ADVICE NOTE

Process for selecting and confirming Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs) in Greater London

Introduction

The London Plan identifies the need to protect biodiversity and to provide opportunities for access to nature. It recommends identifying and protecting a suite of sites of importance at Metropolitan, Borough and Local level in order to protect the most important areas of wildlife habitat in London and provide Londoners with opportunities for contact with the natural world. The Mayor's London Environment Strategy sets out criteria and procedures for identifying such land for protection in Local Plans.

Set out below is a process, developed by the London Wildlife Sites Board, by which London Boroughs (including the City of London) should select and approve Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs).

Boroughs are not obliged to follow this process. But if another process is used it must conform to the policy framework described by national and regional policies identified below.

Why a process is needed

A London Wildlife Sites Board (LWSB)[1] has been established to ensure a transparent and consistent approach to the SINC selection system in London and to ensure that the selection and approval of SINCs by Boroughs is consistent with:

- national policy as set out in *the National Planning Policy Framework*
- national guidance within Local Sites – guidance on their identification, selection and management
- regional policy as set out in Appendix 5[2] of *the London Environment Strategy*
- regional guidance in *London's Foundations*

The views of the LWSB should be sought when the Borough is seeking:

- to identify a site as a Site of Metropolitan Importance (SMI) for nature conservation or to amend an existing SMI. SMIs are selected by the Mayor in partnership with the Boroughs
- validate their site selection process
- advice on changes to policies and procedures relating to the identification and selection of SINCs

Recommended SINC Selection Process

[1] A Board Chaired by the GLA with representatives from London Boroughs Biodiversity Forum, Greenspace Information for Greater London, London Wildlife Trust and London Geodiversity Partnership.

[2] This is also provided in Appendix 1 of this document.

A. Roles and responsibilities of London Boroughs

1. It is the responsibility of London Boroughs to obtain and maintain up to date data on all land of nature conservation interest that is located within the administrative borough boundary, irrespective of land ownership[3]. The borough also needs to be aware of the distribution of priority habitats and key species of wildlife, especially those species that are legally protected.

2. The Borough must have access to a current evidence base relating to habitats, species, etc. from which to support site selection, de-selection or changes to boundaries.
NB Greenspace Information for Greater London CIC (GIGL) is the primary data holder in London. The Mayor expects all London boroughs
to enter into data exchange agreements with GIGL.

3. The Borough should secure the services of qualified ecologists[4] to survey[5] relevant land within the borough boundary, evaluate this land against the criteria set out in Appendix 1 of this document and provide a set of recommendations on which sites should be accorded SINC status (and at which grade).

4. The Borough should submit the survey data and recommendations to a local Site Selection Panel whose responsibility it is to provide independent, expert advice on the approach to surveys and evaluation and to validate any recommendations on SINC status. The Site Selection Panel should consist of a mix of local natural history experts and representatives of "Friends of…" groups and other local groups with an interest in land management; representatives of statutory agencies such as Natural England and/or Environment Agency and relevant NGOs such as London Wildlife Trust; and, other relevant Borough officers from planning and parks/greenspace teams.

5. On the basis of survey data and other relevant evidence and the advice provided by the local Site Selection Panel, the relevant Borough Officer should produce a schedule of proposed SINCs or changes to SINCs.

6. The relevant Borough Officer will use appropriate internal processes, primarily those linked to its Development Plan process, to approve the Borough's SINCs.

[3] Borough-wide surveys of wildlife habitat were previously undertaken by the London Ecology Unit and latterly the Greater London Authority. This service is no longer provided at the regional level and Boroughs are expected to undertake appropriate surveys. Albeit the GLA and other regional bodies may undertake surveys of regionally important biodiversity and geodiversity resources from time to time.

[4] This can be through paid ecological consultants, preferably members of the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM), or natural history experts willing to survey sites in a voluntary capacity, or on the basis of up-to-date information provided by surveys undertaken for other reasons e.g. a development proposal

[5] Ideally this should be undertaken every 5-10 years, but it is recognised that some habitats and sites are not likely to undergo rapid change in terms of habitat and species composition and/or some parts of the borough may be undergoing more rapid change through regeneration programmes, therefore location or habitat specific surveys at different time intervals may be appropriate.

B. Roles and responsibilities of the LWSB

1. The primary role of the LWSB is to ensure consistency of approach across London.

2. The LWSB will meet at least 3 times per annum, in June, October, and February.

3. The LWSB will offer to review the site selection process undertaken by the Borough and confirm, or otherwise, that the process is consistent with the guidance set out in this advice note. For the LWSB to comment on the Borough process the following information should be provided:

- a summary of the approach to site survey including details of surveyors
- a summary map and schedule of proposed changes to SINCs
- the composition and qualifications of the local Site Selection Panel

4. Proposals - from Boroughs or other key stakeholders (eg London Wildlife Trust) – for Sites of Metropolitan Importance should be submitted to the formal meetings of the LWSB.

5. The LWSB will also maintain an overview of national and regional guidance on selection of non-statutory wildlife sites and issues updated guidance and advice as required. Borough officers can seek clarification and advice from LWSB about any aspect of the recommended site selection process, preferably by submitting questions or queries to the three LWSB formal meetings, but otherwise at anytime via the LWSB Chair.

6. The LWSB will work with the London Boroughs Biodiversity Forum to provide best-practice advice and operational support for Borough officers to ensure the most robust and efficient processes and specifications for commissioning surveys, preparing schedules, etc.

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Appendix 1

Policy, criteria and procedures for identifying nature conservation sites in London

A1.1 Introduction

A1.1.1 This appendix updates the previous adopted policy of the London Ecology Committee, which described the policy, criteria and procedures used to identify and recommend land to be protected because of its nature conservation (biodiversity or ecological) value. The appendix does not go into detail on the need for such protection, except as this bears on the criteria used. The previous policy report was adopted by the London Ecology Committee on 25th January 1994, and by the London Planning Advisory Committee for use in the review of Unitary Development Plans in March 1995. It was consequently recommended to London boroughs in paragraphs 7.24 and 7.25 of Government's Strategic Guidance for London Planning Authorities (RPG3, in 1996). An update was adopted by the London Ecology Committee in its meeting of 27th March 2000 and recommended to the Mayor of London as a firm basis for the London Biodiversity Strategy. Minor changes of wording reflect the Mayor's adoption of these procedures in June 2000 and consultation on the draft Biodiversity Strategy in 2001. More recent changes are the result of changes set out in *Planning Policy Statement 9: Biodiversity and Geological Conservation*, especially in relation to consideration of geodiversity.

A1.2 The different kinds of sites and areas

A1.2.1 There are three kinds of site, which are chosen on the basis of their importance to a particular defined geographic area. This use of search areas is an attempt, not only to protect the best sites in London, but also to provide each part of London with a nearby site, so that people are able to have access to enjoy nature.

Sites of Metropolitan Importance

A1.2.2 Sites of Metropolitan Importance for Nature Conservation are those sites which contain the best examples of London's habitats, sites which contain particularly rare species, rare assemblages of species or important populations of species, or sites which are of particular significance within otherwise heavily built-up areas of London.

A1.2.3 They are of the highest priority for protection. The identification and protection of Metropolitan Sites is necessary, not only to support a significant proportion of London's wildlife, but also to provide opportunities for people to have contact with the natural environment.

A1.2.3.1 The best examples of London's habitats include the main variants of each major habitat type, for example hornbeam woodland, wet heathland, or chalk downland. Habitats typical of urban areas are also included, eg various types of abandoned land colonised by nature ('wasteland' or 'brownfield'). Those habitats which are particularly rare in London may have all or most of their examples selected as Metropolitan Sites.

A1.2.3.2 Sites of Metropolitan Importance include not only the best examples of each habitat type, but also areas which are outstanding because of their assemblage of habitats, for example the Crane corridor, which contains the River Crane, reservoirs, pasture, woodland and heathland.

A1.2.3.3 Rare species include those that are nationally scarce or rare (including Red Data Book species) and species which are rare in London.

A1.2.3.4 A small number of sites are selected which are of particular significance within heavily built up areas of London. Although these are of lesser intrinsic quality than those sites selected as the best examples of habitats on a Londonwide basis they are outstanding oases and provide the opportunity for enjoyment of nature in extensive built environments. Examples include St James's Park, Nunhead Cemetery, Camley Street Natural Park and Sydenham Hill Woods. In some cases (eg inner London parks) this is the primary reason for their selection. For sites of higher intrinsic interest it may only be a contributory factor. Only those sites that provide a significant contribution to the ecology of an area are identified.

A1.2.4 Should one of these sites be lost or damaged, something would be lost which exists in a very few other places in London. Management of these sites should as a first priority seek to maintain and enhance their interest, but use by the public for education and passive recreation should be encouraged unless these are inconsistent with nature conservation.

Sites of Borough Importance

A1.2.5 These are sites which are important on a borough perspective in the same way as the Metropolitan sites are important to the whole of London. Although sites of similar quality may be found elsewhere in London, damage to these sites would mean a significant loss to the borough. As with Metropolitan sites, while protection is important, management of borough sites should usually allow and encourage their enjoyment by people and their use for education.

A1.2.6 In defining Sites of Borough Importance, the search is not confined rigidly to borough boundaries; these are used for convenience of defining areas substantially smaller than the whole of Greater London, and the needs of neighbouring boroughs should be taken into account. In the same way as for Sites of Metropolitan Importance, parts of some boroughs are more heavily built-up and some borough sites are chosen there as oases providing the opportunity for enjoyment of nature in extensive built environments.

A1.2.7 The borough is an appropriate search area. Planning Policy Statement on Biodiversity and Geological Conservation (2005), in paragraph 5 (i) , states that local development frameworks should indicate the location of designate sites for biodiversity and geodiversity, including locally designated sites.

A1.2.8 Since essentially a comparison within a given borough is made when choosing Sites of Borough Importance, there is considerable variation in quality between those for different boroughs; for example, those designated in Barnet will frequently be of higher intrinsic quality than those in Hammersmith and Fulham, a borough comparatively deficient in wildlife habitat. Only those sites that provide a significant contribution to the ecology of an area are identified.

Sites of Local Importance

A1.2.9 A Site of Local Importance is one which is, or may be, of particular value to people nearby (such as residents or schools). These sites may already be used for nature study or be run by management committees mainly composed of local people. Where a Site of Metropolitan or Borough Importance may be so enjoyed it acts as a Local site, but further sites are given this designation in recognition of their role. This local importance means that these sites also deserve protection in planning.

A1.2.10 Local sites are particularly important in areas otherwise deficient in nearby wildlife sites. To aid the choice of these further local sites, Areas of Deficiency (see below) are identified. Further Local sites are chosen as the best available to alleviate this deficiency; such sites need not lie in the Area of Deficiency, but should be as near to it as possible. Where no such sites are available, opportunities should be taken to provide them by habitat enhancement or creation, by negotiating

access and management agreements, or by direct acquisition. Only those sites that provide a significant contribution to the ecology of an area are identified.

Areas of Deficiency

A1.2.11 Areas of Deficiency are defined as built-up areas more than one kilometre actual walking distance from an accessible Metropolitan or borough site. These aid the choice of Sites of Local Importance (see above).

A1.2.12 Research indicates that few people are willing to walk for more than five or ten minutes to their local natural open space. This translates into a distance of around 500 metres. Using this distance identifies much greater areas of London that are deficient in access, but some of this deficiency can be met with accessible natural greenspace in places that do not meet the criteria for selection as a Site of Local Importance. A distance of 500 metres actual walking distance is recommended for this more detailed consideration of local access.

Other wildlife habitat

A1.2.13 If an area of wildlife habitat is not designated as of Metropolitan, borough or Local Importance this does not imply that it has little or no value. The needs of wildlife and the value of natural vegetation should be considered throughout the planning process. It is particularly important that opportunities be taken to preserve, enhance or create areas of natural water and vegetation within heavily built-up areas, and to provide access locally.

Suburban gardens

A1.2.14 Private suburban gardens constitute about one fifth of Greater London's land area. Few individual gardens qualify as sites but, in some parts of London, blocks of contiguous private gardens are of value, and may even be the most important habitat in their neighbourhood. Valuable blocks have large and well-established gardens with mature trees, shrubs, water features and other habitats, but few such features occur in small or recent gardens. The better blocks of suburban gardens in a neighbourhood, even if not accessible to the general public, deserve protection.

Green corridors

A1.2.15 Green corridors are relatively continuous areas of open space leading through the built environment and which may link sites to each other and to the Green Belt. They often consist of railway embankments and cuttings, roadside verges, canals, parks, playing fields and rivers. They may allow animals and plants to be found further into the built-up area than would otherwise be the case and provide an extension to the habitats of the sites they join.

A1.2.16 There are special criteria for the recognition of land as part of a corridor network, which are detailed in the former London Ecology Unit's Advisory Note 6 and summarised here. The essential tests are habitat composition and near continuity. The minimum habitat requirement is a natural surface: water or vegetation. The corridor network connects to the countryside (Green Belt or Metropolitan Open Land). Small discontinuities, such as division by a road, are allowed, but larger gaps are fatal. Most blocks of back garden land are isolated from the network, but sometimes they adjoin it, or the gap is small enough for them to be included. Corridor elements are not required to be any particular shape, to link sites, or link together into any particular geometry.

A1.2.17 Sites of importance are included in corridors, but these deserve protection in their own right. Hence the protection recommended for the remainder of the network need not be so strong.

Countryside Conservation Areas

A1.2.18 Within London there still remain a few countryside areas where more traditional landscape predominates, and these broad tracts of land are of high wildlife interest. The wildlife value is not usually concentrated in any one part (or where it is, a site is identified), but is diffused throughout the whole area in features such as hedges, ditches, ponds, meadows, permanent pasture, copses and woods. These should be retained and appropriately managed, so that continued use for farming goes hand-in-hand with maintenance of the wildlife resource.

A1.3 Survey information

A1.3.1 In order to choose sites for protection it is necessary to have good survey information on the habitats and species of all candidate areas.

The London Open Spaces Survey

A1.3.2 Information on wildlife habitats can be collected in a standardised, comprehensive survey. We are fortunate in London in having such a survey, first carried out by the London Wildlife Trust for the Greater London Council in 1984/85, and updated and extended in various surveys since, including re-examination of sites to be described in the handbook series or in relation to proposed developments or management. In a number of London boroughs a systematic survey has been carried out using the former London Ecology Unit's specification since 1985. The specification was updated in 2000, when the GLA was established, to collect additional data required for open space planning. The format of the survey is similar to those usually described as 'Phase I' or 'Field by Field', but is enhanced by the extensive use of standardised written notes. Greenspace Information for Greater London (GIGL) now holds this survey information.

A1.3.3 The initial survey documented areas with semi-natural habitats (more natural than well-gardened allotments or heavily mown urban playing fields) and was also confined to large areas (above 0.5 ha for inner boroughs and 1 ha for outer boroughs). Much subsequent survey work has documented open spaces regardless of their natural quality and has used a much lower area threshold, to provide a more comprehensive coverage.

A1.3.4 Surveys helps to ensure that candidate sites are not overlooked and that the same essential minimum of information is available for each. There is usually little other information available on the quality of the wildlife habitats, but any information provided is taken into account.

Information on species

A1.3.5 Information on species, which has been obtained in a consistent and standardised manner as part of the systematic survey of habitats should also be used in reaching decisions on site quality. Other information on species, relating to individual sites, is frequently available but has, until recently, rarely been collected in a systematic way so as to allow straightforward comparisons with other sites. GIGL holds extensive species data.

A1.3.6 Information on species is often available from local naturalists, who are able to observe sites throughout seasons and years to provide an accurate and quite comprehensive listing of these and who may publish accounts of particular species or sites. Valuable though this information is, it often proves difficult to use it to compare candidate sites, as the recording effort put into each site may differ greatly and so may the completeness of the list. The length of the species list and the detection of rare species therefore depends upon the searching effort. For these reasons, such information on species is used only together with knowledge of how the information was obtained and of the way in which the ecology of individual species affects their apparent status.

A1.4 Criteria for choosing sites

A1.4.1 Having assembled all the useful survey information it is necessary to use a set of criteria for comparing one area with another. Appropriate criteria for assessing sites in an urban context are set out below. These are based upon many years' experience of comparing sites one with another in London, but they are not unique. While the terminology may differ in detail, many of these criteria closely correspond with those used by the Nature Conservancy Council and its successor bodies. The criteria are applied in the context of national and regional planning policy guidance on nature conservation, and taking account of the considerable experience of habitats and species throughout Greater London and their importance for nature conservation.

Kinds of criteria

A1.4.2 Some of the criteria are based in ecological science, in that they are known to be related to attributes that are desirable (these include ancient habitats, size and non-recreatable habitats). Some criteria are based on intrinsic attributes (those that are properties of a site regardless of its geographic setting), but others take geography and use into account.

Taking the criteria together

4.3 There have been a variety of schemes published which attempt to put numerical scores onto criteria and to sum them to an overall score of importance. We agree with the vast majority of workers in this field that this practice is unrefined and does not lead to satisfactory results. Rather, the criteria are used to act as a guide for a professional judgement of a particular site in comparison with alternatives. For some sites only one or a few of the criteria may be important, but for others it may be all or most of them. Whichever criteria are important for a particular site, only those sites that provide a significant contribution to the ecology of an area are identified.

The criteria take relative, not absolute, values

A1.4.4 It must be stressed that each criterion is used to facilitate a comparison of candidate sites within a given search area (metropolis, borough or locality within a borough) and thus they do not take absolute values independent of the search area. Obviously, criteria that show a site to be valuable for a larger search area than London (a region or nation, for example) mean that it is important to London. The converse is not necessarily so.

Representation

A1.4.5 The best examples of each major habitat type are selected. These include typical urban habitats such as abandoned land colonised by nature ('brownfield'). Where a habitat is not extensive in the search area it will be appropriate to conserve all or most of it, whereas where it is more extensive a smaller percentage will be conserved.

Habitat rarity

A1.4.6 The presence of a rare habitat makes a site important, because the loss of, or damage to, only a few sites threatens the survival of the habitat in the search area.

Species rarity

A1.4.7 The presence of a rare species makes a site important in a way that parallels rare habitat.

Habitat richness

A1.4.8 Protecting a site with a rich selection of habitat types not only conserves those habitats, but also the wide range of organisms that live within them and the species that require more than one habitat type for their survival. Rich sites also afford more opportunities for enjoyment and educational use.

Species richness

A1.4.9 Generally, sites that are rich in species are to be preferred, as this permits the conservation of a correspondingly large number of species. However, some habitats, such as reed beds, heaths and acid woodlands, are intrinsically relatively poor in species.

Size

A1.4.10 Large sites are usually more important than small sites. They may allow for species with special area requirements. Large sites may be less vulnerable to small-scale disturbance, as recovery is sometimes possible from the undisturbed remainder. They are also more able to withstand visitors, by diluting their pressure within a wider space. Size is also related to the richness of habitat and species, and so is used as a surrogate for these other two criteria where information is incomplete.

Important populations of species

A1.4.11 Some sites are important because they hold a large proportion of the population of a species for the search area (eg waterfowl populations or colonial birds such as herons or jackdaws).

Ancient character

A1.4.12 Some sites have valuable ecological characteristics derived from long periods of traditional management, or even a continuity in time to the woodlands and wetlands which occupied the London area before agriculture. Ancient woodlands, old parkland trees and traditionally managed grasslands tend to have typical species that are rare elsewhere. These habitats deserve protection also because of the ease with which they are damaged by changes in management, ploughing, fertiliser and herbicide treatment.

Recreatability

A1.4.13 Habitats vary in the ease with which they can be recreated and the length of time required; for example ponds can be created from scratch with reasonable success within a few years, but woods not only take much longer - at least decades - to mature, but even then they do not contain the same flora and fauna as ancient woods on undisturbed soils. In addition to the ecological reasons why certain habitats cannot be recreated, many sites are not capable of being recreated because of practical reasons such as land availability and cost. The more difficult it is to recreate a site's habitats the more important it is to retain it.

Typical urban character

A1.4.14 Features such as canals, abandoned wharves, walls, bridges, tombstones and railway sidings colonised by nature often have a juxtaposition of artificial and wild features. Some of these habitats are particularly rich in species and have rare species and communities of species. Their substrates may have a particular physical and chemical nature which allows species to thrive that are rare elsewhere. They may also have particular visual qualities. Such areas are often useful for the study of colonisation and ecological succession.

Cultural or historic character

A1.4.15 Sites such as historic gardens with semi-wild areas, garden suburbs, churchyards and Victorian cemeteries which have reverted to the wild may have a unique blend of cultural and natural history.

Geographic position

A1.4.16 This criterion is operated through the use of search areas and areas of deficiency (see A1.2.1, A1.2.13 and A1.4.4 above).

Access

A1.4.17 Access is an important consideration, especially in areas where there may be few places for large urban populations to experience the natural world. Nature conservation is not restricted to the preservation of wildlife, but goes hand in hand with the enjoyment of it by all people, from the specialist naturalist to the casual visitor. Some access is desirable to all but the most sensitive of sites, but direct physical access to all parts of a site may not be desirable.

Use

A1.4.18 The importance of a site can include its established usage (eg for education, research, or quiet enjoyment of nature).

Potential

A1.4.19 Where a site can be enhanced given modest changes in management practices this gives it value. Opportunity exists where a site is likely to become available for nature conservation use, or where there is considerable local enthusiasm about it, or where a voluntary group is willing to use and manage it. Potential in this context can be for habitat enhancement through management, for educational or nature conservation amenity use. Where such potential could remedy a deficiency, or is readily capitalised, it is considered important.

Aesthetic appeal

A1.4.20 This factor is the most difficult to measure, but it includes such factors, which contribute to the enjoyment of the experience of visiting a site, as seclusion, views, variety of landscape and habitat structure, colour, and natural sounds and scents.

Geodiversity interest

A1.4.21 Where a site has a geological interest which has educational, scientific, historical or aesthetic interest as set out in *London's Foundations* (2009)

A1.5 Consultation

A1.5.1 The criteria are used with the professional judgement of the designated and with adequate information, but it is equally important that this judgement should benefit from additional consideration by a wide range of interested parties. For this reason the procedures include widespread consultation with individuals and organisations with knowledge of the sites and of nature. These include local naturalists, voluntary organisations, land owners, statutory authorities, council officers and elected members.

A1.5.2 This consultation is normally achieved using a map and schedule of sites recommended for protection in planning. After the consultation period is over this schedule is revised and the site descriptions may be drafted. Every submission made is considered in this process.

A1.5.3 The map and schedule of sites should be updated periodically and at least when comprehensive re-survey permits.

A1.5.4 Where the advice from maps and schedules has been incorporated into Local Development Frameworks, it has been subject to the statutory consultation and objection and inquiry procedure alongside other aspects of these plans.

A1.6 Protection in planning policies

A1.6.1 The GLA recommends that the Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation all be afforded protection in London Borough Local Development Frameworks, against proposals that may harm their value. The detailed advice on policy wording should take planning guidance into account.

A1.6.2 For the parts of Green Corridors outside the sites of importance and Countryside Conservation Areas, a lower level of protection is recommended.

A1.6.3 In addition to protection through planning policies, any site of importance, where the London borough council has a legal interest, can be declared as a Local Nature Reserve under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 (after consultation with Natural England). These will include some of the best in terms of intrinsic value and also others chosen as part of the council's programme to provide places for study and for the quiet enjoyment of nature.