



giving
nature
a home



Getting involved in planning in Northern Ireland: How important is your wildlife site?

This leaflet will help you to assess the value of your wildlife site in your local area. You can use this information to support your comments on planning applications or Local Development Plans, or to lobby for site protection.

Sites that are internationally and nationally important for wildlife are protected by law. As well as the nationally important sites, such as Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs), there are local designations that are recognised by the planning authorities.

The area you are trying to protect may not have a specific nature conservation designation. This may be because the site has not been designated yet, or that the wildlife value of the site is not high enough to warrant its protection on conservation grounds alone.

Conservation designations

Your first step should be to find out if the site is already protected.

There are many types of conservation designations, based on a wide range of wildlife, geological, landscape and historical features. If a site is protected, or it qualifies for protection, the planning authority will take this into account when making planning decisions.

The type of designation depends on how important the site is in a local, national or international context. The higher the wildlife value, the greater the legal and statutory protection in local planning policy, UK, EU and international law.

It is vital to check if the land affected by the proposal has a conservation designation. It would also be important to know whether there is a designated site close by. If so, it's possible that birds and other wildlife could be affected indirectly (e.g. through disturbance, light pollution, or impacts on hydrology).

The main types of site protected for wildlife are listed below.

- **Special Protection Area (SPA)**

These are internationally important sites for birds, designated under the European Directive on the Conservation of Wild Birds 1979 (also referred to as the EU Birds Directive).

- **Special Areas of Conservation (SAC)**
The European Directive on the conservation of Natural Habitats and of Wild Flora and Fauna 1992 (the EU Habitats Directive) requires the protection of these sites for threatened habitats and species.
- **Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI)**
These are nationally important wildlife sites protected under law by the Environment (NI) Order 2002.
- **National Nature Reserve (NNR)**
Reserves are set aside and managed for conservation purposes, with protection under the Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands (NI) Order 1985.
- **Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ)**
These are sites designated for the conservation of marine species and habitats protected under the Marine Act (NI) 2013.
- **Site of Local Nature Conservation Importance (SLNCI) and Local Nature Reserve (LNR)**
Local sites are protected in part from development by policies in the Area Plans/Local Development Plans.

The international and national sites can be found on the NIEA website. Local sites are mapped both in the Area Plans, obtainable from the Department for Infrastructure website and the Local Development Plans are available from your local council.

If a site has a conservation designation, it is worth finding out why the site was designated. For instance, was it because of important wintering wading bird flocks or because of a geological formation? If a planning proposal is likely to affect the reasons for designation, it is important to mention this in your letter of objection. Generally, a site with a conservation designation is easier to defend than a site with none.

National sites and local sites are protected by policies under Natural Heritage in the Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPSS). Development which would harm those sites is not permitted unless there are development reasons which outweigh the value of the site. In that instance, appropriate measures should also be taken to minimise and compensate for impacts.

International sites in Northern Ireland are protected by the Conservation (Natural habitat etc) Regulations (NI) 1995. If development is proposed which may affect an international site, an 'Article 6' assessment must be completed. If this shows that the site will be adversely affected by the development, or cannot prove that it won't be, then the development can only proceed if there are no alternative suggestions and there are imperative reasons of overriding public interest' (IROPI). The Government also has to ensure that appropriate habitats are created in compensation.

The wildlife value of your site

If there is no designation but you are convinced that the site is valuable for wildlife, then you can lobby for its protection.

If you believe this is the case, you should provide as much information on the site to lobby for designation as an ASSI or as a SLNCI. You can also lobby for SLNCI designation by commenting on the draft Local Development Plan (see our leaflet "*How to get involved with Local Development Plans*").

To achieve this, you will almost certainly need time for data collection and considerable support from local wildlife organizations and the local biodiversity officer (LBO) (if your Council has one). You will need clear, scientifically gathered evidence to show that the site meets the relevant criteria.

You can request records held by The Centre for Environmental Data and Recording (CEDaR) at the Ulster Museum.

Surveying your site

If you decide to do your own survey, perhaps because there are no traceable records for the site, there are a few useful guidelines to follow.

- Make sure that you have the permission of the landowner if the land is not public.
- Ideally, try to visit the site several times during the year to find out when it has the most wildlife interest. Winter can be important, and spring and autumn are significant for migrating birds. Regular recording is the most valuable means of surveying.
- Always include the date, time, and location or Ordnance Survey grid reference.
- You should also document how you obtained information on any bird or other animal. For example, did you see or hear it? Was it breeding on site? Was it feeding, or did you find tracks? Soft ground, mud or snow cover can be good for detecting footprints, which along with droppings can be useful to identify mammals.
- Making a note of any unusual weather conditions could also prove useful.
- You should take care when surveying the site not to disturb any wildlife. Disturbing some species is a criminal offence (see our leaflets "*Protecting birds from development*" and "*Protecting other wildlife from development*").

The best time to survey for breeding birds or flowering plants is early spring to late summer in the early morning or evening.

Try to record the following:

- Birds, especially protected species such as barn owls and kingfishers.
- Butterflies and dragonflies.
- Mammals, especially badgers and bats, all of which are protected species.
- Reptiles and amphibians.
- Ponds, streams and boggy areas, as they are normally rich in wildlife.
- Native woodland, particularly with mature trees.
- Big bushy hedgerows, noting the presence of mature trees.
- Different types of plants – try to find out their names, especially if you think they are rare or important plants.

Any such information can then be sent to the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) and will then be forwarded to the relevant department within the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) for further investigation.

Recreation and landscape

Assessing the recreational value of your wildlife site may be particularly useful.

You may want to note:

- Do people use the site for jogging, cycling or walking?
- Do children use the site for playing or for educational purposes?
- How far will people have to travel to the nearest wildlife site if this one disappears?
- Will development have an adverse impact on the local landscape?

