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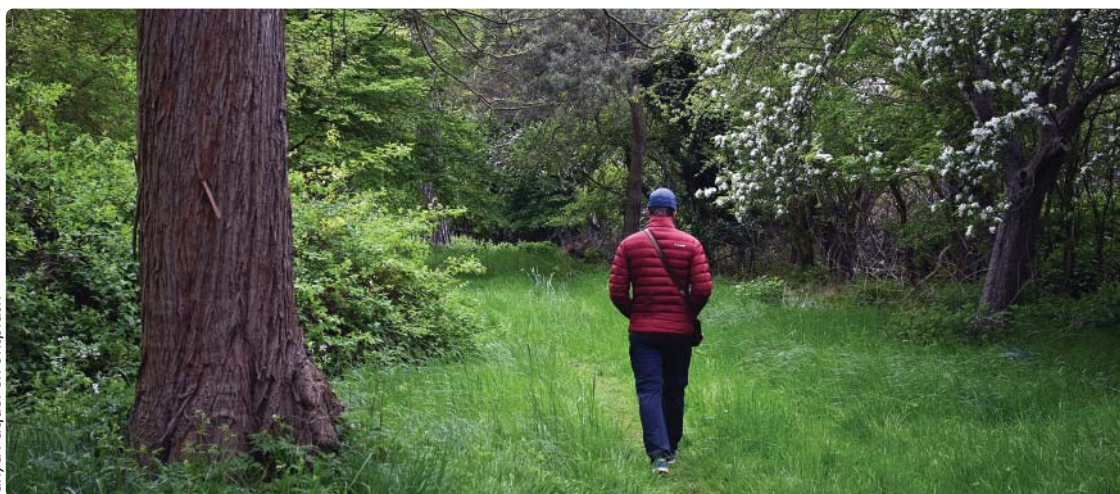
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# addressing local nature recovery

**Peter Jones** looks at Local Nature Recovery Strategies and the Local Nature Recovery scheme, outlines results from pilot programmes for the former, and offers wider reflections on local nature recovery



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Changes in land use, the commercial exploitation of natural resources, climate change and environmental pollution are all having damaging impacts on wildlife and biodiversity within the UK. In 2021 the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee described the UK as 'one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world', and claimed that '15 percent of UK species are threatened with extinction. Of the G7 countries, the UK has the lowest level of biodiversity remaining'.<sup>1</sup> In the updated version of the government's 25 Year Environment Plan,<sup>2</sup> the development of a 'Nature Recovery Network to protect and restore wildlife, and provide opportunities to re-introduce species that we have lost from our countryside' was put forward as a major element in policies to recover nature and enhance the beauty of landscapes.

In 2019 the government announced the introduction of 'Local Nature Recovery Strategies',<sup>3</sup> designed to 'create, advise on, and/or broker local habitat investment opportunities', to 'detail existing areas of high biodiversity value as well as those areas where

habitat creation or restoration would add most value', and to 'help planning authorities identify strategic investments in local habitats'. Five Local Nature Recovery Strategy pilot schemes were launched in 2020, and Local Nature Recovery Strategies were enshrined in the 2021 Environment Act.

In January 2022 the government also announced its intention to launch the Local Nature Recovery scheme, designed to 'make space for nature in the farmed landscape'.<sup>4</sup> The scheme is to be trialled in 2023 and rolled out across England in 2024. This article examines the nature of both the Local Nature Recovery Strategies and the Local Nature Recovery scheme, outlines the initial results of pilot programmes for the former, and offers some wider reflections on local nature recovery.

## **Collaborative local nature recovery projects**

The thinking behind Local Nature Recovery Strategies is that they will 'be a powerful new tool that will help the public, private and voluntary sectors work more effectively together for nature's

recovery, and enable collective effort to be focussed where it will have most benefit'.<sup>5</sup>

A focus on encouraging the public, private and voluntary sectors to collaborate to effect improvements to local environments is not new in the UK. Over 50 years ago, the Countryside Commission and various local authorities set up a number of experimental environmental improvement schemes which led to the establishment of Operation Groundwork. The first of the Operation Groundwork projects was launched in St Helens and Knowsley on the eastern edge of the Merseyside conurbation in 1981. One of its goals was to promote a range of small-scale environmental improvement schemes. In the 40 years since then, Groundwork, rebranded as Groundwork UK, within a federation of individual Groundwork Trusts, has taken on an increasingly national character. By 2021 there were over 40 Groundwork Trusts in England and Wales, embracing over 60 local authority areas.

In the face of the continuing loss of wildlife and wild places, the Wildlife Trusts<sup>6</sup> has reported on being involved in 100 'Living Landscape schemes', designed to 'restore the fortunes of the natural world', to 'help nature recover', and to bring 'people together to extend and reconnect the fragmented remnants of nature over large areas'. In the late 1990s, for example, the Suffolk Wildlife Trust was chosen by English Nature to manage the Renewing the Alde habitat restoration project in an area of 100 square kilometres running inland from the Suffolk coast. The focus was on restoring priority species and particular habitats.

Local Nature Recovery Strategies have been described as 'a new, England-wide system of spatial strategies that will establish priorities and map proposals for specific actions to drive nature's recovery and provide wider environmental benefits'.<sup>5</sup> They are designed 'to drive more coordinated, practical and focussed action to help nature'.<sup>5</sup> The area covered by each of the strategies is to be set by the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, who will also appoint a responsible authority for each to lead its preparation. The focus will be on informing 'decision-making about conservation and restoration of habitats for nature's recovery by landowners and managers, public authorities, and NGOs'.<sup>7</sup>

Traill-Thompson,<sup>8</sup> writing under the Natural England banner, has argued that, while some elements of the Local Nature Recovery Strategies might look familiar, they are new in that they shift 'decision making for nature recovery to political administrative boundaries, to align with land use planning', and that they will bring together a wide range of stakeholders, including planners, Local Nature Partnerships, the public, environmental non-governmental organisations, and farmers, to establish 'a locally led collaborative process'. Furthermore, Traill-Thompson argued that Local Nature Recovery Strategies 'will inform two

significant delivery mechanisms: biodiversity net gain, and future agri-environment schemes'.

Local Nature Recovery Strategies certainly need to be seen alongside the Local Nature Recovery scheme unveiled by the government in January 2022. Local Nature Recovery is seen as 'the improved and more ambitious successor to the Countryside Stewardship scheme. It will pay for locally-targeted actions to make space for nature in the farmed landscape and the wider countryside, alongside food production'.<sup>9</sup> As such, it could include 'managing and creating habitats, adding trees to fields or hedgerows, or restoring peat or wetland areas in appropriate areas of their farm'.<sup>9</sup>

More specifically, it is envisaged that the Local Nature Recovery scheme will include a wide range of themes, including managing feeding, shelter and breeding areas for wildlife on arable farms; creating, restoring and managing species-rich grasslands, wetland habitats, lowland heathlands, and coastal habitats; managing and creating trees and woodlands on farms; and supporting the recovery and re-introduction of particular wildlife species and tackling non-native invasive species. In pursuing such measures, the Department for the Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs (Defra)<sup>9</sup> claims that farmers will be able to choose the right combination of recovery measures to suit their setting and preferences, that the scheme will be administratively straightforward, that it will dovetail into private schemes and market processes, and that it will work in a locally responsive way.

### **Pilot schemes**

The five Local Nature Recovery Strategies pilots, which ran from August 2020 to May 2021, were co-ordinated by Natural England and hosted by Buckinghamshire Council, Cornwall Council, Cumbria County Council, Greater Manchester Combined Authority, and Northumberland County Council. The pilot areas had a good geographical spread, and represented a diversity of habitats, varying pressures on nature, and opportunities for nature recovery.

In August 2021, Defra<sup>10</sup> reported on the lessons learned from the pilots, and some of the hosting authorities have also published draft reports, which have captured some of the initial findings from the pilots under their jurisdictions. At the national level, Traill-Thompson<sup>8</sup> argued that the pilots had demonstrated a wide range of environmental benefits, including nature-based solutions that help to counter the effects of climate change, and the identification of woodlands to store carbon, reduce flooding and cool urban areas and peatlands to absorb and store water.

Defra has reported<sup>10</sup> that lessons learned from the pilots can be grouped into five themes: preparation of Local Nature Recovery Strategies; resources and capacity; data and evidence; collaboration; and

using the products. Under the first theme, strong leadership and transparency from the responsible authority was seen as crucially important in establishing good governance from the onset, and in harnessing collaboration. Here, the early engagement of a wide range of people and organisations was considered vitally important in ensuring effective collaboration, but the Defra report emphasised that there was no single approach to engagement, that different stakeholders need to be engaged differently, and that the employment of stakeholders' inputs should be transparent, so that individuals and organisations could see that their views and priorities were reflected in the overall strategy.

On data and evidence, the report noted that the availability of good data is certainly important, but also stressed that data presentation should be accessible enough to empower non-specialists to make informed suggestions about priorities. At the same time there was seen to be a need for guidance on the data that responsible authorities should be using, and concerns were expressed about the lack of recent data to enable accurate assessments of habitat quality. While the report emphasised the needs of a range of end-users, including local authorities, landowners, environmental organisations, and developers, it argued that some, such as land managers and planners, would require specific guidance on how to use Local Nature Recovery Strategies.

The links with planning were addressed in greater detail in a number of the host authorities' draft reports. The Greater Manchester Combined Authority,<sup>11</sup> for example, explicitly recognised that its draft report did not have formal status within the planning system, but suggested that 'it can help local planning authorities deliver on existing commitments in the National Planning Policy Framework relating to habitat conservation and restoration. It is another piece of evidence that can help local planning authorities to continue in their role in reconciling and balancing competing pressures for land in their areas.' Furthermore, the report was seen as building on earlier work carried out across Greater Manchester, including in the development of the *Places for Everyone* joint plan and Local Plans, and it set out a number of detailed opportunities for nature recovery, and for maximising the potential for new development to play its part in contributing to that goal.

In addressing planners and developers, Cornwall Council's draft report<sup>12</sup> claimed that the 'Local Planning Authority will use this strategy to support land use planning both in terms of plan making and decision taking. It is a positive tool designed to make sure that the location of new development avoids the best areas for nature and positively enhances nature recovery.' The strategy is also seen as important in relation to planning's role in Cornwall Council's response to the climate emergency. Here, the Climate Emergency Development Plan Document

aims to introduce new, and strengthen existing, planning policies to help address climate change across the county.

While Defra<sup>9</sup> has recognised the importance of piloting and testing its Local Nature Recovery scheme, it suggested that lessons learned from past schemes effectively meant that testing should be focused on those elements that are seen to be new. To that end, the focus of testing will include how land management plans are incorporated into the scheme, how local priorities are established, how local collaboration can be incentivised, and how the scheme can complement Local Nature Recovery Strategies. The aim will be to include up to 500 participants, drawn from a range of farming sectors, in the piloting and testing initiatives.

More generally, land use changes within agricultural land uses are not subject to planning policies and regulations, but, since decisions made by farmers and agricultural landowners can have wide-ranging environmental, as well as economic and social consequences, planning authorities will surely want to maintain a watching brief on the Local Nature Recovery scheme.

### **Concluding reflections**

The pursuit of Local Nature Recovery Strategies, and the more recently announced Local Nature Recovery scheme, suggest that the government's drive to tackle the decline of biodiversity within the UK may be gathering momentum. That said, four issues merit concluding reflection.

First, once the operational and financial details and the detailed objectives of the Local Nature Recovery Strategies and the Local Nature Recovery scheme have been finalised, robust monitoring processes will need to be established, to evaluate not only how they are working in practice to stabilise, and to increase, biodiversity, but also 'how the Local Nature Recovery scheme and Local Nature Recovery Strategies complement each other'.<sup>9</sup> Here, monitoring change over time may prove to be a testing challenge, and the availability of the appropriate financial resources to support monitoring will be essential.

Secondly, such monitoring aside, the government will also surely want to have an eye to the wider social and economic consequences of Local Nature Recovery Strategies and the Local Nature Recovery scheme. More widely, for example, in reviewing the Environmental Land Management Scheme (which includes the Local Nature Recovery scheme), the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee,<sup>13</sup> while arguing that 'the [Environmental Land Management] Scheme's success depends on increases in farming productivity alongside changes in land use that will bring environmental benefits', raised the spectre of changes in land use that result from the scheme leading to more imports of food, 'with the environmental impacts of food production



being 'exported' to countries with lower environmental standards'.

Thirdly, it remains to be seen how Local Nature Recovery Strategies will interface with the planning system. In the *Planning for the Future* White Paper,<sup>14</sup> the government emphasised that it wanted 'the reformed system to play a proactive role in promoting environmental recovery and long-term sustainability'. More recently, Defra<sup>5</sup> affirmed the government's intention that Local Nature Recovery Strategies would be an important source of evidence for local planning authorities in preparing Local Plans. However, reductions in local authority finances, and in the size of local authority planning departments, must call into question local authorities' ability to play a full part in nature recovery, at a time when there seem to be an increasing number of other new calls on their expertise and resources.

Finally, while a consistent underlying theme in identifying the benefits of Local Nature Recovery Strategies and the Local Nature Recovery scheme is their role in contributing to tackling climate change, there are concerns that local actions can make little, or no, impression on what is a global problem. However, in challenging this position, Bennett *et al.*,<sup>15</sup> for example, emphasised 'the often-central role of local people in caring for the environment that they are proximal to [and] connected to', and argued that one of the ways that people can respond to external drivers of change using their own expertise and knowledge is through engaging in local environmental stewardship actions and initiatives. Local Nature Recovery Strategies and the Local Nature Recovery scheme certainly epitomise this approach, and may also be important in continuing to raise awareness within communities.

More widely, Local Nature Recovery Strategies and the Local Nature Recovery scheme perhaps need to be set within a wider economic and social context. Here, the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee's argument<sup>1</sup> certainly resonates: 'To reverse the trend of biodiversity loss requires urgent transformative change. This cannot be achieved simply through using natural resources more efficiently. Total material consumption in developed economies needs to be reduced, nature needs to be accounted for in economic decision making and governments and businesses need to take pre-emptive and precautionary actions to avoid, mitigate and remedy the deterioration of nature.'

● **Peter Jones** works in the School of Business at the University of Gloucestershire. The views expressed are personal.

## Notes

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- 4 'Government unveils plans to restore 300,000 hectares of habitat across England'. Press Release. Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs/Natural England/Rural Payments Agency, 6 Jan. 2022. [www.gov.uk/government/news/government-unveils-plans-to-restore-300000-hectares-of-habitat-across-england](http://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-unveils-plans-to-restore-300000-hectares-of-habitat-across-england)
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- 6 *Nature Recovery Network Handbook*. The Wildlife Trusts, 2020. [www.wildlifetrusts.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/Nature\\_Recovery\\_Network\\_Handbook\\_LO\\_SINGLES.pdf](http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/Nature_Recovery_Network_Handbook_LO_SINGLES.pdf)
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