



National Audit Office

Natural England's Role in Improving Sites of Special Scientific Interest

LONDON: The Stationery Office
£14.35

Ordered by the
House of Commons
to be printed on 19 November 2008



SUMMARY

1 Some areas in England are considered so important to the nation's natural heritage that they are Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). Over one million hectares of land have been identified as "special" for their habitats, plants, animals or geology, representing the best examples of natural features throughout England. There are 4,114 SSSIs in England, covering wetlands, heaths, bogs, woodlands and many other habitats. The sites are not confined to the countryside, with 39,000 hectares of SSSIs lying in, or near, an urban area.

2 SSSIs contain habitats which support unusual or endangered flora, fauna and geological features. They are an important resource for scientific research. They also play their part in tackling climate change; peat

bogs, for example, are valuable for storing carbon and retaining rainfall which may reduce the risk of flooding in lower lying urban areas. The importance of SSSIs was recognised in 1949 when limited legal measures were introduced to protect them from development. Some areas have nevertheless been neglected or damaged. In 2000, the legislation was strengthened and the then responsible department (the Department for Environment, Transport and the Regions) introduced a Public Service Agreement (PSA) target to bring 95 per cent of the land contained within SSSIs into a favourable or recovering condition by December 2010. This target is now led by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (the Department), and its delivery is coordinated by Natural England.

3 Twenty-nine per cent of land designated (the scientific term is “notified”) as SSSIs is owned by individuals; the remainder is the responsibility of central and local government, private companies and non-government organisations.

4 The Department has estimated that some £395 million of public money was spent managing SSSIs between April 2000 and March 2008. This equates to an average of nearly £54 million per annum at 2008 prices, equivalent to £50 per hectare per year. Of the £395 million, £77 million has been from European Union grants and the remainder from central government.

5 This Report examines: the progress towards the 2010 target; the performance of Natural England in working with landowners/occupiers and other regulatory bodies; and the cost of managing SSSIs. Appendix 1 outlines the scope of this study and our methodology.

Findings

Our main findings are as follows:

Progress towards meeting the PSA Target

6 Since December 2002, the reported condition of SSSIs has improved from 52 per cent by area in target condition to 83 per cent in March 2008. Of the 888,706 hectares in target condition, 45 per cent were in a favourable condition and 38 per cent were in an unfavourable recovering condition. The long term nature of recovery action means that it may be many years before some sites reach a favourable condition.

7 Natural England has been systematic in delivering this improvement to SSSIs. Through the Remedies Project it has developed a comprehensive database which records for every unit in unfavourable condition: the reason(s) for it being classified as such; the action(s) required to bring it into favourable condition; the organisation(s) or individual(s) responsible; and the anticipated delivery date. Natural England uses this information to monitor progress and prioritise action and resources.

8 Owing to the dynamic nature of biological systems, or the effects of human impacts, the features on SSSIs can change. One site has been partially denotified, 23 sites have been amended and 55 new sites have been notified since 2001.

9 Natural England cannot be sure how far from favourable condition some units may be, because around a quarter of units have not been assessed within the six-year period prescribed by national guidance and Natural England does not record if condition assessments are being undertaken at the appropriate time of year. Around a third of sites do not have conservation objectives in place against which changes in condition can be measured, in part because Natural England considered that this process could not be done until the final national monitoring guide was published in March 2008. The quality of record-keeping by conservation advisers is variable, with no systematic approach to keeping case notes, and incomplete records of features to support some condition assessments.

Managing relationships

10 Improving the condition of sites relies on Natural England building good relationships with landowners, especially since the financial incentives available to support the conservation management of the habitat may fall short of the costs of the work required and the complexity of some environmental stewardship incentive schemes means applicants may require support through the process and during the life of the agreement.

11 Financial incentives are tied into a contractual management agreement between Natural England and the landowner/occupier. Incentives supported by EU grants are subject to compliance checks by the Rural Payments Agency. For all other schemes Natural England carries out checks to confirm that landowners/occupiers are complying with the terms of their agreement. Record-keeping was, however, inconsistent in this area.

12 Conservation advisers have a dual role to play with landowners/occupiers: encouraging them to protect the area; and acting on infringements. Natural England has not yet exercised its powers to enforce positive management practices on landowners/occupiers who persistently refuse to manage land in a way that safeguards the interest of the site.

Making better use of resources

13 The Department estimates that by 2010-11 the ongoing maintenance of sites could cost the public purse around £96 million a year. Private businesses, non-government organisations, local government and individuals also contribute to the maintenance of sites, but there is no complete overview of the costs involved.

14 The wider benefits of SSSIs are not accurately quantified at present, and the public and businesses are not sufficiently aware of how SSSIs can improve the landscape or protect the environment, and the role they might be able to play in supporting SSSIs. Natural England is, however, undertaking work with the Department to help quantify and value ecosystem services that are delivered by the natural environment, which could help support the better understanding of SSSI benefits.

15 Natural England has a programme of work in place to address the backlog of conservation objectives and condition assessments; but operational effectiveness could be improved by allocating dedicated teams to specific tasks, as piloted in the South East Region.

16 Outsourcing work to compensate for resource or knowledge gaps may be a cost effective way to assess the condition of SSSIs, but Natural England does not have a clear understanding of the comparative cost of carrying out assessments in-house.

Value for money conclusion

17 The introduction of the PSA target has stimulated activity to improve the condition of England's SSSIs. At the end of March 2008, 888,706 hectares of SSSIs (83 per cent by land area) were in a favourable or recovering condition, compared with only 501,981 hectares (52 per cent) in December 2002. There are realistic plans in place for Natural England and its partners to achieve the target by 2010, and if work is delivered on time the target will be met.

18 The likelihood of success would be strengthened by improving the assessment process. There are some outstanding conservation objectives and condition assessments that need to be completed prior to 2010 and there is no comprehensive system in place to check that assessments comply with national guidelines.

19 The overall approach to case management could be strengthened by adopting the good practices we saw in some regions, particularly regarding record-keeping. Staff have made good use of financial incentives in building relationships to encourage landowners to improve the condition of SSSIs, but Natural England has underutilised its regulatory powers to enforce appropriate management of land. Improving the robustness of record-keeping and the assessment process will necessitate efficiency savings elsewhere. Such savings could be achieved by allocating dedicated teams to specific projects, based on the approach used in one region, maximising the use of voluntary organisations to help

maintain sites, and by drawing on the environmental benefits of some sites, such as bogs, to seek corporate sponsorship to maintain them.

20 Prior to 2007, the Department had not established the total cost to the Exchequer of managing SSSIs, but has since estimated that expenditure since 2000 has amounted to £395 million. Natural England has developed a comprehensive remedies database which provides a more reliable way of estimating the scale of funding required to achieve the 95 per cent target by 2010. Because of the complex nature of SSSIs, these estimates may change year-on-year.

Recommendations

Progress toward meeting the PSA Target

- a** **Some 60 per cent of sites were first recognised as important between 20 and 60 years ago. Some may no longer retain the features they were established to conserve, or may contain new interest features which are not recorded.** Natural England should periodically review and update as appropriate the current suite of SSSIs. The amendments should include new notifications, renotifications as well as denotifications.
- b** **Around 35 per cent of SSSIs do not have written descriptions of the monitoring requirements for the special features that they were notified to conserve, nor the specific conservation actions that are necessary to provide this protection.** As the final piece of national guidance on monitoring was published in March 2008. Natural England should complete the conservation objectives for all interest features of SSSIs.
- c** **Around a quarter of SSSIs have not had a condition assessment in the past six years, as recommended by national guidelines.** Natural England should assess all sites within the recommended timescales.
- d** **There is no consistent approach to record-keeping. Some advisers maintained comprehensive records for their SSSIs, and others did not. Natural England's database does not record whether national guidelines on assessment of the condition of a SSSI have been followed.** Natural England should record the date of field visits, compliance checks, contact with landowners/occupiers and the extent and location of all features on SSSIs on its electronic database. It should introduce quality assurance to provide consistency in the judgement of condition and compliance with national guidelines.

Managing relationships

- e **Natural England has used its statutory powers to deal with damage to sites, but only once taken steps to enforce positive management practices by landowners/occupiers.** Natural England should use its enforcement powers within a reasonable timescale where landowners/occupiers persistently refuse to manage land in a way which conserves the SSSI.
- f **Financial incentives paid to landowners are accompanied by a management agreement; but for some units in recovering condition there was not a written description of the improvements expected over time.** Natural England should specify for all incentives paid the expected timescales and milestones against which to measure progress.

Making better use of resources

- g **Until 2007, the Department had a limited understanding of the cost of delivering the target. It has now estimated the funding required to deliver the target by 2010, but this estimate is subject to change.** The Department should regularly review these estimates and work with other members of the Major Landowners Group to validate these estimates.
- h **Some regions have allocated dedicated teams to specific projects to address backlogs of work, which has resulted in more efficient working practices.** Natural England should apply these practices nationally to realise efficiencies across all regions.
- i **The public are not fully aware of the wider benefits of SSSIs.** Natural England should quantify the benefits of SSSIs and promote these to the public and businesses to encourage greater support for SSSIs.
- j **Private sector funding has been leveraged in to help with the costs of maintaining SSSIs; but this practice is not widespread.** Natural England should explore the opportunities for further sources of funding from the private sector: in particular the scope offered by SSSIs for carbon offsetting and other forms of corporate sponsorship.
- k **Natural England has outsourced condition assessments and drawing up of conservation objectives for some SSSIs, but has not established whether the results represent value for money compared to a more efficient use of internal resources.** Natural England should assess the cost effectiveness of contracting out work by benchmarking the costs of the different types of assessments carried out by consultants and comparing these to the cost of carrying out condition assessments in-house.