

HAMPSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL**Decision Report**

Decision Maker:	Executive Member for Culture and Recreation
Date:	9 September 2010
Title:	The Condition of Hampshire County Council Managed Sites of Special Scientific Interest
Reference:	1970
Report From:	Director of Culture, Communities and Rural Affairs

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1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. The purpose of this paper is to report on recent changes to the assessed condition of Hampshire County Council managed Sites of Special Scientific Interest
- 1.2. This paper seeks to
 - Inform on the process involved in assessing Sites of Special Scientific Interest and the targets set under the Corporate Biodiversity Action Plan.
 - Report on the progress in achieving these targets.
 - Look at the future options for managing Sites of Special Scientific Interest within the wider context of Hampshire countryside.

2. Contextual information

- 2.1. Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) are the country's very best wildlife and geological sites. They include some of our most spectacular and beautiful habitats - large wetlands teeming with waders and waterfowl, winding chalk rivers, gorse and heather-clad heathlands, flower-rich meadows and windswept shingle beaches.
- 2.2. Hampshire County Council manages 2,012 hectares (4,972 acres) of SSSI, most of this by the Countryside Service. These SSSIs are split into units which Natural England assesses against national standards. The units are then placed into one of 6 categories; Favourable, Unfavourable Recovering, Unfavourable No Change, Unfavourable Declining, Part Destroyed and Destroyed.

- 2.3. From 1 October 2006, all local authorities and other public authorities in England and Wales have a Duty to have regard to the conservation of biodiversity in exercising their functions. The Duty aims to raise the profile and visibility of biodiversity, to clarify existing commitments with regard to biodiversity, and to make it a natural and integral part of policy and decision making. The Duty is set out in Section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act (NERC) 2006, and states that: “*Every public authority must, in exercising its functions, have regard, so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions, to the purpose of conserving biodiversity*”.
- 2.4. It is the Government's Public Service Agreement (PSA) target to have 95% of the SSSI area in Favourable or Recovering condition by December 2010, hence these are known as being in Target Status. This standard has also been adopted by HCC within the Corporate Biodiversity Action Plan 2008 – 2011 (CBAP) and is used for reporting against its Aalborg commitments.
- 2.5. The management of SSSIs can be varied and complex. This can include grazing of common land, water level management of wetlands, creation of habitat such as reedbeds, or scrub management on heathland by volunteers, staff and contractors.
- 2.6. As SSSIs are examples of the very best wildlife sites they deserve, and often get, special treatment to maintain their precious wildlife. Such sites act a repositories for wildlife that, in many cases, will have been more widespread in Hampshire. However it is unsustainable to consider the management of Hampshire's wildlife by solely concentrating on designated sites alone.
- 2.7. Within Natural England's framework document *Securing Biodiversity*, among the aims of the framework is to; *support the restoration of designated sites, including by enhancing the wider countryside in which they sit*. Hampshire Biodiversity Partnership have recently identified Biodiversity Opportunity Areas (BOAs) in order to target where conservation work would be most effective in the wider landscape of Hampshire. BOAs not only provide a focus for delivering action on the ground, but also efficient way of making a real difference on the ground through partnership working. They also help mitigate against impacts of climate change on biodiversity and both the designated sites and the wider BOAs help provide quality places in people want to live and work.

3. Current Figures

- 3.1. In June 2009 the figure for PSA Target Status for the Hampshire County Council SSSIs was at 74.2%. This figure has now increased and is currently 90.6% in Target Status.

	Jun-09	Aug-09	Oct-09	July-10
PSA Target Status	74.2%	76.9%	78.4%	90.6%
Favourable	51.9%	51.4%	53.3%	53.0%
Unfavourable Recovering	22.3%	25.5%	25.0%	37.6%
Unfavourable No Change	11.3%	9.0%	9.0%	5.3%
Unfavourable Declining	14.3%	13.9%	12.5%	4.1%
Part Destroyed/Destroyed	0.2%	0.2%	0.2%	0.0%

- 3.2. This is a little short of the 95% target and a fraction down on the total figures for England which currently stand at 93.9%. We compare very favourably however with the SSSIs in Hampshire as a whole, the figure for which is 88.9%. The figures for Favourable condition also reflect the high standard of work in managing the SSSIs; HCC currently stands at 53.0%, England at 43.0% and Hampshire at 30.8%.

July 2010	England	Hampshire	HCC
PSA Target Status	93.9%	88.9%	90.6%
Favourable	43.0%	30.9%	53.0%
Unfavourable Recovering	51.0%	58.0%	37.6%
Unfavourable No Change	4.1%	3.4%	5.3%
Unfavourable Declining	2.0%	7.6%	4.1%
Part Destroyed/Destroyed	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%

- 3.3. Of the SSSI units within our National Nature Reserves (NNRs) 100% are in Target Status compared with 95.2% for England's NNRs as a whole.

4. Work to Gain this Change

- 4.1. Among the recent work which has resulted in this increase in the percentage in Target Status is the re-grading of 154 hectares (380 acres) of SSSI heathland at Yateley Common Country Park from Declining to Recovering. Here extensive work by staff and volunteers over several years has linked once separate areas of heath by removing trees and cutting scrub.
- 4.2. At Danebury Hillfort removal of invading woodland and the reinstatement of grazing with rare breed sheep has given the site Recovering condition.
- 4.3. Careful management of the coastal grasslands, scrub clearance and grazing at Lymington & Keyhaven Local Nature Reserve has resulted in 31.8% in Recovering and 68.2% in Favourable condition, with all of the site now in Target Status.

5. Future Direction

- 5.1. Maintaining these high standards is an ongoing progress. Habitats are constantly changing and, if left unmanaged, it will be to the detriment of the SSSIs in the majority of cases. Management plans written in consultations

with local communities, Natural England and other partners will ensure that sites are managed appropriately.

- 5.2. Whilst many believe that such special wildlife to be found on SSSIs have an intrinsic value in themselves, it is becoming increasingly recognised that natural environments provide wider benefits to society, and our continuing prosperity. This may be by regulating climate, reducing flooding, promoting good health or providing clean water. These are known as Ecosystem Services. The resourcing of maintaining SSSIs therefore not only benefit the habitats and species present, but contribute to society as a whole.
- 5.3. When planning how sites are managed, it is important to consider the wider countryside in which they sit and how the biodiversity they contain can benefit and contribute toward the wider countryside as well as local communities. Climate change will result in changes to the pattern of species distribution, and reconnecting biodiversity-rich sites to appropriately managed countryside will more readily allow wildlife to adapt to climate change.
- 5.4. In preparing management plans the Countryside Service will consider how the management of its SSSIs and other designated sites can contribute toward supporting the work of habitat restoration in the Biodiversity Opportunity Areas.

6. Recommendation(s)

- 6.1. The continued resourcing of SSSIs is supported and their value recognised in supporting the rich biodiversity of Hampshire, achieving the aims of the Corporate Biodiversity Action Plan and Hampshire County Council's Aalborg commitments.
- 6.2. The management of the SSSIs and other sites of biodiversity importance are considered in the context of the wider countryside and in support of the Biodiversity Opportunity Areas.
- 6.3. All sites are managed with consideration of the Ecosystem Services they provide, among which is their value to the people of Hampshire, and by engaging local communities in their management.

CORPORATE OR LEGAL INFORMATION:**Links to the Corporate Strategy**

Hampshire safer and more secure for all:	no
Corporate Improvement plan link number (if appropriate):	
Maximising well-being:	yes
Corporate Improvement plan link number (if appropriate):	
Enhancing our quality of place:	yes
Corporate Improvement plan link number (if appropriate):	
OR	
This proposal does not link to the Corporate Strategy but, nevertheless, requires a decision because:	

Other Significant Links

Links to previous Member decisions:		
<u>Title</u>	<u>Reference</u>	<u>Date</u>
Direct links to specific legislation or Government Directives		
<u>Title</u>		<u>Date</u>
Natural Environment & Rural Communities Act		2006

Section 100 D - Local Government Act 1972 - background documents

The following documents discuss facts or matters on which this report, or an important part of it, is based and have been relied upon to a material extent in the preparation of this report. (NB: the list excludes published works and any documents which disclose exempt or confidential information as defined in the Act.)

<u>Document</u>	<u>Location</u>
None	

IMPACT ASSESSMENTS:

1. Equalities Impact Assessment:

1.1. N/A

2. Impact on Crime and Disorder:

2.1. N/A

3. Climate Change:

- a) How does what is being proposed impact on our carbon footprint / energy consumption?

N/A

- b) How does what is being proposed consider the need to adapt to climate change, and be resilient to its longer term impacts?

The appropriate management of habitats on designated sites can contribute toward the resilience of biodiversity to climate change. It may also add to local climate regulation, supply insects that act as natural predators and pollinators, reduce pollution and contribute toward the water cycle.