

28 Information products and services

Introduction

The core work of an LRC is to manage and supply biodiversity data. As well as supplying unprocessed data, LRCs may process, analyse and interpret data to provide the information required by their users. However, an LRC should be an impartial source of information and should provide only an objective interpretation of data based on facts and established criteria. In addition to supplying data and information products, an LRC may also provide specific services (eg managing data on behalf of others, commissioning survey work and advising users on their data needs).

LRC products and services should be developed in response to the needs of their core users, but should also take into account the requirements of occasional users, who may come to be more frequent users in the future. The public represents a unique sector of an LRC's potential customers, a sector that many LRC users may wish to see provided with a service. An LRC, however, can only provide an effective service to the public if one or more of its users elect to resource its provision or the LRC secures additional resources specifically for this purpose.

There are a number of issues that need to be considered once an LRC starts to supply data and information to its users. These issues include:

- the formats data will be supplied in
- how access to data will be controlled, particularly to safeguard sensitive records
- what charges the LRC will make for its products and services

To respond effectively to requests for information, an LRC needs to have mechanisms in place for logging and responding to enquiries. An LRC is effectively a data management and supply business, and its users are customers so, in line with good practice in business management, LRCs should monitor the satisfaction of their customers.

29 Data supply

- 29.1 Background
 - 29.2 Policy
 - 29.3 Procedures
 - 29.4 Process of developing the policy and procedures
- Case study: Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre (BRC)

30 Controlling access to data

- 30.1 Background
- 30.2 NBN principles
- 30.3 When might an LRC refuse to supply data?
- 30.4 Sensitive data
 - 30.4.1 System of accreditation
 - 30.4.2 Blacklist
- 30.5 Policy
- 30.6 Procedures
- 30.7 References

Case study: Controlling access to data (Gloucestershire Environmental Data Unit)

31 Core products

- 31.1 Background
 - 31.2 Policy
 - 31.3 Procedures
 - 31.4 Process of developing the policy and procedures
- Case study 1: Core products and information services policy (Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre)
- Case study 2: Standard data searches (Somerset Environmental Records Centre)

- 32 Charging
 - 32.1 Background
 - 32.2 Policy
 - 32.3 Procedures
 - 32.3.1 Core user that has an SLA with the LRC
 - 32.3.2 Contractual user with an ongoing agreement with the LRC
 - 32.3.3 Contractual user that uses the LRC on an occasional basis
 - 32.3.4 Recorder who receives access to some data as part of the services provided to them by the LRC
 - 32.3.5 User whose access to data is paid for by a third party
 - 32.4 Process of developing the policy and procedures

Case study: Charging (Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre)
- 33 Data management services
 - 33.1 Background
 - 33.2 Policy
 - 33.3 Procedures
 - 33.4 Process of developing the policy and procedures

Case study: Data management services (Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre)
- 34 Assessment and analysis of information
 - 34.1 Background
 - 34.2 Policy
 - 34.3 Procedures
 - 34.4 Process of developing the policy and procedures

Case study 1: Objective analysis of data (Somerset Environmental Records Centre)

Case study 2: Data assessment and analysis (Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre)
- 35 Information services for the public
 - 35.1 Background
 - 35.2 Policy
 - 35.3 Procedures
 - 35.4 Process of developing the policy and procedures

Case study: Information services for the public (Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre)
- 36 Handling enquiries and responses
 - 36.1 Background
 - 36.2 Policy
 - 36.3 Procedures
 - 36.4 Process of developing the policy and procedures

Case study: Handling enquiries and responses (Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre)
- 37 Monitoring customer satisfaction
 - 37.1 Background
 - 37.2 Policy
 - 37.3 Mechanisms for monitoring customer satisfaction
 - 37.3.1 Questionnaire surveys
 - 37.3.2 Feedback forms
 - 37.3.3 Users' and suppliers' forums
 - 37.3.4 Steering groups/management boards
 - 37.3.5 Newsletters/websites
 - 37.4 What to assess and how to act on feedback
 - 37.5 Process of developing the policy and procedure

Case study: Monitoring customer satisfaction (Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre)

29 Data supply

Policy & Principles

- The formats and media in which the LRC will supply data to users should be described.
- The basis for deciding which format will be used should be explained.

29.1 Background

This section covers the supply of uninterpreted biological records to users for them to analyse themselves. At one time, LRCs supplied data to users mostly in the form of paper reports. However, technological advances have provided a range of formats in which data or information can be supplied. LRCs might respond to users' queries by supplying data electronically in a wide variety of formats (such as tables of biological records, spreadsheets, and digitised site boundaries) as well as printed reports, which many users still require.

When deciding which of these formats to choose, the LRC should consider what the user needs the data for, whether they will be licensed to use the data on more than one occasion, and what facilities the user has access to. In addition, the LRC may also take into account whether the user is making a one-off request or whether they have a Service Level Agreement (SLA) with the LRC—the LRC may decide that it wishes to supply data in an electronic format (which is potentially more open to abuse) only to partners and those users with whom the LRC has an SLA.

It is necessary to have policies and procedures on data supply so that the formats available, and also the basis on which decisions are taken on the most appropriate format for meeting a particular request, are clear to the user. Therefore, if an LRC declines to supply data in a particular format, the basis for that decision should be clear in the policy. However, note that issues relating to confidentiality and copyright are covered in policies in section 30 *Controlling access to data*.

29.2 Policy

The policy statement should clearly state what formats the LRC is able to supply data in and the conditions under which the LRC will supply data in particular formats. It should describe whether the LRC will supply data in all formats to all users, or whether restrictions will apply to certain users or types of request. It may state that the LRC reserves the right not to supply data in certain formats. For example, an LRC may decide that it will only supply data in paper format, to minimise the risk of data being misused. However, this is very restrictive, and, with appropriate copyright safeguards in place, most LRCs are able to supply data in electronic formats.

The LRC must also consider the practical aspects of preparing the different types of data product. Even where the full range of formats is made available, it may be more time-consuming to provide certain products—so the users may have to pay more for these products in order to cover the extra cost of staff time.

The policies should describe the types of format available, both electronic and paper-based. The LRC will store data using particular databases, but may be able to generate data in a range of different formats. The policy should state the different file types available. However, this list of formats may become out of date, so the policy should be regularly reviewed; or the format types could be included in an annex which can be easily updated.

The policy should avoid restating issues covered by other policy areas, such as data access and confidentiality. However, if necessary, other policies should be referred to, so that it is clear that supply of data also depends on compliance with those other policies.

29.3 Procedures

The procedures for this policy should only describe the process for assessing the most appropriate format for the supply of data to a user and whether or not the conditions attached to this format are met. To describe the technical details of how the different formats will be generated is not appropriate, and is well beyond the scope of the procedures. It may be that there are areas of the procedures that are also described elsewhere (eg responding to enquiries—see section 36 *Handling enquiries*).

The procedures may also describe *how* the data will be supplied (eg by email, on CD or floppy disc).

29.4 Process of developing the policy and procedures

These policies and procedures are relatively straightforward, and probably do not require wide consultation in their development. However, certain users may have particular requirements and the LRC will need to take these into account when determining the range of available formats. If a particular format required is not to be made available by the LRC, then the LRC should work closely with the users affected to ensure that they are able to use an available format as a means of transfer. The LRC manager and IT officer should clearly be involved; but all staff should be made aware of the policies and procedures once they are developed.

Case study

Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre

Background

Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre (BRC) was formed in 1989 as part of the Hertfordshire County Council and provides services to the County Council, seven of the 10 district councils, English Nature and Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust. The BRC is unusual in that, as well as managing and supplying data, it also provides an ecological advisory service to the County Council and district councils. Hertfordshire BRC holds information on 5,000 sites (including County Wildlife Sites) on ArcView, and species records on Recorder.

Policy

Hertfordshire BRCs policy on data supply covers the current use of electronic and hard copy formats for supplying data. The policy makes it clear that the supply of data will depend on the purpose for which the data have been requested, the availability of the data to the LRC, and the users compliance with the BRCs policy on access to data. However, it does not state how the restrictions on supply of data will be assessed for different types of user.

Procedures

The procedures describe how enquiries for data will be dealt with, including ensuring that any restrictions on the release of the data are assessed in relation to the purposes for which they have been requested. There is some overlap with the procedures on *Handling enquiries* (see section 36) and Service Level Agreements (see volume 1, section 15 *Relationships with core users*). However, it was felt necessary to reiterate some of these issues here.

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Policy on Data Supply

Policy Statement

The Centre will supply uninterpreted data in agreed formats to partner and other organisations, recording schemes, societies and individuals. The extent and nature of the supply of data will be defined in Service Level Agreements, specific protocols with suppliers and the Centre's general *Access terms and conditions*.

1. Sub-policies

1.1 The supply of data to users will depend on the nature of their needs, on the accessibility of the data, and on any restrictions which may have been applied to their use. The Centre's policy on access is defined in "Controlling access to data" (see below).

1.2 Where data are available in an accessible format, the Centre will provide data in whatever form is most appropriate for the user's needs.

1.3 If data are not readily available in an accessible format, the Centre reserves the right either not to supply the data, or to provide them in the most cost-effective way available.

1.4 The Centre will enter into specific data supply agreements with specific principal users, as necessary.

1.5 The Centre will supply data in the following formats and media, subject to technical limitations or changing capabilities:

Electronic formats

- as ASCII files
- RECORDER outputs
- ARCVIEW GIS (bmp files)
- DMAP (bmp files)
- ACCESS (dbf files)
- WORD or EXCEL files
- Email attachments

Manual formats

- Photocopies of data sheets etc
- RECORDER print-outs
- DMAP print-outs
- ARCVIEW printed maps at various scales (1:10,000 preferred)

All of these are subject to the relevant copyright controls, as detailed under the policy on "Controlling access to data".

2. Background to policy

2.1 The Centre holds data from a range of sources, subject to various agreements and protocols over its use. This data may be held in a range of formats, electronic and manual, which may be more or less easy to access. The principal data-set held by the Centre relates to sites, both designated Wildlife Sites and other sites of identified local interest. These data consist of manual site data files, incorporating habitat, ownership, management and related data, as well as information on species. Part of these data is also held in summarised and standardised electronic form on RECORDER. Other data-sets held by the Centre consist of species data in both electronic and manual form, and GIS data for site boundaries, related to the RECORDER database and the manual site files. Original field survey data-sets are maintained as separate archived units.

2.2 The Centre has entered into specific written or sometimes verbal agreements over the supply and exchange of data with certain major users:

- Sponsoring local authorities and their associated operational units
- English Nature
- Environment Agency
- Hertfordshire Natural History Society and its associated Groups
- Hertfordshire & Middlesex Wildlife Trust
- Hertfordshire Outdoors
- Hertfordshire & Middlesex Bat Group
- Hertfordshire & Middlesex Badger Group
- Hertfordshire Amphibian & Reptile Group

Lee Valley Regional Park
Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group

Additions to this list are likely to be made, including the National Biodiversity Network.

Where these agreements are formalised, the form and nature of data supply is sometimes also stipulated.

3. Links to other policies

Data ownership and acquisition

Protocols and agreements over data use influence the way in which data may be supplied.

Access Terms and Conditions

This policy covers the terms and conditions under which data are supplied to users

Handling enquiries and responses

This policy describes the way the Centre will handle enquiries.

4. Procedures

4.1 Apart from one-off requests for small quantities of data from whatever source, the Centre will require written, email or faxed requests for the supply of data. These requests will be required to state the extent and nature of the requested data, and its intended use.

4.2 The Centre will check its data register for any restrictions which might have been placed on data when responding to enquiries.

4.3 The Centre will ensure that all data supplied in response to an enquiry are accompanied by a copy of the Centre's *Access Terms and Conditions*, along with details of any specific limitations which need to be applied to any data-set.

4.4 In setting up any data supply agreements, these will include details of the extent, nature and formats of the data which are to be supplied, expected time-scales or periods of delivery, any limitations which are placed on the use of data by either party or by others, and details of any time limit on the agreement.

4.5 The Centre will maintain and keep up-to-date a register of supply agreements.

30 Controlling access to data

Policy & principles

- LRCs should clearly set out the terms under which they will and will not supply data.
- These terms and conditions should comply with the Data Protection Act 1998, with NBN access terms and, where applicable, with the Environmental Information Regulations.
- The LRC should produce policies and procedures relating to release of data, particularly data which are regarded as 'sensitive'.

30.1 Background

One of the major concerns expressed when LRCs propose to supply information products to anyone who needs them is that of misuse of information. Many data suppliers are worried that their data may 'fall into the wrong hands', and there is some justification for this concern. For example, the precise location of badger setts or of nesting sites of birds of prey should not be freely available to anyone without an assessment of the potential risk.

However, the fundamental principle of the NBN is to supply biodiversity information to all those who need it. This belief stems from the principle that more and better information improves the quality of decisions. There will always be some risk, when supplying data, that they will get into the wrong hands. However, the benefits of making biodiversity information widely available to inform decisions will far outweigh the risks of misuse.

Making biodiversity data widely available has a number of potential risks beyond direct environmental damage, such as, for example, landowners refusing permission for survey work because they are not happy for information concerning their land to be widely available, or recorders not supplying data because they don't trust the LRC's control over their use.

In addition to the control of environmentally sensitive data, some parties have concerns over issues such as charging for data, copyright, and the supply of personal information as metadata.

It is clear, then, that careful control of access to data is extremely important. This policy area has to tackle two key issues; building trust between an LRC and its data suppliers, and the practicalities of ensuring that access is carefully controlled.

Policy and procedures are therefore needed to set out the terms and conditions under which data will, and will not, be supplied. These should ensure that an LRC:

- complies with NBN standards on data access (not yet finalised at the time of publication)
- complies with the Data Protection Act 1998
- complies with copyright and ownership obligations
- reassures data suppliers and complies with any restrictions that they place on the use of their data
- protects sensitive data
- uses licences and written agreements to control access

NBN data access terms are currently being developed, and all LRCs should review their policy on access to data when these terms are finalised.

Policy will vary between LRCs, and what may be appropriate for one may not suit another. For example, some LRCs may have to comply with the Environmental Information Regulations (EIR), whereas others may have more discretion over how they refuse or restrict supply of data. The EIR are discussed further in section 30.4.

30.2 NBN principles

The NBN is currently developing a set of 'access principles', upon which the discussion in this section is based. The principles are not yet finalised, although a working draft is currently available. LRCs should use this draft to help develop policy along side this guidance. Compliance with these principles will be a condition of an LRC's accreditation to the NBN; LRCs wishing to be accredited will have to demonstrate that they are implementing the principles. This is discussed further in volume 1, section 10 *Accreditation*.

There may be significant differences in the ways that LRCs and the NBN control access to data. The focus of LRCs is obviously local, in contrast to the NBN's national perspective. The majority of the LRC's funding and data will come from the area it covers. In addition, the LRC may have a more 'personal' approach to data collection and supply; for example, these activities might be conducted through telephone and personal contact, rather than through the internet. This can be an advantage in the control of access to data, as many

data users and suppliers may be known to the LRC.

LRCs are on the 'front line' with recorders, and must explain the NBN access principles to them. In addition, an LRC must decide how to deal with data supplied by recorders who do not agree to the NBN principles and do not wish their data to be used by the NBN. The LRC must decide whether or not to accept data with such conditions imposed upon them, and whether to accept the responsibility for keeping these data apart from its main data-sets.

30.3 When might an LRC refuse to supply data?

As mentioned above, there are many issues which concern people over the release of data. However, from the NBN's perspective, the main concern is the release of 'sensitive data'. This can be defined as data whose release might lead to damage of the natural environment. This is discussed further in section 30.4.

Data may be subject to restrictions placed on them by their owner, as well as those set by the LRC. Generally, LRCs should try to avoid unnecessary restrictions set by data owners, but it is up to individual LRCs to decide whether or not they will hold data that are supplied with additional restrictions. This issue is discussed in more detail in section 17 *Data ownership and acquisition*.

The LRC should set out clearly and openly the conditions under which it will restrict access. It may also decide not to supply data to a user who does not agree to the LRC's conditions or has not adhered to conditions on previous occasions.

An LRC might also be unable to supply data due to lack of resources. It is a fact of life that resources are usually limited and that income is not guaranteed. However, an LRC that is NBN-accredited would not normally be expected to cite lack of resources as a legitimate reason for failing to supply data.

An LRC should have a clear idea of the data products it can supply, and a sound financial framework for its activities. It should therefore be able to provide guidance to users on what data it is and is not able to supply. Obviously, there may be unforeseen circumstances, such as staff illness; wherever possible, contingency plans should be made, so that true emergency situations are rare and can be dealt with on an individual basis.

30.4 Sensitive data

The LRC must decide what data it considers sensitive—where 'sensitive' data are data whose release is likely to result in harm to the environment. This should be done in compliance with the NBN access principles.

The proportion of data an LRC considers sensitive will vary according to what size and type of area the LRC covers, the types of data it holds, and the opinions of its data suppliers. In general, it is felt that only a small proportion of data held, perhaps less than five per cent, is likely to be sensitive. The perceived level of risk can often be reduced by improving trust between the LRC and recorders, and the LRC should work towards this.

The Environmental Information Regulations (EIR) impose a duty on public bodies to provide information relating to the environment to anyone who requests it. Whilst they do not apply to all LRCs, the EIR do provide a useful framework for considering what is sensitive and what is not. The EIR encompass a wide range of general and specific reasons for refusing requests for information. However, there should be a presumption in favour of allowing access to data and restricting access only when it is truly essential.

Regulation 4(3)d is particularly worth noting, as it is this which is most likely to be used as a justification for refusing to release wildlife information on grounds of sensitivity. It requires a judgement to be made and, if necessary, defended at an appeal. It is therefore advisable that LRCs carefully consider their criteria for refusing data on grounds of sensitivity, and ensure that they take account of the exceptions to the right to information laid out in Regulation 4.

In order to remain objective, so as to reassure both data suppliers and users, the LRC should draw up criteria for determining whether data on a species or habitat are sensitive.

The criteria might be implemented through such questions as:

- Are only certain parts of the data-set sensitive?
- Is the subject of the data (ie the species or habitat recorded) vulnerable to human activity?
- Are the data already in the public domain?
- How well protected are the locations cited in the data? (eg easily accessible, or protected by CCTV)
- Would disclosure of otherwise sensitive data help protect the environment in this case?
- Would disclosure increase the likelihood of an illegal act (eg under the Wildlife and Countryside Act)?
- Would disclosure actively help protection of the environment?
- Is there good evidence that substantial harm is, will be or has been caused to the subject of the data (eg through badger baiting, collection of rare plants or invertebrates)?

- Would disclosure substantially damage the ability of a conservation organisation to achieve specific conservation objectives?
- Do the data contain elements that might be considered commercial-in-confidence?

Once the criteria are established, the LRC should produce a list of the species (or taxonomic groups), habitats and sites it considers sensitive. This list should then be used in procedures for controlling access to data. It should be reviewed regularly, and altered according to working experience and changes to the criteria etc.

The LRC should also decide who should be allowed to access products derived from these potentially sensitive data, for what purposes and under what conditions. This could be approached from two angles: a system of accrediting users or a blacklist of inappropriate users. Whichever approach is used, the list or other record should be kept under continual review.

30.4.1 System of accreditation

A system of accreditation may be set up within which users requesting access to sensitive data are checked for their suitability. An LRC may hold an accredited list for regular users, such as county recorders, or it may carry out checks on a case-by-case basis as requests are received. Whichever system is used, the LRC needs to establish a set of criteria and a procedure on who will be allowed access to what data.

The LRC might check:

- that the data have been requested for a legitimate use and that the reason given for the request is genuine
- that the user has not been convicted of or investigated for wildlife crime
- whether there has been any previous misuse of data from the LRC
- references from other LRCs or other accredited users of the LRC

The LRC may also request that evidence be supplied relating to the intended use of data. This could be followed up at a later date to double-check that data were used for the purpose for which they were supplied.

The LRC should also consider whether it is prepared to give blanket accreditation to organisations (eg a local authority with a Service Level Agreement (SLA)). This is potentially an easy way for unscrupulous individuals to gain access to sensitive data. This issue could be addressed by providing data only to particular accredited individuals within an organisation.

30.4.2 Blacklist

The second approach to deciding who should be given access to sensitive data is to consider holding a 'blacklist' of individuals known to the LRC to be high risk. This is a contentious issue, and may be subject to the implications of the Data Protection Act. The LRC should consider these implications carefully before holding such a list.

30.5 Policy

An LRC's policy on controlling access to data should cover all the issues set out above, and be made clear to data suppliers and data users. The LRC should try to achieve a balance between making data freely available to anyone who needs them and protecting sensitive data against misuse.

The terms and conditions under which an LRC will and will not supply data should be clearly set out in policy, and be made available to all LRC users. These terms and conditions should state what types of data the LRC may not be able to supply, its procedures for assessing when it can release these sensitive data, and how any restrictions imposed by data owners will be dealt with.

Policy on access to data should consider:

- the format in which data are supplied (eg a GIS map)
- the length of time for which a user is permitted to hold and use data (eg twelve months)
- the formats in which a user may hold or transfer data (eg whether the user is allowed to enter the data on to GIS)
- the data sources used by the LRC
- the potential limits on data quality and interpretation (eg when the only data available were gathered on a single occasion)
- additional services the LRC can offer
- a request for the users to supply any other data they have collected for the enquiry to the LRC at the end of their research project

Policy should also cover how the LRC will handle requests for data on which additional access conditions have been placed by the data owner.

An LRC may also wish to include a statement or disclaimer on the completeness of the data-sets, stating that data supplied by the LRC are not comprehensive (so, for example, the absence of a record does not guarantee that a particular species is absent from a site; nor does the presence of a record mean that a species is still present). This is particularly applicable to data used for commercial purposes—for example, when a developer needs to prove the absence of a protected species, an LRC may not be in a position to give the developer the guarantee they want.

30.6 Procedures

All requests for data should be logged. The information recorded should include the name and address of the enquirer, the date of enquiry, and whether the request is covered by an SLA or other agreement. The log should be used as a record to check that the correct procedure for release or refusal of data has been followed, and to track what stage in the procedure the enquiry has reached at any particular time.

Once an enquiry is received, the LRC must determine the validity of the enquiry, whether the request can be met and whether the user agrees to any terms and conditions. The simplest way to achieve this is to use standard forms requesting the necessary information and setting out how any terms and conditions may be set. A basic form might ask for the enquirer's details, the type of data required, and what they will be used for. An LRC might also wish to ask for:

- information on membership of any professional bodies
- the intended distribution of any reports that are generated
- the geographical precision required of the data and to be made available in any products based on the data
- the nature of any potentially sensitive LRC data to be searched (eg standard sites, Red Data Book species)
- additional services required (eg full site description, detailed GIS habitat map of search area)

Whatever the content of the form, it should include a statement to be signed by the enquirer that they understand the LRC's terms and conditions and agree to abide by them. This statement should make it clear to the enquirer that they are entering into a legally binding agreement with the LRC. This statement is effectively a 'data release agreement', the counterpart of the 'data supply agreement' discussed in section 17 *Data ownership and acquisition*.

When the LRC receives a request form, it must then decide whether the data are sensitive and whether it should apply separate procedures for determining the sensitivity of data according to criteria relating to the user and intended use. If the data are potentially sensitive, the enquirer should be asked whether they still want them. If they do, the LRC must determine whether or not to supply them to this enquirer. All decisions should be justified by reference to the LRC's terms and conditions, clearly explained to the user, and entered into the enquiry log.

30.7 References

NBN Access Terms—a framework of principles for the exchange of wildlife information within the National Biodiversity Network. NBN, April 2001.

Case study

Controlling access to data

Gloucestershire Environmental Data Unit

Background

Gloucestershire Environmental Data Unit (GEDU) was established in 1991 by Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust (GWT). GEDU provides services to GWT, the County Council and some of the district councils, and has a steering group with representatives from GWT, English Nature and the local authorities.

Discussion

GEDU has produced a policy and procedure for the control of access to data, covering a range of issues from release of sensitive data to copyright and charging. The aims of the policy and how it relates to both users and suppliers of data are clearly set out, along with the principles GEDU has adopted for controlling access.

This particular policy deals with general access terms, confidentiality of sensitive data, some variations in charging, and conditions imposed by its suppliers. This policy applies to all data irrespective of how they are supplied, and it does not, therefore, cover some of the other issues covered in this guidance, such as the range of additional services that GEDU offers, and the formats in which data are supplied or are available. It does list other policies which deal with some of these subjects.

A standard form used to request data is included with the policy, along with a list of the terms and conditions under which the data are supplied.

The procedure uses a flow chart to set out the steps involved in releasing data. This helps to make the terms and conditions of data supply clear to users, suppliers and staff, and should ensure that the policy is applied every time data are requested. GEDU also keeps a log of all data requests and the outcomes of those requests.

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Gloucestershire Environmental Data Unit Controlling Access To (Biodiversity) Data

1. Policy Statement

The Gloucestershire Environmental Data Unit will provide access to the information that it holds. However it will control access in accordance with its policies on ownership, confidentiality and charging, data agreements with its suppliers and priority levels imposed by management.

2. Background

- Data managed by the Data Unit has been gathered and is owned by a number of different organisations and individuals.
- Some of the data that the Data Unit holds is held subject to terms and conditions laid out in data transfer agreements. These terms and conditions may in some cases restrict the Data Unit's ability to supply data.
- The Data Unit may restrict access to sensitive species, habitat and geological data (see section 4.5).
- An LRC needs a clear set of terms and conditions under which users can gain access to data.
- In exceptional circumstances the Data Unit might have to restrict access to data due to resource constraints.
- Control of access to personal data is necessary under the Data Protection Act 1998.
- This policy will be reviewed as the NBN access terms and conditions are developed.

3. Aims

- To ensure that the data supplied meets the users needs.
- To manage the data in our care effectively and efficiently.
- To comply with copyright and ownership constraints attached to data that are managed by the Data Unit.
- To comply with contractual obligations.
- To conform to emerging NBN access terms.
- To ensure that release of data does not harm sensitive habitats or species.
- To assure data suppliers that their data will be supplied to third parties according to clear policies.
- To comply with the Data Protection Act 1998.

4. Guidelines

4.1 General Access Terms

GEDU will give access to its data subject to any conditions imposed on its use by copyright owners, to students and members of the public. These data will not normally include access to exact locations of sensitive species or habitats.

GEDU will supply data to steering group members within the terms of relevant service level agreements. Data and interpreted information will be supplied to non service level agreement holding bodies such as consultants, statutory agencies and other professional users of biodiversity information subject to a charge made to cover the time spent supplying the information.

Where GEDU has entered into a data exchange agreement it may at its discretion supply data and information free of charge [Ref. Charging policy].

Data will be provided on receipt of a signed copy of a data request form (Annex 1) unless a service level agreement or a data exchange agreement covers the supply of data [Ref. Data ownership and acquisition policy].

Direct access to data by personal callers to the GEDU office is not normally possible.

All enquiries and subsequent supply of information or advice will be logged.

4.2 Conditions imposed by data suppliers

GEDU will respect conditions imposed by copyright holders of data supplied to the Data Unit. Examples of conditions imposed by data suppliers include restrictions on access to sensitive species (these species are usually agreed in advance with the Data Unit), or the release of complete county data sets.

Where the Data Unit is unable to release data as a result of these conditions it will contact the copy-

right holder for permission to supply the data. Data may also have been provided to the Data Unit as a result of a commercial contract, in a small number of some cases access to this data may be restricted.

4.3 Data Protection Act 1998

The GEDU use of personal data is minimal and is covered by the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trusts registration under the 1998 Act. GEDU will hold and supply personal data in accordance with the 1998 Act.

4.4 NBN

The Unit will make metadata available for use by the NBN [Ref. GEDU Documenting Data Policy].

4.5 Confidentiality of biodiversity information

Locations of sensitive species or habitats will be provided to County Recorders. Filtered (usually one kilometre square references) locations of sensitive species may be provided to other Data Unit users.

Users can request exact locations for sensitive species on a case by case basis. These requests will be considered by the Director or in his absence the Data Unit Manager. Where the data is covered by a Data Transfer agreement or Data Exchange agreement the Data Unit Manager or Director will contact the data provider to ask for permission to supply the data (see section 4.2).

The recipient of the sensitive species data may be asked to sign a further form placing restrictions on their subsequent use of the data.

5. Links to other Policies

NBN

- Documenting Data
- Data supply policy
- Data ownership and acquisition
- Processing newly acquired data
- Physical security of data policy
- Charging policy
- Public access to data
- Mechanisms/methods for enquiries and responses

GEDU

- Data Ownership and Confidentiality Policy
- Data Supply Policy
- Charging Policy

ANNEX 1

**THE GLOUCESTERSHIRE WILDLIFE TRUST
CHURCH HOUSE, STANDISH, STONEHOUSE GL10 3EU**

Tel: 01453 822761
Fax: 01453 791338

GLOUCESTERSHIRE ENVIRONMENTAL DATA UNIT

DATA REQUEST FORM DR1

Name..... Project

.....

Address..... Job Code.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Tel No.....

Outline the area of study, the type of data required and what the data will be used for.

.....
.....
.....

*Deadline for Receipt of Data.....

*Please allow 10 working days from our receipt of completed form unless otherwise agreed

I/We agree to abide by the conditions listed on form DR2 and understand that these form the basis of a legally binding contract with the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust

Signed.....

Date.....

GLOUCESTERSHIRE ENVIRONMENTAL DATA UNIT DATA REQUESTS BY EXTERNAL USERS POLICY AND CONDITIONS - FORM DR2

Please read carefully before signing form DR1

Thank-you for your request for access to data held by the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust. Please complete and sign form DR1 to clarify the nature of the data required. Your request will be considered by staff and, if necessary, by the Trust's Director.

The release of data will normally be agreed unless one or more of the following situations occurs:

- i) The data have been submitted to the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust in confidence and the donor is unwilling to release them.
- ii) The enquirer cannot agree to the conditions listed below, has not adhered to the conditions on a previous occasion and/or is not prepared to pay the extraction fee.

CONDITIONS

- i) The Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust cannot release data collected under contract except with the agreement of the contractor.
- ii) No copies of the data are to be made for use by third parties, without written permission from the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust.
- iii) Permission must be obtained in writing from the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust if the data is to be used for any other purpose than that described on form DR1.
- iv) The data must not be entered on a computerised database or geographical information system without permission from the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust.
- v) The Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust shall be acknowledged in any report relating to the data. One copy of any such report will be supplied free of charge to the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust.
- vi) Complete county data sets will not normally be released.
- vii) Permission to use data expires 12 months after approval. Applications to extend beyond this period should be made at least 3 months before the expiry date.
- viii) Data provided is as held by the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust.

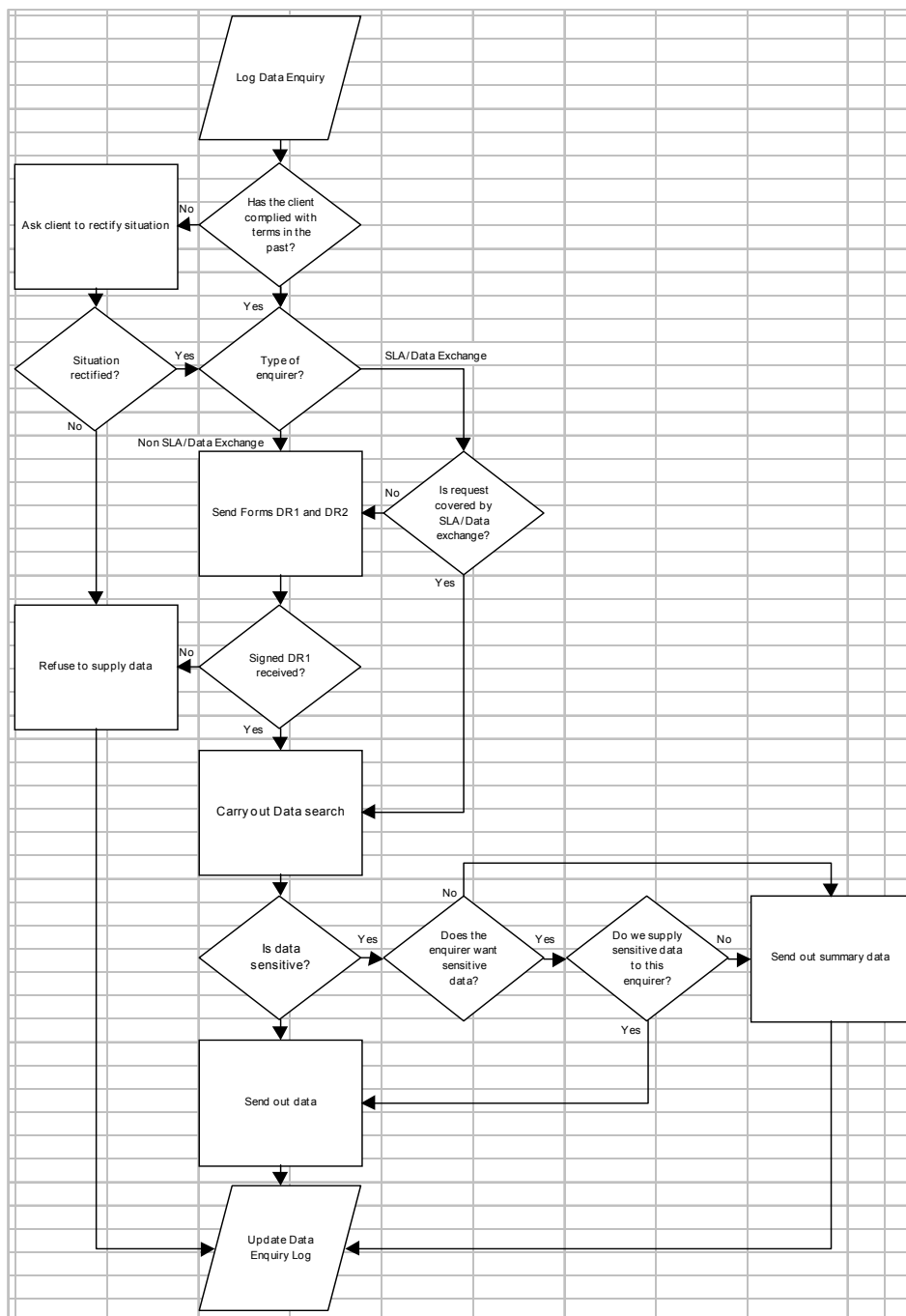
The Gloucestershire Environmental Data Unit is part of the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust, managed under contract by Gloucestershire Wildlife Management Ltd.

DR2 2000

Gloucestershire Environmental Data Unit Procedure for Controlling Access To (Biodiversity) Data

1 Introduction

Data Access Flow Chart



This document should be used in conjunction with the “Controlling Access to Data Policy” as a guide for dealing with requests for data. The following flow chart illustrates the required decision making process prior to providing access to data.

2 Record Keeping

The Data Unit maintains a list of Service Level Agreement holders and Data Exchange Agreements [Ref. Data ownership and acquisition]. This list is used when processing requests for data.

The Data Unit keeps a list of requests for information (Data Enquiry Log). This log is used to keep a record requests for data and also action that was taken prior to providing data (see Annex 1 for a list of fields in the Data Enquiry Log).

In addition to the above the Gloucestershire Environmental Data Unit flags sensitive data on the Recorder database and on paper files [Ref Data Ownership and Confidentiality Policy].

3 Requests For Data Access

Prior to providing access to data held by the Data Unit, we need to establish the following facts:

- Does a Service Level Agreement or a Data Exchange Agreement cover the request?
- The nature of the enquiry should be checked, as the Data Unit does not normally provide complete county datasets
- Has the client failed to comply with terms and conditions in the past?

The Data Enquiry Log should be checked to see if the client has failed to comply with terms and conditions in the past. If the client has failed to comply then they should be contacted and asked to rectify the situation before taking the request further.

If the request is not covered by an existing agreement, then a copy of forms DR1 and DR2 [Ref Annex 1 of Controlling Access to Data Policy] should be sent to the enquirer along with an estimate of the cost of the work [Ref Charging policy]. Data should only be provided once a signed copy of DR1 has been received.

4 Data Search

The resultant data needs to be checked to see if it contains sensitive information.

4.1 Non-sensitive data

If there is no sensitive data then the data can be sent out.

4.2 Sensitive data

If the data search contains sensitive data then we need to check the users requirements. If the enquirer does not need access to exact locations for sensitive data summary information should be provided (i.e. usually with only one-kilometer square references).

If the enquirer requires more accurate locations for sensitive data then Data Unit staff need to refer the request to the Data Unit Manager. The Data Unit Manager in consultation with the Director and relevant Data Exchange Agreements will decide whether it is appropriate to release the data or whether to refer to the owner of the data to ask permission to supply.

5 Data Enquiry Log

Once the data request has been processed the data enquiry log needs to be updated.

6. Data Protection Act

The Data Unit is in the process of reviewing its standing under the 1998 Data Protection Act. This section of the procedure will be amended once the review is complete.

Annex 1

GEDU Data Enquiry Log

The Data Enquiry log is currently held in spreadsheet form. The spreadsheet contains the following information:

- Data enquirer (company, address)
- Date of enquiry
- Enquirer complied with terms and conditions?
- Is request covered by an SLA or Data Exchange Agreement?
- DR1 and DR2 sent?
- Signed DR1 has been received?
- Non-standard deadline for receipt of data has been agreed (and when)?
- Have they requested exact locations of sensitive species?
- Are they entitled to receive sensitive data?
- Request referred to Data Unit Manager?
- Copyright holder consulted?
- Data supplied?
- Reason for refusal to supply
- Date data or refusal letter sent

31 Core products

Policy & Principles

- An LRC should develop, maintain and promote a suite of basic information products for its core users.

31.1 Background

Much of the work of an LRC involves providing similar information repeatedly in response to a number of enquiries. For example, a user might wish to know whether any protected species or designated sites are found in a particular area. Whilst the area of search or the species of interest may vary, the methods used to extract the information would be very similar. In other cases, the product itself is the same (eg a list of sites in the LRC's area). Examples of core products include:

- species inventory—a list of species recorded in the LRC's area with protected status and local status of each species
- habitat inventory—a list of habitats recorded in the LRC's area, with legal status, evaluated importance and total area
- site inventory—a list of all identified sites in the LRC's area, including status, evaluated importance and summary description
- species distribution maps—distribution maps, covering the LRC's area, of, for example, protected and BAP (UK and local) priority species, local Red Data Book species or other species of local interest
- habitat distribution maps—distribution maps, covering the LRC's area, of Biodiversity Broad Habitats, Biodiversity Priority Habitats or other habitats of interest
- species or habitat context—comparison of certain factors concerning a species or habitat in the LRC's area with the same factors in a wider area (eg regional, national, UK, European)
- site boundaries—mapped at 1:10,000 scale or greater for statutory conservation sites, Wildlife Sites, or other identified sites
- integrated information products—sites, habitats and species information with evaluated importance for user-defined areas

Developing policy and procedures on core products enables the LRC to identify the types of core products that may be needed, and thereby to improve its efficiency and consistency in generating them. Once these core products have been defined, standard protocols for producing them can be prepared, so that they can be generated easily when required.

The data behind some products, such as habitat distribution for the LRC's area and inventories, are unlikely to change rapidly, so the product itself can be generated once and then used 'off the shelf'. However, in this case it is important to have an 'expiry date' on the product, so that it is regenerated or reviewed after a set period of time to take account of any changes in the underlying data. The date the product was produced must always be stated.

31.2 Policy

The basis of this policy should be that the LRC will identify a number of core products for its principal users. The policy should set out whose needs will be considered when identifying core products, since the LRC will not want to develop core products for users who only use the LRC occasionally. In most cases, the LRC should consider those organisations with which it has Service Level Agreements (SLAs), and its volunteer recorders its highest priority.

The policy should also make it clear that identifying core products is not a one-off process and that the range, once identified, should be subject to a regular review process. The mechanism for reviewing core products should be detailed in the procedures.

31.3 Procedures

The procedures should say how core products will be identified and whose needs will be considered. The details of how to generate the products should also be documented for LRC staff and for users to see specific details if they wish. These might be published in a separate document and referred to in the more widely available policy and procedures.

The LRC may wish to list the core products identified, although such a list may be better placed in an annex where it is more easily updated. The procedures should also identify how the list of core products will be reviewed. The most appropriate method is as part of the review of SLAs.

If the LRC wishes to develop 'off the shelf' products (ie those that need not be generated anew in response to each request), a timescale should be set for reviewing these products (perhaps no more than six months). One mechanism for ensuring that core products are reviewed may be to attach an expiry date to them. This would mean that products could not be used after their scheduled date for review.

31.4 Process of developing the policy and procedures

These policies and procedures are relatively straightforward. However, they do require wide consultation in their development, particularly with core users (see volume 1, section 15 *Relationships with core users*). Clearly, the LRC manager and IT officer must also be involved, and all LRC staff should be made aware of the policies and procedures once they are finished and put in place.

Case study 1

Core products and information services policy

Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre

Background

Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre (BRC) was formed in 1989 as part of the Hertfordshire County Council and provides services to the County Council, seven of the 10 district councils, English Nature and Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust. The BRC is unusual in that, as well as managing and supplying data, it also provides an ecological advisory service to the County Council and district councils. Hertfordshire BRC holds information on 5,000 sites (including county Wildlife Sites) on ArcView and Recorder.

Discussion

Hertfordshire BRCs policy lists a series of standard searches and core products that can be generated from its data (see attached extract).

As well as describing the types of core products Hertfordshire BRC will supply, the procedures review the types of products and services it provides in relation to the activities that the users undertake. This provides a useful background to the products that are then identified, although some may prefer to place this information in an annex.

Contact

Trevor James

Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre, County Hall, Pegs Lane, Hertford, Hertfordshire SG13 8DN

01992 556155

trevor_james@hertscc.gov.uk

Extract from Policy on Core Products & Information Services

4.2 The Centre will define and maintain a series of core information products according to user needs and to streamline responses. These will include:

4.2.1 **Standard data searches**

The Centre will operate a system of applying standard data searches to enable rapid responses to basic enquiries:

Site & habitat information

Retrieval of accessible data up to a radius of 2km from an OS 6 figure grid reference or a 2km wide corridor.

Protected species searches

Species information on a similar basis, subject to agreements with data suppliers and copyright.

Area searches

Searches will be undertaken for a maximum search area for any one enquiry of 5 x 5 sq. km.

Scarce species searches

Scarce species searches on a similar basis will be supplied according to available data for prioritised species groups.

Species distribution maps

Maps indicating 2x2 km distribution of particular species in Hertfordshire with pre and post-1970 cut-off dates.

4.2.2 **Ecological summaries**

The Centre will provide habitat summaries to users according to need. Habitat map data will be made available as a standard data request up to the equivalent of a printed A4 size, owing to restrictions by licences with the Ordnance Survey.

Information supplied may take whatever form is appropriate to the user's needs and within the capabilities and Service Level Agreements of the Centre, but standard products available include:

RECORDER site and habitat summaries.

Copies or summaries of Phase I/II target notes or similar site survey materials (including National Vegetation Classification summaries where available).

ARCVIEW GIS information (as Shape files or as hard copy), with or without habitat annotations.

Tailored reports on specific sites or areas.

Case study 2

Standard data searches

Somerset Environmental Records Centre

Background

Although technically a branch of Somerset Wildlife Trust, Somerset Environmental Records Centre (SERC) is, in practice, a partnership organisation with a range of service agreement holders including Somerset County Council, all five district councils, Exmoor National Park, English Nature, Environment Agency and Somerset Wildlife Trust. All the local authorities have Service Level Agreements (SLAs) for SERC to provide an information management service. Around half of the Somerset planning authorities have in-house ecologists.

Standard data searches

SERC offers a range of standard data services and product to users, which are described in the attached document. This provides a clear description of the products and of how users can expect to receive products. It also states the variables that users should specify when requesting data (eg the area of search).

Discussion

The information given to users on the data searches available gives clear guidance on how the data held by SERC are analysed and what criteria are applied in searches. This summary statement of standard data searches and products makes it easy for users to understand what type of information SERC can supply and how it might be useful to them. Additional information on confidentiality, objectivity and charges are given.

Contact

Bill Butcher, director

Somerset Environmental Records Centre, Sandhill Park, Bishops Lydeard, Taunton, Somerset, TA4 3DE

01823 433889

somerc@iname.com

SERC Data Searches - Details of Service for Enquirers

1 Standard Outline Data Search

A search is made of an area of **one kilometre** radius from a defined point (supplied six figure national grid reference or point marked on large scale map by the enquirer) or a corridor of **two kilometres** total width centred on a line supplied by the enquirer. Variations on these distances may be specified.

SERC reports on any records of the following within this area of search:

Evaluated sites. These may include statutory sites (Special Areas for Conservation, Special Protection Areas, National Nature Reserves, Local Nature Reserves, Sites of Special Scientific Interest) and non-statutory sites (County Wildlife Sites and County Geological Sites ¹).

Legally protected species . Species listed on certain schedules of the Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981, as amended or other relevant legislation.

Biodiversity Priority Species. Species listed in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan or in local BAPs published for Somerset.

If the enquirer has supplied a map showing the boundaries of a project site, the records of sites and species will be separated into those that are at or adjacent to the project site, or elsewhere within the area of search.

If site records are found in the area of search SERC will supply a GIS computer printed map in colour showing the boundaries of these sites, together with the project area boundary, if supplied, and the area of search.

Sites will be listed with site name, status and a one-line description.

Species records will be listed with scientific and common names, international, national and local status, grid reference, recorder and date of record. (See 4 for exceptions)

2 Detailed data search

As a second stage to the standard outline data search SERC can supply copies of detailed data held for sites identified in the standard search. Detailed data includes a fuller site description, a listing of habitats present, reasons for selection of the site as an SSSI/ County Wildlife Site and a sketch map showing key features.

A standard outline data search and detailed data search can be combined from the outset if required.

3 Optional additional services available

A detailed Phase 1 style habitat interpretation from aerial photographs can be undertaken by SERC, to produce a habitat/ land-use map of all the land in the search area. The aerial photographs are high quality 1:10000 stereoscopic pairs commissioned by SERC for the whole county in 1994/95. The habitat system used is the Integrated Habitat System (IHS) as developed by SERC for the UK, which incorporates Biodiversity Broad and Priority Habitat types and Annex 1 Habitats listed in the EU Habitats Directive, 1992. Within SSSIs and County Wildlife Sites the habitat data are normally derived from field survey.

- The locations of recorded legally protected or notable species can be **mapped** using GIS.
- The species search can be undertaken for **county notable species** in addition to legally protected species. These are nationally rare, locally rare or key habitat indicator species listed in *Somerset Notable Species Dictionary, 5th Edition, SERC, 2000*.
- **County distribution of species** identified in data search - a map showing the distribution of available records within the county.
- **Description and national status** of invertebrate species, and some other species groups, identified in data search.
- A commentary on the **degree of survey coverage** (see 7) within the search area for selected features.

4 Confidentiality

Records of a few species are regarded by SERC as confidential. If the search identifies any of these species the enquirer will be informed and invited to make a request for the details to be released. On receipt of such a request SERC will apply its confidentiality procedures and release details if it is able to do so. The enquirer will be informed as to the decision. Special conditions may be applied to the treatment by the enquirer of any confidential data supplied.

5 Copyright

The copyright of records supplied is retained by SERC or the original recorders. The data are supplied to the enquirer for use only in the context of the case on which the enquiry was made. It may not be published or supplied to third parties without the written consent of SERC.

6 Data sources

Data are compiled by SERC on an ongoing basis from all available professional and voluntary sources. These sources include the various specialist species groups that operate in the county, linked to SERC and the Somerset Wildlife Trust, for which SERC acts as a clearing house for the supply of data. There is therefore no need for users to contact these groups separately. The data search is undertaken only on data held and compiled by SERC at the time the enquiry is made. No new field survey is undertaken. SERC can be commissioned to undertake new field survey in some circumstances.

7 Data Quality and Interpretation

All users of biological data should be aware of the interpretation limitations of the data supplied. Habitat and species recording coverage is far from complete in time and space and further field survey may be required to determine the presence of important features. It is possible to supply only records that have been collected and validated. The ecological condition of a site may have changed since the available records were collected – clearly this is especially the case for older records. The available records may often therefore be viewed as a guide to the present condition of a site or area rather than a definitive statement of its value.

Data supplied by SERC has been verified (in terms of identification accuracy) and validated (in terms of geographical accuracy and other accuracy attributes in the data capture process) as far as possible. Errors cannot be totally eliminated, however, and users are asked to check with SERC if possible errors are noted in the data search results. SERC will advise the user of significant validation or verification issues with the data supplied.

8 Charges

SERC makes a charge for the time it takes staff to extract, analyse and supply data to the enquirer. This is not a charge for the data. SERC reserves the right to recoup a proportion of the costs of acquiring and managing data from its users, within the scope of maintaining charges at a reasonable level.

Current charges are £30 per hour plus VAT, minimum charge for a single enquiry £60 plus VAT.

Standard outline data searches from a defined point are charged at the minimum charge.

Charges are discounted by 50% for searches which result in a complete absence of data.

Quotations are supplied for defined searches and additional services on request.

A proportion of income from this source is used to promote voluntary recording activity in Somerset.

Some categories of user are exempt from charges. Please ask for details.

9 Deadlines

Data searches will normally be supplied to enquirers within 10 working days of receiving an order. Shorter turnarounds may be possible but a supplementary fee will be chargeable. Orders must be in writing by letter, fax or email, quoting a job number or order number and invoicing details. Data will normally be supplied on paper by post and/or fax (disk or email by special request).

10 Advice

SERC does not advise enquirers on actions that might or might not be taken as a consequence of the data identified in the search. If enquirers require further advice they are advised to contact the Somerset Wildlife Trust, English Nature or a relevant consultancy.

11 Consultancy Service

SERC operates a full consultancy service outside of Somerset. This specialises in biodiversity data management, habitat surveys and classifications and Local Records Centre Management. Full details available on request.

SERC, November 2000.

32 Charging

Policy & Principles

- The LRC's charging policy should be transparent to users.
- The LRC should not charge for data per se.
- The LRC should set levels of charging to cover the actual costs of gaining access to, collating and managing data, as well as the costs of supplying data.
- The LRC should have different mechanisms for charging users for access to data, to suit the requirements of different types of user.

32.1 Background

An LRC's key function is to provide services to its core users. In providing these services, it should not seek to make a profit, but to operate in a way that will maintain a sustainable service to its users. To achieve this, an LRC needs to have a clear charging policy that ensures that the LRC covers its costs and is able to develop new services for the benefit of users. As well as the obvious direct costs incurred in providing access to data (eg the cost of the materials and time spent accessing and analysing data), there are significant costs involved in such tasks as collating and processing data and building relationships with data suppliers. All these costs need to be recouped by the LRC. However, the LRC should not charge for the data themselves—more often than not LRCs do not own the data they manage.

It is important that the user has a good understanding of the principles on which they are being charged, and these principles should be clearly summarised in the LRC's policy statement. The underlying principle for the LRC's charging policy should be that all users should meet the real costs of their enquiries. However, the LRC may choose to subsidise the cost for some customers, to encourage them to work with the LRC; or another organisation may pay for the services some users receive (eg a local authority may pay for services to the public).

The different types of user need to be considered when developing a charging policy:

- core user that has a Service Level Agreement (SLA) with the LRC
- contractual user with ongoing agreement with the LRC
- contractual user that uses the LRC on an occasional basis
- recorder who receives access to some data as part of the services provided to them by the LRC
- user whose access to data is paid for by a third party

For further discussion of the issues relating to the different types of user and charging, see volume 1, section 15 *Relationships with core users* and section 16 *Relationships with contractual users*.

32.2 Policy

The LRC's policy for charging should state that the LRC will:

- not charge for data
- set levels of charging to cover the actual costs of gaining access to, collating and managing data, as well as the costs of supplying data
- have different mechanisms for charging users for access to data, to suit the requirements of different types of user

The charging policy should be clear and transparent to all users, and should not discriminate against different types of user for any reason (such as the use to which data will be put). This should not conflict with the LRC's policy on limiting access to sensitive data (see section 30 *Controlling access to data*).

It is not possible to develop standard prices for standard products available through all LRCs. Fixed costs for each LRC will vary (depending on the size of the LRC, historical factors, local costs etc). However, the basis on which charges are calculated (ie taking the total cost of servicing an enquiry) should always be the same. In order to avoid perception problems with individuals or organisations who use several LRCs, it is important that this be transparent to the user in the policy statement and described in more detail in the procedures.

LRCs may publish charging guidelines for different types of user (eg SLA holders and occasional users). These guidelines should state what type of user they apply to and make it clear that there are other guidelines for different types of user.

The LRC may also wish to consider making reduced charges for unsuccessful data searches, and reserving the right to apply subsidised charges if it considers this to be appropriate (see volume 1, section 16 *Relationships with contractual users*).

32.3 Procedures

The main emphasis of the procedures should be to describe how the charges will be calculated and how the charging policy will be implemented.

In calculating costs, LRC management should agree that all customers should cover the direct, variable costs incurred by the LRC in providing services and/or products. Equally, all customers should contribute an appropriate amount towards the indirect fixed costs incurred by the LRC in ensuring that it is in a position to generate suitable products and services. This applies both to customers receiving products on an ad hoc basis and those receiving products on the basis of an SLA.

Indirect fixed costs should include:

- LRC management
- premises costs
- IT system maintenance
- support for recording groups and recorders
- quality assurance systems
- data collation and management systems

Direct variable costs should include:

- staff time spent in managing queries and preparing products
- data analysis costs
- material costs

Where any of these are provided 'in kind' to the LRC by partners, a nominal value should be apportioned to the service and used in calculations.

It is essential that the LRC is able to plan its work and has a stable source of income. An LRC should therefore normally seek to meet all its fixed costs through SLAs for, at least, the coming financial year. This is achieved by establishing a formula by which costs are divided proportionally between the holders of SLAs (see volume 1, section 15 *Relationships with core users*).

An LRC should not allocate any monies raised from one-off 'sales' to fixed costs within that year. Instead, any monies raised should be rolled forward to the following year. They can then be used to reduce the costs to partners, either by reducing charges or by increasing the resources available for the LRC's development.

In exceptional circumstances, the LRC management board may choose to waive or reduce the fee (eg to encourage a new user to see the benefits of the LRC). This should be done explicitly and openly, with no assumption that fees will be waived or reduced in the future.

Illustrations of how different charges can be set are provided below.

32.3.1 Core user that has an SLA with the LRC

The LRC should seek to meet all its fixed costs through SLAs for, at least, the coming financial year. This might include contractual users who have ongoing agreements with the LRC—if the agreements are made in advance and therefore provide secure income. Core users should be involved in the management of the LRC and in setting budgets.

The charges for SLAs should be made up of three elements:

- a contribution to fixed LRC running costs (including a contribution towards supporting volunteer recording)
- a contribution to development costs
- charges for provision of services

These should normally be calculated by taking the indirect fixed costs for the year and dividing this amount according to the proportion of use of the LRC made by each core user. Any direct costs should then be added. If the LRC has made a surplus from the previous year (probably from charging contractual (ie non-core) users), these monies should be deducted from the total cost before apportioning costs to different SLA holders.

Where partners made a long-term commitment to the development of an LRC before it was able to supply services (ie they invested in developing the services), the LRC management board may have (or may wish to make) a commitment to providing services to these partners at a lower cost than to organisations which did not contribute to the development phase. This is normally achieved by adding weighting to the formula for calculating the proportion of the total costs to be charged to each core user.

Charges should also be set for any services provided which fall outside the scope of the SLA. They should be lower than for a third party who does not have an SLA with the LRC, as the core user has already made a significant contribution to the indirect costs of the LRC.

32.3.2 Contractual user with an ongoing agreement for with the LRC

Those users who use an LRC regularly, but do not want to be involved in the management or development of the LRC (see volume 1, section 16 *Relationships with core users*), can be charged at rates calculated in a similar way to the rates for users with SLAs.

32.3.3 Contractual user that uses the LRC on an occasional basis

These users should pay the highest charges for information and services from the LRC; they are unwilling (or it is inappropriate) to enter into any long-term agreement with the LRC, and income from this source is highly unpredictable. However, it is essential that the charges set still only cover the actual costs and do not limit access to data.

Charges may be set by working out an hourly rate for the services provided by the LRC. This can be done by adding all indirect costs to the direct staff costs for providing all services, and dividing by the total number of hours available for LRC staff to handle enquiries. This gives an actual hourly rate which can be used to represent the cost of handling requests. Any other direct costs (such as materials) should then be added, to produce the 'standard' rates which the LRC should quote.

32.3.4 Recorder who receives access to some data as part of the services provided to them by the LRC

An LRC should provide recorders with access to the data they have supplied free of charge. It may also agree to supply other related data to these recorders, to support them in their recording work. The LRC should not count this as supplying a service to users but as a service to suppliers. The costs of this work should therefore appear in the LRC's budgets or business plan under 'support services for recorders'.

It is important to note that these recorders may sometimes receive other data from the LRC, for which they may be charged.

32.3.5 User whose access to data is paid for by a third party

Very few users fit into this category; the most likely case is where one of the LRC's core users pays for public access to data. Many local authorities may want to include this service in their dealings with the LRC. The provision of such a service should be detailed in the local authority's SLA.

The cost should be calculated in the same way as for an SLA, ongoing provision agreement or one-off contract, depending on how the third party intends to pay. These charges should then be met by the third party. Clear guidelines must be developed to ensure that the service is delivered effectively and monitored (see volume 1, section 16 *Relationships with core users*).

32.4 Process of developing the policy and procedures

Agreeing the charging policy of an LRC is fundamental to running the LRC as a business, and must be carried out as part of the budgeting process. The policy on charging and the procedures for setting charges must be set by the LRC management board or equivalent. It is normal for the charging policy to be reviewed regularly (perhaps as often as annually) in association with budget processes.

In addition to the following case study on Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre, please also refer to volume 1, section 16 *Relationships with contractual users*, which contains some information on the charging policy of Somerset Environmental Records Centre.

Case study

Charging

Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre

Background

Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre (BRC) was formed in 1989 as part of the Hertfordshire County Council and provides services to the County Council, seven of the 10 district councils, English Nature and Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust. The BRC is unusual in that, as well as managing and supplying data, it also provides an ecological advisory service to the County Council and district councils. Hertfordshire BRC holds information on 5,000 sites (including county Wildlife Sites) on ArcView and Recorder.

Discussion

The basis of Hertfordshire BRCs policy is that it will not charge for data, but it will charge for the supply of data or information. The policy applies both to SLA holders and to other users, although the approaches to charging the two types are different. As a local authority-based LRC, Hertfordshire BRC must also comply with the Environmental Information Regulations. The charging policy will be agreed with the BRCs management board and will be reviewed in relation to changes in legislation and in response to the development of NBN access principles.

The procedures state how the BRC will make its charging policy available to potential users. This will be through its *Access terms and conditions* document, which will be made widely available. The procedures also describe how the BRC will calculate the rates users are charged.

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Policy on Charging

1. Policy Statements

Within the terms of its Service Level Agreements with sponsoring bodies, the Records Centre will apply charges for the supply of data, information or advice, and for the management of data. No charges will be made for data as such. Charges will be levied to recover the costs of time spent compiling and supplying information, and for any necessary expenses. Charges will generally only be levied from persons or organisations whose use of the Centre has not been agreed to be financed by its sponsoring authorities, or where the type or extent of an enquiry lies outside the scope of its Service Level Agreements.

The charging policy of the Centre will be determined by its Management Board in the light of relevant legislation on the freedom of access to information, and in the light of the access principles of the NBN [yet to be agreed at the time of publication], and will be reviewed regularly.

The Centre reserves the right to recoup a proportion of the costs of acquiring and managing data from its users, within the scope of maintaining charges at a reasonable level, and in the spirit of the Environmental Information Regulations and the NBN access principles.

2. Background to policy

2.1 Any charging policy needs to be clear and made available to potential and actual users, to ensure transparency of contractual agreements.

2.2 The Centre's charging policy needs to relate not only to national legislation, the NBN's principles, standards and procedures, but also to the requirements and legitimate needs of its governing body and sponsors.

2.3 The Centre needs to respect the rights and wishes of its data suppliers in formulating any charging policy, especially in relation to limitations such a policy may make on the use of data by the public or other potential users, or where the Centre may be perceived as exploiting data freely provided by others.

3. Procedures

3.1 The charging policy will be set out in the Centre's *Access terms and conditions* (appended below). It will also be further detailed in its SLA's with sponsors and in internal management memoranda.

3.2 The Centre will produce its *Access terms and conditions* in an accessible format for distribution to its customers, and will make these freely available to enquirers or other interested parties. It will also supply them through other media, including the NBN.

3.3 In setting its charges, the Centre will use its core available work hours and overall budget as a basis for establishing its costs, including the costs of managing its operation. Charges will be reviewed on an annual basis, to reflect changes in the cost of providing the Centre's services.

3.4 The Centre will set up processes for handling monies received from charging, including the provision of receipts, and will ensure that accounting procedures and audits are carried out, according to its sponsoring authorities requirements.

Access terms and conditions for digitised data (adopted 19 May 1998, amended February 2000)



General introduction

The Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre (HBRC) holds data in a variety of formats from a range of sources. HBRC is bound by copyright law and intellectual property right law as to how it may use and supply these data. It is also bound by the terms of the Environmental Information Regulations 1992, where it is given as a principal duty on local authority bodies (including local-authority sponsored bodies) to make environmental information they hold freely available to the public - subject to restrictions imposed by copyright, and any other restrictions placed upon particular data by the copyright and intellectual property right owners. A 'reasonable' charge may be made for the supply of such information or data.

Conditions imposed from elsewhere on access to HBRC data

HBRC normally receives its data on the terms that it will be freely accessible to *bona fide* users, and suppliers of data are informed of this policy upon offer of data to HBRC. In relation to some datasets supplied to us, including digitised datasets, access is controlled by specific protocols agreed with each body. In addition, data supplied by some statutory agencies and commercial sources may be restricted as to its supply to or use by third parties, including sponsoring bodies.

General access terms

1. HBRC will give free access to its readily accessible digitised data, subject to any conditions imposed on its use by copyright owners, to *bona fide* researchers, students, members of the public, charitable or voluntary nature conservation organisations, and natural history or other learned societies. Enquirers may be asked to present their credentials before an enquiry is answered.
2. Digitised data will be supplied free of charge to sponsoring local authorities and English Nature within the terms of relevant service level agreements; this must be used for internal business use only and in the case of English Nature may be subject to a fee for an Ordnance Survey 'End User Licence'.
3. Where HBRC has entered into a data exchange arrangement with a non-sponsoring authority, government agency or research institution, it may at its discretion, supply (digitised) data free of charge. However, in normal circumstances, a charge would be made for the supply of information to such bodies according to the current rate (see below), and in the case of digital data may include a fee for an Ordnance Survey 'End User Licence'.
4. Digitised data will be supplied to commercial bodies, consultants, non-sponsoring authorities, and other statutory agencies according to the following terms. Charges will be made for the time spent in supplying information, and not for the data itself, but will include a fee for an Ordnance Survey 'End User Licence'.

Standard data search: This will involve the retrieval of data up to a radius of 2 km of a defined 6-figure Ordnance Survey grid point, or within a corridor of 2 km either side of a defined line on an Ordnance Survey map, supplied by the client. This data will include identification of any designated statutory nature conservation sites, non-statutory County Wildlife Sites or other sites of local importance.

Area searches: In certain circumstances, data searches based on larger areas defined by clients may be required. It is the policy of HBRC that such searches may be made by negotiation, at HBRC's discretion, up to a maximum of 5 x 5sq km for any one enquiry.

Charges: HBRC charges are for the time spent in compiling information, together with any extra costs for materials, and (where appropriate) for an Ordnance Survey 'End User Licence'. Current (2000) charges are £46.00 per hour or pro rata + VAT, with a minimum invoice charge of £30 for less than an hour. Charges may be waived if no data is available within the search area.

Terms of supply

HBRC will normally supply information in response to standard data searches within 2 weeks of the receipt of the enquiry. More detailed searches may take longer. Only data, which is held by HBRC in accessible form, will be searched in response to an enquiry.

Restrictions on the use of digital data are imposed by Ordnance Survey and are detailed in the 'End User Licence'. Before using the data supplied the customer must agree to be bound by the 'End User Licence' which will accompany the data supplied. To use the data without completing and returning this licence agreement is an infringement of both HBRC and Crown copyright and the customer may be liable to prosecution or civil proceedings.

Formal enquiries, and in particular paid enquiries, must be made in writing (including fax or e-mail), quoting an order number or reference, and these will be acknowledged by confirmation of conditions. Payments will be requested by invoice, and payment should be made within 30 days of receipt.

All information, in response to a paid enquiry or otherwise, is supplied on condition that it is for the use of the enquirer or the enquiring body alone, for the purpose specified at the time of enquiry, and will not be passed down to a third party or used for other purposes, or in any publication (including electronic copying) without the consent of HBRC, which for paid enquiries must be obtained in writing. Copyright in all digitised data supplied rests jointly with Ordnance Survey and HBRC or its data suppliers (see above). Clients are asked to outline the intended use of data.

HBRC retains the right not to supply information, in accordance with the Environmental Information Regulations. This would generally be in cases where:

- i) HBRC is not allowed to pass down data by the copyright owner,
- ii) HBRC considers that the supply of such information might endanger a site, habitat or species,
- iii) The owner of a site or habitat has requested confidentiality.

HBRC endeavours wherever possible to ensure that its data, and any information supplied in interpretation of this data, is accurate, in accordance with the Code of Conduct of the Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management, but can take no responsibility for any inaccuracies, or for any eventualities which may arise from its use. It should be noted that the absence of a record in response to a data search does not imply that a species or important habitat does not exist within the search area.

33 Data management services

Policy & Principles

- The LRC will, by agreement, maintain and manage data on behalf of other organisations.
- The LRC must ensure that appropriate data management policies and procedures are in place to ensure data quality and security.

33.1 Background

The provision of professional data management services is the backbone of an LRC's work. Managing data on behalf of others ensures benefits to both the data supplier and to other data users.

Providing data management services for data suppliers helps to ensure that the LRC has access to as many relevant data as possible. Moreover, by undertaking data entry itself rather than using other people's databases, the LRC can be confident that all the correct procedures have been followed.

There are also many benefits to an organisation in using an LRC for data management rather than doing it for itself. For example, it is likely to be cost-effective; it frees up time to do the organisation's core work rather than managing databases; and, since an LRC is set up for data management and has all the necessary software, hardware and procedures, the organisation need not worry about acquiring or providing them. The quality of data management done by an LRC, which specialises in this, should be higher than data management done by an organisation as an add-on to its core business.

An LRC may be asked to provide data management services to a range of bodies, such as:

- local authorities
- statutory conservation agencies
- voluntary conservation organisations
- recording groups
- natural history societies
- local partnerships (eg those running Wildlife Sites systems)

It is important for the LRC to have a clear policy on the data management services it offers, so that users know what is available to them and understand the basis of any data management agreements they sign.

33.2 Policy

The policy should define the basis on which the LRC will provide data management services. The services offered need to be agreed, although they may be defined in the LRC's business plan rather than the policy itself. Examples of the types of data management services the LRC may offer include:

- computerising records currently held only in paper format, and undertaking associated data validation and verification
- holding and maintaining a computerised database
- providing access for others to the database
- holding or archiving paper records

To ensure that data suppliers have confidence in the LRC's ability to do this work, the policy also needs to make it clear that data management procedures will ensure data quality and security.

The LRC should consider whose data will be managed. Will it manage all data, or will it refuse to manage data if restrictions are placed on how they may be used? The LRC may decide that it will not manage data that do not meet its agreed access terms. On the other hand, the LRC may decide that, if the cost of managing data is met by the data supplier, it will still manage those data. Issues relating to data access and the suitability of data are discussed in section 30 *Controlling access to data*. This policy should concern itself only with whether the LRC reserves the right to refuse to manage some data-sets, and not with the rights and wrongs of the LRC holding data that it cannot use.

In defining whose data will be managed, it is also important to consider the resource implications. Each data-set managed takes up staff time, the cost of which has to be met. The LRC should normally take on this cost for data from volunteer recorders. However, the LRC should avoid accepting uncomputerised data as a 'contribution in kind' from any other organisation, since the LRC would incur a real cost in making those data suitable for use.

33.3 Procedures

The procedures should identify only how the LRC will *provide* the data management services. The detail of *how* the data will actually be managed (eg computerising records, security of data) should be defined in other policies (see sections 16–21 *Data processing and management*). It is important for the LRC to establish an agreement with each data supplier. The LRC may do this as part of an existing agreement. For example, with an organisation it may use a Service Level Agreement (SLA) (see volume 1, section 15 *Relationships with core users*), whereas with volunteer recorders it may use a data supply agreement (see section 17 *Data ownership and acquisition* in this volume). Alternatively, it may decide to establish a separate data management agreement with the data supplier. Where the data-set concerned is ‘owned’ by more than one organisation (eg Wildlife Sites or LBAPs) the agreement may need to be made with a single nominated partner.

The agreement, in whatever form it takes, should:

- identify which data-sets will be managed and who has ownership of them
- explain how the data will be managed (ie what the LRC will be expected to do)
- describe any financial arrangements
- note any data access issues
- describe the formats in which the data may be supplied

The procedures should include an appraisal of the resources needed to carry out data management functions, and should identify any additional resources, such as facilities, hardware or software, that are needed.

33.4 Process of developing the policy and procedures

Although this policy area is relatively straightforward, some difficult policy decisions may need to be taken—whether, for example, to refuse to undertake data management under certain circumstances. It is therefore important for those involved in overseeing the LRC management (the steering group or other similar body) to be involved in developing the policy and procedures.

Case study

Data management services

Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre

Background

Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre (BRC) was formed in 1989 as part of the Hertfordshire County Council and provides services to the County Council, seven of the 10 district councils, English Nature and Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust. The BRC is unusual in that, as well as managing and supplying data, it also provides an ecological advisory service to the County Council and district councils. Hertfordshire BRC holds information on 5,000 sites (including County Wildlife Sites) on ArcView, and species records on Recorder.

Discussion

The policy states that Hertfordshire BRC will provide data management services 'by agreement. It also states that the LRC will ensure that appropriate safeguards cover its data management services.

Hertfordshire BRC has identified that it could have data management agreements with specialist recording groups, natural history societies, local authorities and conservation agencies (eg English Nature). Currently, Hertfordshire BRC has, or is negotiating, data management agreements with:

- Hertfordshire & Middlesex Bat Group
- Hertfordshire & Middlesex Badger Group
- Hertfordshire Amphibian & Reptile Group
- Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust
- Hertfordshire Outdoors
- Lee Valley Regional Park Authority
- Hertfordshire Natural History Society

The procedures state that the LRC will have 'data management protocols with organisations for which it manages data. The protocols are data management agreements, and their scope is described in some detail.

The procedures also state that Hertfordshire BRC will ensure that it is able to provide the required management services before any agreement is finalised.

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Policy on Data Management Services

1. Policy Statements

Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre will maintain and manage data on behalf of other organisations by agreement.

The data management services offered by the Centre will be governed by the Business Plan and Service Level Agreements.

The Centre will operate appropriate systems for managing data and, in conjunction with the data owner, will ensure that data quality, security and confidentiality are maintained.

The Centre will apply nationally or locally agreed data standards to the management and validation of any such data, as appropriate through the implementation of relevant policies and procedures.

2. Background to policy

2.1 In order to extend its own capacity for supplying information, and as a means of supplying support to the biological recording community, the Centre may act as data manager on behalf of other organisations. The services offered include the management of:

- computerised data
- manual data
- processing/validation services
- archiving

3. Links to other policies

Sources of data and relationships with data suppliers - deals more specifically with maintaining relationships with data holders

Access Terms & Conditions

Data management and processing (all areas).

4. Procedures

4.1 The Centre will negotiate and/or maintain and upgrade data management protocols with relevant organisations, within its agreed Business Plan and in agreement with its Management Board. These management protocols will specify as a minimum:

- The extent and content of the data set(s) to be managed and their ownership.
- The access arrangements for the organisation or individuals owning the data, including any limitations on the level of access or service that the owners can expect from the Centre.
- The use which may be made of the data by the Centre and any third parties.
- Any levels of confidentiality which may be needed to apply, wherever possible within the overall regime of the National Biodiversity Network's Access Principles.
- The formats in which the data will be supplied by the owners and held by the Centre.
- The kinds of management processes which will be applied to the data sets.
- Any special equipment, storage or archive facilities which are needed.
- The timescale over which the management protocol will be operated, and any reviews which are necessary.
- What financial arrangements are to be operated in relation to the data, or other exchange arrangements.
- Any responsibilities for liability or insurance which may be necessary.
- The terms of withdrawal by either party from the agreement.

4.2 The Centre will ensure that necessary working arrangements and facilities for the receipt and secure-keeping of data sets acquired under these agreements are in place before the data sets are supplied. These will include necessary working arrangements to ensure security. The Centre will also ensure that any changes to the facilities of the Centre in the future allow for the continued safe-keeping of these data sets.

4.3 The Centre will ensure that, if any special conditions are applied to specific data sets, the relevant controls are placed on the data, including access arrangements, and notices concerning these controls are incorporated into the Centre's Access terms and conditions.

- 4.4 The Centre will ensure that the necessary data validation and verification procedures are in place and can be supported for these data sets before their receipt.
- 4.5 The Centre will ensure that it has the capacity and necessary equipment etc. to handle the agreed data sets before finalising an agreement.

34 Assessment and analysis of information

Policy & Principles

- The LRC must ensure that data used to generate information products are suited to users' needs.
- The LRC should restrict data analysis to the provision of objective analysis, avoiding subjective interpretation.
- An LRC should not provide advisory services to users that involve giving subjective evaluation of issues, even if such evaluation is based on the guidance of partners.

34.1 Background

When supplying information to a user, an LRC is required to undertake an element of assessment and analysis of the underlying data. The LRC needs to:

- assess the data used to generate products to ensure that they are fit for the purpose to which they are being put
- analyse the data to generate the information products required

An LRC should ensure that the data that it uses are of sufficient quality for each use (eg does the user require fully verified data or are data that are still awaiting verification acceptable?). Ensuring that data are 'fit-for-purpose' should not be confused with other data management issues such as verification procedures (see section 6 *Species identification—verification* and section 19 *Processing newly acquired data*). This work should have already been done, so that when the LRC wants to use data it can use the verification information associated with the data to assess whether the data are of sufficient quality for that particular purpose.

34.2 Policy

The LRC should agree a clear policy on the level of assessment and data analysis it will undertake. The policy should state that:

- the LRC will apply all relevant policies concerning confidentiality
- the LRC will ensure all data used are fit-for-purpose according to the user's requirements
- the LRC will make it clear what data its analyses are based on
- the role of the LRC is to provide a source of objective information and that this will be applied by ensuring no value judgements are made in the analysis of data

Although an LRC should act as an independent and objective source of impartial information, this does not mean it will only supply raw data. The LRC should carry out objective analysis of the data it holds. This is likely to include applying a range of criteria to data to provide useful information—for example, using data to evaluate the status of a species or assessing whether a site meets Wildlife Site criteria. The LRC is, in these instances, applying agreed criteria, not devising its own. Equally, an LRC may make comparisons to provide context, such as identifying sites with the largest breeding populations of a species. This is still the supply of factual information.

An LRC should not make subjective judgements based on the data it holds. It must be clearly seen to be impartial with regard to the objectives of all of its partners and users; making value judgements on their behalf can bring this impartiality into question.

The LRC should restrict analysis to collation of the relevant data and supplying the data with relevant contextual information, such as the local, regional or national status of a species or habitat. It should also give information that will help with the interpretation of the data (eg on survey coverage, gaps in data and quality of information), to reduce the risk of others misinterpreting the data. There may also be concerns that data could be misinterpreted by those lacking adequate ecological knowledge. However, the provision of contextual information on the species, habitats or sites of interest, and on the data themselves, should minimise this risk.

A few LRCs have provided advisory services, taking on the role of, for example, the local authority ecologist. If an LRC does provide an advisory service as well as its primary services, it is important to ensure that the two roles are kept separate so that as far as possible the LRC is able to retain its function of providing impartial biodiversity information. The most effective way of doing this is for the LRC to manage the work separately, having, for example, separate budgets and different staff for the data management and advisory roles. In the long term these LRCs should look at passing this advisory service to a separate body which would then buy data services from the LRC through a Service Level Agreement (SLA).

34.3 Procedures

Procedures for the assessment and analysis of data should make it clear how the LRC will ensure that data used are fit-for-purpose or, at least, that the user is aware of the limitations of the data used. The procedure should show how linked procedures, such as those for handling confidential data, will be applied. The LRC may carry out a range of standard analyses as part of the process of generating core products (see section 31 *Core products*). These should be documented so that users can understand how the analyses are performed and to ensure that the standard analyses are carried out consistently.

The procedures should also make it clear how the LRC will ensure that it provides the appropriate level of data analysis. Perhaps the most effective way of illustrating this would be to give a number of examples of the types of data analysis the LRC will and will not undertake.

34.4 Process of developing the policy and procedures

The overall policy should be determined by the LRC management board or similar body in consultation with core users. The development of procedures should be carried out by LRC staff. Users should be consulted over the details of individual analyses. Ultimately users should determine what levels of analysis they need, providing these levels are covered by the LRC's policy.

Case study 1

Objective analysis of data

Somerset Environmental Records Centre

Background

Although technically a branch of Somerset Wildlife Trust, Somerset Environmental Records Centre (SERC) is, in practice, a partnership organisation with a range of service agreement holders including Somerset County Council, all five district councils, Exmoor National Park, English Nature, Environment Agency and Somerset Wildlife Trust. All the local authorities have Service Level Agreements (SLAs) for SERC to provide an information management service. Around half of the Somerset planning authorities have in-house ecologists.

Policy and procedures

Whilst SERC does not yet have a written policy on data assessment and analysis, it has a clear understanding of the extent to which it will undertake these processes. SERC provides users with raw data, evaluated data and interpreted data (including contextual data). SERC will not, however, advise data users on actions that should or should not be taken.

Discussion

An example of SERCs policy on providing objective information can be seen from its approach to planning. SERC will compile baseline ecological data from existing data sources for defined areas of search, evaluate existing data in the context of the resource, and comment on sufficiency of data in terms of coverage and how up-to-date they are. However, SERC will not assess potential impacts of proposed developments on biodiversity, evaluate those impacts (eg by weighing against the benefits of development), or advise on potential mitigation of impacts and alternative proposals. In practice, this means that the planning authority consults SERC, SERC undertakes a data search for the area concerned, copying the results to both the planning authority and Somerset Wildlife Trust; the Trust then gives its advice to the planning authority on the basis of the data.

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Case study 2

Data assessment and analysis

Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre

Background

Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre (BRC) was formed in 1989 as part of Hertfordshire County Council and provides services to the County Council, seven of the 10 district councils, English Nature and Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust. Hertfordshire BRC holds information on 5,000 sites (including County Wildlife Sites) on ArcView and on Recorder. As well as managing and supplying data, Hertfordshire BRC also provides an ecological advisory service, primarily to its sponsoring local authorities—the County Council and seven district councils. The work of the BRC is split approximately 60:40 between biological recording activity and provision of the ecological advisory service. The advisory work includes vetting planning applications, proposing policies for plans and advising on land management.

Discussion

The policy states that the extent to which Hertfordshire BRC will undertake assessment and analysis of data will be in accordance with the services defined in individual SLAs. There is no policy that the BRC will only provide purely objective assessments of its data. However, there is a policy that all BRC staff will act strictly impartially, in line with the code of practice of the Institute of Ecologists and Environmental Managers in carrying out their work. Hertfordshire BRC also provides an advisory service to some of its users, which includes making value judgements on their behalf. Although this work is kept separate to some extent, elements of the policy reflect this service, including some work that LRCs should avoid (eg making comments on site management proposals and providing input to conservation policies).

The procedures identify three areas where assessment or analysis may be required: assessing the accuracy and validity of data in the database (dealt with by other procedures); assessing the relevance of data to a particular enquiry; and analysis of data. They also describe the circumstances under which the LRC will carry out assessment and analysis.

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Policy on Assessment and Analysis of Information

1. Policy Statement

The Records Centre will carry out assessments and analysis of its data holdings in order to deliver agreed services to its principal users. The extent to which analysis is undertaken as part of the core work of the Centre will be defined in Service Level Agreements with the Centre's main sponsors and through the business planning process.

1.1 Sub policies

1.1.1 Assessments and analyses of data carried out in response to enquiries will be carried out within the competence of the Records Centre, in accordance with any restrictions imposed by the Centre's protocols and agreements with outside bodies, and will respect the copyright and intellectual rights of those supplying the data.

2. Background to policy

2.1 Data assessment and evaluation are integral parts of the provision of ecological advisory services and of the maintenance of the sites and species databases.

2.2 The provision of "added value" products (eg interpreted and assessed data) is critical in negotiating funding from the Centre's sponsoring organisations, and will remain critical in maintaining funding, particularly in relation to the core needs of users (eg planning and land management).

2.3 In-house analysis. The development of responses to the needs of major users inevitably requires the manipulation of data, their interpretation, relation to other factors, and their presentation in a way which is meaningful to the user. The extent to which this needs to be carried out will depend to a large extent on the nature of the request, as well as on the capability of the Records Centre, and on the terms of the SLAs under which the request is made. The latter is the key to controlling the potential demand on the Centre, while the Centre also needs to be sure that it has access to the relevant skills to carry out the necessary analysis, either in-house or externally. In doing this, it will also need to ensure that it is operating in accordance with agreements over its working arrangements with partner organisations.

3. Links to other policies

Data needs (all areas).

These policies deal with the way in which the Centre goes about identifying what data it needs to hold, and the support needed to do this.

Data collection and recording (all areas).

The way in which data are collected needs to be closely linked to the likely ways in which they need to be used.

Data management and processing (all areas).

These policies will identify the internal processes which are essential to being able to use data effectively.

Controlling access to data.

Deals more specifically with how the Centre controls general access to records, which is relevant to the way the Centre itself manipulates its data.

Core products and information services.

Identifies the basic information products of the Centre, as opposed to added advisory services.

Charging.

Defines the basis upon which charges for products and services are made, and therefore relevant to the extent of analysis work undertaken.

Handling enquiries and responses

Deals with the physical processes and mechanics of enquiry responses.

4. Procedures

4.1 Assessment and analysis of species and habitat information

4.1.1 Assessment of data includes the following distinct activities:

- Assessment of the accuracy and validity of data within the database.
- Assessment of the relevance of data to the needs of a particular enquiry.
- Analysis of species or habitat data, in association with ecological information on those species and habitats, to elucidate habitat/site management or other characteristics and effects.

4.1.2 The process of assessing and verifying/validating data for accuracy is dealt with under policies concerning Data Management and Processing.

4.1.3 The process of assessing the relevance of data to an enquiry will require the Centre to have the relevant expertise, as dealt with in the Policy on the acquisition of expertise. In carrying out the process, the Centre will need to ensure the following:

- that ALL relevant information is brought together and made available, particularly if an enquiry may concern legal matters or planning considerations;
- that data being used in especially legal situations have been acquired legitimately;
- that data which have not been properly verified are highlighted or withheld;
- that confidential data or sensitive data are dealt with according to any restrictions they may have imposed upon them;
- that the copyright and intellectual rights of data owners is respected according to relevant agreements or protocols.

4.1.4 The analysis of data will depend on the needs of the enquirer or other use to which the work is contributing. However, in making use of data, the Centre will need in particular to ensure:

- that the data being used are capable of being interpreted in the way intended;
- that the use to which they are being put is in accordance with any restrictions which may have been imposed upon them;
- that any analysis is carried out objectively, according to the terms of relevant professional codes of conduct (e.g. Institute of Ecology & Environmental Management).

4.2 Process of analysis and assessment for enquiry responses

Records Centre staff will collate and compile data relevant to particular enquiries, either using the Centre's computer databases or manually from site or species database files. Analysis of data will be carried out relevant to the enquiry type, which will be within the agreed SLAs of the Centre, or within the definition of its *Access Terms and Conditions*. For and on behalf of sponsoring partners, Centre staff will carry out supplementary site visits to record information in response to an enquiry for a specific purpose. Specific types of assessment and analysis include:

- Assessments of planning applications against recorded Wildlife Sites, or potential Wildlife Sites, judged according to the Centre's existing data, supplemented with further site survey by Centre staff or other partners.
- Assessments of habitat management proposals for a site or area, based on the Centre's data on habitats and species, and on the likely impact of the management on these. The Centre's staff will work with partners in these determinations, and may carry out field survey to supplement existing data.
- Analysis of broad data from the Centre's databases to deliver targeted information on habitats, land management, species distribution or conservation policy implications. These analyses will include compiling data and other information from the Centre's manual site or species files, tabulations from the Recorder database, incorporation of data with other data-sets via GIS, and the compilation of responses relevant to the enquiry.
- The Service Level Agreements of the Centre with sponsoring partners identify the limits to which the Centre will normally go in delivering these services, which broadly currently are:
 - Assessment of planning, land management or other proposals against the known importance of an identified Wildlife Site or potential Wildlife Site, including any scarce or protected species on that site, and the provision of an initial response. This may be supported by relevant field survey or consultations up to three days for any one piece of work.
 - Analysis of data in order to provide relevant inputs to plans and strategies.
 - The use of data and other information to draft briefs for management plans etc

Assessment or analysis work to develop products beyond this are regarded as outside the core work of the Centre, and would only be supplied under contract or by special agreement.

35 Information services for the public

Policy & Principles

- All LRCs should respond to enquiries they receive from the public.
- The extent to which an LRC can provide and promote specific services depends on its funding. The services provided should be clearly defined.

35.1 Background

In addition to enquiries from its main users, all LRCs receive some requests for information from members of the public. Some LRCs may choose to respond to enquiries from the public on an ad hoc basis and as a low priority. Others, however, may choose to actively promote services for the public. This may be for various reasons:

- the LRC may see the involvement of the public as a means for encouraging new recorders
- partners in the LRC may want the LRC to provide a public information service on their behalf
- public services may be seen as a means of maintaining a high public profile for the LRC

Dealing with enquiries from the public requires staff time and therefore has a real cost. This cost has the potential to be high if there are a large number of enquiries from the public, particularly if the LRC actively promotes itself to the wider public. Since LRCs generally have a policy of not charging members of the public for information, the LRC needs to consider how the service will be funded. If a partner organisation requires the LRC to provide a public information service on its behalf, that organisation should provide additional resources to fund the service, and the service should be written into the organisation's Service Level Agreement (SLA) with the LRC.

If an LRC sees public services as a means of accessing funding, it should be borne in mind that these services should be provided in addition to existing work and should not be seen as a means of supporting core work. The LRC should be careful that the development of extensive public services does not distract resources from delivering its commitments under SLAs or other contracts.

35.2 Policy

The LRC should have a policy on responding to enquiries from the public. However, as discussed above, the range of services the LRC provides will probably depend on the availability of funding.

The LRC should develop a policy covering: how it will deal with enquiries from the public; what, if any, specific services it will provide; and to what extent these services should be promoted. Note that the policy should not cover issues relating to access to sensitive information or charging, which should be covered by the relevant main policies relating to those issues (see section 30 *Controlling access to data* and section 32 *Charging*).

Policy on the relative priority of enquiries from the public should be dealt with in the policy on *Handling enquiries and responses*; see section 36.

35.3 Procedures

The procedures should state in detail how the LRC will provide services to the public. In particular, they should identify mechanisms for managing the demand for services through reducing the workload involved in responding to these types of enquiry. For example, much general information could be made available on a website or in a set of information leaflets or standard maps. Enquirers may be encouraged to use email to submit their request, thereby reducing the amount of time spent answering the phone.

Even an LRC that does not have the resources to actively promote services to the public, might still adopt these mechanisms, in order to reduce the workload associated with the enquiries it does receive.

35.4 Process of developing the policy and procedures

The policy on the level of service that will be provided to the public should be agreed in consultation with the LRC's management board or other similar body. The policy must be set in relation to sources of funding for this work. The practicalities of how the LRC will provide services to the public should be determined by the LRC manager and other appropriate staff.

Case study

Information services for the public

Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre

Background

Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre (BRC) was formed in 1989 as part of the Hertfordshire County Council and provides services to the County Council, seven of the 10 district councils, English Nature and Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust. The BRC is unusual in that, as well as managing and supplying data, it also provides an ecological advisory service to the County Council and district councils. Hertfordshire BRC holds information on 5,000 sites (including county Wildlife Sites) on ArcView and Recorder.

Discussion

Hertfordshire BRC has a clear remit to provide information services to the public, and is funded to do so by one of its core users. Its policy clearly states that Hertfordshire BRC will provide a wildlife enquiry and information service for the public. The policy statement and sub-policies also explain that the BRC will endeavour to provide the service in a way that minimises the workload for staff.

The procedures identify the link to the BRCs access terms and conditions, and identify the mechanisms that will be used to support public information services.

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Policy on Information Services For The Public

1. Policy Statement

The Centre will maintain a wildlife enquiry and information service for the public and will develop with partners a range of generic products that provide relevant information on Hertfordshire's wildlife to the public.

1.1 Sub-policies

1.1.1 The Centre will work with partner organisations to provide its information service, in particular to ensure its relations with data suppliers are not prejudiced.

1.1.2 The Centre will seek to reduce the effects of demand for information by ensuring that necessary resources are in place to support such a service, and by adopting generic means of communication wherever possible.

2. Background to policy

2.1 The Centre needs to maintain a public presence, particularly to the informed public, if it is to ensure that its long term aims are maintained and supported.

2.2 A public face is also important in order to ensure that new sources of especially voluntary information are forthcoming. Often new casual contacts prove to be highly important in supplying relevant information.

2.3 As its information has been gathered by public funds and from the public, the Centre has a moral duty to provide information back to the public. Under the Environmental Information Regulations (1992), as a local authority organisation the Centre also has a legal duty to provide the public with information it holds which is in the public domain (but not that which is the property of other bodies or individuals without consent).

3. Links to other policies

Identifying data to meet needs.

Public information needs will be one determinant of what data is required.

Data supply.

The means by which data are supplied to the public is dealt with in more detail.

Access Terms and Conditions.

Terms for supply of data

Core products and information services.

Definition of the principal products and services of the Centre, which will limit the extent to which public information services may be available.

Charging.

The basis on which charges, if any, to the public will be made.

Monitoring customer satisfaction.

Monitoring the public information service will form an important part of overall user satisfaction assessment.

Handling enquiries and responses.

Details the mechanics of providing the information service.

4. Procedures

4.1 The Centre will adopt a set of Access terms and conditions which will define the basis upon which a public information service will be provided. This stipulates the extent to which the Centre will respond to a particular enquiry, and identifies any constraints on the products and services offered.

4.2 Limitations on the Centre's ability to service public demands will require a focused approach to publicity. The development of any publicity material, or the release of information to the Press etc. will be carried out in response to specific activities or needs and will have identified the necessary resources to support responses to them.

4.3 The Centre will develop and maintain, within its competences and resources, a publications programme, in conjunction with relevant partners, which will be developed and agreed through its Management Board and within its Business Plan. This may include:

- Internet and internal web-sites.
- Provision of selected data or summary information via the Internet/NBN and Hertfordshire County Council's electronic Gateway.
- Publication of pamphlets, atlases or other books on specific species, groups, habitats or environmental topics, in collaboration with partners.
- Provision of selected data on electronic media (e.g. CDs)
- Information leaflets or broadsheets.
- Articles in newsletters or journals.
- An annual report.

36 Handling enquiries and responses

Policy & Principles

- An LRC needs to identify how it will handle enquiries, particularly how it will prioritise which enquiries should be dealt with immediately.
- A maximum response time to enquiries should be agreed, although this might vary for different types of user.
- Procedures are needed for monitoring and recording responses to enquiries.

36.1 Background

The backbone of an LRC's work is the provision of information in response to enquiries, and every LRC needs to have a policy setting out how it will handle these enquiries. Users need to know how quickly their enquiries will be dealt with and what they can expect. LRCs need clear criteria for prioritising enquiries. In an ideal world, an LRC would have the resources to answer all enquiries immediately, but, in reality, it will normally need to prioritise enquiries. An LRC also needs an effective system for monitoring responses to enquiries so that staff can keep track of how a particular enquiry is progressing, and also so that response times can be analysed to determine whether improvements to services need to be made (see section 37 *Monitoring customer satisfaction*). LRCs will normally need provide information on how enquiries are handled as part of Service Level Agreements (SLAs).

36.2 Policy

The LRC's policy on handling enquiries needs to explain the basis on which the LRC will deal with enquiries. Firstly, it should state what enquiries the LRC will deal with. Normally, an LRC should seek to respond to all enquiries that fall within its remit, subject to other policies such as charging, and to the appropriate terms and conditions.

The policy should then set out how the LRC will prioritise enquiries. There are a number of factors that the LRC may wish to take into account when developing criteria for prioritisation:

- type of user—enquiries from those with Service Level Agreements (SLAs) may be considered a priority over other paid enquiries
- urgency—some enquiries may require a quick response while others may not need a response for a few weeks

Note that the prioritisation of responses to enquiries can be a controversial area for some users.

While it should be recognised that there is a need for prioritisation, users should be told a maximum time in which they should expect to receive a response. It is up to the LRC's staff and management board to agree a workable limit.

The LRC's policy should state that it will monitor responses to enquiries, but the practicalities of how it will do this should be given in the procedures.

The policy statement may also refer to other relevant policies and procedures, by saying, for example, that responses to requests will be made in line with policies on *Controlling access to data* (see section 30).

36.3 Procedures

While the policy should describe the basis of prioritisation, the procedures should describe the actual criteria and how they will be implemented. These criteria should be unambiguous and easily implemented by the LRC's staff. Worked examples of how the criteria should be implemented may be helpful.

In devising a mechanism for monitoring responses to enquiries, it is important to bear in mind the practicalities. A system which requires staff to spend more time logging an enquiry than actually making the response is clearly not cost-effective. The LRC should decide whether all enquiries should be logged (including those to which an answer can be given immediately over the phone) or just those that require staff to access the database and make a formal response. The procedures should define the information to be recorded for each enquiry. Depending on the amount of information the LRC decides to record, this may include some or all of the following:

- name of the enquirer
- address of the enquirer or of their organisation
- date of the enquiry
- reference number for the enquiry
- data or information requested
- priority and/or expected date of response
- actual date of response and a description of the response
- charges made
- confirmation that terms and conditions have been signed
- name of the staff member dealing with the enquiry
- staff time spent dealing with the enquiry

36.4 Process of developing the policy and procedures

Issues such as criteria for prioritisation and response times should be agreed with the LRC's management board or other similar body. The practicalities of implementing the policy should be dealt with by the LRC's manager, who should bear in mind the importance of having a system that is not too bureaucratic.

Case study

Handling enquiries and responses

Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre

Background

Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre (BRC) was formed in 1989 as part of the Hertfordshire County Council and provides services to the County Council, seven of the 10 district councils, English Nature and Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust. The BRC is unusual in that, as well as managing and supplying data, it also provides an ecological advisory service to the County Council and district councils. Hertfordshire BRC holds information on 5,000 sites (including county Wildlife Sites) on ArcView and Recorder.

Discussion

The policy states that Hertfordshire BRC will prioritise responses based on where funding for the enquiry will come from, but will also take into account the relevance of enquiries to the core users agreed priorities. It also explains that the BRC will record enquiries and responses to assess its own performance, although all enquiries will be subject to copyright, confidentiality and sensitivity policies.

The procedures describe how the BRC will make details of its enquiry service available to potential users, and then details criteria by which it will prioritise enquiries. Sponsoring partners are the highest priority, with their enquiries prioritised according to the reason for each enquiry. Other partners are the next highest priority, followed by non-sponsoring authorities and other individuals and bodies concerned with nature conservation. Enquiries from the general public and then those from commercial bodies are the lowest priorities.

The methods that the BRC may use to respond to enquiries are described (eg written, telephone, or email responses). The procedures then describe how the BRC will monitor enquiries and record responses to these enquiries, giving details of the information that will be recorded.

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Policy on Handling Enquiries and Responses

1. Policy Statements

Herts BRC will make details of its enquiry service available to actual and potential users, and will ensure that these make clear the terms under which enquiries will be handled.

Responses will be prioritised on the basis of funding sources and relevance to the priorities of sponsors, but having regard to the requirements of the Environmental Information Regulations. Work needed to fulfil the Centre's commitments to its sponsors set out in its SLAs will be given priority over responses to non-sponsoring organisations and the public.

It will be made plain that data and information supply will be subject to limitations imposed by copyright, confidentiality and sensitivity concerns, within the framework of relevant legislation.

The Centre will maintain adequate records of enquiries and responses to facilitate audit of its performance.

2. Background to policy

2.1 The Centre's enquiry service is fundamental to its reason for existence, and needs to be seen to be effective. It also needs to ensure that potential users know what level of service to expect from the Centre.

2.2 To maintain its support from both users and suppliers of information, it is also important that the Centre is able to report on its services in a meaningful way. It is therefore important that the Centre maintains adequate enquiry recording, processing and auditing procedures. Good information on the nature, frequency, source and cost of responding to enquiries can be valuable in business planning and in justifying budget demands. Sponsoring authorities, and especially the County Council, as hosting body, will sometimes require a formal record of response times.

2.3 It is essential that enquiries are prioritised if obligations in the Centre's Service Level Agreements with sponsoring organisations are to be met.

2.4 Limitations of information supply need to be defined and will be governed by the policies and procedures described in the Policy on Controlling Access to Data. The operation of these procedures would also require the Centre to ensure that it has adequate expertise to identify where responses to enquiries need to be exercised with care.

2.5 It will also be important for systems of enquiry management to be usable by the Centre's staff without imposing unnecessary bureaucracy.

3. Links to other policies

Data Supply

Concerns the basis upon which data will be supplied as a response to enquiries, and on the technical process involved.

Core Products and Information Services

Details the basic products by which the Centre will supply information, and the basis of their supply.

Assessment and analysis of information

Defines the kinds of assessments which the centre makes in delivering its responses.

Information Services for the Public

Establishes the basis upon which the public information service is founded.

Charging

Lays down the basis upon which charges are made for specific services

Monitoring Customer Satisfaction

Deals with the feed-back processes necessary to ensure that enquiry services are maintained.

Access Terms and Conditions

Defines the access arrangements and policy basis for the Centre's information, including copyright, security and confidentiality.

4. Procedures

4.1 The Centre will make details of its enquiry service available to relevant outside institutions and the general public through the production of appropriate information, using a range of media:

- leaflets
- web-pages
- advertisements
- displays

This information will include details of the kinds of responses which can be expected, and the ways in which enquiries may be submitted.

4.2 In providing information on enquiry services to users, the Centre will ensure that attention is drawn to its standard *Access terms and conditions*, including any special attention which may need to be given to issues of confidentiality, copyright or data security.

4.3 The Centre will operate a system of prioritising its response to enquiries, in line with its relevant Service Level Agreements, but bearing in mind the response times required by the Environmental Information Regulations, and the policies of its host authority:

- enquiries from sponsoring partners with legal implications.
- enquiries from sponsoring partners concerning priority species or habitat conservation issues (e.g. Wildlife Sites, protected species).
- enquiries from sponsoring partners concerning nature conservation policy issues.
- enquiries from other partners concerning priority conservation issues.
- enquiries from other partners concerning data acquisition, management or supply.
- enquiries from non-sponsoring authorities, individuals or bodies concerning nature conservation priorities.
- other enquiries from the general public.
- other enquiries from commercial bodies or non-sponsoring authorities.

Details of this prioritisation will be made available to enquirers as necessary.

4.4 The Centre will respond to enquiries in the most relevant way for the enquirer's needs. It may respond using various methods:

- written replies (including fax)
- telephone responses
- email responses
- personal access to the Centre's files.

Material supplied will be governed by the Policy on Core Products and Information Services, and by the Centre's *Access terms and conditions*.

4.5 The Centre will ensure that it maintains a written record of all significant enquiries received, which will include details of:

- the name of the enquirer or contact person
- the organisation and address of the enquirer (including contact numbers)
- in brief, the nature of the enquiry
- the date and nature of the response
- the file reference for the Centre's copy of the response
- any charges levied
- the time involved in responding

4.6 In order to reduce bureaucracy, the record of the enquiry will be integrated into the Centre's time-recording system.

37 Monitoring customer satisfaction

Policy & Principles

- The LRC should employ mechanisms to assess customer satisfaction, to ensure that it is providing the best possible services to its users and suppliers.
- Customers' views should be used to improve the day-to-day work of the LRC and to review longer-term strategic development.

37.1 Background

An LRC is essentially a service-providing business. An important aspect of any business is ensuring that the customers are satisfied with the services they receive. An LRC is no different, and it must have policy and procedures for monitoring customer satisfaction and assessing its performance.

There are a number of different techniques available for assessing whether customers feel that the LRC is delivering an effective service (eg directly, through customer surveys, or indirectly, through meetings of relevant groups).

As well as monitoring customer satisfaction, it is important to have mechanisms for using customer feedback to improve the day-to-day work of the LRC. Unless attempts are made to improve the services provided, there is little point in asking users for their views. However, the LRC should also use feedback from its customers to find out what it is already doing effectively.

37.2 Policy

The policy should state that the LRC will monitor satisfaction and use the resulting information to improve its performance and the services it provides. It may be necessary to identify clearly whose views will be canvassed, since 'customers' could be taken to define a very narrow group of LRC users. The LRC should consider the views of all its users (occasional users as well as those with SLAs or ongoing contracts), and of volunteer recorders and other data suppliers. Unless all the parties that the LRC relies on (ie data suppliers and customers) are satisfied with the services they receive, the LRC may fail. If the services provided do not meet customers' needs, they may stop using the LRC.

37.3 Mechanisms for monitoring customer satisfaction

There are a number of different mechanisms that an LRC may use to monitor customer satisfaction. These mechanisms are quite different in the way that they operate. Some, such as surveys, are targeted and provide an opportunity to ask very specific questions. Others, such as steering groups, should normally already be in place, but can be used as an opportunity to gain feedback from users. In deciding which techniques it wishes to use, the LRC must decide who it wants to get views from, and how frequently, and which are the particular aspects of the LRC's work it wishes to assess.

37.3.1 Questionnaire surveys

Questionnaire surveys can be aimed at particular user groups, but may be time-consuming and may have low response rates. Effectiveness may be increased by circulating the questionnaires via email.

37.3.2 Feedback forms

Customer satisfaction forms can be included with responses to all enquiries. They are easily distributed (the form can simply be inserted each time the LRC sends information to a user), but will only reach data users, not suppliers, and will probably have a low return rate since users tend to use them only if they are very dissatisfied with the service received.

37.3.3 Users' and suppliers' forums

While they may provide less detail than specific customer surveys and feedback forms, forums can be an effective mechanism for obtaining feedback on the LRC. Importantly, they allow groups of users and recorders to discuss each other's perspectives, often giving a broader opinion than feedback from one organisation or individual. It is important to ensure that the forums involve a cross-section of all those that use the LRC.

37.3.4 Steering groups/management boards

Like forums, consulting an LRC management body in order to monitor satisfaction is an indirect method. The body will consist only of a select group of individuals, but those individuals will have an interest in ensuring the LRC succeeds and will be influential in directing its work.

37.3.5 Newsletters/website

Inclusion of a feedback form in newsletters or on the LRC's website provide easy mechanisms for making comments.

37.4 What to assess and how to act on feedback

Aspects the LRC may wish to assess include:

- speed of the response to an enquiry
- adequacy of information received in response to the enquiry
- suitability of the format of the response (eg electronic or paper, maps or tables)
- data quality
- coverage of data (eg taxa available)
- range of services available
- manner in which queries are handled

Having gained feedback from users, the LRC needs mechanisms for ensuring that appropriate action is taken to improve its performance. A number of different options are available, depending on whether the issue of concern relates to the day-to-day running of the LRC or to longer-term development. For example, improving the way in which the LRC responds to enquiries involves determining whether the appropriate policy and procedures are being implemented effectively or whether they need to be reviewed. Alternatively, the area needing improvement may be the range of services the LRC is able to provide; in which case it is necessary to take a longer-term and more strategic view of making improvements.

37.5 Process of developing the policy and procedure

The policy should be fairly straightforward and can usually be agreed by the LRC management, with little need for consultation. The LRC manager should work with staff to identify the most appropriate mechanisms for monitoring customer satisfaction, although the customers whose views will be sought should be asked which mechanisms they would prefer to use. It may be necessary to review this policy and associated procedures at regular intervals, to assess how effective the chosen methods have been.

Case study

Monitoring customer satisfaction

Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre

Background

Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre (BRC) was formed in 1989 as part of the Hertfordshire County Council and provides services to the County Council, seven of the 10 district councils, English Nature and Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust. The BRC is unusual in that, as well as managing and supplying data, it also provides an ecological advisory service to the County Council and district councils. Hertfordshire BRC holds information on 5,000 sites (including county Wildlife Sites) on ArcView and Recorder.

Discussion

The policy states that the BRC will monitor the satisfaction of both users and suppliers. The procedures identify a number of mechanisms that will be used, including establishing a user group and a biological recording forum. A more targeted approach will be used by sending a questionnaire to funding partners and core users and suppliers when the business plan is reviewed (every three years). The BRC will also attend other recording groups and conservation groups in Hertfordshire, to report on the BRCs work and receive feedback.

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Policy on Monitoring Customer Satisfaction

1. Policy Statement

The Centre will establish procedures and organisational structures to enable it to monitor customer satisfaction on a regular basis, including both the users of information and the suppliers.

The Centre will review its customer monitoring procedures on an annual basis, in the light of changing demands, and in relation to the information policies of its sponsors and principal users.

2. Background to policy

2.1 It is critical that the Centre regularly monitors the satisfaction of its customers with its products and services if it is to secure and maintain long term viability. The process should form part of a regular review of user needs. The review process should inform data collection and dissemination priorities.

2.2 A variety of approaches have been taken to monitor customer satisfaction. These include:

- A User group – with representatives from as many as possible of the principal user organisations.
- The Management Board – consisting of representatives of funding bodies and principal data providing partners.
- Liaison groups – drawn from representatives of relevant organisations operating in the Records Centre's area.
- Customer surveys by questionnaire (but could include interviews).
- A Forum on recording in the area.

The resources needed to make effective use of such feedback will need to be identified in the Centre's Business Plan.

2.3 An important issue will be the cost-effectiveness of carrying out such customer satisfaction surveys. The Centre's policy on access to information will focus on the servicing of the Centre's main clients. It will therefore be important to ensure that their satisfaction is addressed as a priority. Extensive surveys of the public may be expensive and time-consuming with little benefit. Surveys by questionnaires sent cold to users may also not produce effective responses, as they may not be relevant to the individual's relationship to the Centre and can be seen as an unnecessary chore. It is also important to ensure that the link is made between judging the satisfaction of particular officers within an organisation who may have used the Centre and those with whom the financial support of the Centre may lie.

3. Links to other policies

Identification of data to meet user needs.

This looks in detail at the processes needed specifically to identify what data is most relevant for users' needs.

Service Level Agreements relating to the supply of information.

Establishes the principles upon which SLAs will be founded, forming the basis of supply to principal users.

Data Supply

Details the processes of supplying data on request.

Core Products and Information Services

Details the principal products of the Centre for its main users.

Assessment and Analysis of Information.

Identifies the extent to which the Centre will provide advisory services based on its data.

Information Services for the Public

Outlines the ways in which the general public will be serviced.

Data Management Services

Deals specifically with the data management services which may be offered to specific users.

Charging

Details the basis on which charges will be made for the supply of information.

Handling Enquiries and Responses

Sets out the Centre's processes for dealing with a range of enquiry types.

Access Terms and Conditions

Sets out the Centre's Access Terms & Conditions.

4. Procedures

4.1 The Centre will set up and service a User Group, which will meet on at least a quarterly basis to review the current work programme, and to receive information on future demands. This Group should consist of directly interested representatives from all the principal funding users and key data suppliers:

- Hertfordshire County Council
- Sponsoring District and Borough Councils
- English Nature
- Hertfordshire Natural History Society
- Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust

4.2 The Centre's Management Board will carry out triennial Business Plan Reviews, which will include a questionnaire to all principal funding partners, main organisational users of and suppliers of information to the Centre. Responses to this questionnaire will be used directly to inform the Business Plan's work programmes.

4.3 The Centre will ensure that it sends a representative to relevant fora or committees concerning biodiversity conservation or biological recording in Hertfordshire, and that a report on the Centre's work is given to these meetings. Current relevant meetings are:

- Hertfordshire Environment Forum: Nature Conservation Topic Group.
- Hertfordshire Wildlife Sites Initiative Steering Group
- Hertfordshire Natural History Society: Records Committee.
- Herts & Middx Wildlife Trust: Conservation & Scientific Committee.
- Lee Valley Conservation Group & Lee Valley BAP Steering Group.
- Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group: Herts/Cambs.
- St Albans Wildlife Advisory Group
- Dacorum Environment Forum

4.4 The Centre will set up with partners an annual Forum for Biological Recording in Hertfordshire, with representatives invited from all organisations with an interest in biological recording in the area.