

OTAS INSIGHT · LG-001

Running a fireworks display this Bonfire Night: the checks organisers miss

Operational

Tactical

Strategic

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Bonfire Night is Thursday 5 November 2026. In England and Wales the midnight cut-off applies on that night only, so weekend displays must stop firing by 11pm [3][4]. Mark the spectator, firing and fallout areas in daylight, consult the police and fire service at least seven days before, and recheck the wind on the day [1][2]. Scotland and Northern Ireland have their own rules [10][15].

Key takeaways

- **Cut-off (England, Wales and Scotland):** midnight on 5 November only. 11pm on every other night, including the weekends either side [4][10]. In Northern Ireland, follow your Department of Justice licence [15].
- **Who fires:** volunteers may only use category F2 and F3 fireworks. F4 needs a professional operator [1].
- **Three areas:** spectators, the firing zone with a safety zone, and the fallout zone [2].
- **Tell people:** police and fire service at least seven days before, and the CAA if aircraft may be affected [1][17].
- **Scotland and Northern Ireland:** firework control zones in Scotland, and a Department of Justice licence in Northern Ireland [13][15].

Why this matters now

Displays run from late October to the weekend after 5 November. Most organisers know the basics. The points below are the ones that most often get missed. Official guidance comes from the Office for Product Safety and Standards (OPSS) and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) [1][2].

The night of the week

In England and Wales, the Fireworks Regulations 2004 ban the use of adult fireworks from 11pm to 7am. The cut-off moves to midnight on 5 November, and to 1am on New Year's Eve, Chinese New Year and Diwali [4]. The only exemption is for local authority staff putting on the authority's own display [4]. OPSS says the times apply to F2, F3 and F4 fireworks [1].

Bonfire Night is a Thursday this year. In England and Wales, a display on Saturday 31 October or Saturday 7 November must finish firing by 11pm. Plan the running order back from that, with a margin.

Scotland and Northern Ireland

Scotland. The public may only use adult fireworks from 6pm to 11pm, or until midnight on 5 November [10]. Professional operators and organisers of public displays for community and similar groups may also fire from 7am to 6pm [12]. Councils can designate firework control zones. Igniting a firework in one is an offence, with exemptions for professional operators and community public displays [13][14]. Ask the council whether your site is in a zone.

Northern Ireland. You need a Department of Justice licence to buy, possess and use fireworks other than indoor fireworks and sparklers [15]. One council's guidance says apply at least six weeks before the display, with a site plan [16]. The Department of Justice sets the actual closing dates, so if you do not have a licence yet, contact it now.

Where you can fire

It is an offence to fire fireworks in or into a street, road or public place [7]. In England and Wales it is also an offence to discharge a firework within 50 feet of the centre of a carriageway if a road user is injured, interrupted or endangered [8]. OPSS advises holding the display on private land with the landowner's permission [1].

Three areas, marked in daylight

HSE says plan and mark out the spectator area, the firing zone with a safety zone around it, and the area where fireworks will fall [2]. Only the display operator or firing team go into the firing and safety zones. Nobody goes into the fallout zone [2]. Check in daylight for overhead power lines [1][2]. The distance on each firework's label is the minimum between the firework and spectators: 5 metres for F2 and 25 metres for F3 [1].

Wind and weather

Recheck the weather and wind direction on the day, and think about what happens if the wind changes [2]. OPSS says set up so the wind blows away from people, buildings and vegetation, and increase the space significantly in windy conditions [1]. Read any Met Office warning in full [19]. Agree with the operator, before the day, who decides to delay, change or cancel.

Who to tell

Who	When or why
Council	Whether you need a permit. Scotland: control zones [1][13]
Police and fire service	At least seven days before [1]
CAA	Near an airfield or where aircraft regularly fly. 7 days' notice requested [17]
Residents	In advance, with the date and time [1]

Stewards, crowds and the bonfire

OPSS says one steward for every 250 spectators, plus qualified first aiders [1]. We could not find that ratio in legislation, so use it as a minimum and set numbers from your risk assessment. For ingress and egress, HSE says keep pedestrian and vehicle routes apart where possible, light and mark the exits, and keep emergency access clear [2]. Keep any bar well away from the display, and do not let spectators bring their own fireworks [2].

If there is a bonfire, check inside it for children and animals before lighting, never use petrol or paraffin, and have one person responsible for lighting it [2].

Misfires, the operator and insurance

Never relight a firework, and keep clear of any that fail [2]. Check and clear the site the next morning [2]. If a professional fires the display, agree in writing who does what, including who calls the emergency services [2]. HSE says operators using F4 fireworks must by law have public liability insurance covering their use [2]. Ask to see it.

What to do

Operational: stewards, crew and firers

- Keep everyone except the firing team out of the firing and safety zones, and everyone out of the fallout zone [2].
- Turn away spectators' own fireworks [2].
- Never go near a misfire. Report it to the operator [2].
- Know who calls the emergency services and where first aid is [2].

Tactical: display and site managers

- Walk and mark the site in daylight [1][2].
- In England and Wales, end firing by 11pm, or midnight on 5 November only [4]. In Northern Ireland, follow your licence [15].
- Recheck the wind on the day and agree the stop signal [1][2].
- Brief every steward on the zones and the emergency plan [2].

Strategic: organisers, committees and directors

- Use a professional operator for F4 fireworks [1].
- Confirm the site is authorised. Scotland: check control zones. Northern Ireland: licence first [13][15].
- Consult the police and fire service at least seven days before [1].
- Agree roles and check insurance in writing. Record the risk assessment [1][2].

Action box

Level	Do this
Operational	Keep the zones clear, turn away spectators' fireworks and never approach a misfire.
Tactical	Mark the site in daylight, end firing on time, recheck the wind and brief every steward.
Strategic	Professional operator for F4, site authorised, police and fire consulted, roles and insurance in writing.

Frequently asked questions

What time do fireworks displays have to finish on Bonfire Night?

In England and Wales, midnight on 5 November itself. On other nights, including the weekends either side, the cut-off is 11pm [3][4]. Scotland has its own permitted hours [10][12]. In Northern Ireland, follow your Department of Justice licence [15].

Can volunteers run a fireworks display?

Yes, with category F2 and F3 fireworks only. Category F4 fireworks can only be bought and operated by professional operators [1].

Who do I need to tell about a fireworks display?

The council, and the police and fire service at least seven days before. The CAA if aircraft may be affected. Nearby residents. In Northern Ireland, you also need a Department of Justice licence [1][15][17].

How many stewards does a fireworks display need?

OPSS guidance says one for every 250 spectators [1]. Use it as a minimum and set the final number from your risk assessment.

What if the wind changes on the night?

Agree beforehand who decides to delay, change or cancel. Recheck the wind on the day and set up so it blows away from people [1][2].

What we don't know yet

Which Scottish council areas have firework control zones this year, and the legal basis for the OPSS steward ratio. The full report sets these out.

This article is general information, not legal advice. It does not replace official guidance, a professional display operator's advice or the conditions set by your council or landowner.

Interest: OTAS Live Ltd, which publishes EPGN, sells event operations services.

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Work with OTAS

Planning a fireworks display or another outdoor event this season?

[Request a call with OTAS to discuss how we can help](#)

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