



association for public service excellence

Rewilding for the future

Insights and best practice from local councils



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Rewilding for the future: Insights and best practice from local councils

This report was researched and written by Wayne Priestley, APSE Associate, with support from Matt Ellis, APSE Principal Advisor for Parks

For any enquires in relation to the report, Matt may be contacted on:

Tel: 0161 772 1810

Email: mellis@apse.org.uk

Introduction

Many people will have heard the term 'rewilding'. Equally, many people will have different understandings as to what it means. In its purist sense, rewilding means the restoration of an area of land to its natural state prior to cultivation or the influences of human activity. Rewilding also infers that the species which inhabited these areas before humans drove them out or hunted them to extinction, will also be restored through reintroduction programmes – one of the most well-known examples being the re-introduction of beavers to the British Isles. Therefore, the ultimate goal of rewilding is to mitigate the species extinction crisis and restore healthy and sustainable ecosystem function in areas that require little or no human intervention or management.

However, because of the different understandings of the term 'rewilding', scientists are increasingly describing the term along a spectrum. This spectrum ranges from people making changes that will benefit nature at one end, to large-scale functioning ecosystems where wild nature exists with little or no human intervention, at the other end.

The Commission on Ecosystem Management (CEM) is one of the six scientific commissions within the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and provides a thorough definition of rewilding [here](#).

The idea of rewilding has been something of a thunderbolt in the world of nature conservation. Indeed, the very word 'conservation' suggests we work to keep what we have, rather than looking at improving the situation. This idea of looking at the present state of nature as the norm suggests we have accepted the current state as the baseline which we need to protect, even though that state may be depleted.

Some argue that while conservation is often backward-looking, rewilding focuses on what the future might hold. Given the significant physical and chemical changes we've made to the environment, returning to the ecosystems of the past may no longer be possible. However, by supporting rewilding, we can help foster the development of new, future-oriented environments. If left alone, nature will ultimately determine what these new ecosystems will become.

The emergence of rewilding

In the 1990's, ideas about how we 'look after nature' began to change. Rather than protecting the pockets of nature we had left, the view developed that we should open the door to creating landscape sized wildernesses with the introduction of both prey and predators to reestablish natural ecosystems. A key element of this was that these areas would link to existing wild areas to allow the free movement of animals and plants. These wild areas would develop without the need for human intervention or management and develop their own natural balances and ecosystems over time rather than the highly managed nature reserves being created at the time.

At this point concerns start to be raised about how society would cope with wild animals roaming through towns and cities if they broke out of these areas. Though this theory was overblown, others were hopeful we would see an increase in human interaction with smaller species such as birds, small mammals and plants and insects. This may seem somewhat trite, as some would argue we already have these experiences. But do we? Ask yourself, when was the last time you cleaned your car windscreen because of the number of insects stuck to it?

The car windscreen example is used as insect populations are in dramatic decline and general biodiversity levels are plummeting worldwide. It is argued that there is a real danger that we are facing an 'extinction of experience' where public indifference to the decline in nature could make it harder to address larger environmental issues such as climate change. Consider how much time we now spend indoors, whether it be in our homes, our workplaces or even in our cars travelling between the two. Our contact with nature is declining generation by generation and it is only likely to increase as urbanisation takes hold. Currently, almost 85% of the UK's population lives in urban areas.

Therefore, if nature stands a chance, we need to look at how we can play a part in the idea of re-establishing the natural ecosystems which our 'civilised' lifestyles have damaged or destroyed. No matter how small our contribution is, there is no reason not to try to redress the imbalance.

The American ecologist and author Robert Pyle wrote, 'What is the extinction of the condor to a child who's never known a wren.' This sentence sums up the dilemma: what hope is there if we can't see the crisis on our own doorstep where more than 1 in 10 species in the UK are now under the threat of extinction and the UK is in the bottom 10% of the world's countries as regards levels of biodiversity. Furthermore, half of the UK's ancient woodlands have disappeared in the last 80 years and 97% of our lowland meadows have gone, along with all the plant and animal communities which depended upon them.

Over the last 50 years, the world's mammals, birds, reptiles and fish have declined by 60%. Indeed, of all the world's mammal biomass, only 4% is made up of wild mammals, the remaining 96% is made up of humans and their domesticated animals such as cows, sheep, pigs and pets.

Nature-deficit communities and the rise of biophilia

Because we live in cities and other urban areas, we rarely see evidence of biodiversity loss and therefore feel little when we hear about another extinction. This concern is fuelled by facts such as fewer than one in ten children now play in wild spaces, because such spaces around homes have shrunk by nearly 90% since the 1970's. Therefore: no connection, no concern.

Our schools often have little time for nature, being driven by academic results and in many cases, parents don't have the time or ability to help children reconnect with nature, allowing instead laptops and 'zombie scrolling' to fill the gap of outside play.

Evidence is showing that because human beings, especially children, are spending less time outdoors than they have in the past, there is the growing view that this change is resulting in a wide range of behavioural problems such as anxiety, behavioural issues, declining health and well-being, depression, increased levels of stress, obesity, the potential for poor academic performance and difficulty in maintaining focus on day-to-day tasks and activities.

Some councils too are struggling to provide access to quality greenspaces and informal green areas due to pressures on land to meet housing targets, land for economic development and shrinking greenspace budgets.

However, on a more positive note, it is noticeable if one of our local greenspaces does come under threat, opposition is swiftly mobilised. Often by people who may not regularly use the space but recognise its worth. Such spaces, from a biodiversity point of view may have little value. But the recognition that nature matters is the important point, a starting point from which to work on. This need to have a connection with nature is sometimes termed 'biophilia', which literally translates to "love of life," and is the idea that this fascination and communion with nature stem from an innate, biologically driven need to interact with other forms of life such as animals and plants. The fact that people across the world can appreciate nature in all its forms suggests that the need for nature is a natural human condition. Indeed, biophilic principles have been incorporated into our everyday lives in the form of green walls, planting schemes in offices, the use of natural materials, outdoor spaces, large windows allowing in natural light etc.

With the growing inclusion of urban greening, sustainable design and green architecture, more and more our buildings, infrastructure and the cities and towns we live and work in could be built around the principles of biophilia. This idea is not simply theoretical; indeed, Birmingham City Council has stated that it will become a green and sustainable city and is focussing very much on its future development being based around the promotion of nature and improving public health.

Biophilic Cities is an organisation that partners with a network of cities, scholars, and advocates from across the globe to build an understanding of the value and contribution of nature in cities to the lives of urban residents. Their report on Birmingham can be accessed [here](https://www.biophiliccities.org/birmingham-uk).¹

¹ <https://www.biophiliccities.org/birmingham-uk>



The Barbican Centre, London – biophilic design in practice

But it is important to note that this type of experience with nature is a highly manicured version of nature, and when we step outside of this, we may find that the truly wild side of nature may be difficult to comprehend or accept. This difficulty in dealing with the unkempt version of nature may be reflected in the minor but important element in the growing practice of wildflower planting in urban areas, where the untidy state of wildflower beds pre and post flowering often leads to complaints from residents that the area is not being cared for or abandoned.

Adopting a more positive note, there are signs that we are starting to grasp the importance of nature to our everyday lives and indeed future existence. This is one of the reasons why rewilding is such an important concept.

However, before we travel further on the road to 'rewilding' we need to make it clear, rewilding is not about removing humans from the landscape. It is more about reconnecting us with the natural world, its ecosystems and natural cycles. It is totally unrealistic to expect modern society to give up its way of life, but what can be considered is how we balance this lifestyle by making it more environmentally sustainable and in doing so giving a higher value to the natural world by living in a way that is not destructive and more accommodating towards the natural world around us.

The sooner we realise we are not apart from nature, but a part of nature, then the sooner we can start making the decisions required.

Rewilding amongst local authorities – what is out there?

In late 2024, APSE carried out a wide-ranging survey amongst its members as to the types of ‘rewilding’ works they were carrying out. It should be remembered that local authorities, under the requirements of the Environment Act 2021, have a duty to consider what actions can be taken for the protection and enhancement of biodiversity within their boundaries and to increase by 10% the levels of biodiversity as part of any future developments. With this fact in mind, it was felt the survey would help local authorities gauge the level of works they were involved in but also understand what others were doing and whether this was relevant/helpful to their work. The survey asked a series of questions around:

- Levels of understanding of what rewilding was.
- Identifying a good example of rewilding.
- Whether they or a partner organisation had undertaken any rewilding work.
- The inspiration for the work.
- How the work was being funded.
- Levels of consultation prior to the work being carried out.
- How they would measure success and whether there had been any targets agreed.
- How was the work was being managed.

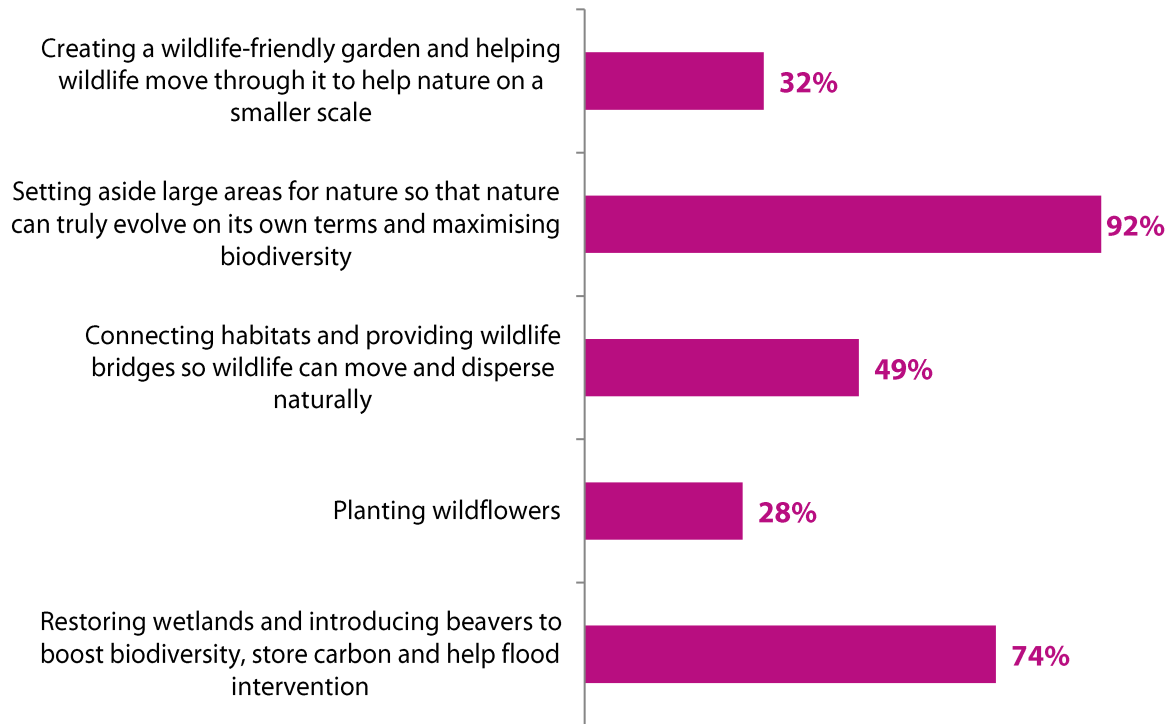


“What level of understanding would you say you have on rewilding?”

From the results it was found that almost two-thirds of respondents felt that they had a good understanding about rewilding. From the examples of rewilding given in 1.1, this was largely borne out.

The examples can be seen in the graph overleaf.

1.1 Which of the following would you say is a real example of rewilding? (You can tick more than one option)



62%

“Have undertaken rewilding projects”

“Has your local authority or any of its partners (e.g. wildlife trusts), undertaken any rewilding projects?”

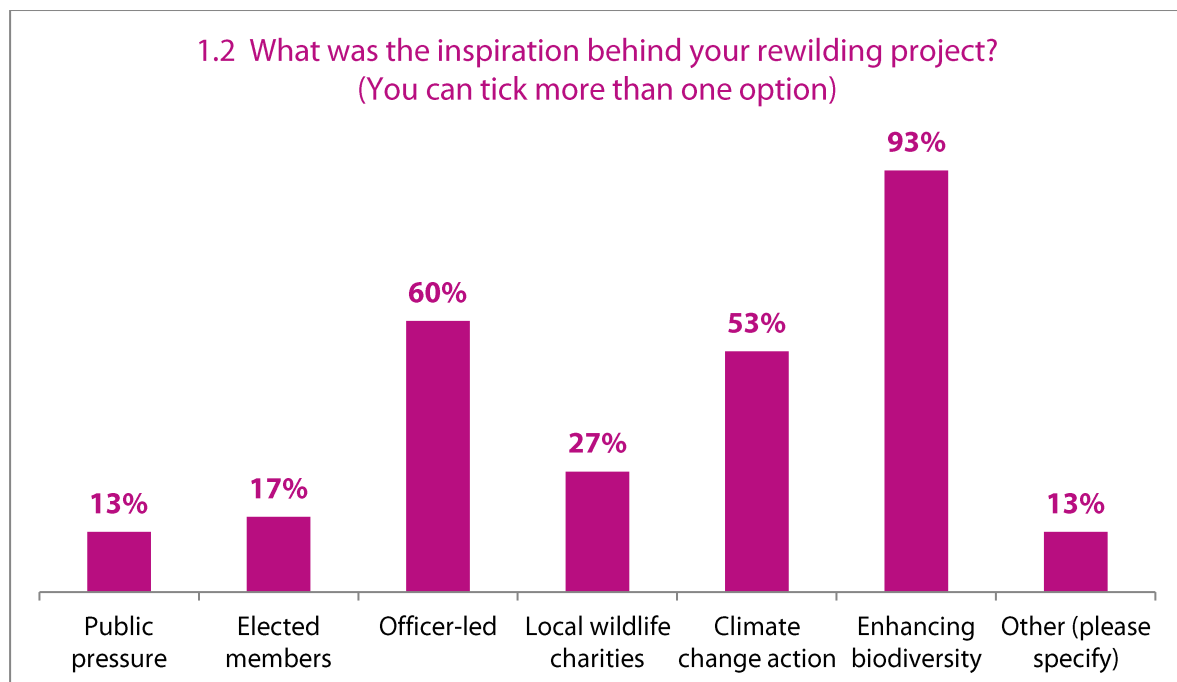
Building on this good understanding, 62% responded that they or partners had undertaken some form of rewilding.

The examples included:

- Beaver and willow tit/warbler reintroduction.
- Redesigning grassland management operations to create species rich grasslands and associated wildflower areas.
- Hedgerow planting and protection of tree copses and planting of native tree species
- Restoration and enhancement of existing woodlands.
- Creation of pollinator gardens to act as green infrastructure links to other greenspace areas.
- Developing nectar networks.

- Reviewing parks and greenspace areas to promote opportunities for greater biodiversity levels.
- Creating scrapes in wet areas to improve opportunities for invertebrates, frogs and other amphibians.
- Peatland and wetland restoration.
- Building natural flood management defence systems.
- Dune restoration.
- Ensuring nutrient neutrality in river courses as part of new developments and sustainable alternative natural greenspaces (SANG's) to relieve pressure on sensitive greenspace areas.

In many cases this work was entered into with the help of partners such as wildlife trusts and national charities such as RSPB. What is clearly seen is that there is a great deal of variety of rewilding at varying scales, from species introduction and landscape restoration, to changes in operational practices, such as the move from amenity grasslands to species rich grasslands and wildflower meadows/planting. It is heartening to see that many of the projects are not undertaken in isolation but are looking at ways to create wildlife bridges to other greenspaces, thereby ensuring plants and animals can move around to ensure breeding and habitat opportunities are maximised.

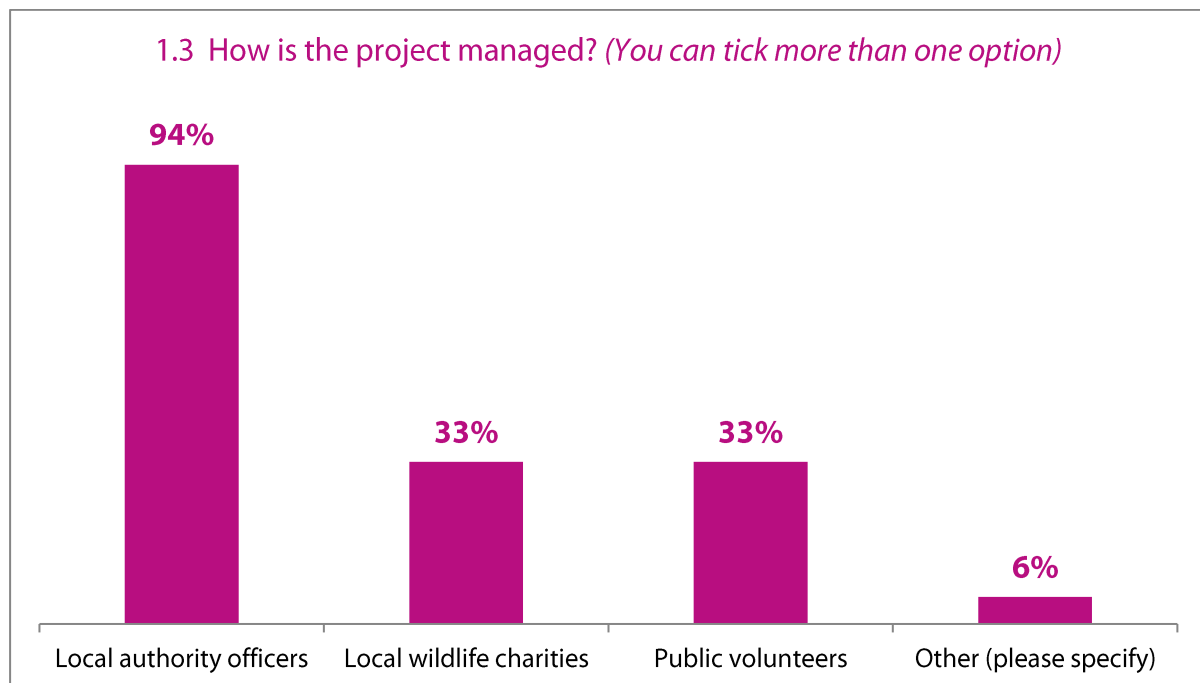


When asked about the inspiration for these schemes, as would be expected, many were driven internally. But noticeably public pressure and wildlife trust/charity partnerships were also regularly quoted. Unsurprisingly, most schemes featured climate change and biodiversity enhancement as key focus areas.

The issue of funding showed many schemes were internally funded depending on the scale of the work, using such sources as Section 106 monies and flooding levies. However, charities such as Bug Life were quoted as were Countryside Stewardship monies. In Scotland, mention was made of

the Nature Restoration Fund which was a capital fund designed to help support projects that would deliver nature restoration, safeguard wildlife, and tackle the causes of biodiversity loss caused by climate change. The fund has distributed over £55 million on such projects since 2021. The use of communication and consultation before beginning new schemes was reported as being paramount to success, with most respondents stating they had undertaken such exercises targeting local residents, affected landowners and elected members.

Monitoring the success of schemes was also noted as being critical to ensuring the aims were being met, and that funding was being well spent. Various methods were reported as being used, such as measuring targets set in Local Biodiversity Action Plans, use of volunteers to inspect, use of local experts in Wildlife Trusts, regular photographic recording, the number of hectares set aside for rewilding including trees planted and new woodlands established, and finally, and importantly, public perception as to the success of the work intended and the benefits reported.



With regards to how projects were managed, local authorities had by far the largest responsibility (94%), although local wildlife charities and local volunteers were clearly involved in joint or supporting roles.

The results of the survey have shown that there is a great deal of excellent and exciting work being delivered across the UK in terms of 'rewilding' projects. Undoubtedly local authorities are heavily involved in many of them but as is often the case, limited funding and resources means they are also reliant on the support of external organisations, particularly wildlife charities, in areas such as sharing management, providing expert advice and in some cases providing much needed funding. Considering the responses to the survey, it is perhaps helpful to look at some other UK case studies to see how the work being carried out is helping to improve the natural environment and levels of biodiversity.

Case studies

It is firmly believed that councils have a key role to play in helping in the rewilding of the UK. Organisations such as Rewilding Britain have a target of the rewilding of 5% of Great Britain.² They believe that there is:

“no doubt that local authorities can directly and indirectly contribute significantly to rewilding, particularly around urban fringes where people can walk out into truly wild or wilding countryside.”

Rewilding projects can vary in size from whole landscape restoration to the reintroduction of single species. Areas which have been designated by local authorities as rewilding projects include former golf courses, post-industrial scrubland and waterways. For example, North Somerset Council, has decided to rewild “as much land as possible” after it declared a nature emergency in 2019 and it is focusing its efforts on parks, agricultural land, waterways and coastal areas to improve biodiversity by 2030.³

Carbon Landscape – Wigan, Warrington and Salford

The Carbon Landscape project is creating a wilderness among millions of homes in Wigan, Warrington and Salford. By improving and expanding precious habitats such as peatlands and building on previous restoration achievements the project is ensuring a more secure future for both wildlife and local communities. The work will be carried out under the Great Manchester Wetlands Partnership.⁴

The Carbon Landscape is a diverse landscape of water, fen, wet grassland, wet woodland and lowland raised bog with a rich natural environment woven into its industrial heritage. It boasts rare wildlife such as willow tits, bitterns, great crested newts, water voles, bog mosses and black-necked grebes. Wildlife is connected through habitat restoration, access improvements and capacity building within local communities. In this way nature and local custodians come together to help create, sustain and experience a resilient post-industrial landscape on the doorsteps of two million people

Collectively the areas incorporated into the carbon landscape project have been granted various designations and declarations, ranging from the internationally important Special Area for Conservation (SAC), nationally important (Sites of Special Scientific Interest), National Nature Reserves, Local Nature Reserves, Sites of Biological Interest (Greater Manchester Ecology Unit) to local wildlife corridors and stepping stones.

² <https://www.rewildingbritain.org.uk/>

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/jun/20/rewilding-not-just-for-toffs-as-one-in-five-councils-in-great-britain-gets-onboard-aoe#:~:text=Examples%20include%20North%20Somerset%20council,to%20improve%20biodiversity%20by%202030.>

⁴ <https://www.lancswt.org.uk/great-manchester-wetlands>



Image courtesy of Carbon Landscape

Further information about the Carbon Landscape project can be found at [here](#).

Urban Rewilding: Allestree Park - City of Derby

The Allestree Park project is in the largest open space in the city of Derby and aims to engage with the local community to co-design and deliver a community rewilding project covering 130 hectares, making it one of the largest urban rewilding sites in England. The site is a former municipal golf course and includes a local nature reserve and mixed woodland. Derby City Council is working with Derbyshire Wildlife Trust, the University of Derby and Friends of Allestree Park to develop the community rewilding project.

At its heart is a natural processes approach, restoring key ecosystem functions to support wildlife and people in the park and the wider landscape. Plans include focusing on the hydrology and building leaky dams to slow the flow' or seeing if nutrient cycling could be improved with a species reintroduction programme including red kites, harvest mice and the 'mini-but-mighty' minotaur dung beetle.

Residents have said they are keen to see improved diversity of wildflowers and letting grasslands grow. They also want more community involvement projects, including monitoring changes and volunteering.

The project aims to connect existing habitats around Derby, and to help the city meet its climate commitments through increased carbon storage whilst also providing everyday access to quality nature experiences to local residents.

The project hopes to inspire people, communities and businesses right across the city and Derbyshire to rewild their own spaces and take steps to reduce their own carbon footprint.



Image of Allestree Park courtesy of Derby City Council

Further information on Allestree Park can be found via the Derbyshire Wildlife Trust [here](#).

Community rewilding: Highland Council

As well as delivering projects on its sites and estates and steadily increasing 'set-aside' land for rewilding projects, the Highland Council have invited community groups and organisations to apply for funding. This local-led approach to delivering nature restoration projects has seen over £425,000 of funding being awarded to 50 community projects throughout Highland over the past two years. Projects include:

- The creation of new wildflower meadow sites.
- Local tree planting initiatives.
- Areas of wetland creation or new wildlife ponds.
- Projects to remove invasive non-native species to enhance local habitats for protected. Species.



Image courtesy of Highland Council

Further information on Highland rewilding can be found [here](#).

Nationally Significant Rewilding Project: Harborough District Council

Although not yet off the ground, Harborough District Council has recently purchased land to restore a nature-depleted area on a nationally significant scale. The council has spent just under £1.8 million on 133.3 acres of land at Tin House Farm, Great Bowden, Leicestershire, to create a unique project of national significance to restore nature at a landscape scale, bringing benefits to wildlife, people and communities.

With the support of Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust, the Market Harborough Rewilding Project will work to restore a nature-depleted area, reestablishing natural processes and building a network of nature sites where wildlife can thrive.

People will be at the heart of this project, with the site being publicly accessible and the creation of opportunities for learning and the wider benefits that nature can bring.

South Leicestershire contains some of the most heavily modified and nature-depleted areas in lowland England. The project will drive the recovery of nature on this land so that it can support an abundance of wildlife that enriches the immediate area and enables wildlife to spread out to surrounding countryside and communities. Not only will the countryside be richer, more resilient and productive but people and communities will benefit from being closer to wildlife and all the benefits this brings.

As well as protecting the site from long-term housing development, the project will help the council meet its carbon reduction and nature recovery ambition. Mat Carter, CEO, Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust said:

"This rewilding project is an amazing opportunity to restore wildlife and natural processes at a nationally significant scale. Only through ambitious and innovative projects like this can we reverse the decline in nature and realise the benefits that it can bring.

The project will showcase how land can be restored to support thriving wildlife and bring benefits to the communities that live around them. We will be working with partners to create a network of sites that supports greater diversity and migration, providing increased resilience for wildlife to adapt to the challenges they face. We will work with nature to restore natural processes such as connecting rivers with their floodplains and enabling natural regeneration and succession to occur. This is an opportunity to create an amazing legacy."

Vignettes of rewilding plans and actions

Brighton and Hove City Council

The Council is planning to rewild a 19-acre golf course on the South Downs which will create a rich mosaic of downland habitats. This will include chalk grassland, biodiverse native scrub, woodland, and dew ponds. The site will also include grazing livestock which will help maintain the different habitats and grassed areas. It will provide a haven for a variety of animals and plants. As well as enhancing biodiversity, the project will create local nature recovery networks. These will be able to absorb and store more carbon.



Image courtesy of Brighton and Hove Council

Coventry City Council

The Council is designating council-owned land across the city for rewilding; a post-industrial site in Hawkesbury, adjacent to the canal, will be allowed to colonise naturally.

Herefordshire Council

The Council has set aside £2 million to purchase farmland which will be allowed to rewild to mitigate phosphates entering the River Lugg. Plans are also in place for the construction and management of integrated wetlands as part of the project.

Plymouth City Council

The Council is leading a project called Green Minds which is trialling different approaches to rewilding, focusing on involving communities and social enterprises: current projects include beaver re-introduction and urban rewilding.⁵

⁵ <https://www.plymouth.gov.uk/green-minds>

‘Rewilding’ too big an issue? Try ‘micro-rewilding’

Until now rewilding, which by its very nature tends to be seen as a large-scale effort, has been concentrated in the countryside, particularly in areas which are seen as being ‘less productive’ from an agricultural or grazing viewpoint. These areas typically include uplands, wetlands and peat bogs. Many of the upland areas were often only farmed because of government subsidies, but by being seen as unprofitable these areas presented the greatest opportunities for rewilding. Indeed, Government has recently begun to offer subsidies to farmers to carry out more sustainable farming practices and help nature recovery through the Sustainable Farming Incentive. Examples of works being funded, include farming without insecticides, reducing harm to pollinators and improving soil health, as well as low-input grassland being managed more sustainably, helping to protect biodiversity and improve water quality. Hedgerows are also being actively maintained, providing essential habitats for wildlife, improving carbon storage, and strengthening natural flood defences.

However, there are a growing number of projects and local movements pushing for more urban rewilding, albeit at a smaller scale, and it is this area that local authorities can be particularly effective.

These smaller rewilding projects, or **‘micro-rewilding’** projects, are designed to create nature corridors throughout the local authority landscape. As with large scale rewilding projects, micro-rewilding can offer many of the same benefits, such as, creating opportunities for biodiversity, reducing flood risk, improving air quality, and countering the urban heat island effect.

Many of these projects involve authorities working with partners and neighbouring authorities, making significant inroads into improving their environments for nature. It is anticipated that as more of these schemes develop then there will be a growing demand for even more of such works.

Many of us are seeing a growing number of wildflower schemes developing in our towns and cities. Although relatively small from a rewilding perspective, they do have the power to create important habitats for small mammals and invertebrates and perhaps most importantly, provide food sources for pollinators. As stated previously, they can also act as links between other greenspaces such as highway verges, parks, cemeteries and other urban greenspaces. This means flora and fauna can move across these spaces more easily resulting in increased habitat and breeding possibilities.

The growing realisation of the value of such areas means micro-rewilding sites are now playing a role in addressing biodiversity loss and mitigating against the negative impacts of climate change. Furthermore, due to their relatively small scale, many local communities are also getting involved in their creation and management. In doing so, communities are reconnecting with their local areas of nature.

In order to develop micro rewilding projects in urban greenspaces a number of simple approaches have been suggested:

1. Established green spaces must be managed, at least in part, with wildlife in mind

Clearly this makes a great deal of sense. For example, many of our urban greenspaces, particularly our amenity grassed areas, are highly managed through regular mowing and the application of artificial feeds and chemicals, making them 'green deserts' as far as both natural flora and fauna are concerned. This is not to say such areas are not important for recreational activities. Nevertheless, there may be opportunities for a more relaxed and less intensive approach to their management and one which promotes greater levels of biodiversity.

2. We must understand what biodiversity we already have

Most local authorities have audited, or are auditing, the levels of biodiversity that exist in their localities. Without knowing what we have, how can we possibly protect and enhance opportunities for it to thrive? Ecological Emergency Plans, Biodiversity Action Plans and Local Nature Recovery Strategies are all good examples of such audits and often provide plans for future nature improvements. With the advent of mandatory Biodiversity Net Gain, our understanding of the levels of biodiversity will also improve. Finally, it is also worth noting that local Wildlife Trusts are also important partners in understanding what biodiversity exists in our area.

3. Management of our largest green spaces should be altered to help them reach their ecological potential

The designation of many of our largest green spaces as LNR's or SSSI's shows that local authorities are clearly recognising the value of such areas and making inroads in trying to protect these important biodiversity assets. Many local authorities are linking such spaces with neighbouring authorities to create significant landscape scale rewilding opportunities. The previously mentioned 'Carbon Landscape' project is a good example of this. Often such projects involve a variety of different partners creating and managing such spaces, and many local authorities have a long and successful history of creating such networking partnerships.

4. Our urban areas must be considered as a microcosm of what we want to achieve in the wider landscape

Through a variety of approaches such as biophilic design, local authorities and their partners are trying to create more nature friendly urban landscapes. SUDs and other nature-based solutions help to reduce flooding, improve water and air quality, alongside large scale grassland and wildflower schemes; these are just some examples where attempts are being made to try to restore natural ecosystems.

These ecosystems may not mirror the pristine landscapes that existed before urbanisation, and they may be shaped by the values we prioritise today. However, they will undoubtedly bring more nature – and the beauty that comes with it – back into our cities. While these environments may be more managed or 'sanitised', they still represent a significant improvement over the grey, lifeless urban landscapes often associated with the early stages of urban development.

5. Within the confines of urban areas, we must be practical about what is feasible

Through its very nature an urban landscape cannot fulfil the requirements of the more traditional natural ecosystems we find in truly wild landscapes. We must accept there will be limitations. The hardscapes we find in our towns and cities however can be softened through green roofs and walls and our greenspace managed in a more environmentally friendly way. Even our roads can be designed to allow wildlife to safely cross through tunnels and bridges. Although still relatively few in number in the UK compared to Europe and the USA, these crossings are usually planted with a variety of local trees or shrubs and other vegetation and allow birds, mammals and insects to keep moving despite a road or railway blocking their path.



Scotney Castle Land Bridge on the A21 in Kent [Image courtesy of Fira⁶]

6. Raise awareness and the benefits of rewilding

Many local authorities now realise the value of public understanding when developing any type or scale of rewilding project, be it landscape size or simply planting wildflowers in an urban area. Without public support many schemes may simply fail through a lack of understanding. Early communication as to what a scheme is about and what the benefits are is critical. Consequently, many local authorities now have significant and tailored education schemes and regular social media updates on the successes these schemes deliver. As mentioned earlier, Plymouth City Council's 'Green Minds' Project is a good example of such work.

⁶ <https://www.fira-la.com/our-work/scotney-castle-land-bridge/>

7. Rewilding people must be at the heart of Urban Rewilding

'Rewilding the self' and 'rewilding the mind' are phrases often heard when discussions take place about the possible introduction of rewilding schemes or projects. Put simply it is the idea that we can rewild by immersing ourselves in the natural world, no matter how small the experience. Examples could include walking in a park or woodland, planting wildflowers in our gardens, or simply watching the amount of life insects, birds and wildlife around us. It is about, not only reconnecting with nature but also realising we all have a duty to protect it, and in doing so to promote and care for it.

8. No space is too small

This is the real crux of the argument as to why the idea of 'rewilding' is important. If we see it as a regional landscape-sized issue, we may feel it's a subject which is far too big for us as an individual. However, if we can recognise that even planting a pack of wildflower seeds in the garden is contributing to the aims of 'rewilding' then we are far more likely to become engaged and supportive of schemes being developed in our local authority area. This idea is important to get across to our residents and partners as every little piece of improvement for biodiversity is a piece in a wider network, a network whose linkages allow a greater opportunity for biodiversity to take hold, spread, grow and become sustainable.

9. Talk to neighbours and partners about connectivity

A local authority does not own or control every piece of land in its area. Often habitats or areas needing to be included in a scheme may sit outside the control of the local authority, such as waterways, motorways, railway embankments, private estates etc. It is therefore important to engage with as many partners and stakeholders as possible when considering any biodiversity scheme. Nature does not recognise administrative or land ownership boundaries and will not thrive if all relevant parties are not working in tandem to support the scheme.

10. Promote success

Clearly after all the hard work that has gone into a scheme, it is only right that any success should be shouted from the green rooftops! Not only is this essential for all those involved in highlighting all the biodiversity benefits they have achieved, but, most importantly, it shows the value of such schemes and the fact they work. Therefore, any doubters will more easily be brought on board for future schemes.

Role of gardens in reconnecting with nature

In urban environments, largely due to a lack of access, many people have forgotten how to co-exist with wildlife. Through smaller and more local micro-rewilding efforts, this relationship can be restored, no more so than in our own gardens.

Gardens cover about a quarter of many cities and towns. It is estimated that there are over 24 million gardens in the UK and collectively they make up almost 5% of the total UK land use which is similar to the size of the county of Somerset.

Rows of gardens can form a habitat corridor, potentially linking up wider green spaces like parks, as well as allotments, school playing fields, cemeteries, and other places that can be of value to wildlife. Through the planting of native trees, wildlife-friendly flowers and shrubs, providing a source of water, erecting bird boxes, bee and insect hotels, and even by having a compost heap, these spaces can become ideal habitats for both flora and fauna.

Rewilding our gardens has now become a mainstream activity for thousands of people, and this was given considerable impetus with the Chelsea Flower Show Best Show Garden 2022 being a wildlife garden.



Urquhart & Hunt Landscape Design's garden for Rewilding Britain [Image courtesy of HortWeek]⁷

⁷ <https://www.hortweek.com/garden-medals-awarded-rhs-chelsea-flower-show/landscape/article/1787302>

Many local authorities are now providing advice to their residents about they can bring a little bit of the wild to their gardens and help biodiversity in the process. Similarly, many wildlife charities are also offering advice on how to wild gardens.

Below are two such examples from Rewilding Britain and Plantlife:

[How to make your garden wilder – Rewilding Britain](#)

[Go Wild in the Garden with these Gardening Jobs – Plantlife](#)

Conclusions

This report can be no more than a taster regarding the issue of rewilding and its many guises. Clearly rewilding has an original definition which has now become blurred as different people adopt different approaches to delivering biodiversity projects under its umbrella. The beauty of the phrase 'rewilding' is that it can be used to describe everything from landscape sized projects to changing the way we garden in our own homes. Quite frankly, that shouldn't be a problem, it's all about the principle.

To stick too rigidly to the idea that rewilding can only be applied to large scale projects of roughly more than 250 hectares could lead to many of the smaller schemes being downgraded and even ignored. However rewilding gives us a 'cause' which enables us to raise the profile of our work under its banner, and recognise that all of these works, whatever the scale, adds to the drive to re-establish nature and increase levels of biodiversity.

Rewilding generally involves letting nature take the lead by restoring natural processes and reducing human management. It is largely true that in the landscape scale projects, this is extremely effective. But in the case of urban areas, 'managed rewilding' may be the way forward, particularly with regards to the smaller scale projects. This is because smaller scale projects often allow more human involvement and by association a greater connection to those things in nature we are trying to help flourish. These schemes allow us to see, and experience nature close up, the planting and management of local wildflower areas being a good example.

It's true that this approach may not restore the original ecosystems that once existed. But that misses the point. Nature is inherently dynamic and constantly evolving—that's why dinosaurs no longer roam the Earth, and why the many early human species that existed millions of years ago have vanished. Evolution has always been part of the natural cycle. Humans have in many places had a detrimental effect on many of nature's cycles, but rewilding, on whatever scale, is a real opportunity to try to heal some of these broken ecosystems. Yes, it is true that they may resurface in a slightly different form, but if they are helping to increase and sustain healthy biodiversity then that surely must be worthwhile.

There is also the growing recognition that once areas start to rewild often smaller species and plants thought to have been extinct in the region start to reappear as though there is some sort of 'ecological memory' which allows them to return once again.

Nature isn't just beautiful and awe inspiring, it is our life support system. It is apparent from the numerous medical studies carried out that contact with the natural world can have increased healing effects and, more than that, it is a primeval need that we have contact with other living things.

What has also surprised many is that when measured against other public spending programmes, the cost of ecological repair is relatively small.

As a closing point, perhaps we would do well to remember that we only live and breathe because of plants. And furthermore, no amount of clever science will ever replace the services nature provides to humankind.

Therefore, the next time we look at the pictures of wild animals and breath-taking natural landscapes on our laptop screen savers, we need to make sure this is not the only experience future generations will have of the natural world.

How can APSE help?

All APSE members can sign up to APSE's Parks, Horticulture and Grounds Maintenance Network, which is an online network providing four learning events across the year, with expert speakers from across local government and the wider parks and greenspace sector. You can sign up to the network using [this link](#).

Training

APSE Training has also designed several special interactive online course for parks professionals:

1. **Wildflower Meadows and Grasslands Management for Local Authorities.** This training course will look at adopting different grassland management techniques, including wildflower planting schemes, which can be implemented at a much faster rate, with similar benefits to tree planting. You can book your place on the course [here](#).
2. **Making Space for Nature in our Burial Grounds and Churchyards.** The course will look in depth at the challenges of gaining acceptance to naturalise areas of burial grounds and the approaches some local authorities have taken to successfully overcome such challenges to improve opportunities for biodiversity in these spaces. You can book your place on the course [here](#).
3. **Biodiversity Net Gain: Preparing Parks Professionals.** This training has been specifically designed to familiarise parks and greenspaces colleagues with this legislation. Through a variety of interactive activities, learners will have the opportunity to gather information and discuss strategies for practical application. You can book your place [here](#).

Benchmarking

APSE Performance Networks is the largest voluntary public sector benchmarking organisation in the UK. With over 200 authorities in membership, Performance Networks assists local councils by:

- Demonstrating progression on carbon reduction/ecological actions
- Helping to set a clear baseline on which competitiveness, efficiency and value for money can be measured in a systematic manner.
- Identifying the impact of service changes and interventions for your own local authorities and for others.
- Assessing the quality, cost and competitiveness of the services that councils provide on a regular basis.
- Helping to report data in meaningful ways to both elected members and the public.
- Identifying direction of travel and pace of change with regard to service delivery.
- Identifying inefficiencies such as poor productivity and high cost.
- Supporting service improvement through process benchmarking and sharing best practice examples.

For more information about how your parks service can benefit from Performance Networks membership, click [here](#).

Sign up for APSE membership to enjoy a whole range of benefits

APSE member authorities have access to a range of membership resources to assist in delivering council services. This includes our regular network meetings, specifically designed to bring together elected members, directors, managers and heads of service, together with trade union representatives to discuss service specific issues, innovation and new ways of delivering continuous improvement. The networks are an excellent forum for sharing ideas and discussing topical service issues with colleagues from other councils throughout the UK.

Networks are a free service included as part of your authority's membership of APSE and all end with an informal lunch to facilitate networking with peers in other councils. If you do not currently receive details about APSE Network meetings and would like to be added to our list of contacts for your service area please email enquiries@apse.org.uk.

Our national networks include:-

- FM and Building cleaning
- Catering (School Meals)
- Cemeteries and Crematoria
- Highways and Street Lighting
- Housing, Construction and Building Maintenance
- Local Authority Commercialisation, Income and Trading Network
- Local Government Reorganisation Network
- Parks, Horticulture and Grounds Maintenance
- Renewables and Climate Change
- Roads, highways and street lighting
- Sports and Leisure Management
- Vehicle Maintenance and Transport
- Waste Management, Refuse Collection and Street Cleansing

Visit www.apse.org.uk for more details.



Association for Public Service Excellence
3rd floor,
Trafford House,
Chester Road, Manchester M32 0RS.
telephone: 0161 772 1810
fax: 0161 772 1811
web: www.apse.org.uk

