
THE OUSE WASHES STRATEGIC GROUP

TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Ouse Washes

The Ouse Washes system was conceived over 350 years ago. Its creation played a major role in turning the Fens into agricultural land. The Washes are 19 miles long and half a mile wide spanning more than ten parishes and the two counties of Norfolk and Cambridgeshire. They form a key piece of infrastructure within the catchment of the Great Ouse, which extends from Oxfordshire to the West Norfolk coastline.

Over 80% of land in the Fens is cultivated and the fertile soils provide some of the most productive farmland in England. As agricultural production is becoming more geared towards the demands of the market place, the management of water resources in the Ouse Washes must balance the necessity for maintaining farming in the longer term, with the protection of the Ouse Washes and the water supported environment within the adjacent watercourses. There are currently over 150 abstraction licences within the Counter Drain and Hundred Foot catchments. These are predominantly surface water abstractions for agricultural use.

Farming contributes significantly to the success of the local economy, supporting many businesses involved in the production of food and rural tourism. To meet the needs of the growing workforce, Fenland requires growth and an improved range of jobs for everyone. Existing Fenland businesses need space to expand, and new businesses moving into the district or new business enterprises need suitable sites or premises from which to operate.

The Ouse Washes has an essential function as a flood storage area; it is one of the country's largest flood defence systems protecting properties and agricultural land across Norfolk and Cambridgeshire from flooding. Continued flood risk management, through the Ouse Washes, has enabled local communities, businesses and agriculture to exist and thrive in this area.

The Ouse Washes is also an internationally important nature reserve, attracting visitors for wildlife and recreation. It is designated as a Special Protection Area, Special Area of Conservation, a Ramsar site and a Site of Special Scientific Interest. The Ouse Washes is listed on the Montreaux record of sites undergoing ecological decline; a situation which a number of organisations are working together to remedy.

There is limited boating on the Ouse Washes with statutory navigation from the Forty Foot River along the Old Bedford/Counterdrain and into the Tidal River via the Old Bedford Lock/Sluice. In practice this route is very rarely used due to issues with the Forty Foot Lock and the channel of the Old Bedford/Counterdrain.

The system is managed by a range of organisations that all need to achieve different things from the land. More extreme weather patterns, rising sea levels and the age of some of the infrastructure are placing pressure on the Ouse Washes and the surrounding areas that benefit from how the system operates. Collaborative working across multiple organisations is now essential for the long term management of this important site.

Overarching aim

The partners who operate or depend on the Ouse Washes system work collaboratively to meet the current and future challenges facing the Ouse Washes and its surrounding communities.

Objectives

As a collective, the Ouse Washes Strategic Group will:

- Develop a shared appreciation of the value and the strategic challenges and opportunities of this area, within the current policy and legislative framework.
- Understand how future change (environmental, social, economic, policy, legislation) could impact the long term sustainability and viability of this area.
- Develop a shared vision for the next 5 to 10 years and, considering the future, for the next 10 to 50 years, for this area.
 - The shared vision will focus on delivering outcomes and finding solutions to the key challenges for the Ouse Washes and catchment.
- Share plans and programmes to inform investment decisions and identify opportunities to deliver work and attract investment in collaboration.
- Improve communications and engagement with others:
 - Outcome: there is improved engagement with communities in this area, with a better understanding of the challenges and the value of the Ouse Washes
 - Outcome: there is a joined up approach to engagement with government and MPs in all matters concerning the Ouse Washes.
- Provide a strategic overview of organisational activity across the Ouse Washes, identify interrelationships and ensure co-ordination between the various Ouse Washes technical groups.
- Provide a governance forum for the technical groups in order to:
 - Provide high level direction; and
 - Broker strategic solutions when issues are escalated by the technical groups.

Geographical coverage

The geographical interest of this group covers an area wider than just the Ouse Washes themselves. It includes the land that the washes protect and any areas that are impacted by or have an impact on the Ouse Washes.

Membership

Membership will comprise of executive managers from the organisations that operate or depend on the Ouse Washes system. Group members should be able to make decisions on behalf of their organisations. Membership will be reviewed annually.

Table 1 – Membership

Organisation	Representative	Title
Environment Agency	Julie Foley	Area Manager (Cambs & Beds)
Natural England	Aidan Lonergan	Area Manager (West Anglia)
RSPB	David Hoccom	Area Manager (Cambridgeshire & The Fens)
Middle Level Commissioners also representing Inland Waterways Association and Hundred Foot Washes IDB	Iain Smith	MLC Chief Executive
Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust	Kevin Peberdy	Director of Wetland Experience & Creation
Ely Group of Internal Drainage Boards	Andrew Newton	Engineer
Wildlife Trust	Martin Baker	Conservation Manager (Cambs)
Cambridgeshire ACRE	Kirsten Bennett	Chief Executive
Cambridgeshire County Council	TBC	TBC
Norfolk County Council	Cllr Anthony White	County Councillor
National Farmers' Union	Rob Wyse	Environment Advisor
East of England Angling Trust (EEAT)	Kelvin Allen	EEAT Chair
Anglian Water	Alan Simpson	Planning Services Manager
Secretariat (Environment Agency Area Secretariat Officer)	Claire Cleverley	EA Officer

Membership responsibilities

The individual members of the group will:

- Commit to working collaboratively using an open and honest approach
- Ensure regular attendance to meetings
- Contribute to agenda setting and agreeing the direction for the group
- Feedback relevant information to colleagues who attend the Ouse Washes technical groups
- Bring strategic issues, raised within the member's organisation, to the group for discussion
- Share organisational plans and programmes related to the Ouse Washes and surrounding area
- Form a link to your own organisation across activities such as:
 - Spatial Planning
 - Social and economic growth and development
 - Conservation and fisheries
 - Commerce / industry / agriculture
 - Environment and sustainability
 - Infrastructure – e.g. transport, services, flood risk management
 - Recreation, amenity, culture, heritage and tourism promotion
 - National and international legislation and policy
 - Emergency planning

Terms of engagement

- Agenda items will be led and owned by a variety of organisations
- Actions will be delivered by all group members
- Discussion will focus on issues or items that are within the control / decision making authority of represented organisations

Arrangements for chairing

Chairing will be shared across all organisations involved. The members will agree a programme of rolling chairs to cover the first year. This arrangement will be reviewed at the end of the year.

Meetings and Secretariat

Frequency and location

The group will meet face to face every six months (to be agreed). Where members agree, additional telecons may be arranged.

Meetings will be hosted by member organisations. A programme of meeting locations will be agreed in advance, the group will ensure locations which are accessible to all members.

Attendance

As the purpose of this group is to create a strategic decision making forum at executive manager level, group members are asked to avoid delegating their attendance if possible. Panel members who miss two successive meetings per 12-month period may be asked to step down.

Agenda setting

The group will agree a forward look for future agendas. The meeting agendas will need to address current issues as well as ensuring strategic discussions to enable the group to work towards the objectives outlined in this terms of reference. The forward look agendas will be flexible and prior to each meeting group members will be asked to put forward agenda items; this will include consideration of any new issues which are escalated to group members from within their organisations or from the technical Ouse Washes groups.

Agenda items will be balanced, with contributions from all organisations. Members are encouraged to table an item that they are leading on, to seek advice or a steer from the wider group or to share examples of good practice or innovation.

Secretariat

The Environment Agency will provide the secretariat for the group, including production of meeting action notes/minutes and distributing papers before the meeting.

All group members will be expected to contribute to meeting papers for agenda items on which they are leading.

Communications

Each organisation will have responsibility for communicating key messages externally.

Review

The group will be reviewed after a year of meetings to consider the following:

- Format of the group and membership
- Structure of meetings
- Delivery against group objectives

Review could be considered within an earlier timeframe if the membership agrees a need.