

# How to: protect or designate a site

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Nature sites and areas of countryside can be 'designated', which means they have special status as protected areas because of their natural and cultural importance. Sites that are important for nature conservation can be designated at different levels.

1. **The highest level of protection is offered to sites that are of European significance: Special Protection Areas (SPAs) and Special Areas of Conservation (SACs).**
2. **The next level of protection is for nationally important sites: a) Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and b) National Nature Reserves (NNRs).**
3. **There are then locally designated or 'third tier' sites: a) Local Nature Reserves (LNRs) and b) Local Wildlife Sites (LWS).**

Designations can overlap. Sheffield contains a spread of different levels of designated sites with the exception of NNRs; with the European level sites in the Peak District National Park (the Designated Sites Chapter of the Sheffield State of Nature Report provides more information on the Sheffield sites <https://www.wildsheffield.com/wildlife/wildlife-conservation/sheffield-state-of-nature/>).

Rotherham contains a spread of nationally and locally important sites.

Protection means that these places have clear boundaries, people and laws to make sure that the nature and wildlife aren't harmed or destroyed and can sometimes be used by people for recreation and study.

There are restrictions on activities and developments that might affect a designated or protected area, for example, building new houses or roads. This includes areas next to as well as in those areas. Nationally and internally important sites are protected by law, whereas locally designated sites are only protected by policies, such as planning policies.

## 1. Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and Special Protection Areas (SPAs)

SACs and SPAs have been created under the EC Birds Directive and Habitats Directive. In the UK they form part of a larger European network called Natura 2000. SPAs are areas of the most important habitat for rare (listed on Annex I to the Directive) and migratory birds within the European Union. Legal protection prevents damaging activities to both SPAs and SACs.

## 2. Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs)

SSSIs are designated under the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 where they support habitats and/or species of national importance. SSSIs represent our best sites for wildlife and geology. Well over half, by area, are internationally important and many play an important part in local culture and economies or provide wonderful opportunities for people to enjoy wildlife and the landscape. The natural wildlife and geological features of SSSIs are irreplaceable parts of our national heritage. These are protected in order to preserve their importance, and to prevent damage and development. Designating a new SSSI is a significant undertaking, but can be done. The Dearne Valley Wetlands were designated in 2022 for example. Guidance on the process can be found here:

<https://jncc.gov.uk/our-work/guidelines-for-selection-of-sssis/>

[www.gov.uk/guidance/protected-areas-sites-of-special-scientific-interest#new-sssi-notifications](http://www.gov.uk/guidance/protected-areas-sites-of-special-scientific-interest#new-sssi-notifications)

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### 3 a. Local Nature Reserves (LNRs)

Are designated by the Local Authority and Natural England. Designation requires a management plan, public consultation and input and sign-off from Local Authority service leads and legal teams. In Sheffield this is the Parks and Countryside Department and in Rotherham it is the Green Spaces Department.

The main difference between a LWS and a LNRS is that the latter is a **statutory designation** - this means that it tends to be found more in searches of protected sites etc - for example they are found on the publically available [Magic Map](#).

However, there is no national legal protection specifically for LNRs but they can be given more weight in planning policies in Local Plans. More information can be found here:

[www.gov.uk/guidance/create-and-manage-local-nature-reserves](http://www.gov.uk/guidance/create-and-manage-local-nature-reserves)

And in this useful summary from [South Derbyshire](#)

### 3 b. Local Wildlife Sites (LWSs)

Local Wildlife Sites (LWSs) are wildlife-rich sites selected for their local nature conservation value. They play a vital contribution in delivering both UK and local biodiversity targets whilst maintaining local character and distinctiveness. They vary in shape and size and can contain important, distinctive and threatened habitats and species. They are not protected by law like SSSIs or National Nature reserves. Whilst SSSIs are a representative sample that meet national criteria, LWSs include all sites that meet local selection criteria. Local Site systems 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. Many are owned by private individuals.

Their designation is non-statutory and their only protection comes via policies in the planning system. Designation is made by Local Wildlife Site Panels/Partnerships made up of the Local Authority, local Nature Conservation Charities and groups, local experts and sometimes representatives of Government bodies. They select sites based on criteria written and agreed locally. In Sheffield the Local Wildlife Sites Partnership is led by the Ecology Unit in the Parks & Countryside Department of SCC. In Rotherham, The Local Wildlife Panel is led by the Green Spaces Department of RMBC. The Councils or SRWT can be contacted for copies of the selection criteria. Data collected by local people/groups can provide vital evidence for designation.

[www.wildlifetrusts.org/local-wildlife-sites](http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/local-wildlife-sites)

[www.wildlifetrusts.org/wildlife-and-wild-places/protecting-wildlife-sites/different-types-protected-wildlife-sites](http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/wildlife-and-wild-places/protecting-wildlife-sites/different-types-protected-wildlife-sites)

## 4. Open and Green Spaces

As well as designating spaces for their nature conservation value, sites can be designated as Open and Green Spaces, Village Greens or Commons which have more of an access and recreation focus, but can include the value of accessing and enjoying nature. Village Green Applications are a significant undertaking as evidence of how the space has been used by the community over 20 years has to be collected and presented. The following organisation can provide advice through their Toolkit, case studies and expert advice.

[www.oss.org.uk/what-do-we-fight-for/village-greens/](http://www.oss.org.uk/what-do-we-fight-for/village-greens/)