

The Reach of LERC Data into the English Planning System

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Abstract

Local Environmental Records Centres (LERCs) supply biodiversity data to the local planning system. It is unknown what the “reach” of this data is, i.e. how often it is taken up and used to inform planning decisions. This paper seeks to make an estimate of this reach by comparing the total number of data searches conducted by LERCs on behalf of the consultants working for developers, with the total number of planning applications for their area. Four years’ worth of data were analysed. The highest proportion of planning applications to receive LERC data was in 2015-16 at 3.15% with the average for all years being 2.72%. The percentage has changed from 2.06% in the first year, suggesting that the reach of LERC data may be increasing, although the data analysed only covers a small time span, so further investigations would be required to produce a more reliable conclusion.

Methodology

Analysis was limited to England because the figures for planning applications here are easily available from the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government.

Between 2012 and 2016, ALERC collected data and information from its members via a survey. This covered a range of topics, including the number of data searches conducted for ecological consultancies. These data searches are almost always in support of planning applications. Over the four year time period, twelve LERCs completed the ALERC survey every year and these are considered the “sample of twelve”. There are forty four LERCs in England, so twelve is considered a reasonable sample, particularly as it covers the range of different types of LERCs, being independent or hosted, large or small, urban or rural.

A simple comparison was conducted between the number of data searches conducted by the sample of twelve and the number of planning applications occurring in their area.

Results

Table 1, below, gives the results of the analysis. Individual years are financial years, April to March.

Table 1. Comparison between number of planning applications and data searches for sample of twelve.

	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	Mean
Total planning applications	183 912	196 491	186 833	192 881	190 029.25
Total data searches	3796	5121	5717	6067	5175.21
Proportion	2.06	2.61	3.06	3.15	2.72
Increase		26.28	17.41	2.80	

The LERC with the highest proportion of planning applications receiving data enquiries had a proportion of 5.48%, whilst the lowest was 0.97%.

Discussion

The figures presented above suggest a low uptake of LERC data in the planning system. There is variability within the sample of twelve LERCs, but even the highest proportion within these, whilst being twice the average is still only around 5%. The reach of LERC data does appear to have increased over the time period covered by this analysis, but this increase is becoming less rapid.

Further study

These figures can be viewed as a preliminary investigation into the reach of LERC data into the planning system. By themselves, the figures suggest that the reach is low, but a number of further investigations should be carried out to determine how high it could actually be. A greater level of response from LERCs would also provide an exact figure.

Potential areas for further study are:

- Complete figures (planning figures and data searches) from all UK LERCs
- Figures for years beyond 2015-16 to create a longer time series and provide most up to date data
- Work to calculate how many planning applications usually have an impact on biodiversity and therefore *should* require a data enquiry
- Work to calculate the number of planning applications that receive biodiversity data from non-LERC sources.