

Report to Cabinet

12 March 2025

Subject:	Designation of Nature Conservation Sites
Cabinet Member:	Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Infrastructure Councillor Peter Hughes
Director:	Executive Director – Place Alan Lunt
Key Decision:	Yes [Type (c) - an executive decision which is likely to be significant in terms of its effect on communities living or working in an area comprising two or more wards of the Borough.]
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1 Recommendations

For the reasons set out in the report, it is recommended that Cabinet:-

1.1 approve the following Nature Conservation designations:

- a) Stour Valley: Upgrade the designation from SLINC to SINC, with extension & deletions to boundary as shown on Plans 1-1.6 of Appendix 1.
- b) Land North of High Haden: Retain SLINC designation with extensions & deletions to boundary as shown on Plan 2 of Appendix 1.
- c) Old Hill disused railway: Retain-SLINC designation with-extensions & deletions to boundary as shown on Plan 3 of Appendix 1.
- d) Great Bridge Canal Basins: Retain SINC designation and extend boundary as shown on Plan 4 of Appendix 1.

e) Warley Woods: Retain SINC designation and extend boundary as shown on Plan 5 of Appendix A.

1.2 delegate authority to the Executive Director of Place to make the necessary changes to the Sandwell Local Plan Proposals Map to reflect the designations identified in the report.

2 Reasons for Recommendations

2.1 This report informs Cabinet of the results and recommendations of the ecological surveys carried out for land at the above locations.

2.2 These sites all have existing Site of Local Importance for Nature Conservation (SLINC) designations or the higher ranking Site of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC) designations

2.3 Following resurvey to update or confirm their status, the following recommendations have been endorsed by the Local Sites Partnership (LSP):

- Reaffirm and extend boundaries of two SINC.
- Upgrade a SLINC to a SINC with extensions and deletions to its boundary.
- Reaffirm two SLINC with extensions and deletions to their boundaries.

3 How does this deliver objectives of the Council Plan?

Growing Up in Sandwell	Nature Conservation Sites can add educational value through the provision of green infrastructure and an important ecological resource
Living in Sandwell	An attractive environment will improve the prospect of achieving significant numbers of high-quality new houses in locations that people wish to live in. The provision of a network of green spaces and nature conservation sites improves the local environment, which in turn makes the borough more attractive as a place to live, work, enjoy recreation in and invest in.
Healthy in Sandwell	Nature conservation sites have the potential to increase levels of physical activity, improve mental health, contribute environmental benefits, reduce the urban heat island effect, and benefit high quality residential development.

4 Context and Key Issues

Background:

- 4.1 Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs) and Sites of Local Importance for Nature Conservation (SLINCs) are designations identified in the Site and Delivery Development Plan Document (SAD DPD) and the Draft Sandwell Local Plan (SLP) that was submitted for examination to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities & Local Government in December 2024. They form part of the Borough's environmental infrastructure. Potential Sites of Interest (PSIs) are not identified in the Local plan as they have not been subject to survey but have been highlighted as sites that may be worthy of designation and potential follow up surveys in the future.
- 4.2 SINCs and SLINCs are not subject to statutory protection. The Government envisages that sites are protected from development through the Local Plan process. The identification and allocation of SINCs and SLINCs within the SAD DPD and emerging SLP is therefore important in maintaining and enhancing the Borough's environmental infrastructure.
- 4.3 Environmental infrastructure also includes green space, and Local Nature Reserves (LNRs). Such spaces are of importance as they have the potential to increase levels of physical activity, improve mental health, contribute environmental benefits, reduce the urban heat island effect, and benefit high quality residential development. The environmental infrastructure of the borough also provides an important ecological and educational resource.
- 4.4 The Birmingham and Black Country Local Sites Partnership (LSP) was consulted in the preparation of the surveys and associated reports that form the basis of the above recommendations and its endorsement sought.
- 4.5 The SAD DPD forms part of Sandwell's Development Plan. It sets out land use policies, allocates land for specific uses or purposes and identifies infrastructure requirements to achieve sustainable communities and development within the borough.
- 4.6 The Sandwell Local Plan is the emerging planning document which will replace the Black Country Core Strategy and the SAD DPD. The Sandwell Local Plan will continue to set out land use policies, allocating land for specific uses or purposes as well as identifying infrastructure

requirements to achieve sustainable communities and development within the borough.

- 4.7 To ensure the designation of nature conservation sites remain valid and up to date, survey work has been carried out on existing SINC and SLINC. This ensures we have an up to date, defensible and robust evidence base.

Survey Programme

- 4.8 All of the sites surveyed had existing designations. Planning legislation requires that Local Plan allocations and designations are based on robust and up-to-date evidence.
- 4.9 The LSP is a group that consists of the four Black Country Authorities, Birmingham City Council, Birmingham and the Black Country Wildlife Trust, EcoRecord, Geodiversity, Natural England, The Environment Agency and botanists. The LSP is responsible for endorsing new sites and existing sites when re surveyed and then ensuring the endorsement/ adoption of those sites by their own organisations.
- 4.10 Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC) and Site of Importance for Local Nature Conservation (SLINC) are designations applied to non-statutory nature conservation sites in the West Midlands. Although these sites do not receive statutory protection, they are protected from damaging development by Local Plan policies.
- 4.11 Below are summaries of each survey's principal issues and recommendations for the sites.

Stour Valley: Stour Valley SLINC lies to the south of Cradley Heath, Sandwell, and follows the course of the Stour River and its northern bank from the B4174 Cradley Forge at SO 93495 85623 in the west to Congreaves Nature Reserve at SO 95359 84800 in the east. This river valley forms an important wildlife corridor in the context of the urban environment and contains a variety of habitats including running water, semi-natural broad-leaved woodland, dense/continuous scrub, marshy grassland, tall ruderal, ephemeral/short perennial and bare ground. The Stour Valley is an important wildlife corridor and has been identified in the Black Country Local Nature Recovery map and strategy as one of the 13 Core Landscape Areas.

Core Landscapes are defined as large areas of land comprised of multiple land use parcels that are ecologically coherent, often sharing similar geology, soil types, habitats, landscape character and land-use

history. Core Landscapes typically support the highest abundance and diversity of semi-natural and priority habitats. They provide significant opportunity and are a priority for investment in ecological recovery (e.g. habitat restoration and creation).

Based on the criteria assessment, it is recommended that the site is upgraded to a SINC, as the site scores mostly Highs for the ecological criteria.

It is recommended that the site boundary is extended in several locations to include further areas of woodland, scrub and tall ruderal. Additionally, it is recommended that several areas of bare ground, hardstanding, buildings and amenity grassland are removed from the site boundary. See plans 1-1.6 of Appendix A

Land North of High Haden: An area of predominantly semi-natural mixed woodland which appears to have developed naturally over time. Several Birmingham and Black Country (B&BC) axiophytes or species rare and uncommon within B&BC have been recorded on site. It is connected to other areas of woodland in the surrounds and likely forms part of an important wildlife corridor in the context of the local area. The woodland is inaccessible to the public but forms a valuable landscape feature, forming the backdrop to private residential gardens. The woodland is situated on a steep embankment, much of which is not possible to survey in detail as it is unsafe due to the topography. Extensions and part deletions to the site boundary are suggested. See Plan 2 of Appendix A

Old Hill disused railway: An old disused railway site predominantly comprising a block of broad-leaved woodland. Habitats associated with a private garden including amenity grassland, introduced shrub and scattered trees are also present. The woodland appears to have developed naturally over time since the site was taken out of use as a railway. Several Birmingham and Black Country (B&BC) axiophytes or species rare and uncommon within B&BC are present on site, including old man's beard, hemp-agrimony and spindle. A section of scrub located to the south-east of the existing SLINC boundary was included in the survey. This is contiguous with the site and forms an extension to the on-site woodland. It is recommended that the site boundary is extended to incorporate this area. It is also recommended that some areas of the site are removed from the site boundary, as these correspond to areas of hardstanding and private gardens. See Plan 3 of Appendix A.

Great Bridge Canal Basins: A section of the Walsall Canal and former canal basins which now comprise predominantly woodland and scrub. Includes a section of the River Tame and blocks of woodland either side of the A41. Habitats present include semi-natural broad-leaved woodland, plantation mixed woodland, dense scrub, standing water, running water, and marginal vegetation. The ground conditions are damp and support a range of rare floral species. An additional area to the east of the existing site boundary was included in this survey at the request of Sandwell M.B.C. Part of this area is a Potential Site of Importance (PSI).

The interior of the site was not accessed during this survey due to access not being granted by the landowner to some areas, and dense vegetation and wet ground preventing access to others. Where possible, these areas were surveyed from the adjacent canal towpath where visible. However, there was still an area in the interior of the site that was not possible to survey. From aerial imagery it appears that this area still comprises a mosaic of habitats of ecological value and they appear to be a continuation of the habitats within the existing SINC. It is proposed that the mixed plantation woodland areas adjacent to the A41, the River Tame section and additional areas of semi-natural broad-leaved woodland are included within an extended site boundary. See Plan 4 of Appendix A.

Warley Woods: Warley Woods encompasses 45ha of public open space and commercial golf course, which includes amenity and semi-improved grassland, scattered parkland trees, tall herb, scrub and woodland (plantation / semi-natural). The site is managed for its amenity value for public, however, sympathetic management for wildlife and floristic diversity, such as field layer planting and a reduction in mowing regime, has been undertaken in a number of areas within the large woodlands, boundaries of the amenity areas and an area known as the 'Wilderness' (park compartment P1). In these areas, species diversity has increased and structural diversity has become varied. In addition, remnant areas of acidic grassland are present within the parkland areas, as indicated by the presence of the species Sheep's Fescue *Festuca ovina* and Heathgrass *Danthonia decumbens*. These areas still achieve the criteria necessary to hold the designation. The current SINC designation does not correspond with the current woodland boundaries, therefore it is recommended that the SINC boundaries are amended to match with habitat extents. Most of the areas previously designated as SLINC should be upgraded to SINC as they form part of the important semi-natural components of the site.

The SINC boundary should also be extended to include the naturalised areas within W1, W3, P1, P4 and golf course and should also include the areas of remnant acidic grassland within P3. A small section of the SINC (located at SP 01134 86241) is now part of a children's play area. The SINC boundary is proposed to be amended to exclude this section. Two small sections of SLINC (located at SP 01114 86098 and SP 00923 86185) are proposed to be de-designated as they are more formal/amenity in character and in addition the more formal and amenity areas of the park and golf course also do not meet the criteria for designation. See Plan 5 of Appendix A.

5 Alternative Options

- 5.1 The alternative is to not commission survey work, which would result in out-of-date evidence base and the potential for SINC and SLINC to be at greater risk of being lost.
- 5.2 The potential for planning decisions to be challenged increases where it can be shown that Local Plan allocations are based on out-of-date or incomplete information. Ensuring there is current information relating to the borough's inventory of nature conservation sites, including SINC and SLINC, reduces this risk.

6 Implications

Resources:	There are no direct financial implications arising from this report. However, sufficient resources will need to be identified within existing budgets to ensure that the ongoing potential nature conservation site review programme can be completed within an appropriate timescale, as this forms part the core function.
Legal and Governance:	National planning policy sets out clear expectations for local authorities to take a strategic approach to the environment and biodiversity. Survey and resurvey work on sites of ecological interest and value should contribute to current and emergent development plan documents (such as the emerging Local Plan and important supplementary planning documents). S.40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act (2006) requires all public bodies to have regard to biodiversity conservation when carrying out their functions – commonly referred to as the 'Biodiversity duty'. These designations support the

	<p>Council in the discharge of this obligation. The continued monitoring of the status of nature conservation sites and identifying new sites is also part of the requirements of The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations (2010). Arrangements for the designation and protection of sites for planning purposes falls outside of the scope of this report and is instead undertaken via the development and review of the emergent Local Plan.</p>
Risk:	<p>The Council's corporate risk assessment strategy has been complied with, to identify and assess the risks associates with this decision/recommendation. This has identified that there are no significant risks that need to be reported.</p>
Equality:	<p>The sites that are the subject of this report are included in the Site Allocations & Delivery DPD, which was subject of a full Equality Impact Assessment prior to its adoption in 2012.</p>
Health and Wellbeing:	<p>The maintenance of Nature Conservation sites will have a positive impact on the health and wellbeing, (including mental health) of the population by providing a green network of sites for Biodiversity</p>
Social Value:	<p>Nature Conservation sites improve the social value of the area by providing green and natural spaces, which is positive for health and well-being</p>
Climate Change:	<p>Nature Conservation Sites are addressing Climate Change and link strongly to Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)</p>
Corporate Parenting:	<p>There are no corporate parenting implications arising from the recommendations contained in this report.</p>

7. Appendices

Appendix 1 - Site Plans

8. Background Papers

Black Country Core Strategy (2011)
Sandwell Site Allocations & Delivery DPD (2012)
Submission Sandwell Local Plan (2024)