



## **Methodology for refining Strategic Nature Area Profiles in Devon**

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### **Brief:**

To refine identified Strategic Nature Areas (SNA) to create a more robust and ground tested series of GIS based maps that will enable the targeted development of landscape scale habitat and landscape improvements.

The data will confirm existing and unrecorded habitat networks within the wider landscape matrix and identify protection, restoration and creation opportunities. It will enable more detailed consultation with communities and landowners by a wide range of organisations & individuals including AONBs, Statutory Agencies, Conservation NGOs and Land Management professionals.

Strategic Nature Areas (SNAs) are identified on the South West Nature Map. They are based on the Rebuilding Biodiversity methodology developed by the South West Wildlife Trusts. SNAs represent a number of areas around the region that are important both for the conservation and, importantly, the expansion of Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) habitats.

SNAs represent a landscape-scale approach to nature conservation. They provide a framework for planning both the conservation and expansion of semi-natural habitats, thus providing the connectivity within the landscape necessary to enable plants and animals to migrate and establish sustainable populations and communities.

Usually, each SNA focuses on a single UK BAP priority habitat. However, they are not intended to imply that all of the SNA should be restored to that habitat in the future. Depending on the habitat in question, the Rebuilding Biodiversity methodology set theoretical targets for the cover of that habitat, of other semi-natural habitat and of other land uses within the SNA.

Devon Biodiversity Records Centre completed the original SNA profiles in 2009/10 and assisted in developing the methodology and format with the Devon County Council biodiversity officer.

## **Delivery**

This work is broken into two distinct stages which are outlined below.

### **Stage 1:**

The original SNA boundaries were derived using a number of methodologies and assumptions. To allow the most effective targeting of conservation resources within these areas, organisations now require maps and profiles which relate more directly to mechanisms through which this work can be delivered.

Initially it is important to highlight potential boundary changes for ground truthing, using a consistent and clearly defined approach.

Key areas:

- Desk top exercise to assess the existing SNA boundaries and range.

The selected SNA boundaries should be scrutinised using aerial photography interpretation (API) and desk top study of existing habitat data. Data used will include information on statutory and non statutory sites, and up to date UKBAP habitat inventories within the boundary or close to the SNA.

- Proposed refinement of SNA boundaries where appropriate.

The use of geographic or habitat features to realign the boundaries where necessary, should use a common sense approach which takes into account clear field, roadway or habitat boundaries as demarcation.

- Updating of SNA profiles for all SNA's identified within the relevant project.

Once the boundaries have been updated, the maximum and minimum areas of UKBAP priority habitat within the 'maintenance and restoration targets' section of the profiles should be recalculated. Data from the UKBAP habitat inventories is used to update the maximum and minimum areas, while areas for possible enhancement are added using data from Other Sites of Wildlife Interest and Unconfirmed Wildlife Sites.

Up to date species searches within the SNA area should be used to inform the 'summary of nature conservation interest' section

### **Stage 2:**

Using the revised maps produced within the earlier exercise a surveyor should then endeavour to ground truth these changes. The surveyor should also acquire additional habitat or geographic information within the SNA from public roadways, footpaths or open access land if possible. Through experience it is acknowledged that there are limitations to access and visibility using this technique. The surveyor can use binoculars where practical to increase depth of vision from vantage points and should take notes and photographs which clearly detail their findings.

It should be noted that information/images gathered without landowner permission may have restrictions on use.

- Upon completion of the ground truthing the surveyor should complete the 'Opportunities for habitat restoration and creation in the SNA' section of the profiles. Without access to assess indicator species at ground level the identification of forces for change, indicators of change and preferred action for the SNA's will be restricted to using the desk top information and limited ground truthing exercise. An up to date knowledge of funding streams, financial drivers, wider conservation partnerships and localised projects will be necessary to complete this section.
- Through experience it is important for both efficiency and accuracy that this exercise is carried out in unison with the field work and the exercise is completed by the same individual where possible.
- At this stage the boundary changes proposed in stage 1 should be adopted or revised and adopted as required.
- Finally using the updated SNA boundaries and profiles as well as the ground truthing data, creation of opportunities maps which show areas of potential connectivity and restoration can be created. These maps show habitat data graphically and simply and can be used to communicate with a wide audience including community stakeholders and landowners.

## **SNA Opportunities Mapping**

### **Aims:**

- To identify opportunities to increase the area of Priority Habitat within the SNA
- To identify linking habitat between existing areas of high ecological value
- Assist in securing improved quality of all habitats within the SNA through positive management

Areas are identified and graded using the results of stages 1 & 2, and should be limited to the following classifications.

- High ecological value (HEV) – areas of the SNA target habitat, other UKBAP habitats, County Wildlife Sites (CWS) Other Sites of Wildlife Interest (OSWI) and Unconfirmed Wildlife Sites (UWS) – additionally physical features such as disused railway lines may fall within this category as they can provide wildlife corridors.
- Intermediate ecological value (IEV) – areas of semi improved grassland, scrub, buffer areas adjacent to riverine corridors, woodland, gardens.
- Low ecological value (LEV) – improved grassland, arable fields, coniferous woodlands

Areas of Opportunity should be identified using the following criteria.

- Areas of IEV which could form links between areas of HEV
- Areas of LEV which are enclosed by areas of IEV or HEV
- Areas identified with potential for habitat creation (e.g Parkland)

Individual maps can be created for singular habitat types if required; separating woodland from grassland for instance may help identify the differing funding sources available.

Maps can also be created to highlight specific areas of opportunity mentioned in the SNA profile, and areas where further survey would be beneficial.

**Note:**

It is important to complete rigorous risk assessments and implement health and safety protocols. Especially because the nature of this field exercise means the surveyor will have to negotiate public highways and associated traffic as well as members of the public, and landowners interested in why they are looking over a field boundary.

This methodology was created in collaboration with East Devon AONB within their Cordiale funded Landscape Mapping Project 2012.



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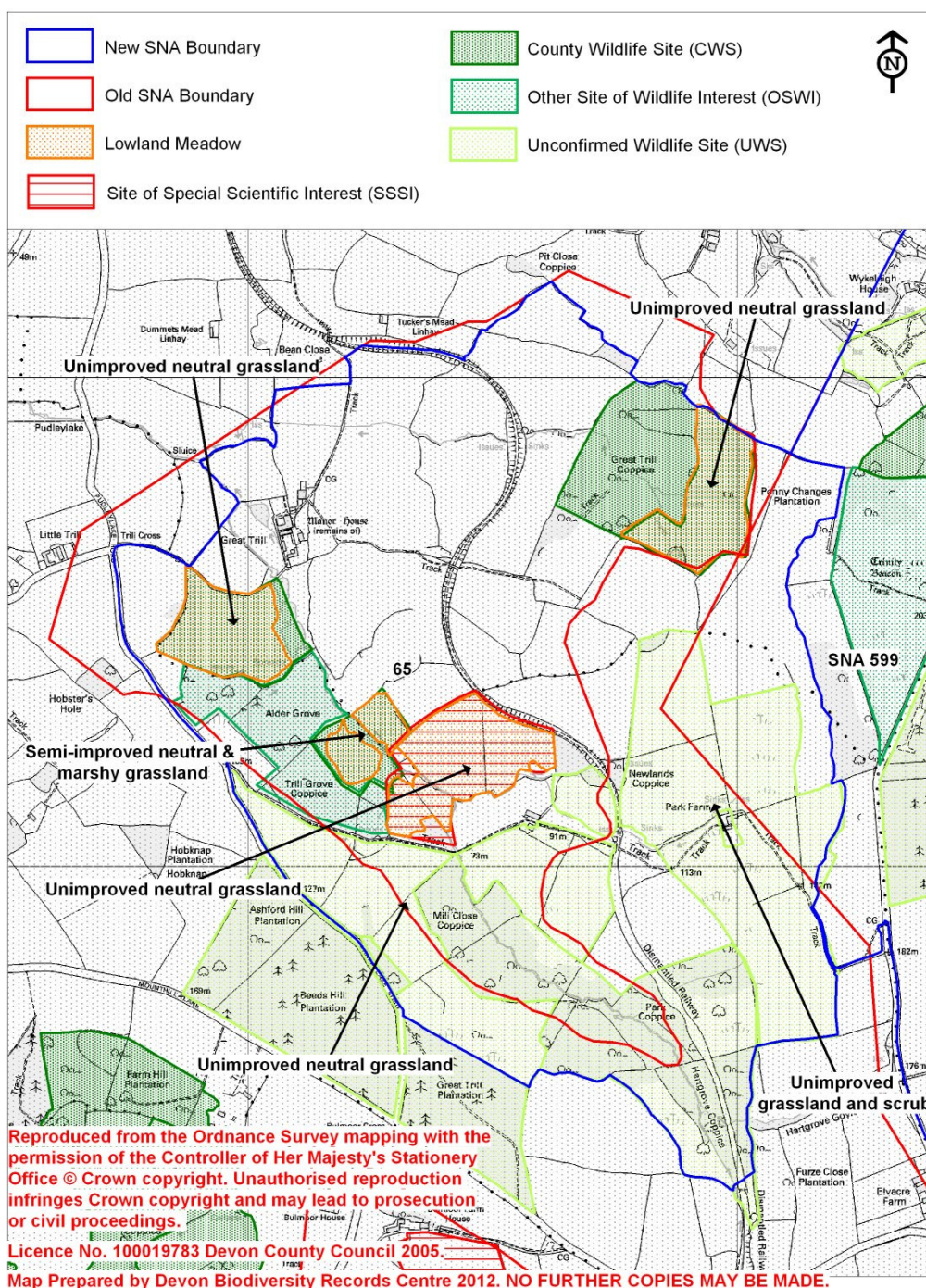
**Date:**

20<sup>th</sup> November 2012



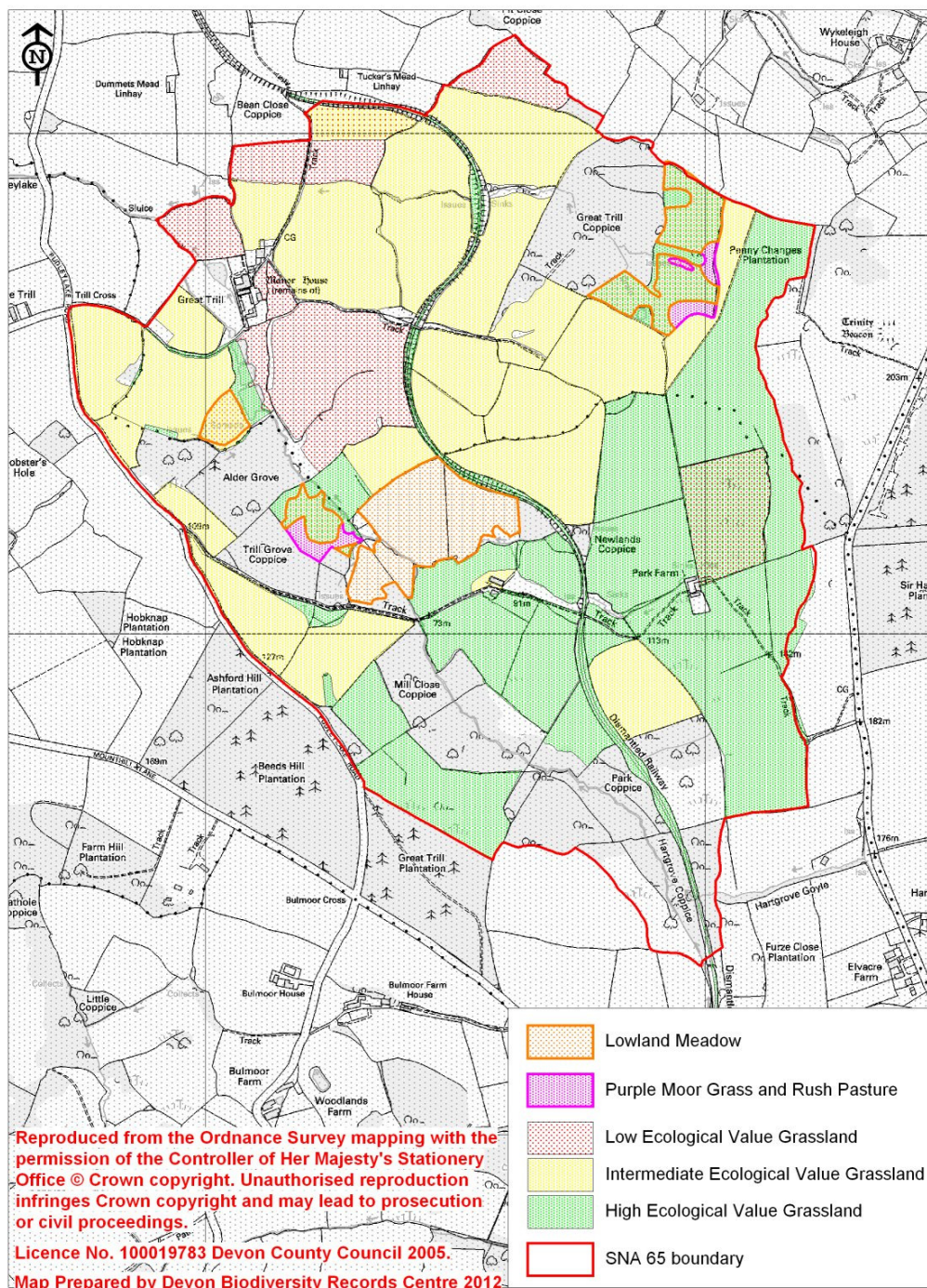
Example of updated SNA boundary:

### SNA 65 - New Boundary



Example of grassland opportunities map:

## SNA 65 Opportunities Map - Grassland



Example of management and further survey map:

## SNA 65 Opportunities Map - Management and Further Survey

