Local Records Centre Accreditation Implementation

NATURAL ENGLAND

Foreword

Natural England commission a range of reports from external contractors to provide evidence and advice to assist us in delivering our duties. The views in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of Natural England.

Background

Local Record Centres are a not-for-profit service run in partnership for the public benefit, which collect, collate, manage and disseminate information of known quality relating to biodiversity, geodiversity, and sites of importance for nature conservation for a defined geographic area.

LRCs in the UK operate under an array of setups and fulfil a diverse range of functions and services in addition to their basic operations. The information provided by LRCs is utilised by a variety of data users, including local authorities, developers, conservation groups and statutory agencies, in support of decisions related to development control and strategic planning, maintenance and enhancement of biodiversity and geodiversity and to support policy and monitoring activities.

In February 2010, Natural England, working in collaboration with the Association of Local Environmental Record Centres, commissioned the design of an accreditation system for LRCs. The objective of introducing an accreditation system is intended to improve the consistency of the collection, collation and dissemination of

environmental information to inform decision making around protecting and enhancing biodiversity and geodiversity.

A follow-up piece of work at the beginning of 2011 trialled the accreditation system. A workbook was produced to assist LRCs with meeting the twenty standard accreditation criteria and to enable assessors to apply a consistent evaluation of an individual LRC's performance.

The pilot resulted in Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Environmental Records Centre and Lincolnshire Environmental Records Centre being formally accredited by ALERC.

Following on from the pilot, ALERC are now planning to roll out accreditation to their membership across England and other parts of the United Kingdom.

This report should be cited as:

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LRC Accreditation Project Steering Group

Contents

1. Introduction

Local Records Centres play a vital role in supporting biodiversity conservation delivery in the UK. In spite of over thirty years of development their service delivery is highly variable across the country and the lack of a clear identity and recognised standard has held back their performance.

Recognising these issues, Natural England, working in collaboration with the Association of Local Records Centres (ALERC) commissioned the development of an Accreditation System early in 2010. This followed an attempt a decade earlier that was not carried through to fruition.

Natural England administers the Defra Fund for Local Biodiversity Recording, an initiative that was set up in September 2008 with an overall aim to develop the national network of local biological recording, increasing the geographic scope, quantity and quality of biological information available to the general public and key public sector users through the National Biodiversity Network (NBN) Gateway.

With wide engagement from LRCs themselves and local and national partners, a draft Accreditation System was developed by August 2010. The system comprised criteria at standard and advanced levels, and an outline process by which LRCs could self-assess and work through a period of months leading to an application for accreditation, for decision by ALERC.

2. Project Objectives

The purpose of this follow-up piece of work was to trial the accreditation system with one or more LRCs and to produce guidance to assist record centres with meeting the accreditation criteria and a proposal for its implementation. The specification required the following elements:

   a. Identify LRCs willing to participate in the trialling of the accreditation system and work with these LRCs to confirm the training/guidance required to meet the accreditation criteria.

   b. Consult more widely across the LRC network to identify potential barriers to accreditation and develop mitigation strategies to address these.

   c. Produce a workbook designed to assist LRCs with meeting the 20 standard accreditation criteria and to enable assessors to apply a consistent evaluation of an individual LRC's conformance.

   d. Trial and accreditation process with at least one LRC from initial application stage, through to recommending the LRC(s) to ALERC for formal accreditation.

   e. Develop costed proposals for an England and UK wide adoption of an accreditation system. This should include a cost-neutral option, i.e. within existing resources.

3. Pilots

In consultation with the Project Steering Group, all LRCs in England were invited to express interest in becoming pilots for accreditation over the period November 2010 to March 2011. Four expressions of interest were received.

The Project Steering Group assessed these against the following criteria:

- Accreditation of the LRC was potentially achievable in the abbreviated timescale
- Pilot LRCs should not be in the same region
- The LRC manager had time available to engage with the accreditation process
- The LRC Steering Group supports the application
- Ideally pilots should be at different stages of development
- Ideally pilots should be challenged by different accreditation criteria

Two LRCs were selected as pilots:

- Lincolnshire Environmental Records Centre
- Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Environmental Records Centre

These LRCs each completed a baseline self-assessment against the twenty standard criteria; they both assessed themselves as falling short of the required criteria in November but reasonably confident that they could achieve the standards for sixteen of the twenty, the success threshold, by the February deadline.

Lincolnshire ERC is situated in the East Midlands, with North Lincolnshire being part of the former Yorkshire and Humberside Government Region. The Records Centre is hosted by Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust and is part of the Lincolnshire Biodiversity Partnership, the other parts being Local Biodiversity Action Plans and Local Wildlife Sites. The Records Centre is managed by the Partnership Manager alongside the other partnership elements, while other staff are dedicated to LRC operation. The partnership arrangement is recent, and follows an earlier period when the LRC was managed separately, following its establishment in 2005.

Cambridgeshire and Peterborough ERC is situated in the East of England region. The Records Centre is hosted by the Wildlife Trust for Cambridgeshire, Bedfordshire and Northamptonshire, but operates a fairly independent operation with the support of a strong suite of partner organisations. The LRC has been established for just under a decade, with the current manager in post for around one year.

The two pilots met the selection criteria to a reasonable degree, with the exception of being at different stages of development, both being established LRCs of no great age and of similar size. Neither are especially well known nationally, both probably being in the mid range of available resources, and in this respect may be well placed to test the accreditation system and to demonstrate the value of accreditation if they are able to achieve the standards.

The recommended accreditation process included the role of a mentor to work alongside the LRC through the preparation and application process. The role of mentor to the Cambridgeshire ERC was fulfilled by the manager of the North and East Yorkshire Environmental Data Centre, while the role of mentor to the Lincolnshire ERC was undertaken by the contractor.

The contractor made visits to both pilot LRCs in early December to advise on the application process and the interpretation of criteria in respect of the LRCs' specific circumstances and operational practices. In the case of Lincolnshire the contractor also attended a meeting of the Biodiversity Partnership and explained the benefits of going through accreditation. A further meeting took place later in the process between the contractor and partnership manager to review progress. Frequent phone contact and email correspondence between staff of both LRCs and the contractor occurred throughout the preparation and application period between November and February. Cambridgeshire's mentor also made two visits to provide support in December and February.

Both pilots appointed an internal accreditation team as recommended, comprising representatives of partner organisations. The main purpose of these teams was to support the LRC manager through the process. Other benefits were envisaged to be to embed accreditation in the whole partnership, to evaluate new policy documents required before the full partnership approves them and to assess the adequacy of LRC staff numbers for the purposes of criterion 9.

The original accreditation system report recommended a six month process between registration of an application intention and the actual application. In this pilot project the timescales required a compressed timetable of just three and a half months. Furthermore, the project specification asked for guidance to be prepared in parallel with the pilots' work, with the consequence that the pilots had no documented guidance at all in the early stages and changing guidance through the period. These factors, together with the immaturity and lack of previous testing of the system, made the challenge unusually acute for the two pilots; in spite of these difficulties the LRCs took on the challenge with enthusiasm. Their motivation to do this can be illustrated by quotes from their expressions of interest submitted in November:

> *"This is a critical time for CPERC, as we build our relationships with local authorities and data providers, building our credibility as well as our ability to deliver a high quality and consistent service, but we are not there yet and live in an uncertain world with much change on the horizon. We are well placed to embrace Accreditation and have done some hard work to improve many areas of our work over the last year. Accreditation would provide a fantastic opportunity for this centre to consolidate its hard work thus far and provide an excellent platform to move the work of the centre and its relationships with partners into a new paradigm."*

- *"Externally audited quality standard of our records centre and our work which gives our customers confidence in our data and service.*
- *Externally audited quality standard which will make us stand out from the crowd as an example of good practice among LRCs and should stand us in good stead in funding applications, should we make any.*
- *Statement of achievement for the records centre and all that has been achieved by the staff and Partnership and recording community as a whole.*
- *Improved internal policies and procedures"*

4. ALERC Assessment

The contractor engaged with the ALERC board during January to advise on the procedures that would be necessary to assess formally the applications to be made by the pilots in February.

These procedures included:

1. The appointment of an assessor or assessors to receive the applications, assess them against the criteria and with reference to the guidance, and make a recommendation to an ALERC accreditation committee.
2. The appointment of an Accreditation Committee to receive the recommendations of the assessor and make formal decisions on the pilot applications.

At its meeting in late January, attended by the contractor, the ALERC board decided to appoint its chairman as the assessor for both pilots, and for a sub-group of the full board to act as the Accreditation Committee in this pilot project period. A timetable of application deadline, assessment, including a visit to each LRC by the assessor, and Accreditation Committee meeting, was agreed.

5. Pilot outcomes

Both pilot LRCs met the application deadline and submitted dossiers of documentation to ALERC by February 24th. The ALERC assessor visited both LRCs in the following week and made recommendations to the Accreditation Committee which met on March 10th.

The ALERC Accreditation Committee confirmed that both pilot LRCs had reached the accreditation standard and approved their applications. They will now be accredited for three years, and will be able to describe themselves as accredited in publicity and promotional material.

As the system required LRCs to reach the standards for sixteen of the twenty criteria, including a mandatory set of ten criteria, the Accreditation Committee has given feedback to the LRCs on the position with regard to those criteria that were not fully achieved at this time.

The ALERC Chairman has made a separate report on his experiences of the assessment process for the Project Steering Group.

6. Guidance

6.1. Guidance Development

The contractor invited all LRCs in the UK to express interest in joining a Guidance and Training Group through the pilot period. The purpose of the Group was to advise the contractor on the preparation of guidance and to contribute comments and material on the guidance as it emerged.

Five LRC managers volunteered to be part of this group; three from England (Thames Valley, Staffordshire and Greater Manchester), one from Wales (North Wales) and one from Scotland (North East Scotland), giving a very good geographical representation across the UK. As the English representatives on this group were from three different regions, all different from those involved in

the pilots, all English regions have been engaged in the Accreditation process as either pilots, Guidance Group or Steering Group. Since most LRCs have regional co-operation and meetings, it was especially useful for Guidance group members to be able to trawl potential best practice examples from other LRCs in their regions.

The group agreed to meet by teleconference to save time and costs, and met successfully three times.

It was agreed to compile the guidance through the mechanism of an online wiki, arranged through Central Desktop. This allowed all members of the group to read and contribute comments and real examples throughout the preparation period of November to January; it also allowed the pilot LRCs to use the guidance[1] as it emerged, and the Steering Group to review and approve the guidance at the end of the period. A further benefit was to allow linking to online resources, such as NBN guidance, where appropriate, without generating an enormous and unwieldy document.

The guidance was substantively completed by the end of January, and, with the inclusion of comments received from the Steering Group, a stable final version completed by 22 February.

6.2. Guidance Outputs

The guidance has been designed to be used as an outline resource. There are many advantages to this means of presentation.

- It is easier to update.
- It is easier to use.
- External online resources can be linked from the guidance, increasing the scope while reducing the volume; updates to the content of the external resources can also be accessed without the need to produce another guidance version.
- Internal cross-referencing is possible.

LRCs applying for accreditation need to access stable version of the guidance. The recommendation to ALERC is therefore to publish stable versions on its website, and to also operate a dynamic update wiki version usable by LRCs; the wiki versions can replace the stable versions at intervals to be decided, perhaps between 1 and 3 years.

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[1] The pilots were able to view and comment on the guidance, but not to edit it.

6.3. Guidance Structure

The guidance is arranged by criteria, within the three groups of criteria – Organisation Fundamentals, Data Custodianship and Products and Services. Including the sub-criteria there are 35 pages, selectable by criterion number and title arranged hierarchically.

A documents list is also included in the guidance. This includes all documents that may be necessary for an applicant to submit to ALERC, the range dependent on which criteria are being selected from the twenty. This list cross-references the documents against the criteria, as many documents can address several criteria. This complexity is rather challenging for both applicants and assessors, but may be unavoidable.

6.4. Guidance Content

Priorities for developing guidance were decided by the Guidance and Training Group in early December. The Group decided that emphasis should be given to the mandatory criteria, and also the criteria that involved relatively new concepts. A distinction was drawn between criteria where the status of an LRC is merely factual e.g. legal entity or not, on the one hand, and criteria which involve qualitative or quantitative thresholds e.g. validation/verification. The group considered that priority should be given to developing guidance for the latter.

This advice was followed. The resulting guidance varies between a few lines for some criteria, and lengthy analysis often including a number of external links for other criteria.

LRC managers also contributed some of their own material or neighbouring LRCs' material to the guidance, including some text interpretation.

The consequence of these two factors is that the Guidance appears to be rather uneven in content and style. The content length variation should reflect the degree of usefulness to LRCs, while style can be harmonised at a later stage if required, once ALERC has approved or amended the content.

The guidance includes a large number of example policies, tools and products from LRCs around the UK, linked to the most relevant criterion. These have proved to be very helpful to the pilot LRCs. However the examples rarely cover the criterion exactly with no more or no less. If an example falls short its inclusion can give a misleading impression that using it is adequate to meet the criterion. If it exceeds the requirements its inclusion can give a misleading impression that all of its features are required by the criterion. Commentary is provided wherever possible to mitigate these risks, but this commentary can risk confusing the issue still further. Users are referred to the precise wording of the criterion if in doubt. In due course many of the current examples should be replaced by new examples of policies, tools and products that exactly meet the criterion.

The pilots also commented that they would like to see more definitive accounts of evidence that should be submitted by applicants. There is some difficulty here, however, as often definitive accounts can only be given for output from particular tools, and the use of particular tools was ruled out (see below).

7. Standards

According to the British Standards Institute[2], a standard is

> "*an agreed, repeatable way of doing something. It is a published document that contains a technical specification or other precise criteria designed to be used consistently as a rule, guideline, or definition. Standards help to make life simpler and to increase the reliability and the effectiveness of many goods and services we use. Standards are created by bringing together the experience and expertise of all interested parties such as the producers, sellers, buyers, users and regulators of a particular material, product, process or service. Standards are designed for voluntary use and do not impose any regulations. However, laws and regulations may refer to certain standards and make compliance with them compulsory.*"

For purposes of LRC Accreditation the published documents include both the criteria and the guidelines. The criteria are designed to be used consistently; some are rules (e.g. the NBN Species Dictionary will be used, criterion 17.1), others refer to definitions (e.g. use of defined BAP Priority Habitats, criterion 18.1), all have guidelines. They have been created by bringing together the experience and expertise of producers (the LRCs), users (consultees in the original development process, including the NBN Trust) and regulators (e.g. Defra and the statutory agencies). They are voluntary and do not impose regulations. Laws and regulations do refer to some of the standards and make compliance with them compulsory (e.g. the Inspire Metadata regulations, criterion 12).

ALERC has decided that the emphasis should be on standards, as expressed through outputs, rather than standardisation. This recognises the variability of local circumstances across the UK and the strength of there being many routes to achieve a desired endpoint. Innovation is widely recognised as a healthy characteristic, and complete standardisation of method as well as standard output could stifle innovation. However it is also recognised that a greater degree of convergence on outputs is desirable in the medium to long term. This can be achieved in some cases through the advanced criteria, which include more quantitative criteria, but some standards need agreement across the whole biodiversity information community in the UK, of which LRCs form a part.

As the emphasis is on output rather than method, no tools are made mandatory in the LRC Accreditation system. Some tools (e.g. Recorder 6, IHS, the NBN Data Cleaner, COFNOD web metadata) are referred to frequently in the guidance because they are in widespread use in LRCs or are likely to become so, but there are other ways of achieving compliance with the criteria. Some tools are in active development, and future editions of this guidance should capture their progress and relevance to the criteria.

It will be apparent that there is some tension between the desire for technical standards on the one hand and the policy decision by the Steering Group to avoid prescription on the other. Technical standards are often applied through the widespread use of certain tools. Some tools (e.g. Recorder 6, IHS) are in fact a hybrid between a tool and a standard, or set of standards, but the recommendation of particular tools was ruled out. The development of standards in this accreditation system, through criteria and guidance, has aimed to strike a reasonable balance between these tensions, requiring a drive towards convergence of outputs for the benefit of users but not at the expense of innovation and healthy local diversity.

Some members of the Steering Group have highlighted the desirability of the system being forward

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[2] http://www.bsigroup.com/en/standards-and-publications/about-standards/what-is-a-standard/

looking to a time when biodiversity information standards are agreed across the full range of players in the UK (or Europe or globally). While this is a worthy aim, realisation of the ambition appears to be some years off, and there are obvious difficulties in defining current thresholds that refer to some unknown future position. While a degree of forward looking has been worked into the guidance (e.g. metadata Inspire standards, NBN Data Flow) these are the exception and only refer to areas where future requirements are already reasonably well known. In some respects the adoption of these accreditation standards will leave ALERC and LRCs well placed to lead the debate with other partners on wider adoption of standards, and ALERC will need to consider how much resource it can devote to this long term ambition. It will also need to keep its own standards under review as the national position develops.

8. Mitigation Strategy

8.1.Introduction

The contractor committed to developing a questionnaire on potential barriers to accreditation for distribution to all LRCs and analyse and report on questionnaire returns.

All LRCs and ALERC itself were invited to fill in the questionnaire. The objectives of the questionnaire were as follows:

- To provide all LRC's with opportunity to identify problems with the proposed accreditation process
- To feed responses into the development of the mitigation strategy
- To understand and plan for the predicted level of uptake of accreditation by LRC
- To collect information to prioritise accreditation training

The questionnaire was distributed to the LRCs and ALERC on the 16th February and a three week period was allowed in which participants could respond.

8.2.Production of the questionnaire

Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.com) was used for the production and distribution of the questionnaire and also for the subsequent analysis of responses. Table 1 details the potential issues that were addressed through the questionnaire and the focus of the questions.

Table 1 information to be collected through the questionnaire

Potential issue in accreditation	Information to be collected
Resource availability:	Number of employees in each LRC Who (job title) would be the competent person responsible for carrying out and auditing the accreditation process? Views on ALERC's capacity to run the accreditation scheme.
Awareness of LRC accreditation scheme	Are they aware of benefits of accreditation? What are the perceived benefits?
Level of Uptake	How many LRC plan to go through process of accreditation? If not, why not? When do these LRCs plan to go through process of accreditation?

Lack of funding	What do the LRCs assume it will cost to become and stay accredited?
The accreditation process	What are the main barriers identified to successful completing the accreditation process? Why are some LRCs going to delay their application?
Meeting the mandatory criteria	Which of the ten mandatory criteria are difficult to achieve and why?
Meeting the non-mandatory criteria	Which of the non-mandatory criteria do the LRCs believe it will be difficult to achieve and why?
Training priorities	In what areas do the LRCs identify that they need training?
Scope and degree of challenge	Do the LRCs think the criteria are set at the right level?
IT Technical expertise and capabilities	Which LRCs have access to open source tools? Which LRC identify IT skills and expertise as a barrier? What training is needed in particular?

8.3. Results of the questionnaire

25 LRCs completed the questionnaire and another 4 partly completed the questionnaire. The key conclusions from each section of the survey are examined in this section. For further detailed information on the responses please refer to the summary of the full list of responses, included as Annex 1[3].

8.3.1. Resource availability

This section sought information on when LRCs planned to go through accreditation and how many were planning to apply for the advanced level. Respondents indicated that:

- 73% of LRCs plan to go through the accreditation process between 2012 and 2014.
- 75% of LRCs answered 'Yes' or 'Maybe' to the question of whether they would apply for the next level.

onsidering the percentage of LRCs indicating that they would plan to apply within this two year period ALERC must ensure that sufficient resources are allocated and prepared to support this.

8.3.2. Benefits and cost

The majority of the LRCs identified that the following were potential benefits of accreditation. The mean and mode responses were that all these potential benefits were important:

- Recognition of LRC professionalism
- Support for securing funding
- Getting our policies and processes sorted out
- Improving our standards
- Aligning with other LRCs

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[3] This is a separate pdf document

The high level of response against 'Recognition of LRC professionalism' suggests that this is considered the 'most important' benefit of accreditation. This may be linked to the perception that accreditation would help to securing funding, considering the consensus (bar one response) that this was 'important'.

In terms of cost the majority, 82%, considered that it would cost less than £750 to follow the accreditation application process and become accredited at the standard level. This figure relates to the application fee only and not the staff time required to complete the accreditation process. There was one additional comment indicating surprise that there was due to be a fee for accreditation.

8.3.3. IT resources and expertise

Only 15% (4 LRCs) identified IT skills and expertise as a barrier. However a further 31% were unsure about this.

23% did not have permission to access open source tools. This needs to be considered if this assists in the process of meeting the criteria for either the mandatory or advanced level.

8.3.4. The accreditation process

Figure 1 illustrates the main barriers that have been identified to successfully completing the accreditation process.

25 LRCs (93%) of those surveyed identified that staff time would be an issue. Second to this 13 LRCs (48%) identified concern with the "capacity of ALERC to manage the scheme". Also commonly identified as a barrier to completing the accreditation process by LRC (37%) was lack of funding. In line with the answers to the question 10, 64% of LRC stated identified that lack of staff time was the main reason why they were not planning to apply for accreditation in 2011. 50% of LRCs also ticked the 'other' reasons box and provided answers that typically fit into the following categories:

- Desire to see the benefits other LRCs get or not to be the 'guinea pig'
- Concerns that ALERC cannot process all applications or will not have the capacity
- Insufficient information available about the criteria and accreditation process

The key Issues of staff time, funding and ALERC's capacity are considered in the mitigation strategy below.
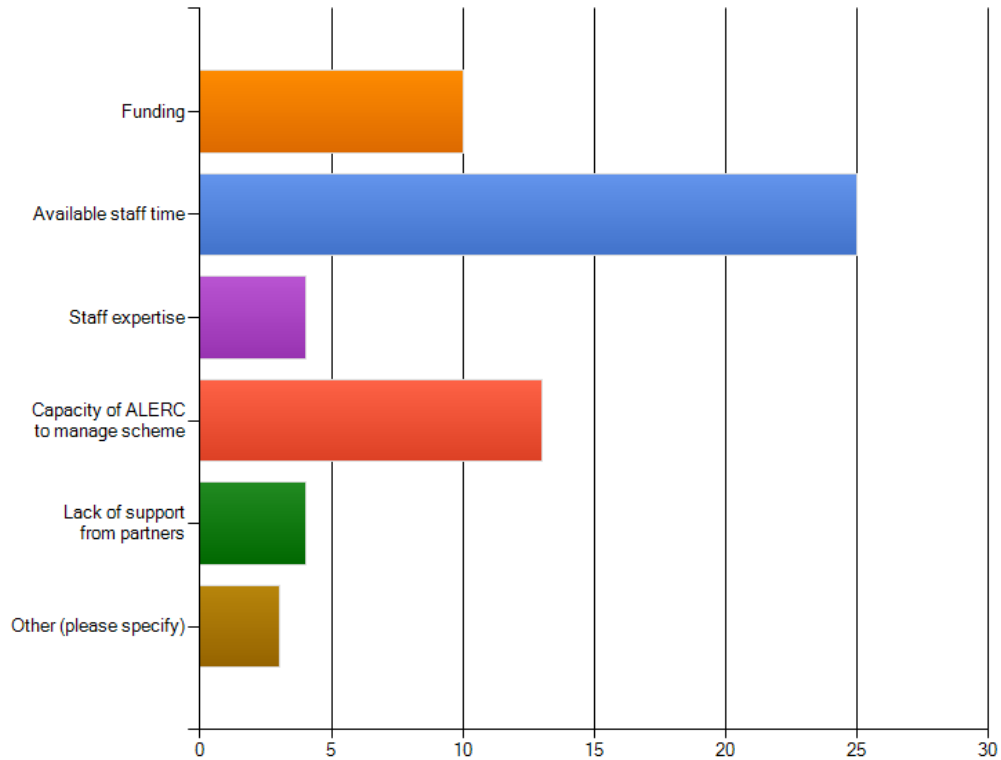
Figure 1 main barriers identified to successfully completing the accreditation process

8.3.5. Meeting the mandatory criteria

There was a relatively broad spread of answers in the relation to question 12 which asked LRCs which of the ten mandatory criteria they considered difficult to achieve in the next 3 years. The only criteria which all but one LRC did not consider they would have difficulty achieving was 'species reporting requirements'. See Figure 2.
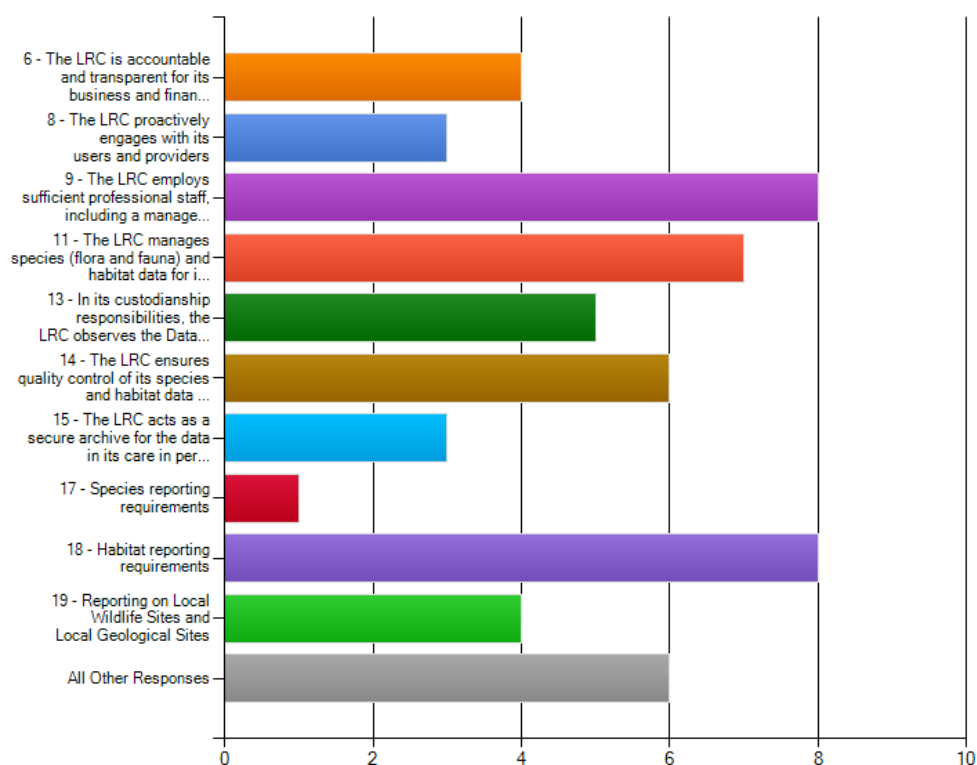
Figure 2 Mandatory criteria which LRCs consider difficult to achieve in the next three years

Table 2 sets out the reasons provided by respondents on why they might be difficult to achieve.

Table 2 Reasons given on why mandatory criteria might be difficult to achieve

Criteria Number	Criteria	Reasons given
6	The LRC is accountable and transparent for its business and financial performance.	Time to compile Annual Report.
9	The LRC employs sufficient professional staff, including a manager or equivalent, to maintain efficient and effective service to its users and providers.	Definition and especially consequence of criterion unclear. Staffing would depend on funding, which is not secure. management is currently carried out by the Technical & Projects Co-ordinator. There is no DBRC manager. We currently have very out of date constitution, terms of reference etc. County Council restructuring means that the manager of the LRC is no longer recognised as such, making progress difficult.
11	The LRC manages species (flora and fauna) and habitat data for its area.	Not clear if no habitat survey data available (other than NE inventories). whether this means the LRC cannot fulfil this criterion. LRC does not manage the habitat data, but will be part of the team that does come April 2011.

13	In its custodianship responsibilities, the LRC observes the Data Exchange Principles of the National Biodiversity Network. Confidentiality (13.2), Metadata (13.3), Authority transfer (13.4), Transparency (13.5), Personal data (13.6), Charging & Resourcing (13.7).	LRC relationship with NBN still unclear. Time taken to document data flow and arrange with national SS in particular. If data flow "works" locally but does not fit in with the national data flow. model, is that an issue?
14	The LRC ensures quality control of its species and habitat data through validation and verification systems.	Not supplying unverified data would vastly reduce the records available to users and would be particularly problematically for groups where there is not currently any recognised county recorders. It would also affect the timeliness of records as verification depends on the availability and time donation of taxon experts. N.B. Automated validation and verification procedures cannot replace expert opinion. Currently, only a small number of the 300,000 plus records held on the Fife Nature Records Centre database have been verified. Although members of the Fife Recorders' Group have expressed willingness to assist with record verification, it is a very time-consuming process. Other methods of record validation and verification e.g. the NBN Data Validation and Verification Tool, are still to be tested. It's inherently difficult getting county recorders to carry out verification as they're all volunteers and we handle large quantities of data that require a lot of time and effort to verify. It is something that we're working on improving though!
15	The LRC acts as a secure archive for the data in its care in perpetuity.	We would need to look at how to keep our paper data secure - at present if there was a fire or flood we would lose the paper data.
17	Species	BMERC uses MapMate as species database and the species dictionary is not fully in line with the NBN Species Dictionary. Although this does not cause any problems with uploading data to the NBN Gateway.

18	Habitats	Standards with respect to habitat data don't yet exist.
		Currency of habitat data is a major problem in this area - agencies unwilling to support broad scale field habitat survey
		BIS only holds habitat data managed by CCW so has little control. Verification procedures are very dependent on VC recorders and their willingness and availability
		Lack of Habitat Data. Cost/difficulties of obtaining MasterMap.
		Currently in the process of developing habitat reporting.
		Whilst we are custodians of comprehensive habitat data coverage for Greater London (all sites over 0.25ha), the survey parcels are mapped rather than individual habitats. The survey data belong to the Greater London Authority and a couple of London Boroughs so we have little influence over what is gathered. We are investigating how to steer this from now on, but won't have a new habitat polygon dataset within 3 years.
		Both habitat and wildlife sites data are not necessarily in our ownership to influence how the data is captured, stored and managed. Habitat data (mainly Phase 1 [all Wales 1990s] and NVC on selected sites) tends to come from CCW and they are increasingly moving towards remote sensing technologies. They have not adopted the IHS approach and there seems to be very little tie in with BAP Habitats. Wildlife Sites have no responsible data owners, who are collating the information consistently etc. However we are trying to do this. We could possibly achieve the criteria within 3 years but not immediately.
		Totally at mercy of CCW as to whether BAP habitat reporting can be developed in Wales.
19	Sites	LGS systems don't yet have their act together.
		We do not currently hold Geological site information.

General comments	
Funding	Hosting arrangement with the Wildlife Trust doesn't currently allow for much independence/transparency of funding which is specifically for GCER. Overall, funding is not sufficient to employ a "critical mass" of staff. There is no permanent fundraising officer for LRCs. Presently we are facing around a minimum of a £30,000 deficit for 2011-12 which will mean the LRC is understaffed (to below 3 FTE). This tends to mean focus is on funded outputs to ensure the funding isn't lost and other areas get squeezed.
Training	Training is not really an issue until standards become clear and endorsed by all biodiversity data stakeholders including local funders.
Other	The Warks BRC works within Local Site, Geological Sites and Habitat partnerships who may not agree to the Accreditation procedures etc. Thus rendering us unable to be in a position to be accredited.

The following mandatory criteria were chosen as the top priority for training:

Mandatory criteria no.	Criteria	Number of LRC who identified this as a priority for training
6	The LRC is accountable and transparent for its business and financial performance	3
8	The LRC proactively engages with its users and providers	3
14	The LRC ensures quality control of its species and habitat data through validation and verification systems	4
18	Habitat reporting requirements	3

8.3.6. Meeting the non mandatory criteria

In comparison with the mandatory criteria there is clearly consensus on the one criteria which LRCs identify as being most difficult to achieve, number 10, the LRC is a Process Orientated Organisation'. This was more than double that recorded for the next criterion identified, criterion 1, 'The LRC is partnership led'. See Figure 3.
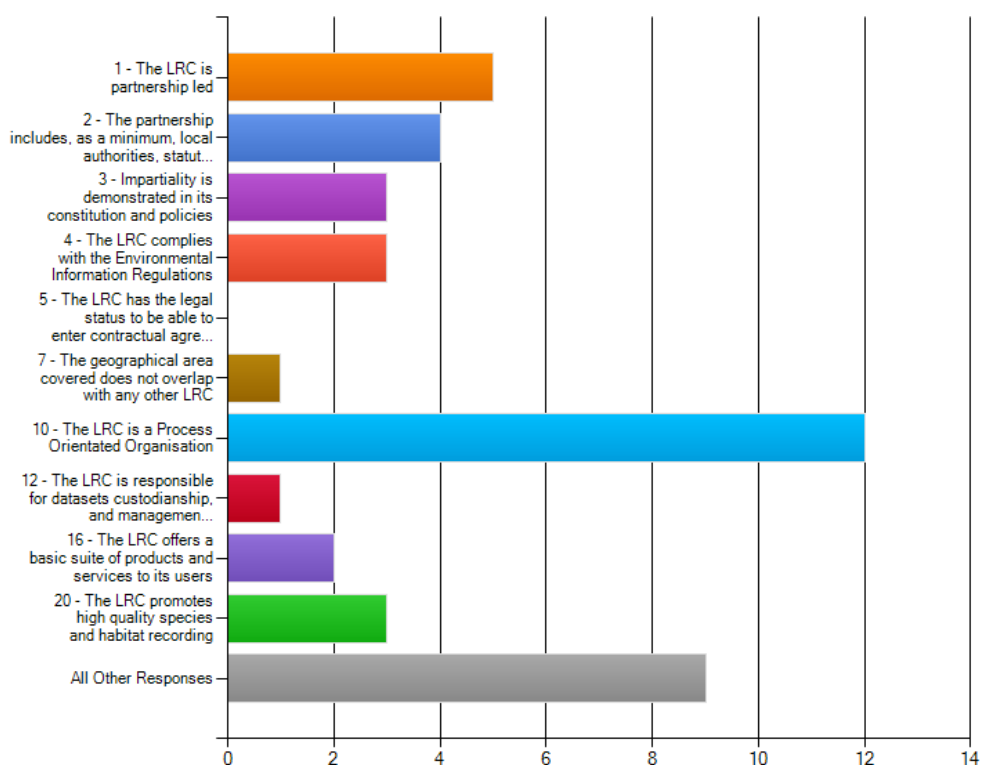
Figure 3 Non mandatory criteria that LRCs identify as being difficult to achieve

Reasons given why they would be difficult to achieve are set out in Table 3.

Table 3 Reasons given on why non-mandatory criteria might be difficult to achieve

Criteria Number		Reasons given
1	The LRC is partnership led.	Could demonstrate this (through the Trust that operates the LRC, but don'tagree with them as criteria and so will seek to get them changed in the review process following the pilot.
2	The partnership includes, as a minimum, local authorities, statutory agencies, conservation NGOs and voluntary recorders.	Could demonstrate this (through the Trust that operates the LRC, but don't agree with them as criteria and so will seek to get them changed in the review process following the pilot as previously stated. Happy with my autonomy in relation to partners! Our SLA partners are now clients. It may be a bit less than 'difficult' but we have always tried to steer clear of undertaking work that we feel is the remit of our partners. That said, it's a great opportunity to work more closely with them as long as they see the benefits of accreditation.
3	Impartiality is demonstrated in its constitution and policies.	Costing out host provided services.
4	The LRC complies with the Environmental Information Regulations.	EIR is only applicable to datasets from public bodies. Providing a planning service is not achievable at present.

10	The LRC is a Process Orientated Organisation	Not entirely sure what this means I think we probably do meet this but need some clarification as to what it actually means Don't know what it means Wording needs to be changed on this criterion to at least add "or equivalent"! Finance and time taken to document procedures and undertake CPD.
10.4	All staff undertake Continuing Professional Development	Budget cuts and funding cuts to BMERC may impact on CPD training, but unknown for next 3 years. Unclear guidance at this time. A greater understanding of what exactly is required. But we probably fulfil this already.
12	The LRC is responsible for datasets custodianship, and management of dataset copies, by agreement with its partners and data providers	Time to document dataset custodianship. N.B. The lack of a right to edit means that often datasets are imported as a standalone survey into Recorder, as otherwise errors in grid references etc. become problematical for the database. Listing all datasets on a website would be very time consuming.
16	The LRC offers a basic suite of products and services to its users	Time taken to keep statutory sites up-to-date (depends on NE performance). 16.6 - There are 1150 BAP priority species alone, which will come from multiple datasets, so documenting coverage of these on our website (which doesn't exist yet) in less than a year's time is unachievable - and in a sense un- desirable. We encourage all our users to come back to us with queries about records supplied to them.
20	The LRC promotes high quality species and habitat recording	Don't agree with the need for precise dates for some species - house sparrows are BAP species, and could be recorded on a daily basis in gardens. Although we would like to develop outreach programmes, we do not presently have the resources to do this and would need a large increase in funding, which is unlikely to be forthcoming with current public sector cuts.
	General comments	
	We can do all of that; we just need more staff to do it. We are a museum natural history department that holds records.	

These responses suggest that lack of understanding of what is required to achieve criteria 10 is the main problem. This may in part be a consequence of the fact that many respondents had not seen the guidance at the time of answering the questionnaire, and some may not have referred back to the criteria document.
Table 4 sets out the response regarding LRC's priorities for training on the non mandatory criteria. In line with the responses on difficulties in achieving the non mandatory criteria the most common response was that training was needed to demonstrate that the LRC is a process led organisation.

Table 4 Top priorities for training

Number of LRC who identified this as a priority for training	Criteria Number	Non Mandatory criteria
11	10	The LRC is a process led organisation
3	4	The LRC complies with the Environmental Information Regulations
2	12	The LRC is responsible for datasets custodianship, and management of dataset copies, by agreement with its partners and data providers
1	3	Impartiality is demonstrated in its constitution and policies

8.3.7. Scope and degree of challenge

The overwhelmingly positive response to question 16 demonstrate that the LRCs believe that the criteria are challenging but achievable and cover a valid range of functions. (Figure4).
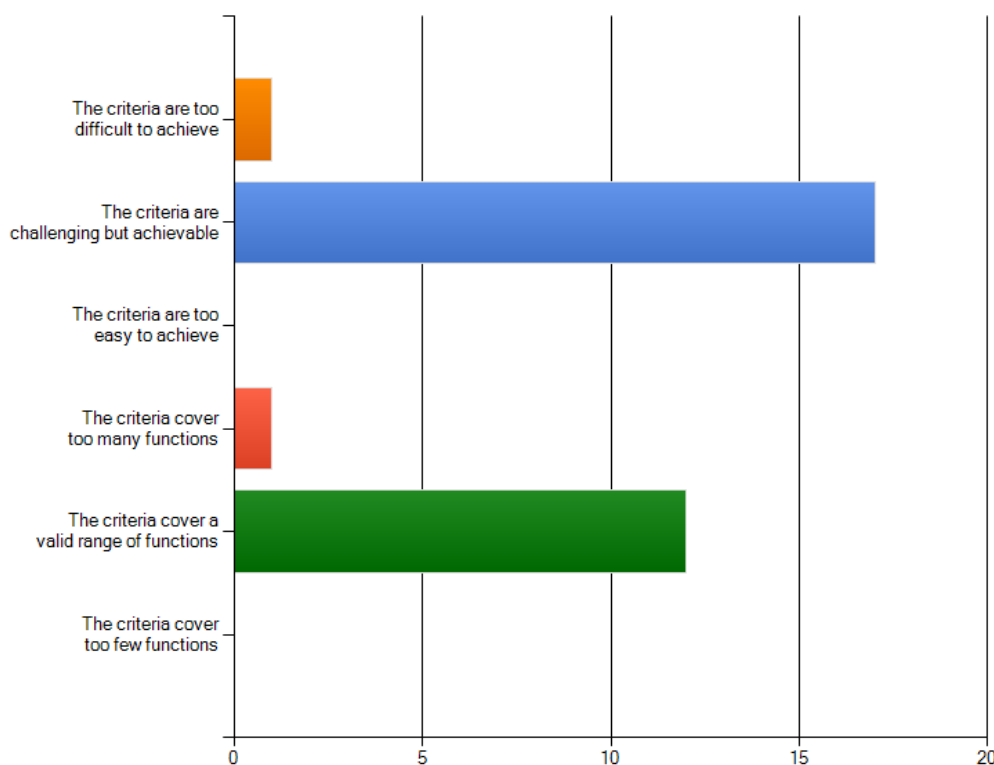

Figure 4 LRCs views on the possible accomplishment and breadth of criteria proposed for the standard level accreditation system

LRCs had the opportunity to provide additional suggestions and other comments on the accreditation process. Suggestions to improve accreditation process broadly supported the follow points:

- Funding is needed to achieve accreditation

- There should be more flexibility in the approach, particularly in regard to some of the criteria

- ALERC must develop a clearer vision of LRC standards and guidelines for LRCs to support the accreditation process

- The feedback from the pilots needs to be distributed to all LRCs. LRCs need the opportunity to assess the process after the pilots have been undertaken.

Other additional comments on the accreditation process included:

- Requests for more staff rather than more training

- Reiterations that the key issue is sustainable long term funding

- A particular note that the advanced criteria are not appropriate for Wales

However in addition there were messages of support and enthusiasm for the process and recognition that it could boost the image of LRCs.

8.4. Key points from the results

The following points we raised in response to multiple questions or by more than 50% of the LRCs. Issues that were seen as barriers to accreditation:

- Lack of sustainable long term funding and/or funding to improve LRCs systems to become accredited;

- Lack of available staff time to allocate to going through the LRC accreditation process; and

- Concerns that ALERC does not have the capacity to process all applications or won't have the capacity to support accreditation

- Concerns regarding the uncertainly with non mandatory criteria 10.

Points seen as supporting or helping to facilitate the accreditation process:

- Three quarters of LRCs intend to apply between 2012 and 2014;

- Three quarters will also consider applying for the advanced level;

- LRCs generally did not identify IT Skills and technical skills as a significant barrier

- There was agreement on the scope and degree of challenge in regard to the standard level accreditation

- There were no particularly mandatory criteria which were identified by a majority as being difficult to achieve. Other than staff resources (covered above), a significant gap between current practice and the required standards exists in habitat reporting requirements.

8.5.Mitigation

The following section addresses the key points identified as barriers through the questionnaire.

Lack of sustainable long term funding and available funding to improve LRCs systems to become accredited

The accreditation application fee will need to be kept as low as possible in order to avoid the accreditation fee itself becoming a significant barrier to uptake. As the predominant expectation is that the fee will be between £250 and £500, it appears preferable that the fee should be kept within this range.

In considering this balance it should be borne in mind that by becoming accredited each LRC will be able to demonstrate its professionalism and that it is effective and efficient. This will be of value to LRCs in securing support for future funding. It therefore seems reasonable that at least some of the costs of operating the accreditation system should be carried by the applicants.

From the viewpoint of the LRC the costs to the LRC of accreditation will be higher in terms of staff time dedicated to the process (see below) than the accreditation fee. However the fee is an additional budget item, whereas the extra staff time will normally be carried within existing budgets with displaced time deferred to activities carried forward to the following year. Most LRCs will recognise that the additional staff time spent on meeting accreditation requirements are strengthening the LRC and are improving activities that the LRC would have been undertaking in due course anyway. This was broadly the experience of the pilots in this project.

Rather than the costs of accreditation itself, the funding concerns expressed therefore seem to be more focused on the overall LRC sustainable funding position in the current financial climate being manifested through cuts to agency and local authority funding, with consequent pressure on grant aid and Service Level Agreement funding streams. Many LRCs are expressing deep concerns that, although they feel they may be at or close to accreditation standards at the moment, financial pressures may make it extremely difficult or impossible to reach accreditation standards in the future. These concerns are beyond the scope of this project, but need to be uppermost in regulatory body and statutory agency policy deliberations with regard to Local Records Centres over the next few years.

Lack of available staff time to allocate to the LRC accreditation process

Typically tasks needed to meet the standard criteria are designed to improve efficiencies, improve data management and communication and therefore reduce staff time needed on organisation tasks in the medium to long term.

This seems to be a valid argument borne out by the experience of the pilot LRCs. Our recommendation here is to communicate this message to LRCs generally. The most effective communicators of the message would be the managers of the pilot LRCs, speaking directly from experience if they are willing to do so. ALERC might consider arranging for a short video sequence of one or both managers speaking on the subject, and embedding the content in the accreditation section of the ALERC website.

An alternative response to the concern is to reduce the staff time required to go through the accreditation process, by either or both of reducing the number of criteria or reducing the thresholds within criteria. We strongly recommend that this option is not followed as we believe

that such action could compromise the standards and benefits of accreditation. This position is supported by the perception of LRCs themselves that the current criteria are challenging but achievable and cover a valid range of functions.

Concerns that ALERC does not have the capacity to process all applications or won't have the capacity to support accreditation

ALERC's role in accreditation is to:

1. Confirms the LRC's eligibility to apply.
2. Appoint a mentor
3. Appoint an assessor
4. Decide on the application through an Accreditation Committee
5. Undertake any follow up work required e.g. checking that outstanding criteria compliance has been achieved, dealing with any external complaints.
6. Keep the criteria and guidance under review, and make it available via its website.

Since ALERC does not currently have a funded plan in place to roll out the accreditation process, ALERC operates primarily on the goodwill of busy LRC managers and other staff, and external funding opportunities are becoming more difficult, the concern expressed by LRCs on this subject appear to be well founded. Our recommendations here are covered in the costs section below.

Concerns regarding meeting mandatory criteria 18 (habitat reporting requirements)

These concerns are likely to be largely misplaced, probably a consequence of LRC respondents to the questionnaire not having access to the guidance or not reading the detailed interpretation of the criteria, both of which emphasise that the criterion addresses quality of habitat data and is silent on the quantity of habitat data that must be managed.

The ambiguous role of Welsh LRCs with regard to habitat data needs to be clarified with the Countryside Council for Wales. It would be desirable in many respects for Welsh LRCs to take on the role of providers of interpreted habitat information to users, in addition to species information.

Concerns regarding the uncertainty with non mandatory criteria 10 (Process Orientated Organisation)

Judging from the additional comments provided it seems that many LRC are unsure how what this means and what evidence will be needed to demonstrate they have delivered on this criterion.
The guidance provides further information to fill this information gap. Contrary to popular belief, the criterion does not specify EFQM or Business Excellence Model as being the only means of meeting the requirement.

Feedback from the Pilots

A short questionnaire was completed by the two pilot LRC managers on completion of the process, in order to capture their experiences. The results are shown in Annex 2.[4]

The key messages are that both pilot LRCs believe that they are stronger LRCs having been through the accreditation process, believe that it has improved the recognition of professionalism in their

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[4] This is a separate pdf document

LRC and will help them secure sustainable funding.

Other messages from the feedback are picked up elsewhere in this report in discussion of particular points.

9. Revisions to Process

The recommended process tested in this pilot project seems to have generally worked well, in that the two pilots completed their applications and ALERC responded with a robust assessment system that resulted in both pilot LRCs being successfully accredited. The process was judged as fair by the two pilots (see Annex 2). The ALERC Chairman has produced a separate report on experiences which has been shared with the Project Steering Group and ALERC Board.

There is widespread agreement that the three months application period necessary in this project was too short; the original six months recommendation would seem to be appropriate.

The role of the internal LRC accreditation team was deemed to be only partially useful. It should be borne in mind that both LRC pilots had strong partnership arrangements, and the finding may be a reflection of that position. There is some risk that, in the absence of an LRC accreditation team, there could be divergence between the LRC staff applying for accreditation and the LRC's governance arrangements. The recommendation therefore is to retain this advice for the time being at least, and to review after several more LRCs have gone through the process.

The role of mentor was judged to be useful by the pilots (see Annex 2). Rapid response when required was judged to be particularly important, as was the value of getting a different perspective. The response on the value of the site visit by the mentor was less emphatic, but from the mentor's viewpoint it would seem to be significantly more difficult to give appropriate advice exclusively from a distance. There is a note of caution in the feedback that apparent conflict on occasions between the advice given by the mentors and the documentation; this may be largely due to the immaturity of the system, but some training or moderation of mentors may prove to be useful in future. As the accreditation system gets rolled out there will be more LRC Managers who have achieved accreditation available to act as mentors for later applicants. Costs of mentoring may be kept down by using managers from neighbouring LRCs, but this also has risks and there was a mixed reaction from the pilots on this point.

The role of the assessor is clearly essential to the robustness of the decision making system. The assessor must be an individual from ALERC acting as an intermediary on behalf of ALERC between the LRC applicant and the Accreditation Committee. There is debate as to whether a site visit by the assessor is necessary; the recommendation is to continue with this for the time being, in order to mitigate the risk of divergence between the documented application and actual practice. While an assessor can only expect to see a fraction of the processes actually in place at an LRC, a site visit can be a deterrent to any applicant considering taking a risk with the documentation.

The issue of the value of practices that have recently been improved in order to meet accreditation standards is a significant one that needs careful handling. The fact that there were numerous examples of these within the two pilots can be interpreted as success of the accreditation system in terms of raising standards. However these improvements must be sustainable over time. ALERC must be assured that these new policies and practices are being fully implemented. An additional process is therefore recommended as follows.

The assessor, working with the applicant, should document which policies and practices have been improved in order to meet the accreditation standard i.e. within the six month application period, and require an annual report from the accredited LRC on implementation of these through the first three year accreditation period. The document should be relatively easy to produce as it is the difference between the baseline produced by the applicant at the start of the application period and the actual application.

The relationship between documents required and criteria is a complex one that would benefit from simplification if possible. A suggestion has been made that this implies that some criteria could be merged. This may be possible, but care must be taken to avoid loss of clarity in the criteria or lowering of standards. From the external point of view, clarity of criteria is much more important than duplication of internal documentation.

ALERC is advised to give serious consideration to the risks of legal action from an LRC that may be refused accreditation. While this is a low risk it cannot be ruled out entirely. The most important response is to ensure that its decision making process is robust and well documented. It would be worth exploring the potential for approval of the accreditation system itself through UKAS, the United Kingdom Accreditation Service, although at present the nature of the scheme seems to be significantly outside of that body's ambit. A prudent move would be to insure against the risks of legal action, through a policy analogous to Professional Indemnity Insurance.

10.   Costs

The costs to ALERC of operating the LRC Accreditation System are assessed, based on the experiences of this pilot project and the results of the LRC survey (see Annex 1). The potential income sources are briefly explored.
Three options are presented:

1.   A cost neutral option (voluntary operation)
2.   Option using paid time of existing ALERC personnel
3.   Option using a new Accreditation Officer post

The advantages and disadvantages of each option are then explored.

10.1. Mentors

At the standard level, three days of mentoring time are assumed per LRC application. In practice much of the time is in short blocks over the whole application period of months. At the advanced level, no mentoring is provided for, as LRC applicants will already have the experience of going through the standard level process. However, as some of the functions at advanced level are not covered at standard level, in an ideal world there would also be mentoring at the advanced level; some informal system may be possible once the first few LRCs have achieved the standard.

10.2. Assessors

At the standard level, four days of assessor time are assumed per LRC application, including a site visit. This is focused time over the space of a few weeks once the application is submitted. Four days are also assumed at the advanced level.

10.3. Dealing with follow up

Follow up time after an LRC is accredited will be necessary to validate the implementation of new policies and practices and to handle any complaints received. An average of two days per annum per

accredited LRC at both standard and advanced levels is assumed. This cost will increase over time as more LRCs become accredited, but then decline again in due course once accreditation renewals are approved.

10.4. Administration

The ALERC administration system needs to be robust in handling applications, decisions, follow up, insurance and dealing with external enquiries. An average of one day per annum per LRC applicant at standard and advanced levels is assumed. Administration will also increase as the number of accredited LRCs builds.

10.5. External accreditation of system

If ALERC pursues the UKAS route, there will be additional costs involved. A very rough estimate of £3,000 to go through the UKAS process is included.

10.6. Insurance against legal costs

A professional indemnity type insurance cost of £700 per annum is included.

10.7. Accreditation Committee

ALERC Accreditation Committee members will incur time and travel costs. These costs are handled in different ways in the options below.

10.8. Criteria Revision

The criteria at standard level need to be reviewed by ALERC after this pilot, and reviewed regularly in the future, perhaps on a two or three year cycle. These costs are handled in different ways in the options below.

10.9. Guidance Revision

The guidance needs to be updated regularly. ALERC has proposed that an online wiki is maintained for LRC suggestions, comments and best practice submission, and that stable versions of the guidance are published to the world on its website periodically. The wiki will require maintenance and moderation, decisions on which parts to accept into the revised published guidance and transfer of format. It is assumed that these costs will be carried by ALERC volunteers.

10.10.   Criteria and Guidance Communication

The Accreditation and Guidance need to be linked and communicated via the ALERC website. It is assumed that these costs will be absorbed by ALERC.

10.11.   Training

In due course ALERC will wish to arrange and offer training courses to its members to assist them in reaching accreditation standards. It is assumed that such training will be cost neutral in its delivery i.e. participating LRCs will share the costs of their training.

10.12.   Potential income sources

It is not part of the current project specification to investigate potential income sources for operating the accreditation system. However, mention of the leading sources may be helpful as background to the discussion of options.

LRCs applying for accreditation

An accreditation fee that could defray all or part of ALERC's costs of running the system could be considered normal . As discussed above, the majority of LRCs anticipate that this fee will be less than £500, and it is reasonable to assume that any significantly higher fee would become a deterrent.

LRCs who are ALERC members

ALERC members pay an annual membership subscription depending on LRC size. Since operation of an Accreditation System is a significant part of ALERC's raison d'etre, it would be reasonable to expect some of this income to be used to run the system. However the income is modest, and ALERC has many other functions in addition to accreditation.

LRCs employing ALERC Directors and other personnel

If ALERC personnel "volunteer" their time to operation of the accreditation system, their employers are effectively providing a subsidy to the system. While it can be argued, and is argued, that improvement of the LRC system as a whole benefits each participating LRC, there are limits on employers' generosity for the common good.

Country Nature Conservation Agencies, Defra and the NBN Trust

The agencies, Defra and the NBN Trust all have interests in strengthening the standards of biodiversity information management in LRCs and elsewhere; this is the motivation behind funding for development of the system. Similar arguments can be applied to implementation of the system over the next few years. However, the public sector is going through a period of substantial funding cuts and grant funded projects have become a rarity, needing very strong justification to proceed.

10.13.   Demand for Accreditation

A variable of great significance to costing the system is clearly the number of LRCs that are likely to apply in the next few years. The LRC survey in this project asked two questions on this subject (see Annex 1). Interpretation of the replies is a little hazardous as assumptions need to be made on the approximately 50% of LRCs who did not respond and many LRCs are waiting to see the results of the pilot.

Once it is widely recognised that the pilot LRCs improved their standards because of accreditation, are operating to more consistent standards, consider themselves to be stronger LRCs having gone through accreditation and believe they have improved their chances of securing sustainable funding, then the demand for accreditation is likely to grow.

Furthermore, LRCs applying for accreditation in 2011/12 will have a more favourable environment to operate in than the pilots because:

1. They will have six months rather than 3.5 to prepare
2. They can choose when to apply without external deadline
3. The guidance is complete and stable
4. Mentors will be available who have gone through the process themselves (although perhaps not for all 2011/12 applicants)
5. Some new relevant tools are likely to be available

On the downside, new applicants may be asked to pay an accreditation fee.

For costing purposes, it is assumed that seven LRCs will apply for standard level each year for the next three years, and three will apply for advanced level each year from 2012 onwards.

10.14.   Options

In Option 1, there is no Accreditation fee, and ALERC personnel , together with previously accredited LRC managers, volunteer their time to running the system.

In Option 2, the Accreditation Fee is set at £500, ALERC personnel charge their time to ALERC at a typical NGO employed charge out rate of £250 per day, and the balance of costs is covered by ALERC membership fees and external grant. Previously accredited LRC managers offer mentoring time for free (one LRC in the year following their own accreditation).

In Option 3, the Accreditation Fee is set at £500, ALERC secures external funding to part cover costs of a part-time Accreditation Officer, the balance of the costs being met by ALERC membership fees. Previously accredited LRC managers offer mentoring time for free (1 LRC in the year following their own accreditation). The costs of the officer are calculated on the basis of £28,000 per annum pro rata plus 20% on costs, charged per day on the basis of 200 working days per annum. This would be an approximately 0.5FTE post.

OPTION 1	Days per LRC standard	Days per LRC advanced	No standard	No. Advanced	Cost standard £	Cost advanced £	Total cost £	No. Days	Per LRC standard £	Per LRC advanced £
Mentors	3	0	7	3	0	0	0	21	0	0
Assessors	4	4	7	3	0	0	0	40	0	0
Dealing with follow up	2	2	7	3	0	0	0	20	0	0
Applications/ accreditation administration	1	1	7	3	0	0	0	10	0	0
External accreditation of the system							3000			
Insurance against legal costs			7	3	700	0	700		100	0
Accreditation Committee							0			
Criteria and guidance revision							0			
Criteria and guidance communication							0			
Training							0			
Total			**7**	**3**	**700**	**0**	**3700**	**91**	**100**	**0**

OPTION 2	Days per LRC standard	Days per LRC advanced	No standard	No. Advanced	Cost standard £	Cost advanced £	Total cost £	No. Days	Per LRC standard £	Per LRC advanced £
Mentors	3	0	7	3	5250	0	5250	21	750	0
Assessors	4	4	7	3	7000	3000	10000	28	1429	1000
Dealing with follow up	2	2	7	3	3500	1500	5000	14	714	500
Applications/ accreditation administration	1	1	7	3	1750	750	2500	7	357	250
External accreditation of the system							3000			
Insurance against legal costs			7	3	700	0	700		100	0
Accreditation Committee							0			
Criteria and guidance revision							0			
Criteria and guidance communication							0			
Training							0			
Total			**7**	**3**	**18200**	**5250**	**26450**	**70**	**2600**	**1750**

OPTION 3	Days per LRC standard	Days per LRC advanced	No standard	No. Advanced	Cost standard £	Cost advanced £	Total cost £	No. Days	Per LRC standard £	Per LRC advanced £
Mentors	3	0	7	3	3528	0	3528	21	504	0
Assessors	4	4	7	3	4704	2016	6720	28	960	672
Dealing with follow up	2	2	7	3	2352	1008	3360	14	480	336
Applications/ accreditation administration	1	1	7	3	1176	504	1680	7	240	168
External accreditation of the system							3000			
Insurance against legal costs			7	3	700	0	700		100	0
Accreditation Committee							840	5		
Criteria and guidance revision							2016	12		
Criteria and guidance communication							840	5		
Training							1680	10		
Total			**7**	**3**	**12460**	**3528**	**24364**	**102**	**1780**	**1176**

In Option 1, the bulk of the costs are effectively borne by employers of ALERC personnel. At up to 91 days per annum and assuming that only perhaps five ALERC personnel have the experience and skills to undertake these roles, a subsidy of up to 20 days per annum per LRC employer is assumed. Note that in this option the external accreditation fee, which is a first year one off, is carried from existing ALERC funds.

In Option 2, there is an Accreditation Fee income to ALERC of £5,000 per annum (10 times £500), but only £3500 in year 1 when there are no advanced level applications. The balance of £21450 per annum (variable per year depending on number of previous LRC managers available, number of applications etc) would need to be covered from a combination of ALERC membership fee income and external grant aid.

In Option 3, there is also an Accreditation Fee income to ALERC of £5,000 per annum but only £3500 in year 1. The balance of £19364 variable per year would need to be covered from a combination of ALERC membership fee income and external grant aid.

Note that in options 2 and 3, the actual costs of running the accreditation system per LRC exceed by a large margin the Accreditation Fee.
Note also that potential savings, especially in years 2 and 3, in costs of mentoring through using managers of previously accredited LRCs, are not taken into account in the above.

10.15. Advantages and Disadvantages of Options

	Advantages	Disadvantages
Option 1	Can be implemented immediately. Several experienced personnel involved.	Very high level of LRC employer subsidy unlikely to be achievable or sustainable. Good communication between personnel critical.
Option 2	Several experienced personnel involved.	Distracts key ALERC personnel from other functions. Potential delay and loss of momentum while fundraising for grant. Risk that fundraising will fail. Good communication between personnel critical.
Option 3	Builds ALERC capacity. All accreditation issues handled by one person, building knowledge and experience.	Potential delay and loss of momentum while fundraising for grant. Risk that fundraising will fail. Could be a difficult post to fill with high requirement for skills and experience.

Option 3 appears to be the preferred option, but carries significant risk in availability of grant funding and finding the right person.

The options are not necessarily mutually exclusive. For example Option 1 could per pursued while fundraising is in hand, with perhaps LRC employers being tolerant on the basis that it's a temporary measure. Option 2 could perhaps be pursued while fundraising for Option 3 is in hand, up to a limit of availability of existing ALERC funds.

It is also feasible to apply a cap on the number of LRCs that can apply for accreditation in any year, the level of the cap being determined by the capacity of ALERC to manage the system. This implies selection at the Expression of Interest stage. This option is not recommended, as it risks building resentment among those LRCs wishing to apply and not selected, and the roll out across the country would take many years, with a two tier LRC network (accredited and not accredited) in existence for the duration.

11. Key recommendations

1. ALERC uses the success of the pilot project to roll out the accreditation system across the UK immediately, through inviting all eligible LRCs to apply for accreditation against the standards.

2. ALERC adopts the standards recommended in the Accreditation System report and Guidance document, with minor adjustment arising from the experiences of this project.

3. ALERC publishes a stable version of the Guidance on its website, and invites all LRCs to provide comment and further best practice examples that can be used in future stable versions.

4. ALERC seeks to engage other parts of the National Biodiversity Network in the adoption of standards for managing biodiversity information across the whole network.

5. ALERC and Natural England agree that the most fundamental standards in biodiversity information management concern the names that are used for species and habitats (criteria 17 and 18).

6. ALERC emphasises the positive aspects of accreditation through promotion of the beneficial experiences of the two pilot LRCs.

7. ALERC addresses the identified barriers to accreditation through the recommendations listed in this report.

8. ALERC reviews the priority that should be allocated to training for LRCs, and the timing and means of arranging training, using the feedback from LRCs described in this report.

9. Natural England, other environmental agencies, Defra and other partners in the National Biodiversity Network recognise the significant benefits to their own organisations and the aims of the NBN arising from LRC accreditation and support ALERC in rolling out the accreditation system across the UK.

12.   References

Butcher, W.G. (2010). Development of a Local Records Centre Accreditation System. Report for Natural England, Project Project SAE03-02-331, WGB Environment.

Local Records Centre Accreditation System Guidance[5]. http://lrcaccred.somasoft.co.uk/accred/ (temporary viewing only, 2011, please consult ALERC for later access). Also available from ALERC in pdf format.

Standards definition http://www.bsigroup.com/en/Standards-and-Publications/About-standards/What-is-a-standard/ Accessed 27th June 2012.

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[5] This resource contains numerous references to relevant documents.