



“green  
alliance...”

# Green expectations

Involving communities  
in landscape change

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Involving communities in landscape change

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## **Acknowledgements**

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Views expressed in the report are those of Green Alliance and do not necessarily reflect the views of the steering group members.

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## **Green Alliance**

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 **creative commons**

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# About this report

This report explores when and where community involvement in changes to land use and management might be useful and appropriate.

It focuses on land use or management changes where the primary or a significant objective is environmental, for example carbon sequestration, habitat creation and restoration, water quality and flood management, or more sustainable agricultural practices. 'Land use change' means changing from one type of land use to another, for example from agriculture to woodland. 'Land management change' means a change in management practices to improve environmental outcomes within a use category, for example, changing from conventional agriculture to regenerative, agroecological practices like agro-forestry.<sup>1</sup>

Our insights are based on extensive desk research, looking at over 75 projects, approaches and initiatives. We also ran two workshops with stakeholders from England, Scotland and Wales, and interviewed leaders involved in 12 projects and initiatives.<sup>2</sup> We have benefited from the advice of a steering group of experts, listed opposite.

This is intended as a starting point for discussion about how and when more community engagement in these changes is needed. We do not pretend to have all the answers. Our conclusions draw on themes that emerged from our workshops and interviews.

Divided into four sections, the first introduces the context around land use and management change in England, Scotland and Wales. We then outline what we mean by community engagement before exploring why its role in land use change might be desirable in different circumstances. Finally, we outline the best ways to do it and make specific recommendations to businesses and

governments so they can involve communities in decisions and projects at the right point and in the right way to ensure success.

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Projects and initiatives interviewed:

Carneddau Landscape Partnership; Burrenbeo Trust; Affric Highlands; Tarras Valley Nature Reserve; Skyline Project; Stroud Valleys Natural Flood Management Project; Wyre Natural Flood Management Investment Readiness Project; Forest Carbon; Integrated Local Delivery; Rural Urban Synthesis Society (RUSS); Slow the Flow; Tir Canol.

We also feature examples from the following projects:

Vegan Land Movement; Highlands Rewilding; Avon Needs Trees; Long Lands Common; Whistlewood Common; Trecadwgan Farm ; Riverwoods Investment Readiness Pioneers.

More information about the projects and approaches we refer to in this report can be found at [green-alliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Green-expectations-summary-of-projects-and-initiatives.pdf](https://green-alliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Green-expectations-summary-of-projects-and-initiatives.pdf)

# Summary

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**Even small changes can cause local controversy and tensions.”**

Twin imperatives to tackle climate change and restore nature are leading to policy changes across England, Scotland and Wales which will alter the current pattern of land use and its management.

As well as changes to government incentives, in England and Scotland there are also goals to increase private investment in nature dramatically. In England, the target is £1 billion a year by 2030.<sup>3</sup> At around 40 per cent of the current government farming budget in England, it is reasonable to expect this to have a significant impact. While there has been less focus on increasing private natural capital investment by the Welsh government, the English target is still likely to drive change in Wales as English registered companies seek the most cost effective projects throughout Britain to deliver environmental outcomes.

In almost all scenarios, most land in Britain will remain as farmland. But even small changes can cause local controversy and tensions. Rural land uses and management changes, such as converting farmland to woodland, are not subject to the planning processes which apply to the built environment and through which the public and civil society can influence decision making. Provided certain environmental and other regulations are met, environmental changes to land use and its management are decisions solely for landowners and managers.

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**Local communities lack formal democratic power, practical control or financial resources to influence change.”**

Tensions can arise between the needs and preferences of different communities. National subsidies which have supported farming are now moving more towards environmental priorities. These are decided by ministers. Local communities may have an interest in the aesthetics of the landscape, and local economic and cultural impacts, but lack the formal democratic power, practical control or financial resources to influence change. These lie with other stakeholders, principally landowners and managers (practical control), government and corporate funders (financial resources) and interest groups (financial resources or practical control). Even amongst communities with a degree of power, there can be tensions, for example between interest groups and landowners and managers.

The question we explore here is whether the changes to land use and management, expected as part of increasing climate and nature action, will create a need for new policy and mechanisms to rebalance interests between different communities. We look at who should be involved in the decisions about land that fall outside the formal planning system, why they should have a say and how this can be achieved.

In Scotland, there is an ongoing process of land reform, aiming to rebalance relationships between very large landowners and the people who live and work in and around land holdings. England and Wales do not have the same historical patterns of land ownership and tenure, but new developments in policy and private investment raise the question about whether they need a similar process.

We propose three changes that would reduce tensions within communities and make sure their



**“  
All these proposals  
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budgets.”**

benefits from altering land use and management are maximised. All these proposals can be delivered through existing policy processes and within current government budgets. They are:

### **Make it easier for communities to act on and lead change**

With policy support, community led action could play an important role in delivering national environmental goals. Giving communities greater ability to make and lead change is likely to reduce tensions.

### **Provide more incentives for commercial projects to engage with communities**

Community led projects on their own are highly unlikely to deliver the scale of change that will achieve national environmental goals. Larger government and commercial projects are needed, and these should engage communities where there is a risk that local backlash could affect the project or where significant local benefits can be delivered.

### **Improve democratic processes for better environmental outcomes**

Government policy needs to be more integrated so national and local democratic processes for setting priorities and plans around land use are connected. Requiring local plans, like Local Nature Recovery Strategies in England, to deliver a share of national environmental priorities, and ensuring that public funding is linked to the delivery of local plans, will mean the public has more input into what happens in their area.



# Britain's changing landscapes



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**Land needs to go from being a net source of greenhouse gas emissions to being a net carbon sink.”**

The dual challenges of meeting the government’s goal of a net zero carbon economy by 2050 and halting and reversing nature decline are changing what is required from Britain’s land. To meet net zero, land needs to go from being a net source of greenhouse gas emissions to being a net carbon sink. This means cutting emissions from agriculture, rewetting peatlands and storing more carbon in new woodlands, wetlands, trees and hedges.

As well as the broad net zero goal for the UK, there are separate nature goals in existence or under development in the nations. In England, the Environment Act has a Species Abundance Target, to halt the decline of nature by 2030, and then increase abundance by ten per cent by 2042.

To meet national climate and nature goals, the independent National Food Strategy review, led by Henry Dimbleby, estimated that ten per cent of land will need to be restored to semi-natural habitat by 2030 and at least 20 per cent by 2050.<sup>4</sup> The Climate Change Committee’s balanced net zero pathway shows woodlands increasing from just under 15 per cent of UK land area today to 20 per cent by 2050, with a further eight per cent of land released from agriculture for other purposes.<sup>5</sup> Our analysis shows that creating this sort of semi-natural natural habitat will increase the abundance of wildlife, as well as contributing to climate action, although more needs to be done to increase the wildlife on farmland.<sup>6</sup>

Government spending and policy in England, Scotland and Wales is changing to achieve these goals. The most significant public funding will come from the replacement of EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) subsidies, with new schemes focused on paying for environmental improvements and more sustainable production.

### Private investment is driving land use change

In addition to government spending, there is a growing role for private funding to deliver environmental objectives. In England, the government has set a target of £1 billion a year of private investment in nature’s recovery by 2030. In Scotland, the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency and the Scottish Wildlife Trust have jointly produced a

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**New natural capital markets bring new jobs and higher quality green spaces.”**

route map to £1 billion of new investment in nature conservation. These sums are in the same order of magnitude as government funding for agriculture, so they are expected to have a noticeable impact. Although Wales currently has no target, the goal set in England will also affect Wales as English companies invest in projects all over Britain to meet their obligations.

Investment in natural capital has been happening in the water industry for many years, with companies realising they can use natural solutions to meet their regulatory obligations on the quality of drinking water and wastewater treatment more cheaply, and with better environmental outcomes. Interventions like treatment wetlands or cover crops preventing agricultural run-off into water courses are often cheaper and have more co-benefits than hard infrastructure solutions using large amounts of energy and chemicals.

More recently, voluntary carbon markets have been developed, with two new standards in the UK: the Woodland Carbon Code and Peatland Code. These offer domestic businesses and individuals a way to offset emissions.

In England, the Environment Act also introduces the concept of Biodiversity Net Gain where developers pay to ensure their projects result in more biodiversity than before, including investing in nature restoration. Some businesses are also starting to recognise that supply chain risks can be managed through investment in natural capital, for example to reduce flooding or increase the resilience of agricultural production.

These new markets bring new funding opportunities to rural areas, providing new jobs and higher quality green spaces. Because of the net zero target, and the public and political focus on climate change, it is likely that action on carbon will be a significant driver of new ‘natural capital markets’. Our research estimates that the yearly value of the carbon that could be sequestered on UK land would be £1.7 billion at £50 per tonne.<sup>7</sup>

**“  
There are concerns  
about local people  
being priced out.”**

## Fear of change

However, there are risks. Media reports, for instance, have highlighted local community disquiet where corporations have bought farmland to plant trees.<sup>8</sup> There are concerns about local people being priced out and about decisions made by outsiders who are gaining at the expense of the local community. The extent of this problem is not clear. However, there is some evidence that these fears are not unfounded. Savills estimates that the price of low and average grade livestock land increased 8.8 and 8.7 per cent respectively in 2021, driven by demand for new land uses to meet environmental objectives.<sup>9</sup> Forestry values jumped by 60 per cent in the same period.

Changes to land use and management need to happen on a wide scale and fast to meet net zero and nature goals. The Financing UK Nature Initiative has produced detailed proposals for scaling up private finance to help drive change.<sup>10</sup> But this could have big implications for the people who visit, live and work in rural areas.

The UK introduced limits on private landowners' rights around the built environment in the Town and Country Planning Act 1947, which forms the basis of the current planning system. However, apart from some environmental regulations, similar limitations do not apply to other types of development and management changes, such as the conversion of agricultural land to woodland or the creation and restoration of wetlands, which may also have big impact on the national interest and local people.<sup>11</sup> The growth of new private markets altering land use has raised questions about whether this should change.

In Scotland, there is a well established debate around land use, tenancy and local communities, due to the concentration of land in a few large holdings. This has led to a land reform programme designed to rebalance power between landowners and local people. In Wales, concerns centre on the risk to culture and local economies from new private natural capital markets, with corporations from outside Wales accused of extracting and exporting value from Welsh land without regard to local preferences. The concerns driving debates in Scotland and Wales are less prominent in England, but this is likely to change.



# What is community engagement?



**“  
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land.”**

Terms such as ‘community’, ‘stakeholder’, ‘engagement’, ‘involvement’ and ‘benefit’ can be ambiguous. Here, we set out which communities are most relevant in terms of the land use changes we have described and the four different types of engagement that have been highlighted by our research. These are: involvement in project delivery; involvement in decision making; community ownership; and sharing financial benefit.

### **What we mean by ‘community’**

The communities we are concerned with in this report are those formed by people who can have an impact on, or who are impacted by, changes to land use or management.<sup>12</sup> From our examples and case studies, the main groups are:

- Landowners, farmers and land managers
- Business buyers and investors
- Delivery partners, eg NGOs
- Local residents
- Those using the area for recreation and non-local interest groups

Within each of these groups, people are not necessarily bound by a set of shared values, identity or way of thinking.<sup>13</sup> But people and organisations will usually have shared characteristics in relation to land or a land management project. For example, they may be united by the way it affects them or it may be the power and resources they have to influence change that they have in common.

Some stakeholders might fall into more than one of the groups listed. For example, farmers and land managers who choose not to take part in a project in their local area, or who cannot take part for some reason, may share more characteristics with local residents than they do with the other landowners, farmers and land managers taking part.

One characteristic shared by many projects we studied around Britain was thorough scoping and community profiling carried out at the inception of, and sometimes throughout, a project. This is to identify all those who might be affected and the extent of their involvement.

“  
Involvement in  
delivery was one  
of the main forms  
of community  
engagement.”

## Four types of community engagement

The term engagement is usually used to refer to an ongoing process of communication between groups about a project or change. It is often also used to describe interactions people and other stakeholders have with a project or process. But it can also simply mean the act of people visiting and enjoying the countryside or an environmental project.

We characterise four forms of engagement for the purposes of this report. This is important because they are applicable in different circumstances and come with a variety of benefits and costs.

### Involvement in project delivery

For many of the projects we looked at, involvement in delivery was one of the main forms of engagement. Local people are often involved in volunteering, for example to help run a project or to carry out work on the land. Many benefits derive from this, for example, enabling people to acquire new skills and jobs.

### Involvement in decision making

Involvement in decision making is often characterised on a spectrum, ranging from simply being informed about what is going on to taking the important decisions.<sup>14</sup>

#### Community engagement and impact on decisions

Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Provide balanced and objective information to the community	Receive feedback on proposed alternatives and decisions	Continue to work with the community and ensure they are consistently understood	Create equal partnerships with those involved and include them in all parts of the decision making process	Ensure the community has autonomy over how the project is run
<div></div> <div>Higher impact</div>				



**“Collaborative approaches offer opportunities for local people to take environmental action.”**

Stakeholders may be involved at different levels and points in a project. For example, in the co-design phase of the Stroud Valleys Natural Flood Management Project, those affected by flooding were heavily involved in setting up and steering the early project stages but they are less involved in technical aspects of the project as it has evolved.<sup>15</sup>

In the Tir Canol project (the successor to Summit to Sea), a process of open stakeholder workshops and drop-ins was used to gather views and ideas, with a liaison group of local organisations and individuals deciding the project's vision. A smaller co-design group, with representatives from conservation, farming, the local economy, arts and community groups then made more detailed decisions about project progress.<sup>16</sup>

“Because it's been co-designed, because we've had hundreds of people mostly locally involved, it has some kind of legitimacy because it's from local people and their vision. It's not an external vision, it's our local vision”  
Sian Stacey, Tir Canol, project development officer, RSPB

Collaborative approaches offer opportunities for local people to take environmental action. For example, Integrated Local Delivery, developed by the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group, uses trained facilitators to bring together local stakeholders to scope risks and opportunities at the landscape level which, in turn, inspires and enables communities to lead on the protection of their local environment.<sup>17</sup>

Some projects may begin with community consultations such as the Skyline Project in Wales, while others, such as Wyre Natural Flood Management Investment Readiness Project, focused limited resources first on securing the buy-in of land managers and investors, only bringing the wider community in during the later delivery phase.<sup>18</sup>

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**Local people can share direct financial benefits from projects.”**

### **Community ownership**

In some of the projects we looked at, communities or community groups came together to buy land. This is one way for them to improve their local environment. For example, the Langholm Initiative in Southern Scotland successfully raised money to buy 4,250 hectares to create the Tarras Valley Nature Reserve.<sup>19</sup> It is worth noting that community ownership of this sort does not necessarily imply ongoing involvement in delivery or decision making.

It is not just local communities but also communities of interests who might seek direct land ownership, possibly creating new tensions. For example, the community interest company Vegan Land Movement buys pasture to reduce the amount of animal agriculture and uses it to plant trees and restore nature.<sup>20</sup>

“[Ownership of the land] does make a difference because, basically, if you own the land, you can do what you like, you control what you can do, whether that’s for natural flood management or nature conservation. Without that control you are always using financial incentives which might or might not work.”

**Robin Gray, Slow the Flow**

### **Financial benefit sharing**

Local people can share direct financial benefits from the project. This could be through buying shares, where people invest small amounts in a project and potentially get a financial return. The crowdfunder for Highlands Rewilding, which raised funds to buy and manage land in Scotland, is an example of this.<sup>21</sup> Alternatively, projects might set up community funds to share proceeds. This model is being used in the Affric Highlands project, where a third of the income from selling carbon credits from tree planting will be donated to local community groups.<sup>22</sup>

# Why involve communities?



**“  
There are three  
reasons for doing  
community  
engagement:  
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and enhancing the  
lives of local  
people.”**

It is worth considering why communities should be engaged at all, to determine when and where different forms of engagement are appropriate. Broadly speaking, there are three reasons: improving delivery, local democracy and enhancing the lives of local people.

In the projects we looked at, it was clear that community engagement could enhance project delivery. Many of the stakeholders we engaged through our workshops and interviews also stressed that community engagement was important in its own right, for two reasons. First, it was asserted that people should have the opportunity to provide input on decisions that affect their lives. Second, locals should share some of the benefits, including building community cohesion and capacity, as well as financial benefits.

We explore the three reasons in more detail below.

### **Delivery benefits**

The delivery benefits of community engagement can be considered both to achieve national environmental goals and individual project goals. In both cases, community engagement can enhance delivery or it can be done to avoid opposition which harms delivery.

### **Local resources**

Engaging a community could benefit a project in terms of resources, such as providing local knowledge and expertise, or collective action, or longevity, with communities continuing the work beyond the formal partnership. This was highlighted as a major benefit by our interviewees.

For example, the Affric Highlands project aims to restore natural processes and healthy wildlife in Glen Affric, Scotland. The local community's sense of ownership (in a non-legal and financial sense) is considered vital for the project to be sustained beyond a five year time horizon.<sup>23</sup> Similar importance is placed on the role of the local community in the Carneddau Landscape Partnership Scheme in Wales.<sup>24</sup>



“The people that live and work here will be embodying the project when the project is gone and finished. They are the constant when we have five year, ten year projects coming and going with whatever grants are available.”

Abbie Edwards, Carneddau Landscape Partnership Scheme

### **Money**

Community engagement can be important to drawing in finance and investment, both from the community and from larger investors, as a strong ‘social licence’ is vital to many investors. This is the case for the Highlands Rewilding project. Its emphasis on the local community and mass ownership through its crowdfunding campaign is encouraging larger investors to get on board, providing confidence that the project will be successful and well received by locals.<sup>25</sup>

Forest Carbon, a leader in voluntary carbon woodland creation in the UK, sees it as important to go beyond standard community consultation processes to higher levels of involvement and collaboration because of the scrutiny that emerging carbon markets receive. They see community involvement as a market expectation.<sup>26</sup>

The Wyre Natural Flood Management Investment Readiness Project project also expected good community engagement to be an important factor in attracting investment.

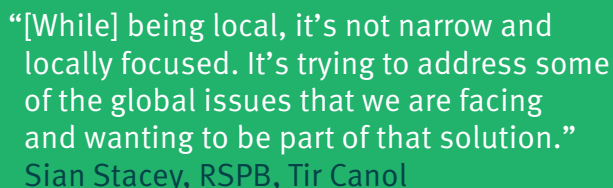
“If local community’s voices aren’t heard, there is a high risk that the corporate interest in investing in carbon projects in the UK could be impaired and it might well be that some corporates and funding they had allocated for UK projects go elsewhere.”

George Hepburne Scott, Forest Carbon

## Action

At a national targets level, communities improving their local environment could help to achieve the scale of change required. There are examples of communities buying land to plant trees, for instance. Outside Scotland, these are fairly small scale, so there would need to be a large increase in the number of projects to make a significant impact on meeting national targets. English projects include the charity Avon Needs Trees in the South West of England, which has bought land for two community woodlands of five and 14 hectares each.<sup>27</sup> Long Lands Common near Harrogate in Yorkshire is a 12 hectare project and Whistlewood Common in South Derbyshire is four hectares.<sup>28</sup>

The English tree planting target is 7,500 hectares a year by 2024 so it would take around 210 12 hectare projects a year to meet a third of the target.<sup>29</sup> Nearly 350 projects would be needed every year from 2035 to meet a third of the Climate Change Committee's higher recommended planting rates.<sup>30</sup> With 935 towns in England this would not be impossible to achieve but it would require proper funding and other support.



“[While] being local, it’s not narrow and locally focused. It’s trying to address some of the global issues that we are facing and wanting to be part of that solution.”  
Sian Stacey, RSPB, Tir Canol

## Avoiding backlash

Avoiding negative backlash from communities is obviously important for a project's success. Objections and opposition from different communities will carry different weight. For example, failure to gain buy-in from landowners and managers can cause setbacks, with long delays, higher expense and potential failure.

While there is a significant desire amongst farmers to take part in environmental schemes to respond to environmental priorities, failure to effectively engage them can lead to opposition.<sup>31</sup> For example, in 2020, after years of







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development, the multi-million pound Summit to Sea nature restoration project in mid Wales was forced to return much of its funding and effectively restart as Tir Canol, having initially failed to secure the support of local farmers.

Where landowners and managers are not involved, for example where land is purchased outright, it is less clear how significant local opposition to changes are likely to be, as landowners have freedom to decide how their land is managed. One impact of better engagement could be to make it easier to attract grants and investment. Another may be to avoid negative PR, which will be important for corporate partners.

“In Wales this is a very big political issue [with] out of area companies funding rewilding projects, forestation projects, buying up land. Now there’s a political backlash against this, which is quite strong here. To make those work and not [create] animosity, you’ve got to engage with the community and you’ve got to listen.”  
Chris Blake, Skyline

### **National influence**

The impact of local backlash on national decisions is not always clear. But there are examples of local views, or the perception of local views, influencing government policy, such as the effective bans on onshore wind and fracking in England. It is possible that this could happen with other types of land use change. Because many types of change are possible, carbon and nature projects involving land are less likely to experience a similar response as there is no single activity for opposition to coalesce around or for policy to block (see page two). Furthermore, there is now strong public support for climate action and restoring nature. But these goals will inevitably lead to landscape changes throughout the UK that concern local communities.

The benefits of good engagement with communities are clear for projects, particularly for securing resources and avoiding negative media attention.

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**New natural capital markets may not always be supported by local people or land managers.”**

There are also potential benefits in meeting national climate and nature goals, such as the creation of new land projects, but these need more policy support to scale up to the level where they make a noticeable national contribution. The likelihood of a lack of community engagement leading to wider public backlash and affecting national environmental goals might be low currently but, as change accelerates, this could change.

### **Giving people a say**

There is a fundamental question about who should make decisions about change, and how they should be made. Three significant interests are pertinent when it comes to the merits of democratic community involvement: national, local people and landowners and managers. These interests will not always be aligned and, therefore, need to be balanced democratically.

Outside the planning system which applies to built development, land use and management decisions are largely for individual landowners and managers to take, in response to market and government signals, particularly the agricultural subsidies keeping at least 40 per cent of farms in business. However, the drivers are changing, with increased emphasis on environment goals and changes to farm payments focused on environmental outcomes.

New natural capital markets may work for the national interest by helping to meet these environmental goals, but they may not always be supported by local people or land managers. The public has a remote and indirect influence on land use and management by electing the government, which then chooses a secretary of state who sets and implements the policy which influences public and private investment.

Many of the groups we interviewed consider community involvement to be an intrinsic good and a basic component of democracy.<sup>32</sup> It is embedded in the Aarhus Convention and its Protocol on Pollutant Registry and Transfers Registry.<sup>33</sup> These provide legally binding instruments that empower communities with the right to access information, participate in environmental decision making and seek justice. Public bodies, like the Forestry Commission and

Natural England, now routinely engage local communities in decisions on environmental change.<sup>34</sup> For instance, the *Natural England action plan 2022 to 2023* emphasises the importance of deploying effective community engagement in local nature recovery, new partnership building and understanding local barriers to connecting with nature.

“Just like a government should, the private sector should be aware that they have a wider responsibility to that community. I think there is a moral responsibility to work with [local communities]”

Angela Williams, Tarras Valley  
Nature Reserve

The land reform process in Scotland demonstrates acceptance of rebalancing democratic institutions around land use decisions. The same reform pressures are not evident in England and Wales. The view that community engagement is important has had limited traction in shaping private landowners’ decisions around land use changes that do not involve built development, which falls under planning. Nevertheless, the scale and impact of the land changes to come, to meet new environmental goals via private markets, may alter this over time.

In Scotland, where there is a long history of debate around land ownership and tenure, there are proposals to make compliance with the voluntary Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement, and its associated codes and protocols, mandatory for large land holdings.<sup>35</sup> This sets out a consultation process on decisions about land use that “could significantly impact on a local community”.<sup>36</sup> No set definition of ‘significant impact’ is given, but it is “taken to mean a decision that might affect the environmental, social, economic or cultural development of a community”.

The proposed Scottish Land Reform Bill also contains other measures to limit negative impacts of land changes on local communities. These include public interest tests on the transfer or sale of large land holdings and compulsory land management plans for large land holdings.

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**For some, there is a clear wish for more formal engagement around large scale changes.”**

As suggested by the use of ‘significant impact’ as the test for community engagement in Scotland, the type and scale of change is important when considering democratic reasons to engage. For example, there was little appetite in our workshops for imposing mandatory engagement requirements on farmers and land managers for what are seen as ordinary decisions about how to manage rural land, such as which crops are grown, the agricultural systems used or creation of small areas of natural habitat. Even though, in some circumstances, these could still have aesthetic, economic and cultural impacts on local people. But, for some, there is a clear wish for more formal engagement around large scale changes, such as the conversion of large tracts of farmland into woodland.

### Enhancing rural communities

Social justification for more community engagement is about balancing the benefits of changes, between the private parties involved and locals. Local communities can benefit from natural capital projects, both directly and indirectly.

Direct benefits include financial gains, such as from tourism, a rise in property values, a community fund administered by project developers and shares in the project or land. They also include enhancement of and access to green spaces, which may also improve local air quality and reduce flood risk.

“What post-industrial communities need is sustainable business models, they need jobs, they need an economic relationship with that landscape”  
Chris Blake, Skyline

Indirect benefits include enhancing the sense of community by providing greater local autonomy and listening to people as part of the project development process. Projects can provide local people with a sense of purpose, for example through volunteering, and feeling more secure about the future due to education and job creation. The Slow the Flow

natural flood management initiative in Yorkshire has helped locals find new jobs after volunteering and gain skills in land management. Many of the project leaders we interviewed also cited investment in social capital as a benefit, but this is harder to measure.

“[There’s a] sense of achievement, sense of collaboration, a sense of understanding about a process they can follow that makes them feel they are doing something positive, and it is actually making people feel valued and connected and part of a community for change.”

Jenny Phelps, Integrated Local Delivery

### When and why is community engagement desirable?

In conclusion, good community engagement of all forms has clear benefits for effective delivery at a project level. Involving local people can bring valuable ideas, knowledge and expertise, as well as volunteer labour capacity. It can attract more financial resources for projects. And it could also avoid damaging backlash.

There are also potential benefits in contributing to meeting national environmental targets with more and bigger community led projects. To increase environmental delivery, policy should encourage voluntary community engagement and help local people to take action themselves.

However, the delivery reason for engagement does not necessarily point to the need for more mandatory requirements. Policy that already exists around community action and encouraging voluntary engagement by developers is likely to be enough to avoid the scale of public backlash which would lead to failure.

Democratic reasons for community engagement depend on the country context. Scotland is shifting more decision making power away from landowners to local communities. Calls for reform of this sort have been weaker in England

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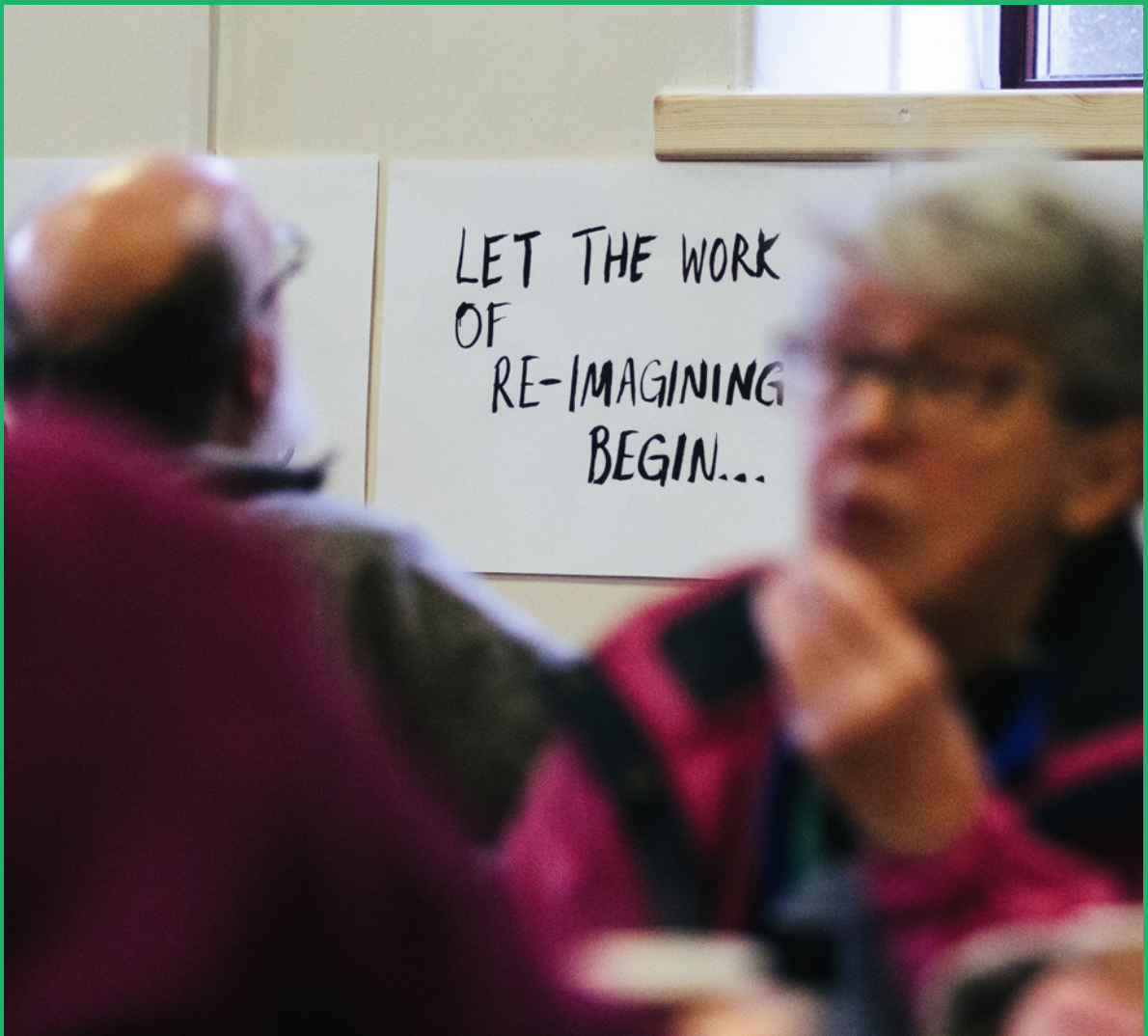
and Wales, and local interests should be balanced with national priorities and the rights of landowners.

In the short term, to satisfy democratic reasons for involving people in changes that affect them in England, there are already policy processes, such as the forthcoming Land Use Framework and Local Nature Recovery Strategies. The new Land Use Framework could set out national priorities, with Local Nature Recovery Strategies outlining how to deliver on priorities locally. An extension of the Local Nature Partnerships and Natural Resources Wales Area Statements could play a similar role in Wales. But in both nations new mechanisms are still necessary to make sure strategies have meaningful impact.

Finally, social reasons for community engagement are about sharing the financial and non-financial benefits of land changes with local people. While this might not be strictly necessary to deliver a project's goals, it may still be worth enhancing the social and economic benefits for the local area, where possible. The case for this may not be strong enough to warrant placing mandatory requirements on land use projects but encouraging voluntary approaches could result in significant local advantages without any risk of slowing down or reducing environmental delivery.

In the following section, we outline what governments and businesses could do to improve community engagement around the land use changes to come.

# How to improve community engagement in land use





**“Community involvement could slow down projects at a time when environmental imperatives demand faster action.”**

Changes to land use and management can take various forms (see page 2), and communities will have differing interests. The benefits of their involvement in delivery and the appropriate level of involvement in decisions and benefit sharing will depend on local circumstances and the type of change being made..

Involvement needs to be practical and proportionate for landowners and managers, wider communities and interested parties. And, while community involvement has many benefits, it could slow down projects at a time when environmental imperatives demand faster action. Here, as a result of our consultations, we propose three areas for improvement which should maximise the benefits of engagement while minimising the risks.

“Projects don’t always need maximum input all the time. It’s about making sure community involvement occurs at the right point of the right type of engagement.”  
Chris Uttley, Stroud Valleys Natural Flood Management Project

## **Make it easier for local communities to act on and lead change**

There are many examples of communities acting to improve their local environment. These include community land ownership, collaborative approaches bringing together multiple stakeholders and local authority led projects.

### **Community ownership**

One way communities can effect change themselves is to buy land. In Scotland, the community right to buy gives communities first refusal when land of significance to the local area comes onto the market. There is also a fund to support communities to raise the money to purchase the land. This was used by the Langholm Initiative in Southern Scotland previously highlighted, where the community group successfully raised money to buy over 4,000 hectares of land to create the Tarras Valley Nature Reserve.

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**Integrated Local Delivery brings together and values all the local stakeholders.”**

In England, communities do not have this first right of refusal, so buying land is more difficult. There are still examples of community groups buying land, but the plots are much smaller than in Scotland. Funding support is also more scarce outside Scotland. Community buy outs at Long Lands Common and Whistlewood Common relied on match funding from Co-operatives UK's Community Shares Booster Fund, but this was available because of the particular way the projects were financed and governed and would not be available to all community led projects.<sup>37</sup> Attempts to buy land of importance to local areas are not always successful. For example, the attempted community buy out of Trecadwgan Farm from Pembrokeshire County Council was unsuccessful in 2019.<sup>38</sup>

It is worth noting that these buy outs do not necessarily lead to good community engagement. Buying land is just the first step and competing priorities around how it is used and managed still need to be balanced. The tools used for this will depend on who owns the land and how the project is governed.

### **Integrated Local Delivery**

Integrated Local Delivery, developed by the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group, brings together and values all the local stakeholders, enabling communities to lead on protecting their local environment and connecting them to a range of relevant government, charitable and corporate organisations. This approach, which has proved to be successful in a number of examples, relies on highly skilled facilitators to integrate and manage the needs of the different interests working together.

### **Local authority leadership**

Sometimes projects are instigated by the local community but implemented by third parties. For example, in the Stroud Valleys Natural Flood Management project, the community demanded action to protect against flooding. In response, the local authority determined that natural flood management would be the most effective solution, employing a co-ordinator to engage landowners and farmers in implementing new measures to hold more water on the land. While the local community provided the impetus, this has been a local authority led project and

**“Commercial projects could do more to improve local engagement for the benefit of communities involved.”**

community engagement has mainly involved information provision on progress and volunteering opportunities.

### **Recommendations for regional governments**

- Governments should provide development grants and match fund community land purchases and capital works for community led natural capital projects in England and Wales. In England the government could use the existing £640 million Nature for Climate Fund. Providing £50,000 each to 200 projects per year, which could be transformative locally, would require only £10 million a year.
- A network of trained community facilitators should be funded to bring together stakeholders for collaborative natural capital projects that respond to both local and national environmental priorities. In England, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs’ (Defra’s) Food Farming and Countryside Programme should allocate £12 million a year (less than 0.5 per cent of current farming budget) to a pilot of up to 240 community facilitators working across English counties. While Welsh government funding is highly reliant on the block grant from central government, a similar approach could be set up under the Sustainable Farming Scheme being developed in Wales.

### **Provide more incentives for commercial projects to engage with communities**

Not all projects that will change land use and management for environmental goals will be led by the local community or aim to involve the community. However, commercial projects could do more to improve local engagement for the benefit of both the project and the communities involved. In some cases, it will be possible to run projects using collaborative processes, such as Integrated Local Delivery (see pages 14 and 29), and this should be done wherever possible. For example, the Riverwoods project in Scotland is aiming to develop restoration projects with commercial business models but it is inviting local communities to help design them, before selecting the projects that best match commercial needs.<sup>39</sup> Where it is not possible, there are other ways to improve engagement and share the benefits.

**“  
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### **Consultation**

Where higher levels of community involvement in decision making are not feasible or appropriate, consultation will still be useful if local community support is a priority for successful project delivery, or to satisfy the requirements of investors or grant makers. There are guidelines on how to consult around this, including from statutory bodies like the Forestry Commission and Natural England. The Scottish Land Commission has a protocol on community engagement as part of its Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement.<sup>40</sup>

### **Governance**

The local community can be embedded in a project through governance arrangements. Green Alliance, the National Trust and the consultancy 3Keel have proposed a Natural Infrastructure Delivery Organisation for managing private payments for ecosystem services projects, to be governed by a board of representatives of interested parties.<sup>41</sup> The advantage of this is that it goes some way to balancing power inequalities between corporate buyers who have the money to create change, landowners who make the decisions about changes and local people who have a strong interest but very little power. A similar approach is being used in the Wyre Natural Flood Management Investment Readiness Project, where a Community Interest Company has been set up to manage the project, with local representation on the board.

### **Volunteering**

Many of the project leaders we spoke to worked with local volunteers. For some smaller projects, they were essential. As well as benefiting the project, volunteering has a number of social benefits for local people, for instance, improving employability by providing new skills and experience.

### **Community funds**

Used extensively in the renewables sector, community funds involve project owners agreeing to donate money over the lifetime of the project to local community groups. This is the case in the Affric Highlands project, where a third of the income from selling carbon credits from tree planting will be donated locally.

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**Opportunities to use existing community partnerships and initiatives should be sought.”**

### **Share offers**

Local people can be offered shares in projects. While this has been used in community buy outs in England, some types of shares do not offer any return on investment. However, Highlands Rewilding recently launched a crowdfunding round which has enabled locals to buy ordinary shares in the project that will have a potential return on investment.

### **Recommendations to project developers and investors**

- Where possible, opportunities to use existing community partnerships and initiatives should be sought. This avoids the need to set up new processes and ensures community support from the start.
- Where initiatives do not exist or are unsuitable, project developers should assess the different forms of community engagement available. This includes considering factors such as financial and other resources, long term resilience and security of outcomes, and the avoidance of negative backlash. They should then design appropriate engagement into their project. This can include governance models that embed community involvement, without the need for broader public consultation or codesign processes upfront, which can be costly and cause delays. It can also involve sharing financial benefits which larger investors might need to secure ongoing support for a project.

### **Recommendations to governments**

- Central government should follow the Scottish government's lead and publish guidance on when engagement is appropriate and how to effectively involve communities and share benefits. This should draw inspiration from the Scottish Land Rights and Responsibilities protocol on community engagement in land decisions.
- Large scale government funded land projects should be required to follow this guidance (ie those over 500 hectares).
- Tax incentives should be offered to investors in projects that also apply this guidance, or that are community led.



## Improve democratic processes for better environmental outcomes

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**There is a new chance to outline how land use can be managed to meet national and local priorities.”**

It remains an open question as to how much, if any, rebalancing of power in decisions about land use is needed to satisfy democratic principles. This debate is most advanced in Scotland, where legislation is already proposed to require more consultation about what happens to large tracts of land. In England and Wales this is a new consideration as new natural capital markets begin to alter perceptions and expectations about what will happen to land.

The governments in England and Wales are developing policies that could affect public involvement in land use decisions. For example, in England, the government will be outlining a Land Use Framework and local authorities are developing Local Nature Recovery Strategies. In this, there is a new chance to outline how land use can be managed to meet national and local priorities.

The Land Use Framework should set out national priorities and the role land will play in delivering them, and Local Nature Recovery Strategies should give communities the chance to decide how best to respond. However, this will require a new mechanism to ensure these plans and strategies have real impact on decisions. Currently, it is not clear how they will.

### Recommendations for governments

- Local plans and frameworks, like Local Nature Recovery Strategies in England, Area Statements in Wales and Regional Land Use Partnerships in Scotland, should be required to meet national goals. In England, this could be done by clearly articulating land’s role in meeting carbon, nature, water and air quality targets under the new Land Use Framework, and allocating proportionate shares of these to local areas, based on land features. Local Nature Recovery Strategies should spell out how they will be met.
- Public funding should be linked to local plans and frameworks like the English Local Nature Recovery Strategies and Welsh Area Statements. In England, this would mean, for instance, that local prioritisation in the

Countryside Stewardship scheme would have to take the strategy into account. A similar requirement should apply to the Sustainable Farming Scheme, under development in Wales, to ensure it supports the priorities and opportunities identified in the Area Statements.

The combination of an obligation to deliver on national targets, via locally led land use plans, and requiring national funding to support those plans would significantly improve community involvement in the necessary land use changes to come. It would also ensure that community involvement is genuine and useful, and it would help to make sure that most rural land changes are supported by well directed government spending.

# Endnotes

- 1 Some types of change can fall into either category, depending on the circumstances, or constitute a grey area between the two. For example, some peat restoration can be carried out while maintaining some level of grazing or other activities, while full restoration to its natural state would require the removal of livestock and a change from agricultural to semi-natural land use. Some agri-environment scheme actions that encourage the creation of small areas of habitat constitute very small scale change on land that is staying mostly agricultural, so this can be a grey area depending on the scale of change.
- 2 Projects and initiatives interviewed: Carneddau Landscape Partnership; Burrenbeo Trust; Affric Highlands; Tarras Valley Nature Reserve; Skyline Project; Stroud Valleys Natural Flood Management Project; Wyre Natural Flood Management Investment Readiness Project; Forest Carbon; Integrated Local Delivery; Rural Urban Synthesis Society (RUSS); Slow the Flow; Tir Canol. More information about the projects and approaches referred to in this report can be found on the Green Alliance website at: [green-alliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Green-expectations-summary-of-projects-and-initiatives.pdf](https://green-alliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Green-expectations-summary-of-projects-and-initiatives.pdf)
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- 6 Green Alliance, January 2023, *Shaping UK land use: priorities for food, nature and climate*; Green Alliance, August 2022, *Land of opportunity: a new land use framework to restore nature and level up Britain*
- 7 Green Alliance, 2022, *Natural capital: the battle for control*, p 17
- 8 ITV News, 10 February 2022, “‘Save our valley’: Villagers in Cwrt-y-Cadno fighting proposals to plant trees on agricultural land’
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- 11 It is rare for people to be given formal legal rights in decisions around natural capital land use change, which falls outside the formal planning system. In England and Wales, communities will generally only have rights to see and comment on plans, if change constitutes development (eg if it involves extensive engineering works). There are environmental regulations which place some limits on natural capital land use changes, such as the need to carry out an Environmental Impact Assessment for woodland planting over a certain size, but these do not generally have any wider community engagement requirements attached. In Scotland, new woodland proposals require stakeholder engagement if they receive government grant support, with affected communities, at a minimum, having a right to see and comment on plans, see: Scottish Forestry, 2017, *Woodland creation: application guidance*.
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- 14 A Georgoulas and L Messely, op cit
- 15 Green Alliance interview with Chris Uttley, Stroud District Council, 26 October 2022
- 16 Green Alliance interview with Sian Stacey, RSPB Cymru, 3 November 2022
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- 26 Green Alliance interview with George Hepburne Scott, Forest Carbon, 11 November 2022
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#### **Photo credits**

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