

Soil definitions

The following tables were compiled in February 2026. Please note that these are not exhaustive.

Table 1 General available guidance

Definitions	Reference
<p>Soil is a mixture of mineral and organic matter that contains air, water, and micro-organisms. It provides a medium in which plants grow, a habitat for animals, and storage for water.</p> <p>> Ecologists</p>	<p>COSMOS-UK</p>
<p>Soils is the combination of weathered minerals, organic materials and living organisms and the interactions between these.</p> <p>> Economists/Natural capital specialists</p>	<p>Defra: Enabling a Natural Capital Approach guidance (PDF)</p> <p>Defra: Enabling a Natural Capital Approach guidance (accessible)</p>
<p>Where soil occurs, it is the topmost layer of the land, forming the interface between the underlying geology and the atmosphere. It is a component of terrestrial ecosystems, providing a medium for the transmission of carbon, water, nutrients, and the growth of plants.</p> <p>> Environmental Impact Assessors</p>	<p>IEMA: A new perspective on land and soil in Environmental Impact Assessment (PDF)</p>
<p>Soil consists of complex structures of soil grains separated by pores, channels and chambers. The solids are chemically active and are slowly but continually changing in composition and shape.</p> <p>> Soil scientists</p>	<p>BSSS: What is soil?</p>

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<p>Soil is the natural medium for the growth of plants. It is also a natural body consisting of layers that are composed of weathered mineral materials, organic material, air, and water.</p>	<p>FAO: What is soil?</p>
<p>Soil is a biologically active complex mixture of weathered minerals, organic and inorganic compounds, living organisms, air and water, which provides the foundation for life in terrestrial ecosystems.</p>	<p>Scottish Government: The Scottish Soil Framework 2009</p>
<p>Soil is an engineering material consisting of mineral particles, organic matter etc, which provides support for structures such as buildings and bridges, and is used for construction purposes such as building roads, dams, and embankments.</p> <p>> Civil engineers/geotechnical engineers</p>	
<p>Soil is the result of weathering processes that occur on the earth's surface where the atmosphere meets the geosphere and hydrosphere.</p> <p>> Geologists</p>	<p>BGS: Soil parent material model</p>
<p>Soil is a growing medium for plants in gardens. Soil is also material they often see on construction sites.</p> <p>> General public</p>	

Table 2 UK Specifications

Definitions	Reference
<p>Soil is not defined but falls under the description of permitted constituents of acceptable earthwork materials.</p> <p>Topsoil is either Class 5A, where the permitted constituents are topsoil or turf existing on site, or Class 5B, general purpose grade complying with BS 3882:2015.</p>	<p>Standards for Highways: Manual of Contract Documents for Highway Works</p> <p>Standards for Highways: Manual of Contract Documents for Highway Works: CC 601 Earthworks</p>
<p>Soil means an assemblage of mineral particles and/or organic matter, which can be separated by gentle mechanical means and includes variable amounts of water, air or vapours (and sometimes other gases)</p> <p>Soil typically has an undrained shear strength of less than 300kpa.</p> <p>The term is also applied to anthropogenic ground consisting of reworked natural soil or man-made materials exhibiting similar behaviour (eg crushed rock, blast furnace slag, or fly ash).</p>	<p>ICE Publishing: UK Specification for Ground Investigation</p>

Table 3 British Standards, Eurocode and other guidance documents

Soil definition	Reference
Refer to the document	BS 3882:2015 – TC Specification for topsoil
Refer to the document	BS 8601:2013 Specification for subsoil and requirements for use
Refer to the document	BS EN 1997-1:2004 Eurocode 7 Geotechnical design – part 1: general rules BS EN 1997-2:2007 Eurocode 7: Geotechnical design – part 2: Ground investigation and testing
Refer to the document	BS 5930:2015 + A1:2020 Code of practice for ground investigations
Soil means the top layer of the Earth’s crust, situated between the bedrock or the parent material and the land surface, and which is composed of mineral particles, organic matter, water, air, and living organisms	Directive (EU) 2025/2360 of the European Parliament and of the Council on soil monitoring and resilience
Soil comprises material arising from excavation or land profiling activities during construction including topsoil, subsoil parent material and underlying geology. These materials may be either undisturbed natural material or made ground.	CIRIA C809 Sustainable management of surplus soil and aggregates from construction