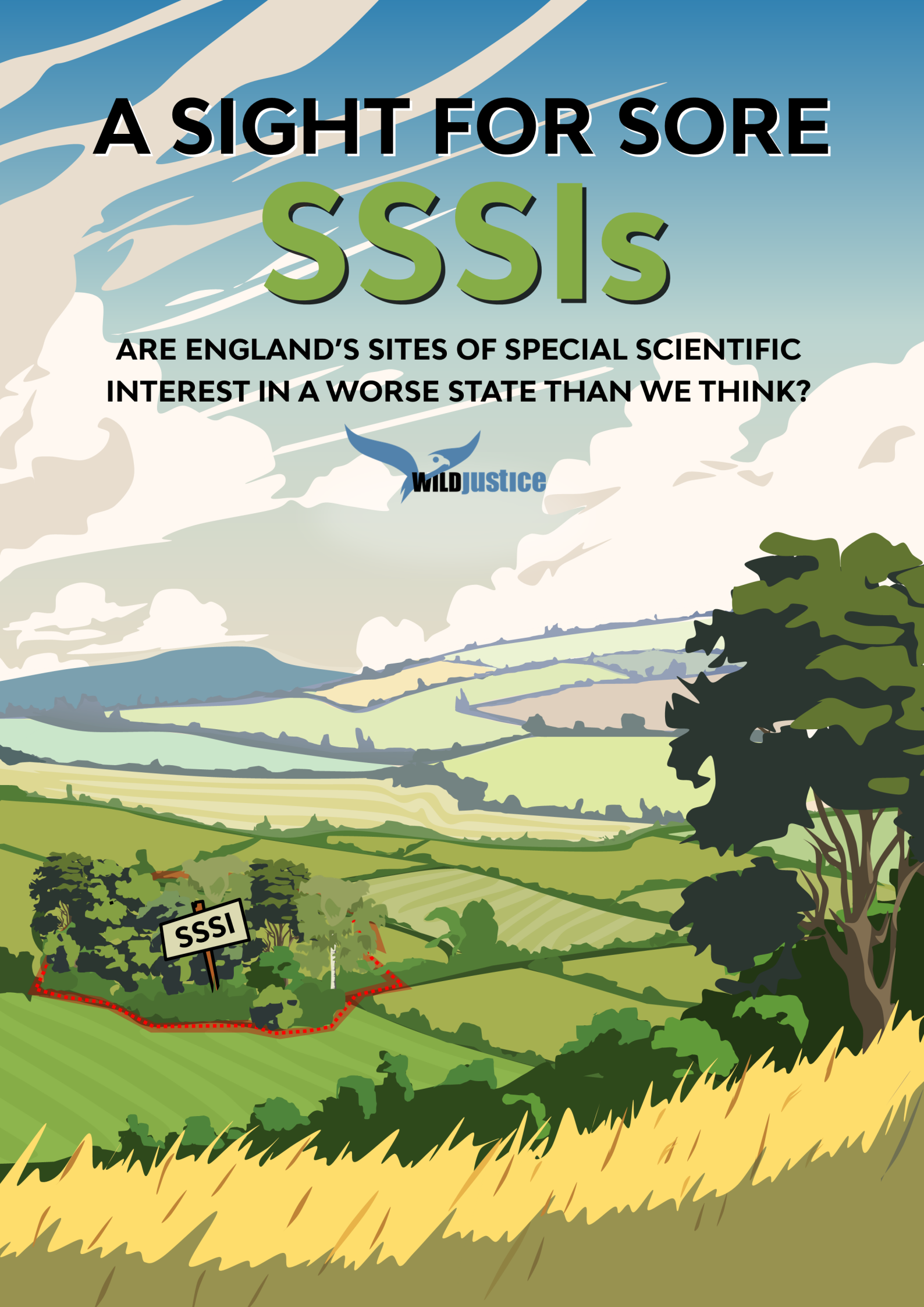


# A SIGHT FOR SORE

# SSSIs

ARE ENGLAND'S SITES OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST IN A WORSE STATE THAN WE THINK?



# A SIGHT FOR SORE SSSIs

## SUMMARY

1. The condition of most (66% by area) Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) in England has not been assessed for more than 10 years.

The system has fallen into disrepair and we can have little faith in the published Defra figures.

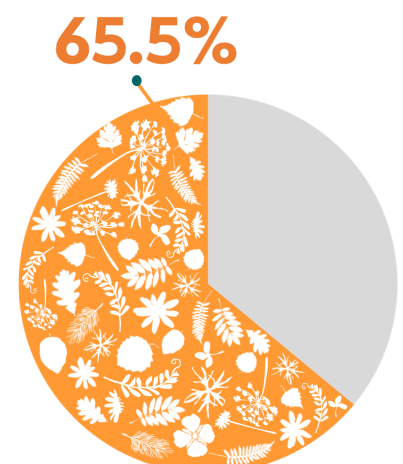
2. An up-to-date analysis of Natural England's data on SSSI condition shows that SSSI condition is worse than the latest Defra published figures. Things are getting worse.

3. The most recent condition assessments show alarming proportions of SSSI are not improving in condition, we predict that if the backlog of condition assessments was rapidly updated English SSSIs would be shown to be in a much worse state than current estimates admit.

4. Defra and Natural England need to clear the backlog of condition assessments so that the public can see the true state of SSSIs in England.

**ALMOST  
TWO-THIRDS  
OF SSSI AREA IN  
ENGLAND HASN'T  
BEEN ASSESSED  
FOR A DECADE  
OR MORE.**

A total of  
**12,611 units**  
haven't been assessed  
since 2013 or earlier,  
adding up to  
**700,252 hectares**  
of protected  
land.



**Figure 1:** Percentage of SSSI units (by area) in England that were last assessed more than 10 years ago.

# A SIGHT FOR SORE SSSIs

## BACKGROUND

Most countries on Earth have networks of sites designated by the national government to protect wildlife. This reflects the biological reality that although wildlife is everywhere, some places are richer in wildlife than others, and protecting such sites is an important part of a nation's wildlife protection strategy.

In the UK, a wide variety of designations exist, with different origins in legislation and with varying levels of protection. At the core of UK wildlife protection are those sites designated since their introduction following the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act as Sites of Scientific Interest (SSSIs, and Areas of Special Scientific Interest, ASSIs, in Northern Ireland). It is generally accepted that SSSIs are a crucial wildlife designation which should usually prevent the destruction of those sites and encourage their wildlife-friendly management. Although the name Site of Special Scientific Interest is a bit of a mouthful, SSSIs should be just that; places which are interesting and special for wildlife.

There are nearly 7,000 SSSIs and ASSIs in the UK. They vary from tiny sites, not much bigger than a back garden, to large upland areas of many thousands of hectares. The protection of these special wildlife sites is fundamental to the UK's ability to protect its wildlife. These are special places where wildlife should thrive, whether they be Sphagnum-dominated bogs home to rare dragonflies, meadows packed with insects and wildflowers, estuaries full of wading birds, or clear flowing rivers shimmering with fish. SSSIs are places where nature should be doing alright. Except, we suspect that it isn't.

Nature conservation is a devolved issue, which means that notifying SSSIs and ensuring their protection has been the responsibility of national administrations in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales for many years. Understandably, over the past 20+ years the details of how SSSIs are notified, monitored and protected have changed slightly but importantly in each UK nation. It is no

longer possible to produce a UK overview of the system except by producing four national overviews.

This report focuses solely on the English situation. That is not because Wild Justice thinks that wildlife in England is more important than that elsewhere in the UK but solely because the data are more easily available and interpretable (we would argue) for English SSSIs than for those elsewhere in the UK. Also, of the nearly 7000 SSSIs (and ASSIs) across the UK, over 4,000 are in England. All the data on assessments of condition for English SSSIs, and subdivided into individual parts of the SSSIs (called Units), are published online and are regularly updated. Earlier this year we pointed out to Wild Justice supporters that they could look up their nearest SSSI online and see how Natural England rated its condition. Hundreds of people investigated their local SSSIs and discovered important designated wildlife sites [of which they had been completely unaware](#), or discovered their favourite place for a relaxing walk was one of these special sites.

SSSIs in England are notified by Natural England; the majority selected for their biological interest, and a smaller number for their geological interest. The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 gave Natural England more power in the protection of SSSIs. Now, not only are the landowners of SSSIs responsible for not destroying these protected sites, but they have obligations to maintain sites in good condition, and improve sites that aren't. Since the implementation of the act, part of Natural England's job has been to keep an eye on the 'status' of SSSIs. By monitoring and assessing their condition they can be categorised and changes in their condition can be detected. With over 4,000 SSSIs in England, that's a lot of monitoring and evaluation – but it's very important. This work, in order to be accurate, is supposed to be carried out regularly.

So, we thought we'd look into it. We want to know the true current status of our SSSIs, so we submitted a data request to Natural England. The following report summarises our findings on the state of SSSI assessment and the state of SSSIs in England.

# WHAT WE DID

**Our aim was to examine the state of wildlife in SSSIs. A fantastic amount of information is [available online for SSSIs in England](#), but these data are presented site by site and there are thousands of SSSIs. Each SSSI is made up of between 1 and dozens of Units, each of which has been assessed as to its condition. A Unit's condition can be classified in one of the following ways:**

1. Favourable
2. Unfavourable – Recovering
3. Unfavourable – No Change
4. Unfavourable – Declining
5. Part Destroyed
6. Destroyed

In April 2023, Wild Justice wrote to Natural England under the Environment Information Regulations (EIR). In our request, we asked for data on Sites of Special Scientific Interest in England, specifically:

- A list of all Biological SSSIs in England
- The county in which they are found
- Their constituent Units
- The size in hectares of each Unit
- The condition (Favourable, Unfavourable Recovering etc) of each unit
- The year in which each SSSI Unit's condition was assessed by Natural England

In early May, Natural England replied to our request with a full set of data - an Excel spreadsheet with over 2 million cells (over 90,000 rows and 23 columns). The dataset contained SSSI Unit assessments from as long ago as 1998 - but overwhelmingly contained assessments from 2005 to 13 April 2023. Our data set is therefore very up-to-date, and, inevitably, more up to date than previous analyses of SSSI status in England.

## EXCLUDED DATA:

We edited this dataset down to around 285,000 cells (15 columns and 19,000+ rows) where each row contained the relevant data for a single SSSI Unit. Some of the data were excluded from our analyses:

### GEOLOGICAL SSSIS.

We removed all the SSSI Units (around 1800) where 'Earth Heritage' was listed as the main habitat as these are Units of geological interest rather than biological interest. Over three quarters of these sites were of Favourable status, as geological sites are less susceptible to degradation than biological ones. By including these sites in our analysis this would make the status of SSSIs as a whole look better than would be reflected if we were to simply look at biological SSSIs. Geology is important, but it wasn't relevant to our investigation.

### DESTROYED SSSIS.

In our results, we removed the very small number of SSSI Units with 'Destroyed' or 'Part Destroyed' status, as these represented less than 1% of the total units, and area covered by them.

### MISSING ASSESSMENTS.

A very small number of sites had incomplete data.

## ANALYSIS:

We wanted to know how recently English SSSI Units have been assessed and what those assessments show, and so we looked at:

- The year each unit was last assessed by Natural England
- The latest status for each unit
- The area of land that all of these units represent.

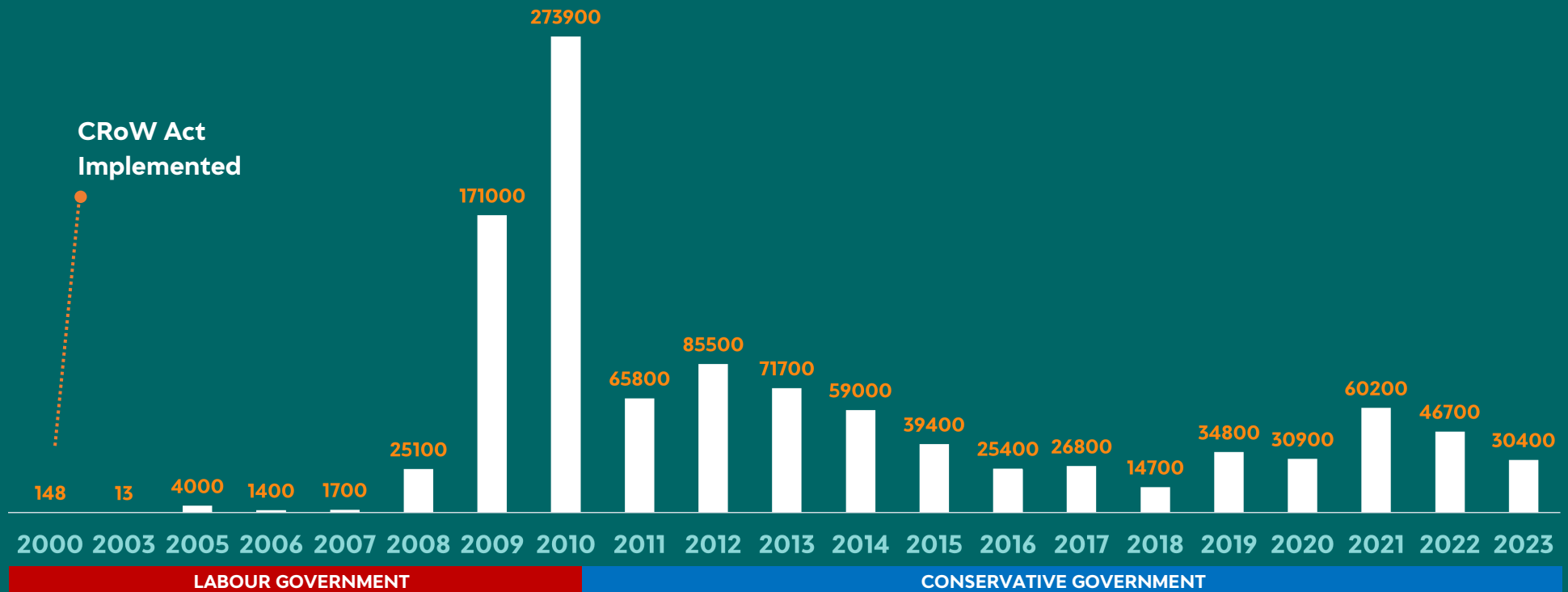
# WHAT WE FOUND

This graph shows the **last** year in which SSSI Units were assessed (by area) **not** the area assessed in each year. The low columns in 2000-2007 do not mean that few SSSI Units were assessed in those years but that few SSSI Units were **last** assessed in those years. Some, many, SSSI Units will have been assessed in several years but they each only contribute to one year in this graph.

By analogy, all cars over a certain age need have an annual MoT test, and a similar graph of MoT last dates ought to have very large columns in 2023 and 2022 – any cars occupying earlier years are not allowed to be driven on UK roads. Similarly, if there were an obligation to have your health checked by a doctor every five years then the last five years should have large columns and it would be a measure of how the system was failing if there were large numbers of people without health checks over a much longer

period. Such analogies are apt – the assessment system for SSSI condition in England is failing to keep tabs on most of the SSSI area in the country. To be honest, we simply do not know the condition of most of the SSSI area in England because no-one has looked for so long.

To spell this out even more, the commonest year of last assessment is 2010 – 26% of SSSI by area was last assessed in 2010 (the year when an Icelandic volcano erupted and closed down many international flights in Europe for several weeks, Germany won the Eurovision Song Contest and the UK acquired a coalition government led by David Cameron). Those distant assessments are still being used by Defra in its annual reporting on current SSSI condition – despite them being so very out of date. This is a monitoring system in disrepair.



**Figure 2:** Area of SSSI Units (hectares) last assessed in each year, between 2000 and 2023. Note: year of last assessment does not equal number of assessments for that year.

# WHAT WE FOUND

The overall status of SSSIs (by area) breaks down as follows:

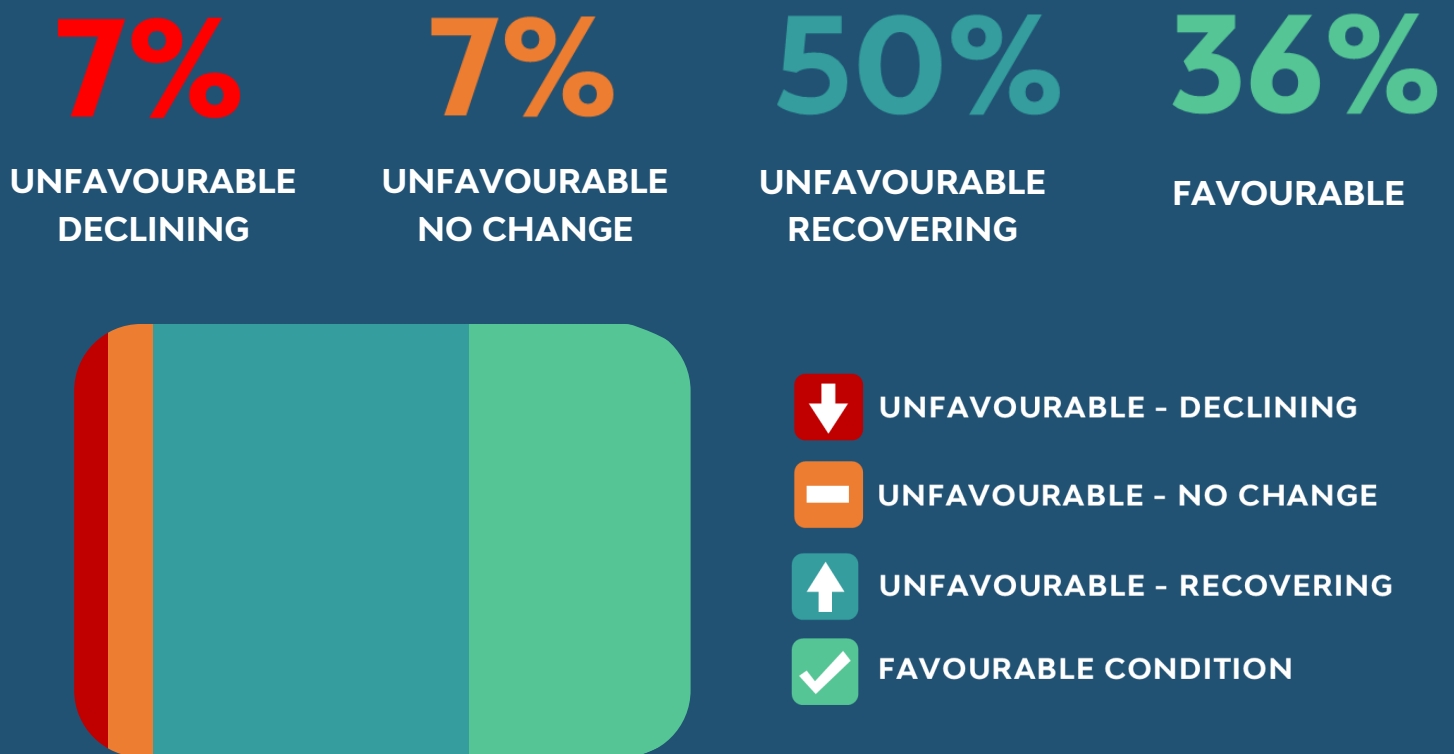


Figure 3: Overall proportion of SSSI Unit areas (ha) of each condition status

However, in Figure 4 we can see the proportion of sites classed as 'Unfavourable - Declining', and 'Unfavourable - No Change' are higher in the Units that were assessed more recently.

We can also see the area of SSSI land classified as 'Unfavourable - Recovering', and 'Favourable' are smaller in those that have been more recently assessed.

**PRE 2011**



**2011-2020**



**2021-2023**



Figure 4: Proportion of SSSI Unit areas (ha) of each condition status, in three time periods; those last assessed before 2011, those assessed between 2011 and 2020, and those assessed from 2021 – 2023.

# HOW THE CONDITION ASSESSMENTS CHANGE OVER TIME:

## FAVOURABLE

In sites last assessed before 2011, 41% (by area) was classed as 'Favourable' by Natural England. For sites assessed in 2021-23 this dropped to 27%.

If SSSI condition has gradually declined, this only becomes apparent as sites with out-of-date assessments are slowly re-assessed.

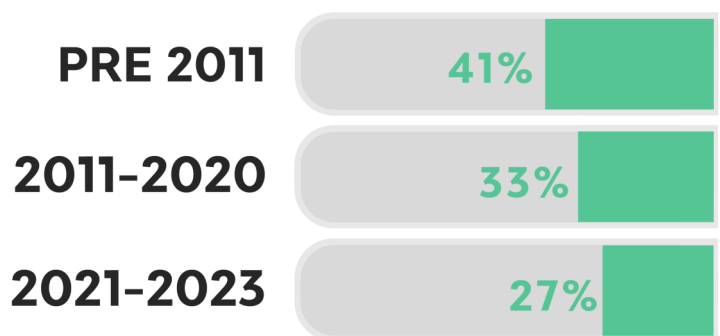


Figure 5: Proportion of SSSI Unit areas (ha) last assessed in three time periods and assessed as being in Favourable condition.

## UNFAVOURABLE - RECOVERING

A similar and more pronounced difference can be seen in SSSI Units classed as 'Unfavourable-Recovering'.

The total SSSI land area with this classification is 55% in sites last assessed before 2011, but only 27% in sites assessed from 2021.

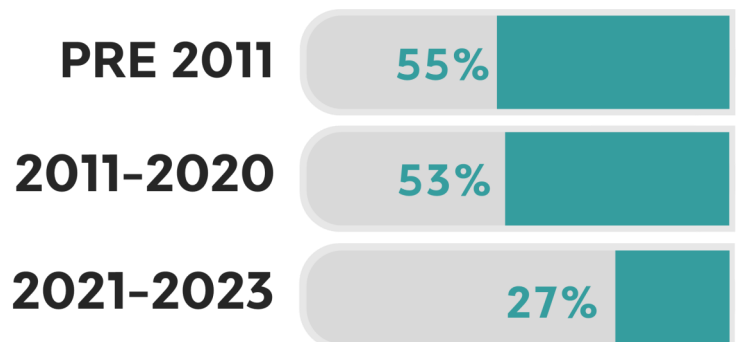


Figure 6: Proportion of SSSI Unit areas (ha) last assessed in three time periods and assessed as being in Unfavourable - Recovering condition.

## UNFAVOURABLE - NO CHANGE

When we look at SSSI Units classed as 'Unfavourable - No Change', the opposite trend can be seen.

Only 2% of SSSI land area had this classification in Units assessed before 2011. In units assessed from 2021, this sits at 14%.

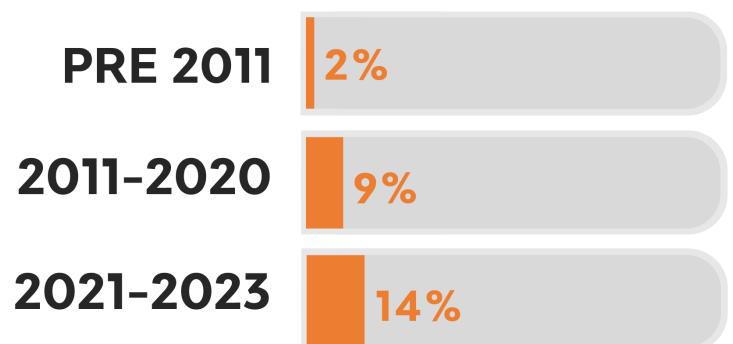


Figure 7: Proportion of SSSI Unit areas (ha) last assessed in three time periods and assessed as being in Unfavourable - No Change condition.

## UNFAVOURABLE - DECLINING

Even more pronounced is the difference in the proportion of SSSI land area with 'Unfavourable' status between years of last assessment.

Only 1% of land area has this status in Units last assessed before 2011, but in more recently assessed Units, the total area leaps up to 31%.

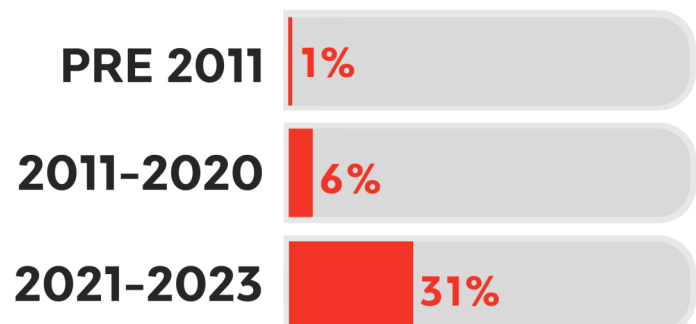


Figure 8: Proportion of SSSI Unit areas (ha) last assessed in three time periods and assessed as being in Unfavourable - Declining condition.

# WHAT WE LEARNED

## 1. THE STATUS OF BIOLOGICAL SSSIS IN ENGLAND IS WORSE THAN WE THOUGHT

Our analysis reveals that the overall proportion of the area of SSSI in Favourable condition is only 36% and the proportion in Unfavourable Recovering is 50%. These figures are worse than the previous published assessment by government in March 2022 which showed that 38% of SSSIs were in Favourable condition and 51% were in Unfavourable Recovering. Defra has a target of 95% of SSSIs being in Favourable or Unfavourable Recovering condition – a target which it misses by a [slightly larger margin each year](#). Defra claims that 89% of SSSIs are in this category and that they are thus 6% short of the 95% target. We claim that the real figure is 86%, 9% short of the 95% target.

Why is this? First, we have excluded geological SSSIs from this analysis – we have looked solely at biological SSSIs and they are the ones in poorest condition. The inclusion of geological SSSIs in previous reports has partly obscured the true status of biological SSSIs. Second, we believe that Natural England is now using more realistic criteria for assessing SSSI Unit condition and this is revealing that the previous assessment methods hid the fact that condition is declining. Third, our analysis is the most up-to-date and is consistent with the suggestion that SSSI condition is declining in England.

Our analysis shows that Defra is further away from the 95% target figure than it claims, and that the gap between reality and target grows every year.

## 2. THE SSSI ASSESSMENT PROCESS IN ENGLAND HAS FALLEN INTO DISREPAIR.

Our Figure 2 reveals for the very first time that the assessments of most SSSI units in England are way out of date. This, to the best of our knowledge, is the first time that these data have been published in this form, though Natural England must have been well aware of them – they are Natural

England's data! Defra also should have been well aware of these figures.

A decade is a long time to be left without assessment and quite frankly gaps of this sort mean that we don't really know the condition of most of our most important wildlife sites and whether they are doing the job required for wildlife protection. Reduced budgets and capacity since the arrival of a Conservative administration (initially a Coalition Government) have meant that Natural England has done a poor job for protected sites. This is largely due to budget cuts but Natural England must shoulder some of the blame in that it has not squealed loudly enough, not enlisted NGO support for change and not allocated other funds to this central role of England's wildlife guardian and regulator.

It would be reasonable to treat those SSSI Units which were last assessed over 10 years ago, 66% of the total area, as Status Unknown in future assessments. We cannot have confidence that their outdated condition assessments are valid.

## 3. MIGHT THE STATUS OF ENGLISH SSSIS BE EVEN WORSE THAN REVEALED HERE?

Yes, very probably. When all the SSSI Units that have not been assessed for over a decade are assessed we believe that the situation will prove to be even worse than it already seems. That view is consistent with the findings in Figure 4 – more recently assessed SSSI Units are in far worse condition than ones that have been unassessed for over a decade.

An entirely plausible possibility (not a worst case scenario by any means) is that if all SSSIs in England were assessed in the next few years then their condition would resemble the most recent condition assessments made in the last three calendar years. If so, only only 54% of sites by area would be Favourable or Unfavourable Recovering and so far from being 6% off target as Defra claim, or 9% off target as our analysis suggests, the real situation could be that Defra is 41% off target – a truly awful position.



# WHAT SHOULD CHANGE?

## WILD JUSTICE'S VIEW:

- 1.** Defra, and Natural England, should publish annual updates on the condition of English SSSIs which in future should include information, as does this report in Figure 2, of the assessment years of all English SSSI Units. This would show whether the dataset was based on recent estimates.
- 2.** A rapid catch-up needs to be carried out in the next few years so that 80% of English SSSI Units have had their condition assessed in the last 5 years – that would be a considerable turnaround from the present situation.
- 3.** Natural England should carry out an urgent review of the resources needed to ensure that English SSSIs are in Favourable condition. That report must be published at the time it is made available to government. It should be predicated on the need for 95% of English SSSIs to be in Favourable or Unfavourable Recovering condition by the 2030 deadline, based on 80% of assessments being carried out in the period 2025-2029.

