



How to Prepare and Deliver Protected Site Strategies

A Collaborative Approach to Nature Recovery





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This guidance outlines the process for developing and delivering Protected Site Strategies. It highlights aspects to be considered, provides links to useful resources, and outlines the process of having a PSS formally approved. Suggestions and advice provided in this document are based on evidence collected by Natural England, especially during the three-year PSS Development Programme 2021–2024.

The guide will be a useful tool for all those who wish to initiate as well as those who already run PSS.

This is the first iteration of this Guidance. We are currently collecting and collating more evidence and welcome feedback from our partners. We intend to publish an updated version of this Advisory Guidance towards the end of 2025 and further iterations of the Guidance over the next four years.

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PSS Overview



What is a Protected Site Strategy (PSS)

Protected Sites are representative examples of important places for nature. They are defined areas of land, freshwater, or sea protected by law for the nature they support including important wildlife, landforms or rock types. They serve as indicators of healthy, naturally functioning landscapes.

If the wildlife and physical environment within Protected Sites are compromised by issues such as neglect or pollution, that signals that the broader landscape is facing challenges that affect both nature and people. Addressing the environmental issues impacting Protected Sites is a vital responsibility for all. It is essential to ensure that nature in these areas can thrive, benefiting both people and the natural world in numerous ways.

The Environment Act 2021 has provided us with important tools to improve our environment. This includes initiatives for cleaning up the air, restoring natural habitats, enhancing biodiversity, reducing waste, and making more efficient use of our resources.

Useful links and resources

→ [Environment Act 2021 – Provision 110 – Protected Site Strategies](#)

→ Protected Site Strategies and other environmental levers (see document on landing page)

Provision 110 – Protected Site Strategies (PSS) in the Environment Act 2021 grant Natural England statutory powers to convene local partnerships focused on addressing environmental issues that affect the conservation and management of Protected Sites, so that they remain healthy and resilient for years to come. The PSS legislation is framed so any matter that can help in this regard is in scope for the collective strategy. As a result, PSS are ambitious and innovative in their approach, operating at a large scale across the landscapes where the identified Protected Sites are located.

Environment Act 2021 – Provision 110 – Protected Site Strategies*

Natural England may prepare and publish a strategy for:

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

A strategy is called a “protected site strategy”.

A “protected site” means: a European site, a site of special scientific interest or a marine conservation zone within England.

Why Protected Site Strategies (PSS)?

We are all connected to the landscapes around us, and it's easy to forget the essential role nature plays in our daily lives.

From the woodlands where our children play, to the sandwiches we enjoy for lunch – courtesy of the crops grown by our farmers – nature is integral to our wellbeing. If nature is not healthy, we all suffer the consequences. But, through collaboration, we can ensure that our water remains unsoiled, our land is productive enough to sustain us all, our landscapes are fit for recreation, and our air is pure, filled with the songs of birds, which have been shown to enhance our mental health.

Whether we live in a city or a rural village, we are all part of these landscapes and can shape the stories of their futures.



*Environment Act 2021 - Provision 110 (5) (g)

- Protected Site Strategies involve looking at ways to improve protected sites and the landscapes or seascapes around them that are facing complex environmental pressures.
- These pressures can cause decline in the important wildlife and habitats on the site and its surrounding landscape or seascape.
- By exploring what these pressures are and bringing different groups of people together to collectively find solutions, Protected Site Strategies will help improve biodiversity in the local landscape on these sites, allowing people and wildlife to thrive.

PSS aim to bring together a variety of stakeholders and **‘any other person that Natural England considers should be consulted in respect of the strategy, including the general public or any section of it’*** to find solutions to challenging environmental issues and restore our most precious habitats, species, and geodiversity.

Why Protected Site Strategies (PSS)?

The PSS approach is different because it is:



Collaborative

Aims to foster collective actions that recognise interconnections between the economy, nature, society and culture to support more effective nature conservation and recovery.



Transformational

Seeks to improve the fortunes of nature represented on protected sites by addressing pressures impacting on the wider landscapes they sit within such as climate change, air and nutrient pollution, or intensive human activities.



Delivery focused

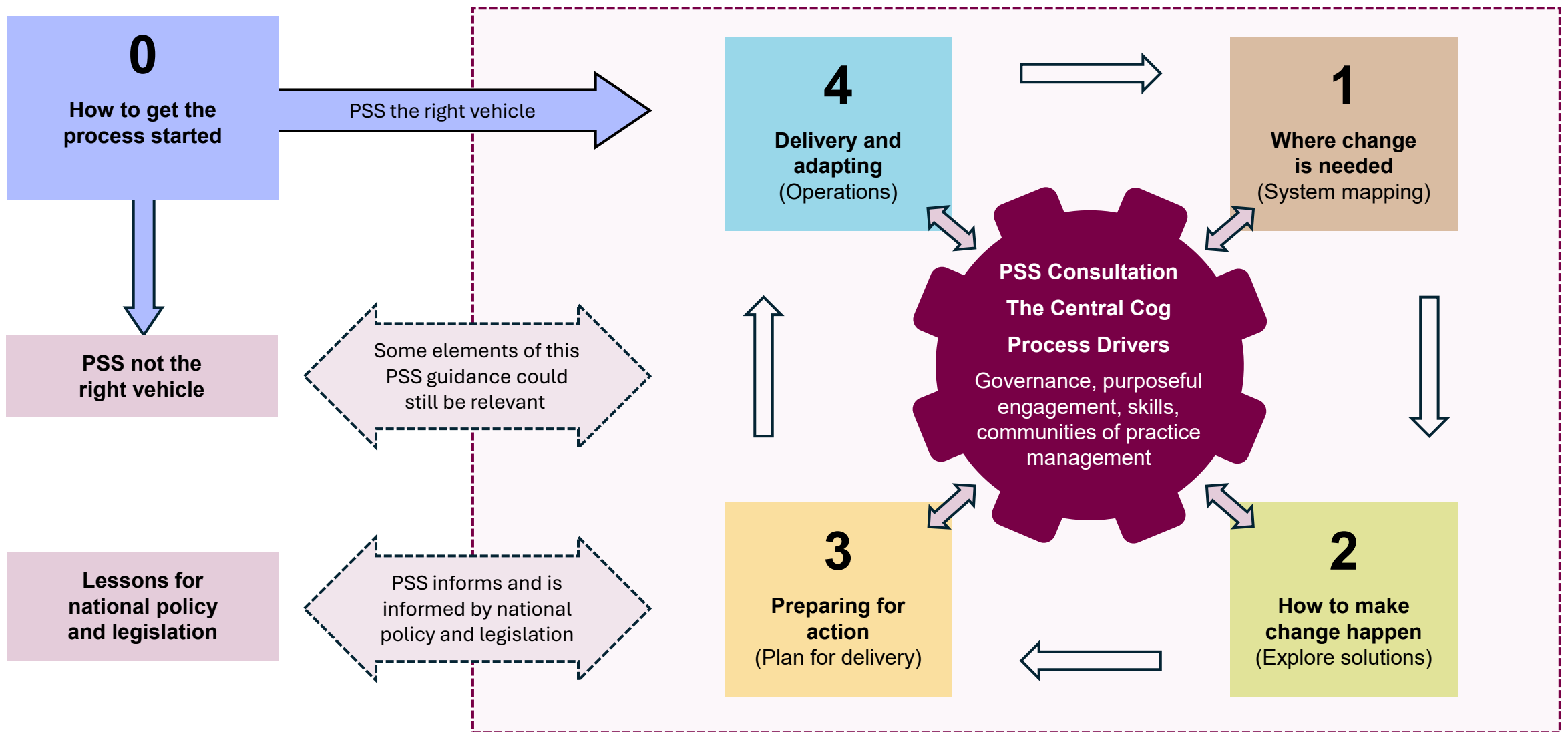
Takes long-term commitment to action, built around producing and implementing clear plans that address challenges in practice throughout the landscape. Milestones will be set and once achieved need to be celebrated.



Adaptive

It is an iterative process that builds over time to increase impact and adapt to changing conditions and opportunities.

Process for Developing and Delivering a PSS



Protected Site Strategies – Drafting the Document

Initial thinking around Protected Site Strategies should lead to the composition of a high-level document defining the overall vision for improving the condition of a protected site, or sites. This strategy document should go to formal public consultation before it can be formally adopted.

It should include:

- The geographical area of interest
- A high-level vision or aspirations (answering the “what” question) with a long-term (10+ years) horizon and
- A rationale (answering the “why” question).

Section 110 (4) of the Environment Act states that a Protected Site Strategy may:

- **Include an assessment of the impact** that any plan, project or other activity may have on the conservation or management of the protected site (whether assessed individually or cumulatively with other activities).
- **Include Natural England’s opinion on measures** that it would be appropriate to take to avoid, mitigate or compensate for any adverse impact on the conservation or management of the protected site that may arise from a plan, project or other activity.
- **Identify any plan, project or other activity that Natural England considers is necessary** for the purposes of the conservation or management of the protected site
- **Cover any other matter which Natural England considers is relevant** to the conservation or management of the protected site.

A Strategic Action Plan can be also prepared detailing actions to be taken to deliver the strategy and explaining “how” and “who” needs to be involved to achieve the goals (see also Phase 3 in this Guidance). It may be necessary to start developing this strategic action plan in parallel with the Strategy document to ensure that the Strategy is feasible and practical. **This Strategic Action plan does not have to be formally consulted upon.**

Protected Site Strategies – Consultation and Adoption

The draft strategy should go out to formal consultation as laid out in the primary legislation (Environment Act - Section 110 (5) (g)).

Extensive collaboration and informal consultation in the initiation phase are thereafter needed to ensure buy-in well before the Strategy is offered to public consultation. This will limit objections and unexpected surprises at the formal consultation stage.

It is important to expect feedback and be prepared to revise the draft Strategy following public consultation.

It is good practice to produce a consultation response document summarising responses received and justifying revisions (or not) to the final Strategy. The consultation process can be expected to take three to six months. Natural England will review consultation responses. When the Strategy is revised, it will be published and can be adopted in accordance with the agreed timeframe for each PSS.



Protected Site Strategies – Consultation and Adoption

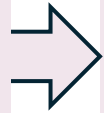
PSS – Preparation to Adoption

PSS Preparation

Developing thinking, evidence gathering, site analysis and stakeholder engagement, to inform future work on PSS.

Depending on the requirements of the PSS the preparatory period can last from around 3 months or more.

In some cases, the initial thinking, research and engagement may have already been done so the PSS can be formalised by minimum preparation. In more complex situations it may be required to go through parts or the whole process described in this guide, including some testing and implementation of solutions before the PSS is formalised.



Consultation

Initial thinking around a potential PSS leads to drafting a Protected Site Strategy document to go on consultation.



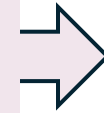
Consultation process runs (usually between 6 to 12 weeks).



Natural England Reviews consultation responses.



Implementing any amendments.



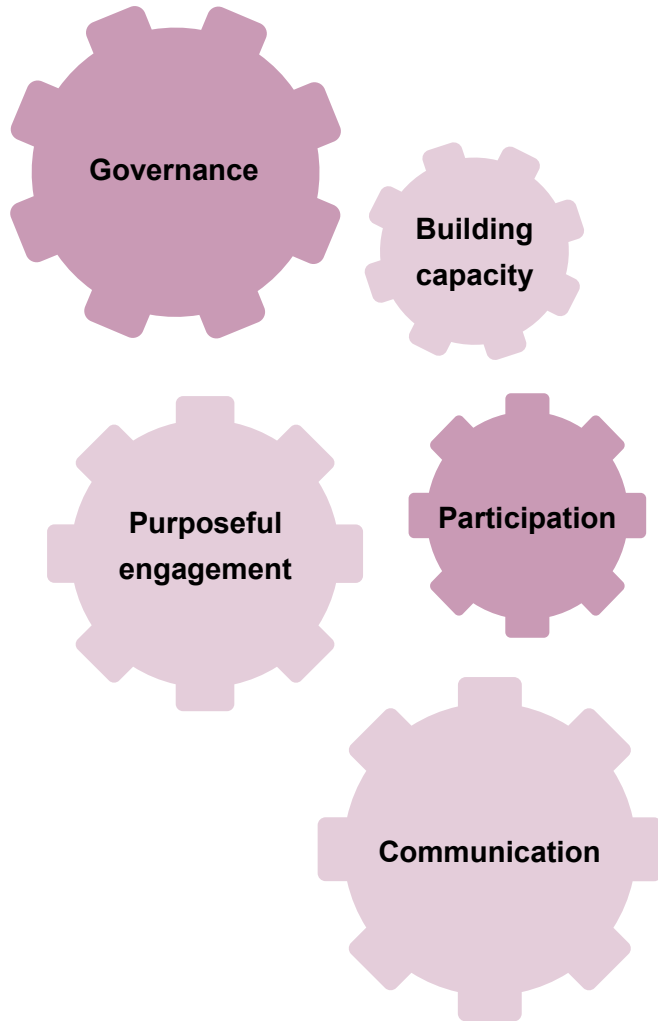
PSS published

The Strategy cannot be amended, updated or revised until and unless the full consultation process is run again.

The Central Cog



The Central Cog – PSS Process Drivers



The success of any PSS will depend on meaningful, effective, and long-lasting collaborations between all parties. **'The Central Cog'** steering any PSS is comprised of effective and agile governance; effective internal and external communications; ongoing active engagement with parties and publics; and purposeful participation in decision making. **It is essential to ensure:**

- **The right people** with the right skills are in the right positions.
- **Effective governance** so the decisions are made and implemented effectively.
- **Wide participation** for legitimate and balanced representation of different values, knowledge, concerns, interests, aspirations and levels of power.
- **Transparent processes** so everyone understands the roles of others, what evidence is available, and how it is used.
- **Considered approaches** explore different options, views, and possibilities, and allow active learning and reflection.
- **Active engagement** that enables participation as opposed to gathering views to inform decisions made by few.
- **Behaviours that encourage negotiation**, knowledge sharing and understanding to achieve win-win solutions.

Useful links and resources

- Governance Factsheet (see document on landing page)
- Community and Stakeholder Engagement factsheet (see document on landing page)

PSS Process Drivers – Governance

Effective Governance structures will be instrumental to the success of the PSS. They encourage and support long-term, collaborative partnerships by balancing internal and cross stakeholder dynamics.

There are several governance models that would be suitable for PSS. The most appropriate model for each PSS should be decided after careful consideration and deliberation between all parties. It is important to determine the starting point (see Initiation stage). In some areas there may already be existing partnerships with established governance structures that can serve as vehicles for the PSS or provide valuable insights. In other areas, there may not have been any form of shared vision or central decision-making body.

Phase 1.4 – Stakeholder mapping: power analysis ([see page 29](#)) offers guidance and useful resources to help understand how the different stakeholders operate and to identify potential participants in a PSS. This process allows an assessment of the potential stakeholder's influence, knowledge and services they can contribute to the governance of the PSS partnership.

Useful links and resources

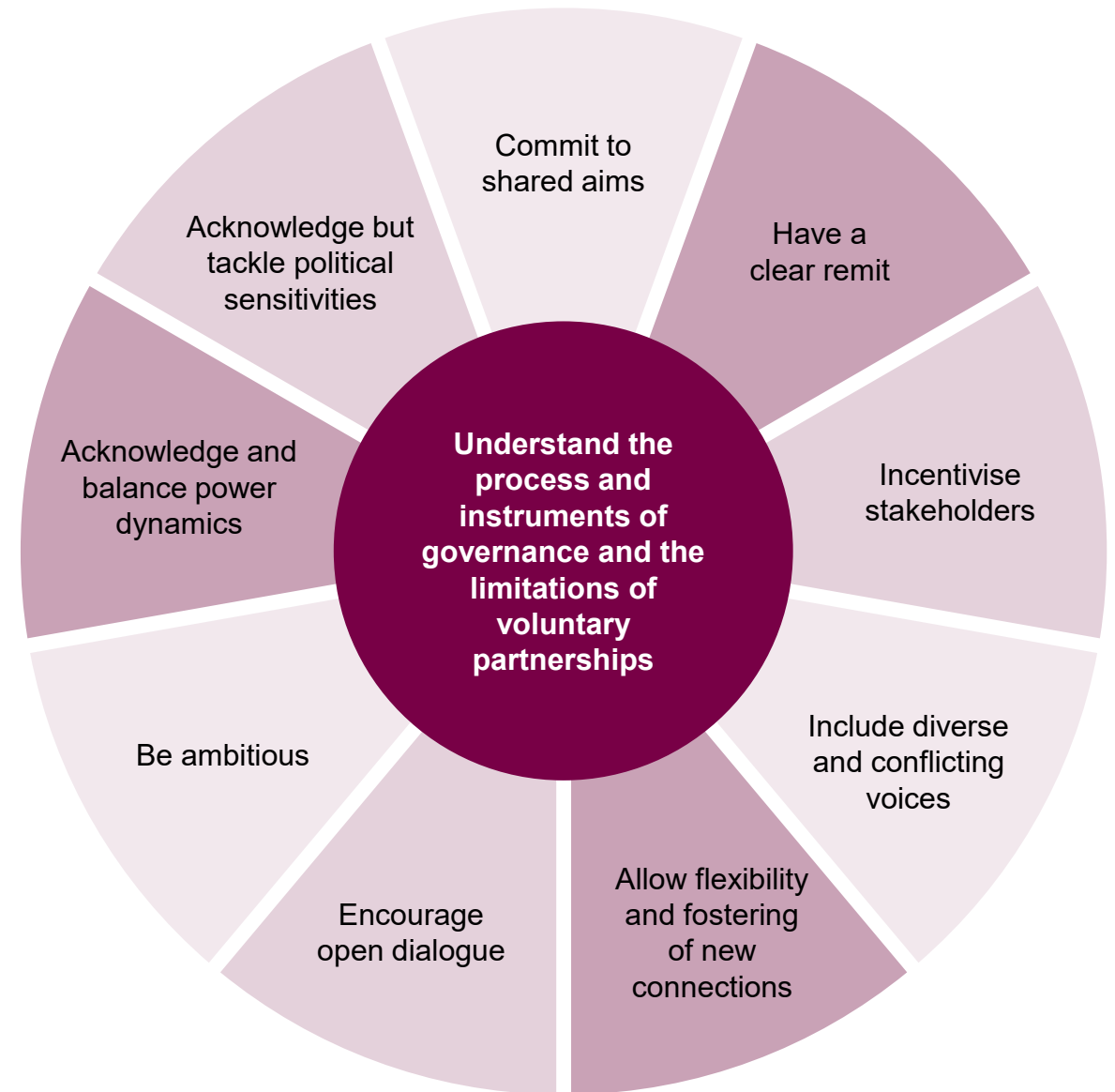
→ [Governance Factsheet](#) (see document on landing page)



PSS Process Drivers – Governance

It is essential for the governance model to accommodate many diverse interests, knowledges, and perspectives to foster innovative thinking and ensure equitable decision making. Relevant literature suggests a range of useful considerations.

An effective governance model will incorporate stakeholders with conflicting interests into the governance structure of the PSS but in strategic positions where they can collaborate whilst their actions have a synergetic rather than conflicting effect. When decision-making is concentrated within a limited circle, the resulting outcomes may fail to address the needs of all stakeholders.



PSS Process Drivers – Communication, Engagement & Participation

PSS require collaborative action that balances the needs of stakeholders whilst fostering nature recovery. Strong communication, active engagement, and enhanced participation will be integral to their success.

Collaborative working in the context of PSS requires a three-pronged approach:

- **Communication** – ensure that messages about PSS reach the appropriate audiences in the right formats to maximise impact.
- **Engagement** – maintain ongoing, purposeful contact with all parties who are affected by or can inform and influence the delivery of PSS objectives.
- **Participation** – ensure meaningful contributions from all parties who are affected by or can influence the delivery of PSS objectives in decision-making processes.



Useful links and resources

→ [Engagement, Participation and Consultation factsheet](#)

PSS Process Drivers – Communication, Engagement & Participation

Consider barriers and challenges each stakeholder might experience when trying to achieve the goals set by the Strategy.

This will help with identifying where potential agreements or conflicts are likely to occur such as conflicting ways of understanding and valuing land use and management, or how to make the environment a priority for all. Understanding stakeholders' views and values will help to illustrate the benefits and outcomes that will support their goals.

Promoting collaboration inclusivity, shared values, and active engagement will enhance delivery capacity of the PSS to tackle complex pressures and create positive, lasting impacts.

Improving communication and engagement within the core participating partners is also crucial.

Learning and networking activities between the partners are essential. They:

- **Build trust** by creating and maintaining an open and transparent environment where stakeholders feel comfortable sharing their ideas, challenges, and resources.
- **Create a collective ethos** that ensures sustainability and effectiveness of interventions over time.
- **Strengthen the bonds** between existing members while remaining open to welcoming new members.
- **Support a culture of knowledge sharing** by holding regular workshops, webinars, and platforms for exchanging data, research findings, encouraging peer learning, and best practices.
- **Develop strategies to resolve disagreements** or challenges that may arise.

Preparing and Designing a PSS



Phase 0 – How to Get the PSS Started

0.1 Initiation checklist

Assess your starting point.



0.2 Draft the PSS proposal

Networking, Researching,
Designing.



0.3 Getting a mandate

Official start of the process.



0.4 Partnership development

Engage (or build) & plan

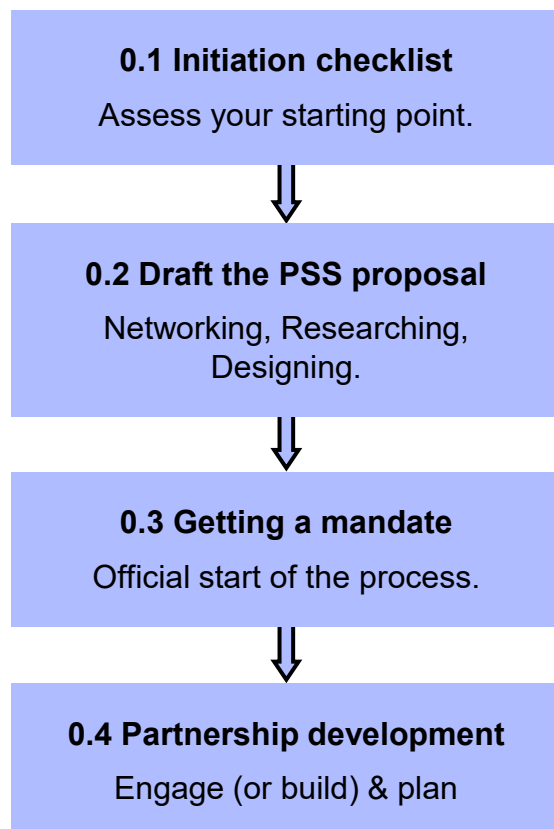
The development of a Protected Site Strategy should be seen as **the inception of a strategic plan and the beginning of a new vision** to address environmental pressures at a landscape or seascape scale. As such, it may concern one or more protected sites and should consult and involve many and diverse stakeholders including citizens and communities.

A variety of tools and approaches exist to support nature recovery on protected sites and surrounding landscapes. While local solutions may suffice in some cases, more complex situations require more holistic approaches.

In such cases, PSS adopting a wider systems thinking can be most effective for safeguarding nature recovery in and around Protected Sites alongside socio-economic growth. This requires accounting for the wider ecological, social, cultural, and economic contexts of the area and the involvement of a wide variety of people and stakeholders.



Phase 0 – How to Get the PSS Started



The need for adopting the PSS approach could have been prompted by one or more of the following or other similar reasons. **In all cases, Natural England’s informed judgement will prioritise whether to take a PSS forward.**

- Pressing environmental issues flagged by the impacts on the Protected Site(s) are of high public interest (e.g. nutrient issues, air quality, coastal squeeze, water resources and recreational pressures).
- There are more than one or complex pressures which the PSS can potentially address.
- Public bodies such as local authorities or the Environment Agency have identified the value of a PSS to address environmental issues. For example, in Local Plans or Diffuse Water Pollution Plans.
- The environmental issues to be tackled have been identified as a priority by the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS).
- Stakeholders from the development sector see the value of committing to sustain a PSS to address impacts from development.
- Where there is an urgent need to reconnect local people with Protected Sites, especially in urban centres.
- Farmers can see the value of a PSS in providing a more resilient approach to addressing issues impacting food security and nature recovery.

0.1 – Initiation Checklist

Lots of information and resources already exist that can be drawn on to realise the potential of a PSS. Assessing what's already in place, what is needed and what the aimed achievements are is the most important step.

Almost always more data, funding, and human resources are needed to address persistent issues. Identifying these needs will form the foundations of a successful PSS.

Please see the checklist as a stock-take to assess where to start.

Useful links and resources

→ [Initiation checklist \(see document on landing page\)](#)



0.2 – Drafting the PSS Proposal

Each PSS should be ambitious, and evidence based; a flexible and action-orientated mechanism that supports local collaborative activities to achieve a set of agreed goals.

Nature improvements are dynamic and evolving so the PSS should be too; an iterative and adaptive process with planning, delivery, and evaluation phases that lead to further adaptation, planning and delivery.

There are some essentials to consider:

- a. **PSS governance** – essential for guiding and supporting the adaptive development of the PSS process
- b. **A team to co-ordinate the process** – the majority of PSS will need a number of people to drive the PSS forwards.
- c. **Project management principles** – they are essential to manage and organise the process.
- d. **Outputs** – it is good practice to document approaches and processes.
- e. **Adequate resources** i.e. people, time, data, money and infrastructure.
- f. **A mandate** to conduct the PSS process

0.3 – Project Mandate

It is important that the PSS project is given a formal mandate to proceed. Once the mandate has been achieved, a reporting schedule of progress will be agreed by each PSS partnership to help support and scrutinise the steps taken to progress the PSS to a satisfactory standard.



0.4 – Partnership Development

Protected Site Strategies legislation in the Environment Act 2021 effectively mandates tackling the root causes of complex impacts on the nature represented on Protected Sites over the long term through collaborative commitments. Creating strong partnerships between a wide range of organisations and communities with key interests in addressing these issues is central to the process.

In the initiation phase, a core group of interested bodies, including Natural England can start the process and invite others to join. Local authorities and existing partnerships (such as a Local Nature Partnership, farm cluster group, Catchment Partnership or Local Nature Recovery Strategy stakeholder group) are amongst the obvious pioneers.

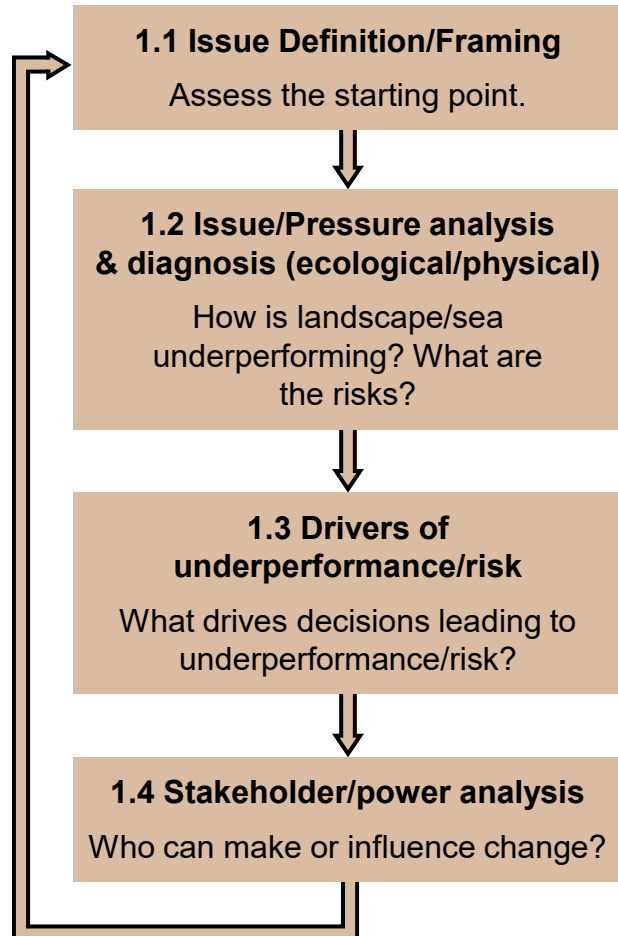
This is only the start of the journey. PSS is a long-term commitment to action and will need to be carefully designed. Some PSS can be taken through the formalisation process in as little as three months from sign off by Natural England, others will require a long lead in time before the formal PSS mandate will be effective.

This guidance will take you through suggested phases of the preparatory and implementation processes of a PSS. Different PSS will be at different stages when they start so not all of them will need to pass through all phases or take all actions described in the guidance.

This guidance document will take you through the phases of the preparatory period.



Phase 1 – Identifying Where Change is Needed (System Mapping)



The main aim of this first phase of PSS development is to create a shared understanding of **why** the conservation and management of the protected site (or sites) is being compromised and the special biodiversity or geodiversity of the site and surrounding landscape is in decline. This is the time to take a step back and **think about the entire landscape** (or system that influences) the site.

Thinking at **landscape or system scale** requires identifying:

- The issue(s): why is the special biodiversity or geodiversity represented struggling?
- Analysis of the issues: what are the root causes contributing to the identified issue(s)/pressure(s)?
- Drivers of these causes: why are actors in the landscape behaving in a certain way?
- The stakeholders who will be affected, can make or influence change

1.1 – Issue Definition/Framing

Identifying and defining the issue(s) associated with negative outcomes for nature is an important early step in the PSS development process.

This phase can be split into three stages:

- **Initial issue definition** – which involves identifying one or more problem(s) that need to be solved based on existing information e.g. ‘The Cumbria lowland peatlands are in poor and declining condition due to ongoing drainage for agriculture’.
- **Issue framing*** – explore with stakeholders different perceptions of the issue(s) to better appreciate what they are and how others understand them.
- **Problem statements** – These clearly define the issue(s) to be addressed and are based on an analysis of the drivers/root causes of the issue(s) (see section 1.2). They include detail of where we are and where we want to be, the root causes that need addressing and taking consideration of the historical and social context in which issue(s) are located.

*‘Issue framing’ is a method that unpacks how people view and speak about a problem, identifying the key arguments, assumptions, and prejudices. How a problem is framed can influence how solutions are approached, as different frames may highlight different aspects of the issue.

Avoid a single, narrow definition of the issue(s). Bear in mind that a PSS aims to work at multiple levels, operating at a landscape (systems) level and taking into consideration the economic and social drivers of site condition. There are a number of tools and further guidance that can support thinking on this.

It may feel challenging to define which pressures to prioritise especially if there are time and capacity constraints or when there is an apparent abundance of evidence and data to review and consider. That said, there may be issues that are well evidenced and others that require more research and data gathering. Defining or framing the issue may therefore include identification of evidence gaps that need filling at a later stage.

Useful links and resources

- [Government publications on natural capital](#)
- [State of Natural Capital Report for England 2024](#)
- [Green Commerce manual \(see document on landing page\)](#)

1.1 – Issue Definition/Framing

It will be important to draw on different sources of knowledge and information at this stage, including local experience as well as documented evidence. A collaborative approach to issue framing is important as different stakeholders will have different perspectives on the problem.

It may be useful to hold internal and external workshops. During these workshops, define the spatial scope/scale and local opinions on the area along with opinions on the creation of the PSS and its priorities (see the Engagement factsheet in useful links and resources for more information). Agreeing on a set of criteria against which to prioritise the pressures the PSS will focus on is key. These criteria may include, for example, the severity of impact and the urgency of intervention, and the feasibility of mitigation.

It may help to set a time limit to this process to try to avoid ‘going down rabbit holes’ and pursuing overly complex strategies that may not be productive in the longer term.

Useful links and resources

- [Community and stakeholder engagement factsheet](#) (see document on landing page)



1.2 – Issue/Pressure Analysis & Diagnosis (Ecological/Physical)

Building on the initial problem framing, this phase aims to identify the root causes underlying drivers of the environmental pressures that impact each protected site. **This stage is crucial for ensuring focus on dealing with key pressures that are leading to the identified issues rather than issues that may only be having minimal impact.**

Here, it is key to think 'far and wide'; sometimes root causes are located beyond the immediate or obvious.

Consider establishing a working group to plan, guide and coordinate this work. Keep this group to a manageable size and make sure the 'right' people are included e.g. those with close knowledge of the issue, not only experts. There may already be existing evidence/data on the reasons for the decline in nature but also some important evidence gaps. Collaboration with academic and scientific (expert) partners will help make sense of existing evidence along with filling important gaps.

Useful links and resources

→ Governance structure guidance [section](#)

Be realistic about the extent to which it is possible or necessary to achieve a perfectly comprehensive evidence base/data set. Given the complexity of factors affecting the site it may not be possible to analyse all elements, and some evidence may not be available at the right time. Where there are several interlinked, complex problems to tackle, involving stakeholders and insights from the issue(s) framing exercise described in 1.2. can help establishing acceptable levels of evidence for defining ways of addressing identified issues.



1.3 – Drivers of Underperformance/Risk

While existing knowledge and stakeholder input will provide a useful starting point, it may be necessary to commission additional social science expert input and/or undertake detailed surveys to collect social science data on drivers of specific pressures affecting the protecting site. This would also be an appropriate point to gather wider insights from the local communities and user groups by employing participatory approaches. In some circumstances, it would be beneficial to collaborate and share data and expertise with partners who may have already commissioned relevant research. This will help streamline the process and avoid duplication of effort.



Example of collaboration for sharing data and expertise

The River Clun PSS pilot established a collaborative agreement (Memorandum of Agreement – MoA) with the Shropshire Wildlife Trust and the Shropshire Hills National Landscape. The MoA enabled the technical experts who had been previously commissioned by these partners to undertake further peatland mapping work within the catchment of the River Clun (the protected site) for the PSS. Not only did this allow for earlier work to be built upon but it also circumvented the need for the PSS coordinator to go through a protracted procurement process that would have severely delayed progress.

Involving stakeholders from the outset can reveal different points of view and can help address real and perceived threats as well as enabling access to additional data sources. The Environment Agency are a key contributor of data and expertise and should be engaged in the co-design of evidence needs and provision as early as possible.

Useful links and resources

→ [Guidance Section on Participatory Approaches](#)

1.4 – Stakeholder/Power Analysis

Engaging with the appropriate stakeholders, at the appropriate time and in the correct way can make a big difference to how the PSS is received and ultimately the impact that it can have. This step aims to help plan **why and when to engage** with stakeholders. It is an important step to help avoid pitfalls of engagement for engagement's sake and resulting engagement fatigue. It will also help identify possible solutions at a landscape scale, as well as helping plan resources.

The objective is to build an understanding of the stakeholders involved in the problem, drivers and possible solutions, and identify what drives their decisions. The word stakeholder refers to those you collaborate/work with, and those who are affected by or may be involved with the PSS.

It is important to go beyond the normal stakeholder identification process. Think who may be involved in the root causes and underlying drivers of the issues identified during the previous stages and include the right people.

At this stage, take the opportunity to scope out wider stakeholders who may have an interest in the site but are perhaps hard to reach. It may be necessary to pursue extra agreements with certain stakeholders at an early stage. This early work may secure early buy-in and may save later objections or disruption in the PSS process.

Stakeholder mapping and power analysis will help guide decision-making around who to engage with and how to ensure the PSS objectives are met. Additionally, statutory consultees of relevance to each PSS need to be consulted. The Environment Agency will be a Statutory Consultee for all PSS.

Useful links and resources

- [Community and Stakeholder Engagement factsheet \(see document on landing page\)](#)

1.4 – Stakeholder/Power Analysis

As there are likely to be many potential stakeholders, it is important to identify and focus on those who are positioned to influence the changes needed to achieve nature recovery that builds ecological headroom for biodiversity or geodiversity through PSS.

A power-interest matrix is a relatively simple tool that can be used to complete a stakeholder power mapping exercise. The tool enables assessing project stakeholders in terms of their level of interest in a problem and the level of impact they are likely to have. The map can be developed further to explore in more depth the type of power (e.g. economic, direct decision making) and interest (e.g. landownership, cultural, recreational use) each stakeholder has and the relationships between different stakeholders.

The process can also be useful to evaluate opportunities for knowledge and resource sharing with different stakeholders. There are different guides and tools available that can support this process (see the Engagement factsheet for more detail on Stakeholder Engagement).

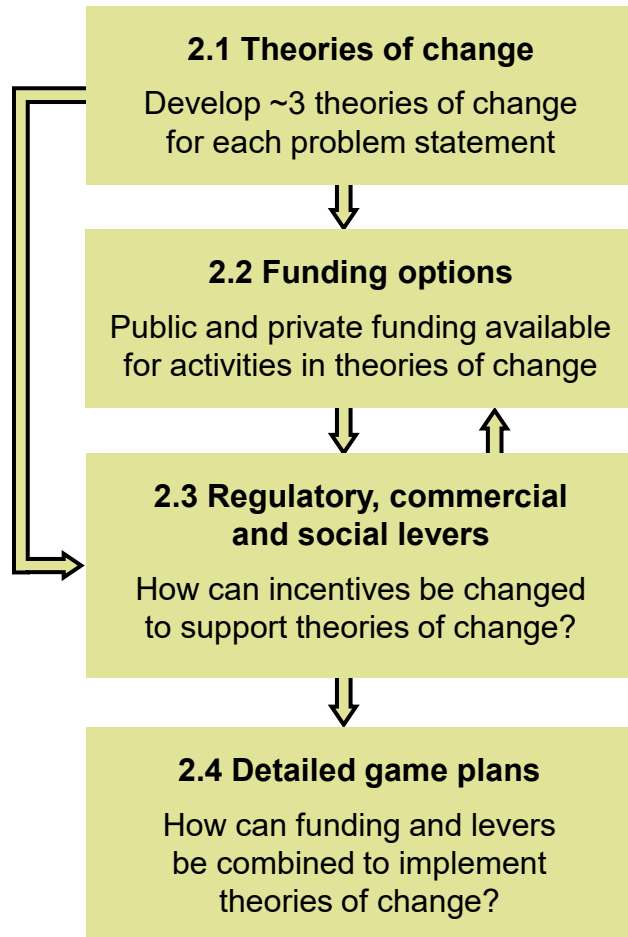
Practically, the stakeholder mapping exercise may start off as a desk-based exercise. The map and matrix can be expanded, corrected and validated through small workshops with partners.



Useful links and resources

- [Green commerce manual](#)
- [Government Analysis Function](#)
- [Engagement factsheet](#)
- [Who is relevant to engage in environmental decision-making processes by interests, influence and impact: The 3i framework](#)
- [Ensuring Effective Stakeholder Engagement - GCS](#)
- [Green Finance Toolkit](#)

Phase 2 – How to Make Change Happen (Explore Solutions)



Finding solutions uses the information gathered in Phase one on root causes and who can make or influence change, to identify theories of change and work these up into detailed ‘game plans’ for addressing each problem statement. The game plans combine and deploy commercial, social and statutory or regulatory levers, and public and private funding options to create the change needed on the ground. The aim is to identify solutions that are carefully targeted at the identified problems and have a clear route to impact.

There are two main outputs you may wish to produce during this phase. These are not compulsory but useful; they can help think through the issues and identify the best solutions:

1. A series of theories of change for each problem statement
2. A series of ‘game plans’ detailing how available resources and levers will be combined and deployed to implement theories of change

The level of engagement and participation of wider stakeholders in producing these outputs will vary from one Protected Site Strategy to another. For some, development of theories of change and ‘game plans’ will be a largely expert led process involving the core team, while others may benefit from more engagement or participation in gathering ideas and evidence for theories of change.

Deeper engagement or participation is likely to be beneficial in selecting a game plan/s to take forward (towards the end of the solutioning phase and beginning of the preparing for delivery phase).

2.1 – Theories of Change

A theory of change maps out the path from the problem or need, to activities, then outcomes and finally to impact. They make explicit any assumptions and evidence relied on for their route to impact. Think about who (which stakeholders) the theory of change is targeting, which root causes it's addressing and how. It's beneficial to produce more than one theory of change for each problem statement as there is always more than one way to solve a problem and the final chosen approach may draw on elements of less obvious solutions that might otherwise have been overlooked.

More detail on creating theories of change is available (see Green Commerce manual in useful links and resources).

2.2 – Funding Options

Theories of change may identify funding needs for a variety of activities, from paying for land management changes, to education or knowledge sharing, to social science research and public campaigning. There will be a wide range of public funding sources and funding from within the partnership, but many theories of change will also require external private funding. Attracting external private funding can be challenging and relies on a good understanding of the interests and motivations of potential funders.

More detail on opportunities to access private funding is available (see Green Finance toolkit in useful links and resources).

Useful links and resources

- [Green Commerce Manual](#) (see document on landing page)
- [Green Finance toolkit](#) (see document on landing page)



2.3 – Commercial, Regulatory and Social Levers

The configuration of commercial incentives, social preferences and needs (e.g. the values and trends influencing people’s decisions) and regulatory prescriptions in a landscape are key in determining environmental outcomes. Based on the theories of change, identify the main factors in each category that are influencing decisions. Think about how these can be boosted or redirected to deliver the desired impact? For example, can people’s preferences be influenced to lead to choosing different food products, or different recreation activities. Can commercial incentives be changed, for example by creating markets for new products or services? Which policies and regulations can be implemented differently to increase incentives to protect and restore nature? Further details are available about influencing people’s behaviour and preferences (see Sussex Woods case study in useful links and resources).

2.4 – Combining Levers in Detailed ‘Game Plans’

Game plans combine funding options and commercial, social and regulatory levers to outline how theories of change will be implemented in practice. Think about how funding and levers can be combined to create an approach that achieves more than the sum of its parts, targeting and catalysing change where it is most needed.

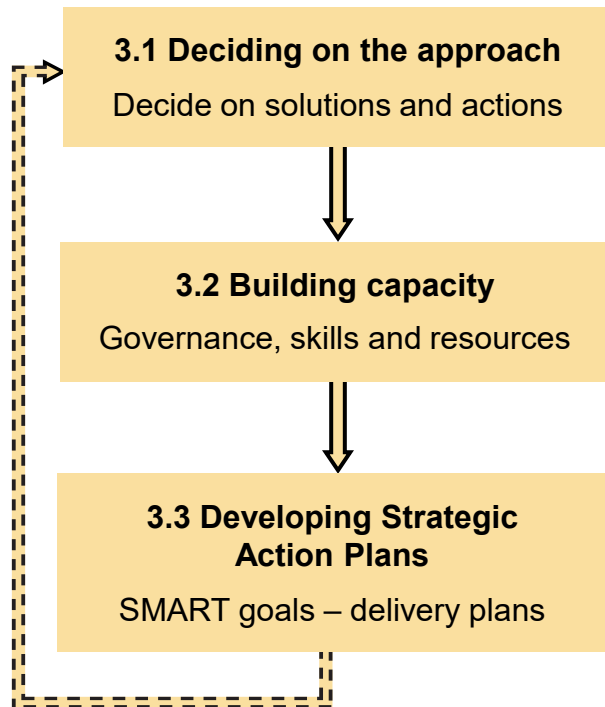
For example, can regulatory or social levers be used to incentivise more private funding for activities in the theory of change? Or can regulation be streamlined to unlock beneficial activity? More detailed examples combining levers in game plans are available (see Green Commerce manual in useful links and resources).

Useful links and resources

- [Sussex Woods case study](#)
- Green Commerce manual (see document on landing page)



Phase 3 – Preparing for Action (Plan for Delivery)



This phase requires identifying and implementing an approach to get from exploring solutions (Phase 2) to operations and delivery (Phase 4).

After a preparatory period, possible solutions will have been identified. At this phase, a collective decision should be made on the most preferable solution(s) and the desired approach to implement them.

To effectively implement solutions, it will be also essential to identify capacity needs and devise a plan to fulfil them.

There are two main outputs of this phase; these are not mandatory but can assist in implementing solutions efficiently and effectively:

1. **A building capacity plan** outlining desired structures, skills, and resources and how these can be put in place.
2. **Strategic Action Plans**, which detail how the Strategy will be delivered in the short or medium term.

3.1 – Deciding on the Approach

This is the point to review and assess the detailed approaches identified in Phase 2 and make a collective decision about how to turn these solutions into action. The chosen approach may be one or a combination of the available options. This decision-making phase is likely to be iterative and circular to ensure that the chosen solution is feasible and applicable and acceptable to all parties. It is essential to establish a process where all parties agree on an approach that will maximise efficiency in delivering actions. This is a further opportunity for collaboration and input from the local community, academics, technical experts and others to help assess and test priorities, options and preferences.

The steering and other governance groups that have been set up, following collaborative processes (see the central cog on page 13 for further information) will coordinate activities during this phase. Decisions to be made include securing costs, ensuring that legal, environmental or financial solutions can work and ensuring that there is commitment from key participants.

The process should culminate with a clear plan on how the Strategy will be delivered in practice. For instance, there should be a good understanding of how actions and priorities are to be developed into a Strategic Action Plan.



3.2 – Building Capacity

In practice, some of the activities identified in the PSS will already be underway, some will be pre-existing and need adapting whilst others will be new. To effectively implement actions for nature recovery required by the Strategy, capacity needs must be identified, and a plan should be devised to outline how these can be achieved; the groundwork for the PSS to reach its objectives.



This plan will focus on creating or advancing the governance systems, improving leadership, collaboration and technical skills, enabling exchange of knowledge and resources ,and adjusting infrastructure. Additionally, it will aim to foster trust and recognise the co-benefits and shared values amongst all stakeholders. These elements are crucial for supporting long-term sustainability of the partnership and ensuring delivery of the Strategy.

There may be engagement and facilitation expertise available among partners. For example, conservation organisations and local councils may already have experience engaging members of the public in information-sharing, consultation, deliberation, and participation exercises. Natural England’s staff have expertise and access to relevant resources and can provide advice.

Useful links and resources

- Engagement, Participation and Consultation factsheet (see document on landing page)

3.3 – Developing Strategic Action Plans (SMART Goals and Delivery)

A Strategic Action Plan should specify how the Strategy should be actioned (see Green Commerce manual in useful links and resources). It should include:

- Clear allocation of roles and responsibilities (including of governance and oversight),
- Goals that are: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound (SMART) and,
- A clear plan of how the goals will be achieved.

Annual plans may support medium-term objectives (3-to-5-year).

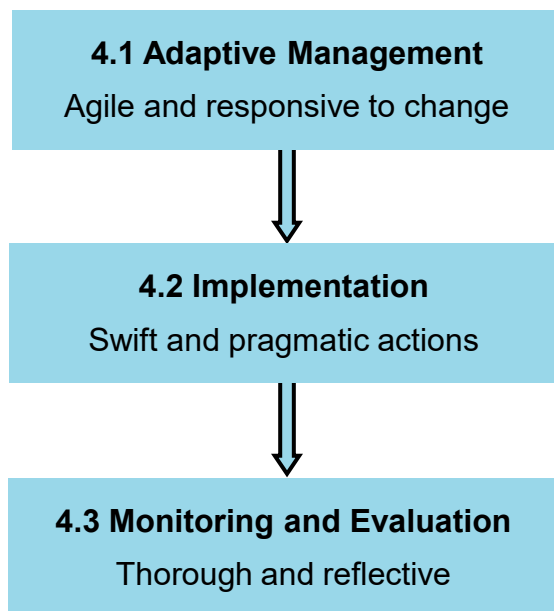
Plans should also clearly align with the Strategy (and therefore with the higher-level vision). Plans should be agile and adaptable to allow for when things are not working but also to embrace new opportunities (for example, as a response to funding or technological innovations).

Useful links and resources

- [Green Commerce manual \(see document on landing page\)](#)



Phase 4 – Delivering and Adapting (Operations)



The PSS ambition is to address complex environmental issues that impact on protected sites. The process is designed to be a long-term collaboration, adapting over time to continuously manage problems and pressures. It is therefore essential that implementation plans for nature improvement are flexible and responsive to environmental, social and economic changes. Robust monitoring and Evaluation processes should be in place to allow for adaptation plans to be successful.

Two useful outputs may be produced during this phase:

1. monitoring and evaluation frameworks
2. adaptation of strategic delivery plans to include rationale for revisiting system mapping and solutions

4.1 – Adaptive Management

Delivery plans within PSSs need to be able to adapt to changing circumstances (e.g. climate change, or changes to social, economic, legislative and political agendas) and learnings about what works or does not work rather than locking partners into a defined set of activities. Data from monitoring and evaluation, as well as regular engagement with participants, can help identify where change is needed. More generally, the PSS should expect to revisit the system mapping, solution finding, and preparing for action phases to identify new opportunities to fill gaps in delivering the overarching PSS. This could involve developing additional Strategic Action Plans providing adaptation measures stay true to the overall vision and direction of the Strategy.

Useful links and resources

→ [Environment Act 2021 – Provision 110 – Protected Site Strategies](#)

It may be appropriate to amend the Protected Site Strategy. The Environment Act foresees the need for amendment (section 110 (11)) to address significant changes in vision or direction, respond to new challenges, or when an update is needed. The revised Strategy document must undergo public consultation and review, as outlined in the [consultation section](#), before it is adopted.



4.2 – Implementation

Implementing the Strategic Action Plan should be an agile process. It will require continuous monitoring, reviewing, and updating of the approach/plan to address change and remain effective.

Appropriate governance structures will be needed to oversee the process and provide direction and ensure accountability. A formal project management approach such as Prince2 or Agile can be adopted. Though this may not be necessary as long as robust procedures that can be scrutinised and adapted are in place.

Use Project Management principles to manage budgets and people. Be clear about responsibilities and oversight arrangements. Monitor progress by defining key performance indicators and specifying milestones. Keep a register of risks and challenges and review this regularly. Maintain a schedule of engagement, consultation, deliberation, and participation activities with stakeholders and communities to ensure a continuous flow of information sharing and feedback, enhance accountability and allow timely adjustments to delivery plans.

Useful links and resources

→ [Central Cog](#)



4.3 – Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring systems and evaluation should be set up at the outset. It is important to be able to track progress and achievements to provide transparency to partners and the wider community. Goals, milestones and performance indicators should be chosen and reported against to the chosen Governance Bodies to enable accountability and ongoing review.

Adopting an open and honest attitude internally and externally about the successes, opportunities, challenges and threats to the initiative is more likely to foster trust, collaboration and ongoing commitment among key stakeholders. It also allows and enables changes to be made to improve performance going forward.

Further information on Monitoring and Evaluation is available on the Knowledge exchange platform and will be accessed via the useful links and resources.

Useful links and resources

- [Monitoring and Evaluation Factsheet \(see document on landing page\)](#)





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