

Environment, Planning and Transport Committee

Review of Local Biodiversity Action

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1 Introduction

Our focus

1.1. The Assembly has a duty to have regard to biodiversity in the exercise of all its functions; and to take, or promote the taking by others of, steps to enhance the conservation of biodiversity. In Wales, along with elsewhere in the UK, Local Biodiversity Action Plans (LBAPs) are used as a means of translating national targets for habitat and species conservation into local action, and also to provide the biodiversity element of local strategies for sustainable development. A new National Assembly for Wales Performance Indicator for 2002-03 requires LBAPs to be in place for all local authority areas.

1.2. Our review has concentrated on these *local actions* to support and enhance biodiversity in Wales. The terms of reference for our review were: "To review current progress and ensure that Local Biodiversity Action Plans (LBAPs) are in place for all areas of Wales, and identify further action needed at the national and local levels to support LBAP implementation through partnerships."

Consultation

1.3. During summer 2002 we sought the views of a wide range of public, private and voluntary sector organisations on action needed at the national and local levels to support and enhance biodiversity in Wales. Specifically, we asked for the following information:

- *Progress* – reports from LBAP partnerships outlining progress in drawing up and implementing LBAPs and best practice that could be applied across Wales.
- *Key issues* - barriers to progress in drawing up and implementing LBAPs, with specific reference to: the effectiveness of LBAP partnerships and the role of partners in the various stages of developing and implementing LBAPs; co-ordination between local and national levels (both organisations and plans), in particular in agreeing targets and priorities for action; resources available to support LBAP preparation and implementation; guidance available to LBAP partners and others; arrangements for involving diverse groups within local communities; access to biodiversity information and expertise; and arrangements for monitoring and reporting.
- *Action* needed at local and national levels to support LBAP partnerships.

1.4. Thirty three individuals and organisations responded to our request for views, respondents are listed at **Annex 1**. Copies of submissions received electronically have been published on the National Assembly website www.wales.gov.uk There was broad consensus on the main barriers to implementation of local biodiversity actions, with the key issues raised being as follows:

- *Partnerships* – whilst recognised as the key to successful LBAP design and delivery, the effectiveness of partnerships was reported to vary according to the commitment, expertise and resources present locally. Many considered the lack of leadership and support from politicians and senior officials in partner organisations to severely constrain effective partnership working.

- *Co-ordination between local and national levels* – at local partnership level co-ordination was reported to be good. However, most considered communication between local and national levels to require improvement. Limited integration of biodiversity into wider objectives was reported, both at national and local level, with a lack of co-ordination between national and local biodiversity targets.
- *Resources* – lack of secure funding was seen as a principal barrier to the effective delivery of biodiversity actions, and taken to reflect low political priority (both local and national) to conservation. Funding for biodiversity was reported to be limited with a multitude of funds, with different rules, that are bureaucratic and time consuming to access.
- *Guidance* – generally this was not regarded to be a significant barrier, though some felt guidance could be more accessible.
- *Access to information and expertise* – lack of information and limited expertise were seen as a major barrier, with a small number of experts and skills base in decline.
- *Monitoring and reporting* – concern was expressed about the lack of reliable local biodiversity data and the absence of centralised data collection, which resulted in difficulty setting quantitative local targets and contributing to national targets.

1.5. We discussed these issues with local officers, voluntary sector partners and the Countryside Council for Wales (CCW), the Assembly's statutory adviser on biodiversity, at our meeting on 6 November 2002. Again, there was a common view on actions needed at the national and local levels to support implementation through partnerships.

Our report

1.6. Section 2 sets the policy background to Local Biodiversity Action Plans, other mechanisms to support biodiversity, and the National Assembly's duties to support biodiversity.

1.7. Section 3 summarises our views, in light of the barriers to progress identified above, on action needed to support the delivery of local biodiversity actions. We recommend increased political commitment to biodiversity at national and local level, matched with resources. We also make recommendations for increasing the accessibility of information and expertise, as well as the establishment of biodiversity awards. Our recommendations are summarised in Section 4.

1.8. The Annexes list the respondents to the consultation (Annex 1), and an outline of progress in implementing LBAPs across Wales prepared by the Wales Biodiversity Partnership (Annex 2).

2 Policy Background

Biodiversity

2.1. The definition of biodiversity provided by Article 2 of the 1992 UN Convention on Biological Diversity 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. Biodiversity conservation has become a useful form of terminology for perhaps the most complex of all the issues facing humankind in the future: namely, how to meet the needs of a growing human population without compromising the variety and abundance of plants and animals and their habitats.

Local Biodiversity Action Plans (LBAPs)

2.2. Local Biodiversity Action Plans originate from the programme of action for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity drawn up by the UK in fulfilment of its obligation under Article 6 of the Biodiversity Convention. *The UK Biodiversity Action Plan* proposed that costed action plans with targets should be drawn up to conserve the UK's most rare and/or threatened habitats and species. A UK Steering Group initially co-ordinated the production of these national habitat and species action plans. In 1995 the Steering Group recommended that the mechanism of LBAPs should be promoted as a means of translating national targets into local action, and also to provide the biodiversity element of local strategies for sustainable development.

2.3. In Wales and at the UK level, Local Issues Advisory Groups were established to provide guidance and share good practice on the production and implementation of LBAPs. The first UK Guidance Note set out in more detail the functions of LBAPs, which were to:

- Ensure that national targets for species and habitats, as specified in the UK Action Plan, are translated into effective action at the local level;
- Identify targets for species and habitats appropriate to the local area, and reflecting the values of people locally;
- Develop effective local partnerships to ensure that programmes for biodiversity conservation are maintained in the long term;
- Raise awareness of the need for biodiversity conservation in the local context;
- Ensure that opportunities for conservation and enhancement of the whole biodiversity resource are fully considered;
- Provide a basis for monitoring progress in biodiversity conservation at both local and national levels.

Other mechanisms to support biodiversity

2.4. Biodiversity action plans are just one part of the UK's approach to the conservation of its natural biological diversity, which has three main strands:

- Site-based protection and management of the biodiversity occurring in a particular geographical area (including Natura 2000 sites and Sites of Special Scientific Interest);
- Special protection measures for certain species wherever they occur;
- "Wider countryside" measures (i.e. not confined to designated sites) – these include biodiversity action plans and agri-environment schemes.

2.5. Many of the UK's conservation measures, particularly those relating to site and species protection, are derived from international obligations, such as the Bern and Bonn Conventions and the EU Birds and Habitats Directives.

2.6. Biodiversity Action Plans provide a distinctive contribution to conservation, which complements other measures, because they:

- Include biological targets for the maintenance and (where possible) increase of the population/extent of the species or habitat concerned and, if appropriate, of its range or distribution;
- Are potentially applicable anywhere in the country – including urban and rural areas;
- Are rooted in broad-based partnerships of the public, voluntary and private sectors, particularly at the local level.

Local Biodiversity Partnerships

2.7. LBAPs are produced by local partnerships of public, voluntary and private sector organisations. There are twenty-four partnerships in Wales covering each local planning authority area (one partnership covers Pembrokeshire County Council and Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority areas).

Wales Biodiversity Partnership (WBP)

2.8. The Wales Biodiversity Partnership brings together the key players from the public, private and voluntary sectors to promote, monitor and advise the National Assembly on action to maintain and enhance biodiversity in Wales. WBP was established in 1996, alongside parallel groups for other parts of the UK, following the recommendations of the UK Biodiversity Steering Group.

2.9. Information on the important habitats and species that occur in local areas in Wales is now available as a result of initiatives by CCW, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and other partners. In 2001, the Wales Biodiversity Partnership appointed a full-time LBAP facilitator to help LBAP partnerships by sharing advice, information and good practice.

Role of the National Assembly for Wales

2.10. Section 74 of The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CROW Act) places duties on the National Assembly in relation to biodiversity conservation. These duties are intended to enshrine in statute the biodiversity action plan process. The Assembly must have regard to biodiversity in the exercise of all its functions; and take, or promote the taking by others of, steps to enhance the conservation of habitats and species included on a list or lists published by the Assembly. The S.74 list was published in November 2002.

Role of Local Authorities

2.11. Section 74 does not apply to local authorities, but local partnerships may be among those included in measures taken by the Assembly in pursuit of its duty to promote steps to enhance biodiversity conservation. The Welsh Assembly Government has made a commitment to enhance biodiversity by supporting the development of local action plans, and as reported in Section 2 a new National Assembly for Wales Performance Indicator for 2002-03 requires LBAPs to be in place for all local authority areas. *Planning Policy Wales* encourages local authorities to adopt LBAPs as supplementary planning guidance.

Funding

2.12. Over 2000-01 and 2001-02, the Countryside Council for Wales contributed £660,000 to local biodiversity action from its grants programme. The Welsh Assembly Government has allocated £200,000 to LBAPs in 2002-03, which is also being provided through CCW grants.

3 Supporting local biodiversity action

Progress

3.1. Fifteen of the twenty-four partnerships in Wales have published LBAPs, a further eight plans are in draft. Implementation is underway in all but three partnerships. A copy of the Wales Biodiversity Partnership's assessment of progress in implementing LBAPs is reproduced at **Annex 1**. [Four partnerships have permanent full-time LBAP officers, ten have temporary or part-time officers, and ten have no dedicated LBAP officer support.] The main barriers to implementation of local biodiversity actions, as summarised in Section 1 above, were reported to be commitment, resources and information.

Political commitment to biodiversity at national and local levels

3.2. Our review has highlighted the need for political commitment to deliver the National Assembly's obligations for biodiversity locally. We are conscious of the key role of local partnerships in delivering national targets, but have been struck by their reliance on a relatively small number of motivated individuals. We heard that partnerships work well in the planning stage, but less well when it comes to implementation due to lack of commitment on the part of senior officers or politicians within partner organisations.

3.3. We consider that the Welsh Assembly Government should demonstrate its leadership and commitment to biodiversity in two ways: by mainstreaming biodiversity considerations into its own policies and priorities, and by supporting the delivery of national targets locally. An obvious example of the former is the need to balance economic growth with the conservation of species and habitats. This means ensuring that biodiversity considerations are at the centre of policy considerations, not merely a checklist at the end. By doing so, conservation considerations can help shape policy decisions, rather than be seen as a barrier to economic progress.

3.4. We welcome the emphasis on the key role of biodiversity conservation in the revised planning guidance *Planning Policy Wales*, but suggest that there is a need to review planning Technical Advice Note 5 (Nature Conservation) to ensure that it properly reflects biodiversity objectives.

3.5. In addition to ensuring that biodiversity is central to its own considerations, the Welsh Assembly Government should ensure that biodiversity is integrated into the policies and priorities of its sponsored bodies. Again, we would expect to see this as a core cross-cutting objective, not an add-on.

Recommendation 1: that the Welsh Assembly Government demonstrates its leadership in the field by mainstreaming biodiversity considerations into its policies and priorities, and those of sponsored bodies.

3.6. Local action is key to meeting national targets for the conservation of species and habitats. However, statutory duties relating to biodiversity do not extend to local authorities. At a local level, strengthened commitment from local government is required, particularly given its key role in supporting LBAP partnerships. We have heard arguments for making biodiversity a statutory duty for local authorities, as well as ways of securing increased commitment within existing legislation, for example by including biodiversity as an indicator in Community Plans. Given the increase in the number of statutory duties for local authorities, we are not

convinced that this is the answer. However, we suggest that further consideration be given to the relative advantages and disadvantages of this and other means of strengthening local government commitment to local biodiversity action. In the meantime, a way of ensuring that biodiversity priorities are at the centre of local considerations is by the adoption of LBAPs as supplementary planning guidance, which we would expect to see in all local planning authorities.

Recommendation 2: that the Welsh Assembly Government considers means of strengthening local government commitment to local biodiversity action, and encourage all Local Authorities in Wales to adopt Local Biodiversity Action Plans (LBAPs) as supplementary planning guidance, in line with planning policy guidance.

3.7. LBAPs provide a basis for monitoring progress in biodiversity conservation at both local and national levels. It is essential that they are co-ordinated with national plans if species and habitat targets are to be met, but important that the *local* focus of priorities is not forgotten. There is scope to increase co-ordination of strategies and place a greater emphasis on local target setting. We consider that a strategy and guidance on monitoring and reporting at a local level is needed, which complements national priorities for the conservation of species and habitats. We suggest that these recommendations be taken forward by the Wales Biodiversity Partnership.

Recommendation 3: that the Wales Biodiversity Partnership take steps to increase co-ordination between local and national strategies and partnerships, and place a greater emphasis on local target setting.

Recommendation 4: that the Wales Biodiversity Partnership take the lead in developing a strategy and accompanying guidance on monitoring and reporting of local biodiversity actions.

3.8. We have also heard that communication between LBAP partnerships and national species and habitat partnerships was initially poor, but that this has improved with the appointment of the WBP LBAP facilitator, who co-ordinates local and national activity. In addition to continued improvement of communication between national and local partners we also consider there to be scope to develop information exchange between local partnerships.

Matching political commitment with resources

3.9. Increased political support for biodiversity and the delivery of national targets locally should be matched with resources. Local biodiversity partnerships require secure dedicated funding, in particular to finance full-time LBAP officers to support their work and implementation of local actions. To address the funding barriers identified during our review, we recommend that funding sources be streamlined to maximise the take-up of existing funding. We also recommend that match-funding requirements be clarified, and that CCW's grant-aid funding cycle be synchronised with the budget planning cycles of match-funding organisations. Consideration should also be given to developing a mechanism for the specific funding of local biodiversity actions, possibly by direct funding of partnerships. Our review has also highlighted the scope for greater collaboration and funding partnerships between national and local government, private and voluntary sectors.

Recommendation 5: that the Welsh Assembly Government establish a review of financing arrangements to clarify, streamline, and synchronise funding sources available to support local biodiversity action.

Recommendation 6: that the Welsh Assembly Government ensure that dedicated funding is made available to

finance a permanent full-time LBAP officer for each partnership and the WBP LBAP Facilitator, and consider mechanisms for the specific funding of local biodiversity actions, possibly by the direct funding of partnerships.

Accessibility of information and expertise

3.10. Target setting and monitoring are dependent on the availability of consistent, reliable and timely biodiversity data, and there is widespread support for the development of a national Local Records Centre network, which would provide a single access-point for species and habitat information. We recommend that such a network be developed in Wales, building on the Powys pilot. We also support the continued development of the web-based National Biodiversity Network.

Recommendation 7: that the Welsh Assembly Government take steps to establish the development of a national Local Records Centre network, building on the Powys pilot project.

3.11. As noted above, partnerships rely heavily on the skills of a small number of experts. We consider it important that national institutions, such as the Countryside Council for Wales and Environment Agency, should increase the accessibility of expert support locally. In addition, local authorities should give a commitment to increasing the capacity of their ecological and LBAP expertise. We also consider there to be considerable scope to harness the skills of volunteers and support voluntary sector bodies to develop their expertise capacity.

Recommendation 8: that all-Wales bodies such as the Countryside Council for Wales and Environment Agency look at ways of increasing the accessibility of expert support locally, and to increase the capacity of local authorities in their ecological and LBAP expertise.

3.12. To reverse the decline in the skills base we recommend that educational and training institutions in Wales be encouraged to increase the availability and take-up of courses in conservation science, taxonomy, and practical land management skills. In parallel, there is a need to develop an enthusiasm for conservation amongst young people and adults through activities at schools and colleges. We also consider that Welsh Universities should be encouraged to align their academic research to UK biodiversity action plan research priorities.

Recommendation 9: that the Welsh Assembly Government and ELWa consider ways of: increasing the availability and take-up of courses in conservation science, taxonomy, and practical land management skills by Welsh educational and training institutions; and encouraging the alignment of academic research to UK Biodiversity Action Plan research priorities.

Delivering local actions through partnerships

3.13. Securing the political and financial commitment of those responsible for local decision making, and increasing their understanding of the importance of biodiversity, would enable local partnerships to focus on the *delivery* of national and local priorities. We have heard of the innovative work already being undertaken by partnerships, such as those outlined in the WBP case studies. With increased support, this focus on action would help partnerships to engage local interest and involve more local people and diverse partners, such as the business community. We consider it particularly important to raise the profile of partnership work in urban areas, as many do not associate towns and cities with conservation.

3.14. Finally, we recommend the establishment of 'biodiversity awards' to highlight good conservation practice and encourage partnership working.

Recommendation 10: that the Wales Biodiversity Partnership establish 'biodiversity awards' to highlight good conservation practice and encourage partnership working.

4 Summary of recommendations

4.1. We recommend that:

Political commitment to biodiversity at national and local levels

- 1 the Welsh Assembly Government demonstrates its leadership in the field by mainstreaming biodiversity considerations into its policies and priorities, and those of sponsored bodies;
- 2 the Welsh Assembly Government considers means of strengthening local government commitment to local biodiversity action, and encourages all Local Authorities in Wales to adopt Local Biodiversity Action Plans (LBAPs) as supplementary planning guidance, in line with planning policy guidance;
- 3 the Wales Biodiversity Partnership take steps to increase co-ordination between local and national strategies and partnerships, and place a greater emphasis on local target setting;
- 4 the Wales Biodiversity Partnership take the lead in developing a strategy and accompanying guidance on monitoring and reporting of local biodiversity actions;

Matching political commitment with resources

- 5 the Welsh Assembly Government establish a review of financing arrangements to clarify, streamline, and synchronise funding sources available to support local biodiversity action;
- 6 the Welsh Assembly Government ensure that dedicated funding is made available to finance a permanent full-time LBAP officer for each partnership and the WBP LBAP Facilitator, and consider mechanisms for the specific funding of local biodiversity actions, possibly by the direct funding of partnerships;

Accessibility of information and expertise

- 7 the Welsh Assembly Government take steps to establish the development of a national Local Records Centre network, building on the Powys pilot project;
- 8 all-Wales bodies such as the Countryside Council for Wales and Environment Agency look at ways of increasing the accessibility of expert support locally, and to increase the capacity of local authorities in their ecological and LBAP expertise;
- 9 the Welsh Assembly Government and ELWa consider ways of: increasing the availability and take-up of courses in conservation science, taxonomy, and practical land management skills by Welsh educational and training institutions; and encouraging the alignment of academic research

to UK Biodiversity Action Plan research priorities;

Delivering local actions through partnerships

10 the Wales Biodiversity Partnership establish 'biodiversity awards' to highlight good conservation practice and encourage partnership working.

Annex 1

Respondents

The following organisations responded to our invitation to submit written evidence to the review. Copies of those responses received electronically are available on the National Assembly website www.wales.gov.uk

Association of Local Government Ecologists

BTCV Cymru

Brecon Beacons National Park Authority

Brecknock Wildlife Trust

Bridgend County Borough Council

British Trust for Ornithology

Butterfly Conservation Wales

Caerphilly Biodiversity Partnership

City and County of Cardiff

Ceredigion Biodiversity Partnership

Countryside Council for Wales

Country Land and Business Association

Conwy County Council

Cyngor Gwynedd

Elizabeth Alice May

Flintshire County Council

Innogy plc

Institution of Highways & Transportation

Isle of Anglesey County Council (supplemented by comments from LBAP officer)

Monmouthshire County Council

National Trust Wales

Newport City Council

North Wales Wildlife Trust

Pembrokeshire County Council

Radnorshire Wildlife Trust

Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council

Royal Society for the Protection of Birds Cymru

Snowdonia National Park Authority

South and West Wales Wildlife Trust

Vale of Glamorgan Council

Wales Biodiversity Group

Welsh Local Government Association

Wrexham County Borough Council

Annex 2

Progress of LBAPs in Wales

Authority	Time given to LBAP per week	LBAP Officers Contract Ends	Framework	Draft	Published	Implementing Up to Nov 01	Reporting Up to Nov 01
Anglesey	FT	Permanent			ü	ü	

BBNPA	FT	Permanent			ü	ü	
Carmarthen shire	2 days	N/A			ü	ü	
Ceredigion	4 hours	N/A			ü	ü	
Conwy	6 days	Apr 03		ü		ü	
Denbigh shire	1 day	N/A		ü		ü	
Flintshire	FT	Jan 04		ü	ü	ü	
Gwynedd	6 days p/w - job share (currently only 3 days)	March 02		ü		ü	
Pembroke shire	20 hours	N/A			ü	ü	ü
Powys	FT	Permanent		ü	ü	ü	
SNPA	FT	*3 yrs			ü	ü	ü

Wrexham	PT 2 days	Permanent			ü	ü	
Bridgend	3 days	N/A		ü		ü	

Authority	Time given to LBAP per week	LBAP Officers Contract Ends	Framework	Draft	Published	Implementing Up to Nov 01	Reporting Up to Nov 01
Caerphilly	PT as LBAP PT as Ecologist	Permanent			ü	ü	
Merthyr Tydfil	1 day	N/A		ü		ü	
Neath Port Talbot	FT	Aug 02			ü	ü	
Rhondda Cynon Taff	14 hrs plus	N/A			ü	ü	ü
Swansea	PT LBAP PT other env duties			ü		ü	

Torfaen	1 day	N/A		ü			
Vale of Glamorgan	FT	March 04			ü		
Blaenau Gwent	2 days	N/A		ü	ü	ü	
Cardiff	FT	*May 03			ü	ü	
Monmouthshire	hours	N/A	ü				
Newport	FT	31 April 02		ü		ü	

Source: Wales Biodiversity Group, 13 September 2002