



***Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes***  
**Environmental Records Centre**

Tring Road • Halton • Aylesbury • Bucks • HP22 5PN  
Tel 01296 696012 Fax 01296 624519  
[www.bucksmkerc.org.uk](http://www.bucksmkerc.org.uk)

## **Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Environmental Records Centre**



Mistletoe, Halton. © Brian Miller

## **Annual Report 2009-10**



## Background

Buckinghamshire County Museum has hosted an environmental records centre since the 1970s, now known as the Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Environmental Records Centre (BMERC). This grew from the Museum's long involvement with the curation of natural history specimens and related documentation. The physical collections continue to be maintained and developed, and are widely used as a research, educational and archival resource. BMERC builds on this by providing a service to collate, manage and disseminate data about wildlife, habitats and geology. Most of these data are now held electronically, making them easily accessible for a wide range of users.

BMERC is a partnership between Buckinghamshire County Council, Milton Keynes Council and Natural England. BMERC also has Service Level Agreements with the planning authorities in Wycombe, South Bucks and Aylesbury Vale District Councils, and with the Environment Agency and British Waterways.

## Aims of BMERC

BMERC aims to provide well-maintained, comprehensive, secure data on the biodiversity and geodiversity of Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes. It will:

- Collate data, from as many sources as possible, on wildlife and geology in Bucks and Milton Keynes
- Manage these data effectively and efficiently
- Ensure the data are available to all who need them, including mobilising data onto the NBN Gateway
- Disseminate the data widely to enthuse and inspire people to care for their environment
- Ensure that data are available to decision-makers who need to assess the impact of decisions on the environment
- Continue to support volunteer recorders in the county, helping them to build capacity and reach new audiences

## Partner statutory requirements

Up-to-date environmental information is provided to Local Authorities with Service Level Agreements (SLA), which allows these partners to demonstrate their meeting of the first key principle of Planning Policy Statement 9 on Biodiversity and Geological Conservation through the use of this information. Access to this information provided by BMERC helps partners to make decisions about avoidance, mitigation, compensation or enhancement measures for biodiversity or geological resources when making decisions on planning applications, strategic documents (such as Local Development Frameworks) and site management plans.

Data provided by BMERC will also help to demonstrate the local authority's meeting of their legal duty under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006, which states:

*"Every public authority must, in exercising its functions, have regard, so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions, to the purpose of conserving biodiversity."*

(Section 40(1))

Whereby conserving biodiversity includes:

*"...in relation to a living organism or type of habitat, restoring or enhancing a population or habitat."*

(Section 40(3))

As part of the Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Biodiversity Partnership, BMERC manage the Local Wildlife Sites GIS layers and provide these to SLA partners for use in their enquiries and decision making as well inclusion within their strategic planning documents. BMERC provide vital support to the Local Sites partnership in assisting them in managing their data which is used at a county level in reporting on the National Indicator 197: Improved Local Biodiversity – proportion of Local Sites where positive conservation management has been or is being implemented.

In light of the proposed High Speed Rail link route going through the heart of Buckinghamshire and in particular the Chilterns AONB, having access to up-to-date environmental information on sites, species and habitats is even more important.

## Partner comments

*'The biodiversity information collected and managed by LRCs underpin Natural England's and our partners' decision making in protecting and enhancing our important habitats and species, in terms of improving people's access and understanding of the natural environment and in adapting to future challenges such as climate change.'* (Natural England)

*'The Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Environmental Records Centre (BMERC) is essential to the work of the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire & Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) and it would be catastrophic if it ceased to exist.'* (BBOWT)

## Staff and volunteers

Martin Harvey left the post of BMERC Environmental Records Officer in autumn 2009. He had been working on a part time basis since March 2008. The recruitment of an Environmental Records Centre Manager was undertaken in late 2009 and a new manager – Brian Miller – appointed. Brian commenced work in early March 2010. In addition, internal recruitment to the new Environmental Records Data Officer has taken place with the appointment of Laura Fennell. There now remains an Environmental Records Officer post to fill to see the new staff complement achieved. Recruitment to this post is anticipated in spring 2010 with Buckinghamshire County Council being the employing authority and BMERC managed under the Culture and Learning service.

During the last year, Laura Fennell, whilst in the post of Environmental Records Officer, has taken on responsibility for the bulk of the day-to-day running of the Records Centre, as well as data management issues, information enquiries and the distribution of data to Service Level Agreement partners. Laura, during this time, received an honorarium in recognition of her increased responsibilities. The results of the records management and data enquiry work are highlighted in this report.

The Environmental Records Centre Manager is line-managed by Buckinghamshire County Council's Museum Manager and Curator (Sarah Gray). The Records Centre has benefited from this support in getting the new structure in place and new post recruited.

The Records Centre has employed two part-time casual employees (Helen Hyre and Caroline Yeo) during this financial year to assist with records entry onto the database. A volunteer data inputter, Louise Hawkins, also joined BMERC in February 2010 leaving in March to join BBOWT as a Biodiversity Conservation Trainee.

BMERC continues to work closely with the Museum's Natural History Curator (Mike Palmer) on many biodiversity- and geodiversity-related projects, especially events and activities aimed at engaging the wider public with wildlife and recording.

BMERC continues to be very grateful to the many volunteers who provide their wildlife information, either directly or via the various species groups in the county. Several of the county wildlife recorders have helped BMERC with record validation; Roy Maycock (BSBI county plant recorder), for example, continues to generously provide his expertise. The continuing work of a number of office-based volunteers during the year should be noted, particularly Mic and Jan Wells who have been processing county mammal records (see below).

## Support from Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC)

During this interim situation, TVERC has provided support to BMERC since November 2008 as part of a contract between the two parties. The support has taken the form of a one-day-per-week presence of a member of staff (Gavin Bird) at the Halton site, as well as project-specific tasks carried out by TVERC staff in Oxfordshire. The priority areas of work have been:

- the development of new BMERC policies and procedures, such as data use and the NBN Gateway, and the service charging policy,
- liaison with service level agreement partners on output delivery,
- data transfer from the BMERC species database (MapMate) to the NBN Gateway,
- the production of biodiversity information for core and local indicators for local authority Annual Monitoring Reports.

This support has ceased following a hand-over period with the new Records Centre Manager in April 2010.

## Finances

Nearly 80% of BMERC's funding continued to come from 3 key partners; Buckinghamshire County Council (39%) (via the County Museum, part of the council's Culture and Learning Service), Milton Keynes Council (18%) and Natural England (20%). Service Level Agreements remain in place with three District Councils in Buckinghamshire (Aylesbury Vale, South Bucks and Wycombe), the Environment Agency and British Waterways. Natural England (NE) continues to support BMERC through a Memorandum of Agreement. The £15k per annum support from NE will continue in 2010/11; this support has largely facilitated the restructuring of BMERC and the mid- to longer-term planning for future growth.

In 2009/10 the total BMERC budget was around £75,000 with expenditure around £50,000 (not including office costs, which are provided by the County Museum). Expenditure was once again taken up by staffing costs and professional fees – expenditure on the support service provided by TVERC - with small amounts going to pay for books, software and equipment, plus small grants to volunteer recording groups.

Current and upcoming staffing levels will account for a large majority of the 2010/11 budget, with improvements to service and centre capacity realised in this coming year, heading into 2011/12.

	2008-09	2009-10
<b>Income</b>		
SLAs / AMR	9,200	9,865
Partners	56,000	58,207
Unsecured Project Work	8,000	7,830
<b>Total Income</b>	<b>73,200</b>	<b>75,902</b>
Carry Over from previous years	0	35,000
<b>Balance available</b>	<b>73,200</b>	<b>110,902</b>
<b>Expenditure</b>		
Salaries	38,900	35,000
Non-salary	6,300	4,670
Contractor costs	14,600	11,210
<b>Total Expenditure</b>	<b>59,800</b>	<b>50,880</b>
<b>End of year balance</b>	<b>13,400</b>	<b>60,022</b>

## Charges

BMERC provides a free enquiry response service to members of the public, students/researchers and conservation organisations. BMERC also provides an enquiry response service to developers and their consultants, charging to cover the time spent in preparing reports.

The charges for 2009 – 2010 were £60 per hour and £220 (partner) and £350 (commercial) per day for contracted work.

New charges for 2010 – 2011 will be set at £75 per hour and £250 (partner) and £350 (commercial) per day for contracted work.

## **Achievements in 2009-10**

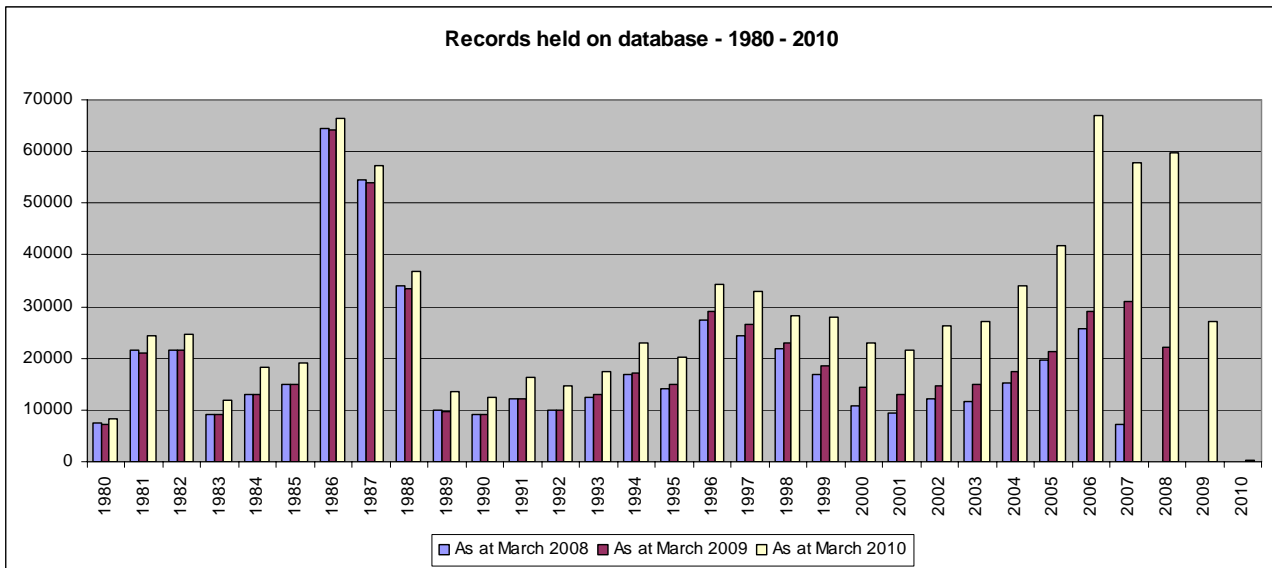
In addition to the routine work of managing data and answering enquiries (see performance indicators, below), tasks completed by BMERC during 2009/10 included the following.

- *Partnership development:*
  - Renewal of SLAs with partners achieved in 2009/10 and, despite a climate of budgetary pressure, a commitment of continued support into 2010/11 broadly confirmed
  - Continued commitment by Natural England to a Memorandum of Agreement in 2009/10 and 2010/11, at the same level of financial support
  - Third meeting of the BMERC Steering Group.
  
- *Sites:*
  - Provision of support to the Bucks CC Wildlife Sites Project Officer at a site selection panel meeting, specifically in documentation of decision-making
  - Provision of a survey data inputting service, following the departure of the Wildlife Sites Project Officer
  - Continued improvements in the management of hard copy and electronic filing of Local Wildlife Site documentation.
  
- *Species:*
  - Approximately 300,000 species records have been added to the BMERC database, despite staff shortage issues during the year
  - Data drops of species records were made to all SLA partners to an agreed schedule
  - Casual part-time staff helped to mobilise a backlog of records, which date back over the last 10 years. A part time volunteer also assisted in data inputting
  - Records from the county moth recorder have been processed and from Butterfly Conservation partially processed, with a view to incorporating into the BMERC database in their entirety in 2010.
  
- *Habitats:*
  - Provision of priority habitat mapping (generated by Bucks CC Natural Environment Team) to TVERC as part of the priority habitats regional dataset contract and also under conditions of the Environment Agency SLA.
  
- *Providing information:*
  - By end-March 2010, over 280 data enquiries had been handled during the 2009/10 business year.
  - Information was again provided to some of the Bucks local authorities – Aylesbury Vale DC, Wycombe District Council and Chiltern District Council - on the biodiversity core and local indicators within the Annual Monitoring Report of the Local Development Framework
  - The BMERC web site was successfully migrated onto the Buckinghamshire Partnership web site.

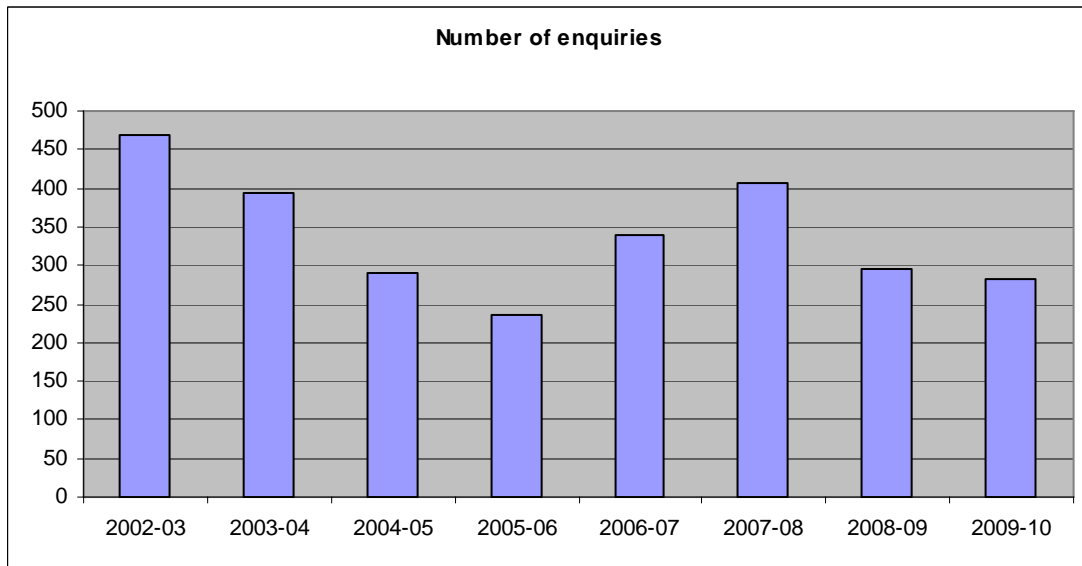
- *Other data management:*
  - BMERC has successfully uploaded four datasets to the National Biodiversity Network (NBN) Gateway during 2009 (see Appendix). This has entailed the drawing up of a policy and procedures to be followed in negotiations and agreement with recording groups to allow their records to be mobilised on to the NBN Gateway
  - Data agreements have been signed with the county plant recorder (Roy Maycock) and the county Amphibian and Reptile Group to formalise access to and use of their records
  - Approaches have been made to other individuals and recording groups, with a view to further scheduled data uploads to the NBN Gateway in 2010, as agreed with Natural England.
  
- *Working with volunteers and the public:*
  - Mick and Jan Wells continue to visit BMERC in Halton to undertake mammal record inputting
  - BMERC continues to directly support the Buckinghamshire Invertebrate Group (volunteer recording group) and Buckinghamshire Earth Heritage Group (the latter undertaken jointly with the Museum Natural History Curator, Mike Palmer), and liaise with other volunteer recorders in the county
  - A successful Wildlife Recorders' Seminar was held in Spring 2009, whilst the 2010 event was staged in mid-March 2010. Initial steps have been taken to see the full management of arrangements for the 2011 seminar by BMERC.
  
- *Other projects:*
  - BMERC completed work on the production of biodiversity maps and county specific biodiversity information, which formed part of the Biodiversity and Planning in Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes guidance document. The work was being co-ordinated by BBOWT and additionally funded by Buckinghamshire County Council, Milton Keynes Council and Natural England.
  
- *Liaison:*
  - A BMERC representative attended regular meetings of the South-East Local Records Centres forum, to share best practice and help develop regional working
  - TVERC has provided Records Centre service support to BMERC during the last twelve months. This will cease by Easter 2010.

## Performance indicators 2009-10

- Species records available on database end of 2008-09: 816,963
- Species records available on database end of 2009-10: 1,116,248 (i.e. 299,285 added during year)



## Data Enquiries

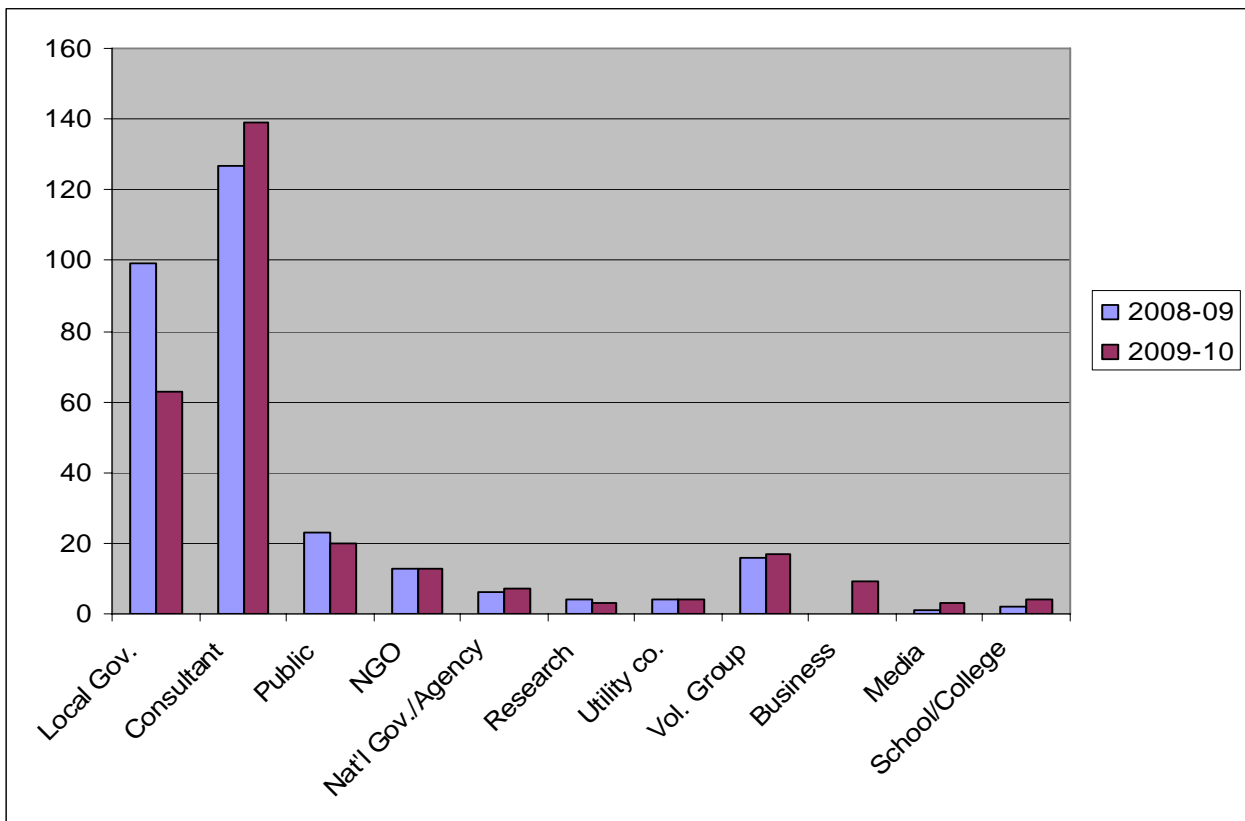


- Speed of response:
  - 88.6% of enquiries received an initial response within 3 days
  - 10.3% of enquiries received an initial response within 10 days
  - 1.1% of enquiries received response after 10 working days but within client's deadline

- *Enquirer categories in 2009-10:*

<b>Enquirer category</b>	<b>No. of enquiries</b>	<b>% of total</b>
Local Government	63	22
Developer / Consultant	139	49
Member of Public	20	7
NGO	13	5
National Government or Agency	7	2
Research	3	1
Utility (e.g. water company)	4	1
Voluntary Group	17	6
Business (e.g. company owning land)	9	3
Media	3	1
School / College	4	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>282</b>	<b>100</b>

- *Graph of enquirer categories 2008-10*



## Appendix

### Species datasets mobilised onto the NBN Gateway:

The screenshot shows the NBN Gateway website interface. At the top left is the NBN Gateway logo. To the right are links for 'Login | Register' and a search box labeled 'Search the NBN Gateway' with a 'GO!' button. Below the search box is a navigation menu with items: Home, About, NBN Gateway, Guidebooks, Useful things, News & Events, Forums, Help. A secondary menu includes: NBN Gateway Home, Browse Datasets, Browse Species, Browse Sites, Web Services, Feedback.

The main content area is titled 'CONTRIBUTING ORGANISATIONS > ORGANISATION DETAILS'. The selected organisation is 'Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Environmental Records Centre'. A blue header bar contains the text 'Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Environmental Records Centre details'. Below this, there is a paragraph of text describing the center's role: 'BMERC collects, maintains and disseminates biological and geological data for Buckinghamshire, including the administrative area of Milton Keynes. It holds records of sites, habitats and species and makes that data available for decision-making in planning and conservation and for research and education.' This is followed by two more paragraphs: 'BMERC maintains close links with local recording groups to encourage biological recording and data sharing in the County.' and 'The service is provided by Buckinghamshire County Council and Milton Keynes Council with support from other districts.' To the right of this text is a logo for the 'Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Environmental Records Centre' featuring four circular icons.

Below the text is a 'Contact Details' section with the following information:

Contact name	Laura Fennell
Contact e-mail	lfennell@buckscc.gov.uk
Address	Museum Resource Centre, Tring Road, Halton, Aylesbury, Bucks
Postcode	HP22 2PN
Website	<a href="http://www.bucksmkerc.org.uk">www.bucksmkerc.org.uk</a>

At the bottom of the page, there are two red-bordered boxes highlighting the 'Species Datasets' section. The top box is a larger version of the section, and the bottom box is a smaller version. Both boxes contain the following list of datasets:

- [Amphibians and Reptiles in Buckinghamshire](#)
- [Freshwater Fish in Buckinghamshire](#)
- [Molluscs in Buckinghamshire](#)
- [Vascular Plants in VC24](#)