



National Audit Office

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

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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.

PART ONE

The system of Sites of Special Scientific Interest

1.1 A Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) is a valuable area of land whose distinctive character is so significant it has been identified as one of the most important habitats and wildlife areas occurring naturally in England.¹ Over 80 per cent, by area, of England's SSSIs are also of international importance. These include Natura 2000 sites, a Europe-wide network of sites which are internationally important for nature conservation, and Ramsar sites, which are internationally important wetland habitats. Not only do these sites protect species threatened with extinction, but they are attractive and educational places to visit, provide rich research opportunities and contribute to reducing the effects of climate change (see Box 1).

1.2 England has 4,114 SSSIs covering eight per cent of its total land area (see Figure 1).² SSSIs are sub-divided into 21,804 units to reflect the ownership or features of each site. The largest site is The Wash in Lincolnshire covering around 62,000 hectares. The majority of sites are smaller than 100 hectares and the smallest site, just seven square metres, is a roof space used as a roost by lesser horseshoe bats. SSSIs are found in all English regions and details of these sites are available on the internet.³ There are many variations in regional characteristics, for example, the East of England has sites that are affected by rising sea levels while the South East has to manage constraints imposed by development pressures. The South West has to deal with an abundance of common land used by multiple tenants. The regions that border Scotland and Wales have sites that are affected by the different conservation management regimes in those countries.

BOX 1

SSSIs can serve many purposes



The bog orchid is threatened with extinction throughout Europe. The UK has between 25 per cent and 50 per cent of the world's population and all bog orchids in England are protected within SSSI land.



Around 50 per cent¹ of SSSIs are open to the public. Many sites are very popular and are regularly used by the public, for example, Wimbledon Common which is recognised for its heathland.



Blanket bogs act as carbon stores and play a role in absorbing carbon emitted into the atmosphere and limiting the effects of global warming.

NOTE

¹ Natural England, *State of the Natural Environment*, 2008.

¹ Nature Conservancy Council, *Guidelines for selection of biological SSSIs*, 1989.

² The total area of England is 13,294,361 hectares. Total SSSI area is 1,076,986 hectares.

³ Natural England website, <http://www.english-nature.org.uk/special/sssi/search.cfm>. On 1 July 2008, the boundaries for 28 sites had been temporarily removed from the website for routine cartographic update work.

1.3 There are 1,456 SSSIs in Scotland covering a total area of 1,036,000 hectares, or 12.9 per cent of the country's land area. Scottish Natural Heritage has responsibility for safeguarding designated sites and monitors the site as a whole; it does not divide SSSIs into units in the way that Natural England does. The Countryside Council for Wales has the duty to conserve the 1,019 SSSIs in Wales, which cover over 265,000 hectares, over 12 per cent of the country's land area. Seventy-seven per cent of SSSIs in Wales are smaller than 100 hectares. The Countryside Council for Wales aims to monitor, and report on, both the condition of the habitat and the condition of the species for which the site is notified.

1.4 SSSIs are not only found in the countryside. Over 39,000 hectares of SSSI land are in, or near, urban areas. Urban SSSIs are important in making plants and wildlife more accessible to the general public. For example, Wimbledon Common provides a local facility in an urban area. Green spaces, such as SSSIs, have the potential to reduce the risk of flooding to urban areas by allowing rainwater to disperse naturally, and in some places to reduce a "heat island" effect whereby urban air is hotter than that in the countryside.

1.5 Natural England, the non-departmental public body with a remit to conserve and enhance the nation's environment, has a statutory duty to identify these areas (see Box 2). All public bodies and certain private companies (including privatised utilities) have a statutory duty to conserve and enhance the features for which a SSSI has been designated.

BOX 2

Natural England

Background

Statutory nature conservation has a long history in the UK. 1949 saw the creation of the Nature Conservancy. In 1973, it became the Nature Conservancy Council. In 1991, the Nature Conservancy Council was divided into English Nature, Scottish Natural Heritage, and the Countryside Council for Wales. In October 2006, a new non-departmental public body, called Natural England, was formed from a merger of English Nature, the Rural Development Service, and the Land Use and Recreation section of the Countryside Agency.

We refer to Natural England in the report to include the organisation itself and its predecessor bodies.

Strategic objectives

- To conserve and enhance the natural environment.
- To increase public enjoyment, understanding and use of the natural environment.
- To ensure sustainable management and use of the natural environment.
- To secure the future of the natural environment.

Staff and regions

Natural England is divided into nine regions, and employs around 2,500 staff.

1 Distribution of SSSIs by region¹

Region	Number of sites	Total area (hectares)	SSSI area as % of regional area
East Midlands	392	165,228	10
East of England	565	185,240	9
London	36	5,517	3
North East	250	172,208	20
North West	440	268,987	18
South East	692	139,130	7
South West	969	201,730	8
West Midlands	442	28,557	2
Yorkshire and Humber	374	227,012	15
Adjustment for over counting due to SSSIs which span more than one regional boundary	-46	-316,623	
England	4114	1,076,986	8

Source: State of the Natural Environment 2008, Natural England

NOTE

¹ As two SSSIs span three regional boundaries, and a further 42 sites span two regional boundaries, a total of 46 sites are double counted in the regional breakdown above. The effect is to add 316,623 hectares to the regional figures.

1.6 The concept of SSSIs was introduced in 1949 (see Appendix 2 for an overview of relevant legislation). The current process to designate (the scientific term is “to notify”) an area of land as a SSSI was introduced in 1981 under the Wildlife and Countryside Act. A potential SSSI can be identified from numerous sources, for example, by a conservation adviser or voluntary organisation. The notification specifies the flora, fauna, geological or physiographical features for which the land is of special interest. Opinion is informed by scientific guidelines relating to biological and geological sites. Natural England then informs the landowners/occupiers and a range of public bodies. Confirmation of a SSSI takes place after public consultation and consideration by the Board of Natural England. Once a SSSI has been confirmed, all land within it is subject to restrictions and landowners/occupiers must obtain permission from Natural England before undertaking any operation that might affect the features of the site.

1.7 Not all SSSIs are in a healthy state owing, for example, to poor land management (such as inappropriate heather burning which damages moorland), neglect (overgrown scrub can smother meadows), or negative impact from the spread of non-native species (such as rhododendron). Natural England is responsible for assessing the condition of each SSSI unit in accordance with national guidelines which set out the criteria against which the health of SSSIs can be assessed and describe the conservation actions required for a range of protected species and habitats.⁴ In doing so, it uses the categories of condition illustrated in **Figure 2**.

1.8 In 2000, the Department for Environment, Transport and the Regions, now the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (the Department) agreed a Public Service Agreement (PSA) target to bring 95 per cent of the land area of SSSIs into a favourable or recovering condition by December 2010. This target supports the UK’s international obligations under the Rio Convention on Biological Diversity of 1992 to reduce biodiversity loss. In 2007, the 95 per cent target became an indicator of the Department’s Departmental Strategic Objective under the PSA 28 for the natural environment. As an existing PSA target, however, it will continue to be reported on until 2010. There is a Departmental SSSI PSA Programme Board which tracks progress towards the target.

2 The five broad categories Natural England uses to describe the condition of a unit

Condition	Definition
● Favourable	Habitat and species’ features are in a healthy state and meet the conservation objectives.
● Unfavourable recovering	Units are not yet fully conserved but all the necessary management measures are in place. Provided that the recovery work is sustained, the SSSI will reach favourable condition in time.
● Unfavourable no change	The special features of a unit are not being adequately conserved.
● Unfavourable declining	The special features of a unit are not adequately conserved and are deteriorating.
● Partially destroyed/ Destroyed	There has been fundamental and lasting damage which means the special features have been lost permanently.

Source: National Audit Office summary based on Natural England¹ and national guidelines

NOTE

¹ English Nature, *Target 2010 – The Condition of England’s Sites of Special Scientific Interest in 2005, 2005*.

1.9 Records from December 2002 showed that 383,404 hectares (40 per cent of land covered by SSSIs) was in “favourable condition” and 118,576 hectares (12 per cent) was in “unfavourable recovering condition”. Unfavourable recovering condition is where an area has not yet reached a healthy state but, as all steps have been taken to address the causes of damage, it is considered to be recovering. Improving the condition of a site can take a long time. For example, heather damaged by inappropriate burning can take 25 years to return to favourable condition and woodland can take even longer to recover (**see Box 3**).

⁴ Known as Common Standards Monitoring guidance. Internet, www.jncc.gov.uk/csm

BOX 3**A site with long recovery timescales**

Charterhouse to Eashing is a lowland woodland SSSI in Surrey. The condition of the unit has been affected by disease and agricultural pollution. It was assessed in 2005 as unfavourable recovering due to the effect of pollution from nearby arable farmland and a lack of mature trees. While the pollution has been controlled, it will take a long time to disperse and increasing the number of mature trees may not happen until the next century.

1.10 SSSIs are on land owned or occupied by private individuals and a range of organisations, including private companies, non-government organisations, and local and central government. In 2003, the Department established the Major Landowners Group. It comprises: Natural England, the Environment Agency, water companies, Forestry Commission, the Ministry of Defence, National Park Authorities, National Trust, Wildlife Trusts, Ports and Harbour Authorities, Crown Estate, RSPB, Association of Drainage Authorities, and local authorities. Natural England works in partnership with individual landowners/occupiers and the Major Landowners Group to improve and maintain the condition of SSSIs, using five approaches to deliver change (**Figure 3**).

3 The five approaches Natural England uses to improve and maintain the condition of SSSIs

Lever	Definition
Regulation	Use of legislative powers to prevent damage to SSSIs.
Incentives	Financial incentives are offered in return for positive management practices that maintain and improve the condition of SSSIs.
Advice	Provision of advice to assist those wishing to undertake operations that might affect protected species and habitats.
Policy and Advocacy	Using wider policy initiatives to influence those responsible for managing land of special interest.
Practical action	Active intervention to influence the way in which the environment evolves.

Source: National Audit Office

1.11 This report examines progress against the target to deliver 95 per cent of the land area of SSSIs into favourable or recovering condition by 2010 and the costs of maintenance. The report focuses on:

- Part 2 – Progress against the target:
 - Performance in improving condition of SSSI land by habitat type and across the regions, and whether the target will be achieved.
 - The appropriateness of Natural England's approach to assessing the condition of units.
- Part 3 – Working with landowners/occupiers:
 - Coordinating the Major Landowners Group.
 - Financial incentives.
 - Relationships with private landowners/occupiers.
- Part 4 – The cost of maintaining progress:
 - The cost of delivering the target.
 - Opportunities to demonstrate wider benefits of SSSIs and secure other sources of funding.
 - The scope for Natural England to improve efficiency.

1.12 Our report is based on a number of methodologies. We assessed the data on SSSI condition produced by Natural England between 2002 and 2008; interviewed key players in the Department, Natural England, the Major Landowners Group, and non-government organisations; visited each of the regions to conduct interviews and sample case files; carried out a landowner/occupier survey; and employed consultants from Oxford index Ltd to assess the SSSI process on 27 units. A full description of our methodological approach is given in Appendix 1.

PART TWO

Progress against the 2010 target

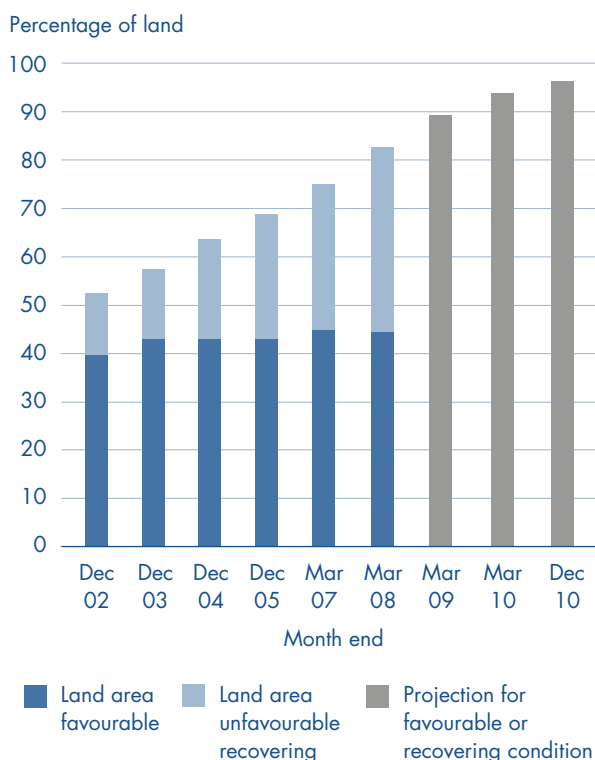
Land area of SSSIs in target condition

2.1 The land area of sites in target condition has increased from 501,981 hectares (52 per cent) in December 2002 to 888,706 hectares (83 per cent) by the end of March 2008. Of the 888,706 hectares in target condition, 45 per cent was in favourable condition and 38 per cent was in unfavourable recovering condition. The majority of the improvement has been in the unfavourable recovering category, reflecting the time it can take for an area to reach a healthy state (see Figure 4). Eighty-nine per cent of land area in favourable condition has remained so since 2002, and 61 per cent of land area not in target condition in 2002 has improved. The Department and Natural England expect to meet the PSA target by December 2010.

2.2 In 2004, Natural England completed a review of all units not in favourable condition to identify: who owned the land, what measures were needed to bring the land into favourable condition, and who had responsibility for implementing these measurements. Natural England classifies these measures into “remedies” and records this information on a database developed as part of the Remedies Project. Natural England considers this project to have been instrumental in delivering the improvements to site condition, particularly for focussing the actions of the larger landowners. In August 2003, there were 7,525 units (444,949 hectares) which required action to address adverse condition.⁵ Natural England used the Remedies Project to allocate resources and negotiate actions required with those responsible. By June 2008, the number of units requiring action to address adverse condition had reduced to 3,422 (127,511 hectares).

4 Percentage of land in favourable or recovering condition by year

The major increase in condition has been within the unfavourable recovering category.



Source: National Audit Office analysis of Natural England data, 2008

NOTE

The change of month end reflects a change made by Natural England to report condition by financial year rather than by calendar year.

⁵ CJC Consulting, *Cost Effectiveness Study of Approaches for Delivery of PSA Target Relating to SSSIs*. Final report for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, 2004.

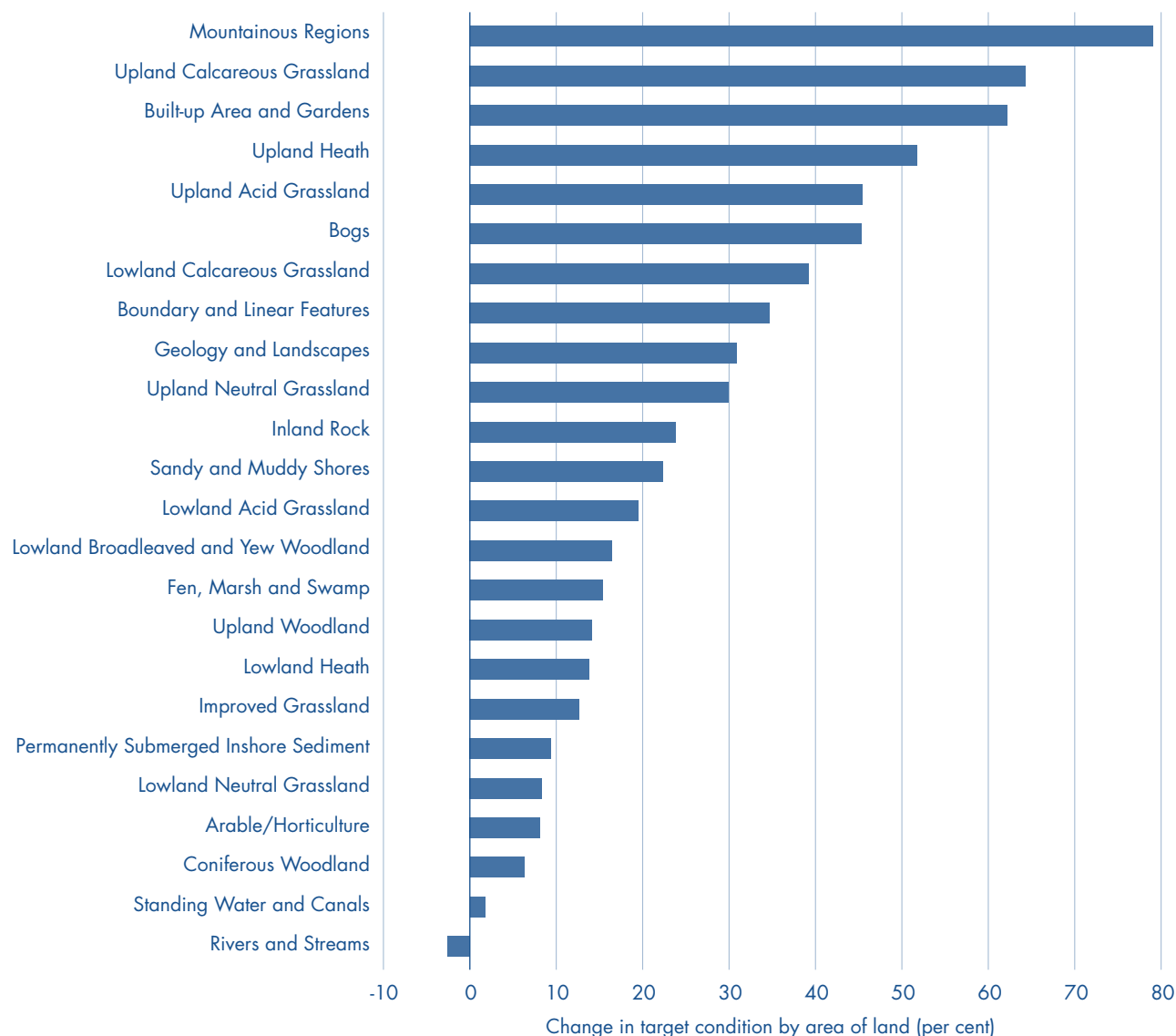
2.3 Natural England's assessment of SSSI land shows improvements in all types of habitat except rivers and streams (see Figure 5). Pollution and silt from agricultural run-off can accumulate on river beds affecting the water flow and quality, and changing the condition for plants and animals. The habitat's complexity is compounded by the number and diversity of bodies involved in its management. As a consequence, Natural England has estimated that only 39 per cent of rivers and streams will reach target condition by 2010.

2.4 In 2005, using the Remedies Project, Natural England identified ten broad habitat types⁶ where improvements in condition would have a significant impact on the 2010 target. Of these, sandy and muddy shores, upland heaths, and bogs accounted for over 70 per cent of all SSSI land area not in target condition. The largest improvements since 2005, by land area, have been in these three habitats. Bogs and upland heath remain the habitats where the greatest gains in land area toward the target can be achieved: 39,831 hectares and 40,006 hectares respectively.

5 The change in condition of habitats from 2002 to 2008

All but one habitat, rivers and streams, has improved in condition since 2002.

Habitat Type



Source: National Audit Office analysis of Natural England data, June 2008

⁶ Bogs, upland heath, sandy and muddy shores, lowland broadleaved and yew woodland, lowland neutral grassland, lowland heath, fen, marsh and swamp, upland acid grassland, standing waters and canals, and rivers and streams. English Nature, *Target 2010*.

2.5 Natural England has allocated annual targets for the contribution each region will make towards delivery of the national target. The contribution required is based on the predominant habitat types and the different challenges that each part of the country faces (**Figure 6**).

2.6 The London region has the greatest divergence between the condition of its SSSIs in June 2008 and its 2010 projection. London's largest site, Richmond Park, which accounts for 22 per cent of SSSI land in the region, is in unfavourable condition owing to undergrazing and problems caused by dog faeces and litter. Natural England plans to re-introduce cattle, but addressing canine and human activity on public land is problematic and so this site is unlikely to reach target condition in the near future.

2.7 Natural England is taking steps to agree land management agreements to overcome the two major causes for sites not being in a favourable condition: overgrazing and moor burning (**see Figure 7**). Around 14 per cent of SSSI land, however, is being adversely affected by air or water pollution which will be difficult to resolve. For example, Epping Forest in Essex is located close to the M25 and consequently suffers from exposure to damaging traffic emissions.

Natural England's assessment of SSSIs

2.8 The approach to assessing the condition of a SSSI throughout the UK is determined by the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC), who produced the Common Standards Monitoring guidance.⁷ This Committee, established in 1990,⁸ is the forum through which the UK conservation bodies⁹ deliver their statutory responsibilities on biodiversity for the UK and internationally.

2.9 Accurately determining the condition of a site depends upon four factors:

- A clear understanding of what the SSSI is seeking to conserve.
- Experienced advisers conducting the assessment in accordance with the guidance.
- Regular monitoring visits at the appropriate time of year.
- Comprehensive record-keeping.

⁷ Internet, <http://www.jncc.gov.uk/page-2199>.

⁸ Under the Environmental Protection Act 1990.

⁹ The Countryside Council for Wales, Natural England, Scottish Natural Heritage, and Environmental Heritage Services for Northern Ireland.

2.10 The JNCC has been producing a range of Common Standards Monitoring guidance since 1998 covering all habitats, flora and fauna. The guidance has been published in stages; 29 guides had been published by October 2006 and the final guide, on invertebrates, was published in March 2008. The Common Standards Monitoring guidance stipulates that conservation objectives should be in place for each SSSI. These objectives comprise: a definitive list of features; a description and map of the extent of habitat and species; criteria to judge the condition of the features; and any issues to be addressed in order for the unit to reach favourable condition.

2.11 Analysis of Natural England's data shows that in 2008, 1,444 SSSIs (35 per cent) did not have conservation objectives in place, partly because Natural England considered that this process could not be done until the final Common Standards Monitoring guide was published in March 2008. Without conservation objectives there may not be a comprehensive record of all the interest features, there will be no accurate assessment of the actions needed to improve the area, nor a baseline from which to measure changes in condition. Natural England cannot, therefore, be sure how far from favourable condition some units may be. There are instances of good practice, for example unit maps showing, in detail, the long term plans required to bring the unit into favourable condition, and timescales with milestones specifying the expected feature responses to these plans.

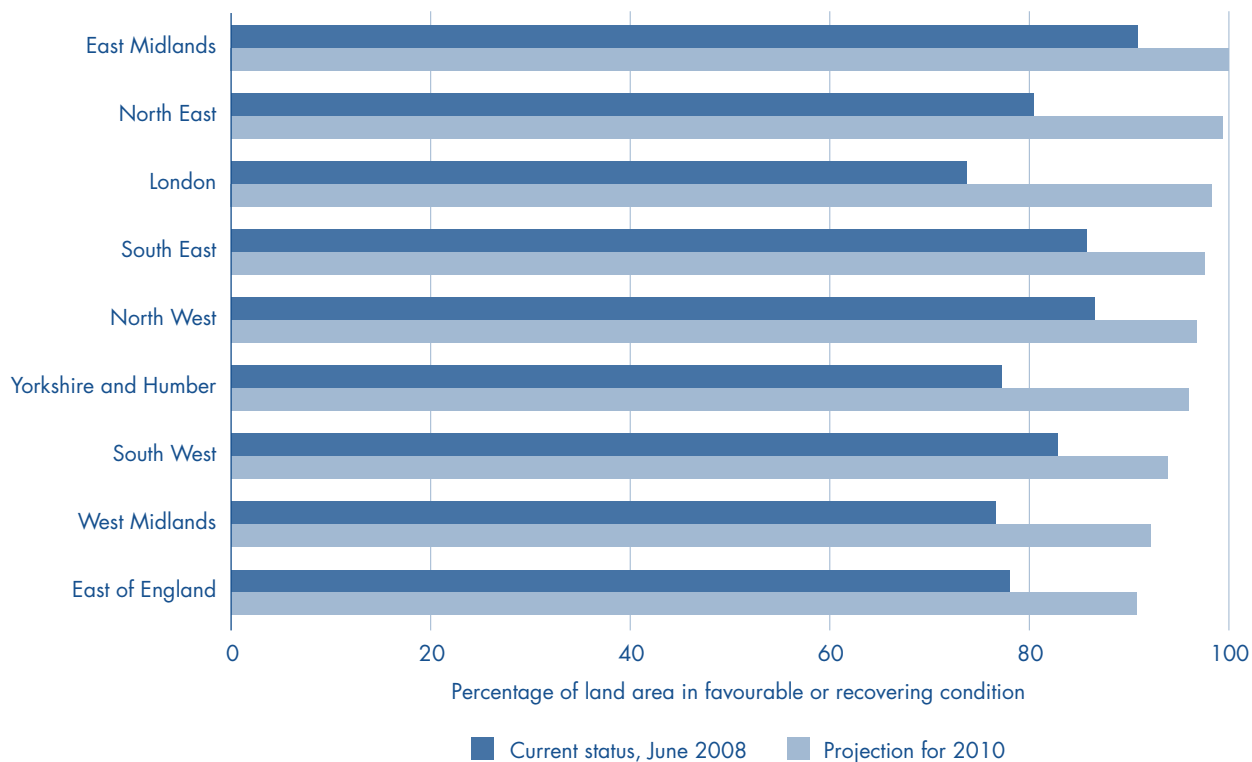
2.12 A SSSI should conserve all of the notified features within it. From our file reviews and our site visits, however, interest features were not being comprehensively assessed in all cases. In two cases (River Wensum and Lathkill Dale), the features had not been assessed during the last condition assessment.

2.13 Condition assessments are undertaken by the conservation advisers. There are around 260 full time equivalent conservation advisers in Natural England, and many have degrees in subjects such as countryside/environmental management, environmental sciences and ecology. The assessment involves selecting a sample of areas and measuring conditions within the area against a checklist (**see example at Box 4 on page 16**). Our visits and interviews with conservation advisers confirmed that they adopt a professional approach to the assessment and there was no influence from their managers to write a biased report so that their region could reach its target. The regions did not, however, have any regular peer review process to validate the judgements exercised in condition assessments.

6 The percentage of land area currently in favourable or recovering condition and the corresponding projection for 2010 by region

The projected contribution to the 2010 target varies across the regions.

Region

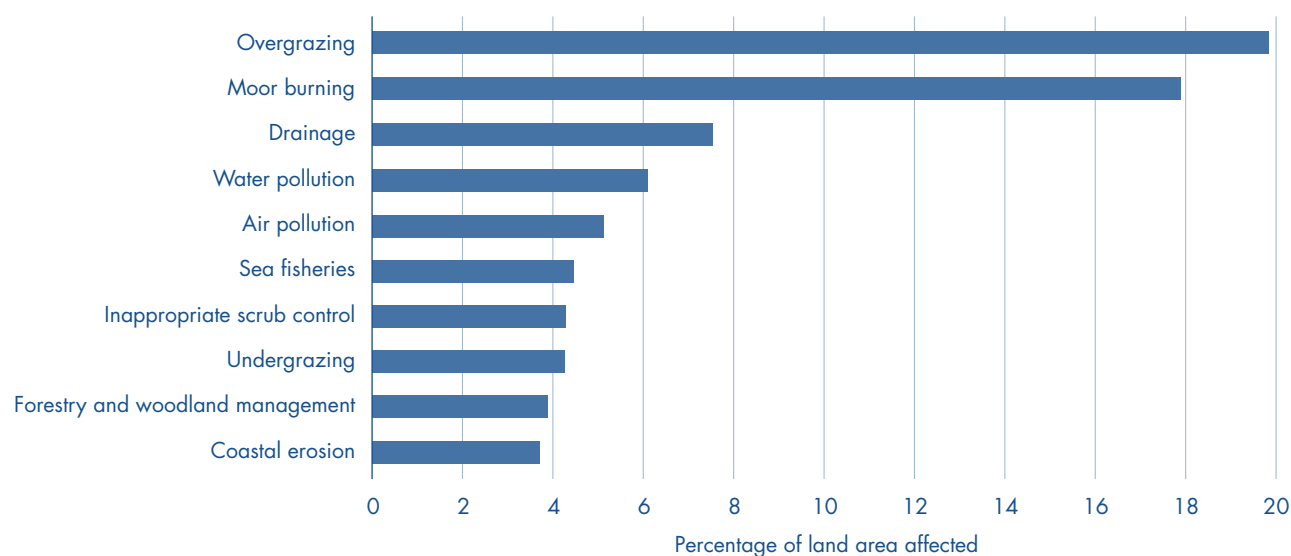


Source: National Audit Office analysis of Natural England data, June 2008

7 The top ten reasons for adverse condition

Overgrazing and moor burning are the main reasons that some land area remains in unfavourable condition.

Top ten adverse condition reasons



Source: National Audit Office analysis of Natural England data, June 2008

BOX 4**Extract from a checklist of favourable condition attributes for a unit of lowland dry heath**

- No decline in extent of habitat.
- Between one per cent and ten per cent bare ground.
- Between 25 per cent and 90 per cent dwarf shrub cover.
- At least two dwarf shrub species present in all stages of growth.
- Presence of fine-leaf grasses and flowering herbaceous plants.
- Less than 15 per cent trees/scrub.
- Less than 25 per cent common gorse.
- Less than one per cent exotic species, such as rhododendron.

2.14 According to the Common Standards Monitoring guidance, the condition of a unit should be assessed at least every six years. In most instances, more frequent assessments are not necessary to determine changes in condition, whereas delays increase the risk that the existing assessment becomes out of date. As there are almost 22,000 units, the six-year cycle implies an annual programme of around 3,700 condition assessments. According to Natural England's data, 5,187 units (24 per cent), which equates to 216,107 hectares, had not been assessed within six years of the last assessment.

2.15 The guidance sets out the times of year to undertake a condition assessment for each habitat type and the features that should be assessed. Rivers and streams, for example, should be visited between mid-June and late-August to assess the composition of the vegetation. Natural England's database, ENSIS, does not distinguish between the date of a conservation adviser's visit to a

unit, and the date the unit condition is changed. This is important as the dates can vary widely, particularly if the condition is changed because appropriate management has been arranged. Natural England cannot rely, therefore, on the date entered into ENSIS to check that assessments are undertaken at the appropriate time of year. For example, out of the 27 units we visited, it appeared from ENSIS that only six (22 per cent) had been assessed at the appropriate time of year.

2.16 Some staff maintained very comprehensive case notes and records of contact with landowners/occupiers. There is no systematic approach to keeping case notes, however, and there were inconsistencies in the type of information recorded. Twenty-five per cent of units in our file review did not clearly map the location and extent of individual features. Natural England's database has limitations in recording all interest features on a site, and we found it difficult to ascertain the full set of SSSI features on each unit we looked at.

2.17 Forty per cent of the files we reviewed showed that the condition assessment had been carried out prior to the relevant guidance being issued¹⁰ and were based on judgement. There is a risk of inconsistency in approach and a lack of evidence to show how judgements on condition were arrived at. In these cases there were incomplete records of what features had been reviewed and their condition.

2.18 Natural England's records did not accurately describe the habitat features on four out of the 27 units (15 per cent) we visited. Blackheath unit 3 and Wimbledon Common unit 7 were recorded as heath but were effectively woodland, Messingham Heath unit 1 was treated as acid grassland but recorded as heath, and Black Mountain unit 1 was described as bog although this feature only covered ten per cent of the area.

¹⁰ The guidance for the four habitats we examined was issued at the following times: Heathland, Bogs, Woodland – February 2004; Rivers and Streams – March 2005.

2.19 Natural habitats and the wildlife they support can change over time. Sixty-three per cent of SSSIs date from before 1984, and there is a risk that some may no longer contain the features for which they were notified. Processes exist to review all geological SSSIs to make sure that they continue to reach the standards outlined in the selection guidelines,¹¹ but no such review has been carried out on biological sites. During our fieldwork, Natural England staff commented that some sites do not meet SSSI standards, but were not aware of any plans to review these sites.

2.20 Since 2000, Natural England has been able to amend notifications to reflect the changing nature of biodiversity and can denotify sites if features are lost, but not those considered to be of European importance. Between 2001 and 2008, 23 sites (one per cent) were re-classified following changes in features (see the example in Box 5), only one site has been partially denotified, and 55 new sites have been notified.

BOX 5

Changes to a site over time

Attenborough Gravel Pits, Nottinghamshire, was first designated as a site in 1964 because of its importance as a refuge for over-wintering waterfowl and to sustain an important breeding bird community. Use of the site by birds has changed and the features for which it was originally classed as important are no longer present but have been replaced by new species of equal importance. These new features are not listed on the original designation and, accordingly, Natural England is re-classifying the site so that the important features are formally recorded.

11 Internet, <http://www.jncc.gov.uk/page-2303> and <http://www.jncc.gov.uk/page-2317>

PART THREE

Working with landowners

3.1 Twenty-nine per cent of land area notified as SSSIs is in the care of 32,000 individual landowners/occupiers (see Figure 8).¹² The rest is the responsibility of private companies, non-government organisations, and central and local government, which form the Major Landowners Group. In respect of SSSIs, some of these bodies have a dual role: to deliver their share of SSSI land into favourable or recovering condition, and to carry out their regulatory duties with regard to conserving and enhancing SSSIs.

The Department's Major Landowners Group

3.2 Natural England plays a major role in coordinating the work of the members of the Department's Major Landowners Group. Of the Group members we spoke to, ten agreed that the PSA target was a priority for their organisation.¹³ Using data from Natural England's Remedies Project the Group has a programme of work in place to deliver the PSA target. Since 2003, the performance of the Group has improved from 56 per cent of land in favourable or recovering condition to 85 per cent in 2008 (Figure 9).

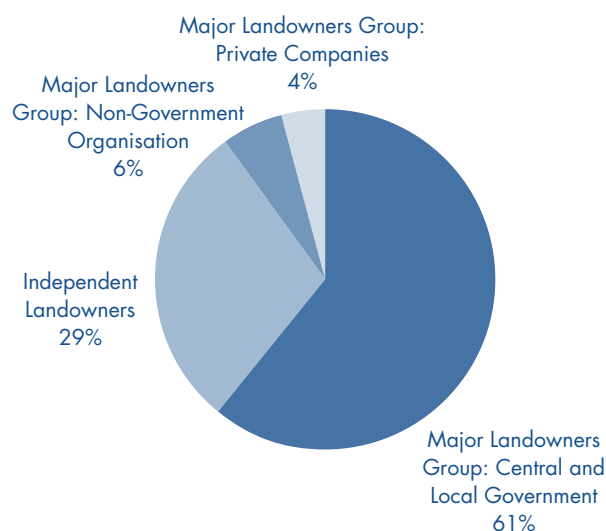
3.3 The Major Landowners Group meets every four months and monitors progress towards the target and the condition of the SSSIs for which they are responsible. We examined attendance at the Group and for the last two years there has been limited representation from the Local Government Association and the Association of Drainage Authorities. Owing to the autonomous nature of each local authority and Internal Drainage Board, Natural England had experienced difficulties engaging them collectively. Instead, Natural England works with the larger landowning local authorities and Internal Drainage Boards at a local level.

¹² English Nature, *Target 2010*.

¹³ The Association of Drainage Authorities did not specify its priorities.

8 Percentage of SSSI land owned by various bodies

The Major Landowners Group is responsible for 71 per cent of land covered by SSSIs.

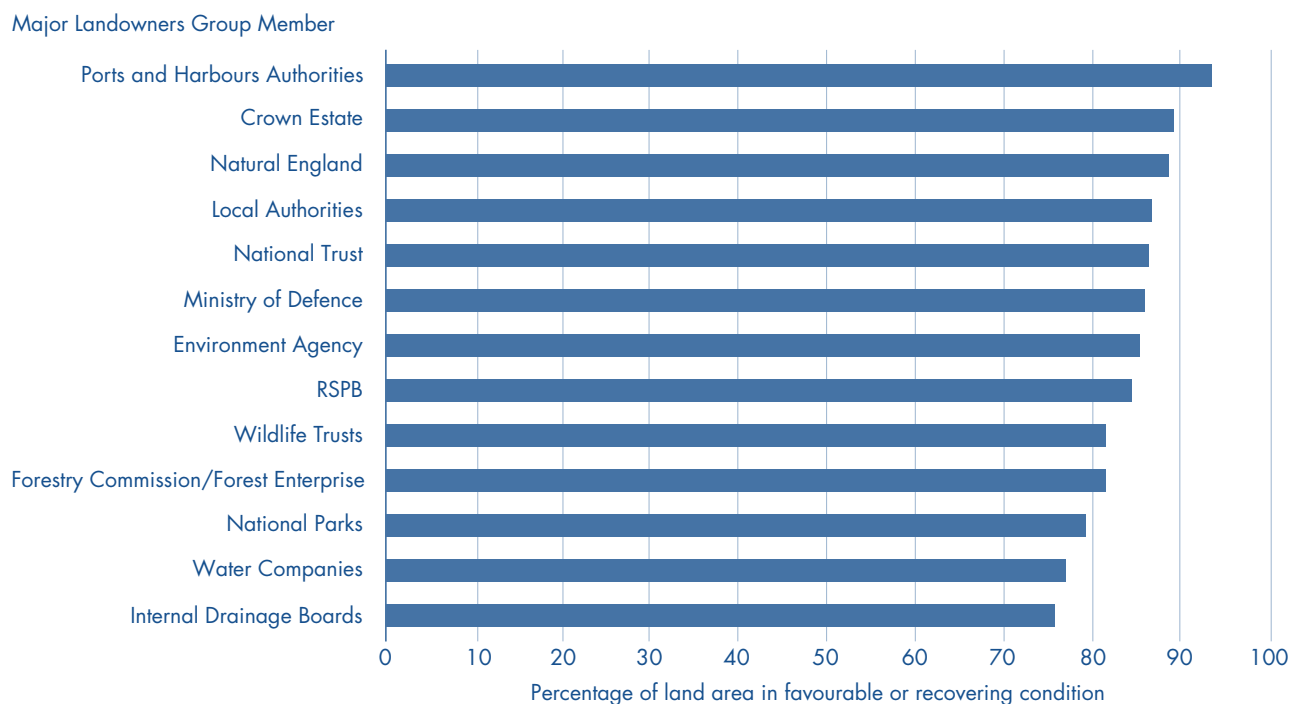


Source: Natural England data, 2008

Landowners/occupiers' responsibilities in respect of land notified as SSSIs

3.4 As guardians of SSSIs, landowners/occupiers are required to maintain their land in a condition that does not diminish its special interest features. The challenge for Natural England is to encourage landowners/occupiers to adopt practices that enhance the environment but also allow them to manage the land in a way that is economically viable. For example, in upland areas, inappropriate burning of heather can cause damage to heathland. Natural England works with the Moorland Association to ascertain an appropriate approach to heather burning and then agrees this with landowners/occupiers.

9 Condition of the SSSI land owned by the Major Landowners Group bodies in May 2008



Source: Natural England data, October 2008

3.5 Our survey of landowners/occupiers showed that 85 per cent of respondents were aware of the implications of owning land within a SSSI, particularly in respect of ongoing management activities. Twenty-nine per cent of the respondents to our survey owned the land prior to notification. The remainder bought land which was already part of a SSSI. The majority of respondents (89 per cent) were aware of legal protection afforded to the land and 79 per cent had been informed about the restrictions this status entails.

3.6 A study commissioned by the Scottish Executive suggested that SSSI notification had not had any significant effect on land values.¹⁴ The conclusions of the study cannot be easily applied to England because a high proportion of Scottish sites are remote from population centres and therefore not subject to demands from development, which can have a significant impact on land values. Whilst it is difficult to establish whether the notification of a SSSI has an adverse impact on land value, there are benefits in owning a SSSI. Such land, for example, is exempt from inheritance tax.¹⁵ SSSIs also provide economic benefits through tourism.

Incentives to encourage positive land management

3.7 In addition to the protection afforded by legislation, financial incentives may be available to landowners/occupiers who enter into contractual management agreements to conserve SSSIs. In June 2008, 677,020 hectares (63 per cent of SSSI land) were supported by an incentive scheme.

3.8 Incentives can be an effective method of encouraging landowners/occupiers to change their working practices to improve the condition of their land. Overgrazing is a typical problem and a respondent to our survey told us that the “*agreement we have on the common land has worked well. The money we received has helped cover the costs of wintering the sheep away from the common.*” Take-up of incentives is voluntary and they are time-limited. Incentives run for up to ten years, which may not be long enough for some areas to recover to favourable condition. In such cases renewal of the agreements will be needed.

¹⁴ Scottish Executive Central Research Unit; *Nature Conservation Designation and Land Values, Countryside and Natural Heritage Research Programme Research Findings No. 22, 2002.*

¹⁵ Inheritance Tax Act 1984.

3.9 Prior to 2005, funding for incentives came from four schemes. Three were part of the wider English Rural Development Programme: the Environmentally Sensitive Areas Scheme (which encouraged farmers to enhance and sustain the environment); the Countryside Stewardship Scheme (which encouraged farmers to enhance and conserve targeted landscapes and habitats); and the Woodland Grant Scheme. The fourth was the Wildlife Enhancement Scheme which was specifically targeted at SSSIs and funded by Natural England, and which ran until 2007. The Environmentally Sensitive Areas and Countryside Stewardship Schemes were replaced in 2005 by Environmental Stewardship, comprising Entry Level and Higher Level strands (which provides funding to farmers who deliver effective environmental land management). At the same time, the English Woodland Grant Scheme was introduced (for the creation of new woodland). These incentives receive matching funding from the EU. Natural England plans to introduce the Conservation and Enhancement Scheme in 2008 to enable payments to be made on land that is not eligible for Environmental Stewardship (see Figure 10).

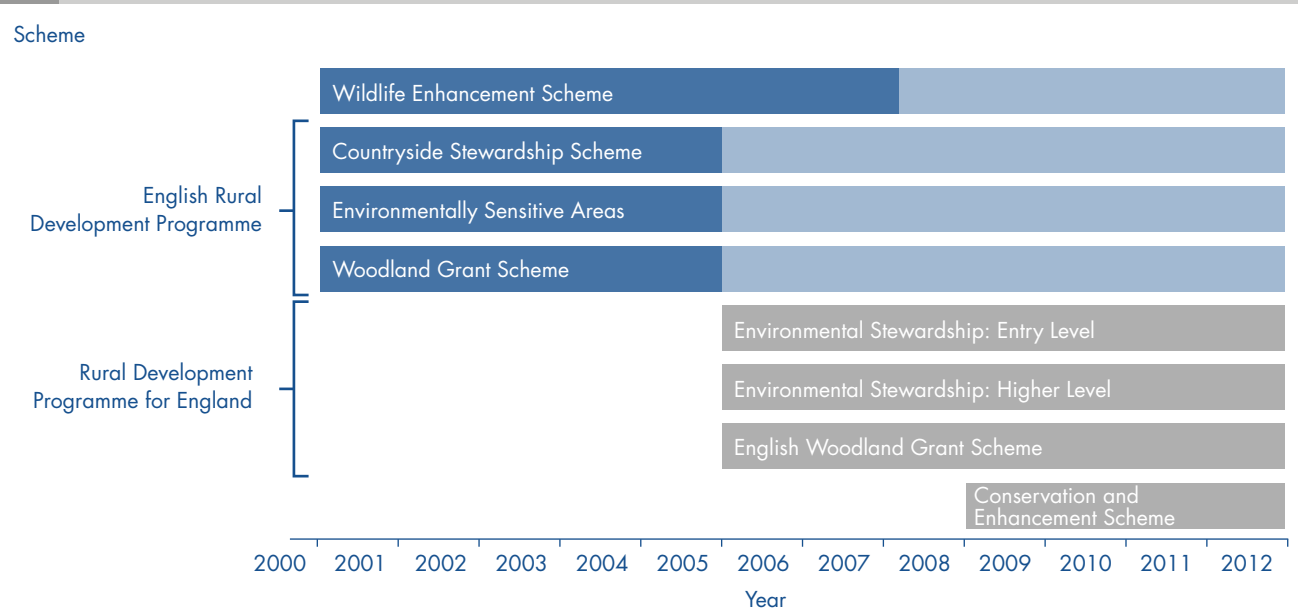
3.10 Natural England has targeted the use of Higher Level Environmental Stewardship at geographical areas which meet the five objectives of this funding. These objectives are: wildlife conservation; landscape quality and character; protection of natural resource and historic environment; access; and understanding of the countryside. Natural England has calculated

that 97 per cent of SSSI land falls within Higher Level Stewardship target areas and is approaching those landowners who are eligible for incentives but are not yet in a management agreement. The remaining three per cent of SSSI land is not eligible for Higher Level Stewardship, for example coastlines. Natural England has estimated that around 27 per cent of agri-environment scheme funding will be used to support the SSSI target.

3.11 Sixty-six per cent of respondents to our survey were in receipt of incentives, but in 71 per cent of cases, they considered that the funding did not cover the full costs of looking after the SSSI. From our discussions with landowners/occupiers it appears that some protect their SSSI at their own cost. The Country Land and Business Association, for example, said that the scheme did not adequately cover the costs incurred by its members, particularly with regard to rising commodity prices.

3.12 It can take around 20 days to process a Higher Level Stewardship agreement, compared with around two days for the Wildlife Enhancement Scheme. Agreeing a Higher Level Stewardship agreement involves preparation work (four days); most require a Farm Environment Plan (six days); technical assessments (eight days); and administrative work (two days). The complexity of applying for the Higher Level Stewardship may deter some applicants and Natural England is now supporting landowners/occupiers by helping them through the application process.

10 The funding of incentives comes from eight separate schemes



Source: National Audit Office

3.13 The Rural Payments Agency is responsible for checking whether landowners/occupiers are complying with the conditions for receiving incentives under all agri-environment schemes. Natural England advises the Agency of landowners/occupiers that are at risk of non-compliance so that its inspectors can take such factors into account in selecting which cases to examine. For all other schemes, Natural England carries out checks to confirm that the actions agreed are being taken, but there is some inconsistent record-keeping in relation to these checks.

Maintaining Relationships

3.14 Close collaboration with landowners/occupiers is an effective way to encourage better management of SSSI land. In 26 out of the 27 sites we visited, a good relationship was a key ingredient in protecting sites. Our survey of landowners/occupiers revealed that 72 per cent have a single point of contact in Natural England. Some of the landowners/occupiers were concerned, however, that changes in Natural England staff undermined relationships which then took a long time to re-establish. Some respondents to the survey also held these concerns: *“you never see the same person twice”*; and *“...confused – since I have many points of contact”*.

3.15 Natural England’s conservation advisers have a dual role to play: building relationships with landowners/occupiers and regulating their activities. There is a potential for conflict between these roles. Until 2000, Natural England did not have the power to enforce positive management agreements and so, historically, it has relied on building relationships. This can result in landowners/occupiers taking years to enter into agreements. For example, a heath we visited in Humberside was overgrown by trees and its condition was declining. Natural England has been trying to negotiate better management with the landowners/occupiers since the 1980s but there is no agreement in place.

Natural England has not made full use of enforcement powers

3.16 Natural England has the power to enforce positive management practices where landowners/occupiers refuse to comply with action required to protect their SSSI (**Box 6**).

3.17 A management scheme has been issued only once, at Kings and Bakers Wood, Bedfordshire (see **Box 7**). Natural England has approved a new regulatory strategy which sets out timescales for dealing with non-compliance and, following regional pilots, intends to implement this during 2009.

3.18 Natural England uses a range of enforcement mechanisms in response to damage to SSSIs, from warning letters to legal action. Natural England has successfully prosecuted landowners/occupiers and third parties who cause wilful damage to SSSIs. For example, a landowner at Lune Forest in County Durham caused damage by constructing tracks across the land, creating drainage and building a car park. In January 2008, the court found the defendant guilty, fined him £50,000 and imposed a Restoration Order requiring him to remove the track and car park, and restore the SSSI to its former condition. Costs of almost £238,000 were awarded to Natural England.

BOX 6

Natural England has powers to deal with non-compliant landowners/occupiers

Natural England negotiates a **Management Agreement** with individual landowners/occupiers. This explains what the landowner/occupier needs to do to conserve the SSSI and details the incentive payment to which they are entitled. It is a contractual agreement.

Where a landowner/occupier refuses to enter into an agreement, Natural England may issue a **Management Scheme**. This is a formal notice of the management that the area requires and the incentive payment that is attached to it.

Failure to act on a Management Scheme can result in Natural England issuing a **Management Notice**. Non-compliance with a Management Notice is an offence which may lead to enforcement action being taken. A court can issue an order instructing the landowner/occupier to comply or allow Natural England to carry out the management.

The final stage in the legal process is for Natural England to exercise its power for **compulsory land purchase**.

BOX 7

Management scheme at Kings and Bakers Wood, Bedfordshire

In 2001, part of Kings and Bakers Wood, Bedfordshire, was significantly felled. The following year this area was sold. Natural England tried to negotiate management of the area with the new owners but received no response. In March 2004, a management agreement supported by incentives was offered. There was no response, and a management scheme to clear some of the felled trees to allow regeneration was issued in July 2004. In June 2006, the site was assessed and recorded as favourable.

PART FOUR

The cost of maintaining progress made after 2010

Future cost of maintaining SSSIs

4.1 In the absence of reliable records of expenditure on SSSIs, the Department undertook a review in 2007 to estimate the amount spent each year since 2000-01. The Department sought information from the other public bodies involved: Natural England, Forestry Commission, Environment Agency and Ministry of Defence. The Department asked each of these bodies to estimate how much public money they had spent on SSSI management from 2000-01 to 2006-07, and to estimate the costs required to deliver the target by 2010 (see Figure 11).

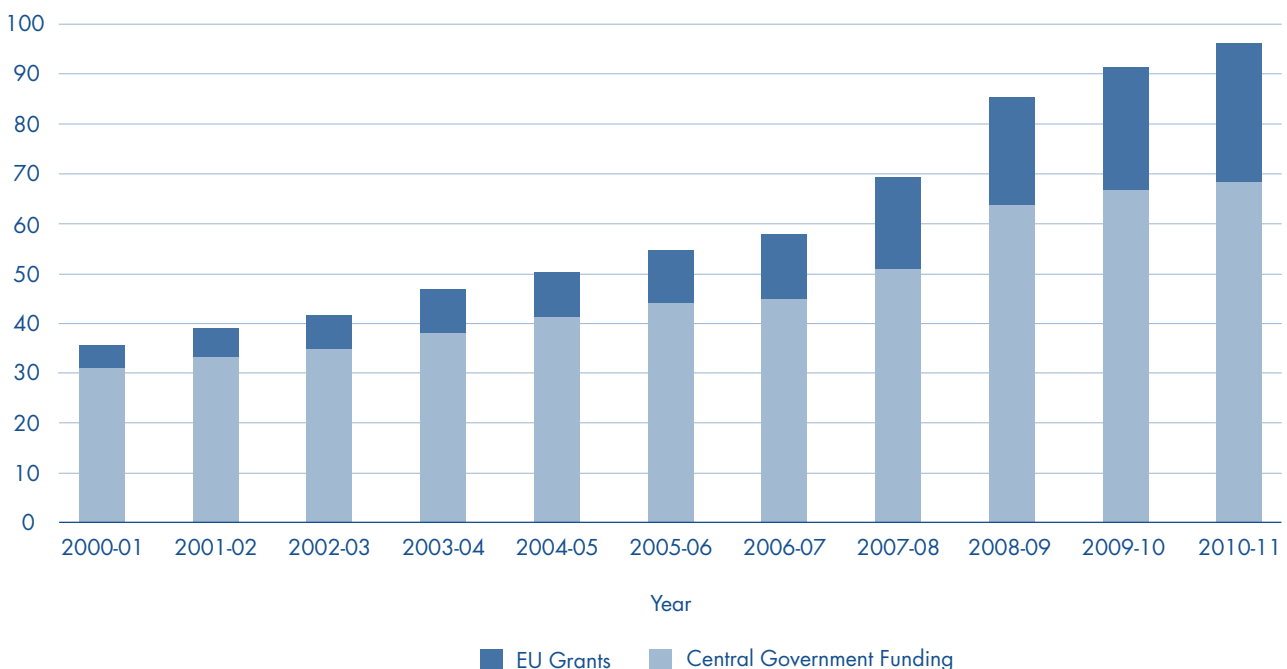
This may provide a reasonable approximation of expenditure on SSSIs, but we have not been able to validate these figures.

4.2 It is anticipated that public costs will increase in 2008-09 to £85 million. The additional costs are due to expected increases in expenditure on incentives, and expenditure by the Environment Agency implementing Water Level Management Plans and habitat creation on the coast. In order to deliver the target, the Department estimates that annual expenditure will need to increase to £96 million by 2010-11.

11 Estimates of central government funding by year

The Department's estimates show that central government funding increases towards 2010.

Estimate of Spend (£m)

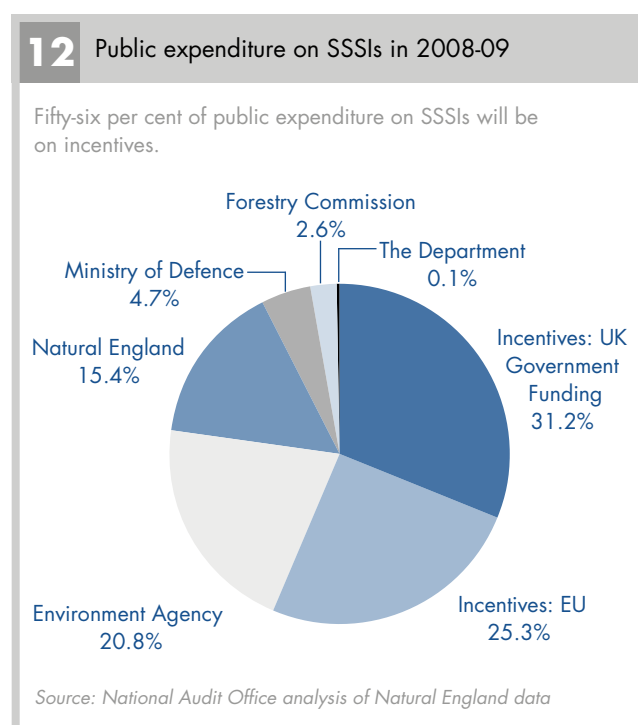


Source: National Audit Office analysis of the Department's and Natural England's data

4.3 The exercise undertaken by the Department estimated that, at March 2008, £395 million had been spent on managing SSSIs since the target was introduced. EU grants accounted for £77 million and the remainder came from central government. This expenditure is equivalent to an average of nearly £54 million per annum at 2008 prices, which is around £50 per hectare, although as each site is unique, broad estimates should be treated with caution. On the basis of the Department's figures, annual expenditure has increased from £36 million in 2000-01 to £69 million in 2007-08, equivalent to a 61 per cent increase once adjusted for inflation. **Figure 12** shows the public funding is mainly spent on incentives.

4.4 The estimated costs do not take account of all of the expenditure incurred by non-government organisations, such as the RSPB and Wildlife Trusts; private businesses, such as water companies; local government; and private landowners/occupiers. There is also a significant contribution made by landowners/occupiers who work at their own expense to improve the condition of their SSSI unit. At Lathkill Dale in the East Midlands, for example, income derived from angling on a private estate funds maintenance and management of part of the river. Our survey revealed that 29 per cent of landowners/occupiers who were in receipt of incentive payments said that the funding did cover the full costs of conserving the land. We have, however, been unable to establish the cost to landowners/occupiers where incentives do not cover the full cost of managing their SSSI.

4.5 Incentives accounted for the largest element of expenditure on SSSIs in 2008-09 (56 per cent). Natural England has developed a detailed cost model (based on average annual costs per hectare, per habitat type) to estimate the annual expenditure on incentives. The actual amounts spent on four habitat types in 2007-08 shows significant variances from the averages used in this model (**Figure 13 overleaf**). Using the average annual costs as an indicator of future spending is a good starting point. Natural England will need, however, to review its estimates once it has more accurate data (from the completion of the conservation objectives) on the extent of work required to bring areas into target condition.



Alternative funding sources

4.6 Land notified as a SSSI may provide wider benefits to society. Natural England is one of the Department's key delivery partners in taking forward work to quantify and value the benefits of ecosystem services, which could support a better understanding of the wider benefits of SSSIs. There are approximately 174,000 hectares of upland bogs, for example, which act as a carbon store. These bogs may also retain substantial volumes of rainfall, releasing it slowly into streams and rivers. Such water retention may help to reduce the flood risk to urban areas.

4.7 There is an increasing public awareness of the risks of climate change and the need to protect biodiversity.¹⁶ Businesses have shown increasing interest in offsetting their carbon dioxide emissions and the Government has a target to reduce emissions by 20 per cent below 1990 levels by 2010.¹⁷ There may be an opportunity for Natural England to seek funding from carbon offsetting bodies to support activities to improve the condition of SSSI habitats (**see Box 8 overleaf**). Such an approach would not be appropriate for every SSSI, but it may be applicable for specific habitat types such as upland bogs and woodland SSSIs.

¹⁶ The Department for Transport report, *A review of public attitudes to climate change and transport*, published in August 2006, notes that current evidence suggests that recognition of the concept of climate change among the UK population has increased to almost saturation point.

¹⁷ Defra UK Climate Change Programme 2006, Internet, <http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/climatechange/uk/ukccp/pdf/ukccp06-ria.pdf>.

13 Variations in the costs of improving individual SSSI units

Habitat Type	Wildlife Enhancement Scheme average cost per hectare 2007-08	Wildlife Enhancement Scheme examples taken from our file review		
		Average cost per hectare	Minimum cost per hectare	Maximum cost per hectare
Lowland Woodland	£142	£64	£64 (Data only available for one site: Ocombe, South West)	
Upland Bog	£21	£26	£1 (South Dartmoor, South West)	£40 (North Exmoor, South West)
Lowland Heathland	£119	£194	£111 (Hetchell Wood, Yorkshire and Humber)	£347 (Seckar Wood, Yorkshire and Humber)
Rivers and Streams	£904	£659	£57 (River Eden and Tributaries, North West)	£1,486 (River Eden, North West)

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Natural England data

BOX 8

Carbon offsetting is a potential source of funding for some SSSIs

Companies and individuals can offset their carbon footprint by sponsoring the planting and management of trees in England. For example, land in Devon was originally pasture land and has been planted with trees native to the UK. The land and trees remain in the ownership of the management company, who supervise them for the benefit of clients, the environment and the local community.

4.8 The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 gives Natural England authority to enter into agreements and working arrangements with private, public, voluntary and charity sectors. Natural England has started to explore the opportunities for working more closely with the private sector to obtain funding. For example, Natural England is setting up corporate volunteering arrangements whereby companies can provide resources to help in the maintenance and improvement of nature reserves or other environmentally important sites. Natural England and the Rural Economy and Land Use project is looking at carbon offsetting to pay for upland regeneration and plans to have two pilot projects in place by March 2009. These projects will enable landowners to raise revenue for peat restoration through the sale of carbon offsets in the voluntary offset market. Natural England has estimated that up to 100,000 hectares of blanket bog remains damaged by drainage. Blocking this drainage will cost between £50 and

£200 per hectare. Natural England considers that it is feasible that this area represents an annual offset revenue potential of around £2 million per annum.

Efficiency of Natural England's work on SSSIs

4.9 Natural England spent around £27.1 million managing SSSIs in 2007-08. Of this, £9.2 million was spent on incentives, £4.5 million on National Nature Reserves, £1.5 million on contracts and legal costs and around £11.9 million on staffing costs. As Natural England does not have a time recording system, the time spent on managing SSSIs has been estimated through our analysis of the organisation's delivery plans, resource planning in the Yorkshire and Humber region, and discussions with staff.

4.10 Conservation advisers are on average responsible for 84 SSSI units. We have calculated how a conservation adviser would spend their time in a typical year (see Figure 14). Conservation advisers spend the majority of their time dealing with core work towards delivery of the target (32 per cent), and incentive payments (27 per cent). These activities include: meeting landowners/occupiers; negotiating agreements; and overseeing care and maintenance paid for by the incentives. They also provide regulatory services, for example, advising local planning authorities about planning applications and advising landowners/occupiers about what operations they can carry out on their land.

4.11 Each conservation adviser has an average annual workload of around 14 condition assessments which requires around six days per year to be spent assessing the condition of sites.¹⁸ In order to address the national backlog of 5,187 condition assessments (see paragraph 2.14), each conservation adviser would need to undertake an extra 20 assessments in 2008-09 which could amount to an extra eight days assessing site conditions. The emphasis for conservation advisers in 2008-09 is on clearing the backlog of 1,444 sites without conservation objectives. As setting conservation objectives is time-consuming it is unlikely that conservation advisers will be able to address the backlog of condition assessments.

4.12 Natural England has scope to reprioritise resources by:

- Allocating dedicated teams to specific projects.
- Establishing the cost effectiveness of outsourcing work.
- Increasing the use of volunteers.

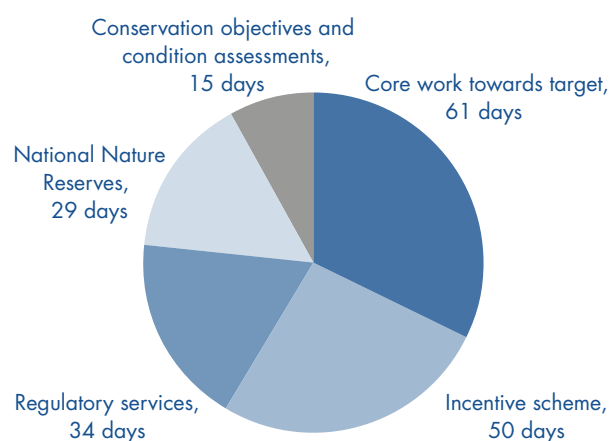
4.13 The South East Region has established a team of five staff to undertake its programme of condition assessments. They have no other competing work duties. This approach has allowed staff to specialise and build skills in field survey and condition assessments, which Natural England considers will result in accurate, consistent and impartial assessments based on field evidence. It has increased operational efficiency and advisers are assessing around three units per day. Through this task-based approach the South East Region expects to complete 2,300 condition assessments in 2008-09.

4.14 Since 2004-05, Natural England has spent around £1.5 million on 29 contracts to carry out specialist work and condition assessments. Natural England has not kept national records regarding the use of consultants and the information available is patchy. Where there was information on the number of condition assessments carried out, costs ranged from £179 to £349 per assessment. In comparison, our own estimates show that a condition assessment by Natural England staff would on average cost around £69 (including staffing overheads). This comparison, however, does not take account of the specialist knowledge that contractors can bring.

4.15 The extent to which Natural England can encourage greater voluntary work on SSSIs could free up time for conservation advisers. According to data held by Natural England, the number of volunteers increased from 861 in 2003 to 1,214 in 2007.¹⁹ We confirmed that volunteers were being used on the units we visited. Volunteers help with minor site maintenance such as clearing rubbish, repair works and site monitoring. Using volunteers would not be appropriate on every site owing to health and safety risks and sensitivities over access onto private land. Such an approach is currently used on National Nature Reserves, and there may be scope to make more use of volunteers generally.

14 Number of days spent by conservation advisers by type of activity

Conservation advisers spend on average 15 days a year assessing the condition of SSSIs and drawing up conservation objectives.



Source: National Audit Office analysis of Natural England data

¹⁸ Based on a six-yearly cycle of assessments of approximately 22,000 units, shared between 260 conservation advisers.

¹⁹ Natural England, *State of the Natural Environment*.

APPENDIX ONE

Scope and Methodology

This Appendix sets out the scope of the study and the methodologies used.

Scope of the study

1 The study focuses on the condition of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and the role played by Natural England in coordinating landowners and protecting biodiversity through this mechanism. We examined the proportion of sites in favourable (or recovering) condition and the impact of the Public Service Agreement (PSA) 3 target and the resources used to deliver improvement in the condition of SSSIs. The question of whether the SSSI mechanism is effective in reducing the rate of biodiversity loss was outside the scope of this study.

2 We looked at overall performance, focusing on four habitat types: upland bogs; broadleaved, mixed and yew lowland woodland; lowland heath; and rivers and streams. These habitat types were chosen as they are present across most regions; include both upland and lowland habitats and habitats found in urban areas; represent good and poorer performing habitats; and comprise a range of sizes and number of units. These habitats had been identified in the English Nature report, *Target 2010 – The condition of England's SSSIs* (2005) as priorities for recovery action.

Methodology

Data Analysis

3 A lot of data are held by Natural England in relation to SSSIs and delivery of the PSA target. We identified relevant data and requested these from Natural England's data team. We examined quantitative data regarding the target and the costs incurred in aiming for the target including:

- Data held electronically on:
 - Current and past SSSI condition, by habitat type and region.

- Remedy types and mechanisms.
- Financial incentive schemes.
- Regional and national planning documents and delivery plans including plans involving the Major Landowners Group.
- Regional staffing and associated work planning and programmes.
- Estimates of the costs of delivering the target.

Key interviews

4 We conducted semi-structured interviews in April 2008 with members of the Department's Wildlife and Countryside team with responsibility for the PSA target, and wider biodiversity targets.

5 In April 2008, we met with several key members of Natural England's national team to discuss: enforcement; the Remedies Project; wider biodiversity; the role of habitat specialists and target managers; and incentives. The findings were used as context in the report.

6 From March to May 2008 we conducted interviews with key personnel from the following members of the Major Landowners Group: the RSPB, Crown Estate, Wildlife Trusts, the National Trust, National Park Authorities, the Association of Drainage Authorities, Defence Estates, the Environment Agency, and three water companies. These interviews were semi-structured and centred on the organisations' progress towards meeting the target and their relationship with Natural England and the Department.

7 In the same time period we spoke with a range of organisations either concerned with biodiversity or involved in activities which affect SSSIs. These were: Regional Biodiversity Partnerships, the Joint Nature Conservation Committee, Bug Life, Plant Life, the Woodland Trust, the British Ramblers' Association, the Country Land and Business Association and the British Association for Shooting and Conservation.

In semi-structured interviews we discussed: the SSSI process; the impact of SSSIs on land use and access; the challenges in preventing biodiversity loss; and relationships and communications with Natural England.

Regional visits

8 We visited an office in each of Natural England's nine regions:

Bakewell	East Midlands
London	London
Norwich	East of England
Kendal	North West
Newcastle	North East
Lyndhurst	South East
Exeter	South West
Shrewsbury	West Midlands
Wakefield	Yorkshire and Humber

9 The visits encompassed semi-structured interviews with regional directors, area team managers, team leaders, front line conservation advisers, support teams and specialist staff. These interviews gave us an understanding of local practices for identifying, managing and protecting SSSIs, partnership working, factors affecting the region's performance and local processes.

10 In all but one region (London), we spoke with non-government organisations, mainly the local RSPB offices and local wildlife trusts to gain a different perspective of regional approaches to managing SSSIs.

11 Each regional visit included between 10 and 18 file reviews, depending on the size of the region. Before the fieldwork started we chose a sample of 112 units to provide us with an overview of how the SSSI system is being managed. The sample chosen was broadly representative of the population of units in each region, in terms of the four habitat types, size, condition, assessment date and tenure. A full list of the sites that were reviewed is found in Appendix 3. The file review followed a checklist which looked at the units' notification, descriptions, condition assessments, remedies identified, management agreements and incentives, consents, and any enforcement action taken.

12 In each region we analysed the database for complaints, consents, assents and advice and compared this to the paper files.

13 In the majority of the regions we also visited units from our sample, accompanied by conservation advisers, and in some cases the consultants and landowners/occupiers or land manager attended.

Consultant Input

14 Through a tendering process we selected Oxford index Ltd to carry out a field-based analysis of 27 units. The consultants chose these units from our sample of 112 units, reflecting the range of sizes, tenure, condition and monitoring frequency in the larger sample. Between April and June 2008 they accompanied Natural England's conservation advisers on site visits, reviewed records, and spoke with landowners and other stakeholders. The objectives of this work were to:

- Establish the adequacy of management plans.
- Evaluate the quality of the data available and the suitability of documentation in place for the future retention of the interest features and their condition.
- Appraise the relationship between Natural England and its stakeholders.
- Comment on the suitability and adequacy of monitoring protocols and assessment periods.

15 The unit visit did not comprise a full Common Standards Monitoring exercise. Rather, an opinion on the condition of the unit, the appropriateness of the remedies identified in delivering favourable condition for the unit, and whether the actions required are being implemented.

Survey of landowners/occupiers

16 Natural England supplied the details of all landowners/occupiers who were linked to our sample of 112 units. A postal survey was sent to these 187 landowners/occupiers consisting of 21 questions, the majority of which were multiple-choice. Our aim was to gather their viewpoints and experiences of owning or managing land notified as a SSSI, particularly with regard to: their understanding of their role and responsibilities; any restrictions imposed by the notification; the efficacy of the incentives that are available to them; and their experiences of working with Natural England. We received 81 responses, a response rate of 43 per cent.

APPENDIX TWO

Overview of SSSI legislation

	Act	Powers and duties
1949	National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949	<p>Defined the meaning of 'nature reserve' as including land managed for preserving flora, fauna, or geological or physiographical features of special interest in the area.</p> <p>Allowed for compulsory purchase of land for establishment and maintenance of nature reserves.</p> <p>Permitted the Government to enter into agreements with owners of land of national interest to be managed as nature reserves.</p> <p>Imposed duty on Nature Conservancy to notify Areas of Special Scientific Interest to local planning authorities.</p>
1968	Countryside Act 1968	<p>Allowed negotiation of management agreements with owners of SSSIs to maintain the special interest of the site.</p>
1973	Nature Conservancy Council Act 1973	<p>Established the Nature Conservancy Council.</p>
1981	Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended by the Wildlife and Countryside (Amendment) Act 1985)	<p>Requirement for all owners and occupiers of any land notified as a SSSI to be told of the special interest and of operations likely to be damaging.</p> <p>Requirement on owners and occupiers to notify the Conservation Agency before carrying out damaging operations.</p> <p>Introduced offences aimed at protecting SSSIs.</p> <p>Power for Secretary of State to make orders for the protection of SSSIs.</p> <p>Introduced facility to negotiate compensatory management agreements with owners for the profits foregone by agreeing not to carry out operations considered likely to be damaging to the SSSI.</p>
1990	Environmental Protection Act 1990	<p>Established Nature Conservancy Council for England (known as English Nature), similar Councils in Scotland and Wales, and Joint Nature Conservation Committee.</p> <p>Provision for management agreements to be negotiated with owners of land adjacent to a SSSI for the purposes of protection of the site.</p>
1994	Conservation (Natural habitats, &c.) Regulations 1994	<p>Transposed the requirements of the Habitats Directive into national law. This built on existing nature conservation legislation for the protection of habitats and species and also introduced a requirement on decision-making public bodies to assess plans and projects affecting European sites.</p>

Act	Powers and duties
2000 Countryside and Rights of Way Act (CRoW) 2000	<p>Gave English Nature power to refuse consent for damaging activities (and to withdraw or modify consents already given). Introduced right of appeal against refusals of consent.</p> <p>Widened powers of entry for English Nature or those authorised by it.</p> <p>Enabled neglect to be combatted by imposing a management notice or, as a last resort, compulsory purchase.</p> <p>Introduced increased penalties for deliberate damage and a new court power to order restoration; improving powers to act against cases of third party damage.</p> <p>Introduced offence for intentionally or recklessly damaging the special interest of a SSSI, knowing it to be a SSSI.</p> <p>Introduced ability to change notifications by enlargement, addition, variation and denotification.</p> <p>Duty placed on public bodies and certain private companies, including privatised utilities, to further the conservation and enhancement of the features for which a SSSI has been notified (known as Section 28G bodies) and to notify English Nature and take account of its advice where making decisions on operations likely to damage a SSSI (whether carried on, within, or outside it).</p>
2006 Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006	<p>Created Natural England.</p> <p>Introduced new (lesser) third party offence of intentionally or recklessly destroying or damaging site or features by reason of which the site is of special scientific interest. This offence does not require knowledge of the SSSI.</p> <p>Extends offences for public bodies and statutory undertakers to include failure to notify Natural England of their intention to permit possibly damaging operations, or to take into account Natural England's advice.</p>

APPENDIX THREE

File reviews

This Appendix lists the sites and units which formed part of our file review of 112 units. The review took place during April 2008 and May 2008.

SSSI Name	Unit No.	Region	Habitat type
Allendale Moors	79	North East	Upland Bog
Aqualate Mere	45	West Midlands	Lowland Wood
Arkengarthdale, Gunnerside and Reeth Moors	16	Yorkshire and Humber	Upland Bog
Armboth Fells	6	North West	Upland Bog
Ashdown Forest	10	South East	Lowland Heath
Avon Valley (Bickton to Christchurch)	7	South East	Lowland Wood
Bardney Limewoods, Lincolnshire	1	East Midlands	Lowland Wood
Bedford Purlieus	2	East of England	Lowland Wood
Bentley Priory	3	London	Lowland Wood
Bere Stream	4	South West	Rivers and Streams
Black Mountains	1	West Midlands	Upland Bog
Blackheath	3	South East	Lowland Heath
Blake's Wood and Lingwood Common	2	East of England	Lowland Heath
Bourne Valley	1	South West	Lowland Heath
Bowes Moor	7	North East	Upland Bog
Bransbury Common	3	South East	Rivers and Streams
Burderop Wood	1	South West	Lowland Wood
Burnt Wood	3	West Midlands	Lowland Wood
Calke Park	3	East Midlands	Lowland Wood
Canford Heath	8	South West	Lowland Heath
Cannock Chase	17	West Midlands	Lowland Heath
Carver's Rocks	2	East Midlands	Lowland Heath
Castle Eden Dene	9	North East	Lowland Wood
Castor Hanglands	4	East of England	Lowland Wood
Charterhouse to Eashing	9	South East	Lowland Wood
Clout's Wood	1	South West	Lowland Wood
Clumber Park	24	East Midlands	Lowland Heath
Clumber Park	40	East Midlands	Lowland Wood
Cressbrook Dale	8	East Midlands	Rivers and Streams

Current condition	Date of assessment	Change in condition since last assessment	Assessed in last 6 years (since Mar 02)?	Conservation objectives written?
Unfavourable declining	Mar-08	Declined	Yes	No
Favourable	May-04	n/a	Yes	No
Favourable	Jun-02	n/a	Yes	No
Unfavourable declining	May-00	No change	No	No
Unfavourable declining	Aug-06	Declined	Yes	Yes
Favourable	Dec-07	No change	Yes	Yes
Unfavourable declining	Mar-07	No change	Yes	Yes
Unfavourable recovering	Nov-01	Declined	No	Yes
Favourable	Jan-04	Improved	Yes	No
Unfavourable no change	Sep-07	No change	Yes	No
Unfavourable no change	Sep-03	No change	Yes	No
Unfavourable declining	Aug-06	Declined	Yes	Yes
Unfavourable recovering	Nov-07	Improved	Yes	No
Unfavourable declining	Oct-02	Declined	Yes	No
Unfavourable recovering	Nov-07	Improved	Yes	No
Favourable	Nov-07	Improved	Yes	Yes
Unfavourable no change	Aug-02	n/a	Yes	No
Unfavourable recovering	Dec-07	Improved	Yes	Yes
Favourable	Mar-07	No change	Yes	Yes
Destroyed	Jan-02	n/a	No	No
Unfavourable recovering	Sep-04	Improved	Yes	Yes
Favourable	Sep-06	No change	Yes	Yes
Unfavourable recovering	Sep-07	Improved	Yes	No
Favourable	Sept-04	No change	Yes	No
Unfavourable recovering	Apr-05	No change	Yes	Yes
Unfavourable no change	Aug-07	No change	Yes	No
Unfavourable recovering	Jun-07	Improved	Yes	Yes
Unfavourable recovering	Feb-08	Improved	Yes	Yes
Favourable	Feb-02	n/a	No	No

SSSI Name	Unit No.	Region	Habitat type
Crofton Woods	4	London	Lowland Wood
Croham Hurst	1	London	Lowland Wood
Curry and Hay Moors	102	South West	Rivers and Streams
Dark Peak	77	East Midlands	Upland Bog
Dark Peak	158	East Midlands	Upland Bog
Denham Lock Wood	1	London	Lowland Wood
Dove Valley and Biggin Dale	43	East Midlands	Rivers and Streams
Drumburgh Moss	9	North West	Lowland Heath
Dunster Park and Heathlands	8	South West	Lowland Heath
East Keswick Fitts	2	Yorkshire and Humber	Rivers and Streams
Eastern Peak District Moors	23	East Midlands	Upland Bog
Eastern Peak District Moors	92	East Midlands	Upland Bog
Epping Forest	12	East of England	Lowland Wood
Epping Forest	29	East of England	Lowland Wood
Epping Forest	31	East of England	Lowland Wood
Foxlease and Ancells Meadows	6	South East	Lowland Heath
Geltsdale and Glendue Fells	35	North East	Upland Bog
Goyt Valley	22	East Midlands	Upland Bog
Hetchell Wood	3	Yorkshire and Humber	Lowland Heath
Hexhamshire Moors	38	North East	Upland Bog
Highgate Common	3	West Midlands	Lowland Heath
Keston and Hayes Common	1	London	Lowland Heath
Kielder Mires	26	North East	Upland Bog
Kirkby Moor	1	East Midlands	Lowland Heath
Lathkill Dale	1	East Midlands	Rivers and Streams
Leek Moors	10	East Midlands	Upland Bog
Leek Moors	13	East Midlands	Upland Bog
Leek Moors	73	East Midlands	Upland Bog
Leek Moors	113	East Midlands	Upland Bog
Maiden Down	1	South West	Lowland Heath
Mallerstang-Swaledale Head	30	Yorkshire and Humber	Upland Bog
Messingham Heath	1	Yorkshire and Humber	Lowland Heath
Minsmere-Walberswick Heaths and Marshes	55	East of England	Lowland Heath
North Dartmoor	3	South West	Upland Bog
North Exmoor	88	South West	Upland Bog
Oocombe	2	South West	Lowland Wood
Oxleas Woodlands	2	London	Lowland Wood
Park Wood	1	West Midlands	Lowland Wood
Povington and Grange Heaths	30	South West	Lowland Heath
Richmond Park	15	London	Lowland Wood
Ridley Gill	1	North East	Lowland Wood
River Avon System	2	South West	Rivers and Streams
River Avon System	30	South East	Rivers and Streams

Current condition	Date of assessment	Change in condition since last assessment	Assessed in last 6 years (since Mar 02)?	Conservation objectives written?
Favourable	Feb-03	n/a	Yes	Yes
Favourable	Aug-04	No change	Yes	No
Unfavourable no change	Aug-07	Declined	Yes	Yes
Unfavourable recovering	Mar-08	No change	Yes	Yes
Unfavourable no change	Mar-05	No change	Yes	Yes
Favourable	Mar-04	No change	Yes	No
Unfavourable no change	Oct-03	n/a	Yes	Yes
Favourable	Feb-05	Improved	Yes	No
Unfavourable no change	Aug-05	No change	Yes	Yes
Favourable	Sep-02	No change	Yes	No
Unfavourable declining	Feb-05	No change	Yes	Yes
Unfavourable recovering	Sep-03	Improved	Yes	Yes
Unfavourable declining	Mar-03	No change	Yes	Yes
Unfavourable recovering	Feb-06	Improved	Yes	Yes
Unfavourable declining	Apr-02	Declined	Yes	Yes
Part destroyed	Aug-04	No change	Yes	Yes
Favourable	May-02	n/a	Yes	No
Unfavourable recovering	Oct-02	No change	Yes	No
Unfavourable recovering	Feb-05	Improved	Yes	No
Unfavourable recovering	Dec-04	No change	Yes	No
Favourable	Sep-06	n/a	Yes	No
Unfavourable no change	Aug-07	Declined	Yes	Yes
Favourable	Jul-02	No change	Yes	Yes
Unfavourable recovering	Mar-05	No change	Yes	No
Favourable	Oct-03	Improved	Yes	Yes
Unfavourable declining	Mar-05	No change	Yes	Yes
Unfavourable declining	Feb-08	No change	Yes	Yes
Unfavourable declining	Mar-08	Declined	Yes	Yes
Unfavourable declining	Feb-07	No change	Yes	Yes
Unfavourable no change	Jul-03	No change	Yes	Yes
Unfavourable recovering	Mar-08	Improved	Yes	No
Unfavourable declining	May-03	Declined	Yes	Yes
Unfavourable recovering	Aug-02	n/a	Yes	No
Favourable	Feb-04	Improved	Yes	Yes
Unfavourable recovering	Oct-06	Improved	Yes	No
Favourable	Mar-05	No change	Yes	Yes
Favourable	Dec-03	No change	Yes	No
Unfavourable declining	Aug-02	No change	Yes	No
Unfavourable recovering	Jan-08	No change	Yes	No
Unfavourable recovering	Feb-03	n/a	Yes	No
Favourable	Oct-07	No change	Yes	Yes
Unfavourable no change	Mar-03	n/a	Yes	No
Unfavourable declining	Mar-03	n/a	Yes	No

SSSI Name	Unit No.	Region	Habitat type
River Barle	44	South West	Rivers and Streams
River Coquet and Coquet Valley Woodlands	3	North East	Rivers and Streams
River Dee (England)	1	North West	Rivers and Streams
River Derwent and Tributaries	117	North West	Rivers and Streams
River Derwent	4	Yorkshire and Humber	Rivers and Streams
River Eden and Tributaries	211	North West	Rivers and Streams
River Kent and Tributaries	103	North West	Rivers and Streams
River Kent and Tributaries	114	North West	Rivers and Streams
River Lambourn	1	South East	Rivers and Streams
River Lugg	4	West Midlands	Rivers and Streams
River Wensum	48	East of England	Rivers and Streams
River Wye	2	West Midlands	Rivers and Streams
River Wye	4	West Midlands	Rivers and Streams
Roydon Woods	1	South East	Rivers and Streams
Sandall Beat	5	Yorkshire and Humber	Lowland Wood
Seaford to Beachy Head	19	South East	Lowland Heath
Seckar Wood	2	Yorkshire and Humber	Lowland Heath
Sexton Wood	1	East of England	Lowland Wood
Siddick Pond	3	North West	Lowland Wood
South Dartmoor	32	South West	Upland Bog
South Pennine Moors	152	Yorkshire and Humber	Upland Bog
Sutton Park	14	West Midlands	Lowland Heath
The New Forest	38	South East	Lowland Wood
The New Forest	99	South East	Lowland Wood
Tick Wood and Benthall Edge	2	West Midlands	Lowland Wood
Tindall Wood	1	East of England	Lowland Wood
Totley Wood	1	Yorkshire and Humber	Lowland Wood
Townclose Hills	1	Yorkshire and Humber	Lowland Wood
Tweed Catchment Rivers England: Till Catchment	3	North East	Rivers and Streams
Upper Arun	3	South East	Rivers and Streams
Upper Teesdale	82	North East	Upland Bog
Waldridge Fell	3	North East	Lowland Heath
Walthamstow Marshes	1	London	Rivers and Streams
Wan Fell	3	North West	Lowland Heath
Weather and Horn Heaths, Eriswell	1	East of England	Lowland Heath
Wettenhall and Darnhall Woods	4	North West	Lowland Wood
Whernside	1	Yorkshire and Humber	Upland Bog
Wimbledon Common	7	London	Lowland Heath
Wimbledon Common	8	London	Lowland Wood
Wortham Ling	1	East of England	Lowland Heath

Current condition	Date of assessment	Change in condition since last assessment	Assessed in last 6 years (since Mar 02)?	Conservation objectives written?
Unfavourable recovering	Feb-06	n/a	Yes	Yes
Favourable	Dec-02	n/a	Yes	No
Unfavourable no change	Mar-03	n/a	Yes	No
Unfavourable no change	Dec-02	n/a	Yes	No
Unfavourable no change	Mar-03	n/a	Yes	No
Favourable	Dec-02	n/a	Yes	No
Favourable	Dec-05	n/a	Yes	Yes
Unfavourable no change	Dec-05	n/a	Yes	Yes
Unfavourable declining	Feb-05	Declined	Yes	Yes
Unfavourable recovering	Aug-02	n/a	Yes	No
Unfavourable declining	Dec-02	n/a	Yes	Yes
Favourable	Aug-02	n/a	Yes	No
Unfavourable no change	Aug-02	n/a	Yes	No
Favourable	Aug-01	No change	No	Yes
Unfavourable no change	Jun-07	n/a	Yes	Yes
Favourable	Aug-07	Improved	Yes	Yes
Unfavourable recovering	Sep-02	No change	Yes	No
Unfavourable recovering	Jan-04	No change	Yes	Yes
Favourable	Oct-04	No change	Yes	No
Unfavourable recovering	Sep-07	Improved	Yes	Yes
Unfavourable no change	Apr-08	No change	Yes	Yes
Unfavourable recovering	Dec-03	Improved	Yes	Yes
Unfavourable recovering	Mar-08	Improved	Yes	Yes
Unfavourable recovering	Sep-05	Improved	Yes	Yes
Unfavourable recovering	Dec-06	Improved	Yes	No
Unfavourable recovering	Nov-06	Improved	Yes	Yes
Favourable	Oct-07	Improved	Yes	Yes
Unfavourable declining	May-02	Declined	Yes	Yes
Unfavourable recovering	Dec-05	Improved	Yes	No
Unfavourable recovering	Sep-05	Improved	Yes	Yes
Unfavourable recovering	Mar-06	Improved	Yes	No
Unfavourable recovering	Apr-03	Improved	Yes	No
Favourable	Jun-05	n/a	Yes	No
Unfavourable recovering	Jul-07	No change	Yes	Yes
Favourable	Sep-03	Improved	Yes	Yes
Unfavourable declining	May-07	No change	Yes	Yes
Unfavourable recovering	Feb-06	n/a	Yes	No
Unfavourable recovering	Apr-06	Improved	Yes	No
Favourable	Jan-03	No change	Yes	No
Favourable	Dec-04	No change	Yes	No

APPENDIX FOUR

Previous National Audit Office and Public Accounts Committee interest

In 1994, the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) published a report entitled *Protecting and Managing Sites of Special Scientific Interest in England*. This study included a review of English Nature's approach to identifying, notifying, monitoring and safeguarding SSSIs.

It identified six areas of concern. The following year the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) published its report based on the hearing. The findings and agreed actions in response to these reports are summarised below.

Finding	C&AG report	PAC report	The Department's and English Nature's Response
Inaccessibility of some data.	There was a mix of data held on paper files and increasingly on computer systems and <i>"many of these operate independently and do not form a corporate system making it difficult for some staff to draw on necessary information"</i> .		It was noted that English Nature was working towards making these systems more compatible and accessible.
Potential incompleteness of the SSSI network.	As at March 1993, over 3,700 SSSIs had been notified. Some habitats were not fully represented, for example, moorland in the North East and meadows, peatland and geological sites in the North West.	Acknowledged that English Nature could not specify the size of a complete series of Sites of Special Scientific Interest but considered that its work to notify a further 180 to 370 sites should be completed as soon as practicable.	The Department agreed with English Nature a target of 85 site notifications over each of the next four years, by which time the series would broadly fulfil its coverage objectives. Further work is needed to complete the SSSI series to cover rivers and other under-represented habitats.
Deficiencies in monitoring and consistency of condition assessments.	There were some deficiencies in monitoring, performance across regions varied, the form and extent of monitoring visits varied greatly, records were incomplete, there were errors in entering details onto the computer database, and there were differing interpretations of damage/deterioration, all of which affect the consistency of judgement regarding site condition.	Stressed the need for forceful management to ensure that a robust and consistent approach to monitoring and data collection was maintained and that appropriate standards were adhered to in the new organisation structure.	English Nature planned to monitor the series as a whole and had brought together site integrity monitoring with loss and damage recording to produce a more comprehensive view of the series as a whole. The system recorded information about natural features within site management units (rather than whole sites) and included information on the condition of important features, threats, management, recovery prognosis and damage.

Finding	C&AG report	PAC report	The Department's and English Nature's Response
Extent of deterioration on sites may be understated.	Loss and damage statistics may have understated the situation as they do not include deterioration due to lack of management and under representation of the impact of pollution.		English Nature had begun to include deterioration due to lack of management and was developing common standards to report both damage and improvements to features of special interest.
Protection of sites was achieved through building and managing relationships.	In 1994, notification of a SSSI did not guarantee absolute protection, and owners could legally carry out damaging activities if they had given English Nature due notice. This resulted in the principle that conflict between development and conservation should be resolved by negotiation.	Urged English Nature to work closely with local authorities to ensure that they adopt complementary nature conservation policies. English Nature should not be reluctant to prosecute or apply for Nature Conservation Orders where appropriate.	English Nature placed more emphasis on positive management by working with owners and occupiers to assist them to conserve sites.
More effective use of incentives for management agreements.	English Nature had reduced the costs and time required to negotiate management agreements, moving away from compensatory agreements and developing schemes with fixed rate payments (Wildlife Enhancement Scheme), concentrating on shorter term positive management agreements.	Concerned that English Nature could be paying to protect a site when damaging activity had already occurred. It acknowledged that it may not be cost effective to visit all sites annually, but stressed the importance of targeting resources to get the frequency and timing of visits right.	The Department and English Nature noted the Committee's concerns. English Nature's new system for monitoring SSSIs subject to management agreements ensured that payments were not made until English Nature was certain the terms of the agreement have been complied with.

GLOSSARY

Agri-environment scheme	Mechanism by which landowners and other individuals and bodies responsible for land management can be incentivised to manage their land in a manner sympathetic to the environment.
Blanket bog	A globally restricted peatland habitat confined to cool, wet, typically oceanic climates.
Citation	Details the “features of interest” for which a SSSI has been notified. Shows the SSSI location, size and the date of notification. It describes the general reasons for notification, and the flora and fauna or geophysical features that are found on the site.
Common Standards Monitoring	A simple, quick, assessment of feature condition.
Conservation adviser	The officer at Natural England responsible for day to day management of SSSIs.
Condition assessment	An assessment undertaken to judge the “condition” of features (including habitats and species) by measuring key attributes against a set of habitat or species-specific targets.
Conservation objectives	For the purposes of monitoring describe the key attributes which make up or support the interest feature(s) for each site and set targets which should be met if the feature is to be assessed in favourable condition.
Countryside Stewardship Scheme	A financial incentive scheme introduced in 1991 to encourage farmers to enhance and conserve targeted landscapes and habitats.
CRoW	Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.
English Nature	The statutory nature conservation agency for England from 1991 to 2006, when it merged with parts of the Countryside Agency and the Rural Development Service to form Natural England.
ENSIS	Natural England’s main database for recording details of activities and assessments of each site.
Entry Level Stewardship	This scheme, set up in 2005, aims to encourage a large number of farmers across a large area of farmland in England to deliver simple yet effective environmental management. Requires a basic level of environmental management. Payment of £30 per hectare, per year across the whole farm (except in extensively grazed upland areas).

Environmental Stewardship	The agri-environment scheme under the Rural Development Programme for England provides funding to farmers and other land managers in England who deliver effective environmental management on their land.
Environmentally Sensitive Areas	This scheme, which started in 1987, made payments to farmers and land managers to help safeguard notified areas of countryside where the landscape, wildlife or historic interest is of national importance. It was part of the English Rural Development Programme.
Habitats Directive	The European Community Directive on the Conservation of Natural Habitats and of Wild Fauna and Flora (Directive 92/43/EEC). This has been transposed into UK law as the Conservation (Natural Habitats &c.) Regulations (1994).
Hectare	A unit of area equal to 10,000 square metres.
Higher Level Stewardship	This scheme is one of the strands of Environmental Stewardship which aims to deliver environmental benefits in high priority situations and areas, and provides for more complex environmental management where land managers need advice and support. There are a wide range of management options available, targeted to support key characteristics of the different areas of the English countryside. Payments relate to the options chosen and include payments for capital items, such as, hedgerow restoration. Generally, applications must be accompanied by a Farm Environmental Plan. Entry into the scheme is discretionary. Applications go through an assessment process which takes into account how the application meets the local environmental priorities. Usually ten year agreements with payments sent out every six months.
National Nature Reserve	Areas of land managed primarily for the benefit of the wildlife, but also have an important role in enjoyment by the public.
Management agreement	A formal agreement between Natural England and the landowner/occupier in return for the payment of incentives.
Management plan	An agreed approach to managing land or undertaking operations on SSSI land. It does not necessarily include payment of any incentives, but can be attached to a management agreement.

Management scheme	Sets out the actions required to conserve or restore the special interest of a SSSI. It is served on the landowner/occupier to ensure they manage their land in a way which enhances the special features. Should the actions within a management scheme not be undertaken and a reasonable management agreement has been offered, Natural England can serve a Management Notice. Failure to comply with a Management Notice is an offence.
National Park	An area of protected land. There are nine National Parks in England: Dartmoor, Exmoor, Lake District, New Forest, Northumberland, North Yorkshire Moors, Peak District, the Yorkshire Dales and the Broads (which has equivalent status to a National Park).
Natura 2000	A Europe-wide network of sites of international importance for nature conservation established under the Birds and Habitats Directives.
Natural England	England's statutory conservation agency created from the merger of English Nature, the Rural Development Service and parts of the Countryside Agency in 2006 by the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006.
PSA target	The Government's Public Service Agreement (PSA) target to have 95 per cent of the SSSI land area in favourable or recovering condition by December 2010.
Ramsar sites	Sites notified as internationally important wetland habitats under the International Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (1976) (Ramsar Convention).
Site of Special Scientific Interest	UK national notification identified under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000) as being important for wildlife and/or geology.
Target condition	Assessed as "favourable" or "unfavourable recovering" condition.
Wildlife Enhancement Scheme	This scheme offers funding for the maintenance and enhancement of the site's wildlife interest. The scheme was run by English Nature and ended in 2007-08.
English Woodland Grant Scheme	The Forestry Commission's suite of grants designed to develop the coordinated delivery of public benefits from England's woodlands.