
Nature-based Solutions Categorisation

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Categorisation of Nature Based Solutions (NbS) intervention types is one theme in the Standardisation workstream for the Ofwat Innovation Fund Mainstreaming Nature-based Solutions (MNbS) project. The categorised list is shown in the accompanying Excel spreadsheet with the filename 'MNbS Nature-based Solutions Categorisation V2.0'. This note comprises key points, describing the purpose, format, approach, status and intended use of the work, and a discussion on the method used to develop the categorisation. We use the IUCN (2016)¹ definition of NbS as follows:

Nature-based Solutions are actions to protect, sustainably manage, and restore natural or modified ecosystems, that address societal challenges effectively and adaptively, simultaneously providing human well-being and biodiversity benefits.

The categorisation has been used in the Environment Agency's Integrated Natural Capital Appraisal project as part of the NbS Ecosystem Service Impact Matrix, where it corresponds to version 1.0.

Key points

The purpose of the standard categorisation is to:

- Facilitate project development and implementation by avoiding mismatches of NbS categories as different actors come together to create larger schemes. This increase in efficiency will reduce project development costs, timelines and hence risks in setting up NbS related projects.
- To enable better data management throughout the planning, implementation and operation of NbS. If different organisations across government, the private sector, finance and river and land management use the same data frameworks then it will be easier to create interoperable tools for collaborative management, governance and finance of rivers and landscapes.

The format of the categorisation comprises:

- Five groups of NbS: Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS), Natural Flow Management (NFM), River Restoration, Coastal NbS, and Treatment Wetlands.
- We have two tiers of intervention. There are 37 interventions at Tier 1 and 144 interventions at Tier 2. Each Tier 2 intervention is a subset of the corresponding

¹ See <https://portals.iucn.org/congress/assembly/motions/print?langua>

Tier 1 intervention. For example, the Tier 2 intervention “Revegetation and habitat management” is a subset of the Tier 1 intervention “Upland peatland management” which is part of the NFM group.

- We have included an additional tier of interventions to show correspondence with agricultural measures as categorised in Farmscoper (an industry-standard agricultural pollution decision support tool), where they overlap with the interventions above. We have also listed other non-NbS Farmscoper interventions for reference as another group, as described below.

The approach is informed by the following decisions:

- We take an inclusive approach to listing NbS and other similar interventions that are not NbS but are likely to be included in hybrid schemes (for example, pervious pavements in a wider SuDS scheme). In the spreadsheet these are categorised as ‘Not NbS’.
- In the same way we have included NbS which do not deliver natural capital benefits (for example, no-till farming in a wider NFM scheme). In the spreadsheet these are shown as ‘NbS (no NC)’.
- We focus on NbS as the deployment of nature to achieve additional benefits (e.g. water quality, flood management etc) rather than interventions for which the rationale is nature recovery itself. For example, we include rewilding under ‘Assisted natural regeneration’ in the NFM group as it assists with flow management, but do not include it in its own right with the objective of nature recovery.
- We propose adoption of the term ‘Natural Flow Management’, rather than Natural Flood Management, because these interventions may be implemented for primary benefits other than flood management, such as the improvement of water quality or the augmentation of low flows. By calling this group Natural Flow Management it will be easier for practitioners to convince funders, planners and project stakeholders of their applicability to other non-flood related problems. By retaining the acronym NFM we believe it will be easier for this change to take place organically as people transition from Natural Flood Management to Natural Flow Management.
- We have provided secondary classification of NbS to show:
 - Location of the NbS (for example, catchment, end of pipe, in channel, urban etc).
 - Alignment with natural capital broad habitat categorisation.
 - Alignment with Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) habitat types.

Other secondary categorisations have been suggested (such as organising SuDS by scale). These are not being taken forward in this stage of the project but could be considered later.

- There are some cases of duplicate interventions across different groups e.g., swales, wetlands, farm management, etc. This reflects practice where they would be implemented through more than one discipline. The grouping has been created in order to create manageable numbers at each level (5 groups, 37 at Tier 1 and 144 at Tier 2).

The status of the categorisation work is that this is now complete. This work has been created in consultation with the Standardisation workstream Task and Finish Group and other actors in the MNbS programme. Wider consultation with organisations with an interest in NbS implementation has also been undertaken.

The intended use of this work is as follows:

- The list will inform national planning and data management, including the MNbS Common Data Framework workstream.
- Organisations (such as water resource regional planning groups or local government) may select to use the list at different levels of granularity. They may choose to adopt the Tier 1 list or the full Tier 2 list or a hybrid between the two. with general use of Tier 1 with a number of interventions broken down to Tier 2 where the Tier 2 lists are particularly relevant. For example, an organisation in an upland area may want to use the Tier 1 list with additional granularity of Tier 2 for upland peatland management interventions.
- The list could inform numerous types of projects which specify a selection of NbS for inclusion in the project.

Method

To create this categorisation of NbS types:

1. We reviewed the documents listed in Table 1 starting with the CIRIA Natural Flood Management (NFM) and Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) manuals as the most comprehensive industry-standard documents available. We then used the other documents listed to supplement the categorisation.
2. For Coastal NbS interventions, we started with the “Working with Natural Processes - Evidence Directory”.
3. We split out ‘SuDS infiltration systems’ into individual interventions based on the Susdrain SuDS components categorisation.
4. The categorisation of treatment wetlands has been informed by the WWT report “Wetlands for Water Quality - A routemap”.
5. We have compared our categorisation with several existing examples of NbS categorisations including the Farmscoper tool and ELMS, as well as NbS categorisation systems developed by organisations including Water Resources

South East and United Utilities to assess how this works alongside categorisations created for practical planning exercises.

6. We updated the categorisation following publication of Working with Natural Processes (Defra, Environment Agency, Natural Resources Wales 2025) and Multiple Benefits of Nature-based Solutions (Environment Agency 2025).
7. We have modified the categorisation following review by a range of NbS specialists, and wider consultation with organisations with an interest in NbS implementation.

Table 1: Reference documents for NbS categorisation

Title	Link	Date accessed
The Natural Flood Management Manual (C802)	https://www.ciria.org/ItemDetail?iProductCode=C802F&Category=FREEPUBS&WebsiteKey=3f18c87a-d62b-4eca-8ef4-9b09309c1c91	03-Jul-24
The SuDS Manual (C753)	https://www.ciria.org/ItemDetail?iProductCode=C753F&Category=FREEPUBS&WebsiteKey=3f18c87a-d62b-4eca-8ef4-9b09309c1c91	18-Jun-24
ENCA Services Databook 3.1 (updated May 2024)	ENCA_May2024_Services_Databook_3.1_Final.xlsm (live.com)	23-Jul-24
Susdrain SuDS components	https://www.susdrain.org/delivering-suds/using-suds/suds-components/suds-components.html	21-Aug-24
Working with Natural Processes - Evidence Directory (2021)	https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6036c5468fa8f5480a5386e9/Working_with_natural_processes_evidence_directory.pdf	18-Jun-24
WWT Wetlands for Water Quality - A routemap	https://www.wwt.org.uk/uploads/documents/2023-07-31/wwt-water-quality-route-map.pdf	04-Jul-24
Coastal Nature-Based Solutions: A Quick Scoping Review - FD2738	https://www.gov.uk/flood-and-coastal-erosion-risk-management-research-reports/coastal-nature-based-solutions-a-quick-scoping-review	16-Jul-24
An Inventory of Mitigation Methods and Guide to their Effects on Diffuse Water Pollution, Greenhouse Gas Emissions and Ammonia Emissions from Agriculture (Farmscoper methods),	https://repository.rothamsted.ac.uk/download/942687eab7ec4b83751c7e241d62f0fa8472d72adcd25a149bb891b7c30d55d0/1595300/MitigationMethods-UserGuideDecember2011FINAL.pdf	04-Jul-24
Working with Natural Processes - Evidence Directory (2025)	https://www.gov.uk/flood-and-coastal-erosion-risk-management-research-reports/working-with-natural-processes-to-reduce-flood-risk-2024#contents	9-May-25
Multiple benefits of nature-based solutions – evidence and matrices	https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/multiple-benefits-of-nature-based-solutions-an-evidence-synthesis	16-May-25
Farmscoper Extension (Defra Project SCF010)	https://randd.defra.gov.uk/ProjectDetails?ProjectId=18702	19-May-25
Nature-based solutions for coastal management	https://naturalresources.wales/flooding/managing-flood-risk/nature-based-solutions-for-coastal-management/?lang=en	19-May-25
Nat4Wat - using nature for water treatment, storage and reuse	https://nat4wat.icra.cat/home	23-May-25
River Restoration Centre (RRC) Manual of River Restoration Techniques	https://www.therrc.co.uk/manual-river-restoration-techniques	18-Jul-25
SuDS asset register and mapping	https://www.water.org.uk/sites/default/files/wp/2019/02/SuDS-asset-register-and-mapping.pdf	22-Sept-25
ReMeMaRe restoration handbooks (2025)	https://ecsa.international/rememare/tools-and-guidance	16-Oct-25

Title	Link	Date accessed
Sand dune managers handbook (2024)	https://dynamicdunescape.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Sand-Dunes-Managers-Handbook_WEB.pdf	16-Oct-25
Estuary Edges	https://www.estuaryedges.co.uk	16-Oct-25
CIRIA Greening coastal infrastructure through eco-engineering (C820).	https://www.ciria.org/CIRIA/CIRIA/Item_Detail.aspx?ProductCode=C820&Category=BOOK	17-Oct-25