

Local Nature Recovery Strategies & Water

How to use the ‘*Water and nature recovery*’ Advice – supplementary information for integrating freshwaters

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Purpose of this document

What is it for?

This supplementary advice document provides additional support for using the main '*Water and nature recovery – source-to-sea opportunities for spatial planning*' advice (herein the 'Advice') note – **the Advice is designed to be standalone, but please use this explainer for further help, if required.** It may be particularly helpful for additional support with the staged approach to water and considering use of spatial datasets.

The main purpose of this document is to assist LNRS advisers in:

1. using the main Advice document;
2. interpreting freshwater nature recovery as an integral part of the LNRS design process;
3. understanding how to use water datasets;
4. finding additional support, where needed.

The document will not provide detail around wider LNRS work or guidance/advice (e.g. information on: purpose and implementation; who is responsible; statutory and official guidance), but does draw upon and is designed around this information.

Who is the intended audience?

This document is focused on supporting Natural England (NE) Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) advisers in implementing freshwater¹ nature recovery opportunities, but can be used by wider NE staff for understanding spatial approaches for water and nature recovery.

Further support

Further resources, advice and support is planned to support NE's freshwater nature recovery ambitions, and may build on information provided here. A range of resources will be made available on our internal [Freshwater Nature Recovery SharePoint Online](#) site. This is expected to include:

- Supplementary supporting advice / advice notes – aimed to provide updates and additional information beyond this document;
- wider advice on NE's principles for working in freshwaters;
- case studies to demonstrate best practice.

¹ Freshwater and water may be used interchangeably, but both should be considered as follows: includes all terrestrial waters within catchments (see footnote 2), including freshwater habitats (e.g. running waters, standing waters, wetlands, transitional, groundwater dependent, and wider landscape water pathways), as well as coastal and transitional waters (where fresh and salt waters meet).

Summary

The 'Advice' (defined in 'Purpose of this document') is designed to be standalone, but there may be instances requiring additional support. This document explains how to use the advice to explore water opportunities in LNRS.

The Advice establishes key opportunities for freshwater nature recovery, underpinned by technical principles and delivery needs. These opportunities are spatial by design, to provide effective representation of the action needed to deliver multiple-benefits for water and nature recovery of freshwater habitats and species.

Key opportunities in water rely on assessing whole catchments and identifying where we can work with, or work to restore, natural processes and natural function.

Typically, restoring water-driven processes at a catchment scale also supports wider landscape resilience, alongside habitat improvements. In applying this thinking, we can identify suitable spatial locations to prioritise necessary action. LNRS provides an excellent opportunity to integrate nature recovery and catchment-based planning (Fig 1.1), to maximise biodiversity, environmental, and climate resilience benefits.

Water nature recovery can be effectively integrated in LNRS by applying the above rationale for working within catchments, and adopting a staged approach (see Fig 1.2). In parallel with LNRS statutory advice, this should ensure opportunities for water are integrated optimally and effectively connect and expand protected areas:

Stage A - Identify catchment areas, watershed boundaries and river networks.

Stage B - Locate and define water-based protected / priority sites.

Stages C & D - Explore opportunities within catchments for the following:

- Consider improving ecological function by examining opportunities for improving or linking existing habitat.
- Ensure opportunities for habitat improvement, creation and expansion occur at existing water habitats and within river corridors and floodplain areas.
- Ensure urban areas and urban planning is appropriately aligned with adjacent nature recovery opportunities.
- Consider opportunities to develop more transitional coastal habitat, which also aligns with Flood and Coastal Risk Management planning and key Natural Flood Management principles.
- Look beyond clearly defined water habitats into the wider terrestrial landscape, to explore opportunities for other catchment improvements to support water.
- Ensure multiple-benefits are captured where possible.

Data and evidence are critical to ensuring stages can be appropriately assessed and defined, and this document also draws links between opportunities and data. Using appropriate available datasets, the suggested approach to assess opportunities for freshwaters can support discussions with colleagues and stakeholders. Presented here is also a summary of supporting contacts and resources, for further support.

Fundamentally, one of the most important questions that should be asked in any nature recovery work, anywhere throughout a landscape, is: '*Can this spatial action also deliver for water?*' The answer should almost always be yes. As such, nature recovery work should always consider how best to integrate water improvements.

This supporting document aims to integrate this thinking with the main water Advice.

Visual summary

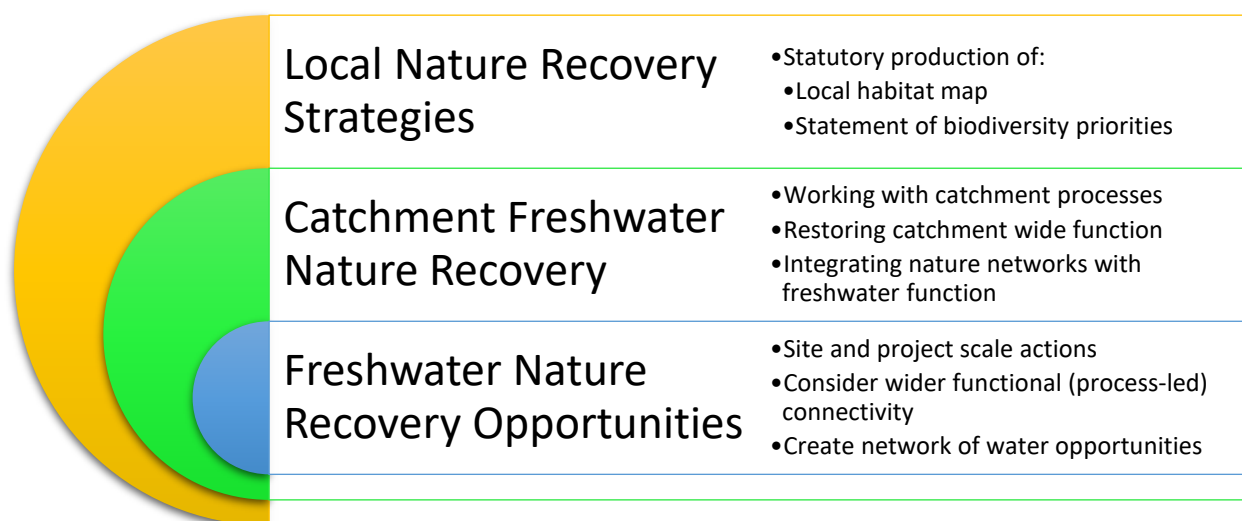


Figure 1.1 Key ways of working in freshwaters and how these sit within and support LNRS

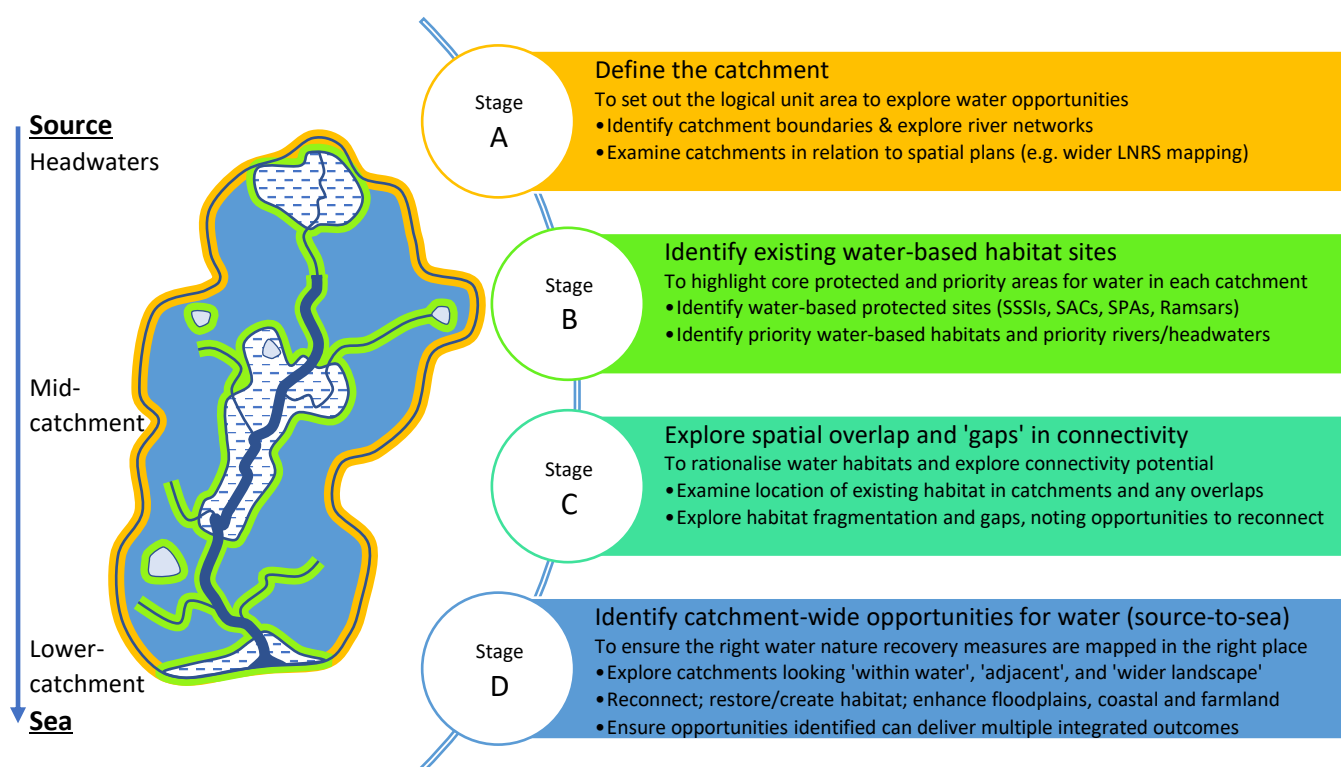


Figure 1.2 Summary of indicative stages for how to support integration of water into the LNRS process (from section 4; also included in the main Advice)

1. About the ‘Water and nature recovery’ advice

The Advice is 1) a concise outline of key opportunities, 2) a summary of the approach for water, and 3) a list of supporting resources/contacts. It acts as a **starting and reference point** to ensure key planning opportunities for freshwater nature recovery have been captured in spatial planning across NE work areas.

It is not intended to be wholly comprehensive or technically detailed – further depth can be gained by consulting reference resources or through specialist water discussions. This supplementary supporting document links to the Advice, for use in instances where additional help is needed.

The water environment is complex, with many dependencies and interlinked component parts, but the Advice aims to simplify this and therefore has been created with the following in mind:

1. Simplifying water and nature recovery join-up -

- a. A comprehensive understanding of technical freshwater ecology should not be required to select appropriate spatial priorities for water improvements (but see point 5 below).
- b. Spatial targeting of opportunities can be informed by underpinning science to simplify interpretation and selection of water environment action - effectively scientific principles are embedded in the list of opportunities.

2. Integrate water in landscapes - Freshwater and wider nature recovery depends on restoration of natural function, with Integrated Biodiversity Advice a key way to link nature recovery planning across water and land. Water habitats may depend on terrestrial improvements (e.g. upland habitat).

3. Working at a catchment scale - The logical spatial unit to consider freshwater nature recovery opportunities is the catchment² – this can and should be considered in parallel with LNRS planning and wider nature recovery ambition. In each catchment, a source-to-sea approach should help understand the right locations for the right action.

4. The Integrated Plan for Water - Ongoing developments to Defra-led policy highlights the need to incorporate multiple water-environment plans within catchment planning. LNRS is considered a key mechanism to plan water nature recovery and flag locations for multiple benefits in catchments.

5. A reference point for key opportunities - Local and regional differences can greatly affect variations in freshwater priorities – more detailed discussions should be had involving local water expertise, supported by existing resources on the science/evidence base. National freshwater specialist help can also be sought, where additional technical support is needed.

² Catchment definitions vary, but is most commonly described as the area of land in which any water will flow toward central location, typically a river, and then through that river to the sea. Any rainfall in a catchment will follow this route and eventually end up in the same place. Sometimes, catchments may be referred to as a river basin, but the underlying principle is the same – water will flow downhill via gravity. As such, we commonly define a catchment, or basin, by topographical boundary.

2. How to use the 'Water and nature recovery' advice

The Advice is applicable across spatial planning work, but has been designed to be particularly useful to aid integration of water with LNRS. This section summarises the use of the Advice - a step-by-step indicative guide can be found in section 4.

The following points should help overview how to use this advice for LNRS:

- The Advice can be used by LNRS advisers to aid discussions with Responsible Authorities and other NE colleagues (e.g. area water advisers).
- It can be shared and referred to as needed to support common reference points for integrating water opportunities into LNRS planning.
- It is not intended to replace selection of local priorities for water, which may vary from the listed opportunities, but can help with national alignment.
- Use the advice to prime freshwater nature recovery integration alongside wider LNRS principles and guidance/advice, but do ensure the following are also referred to:
 - NE Integrated Biodiversity Advice and restoring natural function approach
 - NE's existing and developing freshwater nature recovery advice
 - EA advice for water
 - Defra and Government policy documents for water
- The advice is separated into 3 main parts:
 - **Part 1** covers key water opportunities – this is the main focus of the advice and provides a list of key high-level opportunities in water, designed to be spatially applicable, embed scientific rationale, and separated into key spatial areas within a catchment. Use this to ensure opportunities are captured against wider water priorities and to ensure local needs drive discussions against these.
 - **Part 1a** lists opportunities and for each one includes information on location, improvement opportunity, how to consider (spatially), what additional/multiple benefits could be delivered concurrently, and potential supporting delivery mechanisms. A visual marker provides links across to Lawton and climate change benefits.
 - **Part 1b** demonstrates how opportunities could be considered spatially in a fictional example catchment. This is intended as a visualisation of how you could map opportunities, but actual mapping of opportunities needs to be driven by local priority discussions around ambitious and pragmatic implementation of opportunities, taking a source-to-sea approach.
 - **Part 2** provides a summary approach in stages for considering catchment and water integration in nature recovery planning. Use this to consider how to apply key elements of catchment thinking in nature recovery planning and how this fits with the steps in the LNRS statutory guidance.
 - **Part 3** summarises key resources, contacts and supporting policy/delivery mechanisms for reference. Use this to find additional detail, who to speak with, and what policy/mechanisms underpin potential delivery

3. Key considerations

In spatial planning, water should be approached as a fully integrated part of any landscape, and LNRS should be able to do this simply and effectively. In considering opportunities in water, understanding our approach to freshwater nature recovery and how this links with policy and delivery can help.

a) Technical underpinnings

Catchment scale – as defined previously, catchments are the logical unit scale to work within from a hydrological perspective. Only by considering entire catchment function can we ensure delivery of wider water ambitions, effective nature recovery and embed resilience (environmental & climate) into the wider landscape.

Natural processes and natural ecosystem function – hydrology and catchment processes, when naturally balanced, create landscapes that *function in a resilient manner* – we call this natural ecosystem function. Systems closer to natural baseline return greater benefits, for example by reducing soil erosion, buffering water quality, and enhancing climate resilience, such as mitigating flood and drought impacts.

Water-dependent protected sites – as best representations of their habitat types, many freshwater protected sites rely on and define the habitat as an important feature. This habitat depends on the natural function throughout a catchment to be healthy and resilient – consequently, targets for freshwater protected sites are typically more stringent than ‘Water Framework Directive’ waterbody targets.

b) Policy, mechanisms and collaborative working

Policy drivers – the water policy landscape has recently seen considerable steps forward. Most significantly, the Defra ‘Plan for Water’ (published in April 2023) attempts to holistically consider the water environment and draws on multiple existing policy (e.g. Environment Act, Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP), Water Framework Directive, ...). Importantly, this policy document highlights the need to link together catchment planning, LNRS and other forms of environmental planning.

Delivery and planning – policy drives planning and delivery mechanisms, and recent emphasis to join this up for water means LNRS will form an important part of the process for aligning nature recovery planning through to delivery. An effective ‘policy-planning-delivery mechanism’ framework would ensure this join up best enables multiple benefits and outcomes – catchment thinking can help with this.

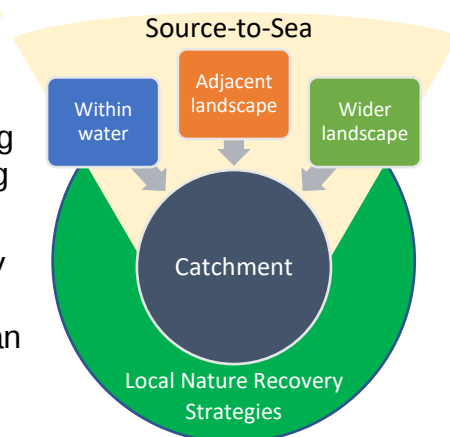
Biodiversity targets – the Environment Act, the EIP, and other recent domestic policy commits to biodiversity and species as apex targets. Linked to this are wider international commitments to biodiversity, such as 30x30. Water forms a critical part of delivering against these targets, and opportunities integrated into LNRS can help.

Working with partners – collaboration and partnership working is a requirement for each LNRS. [ALBs should work closely together on supporting LNRS development](#). NE has a key role in water nature recovery ambition and the Environment Agency (EA) are funded to contribute to LNRS preparation in recognition of their expertise in the water environment. The Forestry Commission support water benefits from tree planting, e.g. as a formal partner in the Catchment Sensitive Farming initiative. NE LNRS advisors should support the involvement of EA & FC colleagues and locally agree the best ways to work together on the opportunities highlighted in the advice.

4. Outline approach for integrating water

The 'Water and nature recovery' advice explains a suggested approach to assessing opportunities, by looking at a catchment, working from source-to-sea, and exploring within water, adjacent and wider landscape areas.

Considering a staged parallel process, alongside statutory steps for LNRS, helps align opportunities for water and wider nature recovery mapping. This section provides 1. an outline overview of the process and 2. considerations for exploring catchments for opportunities.



4.1. Parallel staged approach to exploring and integrating water

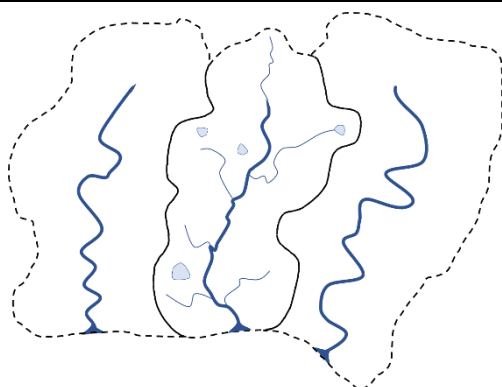
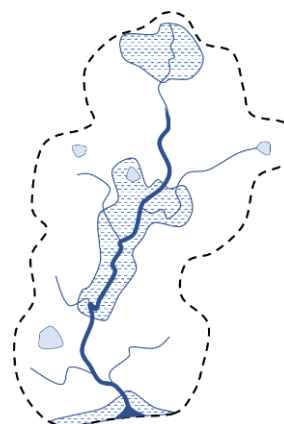
This approach should help a) ensure water opportunities are explored appropriately and b) enable an integrated parallel process alongside wider LNRS planning. Figure 4.1. (pg.10) provides a visual alignment and data use is explored further in section 5.

Stage A. Identify and visualise catchment boundaries This stage considers using catchment boundaries to help exploring opportunities for water.	
Statutory steps supported: Step 3: Describe the strategy area	Data layers to support this stage: WFD Waterbody Catchments - Statutory Rivers
Stage B. a) Identify existing water protected sites b) Identify priority water habitats This stage visualises existing protected and priority rivers, standing water and wetland sites.	
Statutory steps supported: Step 1: Map areas of particular importance Step 3: Describe the strategy area, biodiversity & opportunities	Data layers to support this stage: SSSI – SAC – SPA - Ramsar sites - Priority Habitats Inventory - Priority River Habitat (Headwater areas and Rivers) - Priority Lake Habitat - Chalk Rivers
Stage C. Identify spatial overlap in existing water habitat sites / priority habitats and 'gaps' for enhancing connectivity The first part of opportunity identification, this reviews existing sites for enhancing connectivity.	
Statutory steps supported: Step 3: Describe the strategy area, biodiversity & opportunities Step 5: Areas that could become of particular importance	Data layers to support this stage: Data in stages 1-3 - Statutory Rivers - National Habitat Network
Stage D. a) Explore water-specific opportunities b) Explore terrestrial catchment opportunities c) Identify areas for integrating multiple-benefits Main opportunity scanning - within water, adjacent and wider landscape catchment opportunities.	
Statutory steps supported: Step 3: Describe the strategy area, biodiversity & opportunities Step 4: Agree LNRS priorities and identify potential measures Step 5: Areas that could become of particular importance	Data layers to support this stage: Data in stages 1-4 – Flood Maps – Coastal / saltmarsh layers – WWNP layers (all) – NFM prioritisation layers – habitat creation / restoration layers – EWCO layers – WFD lake waterbodies – GI database – agricultural land class – countryside stewardship

4.2. Considerations for spatially exploring catchments

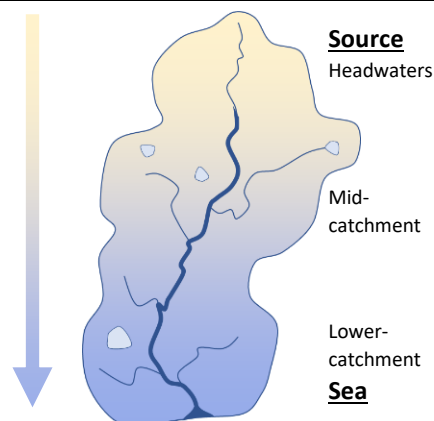
The following concepts can assist identification of the 'right measure, right place' for water and may be useful to help with integrating water and LNRS.

Catchment (watershed) boundaries. Using a layer to overlay catchment boundaries helps define the spatial area within which any action (land or water) may influence nature recovery for waters. Appropriate spatial scale is important: whole river catchments might be larger scale and easier to work in, but might not be fully captured in an LNRS area or vary too much within the catchment area - a smaller scale 'waterbody' catchment might be more appropriate to pick up smaller scale detail, but could take more time.



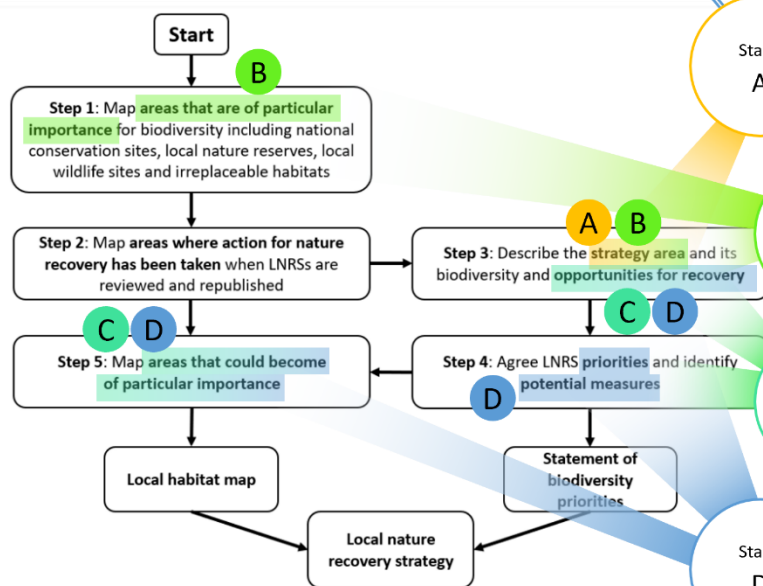
Multiple / varying catchments. Many LNRS areas will contain multiple catchment areas, and LNRS boundaries may have catchments partially in other LNRS areas. Consider how catchment boundaries influence LNRS connectivity and maintain continuity between LNRS areas. It is also worth viewing all catchments present within an area to evaluate how planning for water opportunities intersects with the wider LNRS approach.

Source-to-sea approach. Habitats, environmental conditions and species will vary from upper catchment to lower catchment. Typically, water flows and accumulates with movement downstream, reflecting any positive or negative consequences of upstream habitat or land use. Consider for example how actions in the upper catchment could deliver wider benefit, as any improvements may alleviate issues further down the catchment. This thinking is particularly important for issues such as flooding or water quality.

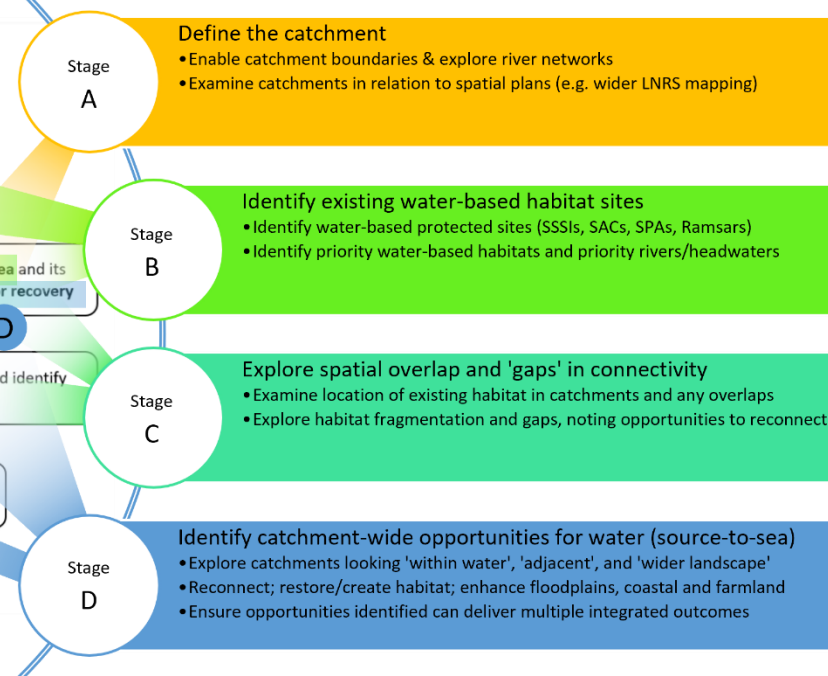


Catchment 'zonation'. Combined with a source to sea approach, opportunities could be informed by viewing a catchment in zones / key areas. These will vary between catchments - use as needed to support the *right measure in the right place*. Geographical features (e.g. topography) might inform zones and help opportunities mapping: for example, boundaries may be suitable for woodland, montane or upland peatland restoration (intercept and slow flow), other areas may benefit from recharge habitat, flood storage, or indicate wetland/floodplain restoration.

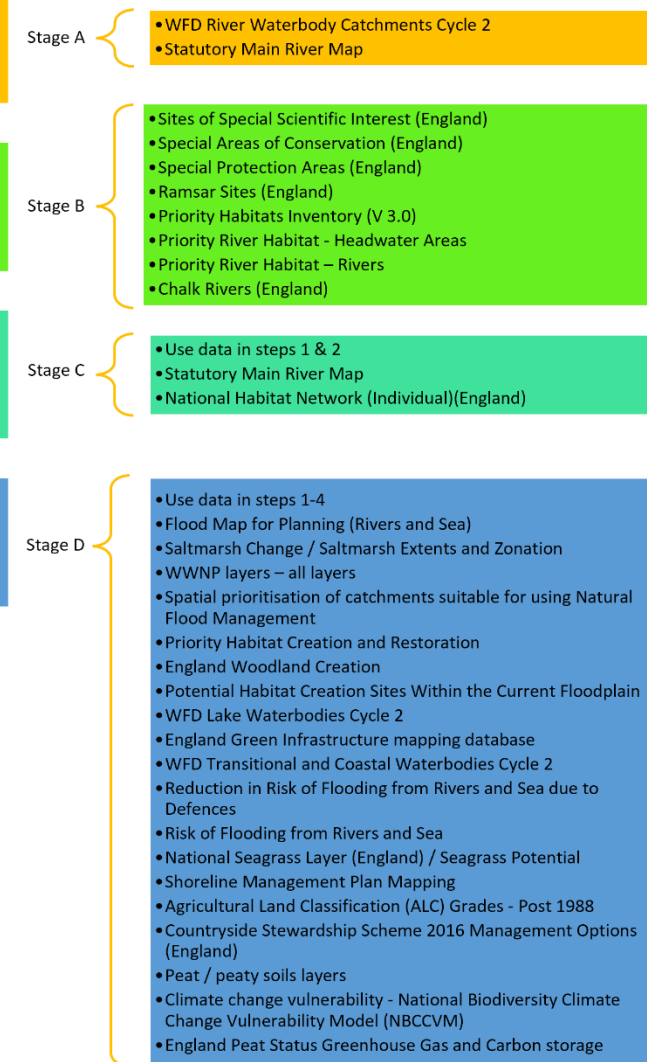
a) Statutory guidance flow chart



b) Suggested parallel approach to integrate water



c) Water relevant data



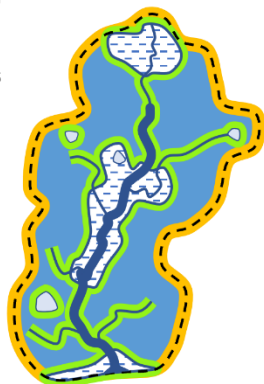
d) Example catchment

Source
Headwaters

Mid-catchment

Lower-catchment

Sea



e) Example of multiple catchments as part of an LNRS

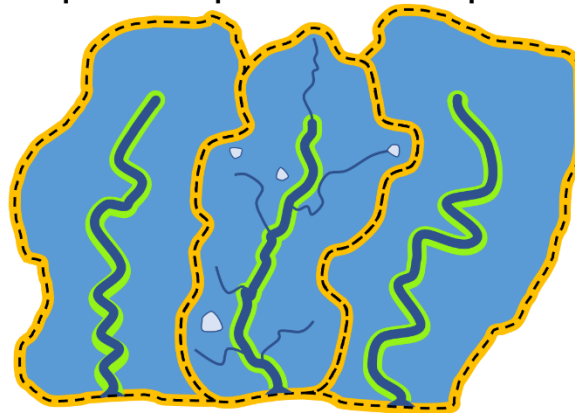


Figure 4.1. Relationship between statutory guidance flow chart (a), suggested parallel approach for water (b), and indicative data used for each stage (c). Example catchment (d) and example of multiple catchments together (e), for visual reference.

5. Water datasets – how to use them in LNRS

This section aims to summarise the current national data offering (Dec 2023), available in the [LNRS Data Viewer](#), that are particularly relevant to water and explain how these can be used in relation to catchment opportunities (as described in the main advice). Other datasets may also help, in addition to the Data Viewer.

The table below lists key catchment opportunities (from the Advice and section 4) and groups suggested available datasets based on usefulness. Some will require several datasets in overlay. Figure 5.1. demonstrates how we might use data to assess a catchment. This is intended as a guide to aligning data and opportunities.

Opportunity type	Key indicative datasets (<i>italics</i> denotes data to define existing sites; * = various)
Within water	
Habitat creation, restoration, expansion	<i>Priority Habitats Inventory Priority River Habitat Priority Lake Habitat Chalk Rivers National Habitat Network Working with Natural Processes* EA Priority Habitat Creation and Restoration Potential Habitat Creation Sites Within the Current Floodplain Peat / peaty soils layers*</i>
Address physical modifications	<i>Priority Habitats Inventory Priority River Habitat Priority Lake Habitat Chalk Rivers Sites of Special Scientific Interest Statutory Main River Map WFD Lake Waterbodies Potential Habitat Creation Sites Within the Current Floodplain</i>
Enhance habitat fringes	<i>Priority Habitats Inventory Priority River Habitat Priority Lake Habitat Chalk Rivers National Habitat Network Sites of Special Scientific Interest WFD Lake Waterbodies</i>
Species reintroductions / wilding	<i>Priority Habitats Inventory Priority River Habitat Priority Lake Habitat Chalk Rivers National Habitat Network Sites of Special Scientific Interest Working with Natural Processes* Flood risk layers*</i>
Adjacent landscape	
Riparian corridors	<i>Priority Habitats Inventory Priority River Habitat Chalk Rivers National Habitat Network Sites of Special Scientific Interest Statutory Main River Map Working with Natural Processes* EWCO layers*</i>
Create wetland, standing water & ponds	<i>Priority Habitats Inventory Priority Lake Habitat National Habitat Network Sites of Special Scientific Interest Working with Natural Processes* Potential Habitat Creation Sites Within the Current Floodplain Spatial prioritisation of catchments suitable for using Natural Flood Management WFD Lake Waterbodies WFD Transitional and Coastal Waterbodies Peat / peaty soils layers*</i>
Floodplain restoration	<i>Potential Habitat Creation Sites Within the Current Floodplain Working with Natural Processes* Flood risk layers* Flood Map for Planning (Rivers and Sea)* EWCO layers* Statutory Main River Map</i>
Historical modification / alternative agriculture	<i>Potential Habitat Creation Sites Within the Current Floodplain Working with Natural Processes* Priority Habitats Inventory Priority River Habitat Chalk Rivers</i>
Wider landscape	
Targeted catchment habitat	<i>WFD River Waterbody Catchments National Habitat Network Spatial prioritisation of catchments suitable for using Natural Flood Management EA Priority Habitat Creation and Restoration England Woodland Creation / EWCO layers* Peat / peaty soils layers*</i>
Natural flood management	<i>Spatial prioritisation of catchments suitable for using Natural Flood Management EA Priority Habitat Creation and Restoration England Woodland Creation EWCO layers* Peat / peaty soils layers* Flood risk layers* Flood Map for Planning (Rivers and Sea)*</i>
Farmland water improvements	<i>Agricultural Land Classification layers* Countryside Stewardship layers* National Habitat Network EWCO layers*</i>
Nature-based Solutions & Green infrastructure	<i>Flood Map for Planning (Rivers and Sea)* Saltmarsh Change / Saltmarsh Extents and Zonation Spatial prioritisation of catchments suitable for using Natural Flood Management Working with Natural Processes* EWCO layers* Potential Habitat Creation Sites Within the Current Floodplain England Green Infrastructure mapping database</i>
Water quality restoration	<i>Agricultural Land Classification layers* Countryside Stewardship layers* National Habitat Network Spatial prioritisation of catchments suitable for using Natural Flood Management</i>
All opportunities may benefit from layers in 'Catchment data explorer (inc. WFD)', 'Flood plan explorer', & 'Ecology and fish data explorer' and use of the National Biodiversity Climate Change Vulnerability Model.	

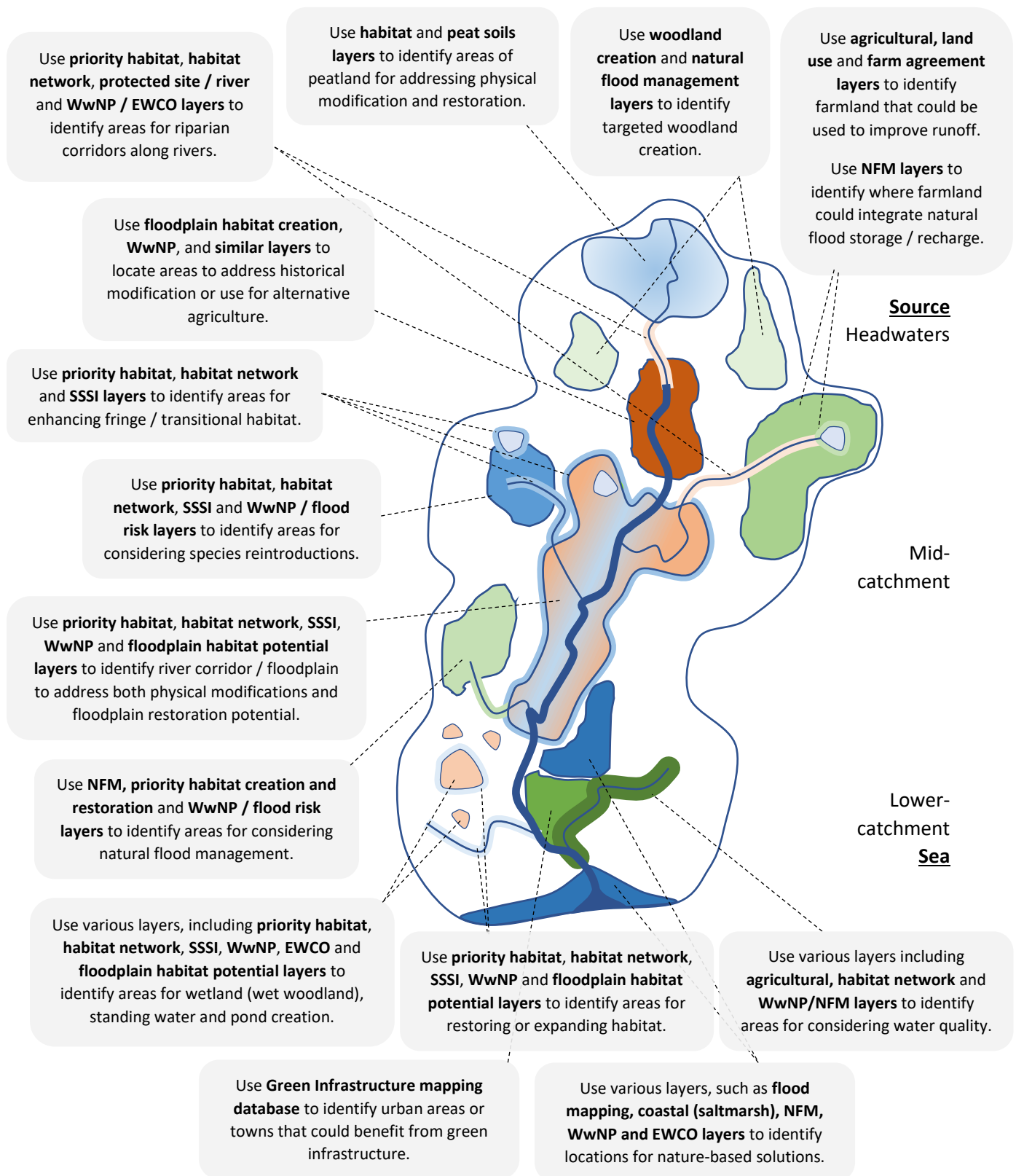


Figure 5.1. Example demonstrating use of datasets to aid identification of features and exploration of opportunities within a catchment. In reality, there may be more or less features present in different catchments, so the approach should be pragmatic. It is also possible that one opportunity may deliver against multiple benefits (e.g. creation of a wetland may also provide natural flood management and improve water quality). As always, it should be the *right measure, in the right place*.

6. Key contacts and support for water

1. Natural England water colleagues

[Water Advisers Network - Who's who across Natural England water work](#)

- National – Water, Coast & Pollution team (SGA) – lead water policy:
 - Water resources
 - Drought resilience
 - Lake restoration
 - River restoration
 - Freshwater nature recovery
 - Natural Flood Management
 - Floods and coasts
 - Diffuse water pollution
 - Environmental quality
 - Chemicals & pesticides
 - Land use and water (CSF)
 - Air quality
- National – Chief Scientists Directorate – water specialists (habitat, hydrology, water quality)
 - Running water habitats
 - Standing water habitats
 - Wetland habitats
 - Freshwater fish
 - Hydrology / hydrogeology
 - Water quality
 - Coastal
- Area team – water advisers network
 - Lead advice on water work for area teams – local knowledge and passion for our freshwaters
- Other support
 - Catchment Sensitive Farming Officers
 - Protected sites advisers / species advisers
 - Priority places area advisers

2. Environment Agency LNRS colleagues and Forestry Commission

[Nature Recovery Network and Local Nature Recovery Strategy - LNRS ALB Wider Joint Working](#)

- EA national LNRS team - lnrs@environment-agency.gov.uk
- EA area – LNRS Single Points of Contact (SPoCs)
- EA River Basin Planning SPoCs*
- EA area Fisheries, Biodiversity & Geomorphology teams*
- FC national – Carbon and Water Woodland Advisor
- FC area – Nature Recovery Advisors / Woodland Creation Officers / Land Use Advisors

* EA LNRS SPoCs or NE area water adviser colleagues may be able to help with specific contacts for these teams

7. Important resources for water

1. Nature recovery resources – key principles and water

Internal Natural England

- [Local planning and delivery of nature recovery \(sharepoint.com\)](#)
- [Strategy for nature recovery \(sharepoint.com\)](#)
- [Generating more integrated biodiversity objectives – rationale, principles and practice - NERR071 \(naturalengland.org.uk\)](#)
- [NE Freshwater Narrative](#)
- [Freshwater and Wetland habitats \(sharepoint.com\)](#)
- [Diffuse Water Pollution Plans \(DWPP\)](#)

2. Nature recovery resources for water

External – Environment Agency

- [Working with Nature](#)
- [Catchment Data Explorer](#)
- [Ecology and Fish Data Explorer](#)
- [Flood Plan Explorer](#)
- [Open WIMS data](#)

External – Forestry Commission

- [UKFS: Section 9 - Forests and Water](#)
- [UKFS Practice Guide: Designing and managing forests and woodlands to reduce flood risk](#)
- [UKFS Practice Guide: Managing Forest operations to protect the water environment](#)
- [UKFS Practice Guide: Managing forests in acid sensitive water catchments](#)
- [FC Information Note: Water Use by Trees](#)

External partners & resources

- [CaBa Biodiversity Pack / CaBa Data Hub](#)
- [Catchment Base Approach \(CaBa\) partners](#)
- [Rivers Trusts](#)
- [Wildlife Trusts](#)
- [Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust](#)
- [Freshwater Biological Association](#)
- [Freshwater Habitats Trust](#)
- [Floodplain Meadows](#)
- [River Restoration Centre](#)
- [Discovering Priority Habitats – Rivers and Lakes](#)
- [Riverscapes Partnership - Woodlands for Water Project: Tree Hub](#)

Note - This list is not exhaustive and intended as a starting place.