

Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation – Current issues and Opportunities

Background

Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs) are considered to be the most important sites for biodiversity outside of legally protected sites. They are important nationally as they represent some of the best biodiversity sites across Wales; priority habitats which we not only need to protect, but also need to manage and enhance. Local CCW officers recognise that some of these sites are of SSSI quality and that they form a cohesive network between other sites. They are also important locally as they reflect a local distinctiveness that communities can more readily engage with through the LBAP process. SINCs are identified by the Local Authority / National Park Authority as a planning tool, and are afforded some protection through Local Development Plan policies but they are not legally protected. A SINC may be considered to be a 'Wildlife Site' when the landowner is informed, and the land is actively managed for its wildlife features.

The Environment Strategy for Wales Target 21 aims to ensure that 'Sites of international, Welsh and **local** importance are in favourable condition to support the species and habitats for which they have been identified' by 2026. In order for this target to be delivered, with respect to local sites, a more joined up and formally endorsed approach would be welcomed.

The importance of a network of SINCs has been clearly recognised in England by Making Space for Nature (Lawton, 2010). In Wales, a similar emphasis could seek to deliver management and enhancement of SINCs throughout the Country through a Wildlife Sites System, which would also be pivotal to the delivery of an ecosystem service approach, ecological connectivity and green infrastructure. As such, it is suggested that the SINC system in Wales could be fundamental to the delivery of the Natural Environment Framework. A Wildlife Sites system would recognise the important role landowner buy in and support has to play in ensuring these sites are conserved through sensitive management – absence / insensitive management of grassland habitats in particular is considered to be equally significant a threat as actual development of the sites.

However, it is important that the gaps in the data are fully recognised – Local Authority and National Park Authority staff are continuously identifying, surveying and designating SINCs. As such, the designation of SINC sites across Wales may never be completed, and therefore SINC data can only be snapshot of the sites which have been identified and/or designated so far. If SINC data is to be used, it must be under the proviso that it is updated regularly, and with an understanding that a lack of SINC designation does not mean a 'green light'.

The sensitivity of using the data is also a concern. In many cases, landowners do not welcome the designation of their land as SINC and in some cases this can lead to sites being intentionally damaged.

Information about SINC across Wales has now been collated which, for the first time, enables us to gain an idea of the bigger picture. Some interesting statistics and facts arose from this exercise:

- The total area of SINC in Wales is 70,357 Ha +
- The total number of SINC in Wales is 5,337 +
- Total percentage of Wales which is SINC: 3.4 %
- In South Wales, most LA's use the 'Guidelines for selection of Wildlife Sites in South Wales, with the exception of some LA's in the valleys region who have modified the South Wales guidelines to create a 'Mid-valleys SINC Criteria';
- Not all Planning Authorities in Wales have begun the process of identifying SINC.

In addition, the Gwent and Glamorgan regional biodiversity forums formed a dedicated subgroup, with a meeting taking place on the 18th May 2011 to discuss the current issues and opportunities.

Current issues

There are a number of ongoing issues which need to be addressed, including:

- SINC not being integrated into projects such as Glastir Woodland Creation mapping;
- SINC not being used in CCW green infrastructure opportunity mapping and Ecosystem Groups priority mapping;
- Lack of funding to identify, survey and manage SINC sites;
- Cost of undertaking land registry searches to identify landowners;
- Constraints and sensitivity of using SINC data;
- Lack of joined up thinking about SINC in the wider context;
- Lack of protection afforded to SINC, including through the planning system.

Case Study – Monmouthshire Local Wildlife Sites Project

In Monmouthshire, 300 grassland Local Wildlife Sites have been designated in a joint project¹ between Monmouthshire County Council and Gwent Wildlife Trust (GWT). The project aimed to comprehensively identify grasslands of Local Wildlife Site (LWS) quality in Monmouthshire and enable their recognition and protection through the Local Wildlife Site system.

Permission was sought prior to survey from all 300 landowners and the project worked closely with the landowners to ensure they were provided with a high quality source of advice, encouraging pride in this rich biodiversity resource and providing support for positive management of their grasslands. Each landowner was provided with an information card produced specifically for their site. The information cards included a map showing the extent of the Local Wildlife Site, details of the habitats / species present, and management

¹ Gwent Grasslands Initiative Project (2005-2008)

suggestions. The landowners are requested to include the information card in the estate agents pack in the event that the site is sold. GWT have run annual landowner days with up to 60 landowners attending. These provide an opportunity to learn more about local wildlife and how to encourage it through sensitive management, as well as a forum for discussion. The project also delivered a newsletter 'Meadow Matters' for Local Wildlife Site owners. Via Monmouthshire County Council there was also access to a small biodiversity grant scheme for Local Wildlife Site owners (Local Agenda 21). It was considered advantageous that many landowners with Wildlife Sites in Monmouthshire were not necessarily farmers, but rather own small areas of land, outside of commercial agricultural production. Many of those landowners appeared to be pleased to find that their land was of high value for wildlife, and were happy to manage the site appropriately. The main challenges for these small sites are accessing grant schemes and securing contractors willing to cut/graze these often small sites at the appropriate time of year. Other threats experienced in MCC are agricultural improvement and increasingly, small woodland grants both of which can cause an almost overnight loss that is difficult to rectify.

Proposals

It is proposed that WBPSG discuss the following opportunities with a view to endorsing some/all of the proposed decision points:

- The coordination and use of an all-Wales GIS layer of SINC's, considering the various constraints and sensitivity issues;
- The integration of SINC's into: national policy and decision making; current and forthcoming schemes such as Glastir, Living landscapes, Futurescapes etc; national opportunity mapping, and the delivery of green infrastructure and ecosystem service approach (e.g. NEF);
- Development of regional or a Wales-wide leaflet on SINC's or Wildlife Sites;
- Developing a national Wildlife Sites System for Wales.

Decision Points

To propose that action be taken towards delivery of the Wales Biodiversity Framework 'Priority for Action / Next Step' to: *Support and promote the development of a strategy to deliver Target 21 of Environment Strategy with respect to Local Sites, including SINC's, Wildlife Sites, and LNRs across Wales.'*

To recognise SINC's as being fundamental to delivering ecosystem service approach and habitat connectivity across Wales.

To propose that the issues raised in this paper are outlined to the new Minister for Environment and Sustainable Development, John Griffiths AM.

To propose that the issues raised within this paper are added to the next Wales Biodiversity Policy Group meeting agenda, with the aim of discussing the lack of protection and recognition afforded to SINC's at present.

To propose that the issues raised by this paper are presented to the next NEF Workstream and / or WBP Programme board.