



Watercourse Maintenance Policy

Approval date: 20/04/2026	Approved by: Board
Applies to: Board Members, officers and employees of the Board.	Linked Documents: Adoption and Abandonment of Watercourses Policy.
Frequency of review: 3 years	Next review date: April 2029

1. Background

- 1.1 This policy sets out how the Board manages, prioritises, and delivers watercourse maintenance in line with its powers under the Land Drainage Act 1991. It forms part of the Board's wider governance and asset management framework and should be read alongside the Board's Environmental Policy. It provides the strategic context for routine and responsive maintenance activities, which are detailed further in the Standard Maintenance Operations Manual.
- 1.2 The Board exercises permissive powers under Section 14 of the Land Drainage Act 1991 to maintain certain watercourses that are critical to effective drainage or water level management. These are referred to as Board-maintained or adopted watercourses. The decision to adopt a watercourse is based on its strategic function and is guided by a separate policy: Adoption and Abandonment of Watercourses Policy, available on the Board's website.
- 1.3 All other watercourses, unless vested in another authority, remain the responsibility of the riparian landowners. Riparian owners have a legal duty to maintain, repair and, where necessary, improve their sections of watercourse to ensure the proper conveyance of water and prevent flooding.
- 1.4 Notwithstanding this, the Board retains permissive powers under Section 14 of the Land Drainage Act 1991 to undertake works on any ordinary watercourse within its drainage district, regardless of formal adoption status. These powers allow the Board to intervene where necessary to reduce flood risk or manage water levels, subject to available resources.
- 1.5 The Environment Agency classifies Main Rivers under a formal designation process to guide its maintenance and investment. While IDBs do not manage Main Rivers, the Board applies a similar classification framework to its own adopted watercourses, to prioritise resources and manage risk in a consistent and transparent manner.
- 1.6 A map of adopted watercourses maintained by the Board is available on the Board's website and is updated periodically. This helps landowners and stakeholders understand which watercourses are formally maintained by the Board and subject to the Board's operational programme.



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2. Types of Maintenance

- 2.1 The Board prepares an annual maintenance programme which sets out the locations and timings of routine works. A summary is published on the Board's website and landowners likely to be affected are notified in advance, in line with operational best practice and the Board's commitment to transparency.
- 2.2 The Board undertakes a range of maintenance activities to ensure the effective functioning of its adopted and permissively managed watercourses. These works are delivered in accordance with the Board's Environmental Policy, Biosecurity Policy, and Standard Maintenance Operations Manual and may include the following:
 - Flail mowing and vegetation control.
 - De-silting and channel regrading.
 - Weed-cutting (in-channel).
 - Tree and scrub management.
 - Debris and obstruction removal.
 - Structure inspection and clearance.
 - Bank repairs and erosion management.
 - Access route management.
- 2.3 Wherever possible, maintenance works are planned to align with biodiversity goals, and measures are taken to mitigate impacts on protected species and designated sites.

3. Environmental Considerations and Timing of Works

- 3.1 The Board recognises its responsibilities under environmental legislation and is committed to carrying out maintenance works in a way that minimises harm. Works will be planned and delivered in accordance with the Board's Environmental Policy, which sets out requirements relating to protected species, habitats, and water quality.
- 3.2 Where appropriate, ecological surveys may be carried out before maintenance begins, particularly where water voles, nesting birds, or invasive species are known or suspected to be present. Timing of works is carefully considered to avoid sensitive periods (e.g. the bird nesting season or water vole breeding season), and all works are undertaken in accordance with the Board's Biosecurity Policy and any relevant consents or licences.
- 3.3 Environmental opportunities (e.g. to enhance habitat or improve water quality) may also be considered during maintenance planning where this is compatible with the Board's core functions.
- 3.4 The Board recognises the increasing importance of climate resilience and nature-based solutions in watercourse management. Maintenance planning will consider



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opportunities to support climate adaptation, sustainable drainage, and the long-term resilience of drainage infrastructure.

- 3.5 In certain circumstances, emergency or urgent works may be required to address risks to flood protection, public safety, or critical drainage infrastructure. Where works cannot reasonably be delayed to avoid sensitive ecological periods, the Board will seek ecological advice where practicable and implement appropriate mitigation measures to minimise impacts.

4. Prioritisation of Maintenance Works

- 4.1 Watercourse maintenance is prioritised based on function, risk, and environmental value. Priority is not determined by whether a watercourse is adopted or unadopted, but by the role it plays in managing water levels and reducing flood risk.

- 4.2 Each watercourse is categorised based on its contribution to the wider drainage system, including factors such as:

- The extent and vulnerability of land served (e.g. agricultural land, developed areas, designated environmental sites).
- The number and nature of properties, infrastructure, or communities potentially affected by poor maintenance or failure.
- The watercourse's role in receiving flows from other systems (e.g. highways, main river, other IDB drains).
- Risk of flooding or waterlogging due to local topography, soil type, or condition of assets.
- Access constraints that may delay response or require more frequent intervention.

- 4.3 The Board also considers:

- Environmental responsibilities, including habitat protection, SSSI management, and water quality improvement.
- Legal and historical obligations, including vested assets, statutory agreements, or legacy drainage improvement schemes.
- Operational efficiency, including machinery access, local knowledge, and cost-effectiveness of planned intervention.



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- 4.4 This prioritisation framework ensures limited resources are deployed where they deliver the greatest benefit in terms of land drainage, public safety, biodiversity and statutory compliance.

Priority Rating	Description
High	Critical watercourse serving multiple landowners, with high flood risk or major infrastructure impact. Includes key agricultural areas or settlements.
Medium	Moderately significant watercourse serving one or more landowners or providing resilience to main routes. Some flood risk or reduced performance if not maintained.
Low	Limited role in network function, generally private benefit only or no wider catchment dependence.
Very Low	No active drainage role or fully bypassed by other systems. Potential candidate for abandonment.

- 4.5 Ratings are reviewed as needed, particularly in light of changes in land use, development, drainage complaints, or infrastructure condition.
- 4.6 These ratings are indicative and used to guide proportionate action.

5. Prioritisation Considerations

- 5.1 The following factors are taken into account when assessing a watercourse's priority. These considerations ensure that the Board maintains a resilient and effective network while making the best use of available resources.
- Flood risk: Likely impact of overtopping or blockage on people, property, infrastructure, or farmland.
 - Drainage function: Importance of the watercourse to the catchment, including connectivity to pumps, sluices, or arterial routes.
 - Land use and productivity: The type and value of land served, including residential, commercial, designated sites, or productive agricultural holdings.
 - Access and maintenance history: Practicality of maintaining the watercourse, condition of structures, and past performance.
 - Environmental value: Presence of protected habitats, species, or enhancement opportunities (e.g. biodiversity net gain).
 - Third-party influence: Influence of upstream or adjacent landowners, inflows from highways or developments, or need for partnership working.
 - Legal obligations or designations: Any relevant statutory duty, conservation status, or planning condition that affects the site.
 - Asset dependency: Whether downstream or upstream assets rely on this watercourse functioning effectively (e.g. pumps, sluices, culverts).



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- 5.2 Prioritisation is reviewed periodically or in response to changes in catchment conditions, land use, or asset performance.
- 5.3 The Board recognises that local landowners, occupiers, and stakeholders may hold valuable insight into how watercourses affect land use, productivity, and flood risk. Where appropriate, feedback and requests for review of a watercourse's priority status may be submitted to the Board in writing. These will be considered on a case-by-case basis, taking into account the adopted criteria set out in this document, available data, and available resources.
- 5.4 The Board aims to acknowledge such requests within 10 working days or advise of an alternative timescale where further investigation is required.
- 5.5 As part of its routine operational planning, the Board will also review watercourse prioritisation annually, with input from asset inspections, and stakeholder feedback received throughout the year.

6. Access

- 6.1 Access to watercourses for maintenance purposes is typically secured under permissive powers in the Land Drainage Act 1991 and the Board's Byelaws. The Board works with landowners to ensure access is available where needed. Riparian owners are reminded of their legal duty to maintain watercourses under their control and to avoid placing obstructions or materials that may hinder maintenance.

7. Rechargeable Works and External Contracting (PSCA/Third Parties)

- 7.1 In addition to the Board's routine programme, maintenance may be delivered through rechargeable works at the request of landowners or partners. These are undertaken where appropriate and subject to Board approval, in line with the Board's Rechargeable Works Policy.
- 7.2 The Board may also deliver maintenance on behalf of others through Public Sector Cooperation Agreements (PSCA) or external contracts. These are agreed on a case-by-case basis where the Board's skills and local knowledge can add value.

8. Communications and Engagement.

- 8.1 The Board is committed to clear and timely communication with those affected by its maintenance activities. In addition to publishing the annual maintenance programme and adopted watercourse map on its website, the Board provides relevant information to landowners through drainage rate letters.
- 8.2 Where necessary, the Board may also use signage, field notices, or direct contact to inform occupiers and stakeholders of upcoming works or site access needs. Feedback



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from landowners is welcomed and can be submitted via the contact details provided on the Board's website.

9. Review

9.1 This document will be reviewed at least every three years or sooner if:

- There are significant changes to national policy, Board strategy, or legislative framework (e.g. updates to the Land Drainage Act 1991 or Defra guidance).
- Operational or environmental circumstances arise that materially affect prioritisation (e.g. a major flood event or infrastructure change).
- Feedback from stakeholders, including landowners, partner agencies, or members, indicates a need for clarification or revision.

Version Control

Version	Date Approved	Summary of Changes
1.0	20/04/2026	Initial policy approved