

Local nature recovery strategies: Advice on governance and working with partners

1. Background information

This advice is for Responsible Authorities (RAs) appointed to lead the preparation of a Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS). RAs are required by LNRS regulations to take reasonable steps to a) involve all supporting authorities for its strategy and b) involve such persons and organisations as appear appropriate. In particular, RAs are required to consider:

1. **who** the Responsible Authority (RA) intends to engage;
2. **how** the RA intends to engage various stakeholders; and
3. **which** specific aspect(s) of the Statement of Biodiversity Priorities/Local Habitat Map, engagement will focus on.

To fulfil these requirements RAs will need to proactively plan their stakeholder engagement. Setting this out in a stakeholder engagement plan will aid transparency and help the RA involve supporting authorities in this process.

The plan should also reflect other engagement requirements set out in LNRS regulations, including conducting a local public consultation, sharing work with neighbouring RAs and maintaining up-to-date online contact details and other information about the LNRS. Natural England will be able to support you in the creation of this plan. The plan should be actively used and amended during strategy preparation if necessary.

LNRSs are designed to encourage collaborative working, with partners helping to flag and resolve potential problems, as early as possible. You should share your plan with supporting authorities and neighbouring RAs for comment. Whilst you are not required to act on comments received during the preparation process (prior to consultation), you are strongly encouraged to give them due consideration to avoid this potentially leading to disagreement and delay when later seeking agreement to proceed to public consultation. Working closely with your supporting authorities to develop a strong stakeholder engagement plan will make this far less likely.

Planning for broad, participative stakeholder engagement is important because this will not only improve the quality of the LNRS itself, but also increase support for the delivery of the strategy through greater collective ownership. It will also provide an opportunity for you to ensure LNRS work aligns with wider communications and stakeholder engagement activities within your strategy area, as well as those of supporting authorities and wider stakeholders. This join-up will be an important way to reduce participation barriers for stakeholders (such as conflicting engagement events or inconsistent lines in announcements/newsletters) and ensure their time is best spent.

2. Advice on project governance

2.1 Steering group

Establishing a steering group to oversee LNRS preparation is an effective way of demonstrating how engagement requirements in the LNRS regulations are being met and ensuring key partners are closely involved.

You are strongly encouraged to include on your steering group all the **supporting authorities** for your strategy. These are any other local planning authorities (LPAs), including National Park Authorities as well as different types of local authority with responsibility for taking planning decisions, wholly or partly within the strategy area, and Natural England for all LNRSs across England. In the case of the local planning authorities, close involvement is vital to ensure the LNRSs and local plans do not conflict but can instead work together to better integrate nature recovery into land use planning decisions.

Your steering group should also consider including representatives of a manageable number of other key stakeholders reflecting a range of interests (you can use the list in section 3 for reference). The LNRS pilots had steering groups with an average of 8 organisations involved but some LNRS steering groups will need to be rather larger where there are a greater number of supporting authorities. Some factors you may wish to consider when deciding who to invite onto your steering group include:

- Where another organisation is leading a substantial area of work on your behalf, it may be appropriate to involve them in the steering group. This could include your local nature partnership or data/stakeholder leads (including hired facilitators).
- Natural England will support targeted engagement with the Environment Agency and Forestry Commission for all LNRSs. However, where there is national focus or pressure on a relevant local environmental issue, such as flood protection, water quality or woodland recovery, it may be appropriate to include representatives of these organisations.
- Where cross-boundary, -strategy, -border working may be particularly important, for example coastal/marine planning or environmental planning across county boundaries or the Welsh/Scottish borders, it may be useful to include those leading on these areas, such as neighbouring RAs.
- The presence of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) or locally active environmental non-governmental organisations (eNGOs) in the strategy area. These organisations may have already undertaken planning work for nature recovery and have relationships with local landowners, which was found to be useful in the LNRS pilots.

2.2 Use of technical groups

In establishing your governance, it is important to emphasize the need to engage more widely than the membership of the steering group alone. In many cases, technical experts, specialists and representatives, who are critical to the process, may not need to be on the steering group but can instead engage more directly in particular parts of LNRS preparation. This could be achieved through the creation of targeted task and finish groups to progress certain areas of work. Pilot task and finish groups focused on a range of topics, such as stakeholder engagement, mapping, or drafting the statement of biodiversity priorities. Others acted as a sounding board on various technical topics or themes which formed part of these activities.

You should consider how best to encourage shared responsibility and accountability through these layers of governance; for example, one of the pilots created a task and finish group of data experts, who were able to invest in data up to an agreed limit.

As with any project, engaging with relevant internal experts and experience within your authority and supporting authorities' structures, can help you to build consensus into the preparation process. A wide range of relevant departments may be relevant at various stages of preparation (e.g. communications, planning, environment, flooding, economic development and regeneration).

Other than experts and specialists, the use of more technically orientated groups may present an opportunity to involve stakeholders who can represent a range of sectors when considering these topics. These stakeholders may not be on the steering group but are nevertheless important in helping to shape the LNRS.

2.3 Establishing steering and technical groups

When setting up these groups, you may wish to consider undertaking a resource or expertise audit, considering what skills are required for the tasks they need to undertake and how you may be able to draw on existing experience and expertise.

When group membership is broadly agreed, you should clarify roles and responsibilities. An established way to formalise agreed roles and responsibilities is a Terms of Reference. This could consider:

- how the group will work together and with others, including other stakeholders;
- the specific contributions of group members, in terms of skills, experience and capacity;
- how decisions will be made, documented and implemented by the group, including accountability for implementation and monitoring;

- whether there are sufficient skilled resources within, or accessible to, the group to prepare the strategy or complete the group's specific task; and
- how data and information will be shared, managed and stored securely.

3. Key stakeholder groups (indicative only)

As stakeholders vary from area to area, you should undertake in-depth, locally-tailored engagement planning. As you are best placed to do this, government have not specified which groups must be engaged in an LNRS beyond those listed in the regulations. Instead, this advice includes an indicative list of stakeholder groups to support RA's engagement planning activities.

- With borders and stakeholders in common, **neighbouring RAs** represent key stakeholders for cross-strategy collaboration, both in terms of data and delivery planning. You should share your stakeholder engagement plan with neighbours, in addition to your steering group. As well as engaging neighbouring RAs throughout the process, regulations also require you to share a copy of the consultation draft ahead of consultation and final drafts ahead of publication with them. We recommend that, like supporting authorities, you give neighbouring RAs as much time as possible to input into final drafts. This allows for meaningful feedback to be given, including solutions to any potential issues that may arise.
- Given their role in holding environmental data and delivering environmental outcomes, **public bodies** are important LNRS partners. They are required to produce biodiversity reports as part of their enhanced biodiversity duty (with a few exceptions, e.g., parish councils) and have regard to LNRSs. This group includes, but is not limited to:
 - town and parish councils
 - utility (including water companies), transport (including Local Transport Authorities) and public health sectors
 - government departments and arms-length bodies

This includes both public bodies with downstream impacts on other strategy areas, as well as those with impacts on the strategy area (e.g., water companies within the catchment area, but outside of the strategy area). In particular RAs should draw on the data and expertise of local arms-length bodies: **Natural England** (who they must engage as supporting authorities in every area), **Environment Agency and Forestry Commission**. Public bodies may also represent useful existing networks for raising awareness or advertising upcoming events (e.g., engaging groups through business and public forums held by local parish councils).

- **Local environmental record centres (LERCs)** represent key partners for environmental expertise and data. Strong connections with your local environmental record centres will be important for LNRS preparation. Some LERCs are public bodies and will also have to 'have regard' to their relevant LNRS as part of their biodiversity duty.
- **Landowners and managers** represent key potential LNRS delivery partners, and include individual landowners and land managers, local farming, forestry and landowning groups and any other local private landholding groups such as schools, universities, hospitals and prisons. In addition to direct engagement with landowners and managers, the pilots found it very useful to engage closely with representative groups.
 - Many landowners and managers will likely already have environmental plans, a key source of local data. 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.
 - It will also be important to engage with those who have received, are applying for, or plan to apply for, landscape recovery grants and wider ELM scheme funding. These stakeholders form an important source of priorities, data and delivery plans. Further, it will be critical to involve those who may be looking to the LNRS as part of longer-term business planning activities.
- **eNGOs** also represent key partners for environmental expertise and data. Some eNGOs also represent significant land-owners or managers already delivering action for nature recovery and should also be considered within the stakeholder group above.

- **Partners and decision-makers for nature and the environment within and across borders** represent an important existing network of stakeholders with expertise relevant for LNRS preparation. These networks were found to be useful in the pilots to access many stakeholders. This group includes:
 - local scales (e.g. local nature partnerships, local resilience forums);
 - catchment scales (e.g. catchment partnerships, catchment-sensitive farming partnerships);
 - regional and landscape scales (e.g. areas of outstanding natural beauty, the Oxford-Cambridge pan-regional partnership);
 - national scales (e.g., Welsh and Scottish borders); and
 - estuarine and marine zones.

Engaging these groups is an important way to support join up on prioritisation and mapping of proposals between LNRS and other relevant spatial plans and strategies.

- Engagement of the **local community** is a key way to ensure the LNRS reflects local priorities in terms of nature recovery and wider environmental issues. This engagement should be designed to build upon the environmental issues that affect residents. It should reach out to a wide range of local interest and community groups including those who are underrepresented. These local groups may also be interested in contributing to LNRS delivery in the future.
- **Businesses** should be engaged to ensure the LNRS reflects local priorities. Their engagement can also support development of local partnerships between businesses and delivery partners. This stakeholder group includes individual and national businesses (including the house-building and construction sector), local enterprise partnerships and representative groups for business. To encourage engagement, communications to this group could draw on well-established relevant local environmental problems impacting businesses (e.g. flood risk, water quality etc.) or specific business interests (e.g. developers will use LNRSs when identifying locations for offsite biodiversity net gain compensation).

In addition to this list, a good stakeholder engagement plan will also consider internal engagement across responsible and supporting authority organisations. This should encompass a range of engagement from awareness-raising communications to directly funding the time of internal experts preparing elements of the strategy.

You should also consider stakeholders in terms of the specific involvement you anticipate them wanting or needing, with the common method being an influence-interest matrix. You should seek to draw on existing expertise within your own RA and supporting authorities' organisations. Where internal or external capacity is not available, there are some relevant online resources you can draw on. For example, LGA Knowledge Hub or [Ensuring Effective Stakeholder Engagement - GCS \(civilservice.gov.uk\)](https://civilservice.gov.uk/gcs/ensuring-effective-stakeholder-engagement).

4. Advice on LNRS engagement approaches

Raising awareness

You should try to build awareness early on in the preparation process. For example, this could be done via sharing newsletters and advertising webinars. This can introduce and build a joint understanding of what LNRS are, particularly for stakeholders outside of the environment sector. Use of social media platforms, along with more traditional communications channels can enable a wider reach; you should also ask relevant local partner organisations to advertise sessions.

Early, wide advertising of sessions can bring to light interested parties that have not previously been identified by local stakeholder analysis. By engaging early, gaps can be identified and preferred methods can be adjusted to the additional audiences.

Accessing under-represented groups – Nature Moments (Using libraries to connect people to nature): Case Study 1

Libraries are increasingly becoming a hub for their communities, offering many services, with the library teams understanding the communities they serve. The Natural England/Hampshire Libraries Nature Moments pilot project was used to explore how regional library services and Natural England could work in partnership for mutual benefit for the organisations and the audiences and communities they serve. This was tested by undertaking community Green Infrastructure mapping to improve the local community's connection to nature. One of the goals of the project was to collaborate and share stakeholders to maximise the benefits of the project.

At Aldershot library the Greater Nepali community group were identified by the library team as one of the stakeholder groups that could benefit from the project. The team were able to gain a greater understanding of the barriers facing this community, including language, culture and access. Engagement has continued after the pilot ended, with further activities organised. Following the success of the pilot, Hampshire Library Service are considering ways to deliver Nature Moments in at least half the branches in the service in the Spring of 2023.

Keeping engagement regular and joined-up

Stakeholders should be kept informed of progress (including the status of drafts), decisions made, and upcoming events to ensure that they are able to prepare relevant input before it is needed. This should result in them feeling engaged with the process, rather than being consulted on pre-determined outcomes. This approach should also reduce the number of challenging responses at the consultation stage, as stakeholder feedback will have been considered throughout the preparation process.

For example, before priorities and measures can be collected, all stakeholders need to be informed on the initial stages of the Statement of Biodiversity Priorities, which provides a description of the strategy area and its biodiversity (for the order of steps to be followed, please refer to Annex 1). This information should be shared with stakeholders before attending workshops or completing surveys, to allow them to read and discuss with colleagues/partners. You should consider using regular newsletters to disseminate information. Webinars or workshops can be used for more interactive sessions to gain feedback to inform the future stages.

Planning engagement from the stakeholders' perspective will maximise the likelihood of their continued interest and collaboration. As a steering group, you should agree an engagement approach for stakeholders working on other relevant spatial plans and strategies, such as river basin management plans, tree and woodland strategies, and national parks management plans. You should consider:

- How you can coordinate or sequence events with other initiatives and projects that stakeholders are being asked to provide input on;
- How you can feed into other strategies or plans, saving duplication of stakeholder time.

This will be particularly important when engaging stakeholders working at a national or regional scale, for example, government departments, national businesses and NGOs, who may have an interest in multiple LNRS. For example, where stakeholders are significant landowners or managers across strategy areas, you should draw on cross-border join-up with neighbouring RAs. Natural England senior advisers will be able to support you in engaging those organisations that will not be able to participate in your LNRS process as fully as they would like to, due to resource constraints for example, to ensure that their input is made possible. This is part of Natural England's role to facilitate engagement in LNRS and deliver broader scale join-up of LNRSs across the country, to help deliver a Nature Recovery Network.

You should also ensure that information is shared in a format appropriate for the target stakeholder group, with accessible language for non-technical experts. You should consider carrying out multiple workshops and webinars at varying times of the day to enable a wide range of stakeholders to engage. For example, farmers and land managers may be more likely to attend workshops and webinars in the evenings, rather

than during working hours as well as at certain times of the year. The location of these workshops can also be important to consider. There will be further advice provided around the prioritisation and mapping of measures process.

Holding workshops online can be an efficient way to engage people and include those that would not be able to attend a face-to-face meeting. However, face-to-face events are also recommended as valuable opportunities to build relationships, particularly with regards to delivery partners, and engage those with more limited access to technology. We also recommend hiring professional facilitators, as several of the LNRS pilot teams found this to be very helpful; facilitators helped to ensure engagement processes were undertaken in an unbiased way.

Grouping stakeholders – Greater Manchester Combined Authorities (GMCA) Local Nature Recovery Strategy Pilot: Case Study 2

The Pilot Area Team of the GMCA LNRS pilot took the decision to create thematic, habitat-based working groups of technical experts based on the core habitats identified in the strategy area. The membership of these groups was determined through stakeholder analysis.

When wider engagement was undertaken, stakeholders were invited to workshops which were based around the National Character Areas within the strategy area, although there was also an option for stakeholders to attend a strategy wide workshop. Both the habitat working groups and workshops around geographic areas encouraged stakeholders to input relevant to their interest or knowledge and allowed for focussed discussion. However, it is important to consider how to build consensus across various sectors and topics of interest which strategy-wide working can support.

For more detailed advice on engagement (not tailored to the LNRS process), you can also refer to Natural England's publication [“Embedding an evidence-led, best-practice culture of engagement: learning from the evidence.”](#)

Annex 1

Figure included in LNRS Statutory Guidance: the order of steps to be followed in preparing contents of a local nature recovery strategy.

