

Running a Special Event Station

A step-by-step guide



A Special Event Station (SES) is a temporary amateur radio station set up to publicise an event. Typical special events include raising money for the Royal National Lifeboat Institute (RNLI) through SOS Radio Week, British Wireless for the Blind (BWFB), International Marconi Day, Windmills on the Air and many more.

Special Event Stations are also a way of introducing amateur radio to the general public.

But if you want to run an SES there are a lot of things to consider. This is designed to be a guide to the most important, but feel free to suggest others.

Choosing a venue

Once you have decided you want to take part in an SES you will need a venue. The best approach is to draw up a short list and arrange to visit the premises to a) work out if it is suitable and b) gain permission to operate.

When visiting the location bear in mind that the owner/occupier will probably have no idea what amateur radio is or what it involves. They won't know an Icom 756 Pro 3 from a G5RV. What they will be interested in is how much space are you going to need, how big and ugly will the antennas be, will it be a hazard to visitors, and are you going to make a mess?

If possible take some photographs of a typical SES station along with you and be prepared to explain what you want to do and what it will involve. Emphasise that it may bring valuable publicity to them, but that it will also involve 10-15 radio hams traipsing through the property.

Typical questions to consider are:

- Is there room to set up the station(s)?
- Are there power points? Where are they? Are there enough?
- Are there desks and chairs?
- Where will you route the antenna cables? Will they fit through windows? Can these be opened?
- Is it safe to put up antennas? Is there enough room? Are there power/telephone lines nearby?
- Are you likely to cause interference? Would this be a problem?
- Will you be able to get access early enough on the day?

If you want to run LF and HF at the same time bear in mind that you will have to separate the stations considerably. At Caister Lifeboat, I always arrange for one antenna to be vertically polarised and the other horizontal to minimise interference. The vertical is also mounted so that the dipole is end on (and therefore in a null) to help further.

Once you have decided that the venue is OK and you have permission, follow this up with a letter or email to confirm what you want to do and when so that both parties know what is going on. There should be no surprises on either side!

Getting a licence

Having decided on the venue you can go ahead and apply for the SES licence. You have to be a full licence holder to do this. The application form is at:

<http://licensing.ofcom.org.uk/radiocommunication-licences/amateur-radio/apply-notice-variation/>

You will need the full address for the SES location. The callsign you request must also reflect the station in some way. Eg GBOCMS stands for "Caister Marconi Station".

The licence is free, and it will probably be delivered via email. **DON'T ARRANGE ANYTHING ELSE UNTIL YOU GET THE LICENCE.** This is because you may not get the callsign you wanted and it could change.

Once you have the licence you can move on.

Register your event with the organisers

Most events have a website that lists the stations taking part. They will want to know what you are planning so make sure you inform them.

Organise a QRZ.com page, eQSL account and QSL cards

Most hams use QRZ.com to find out more about the station they are working. So set up an entry with details of the station, its history and the QSL information.

You will need to design a QSL card and have some printed. How many is up to you. You will need to decide if you are going to QSL every contact or just respond to incoming cards. Bear in mind that you could make 500+ contacts in a typical two-day SES. QSLing all of those will be expensive. Many hams will use eQSL so it pays to set up an account there too. This can be free.

You will also need to log some envelopes with your QSL manager - you will find the name and address for the "GB" series on the RSGB website. Send 10 stamped addressed envelopes with "Wait 10" and "1 of 10", "2 of 10" etc written in the top left hand corner. This means that the manager won't send the envelope to you until they have at least 10 cards.

MAKE SURE YOU PUT THE RIGHT VALUE OF STAMPS ON!

Get a team together

You can't do all of this on your own. You will need to get a team together to organise the rigs, antennas, logging computers, setting up, food, drinks etc - the list goes on. If you get a team together it will make life easier.

Start to draw up an inventory of everything you will need on the day

This must be very comprehensive and can be added to as you remember things. Consider radios, power supplies, ATUs, computers, coax, plus spares. Then you will need multi meters, soldering irons, morse keys, headphones, connecting leads, extension leads, cord, wire, tape, computer interfaces, tools, and much more. How about tea, coffee, food?

As far as antennas go, have you got sufficient coax? Have you got masts, guy lines, pegs, earth stakes and wire? Take a spare antenna or two in case of problems. A spare G5RV or W5GI might be a Godsend.

It is worth having some spare PL259s of the right size, plus SO239/SO239 back-to-back connectors so that the coax lines can be extended.

Don't forget that you will need to set up the computer logging program to reflect the SES callsign BEFORE the event. If using CW you may need to set up macros too.

PR and Publicity

Consider getting the club Public Relations Officer to draw up a press release that can go to the radio press, *RadCom*, *Practical Wireless*, *Radio User*, plus local media, including TV, radio and newspapers. Don't forget free "advertisers". Bear in mind that the lead times on monthly magazines can be up to three months before the publishing date.

Four weeks before the event

Contact the SES location about a month before the event to confirm your presence. Repeat everything you have told them before to make sure they understand what you need. You will need access at least an hour or more before you intend to start operations in order to set everything up.

Start an operating roster, breaking it up into one or two-hour operating slots. You will either have to bring this to club events or publish it online. Keep promoting the event by word of mouth and announce it at club meetings/ in the newsletter. You will need to keep telling people about the event - there will always be people who say they had no idea you were running it!

Start to think about what bands you will operate – do you need propagation predictions? Have you got antennas for the bands? At this point in the solar cycle 40m, 20m, with perhaps 17/15m, are the best options.

Produce some documents for the day

These include small standup signs for the stations that include the callsign, the WAB square, the Maidenhead Locator, the QSL route and policy - that is, will you QSL every contact or just respond to received QSLs?

Produce a handout for potential operators that says what you are doing, how to get there (with postcode for sat-navs), the history of the station and any other info you think might be useful.

Consider handouts for visitors to explain what you are doing and why? Get some "What is amateur radio leaflets?" from RSGB.

Will you need the MAC van? If so tell David.

The week before the event

If possible, test all the equipment and antennas before the event. Make sure everyone knows what they will be doing.

On the day

Arrive early enough to set everything else. Expect some problems - this is amateur radio after all! If you have spare equipment it will make life easier.

Consider using trip hazard signs if appropriate. Rope off antennas if there is a risk of RF burns to the public. Health and safety must be a priority.

Consider allocating someone as the "meet and greet" person, who can explain to ham and non-ham visitors what is going on.

Make sure everyone is happy and knows what they are doing - it is meant to be fun! Take plenty of photographs. Preferably not of the backs of people's heads!

At the end of the day make sure you leave the venue as you found it, otherwise we leave a bad impression and won't be asked back.

After the event

Send a thank-you note to your host. Consider a charitable donation to them if appropriate. It says "thank you", leaves a good impression and paves the way for future events!

Consider another press release explaining how you got on. How many contacts did you make? What countries did you work? Any memorable ones. Ask the club PR officer to help, but give them plenty of information and a decent hi-res image.

The main organisers might want a report too.

Finally, if you think of anything that would have made your life easier make a note of it for next year before you forget!

It is worth having a short debrief meeting to discuss what could improved next time.

QSLing

The first thing to do is check the log for obvious errors and then output an .adi file that can be uploaded to eQSL. You will find a lot of people will have already uploaded their's so you will get instant matches!

If issuing paper QSLs make a note in the electronic log as you receive/issue them.

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