

Guidance for Local Authorities on accessing biodiversity information

Local Authorities need information about the distribution of legally protected, rare or threatened species, important habitats and designated sites. Without up-to-date reliable information, they can find themselves exposed to adverse risk, legally, environmentally and economically.

Local Environmental Records Centres provide cost-effective information services which help Local Authorities to comply with their statutory duties, thereby reducing risk and liability. These services are essential for underpinning policies and decision making and for protecting and enhancing the natural environment for the benefit of the local community.

What is a Local Records Centre?

Local Records Centres are organisations that collect, collate, manage and disseminate information relating to the biodiversity and geodiversity of a region on a not-for-profit basis. This information plays an essential role in decision-making at all levels, helping to protect and improve biodiversity and geodiversity within the region and beyond.

A Local Records Centre (LRC) is much more than the database of records it manages. LRCs are partnership-led and employ experienced staff who provide tailored data services, taking account of local policies and priorities. By working with local and national experts, Local Records Centres validate and verify data to known standards, enabling them to be used with confidence. Much of the data managed by Local Records Centres is gathered by highly dedicated expert volunteer recorders. Without Local Records Centres, this valuable data resource would not be made available to local and national users promptly and in a suitable format.

The data services provided by Local Records Centres to Local Authorities are needed for:

- Forward planning and development control
- Land management/agri-environment schemes
- Bio/Geodiversity Action Planning
- Local Sites monitoring and reporting
- Control of invasive species
- Biodiversity offsetting
- Hedgerow enquiries

- Highway maintenance
- Public access to environmental data
- Reporting on Government indicators
- Monitoring and planning for climate change
- Managing flood risk

The services of Local Records Centres should be sought to ensure compliance with:

- Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006
- Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000
- The Protection of Badgers Act 1992
- The Hedgerow Regulations 1997
- INSPIRE Regulations 2009 and the UK Location Strategy
- UK Environmental Information Regulations 2004 (EIR) and Freedom of Information Act
- Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004; Protection of Wild Mammals (Scotland) Act 2002 and the Wildlife and Natural Environment Scotland Act 2011
- The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2010 and the Conservation (Natural Habitats, etc.) Amendment (Scotland) Regulations 2007
- National Planning Policy Framework chapter 11 "Conserving and enhancing the natural environment"
- National Planning Policy Guidance - Natural Environment; Biodiversity, ecosystems and green infrastructure "How can evidence on ecology be gathered and kept up to date?"
- Technical Advice Note 5, Nature Conservation and Planning (2009) (Wales)

"LRCs are fundamental in providing data to inform planning and development decisions. In that context the information they provide is vital... I use it to support my own professional judgment and knowledge of the local area."

Gail Quartly-Bishop,
Merseyside Environmental
Advisory Service ecologist

How to find your Local Records Centre: www.alerc.org.uk

The Association of Local Environmental Records Centres (ALERC) represents the interests of Local Records Centres throughout the UK, sharing innovations and best practice and promoting standards in environmental data management and service provision.

Local Records Centres in the National Biodiversity Network

Local Records Centres are an integral part of the National Biodiversity Network, a partnership of organisations who collect and use biodiversity data and are committed to making this information available for nature conservation and the public benefit. Local Records Centres play a vital role in the NBN by supporting and guiding local biological recording effort, managing and quality controlling species and habitat records and ensuring that biodiversity data are used to inform local decision making.

The NBN Gateway is a tool for sharing biodiversity data via the internet. However, data shared through the NBN Gateway remain the property of the data providers – their use is governed by terms and conditions and access may be restricted.

Important note:

If you receive a survey report in support of a planning application which quotes the NBN Gateway as a source of data, please ask the author:

- Do they have access to all the records at the highest available resolution?
- Do they have written permission from all the data providers to use their data in this way?
- Did they also contact the Local Records Centre to ensure that they have access to records which are not yet on the NBN Gateway?

If the answer is 'no', this use of data contravenes the NBN Gateway Terms and Conditions and the report is not based on the most comprehensive and up-to-date biodiversity information, which could result in unnecessary delays and expenses.

By negotiating special data access agreements with local and national data providers and making innovative use of the tools and technology offered by the NBN, Local Records Centres provide a 'one-stop-shop' for information on sites, habitats and species in the region. **The NBN Gateway is not a substitute for the data services provided by Local Records Centres** but it can enhance these services, ensuring that Local Authorities benefit fully from the achievements of the NBN.

Services provided by Local Records Centres:

- List of all recorded BAP priority and legally protected species and BAP priority habitats in a defined area
- Records distribution map of any recorded species in a defined area
- GIS data search of a defined area showing recorded habitats, statutory and non-statutory sites and BAP/legally protected species
- Local Wildlife and Geodiversity Sites boundaries and descriptions
- Regularly updated alert layers of BAP priority and protected species and habitats within an administrative boundary
- Species richness maps to highlight biodiversity 'hotspots'
- Public Wildlife Enquiry Service
- Training and guidance to promote high quality species and habitat recording

Many Local Records Centres also provide the following enhanced services:

- Management of Local Wildlife/Geological Sites dataset
- Green infrastructure mapping
- Specialised species and habitat surveys
- Habitat suitability mapping and species modelling
- Local Wildlife/Geological Sites surveys and monitoring
- Habitat opportunity mapping
- Data interpretation to enhance public understanding
- Monitoring and reporting on biodiversity indicators and LBAP outcomes

The suite of data services provided by LRCs are essential for enabling Local Authorities to incorporate consideration for biodiversity into their daily operations as required by the NERC Act, and information obtained from the LRC is vital to inform the focus of new ecological surveys which may be required to support planning applications.