

Filming on Protected Sites in England

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Report details

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Summary

Scoping Filming

- Identify if land is within a protected site
- Consider if the site is suitable for undertaking filming

Getting permission

- **This step could take up to 4 months, longer if surveys are required**
- Undertake any necessary habitat and environment surveys
- Produce filming plan
- Owner / Occupier of land submits notice and filming plan to Natural England to assess
- **Do not start filming (including site preparation works) until necessary permissions are in place**

During filming

- Follow agreed filming plan
- Speak to landowner and Natural England before implementing any changes to the filming plan
- If things go wrong
 - Stop filming immediately if damage occurs
 - Notify Natural England and seek their advice. Notify the landowner.

After filming

- Leave the site how you found it
- Undertake any previously agreed habitat enhancement works.

1 What are Protected Sites?

Areas protected by a variety of legal mechanisms, for example Special Areas of Conservation (SAC), Special Protection Areas (SPA), Ramsar sites, Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). For the purposes of this guidance, we have concentrated on the process for SSSIs.

2 What is a Site of Special Scientific Interest?

These are legally protected areas of land which are designated for their significant ecological, geological or physiographic value. They contain rare species of plants and animals or the best examples of unique habitats such as ancient woodlands, wetlands, grasslands and coastal marshes. They also contain examples of geological formations which provide valuable records of Earth's history.

Activities that could damage or disturb the features for which the site is designated require consent from Natural England before they can legally be undertaken.

3 How do I know if a piece of land is designated as a SSSI and why it is protected?

You can use the Multi-Agency Geographic Information for the Countryside (MAGIC) map system to [check if the land in Great Britain that you are interested in falls within a SSSI](#). Follow the steps below:

1. Locate your chosen area by either:
 - a. Clicking on the '+' / '-' symbol below the on-screen compass to zoom in / out on the detail.
 - b. Drag the map to your location using your mouse or mouse pad.
 - c. Using the search bar in the top left of the screen

2. Land within a SSSI will be highlighted with an overlay



3. Click on the 'i' identify tool in the toolbar at the top of the screen and using the crosshair, click on the map to find out the name of the SSSI.
4. In the pop-up box, click on the HOT LINK to be taken to Designated Sites System which will have more information about the SSSI.

4 Is the site suitable for undertaking filming?

When you are considering filming on a protected site you will need to think about the filming activities proposed and what impact they may have on the protected features of the site.

How to understand what the SSSI is designated for

You should review the SSSI citation which explains why the site was designated e.g. rare species, habitats, geological features and check the list of activities for the site which will require consent from Natural England.

You can find this information via MAGIC map system (see above) or via [Designated Sites System](#)

This will help you determine if the site's sensitive habitats and species have specific requirements or seasonal constraints e.g. breeding, hibernation periods.

How can I find more information on the potential impact of my filming proposals on a protected site?

You can seek advice from an external Ecological Consultant. These can be found through search engines or through the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management [Finding a Consultant | CIEEM](#)

Natural England may also be able to provide a limited amount of free advice on for example:

- checking if your proposal will significantly affect a SSSI
- what you should include with your proposal
- the law on protecting the site

Natural England have a paid for service for providing extra advice if what you want to do is more complicated. More information, and how to contact Natural England can be found at [Sites of special scientific interest: managing your land - GOV.UK](#)

When you are considering what impacts a filming proposal might have on a protected site you should consider:

- What is the scale and duration of the proposed activities e.g. number of crew, equipment, access to site, parking and vehicle movements
- When might filming take place e.g. season, month, time of day
- What will be filmed e.g. special effects, horse riding, vehicles

- How will it be filmed e.g. hand held cameras, drones, static tripods
- Set dressing e.g. greens, imported materials, animals, rigging
- Where on the site might filming occur e.g. coast path, between x and y trees

You should consider impacts across the whole life of the filming process including set-up, filming and take-down.

Filming activities that are likely to have a low impact are more likely to be permitted, filming activities with a high impact either won't be permitted or will need significant mitigation to enable them to happen.

5 I've decided that I want to film on a SSSI

You may need a variety of permissions before filming on a SSSI e.g. planning permission, consent/ assent from Natural England, landowner permission. You are responsible for ensuring these are in place. Filming on a SSSI cannot be undertaken without the necessary permissions in place.

A filming plan can be a useful document to set out what is being proposed. The filming company can write the filming plan, but it must be officially sent to Natural England by the landowner or someone with the formal authority to act on their behalf.

You should start early, as getting permission can take up to 4 months and you may also need to allow additional time for habitat and environment surveys.

At a minimum all notices / plans must include details of:

- What is being filmed
- Where filming is taken place
- When filming will be occurring
- How will filming be conducted
- Any voluntary habitat enhancement works proposed

You should consider all work necessary to prep, shoot and strike the filming.

The complexity of the filming management plan / notice will depend on the scale of filming and the sensitivity of the site e.g. a plan for a 2-3 person film crew accessing a site on foot to undertake filming on one day will require less detail than for a large-scale movie set.

In all cases it should be comprehensive enough to allow Natural England to assess the potential impact of the proposal on the site and determine whether consent can be granted.

Where it is available you should always undertake the proposed filming in accordance with agreed best practice. This should be referenced / included in your filming management plan / notice.

Best practice guidance can be found here: [Biodiversity - albert](#)

If the proposed filming is large scale or complex you are strongly encouraged to employ an Ecological Clerk of Works or Supervising Ecologist at the earliest opportunity to help develop your filming plan and be present on site at all times to monitor and guide filming to avoid environmental harm.

When developing your filming plan try and plan for flexibility and contingencies, including options for potential last-minute changes e.g. weather delays, directorial preferences. This might be through including detailed alternatives in the plan or specifying zones and how things will be undertaken.

Fixed description	More flexible description
Camera locations will be at x, y and z and will track along these routes	A maximum of x cameras will be deployed in zone A, avoiding the wet areas marked on map 1. Where camera tracking is required it will be carried out in the following manner....

6 What happens then the notice is submitted

Note: This section covers the process where the owner / occupier of the land is a private individual. Where the land is owned / managed by a public body e.g. Ministry of Defence, Local Authority, Forestry England, Natural England a slightly different process occurs; this is summarised in Annex 3.

The owner / occupier of the SSSI will submit the notice / filming management plan to Natural England who will then check if the filming could harm the special features of the SSSI. Natural England might ask for more details before making a decision.

Natural England will aim to make consent decisions within 28 working days, but this can take up to 4 calendar months, if necessary. For eligible applications, there will be one of the following decisions once Natural England has assessed the application:

Outcome	What this means for filming
Consent granted without conditions: proposed filming is unlikely to damage the SSSI	Filming can go ahead in accordance with filming plan
Consent granted with conditions: Proposed filming might damage the SSSI but this can be avoided by changing how you do the filming	Filming can go ahead providing it follows the conditions set out.
Consent refused: Proposed filming will damage the SSSI and there is no way to avoid that damage	Filming cannot go ahead.

The decision will be provided in writing; the owner / occupier can appeal against any conditions attached to the consent or if consent is refused.

Filming on a SSSI cannot be undertaken without the necessary permissions in place. If the owner / occupier does not have the necessary permissions in place, they could:

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

7 Once filming starts

Managing changes: If the Director requests changes, reassess the impacts and consult with the landowner and Natural England before implementing the changes.

If things go wrong:

- Stop filming immediately if damage occurs
- Notify Natural England and the landowner and follow the advice of Natural England.

8 When filming is completed

When filming is finished, make sure you clean up everything and leave the site how you found it.

If you want to help improve the area for local wildlife or plants after filming, you must speak to Natural England first and include those plans in your initial filming proposal.

Annex 1: Sample filming activities that may need permission before they can be undertaken on a SSSI

Filming & Land Use

- Preparing ground for sets or props (e.g., digging, levelling, or clearing land)
- Changing grazing patterns to accommodate filming (e.g., introducing, moving livestock or restricting access)
- Feeding animals in new areas for continuity or scene requirements
- Cutting grass or vegetation for aesthetic or practical filming needs
- Applying fertilisers or treatments to maintain visual consistency
- Spraying pesticides or weedkillers for safe filming environments

Habitat & Scene Changes

- Burning vegetation for controlled effects or scene authenticity
- Planting trees or altering woodland for set design or continuity
- Introduction of natural or artificial set dressing
- Removing plants, mosses, fungi, or dead wood for clear filming space
- Managing wildlife (including pest control) for safety and scene integrity
- Introducing animals or plants for rewilding or scene authenticity

Water & Drainage for Filming

- Digging ditches or installing drains for set stability or water effects
- Adjusting water levels (e.g., creating ponds or draining areas for scenes)
- Altering streams or water bodies for filming requirements (e.g., rerouting or dredging)

Construction & Access

- Building tracks, paths, fences, or walls for crew and equipment
- Installing temporary structures (e.g., sets, tents, catering areas)
- Using vehicles off-road for filming logistics
- Creating car parks or hard surfaces for crew and equipment

Recreation & Filming Events

- Organising large-scale filming events (e.g., races, festivals, crowd scenes)
- Using drones or equipment that might disturb wildlife during shoots

- Allowing public access in sensitive areas for extras or audience scenes

Other Filming Activities

- Dumping or spreading materials (e.g., soil, rubble for set dressing)
- Use of special effects e.g. lighting fires, fireworks, artificial snow
- Using generators or noisy equipment for lighting and sound

Annex 2: Information that might be required in a filming plan

What is being filmed

Activity	Examples
Type of production	e.g. feature film, documentary, commercial, TV series
Scenes and actions	e.g. dialogue scenes, action sequences / stunts, use of special effects (smoke, fire, artificial snow)
Props and set dressing	e.g. natural looking props (logs / rocks), artificial elements (fake vegetation, lighting rigs), are earth works needed
Use of animals	Will animals / birds be used in scenes, if so what, how often

Where activities will take place

Activity	Examples
Precise zones of activity within the SSSIs covering both filming and ancillary activities	Should include annotated maps showing zones, boundaries, access points and proximity to sensitive areas

When is filming is occurring

Activity	Examples
Dates and times	Should include all activities from set up, filming and breakdown periods.
Seasonal considerations	Where activity is proposed during a sensitive time period e.g. breeding season, wintering season, flowering period; how will impact be mitigated

Activity	Examples
Duration	Should consider total number of activity days, including set up, filming and breakdown. Specify variation in the levels of activity e.g. 2 week set up significant activity, 4 week filming lower activity, 3 week breakdown significant activity. Indicate type and scale of any night activity

How will filming be conducted

Activity	Examples
Crew size	Total number of people on site (including cast, crew, support staff)
Access methods	On foot, vehicles, temporary paths
Equipment used	Cameras (how many / type), drones (where flying, how long, how frequent), generators (how many, where), lighting, sound gear
Temporary Structures	Sets, trailers, tents, catering units – where / how many
Power sources	e.g. generators with noise and fuel management plans)
Public Interaction	Will the site remain open to the public. Is crowd management needed.

Annex 3: Undertaking filming on a SSSI owned by a public body

A public body is an organisation that is part of government or operations under statutory powers to deliver public services or manage public assets. Examples include local authorities, Natural England, Forestry England, Crown Estate, Ministry of Defence

These bodies are funded by public money and have legal duties, such as conserving and enhancing SSSIs. These legal duties mean a slightly different process applies when undertaking filming within SSSI land owned by a public body.

Seeking permission

- You are still required to submit a filming plan to the public body as the landowner.
- The public body will then assess the proposal to understand the potential impact on the protected site.
- If they believe that the proposed filming is unlikely to damage the special interest of the protected site, they can permit the filming to go-ahead immediately without further permission from Natural England.
- If they believe the filming may damage the features of interest, they will seek advice from Natural England about whether the proposed filming can go ahead and make a decision based on this advice.
- The timescale for receiving advice from Natural England is generally around 4 weeks, although it may be longer if the public body decides not to follow Natural England's advice.

Once filming starts

Managing changes: If the Director requests change you should consult with the public body and follow their advice before implementing any changes.

If things go wrong:

- Stop filming immediately if damage occurs
- Notify the public body and follow their advice.

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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