

Natural England Standard

SSSI Monitoring, Assessment and Reporting



1:0 About this standard

Introduction

This standard has been updated to reflect the results of our Protected Sites Monitoring Reform project. The standard will continue to develop as further monitoring reforms are agreed and implemented, particularly around the reporting that will be required under the 25 Year Plan.

The following information details the standard by which English Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) will be monitored, assessed and reported on. 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 provide evidence to support site management, and provide feedback to land managers to deliver the best environmental outcomes;
- To assess the effectiveness of interventions, and enable us to report on our corporate plan targets and reporting responsibilities;
- To improve the future delivery of Natural England's protected sites responsibilities, for example through improved guidance and training;
- To contribute to our monitoring and understanding of long-term changes in the natural environment, including delivery of Favourable Conservation Status for habitats and species;
- To support landscape scale delivery of outcomes, as important components of resilient, ecologically functional networks, and ecosystem services;
- To support Natural England's regulatory and enforcement responsibilities, including as part of the evidence presented in public inquiries and court cases.

Natural England uses a range of sources and a variety of techniques to gather information to assess or validate the condition of designated features on SSSIs. This is done with regard to the Common Standards for Monitoring (CSM) and the associated guidance for feature assessment agreed by the UK country agencies and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC). We also draw on earth observation, partner & 3rd party data, DNA

evidence, land manager & volunteer data, rapid targeted assessments and site checks. CSM also sets out the condition categories ([Annex 1](#)) that are used.

All SSSIs in England are divided into one or more 'units' which typically separate different areas of habitat and/or land ownership. Units will be used to link the condition of a designated site feature to the risks, remedies and management relevant to a particular part of that site, and hence be more specific about where on a site the management is having the desired effect, or requires some adaption.

25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment

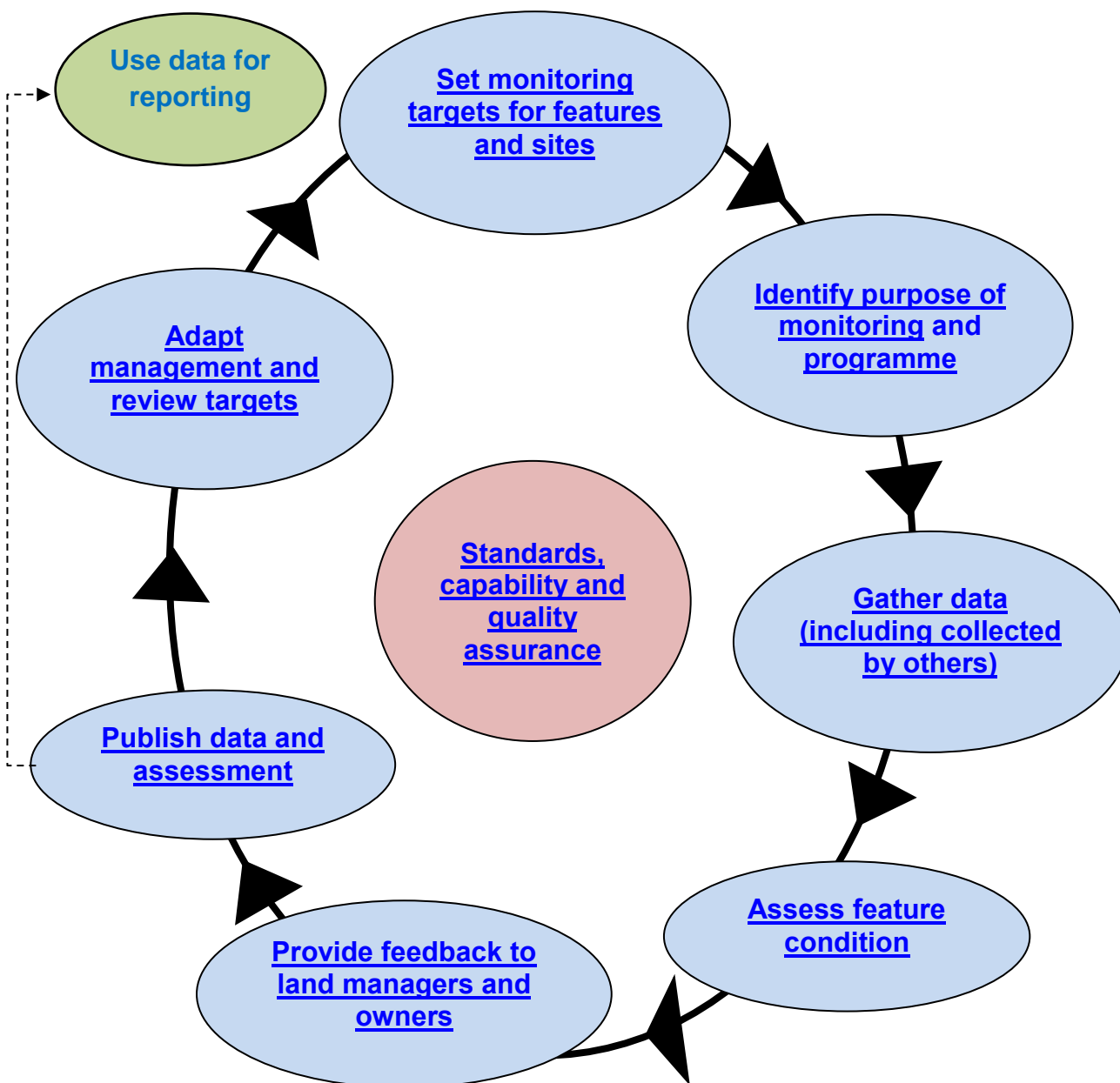
The monitoring and assessment of SSSIs is an important aspect of Natural England's overall monitoring programme and provides evidence for the delivery of the Government's 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment. The extent and condition of Protected Sites will be a key indicator, and data from the monitoring of SSSI features will also contribute to indicators on habitats, species and heritage features. This evidence will also be used to monitor and evaluate delivery of the Nature Recovery Network, Net Gain, Local Natural Capital Plans and the Environmental Land Management System. The reforms of our Protected Sites monitoring, particularly moving from a unit to a feature scale make data more useful for these other purposes.

Data from SSSIs also contributes to the monitoring and assessment of internationally important sites and to the UK Government's international reporting requirements. This standard does not cover how Natural England contributes to the monitoring or reporting requirements for those habitats and species listed in [the Habitats and Wild Birds Directives](#) or of non-designated examples of priority habitats and species that may occur on a SSSI.

The monitoring cycle

Figure 1 shows the main steps in the monitoring cycle. Each step links to a principle within this Standard.

Figure 1 Monitoring cycle



What does this standard cover?

This operational standard details the approach Natural England will take for monitoring, assessing and reporting on SSSI. It covers the types of data that will be used; using that data and evidence to assess or validate condition; the process by which information is shared with site owners or managers; and reporting, including making data publically available and how information is used to meet reporting requirements for the UK Government.

Who is this standard for?

This standard applies to anyone who carries out monitoring, assessment and reporting on a SSSI. It is complimented by other [Natural England standards](#), including:

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

2:0 The Standard

This standard provides a set of principles that all staff should follow for SSSI monitoring, assessment and reporting. We want to ensure that all interested parties 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 set tailored monitoring targets at a range of scales for the favourable condition of designated features

Monitoring targets will be tailored to specific SSSIs or group of SSSIs within their landscape. Targets will be set at an appropriate scale in the Favourable Condition Table (FCT) for the site, or an equivalent document.

2. Natural England will have a prioritised programme to periodically assess all features on all SSSIs

The programme will take account of short and long term priorities, risks and opportunities; together with the susceptibility to change of features, management and other factors. It will be sufficient to describe trends in condition across the series. Our programme will be shared with partners and made publically available.

3. Feature monitoring will collect data at the most appropriate and efficient spatial scale across an SSSI or for a group SSSIs in a cluster, landscape or catchment

Our monitoring will collect data at the most appropriate scale to inform assessment and management. We will assess the condition of each feature at the site scale. We will report on adverse condition reasons, remedies and threats at the unit level to keep a clear link to management and investment in action. In the future we will change our reporting from the current composite unit based approach, to reporting the condition of site features.

4. We will use a variety of evidence and information to assess feature condition

Natural England will use all available data it has access to, to make an assessment of condition; including data collected by others. We will always evaluate whether we can use existing, available data, before collecting or commissioning new data. Natural England staff will consider the quality, age and usefulness of data before deciding whether to use it in an assessment.

Our assessments will be flexible and use a variety of evidence from different sources. These will include simple site checks, rapid field assessments, fuller field surveys eg CSM, specialist commissioned surveys, Earth Observation, and survey data from partners, 3rd parties, land managers, citizens and volunteers.

We will facilitate collaboration and data sharing with partners and land managers using standard methods and new technology.

We will use horizon scanning to keep up to date with new innovations and techniques in monitoring and assessment that could be brought into operational use.

5. We will clearly describe the type of monitoring and assessment we have done based on the information gathered and how it is used

The type of monitoring and assessment we carry out will be appropriate to the purpose and confidence required. We will describe the assessment methods we use.

We will only commission surveys when data available from third parties and indirect monitoring (proxies) is insufficient. Direct field surveys may still be required to validate results of indirect assessments, dependent on the features involved.

Monitoring may be carried out by Natural England staff, partners or volunteers. The final assessment of condition, after monitoring has been done, will be done or endorsed by Natural England.

Level	Purpose	Common evidence used for all levels ¹	Methods relevant to individual levels ²
1	Checking current condition status	Earth observation, partner and 3 rd party data, DNA, land manager and volunteer data	Site check or other reliable evidence (including desk based judgements).
2	Tracking change and assessing the impact of management		Rapid targeted assessments using indicators of change Proxy assessments for species features
3	Identifying and validating a change in condition between favourable and unfavourable.		Detailed surveys eg CSM

¹ Common evidence may be used to inform all levels of monitoring and assessment.

² Rapid assessments, proxy assessments and detailed surveys could be carried out by Natural England staff, partners or volunteers.

6. Feedback will be provided to land managers on our monitoring and assessments

Good, timely feedback on the findings of assessments is essential. This gives land managers an opportunity to understand more about the site, our assessment of its condition and the management required to maintain or improve this.

Feedback should be given promptly by Natural England (normally within 28 days) as part of good customer service. Initial feedback will be provided even if we need to gather additional data (for example, the results of further surveys) and will need a longer period to confirm the outcome of an assessment. We will always provide feedback to owners or managers before any new information about land they manage is made publically available through our website.

We will increasingly seek to involve land managers and partners in planning and carrying out protected sites monitoring. We will develop effective ways that land managers and partners can share evidence and feedback with Natural England.

7. Monitoring data and assessments will be published

The results of all monitoring, assessments and site checks will be recorded on our data system (CMSi) to ensure a clear audit trail and transparency of decisions. Results and

data uploaded from our site survey app (NESS) or entered directly into CMSi are automatically publically available through Designated Sites View.

We will make data available in line with Natural England's open data position. In particular we will:

- Use open data wherever possible in our advice and when making decisions.
- Make all the biodiversity data we collect or commission openly available within 2 years at the level of detail originally captured.

Natural England Evidence team will provide data from SSSI monitoring to the [NBN Atlas](#) (when we have permission to share the data if collected by our partners).

Natural England will continue to publish SSSI condition data as an Official Statistic.

8. We will use monitoring and assessments to review site targets and adapt management

Monitoring and assessment may prompt NE to discuss and seek changes in site management practices, to ensure that the feature(s) reach and remain in favourable condition.

9. Guidance and protocols to support the standard will be easily available

Guidance, protocols and standard specifications will support staff in the day to day use of the standard for monitoring, assessment and reporting, providing more detailed information as necessary.

10. Staff and partners carrying out monitoring and assessment will have the appropriate skills and knowledge

Training, including coaching and mentoring, will be part of our learning and development to ensure that Natural England staff have the appropriate skills and knowledge to monitor and assess features, and be confident in their decisions.

Glossary

3 rd party	Organisations, bodies or individuals, other than Natural England, contributing data and or evidence.
Assessment	The use of primary data to make conclusions about condition
Common Standards Monitoring (CSM)	CSM establishes common standards throughout the United Kingdom for the monitoring of nature conservation. The standards relate to the monitoring required on statutory sites, and set out a basic framework.
CMSi	Natural England's protected sites database.
Favourable condition table (FCT)	FCTs are tailored to each site and set the attributes and targets for the feature(s) of interest which, when met, define favourable condition. The attributes are selected to be measurable and representative, they are not comprehensive.
Monitoring	The collection of primary data
NESS	An app which links to CMSi and allows the recording of monitoring information in the field.
Reporting	How assessments are conveyed to other parties
Unit	SSSI units are divisions of SSSIs used to record management and condition details. The size of units varies greatly depending on the types of management and the conservation interest. There are around 22,000 SSSI units.

Annex 1: SSSI Condition Categories	
<p>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.</p>	
Favourable condition	<p>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 Favourable Condition Tables (FCT). The FCT sets the minimum standard for favourable condition for the designated feature and there may be scope for the further (voluntary) enhancement of the feature.</p>
Unfavourable recovering condition	<p>Often known simply as 'recovering'. The Feature is not yet fully conserved but all the necessary management measures are in place. Provided that the recovery work is sustained, the feature will reach favourable condition in time. At least one of the designated features mandatory attributes is not meeting their targets (as set out in the site specific FCT).</p>
Unfavourable no-change condition	<p>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 FCT) 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.</p>
Unfavourable declining condition	<p>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 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 feature remains in this poor condition, the more difficult it will be, in general, to achieve recovery.</p>
Part destroyed condition	<p>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).</p>
Destroyed condition	<p>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.</p>

3:0 Sign off

The standard

The compliance monitoring plan

Implementation plan

The Equality Impact Assessment

Director

Signature*

David Askew

Director

Signature*

Andrew Windrum (for Caroline Cotterell)

Director

Signature*

Dave Slater

*Can be electronic

Quick reference

Type of Standard	Operational Standard.
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Sign-off:	Caroline Cotterell – Director Strategy Implementation David Askew – Director Evidence Services
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0.3	Updated following advice from NESAC and N&NBPB	D. Leatherland, A. Nisbet, N Downes-Tettmar	March 2019
0.4	Amendments following feedback from David Askew and John Finnie	D. Leatherland, A. Nisbet, N Downes-Tettmar	April 2019
0.5	Amendment following feedback from Andrew Windrum	D. Leatherland, A. Nisbet, N Downes-Tettmar	May 2019
1.0	Signed off version (David Askew and Andrew Windrum for Caroline Cotterell, supported by Dave Slater)		07/05/19
1.1			