

WBPSG8

PAPER 6

Swansea, 8th July 2009

LOCAL RECORD CENTRES IN WALES ANNUAL REPORT TO THE WALES BIODIVERSITY PARTNERSHIP (WBP)

This paper has been produced in consultation with the four Local Records Centres (LRCs) in Wales and is part of their annual commitment to report issues to WBP.

BACKGROUND

At WBP SG3 (November 2007), the Welsh LRCs reported various issues for consideration. This Paper reports back on the latest status of these issues .

ISSUES

1. SUSTAINABILITY OF FUNDING

Sustainability of funding continues to be an issue for the four LRCs, although generally each LRC's funding is more stable than it was in November 2007. Cofnod lost one of its key Local Authority partners (Isle of Anglesey County Council) in 2008 and SEWBReC has recently learnt that Cardiff Council will not be buying its service in 2009/10. Gaps in Local Authority support continue to affect Cofnod and SEWBReC, even after successful 'Biodiversity Champions Seminars' in 2008, which clearly encouraged Local Authorities to use LRC services. Recently an attempt to provide standard services for a shared cost across all North Wales Authorities was put on hold, pending ongoing discussions from the "Making the Connections" project – the future of Cofnod providing services across all North Wales Authorities appears intrinsically linked to this project. On a more positive note, Welsh LRCs have recently secured agreement with Environment Agency Wales to supply Protected and Priority species data, for use by their local biodiversity staff and National Permitting Team. A three year extension to this agreement is currently being negotiated. In addition, new three year agreements will shortly be signed with the Countryside Council for Wales and a further year remains of three year agreements with the regional Trunk Road Agencies. Forestry Commission Wales continues to support Welsh LRCs and it is hoped they will also utilise data for their forest management activities in 2009. An all-Wales SLA is also anticipated with the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) Department of Economy and Transport (DE&T) which would make it the only WAG department to directly fund the LRCs. Discussions with WAG Department for Rural Affairs have stalled, but LRCs hope to restart these soon. Commercial income from the likes of Environmental Consultants continues to play an important role in sustaining Welsh LRCs, however it is currently uncertain how much the recession will affect this area of income. On this final point, the Welsh LRCs rely on Government sources for between 80 and 94% of their income. If the recession has a significant impact on public spending, this could seriously affect LRC funding and viability over the coming years.

2. STRATEGIC CO-ORDINATION OF WELSH LRCs

Welsh LRCs continue to build on their strong strategic partnership. The Welsh LRC network was formally launched by Jane Davidson AM in November 2007, and a joint Web Portal (www.lrcwales.org.uk) was developed to coincide with the event. Together Welsh LRCs have agreed a joint vision (see the website) and in 2008 they jointly attended the Royal Welsh Show. LRC staff continue to meet on a regular basis, to agree and share good practice across Wales. Since November 2007 there have been two all Wales meetings of LRC Managers and

Directors. The most recent meeting (May 2009) looked at the strategic development of Welsh LRCs and in particular their role as part of the National Biodiversity Network (NBN). LRCs have agreed to look into sharing their resources, in particular IT development and administration. Strategic co-ordination gives LRCs in Wales an important strength – one which is viewed by those in other parts of the UK as a model for their LRC development.

3. WBP PARTNERS PROVIDING AND UTILISING LRC DATA

The level of use of LRC products and services by WBP members, though intrinsically linked to funding, is still rather limited. For Local Authorities, our services are mainly being utilised by Planning and occasionally by Highways Departments. The NERC Duty covers all Public Bodies across all their functions, therefore we believe that LRC services could be better utilised across existing partners to screen for biodiversity issues.

The supply of relevant biodiversity data from key WBP members to LRCs still remains an issue. Data from WAG is still generally difficult to access, for reasons such as a lack of clarity regarding data ownership and landowner confidentiality. Also, with the exception of the Countryside Council for Wales, who continue to share all their mobilised data with LRCs, other Assembly Government sponsored bodies are generally failing to share their biodiversity information with LRCs. In the cases of Environment Agency and Forestry Commission Wales, discussions are underway but no definite plans for data sharing have been agreed. There has been some movement with the RSPB sharing their data with LRCs, however transfer of data is currently stalled by internal data management issues. We hope this will be resolved in the coming year.

LRCs recently met with members of the Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (IEEM), which represents many Environmental Consultants. Following discussion, it was agreed to devise guidance for IEEM members on making scientific data, collected during the course of their professional duties, available to others such as LRCs. Guidance would cover issues such as model wording for tender bids and advice on formatting data for sharing. Several Environmental Consultants along with representatives of a wide range of current and potential data suppliers attended the second annual Wales Environmental Information Forum (WEIF) in March 2009. The subject of the Forum this year was Data Flow - looking at ways of encouraging better ways of sharing data. The resultant "Data Sharing Charter", which we hope will be developed in the near future, will hopefully encourage organisations to sign up to sharing their data. A further action to map idealised data flows by taxonomic group at the UK level should also help to free up the movement of data between Vice County Recorders (VCRs), National Schemes and Societies and LRCs.

4. SUPPORT FOR THE VOLUNTEER RECORDING

LRCs continue to be a focal point for gathering local data. In addition LRCs have been giving greater access to the data they hold to Local Recorders, especially to key species experts such as VCRs. This not only enables VCRs to see records they may not have on their own recording systems, but also they are helping to verify records and therefore raise overall data quality. LRCs continue to offer a range of other support for volunteer records, such as data analysis, map production and help with publications. Funding agreed by WBP to support the mobilisation of paper records for local data priorities and to run Species Training days, will be utilised across Welsh LRCs this year. This will result in significant new data holdings for the LRCs and will provide a minimum of 12 Species Training courses across Wales. Both these elements will contribute to the LRCs' aims of supporting current recorders, encouraging future recorders

and improving the data available on which to base decisions. The Welsh LRCs would like to formally thank WBP for this opportunity.

Decision Points

- a) All WBP partners consider whether LRC services could be better utilised across existing partners to screen for biodiversity issues
- b) All WBP partners look into sharing their data with the LRCs