



House of Commons
Science and Technology
Committee

**Sites of Special Scientific
Interest: Government
Response to the
Innovation, Universities,
Science and Skills
Committee's Tenth Report
of Session 2008–09**

**Seventh Special Report of Session
2008–09**

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The Science and Technology Committee

The Science and Technology Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Government Office for Science.

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Seventh Special Report

On 29 July 2009 the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee published its Tenth Report of Session 2008–09, *Sites of Special Scientific Interest* [HC 717]. On 29 September 2009 the Committee received a memorandum from the Government which contained a response to the Report. The memorandum is published as an appendix to this Report.

Appendix: Government response

Introduction

The Government welcomes the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee's report. We have taken note of the Committee's conclusions and recommendations, and will take these into account in ongoing and future work on developing the evidence base used for designating and monitoring Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs).

Response to conclusions and recommendations

Recommendations on "Natural England's role"

1. We welcome Natural England's decision to review the existing SSSI series through a new Notification Strategy. The acknowledgement that "denotification of sites (or parts thereof) that are not considered to be of special interest" is an important way of ensuring that "the series as whole is not devalued" is an important one. We trust that Natural England will take this point forward and actively manage its SSSI series to reflect the dynamic nature of the environment. (Paragraph 23)

In November 2008 Natural England's Executive Board agreed a SSSI notification strategy, which committed to keep SSSIs under review. Implementation of this strategy is currently being planned.

Before the reviews have been carried out it is not possible to judge how many, if any, sites will not be considered to be of special interest. It is anticipated however, that the majority of SSSIs will be considered substantially fit for purpose although in some cases boundaries and/or identified qualifying features of interest may require some amendment.

The need for ecological coherence in a protected areas network is well known, but how this might be best delivered is less well understood. Natural England's SSSI Notification Strategy and Defra's wider biodiversity and climate change policy recognise these issues. Defra has recently announced a review of England's wildlife and ecological network, including its links with the National Parks, and its ability to adapt to climate change and other pressures. The review is to report by June 2010 and will explore if the present range of designations represents a coherent and robust ecological network for England, capable of responding to the challenges of climate change and other pressures. At the same time, Natural England is designing a research programme to establish the value and effectiveness

of SSSIs in climate change adaptation. As part of the implementation of its SSSI Notification Strategy, Natural England aims to ensure that, where appropriate, sites are able to respond dynamically to natural processes and that the SSSI series as a whole should be resilient to such processes and pressures, including the predicted effects of climate change. Accordingly, existing sites will need to be kept under review to ensure new features are adequately protected and site boundaries reflect needs of dynamic systems.

2. We recommend that Natural England commission research on the impact of SSSI status on land values in England, rather than relying on statistics based on Scottish data where the sites are often of a very different nature. (Paragraph 24)

The legislation governing SSSI notification makes it clear that the decision is a scientific one, and the impact of SSSI status on land values is not a factor which can therefore be taken into account. However, Defra and Natural England have broader responsibilities to promote the value of the wider countryside. This includes exploring the economic and other benefits of protected area designations. Natural England will be commissioning new research to look at the impact of SSSI notifications on land values. Defra are also in the process of letting research to examine what impact an SSSI designation has on the biodiversity value of a site as well as to ascertain whether there are different benefits accruing from the range of protected area designations that are presently applied.

Recommendations on “the Joint Nature Conservation Committee’s role”

3. The review process must be soundly based on up-to-date evidence and scientific knowledge. The points made by the Chief Executive of Natural England that the Guidelines for Selection of Biological SSSIs need updating, in part to reflect the pressures of climate change, therefore merit urgent attention. We welcome the news that the JNCC is giving this work a higher priority but, given that it is now 20 years since the Guidelines were first produced, this work must not be allowed to drift: a timetable should be established and published as soon as possible and there should be a process of consultation with interested organisations. (Paragraph 25)

As the Committee noted, the JNCC is reviewing its work on UK-wide conservation standards. In June the JNCC agreed that a partial review of the guidelines on selection of biological SSSIs was needed and should be given high priority.

Parts A and B of the guidance, which set out the rationale and principles for site identification, require revision to capture the changes in law, administration and practice due to devolution and also to address changes in terms of the purpose of the network, particularly with regards to adaptation to climate change and the ecosystem approach.

The guidance on most terrestrial and freshwater habitats and taxonomic groups is still applicable, and in practice is used alongside the professional judgement of the country agencies. Some minor revisions and additions are required, e.g. for pool frog and bog woodland. As part of the ongoing revisions, new guidelines for selection of sites for grassland fungi were published by JNCC on 26 June 2009.

The Department welcomes this initiative. While some updating is required to take into account changes in governance, legislation and wider approaches to conservation being developed within the UK Biodiversity Action Plan and country biodiversity strategies, the

guidance remains broadly fit for purpose, and will continue to underpin UK implementation of the EC Habitats and Birds Directives.

The guidelines were developed to apply across Great Britain, and are also referred to in Northern Ireland. The scope, process and timetable for revision needs to be agreed by the respective statutory agencies in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and will depend on the scientific expertise and resources available to those agencies, as well as JNCC. The JNCC will publish a timetable for the review process in December 2009.

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

The reference number of the Government's response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

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Sixth Report	Pre-appointment hearing with the Chair-elect of the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, Professor Sir Tom Blundell	HC 506
Seventh Report	Spend, spend, spend? – The mismanagement of the Learning and Skills Council's capital programme in further education colleges	HC 530 (HC 989)
Eighth Report	Putting Science and Engineering at the Heart of Government Policy	HC 168-I
Ninth Report	Pre-appointment hearing with the Chair-elect of the Science and Technology Facilities Council, Professor Michael Sterling	HC 887
Tenth Report	Sites of Special Scientific Interest	HC 717 (HC 990)
Eleventh Report	Students and Universities	HC 170-I

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First Report	UK Centre for Medical Research and Innovation	HC 185 (HC 459)
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Sixth Report	Biosecurity in UK research laboratories	HC 360-I (HC 1111)
Seventh Report	Pre-legislative Scrutiny of the Draft Apprenticeships Bill	HC 1062-I (HC (2008–09)262)
First Special Report	The Funding of Science and Discovery Centres: Government Response to the Eleventh Report from the Science and Technology Committee, Session 2006–07	HC 214
Second Special Report	The Last Report: Government Response to the Thirteenth Report from the Science and Technology Committee, Session 2006–07	HC 244
Fourth Special Report	Investigating the Oceans: Government Response to the Science and Technology Committee's Tenth Report of Session 2006–07	HC 506 [incorporating HC 469-i]