



House of Commons  
Environment, Food and Rural  
Affairs Committee

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**Sites of Special  
Scientific Interest:  
Conserving the Jewels  
of England's Natural  
Heritage: Government  
Reply to the  
Committee's Report**

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**Eighteenth Special Report**

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## The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

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\*These Members were nominated as Members of the Sites of Special Scientific Interest Sub-committee. Mr David Lepper was Chairman of the Sub-committee.

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### Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Matthew Hamlyn (Clerk), Fiona McLean (Second Clerk), Jonathan Little and Dr Antonia James (Committee Specialists), Marek Kubala (Inquiry Manager), Louise Combs and Jim Lawford (Committee Assistants) and Anne Woolhouse (Secretary).

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# EIGHTEENTH SPECIAL REPORT

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee reported to the House on *Sites of Special Scientific Interest: Conserving the Jewels of England's Natural Heritage* in its Fourteenth Report of Session 2003–04, published on 15 July 2004 as HC 475. The Government's Reply to the Report was received on 8 November 2004.

## Government response

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### Introduction

The Government welcomes the report of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee into Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). The report is a constructive and timely review of progress towards achieving the Government's aim, expressed as a Defra Public Service Agreement (PSA) Target, of having 95% of such sites (by area) in favourable or recovering condition (hereafter referred to as 'target condition') by 2010. This response is provided by Government on behalf of both itself and of English Nature, reflecting the partnership approach we have adopted in order to deliver the target. This is not intended to constrain or restrict English Nature's independent function and voice. Should it need to report further to the Committee, in line with the Committee's requests, English Nature will do so on its own account.

### Recommendation 1

**SSSIs represent a vital part of our natural heritage. The way we look after them serves as a barometer for the way in which we care for our natural environment. We welcome the Government's targets of bringing 95% of sites into favourable condition by 2010 and urge the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to be entirely realistic, and not complacent, about what will be needed to meet the target. (Paragraph 9)**

The Government acknowledges that the target is challenging, but assures the Committee that it is not complacent about what needs to be done. Significant work has already taken place, such as the development of a computer model<sup>1</sup> by English Nature, and more is underway to inform our strategy for delivering the target. English Nature's current focus is to identify what action or actions are needed and by whom, on each of the 7,100 SSSI management units not in target condition. This is known as the 'Remedy Project' and will provide detailed information on what is needed to achieve the target. The first stage is due to finish by the end of 2004. Discussion with landowners,

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<sup>1</sup> This computer model is used to predict the amount of land brought into target condition over the period of the target, in response to a series of variable assumptions.

and others identified by English Nature as responsible for the remedial actions required on each site will then be undertaken.

The Government recognises that the target will not be achieved unless adequate funding is made available. Where SSSI land needs managing in order to achieve and maintain target condition this has to be paid for, as does the wider range of activities which are undertaken by English Nature in support of the programme. These requirements will be taken fully into account in application of the new Higher Level Stewardship Scheme, and in the allocation of Defra's funding according to its strategic priorities and key targets later this year.

The level of this funding through Defra is one key issue. Another is commitment from other delivery partners, including significant "section 28G<sup>2</sup>" bodies and other major SSSI landowners. The Government is also working to integrate delivery of the target into relevant policy areas such as agriculture and water. For example, in the water environment we are consulting on proposals to tackle land management practices that lead to diffuse water pollution. We have also set out the environment programme for the water companies to deliver, in the context of the current review of water prices. We recognise too that flood management activities have an important role to play in maintaining and improving many wetland SSSIs, and this is one policy issue under review in our new Strategy for flood and coastal erosion risk management in England, as set out in the consultation document 'Making Space for Water', published at the end of July<sup>3</sup>.

In addition, the Government is committed to introducing a Commons Bill as soon as Parliamentary time allows, to reform the law relating to common land. Half of England's common land is designated as SSSI, of which nearly two thirds is not in target condition. The Commons Bill will facilitate more sustainable agricultural management of common land and this would make a significant contribution towards the SSSI target and have benefits for wider biodiversity.

## Recommendation 2

**We endorse English Nature's balanced approach to its new powers to protect SSSIs, as long as it continues to deliver results. It should not be afraid to use its powers where necessary, but a voluntary management regime agreed with landowners is clearly preferable. (Paragraph 14)**

The Government welcomes this endorsement of English Nature's balanced approach to its new powers and the recent publication by English Nature of its Enforcement Policy

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<sup>2</sup> These bodies are defined in Section 28G (3) of the Wildlife and Countryside Act, as amended, and include any Government Department, local authority, statutory undertaker, or any other public body. They are subject to the duty in respect of SSSIs set out in section 28G(2).

<sup>3</sup> Copies of the consultation paper and further information are available at:  
<http://defraweb/corporate/consult/waterspace/index/htm>

Statement.<sup>4</sup> The statement aims to inform SSSI owners/occupiers, organisations and the general public, as to what they can expect from English Nature in its enforcement role. The Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000, which amended section 28 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, introduced a range of new powers to protect SSSIs, including statutory Management Schemes and Notices aimed particularly at neglected sites. The Government expects English Nature to work in partnership with landowners and to use its new powers, where necessary, in order to protect SSSIs from damage and to secure the management necessary to conserve and restore the features of special interest on a site. Since the CROW Act came into force, English Nature has initiated proceedings on several Management Schemes. So far, it has only once considered it necessary to serve one of these on the relevant parties formally, where it has not been able to secure appropriate agreement to the management measures necessary for the special interest features of the site by any other means.

### **Recommendation 3**

**We recommend that Defra and English Nature write to all section 28G bodies reminding them of their responsibilities towards SSSIs, and including information about sites in their ownership, what steps they should take to ensure that the sites are in favourable condition and what sources of advice and financial assistance are available. The letter should also emphasise the need for urgent action, given the timeframe of the PSA target. (Paragraph 16)**

### **Recommendation 17**

**Local authorities need a clearer signal from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister if they are to attach higher priority to SSSIs. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister should write to local authorities to emphasise that work on SSSIs should be a high priority for environmental and ecological officers and outlining the time frame of the PSA target. (Paragraph 50)**

Through the ‘Remedy Project’ outlined in the response to Recommendation 1, English Nature will shortly be contacting all those section 28G bodies it has identified as in a position to influence SSSI condition. English Nature will identify what they need to do, and on which SSSI management units. The Government does not therefore see the need to write separately in respect of SSSIs to all section 28G bodies as this would include many that have no direct or other influence on SSSIs. Nevertheless, Defra stands ready to contact any section 28G body to advise them of their responsibilities where English Nature recommend this would be expedient.

Furthermore many section 28G bodies already take their duties in respect of SSSIs very seriously. The Government and English Nature are already working in partnership with

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<sup>4</sup> English Nature’s Enforcement Policy Statement can be found at [www.english-nature.org.uk/Special/sssi/protection.cfm](http://www.english-nature.org.uk/Special/sssi/protection.cfm)

the most significant section 28G SSSI landowning bodies, including the Ministry of Defence, Crown Estate and Forestry Commission, through the Major Landowners Group. Guidance<sup>5</sup> has also already been issued by Defra in May 2003 to a wide range of stakeholders, including local authorities and other section 28G bodies. This clearly explains the requirements of the legislation protecting SSSIs, draws attention to the duty<sup>6</sup> on section 28G bodies to take steps to conserve and enhance the special interests of SSSIs consistently with the exercise of their functions, and highlights the Secretary of State's expectations in respect of SSSIs.

Local authorities own a little less than 5% of SSSI land. Its condition is no worse than that of SSSIs as a whole. Nevertheless, the Government accepts that local authorities need to continue to be encouraged to attach priority to their SSSI land. We do not consider that a general letter to all local authorities would be effective in achieving this. Not all local authorities own SSSI land, and fewer than 80 hold more than 100ha. For a number, all of their SSSI land will already be in target condition. Where it is not, English Nature's Remedy Project will, for local authority owned SSSIs as for others, identify what needs to be done in order to achieve target condition, and who will need to do it.

This information will enable the Government and English Nature to focus on those local authorities with a significant contribution to make in support of the overall target, and to tailor their approach to each, according to the nature of the contribution. In doing so, Defra and ODPM will discuss with the Local Government Association (LGA) and with English Nature the best way forward, and the ways in which local authorities can be supported in this work, including dissemination of good practice.

In the meantime, the Government and English Nature are taking all available opportunities to raise awareness of responsibilities in respect of biodiversity and SSSIs. For example, we are exploring the extent to which biodiversity can be covered through both the Comprehensive Performance Assessment and Best Value Performance Indicators. This follows agreement between Defra and ODPM Ministers that local government performance measures for biodiversity should be drawn up. Defra and ODPM have also jointly produced a pamphlet with English Nature and the LGA, "Life Support", which encourages Local Strategic Partnerships to integrate Biodiversity issues as they draw up and implement Community Strategies. The forthcoming Circular and Best Practice Guide accompanying the Planning Policy Statement on Nature Conservation (PPS9), due to be published in 2005, will provide a valuable opportunity to emphasise the role of local authorities and other section 28G bodies that are involved in planning. Consultation is now underway on PPS 9 and the Circular.

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<sup>5</sup> A Code of Guidance '*Sites of Special Scientific Interest: Encouraging Positive Partnerships*', available at [www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/ewd/ewd08.htm#sssi](http://www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/ewd/ewd08.htm#sssi)

<sup>6</sup> The duty is set out in section 28G (2) of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, as amended.

## Recommendation 4

**If SSSI landowners and managers are to play an active and willing role in the care of SSSIs it is vital that they understand the basis of English Nature's assessment of their land. We welcome the publication of the assessment criteria. In future assessment rounds, English Nature should ensure that it explains the criteria and the assessment methods to landowners prior to embarking on the assessment, and should hold a series of regional conferences to do so. We recommend that English Nature discuss the assessment of condition with landowner or occupier before publishing the result of the assessment. If the criteria are to be modified in future, it would be helpful to involve land managers in the process at an early stage. (Paragraph 22)**

## Recommendation 5

**It is clearly important that the criteria are supported by sound science. Where the science is still uncertain, efforts should be made to clarify the issue as soon as possible and the expertise of land managers should inform the process. (Paragraph 23)**

The Government agrees that it is important for SSSI owners and managers to understand the basis of English Nature's condition assessment on their land. Once the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) completes the publication of the common standards guidance, English Nature will arrange a series of regional conferences in discussion with groups of landowners and managers with a variety of sites across the country or region, such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and National Trust. For individual landowners and managers, the Government believes that a more personal approach would be preferred as it allows English Nature staff to explain the details of the process as it affects their specific site and habitats. English Nature is happy for landowners to accompany staff members as they carry out condition assessments in order to see first hand how they are made. English Nature will make this offer clear to landowners through a feature article in its regular newsletter, 'Sitelines', to SSSI owners.

In the meantime, English Nature's condition assessment programme is carried out as a continuous rolling programme, started in 1997, rather than in discreet assessment rounds. The rolling programme is in line with the JNCC's Common Standards and applies across the whole of the UK. It ensures that no assessments are more than 6 years old. Now that all units have been assessed at least once, English Nature can report, at any time, the condition of the entire SSSI estate, according to the latest assessment of each management unit.

The Government agrees that English Nature staff should inform the landowners of the results of the condition assessments. To date this has often been done at the same time

as meetings with landowners to discuss the management required on a site. English Nature now publishes the results of all SSSI condition information on its website<sup>7</sup> and it will in future undertake to inform landowners of the results of a new assessment before the website is updated (this usually takes between 2-6 weeks following the assessment).

The Government recognises the importance of sound science to underpin the protection and enhancement of SSSIs. English Nature continues to place a high priority on its support for scientific studies. Where this science is uncertain, the Government acknowledges, that land managers, including English Nature's own National Nature Reserve site managers, have significant expertise to help inform the process.

## **Recommendation 6**

**We take the view that SSSI condition should bear some relation to the state the site was in when it was designated, though without ruling out the prospect of improvement in future. (Paragraph 24)**

The Government agrees with this recommendation in principle, in that the conservation objectives that define the favourable condition of a site should relate to special interest features which existed at the time it was notified. However, not all SSSIs are in favourable condition at the time of notification, and we do not believe either that they should be in order for a site to be notified, or that no improvement in condition should subsequently be required. Conservation objectives are based pragmatically on getting these existing special interest features into favourable condition, not on enhancement of the site with further interests, however desirable that may be in ecological terms.

## **Recommendation 7**

**Good relationships between SSSI owners and managers and English Nature staff are crucial. We welcome the regular staff training that English Nature has introduced and recommend that it keep this area under review. (Paragraph 25)**

As an Investor in People, English Nature is committed to the continuous improvement of business delivery through the training and development of its people. English Nature recognises that, to deliver its business, it needs people with the right combination of knowledge, skills and behaviours. Consequently, English Nature's core training programmes include events to develop a wide range of skills such as: management and interpersonal; stakeholder dialogue and facilitation; negotiating and influencing; and, town and country planning. In addition, English Nature has recently concluded an audit of the technical, professional and scientific competencies of its Conservation Officers and it will be further developing learning programmes linked to these.

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<sup>7</sup> [www.english-nature.org.uk](http://www.english-nature.org.uk)

## Recommendation 8

**It is important that the various parties involved can reach a common science-based understanding of the impacts of burning on moorland and we expect that the burning review group will achieve this. English Nature should inform us of the review's conclusions when they have been reached. (Paragraph 28)**

The Government is currently reviewing the Heather and Grass Burning Regulations and the Heather and Grass Burning Code. A key part of this process will be to review the science-based evidence, with the assistance of an expert panel. We will also draw upon the understanding which is being developed through the Best Practice Moorland Burning Working Group. The review will be undertaken by Defra in association with English Nature and other key stakeholders, including the Country Land and Business Association, the Moorland Association and the RSPB. We intended to consult on revisions to the Regulations and Code over the coming year, with a view to implementation as soon as possible thereafter.

## Recommendation 9

**Agri-environment schemes are one of the most important mechanisms for achieving favourable condition on many SSSIs. The Government should take care in the design and funding of new schemes to ensure that they are more effective than existing ones and that enough funds are available for all SSSIs. The Government must be explicit about what it wants the new agri-environment schemes to achieve for SSSIs and should report regularly on their progress. This is an area that the committee will return to. (Paragraph 35)**

The Government recognises the key role that agri-environment schemes play in the delivery of favourable condition on many SSSIs and the significant contribution already made through the existing Countryside Stewardship and Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESA) schemes. For new agreements these will be superseded from 2005 by the new Environmental Stewardship scheme which has provided the opportunity to bring together and build on the most successful elements of Countryside Stewardship and ESAs. To ensure that Environmental Stewardship is as effective as possible in achieving the desired environmental outcomes, the Government is working very closely with English Nature and other stakeholder organisations in its design.

Of the two elements proposed under Environmental Stewardship, Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) will provide targeted management options aimed at safeguarding and enhancing a wide range of specific environmental features. Delivery of target condition for SSSIs is one of the highest priority outcomes when setting the targets for HLS, and the Rural Development Service and English Nature staff are working closely together to achieve this. On SSSI land the Government will only enter into HLS agreements which, in English Nature's opinion, deliver the management necessary to maintain or restore target condition (insofar as such management can be achieved

through the scheme). HLS will be outcome focussed, farmers will receive feedback on the success or otherwise of their management and there will be a system for recording environmental outcomes. We will report regularly on the contribution that agri-environment schemes are making to the delivery of the PSA target.

The Government recognises the importance of providing a streamlined funding framework in which funds can be used more flexibly to deliver PSA targets, and in a way that better allows judgements to be made about the outcomes resulting from particular inputs. These are key principles of the reform of rural funding streams announced by the Government on 21 July as part of the Rural Strategy 2004. We are committed to funding the agri-environment programme in the long term as part of the Sustainable Food and Farming Strategy. This will contribute to Defra's objective to protect natural resources. We will continue to strive to secure additional funding through the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy. Our work with English Nature has helped to identify the level of funding required to achieve and maintain the target condition of SSSIs.

## Recommendation 10

**The focus and drive provided by the PSA target provides an opportunity for Defra to push forward other aspects of its environmental and conservation work. In particular, we see great scope for improving the status of freshwater ecosystems by integrating work on SSSIs, the Water Framework Directive and diffuse pollution. The problems presented by diffuse pollution have been raised in a number of our recent inquiries and positive action to tackle them has been slow in coming. Government policy and other policies that promote and control development are also important, as are transport policies and other measures that affect airborne conditions. We welcome the announcement that Defra is shortly to publish a draft policy paper on diffuse pollution, which we will wish to examine closely. (Paragraph 37)**

The Government is committed to integrating the delivery of biodiversity objectives into all relevant policy areas. This vision is articulated in the Biodiversity Strategy for England<sup>8</sup> which sets out a programme of activity to achieve it, incorporating the needs of special sites. The Strategy recognises that healthy functioning ecosystems provide benefits to people, both economically and socially. It sets out five key policy areas where integration needs to be achieved: agriculture, water, woodland, marine/coastal management and urban. It also includes four areas where cross-cutting improvement is needed: driving local and regional action; the economics and funding of biodiversity; the engagement of business; and promoting education and public understanding. The Government believes that the urgency and focus provided by the SSSI target is driving forward implementation of the Strategy as a whole.

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<sup>8</sup> 'Working with the Grain of Nature – A Biodiversity Strategy for England'

The Government recognises that the condition of some SSSIs will be improved by a reduction in diffuse water pollution. A public consultation was launched on 17 June 2004, inviting views on a full range of possible approaches (including voluntary, regulatory, economic and information instruments) to tackle diffuse water pollution from agriculture through promoting Catchment Sensitive Farming. The consultation paper was the result of a two year review of diffuse water pollution from agriculture, which has enabled us to establish a basic understanding of the challenges we face. We are also exploring with stakeholders the options for achieving early changes to more sustainable farming practices in priority conservation catchments, with a view to realising immediate improvements on the ground. All of these priority catchments contain SSSIs where poor water quality is contributing to unfavourable condition. Non-agricultural sources of diffuse pollution, which include forestry, industry, construction, urbanisation, transport and recreation also need to be addressed and we are currently reviewing existing research to develop our understanding of the problems.

The Government also recognises that tackling diffuse water pollution in rivers, lakes and other SSSI waters as part of our work to meet the SSSI target, represents in the meantime an investment towards the demands placed upon us by the Water Framework Directive, as well as providing further experience of how to address the problems.

## **Recommendation 11**

**We welcome the Minister for Nature Conservation and Fisheries's confidence that the SSSI target will be met. However, the PSA target is already very challenging; we are concerned that if funding for English Nature is reduced in the 2004 Spending Review, the target will prove impossible to meet. If, as is expected, English Nature's grant-in-aid is less than that on which the interim milestones were agreed, English Nature should report to us on the impact of reduced funding on work on SSSIs. (Paragraph 40)**

The level of future funding for English Nature is clearly critical to the prospect of achieving the SSSI target. English Nature administers the legislative regime that protects SSSIs, assesses and monitors the condition of all SSSIs, and manages some SSSI land directly, in addition to funding other landowners and occupiers to undertake sympathetic management of SSSI land under management agreements.

Defra received its SR04 settlement from Treasury in July, and is currently assessing all funding requirements as part of its resource allocation exercise. This includes reviewing the level of funding required by the Higher Level Stewardship Scheme and by English Nature for its work across the board on SSSIs. As a component of one of Defra's PSA targets, confirmed as such in this year's settlement, the SSSI target will remain a high priority for delivery within Defra. Ministerial decisions on budget allocations for the next three years are expected shortly.

## Recommendation 12

**Defra and English Nature should take care that policies intended to meet the PSA target do not have detrimental effects on other aspects of conservation. (Paragraph 42)**

It is the Government's view that work undertaken in pursuit of the SSSI target will also contribute to the wider aims identified in its overall Biodiversity Strategy for England and vice versa. The Government believes that the factors that influence SSSI condition are largely the same as those that impact on biodiversity beyond protected sites.

We recognise the importance of measuring progress in implementing the objectives of the Biodiversity Strategy for England, including on SSSIs, and have developed a range of indicators to do this. 'Measuring progress: a baseline assessment' was published in December 2003.<sup>9</sup> These indicators will allow us to assess progress towards the Strategy's objectives, to monitor whether our efforts to improve SSSI condition are having an adverse impact on any of our other biodiversity aims, and to adjust policies as new evidence emerges in the future. A full report on progress with the Strategy will be made in 2006.

English Nature also takes great care to ensure that it plans and carries out a balanced programme of work covering all areas of its responsibilities. It recognises that achieving the SSSI target and ensuring that SSSIs are sustained for the longer term relies upon work in the wider countryside and policy environment.

## Recommendation 13

**Public access to SSSIs is important if their condition is to matter to more than a few dedicated conservationists. Of course, it is vital that visitors should not damage the sites but we believe that sensitive management of routes, access points and information should mean that the public can benefit from visiting SSSIs without compromising the condition of sites. (Paragraph 45)**

The Government agrees that SSSIs provide a valuable and important resource to the wider public, and provided advice on this in the Code of Guidance published last year. We believe that in general, and with sympathetic management, SSSIs are capable of accommodating many recreational activities that do not conflict with their special interest features. Equally, it is only by ensuring that people have access to wildlife that there is likely to be necessary enthusiasm and support to conserve it.

The Government acknowledges that about half of the land to which the right of access under Part 1 of the CROW Act 2000 will apply is likely to be SSSI land. We believe that

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<sup>9</sup> Available at [www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/ewd/biostrat/index.htm#indicators](http://www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/ewd/biostrat/index.htm#indicators)

the enhanced provision of public access to these sites can lead to greater public understanding and enjoyment of nature conservation issues without adverse effects to the sites themselves, provided this is undertaken in ways that protects wildlife and land management interests. English Nature has been reviewing the implications for nature conservation of a statutory right of access alongside the mapping of access land, and developing solutions that safeguard the nature conservation interests and allow the land to be managed effectively for wildlife. Whilst it is clear that in particular cases public access can adversely affect the condition of an SSSI, in such instances, powers exist to control or manage access as necessary to protect the nature conservation interest.

English Nature already has considerable experience of encouraging and supporting access to SSSIs, through its work on National Nature Reserves (NNRs), some 35 of which have been identified as ‘spotlight reserves’ as they provide the best opportunity for visitors to experience and enjoy the special interest features of the site. English Nature is also committed to improving access on all NNRs and providing increased opportunities for people to get directly involved in nature conservation.

The Government recognises that other forms of access, such as through the provision of information and via the web, are of great value. It welcomes the initiative taken by English Nature called ‘Nature on Line’ whereby comprehensive information is available on SSSIs throughout England.

### **Recommendation 14**

**If changes to English Nature’s structure were to be made before the PSA target deadline, we see potential benefits for SSSIs, particularly in the delivery of agri-environment schemes. However, we also see risks, if English Nature were to lose its status as a ‘champion’ of wildlife. (Paragraph 46)**

### **Recommendation 15**

**The Government’s response to Lord Haskins’ recommendations has been slow in coming. The delay in making the final announcements has made it harder for the organisations involved to plan for the future. Whatever happens to English Nature in the Modernising Rural Delivery Programme, it is our view that, in terms of SSSIs at least, its role must be first and foremost to protect wildlife. We will review the situation when the Government’s response has been published. (Paragraph 47)**

The Government’s response to Lord Haskins’ Rural Delivery Review was published as part of the Rural Strategy 2004<sup>10</sup> on 21 July 2004. The Government announced its intention to establish an Integrated Agency to meet the mutually reinforcing objectives of conserving and enhancing the resource of nature together with realising the

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<sup>10</sup> Available at [www.defra.gov.uk/rural/default.htm](http://www.defra.gov.uk/rural/default.htm)

economic and social benefits for people of so doing. The new agency will be a powerful, independent statutory Non Departmental Public Body, building on the world-class strengths of English Nature, the Countryside Agency, and the Rural Development Service. Its remit will be to champion integrated resource management, nature conservation, biodiversity, landscape access and recreation.

The Government believes there will be many benefits to the establishment of the Integrated Agency and these are set out in detail in the Rural Strategy. One key improvement will include the creation of a stronger, unified voice for biodiversity and nature resource protection particularly at the regional and sub regional level. This will ensure a coherent and area based approach to the protection of England's most important natural areas, such as SSSIs, and that the conservation aspect of decisions are considered at the earliest stage.

As with any programme of major change it is vitally important that the implementation is properly managed to ensure that all the organisations concerned can continue to operate fully effectively until the integrated agency is established, and that in the interim all opportunities for joint working towards common aims and objectives are taken. This process will be overseen and managed as a single programme in accordance with best programme management principles. The Government welcomes the announcement in August that the Committee will conduct an inquiry into the Rural Strategy.

## Recommendations 16

**The cross-departmental High Level Group could be a valuable way of co-ordinating action on biodiversity across the Government, but it is not clear how effective it has been. Defra should report to us in their response to this report on what the group's terms of reference are, who its members are, how often it meets and what it has achieved. (Paragraph 49)**

The Government endorses the High Level Biodiversity Delivery Group's potential to co-ordinate action and maintain engagement at a strategic level across different Departments, to deliver our biodiversity objectives. It was the lack of any such mechanism for considering the diverse range of programmes and policies that impact on the natural environment that led Defra to establish of the group. Its remit is to oversee implementation of the England Biodiversity Strategy and the SSSI Target and it has met twice, in September 2003 and March 2004. It is scheduled to meet again in the new year.

The group comprises officials from within Defra concerned with water quality, flood management, conservation management (including agri-environment schemes), forestry and the uplands, (including moor burning), sustainable agriculture and farming, Common Agricultural Policy, arable crops, economics and science as well as those responsible for delivery of the PSA target and biodiversity policy. English Nature, the Rural Development Service, the Forestry Commission and the Environment Agency

are also represented along with HM Treasury, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, the Department for Transport, the Ministry of Defence and the Government Offices. Representation on the group is kept under review.

The terms of reference for the Group are:

- To steer and monitor implementation within Government of the England Biodiversity Strategy (EBS) and delivery of the PSA target to bring into favourable condition by 2010 95% of nationally important wildlife sites (SSSIs).
- To provide a forum for consideration of how:
  - existing Government policies can be applied to best effect to meet the SSSI PSA target and implement the EBS; and
  - biodiversity can contribute to other Government policy objectives
- To steer the delivery of biodiversity commitments and consider the barriers to securing delivery and promote appropriate solutions
- To manage the contribution of Government and Agency officials to other implementation structures for the EBS and the PSA target and to liaise with them.

So far the focus of the group has been to raise awareness of the Government's biodiversity targets, and the strategies and proposed process for delivering these, to set out the latest information available on the factors affecting these targets, and to discuss overarching issues such as the economics of biodiversity. In due course, we anticipate the group will discuss and review significant delivery mechanisms and issues affecting the Biodiversity Strategy for England and SSSI target, along with those issues that have not been satisfactorily resolved at the working level. An important issue to be considered at the next meeting is the findings and implications of the English Nature Remedy Project to identify the action needed to deliver target condition on every unfavourable SSSI unit.

## Conclusion

The Government's overall nature conservation objectives are set out in the Biodiversity Strategy for England. Securing healthy habitats and species populations within special sites is an essential component of delivering the objectives of the Strategy. SSSIs also provide a good barometer for the health of the natural environment and we have recognised this by adopting the condition of SSSIs as an indicator in a number of key Government programmes and strategies.<sup>11</sup> The Government welcomes the attention the Committee has given to the progress made towards achieving the SSSI target and the issues surrounding its delivery.

Good progress towards the SSSI target has already been made and we are working to achieve our target of having 67% of SSSIs in target condition by the end of March. The percentage of SSSIs (by area) now in target condition is nearly 65% (based on data from the beginning of October). With a provisional trajectory, to be published in the Defra Autumn Performance Report, setting out what progress we will need to make against the target up to 2010, we will in future be able to assess whether we are 'on' or 'off' course for achieving the target.

We recognise that achievement of the target will be challenging, but remain committed to striving to attain it. Working in partnership with all our delivery partners, inside and outside of Government, is critical and we are dedicated to maintaining and improving, where necessary, these relationships. We are also be taking forward work on those policy areas impacting on and influence SSSI condition, including diffuse water pollution from agriculture, commons and flood management. Other developments, such as the establishment of the Integrated Agency, and the streamlining of funding streams will also contribute to improving SSSI condition, as well as securing benefits for biodiversity across the board.

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs  
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<sup>11</sup> SSSI condition is a sustainable development indicator and is used in 'Quality of Life Counts' and also in Defra's own sustainable development strategy '*Foundations for our Future*'. It is also an indicator in the Biodiversity Strategy for England, and '*Facing the Future- The Strategy for Sustainable Farming and Food*'.