

Engaging the land management sector in Local Nature Recovery Strategies

Advice for Responsible Authorities

Version 1: October 2023

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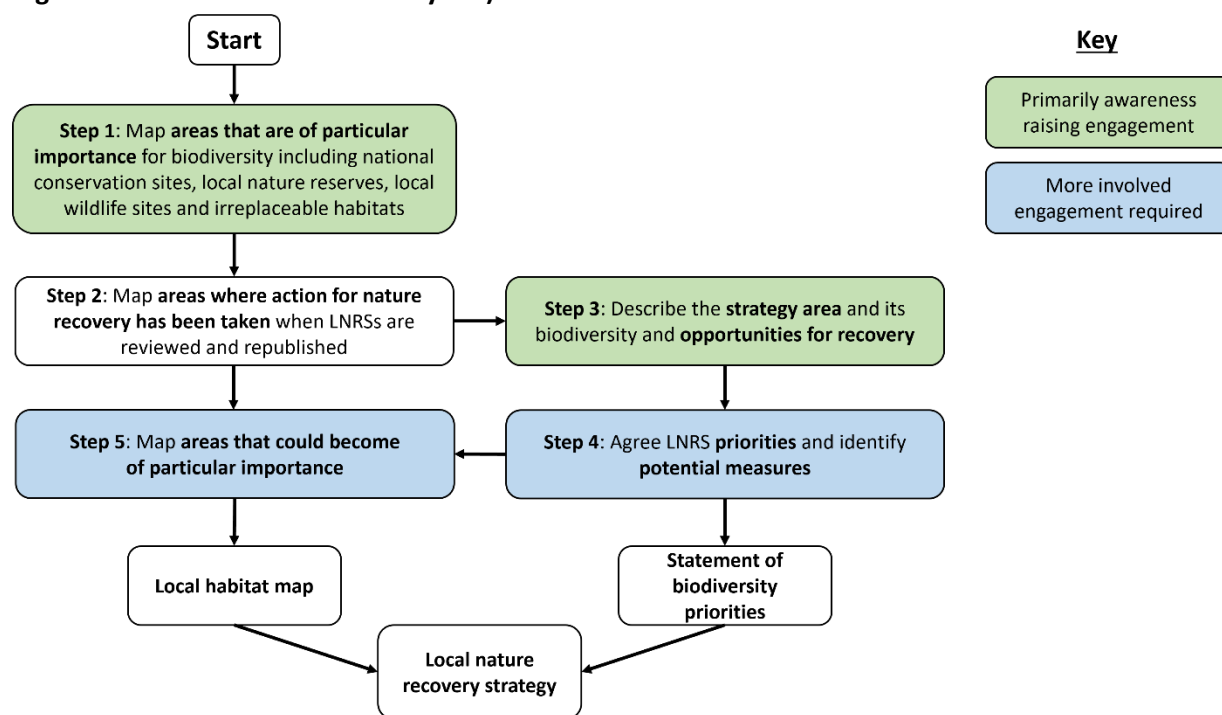
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1. Introduction

This advice is aimed at responsible authorities (RAs) appointed to lead the preparation of a local nature recovery strategy (LNRS) and is intended to support engagement with landowners, farmers (including tenant farmers), foresters and others involved in managing land (henceforth referred to as ‘landowners and managers’) in the preparation and subsequent delivery of LNRSs. The lessons within this advice should be used in parallel with the ‘Advice on governance and working with partners’ provided to RAs in May 2023.

As set out in **Figure 1** below, this advice is intended to apply from the early stages of stakeholder engagement planning, when RAs are expected to be primarily raising awareness of LNRSs, through to carrying out more intensive stakeholder engagement and planning for future engagement.

Fig. 1: Where this advice applies in relation to the steps set out in the LNRS statutory guidance (please refer to the LNRS statutory guidance for more detailed information on each step, noting step 2 in the diagram is for future LNRS review cycles)



Defra Group is keen to maximise time and engagement resources within RAs and support their considerable stakeholder engagement expertise by sharing lessons and experience of engaging landowners and managers. The Country Land and Business Association (CLA), the National Farmers Union (NFU) and Natural England (NE) have contributed to this advice which sets out lessons on how landowners and managers can be best engaged during the LNRS preparation process.

2. The importance of landowners and managers for LNRS

RAs are required by LNRS regulations to take steps to involve “such persons and organisations as appear to the responsible authority to be appropriate in the preparation of its local nature recovery strategy”.

Government is particularly keen that LNRS RAs involve landowners and managers in preparing their strategies, and this has been reflected in the funding provided.

We know from the [LNRS pilots](#) that landowners and managers are an important group for RAs to involve from early on as:

- They have important on-the-ground **knowledge and experience** that can support development of practical and ambitious LNRSs. The group also includes under-represented stakeholders (not frequently engaged by central and local government) who can help to contribute a **broad spectrum** of expertise and experience to LNRSs.
- They will likely already have their own **environmental plans** that should align with LNRS; and may have key sources of **local data** (such as from surveys carried out by a farmer cluster) that can contribute to a strong, evidence based LNRS.
- They are **key delivery partners** for taking action to deliver on government priorities, including actions identified in an LNRS, as well as other delivery mechanisms we want LNRSs to align with (e.g., Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG), Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes, woodland creation proposals etc.). Their input is critical to ensure that your LNRS represents a feasible plan for joined-up action which could be taken on or adjacent to their land.
- Early and frequent engagement will support landowners and managers with their own **long-term business planning** activities.

3. How should you engage landowners and managers?

3.1. Identifying landowners and managers

Many local authorities will already have experience of working with landowners and managers and may have existing networks and relationships in place. It is important, however, to make efforts to engage beyond the most available and visible landowners and managers. This includes those who are not members of organisations like NFU, CLA, or the Tenant Farmers Association, or who do not normally engage with local authorities or environmental groups. Giving the opportunity for everyone who is interested to be involved will support a more democratically prepared and more robust LNRS.

By building awareness and advertising engagement opportunities widely early on, and by utilising a range of communications channels (see section 3.3 below), you are more likely to reach interested landowners and managers who may not have been previously identified through local stakeholder analysis. It may help to start by building awareness amongst local influencers, such as:

- trusted individuals within the farming community
- farmer clusters and co-operatives (where they [exist](#))
- facilitation fund groups
- regional NFU and CLA representatives
- forestry agents
- woodland associations
- Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group, Rivers Trust and Wildlife Trusts advisors
- livestock markets
- local/regional land agents
- agronomy and business management advisors; and others.

Defra Arms' Length Bodies can also help you to identify and get in touch with the above groups and landowners and managers. For example, via NE farming advisors, including Catchment Sensitive Farming

advisors, Forestry Commission Woodland Officers and Environment Agency agriculture officers. Your dedicated NE LNRS senior advisor can put you in touch with these officers.

You may find that using professional facilitators with experience of working with landowners and managers from early on and throughout the LNRS preparation process will aid in bridging the gap with many under-represented landowners and managers. This is something learned from the LNRS pilots, which involved local land management convenors (**Box 1**). There are various ways that professional facilitators may be helpful during your stakeholder engagement, but it is at RAs' discretion how they might choose to employ this option.

Box 1: Case study – Land management convenors in the LNRS pilots

The LNRS pilots made use of a bespoke local 'convenor' function to support engagement between land managers and the pilot authorities. They explored alignment of LNRS with agri-environment schemes and tested the value of a convenor role working with the farming sector to support input to LNRS development.

Acting as an interface between the farming community and the LNRS pilot authority, the convenors were able to bring together the perspectives of farmers and Defra, NE and local authorities, helping to translate the ambition of the LNRS pilots into proposed tangible actions and outcomes on the ground. Their role was thought to offer opportunities for, and an ongoing commitment to, improved dialogue between groups, and was positively received by the farming community in particular.

A key learning point was that the convenor role was useful at the beginning of engagement but was most impactful when accessible as a near constant point of contact for land management stakeholders, helping to explain the process and explain how things link together.

In some LNRS areas, it may be worthwhile looking at whether elements of a convenor type function can be replicated, resources and expertise permitting. Please speak to your NE senior advisor about this.

3.2. Planning your engagement

You should plan when and how often you want to engage landowners and managers at different stages of the LNRS preparation process:

- **Raising awareness early on** – many landowners and managers may not be aware of LNRSs. A key lesson from the LNRS pilots is that they should be brought in early by informing them what LNRSs mean for them, and what opportunities to input there will be later. This also applies to the farm advisory community. This will help them to be ready to input into LNRS at relevant stages. Some landowners and managers may not have the capacity or desire to engage early on, so you should make clear that there will be ongoing opportunities to engage with LNRS throughout the preparation process (and be clear how long the preparation window is), including during public consultations, although this late stage would ideally not be the first time key stakeholders are encountering LNRSs.
- **Keeping engagement regular and joined up, including before consultation** – landowners and managers should be kept informed of LNRS progress, decisions made, and upcoming events to ensure they are able to prepare relevant input before it is needed. We advise that, as with other key stakeholders, you give landowners and managers the opportunity to engage with LNRS before

public consultation through workshops and other engagement events, so that they do not feel they are just being presented with a finished product to comment on. This will also mean that the LNRS is more likely to pass through consultation smoothly if common issues and concerns have already been addressed.

- **Post-publication engagement** – once your LNRS is published, you should flag this to landowners and managers and highlight what happens next (i.e., the plan for the delivery of some of the key actions identified in the LNRS). They should be clear on where they can find more information on LNRS going forward and who they can contact with any questions or concerns.

When planning your engagement and consultations with the farming community, it is important that you consider the farming calendar, as this is likely to greatly impact the ability of many landowners and managers to engage. Every day of the year farmers will be busy, but there are certain peak times to be aware of. This will depend on the type of farm business (poultry, dairy, beef, sheep, arable, horticultural) and its location. Spring (March - May) is typically when dairy, beef and sheep farmers will be calving and lambing stock. Summer (June - August) is when many farmers will be harvesting their crops (e.g., wheat, oats, soft fruit) and making hay and silage. There will be exceptions to this, and it will vary across regions.

Other key dates within the farming calendar are those relating to agri-environment schemes and grants which many farms will be involved in. A summary of these dates is available on the [RPA website](#).

For other land manager groups, such as foresters or those managing land for tourism, there will be different busy periods. You should therefore talk to your stakeholders and relevant ALB advisors early on to identify the best time to engage during the year.

3.2.1. Budgeting your engagement

A portion of funding given to RAs to prepare the LNRS is intended to cover engagement with landowners and managers specifically. You should therefore think about how best to deploy this funding over the course of LNRS preparation as some periods of engagement, such as when setting priorities for the LNRS, may be more intensive and resource hungry, than other times.

3.3. Things to consider when engaging

The farming and land management sector is a diverse group that requires being engaged in different ways depending on a variety of factors including local context and degree of digital connection. You should deploy, and consider the pros and cons of, a variety of engagement methods to have most impact. It is important to ensure you are engaging proactively where possible, instead of relying on passive engagement e.g., via social media. Some top tips for things to consider when engaging are listed below:

- **The history and sensitivities of engagement with your local land manager community** – to engage most effectively with landowners and managers, you should take into account the local context of how engagement has been done to date. A trusted facilitator such as those used in the pilots (see **Box 1**) or with a history of working with the sector locally can help with this.
- **NFU and CLA can help you engage with their memberships** – the NFU and CLA can share information on your behalf with their members (both digitally and in print), offer opportunities to attend regional meetings, and engage in your governance boards or steering groups. NFU and CLA are preparing materials and information about LNRSs for their members. These can be useful in the awareness raising stage.

- **But you should make use of wider groups too** – not all farmers are members of NFU and CLA. Some may be better reached through farmer clusters, facilitation fund groups or other existing discussion groups or organisations in your area. It is important to not just stop at the “usual suspects”. RAs are also encouraged to seek the views of those in under-represented land manager groups that may have been previously overlooked in stakeholder engagement. This will support an LNRS that is more reflective of the local community and encourage wider access to the natural environment.
- **Make use of your Natural England LNRS senior advisor** – in particular when coordinating engagement with neighbouring RAs where landowners or managers’ land spans multiple LNRSs. As set out in section 3.1 above, NE senior advisors can also support collaborative working other Defra Group advisors that may be able to support cross-boundary working.
- **Communicate face-to-face and among peers where possible** – your engagement will be most impactful when done in-person and making use of trusted advisors (see section 3.1). Peer-led meetings, such as facilitation fund groups, can also be a good way of engaging in a trusted and comfortable environment for landowners and managers. Getting buy-in from influential individuals can help to encourage input from their peers in local settings. Including a broader range of land management sector representatives in your working groups will help to ensure messaging and engagement is looked at from their point of view.
- **Plan variable meeting times and places** – landowners and managers are under a lot of time pressure day-to-day. In order to reach the highest number and range of landowners and managers, you should ensure you are offering engagement events at different times of the day (such as breakfast or evening time), and as a mix of in-person and online. Aim to engage in local areas where possible.
- **Consider how you use digital communication methods** – where you are not able to engage in-person, digital communication can be helpful. For example, use of online registration for access to webinars, surveys, newsletters, as well as social media and local WhatsApp groups (via local influencers). Remember that not all landowners and managers will have good internet access or be comfortable using technology. Where this is the case, they may be more likely to engage in-person with someone they trust, or through post and paper communications.
- **Use appropriate language and revolve your messages around the farm environment** – you should avoid using policy or environmental jargon, and instead focus on relevant and relatable examples that make clear how LNRSs relate to the activities and goals of e.g., farming businesses. Be conscious of terminology when describing LNRSs – some land managers may be sensitive to the implication that nature needs to be ‘recovered’ on their land, so you should be clear that LNRSs will not overlook what has been done to conserve and manage nature so far, but build and improve on this. Consider your wider communications and ensure you are referencing all stakeholders and their livelihoods in a polite way. Avoid stereotyping and assumptions that will make stakeholder engagement difficult further down the line.
- **Keep in touch afterwards** – the LNRS pilots showed that it’s important to show how stakeholder inputs have been used in the LNRS to encourage ongoing dialogue. This is essential for landowners and managers to understand how LNRSs fit into other policies and delivery on the ground as these links emerge. Learnings from the local land management convenor role (**Box 1**) may be useful here.

3.4. Key messages

From the outset of engaging landowners and managers, you should consider how best to explain LNRS policy to them in a way that feels relevant and understandable to them and your area (see above tips on use of language). Your NE LNRS senior advisor can also help with shaping your messaging. We advise that you ensure you are covering off the following points in your communications with land managers:

- **Why we need LNRSs, and why LNRSs need landowners and managers** – the key point here being why they should care about LNRSs. Don't assume existing knowledge of LNRSs, and be mindful that different landowners and managers will have different views on whether LNRSs are needed;
- **How LNRSs fit with other schemes and policies** affecting landowners and land managers – and so can help to inform their choices about scheme and funding stream options in their area;
- **How LNRSs will benefit landowners and managers** especially if they get involved early and throughout LNRS preparation, and the opportunities that LNRSs offer;
- **LNRSs won't dictate actions on land** – as per section 4 of the statutory guidance: "The main purpose of the strategies is to identify locations to create or improve habitat most likely to provide the greatest benefit for nature and the wider environment. The strategies do not force the owners and managers of the land identified to make any changes. Instead, the government is encouraging action through, for example, opportunities for funding and investment."
- **Landowners and managers' concerns about LNRS** – it is important to acknowledge that not all landowners and managers will automatically see LNRSs as good news if it is not clear what their use and role in planning land use change and accessing funding streams will be. Landowners and managers will be more likely to meaningfully engage with LNRS if they feel they understand the whole picture, so it is essential that you take the time to work through their concerns and possible areas of confusion about the impact of LNRSs in a transparent and honest way. For example, the role of LNRS in the planning system may be a focus for discussion. Please do refer to the policy narrative on [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk) where needed and we will look to update and provide more information as it becomes available.

4. Other advice and guidance

Defra will be publishing further advice on various steps in the LNRS preparation process, for example, how to approach 'priority setting' and 'mapping of measures'. This is in addition to advice we have already published on taking account of species (Aug 2023), and governance and working with partners (May 2023).

Your dedicated Natural England LNRS senior advisor is best placed to help direct you towards more support in planning for and undertaking your stakeholder engagement, including connecting you with other Defra Group support and expertise.