

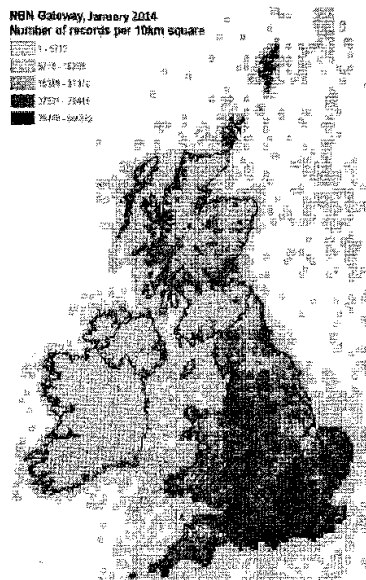
APPENDIX A - Petition (excluding names)

The future of Rotherham Biological Records Centre

In response to the potential closure of the Rotherham Biological Records Centre, we are writing to express our concerns and a series of issues that would arise from such a course of action.

Rotherham has received some bad publicity in recent years which has besmirched the town's name. However, Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council should be proud that one of its services has established a reputation as a leading exponent in its sphere of activity and an example of good practice in Britain. In 1987 Rotherham's Biological Records Centre (BRC) instigated the development of a standardised computer program for biological recording and was one of the original test sites. Biological recorders from around the country gathered in Rotherham to work out the details and discuss progress with the Recorder program, which rapidly became the industry standard. When the UK Bioversity Action Plan (BAP) was being developed in the early 1990s the director of the Joint Nature Conservation Committee declared that Recorder was one of the main contributions to its success.

The Linnean Society set up the Co-ordinating Commission on Biological Recording (CCBR) in the early 1990s, chaired by Sir John Burnett, and it is a measure of the esteem in which Rotherham's BRC was held that Rotherham's Biological Records Officer was invited to sit on the CCBR as the representative of BRCs around the UK. The CCBR report led directly to the establishment of the National Biodiversity Network (NBN) in the mid-1990s, managed by the NBN Trust and principally funded by Her Majesty's Government. Rotherham BRC is an important contributor to the NBN, its 1.7 million wildlife records being part of the 100+ million records, which the NBN makes available online (in comparison, the holdings of Rotherham's BRC are three times greater than those of Sheffield BRC). The NBN Trust considers that Rotherham is probably the best recorded place for wildlife in the UK (see figure 1 below). Any individual can access data from the NBN website and those searching for information about Rotherham's wildlife will receive a better response than those searching almost any other part of the country. We feel that RMBC should be proud of the successes of Rotherham BRC and wish to continue to be a leader in this field.



Most records:
SK49 = 861,737

Fewest records
NB33 = 1,207

Figure 1: NBN Gateway records received in Britain, January 2014

Rotherham BRC was established when RMBC agreed to fund its development thirty years ago following the abolition of South Yorkshire County Council so that RMBC officers and Rotherham residents who needed biological data services would receive them. Rotherham BRC has fulfilled this purpose and these services are just as necessary today. The NBN Trust recognised the

contribution that Rotherham BRC has made by last year awarding Honorary Membership to Rotherham's retired Biological Records Officer. This is the second time that a Rotherham resident has been so honoured following a similar award two years earlier to Mr J.A.Newbould, a Rotherham native and staunch supporter of Rotherham BRC. Such recognition is clear evidence of the esteem in which the work of Rotherham's BRC is held in a national context.

RMBC's decision to develop its BRC was made because it saw the need for its services. If Rotherham BRC is closed or mothballed then this will have repercussions within and without the Council and it appears that these repercussions have not been given full consideration.

Rotherham Planning Authority is required by law to base its decisions on factual evidence. Rotherham BRC provides a significant part of the environmental evidence base which underlies the Planning Committee decisions. Without it RMBC will need to find an alternative source of information, otherwise any decision with environmental implications is liable to be challenged on the basis that RMBC is failing to meet its legislative obligations.

RMBC adopted a Local Biodiversity Action Plan (LBAP) several years ago. A key part of that plan is a series of designated Local Wildlife Sites (LWSs). The documentation which forms part of the Rotherham LBAP has tight time scales for these designations - in the case of breeding birds it is breeding records from an individual site from three of the last five years. Without Rotherham BRC these LWS designations will begin to fail very quickly. Has RMBC considered how it will update these designations in the continued absence of an Ecologist? Has RMBC considered how it will respond if a landowner challenges a LWS designation on the grounds that the records have passed their sell-by dates?

RMBC officers have an ongoing impact on Rotherham's countryside, managing three country parks and numerous Council-owned woodlands and countryside sites, while Rotherham's landscape team is planting trees, shrubs and 'wild flowers' around the Borough. Rotherham wishes to be seen to be having a positive impact on the natural environment, as well as being seen as a good example to local land managers, and for this it is necessary for its land managers to be able to monitor and assess their actions. Rotherham BRC provides a database of records from the sites owned and managed by RMBC, which allows this monitoring and assessment to take place. Without Rotherham BRC these managers will need to set up a separate recording system or risk being regarded as irresponsible and their actions unsustainable as they will not be able to monitor the results of their actions.

The UK Government's Sustainable Development Strategy (2011) highlights 'Protecting natural resources and enhancing the environment' as one of its four priority areas and has an ongoing commitment to factors around the natural environment as key features of its quality of life index. Rotherham's ability to measure the borough's progress against such goals relies in large part on the detailed records held in Rotherham BRC.

Rotherham BRC is an excellent example of a partnership between RMBC and the local community, to the advantage of both. The vast majority of Rotherham BRC's records have been contributed free of charge by this community for the benefit of Rotherham planners and managers. Rotherham residents are able to discharge their civic duties by informing RMBC of wildlife sightings that can be used for planning purposes, assessing land management and environmental protection, and Rotherham BRC provides a place where these sightings can be stored and integrated with others. Has RMBC considered how it will deal with these contributions and how it will respond to them without Rotherham BRC?

The 1.7 million records have been gathered together over a period of 40 years. Since RMBC formally approved the development of Rotherham BRC about £1million pounds of public money (RMBC and HMG) has been spent getting these records into a computer database that can be accessed immediately. It does not seem fiscally responsible to close a valued public facility that has seen this level of investment and is continuing to provide the services which are requested.

Rotherham BRC is an efficient and economical part of RMBC and an outstanding example of local community engagement with the Council. The local community provides expert voluntary assistance to the Biological Records Officer in addition to allowing the use of its records. RMBC funds its BRC for three days each week and the local community's input contributes an additional c. 1.5 days each week, increasing the output by 50%. Rotherham BRC provides an integrated data management facility for RMBC officers and local residents to use and its services are remarkably cost effective. We strongly believe that any outsourcing of such services to environmental consultancies would be more expensive and would almost certainly provide an inferior service.

We have some sympathy with the Green Spaces managers, who have tried to divest themselves of Rotherham BRC before. Rotherham BRC transferred to the predecessor of the Green Spaces team at a time when that predecessor was actively involved in managing the countryside sites owned by RMBC. The formation of the Green Spaces team saw a change of emphasis away from countryside management in favour of urban park management, and in this climate the services provided by Rotherham BRC are less valued. Green Spaces provides the facility but others are the primary beneficiaries. We suggest that RMBC canvasses opinion within its staff about the most satisfactory location for Rotherham BRC.

Rotherham BRC's data holdings could be used for additional benefit, particularly educational, but this will require additional resources, not less. Rotherham BRC contributed information about local wildlife on the RMBC website a decade ago and could do so again, tailoring its contributions to benefit individual schools and communities. Schools and colleges could decide what information they would like to be included and could develop the presentation around the BRC data, benefitting their students and the local community. Rotherham BRC is an asset that can deliver more benefit to Rotherham.

For the reasons outlined above, we, the undersigned, urge the officers of RMBC to recognise the national importance of the Rotherham BRC and to support it in its ongoing excellent work.

List of signatories.

John Bowers Chair Yorkshire Naturalists' Union (YNU). Johnbowers1081@gmail.com

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Bowers', with a horizontal line underneath the name.

[The YNU comprises 40 affiliated Yorkshire Societies and about 400 individual members. It is a major provider of data to the Rotherham BRC and to the NBN Gateway]