

Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs): Briefing note Ahead of House of Commons adjournment debate on 18.09.23

Executive summary

- SSSI designation is intended to protect some of our most precious nature sites. With nature in continued decline, this protection is needed more than ever before.
- However, over the past decade poor management and insufficient support has seen the condition of SSSIs deteriorate.
- A range of policy interventions, so far rejected by the Government, are urgently needed to turn this situation around. These include:
 - Targeted support for private landowners and managers to pay for positive SSSI management that delivers demonstrable ecological recovery.
 - Increased funding for Natural England to enable it to more effectively support the SSSI network, through monitoring, advice to landowners and, if needed, enforcement.
 - A legally binding target to improve SSSI condition.

SSSIs are important for nature

SSSIs provide important legal protections to priority habitats – the woodlands, moorlands, meadows and freshwaters that wild species depend on for their survival. For too many species, that survival is under threat; 41% of UK species are in decline, with 15% facing extinction.¹

The protection and recovery of more habitats is essential if the UK is to meet its commitments to turn around this decline in nature.

This includes the promise to ensure that 30% of land is effectively managed and protected for nature by 2030, agreed as part of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework under the Convention on Biological Diversity (2022). Increasing the area of land that is protected and well-managed for nature will also be critical to achieving the legally binding target under the Environment Act to halt and reverse the decline in the abundance of species, also by 2030.²

The more effective management of existing SSSIs, and an expansion in the network, is critical to meeting these environmental targets and to halting the decline of nature.

¹ <https://www.rspb.org.uk/our-work/state-of-nature-report/> (an updated State of Nature report will be published on 27.09.23).

² For polling on high public concern about these targets not being met, see: <https://www.wcl.org.uk/charities-warn-of-triple-failure-on-nature-protection-ahead-of-key-parliamentary-vote.asp>

SSSIs are struggling

Currently, 8.45% of England is covered by SSSI designations. However, too many of these are languishing in poor condition.

Only 36.82% of SSSIs (by area) are in favourable condition, a decline from 39% in favourable condition from 2022. The area of SSSIs in 'unfavourable - recovering' condition has also declined, from 51% last year to 49% in 2023, with more SSSIs reported as 'unfavourable - no change or declining'.³

These problems are particularly acute in SSSIs covering rivers, as sewage and agricultural pollution continues to degrade freshwater habitats. Recent research from Unchecked UK found that less than a fifth (19%) of SSSI rivers are in 'favourable' or in 'mostly favourable' (more than 50% favourable) condition.⁴

In June 2023 Natural England confirmed the notification of West Penwith Moors and Downs SSSI in Cornwall. This brings over 3000ha of land which is nationally important for nature under protection. This is a positive development for the SSSI network, amidst a generally gloomy picture.

Policy solution: More support for SSSI landowners and managers

Around a third of the SSSI network is owned by private landowners, typically working farmers.⁵ At the moment, there is little advice available for owners and managers of SSSIs to help them to grapple with the on-going management needs of these important nature sites, let alone adapt to the extra challenges that will come with climate change.

Although there has been some financial support available (for example through Farming in Protected Landscapes schemes), the contracts have been limited in scope and duration, restricting their usefulness for landowners.

In the run up to and following the UK's departure from the EU the public were promised that in future public money paid to farmers will be paid in exchange for the delivery of public goods, including the recovery of nature. The Government's roll out of Environmental Land Management (ELM) to deliver on these promises has been slow and lacking in ambition – it has failed to provide farmers with clear, remunerative, sustained options to reward nature-friendly farming on high-value nature sites.⁶

³ https://www.wcl.org.uk/docs/WCL_2023_Progress_Report_on_30x30_in_England.pdf

⁴ https://twitter.com/Unchecked_UK/status/1696453462232387745

⁵ <https://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/47003>

⁶ See RSPB analysis:

<https://community.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/b/rspb-england/posts/farmambition>

<https://community.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/b/rspb-england/posts/payment>



There should be a dedicated, long-term fund to pay for positive SSSI management that delivers demonstrable ecological recovery of these sites. This could be structured through multi-decade ELMs agreements, or through separate funds managed by Natural England.⁷ The new funding scheme should go hand in hand with improved advice, and regulatory requirements not just to prevent damage in an SSSI, but also to ensure they are well managed for nature, including for appropriate public access.

Policy solution: More support for Natural England

Responsibility for assessing and monitoring the condition of a SSSI lies with Natural England, a body that has seen sustained funding costs over the past decade.

In real terms, Natural England is operating on only 62% of the budget it had in 2011, in the face of increased duties to combat the escalating nature and climate emergency. These funding cuts have affected Natural England's fulfilment of its responsibilities towards the SSSI network; almost two thirds of SSSI area in England have not been assessed for a decade or more.⁸

These performance issues in places have led to unfair political criticism of Natural England, a public body working hard to fulfil its duties despite slashed budgets.

Natural England must be properly funded and independently able to carry out its duties, including monitoring, advice to landowners, and if needed, enforcement. Proper assessment of SSSI condition, and work with communities to improve that condition, depends on Natural England having the funds and support needed to carry out this work.

Policy solution: A legal target for SSSI condition

The Government has refused repeated calls from environmental bodies to set an SSSI condition target through its Environment Act powers.

Such a legally-binding target, for at least 75% of the SSSI network to be in favourable condition by 2042, would signal commitment and prioritise action and investment in management and monitoring of the network.

The Government has proved reluctant to set such a legally binding target, settling instead for a non-statutory favourable condition target through Environmental Improvement Plan. Such non-statutory

⁷ See calls for this funding from Nature 2030 campaign, supported by 100 environmental organisations:

<https://www.wcl.org.uk/nature2030.asp>

⁸ <https://community.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/b/rspb-england/posts/knowplace>

targets have been in place since 2018 and have failed to halt a decline in SSSI condition since then. A legally binding target is urgently needed.⁹

SSSIs for nature, people and climate

With the right support for land managers and Natural England, and an effective target to drive improvements, existing SSSIs can flourish and a significant expansion in the network, necessary to meet nature recovery commitments, can take place.

The benefits of such a new approach will go beyond nature. Flourishing, accessible natural spaces will provide a boost to public health, new support mechanisms for land managers will help to revitalise rural communities and the delivery of 30x30 will increase carbon sequestration through nature-based solutions, contributing towards the achievement of Net Zero.

[Wildlife and Countryside Link](#) (Link) is the largest nature coalition in England, bringing together 78 organisations to use their joint voice for the protection of the natural world.

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⁹<https://www.wcl.org.uk/docs/20230116%20Biodiversity%20Targets%20SI%20briefing%20for%20Parliamentarians%20Link%20and%20Greener%20UK%2020.01.23.pdf>