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A vision for a Catchment Approach

1. Water Framework Directive

The target of the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD) is for all European water bodies to achieve and maintain 'good ecological status' (GES) or 'high ecological status' (HES) by 2015, although this can be deferred to 2021 or 2027 if exemptions can be justified. But the WFD is far more than a set of targets; it is a globally unique and inspirational piece of legislation because it commits Member States to:

- a) **Use ecological health as the indicator of success:** WFD brings a step change in the success factors by which the health of rivers and wetlands are judged. Previously, aquatic health was mainly judged on water chemistry alone and/or alongside fisheries management surveys. However, the WFD requires many ecological elements to be monitored including fish, macrophytes, diatoms and invertebrates, as well as chemical elements, morphological elements and more. While there has been criticism of some of the monitoring methodologies, it is widely recognised that this approach is the right one because it puts a healthy functioning ecosystem at the forefront.
- b) **Take an integrated river basin approach:** Rivers and their associated water bodies are the backbone of a landscape; they shape the environment around them and are, in turn, shaped by adjacent land uses. The WFD recognises that rivers cannot be improved outside of the context of the basin within which they lie and that management must take an integrated approach.
- c) **Include the views of stakeholders:** Article 14 of the Directive states that Member States 'shall encourage the active involvement of all interested parties, in particular in the production, review and updating of River Basin Management Plans' (RBMP).¹ This recognises that a commitment to achieve GES or higher, with no deterioration, needs the participation and support of catchment stakeholders in order to be sustainable.

2. Why a Catchment Approach?

A catchment approach should allow the principles of integrated river basin planning to be applied at the scale of the river catchment, enabling issues to be identified and solutions to be targeted with a level of granularity not possible at River Basin District scale. In addition, at this scale stakeholders and communities can more readily engage in identifying issues and targeting solutions; all of this should lead to accelerated and maintained movement towards GES and HES. By putting stakeholders and the community at the heart of catchment planning, a catchment approach can provide the framework for consultation as required under WFD Article 14, thereby bringing the ethos of the WFD and its aspirations to the forefront of community action to improve rivers and wetlands.

¹ Article 14 of the Water Framework Directive particularly refers to RBMP consultation with regards to: a) a timetable and work programme; b) an interim overview of the significant water management issues; c) draft RBMPs. It states that background documents should be available for interested parties and that Member States should allow at least six months for consultation on the RBMP.

Our vision is for the Catchment Based Approach (CaBA) to provide a sustainable delivery mechanism for WFD. We also recognise that this approach provides a significant opportunity to use the catchment geography to integrate WFD delivery with that for flood risk management, biodiversity and climate change adaptation.

3. What should a Catchment Based Approach look like?

Blueprint for Water members are enthusiastic about working in partnership with the Government and other stakeholders through Defra's CaBA. We are already working on many of the relevant catchment issues, and by allowing us to feed into national targets and by opening up different funding mechanisms this approach will allow us to achieve greater delivery. We also recognise that our engagement has benefits for wider civil society, as we can often deliver the required improvements very cost-effectively and we are a direct link to the local community, providing a channel to ensure their views influence what happens in the catchment.

However, increasing reliance on the third sector to deliver Government targets and policy outcomes is an additional burden for those third sector organisations. It requires the development of local partnerships, which may bring conflict when there are differences in priorities or opinion, and which require difficult decisions to be made. It costs money, in terms of staff time and capacity building, as well as delivering on-the-ground improvements. It also requires certainty around the relationship between the CaBA and RBMPs, and the effectiveness of regulation – all of which underpin catchment based working and must be clarified. Without this clarity, there is a risk that the disillusionment felt following our involvement in the first cycle of RBMPs, will return during the second cycle.

We have set out what we believe a successful CaBA should look like below.

3.1. Transparent

The CaBa is effective and fair because all stakeholders agree to the following ways of working.

- 1. Partnerships:** Government views the third sector as a CaBA partner that can help to test assumptions, identify issues and shape objectives, rather than a mechanism to deliver targets and objectives set by Government. There is a clear mechanism by which stakeholder's voices will be listened to and/or integrated into the RBMP, and they are able to influence key decisions about costs, benefits, design and delivery of all measures; all of which have bearing on how the big issues such as abstraction and diffusion pollution will be tackled and, ultimately, the level of ambition.
- 2. Funding and support:** There is clarity and recognition about how much capacity collaborative catchment working requires, and sufficient funding and support are made available. There is a process for securing funding that is transparent, consistent and effectively administered, and there is clarity about how different funding pots within the Defra family can be used effectively together to deliver environmental benefits in catchments. Funding streams also reflect the uneven distribution in the capacity of the third sector to mitigate the risk that those in the most deprived areas will have the least resource.
- 3. The ethos of the WFD:** There is transparency about the prescriptive limitations of WFD application and, where necessary, this is challenged locally by the CaBA, enabling the *ethos* of WFD to be adhered to. For example, on occasions where the WFD classification system misrepresents river ecology, or excludes water bodies that are integral to the freshwater ecosystem, local groups can challenge this. In this way, the CaBA provides a sense check to ensure that we are abiding by the ethos of the WFD.

3.2. Well-governed

Governance structures are defined and understood by everyone.

1. **Roles and Responsibilities:** The role, responsibilities and balance of power amongst stakeholders in the catchment approach – from the catchment scale to the national scale – is defined and understood by all. Stakeholders include Defra, the Environment Agency as the regulator and the Competent Authority for WFD delivery, public bodies with duties for delivering WFD and stakeholders in the private and third sectors.
2. **The decision making processes:** There is a clear process which ensures that decisions made by the Environment Agency are justified and transparent. This includes, for example:
 - i. How dissent amongst stakeholders developing catchment plans will be overcome. For example, a legal or economic issue may be entirely valid and germane to implementation of the WFD, but it may be unpopular or contested by some stakeholders.
 - ii. How a third sector group can challenge the classification or other decisions made about a river.
 - iii. The process by which measures identified at the catchment scale will be considered for the RBMP Programme of Measures.
3. **Effective policy framework:** A catchment approach is not sufficient to achieve the needs of the second cycle alone. The CaBA recognises this and has a timetable detailing when the necessary policy frameworks will be in place. This includes, for example: defining the role of mandatory measures and a strategy for implementing them; a strategy for dealing with diffuse urban and rural pollution; policy guidance for the delivery of Sustainable Drainage Schemes; a plan for dealing with a legacy of past over-abstraction; and a framework for sustainable future abstraction.
4. **Effective regulation:** Through the statutory work of the Environment Agency, the CaBA is underpinned by effective, fair and consistent regulation of baseline legislation. There is, for example, a strategy that defines the statutory measures that all businesses and land owners must adhere to and the additional voluntary measures that can be financed through, for example, Entry Level Stewardship, Higher Level Stewardship, Catchment Sensitive Farming and private or third sector initiatives.

3.3 Clear and agreed objectives

There are clearly defined objectives that demonstrate how the CaBA will meet the requirements of the WFD. These do not prescribe what needs to be done within a catchment, but define what decisions and outcomes the CaBA seeks to inform and the way in which this can be achieved; this approach will create momentum and ambition, and facilitate action. As yet there is no clear vision for integrated catchment management in England and no clear objectives for achieving such a vision. A successful CaBA framework will set this out, resulting in a third sector that is confident that the CaBA has the backing of all Environment Agency and Natural England teams, and that staff in those organisations are fully committed to making an integrated catchment approach succeed.

To meet the needs of the WFD, a successful CaBA will include:

1. **A Local WFD Catchment Plan** (or similar tool) which sets out: the classification of each water body within the catchment; reasons for failure; all the measures needed to reach GES or higher; apportionment of issues to different sources; allocation of responsibility; information regarding why some measures are not be feasible (due to WFD Article 4.4 exemptions); a timetable for all feasible measures to reach GES and a timetable for when unfeasible measures will be overcome or the alternative measure be put in place.

In addition, other outcomes should be included that relate to the freshwater ecosystem, identifying how and where these align with WFD outcomes.

2. **A local multi-stakeholder WFD catchment group** whose objective is to create, collate and consult on the Catchment Plan, specifically to identify, discuss and seek agreement on each of the issues set out in the Catchment Plan. In this way the CaBA provides a platform whereby stakeholders are engaged in all the issues identified in the Catchment Plan in a transparent way, testing the decisions made by the Environment Agency and offering challenge and alternatives to national datasets and economic analysis. The catchment group has a clear governance structure and when there is disagreement on any of these issues there is a process for decision making that is justified, understood and agreed by all.
3. **A pathway to River Basin Management Plans.** The CaBA provides a platform whereby the measures believed appropriate by catchment stakeholders are considered for the RBMP. By defining the pathway, enabling catchment collaboration, and enabling decisions and actions to be linked to the RBMP, the requirements of WFD Article 14 will be met and there will be greater ambition for GES and HES in the second cycle RBMPs. The Environment Agency effectively facilitates, promotes and supports the pathway between the catchment level and the RBMP level. Through this process the Environment Agency explains how and why it has discounted, for example, challenges to the classification and applied Article 4.4 exemptions.

Wider benefits of the CaBA are recognised:

4. **Integrated catchment management:** The CaBA provides the platform for an ecosystem approach, reflecting true integrated catchment management. Stakeholders and communities that do not want to focus wholly on WFD outcomes foster consideration of other issues not directly included in the WFD remit, for example, wildlife, flooding, climate change, wetlands, recreation and development. A Catchment Group might have an overarching vision and work to and include several 'streams', for example, WFD, Biodiversity 2020 and the Marine Strategy Framework Directive, with specific plans for each. The CaBA is the right scale for this as it provides the platform for integration at a comprehensible level, reflecting integrated approaches, enabling funding streams to be aggregated around the catchment geography and securing long lasting improvements to our rivers, streams and wetlands.
5. **Spatial Planning and prioritisation:** The catchment plan provides a spatial planning tool and supports a collaborative way of working that has benefits beyond those required for the WFD. As a spatial planning tool it enables the identification of priority areas for ecosystem functioning and ecosystem services. Allowing these issues to be addressed leads to greater benefits for the environment and greater stakeholder interest providing an incentive for external investment in catchment management and genuine opportunities for co-delivery.

4. Conclusions

We have high hopes that a catchment approach could contribute to the delivery of greater ambition in the second cycle and herald a more integrated and effective approach to protecting and restoring our rivers and wetlands in the future. But to do this it must be fit for purpose and deliverable. Draft River Basin Management Plans will be published in June 2014 and therefore time is of an essence if the CaBA is to work for the second cycle.

5. The Blueprint for Water coalition

The Blueprint for Water coalition is a unique coalition of environmental, water efficiency, fishing and angling organisations which call on the Government and its agencies to set out the necessary steps to achieve “sustainable water” by 2015. The Blueprint for Water is a campaign of Wildlife and Countryside Link. More information is available at www.blueprintforwater.org.uk.

This vision is supported by the following 11 organisations:

- Amphibian and Reptile Conservation
- Angling Trust
- Buglife – The Invertebrate Conservation Trust
- National Trust
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
- The Rivers Trust
- The Wildlife Trusts
- Salmon & Trout Association
- Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust
- Woodland Trust
- WWF-UK

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