Environment Act Interim Target for protected sites

Technical background document for SSSI feature condition target

February 2024

Natural England Technical Information Note TIN216

SSSI Monitoring and Evaluation

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Executive summary

As part of the Environment Act 2021 the government are required to create legally binding targets to protect our environment, clean up our air and rivers and boost nature.

An initial set of targets for biodiversity on land were published in December 2022. With further detail on how these targets will be met through the publication of the Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) in January 2023.

The EIP establishes a set of interim targets which together will support the delivery of the overarching biodiversity targets and reiterates the commitment to restore 75% of protected sites to favourable condition by 2042.

The interim targets for SSSIs are that by 31st January 2028:

- All SSSIs will have an up-to-date condition assessment by 31 January 2028.
- 50% of SSSIs will have actions on track to achieve favourable condition This report sets out the approach and methods adopted to deliver the two EIP targets for terrestrial and freshwater SSSIs.

Most particularly the report looks at the target for up-to-date condition assessments. It explains how the baseline feature condition information has been used to create confidence categories. It describes which categories Natural England considers to be up to date in the context of this metric.

Only those features in the complete and high confidence categories will count towards the target. The initial categorisation process uses data gathered at the unit and feature scale at the end of March 2023.

Once a feature meets the criteria to be up to date, the timing of the next assessment will be driven by the Long-Term Risk Based Monitoring Plan for feature assessment. This plan uses information about the vulnerability and resilience of a feature to determine future monitoring dates and methods.

‘Up to date’ in the context of this target is taken to mean that Natural England has confidence that the condition assessment represents the current situation for that feature.

Those features in the low and no confidence categories will be the priority in the short to medium term. The initial assessment of features in these categories will determine if there is any third-party data which could support the assessment. If not, then a site-based survey will be commissioned and undertaken by a contractor, eNGO, Natural England Field Unit or Natural England Area Team Staff, or a combination.

Those features which fall into the medium confidence category will undergo an additional desk-based assessment before being placed in the High or Low confidence categories and subject to the protocol for those categories.

Using the confidence criteria approach and the long-term risk-based monitoring plan, Natural England will set out a proposal for the delivery of the target.

For the EIP interim target covering actions on track this document describes what is meant by SSSIs, action and on-track.

The target is that 50% of actions are on track, **NOT** that they achieve favourable condition by 2028. Favourable condition is defined by Natural England for each feature and will be described in the Monitoring Specification for the SSSI.

“Actions” are captured on Natural England’s internal reporting system (CMSi) and are linked to the mechanisms that have been identified to address the pressures that have been identified. Each action has a start date and is given an “Action status”.

For this EIP interim target “On track” means:

- A feature is either in favourable condition with no actions behind schedule **OR**
- is in unfavourable condition and at least one action is underway and on track (i.e. with an Action Status of “Underway – on track”) and no actions are behind schedule.

An action is “behind schedule” if its planned start year has passed, and the action status is neither “Underway – on track” nor “Complete”.

Each year there will be a review of the action status for each feature which is currently counting towards the target. If any of the actions are now behind schedule this feature will no longer count towards the target. Progress towards the delivery of this target will be published by Natural England.

Introduction

This Technical Information Note (TIN) sets out Natural England's approach to delivering the Environment Improvement Plan's interim target for protected site condition assessments and for the 'actions on track' interim target. It focuses on the development of the condition baseline and a protocol to assign confidence categories to that baseline. These confidence categories determine when assessments will take place and what form those assessments will take. These assessments may be desk based, use third party data or require a site visit by Natural England staff or others.

The report also defines the term 'up to date' in relation to the interim condition assessment target.

An explanation of the meaning of 'actions on track' will provide clarity on where the information will be collected and what will count towards the target 50%.

Environment Act targets

As part of the Environment Act 2021 the government are required to create legally binding targets to protect our environment, clean up our air and rivers and boost nature.

An initial set of targets for biodiversity on land were published in December 2022:

- By the end of 2030, we will halt the decline in species abundance.
- By the end of 2042, we will increase species abundance so that it is greater than in 2022 and at least 10% greater than in 2030.
- By the end of 2042, we will restore or create in excess of 500,000 hectares of a range of wildlife-rich habitats outside protected sites, compared to 2022 levels.
- By the end of 2042, we will improve the GB Red List Index for species extinction compared to 2022 levels.

These targets will also help the UK to meet its international commitment to protect 30% of its land and ocean by 2030.

The government published its Environmental Improvement Plan in January 2023 setting out in more detail how it will achieve these targets, including interim targets. The EIP also reiterates the commitment to restore 75% of protected sites to favourable condition by 2042.

The interim targets are that by 31st January 2028:

- To restore or create 140,000 ha of a range of wildlife-rich habitats outside protected sites by 31 January 2028, compared to 2022 levels.
- All SSSIs will have an up-to-date condition assessment by 31 January 2028.

- 50% of SSSIs will have actions on track to achieve favourable condition.

These three interim targets cover habitat restoration and creation, and protected sites. By delivering these across a broad variety of interconnected habitats and ecosystems, we will establish the right environment for species to begin to thrive again.

Purpose of monitoring

Monitoring protected sites provides an invaluable source of information for Natural England and others.

Primarily, Natural England uses this information to understand whether management interventions are working to keep/bring the features into favourable condition and secure nature's recovery.

Condition Assessments and their supporting commentary also:

- provide the evidence to support conversations with land managers and partners on management to achieve desired outcomes.
- provide evidence to inform policy interventions from government. Policies around water and air quality are particularly relevant.
- help Natural England advise other regulators such as Planning Authorities or the Environment Agency, and support decisions by Natural England on consenting and assenting activity on or near protected sites; and
- enable other organisations to use these data to support funding applications, implement management activity or undertake research.

Having confidence in the condition assessment information on protected sites ensures that Natural England's reporting on targets and indicators is trusted, has integrity, and meets standards.

Changes to Natural England's monitoring approach

On 1 April 2023 Natural England changed from a unit-based assessment and reporting process to one based on the interest features within each site, called Whole Feature Assessment (WFA). This is a significant change for Natural England and many of our internal processes have been updated to reflect this. We are maintaining the ability to report on the condition of individual units to support land management advice and interventions at the right scale and area-based reporting when required.

The shift to WFA puts protected sites at the heart of nature's recovery. It supports landscape scale working and helps foster partnerships across the SSSI and beyond.

Monitoring notified features rather than units makes it easier to use data from other sources. This includes overwintering bird data from the British Trust for Ornithology, information on the presence of plants from the Botanical Society for Britain and Ireland and population data on the presence of butterflies and moths from Butterfly Conservation. This saves Natural England time on data gathering and supports organisations with citizen science activities.

It also enables the use of new technologies such as Earth Observation, eDNA and eco-acoustics. Being able to gather data remotely can reduce disturbance to rare species and speed up the assessment process.

All other Country Nature Conservation Bodies (CNCBs) – NatureScot, Natural Resources Wales and Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (Northern Ireland) – have always monitored protected site features at the scale of the whole feature. Natural England was alone in taking an alternate approach based on the subdivision of sites into units.

All four CNCBs and the JNCC released a statement in 2022 describing how the nature conservation bodies are all moving to a risk-based approach to monitoring, to ensure best use of resources and new technologies.

How will Natural England deliver the interim targets?

For the EIP target on condition assessment Natural England sets out the following in this document:

- The current condition of features based on our existing data. This is required so that we understand the scale of the task.
- How Natural England define what counts as an up-to-date assessment in the context of the interim target. This includes how confidence categories have been assigned and applied.
- What proportion of feature assessments meet that standard on the 1st of April 2023.
- The strategy for ensuring that all features meet that target by 31 January 2028.

For the EIP target that 50% of SSSIs will have actions on track to achieve favourable condition by 31 January 2028, Natural England will:

- Explain the meaning of 'actions on track'.

- Share the current situation for how many features are considered to have actions on track.

Current condition of SSSI Features

Approach to setting current feature baseline.

The current whole feature condition assessments' baseline has been created using data gathered at the scale of the unit, apart from a small number of assessments which have been undertaken since 2020 using new guidance.

The approach taken for setting the baseline was the subject of an external consultation exercise in 2020. The consultation was through the online Defra Citizen Space.

Existing condition data on CMSi was analysed to aggregate data across units and give a single condition value for a feature on a site. This was done using the approach below.

Least Favourable feature condition status

For each SSSI feature on a site, this baseline uses the least favourable business rule (LFBR) to provide a condition category.

Example: If 'large blue butterfly' was a notified feature on an SSSI, and on three of its Units it was 'Favourable', but on one Unit it was 'Unfavourable – Recovering', then we would record 'Unfavourable – Recovering' as being the condition of that feature on the SSSI.

If a feature was recorded as "unknown" in any unit (or there was no information about that feature) then the whole feature would be "unknown".

Using this approach, the baseline in 2020 was:

Table 1. Baseline for feature condition assessed in 2020 using the least favourable business rule (this table does not include those features not attached to units: approximately 600)

Condition category	Favourable	Unfavourable Recovering	Unfavourable No Change	Unfavourable Declining	Partially destroyed	Destroyed	Unknown	Total
Least Favourable approach	4,375	3,161	712	688	25	42	4,835	13,838
%	31.6	22.8	5.1	5.0	0.2	0.3	34.9	100

Since 2020 a significant amount to monitoring has been undertaken to address the number of unknown features and the updated baseline on 1 April 2023 was:

Table 2. Baseline for feature condition as of April 1st 2023 using the least favourable business rule (this table does not include those features not attached to units)

Condition category	Favourable	Unfavourable Recovering	Unfavourable No Change	Unfavourable Declining	Partially destroyed	Destroyed	Unknown	Total
Least Favourable approach	5,274	3,200	941	1,181	21	44	2,746	13,407
%	39.3	23.9	7.0	8.8	0.2	0.3	20.5	100

The change in the total number of features is primarily down to data cleansing, but also includes the features on SSSIs notified since 2020. This information gives us a worst-case scenario for each feature, but it is analogous to the current method for assigning unit condition.

What counts towards the EIP condition assessment target?

The EIP target for protected sites refers to an ‘up-to-date’ assessment. It is important that we define what is meant by this term so that all eligible assessments are included.

For the purposes of the EIP target, Natural England takes ‘up to date’ to mean that we have complete or high confidence the assessment shown in CMSi represents the condition of the feature on the site, at that point in time.

The mechanism for determining complete and high confidence will be discussed in the next section.

The number of feature assessments which, as of 1 April 2023, count as up to date is 1,998. This is approximately 14.9% of the total number of features.

The change in this number will be calculated each month and shared annually through Defra’s Outcome Indicator Framework for the 25-year Environment plan dashboard.

Setting confidence criteria and baseline

In addition to the condition baseline, it is important to understand the level of confidence we have in the condition of the whole feature that has been derived from previous unit assessments. Note that this shows how confident we are in using unit level information to assign a condition category to the whole feature. It is not a judgement of the individual unit level assessments.

We will assume complete confidence in the condition information where the assessment was undertaken at the scale of the whole feature since 2020 (including work completed at a unit scale).

Confidence in the remaining feature assessments was categorised using three factors:

- Concurrency of assessments, i.e. were all unit assessments done in the same monitoring season? The monitoring season is described as the most appropriate time of year to undertake an assessment for the notified feature. This may be over two calendar years if the monitoring season is in the winter.
- Completeness of assessments – Has the feature been given the same condition on all units where it occurs? If not, how consistent is condition across units and area of the feature?
- Age of assessments.

Confidence categories are described in Table 3.

Table 3. Confidence criteria category descriptions

*A six-year cut off period for this initial categorisation was chosen as this was previously used as the monitoring frequency for reporting.

Condition category	Description of category	Number of features
Complete	Assessment undertaken at the scale of the whole feature since 2020 (when the shift to Whole Feature Assessment began).	1,795
High Confidence	• All units where the feature occurs, assessed within the same monitoring season and given the same condition across all units. In addition, no assessment should be older than six years*. • A feature initially classed as Medium confidence where condition is confirmed through a desk-based assessment.	203
Medium Confidence	• All units where the feature occurs assessed within the same monitoring season and given the same condition across all units, but the assessment is older than six years. • All units where the feature occurs assessed within the same monitoring season but not all units given the same condition, irrespective of the age of assessment. • All units where the feature occurs not assessed within the same monitoring season, but all given the same condition, irrespective of the age of assessment.	7,075
Low Confidence	• Units where the feature occurs not assessed within the same monitoring season and not all units given the same condition irrespective of the age of assessment. • A feature initially classed as Medium confidence where the condition cannot be confirmed through a desk-based assessment.	2,276
No Confidence	No assessment for a feature recorded	2,058
	Total	13,407

Using confidence criteria to determine the monitoring pipeline

Priority for assessment is for those features which fall into the ‘low’ or ‘no’ confidence categories and on April 1st 2023 accounted for approximately 4,300 features. This is likely to increase as the medium confidence category features are reviewed.

These features will have an assessment based on common standards monitoring (CSM). This assessment may however use data from third parties as well as data collected on site. These surveys may be undertaken by partners, contractors or Natural England.

Features in the ‘complete’ or ‘high’ category will be kept under review and will be subject to the risk-based prioritisation approach mentioned above. Annex 4 contains the draft matrix for this approach.

For those features which fall into the ‘Medium’ category, which is the majority, a protocol has been developed, which will assign these features into with High or Low confidence categories. Annex 1 contains the protocol. This process is on-going and will be completed by spring 2025. These features will then be added to the monitoring pipeline.

Assessment methods for features in the complete, high, low or no confidence categories may take the form of:

- a desk-based assessment of any available information, including previous surveys, site visits, file notes or remote observations such as earth observation, moorland change map etc.
- gathering evidence from third parties such as existing citizen science projects e.g. Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS), Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland (BSBI), etc, or data from Local Records Centres, local interest groups, national biodiversity groups such as Butterfly Conservation, Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust;
- developing relationships with partners to gather data on our behalf such as National Trust, RSPB, Wildlife Trusts, Canal and Rivers Trust etc, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) and National Parks, Local Authorities, citizen science approaches etc;
- contracted survey, which could include eco-acoustics, eDNA etc; or
- a Natural England led field survey.

What constitutes a desk-based assessment for medium confidence category features?

Following an initial review, a desk-based assessment will be undertaken on features which have been assigned a medium confidence category to enable them to be moved into either high or low confidence categories.

The initial screening process will move features where more than 50% of the area (or units) were given the same condition or there were fewer than three years spread of unit condition assessment dates into the desk-based assessment protocol. All other features will move to the low confidence category group.

The desk-based assessment is designed to confirm the baseline condition category assigned to the medium confidence feature rather than assigning a new condition (see the medium confidence decision protocol in Annex 1).

Desk-based assessments can be undertaken to change the condition of a feature which is not in the medium confidence category, but this protocol has not been designed for that purpose.

Table 4. Desk-based assessment approach

Step	Action	Notes
1	Review the unit confidence spreadsheets to see if the Area Team have identified any issues about the feature.	These data will provide the view in 2019 from the Area Team around the unit condition confidence, and data may be extrapolated from this for features. Should be easier to confirm unfavourable condition or see a shift from favourable to unfavourable.
2	Review the narrative for each unit where the feature occurs to extract the information about the condition of the feature.	From these data it may be possible to determine the condition of the feature and determine confidence levels. Should be easier to confirm unfavourable condition or see a shift from favourable to unfavourable.
3	Use remote sensed data, Earth Observation, aerial photos, moorland change map, Living England, change map app to look for habitat extent and any obvious changes from the last assessment. Specifically looking at	Should be easier to confirm unfavourable condition or see a shift from favourable to unfavourable.

Step	Action	Notes
	broad negative indicators such as increase in scrub, loss of bare ground etc.	
4	Look for any recent reports covering the specific SSSI and review if features are mentioned. Can also look for site check information.	Should be easier to confirm unfavourable condition or see a shift from favourable to unfavourable.
5	Look for other data available from Area Teams, on the internal systems including Content Manager but the information needs to be relatively up to date.	Should be easier to confirm unfavourable condition or see a shift from favourable to unfavourable.
6	For rivers and lakes review available Environment Agency data for water quality, macrophytes, invertebrates, diatoms & hydrological regime	Should be easier to confirm unfavourable condition or see a shift from favourable to unfavourable.

The outcome of the desk-based assessment will be captured on the Excel spreadsheet in Annex 2 with a clear rationale for the decision on confidence in the current assessment.

The evidence used will be listed and where possible, a link to the location of these data recorded.

By the end of this stage there will be no medium confidence category features remaining; they will all have been assigned into the low or high confidence category.

Process for moving between confidence categories.

As stated above the process for changing feature condition confidence outcomes can be summarised as:

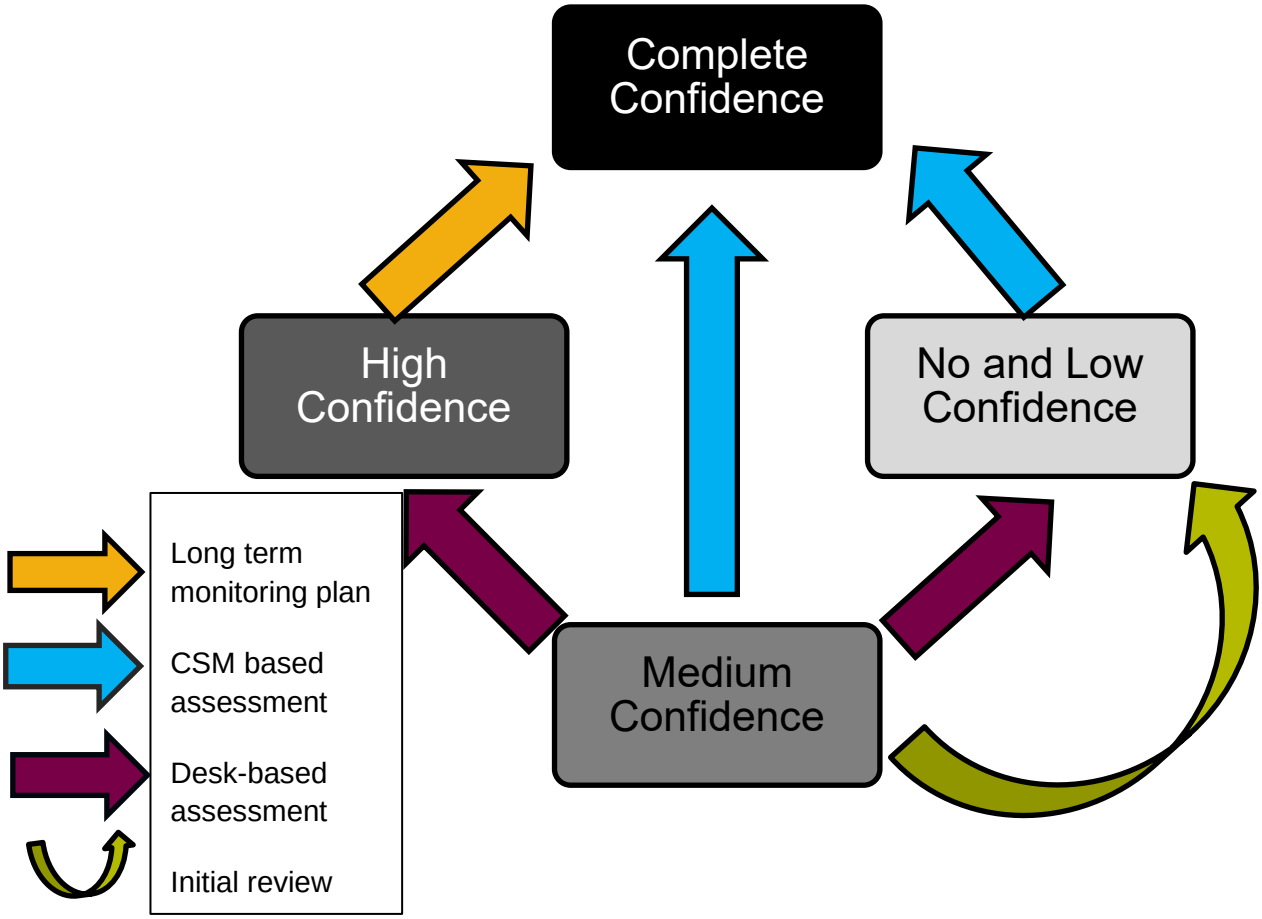


Figure 1. Mechanisms for moving between confidence categories

How Natural England will ensure that all features have an up-to date condition assessment

The confidence categories provide a foundation for the forward planning of condition assessment over the next four years. It is important to sub-divide the features further within these categories to produce a list of features which we will prioritise for each monitoring cycle. To this end, five further categories have been selected by which we can break down the features.

The five categories have been selected to cover a broad range of habitats and include growing pressures, designations of international importance, sites which fall into national focus areas and sites. These categories are nutrient neutrality, Ramsar wetland sites,

nitrate sensitive sites, sites which sit within priority areas for Natural England and air pollution sensitive sites.

For features which are in the high and complete confidence categories a long-term risk-based approach is being developed. The risk-based approach will consider a number of factors including, but not exclusively, how many pressures are present on or near to features, levels of access and supporting access infrastructure, and whether there are grant schemes supportive of conservation aims on the SSSI. The various factors will be assigned a score depending on whether they are classed as high, medium or low, and the risk to the feature assigned a total score for all factors. This score will then be used to decide whether the feature is overall at high or low risk and then in line with specialist advice a year will be assigned for the next monitoring date. This next monitoring date is a guide to support planning but can be overridden when required. The draft criteria for the risk based plan is provided in Annex 4.

What counts towards the EIP interim target of "50% of SSSIs will have actions on track by 31st January 2028"?

One of the three EIP targets linked to the delivery of the species targets in The Environment Act 2021 is that by the 31st of January 2028:

> *50% of SSSIs will have actions on track to achieve favourable condition.*

This target states "50% of SSSIs…" Natural England takes this to mean 50% of SSSI features. There are about 13,500 features across 4,127 SSSIs.

The target is that 50% of actions are on track, **NOT** that they achieve favourable condition by 2028. Favourable condition is defined by Natural England for each feature and will be described in the new Monitoring Specification for the SSSI.

"Actions" are captured on Natural England's internal reporting system, CMSi, and are linked to the mechanisms identified as required to address the pressures identified through the data collection processes for condition assessments. Each action has a start date, and is given an "Action status", which could be:

- Agreed
- Archived
- Complete
- Identified
- Not Agreed
- Not Applicable
- Underway – behind

- Underway - on track

For this EIP interim target “On track” means:

- A feature is either in favourable condition with no actions behind schedule **OR**
- is in unfavourable condition and at least one action is underway and on track (i.e. with an Action Status of “Underway – on track”) and no actions are behind schedule.

An action is “behind schedule” if its planned start year has passed, and the action status is neither “Underway – on track” nor “Complete”.

Actions with a status of “Archived” or “Not Applicable” are excluded from all calculations.

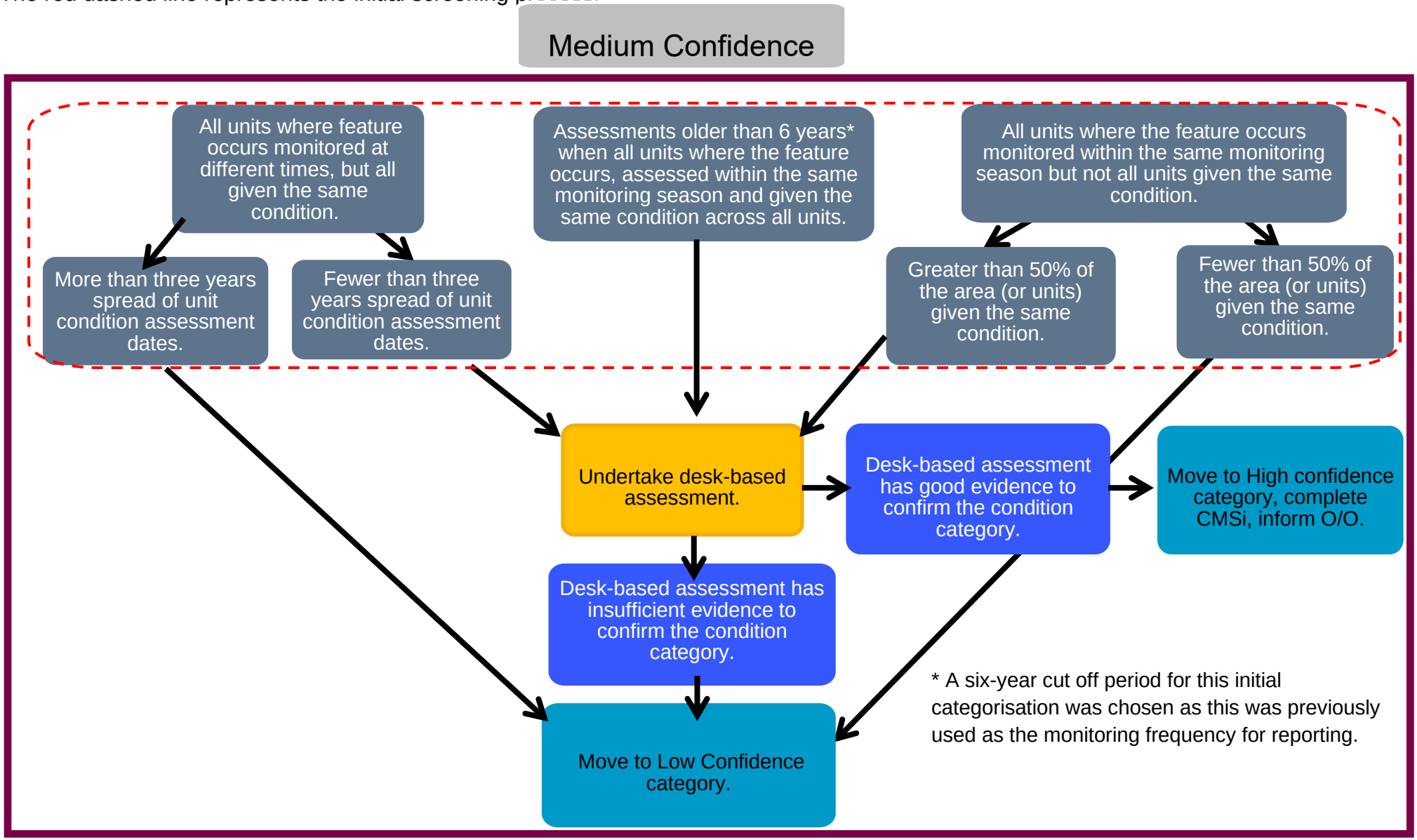
The current situation regarding the number of features that are considered to have actions on track

Data is taken from reports downloaded from Designated Sites View. This combines the current condition of SSSI features, whether the feature has an up-to-date condition assessment or not, and the pressures and actions that have been identified for individual features. Data is cross-checked between these reports to assess whether individual features meet the “on-track” definition. Progress towards the delivery of this target will be published by Natural England.

On the 1st of April 2023 there were 10.8% of features which met the criteria to count towards the EIP target for Actions on track.

Annex 1 Medium confidence decision protocol

The red dashed line represents the initial screening process.



Annex 2 Desk-based assessment recording template

SSSI Name	Feature	Condition confidence post assessment	Condition category (high level)	Additional qualifiers	Rationale for reaching conclusion	Primary Evidence source used	Other evidence source used

Annex 3 Condition categories and descriptions taken from Annex 1 of the Natural England Standard - SSSI Monitoring, Assessment and Reporting

Condition	Description
Favourable	The designated feature is being adequately conserved and the results from monitoring demonstrate that the feature is meeting all the mandatory site-specific monitoring targets set out in the Monitoring Specification (MS). The MS sets the minimum standard for favourable condition for the designated feature and there may be scope for the further (voluntary) enhancement of the feature.
Unfavourable recovering	Often known simply as 'recovering'. The feature is not yet fully conserved but the necessary actions to achieve favourable condition have been identified and recorded; at least one action is underway; and no actions are behind schedule. Provided that the recovery work is sustained, the feature will reach favourable condition in time. At least one of the designated feature's mandatory attributes is not meeting their targets (as set out in the site-specific MS).
Unfavourable no-change	The feature is not being conserved, and will not reach favourable condition, unless there are changes to the 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 MS) with the results not moving towards the desired state. The longer the feature remains in this poor condition, the more difficult it will be, in general, to achieve recovery. If the feature is unfavourable and the necessary actions to achieve favourable condition have either not been identified on CMSi; or none of the actions are underway; or at least one action is behind schedule, then the features should be recorded as Unfavourable – no change. In rare cases, an interest feature might not be able to regain its original condition following a damaging activity, but a new stable state might be achieved.

Condition	Description
Unfavourable declining	The feature is not being conserved and will not reach favourable condition unless there are changes to management or external pressures. The feature condition is becoming progressively worse, and this is reflected in the results of monitoring over time, with at least one of the designated feature's mandatory attributes not meeting its target (as set out in the site-specific MS) with the results moving further away from the desired state. The longer the feature remains in this poor condition, the more difficult it will be, in general, to achieve recovery.
Part destroyed	Lasting damage has occurred to part of a designated feature, such that it has been irretrievably lost and will never recover (no amount of management will allow the feature to ever reach favourable condition).
Destroyed	Lasting damage has occurred to an entire designated feature such that the feature has been irretrievably lost (no amount of management will bring this feature back). This feature will never recover, e.g. a finite mineralogical feature has been totally removed from its surroundings without consent and is therefore lost forever.

Annex 4 – Long-term risk-based monitoring plan draft criteria

Table 1. The indicators which will be used to assign a vulnerability score. The scores given will be 3/2/1. The higher the overall score the sooner the feature should be assessed

Indicator	Description
Latest condition	If the feature is in unfavourable declining condition this would score high in this process as it is important to understand the reasons behind the decline. If the feature is in favourable, unfavourable no change or recovering condition this has a medium score and the destroyed and part destroyed score low.
Number of Pressures	The larger the number of pressures the more likely that the feature could change condition so this would score high in this process.
Mechanism and action date	It is important to visit features when it is likely that the mechanisms have brought about a change.
Quantity of casework (planning applications, licencing, consenting, assenting, regulation etc)	Features with significant amounts of casework would score high in this process.
Level of access and state of access infrastructure	Features which are impacted by access levels and where the access infrastructure is not mitigating the issue would score high in this process.
Time until recommended monitoring cycle	Specialists have provided a broad range of when it is important to monitor a feature considering its ecological functioning. The feature would score high if the monitoring cycle had been exceeded.
Condition stability/history	If the feature condition has been fluctuating between condition categories would score high in this process
Owner/occupier	Landowners or occupiers who have a primary purpose for nature conservation would score low in this process.
Is the site a local priority?	Local Area Teams often have area which they are prioritising, and these would score high in this process.

Indicator	Description
Does the feature/site have Agri-environment scheme in place and underway to bring about condition improvements?	Expiring schemes would score high for this process as it is important to check if the scheme has improved condition.
Peatland code scheme	Being a member of the scheme would score low in this process. The Peatland Code is the certification standard for peatland restoration in the UK, which land managers enter voluntarily.
Conservation enhancement scheme (CES) in place to address all/some of the pressures	Expiring schemes would score high for this process as it is important to check if the scheme has improved condition.
Nature for Climate Peatland Grant Scheme (NCP)	Expiring schemes would score high for this process as it is important to check if the scheme has improved condition.

About Natural England

Natural England is here to secure a healthy natural environment for people to enjoy, where wildlife is protected and England's traditional landscapes are safeguarded for future generations.

Further Information

This report can be downloaded from the Natural England Access to Evidence Catalogue. For information on Natural England publications or if you require an alternative format, please contact the Natural England Enquiry Service on 0300 060 3900 or email enquiries@naturalengland.org.uk.

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