**WeBS Steering Group – 50th meeting  
RSPB The Lodge  
13 May 2015**

**Present at meeting:**  
Andy Musgrove (AM), BTO, Chair Richard Hearn (RH), WWT  
Dawn Balmer (DB), BTO Simon Wotton (SW), RSPB  
Chas Holt (CH) BTO David Stroud (DS), JNCC

Referred to in minutes (not present at meeting)

Heidi Mellan, BTO [HM] Neil Calbrade, BTO [NC]

Minutes of 49th meeting were adopted. Action points from previous meetings were checked at the end of the meeting.

**1.Progress v deadlines**  
Online and paper reports for 2015 published on schedule. The planned publication date for 2016 is 29 March.  
 **2. WeBS Counter network**Heidi Mellan and Neil Calbrade continue to do an excellent job working with the counter network. We have recruited a new local organiser for Aberdeenshire. In Norfolk the plan is a team of two to cover the Norfolk coast. We still need to address coverage in Kent.  
**AP**: Follow up suggestion to cover Northants  
**AP**: check list of training courses and promote

**3.Website & WeBS online**  
WeBS online continues to run smoothly. We discussed whether we should return to collecting information on disturbance. We agreed that information on human activities probably more useful than judging levels of disturbance, which can be subjective. NEWS will collect activity and disturbance information. We noted AEWA MOP will be discussing definitions and should find out the outcome of these discussions.  
**AP**: contact other schemes to ask if they collect disturbance info and what they do   
 **4. Low Tide Counts**  
Looking ahead to 2015/16, there are some major estuaries due for coverage, including North Norfolk Coast, Colne Estuary, Southampton Water, Pegwell Bay and Firth of Forth. Funding is being sought for the North Norfolk Coast.

**5. Annual reporting**  
WITUK1314 was published in April 2015. Target for WITUK1415 will be to publish by end of March 2016.

**6. WeBS Alerts**  
We agreed that WeBS Alerts would not be completed on the previously agreed schedule (in 2015-16) due to JNCC-BTO budget cuts; it is hoped they could be undertaken the following year. We discussed added functionality to report on: (i) all species of non-breeding waterbird at a site, not only designated features; (ii) the waterbird assemblage of the site as a whole. We agreed the inclusion of waterbird assemblages of the site as a whole was the highest priority. DS also suggested the addition of goose species was a high priority. All-time Alerts (irrespective of site designation date), and inclusion of all SSSIs/ASSIs (regardless of coincidence with SPAs) was considered low priority.  
 **7. Population estimates**  
Population estimates were due to be updated during 2015-16, but have had to be deferred for a year due to budget cuts.

**8. Welsh Piscivores project**  
DB provided an update on the NRW funded project on increasing coverage of waterways across Wales using WeBS with a view to providing NRW with more robust information and estimates of status of piscivores.

**9. WeBS Newsletter**  
We discussed ideas for the next WeBS newsletter scheduled for the autumn. We agreed there was probably not enough information on the Scaup census. We suggested articles on AEWA MOP (next spring), Article 12 (and reference to online report), the new European red list, IUCN red list, State of Nature report – Latvia launch.

**10. Data Requests**  
The WeBS Data Request system continues to operate smoothly. The surplus for end of FY 2014/15 is *ca.* £19,301. This is less than previous years but in line with the longer term aim of reducing the surplus.

**11. Progress with on-going WeBS sub-projects**

**11.1 Stratification**  
The paper has been resubmitted to *Journal of Nature Conservation*; verdict awaited.

**11.2 Historic waterbird data**  
There is a medium-term timetable (5 years; agreed at SG45) in place for completion of this task; progress is revisited ahead of every SG meeting. Several volunteers continue to assist Heidi Mellan in this process, and a BTO in-house volunteer has made considerable progress in recent months which has made the timetable a realistic target**.**

**11.3 Methods review**  
Work on the technical review of WeBS methodology is underway by CH. Completing this paper is a priority for May 2015.

**11.4 Indicators**  
Work on production of Arctic indicator using WeBS data is underway. Data from The Netherlands and long-term GSMP productivity data have now been incorporated, and a second version circulated; comments received (CH). A final draft will be produced by end of May 2015. A separate Short Note has been drafted that focuses on Curlew Sandpiper data from northwest Europe as a proxy for Arctic productivity (examining correlations with productivity data collected in the Arctic); comments received.

**11.5 Protected sites**  
This is to cover analyses and paper looking at wider value of the UK’s SPA network for wintering waterbirds beyond the standard qualification criteria.

**11.6 Golden Plovers**  
The flyway survey of Golden Plover within the framework of Wader Study Group census took place in 18 countries in mid-October 2014. CH is collating data from national organisers and will produce a paper for *Wader Study*. CH informed us that a skeleton paper was already done through there were gaps in numbers.

**11.7 Sierra Leone**  
Possible future development of this collaboration (initially led by Wadden Sea Flyway Initiative), involving the WeBS counter network was considered. We agreed to wait until we knew more about Ebola in the country.

**12. WeBS Agreement**We had a thorough discussion of this topic at the beginning of the meeting.

**Strategic discussion on the future WeBS agreement under the next contract***Partnership*  
We started the meeting by having a general discussion about the next WeBS agreement which is due for negotiation over the next few months. All partners were asked to be clear about what they want out of WeBS and for these to be reflected in the next agreement. SW said that RSPB likely to commit initially to a three year agreement, with a second three year agreement to roll on. JNCC and WWT plan for a six year agreement. BTO plan to contribute same amount financially. WWT financial contribution will be maintained at a similar level. JNCC, RSPB, WWT all very positive about continuing agreement. We briefly discussed whether there was any requirement to consider other partners. This has been discussed at length in the past and we concluded that there was no need for additional partners at this stage.

*Data sales*  
All partners agreed that a proportion of the data sales surplus should go to covering core costs. We discussed whether income from data sales is likely to change in coming years, especially regarding the call for more open data in the future. The point was made that the online report already has a large amount of data publically available for free. The data products that are sold are summarised stats with interpretation which has added value. Some merit in looking at our data charges – should there be a small annual increase? Charges are currently increased every third year. Data sales are an important source of funds for the core running of WeBS – potential justification for data charges. We suggested the idea of having a ‘pot’ of money set aside for ongoing technical developments and to support special projects.

**AP**: look at our charging structure and recognise it needs to be part of wider discussion between partners. Aim for 15% contribution from data sales to the budget? (DEB, AJM, all)

*JNCC cuts for 2015/15 and WeBS*JNCC are reducing funding to BTO this financial year. We discussed whether WeBS might take some of this financial cut. We discussed whether WeBS Alerts and/or the work on population estimates could be delayed until the next financial year. Population estimates are needed for next Article 12.

**AP**: BTO to circulate some figures regarding savings to be made if we delay population estimates and WeBS Alerts.

**AP**: We agreed to it was sensible to postpone population estimates and WeBS alerts until 2016/17. Estimates will still be needed to be done in time for Article 12.

**AP**: Look at the sequence of tasks in the lead up to Article 12. Do we do waterbird population estimates first and then APEP? Or do the job all in one? Consider breaking up for publication (breeding vs winter or non-passerines vs passerines). (DAS, DEB, AJM)

**What do we want WeBS to achieve in the next six year period?**The next discussion revolved around what we hope to achieve in the next six years. We considered areas of high priority for development and what we might do differently in the next period of agreement.

*Funding of periodic surveys*  
DS raised the question of how do we fund these periodic surveys such as NEWS and WiNGS. Should we use accrued surplus to help pay for these? Should we consider adding a line in the budget for periodic surveys? Regarding NEWS, there was fairly positive news from SNH and NE, and NRW, though NIEA thought it unlikely they could contribute. WiNGS was last covered 2003/04-2005/06. We discussed whether there is there scope for a sample survey to produce trend information and agreed we need to carefully consider what is required by country agencies.

**Aim**: Aim to build in use of surplus/other funding to secure the future of NEWS and WiNGS. Gulls have reporting required. Keep adapting the online system to make data collection easier (and cheaper) when it comes to WiNGs.

*Priority development ideas*   
How can we get better quality estimates of dispersed waterbirds? Blitzing perhaps more important than a repeat Dispersed Waterbird Survey? Could there be further analyses of atlas data and local atlas data? Need to think through 10 year plan for stratification, DWS, blitz, atlas. What are the species this would deliver for? Be clear on the species perspective. This will improve knowledge of distribution and trends and perhaps enable us to calculate indicators.

Complete inputting of historic data. Thanks to Heidi Mellan and team of volunteers great progress has been made. About two years to completion. We should plan for major publicity when all historical data input; there will be opportunities to highlight stories. Is there a paper that could come out of this?

**AP**: opportunity for fundraising to raise cash to undertake analysis of historical data?

Bring together information on drones. Undertake a comparison of methods around counting using drones. What would it add to our knowledge? Is it ‘gold-plating’ of estimates or will it really fill in a gap in knowledge?

Gathering data on sex-ratios. Suggestion to pilot some work on Pochard, suggestion do every five years. Is there any existing long-term dataset?   
**AP:** RH to write for next newsletter.

Update online application. WeBS was one of the first online applications to be built by BTO and is in need of a refresh to give it a fresh feel.  
**AP**: Discuss with BTO IS Team about scheduling this work (DB, AM)

Gathering information on disturbance. Think more carefully about disturbance issues and whether we really want to collect more information. How can the information be used? We noted that NEWS is collecting information on disturbance.

Mapping roost sites. This was considered a high priority.

Further work in West Africa. This was considered medium priority. Will the money be well spent and who should we work with?

Continued analytical development. It’s important that we continue to make advances in analytical techniques.

Academic uses of WeBS data. Better recording of academic uses of WeBS data. Need copies of paper and report from research. Mostly undergraduates need to chase.  
**AP**: chase up academic uses of WeBS data.

More proactive in seeking research partnerships.   
**AP**: Come up with a list of top 20 research ideas and promote to universities eg non-natives (UEA post-doc).   
**AP**: Have a brainstorm at a future meeting.

Core budget time for encouraging research uses of WeBS data. The WeBS budget does not currently include time for research. It’s important we try to get research time into future budgets.

Low-tide counts. Can we make more explicit use of low-tide data? We should look to get a publication out of low-tide data. The big estuaries probably the most important from an agency point of view. Any key estuaries need to be done? Very important for RSPB case work and agency staff.  
**AP**: review the key estuaries that still need to be counted.

Timing of alerts report and annual report. Should they be at the same time or different?

**AP**: re-draft the WeBS agreement and circulate. Include timing for WiNGS, NEWS, pop estimates, alerts. Include a calendar of episodic events and a gantt chart.

**14. Recent publications**

**Reports**

* Holt, C. et al. 2015. *Waterbirds in the UK 2013/14: The Wetland Bird Survey*. BTO/RSPB/JNCC, Thetford.

**Papers**

* **Pavón-Jordán, D. et al. 2015. Climate-driven changes in winter abundance of a migratory waterbird in relation to EU protected areas. *Diversity and Distributions***

**15. Conferences/meetings**  
PEDS-4, RH phoning in.

**Action from previous meeting**  
**AP**: RH to contact Sierra Leone re short ‘next steps’ paper  
**AP**: All WeBS to country agency correspondence should copy in JNCC

**Date for next meeting**  
Circulate dates for November (second half) and December.

We concluded the meeting by thanking Chas Holt for all his work on WeBS over the years and wished him well in his new employment.