

The British Academy

Place-sensitive understandings of nature recovery

Introduction to a set of discussion papers
commissioned by the British Academy

Introduction

Nature recovery, defined as ‘the activity of helping life on Earth to thrive by repairing human relationships with the rest of the natural world’, is increasingly recognised by governments, the private sector and publics as an essential investment into our future as a healthy and resilient society.^{1,2} From pollinating species and productive soils to green spaces and natural flood defences, nature plays a key role in the health of society and the economy.³ According to a report published by Natural England, over 90% of people report that nature improves their physical health and mental well-being, and many people care for nature and recognise its intrinsic value.⁴ As previous British Academy research shows, nature plays an important role in a just transition to a net-zero and climate-resilient society.⁵

However, the UK has become one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world.⁶ Since 1970, the abundance of species has declined by an average of 19% due to pressures from land use, including the intensification of farming and increased development.^{7,8} As land use evolves to meet the demands for housing, renewable energy, food and digital infrastructure, interdisciplinary research will be pertinent in shaping and informing policy decisions in this space. It is a multifaceted policy area, and an overview of some of the key nature recovery policies that feature across the discussion paper series are outlined in the [Annex](#).

The Academy’s [Sustainable Futures](#) policy work provides a better understanding of the complex drivers of human and social relationships with the environment and the implications for policy and practice. Our activities in this area have focused on the relationships between people and places, the implications of and opportunities from multi-level governance, and the importance of collaborative leadership. Putting people and places centre-stage can lead directly to and help navigate overlapping policy issues with regard to fairness and justice in policy outcomes.⁹

As part of ongoing work, the British Academy commissioned a series of discussion papers on ‘[place-sensitive understandings of nature recovery in the UK](#)’. Researchers were invited to respond to an open call with proposals that analysed current policies and practices of nature recovery, reflected on framings and normative understandings of nature recovery, and explored the links between people and nature.

This summary paper brings together some of the highlights of this set of papers. It is structured around four core themes that cut across the series: [place-sensitive delivery and governance](#); [effective participation](#); [cultural understandings and creative practice](#); and [opportunities for innovation](#). While some papers have a strong focus on one area, the themes are cross-cutting and there are interrelated elements across the series. The paper provides a short conclusion which highlights how these four themes are interconnected and offers some prompting questions for policymakers.

Place-sensitive delivery and governance

Several papers considered nature recovery delivery and governance at the local scale.

[As research from the *Where We Live Next* programme has shown, the role of local government in delivering policies tailored to their place is crucial for meaningful change.](#)

In particular, Godley’s paper [Taking root: the promise and challenge of local authority-led nature recovery](#) explores this by providing a detailed introduction to the challenges and opportunities associated with [Local Nature Recovery Strategies](#) (LNRSs). The paper presents this discussion through case studies from Cornwall, the Isle of Scilly, Scotland and Ireland. Godley illustrates the importance of local authorities prioritising early, sustained and inclusive engagement with local people to develop and deliver a LNRS that is pertinent to place. The paper then provides a series of other examples of locally-led nature restoration projects operating outside the LNRS framework, with a focus on the successes and ‘sticking points’ faced by local authorities when delivering

on place-based nature plans. These challenges include uneven public engagement, resourcing constraints, and managing ongoing reorganisation and devolution. The paper concludes with policy recommendations for local and national governments.

Treloar et al.'s paper [Pioneering place-sensitive nature recovery at a hyper-local scale: a multi-tier, multidirectional governance approach](#) explores mechanisms of place-sensitive delivery at the parish council level and proposes a multi-tier, multi-directional approach to nature recovery, illustrated through a case study of hyper-local activities in Shropshire. The paper explores the benefits of transferring land assets and responsibilities from upper-tier authorities to hyper-local governance institutions (town and parish councils). For example, community ownership of allotments would create an opportunity to grow food and create a more sustainable local economy. The paper also explores networking among parish councils and links between the hyper-local level and wider LNRSs as opportunities to improve local nature recovery by mobilising local expertise and grass-roots action. The inclusion of parish councils as a key stakeholder in the delivery of the region's LNRS is explored as an innovative way to drive local civic environmentalism and develop a more relational, community-led approach to the stewardship of assets including nature.

Effective participation and engagement in place-sensitive nature recovery

As places change, there are likely to be unavoidable personal and political disagreements between different stakeholders. **Research from the social sciences, arts and humanities offers rich insights into the ways people can engage and participate in contested environmental change.**

Green's paper [A place to disagree: using social science methods for engaging communities and exploring contestation in changing landscapes](#) highlights that this is especially the case in the context of increased demands for greater food production, infrastructure investment including housing, and low carbon energy production. The paper argues there is a critical mass of social science scholarship that shows the value in bringing people who do not agree into dialogue with one another, and in addressing – rather than ignoring – disagreement. This means moving away from consensus as a default aim of environmental engagement, and towards a model that embraces contestation and allows different stakeholders to disagree well. Green's paper presents a Restoration Partnership Development toolkit, developed and applied in a multi-partner restoration project in Cumbria with the aim of facilitating meaningful engagement across differences and ensuring nature recovery projects are fairer, more effective and place-sensitive.

Jackson and Rondel's paper [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](#) takes a similar approach to understanding disagreement between stakeholders by exploring tensions in current urban river restoration policy. The paper shares insights on how grassroots expertise can inform planning and nature recovery through case studies in Lewisham, London. It identifies three key roles played by local river organisations: stewardship and care, meaning regular practical maintenance and action; advocacy and scrutiny, whereby groups engage in planning decisions; and partnership working and mechanisms to share knowledge with other stakeholders to inform decision-making. The paper engages with the new [National Planning Policy Framework](#) and [Planning and Infrastructure Bill](#). The authors combine archival research, a policy review and qualitative analysis, and offer recommendations for developers and local authorities including the need for clearer definitions of key terms in planning proposals, early engagement with local nature groups, and the need for investment and resourcing for environmental action groups to ensure continued local expertise. These actions help ensure that planning and housing policy are not at odds with nature recovery goals.

Cultural understandings and creative approaches for place-sensitive nature recovery

A recurring theme across the papers is the focus on the deep connections between nature, culture and creativity. **Insights from across the series make a compelling case for the value and role of the creative and cultural sectors in strengthening nature recovery.**

McFayden et al.'s paper [Integrating intangible cultural heritage in nature recovery: a place-sensitive approach in the Scottish Highlands](#) examines how Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) and long-term, place-based understandings of human-nature relations (traditional ecological knowledge) contribute to nature recovery, drawing on case studies from the Scottish Highlands. Their paper highlights the critical role of creative and meaningful participation in nature recovery, illustrating that sustainable environmental stewardship depends not only on ecological expertise but also on inclusive, culturally grounded engagement. Through the Findhorn Watershed Initiative and Cairngorms 2030, the authors demonstrate how integrating ICH, such as Gaelic placenames, song and traditional ecological knowledge, can foster belonging, relationships and care for and with nature. These connections are strengthened through participatory cultural interventions such as Gaelic music events, creative collaborations and researcher-in-residence schemes, which enable local voices to shape nature recovery through creative engagements with the landscape.

Treloar's paper [Identifying synergies and co-benefits at the intersection of nature recovery and the creative and cultural sectors in rural regions](#) also illuminates the relationship between nature recovery and the creative and cultural sector, through a series of case studies in Cornwall, a rural county with a strong cultural identity informed by the natural environment. The creative and cultural sector offers opportunities to blend creativity, education and ecological restoration, which can enhance communication of and engagement with nature recovery, stimulate new investments in nature recovery, and build cross-sector capacity. Although funding streams for nature recovery and the creative and cultural sector tend to be separated, Treloar includes examples from Defra's [Farming in Protected Landscapes scheme](#) which accounts for cultural heritage alongside nature recovery, and Defra's pilot initiative [Local Investment in Natural Capital](#).

Dobrzynski and Holmes's paper, [Reading walks in Ruskin Land: the potential for literature to advance nature recovery](#), also engages with the importance of cultural connection to landscapes as a valuable tool in ensuring greater public participation in nature recovery. In this case, they explore the role of literature to advance nature recovery in woodland and forests. Their paper introduces the concept of a 'reading walk', a method of reading selected texts or sections of fiction, poetry or non-fiction within a fitting environmental context to facilitate deeper understandings of place and spark imagination of alternative sustainable futures. The paper situates this approach in Ruskin Land, part of England's largest woodland National Nature Reserve near Wolverhampton. They present the reading walk as a model for interdisciplinary education, public engagement and participatory policymaking.

Opportunities for innovation in nature recovery policy

This series of papers have illustrated opportunities for innovation and creativity in nature recovery policy.

Wartmann and Cary's paper, [Integrating people and place into policy: recognising cultural values of nature and lived places for Biodiversity Net Gain](#), explores the highly significant but controversial [Biodiversity Net Gain](#) (BNG) policy, made mandatory through planning legislation in February 2024. BNG is a market-mechanism that increases private investment in nature recovery and it has been criticised for commodifying nature in ways that may not deliver the best outcomes for biodiversity. This paper grapples with some of those complexities and offers insights in order to intervene in a debate that is often dominated by technical experts. The paper explores expanding biodiversity metrics to include social and cultural values, strengthen local delivery and align BNG with social justice agendas. Wartmann and Cary discuss BNG in Swiss and Scottish contexts, drawing comparisons and transferable learnings from Switzerland's place-based model of BNG, to aid potential future opportunities for BNG delivery in Scotland.

Carmichael and Baybutt's paper, [Nature recovery and people in prison](#), explores prisons as an important but under-recognised setting for nature recovery, one which enables integration of environmental restoration with health and wellbeing objectives. Their paper highlights how programmes such as Greener on the Outside for Prisons (GOOP) demonstrate the potential for nature-based activities, such as gardening, conservation and ecological monitoring, to improve wellbeing, foster nature connection and contribute to biodiversity goals. These initiatives not only enhance the prison environment but also support rehabilitation, reduce violence and build transferable skills for life. The paper calls for a 'Whole Prison' approach to health and nature recovery, in line with the [Ministry of Justice's Nature Recovery Plan](#).

Gilchrist, Glentworth and Thornhill's paper, [Recovering what? Reversing personal and institutional shifting baseline syndromes to enable nature recovery in UK national parks](#), engages with the temporal element of nature recovery. They consider the baseline state to which we are trying to recover nature, and argue that Shifting Baseline Syndrome (SBS) – the gradual acceptance of ecological degradation – is a significant barrier to positive change. Focusing specifically on the role of National Parks in the UK, the authors identify the causes and issues generated by two forms of SBS: personal and institutional. They then offer a 10-point policy pathway to restore nature in National Parks to foster stronger coexistence between human and non-human communities. Their recommendations include developing a National Park Network, a National Park Nature Recovery Peoples' Assembly, nature libraries, and opportunities for land ownership and innovation.

Reed's paper, [The role of innovation in artificial intelligence for place-sensitive environmental policy and practice](#), explores the rapidly changing Artificial Intelligence (AI) policy and investment landscape with reference to both the environmental costs of AI as well as its potential role to support place-sensitive nature recovery. The paper outlines some of the known extractive environmental impacts of AI and the policy attention that is required to ensure accelerating development is sustainable. Reed then turns to exploring whether AI can support the monitoring and protection of nature through case studies from the Royal Horticultural Society and Ambios, a non-profit nature recovery training organisation. Through these examples, the paper looks at how AI-enabled tools could support recovery through, for example, landscape-scale future visioning, botanical data processing, place-based gardening advice and land-based education. The paper engages with the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology's [AI Opportunities Action Plan](#). AI is presented as a technology that must be rooted in local knowledge, ethical design and inclusive governance.

Next Steps

This series of discussion papers provides a range of multidisciplinary insights from the social sciences, humanities and arts to provide perspectives on nature recovery policy. It offers a valuable body of evidence for practitioners and policymakers working on nature recovery policy, drawing on innovative case studies and examples already underway from across England and Wales. They unpack some of the challenges and benefits and present a range of cross-cutting themes that should be considered as important features of nature recovery:

- **Place-sensitive delivery and governance**
- **Effective participation and engagement**
- **Creative and cultural approaches**
- **Opportunities for innovation**

These themes and the research underlying this series points to a set of questions for policymakers to consider in the context of current and developing policy on nature and nature recovery (see [Annex](#)). For example,

- What tensions do these themes highlight around nature and wildlife in upcoming planning and infrastructure legislation?
- How can approaches to nature recovery such as Biodiversity Net Gain incorporate social and cultural values?
- What mechanisms are needed at different scales of government, from parish to national, to include local voices in challenging land-use decisions?

Looking forward, the Academy's new phase of our Sustainable Futures work will provide opportunities to explore these and related questions, bringing together researchers, policymakers and practitioners to identify mechanisms to embed the insights emerging from the research community in this space.

Annex: Nature recovery policies in the UK

The UK's legal framework for nature recovery is primarily based on the [Environment Act 2021](#), which established legally binding targets for the natural environment in England. Praised as a 'turning point for nature', the Act set out statutory targets for the recovery of nature focusing on air quality, biodiversity, water and waste, reversing the decline in species abundance by the end of 2030. It subsequently triggered a range of different policies and developments across the UK, some of which are detailed in the table below.^{10,11}

Policy	Description
A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment (known as the 25YEP)	Published in 2018, this plan established 10 goals and a range of actions to achieve each goal "within a generation, leaving the environment in a better state than when we found it".
Environment Improvement Plan 2023	This is the first revision of the 25YEP and established an apex goal to "improve nature by halting the decline in biodiversity."
Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRSs)	LNRSs were introduced as a system of spatial biodiversity strategies, required in England by the Environment Act 2021. Each of the 48 responsible authorities' strategy must contain a habitat map and a statement of biodiversity priorities, alongside other proposed actions for creation and restoration of habitats. ¹² There is long term funding uncertainty for LNRS implementation.
Environmental Land Management Schemes (ELMS)	ELMS, such as the Sustainable Farming Incentive, and Landscape Recovery, were introduced to replace the EU Common Agriculture Policy in late 2021. Important financial provisions for these schemes were included in The Agriculture Act 2020 . Instead of offering payments based on the amount of land farmed, the schemes pay farmers for practical actions that support food production, protect the health of water, soils and wildlife. ^{13,14}
Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)	A mandatory policy introduced in England in 2024 requiring developers to produce a biodiversity net gain of at least 10%, calculated through a biodiversity metric to generate tradable units. Scotland's Biodiversity Metric is being developed by NatureScot, and should be available in 2027. ¹⁵
Planning and Infrastructure Bill 2025	This Bill, first read in the House of Commons in March 2025, seeks to legislate infrastructure change to deliver growth and housing development, while protecting nature. It has however, provoked extensive debate and prompted concern from environmentalists and housing experts. The Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) raised concern that some elements of the Bill reduce the level of protection for the environment, while the Environmental Audit Committee's recent report criticises the narrative that nature is a blocker to housing growth. ^{16,17} This Bill is a live debate at the time of publication.

References and notes

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9. The British Academy's sustainable policy work thus far comprises two main programmes. Governance to Accelerate Net Zero which demonstrates that good democratic governance is essential to drive the urgent collective action necessary across regions, sectors and communities. The Where We Live Next programme has explored and applied the concept of place in relation to environmental sustainability and developed a cross-cutting framework to facilitate place-sensitive environmental policy.
10. Environmental policy is largely devolved therefore, approaches, policies and legislation in relation to nature recovery will differ across the four nations. For example, the Senedd declared a nature emergency in Wales in 2021, which led to the publication of the Environment (Principles, Governance and Biodiversity Targets) Bill in June 2025.
11. There are many other supporting pieces of legislation that are relevant to nature recovery that could have been included if the table was exhaustive. For example, the long-standing Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, the primary legislation for wildlife protection, covering the protection of species, habitats, and national parks; and the Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976 which restricts the reintroduction of certain large animals.
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