

Detailed guide: Sites of special scientific interest: managing your land

Updated: Improved the wording in the 'Decisions on applications for consent' section to make it clear when you'll get a response.

For land you own or occupy, Natural England can select all or part of it for protection. Natural England will do this when it believes the site has features of special interest, such as its:

- wildlife
- geology
- landform

Natural England will 'notify' (or designate) the land as a site of special scientific interest (SSSI). The section: ['New SSSI notifications'](#) tells you more about the designation process and your rights.

This guide tells you what rules you must follow when you manage land you own or occupy within a SSSI. If you do not own or occupy the land and you plan an activity on it, you must work with the owner or occupier. For example, if you're a third party event organiser.

There's separate [SSSI guidance for public bodies](#).

Achieving favourable condition

Natural England's objective is to achieve 'favourable condition' status for all SSSIs. Favourable condition means that the SSSI's habitats and features are in a healthy state and are being conserved by appropriate management.

Natural England will assess whether proposals to carry out operations within a SSSI have a positive or negative effect on the condition of a site.

See ['SSSI condition and assessment'](#) for details of how Natural England classifies the condition of SSSIs.

Check if your land is within a SSSI

All SSSIs in England are registered on the Land Charges register. If you're buying land, your conveyancing search will check if it's notified as a SSSI. You can also use the Magic map system to [check if your land or land you're buying is within a SSSI](#).

1. Click on the '+' symbol below the on-screen compass to zoom in on the

detail.

2. Drag the map to your location using your mouse or mouse pad.
3. Click on the 'i' identify tool in the toolbar at the top of the screen.
4. Using the crosshair, click on the map to find out the name of the SSSI.

Change of ownership

You must tell Natural England within 28 days about changes to the ownership or occupation of SSSI land, including if:

- you sell your land
- you lease it to another person
- someone else gets the right to use the land (known as 'an easement')

Manage SSSI land effectively

You must manage land within a SSSI effectively and appropriately to conserve the special features of the site, such as:

- grazing animals at particular times of the year
- managing woodland
- controlling water levels
- managing scrub on species-rich grassland

You must [check if you need consent](#) before you start work to:

- carry out management tasks
- change an existing management regime

Check if you need consent

There are certain things you cannot do on SSSI land without consulting Natural England and getting consent first. For example, you might want to change the way you manage woodland or change a grazing regime.

Each SSSI has a list of activities, known as 'operations', which need Natural England's consent.

Find out about your land within a SSSI

Use the [designated sites system \(DSS\)](#) to search for a SSSI to:

- get the list of 'operations requiring Natural England's consent' (the ORNEC list) – you can download a list for each SSSI
- get a map of the site's boundary
- find out who's the main contact for the site – this is 'your SSSI'

adviser'

- find out why the site was designated
- get Natural England's 'views about management' report for its steer on how to manage land effectively
- find out the condition of the site

You must get written consent from Natural England if you intend to carry out a listed operation within the boundary of the SSSI. Read the section: ['Get consent to carry out operations'](#) for guidance on how to do this.

If you do not have Natural England's permission you could:

- get an unlimited fine if you – or you allow someone else to – carry out a listed operation
- have to pay to repair any damage to the site

When operations do not need consent

You do not need consent for:

- emergency work, for example to protect livestock during a flood (you must tell Natural England as soon as possible afterwards)
- operations with permission from a public body or local authority (they must have [consulted Natural England](#) before they granted permission)
- an operation which is not on the ORNEC list for that site

Get free or charged advice from Natural England

Get advice from Natural England before submitting your proposal. This is likely to reduce delays to Natural England's consent process.

Free advice

You can get free advice from Natural England:

- to check if your proposal will significantly affect a SSSI
- on what you should include with your proposal
- about routine and repeated operations on the SSSI, including routine agricultural activities
- on their views about management of your site to reach favourable or recovering condition
- about management measures specific to your site's notified features
- on potential sources of funding
- about the law on protecting the SSSI

In all cases you'll get an initial free consultation from Natural England.

Pay for advice

You can pay for additional advice from Natural England if what you want to do is more complicated. Natural England can:

- help you review your survey results
- advise on your mitigation strategies to reduce damage to the environment
- advise on drafting your consent application
- help if you need advice quickly (in less than 28 working days)
- help if you need complex advice to meet a defined deadline

Contact your SSSI adviser as soon as possible if you need advice quickly.

You're likely to benefit most from Natural England's advice if you seek it before you submit your request for consent.

How much you might pay depends on:

- the amount of advice you need from Natural England and how complex your proposal is
- whether or not a Natural England adviser needs to visit your site
- how quickly you need advice

If you want advice on how to reduce damage to protected sites or species, you'll pay £110 per hour.

If you want a meeting, you'll pay:

- £500 per adviser for a 90 minute meeting: at your site, a Natural England office or using a conference call
- £110 per hour per adviser for each additional hour

If you want an adviser to travel to your site, you'll pay the adviser's:

- travel costs at 45p per mile
- public transport, tolls and expenses over and above the mileage at cost
- travel time as part of the hourly rate

Fast-track services

To get advice on non-complex cases in less than 28 working days, you'll need to pay £500 for the simple fast-track service.

To get advice for more complex cases to your defined deadline, you'll need to pay £110 per hour per adviser for the bespoke fast-track service.

Apply for charged advice

Complete the [consent advice request form](#). You need to email the form to either of the following contacts:

- your Natural England SSSI adviser for them to discuss your proposal with you
- consultations@naturalengland.org.uk

Read Natural England's [terms and conditions for paid-for services](#) (PDF, 144KB, 17 pages)

Get consent to carry out operations on your land

You must get permission to carry out the listed operations on your land in a SSSI.

1. Discuss your proposal with your Natural England SSSI adviser – you can [search the DSS](#) to find out who the SSSI's main contact is. ([Contact Natural England](#) if you're unsure.)
2. Fill in the [form to request permission](#) – see the section '[What to include when you request consent](#)' for more guidance.
3. Email your completed form to consultations@naturalengland.org.uk or [post it to Natural England](#).

If you apply to the Forestry Commission for a [felling licence](#) within a SSSI, you must consult Natural England. You'll need Natural England's consent for operations that are not described in the felling licence, such as where vehicles cross the SSSI to get to the tree felling location.

Read the guidance on '[Obtaining consent for work in Sites of Special Scientific Interest \(SSSI\)](#)' on the Forestry Commission website.

You must:

- complete the '[Supplementary notice of operations](#)' form
- complete your [felling licence application](#)
- send both forms to the [relevant administrative hub](#) of Forestry Commission England

This allows the Forestry Commission to get Natural England's consent for you.

What to include when you request consent

Include the following details in your proposal:

- the name of the SSSI
- your name and address
- a description of what you intend to do and how
- approximate start and end dates for the operations
- the location of the proposed operation (send a map with notes if you can)

You should include as much relevant information with your proposal, such as:

- what vehicles will need access to the site, the routes they'll take and ground pressure they'll exert (particularly across fens and bogs)

- how you'll remove any spoil from the site
- the origin and chemical nature of materials you'll bring onto the site

Natural England can ask you for more information if there's a lack of detail and it cannot reach a decision on consent.

Decisions on consent applications

For eligible applications, you'll get one of the following decisions once Natural England has assessed your application:

- consent granted without conditions (for example for operations that are necessary for [achieving favourable condition](#))
- consent granted with conditions, such as requiring you to carry out operations in a certain way or at a certain time to avoid damage
- consent refused for any operations that would damage notified features

Withdrawal or modified consent

Natural England can withdraw or modify an existing consent if new surveys on the site show it's declining from operations previously given consent. This is usually for exceptional cases only.

How Natural England makes a decision

Natural England decides whether to grant consent by assessing the scale and intensity of the proposed operation on the site's notified features. It will assess the level at which the site can sustain the proposed operations without causing significant negative effects. This is known as the site's 'carrying capacity'.

Where possible, Natural England will work with you to improve your proposal to avoid:

- damage to the site
- getting consent with conditions attached
- refusal of consent

You may need to [pay for advice](#) if your proposal is complex. Natural England will tell you if you need this service.

It's an offence to carry out a listed operation without Natural England's consent or to ignore the conditions of a consent.

Read the section on getting [free or charged advice from Natural England](#) before you apply for consent. This will help you submit an eligible application.

Decision process

Natural England will acknowledge receipt of your application within 10 working days. Your application must be complete for it to be eligible for Natural England to consider it. See: [‘What to include when you request consent’](#).

If your application is straightforward, Natural England will try to give you a decision within 28 working days. Natural England can take up to 4 months to make its decision. It will tell you when you’re likely to get a decision if:

- your case is complex
- it’s going to take longer than 28 working days

If you do not receive a consent decision within 4 months, you should take this as a refusal of consent.

If you need advice quicker than 28 working days, you can pay for the [fast-track advice service](#). This service is subject to Natural England’s discretion.

How to appeal against a decision

You have the right to appeal to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) if:

- Natural England refuses permission for operations
- you disagree with the conditions applied to the consent
- Natural England withdraws or modifies previous consent
- you do not get a consent decision within 4 months

You have 2 months to appeal. Read the guidance on [the appeals process](#). You may be able to resolve the problem without a formal appeal by speaking to your SSSI adviser.

SSSI condition and assessment

Natural England categorises the condition of SSSIs as one of the following:

- favourable – habitats and features are in a healthy state and are being conserved by appropriate management
- unfavourable (recovering condition) – if current management measures are sustained the site will recover over time
- unfavourable (no change) or unfavourable (declining condition) – special features are not being conserved or are being lost, so without appropriate management the site will never reach a favourable or recovering condition
- part destroyed or destroyed – there has been fundamental damage, where special features have been permanently lost and favourable condition can’t be achieved

Site visits and condition assessments

Natural England may visit your SSSI to check on its general condition. Natural England or expert contractors will carry out condition assessments if:

- Natural England thinks it's necessary
- the condition of the site may change

For most sites they'll do this at least once every 6 years. They may visit more often if a special feature:

- can only be assessed at a specific time of year
- is likely to change quickly, such as grassland

For sites where changes are expected to be slow, such as woodland, they may do a condition assessment once every 10 years.

Natural England will request your permission before visiting. It may use its power of entry if it believes the site is being damaged.

At other times, Natural England can enter the site without your permission but will only do this if:

- you've been notified of the visit
- you've not allowed access

For assessment, Natural England divides SSSIs into smaller units and assesses them against:

- a list of the features for which the site was designated
- related targets

You can see the SSSI targets on the 'favourable condition table' by [searching for your site on the DSS](#). You'll find the favourable condition table underneath the site summary box.

Example

If one of the special features of your site is a rare plant species, the assessment is likely to include a measure of population size and distribution within the unit. Similarly, if a particular habitat is a feature, Natural England will measure its extent, structure and species composition.

After the assessment, Natural England will contact you to discuss:

- the condition of the site
- any changes in management you need to make if it's not in favourable or recovering condition

Natural England usually publishes summaries of condition assessments within 6 weeks. You can [see these on the DSS](#).

1. Search for your SSSI.
2. Click on 'View details'.
3. In the Summary box, click on 'View units' in the right hand column.
4. Click on 'View map' on the right hand side to see the area on a map.

Condition improvement process

Natural England can take 3 steps to help you improve the favourable condition of the SSSI if it has declined.

1. Management agreement

Natural England will advise you on, and try to agree with you, the work that's needed to protect and improve the condition of the site. You can achieve most management objectives on SSSIs with a [Countryside Stewardship grant](#), which you might be eligible for.

2. Management scheme

A management scheme is a statement of measures necessary to conserve or restore features of your land. Natural England can put a management scheme in place if the features of special interest on your SSSI are deteriorating from neglect or poor management.

Where a management scheme has been put in place, Natural England may ask you to apply for a [Countryside Stewardship grant](#).

Decline resulting from wilful or reckless damage to the site is treated differently and is subject to [enforcement measures](#).

If you think the management scheme is unreasonable or that someone else should be responsible for the work, contact your SSSI adviser and explain why.

3. Management notice

If you do not carry out works set out in a management scheme, Natural England can issue a management notice. This will state that you must carry out some or all of the works set out in the management scheme.

You'll be breaking the law if you get a management notice, but do not carry out the work within 2 months of Natural England's deadline.

If you do not carry out the work, Natural England could:

- prosecute you, which may result in you getting an unlimited fine
- enter your land and carry out the work – you'll have to pay for the work
- get a compulsory purchase order to force you to sell your land to them (as a last resort)

You can [appeal to Defra against a management notice](#). You have 2 months to appeal.

You may be able to resolve the problem without a formal appeal by speaking to your SSSI adviser.

Enforcement

Natural England will take [enforcement action](#) on you or others who:

- intentionally or recklessly damage the SSSI
- destroy any of the features of special interest
- disturb wildlife for which the site was notified
- carry out listed operations without consent

Where possible, Natural England will work with you to avoid legal proceedings. Read the section on [enforcement undertakings](#) to find out more. Natural England will use enforcement measures as a last resort.

New SSSI notifications

Natural England identifies and protects SSSIs in England under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended).

Natural England will select and notify an area as a new SSSI when it believes the land's wildlife, geology or landform is of special interest. When land becomes an SSSI, it does not give the public the right to access your land. Natural England will 'notify' (or designate) the land as a site of special scientific interest (SSSI).

Find out how [Natural England uses its statutory power](#) to protect SSSIs.

Sites are selected using the:

- [guidelines for selection of biological SSSIs](#)
- [Geological Conservation Review](#)

Natural England will write to you and tell you if it believes your land has special conservation value. Natural England is likely to call you to discuss this before sending a notification letter.

The letter will explain the legal implications of the notification by including:

- the reasons for designation
- a statement of Natural England's views on the management of the SSSI
- a list of operations requiring Natural England's consent
- a map showing the SSSI
- your legal responsibilities
- how to give your opinions or object to the designation

The letter will give you details of an adviser who can help you. They'll be able to explain:

- what the designation means for you

- what help is available to help you manage your land, such as [applying for a grant scheme](#)

Natural England must also tell:

- the local planning authority
- the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
- public bodies, such as the Environment Agency, water and sewerage companies and internal drainage boards

Further information on notifying SSSIs can be found on [Natural England's designations programme for areas, sites and trails](#).

Give your opinion or object to a new notification

You have 4 months to [write to Natural England](#) to tell them what you think or to object to the designation of your land as an SSSI.

The [Natural England board](#) decides whether to confirm or withdraw a notification. It has a 4-month consultation period to look at the objections and issues raised.

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs appoints members of the board. They are independent of Natural England staff and the executive board.

Changes and de-notification

If the special interest of the SSSI is not adequately protected by the existing notification, Natural England can:

- extend an existing SSSI if nearby land is also of special interest
- add features of special interest to an SSSI record if they're found on the land
- update the list of operations for which you'll need Natural England's consent
- withdraw the designation of an SSSI, known as 'de-notification'

Natural England will consult with you in a similar way as a [new notification](#) if it makes a change to an existing notification.

Natural England will only de-notify a SSSI in exceptional cases. For example, if the site's special interest is lost and cannot be restored as a result of:

- natural causes
- granting planning permission for development

It's an offence to deliberately or recklessly damage the special features of an SSSI. Sites that have been illegally damaged, or suffered from neglect, will not be de-notified.

You have the opportunity to repair the damage using the [enforcement undertaking](#) process.

Contact

Speak to your SSSI adviser or contact the enquiries team if you need help.

Natural England Enquiries

County Hall

Spetchley Road

Worcester

WR5 2NP

Email enquiries@naturalengland.org.uk.

Telephone 0300 060 3900.

Opening times: 8:30am to 5pm, Monday to Friday (excluding public holidays).

Find out about call charges at www.gov.uk/call-charges.