



SSSI condition assessment

A guide for owners and occupiers

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Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) are the best wildlife and geological sites in England. Knowing the condition of these sites is a vital part of Natural England's statutory responsibility to conserve and protect them. Accurate information on condition allows Natural England to advise owners and occupiers on the type of management an SSSI requires and, where necessary, provide financial support. Natural England assesses the condition of all SSSIs as part of a six year cycle. These condition assessments are carried out on all the SSSIs in England (in parallel with our counterpart organisations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) and will continue to be carried out on a regular basis to help us monitor the health of these sites in the long-term.

This document outlines the assessment process, describes how sites are categorised according to their condition and tells you where you can go to get further information.

Chimney Meadows NNR – Species-rich grassland.
Paul Glendell / Natural England



Notification of SSSIs

Natural England assesses the condition of SSSIs using standard methods that have been developed together with the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) – the UK government’s wildlife adviser. This standard methodology is used for site assessments throughout the UK and details are available on the JNCC’s website (www.jncc.gov.uk).

To monitor sites, Natural England divides SSSIs into smaller more practical monitoring areas called ‘units’. The 4,114 SSSIs in England are divided into about 22,000 units and each one is assessed against a set of targets, or target ranges, that have to be met for the unit to be judged in ‘favourable condition’ (see ‘Condition categories’ on page 6).

A list of Special Features, and the targets against which they are measured on a unit, are specified in a set of favourable condition tables for each SSSI. The Special Features are those that led to the SSSI being notified in the first place, and each feature will have one or more measurable characteristics that can be used to determine its condition. For example, if a Special Feature is a rare plant species, then the assessment process is likely to include a measure of its population size and distribution within the unit. If a particular habitat is a Special Feature then the measures will include habitat extent, habitat structure and species composition.

For some habitats and species the condition assessment also makes use of the best data available from the Environment Agency and other bodies.



Witherslack Woods – large upland broadleaf wood.
Peter Wakely / Natural England

Examples of favourable condition attributes for lowland dry heath

- No decline in habitat extent.
- Between 1% and 10% bare ground.
- Between 25% and 90% dwarf shrub cover.
- At least two dwarf shrub species present – for example, heather *Calluna vulgaris* and bell heather *Erica cinerea* in all stages of growth.
- Presence of fine-leave grasses and flowering herbaceous plants.
- Less than 25% common gorse.
- Less than 15% trees/scrub.
- Less than 10% bracken.
- Less than 1% exotic species, such as rhododendron.



Favourable lowland heath, Holt and West Moors Heaths SSSI, Dorset.
Peter Wakely / Natural England



Access to your land

Before a site condition assessment is carried out, Natural England will contact you – the owners and occupiers – to arrange access to your land. We will also contact you once the assessment is completed to discuss the condition of your site and any changes in management that may be required if the assessment shows that the site is not in a favourable or recovering condition.

Gordale Scar, Malham-Arncliffe SSSI.
Peter Wakely / Natural England

Information on assessments

It is Natural England's policy to inform you of the results of a unit's condition assessment. We will aim to do this before a summary of the assessment is made available on the Natural England website. The website will not give any details of ownership – only the ecological condition of the SSSI will be disclosed.

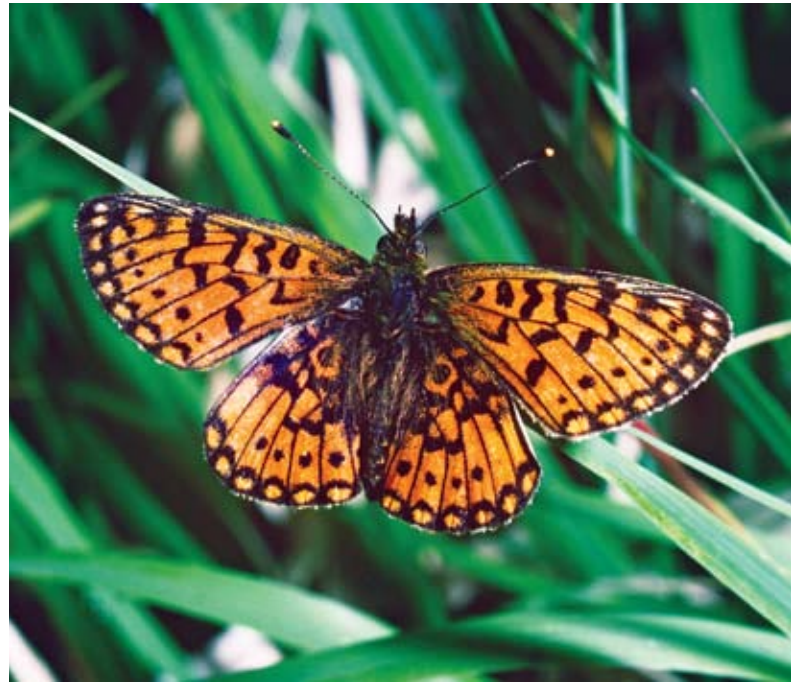
Who does the assessment?

Most site condition assessments will be carried out by staff from your local Natural England office. However, some assessments might require more specialist skills and in these cases we will employ expert contractors, using a variety of monitoring techniques, to do the work. In some cases, the assessments will involve more than one visit, for example where certain features can only be assessed at particular times of the year.

SSSI condition

We measure the condition of SSSIs to assess the quality of their special habitats and species – the Special Features that make these sites important. However, site assessments also look at the management measures that have been put in place to help conserve Special Features or help their recovery if they have been damaged.

If, following the assessment, an SSSI unit is found to be in a favourable or recovering condition, it means that its habitats and species are being conserved by appropriate management. If a unit is found to be in an unfavourable condition, this means there is a current lack of appropriate management, or that there are damaging impacts (which may be outside of the control of the owner) which need to be addressed. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has a target to get 95% of SSSIs (by area) into favourable or recovering condition by 2010.



Small pearl-bordered fritillary.
Peter Wakely / Natural England



Overgrazing by sheep – a cause of unfavourable no change/declining condition. Natural England

Condition categories

After the assessment your site/unit will fall in to one of the following categories:

Favourable condition

This means that special habitats and features are in a healthy state and are being conserved for the future by appropriate management.

Unfavourable – recovering condition

This means that all necessary management measures are in place to address the reasons for unfavourable condition – if these measures are sustained, the site will recover over time.

Unfavourable – no change or Unfavourable – declining condition

These are the terms used to describe sites where the Special Features of a site are not being adequately conserved, or are being lost. If appropriate management measures are not put in place, and damaging impacts are not addressed, these sites will never reach a favourable or recovering condition.

Part destroyed or Destroyed

These terms describe a very small number of sites where there has been fundamental and lasting damage – the Special Features have been lost permanently. Favourable condition cannot be achieved at such sites.

Where to get more information

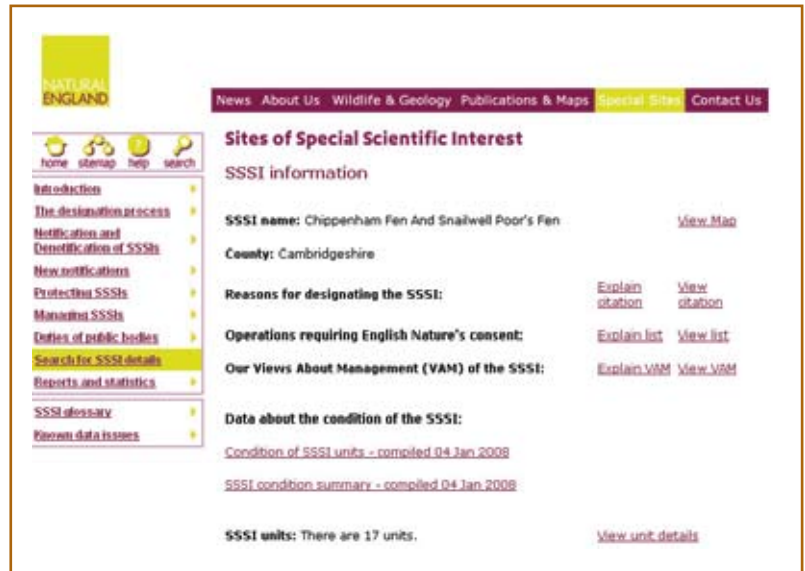
Contacts and website

The Special Sites section of the Natural England website provides background information about SSSIs and allows you to search for detailed information on specific SSSIs. The information available for SSSIs includes details of their current condition, the reasons for their designation, a list of the operations requiring Natural England's consent and our views on the management required.

It usually takes between two and six weeks for a summary of a new condition assessment to appear on the website.

You can also view this information via the Nature on the Map website which can be accessed from the Natural England website, from a specific SSSI page, or directly at www.natureonthemap.org.uk. Using Nature on the Map you can search for SSSIs by name, postcode or nearest town and view a map of the site. Maps are colour-coded according to the condition of the site and you can access further information on the site (as described above) by clicking on the page.

If you wish to contact your local office, their contact details can be found in the 'Contact Us' section of the Natural England website. Alternatively, details for your local office can be obtained by telephoning Natural England's enquiry service on 0845 600 3078.



The screenshot shows the 'Sites of Special Scientific Interest' page on the Natural England website. The page title is 'Sites of Special Scientific Interest' and the sub-heading is 'SSSI information'. The SSSI name is 'Chippenham Fen And Snailwell Poor's Fen' and the county is 'Cambridgeshire'. The page lists 'Reasons for designating the SSSI', 'Operations requiring English Nature's consent', and 'Our Views About Management (VAM) of the SSSI'. It also provides 'Data about the condition of the SSSI', including 'Condition of SSSI units - compiled 04 Jan 2008' and 'SSSI condition summary - compiled 04 Jan 2008'. At the bottom, it states 'SSSI units: There are 17 units.' and provides a link to 'View unit details'.



The screenshot shows the 'Nature on the Map' website. The page title is 'Nature on the Map'. The main content is a map of 'CHIPPENHAM FEN & SNAILWELL POOR'S FEN'. The map is colour-coded, with green areas indicating better condition and orange/yellow areas indicating poorer condition. The map includes labels for 'Abbey', 'Chippenham Fen & Snailwell Poor's Fen (SSSI)', and 'Park Fm'. A search bar at the top allows users to search for English postcodes, places, sites, and more. A sidebar on the left lists various site types, including 'Nature Reserves', 'Agri-environment Schemes', 'Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)', 'International Sites', 'Biodiversity Action Plan Priority Habitats', 'Geological Sites Map', 'Targeting and Planning Map', and 'Agri-environment Delivery on SSSIs'. A sidebar on the right shows an 'Overview map' of the UK and a 'Key' for the map, including 'Natural England Office', 'National Sites of Special Scientific Interest', 'SSSI Use Management Agreements', and 'SSSI condition - last updated 16 Jan 08'. A scale bar indicates 500m. A note at the bottom of the map says 'Click on the map with the mouse to get information about map features'.

Front cover image: Grassland condition assessment.
Patrick Cashman / Natural England



Natural England works for people, places and nature to conserve and enhance biodiversity, landscapes and wildlife in rural, urban, coastal and marine areas.

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