



European Site Conservation Objectives: Supplementary advice on conserving and restoring site features

**Lewes Downs Special Area of Conservation (SAC)
Site Code: UK0012832**



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About this document

This document provides Natural England's supplementary advice about the European Site Conservation Objectives relating to Lewes Downs SAC.

This advice should therefore be read together with the SAC Conservation Objectives available [here](#).

You should use the Conservation Objectives, this Supplementary Advice and any case-specific advice given by Natural England when developing, proposing or assessing an activity, plan or project that may affect this site.

This Supplementary Advice to the Conservation Objectives presents attributes which are ecological characteristics of the designated species and habitats within a site. The listed attributes are considered to be those that best describe the site's ecological integrity and which, if safeguarded, will enable achievement of the Conservation Objectives. Each attribute has a target which is either quantified or qualitative depending on the available evidence. The target identifies as far as possible the desired state to be achieved for the attribute.

The tables provided below bring together the findings of the best available scientific evidence relating to the site's qualifying features, which may be updated or supplemented in further publications from Natural England and other sources. The local evidence used in preparing this supplementary advice has been cited. The references to the national evidence used are available on request. Where evidence and references have not been indicated, Natural England has applied ecological knowledge and expert judgement. You may decide to use other additional sources of information.

In many cases, the attribute targets shown in the tables indicate whether the current objective is to 'maintain' or 'restore' the attribute. This is based on the best available information, including that gathered during monitoring of the feature's current condition. As new information on feature condition becomes available, this will be added so that the advice remains up to date.

The targets given for each attribute do not represent thresholds to assess the significance of any given impact in Habitats Regulations Assessments. You will need to assess this on a case-by-case basis using the most current information available.

Some, but not all, of these attributes can also be used for regular monitoring of the actual condition of the designated features. The attributes selected for monitoring the features, and the standards used to assess their condition, are listed in separate monitoring documents, which will be available from Natural England.

These tables do not give advice about SSSI features or other legally protected species which may also be present within the European Site.

If you have any comments or queries about this Supplementary Advice document please contact your local Natural England adviser or email HDIRConservationObjectivesNE@naturalengland.org.uk

About this site

European Site information

Name of European Site	Lewes Downs Special Area of Conservation (SAC)
Location	Surrey, East and West Sussex
Site Map	The designated boundary of this site can be viewed here on the MAGIC website
Designation Date	1 April 2005
Qualifying Features	See section below
Designation Area	146.86 ha
Designation Changes	N/A
Feature Condition Status	Details of the feature condition assessments made at this site can be found using Natural England's Designated Sites System
Names of component Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs)	Lewes Down SSSI A small section of the SSSI around Glynde Holt is not part of the SAC.
Relationship with other European or International Site designations	N/A

Site background and geography

Lewes Downs is an isolated block of downland which forms part of the South Downs. It is important for the extremely rich chalk grassland and scrub vegetation, which contains a number of southern and oceanic-southern species as well as a nationally rare orchid. The site also supports a rich invertebrate fauna including a rare moth, and an important breeding community of downland birds.

This block of downland has a south-facing scarp slope which is an unusual feature within the South Downs. The majority of the site comprises unimproved species-rich chalk grassland, developed on steep slopes over thin rendzina soils. Other habitats which add to the diversity and interest of the site include areas of mixed scrub and semi-natural woodland.

Lewes Downs is situated within the South Downs National Character Area (NCA). The South Downs area consists of dramatic white chalk cliffs and downland which create a sense of openness, whilst both enclosure and remoteness can be found in woodland and even in close proximity to urban areas. The Arun, Adur, Cuckmere and Ouse Rivers in the area dissect the chalk ridge in its eastern half, separating it into blocks, as they drain south to the sea. Further information on the NCA can be found [here](#):

About the qualifying features of the SAC

The following section gives you additional, site-specific information about this SAC's qualifying features. These are the natural habitats and/or species for which this SAC has been designated.

Qualifying habitats:

- **H6210 Semi-natural dry grasslands and scrubland facies: on calcareous substrates (Festuco-Brometalia)**

This site hosts the priority habitat type "orchid rich sites". This chalk grassland site consists largely of CG2 *Festuca ovina* – *Avenula pratensis* and CG3 *Bromus erectus* calcareous grasslands. It contains an important assemblage of rare and scarce orchids, including early spider-orchid *Ophrys sphegodes*, burnt orchid *Orchis ustulata* and musk orchid *Herminium monorchis*. The colony of burnt orchid is one of the largest in the UK.

Table 1: Supplementary Advice for Qualifying Features: H6210. Semi-natural dry grasslands and scrubland facies: on calcareous substrates (Festuco-Brometalia) (important orchid sites); Dry grasslands and scrublands on chalk or limestone (important orchid sites)

Attributes		Targets	Supporting and Explanatory Notes	Sources of site-based evidence (where available)
Extent and distribution of the feature	Extent of the feature within the site	Maintain the total extent of the feature to 150.10ha of Semi-natural dry grasslands and scrubland facies: on calcareous substrates (Festuco-Brometalia)	There should be no measurable net reduction (excluding any trivial loss) in the extent and area of this feature, and in some cases, the full extent of the feature may need to be restored. The baseline-value of extent given has been generated using data gathered from the listed site-based surveys. Area measurements given may be approximate depending on the methods, age and accuracy of data collection, and as a result this value may be updated in future to reflect more accurate information. The extent of an Annex I habitat feature covers the sum extent of all of the component vegetation communities present and may include transitions and mosaics with other closely-associated habitat features. Where a feature is susceptible to natural dynamic processes, there may be acceptable variations in its extent through natural fluctuations. Where a reduction in the extent of a feature is considered necessary to meet the Conservation Objective for another Annex I feature, Natural England will advise on this on a case-by-case basis.	NATURAL ENGLAND, 2013. <i>Lewes Downs SSSI Favourable Condition Table</i> . Available from Natural England on request
Extent and distribution of the feature	Spatial distribution of the feature within the site	Maintain the distribution and configuration of the feature, including where applicable its component vegetation types, across the site	A contraction in the range, or geographic spread, of the feature (and its component vegetation and typical species, plus transitional communities) across the site will reduce its overall area, the local diversity and variations in its structure and composition and may undermine its resilience to adapt to future environmental changes. This may also reduce and break up the continuity of a habitat within a site and how well its typical species are able to move around the site to occupy and use habitat. Such fragmentation can impact on their viability and the wider ecological composition of the Annex I habitat. Smaller fragments of habitat can typically support smaller and more isolated populations which are more vulnerable to extinction. These fragments also have a greater amount of open edge habitat which will differ in the amount of light, temperature, wind, and even noise that it receives compared to its interior.	Lewes Downs SSSI condition assessments (2009 and 2015). Available from Natural England on request.

Attributes		Targets	Supporting and Explanatory Notes	Sources of site-based evidence (where available)
			These conditions may not be suitable for some of the typical and more specialist species associated with the Annex I habitat feature.	
Structure and function (including its typical species)	Adaptation and resilience	Maintain the feature's ability, and that of its supporting processes, to adapt or evolve to wider environmental change, either within or external to the site	<p>This recognises the increasing likelihood of natural habitat features to absorb or adapt to wider environmental changes. Resilience may be described as the ability of an ecological system to cope with, and adapt to environmental stress and change whilst retaining the same basic structure and ways of functioning. Such environmental changes may include changes in sea levels, precipitation and temperature for example, which are likely to affect the extent, distribution, composition and functioning of a feature within a site. The vulnerability and response of features to such changes will vary. Using best available information, any necessary or likely adaptation or adjustment by the feature and its management in response to actual or expected climatic change should be allowed for, as far as practicable, in order to ensure the feature's long-term viability.</p> <p>The overall vulnerability of this SAC to climate change has been assessed by Natural England (2015) as being low, taking into account the sensitivity, fragmentation, topography and management of its habitats/supporting habitats. This means that this site is considered to be vulnerable overall but is a lower priority for further assessment and action. Individual species may be more or less vulnerable than their supporting habitat itself. In many cases, change will be inevitable so appropriate monitoring would be advisable.</p>	NATURAL ENGLAND, 2015. <i>Climate Change Theme Plan and supporting National Biodiversity Climate Change Vulnerability assessments ('NBCCVAs') for SACs and SPAs in England.</i> Available at http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/4954594591375360
Structure and function (including its typical species)	Functional connectivity with wider landscape	Maintain the overall extent, quality and function of any supporting features within the local landscape which provide a critical functional connection with the site	This recognises the potential need at this site to maintain or restore the connectivity of the site to its wider landscape in order to meet the conservation objectives. These connections may take the form of landscape features, such as habitat patches, hedges, watercourses and verges, outside of the designated site boundary which are either important for the migration, dispersal and genetic exchange of those typical species closely associated with qualifying Annex I habitat features of the site. These features may also be important to	

Attributes		Targets	Supporting and Explanatory Notes	Sources of site-based evidence (where available)
			the operation of the supporting ecological processes on which the designated site and its features may rely. In most cases increasing actual and functional landscape-scale connectivity would be beneficial. Where there is a lack of detailed knowledge of the connectivity requirements of the qualifying feature, Natural England will advise as to whether these are applicable on a case by case basis.	
Structure and function (including its typical species)	Key structural, influential and/or distinctive species	<p>Maintain the abundance of the species listed to enable each of them to be a viable component of the Annex I habitat feature:</p> <p>Early spider-orchid <i>Ophrys sphegodes</i>, burnt orchid <i>Orchis ustulata</i>, musk orchid <i>Herminium monorchis</i></p> <p>The constant and preferential plants of the CG2, CG4 and CG4 NVC community types which form a key component of the H6210 grassland.</p>	<p>Some plant or animal species (or related groups of such species) make a particularly important contribution to the necessary structure, function and/or quality of an Annex I habitat feature at a particular site. These species will include;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structural species which form a key part of the Annex I habitat's structure or help to define that habitat on a particular SAC (see also the attribute for 'vegetation community composition'). • Influential species which are likely to have a key role affecting the structure and function of the habitat (such as bioturbators (mixers of soil/sediment), grazers, surface borers, predators or other species with a significant functional role linked to the habitat). • Site-distinctive species which are considered to be a particularly special and distinguishing component of an Annex I habitat on a particular SAC. <p>There may be natural fluctuations in the frequency and cover of each of these species. The relative contribution made by them to the overall ecological integrity of a site may vary, and Natural England will provide bespoke advice on this as necessary. The list of species given here for this Annex I habitat feature at this SAC is not necessarily exhaustive. The list may evolve, and species may be added or deleted, as new information about this site becomes available.</p>	
Structure and function	Soils, substrate and	Maintain the properties of the underlying soil types, including	Soil is the foundation of basic ecosystem function and its properties strongly influence the colonisation, growth and	

Attributes		Targets	Supporting and Explanatory Notes	Sources of site-based evidence (where available)
(including its typical species)	nutrient cycling	structure, bulk density, total carbon, pH, soil nutrient status and fungal: bacterial ratio, to within typical values for the habitat.	distribution of those plant species which together form vegetation types, and therefore provides a habitat used by a wide range of organisms. Soil biodiversity has a vital role to recycle organic matter. Changes to natural soil properties may therefore affect the ecological structure, function and processes associated with this Annex I feature.	
Structure and function (including its typical species)	Supporting off-site habitat	Maintain the extent, quality and spatial configuration of land or habitat surrounding or adjacent to the site which is known to support the feature.	The structure and function of the qualifying habitat, including its typical species, may rely upon the continued presence of areas which surround and are outside of the designated site boundary. Changes in surrounding land-use may adversely (directly/indirectly) affect the functioning of the feature and its component species. This supporting habitat may be critical to the typical species of the feature to support their feeding, breeding, roosting, population dynamics ('metapopulations'), pollination or to prevent/reduce/absorb damaging impacts from adjacent land uses e.g. pesticide drift, nutrient enrichment.	
Structure and function (including its typical species)	Vegetation community composition	Ensure the component vegetation communities of the feature are referable to and characterised by the following National Vegetation Classification types: CG2 <i>Festuca ovina</i> - <i>Avenula pratensis</i> grassland CG3 <i>Bromus erectus</i> grassland CG4 <i>Brachypodium pinnatum</i> grassland	This habitat feature will comprise a number of associated semi-natural vegetation types and their transitional zones, reflecting the geographical location of the site, altitude, aspect, soil conditions (especially base-status and drainage) and vegetation management. In the UK these have been categorised by the National Vegetation Classification (NVC). Maintaining or restoring these characteristic and distinctive vegetation types, and the range of types as appropriate, will be important to sustaining the overall habitat feature. This will also help to conserve their typical plant species (i.e. the constant and preferential species of a community), and therefore that of the SAC feature, at appropriate levels (recognising natural fluctuations).	NATURAL ENGLAND, 2013. <i>Lewes Downs SSSI Favourable Condition Table</i> . Available from Natural England on request
Structure and function (including its typical species)	Vegetation community transitions	Maintain the pattern of natural vegetation zonations/transitions between grassland NVC communities, supporting woodlands and scrub structures, all of which form a characteristic	Transitions/zonations between adjacent but different vegetation communities are usually related to naturally-occurring changes in soil, aspect or slope. Such 'ecotones' retain characteristics of each bordering community and can add value in often containing species not found in the adjacent communities. Retaining such transitions can provide further diversity to the	

Attributes		Targets	Supporting and Explanatory Notes	Sources of site-based evidence (where available)
		diverse habitat within the SAC.	habitat feature, and support additional flora and fauna.	
Structure and function (including its typical species)	Vegetation: proportion of herbs (including <i>Carex</i> spp.)	Maintain the proportion of herbaceous species within the range 40%-90%	<p>A high cover of characteristic herbs, including sedges (<i>Carex</i> species) is typical of the structure of this habitat type.</p> <p>A low proportion outside target indicates eutrophication, usually from fertilisers, or insufficient removal of biomass, leading to dominance by grasses.</p>	NATURAL ENGLAND, 2013. <i>Lewes Downs SSSI Favourable Condition Table</i> . Available from Natural England on request
Structure and function (including its typical species)	Vegetation: undesirable species	Maintain the frequency/cover of the following undesirable species to within acceptable levels and prevent changes in surface condition, soils, nutrient levels or hydrology which may encourage their spread: Creeping thistle <i>Cirsium arvense</i> , spear thistle <i>Cirsium vulgare</i> , curled dock <i>Rumex crispus</i> , broad-leaved dock <i>Rumex obtusifolius</i> , common ragwort <i>Senecio jacobaea</i> , common nettle <i>Urtica Dioica</i> and Tor grass <i>Brachypodium pinnatum</i> should form no more than 10% of cover through the site.	There will be a range of undesirable or uncharacteristic species which, if allowed to colonise and spread, are likely to have an adverse effect on the feature's structure and function, including its more desirable typical species. These may include invasive non-natives such as <i>Cotoneaster</i> spp, or coarse and aggressive native species which may uncharacteristically dominate the composition of the feature.	NATURAL ENGLAND, 2013. <i>Lewes Downs SSSI Favourable Condition Table</i> . Available from Natural England on request
Supporting processes (on which the feature relies)	Air quality	Restore as necessary, the concentrations and deposition of air pollutants to at or below the site-relevant Critical Load or Level values given for this feature of the site on the Air Pollution Information System (www.apis.ac.uk).	This habitat type is considered sensitive to changes in air quality. Exceedance of these critical values for air pollutants may modify the chemical status of its substrate, accelerating or damaging plant growth, altering its vegetation structure and composition and causing the loss of sensitive typical species associated with it. Critical Loads and Levels are recognised thresholds below which such harmful effects on sensitive UK habitats will not occur to a significant level, according to current levels of scientific understanding. There are critical levels for ammonia (NH ₃), oxides of nitrogen (NO _x) and sulphur dioxide (SO ₂), and critical loads for nutrient nitrogen deposition and acid deposition. There are currently no critical loads or levels	<p>More information about site-relevant Critical Loads and Levels for this SAC is available by using the 'search by site' tool on the Air Pollution Information System (www.apis.ac.uk).</p> <p>NATURAL ENGLAND, 2015. <i>Lewes Downs SAC Site Improvement Plan. Version 1.0</i>. Available at: http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk.</p>

Attributes		Targets	Supporting and Explanatory Notes	Sources of site-based evidence (where available)
			<p>for other pollutants such as Halogens, Heavy Metals, POPs, VOCs or Dusts. These should be considered as appropriate on a case-by-case basis. Ground level ozone is regionally important as a toxic air pollutant but flux-based critical levels for the protection of semi-natural habitats are still under development. It is recognised that achieving this target may be subject to the development, availability and effectiveness of abatement technology and measures to tackle diffuse air pollution, within realistic timescales.</p> <p>Modelling undertaken by Lewes District Council and Wealden District Council for Local Plan assessments has identified that increases in development coming forward within plans, would increase Nitrogen deposition, Nitrogen Oxides and ammonia on roads that run within 200m of Lewes Downs SAC. However assessment of improvements in vehicular technology and in particular Euro6/VI standards that all vehicles are currently being manufactured to, will outweigh impacts from new development. The improvements will be marginally retarded by additional development but future nitrogen deposition and concentration will continue to decline with the existing trend. Additionally, modelling has identified that the habitat mostly affected by increases in N and NO_x and NH₃ from vehicular impacts is woodland, which is not a designated feature of the SAC.</p> <p>Much of the topography of the site in the locations within 200m of affected roads is extremely steep. Therefore the woodland belt which buffers the designated features of the site will not be removed under site management as this could reduce soil stability in these locations and is also a feature of the underlying SSSI designation. The site exceeds the critical load/level however this is due to National and International source attributions rather than from local impacts. A SNAP is therefore not considered appropriate for this site as local measures would not ameliorate impacts from National and international sources (see APIS). However general measures to reduce car journeys and encourage use of cleaner technology and public transport use is welcomed. The</p>	<p>org.uk/publication/5857326774878208</p>

Attributes		Targets	Supporting and Explanatory Notes	Sources of site-based evidence (where available)
			<p>background levels of Nitrogen are expected to decline with EU and Government clean air strategies and continue the existing downward trend.</p> <p>Notwithstanding the above, large inputs from industrial processes that could disperse over greater distances or large increases in vehicular movements not included within Local Authority modelling would need to be assessed separately for potential impacts on the site.</p>	
Supporting processes (on which the feature relies)	Conservation measures	Maintain the management measures (either within and/or outside the site boundary as appropriate) which are necessary to Maintain the structure, functions and supporting processes associated with the feature	Active and ongoing conservation management is needed to protect, maintain or restore this feature at this site. Further details about the necessary conservation measures for this site can be provided by contacting Natural England. This information will typically be found within, where applicable, supporting documents such as Natura 2000 Site Improvement Plan, Site Management Strategies or Plans, the Views about Management Statement for the underpinning SSSI and/or management agreements.	<p>ENGLISH NATURE, 2003. <i>A statement of English Nature's views about the management of Lewes Downs Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)</i>. Available at: https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/PDFsForWeb/VAM/1002952.pdf</p> <p>NATURAL ENGLAND, 2015. <i>Lewes Downs SAC Site Improvement Plan. Version 1.0</i>. Available at: http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/5857326774878208</p>
Version Control Advice last updated: N/A				
Variations from national feature-framework of integrity-guidance: N/A				

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