

## Information Sheet 2E: Designated sites and their meanings

### Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)

SSSIs are notified by English Nature because their plants, animals or geological features are considered to be of at least national importance. It is a statutory designation with legal implications and English Nature (soon to become Natural England) must be consulted before any operations likely to damage the special interest are undertaken.

SSSIs represent the UK's very best wildlife and geological sites. There are over 4,000 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) in England alone, covering around 7% of the country's land area. Over half of these sites, by area, are internationally important for their wildlife, and designated as Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), Special Protection Areas (SPAs) or Ramsar sites. Some SSSIs are also National Nature Reserves (NNRs) or Local Nature Reserves (LNRs).

### National Nature Reserve

National Nature Reserves (NNRs) were established to protect the most important areas of wildlife habitat and geological formations in Britain and as places for scientific research. Every NNR is "nationally important" and they include some of the best examples of particular habitats of geological features. There are around 215 NNRs in England covering over 87,900 hectares. They are either owned and managed by English Nature or held by approved bodies such as Wildlife Trusts.

### Special Areas of Conservation (SAC)

Special Areas of Conservation – or SACs - are notified by English Nature because they contain species and/or habitats of European importance (as listed in the Habitats and Species Directive 1994). They form part of a network of conservation sites set up throughout the European community known as the Natura 2000 series. On land, almost all candidate SACs are, or will be notified as SSSIs. SAC is also a statutory designation with legal implications and English Nature must be consulted before any operations likely to damage the special interest are undertaken.

### County Wildlife Sites (CWS) and County Geological Sites (CGS – also known as RIGS)

CWSs are sites of county importance for wildlife, designated on the basis of the habitat or species present. Although not a statutory designation in the sense of SSSIs, CWSs do have a status in planning decisions and must be included in Local Plans as sites of regional or local biodiversity interest, as described in *Planning Policy Statement No.9* (see below). CWS recognition does not demand any particular actions on the part of the Landowner and does not give the public rights of access, but it may increase eligibility for land management grants and designation is a material consideration in town and country planning decision making. RIGS – Regionally Important Geological Sites – known in Devon as

'County Geological Sites' are the geological equivalent of County Wildlife Sites, and are protected in exactly the same way.

A crucial document in this process is '*Planning Policy Statement 9: Biodiversity and Geological Conservation*' and was published by Defra in August 2005. Planning Policy Statements (PPS) set out the Government's national policies on different aspects of planning in England. PPS9 sets out planning policies for the protection of biodiversity and geological conservation through the planning system. This PPS replaces the earlier Planning Policy Guidance Note 9 (PPG9) on Nature Conservation published in 1994. The new guidance specifically mentions locally selected sites such as CWS and RIGS.

## **Ancient Woodland**

This is a term applied to woodlands which have existed from at least Medieval times to the present day without ever having been cleared for uses other than wood or timber production. A convenient date used to separate ancient and secondary woodland is the year 1600. In special circumstances semi-natural woods of post-1600 but pre-1900 origin are also included. The Devon Ancient Woodland Inventory was prepared in 1986 by the Nature Conservancy Council. Although not a designation in the same sense as an SSSI or a CWS, inclusion in the inventory does mean that town and country planning and other countryside management systems can take account of the status and take steps to avoid damaging such woodlands.

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