

Dear Emma,

Thank you for your email which was passed on to me as the Natural England Conservation Officer responsible for the Quantocks SSSI. I understand your concern regarding the 'unfavourable' status of some units on the SSSI and hopefully I can give you some further information on this.

The Quantocks SSSI is 2474 Ha and this is split up into 43 Units, which is the level we use for condition assessment monitoring. Natural England carried out a significant number of condition assessment surveys on this site during 2016 and 2017, surveying 22 units of heathland, mire and grassland covering over 1700Ha. So this data is only 3 or 4 years old and gives us a useful current view of the situation on the ground. A summary of the results can be viewed below, and I have made sure this now shows the most up to date information

<https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/SiteSearch.aspx>

We did not survey any of the woodland units during this survey round, these were last surveyed between 2010 - 2014. Generally woodland SSSI units are surveyed every 10 years, as these habitats change at a much slower rate than other habitats (which are usually assessed every 7 years) These timescales are subject to change however, based on staff resource, organisational priorities and levels of risk sites may be under. A new SSSI monitoring standard was published in Jan 2020 and is available here

<http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/6232097035386880>

which states that 'Natural England will have a prioritised programme to periodically assess all features on all SSSIs'. Each year a national exercise is carried out to decide which sites are in need of detailed monitoring. While there are no new surveys of this kind scheduled in for the Quantocks at the moment I, and other colleagues, can carry out more rapid SSSI site checks if needed. If there are particular locations of concern to you please let me know.

The 2016/17 survey results showed a significant increase in the % of the SSSI that was classed as favourable, in 2014 9.57% of the site was classed as favourable, by 2017 this had increased to 46.8% which was great news. We found that generally the heathland and grassland is in reasonable condition. The diversity of upland and lowland heathland, in combination with wooded combs, acid grassland, scattered scrub and a high degree of edge habitat, that is a key feature of the SSSI, is being maintained. The increase in favourable condition is principally due to the large areas of open heath covered by the Quantock Commoners Association Higher Level Stewardship agreement. For example in Units 1 and 2 the swaling, bracken control and extensive grazing has worked really well and led to an improvement in habitat structure and diversity.

Units can be classed as unfavourable due to a number of reasons, on the Quantock heathlands this has mostly been due to levels of scrub or bracken and also track erosion. We recognise these are issues in some of the smaller units and this is where I am now trying to focus my efforts, direct management advice to landowners and managers, and make sure we are getting the most out of the stewardship agreements. As new agreements are put in place we are making sure beneficial management options are included. A programme to map and control rhododendron is underway at the moment. 32.9 % of the site is in 'unfavourable recovering condition' which means that although it may not currently be meeting habitat quality targets, it is heading in the right

direction and the mechanisms are largely in place to reach these targets over time.

I am not as familiar with the woodlands, having not surveyed them and still being relatively new to this role. They tend to be in unfavourable condition due to the uniform range of age classes of trees, lack of veteran trees and lack of understory and natural regeneration. This is always going to be a challenge on common land where the woodlands are open to grazing and pressure from deer. The open nature of the woods on the Quantocks is also part of its unique character however and suits many of the key species such as deadwood beetles, lichens and woodland birds like the pied flycatcher. The stewardship agreements set out stocking levels which must be adhered to and ensure that the site generally is not being overgrazed.

The Quantocks is a large and diverse site and there will always be the need for ongoing habitat management. I work closely with the AONB team and other partners and there is a continual process of checking progress and providing advice where needed. I hope this provides you with re-assurance that we are committed to the conservation of this important site, please let me know if you have further questions, or as I mentioned have particular locations you would like to discuss in more detail.

Kind regards
Jo

Jo Chesworth
Lead Advisor - Somerset Conservation Team