Bedfordshire and Luton Biodiversity Recording and Monitoring Centre (BRMC) contribution to the Local Nature Partnership (LNP) capacity building project, April 2012.

Abstract
The Biodiversity Recording and Monitoring Centre (BRMC) were asked to assist with the Bedfordshire and Luton Local Nature Partnership (LNP) capacity building project to investigate engagement between environmental information users and providers. The BRMC invited circa 80 people involved in the LNP project (which includes members of the Bedfordshire and Luton Green Infrastructure Consortium, the Bedfordshire Biodiversity Forum, the Bedfordshire Environmental Education Working Group, and the Central Bedfordshire and Luton Local Access Forum) to take part in an online survey to find out about their use and need for environmental information. Approximately 54% of those invited to take part in the survey completed it and identified some areas for further consideration and improvement. The results showed that information about designated wildlife sites and open space/publicly accessible wildlife sites were the most important and widely used datasets, however some of this information is becoming old and outdated which needs to be addressed. Several datasets were identified that users would like to have better access to, these included habitat, ancient and veteran trees/tree preservation orders and Rights of Way information. The BRMC was identified as the most widely used data provider and were regarded as an important resource for species and site information receiving very positive comments about the data search and 'Partner Page' services they provide. It was noted, however that around 50% of those responding to the survey were unaware of the services the BRMC provide so improvements in advertising the information and services the BRMC deliver could be made.

Introduction
According to the Defra website (http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/natural/whitepaper/local-nature-partnerships/) the purpose of an LNP is to:

•Drive positive change in the local natural environment, taking a strategic view of the challenges and opportunities involved and identifying ways to manage it as a system for the benefit of nature, people and the economy.
•Contribute to achieving the Government's national environmental objectives locally, including the identification of local ecological networks, alongside addressing local priorities.
•Become local champions influencing decision-making relating to the natural environment and its value to social and economic outcomes, in particular, through working closely with local authorities, Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and Health and Wellbeing Boards.

The LNP capacity building project also took into consideration the Government's "Biodiversity 2020: A strategy for England's wildlife and ecosystem services" which includes action in four areas:

- A more integrated large scale approach to conservation on land and at sea
- Putting people at the heart of biodiversity policy
- Reducing environmental pressures
- Improving our knowledge.

To enable the above aims and objectives to be met it is essential that information about the natural environment is available to those with a need to know. As the BRMC are key providers of biodiversity and environmental information for Bedfordshire &Luton they were asked to conduct a survey to help improve the services that they and others provide throughout the county and ensure that data is available to those involved in taking the nature conservation/biodiversity agenda forward within Bedfordshire& Luton.

Method

The BRMC were asked to investigate engagement between environmental information users and providers by:

1. Developing plans and sending out invitations for a workshop to discuss and identify the needs of environmental information users and potential users, and identify how to build capacity and sustain environmental information providers.
2. Workshop held and conclusions disseminated to partners.

The BRMC held a discussion meeting with the Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity and the Greensand Trust to discuss the best way forward in identifying 'the needs of environmental information users and potential users, and identify how to build capacity and sustain environmental information providers'. Rather than organise a workshop it was decided to suggest an alternative approach of devising a questionnaire which would enable more people to respond than would have been able to attend a workshop. It would also eliminate the need for people to take time to attend a meeting/workshop.Having agreed this approach with the Green Infrastructure Consortium (GIC) and Defra, a survey was developed using 'Survey Monkey', an online survey system from which the results could be downloaded and analysed. A set of 24 questions were devised to find out about the type of environmental datasets currently being used, whether there were other datasets that may be of use and the quality of existing data/services available. Not all the questions would be answered by each respondent as some questions were skipped depending on the previous answer. The final list of survey questions can be found in Appendix 1. A list of 80 contacts was assembled to invite to take part in the survey which included people from a wide range of different job sectors including Local Authority departments, local conservation charities, water companies, statutory bodies, health, education, construction and farming. Many of the contacts were identified from the list of partners involved in other aspects of the LNP capacity building project.

An email (the text of which can be found in Appendix 2) was sent via Survey Monkey containing information introducing the BRMC, the reasons for the survey and a web link to take part. The survey ran from 21st March 2012 until the 4th April 2012 and after the first week a reminder email was sent to those identified by Survey Monkey as not having responded. The final number of participants starting the survey was 50, with 43 completing it, a response rate of 54%.

Results

The results of the survey are summarised below showing the responses obtained from each question.

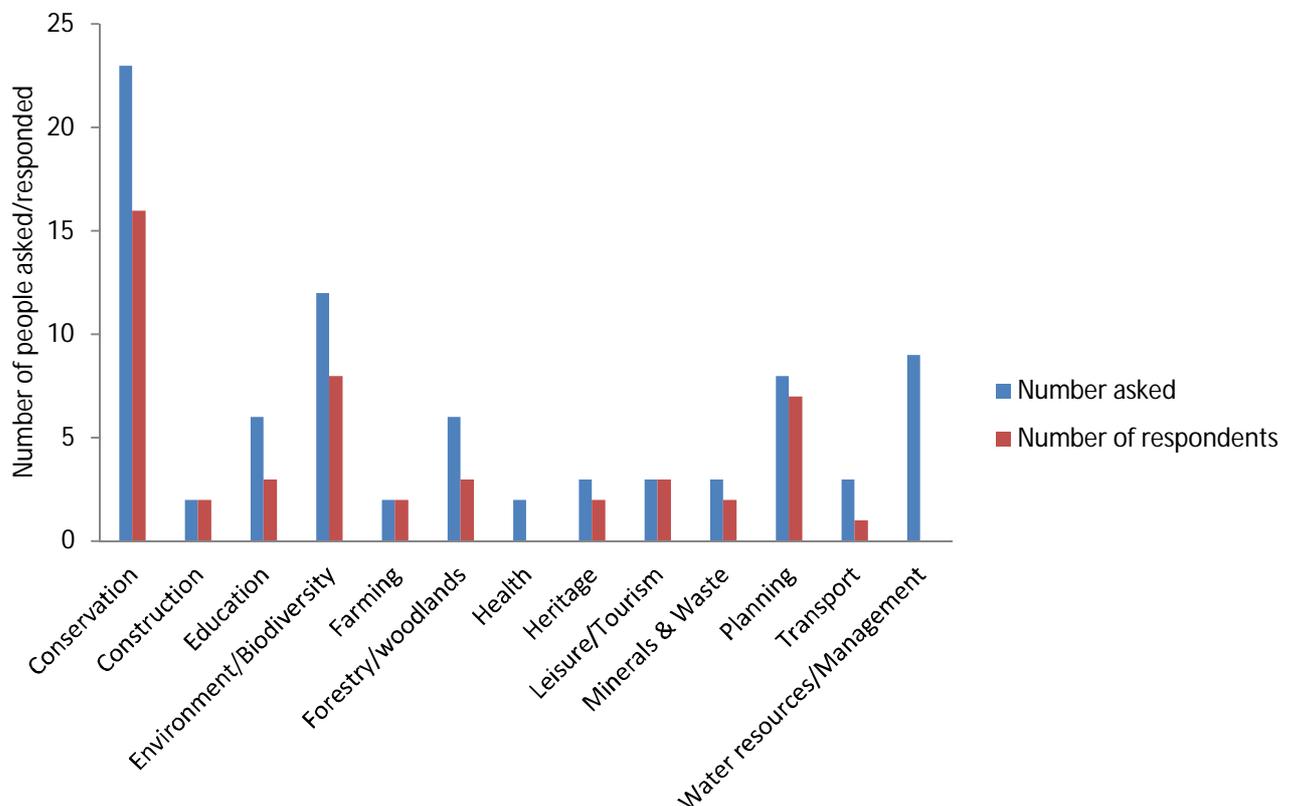*Use of biodiversity/environmental information*

84% of respondents stated that they currently use biodiversity/environmental information. Of those that said they didn't use such information (16%) the main reason was because it was not required for their role. Other reasons included that such data was not a priority for their organisation and that the type of data required was very specific.

Participants job sector

The job sectors of the respondents came from a wide range as shown in Table 1, the titles were chosen to cover as many aspects of relevant sectors as possible. This information is slightly subjective as several people the BRMC considered to be within the 'water resources/management' and 'forestry/woodland' categories selected 'environment/biodiversity' or 'conservation' as their job sector. Hence although it appears that no responses were received from the 'water resources/management' sector it is possible that some responses are linked to that job sector. No responses from the 'health' sector were received, however.

Table 1

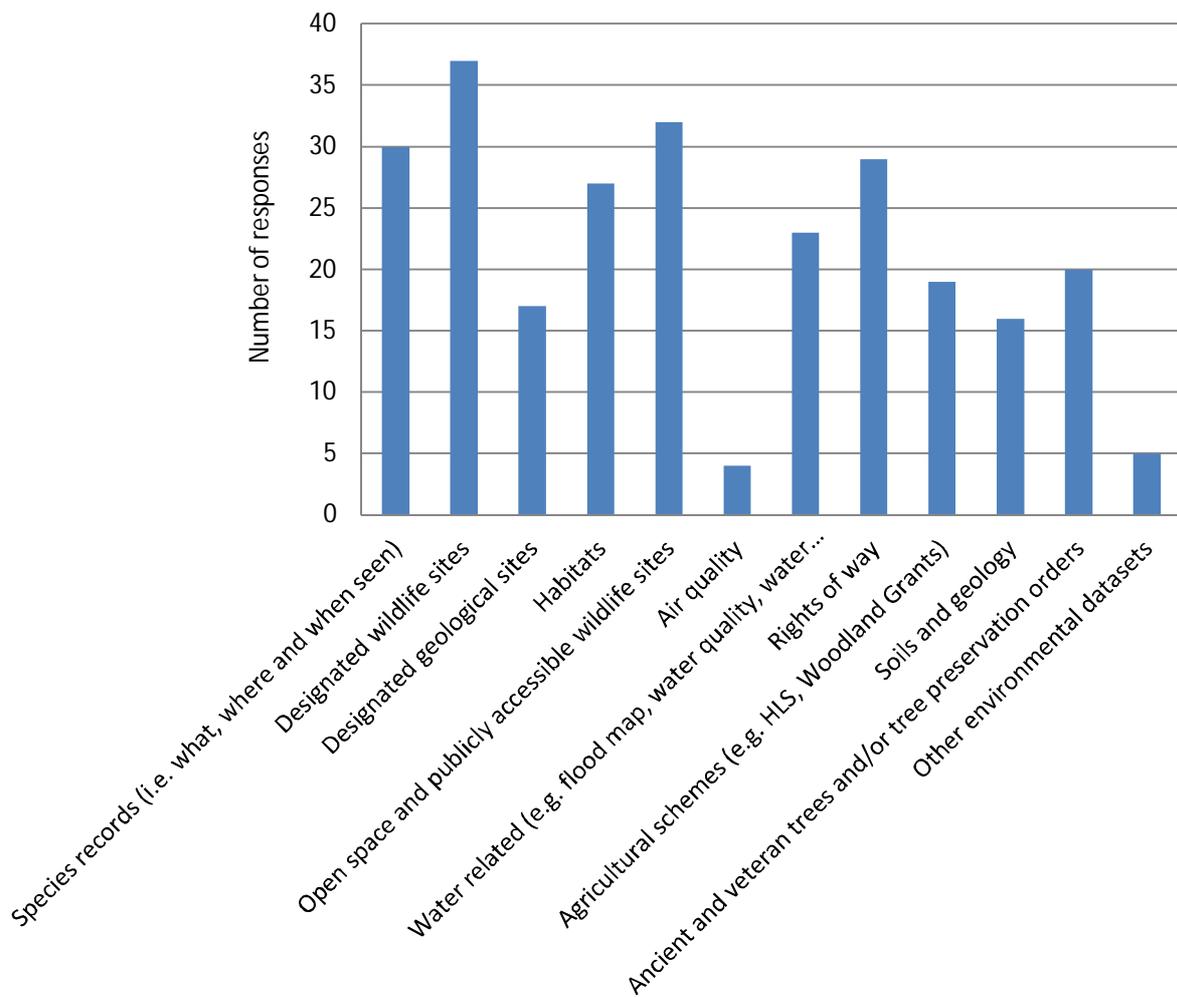# Number of respondents from different job sectors

Type of biodiversity/environmental information used

The main type of biodiversity/environmental information used by respondents is shown in Table 2. The information most widely used is that for designated and accessible wildlife sites, with rights of way, species and habitat data also important. Other environmental datasets used included:

- remote sensing
- land use
- Historic Environment Record (HER)
- Green Infrastructure information
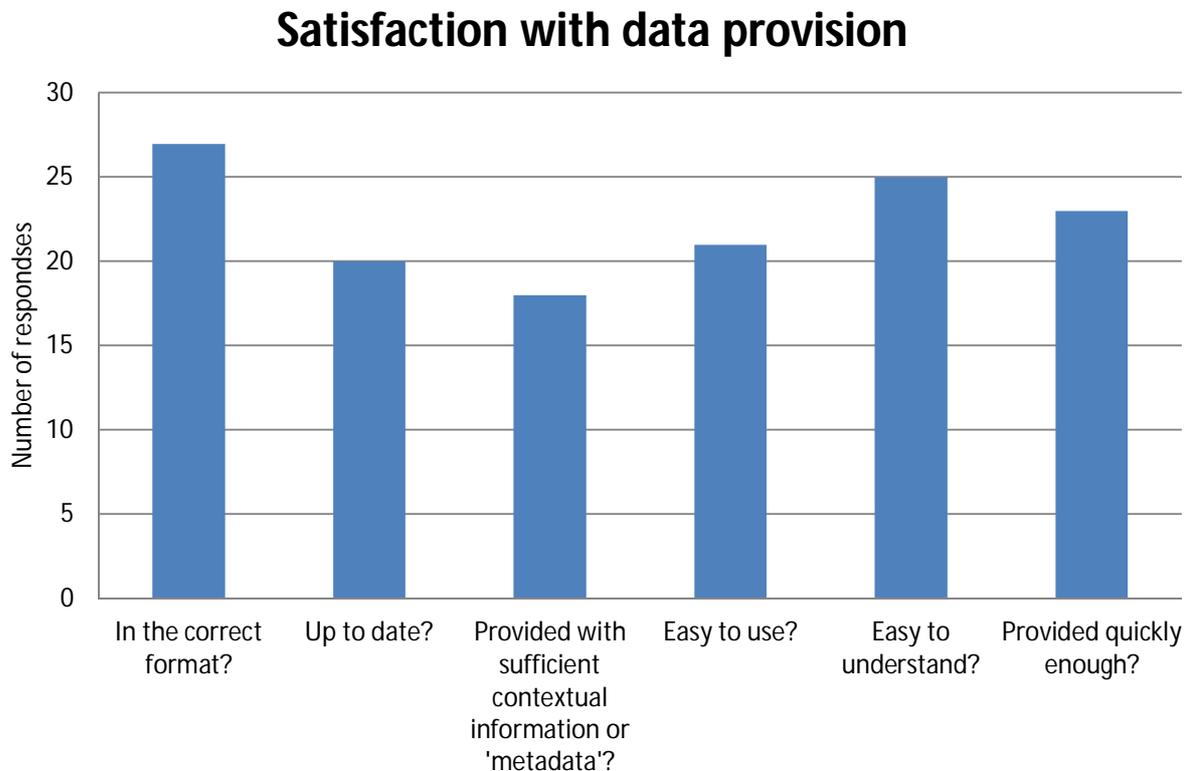
Table 2

Environmental data used by respondents

Satisfaction with data supply

Over 50% of respondents agreed that the data provided to them was in the correct format for them to use, that it was up to date, sufficient contextual information or 'metadata' was provided, data was easy to use and understand and that it was provided quickly enough. The results are shown in Table 3. Several respondents made additional comments about data provision, which included:

- quality of provision varied between providers
- sometimes the format of data provided could not be easily used with existing software/database structure
- species data and County Wildlife Site information is not always as up to date as users would like (it was acknowledged that some of this data is obtained from volunteers and that the best available data is always supplied).
- it was unclear how up to date some datasets were
- data requested from Agencies can be slow to arrive
- the Magic website is not easy to use or understand and some of the information is confusing
- no clear information about what is Environment Agency responsibility and what is Internal Drainage Board responsibility
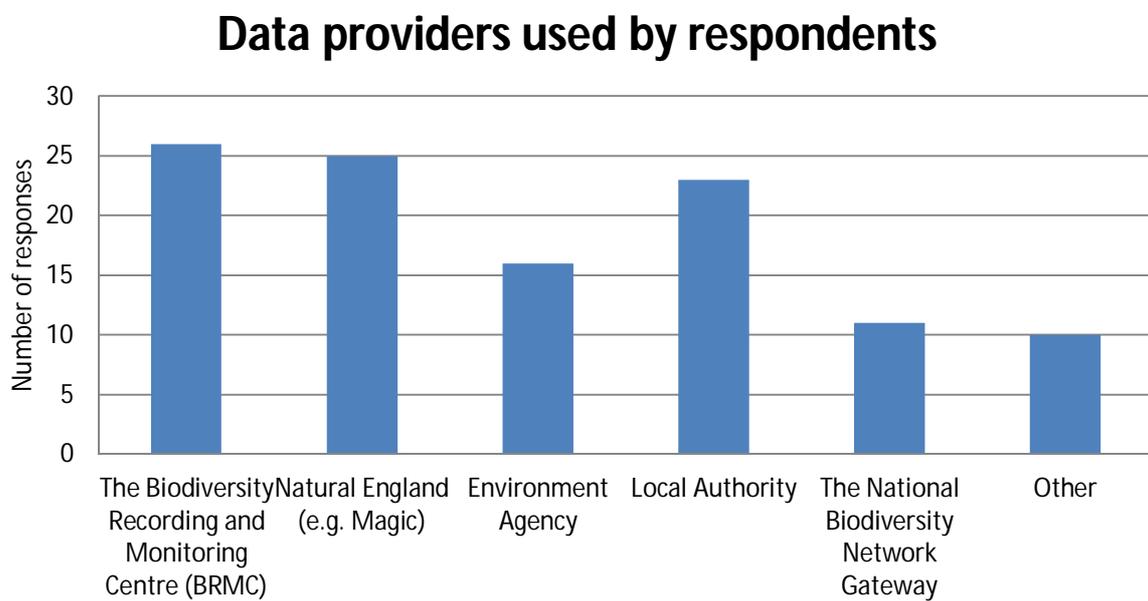
Table 3

Satisfaction with data provision

Data providers

Participants were asked where they obtained their environmental/biodiversity data and the responses are shown in Table 4.The BRMC and Natural England were identified as the most used sources of information, with Local Authorities also a frequently used data source. Other sources of data included the Forestry Commission, the Global Land Cover Facility, Greenspace Information for Greater London, the Wildlife Trust, local recorders or national scheme organizers and specific surveys carried out or commissioned.
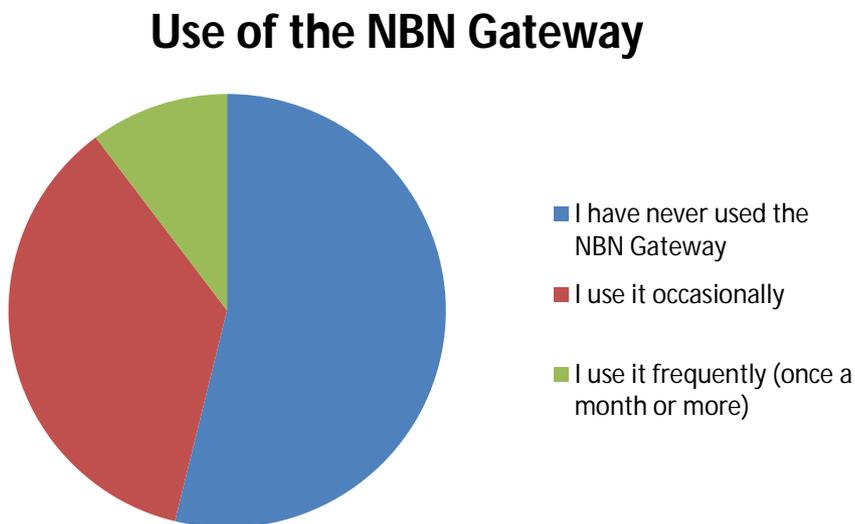
Table 4

Data providers used by respondents

Use of the National Biodiversity Network (NBN) Gateway
Participants were asked whether they used the National Biodiversity Network (NBN) Gateway, a web site that allows users to explore and download UK biodiversity data. As shown in Figure 1, of the 39 respondents, over 50% hadn't used it, 36% used it occasionally and 10% used it frequently (once a month or more). Several respondents said that they would use the NBN Gateway more frequently if they felt the data was reliable and trustworthy, they thought that verification of data was not thorough enough for all organizations contributing data. Resolution of records was an issue for one participant, and several had not heard of the NBN Gateway until taking part in this survey.
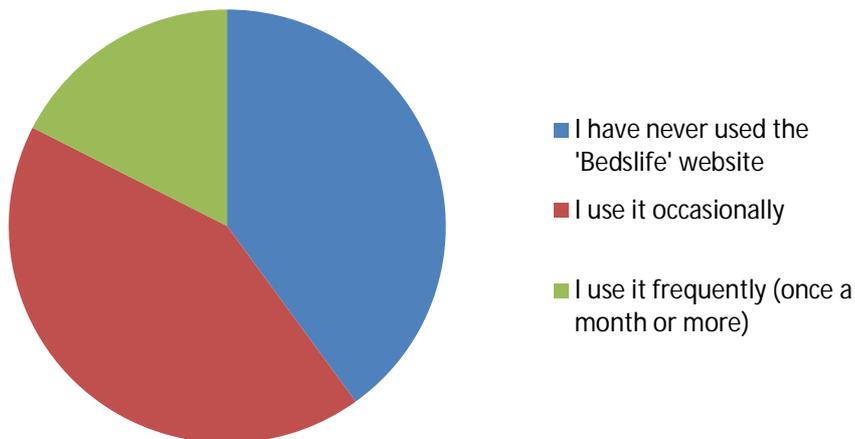
Figure 1

Use of the NBN Gateway

- I have never used the NBN Gateway
- I use it occasionally
- I use it frequently (once a month or more)

Use of the 'Bedslife' website

'Bedslife' is the website of the Bedfordshire Biodiversity Partnership. Participants were asked whether they used this web site which contains information about nature and wildlife in Bedfordshire & Luton and includes information about the Biodiversity Action Plan with downloadable reports and publications. As shown in Figure 2, of the 40 respondents, 40% had never used it, 42% used it occasionally, and 17% used it frequently. When asked what improvements respondents would like to see the following comments were made:

- clearer links to the data/publications
- a single download of the complete Biodiversity Action Plan for Bedfordshire and Luton
- a better explanation of what the BAP is, when it was originally adopted, date of various elements and when up-dates are due
- that the web site and information available is maintained and updated in the future

Figure 2

Use of the 'Bedslife' website

- ■ I have never used the 'Bedslife' website
- ■ I use it occasionally
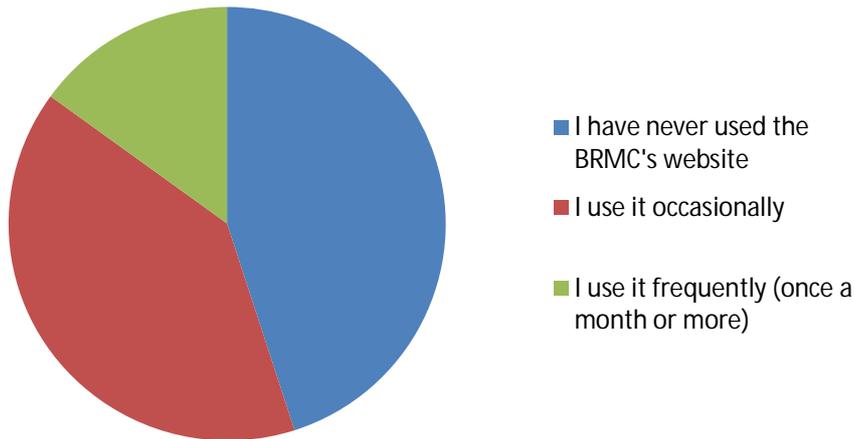- ■ I use it frequently (once a month or more)

Use of the BRMC's website

Participants were asked whether they used the BRMC's website which contains information about species, habitats and designated sites across Bedfordshire & Luton and how to gain access to this information. Of the 40 respondents, 45% had never used it, 40% used it occasionally and 15% used it frequently as shown in Figure 3. No improvements were suggested for the web site.

Figure 3

Use of the BRMC website

- I have never used the BRMC's website
- I use it occasionally
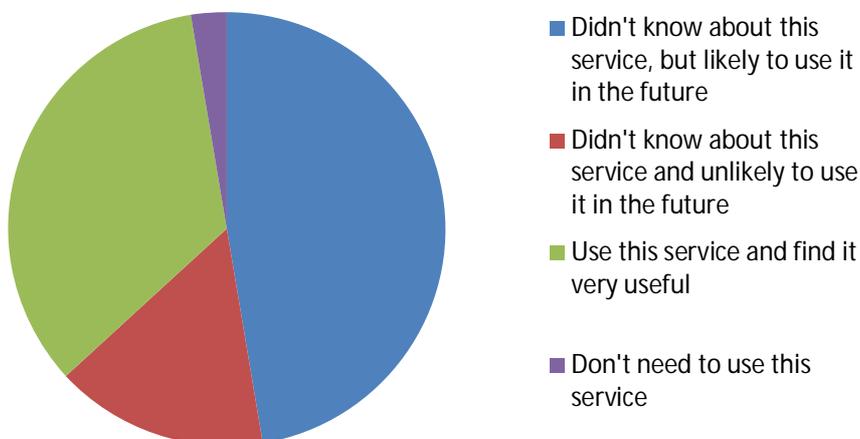- I use it frequently (once a month or more)

Use of the BRMC 'Partner Pages'

The next question asked whether participants knew about access to data via the BRMC website through the 'Partner Pages'. This facility is available to those who support the BRMC financially or 'in kind'. Information available here includes site boundaries, site citations, habitat boundaries and access to NBN 'web services' which enables the user to search for species information within a user specified radius. Figure 4 shows the results obtained from 39 respondents.

Figure 4

Use of the BRMC 'Partner Pages'

- Didn't know about this service, but likely to use it in the future
- Didn't know about this service and unlikely to use it in the future
- Use this service and find it very useful
- Don't need to use this service

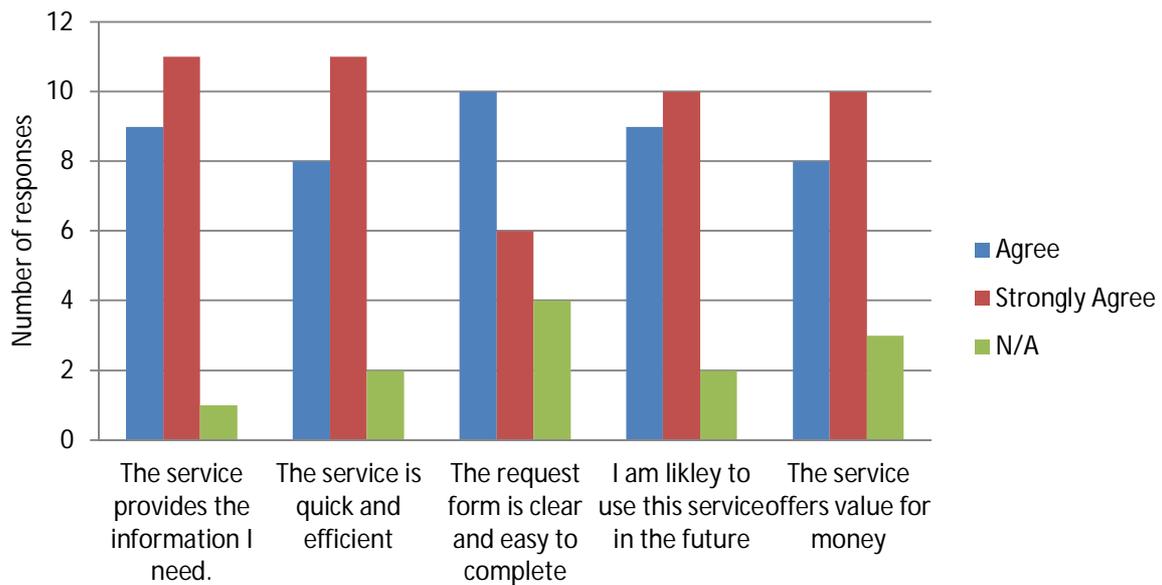*Use and quality of the BRMC data search service*

The next set of questions focused on the data search service that the BRMC provides, supplying information about statutory and non statutory sites, and protected, notable and other species data. Participants were asked if they used this service, and out of 40 responses 57% said yes and 42% no.

Of those responding 'No', 60% were unaware of the service but said they were likely to use it in the future, 18% said they didn't need to use this service and 18% said that they were unaware of the service but were unlikely to use it.

Of those responding 'Yes', the next question asked whether the data search service met requirements. All responses were very positivewith no 'Strongly disagree' or 'Disagree' responses as shown in Table 5.

Table 5

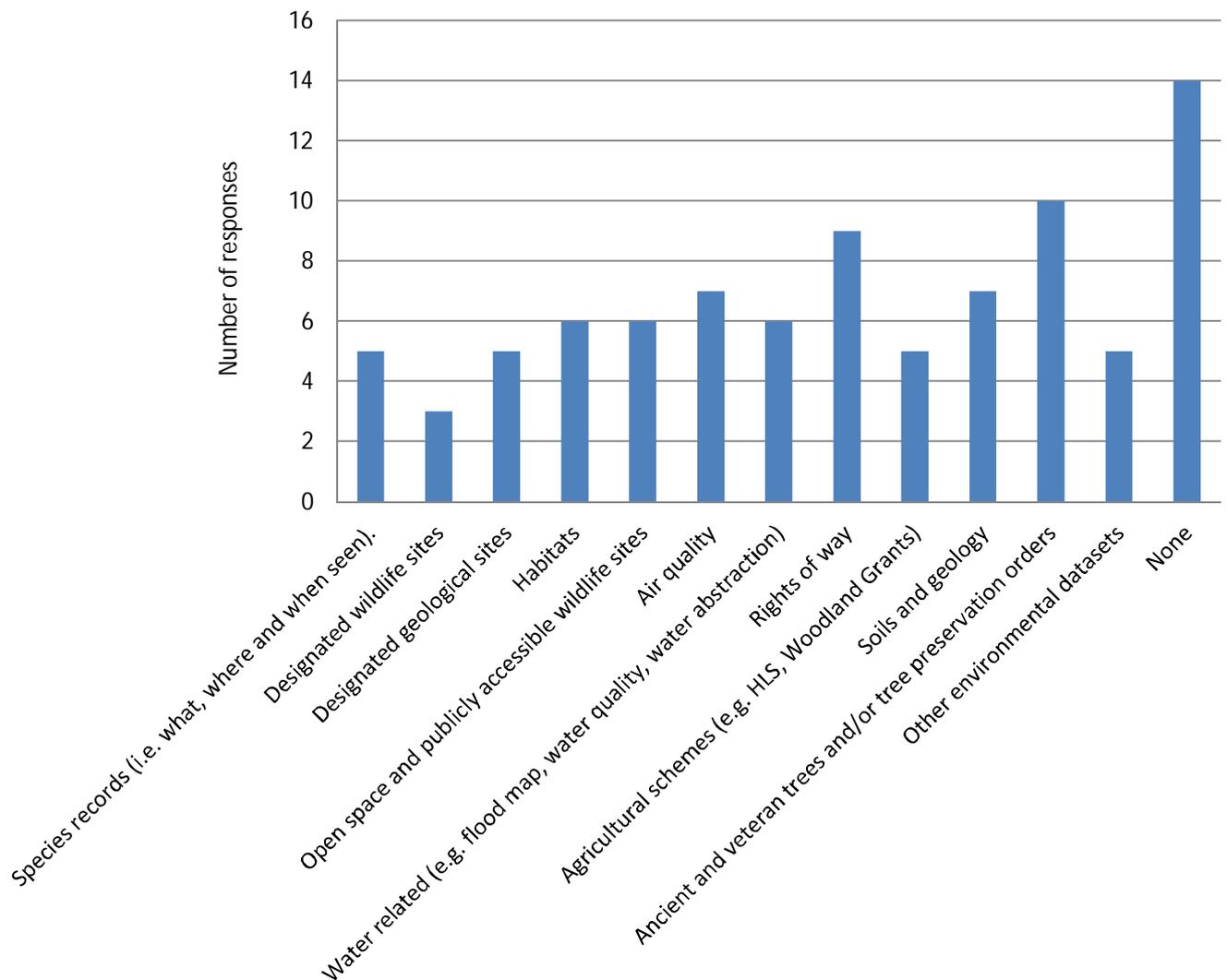## How the BRMC data search service meets user requirements

The next question asked whether there were any datasets or types of environmental information that participants would like to be able to use that they don't currently. 37 respondents answered this question and although 38% said they had access to all the data they needed,it appears that information about ancient and veteran trees and Rights of Way would be useful to several participants. Table 6 shows the responses. 13% of respondents listed their requirements in the 'Other' category which included:

- current landscape analysis information
- historic environment data (particularly if available together with species and site data)
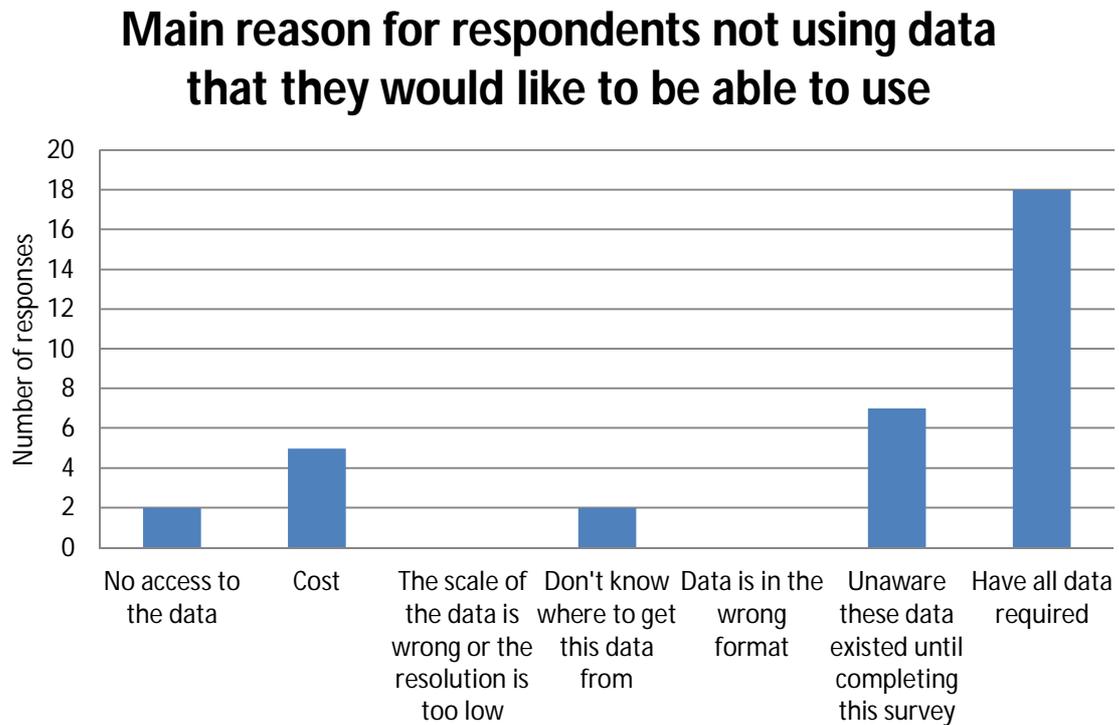- meteorology data

Table 6

Environmental data required by respondents

Reasons for not using data participants would like to use

Following on from this question, participants were asked for the main reason they didn't use any of the datasets they would like to use. Out of 34 responses, 21% said it was because they weren't aware these data existed before taking part in the survey, 15% said it was due to cost and 6% said it was because they didn't know where to obtain the data or that they didn't have access to it. 53% of respondents already had all the data they required. Table 7 shows the responses.

Table 7

Main reason for respondents not using data that they would like to be able to use
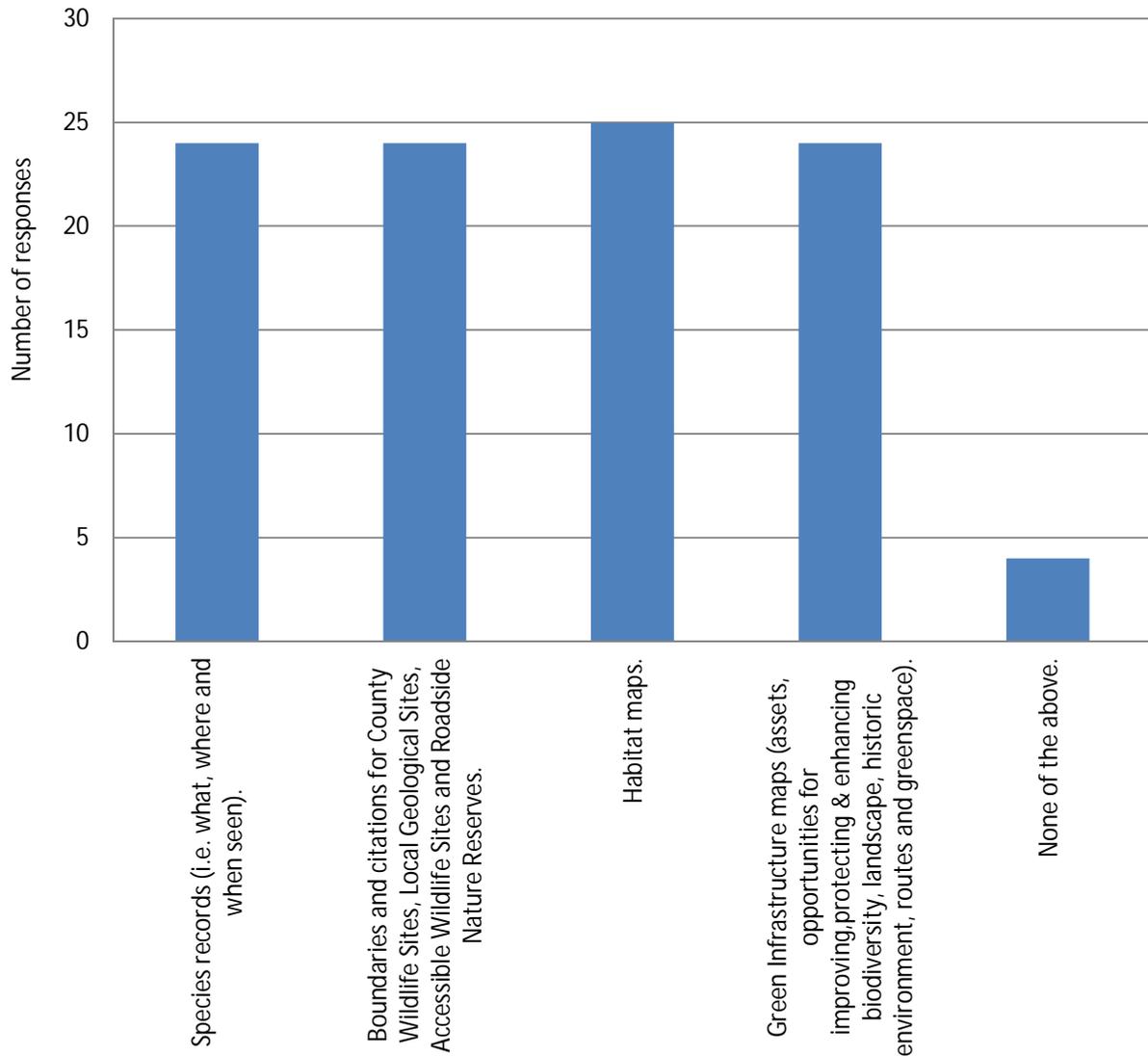

The issue of cost

Several participants identified cost as being a reason why they didn't use any of the datasets they would like to use. When questioned further about this, insufficient or no budget for environmental information were identified as the reasons why cost was an issue.

Use of datasets the BRMC can provide

The next question asked if there were any datasets that the BRMC held that would be useful to participants. Out of 32 responses 78% identified habitat data as being the most useful to have access to, Table 8 shows the responses.

Table 8

Data held by the BRMC that would be useful to respondents

Summary

Out of about 80 invitations to take part in the BRMC data survey, 43 participants completed it, of which 84% stated that they currently use biodiversity/environmental information. The main reason for participants not using biodiversity/environmental information was because it was not relevant to their role.

Responses were obtained from a wide range of job sectors, with most within the conservation sector. The most widely used environmental information was that for designated wildlife sites and open space/publicly accessible wildlife sites, with information about rights of way and species data also identified as priorities.

When asked where they obtained biodiversity/environmental information most respondents identified the BRMC as their main source of data with Natural England and Local Authorities also being important sources.

Most participants were happy with the quality of the data provided to them, however this varied between supplier and it was felt that species and site data were sometimes out of date. Participants did acknowledge that species data relied upon volunteer recorders to supply data to the BRMC, and that if this information was not available it could not be included in the BRMC database.

When asked about their use of the three online resources identified in the survey (the NBN Gateway, the Bedslife website and the BRMC's website) around 50% had used them. Several raised questions over the reliability, trustworthiness and verification of some of the data available via the NBN Gateway, and identified these as reasons for not using it more frequently. No improvements or suggestions were made for the BRMC website, however several suggestions were received for improvements to the Bedslife website to help make things clearer.

The two questions that focused on services that the BRMC provide, the 'Partner Pages' and the data search service, received very positive comments. Around 50% of respondents didn't know about these services but said they would like to use them in the future.

38% of participants felt that they had access to all the environmental/biodiversity data they needed. Of the remaining 62% several identified data they would like to have access to which included ancient and veteran trees/tree preservation orders, Rights of Way, soils/geology data and habitat information. The reasons why participants didn't have access to data they would like to use were largely due to not knowing that the information was available before taking part in the survey, and some because of the cost (limited budgets).

Of the datasets held and maintained by the BRMC that participants didn't currently have access to, respondents identified habitat maps as being the most useful, with species, site and green infrastructure information also near the top of the list.

Conclusions

The BRMC data survey resulted in a high number of responses and identified some areas for consideration or improvement.

Information about designated wildlife sites and open space/publicly accessible wildlife sites were identified as the most important and widely used datasets, however it was pointed out that some of the site information is becoming quite old or outdated. The site information is an important resource for many respondents and the skills and ability to run a program of surveys/re-surveys to keep this information up to date is available, however the resources to fund this work need to be found.

Habitat,ancient and veteran trees/tree preservation orders and Rights of Way information was reported to be very useful and high on the list of datasets people would like to have better access to. Improving existing data and better provision of such datasets needs to be considered.
Up to date species information was regarded as an important resource and the BRMC needs to continue working closely with County Recorders to ensure data are as up to date as possible. Feeding this verified data to the NBN is essential to ensure the NBN has a reliable source of data that can easily be accessed.

The BRMC is the most widely used data provider and very positive comments were received about the data search service and the 'Partner Pages'. However, around 50% of those who responded to the survey didn't know about these resources, therefore the BRMC needs to work with partners to maintain and advertise the information available via the 'Partner Pages' and data search services. Better information about the currency of datasets could also be implemented.

The Bedslife website is a useful resource and consideration needs to be made as to how to keep this up to date. At the present time no plans for maintaining this resource is in place and this needs to be addressed if information about the local BAP is to be disseminated using this method.

Appendix 2
Bedfordshire Local Nature Partnership data survey

Dear Colleague,

We are conducting a survey regarding environmental data and how they are used within the county on behalf of the Bedfordshire Green Infrastructure Consortium (GIC) as part of their Local Nature Partnership (LNP) capacity building work. The GIC is working with a range of local organisations working to improve the natural environment to benefit communities, the economy, public health and the environment itself. The survey will provide important feedback about current data provision and how they might be improved.

We would therefore appreciate about ten minutes of your time to complete this online survey please. Even if you don't use environmental information that will still be useful for us to know and there are questions for such a response. The survey is open until 4th April.

Here is a link to the survey:
http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx

If you have any colleagues who may be interested in taking part please send them the following link as the link above is associated with your email address:
 http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/BedsGICdata

Defra has provided funding to set up LNPs across the country and further information can be found at:
www.defra.gov.uk/environment/natural/whitepaper/local-nature-partnerships/

The BRMC (www.bedsbionet.org.uk) has been asked to conduct this survey because we are a key provider of species, habitat and wildlife site information within Bedfordshire and Luton. Your responses will help improve the services that we and others provide throughout the county.

We hope you will be able to help shape the future of environmental data provision by participating in this survey and we look forward to receiving your response.

With best regards,
Jackie Ullyett

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The BRMC subscribes to the Standard Data Enquiry Service agreed across the East of England.