

Review of local records centres in the UK

The value of biological records has increased in the past decade as planning authorities have to incorporate this environmental information into their decision making process, and the statutory bodies need to maintain an overview of trends and changes in response to climate change and policy initiatives to improve the quality of cities, towns, countryside and seas.

The majority of species information collected in the United Kingdom is through volunteer recorders. The focal point of this effort is either through an established national society or recording scheme or through a Local Record Centre (LRC). A critical part of biological recording is ensuring that the information included in each record is accurate in both identification and location. LRCs are well placed to undertake this work using local knowledge of sites and names and working with local experts. Most of the detailed habitat information for land outside designations is held by LRCs and often updated through the efforts of surveyors linked to LRCs. Though many parts of the UK have well established LRCs, others still lack full functionality, are in development phases or are absent altogether. Where they exist and function successfully they are a highly important link in biodiversity data flow, and are often critical in the provision of species and habitat data.

What was done

This research was commissioned on behalf of the UK country agencies, National Biodiversity Network Trust and National Federation for Biological Recording. The purpose was to undertake an objective, comprehensive survey of LRCs across the UK in order to identify the issues that are preventing the provision of biodiversity information to the decision makers and public through the establishment and maintenance of sustainable LRCs.

The contractors (Just Ecology and exeGesIS) interviewed relevant staff in 58 LRCs across the UK against an agreed structured questionnaire. Interviews took place between February and May 2006 and the majority were conducted face-to-face. Where there was no geographical coverage of LRCs relevant local authority and key potential partners were interviewed. The information from the interviews was summarised to provide the current status of each LRC. Analysis was undertaken as to factors enabling LRCs to operate effectively and obstacles to their operation in relation to the NBN Data Exchange Principles and the NBN Trust Position Statement on LRCs.

Results and conclusions

The review gauged only 33% of established LRCs interviewed as meeting the criteria for a fully functional LRC. By area only 27% of the UK was identified as having a fully functional LRC. The main findings of the review were as follows:

- On average 70% of species records maintained at LRCs came from the voluntary sector. The majority of habitat data came from the non-volunteer sector. Not all voluntary groups submitted records to LRCs, the obstacles were predominantly over resources and communication.
- Some potential problems were identified regarding data flow between LRCs and national schemes and societies (NSSs) as it often became unclear who the data custodian was. Local

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representatives of NSSs and local natural history societies were often used by LRCs to verify records.

- Only 26% of LRCs were providing data to the NBN Gateway, the most commonly stated reason for not providing data being that LRCs did not have the resources to do this. In general LRCs liked the principle of national data collation and provision and found the NBN guidance and standards useful, but viewed the NBN as competition for data and a threat to funding for LRCs.
- 39% of LRCs were in competition with other data suppliers, mainly recording groups and conservation organisations, who sometimes also ran a charged enquiry service. Only 54% of LRCs provided one or more enhanced functions, as defined by the NBN Position Statement on LRCs.
- 81% of LRCs expected an increased demand for biodiversity data, mainly due to: BAP and climate change monitoring; the Strategic Environmental Assessment Act; Planning Policy Statement 9; Local Development Framework; Farm Environmental Plan and Higher Level Stewardship requirements.
- Better core funding, assured safeguards for the protection of confidential data and permission from the recorders to release the data would be required to facilitate public access to data at the finest possible scale.
- 74% of LRCs felt the need to network with other organisations, as it allowed for a range of benefits, such as data exchange, economies of scale, sharing of ideas and to plan conservation efforts.
- The staffing levels of LRCs varied considerably, depending upon the products and services they provided. The average was approximately 3 FTE staff members. 26% of LRCs had problems recruiting staff, mostly due to staff pay and conditions and the lack of suitable candidates.
- Funding insecurity and lack of funding were the main risks in LRC support arrangements. The average operating cost was £91,200 per annum, though this varied enormously. The majority of funding came from local authorities,

statutory agencies, wildlife trusts and LRC enquiry charges. No LRC had funding security for more than 3 years into the future. Though LRCs operated under a range of different legal and managerial circumstances, no single LRC model was found to be inherently better.

Natural England's viewpoint

Natural England's funding of LRCs is intended to contribute to the core functions of collating and managing biodiversity data. Biodiversity data made accessible to Natural England staff through our internal information systems supports evidence-based policy and decision making at local, regional and national scales. Natural England supports the NBN Gateway as the mechanism for disseminating biodiversity information.

This report provides a factual and interpretive assessment of the current status of the LRC network across the UK. The findings of this report will inform the work of the National Biodiversity Network Data Access Group, of which Natural England is a member. It is the responsibility of this group to develop recommendations for the improved efficiency of biodiversity data flow across the network.

Further information

For the full details of the research covered by this information note see Natural England Research Report NERR004 *Review of local records centres in the UK*.

Selected references

NBN Trust 2004. *NBN Trust Position Statement on Local Record Centres*

NBN Trust 2001. *NBN Data Exchange Principles*

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