

03

Chapter **03**

Environmental strategy and countryside

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"A high quality environment is essential to the future prosperity of the South East. The effective protection of the environment and prudent use of natural resources are fundamental aspects of the vision for this region, which is highly urbanised and subject to development pressure." (Regional Planning Guidance for the South East)

Indicator	Latest Data	Progress	RPG9 Policy	IRF Objective	Targets
25 Condition of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs)	2007: 80.17% favourable or unfavourable recovering	✓	E1	13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No net loss to designated sites of international, national or strategic importance through developments (RPG9) No further loss or damage to SSSIs (IRF: 'Action for biodiversity in South East England') Ensure that 95% of SSSIs are in 'favourable condition' by 2010 (PSA, IRF) All SSSIs to be in favourable condition by 2010 ('Action for biodiversity in South East England')
26 Number and area of designated sites damaged/destroyed by development	2006-07: 4.533 hectares	✗			
27 Change in areas of biodiversity importance, including: (i) Priority habitats and species (by type) (ii) Areas designated for their intrinsic environmental value including sites of international, national, regional or sub-regional significance	See text	■■■	E2	13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Year-on-year increase in each key habitat (RPG9) Increase woodland area in the Rest of the South East (ROSE) from 11% to 15% by 2016 (RPG9) By 2010, achieve a sustained increase in the regional wild bird population index (including reversing the historical declines in the indices of farmland and woodland species) (IRF) To maintain the condition and extent of all key regional habitats which are judged to be at a favourable conservation status (IRF) To restore and/or recreate key regional habitats so these reach a favourable conservation status (IRF)
28 Extent and condition of key habitats for which Biodiversity Action Plans (BAPs) have been established	See text	■■■			
29 Extent of ancient woodlands	2007: 235,095 hectares (include ancient & native woodland and plantations on ancient woodland sites)	✓			
30 Population of wild birds	2005: 96.6 (index 100 in 94)	✗			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Year-on-year improvements in pollution levels (RPG9, National Air Quality Strategy targets) To establish Air Quality Action Plans in areas which are likely to meet national air quality objectives (relevant local authorities in conjunction with partner agencies) (IRF)
31 Days when air pollution is moderate or high (rural and urban)	2006: 90 days	✗	E7	11	

Key to table: Significant effect indicator and National Core Output Indicator

Policy implications

Areas of international and national importance for nature conservation, landscape and cultural value

Policy E1 gives priority to protecting areas of national or international importance.

Although the condition of the Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) has stabilised over the last couple of years, further and faster improvements are necessary to achieve the target (95% of SSSIs in favourable condition by 2010). On the basis of the recent trend, this appears unlikely. Furthermore, the necessary improvement of site management is outside the direct influence of regional policy. It will be delivered by land managers (including conservation organisations) who will be influenced by incentives eg Environmental Stewardships. In terms of the impact of housing on designated sites, the increase in area damaged or destroyed by development does not constitute a trend yet, as data has only been monitored for two years. There is also a need to consider the impact of housing nearby designated sites on those sites, for example, sites designated under the European Birds and Habitats Directives. One such example is the Thames Basin Heaths SPA (which affects parts of Berkshire, Hampshire and Surrey), where mechanisms are being put in place to manage the impact of recreation on the SPA, and careful monitoring of the success of these mechanisms will be required over the next five years. Although the South East Plan continues with a strong emphasis on protection, pressure for development outside urban areas will increase in the future as the urban potential reduces and the scale of development required to meet Government targets on housing increases (see Chapter 2). This will need to be monitored closely.

 E1 – 2006  E1 – 2007

Biodiversity

Policy E2 aims to maintain and enhance the region's biodiversity and achieve national and locally set targets.

Unfortunately, activities affecting these indicators generally only reveal trends over a longer period of time and it is therefore difficult to judge performance. For example, the benefits of the recently introduced Environmental Stewardship schemes on farmland birds will not be seen for another few years. However, there is some cause for concern. While the national farmland bird indicator shows a broad stabilisation of populations since the early 1990s, the South East indicator is still showing a decline. The take-up of the Entry Level Scheme (ELS) farmland bird option needs to be monitored. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) is concerned that recent changes to the national set-aside policy will result in more land being taken into production which will have a negative effect on farmland birds. The RSPB is calling for more support for Environmental Stewardship schemes to counteract the effect of lost set-aside land. Another significant issue is the European Union Birds and Habitats Directive to protect ground nesting birds and its impact on land available for development in certain parts of the region. The area with the greatest problems is the Thames Basin Heaths SPA which affects parts of Berkshire, Hampshire and Surrey. Mechanisms are being put in place to manage this but careful monitoring will be required over the next five years.

 E2 – 2006  E2 – 2007

Air quality

Policy E7 aims to control pollution and improve air quality.

The indicator on air quality is limited as it relies on data from only five sites for 2006. The timeline over which the data is presented highlights the high level of variability in air pollution from year to year but the increase, which reflects the national picture, is of concern. The Air Quality Strategy (AQS) 2007 sets out the Government's policies aimed at delivering cleaner air in the UK and the draft South East Plan seeks to deliver improvements in air quality through joint working. However, hotter, drier summers predicted as a consequence of climate change could result in an increase in days of moderate or high air pollution at rural sites, unless pollutants are reduced. Work is underway at the Assembly and in partnership with SEEDA and WWF to set out a route map to achieving the Ecological Footprint and greenhouse gas reduction targets set out in the South East Plan.

 E7 – 2006  E7 – 2007

Areas of international and national importance for nature conservation, landscape and cultural value

RPG9 POLICY:

E1 Priority should be given to protecting areas designated at international or national level either for their intrinsic nature conservation value, their landscape quality or their cultural importance.

Indicator 25

Condition of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs).

Indicator 26

Number and area of designated sites damaged/destroyed by development.

Highlights

- The condition of Sites of Special Scientific Interest is improving with 80.17% in favourable and unfavourable recovering conditions in October 2007. This represents an increase of 12.8% since October 2004.
- Only Kent has been affected by housing developments in Nature Conservation areas. Six counties have been affected by housing developments in Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) and National Parks.
- Again, this year there was no data available for Oxfordshire.
- Housing developments in nature conservation areas, AONBs and National Parks have increased in five counties (Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Isle of Wight, Surrey and West Sussex).

	In target condition (meeting PSA target)(%)	Not in target condition (%)
October 2004	67.4	32.3
September 2005	72.5	27.5
October 2006	79.6	20.4
October 2007	80.17	19.3

Table 1 PSA target condition, 2004-07

Commentary

The condition of Sites of Special Specific Interest continues to move in the right direction; however, the progress in 2007 is insignificant.

The main causes of unfavourable condition include coastal squeeze and engineering, intensive agriculture, lack of grazing by livestock and increased deer population in woodlands ('Target 2010 – South East', English Nature).

The impact of housing on designated sites has increased. However, as data has only been accurate for the last two years, it is too early to consider any robust trend.

Generally, the monitoring of the landscape quality or cultural value of protected sites presents difficulties because of a lack of data and objective characteristics for monitoring.

Policies C1 – C3 from the draft South East Plan promote the sustainable land management in designated areas and landscapes, and the EiP inspectors' report stresses that high priority should be given to the protection of National Parks and AONBs.

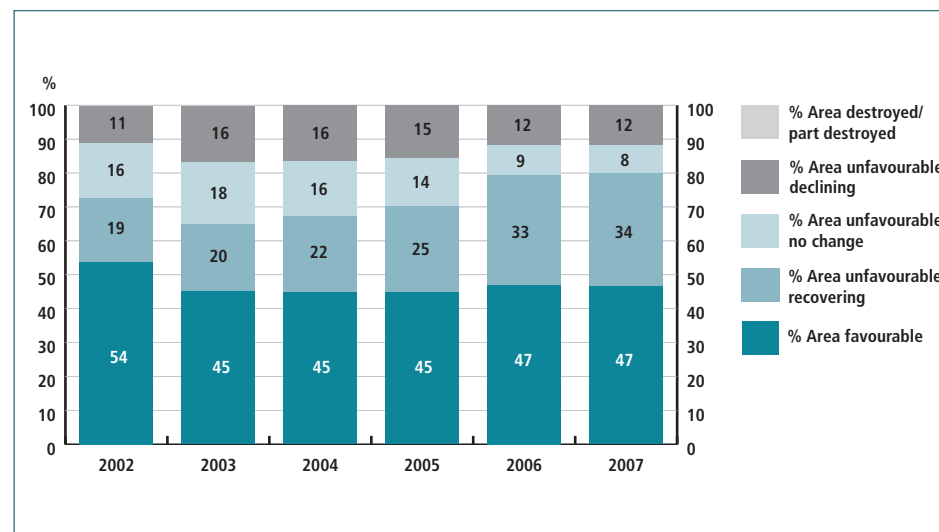


Figure 13 Condition of SSSIs in the South East

Source: English Nature.

Note: Figures do not sum 100 due to rounding.

	Nature Conservation ¹	AONBs and/or National Park
Berkshire	0	0.262
Buckinghamshire	0	2.38
East Sussex	0	0
Hampshire	0	0
Isle of Wight	0	0.64
Kent	0.008	0.06
Oxford	Not available	Not available
Surrey	0	1.153
West Sussex	0	0.03
SOUTH EAST	0.008	4.525

Table 2 Impact of greenfield development (completions) on nature conservation and designations (hectares covered by housing), 2006-07

Source: Data supplied by local authorities to Regional Assembly.

¹ Nature conservation comprises Ramsar, SPA, SAC, National Nature Reserve, SSSIs, and Sites of Nature Conservation Interest. Data only available in hectares.

Biodiversity

RPG9 POLICY:

E2 The region's biodiversity should be maintained and enhanced with positive action to achieve the targets set out in national and local biodiversity action plans through planning decisions and other measures.

Indicator 27

Change in areas of biodiversity importance, including:

- (i) Priority habitats and species (by type)**
- (ii) Areas designated for their intrinsic environmental value including sites of international, national, regional or sub-regional significance.**

Indicator 28

Extent and condition of key habitats for which Biodiversity Actions Plans (BAPs) have been established (including indicator 29 on extent of ancient woodlands).

This year, the South East England Biodiversity Forum has provided data for five types of habitats: inter-tidal habitats, reedbeds, calcareous grassland, woodlands and chalk rivers.

Highlights

- Since the last monitoring report, a comprehensive dataset for coastal BAP habitats has been produced as part of the BRANCH Interreg IIIB Project.
- The new dataset shows that the region holds about 2,500 hectares of saltmarsh (5.5% of the UK resource). This figure is half that reported in 2006; however, the change is owing to more accurate data.

- The South East holds 17,500 hectares of intertidal mud and sand flats (6% of the UK resource).
- For reedbeds, final results of a joint RSPB/Environment Agency project have led to a reduction in the estimated overall existing resource by about 50 hectares to 650 hectares.
- Current estimates put the amount of lowland calcareous grassland in the South East at 11,651 hectares (around a quarter of the national resource). Of these, 68% is protected within Sites of Special Scientific Interest. The proportion has not changed since 2005.
- Newly created calcareous grassland will not, in the short-term, replace the losses of diverse and ancient flower-rich grasslands declining through lack of management.
- The designated SSSIs chalk rivers – the Itchen, Test, Hampshire Avon and Kennet – remain in unfavourable condition. Many of the region's chalk rivers suffer from issues associated with over-abstraction and algae, and poor aquatic plant growth is a common cause of concern.
- Further surveys in Wealden District (East Sussex), Mid Sussex District (West Sussex) and Tunbridge Wells Borough (Kent) undertaken by a partnership of conservation bodies and local authorities has increased the area of ancient woodland compared to the original inventories (published in the late 1980s early 1990s) to 235,095 (include ancient and native woodland and plantations on ancient woodland sites). These surveys have included sub two-hectare woodlands for the first time, and indicate that the area of ancient woodland across the South East region recorded on the original inventories is likely to be a

considerable underestimate. Figures for established native woodland cover have, therefore, increased; however, the extent can only be determined once area comparisons between this and previous inventories have been made. These findings increase the woodland area protected through the planning process.

Habitat(s)	Extent/Area	Trend in area/extent	Condition	Trend in Condition
Intertidal flats (mud and sand flats)	✓	—	—	—
Intertidal flats (saltmarsh)	✗	✗	—	—
Reedbeds	—	—	—	—
Calcareous Grasslands	✗	—	—	—
Native Woodland/ Pasture Woodland/Parkland	✓	✓	—	—
Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS)	✓	✓	—	—
Wood Pasture/Parkland	—	—	—	—
Chalk rivers	✓	✓	—	—

Table 3 Extent and condition of key habitats, 2007

Source: South East England Biodiversity Forum.

Note: See annex for a definition of relevant key habitats.

Key to table:

- Green: available data indicates the status in the region is broadly favourable (key habitat is in a healthy state and is being conserved for the future by appropriate management)
- Amber: available data indicates the status in the region is unfavourable, but improving (all necessary management measures are in place to address reasons for unfavourable status)
- Red: available data indicates the status in the region is broadly unfavourable (key habitat is not being adequately conserved).

Commentary

The South East Regional Priority Habitat Dataset was put together in 2006 using data collected locally by the Local Environmental Records Centres in the region. It covers all priority habitats (and land-use in some counties). Local investment in collection and collation of habitat data has not been consistent across the region and the dataset is therefore not uniformly complete and recent across the South East. The most significant data gaps are in Surrey, East Sussex and West Sussex.

The creation of the dataset has attracted attention to the need for development of this resource and investment has been forthcoming from the South East England Regional Assembly, Natural England and local authorities to improve the data. Recent work has been specifically targeted to priority grassland habitats and to significant data gaps – particularly in Buckinghamshire, Surrey, East and West Sussex, Hampshire, Oxfordshire and Greater London. Work is planned on gap-filling and updating digital data over the next few years and this will improve the dataset across the whole of the region.

The data is available from The Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre which is acting as lead records centre for development and supply of data.

In the future this data will be vital to monitoring performance against the targets set out in policy NRM4 in the South East Plan.

Changes in the data collection methodology for a number of the key habitats make it difficult to determine any trends in extent and condition. Monitoring of all key habitats should be maintained in the future to determine changes and provide a comprehensive indication of biodiversity in the South East.

The proportion of Lowland Calcareous Grassland designated as an SSSI has not changed but the extent of the resource is unfavourable because of the depletion of the habitat over the last half century. Only now is this trend beginning to be addressed. However, at a regional level the extent of chalk rivers and inter-tidal flats habitats remains stable while the extent of woodland habitats has increased as a result of restoration and planting schemes.

The Environment Agency is tackling pressures on the region's chalk rivers through a number of initiatives including:

- Modifying abstraction licences and waste water discharge consents programme conducted in accordance with the Habitats Regulations
- On chalk streams not protected under the Regulations addressing over-abstraction pressures through a Restoring Sustainable Abstraction Programme.

Indicator 30

Population of wild birds.

Highlights

- In 2005, the population index was 85.2 for farmland, 89.8 for woodland and 96.6 for all species.
- Between 1994 and 2005, the population index has declined by 14% for farmland species (compared to 6% for England) and 10% for woodland species (compared to 5% for England). This represents a decline of more than 3% for all species (compared to 6% for England).
- The South East experienced the highest percentage decline of woodland and farmland birds in any English region.
- Detailed information on the long-term population trends of wild birds is based on the Common Birds Census, which shows that in the South East between 1970 and 1994, farmland populations fell by 31% and woodland bird populations by about 20%.

Commentary

Nine of 19 individual farmland bird species declined by 10% or more. Species that fared particularly poorly include grey partridge, starling and corn bunting.

Eleven of 28 individual woodland bird species declined by 10% or more. Spotted flycatcher and lesser whitethroat fared particularly badly.

Thirty of 79 individual species making up the index for all species in the South East declined by 10% or more. However, some species, such as the buzzard, did exceptionally well.



Figure 14 Population of wild birds, 1994-2005

Source: Department For Rural Affairs (Defra), British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB).

Air quality

RPG9 POLICY:

E7 Local authorities should work with the Environment Agency and others to play a positive part in pollution control and encourage measures to improve air quality.

Indicator 31

Days when air pollution is moderate or high (rural and urban).

Highlights

- In 2006 there were 90 days in the region where pollution was moderate or higher.
- The average number of days when pollution was moderate or higher in urban sites was 64 days in urban sites and 165 days in rural sites.
- Between 2005 and 2006, each site recorded higher levels of pollution than 2005 except for Lullington Heath (near the East Sussex Coast), which recorded a slight decrease.
- Again in 2006, the rural stations of Lullington Heath, Rochester, and Harwell experienced the highest number of days when air pollution was moderate or high.

Commentary

Air quality is measured at a range of national Automated Monitoring Network sites across the South East. Local authorities have an extensive network of air quality monitors, but this data are not currently collated at a regional or national level. The indicator is limited as it relies on data from only five sites for 2006 and local differences are hidden. Comparisons with previous years should be treated with caution, as Reading New Town site failed to capture data on sulphur dioxide (SO₂).

No overall trend is obvious but the increase, which reflects the national trend, is a concern. The timeline over which the data is presented highlights the high level of variability in air pollution from year to year. The Air Quality Strategy (AQS) 2007 sets out the Government's policies aimed at delivering cleaner air in the UK. The draft South East Plan proposes that local authorities and other relevant bodies should seek an improvement in air quality in their areas so there is a significant reduction in the number of days of medium and high air quality pollution by 2026. This will help to ensure that measures are taken to mitigate climate change. PPS1 on Planning and Climate Change states that "targets and trajectories can be helpful in assessing successfully implementation but only when their likely achievements derive directly or substantially from identified policies in the RSS and the likely means of delivery is consistent with other objectives in the RSS".

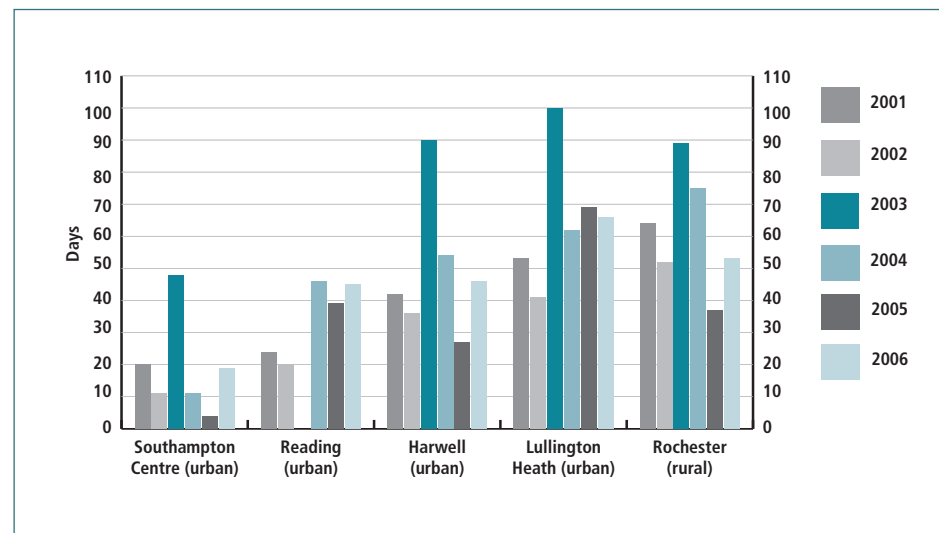


Figure 15 Number of days when air pollution was moderate or higher, 2001-06

Source: Defra.

Note: Urban monitoring sites comprise Reading and Southampton. No data was available for Reading in 2003. Rural monitoring sites comprise Harwell, Lullington Heath and Rochester.

The indicator is based on the banding system of the Government's Air Pollution Information Service which classifies levels of five major air pollutants (ozone, PM₁₀, sulphur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide and carbon monoxide) into bands of 'low/moderate/high/very high' pollution. These were chosen on the basis of effects on health and advice from the Department of Health's Committee on Medical Effects of Air Pollutants and reflect the increased risk of suffering health effects by vulnerable groups on specific days. Figure quoted in RMR06 was the total of number of days recorded in urban and rural sites.