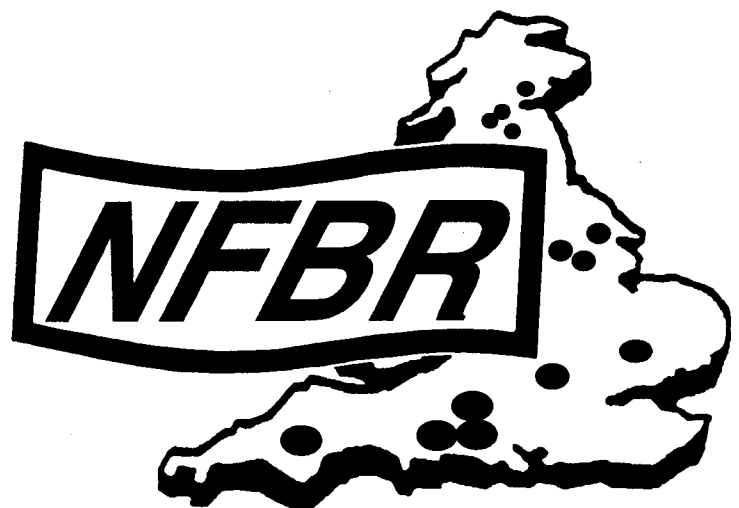




NATIONAL FEDERATION FOR BIOLOGICAL RECORDING

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**National Federation for Biological Recording
Newsletter 23**

CONTENTS

Article	Page no.
Honorary Officers and Council Members	2
Progress towards the NBN: the NFBR perspective	3
NBN update	5
Progress with NBN collect/collate software	7
Key species - the Rotherham approach	8
The Spider Recording Scheme	12
A Certificate in Biological Recording	14
News from the BSBI	15
News from BRISC	16
Butterflies for the New Millennium - Newsflash!!	18
Attention - NFBR Conference/AGM!!	18
Reviews	
• Provisional atlas of the ground beetles (Coleoptera, Carabidae) of Britain	18
• Proposals for future monitoring of British mammals	19
Call for new Council members/Treasurer	20
Items for the Newsletter	20

NATIONAL FEDERATION FOR BIOLOGICAL RECORDING
Honorary Officers and Council Members 1998

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Progress towards the NBN: the NFBR perspective

Sometimes, despite all the occasional frenetic activity, progress towards getting the National Biodiversity Network (NBN) up and running seems painfully slow! Since April, when the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) was expected to be producing its revised criteria for bids, the NBN has been working towards the submission of its own bid to the Fund. With NFBR represented both on the Executive Group of the NBN and on its Local Advisory Group, we have been heavily involved with discussions, although, as an organisation, we do not bring to the table the kind of financial weight that the other principal partners do - JNCC, NERC, RSPB, The Wildlife Trusts and the Natural History Museum.

At the end of July, the bid to the HLF was submitted. This involved the production of detailed Project Plans for the various elements of the NBN programme, including detailed costs, as well as an overall Business Plan, for which external consultants were employed. NFBR itself is not directly carrying any of these various Projects forward, although individual members of NFBR Council, notably Paul Harding, Charles Copp, Stuart Ball and Sara Hawkswell, through their involvement with partner bodies, are heavily involved. The role of the NBN Executive Group is to co-ordinate, oversee, and agree these Project Plans and other programmes within the NBN. NFBR's role, therefore, is an important one in ensuring that individual concerns from its constituent members, as well as from its associated organisations, BCG, ALGE and BRISC, are taken into account. The communication problem that this presents is considerable, and this is one reason why one of the NBN Projects is itself concerned with "Communications" - the putting into place of appropriate mechanisms to ensure everyone who wants to know is kept abreast of what is relevant in a structured way, including the setting up of a Worldwide Web Page (www.nbn.org.uk). NFBR was represented at the inauguration of the "Communications Group" in July to push this forward, although it needs someone with specialist knowledge in this area to take this representation on - offers?.

The main project developments so far have been on two main fronts: the Linking Local Records Centre Project (currently managed by Sara Hawkswell), and the Developing Collect/Collate Software Project (led by Stuart Ball). Associated with these are Projects concerned with Developing Data Standards (led by Stuart Ball), and Developing Standards for Identification (led by Peter Barnard, Natural History Museum). The latter is largely concerned with generating and managing the Taxonomic Dictionary supporting the Collect/Collate Software (now known as **Recorder 2000**). The award of contracts to carry out the software build was to happen at the end of July (see notes elsewhere in this Newsletter).

The Project "Linking Local Records Centres" has recently advertised for expressions of interest from existing Records Centres to be taken on board as the "second tranche" of pilot LRC's under the NBN. This follows on from the first tranche, which involved the setting up of processes for "new" centres. With funding already obtained from elsewhere, there will be up

to six of these second tranche centres. The rationale and programme for this was widely discussed with partners in the NBN, including ourselves.

The need to involve National Schemes and Societies has been seen as crucial since the start, and there is an umbrella Project to take this forward, led by Paul Harding. The establishment of a single mechanism for bringing the wide diversity of such bodies on board is seen as a particularly difficult area, involving the collaboration of a widely varying number of bodies, many with few resources to direct to such work. So far, the setting up of a useful "National Advisory Group" to parallel the Local one has been only partially successful. Related to this is a Project designed to link various institutional National Custodians of data, led by Ian Fisher of RSPB. A number of particular custodians - notably RSPB itself, with its in-house Griffin Database Project, as well as the Institute of Freshwater Ecology, are sub-projects under this.

The HLF bid is an important milestone. If we are successful in gaining the kind of support that is needed to take things forward, then the structures necessary to progress further will be put in place. Not least of these must be an organisation which can act on behalf of all the existing partners to carry out the management tasks. Various options for this have been discussed, and the concensus appears to favour a Company Limited by Guarantee, with charitable status. The relationship between this body and existing partners is a key issue needing further deliberation. At present, moves to further this have been on hold pending the submission of the HLF bid.

As for the HLF bid itself, with the changed criteria and somewhat diminished pot of gold available, exactly what can be expected is in question. The bid has been designed to cover eligible expenditure towards setting up the necessary elements to support the Demonstration Phase of the NBN. Further bids will be necessary, from both local consortia as well as the NBN itself, to carry out the Expansion Phase in an organised way. The key is to ensure that the current NBN Programme is seen as a relevant umbrella for such future bids, to ensure that the NBN functions well in the future. This will need the wholehearted support of bodies such as NFBR, even if we do not have much cash to put up-front in the process. A particular role that NFBR and its members can play is to ensure that relevant local players are kept up to speed and encouraged to support the process, particularly Local Government. While the Local Government Association and its Scottish equivalent, COSLA, have been involved to some extent in discussions, so far they have been only luke-warm. Support from the national conservation agencies (English Nature has recently produced a useful statement) is an important element in this, but so too is the support from individual local bodies likely to want to get involved. If the development of biological recording is to prosper, then we must ensure this involvement.

Trevor James, Chairman

NBN Update

The LRC team

Over the last 9 months, a team of five workers has been employed by The Wildlife Trusts (TWT) on behalf of the NBN to undertake the work of the Linking LRCs Project. Sara Hawkswell, Biodiversity Information Manager and Rachel Hackett, Biodiversity Information Officer are based at TWT National Office in Lincoln. Three outposted LRC Support Officers: Liz Halliwell, Patrick Cloughley and Ross Andrew are based in Cheshire, Llandrindod Wells and Aberdeen respectively. Sadly, Ross Andrew will be leaving at the beginning of September to take up a new post as LRC Manager for Orkney. We wish him well and will continue to work with him in his new role. In the meantime, the work programme for the project will not be altered, and we are seeking an immediate replacement for Ross.

The Pilot LRCs - Phase 1

In October 1997, three pilot LRCs were selected from 20 applications to help develop and test the case for the "new-type" LRC, proposed as part of the NBN. The pilot areas are: Cheshire, Merseyside, Halton and Warrington; North East Scotland; and Powys and the Brecon Beacons. They are all areas without existing LRCs, and where a range of different challenges will need to be overcome to establish effective LRCs. Each pilot has a working/steering group of committed local partners and recorders.

A LRC Support Officer is based in each of the three pilot areas to facilitate the working groups and prepare development plans for the proposed LRCs. Pooled together, the pilots will test the strength and flexibility of the framework to help shape future LRCs nationally.

Phase 1 Pilots - progress to date

- Pilot areas selected
- Steering/Working Groups established
- LRC Support Officers appointed
- Workshops undertaken and planned in each of the pilot areas, on a range of issues:
 - User and supplier needs
 - Habitats and sites
 - Methods of operation
 - Funding mechanisms
 - Policy and conservation action
 - Data confidentiality
- Draft outline for development plan guidelines produced

Operational Standards

The first phase of this work developing operational standards and good practice guidance is complete. It involved the formal assessment of six existing LRCs, using a mixture of desk reviews, questionnaires, telephone interviews and personal meetings. The study aimed to:

- evaluate the effectiveness of existing policies and operational management in meeting the needs of customers and suppliers; and
- draft recommendations on the preparation and implementation of operational standards.

A detailed report on the study, its findings and recommendations and the NBN's response to these recommendations has been produced. The report: *'Linking LRCs. Developing Operational Standards and Good Practice Guidance - Phase 1'* can be found on the LRC (Progress) pages of the NBN Web Site. As a result of this report, it is proposed to adopt a more bottom up 'model office' approach to developing standards. This will involve the hands on development of a procedure manual by staff in demonstration centres, who can test each aspect in practice (see demonstration LRCs - Phase 2).

Demonstration LRCs - Phase 2

This second phase of demonstration LRCs has been planned to complement the work already underway on the Phase 1 Pilots. Expressions of interest were invited from existing LRCs interested in becoming 'Demonstration Centres', and who wish to work with the NBN to address:- particular difficulties they have experienced; build on known practice elsewhere; and refine and document their current practice. Collectively, the demonstration LRCs will focus on:

- developing partnerships
- establishing effective involvement with National Schemes and Societies
- developing and documenting procedures and standards for LRCs.

The deadline for expressions of interest was Friday 21 August 1998. Selection procedures will take place during September, with a view to starting work on Phase 2 in the autumn. Further information is available from myself or Sara Hawkswell at The Wildlife Trusts, UK National Office.

Working through Local Record Centres seminars

A successful seminar attended by over 100 people was held in London on Thursday 19 March 1998. The seminar gave delegates the opportunity to find out more about the NBN and Linking LRCs Project. A copy of the seminar report can be found on the LRC (Progress) pages of the NBN Web Site.

Following this success, a series of regional seminars have been proposed throughout the life of the Linking LRCs Project. These seminars will include formal presentations and workshops, and provide you with the chance to meet and talk with the people delivering the project, enabling you to contribute to the development of operational standards and other NBN projects. Around four seminars a year are planned in different regions of the UK, to ensure that everyone has reasonable access to at least one a year. The first seminar will be held at the Jarvis Caledonian Hotel, Inverness on Thursday 22 October. A second seminar is planned for Wednesday 9 December at the National Museums & Galleries of Wales, Cardiff.

Further details will be available on the LRC (Progress) pages on the NBN Web Site (<http://www.nbn.org.uk>) from 10 August 1998.

Dates for your diary:

- Friday 27 August 1998 - Local Advisory Group meeting - Linnean Society, London
- August 1998 Selection of users for testing the New Recorder software
- September 1998 Testing of the new **Recorder** software to begin
- Thursday 22 October 1998 Linking Local Record Centres Seminar - Inverness
- December 9 1998 Linking Local Record Centres Seminar - Cardiff (day to be confirmed)

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Progress with NBN collect/collate software

The process to find a company to build the new software is nearing its final stages. We undertook six weeks of intensive negotiation with the short-listed companies between the start of June and mid July, and we now have finalised contracts and are awaiting "Best and Final Offers" which are due today (28 July)! Tomorrow, the evaluation team meets and it is decision time. Next week (4 August), the Recorder Steering Group meets to receive our recommendation and will, hopefully, give us the go-ahead to award the contract.

Then we can actually start work! This all seems a tremendously long and tortuous process (especially to those involved!), but we are told that we have managed to do the whole thing in near record time for an EU Services Directive procurement. They apparently more typically take at least a year.

The chosen company will require some start-up time to assemble their team, for their designers and programmers to assimilate the mountains of documentation, and spend some time with Charles Copp and myself getting to grips with it all. If all goes to the current time table, design/prototyping meetings should start in October, and beta versions of the first modules will be released around mid-February or March. The exact details depend on which supplier we select.

Plans for user involvement in the design and testing are well advanced. We plan to centre formal testing on 2 (possibly 3) existing, well established LRCs who have a good network of volunteers and access to GIS facilities. We will appoint a co-ordinator in each of the chosen centres to help us recruit and support volunteers to do the actual testing. We are also involving two national recording schemes (Mammal Society and BSBI) to help us to test local and national verification of data input by testers in the target areas, and BRC are contributing some of Mark Telfer's time to co-ordinate this. Finally, English Nature and the Countryside Council for Wales have contributed some staff time to help with the more technical aspects of testing, particularly in relation to communications and GIS.