

16th September 2014

JNCC Announcement on support for Recorder 6: ALERC position

Dear Mary,

It is with great interest and concern that the LRC community has read JNCC's announcements on Recorder 6 and its future. Having digested these, ALERC has prepared a response which offers information and guidance and that we hope notifies you of the key issues that will need to be addressed in the not too distant future.

ALERC has information on the biodiversity databases of 39 of its member LRCs. Of the 39, 34 (87%) use Recorder 6. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that Recorder 6 is very much the main database software of choice for LRCs. According to figures from 2013, the LRCs using Recorder 6 are storing nearly 64 million records in it. These figures are due to be collected again this summer, at which point we expect to see even more records being held in Recorder 6 up and down the UK. This is significant number and shows how important Recorder 6 is for maintaining and sharing on the UK's biodiversity.

Given the large stake that LRCs hold in the future of Recorder 6, ALERC feels that decisions made on its future must be taken extremely carefully in order to ensure that data sharing continues to work for the benefit of data providers and data users. Therefore, a lot needs to be considered before decisions can be made. This is outlined below.

Current status of Recorder 6

The sheer volume of data that is held within Recorder 6 databases shows that, whilst it has room for improvement, Recorder 6 provides an essential service. We know that a vast number of species observations are held within Recorder 6 databases, but this is only part of the story. Holding species observations is just one function that Recorder 6 performs. It is extensively used to hold site and habitat information as well, and has the capacity to store detailed information on recorders, which can be vital for verification purposes.

One of the most important considerations is that Recorder 6 can be operated in different ways depending on local circumstances. This is particularly true for the way data is arranged within the database. LRCs receive data from different sources, for example one LRC may have most of its data provided by a local natural history society in bulk uploads, whilst another may have to accumulate data from a number of different species interest groups or field survey teams. Recorder 6's system of storing data in individual surveys can be used to great effect in these situations, allowing sections of data to be imported, updated and exported in an efficient and organised manner.

The affordability and customisability of Recorder 6 means it is used by local voluntary recording groups, small conservation and community groups and individual recorders to manage their own data who then pass records on to their LRC. This helps efficient data management as data arrives at the LRC in a

standard format using the NBN taxon dictionary, rather than spreadsheets and tables that take time to process.

Preserving functionality

ALERC welcomes the fact that JNCC only wish only to cease support for Recorder 6 once, or if, online applications are able to provide the same level of functionality and accessibility. As suggested earlier, Recorder 6's extensive functionality can be used in different ways to suit different local situations, which LRCs have utilised to maximise the benefit for their recorders and clients. For example an LRC hosted by a museum may be responsible for logging specimen numbers in a collection. In fact, use of the Collection Module enables museums and collections use Recorder 6 as a complete database for all their collections.

Systems for reporting are another key consideration for LRCs. The combination of the species data, habitat data and site boundaries that an LRC has access to, plus the format that these are provided in will all determine how an LRC is most efficiently able to produce reports for locations in its area. These variables are also combined with the fact that there are varying GIS platforms that LRCs have available to them, as well as varying programming expertise and vary demands from clients, such as local authorities. The result of this high degree of variability is to produce many different reporting routines and methodologies that are tailored to differing local situations. Recorder 6 allows LRCs to do this in a number of ways. Many LRCs have developed semi-automated routines, often using database management systems that allow records and other site information to be opened in a GIS, thus allowing for the added functionality of the GIS to be used to query the records in complex and sophisticated ways. These routines, which manipulate records via Recorder 6's "back end" bypassing the user interface, are very common amongst LRCs. However, in many circumstances, Recorder 6's own reporting functions are also used. This would be done where it is quicker and more efficient to compile a report using Recorder 6 itself, although further formatting might be required after the report is originally produced in order to make sure it is presented in the desired fashion.

Another major consideration is the fact that LRC staff are competent in using Recorder 6 and familiar with its interface, its structure and its quirks. The introduction of a new system means that time and resources will have to be found in order to get LRC staff up to the same level of competency.

Networking and online capacity

Recorder 6's networking capabilities are of prime importance to LRCs, who operate in an environment that may mean their database needs to be accessed from different work stations for different reasons within an office environment. Moving to online systems will add to this and increase flexibility. In many cases, online recording systems are already used to increase efficiency and flexibility for data input, allowing recorders to submit their records directly into a database if they want, and managing them there. The important thing to realise when planning the future of recording software is that these systems are used in conjunction with Recorder 6. They don't have the functionality that Recorder 6 has, but offer a different set of opportunities such as remote data input, automatic validation and remote verification.

A recent ALERC consultation found mixed views about the benefits of a transition to online-only solutions. Where people are concerned about the prospect, they raise a number of issues, all of which will need to be addressed by JNCC if they are to produce a new solution for biodiversity recording. These issues include technical concerns regarding the "up time" of websites and importantly the reliability of internet connections. LRCs who see online solutions as more beneficial tend to be those already using an online recording system. In these cases, the potential efficiencies for data input, validation, verification and reporting are recognised. However, it is important to note that in these instances the LRCs are using a combination of online recording software with Recorder 6. In some

instances, they may even use two or more online recording websites, chosen to appeal to different sections of the recording community or for work on different projects, but all of which provide data stored in Recorder 6. Details and case studies of specific LRC online recording implementations can be provided on request.

With all this in mind ALERC would like to recommend that JNCC publish and consult on its vision for the future of biodiversity recording as soon as possible. This will allow LRCs and their partners to comment in a constructive way and provide the information necessary in order to produce a strategy that will meet the needs of JNCC and all the others who currently hold a stake in recording software. Publication will also have the added advantage of clarifying exactly what is planned and disabusing people of any false notions that exist.

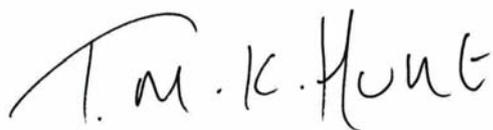
The future

Little is known about JNCC's plans for the future of biodiversity recording software, other than the intention to withdraw support from Recorder 6 and any other versions of Recorder. ALERC welcomes communication at this early stage and would welcome further communication and consultation, possibly including workshops as well as written work. It is important that future solutions include the functionality outlined above, as well as allowing easy migration of both data and reporting routines into new systems with 24-7 accessibility. The danger if this is not done satisfactorily is not so much that there will be ineffectual or broken systems in place, but rather that LRCs will not migrate at all and any resources used to develop new systems may be wasted.

With all these considerations, it is likely that a good deal of time would be required in order for LRCs to migrate to a new system, assuming they wish to. This is not simply because of the resources it is likely to take, but also because the changing technological environment and the various hosting arrangements (for example local authority hosted LRCs often have difficulty obtaining permission to access certain websites). Not everyone as yet has access to a satisfactory broadband connection, vital for migration to an online database.

Should you require clarification or further information on any of the points raised, please do not hesitate to get in contact. This is a very important subject for most LRCs, and as we represent a major Recorder 6 user group, ALERC would welcome the opportunity to discuss it with JNCC and others.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tom Hunt". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial 'T'.

Tom Hunt – ALERC National Coordinator