**Natural England Standard**

**SSSI Monitoring and Reporting**

**1:0 About this standard**

**Introduction**

Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) safeguard England’s most important areas of natural heritage. Monitoring and reporting on the condition of these sites is a vital part of Natural England’s statutory responsibility to conserve and protect them.

The objectives of SSSI monitoring are:

- To inform agreement of the most appropriate site management, thereby delivering the best environmental outcomes;
- To assess the effectiveness of Natural England’s interventions and enable us to report on our corporate plan targets and statutory responsibilities;
- To improve the future delivery of our protected sites responsibilities, for example through improved guidance and training;
- To contribute to our monitoring of long-term changes in the natural environment.

Information from condition assessments are also used to inform National England’s regulatory and enforcement responsibilities and can often form part of the evidence presented in Public Inquiries and court cases.

Natural England assesses the condition of SSSIs using Common Standards Monitoring (CSM)\(^1\), developed by the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) for the whole of the UK. For the purpose of monitoring all SSSIs are divided into one or more monitoring ‘units’ and condition is recorded at this unit level for all features. Units allow us to more accurately link condition of a feature to the management in place, and hence be more specific about where on a site the management is either right, or requires some adaption. Units typically separate different areas of habitat and/or land ownership. Whilst condition is recorded at the unit level, some features, for example bird populations or woodland, may initially be assessed across a whole site and then considered in the context of factors influencing individual units.

This operational standard details the procedures adopted by Natural England for SSSI monitoring; the method of recording data; the process by which information is shared with site owners or managers; and how information is used to meet reporting requirements for the UK Government. CSM also contributes to monitoring protected sites that are part of the Natura

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\(^1\) JNCC- Common Standards Monitoring (1998) [http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-2198](http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-2198)
2000 series, which include Special Protection Areas (SPAs), designated under the EC Birds Directive, and Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), designated under the EC Habitats Directive. However, this standard does not cover any monitoring or reporting of favourable conservation status using a Natura 2000 site’s Conservation Objectives or of non-notified priority habitats and species that may occur on a SSSI. CSM is also used to monitor Ramsar sites designated under the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance. The monitoring and reporting systems described in this standard are also used to contribute to the reporting requirements of the European Commission.

SSSI monitoring is undertaken as part of Natural England’s Integrated Site Assessment (ISA) programme, which combines the assessments of SSSIs and Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) agreements. The ISA programme incorporates all SSSIs irrespective of whether the land involved has an HLS agreement in place. A schematic diagram of the monitoring process is included in Annex 1.

This operational standard on SSSI Monitoring and Reporting is complimented by other Natural England standards, including:

- SSSI Strategic Standard
- Evidence Strategic Standard
- Quality Management Strategic Standard
- Record Management Strategic Standard
- Access to Information Standard

### 2:0 The standard

Natural England is committed to ensuring that SSSI monitoring is carried out to a consistent standard across all sites. Our aim is to ensure that interested parties can have confidence in our findings and that the data we publish is effective at informing the management of individual sites and the condition of the SSSI series as a whole.

In delivering this standard, we will apply the following principles:

1. **We will adopt a consistent and transparent approach to monitoring the condition of SSSIs**

Natural England monitors the condition of SSSIs using Common Standards Monitoring (CSM), a methodology developed for UK-wide use by the Joint Nature Conservation Committee. This approach is based on assessing the notified features of a site against a series of attributes and targets that define ‘favourable condition’ (see Annex 1). In accordance with the procedures of CSM, we will:
a. Define favourable condition for sites by setting out the attributes and targets for each feature they contain.

Favourable condition for a SSSI is achieved when all of a site’s notified features are assessed as meeting the attributes and targets set out within CSM guidance. For each SSSI, a list of notified features, together with their associated attributes and targets are compiled into a Favourable Condition Table (FCT)\(^2\). While FCTs can be produced using generic, UK-wide guidance, a more accurate description of favourable condition for a site can be established if the attributes and targets for each feature are adapted to take account of local conditions. Natural England will seek, wherever practicable, to develop ‘tailored’ FCTs for all SSSIs which reflect natural variation and diversity between sites and the role that some features have in supporting others. In compiling site-tailored FCTs Natural England staff will draw on relevant evidence and advice from a wide range of sources, including designation documents, past surveys and assessments, and information from partners and site managers.

b. Monitor the condition of each site against defined targets.

The targets set out in an FCT, form the basis of the evaluation made by Natural England staff when undertaking site assessments. This ensures that judgments made on site condition are based on clear criteria and can be explained to other parties. Following the targets set out in FCTs also ensures that a site assessment undertaken in one year can be compared easily with past or subsequent assessments.

c. Seek appropriate specialist advice and data sources in defining favourable condition and monitoring sites.

Some SSSIs, particularly those with a large number of notified features, are complex and challenging to monitor. In such cases, while SSSI local advisers are responsible for drafting favourable condition tables and assessing condition, advice may be sought from in-house specialists. Where advice for one notified feature appears to conflict with advice for different features, the issue should be referred to the national FCT lead or the Assessment Review Panel.

At some sites, the specialist nature of a feature, or health and safety considerations, may mean that Natural England staff are unable to undertake site assessments. For example, when surveying mines and cliff ledges which may require access by rope, or rare lower plant communities for which no suitable in-house expertise is available.

\(^2\) Favourable Condition Tables also describe features that are notified for Natura 200 sites
In these circumstances monitoring can be undertaken by appropriately qualified contractors, subject to available budget. All contracted-out monitoring should be undertaken according to the same procedures and standards as that followed by Natural England staff.

Where appropriate, information sourced from recording schemes and other data sources should be used to assess the condition of features. For example, non-breeding bird data can be used from the Wetland Birds Survey (WeBS).

d. *Monitor all sites at regular intervals, at the appropriate time of year, and at an appropriate level of detail.*

The frequency of monitoring for each site is dependent on a range of factors such as feature type and the nature of adverse influences, but takes place on average every seven years. Appropriate interval times for different types of sites are described in the ISA guidelines available from Natural England’s intranet site3. Sites may require visiting by advisers at other times, for purposes other than ISA monitoring.

The best time to monitor each site will vary depending on its notified features. For example, many habitat features are best observed during spring and summer months, while certain bird features may only be observed in winter months. Appropriate monitoring periods for each type of feature follow CSM principles and are described in the ISA guidelines.

Sites can be assessed by either a Rapid or Detailed Site Assessment. Whilst both use FCTs as the basis of monitoring, rapid assessments rely to a greater extent on adviser judgment to determine feature condition. ISA guidelines provide details on how to decide which form of assessment is appropriate to use.

e. *Interpret the results of monitoring to assess unit condition.*

Following completion of a monitoring visit or the collation of other relevant information, local SSSI advisers are responsible for assessing the condition of each unit within an SSSI. Each unit is assigned to one of six assessment categories as set out in Annex 3. In determining the condition of a unit we will:

- ensure all notified features occurring in that unit are assessed (referred to as ‘reportable features’)
- ensure all mandatory attributes for each notified feature are assessed

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3 The section ‘Integrated Site Assessment’ under Operation Guidance contains all ISA guidelines.
• assign each feature a condition, and assign the lowest feature condition as the unit condition.

As described in point 1.c., specialist advice, external data sources and contracted surveys can be used to assess the condition of features. In instances where all options for gathering data have been explored and doubt still exists over the evidence available, indirect attributes can be used to assess the condition of a feature.

While FCTs set targets or target ranges that should be met for a feature to be considered favourable, situations may occur where exceptions are identified. This could include sites that have been affected by severe weather or where significant fluctuations in numbers of migratory birds are recorded. In such cases, the reason for variation from FCT targets should be clearly documented and approved by appropriate Natural England specialists.

2. We will work closely with site owners and managers when monitoring SSSIs and provide feedback to inform management practices.

As part of our Integrated Site Assessment programme, which covers both SSSIs and land in Higher Level Stewardship agreements, information is shared with land managers about site condition and appropriate management practices. This exchange is vital in enabling SSSIs to maintain or make progress towards favourable condition. In implementing the ISA programme we will:

a. **Seek permission before visiting a site.**

   Natural England staff do not have an automatic right of entry to SSSIs. We will contact owners or managers at least 48 hours in advance of site visits to seek permission, unless we need to visit a site in an emergency. Where we are unable to secure permission to visit a site, we may use our powers of entry provided by the Wildlife and Countryside Act.

b. **Provide feedback to owners and managers on site condition and management.**

   We will provide feedback to owners or managers of SSSI land following all site visits. This may be done verbally at the time of the visit and at the very least within 21 calendar days. Where we need to gather additional data about a site (for example, the results of bird surveys) we may require a longer period to confirm the outcome of an assessment and to provide recommendations on appropriate management. We will always provide feedback to owners or managers before any new information about land they manage is made publically available through our website.
c. **Seek advice from owners and managers when monitoring sites.**

We recognise that owners and managers can make a significant contribution to our understanding of the ecology of a site. In most cases, we will seek the input of owners and managers when monitoring a site’s notified features.

3. **We will record information about SSSIs in a consistent and transparent way.**

Information about all SSSI’s is stored on Natural England’s designated site database, ENSIS. This includes details of ownership, FCTs, past and current assessments, and some information relating to the management of sites. Some of this information is available externally through our website (see point 5). More detailed information on site monitoring is kept within the database of the Integrated Site Assessment Programme and in individual site files. When recording details of SSSIs we will:

   a. **Ensure information on ENSIS is accurate and up-to-date.**

   The results of monitoring should be added to ENSIS within three weeks of completing an assessment. This may not be from the date of a site visit, since other records may need to be checked in order to complete an assessment. Summaries of assessments should be accurate and informative and written in plain English in order that they can be understood by anyone unfamiliar with the assessment. Other site information, such as land ownership details, should be updated as soon as new information is available.

   b. **Avoid disclosing sensitive information.**

   We recognise the importance of making information about SSSIs available to all interested parties. In doing so, we will also ensure we meet the provisions of the Data Protection Act 1998 and avoid disclosing personal data in fields on ENSIS that are published externally.

   For some features on certain SSSIs, public disclosure of their presence may pose a risk to their effective conservation. Where we consider a sensitive feature should be excluded from public documents, we will set out our reasons in accordance with the provisions of the Environmental Information Regulations (2004) and the Freedom of Information Act (2000).

   c. **Be clear when an assessment is made outside of the procedures of Common Standards Monitoring.**
The majority of assessments, made following a site visit, comply with the principles of Common Standards Monitoring (CSM). These will include other information, for example about the management regimes in place, when determining which unfavourable condition category should be used. However, in some circumstances a judgement can be made for an already unfavourable unit/feature on which unfavourable condition category to apply based solely on information about the management in place (i.e. without an up to date field assessment using CSM). A unit/feature may be assessed as ‘unfavourable recovering’ when, based on our judgement of the best available evidence all the necessary management mechanisms are in place on an unfavourable unit/feature to achieve favourable condition (e.g. all remedies are underway/complete). Sites may be assessed as ‘unfavourable declining’ or ‘unfavourable no change’ when the management mechanisms in place will not achieve favourable condition. Assessments based on these circumstances should be recorded on ENSIS as non-CSM compliant.

In any other circumstances, where assessments are not the result of a site visit, they should be recorded as non-CSM compliant with the reason recorded.

d. Record information to inform site management.

As part of the assessment process, information relating to site management and appropriate follow up actions should always be recorded on ENSIS. For sites in ‘favourable’ or ‘unfavourable recovering’ condition, ‘Condition Threats’ should be recorded, if appropriate, to identify factors that may cause deterioration in condition. For other sites ‘Remedies’ should be recorded to identify actions needed to improve their condition.

e. Record all relevant information used in making decisions about site condition and management.

In addition to information stored on ENSIS, more detailed information including field survey forms, evidence for species assessments, and advice from specialists, must be adequately stored to ensure that the rationale for any decision made is fully documented. Details of field surveys at attribute level should be recorded on ISAT. Natural England’s Record Management Standard provides guidance on the storage of all information to enable clear audit trails that ensure future responsible officers and other interested parties are able to access relevant information about sites.

4. We will adopt procedures to ensure the consistency and quality of monitoring.

As an evidence-based organisation, Natural England must have confidence in the data we collect and the way in which it is used to inform decision making. The following procedures are in place to ensure that monitoring of SSSIs is undertaken consistently and to a high quality:
a. A rolling audit programme is undertaken to examine a different aspect of the ISA programme each quarter. This audit scrutinises a sample of assessments to highlight good practice and identify where there is a need to review or ensure better compliance with guidance.

b. Favourable Condition Tables (FCTs) are produced by lead advisers and confirmed by local delivery team leaders. FCTs for complex sites may need to be referred to relevant specialist staff prior to publication on ENSIS.

c. The Assessment Review Panel provides a mechanism for detailed scrutiny of certain SSSI condition assessments. This includes assessments that may be either:
   • highly complex in nature;
   • significant in determining regulatory or enforcement actions; or,
   • where uncertainty exists, either among Natural England staff or members of the Major Landowners Group, over the decision.

The panel meets at least four times per year and is comprised of representatives from several areas of expertise within Natural England.

5. **We will report on the condition of SSSIs in an open and accessible manner.**

The primary data source for SSSI reporting is ENSIS. All reporting is done by area, based on assessments of individual site units. Unit area can be aggregated to give condition and management information at a variety of scales including regional and national. Through the following mechanisms we will report information on SSSIs appropriate to audience requirements:

a. Bespoke reporting by Natural England allows SSSI data to contribute to the reporting requirements of the Habitats Directive for Natura 2000 sites and the UK government targets on biodiversity.

b. Natural England’s internal online database, ‘SSSI View’, provides live information on a comprehensive range of indicators, with the option for users to generate a variety of standard reports.

c. A simplified version of Natural England’s database is available online for members of the Major Land Owners Group (a group chaired and administered by NE, comprising public sector and Non-Government Organisations that own significant areas of land designated as SSSIs), providing live information on condition assessments, condition threats and remedies.
d. SSSI condition, as a national figure of the area and percentage of SSSI in each condition category, is updated monthly on Natural England’s website. This is as an official statistic, and we aim to fulfil the requirements of the UK Statistics Authority’s Code of Practice. In accordance with this Code, a regular national overview of the condition of SSSIs, including a commentary, will be published on our website.

e. The condition of each SSSI unit is published on Natural England’s website, together with the latest assessment comments and any reasons for adverse condition.

Reporting of SSSI condition may be based on CSM-only assessments or a combination of CSM assessments and other non-survey based assessments.

6. **We will ensure that our staff have appropriate training and guidance to undertake the monitoring and reporting of SSSIs.**

A high responsibility is placed on Natural England staff to undertake and confirm SSSI condition assessments. Natural England is committed to ensure we continue to maintain a highly skilled and knowledgeable workforce by ensuring staff participate in regular training and personal development. Training and development for work on SSSIs is supported through the following processes:

a. The Natural England Skills Framework support our learning and development programme

b. A series of training modules and e-learning packages cover all aspects of SSSI work

c. The induction programme, together with shadowing and mentoring opportunities, are available to all staff. Support networks are established in local Land Management teams for newly appointed advisers.

d. The production of up-to-date and relevant guidance on SSSIs available through the Natural England intranet (See [Guidance Standard](#))

e. A network of national specialists to provide advice which can be accessed through a single portal on Natural England’s Intranet site.
Annex 1: Monitoring and reporting cycle for SSSIs

Annual programme of Integrated Site Assessments (ISAs)

Consider revisions to FCT

Draft Favourable Condition Table (FCT)

Final 'site-tailored' FCT

Prepare for site assessment

Site visit (ISA)

Determine unit condition

Collect additional evidence

Advice from specialists and site manager

Feedback to owner/land manager

Input from owner/land manager

Add assessment to ENSIS

Record Threats and/or Remedies

Recommendation on site management

Add assessment to ENSIS

Audit trail - record data on ISA database

Quality Assurance

Strategic Planning: 2020 trajectory, local plans

National Reporting: Biodiversity 2020 - Habs Regs

Advisory from specialists

Input from owner/land manager

Annual programme of Integrated Site Assessments (ISAs)

Content Owner: Landscape and Biodiversity Function
SSSI Monitoring and Reporting Operational Standard – external version
02/10/13 Final v3.0
Annex 2: Extract from Favourable Condition Table (FCT) for a SSSI notified for lowland calcareous grassland, showing ‘Attributes’ and ‘Targets’ used to assess site condition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria feature</th>
<th>Attribute term in guidance</th>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Site-specific Targets</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lowland calcareous grassland CG5 Bromus erectus - Brachypodium pinnatum grassland</td>
<td>Extent</td>
<td>Total area (ha), mapped in relation to baseline (ie first available map of interest feature when/after notified), in period May-July.</td>
<td>No reduction in area and any consequent fragmentation without prior consent</td>
<td>Recoverable reduction = unfavourable; non-recoverable reduction = partially destroyed. Excludes bare ground associated with rabbit warrens (see below).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowland calcareous grassland CG5 Bromus erectus - Brachypodium pinnatum grassland</td>
<td>Sward structure: bare ground</td>
<td>Record extent of bare ground (not rock) distributed through the sward, noticeable without disturbing the vegetation, in period May-July. Measure annually if possible.</td>
<td>No more than 10%.</td>
<td>Outside target indicates management problems eg over-grazing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowland calcareous grassland CG5 Bromus erectus - Brachypodium pinnatum grassland</td>
<td>Sward structure: localized bare ground</td>
<td>Record extent of localized bare ground around rabbit warrens. Measure annually if possible.</td>
<td>No more than 0.05 ha ie approx 20x20 metres</td>
<td>Outside target indicates rabbit grazing and disturbance levels are too high.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowland calcareous grassland CG5 Bromus erectus - Brachypodium</td>
<td>Sward structure: litter</td>
<td>Record cover of litter where in a more or less continuous layer, distributed either in patches or in</td>
<td>Total extent no more than 25% of the sward</td>
<td>Outside target indicates biomass removal is insufficient eg under-grazed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowland calcareous grassland CG5 Bromus erectus - Brachypodium pinnatum grassland</td>
<td>Sward structure: average height</td>
<td>Record sward height in period May-July.</td>
<td>Sward 2-10 cms. Shorter sward required for notable plants.</td>
<td>Outside target indicates insufficient grazing or over-grazing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowland calcareous grassland CG5 Bromus erectus - Brachypodium pinnatum grassland</td>
<td>Sward composition: grass/herb ratio</td>
<td>Proportion of non-Graminae (&quot;herbs&quot;), in period May -July.</td>
<td>40-90%</td>
<td>Low proportion outside target indicates eutrophication, usually from fertilisers, or insufficient removal of biomass, leading to dominance by grasses.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Annex 3: SSSI condition categories

These definitions were produced as part of revised guidance on the assignment of unfavourable recovering condition. They provide greater detail on condition categories than definitions published on Natural England’s website for external audiences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition Category</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Favourable condition</td>
<td>The designated feature(s) within a unit are being adequately conserved and the results from monitoring demonstrate that the feature(s) in the unit are meeting all the mandatory site specific monitoring targets set out in the FCT. The FCT sets the minimum standard for favourable condition for the designated features and there may be scope for the further (voluntary) enhancement of the features / unit. A unit can only be considered favourable when all the component designated features are favourable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfavourable recovering condition</td>
<td>Often known simply as ‘recovering’. Units/features are not yet fully conserved but all the necessary management measures are in place. Provided that the recovery work is sustained, the unit/feature will reach favourable condition in time. At least one of the designated feature(s) mandatory attributes are not meeting their targets (as set out in the site specific FCT).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfavourable no-change condition</td>
<td>The unit/feature is not being conserved and will not reach favourable condition unless there are changes to the site management or external pressures and this is reflected in the results of monitoring over time, with at least one of the mandatory attributes not meeting its target (as set out in the site specific FCT) with the results not moving towards the desired state. The longer the SSSI unit remains in this poor condition, the more difficult it will be, in general, to achieve recovery. At least one of the designated feature(s) mandatory attributes and targets (as set out in the site specific FCT) are not being met.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfavourable declining condition</td>
<td>The unit/feature is not being conserved and will not reach favourable condition unless there are changes to site management or external pressures. The site condition is becoming progressively worse, and this is reflected in the results of monitoring over time, with at least one of the designated features mandatory attributes not meeting its target (as set out in the site specific FCT) with the results moving further away from the desired state. The longer the SSSI unit remains in this poor condition, the more difficult it will be, in general, to achieve recovery.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part destroyed condition</td>
<td>Lasting damage has occurred to part of the designated feature on the unit such that it has been irretrievably lost and will never recover (no amount of management will allow the feature to ever reach favourable condition). Conservation work may be needed on the residual interest of the unit. If more than one feature occurs in a unit, but only one is considered part</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destroyed condition</td>
<td>Lasting damage has occurred to an entire designated feature on the unit such that the feature has been irretrievably lost (no amount of management will bring this feature back). This feature will never recover in the unit. E.g. a finite mineralogical feature has been totally removed from its surroundings without consent and is therefore lost forever.</td>
</tr>
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**Quick reference**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of standard</th>
<th>Operational standard</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Purpose:</strong></td>
<td>The methodology and approach used to monitor and report on the condition of SSSIs.</td>
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| **Owner(s):**    | Evidence (Debbie Leatherland (Senior Specialist) and Landscape & Biodiversity Standards (Lydia Speakman, Senior Adviser))  
                     Jonathan Pearce (Senior Adviser) |
| **Sign-off:**    | Maddy Jago, Director Landscape and Biodiversity  
                     Ken Roy, Director Performance and Standards |
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Amendment detail</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>V0.1</td>
<td>First draft</td>
<td>Debbie Russell</td>
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<tr>
<td>V0.2</td>
<td>Placed in standards template, text revisions and reordered</td>
<td>Lydia Speakman</td>
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<td>Revised, input from Debbie Russell (Evidence)</td>
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<td>Revised with input from A Windrum (LM), T Laws, J Blowers (L&amp;B)</td>
<td>Jonathan Pearce</td>
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<td>V0.6</td>
<td>Incorporation of final comments from Debbie Russell and Pippa Botley (LM), Tim Frayling (Regulation) Issued to Protected Sites Work stream Group</td>
<td>Jonathan Pearce</td>
<td>30.01.13</td>
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<td>V1.0</td>
<td>Incorporating feedback from several LM lead advisers</td>
<td>Jonathan Pearce</td>
<td>16.04.13</td>
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<tr>
<td>V2.0</td>
<td>Incorporating feedback from Ken Roy and revised edits by Jonathan Pearce</td>
<td>Jonathan Pearce</td>
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<td>V3.0</td>
<td>Incorporating feedback from Maddy Jago and discussed with Debbie Leatherland and Jonathan Blowers</td>
<td>Jonathan Pearce</td>
<td>2.10.13</td>
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