An information note for LBAP coordinators and Lead Partners / Agencies

The Biodiversity Action Reporting System (BARS)
Your Questions Answered

May 2002
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This note provides information about a web-based information system being developed to support the planning, monitoring and reporting requirements of national and local BAPs. It outlines the benefits of having a database to support BAP activities, describes the system’s key components and how it will work, and details the timetable for development. The system is being called the Biodiversity Action Reporting System (BARS). It will be available free of charge to Lead Partners and LBAP coordinators.

The development of the system is being supported by the country Biodiversity Groups in England, Scotland and Wales. They encourage its adoption by all LBAPs and Lead Partners. Clearly, you will only choose to use the system if it meets your needs and provides added value to your data. Every effort is being made to ensure this is the case.

Q 1. Why do we need a national information system for BAP?

The UK BAP includes 436 national action plans for habitats and species and approximately 150 local BAPs. These plans include a large number of targets and actions that together provide a vision for an enriched natural environment. Establishing the level of progress towards this vision is, however, extremely difficult because many of the plans are operating in isolation. A more coordinated approach to recording BAP action and delivery will make it possible to identify both what is and is not being done at UK, country and local levels.

Q 2. What will the information system do?

The Biodiversity Action Reporting System (BARS) is designed to support the full process of action planning, from writing a plan, monitoring its implementation through to reporting (both internally and externally). It will enable LBAP partnerships, Lead Partners / Agencies and steering groups to enter action plans, record progress towards targets and actions, enter details about problems encountered in plan implementation, and generate a range of sophisticated reports. In addition, the system will enable:

i. Improved integration and communication between local and national action plans.

ii. Dissemination of good practice across the biodiversity community, through communicating the types of activities underway and by providing an opportunity to learn from the experience of others.

iii. LBAP activities to be set in the national context through, for example, viewing contributions to national targets.

iv. Forward planning and prioritisation of activities.

v. Users to assess the full range of BAP-related activities that are underway in a given area, whether the activity is initiated nationally or locally.
BARS will complement, not compete with, the National Biodiversity Network (NBN). There will be major benefits of the two systems working together (for example, overlaying NBN distribution data with the activity data available in BARS will help identify gaps in conservation activity). The opportunities for linkage between BARS and NBN are already being explored.

**Q 3. How will integration of information across the BAP partnership be achieved?**

Perhaps the largest obstacle to integrating BAP-related information is that much of it is text-based. BARS overcomes this problem by structuring text through the use of data standards and dictionaries. These standards include:

1. Species and habitat lists.
2. Target categories (targets and outcomes will also be recorded using numeric fields).
3. Action categories (to record the type of activity underway, e.g. “habitat creation scheme”).
4. Lists of threats to species and habitats.
5. Lists of barriers or obstacles to plan implementation.
6. Categories to record examples of good practice and success.
7. A list of geographical locations.

All users of the system will use the same standards and it will consequently be possible to share and integrate the information across local and national plans. There will be text boxes within the system to enter the detail of targets, actions, progress reports, etc. However, the essence of the text will be captured using the standard dictionaries.

**Q 4. I can see that structuring my information in this way is useful to others but what’s in it for me?**

Structuring information using these standards may initially seem to be unnecessary for internal monitoring and reporting. However, experience has proved this isn’t the case. LBAPs and Lead Partners who have been monitoring their own plans using a variety of systems for several years have often been amazed by the amount of information they have generated and now need to process. Their experience has shown that it is often very difficult to extract information from text-based databases. Indeed, this early experience of developing BAP monitoring and reporting systems has been very useful in informing the development of BARS.

A large amount of effort is being made to ensure BARS makes your own information more useful to you. It is hoped that you will choose to use the system because of the added value it gives to your own data, not simply as an act of altruism. Feedback from those involved with testing a prototype of BARS (see Q 10) is helping to shape its reporting functionality: for example LBAP users have found that the ability to generate organisation-specific activity reports (e.g. work programmes) has saved considerable administration time and improved communication across partnerships.
Q 5. How will BARS work?

Improving integration and communication is only possible if the information system is web-based, because it is extremely difficult to share data that is maintained on stand-alone databases. BARS will work as follows. Users will not be required to be permanently on-line. There will be the facility to download a database package to use off-line to enter or edit data and generate in-house reports. These data will be uploaded onto a central server when you next go on-line. While on-line, you will be able to perform a range of additional functions, including:

• accessing information on other organisations working on particular species / habitats;
• searching by category of conservation activity to establish whether other organisations are carrying out similar activities;
• analysing the contribution your action plan is making to national, country or regional targets;
• generate sophisticated reports containing charts and maps.

Security features will be built in to ensure that confidential information (e.g. of the precise location of sites) is not available to others. The intention is that future national or country reporting requirements will be met quickly and with little additional effort, provided users keep their information up to date.

BARS will not be ready in time for the 2002 national BAP reporting round, although many of the standards being developed will be used to support reporting in 2002. Further details about 2002 reporting can be found on the UK BAP website (www.ukbap.org.uk).

Q 6. How much will it cost and what will I need to use it?

BARS will be available to members of the BAP community free of charge. It will be a bespoke system and no additional software will be required to run it. All computers purchased in the last five years will almost certainly be capable of running BARS. A detailed manual will be available and there will be training workshops to introduce the system.

For those with a technical interest, the minimum specifications for computers running the system will be: the Windows 95 operating system (all more recent versions of the Windows operating system will work including: OSR2/ Windows 98/ 2000 and Windows NT/ XP); a Pentium 166 MHz processor; 32MB RAM; 500MB Hard Disc; Internet Explorer 4; 800x600 dpi screen; internet connection with at least 33k dial-up speed.

Q 7. Who will BARS be used by?

Initially, the system is targeted at three main user groups:

(a) Plan-focussed Lead Partners. These organisations have ultimate responsibility for national plan delivery, often working in association with members of a steering group.
(b) LBAP coordinators. These are individuals who work with a diverse team of local authorities and organisations.
(c) Agencies/organisations who are delivering on a range of plans on which they may or may not be leading.

One important feature of BARS is that it will enable shared activities (i.e. those being carried out by more than one organisation) to be recorded once. These data can be accessed and, if necessary, entered by all the organisations involved but because it is largely maintained by one “lead” organisation, duplication of reporting effort (and the risk of double counting) will be reduced.

Q 8. Will the system only be focussed on national priority habitats and species?

No. Many LBAPs work on local priorities and these will be treated by the system in the same way as national HAPs and SAPs. Similarly, the system will allow you to record activities that are not focussed on any particular species or habitat (e.g. cross-cutting themes relating to education or community involvement).

Q 9. Will it be possible to use BARS in Welsh?

Yes. All the dictionaries will be translated into Welsh and so most of the standard data can be viewed in either language. Welsh users of the system will have the option of entering text-based data in both languages.

Q 10. What is the timetable for the development?

The development is well underway. In 2001 a prototype database was built and this is currently being tested with a limited number of LBAPs and Lead Partners. An extensive “roadshow” has also been conducted around the UK introducing the system to LBAP coordinators and getting on-the-spot feedback. Money has been committed to develop BARS and professional developers have been appointed. Over the summer and autumn of 2002, testing of the web-based functionality will begin, initially involving those in the current trial. This further trial will be used to ensure that BARS is fit for purpose, both in terms of meeting the internal needs of the users and, following an integration exercise in 2002, the external requirements of the UK BAP partnership. The target launch date for the system to the full BAP partnership is early 2003.

Q 11. How can I get involved in the development?

A significant number of LBAPs and Lead Partners have already influenced the development in some way (e.g. through testing the prototype, sharing their experience of other systems or giving feed-back during the roadshow). If you would like to get involved, the most direct way at this stage will be for you to give feedback on the data standards and dictionaries that will underpin the system. These dictionaries will include lists enabling the categorisation of conservation activities, threats facing biodiversity, and constraints to action, as detailed above (Q 3). These are currently being developed, and some of them will be used in 2002 reporting. There will be opportunity for all LBAP coordinators and Lead Partners to comment on these
standards via the UK BAP website (www.ukbap.org.uk). The standards are not yet available on the website, but you will be notified as soon as they are.

Q 12. I am not involved in the formal trial but am thinking about reporting now. What should I do?

Guidelines to help you start structuring your information in such a way as to make it easier to transfer it into BARS are due to be published via the UK BAP website (www.ukbap.org.uk) shortly. You will be notified as soon as these guidelines are available.

Further information

We will do our best to keep you up to date with developments via Biodiversity News and the UK BAP website (www.ukbap.org.uk). However, if you would like additional information about BARS, please contact your country LBAP coordinator / facilitator, or alternatively Lead Partners should contact:

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