

Title

A Biodiversity Duty for Public Sector Bodies and Local Government Report on Visits to Local Authority Biodiversity Champions 2008/09

Background/Progress

WBP SG approved a programme of meetings with newly appointed Local Authority Biodiversity Champions (WBPSG4 February 2008)

These 'compliance visits began in August 2008 following three successful and well attended Ministerial Workshops introducing the Duty to Champions and Senior Local Authority Staff.

The one to one visits programme to all 22 Unitary and 3 National Park Champions was completed mid January 2009. (One visit was conducted 'virtually' as the Champion had just held a meeting with the county biodiversity team; one Champion withdrew from the meeting at short notice but it went ahead with the Authority's staff.)

All meetings have used a standard Agenda and Visit Record sheet; see Annex 1a and b.

Each meeting generated an agreed record, shared with those present.

These will act as a baseline for future compliance visits.

The records have been analysed and presented as generic findings; see Annex 2.

Points to note:

- All Authorities have appointed a Champion. They all understand that the Duty affects the whole authority and all its functions. Many Senior Staff do not understand this.
- Many Champions have addressed fellow Members. About 20% have taken papers to Cabinet and a further 40% plan to do so. Some authorities are preparing Authority - wide Action Plans and even aim to use BARS to communicate and record progress.
- Most Champions have initiated a programme of regular meetings with biodiversity/ ecology staff, who feel empowered and supported.
- Senior Staff in some authorities have taken papers or held discussions in Senior Management Teams and initiated awareness and training sessions. In some cases, they have secured funds to recruit L BAP Officers or extra staff, to provide ecological support for departments across their functions.
- 50% of authorities have a service level agreement with their Local Record Centre, using them to support forward planning and development control. Some have commissioned innovative work to underpin their Local Development Plans with spatial ecological information.
- Many authorities have dedicated planning ecologists, freeing up the ecologist to support other functions/ departments.
- There are still some L BAP officers on short term and part time contracts.

- Many authorities have committed to a biodiversity audit of properties on their Assets Registers and have plans to improve management of their own land for biodiversity.
- Most authorities help others, including local communities, to manage land; they use a range of mechanisms and incentives, including S39 agreements, free advice and labour, European monies.
- Many Champions had messages for the Welsh Assembly Government, including requests for help to calculate their carbon footprint, for more freedom to initiate local action, the issue of TAN5, to make the Wales Spatial Plan process more orientated towards protecting the natural environmental, land management to meet climate change adaptation, flood prevention and biodiversity goals. They also pointed to instances where Assembly Departments failed to demonstrate compliance with the Duty.
- Champions in rural areas requested a review of funding formulae to recognise their huge responsibilities for the conservation of habitats which offer ecosystem services for citizens of Wales/ UK.
- A request has been made for a fully informed WBP Welsh speaking spokesperson for the Duty, to cover authorities with Welsh speaking Champions and staff.
- Staff of the WLGA have been updated informally about progress during this current round of NERC Duty visits; they have been most supportive.

Plan/Proposals

WBP should make return visits to Champions during 2009/10 to consolidate the relationships. A marine/ coastal theme has been requested by coastal authorities; specialist support would be needed.

WBP should establish and coordinate an annual programme of 'compliance visits'; these visits could be conducted by the three WBP support Officers; all have been involved in the first round of visits and protocols and paperwork have been set up.

At least one Ministerial event should be arranged annually to support the Champions, with WAG and WLGA involvement.

Decision Points

- a) To recommend that at least one Ministerial event is arranged annually to support Champions
- b) To agree that WBP initiates an annual programme of meetings with Champions as 'compliance' visits
- c) To agree the key messages from the initial round of visits and provide feedback to those involved.
- d) To agree that the information collected can be fed into the DEFRA led review of the implementation of the Duty during 2009.