

## **BULLETIN TO INFRASTRUCTURE SERVICES COMMITTEE – 17 JUNE 2021**

### **2020/21 ANNUAL REPORT ON NORTH EAST SCOTLAND BIOLOGICAL RECORDS CENTRE (NESBReC)**

#### **1 Purpose of the Bulletin**

- 1.1 To inform the Committee of the activity of the North East Scotland Biological Records Centre (NESBReC) for the period 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021 through the presentation of the NESBReC Annual Report, as shown in **Appendix 1**.

#### **2 Background**

- 2.1 NESBReC maintains a quality assured database of biodiversity information and disseminates this information to allow ecological assessment for Aberdeenshire Council and other organisations on relevant planning applications, forestry proposals, planning policy and Strategic Environmental Assessments. NESBReC also acts as a hub for biological data exchange and provides support and guidance for biological recorders among the general public. The NESBReC Strategy 2020-2023 sets out the core objectives and key priorities for NESBReC.
- 2.2 NESBReC has 2.6 full-time equivalent staff and forms part of the Specialist Services Team, within the Planning and Environment Service. The Service is based at Woodhill House and has the prime role of collating, managing and providing biological information for the North East of Scotland.
- 2.3 NESBReC allows the Council to satisfy the relevant requirements of the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004, the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy 2004 and associated 2020 Challenge for Scotland's Biodiversity and National Planning Framework 3.
- 2.4 NESBReC is supported through an annual grant from NatureScot (formerly Scottish Natural Heritage) and Scottish Forestry, as well as having an annual agreement with the Cairngorms National Park Authority and a Service Level Agreement with Aberdeen City Council. Other funding is provided through project work and payment for biological data searches for private organisations.
- 2.5 The Annual Report has been brought to this Committee as it is the policy reporting Committee for the Service in order to inform members of the activity NESBReC has undertaken in relation to the above Strategy.

#### **3 Discussion**

##### Summary of Annual Report for 2020/21

- 3.1 NESBReC carried out 2,810 biological data searches during the reporting period with 96% completed for Aberdeenshire Council. NESBReC carries out a review of the Aberdeenshire Council weekly planning application lists for

any biological data with 2,705 planning applications searched during 2020-21. In addition, 53 commercial searches were carried out for environmental consultants. This was a reduction from 2019/20 due to consultants being unable to carry on normal working during the first Covid-19 lockdown, continuing until August 2020 when requests started to pick up. This was reflected with NESBReC receiving approximately £1,000 less income for this work in 2020/21 compared to 2019/20 (£10,322 – 2019/20; £9,389 – 2020/21). A further 42 non-commercial data searches were carried out for users such as students, researchers, other organisations and Aberdeen City Council (as part of a Service Level Agreement).

- 3.2 NESBReC added 108,544 species records to the database during 2020-2021. This is more than double the number added in the previous year and is mostly attributable to the stability and experience of the NESBReC Team. In 2019-20, the Data Assistant post was vacant for around 3 months and it then took several more months to get the post holder up to speed with the work stream (this is always expected when training up the Data Assistant role).
- 3.3 NESBReC delivered 8 online biological recording workshops with 118 attendees and hosted an online annual Recorders Forum to an audience of 94 local recorders from all across the North East of Scotland. These events would normally be held in person, but the Covid-19 pandemic meant that NESBReC staff had to learn to deliver these events virtually using Microsoft Teams. These online events were important in terms of maintaining contact with existing recorders as well as reaching new ones.
- 3.4 NESBReC maintained a continuous social media presence via Facebook with the number of “followers” of the page increasing from 985 to 1,334 in the last year. This was as a result of the increased emphasis of online work and promotion due to the restrictions faced as a result of Covid-19 during 2020-21. This included being involved with the Grassland Watch project, a wildflower recording promotion in local greenspace working with NESBiP (North East Scotland Biodiversity Partnership), Greenspace Aberdeenshire, and the Aberdeenshire Council Ranger Service. This increased public awareness of local species and was important for maintaining contact with existing recorders as well as reaching new ones.
- 3.5 The restrictions imposed due to Covid-19 meant that the planned habitat survey work for Aberdeen City Council and Aberdeenshire Council could not go ahead. All survey work was postponed until 2021/22. This meant that no new habitat data was added to NESBReC’s GIS and no new plant records were collected from the survey work to be added into NESBReC’s database. It also meant that no project income was generated from these sources in the reporting period. This resulted in NESBReC receiving only £65,447 worth of external income and grants in 2020/21, compared to £73,361 in 2019/20.

#### **4 Council Priorities, Implications and Risk**

- 4.1 This Bulletin helps deliver the Strategic Priority “Economy and Enterprise” within the Pillar “Our Economy”, by having the right people, in the right place, at the right time.

The Bulletin helps deliver the Strategic Priority “Health & Wellbeing” within the Pillar “Our People”, by encouraging active lifestyles and promoting well-being.

The Bulletin helps deliver the Strategic Priority “Resilient Communities” within the Pillar “Our Environment”, by addressing issues raised by climate and sustainability.

4.2 The table below shows whether risks and implications apply in relation to this Bulletin.

Subject	Yes	No	N/A
Financial		x	
Staffing		x	
Equalities		x	
Fairer Scotland Duty		x	
Town Centre First		x	
Sustainability		x	
Children and Young People’s Rights and Wellbeing		x	

4.3 An Equality Impact Assessment is not required because this Bulletin is only to inform the Committee on the performance of NESBReC and does not have a differential impact on any of the protected characteristics.

4.4 The following Risks have been identified as relevant to the on-going delivery of the NESBReC Strategy on a Corporate Level ([Corporate Risk Register](#)):

- *ACORP001 Budget Pressures:* NESBReC is supported through several annual grants and has a Service Level Agreement with Aberdeen City Council. If any of these grants were not successful or the Service Level Agreement was terminated, there would be a financial impact through a reduction in income.
- *ACORP005 Working with other organisations:* As above, if existing grants and agreement were to cease the result would be a reduction in income. NESBReC has a good working relationship with all of its funders and allows for a quality assured database of biodiversity information to be kept for the whole of North East Scotland. This allows for better informed decision making on biological and ecological matters relating to planning applications.
- *ACORP006 Reputation management (including social media).* NESBReC promotes the work which it undertakes and engages with communities through social media. This is all undertaken in accordance with the Council’s Social Media Procedure.

4.5 The following Risks have been identified as relevant to the on-going delivery of the NESBReC Strategy on a Strategic Level ([Directorate Risk Registers](#)):

- *ISSR004 Climate Change:* Conserve the natural and historic environment by protecting and enhancing landscape, biodiversity and historic assets. It is recognised that there is a heightened risk of the

natural environment being damaged or lost as a result of climate change. NESBReC will continue to provide biological information which can be used when determining planning applications to help ensure the natural environment is protected and enhanced through new development.

## **5 Scheme of Governance**

- 5.1 The Head of Finance and Monitoring Officer within Business Services have been consulted in the preparation of this Bulletin and had no comments to make and are satisfied that the Bulletin complies with the Scheme of Governance and relevant legislation.
- 5.2 The Committee is able to consider this item in terms of Section F.7.1 of the List of Committee Powers in Part 2A of the Scheme of Governance as the Bulletin allows scrutiny and review of the activity of the North East Scotland Biological Records Centre (NESBReC).

**Alan Wood**

**Director of Infrastructure Services**

Bulletin prepared by Glenn Roberts, NESBReC Co-ordinator

28 May 2021

## **List of Appendices**

Appendix 1 – North East Scotland Biological Records Centre (NESBReC) Annual Report 2020/21

## **NORTH EAST SCOTLAND BIOLOGICAL RECORDS CENTRE (NESBReC) ANNUAL REPORT 2020/21**

### **1. Introduction**

- 1.1. The North East Scotland Biological Records Centre (NESBReC) has the job of managing biodiversity data and promoting the natural environment within Aberdeenshire and other local authorities. This involves partnership working with a diverse range of bodies including national agencies, community groups and most importantly a significant number of individuals who regularly contribute species records to NESBReC. The core of the Team's work is based around the management of a database of biodiversity information and providing such data to decision makers and other data requestors.
- 1.2. The NESBReC Strategy 2020-23 shows where NESBReC clearly delivers, or contributes to, Scottish Government and Aberdeenshire Council Priorities. The Strategy is primarily an Aberdeenshire Council working document to help manage and deliver key objectives of NESBReC. The Strategy also provides opportunities to improve efficiency, participation and collaboration with key stakeholders and partners and embed best practice in the delivery of the NESBReC service.
- 1.3. Despite the challenges presented by Covid-19 during 2020-21, NESBReC has continued to deliver most of its core business activities without interruption, with the only key impact being the restrictions on face-to-face meetings, training and site visits for species and habitat monitoring. Due to these restrictions, training events and public awareness raising activities were held online using Microsoft Teams instead.
- 1.4. The NESBReC Strategy 2020-23 identifies four Aims that can be measured by a total of 29 Annual Performance Indicators (APIs). These indicators are all reported on in the tables below and are listed in the order they appear in Section 5 of the NESBReC Strategy 2020-23. Where Covid-19 has affected delivery of any APIs this is noted. If any APIs are new and were not gathered in previous years, they are recorded as N/A.

### **2. 2020-23 NESBReC Strategy Aim 1 – Manage Biodiversity Information**

- 2.1. NESBReC manages a database of biodiversity information on protected sites, habitats and species and acts as a hub for biological information exchange pertaining to the biodiversity of North East Scotland.
- 2.2. NESBReC added 108,544 species records to the database during 2020-2021. This is more than double the number added in the previous year and is mostly attributable to the stability and experience of the NESBReC team. The database is the bedrock of NESBReC's core work and is used daily in carrying out data searches and reports for a range of users including the screening of Aberdeenshire Council's weekly planning applications for habitat and species data. The more current the data is that is added to the database, the more relevant and accurate any data searches will be for data requestors.
- 2.3. The restrictions imposed due to Covid-19 meant that the planned habitat survey work for Aberdeen City Council and Aberdeenshire Council could not go ahead.

All survey work was postponed until 2021-22. This meant that no new habitat data was added to NESBReC's GIS and no new plant records were collected from the survey work to be added into NESBReC's database. It also meant that no project income was generated from these sources in the reporting period. This meant NESBReC received only £65,447 worth of external income and grants in 2020/21, compared to £73,361 in 2019/20.

<b>Aim 1 – Manage Biodiversity Information: Annual Performance Indicators</b>	<b>2020/21</b>	<b>2019/20</b>
I. Number of new records added to NESBReC database	108,544	43,673
II. Outputs delivered according to specific SLAs or grant conditions	Yes	Yes
III. Delivery of any habitat survey contract(s)	No (Covid-19)	Yes
IV. Increase in habitat data held on GIS layers	No (Covid-19)	Yes
V. Number of new plant species records collected through habitat survey contract(s)	Zero (Covid-19)	N/A (not an API)
VI. Number of Service Level Agreements in Place	1	1
VII. Number of records uploaded to NBN Atlas	6,170	0

### **3. 2020-23 NESBReC Strategy Aim 2 – Protect and Enhance Biodiversity**

- 3.1. NESBReC provides baseline biodiversity information to enable a range of users to analyse data and monitor any changes and help decision-makers make the best choices for the protection, restoration and enhancement of the biodiversity of North East Scotland.
- 3.2. NESBReC carried out 2,810 biological data searches during the reporting period with 96% undertaken for Aberdeenshire Council. NESBReC carries out weekly planning application screening for any biological data and 2,715 planning applications were searched during 2020-21. In addition, 53 commercial searches were carried out for environmental consultants. This was a reduction from the previous year due to consultants being unable to carry on normal working during the Covid-19 lockdown, continuing until August 2020 when requests started to pick up. This still resulted in NESBReC generating £9,389 worth of income as a result of undertaking this work. A further 42 non-commercial data searches were carried out for users such as students, researchers, other organisations and Aberdeen City Council (as part of a Service Level Agreement).
- 3.3. The NESBReC Co-ordinator represents all Scottish Local Environmental Record Centres on the Scottish Biodiversity Information Forum (SBIF) Advisory Group. SBIF is an initiative that is tasked with developing a strategy to enable the improved flow and management of biological data for the whole of Scotland. NESBReC attended both scheduled meetings of the SBIF Advisory Group in 2020-21, as well as liaising with and advising the SBIF Development Officer as and when required. NESBReC's participation

makes sure that it can feed in to such national and regional strategic planning, and that it is fully aware of current developments in the sector.

<b>Aim 2 – Protect and Enhance Biodiversity: Annual Performance Indicators</b>	<b>2020/21</b>	<b>2019/20</b>
VIII. Number of data searches carried out for Aberdeenshire Council	2,715	2,534
IX. Number of data searches carried out for Local Development Plan	0	0
X. Number of data searches carried out for environmental consultants	53	65
XI. Number of searches for non-commercial users	42	49
XII. Average time taken for full response to requests	2 days	2 days
XIII. Number of SBIF Advisory Group meetings attended	2	1

#### **4. 2020-23 NESBReC Strategy Aim 3 – Promotion of the Biodiversity of the Natural Environment**

- 4.1. NESBReC helps promote understanding of the biodiversity of the natural environment to everyone, and to ensure it is at the heart of community wellbeing, emphasising the benefits it provides to people’s mental health, economic development and sense of place, especially in light of the increased need following the Covid-19 pandemic.
- 4.2. NESBReC delivered 8 online biological recording workshops with 118 attendees and hosted an online annual Recorders Forum to an audience of 94 local recorders from all across the North East of Scotland. These events would normally be held in person, but the Covid-19 pandemic meant that NESBReC staff had to learn to deliver these events virtually using Microsoft Teams. These online events were important in terms of maintaining contact with existing recorders as well as reaching new ones.
- 4.3. NESBReC maintained a continuous social media presence via Facebook to 1,334 “followers”. This was an increase from 985 the previous year. The Facebook page also increased its number of “likes” from 887 to 1,185. This increased public awareness of local biodiversity was important for maintaining contact with existing recorders as well as reaching new ones. The increase in use of the Facebook page coincided with the lockdown period when people were staying at home and taking more notice of the wildlife around them, looking for ways to engage with it and seeking out more information, as well as making personal connections with nature and other people with a shared enthusiasm for it. A typical post would feature a seasonal species that people could look out for and then report their sightings, often boosting the records of certain poorly recorded species in the database. In addition, the identification skills of the Facebook page users could be improved through the use of photos and simple, concise descriptive text. The photos used were all taken locally by local recorders, demonstrating the richness of North East Scotland’s natural environment.

- 4.4. Understandably, Covid-19 had a detrimental effect on the activities and events of all other organisations and groups that NESBReC would usually interact with in terms of giving in-person presentations or joint participation in other organised events. Where able to do so, NESBReC delivered online presentations to relevant groups and organisations.

<b>Aim 3 – Promotion of the Biodiversity of the Natural Environment: Annual Performance Indicators</b>	<b>2020/21</b>	<b>2019/20</b>
XIV. Annual Recorders Forum held & number of attendees	94 attendees	115 attendees
XV. Number of training events held	8	7
XVI. Total number of attendees at training events	112	122
XVII. Number of presentations delivered to other groups	2	4
XVIII. Attendance at NESBiP Awareness Group meetings	1	2
XIX. Number of Facebook “likes” and “followers”	1,185 “likes” 1,334 “followers”	887 “likes” 985 “followers”
XX. Participation in events run by other groups and organisations	1	5
XXI. Number of new recorders submitting records	1,028	N/A (not an API)
XXII. Number of young people under the age of 25 engaging with NESBReC	0*	N/A (not an API)

*\*Methods for collecting this data are still being worked on so no confirmed figures are available at this time. However, it is believed there is some engagement with people of this age with NESBReC through submission of records, attendance at training events and the Annual Recorder’s Forum.*

## **5. 2020-23 NESBReC Strategy Aim 4 – Continuous Improvement**

- 5.1. NESBReC seeks to ensure its service is high quality, continually improving, efficient, sustainable and responsive to local people's needs.
- 5.2. During 2020-21 the NESBReC Strategy 2020-2023 was produced which set out the key priorities, aims and objectives for NESBReC over this three-year period. A Review of the NESBReC Strategy 2017-20 was also undertaken which, provided a report on achievements and progress in that three-year period. Both documents were reviewed by the Planning & Environment Service Member Officer Working Group, all six Area Committees, and approved by Infrastructure Services Committee.
- 5.3. The NESBReC Advisory Group meets twice a year and comprises representatives from other external organisations as well as the wider biological recording community and environmental businesses. The Group exists to comment and advise NESBReC on its operations and initiatives whilst day to day management remains the remit of Aberdeenshire Council.

This helps to ensure that NESBReC is not simply perceived as a council service but that it is interested in external ideas, open to partnership working and is a biological resource for a range of users across North East Scotland. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic these meetings were held online but were still viewed to be useful and productive.

<b>Aim 4 – Continuous Improvement: Annual Performance Indicators</b>	<b>2020/21</b>	<b>2019/20</b>
XXIII. Up-to-date Strategy in place	Yes	Yes
XXIV. Up-to-date Action Plan in place	Yes	Yes
XXV. NESBReC Advisory Group meetings held	2	2
XXVI. Number of training events attended by staff	3	N/A (not an API)
XXVII. Performance Indicators recorded and presented in Annual Report	Yes	Yes
XXVIII. Other reports accepted by various organisations	Yes	Yes
XXIX. Annual financial budget set and monitored	Yes	Yes