

UK SPA & RAMSAR SCIENTIFIC WORKING GROUP

10 May 2017

11:00 – 14:30, JNCC Offices, Peterborough

Minutes

Attending in person

Clive Porro, Defra (Chair)
David Stroud, JNCC
Richard Hearn, WWT
Nigel Buxton, SNH
Patrick Lindley, NRW
Kate Jennings, RSPB
James Williams, JNCC –item 9 only
Philip Eckersley, NE

Telephone conferencing

Andy Tully, Defra
Richard Weyl, DAERA
Ronan Owens, DAERA
Matt Parsons, JNCC (minutes)
Steven Dora, SG

Apologies

Jeremy Wilson, RSPB

1. Welcome and apologies

The Chair welcomed attendees to the meeting, explaining that he would be chairing the group on a temporary basis, since a replacement permanent Chair has not yet been appointed.

Apologies were received from Jeremy Wilson (RSPB).

2. Minutes of last meeting; amendments & approval

The draft Minutes of 22 June 2016 were agreed subject to one change requested by Andy Tully regarding item 6 and the possible role of the Executive Steering Group (ESG) following the completion of Phase 1.

Regarding the action points from the June 2016 meeting, Chair reported that most had been discharged, except for point 11 concerning the annual report, which was on the current agenda (item 4).

Regarding Action 10, Chair informed the group that a candidate for future Chair of the group, following Ian Bainbridge's retirement, has been identified and an informal approach made, but that it would not be possible to complete the process until after the impending general election. He anticipated that the appointment process should be straight forward, subject to ministerial approval.

3. Revised ToR and work plan

Chair proposed that these two items -identified separately in the draft agenda - should be dealt with as a single item.

By way of an introduction, Andy Tully said that with Phase 1 published and Phase 2 well underway, it was an appropriate time to review the ToR and work plan, also considering no substantial review had been undertaken since the group was established in 2001. The last ESG meeting made some suggested amendments to these; this version, with tracked changes, was presented for discussion.

3.1 ToR

David Stroud said that the group would need to address significant issues in the coming period. One issue is how to secure monitoring information for species that are data deficient or difficult to monitor. Another significant issue is the impact of climate change on the SPA network; this was addressed partially by the CHAINSPAN project but further work is required.

Comments from SPAR SWG included the following:

- Nigel Buxton said that the ToR/work plan needed to reflect that we are in uncertain times due to “Brexit” and due to the uncertain future role of the Birds Directive and SPA. Therefore, it would be sensible to identify a review of the plan in 2019.
- Kate Jennings said that it was appropriate to highlight – as the draft has done - the importance of fully implementing the recommendations of the second Review published in 2001.
- Steven Dora asked why the word “avian” had been removed from the revised ToR regarding the Ramsar functions of the group. David Stroud replied that this was in recognition that Ramsar Sites could be designated for a range of non-avian wetland species and communities and that there was no alternative forum to consider these. This was accepted.

3.2 Work plan

This item was dominated by discussions on what the group agreed was a major priority, namely responding to climate change effects on the network.

Kate Jennings said that there is no robust decision-making process, at a UK network level, to deal effectively with the situation where bird features decline in sites from the effects of climate change. She proposed that the concept of Favourable Conservation Status (FCS) could provide an appropriate framework for such considerations, noting that the concept came originally from Bern Convention so should not be influenced by the UK’s impending departure from the European Union.

It was noted that discussions regarding FCS (including its possible application to birds) had been underway for some time in other fora. It was agreed therefore that SPAR SWG should not seek to develop separate work on this but should apply whatever

emerges from the existing processes, and should frame future work on the impacts of climate change on the network in the context of FCS.

The issue was raised of how international coordination would work following the UK's departure from the EU. Discussion included: regardless of the future status in the UK of European legislation such as the Birds Directive, other influential fora existed, such as the African-Eurasian Waterbirds Agreement (AEWA) and the Bern Convention; and that existing treatment of species' populations at a biogeographical scale would continue to be appropriate, demanding a future, internationally coordinated approach.

Action 1: Defra to circulate a "clean" version of the revised ToR and work plan, incorporating suggested additions discussed.

Action 2: Defra to take the revised paper to next SPAR SWG and, subsequently, ESG meetings, for review and sign-off.

4. Annual Report

David Stroud reminded the group that no annual report had been produced since the 2010-11 report but that it was appropriate, in the interest of good governance, that these are maintained. The report is, in the first instance, a report to the UK Natura 2000 and Ramsar Steering Committee, but also is intended for public awareness. The group agreed that the primary purpose of the report was to ensure visibility of its work, meaning that brevity and providing links to Phase 1 and 2 were important. Past reports and meeting papers are uploaded to the JNCC website. JNCC had not been able to make any progress on a 2011-17 report, though, due to priority required for Phase 2 delivery.

Action 3: David Stroud to draft a 2011-17 Annual Report for consideration by the group at its autumn 2017 meeting.

Action 4: JNCC (as secretariat) to ensure SPAR SWG page on JNCC website is updated at appropriate times with relevant documents.

5. Phase 1 of Third Network Review

David Stroud recapped on progress since the last meeting of the group (in June 2016). Primary achievement was the formal submission of the Phase I Report from the Joint Committee to Ministers and its subsequent publication on the JNCC website in October 2016. David thanked the many organisations and individuals who had contributed, not least the numerous volunteers who collected the survey data without which the Review could not have been undertaken.

5.1 Handling of errors identified since publication

David Stroud explained that a small number of errors had been identified, very largely mistakes in the transcription of numbers (e.g. population sizes). None of the errors affected any of the report's conclusions. The group recognised errors were almost unavoidable in a document of such a size, despite the thorough editorial process that it had gone through.

Discussion followed on how best to "publish" the updates and any revision of the report. It was concluded that, initially an "errata" note be produced and placed

prominently on the relevant JNCC web-page. This would be followed by a revised version of the full report, with the errata referenced as a footnote in appropriate places, including with asterisks next to each error.

Action 5: JNCC initially to publish online an errata sheet to accompany the Phase I report; then to consider how the Phase I report itself could be revised in a way that maintains clear and transparent version control.

5.2 Dissemination of results

David Stroud reminded the group of the importance of recognising the many thousands of individuals, many of who were volunteers, who contributed data that was used in the review. Consequently, it is desirable to ensure these people receive accessible summaries of how their data were used; these will include articles in relevant journals and bulletins, e.g. WeBS, Scottish Raptor Monitoring Scheme report, Rare Breeding Birds Panel annual report. A major article, already circulated to the group, will be published in *British Wildlife* in June 2017. The group acknowledged the importance of such contributions and offered to contribute to further publicity material. It was noted that the seabird recording community has contributed many data though has not yet been addressed; the Seabird Group and its journal/newsletter would be an effective mechanism, as well as others such as *BTO News* and *State of the UK's Birds*.

Action 6: David Stroud to circulate to the group articles that have been produced that summarise the findings of the Phase 1 report.

6. Phase 2

David Stroud told the group that papers covering the first two tranches had been given to ESG in November 2016 and February 2017 (summaries of which were copied to the present SPAR SWG meeting for information). A sub group meeting on 10 May would be considering drafts for a fourth tranche.

Andy Tully expressed his thanks to the Phase 2 subgroup for its recent progress. ESG had been offered the sub group's recommendations on the first two tranches of species reports. Tranches 3-5 will be progressed and completed this summer, after which (post summer break) ESG will meet to consider the recommendations from all tranches. Defra and the devolved administrations will be preparing advice for their ministers, who will subsequently consider the advice and decide upon what action is to be taken.

Devolved administrations and their SNCBs requested that a summary be circulated, indicating the status for each species or group of species in terms of drafting by sub group, whether it had been passed to ESG, signed off by ESG, etc. They asked that country-specific implications be highlighted.

Kate Jennings welcomed the progress that had been made with Phase 2 papers. However, she raised concerns that delivery of Phase 2 would be seriously weakened by an unmet need for further data (which the Phase 2 sub group identified). She pointed to the stalling in 2017 of the SCARABBS (Statutory Conservation Agencies & RSPB Annual Breeding Birds Scheme) survey programme.

Action 7: David Stroud and Andy Tully to liaise in order to circulate to SWG a tracking spreadsheet of state of each Phase 2 species reports. To include, where possible, a summary of country-by-country implications as well as at a UK scale.

Action 8: JNCC to make Phase 2 reports available to SPAR SWG via a secure, password protected website.

7. Marine SPA sufficiency assessment - update

Matt Parsons explained that the assessment had suffered a number of delays, largely associated with resources required for marine SPA identification, consultation and classification. Draft outputs were being considered by Defra and the devolved administrations, who commissioned the work. However, the work is not yet at a stage where it can be shared more widely.

Kate Jennings expressed her concerns over the delays and over what she saw as a divergence of the terrestrial/estuarine assessment and the marine assessment processes. She reminded the group that RSPB had expressed concerns regarding methodology, based on an earlier draft of the work that they had seen. She asked that the government steering group for the assessment be asked if SPAR SWG can be appraised of the method, even if outputs are not yet ready for circulation.

Matt Parsons informed the group that there had been coordination between the Phase 2 process and the marine assessment, in relation to acknowledging the overlap in species between the two assessments and that for some largely marine species decisions regarding Phase 2 would need to be deferred until the marine assessment had concluded.

Action 9: JNCC to pass on RSPB's request to the marine sufficiency steering group for SPAR SWG to see the method that is being proposed for the assessment, in advance of seeing the full report.

8. Update on Article 12 reporting

David Stroud reported that NADEG (Expert Group on Birds and Habitats Directives) met earlier in May 2017 and adopted the reporting guidance, effectively "firing the starting gun" on the Article 12 reporting round for 2013-18. The final report is to be submitted by Member States in June 2019, meaning the first half of 2019 will be reserved for achieving sign-off, with the period from now until end of 2018 being used for report drafting.

As for the previous report, there will be a requirement in the forthcoming round to report on numbers of relevant species within the SPA network. The default information will be the assessments made for the third Review, but where these can be readily updated they will be. This will require collation of existing information, e.g. from WeBS databases, UK Seabird Monitoring Programme database, etc., though it was noted that for seabirds, the national census data is long out of date for many species.

Detailed discussion followed regarding the quality of the evidence base for bird population assessment in the UK. The current failure to secure adequate resources for a coordinated breeding seabirds census (to update the last census that was held around 2000) was one example, of concern to the SWG. Another concern was what appeared to be inadequate co-ordination of bird monitoring evidence within

government, especially for marine birds. Nigel Buxton asked the Chair to register his considered opinion that this knowledge gap is likely to undermine the proper functioning of the UK SPA network. Furthermore, the group resolved that a formal approach to governments should be made to register the group's concerns; ESG and the SNCB's Chief Scientists Group should be the primary recipients. The group agreed that a workshop for stakeholders could be a useful step to take to start addressing these issues.

Action 10: David Stroud to draft, with RSPB input, a short summary of strategic uses of bird monitoring data, aimed at government policy officials, with emphasis on where evidence is poor. To include a proposal to hold a stakeholder workshop. Draft for discussion and sign-off at the next meeting.

9. Ramsar update

James Williams updated the group on plans for the forthcoming triennial Ramsar report, that Contracting Parties are required to deliver before each Convention of Parties (CoP). CoP 13 is to be held in October 2018 and the UK's report needs to be signed off in December 2017. A first round of consultation on the draft report is underway, involving statutory bodies (required by 21 July 2017), followed by a wider consultation (to include NGOs) from late September through October.

David Stroud reported other Ramsar matters. Dungeness to Pett Level site was designated in June 2016, the first UK Ramsar site for some time. JNCC have an action to prioritise update/provision of Ramsar Information Sheets (RIS) in sites in the UK Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies. The aim is to complete these prior to CoP 13. A timetable for long-overdue RIS updates Ramsar Sites in metropolitan UK is yet to be confirmed. David highlighted that a report – expected to be influential -was to be presented to CoP 13 on the *State of the World's Wetlands and their Services to People*; a draft is available from David on request.

10. Brexit

Andy Tully noted that this draft agenda item was set before the announcement of the "snap" General Election. Therefore, under guidelines operating during the pre-election period, little could be said by Defra regarding Brexit; however, Andy offered to field questions. Patrick Lindley asked if Article 12 reporting would definitely go ahead, given that it appears that the UK would have left the EU by the time the report is due. Andy Tully said that this is being considered by government but no firm answer could be given.

11. AoB

Kate Jennings reported that a "gap analysis" of WeBS data had been started by BTO, to identify strategic priorities for new counts, but had stalled due to staff changes in BTO. There is a plan for the WeBS partnership to take a paper to SPAR SWG for its consideration at a forthcoming meeting.

12. Date of next meeting

27 September 2017, at JNCC offices in Peterborough.