Identifying and agreeing priorities and potential measures within Local Nature Recovery Strategies

Advice for Responsible Authorities

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Purpose and Summary

This advice is intended to help responsible authorities (RAs) identify and agree 'priorities' and 'potential measures' in their LNRS. This is step 4 in the preparation process (section 1 Process Overview, Figure 1). It builds on the mapping of areas that are already of particular importance for biodiversity (step 1) and the description of the strategy area and its opportunities (step 3). These steps provide important evidence to support RAs and partners in identifying and agreeing priorities and potential measures.

This advice is designed to help RAs follow the approach set out in the statutory guidance. In some places it summarises what the statutory guidance says to provide context for the advice, but it is the statutory guidance itself to which RAs are legally required to "have regard" and RAs should read this advice alongside that guidance.

It is also designed to work with existing advice and documents, such as advice on species recovery and forthcoming National Environmental Objectives (NEOs).

Key messages

1) **RAs must work with stakeholders and ensure that they play a significant role in developing the priorities.** Stakeholders should participate in producing a product they understand and are invested in, to support delivery on the ground.
2) **RAs should adapt how they record and present their list of priorities to ensure they are accessible to different end-users.** Experience suggests that it may be helpful to use a list or simple table for the final product, with an appended matrix for stakeholders who want further detail.
3) **RAs are encouraged to draw on both criteria-based and preference-based factors in a balanced approach.** This advice will explore approaches taken in the LNRS pilots. It will also provide a series of considerations RAs and partners should be aware of when agreeing on a scoring system.

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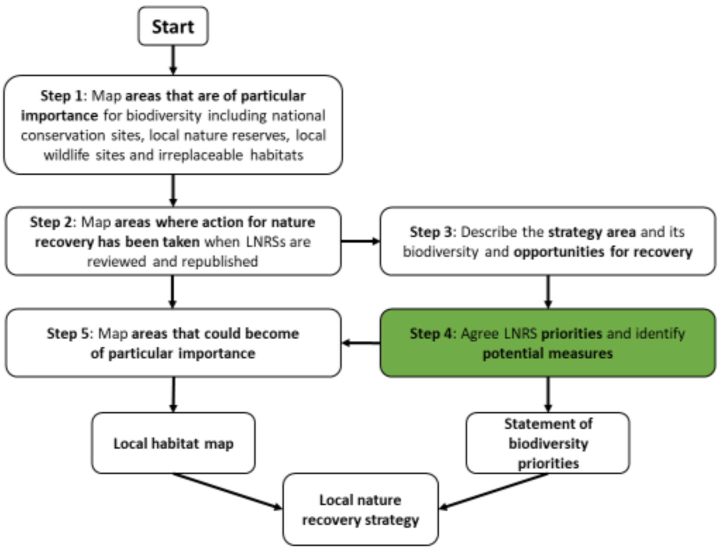
1. Process overview

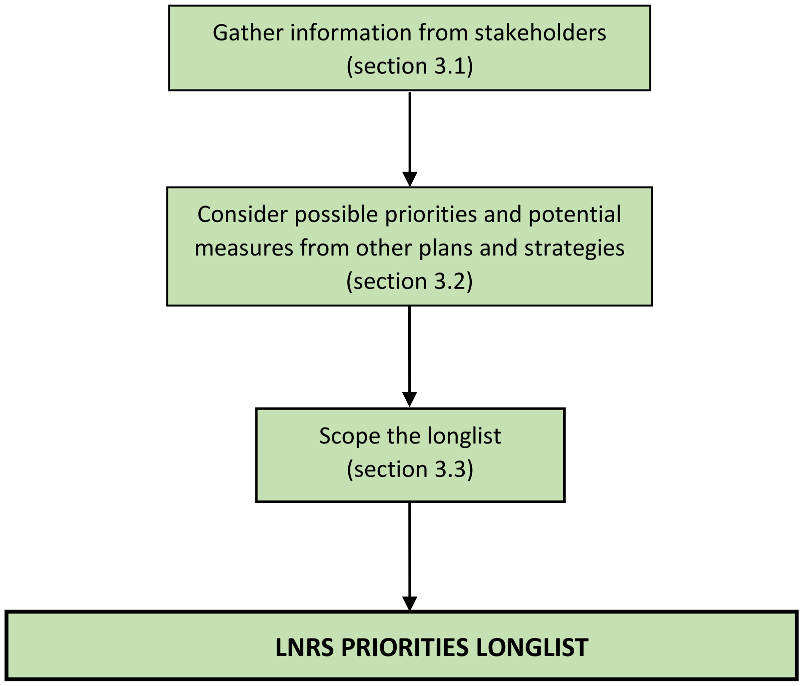
Figure 1. Order of steps to be followed in preparing contents of a LNRS



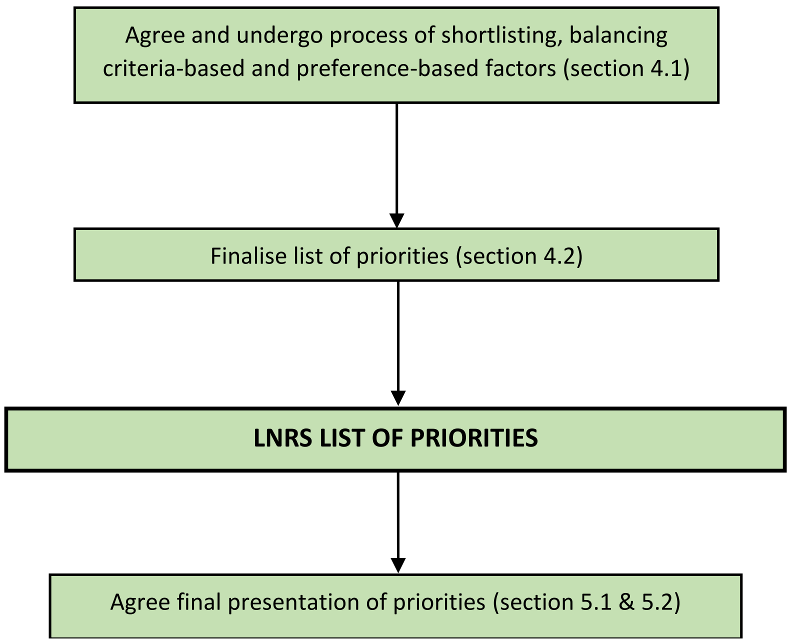
The Environment Act (2021) requires that all LNRSs must include priorities and potential measures as part of their "statement of biodiversity priorities". RAs must also "have regard" to LNRS statutory guidance, which explains what an LNRS should include. Paragraphs 48 to 72 of the statutory guidance focus on priorities and potential measures.

Process overview

Identifying possible priorities and measures (creating a longlist)



Agreeing priorities (shortlisting)



2. Definitions

It is important that RAs take time to ensure stakeholders understand the terminology and process of LNRS to allow them to effectively engage. This establishes a shared understanding of what the LNRS is seeking to achieve and how. It also speeds up the process of refining and reaching agreement on priorities. RAs may find it useful to use the descriptions and examples below, along with the examples included within the statutory guidance.

Priorities

Priorities are “the end results that the strategy is seeking to achieve” (LNRS statutory guidance, paragraph 51). There is no single right way to describe priorities but, in most cases, priorities should include relevant habitats or species. The right way will depend on local circumstances and the views of stakeholders.

Potential measures

Potential measures are “specific practical actions to achieve" priorities (LNRS statutory guidance, paragraph 51). These are the suggested activities that, if done properly, would help to deliver the agreed priorities. They can benefit a particular species or habitat or provide wider environmental benefits (nature-based solutions).

As with priorities, most potential measures should include relevant habitats or species. RAs should use consistent naming systems with those used in mapping (steps 1, 2 and 5). They can use a broader classification where this is appropriate, for example, potential measures for “Urban” habitat priorities. However, the creation or enhancement of habitats may not be enough to deliver some priorities on their own. As a result, RAs may wish to include a small number of potential measures that do not relate to creating or improving habitat. For example, deer management or reducing recreational disturbance to support recovery of a threatened species.

Illustrative examples of priorities and potential measures:

Priorities:

1. Improve the condition of upland peatland in the strategy area to increase carbon sequestration.

2. Improve abundance of breeding bird species in upland peatland e.g., curlews and golden plovers.

Potential measure:

Rewet blanket bog in X area by using natural materials to block drainage channels, enabling suitable conditions for further restoration and creating a more attractive habitat for improving breeding bird species.

Box 1: Example of a potential measure that contributes to priorities for habitats, species and wider environmental benefits

Priorities:

1. Connect and enhance existing ancient and native woodland to improve ecological connectivity.
2. Increase the abundance of purple emperor butterflies in X area.
3. Increase carbon sequestration from woodland creation in X area.

Potential measure:

Create new woodlands and restore semi-natural woodlands around and between existing ancient woodlands, favouring natural colonisation on woodland boundaries, hedgerows and along watercourses.

Box 2: Example of a potential measure that contributes to multiple priorities

Priority:

Improve the water quality of River X, focusing on catchment Y, through creation of semi natural habitat and other land-use changes.

Potential measure:

Create woodlands in steep gradients in the upper catchments of River X.

Create rough grassland or wooded riparian buffer zones.

Box 3: Example of a priority where a specific ecosystem "River X" has been agreed because it is of particular concern to stakeholders

3. Identifying possible priorities and potential measures (creating a longlist)

The LNRS pilots found that it was practical and effective to gather suggestions of possible priorities and potential measures at the same time. This helped stakeholders with limited resources to engage effectively in the process.

Only possible priorities will go through the shortlisting process, but RAs should record information about any links between potential measures and possible priorities. This will help RAs and partners when they assess potential measures against agreed priorities (see section 4.2).

3.1 Gathering information from stakeholders

It is essential for RAs to undertake detailed stakeholder planning early in the preparation process. This will ensure that that the right questions are asked, and that inputs are in the right format for prioritisation. For more information on engaging with stakeholders, see the advice on Governance and working with local partners, and engaging the land management sector in LNRSs.

Options for engagement:

- **Workshops**

The LNRS pilots found that workshops were an effective way to gather possible priorities and potential measures. RAs could categorise workshops by theme, such as species, habitats and nature-based solutions, or by stakeholder group. Workshops proved to be a good way to bring together those with different views through the careful consideration of the categories/groups/themes of the workshops and a focus on ambitions for the area.

- **Surveys**

Surveys are another useful way of gathering possible priorities and potential measures, especially when used to supplement workshops and other engagement activities. For example, they could be used to gather inputs from stakeholders who are unable to attend workshops. Surveys should be tailored to ensure that the questions are suitable for groups' areas of interest and technical knowledge, and that the outputs are in a format that is easy to analyse and use for prioritisation.

Tips for sharing and processing information:

- **Using a prioritisation matrix**

RAs should consider using a matrix to compile the possible priorities and potential measures that are suggested by stakeholders and drawn from other plans and strategies (section 4.1 expands on how to use matrices for shortlisting). The LNRS pilots in Greater Manchester (p95) and Cumbria used matrices for this purpose. A matrix can illustrate the relationship between potential measures and possible priorities, which will help to avoid duplicating potential measures against a list of possible priorities. RAs could also use a matrix to track inputs from stakeholders, by tagging possible priorities and potential measures with stakeholder names, to demonstrate how their inputs translate into the agreed priorities.

- **Sharing information with task and finish groups**

RAs may have set up task and finish groups to draft the description of the strategy area and its biodiversity, including issues and pressures, and identify opportunities for species.

RAs will have already involved many local partner organisations as part of step 3. RAs should share the description, including opportunities for species, with all stakeholders they plan to engage in step 4. This information will provide important context for the identification of possible priorities, including opportunities for species and identified pressures and issues.

RAs should ensure that information gathered from stakeholders is tagged (e.g., "species inputs") so that relevant task and finish groups can easily access and use stakeholder inputs.

- **Written rather than spatial information**

The pilots found that it was more effective to share written information and evidence with stakeholders than to provide spatial information at this stage of the LNRS process. This can help to focus discussion on ambitions for nature's recovery and wider environmental goals, instead of where potential measures could be located. This is the subject of the next stage of LNRS preparation.

3.2 Considering priorities and potential measures from other plans and strategies

RAs should look to a variety of existing local plans and strategies when identifying possible priorities and potential measures (please refer to the **appendix** for a non-exhaustive list). This can provide stakeholders with assurance that any previous work on identifying opportunities for nature recovery and wider environmental benefits are being considered in the LNRS. However, in doing this RAs should engage stakeholders on these additions to build consensus and ensure they are in the right format for LNRS.

RAs can draw on other plans and strategies, such as marine management plans or river basin management plans, when identifying possible priorities or potential measures addressing cross-boundary issues. For example, planting trees in upper catchments that slow the flow of water to communities at flood risk.

RAs should be aware of any public body duties they have regarding plans. For example, the public body duty regarding species is of particular relevance for LNRS; all LPAs will have to co-operate with Natural England in the preparation and implementation of species conservation strategies. Where the RAs has duties regarding particular plans, they may want to consider how they reflect this in their matrix to ensure that it is considered.

3.3 Scoping the longlist

Include in the longlist:

- **Possible priorities that contribute to National Environmental Objectives (NEOs)**

RAs may need to add or 'scope in' possible priorities to ensure their longlist contributes to all relevant NEOs for the strategy area. Stakeholders may have avoided putting forward some possible priorities because potential measures in the area would not be able to practically deliver them. For example, if the geology and topography of the LNRS area are not suitable for peat restoration. In this case, the RA should consider whether the NEO can really be considered relevant for the strategy area or not.

- **Possible priorities that address the pressures and opportunities in the strategy area**

RAs should ensure their longlist includes possible priorities that address the pressures and opportunities identified in the description of the strategy area (step 3 of LNRS preparation). For example, if flood risk is a pressure facing the strategy area, a possible priority could be “mitigate flood risk to X area”, and the potential measure could be “restore saltmarshes”.

Exclude from the longlist:

- **Co-benefits**

LNRS priorities should be the species and habitats that the strategy will focus on supporting, and achievable improvements to the wider natural environment through their conservation and enhancement. Co-benefits are other positive things that creation or improvement habitat can also contribute to – like improvements to peoples’ health – which, though often important, are outside the legal scope of what LNRSs are designed to achieve. RAs may find it useful to store any information collected about co-benefits (from stakeholders or other plans and strategies), as these will be important considerations for step 5 of the LNRS so that priorities can be delivered in ways that also deliver co-benefits where possible.

- **References to site-level locations**

Most possible priorities should not include site-level locations for delivery. A small number could include high-level locations, e.g., at river catchment scale. Information about delivery locations should be stored for RAs and partners to use during step 5 of preparation.

Keep a record of priorities and potential measures that are out of scope:

When collecting suggestions or determining the final longlist, it may be useful to keep a record of those possible priorities which have been ‘scoped out’ but are still nevertheless important for nature recovery outcomes in the area e.g., sewage outfalls in relation to water quality. This information, if highlighted in an LNRS, could be used by other plans and strategies, for which these issues are in scope to support nature recovery. It may also help RAs explain to stakeholders why certain suggested priorities aren’t carried through to the agreed priorities.

4. Agreeing priorities (shortlisting)

4.1 Working with partners and options for methodology

Drawing on expert opinion – criteria-based factors

Some LNRS pilots formed a task and finish group comprising steering group members (RAs can refer to advice on Governance and working with local partners) and other local experts to agree priorities. This group ranked possible priorities in the longlist according to agreed criteria (see below). Using this method, the possible priorities with the highest ranking became the agreed priorities.

Criteria that the local expert task and finish group could consider:

- For which habitats and species is the strategy area particularly important, or can make a particular contribution to in terms of creation, enhancement and connectivity? RAs should refer to their description of the strategy area, as well as section 6.3 of the species advice (for advice on using species priority lists and other considerations).
- Does the possible priority help to deliver one or more of the NEOs?
- The urgency of the issue that the possible priority is aiming to resolve or improve. Is it already improving, or is it continuing to get worse?
- Which possible priorities align or could join up with those of neighbouring RAs across the boundaries? E.g., improving water quality in a catchment which extends downstream into a neighbouring RA that also has a priority to improve water quality.

Where a species task and finish group is set up, RAs should ensure the group’s work remains connected to overall prioritisation (as noted in section 3.1). RAs should assess possible priorities for species alongside others included in the longlist. This will help to ensure that overall prioritisation achieves a balance of priorities for habitats, species and wider environmental outcomes. This will also ensure the prioritisation group has oversight of dependencies, for example some species priorities will be dependent on achieving habitat priorities and making those dependencies clear to end-users will be crucial for their delivery. There may also be instances in which one potential measure can contribute to priorities that target both species recovery or enhancement and habitat creation or enhancement.

Drawing on stakeholder engagement – preference-based factors

Some LNRS pilots focused on stakeholder opinion and the frequency with which key issues and priorities featured in discussions, surveys, workshops or other initiatives in the area led by delivery partners. Information (such as tallies or keyword mentions) was used to inform shortlisting, helping to identify the most important priorities.

RAs can use the information to understand whether the most frequently listed priorities being fairly reflected in the agreed priorities list. They can also use this information to understand whether there is local support to deliver possible priorities. RAs should refer to this information when discussing mapping of potential measures.

Undertaking a transparent, balanced and iterative approach

The LNRS pilots found that using a prioritisation matrix can be a helpful way to visualise and present the shortlisting process. It will also help to maintain links between possible priorities and the associated potential measures to deliver them. Scoring priorities across a balance of criteria-based and preference-based factors can help to create agreed priorities or aid decision making by the steering group.

Drawing on both criteria-led and preference-led approaches is important because in isolation, neither approach is likely to be sufficient. For example, a preference-led approach will tend to be biased towards those who have been able to engage and their interests. Conversely, a criteria-based approach could rate a possible priority that helps the environment in lots of ways albeit to a lesser extent, above a possible priority that delivers a single thing which is of vital importance to the area. As a result, RAs are recommended to use a combination of these methods.

To improve inclusion, transparency and consensus-building amongst stakeholders, RAs may wish to share draft lists of priorities for feedback on whether the list reflects their understanding of the priorities in the strategy area.

4.2 Considerations for RAs and partners when finalising the list of priorities

Check against the following criteria to finalise the agreed priorities:

- Do the agreed priorities and potential measures contribute to a balanced range of the NEOs?
- Do the agreed priorities address the opportunities and pressures identified in the description of the strategy area (step 3 of LNRS preparation)?
- Do the agreed priorities sufficiently cover the variation of landscapes and ecosystems in the strategy area?
- Do the agreed priorities balance the contributions from different types of stakeholders? i.e., national experts through to local residents.
- Are there a manageable number of agreed priorities? The number of agreed priorities will depend on the factors listed above but should be manageable enough for end-users to understand and to focus delivery planning.

Allocate potential measures to agreed list of priorities:

Once RAs have agreed their priorities, they need to allocate potential measures to each of the priorities. This may require a technical task and finish group to ensure the potential measures that are allocated to each priority are appropriate. It will also be helpful to draw on the links between priorities and potential measures that were recorded when gathering information from stakeholders (see section 3.1).

5. Presentation of priorities and potential measures

5.1 Considerations for presenting priorities and potential measures

Once RAs have their agreed priorities and potential measures for the strategy area, they will need to consider how to display them in a way that will allow end users to easily understand the priorities and identify the potential measures that can be taken to deliver them. Box 4 provides an example of a priority described in different levels of details that could be useful for different end-users.

Priorities:

Improve species abundance and biodiversity in X city.

Improve species abundance and biodiversity in X city by connecting existing wildlife-rich sites.

Improve species abundance and biodiversity in X city by connecting existing open mosaic habitats on previously developed land (brownfield sites).

Potential measure:

Create urban meadows and ponds in X area of previously developed land.

Box 4: Example of a priority described in different levels of detail

Group related priorities:

To aid this, RAs may find it useful to group similar or related priorities together to make them more accessible to a less technical audience. They could include a more detailed list of priorities and potential measures in a matrix. Grouping priorities may also help RAs to cross-reference their priorities with neighbouring strategies and assist with national collation.

Some of the pilots categorised their priorities into overarching themes or objectives including habitat types, species, geographical areas and ecosystem services. For example, the Greater Manchester and Cumbria pilots grouped priorities by the broad habitat types relevant to their strategy areas.

Priorities could also be grouped if they address a common pressure or opportunity identified in the description of the strategy area (step 3 of LNRS preparation).

Consider how to present and record links across the contents of LNRS:

RAs should consider how to present the links from the description of the strategy area, including the pressures, issues and opportunities identified in step 3, to the agreed priorities and potential measures. A persuasive narrative throughout the statement of biodiversity priorities, describing the journey, will be an important tool for stakeholder engagement, including future delivery.

- RAs should also consider how to present the links between their agreed priorities and potential measures in a way that is accessible to different end users. The prioritisation process can be highly detailed, and it will be important to record and retain these detailed links (e.g., by tagging and presenting this in a matrix) across priorities and potential measures for stakeholders to refer to.
- It is also important to ensure that new readers have a clear narrative throughout the document, zooming out from the detail.

In addition, RAs should consider how they can present links across the statement of biodiversity priorities and the local habitat map. For example, linking potential measures to the areas that could become of particular importance for biodiversity and the wider environment.

5.2 Methods for presenting agreed priorities and potential measures

Experience suggests that a list or simple table are a helpful summary for the presentation of agreed priorities and potential measures. These options may be more accessible for readers who were not able to engage in the preparation process. It will also be helpful to include an appended matrix for stakeholders who want further detail.

RAs should consider asking stakeholders for their preference at the end of workshops or surveys; seeking feedback will help RAs to take the approach most effective for them and local partners.

Appendix: Non-exhaustive list of plans and strategies

- Local plans, neighbourhood plans, minerals and waste plans
- Local planning authority local ecological networks
- Biodiversity action plans or natural capital reporting
- Species and protected sites conservation strategies
- Local tree and woodland strategies, including Community Forest plans
- Local flood risk management plans, river basin management plans, catchment plans and planning systems, including water company biodiversity action plans, internal drainage board biodiversity action plan
- National park management plan
- Green infrastructure plans
- Area of outstanding natural beauty management plans
- Marine management plans, shoreline management plans, estuary strategies
- Regional/local climate adaptation plans, strategies or climate risk assessments
- Nature restoration/enhancement plans for infrastructure projects, including transport (e.g., Network Rail biodiversity action plan, National Highways England biodiversity action plan and HS2 Green Corridor programme) and energy (e.g., environmental statements in applications for development consent orders and active decommissioning strategy or management plans)