

Farming Evidence Review

Introduction

The Lake District was designated a national park in 1951. A number of its Special Qualities are relevant to this evidence paper including: a world class cultural landscape; rich archaeology and historic landscape; unique farming heritage and concentration of common land; the high fells, and distinctive buildings, and settlement character.

In 2017 the English Lake District was also designated a World Heritage Site cultural landscape, with one of the themes of Outstanding Universal Value – a landscape of exceptional beauty, shaped by persistent and distinctive agro-pastoral traditions and local industry which gives it special character. There is significant overlap between this evidence paper and the historic environment and cultural landscape evidence paper, particularly with regard to hefting and commoning systems.

Relevant outcomes stated in Partnership Plan 2020-2026

- We will maintain, celebrate and strengthen traditional Lake District farming systems including the livestock, the food its produces, and the land management practices that support our natural and cultural heritage that are essential to the Lake District National Park Special Qualities, and sustain World Heritage Outstanding Universal Value.
- We will support profitable farming, forestry and land management businesses, maintaining traditional land-based skills and sustaining our agro-pastoral farming system.

Facts, figures, trends

1. Farm business viability

Farm type and size

- 1.1. Agriculture is the dominant land use in the Lake District, with a total farm holding area of 148,431 hectares in 2024, representing 63% of the total area of the National Park. Of this farmland area, grassland predominates, with 133,970 hectares of permanent pasture and sole right rough grazing.¹
- 1.2. The Lake District has the largest concentration of common land in Britain with 66,219 hectares and 254 graziers² (see also the Historic Environment and Cultural Landscape Evidence Paper).

¹ [Structure of the agricultural industry in England and the UK at June - GOV.UK](#) – National Parks ODS

² State of the Park Report 2023 [State of the Park Report : Lake District National Park](#)

- 1.3. The Lake District is almost entirely designated as a Less Favoured Area where natural characteristics (geology, altitude, climate, etc.) making economic competition difficult.³
- 1.4. The landscape of the English Lake District has been primarily moulded by the interaction of humans with the natural environment, especially through farming⁴ (see also the Historic Environment and Cultural Landscape Evidence Paper).
- 1.5. The total number of commercial farm holdings in the Lake District National Park in 2024 was 1211. This, along with average farm holding size, has fluctuated since 2009, with the highest number of farms (381) now falling in the less than 100 hectares category.⁵

Tenure

- 1.6. In 2024, 62,818 hectares (42%) of registered agricultural land (farm holdings) was rented (for 1 year or more) and 78,939 hectares (53%) were owned. This is the third highest proportion of rented land in English National Parks.⁶
- 1.7. The National Trust owns around 20% (50,000ha) of the Lake District including 90 tenanted farms and 55 Herdwick flocks.⁷
- 1.8. 3.03 years was the average length of new Farm Business Tenancies nationally in 2021.⁸
- 1.9. In contrast, all new National Trust tenancies in the Lake District during the last 4 years have been 15-year Farm Business Tenancies.⁹
- 1.10. More detail has been sought to build a picture of tenant farming in the Lake District National Park, including average tenancy length, succession opportunities, tenant age profile and the extent of contract farming, but these requests have not yet been successful.
- 1.11. In the Lake District, there is evidence to suggest some tenant farms are not being re-let as they have greater potential for returns for the landlord through credit and grant schemes.¹⁰

³ Rural Payments Agency 2023 - [Less Favoured Areas \(LFA\) and Moorland Lines Layer](#)

⁴ [Final-LDNP-LCA-for-Adoption-May-2021-compressed.pdf](#)

⁵ [Structure of the agricultural industry in England and the UK at June - GOV.UK](#) – see National Parks data set.

⁶ [Structure of the agricultural industry in England National Parks - GOV.UK](#)

⁷ National Trust website [a position statement on its Landlord's Flocks](#)

⁸ [Rock Review: working together for a thriving agricultural tenanted sector - GOV.UK](#)

⁹ Pers comm. National Trust, June 2025

¹⁰ State of the Park, 2023 [State of the Park Report: Lake District National Park](#)

Income trends

- 1.12. On a national level:
- 1.13. Farmers are price-takers, not price-makers. In 2023/24, the average farm business income on Grazing Livestock farms in Less Favoured Areas fell by 12% to £23,500.¹¹
- 1.14. On average from 2015 to 2020, farmers who owned and farmed land in Less Favoured Areas saw a financial return equivalent to £6.92 per hour, less than the national living wage. This was lower for tenant farmers who pay rent.¹²
- 1.15. Basic Payment and agri-environment scheme payments on Less Favoured Area grazing livestock farms equated to around 50% of total Farm Business Income in 2022/23¹³, often making the difference between profit and loss.
- 1.16. For grazing livestock farms in the Less Favoured Area, between 2022-23 and 2023-24, the average Basic Payment fell by 18% to £17,100 whilst agri-environment payments only rose by 5% to £14,700.¹⁴
- 1.17. As part of the Agricultural Transition, Basic Payments were replaced by Delinked Payments in 2024, based on an applicant's historic farmed area. Delinked Payments are being progressively reduced to zero with no further payments beyond 2027.
- 1.18. For 2025, a 76% reduction will be applied to the first £30,000 of a payment, and a 100% reduction to any portion above £30,000. This means no farmer will receive more than £7,200 in Delinked Payments in 2025. In 2026, a 98% reduction will be applied to the first £30,000 of any delinked payment (the maximum payment now being £600).
- 1.19. Lake District specific data on Farm Business Income is being sought through the Farm Business Survey to monitor the impact of Agricultural Transition in the Lake District National Park.
- 1.20. Responses to a 2021 survey of 100 Lake District farm businesses highlighted most farmers felt it was going to be very difficult for their businesses to survive the change to direct payments with profits from livestock farming heavily dependent on the Basic Payment Scheme.¹⁵
- 1.21. The Lake District National Park covers 35% of the area of Cumbria, but received only 21% (£22.5million) of the total agri-environment scheme funding issued in 2024 to Cumbrian landowners/managers (total £105.7 million) through CS, HLS and Sustainable Farming Incentive.¹⁶
- 1.22. Data from farming charities shows an increase in demand for their services. Calls to the Farming Community Network Helpline in Cumbria has steadily increased over the past two years. On average they receive 3 new calls per week from farmers and their families with financial worries (mainly linked to

¹¹ [Chapter 4: Livestock Farms - GOV.UK](#)

¹² [Rock Review: working together for a thriving agricultural tenanted sector - GOV.UK](#)

¹³ [Monitoring the agricultural transition period in England, 2022/23 - GOV.UK](#)

¹⁴ [Chapter 4: Livestock Farms - GOV.UK](#)

¹⁵ Lake District National Park Partnership Farmer engagement feedback report, March 2021

¹⁶ Rural Payments Agency, via Natural England Cumbria Area Team – May 2025

delays receiving grant and scheme payments) and concerns about family or marital breakdown. However, the recent trend has been regarding farm planning and succession, linked to changes to Inheritance Tax.¹⁷

- 1.23. At a national level (across England and Wales), RABI – the farmers charity – has seen a continued increase in demand for all services over the last three years.¹⁸

Figure 2.2 Average Farm Business Income (£ per farm) on livestock farms by cost centre, England 2020/21 and 2022/23

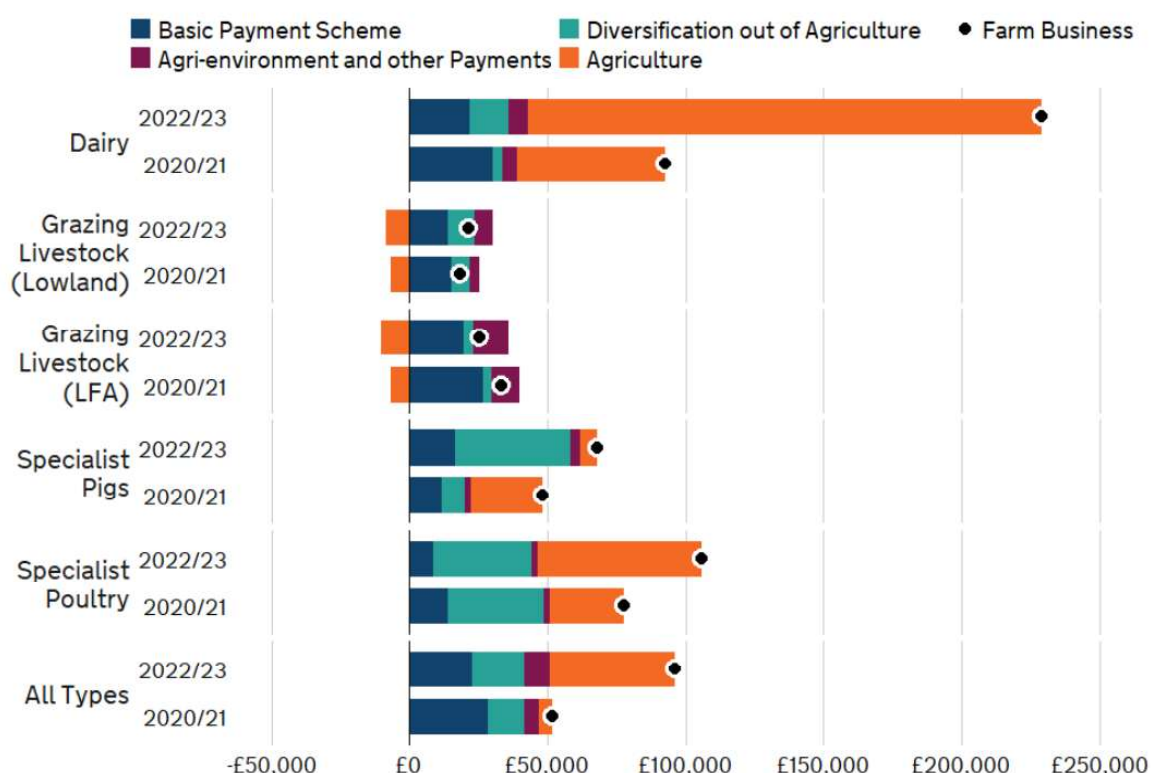


Figure 1 - Average Farm Business Income 2020-21 and 2022-23 (Defra)

¹⁷ Pers comm. FCN Northwest, June 2025

¹⁸ Pers comm. RABI Regional Manager, June 2025

Livestock and food production

- 1.24. Livestock populations in the Lake District National Park have fluctuated since 2009¹⁹ (see also the Historic Environment and Cultural Landscape Evidence Paper for detail on hefted flocks).

	Commercial holdings ⁽¹⁾					
	2009	2010	2013	2016	2021	2024
Livestock (number of animals)						
Total cattle	68,446	68,049	63,714	60,303	61,297	59,180
Total sheep	658,896	661,527	669,279	686,423	672,685	633,180
Horses	978	898	1066	1107	957	888

- 1.25. Despite agri-environment schemes and deer management in Lake District, high deer populations persist, though there is no complete data set available to provide accurate information on the densities of wild deer populations., There is also no single density threshold for habitat damage from grazing pressure. The Lake District National Park Partnership Deer Strategy will explore the relationship between deer, management and habitat response.
- 1.26. Official breed society registrations for the three distinct sheep breeds in the Lake District National Park are falling.
- 1.27. For Swaledale sheep, the 2024 registration period saw a 20% reduction in shearling rams registered. Gimmer (female) lamb numbers reduced by 3,595, to 55,155. The overall number of registrations 61,712 is the lowest seen since 1985. ²⁰
- 1.28. For Rough Fells, gimmer lamb numbers have dropped from 2,718 in 2022 to 2432 in 2024, an 11% decrease. Ram lambs likewise have fallen from 221 to 166, a 25% decrease. Ewes to pure breed ram have fallen from 8,238 to 8,004. ²¹
- 1.29. For Herdwick sheep, in 2024 there were a total of 449 rams registered from 100 flocks - this was made up of 386 Shearlings, a drop of 38 from 2023, 59 Two Shears, a drop of 15 from the previous year and 4 Aged Tups which is down by 11. In 2024, 26 females were approved, similar to 2023. ²²
- 1.30. Livestock that primarily live on pasture are an essential part of sustainable farming systems, providing nutrient dense meat and milk, as well as

¹⁹ [Structure of the agricultural industry in England and the UK at June - GOV.UK](#)

²⁰ Pers comm, SSBA Head Secretary, May 2025

²¹ Pers comm. RFSBA Chairman, June 2025

²² Pers comm. HSBA Secretary, June 2025

sustainable fibres such as wool, from the grass and legume plants that would be inedible to humans.²³

- 1.31. Hill sheep play a critical role in the UK stratified sheep industry, providing quality breeding stock for marginal and lowland farms across the country from which sheep meat is derived for UK consumption or export. Data has been sought on the value of the hill sheep sector to the wider farming industry and Cumbrian economy but has not yet been provided.
- 1.32. Abattoir services are critical to the viability and long-term sustainability of many farms and local meat businesses. On a national level, the loss of small abattoirs, at a rate of 10% per year, has created a fragile system that is vulnerable to collapse.²⁴
- 1.33. Responses to a 2021 survey of 100 Lake District farm businesses highlighted that the feasibility of developing World Heritage Site branding for the livestock products of the Lake District should be investigated.²⁵

Diversification

- 1.34. On a national level, the return on diversified activities on Grazing livestock farms in Less Favoured Areas rose by 75% (£2,400) between 2022-23 and 2023-24, largely driven by income from building rental and recreation activities.²⁶
- 1.35. We do not have data for the value of diversification activity on farms in the Lake District and the contribution farm diversification makes to the local economy.

Local Economy

- 1.36. The agricultural industry makes a significant contribution to the local economy and employment: 20,000 people are employed in the rural and agricultural sector in Cumbria which equates to 8% of employed adults in Cumbria.²⁷
- 1.37. In the Lake District the agricultural workforce is made up of 2,535 people working directly in farming jobs.²⁸
- 1.38. 2016 ONS data shows that the agriculture, forestry and fishing sector in Cumbria generated £250m in gross added value (GVA) – 3.2% of England's total for that sector – which is 2.1% of Cumbria's total GVA.²⁹

²³ [Sustainable Livestock | Sustainable Food Trust](#)

²⁴ [Abattoir Users Survey, Sustainable Food Trust 2022 - Final abattoir users survey web.pdf](#)

²⁵ Lake District National Park Partnership Farmer engagement feedback report, March 2021

²⁶ [Chapter 4: Livestock Farms - GOV.UK](#)

²⁷ [State of the Park report, 2023](#)

²⁸ [Structure of the agricultural industry in England and the UK at June - GOV.UK](#)

²⁹ <https://www.cumbria-industries.org.uk/farming-in-cumbria-today/>

- 1.39. More detail has been sought to build a picture of the livestock industry's contribution to the local economy in the Lake District and Cumbria, but these requests have not yet been successful.

2. Farming & Public Goods

- 2.1. Farm woodland in the Lake District National Park has increased from 3,247 ha in 2013, to 4,966 ha in 2016, 6,083 ha in 2021 and now stands at 6,519 ha in 2024.³⁰
- 2.2. 130,100ha (55%) of land in the Lake District National Park is currently managed under an agri-environment scheme.³¹
- 2.3. In the Lake District, there are 435 live Countryside Stewardship (CS) Higher Tier Scheme and Environmental Stewardship Higher Level Scheme (HLS) agreements, and 71 live Commons Agreements in either CS Higher Tier or the Higher Level Scheme (HLS).³²
- 2.4. Currently, all Higher Level Scheme (HLS) agreements are due to expire in 2028.³³
- 2.5. More detailed information on the type of agri-environment agreements and land management option uptake in the Lake District has been requested from the Defra Farming and Countryside Programme statistics team – this will be published in October 2025.
- 2.6. Some of the methods used to determine grazing levels under agri-environment scheme agreements have been found to have limitations and there are areas where information is lacking.³⁴
- 2.7. Agri-environment scheme delivery has faced recent disruptions and accessibility into schemes is variable. Routes into the most ambitious agri-environment schemes can be complicated, time-consuming and rely on local Natural England adviser capacity.
- 2.8. There are four Landscape Recovery Projects in development extending across 31,622 hectares (13.4%) of land within the National Park boundary and involving 100 land managers, plus 3 Commons Associations.³⁵
- 2.9. There are an additional 10 green finance initiatives, involving Lake District land, in development³⁶, with further project concepts being explored by a variety of groups. All these projects and concepts are currently grappling with how to access emerging green finance markets. The Lake District National Park-led Nature-Based Finance Knowledge Hub exists to facilitate knowledge sharing in this area.

³⁰ [Structure of the agricultural industry in England and the UK at June - GOV.UK](#)

³¹ Natural England Cumbria Area Team - includes Environmental Stewardship, Countryside Stewardship and Sustainable Farming Incentive, as of July 2024.

³² Natural England Cumbria Area Team – May 2025

³³ Natural England

³⁴ An independent review of Natural England's "Grazing Regimes for Nature Recovery" conducted by Professor Robin Pakeman, 2024.

³⁵ Eastern Fells, Glenderamackin, Penrith to Kendal, Upper Duddon (in assurance phase)

³⁶ Green Finance Knowledge Hub

- 2.10. We do not have detailed data on the number of farmers in the Lake District that are in developing or active private / nature finance arrangements and the potential value of these schemes to farm businesses.
- 2.11. In 2024-25, the Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) programme supported 285 farmers and land managers to undertake projects aimed at Nature, Climate, People and Place, with a total spend of £2,038,269.35.
- 2.12. In 2024-25, £300,000 of FiPL funding supported projects specifically helping threatened species recovery and wetland creation and restoration on farms in the LDNP.
- 2.13. In the same period, FiPL has also supported 21 projects working to improve agricultural soils health and 53 projects developing resilient and nature friendly farm businesses.
- 2.14. £141,949 of 2024-25 FiPL funding has supported educational access projects, helping farmers to successfully host school groups and adult learners on-farm.
- 2.15. Through FiPL, 22 farmers undertook a carbon audit in 2023-24.³⁷ It is too early to say whether these carbon audits have led to climate adaptation measures on-farm, but this is a focus of ongoing FiPL monitoring.
- 2.16. A farm carbon audit is not available for each Lake District farm business, however a project by the West Lakeland CIC has shown that for 20 farm systems (including grazing on Commons) the average emission per farm is 225.86 tonnes CO₂e and that 171.16 tonnes CO₂e are typically sequestered each year. This results in an average carbon balance, or net emissions of 54.70 tonnes CO₂e for each of those 20 farms.
- 2.17. An Environmental Land Management Test (part of Defra Tests & Trials) carried out in 2024 by the Peak District National Park, but on behalf of all the English National Park Authorities, found that 'Advice' was a key barrier to environmental scheme participation and on-farm action for nature.³⁸
- 2.18. A 2023 workshop between farming organisations in the Lake District National Park Partnership, focusing on advice and support for agricultural transition, found that advice needed to be more joined up, of higher quality, locally based and multi-generational. Partners agreed there was a farm advice supply shortage, a need for upskilling and a mechanism to ensure up to date, common awareness among advisers.
- 2.19. A 2022 study by the Cumbria Local Nature Partnership into Nature Recovery Skills & Awareness highlighted a need for increased provision of knowledge/evidence, improved/increased provision of skills training and more joined up messaging regarding priorities for the natural environment. The

³⁷ [LDNPP Annual Report Page 23-24 AW NoCrops.pdf](#)

³⁸ Environmental Land Management Local Convener and Local Delivery Lead Test – Peak District National Park, 2024

study also identified that more could be achieved for nature with increased resource/personnel to support the farming/land management community.³⁹

- 2.20. Responses to a 2021 survey of 100 Lake District farm businesses highlighted future farm support should include farm business and environmental advice, both on a group and one to one basis.⁴⁰
- 2.21. Farmers and land managers, supported by farm advisers, will be instrumental in delivering ambitions being set through the Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework.⁴¹
- 2.22. There is an increasing focus on natural capital assessments to inform nature-based finance projects and arrangements. However, it has been demonstrated that solely valuing natural capital misses the full range of benefits that upland landscapes provide for society.⁴²

Capital	Dimension	Landscape Attribute
Natural	Ecosystems	Upland moorland mosaic
	Freshwater	Sunbiggin Tarn (Quantity & Quality)
	Geodiversity	Limestone Pavement
Human	Knowledge	Fell system
		Livestock behaviour
	Skills	Vegetation management
		Drystone walling
Social	Bonding network	Commoners associations
	Bridging network	Partnership organisations
Cultural	Tangible	Field walls & system
		Archaeological Features
	Intangible	Hefting
		Sense of Place
Financial	Currency	Tranquillity
		AES grants
		HLF Programme
		Local Business Multiplier Effects

Figure 2 - Attributes forming a multi-capitals framework, Friends of the Lake District⁴³

³⁹ Cumbria Local Nature Partnership Nature Recovery Skills and Awareness - An assessment of 'immediate need' and some outline proposals/options for partnership-led approaches, April 2022 (unpublished)

⁴⁰ Lake District National Park Partnership Farmer engagement feedback report, March 2021

⁴¹ Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework Guidance on apportioning national targets - Final report. LUC, December 2024

⁴² The Contribution of Wasdale Farming to Social and Cultural Capital of Wasdale and the Lake District, 2023

⁴³ [Investigating the Public Benefits of Little Asby Common Using a Multiple Capitals Approach](#)

What does this mean?

3. Farm business viability

- 3.1. Farming in the Lake District National Park is facing the biggest change in half a century with implementation of the Agriculture Act 2020 and the Government's ambitions as set out in its 25-Year Environment Plan.
- 3.2. There is a worrying downward trend in farm income, with many upland farmers earning less than the minimum wage and their core agricultural business operating at a loss. Farming in the Lake District – typified by persistent and distinctive agro-pastoral traditions – is on the brink of collapse.
- 3.3. Grazing livestock farms in the Less Favoured Area will need to adapt to fill the income gap caused by the accelerated loss of Basic Payment, but there is currently a lack of bespoke support and locally tailored advice set in the context of a protected cultural landscape.
- 3.4. Better collaboration and open dialogue between tenants and landlords, stability in the form of security of tenure and succession planning would help to manage uncertainty for the tenant farming sector during the Agricultural Transition.
- 3.5. Despite grass-fed beef and lamb forming an essential part of sustainable farming systems in the UK, there are barriers to the creation of local food networks, resulting in missed opportunities to better connect with local consumers, and reach premium markets.

4. Farming & Public Goods

- 4.1. Without locally tailored advice and support, the measures taken by farmers and land managers to adapt to Agricultural Transition could have an impact on the condition of Special Qualities and attributes associated with the World Heritage Site.
- 4.2. For parties seeking to make land management changes, continued support is needed to raise understanding of the cultural landscape context in which they are operating and identify suitable opportunities through reference to the Landscape Character Assessment.
- 4.3. Farmers and landowners must be supported and incentivised to achieve the objectives set out in the Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework. Farm advisers are key levers for targets in many Protected Landscapes – there is a need to keep this expertise. Schemes such as FIPL are essential and should be maintained.⁴⁴
- 4.4. The success of the Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) programme demonstrates what can be achieved by Government investment when

⁴⁴ Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework Guidance on apportioning national targets - Final report. LUC, December 2024

directed through place-based decision making and delivery. FiPL has delivered a wide range of benefits across each of the four FiPL themes of nature, climate, people and place.

- 4.5. The number of agri-environment schemes pending expiry in the Lake District is a key concern, particularly on common land where reaching agreement over future management tends to be more complex and contiguous land management between neighbouring open commons is required.
- 4.6. Slow progress in reaching a shared policy vision for the Environmental Land Management (ELM) scheme in the uplands is hampering farmer ambition to deliver urgent action for nature and climate.
- 4.7. There is a need to represent and value more than just Natural Capital in the Lake District if we are to fully recognise the ways management of land in the National Park can deliver a range of benefits for society.
- 4.8. The provision of joined up local farm advice that is sensitive to the cultural landscape would help minimise siloed thinking and provide clearer messaging for farmers and land managers on ways to deliver landscape benefit and public goods through a multi-capitals approach.

References and policy context

Some of the key international, national, regional and local strategies that provide important context for updating the Management Plan include:

- [Farm Business Survey - GOV.UK](#) Data series giving information about the Farm Business Survey for England.
- [Rock Review: working together for a thriving agricultural tenanted sector - GOV.UK](#) An independent review of tenant farming in England by the Tenancy Working Group, 2022.
- [Farming & Farm Forestry in the Lake District](#) A report for the Lake District National Park Partnership, Farming & Forestry Task Force, 2013.
- [Abattoir Users Survey](#) A survey of abattoir users conducted by the Sustainable Food Trust and National Craft Butchers, 2022
- An independent review of Natural England's "Grazing Regimes for Nature Recovery" conducted by Professor Robin Pakeman, 2024 (not yet published online).
- Environmental Land Management Local Convener and Local Delivery Lead Test – Peak District National Park, 2024 (not yet published online).
- [Investigating the Public Benefits of Little Asby Common Using a Multiple Capitals Approach](#) Research commissioned by Friends of the Lake District, 2023, to seek to better understand the multiple benefits and values of their land assets.
- [The Contribution of Wasdale Farming to Social and Cultural Capital of Wasdale and the Lake District](#) Research commissioned by the West Lakeland CIC, 2023, to demonstrate the value of cultural and social capital created and maintained by farmers in Wasdale.
- [UK Sheep Farming and the Sustainability Agenda](#) A report published by the National Sheep Association and produced in association with the Harper Adams University School of Sustainable Food and Farming, 2024.
- [Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework - GOV.UK](#) Ambitious targets for National Parks and National Landscapes to meet their potential for nature, climate, people and place, updated 2024.
- [Lake District National Park Landscape Character Assessment and Guidelines](#) Produced by consultants for a partnership of Natural England, The National Trust, Friends of the Lake District and The Lake District National Park Authority, Revised 2021.
- [Agricultural Transition Plan update January 2024 - GOV.UK](#) Updates Defra's progress since the [Agricultural Transition Plan](#) was published in 2020 and sets out their plans and priorities for the next phase.