

Local Record Centres

Working together for biodiversity in the east of England



A Local Record Centre is a one-stop-shop for ecological information and a valued resource for the local community, working with local authorities, environmental consultants, educational institutions and the general public.

There are six Local Record Centres (LRCs) in the East of England, covering Bedfordshire and Luton, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, Essex, Hertfordshire, Norfolk and Suffolk. Together these form part of a wider network of LRCs nationwide, all responsible for collating, managing and sharing information on animal and plant species, habitats and protected sites.

This information enables local authorities and other users to determine the presence of sites or species in any given location, including those protected by law. From a planning and development perspective, LRCs provide a valuable evidence-base, which is essential for underpinning policies and decision making in both the public and private sector, ensuring compliance with national and international legislation.

Because of their capacity to engage and support local volunteers with expertise in ecological and geological survey, species identification and data management, LRCs deliver valuable services in a highly cost-effective way while helping to achieve Big Society objectives.

What does your Local Record Centre do?

- Acts as a custodian of ecological and geological data for the county, holding hundreds of thousands of digitised species records.
- Engages with the local recording community – volunteers and amateur naturalists – to support and guide local biological recording effort, ensuring species and habitat records are managed and undergo quality control.
- Disseminates information about the distribution of legally protected, rare or threatened species, habitats and geodiversity sites to organisations in the public and private sector whose actions affect the environment. This includes: forward planning and development control, land and waste management, control of invasive species, highway maintenance and Local Wildlife Sites monitoring and reporting.
- Provides a range of products and services to meet the requirements of data users e.g. GIS data searches, habitat mapping, green infrastructure projects, planning list searches etc
- Supports and trains volunteers, attends public events and promotes the recording of wildlife in the community
- Provides data to the National Biodiversity Network, a national database of wildlife information across the UK

Case studies of how information from Local Record Centres has been used

The Brecks Biodiversity Audit

This ambitious initiative was led by the University of East Anglia in 2009 to collate information about the wealth of biodiversity found in Breckland, an area of 10,000 km² straddling the counties of Norfolk and Suffolk. The audit, which benefited from funding and assistance from the Norfolk Biodiversity Information Service (NBIS) to collate species information, has drawn attention to the immense diversity of life in Breckland. Over 12,000 species were recorded with 2,149 a priority for conservation and 317 listed on the UK's Biodiversity Action Plan. The report has highlighted the need for physical land disturbance - putting "the Brecks back into Breckland" - to create mosaics of different conditions benefiting many insects and plants to maintain this remarkable biodiversity.

The Norwich Green Infrastructure Development Plan

The Greater Norwich area has been identified as a growth point with over 20,000 new homes planned. Government policy determines that new development should be supported by the creation of high quality green infrastructure (GI). In practice this should comprise a network of 'green' spaces and inter-connecting 'green' corridors in urban areas and their surrounds, which stretch out into the wider countryside. Mapping undertaken by NBIS produced a map that outlined BAP and other habitats and land use within the Greater Norwich area. A series of criteria such as distance from designated sites and existing habitats and proximity to development areas were then used in the GIS to identify potential sites for creation of new 'green' space. Those areas of highest potential were then used to develop 'priority areas' linking Norwich to other areas of development to the south, and the Broads to the North. Documents such as this GI Development Plan in turn form the evidence base for strategic plans. The priority areas identified were used to inform the Greater Norwich Joint Core Strategy, the basis for the strategy governing development in the Greater Norwich area over the coming years. It is important that projects such as this are built on robust evidence and the methods and processes used by NBIS are designed to ensure this.

Green Infrastructure Planning

The BLBRMC has played a significant role in green infrastructure (GI) planning across Bedfordshire and Luton over recent years, working alongside the local Green Infrastructure Consortium to map networks and priority areas. The aim of GI planning is to identify assets and opportunities to improve, protect and enhance the network of green spaces, access routes, wildlife habitats, landscapes and historic features across the county to achieve social, environmental and economic benefits. The BLBRMC has operated at the county, district and parish levels, pulling together information about existing and aspirational GI assets and combining this with its own habitats, species and sites data to produce maps at the different levels required. Examples include a county-wide strategic networks map and parish-level GI plans. An additional project was subsequently commissioned building upon this work to identify priority GI opportunities in the Ivel Valley. The BLBRMC is again producing the maps that will be used in the final report.

Site Sensitivity

Despite the abolition of regional planning, Bedfordshire faces a lot of growth pressure. Housing demand is high, as is demand for open space and natural areas. People want quality places in which to explore, recreate and commune with nature. However, recreational pressures can greatly compromise site ecology. Visitor impacts on natural areas result from a combination of site sensitivity and the features of the visitor pressure (e.g. intensity, duration, seasonality, type of recreation). Bedfordshire's natural areas are expected to face increasing visitors, and many are thought to be suffering already. Natural areas have an inherent degree of sensitivity to visitor pressure. Being able to predict the degree of and reasons for site sensitivity could help inform habitat management. A model to predict wildlife site sensitivity has been created using data from BLBRMC.

Planning list searches

Since the end of January 2011 CPERC has been working with colleagues at Peterborough City Council (PCC) to screen planning applications against the species records and designated nature conservation sites that CPERC holds information on. PCC sends planning application information

in GIS format on a weekly basis to CPERC and a search of the records is performed according to criteria set by PCC. These criteria determine which species records are searched for (such as protected species) and the relative proximity to the application site they have to be before they are displayed in the results. The criteria can be adjusted according to the changing needs of the authority and/or changing legislation. The results show the records of interest with attached planning application reference numbers to show which planning applications they are near to. The results are sent to PCC's Wildlife Officer to interpret and to see if any of the records highlighted indicate that there are issues that may need to be brought to the attention of the planning team. In this way this process allows possible biodiversity issues to be highlighted at an early stage of the planning process, potentially saving time at a later stage and hopefully avoiding negative impacts. Although the records held by CPERC are not comprehensive (as with any records centre) the data holdings are updated periodically and as such the search tool becomes more powerful as time goes on.

Annual Monitoring Reports (AMRs)

Many LRCs provide data to local authorities for their AMRs (Core Output Indicator E2); an AMR is one of a number of documents required to be included in the Local Development Framework Development Plan Document. It is submitted to Government by a local planning authority each year to assess the progress and the effectiveness of a Local Development Framework (LDF). For example, information provided by CPERC to support LDF AMRs includes: 1) Statutory and non-statutory designated conservation sites affected by development over the previous financial year; 2) Summary of non-statutory designated sites within the local authority area and a summary of changes in those sites compared to the previous financial year; 3) Summary of statutory designated sites within the local authority area and a summary of changes in those sites compared to the previous financial year and 4) An assessment of the impact of development on NERC S41 (Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act Section 41) species within the local authority area. Evidence based reporting undertaken by local authorities as part of their statutory duties provides LRCs with a focus for their services, typically contained within Service Level Agreements (SLAs) that offer the best value for money to those authorities seeking a cost effective approach to long term, consistent data reporting.

Local Record Centres:

- Are not-for-profit organisations
- Act as a central one-stop-shop for environmental information
- Offer an impartial service
- Are the most cost effective way of obtaining ecological information and offer value for money
- Are a vital resource to ensure compliance with statutory duties
- Have local connections, knowledge and expertise when it comes to collating, managing and disseminating data
- Can provide a suite of products and services to meet the needs of data users, and can work together across the region to make this process more accessible and user friendly. This includes:
 - Service Level Agreements with public bodies and local authorities
 - A data request service for environmental consultants
 - Specific project work including habitat mapping and Green Infrastructure

Your Local Records Centres in the East of England are:

- Biological Records in Essex (BRIE) <http://www.brienet.org.uk>
- Bedfordshire and Luton Biodiversity Recording and Monitoring Centre (BRMC) www.bedsbionet.org.uk
- Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Environmental Records Centre (CPERC) www.cperc.org.uk
- Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre (HBRC) www.enquire.hertsc.gov.uk/hbrc
- Norfolk Biodiversity Information Service (NBIS) www.nbis.org.uk
- Suffolk Biological Records Centre (SBRC) www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~sbrc