

Target 2010 – South East

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



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



Chalkhill blues, Devil's Dyke SSSI, West Sussex. Pete Stroh/Natural Treasures

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

This publication is one of nine regional documents produced as sister publications to the national report *Target 2010 – the condition of England's Sites of Special Scientific Interest in 2005* (English Nature, 2006). It reviews the current situation in the South East and details the progress that has been made towards the 2010 target since September 2003. It summarises the major factors affecting SSSI condition and some of the actions that need to be carried out over the next five years if the target is to be achieved in the region. The report should be read in conjunction with the Target 2010 report mentioned above, which sets the national context and also contains useful definitions of the Government's PSA for SSSIs, and what is meant by target condition.

The South East picture

The South East region includes the counties of Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, East Sussex, West Sussex, Surrey, Hampshire, the Isle of Wight and Kent, and has a very diverse natural environment that reflects its underlying geology. The coastline boasts extensive areas of shingle, sandy beaches, grazing marsh, cliffs and estuaries, whilst inland there are large areas of heath, woodland and downland – the latter intersected by some of the finest chalk streams in the UK. This landscape has been heavily influenced by farming and local industry, and in recent centuries, has become extensively urbanised.

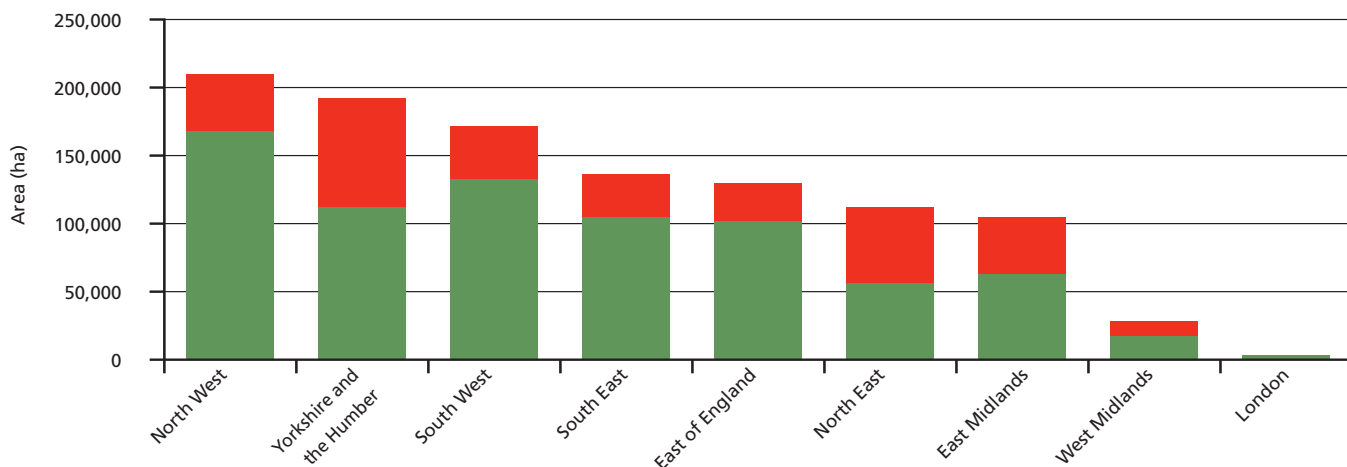
Figure 1 Distribution and condition of SSSI units in the South East

There are 696 SSSIs in the South East covering nearly 134,000 hectares - roughly 12 per cent of all SSSI land in England. The New Forest and the large areas of coastal SSSIs, make up a significant proportion of this total. Of the nine English regions, the

South East contains the fourth largest area of SSSI land (Figure 2). Only the North West and East of England regions have a higher proportion of SSSI land in target condition than the South East, which currently has 77.7 per cent of its SSSI land meeting the target.



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



Progress towards the 2010 target

In the past two years, excellent progress has been made towards the 2010 PSA target in the South East. Back in September 2003, 65.6 per cent of SSSI land in the region was in target condition - a figure that, as of 31 December 2005, has risen to 77.7 per cent (Figure 3). This places the South East ahead of the national position where 69.8 per cent of SSSI land is in target condition. In terms of area, over 17,000 hectares of SSSI have been brought into target condition in the region during this period. This excellent achievement reflects the hard work of landowners, managers and organisations able to fund and deliver the necessary work, and it often involves many years of careful land stewardship and management. However, with more than 29,000 hectares of SSSI land not achieving target condition, there is clearly still a great deal of effort required over the next five years in order to achieve the PSA target by 2010.

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

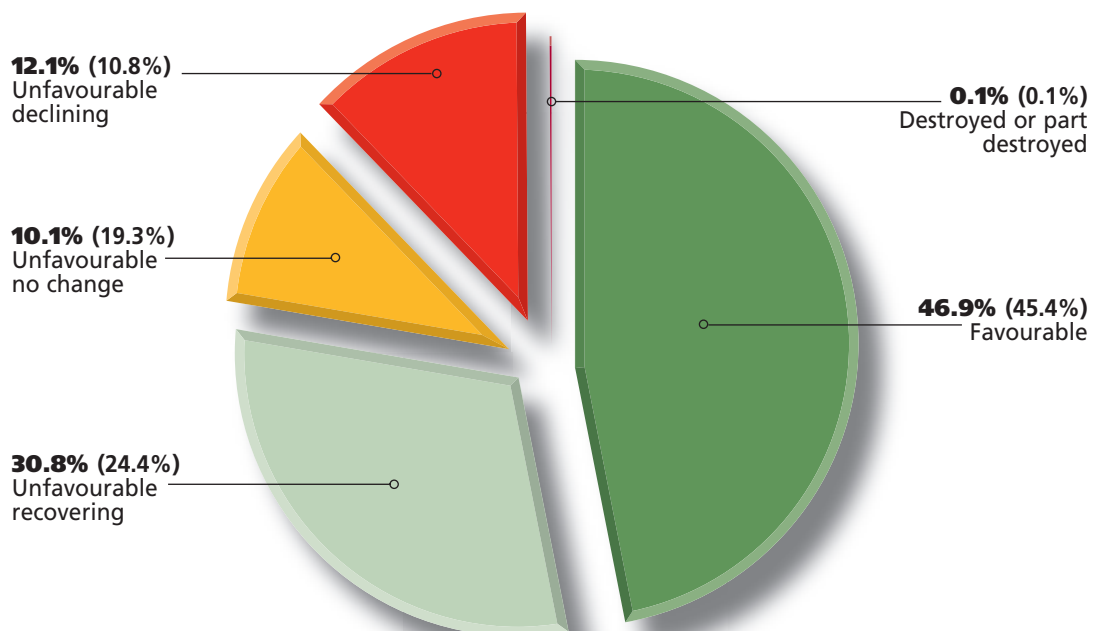
	In target condition		Not in target condition	
	%	Area (ha)	%	Area (ha)
September 2003	65.6	86,691	34.4	45,465
December 2005	77.7	103,974	22.3	29,794

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

2010 report) are shown in Figure 4, which also compares the current regional and national positions. For the purposes of this report, however, we group the categories into two – SSSI land in target condition (made up of SSSIs in

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

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

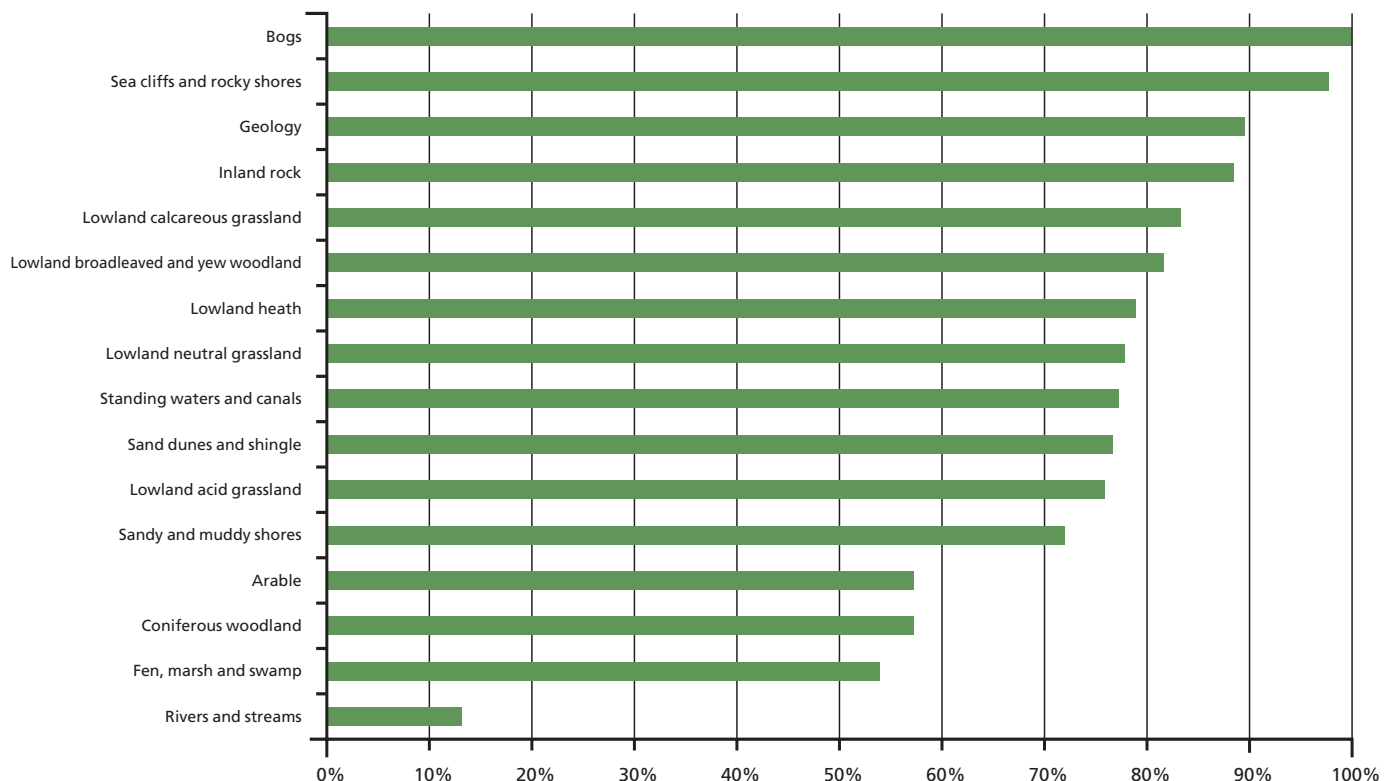




Condition of SSSI habitats in the South East

Nationally, SSSIs are broadly divided into 21 habitat types, 16 of which are found in the South East region. These range from the bogs and acid grasslands of the New Forest, chalk downland of the South Downs, through chalk streams and ancient woodland to geological sites and the specialised habitats of the coast. Figure 5 lists all of the main SSSI habitats found in the region and shows their condition at the end of 2005.

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

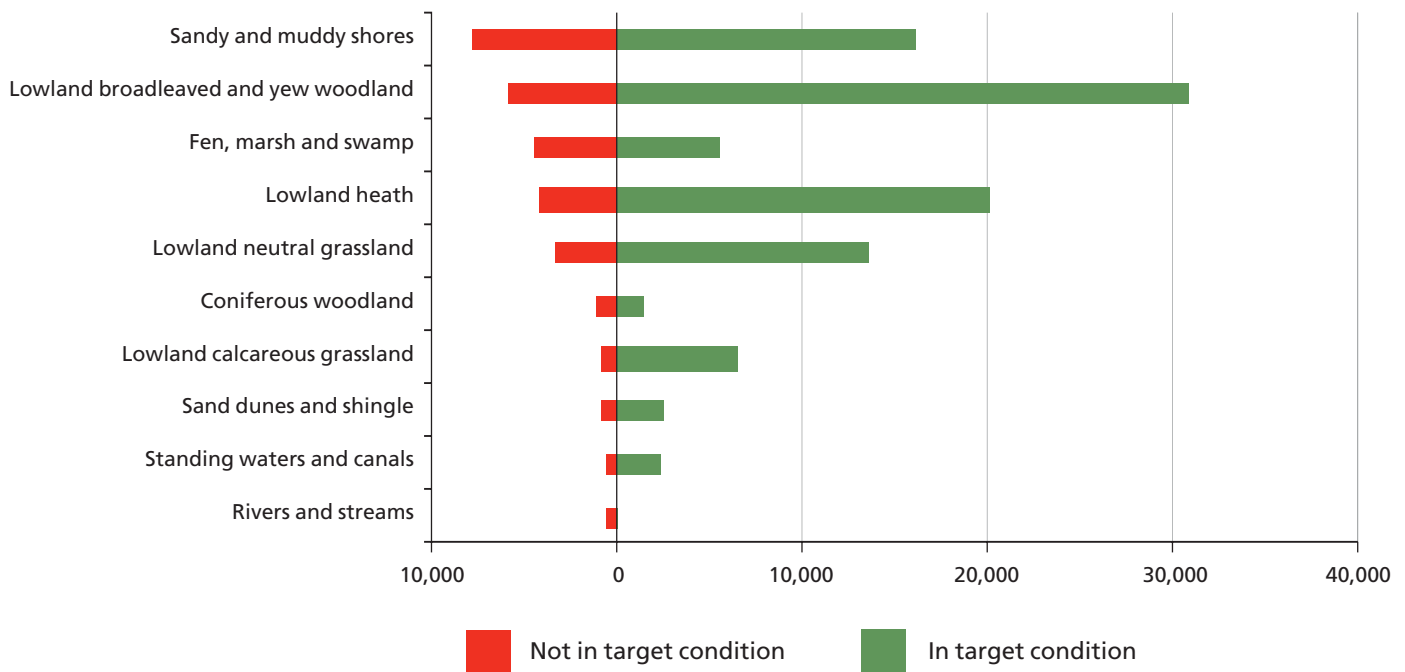


By percentage of area, the habitat type in the worst condition is rivers and streams, as is the case nationally. Although not a major contributor to the overall area of SSSI in the South East, the condition of this habitat is still cause for serious concern, as in some cases it can affect the condition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

By 2010 we want to see all habitats in the region in good condition, including rivers and streams. However, as Figure 6 illustrates, the area of each SSSI habitat varies widely, and inevitably a sharper focus is brought to those habitats where the largest areas of land can be brought into target condition.

In the South East this means prioritising efforts on the coast, the New Forest and other habitats that can make the greatest contribution to the 2010 target. Of the 29,794 hectares of SSSI land still not in target condition in the South East, over 25,000 hectares can be accounted for by five habitats.

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

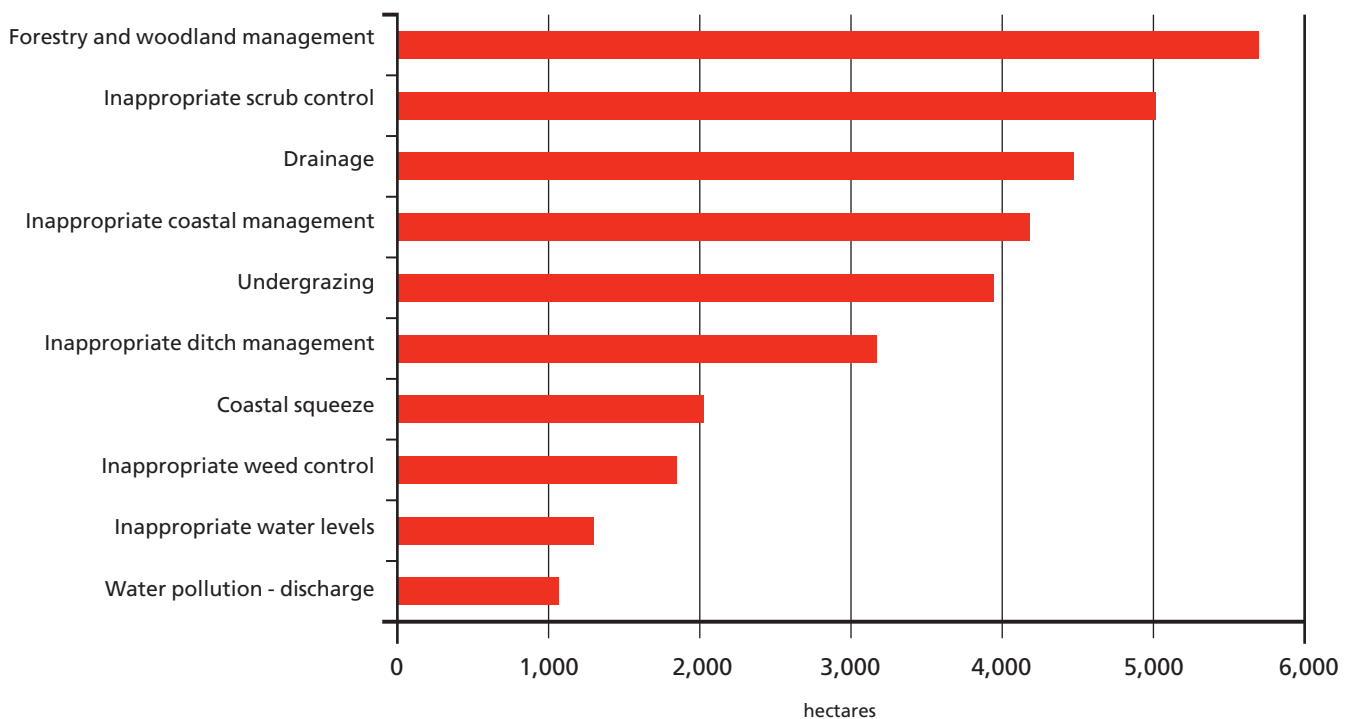


Large-leaved lime stool, Mole Gap to Reigate Escarpment SSSI, Surrey. Peter Wakely/English Nature 11,097

Why some habitats in the South East are not in target condition

The main reasons why some SSSIs are not in target condition are well understood, as are the type of habitats on which they impact, although the solutions are often complex. Nationally English Nature has identified 42 different causes, a comprehensive description of which is provided in an earlier publication (England's best wildlife and geological sites – English Nature, 2003). Figure 7 shows the main causes for the South East by area.

Figure 7 Why SSSIs in the South East are not in target condition



In many cases, a single SSSI will be affected by a range of factors that prevent it from being in target condition. In such situations, each cause must be tackled and resolved or else the site will not meet target condition.

Forestry and woodland management – 5,700 hectares

Many of our best woodland SSSIs are the result of centuries of traditional management, such as coppicing. Over the last century however, demand for woodland products including charcoal and hurdles has virtually disappeared,

and as a consequence, traditional management is not being carried out. In some cases neglected, woodlands have lost or are losing the species that people most associate with English woodland, such as dormice and fritillary butterflies. Deer populations have increased enormously over the past 50 years, causing problems for many woodland SSSIs by hindering natural regeneration.

Scrub control – 5,016 hectares

Grazing of many heathland and grassland sites has long been uneconomic, resulting in scrub

and tree invasion. Planting of pine on heathland sites has exacerbated the problem. Restoration and control is costly and the subsequent maintenance of sites is increasingly difficult in the absence of livestock. The public perception of the nature of the land around them, particularly in the more urbanised areas, can also be a major problem. Wooded areas are popular and there is an understandable resistance to changes in the local landscape which would be brought about by the removal of invasive trees and scrub and the fencing and grazing of land.



Lewes Downs SSSI, East Sussex. Peter Wakely/English Nature 12,465

Drainage – 4,473- hectares

Drainage of lowland areas to maximise farm production has had a harmful effect on a number of wetland SSSI habitats, causing direct loss of wetland features. The intensive agriculture that follows drainage can also lead to damaging nutrient enrichment for a range of habitats, including grazing marsh, fens, bogs, and reedbeds.

Coastal management – 4,181 hectares

Coastal management can include engineering works aimed at slowing down coastal erosion or preventing flooding. Such intervention can have a long-term damaging effect on the natural processes such as cliff erosion or shaping and

establishment of new beach features which are required to keep SSSIs in favourable condition.

Undergrazing – 3,946 hectares

Over the last few decades, wide-scale changes in agricultural management have had a damaging effect on many important lowland habitats. This has been partially driven by changes in farm economics, but the urbanisation of the South East and changes in the structure of land ownership are also a major influence. Semi-natural grasslands, previously grazed by cattle and sheep, have become neglected and some have become isolated in a predominantly arable landscape. This has led to a rapid deterioration of flower-rich grassland and heathland SSSI, as

scrub and coarse grasses have taken over. The decline in cattle numbers in parts of the region is particularly acute. The introduction of the single farm payment in 2005 and move away from production related support payments for farmers is likely to exacerbate this problem.

Coastal squeeze – 2,026 hectares

A natural coastal ecosystem would allow habitats such as saltmarsh and mudflats to ‘migrate’ inland in response to long term rises in sea level. Immovable sea defences and rising sea levels trap these fragile habitats causing ‘coastal squeeze’, which is a particular problem for the coastal habitats of the South East in the face of long-term climate change.

The county picture

Just as there are obvious differences in the issues and problems facing the South East compared to the other English regions, there are differences within the region. For each county in the region, the condition of SSSIs and main reasons for not meeting target condition can be summarised as follows:

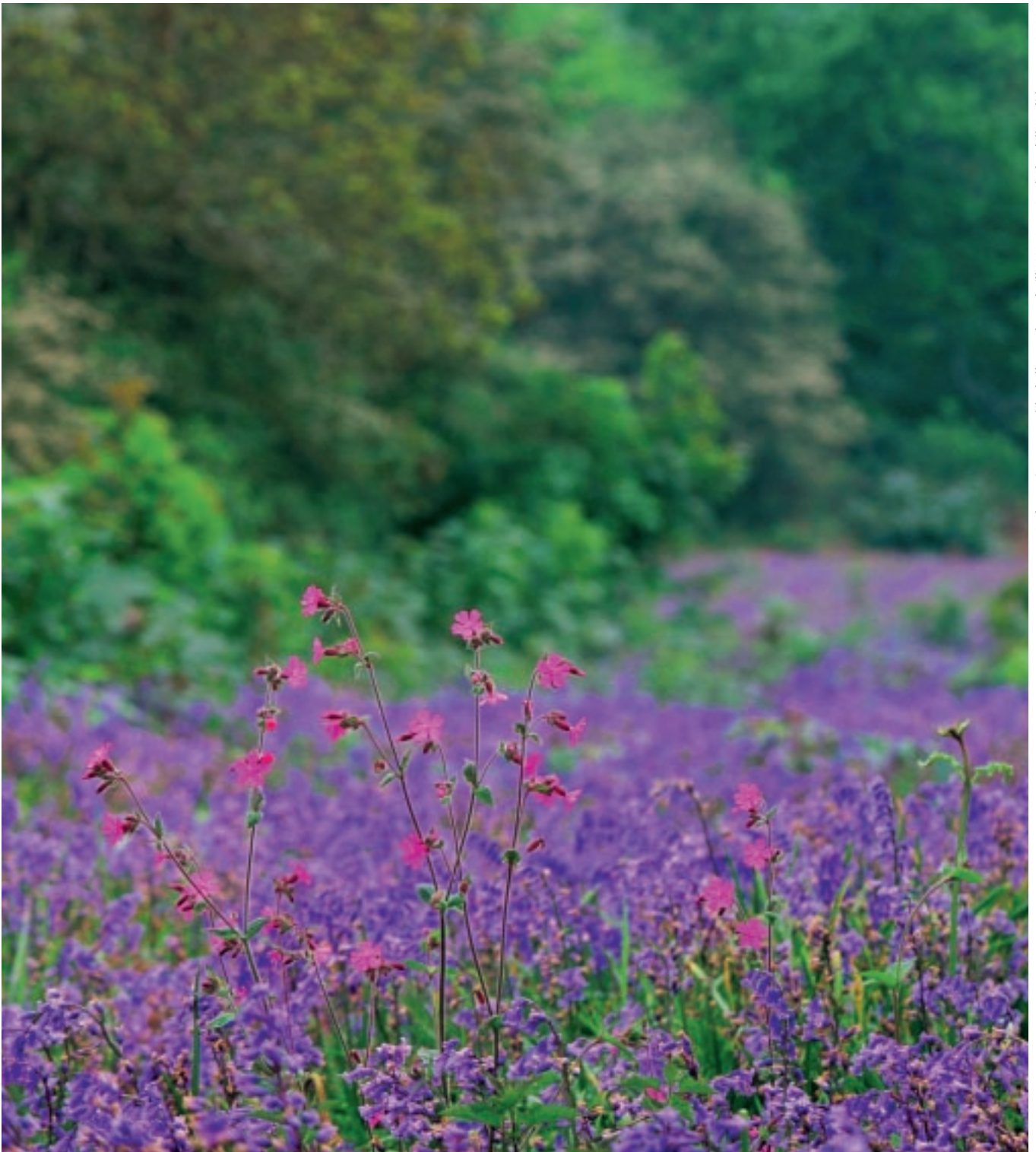
- **Berkshire (94.7% in target condition)**
High deer populations are a problem in the extensively wooded landscape in the west of the county. The increasing disturbance of sites with important bird populations is an issue in the increasingly urbanised east.
- **Buckinghamshire (86.7% in target condition)**
Again, deer are a major issue and, in the Chilterns beech woods, grey squirrels also have a major impact. The lack of sheep and cattle grazing is an issue for many of the small and scattered flower meadow SSSIs in the county. To the north, increasing urbanisation around Milton Keynes and gravel extraction along the Ouse Valley continue to alter the landscape.
- **East Sussex and West Sussex (76.2%– and 87.9% respectively in target condition)**
Development pressure is a major and growing issue in Sussex. For chalk grassland SSSIs, undergrazing and scrub management are key issues. On heathlands, undergrazing is also the main concern. Local initiatives and Environmental Stewardship schemes are helping to tackle these problems. The loss of traditional management is affecting the condition of woodland SSSIs in the Weald, and for freshwater wetland habitats, water resource management, water quality and spread of non-native species are key factors. On the coast, coastal squeeze is the greatest challenge, as it is for large areas of coast throughout the region.
- **Hampshire (74% in target condition)**
Great progress has been made in Hampshire, but the biggest challenges remain heathland and wetland restoration. In the New Forest efforts are focused on addressing past wetland drainage which has damaged internationally important mires. The extensive grazing system, managed by the New Forest commoners, and the Forestry Commission's burning and cutting programmes are also crucial in achieving target condition on many habitats. Elsewhere in the county, extensive scrub clearance programmes and innovative grazing regimes are achieving excellent results on MoD owned heathland SSSIs. Other issues include water quality in chalk rivers, undergrazing and scrub control on grassland sites, and coastal squeeze.
- **Isle of Wight (94.4% in target condition)**
SSSIs on the Isle of Wight are largely meeting the 2010 target. However, more work is needed to maintain those in target condition and tackle those still not meeting the target. Effort is focused principally on chalk grassland, woodland and wetland restoration and the management of coastal grazing marsh.
- **Kent (76.8% in target condition)**
Almost three quarters of Kent's SSSIs are coastal, and these are where the largest areas of SSSI are not in target condition. In some places, poor water quality is causing algae to grow on mudflats, which damages feeding areas for wintering waders. Coastal squeeze is also a growing problem. Formerly extensive areas of grazing marsh have been fragmented by arable farming, resulting in changes to water levels and water quality. The internationally significant shingle beach at Dungeness is damaged each year by the movement of shingle for coastal-defence. Inland, undergrazing is affecting the condition of chalk and neutral grassland SSSIs.

● **Oxfordshire**
(84.5% in target condition)
The condition of meadows is a cause for concern in Oxfordshire. Herb-rich meadows in the extensive clay vale are sparse and scattered. Around Oxford some of the meadows are large and more numerous but haymaking, with the necessary aftermath grazing, is becoming difficult to sustain. Wetlands are a very important feature in parts of Oxfordshire, where there is a nationally important series of fens and the more recent

creation of a vast series of gravel pits along parts of the Thames Valley. The fens in particular are suffering from a lack of management and diffuse pollution of various sorts. They are in a reasonable state only because of direct intervention by conservation bodies. Deer are a major issue throughout Oxfordshire.

● **Surrey**
(73.4% in target condition)
On heathland and chalk grassland sites, key issues are scrub management and lack of

grazing, which Environmental Stewardship and local grazing projects are helping to address. On some heathlands, a history of military use has complicated the task of achieving target condition. English Nature is working closely with the MoD to try to tackle these difficult issues. Development pressure is an increasing problem. The key issue for woodland sites is lack of management and for the county's river valleys it is water quality and inappropriate grazing of floodplain grasslands.



Red campion among bluebells, Northward Hill SSSI, Kent. Paul Glendell/English Nature 24,384

The road to 2010

At the end of 2005, we know that 77.7 per cent of the South East's SSSIs are in target condition. We also have a good understanding of the reasons why the remaining 22.3 per cent are not. Over the next five years the challenge is to ensure that this remaining area meets the 2010 target, and at the same time, take care that SSSIs already in target condition stay that way. To achieve this we need to be absolutely clear about what needs to be done, and by whom.

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

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

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

Figure 8 Remedies for bringing SSSIs into target condition in the South East - the top five (by area)

Remedy	Organisations that can help deliver the remedy	SSSI habitats that will benefit most from the remedy	Area of SSSI that would benefit from the remedy (ha)
Direct management	Forestry Commission	Lowland broadleaved and yew woodland	9,619
Flood Risk Management works	Environment Agency	Sandy and muddy shores	6,266
New Environmental Stewardship - Higher Level Schemes	Defra Rural Development Service	Lowland heath	4,669
Review of discharge/pollution, prevention and control consents	Environment Agency	Sandy and muddy shores	4,025
New Woodland Grant Schemes	Forestry Commission	Lowland broadleaved and yew woodland Lowland heath	3,361

Remedies in action

The MoD, Forest Enterprise and the Crown Estate have demonstrated the successful application of a remedy on Broadmoor to Bagshot Woods and Heath SSSI - a site covering 1,715 ha. Together, the three organisations control the management over most of the SSSI. Plans have been drawn up with each party, and agreement reached on felling cycles within the coniferous woodland to maintain sufficient habitat for the breeding birds for which much of the site has been notified. Over the past three years, considerable heathland restoration has been undertaken. This has been achieved not only through English Nature working with the individual partners, but also through co-operation between the owners themselves. The work has resulted in much of the site moving from unfavourable into recovering condition.



Seaford to Beachy Head SSSI, East Sussex. Peter Wakely/English Nature 14,183

Working together

The example above demonstrates the potential of landowners and public bodies working in a committed and co-ordinated way to restore and manage important sites. This is happening throughout the region, sometimes with quick fixes and sometimes on projects that may take a long time before they start to deliver target condition. Development of strategic approaches is vital, for example, to deal with coast and estuary management. Great credit is due to all who have been working in this way over the last two years, and making significant progress towards the 2010 target. It is clear that the biggest challenge ahead is to ensure that there is a continuing partnership approach, with truly co-ordinated action and adequate resourcing by key stakeholders.

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

the major landowners in the region at the end of 2005.

This table shows the areas of land owned by each body. It does not necessarily reflect who is responsible for a SSSI not being in target condition. In many cases, there will be one or more reasons why the named landowner is not in a position to do anything about

an SSSI not meeting the target condition. At the time of going to press, English Nature is working to reach final agreement with our partners to identify, in such situations, which organisation is responsible for taking action. In the near future we will be able to show the area of SSSI holding for which the individual landholder has agreed responsibility.

Figure 9 Major landowners and the condition of their SSSIs in the South East

Organisation	Total area (ha)	Area of SSSI in target condition (ha)	Area of SSSI in target condition (%)
Forest Enterprise	29,405	19,370	66%
Crown Estate (Marine)	12,326	9,136	74%
National Trust	8,570	7,925	92%
MoD	8,375	5,145	61%
Wildlife Trusts	6,859	4,982	73%
RSPB	3,566	2,759	77%
English Nature	3,117	3,031	97%
Local Authorities	3,088	2,535	82%
Crown Estate (Rural)	3,044	3,005	99%
Water Companies	2,043	1,686	83%
Ports and Harbours Authorities	1,965	1,871	95%
Environment Agency	1,025	935	91%

Why the PSA target is so important

The protection of SSSIs has long been considered essential to the conservation of England's wildlife habitats and natural features, but there is an increasing awareness of the wider value of these special sites. First, by protecting particular habitats, many species, rare or otherwise, are conserved. Secondly, SSSIs perform many important 'ecosystem services' such as upland moorlands that provide our water, saltmarshes that protect our coasts from rising seas, and natural floodplains that buffer towns from flash flooding. Thirdly, SSSIs create social wealth and enhanced quality of life by offering people the comfort, often tangible, of knowing that these precious areas are protected for future generations. Last but not least, a vibrant countryside contributes to economic wealth and provides opportunities for local and regional eco-tourism.

Achieving the PSA target will ensure that these benefits can be secured for future generations. English Nature firmly believes the target is both realistic and achievable. However, this will require everyone's cooperation as well as adequate resources dedicated to addressing outstanding issues.

The responsibility for overseeing this process passes from English Nature to *Natural England* later this year. The creation of the new organisation has already begun, with English Nature, the Landscape, Access and Recreation remit of the Countryside Agency, and the environment activities of Defra's Rural Development Service

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





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

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Top left: Chimney Meadows SSSI, Oxfordshire.
Paul Glendell/English Nature 24,543

Middle left: Fly agaric, Yately and Hawley Commons SSSI,

Hampshire. Peter Wakely/English Nature 20,113

Bottom left: Jewel anemones on the south coast.

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Main: Ancient beech, Windsor Forest and Great Park SSSI,
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