

# Local Sites

Guidance on their Identification,  
Selection and Management



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## Foreword



In a country as rich in its diversity of wildlife, habitats and geological heritage as England, we must take a range of integrated approaches if we are to successfully conserve this legacy for future generations. One of those approaches is to protect valuable sites as jewels in the wider countryside. Whilst it is right that all of us, and especially the statutory agencies and environmental bodies, give sufficient attention to the nationally and internationally important sites, there is a key role for local government, interest groups and local communities at grass roots level in this approach.

Non-statutory Local Sites, of which there are in the region of 35,000 in England, make a vital contribution to delivering both the UK and Local Biodiversity and Geodiversity Action Plan targets and maintaining local natural character and distinctiveness. They provide important and widely distributed wildlife refuges for most of our fauna and flora and, through their connecting, stepping stone and buffering qualities, support other site networks. The Government's recent Planning Policy Statement on biodiversity and geological conservation (PPS9) reaffirms the importance of the contribution such sites can make to our overall biodiversity objectives.

The diverse nature of Local Sites can also provide other benefits to individuals, particularly if they are open to the public and able to provide excellent opportunities for contact with nature and a contribution to the quality of life and well-being of the community. They can also provide a focus for community involvement in the management of sites or offer opportunities for research and education.

Traditionally, partnerships supporting Local Sites systems have organised themselves in a number of different ways. The purpose of this guidance is to promote a transparent and consistent approach to the operation of Local Sites systems, drawing together best practice while accommodating the strengths of existing systems. Our hope is that the guidance will encourage existing partnerships and prompt others to fill gaps so that the best of their local natural wildlife and geological heritage is protected. In this way, we aim to raise and consolidate the profile of Local Sites as an important mechanism in our overall approach to biodiversity and geological conservation.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'Jim Knight'.

**Jim Knight**  
Minister for Biodiversity



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# Introduction

This document provides guidance on the development and management of systems to identify sites of local importance for nature conservation in England. It deals with the management of Local Sites systems for biodiversity and geological conservation which complement the series of internationally and nationally designated wildlife and geological sites<sup>1</sup>.

The guidance is intended to promote more transparent and consistent approaches in the operation of Local Sites systems across the country, embracing regional and local diversity and variation within the natural environment. It outlines the roles and purposes of Local Sites systems and proposes frameworks and standards for their operation as well as for the selection, protection and management of the sites themselves.

We recognise that there are currently a number of different terms in use by Local Sites partnerships to describe sites of local importance and some of these are of long-standing and well-known locally<sup>2</sup>. To promote a common understanding of the kind of sites in question, and a more common currency in terms of the general level of importance of such sites, we consider that adopting a common term for these sites would be sensible. Although we recognise that there is a lack of consensus amongst many stakeholders on the most appropriate term to be used, we recommend use of the generic term “Local Site”, which is the term used in the Government’s new planning policy advice and will be used throughout in this document. However, this term may be subdivided to describe an individual site as either a “Local Wildlife Site” or “Local Geological Site” – or even a “Local Wildlife/Geological Site” if the interests coincide.

At the heart of this guidance is the principle that whilst Local Sites may also provide other benefits, they contain features of *substantive* nature conservation value and that the purpose of selection is to provide recognition of this value and to help conserve those features by affording the sites an appropriate degree of protection.

The overall objective of this guidance is to create a more consistent sense of the value and importance of Local Sites by securing broader awareness of this and support for their protection, and in particular, promoting:

- Local Sites systems that sit in their rightful place within the Government’s overall strategy for biodiversity and geological conservation;
- appropriate dialogue and involvement across the range of relevant stakeholders;
- the operation of clearly understood processes and criteria for the selection of sites;
- the maintenance of a suite of sites that remain relevant at any point in time; and,
- Local Sites systems operated in a transparent way that can be communicated with confidence to all parties from landowners to developers.

On receipt of this guidance, we would expect every system to review their current position and implement changes in line with this guidance in order to meet existing nature conservation policy objectives.

<sup>1</sup> Special Protection Areas, Special Areas of Conservation, Ramsar sites and Sites of Special Scientific Interest.

<sup>2</sup> A list of common terms currently in use to describe these sites is attached at Annex A.

# Part 1: Background and Context

1. Although the system of statutory designations contains well over a million hectares, it is widely recognised as leaving out many sites that are, nevertheless, of significant value for the conservation of wildlife and geological features<sup>3</sup>. This is because the purpose of such statutory designations is to provide a representative rather than a comprehensive suite of sites, the individual sites exemplifying the nation's most important wildlife and geological features, rather than including every site with such interest.
2. In most areas, local authorities, working with other local partners, have set up systems of locally valued non-statutory sites. Supporting in the region of 35,000 Local Sites, these systems contribute significantly to delivering both UK and Local Biodiversity and Geodiversity Action Plan targets.

- Local Sites networks provide a comprehensive rather than representative suite of sites.
- Local Sites provide wildlife refuges for most of the UK's fauna and flora and through their connecting and buffering qualities, they complement other site networks.
- Local Sites have a significant role to play in meeting overall national biodiversity targets.
- Local Sites represent local character and distinctiveness.
- Local Sites contribute to the quality of life and the well-being of the community, with many sites providing opportunities for research and education.

3. Following consultation on the protection and management of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and a subsequent report published in August 1999, a Local Sites Review Group was set up by the then Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR). It reported in April 2000 and defined the overall objective of a Local Sites system as follows:

*"The series of non-statutory Local Sites seek to ensure, in the public interest, the conservation, maintenance and enhancement of species, habitats, geological and geomorphological features of substantive nature conservation value. Local Site systems should select all areas of substantive value including both the most important and the most distinctive species, habitats, geological and geomorphological features within a national, regional and local context. Sites within the series may also have an important role in contributing to the public enjoyment of nature conservation."*

4. The review group found that the Local Sites systems currently in operation vary considerably. It concluded that the lack of a consistent approach to the selection of sites and system management made it difficult to apply national or regional policies consistently or target national funding streams. The review group also suggested that a consistent approach could provide a better basis for the appropriate management and protection of these sites.

<sup>3</sup> The use of the term 'wildlife' is intended to encompass both species and habitats whilst 'geological' conservation and features should be taken to be inclusive of both geological and geomorphological interests.

## Legislative and Policy Context

### Treatment within the Planning System

5. *Planning Policy Statement 9: Biodiversity and Geological Conservation* provides a statement of national planning policy for biodiversity and geological conservation in England. It recognises that Local Sites have a fundamental role to play in helping to meet overall national biodiversity targets, contributing to the quality of life and the well-being of the community and in supporting research and education. Local Development Frameworks should identify all local nature conservation areas on the proposals map<sup>4</sup>.
6. Criteria based policies should be established in Development Plan Documents within the Local Development Framework against which proposals for any development on or affecting such sites will be judged. Clear distinctions should be made between the hierarchy of international, national, regional, and locally designated sites.
7. *Planning Policy Guidance Note 17: Planning for Open Space, Sport and Recreation* sets out the Government's policies for the protection and creation of open spaces, sports and recreational facilities. Local authorities are expected to protect all open space required by communities and they should assess community needs for open space, sport and recreation and carry out audits of open space and sporting and recreational facilities. It recognises that open space of high quality or of particular value to a local community should be identified and given protection by local authorities through appropriate policies in plans. Areas of particular quality may include open spaces that also benefit biodiversity and geodiversity. Local Authorities should take account of the various functions of open space, including that of providing havens and habitats for flora and fauna, when deciding on the most appropriate way to treat such spaces.
8. Government's announcement on the rationalisation of local authority plans (ODPM, November 2002) identifies Local Biodiversity Action Plans as one of the plans to be subsumed into Community Strategies. Local authorities will need to demonstrate that local biodiversity planning has been considered within their Community Strategy and that Community Strategies as a whole are informed by the purposes of biodiversity planning.

### Section 74 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000

9. Every minister and Government department has a duty to have regard to the purpose of the conservation of biological diversity in the exercise of its functions; and to take, or promote the taking by others, of steps to further the conservation of the habitats and species which together are of principal importance for the conservation of biodiversity<sup>5</sup>.

### Biodiversity Strategy for England

10. This is the principal means by which Government in England will discharge the section 74 duties referred to above, and this includes the promotion of a more consistent approach to the operation of Local Sites systems, ('Working with the Grain of Nature' Defra, 2002, pp 24 and 58).

<sup>4</sup> See sections 2.20-2.23 of Planning Policy Statement 12: Local Development Frameworks

<sup>5</sup> List of the habitats and species is available at <http://www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/cl/habitats/habitats-list.pdf>

## Biodiversity Action Plans

11. In most areas, local biodiversity partnerships have identified locally important species and habitats, along with actions needed to maintain and enhance them, taking account of priorities identified in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan. The DETR circular on the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (04/01) makes clear that Local Sites are important components within Local Biodiversity Action Plans.

## Local Geodiversity Action Plans

12. Although no formal equivalent to Biodiversity Action Planning currently exists for geological sites, action for such sites is now being developed and promoted widely. Some areas have set priorities and objectives for geological features, through Local Biodiversity Partnerships. Local Geodiversity Action Plans have also been prepared in some areas and these aim to set local objectives to deliver and promote geological conservation based on knowledge of the existing network of nationally important geological SSSIs, Local Geological Sites (Regionally Important Geological Sites(RIGS)) and geology in the wider environment.

## EU Habitats Directive

13. Article 10 of the EU Habitats Directive says that:

*“Member states shall endeavour, where they consider it necessary, in their land use planning and development policies, and, in particular, with a view to improving the ecological coherence of the Natura 2000 network, to encourage the management of features of the landscape which are of major importance for wild flora and fauna.”*

This has been transposed into UK law in regulation 37 of the Habitats Regulations 1994:

*“For the purposes of the planning enactments...policies in respect of the conservation of the natural beauty and amenity of the land shall be taken to include policies encouraging the management of features of the landscape which are of major importance for wild flora and fauna.*

Such features are those which, by virtue of their linear and continuous structure (such as rivers with their banks or the traditional systems for marking field boundaries) or their function as stepping stones (such as ponds or small woods), are essential for the migration, dispersal and genetic exchange of wild species.”

These planning policies, referred to as “Regulation 37 policies”, should be included in land use plans or spatial strategies. Local sites systems contribute to fulfilling this requirement and can play a very important part in maintaining the links that join up and support the nationally and internationally recognised sites.

## Part 2 – Framework for Establishing and Administering a Local Sites System

### Key interests and their roles

14. Many organisations have an interest in biodiversity and geological conservation. They may have a general interest, hold information about these subjects, or have responsibilities or carry out activities that impinge on them. The establishment and management of a Local Sites system, whilst needing a clear focus of responsibility, should be based on a partnership approach involving such organisations.
15. In many areas, partnerships dealing with Local Sites systems or acting as Local Biodiversity Action Partnerships are already in existence. RIGS groups may also involve a range of partner organisations as well as individual volunteers.

Local Sites partnerships should build or draw upon such established partnerships where they exist.

Existing arrangements for managing Local Sites systems should be reviewed against the good practice principles set out here, which recognise that a partnership could structure itself in a variety of ways.

The smaller the core partnership that is leading the process, the more important it is to consider the need to inform and involve wider nature conservation and community interests at relevant stages in the selection process, and in supporting the management and protection of Local Sites once selected.

### Local Authorities

16. Local authorities have powers to promote social, environmental and economic well-being within their administrative areas. They also have a range of statutory roles and responsibilities relating to land use planning, minerals, waste, education, transport, land reclamation, pollution and land drainage. All of these are relevant to the purposes and interests of Local Sites.

Local authorities should provide leadership in establishing and maintaining partnerships and systems to identify and manage Local Sites. It may be more effective for the County or Unitary authority to take the overall strategic lead as other relevant frameworks such as Local Record Centres and Biodiversity and Geodiversity Action Plans are usually structured at this level. In many areas, it may be more effective for Local Authorities to collaborate in partnerships to run a single unified Local Sites system over their combined administrative areas, particularly in tiered county/districts.

## Voluntary and community sector

17. The voluntary and community sector will be key to the success of any Local Sites Partnership. The Wildlife Trusts and RIGS Groups are already actively involved in the identification of local wildlife and geological sites in many areas. In addition, nature conservation expertise is found in individual experts who will often be active in organisations such as the RSPB, Geologists' Association groups, Friends of the Earth, BTCV, 'Friends of' groups, and in local natural history and conservation societies. They can bring important local knowledge and connections to any partnership.

## Statutory agencies and bodies

18. Agencies and bodies such as English Nature, Rural Development Service<sup>6</sup>, the Forestry Commission and the Environment Agency have direct responsibilities and obligations for nature conservation through regulation and their influence on the management of land by others, as well as the management of their own estates. Consequently, they can contribute expertise directly to the work of Local Sites partnerships and to the conservation and management of individual Local Sites.

## Land owning interests

19. In any one area, Local Sites are likely to be owned by a variety of bodies such as water companies, transport bodies, mineral operators, and private landowners including farming and forestry interests. Some conservation organisations such as National Trust, RSPB, Wildlife Trusts and the Woodland Trust are among significant local landowners. Other important land owners include local authorities (e.g. parks, estates, schools) and government departments and agencies (including the Ministry of Defence, the Prison Service and Health Trusts).

The positive engagement and co-operation of land owners and their representative bodies can contribute significantly to the success of Local Site partnerships and their involvement should be welcomed. Each system should decide how best and at what stages to involve land owning interests; for example, by co-opting representatives that reflect the broad interests of landowners on to the Partnership or through other mechanisms which will allow effective input.

<sup>6</sup> English Nature, most of the Rural Development Service and parts of the Countryside Agency will form the new agency "Natural England".

## Role of a local sites partnership

20. The role of a Local Sites partnership should be to:
- agree the basis for site selection;
  - co-ordinate site selection procedures including survey and identification of candidate sites;
  - actively promote and support site management;
  - co-ordinate funding provision and/or identify and promote the taking up of funding opportunities;
  - promote educational use where appropriate;
  - establish a process for monitoring the condition of the selected sites;
  - review the operation of the Local Sites system at suitable intervals;
  - promote the role and importance of Local Sites at a strategic level (for example in delivering BAP targets, targeting of agri-environmental schemes) and;
  - promote the enhancement of sites through buffering and increasing connectivity.

The Partnership should agree clear roles and responsibilities for the partners involved and set out the process it will follow, and the criteria it will use, in selecting Local Sites.

21. Depending on the size of the partnership, it may choose to take direct responsibility for the evaluation and selection of candidate sites, or to elect a smaller site selection panel for this purpose. Site evaluation and selection is dealt with in Part 3 of this guidance.
22. Once the sites are identified, the partnership should promote the appropriate management of sites and provide support and advice to site owners. One way of achieving this might be through the production of site management plans, which may be relatively straightforward documents. The Partnership should also aim to make the best of funding opportunities to ensure the protection, management and beneficial use of the site network. Site management, resourcing, educational use, monitoring and review are dealt with in Part 4 of this guidance.
23. Community Strategies can provide a useful framework for adopting Local Sites and although the selection of Local Sites will require the active involvement of those with a particular interest and expertise in the natural environment, the Partnership should welcome the involvement of other stakeholders.
24. Whether or not adopted as part of a Community Strategy, Local Sites which are selected by the Partnership must be submitted to the local authority for inclusion within their Local Development Frameworks at the earliest opportunity.
25. Local Sites will not be individually identified within the Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS). However Partnerships might make representations to the Regional Planning Body to ensure that the role of Local Sites is recognised in the RSS as part of broader regional policy addressing biodiversity and geological conservation.



## Part 3 – Evaluation and Selection of Local Sites

### Key Functions of the Partnership in the Site Selection Process

26. In respect of site selection, the Local Sites partnership should;
  - **Be responsible for site selection**
27. The evaluation and selection of Local Sites is a central responsibility of a Local Sites partnership. In many instances, a partnership may elect to appoint a panel with suitable expertise and give it the responsibility for evaluating and selecting sites, or employ a Local Records Centre in connection with this responsibility. However the Local Sites partnership remains the final arbiter for the evaluation and selection process.
  - **Possess adequate technical knowledge**
28. A Local Sites partnership should ensure it has (or has access to) adequate technical knowledge and understanding of local circumstances, viewed against the wider regional and national picture to derive and apply criteria for the evaluation and selection of Local Sites. These should include scientific and social values attributable to ecological and geological interests. The principles, criteria, processes and implications of their selection decisions need to be capable of being clearly communicated and justified to local authorities, site owners, nature conservation and other local environmental organisations, developers, Local Strategic Partnerships and the wider community.
  - **Develop and document site criteria**
29. Within each Local Sites system, the criteria for the selection of sites should be derived with reference to the site selection framework of criteria described below at paragraph 50. One inclusive set of criteria should be produced for the evaluation of all sites, taking account of the variety of interests that may eventually be selected in the suite. Criteria may need to be weighted relative to each other or geographically to reflect special interests, considerations or priorities, such that they are appropriate to the locality.
30. The objective should be to develop criteria that when applied result in the selection of a series of sites that together with other site networks provide the full range of the important species, habitats and geological features at a level necessary to maintain the nature conservation interest of the area.
  - **Select sites against criteria**
31. Once the partnership has agreed and documented the criteria, candidate sites should be assessed against them. The objective of site selection is to select *all* sites that meet the criteria.



- **Record reasons for selection of each site**

32. The basis for selection needs to be transparent to anyone who wishes to understand the rationale for the decisions made. Therefore, the basis for individual site selection should be recorded, showing the species, habitats or features judged to be of substantive interest and how they were assessed against the criteria and any functions the site supports. This information should be sent to the site owner, and made available to others who may be interested in a site. Conversely, there may also be a need to demonstrate why a site was not selected.

- **Allow site owners an opportunity to comment**

33. Site owners should, whenever possible, be contacted and asked for access permission to survey and monitor sites. This initial engagement will provide an ideal opportunity to discuss the implications of the survey and potential site selection and offer an opportunity for the site owner to raise any issues.

34. Prior to formal endorsement of the list of sites by the Local Site partnership, site owners should be given the opportunity to make observations, for example, on whether or not the site continues to host the listed features, provides the functions as stated and accords with the assessment made against the selection criteria. This liaison with landowners relates to the partnership's precise function of identifying appropriate sites and should, therefore, be confined to factors relating directly to the application of the site selection criteria.

35. In the information it sends to owners of a proposed site, the partnership should set out the process it will follow in considering any observations received from site owners and how the partnership will respond.

- **De-select sites which no longer qualify**

36. The partnership can de-select sites if their nature conservation interest deteriorates to such an extent that they no longer qualify as Local Sites. De-selection proposals may be prompted by an individual or picked up during monitoring. If sites are proposed for de-selection, owners and other interested parties should be notified and given the opportunity to make observations. Formal de-selection, once agreed by the partnership, should be notified to owners and other interested parties.

37. In considering whether to de-select a site, the partnership should consider any implications for the provision of contact with nature and the availability of sites for educational use. The potential for restoring the site's features of interest should also be a consideration. This is particularly relevant where a site has been deliberately damaged, or degraded through neglect or inappropriate management.

## Key Principles and Priorities of the Site Selection Process

38. The nature conservation interest of a site may be inclusive of a range of benefits that the natural features and processes within a Local Site might provide. These include the conservation of biological or geological diversity; the opportunity for contact with and enjoyment of nature; a resource for learning about the natural world or for research into natural features and processes.
39. The selection of Local Sites to help sustain biodiversity should be founded on national, regional and local biodiversity priorities. Other habitats and species features should also be considered if they contribute substantially to local natural character, even if they are not selected as priorities within the local BAP. Similarly, selection of Local Sites to maintain geological conservation should be based on national, regional and local assessment of features of geological interest and the provision of such sites for educational or research purposes. Therefore, this national guidance simply provides a standard framework against which to structure assessment of local nature conservation priorities, rather than a rigid set of rules.
40. The geographical area within which Local Sites systems operate will usually be the administrative area of one or more Local Authorities. Such boundaries may poorly reflect the distribution of habitats, species and other natural features and in such areas the criteria for the selection of Local Sites may be best derived with reference to the Natural Areas covering the administrative areas in question<sup>7</sup>. These provide a context for identifying local priorities and recognising what is locally distinctive based on geological/biogeographical zoning.
41. The effective selection of sites depends on a good knowledge of the natural character of an area and the broad extent and quality of the nature conservation resource from which sites will be selected. Such information needs to be updated and reviewed from time to time to inform the setting of priorities and objectives for local biodiversity and geological conservation, which themselves inform the selection of Local Sites. This baseline information will enable candidate sites for evaluation to be identified and targets to be determined to provide adequate coverage of the priority nature conservation features of the area within the Local Sites series. It also provides information about local distinctiveness which is also a consideration in the evaluation process.
42. Local Site systems should select all areas of substantive nature conservation value. Developing the criteria will hinge on defining what qualifies as 'substantive' in the local context. This is a complex issue affected by many factors including:
  - determining criteria thresholds for the nature conservation benefits to be secured through any particular Local Sites system. This will involve considering the amount and distribution of locally significant species, habitats and geological features to be selected into the system;
  - distribution, abundance and increasing or declining trends in the nature conservation resources;
  - maintaining viable populations and functioning ecological communities;

<sup>7</sup> See English Nature's website at [http://www.english-nature.org.uk/science/natural/NA\\_search.asp](http://www.english-nature.org.uk/science/natural/NA_search.asp)

- differing abundance and therefore significance of the nature conservation resources, for example between rural areas and urban areas;
- general paucity of natural interest in the area; and,
- the importance of certain features at the edge of their range.

These factors are considered at paragraphs 44-48 and ultimately have a bearing on the framing and weighting of the site selection criteria.

43. Description requires a standard terminology of classification and nomenclature for species, habitats and geological features, so that information gathered at various times and by different people can be compared. More information on the use of terminology is at Annex B.

## Selection Criteria

### Important considerations for developing criteria

44. The first step in identifying features to be conserved is to describe the nature conservation resource currently, or historically, found in the area. This may well have been covered in documentation produced by Local Biodiversity Partnerships (e.g. action plans), Local Geodiversity Action Plans, local RIGS Group database, a Nature Conservation Strategy, Ancient Woodland Inventory or Natural Area Profiles for the area in question.
45. The thresholds which determine which sites are of key wildlife or geological interest at a local level will be a matter of judgement. This judgement must be based on an understanding of ecological and geological principles and processes, the distribution and abundance of the resource (national, regional and local), and trends for increase or decline in abundance and distribution. These considerations are relevant when developing criteria thresholds so that when they are applied to specific habitats, species or geological features, all those sites selected can be justified as of substantive importance to the biodiversity/geodiversity of the local area and that no sites of such importance are excluded.

#### Example

The **Derbyshire Wildlife Sites Selection Guidelines** (2003), recognises the considerable variation in the extent and quality of different habitats between the different Natural Areas in Derbyshire and the selection thresholds have attempted to take this into account. For example, good examples of semi-natural grasslands are especially scarce in the Coal Measures, Trent Valley and Rises and Needwood and South Derbyshire Claylands Natural Areas and the threshold for the selection has been set slightly lower than for other Natural Areas.

46. The survival of biological systems requires the maintenance of viable populations and a functioning ecological community. The proportion of an ecological resource that needs to be listed to sustain a biological feature will vary. Maintaining biodiversity requires a

sufficiently large area of a habitat or population of a species for fluctuations in birth and death rate, immigration and emigration, to be moderated and buffered. In principle, the largest possible areas are required, but in practice loss and attrition has occurred. This will generally require the resilience that a network of sufficiently close sites can provide. In this respect, Local Sites can support and increase the value of national statutory nature conservation sites in their area.

47. Biological and geological features are not evenly distributed across the country, and what might be an important feature in one area might not be seen as very significant in another. Criteria development must be sensitive to local circumstances. For instance, areas of semi-natural vegetation range from 4% of Cambridgeshire to 40% of Cumbria. This implies that criteria thresholds for features of nature conservation interest will be set differently within one district or county compared to another. It also means that rare features at the edge of their range may need to be considered as locally significant despite appearing commonplace at the centre of their distribution.
48. Similarly what counts as 'substantive' in one area with substantially less natural space or lacking natural interest, may be much smaller than a site qualifying as substantive in another. The criteria and evaluation of sites within an administrative area will need to reflect such local contrasts, so that where an administrative area includes contrasting areas, criteria will need to cover both contexts.

### **Developing the Criteria**

49. Once the full extent of the natural resource has been established and the priorities for conservation agreed, the next stage is to develop the criteria.
50. All Local Sites systems should have a set of clear and locally defined site selection criteria with measurable thresholds developed with reference to the standard set of criteria listed below. Some or all of these can inform the development of individual measurable thresholds for Local Site selection criteria, providing a structured and systematic approach to the description and assessment of sites.

- Size or Extent
- Diversity
- Naturalness
- Rare or Exceptional feature
- Fragility
- Typicalness
- Recorded history and cultural associations
- Connectivity within the landscape
- Value for appreciation of nature
- Value for learning

See Annex C for a full explanation of terms.

51. Many existing Local Site systems already base their selection criteria for biological sites on the 'Ratcliffe approach' set out in the Nature Conservation Review, 1977<sup>8</sup>. However, the application of these criteria, devised for the identification of a series of nationally important sites, inevitably requires some adjustment for use in a local context. In particular, opportunities for educational and amenity use, both alluded to in the rationale for the Nature Conservation Review (NCR), can be significant for Local Sites.
52. For geological sites, guidelines for the selection of nationally important sites, originally published in the Geological Conservation Review (GCR), have already been supplemented by criteria for more local application in the selection of RIGS. This has involved emphasis of the educational and research opportunities and aesthetic qualities of sites.

Local Geological Sites [RIGS] are selected on a local or regional basis using four nationally agreed criteria [1990]:

- The value of a site for educational purposes in life-long learning;
- The value of a site for study by both professional and amateur Earth scientists;
- The historical value of a site in terms of important advances in Earth science knowledge, events or human exploitation;
- The aesthetic value of a site in the landscape, particularly in relation to promoting public awareness and appreciation of Earth sciences.

53. The setting of overall targets for species, habitats and geological features and the weighting or setting of thresholds within site selection criteria need to be considered and applied with reference to each other.

## Site Selection

54. Once criteria have been agreed and documented, potential sites should be evaluated against them. All sites that meet that criteria should be selected. Further clarification on the application of these criteria is provided at Annex C.
55. Applying these criteria, like those of the NCR and GCR, should not be seen as a mechanical, rule-based approach: whilst they are based on sound, rational principles, using them to reach sound judgements requires knowledge and understanding.
56. Nevertheless, it is important that the application of criteria is transparent and consistent between sites and across different types of nature conservation interest within each Local Site system. The production of guidelines on the application of the criteria in relation to different habitats, species and geological features can help provide clarity and consistency between those carrying out site evaluation, and over time. Such guidelines contribute to

<sup>8</sup> Ratcliffe, D.A., (ed.) (1977). A nature conservation review, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

quality assurance in site evaluation and help provide a baseline for long-term monitoring. They also provide a valuable mechanism for arbitration concerning the evaluation of individual sites.

### Example

**Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation in the County of North Yorkshire: Guidelines for Site Selection** (North Yorkshire SINC Panel 2001) provides detailed guidelines on the interpretation of selection criteria in relation to each of a wide range of habitat types, including grasslands, flowing water habitats, coastal habitats, upland moorland habitats and habitats on artificial substrates. The guidelines include reference to National Vegetation Classification community types and lists of indicative or characteristic plant species.

57. Where a locality has a number of small fragments of semi-natural habitat which together could be managed to provide linkages for natural colonisation or movement, a Local Site boundary can be defined to take in a wider area and include both discontinuous natural patches and the areas separating them. For instance, along a watercourse, a single Local Site might comprise separate stretches of the waterway and banks along with intervening built-over or culverted stretches, in order to support and encourage sympathetic future management and development.

## Relationship with other Sites

### Local Sites and Open Spaces

58. Local Sites should form just one element within a wider Open Space Strategy that takes account of the full range of social uses requiring different types of open space. A Local Site may suffer pressures from a range of different uses where it is the only local open space, particularly in urban areas. Selection of such sites is important to establish their value for nature conservation. The Open Space Strategy should make provision elsewhere for the demand for other functions which would have an adverse effect on Local Sites' biodiversity or geological value. Where local space provides primarily for social and community functions or benefits not related to a site's nature conservation interest, it should not be selected as a Local Site, but should be recognised for these in relation to local open space policies.

### Example

The criteria for the selection of **Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation in the West Midlands** (January 1997) include consideration of biological, geological and social interests, with all three aspects given equal weight when evaluating sites. However, the guidance makes clear that the social interest of the site, which includes aesthetic quality and educational value, is concerned with the 'value derived from ... wildlife and natural features'

## Local Nature Reserves

59. Local Nature Reserves (LNRs) are sites containing special interest within the administrative area of a Local Authority for their flora, fauna, geological or physiographical features, and which are managed for the purpose of their preservation or for providing opportunities for related study and research. They are also recognised as an important means of providing for the public enjoyment of nature. LNRs should have a high degree of natural interest, or a combination of reasonable natural interest and high value for environmental education by providing opportunity for research and study of flora, fauna, geological or physiographical features. In contrast, Local Sites are required to have only substantive nature conservation interest and do not necessarily have to provide opportunities for study and research.
60. A commitment to ongoing management for nature conservation, study and research into nature conservation or both, is central to LNR designation. Whereas Local Sites are primarily managed as part of the overall strategy for conservation of biodiversity or geological interests and may as likely be privately owned farmland as a stretch of canal or urban greenspace. However, where a local authority recognises special value in a Local Site for its ecological or geological features or its potential role in providing for education, research and possibly, quiet enjoyment relating to its natural features, it should consider the scope for declaring it as an LNR.

## Sites of Special Scientific Interest

61. Besides the special features for which they are designated, Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) may contain additional features of 'substantive nature conservation interest' in the local context, which could warrant their selection as Local Sites. For example, a site designated for its biological features may also contain geological features of local interest, or vice versa. Also, SSSIs designated for features of scientific interest may play an important role in providing locally for contact with nature.
62. Where a SSSI contains features of local significance that are not part of its national conservation objectives, the Local Sites partnership should liaise with English Nature to include the locally significant interest as part of the management advice for the SSSI (so long as this does not conflict with the over-riding international or national interest of the site). Responsibility for giving consent to any work or development that may affect the natural interest of the site remains with English Nature.
63. This should not prevent the Local Sites partnership from working actively with the landowner and English Nature to enhance the site's management and use. Nor should it prevent SSSIs which allow public access and use from being included in any public information about Local Sites. Rather, for SSSIs which are additionally selected as Local Sites, the Local Sites partnership should liaise with English Nature to ensure a co-ordinated approach to promoting the conservation and management of the site, which complements rather than compromises effort in relation to the SSSI designation.
64. Where a SSSI is part of a larger area of substantive nature conservation interest, the contiguous area should be considered for selection as a Local Site and assessed against the agreed local criteria.



## Part 4 – Management and Resourcing of Local Sites Systems

65. After the sites have been selected it will be important to make every effort to ensure that activities affecting the sites are managed so as to be sympathetic to the interests of the sites; and that their general condition is monitored to ensure that they retain the interests for which they were selected. Similarly, the system itself will require ongoing maintenance and the administration of Local Sites systems in this way will require resourcing at a local level. The resource requirement will depend on the scale of the system being administered, e.g. number of sites or partners and stakeholders involved or diversity/complexity of interests within the system; and the timescales and level of performance or achievements that the partnership sets for itself.
66. A Local Sites system provides a mechanism through which many partner organisations can deliver some of their programmes of conservation work in a focused way. Contributions of financial support or staff time towards a Local Site partnership can represent a significant value-for-money benefit in delivering an organisations' own biodiversity and geodiversity objectives and obligations; and provide an opportunity for acquiring positive environmental credentials. This is in line with the Modernising Government objective of joining up public services through working in partnership.
67. The essential functions for which resources need to be found will include:

### Site records and information management

68. Gathering, maintaining, analysing and disseminating information on the distribution and abundance of features, habitats and species, whether through a Local Records Centre or from other sources, will be a first stage requiring significant staff time and resources. There is an increasingly well recognised suite of survey methodologies and classification systems, such as the National Vegetation Classification, and the National Biodiversity Network has an important role in promoting their standardised use and wider adoption. Once the sites have been selected, a Register of Local Sites will need to be set up, maintained and periodically reviewed.
69. Ensuring that relevant information on the Local Site system and individual sites is disseminated to the appropriate people and organisations can be time-consuming. As part of the National Biodiversity Network, the establishment of Local Record Centres is being encouraged as places to hold, maintain and provide access to Local Site and species information, in the context of regional and national priorities and policy. Where a Local Records Centre has been set up, the information collection and maintenance of the Register of Sites would normally form part of their work programme. Local BAP partnerships may also hold relevant information. For geological data, centres should be linked to a national database.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> UKRIGS encourages RIGS groups to use the UKRIGS GeoConservation database.



## Selection of Local Sites

70. Information about the significance of a site enables balanced judgements over future management and land use that take its nature conservation significance and character into account. This information should be provided for each Local Site in the form of a simple map and brief description of the features of interest.
71. Information about the importance of the sites within a local system should be publicly available and locational details should be sent to relevant decision-makers with further information on the site's features and interest as appropriate. The range of parties that need to be provided with basic site information is similar to that for statutory sites. Land owners and managers are of foremost importance. Others include the planning authorities, major utilities, the Environment Agency, Forestry Commission, English Nature and the Rural Development Service. All of these need to be made aware of the substantive value of the Local Sites selected by a Partnership. This will enable them both to avoid unwitting damage and to identify opportunities through their own programmes and functions to contribute positively to nature conservation and the achievement of national and local biodiversity and geological conservation targets.

### Example

The Somerset Wildlife Sites Project initiated the 'Habitat Management Map Programme' in 1998, to provide important data and information for each owner, manager and tenant of every Local Site in the county, in a format likely to be retained for future reference:

- Site name
- An aerial photo with inset map, showing site boundary
- Name and address of site owner, tenant or manager with date of last contact and name of adviser involved

On the reverse

- A standard description of the Local Site system in Somerset and implications of status
- A paragraph on the importance of the particular site, with recorded species and habitats
- Management guidelines for the main habitats on site
- Contact addresses for future information and advice
- Logos of those institutions and agencies that support the project.

Laminated maps were sent to each owner, manager and tenant. Each was distributed with a standard covering letter and tear off section for changes of address, ownership and other comments, returnable in a pre-paid envelope provided.

## Advice and support for site management

72. Besides knowing the features that make a Local Site significant for nature conservation, it is important to know how to manage the site to maintain and enhance its nature conservation interest, or whether a planned activity would be neutral, beneficial or detrimental. Local Site partnerships could provide management guidance or, where necessary, support owners in producing management plans to promote the management of sites for their nature conservation interest. This should be driven on a needs basis and whether to issue general management guidance or encourage development of site specific management plans is a matter for the judgment of the partnership.
73. Management plans should be kept simple, with objectives that focus on the location and extent of the features for which the sites were selected and which link firmly with delivery of local objectives for biodiversity and geology. This could mean producing a simple map, showing features of interest relevant to site management, including habitats, species and geological features.
74. In many instances the wildlife or geological interest of a site may reflect a history of benign site management and maintaining such practices may incur no additional costs or lessen financial returns. In other cases, ensuring conditions are sympathetic to wildlife and geology may require changes to site management which do imply additional costs or diminished financial returns. In such instances, it may be possible to secure funding from a number of sources including those listed at Annex D.
75. Provision of advice and promotion of positive management tailored to individual sites is time intensive, often requiring face to face discussions. But there are substantial benefits in establishing a proactive programme of advice for land managers, and the most effective Local Site systems actively provide advice and promote the achievement of favourable condition of sites by contacting and helping owners to achieve appropriate management.
76. Local authority departments, public and voluntary agencies and partnerships should be encouraged by Local Sites partnerships to include commitments to protecting and enhancing the nature conservation value of Local Sites and other land that they manage as part of a commitment to sustainable development in their plans and policies. Research commissioned by Defra<sup>10</sup> found a large amount of Local Site damage occurred on sites in local authority ownership, due to management which did not have adequate regard to their nature conservation value and the action needed to avoid damage. This highlights the need for better informed management which reflects the variety of functions, including nature conservation, that open spaces can provide. Close collaboration between planning and land management responsibilities within local authorities is essential to achieve this.
77. Other measures that can help protect Local Sites include Tree Preservation Orders, Felling Licences, Hedgerow Regulations, protected species legislation and Environmental Impact Assessment regulations for uncultivated and semi-natural land. Some damaging activities are criminal acts that can be prosecuted, and local police wildlife liaison officers could be invited to participate in the work of Local Sites partnerships.

<sup>10</sup> Study into non-development damage to Local Sites, possible solutions to damage and provision of resources, Just Ecology 2002. A summary of the report is available at <http://defraweb/wildlife-countryside/resprog/findings/2002jan2.htm>


## Community Involvement and Educational Value

78. While some Local Sites may be sensitive to even modest levels of human disturbance, others could provide important opportunities for people to have contact with nature as well as related educational opportunities.
79. Voluntary and community organisations, including those focusing on nature conservation and the environment, and locality-focused groups, can provide an effective 'bridge' for wider community involvement. Local nature conservation groups play a key role but broadening dialogue and involvement beyond environmental groups to include other interests relevant to the locality could secure wider community support for nature conservation's contribution to quality of life. Linking Local Sites with the Community Strategy may enable local people to become actively involved within the context of other local priorities such as neighbourhood renewal or health action zones.
80. The educational value of Local Sites can be promoted through liaison with the local education authority and by linking up individual Local Sites with nearby schools. Although local education authorities and schools have important roles to play, the active involvement of non-governmental organisations is often critical in providing the expertise and support for individual schools and teachers to develop the confidence and experience in using Local Sites for a range of project work and educational activities across the curriculum. Local Sites partnerships have an important role to play in forging such links between the environmental and educational interests locally.

## Reviewing Local Sites Systems and Monitoring Site Conditions

81. We recommend that Local Site systems should from time to time:
  - aim to reconsider whether they are operating in the most effective way to achieve the overall objective set out in the Introduction to this guide;
  - ensure that they continue to represent an adequate selection of sites of nature conservation interest in the area; and,
  - consider the information on the condition of Local Sites and the effectiveness of measures for their conservation and management.
82. Research commissioned by Defra<sup>11</sup> found a lack of systematic, quantifiable and verifiable data on damage to sites, and no assessment or monitoring programmes able to provide such information. The general condition of sites should be monitored to ensure that they retain their 'substantive value' and that the local system robustly justifies policies and related decision-making. Monitoring is a quantity or quality based measurement of the features for which the sites were selected with reference to desired target levels. The targets for Local Sites should be, as a minimum, to maintain the features for which the site was selected. Where a simple habitat map, with species notes if needed, is the basis for management, monitoring will mean re-mapping any changes as a basis for review.

<sup>11</sup> Study into non-development damage to Local Sites, possible solutions to damage and provision of resources, Just Ecology 2002.

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83. It is important for the integrity and utility of Local Sites systems that the appraisal of sites remains valid and up to date. Short-term changes to the quality of sites, resulting more from non-development related damage than the lack of active management, may require short review intervals. The review of Local Sites is likely to be less onerous than the original selection process, focusing on aspects of significant change, rather than the comprehensive re-assessment of sites. But this still implies a resource requirement and a process of on-going review is recommended as a way of addressing this. A review period of between five and ten years is recommended.
  84. However, where Local Sites systems operate over extensive administrative areas and include a large number of sites, the selection and review process may take a number of years and operate as a rolling programme of work. This should be planned such that individual sites are revisited at regular and consistent intervals.

## Annex A: List of common terms currently used to describe Local Sites in England

- Areas of Natural History Interest (Biological)
- Biodiversity Alert Sites (BAS)
- Biological Heritage Sites
- City Wildlife Sites
- County Wildlife Sites
- County Geological Sites
- Heritage Sites
- Key Wildlife Sites
- Local Wildlife Sites
- Natural Heritage Sites
- Regionally Important Geological/geomorphological Sites (RIGS)
- Sites of Biological Importance
- Sites of Biological Interest
- Sites of Community Wildlife Interest
- Sites of Ecological or Geological Importance
- Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs)
- Sites of Local Nature Conservation Importance (SLINCs)
- Sites of Nature Conservation Importance (SNICs)
- Sites of Nature Conservation Value
- Sites of Scientific Importance
- Special Wildlife Sites
- Wildlife Heritage Sites
- Wildlife Sites

# Annex B: Use of Terminology

## Species

Species do not normally pose classification problems. The National Biodiversity Network species dictionary provides a useful facility for tracking changes in taxonomy and nomenclature over time and provides distribution information which gives a geographical context. Red Data books provide valuable information on rarer species and those suffering significant decline. Levels of national, regional and local significance are set for some species, especially birds. There are also national and local BAP priorities and associated Action Plans, which may be separate or grouped with other species or with habitats.

## Habitats

Habitat classifications are more problematic. The Broad and Priority habitat definitions adopted in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan provide a framework for recognising and describing habitats which are recognised as being of conservation significance at a national level and have associated Habitat Action Plans. Similarly classifications such as Phase 1 Habitat Survey and the National Vegetation Classification include categories of habitat or vegetation which have acknowledged value for nature conservation and their use allows for comparisons within regional and national contexts. The results of surveys using these methodologies can also contribute to regional and national habitat inventories. Such benefits may also result from using other well-established classifications such as the Somerset Environmental Records Centre's Integrated Habitat System. This includes both Broad and Priority habitats in its framework and the results of surveys using this methodology can contribute to regional and national habitat inventories. Habitat classifications are generally less well developed in relation to urban areas, and description is more commonly by landuse type or function – e.g. cemetery, railway lineside – and this has been the basis for many habitat action plans in many urban LBAPs.

## Geological features

The Geological Conservation Review provides the basis for the classification of the country's geological conservation resource at a national level. This has been developed for local application through the RIGS system which also reflects the educational role of local geological sites. The Association of UKRIGS has produced a Field Record and Site Assessment form which provides a structured format for recording site details for evaluation, which is available for downloading at [www.ukrigs.org.uk](http://www.ukrigs.org.uk).

# Annex C: Reference Criteria for the Selection of Local Sites

## Size or Extent

The ability of a site to support a species depends, in part, upon its extent. The requirements of many species of animal for minimal areas for foraging and territories for breeding may preclude their survival within smaller areas of otherwise suitable habitat. The same may also be true of certain plant species where the long-term viability of populations may require a minimal extent of habitat free from adverse environmental influence, allowing for turnover within local populations

Although, for mobile species, including many birds, mosaics of different habitat features or elements at the wider landscape scale are essential, the presence of individual blocks of a particular habitat type of a minimal size can nevertheless be critical.

Where the interest of a site is an active natural process, such as shifting tidal flats, the site boundary should encompass the area of active process as well as any adjacent area to which the process will imminently spread.

Although larger sites can be critically important for supporting viable populations of certain species, smaller sites can also be important where species are able to use them as 'patches' of a larger habitat resource dispersed across the landscape. Small sites may also be the only locally available patches of accessible natural greenspace offering opportunities for the appreciation of nature.

## Diversity

A key principle of nature conservation is to sustain the diversity of wildlife, habitats, geological and geomorphological features. The former includes maintaining genetic diversity within populations of animals and plants as well as the diversity of species and habitats. Some habitats are characteristically more species-rich than others. For example, unimproved calcareous grassland is considerably richer in plant species than heathland. However, each habitat type is characterised by its own range of species. Conserving the diversity that these different habitats represent, and the diversity of their respective floras and faunas, means effectively conserving the integrity of these contrasting environments, one richer in plant species, and the other poorer.

Conserving diversity at a landscape scale can involve maintaining habitats at different stages of ecological succession. This may mean arresting succession of a particular patch of habitat at an intermediate stage or allowing sufficient patches of habitat to proceed through succession at staggered intervals such that at any one time different patches are at different stages of succession.

England contains a wide diversity of geological features and landforms from a range of eras within a relatively small area. Individual sites and features together contribute to this diversity. The sites in a Local Sites system should seek to reflect the diversity of features that characterise the geology of the area in question as together they provide the basis for understanding the processes that have built and shaped the resource over time.

## Naturalness

Human activities past and present have had such an impact that even those parts of the landscape that seem least modified are now more usually described as 'semi-natural'. In this context, the concept of 'naturalness' is probably better considered not as the absence of human intervention or legacy within a site but the degree to which a site supports natural features or demonstrates active or past natural processes. Eroding coasts are dynamic features dominated by natural processes. In contrast, quarry exposures revealing rock strata betray past natural processes within what is a landscape feature clearly of human, industrial origin. Both significantly demonstrate 'naturalness' by revealing past or present natural process.

Within urban areas, natural processes of colonisation and succession can transform previously developed land into seemingly natural vegetation. But it is often the early stages of such natural recolonisation that, though less apparent, are more significant for the presence of rare or scarce species of conservation importance.

Therefore, naturalness should be considered as much in terms of process as the presence of 'natural' features.

## Rare or Exceptional feature

This is perhaps the most self evident of the criteria. The local loss of a rare species or habitat may result directly in the reduction in its wider geographical range. For species that are rare, local populations may represent an important part of the total species gene pool. The loss of a local population may result in the irreversible loss of genetic diversity, local races or subspecies and ultimately of species themselves.

Exceptional geological features if lost are equally irreplaceable; the environments and processes that created them may no longer exist.

## Fragility

Although some habitats and geological features are stable over long periods, others are more prone to change and so are at greater risk of being lost. Such change might be the successional change that occurs naturally or may be due to the direct or indirect impact of other influences or human activities. This may extend to include the influence of climate change. For example, some invertebrates require grasslands with short open turf with a good proportion of exposed soil. The cessation, or even the reduction in the intensity of grazing, could lead to the loss of species in relatively short periods of time. Similarly many sites such as peatlands are susceptible to erosion and damage from trampling and unmanaged access. Active conservation management is important in maintaining the condition of sites, countering adverse impacts and preventing the loss of ephemeral populations and habitats through successional change.

Fragility should not be construed as susceptibility to development. It is the intrinsic sensitivity of habitats or features that should be considered rather than the site's likelihood to face development. Different types of habitat and geological feature have different sensitivities to change and damage. In contrast, many woodlands are comparatively robust and may require little management to conserve their nature conservation interest over long periods.



Fragility is relevant to evaluation of sites because Local Site designation could aid the conservation of fragile habitats and features through prioritisation of land management resources.

## Typicalness

Generally, Local Sites will not be typical of the landscapes in which they are found; their designation is likely to reflect the fact that they are special in some way. Rather, their value lies in them exemplifying a type of habitat, geological feature, or a population of a species, that is characteristic of the natural components of the landscape in which they are found.

Wildlife habitats and geological features play an important role in helping define a 'sense of place' or local distinctiveness. They represent the 'natural character' of an area, especially where this has been lost or eroded from the wider landscape. Similarly, sites may exemplify natural processes past or present whether geological or biological. In this way, Local Sites are likely to typify the best of the natural environment of an area.

## Recorded history and cultural associations

Past investigation or recording of a site can add greatly to its value for understanding processes and change in the natural environment. Many sites also have links to historic events or have literary or other associations in art. Besides revealing environmental change (or stasis) over time such recording or portrayal can also reveal changes in perception of the natural environment and the economic value that it has been ascribed at different times.

Because the natural environment has been extensively shaped and influenced by human activity, the natural features that we have inherited and which provide important components of regional and local distinctiveness also represent important parts of our cultural heritage. A good example of this is the relationship between local geology and building stone. Not only are many towns and cities dominated by buildings made of locally quarried stone, but the former quarries from which such stone came are commonly sites of local value for their geological or ecological interest.

Because Britain has played an important role in the history of Earth Science, many sites are of significance as the places where scientific concepts were first demonstrated.

## Connectivity within the landscape

Besides being of intrinsic interest themselves and directly supporting wildlife within their boundaries, Local Sites also have an important role in supporting populations of species within the wider landscape. Such species may not depend on any single site or piece of habitat but rather require a habitat resource which is comprised of numerous patches which though dispersed, are accessible and are potentially parts of a functional network. Individual sites need to be considered in terms of the contribution they make to such networks; not simply the quantity of habitat they provide, but its geographical position. The quality of habitat and the nature of the surrounding matrix are also extremely pertinent considerations.

In considering the geological interests of potential sites, a relevant factor would be the degree to which their interest features contribute to understanding landscape-scale geological or geomorphological processes, past and present.

### Value for Appreciation of Nature

The scale and cumulative impact of human intervention in the landscape, plus social changes, such as the decline in land based employment, have had a combined effect in reducing people's contact with nature and a high quality natural environment. There is growing evidence that the positive associations that people have with the concept of nature is reflected in benefits to people's well being. Whilst there is an established history of recognising the intrinsic appeal or aesthetic value of nature manifest in particular places, the amenity and spiritual benefits provided by contact with nature has often been considered a subordinate concern. Sites which are important for the conservation of rare species or exceptional geological features, are rich in biodiversity or typify the natural character of an area will often be additionally important for providing people with the chance to experience and enjoy local wildlife and geology. In populous areas that are poorer in high quality natural environment, sites of lesser intrinsic ecological or geological interest may still be of substantive nature conservation value for the opportunities they provide for the appreciation of nature.

Although the absence of rights of access to sites can clearly affect the opportunities for experiencing, and close enjoyment of, the interest features within them; their protection and enhancement within the landscape can offer significant visual appreciation from neighbouring or more distant locations.

### Value for learning

The value of statutory designated sites such as nature reserves, in providing opportunities for research and investigation into ecology and geology has been a long established and accepted principle in nature conservation in Britain. Today, there is an equal need to provide sites for local educational use to enable people of all ages to learn about and better understand the natural world around them.

Some sites may offer particular local opportunities for controlled research, investigation or experimental work. The ease with which people can reach a site, the safety of access and for use of the site, and the rights or permission for using the site will all be relevant considerations.

## Annex D: Sources of funding

There is potentially a wide range of sources for land management advice and funding support programmes. Local Sites partnerships can play a valuable role in identifying, publicising and providing access to sources of information, advice and funding for environmental land management.

Local Sites systems that have been developed through a partnership and are endorsed by local authorities will be more likely to attract a range of funding support available for nature conservation objectives. These include:

- **Planning conditions and section 106 agreements** with developers for works to secure public benefit. These could include measures to improve public access and interpretation. Section 106 agreements could also include one-off or ongoing payments for positive management.
- Local authorities can make **payments under section 39 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981** for entering into management agreements in respect of any land in their area for the purpose of conserving or enhancing its natural beauty, or promoting its enjoyment by the public.
- Defra's Rural Development Service administer **agri-environment schemes** set up under section 18(1) of the Agriculture Act 1986 and section 98 of the Environment Act 1995. Local Sites may contribute towards the points target for qualification under the **Higher Level Stewardship** scheme if they have been identified in a regional targeting statement.
- In economically depressed and socially deprived areas, **regeneration funding** for activities to improve the social value of sites may be available. This might include training towards accredited qualifications in environmental and land management skills, as well as improving public access, educational value, and community safety around sites.
- A range of **lottery, landfill tax credit schemes, aggregates levy sustainability fund, foundation and trusts grants** are available for voluntary and community sector led initiatives geared to environmental, health, quality of life, social inclusion and other objectives which may be relevant to Local Sites. These links should be identified through work with Local Strategic Partnerships on Community Strategies.

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