

Biodiversity Information and Reporting Group

21/03/07

Present:

Ray Perrins (SWO), Naomi Brookes (BSW), Imogen Davenport (DoWT), Jo Illsley (BRERC), Tim Corner (BRERC), Eleanor Bremner (DBRC), Bill Broadbent (DeWT), Carolyn Steele (DERC), Craig Dixon (DCC), Larry Burrows (SCC), Bill Butcher (SERC).

Apologies:

Matt Hamilton (Avon LBAP), Deborah Elton (SSDC), Vicki Breeze (SCC).

Notes:

1. Role of the group, terms of reference, future meetings

RP introduced the role of BIRG as a Working Group within Biodiversity South West (BSW). BIRG's principle aim to keep biodiversity information flowing across the region. BIRG will be looking at what information is needed, what is currently reported on to fill these needs, and what should ideally be used. It will also look to publicise and interpret new biodiversity information and facts and figures. This meeting covered the biodiversity needs of Local Authorities, in particular for Local Development Frameworks and Local Area Agreements. The next two meetings will cover (1) regional biodiversity information needs (including potential Nature Map indicators and BSW reporting) and (2) interpretation of widely used regional biodiversity information (for example wild bird populations and SSSI condition).

Terms of reference have been circulated and any comments are welcome.

2. Tim Corner (Bristol Regional Environmental Records Centre) presentation.

TC gave a presentation on the advantages of consistency of using the same standards for biodiversity data collection and use. Continued use will hopefully lead to more data and therefore more complete datasets.

TC also spoke about BRERC's work on Nature Map identifying areas where work could be done to restore/connect existing relevant habitat within individual SNAs.

BB talked about SERC's Integrated Habitat System, which is being used by a number of customers, including the East of England Biodiversity Forum and the London Biodiversity Partnership.

3. Local Development Frameworks (LDFs) and Annual Monitoring Reports (AMRs)

BB mentioned his work for the East of England Biodiversity Forum. SERC is preparing a report into the top biodiversity information "drivers" in that region, such as their Regional Spatial Strategy (and LDFs), agri-environment schemes, the biodiversity sector itself (Natural England, Environment Agency) etc. From these they will work out what biodiversity data is needed, in terms of both scope and quality. The LRCs then detailed the information they had available and a match was attempted between the information available and that required. Two main principles have emerged from this work. Firstly, the consistent need for biodiversity information. The scope and quality required is very

similar across different counties. Secondly, the data actually available is quite inconsistent, leading to a mismatch. They have not fully explored this but it is partly due to variations in the state of development of different LRCs across the East of England.

The conclusion is that LAs need data of quantity and quality higher than that available. The challenge will be how to fill this gap by either:

- 1) Making more money available to improve the baseline data and ongoing collection.
- 2) Seeing if the requirements can be lowered.

The best way forward may be to use both approaches to get the requirements and data to meet halfway.

This again highlighted TC's point about the need for regional standards for biodiversity data. Working to regional standards and in partnership means that the most and highest quality biodiversity information can be obtained for the least expenditure in terms of money, time and effort.

Core Output Indicator (COI) 8: Biodiversity

COIs are designed to “ensure a consistent and cost-effective approach to monitoring implementation of key national objectives and targets at the regional and local levels.” They are reported on in Local Planning Authority Annual Monitoring Reports (AMRs).

From the COI document:

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1505460>

“COI 8: Biodiversity. Change in areas and populations of biodiversity importance, including:

(i) priority habitats and species (by type); and

(ii) areas designated for their intrinsic environmental value including sites of international, national, regional or sub-regional significance.”

SSSI condition is often used as an indicator, as this information is available from Natural England. However the group considered it of little value in measuring impacts from the planning system. CS pointed out that exceptions do exist, for example in Dorset where SSSIs around Bournemouth and Poole can be affected by development. However, most planning related habitat impacts are more likely to be on valuable habitat outside designated areas.

The possibility of using a measure of planning impacts on local sites (Local Nature Reserves, Wildlife Trust Reserves) was raised and considered a good possibility.

At the moment there is no habitat monitoring process and ideally this would be written in to the planning system itself. BB raised the possibility that biodiversity should be a Contextual Indicator rather than a COI, although any change to COI is likely to take at least 5 years to achieve. For more information on developing indicators for LDFs see:

http://www.communities.gov.uk/pub/906/LocalDevelopmentFrameworkMonitoringAGoodPracticeGuide_id1143906.pdf

In general, the group considered habitat information to be the most useful in terms of monitoring the impact of the planning system over the short term. The BAP priority habitat information compiled by BRERC could form a basis for this monitoring with the important proviso that this baseline is incomplete and much further work would be needed to get a full picture. There are also issues within large urban areas (Bristol, Plymouth) with little or no BAP habitat. In such cases Green Infrastructure may be more relevant to biodiversity gains.

Species information was regarded as generally less useful, especially on an annual basis. However, certain candidates were identified, in particular bats, which (1) are not particularly restricted to any habitat type, (2) can be affected by planning issues and (3) are priority species.

Action: Consistent regional advice needs to be available to assist LAs to decide what to meaningfully do in terms of biodiversity monitoring and reporting for LDFs and AMRs.

RP and NB will coordinate a one day seminar and workshop event with two aims. Firstly to try and get biodiversity gains through the LDF system. Secondly to produce guidance on the SWO and BSW websites for LAs on what to include in AMRs. LRCs will be key participants in this event.

4. Local Development Frameworks and Nature Map

The discussion led on to the Guidance on the use of Nature Map in LDFs, commissioned by BSW, which is now available. ID had circulated this but wondered if planners would have the time to read it. The issue of Green Infrastructure was raised again in terms of where it interacts with SNAs. It was decided that Green Infrastructure might be a good agenda item for a future meeting.

Action: LRC representatives to read guidance to assist with LA enquiries. A summary of the document will be prepared by the Planning and Development Group as well as a cover letter to accompany the guidance. **All** to help with circulating and promoting the guidance to planners and other interested parties.

5. Local Area Agreements

RP introduced LAAs: *“three year agreements, based on local Sustainable Community Strategies, that set out the priorities for a local area agreed between Central Government, represented by the Government Office, and a local area, represented by the lead local authority and other key partners through Local Strategic Partnerships”* (from “Guidance for Round 3 and Refresh of Rounds 1 and 2”:

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1164930>

See also “Developing the Future Arrangements for Local Area Agreements”:

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1506327>

LAAs are currently in their third round (started in April 2007), which rolls out LAAs to all upper tier authorities. In previous rounds biodiversity had not been mentioned specifically in guidance. However a number of LAA agreements included biodiversity indicators under various outcomes. See:

<http://www.sustainable-development.gov.uk/advice/local/documents/laa-sustainable-community-outcomes.pdf>

The third LAA round now includes biodiversity within a new layout. This consists of four main blocks to each LAA. These are:

- Children and Young People
- Safer and Stronger Communities
- Healthier Communities and Older People
- Economic Development

The Economic Development block is a brand new block added for this round. In addition within Safer and Stronger Communities, biodiversity is an indicator for 2 out of the 12 Outcomes:

- Increased access to and enjoyment of green spaces and the countryside.
- Improve the quality of the local environment by reducing the gap in aspects of liveability between the worst wards/neighbourhoods and the districts as a whole, with a particular focus on reducing levels of litter and detritus.

The indicator is the same for both outcomes and is:

“Protect and enhance biodiversity – to conserve and enhance wildlife and the rural landscape and promote access and understanding by all”^{##}

^{##} The Countryside Agency’s “Countryside Quality Indicators” and the England Biodiversity Strategy progress indicators provide strong bases for setting targets. Examples include: condition and change in condition of SSSIs; numbers of farmland/woodland birds; level of use of rights-of-way and access land; volunteer time spent in conservation activity; number of visits to nature reserves.”

As a result there are now possibilities for obtaining biodiversity gains through the LAA system, especially in light of the new duty under the NERC act (2006) on public bodies and statutory undertakers to ensure due regard to the conservation of biodiversity. Work is needed at a local network level to persuade Local Strategic Partnerships to use LAA money for biodiversity gains.

BB raised the issue of complications in two tier areas (for example with district and county councils such as Cornwall and Somerset), which is also acknowledged in the government guidance.

Action: It was agreed that **RP and NB** organize a seminar on LAAs, followed by a workshop to determine ways of getting biodiversity gains through the LAA process.

6. Association of Local Government Ecologists (ALGE) guidance

ALGE have produced a report on “Biodiversity Needs for Local Authorities and National Park Authorities”. See:

<http://www.alge.org.uk/publications/files/index.php>

The group briefly looked at this and considered it useful, although it did not necessarily make clear what information is already available, something which LRCs can do. This may provide a useful background for the two seminar + workshop events listed above.

7. Date of next meeting: 19th June (regional biodiversity data needs and reporting)

Abbreviations:

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| ALGE | Association of Local Government Ecologists |
| AMR | Annual Monitoring Report |
| BAP | Biodiversity Action Plan (Habitat) |
| BRERC | Bristol Regional Environmental Records Centre |
| BSW | Biodiversity South West |
| DBRC | Devon Biodiversity Records Centre |
| DCC | Devon County Council |
| DERC | Dorset Environmental Records Centre |
| DeWT | Devon Wildlife Trust |
| DoWT | Dorset Wildlife Trust |
| LA | Local Authority |
| LBAP | Local Biodiversity Action Partnership |
| LDF | Local Development Framework |
| LRC | Local Records Centre (environmental/biodiversity information) |
| NERC | Natural Environment and Rural Communities (Act) |
| SCC | Somerset County Council |
| SERC | Somerset Environmental Records Centre |
| SNA | Strategic Nature Area (from the South West Nature Map) |
| SSDC | South Somerset District Council |
| SWO | South West Observatory |