

Wales Environmental Information Forum and Steering Group: Update

Background

The Wales Environmental Information Steering Group (WEISG) shared vision is “Sharing Welsh environmental information to benefit the environment & people of Wales, the UK and globally. WBP were last updated on the Wales Environmental Information Steering Group (WEISG) in November 2008 (see WBP SG6 Item 11) and endorsed the establishment of WEISG as a WBP Task and Finish Group. In the new Wales Biodiversity Framework WEISG is a WBP Support Group. The 2008 paper introduced WEISG terms of reference; 6 WEISG workstreams (data flow, data quality, skills, technology, resources & governance); agreed to focus initial efforts on progressing WEISG data flow and data quality workstreams; and reported that the UK National Biodiversity Network (NBN) partnership is looking to WEISG as a good model for other countries/regions in the UK to follow.

Progress

Data Flow (and this year’s Wales Environmental Information Forum (WEIF))

Following the success of last year’s WEIF, delegates returned to the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth in March for a second event that again involved representatives from a wide range of sectors contributing to the supply and use of environmental data. Although the remit of the Forum is environmental data, participants tended to concentrate on biodiversity data.

The subject of this year’s forum was to address specific constraints to the ‘flow’ of vital environmental data and information in Wales. The discussions on the day:

- worked through the major problems regarding data flow in Wales,
- explored what a good basis for the ideal data flow model would look like,
- matched solutions to problems,
- explored what principles should be adopted for data flow

Delegates condensed and prioritised the solutions and principles into two practical projects for action by WEISG:

- Develop a data sharing charter for partners in Wales to sign up to (particularly public sector organisations).
- Define and agree roles and responsibilities for all partners involved in the flow of data for specified taxonomic groups

Plans/proposals for delivering these actions are outlined in the “Plan/Proposals” section below

The results of this year’s WEIF will help resolve the issues that constrain the flow of environmental data from the point of collection to the point of use in Wales. An article on WEIF 2009 is attached for information and all notes, presentations and information recorded at the forum are published on the Wales Biodiversity Partnership (WBP) website.

Additional work is proceeding on all WEISG workstreams, through specialist groups, and where resources are available. Progress has been made with the skills workstream. WEISG members are represented on the Natur Education Group and a skills workshop is being planned for Nov/Dec.

Supporting the WBP Framework

WEISG members are linked through to WBP Policy and Species Expert Group and most of the Ecosystem Groups. The only gaps at present are Marine, Urban & Brownfield, Upland and Freshwater and WEISG will need to remain mindful of these gaps in representation when agreeing priorities for action and needs to consider how it will feed into and respond to the needs of these groups.

Linking into the UK Agenda

WEISG aims to find solutions for Wales that work within a UK and global context. The mechanism the group uses to ensure this is through WEISG members being contributing partners of:

- Association of Local Environmental Record Centres (ALERC),
- National Biodiversity Network (NBN)
- Marine Environmental Data and Information Network (MEDIN),
- Association of Local Government Ecologists (ALGE).

Further to this, partners from outside of Wales from the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC), Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), NBN, and MEDIN attended and contributed to this year's WEIF and the NBN and MEDIN are contributing to WEISG focus workshops that will progress the WEIF action to develop a data sharing charter for Wales.

The NBN Trust continues to advocate WEISG as a good model for other countries/regions to follow and partners in SNH are particularly interested our experiences with WEIF/WEISG. Staff from CCW & LRCs in Wales represent Wales' interests at NBN Trustees and through NBN working groups. Specifics include contributions to the strategic direction of the NBN partnership and a recent Natural England-NBN workshop on data flow. The outcomes and actions emerging from this workshop mirror those from WEIF.

Opportunities for financial contributions to projects in Wales have been realised through the NBN's Defra project. A proposal to develop information products for Forestry Commission in Wales has been approved along with a data quality project proposed through LRCs.

Plan/Proposals

WEIF 2009 Action 1: Data Charter

WEISG will prepare a data sharing Charter for Government and Government sponsored bodies in Wales to sign up to with a view to extending this to Local Authorities and then the voluntary sector through consultation. The proposal will be developed in the context of the NBN's data sharing principles. A focus workshop is booked for November to complete a charter ready for consultation/approval.

WEIF 2009 Action 2: Data Flow Roles and Responsibilities

The aim of this action is to define and agree the roles and responsibilities for all partners involved in the flow of data for specific taxonomic groups. LRCs in Wales are taking the lead for the action. A focus meeting is scheduled for November to take this forward and will aim to identify opportunities for collaborative projects with partners working on the same issues elsewhere in the UK.

Additional WEISG Action: Skills workshop

A focus meeting/workshop is being planned to agree actions and priorities to steer and progress the skills workstream

WEISG workstreams in abeyance

The Technology, resources, data standards workstreams are in abeyance whilst we focus on the above.

WEISG co-ordination

The results of the focus workshops and updates on developments since WEIF will be brought together at a full meeting of the steering group to be scheduled for Dec/Jan for Steering Group approval or direction.

Issues

The WEISG workstreams and actions have not progressed as quickly as we would have wanted. There are no dedicated resources and progress has had to be made by partners taking on this agenda in addition to their "day job". It is unlikely that this situation is going to improve in the near future and in fact it may become worse as resources in the public and

Third Sector become ever more constrained. Nevertheless, there is a lot of enthusiasm and commitment from partners (Wales & UK) and progress will be made. It will also be important to seek collaborative opportunities through the NBN and MEDIN with partners in Scotland and England to ensure that best practice is shared and resources are maximised.

Ordnance Survey (OS) Derived Data

Since agreement at WEIF to develop a data sharing charter for public bodies in Wales, a new OS Pan Government Agreement (PGA) has been signed that may conflict with this agenda. The Data Sharing Charter was to aim for free and open use of all environmental data for or about Wales. OS licensing constraints for data derived using OS bas maps may derail the work that we aim to do on the data sharing charter. The Welsh Assembly Government (WAG), Assembly Government Sponsored Bodies and sister agencies are currently in high level discussions with OS about this.

Decision Points

To endorse the plans/proposals outlined in this paper