

SPACES WILD

championing the values of London's wildlife sites



Protecting London's
wildlife for the future

Foreword

London is a remarkably green city supporting a wide diversity of habitats and species. Almost half of its area is blue and green space, and almost a fifth – covering over 1,500 different sites – is of sufficient value to biodiversity to be identified worthy of protection. These wildlife sites consist of much more than nature reserves, ranging from wetlands to chalk downs that are often valued by the local community for uses other than habitat. They have been established for almost 30 years, and as a network they provide the foundations for the conservation and enhancement of London's wildlife, and the opportunity for people to experience the diversity of the city's nature close to hand.

They are a fantastic asset, but awareness of wildlife sites – the Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs) – is low amongst the public (compared to, say, the Green Belt). There is understandable confusion between statutory wildlife sites and those identified through London's planning process. In addition the reasons why SINCs have been identified are often difficult to find out.

With London set to grow to 10 million people by 2030 the pressures on our wildlife sites will become profound. I have heard of local authorities being forced to choose between saving a local park and building a school. Accommodating our growth without causing a decline in the quality of our natural assets will be challenging; we have a target to build an estimated 42,000 homes a year in the capital merely to keep up with demand. Organisations responsible for the management, protection and monitoring of SINCs, are subject to significant reductions in funding.

The protection and management of London's SINCs is an essential component of meeting this challenge. With a growing understanding of the role of green infrastructure as a means to improve the functioning and comfort of the city, the relevance of wildlife sites should be seen as an opportunity to further enhance and extend the SINC network to secure gains for wildlife and people. It is time therefore to shout louder about what they are, what they provide, and how best we can sustain them for the future.

This report helps to explain what SINCs are, their purpose and how they differ from – and complement – other land-use designations. It's a complex picture, which is why their function is often misunderstood, and why they are vulnerable to being damaged or lost from development or inappropriate management.

With a society increasingly disconnected from the natural world, it makes it even more important for London's SINCs to remain in place, protected, conserved, and most importantly, cherished by the public. I hope this report plays its part in that.

Nicky Gavron

Nicky Gavron AM

London Assembly Member and Chair of the Assembly Planning Committee

*SINCs cover 19.3% of the
Greater London area*

*Jenny Wood Nature Reserve, West Hampstead,
a Borough SINC*

Front cover: Burgess Park, a Borough SINC



greater spotted woodpecker © Mike Snelle

Protecting London's wild spaces

The development and growth of London since the 1850s has meant that large areas of former countryside and natural habitats have been lost to urban development and have long since disappeared, or become degraded. Those that survive today have largely been protected through public action or deliberate planning policy. The establishment of the modern land-use planning system in the 1940s and a burgeoning interest in the environment and sustainability in the 1980s led to the development and refinement of a policy framework which has resulted in the mechanisms through which sites of natural value are afforded protection from possible development. A system to identify and protect sites of wildlife interest in London, established in 1985, is in operation today.

This report provides an overview of this framework and aims to act as a reminder of policy intent and to highlight some of the challenges to the protection and management of these sites as London continues to grow into a more densely populated metropolis.

What needs protecting?

London supports a wide diversity of wildlife habitats, including woodlands, rivers and wetlands, chalk downland, heaths, meadows, hedgerows, gardens and scrub. These support over 13,000 species which have been recorded within the capital over the last 50 years; some of these are of national or even international conservation importance. Protecting these habitats from loss or damage by development pressures helps to retain the overall quality of London's natural environment. Without this protection the overall quality of London's nature is likely to be damaged over time.

London's SINC system

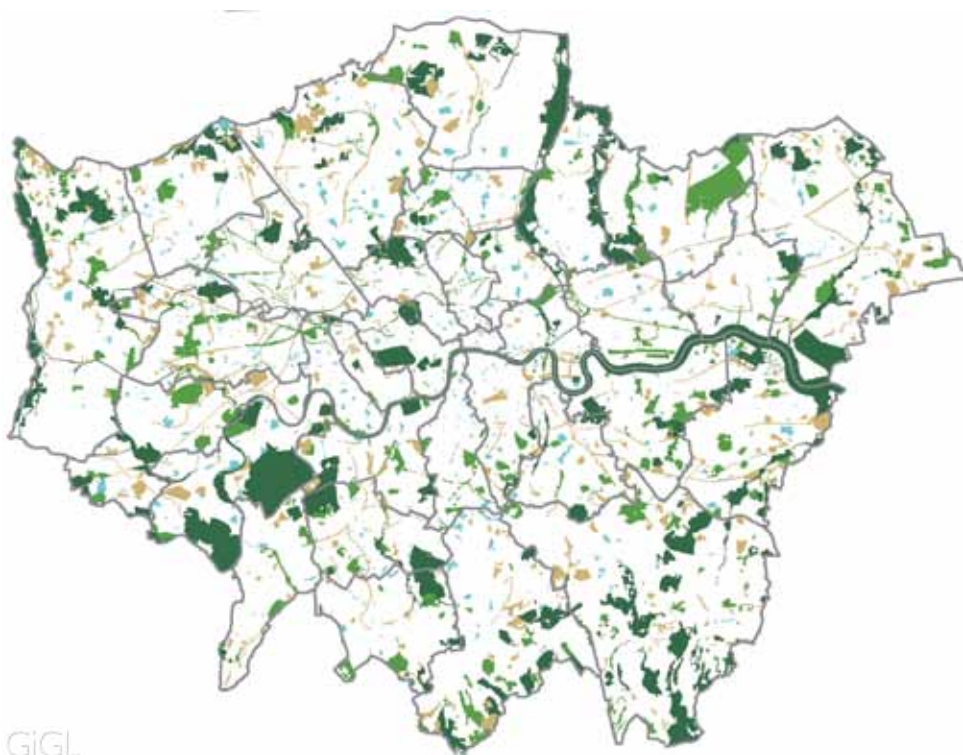
Wildlife sites are identified for the important habitats and species they support. Terms for describing them in Britain are varied; London's Local Wildlife Site system is the portfolio of Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs) and the policies applied to protect them. It is a land-use designation, identified through objective survey and evaluation, and affords levels of protection within the planning system. A comprehensive network of SINCs stretches across London, covering a breadth of important wildlife habitats, from woodlands, rivers and marshes, to public parks, cemeteries and community gardens. However, private gardens cannot be identified as a SINC.

London's SINCs are designated within a hierarchy of importance:

- **Sites of Metropolitan Importance** are of regional (London-wide) value (and some are of national or even international importance)
- **Sites of Borough Importance** (grade 1 and 2) are of value to their respective borough
- **Sites of Local Importance** help to redress any remaining local deficiencies in SINC provision and ensure people have access to green space close to home

Policy context

The London Plan (2015) and borough Local Plans are key to SINC identification and protection. 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. This is consistent with the objectives of the National Planning Policy Framework (paragraph 117, 2012).



GiGL

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London's Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation have been identified as the result of field-based survey since 1984. All SINC designations have since been reviewed as part of the local plan cycle, some as far back as 2006. GiGL now holds data and information on over 1,570 sites covering 19% of London, which are illustrated in the above map (Sites of Metropolitan Importance - dark green, Borough Importance - mid-green and brown, and Local Importance - blue)

How are SINCs identified?

For a SINC to be identified a number of criteria are used to determine the nature conservation value of the site in question. These are set out in Appendix 1 of the Mayor's Biodiversity Strategy; (*Connecting with London's Nature*, Greater London Authority, 2002). The criteria act as a guide to allow professional ecologists to identify the range of sites required to ensure the full range London's natural habitats are adequately represented, protected and accessible to local communities. However, local expertise needs to be involved in the evaluation process to help determine local value.

The London Wildlife Sites Board, chaired by the Greater London Authority (GLA), provides guidance on selecting and confirming SINCs. However, the selection of SINCs is primarily the responsibility of individual London boroughs as part of the preparation and review of their Local Plans. The Mayor and the GLA have a role in selecting and confirming Sites of Metropolitan Importance.

As of early 2015 there are 1,571 SINCs identified in Greater London.

These consist of:

- 140 Sites of **Metropolitan** Importance
- 878 Sites of **Borough** Importance
- 553 Sites of **Local** Importance

It is possible that not all sites that should be of SINC quality have been correctly designated as such. In addition SINCs may not be managed appropriately, leading to a degradation of their wildlife value.

It is essential to keep information up to date to ensure the identification and protection of SINCs through the land-use planning system. Between 1984-5 natural habitats across all London boroughs were surveyed to get a baseline of London's ecology. This provided the basis on which the London SINC network was established and through resurvey was eventually completed for all London boroughs in 2009.

Since these surveys were undertaken several London boroughs have updated their information on a regular basis; however, over half of London boroughs are reliant on habitat data that is over 10 years old. Some of this information is unlikely to be fit for purpose, particularly for those sites which contain habitats such as grasslands which can change quite rapidly if left unmanaged. However, Greenspace for Greater London (GiGL) – *see box on p.13* – regularly request verification data from local authority ecologists to confirm data is still broadly accurate. A number of other land owners provide data to GiGL on a site-by-site basis.

Consequently, London boroughs should update their data regularly to ensure the most valuable sites have been identified and the appropriate levels of protection area applied through local planning policy.

'I like this place it's quiet and peaceful'

"The series of non-statutory Local Sites seek to ensure, in the public interest, the conservation, maintenance and enhancement of species, habitats, geological and geomorphological features of substantive nature conservation value. [They] should select all areas of substantive value including both the most important and the most distinctive species, habitats, geological and geomorphological features within a national, regional and local context. Sites within the series may also have an important role in contributing to the public enjoyment of nature conservation."
Local Sites, Defra (2006)

SINC and SSSI; what is the difference?

Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) form a representative selection of habitat types across the country notified under a statutory process overseen by Natural England. As 'statutory sites' they are of national importance; in London there are 37 SSSIs (as well as a number of internationally important sites). SSSIs are afforded a high level of planning protection (higher than that for SINCs), and in addition their landowners are supported to manage their SSSI to maintain its biodiversity or geological interests for which it is notified (and can't undertake certain operations on them without Natural England's consent).

In terms of habitat quality there may be little apparent difference between a SSSI and a Metropolitan SINC (some geological SSSIs lie within Borough SINC), but the levels of protection afforded to them, and the implications for their management, are different.

Is a SINC a nature reserve?

SINC encompasses a wide range of green spaces that support a level of wildlife interest; most sites have more than one function, so are not just maintained to provide primary benefit for wildlife. Most of London's SINC are not nature reserves. Just because a site is designated as a SINC does not mean that it is managed specifically for wildlife, although all of London's identified nature reserves are also SINC.

A site can be identified as a statutory Local Nature Reserve (LNR) if the designating body (a local authority only) has a legal interest in the land. All 142 LNRs in London are identified as or within SINC, although the LNR may form just part of the SINC to reflect management objectives or land ownership e.g. Streatham Common and Totteridge Fields.

National Nature Reserves (NNRs) are SSSIs that are also designated to provide special opportunities for scientific study and education, and managed to provide public recreation that is compatible with their natural heritage interests. There are currently two NNRs within London; Richmond Park and Ruislip Woods.

SINC, Green Belt and Conservation Areas

The metropolitan green belt covers 22% of London, primarily on its outer fringes. Land within the Green Belt is afforded protection from development that damages its 'open (unbuilt) character', and many of London's SINC within it benefit from the protection it provides. Nevertheless, some uses of the Green Belt can be damaging to wildlife (e.g. agriculture, landfill, golf courses), and other land within the Green Belt may not necessarily be of high value for nature conservation. However, loss of Green Belt may prevent future opportunities for wildlife to prosper. Similar issues apply to sites within Metropolitan Open Land, known as 'inner London's Green Belt'.

Conservation Areas (CA) are based on the architectural or historic interest of an area (not its wildlife value), and includes protection of buildings, groups of trees, and views. Nevertheless, CA enjoy stronger planning protection than that for SINC, and a number of SINC benefit from also lying within or adjacent to CA boundaries, although this may impose some constraints on management (e.g. tree removal).

Why are SINCs important?

A place for nature

Much of London's most familiar wildlife are those species that have adapted to the urban environment and are able to thrive in the new habitats provided by parks, gardens and London's built environment. But many of the rare, uncommon and special species that occur in London are dependent upon particular habitats such as chalk grasslands, ancient woodlands or heathland which are remnants of once wild, natural places that existed prior to urbanisation and agricultural intensification. These fragments of natural habitat and the species they support are an important constituent of London's heritage and cultural identity. SINC's help preserve landscapes and natural features that help contribute to a sense of place and distinctiveness. Without these special places a city's neighbourhoods can gradually lose their identity.

Wild wellbeing

There is growing evidence demonstrating that spending time in natural green space improves our mood and self-esteem. However, in an increasingly urban society people are becoming more remote from the natural environment. Increased mental illnesses and obesity problems appear to show some links to this disconnection. Many SINC's provide ideal opportunities for people to take a walk, relax or simply escape the stresses of city life; without them most people would have to travel farther afield to gain that experience.



SHARING SPACES

BURGESS PARK

Burgess Park is Southwark's largest park. Stretching between Camberwell, Walworth and Peckham, it has developed as a result of Abercrombie's 1944 *Plan for London*. Bomb-site and slum clearance over the 1960s and '70s, led to the Park first opening in 1973. It was first designated as a Borough SINC in 1989, predominantly for its size (now 56 hectares) in an area otherwise deficient in natural green space.

Southwark Council is undertaking a major transformation of Burgess Park to significantly upgrade it to benefit local people; begun in 2010, this is due to be completed by 2018. As part of this transformation London Wildlife Trust identified the opportunity for the Park to enhance its value for biodiversity, towards designation as a Metropolitan SINC (e.g. similar to the status of St James's Park).

Potential areas for biodiversity enhancement were surveyed and plans for habitat improvements are being implemented. New wetlands, wildflower meadows and more diverse wooded areas are key to the Park's refurbishment. The Council's contractors are being trained in how to best manage these areas as part of their wider work, and the Trust is helping to monitor the success of these habitat interventions.

southwark.gov.uk/burgesspark



Pond dipping at Camley Street Natural Park, a small Metropolitan SINC in King's Cross, which - according to research - is worth £2.8 million a year to the local economy for the ecosystem services it provides.



“There are loads of bugs here, they are so cool... wow! Today I’ve seen millipede, centipede, woodlice, worms, spiders and beetles!”

Natural play

Research shows that children who are in regular contact with natural green spaces demonstrate enhanced cognitive development, and are more able to cope with stressful life events. Regular connection with nature at an early age can also have a positive impact upon an individual's attitude towards the environment in later life. Yet less than 10% of children today ever play in natural areas, compared to 40% of today's adults who did. Many SINCs provide the perfect opportunity for unstructured ‘natural’ play, getting children to use their own imagination which in turn provides benefits for their concentration and relaxation.

Providing city services

Natural habitats are critical to the functioning of the city; they are an important element of ‘green infrastructure’. Wetlands can help reduce the impacts of heavy rainfall, woodlands can help with city cooling and enhance air quality, and wild green spaces provide places in which we can step away from busy streets and relax. These ‘ecosystem services’ - which are so often taken for granted – are increasingly being recognised and evaluated as being important to people's quality of life and the city's functionality. The All London Green Grid (ALGG) is the policy framework to promote the design and delivery of ‘green infrastructure’ across London; the network of SINCs provides an essential core from which to further enhance wildlife habitats – and the benefits that they can provide. Therefore protecting, extending and creating SINCs is more than just nice to have; it is essential to making London a more pleasant place live, work and play.



Tolworth Court Farm, a Borough SINC



Threats to London's SINCs

London's SINC system has been remarkably successful and resilient over the last 30 years. However, with a rapidly growing London it faces considerable pressures, as the city needs to find places to accommodate a rapidly rising population. If the SINC system is to function effectively, then the purpose and importance of SINCs needs to be more visible to those that have the powers to protect them, those that value them and those that may choose to exert unintentional damaging impacts upon them.

Nibbled away

The most significant threat to SINCs is likely to be development as the capital's population grows to a projected 10 million by 2030. SINC policies do not provide absolute protection, other needs (schools, housing or transport infrastructure for example) can outweigh the need to protect a SINC from loss or damage. As a consequence a number of SINCs have been built on, and many more have had developments encroach upon them, or have been affected by the indirect impacts of new development close to their boundaries. Although planning policy requires mitigation or compensation for any damage or loss to the ecological value of a SINC these measures are not always sufficient or are not properly implemented, monitored and managed. Regular expert assessment of sites is one of the keys to ensuring that SINCs are recognised for their value and protected through policy.

ENCLOSING SPACES

GUNNERSBURY TRIANGLE

Gunnersbury Triangle is a 2.5 hectare nature reserve in Chiswick managed by London Wildlife Trust. In 1983 a landmark planning decision to protect the site for wildlife prevented development. Now a Metropolitan SINC and designated as a statutory Local Nature Reserve, it is dominated today by willow and birch woodland and includes a pond and several small areas of grassland, providing a home for over 200 plant species, 47 bird species, amphibians such as frogs, toads and newts, and a rich diversity of fungi and invertebrates.

Since the early 2000s, however, new development has arisen close to the reserve's boundaries, the most recent - in 2014 - adjacent to its northern edge. Although the footprint of the site is protected from direct encroachment, the impacts from tall buildings have destroyed the open character of the Triangle, and may adversely impact on its wildlife, in particular nocturnal species from light pollution. This sets a worrying precedent for wildlife as land prices encourage ever denser development within London.



dummock © Jonathan Michaelson



six-spot burnet moth



Loss of quality

The lack of appropriate management is increasingly being identified as a key threat to the quality and protection of SINC's. The SINC status applied to a site through the land-use planning process does not require the land-owner or manager to maintain a site's nature conservation interest. However, local authorities and other public bodies have an obligation under section 28 of the Natural Environment & Rural Communities Act 2006 to have regard for biodiversity within their service delivery. One primary way of meeting this responsibility is to ensure the appropriate management of the SINC's under their control, and to help to advise other landowners within their area on how they can maintain the quality of their SINC's. For more information on this subject see *Duty Bound* (see back cover).

Competing interests

Most SINCns in London are multifunctional; they include public parks, cemeteries, railway linesides, school grounds and reservoirs. Consequently they may need to be managed in ways that might limit their full ecological potential. Recognising how different user needs can be met whilst seeking to maximise opportunities to enhance biodiversity habitats on a site is critical for maintaining and strengthening the SINC network across London. In recent years many more parks are being managed in ways that enhance their ecological value and increase the amount of quality wildlife habitats. But a growing population is likely to result in greater recreational pressure on the city's parks and green spaces, presenting new challenges for creating and managing space for nature.



LOSING SPACES

ERITH QUARRY

Erith Quarry was an active minerals extraction site from the 1890s to the early 1980s. After quarrying ceased, the site was vacated and in the 1990s the site was given a dual designation; as a Borough SINC (in recognition of the Quarry's relative habitat value), and for redevelopment.

Planning permission was granted for residential dwellings and a new primary school with associated landscaping in March 2015. Ecology was an important consideration for this application; extensive ecological surveys were carried out before any designs were finalised. It was argued, as part of the permission, that the ecological value of part of the site was declining (mainly due to lack of management).

Although the approved development will reduce the area designated as a SINC (22.78ha) a principle behind the development was to protect and enhance the best habitats. 3.25 hectares of the best grassland was retained. Ponds will be created within this area, and the ring of woodland that surrounds the site will be enhanced through a plan delivered by a specially created management company.

The funding of nature conservation activities directed through 'planning gains' is very low. Department for Communities and Local Government figures for 2007/8 show housing development valued at £95bn nationally; of this £5bn in S106 contributions was made, with only £5m allocated to 'nature conservation'.

CONNECTING SPACES

BATS

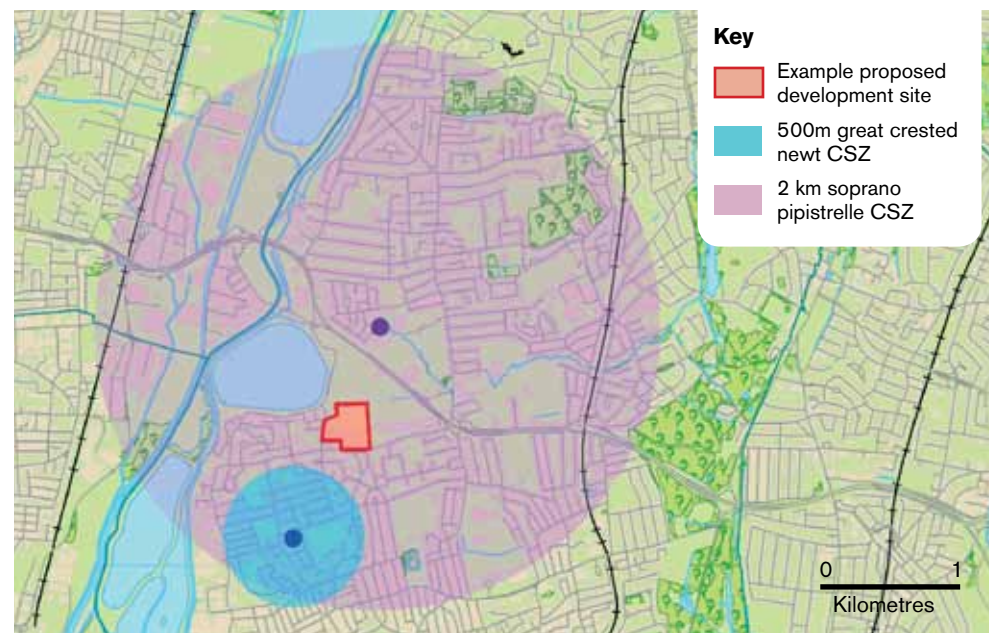
Bats are highly mobile species that use the landscape intensively for foraging, roosting and commuting. In cities, where green spaces are smaller and more fragmented, they need to commute from their roosts in buildings to suitable foraging areas. Research indicates that in order for a bat roost to survive bats need to have access to foraging within a core distance from their roost. This core foraging area (the Core Sustenance Zone - CSZ) provides the food that bats need to feed their young without having to commute large distances. Loss or reduction of this foraging area could therefore result in a loss of a roost.

Foraging areas within the CSZ are often not known, nor given adequate protection; very many are likely to fall outside a SINC. When assessing planning proposals, it is common practice to determine the importance of a site based on the species recorded there. However, the absence of a record does not mean that the site is not used by a species, particularly mobile and difficult to record animals such as bats. For example, land beside Fortismere School in Haringey is a small open space, mostly woodland which has developed from overgrown landscaped grounds, with two small lined ponds which support limited aquatic vegetation. It is designated as a Local SINC, although a significant proportion of it has been redeveloped to accommodate the school.

Despite no roosting bats being recorded on the site it is an important foraging resource for bats roosting in the local area. Further development of it could result in an adverse impact on the local bat population.



brown long-eared bat © Hugh Clarke



When trying to identify impacts of development the current system is a 'one size fits all' approach; assessments will only seek out records of key species within 1km of the development boundary. This is often not appropriate for highly mobile species such as bats. All species have an area that they most regularly use to find food, known as a CSZ. For most ground-dwelling species - such as slow-worm or great crested newt - the extent of the CSZ may be no more than 500m across, but bats will regularly fly up to 2km from their roost. The map above shows how the CSZ approach would look; the development site (red) does not impact upon the CSZ of a great crested newt colony but is within the CSZ of a soprano pipistrelle bat. Using this approach changes the decision-making process for this site by identifying that habitat requirements for a bat might need to be addressed within a development proposal. This type of desk survey is recommended as best practice, however it is only requested in around 1% of planning cases. The complete lack of information may constitute a more pressing issue than the current search area.

Broken links in the chain

Maintaining SINC's as the key nodes of a wider network is critical to maintaining the ecological health and functionality of the wider green space network – including the large area of London occupied by gardens. No individual site functions as effectively in isolation as it does in being connected to a much larger network of sites; and the fact that sites being lost or degraded in ecological quality will increase the impacts of fragmentation. Many mobile species rely on a number of sites and/or habitats within their lifecycles, ideally adjacent to each other, connected via suitable green corridors or within close proximity.



Limited data and evaluation

An essential requirement of an effective SINC system is the data required to evaluate a site's nature conservation value. Natural and semi-natural habitats are dynamic and regular surveys and monitoring of site condition is needed to determine changes to the ecological value of a site. Identification of SINC's should also incorporate local knowledge to aid understanding of sites' value to local communities. Consulting with local groups is vital to identifying issues of concern, and for understanding potential conflicts of management. However, survey, monitoring and effective consultation are often activities that are curtailed when budgets and resources are tight.

Trampled underfoot

Visitor pressures on London SINC's are inevitably some of the highest in the country, although this is unequal across the city. St James's Park (a Metropolitan SINC) hosts over 7 million visits a year, and Brockwell Park (a Borough SINC) hosts almost 4 million annual visits, whereas some SINC's on London's outer fringes may not see more than 50 people a year. Many SINC's are closed to the public or have limited access. Measures to reduce the impacts of visitors on wildlife are well understood and now generally well-embedded in site management. Nevertheless, visitor pressures can be acute and the biodiversity features of public park SINC's may need to compete against multiple demands from a broad range of other interests, and even with the right management may degrade (for example, through disturbance to birds).



before



after (© Rebecca Harrison)

TRAMPLED SPACES

HIGHGATE WOOD

Highgate Wood is a 28 hectare Metropolitan SINC in north London surrounded by residential areas (with a couple of large residential developments being built nearby) and good transport links. The Wood is very popular with young families and dog walkers as well as those who wish to keep fit. With increasing numbers of visitors, new plant pathogens, and more extreme weather events, the Wood is under constant pressure.

Many areas of the ancient woodland floor are compacted due to the high footfall, which in turn affects the health not only of the ground flora but also of the trees. Trees have an intimate symbiotic relationship with fungi through microscopic mycorrhiza which grow on the roots of the trees increasing their capacity to absorb nutrients and water. The trees return food in the form of sugars through to the fungi's mycorrhiza. Compacted soil inhibits this process because the fungi cannot grow and the gaseous exchange required is also inhibited. This in turn affects the trees roots' abilities to grow, absorb water and nutrients and maintain anchorage.

Management at Highgate Wood make extensive use of dead hedging to reduce trampling of sensitive areas, and create 'conservation areas' every 5 years, where the canopy is opened up and the area fenced off for 10 years. These conservation areas are helping to promote tree regeneration, enhance tree age diversity, and give the ground a 10-year break from trampling.

Holding the evidence

Information on London's SINC's is managed by Greenspace Information for Greater London CIC (GiGL), the capital's environmental records centre. This includes site boundaries, citation documents and information regarding a site's accessibility. SINC data are accessed via GiGL for many local and national uses, and it is critical that the evidence base is kept up to date.

GiGL is a not-for-profit community interest company whose remit includes providing existing habitat and species information to inform new field surveys, as well as providing guidance for data collation methodologies and standards. For example, boundaries should be mapped to OS MasterMap and citations provided using the standard citation templates. New survey information should be supplied to GiGL to ensure its ongoing use by its stakeholders.

GiGL has also mapped and maintains the Areas of Deficiency (AoD) dataset, which is available for review and analysis. London boroughs should inform GiGL when SINC designations are created or altered, and if any changes to a SINC affect the alleviation of AoD. Liaison with GiGL at an early stage should aid the site designation process so that new SINC and AoD maps can be supplied and analysed.

gigl.org.uk



Clapham Common meadows



© Friends of Littleheath Woods


LOCALLY-RUN SPACES

LITTLEHEATH WOODS

Littleheath Woods in Selsdon, south Croydon, is a Borough SINC covering 25.3 hectares and largely surrounded by suburban housing. Comprising of both ancient and younger woodland, grassland, and ponds, it is an important amenity resource for local people, used for recreation and available for schools and youth groups for educational purposes. Under-management of the site led to the formation of The Friends of Littleheath Woods in 1994. The Friends, supported by local subscriptions, undertake site management to meet the objectives of the Croydon Council's shared Management Plan Vision for Littleheath Woods.

The Friends also lead walks to introduce people to the wildlife and natural aspects of the site. They are affiliated to The Conservation Volunteers and the Council provide funding for the Friends' insurance needs, as well as the advice of a forestry specialist to assist on tree management. Selsdon Residents Association are supportive of the Friends' work and have provided resources to assist in path signage.

www.folw.co.uk



‘This is a really lovely area, I didn’t even know it was here. It’s such a nice space to be in.’

London’s SINC’s support 91% of the protected species in Greater London and 207 of London’s 214 Biodiversity Action Plan priority species. Most of the known Biodiversity Action Plan priority habitats are found within SINC’s, including 1,351ha of acid grassland, 123ha of reedbed and 47ha of lowland heathland. However, private gardens are excluded from SINC status.

Ten Acre Woods meadow in Hillingdon



Beam Parklands © The Land Trust

EXPANDING SPACES

BEAM PARKLANDS

In 2011 the 53 hectare Beam Parklands in Dagenham opened after a major refurbishment, following recognition that this Borough SINC could both increase flood storage capacity and benefit from significant habitat creation. Under the ownership of The Land Trust an endowment fund of £1.9m was secured from the then Homes & Communities Agency, when the project was identified for the East London Green Grid. The Parklands have been added to the Land Trust’s investment portfolio, and their 25-year investment strategy – with a methodology for calculating endowment that has been sanctioned by government – gives them the capability to manage the risks and liabilities associated with restored spaces. Interest earned covers the Parklands’ future maintenance and repairs in perpetuity, as well as helping to support thousands of community events and educational activities for generations of children.

Over the long-term, an endowment managed by a third party can be more cost effective for a local authority upon completion of a major refurbishment project. This solution gives Beam Parklands a securer future and reduces maintenance liabilities for the Environment Agency and the London Borough of Barking & Dagenham (the previous land owners).

What we all can do to help

The role of local authorities

Protection through planning

Embedding robust planning policy for the identification and protection of SINCs into forward planning will continue to be essential to ensuring that a borough's critical ecological assets are properly protected. But simply identifying and mapping the SINC network to protect key assets from loss to development is unlikely to be sufficient in the future. Planning policy will also need to be used to encourage connectivity between sites and improvements to the wider green space network to increase the overall resilience of the SINC network. Where loss or damage is unavoidable planning policy should be more effective in securing sufficient mitigation or compensation, by exploring mechanisms such as biodiversity offsetting.

Managing wildlife sites

Many SINCs need specific and appropriate management to maintain their ecological value. Resourcing the management of sites will be a challenge with reduced public sector budgets; new approaches and new funding sources will need to be identified. This might include transferring or devolving management to other bodies, including local communities, or linking the management objectives to the local authority's statutory duties in order to maximise opportunities for co-funding.

Promoting the value

Promoting the multiple benefits that SINCs can provide is a means to raise their profile within local communities and help secure local support and involvement in future management. In addition, evaluating and illustrating the costs and benefits of a functioning SINC system – using techniques such as natural capital accounting – should be part of long-term economic planning which takes proper account of the value of these assets to the resilience and well-being of local communities.

Local authorities should provide leadership in establishing and maintaining partnerships and systems to identify and manage Local [Wildlife] Sites. Defra 2006



Hutchinson's Bank, a Metropolitan SINC

Local communities

Raising awareness

The SINC status of many sites is not often well known, or its implications for the land-use planning process not clearly understood. Raising awareness of the reason for a site's SINC status will help to ensure that the wildlife interest of a site is 'on the radar'. This encourages more constructive and informed dialogue about the protection and management of the site.

Forward planning

All of London's local authorities are required to prepare Local Plans which set out the policies necessary to shape development within the borough. This includes the identification of SINCc and inclusion of policies for their protection. By participating in the Plan process local community groups can send a clear message that the protection of wildlife and natural green spaces are very important to them, and that plan policies should be sufficiently robust to protect and, if possible, to expand the SINC system.

Development management

Engaging in the planning process can help to influence a decision over a planning application. Nature conservation is a material consideration within the planning system, and if a SINC is affected by a proposed development then raising this issue with the planning case officer at an early stage is vital. Informing London Wildlife Trust and other groups can usually assist in this process when impacts on wildlife are significant.

Making friends of SINCs

There are currently over 500 local 'friends of' groups operating in London, aiming to improve their local green space which include SINC. Supporting these groups, establishing new ones and helping with activities and site management can help to raise the awareness of the ecological interests and needs of sites that are SINC.

Information gathering

Many people have an interest in wildlife, and their activities could lead to much more information being available about London's SINC. Recording and monitoring wildlife is very important and GiGL collate data from a variety of sources including community groups.

London Wildlife Trust's commitments

The Trust manages over 40 SINC, and we are working to ensure that these achieve their ecological potential and are places where people can experience London's wildlife close to hand. We are able to provide advice on management, and undertake appropriate surveys, monitoring and evaluation of wildlife sites. We will advocate for regular review and surveys of London's SINC, and through our role on the London Wildlife Sites Board, help to ensure that their identification is robustly scrutinised.

The Trust will continue to promote the importance of London's wildlife sites, and the role they play in enhancing the wider green infrastructure of the city – not only that currently exist but that we need to restore and create. We will be working with many partners, landowners and local communities to restore the natural landscape through our Living Landscapes and the All London Green Grid; SINC are critical pieces of the jigsaw that needs to be enhanced and better ecologically connected. By doing so it should contribute to a city-wide and national network of high-quality natural areas for wildlife and people.



ringlet © Penny Frith



common carder bee © Penny Frith

Take Action

For local authorities

- raise awareness about the range of benefits SINC provide
- survey SINC to support local plans and strengthen their protection
- promote connectivity of SINC through policy and projects
- engage and support community groups to help manage sites
- ensure planning decisions are informed by up-to-date wildlife data



Saltbox Hill SSSI, a Metropolitan SINC



heather

For local communities

- raise awareness about your local SINC
- join your local 'friends of' group
- provide wildlife information about your local SINC
- make comments on the development of your Local Plan
- draw attention to planning applications that affect SINC

Further reading:

Local Sites; Guidance on their Identification, Selection and Management, 2006, Defra
Duty Bound, 2008, legacy.london.gov.uk/gla/publications/environment/dutybound.pdf
Process for selecting and confirming Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs) in Greater London, 2013, Greater London Authority
Secret Spaces, 2014, The Wildlife Trusts wildlifetrusts.org/localwildlifesites
Camley Street Natural Park; an economic valuation of ecosystems services, 2015, Atkins

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