

Natural England Standards

Sites of Special Scientific Interest



Introduction

Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) safeguard England's most important areas of natural heritage. They include some of our most spectacular and beautiful habitats and provide a refuge for many of our rarest plants and animals. They also protect our most important features of geology and physical geography, places where valuable records of the Earth's history are revealed. Today over 4,000 SSSIs exist, covering more than a million hectares or 8.1 per cent of the land surface of England. The sites included within the series of SSSIs are intended collectively to represent the full range of natural features that exist across the country. SSSIs are afforded a high level of protection under the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981) (as amended) to protect their conservation value. In general this prohibits potential damage to sites caused by harmful operations or construction projects without a thorough consideration of the need for such activities and possible alternatives. The legal protection of each site, and the assessment of their condition, is based on one or more 'notified features' identified within the notification documents.

As the government's conservation advisory body, Natural England has a number of statutory duties and general responsibilities in relation to SSSI. These are listed in Annex 1 and include:

- Notification of those areas as an SSSI which, in the opinion of Natural England, are of special interest by reason of their flora, fauna, geological or physiographic features (based on published site selection guidelines).
- Ensuring the protection of SSSIs and safeguarding their existence into the future, by providing advice to SSSI owners and managers. This includes working with them to ensure active management. Such management may be within or outside a SSSI boundary.
- Monitoring and reporting on the condition of SSSIs.
- Regulating activities which could impact on the conservation value of sites through the provision of consents, assents and formal advice

- Providing advice on the potential impacts of development and other activities on SSSIs to ensure their protection in line with the policies in the National Planning Policy Framework and other statutory policies and plans.
- Investigating reports of damage to sites and assisting in the enforcement of legal measures to protect sites and prosecute offenders.
- Ensuring SSSIs contribute to government objectives on nature conservation, as outlined in the 2011 Natural Environment White Paper¹ and Biodiversity 2020².

SSSIs and Government Policy

In 2011, the government set out its policy objectives for nature conservation in ‘Biodiversity 2020: a strategy for wildlife and ecosystem services’. This established an objective for the ongoing improvement of SSSIs, which requires by 2020, that 50% of sites be in favourable condition, and 95% of sites be in either favourable or recovering condition. This objective forms an important element of the Strategy’s mission which seeks to: “halt overall biodiversity loss, support healthy well-functioning ecosystems and establish coherent ecological networks, with more and better places for nature for the benefit of wildlife and people.”

The new target places an emphasis on ensuring that the management arrangements in place for individual SSSIs are effective in sustaining recovery to favourable condition in the years leading to 2020 and beyond. It also requires emerging threats to site condition to be understood and addressed

SSSIs and other sites designated for nature and geodiversity conservation

Many SSSIs overlap in area with other sites designated for nature conservation. For example, National Nature Reserves are sites considered to be particularly important as places for scientific research and for education and recreation. Many SSSIs also cover areas recognised as internationally important. These include Special Protection Areas (SPAs) designated under the European Union Birds Directive; Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) designated under the European Union Habitats Directive; and wetland sites designated under the Ramsar Convention.

Many SSSIs designated for geological features are also of international importance. They include reference sites for international dating and several SSSIs on the Dorset and Devon Coast which form part of the Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site.

¹ [Natural Environment White Paper, The Natural Choice: Securing the Value of Nature.](#)

² [Biodiversity 2020 –: A strategy for England’s wildlife and ecosystem services.](#)

What does this standard cover?

This standard sets out how Natural England will carry out its statutory duties for the selection, notification and protection of SSSIs. This includes how we will work with owners, occupiers and other stakeholders, and achieve the Government's wider policy objectives for the environment.

This standard is designed to explain *why* and *what* our role is in delivering our statutory duties and Government policy on SSSIs. It should be read in conjunction with [other related standards](#) including the:

- Evidence Standards
- Regulation Strategic Standard
- Biodiversity Strategic Standard [under development]
- Ecosystem Services Strategic Standard [under development]
- Customer Service Standard
- Upland Strategic Standard
- National Nature Reserves Strategic Standard [under development]
- International Site Designation Processes

Who is this standard for?

The principles contained within this standard are applicable to all Natural England staff and anyone acting on our behalf.

This standard also enables people and organisations with an interest in SSSIs to understand how Natural England goes about delivering its responsibilities.

The standard

What is the standard?

Natural England recognises the fundamental contribution made by SSSIs towards the conservation of the natural environment. The value of the SSSI series extends beyond the protection of our most important areas of biodiversity and geodiversity. They provide a foundation for government conservation objectives to restore natural habitats, improve the status of threatened species, and establish coherent ecological networks. SSSIs also play an important role in the provision of ecosystem services and in enabling greater public engagement with the natural environment.

We also recognise the need to work with and support land managers and other partners who deliver the benefits of an effective SSSI series.

Our approach is guided and shaped by 12 principles divided into three groups:

- Valuing the SSSI series
- Our way of working

- Working with others

Valuing the SSSI series

1. In our decisions and advice to others, we will at all times aim to protect and maintain England's SSSI series as a major national asset for biodiversity and geodiversity conservation.

The purpose of SSSIs is to safeguard, for present and future generations, the diversity and geographic range of habitats, species, and geological and physiographical interest features. The sites included within the series of SSSIs are intended collectively to comprise the full range of natural and semi-natural habitats and the most important geological and physiographical sites and the processes supporting them³.

We will continue to review gaps in the present coverage of priority habitats and species within the SSSI series through our Notification Strategy⁴, taking into account any long term influences such as climate change.

A large proportion of the notified SSSI series is classified as Special Areas of Conservation, or Special Protection Areas, under EU Habitats and Birds Directives, or as a Ramsar site. We will provide advice to government about these designations, allowing it to meet its international commitments and legislative obligations.

2. We will seek to increase the additional benefits to society of the SSSI series, whilst respecting the statutory requirements for their protection.

SSSIs provide benefits for society that go beyond their role as a representative national series of wildlife and geodiversity features. In the *2011 Natural Environment White Paper* and in *Biodiversity 2020* the Government set out policies which aim to maximise the value of the natural environment to society. SSSIs have the potential to make a significant contribution to these aims. For example, sites can be important for the regulation of flood risk, or provide opportunities for education, recreation and tourism.

We will seek and promote opportunities to enhance these additional benefits to society from SSSIs wherever possible. In doing so, we will always seek to work consensually with partners; particularly with landowners and those with livelihoods linked to the sites, and always ensure the protection of the special interest of the site is not compromised.

3. We will engage with the wider public to raise awareness of, and support for, England's SSSIs.

Research suggests that while many members of the public regularly access SSSIs close to their home, they may not be aware of their significance for nature conservation or that they are notified as SSSIs.⁵

³ Defra, 2003: [Sites of Special Scientific Interest: Encouraging positive partnerships](#), page 10.

⁴ [Natural England SSSI Notification Strategy](#).

⁵ [Defra, Benefits of Sites of Special Scientific Interest, Annex 4](#).

We will seek opportunities to increase public awareness of SSSIs and their value to society. Working closely with SSSI managers we will seek to make more information about individual SSSIs locally available to the general public. In doing so we will work consensually with partners, particularly those with livelihoods linked to the sites, and always ensure the protection of the special interest of the site is not compromised.

Where we directly manage an SSSI as part of a National Nature Reserve (NNR) we will not only promote these aims, but will also demonstrate good practice; we will encourage our partners that manage NNRs under Section 35 agreements to do likewise⁶.

Our ways of working

4. We will identify and notify SSSIs on the basis of their scientific value, following established guidelines.

Guidelines published by the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC)⁷ on the selection of biological sites and geological sites will inform our selection of sites for notification. Natural England's SSSI Notification Strategy⁸ provides further clarification on how we go about the selection of sites. This is guided by the principle that the SSSI series represents the full range of biological and geological features that exist throughout England. The selection and notification of new sites will be influenced by environmental change, changes in our understanding of the natural environment, and the rarity and the degree of threat to habitats and species.

Although sites are chosen for their special scientific interest, they may at the time of notification be in unfavourable condition (see Annex 1), which may mean their long term conservation is uncertain. Unfavourable condition does not preclude sites from being considered on the basis of scientific interest. Such sites will, however, need to meet the relevant baselines of scientific quality to enable us to form a view on special interest, including the baselines outlined in the published selection guidelines.

The Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981) (as amended)⁹ sets out a detailed procedure for informing and consulting with relevant parties over the notification of sites.

When selecting and notifying SSSIs we will always:

- Use the best available scientific evidence, adhering to our Evidence Standard.
- Provide information to land owners and other interested parties in an appropriate format, so that they may be able to respond in accordance with the provisions of the Wildlife and

⁶ Under section 35 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 Natural England can enter into an agreement with others for a site to be notified as NNR and managed by them to meet the objectives of NNRs.

⁷ For biological sites see: JNCC, [Guidelines for the selection of biological SSSIs](#). For geological sites see: JNCC, [An Introduction to the Geological Conservation Review](#).

⁸ Available from: <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/conservation/designatedareas/sssi/designation.aspx>

⁹ Available from: <http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-1377>

Countryside Act.

- Adhere to the principles of our Notification Strategy for SSSIs.

We will adopt a similar rigorous approach in our advice to government about their commitments to the designation of the Natura 2000 site series under the EU Habitats and Birds Directives.

5. We will adopt a consistent and transparent approach to defining the targets that should be met for a site to be considered in favourable condition.

Guidelines published by the JNCC¹⁰ are used to establish the desired state of the features on each site and these are set out in a Favourable Condition Table. These tables list targets or target ranges against which key characteristics of special features are measured to determine favourable condition. Each table reflects the specific characteristics of a site.

Some sites contain habitats or species which have contrasting requirements. In such cases establishing targets for favourable condition will require complex judgement, balancing the requirements of different natural features and taking account of issues such as rarity and abundance.

- We will ensure that the evidence used, and the decisions made, in developing Favourable Condition Tables are recorded through an audit trail.
- We will ensure that Favourable Condition Tables are made publicly available in an accessible format.

6. We will follow a consistent and transparent approach to the gathering and interpretation of evidence about feature and unit condition for each SSSI

SSSIs are divided into a number of units (which may separate different areas of habitat, or management practices, or tenure) and all condition assessments are recorded at this unit level. The actual condition of each unit is assessed against the parameters set out in the site's Favourable Condition Table. The frequency of assessments is dependent on the nature of the site, and takes place on average every seven years as part of our Integrated Site Assessment programme. Each unit is assessed to one of six condition categories: 1) Favourable; 2) Unfavourable, recovering; 3) Unfavourable, no change; 4) Unfavourable, declining; 5) Part destroyed; 6) Destroyed (See Annex 2).

We will follow a consistent and transparent approach to the gathering and interpretation of evidence about feature and site condition, and make our assessments publicly available.

7. We will take account of environmental change, changes in land and water management practices, and our increasing understanding of ecological processes.

¹⁰ JNCC, [Guidance for Common Standards Monitoring](#).

SSSIs are part of naturally dynamic ecosystems which change in response to environmental influences. For example, natural physical change is a particularly notable feature of coastal sites¹¹. Changes in river systems and the longer term complex effects of climate change can also have significant impacts on SSSIs. Changing economic and social factors can influence land use patterns and consequently the management of SSSIs. An increase in scientific knowledge of the interaction between habitats and species, and their response to environmental change, enables new approaches to conservation to be considered. These factors contribute to the consideration of where, and for what reasons, SSSIs are notified, as well as to how they are managed.

In taking account of change we will:

- Review gaps in the coverage of natural features within the SSSI series.
- Review our advice on the conservation requirements and management options for SSSIs.
- Develop our understanding of external factors that may influence the condition and management options for SSSIs.

8. We will provide advice and guidance on the management of SSSIs through an open and transparent process drawing on the best available evidence.

The guidance and advice that Natural England provides on the management of SSSIs is influenced by developments in scientific research and learning from practical experience. Likewise, the decisions we make when considering consents or assents for operations that may damage sites are influenced by advances in knowledge. Natural England staff use their professional judgement to interpret evidence within the context of individual sites.

In providing advice and guidance we will:

- Adhere to the principles within our [Evidence Standard](#) on the gathering, use and evaluation of evidence.
- Ensure that the evidence on which we base our advice and decisions is made available to interested parties in an accessible format.

9. We will support our staff in developing their skills, in order to secure the best possible outcomes for SSSIs and provide a high standard of service to those who own or manage them.

In many cases, the provision of advice concerning the management of SSSIs is relatively straightforward and can be addressed through appropriate guidance, interpreted through the professional judgement of our staff, who are competent in its use. In a minority of cases, the provision of advice or a decision on consents may be technically complex or have significant

¹¹ Since 1999 coastal change has been factored into the boundary decisions for all new or re-notified coastal SSSIs.

economic or social implications.

- We will ensure that our staff are knowledgeable about the range of guidance available on SSSIs and are skilled in its application.
- Where necessary, we will provide additional expert advice and undertake a peer review of advice and decisions.

10. We will systematically identify actions needed to ensure sites attain and maintain favourable condition.

A range of actions can be determined to help restore sites in unfavourable condition. These are referred to as 'Remedies'. They might include the adoption of an appropriate management plan or the implementation of a new grazing regime. We also recognise that even where sites are in favourable or unfavourable recovering condition there may be threats to this, leading to a decline in quality. These are referred to as 'Condition Threats'. They could include the impact of development, changes in land management regimes or invasion of non-native species.

We will adopt systems that enable appropriate 'Remedies' and 'Condition Threats' to be identified and work with site owners and occupiers, and other partners, to seek appropriate solutions.

Working with others

11. We will build and maintain a strong working relationship with owners and managers of SSSIs.

Protecting England's network of more than 4,000 SSSIs is a task we share with a huge range of landowners and land managers. This includes private farms and estates, public bodies and other conservation organisations. In addition to the value that SSSIs provide to nature conservation, many sites are closely connected to individual livelihoods, or are important for commercial and cultural activities.

In working with others we will:

- Be open and transparent in the way we work and provide information in an accessible format.
- Always aim to reach agreement with partners through discussion and negotiation in order to secure the best results for the special features of a SSSI, while considering the wider uses of the land.
- Identify opportunities for owners and occupiers of SSSIs to obtain financial support for appropriate management practices, where these are available.

- Apply our regulatory powers in accordance with the principles set out in the Regulators' Compliance Code¹².

12. We will develop a broad partnership to contribute to the protection of SSSIs.

In addition to targeted conservation measures, a range of other mechanisms exist that can play an important role in protecting and enhancing SSSIs. These include multi-agency strategies such as Shoreline Management Plans, River Basin Management Plans under the Water Framework Directive and Local Plans. The management of SSSIs is made more effective where all relevant parties understand what is required to achieve favourable condition for each site, as set out in a Favourable Condition Table. We will therefore aim to make information on the objectives and management requirements of each site accessible to all relevant parties, to enable their incorporation into relevant plans and strategies.

Application of the standard

Detailed guidance on how we will achieve and apply the principles will be provided through a suite of operational standards and an implementation plan.

¹² [Regulators' Compliance Code](#)

Annex 1: Summary of key activities, Natural England's role, legislation and guidance relevant to SSSIs

(This summary includes relevant nature conservation legislation only. Other legislation also provides mechanisms for taking action on factors affecting SSSIs, including the Water Act, the Environment Act, and the Integrated Pollution Prevention and Control Directive.)

Activity		Natural England's role	Legislation	Supporting guidance and documentation
Selection and notification	Site selection	Identification of sites considered to be of scientific interest due to their flora, fauna, geological and physiographic interest.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act - Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981(as amended) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - JNCC Guidelines for the Selection of Biological SSSIs - JNCC Principles for the selection of GCR sites. - Natural England SSSI Notification Strategy
	Notification	Consultation with owners, occupiers and statutory consultees; consideration of objections; and confirmation of Notification to owners, occupiers and statutory consultees.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981(as amended) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Natural England notification guidance
	De-notification	De-notification of sites no longer considered to be of special interest for their flora, fauna, geology or physiographic features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981(as amended) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Natural England notification guidance

Activity		Natural England's role	Legislation	Supporting guidance and documentation
Monitoring and reporting	Favourable Condition Tables	Setting the attributes and targets that should be met for a site to be considered to be in favourable condition.	- Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006, Section 3.	- JNCC Guidance for Common Standards Monitoring. NERC establishes role of JNCC re common standards for monitoring across country agencies.
	Condition assessment (Integrated Site Assessment)	Assessment of whether site features meet the requirement of favourable condition.	- Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006, Section 3.	- JNCC guidance on Common Standards Monitoring - Natural England Guidance for Integrated Site Assessments
	Reporting	Compilation and publication of information about current status and change of SSSIs.		- Natural England operational guidance
Management advice	Management advice and management agreements	General advice and voluntary agreements between Natural England and site owners or occupiers to secure appropriate management of land.	- Countryside Act 1968 - Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006	- Natural England operational guidance
	Remedies	For SSSI monitoring units in 'unfavourable no-change' and 'unfavourable declining' condition: identification of factors preventing attainment of favourable condition. Implementation of actions to address these factors where the action is owned by Natural England. Where the actions are owned by partners, then to agree the actions with relevant partners.		- Natural England Remedies guidance

Activity		Natural England's role	Legislation	Supporting guidance and documentation
Management advice	Condition Threats	For SSSI monitoring units in 'unfavourable recovering' and 'favourable' condition: identification of factors that have a reasonable chance of preventing the attainment, or maintenance of, favourable condition. Implementation of actions to address these factors where the action is owned by Natural England. Where the actions are owned by partners, then to agree the actions with relevant partners.		- Natural England Condition Threats guidance
Regulation and enforcement	Consents	Consider and issue Consent for operations where Natural England's consent is required. Implementing solutions to legal infringements.	- Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) (Section 28E)	- Natural England operational guidance
	Assent	Consider and issue Assent to statutory undertakers carrying out their statutory duties on or adjacent to an SSSI where the activity may damage the special interest of the SSSI.	- Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) (Section 28H)	- Natural England operational guidance
	Advice	Provision of Advice to other consenting bodies who are considering an application under their 'consenting' regimes that may impact, directly or indirectly the special interest of an SSSI.	- Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) (Section 28I)	- Natural England operational guidance

Activity		Natural England's role	Legislation	Supporting guidance and documentation
Regulation and enforcement	Regulation	Modification or withdrawal of Consent to address previously issued S28 Consents that are now acknowledged as damaging the special interest of an SSSI. Use of Management Schemes/Notices to address lack of management (neglect) where this is adversely affecting the special interest of an SSSI.	- Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended)	- Natural England operational guidance
	Enforcement	Use of enforcement powers, including civil sanctions to address damage to the special interest of an SSSI.	- Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended)	- Natural England operational guidance
Delivering government policy	Achieving the aims of national policies for nature conservation	Work with owners and occupiers of SSSIs and other conservation partners to achieve objectives for improvement in the condition of the SSSI series.		- Natural Environment White Paper (2011) - Biodiversity 2020 (2011)

Annex 2: Definition of SSSI condition categories

Favourable

Favourable condition means that the SSSI land is being adequately conserved and is meeting the targets set out in a Favourable Condition table. However, there is scope for the enhancement of these sites.

Unfavourable recovering

Unfavourable recovering condition is often known simply as 'recovering'. SSSI units are not yet fully conserved but all the necessary management measures are in place. Provided that the recovery work is sustained, the SSSI will reach favourable condition in time.

Unfavourable no change

This means the special interest of the SSSI unit is not being conserved and will not reach favourable condition unless there are changes to the site management or external pressures. The longer the SSSI unit remains in this poor condition, the more difficult it will be, in general, to achieve recovery.

Unfavourable declining

This means that the special interest of the SSSI unit 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.

Part destroyed

Part destroyed means that lasting damage has occurred to part of the special conservation interest of a SSSI unit such that it has been irretrievably lost and will never recover. Conservation work may be needed on the residual interest of the land.

Destroyed

Destroyed means that lasting damage has occurred to all the special conservation interest of the SSSI unit, such that it has been irretrievably lost. This land will never recover.

Quick reference

Type of Standard Strategic

Purpose: To set out the key principles that will guide Natural England in discharging its statutory duties to notify and protect Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). This includes how we will work with partners and stakeholders, and contribute to government's wider policy objectives for the environment.

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