

NBN Trust Membership Scheme Review - Report April 2017

1. Purpose

To provide the summary of the Feedback received from the *NBN Trust Membership Scheme Review 2016 Consultation Paper* completed in November 2016 and an update on the development of the new membership scheme.

The National Biodiversity Network Trust, (NBN Trust), and the Board of Trustees would like to thank everyone who took the time to participate in the membership review through completing the online survey, providing detailed feedback and also passing on comments and suggestions to members of the NBN Trust staff and Trustees. All these comments have informed the decision made by the Board of Trustees on how to proceed.

2. Executive Summary

In late 2016 the NBN Trust Secretariat and Board of Trustees issued consultation on the NBN Trust membership scheme. The consultation was concluded in November 2016 and the results considered by the Board of Trustees in February 2017.

Overall the feedback received was that the current membership scheme was not working, however, there was no clear consensus on a proposed new scheme. The Trustees have agreed that a transition approach is required.

The clear messages that came out of the responses were that organisational members were not able to, or prepared to, pay any more in membership fees at this time; that the proposed individual membership category was not appropriate and clarity was still required on the benefits of membership.

The Trustees have agreed to introduce simplified membership categories, hold fees at the existing rate for current members and introduce a 'Pay What You Decide' membership for individuals.

For simplicity there will be two types of Membership – 'Member' and 'Corporate Member'.

Members will be able to join as either an Individual or Organisational. Organisational members will include all organisations, record centres, schemes and societies, voluntary groups, government bodies etc.

Corporate Membership will be for businesses or other organisations who want to support the aims of the Network and for whom membership may not be appropriate. They will not have access to the full suite of benefits e.g. voting rights.

[[Link to Revised Benefit Table April 2017](#)]

Fees will be kept at the current rates for existing members for 2017/18. New members will be asked to join at tiered rates relating to turnover. These will be similar to the current rates.

[[Link to Membership Fees 2017/2018](#)]

NBN Trust will review membership rates from time to time, usually in the autumn of each year, taking account of financial pressures on the Trust and of member's ability to pay. We will give at least 3 months' notice of any increase.

These changes will take effect from April 2017.

3. Review Feedback

a. Respondents

Number of Responses: 86

Members: 45

Non-Members: 37

Not-stated: 4

The majority of respondents were individuals then Record centres, conservation charities and government bodies.

The responses received, both positive and critical were generally split evenly and between members and non-members. There was overwhelming support for simplified membership categories.

b. Highlights

- Respondents did agree that the current scheme was not working and that changes were needed to increase membership
- There was generally a positive response to the benefits that were offered although there were calls for these to be increased and tailored
- Overall there was a resistance from current and potential members to pay any more than current contribution
- It was noted that the fee level for individual members was too high and benefits unclear for individuals members
- The responses did not provide a consensus about whether the proposals set out in the review paper were the right way forward

c. General comments on Feedback

General themes from the feedback received included:

- There is support for the NBN and the need to offer a package of benefits
- Respondents wanted membership and data provision/use to remain connected
- Respondents felt that there was not enough emphasis on positives of collaboration
- Respondents noted that there was a lack of value placed on the work of the NBN Secretariat
- Scheme does not recognise value placed on data provision and non-financial support
- Individual membership rates were too high and unclear on benefits of joining

4. Response to Consultation Paper Section 2 - Benefits of Association

Do you agree that the Benefits of Association provide the right emphasis for current and potential members?

The responses were split on these broad objectives. Positive comments included that we need to stress the facts of how the NBN can play a part and the tools we do have i.e. NBN Atlas.

'A key asset of the NBN is the ability to link local and national data providers and users and I think this should be emphasised as a benefit.'

'...stress that biodiversity is an essential part of healthy ecosystems and that healthy ecosystems are essential for human health and well-being.'

Some of the criticism was around if these were really benefits to encourage members to join and if it implied an overlap with the work being done by other organisations.

'Many of us already do the things cited as benefits but through Association we can better and more effectively collaborate with each other. I don't think that comes across particularly clearly...'

'Not sure how joining the NBN will help recorders collect even more data. Or how the NBN in its current form improves knowledge of population trends.'

'How does individual membership of NBN rather than another contributing organisation offer enhanced benefits?'

The NBN Trust needs to differentiate itself from the work of local record centres and NGO's. We need to be clear why support should be given to NBN Trust in addition to other recording schemes, affiliations.

5. Response to Consultation Paper Section 2 - Benefits of Membership

Do these benefits represent a package sufficient to encourage potential members to join the NBN?

There was a lot of positivity towards the benefits with some respondents expressing opinion that they agreed that they should pay towards them. However some were slightly cautious that they wouldn't encourage new members and need to be improved over time. Another suggestion was to link to other organisations for a discount or shared service.

'There are some good benefits here and their value would increase as more become members. But would they be sufficient to encourage new members?'

'I would like to see members pulling their weight more and that this should become integral to the benefits associated with being a part of the Network.'

However there was some criticisms were that they had no relevance for individuals, that the offer of support from the Secretariat was welcomed but could it be achieved with limited resources. Larger organisations noted that the benefits offered little to them.

'As an individual recorder - no.' *'No - very little here for volunteer run recording schemes'*

'...probably would use few of the benefits above and, having no profits or turnover couldn't afford membership anyway.'

'The list itself is fine, but what service will members benefit from in terms of inputting data and more importantly out-putting data, which is exclusive to members'

Many respondents wanted the linking of benefits to data provision and recognition of the non-financial contributions that they make. This message was from all sectors – individuals, small organisations and the large charities.

'There needs to be a recognition that the NBN Trust also benefits from the activities of the Network members.'

6. Response to Consultation Paper Section 2 - Categories of Membership

Do you agree with the categories of membership that we have identified?

Many respondents broadly agreed with the categories.

'Yes, they are clear and concise, and reflect the make-up of those currently involved. Would benefits also reflect the amount of input received from each category?'

The main criticisms were around where small schemes and societies fitted in – those with very limited or zero income. They didn't class themselves as 'organisation' and were not an individual.

'Is a voluntarily organised recording scheme that does not charge for data an individual or an organisation? i.e. not sure if your proposed scheme is clear what category you should belong to'

There were a number of comments about how turnover is measured. For example if a record centre sits within a larger charity how would turnover be calculated? Comments were also made about profit v non-profit organisations and how would we encourage larger organisations to join.

'Not sure that "turnover" is the right term to base an organisation fee on. Local Government bodies do not have a "turnover" as such. Where an organisation such as record centre is part of a larger organisation (e.g. Local Authority or Wildlife Trust) would the "turnover" refer to the wider organisation or the record centre? This would result in very different membership fees.'

'...some kind of distinction is needed with regards profit making organisations versus charities and not for profit.'

'It seems quite simple but some larger organisations will be scared off by the cost and they may have a lot of potential data to contribute.'

7. Response to Consultation Paper Section 2 - Fee Structure

Do you agree with the proposed fee structure?

The clear message here was that the individual membership was too high. The discrepancy between organisations getting a full discount while individuals have to pay was noted.

'I think the amounts aren't quite right. I'd offer more benefits and then charge more for organisations and slightly less for individuals. For commercial users or service providers, the amount could be considerably higher.'

There are mixed views on whether there should be 100% discounts or not and if there is, on what basis. There is a call for quality data provision not just data provision when determining discounts. There were also suggestions to remove the higher level fees for organisations.

'I don't think a discount should be applied just if a member supplies data. A member handing over tens of thousands of unvalidated and unverified records immediately puts a burden on the already overstretched network of validators and verifiers, where a member that hands over a well curated and verified high quality dataset doesn't. It would be good to move us away from purely being about numbers to a focus on high quality data instead.'

Although a number of responses called for larger organisations to pay more. The larger organisations who responded stated that they would not wish to pay higher amounts without greater benefits.

'As an organisation with a turnover of more than £x million we would require the last membership category at a cost of £1000. As a charity we try to operate as efficiently as possible with very limited funds available to mobilise biological data. We agree that the service that we receive from the NBN Trust/Gateway is value for money and would gladly pay for this service if it was no longer provided freely. However, as membership is voluntary, we are more likely to use our limited funds elsewhere. It is more likely that we could justify paying a smaller amount for NBN membership and then pay for extra services provided to us by the NBN Trust when required.'

8. Summary

Following the feedback the Membership Review Group and Board of Trustees have considered the feedback and how to proceed.

They agreed that neither pressing on with the proposals nor maintaining the 'status quo' represented a viable option. Since the Membership Review was launched progress has been made by the Scottish Biodiversity Information Forum (SBIF) in carrying out a review of biological recording infrastructure in Scotland. It is likely that outcomes of that review will positively impact on the service provision by the NBN Trust in future across the UK. The Trustees recognise the need to keep the options open on the membership scheme in operation following the outcomes.

In addition the Trustees will be creating a new working group to discuss governance and constitution of the Board. One of the outcomes of that review will be to increase and promote the support offered to the membership.

The Trustees agreed that there should be a transition arrangements to include simplified membership categories and note members views regarding membership fees.

9. Proposals made by the Board of Trustees

1. to trial a new scheme for individuals 'Pay What You Decide'. Further details below.
2. not to increase fees for current members at this time and retain existing discounts
3. to allocate new members to the proposed categories – individual, organisational, corporate – at current rates
4. consider ways in which awareness of the role of the NBN Trust can be raised and the benefits of membership can be better promoted
5. To review the position again following the results of the SBIF review and the Governance review once these are available.

10. Pay What You Decide – for Individual members

Clear feedback was received as part of the review that proposed individual membership fees were too high. Comments were also expressed that currently individuals pay the same amount as organisations who could get a full discount. There were also comments that individuals would like a discount to recognise that they supply data via organisations.

Pay What You Decide (PWYD) is similar to membership donations already in place with other organisations e.g. people decide to pay regular amounts of say £3 a month or £40 per year to their chosen charity.

- There will be suggested amounts e.g. minimum £5, £10, £20, £25, £50, other
- This gives the flexibility to tailor benefits, if we chose to, depending on donation, e.g. posting of a member certificate for donations above £10 only to cover administration costs
- We can extend the model to include organisations who currently get a 100% discount and may want to make a bespoke donation
- By building up the individual membership we can then seek ways in the future to link to other discounts with other national schemes and societies or discounts at shops.

11. Conclusion

The Board of Trustees and respondents to the membership review have all agreed that the membership scheme does need to be reviewed. The Trustees recognise that the feedback received was not conclusive on how a new scheme should work.

A transition arrangement will be implemented including the introduction of simplified membership categories, a new individual membership scheme and retaining fees for existing members at the current rate for 2017 - 2018.

The transition arrangements will be reviewed again at the Board of Trustee Meetings in November 2017.

12. Next Steps

The NBN Trust Secretariat will contact all existing members to notify them of the changes and which category of membership they will be moved to – individual or organisational. All will be classed as a ‘Member’.

As members renew during 2017 / 2018 they will again be notified of the revised membership category. Existing and new individual members will be able to re-join / join as individuals on a ‘pay what you decide’ scheme. Full details of the scheme will be made available on our website.

13. Note on Affiliate Membership

In addition to the general membership the NBN has a number of members who are referred to as Affiliate Members. In the main these were founder members. The majority of these members have signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) with the NBN Trust. These MoA’s set out the principles of the relationship including financial contributions and benefits. Any changes to the benefits and financial contributions will be made using the appropriate mechanisms contained within the MoA. If you are interested in this class of membership please contact the NBN Secretariat.

Associated Documents

1. NBN Trust Membership Review 2016 Consultation Paper.
2. Benefits Comparison Table May 2017
3. Revised Terms and Conditions May 2017
4. Subscription Fees 2017 / 2018