



Nature recovery and regional development: A summary report for Britain's Leading Edge

Preliminary findings and early impressions from the NaRReD team after 12 months of research

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NaRReD
Nature Recovery and Regional Development



Introduction

The University of Exeter's Nature Recovery and Regional Development (NaRReD) research project is an ESRC-funded three-year investigation to explore the socio-economic impacts of nature recovery in rural peripheral regions of England. In collaboration with Britain's Leading Edge (BLE) – a network of 12 upper-tier rural local authorities – the project seeks to examine the development and implications of Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS). The research aims to inform both national and regional policy and practice, while drawing attention to the importance of the rural periphery for nationwide nature recovery and the associated benefits for local social and economic development. Now, one year in, the research team is pleased to report on the progress made so far, share preliminary findings and early impressions, and outline the next steps of the project.

The research so far

In our first year we have focussed our attention on the local authorities in BLE, exploring how nature recovery activities are related to social and economic development. We have:

- **Conducted over 40 in-depth semi-structured interviews with more than 50 participants.** These include local authority officers who are directly or indirectly involved with the development of the LNRS or have a stake in related aspects of the research, such as economic development. We have also spoken with National Landscape officers and representatives from Local Nature Partnerships to get a feel for the strength of collaborations and emerging ambitions for nature recovery.
- **Collected secondary statistical data for the BLE** across three domains: 1) Demographics; 2) Industry and economy; and 3) Land use and agriculture (to be shared in a separate report).
- **Reviewed background literature** including ecological restoration, civic environmentalism, regional economic development and the green transition, ecological economics and natural capital accounting, green skills and business development.
- **Shared initial thoughts and emerging findings at conferences** in the UK, Italy and Germany, as well as **written a conceptual paper** currently under review with the journal *Regional Studies*.
- **Transcribed the interviews and started to code and analyse the data.** We briefly report on our early impressions and preliminary findings below.

Preliminary findings and early impressions: local authorities

We have a significant body of data from interviewing officers from the 12 BLE authorities, and are now in the position to begin to distil some key themes, illustrated with examples related to LNRS development and the intersection of nature recovery and the economy.

1. Variation in the degree to which nature recovery is integrated with economic development activity in council structures and strategy

It appears that council structure influences the ease with which nature recovery can be integrated with economic development policy and practice. For example, in Rutland, an interviewee described how recent restructuring in the council brought a sustainable economy manager into the investment and visitor economy directorate and highlighted the intention to integrate Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) with the council's economic strategy. We also found that in Cornwall, the proximity of the economic and nature recovery teams was viewed as being highly beneficial for policy development. Having closely aligned teams delivering the LNRS and economic development can thus encourage a unified approach to policy, which helps to prioritise nature recovery in higher level council strategy.

2. Finding multiple benefits from nature recovery activity

Nature recovery intersects with other sectors to provide multiple benefits. An interviewee from Cornwall highlighted that a new payment available through the Sustainable Farming Incentive supports farmers to host school visits, providing overlapping benefits for nature recovery, farmers and schools. Hospitality and eco-tourism opportunities were also present in our data as sectors that will increasingly be tied to nature recovery across farmland. As an interviewee from Cumberland suggested, however, sometimes people from these sectors need to be actively brought together to talk: "That's where the magic happens. That's where you get innovation, you get new ideas". This suggests the crucial role local authorities can play in highlighting opportunities for, and fostering connections among, stakeholders from diverse sectors to support nature recovery and regional development.

3. Communication and engagement

Our findings indicate that communication with local stakeholders, particularly landowners and farmers, is critical for successful nature recovery planning and outcomes in every location. As an officer in Shropshire said, "we really need the engagement of those who own and manage the land, otherwise we can't really achieve anything". However, our data demonstrate that local authority officers use the term 'nature recovery' sparingly with these groups. For example, an interviewee in one BLE region said, "I wouldn't necessarily use the phrase nature recovery, because it alienates some stakeholders". For an interviewee from Cornwall, their approach was to not "necessarily get into the weeds with somebody about [the meaning of] nature recovery" but rather to talk in positive terms about the work of the nature recovery team and to highlight to people what the council offers, including opportunities for tree planting.

4. Collaboration and partnerships

Councils are collaborating with a wide range of partners to develop their LNRS and associated activities. These include **expected partners** such as Wildlife Trusts, the National Trust, Natural England and the Environment Agency. Local Nature Partnerships are also playing a key role. However, our data further indicate the involvement of **less obvious partners** in nature recovery as well. Cornwall Council, for example, includes their site management contractors, Cormac, on the nature recovery working group. An interviewee from East Riding of Yorkshire indicated their desire to set up a corporate working group – a 'farmland interest group' – that will have the potential to cut across other areas including nature recovery and the farming community.

5. Linking policy to delivery in planning

Officers who have been working on their LNRS have often reported concerns about the practicalities and possibilities for delivery. This included how the policy will be integrated with existing council practice, such as planning. An interviewee from Cornwall suggested that this becomes more complex around urban edges where allocation for development sites is more likely. However, by introducing a call for sites for nature recovery as part of their wider call for sites for the local plan, officers are exploring ways to integrate nature recovery allocation with the local plan-making process. An interviewee from the Isle of Wight was clear about the need for the LNRS to link with planning applications, telling us that, ideally, there would be "an expectation from the ecology team that when an application comes through, or actually [in] pre-app stage, the relationship between the application, the site selection, and the due diligence work to the LNRS is absolutely clear".

6. Skills and training

Interviewees across BLE authorities have indicated that there is a notable shortage of skills and provision needed for nature recovery across rural regions, both within local authorities, and externally in the wider economy.

In relation to internal staff, an interviewee from East Riding reported that technical roles directly associated with LNRS development were difficult to fill, with the positions being vacant for two years despite several rounds of recruitment. Similarly, an interviewee from Shropshire described how the time taken to recruit key staff had delayed the LNRS process. An interviewee from Cornwall Council reported a shortage of applicants when recruiting for an ecological economist role, and ecologists are seen as particularly difficult to recruit and retain.

In relation to the local economy, authorities including East Riding and Isle of Wight have employed consultants to develop their LNRS; authorities including Dorset have also contracted consultants around BNG and land use. Further, there is uncertainty about the future availability of on-the-ground skills. In relation to maintaining the trees that are going in the ground now as part of major planting projects, an interviewee from Cornwall said they are conscious of the question: “Where are the contractors who will manage these trees in 10 [or] 15 years’ time?”

7. BNG as an opportunity and challenge in delivering LNRS

Special purpose vehicles (SPV) – legally and financially separate entities set up to isolate financial risk – are being considered as a means for delivering BNG by some BLE authorities. Interviewees from Dorset, Cumberland, and Westmorland and Furness reported that they are looking to set up or are already working towards setting up an SPV for nature, including a habitat bank for BNG. An interviewee from Cumberland highlighted the challenge of structuring such a vehicle to effectively enter both existing and emerging markets: so that it is compliant with current statutory codes as well as future ones. According to an interviewee from Cornwall, there is a case for an SPV for the region, but before that could happen “you have to have a really robust idea of where your money is coming from, and you can't rely on the council to float it”. Another Cornwall participant echoed the need to get the legal structures around the SPV “right”. **There was, however, concern about whether BNG will contribute to LNRS delivery if developers opt for onsite as opposed to offsite BNG.** Yet in Shropshire, according to one interviewee, developers were being encouraged to deliver BNG onsite, and the provision for offsite BNG was very small, so “there isn't going to be this sudden floodgate of funded land creation happening through BNG” in the region.

Next steps

As the NaRReD project enters its second year, we will be:

- Seeking **interviews with national policy makers**.
- Visiting local projects and attending events.
- Carrying out in-depth **case study work** to explore the range of ways in which nature recovery is supporting regional economic development across the BLE.
- Engaging with the academic community through **participation in conferences**.
- **Drafting papers** that can be submitted to **academic publications**.
- **Continuing to engage** with the BLE and LA officers, councillors and collaborators.
- Engaging in national policy debates and developments.
- **Exploring models of best practice** in nature recovery that generate positive and sustainable regional development.

We would like to thank everyone who has participated in the research so far and look forward to the next stages of the project and reporting on further findings.

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