

The British Academy

Taking Root: the promise and challenge of local government-led nature restoration

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Abstract

Rapid biodiversity loss and ecosystem decline demand urgent action to restore nature. Local government is uniquely positioned to lead such efforts in direct response to local priorities. However, they are seldom provided with the necessary resources or institutional support. One exception to this is the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) framework – a nationwide system of spatial strategies aiming to reverse ecological degradation in England. This discussion paper examines local nature restoration efforts occurring both within and external to the LNRS framework, assessing the opportunities and constraints of local authority-led nature restoration. First considering Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly's LNRS, the paper explores the importance and challenge of public engagement within the framework, before assessing the wider barriers to strategy development in other local authorities. The paper then considers three local authority-led restoration initiatives operating outside the LNRS framework in Scotland, Cornwall, and Ireland. Key enablers of truly place-based nature restoration include early, sustained and inclusive public engagement and strong local partnerships. However, local innovation is often constrained by short-term and uncertain funding, uneven institutional capacity and complexity, and statutory gaps that overlook marine priorities. The paper concludes with recommendations for both local and national governments to support co-produced, well-resourced, and flexible approaches to place-based nature restoration.

Keywords: local government, nature recovery, public engagement, capacity, funding.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Human pressures on the natural world have rapidly degraded the ecosystems upon which all nations ultimately depend.¹ While international^{2,3} and national⁴ policy agendas increasingly reflect the urgency of reversing this degradation, equivalent frameworks at more local scales remain limited.⁵ This is despite a strong body of evidence indicating that a shift towards local governance increases responsiveness to local needs,⁶ civic participation in decision-making,⁷ and community-level well-being and belonging.^{8,9}

The Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) framework is a nationwide system of spatial strategies aiming to reverse ecological degradation in England.¹⁰ Although mandated by the UK Government, each strategy is developed at the local level, promoting the alignment of nature restoration efforts with local priorities. This discussion paper examines how such alignment can be pursued within the framework, drawing on an exemplar case of public engagement in LNRS preparation – Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly – before assessing the wider constraints on the development of these strategies elsewhere. The paper then turns to local nature restoration initiatives occurring outside the LNRS framework in the highly nature-depleted UK and Ireland,¹¹ considering what these examples reveal about the broader potential – and challenges – of locally-led nature restoration efforts.

This discussion paper applies the term ‘nature restoration’ to an intervention undertaken to reverse ecological degradation and ‘nature recovery’ to the desired increase in ecosystem health that motivates this intervention.¹² The inherently local variations in priorities and demands that exist in relation to environmental issues¹³ suggest that these interventions must be locally-determined; however, the benefits of locally-led nature restoration are not guaranteed by decentralisation alone.¹⁴ Realising this potential is dependent on the meaningful engagement of communities in decision-making.¹⁵ This understanding was outlined in an extensive review by the Defra Social Science Expert Group, which emphasised the importance of integrating the knowledge, perspectives and concerns of affected groups into policy processes.¹⁶ It is therefore increasingly understood that public engagement – when individuals, groups or organisations actively participate in decisions that affect them¹⁷ – is a prerequisite for successful environmental governance.^{18,19,20}

- 1 Bridle, J., Balmford, A., Durant, S.M., Gregory, R.D., Pearson, R. and Purvis, A. (2025) ‘How should we bend the curve of biodiversity loss to build a just and sustainable future?’, *Philosophical Transactions B*, 380(1917), 20230205.
- 2 European Council (2024) Nature restoration.
- 3 United Nations General Assembly (2019) United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021–2030).
- 4 DEFRA (2023a) Environmental Improvement Plan 2023.
- 5 Honeybun-Arnolda, E., Collins, C., Mukhopadhyay, R., Turner, R. and Wills, J. (2024) ‘Localising and decentralising goal-based governance for sustainability’, *Environmental Science & Policy*, 151, 103638.
- 6 Faguet, J.P. (2004) ‘Does decentralization increase government responsiveness to local needs?: Evidence from Bolivia’, *Journal of Public Economics*, 88(3–4), 867–893.
- 7 Putnam, R.D. (1993) ‘The prosperous community’, *The American Prospect*, 4(13), 35–42.
- 8 Lago, I., de Gispert, C., Bosch, N. and Vilalta, M. (2025) ‘Decentralizing happiness’, *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*, pja012.
- 9 Lecours, A. (2012) ‘Sub-state nationalism in the western world: Explaining continued appeal’, *Ethnopolitics*, 11(3), 268–286.
- 10 DEFRA (2023b) Policy paper: Local nature recovery strategies.
- 11 Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland (2023) BSBI Online Plant Atlas 2020
- 12 Gann, G.D., McDonald, T., Walder, B., Aronson, J., Nelson, C.R., Jonson, J., Hallett, J.G., Eisenberg, C., Guariguata, M.R., Liu, J. and Hua, F. (2019) ‘International principles and standards for the practice of ecological restoration’, *Restoration Ecology*, 27 (S1): S1–S46.
- 13 Hodge, I. (2024) ‘The potential for local environmental governance: A case study of Natural Cambridgeshire’, *Journal for Nature Conservation*, 79, 126631.
- 14 Kiwango, W.A., Komakech, H.C., Tarimo, T.M. and Martz, L. (2015) ‘Decentralized environmental governance: A reflection on its role in shaping wildlife management areas in Tanzania’, *Tropical Conservation Science*, 8(4), 1080–1097.
- 15 Wright, G.D., Andersson, K.P., Gibson, C.C. and Evans, T.P. (2016) ‘Decentralization can help reduce deforestation when user groups engage with local government’, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 113(52), 14958–14963.
- 16 Defra Social Science Expert Group (2022) Review of Public Engagement.
- 17 Baker, D.J., Gaston, K.J., Metcalfe, K. and Maclean, I.M. (2025) ‘Systematic conservation planning for nature recovery’, *BioScience*, 0, 1–18.
- 18 Bodin, Ö. (2017) ‘Collaborative environmental governance: Achieving collective action in social-ecological systems’, *Science*, 357(6352), eaan114.
- 19 Davis, J., Hafferty, C., Ingram, J. and Short, C. (2024) The Nattergal Report on Stakeholder Engagement Best Practice for Landscape-scale Nature Recovery Projects. Countryside and Community Research Institute, University of Gloucestershire, UK.
- 20 Wills, J., Shaw, R.F. and Muir, M. (2020) Growing communities through nature: Research report. University of Exeter. ISBN: 978-0-902746-44-2.

It is consequently necessary to distinguish between environmental governance that is simply local and that which is truly 'place-based'. While local environmental governance is defined by its geographical scale of operation, place-based environmental governance produces policies and actions that respond directly to the specific priorities of a local community. Central to this responsiveness is collaborative engagement, which can be achieved through principles of participatory dialogue, flexibility, inclusiveness, transparency, and a shift, at least in part, from hierarchy to heterarchy.^{21,22,23} Where these principles underpin nature restoration efforts, outcomes will most closely align with local needs and priorities.

21 Gunningham, N. (2009) 'The new collaborative environmental governance: The localization of regulation', *Journal of Law and Society*, 36(1), 145-166.

22 Koebele, E.A. (2019) 'Policy learning in collaborative environmental governance processes', *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning*, 21(3), 242-256.

23 Following Crumley (1995, p. 3), heterarchy is here understood as the relation of elements to one another when they are unranked or when they possess the potential for being ranked in a number of different ways.

CHAPTER 2

England's Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) framework

This section of the discussion paper provides background on the LNRS framework, before exploring how local authorities can foster strong public engagement within this national mechanism for nature recovery. The section concludes by examining limitations of the LNRS framework, including its exclusively terrestrial statutory scope, the disparities in local authorities' capacity for public engagement, and the uneven impacts of local government reforms.

The LNRS framework serves as a delivery mechanism for recommendations made by Lawton and colleagues in the influential 2010 report *Making Space for Nature*,²⁴ that biodiversity in England should be 'bigger, better and more joined up'.²⁵ An LNRS is developed at the local level and comprises:

1. A statement on biodiversity priorities.
2. Maps of the most valuable existing areas for nature.
3. Mapped proposals for creating or improving habitat for nature and wider environmental goals.

LNRSs were brought into law by the Environment Act 2021²⁶ and will cover the whole of England. They will be prepared by 48 'responsible authorities',²⁷ which are predominantly local governments – though in some cases combined authorities, where they exist, are charged with LNRS development.²⁸ Other 'supporting authorities' help to shape LNRSs – these include the smaller local authorities in a given area.²⁹ The guidance given to responsible authorities states, 'key to achieving [the desired outcomes] will be creating genuine local collaboration with a partnership of organisations and individuals'.³⁰ This is underpinned by the intent of the LNRS framework to enable public, private and third sector organisations to cooperate for the good of nature.^{31,32} However, while the guidance emphasises the importance of engagement, there is no legal requirement for partnership working in LNRS preparation.^{33,34} The extent of collaboration ultimately remains at the discretion of responsible authorities.

Leading examples of LNRS preparation show where local engagement has been effective. Prior to the Environment Act 2021, LNRSs were trialled in Buckinghamshire Council, Cornwall Council, Cumbria County Council, Greater Manchester Combined Authority, and Northumberland County Council.³⁵ These authorities offer transferable learnings in LNRS development, both due to their 'head start' in this process and the strong leadership that they exhibited. The pilot scheme in Greater Manchester not only informed how other combined authorities could approach this task, but how an LNRS can be developed in areas with a mix of urban, peri-urban and rural landscapes.³⁶

24 Lawton, J.H., Brotherton, P.N.M., Brown, V.K., Elphick, C., Fitter, A.H., Forshaw, J., Haddow, R.W., Hilborne, S., Leafe, R.N., Mace, G.M., Southgate, M.P., Sutherland, W.J., Tew, T.E., Varley, J., and Wynne, G.R. (2010) *Making Space for Nature: a review of England's wildlife sites and ecological network*. Report to DEFRA.

25 UK Parliament (2021) 'Local nature recovery strategies'. UK Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology, Research briefing number 652.

26 Environment Act (2021), ss. 104–108

27 DEFRA (2023b) Policy paper: Local nature recovery strategies.

28 DEFRA (2025) Local nature recovery strategies: responsible authorities.

29 Ibid

30 DEFRA in Anthony, C. (2025) 'Nature restoration and collaboration: Integration and participation in England's Local Nature Recovery Strategy Framework', *Journal of Environmental Law*, eqaf006.

31 Evans, S. (2022) 'Reversing nature's decline with Local Nature Recovery Strategies', Local Government Information Unit.

32 Mosedale, J. (2023) Identifying and prioritising marine nature recovery (MNR) opportunities. A scoping report for Cornwall Wildlife Trust.

33 Anthony, C. (2023) The role of legal frameworks in supporting collaboration for nature recovery: case studies of environmental partnership working at landscape-scale in England post-Brexit (Doctoral dissertation, University of Sussex).

34 Anthony, C. (2025) 'Nature restoration and collaboration: Integration and participation in England's Local Nature Recovery Strategy Framework', *Journal of Environmental Law*, eqaf006.

35 Jones, P. (2022) 'Addressing local nature recovery', *Town and Country Planning*, 91(11/12), 403–406.

36 Evans, S. (2022) 'Reversing nature's decline with Local Nature Recovery Strategies', Local Government Information Unit.

Equally, Cumbria County Council demonstrated how to tackle LNRS development in an area with an exceptionally high concentration of organisations involved with the natural world.³⁷ Furthermore, Cornwall Council demonstrated particularly strong engagement in LNRS development, underpinned by the early and sustained involvement of a diversity of interest groups in a multilevel approach. This strong engagement is critical to equitable and responsive LNRS development, and the Cornish case holds learnings relevant to all responsible authorities.

2(a) Early, sustained and inclusive engagement: Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly as a case study for effective LNRS development

Early public involvement in the development of Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly's LNRS is best demonstrated by Cornwall Council's The Cornwall We Want campaign. This consultation established key priorities for nature recovery from the survey responses of more than 2,000 members of the public,³⁸ with these priorities directly steering the draft LNRS.³⁹ This campaign was followed by a further consultation on the draft strategy to ensure alignment with local priorities. Across these stages, there were regular and frequent opportunities for public involvement, directly engaging thousands of residents.⁴⁰ Public engagement is not a 'one-off' exercise;⁴¹ instead, it is an essential process that ought to occur from the conception to completion of nature restoration efforts. Although there has been a tendency of conservation and restoration projects failing to engage communities during planning stages,⁴² the Cornish example demonstrates how early and continuous engagement can and should be deployed in the development of LNRSs or equivalent initiatives.

Cornwall Council implemented a varied engagement strategy, involving surveys, roadshows, workshops, roundtables, focus groups, targeted leaflet and email campaigns, and one-on-one sessions.⁴³ This inclusive approach reflects the diverse ways that stakeholders prefer to engage,⁴⁴ ensuring the participation of a wide range of groups⁴⁵ – including business leaders, farmers, and local residents.⁴⁶

This diversified strategy was enabled by the mobilisation of existing partnerships. For instance, an array of different stakeholders were engaged through the Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly's Local Nature Partnership (LNP) – a body created in the wake of the Lawton Review⁴⁷ to convene local organisations on conservation issues.⁴⁸ Meetings with other existing partners including the local Marine and Coastal Partnership, National Landscapes, Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Leadership Board, and the Voluntary Sector Forum also ensured that as many voices as possible could be heard.⁴⁹ Such partnerships are valuable assets that responsible authorities should actively draw upon in nature restoration. This is not only due to the challenge of building new partnerships, but because existing networks promote social equity in restoration outcomes through diversity and inclusion in the engagement process.⁵⁰

37 Cumbria County Council (2025) Public Consultation - Now Closed!

38 Cornwall Council (2020) Feedback Report October 2020.

39 Cornwall Council (2025a) Public Survey for UGS Evaluation.

40 Cornwall Council (2024a) The Cornwall We Want.

41 Davis, J., Hafferty, C., Ingram, J. and Short, C. (2024) The Nattergal Report on Stakeholder Engagement Best Practice for Landscape-scale Nature Recovery Projects. Countryside and Community Research Institute, University of Gloucestershire, UK.

42 Dunn-Capper, R., Quintero-Urbe, L. C., Pereira, H. M., and Sandom, C. J. (2023) 'Diverse approaches to nature recovery are needed to meet the varied needs of people and nature', *Sustainability Science*, 1, 3-17.

43 Cornwall Council (2025b) Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Nature Recovery Strategy Consultation Report.

44 Honeybun-Arnolda, E., Collins, C., Mukhopadhyay, R., Turner, R. and Wills, J. (2024) 'Localising and decentralising goal-based governance for sustainability', *Environmental Science & Policy*, 151, 103638.

45 Wills, J., Shaw, R.F. and Muir, M. (2020) Growing communities through nature: Research report. University of Exeter. ISBN: 978-0-902746-44-2.

46 Cornwall Council (2024b) LNRS Engagement

47 Lawton, J.H., Brotherton, P.N.M., Brown, V.K., Elphick, C., Fitter, A.H., Forshaw, J., Haddow, R.W., Hillborne, S., Leafe, R.N., Mace, G.M., Southgate, M.P., Sutherland, W.J., Tew, T.E., Varley, J., and Wynne, G.R. (2010) Making Space for Nature: a review of England's wildlife sites and ecological network. Report to DEFRA.

48 Cornwall Council (2025c) Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

49 Cornwall Council (2024b) LNRS Engagement.

50 Dunn-Capper, R., Quintero-Urbe, L. C., Pereira, H. M., and Sandom, C. J. (2023) 'Diverse approaches to nature recovery are needed to meet the varied needs of people and nature', *Sustainability Science*, 1, 3-17.

Cornwall Council ran a deep, multi-level engagement strategy in LNRS development, reaching stakeholders across a range of spatial scales. For instance, while the public consultation was region-wide, the 28 touring 'roadshows' enabled more local discussions, and briefings through Cornwall's 12 Community Area Partnerships (CAPs) raised awareness of LNRS development at the hyperlocal level.⁵¹ These CAPs represent an intermediary between communities and the responsible authority, and were mobilised due to the otherwise incredibly complex task of individualised engagement with each of the region's town and parish councils – which range in populations from approximately 20 to 17,000 people.⁵² When considering the spatial differentiation of priorities and demands that exists in relation to environmental issues,⁵³ it is clear that a solely regional scale of consultation would not accurately reflect the diverse demands of different communities. A multi-level approach is consequently essential for understanding the varied priorities of local communities in nature restoration efforts.

The actions of Cornwall Council and its partners demonstrate how early, sustained, and inclusive engagement can support the alignment of an LNRS with local priorities and values. However, this alignment only truly arises once the priorities uncovered by this engagement are reflected within the final strategy. In some cases, despite strong engagement, local priorities cannot be addressed in subsequent interventions. This disconnect can arise due to issues of resourcing, feasibility or the statutory scope of formal frameworks. In Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, for example, the exclusively terrestrial focus of the LNRS framework precluded the ability to address a major priority arising from public consultation: marine nature restoration.

2(b) The absence of marine nature restoration in the LNRS framework

Although terrestrial and marine environments form an 'interrelated continuum' across the coastal zone,⁵⁴ marine nature restoration is beyond the statutory scope of the LNRS framework. This is largely due to the highly complex nature of marine ecosystem management.⁵⁵ However, Cornwall Council's consultation for LNRS development revealed that 57% of the public wanted 'more marine areas better managed for nature' and 48% wanted 'more coasts and beaches to be better managed for nature'.⁵⁶ There is thus a misalignment between the demands arising from consultations and the nature restoration interventions enabled by the LNRS.

While trust in local institutions is typically higher than at national levels,⁵⁷ such a disconnect between public priorities and subsequent actions could erode the credentials of local authorities as institutions that are responsive to citizen demand. It is perhaps unsurprising that Cornwall Council, following a scoping report for the Cornwall Wildlife Trust,⁵⁸ is expanding their nature recovery efforts into the marine realm. However, since these efforts operate outside the statutory framework, they lack dedicated funding. In a context where local authorities face surging financial pressures,⁵⁹ the additional spend that this represents is fiscally contentious. Nevertheless, Cornwall Council is responding to citizen demand, albeit outside the formal LNRS framework.

51 Cornwall Council (2024b) LNRS Engagement.

52 Wills, J. (2020) 'The geo-constitution and responses to austerity: Institutional entrepreneurship, switching, and re-scaling in the United Kingdom'. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 45(4), 817-832.

53 Hodge, I. (2024) 'The potential for local environmental governance: A case study of Natural Cambridgeshire', *Journal for Nature Conservation*, 79, 126631.

54 Christie in Mosedale, J. (2023) Identifying and prioritising marine nature recovery (MNR) opportunities. A scoping report for Cornwall Wildlife Trust.

55 Anthony, C. (2025) 'Nature restoration and collaboration: Integration and participation in England's Local Nature Recovery Strategy Framework', *Journal of Environmental Law*, eqaf006.

56 Cornwall Council (2024a) The Cornwall We Want.

57 LGIU (2025a) State of the Locals 2025.

58 Mosedale, J. (2023) Identifying and prioritising marine nature recovery (MNR) opportunities. A scoping report for Cornwall Wildlife Trust.

59 LGIU (2025b) The State of Local Government Finance in England.

However strong Cornwall Council's approach to LNRS development may be, it is not a rigid template to be replicated elsewhere. All engagement strategies must be tailored to the specific needs of a local area. In the Cornish case, nature is central to local communities⁶⁰ and plays a vital role in the local visitor economy.⁶¹ The approach taken here may therefore not be appropriate in other areas. There are, nonetheless, transferable learnings from the region's engagement strategy for other responsible authorities, particularly the importance of early, sustained and inclusive engagement.

2(c) The uneven challenge of public engagement within the LNRS framework

The example of LNRS development in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly is emblematic of the capacity of local authorities to pursue a truly place-based mode of environmental governance. However, this capacity is not uniform across local authorities. LNRS development occurs within an uneven landscape of institutional support and organisational complexity. While some responsible authorities benefit from strong existing partnerships and streamlined governance, others face additional challenges.

Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, for instance, possesses a high concentration of organisations dedicated to nature conservation.⁶² The region also has a strong track record of decisive action on issues pertaining to climate and the environment.⁶³ Central to this track record has been the role of the University of Exeter, whose campus in Penryn, Cornwall, has produced a long-term research relationship with Cornwall Council. This university-community collaboration has been key to expanding public engagement with environmental issues,⁶⁴ and has been critical in enabling co-production approaches to nature recovery.⁶⁵ Yet, a relationship of this kind is an asset that not all areas possess, privileging some responsible authorities in LNRS development.

Equally, some responsible authorities have contended with more complex political geographies than others. This complexity arises due to local government in England existing as a patchwork of different council types, with some areas being governed by a single-tier local authority (e.g. unitary authorities) and others having two-tier local government (both county and district councils).⁶⁶ The relative political simplicity of Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly – two unitary councils, with one as the responsible authority – is not common to all authorities. For instance, in Cornwall's neighbour Devon, while Devon County Council is the responsible authority for LNRS development, it must collaborate with the 10 supporting authorities of East Devon, Teignbridge, South Hams, West Devon, Torridge, North Devon, Exeter City, Mid Devon, Torbay Council and Plymouth City Council, as well as Dartmoor National Park and Exmoor National Park.⁶⁷ The task of collaboration within the LNRS framework is thus greater in some areas than others, with no reflection of this differing complexity existing in funding allocations or delivery expectations.

60 Woolgrove, N.J. (2023) Exploring regional development pathways through nature recovery across England's rural-periphery (Doctoral dissertation, University of Exeter)

61 Gaskell, C., Wills, J., Craig, N. and Hartgroves, R. (2021) Sustaining the environment and visitor economy in Cornwall. Environment and Sustainability Institute, University of Exeter.

62 Turner, R., Blundell, A., Collins, C., Exeter, O. and Wills, J. (2021) Sustainable development in Cornwall: local perspectives on challenges and opportunities. Environment and Sustainability Institute, University of Exeter, UK.

63 Turner, R. and Wills, J. (2022). Downscaling doughnut economics for sustainability governance. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, 56, 101180.

64 Wills, J., Shaw, R.F. and Muir, M. (2020) Growing communities through nature: Research report. University of Exeter. ISBN: 978-0-902746-44-2.

65 Honeybun-Arnolda, E., Collins, C., Mukhopadhyay, R., Turner, R. and Wills, J. (2024) 'Localising and decentralising goal-based governance for sustainability', *Environmental Science & Policy*, 151, 103638.

66 LGIU (2025b) The State of Local Government Finance in England.

67 Devon County Council (2023) Devon's Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

2(d) Nature recovery in the era of local government reform

The Lawton review called for a more coordinated and spatial approach to nature restoration in England.⁶⁸ Although the LNRS framework is undeniably spatial, the extent to which it has been coordinated is constrained by the volatile nature of the local government sector at present.

Plans for local government reorganisation in England were announced in the [Devolution White Paper](#) of December 2024. They aim to achieve 'better outcomes for residents, save significant money ... and improve accountability' by mandating a shift in areas currently governed by both county and district councils towards single-tier unitary authorities. Some areas have already undergone this transition – Cornwall, for instance, became a unitary authority in 2009. However, over 200 councils are presently navigating the first stages of this task in 2025, with interim reorganisation proposals having been submitted to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) in March and final proposals due in the Autumn.⁶⁹

In areas undergoing reorganisation, negotiations about future governance arrangements have complicated the working relationships of LNRS responsible and supporting authorities. This is particularly the case where different councils have submitted competing proposals for reorganisation due to diverging visions for their region's future.⁷⁰ Although the eventual establishment of single, unitary authorities would theoretically simplify collaboration in nature restoration efforts, the timescales for reorganisation extend beyond that of the LNRS framework. As a result, there is no immediate benefit to reorganisation and LNRS development unfolding contemporaneously.

Also announced in the Devolution White Paper were plans to transfer greater powers to subnational governments in England, with emphasis on expanding the role of mayoral combined authorities – now redesignated as 'strategic authorities'.⁷¹ This envisaged future was explicitly referenced in the context of LNRS development, with the UK Government stating its intention that 'strategic authorities will be appointed the Local Nature Recovery Strategies responsible authority where they are not already'.⁷² While there are indeed several regions in which this is already the case,⁷³ this does raise questions about how genuinely 'local' LNRSs are in these cases. Of particular concern is whether stakeholder engagement can sufficiently reach local residents when LNRS development is occurring across populations as large as three million people – as is the case for the responsible authorities in Greater Manchester and the West Midlands.⁷⁴

Reorganisation and devolution have not occurred uniformly in England since the White Paper. Some regions have been fast-tracked through these processes; others have seen a slower pace of change.⁷⁵ The complicated patchwork of political geographies in English local government is therefore set to persist, and the extent to which these reforms disrupt LNRS development will depend on the stage that authorities have reached in their devolutionary and reorganisational journeys.

Nevertheless, the persistence of this patchwork need not constrain the quality of environmental governance. After all, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to nature recovery.⁷⁶ As long as LNRSs meet the varying needs and priorities that exist in relation to environmental issues,⁷⁷ and communities are engaged sufficiently throughout this process, a success can be made of this framework by all responsible authorities.

68 Lawton, J.H., Brotherton, P.N.M., Brown, V.K., Elphick, C., Fitter, A.H., Forshaw, J., Haddow, R.W., Hilborne, S., Leafe, R.N., Mace, G.M., Southgate, M.P., Sutherland, W.J., Tew, T.E., Varley, J., and Wynne, G.R. (2010) Making Space for Nature: a review of England's wildlife sites and ecological network. Report to DEFRA.

69 MHCLG (2025a) Local government reorganisation: invitation to local authorities in two-tier areas.

70 LGIU (2025c) LGR snapshot – April 2025.

71 MHCLG (2024) English Devolution White Paper.

72 Ibid

73 DEFRA (2025) Local nature recovery strategies: responsible authorities.

74 ONS (2023) Population estimates - local authority based by single year of age.

75 MHCLG (2025b) Devolution revolution: six areas to elect Mayors for first time

76 Davis, J., Hafferty, C., Ingram, J. and Short, C. (2024) The Nattergal Report on Stakeholder Engagement Best Practice for Landscape-scale Nature Recovery Projects. Countryside and Community Research Institute, University of Gloucestershire, UK.

77 Hodge, I. (2024) 'The potential for local environmental governance: A case study of Natural Cambridgeshire', *Journal for Nature Conservation*, 79, 126631.

CHAPTER 3

Beyond LNRS: examples of locally-led nature restoration that might inform responsible authorities

Although the development of LNRSs lays the groundwork for a nationwide wave of nature restoration in England, the framework does not, in itself, deliver tangible recovery. Successfully translating these strategies into outcomes depends on the initiatives that follow them. While some LNRSs have already been published, others remain under development. Now is the time for responsible authorities to consider how restoration efforts can fulfil the social and ecological priorities emerging from the LNRS process.

This final section turns to three instances of locally-driven nature restoration operating externally to formal nature recovery frameworks. Although many such cases could inform this discussion, this section focuses on three: river channel restoration in East Renfrewshire, Scotland; the Making Space for Nature scheme in Cornwall; and the strategic planning approach in Fingal, Ireland. These examples illustrate the capacity of local authorities to lead a place-based wave of nature restoration, whilst highlighting particular 'sticking points' that must be addressed in order to unlock the full potential of local authorities in this arena.

3(a) East Renfrewshire: restoration of the Lavern Water

Led by East Renfrewshire Council and supported by the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) among other partners, [the Lavern Water restoration](#) showcases the potential of targeted local innovation in nature restoration. The project was completed in 2023 and involved weir removal as a means of restoring the natural course of the Lavern Water – a small, post-industrial river in the region – with ecologically significant outcomes.⁷⁸ In addition to reducing flood risk and improving water quality, four kilometres of habitat was once again made accessible to fish species, resulting in salmon being recorded in the Water for the first time in 150 years.^{79,80}

The Council placed a strong emphasis on community engagement in this intervention. For example, students from the local Carlibar primary school help to monitor improvement in the river's biodiversity, while other residents contribute through voluntary biodiversity surveys.⁸¹ The latter is an approach that is today replicable due to the increasing ease of using citizen science tools such as [iNaturalist](#). Together with the creation of a greenspace and path network beside the Lavern Water, this channel restoration is credited with reigniting local interest and participation in nature.⁸²

The project was not without its challenges, and was delayed due to the need to source additional funding, with a knock-on impact of necessitating weir removal during a period of uncharacteristically high rainfall.⁸³ Despite funding difficulties, this example highlights for responsible authorities – within the LNRS framework and beyond – how targeted, small-scale restoration rooted in community participation can deliver meaningful ecological and community benefits.

78 East Renfrewshire Council (2023) £2.8 million transformation of Barrhead's Lavern Water now complete.

79 Green Action Trust (2024) Crossmill Weir Removal.

80 Green Action Trust (2025) First salmon spotted upstream in the Lavern Water in 150 years!

81 East Renfrewshire Council (2023) £2.8 million transformation of Barrhead's Lavern Water now complete.

82 Green Action Trust (2024) Crossmill Weir Removal.

83 Ibid

3(b) Cornwall: Making Space for Nature

Making Space for Nature was a nature recovery project made possible by European Regional Development Fund allocations, match funding from Cornwall Council, and support from the University of Exeter. The project involved the restoration and enhancement of urban green spaces in Cornish towns. Operating between 2020 and 2022, the local authority played a central role, providing leadership and strategic oversight, while the University contributed ecological expertise.⁸⁴

Through this collaborative model, 78 hectares of green spaces – including public parks, roadside verges, allotments, cemeteries and churchyards – across 15 towns were transformed.⁸⁵ This transformation included the creation of new wildflower meadows, ponds, hedges, trees, shrubs and bulbs.⁸⁶ While not only creating more hospitable environments for pollinators, birds, and other wildlife, the scheme has also created new natural assets for local communities.⁸⁷ By introducing signage, seats, paths and ‘natural play’ opportunities, the scheme has improved access to and understanding of local biodiversity.⁸⁸

At the 2022 Landscape Institute Awards, this ‘great green infrastructure network’ was crowned the winning entry in the ‘Excellence in Biodiversity, Conservation and Enhancement’ category.⁸⁹ Making Space for Nature also inspired a flagship initiative titled Urban Green Shoots, with the shared aim of bringing increased biodiversity to public open spaces across Cornwall.⁹⁰ This successor scheme was enabled by allocations from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund – investment introduced in 2022 as part of the former Conservative Government’s wider ‘levelling up’ agenda.⁹¹ Public engagement included regular drop-in sessions at the sites of restoration, enabling local people to voice their ideas, comments or queries in relation to any changes.⁹² Therefore, across both schemes, nature restoration was well-publicised and rooted in community demands.

However, the Urban Green Shoots scheme has now come to an end, and Cornwall Council ran a public survey to evaluate the scheme in early 2025.⁹³ This termination is due to the UK Shared Prosperity Fund – which underpinned this project – having a spending deadline of March 2025.⁹⁴ Although the incumbent Labour Government extended this deadline to March 2026,⁹⁵ uncertainty surrounding future funding prevents the continuation of the Urban Green Shoots scheme. Therefore, while the project highlights to responsible authorities the value of strong leadership, strategic partnerships, and meaningful community engagement in nature restoration, it also underlines the need for more secure, long-term funding to sustain any ecological and community benefits.

3(c) Fingal: strategic planning for nature

Fingal, a county located immediately north of Dublin, demonstrates the capacity of local authorities to pursue nature recovery through strategic planning. Since 2011, green infrastructure has been embedded in the Council’s County Development Plans; integrating greater ecological considerations in land use decisions across one of the Republic of Ireland’s fastest-developing regions.⁹⁶ This has underpinned local projects such as the [Portmarnock South Local Area Plan](#), where a residential development of 3,000 homes incorporated habitats for migratory birds and sustainable drainage systems.⁹⁷

84 Cornwall Council (2025d) Urban Green Shoots.

85 Simpson, Z. (2024) Flower project boosted pollinating insects - study, BBC News.

86 Cornwall Council (2019) Making space for nature in Cornish towns.

87 Simpson, Z. (2024) Flower project boosted pollinating insects - study, BBC News.

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89 Landscape Institute Awards (2022) 2022 Finalists and Winners.

90 Cornwall Council (2025d) Urban Green Shoots.

91 MHCLG (2025c) UKSPF 2025-26 allocations.

92 Cornwall Council (2025d) Urban Green Shoots.

93 Cornwall Council (2025a) Public Survey for UGS Evaluation.

94 Brien, P. (2022) The UK Shared Prosperity Fund. House of Commons Library Briefing Paper no. 8527. House of Commons Library.

95 MHCLG (2025c) UKSPF 2025-26 allocations.

96 Fingal County Council (2023a) Fingal Biodiversity Action Plan 2023–2030.

97 Fingal County Council (2023b) Implementation Plan: Priority Actions 2023–2026.

Fingal's Biodiversity Action Plan 2023–2030 builds on this foundation, setting out measurable goals for restoration across woodlands, wetlands, farmland and marine ecosystems.⁹⁸ Priorities for the plan are determined through a Biodiversity Forum, which brings together a broad coalition of stakeholders including residents, farmers non-governmental organisations and state agencies.⁹⁹ Rather than vague, aspirational targets, the Plan starts with a clear vision for Fingal's ecosystems in 2030 and works backwards, establishing a realistic strategy of what it will take to get there: €40 million, six biodiversity officers, and a planning ecologist.¹⁰⁰

Although access to funding is constrained by administrative burdens, and a €20 million gap remains between projected needs and currently confirmed budgets, delivery on these targets is already underway, and the Council funds most measures from its own resources.¹⁰¹ These efforts are not limited to terrestrial habitats, and there is ongoing work by the Council to restore oyster beds, salt marshes and seagrass meadows in partnership with universities in Dublin and Galway.¹⁰² Yet, there is no formal mechanism mandating this marine focus, nor dedicated funding to support it. Instead, this pursuit of marine nature recovery is occurring on the council's own initiative.

For other local authorities operating in pursuit of nature recovery, Fingal's approach demonstrates the importance of embedding ecological considerations within strategic planning, backed by clear targets, resource requirements, and stakeholder engagement. This example also highlights that while local innovation can drive progress, statutory frameworks must address funding gaps and administrative barriers to ensure successful nature restoration across both terrestrial and marine ecosystems.

98 Fingal County Council (2023a) Fingal Biodiversity Action Plan 2023–2030.

99 Ibid

100 Ibid

101 Fingal County Council (2023b) Implementation Plan: Priority Actions 2023–2026.

102 Fingal County Council (2023b) Implementation Plan: Priority Actions 2023–2026.

CHAPTER 4

Conclusions

Summary:

- Local authorities are uniquely positioned to lead a truly place-based wave of nature restoration. This potential is evident both within and outside formal frameworks for nature recovery.
- Early, sustained and inclusive public engagement is essential to unlocking the potential of local authority-led nature restoration. Strategic partnerships with other local organisations are also critical assets.
- In the pursuit of place-based nature restoration, some local authorities benefit from greater institutional support, streamlined governance, and limited disruption from local government reforms. Others face additional challenges.
- Short-term, insufficient and uncertain funding constrains the potential of local authority-led nature restoration.
- Exclusively terrestrial statutory scopes for nature restoration can preclude delivery on local demands where marine ecosystems are priorities. This could erode trust in local governance.

Policy recommendations for local governments:

- Local governments should consult the public early and throughout nature restoration efforts: from planning to completion.
- Local governments should adopt a multi-level approach to public engagement, reflecting the need to understand nature restoration priorities across different spatial scales.
- Local governments should use a wide range of engagement methods, reflecting the diverse requirements and preferences of different stakeholders.
- Local governments should develop and enhance strategic partnerships for a co-production approach to nature restoration.

Policy recommendations for national governments:

- National governments should afford additional support and flexibility to local authorities that face additional challenges in nature restoration.
- National governments should support the development and enhancement of council-university partnerships and other local partnerships in nature restoration.
- National governments should commit to long-term, well-resourced, and stable nature recovery agendas.
- National governments should fully empower local authorities to deliver on local restoration priorities, regardless of statutory scope, particularly in relation to local marine nature restoration.

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