



Principles of Preparing Good Guidance for Ecologists & Environmental Managers

January 2021

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PREAMBLE

As the professional body for ecologists and environmental managers, CIEEM encourages high standards of practice by encouraging appropriate use of good practice guidelines.

CIEEM occasionally publishes its own guidance but also contributes to, comments on, and may endorse, relevant guidance produced by other organisations.

There is a wealth of guidance on a range of topics readily available to ecologists practicing in the UK and overseas. Whilst extremely useful, navigating this can be daunting for professionals, whether they are seeking to follow these guidelines or check whether others have used them appropriately.

This brief guide sets out eight principles of good guidance for editors and commissioning authorities. It is not CIEEM's intention to be prescriptive about how guidance is written, but it is CIEEM's view that abiding by these principles will ensure that better guidance is produced, and it will be more widely accepted within the profession.

PRINCIPLE I

The need and scope of new guidance is clearly identified by a range of stakeholders.

Is new guidance or a revision of existing guidance necessary? For instance, has professional practice changed, technology improved or new approaches been developed? Is there current guidance that is no longer fit for purpose or has a gap been identified? In order to avoid unnecessary duplication of standards, producing new guidance should only be done where there is a clearly identified need to do so. It may be that existing guidance can be revised and updated, which could be a simpler process than writing new guidance.

Any new guidance should have a clearly written scope of what it covers and what it excludes. It is often useful to reference other guidance, especially where these provide overlapping or relevant additional advice. Care should be taken to avoid conflicting with existing guidance except where it is agreed by stakeholders to be out of date and where there is clear evidence to justify a change in approach. Duplication of existing guidance should also be avoided where possible.

PRINCIPLE II

Guidance should be clear on its purpose in order to aid interpretation by competent practitioners.

Guidance needs to be clear on whether it is:

1. describing minimum standards;
2. describing 'best' practice;¹
3. describing 'good' practice;²
4. providing advice on a range of methods that are available;
5. describing case studies of individual approaches; and/or
6. advising on interpretation of legislation, licensing or policy.

In many cases, a single guidance document will contain all of the above. The document should make it clear what forms it contains to allow the target audience to interpret the content correctly. For example, guidance on minimum standards needs to be concise, specific and unambiguous and should get consensus from a wide range of organisations and professionals before being published. This is because CIEEM members that fail to meet the minimum requirements set out in recognised industry standards without sufficient justification may be in breach of CIEEM's Code of Professional Conduct.

Case studies and examples are useful for illustrating how guidance can be applied, but these should be clearly signposted to avoid situations where a single case study is considered the only way to approach a problem.

The reasons, authority and evidence for any specific recommendations of 'good practice' or 'best practice' should be clearly explained to allow the user to make an informed decision about their applicability.

Guidance should be clear where it constitutes advice on legislation and licensing from a statutory nature conservation authority, as such advice often has a specific legal standing.

¹ Best practice is defined as a process or methodology that has been shown to be the most effective in achieving the desired outcome.

² Good practice is defined as a process or methodology that has been consistently shown to work well and to achieve reliable results.

PRINCIPLE III

Guidance should be clear about the intended outcomes and how to achieve them.

It is vital that guidance is clear about its aims and its intended target audience (see Principle II). Where specific methods or interventions are discussed, such as surveys protocols, mitigation measures or management prescriptions, the intended purpose or outcomes of those interventions should be described, along with the recommended steps to achieve the outcomes. Any shortcomings or limitations in an approach or intervention should be clearly stated. This will enable the user to clearly understand the advice set out, and be able to apply the principles to circumstances beyond those covered by the guidance, where relevant.

PRINCIPLE IV

All guidance written specifically for use by professionals should be clear that there is a requirement for ecologists and environmental managers to use their professional judgment.

Professional judgment is about making sound decisions that are site and situation specific and informed by the evidence available. Professionals should ensure that their decisions are proportionate and, where there is uncertainty, they should apply the precautionary principle. Guidance should support professionals in navigating this decision-making process (see also Principle III).

Professionals should use guidelines to inform their approach to a task. The foundation of good science is starting with clearly defined objectives and designing an appropriate method to deal with them. Deviations from accepted good practice must be clearly explained, with any limitations noted and sound reasons given that can then stand up to scrutiny by others.

It is important to allow professionals to have flexibility in applying guidance as it is generally written for the most common scenarios. For example, recommendations for optimal survey periods that reference seasonal and weather conditions should make allowance for geographical differences. Regional climate and micro-climatic variations and seasonal weather patterns make it impossible to be definitive about when breeding, hibernation or other 'seasons' start and finish. Broad categories, which include optimal, sub-optimal and unsuitable seasons for surveys, should be used.

PRINCIPLE V

Good guidance is based on good evidence.

All guidance should be evidence-based and should reference original (ideally, peer-reviewed) published sources, where available, that illustrate that the techniques recommended are appropriate. There should be a higher benchmark for evidence to support guidance on minimum standards as these are most likely to be subject to challenge. Where the advice provided in a guidance document is based on the opinions of the author(s), without published evidence, this should be made clear and appropriate caveats provided.

Where guidance is based on existing practice, but the scientific evidence supporting it is limited, this should be stated and there should be sufficient flexibility in the guidance to allow for individuals to innovate. Scientific testing, e.g. comparative studies of different techniques, is strongly recommended where new approaches are suggested and the results should be published widely. The process of developing new guidance is an opportunity to identify gaps in the evidence base and to recommend priorities for new research and data gathering to fill these gaps. Respect the intellectual property of others by ensuring that all evidence, concepts and other thinking, even where it is unpublished, is properly referenced.

PRINCIPLE VI

Good guidance is clearly written, consistent and unambiguous.

Guidance needs to be written to a high standard of English (or other language where relevant), in terms of grammar, punctuation and spelling. It should be written in a manner which ensures that any advice provided is clear and unambiguous. It should be concise; information which is unnecessary to the purpose of the document should not be included without good reason. The advice given should be consistent throughout, and consistent with other relevant guidance documents unless there is good reason for a disparity (and such disparities and the reasons for them, should be made clear).

PRINCIPLE VII

All guidance written specifically for use by professionals should involve stakeholders and users and commit to a transparent consultation and review process.

A transparent review and consultation process is essential to ensure practitioner support. Sufficient time should be allowed for organisations and individuals identified as key stakeholders and users to review and comment upon drafts of the guidance before it is published. Editors should make it clear to consultees how specific comments have been addressed through the review process.

Guidance should carry a publication date and, in most cases, state a proposed review date. CIEEM recommends that the commissioning authority reviews guidance at least every five years to check it remains fit for purpose. As far as is practicable, out of date guidance should be removed from circulation. Where CIEEM has endorsed guidance, it may conduct its own review after five years and publish its findings for members.

PRINCIPLE VIII

Guidance should be written and edited by those with authority in the topic.

Better guidance is prepared by technical experts and reviewed by other experts, with overall editorial control being the clear responsibility of an individual or small number of appointed people. Where guidance covers a range of topic areas, specialists in those specific areas should be appointed to write and review them.

PRINCIPLE IX

Consider the geographical context of new guidance.

New guidance should clearly state its geographical scope and reflect this throughout the content. Engage with practitioners within each geography, e.g. individual nation states, to ensure that guidance is appropriate across all geographies that it is intended to cover. This is particularly important in relation to guidance that relates to the legal and policy framework, where there can be considerable divergence between different nations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This guidance has been produced by members of the Professional Standards Committee on behalf of the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management.

This document should be referenced as CIEEM (2021) *Principles of Preparing Good Guidance for Ecologists and Environmental Managers* (Version 3), Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management, Winchester.

The first iteration of these principles was published in 2016.





Raising the profile of professional ecological and environmental management and promoting the highest standards of practice for the benefit of nature and society.



43 Southgate Street
Winchester, Hampshire SO23 9EH

t: 01962 868626
e: enquiries@cieem.net
www.cieem.net