



Policies and Procedures

Appendix 6. Working with the Statutory Nature Conservation Bodies, Departments and EU consortia on joint projects

JNCC Evidence Quality Assurance (EQA) Policy

2018/19
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<https://jncc.gov.uk/about-jncc/corporate-information/evidence-quality-assurance/>

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Appendix 6. Working with the Statutory Nature Conservation Bodies, Departments and EU consortia on joint projects¹⁶

1. Background

When working jointly with other government bodies or in EU projects, JNCC may not always be able to control evidence quality. When working in partnership, adding interpretation to evidence collations or aggregating evidence there is a need to seek assurances from other organisations on the quality of the evidence that they are supplying. This guidance note provides some suggestions on how to do that.

Specialists within the Statutory Nature Conservation Bodies (SNCBs), with whom JNCC staff often work closely, have a responsibility to support good evidence quality assurance (EQA) practices in joint work. This responsibility also applies to other partners, both in government and the NGO sector, and any contractors employed to deliver evidence products. In these cases, JNCC staff will need to help others understand our EQA standards and procedures and what we expect from them to support achievement of good practice.

In working jointly with partner organisations agreement must be reached and recorded on standards that will be adopted for any given project at the start of that project; the JNCC policy should be followed as closely as possible.

The challenge is to ensure that the JNCC EQA principles are met when working jointly and when other EQA policies or standards need to be considered or are absent. The overarching EQA approach in a project may already be established in a MoA or MoU with one of the SNCBs or Departments, but even in these circumstances the EQA approach for any individual project, task or piece of work may need to be agreed before work starts.

2. The SNCBs and EQA Policy

Natural England – Evidence Standards¹⁷. NESTND024 is the standard that covers the way Natural England uses and analyses data, research findings and other information to develop its evidence base. NE may also use standards from other organisations, for example they have adopted Production of Quick Scoping Reviews and Rapid Evidence Assessments (NERC, 2015)¹⁸.

Natural Resources Wales – Good Evidence: Our Evidence Management Strategy and Delivery Plan 2014-2017¹⁹. This plan sets out key principles, but evidence standards are currently being developed. NRW has assessed the JNCC EQA Policy and guidance notes (EQGNs) during development of its own standards.

Scottish Natural Heritage – SNH Instruction Notice No. 417 sets out QA standards for acquisition, commissioning and managing data. SNH Instruction Notice No. 429 sets out QA steps for completion and publication of research reports. It includes requirements for peer review and the involvement of the SNH Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC). The SAC comprises a chairman and nine independent scientists and specialists, and fulfils three key roles in the quality assurance process. The Committee reviews the annual bidding round for research projects, and individual members advise on the detail of research proposals

¹⁶ This Appendix is an edited version of EQGN 6

¹⁷ <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/category/3769710>

¹⁸ <https://connect.innovateuk.org/documents/3058188/3918930/JWEG%20HtG%20Dec2015v2>

¹⁹ <https://naturalresources.wales/our-evidence-and-reports/our-evidence/?lang=en>

associated with their specialist skills and experience. Individual members provide independent peer-review of key and critical Commissioned Research Reports and other publications. The Committee also reviews the SNH research programme areas on a five-yearly cycle, through which the members assess and advise on the quality and application of the recently-completed work, as well as providing guidance on future directions for the research programme.

3. Departmental and Agency EQA Policy

Defra (and Welsh Government) – the [Aqua Book](#)²⁰: Guidance on Producing Quality Analysis for Government sets out detailed best practice on quality assurance of evidence. JNCC has used the Aqua Book to inform its EQA Policy and guidance, which sometimes uses different terminology, but is compliant with the principles established in the Aqua Book.

Scottish Government – Main Research Providers²¹. SG uses six MRPs to acquire evidence on the environment and each MRP is responsible for quality standards; most follow international (ISO) standards. Of most relevance to JNCC are The James Hutton Institute and Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. See also Code of Practice for Official Statistics.

Cefas²² follows a range of international standards (ISO) and other accreditations to support high-quality evidence production.

Marine Management Organisation: the MMO Evidence Strategy 2015-2020 Part 1²³ sets out its approach to quality assurance (section 7.1), making reference to a group of EQA policy documents. MMO both assessed the JNCC EQA Policy and consulted JNCC during the development of these policies and the two are consistent on general EQA principles and some practices.

The Code of Practice for Official Statistics²⁴ (UK Statistics Authority) sets standards for quality assurance of data and evidence. Compliance with the Code is a statutory requirement on all UK bodies that produce statistics that are designated as National Statistics through the Authority's Assessment process. JNCC used the Code to inform its own EQA Policy to ensure consistency.

The Joint Code of Practice for Research²⁵ (JCoPR) sets standards for research practice, and hence evidence quality, providing a generic framework of principles to apply through the research process. JNCC has not endorsed the JCoPR, but the JNCC EQA Policy is compliant with the code and goes further in specifying best practice.

²⁰

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/416478/aqua_book_final_web.pdf

²¹ <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Research/About/EBAR/research-providers>

²² <https://www.cefas.co.uk/about-us/quality/>

²³

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/445083/MMO_Evidence_Strategy_2015-2020_-_Part_1.pdf

²⁴ <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Code-of-Practice-for-Statistics.pdf>

²⁵ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/413154/pb13725-research-code-practice.pdf

4. How do EQA standards in the SNCBs, agencies and Departments compare to the JNCC approach?

Much of the current policy and guidance was developed at around the same time and JNCC was involved in Defra, NE, NRW, and MMO review processes, as well as convening an interagency evidence quality Task & Finish group. In addition, by publishing the JNCC EQA Policy on our website it has been available for others to use.

The outcome of this period of reflection, refinement and development of operational standards has meant that the general principles are consistent across policies and guidance. In addition, much of the more detailed practice is consistent between different organisations. However, there are some differences that could influence the scope of EQA approaches agreed in joint working.

Important differences to be aware of:

Risk-based decisions on which EQA practices to apply: Risk assessment should only ever be used as a guide to decisions about EQA practices, but if JNCC staff are concerned about agreement on the level of EQA required in a joint project because of the risk assessment then guidance from more senior staff may be required. Once the EQA approach is agreed then it is important to be transparent about what this means for the quality of the evidence produced. JNCC staff should be aware that wider risk considerations may mean different peer review and sign-off procedures are required, and will need to consider the resource, timetabling and cost implications.

Governance and delegations: partners may have different governance processes and formal sign-off procedures from JNCC. Joint projects will need to accommodate these and plan time to ensure that this does not impact on the EQA practices required; this should be clarified at the start of a joint project and agreement reached on each organisation's needs.

Records: EQA records kept by other organisations may not be the same as those required by the JNCC Policy. JNCC forms can be adapted for joint working to help support project management (see below), but staff should not seek to impose the same documentation standards on others. However, the JNCC project staff should seek assurances from the partner organisation(s) that EQA records are being kept.

EQA statements in publications: Other organisations may not include a summary statement of the EQA practices adopted for a project. This is a simple approach to improve transparency and should be maintained in publications co-produced by JNCC.

5. Working in EU consortia

Involvement in delivering evidence within an EU consortium is likely to be under a contractual agreement with defined responsibilities for specific work packages or tasks. EQA procedures may not be defined in the contract documentation or overarching description of work (project specification).

JNCC project officers should seek to establish a general EQA approach in the contract document prior to signing. If this is not feasible, then as part of the project governance process this should be established and JNCC should promote the adoption of an EQA approach.

Ways of working and responsibility for EQA:

- Any work packages or tasks that JNCC has lead responsibility for delivering should include an EQA approach based on our policy and work planning should include sufficient time to ensure that this can be followed.
- Any tasks within a work package being led by JNCC, but delivered by another partner, should include an agreed approach to EQA that the task leader agrees to take responsibility for; JNCC should seek assurances from the partner(s) that an EQA process is in place and being followed.
- Work packages or tasks that JNCC has no specific role in delivering would be covered by a general approach to EQA agreed by all partners, but in cases where evidence from these are then aggregated with those from JNCC work or jointly interpreted by JNCC will require assurances on quality from other partners.

JNCC project staff have responsibility for ensuring that partners are aware of the importance of having defined EQA approaches and that JNCC will expect all partners to have EQA practices in place and that assurances will be required.

6. Agreeing and recording an EQA approach in joint working

It is important to raise the issue of evidence quality and assurance approaches at the start of any joint project and agree responsibilities for producing an EQA plan, decision making and accountability, and recording practice. The principles in the JNCC EQA Policy should be followed as closely as possible; the Annexes documentation (including the peer review template) can be used to help put a joint EQA plan into practice and adapt it as necessary.

Key documents:

PID (project initiation document): Optional, may be helpful to support project planning and agree governance for large or complex projects. An EQA plan can be incorporated into a PID, especially to establish governance, but records of EQA decisions should be captured in a PAD or alternative record.

PAD (project audit document):

- if JNCC is leading a joint project or has responsibility for delivering an evidence task within a project then a PAD should be used if relevant (see EQA Policy, EQA flowchart for when a PAD is required);
- if JNCC has no lead role then the project officer may wish to keep their own records in the form of a PAD or reduced PAD to support effective engagement with the project partners. However, the project leader should maintain an audit of EQA decisions and actions and the PAD can be shared and adapted to meet this need if the project leader does not have a standard approach.

Alternative records: If JNCC is not leading on a project or a PAD is deemed unnecessary then an alternative record of the joint decisions on risk and EQA plan must be recorded in the SharePoint EQA database.

An assurance statement: JNCC does not have a template for recording and communicating evidence quality assurance for other partners, but project staff should be willing to supply short statements to partners if requested (see below for some suggested inclusions).

7. Gaining Assurances on Evidence Quality from Partners

In cases where JNCC relies on evidence produced by partners and is involved in aggregating data or interpreting evidence then an assurance statement on QA must be sought from the partner(s).

The statement should include:

- Confirmation that the evidence has been produced in accordance with the originating organisation's own EQA policies, and has been signed-off by the responsible officer (who should be named);
- Statement of the EQA standards that have been applied and met (policy document names, including any national codes and international standards);
- A record of any peer review process that has been applied (see EQGN#2 in relation to anonymity of reviewers);
- Additional information that JNCC staff might think necessary to provide assurance for a specific type of evidence, such as record of field methods applied, statistical approaches used, an assessment of certainty associated with interpreted information, etc.