

ALERC

Association of Local Environmental
Records Centres



Making “Open” Work

A workshop exploring how LERCs can seize the opportunities arising through Open Data and mitigate its risks



Introduction

In January 2017, the Open Data Institute was commissioned by GiGL to lead a workshop on Open Data and what it may mean for LERCs. The workshop was an opportunity to learn more about Open Data as an international, cross sectoral movement and to look at the possible ways by which LERCs could respond to both the opportunities and threats presented through Open Data.

The Open Data Institute is there to help “people identify and address how the web of data will impact their businesses and their sectors”. Amongst other activities, it provides leadership and training, and conducts research in order to support and inspire people to innovate with data. The ODI therefore provides an excellent opportunity to investigate what Open Data means for LERCs and to explore how LERCs could use Open Data to pursue and expand their objectives and it was with this in mind, that a workshop between GiGL, other LERC representatives and ALERC that addressed Open Data in the UK and supported the objectives of the wider European Interreg BID-REX project, which is improving regional policies by matching biodiversity data with conservation decision making.

Ben Cave of ODI led the workshop, using techniques designed to help the selection of LERC employees to learn what Open Data actually is, analyse the opportunities it may provide and mitigate the risks. This report summarises the day and details its findings.



Making “Open” Work

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Summary

This report summarises a workshop designed and delivered for Greenspace Information for Greater London CIC (GiGL) by the Open Data Institute. Present at the workshop were representatives of a number of Local Environmental Records Centres (LERCs) along with leaders from ALERC.

There is a concern that open data is a risk to LERCs’ commercial not-for-profit activity. There is a willingness to support the open data programme, but a need to identify alternative revenue streams unless collection and publishing costs are reduced.

There is a distinction between raw data as received from volunteer groups, and the enriched and organised information resources on which LERCs’ commercial activities depend. Publishing this raw data openly could be a way to fulfil the requirements of the open data programme but it was not known whether this was the case.

There are potential business models that could be put in place to protect LERC revenue as more of their data was published openly. A primary source of revenue is reports for environmental consultants that form an important part of their own business activities. At present, reports are charged on a case-by-case basis. The data that forms these reports gains value when combined with other data, and therefore that value is not directly linked to data that could be made open. Differentiated costs dependent on use or a ‘pay or play’ structure where clients can contribute to a shared goal may also be alternative business models.

The report contains recommended next steps in the following areas:

- Engage with Defra to discuss the requirements and impact of the open data programme
- Explore options for open data publication and new commercial products
- Work with LERC community to reduce costs and engage data users

Current Situation

The workshop brought together representatives of a number of Local Environmental Records Centres (LERCs) together with ALERC leaders to explore the options for more effective sharing of LERC data assets both with customers (clients and partners) and the wider public. The discussions during the course of the day were split into two key themes: 1) Developing effective business models for sharing data and 2) Sharing data assets effectively through open data and related channels.

The difficulties around open data

A key theme of discussions throughout the day was the difficulty in complying with the requests of country agencies to share data, particularly species occurrence monitoring and distribution, at capture resolution. Capture resolution data forms the underlying value that allows LERCs to conduct much of their commercial not-for-profit activity. There is a concern that making such data available, particularly in the enriched & ordered form which the LERCs hold, would undermine their ability to sustain their operations through commercial activities. While the LERCs are willing to support the open data programme, their priority remains easy access to high quality data and related services. Charging private and public sector organisations for use of these services provides vital income that is reinvested back into each LERC's activities for the benefit of their customers and the wider public.

The alternative forms of open data

Beyond the release of capture resolution data, another aspect of the discussion centred around alternate forms of participation in the open data process alongside government. One area that provoked significant discussion was the separation between raw data as the LERCs receive it from volunteer groups, and the enriched and organised information resources on which their commercial activities depend. Releasing raw data was thought by many participants to be of little use. However, there may be an option to explore in the release of less 'rich' data as open. While, for example, data without the provenance of the recorder who observed it would be less useful to an environmental consultant, it would have basic usefulness to amateur observers or those with a personal interest in conservation. For this reason much of the afternoon was dedicated to the difference between basic data and enriched information and whether the basic data could be made open without detriment to the business model of the LERCs.

The business models to support open

One of the key streams of discussion throughout the day was the business models that could be put in place to protect LERC revenue under a scenario where a greater proportion of their data was made open. During the discussions we clarified that one of the primary sources of revenue for LERCs are reports for environmental consultants that form an important part of their own business activities. At present, reports are charged on a case-by-case basis linked to geography, which given the size of most environmental consultants is the only viable option (rather than a subscription model which would only prove attractive to large, high-volume users). A key insight was that the value from data, particularly 'fuzzy' species occurrence data at intermediate resolution occurrence data, comes from capture-resolution, full categorisation of the species and a record linked to the details of the original recorder. Given that this value is not directly linked to data that could be made open, we also explored the potential alternative business models that could include differentiated charging based on use or a 'pay or play' structure where clients can contribute to a shared goal as an alternative to commercial use.

Recommended Actions

The recommended actions are grouped into three themes:

Engage Defra to discuss the requirements and impact of the open data programme

1. Accurately calculate the lost revenue from opening capture resolution data - The central argument to government regarding the release of capture resolution open data is the lost revenue from this activity. In order to more effectively advocate for an alternate settlement, offer the government an accurate estimate of the cost to them of subsidising the release of this data. This estimate should be quoted directly in future discussion as a necessary subsidy to LERC operations if you are to open all data at capture resolution.
2. Arrange a direct conversation with representatives of DEFRA to discuss the possibilities and constraints of open data from the LERCs and agree a whole-department strategy rather than engaging further with Country Agencies directly.

Explore options for open data publication and new commercial products

3. Seek legal opinion on personal data publication - The discussion of the future relationship with the atlas highlighted that the data will be published with the name of the original observer. This could well breach data protection unless the explicit permission of that person has been gained for the publication. As a Privacy Impact Assessment has already been completed, we advise seeking a specialist legal opinion from a data protection lawyer to clarify
4. Explore the publication of ALERC-wide species and sites data that will have some potential use for those interested in a national summary of biodiversity and will act as an advert for LERC data and a gateway to using their services.

Explore options for open data publication and new commercial products

5. Reduce costs by identifying coordinated delivery mechanisms for value-added data services - One current hindrance to growth in the business LERCs turnover is the methods of delivering data to clients. Manual reports which take time to request, process, service and return represent an inefficiency which prevents you seeking larger client bases. We recommend both exploring how software developed by some LERCs can be licensed and used by others and the development of a bespoke API for your popular data types. The API would allow repeat clients to automate their reporting requests and would bill them accordingly for the service, allowing LERC staff to dedicate more of their time to high-value data work.
6. Embark on a communications campaign to demonstrate the value of LERCs to the data chain - One of the main concerns observed during the session was that government partners and the wider public do not fully understand the essential role the LERCs play in bridging the gap between messy, raw data from volunteer groups and high-quality, actionable insights which can inform a planning decision or a biodiversity report. Communicating these message to your clients and partners will help to raise the profile of LERCs and provide further support in ongoing discussions over the place of open data alongside a commercial business model.

7. Seek a project to subsidise the coordinated release of intermediate resolution species occurrence data. Explore further the two ideas of creating a UK-wide dataset showing the location of publicly accessible wildlife sites (a non-statutory designation), the other project was looking at a planning alert layer

8. Coordinate ALERC discussions over development of AP and identification of coordinated delivery mechanisms.

Turning Advice into Action

ALERC Board of Directors

The workshop showed that open data has the power to increase biodiversity data sharing and enhance LERC business models. To harness this power and to turn the advice we have received into positive action, the ALERC directors make the following proposals to our membership:

1. Create a priority species “heat map” for the UK to be published on the NBN Atlas. The purpose of this map is to display the variability in the distribution of priority species, which in turn highlights the need to perform site based data searches for detailed information to assist with planning applications. The map can be constructed piece by piece by LERCs working within their individual regions to produce regional maps, which when published together, will produce a picture for the whole of the UK. When published, it will not only advertise the existence of LERC records and their importance, but also demonstrate some of the cartographic capabilities offered by LERCs.

The map will be a visual representation of the number of priority species recorded per 1km square. A full specification will be produced and shared with LERCs.

2. Investigate the possibility of publishing basic Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) information as open data. This could be the boundaries of LWSs, or it could be summary information such as tables of data on LWSs for different areas.

The purpose of this exercise would be similar to the previous one in that draws attention to the existence of data accessible through LERCs. In this case it would draw attention to the fact that there other forms of biodiversity data (other than species records) and would raise the profile of series of designated sites that are not given the attention they deserve.

Working with other sectors, such as academics, may be the best way to produce a layer that is useful, powerful and positively impacts LERC business models. In the first instance, ALERC should set up a small liaison group with the Wildlife Trusts (key LWS stakeholders) to discuss LWSs and their promotion.

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