely set free from a Middle Level mink trap – hopefully a sign that things are working!

Badger

The CO is aware of numerous instances of badgers digging in bank sides, an increasingly common occurrence. A record is kept of locations and a note is included in current Board reports regarding legislation. Boards are advised that where workings are considered high risk to contact the CO as soon as possible.

Otter

Sightings or reports welcomed.

Other Environmental issues

Following media reports of avian influenza being confirmed in captive and wild birds in the fens in November 2020 a dead mute swan subsequently tested positive for the H5N8 strain of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) in mid-December on the Forty Foot River near Puddock Bridge. Defra advised that once a confirmed case is recorded, they do not re-test in the same location and the landowner is responsible for the disposal of any subsequent birds. As a result, one further dead swan was recovered and disposed off professionally, a third was seen but not recovered in time. An Advisory Note has been written by the CO to instruct staff on the issue.

Please contact the CO if you come across dead wildfowl, birds of prey or gulls.

Training/Advice/Partners

The CO is engaged with project works at Woodwalton Fen and has contributed comments to numerous planning issues in 2020. Discussions have also been attended regarding the Lowland England Peat Strategy.

At present, the ongoing situation regarding Covid-19 means no public events are planned, however when it is deemed safe to restart events options will be considered. In the meantime, the Conservation Officer is happy to assist with any enquiries.

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Drainage Ditch Action Plan

Target Reference	Target	Action Reference	IDB Actions	Partners	Date	Indicators	Report
2	Identify ditches of conservation interest and manage appropriately	2.1	Assist the Wildlife Trust to identify and map ditches of County Wildlife Site quality	Plantlife, Wildlife Trust	Ongoing	Map produced (numbers of CWS designated)	<i>Drains of conservation interest and County Wildlife Sites (CWS) are identified and mapped in the MLC Operations Manual</i>
3	Support the Conservation Officer in working with landowners to benefit wildlife in the district	3.1	Refer private landowners to the Conservation Officer for advice on creating field margin buffer zones and wildlife-friendly ditch management	Conservation Officer, Natural England, Wildlife Trust, FWAG	Ongoing	Number of contacts received and passed to Conservation Officer	<i>Ongoing.</i>
5	Plant black poplars to increase existing population	5.1	Identify suitable sites and plant at least 10 young black poplars	Conservation Officer	2015	Number of trees planted	<i>20 black poplar cuttings from DNA tested local stock planted previously at nine sites throughout the catchment.</i>

Rivers Action Plan

Target Reference	Target	Action Reference	IDB Actions	Partners	Date	Indicators	Report
1	Manage rivers and their banks for biodiversity as well as for	1.1	Manage rivers according to conservation advice detailed in the Middle Level Operations Manual	Conservation Officer	2010 updated annually	Manual reviewed and followed each year	<i>The Operation Manual's guidance was updated in 2020.</i>

	drainage	1.2	Experiment with new biodiversity-friendly methods (for example coir rolls for revetment work) where appropriate	Conservation Officer	Ongoing	(a) Number of sites with soft revetment installed (b) Length of river with soft revetments installed	(a) 24 sites with coir roll revetment previously installed. (b) Total length 1773 meters.
		1.3	Improve habitat for fish, especially eels, by removal or modification of barriers where possible	Environment Agency	Ongoing	(a) Number of barriers with potential for modification (b) Number of barriers modified	(a) Two, St Germans Pumping Station & Tibbett's Bridge Pumping Station. (b) The elver pass at St Germans is operational. See summary.
2	Control invasive species	2.1	Report all sightings of invasive species to the Operations Engineer and/or the Conservation Officer and control as appropriate	Conservation Officer, Environment Agency	Ongoing	(a) Number of incidents reported (b) Number of incidents dealt with	a & b) Floating Pennywort reported just outside MLC waters at Stanground and Salters Lode in 2020. Situations monitored, discussions regular and ongoing.
3	Be aware of and manage species-rich hedgerow	3.1	Consider gapping-up or extending areas of species-rich hedgerow on the Middle Level Main Drain	Conservation Officer	Ongoing	Length of hedge maintained / planted	Sensitive landscaping plan in place at Head Office. Extensive, new hedge planting of c6000 whips courtesy of the EA took place in winter 2020 at a number of sites per Jon Fenn.

Reedbed Action Plan

Target Reference	Target	Action Reference	IDB Actions	Partners	Date	Indicators	Report
1	Identify, assess and map any areas of reedbed over 0.5ha in size	1.1	Pass details of any known areas to Conservation Officer	Wildlife Trust, Natural England, Environment Agency	2012	Review of reedbed areas carried out	The reedbed at St Germans PS bypass channel is already a County Wildlife Site.

		1.2 *	Assist the Wildlife Trust to assess against County Wildlife Site criteria	Wildlife Trust	2013	Information forwarded to Wildlife Trust	
2	Support appropriate reedbed creation	2.1	Liaise with major habitat creation projects such as the Great Fen and gravel pit restorations	Natural England, Wildlife Trust, RSPB, WWT, Environment Agency	Ongoing	Formal contact made with project	<i>The usual liaison with the Great Fen Partners was continued.</i>
		2.2	Manage the Middle Level main drains, where possible, to assist private landowners who wish to create areas of reedbed on their own land	Wildlife Trust, Environment Agency	Ongoing	(a) Number of requests received (b) Number of landowners assisted	(a) none (b) No assistance required.
3	Take conservation value of reedbed into account when planning and carrying out ditch and river maintenance	3.1	Retain existing reed fringes at the toe of the bank, where possible, when de-silting larger rivers	Conservation Officer	Ongoing	(a) Number of opportunities identified (b) Number of operations retaining a percentage of reed fringe	<i>The usual ML river management that leaves a fringe of reeds and other emergent water plants at the channel margins was carried out throughout the system.</i>
		3.2	Where reeds are present, commence mowing or cleansing work outside the bird breeding season (7 th April – 15 th July). Where reeds are growing in water be aware of the potential for late-nesting reed warblers being present until late August and avoid mowing in that location.	Conservation Officer, Wildlife Trust, RSPB	Ongoing	Reeds not cut during bird nesting season	<i>All relevant staff briefed on mowing in the breeding bird season and precautionary approach in place.</i>

Fen Action Plan

Target Reference	Target	Action Reference	IDB Actions	Partners	Date	Indicators	Report
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1	Identify, assess and map areas of existing fen habitat	1.1	Pass details of any known areas to Conservation Officer	Wildlife Trust, Natural England, Environment Agency	2013	Review of potential fen areas carried out	<i>No new potential fen areas identified.</i>
		1.2 *	Assist the Wildlife Trust to assess against County Wildlife Site criteria	Wildlife Trust	2013	Information forwarded to Wildlife Trust	<i>As above.</i>
2	Support fen habitat conservation and creation through the Great Fen Project	2.1	Manage Middle Level Main Drains to contribute to the Great Fen Project and support appropriate water level management and flood storage	Wildlife Trust, Natural England, Environment Agency	Ongoing	Number of meetings / contacts that contribute to management target	<i>Great Fen meetings were attended by the MLC CEO. CO in contact with Great Fen monitoring officer.</i>
3	Support conservation measures for existing major fen sites	3.1	Contribute to implementation of the Water Level Management Plan for Woodwalton Fen and Holme Fen	Natural England, Environment Agency, Wildlife Trust	Ongoing	WLMP actions implemented where within MLC's control	<i>A review of the WLMP for Woodwalton Fen was completed by the appointed consultants in 2016.</i>

Floodplain Grazing Marsh Action Plan

Target Reference	Target	Action Reference	IDB Actions	Partners	Date	Indicators	Report
1	Identify, assess and map areas of existing floodplain grazing marsh	1.1	Pass details of any known areas to Conservation Officer	Wildlife Trust, RSPB, WWT, Natural England, Environment Agency	2013	Review of potential grazing marsh area carried out	<i>No new potential grazing marsh areas identified, other than sites under consideration by conservation bodies.</i>
		1.2 *	Assist the Wildlife Trust to assess against County Wildlife Site criteria	Wildlife Trust	2013	Information forwarded to Wildlife Trust	<i>As above</i>

2	Support landowners in creating or restoring grazing marsh / wet grassland	2.1	Manage Middle Level Main Drains where possible to assist private landowners and organisations undertaking habitat creation	Conservation Officer, Natural England, RSPB, WWT, Wildlife Trust	Ongoing	(a) Number of requests received (b) Number of landowners assisted	(a) None. (b) None.
3	Support appropriate management of the Ouse Washes	3.1	Contribute to implementation of all relevant plans (e.g. site management plan and WLMP)	Conservation Officer, Natural England, RSPB, WWT, Environment Agency, Wildlife Trust	Ongoing	All relevant actions implemented	<i>Meetings attended and responses submitted by CO</i>
		3.2	Promote and support measures to limit spring and summer flooding of the Ouse Washes	Conservation Officer, Natural England, RSPB, WWT, Environment Agency, Wildlife Trust	Ongoing	(a) Number of opportunities to comment on flood-limiting measures (b) Number of comment opportunities taken up	<i>None. CO to monitor and update when possible.</i>

Open Water Action Plan

Target Reference	Target	Action Reference	IDB Actions	Partners	Date	Indicators	Report
1	Promote the creation of ponds, lakes and reservoirs in appropriate areas	1.1	Consider pond creation as mitigation when a ditch has to be filled in or culverted	Local authorities, Amphibian & Reptile Conservation, Wildlife Trust	Ongoing	(a) Number of mitigation opportunities (b) Number of ponds created	(a) None (b) None.
		1.2	Support creation of flood storage areas and reservoirs	Environment Agency, Natural England, Wildlife Trust, RSPB	Ongoing	Number of projects involved with	<i>No project applications, other than Great Fen developments.</i>

		1.3	Assist private landowners with advice, information or contacts as necessary	Amphibian & Reptile Conservation, Wildlife Trust	Ongoing	(a) Number of information requests (b) Number responded to	(a) None (b) None
2	Look for opportunities to create open water habitat when managing ditches	2.1	Create a pool at an appropriate ditch junction when re-profiling (see the Drainage Channel Biodiversity Manual, technique CL3))	Conservation Officer	2010	One pool successfully created	No appropriate opportunities of this type occurred during the period.
3	Support appropriate habitat creation as part of gravel pit restoration	3.1	Support inclusion of wetland habitats such as wet woodland, wet grassland, scrub and open water in gravel pit restoration schemes	Aggregates companies, local authorities, RSPB, WWT, Wildlife Trust	Ongoing	Number of schemes involved with	Ongoing development of Block Fen area. Progress monitored and comments made when requested.

Water Vole Action Plan

Target Reference	Target	Action Reference	IDB Actions	Partners	Date	Indicators	Report
1	Manage ditches according to the law and to best practice for water vole	1.1	Assume water voles are present when carrying out works and follow the ADA water vole mitigation guide	Conservation Officer	Ongoing	Measures incorporated in management plans	Water vole mitigation guidelines were followed. The measures are incorporated in the ML Operations Manual.
		1.2	Publicise good practice for rat control near drainage ditches	Conservation Officer, Wildlife Trust	Ongoing	Good practice publicised	Best Practice for rat control has been previously publicised in the Environmental Officer's Natural Level newsletter.
2	Enhance drainage ditch habitat to benefit water vole	2.1	Look for opportunities to add a marginal shelf when re-profiling banks	Conservation Officer	Ongoing	(a) Opportunities identified (b) Measures taken	No opportunities identified; no measures taken during the period.
3	Monitor water vole populations	3.1	Set up a survey programme to monitor water vole populations	Conservation Officer, Wildlife Trust	2011	Surveys carried out	Surveys ongoing.

		3.2	Provide data on water vole to the relevant Biological Records Centres	Conservation Officer, CPERC, NBIS	Ongoing	Data sent via Environmental Officer annually	<i>Data sent to CPERC.</i>
4	Control mink as necessary	4.1	Promote and support the Middle Level mink control programme	Conservation Officer, associated groups	Ongoing	Measures taken	<i>New mink strategy in place; meetings attended with Eastern Region Mink and Water Vole group. Mink control promoted at any opportunity.</i>
		4.2	Carry out mink control as part of the Middle Level programme and report all sightings to the Conservation Officer	Conservation Officer	Ongoing	Number of sightings/minks caught	<i>8 new rafts and remoti traps supplied by Middle Level. <u>All sightings important.</u></i>

Otter Action Plan

Target Reference	Target	Action Reference	IDB Actions	Partners	Date	Indicators	Report
1	Improve otter habitat	1.1	Identify and maintain existing key bushes and trees near watercourses likely to be important for otters	Conservation Officer	2012 and ongoing	Sites identified and listed in management plans	<i>Key bushes and trees will be included in the management plan.</i>
		1.2	Create small habitat triangles incorporating "mini-holts" at agreed sites	Conservation Officer	Ongoing	Number of sites created	<i>Holt sites enhanced where possible.</i>
		1.3	Provide at least 4 artificial otter holts	Conservation Officer	2015	Number of holts provided	<i>Total holt numbers provided is 81.</i>
2	Monitor otter populations	2.1	Set up and maintain a survey programme to monitor otter presence throughout the Middle Level BAP Area	Conservation Officer, Wildlife Trust, Mammal Group	2010	Surveys carried out	<i>Sites continue to be monitored when possible.</i>

		2.2	Provide data on otter presence to the relevant Biological Records Centres and the National Otter Survey	CPBRC, NBIS	Ongoing	Data sent to BRC annually	<i>Data sent to CPERC.</i>
		2.3	Ensure any dead otters are reported to the Conservation Officer and transferred to the Environment Agency for post mortem	Environment Agency	Ongoing	Otters reported to Conservation Officer, if found	<i>Several mortalities reported to CO in period. One sent to Cardiff Otter Project.</i>
3	Reduce otter deaths related to eel and crayfish trapping and road traffic	3.1	Report incidents of suspected illegal netting, trapping or fishing to the Environment Agency Fisheries Officers and the Conservation Officer	Environment Agency, Angling Clubs & syndicates	Ongoing	Incidents reported, if discovered	<i>CO in touch with 'Fenland Guardians' regarding issues..</i>
		3.2	Publicise the dangers presented to otters of crayfish traps and eel traps without otter guards fitted	Environment Agency, Angling Clubs & syndicates	Ongoing	Number of publicity opportunities taken.	<i>Opportunities to publicise the issue taken when possible.</i>
		3.3	Consider the provision of bridge ledges at potential road mortality bridges	Environment Agency, Cambridgeshire County Council, private bridge owners	Ongoing	Number of ledges provided	<i>This measure was dropped from the project & additional holts installed instead.</i>

Bats Action Plan

Target Reference	Target	Action Reference	IDB Actions	Partners	Date	Indicators	Report
1	Improve habitat for bats	1.1	Put up at least one bat box at an appropriate site, e.g. a pumping station	Bat Conservation Trust	2015	Number of bat boxes sited	<i>8 boxes previously installed. 1 damaged beyond repair and to be replaced.</i>

		1.2	Pollard suitable trees to provide bat roosts		Ongoing	Number of trees pollarded	<i>A number of pollarded trees in the system, further opportunities to be discussed if found</i>
		1.3	Identify potential sites for a bat hibernaculum, e.g. in disused buildings or tunnels	Conservation Officer, Bat Conservation Trust	As opportunities arise	Site created	<i>Under consideration.</i>
2	Collect information on bat populations	2.1	Monitor bat boxes	Bat Conservation Trust	2015 onwards	Number of boxes used by bats	<i>Studies ongoing</i>
		2.2	Pass bat box information to CPBRC and NBIS	Conservation Officer, CPBRC, NBIS	2015 onwards	Data via Conservation Officer annually	<i>Annually if box found to be occupied by bats.</i>

Kingfisher Action Plan

Target Reference	Target	Action Reference	IDB Actions	Partners	Date	Indicators	Report
1	Improve the quality of kingfisher habitat	1.1	Provide at least 4 potential nest holes	Conservation Officer	Ongoing	Number of nest sites provided	<i>A total of 35 holes have been drilled at 17 sites.</i>
		1.2	Leave kingfisher fishing perches where possible (e.g. occasional branch)	Conservation Officer	Ongoing	Number of perch sites left	<i>There are many natural perch sites for kingfishers available</i>
2	Collect records of kingfisher breeding between March and July	2.1	Note sightings of potential breeding kingfisher and pass information to CPBRC and NBIS via the Environmental Officer	Conservation Officer, CPBRC, NBIS	Ongoing	Data sent via Environmental Officer annually	<i>Kingfishers are very active along Middle Level waterways. Breeding likely, CO keeping notes on pairs in breeding season</i>

Barn Owl Action Plan

Target Reference	Target	Action Reference	IDB Actions	Partners	Date	Indicators	Report
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1	Improve the quality of barn owl habitat	1.1	Put up at least 8 barn owl nest boxes in suitable locations	Wildlife Conservation Partnership	2015	Number of nest boxes provided	<i>8 boxes previously installed.</i>
		1.2	Pollard suitable trees to provide natural nest sites	Conservation Officer	Ongoing	Number of trees pollarded	<i>A number of trees have been pollarded previously</i>
2	Collect records of barn owl presence	2.1	Monitor nest boxes for use. Have occupied boxes checked for success by licensed barn owl ringers.	Wildlife Conservation Partnership	2015	(a) Number of nest boxes checked by licensed ringers (b) Number of nest boxes used	<i>(a) 8 (b) most boxes are in use, including by stock dove and jackdaw</i>
		2.2	Pass barn owl box information to CPBRC and NBIS	Conservation Officer, Wildlife Conservation Partnership, CPBRC, NBIS	2015	Data sent via Conservation Officer annually	<i>Annual, when box is occupied.</i>

Eel Action Plan

Target Reference	Target	Action Reference	IDB Actions	Partners	Date	Indicators	Report
1	Provide elver passes at barrier points	1.1	Install an elver pass at St Germans as part of the pumping station improvements	Environment Agency	2010	(a) Elver pass complete (b) Weight of eels recorded using pass	<i>(a) St Germans PS pass completed in 2013 (b) c42kg in 2020 – see summary..</i>
		1.2	Identify any further barrier points where there is a need for an elver pass and consider opportunities for installation	Environment Agency	2011	(a) Number of sites identified (b) Number of passes installed	<i>(a) 3 sites identified (Salters Lode, Bevill's Leam PS, St Germans PS) (b) No new ones</i>

2	Facilitate the safe passage of mature eels on their migration out of the Middle Level system.	2.1	Devise and operate 'eel-friendly' slow start-up methods at St Germans Pumping Station to allow safe passage of 'silver' eels on return migration.	Environment Agency	Ongoing	Absence of eel and fish casualties and associated scavengers downstream of pumping station.	<i>In place.</i>
3	Collect information on eel populations	3.1	Work with the Environment Agency to collect information on the status of eels	Environment Agency	Ongoing	Surveys carried out	<i>Elver pass records sent to EA Fisheries Department, Brampton.</i>

Procedural Action Plan

Target Reference	Target	Action Reference	IDB Actions	Partners	Date	Indicators	Report
1	Provide training on IDB BAP and conservation management of drainage channels for all relevant staff by 2013	1.1	Establish programme of 1-day courses for MLC or IDB staff and members	Conservation Officer, Wildlife Trust, Natural England, other specialists	2013	(a) Number of courses held (b) Number of Board members / staff attending courses	(a) <i>None, due to Covid-19 restrictions.</i> (b) <i>Boards will be updated when opportunities arise.</i>
		1.2	Establish suitable training for contractors' staff	Conservation Officer, Contractors	2013	Contractors attended training course	<i>A machine operators' workshop on 'Ditching where Water Voles are Present' was run previously in 2010. CO reviewing this.</i>

2	Take biodiversity into account when planning and undertaking capital works	2.1	Consult with the Conservation Officer and choose the best possible mitigation solutions for biodiversity, e.g. fish-friendly pumps	Conservation Officer	Ongoing	(a) Number of capital schemes undertaken (b) Number of schemes commented on	<i>(a) No MLC capital schemes undertaken. (b) Comments regularly submitted via Works Committee and Planning Applications.</i>
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