

# Councils in adversity – why less isn't more for nature

*This article reviews the feedback provided by wildlife staff across local councils in England, when they were asked to indicate the effects of cuts on the ability of local authorities to fulfil their work on nature conservation. The results suggest that councils will be severely constrained in their advisory role on wildlife and in their pursuit of the White Paper's initiatives.*

**MIKE OXFORD**

## **Local authority resources for wildlife – the gloomy context**

The Association of Local Government Ecologists (ALGE) represents over 300 professional ecologists working in local government in the UK. Last year, faced with the implications of the cuts in public services, ALGE surveyed its members in England to establish how the cuts would affect biodiversity work in local government. The survey was carried out online and the results analysed automatically using Survey Monkey. The results are based on a response rate of approximately 13% of all ALGE members in England. The low sample size perhaps indicates the pressures which staff are under, but the feedback indicates some of the generic issues facing local authorities as they pursue their commitments for wildlife.

The results are from only those authorities that already employ a member of staff in an ecology or biodiversity role. There is no data from local authorities that do not employ an ALGE member. The results should also be seen in the context of another ALGE survey undertaken in 2004 of all local authorities in the UK. One of the main findings from that exercise showed that only 35% of councils in England had access to an in-house ecologist. In other words, 65% of local planning authorities had no reported expertise in ecology. There is no reason to think that this situation has improved since 2004.

The latest survey shows that while local government's past capacity to help deliver a range of wildlife initiatives was already limited, it is now being further eroded, in some cases at a rapid rate. Also, in the absence of any contrary evidence, a large proportion of the 65% of councils that have no ecology expertise are probably not engaged in such a wide range of biodiversity projects. They simply do not have the capacity and are likely to be lagging behind.

## **The ALGE survey – summary results**

Table 1 provides a summary of the responses, indicating in column 2 the proportion of local authorities currently engaged in some key areas of biodiversity work. Column 3 then shows how spending cuts have reduced this effort.

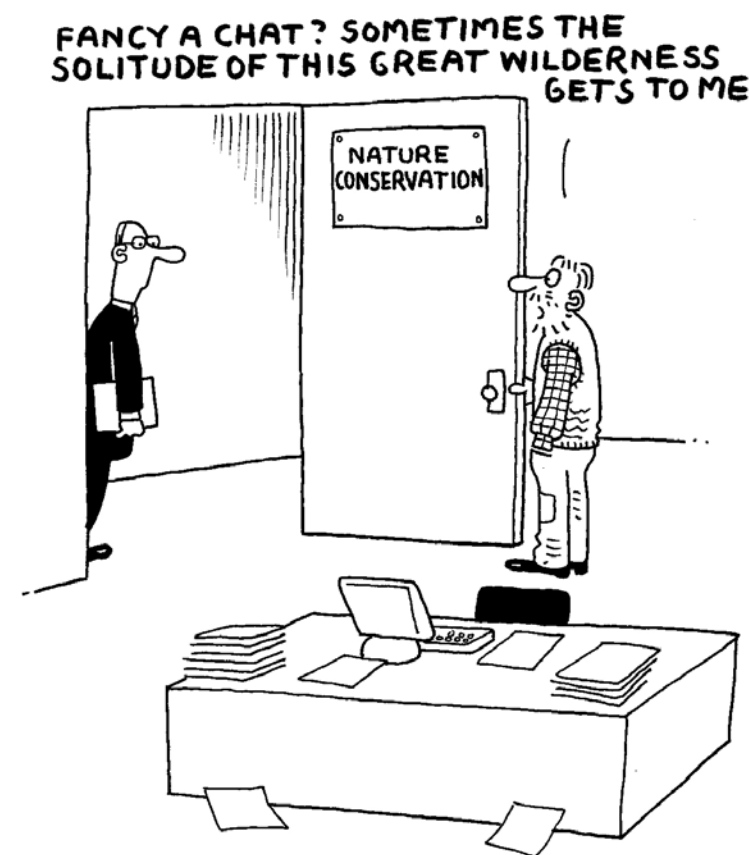
Table1 Impact of spending cuts: summary of results

Area of biodiversity work facing cuts	% of respondents with an existing budget for this type of work	% of respondents with a budget (see column 2) facing full or partial cuts in the service
Biodiversity Opportunity Mapping	45%	68%
Ecological Restoration Projects	54%	46%
Biodiversity Grants and Support for Local Community's Biodiversity Work	75%	93%
Management of Council Land for Biodiversity	78%	67%
Local Environmental Records Centres	100%	44%
Local Wildlife Sites Management	83%	57%
Marine Conservation Work	15%	75%
Countryside Management	54%	85%
LBAP Officers	86%	68%
Support for LBAP Partnerships	90%	60%
Support for Planning Services	96%	38%
Corporate BAP Work	67%	72%

### Issues and implications of the results

So what does it all mean? First, cuts in biodiversity services have not been uniform. There is considerable variation between local authorities in how they have applied the cuts, ranging from as little as 5% up to a full 100% of total budget lost. However, the average has been a cut of 19%, which means that biodiversity work has been hit at least as hard as other services and in some instances has taken a bigger cut proportionately. These cuts also need to be considered in the context of the typical size of the budget, which for biodiversity is often very small, covering a handful of staff at most and very little, if any, operational budget. Therefore any loss of resources can significantly affect the authority's capacity to undertake biodiversity work.

In terms of lost posts, 26% of authorities report that they lost one member of staff and 18% report that they lost between 2-4 staff during 2011. And one authority



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reported that it lost over 5 of its biodiversity team. Furthermore, since biodiversity work is normally covered by only a handful of staff at most, and in many authorities by only one member of staff, any loss can have a significant impact on capacity.

### Feeling the pain

While it is not surprising that 96% of ALGE members currently provide support for their council's planning service, over a third (38%) report that this service will have been cut or reduced as a result of the overall spending review in 2011. To compound things, this reduction in service across England coincides with a reduction in the level of planning advice available from Natural England.

The results in Table 1 show that much of the wider work undertaken by local government (that might be considered as key to implementing many of the initiatives in the Government's Natural Environment White Paper) have also faced dramatic cuts. For instance, biodiversity opportunity mapping, work with local

communities, ecological restoration projects, and local site management. It seems that there has been little reward for authorities engaging in such commendable effort, and consequently it now looks expendable!

Local Environmental Records Centres and biodiversity data management are also likely to feel the effects, with 44% of ALGE members reporting that their authority's have cut or have reduced their financial support. And there is also little evidence that the Government's localism agenda will bring greater benefits to local partnerships and local community groups. The hard truth suggests just the opposite, with:

50% of authorities reporting that they have cut all funding for local grants and local community groups and a further 43% report that their budgets have been reduced, and;

26% of authorities have cut all of their funding support for local biodiversity partnerships and 34% have reduced their budgets.

It also seems likely that local government will find it even harder to fulfil its various statutory duties with regard to the conservation of biodiversity. In particular, if current trends continue, planning authorities will have less ecological expertise and resources to work with, and the probability is that overall more planning decisions will be made without taking the natural environment into account. This issue alone presents something of a challenge for central government if it genuinely wishes to see more effective implementation of the Habitats and Wild Birds Directives.

### Loss of support and advice at local levels

Increased pressure in delivering these statutory duties needs to be considered alongside other changes within local government. The National Planning Policy Framework and delegation of decisions to the very local level make it all the more important that professional ecological advice is available. However, similar cuts to Natural England's budget have reduced its capacity to support local authorities through the provision of ecological expertise, meaning that ecologists retained in local government are often supporting more than just their own authority. Current and future losses will significantly impact the availability of such expertise and any sought-after efficiencies and 'new smart ways of working' in terms of applying and implementing wildlife legislation, such as the Habitats Directive, will be hard won.

Local government is therefore at the receiving end of a mixed message from Central Government, where the latter has identified the former as a key player in the delivery of many aspects of biodiversity conservation in England. This has been emphasised in the Government's White Paper: *The Natural Choice* (June 2011), the new *England Biodiversity Strategy* (2011), the Lawton Report: *Making Space for Nature* (2011) and the *Report of the Habitats and Wild Birds Directives Implementation Review* (2012). Indeed, many of the initiatives in these documents rely upon local government playing an active role and often taking the lead at the local level. Such initiatives include:

- Biodiversity Offsetting
- Local Nature Partnerships
- Nature Improvement Areas
- Protecting natural value through the planning system
- Improving the quality of local wildlife sites
- Restoring habitat connectivity at the landscape scale
- Engaging and involving local communities in local projects
- Planning for green infrastructure

In looking to the next two years it is difficult to conceive how the small proportion of councils with ecological expertise will maintain existing services let alone engage in many of the new initiatives that are being promoted. It is even more difficult to foresee a situation where local authorities without wildlife expertise and existing biodiversity budgets will be able to find new resources which would help them to catch up.

As Winston Churchill might say: "Never before, have so few, been expected to do so much, with so little!"

ALGE intends to repeat this survey during the current financial year 2012/2013 and will report the findings in due course.

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Campaign placards for defence of the Newcastle Green Belt. The Green belt threat here includes 600 new houses proposed around Gosforth Park nature reserve. CPRE has claimed that government inspectors are putting pressure on local planning authorities to allow greater proportions of new housing, meaning some tracts of Green Belt around major settlements will be targeted.

