

Criteria for the Selection of Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation in the County Boroughs of Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Merthyr Tydfil and Rhondda Cynon Taff (the ‘Mid-Valleys Area’)

**Prepared by Caerphilly County Borough Council, Merthyr Tydfil
County Borough Council and Rhondda Cynon Taff County Borough
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PART 1

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

- 1.1 In 2004 the *Guidelines for the Selection of Wildlife Sites in South Wales* (referred to as the *South Wales Guidelines*) was published by the Gwent Wildlife Trust as part of a partnership project to develop a common set of guidelines for the selection of Wildlife Sites (and Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation) in the South Wales region. The purpose of the *Guidelines* is to provide a framework within which individual local authorities are free to refine their own detailed criteria for the selection and designation of Wildlife Sites within their administrative boundaries. The use of these guidelines as a framework for the development of local criteria for Wildlife Site systems provides a robust and defensible system, which maintains a consistent approach across South Wales (Gwent, Glamorgan and Carmarthenshire). Subsequently, in 2008 the Wales Biodiversity Partnership has produced guidelines for the selection of local sites in Wales.
- 1.2 The criteria in this document are used to identify Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC's) and represent the refinements of the *South Wales Guidelines* for a recognisable biodiversity area: the valleys of central South Wales (the "Mid-Valleys area"). The Mid-Valleys area comprises the Unitary Authorities of Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council, Caerphilly County Borough Council, Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council and Rhondda Cynon Taff County Borough Council. It should also be noted that the criteria only refer to the parts of the four Unitary Authorities that do not lie within the Brecon Beacons National Park.
- 1.3 SINC refers specifically to sites of substantive nature conservation value. They are the most important places for wildlife outside legally protected land such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), and their importance is significant in a more localised context than internationally or nationally designated sites. For this reason SINC are sometimes referred to as 'second tier sites'. Unlike SSSIs, their designation is non-statutory.
- 1.4 However, it is understood that these SINC's are not fully inclusive of all the most important places for wildlife and are entirely dependent on recording effort and new information that comes to light. If sites not included are subsequently found to qualify, for example, through the application of these criteria by ecological consultants on development sites, then the SINC protection policy in the Development Plan should be applied to ensure that the nature conservation interest is fully considered.
- 1.5 A successful SINC system requires rigorous criteria to enable sites to be identified. This document provides specific criteria for the Mid-Valleys area. These criteria refine the *South Wales Guidelines* into a local context and are based on the structure and format of these guidelines. In order to prevent unnecessary repetition, much of the supporting context information provided in the *South Wales Guidelines* is not reproduced in this document and readers are directed to the *South Wales Guidelines* document for background information. This includes important components, such as the principles behind the guidelines (including Ratcliffe criteria) and explanatory text concerned with habitat and species criteria. In addition much of the context information for individual habitats and species is also not repeated.
- 1.6 This document specifically identifies the habitat and species criteria against which SINC's will be identified and designated in the three county boroughs that make up the Mid-Valleys area. It also contains additional context to clarify and identify features and issues

within the Mid-Valleys area, which are not identified within the *South Wales Guidelines*, and in a few cases, specific diversions from the *South Wales Guidelines* framework.

- 1.7 The *Criteria for the Selection of SINC in the Mid-Valleys Area* have obviously initially benefited from the extensive consultation and revision process undertaken for the *South Wales Guidelines* and the rigour provided through that process. These specific SINC criteria have been further developed and refined through consultation with the Local Biodiversity Action Plan (LBAP) partnerships of Caerphilly, Merthyr and RCT and specialist consultation with recording groups, county recorders, wildlife organisations and agencies.
- 1.8 This is a technical document, providing a scientific basis for SINC selection, primarily based upon habitat criteria. Species criteria are mainly used as contributory or supporting features for SINC designated for habitats, however the SINC criteria also identify those species, which are sufficiently rare or strongly protected, to warrant SINC designation on their own merit.
- 1.9 References are made where appropriate and the majority of these are listed in the *South Wales Guidelines*.

2.0 SINC IN A PLANNING CONTEXT

- 2.1 'SINC' is purely a planning term, which identifies non-statutory Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation in planning policies. As such a SINC is primarily a designation system used to advise the planning process and refers to specific adopted planning policies. This policy protection affords such sites particular consideration in the planning context. To justify designation as a SINC, a site needs to qualify under at least one criterion as detailed in this document. However, SINC are not usually selected for one specific feature and are identified as a suite of sites that contribute to the natural capital of the local area. All sites, which meet the local criteria, should therefore be selected as SINC. This non-statutory designation should be used to inform decisions made by a wide variety of other individuals and organisations.
- 2.2 The SINC system is vital for enabling the planning system to recognise and thus protect or enhance those areas of substantive nature conservation value, which lie outside the limited network of statutorily protected SSSIs. Planning Policy (Wales) (2002) and Technical Advice Note (TAN) 5 recognise the concept, which is put into effective use through the statutory development plan (or supplementary planning guidance where appropriate) and development control process.
- 2.3 The primary role of the SINC system ensures that development proposals, which affect a SINC, receive proper consideration at the planning application stage. In the cases where landowners are not currently aware of SINC designations (see below), the presence of a SINC in a proposed development site will usually be identified during a pre-application enquiry to the council. At that stage (or occasionally later at the planning application stage) the extent and type of development will be considered against the features of the SINC and requirements for survey and assessment work will be identified to the planning applicant. Advice will be given on the extent and scope of work required and applicants will be encouraged to maintain a dialogue during the assessment process. As a result of assessment work, mitigation or compensation measures may be identified (which can maintain or off-

set the important features of the SINC). The ecological assessment process will help to advise the councils' final planning decisions.

- 2.4 Local authorities have an important role in establishing and maintaining SINC systems. Each of the three Local Biodiversity Action Plan (LBAP) partnerships also has a role to play in the on-going development and review of the SINC system in the respective local authority areas. The active involvement of landowners is always desirable, although it cannot be guaranteed that every landowner will be aware of a SINC designation. The principle means of landowner consultation will be through the respective Local Development Plan consultation process.
- 2.5 Although originally conceived as a planning tool, SINC systems now have the potential for many other uses. They effectively constitute a database of information on particular habitats and species, which can help inform many other areas of work, including the preparation of Local Biodiversity Action Plans, site management plans and biodiversity monitoring. Where positive management is required, the presence of a SINC system may act as a means of prioritising resources such as grant aid or advisory services. They can also provide a valuable means of awareness raising as well as occupying a variety of educational, social and amenity roles.

3.0 APPLICATION OF THE CRITERIA

Relationship with Nationally Designated Sites

- 3.1 Statutory Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and non-statutory SINC's do not generally overlap in the Mid-Valleys area. This limits the risk of confusion amongst landowners, users and potential developers, etc. concerning the legal status and protection of the land concerned. However, there may be some instances where it is appropriate to designate SSSI land as a SINC, for example, where a SSSI is notified on geological grounds, and is subsequently selected as a SINC because of its biological (i.e. nature conservation) interest.

Geological Sites

- 3.2 Some SINC's in the Mid-Valleys area are also of geological or geomorphological importance in addition to their biological significance, and there are other sites, which may have value and significance on geological grounds alone.
- 3.3 SINC's should be designated entirely on ecological grounds, without reference to geology except where this is a factor affecting or determining the ecological value. A national framework for the identification and recognition of non-statutory geological sites already exists in the form of the Regionally Important Geological and Geomorphological Sites (RIGS) programme.

Site Boundaries

- 3.4 Site boundaries should be drawn as far as possible to be meaningful in ecological terms. Where sites are selected on species criteria, appropriate regard should be given to the habitat requirements of the species concerned.

- 3.5 Observable physical boundaries or topographic features should be used as defensible boundaries wherever possible. Where only part of a management unit is of qualifying quality, the whole management unit should still be designated. Where areas (such as single fields) failing to meet the criteria occur within a definable complex of management units (such as a block of fields), then the whole complex can still be designated as a SINC providing the qualifying areas form a clear majority of this SINC.
- 3.6 Areas of land which marginally fail to meet any of the criteria but which lie adjacent to qualifying habitat, and thus form part of an effective ecological unit, should be selected. Also, there are exceptions when considering watercourses and other open water bodies where the aquatic habitat may be profoundly influenced by adverse management of the immediate bank sides.

Survey methodology

- 3.7 In general any area of land or water, which satisfies one or more of the criteria, is eligible for designation as a SINC. Sites should generally be evaluated on the basis of reliable information that is as up to date as possible. Ideally, the criteria should be applied wherever possible when surveying sites to identify new SINC^s, including, for example, ecological consultants carrying out surveys of development sites as a means of assessing the nature conservation value.

4.0 DEVELOPMENT OF A WILDLIFE SITE SYSTEM

- 4.1 The long-term desire of the SINC system in the Mid-Valleys area is to broaden their role and function, to develop a 'Wildlife Sites' system. The *South Wales Guidelines* set out the benefits of a Wildlife Site system, where the twin functions of planning designation and positive biodiversity enhancement and management can be delivered through active liaison with the landowner(s) and other relevant bodies. The presence of a Wildlife Site system will act as a means of prioritising resources such as grant aid and will provide a valuable means of raising awareness.

