

# The Hive Count: Your Response and Future Plans for the Project

By National Bee Unit, Defra

*The National Bee Unit has been running a project in collaboration with Defra for three years. You may have heard of it; The Hive Count. Its aims were to establish an estimated total of honey bee colonies across the UK which would then be submitted to the EU Commission as part of member states' National Apiculture Programmes.*

## The Hive Count pilot study

The Pilot year, 2015–2016, was used to test the methodology for the Hive Count. From November 2015 through to 1 January 2016 we asked beekeepers to sign into BeeBase, go to the 'personal details' section of their records and update the 'Total colonies owned (as of today)' field. From the emails we received, it was obvious that this was not the most efficient method for beekeepers to use; especially for those who had not used their account for some time and had forgotten their login name, password or both. This resulted in very time-consuming data collection, with in some instances staff from Sand Hutton had to amend people's records for them.

We decided to address this issue by making the process by which beekeepers record their colony numbers smarter and more efficient. Although we cannot easily solve the password and login issues, we did attempt to fix the ease of access to the data entry page. A new page was created which was only made live and visible to beekeepers during the data collection period of November through to January the following year. Beekeepers were directed to the page via a link sent by email and after securely logging into their account. Once a return was submitted they then had the opportunity to distribute this figure via their apiaries recorded on BeeBase or by adding a new apiary in the

'My Apiaries' section. The data was then submitted and the page closed. If any errors had been made beekeepers could phone the office and have these amended manually by NBU staff.

## Year 1: testing our procedures

The first year of the Hive Count, November 2016 through to 1 January 2017, was used to test the improvements and fine-tune the methodology. This was a positive experience with far fewer calls by beekeepers who could not find the data entry page. The overall response was similar to the previous pilot year and we even included engagement across various social media platforms and through many stakeholders.

## Year 2: Official Hive Count

The second year of the Hive Count began from the beginning of November 2017 through to 1 January 2018 and was the official gathering of data to submit to the EU Commission where we received a marginally higher participation from beekeepers, some of whom participated in the previous year. Between the two years of the Hive Count we received a total of 9075 returns. In Year 1, 2016–17, there were 4,481 returns and in Year 2, 2017–18, there were 4,594 returns, 2,275 of that figure were from beekeepers who had completed a return in Year 1 and 2,319 were new returns by new beekeepers.

## The results so far ...

Year 1, 2016–17, Hive Count was 223,187 hives. Year 2, 2017–18, Hive Count was 247,461 hives.

It is important to note that the hive count methodology has been developed in order to meet EU reporting needs and in the absence of any regular, systematic data collection it represents the best estimate of hives available to us. Despite this, the count has several limitations, including its reliance on the BeeBase database being up-to-date and accurate for all registered keepers. The figure is therefore an estimate and an experimental total and should be labelled as such when used.



A pollen-laden honey bee by Anthony Whincup, BBKA Individual Member.

## Moving forward, the future of the project

As the UK leaves the European Union our participation within the official EU National Apiculture Programme stands to be affected, thus the requirement for us to carry out the Hive Count on behalf of the Commission is unlikely to continue. However, the Government remains committed to supporting UK bees. The value of the Hive Count in allowing us to spot changes in hive numbers over time means that we wish to continue with the count for the foreseeable future.

There are, of course, other notable benefits in having beekeepers update records on BeeBase regularly. A prime focus of the Hive Count is keeping the National Bee Unit's beekeeping records and database accurate for operational purposes, such as contingency responses. Given that there have been two Asian hornet outbreaks in consecutive years, and an early sighting in 2018's spring, not to mention the added threat of small hive beetle, the importance of BeeBase being up-to-date is increasingly apparent.

## Thank you for contributing

Defra and the National Bee Unit wish to thank all the beekeepers that have submitted returns and we encourage all beekeepers to register on BeeBase and carry out annual updates. In knowing the location and numbers of beehives the Government is in a better position to support the beekeeping sector and respond to pest and disease outbreaks.