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Is Urban Rewilding Taking Root? Exploring Local Authorities' Perspectives on Challenges and Opportunities in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

Globally, urban rewilding is emerging as a promising strategy to address biodiversity loss and climate change impacts by reintegrating nature into cities and supporting more sustainable urban development. Despite growing interest, little is known about how urban rewilding is interpreted and operationalised by local governments. This sequential mixed-methods study uses a focus group with local-authority professionals from the United Kingdom to inform an online survey distributed nationally, exploring how the concept is understood, the opportunities it presents and the barriers to its implementation. Respondents identified urban rewilding as an opportunity to enhance biodiversity, ecological connectivity and community wellbeing, while also contributing to climate resilience and nature-based solutions. Reported practices suggest growing engagement with approaches associated with urban rewilding, although the term itself was not always used because of conceptual ambiguity and concerns about public acceptance. Implementation was also constrained by limited resources, competing land uses and perceptions of wilder landscapes as untidy or neglected. The findings suggest that urban rewilding is interpreted as a context-dependent and managed approach that provides greater autonomy for ecological processes while accommodating human use and other urban functions. The study identifies context-sensitive implications for planning, green-space management and community engagement and establishes priorities for further research.

Keywords: Rewilding, perceptions, biodiversity loss, wildlife, nature-based solutions, urban green spaces

1. Introduction

In the context of the current biodiversity crisis, urban rewilding has recently gained attention as cities become recognised not just as human-dominated spaces but as emerging ecological habitats (Piana et al. 2024; Finnerty et al. 2025). Initially studied through concepts like synurbisation (wildlife adapting to urban life) and synantropisation (species coexisting closely with humans), urban wildness is now being reassessed in light of land-use changes, climate shifts, and spontaneous vegetation growth (Piana et al. 2024). However, as Kopnina (2013) argues, urban greenery is often perceived through an anthropocentric lens, with plants treated as aesthetic or functional objects rather than as entities with intrinsic value. This critique aligns with emerging calls for a more ethical and ecocentric approach to urban nature, one that acknowledges the agency and dignity of non-human life within the social-ecological system (Kopnina 2013).

Building on this conceptual evolution, urban planners and landscape architects are increasingly incorporating what might be regarded as rewilding concepts into the design and management of urban spaces such as public parks and gardens (Lehmann 2022).

Such ‘urban’ forms of rewilding have been promoted (Prior and Brady 2017; Moxon et al. 2023) as potential solutions for ecological crises that allow towns and cities to be part of the solutions. The potential for urban nature-based solutions is perhaps particularly relevant in the United Kingdom (UK) which has experienced significant nature decline within a context of global loss, leading to the lowest remaining levels of biodiversity amongst the G7 countries (Environmental Audit Committee 2021).

These responses seek to deliver nature recovery whilst also capitalising on perceived co-benefits for both place operations and the wellbeing of citizens (Pettorelli et al. 2022; Moxon et al. 2023).

Rewilding in towns and cities can range in typology from larger-scale scenarios like brownfield land restoration and nature recovery in natural reserves within urban areas to smaller-scale strategic interventions like establishing ‘no-mow’ areas in parks and transport corridors (Lehmann 2021, 2022; C40 Cities and ARUP 2023; Masood and Russo 2023; Moxon et al. 2023; Russo et al. 2025), where these assigned spaces remain uncultivated and self-regulated in contrast to the traditionally intensively maintained green spaces (Lehmann, 2022). This form of rewilding is conceptually aligned with informal green spaces (IGS) (Rupprecht et al. 2015), which are often unmanaged, spontaneous vegetated areas that operate under a form of nature autonomy. In a study of Łódź, Poland, Włodarczyk-Marciniak et al. (2020) found that residents recognised IGS as valuable for their self-regulating ecological functions such as rainwater retention, air purification, and temperature moderation and supported minimal interventions to improve their accessibility. These findings reinforce the potential of self-regulating green spaces to serve as socially accepted and ecologically functional components of urban rewilding.

These ‘urban rewilding’ interpretations and practices however differ significantly from current theoretical concepts of rewilding. The original notion of rewilding was conceived as a strategy for addressing biodiversity loss and restoring damaged ecosystems rapidly and at scale in North America (Jørgensen 2015; Corlett 2016; Jepson et al. 2018) and has sometimes drawn criticism for depending more on theory than empirical evidence (Hart et al. 2023).

Recent reviews of the theoretical principles (Carver et al., 2021) of this arguably still emergent and developing idea (Wynne-Jones et al. 2020a), suggest that: restoration of natural processes (through the reintroduction of missing species, re-establishing predator-prey relationships and restoration of habitat); recognition of the inherent value of all species and ecosystems (and their need to coexist); and acceptance of the inherent dynamism of these species and systems, are key in implementing the approach (Carver et al. 2021). These it is

argued dictate its requirement for landscape-scale management and planning (prioritising core wilderness areas alongside connectivity) as well as stakeholder participation and public education within this to address concerns regarding human-wildlife coexistence (ibid). Both the scientific method and traditional ecological knowledge are highlighted as valuable approaches for informing rewilding efforts (Ibid).

Policies that support possibly important tools for addressing the intertwined biodiversity and climate crises are often hampered by this information gap (Hart et al. 2023).

In their 2021 paper, Carver et al. establish a foundational framework for rewilding centred around ten key principles. These principles prioritise the restoration of natural processes through the reintroduction of missing species and the re-establishment of predator–prey relationships. Additionally, they emphasise the importance of landscape-scale planning which considers core areas, connectivity corridors, and the potential for coexistence between humans and livestock. The framework recognises the inherent dynamism of ecosystems and allows for natural processes such as disturbance and species range shifts to occur. Rewilding projects should also account for the impacts of climate change and can potentially act as a mitigation strategy. Local engagement through stakeholder participation, good governance structures, and public education is crucial, together with addressing concerns regarding human–wildlife coexistence. Finally, the framework aspires to a paradigm shift in human–nature relationships. Rewilding recognises the intrinsic value of all species and ecosystems, with the goal being a future where humans can coexist with healthy and functioning ecosystems (Carver et al. 2021).

1.1 Concepts of rewilding and human – nature relationality

Thus, recognition of the intrinsic value, needs and agency of *all* species (human and non-human) can be seen as central to recent theorising of rewilding. Historically, however the

development of the concept of rewilding, and human-non-human relationships with/in it, has been appraised as both less definitive and inclusive (Jørgensen, 2015). Jørgensen's review of the evolution of the idea prior to 2015 identifies how interpretations to that point appeared underpinned by various understandings of 'wild' nature as past ecologies (preceding human activity or particular histories of human-environment interaction) that can be restored to pre-anthropogenic impact points (ibid). These scenarios, whilst diverging about which historic set points are desirable for restoration, arguably each reinforce dualistic understandings of nature-culture, with human behaviour excluded from 'natural' processes and largely antithetical to restoring the wild (Glentworth et al., 2024). More recently, exploration of the practical application of rewilding within the UK has suggested historical ecologies are providing inspiration for achieving novel forms of 'wildness' rather than strict baselines for restoration (Wynne-Jones et al. 2020b). United Kingdom organisations and practitioners, it is suggested, have moved rewilding away from ideas of reinstating past ecological base-lines towards pragmatic future orientated scenarios where nature can achieve more autonomy and agency, a potentially unifying theme within the use of the concept in the UK that is also expressed in more recent theorisation (as above) (Wynne-Jones et al. 2020a). As such UK-based initiatives can be seen to favour language like "wilding" and "wild" rather than the 're' prefix, which might indicate a return to the past (Thomas, 2022). Importantly, considerations associated with processes of governing land management (funding, legal constraint etc.), as well as ethics surrounding social justice, have been identified as having an influence on how wildness in the UK is delivered in practice, 'delimiting' the enaction of the concept (Ibid). Likewise, the material geographies and popular cultural forces shaping rewilding in the UK have been identified as distinct, resulting in forms of rewilding that operate at smaller spatial scales (Thomas 2022).

Recent reviews of the literature and case study research suggests that those delivering rewilding in the UK may deploy context-dependent interpretations of ‘wildness’ and the space for humans within these that reflect the influence of delimiting factors; moving between conceptions that suggest dualistic division as discussed above and versions that include co-operation and concession, and sometimes interdependency (Glentworth et al. 2024). Glentworth et al., (2024) propose that there are currently three dominant interpretations of the relationship between humans and nature current in rewilding conceptualisation and practices towards restoring ‘non-human autonomy’. ‘Human–nature dichotomy’ reflects the position of early conceptions, discussed above, that have subsequently been critiqued for dualistic division of anthropogenic and natural activity, with no place for humans in restored natural processes. ‘Rewilding as human–nature compromise’ suggests forms of restoration of autonomous nature where pragmatic concessions and accommodations of human activity can be negotiated (such as continuance or establishment of certain forms of livelihood and cultural identification). This conception arguably can expand rewilding practice into more anthropogenically altered and busy environments and result in complex human-nature relations (Ibid). ‘Rewilding as human–nature mutualism’ envisages restoration of natural processes as also restorative of mutually beneficial relationships between humans and natural world. This perspective appears to suggest rewilding can help people find their place within nature again, rebalancing the autonomy of both humans and non-humans for the advantage of both (Ibid)

Of note within these analyses of the evolution and use of the rewilding concept across spaces and situations is recognition of its relative plasticity (Jørgensen 2015; Deary and Warren 2017). The notion of rewilding has been compared with other influential ‘plastic’ ideas that on transferring from scientific to popular use have proved particularly accommodating to diverse interpretation and application whilst continuing to benefit from the authority

bestowed by their ‘scientific’ origin (Pörksen 1995; Jørgensen 2015). This plasticity has been seen both as problematic, for undermining definitional precision, and as opportune, for enabling rewilding’s broad uptake and appeal, while some scholars argue its coherence can be maintained by foregrounding core themes such as non-human autonomy (Prior and Ward 2016). The concept of rewilding has also been identified as a significantly emotive concept in the UK, with positive ecological emotions inspiring advocates and negative feelings emerging where rewilding efforts clash with the character of established environmental management and the place of people within them (Wynne-Jones 2025).

Some commentators may find a continued focus on the cultural specificity of rewilding interpretations and how particular ‘flavours’ (Carver 2016) of rewilding conceive of human-nature relationships and wildness frustrating, given attempts within the scientific literature to clearly define the concept’s logics and conditions for application. However, we argue here that without continued exploration of how popular rewilding ideas take root and proliferate in different contexts we risk losing sight of how versions of this concept currently motivate (both inspiring and potentially limiting) land management practice despite academic attempts to fix its conception and application.

1.2 Implementing rewilding in urban areas

The application of ideas of rewilding in an urban context can be seen as an example of both the plasticity of the concept and its emotive power to inspire. Importantly, in the wake of the Covid-19 crisis, urban rewilding has emerged as an important idea within the public imagination (Russo 2023). Influential media outlets like the BBC, CNN, The Guardian and The New York Times have each actively discussed and promoted the idea of letting post-pandemic cities grow wild for example (Wilson 2023). This is matched by a blossoming of arguably ‘urban’ rewilding projects, with examples in the UK ranging from explorations of

urban species reintroduction (such as White Storks as an ‘umbrella species’ within London) to funding initiatives that encourage the application of rewilding within urban areas (for example the Rewild London Fund 2023) (Yeo 2021; Thomas 2022; C40 Cities and ARUP 2023; Russo 2023; Masood and Russo 2023; Gorghiu et al. 2024; Cary and Wartmann 2024).

Despite its growing popularity, the application of rewilding in urban contexts remains contentious, as its core principles large-scale ecological restoration, connectivity, and the autonomy of natural processes, were developed in non-urban, often wilderness contexts, and often conflict with the social, spatial, and ecological constraints of densely populated built environments (C40 Cities and ARUP 2023). Urban areas present fragmented habitats, high human impact, and complex land-use demands that can limit the extent to which rewilding’s foundational ideals can be realised. Additionally, the term ‘urban rewilding’ remains undefined in UK policy (Cary and Wartmann 2024), contributing to conceptual ambiguity and inconsistent application across governance systems and practice. The coherence and validity of the concept have also been questioned, particularly regarding its theoretical consistency and empirical grounding in urban settings (HU et al. 2024).

1.3 Study Objectives and Conceptual Framework

This research responds to these challenges by examining how urban rewilding is understood, interpreted and operationalised within the context of UK local governance. It explores how understandings and reported practices align with, or diverge from, established rewilding principles, particularly those concerning the restoration of ecological processes, the autonomy of natural systems and the role of human intervention.

While localised studies, such as Harrington and Russo's (2024) detailed research with a single authority in Hampshire UK, have begun to map opportunities and constraints, these remain limited in scope. Their findings highlight the need for broader empirical research across a wider range of local authorities to understand the variation in interpretation and implementation of urban rewilding across the UK (Harrington and Russo 2024). This study addresses this gap by addressing 3 research objectives:

1. To examine how the terms “rewilding” and “urban rewilding” are understood and used within UK local governance, including how these understandings relate to ecological restoration, natural processes, human intervention and nature's autonomy.
2. To explore perceived barriers, opportunities and motivations associated with implementing urban rewilding and how these perceptions reflect different understandings of human–nature relationships.
3. To identify practice-oriented considerations arising from the reported experiences and perceptions and to propose priorities for future research.

The study is informed principally by Glentworth et al.'s (2024) interpretations of human–nature relationships in rewilding: human–nature dichotomy, human–nature compromise and human–nature mutualism. These interpretations provide a conceptual lens for considering how human intervention and non-human autonomy are positioned within understandings and reported practices of urban rewilding. Broader perspectives on the diverse values of nature and future urban-nature relationships provide additional conceptual context for considering the wider implications of these interpretations (IPBES 2022; Mansur et al. 2022; Durán et al. 2023).

The United Kingdom was chosen as the study area because it has among the lowest remaining levels of biodiversity in the G7 (Environmental Audit Committee, 2021), a

strong policy discourse on nature recovery, and emerging urban rewilding initiatives such as the London Rewilding Taskforce. These characteristics make the UK a relevant context for examining how rewilding is interpreted within highly urbanised and institutionally complex landscapes and provide a basis for future comparative research in other urban governance contexts.

2. Materials and methods

2.1 Study design

This research utilised a sequential mixed methods approach. Employing an exploratory design, qualitative data from a focus group was first collected and analysed (Berman 2017). Emerging themes from this initial analysis then informed the development and design of a subsequent survey instrument for further exploration of the research objectives (Berman 2017).

2.2 Focus Group (Exploratory Stage)

An exploratory focus group was conducted to investigate local authorities' perceptions of rewilding and its practical implementation. Invitations were extended to 20 personnel, of whom eight participated. This sample size aligns with established recommendations for focus groups, which suggest six to eight participants as optimal for achieving a balance between diversity of perspectives and depth of discussion (Nyumba et al. 2018). Participants were professionals from planning, ecology, and green space management departments, representing local authorities in Southern England. The session was conducted online via MS Teams in February 2023 to facilitate accessibility and engagement.

A semi-structured focus group discussion script explored participants' understanding and level of acceptance of the term 'rewilding' and its application within their local authorities. Specific questions focused on implementation challenges and consequences of adopting

‘wild’ aesthetics and management strategies. The focus group discussion aimed to understand local authorities’ current policy aspirations and the difficulties they face in achieving them.

2.3 Survey Instrument

To explore whether perceptions identified during the focus group were also evident among a geographically broader sample of UK local-authority professionals, we developed an online survey informed by the qualitative stage. The survey was not designed to produce statistically representative estimates for the UK local-authority workforce. Prior to full deployment, the survey was pilot tested with the research team and one local authority in Southern England. This step ensured that the wording and terminology were appropriate for local government contexts and that the questions were clear and accessible. Feedback from the pilot led to minor refinements in language and structure to enhance clarity and relevance.

The final survey instrument was administered between October 2023 and January 2024 and targeted professionals working within UK local government. All 317 local authorities were contacted via email with a link to the survey hosted on the JISC platform

<https://www.jisc.ac.uk/online-surveys>). To increase reach, the survey was also disseminated through professional social media channels, including LinkedIn and X (formerly Twitter), using a direct link and QR code. In total, 47 responses were received, of which 46 were complete. Relative to the 317 institutional invitations, this corresponds to a nominal response rate of approximately 14.8%. The completion rate among respondents was 97.9%. This sample size is comparable to previous studies on local authority rewilding initiatives, such as Yeo (2022), which included 43 participants.

The survey (see supplementary material) comprised three core sections: (i) definitions of rewilding and urban rewilding (e.g., “How would you define the term ‘rewilding’?”), (ii) perceived opportunities and barriers to implementation, and (iii) a dedicated section for

authorities not currently undertaking rewilding initiatives. A demographic section captured respondents' professional roles and disciplinary backgrounds (e.g., ecology, planning, landscape architecture), enabling contextual interpretation of responses. Additionally, participants were asked to evaluate a series of rewilding definitions drawn from the literature using a five-point Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree).

2.4 Data Analysis

Focus group data were analysed using NVivo 14 following an inductive thematic approach. The coding process was applied exclusively to the focus group transcript and involved three stages: (i) preliminary reading to identify recurring concepts; (ii) generation of initial codes; and (iii) refinement of codes into broader themes through constant comparison. This process resulted in four key themes that informed the design of the subsequent survey: (a) limited urban applicability due to human exclusion, (b) conceptual and terminological challenges, (c) scale considerations, and (d) rural bias in existing models.

Open-ended survey responses were analysed using NVivo 14, primarily through word-frequency queries and text-search functions to identify commonly used terms and patterns in language. Descriptive statistics were generated using Microsoft Excel to summarise response distributions and support data organisation. In addition, respondents' agreement with the selected rewilding definitions was analysed using the JISC survey platform, which calculated mean rank, variance, standard deviation, lower quartile and upper quartile based on assigned agreement ranks. Given the exploratory design, modest sample size and non-probability recruitment strategy, inferential tests and subgroup comparisons were not undertaken because the sample was not sufficiently large or balanced to support reliable population-level inference. Frequencies derived from open-ended responses indicate the occurrence of themes

within the dataset and should not be interpreted as statistically validated rankings of their relative importance.

3. Results

3.1 Focus group: challenges

The focus group revealed a significant disparity in acceptance/understanding of the language, concept, and application, particularly concerning the suitability of rewilding initiatives in urban environments. Within the focus group, several participants indicated that their local authority was actively using what they understand to be rewilding approaches (forms of ecological restoration), irrespective of whether the term ‘rewilding’ is explicitly used. Such approaches are being used in rural and urban contexts, and at large and small landscape scales. Furthermore, they have disseminated information regarding their use of these approaches to local residents.

Several key themes emerged from the discussions related to the challenges of implementing rewilding:

- **Limited urban applicability due to human exclusion:** A prevailing sentiment suggested that urban rewilding is likely to exclude human influence and therefore be fundamentally incompatible with urban landscapes. Participants expressed concerns that such initiatives could neglect the needs and integration of human populations within cityscapes and peri-urban settlements.
- **Conceptual and Terminological Challenges:** The term/language of ‘rewilding’ was identified as potentially problematic. Concerns included a conceptual questioning of the legitimacy of the language, as well as ambiguity in interpretation across various

stakeholder groups (professionals, industry, and communities). This ambiguity, it was argued, could hinder effective application and create implementation barriers.

- **Scale Considerations:** Linked to the conceptual question, the discussions also highlighted a perception/view that rewilding projects are inherently large-scale endeavours. This focus on vast landscapes may overlook the potential for smaller-scale, targeted interventions within urban environments.
- **Rural Bias in Existing Models:** The discussion suggested that there is a current dominance of rural and large-scale landscape models in shaping the understanding and application within UK local authorities of rewilding. This indicates a potential mismatch between the scale and scope of exemplars of rewilding that local authorities are looking to and the activity that they associate with rewilding within their own local authorities. It also suggests that some of the unique challenges and opportunities presented by their experimentation in urban/peri-urban environments are not being explored and shared.

3.2 Survey Overview

Of the 47 participants recruited for the study, 46 provided complete responses. These responses were obtained from across the United Kingdom, and their regional distribution is presented in Figure 1. As can be seen, respondents were relatively evenly spread across most regions and countries, with the highest concentration in Scotland (17.4%) and the lowest in the North West (2.2%).

Percentage

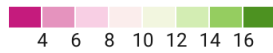


Figure 1: Distribution of UK survey responses by region (N = 46). South West: 6 (13.0%); South East: 6 (13.0%); Greater London: 4 (8.7%); East of England: 2 (4.3%); West Midlands: 4 (8.7%); East Midlands: 4 (8.7%); Yorkshire and Humber: 3 (6.5%); North West: 1 (2.2%); North East: 3 (6.5%); Northern Ireland: 2 (4.3%); Wales: 3 (6.5%); Scotland: 8 (17.4%). Percentages are calculated on N = 46 and may not sum to exactly 100% due to rounding. (Created with Datawrapper)

Over half of the respondents (56.5%) described their local-authority area as mixed urban–rural, followed by urban contexts (28.3%), with rural contexts also represented. Of the 42 respondents who reported the extent of their local authority’s land ownership, 15 (35.7%) selected 100–500 hectares and 14 (33.3%) selected more than 1,000 hectares.

3.3 Definitions: Understanding of concepts

Analysing the responses to “How would you define the term ‘rewilding’?” revealed several key themes.

A core theme centres on minimising human intervention to allow natural processes to take the lead in shaping landscapes and restoring ecological balance. The term “natural processes” was frequently used (n=7) to express the idea of allowing ecological systems to function with the minimum of human intervention and reduction or removal of human management practices. This theme was evident in phrases like “minimal management” and “returning land to nature”. Rewilding is also seen as a form of ecological restoration, aiming to return degraded habitats to a healthier/previous state with increased biodiversity. This was reflected in the use of words like “restoration”.

The responses to questioning on the interpretations of the term ‘urban rewilding’ show that many definitions emphasise reintroducing defined aspects of autonomous nature through allowing some natural processes to occur within defined urban environments: “bringing back elements of wilderness and embracing and allow a natural process to develop”. Several responses (n=4) highlight for example the importance of allowing natural regeneration and minimising intensive management practices “Managing land in as natural a way as possible to the benefit of wildlife”. A common theme (n=12) is also the goal of increasing biodiversity and “naturalising urban ecosystems”: “Adding biodiverse planting to developed areas included leftover spaces, green roofs, rain gardens etc”. This response appears to conceive of urban rewilding as a route to increasing the presence and diversity of nature.

3.4 Rewilding vs Urban Rewilding

The key difference between rewilding and urban rewilding, based on the definitions provided, is determined by this research as being associated with scale, location, and a return to a previous set point where autonomous ‘natural’ processes were foremost.

Rewilding was understood to be focused on rural or wilderness areas. Answers defining rewilding emphasised terms like “natural state”, “natural processes”, “large scale restoration”, and “allowing nature to take its course”. This suggests minimal human intervention and co-existence, with a focus on letting non-human nature re-establish itself.

The research findings show that the term ‘Urban Rewilding’ is taken to mean the application of the principles of rewilding to urban environments. However, while aiming for increased biodiversity and natural elements, urban rewilding is identified as often involving a more managed approach (“potentially involving more human intervention”) to incorporate nature into existing urban areas.

While some answers define both rewilding and urban rewilding similarly, a few responses (n=8) clearly suggest this difference. For example, one answer says “probably as above but with a more people-centric approach” for urban rewilding. This research therefore identifies human involvement/presence as a key differentiating factor between rewilding and *urban rewilding*, but confirms the shared core principles of ecological recovery and an emphasis upon natural processes. Table 1 summarises the key differences between rewilding and urban rewilding from the data.

Table 1: Differences between rewilding and urban rewilding as perceived by professionals working in UK local authorities, based on responses from the national survey. The table integrates practical characteristics with underlying conceptual frames of human–nature relationships, adapted from Glentworth et al. (2024).

Dimension	Rewilding	Urban Rewilding
Location	Rural or wilderness areas	Urban environments
Scale	Large-scale	Smaller scale
Human Involvement	Minimal	More managed, with varying scales of human influence
Focus	Restoring natural processes and ecosystems including key animal species	Increasing biodiversity and green spaces
Autonomy (Nature's Agency)	High: natural succession and processes unfold without intervention	Partial, often contingent and sometimes temporary: natural processes encouraged but with significant human influence due to context
Human–Nature Relationship	Often reflects <i>human–nature dichotomy</i> — little or no human role in natural systems, but can also represent human-nature compromises and sometimes mutualism where restoring nature can also bring benefits to humans.	Sometimes reflects aspects of human-nature <i>mutualism</i> — but with nature accommodated in people-centred processes. Could be described as human-nature alliance.
Conceptual Frame	<i>No place for humans in restored wild processes or pragmatic concessions. Sometimes restorative mutualism between people and nature (Glentworth et al. 2024)</i>	Humans key to identifying creative and opportunistic possibilities for (frequently partial) restoration of natural processes
Examples from answers	“Returning the countryside to as natural state and process as possible” “Removal of land management interventions to allow natural succession to take place” “Large scale holistic restoration of ecosystems, where nature is allowed to care for itself” “Returning to a natural habitat, although most people associate it with the re-introduction of species previously found here such as lynx, wolves, etc.” “restoring land back to natural systems of management involving key animal species rather than human intervention”	“Identifying areas which can be left to nature - and limiting intervention - allowing nature to thrive” “The introduction or reintroduction of nature into urban places” “Bringing nature back into the built environment” “Amending management on urban sites to allow natural processes to take place, but with some human influence due to the external environment” “allowing some manicured areas in an urban setting to be reclaimed by nature”

Figure 2 shows the 1,000 most frequently used words in definitions of “rewilding” (left) and “urban rewilding” (right), generated using NVivo 14 word frequency queries. Larger words indicate higher frequency. The word “natural” was most frequent in definitions of rewilding, while “urban” was most frequent in definitions of urban rewilding.



Figure 2: Word clouds of respondents' definitions of "rewilding" (left) and "urban rewilding" (right).

Local authority professionals were asked to assess the applicability of several influential definitions of rewilding to urban contexts using a five-point Likert scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree) (see Supplementary Table S1). The definition by Lorimer (2015) received the highest level of agreement, with 50% of respondents selecting “strongly agree” and 41.3% selecting “agree.” (Pettorelli et al.’s 2018) definition scored 28.3% “strongly agree” and 41.3% “agree.” Naundrup and Svenning’s (2015) definition, which emphasises species reintroductions, was supported by 21.7% of respondents as “strongly agree.” The definition proposed by the IUCN CEM Rewilding Thematic Group (Carver et al. 2021) received 34.8% “strongly agree.” Full details of all definitions and response distributions are provided in Supplementary Table S1.

3.5 Forms of urban rewilding projects

Respondents reported that their local authorities were adopting initiatives identified as forms of rewilding across diverse locations, ranging from roadsides and verges to parks, gardens and nature reserves. Efforts focus on restoring habitats through practices like “reducing mowing and use of herbicides in parks, roadside verges” and “replacing grass in parks with more diverse planting”. This new diversity includes planting native wildflowers and trees, with one local authority recognising the success of “wildflower additions, leaving grass to grow (but not necessarily managing it), planting trees”. Additionally, local authorities are creating wildflower meadows, woodlands, and wetlands, while allowing some green spaces to develop naturally, with another local authority citing the benefit of “resisting the temptation to always clear naturally regenerating scrub from open habitats”. The survey answers revealed that this work, interpreted as rewilding, aims to improve biodiversity and connect fragmented habitats, often incorporating a multifunctional approach which embraces sustainable drainage systems (SuDS). Further, the data identifies the implication of this strategy shift in new developments through the consideration of biodiversity through policies like “no biodiversity net loss for all development proposals”.

3.6 Motivations

Within the open-ended responses, environmental concerns, particularly biodiversity loss and climate change, were the most frequently identified motivations for local-authority rewilding strategies. Biodiversity enhancement was the most frequently mentioned motivation within this dataset ($n = 11$), with respondents referring to the “biodiversity emergency” and “ecological crisis” (Table 2). One local authority states their aim is “to address the Ecological Crisis the planet is facing,” while another highlights “increasing biodiversity, better habitat management”

as a key motivator. Additionally, Biodiversity Net Gain (2) was mentioned by two local authorities as part of their strategy.

Climate change more widely (9) is another pressing concern motivating rewilding efforts. Phrases like “climate emergency” and “carbon neutral targets” are frequently used. One council explicitly states their motivation as being “part of carbon neutral targets,” while another identified the motivation of rewilding as part of “nature-based solutions for climate change.” Several authorities also mention specific environmental benefits like wetland and river restoration, with one council noting their plan to “re-wetting, heather regeneration, moorland restoration” as part of their rewilding strategy. Although environmental motivations were frequently reported, respondents also identified the potential for cost savings (n = 6).

Phrases like “reducing management resources” highlight the economic benefits of rewilding efforts. One council directly mentions “delivery of environmental enhancement, reduction of management resources” as a key motivator. Conversely, it was also noted that urban rewilding sites (n=2) may not necessarily lower cost from a creation or maintenance perspective depending upon the approach and extent of human management.

Several authorities also emphasised a link between rewilding and public health (n=5), using terms like “health and wellbeing” and “public enjoyment.” For example, one local authority states their motivation as “Increase and enhance biodiversity, increase public involvement and enjoyment of open green and blue spaces.” This suggests rewilding can be perceived as an investment in the mental and physical benefits associated with time spent in natural environments.

Table 2: Motivations for rewilding strategy as a Local Authority

Motivation	Frequency

Biodiversity Enhancement	11
Climate Change / Climate Emergency	9
Cost Savings / Budget Efficiency	6
Health and Well-being	5
Nature Recovery / Nature Network	5
Public Engagement / Involvement	4
Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) / Legal Obligations	4
Improved Land Management / Habitat Connectivity	4
Flood Alleviation / Water Quality	4
Public Enjoyment / Green Spaces	3
Biodiversity Duty / Ecological Crisis	3
Political or Strategic Motivation	2
Resilience to Urban, Climate, and Disease Pressures	2

The responses to the question of whether motivations for rewilding differ based on location (i.e., urban, urban fringe, rural) reveal mixed responses. It was suggested that urban areas could be used to prioritise health and wellbeing, while rural locations might focus on broader ecological benefits: “urban more driven for health and wellbeing, more publicly owned land”. However, many respondents highlighted the importance of adapting methods and the potential for a range of motivations in different contexts, rather than having fundamentally different motivations across contexts. There is also some uncertainty about the extent of these variations.

3.7 Collaborations and future plans

Of the 38 respondents who answered the open-ended collaboration item, 35 indicated that their local authorities collaborated with external organisations or groups to pursue rewilding or nature-recovery objectives. This finding highlights the potential importance of collaboration and peer-to-peer learning in supporting activities associated with urban rewilding. Among the 39 respondents to the question concerning future plans, 28 (71.8%) reported that their local authorities planned to include rewilding initiatives in the future, while four (10.3%) reported no such plans and seven (17.9%) were uncertain.

3.8. Barriers to implementation

With regard to the barriers to implementation, respondents identified a range of challenges for implementing rewilding strategies in both the medium- and long-term. As outlined in Table 3, these challenges span a variety of financial, operational, and social factors that impact both immediate and future success.

Table 3: Barriers to implementation in the medium and long term.

Category	Medium-Term Challenges	Frequency	Long-Term Challenges	Frequency
Funding	Short-term funding constraints, lack of long-term financial commitments for projects.	7 mentions	Lack of long-term funding from central government, funding for maintenance, reliance on short-term planning.	7 mentions
Staffing	Stretching staff resources, especially during peak times like urban meadows in late summer.	3 mentions	Risk of staff cuts, staff turnover affecting continuity of long-term projects.	5 mentions
Public Perception	Overcoming perceptions of "untidy" spaces or "budget-cutting" measures.	4 mentions	Changing public understanding of rewilding, perceptions of areas being "untidy" as a result of rewilding.	6 mentions
Policy & Legislation	Adjusting to changing regulations and policies.	2 mentions	Lack of legislative support for biodiversity, especially for long-term projects like rewilding.	3 mentions
Land Use & Development	Conflicts with other urban aspirations (e.g., housing, transport).	6 mentions	Increased pressure from housing developments, competing land uses for nature restoration.	6 mentions

Climate Change	Adapting to immediate climate impacts on rewilding areas (e.g., drought, extreme weather).	2 mentions	Long-term climate resilience, adapting rewilding strategies to future climate conditions.	5 mentions
Maintenance & Management	Managing growing areas of rewilding, balancing competing land uses, needing more resources.	4 mentions	Long-term maintenance costs for rewilding areas, including care for biodiversity and keeping areas wild.	8 mentions
Community Involvement	Difficulty involving local communities, especially with budget cuts.	3 mentions	Ensuring sustained community involvement, keeping long-term education and awareness of biodiversity goals.	4 mentions
Compliance & Enforcement	Ensuring agreements are upheld between landowners/municipalities for ongoing management.	2 mentions	Policing and enforcing long-term management agreements (e.g., 30-year commitments).	4 mentions
Biodiversity & Species Management	Managing species introduction and habitat management on an ongoing basis.	4 mentions	Ensuring species thrive long-term, addressing habitat shifts due to urban expansion.	6 mentions

In the medium term, the challenges primarily stem from the need for sustainable funding and staffing limitations. Local authorities may face difficulties securing sufficient financial resources for rewilding projects, with many funding sources being short-term or restricted in scope. As stated in Table 3, this lack of long-term funding commitments for maintenance can mean that initial rewilding efforts may not be sustainable over time, leading to challenges in keeping the areas properly managed.

Staffing resources are also stretched in the medium term, particularly during peak maintenance periods such as late summer when urban meadows require extensive care. The pressure on staff (highlighted in Table 3) is compounded by high turnover and insufficient personnel, making it difficult to maintain the momentum of rewilding efforts and to manage the growing demands of urban spaces.

Additionally, public perception is a significant barrier. The results suggest that there can be perceptions that rewilded areas are “untidy” or associated with budget cuts, leading to

resistance and a lack of community support. As shown in Table 3, overcoming these perceptions is essential for the success of rewilding projects, but it could require investment in public education and engagement, which can be limited by tight budgets.

The survey also indicated significant land use and development pressures, as urban growth and competing land priorities can limit available space for rewilding (Table 3). These challenges may make it difficult to designate and protect areas for biodiversity restoration in the face of increasing housing and infrastructure needs.

In the long term, the challenges identified in Table 3 become more pronounced and complex. Ongoing funding remains a critical concern, as the long-term sustainability of rewilding efforts requires continuous investment in maintenance and management. Without stable and predictable financial resources, the success of rewilding projects is uncertain, leading to the risk of neglect or degradation of these areas over time.

Staffing challenges, too, become more difficult to manage in the long term, with the potential for staff cuts and turnover putting long-term projects at risk. As indicated in Table 3, without a stable workforce dedicated to rewilding, the continuity and effectiveness of these projects may be compromised.

Public perception issues (Table 3), particularly around rewilded spaces being perceived as “untidy”, are likely to persist in the long term, making it even more critical to address misconceptions and engage with the community. Sustaining public support will be essential for the long-term success of rewilding, and this requires ongoing education and awareness campaigns.

Land use pressures will also continue to challenge long-term rewilding efforts, with urban development encroaching on rewilded spaces. As shown in Table 3, the competition between rewilding and urbanisation will intensify, especially as the demand for housing and

infrastructure grows. Additionally, climate change introduces an increasing level of uncertainty, as shifting environmental conditions may alter the effectiveness of rewilding strategies. The need for long-term climate resilience is a significant factor that local authorities will need to address to ensure that rewilding efforts remain viable in the face of environmental changes.

3.9.Reasons for Not Pursuing Rewilding Initiatives

Respondents identified a range of reasons why their local authorities were not pursuing rewilding initiatives, as summarised in Table S2. The most commonly cited barriers were conflicting priorities and limited funding or staffing capacity, each mentioned by two respondents. These constraints reflect broader challenges within local government, where rewilding must compete with other pressing demands, including housing, budgetary pressures, and internal organisational dynamics.

A smaller number of respondents highlighted issues such as a lack of clear guidance, insufficient expertise, and organisational restructuring, all of which were seen as contributing to delays or hesitancy in adopting rewilding approaches. One authority specifically noted that a recent restructure had shifted attention away from rewilding towards other immediate concerns.

Concerns regarding site suitability and the limited availability of land were also raised. In urban areas in particular, there may be few spaces that are sufficiently large or appropriate to support rewilding efforts without conflicting with other land-use objectives. Perceptions of rewilding were another consideration. While only one respondent explicitly mentioned issues with the term ‘rewilding’, suggesting it can be misleading or indistinct from routine habitat management, others noted potential public and political resistance. Aesthetic preferences for

neatly maintained green spaces and misunderstandings of wild landscapes were each mentioned as potential barriers to community and elected member support.

Finally, some authorities clarified that although they are engaging in ecological restoration or habitat enhancement, these actions may not meet all criteria for rewilding, depending on how the term is defined. This partial adoption or use of alternative approaches was cited by two authorities (Table S2).

3.10 Promising opportunities for urban rewilding

The results showed strong agreement that urban rewilding could improve green-space inclusivity and wellbeing in cities, with 39 of 40 respondents (97.5%) agreeing or strongly agreeing. The responses to the question on promising opportunities for urban rewilding in different local authority areas, highlight several key themes. Firstly, there is a strong emphasis on public engagement and education, with respondents advocating for initiatives such as volunteering programs “moving forward BNG (Biodiversity Net Gain) and Public engagement / Volunteering...” to foster community buy-in and a connection with nature “Creating wild spaces encourages better interaction with the natural world...”. Secondly, habitat creation and management emerge as priorities (5 responses), with strategies like habitat banks “Purchase and management of habitat banks...” and sustainable green space management “the management for biodiversity of its greenspaces...” aiming to enhance biodiversity. Thirdly, the data highlights the need to rethink green spaces and infrastructure, with suggestions for transitioning amenity lawns to wildflower meadows “amenity grass transitioning to a more diverse grassland...urban wildflower meadows...”.

Finally, for one local authority the upcoming Local Plan presents a crucial opportunity to integrate rewilding goals into urban development schemes, while clear communication and evidence-based engagement are identified as essential for overcoming potential aesthetic

concerns regarding traditionally manicured parks “Habitat connectivity and creating sustainable opportunities...”. “The Councils are at the start of writing a new joint Local Plan and there is an opportunity, if we have the evidence, to increase the amount of appropriate rewilding/ biodiversity to more urbanised schemes”. New Local Plans create a clear opportunity for urban rewilding policy to be embraced, with further potential for this to potentially interface with other newer areas of planning policy and regulations, such as BNG and Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS).

4. Discussion

4.1 *Semantic ambiguity and conceptual tensions*

Our findings confirm that the term rewilding remains contested within UK local authorities. Many respondents avoid using it due to perceived rural connotations and associations with human exclusion, preferring alternatives such as “nature recovery” or “wildflower enhancement.” This contrasts with London’s policy discourse, where “rewilding” has been formalised through initiatives such as the London Rewilding Taskforce (C40 Cities and ARUP 2023). These linguistic choices influence governance narratives and public acceptance, reinforcing the need for locally legible definitions that reflect urban realities.

However, ambiguity does not only function as a barrier; it can also act as an enabler. Similar to concepts such as sustainable development (Borne 2013), the flexibility of “rewilding” allows multiple interpretations that can activate policy instruments and encourage experimentation across scales. This adaptability makes the concept appealing to policymakers and practitioners, supporting innovation rather than restricting action. Rewilding discourse also includes political and advocacy dimensions, where its emotive appeal is used to mobilise public support and influence decision-making. Recognising these dynamics is essential for understanding how ambiguity can both hinder and promote implementation.

4.2 Scale and spatial constraints

The emphasis on scale illustrates a divergence between theoretical principles of rewilding and its urban application. While London promotes landscape-scale connectivity and, in some cases, species reintroduction, most respondents reported that their authorities implemented small-scale interventions such as roadside verges, pocket parks, and sustainable drainage systems (SuDS). These practices are incremental and opportunistic, constrained by land availability, funding, and aesthetic expectations. This contrast highlights the need for multi-scalar strategies suited to compact urban environments (Russo and Cirella 2018; Harrington and Russo 2024).

4.3 Is rewilding taking root in UK local authorities?

Within the respondent group, 41 of 47 respondents (87.2%) reported that their local authorities were undertaking initiatives described as, or associated with, rewilding, including where the term itself was not explicitly used. Earlier data (Yeo 2022) similarly found that 43 authorities across England, Wales, and Scotland were implementing or planning rewilding work. Reported interventions include reduced mowing, wildflower planting, tree planting, and SuDS integration, often linked to Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) schemes. Examples cited by participants include Tolworth Court Farm (Royal Borough of Kingston, London) and Gloucester Nature Park in south-west England. These projects tend to be smaller-scale and embedded within conventional management regimes, reflecting a pragmatic approach rather than full ecological autonomy. Some authorities not explicitly adopting “rewilding” nonetheless reported actions that overlap with rewilding principles, such as grassland management for biodiversity and habitat connectivity measures. These patterns suggest that urban rewilding is operationalised incrementally, shaped by policy instruments and local constraints.

4.4 Human–nature relational framings

The observed practices align with Glentworth et al.'s (2024) three framings of human–nature relationships. Elements of the human–nature dichotomy persist in proposals for quiet cores or restricted-access zones, while compromise is evident in strategies that negotiate coexistence through cues-to-care and seasonal maintenance. Mutualism emerges where rewilding is explicitly linked to wellbeing, climate resilience, and community engagement. Beyond these relational framings, participants' references to natural processes, reduced intervention, biodiversity recovery and the accommodation of human use indicate a more dynamic relationship between ecological processes and urban management. We tentatively describe this practical orientation as negotiated coexistence, whereby greater autonomy is afforded to natural processes within parameters established by public access, safety, maintenance requirements and other urban functions. Negotiated coexistence can therefore be interpreted as an urban expression of the compromise and mutualism framings identified by Glentworth et al. (2024), rather than as a distinct theoretical category. This interpretation is also compatible with broader perspectives that recognise the intrinsic, instrumental and relational values of nature and consider how these values may inform future urban-nature relationships (IPBES, 2022; Mansur et al., 2022; Durán et al., 2023).

4.5 Implications for governance and planning

These findings highlight the need for governance frameworks that accommodate semantic ambiguity, spatial constraints, and relational values. Finally, policy and legislative uncertainties were identified by survey respondents as barriers to long-term rewilding strategies. As highlighted in Table 3, participants noted the lack of clear, supportive legislation for biodiversity restoration and the slow pace of government action as impediments to sustained rewilding efforts. These findings suggest a need for a more cohesive and long-term policy framework to support future initiatives. Embedding process-led objectives in planning policy, leveraging BNG and LNRS for financing, and adopting design codes tailored to urban

contexts are critical steps. Equally important is public engagement through participatory mechanisms such as citizen science, which can foster ownership and strengthen relational values, consistent with the IPBES (2022) emphasis on diverse values of nature.

4.6 Implications for practice and future research

The findings indicate that urban rewilding is receiving increasing attention in the United Kingdom, while its implementation continues to present significant challenges. A recurring barrier identified by local authority professionals is public perception, as wilder urban spaces are frequently interpreted as neglected rather than intentionally managed. This finding is consistent with studies that report preferences for formal green spaces over areas dominated by spontaneous vegetation (de la Fuente de Val 2023), although other research indicates that moderate forms of rewilding can be perceived favourably and may, in certain configurations, be preferred (Masood and Russo 2023). Evidence also suggests that perceived wildness can enhance wellbeing through nature connectedness (Samus et al. 2022). Taken together, these insights underline the importance of targeted communication strategies and participatory approaches that make the ecological rationale for wilder landscapes explicit, socially legible, and locally acceptable. Engaging with environmental aesthetics helps frame wildness as an intentional and valued quality rather than neglect, supporting strategies that reconcile ecological goals with socially legible design cues (Prior and Brady 2017).

The conceptual tensions revealed in the focus group and survey—especially concerns about human exclusion, ambiguity surrounding terminology, and assumptions about spatial scale—reflect the influence of rural-centric models on current understandings of rewilding. In light of Glentworth et al.'s (2024) identification of three dominant framings of human–nature relations (dichotomy, compromise, and mutualism), our findings point to an urban-specific interpretation that can be described as negotiated coexistence. This interpretation is

characterised by partial, pragmatic, and context-sensitive interventions that seek to enhance nature's autonomy while accommodating human presence, safety, and urban functionality. Recognising and articulating this interpretation creates opportunities to broaden the policy relevance and social acceptability of urban rewilding, and to reposition it as a process-led, people-centred approach to urban land management.

Given the exploratory nature of this study, the following implications are presented as context-sensitive considerations arising from the reported barriers and opportunities and interpreted alongside the relevant literature, rather than as universally applicable prescriptions. Local authorities seeking to support urban rewilding could consider incorporating process-led objectives into statutory planning instruments, including Local Plans and Supplementary Planning Documents. Rather than focusing exclusively on species targets, such policies could provide appropriate scope for natural succession, structural complexity and disturbance regimes, supported by explicit maintenance calendars and risk-management measures that communicate intentional management and reduce perceptions of neglect (Nassauer 1988; Harrington and Russo 2024). In addition, the identification of public perception as a recurring barrier among respondents (see Section 3.9) highlights the importance of communication and community-engagement strategies, particularly during transitional phases when aesthetic ambiguity and perceptions of neglect may be most pronounced (Prior and Brady 2017).

Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) and Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) may also provide mechanisms for financing and locating process-led interventions within fragmented urban landscapes, including roadside verges, riparian corridors and sustainable drainage systems. Where locally appropriate, these areas could combine lower-intervention management with visible indications of intentional care, including edged paths, mown desire lines and interpretive signage explaining seasonal changes and ecological function (Nassauer 1988, 1995; Li and Nassauer 2020; Russo 2024a). This approach directly addresses concerns about

‘untidy’ spaces by combining ecological objectives with visible care signals and participatory engagement (Li and Nassauer 2020).

Context-sensitive design guidance may assist the implementation of urban rewilding across multiple spatial scales, from pocket parks to district corridors, to ensure that rewilding is feasible within compact urban environments (Russo and Cirella, 2018). Such guidance could include specifications for seasonal mowing regimes, rotational scrub management, and safe interfaces between wilder areas and public access routes, directly addressing concerns about liability and health and safety voiced by practitioners (Harrington and Russo, 2024). In addition, authorities should adopt long timeframes for rewilding strategies, ideally 100 years, paired with adaptive five-year reviews to reconcile ecological temporalities with local political cycles (Harrington and Russo, 2024; Carver et al., 2021).

Funding remains a critical barrier to implementation. While urban rewilding often prioritises minimal intervention, our results indicate that it nonetheless requires sustained activities such as monitoring, episodic maintenance, and communication. In the context of continued constraints on government funding (Mell 2018), alternative financing arrangements could combine developer contributions, including Section 106 agreements and the Community Infrastructure Levy, with public–private partnerships and targeted grants to support long-term stewardship and adaptive management (Mell, 2018; Harrington and Russo, 2024). Given the emphasis in practice on doing less but doing it differently, future research should examine the financial trajectories of process-led regimes, including comparative analyses of maintenance demands and cost stability relative to conventional manicured approaches (Mell 2018). Geospatial approaches can assist in identifying opportunity spaces for urban rewilding and estimating potential long-term savings, particularly where connectivity benefits are achievable across fragmented assets (McKinney et al. 2018; Jin et al. 2024).

Beyond financial and institutional constraints, respondents' references to wellbeing, public involvement and connections with nature indicate that relational values may influence the social acceptance and long-term stewardship of urban rewilding. The diverse-values framework developed by IPBES (2022) provides a relevant perspective for interpreting these dimensions, including care, connectedness and place attachment. Public engagement strategies could therefore move beyond information provision to improved governance systems that include participatory mechanisms, such as citizen science and volunteering, which foster ownership and strengthen nature connectedness (Samus et al., 2022; McKinney et al., 2018). Monitoring frameworks should integrate ecological and social indicators, including perceived wildness and place attachment, alongside conventional biodiversity metrics, with annual dashboards and periodic reviews used to support transparency and adaptive learning (Pettorelli et al., 2018; Harrington and Russo, 2024).

These recommendations are closely aligned with the relational framings set out by Glentworth et al. (2024). Elements of the human–nature dichotomy persist in proposals for quiet cores or restricted-access zones where natural processes can predominate. Human–nature compromise is reflected in strategies that negotiate coexistence through cues-to-care, shared-use interfaces, and seasonal maintenance to sustain public acceptance. Human–nature mutualism emerges where rewilding is explicitly linked to wellbeing, cooling, flood attenuation, and place identity, and where citizen participation is embedded in monitoring and stewardship. The proposed interpretation of negotiated coexistence draws these practical dimensions together by emphasising governance instruments, design guidance, adaptive management and value cultivation as possible means of enhancing nature's autonomy within human-dominated settings (Glentworth et al., 2024; Harrington and Russo, 2024).

Finally, this study highlights ongoing debates concerning terminology. Several respondents expressed concern that “true” rewilding implies the exclusion of human needs and is therefore

more appropriate to rural contexts. In urban environments, where ecological restoration commonly involves managed interventions and coexistence, alternative framings such as renaturing, wildness, and naturalness have been proposed (Kowarik 2013; Threlfall and Kendal 2018; Sarabi et al. 2023; Russo 2024b). While these terms may provide more context-sensitive language for urban practice, they raise questions about whether the emphasis on autonomous nature, central to many conceptualisations of rewilding, might be diluted. Although the present findings reflect the UK local-government context, urban rewilding may raise different implementation questions across climatic, ecological and institutional settings. Further comparative research should examine whether urban rewilding alters wildland–urban interfaces and associated risks, including wildfire exposure and zoonotic-disease transmission, across different spatial and climatic contexts (Schug et al., 2023).

Beyond immediate practice, several areas warrant further research to strengthen the evidence base for urban rewilding:

1. **Economic Analysis:** Comparative studies on cost savings and maintenance demands of process-led regimes versus conventional manicured approaches.
2. **Public Preferences:** Investigating aesthetic perceptions and social acceptance of wilder urban spaces across different demographic and cultural contexts.
3. **Governance Frameworks:** Examining policy instruments and institutional arrangements required for long-term rewilding strategies, including integration with BNG and LNRS.
4. **Ecological and Social Monitoring:** Developing frameworks that combine biodiversity metrics with social indicators such as perceived wildness, place attachment, and wellbeing.

5. **Financing Models:** Exploring alternative funding mechanisms, including public–private partnerships, developer contributions, and dedicated rewilding funds to support adaptive management.
6. **Risk and resilience:** Investigating whether, and under what conditions, urban rewilding alters wildland–urban interfaces and associated risks across different climatic and urban contexts.

4.7 Study limitations

Our study aimed to capture the perspectives of professionals working within various departments of UK local authorities; however, several limitations should be acknowledged. The recruitment process presented significant challenges that affected both the response rate and the diversity of professional backgrounds represented. Our initial approach relied on Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to distribute the survey across all local authorities. In many cases, the survey was not forwarded to the relevant departments, which delayed our reach and reduced the likelihood of receiving responses from a wide range of professional roles.

To address this, we subsequently contacted specific departments, such as urban planning, green infrastructure, and green space management, directly. While this improved the targeting of potential respondents, it also introduced a disciplinary bias, as the survey was more likely to be completed by staff working in ecology, conservation, landscape architecture, and related fields. Moreover, several authorities declined participation due to institutional security restrictions surrounding online survey platforms. Some reported that completing the survey via a weblink was not permitted under their IT security policies, further reducing opportunities for participation from a broader set of departments.

These challenges are not unique to our study. Similar barriers have been reported in international research, such as Esperon-Rodriguez et al. (2025), who encountered institutional,

legal, and technical obstacles when surveying 109 cities globally on urban forest irrigation. These included difficulties in reaching the appropriate personnel, internal approval delays, and IT systems blocking access to survey platforms (Esperon-Rodriguez et al. 2025). Our experience reflects these broader issues, which are common when conducting research with local government bodies. The final sample comprised 47 responses (46 fully completed) and was dominated by professionals with conservation, ecology, or landscape architecture backgrounds. This skewed representation limits the generalisability of the findings to the broader local authority workforce, particularly to departments such as planning, transport, housing, or public health, whose perspectives may differ. Although the sample size aligns with similar studies, such as Yeo (2022), who surveyed 43 local authority staff on rewilding implementation, the bias in professional composition means that the results should be interpreted with caution when considering their applicability across all UK local authority functions. Importantly, the low response rate means that motivations and obstacles cannot be ranked or weighted in terms of relative importance. While these factors were categorised thematically, their prominence should not be interpreted as reflecting their prevalence across the wider local authority population. Similarly, comparisons between urban, peri-urban, and rural contexts were exploratory and cannot be considered definitive. The findings should therefore be understood as indicative rather than representative, with the proposed conceptualisation of negotiated coexistence and its implications for practice regarded as provisional. Further research using larger, more balanced, and professionally diverse samples is needed to test these findings and examine contextual differences more systematically.

5. Conclusions

This study explored the opportunities and challenges associated with urban rewilding through a focus group and an online survey distributed nationally to professionals working in UK local authorities. Respondents associated urban rewilding with opportunities for ecological

restoration and biodiversity recovery while identifying barriers related to resources, organisational capacity, knowledge, public access and compatibility with human use. These barriers broadly correspond with those identified by Harrington and Russo (2024) in their study of a local authority in Hampshire. The findings also indicate that contested terminology and contrasting expectations of urban landscape aesthetics may complicate the interpretation and implementation of urban rewilding (Koh, 1988).

The study extends existing single-authority research by examining perspectives obtained from professionals located across different parts of the UK. Its sequential mixed-methods design enabled the preliminary themes identified through the focus group to inform the subsequent survey, providing exploratory insights into how urban rewilding is interpreted and reported within different local-authority contexts.

Conceptually, the findings suggest that urban rewilding can be understood as a form of negotiated coexistence, whereby a greater degree of autonomy is afforded to ecological processes within parameters shaped by public access, safety, maintenance requirements and other urban functions. Negotiated coexistence should not be regarded as a distinct theoretical category but as a context-dependent manifestation of the human–nature compromise and mutualism framings identified by Glentworth et al. (2024). Urban rewilding is consequently likely to remain contingent and pragmatic, requiring the continued negotiation of ecological processes alongside the diverse functions and expectations associated with urban landscapes. The findings identify context-sensitive implications for policy and practice, including clearer terminology, process-led planning objectives, long-term stewardship arrangements and communication strategies that make the ecological purpose of wilder landscapes publicly legible. The relevance and effectiveness of these considerations will depend on local environmental, social and institutional conditions.

Ultimately, urban rewilding may provide opportunities to enhance the autonomy of nature within cities while acknowledging the constraints associated with human use and urban management. In contrast to conventional parks characterised by intensive management, rewilded landscapes may support more self-organising ecological processes through reduced intervention and natural regeneration. Within the negotiated conditions of urban environments, such landscapes may contribute to the development of more liveable, resilient and biodiverse cities (McKinney et al. 2018).

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work, the authors used Microsoft Copilot to review grammar and maintain consistency with British English. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Supplementary material – Survey and Tables

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Highlights

- Respondents linked urban rewilding to inclusivity and wellbeing.
- Public education was identified as important for implementation.
- Biodiversity loss and climate change were frequently reported motivations.
- Clear definitions and context-sensitive guidance were considered necessary.
- Urban rewilding was viewed as more people-centred than traditional rewilding.