

The British Academy

Learning from small urban rivers and the people who steward them:

How grassroots expertise can inform
policy at the intersection of nature
recovery and planning

Emma Jackson and Louise Rondel

Contents

Abstract	3
Introduction	4
The research	6
At the intersection of nature recovery and planning	6
Lewisham's rivers and local policy	7
Case study 1: Stewardship and Care: Friends of the River Pool	9
Case study 2: Advocacy and Scrutiny: Creekside Discovery Centre and Quaggy Waterways Action Group and development pressure	10
Case study 3: Partnership Working: Ravensbourne Catchment Group and the Lewisham Biodiversity Partnership	12
Conclusion and recommendations	15
Funding statement	16
Acknowledgements	16
Bibliography	17

Abstract

What are the tensions in current policy regarding urban river restoration? How can policymakers learn from the locally embedded expertise of people living with and caring for urban rivers? Drawing on research focused on place-making and urban rivers in the London Borough of Lewisham, this paper argues that these forms of good practice can be learned from and scaled up. The paper first sets out the ambitions and tensions in recent national and local policy regarding urban river restoration. We use three empirical examples of case studies to demonstrate how local river organisations respond to these challenges by innovative practices. These include stewardship and care, meaning regular practical maintenance and action; advocacy and scrutiny whereby groups engage in debates about planning; and partnership working where mechanisms are in place to enable groups to share knowledge with other stakeholders and inform decision making. The paper is based on a year-long project 'Place-making and the rivers of Lewisham' carried out at the Centre for Urban and Community Research at Goldsmiths (University of London) that combined archival research on planning documents and a policy review with an in-depth qualitative study.

Keywords: urban rivers; river restoration; place-making; city planning; stewardship; care; advocacy; London, environmental volunteering.

Key Recommendations

Engage

- Developers should engage with local river action groups when developing proposals to draw on grassroots knowledge.
- Local authorities should develop mechanisms to enable river and other environmental action groups to engage with Planning Officers and developers to share their expertise and feed embedded knowledge into policy, proposals and plans.

Define

- Policy documents and planning proposals should clearly and carefully delineate what key terms including 'river restoration' signify and how the practical application of these should be enacted in the different river sites so development plans can be assessed by exact criteria.

Support

- Civic and local authorities should provide ongoing financial support for the work of local river and other environmental action groups to continue their practical interventions into sites and to continue to build their knowledge base.

Introduction

Across planning policy at a UK, London and borough level, the proposed futures of rivers are set out in different and often competing ways, including measures for nature recovery and ecology, increased access, recreation, active travel, education, aesthetics, deculverting (uncovering rivers from concrete channels), flood management and heritage.¹ In the case of urban development, rivers are also expected to perform economically, drawing in investment, new residents and consumers.² These differing policy imperatives give rise to tensions which are heightened as national planning policy is reformed. In this context, nature recovery and pressures to develop housing at times come into conflict but also offer opportunities. During a year-long research project 'Place-making and the Rivers of Lewisham', we investigated this policy landscape alongside people's place-specific practices and imaginings of river spaces. The project explored the synergies, conflicts and opportunities that arise from these different kinds of place-making on the rivers.

The tensions between development/infrastructure projects, the right to blue spaces and clean water, and the role of grassroots knowledge have been long documented in the social sciences.³ There has been an increasing awareness in this academic literature that river restoration is complex and involves a set of stakeholders with different understandings of what this process means, and that their contributions can be vital.⁴ Within these discussions, the crucial role of indigenous, deeply-local values and expertise in river restoration and other nature recovery initiatives is increasingly emphasised.⁵ Learning from these approaches, we highlight the potential of grassroots knowledge to inform planning policy which incorporates river restoration priorities.

Despite this turn to the social aspects of river restoration, Eden et al. argue that 'the public are under-researched and their involvement is under-implemented, particularly in the case of rivers.'⁶ Similarly, Holt et al. identify 'a shift toward partnership and multi-stakeholder collaborations for managing urban river corridors', but note 'little is known about how these groups function and how effective they might be.'⁷ Their research (in Sheffield, UK) highlights that difficulties in effecting change can stem from both the lack of shared vision across partnerships and the uneven ways that stakeholder views are prioritised within collaborative processes.

-
- 1 See for example HM Government. (2018). A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65fd713d66ca2f0017da89e/CD1.H_HM_Government_A_Green_Future_Our_25_Year_Plan_to_Improve_the_Environment.pdf; Greater London Authority. (2021). The London Plan. Available at: https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/the_london_plan_2021.pdf; London Borough of Lewisham. (2023). Lewisham Local Plan. Proposed Submission Document - Regulation 19 stage, p.379. Available at: <https://lewisham.gov.uk/myservices/planning/policy/planning/lewisham-local-plan-consultation-on-modifications>. This draft version was published in January 2023 and was submitted to the Secretary of State for independent examination on 3rd November 2023. It underwent an examination in public in June and July 2024.
 - 2 See for example, Greater London Authority. (2021). The London Plan. Available at: https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/the_london_plan_2021.pdf.
 - 3 See for example Linton, J. (2010). What is Water? The History of a Modern Abstraction. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press; Swyngedouw, E. (2004). Social Power and the Urbanization of Water: Flows of Power. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
 - 4 Doehring, K., Cole, C., Young, R.G. and Longnecker, N. (2023). Collective storytelling as a river restoration tool: The role of catchment communities in inspiring environmental change. *Frontiers in Communication*, 7, <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/communication/articles/10.3389/fcomm.2022.1061634>.
 - 5 See for example, Carriere, S. and Carriere, M. (2025). Indigenous-led Research Helps Restore Fire Stewardship and Biodiversity in the Saskatchewan River Delta. Indigenous Leadership Initiative. Available at: <https://www.ilinationhood.ca/blog/indigenous-led-research-helps-restore-fire-stewardship>; Centre for Indigenous Conservation and Development Alternatives [CICADA]. (2015). Indigenous Confluence: The Role of Indigenous Knowledge in River Restoration and Sustainable Futures. Available at: <https://cicada.world/research/indigenous-confluence-the-role-of-indigenous-knowledge-in-river-restoration-and-sustainable-futures/>; Fox, C.A., Reo, N.J., Turner, D.A. et al. (2017). 'The river is us; the river is in our veins': Re-defining river restoration in three Indigenous communities. *Sustainability Science*, 12, 521-533, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-016-0421-1>; Parsons, M., Fisher, K., Crease, R.P. (2021). Decolonising river restoration: Restoration as acts of healing and expression of Rangiratanga. In: *Decolonising Blue Spaces in the Anthropocene*. Palgrave Studies in Natural Resource Management. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-61071-5_9; Walker, E., Jowett, T., Whaanga, H. and Wehi, P.M. (2024). Cultural stewardship in urban spaces: Reviving Indigenous knowledge for the restoration of nature. *People and Nature*, 6(4), 1696-1712, <https://doi.org/10.1002/pan3.10683>.
 - 6 Eden, S. and Tunstall, S. (2006). Ecological versus Social Restoration? How Urban River Restoration Challenges but Also Fails to Challenge the Science - Policy Nexus in the United Kingdom. *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy*, 24(5), 661-680 <https://doi.org/10.1068/c0608j>.
 - 7 Holt, A. R., Moug, P. and Lerner, D. N. (2012). The Network Governance of Urban River Corridors. *Ecology and Society*, 17(4). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26269213>.

The small urban rivers in the south-east London borough of Lewisham offer an apt case study for examining the tensions between nature recovery and planning and also speak to the research gap identified above. Environmental commitments and ambitions for river restoration are written into its draft *Local Plan (2023)*, including restoring floodplains and ‘enhanc[ing] the ecological, amenity, recreational and historic value of water spaces, including by enhancing public access to these spaces.’⁸ However, Lewisham is also an area experiencing a fast rate of urban change with significant pressure to build housing.⁹ Many of the sites allocated for development are near its three rivers and, reflecting debates unfolding on the national scale, priorities for nature recovery are not always commensurate with building housing.

Working within these tensions, a complex network of voluntary groups, ecological organisations and council teams care for and maintain Lewisham’s rivers. These different actors have been partially successful in influencing local policy on river management and restoration. This paper argues that these forms of good practice can be learned from by other local authorities, and scaled up. Our paper draws out the different roles of grassroots expertise in informing policy at the intersection of nature recovery and urban planning, using three case studies from across the borough. Case Study 1 is an example of vital grassroots nature recovery actions. Case Study 2 demonstrates how knowledge gained through practical engagement informs policy scrutiny and lobbying work. Case Study 3 shows how this knowledge can be fed upwards and formalised.

8 London Borough of Lewisham. (2023). *Lewisham Local Plan. Proposed Submission Document - Regulation 19 stage*, p.379. Available at: <https://lewisham.gov.uk/myservices/planning/policy/planning/lewisham-local-plan-consultation-on-modifications>.

9 London Borough of Lewisham. (2020). *Lewisham’s Housing Strategy 2020-2026*. Available at: <https://lewisham.gov.uk/-/media/archive/O-services/O-housing/housing-strategies/lewishamhousingstrategy2020-26.pdf>.

The research

This paper is based on original research carried out in partnership with Lewisham's voluntary river action groups between 2023-2024.¹⁰ It combined two strands:

1. Policy document analysis was undertaken to evaluate the place of the rivers in planning policy and council documents, mapping how this has changed over time. This involved a review of current river-related policy at the national, London and Lewisham level as well as archival research in the London Archives, Lewisham Heritage Archives, Transport for London Corporate Archives, and the Centre for Urban and Community Research archive, focusing on materials from 1969 onwards.¹¹ In analysing the materials, key themes, continuations and divergences were identified across the seven decades.¹²
2. Qualitative research focusing on two contrasting stretches of Lewisham's rivers was undertaken to analyse the various ways that people engage with the rivers. The two stretches provide a transect through parts of the borough undergoing intensive urban development. This research strand comprised i. Conducting 19 walking/on-site interviews with stakeholders along the river including members of river action groups, artists, council representatives and local residents, plus 18 short interviews with people at river events. ii. Taking part in 11 activities alongside river action groups. iii. Conducting creative workshops along the rivers: including three collaging workshops; a photography workshop; and a soundwalk. iv. Collaborating with a sound recordist who made soundscape recordings along the rivers. The data was coded and analysed thematically.¹³

At the intersection of nature recovery and planning

An examination of national and local policy documents shows a wide range of directives for rivers. On a general level, the [National Planning Policy Framework \(NPPF\) \(2024\)](#) includes a set of guidelines for conserving and enhancing the natural environment, setting out how '[p]anning policies and decisions should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment.'¹⁴

10 Jackson, E. and Rondel, L. (2024). Place-making and the Rivers of Lewisham: End of Project Report. Available at: <https://placemakingandtheriversoflewisham.wordpress.com/>

11 Policy analysis covered: Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2024). National Planning Policy Framework. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67aafe8f3b41f783cca46251/NPPF_December_2024.pdf; HM Government. (2018). A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65fd713d65ca2f00117da89e/CD1.H_HM_Government_A_Green_Future_Our_25_Year_Plan_to_Improve_the_Environment.pdf; Greater London Authority. (2021). The London Plan. Available at: https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/the_london_plan_2021.pdf; London Borough of Lewisham. (2023). Lewisham Local Plan. Proposed Submission Document - Regulation 19 stage. Available at: <https://lewisham.gov.uk/myservices/planning/policy/planning/lewisham-local-plan-consultation-on-modifications>; London Borough of Lewisham. (2015). River Corridor Improvement Plan. Available at: <https://lewisham.gov.uk/myservices/planning/policy/adopted-local-plan/spds/river-corridors-improvement-plan-spd>; Lewisham Biodiversity Partnership. (2021). A Natural Renaissance for Lewisham: Biodiversity Action Plan (2021-2026). Available at: https://natureconservationlewisham.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/a-natural-renaissance-2021-2026_final.pdf

12 See Rondel, L., Jackson, E. and Beier, T. (2024). Planning with and for Lewisham's rivers: A review of the planning documents, policies and reports on urban rivers. Available at: <https://placemakingandtheriversoflewisham.wordpress.com/>

13 The research received ethical approval from Goldsmiths Research Ethics Committee. All participants were made aware of the nature and aims of the research, that they could be anonymised if they wished and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any stage without giving a reason. All participants signed an informed consent form confirming their permission to take part in the research and be included in the research outputs.

14 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. (2024). National Planning Policy Framework. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67aafe8f3b41f783cca46251/NPPF_December_2024.pdf (pp.54-58).

However, this is complicated by the current context of the pressure to build housing and do so quickly (and more so given the imperative of profit for developers). For example, the Housing Secretary stated in 2024 'We can't have a situation where a newt is more protected than people who desperately need housing ... What we need is a process which says protect the nature and wildlife but not at the expense of us building the houses we need. We can do both.'¹⁵ In December 2024, the NPPF was revised to set out how parts of the green belt could be re-defined as 'grey belt' and so made available for development. In the same month, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) published the Planning Reform Working Paper: *Development and Nature Recovery* which proposes supporting developers to discharge environmental obligation at 'a more strategic level, rather than project-by-project.'¹⁶ This working paper has informed the Planning and Infrastructure Bill which is being read in the House of Lords at the time of writing.¹⁷ These proposed changes have been welcomed by those in the construction industry for increasing available land and expediting planning applications,¹⁸ but they are of concern for nature conservation and environmental organisations who argue that in these approaches, both the ecological importance of green belt land and the environmental distinctiveness of specific sites are overlooked.¹⁹

Against this national backdrop, we now focus on our research area of Lewisham and local river-related planning policy, to examine the sometimes fraught relationship between the development of real estate and environmental concerns and to raise questions about the interplay between these different imperatives.

Lewisham's rivers and local policy

Lewisham is an inner London borough with a diverse population in terms of age, ethnicity, socio-economic classification and levels of deprivation, with sharp contrasts between different wards.²⁰ It is an area that is undergoing fast-paced changes with a number of major residential and retail developments planned and in process. Multiple sites for development are adjacent to Lewisham's three rivers – the Pool, Quaggy and Ravensbourne. These rise in the Kent borders, flowing through the neighbouring boroughs of Croydon, Bromley and Greenwich before crossing into the borough. At two confluences, the Pool and the Quaggy merge into the Ravensbourne, which then widens into Deptford Creek before flowing into the Thames.

The ways that Lewisham's rivers feature in plans for regeneration and development have shifted significantly over the past 55 years. In planning documents and proposals for the town centre from 1969 to the mid-2000s, the rivers are noted as having the potential to play a central role in the social and economic life of Lewisham.²¹ But largely the rivers are discussed as a pleasing but 'passive' backdrop. However, in more recent documents, there has been a notable quantitative and qualitative increase in when and how the rivers are referred to. For example, in contrast

-
- 15 Courea, E. (2024). 'Prioritise people's needs "over newts" in housing policy, says Angela Raynor'. The Guardian. 8th December 2024. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2024/dec/08/prioritise-peoples-needs-over-newts-in-housing-policy-says-angela-raynor>.
- 16 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). (2024). Planning Reform Paper: Development and Nature Recovery. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/675db3f7c9bf84c3b2bcf9f3/Planning_Reform_Working_Paper_-_Development_and_Nature_Recovery.pdf (p.2).
- 17 UK Parliament. (2025). Planning and Infrastructure Bill. Available at: <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3946>.
- 18 See for example Savills. (2025). Planning Reform Working Paper (Development and Nature Recovery): Savills Response. Available at: <https://pdf.savills.com/documents/Planning-Reform-Response-Jan-25.pdf>; Urbanist Architecture. (2025). Green Belt rules: Updated NPPF and what it means for the Green Belt [2025]. Available at: <https://urbanistarchitecture.co.uk/green-belt-rules-nppf/>.
- 19 See for example Amphibian and Reptile Conservation. (2025). ARC response to Government planning reforms in England. Available at: <https://www.arc-trust.org/news/arc-response-to-government-planning-reforms-in-england>; Bat Conservation Trust. (2025). BCT Response to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's Planning Reform: Development and Nature Recovery Working Paper. Available at: https://cdn.bats.org.uk/uploads/pdf/Our%20Work/250121-BCT-Response-to-Planning-Reform-Development-and-Nature-Recovery-Working-Paper_2025-01-21-171313_ihov.pdf.
- 20 Office for National Statistics. (2021). Build a custom area profile. Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/customprofiles/draw/.
- 21 Lewisham Challenge Partnership. (1999). Lewisham: The new commitment to regeneration; London Borough of Lewisham. (1969). Lewisham Central Area; London Borough of Lewisham. (1986). Lewisham Town Centre: Area Action Plan; London Borough of Lewisham and London Development Agency. (2002). Urban Renaissance in Lewisham: Lewisham Gateway Planning Brief.

with previous documents, in Lewisham's current draft Local Plan (2023), the rivers' ecology and biodiversity are considered as important in their own right, with several objectives outlined to improve or enhance these: including mentions of restoring, re-naturalising and deculverting. This contemporary focus on rivers as 'active' has been influenced by the approach of local river action groups and the work of the Ravensbourne Catchment Improvement Group, the Lewisham Biodiversity Partnership and London-based river charity Thames21, as well as a widespread zeitgeist around environmental concerns in a time of climate crisis.

Lewisham's draft Local Plan sets out measures for the borough's rivers including preserving and enhancing biodiversity, protecting habitat, managing flood risk and responding to climate change as well as bringing economic benefits, improving and increasing access to river spaces, promoting health and social wellbeing, supporting active travel and celebrating heritage and culture.²² In these different policies surrounding the rivers, our analysis identifies an overlap between the different priority areas and therefore there is potential to bring these imperatives together. For example, strategies for flood management can also bring benefits to river ecology; or urban greening approaches can support both wildlife and community life. However, we also found that there are also a number of tensions: increased access does not always align with habitat protection; or the profit margins of developing housing can come into conflict with environmental measures which can be costly and time-intensive. What is more, our analysis finds that there is a lack of clarity surrounding the definition, interpretation and implementation of the directives to 'protect', 'preserve', 'enhance' and 'improve' rivers (and other natural spaces) where clearer definitions would make developers' responsibilities more explicit and realisable.

A common thread through both the archival materials and current plans is that the rivers are expected to perform economically: improving Lewisham's image to shoppers and employers as well as in marketing new developments. In the context where development is almost entirely privately funded with the local authority providing guidance, our analysis raises questions about:

1. How the imperative of profit, closely bound to private investment, may be in tension or even conflict with the ecological and socio-cultural dynamics of rivers.
2. How the guidance in relation to river restoration or enhancement is interpreted by developers, underlining the importance of clarity around the terminology used, and ensuring that the actions are applied appropriately to each site allocation.
3. How the developers' implementation of the guidance is being monitored to ensure best practice and best outcomes faced with competing priorities.

River action groups work within these tensions and also challenge them through their advocacy work and practical actions, seeing opportunities to promote river restoration. Drawing on our empirical research, in the following sections we set out three case studies that show the potential roles of grassroots expertise to inform policy and practice at the intersection of nature recovery and urban planning.

22 London Borough of Lewisham. (2023). Lewisham Local Plan. Proposed Submission Document - Regulation 19 stage. Available at: <https://lewisham.gov.uk/myservices/planning/policy/planning/lewisham-local-plan-consultation-on-modifications>.

CASE STUDY 1

Stewardship and Care: Friends of the River Pool

The first case study focuses on the stewardship and care work of Friends of the River Pool (FoRP). The group is part of an extensive network of organisations and groups who maintain and care for the rivers and river spaces. This includes Lewisham Council's Nature Conservation Officers, Glendale (the private contractors for the borough's parks and green spaces), Thames21, the Environment Agency and other volunteer groups. There are regular weekly and monthly volunteer events where litter picking and other river-related activities take place along different stretches of the rivers. These attract a high number of regular, semi-regular and one-off volunteers. Volunteers make a significant contribution to the maintenance of the rivers.

FoRP meet every Wednesday to maintain a stretch of the river running from Lower Sydenham to Catford Bridge through the River Pool Linear Park. This forms part of the Waterlink Way, a riverside path and cycle route that links together footpaths and quiet roads that can be followed to the Thames. While the Linear Park was primarily founded as a cycle route, Donna Davies, the chair of the group described how she 'wanted it to stop being a thoroughfare and become a destination, somewhere that people chose to come to' (interview).

FoRP's work includes berm-building to manage water flow, planting, managing woodland and litter picking (see Fig.1). Through this work they have gained an intimate individual and collective knowledge of the ecology of the river and its surroundings. This work spills over from the weekly sessions and into their everyday life. A volunteer recalled how he returns to the river to check that the group's work is holding up, checking the berms after heavy rain.



Fig. 1. Litter picking with Friends of the River Pool. Photo: Louise Rondel, June 2023.

As well as the work of river maintenance and upkeep, the group's approach to attracting more visitors involves understanding how the basic infrastructure of bins and benches are vital to the social upkeep of the space. Donna explains: 'my theory was that if there are ordinary people using the park and sitting in the park, you get less antisocial behaviour.' Relatedly, the group regularly interact with passersby: a volunteer comments 'We will always stop and explain things. Because the more we talk to people, the more they understand what we're doing ... it's good that people understand the space.' Through these forms of embedded practical action, the group balances nature recovery work with sharing their knowledge and making river spaces more accessible for leisure, which in turn encourages people to use them.

The group's activity also has social and wellbeing benefits for volunteers. Volunteers report a range of reasons for becoming involved including wanting to make a positive contribution to their local environment, looking for a physical activity to do post-retirement, and being referred through social prescribing. The social benefits for volunteers come to be as important to them as the river-related work they carry out, especially during the sessions which are held weekly. There is clear evidence of teamwork and camaraderie as well as social support amongst the regular volunteers. Volunteers noted the positive impact of taking part in river activities for their mental health and wellbeing.

This case study shows the value of the repeated, locally-based work of volunteers in building up place-based ecological expertise that also enhances the public realm and builds bonds between people and places. While FoRP's key focus is on this regular, physical work, the group also feed their emplaced knowledge into both the Ravensbourne Catchment Improvement Group and the Lewisham Biodiversity Partnership (see CS3).

CASE STUDY 2

Advocacy and Scrutiny: Creekside Discovery Centre and Quaggy Waterways Action Group and development pressure

The second case study focuses on the work of the Creekside Discovery Centre (CDC)²³ in Deptford and Quaggy Waterways Action Group (QWAG).²⁴ As well as conducting practical work such as river clean-ups, maintenance and habitat management, these groups also do significant work to scrutinise and monitor development plans, lobbying for river restoration and nature recovery in river spaces.

These different facets of their work feed into one another. The knowledge and understanding which are gained through practical action inform how they engage with development plans and developers. Walking us into Deptford Creek (see Fig 2.), staff from CDC emphasise the importance of their slowly-gained and place-specific understandings, cultivating 'a deep knowledge and love of this place'. This comes from the Centre's location on the Creek which enables day-to-day monitoring and on-the-ground work. They explain that they 'learn from the Creek, we don't try and impose our views on it' (interview with CDC staff). These learnings are taken forward in their advocacy and consultation work with developers who are building housing along the Creek's banks.

23 Creekside Discovery Centre: <https://www.creeksidecentre.org.uk/>.

24 Quaggy Waterways Action Group: www.qwag.org.uk.

They give the example of using their expertise to dissuade developers from putting a barrage into the Creek which would have been incompatible with its tidal ecology. They also highlight how they work to prevent the installation of steel sheet piling walls ('the worst walls for biodiversity ... as little but algae grow' [interview with CDC staff]), advocating instead for maintaining the Victorian wharf walls where a diversity of wild plants grow.



Fig 2. Deptford Creek with staff from the Creekside Discovery Centre.
Photo: Louise Rondel, February 2024.

QWAG also apply what they learn from being alongside and in the rivers to their policy-oriented work. Paul de Zylva (Chair of QWAG) explains that the Action Group was formed in 1990 'to try and stop the authorities from putting the rivers into concrete even more and try to bring those below ground, above ground.' They have achieved some successes along the length of the Quaggy where the river has been restored and flood plains created. QWAG continues this work by scrutinising policy and plans, pushing the authorities and developers to restore the rivers as much as possible - 'to do right by the river' (interview with Paul de Zylva). They draw on their expertise to question plans as they come out for public consultation. For example, in a case where a developer planned to restore the river in a location which QWAG knew would be impossible, due to their in-depth understanding of the particularities of the river - its natural course, depth, movement, banks and surrounding infrastructure. They also monitor developments as they progress to see if promises are being upheld. The efforts are ongoing, especially as new riverside sites come forward for development presenting new opportunities for river restoration, but also for developers to elide their responsibilities. Through their place-specific, deeply-embedded work, QWAG have made strides in 'manag[ing] to influence thinking to such an extent that policy is now very different. Rivers are not only a consideration, but they are actively pursued as a way to improve the environment and people's experience of it.' (interview with Paul de Zylva).

These examples demonstrate how local groups draw on their knowledge to influence policy and hold the local authority and private developers to account. While this work has had an impact on local planning, challenges remain. For example, as staff from CDC highlight, developers rarely have a member of staff dedicated to rivers and are often remote from the site, with little knowledge of the river's workings. An intertwined difficulty is the ways in which responsibilities are moved between developers/land management companies after completion of schemes as well as the complex network of organisations, companies and wildlife who have a stake in the rivers. CDC also underlines how, as a small charity with no public funding, it is difficult to deal with developers

who often have large budgets. QWAG too relies on the labour of volunteers, often having to 'keep an eye' on developments over years if not decades. Furthermore, both CDC and QWAG note how there is latitude for (mis)interpretation in the definitions of some of the terms employed in policy where imperatives such as 'river restoration', 'improving biodiversity' or 'enhancing access' need delineating with more clarity over how they will be implemented in practice.

This case study demonstrates how practical knowledge gained through a close and long-term engagement with river spaces can inform advocacy and lobbying work. This can feed directly into planning policy and influence actions taken by developers. However this is not a straightforward process and is contingent on the commitment and labour of volunteers or underfunded third-sector organisations. The case also highlights the need for clearer definitions around key terms used in river restoration projects.

CASE STUDY 3

Partnership Working: Ravensbourne Catchment Group and the Lewisham Biodiversity Partnership

The third case study uses two examples to demonstrate how the grassroots knowledge exemplified by CS1 and CS2 can be fed upwards and formalised through partnership working. While the river action groups are members of both partnerships, they have different foci and geographic range. The first group, the Ravensbourne Catchment Improvement Group (RCIG),²⁵ works across borough boundaries on river specific issues. And the second, The Lewisham Biodiversity Partnership (LBP),²⁶ brings together voluntary groups, ecological groups and Council Officers who work across a range of green and blue spaces within the borough. The work of both partnerships has had an impact on local policy, with the first informing the River Corridor Improvement Plan, Supplementary Planning Document (2015) and the second developing a Biodiversity Action Plan for Lewisham (2021-2026).²⁷

The RCIG was set up 10 years ago as part of a national shift towards taking a catchment-based approach to river management. It is chaired by Thames21 and brings together the Environment Agency, Thames Water, the local councils of Lewisham and Bromley with local river action groups and Friends groups – such as those described in Case Studies 1 and 2 – in quarterly meetings. Working groups are also hosted quarterly, for example, on water quality. As Joel Wigfield, the current host of the meetings, described 'We pull everyone together' (interview). One of its prime functions is to provide a communication channel between all of these stakeholders. Joel describes 'It would be very rare for a member of a "Friends of..." group, for example, to speak directly to someone in Thames Water unless it was via a complaints channel or something like that, whereas through the Catchment Partnership we provide this platform' (interview). Furthermore the group bridges the administrative boundaries of local authorities that contrast in terms of housing, wealth and politics.²⁸

25 Ravensbourne Catchment Improvement Group: <https://www.thames21.org.uk/catchment-partnerships/ravensbourne/>.

26 The Lewisham Biodiversity Partnership: <https://natureconservationlewisham.co.uk/lewisham-biodiversity-group/>.

27 London Borough of Lewisham. (2015). River Corridor Improvement Plan. Available at: <https://lewisham.gov.uk/myservices/planning/policy/adopted-local-plan/spds/river-corridors-improvement-plan-spd>; Lewisham Biodiversity Partnership. (2021). A Natural Renaissance for Lewisham: Biodiversity Action Plan (2021-2026). Available at: https://natureconservationlewisham.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/a-natural-renaissance-2021-2026_final.pdf.

28 Bromley is a wealthier borough with a Conservative Council and Lewisham has levels of higher deprivation and a Labour Council.

The meetings include a careful balance of presentations from one of the local councils, one of the community groups and other talks from guest speakers. Communications can occasionally get fractious, particularly between some of the river action groups and Thames Water. But providing these channels and building relationships means that most of the time 'our reputation as a Catchment Partnership and the partnerships between Thames21 and local authorities, usually mean that projects go relatively smoothly' (interview with Joel Wigfield). And despite the differences between local authorities, the boroughs from the RCIG have shown willingness to collaborate with each other. For example, Lewisham, Bromley, Croydon and Greenwich are equally providing funding for a current project on opportunity mapping for nature-based solutions.

The RCIG has been successful in bringing together these stakeholders and developing the River Corridor Improvement Plan, a Supplementary Planning Document which was adopted by Lewisham Council in November 2015. The aim of the plan is to 'secure high quality development along the river corridors, whilst balancing objectives for environmental protection and enhancement, flood risk, housing supply and economic growth.'²⁹ For example, the partnership has sought to intervene in the challenges of post-development site responsibility by advising that '[a]pplicants should submit to the Council a management, maintenance and monitoring plan, outlining how the river environment, including channel, banks and any associated landscaping will be maintained in perpetuity.'³⁰ Thus, the relationships forged through the partnership are also useful in responding to development pressure in Lewisham close to river sites, with the members' expertise formalised into planning policy.

Also bringing together a range of stakeholders on an intra-borough level, the Lewisham Biodiversity Partnership is organised by Lewisham Council's Nature Conservation team - Jess Kyle (Nature Conservation Officer) and Eszter Wainwright-Déri (Ecological Regeneration Manager). They hold quarterly meetings attended by different people working on biodiversity in Lewisham, including representatives from Glendale (the council's contractors), Park Rangers and various Friends and other groups. In these meetings, the Council Officers provide updates on what is happening across the borough and attendees share updates, upcoming events and sightings from 'their' patch. These sighting reports feed into Greenspace Information for Greater London's (GiGL) data maps which are used by planners, developers and ecology consultants.³¹ The Chair of the Partnership (a volunteer who is also involved in several groups) emphasises how 'we help each other out, share hints and make this thing more sustainable. We make it easier for [the Council Officers] to do their jobs ... connecting with each other and creating nature corridors' (notes from meeting). The knowledge gained by the participating groups has been formalised into a Biodiversity Action Plan for Lewisham (2021-2026), which in turn has been fed upwards into the development of the Local Plan.³²

Key to the success of this partnership is Lewisham Council's longstanding and well-respected Nature Conservation team. Jess, the Nature Conservation Officer reflects on her role doing outreach work - 'a relatively uncommon thing within a London borough' - organising and facilitating regular volunteer sessions (interview). This is work that she has been doing for over 17 years and so has built strong relationships with volunteers and groups. This is also reflected in volunteers' accounts where the role played and expertise of the Officers is a recurring theme. Jess describes how, in volunteer sessions, the tea, biscuits and chat are as important as the work and consolidate these relationships (interview). As part of this bridging work, the annual Three Rivers Clean-Up event is organised. It brings together different groups working across the catchment as well as attracting semi-regular and one-off volunteers. Having someone from the local authority visibly 'on the ground' who is known and approachable and who organises regular weekly and annual events are key in the development of the Partnership. This in turn enables the building of formal and informal connections and the knowledge sharing practices which are borne from these, eventually feeding into the Biodiversity Action Plan.

29 London Borough of Lewisham. (2015). River Corridor Improvement Plan. Available at: <https://lewisham.gov.uk/myservices/planning/policy/adopted-local-plan/spds/river-corridors-improvement-plan-spd> (p.1).

30 London Borough of Lewisham. (2015). River Corridor Improvement Plan. Available at: <https://lewisham.gov.uk/myservices/planning/policy/adopted-local-plan/spds/river-corridors-improvement-plan-spd> (p.38).

31 Greenspace Information for Greater London CIC. (n.d.) Discover London. Available at: <https://www.gigl.org.uk/discoverlondon/>

32 Lewisham Biodiversity Partnership. (2021). A Natural Renaissance for Lewisham: Biodiversity Action Plan (2021-2026). Available at: https://natureconservationlewisham.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/a-natural-renaissance-2021-2026_final.pdf

The challenge of these action groups is that they are hyperlocal and specific in their focus and therefore can be sidelined in the development process. However, the partnerships build connections across disparate groups and, crucially, provide a professionalised channel of communication. Underpinning their success are committed and trusted chairs. For example, in the case of LBP, the Council Officers can communicate with both action groups and the local authority and in the case of ROIG, the chair is sensitive to working across borough boundaries and with a range of stakeholders. In both cases, the partnerships provide a formalised means to document grassroots knowledge and inform policy.

This successful partnership working serves as an example of good practice from which other local authorities can learn. We argue that these two overlapping examples of cross-borough and intra-borough working show possibilities for how local authorities can feed grassroots knowledge of an area's nature into formal planning policy and address the tensions and competing expectations concerning the role of rivers in cities.

Conclusion and recommendations

Drawing on the work of local action river groups along the Rivers Pool, Quaggy and Ravensbourne in the south-east London borough of Lewisham, we have examined practices of stewardship and care, advocacy and scrutiny, and partnership working. At a national moment in which planning policy proposes prioritising housing development over place-based approaches to green and blue spaces, the three case studies show how local knowledge gained through practical engagement can feed into local policy and decision-making. These models of good practice highlight the value of these emplaced local knowledges in a wider national policy context where the direction of travel is towards less place-specific planning.

We conclude with a set of recommendations on incorporating grassroots knowledge into local policy, particularly in light of the tensions at the intersection of nature recovery and planning and housing policy.

- As developers consider drawing up proposals for sites adjacent to rivers, they should engage with local river action groups in the early stages to ensure their knowledge of the site is taken into account.
- Policy documents and planning proposals should clearly and carefully delineate what key terms including 'river restoration' and 're-naturalisation' signify and how the practical application of these should be enacted in the different river sites so development plans can be assessed by exact criteria. This should be done in conversation with the local river action groups.
- Other local authorities can learn from the Ravensbourne Catchment Group and the Lewisham Biodiversity Partnership. These serve as examples of good practice of incorporating and formalising local expertise into planning and nature recovery policy.
- Local authorities should implement or strengthen the outreach work of local-authority Nature Conservation Officers in order to develop relationships and garner 'on-the-ground' expertise which can be fed into policy. This in turn supports the work being carried out by the local action groups.
- The guidance developed by the Ravensbourne Catchment Improvement Group in the River Corridor Improvement Plan (including post-development responsibilities) can be applied to other sites.
- Provide ongoing support for river and other environmental action groups who are often underfunded or reliant on volunteers in order to continue their practical interventions into sites and to continue to build their knowledge base.
- Develop local mechanisms to enable local river and other environmental action groups to engage with local authority Planning Officers and developers to share their expertise. Provide support, such as funding and resources for them to do so.

Funding statement

This research was funded by Goldsmiths Strategic Research Fund, University of London.

Acknowledgements

With thanks to the river action groups whose engagement and knowledge inform this paper and who took us for walks along 'their' patch: Donna Davies and Friends of the River Pool; the team at the Creekside Discovery Centre; Paul de Zylva and the Quaggy Waterways Action Group; Joel Wigfield; and Jess Kyle, Eszter Wainwright-Déri and members of the Lewisham Biodiversity Partnership. Thank you also to all the other participants who generously took part in the 'Place-making and the Rivers of Lewisham' project. Thank you to Tanja Beier and Jack Shenton for research assistance on the policy review and archival research.

References

- Amphibian and Reptile Conservation. (2025). ARC response to Government planning reforms in England. Available at: <https://www.arc-trust.org/news/arc-response-to-government-planning-reforms-in-england>.
- Bat Conservation Trust. (2025). BCT Response to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's Planning Reform: Development and Nature Recovery Working Paper. Available at: https://cdn.bats.org.uk/uploads/pdf/Our%20Work/250121-BCT-Response-to-Planning-Reform-Development-and-Nature-Recovery-Working-Paper_2025-01-21-171313_ihov.pdf.
- Carriere, S. and Carriere, M. (2025). Indigenous-led Research Helps Restore Fire Stewardship and Biodiversity in the Saskatchewan River Delta. Indigenous Leadership Initiative. Available at: <https://www.ilinationhood.ca/blog/indigenous-led-research-helps-restore-fire-stewardship>.
- Centre for Indigenous Conservation and Development Alternatives [CICADA]. (2015). Indigenous Confluence: The Role of Indigenous Knowledge in River Restoration and Sustainable Futures. Available at: <https://cicada.world/research/indigenous-confluence-the-role-of-indigenous-knowledge-in-river-restoration-and-sustainable-futures/>.
- Courea, E. (2024). 'Prioritise people's needs "over newts" in housing policy, says Angela Raynor'. The Guardian. 8th December 2024. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2024/dec/08/prioritise-peoples-needs-over-newts-in-housing-policy-says-angela-rayner>.
- Doehring, K., Cole, C., Young, R.G. and Longnecker, N. (2023). Collective storytelling as a river restoration tool: The role of catchment communities in inspiring environmental change. *Frontiers in Communication*, 7, <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/communication/articles/10.3389/fcomm.2022.1061634>.
- Eden, S. and Tunstall, S. (2006). Ecological versus Social Restoration? How Urban River Restoration Challenges but Also Fails to Challenge the Science – Policy Nexus in the United Kingdom. *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy*, 24(5), 661-680 <https://doi.org/10.1068/c0608j>.
- Fox, C.A., Reo, N.J., Turner, D.A. et al. (2017). 'The river is us; the river is in our veins': Re-defining river restoration in three Indigenous communities. *Sustainability Science*, 12, 521–533, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-016-0421-1>.
- Greater London Authority. (2021). The London Plan. Available at: https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/the_london_plan_2021.pdf.
- Greenspace Information for Greater London CIC. (n.d.) Discover London. Available at: <https://www.gigl.org.uk/discoverlondon/>.
- HM Government. (2018). A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65fd713d65ca2f00117da89e/CD1.H_HM_Government_A_Green_Future_Our_25_Year_Plan_to_Improve_the_Environment.pdf
- Holt, A. R., Moug, P. and Lerner, D. N. (2012). The Network Governance of Urban River Corridors. *Ecology and Society*, 17(4). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26269213>.
- Jackson, E. and Rondel, L. (2024). Place-making and the Rivers of Lewisham: End of Project Report. Goldsmiths, University of London. Available at: <https://placemakingandtheriversoflewisham.wordpress.com/>.
- Lewisham Biodiversity Partnership. (2021). A Natural Renaissance for Lewisham: Biodiversity Action Plan (2021-2026). Available at: https://natureconservationlewisham.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/a-natural-renaissance-2021-2026_final.pdf.
- Lewisham Challenge Partnership. (1999). Lewisham: The new commitment to regeneration.

Linton, J. (2010). *What is Water? The History of a Modern Abstraction*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

London Borough of Lewisham. (1969). *Lewisham Central Area*.

London Borough of Lewisham. (1986). *Lewisham Town Centre: Area Action Plan*.

London Borough of Lewisham and London Development Agency. (2002). *Urban Renaissance in Lewisham: Lewisham Gateway Planning Brief*.

London Borough of Lewisham. (2015). *River Corridor Improvement Plan*. Available at: <https://lewisham.gov.uk/myservices/planning/policy/adopted-local-plan/spds/river-corridors-improvement-plan-spd>.

London Borough of Lewisham. (2020). *Lewisham's Housing Strategy 2020-2026*. Available at: <https://lewisham.gov.uk/-/media/archive/O-services/O-housing/housing-strategies/lewishamhousingstrategy2020-26.pdf>.

London Borough of Lewisham. (2023). *Lewisham Local Plan. Proposed Submission Document - Regulation 19 stage, p.379*. Available at: <https://lewisham.gov.uk/myservices/planning/policy/planning/lewisham-local-plan-consultation-on-modifications>.

Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. (2024). *National Planning Policy Framework*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67aafe8f3b41f783cca46251/NPPF_December_2024.pdf.

Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). (2024). *Planning Reform Paper: Development and Nature Recovery*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/675db3f7cfbf84c3b2bcf9f3/Planning_Reform_Working_Paper_-_Development_and_Nature_Recovery.pdf.

Office for National Statistics. (2021). *Build a custom area profile*. Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/customprofiles/draw/.

Parsons, M., Fisher, K., Crease, R.P. (2021). *Decolonising river restoration: Restoration as acts of healing and expression of Rangiratanga*. In: *Decolonising Blue Spaces in the Anthropocene*. Palgrave Studies in Natural Resource Management. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-61071-5_9.

Rondel, L., Jackson, E. and Beier, T. (2024). *Planning with and for Lewisham's rivers: A review of the planning documents, policies and reports on urban rivers*. Available at: <https://placemakingandtheriversoflewisham.wordpress.com/>.

Savills. (2025). *Planning Reform Working Paper (Development and Nature Recovery): Savills Response*. Available at: <https://pdf.savills.com/documents/Planning-Reform-Response-Jan-25.pdf>.

Swyngedouw, E. (2004). *Social Power and the Urbanization of Water: Flows of Power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

UK Parliament. (2025). *Planning and Infrastructure Bill*. Available at: <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3946>.

Urbanist Architecture. (2025). *Green Belt rules: Updated NPPF and what it means for the Green Belt [2025]*. Available at: <https://urbanistarchitecture.co.uk/green-belt-rules-nppf/>.

Walker, E., Jowett, T., Whaanga, H. and Wehi, P.M. (2024). *Cultural stewardship in urban spaces: Reviving Indigenous knowledge for the restoration of nature*. *People and Nature*, 6(4), 1696-1712, <https://doi.org/10.1002/pan3.10683>.

The British Academy
10–11 Carlton House Terrace
London SW1Y 5AH

Registered charity no. 233176

thebritishacademy.ac.uk

Published November 2025

© The British Academy. This
is an open access publication
licensed under a Creative
Commons Attribution-
NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0
Unported License

[doi.org/10.5871/nature-recovery/
small-urban-rivers](https://doi.org/10.5871/nature-recovery/small-urban-rivers)