

APSE Report 2025

Rewilding for the Future

Can local authorities deliver rewilding in an urban setting?

Insights and best practice examples from UK local authorities

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Rewilding for the future

Insights and best practice from local councils



What is re-wilding?

'The large-scale restoration of ecosystems to the point where nature is allowed to take care of itself.' **Rewilding Britain**

Rewilding is comprehensive, often large-scale, conservation effort focused on restoring sustainable biodiversity and ecosystem health by protecting:

core wild/wilderness areas,

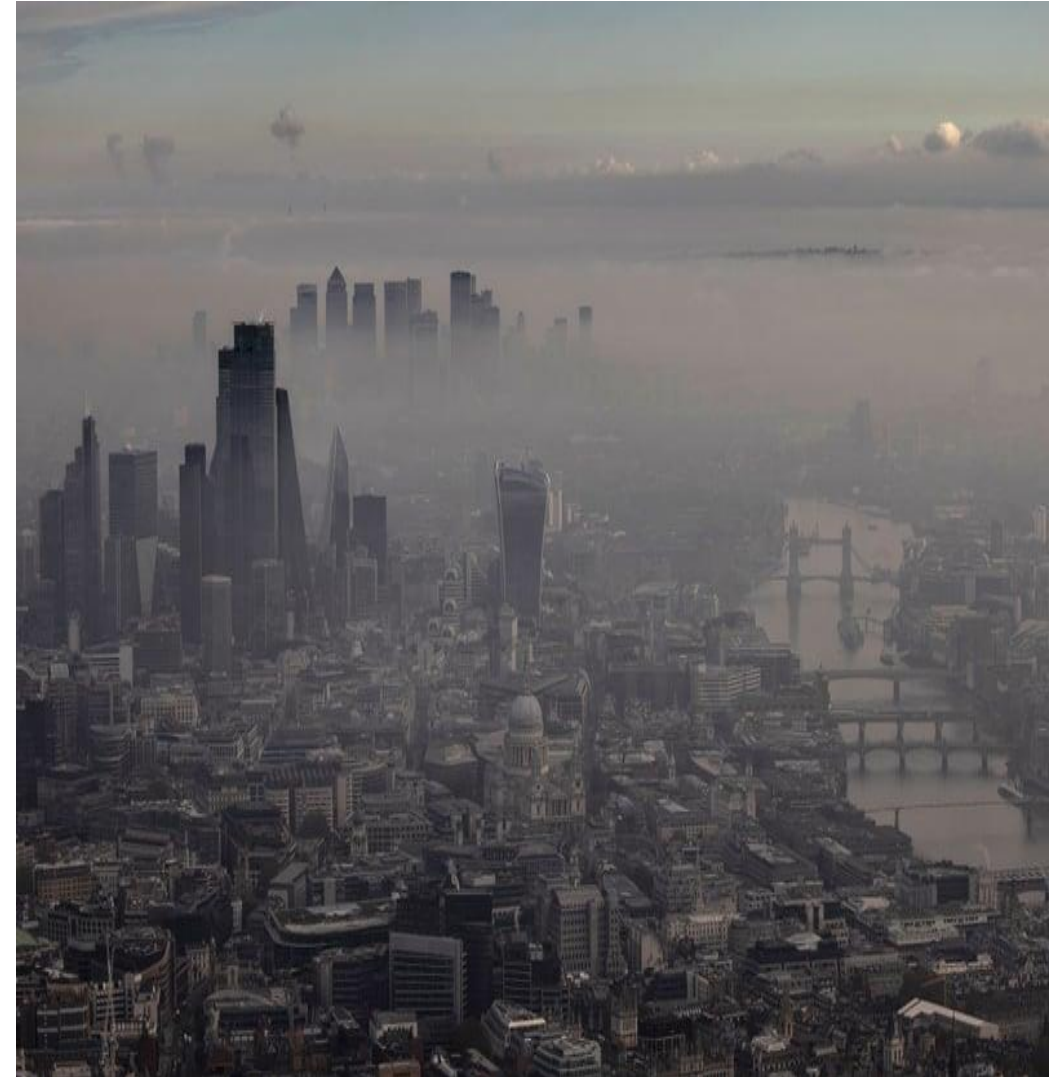
connectivity between such areas,

protecting or reintroducing **apex predators** and highly interactive species (keystone species).

The vision is of dynamic but stable self-regulating and self-sustaining ecosystems with near pre-human levels of species diversity that require little or no human intervention or management

Why re-wild?

- By 2050 over two-thirds of the global population will live in urban areas which will need to be resilient to the impacts of climate change, embracing the natural world will be one way to achieve this.
- The UK has lost large areas of natural spaces and with it has seen a large decline in biodiversity levels.
- Over two-thirds of the UK is now used for agriculture and 8% is built on
- Between 1970 and 2013, 56% of species in the UK declined.
- Helps ameliorate impacts of climate change.

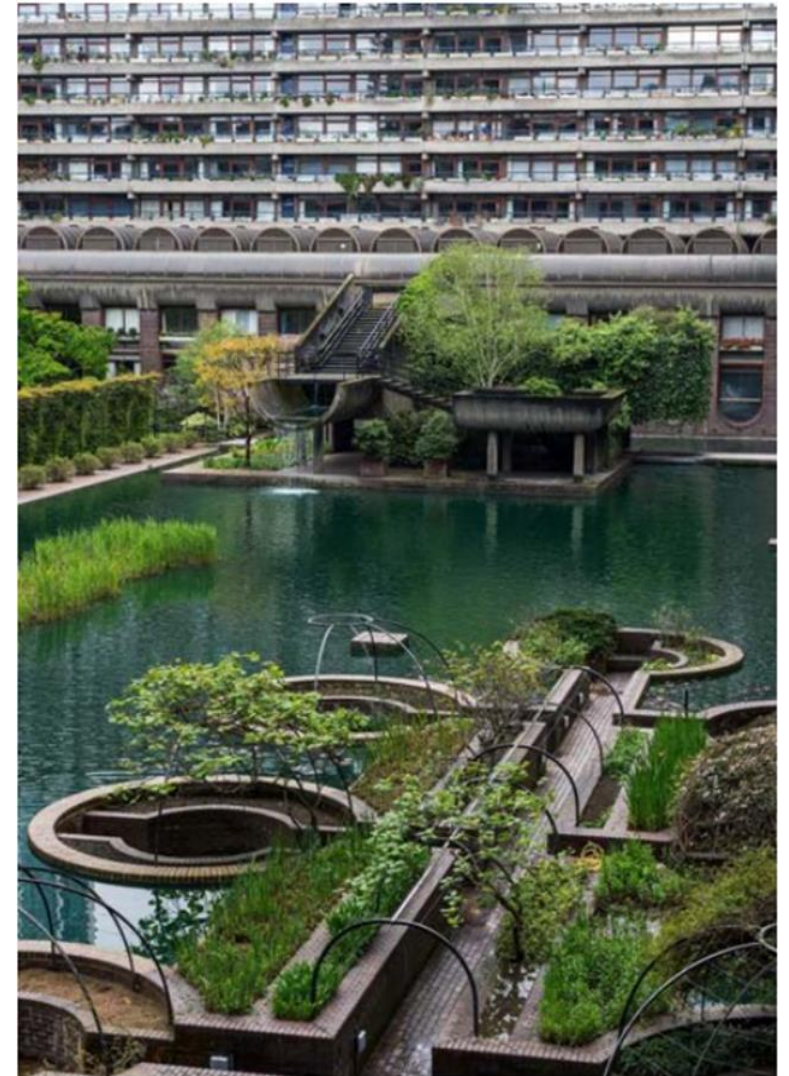


The Growing problem of 'Nature deficiency'

- Nature-deficit disorder (NDD) describes the human costs of spending less time in nature, resulting in negative effects on mental and physical health, (reduced attention spans, higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses, and diminished use of the senses).
- Worry that plummeting biodiversity levels and worldwide threats to greenspace environments there is a danger that we are facing an '**extinction of experience**'.
- Potential for public indifference to the decline in nature makes it harder to address wider environmental issues such as climate change.
- The American ecologist and author Robert Pyle wrote, '***What is the extinction of the condor to a child who's never known a wren***'
- We need to look at how we can play a part in the idea of re-establishing the natural ecosystems which our 'civilised' lifestyles have damaged or destroyed.
- No matter how small our contribution is, there is no reason not to try to redress the imbalance.

Urban Greening and Biophilic design

- Fewer than 1 in 10 children now play in wild spaces around their homes, because it is estimated that these spaces have shrunk by 90% since the 1970's.
- Some councils are struggling to provide such spaces due to increasing demands for housing, economic development and shrinking greenspace budgets.
- The way we design our cities and greenspaces is beginning to include designs which connects people to nature by incorporating direct and indirect elements of the natural world into buildings and communities
- Natural light, air, plants, natural materials, and patterns that mimic nature are all being used to help re-establish the connection with nature. – 'biophilic design'.



The Barbican Centre, London – biophilic design in practice

If not re-wilding, then what?

Until now rewilding, which is by its very nature tends to be a large-scale effort, has been concentrated in the countryside and rural areas.

More recently, however, there have been a number of projects and local movements pushing for more urban rewilding and at a smaller scale.

By creating urban '*micro-rewilding*' projects there will be an ability to connect such spaces and create nature corridors throughout the landscape.

Micro-rewilding can offer many benefits such as reducing flood risk, improving air quality, and countering the urban heat island effect.

Perhaps most importantly it can be seen as **achievable**



So where do local authorities stand in relation to re-wilding?

Recent study stated that 21% of councils in the UK said they were 're-wilding' or had plans to do so in the future.

Not every council has the potential or resources to undertake large scale landscape re-wilding. and often councils do not have the same understanding or definition of what re-wilding is nor how they can apply it.

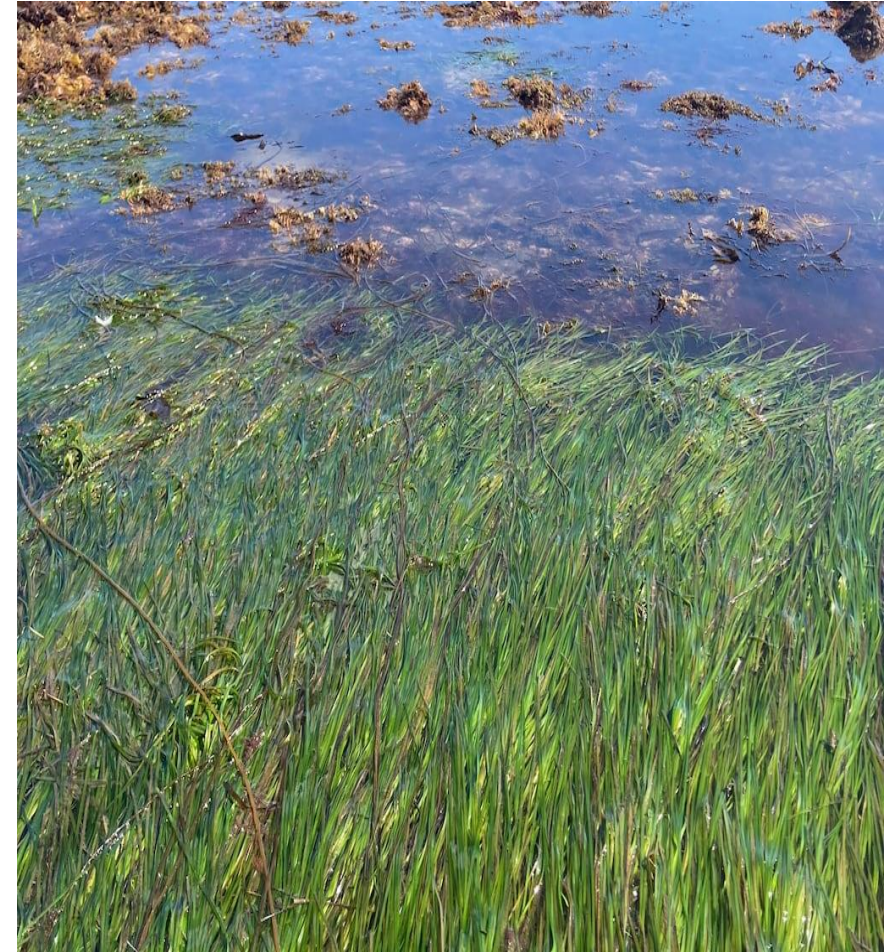
Scale and public acceptance are often the biggest concern.

Large Scale rewilding, urban rewilding and micro rewilding – what's in a name?



Case Studies – Regional to local

- Peat bog restoration in Northumbria, Cumbria, Lancashire, Yorkshire and Greater Manchester – carbon sequestration, purify and store water, alleviate flooding risk and provide unique wildlife habitats.
- Returning Swindale Beck in Cumbria to its original course has led to the return of salmon and trout as well as increasing the quality of aquatic habitats in the river and reducing the potential for flooding downstream.
- Creating Highly Protected Marine Areas by banning fishing and any activities which may damage the seabed. **South Tyneside Stronger Shores Project.** focusing on nature-based solutions for coastal resilience and habitat restoration like kelp beds, oyster reefs and seagrass..



Local Authorities and rewilding – APSE Survey findings (2024)

- Redesigning grassland management operations to create species rich grasslands and associated wildflower areas.
- Hedgerow planting and protection of tree copses and planting of native tree species
- Restoration and enhancement of existing woodlands.
- Creation of pollinator gardens to act as green infrastructure links to other greenspace areas.
- Reviewing parks and greenspace areas to promote opportunities for greater biodiversity levels.
- Creating scrapes in wet areas to improve opportunities for invertebrates, frogs and other amphibians.
- Beaver and willow tit/warbler reintroduction.
- Peatland and wetland restoration.
- Building natural flood management defence systems.
- Dune restoration.

10 steps to urban rewilding

Urban spaces are entirely human construct but with some innovative thinking, these could be altered to create novel but functioning ecosystems.

- 1. Established green spaces must be managed, at least in part, with wildlife in mind.**
- 2. We must understand what biodiversity we already have.**
- 3. Management of our largest green spaces should be altered to help them reach their ecological potential.**
- 4. Our urban areas must be considered as a microcosm of what we want to achieve in the wider landscape.**
- 5. Within the confines of urban areas, we must be practical about what is feasible.**
- 6. Raise awareness and the benefits of rewilding.**
- 7. Rewilding people must be at the heart of Urban Rewilding.**
- 8. No space is too small to be valuable.**
- 9. Talk to neighbours and partners about connectivity.**
- 10. Promote success.**

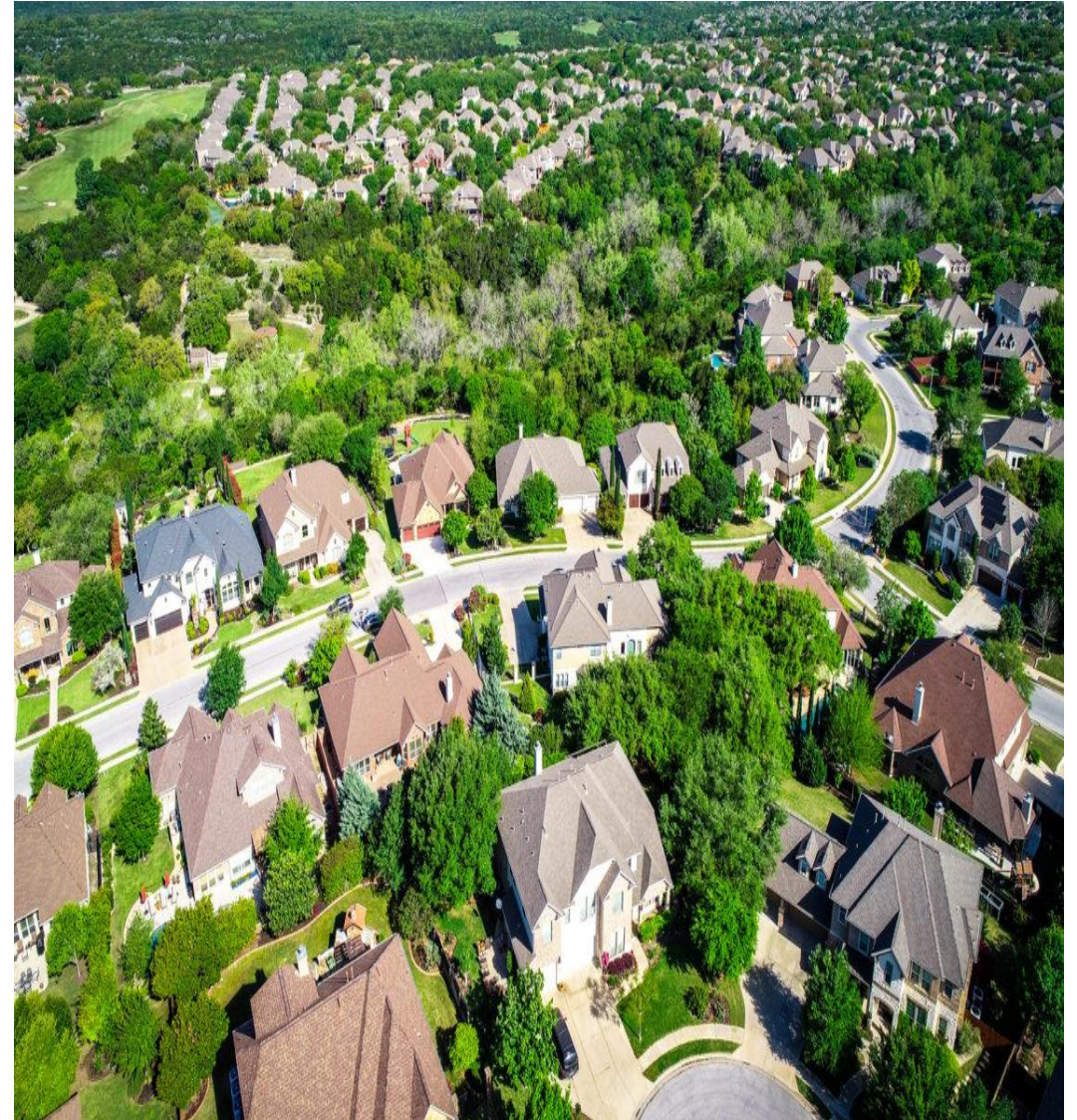
Rewilding our residents.

Gardens cover about a quarter of many cities, and rows of gardens can form a habitat corridor, potentially linking up wider green spaces like parks, as well as allotments, school playing fields, cemeteries, and other places that can be of value to wildlife.

In urban environments, largely due to a lack of access, and opportunities for contact, many people have forgotten how to co-exist with wildlife.

Through smaller and more local micro-rewilding efforts, these relationship can be restored.

Many local authorities and wildlife charities are now providing help and advise on how to rewild gardens.



Conclusions

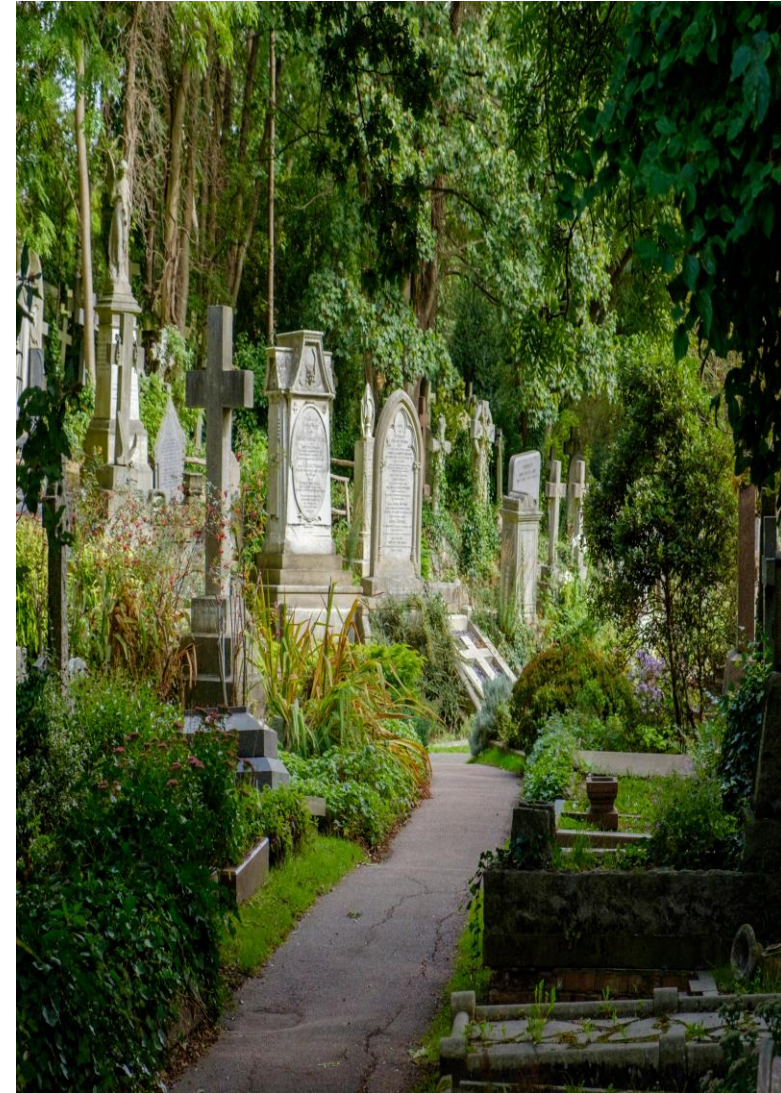
It is probably unrealistic to expect modern society to give up its way of life, but what can be considered is how we balance our lifestyles to become more environmentally sustainable and in doing so giving a higher value to the natural world.

Urban rewilding isn't always about large wilderness areas but about creating networks of smaller green spaces, like private gardens, parks, and even disused railway lines.

Through small-scale actions, such as planting wildflowers or creating ponds, changing our greenspace operations and management regimes, we can contribute significantly to larger wildlife networks, support a wider range of biodiversity and help mitigate the impacts of climate change.

Rewilding is not about removing humans from the landscape. It is more about reconnecting us with the natural world, its ecosystems and natural cycles.

Make the connections



A Final thought

“We moved from being a part of nature to being apart from nature”.

David Attenborough