

DESIGNATED SITES PROTOCOL (ECOLOGY AND GEOLOGY)

PROTOCOL FOR THE DESIGNATION AND REVIEW OF Local Sites (SITES OF NATURE CONSERVATION INTEREST AND REGIONALLY IMPORTANT GEOLOGICAL SITES) FOR BATH AND NORTH-EAST SOMERSET COUNCIL, BRISTOL CITY COUNCIL AND SOUTH GLOUCESTERSHIRE COUNCIL AND WILDLIFE SITES FOR NORTH SOMERSET COUNCIL (Version 12)

INTRODUCTION AND POLICY BACKGROUND

Since the 1980s a system of Sites of Nature Conservation Interest/Importance (SNCIs) or Wildlife Sites, and Regionally Important Geological Sites (RIGS) has been used in the former Avon county area to help highlight, conserve and enhance those areas of greatest wildlife and geological importance - their conservation is key to safeguarding the biodiversity of Bath & North-East Somerset, Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire. There are policies in the Local Plans / Local Development Frameworks of the four unitary authorities and in the Adopted Joint Replacement Structure Plan for the protection of SNCIs/ Wildlife Sites and RIGS. The generic term adopted for such sites in governmental planning policy advice is Local Sites.

This protocol has been agreed between the nature conservation staff of the four unitary authorities of the former Avon county, in consultation with colleagues from the voluntary and statutory sectors.

The criteria for determining SNCIs are listed in Appendix 1, and in Appendix 4 for RIGS. These may be modified from time to time by agreement of the Local Sites Partnership; for example the recent proposed addition of a new criterion referring to the presence of key species and habitats as highlighted in the UK, regional or local biodiversity action plans.

The application of these criteria are guided by "Natural Assets - Non-statutory sites of importance for nature conservation (Collis and Tyldesley 1993) and the document, "Natural Assets in Avon - A policy guide and criteria for the selection of non-statutory sites of nature conservation importance", which was produced by Avon County Council in 1995. This contains guidance as to the threshold levels to be applied to the criteria.

It is essential that all criteria are applied rigorously and that sites are found to be of substantive nature conservation interest, in line with PPS9, before they are designated. All land that meets Local Sites criteria should be determined as such. Any sites that fail to meet the criteria will not be listed. The criteria should be applied as objectively as possible using scientific data and the professional judgement of suitably qualified or experienced personnel. For this reason, the Unitary Authority Ecologists, in liaison with BRERC where appropriate, should usually carry out the initial assessment of a site against SNCI / Wildlife Site criteria using objective survey information or other relevant data. Recommendations on RIGS sites are made by the Avon RIGS Group using their specialist geological expertise to assess sites against the RIGS criteria. Recommendations are then brought to the relevant Local Sites Panel by the Local Authority Ecologist, BRERC, or an Avon RIGS Group representative member. The Local Sites Panel whose membership includes professionals within the field from a range of organisations, and other specialists or

interested parties where appropriate, should make the final assessment on whether a site meets the criteria.

Where resources permit, owners of Local Sites will be directly notified of designations or alterations. This is beneficial in highlighting the value of the site to those that look after it and in promoting appropriate management, and sources of support for management. However, where site owners can not be directly notified, opportunities for representations will instead be provided through Local Development Framework and Supplementary Planning Document public consultation processes.

The Local Sites Panel are the determining body for decisions on new Local Sites, and amendments or deletions to Local Sites, in accordance with the agreed criteria and procedure. All decisions by the Panel should be subject to Local Sites policies in the relevant Local Development Framework and other relevant documents.

National Policy and Guidance

- Planning Policy Statement 9 (PPS9) states:

9. Sites of regional and local biodiversity and geological interest, which include Regionally Important Geological Sites, Local Nature Reserves and Local Sites have a fundamental role to play in meeting overall national biodiversity targets; contributing to the quality of life and the well-being of the community and in supporting research and education. Criteria-based policies should be established in local development documents against which proposals for any development on, or affecting, such sites will be judged. These policies should be distinguished from those applied to nationally important sites.

12. Networks of natural habitats provide a valuable resource. They can link sites of biodiversity importance and provide routes or stepping stones for the migration, dispersal and genetic exchange of species in the wider environment. Local authorities should aim to maintain networks by avoiding or repairing the fragmentation and isolation of natural habitats through policies in plans. Such networks should be protected from development, and, where possible, strengthened or integrated within it. This may be done as part of a wider strategy for the protection and extension of open space and access routes such as canals and rivers, including those within urban areas.

- The Local Sites protocol and the criteria are in accord with government guidance as set out in *“Local Sites. Guidance on their Identification, Selection and Management”* (DEFRA, 2006).

PROCEDURE FOR THE DESIGNATION AND AMENDMENT OF LOCAL SITES

The standard procedure for the designation of Local Sites will be as follows.

1. IDENTIFICATION

New ecological survey of an existing or potential SNCI / Wildlife Site, or other relevant information, becomes available to the Local Authority ecologist (or RIGS group, for potential RIGS sites), highlighting the potential need to amend or delete an existing Local Site, or to define a new Local Site.

This information may come from the Bristol Regional Environmental Records Centre (BRERC); the Avon Wildlife Trust; Avon Regionally Important Geological Sites (RIGS) Group; Local Authority surveys or site visits; consultants' reports and ecological surveys for planning applications; Natural England; members of the public or other sources and wherever possible should then be provided to BRERC.

2. DATA EVALUATION

Unitary Authority Nature Conservation Officer/Ecologist ensures, in liaison with BRERC, the RIGS Group, and other specialists where necessary, that there is adequate data on which to fully evaluate the site. If there is insufficient data further data may need to be obtained, or new surveys carried out, before evaluation of the site against Local Sites criteria is carried out.

3. TESTING AGAINST CRITERIA

Unitary Authority Nature Conservation Officer/Ecologist evaluates the site data against the SNCI / Wildlife Site designation criteria. RIGS Group evaluates RIGS site data against RIGS criteria. All proposed new sites, or significant extensions to an SNCI / Wildlife Site boundary should be brought to the Panel. Minor and uncontentious boundary changes such as mapping errors and removal of anomalies can be made by the Unitary Authority Ecologist provided the panel is notified.

4. DETERMINATION BY LOCAL SITES PARTNERSHIP

Unitary Authority Ecologist make recommendations to the partnership for new local sites or extensions to existing local sites. This can be in writing or by meetings. The Local Sites Partnership will meet at least once a year. A Partnership member (to be agreed at each meeting) will take notes of the decisions made at the meeting. The role of the Partnership is to

- a) determine designations and changes to existing or proposed Local Sites, providing as objective an assessment process as possible, and to add rigour to the application of criteria using professional judgement from a range of personnel with relevant expertise.
- b) The Panel also have a role in agreeing the Local Sites criteria, and any changes to

the criteria.

All sites that meet Local Sites criteria should be determined as Local Sites. Any sites failing to meet the criteria will not be listed as Local Sites.

Membership of the Partnership includes:

- Unitary Authority Ecologists
- Bristol Regional Environmental Records Centre
- Natural England
- Avon Wildlife Trust
- The Environment Agency
- Forestry Commission
- RIGS Group representative (where appropriate)
- Other interested groups, relevant to that site or particular ecological interest, where appropriate

If the Partnership are in agreement with the proposed Local Sites change, the details of that change should be taken as formal designation.

5. COLLATING RESULTS OF PARTNERSHIP

Notes of partnership meetings and all decisions taken by the partnership are provided to BRERC for circulation. For decisions made by the Partnership in writing or by email, details and written confirmations of the decision will be collated by the Ecologist who initially requested the decision, and provided to BRERC.

A copy of the details agreed by the Partnership for each site (as detailed in Appendix 4), including accurate site boundary and completed criteria sheet (Appendix 3), are provided by each Unitary Authority Ecologist to BRERC immediately after the meeting / decision.

The minutes of the meeting are circulated with an opportunity to comment on the accuracy of decisions.

BRERC then create a “changes” GIS data layer for each Authority, containing new sites, amended sites, and sites for de-designation. Each ecologist may then use this information to report the changes to the relevant Council Members, Committees or departments, and to notify changes to all consultees. Notify site owners, if possible.

6. NOTIFICATION AND AMENDMENT OF RECORDS

BRERC will make any necessary changes to the definitive GIS data layers held at BRERC (also updating the SNCI / Wildlife Site & RIGS register database, and species database where appropriate). A copy of the new definitive layer will be given to the ecologists. This will take place once a year (or more frequently if agreed).

Ecologists are to ensure that records held at the Unitary Authorities are up-dated. All data users within the Authority should be in receipt of and using the correct and most recent up-to-date version of the SNCI data, as supplied by BRERC.

APPENDIX 1

CRITERIA FOR THE DESIGNATION OF SITES OF NATURE CONSERVATION INTEREST/IMPORTANCE / WILDLIFE SITES

These criteria are based on “Natural Assets - Non-statutory sites of importance for nature conservation (Collis and Tyldesley 1993) and the draft document, “Natural Assets in Avon - A policy guide and criteria for the selection of non-statutory sites of nature conservation importance”, which was produced by Avon County Council in 1995.

Site characteristics relate to a site’s intrinsic value for nature conservation. The community factors consider the social context of a site.

Site Characteristics

- (i) **Naturalness**: Areas of semi-natural habitat are often the most important for nature conservation because they support the highest number of native British species.
- (ii) **Size**: Larger sites are usually more important than smaller sites and likely to accommodate more habitat variation. In the absence of large sites, small sites increase in value.
- (iii) **Diversity**: This refers to the range and diversity of wildlife species, habitat and/or geological features present on a site. Some habitats are naturally of low species diversity, e.g. reedbeds.
- (iv) **Rarity**: This considers how common or uncommon the species, habitats or geological features present on the site are, for example, the features of interest may be rare on an international, national, county or local scale, and a species rare in Avon may be common elsewhere in Britain.
- (v) **Fragility**: Some sites are more vulnerable to change and damage by external influences. Particularly fragile areas require careful conservation to remain viable in the long term. For example, the quality and quantity of water passing into and out of a wetland area are important in the conservation of the wetland habitat.
- (vi) **Irreplaceable**: Some areas, such as ancient woodland once lost or damaged cannot be re-created in hundreds of years, if at all. Many sites cannot be re-created elsewhere on account of technical difficulties, land availability, cost, community values and other ecological or social reasons.
- (vii) **Typical or Representative**: It is desirable to safeguard a sequence and range of habitat types and geological features. Particularly good examples of “typical” or “representative” features should be conserved, including those of a typically urban character e.g. canals, abandoned wharves and disused railway lines colonised by nature.
- (viii) **Geographical Position**: The geographical position of a site may enhance its value; for example because of its location in or adjacent to a wildlife corridor or its proximity to other habitats of wildlife value. The interest of a geological

site may be as part of a sequence of geological features across Avon.

- (ix) Important Populations of Species: Some sites are important because they hold a large proportion of the Avon population of a species.
- (x) Age or Continuity of Land Use: Some sites have ecological characteristics derived from their long standing such as ancient woodland and traditionally managed meadows. Old, relatively undisturbed environments tend to be rare and usually contain a large range and diversity of species.
- (xi) Presence of key species and habitats: The site is important for key species and habitats highlighted in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan and in regional and local biodiversity action plans.

Community Factors

- (i) Community or Amenity Value: Sites are assessed in terms of their value to local people. For example, some sites are valued by the local community on account of their attractive flowers or their rural atmosphere away from the hubbub of urban life. Others are of particular significance to the local community because of their links with community history, such as canals, disused railway lines and old cemeteries.
- (ii) Physical Access: Physical access to sites is a valuable asset in urban areas. Sites with access for disabled people are particularly important.
- (iii) Visual Access: Visual access to sites is also an important consideration in urban areas. For example, although there may be no physical access to a site, the local community may be able to observe and enjoy wildlife there from outside the site's boundaries. Some sites can be seen by a large proportion of the urban population, e.g. on a prominent hillside.
- (iv) Educational Value: Some sites may be of particular value for formal and/or informal education by virtue of their proximity to educational establishments and/or having a range of robust habitats or facilities to aid study and interpretation.
- (v) Landscape or Aesthetic Appeal: This is difficult to assess objectively, but is often indicated by the number of people using or appreciating the site, and is therefore closely linked to (i) and (ii) above.
- (vi) Situated in Area Lacking Natural Habitats: The location of a site within an ecologically impoverished part of the conurbation may enhance its special conservation value.
- (vii) Recorded History: Some sites have been studied by amateurs and professionals for many years, or may be the location at which a specific discovery was made. These add to the conservation value of the site.

APPENDIX 2 - GUIDANCE ON APPLYING CRITERIA FOR SNCIs / WILDLIFE SITESApplication of criteria – guidelines for scoring

To qualify as an SNCI / Wildlife Site, a site must demonstrate clearly that it is of substantive biodiversity interest, using the listed criteria. Each site must be of significant importance for biodiversity in the context of the individual unitary area. Evaluation must be done in a standardised manner.

Whilst it is not appropriate to have absolute cut-off points for these criteria, as a guide, to qualify as an SNCI/ Wildlife Site a site should have:

- at least one 'strong' score in criteria 1 – 11 (scientific criteria)
- plus:**
- 2 or more other 'strong' scores from any criteria
- or**
- 1 other 'strong' and 3 or more 'moderate' scores from any criteria
- or**
- 5 or more other 'moderate' scores from any criteria

No.	Criteria	Strong	Moderate	Weak	Nil
1	Naturalness	Absence of inappropriate human disturbance	Some disturbance, but natural regeneration has occurred.	Inappropriate recent human disturbance	Dominated by recent human disturbance
2	Size	Large ecological unit for type of habitat	Well above minimum mappable units	Minimum mappable unit	Too small to maintain ecological integrity
3a	Diversity - Species	High number of species for this habitat	Moderate number of species for this habitat	Low number of species for this habitat	Minimal diversity i.e. dominated by one species
3b	Diversity - Habitats	3 or more semi-natural habitats	2 semi-natural habitats	1 semi-natural habitat	No semi-natural habitat
4a	Rarity – species	One or more RDB or equivalent nationally rare or scarce species; or two or more locally rare or scarce species	At least one locally rare or scarce species	No rare or scarce species recorded	Only common species
4b	Rarity – habitats	Nationally rare semi-natural habitats	Locally rare habitats	No rare habitats recorded	Only common habitats
5	Fragility	Habitat or species populations under severe threat of removal	Habitat or species populations under threat of removal	Slight threat to habitat or species populations	No known threat
6	Irreplacability / lack of recreatability	Not possible to recreate in a reasonable timescale e.g. ancient woodland	Naturally regenerated sites	Recreatable within a short time period	Immediately recreatable or replaceable
7	Typicalness/ Representative example	Very good/best/ classic/only example of this habitat in district and/or UK BAP priority habitat	Reasonable example, degraded semi-natural BAP priority habitat	Poor example of semi-natural habitat type, better examples elsewhere	Common habitat type but very poor example

No.	Criteria	Strong	Moderate	Weak	Nil
8	Geographical position	The site is linked to more than one area of semi-natural habitat; is part of a concentration of SNCIs / Wildlife sites; or it is within a Strategic Nature Area	Linked to one other area of semi-natural habitat	Weakly linked to other semi-natural habitat or wildlife corridor	Completely isolated from other semi-natural habitat
9	Important populations	Holds a significant population of a notable or BAP species (what is significant will vary by species)	Holds an important population of a notable or BAP species	Does not hold an important population of a notable or BAP species	No notable or BAP species recorded
10a	BAP species	Species recorded subject of a UK BAP Action Plan	LBAP priority short list species recorded	LBAP long list species recorded	No BAP species recorded
10b	BAP habitats	Regional/UK BAP habitat is present	LBAP habitat is present	LBAP long list habitat or degraded BAP habitat present	No BAP habitat
11	Age/continuity	Long established habitat	Established habitat	Recently established habitat	Newly established habitat
12	Community or amenity value	Site or features of the site are strongly valued by the local community	Site or features of the site are moderately valued by the local community	Site features are weakly valued by the local community	Site features not known to be valued by the local community
13	Physical access	Appropriate, good quality public access including some disabled access	Public access provided, but not good quality	Difficult to access	Not physically accessible
14	Visual access	Most of site is visible from outside – score more highly when visible to high numbers of people	Some restricted views	Very restricted views	Cannot be seen at all
15	Educational value	Appropriate educational features and/or facilities available	Some educational potential or close proximity to educational establishment	Difficult to use for formal education Distant from educational establishments	No formal educational access
16	Landscape or aesthetic value	Highly valued for its landscape and aesthetic character	Moderately valued for landscape and aesthetic character	Little value for landscape or aesthetic character	No known value in landscape or aesthetic character
17	Area lacking in natural habitats	Only significant semi-natural area in vicinity	One of only a few semi-natural habitats in area	In an area with other natural habitats	In a large block with other natural habitats
18	Recorded history	Important historical or survey records	Good continuity of historical or survey records	Only recent or very old records	No known records

This table is a summary.

Refer to “Natural Assets in Avon 1995” where relevant for more detail. The UK priority habitats are listed at <http://www.ukbap.org.uk/habitats.aspx>

APPENDIX 3

BLANK CRITERIA FORM FOR THE EVALUATION OF SNCIs / WILDLIFE SITES

Application of criteria – guidelines for scoring

To qualify as an SNCI/Wildlife Site, a site must demonstrate clearly that it is of substantive biodiversity interest, using the above criteria. Each site must be of significant importance for biodiversity in the context of the individual unitary area. Evaluation must be done in a standardised manner.

Whilst it is not appropriate to have absolute cut-off points for these criteria, as a guide, to qualify as an SNCI/ Wildlife Site:

- All SNCI/Wildlife Sites must score strongly on at least one of criteria 1 – 11 (scientific criteria).
- Any site with 2 or more strong criteria
- Any site with 1 strong and 3 or more other criteria
- Any site with 5 or more moderate or strong criteria

Site Name and Number:						
	Criteria	Strong	Moderate	Weak	Nil	NOTES
1	Naturalness					
2	Size					
3a	Diversity – species					
3b	Diversity – habitats					
4a	Rarity – species					
4b	Rarity – habitats					
5	Fragility					
6	Irreplaceability					
7	Typicalness					
8	Geographical position					
9	Important populations					
10a	BAP species					
10b	BAP habitats					
11	Age / continuity					
12	Community/amenity value					
13	Physical access					
14	Visual access					
15	Educational value					
16	Landscape aesthetic value or					
17	Area lacking in natural habitats					
18	Recorded history					

APPENDIX 4

Avon RIGS Group

Criteria for Proposing RIGS Sites

The Avon RIGS Group has modified its assessment method for proposing RIGS sites to take account of the English Nature criteria published in *Earth Science Conservation in Britain: A Strategy*. These are:

1. the value of a site for educational fieldwork in primary and secondary schools, at undergraduate level and in adult education courses;
2. the value of a site for study by both professional and amateur earth scientists; such sites demonstrate, alone or as part of a network, the geology or geomorphology of the area;
3. the historical value of the site in terms of important advances in earth science knowledge;
4. the aesthetic value of a site in the landscape, particularly in relation to promoting public awareness and appreciation of the earth sciences.

The Avon RIGS Assessment Form lists a selection of geomorphological and geological topics set against these four criteria. There is also a catch-all. Other feature/s line for other interests relevant to some sites, e.g. the historic use of stone from the site.

When proposing a site for possible RIGS designation please circle an appropriate code and use a line in the Notes on Assessment box below to explain how this is of regional importance. For example, for the road cutting leading to the Suspension Bridge in Bristol, you think that the fossils exposed are of educational value, so write PE in the first column on a line in the box below, and then on the same line explain what is of particular importance (e.g. many fossil corals and brachiopods very well exposed, useful at all levels of education).

This site also has a number of other important features of interest, including:

ME: several massive calcite and barite/quartz veins well exposed, useful at all levels of education

CCH: the most westerly fissure was investigated and described by Charles Moore (1881, Quart Journ eol Soc, 27, p.75)

OA: the bridge and the gorge make the site a major tourist attraction

Please write in the name and grid reference of the site at the top of the form, and add the date of your visit and your name.

Avon RIGS Group - RIGS Assessment Form

Site name

Site number

Grid reference

District

Current site status

Date

Date of last visit

Name of surveyor

	Education Value	Research Value	History Value	Aesthetics Value
Static geomorphology	SGE	SGR	SGH	SGA
Active geomorphology	AGE	AGR	AGH	AGA
Caves and karst	CKE	CKR	CKH	CKA
Cross-cutting relationships (e.g. unconformities, fissures)	CCE	CCR	CCH	CCA
Lithology	LE	LR	LH	LA
Mineralogy	ME	MR	MH	MA
Palaeontology	PE	PR	PH	PA
Stratigraphy	SE	SR	SH	SA
Tectonic structures	TSE	TSR	TSH	TSA
Other feature/s	OFE	OFR	OFH	OFA

Notes on Assessment (please refer to the codes above for each line, e.g. PE)

Further information required Yes No Site visit required Yes No

Expert Advice: Name

Date

Proposed as RIGS by

Date

Reviewed as RIGS by

Date

Proposed re-designation/de-designation by

Date

Accepted by Designation Group: Yes No

Date

Accepted by RIGS Committee: Yes No

Date

Planning authority informed of recommendation

Date

Recommended status accepted: Yes No

Date

APPENDIX 5

INFORMATION FOR PARTNERSHIP MEETINGS ON CHANGES TO SNCIs / WILDLIFE SITES

The sheet in Appendix 3 should be completed for each site proposed , together with the following information for the panel meeting:

GRID REF
NAME OF SITE
PROPOSED SITE BOUNDARY
FEATURES FOR WHICH THE SITE IS BEING DESIGNATED
DATE OF SURVEY
SURVEYORS

The following information should be added at the partnership meeting:

PARTNERSHIP COMMENTS
DECISION
DATE OF DECISION
REASON FOR DESIGNATION

APPENDIX 6: Definitions

BAP – Biodiversity Action Plans were drawn up nationally in 1994 to deal with biodiversity conservation listing species and habitat types of conservation concern. In recognition that biodiversity is ultimately lost at a local level there is an Avon wide BAP and individual local authority BAPs.

UK BAP <http://www.ukbap.org.uk>

AVON BAP <http://www.avon-biodiversity.org.uk>

BATH & NE SOMERSET BAP <http://www.wildthingsbap.org/>

SOUTH GLOUCESTERSHIRE BAP <http://www.southglos.gov.uk/NR/exeres/aef557f2-9d2b-4232-aa6e-d26b0cf3ead1>

NORTH SOMERSET BAP http://www.n-somerset.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/C35887AE-0664-4215-B4B3-B35CC2589D0B/0/Strategy_Biodiversity_action_plan.pdf

Notable Species: Notable species are those in the former county of Avon meeting criteria based on legal status or protection or limited number and distribution

Strategic Nature Areas - the best places for action across the region to conserve, create and connect large scale wildlife habitats identified on the South West Nature Map and the Regional Spatial Strategy.

APPENDIX 7:

GUIDANCE ON APPLYING RIGS CRITERIA