Mobilisation of Local Wildlife Site end of project report

August 2025
Version 1

Contents

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Acronym	Definition
BNG	Biodiversity Net Gain
DEFRA	Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
GIS	Geographic Information System
LAs	Local Authorities
LERC	Local Environment Records Centre
LNRS	Local Nature Recovery Strategy
LPAs	Local Planning Authorities
LWS	Local Wildlife Site
NNR	National Nature Reserves
NCEA	Defra's Natural Capital and Ecosystem Assessment
NE	Natural England
OS	Ordnance Survey
OSMM	Ordnance Survey Master Map
RPA	Rural Payments Agency
SLA	Service Level Agreement
SSSI	Site of Special Scientific Interest
TWT	The Wildlife Trusts
UKHab	UK Habitat Classification

Partners and Funders

The Local Wildlife Sites Projects is delivered by The Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts (RSWT) in partnership with Natural England and funded by Defra's Natural Capital and Ecosystem Assessment (NCEA) programme. NCEA is delivering a nationwide survey of England's land, coast, and sea: mapping the location, extent and condition of our ecosystems and the benefits they provide. Through comprehensive monitoring and the development of innovative tools and guidance, the programme is providing insights on how and why our environment is changing and the impact of this – so that we can better protect and manage our natural capital for people and the planet. This report outlines the key findings collected through a series of LWS stakeholder meetings, workshops and 1-1 discussions between the period of January 2024 and March 2025 throughout the duration of LWS project. We wish to extend our thanks to everyone who took the time to contribute to these discussions.

NCEA
Natural Capital and Ecosystem Assessment

NATURAL ENGLAND

1. Introduction

1.1 What are Local Wildlife Sites and why are they important?

Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) are defined areas, identified and selected locally for their nature conservation value, based on important, distinctive and threatened habitats and species that have a national, regional and a local context. Found on both public and private land, LWS vary in size and shape from small ponds, copses and linear features such as hedgerows, road verges and water courses to much larger areas of habitat such as ancient woodlands, heaths, wetlands and grassland. Collectively, they play a critical role in the conservation of the UK's natural heritage by providing essential wildlife refuges in their own right and by acting as stepping stones, corridors and buffer zones to link and protect other site networks and the open spaces of our towns and countryside.

LWS are assessed against local criteria, these criteria are a set of scientific and ecological standards used to assess and designate LWS. Some LWS are of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) quality, but SSSIs are a representative sample of our best sites that meet designation criteria. Unlike SSSI, LWS are non-statutory and have no legal protection, instead they rely on good local planning policies and decisions. The total cumulative coverage of LWS gathered from LWS partnerships was 750,475 hectares (ha). To help contextualise this, in England, National Nature Reserves (NNRs) cover over 110,000 ha, Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) cover 1,009,620 ha and National Parks cover 1,260,400 ha.

1.2 What is a Local Wildlife Site System?

A Local Wildlife Site system is the partnership-based approach for identifying, selecting, assessing, monitoring and protecting Local Wildlife Sites. Systems are most commonly administered on a county or unitary authority scale and their efficient delivery requires access to a large volume of up-to-date information and data.

Organisations included in the LWS partnerships vary, as does the partner responsible for holding digitised Local Wildlife Site boundary data but this is usually the Local Environmental Record Centre (LERC), one or more local authorities (county, unitary, metropolitan and/or district/borough) and / or Wildlife Trusts.

Local Environmental Record Centres (LERCs) play a vital role in collecting, managing, and sharing local wildlife data, supporting biological recording, and informing local decision-making, including planning and conservation efforts. A shared data business model has been developed by LERCs with the aim to create sustainable income that, as non-profit organisations, is invested in ongoing data stewardship work, and the development and provision of data, information and answer services to their stakeholders.

1.3 What is the aim of the project?

It is becoming increasingly difficult to secure recognition of LWS in national policy, or to secure incentives for their management, because there is no nationally consistent information on their location and status. The Wildlife Trusts have long been the champions for LWS, but there is no national picture of LWS, including how many LWS system partnerships are still active.

The initial part of the project will enable an understanding of the current status of the Local Wildlife Site System including how the whole system is functioning, what LWS data is held and whether or how the data can be accessed. It will broadly identify any issues with data sharing, both practical and resource based, and begin the dialogue with the Local Wildlife Site Partnerships to work together to develop solutions.

The project will then identify what is needed to enable the long-term sustainability of collecting, managing, and sharing this LWS data, resourcing needs, and to produce recommendations for addressing these challenges.


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2. Main findings

2.1 Identifying and understanding the condition of LWS

2.1.1 LWS System Status Report

The initial part of the project aimed to understand the current status of the Local Wildlife Site System, how the whole system is functioning, what LWS data is held and whether or how the data can be accessed. Questionnaires were sent to 52 LWS Partnerships requesting this information, and there was a response rate of 94%. This information was summarised into the LWS System Status Review Report and includes: the status of the LWS Partnerships, data gaps identified, licensing constraints and thoughts on data sharing. The report also includes choropleth maps showing the quantity and density of LWS in each Partnerships area (where data was available) and identifying broad data gaps[1].

2.1.2 Resources and guidance

Selection Criteria
LWS Selection Criteria are a set of local scientific and ecological standards used to assess whether a site should be identified as a LWS. These criteria are used to determine if a site has sufficient biodiversity value to merit recognition and selection is based on the most important and threatened species and habitats, locally, regionally and nationally. They are selected locally by partnerships of Local Authorities (LAs), nature conservation charities, Local Environmental Record Centres (LERCs), statutory agencies and other local stakeholders.

As the selection criteria for LWS varies locally, standardising the criteria could be useful to ensure consistency in the selection process across the country, however, local criteria are tailored to specific regional ecological characteristics and a standardised criteria could risk overlooking locally important sites. Some partnerships, in this context meaning organisations responsible for maintaining the LWS system, have a robust selection criterion based on the 2006 DEFRA guidance[2], their criteria are reviewed regularly to ensure it is appropriate and they have used other LWS partnership criteria to ensure they align. However, some partnerships have experienced the following issues:

1. Some partnership selection criteria is vague, so issues arise due to individual interpretation, particularly with developers.
2. Variation in selection criteria across partnerships can make it difficult to compare sites and trends effectively.
3. Species related criteria are weaker than habitat criteria for some partnerships due to lack of expertise.
4. Lack of a standardised process for the deselection of LWS when overlapping with other designations such as SSSIs or Super National Nature Reserves.
5. How to update the selection criteria to tackle dynamic processes with scientific rigour.
6. How to update the selection criteria for species reintroductions and make this consistent nationally.
7. Need to update selection criteria to make more reference to Priority habitats, UKHab and BNG condition assessment.
8. May need distinct criteria for urban and rural sites (although this may not be appropriate for all partnerships and would require a definition for urban and rural sites).
9. Issues around some approaches where a species needs to be present for x number of years to reach the threshold for designation, but current capacity issues do not always allow for regular survey of sites.

Standardising the selection criteria for LWS could be useful to help with the issues above but would also need to be flexible for local interpretation and transitioning to a standardise system would require significant time and resources.

A more useful solution could be to revise and republish the archived 2006 DEFRA guidance, to also bolster the importance of LWS in local planning.

1 Local Wildlife Sites System Status Review: Local Wildlife Sites Project
2 Local Sites: Guidance on their Identification, Selection and Management

Guidance for landowners:
Across the country, the availability and format of habitat management advice for LWS varies widely. In some cases, partnerships provide habitat management advice online and offer tailored advice to landowners who get in touch. However, the majority of partnerships do not have management guidance published, and advice is only shared after a site survey, typically in the form of broad, general recommendations rather than a detailed management plan. Some partnerships do not provide direct guidance themselves and instead signpost to other organisations for help.

The content and specificity of habitat guidance, often varies between regions due to the range of habitats found across the country. Even when sites share the same broad habitat type, differences in local context calls for tailored management approaches and so guidance from one region may not be applicable elsewhere. Although there are regional variations for habitat types and management methods, many partnerships have expressed interest in adapting existing habitat guidance for their own use. By creating a shared resource library of habitat management materials, partnerships could save time, make better use of existing knowledge and work towards a more consistent approach to LWS management across the country.

2.1.3 Existing methodologies for the assessment of LWS

Current methods to assess LWS
A variety of methods are currently used to assess LWS and for the monitoring of these sites, reflecting differences in capacity, partner needs and the level of detail required to complete adequate survey depending on the species present. The methods described are ways to classify and map habitats. Currently the most common method is the Phase 1 Habitat survey (as seen in figure 1), this approach involves mapping and categorising habitats within a site, typically accompanied by a species list recorded per habitat. Phase 1 surveys can be supplemented with detailed site descriptions, target notes, full species list and photos. The information collected is then assessed against a locally agreed set of LWS selection criteria to determine whether a site qualifies. Phase 1 has been historically used and acts as a baseline for monitoring changes in site condition over time.

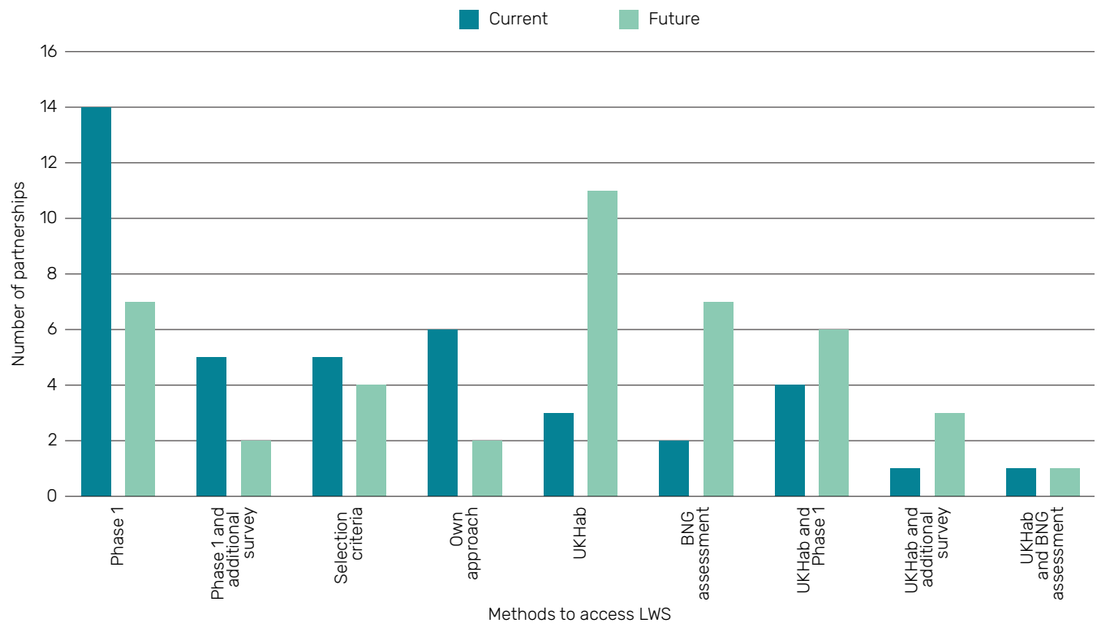

Figure 1: Graph to illustrate the different methods currently used by partnerships and the methods planned to be used or trialled in the future.

In some cases, Phase 1 alone is not always sufficient, sites selected for their important birds, invertebrates and other species may require more targeted survey techniques to test if a site meets the LWS criteria.

As seen in figure 1, many LWS partnerships, are exploring alternative or complementary methods. Twenty-one out of 43 partnerships plan to utilise the UK Habitat Classification (UKHab) method, either as a stand alone or in combination with Phase 1. This method involves classifying and mapping habitats using a list of standard habitat types, each with specific codes and descriptions. UKHab is becoming the industry standard, largely driven by the requirements associated with Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG), and its compatibility with national initiatives like the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) . Several partnerships noted UKHab is better correlated with other sites, such as priority habitats and has better categories for urban areas than Phase 1. While UKHab offers potential for national consistency, some challenges have been noted and these include:

- UKHab doesn't always align with the selection criteria.
- UKHab is not useful for LWS that meet species guidelines.
- UKHab is too technical and the boundaries are a bit blurry.
- UKHab is overcomplicated and not user friendly, unlike Phase 1.
- Some UKHab definitions lack clarity, and the sometime does not clearly differentiate between habitats in good condition and those in poor condition.
- In woodland areas, the standard UKHab minimum mapping unit of 0.04 hectares can be too small, leading to time being spent on unnecessary detail. Using a larger unit size, like 0.25 hectares for general mapping and reserving 0.04 hectares for areas needing finer detail could improve efficiency.

The UKHab End User License Agreement (EULA) lacks clarity of key definitions and because of this, NE has been unable to make use of UKHab in many of its works. One Wildlife Trust (WT) has confirmation from UKHab that its work is covered by free licence, including sending survey maps and reports to landowners that have paid for advice, but each user needs to sign up. UKHab has spoken to ALERC and has agreed a special licence costing £80 per year is needed for LERCs. With free licence you can show the codes on maps and reports but cannot change or reprint the definitions without confirmation from UKHab (this is to maintain consistency). With approval from UKHab, one Trust has adapted the key by removing habitats not found in their county and printed and shared this with volunteers. There is a UKHab copyright sheet that must be attached to it.

Another method that will experience an increased uptake among LWS partnerships is the Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) metric. This shift is largely driven by the growing need to provide BNG data for planning and development purpose, integrating the BNG metric into the main survey process, rather than completing it as a separate task is more time efficient. However, some concerns have been raised about relying solely on the BNG metric for assessing LWS. The metric has been described as too basic to fully capture the ecological value of a site. To address this, sites would require priority habitat surveys and frequency and abundance of indicator species surveys to give a more detailed picture of the site.

Five partnerships currently use their selection criteria when resurveying sites to note if the site still has the feature(s) it was designated for. This approach is dependent on the robustness of the partnerships selection criteria and does not always ensure national consistency.

Finally, six partnerships use ad hoc methods such as tick box surveys or the surveyor's opinion, these approaches are subjective and not comparable nationally.

Frequency of LWS survey

The rate at which LWS are surveyed for monitoring existing sites varies greatly between partnerships, there are some partnerships who do not have a rolling monitoring programme and only assess sites on an ad hoc basis, see figure 2. Generally, the common aim is to survey sites at least every 5-10 years depending on habitat type, with grasslands taking priority over woodland, but this is often not achieved due to capacity issues.

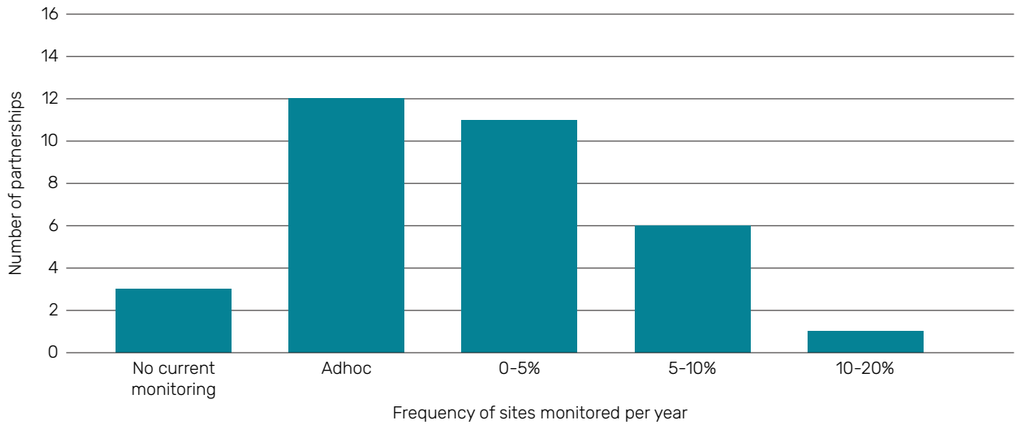

Figure 2: Graph to illustrate the frequency of sites monitored per year for different partnerships.

Prioritisation of sites

There are various approaches to prioritisation of survey based on:

1. Time since last survey.
2. Potential funding available or project opportunities (e.g. council funding areas).
3. Access and landownership amenability.
4. Habitat risk (e.g. grasslands prioritised over woodlands).

Condition assessment

Of the 40 partnerships that directly answered questions around condition assessment, only 13 assess the condition of LWS, as seen in figure 3. Although some of these approaches are subjective and do not follow robust methodology, some partnerships use a condition matrix similar to that used for assessing the condition of SSSIs, with the categories including favourable, part-favourable or unfavourable and recovering, stable or declining. One partnership stated they find the SSSI condition assessment unhelpful.

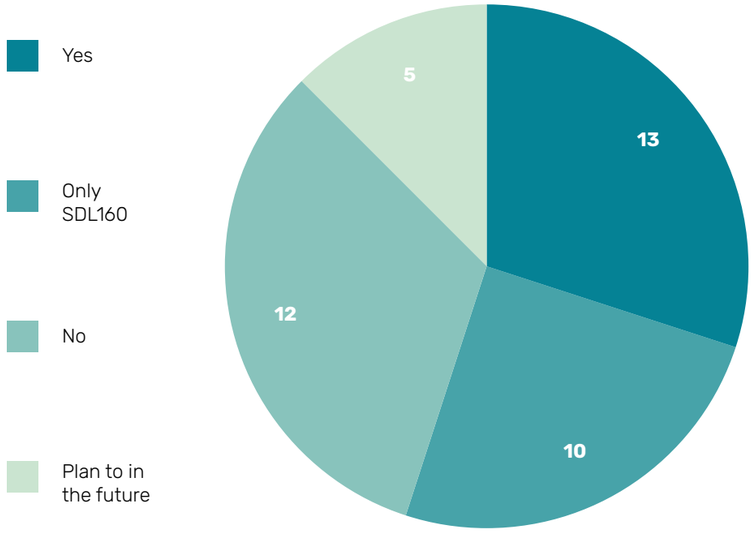

Figure 3: Chart illustrating whether partnerships assess LWS condition

Ten partnerships stated they only assess condition through the Single Data List 160. The SDL160 collects data on Local Sites in positive management and Local Authorities (LAs) are required to submit to central government, but this is not being enforced and in many cases the responsibility is passed to the LERC/ WT. SDL160 figures can be misleading because it doesn't always reflect an accurate picture of site status/condition of sites. For example:

- A site can score highly because it is in Countryside Stewardship, even if it is not in favourable condition.
- If there is no desk evidence of a site being in management it will not score, even if the site is in favourable condition.

Five further partnerships plan to start assessing condition in the future. Other partnerships have commented that they do not have the information to say what condition sites are in, and do not have the capacity to complete full condition assessment of LWS. It's also worth noting, partnerships have stated if they had the capacity, they would complete LWS condition assessments, but this is unlikely to occur due to the number of LWS and the time needed to complete all surveys to this level.

2.1.4 Volunteers

The use of volunteers among partnerships varies. Six partnerships (based on 19 answers) currently use volunteers to assist with site surveys. The majority of these are specialists utilising their expertise for specific species that would otherwise be harder to identify and record and are normally members of naturalists' groups. One partnership currently uses volunteers to assist with admin tasks such as digitising paper records. Eight partnerships have no plans to use volunteers in the future, two of which had previously used volunteers and four partnerships plan to use volunteers in the future.

Partnerships may not plan to use volunteers to assist with surveys, due to the initial investment of time for training and the accuracy and use of data collected being questioned e.g. to inform Local Plans. One partnership with experienced use of volunteers had to defend challenges to LWS reports by developers on several occasions, where questions over plant ID and confidence in reporting came under scrutiny. Some partnerships noted the return was not worth the initial time investment as volunteers can have other priorities and not always complete the target number of sites or to the standard required. For volunteers to give real value to the survey program they need to be long term, have a high level of knowledge and reduce the reliance on supporting teams. Some volunteers may also be useful in identifying landowners if the volunteers are embedded in the community, but this does not always lead to obtaining the necessary permissions for survey access.

While survey output alone may not justify continued collaboration with community groups, there are broader benefits to training volunteers to develop skills and encourage people to connect with and advocate for nature. Volunteers regularly play a fundamental role elsewhere in the LWS system – for example in supporting Wildlife Trusts undertake conservation management of local reserves. Another LWS partnership had a two-year Heritage Lottery funded project focussing on the wildlife and landscape value of Local Wildlife Sites and churchyards within their county. The project was highly successful achieving its aims, particularly the enthusiasm and commitment of everyone who volunteered with over 260 initial volunteers.

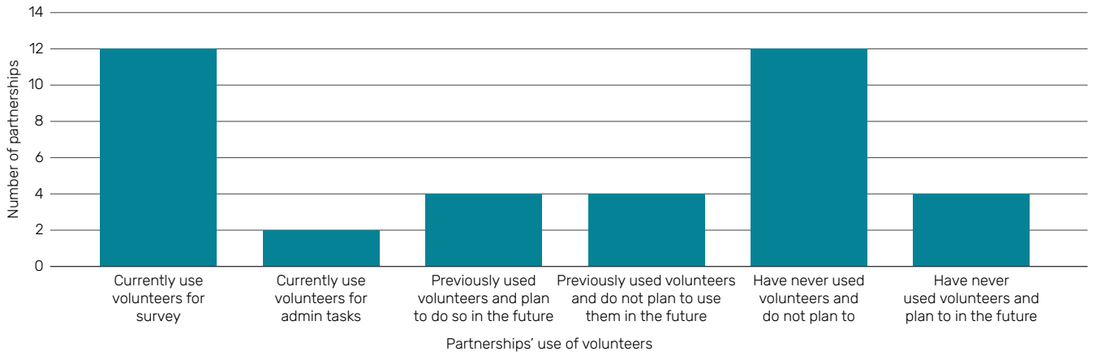

Figure 4: Graph to illustrate the frequency of sites monitored per year for different partnerships.

2.2 The conservation/protection of LWS and contribution to targets

2.2.1 Landowner Engagement

Finding and contacting LWS landowners
One of the biggest time-consuming tasks is identifying and then contacting LWS landowners. There is an existing licence between the Rural Payments Agency (RPA), DEFRA and Ordnance Survey for use of data for nature recovery and the RPA can be used to find landowners for free with an agreement. The RPA includes contact details, but some landowners might not be registered with RPA if they are not receiving grants.

Another option is Land Registry, however this is not always successful as land isn't always registered, and the Land Registry is often out-of-date. More urban LWS may not be recorded on the RPA register or the Land Registry. Some members noted that Land Registry is more efficient than RPA, with the current cost being £7 per search. This cost needs balancing against staff time of an alternative approach.

Landowner engagement
Ensuring LWS are well managed and in good condition depends heavily on the involvement of landowners. When landowners are equipped with the right knowledge, support and tools, they are more likely to manage their sites in a way that benefits nature. Landowner engagement is an area most partnerships feel they are lacking due to limited capacity and resources. Undertaking surveys can be a good gateway to build relationships with landowners, but there is a risk that time and resources spent surveying sites where landowners are not engaged or do not intend to manage the site appropriately.

Some partnerships administer an e-newsletter for LWS landowners, and one partnership has hosted LWS landowner events in the past. These events were popular among LWS owners, landowners left with a better understanding of what a LWS designation means, how it relates to the planning system, and how to manage habitats more effectively. Bringing LWS landowners together creates opportunities for shared learning, encouragement and peer-to-peer support. Despite the benefits, it can be difficult to encourage landowners to get involved and reach a wider audience. A space for landowners to discuss how they manage their site and lean on each other for guidance, with a section for resources such as management guides and links to funding opportunities could be beneficial to help improve the condition of LWS through good management.

2.2.2 Online community

LWS online community for LWS stakeholders:
Generally, there is an appetite for an online community for LWS stakeholders and possibly landowners, to use as a knowledge sharing platform to help build standards of practice, share resources and facilitate good communication.

LWS partnerships are made of different organisations, these organisations like The Wildlife Trusts (TWT), and Local Environment Record Centres (LERCs) may have an internal platform to communicate and collaborate with each other, but there is currently no centralised platform for all partners to utilise. Previous meetings have included members from different partnerships, and different organisations, and been well attended and the members find it useful to exchange ideas with one another to build standards of practice and find solutions to common issues.

Members of LWS partnerships have expressed strong support for the creation of an online space where LWS stakeholders can connect, share experiences and learn from one another. Working on LWS can often feel isolating when individuals are the sole member of their team focused on this work. Many have found it encouraging and helpful to hear how others in similar roles have faced and overcome the same challenges. The online community could be used to:

1. Learn what other LWS partnerships are doing, their approaches and processes in a wider context.
2. Help create consistency in the application of guidelines and selection criteria.
3. Discuss trends in the loss of Local Wildlife Sites, and how to overcome these issues.
4. Act as a resource library to share approaches and utilise good resources already available (e.g. management guidance or survey forms).
5. Share ideas on how to engage LWS landowners
6. Discuss queries regarding national policy.
7. Discuss funding and resource opportunities, and what is an appropriate ask from Local Authorities and other data users.
8. Provide examples and ideas on how to develop and streamline the LWS systems.

Such a platform could play an important role in strengthening the LWS network, reducing duplication of effort and supporting more effective conservation outcomes. It could be useful to also include planners within this community alongside WT, LERCs and Local Authorities (LAs) to bring in all stakeholders

with different perspectives. Members working on Heritage Gateway highlighted that their AGM forum played a key role in encouraging collaboration and ensuring wider involvement from LAs and Record Centres (RCs) in developing the Historic Environment Records (HERs) national dataset.

LWS online community for LWS Landowners:
Discussion explored whether LWS landowners would engage in an online community. Many felt bringing landowners together could foster peer-to-peer support, increase engagement and ultimately help improve site condition. However, some raised concerns about whether landowners would actively use an online platform, because some partnerships do not have regular direct contact with LWS landowners and there are many gaps in LWS ownership. Another concern is landowners may lack awareness of or interest in accessing an online platform. It could be more beneficial to have separate areas/ forums depending on the habitat type, as the LWS designation itself does not link LWS owners but the habitat type or species within them. Despite these challenges, an online community could be used to help raise awareness of LWS, which is needed, and may subsequently help improve site condition. Suggestions for elements that would be useful to include for LWS landowners:

1. Links to potential funding opportunities for landowners to help with management and improve site condition.
2. Forum to help landowners' express concerns and generate ideas to help overcome these.
3. Resource library that includes practical habitat management guides and best-practice examples.
4. Links with local groups to identify and create management prescriptions for their sites.
5. Case studies representing successful site management.

Caution would be needed to ensure this space focuses on help and knowledge sharing and is respectful of the different perspectives and priorities.

2.2.3 30by30 assessment

The UK has committed to protect 30% of land and sea for nature by 2030 (30by30), to support the global 30by30 target. For these targets to be meaningful and achievable, LWS need to be considered as part of the protected area network given they cover around 5% of land area.

To understand the area of LWS likely to count towards 30by30 and the actions needed to get them there, partners from two partnerships, Derbyshire WT and Norfolk WT, completed a subset assessment. Each selected 10% of their LWSs randomly using a stratified sampling method of priority habitats amounting to 121 sites for Derbyshire, covering a total of 1,086.81ha and 140 sites for Norfolk covering a total of 3,744.86ha. The total operational area of Derbyshire is 263,083 ha, with the total area of LWS 10,359ha. For Norfolk, LWS cover a total area of 16,220ha, with an operational area of 550,509ha[3]. Each site was then assessed against a checklist developed from the draft DEFRA 30by30 assessment criteria. The two partnerships were selected due to the differences of their LWS systems: Derbyshire has had continuous funding into their LWS system and represents the possibility of a well-funded LWS system and Norfolk has had less consistent funding but still has an active system and so more readily has the data to hand. The data from the two partnerships can be compared to highlight how increased funding into a LWS system may contribute to more sites counting toward 30by30 and highlights where best to target that funding.

For Derbyshire, 15% of sites (18/121) currently meet all the criteria and would contribute to 30by30 covering an area of 357.25ha, for Norfolk on the other hand only 2% (3/140) would contribute which amounts to 106.11ha. For both partnerships, more sites reached the 'Protection' criteria than 'Management'; 43% (52/121) for Derbyshire and 16% (22/140) sites for Norfolk met the 'Protection' criteria. For 'Management' this was much lower with Derbyshire only having 16% (19) sites and Norfolk 6% (9) sites. To help contextualise these figures, the area of LWS that met the 'Protection' criteria for Derbyshire was 804.14 ha, and for 'Management' this was only 260.15 ha. For Norfolk the total area of LWS that met the 'Protection' criteria was 291.05ha and only 154.73ha met the 'Management' criteria. This highlights the gap in management for LWS for both LWS partnerships. See appendix for table results.

3 Local Wildlife Sites System Status Review: Local Wildlife Sites Project

Protection
As part of the checklist there was a confidence score associated with each criterion. For the criterion 'Effective in local planning', the confidence score varied depending on the site for both Norfolk and Derbyshire. The average confidence score for Norfolk was 50% and for Derbyshire this was 75%, in order to score for this criterion, the confidence score needed to be 100% to ensure LWS would be protected.

In line with the DEFRA guidance, the 'Protection' criterion each had a score, in order to qualify for the 'Protection' criteria, each site needed to score above three. Of the sites that reached the 'Protection' criteria, the mean score for Derby was 5.6 and for Norfolk 3.2. A higher percentage for both Derbyshire (29%) and Norfolk (24%) was the criterion 'Able to demonstrate a history of delivering in-situ conservation for at least 20 years, for example through relevant agri-environment agreements', although this criterion alone was not enough for sites to qualify as protected. The lowest scoring criterion for each partnership was 'Is there a conservation covenant and/ or another legal agreement in place for at least 20 years?', 3% for Derbyshire and 1% Norfolk. Sites meeting this criterion would qualify as protected without needing to meet another criterion. This highlights the lack of guaranteed protection for LWS which needs to be improved if LWS are to contribute to 30by30.

Management
The number of sites to reach each management criterion varied between Norfolk and Derbyshire, but the lowest scoring criterion for each was 'Is monitoring in place to assess progress and check plans are on track?' with only 23% of sites for Derbyshire and 12% of sites for Norfolk, this highlights earlier statements about the limited monitoring taking place within LWS systems due to capacity and lack of resources for a rolling monitoring programme.

For LWS to contribute towards 30by30 stronger policies in protection are needed, and investment into LWS monitoring programmes to ensure LWS are appropriately managed. Further details can be found in the appendix.

2.2.4 Threats to LWS

Awareness
There is generally a lack of awareness of LWS for both the public and within organisations. A common issue is new landowners are often unaware that their land includes a LWS, and without this knowledge they may not recognise the value of their site or understand how to manage it appropriately.

LWS data included in the sales particulars when a site is sold, so landowners and those managing the data are aware.

LPAs (or LERCs as agents of LPAs) could be asked to provide boundaries of LWS in local land searches when new owners are acquiring land.

There is also a lack of awareness of the importance of LWS with planning officers and ecological consultants and so reports may lack detail which effects their protection in planning . Securing national level protection could help raise awareness more widely.

Protection
Development is another major threat to LWS. As highlighted in the 30by30 subset assessment, protection in planning is not 100% effective. This is the case across England, and the protection level varies on a case-by-case basis. There are cases where development has been approved on a LWS, such as the Longridge housing development in Cheshire[4]. Development on areas surrounding LWS can also have a negative effect on the site by encroaching on buffer zones and increasing indirect pressures. These include recreational pressure from increased footfall, the spread of invasive species from gardens and increased pollution or changes in water runoff.

In some cases, LWS are not receiving sufficient recognition in agri-environment schemes. Their inclusion in these schemes would help support management and improve data on LWS condition. This gap in recognition highlights the need for improved access to LWS information and data by NE, farm advisors and land managers, which can then unlock the required collaboration to achieve better recognition of LWS in agri-environment schemes.

4 Cheshire Wildlife Trust devastated by local planning decision

There needs to be an improved understanding of LWS through data from the schemes fed back into the LWS partnership and landowners to survey/ pay for survey as a requirement of Countryside Stewardship (CS).

Management
Lack of appropriate management either through neglect or lack of resources is a major threat to LWS. Many partnerships struggle to encourage landowners to carry out proper management without incentive, for the 30by30 assessment, only 24% of Derbyshire sites and 24% Norfolk sites had 'management measures being implemented and delivered'. Kent in the past, presented The Richard Neame Award to a landowner with a LWS in good management. It is now to be awarded for good management plans with the prize money of £1000 and advice helping to implement these plans.

2.3 Running the LWS System

2.3.1 Managing and Storing LWS data

A common challenge faced by LWS partnerships stems from the variety and limitations of software used to manage and store LWS data. There is no standardised system in place, and approaches vary widely. Some partnerships are still transcribing paper copies, while other store information such as landowner contacts and survey details in Word or Excel documents. Many partnerships currently use Microsoft Access to manage LWS records, but issues with its functionality and integration with other systems have been reported. Several partnerships are exploring Customer Relationship management (CRM) systems, which could allow landowner details, site citations and contact history to be linked directly to GIS (Geographic Information Systems) polygons. GIS platforms in use also vary, with common tools including ArcGIS, QGIS and MapInfo. Being able to link spatial data to landowner records would simplify processes and allow data managers to easily identify when a landowner is involved in other projects, helping to coordinate conservation efforts more effectively. Despite interest in integrated systems, there is currently no single platform that meets all the needs of LWS partnerships. For partnerships wanting and needing better software, a shared solution could help build consistency, save time, and improve long-term monitoring of LWS condition.

2.3.2 Sharing LWS data

Spatial boundary data is required for an area to be recognised as contributing to 30by30. The provision of spatial data will be a core requirement of the long-term approach to assessment and reporting, as this is required for international reporting. 30by30 sites need to be published openly on the Protected Planet website which is used by other countries.

As part of the LWS Status Report, partnerships were asked whether 'the LWS Partnership would be interested in sharing data with The Wildlife Trusts and Natural England for the purposes of creating a national map of LWSs'. The responses were as follows:

- 23 respondents advised they would be interested in a Shared Data Licence agreement.
- Two respondents advised they would be interested in an Open Data agreement.
- Two respondents were not interested in data sharing.
- The remaining 22 respondents provided other free text responses.

Of those interested in sharing LWS boundary data, there are some caveats that need to be adhered to in relation to a sharing agreement. Partnerships would:

- Like to know exactly how the data will be used.
- Require a guarantee that the dataset will not be used for commercial purposes.
- Like to share only certain aspects of the dataset.
- Require an agreed recurring licensing fee.
- Require simplification or obfuscation of their LWS boundaries to protect their dataset.

Current sharing of LWS data
The majority of LWS partners share their spatial data in the form of shapefiles or PDFs, with SLA partners on an annual basis. In some areas, data is also made accessible through shared platforms under formal data agreements, allowing Service Level Agreement (SLA) partners to access up-to-date information and enabling the data holder to track usage. LERCs also provide LWS boundaries, citation and species/ habitat data (where available) to consultants, and other businesses without an SLA via data requests, this service is priced based on the ongoing management of the dataset. In some cases where landowners are unaware that a LWS exists on their land, limited LWS data, that does not meet planning requirements, is often shared free of charge to help raise awareness.

Publishing LWS boundaries
The key concern relating to data sharing, was how a national LWS map may impact on an important source of income. Commercial end users pay for access to LWS data, and the income is used to fund the LWS system, including LWS survey and monitoring, and in some instances, this was identified as a significant amount of income. Several partnerships noted that they would need additional financial contribution to the LWS work in order to account for loss of income, to ensure the management of the LWS system could continue.

Some level of data sharing may be more feasible than others, for example sharing of boundaries but not citation data. It may also be more feasible to share boundaries at a low resolution, that transforms to point data at higher resolutions. This would need to be combined with clear signposting back to the provider (LERC) so users of the data are required to access more detail and ensure an understanding that data needs to be maintained and updated.

A concern flagged by several partnerships was that LWS across England have a variety of landowners, and so public availability of the data may require significant efforts to liaise with the landowners.

Purpose of sharing data
Common feedback from LERCs highlighted the need for clear consideration about what the data is needed for, what questions it is trying to answer and who the intended audience is. Raw data is rarely useful on its own without context and needs to be presented in a way that meets the relevant needs. For example, graphics and maps may be more appropriate for a public audience than spreadsheets of raw figures, LERCs are equipped to do this. It's also important to recognise that this data is not static, it must be regularly updated and users should understand its value and relevance.

Data collected
Data collected by consultants isn't shared with LERCs, either due to copyright held by developers, commercial confidentiality or lack of funding/ time and so there is information collected that is missing from the records. Consultants are generally keen to share data in LERC-ready format, but they need to cover the costs of their time to do this. Some Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) have already made this a local requirement, but do not have the capacity to ensure this is happening.

Requiring ecological survey data collected as part of the planning application process should be shared for wider use so it can contribute to environmental understanding and decision making. Consultants can legitimately charge their clients (the developer) to do this on their behalf.

2.3.3 Funding

Current financial situations
Funding for LWS systems provided by Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) varies significantly across partnerships. In some areas, funding only includes survey on an ad hoc basis, while in others it includes broader support for data provision and ongoing maintenance. However, for some partnerships the data stewardship is not fully covered by the SLA and the cost is absorbed by the LERC. Even when LPAs contribute to LWS survey and advice, this funding does not cover the full scope of LWS work. The level of support can also differ between LPAs operating within the same region.

It was noted that any LERC function is mainly supported by commercial data search services. For some areas LWS survey is supported by funding from Wildlife Trusts. The absence of central government support is felt by LERCs and LPAs

Due to variation there is no one size fits all approach and currently no model that would suit all partnerships and their needs. Instead, there are various suggestions on how to increase funding through engaging with LAs and other funding streams.

Ways to increase funding – how to engage with LAs and encourage update of services:
Collaborative working is essential, not just in terms of money but also building relationships with councillors and officers to facilitate the development of partnership agreements. It is also useful to understand what the LPA needs and then demonstrating the costs and value of the data; LPAs value an itemised approach as this is defensible to the finance department and allows them to link this to their biodiversity duty reporting objective.

There is a need for clear guidance from UK Government about what the biodiversity duty entails and repercussions of non-compliance.

It could be beneficial to tap into other departments aside from planning such as Highways, Rural estate and Green Space Infrastructure.

Increasing the uptake of searches for LWS information can help boost the protection of LWS, including in the planning system, and begin the process of supporting landowners manage LWS. There are various ways to encourage the uptake of services:

- Emphasise the legal biodiversity obligations that LPAs must fulfil.
- Advocate for the requirement of data searches for planning in line with CIEEM guidance, with planning ecologists involved and enforcing the requirement.
    - *Data searches from LERCs should be made a requirement in the planning process as previous encouragement hasn't increased uptake. There should be advocacy for LERC services from Central Government to make the use of services a requirement of the planning process.*
- Staff turnover can disrupt relationships but consistent engagement with new staff is critical for maintaining connections and ensuring continuity.
- Engage an umbrella authority where possible, to help streamline communication and coordination. It is extra difficult where LPAs lack a central organisation, as it is necessary to approach all LPAs individually.
- Offer new services such as BNG monitoring for LAs and then bundle this with existing services (with allowance for extra resourcing) as services are more appealing as a package.

Other avenues to help with funding:
There were various suggestions on different avenues to help with funding:

- Sustainable farming incentive.
- New Nature Impact Fund.
- National landscapes infrastructure funds.
- Working with consultancies to identify income opportunities such as restoration.
- Get monitoring and management/ restoration into project proposals both internally and externally.
- Ensure LWS are in strategies and plans.
- Mitigation money from NSIPS.
- Funding from water companies for nature-based solutions via LWS network.
- Citizen Science.

It was noted that project funding only helps the specific project and not the funding of the whole LWS system.

Where to focus funds
One of the biggest gaps in LWS systems is proper monitoring of LWS. Without monitoring in place to track the progress and implementation of management plans, the condition of LWS is still unknown and LWS are under threat of neglect or improper management. There may be ways to help mitigate this challenge such as using AI for rapid assessment, not to replace on the ground survey but to help identify which sites should be prioritised and the use of sentinel satellite data can help identify which sites have been developed.

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3. Next steps and recommendations

The next section consists of proposed next steps for the continuation of the project, these will be developed after further discussions with stakeholders including NE and DEFRA and are contingent on the level of funding received to continue this work.

3.1 Summary of issues identified and possible solutions

Issue	Possible solution
Awareness of LWS	LWS data to be included in the sales particulars within the land conveyancing information.
	LPAs (or LERCS as agents of LPAs) could be asked to provide boundaries of LWS in local land searches when new owners are acquiring land.
Protection of LWS	Stronger policies in planning.
	Review, update and republish the archived 2006 DEFRA guidance.
	Clear guidance about what the biodiversity duty entails and repercussions of non-compliance.
Management of LWS	There needs to be an improved understanding of LWS through data from the schemes fed back into the LWS partnership and landowners to survey/ pay for survey as a requirement of Countryside Stewardship (CS).
	Increase landowner engagement either through survey or peer-to-peer support to encourage appropriate management.
	Create a library for partnerships to share their own resources and guidance.
Monitoring of LWS	Investment in a rolling monitoring programme, allowing sites to be visited more frequently.
	Invest in technology such as AI, drone footage & satellite imagery to inform survey/ monitoring prioritisation/habitat condition.
	Requiring ecological survey data collected as part of the planning application process should be shared for wider use so it can contribute to environmental understanding and decision making. Consultants can legitimately charge their clients (the developer) to do this on their behalf.
	Make services such as Land Registry and Rural Payments Agency (RPA) available to partnerships free of charge.
Funding of LWS system	Data searches from LERCs should be made a requirement as previous encouragement hasn't increased uptake. There should be advocacy for LERC services from Central Government to make the use of services a requirement of the planning process.
	Consider wider resource opportunities, either through Citizen Science projects or opportunities within landscape recovery projects.
Software for LWS data	Develop a software to link spatial data to landowner data, citation data and liaison records to: improve efficiency of LWS, update delivery, and ensure consistent data formats for easier sharing and comparison.

Figure 4: Table of known issues and possible solutions

3.2 Next steps

The project has shown the value of continued engagement and collaboration across LWS partnerships. In addition to the continued work, future objectives for the LWS work could include:

1. *Review findings:*

   The initial steps should involve collaborating with NE and DEFRA to review the findings from the first phase of the project and discuss the actions that can and will be taken to implement the proposed changes. This is important to ensure the LWS partnerships that have invested their time and resources into this project are acknowledged and heard. Suggested policy changes include:

   - *Review, update and republish the archived 2006 DEFRA guidance.*
   - *Advocacy for LERC services from Central Government to make the use of services such as data searches, a requirement of the planning process.*
   - *Requiring ecological survey data collected as part of the planning application process should be shared for wider use so it can contribute to environmental understanding and decision making. Consultants can legitimately charge their clients (the developer) to do this on their behalf.*
   - *Clear guidance about what the biodiversity duty entails and repercussions of non-compliance.*
   - *LWS data to be included in the sales particulars within the land conveyancing information.*
   - *LPAs (or LERCs as agents of LPAs) could be asked to provide boundaries of LWS in local land searches when new owners are acquiring land.*

2. *Online community and collation of resources:*

   To address the feedback gathered about establishing an 'Online Community' to maintain stakeholder connectedness and knowledge sharing, we recommend exploring options to set up this platform. This could house a tool kit of LWS advice and good practice comprising both existing materials and new resources identified as part of the project. This could include sample survey forms, criteria and webinar materials used when engaging Local Authorities.

3. *Awareness:*

   Raising the profile of LWS should be a priority to ensure people are aware of the importance of LWS. Across England, LWS have different names in different counties, including Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs), Sites of Nature Conservation Importance (SNCIs), County Wildlife Sites (CWS), Biological Heritage Sites (BHS) and Sites of Biological Importance (SBI). Currently there is no centralised platform to visit to get information about LWS, and so it can be hard for the public to find out information. Another purpose of the proposed centralised platform could be to create a national resource of information about LWS that includes overall statistics nationally but also connects to individual partnerships with case studies to show the value of LWS on a local and national level. This could be used to build the narrative of LWS but also signpost to other pages such as Record Centres.

4. *Long term plan and solution(s):*

   Natural England is not able to provide financial contributions for LWS partnerships to fund their work. For LWS work to continue and improve, funding into these systems is required. Further investigation is needed for funding options or resourcing streams to assist with both data collection and conservation management on sites. Partnerships would also need alternative funding if revenue made through data searches were to be lost as a result of sharing LWS data.

4. Glossary

Biodiversity Net Gain Condition Metric
Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) is an approach to development and/or land management that aims to leave the natural environment in a measurably better state than it was beforehand. In order to measure this, a new metric has been developed by Natural England to support the BNG assessment.

Citations
Citations are documents that describe the ecological features and reasons for designating a specific area as a Local Wildlife Site (LWS). These citations often include species or habitats of importance to conservation but may also include notes on the general wealth of biodiversity of a site.

Countryside Stewardship (CS)
Countryside Stewardship (CS) is a government scheme which provides financial incentives for farmers, foresters and land managers in England to look after and improve the environment and the land which they manage.

Data Stewardship
Data Stewardship is the ongoing process of managing an organisation's data to ensure they are accurate, accessible, secure and effectively shared across systems. It encompasses a broad range of responsibilities, from technical database management to ensuring data quality, validation and fostering collaborative data relationships

DEFRA 2006 Local Sites Guidance
This national guidance outlines how local authorities and partners should identify, select and manage non-statutory Local Sites of wildlife or geological importance. It promotes consistent systems based on clear ecological or geological criteria and scientific evidence. The guidance encourages local partnerships to protect and improve the condition of these sites. The aim is to make sure these sites are properly recorded, monitored and appropriately managed, and to recognise their role in supporting biodiversity at a local and national level. Although this guidance is archived, it is still used to support local planning and nature recovery efforts.

Geographical Information Systems polygons
Geographical Information Systems (GIS) is software that brings together maps and data for analysis, GIS mapping allows people to create, manage, and analyse information about a location. A polygon feature is a shape drawn on a digital map that shows the area and boundaries of an object/place and can store extra details such as names, types of land etc.

Land Registry
Land Registry is the official government body responsible for recording the ownerships of land and property in England and Wales. It maintains a public register with information about land ownership, including property boundaries, ownership details, and legal interests (e.g. rights of way).

Local Nature recovery Strategies
Local Nature recovery Strategies (LNRS), introduced in the Environment Act 2021, are a new spatial strategy to identify locations to improve nature on a more local and focused level, which will help to better target funding and resources for nature recovery. The strategy sets local priorities for nature recovery and maps areas where action to help nature will have the biggest impact, working with local stakeholders from the public, private and voluntary sectors. Every county in England will produce a LNRS, these will combine to form a national plan to restore, create and connect habitats across England.

LWS Partnership
in this context meaning organisation responsible for maintaining the LWS system.

Open Data Agreement
Open data is data that can be freely accessed, used and shared by anyone. An open data agreement makes it easier for individuals and organisations that want to share data to do so, with minimal requirements for users and no restrictions on use.

Section 4: Glossary

Phase 1 Habitat Survey
A Phase 1 habitat survey is a standardised method for mapping and classifying wildlife habitats, including urban areas. It provides a rapid, broad overview of the types of habitats present on a site and their potential ecological value. The survey uses a set of codes and colours to identify and map different habitats, including vegetation types, water bodies, and other features.

Point data
Point data, in the context of mapping, refers to the visualisation of geographic data using points on a map to represent specific locations.

Single Data List 160
The Single Data List 160 (SDL160) requires Local Authorities (LAs) to report the number of Local Sites in their area and how many are in positive management. These figures are used to produce an annual statistic showing the percentage of Local Sites in positive conservation management. To count as positively managed, there must be documented evidence of management that contributes to maintaining or enhancing the features of interest for which a site has been selected and designated.

Shapefile
A shapefile is a vector data format commonly used for geospatial analysis. Shapefiles store the geometric location and attribute information as points, lines or polygons.

Shared Data Agreement
A shared data agreement is a formal document outlining the terms and conditions under which data is shared between two or more parties. It includes details about what data is to be shared, how the data is used, the purpose of data sharing, the responsibilities of each party and how long the data will be kept.

UK Habitat Classification System
The UK Habitat Classification system (UKHab) is a coding system used for surveying and classifying habitats when conducting a habitat assessment. It assigns specific ecological features a primary habitat code, secondary code, and condition score.

Appendix

LWS 30by30 assessment summary results

		Derbyshire			Norfolk		
		No.	No. (%)	ha	No.	No. (%)	ha
Overall	How many sites will currently contribute to 30by30	18	15%	357.25	3	2%	106.11
	How many sites contribute through protection alone	52	43%	804.14	22	16%	291.05
	How many sites contribute through Management alone	19	16%	360.15	9	6%	154.73
Protection	Effective protection in local planning?	120	99%	45.28	124	89%	
	In permanent ownership and managed in hand, or subject to a long-term tenancy agreement with at least 20 years remaining	55	45%	750.87	11	8%	244.31
	Able to demonstrate a history of delivering in-situ conservation for at least 20 years, for example through relevant agri-environment agreements	35	29%	671.43	34	24%	457.85
	Subject to an agri-environment agreement or other formal management agreement that will deliver in-situ conservation outcomes, for a total of 10-20 years	33	27%	443.7	16	11%	225.16
	Long-term ownership: is the site protected from neglect or inappropriate management? E.g. owned by a NGO or church	28	23%	444.32	12	9%	114.67
	Included within a Landscape Recovery project, or subject to an agri-environment agreement that will deliver in-situ conservation outcomes, for more than 20 years in total?	5	4%	45.63	4	3%	37.44
	Is there a conservation covenant and/ or another legal agreement in place for at least 20 years?	4	3%	45.28	1	1%	5.84
	Mean Score for those >0	5.6			3.2		
Management	Does governance/ownership have the ability to undertake reasonable in-situ management actions to deliver and sustain positive outcomes for biodiversity?	49	40%	795.18	102	73%	1338.05
	Is there a management plan or similar that is designed to deliver identified outcomes for biodiversity?	36	30%	716.39	34	24%	551.06
	Are these management measures being implemented and delivered?	29	24%	658.18	34	24%	410.50
	Is there evidence that the area is achieving or making progress towards biodiversity outcomes, and that this will be sustained over the long-term?	29	24%	398.61	60	43%	648.68
	Is the site in a long-term funded management agreement, for how long?	28	23%	661.73	70	50%	727.64
	Is monitoring in place to assess progress and check plans are on track?	28	23%	415.84	17	12%	285.12

The Wildlife Trusts are a federation of 47 charities, 46 individual Wildlife Trusts and a central charity, the Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts. Together we have more than 900,000 members, 39,000 volunteers and 3,600 staff across the UK. We share a vision of nature in recovery, with abundant, diverse wildlife and natural processes creating wilder landscapes where people and nature thrive.

Wildlife Trusts care for – and have restored – some of the most special places for wildlife in the UK. Collectively we manage more than 2,300 nature reserves, operate 123 visitor and education centres and own 29 working farms. We undertake research, we stand up for wildlife and wild places under threat, and we help people access nature.

We work with businesses who are committed to being nature positive and take action to help restore 30% of land and seas for nature by 2030.

The Wildlife Trusts

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