East of England Regional Advocacy Project

Final Project Report

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1. Background and justification for the project

In 2009, a Defra-funded Regional Review of Biodiversity Recording in the East of England was carried out by the consultancy RPS on behalf of Natural England, specifically looking at Local Record Centres (LRCs), acting as the central custodians of environmental data. The East of England region covers the LRCs for Bedfordshire and Luton, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, Essex, Hertfordshire, Norfolk and Suffolk. The aims of the review were to identify prioritised actions to secure sustainable funding for LRCs and to address the gaps that currently exist in the coverage and consistency of biodiversity data collection and management.

The review put forward a suite of potential projects as a result of its findings from stakeholder engagement and workshops held within the East of England region and beyond.

Three projects were then developed from the proposals and identified as being most pertinent to achieving the wider objectives of the Defra Fund for Local Biodiversity Recording. These three projects were: 1) improvements to data request services for consultants and public bodies, 2) advocacy of the need for and value of LRCs to public bodies and recorders and 3) collating baseline biodiversity data for Tendring, Essex into one place (with a wider remit to develop a fully functioning LRC in Essex).

The project discussed in this report focuses on 2) advocacy of the need for and value of LRCs to public bodies and recorders.

In February 2010, at a Regional LRC Forum in Bedfordshire, Natural England representatives presented the opportunity to fund this project in the East of England and take advocacy to three key audiences in order to raise awareness of and support for LRCs.

2. Aims and objectives

The purpose of this project was to take forward a set of prioritised actions arising from the Regional Review of Biodiversity Recording in the East of England. The aims of the project were as follows:

1. To make data providers aware of how data submitted to LRCs in the East of England are managed and how they are used to inform decisions

2. To identify present and coming needs of public bodies relating to biodiversity and the products and services that LRCs need to provide to meet them

3. To make public bodies in the East of England aware of the availability of products and services from LRCs relating to their biodiversity duties

The Regional Advocacy Officer (RAO) undertaking the project was based at the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Environmental Records Centre in Cambourne and would work with the following LRCs across the region to deliver the project:

- Bedfordshire and Luton Biodiversity Recording and Monitoring Centre (BLBRMC)
- Biological Records in Essex (BRIE)
- Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Environmental Records Centre (CPERC)
- Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre (HBRC)
- Norfolk Biodiversity Information Service (NBIS)
- Suffolk Biological Records Centre (SBRC)

The project (and this report) is divided into three sections: advocacy to data providers, identifying the needs of public bodies relating to biodiversity information and advocating to public bodies the availability of products and services from LRCs. Each of these sections is discussed separately within this report, followed by an overview of the project and recommendations.

<p style="text-align: center;"><u>**PART I: Advocacy to Data Providers**</u></p>

3. Background

The Regional Review highlighted concerns by volunteer recorders providing data to LRCs over how their data are used. These concerns have resulted in data considered as being sensitive not having been passed on to a LRC or only being provided at a coarse resolution. These issues risk decisions being made about the development of land in ignorance of the presence of such species and might potentially result in loss or damage to the population. Such concerns typically relate to a feeling of lack of control by data providers over how data is used and a lack of acknowledgement of the original data provider.

4. Methodology

The RAO developed a communication plan, in consultation with the East of England LRCs. The communication plan outlines how target audiences would be approached across the six counties in the region. The RAO would be responsible for developing communication material and supporting individual LRCs in its delivery. The RAO would also be responsible for communication at a regional scale.

This message includes the following:
- How sensitive species are managed (both by the LRC and when made available to third parties e.g. through the National Biodiversity Network [NBN] Gateway)
- How data are validated and verified
- Case studies of how biodiversity data are used to inform decisions
- Benefits of data being available to a LRC as well as a National Scheme (and how this can be achieved)
- A Code of Conduct for LRCs in the East of England based on existing best practice

5. Communication Plan

Regular liaison was made with each LRC to identify the issues relating to target audiences and how advocacy could add value to their work, either individually or for the region as a whole. A communication plan was created to highlight the target audiences, issues, key messages and the role for the RAO and LRC in addressing these issues. The communication plan can be found in *Appendix 1* and would be used to steer work and keep a record of activities and events undertaken by the RAO.

As outlined in the above project objectives, the key audiences for the RAO and LRCs to engage with are data providers and public bodies, including local authorities (especially planners). For each LRC the following issues relating to **data providers** are identified:

- **BLBRMC**: The LRC has good relationships with most of its data providers, primarily the Bedfordshire Natural History Society, which sits on the LRCs steering group and vice versa. The LRC does not hold bat data due to the bat group's own funding received from consultants wanting the data. The key message, that continued provision of data are important to help protect and enhance biodiversity in Bedfordshire and inform decision making, is to be reinforced wherever possible through articles, events and meetings.

- **BRIE**: BRIE has contrasting relationships with data providers and county recorders and this is a focus of a separate project. The LRC is trying to establish new relationships and improve existing ones, with the appointment of a new member of staff to drive this forward. Due to existing contacts in Essex, the RAO also helped identify and contact new data providers (e.g. RSPB).

- **CPERC**: Relationships with most data providers are good, although there is a lack of county recorders for some taxa and also a lack of bat/mammal data due to the mammal group's desire to retain their funding stream from consultants for this data. The key message, that data are important in helping protect and enhance biodiversity in Cambridgeshire and inform decision making, and that the LRC has data sharing policies in place, was mainly addressed through a Recorders Day event organised by the RAO and

LRC to build relationships, identify gaps in data/coverage and fill in county recorder vacancies for certain taxa. Meetings are also being held with the mammal group to try and establish a data sharing agreement over the provision of data at a reduced resolution so that consultants would still need to pay them for data. This is still ongoing at the time of writing.

- **HBRC**: The LRC's relationships with data providers is a complex one, with most data sitting with the Hertfordshire Natural History Society (HNHS). What data the LRC does hold is largely on paper and needed to be digitised. There is a feeling of mistrust by providers towards the LRC due to previous history and because it sits with the County Council. However, the current staff are working hard to improve these relationships and consequently its data holdings, and the centre manager now sits on the committee of the HNHS. The key message is that a fully established LRC in the county, offering a cost effective and impartial range of services to help protect wildlife in Hertfordshire, requires data, which can be stored securely and managed as an archive of biodiversity information for the county.

- **NBIS**: The LRC has a good relationship with the Norfolk and Norwich Naturalists Society, although it does not receive data from some county recorders nor from some National Recording Schemes. Data that are received are not always on a consistent basis. The key message is that data is important in helping protect and enhance biodiversity in Norfolk and inform decision making. NBIS would like to have data sharing policies and agreements in place and can support data providers through the Recorders Fund in return for sharing their data. As well as continuing with its Recorders Fund to support and assist the recording effort in the county, the LRC is to formalise its relationships with groups and individuals through data sharing agreements and continue its regular events and communications.

- **SBRC**: The LRC has good relationships with its data providers and the Suffolk Naturalists Society, and has a good amount of data for bats and badgers. These relationships have been built and nurtured over time, and are a good example of best practice in how a LRC can work effectively with data providers (especially mammal groups) and support them in their own work.

- **Regional**: It is critical for LRCs to have the support of data providers, who continually provide their data and thereby increase and enhance LRC data holdings. Although the reasons for their collecting and providing data to the LRC are varied, it is vital that providers understand how and why their data are used in the wider picture of conserving biodiversity through planning and development. The RAO is to disseminate and share best practice across the region (e.g. CPERC Recorders Day event) and put together a Code of Conduct to help clarify what happens to data received by a LRC.

The communication plan also lists the events, meetings and engagement had with data providers throughout the year. One such event was the CPERC Recorders Day and a review of this event can be found in *Appendix 2.*

6. How sensitive species are managed (both by the LRC and when made available to third parties e.g. through the NBN Gateway)

Data on sensitive species, such as bats and badgers, are rarely given to LRCs without a set of clauses, either set out in a data sharing agreement between the LRC and the data provider or less formally. These clauses include only showing data at a reduced resolution to consultants (so that for more detailed information they would still have to pay the data provider) and/or not giving data to the NBN Gateway. The former is a common issue around the region, with many data providers, like LRCs, reliant on data sales by consultants, accounting for a good proportion of their or the group's income.

The management of sensitive species data varies across the region, with some LRCs having data sharing agreements in place and some not; these data agreements do not necessarily mention the NBN. Some LRCs have data policies on their website and some do not have any in place at all. However, whether formal arrangements are in place or not, LRCs are unanimous in that they do not share sensitive species information without prior consent from the data provider (verbal or otherwise) and adhere to any clauses attached.

- **BLBRMC** has used data sharing agreements in the past but some are out of date, and none mention the NBN. However, approaches have been made to county recorders in person to seek permission for publication on the NBN Gateway. Sensitive data is not generally given to the public but each request is dealt with on a case by case basis. It does not have bat data due to the bat group wishing to retain their funding stream and provide interpretation to consultants. A comprehensive set of data policies is available on its website.

- **BRIE** does not have any data sharing agreements or policies in place yet but this is changing as relationships with data providers improve. Any sensitive data supplied for the Tendring pilot project is supplied at a low resolution.

- **CPERC** has data sharing agreements in place with organisations and/or individuals with large data sets, which addresses issues of confidentiality and data access/resolution, but no mention of the NBN. However, approaches are always made before any data are put on the NBN Gateway. A comprehensive data policy was created as part of the LRC's bid to attain official accreditation by the Association of Local Environmental Record Centres (ALERC).

- **HBRC** has lots of sensitive data pre-2005, with more current data sitting with the HNHS. It has data agreements in place with some groups/individuals but hasn't supplied much information to the NBN as this is perceived to already happen primarily by existing recorders for National Schemes.

- **NBIS** has little in the way of sensitive data but what it does have is current; confidential data is supplied with details of the data provider if more information sought. It does not have written data agreements in place but is in the process of formalising relationships with recorders and putting together draft agreements. Data supplied to the NBN Gateway is given at a low resolution and anyone requiring higher is dealt with on a case by case basis and encouraged to do a data search via the LRC itself.

- **SBRC** does not have written data agreements in place as the providers trust the LRC not to misuse it and this relationship has been built over many years. Any confidential data flagged in a search is released to the NBN at low resolution. The LRC also has data policies on its website.

From the above, it could be said that by having formal data sharing agreements in place with data providers (particularly new ones) would clearly define what and what not the LRC does with data provided, helping to reduce mistrust by data providers and a sense of having no control over how their data are used. This would especially be useful for BRIE as it works to establish itself as a new LRC in Essex and form new relationships with data providers. Data sharing agreements would cover issues such as who to impart data to, at what resolution, if it can be provided to the NBN Gateway and contact details to be used in data searches for further follow up (if desired). It is understandable that some LRCs have good relationships with data providers built on trust over a period of time and such formal agreements would not be necessary or even desirable. However, it could perhaps benefit the LRC by addressing other factors such as the quantity/coverage of data provided and the frequency at which it is given.

Having a clear set of policies and procedures re data management may also help alleviate mistrust, and ideally be available on a LRCs website for transparency. If a LRC does not already

have policies in place, it is recommended that they do so, especially as this is a requirement for ALERC accreditation.

Related to all of this is the need for a regional Code of Conduct, highlighting exactly what happens to data when received by a LRC and addressing common issues or concerns. This was an objective of this project and discussed further below.

The issues around data providers not wanting to give their data to LRCs on certain (or valuable) taxa for fear of losing their own income stream is a complex one and unlikely to be resolved easily. Suggested ways around this would be to set up a Recorders Fund (as per NBIS) and give grants to data providers to support them in their recording effort (not a direct replacement for their lost funding but still a possible source of income to them). A more practical option may be to come to an agreement whereby the LRC can use their data at a reduced resolution for commercial data enquiries, so that users would need to pay for data at a better resolution if desired (though in effect they are paying twice – the LRC and data provider, which may lead to users bypassing the LRC and going direct to the data provider).

Recommendations:
- ▪ Introduce and increase the number of data sharing agreements with data providers to cover issues surrounding data management and dissemination to help improve data provision and frequency given (*Appendix 3* for CPERC example).

7. How data are validated and verified
A unique selling point of LRC data are that they are validated and verified – meaning they are credible, reliable and from a known provenance so that users can be safe in the knowledge that they are basing their decisions on sound evidence. This also reassures data providers that LRCs work to set standards and are willing to work with them to ensure data are validated and verified. Validation means that data have been checked against the minimum requirements needed for record submission (e.g. date, specific location, species name, recorder etc). Verification of data means they are assessed against the likelihood of occurrence in a particular area/time of year; the latter is usually undertaken by county recorders, as the local experts in their geographical area.

Validation and verification across the region follows a fairly similar pattern, with most data received by LRCs coming from county recorders, already validated and verified. This data would usually also be double checked and validated by the LRC either manually when entering on to the database and/or using software such as the NBN's Data Validation and Verification Toolkit, Grab a Grid and in-house systems. In cases where data are received from others, they are passed to the relevant county recorder for verification. If no county recorder exists for whatever reason, the data are either stored until such time a recorder is available to verify, sent to a National Scheme or local expert for verification or used in data searches but flagged as unverified, though the latter is the exception rather than the norm.

Comprehensive information on the validation and verification process is available as part of the data management policies for some LRCs, namely BLBRMC, CPERC and SBRC.

Validation and verification in the region appears to be a straightforward process, with the most pressing problem being the unavailability of a county recorder in an area to verify data for certain taxa. However, where a county recorder does not exist, it is unlikely LRCs will receive much data for that taxon group anyhow. Hence, the amount of data that is sitting on a LRC database waiting to be verified is relatively small. The most valuable data, in terms of demand, such as European Protected Species (bats, great crested newts), almost always has county recorders, though these data are also the least likely to be given freely to the LRC due to the income generated by the providers themselves.

It is good practice to have the whole validation and verification process written up and made available to data providers (and users) to ensure transparency of LRC operations and promote that

this is a unique selling point of data coming from LRCs as opposed to the NBN or other source. This will also be included in a regional Code of Conduct for clarification.

Recommendations:
- Have in place comprehensive data management policies and procedures, in preparation for the ALERC accreditation process (*Appendix 4* for CPERC example*)* and to inform data providers of the functions and processes of a LRC
- Investigate the feasibility of setting up a Recorders Fund as an alternative way for data providers to obtain funds whilst improving the recording effort in the county

8. Case studies of how biodiversity data is used to inform decisions
There are many examples of how LRC data have been used across the region by various organisations and public bodies to help inform decision making and ultimately, protect biodiversity. Some case studies are highlighted in Part II and are also featured in an Advocacy Document produced by the RAO to help showcase LRCs to key audiences.

Recommendations:
- Use of Advocacy Document and/or case studies to showcase LRCs – circulate to key audiences, publish on website and use where possible (*Appendix 5*)

9. Benefits of data being available to a LRC as well as a National Scheme (and how this can be achieved)
There is no question that the more data made available, the greater the benefit to biodiversity and the environment. The less 'ownership' there is of data and a greater desire/motivation to share it, the more it would benefit the recording community and data users to gain a better insight into an area's ecological makeup.

The most obvious benefit to LRCs having data from National Schemes (including the NBN Gateway) is that they would have more detailed ecological coverage of the county and more complete datasets, meaning they can monitor local distribution and changes more effectively. They are also able to provide more information to data users, most notably local authority planners and environmental consultants, ensuring they have the best available data on which to make decisions, which could affect biodiversity and the environment. Knowing LRCs have comprehensive data, it would likely increase uptake of products and services by data users, and in turn benefit LRCs through increased funding.

Currently, most data received by LRCs comes from county recorders. These recorders might also be the county representative of a National Scheme. Ideally, the recorder would send their data to both the LRC and the National Scheme, or the Scheme, having received data direct, passes them on to the LRC. However, this flow of data does not happen on a consistent basis, and there are anomalies between the data held by a LRC, National Scheme and county recorders. Both options above are not without their problems, because either the county recorder has to ensure they send data to all the relevant sources (on top of the validation and verification process. This is also reliant on their relationship with the LRC) or the National Scheme has to refer data received back to the LRC, not knowing if it has already been sent to the LRC direct by the recorder. Clearly, a system needs to be in place to ensure a continued flow of data between county recorders, LRCs and National Schemes to the benefit of data users and data providers.

Across the region, LRCs do receive data from National Schemes, either direct from the Scheme itself or from a county recorder who is the representative of a Scheme. However, much of this relies on the LRC being proactive in asking for the data in the first place. One LRC comments that most Schemes are happy to share their data, though may want a written data sharing agreement in place covering the potential uses of their data. Conversely, another LRC states that National Schemes are more geared towards producing and publishing atlases and submitting their data to the NBN Gateway, rather than making it locally available to LRCs, and indeed did not like the fact that LRCs charged for data. Another LRC said obtaining data from a Scheme is not a high priority because at least the data is available and being held on a database, regardless of where; a higher

priority should be getting people to submit their data in the first place. There are also problems in accessing and using data that is on the NBN Gateway, as it is often not at a high enough resolution for LRCs to use in their outputs to data users.

The NBN, in its online publication called 'sharing information about wildlife' states that "local records centres, where they are fully functional, may already have a strong role in promoting data quality among their own volunteer recording community. However, this is often carried out independently of other organisations, and integration of their efforts with those of the national societies and recording schemes would be particularly beneficial". Similarly, LRCs can greatly add value to National Schemes through the validation and verification process, such as checking for typos in local names and grid references, knowing the abilities of the local recorders and which species are likely or unlikely to be found in their area etc. LRCs also have the connections with local data users to ensure that records are used effectively. National schemes do not have the resources to interact at a local scale and so would clearly benefit from working more closely and sharing data with LRCs to improve the quality of data and relationships with data users and providers.

At the time of writing, Natural England is also looking into data flow issues between LRCs and National Schemes and is planning to pilot the role of on-line recording in the process.

It also became apparent during the project that there is some concern by LRCs about the ultimate role of the NBN, with uncertainty over its future direction and whether LRCs fit into its overall business model. This perceived conflict of interest between the NBN and LRCs was also mentioned by IEEMs Chief Executive Officer Sally Hayns at the Consultants Conference in January 2011, where she said 'it was important to clarify the overall vision for UK biodiversity data management and the roles of the main data holding organisations'.

It was not within the scope of this project to address all matters relating to the NBN; however, one issue that was addressed is the inappropriate use of the NBN Gateway by data users to produce desktop data searches, bypassing the LRC altogether. This issue is of increasing concern to data users, data providers and LRCs, with some data users obtaining and using data freely available from the NBN Gateway to inform their desktop reports, which are then submitted to planning authorities and decision makers. Unless the recipient is knowledgeable and/or experienced about ecological reports, there is a danger that applications would be assessed and decisions made based on reports that might not contain the full picture about an area's wildlife and habitats.

9.1 A comparison of data from a LRC and the NBN Gateway

The RAO decided to illustrate the above issue by undertaking data searches in the same geographical areas using the NBN Gateway and a LRC, highlighting the differences (and similarities) between the two.

The NBN Gateway has over 65 million records on its database. The LRC used for this purpose was CPERC, which holds half a million records.

Data searches took place (for all species and all dates) for five separate 10km squares, and the results, including list of taxa found, numbers of records for each square and associated graphs can be found in *Appendix 6*.

Overall, it was generally found that the data held by the LRC are more recent than the NBN Gateway, with more records available for the last ten years. In terms of the quantity of data, the Gateway had more, but not significantly so, as would be expected with 65 million records on its database compared to half a million at CPERC; the maximum difference in the number of Gateway records compared to the LRC was 17,752 for square TL57.

Below is a graph illustrating the difference in the number of records held at the LRC and the Gateway for each 10km square searched. It can be seen that the quantity of data are not significantly higher for the Gateway even though it has millions more records in its database.
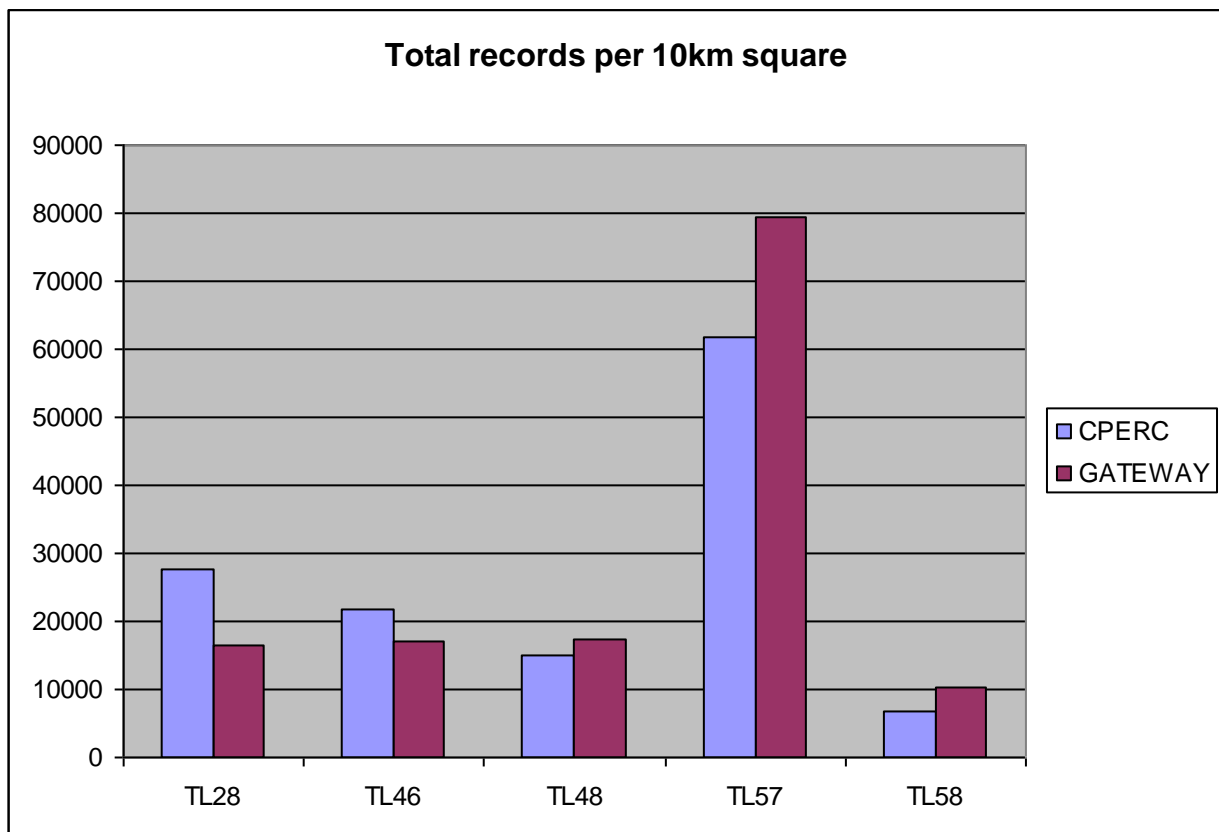
Total records per 10km square

Figure 1 showing the number of records held by the LRC and the NBN Gateway for each 10km square

In terms of taxa, the NBN did have more species listed than the LRC, a figure of 61 compared to 36. The providers of the records also differed, with the NBN Gateway receiving much of its data from National Schemes and surveys whereas the LRC receives its data from local recording groups and surveys; however, there was a discrepancy in one of the NBN data providers as they seemingly came from the north east area, and the area searched for this purpose was in the east of England.

Aside from the above, the key difference between obtaining data from the NBN Gateway and the LRC was time and complexity, with it being a much more convoluted and time consuming process retrieving records from the Gateway than from the LRC.

The volunteer who undertook this work was technologically experienced yet it took him two full days plus extra time at home to obtain the data from the NBN Gateway. The process was quite complex and the user would have to be confident with databases, excel and handling raw data to retrieve the records and files wanted, especially if a number of taxon groups, areas or dates were being searched.

One last aspect about using the NBN Gateway was that most data searches do not go beyond a resolution of a 10km square, and if the user wanted a higher resolution they would need to contact the NBN Gateway and the various data providers for access rights, which again would be a lengthy process with various contacts having to be followed up. The user may also have to pay money for certain data from certain groups.

To sum up, the key differences between using the NBN Gateway and a LRC for a data search are:
- Resolution of data. Much of the NBN data is only available at 10km resolution, which is not good enough for standard data searches. If the user wants better resolution they have to contact the various data providers separately and there is no guarantee the providers would grant higher access or provide data free of charge.

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- Data providers, validation and verification. Whilst the NBN obtains data from National Schemes, the LRCs receive data from local groups, individuals and societies, meaning the data are more likely to be reliable through the validation and verification process. LRCs also have the relationships with local data providers to undertake a 'gap analysis' in data and improve local recording effort. This is a key difference between NBN and LRC data, as the NBN does not have the resources to foster close relationships nor check the data received are completely accurate.

- It is a very time consuming process to obtain different datasets from the NBN Gateway at the required resolution and the process requires technological knowhow to download raw data and create spreadsheets to use it.

- There are differences in the quantity of data held, the taxa covered and the dates for which data are available; the example above shows that whilst LRC data are more recent and the quantity on a par with the NBN, the Gateway's data are more extensive (more taxa).

- Under the terms of use of the NBN Gateway, it should not be used for commercial benefit i.e. data searches should not be made by consultants or others who are acting within a commercial capacity.

Ultimately, a good desktop data report would contain a data search undertaken by a LRC, which ideally would contain the same information that's available on the NBN Gateway. However, in practice, due to the disparity in information available through both, it's more likely that the NBN Gateway would be used in addition to a LRC for supplementary information, even though this is forbidden under its terms of use.

It is not good practice to rely solely on the NBN Gateway or other free data source for biodiversity information for the reasons outlined above, as this does not provide a great enough insight for the decision making process and in some cases could be detrimental to biodiversity and the environment.

Recommendations:
- A separate, more focused review looking at data flow between National Schemes, the NBN and LRCs, for the benefit of biodiversity recording and dissemination in the UK
- Use of example above illustrating the difference between a data search using the NBN Gateway and a LRC for training and promotional purposes e.g. presentations to planners and consultants etc (*Appendix 6*)

10. A Code of Conduct for LRCs in the East of England based on existing best practice
Related to much of the above and an objective of this project, a written Code of Conduct was drafted by the RAO, together with input from the LRCs and data providers, to outline what happens to data when they are received by a LRC.

The Code of Conduct can be found in *Appendix 7* and is a general statement for all LRCs in the region. It is intended to compliment individual and more specific LRC policies (if available) or be used as a starting point for those without policies yet in place. As a concise summary of what generally happens to data within the region, it is a useful tool in helping to build relationships with data providers and data users, reassuring them data are handled and managed according to a regional standard.

The Code covers the key aspects about what happens to data when received by a LRC, including validation and verification, and how they are kept safe and secure.

Recommendations:
- The Code of Conduct to be used as a tool to inform and reassure data providers and data users that data received by a LRC is managed according to a regional standard. The Code

can be made available through websites, meetings and presentations and act as a guide to compliment existing LRC policies or as a pre-cursor to those yet to be in place (*Appendix 7*)

11. Timeline of a record

The RAO also produced an article entitled 'timeline of a record' (A*ppendix 8*) which sets out clearly the path data takes when received by a LRC, from the validation and verification process to disseminating it to data users. This is especially useful in justifying the fees a LRC charges for data searches, by highlighting the time it takes for staff to process records and ensure they are suitable for sharing with others as part of the evidence-based process in decision making. This is most pertinent to consultants and commercial users who, at the Consultants Conference in January 2011, raised the issue of LRC costs and fees.

Recommendations:
- The 'timeline of a record' article to be used where possible by LRCs to aid understanding and justify costs to data users (*Appendix 8*)

PART II: Identifying the needs of public bodies relating to biodiversity information

12. Background

The Regional Review highlighted the need to raise the profile of LRCs and to emphasise the need for biodiversity information by public bodies in meeting their statutory obligations. The objective for the RAO in this project was to identify present and coming needs of public bodies relating to biodiversity and the products and services that LRCs need to provide to meet them.

13. Methodology

The RAO undertook a review of existing biodiversity needs in consultation with the East of England LRCs, based on existing studies and an assessment of coming changes, considering the likelihood and potential impact on public bodies. The RAO then co-ordinated a review of existing practice across the region, looking at opportunities for being more effective in meeting the needs of public bodies within existing resources. The outputs of the review would feed into the advocacy to public bodies and also inform the delivery of Project 1) Improvements to Data Request Services.

14. Biodiversity needs of public bodies

The RAO reviewed existing studies and reports already in the public realm to identify the main requirements for using biodiversity data, mainly in the form of legislation that public bodies should adhere to in order to fulfil their statutory obligations. The associated legislation is termed as the *key driver* as to why public bodies should engage with LRCs to help meet their obligations and follow best practice.

Two reports were looked at: East of England Biodiversity Data Needs, published by the East of England Biodiversity Forum in 2007 and Biodiversity Needs of Local Authorities and National Parks, published by ALGE in 2006. The key drivers identified as being pertinent to data users can be seen in the document 'Legislation and Guidance Relating to Local Environmental Record Centres' in *Appendix 9* and are outlined below:

- **Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004**. Part of the regional planning process. Part 2, section 13 survey of area states: the local planning authority must keep under review the matters which may be expected to affect the development of their area or the planning of its development. These matters include: the principal physical, economic, social and environmental characteristics of the area of the authority.

  This means that the local authority must assess existing conditions in order to fully understand the likely impacts from its planning and development work.

- **Planning Policy Statement 12 local spatial planning**. Part of Regional Development Frameworks, paragraph 4.9 states: the evidence base is critical to the preparation of local

development documents. Paragraph 4.49: Local Development Framework Monitoring Guide. The guide sets out core local development framework output indicators, against which authorities must monitor policy implementation.

Without a credible evidence base (including biological records) it would be impossible for local authorities to prepare accurate documentation prior to development.

- **Planning Policy Statement 9 biodiversity and geological conservation**. Part of Development Control, section 2.31 states: it would be good practice for all local authorities to contribute to the establishment and running of a LRC as a cost-effective way of providing a publicly accountable 'one-stop shop' for comprehensive and reliable environmental information upon which to plan, in line with the key principles of PPS 9.

  This guidance makes the case for value for money and principles of support

- **NERC Act 2006**. Section 40 states: every public authority must, in exercising its functions, have regard, so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions, to the purpose of conserving biodiversity. Executive Summary 10 states: in demonstrating that it has fulfilled its duty to have regard to biodiversity, a local authority is likely to be able to show that it has: demonstrated a commitment and contribution to key local biodiversity initiatives, such as Local Biodiversity Action Plans, Local and/or Regional Records Centres and Local Site systems.

  NERC duties should be taken seriously by local authorities and in particular planning departments who are at the forefront of modifying the natural environment.

- **Habitats Directive**. Article 12(1) (b) of the Habitats Directive provides that: "Member States shall take the requisite measures to establish a system of strict protection for the animal species listed [i.e. European Protected Species] in their natural range, prohibiting…. (b) deliberate disturbance of these species, particularly during the period of breeding, rearing, hibernation and migration."

- **Natural England's Standing Advice**. Related to the above, Natural England has adopted national Standing Advice for protected species; it provides advice to planners on deciding if there is a 'reasonable likelihood' of protected species being present and also provides advice on survey and mitigation requirements. Natural England's aim is to support local authorities in carrying out their statutory duties by providing a consistent set of advice that applies to all planning applications. It can be found at http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/planningtransportlocalgov/spatialplanning/standingadvice/default.aspx

In summer 2010, Regional Strategies and Planning Policy Statements were abolished or underwent a review through the 'localism bill' introduced by the new coalition government. 'There would be new ways for local authorities to address strategic planning and infrastructure issues based on cooperation: a consolidated national planning framework covering all forms of development, which sets out national, economic, environmental and social priorities' (www.communities.gov.uk Sept 2010).

This was still ongoing at the time of writing and more details on new legislation was expected to be announced in the Government's White Paper on the Natural Environment, due for release in summer 2011.

Related to this was an independent review of England's wildlife sites and the connection between them, led by Professor Lawton and published by Defra in September 2010 entitled 'making space for nature'.

The review made the following key points for establishing a strong and connected natural environment: that we better protected and managed our designated wildlife sites; that we established new Ecological Restoration Zones; that we better protected our non-designated wildlife sites and that society's need to maintain water-quality, manage inland flooding, deal with coastal erosion and enhance carbon storage, if thought about creatively, could help deliver a more effective ecological network (ecology and policy blog, British Ecological Society 24/09/2010).

The report made many recommendations and the Government response will be included in the forthcoming White Paper.

Also under review is the National Indicator set, a set of indicators on which central government performance manages local government, covering services delivered by local authorities alone and in partnership with other organisations. The Indicator concerning local biodiversity is called NI 197 and measures the proportion of local sites where positive conservation management is implemented. This information is provided by LRCs as part of a local authority's Annual Monitoring Report (AMR). Although full details have yet to be issued, the Government has finalised the list of central departments' data requirements for 2011-12 (information that local authorities should expect to provide to central Government) and NI 197 will remain as 'local nature conservation/biodiversity' (reference number 160-00-01). This is important for LRCs as it is a key driver for local authorities using their services to aid in their reporting and statutory duties.

During the project, the RAO attended a planning conference given by Penny Simpson, an environmental lawyer, who specialises in working with developers and local planning authorities on European Protected Species and how to discharge their duties. Citing recent court cases and decisions, she has produced some articles and reports, which are useful in highlighting to local authorities why they should take notice of case law in relation to protected species. These articles can be found in *Appendices 10 and 11*

15. Current service provision
An outline of how each of the LRCs are doing in providing products and services against the key drivers is as follows:

- **BLBRMC**: the LRC relies heavily on separate project work and data sales (to consultants) for income, with no SLAs in place with any of the three unitary authorities. It has sufficient data to meet biodiversity needs, and is able to provide information for the key drivers, as well as for separate project work such as the digitisation of Phase 1 habitat maps and Green Infrastructure mapping. The issue is more about the reluctance of local authorities to fund the LRC for its data due to impending budget cuts, and the LRC is committed to finding more cost-effective ways around this e.g. web-based data searches and project work.

- **BRIE**: is currently collecting and supplying data to one district authority in Essex for its pilot data provision project, and continuing to build relationships with other potential data users and data providers to establish itself as a LRC. At the time of writing it has increased its data provision services to four local authorities to address the key drivers.

- **CPERC**: the LRC obtains most of its income from data sales and has SLAs with most of its local authorities. Its data holdings are improving due to signed agreements with large data providers and it has sufficient data to meet biodiversity needs. It is able to supply information for AMRs and NI 197 and also recently started undertaking planning list searches for Peterborough City Council, which it hopes to do for other authorities. It is not able to undertake large scale habitat mapping projects but has sufficient data for smaller scale projects i.e. woodland mapping for Peterborough.

- **HBRC**: due to budget cuts, the LRC is undergoing internal changes to separate the LRC function from the advisory function in order to establish itself as an independent and impartial LRC and build relationships with data providers and data users. The local Wildlife

Trust currently undertakes NI 197 reporting and the LRC has many paper records needing to be digitised.

- **NBIS**: has sufficient data to meet biodiversity obligations, undertaking data searches for consultants and supplying NI 197 information, as well as habitat and land-use mapping and Green Infrastructure projects. Again, it is more a case of local authorities unwilling or unable to fund the LRC for data and services due to budgetary constraints. In looking at how it can expand its services, the LRC, together with project 1) undertook a review of planning screening toolkits used by other LRCs in the country.

- **SBRC**: has a large amount of data to fulfil biodiversity data needs, sending an annual data CD to their SLA partners and undertaking mapping projects. Its main funder is the County Council and some other local authorities although there is a lack of formal SLAs and this may not be sustainable in the current economic climate.

16. Case studies
Below are some examples of what LRCs can do and how they work with other organisations to support the needs and requirements for biodiversity information. They also feature in the Advocacy Document in *Appendix 5*

The Norwich Green Infrastructure Development Plan
The Greater Norwich area has been identified as a growth point with over 20,000 new homes planned. Government policy determines that new development should be supported by the creation of high quality green infrastructure (GI). In practice this should comprise a network of 'green' spaces and inter-connecting 'green' corridors in urban areas and their surrounds, which stretch out into the wider countryside. Mapping undertaken by NBIS produced a map that outlined BAP and other habitats and land use within the Greater Norwich area. A series of criteria such as distance from designated sites and existing habitats and proximity to development areas were then used in the GIS to identify potential sites for creation of new 'green' space. Those areas of highest potential were then used to develop 'priority areas' linking Norwich to other areas of development to the south, and the Broads to the North. Documents such as this GI Development Plan in turn form the evidence base for strategic plans. The priority areas identified were used to inform the Greater Norwich Joint Core Strategy, the basis for the strategy governing development in the Greater Norwich area over the coming years. It is important that projects such as this are built on robust evidence and the methods and processes used by NBIS are designed to ensure this.

The Brecks Biodiversity Audit
This ambitious initiative was led by the University of East Anglia in 2009 to collate information about the wealth of biodiversity found in Breckland, an area of 10,000 km^2 straddling the counties of Norfolk and Suffolk. The audit, which benefited from funding and assistance from the Norfolk Biodiversity Information Service (NBIS) to collate species information, has drawn attention to the immense diversity of life in Breckland. Over 12,000 species were recorded with 2,149 a priority for conservation and 317 listed on the UK's Biodiversity Action Plan. The report has highlighted the need for physical land disturbance - putting "the Brecks back into Breckland" - to create mosaics of different conditions benefiting many insects and plants to maintain this remarkable biodiversity.

Green Infrastructure Planning
The BLBRMC has played a significant role in green infrastructure (GI) planning across Bedfordshire and Luton over recent years, working alongside the local Green Infrastructure Consortium to map networks and priority areas. The aim of GI planning is to identify assets and opportunities to improve, protect and enhance the network of green spaces, access routes, wildlife habitats, landscapes and historic features across the county to achieve social, environmental and economic benefits. The BLBRMC has operated at the county, district and parish levels, pulling together information about existing and aspirational GI assets and combining this with its own habitats, species and sites data to produce maps at the different levels required. Examples include a county-wide strategic networks map and parish-level GI plans. An additional project was

subsequently commissioned building upon this work to identify priority GI opportunities in the Ivel Valley. The BLBRMC is again producing the maps that will be used in the final report.

Site Sensitivity
Despite the abolition of regional planning, Bedfordshire faces a lot of growth pressure. Housing demand is high, as is demand for open space and natural areas. People want quality places in which to explore, recreate and commune with nature. However, recreational pressures can greatly compromise site ecology. Visitor impacts on natural areas result from a combination of site sensitivity and the features of the visitor pressure (e.g. intensity, duration, seasonality, type of recreation). Bedfordshire's natural areas are expected to face increasing visitors, and many are thought to be suffering already. Natural areas have an inherent degree of sensitivity to visitor pressure. Being able to predict the degree of and reasons for site sensitivity could help inform habitat management. A model to predict wildlife site sensitivity has been created using data from BLBRMC.

Planning list searches
Since the end of January 2011 CPERC has been working with colleagues at Peterborough City Council (PCC) to screen planning applications against the species records and designated nature conservation sites that CPERC holds information on. PCC sends planning application information in GIS format on a weekly basis to CPERC and a search of the records is performed according to criteria set by PCC. These criteria determine which species records are searched for (such as protected species) and the relative proximity to the application site they have to be before they are displayed in the results. The criteria can be adjusted according to the changing needs of the authority and/or changing legislation. The results show the records of interest with attached planning application reference numbers to show which planning applications they are near to. The results are sent to PCC's Wildlife Officer to interpret and to see if any of the records highlighted indicate that there are issues that may need to be brought to the attention of the planning team. In this way this process allows possible biodiversity issues to be highlighted at an early stage of the planning process, potentially saving time at a later stage and hopefully avoiding negative impacts. Although the records held by CPERC are not comprehensive (as with any records centre) the data holdings are updated periodically and as such the search tool becomes more powerful as time goes on.

Annual Monitoring Reports (AMRs)
Many LRCs provide data to local authorities for their AMRs (Core Output Indicator E2); an AMR is one of a number of documents required to be included in the Local Development Framework Development Plan Document. It is submitted to Government by a local planning authority each year to assess the progress and the effectiveness of a Local Development Framework (LDF). For example, information provided by CPERC to support LDF AMRs includes: 1) Statutory and non-statutory designated conservation sites affected by development over the previous financial year; 2) Summary of non-statutory designated sites within the local authority area and a summary of changes in those sites compared to the previous financial year; 3) Summary of statutory designated sites within the local authority area and a summary of changes in those sites compared to the previous financial year and 4) An assessment of the impact of development on NERC S41 (Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act Section 41) species within the local authority area. Evidence based reporting undertaken by local authorities as part of their statutory duties provides LRCs with a focus for their services, typically contained within Service Level Agreements (SLAs) that offer the best value for money to those authorities seeking a cost effective approach to long term, consistent data reporting.

From the above, it is fair to say that most LRCs in the region are able to provide the essential services needed to enable local authorities and public bodies to fulfil their statutory duties (e.g. AMRs and NI 197) and also provide information and services for custom projects. There are gaps in habitat data holdings for some LRCs and also disparities in the amount of data held for European Protected Species, which are especially valuable to planners.

The problem is not so much the unavailability of data or services provided by LRCs but the lack of support given to them by the organisations that helped set them up in the first place and who are in most need of data. Reasons why this support is not given varies, ranging from a lack of funding, a lack of knowledge (on how to use/interpret the data), a lack of awareness of and/or enforcement of the legislation and lack of guidance by governing bodies on best practice and the need for biodiversity data.

The issues surrounding interpretation of data ('what's the point of having it if we don't know what it means?') and enforcement of legislation/best practice comes up time and again. Both of these are somewhat beyond the control of this project and for individual LRCs to address – interpretation of data requires a local authority ecologist in place to relate to planners and other users what the data means; with impending budget cuts, this service or post is not seen as essential and this role doesn't exist within many authorities. LRCs traditionally do not interpret data themselves as staff are not trained ecologists and it allows them to provide an impartial service no matter where they sit. Other organisations can help with data interpretation (e.g. Wildlife Trusts) and a possible solution is making joint approaches to authorities to help clarify who does what, though this in itself had its own implications.

The apparent lack of enforcement of current legislation, or indeed guidance on best practice, combined with the changes to and review of current legislation by the new coalition Government means a lack of awareness within authorities and LRCs having to reiterate their statutory duties wherever possible, especially as staff come and go. This is hoped to be addressed in the forthcoming White Paper and new legislation being introduced, and more importantly, enforced, for the benefit of LRCs and other conservation organisations.

17. Working with project 1) Improvements to Data Request Services
The outcomes of the advocacy project (project 2) were to feed into the Data Request project to help ensure each LRC is able to provide an improved service to local authorities and other public bodies in the region. Specifically, the Data Request project was to review the outcomes regarding the data needs of local authorities and other public bodies in the East of England, compare these data needs with the services currently being provided and develop a strategy outlining how LRCs can meet the data needs identified.

Unfortunately, due to the delayed start of the advocacy project, there was a mismatch in the timing between the two projects and therefore a lack of crossover as originally envisaged. However, data needs, in terms of legislation and key drivers, are already well documented and so relatively easy to identify and gauge how LRCs are doing against providing the data and services needed to meet these needs. The two project officers were unable to develop a future strategy together but each provided recommendations and follow up for LRCs as part of their legacy when both projects finish.

The Data Request project involved two outputs that were relevant to this one – providing a standard minimum service for data requests and investigating the use of planning screening toolkits. Both of these are discussed at length in the official project report but are outlined below:

- **Data request service**: the Regional Review found that the data enquiry service provided to data users lacked consistency, both across the region and nationally. These inconsistencies included response quality, charges applied and services offered. The project aimed to address these problems by establishing a consistent standard service for data enquiries across the region. The data supplied to consultants and local authorities were used to support decision-making during the planning process, and improving the data supplied should lead to better informed decisions. The project officer was able to standardise the data request service for the region from April 2011 and the RAO contributed towards the promotion of this by helping organise and attend the regional Consultants Conference (and official launch of the standard data service) held in Cambridge.

- **Planning screening toolkits**: one service of potential use to local authorities was screening planning applications for biodiversity interest. A number of LRCs around the country provide a planning application screening service to local planning authorities, using an automated (or semi-automated) tool to do so. It could be a service that local authorities would find useful and therefore encourage a SLA with their LRC. NBIS and the project officer were keen to develop a tool in this region and roll it out to the other LRCs if interested. They found that developing a tool would require much input in terms of time and money (particularly if it required an external contractor) and therefore only worth proceeding if local authority planners would find it useful. Unfortunately, feedback received at a Planning and Biodiversity Topic Group meeting in Norfolk was not very positive, as many of the authorities targeted did not have ecologists in post to interpret the information resulting from the tool. Lack of funding was another issue. The development of a planning screening tool for NBIS and the region has been put on hold for the time being but the situation should be reviewed regularly for further opportunities to develop this tool.

Recommendations:
- LRCs to keep informed of changes to Government legislation issued in the forthcoming White Paper as well as the National Planning Policy Framework and the National Ecosystem Assessment.
- Use of Advocacy Document and/or case studies to showcase LRCs – circulate to key audiences, publish on website and use where possible (*Appendix 5*)
- Review the work started by NBIS on planning screening toolkits and investigate future possibilities
- Consider developing web-based data access as an option for users wanting a quick and cost effective way of accessing data that's up to date
- Increase habitat data to undertake habitat mapping and green infrastructure projects
- Investigate a joint approach to local authorities with the Wildlife Trusts to clarify services offered and act as a possible solution to the interpretation of data for those authorities without ecologists

PART III: Advocating to public bodies the availability of products and services from LRCs

18. Methodology
The RAO developed a communication plan, in consultation with the East of England LRCs, to advocate to existing and potential public user bodies the role of LRCs. Regional and national bodies will be approached at a regional level.
The messages include:
- The direct benefits to public sector users in supporting LRCs
- The wider benefits of supporting LRCs.

The mechanism will include presentations and meetings and the development of proposals.

19. Communication Plan
Regular liaison was made with each LRC to identify the issues relating to target audiences and how advocacy could add value to their work, either individually or for the region as a whole. A communication plan was created to highlight the target audiences, issues, key messages and the role for the RAO and LRC in addressing these issues. The communication plan can be found in *Appendix 1* and would be used to steer work and keep a record of activities and events undertaken by the RAO.

As outlined in the original project objectives, the key audiences for the RAO and LRCs to engage with are public bodies, including local authorities (especially planners) and data providers. For each LRC the following issues relating to **public bodies** are identified:

- **BLBRMC**: A key supporter of the LRC has been Bedfordshire County Council; however, in 2009, the County Council was dissolved and replaced by three Unitary Authorities, none of

which currently supported the LRC through Service Level Agreements (SLAs) though they were receptive to the idea of having cost-effective access to data and services supplied by the LRC. The key message therefore is that using up-to-date information is critical for addressing the key drivers (legislation) against which public bodies are accountable. Also, the LRC is committed to ensuring access to data is as cost-effective as possible. Solutions included the LRC developing web-based access to data for cost-effectiveness, the identification and promotion of smaller projects that could be undertaken by the LRC and continued reinforcement of biodiversity obligations at events and meetings. The RAO primarily helped address the latter by organising a Planning and Biodiversity Conference aimed at local authorities.

- **BRIE**: Although the establishment of a LRC in Essex is the subject of a different project, it still lies within the East of England region. The lack of a LRC in Essex has meant that public bodies are not accessing biodiversity information and therefore it is unknown if and how they are fulfilling their statutory biodiversity duties within planning. The pilot data provision project for Tendring District Council allowed BRIE to focus on collating data for one specific area for use by the local authority. This has then been used as a case study to get other authorities on board and gradually build support for the LRC, emphasising the key message that access to up-to-date and verified data is vital to meet biodiversity obligations (key drivers) and for making informed planning decisions. Like other LRCs, BRIE is a trusted and cost-effective one-stop-source for information and services. The RAO assisted, where possible, in helping advocate the concept of LRCs and BRIE to public bodies, primarily through the Planning and Biodiversity Conference (as above) and contact with Basildon District Council (using contacts made in previous job).

- **CPERC**: Although the LRC has secured SLAs with most authorities, there is an ongoing need to engage with them as SLAs expire and/or staff come and go, and to convince decision makers of the need for data to aid planning decisions. This is most difficult where authorities did not have an ecologist to interpret data. The key message is that access to up-to-date and verified data was of benefit to public bodies to meet biodiversity obligations and make informed planning decisions; the LRC has products and services to meet these needs and is committed to helping find a solution to interpret this information. One solution is to work in conjunction with the local Wildlife Trust to offer an interpretation service but this depends on the availability of Trust staff and the commitment of the Trust to make a joint approach (which could potentially have an adverse effect on their own funding received from local authorities). The RAO primarily organised a Planning and Biodiversity Conference to convey these messages to a local authority audience. The RAO also assisted with the design and creation of a new website and general leaflet for the LRC to appeal to key audiences.

- **HBRC**: The situation in Hertfordshire is not straightforward because the LRC sits within the County Council and receives funding as part of a wider environment team that also offers an interpretation and advisory service to local authorities. The LRC is unable to proactively seek SLAs with separate authorities at this time. Added to that, a core service provided by LRCs (the reporting of NI197) is undertaken by the local Wildlife Trust. The key message is that a fully functioning LRC is important to the work of public bodies in meeting their obligations (key drivers) and should be the primary source of data in the county, able to provide a range of services and products through dedicated SLAs. The LRC did hold a seminar for planners re protected species and how planning authorities should discharge their legal duties, which the RAO attended and drew inspiration from to organise a Planning and Biodiversity Conference for LRCs in the region.

- **NBIS:** The LRC sits with the County Council and has some SLAs with local authorities. It has been difficult to convince some authorities of the need for and value of having data, and there is a mismatch between the value of SLAs and what authorities are willing to pay. The LRC has been trying to demonstrate the cost effectiveness of having a SLA and broaden its products and services to meet the needs and requirements of authorities. The

key message is that access to up-to-date and verified data is of benefit to public bodies to meet biodiversity obligations and make informed planning decisions and that the LRC has or can develop products and services to meet these needs.

- **SBRC:** SBRC also sits with the County Council and receives funding year-on-year, although some SLAs may have expired. This situation may be under increased threat due to the current economic climate and impending budget cuts. The LRC is to continue highlighting the key message that access to up-to-date and verified data is of benefit to public bodies to meet biodiversity obligations and make informed planning decisions. Although the LRC produces its annual data CD for users, it is looking into the possibility of providing web-based access to data. There is also the possibility of re-establishing a joint approach to authorities with the local Wildlife Trust due to a new member of staff working for the Trust.

- **Regional**: From previous reports and from the above it is clear that LRCs need ongoing support and funding to maintain their function as data custodians, with the key message that data and services provided by LRCs are of benefit to a variety of users and that SLAs are the most cost effective way of supporting LRCs. Some outputs to address this include the Advocacy Document to showcase LRCs in the region and, discussed below, identification of different funding streams for LRCs, a Planning and Biodiversity Conference and engaging with regional bodies/organisations to look at the possibilities of providing a regional data set for consistency and ease of use.

The communication plan also lists the events, meetings and engagement had with data users throughout the year. As discussed in Part I, the plan was used to steer work and deliver outputs for LRCs individually or regionally.

20. Planning and Biodiversity Conference

A major output for LRCs in the region, especially CPERC and BLBRMC, was the organisation of a Planning and Biodiversity Conference held in Cambridge in April 2011. This event was aimed primarily at planners within local authorities, as well as other staff for whom it was relevant both within authorities and other public bodies/conservation organisations. A review of the event can be found in *Appendix 12.* The conference was organised for both CPERC and BLBRMC due to the fact that similar events already took place in the other counties, and both these LRCs had a great need to promote their services in the current economic climate, especially as neither sat with a County Council and therefore funding was not as secure. BRIE was also involved to a degree and the event was opened up to planners across the region, with a good number coming from Essex and at least one representative attending from each county in the region.

Talks ranged from eco-systems services to legislation, wildlife recording and LRCs to using data to assess site sensitivity followed by a mapping activity to highlight the data available from a LRC for use in planning. The mapping example can be found in *Appendix 13*.

The event was considered a success, with almost 80 delegates attending from local authorities and other organisations engaging with LRC staff and listening to relevant talks. Feedback received by all was generally very positive and it is hoped to organise a similar event next year, with discussions already taking place between CPERC and BLBRMC.

Following the event, BRIE added new local authorities to its steering group, liaising with some districts for the first time at the conference. Both BLBRMC and CPERC staff engaged with planners and authorities throughout the day, discussing services such as planning list searches that could be offered by the LRC for the benefit of planners.

Recommendations:
- Organise future cross-regional events aimed at key audiences e.g. Planning and Biodiversity Conference (*Appendix 12*)

- Use of example illustrating data held by a LRC for training and promotional purposes e.g. presentations to planners and consultants etc (*Appendix 13*)

21. LRC Funding Opportunities

The RAO produced a list of various funding sources that have been or could be available to LRCs, and this can be found in *Appendix 14*. These range from statutory bodies such as the Forestry Commission to utility companies, the National Lottery and the Government's new burdens funding.

It is evident that a range of funding options are available to LRCs, although some of these would be for separate project work as opposed to core work. LRCs will have to be ever more creative and progressive if they are to secure funds whilst not compromising their core work areas, undertaking a range of projects and offering products and services that are relevant and useful to data users. Much of this is already happening or in progress, but it is not enough for LRCs to sit back and carry on as they always have in light of the current economic climate and the demand for cost effective and user-friendly solutions to working with data for the decision making process.

Recommendations:
- LRCs to investigate and identify different sources of funding. Look into ways of being more creative and progressive in appealing to a range of funders and to enhance the existing products and services offered to increase relevancy and cost effectiveness

22. Regional SLAs

When looking at funding opportunities for LRCs, it is apparent that potential funders include large regional or national bodies and organisations that would benefit from being able to access data for an area or region matching their own boundaries and work areas. Specifically, if a regional dataset could be offered to such organisations so that they only need deal with one source for data as opposed to several, this would likely be an attractive and more cost effective proposition for the data user and an effective way of regional LRCs working together to attract secure funding and improve regional data coverage.

In another project funded by Natural England in the Southwest, the project officer there focused on arranging regional SLAs with various utility companies and organisations to the benefit of LRCs. The RAO for this project also considered the possibility of doing this for the East of England region and subsequently contacted various organisations to initiate the process, as well as raise the idea with LRCs at a regional forum in March 2011. Although there was a mixed response at the forum by LRCs as to the practicalities and implications of being able to provide a regional dataset, it was felt that it was a worthwhile project to investigate further, to ascertain the feasibility of offering such a service to regional organisations.

The key issues surrounding a regional dataset are:

- Having one LRC act as the central point of contact for regional data enquiries and searches. This LRC would act as the first point of contact by an organisation requesting data within the region and would therefore take responsibility for initiating the search and collating the data from other LRCs involved, as well as determining the cost and dividing the funds to the participating LRCs for data supplied. This LRC would also act as the legal entity on signed contracts and agreements and therefore be solely responsible for ensuring data searches happen according to the original terms and conditions of an agreement. Such a role is not to be taken lightly and could initially prove to be quite difficult and time consuming in kick-starting this process.
- Although the regional standard data service is now in place so that there is more consistency in LRC data searches and outputs, there are still many issues to be ironed out in order for a regional dataset to be provided. LRCs in the region are disparate in terms of their data holdings, charges, software and technology used, and more commonality would have to be in place for a cross-regional data search to take place.

The RAO approached the utility company Eastern Power Networks (EPN) and had a meeting with them together with the centre manager for CPERC. The notes of the meeting can be found in *Appendix 15* and it was a positive meeting in that EPN are very progressive with regards to their biodiversity obligations and are aware of data usage and how it could be used to inform their work on the ground. The idea of a regional dataset was met with approval and EPN are keen to send CPERC a couple of trial projects to see how a data search would work in practice. By understanding what organisations want in terms of regional data, it might perhaps be easier to determine how a regional dataset might be provided in the first place.

Another meeting was held with the Forestry Commission (FC) at their East of England offices, together with a data officer from NBIS. Although it was apparent they have no funding in the short to medium term to consider regional SLAs, it was a useful meeting to discuss their data needs and usage and the meeting notes can be seen in *Appendix 16*.

During this project, Natural England reduced their funding to LRCs for the financial year 2011-12; however, the Environment Agency was able to fund LRCs across the region as part of a one-year SLA. It is hoped that together with the FC, these three organisations, as part of Defra, can find a solution in the future to work together in supporting LRCs.

Recommendations:
- A separate review investigating the specific issues and advantages of regional SLAs and providing a regional dataset to larger companies and organisations
- Continued liaison with EPN to potentially initiate a regional or cross-border SLA

PART IV: Outcomes and recommendations

Throughout this project, a number of challenges were identified that affected the RAO's work and associated outputs. However, where challenges occurred, this sometimes led to new opportunities and the identification of more specific needs and requirements.

The timing of the project was unfortunate in that the whole concept of regions and regional bodies was abandoned by the new coalition government in Spring 2010, immediately limiting the number of regional organisations and contacts the RAO could engage with (e.g. EEDA, GO East, regional Wildlife Trust policy officer). However, potential SLA partners and funders such as national/regional bodies and organisations still operated on a regional basis and so the concept of LRCs working together as a region was not defunct and instead helped to create consistency (e.g. regional data standards) in an otherwise disparate group.

The economic downturn also meant huge budget cuts to public bodies. As a key audience for the RAO, this proved difficult to successfully engage with local authorities and advocate LRCs, particularly when their products and services are not considered essential by cash-strapped authorities undergoing redundancies.

Related to this, the apparent weakness of current legislation and it not being strongly enforced, together with a lack of guidance on best practice, means it remains relatively easy for local authorities to ignore their biodiversity duties and do away with LRCs in their cost-cutting exercises. Added to this, an element of uncertainty because of the changes being made to legislation by the new coalition Government.

This situation is made relatively easier for LRCs when an authority has an ecologist or environmental team in place, able to act as an advocate for LRCs and biodiversity in general. Also key is their ability to interpret environmental data and provide advice to an authority on its biodiversity obligations within planning. Without ecologists (themselves increasingly seen as a luxury amidst budget cuts), local authorities cannot interpret data and therefore it is another reason for not accessing or wanting it in the first place.

The above could also lead to opportunities for LRCs to look beyond local authorities and adapt their business models to obtain funding from different sources as well as creating new products, services and cost effective ways for data usage, access and understanding. Opportunities could exist to work with other organisations more closely to supply and interpret data (e.g. Wildlife Trusts) or for LRCs to join forces/resources to promote themselves as a larger unit. It is also hoped the impending White Paper on the natural environment and changes to planning legislation will ensure local authorities take their biodiversity obligations more seriously.

In terms of working with LRCs themselves, there was a disparity in how they each responded to the possibilities inherent within this project and acted on that potential. This led to a contrast in the input and feedback provided by some LRCs to inform the work of the RAO, and consequently, some LRCs benefitted more than others from the project. However, regional outputs, such as the Code of Conduct and advocacy document, would benefit all LRCs regardless of their levels of engagement with the RAO.

On the whole, relationships with data providers were generally good or improving, with common issues affecting most LRCs (e.g. lack of data for certain taxa, getting data from National Schemes). Relationships are built over time and if LRCs offer a standard and consistent approach to data management and dissemination this can only help to reassure data providers and encourage the provision of data.

The objectives, aims and required outputs of the project were quite broad, given the nature of advocacy work to different audiences. This resulted in a lack of specific (S.M.A.R.T) tasks, making it difficult to gauge success for the more intangible elements of the project. However, some outputs, as dictated by the project objectives, were achieved within the timeframe given e.g. communications plan and Code of Conduct.

Difficulty in co-ordinating work to address the objectives shared with the other Natural England-funded project to standardise data requests. This was due in part to the delayed timing of this project and the outputs of both project officers not overlapping as much as originally envisaged within the time period remaining. However, both officers regularly communicated and worked together, where possible, on fulfilling objectives, such as the consultants conference.

Recommendations for LRCs for the future have been listed throughout this report, and are also listed below:

- Introduce and increase the number of data sharing agreements with data providers to cover issues surrounding data management and dissemination to help improve data provision and frequency given (*Appendix 3* for CPERC example)

- Have in place comprehensive data management policies and procedures, in preparation for the ALERC accreditation process (*Appendix 4* for CPERC example*)* and to inform data providers of the functions and processes of a LRC

- Investigate the feasibility of setting up a Recorders Fund as an alternative way for data providers to obtain funds whilst improving the recording effort in the county (investigate NBIS example)

- Use of Advocacy Document and/or case studies to showcase LRCs – circulate to key audiences, publish on website and use where possible (*Appendix 5*)

- A separate, more focused review looking at data flow between National Schemes, the NBN and LRCs for the benefit of biodiversity in the UK

- Use of example illustrating the difference between a data search using the NBN Gateway and a LRC for training and promotional purposes e.g. presentations to planners and consultants etc (*Appendix 6*)

- The Code of Conduct to be used as a tool to inform and reassure data providers and data users that data received by a LRC is managed according to a regional standard. The Code can be made available through websites, meetings and presentations and act as a guide to compliment existing LRC policies or as a pre-cursor to those yet to be in place (*Appendix 7*)

- The 'timeline of a record' article to be used where possible by LRCs to aid understanding and justify costs to data users (*Appendix 8*)

- Review the work started by NBIS on planning screening toolkits and investigate future possibilities; see also CPERCs example of weekly planning list searches in Advocacy Document

- Consider developing web-based data access as an option for users wanting a quick and cost effective way of accessing data that's up to date

- Increase habitat data to undertake habitat mapping and green infrastructure projects

- Investigate a joint approach to local authorities with the Wildlife Trusts to clarify services offered and act as a possible solution to the interpretation of data for those authorities without ecologists

- Organise future cross-regional events aimed at key audiences e.g. Planning and Biodiversity Conference (*Appendix 12*)

- Use of example illustrating data held by a LRC for training and promotional purposes e.g. presentations to planners and consultants etc (*Appendix 13*)

- LRCs to investigate and identify different sources of funding. Look into ways of being more creative and progressive in appealing to a range of funders and to enhance the existing products and services offered to increase relevancy and cost effectiveness (*Appendix 14*)

- A separate review investigating the specific issues and advantages of regional SLAs and providing a regional dataset to larger companies and organisations

- Continued liaison with EPN to potentially initiate a regional or cross-border SLA

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