

Practical information and good practice on NI 197 (Improved Local Biodiversity – proportion of Local Sites where positive conservation management is being achieved)

Local authorities which included NI 197 in their Local Area Agreements have already been through the process of establishing baseline information for NI 197, albeit on a much compressed timescale. In December 2008, Defra undertook an informal survey of these authorities to obtain some information on the process they had been through. This note sets out some useful good practice information, based largely on the responses, on how these local authorities have tackled some of the practical issues on this indicator. It is intended to assist other local authorities with this year's reporting round. Obviously each authority has flexibility to decide on the most appropriate arrangements to suit their local situation.

LA single contact point on NI 197

It is useful to nominate a single point of contact to coordinate work on the indicator, both internally within the authority and externally with the Local Sites Partnership. A number of respondents had nominated the local authority ecologist to lead.

Local Sites Partnerships

Local Sites Partnerships play a crucial role in both in reporting on the indicator and actually helping drive improvement in management of Local Sites. It is sensible to involve the Partnership early on in what the structures, procedures and responsibilities for reporting against this indicator should be. Partners are often able to provide important support to the process of both reporting and driving improvements.

Many areas already had Local Sites Partnerships in place, as envisaged in the Local Sites guidance, and were there therefore relatively well-placed in terms of the required structures. Those areas which did not already have Local Sites Partnerships in place had taken action to establish them.

Local Sites Partnerships are often at county level, though not always. For example some partnerships operated at a different geographic scale because local authorities had a unitary structure rather than county and district. In some areas, the Partnership covered more than one Unitary authority.

Database of sites

A central authoritative database of Local Sites is important to be able to report accurately and to manage work on Local Sites generally.

Many areas already had such a list, often in electronic format making it relatively easy to interrogate and share with partners (ideally on mapped on GIS, but sometimes as simple as an Excel spreadsheet). These typically contain information such as the site name, location, owners and features for which the site was designated, and sometimes

management information. Some databases had been refined in order to also be able to include NI 197 reporting information.

Databases of Local Sites information were often held by the local authority or sometimes by another member of the Partnership, such as the Local Records Centre or the local Wildlife Trust.

In some areas, information on sites had been out of date and had required effort to bring up to standard. Where an authoritative list of sites was not in existence, steps had been taken to compile one.

Collation of the data

In most cases, it fell to the local authority lead to collate the required data (and to hold the information comprising the NI 197 audit trail). However, in other cases, the local Wildlife Trust or Local Records Centre had taken on this role on behalf of the Local Sites Partnership. Each area is able to agree the solution which suits them best.

Local authorities compiling baselines for their LAA were working to a very tight timescale and so not able to undertake this as thoroughly as should be the case for reporting round at the end of March 2009. The approach to collating data had generally involved the following:

- Requesting information from Natural England, Forestry Commission and others on grant schemes such as Environmental Stewardship and Woodland Grant Schemes. Given that this is a substantial amount of information, it is really useful to clarify with NE and FC early to make sure there is a common understanding of what is required and the timescale for providing it.
- Obtaining information from the local authority's own records and experts (such as ecologists and LBAP coordinators).
- Requesting information from the Local Sites Partnership, where partners are able to provide some data and other conservation organisations.
- Requesting information from major site owners, e.g. National Trust, RSPB
- Request to Local Geological Groups who had been able to contribute greatly in respect of Local Geological Sites.
- Requesting information from district level local authorities, to establish which sites had management plans and which sites had received advice which had been documented and acted upon.

Local authorities reported that they had generally been able to collate the information by desk-based means (some felt that site visits were more likely to be required to deliver improvements in due course). London boroughs reported that they had relatively easily been able to undertake site visits as part of normal operational activities, though this may not necessarily be the case in other areas.

Approach to decisions on whether management of a site was sufficiently substantive to score as 'positive management'

An initial decision is generally reached on each site by the local authority (or alternatively this could be by whoever collates the data if this is another partner such as the Local Record Centre or local Wildlife Trust). This was then submitted to the Local Sites Partnership for validation/sign-off, usually at a meeting. Where there was any dispute as to whether a site was in positive management then it was not counted.

On decision-making criteria, in December 2008 Defra published enhanced advice (<http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/localgovindicators/documents/ni197-guidance-revised.pdf>) that a site should score if :

- the management taking place is considered to be substantively contributing to the conservation of the features for which the site was selected, and;
- the management is at a level or rate which is judged to be sufficient in order to conserve these features in the long-term

The focus is on ensuring on-the-ground benefits for biodiversity/geodiversity so, where considering whether Environmental Stewardship or other grant schemes constitute positive management, good practice is to check that the options are appropriate for the habitat type/features for which the site was designated.

The Defra guidance did not set a fixed proportion of the site which must be in positive management as this was not deemed a consistent measure, due to the variation of types of sites and types of management required.

Local Geological Sites

It was clear from the responses that local geoconservation groups had played a really important role supporting work in respect of Local Geological Sites, for example, being able to provide an informed view on whether sites were in positive management or not and assisting in prioritising sites needing management. It's therefore good practice to engage these groups effectively.

Interaction with lower tier local authorities

County level authorities had been active in seeking to engage lower tier authorities in supporting work on NI 197, particularly in relation to delivering an increase in the number of sites in positive management. In some areas, some lower tier authorities were already actively involved in Local Sites Partnerships and in others their engagement had been sought through setting up meetings, or proactively contacting them. Obviously, capacity issues can have an influence on lower tier authorities' ability to be involved. It was noted that in some cases, lower tier authorities have direct ownership of, or influence over, some land in Local Sites.

This was not relevant in areas with Unitary authorities.

Other issues

Some local authorities had taken the opportunity to use NI 197 to raise the profile of nature conservation within their area, both within the authority and externally, through raising in as many fora as possible.

One authority felt having all sites accurately recorded in the field and mapped on GIS is key, noting that this had required some effort to bring records up to date.

Most reported that this indicator was already stimulating new positive action on Local Sites in their areas, with the remainder reporting that this was expected in time and/or that it was too early to tell.

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