



## **Protecting Geoheritage – the role of Geodiversity Charters within the United Kingdom**

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A Geodiversity Charter is a guidance document that sets out a clear ambition to recognise geodiversity as a vital and integral part of the economy, environment heritage and future sustainable development. This is necessary to safeguard and manage geodiversity for both current and future generations. It can facilitate the development of a holistic and integrated approach to geodiversity, by considering conservation, ecosystems services, natural capital and offer guidance on sustainable management of geoheritage to benefit of the whole environment and community.

The aim of a Geodiversity Charter is ultimately to better inform decision makers and support policy at a strategic level as well as encouraging stakeholders to work together and take a more holistic approach to conservation management of geodiversity. Since Scotland's Geodiversity Charter was originally launched in June 2012 two other countries within the United Kingdom (UK), England and Northern Ireland, have produced their own and Wales is working on one. Whilst there are many levels of protection of geoheritage sites within the UK it has not always widely appreciated how much geodiversity contributes to the natural environment, except within certain limits. The Charters can aid with demonstrating this.

In 2017 Scotland reviewed and relaunched their Geodiversity Charter and during that process demonstrated that the Charter had proved to be an effective vehicle for engaging organisations such as Local Authorities, and also for promoting and celebrating activity. The Charter has been kept 'live' by holding multiple events, conference, competitions and promoting case studies and refreshing after 5 years. The current version has the support of 88 signatories.

Northern Ireland's Geodiversity Charter (2017) has been particularly effective in engaging with local councils who use the charter as a vehicle to help raise the awareness of geodiversity at a variety of levels. Government Departments, notably the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs have taken the Charter one step further and include addressing the actions identified within the Charter as one of the conditions of natural heritage grants that are awarded to NGOs including those that manage landscape partnerships and AONBs. The Geodiversity Charter for England, launched in 2014, is now undergoing a period of consultation prior to refreshing and relaunching in late 2019. Similarities with the Scottish and Northern Ireland experience are shown in that resources are limited and participation in the forum which steers the Charter is on a voluntary basis.

Relevant case studies highlighting good practice within organisations have proved to be a useful and positive way to demonstrate how all can become involved and communication is essential to maintain interest. All three charters use very diverse case study material, reflecting the national differences in geodiversity and local involvement. Between the three countries about 150 different organisations have signed to say that they are aware of the charter and to support the aims. The main difficulty with achieving the aims lies with lack of resources and personnel to drive the process at times.