



How do we ensure that Local Nature Recovery Strategies drive delivery?

5 key findings from an EPIC workshop



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Introduction

This briefing summarises the findings of an online Environmental Policy Implementation Community (EPIC) workshop on Local Nature Recovery Strategies. The workshop involved hearing from three speakers, a discussion in breakout rooms, and a finishing plenary session to feed back learning.

The speakers were:

- Sam Evans, Head of Natural Environment, Greater Manchester Combined Authority
- Matt Browne, Head of Policy & Advocacy, Wildlife & Countryside Link
- Sachi Shah, LNRS Project Manager, Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Natural Environment Partnership

The workshop took place on the 13th March 2024, 1.30-2.30pm, and [a recording of the presentations can be found here on the IES website](#).

Background

UK nature is in crisis. Last year, the [State of Nature Report](#) found that the UK was one of the most nature-depleted countries on the planet.

Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) are one of the Government's flagship policies to reverse these trends and ensure that local areas in England are protecting and creating appropriate natural habitats. 48 responsible authorities in England have been tasked with producing a Local Nature Recovery Strategy for their area, which will identify priorities and opportunities alongside and produce a local habitat map. They are currently being developed by responsible authorities in partnership with local stakeholders, and are expected to be finished in early 2025.

EPIC held a workshop with community members in March 2024, to look ahead and discuss how we can ensure LNRS are used and drive delivery on nature recovery, once they have been completed.

About EPIC

[EPIC](#) is a community of environmental scientists within the [Institution of Environmental Sciences \(IES\)](#), who support the urgent implementation of policies that lead to the protection and regeneration of the natural world. It brings together voices to call for ambitious and deliverable policy, and provides local authorities and other decision makers with the knowledge, insights and tools to deliver on the ground.

To keep up to date with EPIC's work, you can sign up for the [quarterly EPIC newsletter](#).

Key findings

1. **LNRS have huge potential to drive the delivery of our nature goals, but are at risk of ‘gathering dust on a shelf’**

LNRS are not delivery plans. They identify key opportunities for nature recovery, but do not bind local authorities or landowners to act on these opportunities. They map key areas for habitat protection and restoration, but do not confer new protections on these areas.

Yet LNRS do have huge potential to inform and drive the delivery of national and local goals for the environment and nature. They can do this through informing decisions on how land is used and funding is allocated. To be successful, steps must be taken and mechanisms put in place to ensure that decision makers are both aware of the LNRS and are guided by it when making decisions. As several of our speakers commented, a strategy ‘gathering dust on a shelf’ has no impact by itself, no matter how well thought through or evidenced.

2. **LNRS need to have a strong voice in planning decisions**

The planning system is the main control on how land is used in England, so having a strong weight in planning decisions is key for LNRS to achieve impact.

An amendment to the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act in September 2023 required Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) to ‘take account’ of LNRS. While this represents a strengthened legal duty for LPAs, what ‘take into account’ means in practice is unclear, especially considering local authorities are all at different stages of developing their Local Plans.

The promised government guidance on this is yet to be published. The guidance must not allow for LNRS to become easily ignored or a tick-box exercise, but instead it should give LNRS a strong voice for nature in planning decisions.

The Biodiversity Net Gain strategic significance multiplier is another way that LNRS can encourage impactful and locally-appropriate decisions for nature through the planning system. This stipulates that if biodiversity gains are delivered in LNRS key areas, then within the biodiversity metric, they will be worth 15% more.

However, reports have indicated that [Defra intends to remove the part of the strategic significance multiplier that would penalise building on priority LNRS areas](#). This could incentivise developers to build on priority LNRS areas, as they will have no penalty for doing so, but if they create biodiversity gains onsite then this would receive a positive multiplier.

3. Key guidance is missing

As well as planning guidance, responsible authorities and other stakeholders are also waiting for guidance on how LNRS will align with new environmental land management schemes (ELMS). Government is still exploring how LNRS and ELMS funding initiatives, as well as schemes such as Biodiversity Net Gain will line up, stack and work together. The Land Use Framework for England, which would provide strategic guidance for managing land demands, is also delayed awaiting publication.

Without this guidance, local authorities and landowners are currently operating under considerable uncertainty, and it is difficult to communicate the overall vision for nature recovery in England without understanding how these different pieces fit together. Guidance should be produced as soon as possible, so that land managers and other stakeholders can make informed decisions and don't have to delay action.

4. Local stakeholders need to use and buy into LNRS

Decisions are constantly being made at the local level that LNRS can and should be informing and influencing. If local stakeholders, such as land managers and farmers, developers, businesses, institutions and environmental and community groups voluntarily integrate their LNRS into their plans, and use it to guide their decision-making, then this will out-size the influence and impact of LNRS.



To do this, LNRS need to provide a compelling vision and argument for why they are important and why they should be used. This includes how they link up with other initiatives to fit into the national plan for nature recovery.

It is also important to ensure that the strategy document itself is user-friendly, accessible and engaging. Speakers and participants mentioned the steps their responsible authorities are taking to ensure public engagement with the LNRS, including running multiple and tailored workshops and producing LNRS user guides.

Trust in such initiatives is low for some stakeholders, especially land managers and farmers, who have been historically subject to numerous different initiatives and narratives. This includes current and pervasive uncertainty around the rollout of ELMS, as the transition away from CAP style payments continues. To help to overcome these barriers, there needs to be clear, confident and long-term support for LNRS from government, as well as clarity on related schemes such as ELMS.

5. Planning for the long-term

LNRS are not 'one-off' documents: a review and revision process will take place every 3-10 years. However, funding has only been provided to responsible authorities until March 2025, when LNRS are expected to have been developed and published.

It is important that funding is available for monitoring and evaluation between reviews, to ensure that the strategies reflect current local nature trends, and are as effective as possible. The lack of long-term funding provision does not send a confident signal to stakeholders, and there have been reports of issues with recruitment and retention in LNRS management roles.

Government should not wait until the last moment to provide funding past 2025, and should provide upfront funding to ensure confidence and signal their belief in the long-term success and value of LNRS.

About the IES

[The Institution of Environmental Sciences \(the IES\)](#) is at the forefront of uniting this interdisciplinary field around a shared goal: to work with speed, vision and expertise to solve the world's most pressing environmental challenges, together. As the global professional membership body for environmental scientists, we support a diverse network of professionals all over the world – and at every stage of their education and careers – to connect, develop, progress and inspire.

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