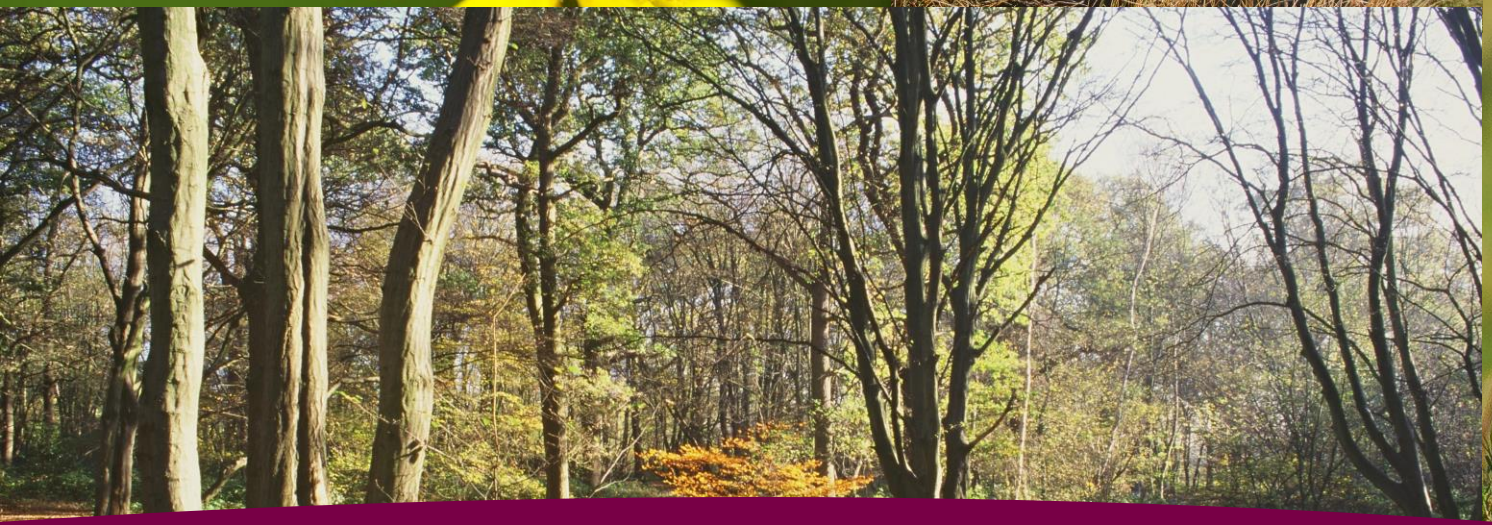

Protected Site Strategies and Other Environmental Levers

A guide to aid preparation and delivery of Protected Site Strategies

NE793

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Introduction

Introduction

What does this document do?

This document provides an introductory guide to the interactions between the Protected Site Strategy (PSS) mechanism and other environmental levers, covering key legislation, national strategies, local strategies and funding mechanisms. PSS is a flexible tool which may be applied to any protected site in England and may therefore be concerned with environmental threats and policy contexts: it is not possible to capture every possible interaction with the most likely levers reviewed here. Several levers reviewed are in development; information presented as available as of May 2025.

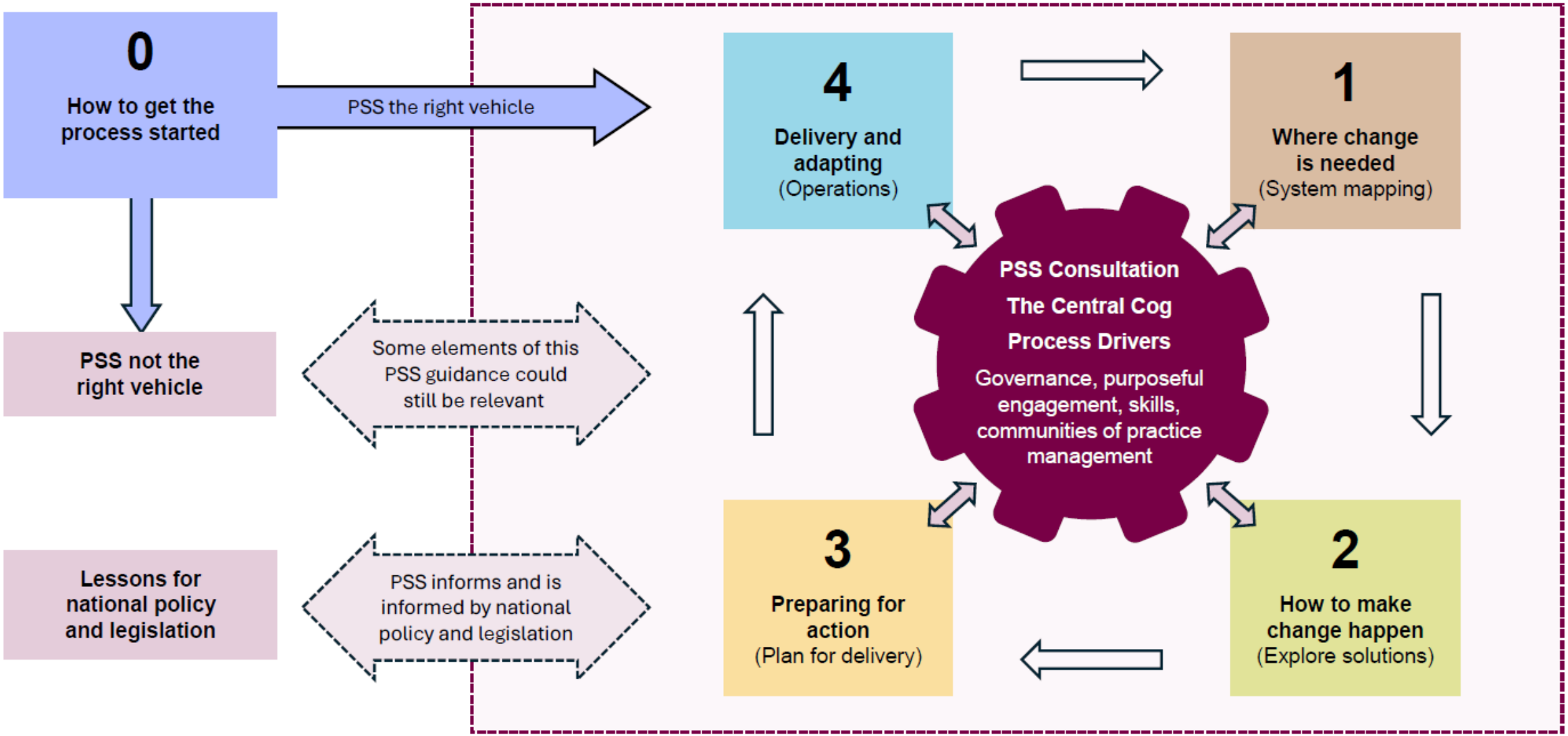
It is intended to be read alongside the “How to Prepare and Deliver Protected Site Strategies: A Collaborative Approach to Nature Recovery” guidance. Where applicable, this document provides specific suggestions by phase of PSS development, as explained in the main guidance document and shown overleaf.

This document is intended for informational purposes only. It provides a summary of relevant policies, funding mechanisms, and regulatory levers to support understanding and discussion. It does not constitute legal advice or guidance.

Who is this guide for?

- Natural England staff and partners with responsibility for preparing and delivering PSS
- Other Natural England staff and partners who will need to engage with local PSS
- Anyone with an interest in PSS.

Process for Developing and Delivering a PSS



Legal and Regulatory Framework

Protected Site Strategies – what does the law say?

The **Environment Act 2021 – Section 110 – Protected Site Strategies** states (in sub-section 1):

Natural England may prepare and publish a strategy for:

- Improving the conservation and management of a protected site
- managing the impact of plans, projects and other activities **(wherever undertaken)** on the conservation and management of the protected site.

PSS can therefore consider the impact of plans, projects and activities not just within the protected site that is legally protected, but also outside that geographical boundary.

The Act (sub-section 5) requires Natural England to **consult with** the following when preparing a PSS:

a) Local planning authorities

b) Any Public Authority in England affected by the strategy

c) Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities (IFCAs)

d) The Marine Management Organisation (MMO)

e) The Environment Agency

f) The Secretary of State

g) Any other person that Natural England considers should be consulted in respect of the strategy, including the general public or any section of it.

The Act (sub-section 7) requires bodies (a) to (e) above to **co-operate with Natural England** in preparation of a PSS as relevant to their function.

The Act (sub-section 10) requires the following 'legal persons' **to have regard** to a PSS as is relevant to any duty which the person has under:

a) the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017

b) sections 28G to 28I of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981

c) sections 125 to 128 of the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009

Authorities under (b) above are known as "a section 28G authority**"** and have a duty to further the conservation and enhancement of sites of special scientific interest (SSSIs).

These include:

- Government departments and their agencies
- Local authorities, including planning authorities
- 'Statutory undertakers' such as rail, water and electricity companies, and harbour authorities
- Any other public body of any description.

What are Protected Sites?

A Protected Site is a defined area of land, water or sea that has legal protection to conserve the most important wildlife (species and habitats), landforms and/or geological interest.

For the purposes of PSS, a "protected site" means the following within England:
(a) a European Site
(b) a site of special scientific interest (SSSI)
(c) a marine conservation zone (MCZ)

Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) is a term for legally safeguarded areas of oceans and seas. They include SACs, SPAs, MCZs, Ramsar sites and SSSIs. Natural England are responsible for sites within, or straddling, England's inshore waters (up to 12 nautical miles) and the Marine Management Organisation (MMO) is responsible for offshore sites (beyond 12 nautical miles).
Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs) are areas of the sea (including the shoreline) that allow the protection and recovery of marine ecosystems, taking a whole site approach to protections. They are legally designated as MCZs. The first three HPMAs came into force in 2023.

Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)

Geographical areas which are designated (legally protected) to maintain and protect a specific aspect of biological or earth heritage interest. There are 4,128 SSSIs across England, as of April 2025.

Key legislation and provisions related to Protected Sites are:
- 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act: first SSSIs designated
- 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act: required owners/occupiers to consult Natural England on activities in SSSIs
- 2000 Countryside & Rights of Way Act (CROW Act): introduced general duty for government departments to conserve biological diversity; improved protection of SSSIs through greater powers to manage and issue penalties for damage .
- 2006 Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act (NERC Act): biodiversity duty for public bodies to conserve and enhance biodiversity; made it an offence for section 28G authorities to carry out operations in protected sites without consulting with Natural England.

Natural England has a legal duty to protect SSSIs and monitor their condition. Natural England can use powers such as Management Schemes, Notices and granting consents, assents and advice to manage the site.

European Sites

Sites for which their designation, management and monitoring is covered by the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (often referred to as "Habs Regs"). These Regulations transposed into UK law the EU Birds Directive and the EU Habitats directive (and hence the sites are known as "European sites". All European land sites are also protected as SSSIs. They include:
- Special Area of Conservations (SAC)
- Special Protection Areas (SPA)
- Ramsar sites (wetlands of international importance)
- European Marine Sites (offshore European sites)

'Habs Regs' give additional regulatory power to manage impact of plans or projects on European sites through the Habitat Regulation Assessment (see overleaf).

Marine Conservation Zones (MCZ)

A type of marine protected area (MPA) that is designated under the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009. There are 91 MCZs in waters around England.

Environment Act 2021

What is this lever trying to do?

The 2021 Environment Act provides a **legal framework for environmental governance** in England (and Wales) by:

- Introducing long-term legally binding environmental targets and Environmental Improvement Plans (EIPs) reviewed every 5 years
- Establishing the Office for Environmental Protection

The Act also introduced a wide **range of measures to improve the environment** related to waste, resource efficiency, air quality, water, nature and biodiversity and conservation - including Protected Site Strategies. Measures which are most relevant to PSS are:

- Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS)
- Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)
- Species Conservation Strategies (SCS)
- Reform to water abstraction licensing
- Conservation covenants

How does this lever interact with PSS?

The Environment Act provides the legislative framework for PSS. It also grants powers for setting environmental targets through secondary legislation, which PSS will contribute towards, alongside aligned levers (LNRS, BNG) as outlined in this document.

How might this lever be considered in PSS development?

A review of Section 110 of the Environment Act, which is the underpinning legislation for PSS, can be useful at all stages of PSS development, and particularly at the points of drafting of the strategy, formal consultation and publication.

Some PSS may require familiarity with other sections of the Act and related Guidance relevant to the pressures and opportunities for solutions on their sites (such as water, air quality).

Habitat Regulations 2017 and Habitat Regulation Assessments (HRA)

What is this lever trying to do?

The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 and the Conservation of Offshore Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (collectively known as 'Habs Regs') aim to protect wildlife sites and species by transposing the EU Habitats Directive and Birds Directive into UK law.

The regulations require competent authorities to carry out a **habitat regulations assessment (HRA)** to test if a plan or proposal could significantly harm the designated features of a protected site. The HRA process requires project developers to investigate risks to the site and to its conservation objective, to eliminate or control such risks and to propose mitigation measures.

Competent authorities include:

- Local planning authorities
- Statutory undertakers, such as energy and water companies
- Government departments and agencies
- Anyone holding public office, such as planning inspectors, commissioners or elected members of planning committees.

The HRA requirement has broad implications for local and national development and spatial strategies. Plans subject to assessment include local development plans, national policy statements, marine plans and river basin management plans, among others. Types of projects assessed range from housing, transport and energy schemes to any activity requiring planning permission or involving other forms of development.

In some areas (such as water catchments), pollution from nutrients (particularly nitrogen and phosphorus) in rivers, lakes and estuaries is so severe that new developments often fail HRAs. This is because any additional wastewater from sewage is likely to harm protected sites. To proceed, plans or projects must mitigate their nutrient impacts to avoid increasing the existing nutrient burden within a catchment. This approach called "nutrient neutrality".

How does this lever interact with PSS?

Habitat Regulations provisions apply to protected sites which are European sites. They also underpin and shape other local plans and strategies.

How might this lever be considered in PSS development?

For a PSS on a European site, exploring the implications of Habitat Regulations and how they have been applied locally during the initiation and system mapping (phases 0 and 1) stage may generate deeper understanding of the problems and motivations and behaviours of local stakeholders. For example, mitigation schemes may be already in place or have been considered previously and may offer lessons. Any solutions proposed by PSS must ensure that these are compliant with the Habitat Regulations.

Plans and Policies

Environmental Improvement Plan 2023 (EIP23)

What is this lever trying to do?

The EIP23 is the first revision of the 25 Year Environment Plan (25YEP[1]) and was published under the requirements of the 2021 Environment Act. There is a requirement for the EIP to be updated at least every five years, and a further revision (EIP25) is expected in summer 2025.

EIP23 sets out the government's current framework and actions for restoring and enhancing the natural environment.

The overarching goal of EIP23 is to "restore nature", with all other goals contributing to this outcome. The plan includes both statutory long-term targets and interim targets that show progress towards them. These targets are subject to change in upcoming revisions.

Key targets relevant to protected sites and species include:

- Restore or create over 500,000 hectares of wildlife-rich habitat outside protected sites by 2042, with an interim target of 140,000 hectares by 2028 (compared to 2022 levels).
- Protect 30% of land and sea for nature by 2030 (known as the 30by30 commitment).
- Ensure that 100% of SSSIs have an up-to-date condition assessment.
- 50% of SSSIs to have actions on track to reach favourable condition by 31 January 2028.
- Achieve favourable condition on 70% of designated features in Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) by 2042, with 48% in favourable condition by 31 January 2028 as an interim target.
- Halt the decline in species abundance by 2030.
- Reverse the decline in species abundance and reduce the risk of species extinction by 2042.

Outcome Indicator Framework

The Outcome Indicator Framework of 66 indicators of environmental change helps assess and monitor progress towards achieving the 25YEP and EIP goals.

How does this lever interact with PSS?

PSS is a mechanism which can help deliver the aspirations outlined in the 25YEP and EIP, for protected sites and for nature more widely.

How might this lever be considered in PSS development?

PSS can contribute to the achievement of the 25YEP and EIP goals, both within and outside protected sites. In developing plans for implementation as well as monitoring and evaluation of an individual PSS, consider how these align and contribute data towards the Outcome Indicator Framework.

[1] The 25YEP, adopted in 2018, is a national and comprehensive framework and vision which sets out what the Government will do to improve the environment, within a generation. The plan aims to deliver the following "simple" goals: "*cleaner air and water; plants and animals which are thriving; and a cleaner, greener country for us all*."

National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)

What is this lever trying to do?

The NPPF specifies the Government's planning policies for England and describes how they should be applied. It covers housing, the economy, business, transport, countryside and the natural environment. “Planning”, or “town and country planning”, is the part of UK land law that concerns land use. Most development proposals under the Town & Country Planning Act need to secure planning permission from the relevant Local Planning Authority (LPA). The NPPF and associated planning practice guidance provides on overarching national policy context to guide plan-making and decision making locally.

The NPPF was most recently revised in December 2024. Chapter 15 relates to “conserving and enhancing the natural environment”. It explains how local plans should protect and enhance biodiversity and geodiversity and it sets out principles in determining planning applications related to protected sites (termed “Habitat Sites” in the NPPF).

How does this lever interact with PSS?

The NPPF provides a framework for LPAs, including guidance on how LPAs should develop Local Plans and make planning decisions in relation to protected sites.

For further detail on the legal duties, policy context and opportunities for enhancing protected sites through development, see the PAS guidance: Protected sites and development | Local Government Association

How might this lever be considered in PSS development?

Detailed knowledge of the NPPF is not a requirement for the development and implementation of a PSS. Good engagement with planning authorities should ensure alignment of the PSS with local and strategic plans, and therefore with the NPPF.

Land Use Framework

What is this lever trying to do?

The future Land Use Framework (LUF) is a strategic “vision for land use in England and how to deliver it”. The intent is to support integrated decision-making on how land is used to meet different environmental, social, and economic needs. While urban land is regulated through the planning system under local authorities, there is currently no equivalent strategic coordination for agricultural and rural land use, making it difficult to align decisions with national priorities such as housing, infrastructure, food security, biodiversity, and climate resilience.

A consultation on the vision and principles of the LUF ran from January to April 2025. The Government response to the consultation is scheduled for summer 2025 and a collaborative process for developing the LUF will follow.

The LUF is not a prescriptive tool and will not impose land use change. Instead, it aims to bring together data and stakeholder input to guide strategic, integrated decisions. It highlights broad spatial opportunities (such as less productive farmland suited to alternative uses) and promotes multifunctionality, where land delivers multiple benefits (e.g. combining woodland with grazing) and aims to facilitate more joined-up decision-making and co-creation of delivery plans based on a strategic overview of competing demands.

The LUF aims to support delivery of delivery of national environmental targets, including the 30x30 commitment conserve at least 30% of its land and sea for biodiversity and the Environment Act biodiversity goal to restore or create 500,000ha of wildlife-rich habitat outside existing protected sites by 2042. Protected Landscapes (e.g., national parks and landscapes) are explicitly mentioned in the LUF consultation document, which states that [the Government] is *“developing a package of measures to ensure [Protected Landscapes] are able to deliver the objectives for nature, water, rural housing and climate in the LUF”*.

How does this lever interact with PSS?

The LUF could inform PSS by identifying broader spatial opportunities for nature recovery, ensuring that actions within protected sites align with national environmental targets and contribute to landscape-scale objectives. An individual PSS could also potentially inform regional and local planning as part of the LUF co-design process.

How might this lever be considered in PSS development?

Further detail is likely to emerge following the consultation response. In the meantime, the LUF provides a useful signal of future direction, though it may have limited immediate implications for PSS preparation.

Environmental Delivery Plans (EDPs)

What is this lever trying to do?

Environmental Delivery Plans (EDPs) are proposed in the 2025 Planning and Infrastructure Bill. EDPs aim to improve the delivery of environmental mitigation and compensation for development impacts on protected sites and protected species by providing a more strategic and coordinated approach. EDPs are to be developed and managed by Natural England.

EDPs represent a shift from the current project-by-project mitigation model to one that enables mitigation and compensation to be delivered at a more effective, landscape-aware scale, while remaining focused on legal duties relating to protected sites and species.

EDPs will outline targeted conservation actions designed to mitigate or compensate for the environmental impacts of development on protected sites and species. This approach allows for the pooling of resources to implement site-specific measures—such as reducing nutrient inputs to designated waterbodies or restoring habitat features critical to the condition of protected sites.

EDPs are intended to be adaptable to different scales of development. Some may focus on mitigating impacts from a single large scheme, while others could coordinate mitigation needs from multiple smaller projects where these affect the same protected site(s). This flexibility ensures EDPs can be tailored to the specific ecological pressures and legal requirements relevant to designated features.

Implementation of measures specified in EDPs will be financed by levy payments from developers to the Nature Restoration Fund This system should simplify the process for developers by consolidating their environmental obligations for species for which there is a EDP into a predictable payment, while ensuring that sufficient funds are available for meaningful environmental restoration.

Each EDP will be grounded in scientific evidence. It will detail the specific environmental impacts addressed and the corresponding conservation measures. Natural England will be responsible for monitoring the effectiveness of these measures, with provisions to adjust strategies as necessary to achieve the desired environmental outcomes.

Environmental Delivery Plans (EDPs)

How does this lever interact with or align to PSS?

As the Planning and Infrastructure Bill is still under consideration, the exact relationship between EDPs and PSS has not yet been fully defined. However, Clause 53(2) of the Bill requires Natural England, in preparing an EDP, to have regard to Environment Act strategies such as PSS. This provides a mechanism for ensuring alignment between the strategic mitigation aims of EDPs and the longer-term recovery goals of PSS.

While EDPs are primarily intended to identify and deliver strategic conservation measures that address the environmental impacts of development (such as nutrient pollution or habitat loss) they may also contribute to the broader restoration ambitions of PSS by supporting actions that improve the condition and resilience of protected sites over time.

How might this lever be considered in PSS development?

Coordinating the use of evidence, data and modelling across both the development of an EDP and a PSS will support consistency and more effective decision-making – this includes fostering joined-up approaches to information sharing and communications across all partners involved in a PSS.

Further detail on EDPs are still to emerge, so it is important to remain informed about legislative developments.

Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs)

What is this lever trying to do?

Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs) are large-scale developments designated under the Planning Act 2008 to streamline the consenting process for projects of national importance. Applications are examined by the Planning Inspectorate, which advises the Secretary of State on whether to grant consent.

Projects fall into the following categories: energy, transport, waste, wastewater and water. Examples are wind farms, solar parks, water treatment plants and railway lines. A searchable database of NSIPs in England is available online.

The March 2025 Planning and Infrastructure Bill proposes further changes to speed up NSIP decisions through streamlined consultation and procedural reforms, though these may be amended as the Bill progresses through Parliament.

How does this lever interact with PSS?

NSIPs aim to deliver nationally important infrastructure efficiently, while a PSS aims to protect designated sites. Where a Habitat Regulations Assessment for an NSIP identifies significant effects on a protected site, a PSS can be used explicitly as a statutory mitigation or compensation mechanism to avoid, reduce, or offset those impacts.

Where deemed appropriate, a PSS may be commissioned to deliver mitigation or compensation for one or multiple NSIP schemes, with the development and implementation of PSS measures being chargeable. In addition to formal mitigation, there may be opportunities for PSS solutions to be co-developed collaboratively with NSIP promoters and other stakeholders through consultation and engagement.

How might this lever be considered in PSS development?

Early identification of any NSIPs located near or within the PSS area can help focus subsequent assessment and engagement.

Understanding whether NSIP developments contribute to pressures on protected sites supports a clearer picture of challenges and informs stakeholder mapping, including NSIP actors.

Where NSIP activities are relevant to the conservation or management of protected sites, a PSS may explicitly reference these activities in line with Environment Act 2021 requirements. Statutory authorities engaged in the NSIP consent process should be consulted during PSS strategy preparation to ensure alignment and effective implementation.

Freeports and Investment Zones

What is this lever trying to do?

Freeports and Investment Zones are defined geographical areas created by the UK Government where specific economic regulations, such as tax reliefs, business rates retention, planning and targeted public investment are applied. Both intend to boost economic growth and employment, with Freeports designed to drive regeneration and Investment Zones aiming to improve national productivity.

Eight Freeports have been established in England near major ports, each with defined boundaries and up to three designated tax sites where businesses can access tax reliefs, customs benefits, and other incentives. Freeports operate through partnerships between the public and private sectors. Each Freeport is overseen by a governance board made up of businesses, local authorities, and other stakeholders, and is required to publish key documents, such as board papers, to support transparency.

Investment Zones are situated in larger city regions, with seven established as of April 2025. Each Investment Zone includes partnerships with a local research institutions such as universities. They have been developed in partnership between government and the local Combined Authority.

While some developments within Freeports and Investment Zones may qualify as Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs) under the Planning Act 2008, many fall under the Town and Country Planning or Marine Licensing regimes or may proceed via Permitted Development Rights depending on their scale and nature.

Freeports and Investment Zones are now being considered under a single strategic framework, and this may be reflected in future updates. Terminology and policy details may evolve following the publication of the next Freeports Action Plan. For up-to-date information and further details see Freeports and Investment Zones.

How does this lever interact with PSS?

Freeports and Investment Zones both aim to deliver collaborative economic development, while PSS focus on collaborative local nature recovery. There may be opportunities for alignment between the two, supporting shared goals for local communities and the environment.

PSS can play a strategic role within Freeport and Investment Zones areas by helping to identify opportunities to avoid, mitigate, or compensate for the environmental impacts of development, and to deliver wider benefits for nature through enhancement and restoration efforts.

How might this lever be considered in PSS development?

Certain Freeport or Investment Zones developments or activities may contribute to pressures on protected sites which are within or lie close to the boundaries of these zones or designated tax sites.

Engagement with Freeport and Investment Zone partnerships could help identify opportunities to align economic and environmental objectives, including where associated developers might support nature-based solutions.

Where Freeport and Investment Zones activity is relevant to site condition or management, it may be appropriate to reference this in a PSS. Statutory bodies involved in Freeport and Investment Zone governance may also be relevant to engagement and consultation during strategy preparation.

Favourable Conservation Status (FCS) and FCS strategies

What is this lever trying to do?

Favourable Conservation Status (FCS) is the situation in which a habitat is thriving throughout its natural range and is expected to continue to do so in the future. Achieving FCS is the overarching goal of the Habitat Regulations, i.e. achieving FCS is the reason why a (European) site or species is protected.

The Defining Favourable Conservation Status (DFCS) project team at Natural England produces peer-reviewed definitions of what FCS looks like. “FCS Definitions” are effectively guides to “what good looks like” for a particular species. Definitions describe long-term ambitions which can help inform national and local policies.

The DFCS is working on the production of FCS strategies that will offer high-level, practical guidance on how FCS can be achieved over a period of around 25 years. FCS strategies are flexible tools that can focus on single or multiple features. There are three types: species (national strategy for a single species); habitat (national strategy for a habitat or coherent habitats); place-based (strategy that brings together multiple FCS definitions in a place).

How might this lever be considered in PSS development?

Identify FCS definitions and FCS strategies related to species, habitats or species related to the protected site

Consider FCS definitions and strategies when assessing issue and pressure analysis and diagnosis.

FCS definitions and strategies should provide high-level practical guidance for appropriate ecological solutions. Consider these in game plans.

FCS outcomes should be included in monitoring and evaluation plans.

How does this lever interact with or align to PSS?

FCS and FCS strategies provide an evidence base to inform the design and delivery of PSS. FCS can help:

- Identify conservation objectives for the PSS
- Integrate conservation objectives of overlapping featured within a PSS
- Resolve potential conflicts between conservation objectives for different protected features.

SEA LAMPREY

THE HUMBER

BULLHEAD

PEAK DISTRICT DALES

BROOK LAMPREY

CLUN

Examples of FCS definitions being produced to support PSS R&D project pilot sites

Species Conservation Strategies (SCSs)

What is this lever trying to do?

The Environment Act 2021 created a new power for Natural England to prepare and publish strategies for improving the conservation status of any species of fauna or flora. These Species Conservation Strategies (SCS) differ from other conservation strategies because the Act imposed a legal duty on public bodies to cooperate with their preparation and implementation and then to have regard to them.

SCS have not yet been fully defined but the intention is that they will develop targeted actions on the ground to recover species. An action plan, or a series of local-scale actions plans, is expected to accompany or follow each SCS. Action plans can be written for groups of species, or by theme or habitat, not just for individual species.

Three early pilot projects are testing (as of March 2025) whether strategic licensing approaches can deliver conservation outcomes for species while supporting economic growth. These approaches aim to improve conservation status at a landscape scale and provide greater certainty and efficiency for developers. If successful, strategic licensing could become a core mechanism within future SCS and may be supported through instruments such as the Nature Restoration Fund.

How does this lever interact with PSS?

A PSS is a spatial strategy. The spatial dimension of each SCS is not yet known and likely to differ by species. A PSS could act as a local delivery mechanism for SCS actions.

How might this lever be considered in PSS development?

For species relevant to the protected site(s): review relevant SCSs and associated action plans.

If SCS and PSS are being developed in parallel, consider alignment, coordination and sharing opportunities and workload. The SCS team may already have assembled and engaged with scientific experts and other stakeholders with knowledge about the species of interest to the PSS. Similarly, PSS development may offer a SCS development team opportunities to collect data or test solutions for particular species.

Marine Plans and Marine Spatial Prioritisation

What is this lever trying to do?

The **Marine and Coastal Access Act** (2009) (MCAA) sets out the statutory basis for regulating marine activities. It established the Marine Management Organisation (MMO) and a marine planning system that requires the production of Marine Plans and associated policies in the context of the Marine Policy Statement. The MMO has prepared the first suite of eleven Marine Plans for England. Under Section 54 and 61 of MCAA, Marine Plans are monitored, reported on, and revised (if necessary) every three years

Marine Plans utilise a policy hierarchy to promote or discourage activities. Marine licensing decisions need to have regard to the Marine Plans. Depending on the size and nature of a marine project it may need a marine license. Further, depending on the size and whether the project affects an MPA, the project licensing process may need environmental assessments (e.g., EIA, HRAs), which may set licensing conditions.

Marine planning in England is not spatially prescriptive (unlike Scotland's 'Marine Regions' that identify areas for activities). A Defra-led initiative, **Marine Spatial Prioritisation**, identifies spatial and strategic priorities across marine sectors in England. It aims to balance marine development with nature recovery and biodiversity goals to support cross-government decision-making on the optimal use of UK seas. Additionally, the Crown Estate's **Marine Delivery Route Map (MDRM)**, aims to support socio-economic and environmental ambitions for the marine and coastal environment by identifying strategic risks and fostering collaboration between stakeholders.

How do these levers interact with PSS?

Marine Plans and Marine Spatial Prioritisation guide decision-making on development proposals in marine areas. Marine licensing enables delivery of suitable marine projects. The MDRM aims to support delivery of multiple objectives. A marine or coastal PSS will need to operate within the planning and licensing context of the site.

How might this lever be considered in PSS development?

A PSS should be aligned with the marine plans pertaining to the local site.

PSS may offer opportunities to find creative and collaborative solutions to mitigate risks from certain projects or developments (e.g. aquaculture, dredging, offshore wind) and restore habitats for the benefit of the protected site and local communities.

PSS could provide site-specific evidence that supports the implementation of marine planning objectives, including further protecting MPAs. PSS has the potential to strengthen connections between marine policies, especially those related to or affecting ecosystem protection, restoration, and sustainable development.

Local Strategies

Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS)

What is this lever trying to do?

Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) are statutory spatial strategies required under the Environment Act 2021. LNRS are intended to provide a spatial framework for prioritising and targeting action to achieve the greatest gains for nature[1]. They support more effective coordination of conservation efforts. LNRS are an evidence base for decision-makers on where and how nature recovery activities will have the greatest positive impact. There will be 48 LNRS covering all of England, each prepared by a Responsible Authority.

A central component of each LNRS is the Local Habitat Map, which identifies areas where nature recovery actions can have the greatest impact. This includes areas of existing nature value and places with potential for improvement, helping to prioritise efforts across the landscape.

Each LNRS must include a Statement of Biodiversity Priorities, which describes the area's biodiversity, sets recovery priorities, and proposes measures to deliver them.

[1] The statutory coverage of a LNRS extends to the mean low water mark, encompassing terrestrial and intertidal zones but excluding marine areas beyond this point. However, some Responsible Authorities have chosen to voluntarily extend their strategies to include adjacent marine areas.

Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS)

How does this lever interact with PSS?

LNRS and PSS should play complementary roles in nature recovery. A LNRS provides a broad spatial framework across a Responsible Authority's area, mapping all protected sites and identifying priorities for wider nature improvement. LNRS focus on broader-scale improvements and generally avoid actions within protected site boundaries, to prevent conflict with existing management. While not required to align with all site plans, Responsible Authorities should consider relevant strategies and local knowledge to guide effective action. PSS, by contrast, focus specifically on improving the condition of protected sites. However, PSS are also expected to consider external pressures and opportunities beyond site boundaries where relevant.

LNRS can influence funding and inform decision-making but they do not have regulatory status and cannot impose management obligations. As a result, improvements at protected sites will be driven indirectly, through guidance, funding incentives (such as those linked to biodiversity net gain) and collaborative planning.

As of May 2025, most LNRS are still in development. While all 48 Responsible Authorities are working towards publication, timelines vary across regions. All strategies are expected to be published by the end of 2025.

Key points of interaction are:

1. LNRS map the most valuable existing areas for nature, and map specific proposals for creating or improving habitat (see: statutory guidance for LNRS for more detail). This mapping should further develop the analysis of the existing habitats and the areas of particular importance for biodiversity that were identified at the first stage of preparing the local habitat map. This exercise can complement and support the objectives of a PSS.
2. The Statement of Biodiversity Priorities in an LNRS should align with the conservation objectives of protected sites to ensure that actions complement and support site-specific management.
3. A LNRS add value by addressing landscape-scale issues such as ecological connectivity and wider pressures. A PSS can complement this by identifying targeted actions that respond directly to the needs of a specific site, including those outside the scope of the LNRS (e.g. infrastructure upgrades and by accessing different delivery routes or levers to help secure outcomes.

Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS)

How might this lever be considered in PSS development?

Most LNRS will be published before PSS development begins and will remain unchanged for several years. Therefore, PSS teams will primarily work with established LNRS as a key evidence base to align priorities, identify opportunities, and support place-based, local ambition for nature recovery.

Phase	Key Actions
Phase 0	• Identify all LNRS covering the protected site(s), noting that site areas may span multiple LNRS boundaries. • Determine the Responsible Authority for each LNRS and establish contact to discuss alignment opportunities. • Examine draft or published LNRS documents, focusing on the Statement of Biodiversity Priorities and Local Habitat Map. Consider both mapped and unmapped measures relevant to the site, including delivery mechanisms and wider environmental benefits. • Engage with the partnership(s) involved in LNRS preparation or delivery to understand LNRS priorities and potential collaboration. Recognise that LNRS will be at different stages locally and that stakeholder input and engagement in each LNRS will have varied.
Phases 1-2	• Use the Local Habitat Map to assess how the protected site relates to wider nature recovery priorities. • Identify specific actions proposed near the site and evaluate their relevance to PSS objectives. • Contact Responsible Authorities for relevant LNRS to explore alignment and data sharing opportunities.
Phases 3-4	• Reference LNRS priorities in the PSS and identify joint actions that support both strategies. • While most LNRS will be published before PSS development, it is important to recognise that PSS outcomes can help inform and shape future LNRS revisions. LNRS have review cycles of 3–10 years, providing opportunities for PSS learning and evidence to feed back into local nature recovery ambitions.

The phased approach shown to the left should be tailored to the relative stages of development of both the PSS and the LNRS.

For example:

- If PSS development is ahead of LNRS preparation, it would be useful to share emerging PSS objectives and evidence with LNRS Responsible Authority. This helps shape LNRS priorities and mapping.
- If a PSS is developed during or after LNRS publication, it should use the LNRS as a strategic evidence base. A key action will be to align PSS actions with identified priorities and mapped opportunities.
- During the post-publication LNRS review period, it would be useful to share what the PSS has achieved or intends to achieve. This information can inform future LNRS updates and spatial priorities.

Local and Neighbourhood Plans

What is this lever trying to do?

Local Plans, prepared by a local planning authority in consultation with its community, set out a vision and a framework for the future development of an area. Once in place, Local Plans become part of the statutory development plan. The statutory development plan for the area is the starting point for determining local planning applications.

Local Plans must comply with the NPPF, which provides national planning policy, including environmental safeguards. Changes to the NPPF can sometimes impact local planning policies, necessitating ongoing awareness.

Local Plans undergo a thorough approval process, with public consultation used to gather feedback from communities and stakeholders. The final draft is submitted to the Government, which then appoints an Independent Planning Inspector. The Inspector's job is to make sure that the Plan is coherent and meets all legal obligations, and that it includes an achievable path to sustainable future development in the area. Once adopted, the Local Plan must be reviewed at least every five years to stay relevant and effective.

Smaller geographical areas, such as villages, small towns, or suburbs, may also create a Neighbourhood Plan that applies to a specific part of a council area. Neighbourhood planning gives communities direct power to develop a shared vision for their neighbourhood and shape the development and growth of their local area. A neighbourhood plan should support the delivery of strategic policies set out in the local plan (for example, a Neighbourhood Plan cannot propose less development than is set out in the Local Plan's strategic policies). An example of a Neighbourhood Plan for the community of Holbeck in Leeds can be found online.

Local and Neighbourhood Plans

How does this lever interact with or align to PSS?

Local Plans already play a role in safeguarding designated sites, requiring developments to demonstrate no significant adverse impact on Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), Special Protection Areas (SPAs), Ramsar sites, and Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). Local Plans also integrate policies on flood risk management, Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SuDS), pollution control, and climate resilience to support the long-term health of ecosystems. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) reinforces this by requiring Local Plans to embed biodiversity net gain, strategic habitat creation, and mitigation measures.

LPAs already conduct Habitat Regulations Assessments (HRA) to assess the potential impact of development on European sites. With PSS, there will be clearer, site-specific guidance (and evidence) to inform these assessments and help LPAs manage cumulative impacts on protected sites more effectively.

The Planning Practice Guidance (PPG) on protecting and enhancing the natural environment has been updated with the addition of paragraph 44, which clarifies that, pursuant to Section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 (as amended by the Environment Act 2021), all public authorities in England are under a statutory duty to consider how they can conserve and enhance biodiversity. In discharging this duty, public authorities must "have regard" to any relevant LNRS. PSS should inform and align with LNRS, which should then feed into the Local Plan ensuring that it reflects the conservation and mitigation measures articulated in the PSS.

Where a LNRS is not yet adopted or still in progress, the PSS can be a very important evidence base in its own right to inform plan making. While Local Plans provide a strong framework for spatial planning, it can sometimes be challenging to justify policy protection outside protected areas without a robust evidence base. A PSS could therefore add an additional layer of strategic oversight, e.g., by identifying necessary actions for off-site actions around a protected site and ensuring that local planning decisions and policies align with these measures, and, in theory, could offer a framework for delivering the aspirations of Local and Neighbourhood Plans.

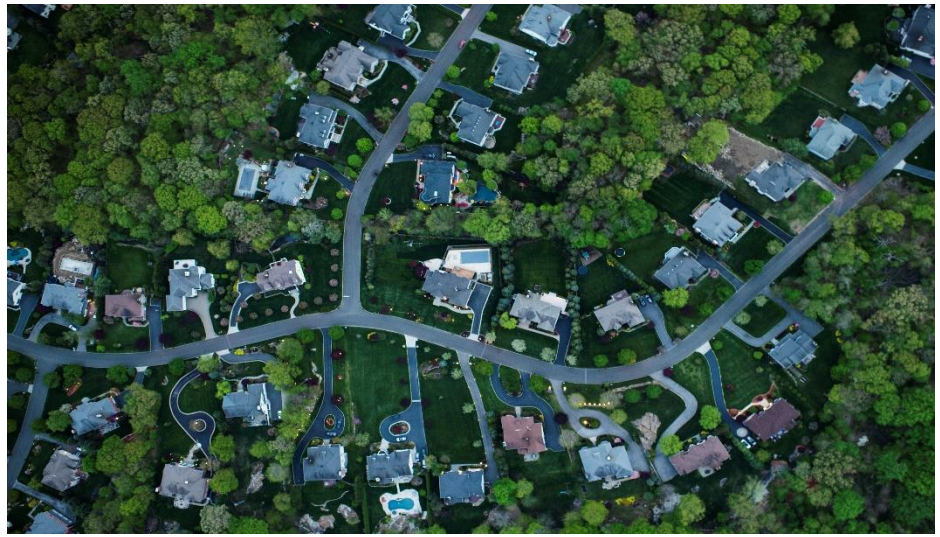
Overall, Local and Neighbourhood Plans and PSS should be aligned to ensure that development contributes to, rather than undermines, site protection and nature recovery.

Local and Neighbourhood Plans

How might this lever be considered in PSS development?

A PSS may propose actions or policies that could shape a Local Plan, but once a Local Plan is adopted, opportunities for immediate influence are limited. Where Local Plans are under review or in development, a PSS can help guide future policies and strategic planning decisions.

It is important to identify, as early as possible, the Local or Neighbourhood Plans that cover or otherwise impact the protected site(s) that the PSS is focused on, and determine whether these plans are adopted, under review, or in development to understand opportunities for influence.



It will also be important to:

1. Review relevant policies on biodiversity, green infrastructure, and climate resilience within Local and Neighbourhood Plans.
2. Establish relationships with LPAs early to integrate PSS considerations into planning policies.
3. Participate in Local and Neighbourhood Plan consultations and evidence-gathering stages to ensure biodiversity and site protection measures are considered.

Green Infrastructure Framework (GIF)

What is this lever trying to do?

‘Green Infrastructure’ (GI) is the network of interconnected green and blue spaces, both urban and rural, that deliver environmental, economic, health, and wellbeing benefits for nature, local communities, and wider prosperity. It includes parks, gardens, woodlands, rivers, footpaths, and cycleways and other GI (such as local nature reserves, rainwater gardens, green roofs, street trees etc.) and is integral to improving quality of life and addressing climate change. The National Planning Policy Framework (2021) defines GI as a multi-functional system capable of supporting biodiversity, health, and climate resilience.

In January 2023, Natural England launched the Green Infrastructure Framework (GIF). This provides principles and planning guidance to support the development of GI. There is also a comprehensive geospatial dataset which can be used to assess what is currently in place and what might be needed, which includes data on biodiversity, urban greening, accessible green space, index of multiple deprivation etc. to aid conversation and targeting.

The GIF includes **five Headline Green Infrastructure Standards** that help stakeholders to plan and create effective GI systems. These standards aim to deliver high quality green spaces and ensure that all people have access to nature, particularly within 15 minutes’ walk or wheel from home, which is a key goal in the Accessible Greenspace Standard.

Five Headline Green Infrastructure Standards:

1. Green Infrastructure Strategy Standard
2. Accessible Greenspace Standard
3. Urban Nature Recovery Standard
4. Urban Greening Factor Standard
5. Urban Tree Canopy Cover Standard

These standards provide detailed guidance on what constitutes good green infrastructure and how it can be strategically planned to deliver multiple benefits for both people and nature. When used together, these Green Infrastructure Standards will help stakeholders to deliver the 15 Green Infrastructure Principles and enable everyone to benefit from good green infrastructure provision.

The Green Infrastructure Strategy Standard (S1) supports local authorities in assessing and planning green infrastructure across their areas, both for existing and potential green spaces. Local authorities are encouraged to:

- Develop Delivery Plans for new and existing greenspaces.
- Apply the Green Infrastructure Standards to local contexts, adapting them as needed.
- Set policies and development requirements for green infrastructure in local plans and design codes.
- Establish SMART targets and regularly evaluate progress (every five years) to ensure effective delivery of their green infrastructure strategy.

Green Infrastructure Framework (GIF)

How does this lever interact with or align to PSS?

The GI Strategy primarily guides local authorities in planning and policy development and aligns with PSS at a broader, landscape scale. The GI framework supports the future LNRS by helping to identify areas for habitat creation or enhancement and informing planning decisions that contribute to nature recovery. This can complement PSS by improving surrounding land use and enhancing ecological connectivity.

In addition, GI has the potential to reduce recreational pressure on protected sites by promoting alternative greenspaces near where people live. This principle underpins the Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG) approach, which aims to mitigate the recreational impacts of residential development on protected sites by providing attractive, accessible alternatives. Until LNRS are fully established, existing GI strategies (including those incorporating SANG principles) may play a key role in guiding offsite BNG delivery and supporting the aims of PSS.

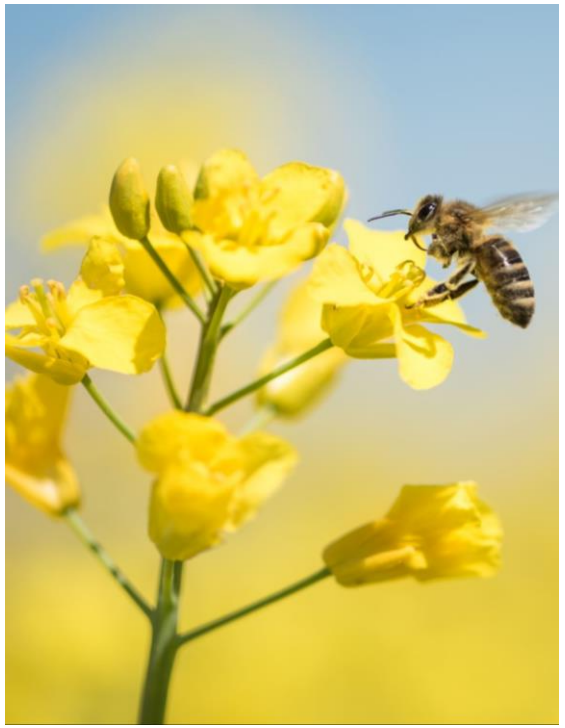
How might this lever be considered in PSS development?

Relevant GI strategies may help inform early understanding of the spatial context surrounding a protected site. These strategies can highlight existing or planned green infrastructure projects that could support or complement the objectives of a PSS.

Where available, GI strategies may also provide a useful evidence base on the extent, condition and connectivity of green spaces in the area. This can support assessments of wider opportunities for nature recovery, particularly where actions beyond the site boundary are needed.

The GI audit that informed the strategy may also be a helpful resource for identifying baseline conditions and local priorities relevant to PSS development.

Protected Landscapes – Management Plans



What is this lever trying to do?

Protected Landscapes, encompassing **National Parks** and **National Landscapes** (legally referred to as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs)), are designated for their exceptional landscapes, wildlife, and cultural heritage. Protected Landscapes cover nearly a quarter of England's land area.

To ensure the preservation and enhancement of these areas, statutory Management Plans are developed and regularly updated. These outline priorities and guiding actions to:

- Conserve and enhance natural beauty, wildlife, and cultural heritage.
- Promote public understanding and enjoyment of the area's special qualities.
- Foster sustainable economic and social development of local communities.

These plans articulate the unique features that warrant the area's protected status and provide a framework for coordinated efforts among stakeholders.

The statutory basis for these Management Plans is established through legislation:

- National Parks: The Environment Act 1995 mandates National Park Authorities to adopt and regularly review Management Plans. There is a statutory duty to review the National Park Management Plan "at intervals of not more than five years" (Section 66 of the Environment Act 1995).
- National Landscapes (AONBs): The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 requires local authorities to publish and review AONB Management Plans. The plan must be published within three years of designation, reviewed every five years and made publicly accessible.

In support of these plans, the Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework (PLTOF) sets out a suite of national targets and indicators that all Protected Landscapes are expected to contribute to. These include targets relating to the condition and recovery of SSSIs, as well as broader goals for nature recovery, climate action, and community engagement. This framework helps align local management with national priorities for environmental improvement.

Proposal 3 of the Glover Review called for strengthened Management Plans that set clear priorities and actions for nature recovery, with their implementation backed up by stronger status in law. The Government's response recognised the need for strengthened plans, saying that future Management Plans must include targets and actions that align with national goals. More information can be found here.

Protected Landscapes – Management Plans

How does this lever interact with or align to PSS?

The interaction between PSS and Protected Landscape Management Plans will involve strategic coordination rather than direct incorporation.

Where a PSS is being developed within or near a Protected Landscape, it will be essential to align policies to maximise consistency across planning frameworks, coordinate actions to address shared environmental pressures, and explore joint funding and delivery mechanisms.

Stakeholder engagement will be important. National Park Authorities, AONB Partnerships, National Landscape Conservation Boards (e.g. Cotswolds and Chilterns), local authorities, landowners, and communities should be working together to implement coherent conservation and land management strategies.

How might this lever be considered in PSS development?

Protected Landscape Management Plans can help identify shared pressures (such as visitor impacts, nutrient pollution and habitat fragmentation) and support the development of complementary interventions. These Plans are key reference documents for the Protected Landscapes Duty, which requires most public authorities operating in National Parks and National Landscapes (AONBs) to have regard to the purposes of these designations when exercising their functions, including planning.

Engaging in early and ongoing dialogue with Protected Landscape teams (such as National Park Authorities and AONB Partnerships) who are responsible for managing and delivering the statutory purposes of these areas can help ensure that PSS aligns with wider conservation and land management goals. These teams often work closely with local authorities, landowners, communities and stakeholders, and are well placed to support coordinated action across designated landscapes.





Funding Mechanisms

Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)

What is this lever trying to do?

BNG is a way to ensure development projects improve biodiversity. It became a legal requirement in England under the Environment Act 2021. Developers must increase biodiversity by at least 10%, as measured by a government-approved tool (the statutory Defra biodiversity metric). They can achieve this by:

- Enhancing biodiversity within the development site (the preferred solution);
- If that's not possible, delivering some or all of the required biodiversity gain off-site - either on other land they own or by buying biodiversity units from other landowners or habitat providers;
- If neither on-site nor off-site options are feasible, buying statutory biodiversity credits from the government (a last resort).

Landowners and land managers can generate income through sale of biodiversity units for use as off-site BNG compensation to developers. BNG applies only to terrestrial and freshwater habitats and does not currently apply to marine environments beyond the mean low water mark.

A Biodiversity Gain Plan must be approved by the local planning authority before any development starts. Most BNG commitments, including all off-site and any 'significant' on site provisions must be legally secured for at least 30 years.

Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)

How does this lever interact with PSS?

BNG was introduced as a new layer of regulation on top of existing protections for designated sites and species. It does not alter the legal protection already in place.

BNG and PSS operate separately but can support each other:

- Both link to LNRS (which guides where habitat improvements should take place).
- While BNG funding is tied to development, off-site BNG delivery projects could align with PSS goals to improve protected sites, by creating buffer zones, ecological corridors between sites or undertaking enhancements within protected sites.
- Local authorities or other relevant bodies could potentially develop strategies or frameworks to encourage or direct off-site BNG compensation towards areas that would strategically benefit protected sites or contribute to the broader conservation goals of a PSS.

How might this lever be considered in PSS development?

Things to be aware of:

- For additionality purposes, any BNG funding applied to protected sites must go above and beyond what is already legally required, which generally is to undertake works that maintain or improve the site to be in favourable condition.
- Whether BNG funding could help deliver habitat improvements in and around protected sites. Landowners selling biodiversity units within a protected site must get consent from Natural England before works.
- Opportunities to coordinate efforts with local planning authorities and land managers.

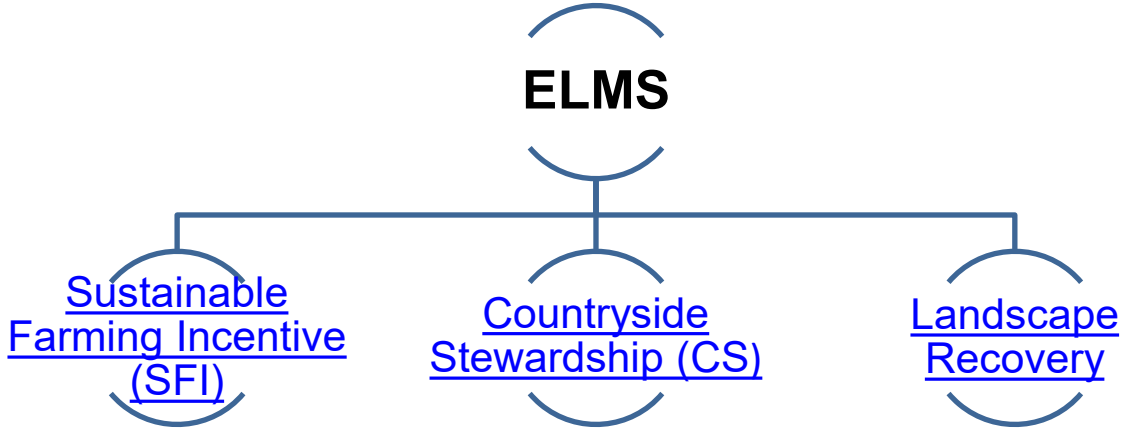
More Information

- Understanding biodiversity net gain: An overview of BNG and its implications for land managers, developers, and local planning authorities
- Biodiversity net gain - where to start: An introduction to BNG, explaining its purpose and initial steps for implementation
- Biodiversity gain plan: Information on creating a biodiversity gain plan to demonstrate how BNG will be achieved in a development
- Biodiversity Net Gain FAQs: Resources and FAQs to assist local authorities in implementing BNG

Environmental Land Management Schemes (ELMS)

What is this lever trying to do?

Environmental Land Management Schemes (ELMS) provide financial incentives to farmers and land managers to support environmental improvements on their land. These schemes aim to enhance biodiversity, improve soil and water quality, and contribute to climate resilience aiming to make progress towards UK Government goals. ELMS operates dynamically in response to budgets and policy needs. Further detail on each is provided next in this document.



All ELMS schemes offer opportunities for funding of actions which may help achieve the aims of each PSS.

The Landscape Recovery scheme is particularly relevant to protected areas in England as it encourages the creation of natural, less intensively managed landscapes, including rewetting peatlands for carbon storage and establishing new woodlands. The second round of projects, funded in 2023, focused on net zero, protected sites, and wildlife-rich habitats. It benefitted over 160 SSSIs. The timing and focus of PSS and Landscape Recovery may not always match. Some protected sites may already be part of a Landscape Recovery project, but these projects mainly address farming-related pressures. A PSS may still be needed to tackle other issues affecting the site.

How does this lever interact with PSS?

The distinctions between the three ELMS schemes should be reflected in how they are considered during PSS development. For example, Landscape Recovery operates at a large scale, involving long-term, contractually binding agreements with multiple land managers, aiming for land-use change supported by a mix of public and private funding. In contrast, the SFI scheme focuses on individual holdings and is publicly funded. The key consideration is how these schemes overlay and interact with the protected site itself, and the influence on management and conservation efforts.

Future ELMS rounds may introduce additional funding mechanisms aligned with PSS priorities. Any future opportunities or potential changes to these schemes should be monitored as they emerge.

ELMS: Sustainable Farming Incentive

The Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI)

- The SFI pays farmers and land managers for adopting and maintaining sustainable farming and land management practices.
- Its primary aims are to protect and enhance the environment, support sustainable food production, and improve overall farm productivity and resilience. It offers a flexible 'pick and mix' approach, allowing farmers and land managers to choose from a wide range of actions tailored to their specific land and circumstances.
- It is open to farmers or land managers in England that have management control over eligible agricultural land. The land must be in agricultural use and meet certain environmental standards relevant to the specific SFI actions being undertaken.
- The broad eligibility criteria mean that many farmers with land adjacent to, or in the vicinity of, protected sites could participate in the scheme.
- The SFI provides payments to farmers on a quarterly basis for carrying out SFI 'actions' as specified in their SFI agreement. These actions cover various aspects of land management. Examples are: assessing and improving soil health; establishing herbal leys to enhance soil structure and biodiversity; providing winter bird food to support farmland bird populations; managing hedgerows to create wildlife habitat; and, developing plans for the sustainable management of moorland.

The SFI scheme was closed to new applications in March 2025 due to the scheme reaching its allocated budget. The Government has indicated that a reformed and improved SFI offer is expected to open for applications in 2026. All existing SFI agreements that were in place before the pause will continue to be honoured and farmers will continue to receive payments under the terms of their agreements.

How might this lever be considered in PSS development?

While SFI may offer some opportunities to support PSS, such as helping landowners and farmers access funding for actions that contribute to site resilience, it lacks spatial targeting or mechanisms to direct uptake of specific actions aligned with PSS objectives.

The scheme's future is also uncertain, with recent funding pressures and potential reform affecting its availability and design. Given these limitations, SFI should be considered a supporting option during the solutioning and plan-making phases, but other ELM schemes could offer more targeted and impactful opportunities for protected sites.

ELMS: Countryside Stewardship

Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier (CSHT)

- The CSHT provides funding to farmers and land managers to protect, restore, or enhance the environment. It focuses on complex, environmentally significant sites and woodlands that require complex management, especially protected sites and areas with environmental significance.
- It aims to achieve environmental benefits such as habitat protection, species restoration, improved water quality, flood risk reduction, enhanced carbon capture, and conservation of historical and archaeological features.
- The CSHT supports the achievement of environmental goals related to nature recovery, carbon storage, and sustainable food production. There is a strong interaction with protected sites, particularly Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), as the scheme is designed to manage important environmental and historic areas.
- CSHT agreements are tailored to specific land needs and environmental objectives and are developed in collaboration with experts from Natural England or the Forestry Commission.
- The scheme provides ongoing support for sites previously covered by Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) agreements, ensuring continuity in environmental management. The CSHT scheme is in a controlled rollout phase and is primarily accessible by invitation, as it continues to be developed and tested. Land that is in an active Landscape Recovery project is generally not eligible for CSHT funding to avoid double funding for the same activities.

How might this lever be considered in PSS development

As with other funding mechanisms, CSHT should be considered in the PSS solutioning and action planning phases.

There also may be an opportunity in linking future environmental scheme spatial prioritisation with PSS and LNRS (i.e., to help identify priority areas where targeted management actions will deliver the greatest benefits for protected sites and nature recovery). This means funding and support (whether through CSHT or otherwise) can be better targeted.

ELMS: Landscape Recovery

Landscape Recovery

- The Landscape Recovery scheme applies a new approach to supporting long-term, large-scale habitat restoration and land use change.
- It focuses on large-scale projects that require collaboration across extensive areas, rather than individual farm-level initiatives. It offers bespoke agreements that are intended to deliver environmental and climate goods, focusing on net zero, biodiversity and water quality.
- Landscape Recovery is intended to attract both public funding and private investment for long-term sustainability (intended to be one of many mechanisms to contribute to the goal of raising £500 million in private finance annually by 2027 and over £1 billion by 2030).
- Funding is provided through bespoke agreements, typically lasting over 20 years, for significant habitat restoration and land-use change.
- Existing projects aim to improve soil health, recover threatened species, and increase resilience to flooding and drought. Project also offer social benefits, including improved public access to nature and opportunities for community engagement.

How might this lever be considered in PSS development?

The Landscape Recovery scheme is particularly relevant to protected areas in England as it encourages the creation of natural, less intensively managed landscapes, including rewetting peatlands for carbon storage and establishing new woodlands. The second round of projects, funded in 2023, focused on net zero, protected sites, and wildlife-rich habitats. It benefitted over 160 SSSIs.

It is unlikely that a PSS will be developed entirely within an existing Landscape Recovery project area. However, future rounds of Landscape Recovery may overlap with PSS areas, making coordination and alignment important to ensure efforts are complementary and avoid duplication. Additionally, many Landscape Recovery projects are still in development, and some may not proceed to implementation meaning there may be further opportunities for a PSS to build on project findings/learnings.

Water Restoration Fund

What is this lever trying to do?

The Water Restoration Fund (WRF) is a £11 million fund created from environmental fines and penalties levied on water and sewerage companies.

The fund supports local organisations to deliver a range of initiatives — from tackling pollution and restoring habitats to implementing nature-based solutions that improve climate resilience and biodiversity. Funds were hypothecated, meaning they are reinvested in the regions from which the original environmental penalties were raised. In the first round, this applied to areas served by Thames Water, Yorkshire Water, Anglian Water, United Utilities, and South West Water. The eligible water company areas may change in future rounds, depending on the source of any additional fines. Other funding pots are available nationally and regionally which support water environment improvements outside these areas (e.g., Water Efficiency Fund).

The first round of funding was awarded in March 2025, with all projects expected to start in the same year. Two types of grants were available: d**evelopment projects** (6–12 months) and **delivery projects** (up to 30 months). Grant sizes ranged from £75,000 to £2 million, supporting efforts to improve the health of rivers, lakes, wetlands, and estuarine waters in affected areas. More information can be found here.

The WRF was designed as a one-off initiative. While there is potential for future rounds, the Government has not formalised the WRF through the Water (Special Measures) Bill.

How does this lever interact with PSS

WRF projects should link to national and local plans (e.g., River Basin Management Plans, Local Nature Recovery Strategies).

The WRF can help deliver actions identified in a PSS such as improvements to river health, wetlands, and floodplain restoration.

LNRS is expected to play a key role in guiding funding decisions, including for initiatives such as the WRF. If a PSS aligns with LNRS priorities, it increases the likelihood that WRF-funded projects (or similar water-industry schemes) will contribute to strategic nature recovery efforts.

How might this lever be considered in PSS development?

Identify existing WRF-funded projects near or around the protected site in question. This helps assess ongoing restoration work.

Nature Restoration Fund (NRF)

What is this lever trying to do?

The Nature Restoration Fund (NRF) is a proposal codified in the Planning and Infrastructure Bill that is intended to enhance environmental recovery alongside development projects. The NRF objectives are to speed up delivery of new housing and critical infrastructure whilst also whilst also enabling funding of strategic interventions for nature.

Developers would be able to fulfil their obligations to address certain environmental impacts of a project (e.g. nutrient pollution, or impacts on a particular protected species), by contributing defined payments to the NRF. The NRF funds would be used by a designated body (likely to be Natural England) to implement strategic conservation measures specified in the Environmental Delivery Plans (EDPs) adopted for those impacts/measures.

The Government anticipates that this fund will lead to quicker completion of infrastructure projects. It is also expected to contribute to achieving broader environmental targets, such as the protection of 30% of UK land and sea by 2030 and halting species decline by the same year.

EDPs will set out a Nature Restoration Levy (NRL), which developers must pay to address the environmental impacts of development. The funds raised through the NRL will be used to deliver strategic conservation measures identified within the EDP, supporting the protection and enhancement of protected sites and species. The Levy will be set according to a fixed charging schedule for the lifetime of the EDP. Natural England has the flexibility to delegate the delivery of conservation measures to trusted partners, creating a potential funding stream for those engaged in nature recovery. This approach is intended to ensure that development contributes meaningfully to environmental outcomes by supporting targeted, place-based conservation efforts. More information can be found here.

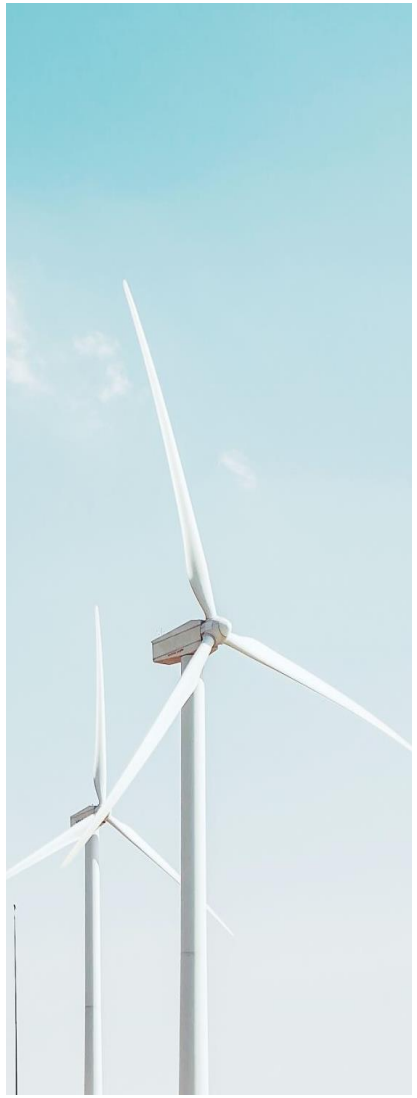
How does this lever interact with PSS

The Planning and Infrastructure Bill is being considered in Parliament. It may be that the NRF will be able to finance projects at both national and local levels that focus on restoring and connecting different habitats. This could directly support the specific priorities that are outlined in strategies (PSS, LNRS, etc.)

How might this lever be considered in PSS development?

Since the Planning and Infrastructure Bill is still under consideration, the exact eligibility criteria for projects under the NRF are not yet confirmed. However, as the fund develops, a key consideration in the PSS process will be understanding how projects might align with EDPs. This means staying informed on any emerging advice and official guidance on how the NRF will be applied in practice.

Marine Recovery Fund (MRF)



What is this lever trying to do?

The MRF is a financial mechanism developed by Government to support strategic compensation measures for offshore wind activities that impact Marine Protected Areas (MPAs). It allows developers to contribute funds towards environmental compensation projects, facilitating the accelerated deployment of offshore wind energy while meeting environmental commitments. The fund is part of the Offshore Wind Environmental Improvement Package (OWEIP), which aims to balance infrastructure development with marine conservation and enabled by the Energy Act 2023.

Offshore wind developers will contribute to the MRF, which finances the creation or expansion of MPAs and other targeted ecological restoration initiatives. This system replaces the previous method whereby the environmental impacts of individual projects were addressed independently. It is intended to lead to more coordinated and effective conservation efforts. The proposed MRF approach operates within the parameters of the NSIP planning process.

The MRF is expected to facilitate up to £30 billion in offshore wind investments by simplifying the approval process and reducing bureaucratic delays associated with environmental assessments. By pooling resources, the MRF is expected to support large-scale projects that deliver significant ecological benefits, such as habitat restoration and species protection, thereby improving the overall health of marine ecosystems.

A consultation on the future operation of the MRF is open until May 2025 Version 1.0.

How does this lever interact with PSS?

The MRF is relevant to PSS used for Marine Protected Areas where Offshore Wind Developments are proposed.

How might this lever be considered in PSS development?

There is guidance on current approved strategic compensation measures which should be considered at the PSS solutioning stage. There may be opportunities for PSS to add to the list of compensation measures, such as by supporting practical demonstrations of actions.

Developers participating in the MRF may want to engage with PSS to ensure that compensation measures complement broader efforts.

There may be opportunities for the PSS to influence MRF local implementation.

Marine Net Gain (MNG)

What is this lever trying to do?

Marine Net Gain (MNG) is an emerging policy concept, analogous to the Biodiversity Net Gain approach applied to terrestrial development projects, that is intended to ensure that marine development projects contribute positively to biodiversity rather than simply addressing harm. Unlike the Marine Recovery Fund (MRF), MNG is expected to be more flexible and not limited to a predefined set of approved measures.

MNG seeks to leave the marine environment in a measurably better state after development. The concept has emerged from UK marine conservation policies, the Environment Act 2021, the 25YEP and international commitments like the 30x30 commitment (protecting 30% of the ocean by 2030).

MNG requires a net positive impact on marine ecosystems, not just a net neutral offsetting of damage. It is likely to apply to offshore wind farms, port expansions, aquaculture, and other marine projects. MNG actions could include habitat restoration, species recovery, and improvements to ecosystem services such as carbon sequestration and fisheries productivity. The system is still under development, but could involve habitat condition assessments, species abundance, and ecosystem function indicators.

Initially, MNG is expected to operate as a voluntary mechanism, simpler than terrestrial BNG, potentially using a levy-based approach. Meanwhile, industry is already exploring its own approaches in the absence of formal MNG policy. For example, The Crown Estate (which manages seabed leases for offshore wind) has introduced an initiative requiring successful bidders to demonstrate how they will accelerate progress toward net positive environmental outcomes and increased marine ecosystem resilience. This can be seen as an interim form of MNG or a Marine Recovery Fund specifically for offshore wind.

Natural England is supporting the development of MNG through evidence-building projects, including mapping Marine Irreplaceable Habitats (MIH), assessing restoration potential for key habitats and species, and developing indicators to measure environmental gains and impacts. Collaboration with industry and stakeholders is ongoing to shape the policy.

How does this lever interact with PSS?

Both MNG and PSS focus on collaboration between stakeholders, including local authorities, marine planners, conservationists, and developers.

Determining how to address the overlap of marine and terrestrial ecosystems in terms of marine net gain is complex, particularly when marine protected areas are closely connected to coastal areas protected under PSS.

How might this lever be considered in PSS development?

MNG may present opportunities where PSS is being developed for coastal or marine sites where there is a proposed marine development.

At this stage, the specific role of MNG within each phase of PSS development is not fully defined. However, it is expected that the process for implementing MNG will align closely with that of BNG, incorporating similar principles and methodologies.

Annex/Other Considerations

Annex

In addition to the policies and funding mechanisms outlined in the main guidance, there are several other important factors that should be considered when developing and implementing a PSS. This annex highlights issues that PSS coordinators should consider at the outset or through development. While this is not an exhaustive list, it provides a foundation for understanding the broader policy landscape that may impact a PSS.

Permits and Licences

Works undertaken to implement measures codified in a Protected Site Strategy may require specific permits and licenses from the relevant authority.

The EA, for example, issues permits for a range of activities that could impact the environment, such as waste management, flood risk activities, abstraction and impoundment of water, and measures affecting fish movement. The PSS coordinator must be aware of existing EA permits impacting the site and ensure that any new actions planned within the PSS, like nutrient mitigation schemes or restoration works, comply with EA regulations and obtain the necessary permissions.

Any felling of growing trees generally requires a felling licence from the Forestry Commission, unless specific exemptions apply.

Activities that may affect protected species and habitats require authorisation by Natural England.

Activities in the Marine Protected Areas may require licensing from the MMO.

It is important to note that, depending on the nature of the work, other permits or consents from different bodies might also be required.

National Plans and Strategies (Current)

There are multiple national plans and strategies to guide the sustainable management and conservation of different natural habitats/resources across various sectors. At the time of writing, this includes the following:

Freshwater and Water Environment

National Plans/Strategies	Description
River Basin Management Plans (RBMPs)	These plans are focused on protecting enhancing the water environment across England. Natural England has a duty to consider these plans in its operations. https://www.gov.uk/guidance/river-basin-management-plans-updated-2022
Diffuse Water Pollution Plans (DWPPs):	Focused on addressing pollution from widespread, non-point sources. These plans aim to improve water quality by mitigating diffuse pollution. https://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/file/5645420019580928
River Restoration Plans:	Seek to restore natural processes and habitats within river systems, to increase biodiversity and ecosystem health. https://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/file/5930079982977024
Water Level Management Plans (WLMPs):	Designed to balance the water level needs of various stakeholders. Essential for flood risk management and environmental protection. https://www.wlma.org.uk/uploads/WMA_WLMP_Info.pdf
Flood Risk Management Plans (FRMPs):	These plans outline strategies to manage and reduce flood risks, safeguarding communities and the environment. https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/flood-risk-management-plans-2021-to-2027
Catchment Flood Management Plans:	These plans take a holistic approach to managing the water environment within specific catchment areas, considering factors like land use and water quality. https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/catchment-flood-management-plans
Water Resource Management Plans (WRMPs):	Outline strategies for ensuring a sustainable and resilient water supply over the long term. https://engageenvironmentagency.uk.engagementhq.com/water-resources-management-plans
Water Industry National Environment Programme (WINEP) / Asset Management Plans (AMP):	These plans detail environmental improvement projects funded by water companies, with data openly available for public scrutiny. https://engageenvironmentagency.uk.engagementhq.com/winep
Drainage and Wastewater Management Plans (DWMPs)	Introduced to take a strategic, holistic approach to managing drainage and flood risk over a 25-year timeframe. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/drainage-and-wastewater-management-plans-guiding-principles-for-the-water-industry
Abstraction Licensing Strategies	These strategies manage the abstraction of water within catchments, ensuring that water resources are used sustainably. https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/water-abstraction-licensing-strategies-cams-process
Reservoir and Canal Management Plans	Ensuring man-made water bodies support wildlife and provide clean water.
National Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management Strategy	Protecting freshwater and coastal environments from climate risks. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-flood-and-coastal-erosion-risk-management-strategy-for-england--2

Marine Environment

National Plans/Strategies	Description
UK Marine Strategy	A government framework ensuring UK seas achieve 'Good Environmental Status' by protecting ecosystems. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5f6c8369d3bf7f7238f23151/marine-strategy-part1-october19.pdf
Fisheries Management Plans	Protecting marine species and habitats from overfishing and destructive practices. https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/fisheries-management-plans
Shoreline Management Plans (SMPs)	Provide a strategic approach to managing coastal risks, addressing issues like erosion and sea-level rise. https://www.gov.uk/guidance/shoreline-management-plans

Peatlands

National Plans/Strategies	Description
UK Peatland Strategy (2018–2040):	Developed by the IUCN UK Peatland Programme, this strategy aims to promote a collaborative effort in restoring and conserving the UK's peatlands, targeting two million hectares to be in good condition, under restoration, or being sustainably managed by 2040. https://www.iucn-uk-peatlandprogramme.org/uk-strategy
Peat Action Plan	This plan outlines actions to protect, restore, and sustainably manage England's peatlands. The plan also included the announcement of the Nature for Climate Peatland Grant Scheme through the Nature for Climate Fund. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/england-peat-action-plan

Forestry and Woodlands

National Plans/Strategies	Description
England Tree Action Plan (2021-2024)	The England Trees Action Plan 2021 to 2024 sets out the government's long-term vision for the treescape it wants to see in England by 2050 and beyond. The plan provides a strategic framework for implementing the Nature for Climate Fund and outlines over 80 policy actions the government is taking over this Parliament to help deliver this vision. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/england-trees-action-plan-2021-to-2024
Tree Health Resilience Strategy (2018)	Sets out plans to protect England's tree population from pest and disease threats. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5b06a40e40f0b61f92a72a16/tree-health-resilience-strategy.pdf
Ancient Woodland 'standing advice'	https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ancient-woodland-ancient-trees-and-veteran-trees-advice-for-making-planning-decisions Note, some areas may also have local tree strategies: https://ato.org.uk/resources/tree-and-woodland-strategies-policies

Other

Nature Recovery Network: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/nature-recovery-network

B-lines: https://www.buglife.org.uk/our-work/b-lines/

Local Planning (1)

This section outlines other key aspects of the local planning system that a coordinator should be aware of.

Development Management

This is the core process for determining planning applications. LPAs assess proposals against their adopted Local Plan, relevant national policies (like the NPPF) and other material considerations. The aim is to ensure development is appropriate, sustainable and does not cause unacceptable harm.

For proposals potentially affecting protected sites, this includes ensuring compliance with environmental legislation and policies. Key considerations include the development's scale, design, access, infrastructure needs, and potential environmental impacts

Decisions are made either by planning officers (for minor applications) or elected councillors on a planning committee (for major applications), based on planning merits, not solely on public opinion.

For more information:
https://www.planningportal.co.uk/planning/planning-applications/the-decision-making-process/introduction

A critical function of **Development Management** is securing necessary measures to make a development acceptable. This can be achieved through:

- Planning Conditions: These are requirements attached to a planning permission that dictate how a development must be carried out (e.g., implementing specific pollution control measures, timing works to avoid sensitive periods, delivering on-site habitat creation).
- Planning Obligations (e.g., Section 106 Agreements): These are legally binding agreements between the LPA and developers used to mitigate impacts that cannot be dealt with by conditions. They often secure financial contributions towards mitigation or conservation measures, affordable housing, infrastructure, or the long-term management of mitigation/enhancement features. They are a key mechanism for funding Strategic Mitigation Schemes and securing off-site Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG).
- Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG): Legal requirement to ensure development projects improve biodiversity. It became a legal requirement in England under the Environment Act 2021. Developers must increase biodiversity by at least 10%, as measured by a government-approved tool (the statutory Defra biodiversity metric).
- Nutrient / Water Neutrality: Where applicable (driven by Habitats Regulations Assessment for European sites), development must demonstrate it will not add to nutrient burdens or water stress in sensitive catchments, often requiring mitigation secured through conditions or S106 agreements.

Local Planning (2)

Natural Environment Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs)

An SPD is a document produced by a Local Planning Authority. SPDs are a 'material consideration' in the planning decision-making process. This means they must be taken into account when determining planning applications, although they do not have the same legal weight as the Local Plan itself.

A Natural Environment SPD (which might be called a Biodiversity SPD, Green Infrastructure SPD, Landscape SPD, etc.) is simply an SPD that focuses specifically on providing detailed guidance related to the natural environment aspects of the Local Plan policies.

These documents offer practical advice and set standards for developers and decision-makers on topics such as BNG, GI, protected species, protected sites, landscape character assessments, trees and woodlands and hedgerows.

Examples:

- https://blackburn-darwen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Draft-Natural-Environment-SPD.pdf
- https://www.rotherham.gov.uk/downloads/file/2425/spd11-natural-environment-june-2021
- https://shropshire.gov.uk/media/8451/ev86-natural-environment-spd-scoping-draft-july-2014.pdf

Strategic mitigation schemes

These are large-scale, pre-planned initiatives designed to counteract the cumulative impacts of multiple developments on protected sites, particularly concerning issues such as nutrient pollution (nutrient neutrality schemes), water quality/scarcity, or recreational pressure. They aim to provide a strategic, efficient, and effective way to mitigate impacts, ensuring the overall ecological integrity of protected sites is maintained or improved despite development pressure. Funding often comes from developer contributions secured through Development Management (via S106 or sometimes the Community Infrastructure Levy).

They establish clear mechanisms for developers to meet their mitigation requirements, often involving contributing funds towards landscape-scale projects (e.g., wetland creation for nutrient capture, funding for wardens and path improvements to manage recreation, or creating Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace - SANGS). These schemes are typically underpinned by evidence and policy, often set out in Local Plans or SPDs ensuring a consistent approach.

This document was prepared by ICF Consulting Services Ltd., with input and guidance from staff at Natural England and Defra.

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About Natural England
Natural England is here to secure a healthy natural environment for people to enjoy, where wildlife is protected and England's traditional landscapes are safeguarded for future generations.

Further Information
This report can be downloaded from the Natural England Access to Evidence Catalogue. For information on Natural England publications or if you require an alternative format, please contact the Natural England Enquiry Service on 0300 060 3900 or email enquiries@naturalengland.org.uk.