



Department
for Environment,
Food & Rural Affairs

Government response to the Office for Environmental Protection review of Local Nature Recovery Strategies and their role in contributing to nature recovery commitments in England

October 2025



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Food & Rural Affairs

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Presented to Parliament pursuant to section 29(6) of the Environment Act
2021

We are responsible for improving and protecting the environment. We aim to grow a green economy and sustain thriving rural communities. We also support our world-leading food, farming and fishing industries.

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Introduction

The government welcomes the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP)'s report '[A review of Local Nature Recovery Strategies and their role in contributing to nature recovery commitments in England](#)' and the insightful and constructive recommendations it contains. The OEP's support in addressing the collective challenge of reversing nature's decline and improving the wider environment is essential.

The report recognises the important role that local nature recovery strategies (LNRSs) are intended to play in helping to meet government's environmental commitments and the huge amount of effort and progress that has already been made in preparing LNRSs across the country. Local leadership, knowledge and support are critical if nature is to recover, and LNRSs are the vehicle that enables this.

LNRSs build on extensive experience of previous locally led efforts to conserve and enhance nature, but the process of preparing LNRSs is new and challenging. Firstly, planning for nature recovery is a new responsibility for local government. This has required the development of new organisational expertise and the creation or adaptation of relationships with key partner organisations. Secondly, implicit to the purpose of LNRSs is the need to decide which actions are most important or urgent. This is significantly more challenging than compiling all nature-positive proposals, but it is crucial to ensuring that nature recovery effort can be focussed where it will have most benefit and that LNRSs can be used effectively for other decision-making processes, such as land use planning.

Defra and its arm's length bodies have worked collaboratively with LNRS responsible authorities (RAs) to rise to this challenge and to prepare strong, impactful strategies that are tailored to local circumstances and priorities. Much has been learned through the process, and the OEP's report plays an important role in capturing this knowledge so that we can build on the progress we've already made. Through the legal requirement for all LNRSs to be reviewed and republished every 3 to 10 years the role that LNRSs play in driving nature recovery and environmental improvement can continue to adapt and grow over time.

This response was laid in Parliament and published in accordance with section 29 of the Environment Act 2021.

Summary of the OEP's findings and recommendations

Sections 104 to 108 of the Environment Act 2021 create the requirement for there to be LNRSs covering the whole of England and establish who will prepare them, what LNRSs must contain and what data government will provide to support this process. The Environment (Local Nature Recovery Strategies) (Procedure) Regulations 2023 create more specific requirements regarding LNRS preparation, publication, review and republication, while the [LNRS statutory guidance](#) expands upon what an LNRS should contain. Government's intention for how the actions proposed in LNRSs will be delivered

and what LNRSs will collectively achieve are set out in policy documents, including the current Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP).

Preparation of LNRSs was ongoing across in England during the period of the OEP's review, with 4 of the 48 LNRSs completed and published before the OEP's report was published on 19 June 2025. Evidence to inform the OEP's review was gathered through engagement with LNRS RAs and partner organisations, and through review of available material from a sample of 12 LNRS areas.

The OEP's stated intention was to focus findings and recommendations on the strategic issues where action could improve the prospects of LNRSs delivering for national nature recovery commitments, as they are intended to do. In summary, the OEP recommendations focus on:

- the importance of getting all 48 LNRSs published as soon as possible
- the need for greater certainty about how LNRSs will be resourced, used and delivered
- issues with the quality of data available for LNRS preparation
- proposed timings for when LNRSs should be reviewed and updated

Summary of the government response

The government is able to respond positively to the recommendations in the OEP's report, with detailed responses set out below.

LNRSs are an important policy tool, which help us meet our ambitious nature recovery commitments through empowering local people and decision makers and by focussing effort where it will have most benefit. Government is determined to work with partners to enable this tool to be used effectively and for its role to continue to develop and grow.

This response seeks to provide further clarity and certainty regarding government's intentions for LNRSs, as both are important for effective partnership working. As the OEP has noted, much has already been achieved in the preparation of LNRSs, and government is keen to sustain momentum to drive delivery of the published LNRSs so that nature in England can recover.

The government response to the OEP's recommendations

Recommendation 1 – Publish all strategies at the earliest possible opportunity

OEP recommendation 1

Responsible Authorities should, together with Supporting Authorities and Defra, implement course-corrective action to ensure that all LNRS are published at the earliest opportunity.

Government's response to recommendation 1

Government shares the OEP's view of the importance of LNRSs for meeting environmental targets and commitments, and the need for complete England-wide coverage of published LNRSs as soon as possible. While each RA is responsible for the LNRS for their area, Defra and its arm's length bodies have an important role to play in providing support.

As recognised in the OEP's report, LNRS preparation is a novel and challenging task, and those individuals and organisations working on this have collectively made great progress. Each LNRS published is the product of a partnership and a key early step in an ongoing cycle of delivery, review and republication that will drive and direct nature recovery action over the long term. While it is important to take the time necessary to build strong foundations for the long term, this must be balanced against the urgency of having LNRSs in place so that they can direct and encourage much-needed action for nature recovery.

Since publication of the OEP's report, a further 5 strategies (Greater Essex, Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland, Greater Manchester, Derbyshire, and Berkshire) have been published, with 21 more preparing for publication, and 10 currently at or approaching public consultation. The [map of LNRS areas on GOV.UK](#) is being regularly updated to reflect progress across England, to provide greater transparency about which LNRSs have been published and which not.

Defra has continued to provide direct support to RAs, with Natural England working closely with Environment Agency and Forestry Commission colleagues in local area teams. RAs have been encouraged to work directly with each other, through an online platform and through peer groups.

Information gathered by Defra's arm's length bodies enables additional technical support to be provided to specific LNRSs, or to all RAs via regular newsletters and question and answer sessions. As well as technical support, Natural England has been able to move staff resource towards LNRSs where this support can help improve timelines. Based on

the monitoring, and on information provided by RAs, government expects the majority of LNRSs to be completed and published by the end of 2025.

Defra ministers have written to all LNRS RAs to reiterate the important role that LNRSs are expected to play and highlight the need for the remaining LNRSs to be completed and published as soon as possible. During summer 2025 officials also held meetings with RAs for whom publication during 2025 will be challenging. These meetings explored the reasons why these RAs were progressing more slowly and considered how work might be accelerated to enable funding to support LNRS delivery to be allocated confidently.

Recommendation 2 – Define how LNRS contribute to national nature recovery commitments

OEP recommendation 2

Defra, in consultation with Arm's Length Bodies and Responsible Authorities, should define and clearly explain the role that each LNRS will play in contributing to national nature recovery commitments - in particular, what each LNRS will deliver for legally-binding targets and a revised EIP. This should be quantified wherever possible and include an understanding of how LNRS stack up at the national level.

Defra should also explain the significance of LNRS in relation to other national and local mechanisms for nature recovery.

Government's response to recommendation 2

Government is currently preparing its revised EIP. The revised EIP will clarify how legally binding targets set under the Environment Act (2021) will be delivered. The [land use in England consultation](#), which concluded in April 2025, set out non-prescriptive, high-level analysis of how this delivery could be distributed across England in a way that manages trade-offs across objectives. LNRSs have an important role in delivery of targets for biodiversity and for wider environmental improvement by establishing where action should be targeted for greatest benefit.

Defra and its arm's length bodies are currently exploring how best to collate and combine key information from all published LNRSs to create a coherent national product. We have engaged with nature recovery stakeholders to understand what information they would want a national product to contain and how they would use it alongside the individual strategies.

A combined national map of nature recovery actions proposed by LNRSs will provide a vision of potential nature recovery across England. This will illustrate how areas of existing importance for nature could be expanded and connected to form a healthier and more robust network of habitats. It will also enable evaluation of identified opportunities against national targets and goals. It will be a vision and not a fixed plan because it is for landowners and managers to decide which proposed actions to take forward or not. Many

factors will affect these choices, including the support and incentives that government provides, but it will be challenging to accurately predict what proportion of proposed actions will be taken forward and where. The objective for LNRSs is to steer and inform landowner and manager choices so that more action for nature and the environment is taken in the locations where it will have greater benefit, and for individual actions to connect better at a landscape scale.

Government's intention is to require all LNRSs to be reviewed and republished regularly, and to use this process to capture information on what action has actually been taken and where. This will help show how LNRSs are supporting delivery of national targets and allow proposed actions to be updated to reflect the latest information and circumstances to ensure that each LNRS remains a current and relevant tool for nature recovery. It will also enable the national vision to evolve to reflect the choices that landowners and managers have taken so it too remains current and relevant.

Defra and its arm's length bodies are integrating LNRSs into the ongoing development and delivery of wider policy on nature recovery. As more LNRSs are published across the country, they are expected to increasingly become the focus of nature recovery activity in each area. We will work with nature recovery stakeholders to ensure that the role of LNRSs, and how they work alongside other nature recovery initiatives, is clearly articulated.

Recommendation 3 – Establish the long-term governance and resourcing arrangements for LNRS

OEP recommendation 3

Defra should, as soon as possible, establish a long-term approach to LNRS governance and resourcing. This should set out the roles and responsibilities (particularly for coordination, oversight, monitoring and evaluation), and its commitment to sufficient long-term resourcing.

Government's response to recommendation 3

The [English Devolution White Paper](#) sets an ambitious new framework for devolution in England, and the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill currently before Parliament will deliver on the government's commitment to widen and deepen devolution across England. The Bill identifies environment and climate change as one of 7 areas of competence for Strategic Authorities, and the White Paper explains that the LNRS RA role will be aligned and enhanced to be at the heart of this function.

This enhanced role builds on the existing statutory role for RAs to prepare and publish the LNRSs for their area and periodically review and update it to take account of what has been delivered. The enhanced role will enable Strategic Authorities to work with partners to drive delivery of the nature recovery actions their LNRS proposes. Defra and its arm's length bodies have been engaging with RAs to develop a more detailed understanding of

the relevant roles and responsibilities. Our intention is to continue to work with RAs to co-develop a written description of what is expected of an RA during the 'delivery phase' of an LNRS. It is expected that this will include:

- leading and convening a delivery partnership
- embedding LNRSs into local decision-making
- identifying strategic projects and facilitating project development
- tracking and reporting on activities or projects delivering LNRS priorities

Defra has provided RAs with £6.5 million in grant funding in the 2025 to 2026 financial year to support them in transitioning to delivery of LNRSs. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) has set out that [the Integrated Settlement](#) will include an environment and climate change theme, with LNRSs expected to be included from the 2026 to 2027 financial year. The multi-year Integrated Settlement aims to provide funding certainty across the spending review period by providing an indication of expected annual funding, including for LNRSs.

Recommendation 4 – Clarify funding streams and delivery mechanisms for coherent on-the-ground nature recovery action

OEP recommendation 4

Defra should work with its Arm's Length Bodies and Responsible Authorities to determine the most appropriate funding and delivery mechanisms. This should detail how much funding is associated with each delivery mechanism, assess whether this is sufficient, and set out how they will work coherently together to deliver local and national nature recovery commitments.

In addition, Arm's Length Bodies should set out how they will use LNRS to inform the exercise of their functions.

Government's response to recommendation 4

LNRSs have been created to be a tool to help encourage and target habitat creation and improvement where it will be most beneficial. Government's intention is to make the maximum use of LNRSs across relevant policy areas, enabling policies to better target and prioritise effort, and helping us to achieve more and be more efficient by focussing collective efforts on an agreed set of actions for each area. As the OEP's report notes, biodiversity net gain, the biodiversity duty and public authorities, and the planning system are existing and established drivers that will encourage and enable delivery of the actions LNRSs propose. Government has previously provided LNRS RAs and partners with a summary of how it sees LNRSs being used and delivered, and this summary was shared with the OEP to inform its report. Government is keen to add to and strengthen existing

policies which encourage LNRS delivery and will provide further updates and communications as this work progresses.

Government is also keen that partners in the public, private and voluntary sectors look to the published LNRSs and consider how they might support their delivery. Taking a more spatial and cross-sector approach, as will be supported by the planned land use framework, will help in identifying further opportunities for nature-based solutions and associated funding.

Natural England, Environment Agency and the Forestry Commission are updating internal policies and operational processes to make good use of LNRSs in the exercise of their functions that will support LNRS delivery. For Natural England, nature recovery is at the heart of their organisational purpose and LNRSs provide a powerful new tool to help coordinate and target action on the ground. Natural England's organisational strategy is currently being updated with publication expected later this autumn. Environment Agency and the Forestry Commission are seeking to use LNRSs to inform decisions about grant making, regulation and land management in their operations.

Recommendation 5 – Update the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)

OEP recommendation 5

MHCLG should, as soon as possible, update the NPPF to describe the weight that should be given to LNRS when plan making and in making planning decisions. This should set out how that weighting applies to different component parts of LNRS.

Government's response to recommendation 5

Earlier this year, government updated Natural Environment and Plan-making [Planning Practice Guidance on LNRSs](#). These updates include references to how LNRSs will provide valuable evidence for plan making and may contain information to support decisions on planning applications. The guidance also provides clarity on how local planning authorities have regard to LNRSs in both the plan making and decision-making process.

In addition to the existing LNRS 'have regard' duty set out in Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 (as amended by Environment Act 2021), government has committed to commence the new system for plan-making provided by the Levelling Up & Regeneration Act 2023 before the end of 2025, which includes new legal duties on plan makers to 'take account' of LNRS. The Planning and Infrastructure Bill, currently undergoing Parliamentary scrutiny, will extend these new duties to Spatial Development Strategies.

The [National Planning Policy Framework](#) is clear that planning policies and decisions should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by protecting and

enhancing valued landscapes and sites of biodiversity value. The framework also sets out that local plans should identify, map and safeguard components of local wildlife-rich habitats and wider ecological networks. It was revised in December 2024, as part of which specific reference is made to LNRSs where land is released from the Green Belt for major development involving the provision of housing. In that context, where land has been identified as having particular potential for habitat creation or nature recovery within LNRSs, it requires that proposals contribute towards these outcomes. This does not mean that LNRSs should prevent development, but rather that the information they contain should inform actions to improve habitats in conjunction with relevant development proposals. We intend to consult on further updates to the National Planning Policy Framework later this year, which will include policy on the role of LNRSs in planning.

Recommendation 6 – Establish a baseline for the spatial components of LNRS

OEP recommendation 6

Defra should establish a baseline for the spatial component of all LNRS.

Defra and Natural England should also consider where they might best intervene to support improved access to data relevant to LNRS.

Defra should ensure key nationally significant datasets are updated (e.g. the Priority Habitat Inventory and Agricultural Land Classification) to inform LNRS.

Government's response to recommendation 6

Defra and its arm's length bodies have supported LNRS preparation through the creation of the [LNRS data viewer](#). The data viewer, developed by the [Natural Capital and Ecosystem Assessment Programme](#), signposts access to relevant publicly held datasets, provides advice on how they might be relevant to LNRS preparation and enables RAs to download data for their area. As the OEP's report notes, the viewer has been well received by RAs and it provides a mechanism for government to provide new or improved datasets ahead of LNRS review and republication.

Government recognises the importance of high quality, accessible data to inform good policy development and decision making. As the OEP outlines, while issues with data quality and availability have created challenges for LNRS preparation, it is a wider cross-cutting issue of relevance across environmental policy.

The land use consultation, which concluded in April, included a section on 'Accessible and high-quality data'. This sought feedback on how government could improve access to and management of spatial data to inform decision-making. Government is currently considering responses to the consultation ahead of the publication of the land use framework.

The land use consultation also included a question on updating the Agricultural Land Classification (ALC) system. Updating the ALC system would provide up-to-date and accurate information on land quality. The government remains committed to reviewing and maintaining accurate land classification data to support planning and policy decisions.

Work also began during 2025 to review and revise the priority habitat lists and definitions and acquire additional data to update the Priority Habitat Inventory.

Recommendation 7 – Require early review of LNRS and clarify the process for ‘exceptional’ amendment

OEP recommendation 7

The Secretary of State should require early review of all LNRS. This should be no later than three years following publication of the last LNRS.

Defra should define the ‘triggers’ for when full review of LNRS will be required, and the intended purpose of such review. It should also set out when and how Responsible Authorities might undertake local ‘exceptional’ amendments to LNRS outside of the formal review process.

Government’s response to recommendation 7

Government is in full agreement with the OEP that LNRSs have a significant role to play in meeting our environmental targets and commitments, and that for LNRSs to perform this role it is important that they are kept up to date.

The LNRS regulations give the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs discretion about exactly when to announce that all LNRSs should be reviewed, updated and republished. The first review and republication must be announced 3 to 10 years after the LNRS regulations came into force, which was April 2023. Subsequent reviews must be announced 3 to 10 years after the last review was announced. This discretion is intended to help align the reviews and republications with the review and republication of other plans and strategies, such as the EIP.

It is expected that it will take each RA significantly longer to prepare their first LNRS compared with subsequent reviews and republications. This is because, as the OEP recognises, preparation of LNRSs is a challenging and novel task which generates significant amounts of knowledge, experience and lessons learnt. It is also expected that there will be less variability in the time it will take different RAs to complete LNRS reviews, because the process of preparing the first version will ensure that each area has strong leadership and collaborative working practices in place and that best practice has been established.

The timing of the first review and republication of LNRSs needs to balance the importance of updating the actions they propose to help us meet our goals and targets with having a

period of stability to deliver the actions that the first generation of LNRSs propose. It will also need to consider how best to align with periodic EIP updates and the cycle of reporting under the public authority biodiversity duty. Government has noted the OEP's recommendation and is continuing to consider timing for the first review and republication in a way that best balances these different factors, and within what the law requires.

Government will prepare some written advice to share with LNRS RAs to set out some of the factors that government would expect to be relevant when considering any requests to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to make amendments to LNRSs between review and republication cycles. This process is intended to be used only in exceptional circumstances, to make sure that all stakeholders have stability and certainty in the collaboratively agreed plan.

Annex A. List of the OEP's recommendations

Recommendation 1: Publish all strategies at the earliest possible opportunity

Responsible Authorities should, together with Supporting Authorities and Defra, implement course-corrective action to ensure that all LNRS are published at the earliest opportunity.

Recommendation 2: Define how LNRS contribute to national nature recovery commitments

Defra, in consultation with Arm's Length Bodies and Responsible Authorities, should define and clearly explain the role that each LNRS will play in contributing to national nature recovery commitments - in particular, what each LNRS will deliver for legally-binding targets and a revised EIP. This should be quantified wherever possible and include an understanding of how LNRS stack up at the national level.

Defra should also explain the significance of LNRS in relation to other national and local mechanisms for nature recovery.

Recommendation 3: Establish the long-term governance and resourcing arrangements for LNRS

Defra should, as soon as possible, establish a long-term approach to LNRS governance and resourcing. This should set out the roles and responsibilities (particularly for coordination, oversight, monitoring and evaluation), and its commitment to sufficient long-term resourcing.

Recommendation 4: Clarify funding streams and delivery mechanisms for coherent on-the-ground nature recovery action

Defra should work with its Arm's Length Bodies and Responsible Authorities to determine the most appropriate funding and delivery mechanisms. This should detail how much funding is associated with each delivery mechanism, assess whether this is sufficient, and set out how they will work coherently together to deliver local and national nature recovery commitments.

In addition, Arm's Length Bodies should set out how they will use LNRS to inform the exercise of their functions.

Recommendation 5: Update the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)

MHCLG should, as soon as possible, update the NPPF to describe the weight that should be given to LNRS when plan making and in making planning decisions. This should set out how that weighting applies to different component parts of LNRS.

Recommendation 6: Establish a baseline for the spatial components of LNRS

Defra should establish a baseline for the spatial component of all LNRS.

Defra and Natural England should also consider where they might best intervene to support improved access to data relevant to LNRS.

Defra should ensure key nationally significant datasets are updated (e.g. the Priority Habitat Inventory and Agricultural Land Classification) to inform LNRS.

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