

Natural England's proposal for the "Defra Fund for Innovation in Local Biodiversity Recording"

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Summary

Information about the distribution, location and trends in biodiversity is fundamental to policy implementation by Government Departments and statutory agencies. A unique feature of biodiversity recording in the United Kingdom is that most species information is collected through volunteer effort. The information that volunteers collect is channelled through Local Record Centres and national societies and schemes. Given the increasing emphasis on access to biodiversity information it is timely to address long-running problems related to inconsistent coverage of Local Record Centres. All policy uses require comprehensive England-wide coverage to support credible, sustainable evidence-based policy formulation and delivery. This proposal is intended to develop this comprehensive coverage to a consistent standard.

In 2004 a pilot study demonstrated the value of using up to date biodiversity information from Local Record Centres in delivering agri-environment schemes. Following this pilot Defra has been exploring the most effective way of providing national implementation of this cost saving approach. In March 2007, Martin Brasher, Deputy Director of Defra's Wildlife Habitats and Biodiversity Division wrote to Helen Phillips, Chief Executive of Natural England to confirm plans for a £485,000 one-year Defra Fund for Innovation in Local Biodiversity Recording for the 2007/08 financial year.

A subsequent meeting between Defra, Natural England, Environment Agency and JNCC representatives clarified the policy drivers and objectives of this fund. The objectives identified are to improve the coverage, consistency, efficiency and sustainability for local biodiversity data collation, management and dissemination provided by Local Record Centres. Natural England has been invited to submit a proposal as to how the fund could be used to further these objectives. This proposal outlines a process of regional facilitation, including demonstration projects, to identify the steps towards more efficient and innovative ways of mobilising local biodiversity information.

Background

Local Record Centres (LRCs) collate and manage species data on behalf of voluntary recording groups and individuals for a geographical area (usually county or sub-region) and make it available to biodiversity decision makers. They also act as a focal point for the collation of habitat data collected by various organisations.

LRCs are run on a not-for-profit basis funded through partnerships including local authorities, wildlife trusts and statutory agencies. A small proportion of funding comes from fees for data searches from consultancies, primarily for development control. Currently the majority of funding for LRCs in England (> £1.1 million per year) comes from local authorities. Natural England has proposed an allocated of £600k per year for mobilising local biodiversity data, although this is subject to a review of budget allocations. It is also moving away from a model of paying for products to one of supporting the core costs of data collation and management in return for access to biodiversity data across the organisation. Environment Agency currently spends £120k per year on LRCs and is looking to centralise initial screening of permitting as part of Better Regulation.

Objectives

The focus of funding under the Defra proposal will be on the data collation, management and dissemination roles of LRCs. It excludes enhanced functions¹ that may be undertaken by LRCs, such as interpretation and habitat survey. Our proposal is that funds are targeted on the following outcomes:

Coverage:

- There are currently 35 record centres across England covering 83% of counties². Funding will be targeted to fill gaps in coverage of the existing LRC network;
- Coverage also relates to the range of taxonomic groups for which LRCs hold data and effort will be focused on ensuring that LRCs work with all local recording groups and relevant national recording schemes to provide adequate taxonomic coverage. They should also work with organisations involved in habitat survey to secure access to available habitat data.

Consistency:

- Individual record centres vary considerably in their adoption of standards. The funding will be used to ensure that LRCs are working to established standards and guidance, as promoted by the NBN, related to verification and validation of records, data management and data exchange.

Efficiency:

- A large proportion of LRC data holdings may be paper based and responding to data requests is often a laborious, manual process. Data capture, management and dissemination to end users needs to be a streamlined process in order to provide effective and efficient services to users. This service needs to include access to existing and new species and habitat data as soon as possible after the data has been captured
- Data from LRCs should feed into the NBN Gateway process and supplied to users' existing information systems. This supports the philosophy that data should be collected once and used many times.

Sustainability:

- One of the biggest issues facing LRC sustainability is uncertainty over future funding. Any development strategy for LRCs must provide a greater level of funding security to cover staff resources and the other core costs of data collation, management and dissemination.

Mechanism

The development status of Local Record Centres and the issues affecting them varies considerably across regions. A regional approach is proposed as the most effective way of meeting the above objectives. This will provide the flexibility to identify appropriate solutions and to be responsive to local needs. Adopting a regional approach as opposed to a county-by-county approach provides the option to consider regional or sub-regional solutions, with commensurate efficiencies of scale and management.

Within each region it is proposed to contract a facilitator to work together with the existing Regional BAP Coordinator. Each regional facilitator will work to a standard remit, based on the objectives outlined above. They will work with the LRCs in the region to understand their business process and with local authorities, regional and national players to understand their information needs. They will run a series of workshops, with the above stakeholders, to challenge assumptions, identify how the objectives could be met and the development steps

¹ NBN Trust Position Statement on Local Record Centres

² UK Review of Local Record Centres (Draft 2007), Natural England et al

towards this. The facilitator will then represent the regions and take forward the outputs of the workshops, producing funding bids, along with stakeholders. These projects should have practical outputs (e.g. digitisation of data or improved data delivery mechanisms to users) and further the objectives of the fund.

Nationally coordinated projects are proposed that will demonstrate to users the opportunities offered by the NBN in mobilising local biodiversity data. These will build on the existing Defra/NBN Joint Venture Agreement projects with record centres in Greater London and the Bristol area plus one or two additional projects such as the establishment of a Yorkshire & Humber Ecological Data Network. These projects will assess the status of progress to date and provide an in-depth level of business analysis that will help to inform the regional facilitation process. The outcomes of these projects will be to demonstrate to data users and record centres efficient mechanisms for the exchange of biodiversity data to underpin business requirements. A specific target of these demonstrations will be local authorities and government agencies that can benefit through cost reduction to their core business. These projects will also provide a toolset that may be adopted by projects identified at regional level.

A Project Steering Group, including Defra, Environment Agency and Local Government Association representatives and a Natural England project manager, will oversee the delivery of the project. The facilitators will liaise with the Steering Group at each stage of the project. The Steering Group will decide which proposals are to be taken forward and oversee their delivery.

Outline plan and timescales

Task	Outputs	Date
Tendering for nationally coordinated projects	Contract in place for extension of existing projects (London & Bristol). Further 2 projects identified.	May-Jun 07
Tendering for regional contracts	Contract in place for facilitator in each region (SE and London combined)	May-Jul 07
Undertake nationally coordinated projects	Nationally coordinated projects delivery. Outputs disseminated as part of workshops.	Jun – Oct 07
Induction of facilitators	Facilitators familiar with the objectives of the project and the background of their region	Jul 07
Meetings with stakeholders	Facilitators familiar with status, business processes and issues faced by LRCs and users in the region, preparation for workshops complete	Aug-Sep 07
Workshops	A series of workshops conducted in the region with stakeholders. Development steps and potential projects identified.	Sep-Oct 07
Project bidding	Facilitator develops funding bids together with stakeholders in the region	Oct-Nov 07
Bid evaluation	Steering Group evaluates submitted bids and decides which are to be taken forward.	Nov 07
Project delivery	Demonstration projects between LRCs and users implemented.	Dec 07-Mar 08

The cost of facilitation is estimated at £32,000 (inc VAT) per region. This is based on a daily rate of £500, plus expenses, working 50 days over a period of five months.

Four nationally coordinated projects will be allocated £20,000 each (inc VAT), inclusive of the development of technical solutions. This is based on a daily rate of £500 plus expenses, working 30 days over a period of 5 months. These projects will be initiated early in the year to reduce risk of underspend

This would leave an average of £18,500 per region (inc VAT) for regional demonstration projects.

Risks

The main risks to the delivery of this project relate to existing plans and strategies that may conflict with the overall objectives set out here. There may also be concern that an emphasis on 'efficiency' could mean reducing services and staffing for existing record centres, hence place jobs under threat. To address this facilitators should be independent, not have pre-conceived ideas about LRCs and work under the remit defined by the Steering Group. They will need to work closely with the Regional BAP Coordinator. The Steering Group will provide an induction to the regional facilitators to ensure that the objectives are clear. The approach to meeting the objectives should come from the stakeholders, therefore instilling ownership, and build on existing established record centres.

A secondary risk to the project is the timeframe available to contract suitable facilitators. The level of funding for this activity is above the EU tender thresholds and will lead to longer tendering times. To reduce the risk the tendering process for facilitators should be started as soon as the business case and proposal are approved. Allowing contractors to bid for contracts in one or more region would enable both small and large consultancies participate. It may be possible for funding of demonstration projects to be issued as grants or as variations on existing single tendered agreements. For demonstration projects requiring software development it may be possible to do this under an existing Framework Contract.

Since funding is focused on LRCs, local and national recording schemes may feel that they are being unfairly excluded. It needs to be communicated that there are other funding streams available for such schemes (through the NBN Data Access Group and the Defra/NBN Joint Venture Agreement).

The Department for Communities and Local Government is a key funding partner in LRCs and needs to be seen as part of the ultimate pan-government solution to sustainable funding. In establishing this fund there is a risk that DCLG might wish to reduce any input to LRCs as a consequence of Defra providing the direct government funding. This funding is an opportunity to engage DCLG and explore the better regulation and efficiency saving possible through secure access to information.

Outcomes

The outcome of this project will be a practical process identified in each region for a more efficient, innovative way for mobilising local biodiversity data. There will also be actual examples to demonstrate to users of biodiversity data the benefits of the approach, hence demonstrating benefits to their business processes. By undertaking this groundwork any future funding for the collation, management and dissemination of biodiversity data can be targeted more effectively. The process will also help to accelerate the establishment of a network of Local Record Centres providing full coverage across England and clarify the real costs to secure and maintain this service.

The objectives outlined above combined with the development steps to be identified in each region will provide a set of performance indicators against which the effectiveness of future funding can be measured.