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Pioneering place-sensitive nature recovery at the hyper-local scale: a multi-tier, multi-directional governance approach

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Abstract

Shropshire is pioneering a community-led model for nature recovery, where parish councils are beginning to play a central role in mobilising local action. Through partnerships with organisations like the Middle Marches Community Land Trust and the Shropshire Association of Local Councils, local governance networks are convening residents, landowners and volunteers to co-produce bespoke hyper-local nature recovery plans. These are influenced by and supportive of the regional Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) led by Shropshire Council. Hyper-local activities range from participatory habitat mapping to community land purchases and other volunteer-led nature recovery activities. At the heart of Shropshire's success is local leadership aided by delegated responsibility to those with a strong motivation to act, robust partnerships with community organisations, community control of land assets, networking amongst parish councils, ability to collect a sound precept, and a linking between hyper-local efforts and regional strategy. This decentralised, place-based approach fosters durable, locally meaningful outcomes, which actively encourage communities to get involved with protecting and enhancing their local ecosystems. It presents a replicable model of civic environmentalism with the potential to shape how LNRSs are implemented across the country.

Keywords: nature recovery, parish councils, Local Nature Recovery Strategies, local governance, civic environmentalism, community partnerships, land assets.

Introduction

In 2023, the UK Government instructed each of the 48 upper-tier local authorities in England to develop an LNRS¹ that listed priorities, mapped high-value areas and suggested actions for nature recovery. Our Nature Recovery and Regional Development research project engages with 12 local authorities from Britain's Leading Edge (BLE), a network of councils in rural regions covering 27.5% of England's land area.² Except for the Isles of Scilly, all BLE areas are parished, accounting for 21% of England's parishes with over 2,000 individual councils. Given that nature recovery is now framed as an ecological imperative that is dependent on effective multi-level governance and action, this paper explores the neglected role of parish councils in shaping nature recovery in England.

Our case study of Shropshire and its 180 parishes showcases the scope for hyper-local civic leadership to deliver national policy through grounded action for nature recovery. These efforts demonstrate that the smallest governance units, operating with limited resources but deep local legitimacy, are mobilising communities, brokering partnerships and influencing local strategic planning. This paper documents the work being done in several parish councils and a parish meeting in Shropshire to outline the scope and potential of taking action for nature recovery at the hyper-local scale.

We explore new opportunities to develop this activity in the context of fast-changing national policy developments regarding devolution, localism, land use and place-based policy making.^{3,4} Our research demonstrates how nature recovery is being co-produced through multi-level and multi-directional governance arrangements in which leadership, initiative and knowledge move from central institutions downward but also from local actors upward and outward. We contribute to wider debates about the reconfiguration of local governance and the strategic potential of hyper-local democratic structures in shaping the future of environmental actions and outcomes.

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- 1 Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) (2023). Local Nature Recovery Strategy statutory guidance: What a Local Nature Recovery Strategy should contain. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-nature-recovery-strategy-what-to-include>.
 - 2 Reed, J., Wills, J., Willett, J., Treloar, G., Bateman, I. and Osborne, J. (2025). Rural regions and sustainable development in England: An overview of the local authorities in Britain's Leading Edge. Available at: https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/articles/report/Rural_regions_and_sustainable_development_in_England_An_overview_of_the_local_authorities_in_Britain_s_Leading_Edge/29813807?file=57281939.
 - 3 Tilley, H., Newman, J., Connell, A., Hoole, C. and Mukherjee, A. (2023). 'A place-based system? Regional policy levers and the UK's productivity challenge'. *Regional Studies*, 57(10), pp. 2102-2114.
 - 4 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2024). English Devolution White Paper. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-devolution-white-paper-power-and-partnership-foundations-for-growth/english-devolution-white-paper>.

Parish councils and local government in England

England's 10,000 parish councils are the first tier of local government, providing community-scale political representation and leadership in England's towns and villages⁵. Council sizes vary from small villages to large towns and whilst the average council has only seven councillors, some have as many as 31.⁶ Councillors are volunteers and income is raised through the council tax precept. Larger parishes may have budgets exceeding a million pounds, but most are much smaller than this.

Parish council power has diminished over the past century, but some parishes have recently undergone a period of quiet capacity building, largely under the radar of national policy attention.^{7,8,9} Although uptake has been uneven, some lower-tier authorities such as those in Cornwall have experienced a sharp increase in asset holdings and administrative responsibilities as upper-tier authorities have divested themselves of financial liabilities such as libraries and public toilets. Town and parish councils have been able to raise income and localise management to make a success of running these facilities.¹⁰ Community-based place-sensitive leadership has proved itself in increasing managerial efficiency of assets and staff resources. Gains have also been made by fostering strong local relationships with civil society, including individuals, organisations and businesses, in collective action and events,¹¹ and mobilising local knowledge for the benefit of the community.¹²

However, whilst there are some notable success stories of parish councils galvanising and mobilising community activity,^{13,14} this level of governance has also had a reputation for entrenched self-interest, ineptitude and deep, bitter conflict.¹⁵ In truth, the situation is mixed and dependent on people and place. Funding cuts have meant that upper-tier authorities are focused on the delivery of statutory services, and cost pressures have led to outsourcing service delivery to other providers.¹⁶ This creates further internal incentives for partnership working and potential asset transfer between upper-tier authorities and parish councils over the delivery of services, including the LNRS.

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- 5 Wills, J. (2016). *Locating localism: Statecraft, citizenship and democracy*. Bristol: Policy Press Scholarship.
 - 6 Giovannini, A., Griggs, S., Jones, A., Parker, S. and Rose, J. (2023). *The future of local councils*. Somerset: Society of Local Council Clerks. Available at: <https://oro.open.ac.uk/87187/1/SLCC-Future-Report-2022%20%281%29.pdf>.
 - 7 Ellwood, S. (1999). 'Parish and town councils: Left out in the cold but invited to the party'. *Public Money & Management*, 19(3), pp. 7-9.
 - 8 Jones, A. (2007). 'New wine in old bottles? England's parish and town councils and new labour's neighbourhood experiment'. *Local Economy*, 22(3), pp. 227-242.
 - 9 Wills, J. (2016). *Locating localism: Statecraft, citizenship and democracy*.
 - 10 Wills, J. (2020). 'The geo-constitution and responses to austerity: Institutional entrepreneurship, switching, and re-scaling in the United Kingdom'. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 45(4), pp. 817-832.
 - 11 Jørgensen, A., Mia, A. F., Casado-Díaz, M. and Atkinson, R. (2020). 'Rural cohesion: Collective efficacy and leadership in the territorial governance of inclusion'. *Social Inclusion*, 8(4), pp. 229-241.
 - 12 Kambites, C. J. (2010). 'Sustainability and attitudes to locality: The discourse of town and parish councillors'. *Local Environment*, 15(9), pp. 867-880.
 - 13 Burnett, A. and Nunes, R. (2021). 'Flatpack democracy: Power and politics at the boundaries of transition'. *Environmental Policy and Governance*, 31(3), pp. 223-236.
 - 14 MacFadyen, P. (2017). *Flatpack democracy: A DIY guide to creating independent politics*. Bath: Eco-Logic Books.
 - 15 Willett, J. and Cruxon, J. (2018). 'Towards a participatory, representative democracy? UK parish councils and community engagement'. *British Politics*, 14, pp. 311-327.
 - 16 Andrews, R. (2024). 'Drivers of reverse corporatization in English local government: A longitudinal analysis'. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 90(3), pp. 615-632.

National policy: foundations and new directions for nature recovery

Our research is taking place within a fast-evolving policy landscape, not least due to the change in government in 2024. Important recent legislation includes the Agriculture Act 2020 which determines new incentives and subsidies for farmers and landowners. It replaced EU policy with a new framework of Environmental Land Management schemes (ELMs) through which farmers and landowners are subsidised with public money for nature-friendly agricultural practices and countryside stewardship. The Environment Act 2021 established a national framework for nature recovery including the establishment of targets, mandating Nature Recovery Networks (NRN) and LNRs. Following extensive engagement, the strategies are emerging as well-evidenced documents to guide nature recovery at a local level, in accord with a growing agenda for creating place-sensitive environmental sustainability policy.¹⁷ Although not yet tested within the planning system, LNRs are intended to guide plan-making and planning decisions, strengthening the case for nature amid competing interests.

The Environment Act 2021 also introduced a requirement for all new developments to contribute to an uplift of 10% Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG), and an 'enhanced biodiversity duty' for public authorities in England, including town and parish councils. A commitment to protect 30% of land and sea by 2030 was made in the related Environmental Improvement Plan (2023) in line with the international Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (2022). This '30-by-30' target now serves as a guiding vision for nature recovery at all levels of local government.

Recent policy developments in local government, as outlined in the Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill (2025) and Planning and Infrastructure Bill (2025), also have major implications for the governance of local nature recovery. It is proposed that LNRs will come under the remit of new higher-level Strategic Authorities (SAs). However, the intention is also to strengthen parish and town councils and enable communities to take control of local assets which may bring nature recovery activity further into the orbit of hyper-local governance institutions. The Government has committed to 'work with the town and parish council sector to improve engagement between them and local authorities'¹⁸ providing opportunities for multi-scalar action for nature recovery. However, there is a risk under devolution that new mayoralities will not recognise the role of parish councils for the delivery of nature recovery and that the potential contribution of hyper-local governance will be overlooked.

The Planning and Infrastructure Bill (2025) proposes that the new SAs establish and oversee Spatial Development Strategies (SDSs) but this may present a tension with principal authorities' local plans and hyper-local neighbourhood plans, not least in relation to LNRs, by adding another layer to planning. In addition, new Environmental Delivery Plans (EDPs) will be created by Natural England, incorporating funds from a new Nature Restoration Levy (comprising the Nature Restoration Fund) that will be charged to developers to mitigate for environmental impacts, potentially overturning the previous endorsement of BNG – but this is not yet confirmed.¹⁹ The effectiveness of BNG may be undermined by inconsistent delivery, poor metrics of success and controversy over whether the investment should be local, regional or beyond. This disconnect is especially problematic given that upper-tier authorities, through LNRs, are tasked with directing

17 British Academy (2023). Understanding the role of place in environmental sustainability: A summary of insights from Where We Live Next commissioned research. Available at: https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/4667/Where_we_live_next_report_-_FINAL_REPORT.pdf.

18 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2024). English Devolution White Paper.

19 House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee (2025). The role of natural capital in the UK's green economy: First report of session 2024–25 (HC501). London: House of Commons.

nature restoration efforts for maximum local impact. Aligning BNG with LNRSs is essential to ensure funding delivers real ecological value to the areas where development takes place. The need to re-design the Nature Restoration Fund in this context is currently a topic of heated debate amongst stakeholders and policymakers.

The rollout of ELMs is also fast evolving, influencing how farmers and landowners engage with nature recovery. Oversubscription of the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI), although viewed as a success by the Government, had immense ramifications for land managers, with reports of farmers reverting to intensive practices following the scheme being momentarily paused.²⁰

The proposed Land Use Framework (expected to be published in 2025) will include: 1) principles that Government will apply to land-use related policy; 2) a description of how policy levers will support land use change; 3) land use data and analysis to support innovation and spatial decision making across the public and private sectors. It is also envisaged by the Government that the Framework will be integrated with its devolution plans, but the implications for parish councils, asset transfer, nature recovery and hyper-local nature governance remain unclear. It is within this changing national policy space that parish councils can be especially effective, with opportunities for hyper-local action and delivery.

17 British Academy (2023). Understanding the role of place in environmental sustainability: A summary of insights from Where We Live Next commissioned research. Available at: https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/4667/Where_we_live_next_report_-_FINAL_REPORT.pdf.

18 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2024). English Devolution White Paper.

19 House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee (2025). The role of natural capital in the UK's green economy: First report of session 2024–25 (HC501). London: House of Commons.

20 BBC (2025). The Landscape Revolution, BBC Sounds Radio 4, 4 May. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m002bs13>.

Issues and opportunities for parish councils to realise their agency and motivate collective action on nature recovery

Our research interviews suggest there is great potential to galvanise collective action for nature recovery at the parish scale, and further opportunities could be unlocked through non-prescriptive policy interventions. In some areas, this potential is already being realised, offering insights into policies and practices that could be scaled up and applied elsewhere. Encouragingly, there is a growing interest in more effective and collaborative working across different levels of governance, though significant barriers remain.

Parish-level governance has several core features that enable a strong and productive relationship with civil society, making it particularly well-suited to supporting nature recovery efforts on the ground. Parish councils often have substantial land holdings, including parks and recreational grounds, burial grounds and allotments that will be important to local people as well as having potential for nature recovery^{21,22}. Notably, there is also no cap on the precept that parish councils (and parish meetings) can raise, giving them financial flexibility and scope to generate income.

An interviewee from the Isle of Wight told us that:

‘[Parish councils] are unique organisations, they have inviolable funding, nuclear war won't stop the precept coming in [and] there's no cap on the precept...’

Whilst parish precepts are tied to council tax bands and thus property prices²³, areas with more widespread deprivation may not have the wealth or support to raise funds through increasing the precept. However, other fundraising options are available including gifts, setting up a parish lottery, crowdfunding and bidding for funding^{24,25}. Moreover, there are modes of capacity building that do not involve funding^{26,27}.

For example, parish councils are well placed to partner with social enterprises, thereby building capacity through partnerships with civil society. Echoing studies which emphasise the effectiveness of community-level engagement^{28,29,30}, an interviewee from Cumberland Council suggested:

‘What they can do...[is] mobilise very local communities...This is the stuff they care about... whether it's the quality of the pavements or the roads or the hedges...that's the stuff that parish councils can really tap into. So, I think there's a lot of opportunity there.’

21 Giovannini, A. et. al. (2023). The future of local councils.

22 Scott, M., Parker, G., Juntti, M., Castellino, J., Forero, O., Mell, I., ... Blyth, R. (2024). 'The biodiversity crisis – planning for nature recovery?'. *Planning Theory & Practice*, 25(1), pp. 103-140. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649357.2024.2322879>.

23 Jones, A. (2020). *The resurgence of parish council powers in England*. Cham: Springer International Publishing. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-45128-8>.

24 Sandford, M. (2021). *Parish and town councils: Recent issues*. House of Commons Library. Available at: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN04827/SN04827.pdf>.

25 Swift, R. and Billingham, Z. (2024). *Handforth in hindsight: The future of hyperlocal governance in England*. Institute for Public Policy Research North. Available at: https://ippr-org.files.svdcdn.com/production/Downloads/Handforth_in_hindsight_Mar24.pdf.

26 Honadle, B. (1981). 'A capacity-building framework: A search for concept and purpose'. *Public Administration Review*, 41(5), pp. 575-580.

27 Jones, A. (2020). *The resurgence of parish council powers in England*.

28 Jørgensen, A. et. al. (2020). 'Rural cohesion: Collective efficacy and leadership in the territorial governance of inclusion'.

29 Andrews, R., Downe, J., and Guarneros-Meza, V. (2014). 'Contracting for social cohesion: Can local area agreements make a difference?'. *Policy and Politics*, 42(4), pp. 477-493.

30 Kambites, C. J. (2010). 'Sustainability and attitudes to locality: The discourse of town and parish councillors'.

However, there are limitations of nature recovery work at this scale. Some interviewees highlighted weak oversight and highly uneven interest and capacity to pursue this agenda.³¹ According to an interviewee from the Isle of Wight: ‘...There’s no ombudsman, so if they’re awful, they’re awful forever.’

There are also challenges in developing and managing positive relationships with upper-tier authorities that necessarily vary from parish to parish. As a respondent from Cumberland Council said:

‘...It’s hard because there’s a lot of them, and they’re very mixed. They’re very diverse in the capacity that they’ve got and the way that you have to work with them.’

Notwithstanding a wider unevenness in capacity and willingness across parish councils and county-level Associations of Local Councils, the National Association for Local Councils (NALC) encourages local councils to promote biodiversity by partnering with conservation groups and volunteers – reflecting a broader effort to draw on external expertise and overcome inaction.³²

As one respondent from the Isle of Wight told us, parishes were envisaged to be the key agents to deliver their LNRS:

‘For us, it’s the parish network...every parish will have a little cluster of LNRS materials within its domain.’

There was, however, sentiment that more could be done to engage parish councils and build capacity from the top down. An officer from Cornwall Council said:

‘We do create toolkits that try to trickle down [information], whether it’s grants or advice or whatever, to embed nature recovery at the parish level, but I know there’s a hell of a lot more we could do.’

Capacity building thus involves more engagement work and this requires funding, time and expertise, which are limited. Further, whilst engagement and communication are critical, a trickle-down approach may only go so far in encouraging parish councils to act on nature recovery.

Concrete interventions are required to unlock the potential for collective action on nature from the ground up. Transferring assets and functions to communities would support this work and enable community-scale collective action around nature recovery to flourish. As an officer from the Isle of Wight said:

‘...thinking down the line in terms of once the LNRS is in place, [parish councils] are going to be a key stakeholder in terms of some of that localised delivery. So, looking at how really small projects could come forward on land that may be owned by town and parish councils, or is managed by them...they’re going to be really important to get some of that real kind of boots-on-the-ground, local physical action in terms of nature recovery.’

An interviewee from Dorset further suggested:

‘Could we start creating large allotments and gifting them to small towns and parishes? [These would be] large allotment areas where local families, local groups...could go and grow their own. All of a sudden, you start creating community interest companies, and you start bringing food security [to the region].’

31 Willett, J. and Cruxon, J. (2018). ‘Towards a participatory, representative democracy? UK parish councils and community engagement’

32 National Association of Local Councils (NALC) (2025). Biodiversity. Available at: <https://www.nalc.gov.uk/campaigns/tackling-climate-change/biodiversity.html>.

In such a model, there are mutual benefits for people and nature, providing activities that foster good health and wellbeing, as well as improvements in biodiversity. Land assets can give people the space and the opportunity to be entrepreneurial, growing their own food and benefiting from the development of a more sustainable local economy.³³ Where there is limited capacity in parish councils, partnering with Community Land Trusts could increase access to land asset management expertise, and the delegation of responsibility to new roles within parish structures such as nature wardens or 'lengthsmen'³⁴ may help to fulfil nature-related functions.

Echoing a willingness amongst upper-tier authorities to transfer functions and assets to parish councils for nature recovery, a Westmorland and Furness council officer suggested:

'Community power has been a huge thing and a huge focus for the council...there's a big project underway about discharging functions...to parish councils. That could be things like verge maintenance...A playground, playing fields...these are the kinds of green spaces that can be maintained at that level. It doesn't necessarily have to be [the council] doing that: they can discharge those duties into the community. And of course, that presents a really good opportunity for the LNRS to be embedded in those practices.'

Support for parish-level hyper-local nature recovery – including the transfer of assets and responsibilities – would need to be reflected in local planning processes. As statutory consultees on local planning, parish councils already play an important role in the local plan-making process and planning decisions, including via neighbourhood plans. Given that local plans are reviewed every 5 years, and LNRSs anywhere between every 3 and 10 years, parish councils have an opportunity to keep a focus on hyper-local nature recovery within the more regular review cycle of local plans, and through the quotidian decision-making of local planning authorities on planning applications. This is particularly important given devolution plans for new SAs to take responsibility for LNRSs, with attendant risks to agreed priorities and goals; incorporating hyper-local nature recovery into planning would serve to mitigate potential policy disjuncture between levels of local government under devolution.

33 Sustainable Food Cornwall and the University of Exeter (2023). Community growing in Cornwall: The impact and potential of local sustainable food growing in Cornwall. Available at: <https://sustainablefoodcornwall.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Community-Growing-in-Cornwall-Report-FINAL-no-appendices.pdf>.

34 Martin, S. R. (2003). 'The long meadow: An historical ecology of roadsides in Britain'. *Landscapes*, 4(2), 90-113.

Case study: Shropshire – unlocking parish-level leadership for nature recovery

The Shropshire case highlights how locally rooted governance networks – where community entrepreneurship, collaborative infrastructures, reliable financing, community land assets and place-based leadership intersect – can drive hyper-local nature recovery. Through the efforts of individual parish councils and organisations including the Middle Marches Community Land Trust (MMCLT), Restoring Shropshire's Verges Project, the Marches Meadow Group, the Shropshire Association of Local Councils (SALC), Caring for God's Acre, the Shropshire Hills Landscape Trust and the Stepping Stones Project, these actions are beginning to take shape and yield results. The Shropshire activity reflects a vision of environmental action as best embedded in community organisation, aligned with national priorities and capable of delivering durable, locally meaningful outcomes.

Critical relationships enabling collective action and a civic environmentalism

The work in Shropshire highlights the potential for local actors to engage in civic environmentalism.³⁵ This reflects the role of individuals, community groups and town and parish councils in initiating and sustaining place-based environmental action, often outside formal state-led processes. This is especially important for the future of nature recovery as, at the time of writing, there is no planned follow-on funding for the delivery of LNRs. The work in Shropshire demonstrates the potential for locally embedded leadership and community capacity to deliver national policy frameworks, such as the LNRs.

Civic environmentalism exemplifies a mode of engagement with nature recovery that is place-based, relational and highly adaptive. Rather than waiting for top-down mandates and funding, these parishes are interpreting national objectives, as well as their regional LNRs, as an invitation to innovate. This is especially important given the limited capacity, including funding and resources, of upper-tier authorities to engage in this work. Further, embedding practice locally in this way sustains activity beyond the national political cycle and makes the most of the policy investments already made.³⁶ We have found that parish councils in Shropshire are well positioned to convene diverse actors (e.g. farmers, landowners, local schools and volunteers) in ways which regional and national governance bodies may not be able to. This indicates the extent to which parishes are actively co-producing the meaning of policy as it unfolds in real time, with significant implications for policy outcomes at the hyper-local scale.

Shropshire's hyper-local nature recovery efforts have developed through relationships that span grassroots, community and local governance structures. The most important of these has been the collaboration between SALC and MMCLT; SALC providing access to all town and parish councils across the county, and MMCLT bringing a nimble, entrepreneurial approach to land stewardship and environmental engagement. Since 2023, the two organisations have played an important role in organising a series of conferences and workshops. In late 2023, 89 town and parish councillors attended a conference on the importance of lower tiers of government to help deliver local nature recovery across Shropshire. The conference was repeated in 2024, and another is planned for 2025. These events are offering a focal point for councillors and other interested stakeholders to converge and discuss opportunities, achievements and barriers.

35 John, D. (1994). 'Civic environmentalism'. *Issues in Science and Technology*, 10(4), pp. 30-34

36 Turner, R. A. and Wills, J. (2022). 'Downscaling doughnut economics for sustainability governance'. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, 56, Article 101180

As a result of these efforts, parish councils across Shropshire are emerging as a vital set of partners for the delivery of the LNRS. These parishes are connecting with residents, local organisations and landowners, as well as higher tiers of government in bespoke ways around specific interests in place. Our findings show that they are emerging as facilitators and recipients of multi-directional relationships – upward to upper-tier local authorities and national stakeholders and laterally to individual residents, community groups, neighbouring parishes and local voluntary organisations.

The case also highlights the catalytic role of single actors in parish areas, with the chair or clerk of parish councils having been particularly important. The success of Shropshire can in part be traced to the motivation of a parish clerk in Edgton, who catalysed local action. As the clerk of a parish meeting rather than a council, they have been particularly free to take initiative, which also highlights the potential impact of strengthening similar delegated leadership roles in other parish structures. Indeed, having the ability to articulate locally resonant concerns (such as local nature recovery) and ensure the subsequent elevation of these concerns through strategic coordination and community mobilisation serves as a demonstrator for changes that could be picked up elsewhere.

Nature outcomes in Shropshire's parishes

Shropshire's evolving model has delivered a range of outcomes that reflect both process and impact. Strategically, the inclusion of parish councils as a core stakeholder group in the development of the county scale LNRS is perhaps the most significant process innovation. Rather than being relegated to peripheral consultees, parish councils have a role as co-producers of local environmental planning and action. This shift is evident in the formation of local working groups that are driving the activity, organising participatory habitat mapping events held in parish halls as well as the ongoing creation of bespoke parish nature recovery plans – many of which are now informing local decision making.

SALC has established a dedicated resource hub to support this work in parishes across Shropshire with advice for nature recovery at the parish scale.³⁷ However, the majority of resources have been created by parishes themselves and then shared with others. For example, at the Edgton parish meeting, villagers have mapped existing habitats, held winter 'wildlife talks' (on dormice, barn owls, etc.) to raise awareness, and formed a nature recovery working group. By early 2024, this group had built two barn owl nesting boxes and established a volunteer network.

Image 1: Barn Owl box put up within Edgton village, with a Barn Owl in the box six months later.
Photo credits: Janet Cobb



37 Shropshire Association of Local Councils (SALC) (2025). Local Nature Recovery. Available at: <https://www.alcshropshire.co.uk/local-nature-recovery>.

Similarly, Welshampton and Lyneal parish council set up a volunteer biodiversity group and now run 'Big Green Day' fairs and open days in the village hall. These events (featuring local rangers, wildlife NGOs and young people) have generated dozens of home-made bird, bat and bug boxes for local gardens. Reflecting the work in Edgton, they also installed a community nature map in the village hall: residents have marked-up ponds, hedges, trees and other features on a wall-sized map to crowdsource a habitat inventory and to highlight where action can be taken by the community. So far, this has focussed on the rewilding of roadside verges across the parishes, building on momentum generated through the Restoring Shropshire's Verges Project.³⁸ Although this might appear to be a relatively limited opportunity for on-the-ground nature recovery compared to national approaches such as ELMs or BNG, it is not insignificant when considering the amount of land verges cover and their potential to function as wildlife corridors. Community Land Trusts are also a vehicle through which nature recovery can occur at scale – including for key species – as MMCLT shows.

The ambition is that every parish in Shropshire will eventually possess a bespoke nature recovery plan, creating a mosaic of hyper-local strategies aligned with wider LNRS goals. Through the process of planning and monitoring outcomes, local communities and individuals become 'stakesharers' for local nature recovery, meaning they share ideas, solutions, threats and opportunities as they stake out a collective response.³⁹

Although not statutorily recognised, these will buttress the LNRS, adding another layer of detail to support the case for nature in the planning system and potentially contributing to future iterations of the LNRS. In addition, some parishes are exploring the potential of increasing their precept to generate funds for local nature recovery. Whilst adding a 'nature recovery levy' to a parish's precept has yet to be implemented, it offers a potential avenue to sustain funding for future local nature recovery activities. Shropshire's council tax is currently below the average for England, suggesting there may be some room for manoeuvre for parishes to introduce a nature precept. However, although the region has below-average levels of multiple deprivation, a raise in the parish council precept may be unaffordable for many households and met with resistance such that the outcomes would depend upon the strength of local opinion.

People in Shropshire also have an emerging interest in community land ownership. This is particularly important within the context of the Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, in which as noted above, there are ambitions for increased rates of community asset transfer. Shropshire has several examples where this has already happened and here, we focus on the MMCLT and a community asset in Minsterley. Local parishes were instrumental in supporting a fundraising effort to purchase Minsterley Meadows for the MMCLT in 2024. This is an important site that is home to over 90% of Shropshire's Green Winged Orchids.⁴⁰ The community raised £158,000 and has secured the land and additional funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund (£224,000) to safeguard the meadows into the future. Meanwhile, Pontesbury Parish Council has assumed ownership of a green space within a new 85-home development and has planted a community orchard on the land, embedding nature recovery into the fabric of this new community. Further, from 2028, the parish council will also become the custodian of a nearby wildlife corridor and has a management plan in place to help protect and recover nature in this area.

These activities are signalling a broader shift in local governance culture in Shropshire, reflecting a more relational, community-led approach to the stewardship of assets and in the interests of people and nature. Asset transfers to parishes and community land trusts are embedding long-term custodianship, while also creating new opportunities for local innovation and intergenerational experiences of nature recovery. In Shropshire, the parishes remain custodians of green spaces and are acting as important vehicles for civic and ecological renewal at the community scale.

38 Middle Marches Community Land Trust (2025a). Restoring Shropshire's Verges Project. Available at: <https://middlemarchescommunitylandtrust.org.uk/restoring-shropshire-road-verges/>

39 Torkar, G. and McGregor, S.L. (2012). 'Reframing the conception of nature conservation management by transdisciplinary methodology: From stakeholders to stakesharers'. *Journal for Nature Conservation*, 20(2), pp.65-71.

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Conclusion

Using Shropshire as an exemplar case, our research has exposed the extent to which nature recovery is aided by local leadership, strong partnerships with community organisations, community control of assets, networking amongst parish councils and a linking between hyper-local nature efforts and wider LNRs. Further, whilst not implemented in Shropshire as yet, a nature recovery levy to the parish precept is another step that councils could take. Whilst other regions' parish councils, and Associations of Local Councils, may have uneven capacity and desire to act, the Shropshire case highlights what is possible when organising and mobilising at the hyper-local scale.

Whilst currently there are barriers to measuring on-the-ground nature recovery including funding and resources for ecological surveys, we argue that successful local nature recovery involves a suite of governance bodies and associated networks, including parish councils, community organisations and members of the public. This mobilises local expertise, generates grass roots collective action for environmental improvements and increases community awareness about – and interest in – nature recovery. Parish councils are well-placed to coordinate this kind of civic environmentalism because they are closer to their communities and able to mobilise around local assets of community value. However, it is imperative to attract people with the energy, enthusiasm and skills to be able to develop a vision, drive efforts, mobilise support and act as an interface between different levels of governance architecture, as well as across organisations and groups. In a landscape where parish-level nature recovery may not benefit from developer-funded mechanisms such as BNG or the Nature Restoration Fund, relationships with other bodies become important in supporting local success.

Several policy suggestions arise from this case. Most importantly, asset transfer from upper-tier authorities to parish councils for nature recovery – a nature asset transfer – would allow local leaders and parish-led networks to further channel their energy into tangible, on-the-ground action for nature. This may include parks, gardens, verges and other land holdings such as county farms in areas that retain them, and will also involve the transfer of functions. Policy ambitions included in the Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill offer some scope for community asset transfer, but a greater focus on rural assets for nature recovery is needed.

Parish councils should be encouraged to develop hyper-local nature recovery plans. This would increase their influence within region-wide LNRs and act as an important local delivery mechanism. With the first iterations of LNRs already published or in the pipeline, hyper-local plans can feed into future LNR reviews. Formalising hyper-local plans in this way will also carry greater clout in planning processes, influencing neighbourhood and local plans.

There is scope to develop specific roles in parish and town councils to lead on strategy and on-the-ground nature recovery work. Our case study shows the vital role parish clerks can play and the optional development of roles such as nature wardens or 'lengthsmen' may be a mechanism through which agency and local leadership could be unleashed.

Parish councils' key financial advantage is that they can raise their precept; councils, with community buy-in, could include a ringfenced nature recovery levy in their precept. Where raising funds through the precept risks sustaining inequalities, other financial mechanisms are available. Public awareness and support are, however, critical. With local nature recovery unlikely to be funded centrally, community engagement is critical for success and parish councils should consider this as an integral part of their work.

Parish councils have organisational, financial, functional and place-based advantages for local nature recovery that could be enhanced by a further transfer of functions and assets, a recognised role in planning for nature recovery, the development of new local leadership roles, raising additional funding and a focus on public engagement.

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