



Improvement Programme for England's Natura 2000 Sites (IPENS) Planning for the future

Summary Report



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Introduction

The Improvement Programme for England's Natura 2000 Sites (IPENS) is a new strategic approach to managing England's Natura 2000 sites. It has enabled Natural England, the Environment Agency, and other key partners to plan what, how, where and when they will need to target their efforts on Natura 2000 sites and the areas surrounding them.

Europe's most important protected wildlife areas

England has a diverse range of habitats resulting in a wonderfully rich and varied wildlife. It hosts some of Europe's most valuable and threatened species and habitats which are protected as part of a Europe-wide network of more than 27,000 nature conservation areas. This is known as the Natura 2000 network.

The Natura 2000 network includes:

- **Special Protection Areas (SPAs)** important for their rare, vulnerable and migratory bird species.
- **Special Areas of Conservation (SACs)** which protect a variety of wild animals, plants and habitats.

In England there are 338 Natura 2000 sites (on land and at sea) covering 2,076,875 hectares. These include some of our most cherished landscapes such as the Northumberland coast, Liverpool Bay, New Forest, Norfolk Broads and Cumbrian fells.

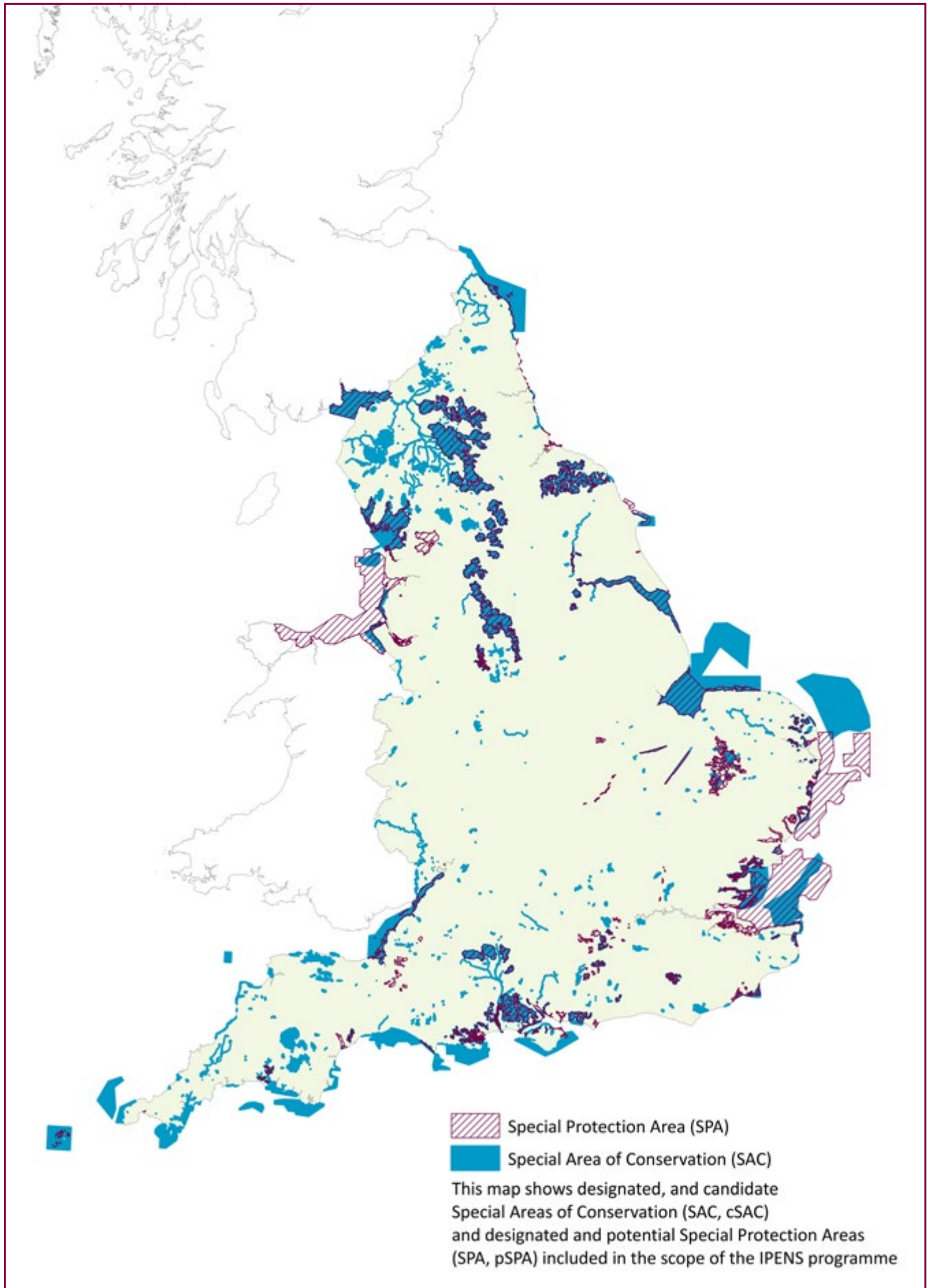
Where Natura 2000 sites are on land or at the coast they are also notified as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) – a UK designation that protects the country's best wildlife and geological sites. 82% of the area of SSSIs in England has Natura 2000 protection.

Whilst a number of Natura 2000 sites are in a good state, many face challenges which affect their condition. These are from issues such as pollution, inappropriate grazing, and impacts from invasive species.



Dorset heathland

Natura 2000 sites in England



Improvement Programme for England's Natura 2000 Sites (IPENS)

Aim of IPENS: to identify the programme of work needed to improve or maintain (where they are already in a good state) the condition of England's Natura 2000 sites.

Whilst each site is unique, the wildlife on many sites is affected by common, often complex problems, as well as site specific issues. We reviewed every Natura 2000 site to ensure that these are successfully tackled. We developed:

- A **Site Improvement Plan** covering every Natura 2000 site in England.
- **Theme Plans** to address issues that are common across many sites (eg invasive species).
- **Evidence reports** that help fill gaps in our knowledge about Natura 2000 sites.
- An **Implementation Plan** which outlines the future management of England's Natura 2000 sites.

IPENS aims to benefit all the species and habitats for which our Natura 2000 sites are important:

- 69 habitats (eg blanket bogs and coastal lagoons);
- 38 species (eg grey seal and Desmoulin's whorl snail); and
- 106 bird species (eg kittiwake and nightjar).



Grey seal *Halichoerus grypus*

Project title: Improvement Programme for England's Natura 2000 Sites (IPENS). LIFE11 NAT/UK/000384 IPENS

Project lead: Natural England

Project partner: Environment Agency

Total cost: €3,575,345 – 50% funded by the EU LIFE+ Nature fund

Duration: 01/07/12 – 30/06/15

A summary of the main project activities

Key project activities	What it involved
Programme scoping – identifying project focus	An analysis of existing data and evidence to work out what the project needed to focus on. This included identifying which issues affect many Natura 2000 sites and what gaps there are in our knowledge. A report outlining the method and findings is available.
Developing theme plans	Collaborative work with partners and specialist staff from Natural England and the Environment Agency to review and decide how to address issues that affect multiple Natura 2000 sites (eg atmospheric nitrogen deposition). Findings from the theme plans helped inform the Site Improvement Plans and vice versa.
Developing Site Improvement Plans (SIPs)	<p>Interactive work with staff and local stakeholders with an interest in, or responsibility for, the management of Natura 2000 sites to produce a SIP for each site. The SIP outlines what is required to achieve and maintain sites in a good condition. They:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Provide a high level description of the issues affecting the condition of the site. ■ Identify the priority actions required to address the issues. ■ Identify how much it might cost, where the money could come from and who might need to be involved. <p>There are 267 SIPs covering 338 Natura 2000 sites. Some sites have been grouped together where they have large overlapping areas or common species or habitats.</p>
Integrating SIPs for water dependent Natura 2000 sites into River Basin Management Plans	<p>River Basin Management Plans (RBMPs) are a way of promoting better management of rivers and their catchment areas. They form part of the implementation of the Water Framework Directive (WFD) in England. The WFD is a European structure for the management of the water environment.</p> <p>For updated RBMPs, to be published in December 2015, the SIPs identify the actions required for the water dependent habitats and species on Natura 2000 sites.</p>
Identifying and plugging gaps in Natura 2000 evidence	Throughout the project we identified gaps in our knowledge about Natura 2000 sites. IPENS commissioned 54 evidence projects to start to fill these. Where we still have outstanding gaps in our knowledge these have been recorded on an 'evidence gap log'.
Implementation Plan for the future management of England's Natura 2000 sites	Collation and analysis of the findings from the SIPs, theme plans and evidence programme (a Programme Report outlining these findings is available) to inform an Implementation Plan for the future management of England's Natura 2000 sites. A Steering Group will be established to oversee the delivery of the Plan.

Working with partners to improve Europe’s most important wildlife areas

Over 650 organisations (such as conservation groups, government bodies and private companies) have been involved (via meetings, workshops and correspondence) in developing and commenting on the site and theme plans. This was essential in helping us to:

- Develop a shared understanding of the key issues affecting the condition of the sites and what we need to do to tackle them.
- Discuss who should do what to deliver the actions.

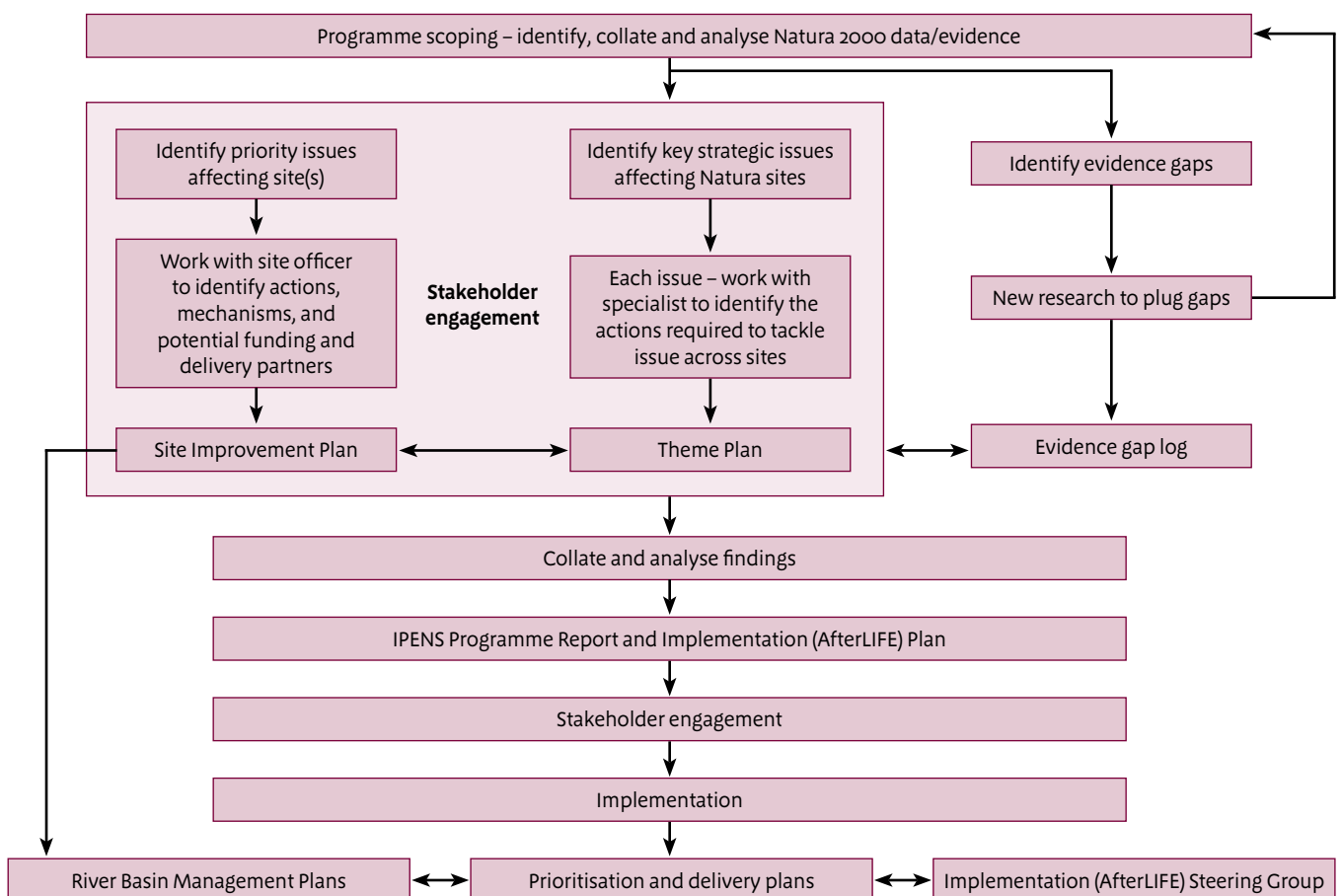
Tackling air pollution

Culm Grasslands SAC – a cluster of marshy unimproved grasslands – supports the largest population of marsh fritillary butterfly in the UK. Surrounded by intensive agriculture the site is susceptible to high nitrogen inputs from the air; a problem shared with many other sites but with no current way to tackle it. We developed an Atmospheric Nitrogen Theme Plan that recommends that we help farmers close to protected sites to reduce their air pollution. Culm Grasslands was used, as part of our evidence programme, to test how we can best identify local emissions and the potential ways to reduce them.



Marsh fritillary *Euphydryas aurinia*

An overview of the project activities

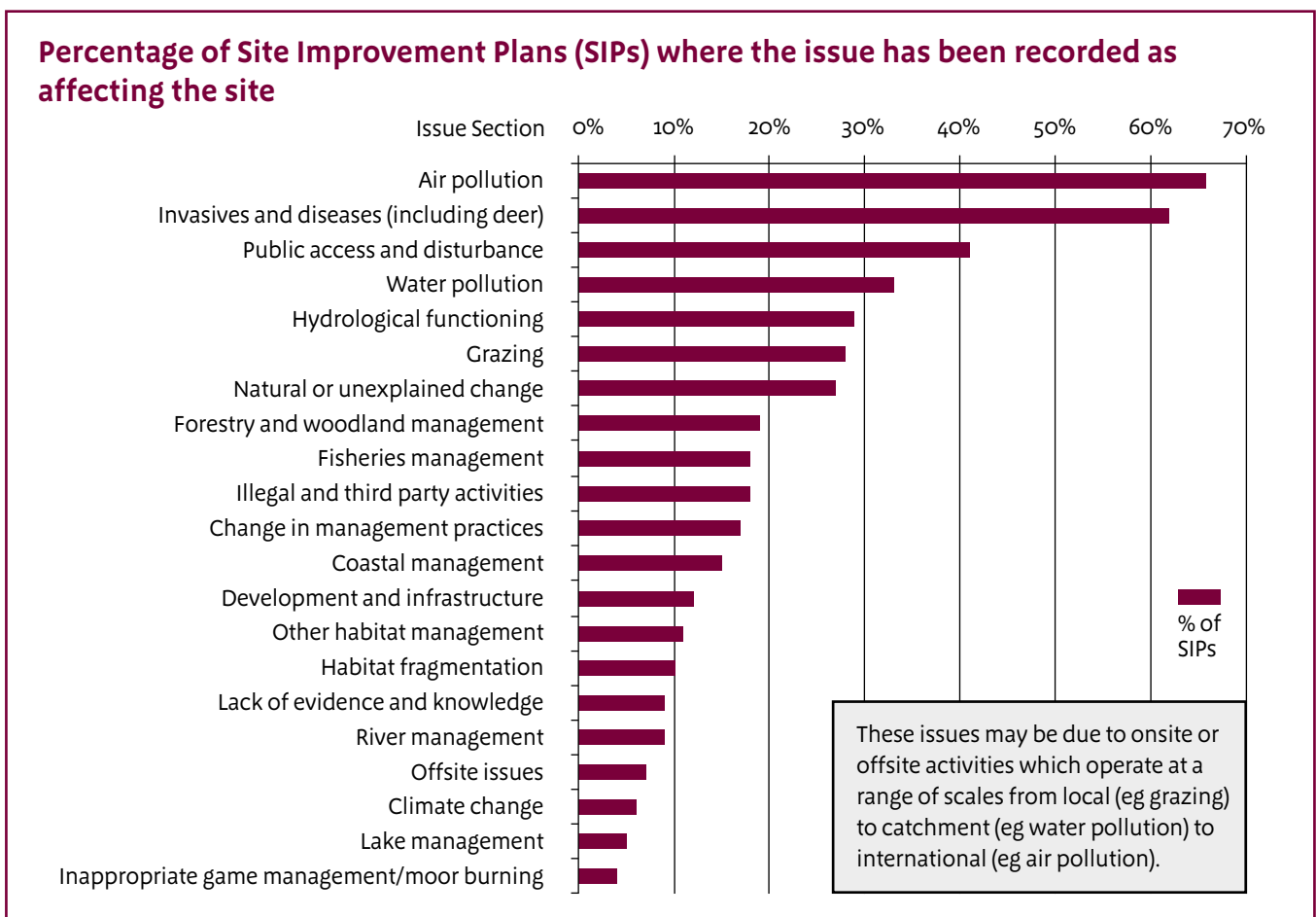


Issues affecting the condition of England's Natura 2000 sites and how we can address them

IPENS provides us with a much better understanding of the issues affecting England's Natura 2000 sites and what we need to do to tackle them at an individual site level and, where required, for the whole network.

The challenges facing England's Natura 2000 sites

Virtually every Natura 2000 site is affected by at least one issue, with **air pollution** and **invasive species and disease (including deer)** affecting the most SACs and SPAs in England. Some issues, whilst only affecting a small number of sites impact a significant proportion of either the Natura 2000 land area (eg inappropriate game management) or area of habitat type (eg lake management).



Priority actions for Natura 2000

Collectively the SIPs propose over 3000 actions (in addition to work already underway for the sites) to tackle these issues at an individual site level. These can range from short-term, small-scale actions (eg species surveys) to large-scale, long-term actions (eg river restoration).

Whilst some issues can be tackled on a site-by-site basis others also need to be tackled at a landscape scale or national level. IPENS identified 11 issues that would benefit from this approach – a theme plan was developed for each.

Summary of the actions proposed to tackle the issues affecting multiple sites

Theme plan topic/issue	Summary of action proposed
Atmospheric nitrogen	Trialling of a new approach, Site Nitrogen Action Plans, to identify local emission sources and potential ways to reduce them.
Climate change	A common approach to targeting and implementing actions that help England's Natura 2000 network adapt to climate change. Plus more detailed proposals such as making conservation designations more appropriate for a changing climate.
Diffuse water pollution	An England wide long-term, adaptive approach, which includes developing detailed catchment plans to address diffuse water pollution (DWP) and improvements in the way existing tools to address DWP are used.
Grazing	A number of actions to improve grazing including: improved advice, support and training; and wider support to underpin grazing management systems at the farm level.
Habitat fragmentation	A more consistent assessment of sites which prioritises where work should be targeted at an England level. Followed by information to aid the development of local plans to improve habitat connectivity.
Hydrological functioning	Implementation of priority actions for land-based wetland SACs, along with the development of a programme of long term hydrological restoration plans which are based on natural hydrological functioning.
Inappropriate coastal management	A recommended approach to address the challenges facing coastal Natura 2000 sites, which places emphasis on the importance of adaptive coastal management and partnership working. It outlines a number of priority actions at a national, policy and local site level.
Invasive species	Four overarching principles for work on invasive species which promote: considering the wider environment around Natura 2000 sites; applying prevention, rapid response and control in that order; prioritisation; and, being more planned and proactive in our approach.
Lake restoration	A planned, national approach which includes: developing a high level partnership and evidence base; improving skills and knowledge; securing available funding; and, continued catchment scale activity to reduce diffuse and point source pollution.
Public access and disturbance	Actions are proposed to review and fill gaps in: evidence; the tools to address the impacts of public access and disturbance; and guidance. Along with improving access to guidance.
River restoration	Addressing outstanding issues from an established programme of river restoration in England that has strong support from stakeholders.

How we will implement the actions

We have a range of work programmes and initiatives (such as the Environmental Stewardship Scheme, National Nature Reserve management and new LIFE projects) which will deliver some of the work required to improve our Natura 2000 sites. Where possible, the actions identified by IPENS will need to be included in these. We also need to ensure that we thoroughly explore the use of other options where we are not currently realising their full potential; such as, bringing together local organisations and individuals, where appropriate, to work together to improve the condition of a site.

In some cases, where there are no existing means to address a problem, we will require new approaches (for example, Site Nitrogen Action Plans to address air pollution) which will require funding and other resources.

Developing our knowledge of Natura 2000 sites and their management

IPENS has spent over £1 million to fill gaps in our knowledge about Natura 2000 sites. This has included:

- Investigating issues affecting Natura 2000 sites.
- Looking into potential management measures to address the issues.
- Monitoring and mapping sites to provide a baseline to work from.

Coastal squeeze (erosion of intertidal habitats between a fixed sea defence and rising sea level) is an issue for estuaries in England, particularly in six main estuary complexes in the south and east of the country. The IPENS Healthy Estuaries project evaluated estuary-scale evidence using selected case studies. If used more widely, this approach could help understand where coastal squeeze is a risk and inform development of sustainable flood risk management strategies that will deliver effective habitat creation in the best places.



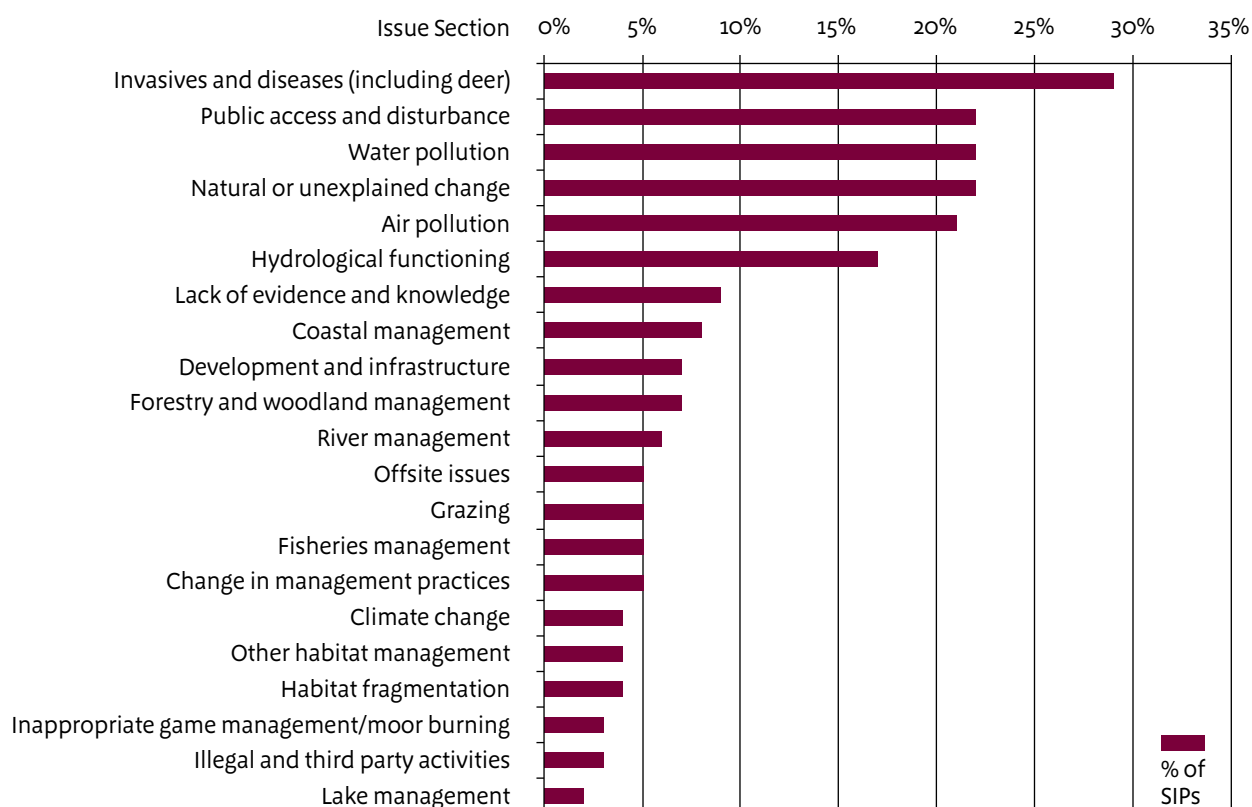
Allfleet's marsh realignment, Crouch and Roach Estuaries SPA

A lot more evidence is still needed, with over 500 individual site specific research requirements identified in the SIPs. The areas of greatest research need are: **invasive species and disease (including deer); public access and disturbance; water pollution; natural or unexplained change; and air pollution (see chart overleaf).**

Funding Natura 2000 management

Approximately 50% of the Site Improvement Plan actions included an initial cost estimate. This alone comes to £800 million; with river management, water pollution and hydrological functioning being the most costly to tackle.

Percentage of Site Improvement Plans (SIPs) where an evidence gap has been identified



The Rural Development Programme for England – a European funding instrument that provides money to improve agriculture, the environment and rural life – is one of the most common funding sources needed for work on Natura 2000 sites. This, along with other regularly used sources of money (eg National Nature Reserve management funds and the Conservation and Enhancement Scheme), will not be sufficient to fund all the work identified by IPENS.

As a conservation sector we need to look for new and innovative ways to fund Natura 2000 management. This potentially includes join-up on the submission of bids for funding such as from Heritage Lottery, EU LIFE+ and other EU funds.

Prioritised Action Framework (PAF) – every country in the EU has developed a PAF which outlines their funding needs and priorities for Natura 2000 sites. This will help the European Commission direct European funding for biodiversity and nature. IPENS is one of nine EU LIFE+ funded projects whose results will be used to update and improve the PAFs.

A collective approach to Natura 2000 management

Many organisations (from government departments and agencies, to conservation groups and private companies) have a role in helping to improve the condition of England’s Natura 2000 sites. In many cases it will be necessary to use (or establish where they do not already exist) local or national partnerships to help deliver this work.

Landowners and land managers will also need to be involved in further specifying and implementing the actions on their land (for example through agri-environment agreements).

Turning plans into conservation action

IPENS has identified the actions required to improve the condition of our Natura 2000 sites and we now need to successfully implement them. To do this we need to work with other organisations to:

- Carry out an exercise to prioritise the actions identified in the site and theme plans, and use this to inform implementation plans.
- Develop a coordinated approach to funding Natura 2000 work and identify how we pay for the actions we do not currently have money for.
- Make best use of existing skills, knowledge and resources to manage Natura 2000 sites, and take a collective view of where there might be gaps in these.

A Steering Group including representatives from government, the conservation sector and other organisations that manage Natura 2000 sites will coordinate this work.

By improving the condition England's Natura 2000 sites we will help assure the long term survival of their important habitats and species, and:

- the vital services they provide such as clean water and climate regulation;
- the contribution they make to our economy; and
- the inspiration and enrichment they give our lives.

Reviving rivers – Natural England and the Environment Agency have been working with three local Rivers Trusts and landowners to restore natural processes on sections of three SAC rivers in Cumbria. By working in partnership a range of environmental, social and economic benefits have been delivered. The project has increased habitat in the river for European rare species such as white-clawed crayfish, improved public access and enjoyment, and is helping to manage flood waters.



Remeandered river channel, River Eden SAC

To find out more

Information on all aspects of the project, including the Site Improvement Plans, theme plans and research are available on the IPENS website: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/improvement-programme-for-englands-natura-2000-sites-ipens>

Front cover
Dendles Wood, Dartmoor SAC
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