

Norfolk Biological Records Centre Business Plan

Executive Summary

October 2007



Business Plan Outline for a Norfolk Biological Records Centre



Norfolk is experiencing unprecedented levels of growth. The need for high-quality environmental information to help guide development has never been greater.

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THE PROPOSAL

1. To develop a new Norfolk Biological Records Centre delivering high quality information on habitats, sites and species through a partnership hosted by Norfolk County Council. The centre will bring together the energies of many professionals and volunteers and fulfil a growing need for biodiversity information across all sectors. This proposal follows an extensive consultation process across Norfolk and is the clear consensus on the way forward.

RAPIDLY RISING NEED

2. The demand for high quality biodiversity information is strong and growing rapidly, driven by the need to ensure that decisions are based on sound evidence in order to protect and enhance vital environmental resources.
3. The statutory requirement on all local authorities and other public bodies has increased significantly, especially since October 2006, when they were given a duty to have regard to the conservation of biodiversity in the exercise of all their functions (S40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006). This has focused the need for rigorous and current data.

The Biodiversity Duty in the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006

Section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 states that: "Every public body must, in exercising its functions, have regard, so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions, to the purpose of conserving biodiversity."

This biodiversity duty applies to a very wide array of organisations, including county, district and parish councils. According to the guidance from DEFRA, local authorities that are effectively implementing the duty should be able to show that biodiversity considerations have been integrated into:

- All relevant policies and strategies;
- Management of land and buildings;
- Planning, infrastructure and development control;
- Formal and informal education.

High quality biodiversity information will be vital to the successful implementation of the biodiversity duty across these four major functions.

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4. Biodiversity is a core component of sustainable development, underpinning economic development and prosperity, and has an important role to play in developing locally distinctive and sustainable communities.
5. The benefits of conserving biodiversity are many and varied. Biodiversity plays an important role in tackling climate change, provides us with essential materials, contributes to our health and wellbeing and supports other vital ecosystem services that sustain life on earth.
6. The economic value of biodiversity is demonstrated by a study of visitors to the Norfolk coast in 1999; this estimated that visitors to six sites spent £21 million per year in the local economy, of which £6 million could be attributed to birds and other wildlife, supporting 135 FTE jobs.
7. The local authority functions that need to be based on current and accurate biodiversity information include the following:

STRATEGIES AND POLICIES

- Local Area Agreements
- Corporate Priorities and Internal Policy
- Sustainable Community Strategies
- Neighbourhood Renewal
- Green Infrastructure
- Ecological Networks
- Local Biodiversity Action Plans

PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

- National Planning Policy requirements (PPS9)
- Legal Requirements for Environmental and Sustainability Appraisal
- Forward Planning – including LDF Annual Monitoring Reports
- Development Control

LAND MANAGEMENT

- Designated Sites
- Protected and Priority Species on Local Authority Land
- Management of Green Infrastructure
- Farms and Tenanted Land
- School Grounds
- Waterside and Coastal Areas

EDUCATION AND ADVICE

- Community Engagement
8. Many of these are statutory functions and are assessed as part of performance monitoring criteria on which budgets depend. Early use of sound data can avoid costly and time consuming public inquiries later. Getting this information right from the outset, when local authorities are preparing their Local Development Frameworks, will save time and cost at the development control stage. A Local

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Records Centre can help speed up the decision-making process, which will in turn help planning authorities to meet targets and support aspirations to be “an excellent authority”.

9. Developing a strong Local Records Centre can therefore be seen as a very cost-effective contribution to demonstrating compliance with the NERC Act biodiversity duty, underpinning many other corporate priorities and obligations.

HISTORY

10. Norfolk has had a very small Local Records Centre in place for several years. The Norfolk Biological Records Centre (NBRC), based at the Gressenhall Rural Life Museum in East Dereham, has been active in managing species data, but has not been sufficiently well resourced to manage habitats and sites data that users now need.
11. Norfolk is one of the last counties in England to develop a fully functioning Local Records Centre. Neighbouring counties, such as Suffolk, already have strong centres delivering high quality services. Norfolk, with its growth areas at Norwich and Thetford, and special green infrastructure, needs a model Local Records Centre to meet its unique challenges.

Case Study: Somerset Environmental Records Centre

Somerset Environmental Records Centre, a partnership of 12 organisations, manages 1.5 million species records and 300,000 mapped habitat parcel records for 2,000 County Wildlife Sites and 120 Nature Reserves. It also monitors biodiversity change, maps Ecological Networks, habitat restoration opportunities in Local Biodiversity Action Plans and provides targeted data searches for 5,000 planning applications and 200 projects each year.

COSTS

12. The additional costs of the preferred option over the existing NBRC costs are around £85,000 per annum. Spread across a partnership of ten or more organisations this represents a very cost-effective solution, made possible by a very strong partnership approach and interaction with the voluntary recording community.

COSTS OF NOT ADOPTING THE PROPOSAL

13. Other options for public bodies entail high risk or high cost or both. Attempting to continue without accessing a high quality biodiversity information service would expose the body to risk of proceedings under the NERC Act, as well as unwitting damage to biodiversity resources. Local authorities risk losing funding in terms of being marked down in performance assessment by central government. The use of consultants for information, as well as interpretation and case-specific advice, would result in higher costs.

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PARTNERSHIPS

14. The NBRC should complement and work closely with other organisations and partnerships in the county.
15. Local Record Centres are able to provide a highly professional and cost effective service partly through their interaction with an energetic and expert voluntary recording community. This is especially strong in Norfolk, largely through the co-ordination and leadership of the Norfolk and Norwich Naturalists' Society. The consultation has shown strong support from the recording community for a fully developed NBRC. This will, in turn, support and energise the recording community.
16. The Norfolk Wildlife Trust has developed many relevant initiatives and leads on the management of the Norfolk County Wildlife Sites System. The Norfolk Biodiversity Partnership is active in the Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) process across a range of key habitats and species; it has a wide range of stakeholders and a strong and growing need for rigorous biodiversity data. The NBRC will be an essential new service that strengthens both the County Wildlife Sites System and the BAP process, building on existing networks and providing easier access to information for all.

IMPLEMENTATION

17. Implementing this business plan will require a collective commitment from the local authorities across Norfolk, statutory conservation agencies and other key organisations. The most efficient mechanism to achieve this is through negotiated Service Level Agreements (SLAs) in which services and fees are defined. The minimum length of SLAs should be three years. Early commitment in principle to these arrangements from key organisations is essential to allow the business plan to be implemented.

The full Business Plan is available from the Environment Group (Partnership and Policy), Department of Planning and Transportation Room 301, County Hall, Martineau Lane, Norwich, NR1 2DH. Tel: 01603-223453

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