

Natural England Standard

Engagement: why we do what we do



1:0 An introduction

Strategic standards for 'why we do what we do'

We have a set of standards for 'why we do what we do' for each of the main areas of our work where we help deliver environmental outcomes. These are: Access, Biodiversity, Climate Change, Ecosystem Approach, Engagement, Landscape, Land Management, Land use and Marine. They describe the relevant legislation and Government policy, our role, and the principles that we apply to our work.

The standards are for all our staff and will provide:

- a common framework to help us work more consistently
- a coherent picture of our role, Government policy and how we deliver for the natural environment, people and places
- a clearer and shared understanding of our role as a science-led, impartial delivery body
- our customers with a better understanding of what we do and why.

A number of common themes are listed below which run through the principles in the standards. As such they illustrate key attributes that will be evident across our work and our contribution to national and local priorities.

1. Gathering, interpreting and providing evidence and information that those making decisions and choices need.
2. Practical advice that helps secure a high quality and diverse natural environment, which provides services of benefit to people and the economy and is resilient to climate change.
3. Enabling and supporting people to act for and engage with the natural environment.
4. Ensuring that the natural environment contributes to green growth and quality of life.
5. Working with and through others.
6. Responsive to local circumstances and customer needs.

2:0 Engagement strategic standard - definition and scope

We use engagement to refer to the development of understanding and personal value, ownership, and empowerment and, ideally, commitment to safeguarding the natural environment and the services it provides.

It is more than simply contact with and enjoyment of the natural environment. Engagement is about reconnecting people with their environment so that it is a consideration in both their

working and personal lives. Engagement is a way of working that seeks to put people at the centre of decisions in order to achieve a healthy natural environment that is locally sustained.

There is long-term value in securing engagement. Its value will accrue to people in terms of benefits such as improved health and better relations with others. The natural environment will benefit due to the larger number of people involved in its care.

Engagement happens at both the individual and community level. These are not mutually exclusive, as communities comprise individuals, but there are some valid distinctions. At the individual level, engagement will primarily seek to promote awareness, understanding, support, and commitment through, for example, making information available or providing volunteering opportunities. With communities and stakeholders, engagement is about promoting participation in decision making that affects the natural environment.

3:0 Government policy and statutory context

Public engagement is a central theme of government policy. In the [2011 Natural Environment White Paper: The natural choice, securing the value of nature](#), the Government promotes 'reconnecting people and nature' as one of four main themes. The White Paper identifies the need to improve the benefits people enjoy from the environment through better health and improved recreational access, and ways in which people can engage to protect the value of the natural environment.

Similarly, 'putting people at the heart of biodiversity policy' is one of four main priorities for action in [Biodiversity 2020: A strategy for England's wildlife and ecosystem services](#), the 2011 England Biodiversity Strategy. In this strategy, the government sets out to 'engage significantly more people in biodiversity issues, increase awareness of the value of biodiversity and increase the number of people taking positive action.'

Current Government policies promote localism and 'Big Society' and seek to devolve decision making to the local level, wherever practicable. The Localism Act 2011 enshrines this principle by passing new powers and freedoms to local authorities. This makes it all the more important that communities are engaged with the natural environment so that they are in a position to exercise a genuinely informed choice, based on an understanding of options and consequences, supported by relevant evidence.

The UK is also a signatory of the Aarhus Convention, which is forging a new process for public participation in negotiating and implementing international agreements.

4:0 Natural England's role

Our role includes providing advice to others on the effectiveness of different forms of engagement. This is so that government policy is transformed into action on the ground. We do this largely through interpreting the available evidence for use by others and by sharing our practical experience and that of our partners.

We have particular expertise in engaging individuals and communities of place and interest through our work on, for example, our National Nature Reserves (NNRS), Biodiversity Action Plans, and Marine Conservation Zones, as well as through initiatives such as Access to Nature and Natural Connections. In addition, we have a large body of regular and sustained engagement with the farming community, who play a key role in determining natural environment outcomes. We have invested in developing the social science evidence base on engagement (e.g. civil engagement case study material and the the Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment ([MENE](#)) survey and an evidence base on the benefits and value of the natural environment to society and the economy. Through our grant giving, we have supported and continue to support a wide range of local engagement activities.

5:0 The principles we apply to our work

EN1 Reconnecting individuals and communities with the natural environment through all aspects of our work

We will engage individuals and communities of interest and place across the full range of our activities wherever appropriate opportunities arise. We will adopt a long term approach, which recognises that building trust and turning increased awareness into ownership and action takes time.

Opportunities to engage arise in many contexts, for example, through our advice to local government about development and land use planning, our delivery of government's agri-environment schemes, and the use of our experimental powers for land management.

Our role will be to facilitate, encourage, enable, lead and support others to understand and take action for the natural environment to secure lasting benefits. Where legal requirements and national policy objectives differ from the aspirations of communities' and stakeholders we will aim to achieve mutually acceptable outcomes, based upon a shared understanding. We will 'engage discuss decide'.

EN2 Providing information and evidence

In line with the principles of our Evidence Standard, we will make available the best available environmental, social and economic evidence on the benefits of a healthy natural environment. We will do this to demonstrate the relevance of the natural environment to people's lives and enhance people's understanding of it, to enable them to make informed choices and take positive action when it is required. We will make our evidence available in ways that are understandable and helpful to those who use it.

EN3 Developing opportunities for engagement

Working with partners and stakeholders, we will support communities as they bring together environmental, social and economic interests to make decisions and build their own capacity to take direct action. Where appropriate we will support time-limited projects which develop and demonstrate effective ways of working, to give other people confidence to act together to influence the future of their local environment.

EN4 Using National Nature Reserves to engage individuals and communities

National Nature Reserves (NNRs) are chosen as some of the most important areas for biodiversity and geodiversity in England, many close to local communities or in popular and attractive recreational areas. We will use NNRs we run, to engage communities across the full range of our work, and demonstrate how a healthy natural environment delivers multiple benefits to society.

EN5 Developing our evidence

Working with partners and communities, we will gather evidence about good practice and the environmental, social and economic benefits it delivers. We will also gather evidence about the changing values, understandings, behaviours and attitudes of society towards the natural environment. We will gather this evidence and translate it into information and advice that guides others to take practical actions, which engage individuals and communities with the natural environment.

Quick reference

Type of standard	Strategic standard
Purpose:	Sets out the principles that all staff are expected to apply to their work
Owner(s):	Access & Engagement Function
Sign-off:	Liz Newton, Director Access & Engagement Rob Aubrook, Director Standards
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