

Atlas platform update

The following paper provides a brief summary of progress in implementing the Atlas of Living Australia infrastructure in the UK, and also details a proposal for the NBN Trust to resume management of the NBN Gateway and technical infrastructure, including the Atlas platforms.

Board actions

- a) Note the satisfactory progress in development of the Atlas of Living Scotland and its proposed formal launch in May 2016
- b) Note the significant progress in securing funding for an Atlas of Living Wales and Atlas of Living Northern Ireland
- c) Note the increased commitment in England to implement an Atlas of Living England
- d) Decide the Trust's view on the changes proposed in the paper around the current role of JNCC in delivering technical support and leadership with respect to the current Gateway
- e) Note the order of costs around Atlas work and the proposed strategy (The budget for the coming year is formally addressed in Financial papers)

1. Atlas Implementation Updates

Atlas of Living Scotland

- Phase 1 and 2 of build substantially complete
- Habitat layers incorporated
- Sensitive species list incorporated to limit view and download
- Largest Scottish library of on-line species images
- 28 data partners – data upload in progress
- Launch plans in preparation for May

Atlas of Living Wales

- Funding and specification agreed
- MOU to be established

Atlas of Living Northern Ireland

- Funding and specification agreed for phase 1
- MOU to be established
- ambitions for a phase 2 to incorporate links to Irish Republic data, to provide a chargeable information inquiry portal; and to more fully incorporate textual information on CeDAR's existing website.

Cross platform developments update

- The Scottish Atlas is built to prevent full access to data relating to a list of sensitive species, and only shows them at a low resolution. In order for the Atlas to allow access to these data to a limited or licenced range of users, additional functionality has to be built. This could cost around £20,000 at current CSIRO costs – and commensurate developer time. Due to this cost, and the pressing claims of other priority tasks, we decided to defer work on that access provision. In the interim, sensitive species data can still be accessed via the NBN Gateway.

- The analytical power of the Atlas – for example the ability to cross analyse species records (point data) against a wide range of spatial layers (e.g. habitat and other environmental data) might best be provided “once and well” to all national or regional Atlas portals. Accordingly, we are moving to deliver this analytical service from the Scottish Atlas in the first instance – but in due course from its own site. Though users will be able to continue to use it has the added advantage that users will explore wholly local data if they wish, they will also be able to undertake cross boundary or whole UK analysis from within their own Atlas. Maintenance and other costs should be less and the need for a further “Atlas of Living UK” (or GB, or British Isles) is lessened as each Atlas will incorporate means to link to that wider scale of data.
- The Atlas(s) was hosted by Amazon, but to take advantage of a £20k grant from Microsoft, we transferred a substantial part to Microsoft. Longer term decisions about hosting the Atlas(s) need to be taken in the coming year.

Atlas of Living England

- There is agreement in principle to pursue development of the Atlas platform in England
- Policy development is laying increased importance on the role of open data

Regional/ Local Atlases

- London (GIGL) and the Cairngorm National Park have both expressed interest in adopting the Atlas platform to provide access to appropriate data.
- The Highland and Western Isles recording community are likewise interested in exploring how the Atlas of Living Scotland could be used to act as a hub for their recording activities

2. NBN Trust resuming technical leadership of NBN Atlas/Gateway infrastructure

Background

Previously JNCC have managed the development of the NBN Gateway offering technical support and assistance to NBN data partners during their data upload process, as well as implementing changes to the NBN Gateway as specified by the Statutory Agencies and agreed by the Trust. These costs have been borne by contributions paid to JNCC by the statutory agencies.

The implementation of the Atlas of Living Australia in the UK, via the pilot project, the Atlas of Living Scotland has been project managed by the NBN Trust. When fully implemented reliance on the NBN Gateway will cease and this calls into question the relationship that has been in place for some time between JNCC as suppliers of technical support on the NBN Gateway and the NBN Trust as its owners.

Changes: Benefits and Drawbacks

JNCC is suggesting that the NBN Trust take over the full management of the NBN Gateway, and the Atlases. As part of this they would recommend that the Statutory Agencies redirect the JNCC funds for this service to the NBN Trust. This would have the following benefits:

- Governance of the NBN Gateway/Atlases would rest solely with the Trust removing the current anomaly that critical aspects rest with JNCC
- Financial costs and allocations would be considered in the round with the Trust fully in control of all resources
- Priorities for development would more explicitly lie with the Trust (and its membership) rather than JNCC and the Statutory Agencies
- Exercise of Ownership of the NBN Gateway/Atlases would be more complete through accepting full responsibility for the necessary technical leadership.
- The Trust could better manage the risks around technical support and technical leadership.
- It would be open to the Trust to secure the capacity to deliver technical leadership and some technical development however it wanted: through employment of staff, contracting some other service provider; or continuing to contract services from JNCC .
- The implementation of the Atlas of Living Australia in the UK, via the pilot project, the Atlas of Living Scotland has been project managed by the NBN Trust, and when fully implemented across the UK, will reduce mean that

However, there are also potential downsides and new risks that need to be considered:

- Adding the costs currently allocated to the JNCC to the sums already paid by the Country Agencies to the NBN Trust will (of course) make these expected sums paid direct to NBN from the Country Agencies substantially larger. At this time of cost cutting, it cannot be assumed that such costs would be accepted or in the longer term sustained (despite the changes, in reality, being neutral in impact). Transparency might act against us!
- The benefit in currently relying on JNCC technical support may exceed the current cost in that JNCC staff are well versed in NBN Gateway work and committed to NBN services. Although the option to contract JNCC to deliver work to NBN would still be there, there can be no certainty that JNCC would necessarily retain the capacity to do this work.
- Contracted services *might* attract VAT, and cost more. However it is possible (probable) that it would be exempt from VAT (see for example: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/vat-information-sheet-1113-supplies-of-research-between-eligible-bodies/vat-information-sheet-1113-supplies-of-research-between-eligible-bodies>)

However, given the wider range of options open to NBN for raising money, the severe financial pressure in the public sector, the benefits in having more accountable governance and associated means for more effective risk management, staff are recommending that the Board ask staff to negotiate (or accept) this transition. The intention is not to make this happen precipitously, but that new arrangements would be in place for 2017 onwards.

It is anticipated, that should progress on the English Atlas (and of course the Welsh and Northern Irish Atlases) be as hoped for in the coming year, then we could cease reliance on the NBN Gateway within 18 months from now.