Briefing for the Public Petitions Committee

**Petition Number:** PE1277

**Main Petitioner:** Mike Brown on behalf of UKRIGS in Scotland

**Subject:** Geodiversity duty

Calls on the Parliament to urge the Scottish Government through Scottish Planning Policies and Planning Advice Notes to establish a geodiversity duty which integrates all necessary local and national structures for the efficient collection, analysis and sharing of geodiversity data to inform better decision making processes.

**Background**

Geodiversity is the variety of rocks, minerals, fossils, landforms, sediments and soils in an area. It also includes the natural processes which form and alter these features. According to Scottish Natural Heritage:

> The natural heritage of Scotland owes much to the rocks, fossils and landforms which make up its geological and geomorphological foundations. This ‘Earth heritage’, in conjunction with other factors such as climate, exerts a powerful influence on natural systems, land use, biodiversity, industry and infrastructure, and has profoundly influenced the social, economic and cultural development of Scotland.

Scotland is recognised as having some rich sites for geodiversity, including the UNESCO Geopark and National Nature Reserve at Knockan Crag near Ullapool. Scottish Natural Heritage is responsible for the conservation and enhancement of a network of Earth science Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), which includes the very best Earth heritage features in Scotland chosen to represent the key stages in the growth and development of Scotland’s landscape over its three billion year history. The selection of Earth science SSSIs is based on the Geological Conservations Review undertaken by the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC).

The British Geological Survey (BGS) is the world's oldest national geological survey and the United Kingdom's premier centre for earth science information and expertise. It has an office in Edinburgh. The organisation represented by the petition, UKRIGS, is the UK Group of Regionally Important Geological and Geomorphological Sites.

**Scottish Government Action**

The petition refers explicitly to Scottish Government planning guidance. The Scottish Government is currently rationalising national planning policy by

The Scottish Planning Policy (SPP) Consultative Draft makes one reference to geodiversity, stating:

Local nature conservation sites designated for their geodiversity should be selected for their value for scientific study and education, their historical significance and other cultural and aesthetic value, particularly for promoting public awareness and enjoyment.

The accompanying Environmental Statement says:

The rocks and landforms of the coast form important habitats and are important geological resources in their own right.

And that, related to geology, there are:

numerous sites located throughout Scotland, and many of these are designated as SSSIs. Opportunities to increase understanding and appreciation of them could be developed further. However, given the long term nature of geological evolution, it is not expected that any changes to the SPP are likely to generate nationally significant effects on this aspect of our environment.

The analysis of responses to this consultation makes no reference to geodiversity, even though Scottish Natural Heritage’s response to the consultation states:

There is no reference to geodiversity, failing even to mention that it is under statute a component of the natural heritage whilst it goes into considerable detail about some aspects of nature conservation.

And:

Geodiversity is not mentioned except in relation to local nature reserves, and it is not clear if the term 'landscape and natural heritage' or 'nature' include this. In line with others sections in the SPP, definitions for landscape (ELC) and natural heritage (Natural Heritage Act) should be included.

The SNH response to the Environmental Statement says:

The Geological Conservation Review identified sites of national (Great Britain) and international importance. Many of these nationally and internationally important sites have not been formally designated as SSSIs and therefore remain without any recognised form of protection. If these sites are not accorded appropriate recognition, then it is incorrect to say that it is unlikely there will be nationally significant effects. It isn’t clear what is meant by "given the long term nature of
geological evolution it is not expected that any changes to the SPP are likely to generate many nationally significant effects on this aspect of our environment.""). Many geological features are irreplaceable if damaged by planning related activities.

The Planning Advice Note on Planning for Natural Heritage makes some reference to geology, but not to geodiversity.

In 2004, the then Scottish Executive funded BGS to carry out the West Lothian Geodiversity Framework project. This assessed the state of geodiversity in the area, including pressures and threats, integrating audit results with West Lothian Council's Local Biodiversity Action Plan Partnership and the planning system. A draft West Lothian Geodiversity Action Plan (WLGAP) was prepared, with these main objectives: to 'embed' geodiversity into future planning, management and interpretation policies; to recommend strategies for continued monitoring of WLGSS; and to increase overall awareness, understanding and appreciation of West Lothian's geodiversity. Many more Local Geodiversity Action Plans exist in England.

The Scottish Government has identified geodiversity as a theme fundable under the Scotland Rural Development Programme.

Scottish Parliament Action
The issue of geodiversity is not one which has come up very often in the Scottish Parliament. The issue was raised during consideration of the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Bill in 2003. The Environment and Rural Development Committee Stage One report stated that “the provisions of the Bill should be strengthened in relation to geodiversity. The Committee strongly urges the Minister to include enhanced references to geodiversity and a specific offence provision relating to geodiversity crime in the Bill”. The Act as passed contains no specific reference to geodiversity though it did contain provision for SNH to produce a Scottish Fossil Code. SNH, in submissions to Parliamentary Committees on the recent Flooding (Scotland) Bill and the Marine (Scotland) Bill have made further reference to the importance of geodiversity.

A related SPICe Briefing on Soil Protection in Scotland was published in 2006, making reference to geodiversity

Graeme Cook  
Senior Research Specialist  
October 2009

SPICe research specialists are not able to discuss the content of petition briefings with petitioners or other members of the public. However if you have any comments on any petition briefing you can email us at spice@scottish.parliament.uk
Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in petition briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.