

Target 2010 – East of England

The condition of the region's Sites of Special Scientific Interest in 2005



working towards *Natural England*
for people, places and nature



Green-winged orchids, Upwood Meadows SSSI, Cambridgeshire. Paul Glendell/English Nature 25,331

Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) are the very best wildlife and geological sites in England. The Government has signed a Public Service Agreement (PSA) to ensure that, by area, 95 per cent of these sites are in the best possible condition (target condition) by 2010.

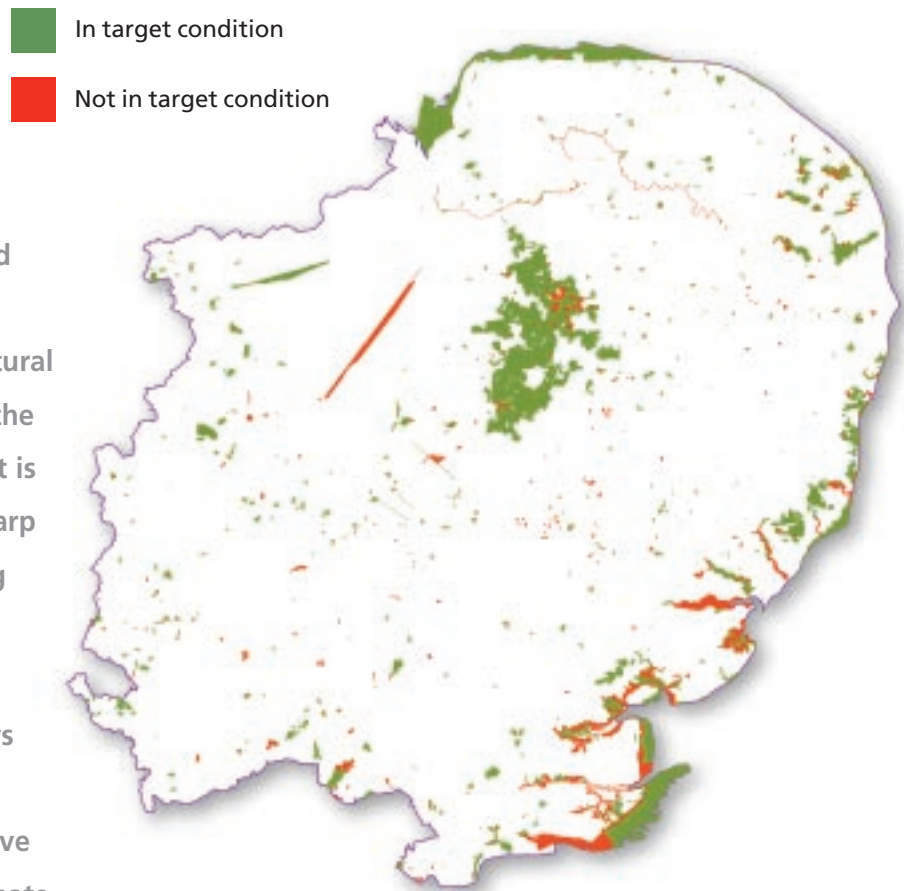
This publication is one of nine regional documents produced as sister publications to the national report *Target 2010 – the condition of England’s Sites of Special Scientific Interest in 2005* (English Nature 2006). It should be read in conjunction with *The East of England’s Best Wildlife and Geological Sites: Identifying the challenge in bringing them into favourable condition* (English Nature, July 2005), which provides a more in-depth analysis of the factors affecting the region’s SSSIs and the steps required to tackle these issues. The present document provides updated statistics since April 2005. These two reports together detail the progress that has been made since September 2003 and provide a summary of the current situation in the East of England region.

The report should also be read in conjunction with the Target 2010 report mentioned above. This sets the national context and also contains useful definitions with respect to the Government’s PSA target for SSSIs, including what is meant by target condition.

The East of England picture

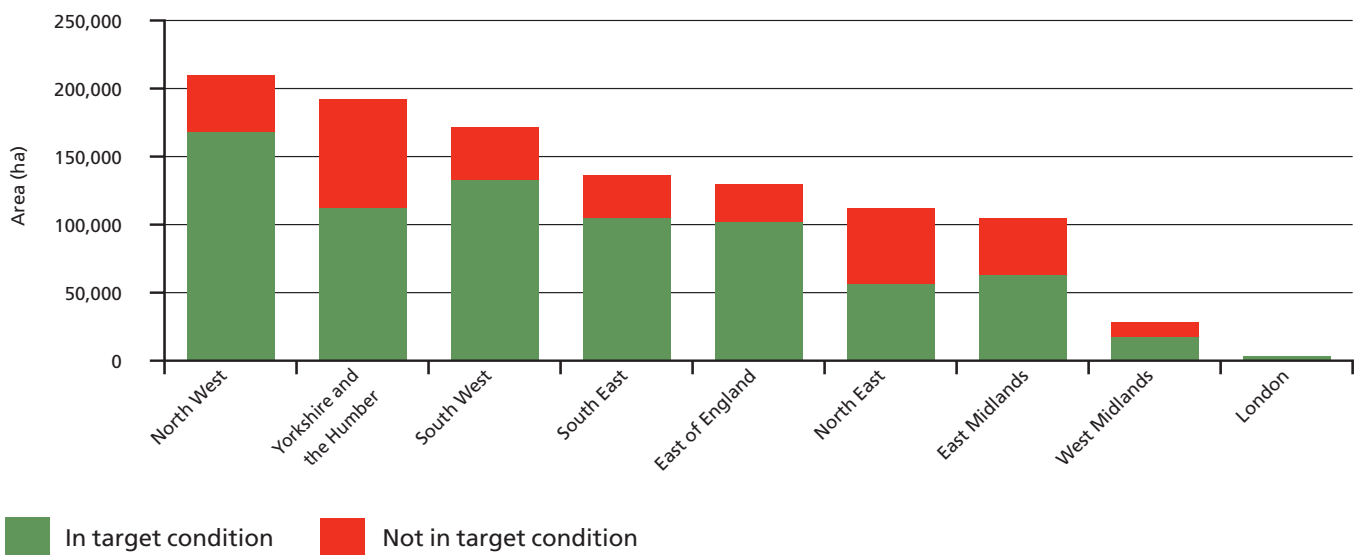
The East of England region comprises the six counties of Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Norfolk and Suffolk. It also includes the four unitary authorities of Peterborough, Luton, Thurrock and Southend-on-Sea. The East of England has a rich and diverse natural environment containing many of the UK's rarest habitats and species. It is a region of dramatic and often sharp contrasts, with landscapes ranging from a long low-lying coastline, featuring windswept beaches, dunes and marshes, to river valleys with grazing marshes and large-scale arable farmland, and extensive lowland heathland and more intimate mixed woodland and hedgerows.

Figure 1 Distribution and condition of SSSI units in the East of England



There are 565 SSSIs in the region covering nearly 130,000 hectares - over 12 per cent of all SSSI land in England. This is a significant proportion of the national total, explained in part by the extensive nature of coastal SSSI land within the region as illustrated in Figure 1. Of the nine English regions, the East of England contains the fifth largest area of SSSI land. Only the North West region currently has a higher proportion of SSSI land in target condition than the East of England's 78.1 per cent.

Figure 2 Area and condition of SSSIs in England's nine government regions



Progress towards the 2010 target

In the past two years, steady progress has been made towards the 2010 PSA target in the East of England. As Figure 3 shows, at the end of 2005, 78.1 per cent of SSSI land in the region was in target condition, comparing well against the national figure of 69.8 per cent. This is a very creditable achievement and represents a rise of over 2 per cent since September 2003, equating to over 3,000 hectares of additional SSSI land in target condition. Such progress reflects the hard work by landowners and managers in bringing these sites into such good condition, often through many years of careful land stewardship and management. Whilst there is much to celebrate, with nearly 28,000 hectares of SSSI land not in target condition, there is clearly still a great deal of effort required over the next five years in order to achieve the PSA target by 2010.

Figure 3 Progress towards PSA target in the East of England since September 2003

	In target condition		Not in target condition	
	%	Area (ha)	%	Area (ha)
September 2003	75.9	96,575	24.1	30,629
December 2005	78.1	99,798	21.9	27,923



Boats on mudflats, Benfleet and Southend Marshes SSSI, Essex. Paul Glendell/English Nature 22,969



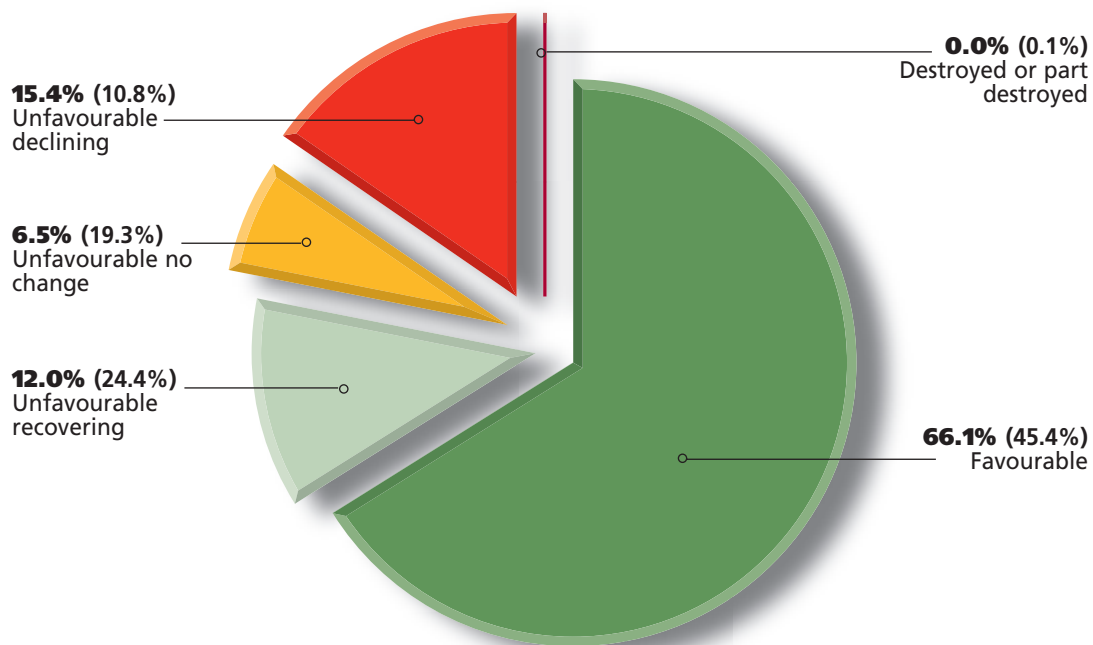
Turkey tails fungus with ice, Epping Forest SSSI, Essex. Peter Wakely/English Nature 18,762A

All land designated as SSSI in England is part of the Government's 2010 PSA target. English Nature uses five categories to assess the condition of SSSIs. These categories (described in the national Target 2010 report) are

shown in Figure 4, which also compares the current regional and national positions. For the purposes of this report, however, we concentrate on the two main categories – SSSI land in target condition (made up of SSSIs in

favourable and unfavourable recovering condition) and SSSI land not in target condition (made up of SSSIs in unfavourable no change, unfavourable declining, part-destroyed and destroyed condition).

Figure 4 Condition of SSSIs in the East of England at 31 December 2005 (national status in brackets)



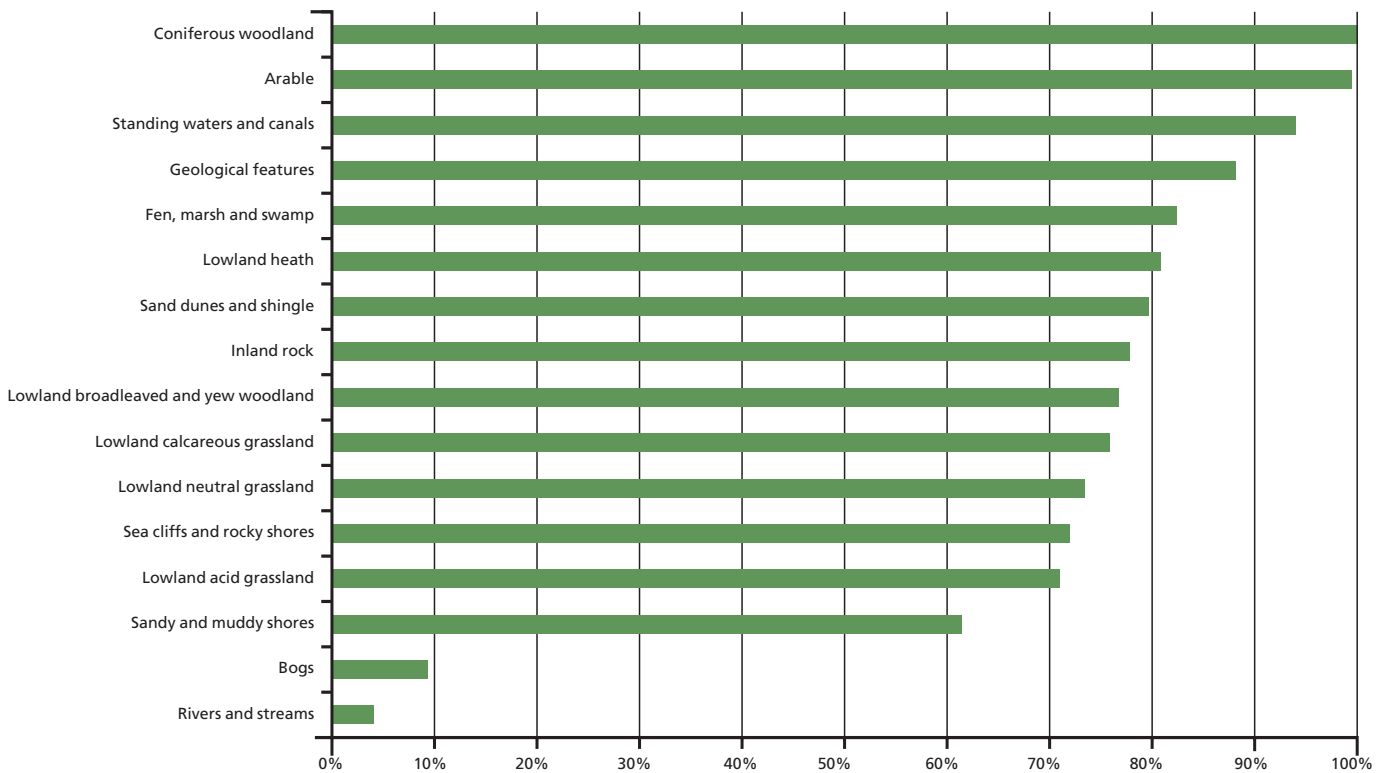
Condition of SSSI habitats in the East of England

Nationally, SSSIs are broadly divided into 21 habitat types, 16 of which are found in the East of England region. These range from the varied habitats of the coast, through an array of freshwater, grassland, heathland and woodland habitats, to geological sites. Figure 5 lists the main SSSI habitats found in the region and shows their condition at the end of 2005.

Mossy stump, Hales and Shadwell Woods SSSI, Essex. Peter Wakely/English Nature 13,604



Figure 5 SSSI habitats in the East of England (percentage in target condition)

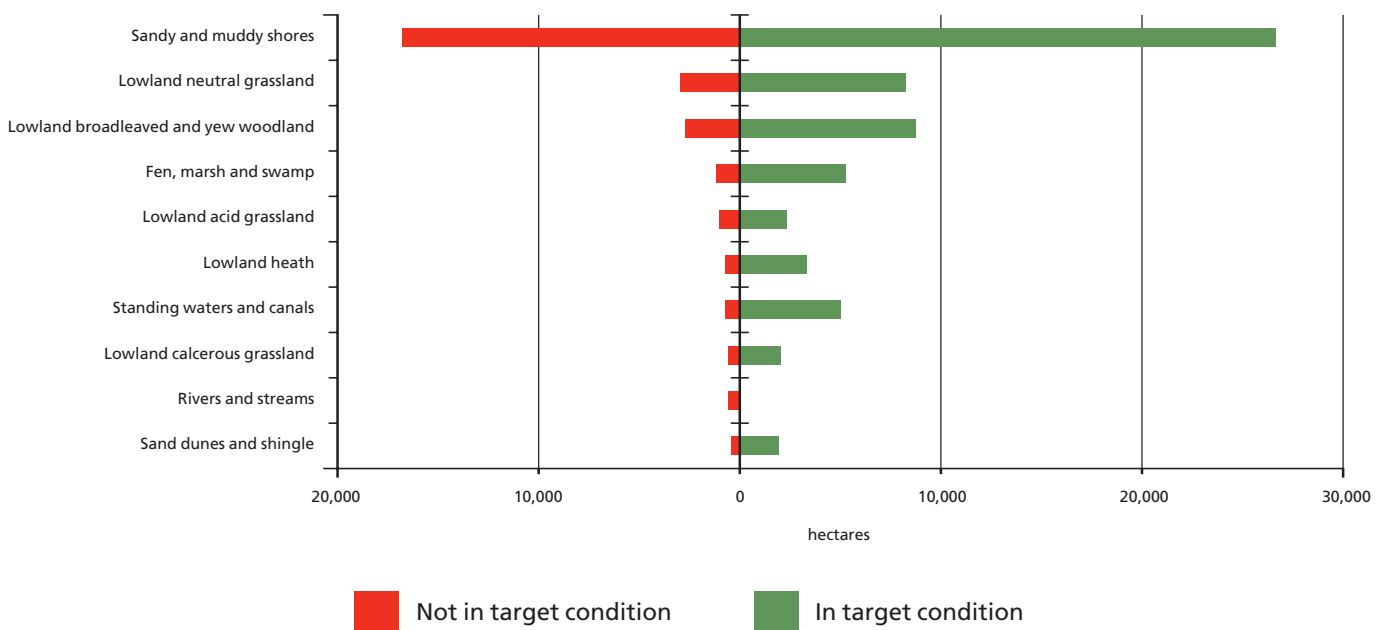


By percentage of area, the habitat in the worst condition is rivers and streams, as is the case nationally. Although not a major contributor to the overall area of SSSI land in the East of England, the condition of this habitat is still cause for serious concern, as in some cases it can

affect the condition of other wetland habitats. By 2010, we want to see all habitats in the region in good condition including rivers and streams. Figure 6 shows, the area of each SSSI habitat which is not yet in target condition. Particular attention needs to be given to

coastal habitats which can make the greatest contribution to the 2010 target. Of the 28,000 hectares of SSSI land still not in target condition in the region, nearly 17,000 hectares can be accounted for by just one habitat – the sandy and muddy shores around the coast.

Figure 6 SSSI habitats in the East of England - top ten in order of greatest area that is not in target condition



Why some habitats in the East of England are not in target condition

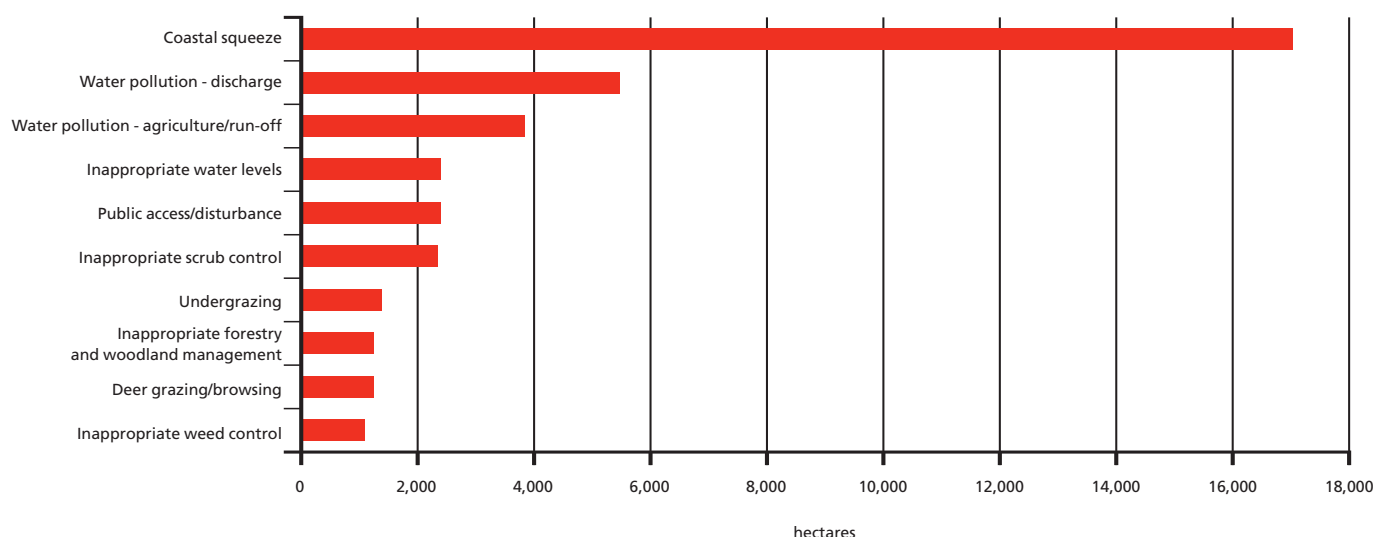
The main reasons why some SSSIs are not in target condition are well understood, as are the type of habitats on which they impact, although the solutions are often complex. Nationally English Nature has identified 42 different causes – a comprehensive description of which is provided in an earlier publication (*England's best wildlife and geological sites – The condition of Sites of Special Scientific Interest in England in 2003* - English Nature, 2003).



Sand Dunes, Holkham, North Norfolk Coast SSSI, Norfolk. Paul Glendell/English Nature 14,904

Figure 7 shows, by area, the top ten reasons why SSSI land is not in target condition in the East of England. By far the most important cause is coastal squeeze, which affects a considerable area of coastal habitat. Water pollution (both direct and diffuse) is also a key factor, affecting a variety of habitats, particularly wetlands. Undergrazing and the need for scrub control is affecting many grasslands and heathlands, whilst in woodlands, deer grazing/browsing and the need for more positive management (for example reintroducing coppicing, and ride management) are key issues.

Figure 7 Why SSSIs in the East of England are not in target condition





Coppice tree regrowth, Bedford Purlieus SSSI, Cambridgeshire. Paul Glendell/English Nature 25,776

In many cases, a single SSSI will be affected by a range of factors that prevent it from being in target condition. For example, the condition of some coastal habitats may be affected by both coastal squeeze and public disturbance. In such situations, both causes must be tackled and resolved if the site is to achieve target condition.

Coastal squeeze – 17,100 hectares

Coastal squeeze is the name given to the squeezing of coastal habitats when a fixed landward boundary, for example a sea wall, prevents the migration of coastal habitats in response to sea level rise. This process is particularly characteristic of estuaries in southern and eastern England.

Water pollution

- **direct (discharge) – 5,500 hectares**
- **diffuse (agriculture/run-off) – 3,900 hectares**

Pollution of aquatic systems can come from a range of sources, including industrial and sewage discharges and agriculture. Diffuse agricultural pollution is a problem for many SSSIs due to the prevalence of arable farming. Run-off from agricultural land brings nutrients and silt into watercourses, lakes and other wetlands.

Inappropriate water levels – 2,444 hectares and drainage – 786 hectares

Lowland wetlands are home to many waterfowl, aquatic plants

and invertebrate animals. The region’s wetlands have been extensively drained over the centuries, and it is important to keep our remaining sites in target condition. Water levels are managed through pumping and retention in networks of drainage channels.

Public access/disturbance – 2,400 hectares

Whilst coastal areas provide opportunities for recreation, without careful control and management, some activities can have an impact on a site’s condition. Coastal areas can be particularly sensitive to the impacts of illegal access, which can lead to extensive damage and erosion of fragile habitats.



Orwell Estuary SSSI, Suffolk. Peter Wakely/English Nature 9,356

The county picture

Whilst there is a substantial level of commonality across the region in terms of the key reasons for sites not achieving target condition, some factors are more prevalent in certain areas than others – this reflects again the variable distribution and nature of habitats and issues affecting them. For each county in the region, the condition and main causes for SSSI land not being in target condition can be summarised as follows:

- **Bedfordshire (84.9% in target condition)**
Undergrazing and lack of scrub control.
- **Cambridgeshire (63.5% in target condition)**
Diffuse and direct pollution, together with inappropriate water levels.
- **Essex (56.6% in target condition)**
Coastal squeeze.
- **Hertfordshire (65.5% in target condition)**
Inappropriate forestry and woodland management, and deer grazing/browsing.
- **Norfolk (92.3% in target condition)**
Drainage of wetland sites, and lack of scrub control on grasslands and heathlands.
- **Suffolk (85.3% in target condition)**
Coastal squeeze.

The road to 2010

At the end of 2005, we know that 78.1 per cent of the East of England's SSSIs are in target condition. We also have a good understanding of the reasons why the remaining 21.9 per cent are not. Over the next five years, the challenge is to ensure that this remaining area meets the 2010 target and, at the same time, take care that SSSIs already in target condition stay that way. To achieve this we need to be clear about what needs to be done, and by whom.

To tackle this critical step, English Nature established a Remedies Project in 2004 which has drawn together detailed information on every SSSI in the region. Each SSSI has been sub-divided into separate units, according to habitat type and management. For each unit not in target condition, the project:

- defines the actions needed to address these causes;
- details the mechanisms to enable the necessary actions to be carried out;
- identifies the organisations and individuals best placed to implement those actions and mechanisms, and
- enables and secures the agreement of land managers to ensure the actions are carried through.

Figure 8 lists the five most important remedies that have been identified in the East of England in terms of the area of SSSI that can be brought into target condition.

Figure 8 Remedies for bringing SSSIs into target condition – the top five (by area)

Remedy	Organisations who can help deliver the remedy	SSSI habitats that will benefit most from the remedy	Area of SSSI that would benefit from the remedy (ha)
Flood Risk Management works	Environment Agency	Sandy and muddy shores	14,869
Implement asset management programme scheme	Water Companies	Lowland neutral grassland	3,436
Review of discharge/pollution, prevention and control consents	Environment Agency	Sandy and muddy shores	2,865
Revoke/amend discharge/pollution, prevention and control consents under Asset Management Programme 3/4	Environment Agency	Lowland neutral grassland, rivers and streams	2,818
Targeted agri-environment schemes	Defra Rural Development Service	Lowland neutral grassland, rivers and streams	2,565

Working together

An enormous amount of credit is due to the partner organisations and individuals whose efforts have led to the significant advance towards the 2010 target in the last two years. Without such close partnership working, we would be some way behind the current position. The continuation of this approach is essential if the target is to be achieved.

Of all the partners that English Nature works with in the East of England, a small number manage large areas of SSSIs. These partners are described as the Major Landowners Group and they have a particularly critical role to play in adopting remedies and bringing SSSIs into target condition. Figure 9 provides a summary of the area and condition of SSSI holdings for the major landowners in the region at the end of 2005.

Figure 9 Major landowners and the condition of their SSSIs in the East of England at the end of 2005

Organisation	Total area (ha)	Area of SSSI in target condition (ha)	Area of SSSI in target condition (%)
Wildlife Trusts	39,111	37,306	95%
Forest Enterprise	20,682	20,608	100%
MoD	18,643	14,484	78%
Crown Estate (Marine)	12,782	4,633	36%
English Nature	12,068	9,559	79%
RSPB	6,441	4,614	72%
National Trust	5,022	4,802	96%
Crown Estate (Rural)	2,543	2,522	99%
Local Authorities	2,492	1,893	76%
Water Companies	2,163	2,142	99%
Ports and Harbours Authorities	1,693	964	57%

This table shows the area of SSSI owned by each body. It does not necessarily reflect who is responsible for an SSSI not being in target condition. In many cases, there will be one or more reasons why the named landowner is not in a position to do anything about an SSSI not meeting the condition. At the time of going to press, English Nature is working to reach final agreement with our partners to identify, in such situations, which organisation is responsible for taking action.

In the near future we will be able to show the area of SSSI holding for which the individual land holder has agreed responsibility.

At a consultation event on 18 July 2005, held in association with the publication *The East of England's best wildlife and geological sites: Identifying the challenge in bringing them into favourable condition* (English Nature, July 2005), support was given to establishing a regional working group which could serve to

galvanise and lead the resolution and implementation of solutions for particular and/or priority regional issues and challenges. English Nature is currently working with key partners to take this suggestion forward. We also hope that this will stimulate key partners to prepare their own plans for reaching the PSA target by 2010 and that the profile of the PSA target will be raised by its inclusion in key strategies and programmes across the region.



Spring flora, King's and Baker's Woods and Heaths SSSI, Bedfordshire. Peter Wakely/English Nature 17,627



Harebells, Bonemills Hollow SSSI, Cambridgeshire. Pete Stroh/Natural Treasures

Why the PSA target is so important

The protection of SSSIs has long been considered essential to the conservation of England's wildlife habitats and natural features but there is an increasing awareness of the wider value of these special sites. Firstly, by protecting particular habitats, many species, rare or otherwise, are conserved. Secondly, SSSIs perform many important 'ecosystem services' – upland moorlands that provide our water, saltmarshes that protect our coasts from rising seas, and natural floodplains that buffer towns from flash flooding. Last but not least, SSSIs create social wealth, by offering people the simple enjoyment of a quiet walk in the countryside, and economic wealth through the opportunities they provide for local and regional ecotourism.

Achieving the PSA target will ensure that these benefits can be secured for future generations. It is clear that the biggest challenge ahead is to ensure that there is a continuing partnership approach, with truly co-ordinated action by key stakeholders. Despite the difficulties ahead, English Nature firmly believes the target is both realistic and achievable. However this is only possible if everyone

co-operates and adequate resources are dedicated to addressing the outstanding issues.

The responsibility for overseeing this process passes from English Nature to *Natural England* later this year. The creation of the new organisation has already begun, with English Nature, the Landscape, Access and Recreation elements of the Countryside Agency, and

the environment activities of Defra's Rural Development Service working together as partners. Since April 2005, this natural partnership has been working together to deliver joint outcomes and pave the way for *Natural England* whilst continuing to deliver their separate and respective statutory duties. Achieving the 2010 PSA target will remain a vital area of work for the new organisation.





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English Nature, the Rural Development Service and the Countryside Agency. Working in partnership to conserve and enhance our landscapes and natural environment, to promote countryside access and recreation as well as public well-being, now and for future generations.

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Middle left: Hornbeam pollards, Epping Forest SSSI, Essex. Peter Wakely/English Nature 18,477A.
Bottom left: Hunstanton Cliffs, North Norfolk Coast SSSI, Norfolk. Chris Gibson/English Nature
Main: Heathland at Roydon Common SSSI, Norfolk. Paul Glendell/English Nature 24,756



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