

Unlocking Better Planning decisions for Nature

Overview

The Association of Local Environmental Records Centres (ALERC) represents a UK-wide network of 52 Local Environmental Records Centres (LERCs)¹ that provide biodiversity information services to support local and regional planning decision-making. We are concerned that a significant number of planning applications which should be informed by professionally qualified ecologists and underpinned by robust, site-appropriate evidence are being submitted for planning permission and approved without either.

Recent analysis undertaken by ALERC **highlights that appropriate ecological evidence is absent in the majority of planning applications**. This information needs to contribute to the wider discussions on how to improve the consideration of nature in planning.

Biodiversity² is a material consideration in planning and is covered by relevant legislation, this is not optional. Research conducted by the Mayor of London in 2016 established a useful benchmark. A set of criteria was used to analyse planning applications in order to identify those that could potentially have a negative impact on biodiversity and should have been informed by further ecological assessment and consideration, including a Local Environmental Records Centre data search report. The criteria included the proximity of an application site to protected and priority species, statutorily and non-statutorily designated sites and important habitats.

The results established that approximately 18% of the planning applications analysed met one or more of the criteria, and ought to have been informed by a data search report. There has been no equivalent research carried out elsewhere in England, but feedback based on our members' experience in other counties suggests that it is closer to 21%.

In February 2024, biodiversity net gain (BNG) became mandatory in England, a change we expected to result in an increased use of biodiversity data in planning and decision making. To explore this further, ALERC members identified the number of commercial data search reports delivered each year as a proxy for the number of planning applications screened for biodiversity on a per county basis. The results have been converted into a percentage per county for the purpose of comparison to the research and reflect the past five years' figures to show the performance of the Local Environmental Records Centres' commercial data search services in the lead up to and after the implementation of biodiversity net gain.

¹ Local Environmental Records Centres (LERCs) are not-for-profit organisations that collect, collate and manage information on the natural environment for a defined geographic area. LERCs support and collaborate with a network of experts to ensure information is robust, and make information products and services accessible to a range of audiences including decision-makers, the public, and researchers (ALERC definition)

² Biodiversity is 'The variability among living organisms from all sources including, inter alia, terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystems and the ecological complexes of which they are part; this includes diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems.' Article 2 of the Biodiversity Convention

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The results demonstrate that many planning applications do not consider biodiversity evidence when they should, despite statutory requirements such as the strengthened biodiversity duty in the Environment Act 2021 and the biodiversity net gain provisions in Schedule 7A of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. We believe that raising awareness and improving collaboration between those involved in development and environmental impact management will lead to better consideration of biodiversity in planning and ultimately better outcomes for nature and people.

Results

Figure 1 below reflects the results for the geographic areas represented by participating ALERC members. They range from 1.7% in Greater London to just over 16% in Doncaster, with an average of 9%. Our survey results also demonstrate that only 66% of local authorities have access to their LERC's evidence base and it cannot be assumed that all of their planning departments actively and routinely use this evidence base to identify planning applications that require biodiversity assessments.

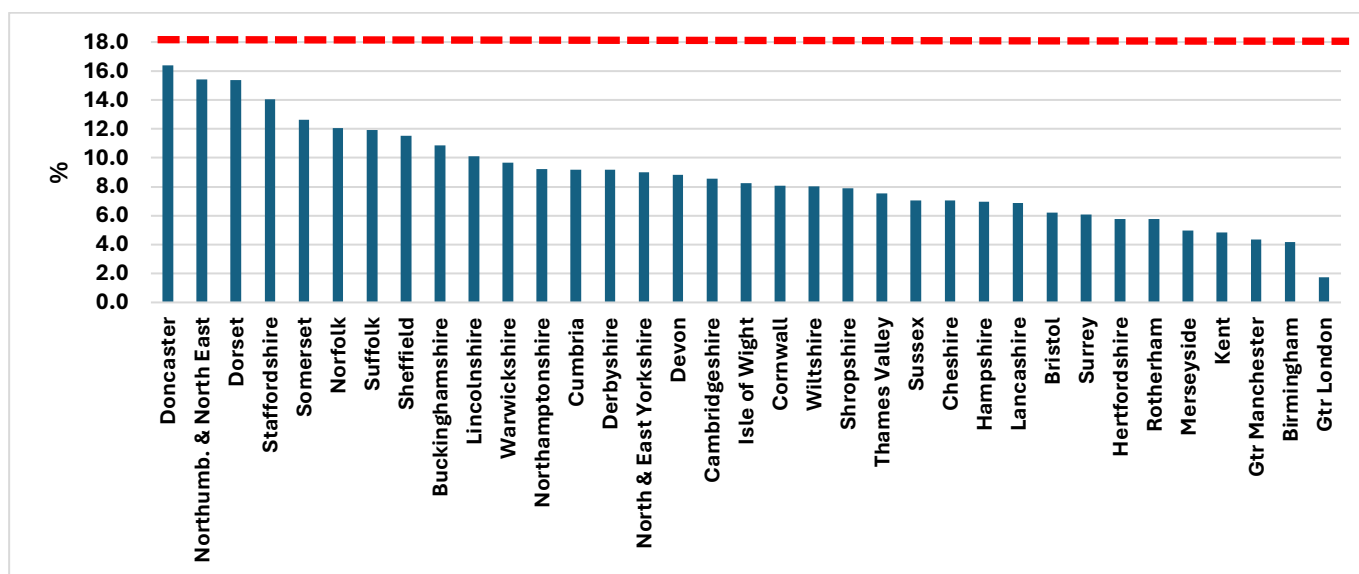


Figure 1. The number of LERC data enquiries as a % of planning applications 2024-25.

(18% is the minimum level of data enquiries a LERC should expect.)

The average percentage of applications in England informed by a LERC data search for the past five years has consistently been below 10% (Figure 2) and whilst the trend is upwards, this is far too low. Following the introduction of mandatory BNG, we expected to see a much stronger adherence to the mitigation hierarchy³ to

³ The mitigation hierarchy is the framework used to minimise environmental impacts. It involves a structured approach that prioritises avoidance followed by minimisation, then restoration and lastly compensation. The hierarchy is critical in guiding planners, developers and conservationists in making informed decisions to protect ecosystems when developing plans and undertaking projects. <https://ukgbc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/UKGBC-The-Mitigation-Hierarchy-Factsheet-v0.5.pdf>

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ensure that local and national policies relating to species, habitats and local wildlife sites, all of which are captured in our members' data search reports, have been considered and factored into planning and project design. As you can see from Figure 2, this has made very little difference. We have no reason to suppose that the proportion and trends in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are any different.

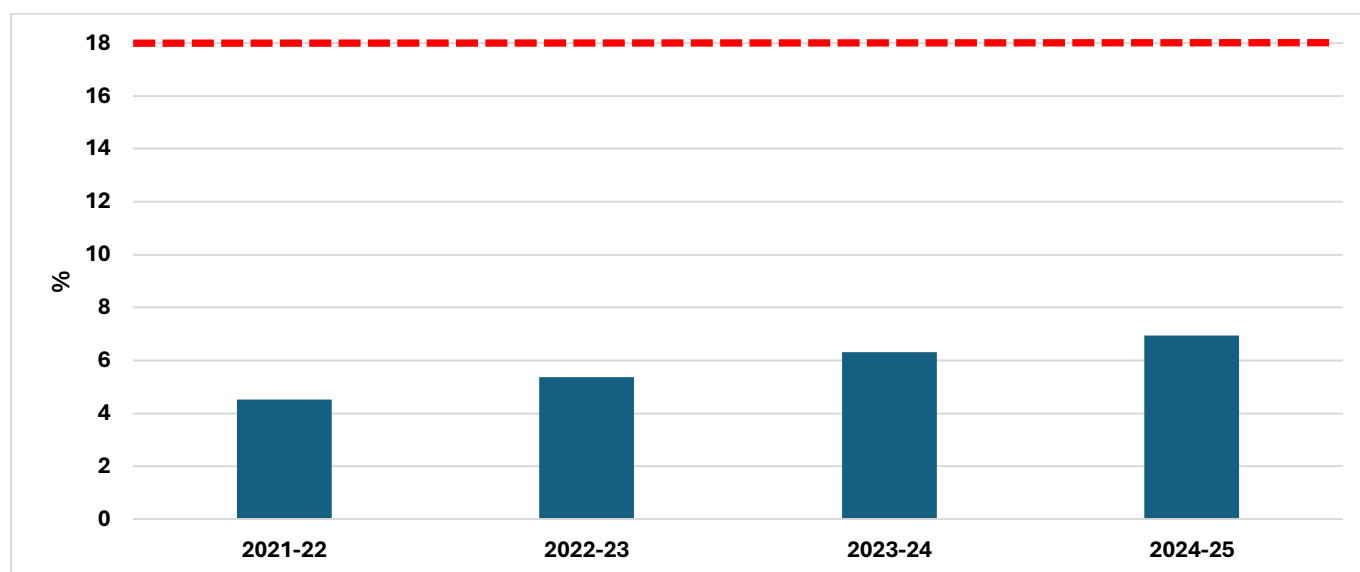


Figure 2. Increase year on year in the total number of LERC data enquiries as a % of planning applications for the past five financial years. (18% is the minimum level of data enquiries a LERC should expect.)

Recommendations

Based on ALERC's national discussions and our members' experiences locally we, make the following recommendations:

1. There is clear advocacy for and signposting to LERCs' planning-related services from relevant public and private sector organisations and resources such as MAGiC and local authority websites.
2. Evidence of consulting the relevant local environmental records centre's evidence base is a requirement for developments with potential impact on biodiversity. This should also be written into national and local authority validation checklists, and uptake should be measured and enforced.
3. Uptake of these services by developers on a per local authority basis is used as a measure of informed decisions and consideration of the conservation and enhancement of the natural environment. This should be included as a metric for biodiversity duty reporting.