Birmingham & The Black Country Local Sites Selection - Guidance (September 2016)

INTRODUCTION

Local Sites systems operate throughout England for the purpose of conferring a level of protection to those sites of substantive 'nature conservation' value that are not otherwise covered by national or international designations. Here the term 'Nature Conservation' encompasses both ecological (i.e. habitats and species) and geological/ geomorphological assets.

National guidance has been published by Defra to ensure some consistency between the many Local Sites systems (see 'Local Sites – Guidance on their identification, selection and management' –Defra PB11684 2006). The system defined in this document conforms with this guidance.

Local Sites receive their protection mainly through the operation of the planning system. National guidance such as 'Planning Policy Statement 9: Biodiversity and Geological Conservation' (PPS9) and the more detailed Government Circular 06/2005: 'Biodiversity and Geological Conservation - statutory obligations and their impact within the planning system' set the national context. Local Development Frameworks and related local planning documents, for example, the Supplementary Planning Documents published by Dudley (2007) and Walsall (2008) provide the local planning context. The first Local Sites schedule for Birmingham and the Black Country was introduced in 1977 and the sites have been protected ever since by a succession of local planning policy and nature conservation strategies. It is important to note that the selection of Local Sites and the maintenance of site schedules is carried out independently of the making of planning policy.

This non-statutory system is intended to be comprehensive (i.e. all sites should be selected that meet the criteria), whereas statutory designation systems such as: Special Protection Areas, Special Areas of Conservation, Ramsar sites and Sites of Special Scientific Interest are intended to provide a representative suite of sites.

In Birmingham & The Black Country Local Sites encompass what are termed Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs) and Sites of Local Importance for Nature Conservation (SLINCs). This two-tier system aims to ensure that all sites of substantive local nature conservation value are selected by assessing sites in both a sub-regional (i.e. Birmingham & The Black Country) and metropolitan borough context (either Birmingham, Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall or Wolverhampton). The two designations are defined as:

- **Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs)** - Sites of substantive nature conservation value in the context of Birmingham & The Black Country
- **Sites of Local Importance for Nature Conservation (SLINCs)** - Sites of substantive nature conservation value in the context of a metropolitan borough.

Importantly Local Sites are not assessed in a regional or national context.

SELECTION OF LOCAL SITES

1. To ensure the effective selection of Local Sites a series of Site Selection Criteria have been produced against which all sites must be evaluated.
2. The Local Sites Selection Criteria are based on reference criteria given in Local Sites: Guidance on their Identification, Selection and Management (Defra, 2006) which are themselves based on those contained in A Nature Conservation Review (Ratcliffe ed. 1977) (commonly referred to as 'Ratcliffe's Criteria'). These have been adapted to best serve the needs of the Local Sites system in Birmingham & The Black Country and the resource it works to protect.
3. The Site Selection Criteria are divided under three headings: Ecological, Geological and Social. Sites can be evaluated against either the Ecological or Geological criteria or against both where appropriate. All sites must be assessed against the Social criteria, however, no site can be assessed against the Social criteria only.
4. The Ecological and Geological criteria are of primary importance. The Social criteria evaluate the value derived from experiencing natural features and therefore no site will be selected where it scores highly against Social criteria only.
5. For site evaluation purposes a value (either High, Medium, Low or Unknown) must be given against each of the criteria based on the information collected and presented in a Local Sites Assessment Report. Attributing values requires an informed judgment being made with reference to the evaluation criteria and the guidance given within these. In the assessment report a summary of how this value judgment was reached must be given for each of the criteria.
6. There are no 'absolute' values for any of the criteria and their application is not mechanical or rule-based. The criteria are, however, based on sound, rational principles and their application requires a good knowledge and understanding of the local ecological and geological resource.
7. Based on the values attributed against each of the criteria a judgment must be made as to whether a site merits Local Site status. Those sites scoring 'Highs' will tend to meet the threshold for SINC status whereas those scoring 'Mediums' will tend to meet the threshold for SLINC status. Sites scoring mostly 'Lows' will tend not to meet Local Site standards. However, not all criteria are of equal weight. In some cases a site may justify designation where very few criteria score highly (e.g. where the site supports a population of a protected or priority species or displays a single important geological feature).
    - Sites will be selected as SINCs if they meet the selection criteria in the context of the sub-region.
    - Sites will be selected as SLINCs if they meet the selection criteria in the context of the metropolitan borough.
8. Statutory nature conservation sites (other than LNR) that are designated for their geological value may be designated as ecological Local Sites or vice-versa. However, sites will not be selected as ecological or geological Local Sites if they are statutorily protected for these reasons.
9. Local Nature Reserve (LNR) status will not be considered when evaluating sites as this designation considers different attributes to that of the Local Sites system.
10. Sites will be assessed periodically and their status re-assessed. Sites which have deteriorated through neglect or wilful damage will not be deselected as Local Sites without considering the potential for restoration.

SELECTION CRITERIA

Ecological Criteria

Habitat Diversity[1]

Rationale

Habitat 'types', variants of these and the ecotones between different habitats not only have an intrinsic value in themselves, but sites comprising a higher diversity of these will usually support a wider range of associated species. Additionally, many species are dependant on the presence of more than one habitat type (amphibians for example) or the ecotone between two habitats (e.g. woodland edges).

Habitat diversity is broader than habitat 'types' however, and variation within single habitats is also an important consideration. These variations include attributes such as micro-climate, micro-habitats (for example dead wood or bare soil), topography, parent rocks and derived soils. Structural diversity within a habitat type is also important (e.g. variations in the physical and temporal structure of a woodland) and in some circumstances diversity may depend on the presence of different stages of ecological succession. A site with a restricted number of habitats can therefore score highly, especially if there is variation of this type.

Attributing Value

Sites which would tend to score highly under this criterion are:

- Those that support a range of habitats.
- Those that support habitats with physical and/or structural variation or are otherwise of notable complexity.

Species Diversity

Rationale

A high diversity of species will usually be a positive attribute of a site. Species diversity should not be interpreted simply as the total number of species, however, and it is important that sites are assessed against the norms of the habitats under consideration. For example, some habitats are intrinsically species-poor and a direct comparison between these and an intrinsically species-rich habitat would underestimate the value of the former. Furthermore, there are species that are considered to be indicators of particular habitat types or of habitat 'quality'. The presence of an assemblage of these would be of greater value and score more highly than the presence of a larger number of species associated with negative disturbance of the same habitat. Specifically, it is recommended that the '**axiophyte**[2]' list of plant species strongly associated with sites of nature conservation interest in Birmingham and the Black Country is referred to and axiophyte species present at the site is listed in the assessment. An up to date copy of the list is held by and can be requested from EcoRecord[3]. Outstanding diversity within a single species group (e.g. Odonata, Lepidoptera or avifauna) may also justify a high score.

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[1] It is important that Habitat Diversity is considered in relation to other criteria including Size or Extent, Rarity and Naturalness: i.e. Habitat Diversity should not be sought to the detriment of these attributes.

[2] BSBI has defined **axiophytes** as follows:

- Species 90% restricted to habitats of nature conservation importance
- Species recorded in fewer than 25% of tetrads in a vice-county
- Very rare species should be considered for omission as chance occurrences
- See http://www.bsbi.org.uk/axiophytes
- There is a need to apply these criteria with discretion

[3] **EcoRecord** is the Local Environmental Record Centre for Birmingham and the Black Country
enquiries@ecorecord.org.uk

Species diversity should be assessed over a wider range of groups as possible. In many cases, however, the available information will relate only to flora and therefore this criterion will commonly be assessed on botanical diversity.

Attributing Value

Sites which would tend to score highly under this criterion are:

- Those that support a high diversity of plants and/or animals.
- Those that support species-diverse examples of their component habitats (reference to the axiophytes list should be made).
- Those that support a high diversity of discrete groups or assemblages of species (reference to the axiophytes list should be made).
- Those that support an assemblage of 'indicator' species (reference to the axiophytes list should be made).

Habitat Rarity

Rationale

Most habitats and their variants have an intrinsic value and those that are rare or less common are perhaps most in need of recognition and protection. In addition to their intrinsic value these may support species or communities unique to the habitat, which clearly adds to their importance. Sites that support habitats that are rare internationally, regionally or locally are therefore of value in the context of the Local Sites system.

Attributing Value

Sites which would tend to score highly under this criterion are:

- Internationally or nationally identified habitats (e.g. under the European Habitats Directive).
- Those listed under Section 41 of the NERC Act (2006) (Habitats of Principal Importance).
- Those that support Biodiversity Action Plan Priority Habitats.
- Those that are rare in the West Midlands.
- Those that are rare in a Birmingham and Black Country context.

Species Rarity

Rationale

For rare species an individual population may represent an important part of the total population and its loss may result directly in the reduction of the species' geographical range. The loss of a local population may also result in the irreversible loss of genetic diversity, local races or sub-species and ultimately of species themselves.

Individual sites may therefore contribute significantly to the protection of species that are rare or declining nationally, regionally or locally. These include those species protected under international and national legislation, Red Data Book species and BAP Priority Species. Sites that support populations of species that are not considered rare or declining internationally or nationally, but that are rare in the sub-region or local authority area are also of value in the context of the Local Sites system. Specifically, it is recommended that the '**axiophyte**[4]' list of plant species strongly associated with sites of nature conservation interest in Birmingham and the Black Country is referred to and axiophyte species present at the site is listed in the assessment.

In the broader sense this criterion refers not only to individual species but also to communities and species groups, and due consideration should be given to the presence of these on a site.

Attributing Value

Sites which would tend to score highly under this criterion are:

- Those that support species protected by international or national legislation (e.g. the European Habitats Directive & the Wildlife and Countryside Act).
- Those that support species listed under Section 41 of the NERC Act (2006) (Species of Principal Importance).
- Those that support BAP Priority Species.
- Those that support species listed as Red Data Book species.

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[4] BSBI has defined **axiophytes** as follows:

- Species 90% restricted to habitats of nature conservation importance
- Species recorded in fewer than 25% of tetrads in a vice-county
- Very rare species should be considered for omission as chance occurrences
- See http://www.bsbi.org.uk/axiophytes
- There is a need to apply these criteria with discretion

- Those that support flora species which are members of the current EcoRecord axiophyte list for Birmingham & the Black Country.
- Those that support fauna species identified as of 'Conservation Concern' by the RSPB (Red List & Amber List bird species), the Mammal Society (National Decline & England Decline) or by Butterfly Conservation West Midlands (Regional Decline).
- Those that support species listed on other relevant species schedules.

Size or Extent

Rationale

The ecological value of a site will usually increase with area. Larger sites tend to be more diverse in habitats and species and can support larger populations. They can also better support species dependant on extensive territories or foraging areas, are more able to tolerate disturbance and are less prone to local extinctions. In ecologically isolated populations a larger site can insulate a species against adverse events which would lead to local extinctions on a small site.

Size or Extent encompasses broader attributes than the total size of a site however, and what comprises a 'large' or 'small' site can not be defined simply. Factors such as the geographical context (e.g. surrounding land use or frequency of similar sites in the locality) and the type of habitats supported (e.g. the area covered by a 'large' pond may be considered a 'small' woodland) must be considered.

Other factors including the size and quality of specific habitat types must also be considered. For example, a site may contain a small area of a habitat that is uncommon in the conurbation or that is a particularly high quality example of a habitat (e.g. a reed bed or species-rich neutral grassland). These examples would be significant in the context of the Local Sites system and would therefore score highly despite their physical extent.

Populations of species and communities should also be considered under this criterion. For example, a large population of a rare or protected species (e.g. great crested newt) or a large example of a specialist community (e.g. invertebrates) may score highly.

Attributing Value

Sites which would tend to score highly under this criterion are:

- Larger sites.
- Those sites containing significant areas of a single habitat type.
- Those sites supporting a significant population of a species defined in the Rare Species criterion.
- Those sites supporting a significant species community.

Naturalness

Rationale

Human activities past and present have had such an impact that even those parts of the landscape that seem least modified are usually more accurately described as 'semi-natural'. Here therefore the concept of 'naturalness' is considered not as the absence of human intervention or legacy within a site, but the degree to which a site supports natural features or natural processes.

Long established habitats associated with traditional rural landscape form and management practice are perhaps the most easily identifiable as 'natural' in this context (e.g. heathlands, woodlands and unimproved grasslands). Habitats such as these may support long-standing ecological associations between species and physical conditions that cannot easily be re-created. These habitats have an intrinsic value that is particularly significant where they have been least affected by modern human activity including the introduction of species, alterations in physical structure, physical disturbance to soils and the addition of soil nutrients.

This criterion is, however, not defined by longevity or history and does not apply only to habitats of a rural origin. Natural processes and ecological associations of value can develop at any pace through the colonisation and succession of an area, whatever the preceding dominant activity may have been. This may apply to previously developed sites, formerly arable sites or those where semi-natural habitats have altered through abandonment of management. Stability can be an important consideration (e.g. where 'arrested succession' is in evidence on a highly modified sub-strate), as short-lived habitats may be commonplace and relatively easy to re-create.

Attributing Value

Sites which would tend to score highly under this criterion are:

- Those which have developed through consistent management over a very long period.
- Those where species recruitment has occurred through natural processes (i.e. not introduced purposefully or directly through human activity).
- Those which have been least influenced by human activity.
- Those that have developed on intrinsically nutrient-poor soils and where there is a rarity or absence of species associated with anthropogenic disturbance.
- Those where associations between species, communities and habitats have developed and where these can not easily be re-created.

Position / Connectivity

Rationale

Besides directly supporting wildlife within their boundaries, sites may also have an important role in supporting populations of species within the wider landscape. This includes populations that survive across a group of sites (where exchange of individuals maintains genetic diversity and helps to prevent local extinctions), populations that require physically linked sites to colonise new areas and where different sites are utilised for different purposes (e.g. foraging and breeding).

Individual sites must therefore be considered in terms of the contribution they make to such networks. The quality and nature of the surrounding matrix are also pertinent considerations. This criterion is clearly related to those of size and diversity.

Attributing Value

Sites which would tend to score highly under this criterion are:

- Those which have physical links with other sites and the wider landscape.
- Those which have strong ecological links with other local sites supporting similar species and habitat assemblages.
- Those which have strong ecological links with other local sites supporting different but complementary habitat assemblages.
- Those which are strategic ‘stepping stones’.

Geological Criteria

Intrinsic Scientific Interest

Rationale

The scientific interest of a site will contribute to an understanding of the geological past and its heritage and the interpretation of the area's geodiversity. It will be expressed through:

Palaeontology

Rock types can be characterised by the types of fossils found within them. Fossils are a vestige of the wildlife of the past and their occurrence helps to date the rocks and make comparisons with rocks from other localities. Fossils are also indicators of ancient environments and provide clues to evolutionary pathways of animal and plant families.

Stratigraphy

The types and ages of different rocks provide a record of the depositional environments at the time of their formation and is the fundamental expression of an area's geodiversity. Individual sites contribute to this geodiversity and local distinctiveness and character.

Structure

Some sites exhibit faulting, folding and other landform features providing information on the tectonic history of an area or region.

Physiography, Geomorphology and Natural Processes

Features resulting from weathering or glacial action, landforms and active processes such as river meanders that impact upon the landscape.

Attributing Value

Sites which would tend to score highly under this criterion are:

- Those that have a distinctive or diverse range of fossils.
- Those that have unusual or rare fossil groups.
- Those that illustrate the geological diversity of the area.
- Those that contribute to an understanding or interpretation of the landscapes, climate and environments in the geological past in the area.
- Those that exhibit structural features e.g. faulting, folding.
- Those that demonstrate geomorphological processes e.g. river meanders, alluvial deposits, ice age related features etc.

Rarity

Rationale

The uniqueness of a site in the local or regional context. In cases where there are no other exposures of a particular horizon within a borough, then sites may be selected on this criterion alone in the interest of conserving geodiversity.

Attributing Value

Sites which would tend to score highly under this criterion are:

- Those that are stratigraphically uncommon.
- Those which have rock types or parts of the geological succession that are under-represented.

- Those sites that have unique features.

Association with Other Sites and Features

Rationale

The site contributes to a network of sites and the bigger picture for interpretation and understanding of the geological past on a wider or landscape scale.

The site may have both geological as well as biological/ecological value which is of value to a local neighbourhood or demonstrates the underpinning influence of geology upon habitat and flora.

Attributing Value

Sites which would tend to score highly under this criterion are:

- Those sites which contribute to a network of sites that aid the interpretation and understanding of an area.
- Those sites which have a moderate geological value and also have a moderate or better ecological value

Social Criteria

Historical & Cultural

Rationale

Because the natural environment has been so extensively shaped and influenced by human activity, the natural features of value in the landscape of today are often also important parts of our cultural heritage. Such features can contribute considerably to the quality of the local environment as well as helping to define local distinctiveness.

The historic land-use and activities that have created these features are many and varied. They include post-industrial sites and their associated structures and by-products (e.g. spoil or slag heaps), transport networks (e.g. canals, dismantled railway lines, 'green' lanes and holloways), agricultural landscapes (e.g. hedgerows, ancient woodlands, ridge and furrow systems) or residences and formal landscapes (e.g. artificial lakes, avenues of trees or moats). Within these there may be features of finer detail (e.g. bank and ditch systems, ancient coppice stools or pollards) which add additional value.

A further example of the relationship between the cultural and natural landscape is that between local geology and its uses in the built environment. Not only do many places contain structures made of locally quarried products, but the former quarries from which these materials came may now be sites of local value for their geological and/or ecological features.

Sites may also have links to historic events or have literary or other associations in art. Such recording or portrayal can reveal changes in perception of the natural environment and the economic value that it has been ascribed at different times.

Attributing Value

Sites which would tend to score highly under this criterion are:

- Those with links to historic agricultural practice.
- Those with links to local industrial development.
- Those with links to former societies.
- Those with links to historic events or those that have literary and artistic associations.

Recorded History

Rationale

A record of research, scientific literature references, association with scientists of recognised stature or contributions to scientific advances adds considerably to a site's interest. For example, where geological concepts were first demonstrated or where new ecological methods and techniques have been trialled, refined and reported upon.

Additionally, a long-term record of the natural processes acting upon or being displayed within a site, the management of a site or comprehensive ecological records for a site can add considerably to its interest.

Attributing Value

Sites which would tend to score highly under this criterion are:

- Those with links to scientific research and advances.
- Those with long-term records of features or management.

Access

Rationale

Sites that provide people with the chance to experience nature and a high quality natural environment are important. Access to sites is particularly valuable in urban areas with few opportunities for the appreciation of nature. In these circumstances small sites or those of lesser intrinsic nature conservation interest may be of increased value for the opportunities they provide for the appreciation of nature.

Uncontrolled access is not, however, always desirable. Any adverse impacts that this may have on the nature conservation value of the site must be considered.

Attributing Value

Sites which would tend to score highly under this criterion are:

- Those with legitimate and safe public access.
- Those that are close to peoples' homes and/or close to public transport routes.
- Those in areas with little accessible natural greenspace.
- Those not adversely impacted upon by public access.
- Those specifically managed to accommodate public access and where resources such as interpretation or organised events are provided.

Aesthetic

Rationale

Areas of ecological and geological value can be visually attractive, helping to define a sense of place and contributing to the quality of life of the people who live or work there.

A site's visual contribution to the local environment and the views into and out of a site should be considered, as should features that provide a seasonal high point such as a carpet of bluebells, heather in bloom, autumn colour or an annual display of meadow flowers.

Attributing Value

Sites which would tend to score highly under this criterion are:

- Those that are attractive with a high visual quality.
- Landscapes that are important to local communities reflecting natural and industrial

heritage

- Those that contribute positively to local distinctiveness and a sense of place.
- Those with a high value for the appreciation of nature.

Value for Learning

Rationale

Sites of ecological and geological interest can be valuable local educational resources, enabling people of all ages to learn about and better understand the natural world around them.

Some locally designated sites can provide opportunities for formal education which the national statutory network of sites cannot fulfil alone. Many sites are used or are suitable for further education, higher education and postgraduate studies and are valuable for training new environmental professionals. Research, investigation or experimental work may be undertaken as a part of this. Sites which illustrate local natural features are valuable to primary and secondary schools for project work and for activities that link with the National Curriculum.

There is an equal need to provide a focus for more informal education and opportunities for the wider community. Sites can have a role in the development of skills through involvement in their protection, management and recording. All these activities can potentially benefit sites through promoting wider understanding, support and care of these local assets.

Attributing Value

Sites which would tend to score highly under this criterion are:

- Those that are currently utilised for formal and informal education.
- Those that are close to educational establishments.
- Those with legitimate and safe student access.
- Those that are unlikely to be damaged by educational use.
- Those that are managed to accommodate student access and that provide resources such as interpretation or organised events.
- Those that demonstrate features as set out in the National or other curricula.