



CHAPTER 6

How the Scheme Operates: The Assessment and Review Processes

1. Introduction

1.1. This chapter sets out:

- 1) The process that will be followed in assessment of applications for accredited status
- 2) How Accredited and Affiliated status will be reviewed
- 3) The quality control processes that will underpin the scheme

2. Governance

- 2.1. Natural England will own the scheme and the assessment process with support of the Country Park Network.
- 2.2. Assessments will be undertaken by an Administration Team, using a largely automated assessment process.
- 2.3. Questions arising on evidence where the Administrators require clarification will be referred to Natural England and/or the Country Parks Network Steering Group (which is supported by Natural England) and drawn from membership of the Country Park Network.
- 2.4. The Scheme's database will assess applications and identify criteria met/not met. The Administrators will assess evidence offered against each criteria and confirm the suitability or otherwise of that evidence.
- 2.5. The database will recommend what status a site is given – the Administration team will endorse or reject that recommendation based on their assessment of evidence provided.
- 2.6. Where the Administrators have any questions/concerns around the suitability of the evidence provided, they will refer those questions to Natural England in the first instance.

3. Preparing for the Assessment Process

- 3.1. Applications will be received by the Schemes administrators. On receipt of an application they will:
 - 1) Log the date an application is received
 - 2) Check the application for completeness i.e. that all evidence identified on an application form is present.
- 3.2. The administrators will then;
 - 1) Enable the database to assess the application
 - 2) Assess the suitability of evidence provided and confirm to the
 - 3) database its suitability or otherwise

CHAPTER 6

How the Scheme Operates: The Assessment and Review Processes

- 4) Confirm or reject (with qualification) the database's recommendation on the status to be awarded to a site based on the application
- 3.3. Should any evidence be lacking or the link made to it unclear, the administrators will either:
- 1) One or two minor issues with evidence: put the application on hold, whilst the Administrators contact the applicant to seek clarification/further evidence relevant to the minor issues. The Administrators will note on the database/application that assessment is delayed pending submission of further evidence. The Administrators will allow applicants a maximum of two weeks to submit further evidence
 - 2) Several issues with evidence or applicant unable to submit evidence within 2 weeks: assess the application as Affiliated/not having demonstrated the Scheme's criteria and referred back to the applicant for amendment then subsequent resubmission. The Administrators will highlight where issues exist.

4. After Assessment

4.1. Within two weeks of assessment, the Administrators will:

- 1) Inform the applicant of the outcome of the assessment by e-mail or letter:

If the decision is to **Accredit** a site, this message will confirm:

1. Award of accredited status
2. How they will receive their certificate
3. The Accredited logo the site may use and how they may use it
4. What the Scheme will do now (e.g. add site details to the register of Accredited sites)
5. What the site needs to do now (esp. abide by the Scheme's Terms of Engagement)
6. The timescale for Review of the Status

If the decision is to **Affiliate** a site, the e-mail will confirm:

1. Where the application hadn't demonstrated that they met the Scheme's criteria
2. The implications of the decision
3. What the site can do now (promoting the development of an Action Plan)
4. How and when they may re-apply
5. Networking opportunities available for further advice and support

- 2) Add the site to the relevant register (Accredited or Affiliated).
- 3) Where Accredited Status has been confirmed, they will also co-ordinate the signing of a certificate and sending of it to the Applicant.

CHAPTER 6

How the Scheme Operates: The Assessment and Review Processes

- 4) Update the database to record the new status, the date it was awarded; and the review date.
- 5) The Administrator will keep on behalf of Natural England a file (preferably electronic) for each application, their assessments and all correspondence related to each application and its subsequent review. These files will be available to Natural England at any time.

Evidence submitted will be kept by the Administrators as a portfolio for that site – this becomes an ongoing data record for a site that can be updated and added to whenever a review becomes necessary or changes occur on the site. It provides baseline evidence for use during future reviews of status and reassessment.

The managing organisations of accredited Country Parks must inform the Schemes Administrators immediately of any change in their provision or services that may affect their status i.e. their ability to satisfy the criteria.

In addition, the status of each site will be reviewed by the Network every three years, when the managing organisations will be required to formally confirm that their site continues to meet the requirements of the scheme – this may involve the submission of further evidence and random site checks.

5. Quality Control

- 5.1. The Accreditation Scheme is underpinned by a self-assessment process. To maintain the rigour of the scheme, Natural England will each year select a sample of applications and Accredited sites to review in more detail. This review will normally involve a check of the criteria and a comparison of evidence submitted during an informal 'mystery shopper' style site visit.
- 5.2. The requirement for this process will be written into the Schemes Terms of Engagement, so the site concerned need not be informed that they have been selected for review.
- 5.3. A minimum of two representatives from Natural England will attend each visit – these will be drawn from Natural England, the Steering Group of the Country Parks Network and/or the Scheme's Administrators.
- 5.4. A report of each visit will be recorded and submitted to Natural England by the Administrators. Should the assessment identify that facilities and services highlighted as part of an application do not satisfy the criteria, the Administrators will be asked by Natural England to initiate and lead a review of the status of the site concerned.

CHAPTER 6

How the Scheme Operates: The Assessment and Review Processes

5.5. At this stage the lead applicant will be informed by the Administrators of the assessment and where the visit identified the site as not having demonstrated the required criteria. The Applicant will be:

- 1) Offered the opportunity to comment in writing on the report of the site visit.
- 2) Given one month to provide suitable evidence (as defined by the Natural England and the Administrators acting on their behalf) that demonstrates that the issues highlighted have been addressed.

5.6. If after this the Administrators consider that, based on the evidence submitted, the site no longer meets the Schemes criteria, they may propose the site for regrading. If this is endorsed by Natural England, the site concerned will:

- 1) Be re-graded to Affiliate with immediate effect
- 2) Have their online entry and register entry amended
- 3) Required to return their certificate of Accreditation and remove the Accreditation logo from their site and all literature and promotional material
- 4) Encouraged to reapply for Accreditation once the issues have been addressed.

Natural England's decision as a result of this assessment is final and binding, with no further right of appeal. Applicants may reapply at any time, but will be required to provide suitable evidence that previously highlighted issues have been addressed.

6. Status Review

6.1. Each site's Accredited status requires review every three years.

It is envisaged that this will involve:

- 1) Applicants being asked to confirm any changes to services and facilities that will materially affect their status
- 2) Applicants to submit up-to-date versions of evidence (esp. Management Plans, site maps, activity programmes and Policies)
- 3) Examination of these updates by the Assessment panel.

Further details of this process will be added as they are agreed by the Steering Group.

6.2. Affiliated status requires no formal review. However the network may monitor the register of affiliated sites and consider further engagement with a view to highlighting any support available to Affiliated sites working towards upgrading and becoming Accredited. Further details of this engagement will be provided as they become available.