

Summary of discussions at the NBN Conference Knowledge Exchange Session 3: Providing multi-regional, multi-taxa and national commercial services in collaboration with data providers

Two sessions were held which provided an introduction to the NBN Trust's proposal for the provision of services, which was then discussed with delegates to garner their early opinions, any concerns and ideas.

Background

For the majority of its existence the NBN Trust has been almost fully funded by public bodies, however, public funding, particularly from the country nature conservation bodies and JNCC, is being squeezed. Due to a number of reasons, particularly taking on the management and development of the NBN Atlas and associated specialist staff, the amount of funding received via this route no longer fully covers the Trust's running costs. Therefore, the Trust needs to investigate alternative and diverse income streams to cover the shortfall and ensure it does not continue to be reliant on a very narrow funding base. The NBN Trust received an HLF Resilient Heritage Grant in March 2019 which includes funding to investigate new income streams.

The NBN Trust and ALERC have in the past received enquiries from national organisations or those covering several regions asking if they could access datasets from multiple providers (e.g. multiple Local Environmental Record Centres, National Schemes and Societies, local and regional recording groups) via a single national portal. The benefits to the organisations of the NBN Trust and data partners collaborating on this approach would be twofold: it saves time on administration and removes the need to piece together all datasets before they can be used to inform the organisation's activities.

Proposal

The Trust and data providers collaboratively provide multi-regional, multi-taxa and national services to fee paying data consumers. Data will not be available within the NBN Atlas, it will be downloaded and forwarded to the consumer, at least in the short to medium term.

The Trust will act as a broker dealing with:

- Initial enquiry & confirming consumers requirements including geographical coverage
- all contracts
- invoicing & receiving payments
- passing relevant payments onto data partners
- provision of data to the consumer

The Trust will also actively seek new business to make this arrangement worthwhile to the data providers.

Data owners/partners will still have complete control over what data can be included in any data package and who is provided with their data. They do not hand over control of data to the NBN Trust.

Desired Outcomes

At the start of the session we set out our desired outcomes, which were to have:

- gathered opinions on the feasibility of our proposal
- gained agreement with our proposal
- gained agreement in principle to collaborate in future discussions and service
- obtained any other ideas for income generation

Discussions

There was a high level of interest in, and support for, the proposal in general terms and agreement that the Trust should lead on investigating the provision of collaborative services further.

Data partners saw the potential for the collaboration to bring in new business. They were particularly interested in the Trust taking on the administrative burden and doing the 'hard sell' on the Network's behalf, highlighting the advantages of the Network's data and being unapologetic about the financial costs associated with the provision of excellent data services.

The main issues that will need to be worked out before services could commence are:

1. Pricing

This is seen as key. There needs to be consideration of whether fees should be consumer agnostic, i.e. will the fees be the same for all projects regardless of sector of consumer or should fees be based on e.g. turnover of customer? Additionally, there was discussion over what fee structure should be used:

- A fee per transaction
- Fees per x transactions
- A licencing or SLA agreement for certain periods of time
- A combination of the above

2. Membership fees

It is envisaged that, at least initially, those data partners wishing to be part of the collaborative services will need to pay increased membership fees, to assist with:

- the development of the NBN Atlas needed to be able to provide services
- development of advertising of services and bringing in customers
- additional NBN Trust staff time to carry out the associated work

While the majority present were in principle happy to consider paying increased membership fees, there needs to be transparency around these fees and a clear rationale for the level they are set at. It was suggested that the membership fee could be a proportion of the business delivered to the data partner rather than a flat fee.

3. Development of the NBN Atlas

Along with it being essential that it is really easy to upload/share data to the NBN Atlas. There are a number of improvements that will be needed to be implemented in the NBN Atlas before we can proceed with these services. They include:

a. Implementation of a two-tier system

This will be needed to ensure that data providers can provide high resolution data to the NBN Atlas that is not made available publicly.

b. Improvements to the geographical search function

The current system where records are displayed as the centroid of the relevant sized grid square (e.g. 1km, 2 km, 10km etc.) means that records that are actually within the boundary of a search area may be missed if that search area does not contain the centroid of the grid. This needs to be rectified.

c. Signposting to the availability of higher resolution data

At present there is no way of knowing if data partners have higher resolution data than that which is publicly available on the NBN Atlas. A system would be added (perhaps not until after launch of commercial services). This would also act as a shop window for individual data partners' services.

It was also suggested that it may be useful to enable automatic refresh of species data from Recorder 6. This would require development of both the NBN Atlas and R6 systems and could be looked into in the future.

There was discussion around the need for species datasets shared via the two tier system to be tagged with national, regional and local designations where they exist, for example local species of conservation concern (SOCC) lists maintained by local species experts and authorities.

3. Data & services included

Comprehensiveness of the data that could be provided is important. Some considerations that will need to be taken into account:

- Will there need to be a critical mass of data partners for it to be of interest to multi-regional or national consumers?
- What data should be included? Can we provide more than just species data? E.g. habitat, local sites etc.? Non-species data may be too difficult as it is very local in nature.
- Not all data is created equal – need to identify which datasets are sought after, e.g. protected species, and perhaps start with those.

It was agreed we would have to start small, most likely with just protected species data, however, there is great potential for expanding and evolving services as more income is received and development of the NBN Atlas progresses. Products provided may need to cater to differing skill levels of the data consumers.

It was suggested that we use the Environment Agency as a pilot and that we might want to explore the potential for compatibility with the Welsh LERCs data delivery mechanism.

5. Retention of relationships between data partners and data users

Relationships between data providers and data consumers are really important, especially with regard to local and/or species specific information and advice services. It is essential that this is reflected in any contracts brokered by the NBN Trust.

6. Data Partner Concerns

Data partners had the following concerns which need to be addressed in any potential model going forward:

- There needs to be rigorous controls on e.g. confidential records
- Data partners need to be able to withdraw data
- Excellent data security is essential

There were also some questions around whether data owners may start providing data directly to the NBN Trust rather than via the LERCs or schemes and societies if there were a possibility for them to earn income. Similarly, it is possible that some LERC data originally comes from schemes and societies and there may need to be agreements arranged between these groups around who receives any income from services including these data.

7. Other potential income generating service for the NBN Trust

The workshop delegates suggested the following additional services that they felt data partners may be willing to pay for.

- Signposting NBN Atlas users to data partner services could bring in income for the NBN Trust. E.g. The Trust could receive a percentage of the fees received from new business brought in via the NBN Atlas.
- Smaller organisations who do not have the resources to provide commercial services from their data may be interested in the Trust providing these services just for their data, for a fee.
- Data partners may be more willing to provide increased membership fees if the NBN Atlas provides the tools they need.

Outcomes

By the end of each session we had successfully reached our desired outcomes. Data partners (and others) present:

- agreed our proposal was feasible
- agreed to collaborate in future discussions about collaborative service provision
- agreed in principle to offer collaborative services via the NBN Trust, dependent on the final proposal presented to them
- provided additional income generating ideas for the NBN Trust

Next Steps

- NBN Trust are working with ALERC to investigate LERC contracts to inform potential general contract terms and conditions that would be agreeable to all LERCs, and potentially other data providers
- NBN Trust are developing the requirements for and implementation of the functionality described in point 3 above
- NBN Trust will produce a work plan and timescale for delivering pilot services by 31st January 2020
- NBN Trust, in conjunction with its plans to adopt the FAIR principle of data management, will produce a proposal for cataloguing Network datasets by 31st January 2020