

The Importance of Data Sharing...

A Consultant's View

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Paula's article is timely, and it is good at last to see the improvements that are being made in this field. IEEM is playing a key role in this through working with the main parties, including NBN and ALERC. A preliminary meeting (convened and chaired by IEEM) was held in May 2011, and further meetings are planned.

Nevertheless, problems remain. Last week, for the third time in two years, I received a Local Records Centre (LRC) data search that consisted exclusively of data I had previously provided to the LRC, returned to me in tabular form, for which privilege I was charged the standard fee. The next day two further data searches for other sites in the same LRC area came back with no data at all, in each case with the same fee payable.

Now, before I get any irate correspondence in response to this, I should point out that I used to run a record centre; I fully understand that the charge is for the staff time and not the data; but it is difficult enough persuading a client to pay for the data search in the first place (which is usually at least 15% and sometimes as much as 40% on top of the fee for a simple initial bat survey) – and then you tell them that they have just paid for nothing. Try doing this time and time again and not becoming just a little jaded.

Frustrating as this is, I found myself wondering, and not for the first time, how on Earth the LRC can hold so little data in an area where I could reel off the names of 20 local ecological consultancy companies without even having to think about it? I know that we are not the only consultancy to have done surveys in this area in the last few years – so why has none of the data collected been made available to the LRC?

The most common excuses given by consultants for not passing on data to record centres are:

1) The client won't agree to it.

This is demonstrably incorrect in the majority of cases. Many consultancies put a clause in their Terms and Conditions (or in their fee proposals if there are company T&Cs that can't be easily altered) that clearly states they give their records to the LRC and if the client has any objection to this then to let them know (a suggested clause is given in the new *Professional Guidance Series no. 7 – Model Service Agreements*, which is available in the members' section of the IEEM website). In the case of my own company, in nearly five years of operation on this basis only one client has objected,

and then only until planning permission was granted, after which he was happy for the data to be released. If this is not already standard practice in your company then it should be; you have nothing to lose. If clients do object you are still giving them the chance to do so, but I guarantee that many – probably the majority – will not. There should be a presumption of data being made available to the LRC unless the client specifies otherwise.

2) It's too time consuming as there is no simple or standard way of doing so.

It is recognised that this can be a problem, and there are developments in the pipeline that should make the practicalities of passing on data a lot easier in the future. In the meantime, in my experience most LRCs are pleased to receive data in almost any format (although it is best to check with them first), and sending in data is a good job for those quieter winter months; no-one is suggesting the records must be passed on the minute the survey is complete.

Consultants are fond of bemoaning the failings and inconsistencies of LRCs, whether this is in relation to charges (especially for cross-boundary searches or where all data is not held in one place), time delays, lack of data or poor quality of data, and the absence (in most cases) of any means for those consultants who do supply data to receive something in return. These are all valid concerns that must be addressed. However, in terms of poor quality or lack of data, we really have no basis for complaint if we are not helping to improve the situation by providing good quality data ourselves; the LRC cannot supply it if they don't have it.

Finally, remember that it is stated in our *Code of Professional Conduct* that we should make data available to the relevant bodies wherever possible – that alone should be sufficient incentive!

These views are my own and not those of Swift Ecology.

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