

Running a fireworks display this Bonfire Night

The checks organisers miss: times, zones, notifications and the rules in each UK nation. Full report

- Operational
- Tactical
- Strategic

Correct as of	20 October 2026
Applies to	Organisers of fireworks displays in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, community and professional
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Read this first. This report is general information for event professionals and community organisers. It is not legal advice and does not replace official guidance, a professional display operator's advice or the conditions set by your council or landowner.



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About this report. It expands OTAS Insight LG-001 with the rules in each UK nation, the checks organisers most often miss, actions for each level, a pre-display checklist and a steward briefing script. Section 8 lists what we could not confirm. To ask for this report in another format, use the contact details on the OTAS Insights page.

1 Summary

Bonfire Night falls on Thursday 5 November 2026, and many displays will run on the weekends either side. Most of the safety and legal points for a fireworks display are well known. This report is about the ones organisers tend to miss: the firing cut-off time on nights other than 5 November, the separate rules in Scotland and Northern Ireland, who to tell and when, the zones that keep spectators away from firing and falling debris, and what to do when the wind changes.

Official guidance for organisers comes from the Office for Product Safety and Standards (OPSS) and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) [1][2]. HSE says a local display run by a sports club, school or parish council still needs responsible planning, and a major public display needs a robust and detailed approach with professional involvement [2].

This report covers displays in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, with the differences set out in section 3. It is general information for event professionals and community organisers, correct as of 20 October 2026. It is not legal advice.

At a glance. The checks organisers most often miss.

- **In England and Wales, the cut-off is midnight on 5 November only.** On other nights it is 11pm, so a Saturday display on 31 October or 7 November must finish by 11pm [3][4]. Scotland has its own permitted hours [10][12]. In Northern Ireland, follow your Department of Justice licence [15].
- **Scotland and Northern Ireland differ.** Scotland has firework control zones and different permitted hours [10][13]. Northern Ireland needs a Department of Justice licence to buy, possess and use display fireworks [15].
- **Category F4 fireworks are for professionals only.** Volunteers may only use categories F2 and F3 [1].
- **Tell people early.** OPSS says consult the police and fire service at least seven days before. The CAA asks for at least 7 days' notice for displays near an airfield or where aircraft regularly fly [1][17].
- **Mark three areas.** Spectators, the firing zone with a safety zone around it, and the fallout zone where debris lands [2].
- **Recheck the wind on the day,** and have a plan if it changes [2].

2 Why this matters now

Displays run from late October to the weekend after 5 November. Weather at this time of year can change plans at short notice, and the Met Office issues weather warnings that organisers should read in full, not just by colour [19]. OTAS Insights covers high wind decisions for outdoor events in a separate Insight. This report keeps to the points specific to fireworks.

3 The rules by nation

3.1 England and Wales

The Fireworks Regulations 2004 make it an offence to use an adult firework during night hours, from 11pm to 7am [4][6]. The "permitted fireworks nights" are [4]:

- 5 November, when the cut-off is midnight;
- 31 December, the first day of Chinese New Year and Diwali, when the cut-off is 1am.

The only exemption in the regulation is for a person employed by a local authority putting on that authority's display, or at a national public celebration or commemorative event [4]. A display run by a club, charity or business on any other night must finish firing by 11pm. OPSS says the time restrictions apply to all category F2, F3 and F4 fireworks [1]. These regulations do not extend to Northern Ireland [25], where display fireworks are controlled through the Department of Justice licence (section 3.4).

Breaking a prohibition in fireworks regulations is an offence carrying up to six months' imprisonment, a fine, or both [6]. GOV.UK says you can be fined an unlimited amount for using fireworks illegally, and could get an on-the-spot fine of £90 [3].

3.2 Where you can fire

It is an offence to throw, cast or fire any firework in or into a highway, street, thoroughfare 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 highway that includes a carriageway, without lawful authority or excuse, if a user of the highway is injured, interrupted or endangered [8]. OPSS advises organisers to hold the display on private land with the landowner's permission [1]. If your site is a park or other open space the public use, ask the landowner and the council how the display is authorised before you plan anything else.

3.3 Scotland

In Scotland the general public may only use adult fireworks between 6pm and 11pm, with a midnight cut-off on 5 November and 1am on New Year's Eve, Chinese New Year and Diwali [10][11]. Organised public displays have more time. The Fireworks (Scotland) Regulations 2004 allow use from 7am to 6pm as well by [12]:

- professional organisers or operators of displays, in the course of their business;
- the organiser of a public display, or someone assisting them, putting it on for a charitable, religious, youth, recreational, community, political or similar organisation.

The Scottish Government says a community group can show it is organising a public display with, for example, a public entertainment licence or public liability insurance documents for the display [11].

Councils in Scotland can designate **firework control zones**. It is an offence to ignite a firework in a zone on the days it operates [13]. Exemptions in force since 22 June 2023 cover professional display operators and the organisers of public displays for community and similar organisations [14]. Check with the council whether your site is in a zone, and keep evidence that your display falls within an exemption.

3.4 Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland you must have a fireworks licence from the Department of Justice to buy, possess and use fireworks other than indoor fireworks and sparklers [15]. There is a separate form for display type fireworks, categories F3 and F4 [15]. One council's guidance says applications should reach the Department at least six weeks before the display, with a list of the fireworks and a site plan showing the firing area, fallout area, safety

distances and spectator area, and that a council health and safety officer may visit the site [16]. nidirect says the closing date for Halloween display applications was 16 October 2026 [15]. The Department of Justice sets the actual closing dates. If you are planning a Bonfire Night display in Northern Ireland and do not yet have a licence, contact the Department now.

3.5 Firework categories

Category	Who can use them	Minimum distance from spectators (OPSS)
F1	Aged 16 and over. Indoor use, for example party poppers and sparklers	1 metre
F2	Adults only. Outdoor use in relatively confined areas such as gardens	5 metres
F3	Adults only. Large open spaces	25 metres
F4	Licensed professionals only. Large public displays	Set by the professional operator

Table 1. Firework categories, from OPSS guidance [1]. Sellers must not supply F2 or F3 fireworks to anyone under 18 [9].

OPSS says volunteers running fireworks events may only use category F2 and F3 fireworks, and that F4 fireworks can only be bought and operated by professional firework licensed operators [1]. HSE says category 4 fireworks may only be used by professional display operators and in untrained hands they can be lethal [2]. The distance on each firework's label is the minimum between the firework and spectators [1].

4 The checks organisers miss

4.1 The night of the week

Bonfire Night is a Thursday this year. In England and Wales, a weekend display on Saturday 31 October or Saturday 7 November is not on a permitted fireworks night, so firing must end by 11pm [4]. Build the running order back from that time, with a margin for delays.

4.2 Three areas, marked in daylight

HSE says to plan and mark out areas for spectators, for firing fireworks with a safety zone around it, and an area where the fireworks will fall [2]. Nobody other than the display operator or firing team should be in the firing zone or the safety zone, and nobody should be allowed into the zone where fireworks will fall [2]. Check the site in daylight for overhead power lines and other obstructions [1][2]. OPSS says the explosive impact of the display must be suitable for the size of the venue, and that you should choose the fireworks to suit the space you have [1].

4.3 Wind and weather

HSE asks organisers to consider the direction of the prevailing wind and what would happen if it changed, and to recheck the site, weather and wind direction on the day [2]. OPSS says to set up so the wind blows away from people, buildings and vegetation, increase the space around the fireworks significantly in windy conditions, and never use fireworks near open fields or during droughts [1]. Read any Met Office warning for your area in full [19]. Agree with the display operator, before the day, who decides to delay, change or cancel the display, and on what conditions.

4.4 Who to tell, and when

Who	What	Source
Council	Ask whether you need a permit and what else to do. In Scotland, ask about firework control zones	[1][13]
Police and fire service	OPSS says consult them at least seven days before the event	[1]
CAA	If the display is near an airfield or where aircraft regularly fly. At least 7 days' notice is requested, using the CAA notification form	[1][17]
Nearby airport	HSE says if your site is near an airport you may need to contact it	[2]
Residents and animal keepers	Tell neighbours in advance and check for nearby farms, stables or zoos	[1]
Department of Justice (Northern Ireland only)	Fireworks licence, applied for well in advance	[15][16]

Table 2. Notifications for a fireworks display.

4.5 Stewarding and first aid

OPSS guidance says you are required to have one steward for every 250 spectators, and that qualified first aiders are needed on site [1]. We could not find this ratio in legislation, so treat it as the minimum in that guidance and set steward numbers from your risk assessment and the site. HSE says appoint enough stewards or marshals, make sure they understand what to do on the night and in an emergency, and signpost the first aid facilities [2].

4.6 Ingress and egress

For major displays, HSE says think about how people will get into and out of the site, keep pedestrian and vehicle routes apart where possible, mark exit routes clearly and keep them well lit, and make sure emergency vehicles can get in [2]. The end of a display is when most people leave at once, in the dark.

4.7 The bar, spectators' own fireworks and drink

HSE says any bar should be well away from the display site, spectators should be discouraged from bringing drink and should not be allowed to bring their own fireworks [2]. It is an offence for anyone under 18 to possess an adult firework in a public place, which includes places the public can access on payment [5].

4.8 The bonfire

If there is a bonfire, HSE says check the structure is sound and has no children or animals inside before lighting, do not use petrol or paraffin, have one person responsible for lighting it, wearing suitable clothing, and make sure they and their helpers know what to do if someone is burned or their clothing catches fire [2].

4.9 Misfires and the morning after

Never try to relight fireworks, and keep well clear of any that have failed to go off [2]. The next morning, check and clear the site carefully, and dispose of fireworks safely. HSE says they should never be burnt in a confined space [2].

4.10 Who does what with the operator

If a professional operator fires the display, HSE says make sure you are clear on who does what, especially in an emergency, and that someone is responsible for calling the emergency services [2]. Put it in writing.

4.11 Storage and insurance

Ensure there is a suitable place to store the fireworks. HSE says your supplier or local authority should be able to advise [2]. OPSS says keep fireworks dry and away from incompatible materials such as flammable liquids [1]. HSE says professional display operators using category F4 fireworks are required by product safety law to have public liability insurance covering their use, and most employers must have employers' liability insurance [2]. Ask to see the operator's certificate.

4.12 Fire safety risk assessment

In England and Wales, OPSS says the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 applies to venues hosting weddings and other celebrations, and that fireworks call for additional fire safety measures [1]. The Order extends to England and Wales only [21]. The Home Office guide on fire safety risk assessment for open-air events and venues lists firework displays among the events it covers. It applies to England [18].

In Scotland, the Fire (Scotland) Act 2005 applies instead. A person with control of relevant premises must carry out a fire safety assessment and take the fire safety measures that are reasonable to keep relevant persons safe [22]. In Northern Ireland, the Fire and Rescue Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 sets the same kind of duty [23], with the Fire Safety Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010 made under it [24]. Check the fire and rescue service guidance for your nation. The can-do guide for voluntary events gives practical help on risk assessment for community organisers [20].

5 What to do

Operational

- Know the three areas: spectators, the firing zone with its safety zone, and the fallout zone. Keep everyone except the firing team out of the firing and safety zones [2].
- Stop spectators bringing their own fireworks onto the site [2].
- Never relight a firework, and keep people well clear of any that fail to go off. Report them to the display operator [2].
- Know who calls the emergency services and where the first aid point is [2].
- If you light the bonfire: check inside it first, no petrol or paraffin, suitable clothing, and know what to do if someone is burned [2].
- Keep exit routes clear and lit at the end of the display [2].

Tactical

- Walk and mark the site in daylight. Check for overhead power lines and obstructions [1][2].
- In England and Wales, set the running order so firing ends by 11pm, or midnight on 5 November only. In Scotland, check the permitted hours for your type of display. In Northern Ireland, follow the conditions of your Department of Justice licence [4][12][15].
- Recheck weather and wind direction on the day. Agree with the operator who calls a delay, change or cancellation, and on what conditions [1][2].
- Brief every steward on the zones, the emergency plan and the stop signal. Set steward numbers from the risk assessment, using the OPSS figure as a minimum [1][2].
- Keep pedestrian and vehicle routes apart where possible, and keep a clear route for emergency vehicles [2].
- Site any bar well away from the display [2].
- Check and clear the site the next morning [2].

Strategic

- Decide who fires the display. Category F4 fireworks need a professional operator. Volunteers may only use F2 and F3 [1].
- Confirm how the site is authorised: landowner permission, council permit, and in Scotland whether it is in a firework control zone [1][13].
- In Northern Ireland, confirm the Department of Justice licence is in place before buying fireworks [15].
- Consult the police and fire service at least seven days before, and notify the CAA if aircraft may be affected [1][17].
- Agree in writing with the operator who does what, including in an emergency. Check their public liability insurance [2].
- Make sure a risk assessment and, where it applies, a fire safety risk assessment are done and recorded [1][18].
- Tell residents in advance and consider lower-noise fireworks where the site is near homes or animals [1].

6 Tools

6.1 Pre-display checklist

When	Check	Who
Now	Site authorised. Scotland: firework control zone checked. Northern Ireland: licence in place	Strategic
Now	Operator appointed for F4, roles and emergency duties agreed in writing, insurance seen	Strategic
7 days before, at least	Police and fire service consulted. CAA notified if needed. Residents told	Strategic
Before the day	Site walked in daylight. Zones marked. Power lines checked. Running order ends by the cut-off	Tactical
Before the day	Stewards and first aid arranged. Bar sited. Routes and emergency access planned	Tactical
On the day	Weather and wind rechecked. Briefing given. Stop signal agreed	Tactical
During	Zones kept clear. No spectators' fireworks. Misfires left alone	Operational
Next morning	Site checked and cleared. Unfired fireworks disposed of safely	Tactical

Table 3. Pre-display checklist. Adapt it to your risk assessment.

6.2 Steward briefing script (about 1 minute)

"Tonight there are three areas: the crowd, the firing zone and the fallout zone where debris lands. Nobody except the firing team goes into the firing zone, and nobody goes into the fallout zone. Your post is _____. If anyone tries to bring fireworks in, they do not come in. If a firework fails to go off, keep everyone back and tell _____. Never go near it. The stop signal is _____. If anyone is hurt, call _____ on the radio and they will call the emergency services. At the end, keep the exits clear and lit. Any questions?"

7 Frequently asked questions

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

In England and Wales, midnight on 5 November itself [3][4]. On other nights, including the weekends either side, the cut-off is 11pm. Scotland has its own permitted hours for different types of display [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 firework licensed operators [1].



Who do I need to tell about a fireworks display?

The council, the police and the fire service, at least seven days before. The CAA if the display is near an airfield or where aircraft regularly fly. 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 steward for every 250 spectators [1]. Treat that as a minimum and set the final number from your risk assessment and site.

What if the wind changes on the night?

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

8 What we don't know yet

- **Which council areas in Scotland have firework control zones this year.** Check with the council for your site [13].
- **Legal basis for the steward ratio.** OPSS guidance states it as a requirement. We could not find it in legislation [1].
- **Changes in Scotland not yet in force.** Some parts of the 2022 Act, such as restricting the days on which fireworks may be used, were not in force on 20 October 2026 [14].
- **Local conditions.** Councils and landowners may set their own conditions for a display on their land [1][3].

9 Sources

All web sources were opened and checked on 20 October 2026.

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10 About this report

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