

Natural England Designations Strategy

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Natural England Designations Strategy

1. Introduction and Purpose

This strategy is intended to guide Natural England's landscape and biodiversity designation work in the medium term future. It will be reviewed after 5 years .

Our designated areas and sites represent England's finest landscapes, and very best wildlife and geological sites on land and at sea. They provide opportunities for people to experience and enjoy some of our most spectacular and beautiful land and seascapes, and they hold the largest remaining tracts of semi-natural habitat in England. Their conservation and enhancement secures vital elements of our natural and cultural heritage. As well as having intrinsic value they provide people with vital 'ecosystem services' like clean water, climate regulation, beautiful places for recreation, and opportunities to learn about nature. In many cases, they provide the environment to support peoples' livelihoods (for further details see Annex 1).

Designation is important for biodiversity because it provides a long-term means of supporting habitats, plants and animals which find it more difficult to survive in the wider environment; and because site protection and subsequent management is the most reliable way of ensuring that biodiversity is conserved for the benefit of future generations. It is important for landscapes because it enables the coherent and effective management of extensive areas which have a distinct identity to those who live in, work in and visit them.

This Strategy provides a framework for making choices about our designations so that we can contribute to the delivery of the Government's ambitions as set out in the 2011 Natural Environment White Paper (NEWP) and Biodiversity 2020: A strategy for England's wildlife and ecosystem services, whilst ensuring that we deliver our statutory duties to identify and protect areas of special interest on land and at sea.

In implementing this strategy our aim will be to:

- Fulfil the Government's national and international obligations;
- Deliver Natural England's statutory general purposes;
- Secure protection and enhancement of our finest landscapes along with their wildlife, and cultural heritage. They will provide opportunities for everyone to experience, learn from and simply enjoy nature;
- Protect important wildlife habitats so that they support the recovery of species that are highly threatened and which, once lost, are impossible to recreate or restore, even in the long-term;
- Conserve sites important for their geological interest;
- Deliver designated sites and areas that actively contribute to ecological connectivity and better management and restoration of ecosystems;
- Focus, subject to statutory requirements and scientific imperatives, on areas where we can work in partnership with others to improve management of the wider landscape so that connectivity increases and better ecological networks are created;

Where we have an option to designate either of two sites we will prioritise the one that offers the widest range of environmental and societal benefits. While we will continue to take action to protect significant small sites, we will normally prioritise large sites over smaller ones.

2. Our Roles and Responsibilities

Natural England's role is to help protect England's nature and landscapes, for their intrinsic value to the nation; for people to enjoy, and for the services they provide, both now and in the future. We have specific responsibilities for a range of landscape and biodiversity designations on land, coast and at sea.

- We advise Defra and the Secretary of State on the selection of *Natura* 2000 sites, Ramsar sites, Marine Conservation Zones, and National Trails.
- We designate Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) and National Parks.
- We declare National Nature Reserves and directly manage some 140 with other partners.
- We advise land managers and others in order to manage monitor and protect England's most valuable wildlife sites, our priority habitats and species and the character and quality of our landscapes. We do this in order to maintain and restore the coherence and resilience of our ecosystems and raise awareness of the value of ecosystem services.
- We advise on the protection of the marine environment in inshore waters.
- We manage National Trails, promoting responsible access to the natural environment so that people can enjoy and value what it has to offer.
- We protect our landscapes and designated areas from damage – and, through the provision of statutory advice in the planning system, help secure priority habitats and green infrastructure - Where necessary, we exercise our regulatory and enforcement powers to achieve protection of threatened habitats and species.

A table showing our role in relation to various designations can be found at Annex 2 and details of our duties and powers in relation to designated sites can be found at Annex 3.

3. Why we need a Designations Strategy

Designation is an important tool which contributes to the delivery of environmental legislation designed to fulfil the Government's national and international obligations, and to the delivery of its policy framework, including the Natural Environment White Paper and Biodiversity 2020.

Our approach to designations, whether sites or extensive tracts, has evolved over time and this has resulted in a piecemeal approach so that we have tended to consider them as separate entities rather than as a suite of mechanisms which complement each other. Consequently we have a range of designated sites which make varying contributions to ecological networks, and do not always complement one another. Taking a more strategic approach will enable us to review the different designation series and ensure that we have the right sites and wider areas, designated for the right reasons, and contributing better to a coherent ecological network for England.

Designation is only one of a range of mechanisms available to Natural England in pursuit of its general purpose. In the course of our work towards a healthy, accessible and wildlife rich natural environment we will try to apply the best possible approach, taking all relevant factors into account. The best approach will normally be one that complements the use of other mechanisms (both those available to us and those used by others); and that, where possible, is compatible with broader social and economic ambitions. We will be sensitive to the impacts designation may have on those who live and work in an area under consideration and, where permitted by the relevant legal framework, we will consult those affected as early in the process as possible.

3.1 Statutory Drivers

UK statutory provisions and international directives ultimately govern our work on landscape, biodiversity and marine designations. All other policy and desirability considerations are secondary.

There is a continuing need for us to undertake designation work and to ensure that existing designation series are robust and relevant. Some particular pressures include: a forthcoming requirement to review the Special Protection Area (SPA) network; providing advice on establishing England's contribution to the UK Marine Protected Area Network; a commitment to the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) to review our SSSI series; and fulfilment of our statutory role with respect to National Park and AONB designation.

Natura 2000

Special Protection Areas (SPAs), classified under the Wild Birds Directive, and Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), designated under the Habitats Directive, together form the *Natura 2000* network. On land, these sites are also notified as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). These Directives are designed to conserve and protect our rarest and most threatened species and habitat types on a European scale. The Directives are transposed into national law through the Habitats Regulations and Natural England has specific roles under these Regulations including identifying SACs and SPAs on behalf of Defra, providing conservation advice and/or proposing management for these sites.

The SPA network is periodically reviewed to examine its adequacy in view of the requirements of the Wild Birds Directive. The first terrestrial SPA review was commenced in the mid-nineties and its recommendations were published in 2001. As a result of the review the legal documents for many classified SPAs in the UK network now require amending to incorporate changes to the qualifying species at the sites. A further review ('2010 SPA Review') of the terrestrial and coastal SPA network is currently underway. This is targeting parts of the current UK network to ensure UK obligations under Article 4 of the Birds Directive are met. This review will provide information to be used to further support the development of the current UK terrestrial and coastal SPA network. The outcome of this work is likely to result in significant amendments to the SPA series in England. This will include the addition of new qualifying species and/or modification of the boundaries of existing sites and also entirely new SPAs (*which will, in some cases, also require SSSI notification where this is not already in place to underpin the SPA*). It is also likely to impact on the recommendations of the earlier 2001 SPA review.

Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)

MPAs in English waters are SPAs, SACs, SSSIs, Ramsar sites and Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs), designated under the Marine & Coastal Access Act 2009.

In addition, the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) requires UK Government to establish a programme of measures for achieving Good Environmental Status (GES) in the North East Atlantic Ocean¹ by 2016. The UK MPA network is expected to form an integral element of the UK's programme of measures for GES, both meeting the Directive's requirements to put in place spatial protection measures which contribute to a coherent and representative network of MPAs, and supporting the achievement of a number of descriptors particularly Descriptors 1 (biodiversity) and 6 (sea-floor integrity). As the extent of the MPA network and the management measures which will be needed to support the objectives of the sites are not yet clear, it is difficult to say at this stage exactly what contribution the network will make towards the achievement of GES. MPAs alone will not be sufficient to achieve GES across the whole of the UK's marine environment and further 'wider' measures will be needed.

¹Defined in the Directive as the Greater North Sea, including the Kattegat, and the English Channel; the Celtic Seas; the Bay of Biscay and the Iberian Coast; in the Atlantic Ocean, the Macaronesian biogeographic region, being the waters surrounding the Azores, Madeira and the Canary Islands;

Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs)

Natural England has a duty to notify land as a SSSI which in our opinion is of ‘special interest’ by reason of its wildlife (habitats and species) geology, and geomorphology. The natural environment is dynamic, the nature of threats may change over time, and our understanding of habitats, species and geology is constantly developing. Mindful of these facts, Parliament has also given us powers to amend existing SSSI notifications, either by varying interest features or including additional land, or both. Where land is not considered to be of special interest, we also have a power of ‘denotification’ to remove an existing notification from a SSSI, or any part of a SSSI.

In 2009 we made a commitment to the Public Accounts Committee (PAC), the National Audit Office (NAO) and the former Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee (IUSSC) to review the SSSI series and our SSSI Notification Strategy sets out a systematic approach to enable us to do so². By implementing the notification strategy we will fill existing gaps in coverage, ensure that the series contains the most valuable sites, and that SSSIs are dynamic and resilient to the effects of climate change, as far as is practicable.

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) and National Parks

We designate both National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Though sometimes referred to as “landscape designations” they deliver conservation and enhancement of biodiversity, and help connect people with nature. The purposes of National Parks are, first, to conserve and enhance their natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage; and second, to promote opportunities for understanding and enjoyment of these areas’ special qualities. We have a duty to keep under review whether any land in England meets National Park designation criteria and to proceed with designation where we consider this especially desirable. The purpose of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty is the conservation and enhancement of their natural beauty (which includes their flora, fauna, geological and physiographical features). Natural England has discretionary powers to designate AONBs where this is desirable but there is no explicit duty on us to do so.

3.2 Policy Drivers

In 2010 the Government signed up to the UN agreement by the parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, which included 20 headline targets for 2020. The Natural Environment White Paper and Biodiversity 2020 provide us with a framework for action to deliver these – on land and at sea – with a broader focus and an ambitious agenda to restore and improve the coherence and resilience of our ecological networks.

The Natural Environment White Paper

The White Paper outlines the Government’s vision for the natural environment, shifting the emphasis from piecemeal conservation action towards a more integrated, large scale approach. It contains a commitment to move from net biodiversity loss to net gain, by supporting healthy, well-functioning ecosystems and coherent ecological networks. The White Paper stresses that natural capital, such as protected areas, should be properly valued. It draws attention to the findings from *The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity* (TEEB) study and *The UK National Ecosystem Assessment* (UK NEA) that the natural environment carries significance beyond its intrinsic value and that protected natural areas can yield returns many times higher than the cost of protection. We understand better the services that the natural environment delivers to people and we are beginning to be able to place an economic value, both on those ostensibly ‘free’ services and on the consequences of losing them. Government’s priority is to ensure that our distinctive landscapes and the wildlife they support are robust and resilient. Coherent ecological networks are needed on land and at sea which are more likely to support biodiversity and ecosystems in the face of current changes and future pressures such as food security, development and climate change. To help facilitate such networks the White Paper commits Government to assist partnerships of local

² <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmpubacc/244/244.pdf>
http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/Images/Notification%20strategy%20for%20web_tcm6-15235.pdf

authorities, local communities and landowners, the private sector and conservation organisations to establish Nature Improvement Areas (NIAs). These will be based on a local assessment of opportunities for restoring and connecting nature on a significant scale and our work on designations is set within the context of wider initiatives such as these.

Another major theme in the White Paper is reconnecting people with nature. This offers wide ranging public benefits including better mental and physical health, environmental education opportunities and promotion of volunteer activity. Designated areas can contribute significantly to this agenda.

This strategy will contribute to the implementation of the White Paper by maximising the contribution of designated areas to well functioning ecosystems and ecological networks, and increasing the opportunities for people to enjoy and experience accessible natural environments rich in wildlife.

Biodiversity 2020 – The England biodiversity strategy

Biodiversity 2020 builds on the White Paper and sets the direction for biodiversity policy for the next decade. The mission for Biodiversity 2020 is:

“To halt overall biodiversity loss, support healthy well-functioning ecosystems and establish coherent ecological networks, with more and better places for nature for the benefit of wildlife and people.”

This Strategy will form a key contribution to the delivery of Biodiversity 2020 objectives and in particular to two of the outcomes:

Outcome 1C:

“By 2020, at least 17% of terrestrial and inland water, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem services, conserved through effective, integrated and joined up approaches to safeguard biodiversity and ecosystem services including through management of our existing systems of protected areas and the establishment of nature improvement areas”

Currently, SSSIs cover 8% of the land area in England, AONBs 15% and National Parks 9%, taking into account the overlapping of SSSIs with both other designations, 28% of the land area is covered by SSSI, AONB and/or National Park (see Annex 4 for breakdown). There is a real opportunity for National Parks and AONBs to realise their potential to make a significant contribution to ecological networks and to the delivery of ecosystem services through their management planning process.

Outcome 2A:

“By the end of 2016 in excess of 25% of English waters will be contained in a well-managed Marine Protected Area network that helps deliver ecological coherence by conserving representative marine habitats.”

MPAs currently cover 23% of English waters and this is set to increase to 24% once the Studland to Portland draft SAC is submitted to the European Commission in 2012. It is anticipated that additional SPAs and MCZs designated in the first tranche will enable achievement of the ‘at least 25%’ element of the target but more planning is needed to ensure the achievement of the “well managed” element of the target, as well as achieving sufficient coverage of representative marine habitats. It is also worth noting that currently there is no agreed definition of ‘well managed’.

Biodiversity 2020 also makes specific reference to our existing SSSI Notification Strategy, *“Natural England will consider the impact of climate change and other long-term processes on the existing SSSI network through its Notification Strategy, which will also identify gaps in the present coverage of priority habitats and species within the SSSI series.”* The SSSI Notification Strategy is a key component of this wider Designations Strategy which will support achievement of the following Biodiversity 2020:

Outcome 1A:

“Better wildlife habitats with 90% of priority habitats in favourable or recovering condition and at least 50% of SSSIs in favourable condition, while maintaining at least 95% in favourable or recovering condition.”

Outcome 1B:

“More, bigger and less fragmented areas for wildlife, with no net loss of priority habitat and an increase in the overall extent of priority habitats by at least 200,000 ha.”

Outcome 1D:

“Restoring at least 15% of degraded ecosystems as a contribution to climate change mitigation and adaptation.”

Outcome 3:

“By 2020, we will see an overall improvement in the status of our wildlife and will have prevented further human-induced extinctions of known threatened species.”

Ospar Convention (Bergen ministerial meeting 2010)

Ospar set a target for the establishment of a network of MPAs and to ensure that:

- a. By 2012 it is ecologically coherent, includes sites representative of all bio-geographic regions in the Ospar maritime area, and is consistent with the CBD target³ for effectively conserved marine and coastal ecological regions;
- b. By 2016 it is well managed (i.e. coherent management measures have been set up and are being implemented for such MPAs that have been designated up to 2010).

The 2012 element of the Ospar target relates to sites submitted to the Ospar Secretariat by December 2012 whereas the 2016 element applies to sites submitted to Ospar by 30 June 2010. Sites submitted after that are expected to have management measures in place within five years of designation at the latest. Ospar will be carrying out an evaluation of the ecological coherence of the network in 2013 which may identify gaps in representation. The Ospar target does not require the MPA network to be ecologically coherent at a UK or sub UK level.

The European Landscape Convention

Government made a commitment to effectively protect, manage and plan England’s landscapes in 2007 when it ratified and implemented the European Landscape Convention. This convention is a treaty, under the Council of Europe, and implementation is by agreement. Its guiding principles require signatories to:

1. Ensure clarity in the use of terms and definitions
2. Recognise landscape in a holistic sense
3. Apply to all landscape
4. Understand the landscape baseline
5. Involve people
6. Integrate landscape
7. Raise awareness of the importance of landscape

While there are no set targets, we have produced jointly with Defra and English Heritage a European Landscape Convention Framework for Implementation in England. This outlines Natural England’s contribution to delivering Government’s commitments under the Convention.

³ The CBD target, agreed in Nagoya in 2010, being referred to is:

By 2020, at least 17 per cent of terrestrial and inland water, and 10 per cent of coastal and marine areas, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem services, are conserved through effectively and equitably managed, ecologically representative, and well connected systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures, and integrated into the wider landscape and seascapes.

UK Government Vision and Circular 2010 for English National Parks and the Broads

Launched in 2010 and subsequently endorsed by the Coalition Government in May 2011, the National Parks and the Broads vision and circular set out a range of priority outcomes including: A renewed focus on the achievement of National Park purposes; Leadership in climate change adaptation and mitigation; Securing a diverse and healthy natural environment, and enhancing cultural heritage; Working to support vibrant living and working communities, and wider partnership working generally.

Natural England is one of the named key public bodies expected to work in partnership with the National Park Authorities towards delivery of Vision and Circular objectives. This document is due for a review in 2015.

4. Scope of the Strategy

This Strategy deals with the landscape and ecological designations and those at sea, over which we have a direct influence, either as the designating authority or as a statutory adviser. It is set in the context of wider initiatives such as the developing Nature Improvement Areas (NIAs) and our work on spatial prioritisation.

We will continue to advise, support and positively influence the management of sites important for nature where the primary lead and legislative responsibility for designation rests with others. Sites such as Local Nature Reserves, Country Parks and non-statutory Local Sites all have potential to support the aims of this Designation Strategy.

Designation on its own is rarely sufficient to deliver conservation or enhancement of the natural environment; it is one of a number of tools which enable us to deliver against our statutory functions and support the implementation of the Government's objectives. The Lawton Report, *Making Space for Nature*, recognises that the current series of protected sites and areas does not equate to an ecological network. It also makes clear that although protected sites are fundamental to an ecological network they are not the sole component. We have reviewed the evidence to determine these other components and concluded that whilst ecological designations (SSSI, SPA, SAC, Ramsar and MCZ) are important, other mechanisms and levers are also significant; for example Shoreline Management Plans for coastal habitats, the role of relevant and competent authorities at sea (e.g. The Marine Management Organisation), and agri-environment schemes for lowland grasslands. The importance of these other mechanisms is likely to vary between species and habitats.

This strategy deals with the use of designation as a tool but must take account of these other mechanisms as part of the wider context. Assuming the proposed site or area meets the statutory requirements for designation we will then need to consider whether designation is the most appropriate mechanism. In doing so we will be guided by the following considerations:

- Is designation a duty or a discretionary option?
- Will designation address the impacts on the site or area?
- Are there other mechanisms available which would address the issues in the medium to long term?
- Do we have sufficient evidence to be confident that these other mechanisms will secure the protection of the natural features and special qualities of the area without designation?
- Would designation increase the likelihood of management mechanisms being put in place (e.g. HLS) and are we confident that this will happen?

Depending on the type of designation under consideration, a range of other factors may influence the desirability of designation. The wider aims and principles of this strategy will have a significant but not exclusive bearing on the desirability of designation. In some cases other factors may only come to light in

the course of discussion with stakeholders and local communities affected by a proposed new designation or boundary variation.

Ultimately this strategy is designed to guide us – not constrain us. There will occasionally be cases where designation is appropriate and desirable even though it does not appear to meet all or most of the strategy principles.

5. Our Existing Programmes

We have significant existing commitments on a range of designations (see Table 1 below) and further information is provided at Annex 5.

Table 1 Summary of Existing Designation Programmes

Designation	Existing Programme
Marine Conservation Zone	127 recommended, 1 designated, and phased designation of a proportion of these sites over three years from 2013
Marine SAC	Nearing sufficiency (we will provide advice on Studland to Portland pSAC by end July 2012)
Inshore Marine SPA	Challenging programme of identification requiring completion by end 2015
Terrestrial SAC	Substantially complete; future selection requirements likely to be small
Terrestrial SPA	Outstanding actions from 2001 review, current review reports 2012. Likely to lead to substantial work programme
Ramsar	No new work planned
SSSI	Work underway to review the series likely to result in significant programme
National Park/AONB	Lakes Dales National Park extension boundary review. 2 AONBs where further investigation planned
National Trail	No new work planned
National Nature Reserve	On-going programme to ensure series is both representative and meets criteria

This is in addition to work to consolidate existing designations, such as updating and finalising favourable condition tables for SSSIs and providing advice to management authorities for European marine sites.

6. A Strategic Approach

The publication of the Lawton Report (*Making Space for Nature*), the National Ecosystem Assessment, the Natural Environment White Paper and Biodiversity 2020, offer a unique opportunity for us to review our approach to designations. We will take a more strategic approach and consider the collective range of designations as valuable tools in fulfilling our role.

The Lawton Report suggests that priority for action at a landscape scale should be as follows:

- 1st Manage existing sites better
- 2nd Make existing sites larger
- 3rd Create new sites
- 4th Enhance connectivity
- 5th Create new corridors

The report uses the term 'site' to refer to important areas for England's wildlife which may, or may not, carry a designation. Designation can facilitate Lawton's top priority of managing existing areas better because once a site is designated we have a range of levers to support positive management, and the future of the site is secured in perpetuity. In some cases, better management may also support Lawton's fourth priority of enhancing connectivity because better managed sites are likely to provide larger source populations for dispersal, which in turn increases the chances of species colonising or re-colonising sites, and genetic exchange between populations. There are constraints on the ability of the current suite of designations to achieve Lawton's second, third and fifth priorities, but designation can provide a focus for efforts to make existing patches of habitat larger (such as the Great Fen Project being developed around two NNRs). They are certainly an important tool in securing the protection and long term management of sites that are created by other means, such as agri-environment schemes.

Designation on its own is rarely adequate because the ongoing management of sites is required to ensure that they retain their interest. In order to achieve this, some designations require us to offer conservation advice and/or set management objectives. In addition, whilst we have a choice over whether we take forward some designations, we have a statutory duty, and are required by Government, to implement others. Through this strategy, we will establish clear priorities so that we can better target resources and offer clarity to our stakeholders and partners.

Our work on designations is currently managed under several separate programmes with varying degrees of integration. By bringing these programmes together and taking a strategic approach we will consider the contribution that designations might make to ecological networks, the ways in which they can complement one another, and opportunities for increased efficiencies. Designation incurs costs; both in the process of designation itself, and in the subsequent management of sites and areas. We will ensure that we use it in those places where it is the most effective tool for conserving the very best of our wildlife and geology and our most valuable landscapes, and we will manage the costs through appropriate prioritisation and timing of our work.

Collectively, our designated sites and more extensive protected areas should fulfil the following objectives:

1. Include our best landscape, nature conservation and earth heritage sites;
2. Encompass the full diversity and range of habitats, species, and geological and physiographical features (including the full range of natural and semi-natural ecosystems and important geological and physiographical features) throughout England and its territorial waters;
3. Actively contribute to ecological connectivity, reduced fragmentation, and better management and restoration of ecosystems);
4. Support the development of ecological networks, and encompass a 'whole system' approach;
5. Provide for the conservation and enhancement of landscape, the marine environment, wildlife and cultural heritage across more extensive tracts which may contain multiple smaller site designations;
6. Offer opportunities for people to access, enjoy, and learn about the natural environment;
7. Provide opportunities for research and scientific enquiry.

And we will:

- a) Keep our designated sites and areas under review to ensure that we continue to deliver all of the above, and;
- b) Use our learning from the operation and management of the current suite of sites and areas, to inform our own practices, and those of others, to move towards a whole system approach.

In order to ensure that collectively the sites and areas are able to do this, our approach to designating new, and amending existing, ones will be based on the following principles:

Our Strategy will:

- Be underpinned by best available evidence;
- deliver our relevant national and international commitments;
- wherever possible enhance connectivity;
- operate at a sufficient scale to facilitate coherence;
- facilitate resilience to climate change and other impacts, and accommodate change where necessary;
- wherever possible encourage stakeholder and community engagement;
- increase public understanding and enjoyment of the natural environment;
- take a holistic approach so that decisions on revised boundaries and new designations take account of existing designations;
- give priority to actions that seek to implement the Natural Environment White Paper and Biodiversity 2020;
- In fulfilling the above points, demonstrate a commitment to the ecosystem approach.

The following paragraphs provide more detail on each of the principles.

- Be underpinned by best available evidence

Our Strategy, and the processes for its implementation, will be compliant with our Evidence Standards. We must ensure that we have the appropriate evidence to: (i) ensure that statutory or other legal designation criteria are met; (ii) be certain that designations are in the right location and of the right quality to deliver the ambitions of our strategy; (iii) justify any new designations, increases in size of existing designations or other amendments; and (iv) demonstrate whether, once designated, they continue to qualify and to deliver their objectives. Evidence supporting a designation or notification may come from a variety of sources including other statutory bodies and NGOs. In specifying evidential needs in situations where data is not readily available we will ensure that requirements are realistic and proportionate.

- Deliver our relevant national and international commitments

We need to provide appropriate advice to Government to deliver the designations required to fully implement the Habitats and Birds Directives, including periodic reviews (e.g. SPA review), MSFD, Ospar Convention and the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009. We must also discharge our duties to consider any further formal proposals for National Park and AONB designation or boundary variations; identify and notify SSSIs; implement our SSSI Notification Strategy in response to our commitment to the Public Accounts Committee, and deliver the Biodiversity 2020 objectives.

- Wherever possible and appropriate enhance connectivity

We will better exploit the synergy between existing designations so that they are collectively seen as complementary in delivering the Natural Environment White Paper recommendations, as opposed to a collection of separate types of designation with differing emphasis. New designations should seek to reduce fragmentation and generally maintain and increase connectivity (for example by protecting patches of habitat important for meta populations). There are some guidelines that we can apply: (i) in general, the closer sites are to each other the more easily species can move between them, although there is limited information on how close they need to be; (ii) bigger sites are better than smaller ones because they support larger populations and have less edge effects; and (iii) for a very few species (less than 0.1%) we can prescribe a distance that equates to their dispersal ability based on evidence. The situation is different in our marine work where a distance of 40-80km between boundaries for sites of a similar habitat has been recommended.^{4 5} In some circumstances improving terrestrial habitat connectivity can be potentially detrimental to native species under threat from expanding populations of introduced invasive species. We will take account of such circumstances in implementing the strategy.

⁴ http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/Images/100608_ENG_v10_tcm6-17607.pdf

⁵ http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/pdf/06-03e_Guidance%20ecol%20coherence%20MPA%20network.pdf

- Operate at a sufficient scale to facilitate coherence

We will expand existing and notify new SSSIs to encompass large, connected areas of habitat (ecological units). Examples are: the erodible corridors next to a river SSSI, or all of the habitat patches used by a meta-population. Bigger sites are preferable to small ones because they contain more species, have proportionately less edge, have greater topographic, geological and hydrological diversity (which can facilitate species' persistence under climate change) and they make it easier to restore and promote more natural processes and the ecosystem services on which society depends. They may often require less intensive management than small sites and, where intervention is required, there are likely to be economies of scale. The approach advocated in the Ecological Network Guidance for the Marine Conservation Zone Project offers an example of how this might work.

- Facilitate resilience in the face of climate change and other impacts

As the impacts of climate change become more apparent, the suite of sites needs to be kept under review to ensure new features are adequately protected and site boundaries reflect the needs of dynamic systems. We may also consider that a higher (or lower) proportion of the total resource should be protected within designated sites. As far as possible, new and amended sites need to be dynamic in the face of natural processes so that networks are resilient to the predicted effects of climate change. This includes being sufficiently large to accommodate natural processes; include whole systems or features; and maintain large populations which are better able to withstand climatic fluctuations. At a network scale we must protect heterogeneity of habitats and microclimates, particularly protecting cooler and damper places (such as north facing slopes) where species may be able to persist. We must also facilitate dispersal of species to new locations. Designation should make it easier, not harder, for site management to promote adaptation measures. We must recognise that sites can remain valuable even if their interest features change.

- Wherever possible encourage stakeholder and community engagement

Involving local communities or resource users at an early stage in designation can lead to a greater sense of ownership. We will always consult widely on proposed AONB or National Park designations or boundary variations before an order is made and again prior to its confirmation. Selection of SSSIs and other biodiversity or geological based sites is determined strictly on scientific evidence but we will, wherever possible, seek to engage local communities so that they value, enjoy and support the site. Inputs from local residents and businesses will inform Impact Assessments to be completed for all SAC, SPA, or Ramsar site recommendations made to the Secretary of State.

- Increase public understanding and enjoyment of the natural environment

Where there is no conflict with conservation needs, we will favour designations that provide opportunities for the public to engage with nature. Access to natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage can bring greater understanding and appreciation of the environment, contribute to mental and physical wellbeing, and bring opportunities to learn about the natural environment.

- Take a holistic approach so that decisions on revised boundaries take account of existing designations

When considering new sites or revisions of boundaries we will take account of the location of adjacent or adjoining sites in order to facilitate delivery of the Lawton recommendations to increase connectivity and buffer existing sites. For example, any decisions on boundary revisions for AONBs should take account of existing SSSIs and we should seek to join up existing SSSIs where appropriate, by notifying and/or improving the management of the land in between them, to facilitate ecological coherence.

- In fulfilling all of the above, take an ecosystem approach

The ecosystem approach is the integrated approach to sustainable land and sea management for the benefit of people. It articulates the benefits in terms of ecosystem services, recognises the need to maintain or restore functioning ecosystems and involves people in decision-making about the environment. It also considers the value of ecosystem services to people (both in monetary and non-monetary terms) and can work at a range of spatial scales. We need to acknowledge the features of healthy functioning systems and aim to conserve and enhance these features. Ecosystems with an appropriate species complement and intact hydrological, geomorphological and ecological processes are thought to be more

resilient and as a general rule are thought to deliver a wider range of services. We will ensure that the objectives for our designated sites make stronger links to environmental conditions such as air quality, water quality and ecosystem services, so as to reduce the effects of climate change and other factors by management and other activities on the site, and ensure that ecosystem services are taken into account when making decisions about designating new sites.

7. Implementing a Strategic Approach

Our first priority must be to deliver our statutory duties and thus support Government in delivering its international obligations and national commitments. The key difference in our approach under this strategy is that, in delivering our statutory duties we will also consider how, collectively, the whole suite of designations can be used to deliver ecological networks and the full range of ecosystem services. Wherever possible, we will focus our efforts on areas where we can work in partnership with others, such as NIAs, to designate new sites; manage existing sites; and better manage the wider landscape and our seas. Where more than one designation or notification option exists we will favour the solution that addresses the widest range of strategy principles and so deliver the best spread of public benefits.

Our Priorities will be to:

1. Fulfil the Government's international obligations;
2. Comply with UK statutory duties and public law obligations governing our landscape and biodiversity designation activity;
3. Designate sites to protect habitats and species that are highly threatened and, once lost, impossible to recreate or restore, even in the long-term;
4. Create a well managed, ecologically coherent, MPA network;
5. Focus on Nature Improvement Areas, AONBs, National Parks, and areas identified through our spatial prioritisation work (See Map 4) where we will use designation as a tool to contribute to the creation of ecological networks in well-managed landscapes.

Table 2 How we will deliver these priorities

Objective	Mechanism for delivery	How we will do it
Designated sites actively contribute to ecological connectivity, reduced fragmentation, and better management and restoration of ecosystems	SSSI Notification Strategy	Our SSSI notification Strategy will take into consideration areas where we can also work in partnership with others to better manage the wider landscape to increase connectivity and deliver ecological networks ⁶ . These would include AONBs, National Parks, Nature Improvement Areas and areas identified through our spatial prioritisation work.
	New AONBs and National Parks, and boundary reviews	We intend to scope possibilities for a review of the extent of AONB and National Park designations in England in order to help establish a) whether the number of established AONBs and National Parks is appropriate for 21 st century needs and b) that a suitably diverse range of landscapes of natural beauty is under positive management to secure their conservation and enhancement. We are <u>not</u> intending this work to result in any proposals for revocations or to remove land from designation generally. Where any future designation projects are being considered the principles and objectives of this strategy, and Focus Areas identified through Natural England's spatial prioritisation work will influence any decisions made. The primacy of the statutory natural beauty and, for National Parks only, the recreation opportunity criterion for designation will, however, not be affected.
	NNR Review	<p>We will review our management standards for NNRs so that their function in supporting ecological connectivity and restoration of ecosystems is explicit.</p> <p>We will identify sites in the NNR series which are good examples of land management for ecosystem services and make a significant contribution to landscape quality, and we will seek partnerships that secure the contribution of NNRs to the implementation of large scale biodiversity restoration.</p>
	Deliver MPA Network	We will advise on the identification of MCZs and complete the identification of and deliver advice on new SPAs.
Support the development of ecological networks, and encompass a 'whole system' approach. Includes delivery of an	SSSI Notification Strategy	We will select new sites in the context of their contribution to ecological networks and their delivery of ecosystem services.

⁶ Opportunities for partnership working are not relevant considerations in the SSSI identification and notification process so it will sometimes not be possible to favour a potential notification on the basis of such opportunities.

ecologically coherent and well managed MPA network contributing to GES by 2020.		When selecting new sites we will: a) prioritise sites for habitats and species that are highly threatened and impossible to recreate or restore, even in the long-term, and b) prioritise large-scale sites over smaller ones.
	AONB and National Park Management Plan Reviews	We will work with National Park Authorities and AONB Partnerships and provide management plan guidance to enhance the ecological value of these protected landscapes, build ecological networks, and deliver ecosystem services.
	Deliver MPA Network	We will advise on the identification of MCZs against the MPA network design principles and ensure adequate evidence underpinning them; complete identification and advise on new SPAs, and provide conservation advice to regulators on the development of management measures for MPAs in English waters.
Include our most valuable landscape, nature conservation and earth heritage sites. Includes intrinsic value and the value of these features to society (ecosystem services).	International Commitments including SPA Review and any SAC reviews	We will advise on the identification of new SACs and SPAs
	NNR review	We will review the current series of NNRs to ensure they meet selection criteria on 'value'. We will continue to prioritise new declarations of most valuable nature conservation/earth heritage sites and we will de-declare those that no longer meet the criteria.
	Protected Landscapes Review	We will ensure that our plans to review the extent and diversity of the current suite of AONBs and National Parks considers their contribution to NEWP aspirations and delivery of ecosystem services.
	SSSI Notification Strategy	We will designate sites for habitats and species that are highly threatened and impossible to recreate or restore, even in the long-term.
We will take into account the ecosystem services that sites provide when deciding on the boundaries of sites.		
Encompass the full diversity and range of habitats, species, and geological and physiographical features throughout England and its territorial waters.	SSSI Notification Strategy	<p>We will fill existing gaps in SSSI coverage; ensure that the series contains the most valuable sites, and that SSSIs are dynamic and resilient to the effects of climate change, as far as is practicable. Specifically we will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Notify new SSSIs where we identify major shortfalls in the coverage of habitats and species. ▪ Consider how far the existing sites constitute a local network and look for mechanisms to fill in the gaps. ▪ Ensure that existing sites are notified for the right features including the designated features of overlapping Natura 2000 and Ramsar sites.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> De-notify those sites, or parts of sites, that are not of special interest because they have lost the features they were notified for and restoration is not possible⁷, or were wrongly notified.
	NNR Review	We will prioritise new declarations of NNRs that enable the wider series to be more representative of England's biodiversity and geodiversity.
	Deliver MPA Network	We will advise on the identification of MCZs against the MPA network design principles and ensure adequate evidence underpinning them; identify and advise on new SPAs, and; advise on conservation objectives and the development of management measures for MPAs in English waters. MPAs will comprise of broad-scale representative habitats as well as rare, threatened and declining habitats and species.
Offer opportunities for individuals to access and enjoy the natural environment.	NNR review	We will take steps to make the whole series as accessible as possible to the general public through designation as open access land.
	National Trails	We will continue to fund the management of National Trails.
	National Parks	We will continue to work with National Park authorities to support best practice in the delivery of their second purpose of promoting understanding and enjoyment of the parks' special qualities.
Provide opportunities for research and scientific enquiry.	NNR review	We will identify those NNRs which contribute most towards research, evidence gathering and data collection and will enter into partnerships with academic institutions and research organisations to maximise their contribution in this field.
	MCZs	We will recommend to Defra the establishment of reference areas which are highly protected Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs) or parts of MCZs. The features (either habitats or species) designated within them will have conservation objectives to achieve reference condition. Reference condition will demonstrate the condition of features when there are no human impacts on them, and are important for us to understand the value of a more natural marine environment and the impacts of activities.

Maps 2 and 3 illustrate how an area might look prior to and following Designations Strategy implementation. implemented.

⁷ De-notification will not normally be considered in cases where interest features have been lost as a result of unconsented activities or through neglect

8. Implementing the Strategy – The Next Steps

We will combine all of our designations work into a single programme and we will develop a work programme to achieve the following:

Task	Timescale
Establish a cross- functional Designations Board with a remit to have oversight of the entire strategy throughout its implementation phase.	By end August 2012
Communicate Designation Strategy principles to internal and external stakeholders so that collaborative working towards delivery of strategy aims is promoted. This will involve making available a web link to the strategy document and writing directly to all stakeholders involved in its development.	By end August 2012
Develop a checklist to evaluate how effectively future site and area designation proposals might achieve strategy aims.	By end November 2012
Use Designation Strategy principles in combination with our spatial prioritisation work to both filter and prioritise formal proposals from third parties for AONB and National Park designation work (new designations and boundary variations).	By end December 2012
Carry out a strategic review of the extent and diversity of the existing set of AONB and National Park designations to establish whether there is potential scope for future new designations.	By end August 2014
Complete national scientific reviews of the existing SSSI series and detailed local reviews of existing individual sites to establish a programme to up-date the SSSI series.	By end August 2013
Provide timely advice to enable Government and regulators to establish a well managed Marine Protected Area network covering in excess of 25% of English territorial waters by the end of 2016.	In accordance with Defra requirements
Work in collaboration with other statutory nature conservation bodies, under the leadership of JNCC to develop and implement the recommendations of the current terrestrial SPA review, including developing a programme of potential changes to site boundaries.	By end August 2014
Establish an external stakeholder consultative forum to help guide Designation Strategy implementation; resolve problems and share good practice.	By end February 2013
Review, with input from the consultative forum, achievements of the strategy and make recommendations on appropriate changes	During 2016

Annex 1 Main Categories of Ecosystem Services Potentially Delivered by Designated Sites and Areas

Service	Effect of designated sites	Benefits for Human Wellbeing	Distribution of Benefits
Provisioning Services			
Genetic resources	SSSIs have been identified as significant in holding reserves of crop wild relatives. Management of some sites employs rare livestock breeds.	Crop wild relatives and rare breeds could play a significant role in future agricultural production.	All sites can be expected to conserve genetic resources in some way, though the benefits are variable and often uncertain. Only certain sites use rare livestock breeds.
Fresh water	Water is abstracted directly from some sites; others play an important role in catchment management.	Clean water is essential for human life and many economic activities.	Benefits are variable and site specific – some sites are regionally significant, notably large upland sites.
Regulating Services:			
Climate regulation	Reduced impacts on global climate through carbon sequestration/storage; micro-climate effects through shading and evapotranspiration	Reduced damage costs from climate change	Benefits are widespread, especially from bogs, woodlands and some grasslands; microclimatic effects are local.
Water regulation	Localised effects in reducing flooding through water storage/reduced run-off	Protection of property and infrastructure	Benefits are location specific but likely to be widespread and downstream or down slope of site (e.g. woodlands and grasslands).
Water purification and waste treatment	Woodlands, wetlands and other habitats can filter pollutants and enhance water quality	Enhanced water for human consumption and reduced treatment costs; benefits for fisheries and recreation	Benefits are location specific, but likely to be widespread and apply to a range of habitats (e.g. woodlands, grassland, wetlands).
Cultural Services:			
Recreation and ecotourism	Enhanced opportunities for countryside recreation through biodiversity and landscape effects	Increased enjoyment of countryside	Public use varies with type of designations. National Parks and some NNRs attract large numbers of visitors.
Educational and scientific values	Opportunities for education, research, learning and training	Increased education, learning and scientific knowledge	All sites have scientific and potential educational value, particularly NNRs; the benefits themselves vary according to access and educational/ scientific use.
Sense of place, spiritual and existence values	Conservation of species, habitats and geodiversity for benefit of current and future generations; defining sense of place and local identity	Appreciation, inspiration, non-use values	Benefits of individual sites are likely to vary according to their characteristics and their landscape context and biodiversity. The SSSI series has a collective role in provision of these benefits to society.

Source: Benefits of SSSIs June 2011 Report to Defra Prepared by GHK Consulting Ltd, in conjunction with Dr Mike Christie of Aberystwyth University, ADAS, IEEP, Rick Minter and the Research Box

Annex 2 Natural England's Role in Designations

Name of designation	Current Number	Type	Natural England's Role in Designation
Ramsar sites	70	International	Site identification Advice to Defra
Special Areas of Conservation (SACs)	241	European	Site identification Advice to Defra
Special Protection Areas (SPAs)	81	European	Site identification Advice to Defra
Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)	34	Domestic	Designation
National Nature Reserves (NNRs)	225	Domestic	Site selection Declaration
National Parks (and The Broads)	10	Domestic	Designation
Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs)	4120	Domestic	Site selection Designation
Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ)	1	Domestic	Advice to Defra
National Trails	13	Domestic	Propose Advice to Defra

Annex 3 Natural England's Statutory role and responsibilities

The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 established Natural England as an independent body responsible for conserving, enhancing and managing England's natural environment for the benefit of current and future generations. For the first time a single organisation was given responsibility for enhancing biodiversity and landscapes in both urban, rural and marine areas, promoting access, recreation and public well-being.

Section 2 of the act sets out Natural England's statutory general purpose as being:

to ensure that the natural environment is conserved, enhanced and managed for the benefit of present and future generations, thereby contributing to sustainable development. This purpose includes:

- (a) promoting nature conservation and protecting biodiversity;*
- (b) conserving and enhancing the landscape*
- (c) providing and improving facilities for the study understanding and enjoyment of the natural environment;*
- (d) promoting access to the countryside and open spaces and encouraging open air recreation;*
- (e) contributing to social and economic well-being through management of the natural environment.*

Earlier legislation gave Natural England specific powers and duties in respect of designations.

AONBs and National Parks

Our protected landscapes hold the largest remaining tracts of semi-natural habitat in England and deliver a wide range of ecosystem services. They are designated for their natural beauty (National Parks also for their recreational value) and both have the conservation and enhancement of "flora, fauna, geological and physiographical features" as part of their primary purpose. Together, they contain more than 50% of SSSIs by area. Their large area, governance and legal standing means that they offer an excellent base for delivering ecological networks.

The purposes of National Parks are, first, to conserve and enhance their natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage; and second, to promote opportunities for understanding and enjoyment of these areas' special qualities.

We have a duty to keep under review whether any land in England meets National Park designation criteria. Where we identify such land and deem it especially desirable that the necessary measures are taken to secure delivery of the two purposes we must proceed with designation.

The purpose of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty is the conservation and enhancement of their natural beauty. This includes their flora, fauna, geological and physiographical features. Natural England has discretionary powers to designate such areas but there is no explicit duty of designation.

Since the original legislation (1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act) there have been various changes in both legislation and practice concerning our protected landscapes. The most significant are:

1972 The Local Government Act required the setting up of a separate authority for each National Parks. Each NPA produces a management plan for the whole area of the park and works with land owners and managers and a wide range of other organisations to implement that plan. NPAs also act as the Local Planning Authority for their areas.

1974 The report of the National Park Policies Review Committee, chaired by Lord Sandford, proposed balancing the then uneven geographical distribution of National Parks, to include more diverse types of landscape, providing they were of the highest quality. It also suggested that when the two purposes of National Parks are in conflict the protection of wildlife and landscape should take precedence (Sandford Principle).

1991 The Report of the National Parks Review Panel (Edwards Report), reviewed the history of the Parks over the previous 40 years, identified their key attributes and set out a vision for the future. Many of the

recommendations, most notably revised purposes for National Parks, were incorporated in the Environment Act 1995.

1995 The Environment Act revised the purposes of National Parks, which now are:

- To conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the National Parks
- To promote opportunities for the public understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of the parks.

The Act also introduced independent National Park authorities with full planning powers, and amended the 1949 Act to introduce a duty on all public bodies to have regard to National Park purposes when carrying out their functions.

2000 The Countryside and Rights of Way Act introduced new provisions relating to the management of AONBs. The key ones were a requirement to produce AONB management plans; the option for AONBs to be managed by statutory Conservation Boards with a second purpose to increase understanding and enjoyment of the area's special qualities (now taken up by the Cotswolds and the Chilterns AONBs), and a "duty of regard" to the purpose of AONB designation placed on relevant authorities equivalent to the one for National Park purposes.

2006 The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act gave Natural England discretion to take into account wildlife and cultural heritage when assessing the natural beauty of an area being considered for National Park (though not AONB) designation. It also clarified the legislative meaning of "natural beauty" by confirming that this quality could be found in landscapes influenced by human activity.

SSSIs

Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) give legal protection to the best sites for wildlife and geology in England.

Natural England has a statutory duty to notify land which in its opinion is of 'special interest' by reason of its wildlife (habitats and species) or geology. However, the natural environment is dynamic, the nature of threats may change over time and our understanding of habitats, species and geology is constantly developing. Mindful of these facts, Parliament has also given Natural England powers to amend existing SSSI notifications, either by varying interest features, including additional land, or both. Taken together, these powers and duties provide Natural England with a means of conserving areas that it considers to be of 'special interest' by reason of their wildlife (habitats and species) or geology. Where land is not considered to be of special interest, Natural England also has a power of 'denotification' to remove an existing notification from a SSSI, or any part of a SSSI.

There is no statutory purpose for SSSIs; however a general purpose is defined in government policy. Defra's code of guidance states that: *"The purpose of SSSIs is to safeguard, for present and future generations, the diversity and geographic range of habitats, species, and geological and physiographical features, including the full range of natural and semi-natural ecosystems and of important geological and physiographical phenomena throughout England. The sites included within the series of SSSIs are intended collectively to comprise the full range of natural and semi-natural habitats and the most important geological and physiographical sites. The SSSI series should therefore include all of our most valuable nature conservation and earth heritage sites, selected on the basis of well-established and publicly available scientific criteria."*

National Nature Reserves

Our National Nature Reserves represent some of the finest wildlife and geological sites in England and are some of the best examples of our natural heritage. They are places where both professionals and the wider public can enjoy, understand and interpret the natural environment. They are reservoirs of biodiversity, containing some of our most pristine habitats, our rarest species and most significant geology. They offer people an inspiring vision for what might be achieved in the future as well as operating as "outdoor laboratories" where we can develop and test new techniques for conservation. The series is not representative in some areas but over representative in others and there is scope to increase the number of NNRs, particularly approved body NNRs.

1. NNRs are declared by Natural England under provisions originally enacted in the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. The idea at the time was to give the very best of England's environment the status of reserves for the purpose of their protection and providing outdoor laboratories for ecological research.

2. The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006, which created Natural England and gave it its core statutory functions, also specifically broadened the statutory purpose of NNRs. This was done by schedule 11 of the Act. As a result, the statutory position is now as follows.

- a. Every NNR must be managed for one or both of these conservation purposes:
 - preserving flora, fauna or geological or physiographical features of special interest in the area, or
 - Providing, under suitable conditions and control, special opportunities for the study of, and research into, matters relating to the fauna and flora of Great Britain and the physical conditions in which they live, and for the study of geological and physiographical features of special interest in the area.
- b. In addition to this duty (but not as an alternative to it), NNRs may be managed for a recreational purpose. Under the statute this means:
 - either to provide opportunities for enjoying nature,
 - **or** for open-air recreation,
 - **or** for both.

3. Two specific factors have a bearing on our power to manage NNRs for recreation in accordance with (b):

- a. Under the statute, we can only do so to the extent that the management of the land for the recreational purpose does not compromise its management for the conservation purpose.
- b. One of Natural England's core statutory functions is to ensure that the natural environment is conserved, enhanced and managed for the benefit of present and future generations, thereby contributing to sustainable development. The equal components of this general purpose are clearly set out by NERC section 2 as follows:
 - promoting nature conservation and protecting biodiversity,
 - conserving and enhancing the landscape,
 - securing the provision and improvement of facilities for the study, understanding and enjoyment of the natural environment,
 - promoting access to the countryside and open spaces and encouraging open-air recreation, and contributing in other ways to social and economic well-being through management of the natural environment.

Natura 2000/Ramsar

Natura 2000 sites are Special Protection Areas, classified under the Birds Directive and Special Areas of Conservation, designated under the Habitats Directive. Together they form the Natura 2000 network. On land, they are also notified as SSSIs. These Directives are designed to conserve and protect our rarest and most threatened species and habitat types. The Directives are transposed into UK law through the Habitats Regulations and Natural England has specific roles under these Regulations including identifying SACs and SPAs on behalf of Defra, providing conservation advice and/or proposing management for these sites.

Ramsar sites are wetlands of international importance designated under the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, especially as Waterfowl Habitat (Ramsar, 1971). In England, Ramsar sites are also notified as SSSIs and there is a significant overlap between the boundaries of Natura 2000 and Ramsar sites. Government has issued policy statements relating to the special status of Ramsar sites. This extends the same protection at a policy level to listed Ramsar sites as that afforded to sites which

have been designated under the EC Birds and Habitats Directives as part of the EU Natura 2000 network. There may be further Ramsar sites designated in the future.

Marine SACs and SPAs are dealt with separately below.

Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)

MPAs in English territorial waters include Special Areas of Conservation, Special Protection Areas (classified under the Habitats and Birds Directives respectively), Marine Conservation Zones (designated under the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009) and intertidal SSSIs. Government has committed to substantially completing the marine protected area (MPA) network by the end of December 2012 – this commitment will not be met. By 2016 the entire UK MPA network must be in place with management measures that help deliver ecological coherence by conserving representative marine habitats. By 2020 Good Environmental Status required by the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) must be achieved with a six year programme of measures in place.

National Trails

National Trails are a series of long-distance paths routed through some of our finest landscapes and providing high quality opportunities for people to experience and enjoy the natural environment. These routes are widely recognised by the public (an estimated 12 million visits per annum), bring significant economic benefits to the areas through which they pass, and are generally accepted by landowners as a good experience of public access.

The routes are officially designated by the Secretary of State following proposals made by Natural England who also lead product management using mechanisms which include quality standards and a substantial contribution to funding. Path maintenance is generally carried out by local authorities or National Park authorities; although in some cases we provide direct support to an agent.

Annex 4 Nature Improvement Areas

Nature Improvement Areas (NIAs) embody the more integrated, holistic approach that was signalled in the Natural Environment White Paper and Biodiversity 2020, joining up objectives for biodiversity, soils, farming and the low carbon economy to improve the functioning of ecosystems and their services. NIAs take forward recommendations identified in the Lawton review, *Making Space for Nature* (2010) and they will be one of the areas where we will focus our designation efforts.

Although the characteristics of NIAs will vary across the country according to what is possible and what is needed, these will be places where:

- opportunities to deliver ecological networks, both in terms of large area and scale and valuable benefits to wildlife and people, are particularly high;
- a shared vision for the natural environment exists among a wide partnership of local people, including statutory and voluntary sectors;
- significant improvements to the ecological network can be achieved over large areas by enlarging and enhancing existing wildlife sites, improving ecological connectivity and creating new sites;
- the surrounding land use can be better integrated with valued landscapes and action to restore wildlife habitats and underpinning natural processes helping to adapt to climate change impacts;
- benefits to urban areas and communities can be achieved and, where appropriate, NIAs may contain urban areas as part of an enhanced ecological network;
- 'win-win' opportunities are identified and have the potential to be exploited to the full to derive multiple benefits, for example with benefits for the water environment and Water Framework Directive objectives, flood and coastal erosion risk management and the low-carbon economy;
- there are opportunities to inspire people through an enhanced experience of the outside world.

NIAs are fundamental to the step-change that is needed if we are to establish a coherent and resilient ecological network. The Natural Environment White Paper commits Government to assist partnerships of local authorities, local communities and landowners, the private sector and conservation organisations to establish new Nature Improvement Areas (NIAs), based on a local assessment of opportunities for restoring and connecting nature on a significant scale.

NIAs should contain all these components of an ecological network:

- core areas, especially existing wildlife sites (National Nature Reserves (NNRs), Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), Local Nature Reserves (LNRs) etc.);
- corridors and stepping stones;
- restoration areas, where priority habitats are created to provide (in time) more core areas;
- buffer zones, that reduce pressures on core areas;
- surrounding land that is managed including for sustainable food production, in a wildlife friendly way.

Annex 5 Statistics on land cover

Total SSSI Number	4120
Total SSSI Area (ha)	1,082,216
Area of England to Extent of Realm (Mean Low Water)	13,327,200
Total SSSI Area to Extent of Realm (ha)	1,017,784
Proportion of England notified as (Terrestrial) SSSI	7.6%

AONBs

Total Area = 1,927,050 ha (15% of England (13,327,200 ha) is AONB

- SSSI area in AONB = 253,913 ha
- Total SSSI area is 1,082,216 ha (within 4,120 sites)
- % of AONB that is SSSI = 13%
- % of SSSI area within AONBs = 24%

National Parks

Total Area = 1,216,113 ha (9% of England (13,327,200 ha) is National Park

- SSSI area in National Park boundaries = 292,383 ha
- Total SSSI area is 1,082,216 ha (within 4,120 sites)
- % of area within National Park boundaries that is SSSI = 24%
- % of SSSI area within National Park boundaries = 27%

Protected Areas in England			
Designations included	hectares	km ²	Percentage of England
SSSI/N2K/Ramsar area to Extent of Realm	1,082,216	10,082	7.6%
Local Wildlife Sites	747,314	7,473	5.6%
SSSI/N2K/Ramsar & Local Wildlife Sites	1,703,110	17,031	12.8%
National Parks	1,216,111	12,161	9%
SSSI/N2K/Ramsar & Local Wildlife Sites & National Parks	2,573,437	25,734	19.4%
AONB	1,926,999	19,270	15%
SSSI/N2K/Ramsar & Local Wildlife Sites & National Parks & AONB	4,082,127	40,821	30.7%
SSSI/N2K/Ramsar & National Parks & AONB (to EoR)	3,678,900	36,789	27.7%
England to extent of realm boundary (cMean Low Water)	13,294,252	132,943	

Annex 6 Designations Commitments Forward Look

National Parks and AONBs

In terms of known pressures for landscape designation activity, we are aware of 48 local aspirations for new or amended AONBs (41) and National Parks (7). A very small number of these are formal proposals supported by landscape assessment based evidence. The majority are simply informal suggestions we have become aware of via a variety of sources. Some have the potential to become formal proposals in the future. Following adoption of the Designations Strategy we will review the list using strategy principles and spatial prioritisation to help identify cases with future potential to be acted on.

The Board recently agreed that 2 AONB boundary variation proposals should be progressed - Suffolk Coast and Heaths, and Surrey Hills. We have undertaken preliminary scoping work on these two cases. This included a quality assessment of landscape evidence supporting the formal proposals. The conclusion was that the evidence of natural beauty was incomplete in both cases and further evaluative work is needed. We will be discussing next steps with the relevant AONB managing bodies.

It would be inappropriate for us to deal with our AONB and National Park designation responsibilities on a purely reactive basis. We intend explore the practicalities and resource needs of undertaking a review of the extent the two landscape designations in England in order to help establish a) whether the number of established AONBs and National Parks is appropriate for 21st century needs and b) that a suitably diverse range of landscapes of natural beauty is under positive management to secure their conservation and enhancement. We are not intending this work to result in any proposals for revocations or to remove land from designation generally.

Marine Protected Areas

Natural England is working with Defra to establish a shared view of marine priorities to be delivered from 2012/13 to 2014/15, in a context of effective close collaboration with other ALBs. This process will also consider how these priorities should be resourced within anticipated baseline and any additional funding to be agreed. It will also seek to establish a shared understanding of risks and opportunities.

The outputs of these discussions will be used to inform future conversations within Natural England, and with Defra marine policy and sponsorship, to design and deliver viable and effective marine targets, priorities and resource allocation for the Corporate Plan 2012/13.

There are key milestones between now and December 2012 when Government has committed to substantially completing the marine protected area (MPA) network; from 2012 to 2016 when the entire UK MPA network must be in place with management measures that help deliver ecological coherence by conserving representative marine habitats; and through to 2020 when Good Environmental Status required by the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) must be achieved with a six year programme of measures in place.

Defra has set us specific delivery targets for completion of advice on MPAs over the next Corporate Plan period to March 2015, as follows:

- **MPA designation:**
 - Advice on MCZs with IA by mid July 2012;
 - Advice on Studland to Portland pSAC by end July 2012;
 - Advice on Flamborough Head and South Cornwall Coast SPAs by end 2014;
 - Advice on circa 9 other new SPAs by end 2015.

- **MPA conservation advice:**
 - Reg 35 advice for 6 inshore cSACs by April 2012;
 - Reg 35 advice for 2 inshore/offshore cSACs and 2 SPAs by July 2012;
 - Reg 35 advice for Studland to Portland by December 2012;
 - Review of Reg 33 advice on 45 existing EMS – 2 year project starting April 2013;
 - Conservation advice for first tranche of MCZs starting April 2013 based on site verification and other evidence available at designation.

- **MPA Monitoring**

- Site verification and baseline monitoring of MCZs phased over 6 year programme starting in 2013/14;
- MPA monitoring 6 year risk based cycle to enable Defra to report under S124 of the Marine Act and to EC under the Habitats and Birds Directives and MSFD.

Terrestrial Natura 2000 and Ramsar sites

Terrestrial SACs

The terrestrial SAC selection programme is largely complete and remaining actions are limited to two new SACs for Fisher's estuarine moth (*Gortyna borelii lunata*). *Once cSACs for this species have been submitted, the planned programme of designation of terrestrial SACs for both Annex I habitats and Annex II species is up to date.*

*Future changes to the Habitats Directive annexes or newly discovered/colonising features could result in a need for further site selection. Changes to include land restored or recreated through LIFE Nature funded projects or provided as compensation for adverse effects on the integrity of the Natura 2000 series are likely to generate an ongoing, but relatively low level, programme of amendments or new sites. There may need to be an initial pulse of activity to catch up on outstanding actions to designate a number of compensation sites, such as coastal managed realignments. One such example is the case for an extension to an existing SAC for marsh fritillary, (*Euphydryas aurinia*) at Breney Common and Goss and Tregoss Moors as a result of an EC 'LIFE' project to restore habitat for this species. This is being progressed and the proposals are due to be submitted to Defra this year. If approval is received then a consultation will be progressed during 2012/13.*

Terrestrial SPAs/Ramsar sites

The SPA network is periodically reviewed to examine its adequacy in view of the requirements of the Birds Directive. The first terrestrial SPA review was commenced in the mid-nineties and recommendations published in 2001.

The 2001 SPA Review revised our understanding of the UK terrestrial/coastal SPA network, both in terms of the number of sites selected and the species that qualify within these sites. The review presents site accounts that differ in most cases from the currently classified SPA citation. These accounts are effectively lists of potential qualifying species and as such, according to current Government policy, these species are fully protected in the SPA or pSPA. As a result of the review the legal documents for many classified SPAs in the UK network now require amending to incorporate changes to the qualifying species at the sites. The recommendations of the 2001 SPA Review have not yet been implemented due to the considerable resource requirements to progress this work.

A formal consultation exercise is required on 34 SPAs to update changes to the citations and qualifying features of the sites. A further 16 sites require changes which don't necessitate formal consultation but where notice of changes to owners and occupiers and interested parties is still needed.

A further review ('2010 SPA Review') of the terrestrial and coastal SPA network is currently underway. This is targeting parts of the current UK network to ensure UK obligations under Article 4 of the Birds Directive are met. This review will provide information to be used by Government Departments/Devolved Administrations and statutory nature conservation organisations to further support the development of the current UK terrestrial and coastal SPA network.

The outcome of this work is likely to result in significant amendments to the SPA series in England. This will include the addition of new qualifying species and/or modification of the boundaries of existing sites and also entirely new SPAs (which may in many cases also require coincident SSSI notification which will be addressed by the SSSI Notification Strategy). It is also likely to impact on the recommendations of the earlier 2001 SPA review.

The preliminary information required to begin to forward plan a programme of work will not be available until Q2 2012/13. The final peer reviewed Phase 1 report is, however, not likely to be finalised until December 2012 at the earliest.

Ramsar site designations are usually carried out in conjunction with SPAs (as a key criterion for designation of sites relates to those that support important populations of water birds). A review would be beneficial, however, to understand any gaps in provision for key (especially globally threatened) non avian features not covered by SAC provision. This is not a priority work area at present.

SSSIs

Efforts are focussed primarily on the SSSI Notification Strategy. National specialists in Landscape & Biodiversity and Marine will substantially complete reviews of coverage by habitat and species group during 2011/12 although the more complex reviews will continue for another two years. Land Management local delivery teams have rapidly assessed 4,000 existing SSSIs to identify any amendments required to features and boundaries. In 2012/13 to 2014/15 those sites identified as requiring changes during rapid assessment will be subject to more detailed review. National specialists will complete reviews of coverage for the more complex groups, such as vascular plants, lower plants, fungi and invertebrates.

It is likely that the SSSI notification programme will be relatively limited for next 2-3 years alongside the reviews - approx 12-20 cases per year. Thereafter, the expectation is that there will be c.50 cases per year with approx 10% being major notifications and the bulk being small sites or amendments.

General – Scope for denotifications/revocations

Natural England will consider denotification of all or parts of SSSIs that are not of special interest because:

- they never were (e.g. to correct errors);
- the national context has changed and reduced their relative importance (e.g. a qualifying threshold increases or a better example is found);
- the interest has been lost due to natural change (e.g. shift in a species distribution) or permitted development.

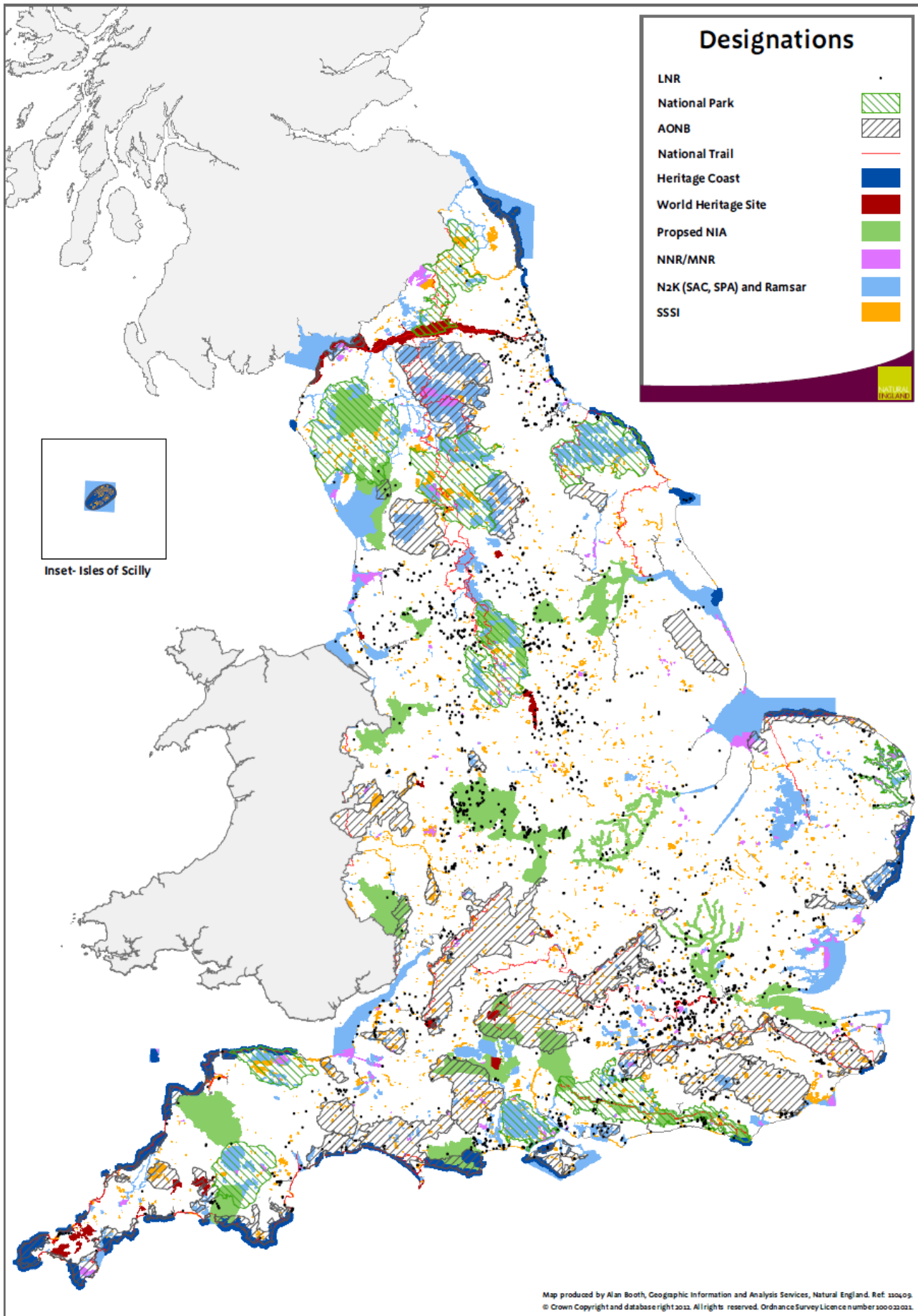
We will not de-notify in cases where:

- the interest is recoverable or restorable or likely to re-colonise
- Another interest feature is present
- The interests have been lost due to neglect or unconsented activities

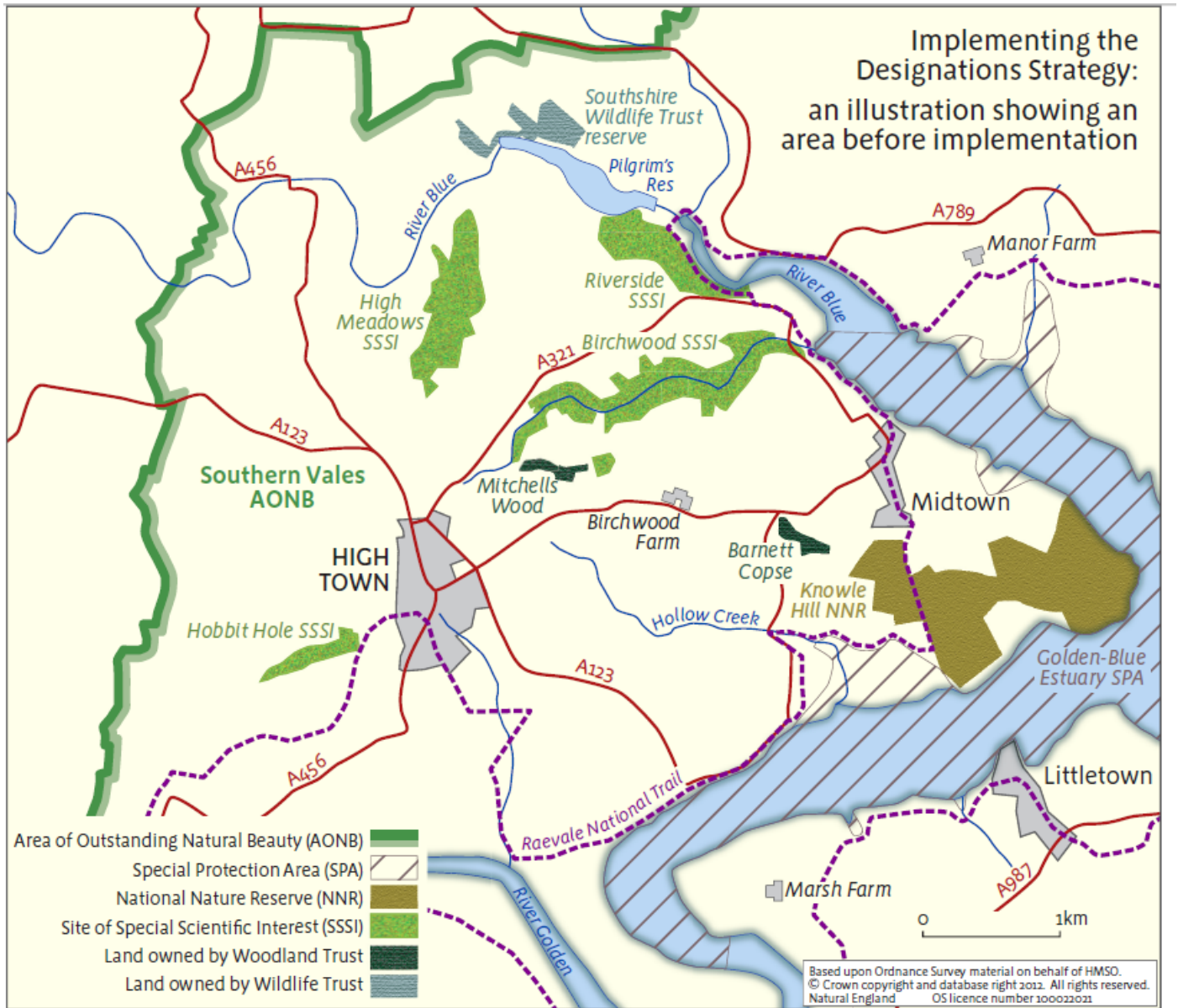
In the case of an AONB or National Park the circumstances surrounding a potential revocation or diminutive variation would have to be extraordinary. In the past we have revoked AONBs where they have been replaced by National Park designations but it is hard to conceive of a situation in which removal of protective designation wholly or in part would be warranted. It is not necessary for every parcel of land within an AONB or National Park to satisfy the designation criteria as a designation can wash over' (ie include) a tract of land even though that land does not itself meet the designation criteria. This is the case even close to the boundary of a designated area.

If part of the landscape of an AONB or National Park became so degraded that the designation criteria were no longer met our priority would be to address the circumstances that led to this situation and seek remedial solutions with the relevant AONB Partnership or National Park authority. We would also need to investigate possible breaches of the duty of regard to the purposes of designation placed on relevant authorities.

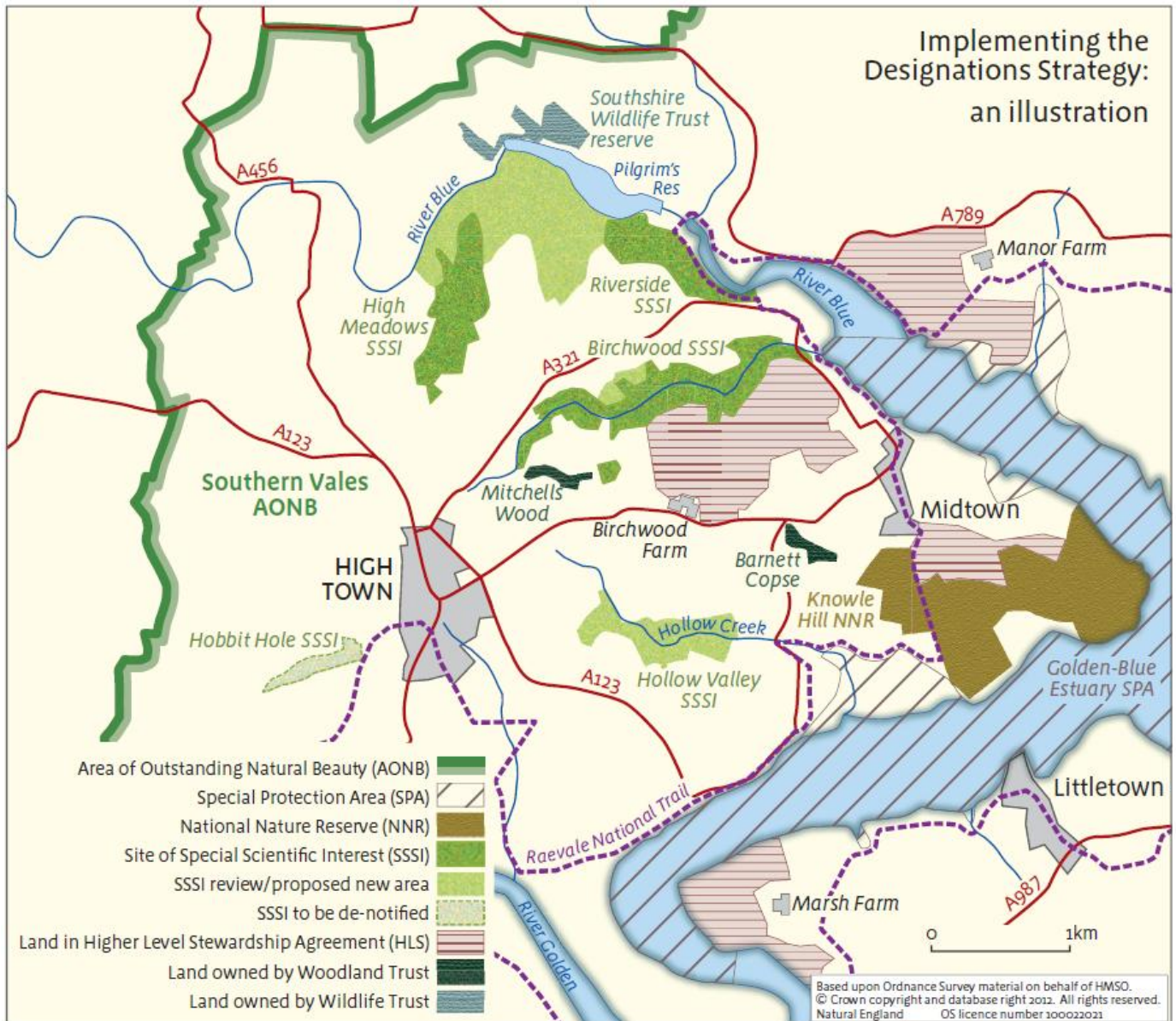
Map 1 Current Designations



Map 2 An illustration of how an area might look before Designations Strategy implementation

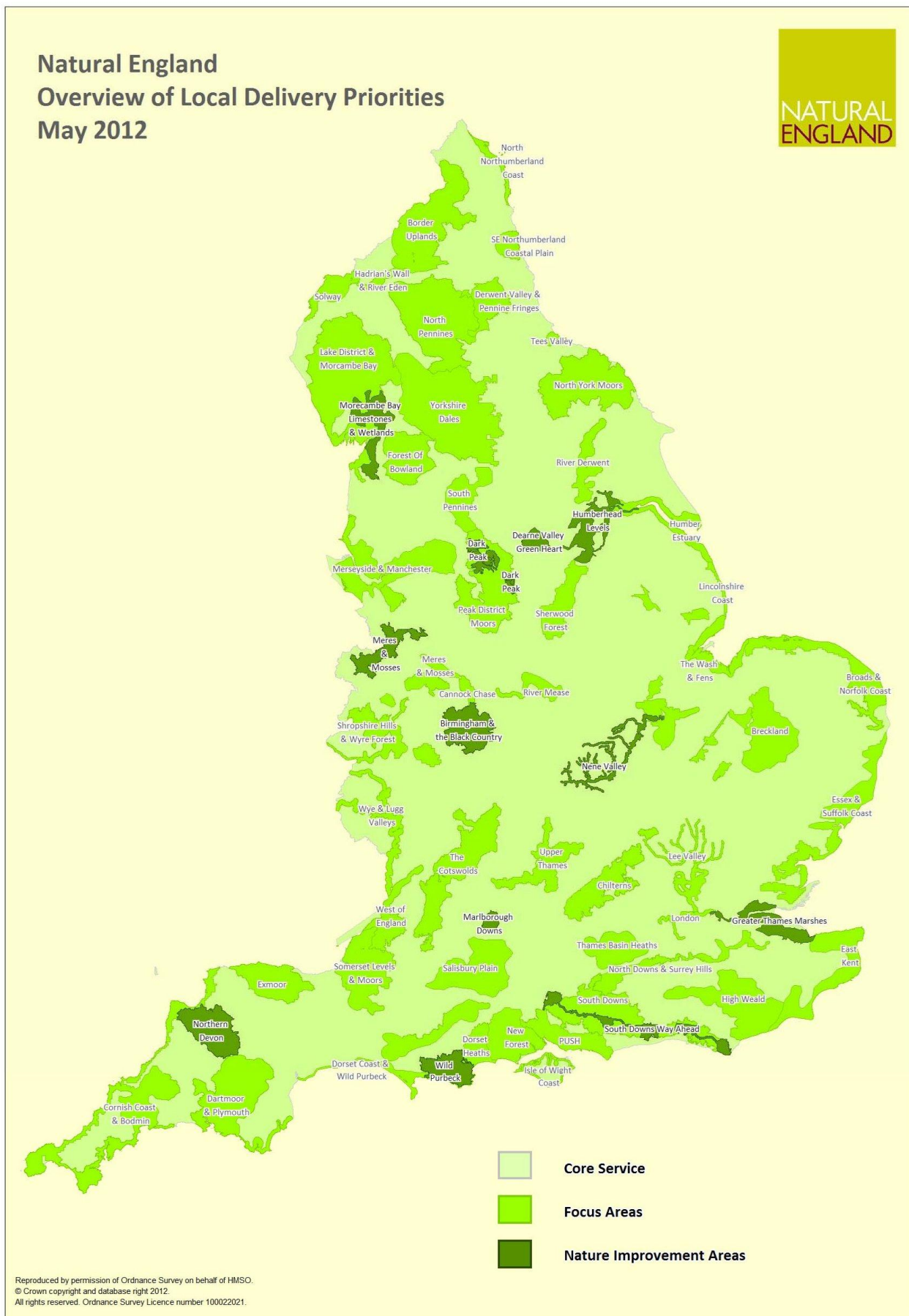


Map 3 An illustration of how an area might look once the Designations Strategy has been implemented



- SSSI enlargement / boundary review to make a few sites more sustainable.
- SSSI de-notification – site does not meet guidelines.
- NNR – demonstrating/promulgating best practice.
- Wildlife Trust reserve - part of the wider picture.
- Stewardship providing additional connections and buffering around and inside designations.
- The SPA has an additional feature added
- AONB – part of the overall matrix and working to improve ecological quality and connectivity through management planning.

Map 4 Natural England's spatial prioritisation - Focus Areas (see briefing note overleaf)



The past year or so has involved much change for Natural England. We have reduced our staff base significantly and restructured the organisation. We have had a new steer from Defra about how it wants us to work. At the same time, there have been significant developments in Government policy – such as the Natural Environment White Paper - which we are now putting into operation.

Natural England has a new Corporate Plan which reflects these changes. One of the key shifts we need to make is to prioritise our delivery more clearly, given our reduced resources. We will focus our efforts on high priority areas where we can achieve the biggest benefit for the natural environment. Whilst maintaining a core offer throughout the country, in certain areas, we will concentrate our staff and financial resources to maximise the benefits from public money. We have considered **where** we prioritise our effort as well as **what** we prioritise. The overall aim is to put more of our effort over time into priority areas over time. This re-consideration of priorities does not affect Higher Level Stewardship targeting, since the current programme has just 2 years to run and we have planned much of its delivery in line with previously agreed target areas and statements.

Our Local Delivery Offer

We have to rigorously prioritise to get the maximum public benefit from reduced resources. Many of our partners have been going through a similar process. Our Local Delivery Offer, described below, is the narrative we will use to explain this prioritisation process and what it means locally.

Our Local Delivery Offer is based on **three levels of prioritisation**: a substantial core service everywhere in England, together with two tiers of enhanced delivery which together cover about one-third of the country. It is intended as a five year view, though there will be some evolution of the approach. This is a broad steer to be interpreted locally and which we have now started to implement. Our Area Managers will lead discussions with local staff, and partners, to translate the national map and the principles of the approach into more detail for each focus area.

Key messages about our Local Delivery Offer

- **We will still deliver a significant amount everywhere.** Our substantial core offer (see text accompanying the map) emphasises our intention to continue protecting and enhancing the basic ecological structure and landscape character of the wider countryside. We estimate that more than 50% of Natural England's total resource goes into the core offer areas, though the other tiers have more resource per hectare.
- The enhanced tiers indicate a higher level of focus and investment by Natural England. The focus areas are typically where we are targeting more than one delivery programme. So these areas are the key opportunities for Natural England to **integrate its delivery** to achieve better outcomes.
- The focus areas are the best picture we have about where we need to concentrate effort in order to achieve our biodiversity, landscape, access, engagement and other land management objectives. **They show where we currently focus more effort.**
- The focus areas are also the best overview we have of future priorities, but this is not yet a perfect picture. For example, we are still working out the implications of the new Biodiversity 2020 targets and the Monitoring Engagement with the Natural Environment (MENE) evidence. So we expect this map to evolve.
- This map is a picture of where Natural England believes it needs to focus its effort. It is not intended as a map which represents the views or priorities of all the organisations which contribute to natural environment outcomes. However, we have taken account of other Defra partners' delivery programmes and also those of some other key partners. **We want to have more discussions with partners and stakeholders to hear whether our local delivery offer makes sense in the context of what we are all jointly trying to achieve.**

- The map is a broad guide as to where we anticipate focusing more effort in future; but it should not be interpreted too precisely. We can adjust boundaries locally as makes sense to our delivery programmes or customers.
- The focus areas capture the majority of our geographically targeted work and especially where different programmes overlap, but each programme will continue to target some of its delivery elsewhere.
- **We want to focus proportionately more of our resource in focus areas and Nature Improvement Areas (NIAs) over time**, to maximise the benefits of our limited resource, and make a big difference in certain places, rather than not enough difference everywhere.
- This is a strong steer, but not a moratorium on projects that are outside focus areas. Small scale investment outside the focus areas, which act as a catalyst or lever for others' investment, may be legitimate.
- We have limited this approach to our terrestrial delivery at the moment. However, we have included many coastal stretches and have taken particular account of where the coast abuts a potential marine designation, to encourage integration with our **marine work** and to take account of the links with offshore processes such as sediment flow. While the current priority for marine work is the site designation process, we would aspire to develop marine spatial priorities over time.



Natural England is here to secure a healthy natural environment for people to enjoy, where wildlife is protected and England's traditional landscapes are safeguarded for future generations.

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