

ALERC

Association of Local Environmental
Records Centres



Local Environmental Records Centres and Biodiversity Net Gain



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Version: 03 (04/01/2019)

Summary

Local Environmental Records Centres are well placed to satisfy the demand for data services that a policy of environmental net gain will place on the planning process. This is through adapting and adjusting current services as well as growth of services in their current forms.

Developed services

- Metric calculations.
- Potential offset site inventory.
- Offset site registry.
- Sites at risk registry
- New forms of reporting.

Current services

- Context setting.
- Green infrastructure, habitat and species data management.
- Ecological network mapping.

Why Local Environmental Records Centres?

- Our members employ approximately 130 staff in England, with each team focusing on delivering services to well-established local networks of partners and clients to inform their activity and decisions at a county or regional level. These staff could be trained in the specifics of the biodiversity net gain process and its requirements to ensure it is embedded in local services and the expertise accessible to local stakeholders on an ongoing basis
- ALERC's accreditation system, which was funded and approved by Natural England, requires members to demonstrate impartiality in their policies and services, which is vital to the success of biodiversity net gain delivery and monitoring. The system could be further developed to include criteria specific biodiversity net gain
- Members work to national data standards and collaborate across boundaries to deliver multi-regional and country-wide services to partners

Members work on a not-for-profit basis, regardless of their legal status. Any profit generated will be reinvested into the improvement of existing services, and the development of new ones as outlined above.

Introduction

This document sets out a role for Local Environmental Records Centres (LERCs) in key aspects of the biodiversity net gain process as currently defined. The intended audience for this document includes LERCs, Natural England, Defra and other organisations the Association of Local Environmental Records Centres (ALERC) would like to collaborate with on net gain delivery. Once the projects are more clearly defined ALERC will develop a separate document that sets out our offer to developers and consultants (LERC client base).

LERCs are 'not-for-profit' organisations that collect, collate and manage information on the natural environment for a defined geographic area. LERCs support and collaborate with a network of experts to ensure information is robust, and make information products and services accessible to a range of audiences including decision-makers, the public, and researchers.¹

LERCs collaborate at a UK-level via the co-ordination of ALERC. ALERC is a social enterprise, employs a member of staff, has a Board of Directors drawn from the ALERC membership and aims 'to provide a central voice for the views and concerns of the Records Centre community, whilst building a support-based network of knowledge and advice to meet the needs of its members.'²

To become an accredited member of the ALERC, LERCs must demonstrate that they are an impartial source of data and information. The LERC network works to national standards and collaborate across county boundaries where this is required for the purpose of service delivery. The provision of data and information-related services to inform and monitor net gain in their area fits well with these commitments. It would also be pertinent for the information, monitoring and reporting requirements of biodiversity net gain to be strongly supported in any related policies, best practice guidance and standards.

The following table describes how LERCs can lead on the delivery of data and information services for the key stages of delivering biodiversity net gain. There will be costs associated with initiating some services that we will need to seek external funding for, for example the development of a database to manage the offset registry and associated reporting. However, once the systems are in place, it is anticipated that LERCs will cover the costs of further development and maintenance along with the generation of new data through charging a competitive rate for biodiversity net gain-related services. It is worth considering trialling the following ideas and reviewing the outputs to ensure they meet the requirements of all stakeholders.

Developed Services

Metric calculations

As holders of the best quality data for their area, it is logical that LERCs also provide a service to calculate the biodiversity value of a given location's baseline habitat data using the Defra metric, alongside any local variations that may be required by local and regional planning authorities.

Service users

- Land managers and owners.
- Anyone involved in designing and implementing biodiversity net gain projects.
- Local authorities.

^{1,2} Association of Local Environmental Records Centres website: <http://www.alerc.org.uk/>

Creation and maintenance of inventory of potential offset sites

LERCs provide an informal signposting service within their county to put enquirers in touch with relevant stakeholders, and this service is a natural extension of that. This service would comprise a GIS dataset that represents potential offset site boundaries for a given area (county or region), which links to a database of information about the site as provided by the site owner / manager using an agreed template that standardises information collection e.g. project potential, additionality etc.

Service Users

- All land managers and owners that have sites that meet requirements.
- Local Nature and Enterprise Partnerships or other strategic advisory partnerships.
- Local authorities that need to keep up to date with the local resource available.
- Anyone involved in designing and implementing biodiversity net gain projects.

Additional Support

Ensure a standard is developed for presenting information about potential offset sites at least at county level but possibly nationally.

- Ensure delivered offsets are reported to the LERC in order that the potential offset site is moved to the 'delivered offset' registry.

Creation and maintenance of registry of sites where offsetting has occurred

A GIS dataset that represents locations where offsets have been carried out in a given area (county or region), along with associated information about the site, related net gain project and forecast of outcomes provided using an agreed template that standardises information collection.

Service Users

- Land managers and owners.
- Anyone involved in designing and implementing biodiversity net gain projects.
- Local Nature and Enterprise Partnerships or other strategic advisory partnerships.

Additional Support

- All completed offsets to be reported to the LERC for incorporation into the registry, including projects delivered prior to the dataset being created to allow for accurate reporting (where possible).

Creation and maintenance of registry of sites at risk

A GIS dataset that represents locations where existing habitats *could* be enhanced if metric gives the activity sufficient weight. Would require collaboration between LERCs and local partners to identify sites.

Service Users

- Land managers and owners.
- Anyone involved in designing and implementing biodiversity net gain projects.

- Local Nature and Enterprise Partnerships or other strategic advisory partnerships.

Reporting

LERC processes include independent verification of information and datasets that are then used to underpin reporting. Local reporting to national standards would enable national statistics to be generated without the need for a national reporting system that could be expensive and underutilised (e.g. Biodiversity Action Reporting System). Reports could include:

- Annual biodiversity net gain statistics per
 - developer e.g. your company's biodiversity net gain (habitat extent, units) for the past financial year is the equivalent of 5 Parliament Squares.
 - local authority e.g.
 - developer X hasn't provided any monitoring data in the past year
 - developer Y has met their annual monitoring commitment
 - over X ha of net gain covering habitats X,Y,Z has been delivered in your area in the past financial year.
 - land manager / owner e.g. you have provided receptor sites for X ha of offsets in the past financial year.
 - county / region e.g. losses and gains of priority habitats per area that can be aggregated to country-level.
 - [Lower Super Output Area](#) to demonstrate impact of development and related net gain activities on local residents e.g. is loss of green infrastructure due to development of a site compensated for in related net gain work.
- LERC reports to statutory bodies on whether robust monitoring and evaluation measures and procedures are being adhered to after the project e.g. whether required data are being provided, general communications etc. This will inform any further action required where the projected gain is achieved and can therefore be accredited by an appropriate authority, and crucially, where a project fails.
- All known information about a site and its surroundings including green infrastructure, habitats, species, as well as biodiversity net gain features such as habitat condition, suitability, potential and delivered offset information.

Service Users

- Land managers and owners.
- Local authorities.
- Local Nature and Enterprise Partnerships or other strategic advisory partnerships.
- Developers (Corporate Social Responsibility reporting, annual reports etc.).
- NGOs.
- Members of the public (public accountability).

Additional support

- The requirement to report relevant information to LERCs will need to be part of the mandatory biodiversity net gain deliverables, and a means of enforcing it developed.

Additional ideas

- ALERC to explore net gain processes becoming part of an advanced accreditation assessment.
- ALERC could explore the idea of LERCs overseeing local habitat banking.

Current Services

ALERC co-ordination

ALERC could have a key role in setting data standards and developing related systems on behalf of its members via the National Coordinator and Board.

Additional Support

Will require funding for staff time.

Context setting

LERC data search reports should provide everything the LERC knows about the site within the red line boundary, and a buffer of 1 or 2km (or more) to inform net gain project design and preconstruction. This would include, where available, green infrastructure, habitats (including condition and extent) and species (protected, priority, invasive non-native etc.), as well as designated sites and any known biodiversity offsetting opportunities or completions.

It is possible, at least to start with, that rigorous habitat / green space data aren't available for all counties, so LERCs could collaborate to generate a baseline using remote sensing data and aerial photographs that has biodiversity units already calculated.

Service users

- Anyone involved in designing and implementing biodiversity net gain projects.
- Local Nature and Enterprise Partnerships or other strategic advisory partnerships.
- Local authorities.
- Local stakeholders, including members of the public for the sake of transparency.

Additional Support

- A licence for the remote sensing and aerial photography datasets would be required, which will involve the need for funding.

Generation, management and improvement of county-wide green infrastructure, habitat and species data and related unit calculations

LERCs are well-placed to oversee and deliver all aspects of data generation, management and analysis in relation to biodiversity net gain in their area, from initial site assessments to establish the biodiversity baseline plus related unit calculations, to the ongoing surveys that inform site management and monitor a project's progress towards target condition. The means of delivering this service will vary, at least initially, because some LERCs already have an in-house survey service that could undertake the work, whilst others collaborate with stakeholders that have the requisite skills. Regardless of the approach, the implementation of agreed standards for survey and monitoring as well as the resulting data

will provide consistent and comparable information outputs across boundaries. LERCs' independence from offset providers and funders will also ensure monitoring is fair and impartial.

The income generated through charging for biodiversity net gain services can be utilised by each LERC to implement a rigorous county-wide survey and monitoring programme that generates high quality data on green infrastructure, habitat extent and condition, and species that inform *all* LERC services for stakeholders. Over time, this will also ensure consistent data are available for all potential offset sites, and that unit calculations are all based on the same data.

- Grant-giving bodies to make it a condition of the grant.
- Local Nature and Enterprise Partnerships or other strategic advisory partnerships.
- Local authorities to write it into planning agreements.
- Developers to write it into contracts with their consultants.

Service Users

- Anyone involved in designing and implementing biodiversity net gain projects.
- All LERC stakeholders will benefit from improved data, including partners, clients and the general public.

Additional Support

- Work with ALERC, construction industry and [CIEEM](#) on further developing the "[Caring is Sharing](#)"² project undertaken by a working group in 2015, and agree a process of data mobilisation from developer to LERC that can be endorsed by planning authorities etc. To include a clear schedule of new survey post project that the LERC can report on as a means of policing the ongoing monitoring of the offset (no data = no monitoring happening).
- CIEEM, other professional bodies and funders to promote data sharing with LERCs as best practice.
- Local authorities to make data sharing with LERCs a requirement of their net gain approach.
- Developers to write data sharing into contracts with their consultants.
- Where LERCs initially don't have the capacity to undertake all data-related activity, ensure that they are identified as the custodian and verifier of all data generated by third parties, including unit calculations, to oversee a consistent approach and enable accurate reporting.
- Guidance on field survey for data-generation (rather than report-generation) to be written by CIEEM and ALERC, learning from existing guidance on biodiversity net gain developed and used by individual LERCs with their local partners.
- Guidance on data standards and what LERC-ready data look like to be written by ALERC in collaboration with members who have rigorous systems already in place.
- Access to detailed up-to-date Ordnance Survey products will be required, along with aerial photography for validation and verification purposes. Some LERCs already have these via contracts with local partners but there will be gaps in coverage.

² Smith, R. et al 2016 "Sharing Ecological Data Using GIS Files". *In Practice* 50 pp92.

Ecological Network Mapping

A modelled Geographical Information System (GIS) dataset that helps strategically plan net gain in the LERC's area and eliminate potential for bias towards particular land managers / owners. Where ecological network mapping hasn't been undertaken it's likely many LERCs will have existing resources and to analyse including designated sites, habitat suitability mapping, biodiversity opportunity areas and local and regional biodiversity targets set out in local policies. Should include links to Lawton principles.

Service users

- Anyone involved in designing and implementing biodiversity net gain projects.
- Local Nature and Enterprise Partnerships or other strategic advisory partnerships.
- Local authorities.
- Local stakeholders, including members of the public for the sake of transparency.

Additional Support

- Sharing of modelling methodologies between LERCs to help complete coverage.
- Local stakeholder advice and support via a task-and-finish group where required.

