

Written evidence from Natural England (PAE0020)

1. The target to ensure that 75% of all SSSIs are in a favourable condition by 2042 and meeting the 30 by 30 target will both require an increase in monitoring activities. What impact would a statutory purpose for monitoring have on the ability to meet these targets?

- Public bodies already have a statutory duty to maintain and enhance SSSIs; a statutory purpose would therefore complement this, requiring progress to be measured and reported. In our response the Defra's Nature Green Paper consultation Natural England argued for a statutory duty to monitor (inter alia) SSSIs. Such a duty is likely to lead to the development of more innovative methods for monitoring that are more efficient and effective. A statutory purpose for monitoring would give Natural England a focus for discussions with partners and encourage others to work with us in undertaking monitoring.
- It should be noted that now we have the Environment Improvement Plan (EIP) there is an implicit requirement to monitor to assess progress against delivery. Natural England and others need to be able to monitor at the appropriate frequency, based on risk and ecological factors; this would need to be factored into any duty or purpose.
- Monitoring of itself will not affect the ability to meet either EIP or 30 by 30 targets; accurate monitoring will allow progress to be measured, and if required specific actions to be identified and put in place where needed. Ultimately restoring sites to favourable condition, and maintaining them in that state, will require well-resourced site-based management, coupled with actions to address wider scale pervasive ecological impacts, such as water quality.

2. What assessment has Natural England made of the recent uplift in funding to deliver on the latest SSSI target to ensure 75% of all SSSIs are in a favourable condition by 2042?

- Natural England welcomed the much-needed investment in the environment in the most recent SR21, building on the uplift in SR20. The EIP set targets that by 31 January 2028, 50% of SSSI features would have actions underway and on-track to achieve favourable condition, and that every feature will have an up-to-date condition assessment. With existing levels of resourcing (a c.37% Full Time Equivalent (FTE) increase since 18/19), we forecast to secure 42% of SSSI features with an up-to-date condition assessment by March 2025 and 21% of features with actions on-track.
- A sustained and holistic policy and funding commitment is required as we move towards 2042, recognising that monitoring and evaluation, sustainable development, strategic solutions, and engagement with partners and landowners are all critical factors in reaching this 2042 target.
- Natural England has a central role to play in reaching this target, as do other regulators such as LAs, the EA and FC. A large number of SSSIs are privately owned, and while regulation can be an effective tool in preventing decline and maintaining nature, incentivising improvement has been shown to be effective.

3. At Natural England, what is the agreed target longevity for the protection of the designations that will contribute to 30 by 30?

- Natural England is currently in discussion with Defra over the 30 by 30 assessment criteria, of which this is part. International guidance suggests a longevity that ensures biodiversity outcomes, which can still be interpreted very widely as it depends on the nature of the habitats and species.
Consideration will need to be made of wanting to encourage commitment to the target, which is easier to do within the decision-making timescales of a single generation.
- The 30 x 30 commitment will consist of both designated and non-designated sites. The purpose of this latter component is to acknowledge, value, manage and protect (in a wide definition of the term) areas that are important for biodiversity but are not part of a formal government protected area.