

WeBS Local Organiser Advisory Committee

Minutes of 14th Meeting: 4th June 2024

Attendees

Chair: Gill Birtles (BTO)

Neil Calbrade (BTO), Teresa Frost (BTO), Dan Jenkins-Jones (Wales), Kerry Mackie (Northern Ireland), Andy Riches (South and East Scotland), Eve Tigwell (South West England).

1 Apologies for absence

Chris Gunn (Eastern England), Phil Hampson (Northern England), Brian Moore (Midlands).

2 Welcome and introductions

All attendees of the WeBS Local Organiser Advisory Committee (LOAC) introduced themselves.

3 Confidentiality and conflicts of interest

Members of the LOAC were asked to note that agenda items marked with an asterisk [*] should be regarded as strictly confidential. The LOAC may add or remove asterisks during the meeting. LOAC members are asked to notify the Chair of any conflict of interest for any particular item and to absent themselves from the discussion, decision or vote for this item as appropriate.

4 Action Points from the Last Meeting and Matters Arising

AP/LOAC12/1 Add coverage maps of LTC sites onto the BTO website - not done. NC will look into this in the following year. - **Neil will look into the feasibility of this but it is a tricky task.**

AP/LOAC12/4 Look into reviewing how casual counts are viewed and verified by Local Organisers and used in WeBS Online and encourage additional supplementary counts - not done. TF and GB will look into promoting supplementary and casual counts and making it clearer why/how we use this information, e.g. in the newsletter. - **done and if time allows, GB can run through this in the 2024 LO meeting.**

AP/LOAC12/5 GB to email LOAC with questions prior to the publication of the newsletter and write an article to be included - not done. GB will do this for the 2023 edition of WeBS News. - **done.**

AP/LOAC13/2 GB and TF to see if it is viable to create a way for LOAC members to access WeBS effort statistics such as volunteer numbers, site coverage, Priority and habitat site coverage. - **done (see point 9 below).**

AP/LOAC13/3 GB to get Kerry Mackie in touch with the new NI Engagement Officer. - **done.**

5 WeBS Progress Update

Core and Supplementary Update (GB)

GB is currently working with BTO developers to make some updates to WeBS Online in order to streamline and reduce the time that some annual tasks take the WeBS team to complete. While this development is more focussed on 'back of house' updates, there will be some updates for LOs and Counters, including:

- **Mailing Lists**
 - Counters will be able to opt themselves in or out of the mailing lists through their 'My Details' page.
 - Be able to specify if they would like to be included in either the paper or electronic mailing lists.
 - Current method is for counters to get in touch with LOs or WeBS HQ to update their preferences. It is hoped that removing this barrier will lead to more e-mailing list subscriptions and fewer reports/newsletters printed.
- **Counter Handbooks**
 - At the point where they allocate them to a site, LOs will be able to opt out new counters from receiving paper Counter Handbooks in the post.
 - This will require LOs to ask an extra question during initial conversations e.g. 'would you like a physical handbook or are happy to access the guidance online'.
 - It is hoped that this will reduce the amount of paper printed and handbooks being sent out.
- **Paper Forms**
 - LOs can specify forms needed for each site/counter, how many/which type and who to send them to in WeBS Online, so that GB doesn't need to check every year with LOs to make sure our database and form requirements match and are up-to-date.
- **Site Information**
 - LOs be able to log information for each site in WeBS Online e.g. access details, history etc.

We are currently in the early stages of writing the specification for this work, so there is no time-frame or deadline yet of when this will be delivered.

Low Tide Counts Update (NC)

In 2023/24, Low Tide Counts were carried out at several large sites, including two which we the first LTCs carried out for the first time in many years including the Firth of Forth (last counted fully in 20023/04) and Morecambe Bay (counts carried out under contract from Natural England including both aerial and ground surveys). In addition, the Mersey Estuary, Cleddau Estuary and Wigtown Bay were counted.

GSMP Update (NC)

After a considerable delay, we have now received the GSMP database from WWT and we are currently working to integrate the data into the BTO database which will ultimately allow us to have more sites available to be counted, and give us the ability to develop trends and carry out further analysis.

The Icelandic-breeding Goose Census (IGC) counts went ahead again in October and November 2023 which were organised by the BTO for the second year.

We are still awaiting confirmation on when the next International Swan Census will be carried out. It is due to be carried out in January 2025, but it may be delayed until January 2026, though we will be doing much of the preparation work of the database and online system this year regardless of when the census goes ahead. If the census goes ahead this year, as with past swan censuses (which have previously been organised by WWT), WeBS LOs will be contacted to see if they would be willing to organise swan counts in their areas. We will confirm as soon as possible, hopefully by the end of this month.

Waterbird News Update

WeBS News was rebranded to Waterbird News and published in October last year. Articles or suggestions of articles are sought for this year's edition, and can be sent to Neil by the end of August for inclusion. We have already received confirmation of articles about the Heronries Census and a Green Sandpiper study, along with a site in the spotlight article on Woolston Eyes Nature Reserve in Cheshire.

6 Reports from LOAC Regions

LOAC members were invited to contact the Local Organisers within their regions prior to the meeting to see if there was anything they would like to raise with the committee:

- Eve Tigwell - good response and a few questions from LOs:
 - Mike Smart (LO for Gloucestershire (inc. Severn Estuary; excl. Cotswold Water Park) raised the project idea of working to understand where birds move to during times of flooding in the south-west. ET suggested to him the idea of organising a SW LO meeting to discuss the topic. She is yet to hear from Mike about this idea, GB is happy to support. Also raised the possibility of NC asking Mike for a newsletter article.
 - Received a query from an LO who would like to know which tasks they should prioritise as they have limited time for the role. This led to ideas of how to communicate to LOs the priority tasks, while also advertising the LO role to counters, who may be put off by the perceived large workload. LOs could also think of the feasibility of mentoring their replacement so that they can pass on their knowledge and expertise. Also the idea of having a deputy LO to share the workload e.g. one organises while the other validates.

AP/LOAC14/1 GB to update the LO Role Description document, as it is currently dated, and share this with current LOs once completed.

AP/LOAC14/2 GB to write an article for Waterbird News 2024, detailing the LO role, responsibilities and tasks for those who may be interested in taking on the role.

AP/LOAC14/3 GB to re-establish the role priorities in the 2024 LO meeting.

7 LO attendance to the annual LO meeting (DJJ)

Dan Jenkins-Jones received one response, when asked LOs in Wales the reasons for not attending the annual LO meeting, he received the following reasons from one LO:

- Not engaged with WeBS or BTO.
- Little time for 'extracurricular' meetings.
- It's not a loss to them to not be connected.
- Perturbed by their failure to recruit new counters.

DJJ is disappointed with the turnout of LOs to the 2023 LO meeting (41 of 155 LOs attended) so raised the proposition of LOAC creating a questionnaire for LOs, in order to better understand the barriers to attending the annual LO meeting, and getting involved with WeBS generally. This was supported by LOAC and so LOAC, led by DJJ and supported by GB, will create and send a questionnaire to LOs.

AP/LOAC14/4 LOAC to create and send a questionnaire to LOs in the mid-late summer, with results to be shared with LOAC and WeBS team before planning of annual LO meeting in the autumn begins.

Ideas of making it more accessible include a shorter meeting, or having two meetings (one during day time, one in the evening) to give people more options..

DJJ also raised the idea of how LOAC could be more proactive in general in engaging with LOs and also be more involved in the Regional Network, as it can feel isolated. The Wales RN meeting in March 2024+ was really good as all members (ROs, RRs, LOs, GBW Ambassadors, Youth reps.) were invited.

AR suggested the idea of checking in with LOs of under-performing regions to see if they need any help. Not a performance review but just a friendly check-in to see if they can help with anything so the LOAC terms of references would need clarifying for this so they know their responsibilities regarding underperforming LOs. This would also require LOAC to be able to see how LOs are getting on and be able to see data in order to see patterns of low coverage. At this moment, this is not fully possible, but there is work in the process to look into this (see point 9 below).

8 Review of Local Organiser retirement process

GB raised the idea of creating an LO retirement document, which retiring LOs can fill out as a way of capturing hard-earned knowledge of the region, sites and counters and creating a handover document for new LOs so that they are not starting from scratch.

GB received positive responses to this idea and asked for ideas of what the document could include. This included:

- Site information;
- Landowner info. (not contact info. unless publicly available);
- Counter team set ups (how particular teams coordinate, who enters data and when etc.);
- Maps of sites and viewing/access points;
- Specific species info. for the region;
- Highlight sites suitable for entry/exit, intermediate, and expert skill levels and sites that are suitable for volunteers with accessibility requirements;
- How the out-going LO communicates with counters and how often;
- Local promotion opportunities e.g. newsletters, Bird Clubs etc. List contact details if they're in the public domain;
- Out-going LO happy to be contacted by any new LOs? Timeframe for this e.g. within the next 5 years?;
- General struggles/issues;
- Any successes.

TF suggested that we can ask any ex-LOs that we are still in contact with to retrospectively fill in this document too.

AP/LOAC14/5 GB to create retiring LO document and share a draft with LOAC for comment.

9 Introduction to WeBS Core Count and Organiser Recruitment and Retention Review and Strategy

GB introduced the project that GB, TF and Emma Caulfield (BTO) are currently working on. In the 2022/23 - 2026/27 WeBS partnership agreement, "volunteer engagement and development" was ranked a high priority work area by the partners. Therefore, it was decided to create a strategy document, which will stock-take the 'health' of WeBS and from this data, strategy ideas will be suggested and detailed.

The idea is that this document will be shared and used by BTO Surveys, Engagement, Country Office and Training teams, WeBS Steering Committee, LOAC, Local Organisers, RNC. It was decided to fit this into the operations budget, rather than the development budget, meaning exact outputs and tasks were not set out in the contract. This gives us a lot of scope to adapt the work around volunteer engagement including this review and strategy.

The stages for collecting data and writing the report are:

- *Stage 1- Reviewing the WeBS Core Count existing volunteer database:*
 - E.g. how many counters are staff, or volunteers of partner or stakeholder orgs., what is the turnover of counters and how is it changing, the age of counters at key sites, training journey assessment and qualitative assessment of the state of the WeBS volunteer network.
- *Stage 2- Strategy to strengthen our volunteer base for existing sites, particularly key complex sites:*
 - Using data collected in stage 1, identify areas for improvement e.g. new initiatives, web app developments, focus needed on finding

skilled volunteers for challenging sites e.g. The Wash.

- *Stage 3- Recommendations for defining new “volunteer engagement” sites:*
 - Follow-up work under the volunteer engagement and development area is foreseen to include creating new sites for the purposes of entry level engagement, esp. in urban areas.

Therefore, it was asked of LOAC, what would they like to see covered in the report?

ET - it will be very useful to BTO and LOs in order to see what is happening in their regions and what support specific LOs need. The key analysis should be where the gaps are and what can we do to fill them.

AR- A big problem is that lots of people are leaving and there aren't those to replace them. It would be good to have a strategy for this situation.

GB will share early drafts with LOAC so that they can give qualitative data based on the data at Stage 1 and findings in Stage 2, which can be incorporated into the report.

AP/LOAC14/6 GB to share early drafts with LOAC so that they can give comments.

10 Any other business

No other business was raised.