Social accountability for place-based nature recovery

A scoping study for Natural England

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Natural England Commissioned Report NECR585

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Foreword

This work was commissioned to explore the potential for a social accountability approach to accelerate nature recovery, how far elements of that approach already exist within existing policies and projects, and what can be built on. The aim is to provide evidence to support better long-term public engagement and oversight of delivery against place-based commitments.

Natural England commission a range of reports from external contractors to provide evidence and advice to assist us in delivering our duties. The views in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of Natural England.

Executive summary

Nature recovery is a priority for the UK government, and public engagement is conceived of as an important enabling factor towards that aim (Defra Social Science Expert Group, 2022; Hafferty, 2022). A number of commitments on transparency, accountability, and citizen involvement are made in relevant policies, including the 25 Year Environment Plan 2018, and the Environmental Improvement Plan 2023.

This paper reports on a scoping study conducted in 2023-2024 focused on one approach to public engagement in policy and delivery – social accountability. The aim was to provide Natural England with new insights on **the potential for a social accountability approach to accelerate nature recovery, how far elements of that approach already exist, and what could be built on in the future**. The study was commissioned by Natural England and undertaken by researchers at the Institute of Development Studies, based at the University of Sussex. The research primarily involved interviews and workshop discussions with experts from Natural England, the Environment Agency, Local Authorities, and others. We focused particularly on three policy initiatives prioritised by a steering group – Biodiversity Net Gain, Local Nature Recovery Strategies, and Landscape Recovery Schemes.

What is social accountability?

Social accountability is a term popularised in the field of international development, where it has been studied extensively. It refers to ways that the public and civil society organisations can hold authorities and responsible parties accountable for their actions through social participation, engagement and mobilisation, and through this improve the delivery of public services and policy goals. Responsible parties include government and government agencies, but also relevant actors in the private and non-profit sector. Authorities play a crucial role not only in engaging with the public on these terms, but in creating a positive enabling environment for accountability.

Social accountability is one way of cultivating public accountability more broadly. It became prominent as a way to address some of the weaknesses identified in the conventional public accountability mechanisms of elections, parliamentary oversight, and inter-agency oversight and challenge. Social accountability seeks to use more direct channels of accountability between the public and those delivering on public policy, services or goods, complementing what are seen as the ‘long route’ channels of representation through electoral democracy.

Social accountability aims to enable more real-time engagement between the public and authorities and responsible parties on what is being done and whether it is working. The logic of social accountability is that these kinds of engagements can bolster incentives for delivery, and in the process improve public relationships with authorities and responsible parties.

Taking forward this logic, social accountability approaches commonly involve:

a) Monitoring by the public of how policies, regulations and programmes are being delivered 'on the ground',
b) creation of new spaces for ongoing engagement by members of the public with authorities or those delivering services, and
c) ongoing engagement over time, rather than one-off actions or consultations.

These characteristics distinguish social accountability approaches from other forms of public or community engagement in public policy. Most notably, the logic of social accountability is different from public engagement in consultation and decision-making, because it focuses on whether commitments or obligations of particular actors have been followed through and are making a difference. That said, other forms of engagement can lay the ground for social accountability to emerge at a later point.

Why is social accountability relevant to nature recovery?

Social accountability has been the focus of significant research and learning in many countries over recent decades. Studies, including systematic reviews and meta-analysis, have shown that under the right conditions, social accountability approaches can:

- **Improve public service delivery**, particularly at the 'frontline' or at the local level. Reviews have consistently found that social accountability processes can help the public and those providing services or public policy actions to agree on what constitutes a good quality service or policy response, and through ongoing engagement over commitments and actions taken, accelerate progress towards those quality standards.
- **Effectively engage the public in collective problem-solving and proactive efforts to resolve public policy challenges**, leading to joint actions, increased citizen support for action, and increased public contributions to solutions.
- **Improve relationships between the public and service providers or decision-makers** at the local or service-delivery level.

Research has also explored what is important for social accountability to work well. The evidence highlights the importance of tapping into shared interests and incentives between the public and authorities, the benefits of proactive support from authorities to open up engagement opportunities, and the role of third parties in helping the public to organise activities and use information.

There is limited literature and evidence on the uses of social accountability specifically in relation to the natural environment and ecological change. But research on other forms of citizen engagement on these issues offers relevant insights on what might be important for it to work.

Greater citizen participation on the natural environment has been shown to change attitudes and the willingness of participants to support pro-environment policies, potentially catalysing change. However, evidence suggests the need to understand different publics

and their motivations and capacities to engage, and to recognise that action might be needed by authorities to enable good engagement. Also evidenced is that successful engagement requires a degree of power-sharing or delegation of power through new forms of participation. Finally, whilst engaging the public in gathering and interpreting data and information is very important, initiatives framed largely to generate data rather than inform dialogue and collaboration are less likely to drive change.

Our findings

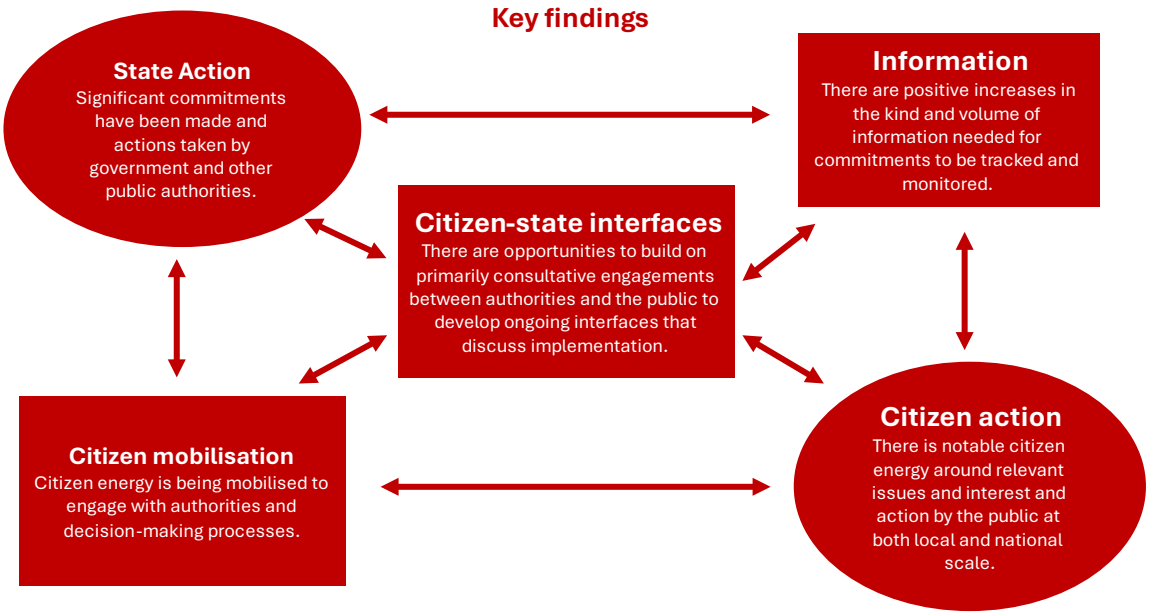
This short scoping study did not find any existing examples of social accountability for place-based nature recovery to learn from directly. However, we found that many of the relevant building blocks or conditions for social accountability are in place or being developed in particular initiatives, offering potential.

We concluded this by analysing our findings through a framework developed for the World Bank. This framework sees social accountability as the interaction of five components: 'the interplay of both state and citizen action, supported by three "levers": information, interface, and civic mobilization' (Grandvoinnet et al 2015: 3).

We found that significant commitments have been made and actions taken by government and other responsible parties towards nature recovery, signalling positive **state action**. There is notable public energy and action on nature issues at both local and national scale, demonstrating a level of **citizen action**. We saw evidence of increases in the kind and volume of **information** needed for those policy commitments to be tracked and monitored. We also saw that public energy is being mobilised to support these kinds of engagements, including by mediating organisations such as environmentally focused NGOs, which indicates the presence of **civic mobilisation**. In relation to **citizen-state interfaces,** there are opportunities to build on primarily consultative or irregular interfaces between authorities and the public to create longer term engagements that enable the public to play a role in accountability processes. Figure 1 below captures these headline findings.

Although the potential is there, we concluded that these positive elements are not joined up in ways that enable routine social accountability processes. Our interviews also highlighted a number of perceived barriers to use of social accountability approaches in the nature recovery sector. Some of these barriers, such as a general lack of social and political engagement, or disillusionment with public decision-making, are long-term and difficult to shift. Some, such as the complex accountability relationships in the sector, can be navigated. Others, such as fears of increasing public scrutiny or a lack of publicly usable progress data, could potentially be reduced. It would be important to address these potential barriers in designing new social accountability processes.

Figure 1: Key findings



Implications and recommendations

We make five recommendations:

a) **Pilot and experiment at initiative level**. Based on this review we see good reasons and opportunities to test social accountability approaches in certain policy areas.

b) **Enhance current engagement and participation efforts.** There are opportunities to extend current practices to open up the potential for social accountability, for example in Local Nature Recovery Strategies.

c) **Integrate social accountability insights into governance plans.** The potential gains from a social accountability approach could be explored in several other policy areas– for example development and management of designated areas, catchment-based initiatives on water management, catchment sensitive farming, and programmes of work on green infrastructure.

d) **Strengthen the enabling environment for social accountability.** Actions such as improving transparency and information-sharing practices and clarifying different responsibilities in the sector would support more social accountability.

e) **Socialise and champion the potential of social accountability for nature recovery**. As a relatively novel approach, we recommend further work to engage others who care about nature recovery in the discussion on how social accountability could make a difference.

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Glossary

Accountability	A relationship where someone – an individual or an organisation – has an obligation to explain their actions to another individual, group or organisation, and have their actions judged.
Duty Bearers	Those that have identifiable responsibilities towards the public - a duty to do certain things. It is broader than government, as others, like businesses or community groups, might also have these responsibilities towards the public.
Downstream engagement	Citizen engagement and participation after policy decisions have been taken on the implementation of policy or plans.
Engagement	Working with others, such as individuals, communities and organisations, in a two-way process.
Mobilisation	Organising and supporting groups of people to participate or take action
Public engagement	Ways that organisations invite the public to participate in discussion and decisions.
Responsible parties	Similar to duty-bearers (see above), individuals or organisations that have identifiable obligations towards the public.
Social accountability	Ways that the public and civil society organisations can hold authorities and other responsible parties accountable for their actions through social participation, engagement and mobilisation.
Social participation	People coming together to discuss and act on public problems or challenges, or mutual support.
Upstream engagement	Citizen engagement and participation before policy decisions.

Introduction

Nature Recovery is a priority for the UK government, and public engagement is seen as an important way of enabling it (Defra Social Science Expert Group, 2022; Hafferty, 2022). A number of commitments on transparency, accountability, and citizen involvement are made in key policies, including the 25 Year Environment Plan 2018, and the Environmental Improvement Plan 2023. This paper reports on a scoping study conducted in 2023-2024 exploring a particular approach to public engagement in policy – social accountability – and its potential to advance nature recovery efforts.

Background and definitions

Researchers at the Institute of Development Studies were commissioned by Natural England to undertake research into how social accountability approaches might support place-based nature recovery. The research took place from September 2023 – March 2024.

Social accountability refers to ways that the public and civil society organisations can hold authorities and other responsible parties accountable for their actions through social participation, engagement and mobilization, enhancing or adding impetus to the delivery of public services and goods in the process.[1] Responsible parties – sometimes referred to as duty-bearers – include government and government agencies, and relevant actors in the private and non-profit sector. As well as being accountable for some actions themselves, authorities also play a crucial role in creating a positive enabling environment for social accountability.

Social accountability is one way of cultivating public accountability more broadly. It was popularised as a way to address some of the weaknesses identified in the conventional accountability mechanisms of elections, parliamentary oversight, and inter-agency oversight and challenge. Social accountability seeks to use more direct channels of accountability between the public and those delivering on policy, public services or goods, complementing what are seen as the 'long route' channels of representation through electoral democracy. This aims to overcome the challenge of delegation – that much of what the public care about is the responsibility of arms-length bodies, the private sector, local government, or some combination – rather than solely central government. It also aims to enable more real-time engagement between the public and authorities and responsible parties on what is being done and whether it is working. The logic of social accountability is that these kinds of engagements can bolster incentives for delivery, and in the process improve public relationships with authorities and responsible parties.

[1] Our own definition, drawing particularly on Malena, Forster & Singh (2004) and Joshi & Houtzager (2012).

Based on the obligations or commitments of authorities and responsible parties, social accountability approaches focus on *actions taken or not taken*. This distinguishes them from public engagement in decision-making or policy formulation – although such engagement can lay the ground for social accountability at a later point. The terminology of 'upstream'/ 'downstream' is sometimes used in citizen engagement and participation literature to refer to phases of policy process that lie before or after the actual policy decision. Consultation is often focused on decision making during 'upstream' engagement, whilst social accountability processes include a focus on 'downstream'.

Although not frequently used in the UK context, the term social accountability is common in the field of international development. Significant efforts have been made to establish social accountability processes in many countries in recent decades. This has led to social accountability being studied extensively, particularly in the Global South. Under the right conditions, social accountability approaches have been shown to have positive impacts on service delivery and public engagement with authorities, and effectively engage the public in proactive efforts to resolve public policy challenges. However, their use and impacts in relation to the natural environment has been relatively little studied.

Many different social accountability tools, methodologies and approaches have been developed and promoted.[2] These commonly involve:

a) **Monitoring by the public of how policies, regulations and programmes are being delivered 'on the ground'.** Examples of this include community members gathering and aggregating information on service quality or activity; the condition of roads, the environment, or buildings; people's experiences of engaging with a particular service or issue; progress of implementation; private contractors' actions, and the use of public funds. This can be done through site visits, surveys, interviews, or participatory scoring, sometimes with service providers themselves. This supplements and sometimes becomes incorporated into official data, where it can shed light particularly on marginalized populations' needs and interests.

b) **Creation of new spaces for ongoing public engagement with authorities or institutions or those delivering services.** Examples include 'interface' meetings where people share feedback or their experiences or the data they've collected, opportunities to engage in collective prioritization based on performance, engagement of citizens in decision-making processes such as 'citizen's juries', or regular 'town hall' meetings where questions from the public can be addressed and commitments followed up on.

c) **Ongoing action over time, rather than one-off engagements** because of a focus on tracking delivery and implementation and improving governance relationships.

[2] For examples see SDG Accountability Handbook: A Practical Guide for Civil Society; https://www.wvi.org/social-accountability/our-approach; World Bank's Sourcebook for 21 Social Accountability Tools; UNESCO IIEP's Public expenditure Tracking Surveys: Lessons from Experience

These characteristics tend to distinguish social accountability approaches from other forms of public or community engagement in public policy. Some of the methodologies are similar to those used in other participatory governance mechanisms such as citizen juries, and citizen assemblies, though these are more often used ‘upstream’ on decision making, rather than delivery.

Our research explored the potential for social accountability approaches to stimulate more effective long-term public engagement with, and oversight of, place-based nature recovery efforts in the UK, with a particular focus on England. As a scoping study, the aim was not to fully prove this potential, but instead to explore possibilities and existing practices and experiences within the nature recovery space.

Method

Our research was overseen by a Steering Group convened in August 2023. The Steering Group involved seven members of staff from Natural England and one from the Environment Agency (see Appendix 1: Participants).

At a kick-off meeting in mid-September the Steering Group agreed the initial approach to the research. We agreed to use a qualitative inquiry method focused on gathering the views, experience, and insights of expert practitioners, defined as a person with extensive knowledge or ability based on their experience, research or occupation. We focused data-gathering and gaining expert insider insights on three specific policy areas – Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG), Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS), and Landscape Recovery Schemes (LRS). These were selected as important strategic initiatives in delivering nature recovery, being relatively early in their development, and involving a range of stakeholders external to Natural England.

During October – December 2023 we conducted 21 interviews that included 26 individuals. A first set of interviewees were proposed by the Steering Group given the anticipated value of their perspectives and experiences. They included experts on the chosen policy areas, people across different institutional positions with Natural England, and people working in other relevant organisations. We asked early interviewees for recommendations on others to interview, thus snowball sampling to find others with relevant insights.

Of those interviewed, 16 were staff members of Natural England, and 4 from the Environment Agency. There was one interviewee from an Environment-focused NGO (Groundwork), one from a private sector developer (Mott MacDonald), two from Local Authorities, and two from DEFRA. We spoke with seven interviewees who worked mainly on Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS), four with specific expertise on Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG), and five involved with Landscape Recovery Schemes (LRS). The remaining interviewees offered wider insights.

Interviews were on condition of anonymity, so in reporting our findings we identify their institutional affiliations or roles only where that doesn't identify them. A participant information sheet was shared prior to interviews identifying the purposes of the study, interviewees' right to withdraw, and our approach to confidentiality and anonymity. The research was approved by the Institute of Development Studies ethics approval process.

Interviews were semi-structured. We posed a set of core questions to all interviewees that covered:

- The key accountability challenges they perceived in relation to nature, and nature recovery, in UK at present.
- Where they saw significant popular energy around issues to do with the natural environment, and how far these might provide opportunities for increasing citizen oversight of nature policy and its implementation.
- What strategic opportunities they saw for introducing greater citizen engagement in policy delivery (specific policy areas or commitments, legal frameworks and duties, or upcoming changes).
- What barriers they saw to developing more opportunities for citizen oversight of nature recovery.
- Key lessons from their experience in relation to (i) engaging people in nature recovery and (ii) accountability for nature and nature recovery.

We supplemented these questions with others specific to the role, expertise, or positioning of the interviewee, or adjusted phrasing to relate to the specific initiative in which they had expertise. We asked follow-up questions in relation to specific examples, views shared, or to understand the dynamics of the sector.

Prior to interviews we shared a short technical note to clarify our working definitions of social accountability and the main interests of the research. Interviews were supported by document review of key policies relating to the three focus policy areas. Several interviewees supplied additional documentary evidence subsequent to our discussions, which we also reviewed.

Alongside the interview and document review process we conducted a literature review. This covered academic and grey literature published since 2008, and was conducted through multiple keyword searches of Google Scholar, supplemented by searches for additional material cited in relevant sources (see Appendix 2). Given our team's knowledge of the evidence related to social accountability broadly, our literature review was designed to fill gaps relevant to this study.

We looked for evidence of the explicit application of social accountability approaches to policy issues related to the natural environment and expanded this search to include relevant evidence on outcomes of public participation in nature recovery and conservation efforts more generally. Given the dominant use of the idea and language of social accountability in development studies and thus in evidence from the Global South, we

searched specifically for examples from the Global North. We made a number of exclusions based on our experience, for example excluding the body of work covering accountability of extractive industries that we knew to have limited relevance. These searches found, grouped, and initially analysed headline findings from 77 sources. We identified 21 sources for in depth analysis based on relevance to this study. The main messages from this review of existing evidence are detailed in Section 2 below.

We analysed the information gathered through interviews first by coding inductively for themes in answers to the core questions. We also coded and organised interview content and material from our document review against an existing framework that identifies the component parts of social accountability processes.

In January 2024 we brought together the Steering Group with selected interviewees in a one-day workshop designed to share, validate, and deepen findings from the analysis. In the workshop we fed back initial findings for discussion and engaged participants in collective analysis through participatory groupwork. 12 people participated in this workshop (see Appendix 1: Participants), and in this report we include insights gathered there alongside those from interviews, in particular in our discussion of strategic implications and opportunities for nature recovery policy and initiatives. This final report was produced in consultation with the Steering Group and workshop participants, and we are grateful for their inputs and expertise.

Literature review

In this section we summarise findings from our review of academic and grey literature. We start by summarising an existing evidence base which suggests that, under the right conditions, social accountability approaches can lead to improvements in the delivery of public policy. The great majority of this evidence comes from the field of development studies and thus policy contexts in the Global South. The evidence base largely relates to the delivery of specific public services, rather than broad policy areas, such as the approach to the natural environment. Given this, we go on to discuss the results of a literature review conducted specifically for this scoping study. This review looked at the evidence for social accountability or similar processes a) specifically in relation to nature recovery and ecological policy outcomes, and b) specifically in the Global North. We found relatively little literature directly identifying cases of social accountability processes being used for natural environment goals. However, we did find examples of associated processes of public engagement which offer important lessons and highlight relevant issues.

What does the evidence say about social accountability approaches in general?

Social accountability has been the focus of significant research in the international development field. Across this large body of work, which includes systematic reviews and meta-analysis, there is evidence that under the right conditions social accountability approaches can:

- **Improve public service delivery**, particularly at the 'frontline' or at the local level. Reviews have consistently found that social accountability processes help the public and those providing services or public policy actions to agree on what constitutes a good quality service or policy response. They can then accelerate progress towards those quality standards through ongoing engagement over policy commitments and actions taken to pursue them (Anderson et al 2020).
- **Effectively engage the public in collective problem-solving and proactive efforts to resolve public policy challenges**, leading to joint actions, increased citizen support for action, and increased public contributions to solutions (Anderson et al 2020).
- **Improve relationships between the public and service providers or decision-makers at the local or service-delivery level,** though fewer studies show larger-scale improvements in governance relationships (Lodenstein et al 2013).

Illustrative examples include:

- A randomised control trial in Madagascar showed interventions led by the local school community (parents, community members and teachers) were effective in improving teacher behaviour, school attendance and test scores – more effective than district and provincial government-led interventions[i] (Lassibille et al 2010)

- The use of social accountability tools to monitor health service access and quality in Maharashtra State, India, improved health system responsiveness to users' needs and entitlements (Shukla et al 2023)

Research has also explored the conditions and design features that are important for these benefits to be seen. Approaches that tap into shared interests and incentives between the public or community and a service provider or authority are particularly beneficial. For example, where social accountability initiatives in the health sector have added public pressure to actions that health service workers also agreed were service priorities (Lodenstein et al 2017).

Other enabling conditions have been shown to be important to underpin social accountability (Fox, 2016, Joshi et al 2014, Gebremedhin 2023, Grandvoinnet et al 2015). They include:

- action by authorities to open up engagement with citizen groups, their experiences, and perspectives
- a focus on issues that the public care about and think can change
- facilitation and enabling of public involvement, going beyond simply providing information and assuming action will follow, and
- designing initiatives in ways that join up different actions across the system of decision-making, not only in specific localised sites.

In our later analysis we use a framework developed for understanding enabling conditions for social accountability to analyse the nature recovery policy area.

Findings from relevant initiatives on the natural environment

Given the focus of the existing social accountability research on processes that target public services such as health and education, we undertook an additional review of literature and evidence specifically for this scoping study. We were purposively looking for evidence from applications of social accountability to the natural environment, and environmental policy. Given that the term is not as common in all disciplines and geographical areas of study, we extended this to exploring the accountability aspects of public participation processes described in other ways. We also purposively sought out evidence from contexts of the Global North.

A first observation is that there is limited literature on the uses of social accountability specifically in relation to the natural environment and ecological change. As noted above, the greatest weight of evidence on social accountability initiatives focuses on services delivered directly to the public (such as health, education, and government administrative services). To illustrate this, a comprehensive review on 'social accountability for water' for an international development donor predominantly found evidence on issues of domestic water supply and sanitation services, rather than the management of water resources, or ecological factors (Brown et al 2022, Hepworth et al 2020 and Hepworth et al 2021).

The apparent gap in evidence may also result from how processes are described or labelled. We expanded our review to incorporate other forms of public participation and community engagement.

We found a substantial body of work on **community-based management** of the natural environment. Much of this literature explores community involvement in place-based environmental strategies in forest habitats in the Global South, often linked to climate change mitigation. A number of studies suggest positive effects – as well as untapped potential for further impact – on accountability relationships. There are also a number of studies exploring community-based management and participatory planning of water resources. For example, Kochskämper et. al. (2016) studied participation approaches in water-basin management in the UK, Germany and Spain, and observed that greater intensity of citizen involvement led to better quality plans.

This literature overlaps with a broader theme of study on **community monitoring** of the state of the natural environment, including a growing literature on the role of what is termed **citizen science**. As noted above and expanded on in our findings below, data and information are a crucial part of increasing public understanding of problems or progress and how they are being acted on. Community monitoring has been explicitly linked to positive place-based change, holding accountability potential. However, evidence suggests that the design of these activities matters. A review of 111 cases concludes that initiatives framed largely to generate data – aligning more with the 'citizen science' label – are less likely to inform genuine decision-making processes that those that are more collaborative in design (Villaseñor et al 2016).

Literature on the impacts of participatory decision-making on environmental issues

Similar potential is also explored in a growing body of research and evidence exploring the impacts of **participatory decision-making** on environmental issues. These include evidence generated on citizen juries and citizen assemblies, with a number of climate change processes documented, including in the UK, and some evidence on participatory budgeting approaches (Roberts et al 2015, Bryant et al 2020, Bryant et al 2023, Wells et al 2021).

Looking more broadly at the evidence that greater public participation can improve environmental policymaking, a study of 305 case studies from Western democracies found evidence that higher quality participation improves policy (Newig et al 2023). Their measures of quality incorporated the quality of communication, delegation of meaningful responsibility to participatory processes, and representation of various interests.

Two recent publications from DEFRA/Natural England are also relevant. The DEFRA Social Science Expert Group has explored the evidence on what constitutes effective citizen participation on environmental policies. Their report in 2022 notes some concerns over the depth and duration of current participation opportunities as well as highlighting the potential for better policymaking through more systemic and joined-up processes (DEFRA Social Science Expert Group 2022). A Natural England report the same year highlights the

potential of citizen engagement to enhance the quality and legitimacy of decision-making more broadly (Hafferty 2022).

Across this work a number of relevant themes emerge. One is the need to understand different publics and their motivations and capacities to engage, and to recognise that targeted support might be needed to enable good engagement across different publics (Brink et al 2019, Pradhananga et al 2015, Singh et al 2014, Turreira-Garcia et al 2018 and Bill et al 2020). Another is that successful engagement requires a degree of power-sharing or delegation of power to new forms of participation (Newig et al 2023). Finally, there are consistent findings of the benefits of participation in relation to changing attitudes towards the environment (Ghimire et al 2021, Chase et al 2018).

Findings from interviews and discussions

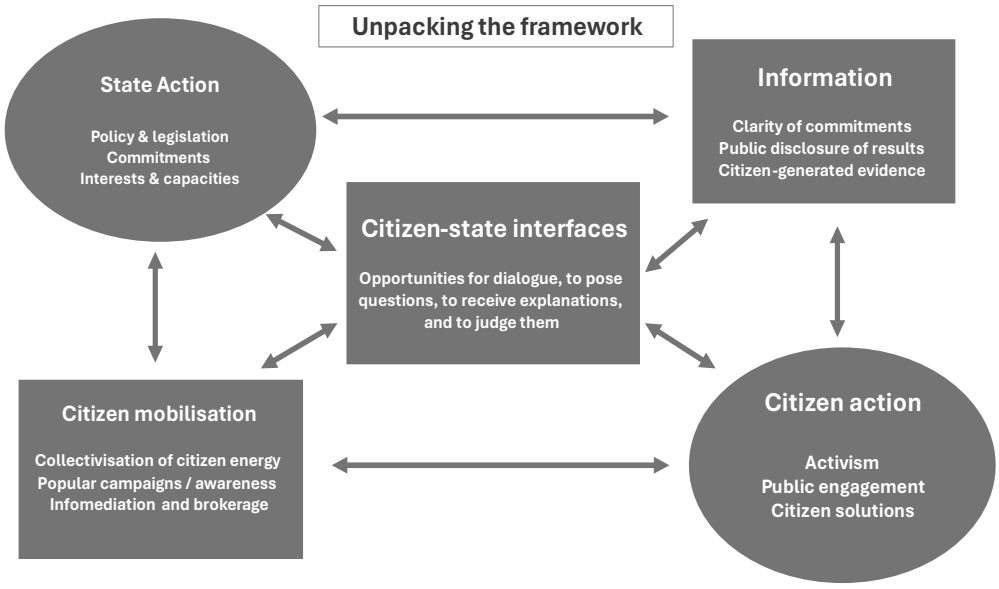
In this section we share findings on the potential for social accountability to play a role in accelerating nature recovery in the UK. We analyse how far the conditions that support social accountability are in place and where there may be gaps, based on our interviews. We conclude this section by summarising a range of barriers that interviewees suggested would need to be navigated or tackled for social accountability to be successful in nature recovery.

Analysing conditions for social accountability for nature recovery

Based on a wide-ranging review of evidence, a well-respected framework developed by the World Bank discusses social accountability as comprising five elements: 'the interplay of both **citizen** and **state action**, supported by three "levers": **information**, **interface**, and **civic mobilization**' (Grandvoinnet et al 2015: 3, our emphasis). This is depicted in Figure 2 below, following the original in depicting these two types of action in circles, with the levers in rectangular boxes between them, all connected with double-ended arrows to indicate that they interact. The diagram includes our own text giving examples of what each element looks like in practice.

In this section we present findings from our interviews and workshop organized with the help of this framework. This allows us to analyse conditions or 'constitutive elements' for social accountability. The framework is not intended to suggest that achieving social accountability flows simply from different elements being present, but to help understand the different aspects that need to be in place for it to work.

Figure 2: Social accountability as the interplay of 5 elements (Adapted from Grandvoinnet et. al 2015)



While we did not find evidence of existing social accountability initiatives for place-based nature recovery, there is a significant amount of public engagement going on and some elements of social accountability already in existence or emerging.

- In terms of **state action** [by government and other responsible parties], clear instances and opportunities exist and more are emerging.
- Relevant **citizen action** is taking place, and there are signs that this is likely to increase further in the coming years and decades
- There is some relevant **information** already available and some commitments to start supplying more
- We found some evidence of **civic mobilisation** in various forms, although uneven
- There are relevant efforts at establishing **citizen-state interfaces,** but these tend to upstream in formulating policies, rather than downstream, engaging people in delivery and progress.

The remainder of this section explores each of the five elements in more detail, starting with some short definitional text to clarify why this element is important. In each we discuss general findings and observations and those specific to the three policy areas we placed particular emphasis on. Box 1 gives a brief description of those policy areas.

Box 1: Summary of three policy areas

Local nature recovery strategies (LNRS) are mandated by the Environment Act (2021) to identify locations to create or improve habitat most likely to provide the greatest benefit for nature and the wider environment. Each local nature recovery strategy is tailored to its area and must contain i) a local habitat map and ii) a written statement of biodiversity priorities. A total of 48 responsible authorities have been appointed to lead the preparing, publication, review and republication for each strategy area. Together, the strategies cover the whole of England with no gaps or overlaps. Responsible authorities work with organisations and partners in their area to agree what should be included in their local nature recovery strategy. Defra will publish information on each strategy. Local nature recovery strategies - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) is mandated by the Environment Act (2021) to ensure that developments leave habitats in a better state for wildlife than before. It became mandatory from 12 February 2024 for major developments under the Town and Country Planning Act (TCPA) and for minor developments from 2 April 2024. Developers are required to deliver a BNG of at least 10% through the following prioritised steps referred to as the biodiversity gain hierarchy: i) creating biodiversity gains on-site ii) delivering gains off-site on their own land or through off-site biodiversity units bought on the market iii) buying statutory biodiversity credits from Natural England. Landowners are legally responsible for managing habitats for 30 years from the completion of development. Commitments for off-site gains are recorded in a registry managed by Natural England. There is currently no requirement to register on-site gains. Responsibility for enforcement is through a legal

agreement between the landowner and the Local Planning Authority (where a planning obligation secures on-site or off-site gains) or a conservation covenant. The Local Planning Authority (LPA) or responsible body are required to check that gain plans match those in the registry and to monitor whether the landowner is meeting their obligations and take action if they do not. Biodiversity net gain - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

The Landscape Recovery Scheme (LRS) supports large-scale, long-term management of land for the benefit of sustainable food production and the environment. The scheme is for landowners and managers who want to take a more radical and large-scale approach to producing environmental and climate goods on their land. It is one of the three Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes, alongside the Sustainable Farming Incentive and Countryside Stewardship. Landscape Recovery projects are selected in competitive application rounds. The first were selected in 2022 and 2023. There are 4 main distinguishing features of the Landscape Recovery scheme: i) Large-scale projects: the scheme is designed to deliver outcomes that require collaborative action across a big area, such as restoring ecological or hydrological function across a landscape; ii) Long-term public funding (for example for 20 years or longer): the scheme supports outcomes that take a long time to deliver, such as peatland restoration, woodland management, or habitat restoration; iii) Bespoke agreements: the scheme funds activities that contribute to priority outcomes but are specific to the locality and so difficult to facilitate through other schemes; and iv) Blended funding: the features above and the provision of development funding should enable projects to attract private investment Landscape Recovery: round two - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

State action

State action can include broad institutional behaviour, but also actions of different organisations or parts of the state, and the actions of individuals within those organisations. The actions of relevant authorities have both positive and negative impacts on social accountability processes. Positively, there are ways that authorities can enable public engagement, actions that can make it easier for the public to play a part in social accountability, and responses from authorities to public or citizen action. Negatively, there are actions that can limit possibilities, or reject citizen input.

Interviews mentioned significant state action and new commitments in place for nature recovery. Commitments by Parliament, DEFRA, Natural England, the Environment Agency, Local Authorities and others provide a starting point for social accountability to occur and be effective. Commitments fall into three categories: legislation and policy, expansion and clarification of responsibilities, and interests and capacities to engage.

Legislation and policy:

Frequent mentions were made in our interviews of the significant regulatory and public policy commitments that have been made on the natural environment and nature recovery over recent years, especially through the 25 Year Environment Plan (2018), Environment Act (2021), Environmental Improvement Plan (2023) and DEFRA's Plan for Water (2023).

These include a focus on delivery, transparency and accountability. The 25 Year Environment Plan refers to 'building transparency and accountability into environmental reforms and close working across government departments, local authorities, businesses, the public and other stakeholders to oversee delivery at a strategic level' (HM Government 2018: 138). The UK Government Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) launches 'a decade of delivery with target-led, targeted actions towards leaving our environment in a better state than we inherited' (HMG Government 2023: 6). DEFRA's Plan for Water (2023) is seen as a big opportunity, with an intention to generate 'catchment by catchment, community by community action plans […] to better enable them to improve accountability for water management' (Interview, 9/10/23, Environment Agency). In sum, participants observed a particular moment of opportunity in relation to Government commitment to nature recovery:

> "I feel the profile of nature and a healthy natural environment is much more prominent nationally than for quite a while, coinciding with a time when Government has made commitments through the Environment Act, with targets like 30 by 30, targets on air quality, water quality…". (Interview, 21/11/23)[3]

The strategies and initiatives selected for particular focus in the scoping study are all mandated in the EIP (2023), and participants could identify ways in which they offered opportunities for social accountability.

Local Nature Recovery Strategies were described to us as 'a mechanism for giving society, communities and the public, agency over the natural environment'.

Biodiversity Net Gain introduces clear new frameworks requiring nature recovery action by developers. Its introduction of a public register for off-site net gain commitments was regarded as a significant step forward in terms of transparency (Interview, 15/11/23).

Landscape Recovery Schemes were also seen to create accountability opportunities, albeit in a complicated scenario of multiple public and private responsibilities and stakeholders. One participant noted the pragmatic operational need for public engagement within this initiative:

> "From an early stage there was an awareness that doing radical, big, land use changes you have to engage stakeholders and communities in proposals, and ensure you take people with you, and give them the opportunity to input. If you don't, the alternative is that they could react negatively to the changes, which leads to implementation problems" (Interview, 4/12/23).

[3] Where we use direct quotes from interviews, we indicate the institutional position of those participating in the interview – for example in this interview we had a participant who works for Natural England, and one working for a Local Authority.

Other examples were also shared. For example, the Catchment-Based Approach, introduced by DEFRA in 2013, offers a wide range of publics and stakeholders the opportunity to build ownership and stewardship of their local river catchments. Collaboratively developed catchment specific plans include stated aims and monitored outcomes.

Also seen as favourable is the broader legislative and policy context in which these initiatives are emerging. Recent reforms of the planning system, water regulation and land and agricultural subsidies following Brexit were given as examples. The prospect of further decentralization and regional devolution was also highlighted as a key opportunity. Several interviewees felt that this could introduce more citizen engagement in local policy delivery, including monitoring progress of delivery.

Expansion and clarification of responsibilities:

We explored with interviewees how some of these new policies and programmes extend the range of those who have public duties for nature recovery. This is important given that social accountability as an approach depends on there being identifiable authorities and responsible parties to hold accountable. Some examples given included:

- **Local Nature Recovery Strategies** are based on nature recovery commitments undertaken by a wide range of bodies working in partnership; they offer opportunities to expand these commitments, as well as make these more visible to the public at large, at the same time as supporting the duty-bearers to deliver them.
- **Biodiversity Net Gain** designates ‘a new set of responsibilities for duty bearers including developers, landowners and local authorities’. In particular, ‘landowners enter a new kind of legal agreement with a designated responsible body […] to dedicate their land to a particular ‘conservation covenant’ (Interview, 11/11/23).
- **Landscape Recovery Schemes** require the identification or formation of a single legal entity that leads each project, with new legal responsibilities towards nature.

Interests and capacities for engagement:

Interviews highlighted a range of interests and capacities among relevant institutions and professional groups which could support social accountability initiatives. Partnership working and community engagement are familiar ways of working in the sector, and there has been recent further investment in relevant roles, including inclusion advisors, within Natural England.

Numerous examples were cited of Natural England and Environment Agency involvement in partnerships and collaborations with Local Authorities and environmental NGOs (ENGOs) such as the South Downs and Cumbria People and Nature Networks. There were also frequent references made to investment in public engagement capacity through specialist staff in these agencies, and better internal knowledge sharing and capability building. An example shared was the East Midlands Inclusion Hub – where Natural England convene and enable peer support to a large network of local authority, ENGOs and small grassroots organisations on the topic of more inclusive and participatory nature recovery.

Important partnerships are also in place to support this, for example the Engagement Laboratory operated by the University of East Anglia. This experiments with new ways of mapping, practising, learning about, and responding to diverse public engagements with nature and biodiversity.

The importance and value of citizen engagement was also illustrated through Natural England's Inclusion Officers' development of a non-statutory Inclusive Engagement Guide specifically for Local Nature Recovery Strategies, shared through Defra processes with all Local Authorities to help them develop their approaches.

We found that significant commitments have been made and actions taken by government and other responsible parties towards nature recovery, signalling positive **state action**.

Citizen action

Action by the public is also crucial for social accountability processes. As the framework notes, this citizen action 'can comprise diverse activities, depending on the context and the stage in the process. It typically includes making demands (for information, justification, or sanctions), protesting against injustice, or claiming better public goods' (Grandvoinnet et al 2015: 3).

Interviewees could point to a great deal of popular energy and action around diverse nature and environment issues. Many saw an increasing importance of nature and nature recovery issues in the public consciousness. This was attributed by some to heightened awareness and closer relationships with nature since the pandemic and lockdown, both for recreational and physical and mental health reasons. Media coverage was seen to have played a part in the increased attention to some issues, such as water quality.

A number of issues were noted to capture particular attention. Issues seen as energising to the general public nationally were water quality (mentioned by almost half our interviewees) and climate change. Interviewees also described particular readiness in some community groups to engage on a very specific issues (for example, habitats for a particular species of bird).

Amongst the triggers for action were public interest in better performance from key private sector actors affecting nature, such as water companies and developers, pointing to instances of citizen action because of a sense of a lack of accountability.

Interviewees, particularly those working with local communities, gave many relevant examples of citizen energy:

> "Otley, a small town outside Leeds has created its own Local Nature Recovery Strategy. It's perfect, it has been fully citizen-led, done from the ground up" (Interview, 28/11/23)

> "There's fantastic energy in Cumbria and lots of exciting things happening already. […] People care!" (Interview, 21/11/23)

Many types of action were shared:

- **Popular protests** were mentioned by many, both national movements such as Extinction Rebellion, and localised campaigns. Some high-profile place-based and localised examples were mentioned, for instance the recent citizen campaign ignited by council tree-felling in Plymouth and the earlier case in Sheffield.
- Examples were also shared of **ongoing community campaigns** around particular priorities – for example groups organising around water quality in specific rivers, sewage discharges to the sea, or in relation to specific woodlands, green spaces, or other habitats.
- **Neighbourhood nature initiatives** were mentioned in positive terms and several specific instances shared of community actions and projects to care for and restore the natural environment or undertake stewardship.
- Those working with Local Nature Recovery Strategies noted the array of stakeholders, community organisations, and individuals motivated to engage in **consultation processes** on nature recovery and the environment more generally.

We also heard examples that demonstrate national level public engagement on nature policy, for example the People's Plan for Nature, the Manifesto for People and Nature, amongst others, and the broader Rights of Nature movement.

Natural England staff interviewed were clear that people tend to engage out of a desire to learn and an interest in developing their own citizenship in ways that are more active and environmentally focused. They reported public interest in learning about government-supported schemes for nature recovery, and their decision-making processes. However, it was also noted that localised action might not always be through institutional channels or very visible to the nature recovery sector:

> "Where people have got upset about a development proposal in a local area, you see examples of quite powerful community-led interventions. Also, there are more guerrilla activities – people taking it on themselves to take action" (Interview, 11/11/23).

There is notable public energy and action on nature issues at both local and national scale, demonstrating a level of **citizen action**

Information

The framework places a particular emphasis on information flow. As the authors note, **'**[a] wide range of information is needed to ensure accountability, and it is often highly technical in nature (for example, laws, policies, standards, targets, performance, assets, budgets, revenues, and expenditures)' (Grandvoinnet et al 2015: 4). Information is not sufficient in itself – the authors argue that 'intermediaries—whether a person, an organization, or the media—are almost always needed to improve access to information, simplify it, clarify it, and point out its implications' (Grandvoinnet et al 2015: 4). This links information with the element of civic mobilisation in the framework. Relevant information

for accountability processes may also not exist – a particular risk where private sector actors bear responsibility for action:

> ‘Information asymmetry is rarely an accident of history […], rather, it is the result of authorities or other individuals in charge who intentionally withhold information or resist attempts to make it accessible.’ (Grandvoinnet et al 2015: 4).

In the case of nature recovery, a number of policy mandates support increased transparency and information flow. Interviewees referred to the 25 Year Plan’s commitment to ‘[p]rovide robust and credible reporting, governance and accountability’ (HM Government 2018: 128), and its assertion that ‘[t]ransparency and accountability are key features of successful reform programmes and will be built into our environmental reforms’ (HM Government 2018: 138). They also referenced the stated intention of ‘[e]nsuring independent oversight and accountability’ so as to ‘give the environment a voice’ (HM Government 2018: 139).

DEFRA’s commitment to ‘overseeing delivery [of the Plan] at a strategic level, working closely with other government departments, local authorities, businesses, the public and other stakeholders’ implies information-sharing for coordination purposes. The Plan makes specific reference to improving information to the public for them to assess environmental risks; providing real-time information on water availability; developing better information on soil health, recycling, marine litter prevention, and regular official information on how the environment is changing. Importantly, however, these plans and strategies say less about how this information will be mediated. This will be important to make information easily available and usable by the public and inform a conversation on progress towards nature recovery.

Within our focus initiatives, there is a significant information component to **Biodiversity Net Gain**. The BNG public register introduced in 2024 is hailed as an important step, giving public access to offsite biodiversity net gain commitments arising from developments. This register will include specifics on what nature recovery projects different land managers are committing to undertake. There will also be information on onsite commitments recorded through planning authorities’ processes and portals, and public availability of key metrics and tools for assessing levels of biodiversity. However, participants were keen to stress the potential complexity of this information, both its technical nature but also its spread across multiple portals. This is a key example of the need for ‘translation’ of information to support public engagement – or what some refer to as ‘info-mediation’.

Public mapping of priorities for nature recovery through **Local Nature Recovery Strategies**, makes relevant information available in accessible, appealing formats, and through a collective process involving diverse actors with different standpoints. Participants involved in LNRS delivery noted the potential to use these maps on an ongoing basis as a potential accountability tool, particularly if they include commitments made by different actors. However, the timeframe and framework for review and public engagement on LNRS progress is yet to be set. The statutory guidance only gives a

commitment to review between 3 and 10 years after completion, so efforts to maintain and share information on progress may need to be stimulated.

Despite these information innovations, some expressed concerns about whether information shared is yet widespread enough or sufficiently useful or appealing to the range of relevant publics.

> "As a general rule there may not be a huge amount of transparency so having the ability for people to know what is meant to be happening, where, and by whom is not always clear." (Interview, 11/11/23)

> "BNG conceives of nature in complex indicators and descriptors that an average person may not understand." (Interview, 11/11/23)

> "Online tools will only ever reach a certain subset of people, and we need to be aware of this." (Interview, 28/11/23)

Another way that information plays a critical role in social accountability processes is through the ability of the public to *generate* useful information themselves. This might be on the ways that services or policies are experienced, verifying actions that have or have not taken place, or collecting other data. Participants spoke of the significant volume of 'citizen science' activity in the UK – ranging from broad observations on ecological diversity to specific measurement of habitat and nature quality – such as community groups testing water quality.

Whilst citizen science initiatives were generally mentioned in positive terms in interviews, some did share concerns about the scientific quality and relevance of the data they generate. Some also felt that these activities may not be joined up enough with other data collection or decision-making activities.

One ENGO respondent reflected on this tension:

> "At a workshop the other week we were talking about the power of citizen science and 'levels' of citizen science. It's tricky. For it to be relied upon, there needs to be a methodology that's agreed. But we shouldn't dismiss the 'lower end' – people getting out and taking photos, recording what they see – this is a way of getting people interested. It can help you record things. It's really valuable in terms of data, but also in getting people involved and their sense of ownership of their local space." (Interview, 6/12/23)

We saw evidence of increases in the kind and volume of **information** needed for those policy commitments to be tracked and monitored. There remains, however, some way to go in fully activating the crucial 'lever' of information needed to support the interplay of citizen and state action for effective social accountability, but there are areas of potential.

Civic mobilization

Civic mobilisation is another 'lever' connecting state and citizen action. It refers to organising and 'pointing' civic energy or authorities' attention at particular problems, engaging more of the public, and establishing coalitions of those sharing similar objectives.

It is important in the framework for a number of reasons. First, evidence suggests that the other two levers are not sufficient on their own: 'information or the existence of a citizen-state interface does not necessarily spur citizen or state action on an issue' (Grandvoinnet et al 2015: 4). Second, not all members of the public can easily be involved in citizen action – some support from intermediaries may be needed to facilitate their involvement, particularly for those that face the greatest barriers or marginalisation. Third, action from authorities also needs to be mobilised, to overcome barriers within the state to reaching out and engaging with the public.

Our interviewees shared evidence of citizens being spurred into various forms of action by intermediaries, in particular local voluntary organisations and E-NGOs. Often these examples were of people mobilising for action in their local communities. Much of the citizen action we discussed above clearly included some form of mobilisation – whether the broad social mobilisation supporting protests and campaigns, or the targeted facilitation to engage people in neighbourhood initiatives and consultations.

One important role of mobilisation is to allow people to engage with issues collectively, and on their systemic drivers, rather than in more diffuse forms of action, such as individual complaints. Citizen action on water quality demonstrates this. Water quality was often mentioned to us as an issue where civic mobilization has arisen and grown rapidly and is gaining some traction in terms of securing media coverage and penetrating the public consciousness. The activities of the campaign group Surfers against Sewage was given as a combination of effective mobilization of public awareness including through effective media liaison, and citizen science-type monitoring of pollution levels.

Observations were made that when people have been involved in the taking of a decision or earlier stages of a process, they are more likely to be interested in monitoring the outcomes: for example, LNRS staff said:

> 'Messaging about how [people] can play their part and make a difference can be delivered through many stakeholders in this process. We need buy-in into the LNRS so that they care enough to help deliver it.' (Interview, 21/11/23)

Such comments resonate with the terminology of 'upstream'/ 'downstream' stages of engagement, referring to consultation before policy and planning decisions and involvement in delivery after those decisions. They also indicate the existence of 'internal mobilisers' within statutory bodies responsible for nature recovery, suggesting the potential for positive citizen-state coalitions to continue to develop and grow.

Overall, we see some good existing examples of civic mobilisation for nature recovery, and potential for that to grow further, including the building of coalitions.

Citizen-state interfaces

A key feature of many successful initiatives and one of the five elements proposed by Grandvoinnet et al. is the availability and character of citizen-state interfaces. This refers to opportunities for ongoing engagement between the public and those with responsibilities towards an issue or for particular actions. These interfaces are more than consultative opportunities – they also involve people in tracking progress. They may involve hearing about the actions of those who have made commitments and asking questions and receiving explanations on progress. They can be formal – such as assemblies or regular forums – but also include more informal interactions. Ongoing relationships are important. Grandvoinnet et al argue that "what matters are not only the interactions occurring through the interface, but also the processes that lead up to it and those that follow as well as the level of citizen representation, if any" (Grandvoinnet et al 2015:4).

Our interviews and discussions suggest that over recent years the environment sector has seen the adoption and regularisation of some examples of citizen-state interfaces. Examples mentioned are occurring largely in the framework of LNRS, with Local Authorities generally playing a key role. Local Nature Partnerships, established following HM Government's 2011 Natural Environment White Paper, have reportedly thrived in some regions, often playing leading roles in delivering LNRSs.

> 'Some of the information is hard to find online unless you know what you're looking for. At the citizen level, the Local Nature Partnerships will really help us; there'll be new methods of reaching out to people' (Interview, 21/11/23)

We heard how 'Nature Conversations' are being piloted in one county–regular in-person events at which locally-tailored facts and figures are presented to residents by councillors and council staff. The floor is then opened for comments and questions and inputs for climate change and biodiversity action plans. Such spaces, along with the Local Nature Partnerships, were reported to be playing important roles in sustaining the momentum of public engagement in the interim period between the LNRS pilot and delivery of the strategy (Interview, 21/11/23).

Staff were clear about the need to achieve continual engagement, in the LNRS process, where strategy development is followed by a potential gap of 3-10 years before review. They also acknowledged the importance of process, not only the final document:

> "We'll come out in 18 months with a [Local Nature Recovery] Strategy document and mapping on the website, but the process of how you get there is more key than final document itself, because you've made connections, engagements, raised awareness. If people engaged and collaborated, that's how it'll be useful. The finished document is just an end result; the whole process had a higher level of

> importance as something useful and tangible for nature recovery" (Interview, 21/11/23).

LNRS illustrates the importance of interfaces in other respects too. Local Authorities have statutory requirements to develop, but not deliver the LNRS. Delivery therefore depends on collaborative working between the Authority, a range of other statutory agencies, and other stakeholders, including community residents, landowners, and land managers. In rural counties in particular:

> "Delivery […] comes down to the willingness of landowners and managers to make those changes. And that comes down to the language we use to communicate about why we want them to be involved, how it affects them. Does the term 'nature recovery' imply that they aren't doing a good enough job, that there's a problem? It's not about them – England is one of most the nature-depleted countries in Europe. It's about explaining why their involvement is important. The delivery of change can be made difficult by this, across the country and not just on LNRS" (Interview, 21/11/23).

Achievement of a state-citizen interface in the view of these LNRS actors is all about 'meaningful engagement and being clear and honest with people; [about] not coming from position of power but as a collective' (Interview, 21/11/23).

We also heard about interesting experiments in public deliberation using Citizen Juries or similar models. The Environment Agency held Rethinking Water Citizens' Juries online during lockdowns in 2021-22. These offer potentially rich lessons for the sector about how to build interfaces and generate a broad-based mandate for transformational change, although they are admittedly resource-intensive.

For example, the Citizen Juries presented the public with expert opinions and information in a way that allowed them to develop questions to pose to policymakers. Although there was some initial reluctance from officials to be involved those that engaged – both members of the public and officials – saw significant benefits (Interview, 4/12/23, Environment Agency). Another example was the West Yorkshire LNRS team commissioning a digital transformation company to develop online approaches to help responsible authorities engage communities in developing the LNRS.

An interviewee involved in a LNRS reflected on how examples like this could support accountability once the strategies are delivered:

> "Say you've set up an LNRS with a Citizen Jury or Assembly, that could have an accountability role – the group steering the LNRS could report back to the citizen panel. If you do it as a working strategy and your strategy has identified say five top locations, you could go to those places and set up a project group or process with the community" (Interview, 28/11/23).

There is, then, some experience of building citizen-state interfaces within delivery of **Local Nature Recovery Strategies**, and significant energy and knowledge available for building

more. It is more difficult to assess the scope for citizen-state interface in relation to our other two focus initiatives, partly as they are relatively new.

Developing interfaces like this is not central to the design of **Biodiversity Net Gain,** it relies on existing mechanisms. One relevant interface here is through the statutory planning system run by local councils. But interviewees noted that relying on these systems is based on quite optimistic assumptions. One is that concerned citizens will take the time to search and navigate local planning portals to understand net gain commitments made. Another is that resource-stretched Local Authorities will be able to engage if members of the public want to use this information to monitor delivery and compliance with commitments.

How far relevant interfaces are established through the **Landscape Recovery Scheme** is likely to be different for different projects funded. As these are only in the planning stage this is hard to assess. However, all projects are required to include participation and engagement plans as part of the funding criteria. The ambition is that projects involve members of the public in every stage from scoping and design to implementation. There are also evaluation and monitoring plans for the Scheme overall that could present an opportunity for dialogue and interface.

We also had some broader reflections about how the term ‘citizen engagement’ is used in the sector which are relevant to how citizen-state interfaces work. First, the term is often used to describe activities that we would consider closer to ‘stakeholder management’. For example, interviewees working on LNRS engagement described managing engagement with several hundred groups that had engaged in their consultations. These groups – important as they are – represent people already organised around specific interests and engaging them involves a degree of negotiation between different interests. Interviewees acknowledged the risk that this crowds out the ‘less organised’ public that would be engaged in more open interfaces. Second, public engagement activities are often framed only as ‘upstream’ consultation on preferences and priorities or encouraging the public to act. This leaves out the ongoing participation through citizen-state interfaces that social accountability requires.

Overall, suitable interfaces emerge as the main missing element of the five components of social accountability that Grandvoinnet et al. put forward. This isn’t to say that there is a lack of public engagement– as the discussion above notes in relation to LNRS, there is much relevant existing practice. But the specific characteristics of citizen-state interfaces that are important for effective social accountability do not seem routinely ‘designed-in’. One of those characteristics is the ongoing nature of the interface. Opportunities for citizen-state interface are also dispersed amongst multiple actors – for example Local Authorities, or for LRS the legal entity running the individual schemes.

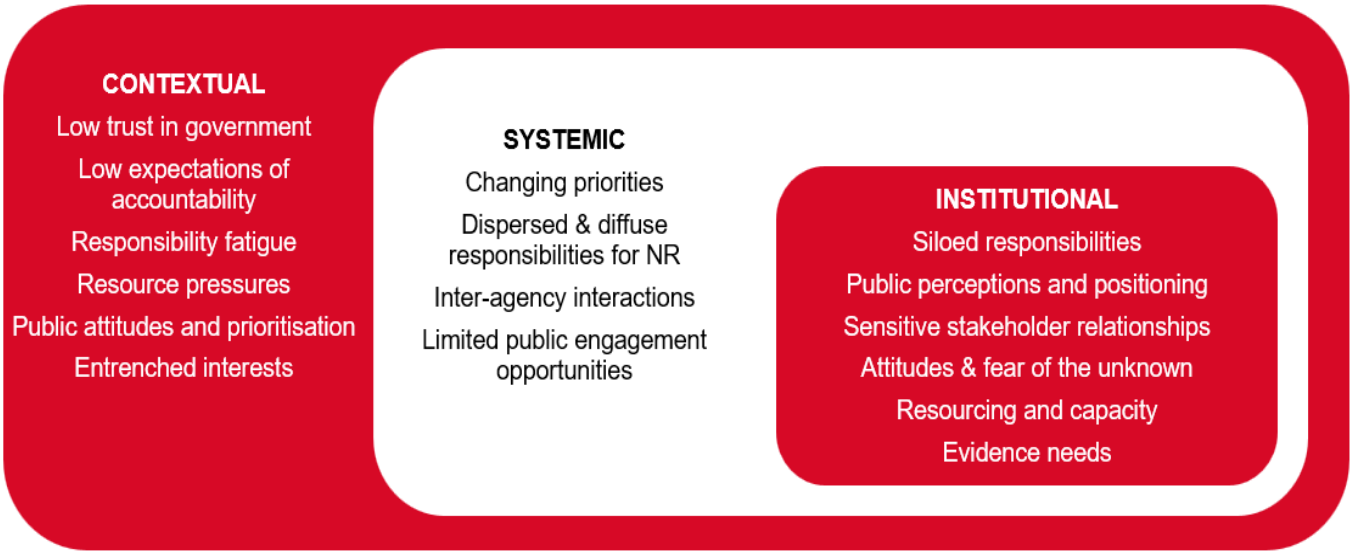
Barriers

Our interviews also explored perceived obstacles or barriers to achieving social accountability for place-based nature recovery.

We have grouped them at three levels: contextual, systemic, and institutional. This categorisation is intended to start to separate out which may be more and less amenable to change. Actions to increase social accountability for nature recovery need to actively strategise how to overcome, navigate around, or reduce these barriers. For example, there are a number of institutional barriers which could be tackled through some key actions.

We present the key barriers identified in our interviews graphically in Figure 3 below, then discuss each group in turn.

Figure 3: Barriers identified to social accountability approaches in nature recovery



Contextual barriers

Contextual barriers are those at the level of the broader social, political, economic and cultural context.

Two areas frequently raised in interviews relate to conditions in the UK in general. First, many interviewees commented on **pervasive low trust in government** and government institutions, and an associated **lack of expectation of public accountability**. These may limit the extent to which the public engage in social accountability processes, particularly if they feel they won't make a difference. This lack of expectation can come from a view that government is un-responsive, but one interviewee also suggested a deeper cultural basis:

> '[There is] a lack of a sense that people should be accountable – "Who are we to challenge them? They're probably the experts. […]. And we don't know what promises are made and who is accountable for what".' (Interview, 6/12/23)

On the flipside, whilst some members of the public may not be motivated or see it as their place to engage in scrutinising public policy actions, those who are active at a community level may also experience what one interviewee called **responsibility fatigue**. They

described this as a sense of the public being asked too often to take actions to solve problems themselves, rather than government taking action.

Several interviewees noted the effect of the **'resource crunch'**, on the public sector and the public at large. Pressure on time and resources may mean that authorities are limited in what they can promise or commit to in response to citizen demands. For the public, respondents noted that current economic pressures leave many time-poor and focused on employment and household incomes, with less time to engage in community activities.

More specific to nature recovery, a range of barriers were frequently highlighted in relation to **public attitudes and prioritisation.** Despite the significant citizen energy around issues of the environment and nature, interviewees cautioned about the need for more analysis and careful planning on two issues.

First, consistent concerns were shared about which members of the public are interested and able to be active in community work on nature recovery and how representative of diverse communities this leaves public involvement on nature. Those with inclusion expertise felt that this barrier was partly caused by what opportunities are made available by authorities, and who can participate in them.

Second, there were questions raised about how far the public supports *systemic nature recovery* as a goal. We can think of public interest here as somewhat 'patchy' - for example, citizen energy directed towards particular species or habitats, rather than looking across the ecosystem. There can also be mismatches between popular understandings of what of what 'good nature' looks like and the views of ecologists.

Finally, it was frequently noted that there are some **entrenched interests and power dynamics** in the environment sector. Key in this were the perceived power and significance of major landowners and developers. Some felt there may be additional pressures if they adopt greater public scrutiny or reporting requirements. As such some saw landowners and developers needing to be 'brought on board' and supported in their actions rather than challenged.

Systemic barriers

By systemic barriers we mean those at the level of the UK government more broadly, and the institutional system surrounding nature recovery and environment policy.

Whilst we have noted the significant HMG commitment to nature recovery in legislation and policy above, several interviewees raised a concern around the sense of **frequently changing Government** priorities. This was associated with changes in political leadership in the policy area. Long-term planning and prioritisation processes provide an important grounding for social accountability processes.

We also heard concerns around the complexity of the environment and nature recovery sector. **Responsibilities and therefore accountability for nature recovery was perceived to be highly dispersed**, involving multiple institutions and actors. We asked

our workshop participants to map out accountability relationships in the sector and even amongst this expert group it was a difficult and complicated task. With this complexity it is understandably hard for the public to know who should be held accountable for what. There are also **complex interactions of accountability relationships** within the sector, with multiple bodies playing some role in holding others to account.

We heard a consistent view of **limited opportunities for the public to engage** with institutions on issues of nature and nature recovery in an ongoing way. Where they exist, these opportunities are frequently focused on public consultation prior to decision-making, rather than engaging people in structured ways throughout implementation.

Institutional barriers

By institutional barriers we mean those within and around the key agencies with lead delivery responsibilities on nature recovery (eg. DEFRA, Natural England, Environment Agency).

One of these relates to the institutional complexity of the sector noted above. Several interviewees noted how the **siloing of responsibility between agencies** makes it harder to design activities to involve the public, as conversations would span institutional boundaries and responsibilities. A number of interviewees noted coordination within and between organisations as being important for new approaches like social accountability.

Another barrier mentioned was the **public perception** of nature recovery bodies and different mechanisms for accountability. It was noted that some sections of the public are already highly critical of nature recovery agencies. This might limit the internal appetite for new forms of public engagement – although the experience with the Rethinking Water Citizen Juries described above provides some evidence that these relationship barriers can be overcome. While these perceptions are external to specific organisations, there are potentially steps that could be taken to clarify positioning vis-à-vis other institutions, and different roles in the sector.

Linked to the broader systemic barrier noted above on power dynamics within the sector, several interviewees noted possible concerns around damaging stakeholder relationships needed for nature recovery, most notably with farmers, landowners, and developers. Prevailing **attitudes** which prioritise technical expertise on ecological issues over inputs from the public were mentioned, though Natural England's Science, Evidence and Evaluation Strategy (Natural England 2020) welcomes different forms of evidence from a range of sources. Some thought that an underlying **fear of the unknown** might make people cautious about opening up more decision-making to the general public.

At a more practical level, several interviewees raised issues of **resourcing** social accountability and in-depth public engagement processes. This included having available time and resources, and expertise and skills.

Finally, and in light of this range of institutional barriers, it was noted by several interviewees and in our workshop that **more compelling evidence is needed** that

demonstrates that social accountability can accelerate nature recovery ambitions and is worth resourcing.

Ways forward

In this section we summarise the findings of the scoping study and look at their implications for future actions by Natural England and other organisations with an interest in place-based nature recovery in the UK. We share five areas of recommendations.

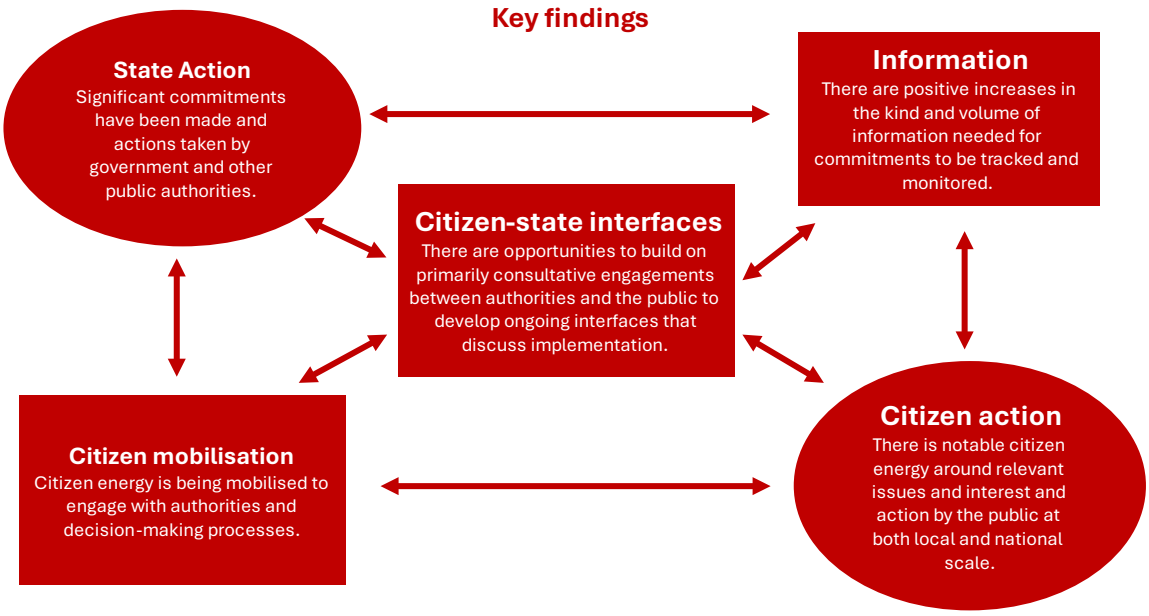
Summary of findings

Through this short scoping study, we have found clear articulations of the potential for social accountability mechanisms to be leveraged to support crucial HMG commitments to place-based nature recovery. These include raising the public profile of nature recovery aims, strategies that are more connected to public and place-based priorities and activating the potential of public opinion and engagement in ensuring delivery.

We also found evidence that the conditions or constitutive elements for social accountability processes exist, to greater or lesser - and in some cases increasing – extents. Significant commitments have been made and actions taken by government and other public authorities. There are associated increases in the kind and volume of information available for those commitments to be tracked and monitored. There is notable 'citizen energy' on relevant issues and interest and action by the public, at both local and national scale. In various ways this energy and these actions are being mobilised to engage with authorities and decision-making processes, including by mediating organisations such as E-NGOs. There are opportunities to build on existing primarily consultative or irregular interfaces between authorities and the public on these issues to create longer-term engagements that enable the public to play a role in accountability processes around the delivery of commitments. Although the potential is there, however, these elements are not currently joined up in ways that mean that social accountability processes are routinely taking place. These conclusions are summarised in Figure 4 below.

Our work also highlighted a number of perceived barriers to social accountability processes. Some of these barriers, such as a general lack of social and political engagement, or disillusionment with public decision-making, are long-term and difficult to shift. Some, such as the complex accountability relationships in the sector, may not be very amenable to change but could be better addressed and can be navigated. Others, such as fears of increasing public scrutiny or problems with the way that information is made public, could be shifted over time. These barriers don't rule out attempts at introducing social accountability in the sector, but they do need to be acknowledged and anticipated.

Figure 4: Key findings



Implications and recommendations for future action

Taken together, our conclusions suggest there is a current opportunity for Natural England and others to further explore the role that social accountability could play in strengthening delivery of nature recovery.

Drawing from our discussions with stakeholders and experience in the field, we suggest five areas for action. A theme across these is on further learning and analysis – both more in-depth analysis of particular opportunities and learning from making changes and monitoring the impacts. However, there are also more systemic actions that can be taken now, based on the evidence we have gathered.

1. Pilot and experiment at initiative level

One obvious next step is to pilot some actions to strengthen social accountability systems within specific initiatives, projects, or sites, to explore how social accountability can accelerate nature recovery ambitions. Piloting could offer rich learning and necessary evidence on process and outcomes, including how far the barriers we identified can be overcome.

Pilots should connect actions across the five elements of the framework in ways that enable a social accountability logic to take hold – purposefully linking different accountability processes, actors, or information provision, or sites of action. For example, there are opportunities within BNG to pilot new processes that help make net gain

commitments more visible and understood by different communities or groups of the public. There are also opportunities for enhanced third-party and citizen monitoring of progress on these commitments. Local Planning Authorities, if set the challenge and given some resources for experimentation, may also be able to go beyond minimum statutory requirements to engage the public further on BNG commitments.

2. Enhance current engagement and participation efforts

Actors in the natural environment sector are already investing in enhancing community engagement and public participation for nature recovery. For good reasons much of that effort is focused on consultation on priorities or building connections with nature. Adding social accountability thinking could help open up opportunities for ongoing two-way engagement and scrutiny. Empowering the public to engage could serve as a motivator for participation in the first place and make co-production more meaningful.

One way of taking this forward would be to pose key questions in planning specific engagement strategies such as those in LNRS or being drawn up for Landscape Recovery Schemes. Box 2 suggests what some of these questions might be.

Box 2: Suggested prompt questions for adding social accountability logics to existing public participation

- How can publics/stakeholders be involved in following up on strategies that they have been consulted on?
  - Is there potential for public/stakeholder monitoring of changes and actions?
  - Are opportunities for public/community action and engagement in delivering changes clear?

- How would the public know whether commitments made in those strategies were being delivered?
  - What data is going to be publicly available, and how can that be made as useful as possible?
  - How easy will it be to link data or information on progress to different actors' responsibilities and commitments?

- What ongoing spaces can be used for the publics/stakeholders to engage in delivery of strategies and changes?
  - How far can publics/communities set the agenda in these spaces, and ask difficult questions?
  - Who should be expected to answer for actions in these spaces?

Existing expertise in public engagement and inclusion across nature recovery actors should be used to a) identify the best ways to incorporate these questions, and b) use the insights gained to adapt and modify approaches over time.

3. Integrate social accountability insights into governance plans

Insights from social accountability approaches could be used to strengthen a broader focus on accountability across policies, programmes, policies, and initiatives in the sector. This applies from conception, through design, and to final evaluations. The five-part framework from Grandvoinnet et al that we've used in this report provides a useful model for considering the different components needed.

Our findings and approach could support policy leads and stakeholders to engage further in conversations around strengthening governance and accountability systems. We suggest prioritising:

a) Initiatives or policy areas where there are multiple actors with diverse interests and the benefit of engaging the public in shoring up existing accountability mechanisms can be most clearly articulated, and / or

b) initiatives that are in the design phase, and at points where social accountability can be designed in, and / or

c) initiatives that have clear leadership or ownership by Natural England or the Environment Agency, and in which it is therefore easier to make changes that reflect a strong understanding of relationships and incentives.

Policy areas suggested as relevant for this kind of analysis include: development and management of designated areas; catchment-based initiatives on water management; the programme of work on Green Infrastructure (including Nature Cities, Green Community Hubs, and Local Action Projects); and Catchment Sensitive Farming.

There is also wider potential for exploring how social accountability features in the governance of nature recovery policy. This could contribute to responses to recommendations from the Office for Environmental Protection Annual Progress Report 2024[ii] to develop clear and effective governance in the sector. Questions to motivate this higher-level discussion include who is accountable and 'reports back' to whom, and where greater public accountability might motivate and sustain delivery of commitments.

4. Strengthen the enabling environment for social accountability

As the framework we have adopted in our analysis argues, there are a number of critical enablers required for social accountability processes to work successfully. Intentional efforts to engage by authorities and mobilisation through citizen organisation are key. However, it is also possible to take action to create a more 'social accountability-friendly' system overall.

Core to this is the suitable sharing of information. Our discussions suggested that data and information shared on nature recovery actions needs to be more usable and relevant for the public to play an accountability role, and for different actors to hold one another to account. Reviewing broad data and information-sharing frameworks in the sector might be necessary to enable this. The bar could also be raised institutionally on expectations of

proactive and usable public disclosure on new schemes and projects. Addressing this might include, for instance, looking at requirements in contracts such as those to be brought in for Landscape Recovery Schemes. The emphasis on usability is crucial to avoid the problem of 'opaque transparency': the release of large volumes of information but not in ways that can support any public engagement or action.[iii]

Another example of how the enabling environment might be strengthened is to clarify key accountability responsibilities in the sector. The accountability 'ecosystem' related to nature recovery is dense, with many actors, often playing different roles in terms of delivery, reporting, or holding others to account for their actions to support nature recovery. Even for the interested public this makes it hard to know where to act or who to engage; roles and responsibilities could be more clearly delineated to support those wishing to engage.

5. Socialise and champion the potential of social accountability for nature recovery

Some of our participants highlighted potential scepticism within the sector about whether engaging the public more fully and in a more empowered way can support nature recovery. This may be because the lack of resources for deep ongoing engagement or because problems are viewed as largely technical and in need of 'expert' scientific fixes or come from an understanding of the sector as shaped by very established and somewhat entrenched interests. A good number of the barriers to adopting social accountability that we identified are connected to established ways of doing things, attitudes, or ideas about what might be lost rather than what might be gained by changing approaches. Given these factors, and that we didn't find existing examples of social accountability processes instituted by HMG actors in nature recovery, any progress towards these will need internal work in the sector. Some of that work we can describe as 'socialising' a new concept. Other aspects could be described as requiring 'championing'. The work might involve:

- Developing the language that works within different institutions to express the ideas behind social accountability – including deciding whether the term itself is useful or distances some audiences, and coining alternative terminology that might resonate more or work better
- Sponsoring pilot initiatives and system changes to develop the evidence base and learn more about the potential of social accountability
- Advocating in internal and cross-institutional spaces
- Developing and sharing brief case studies for inspiration.

Appendix 1: Participants

Steering Group

Name	Agency	Position
Cardinal, Isabelle	Natural England	Principal Specialist Social Scientist
Coke, Alexia	Natural England	Senior Specialist, Social Science
Hinds, Paul	Natural England	Principal Adviser Engagement
Holmes, Andrew	Natural England	Senior Specialist, Social Science
Lorentzon, Anna	Environment Agency	Principal Specialist Social Scientist
Sharman, Jemma	Natural England	Principal Specialist, Local Governance
Smith, Gregg	Natural England	Principal Adviser, Biodiversity Net Gain
Willis, Cheryl	Natural England	Deputy Director, Science & Evidence
Collins, Anna	Natural England	Principal Adviser, Local Nature Recovery Strategies

Workshop participants – January 2024

Name	Agency	Position
Birch, Jo	Natural England	Inclusion Senior Adviser (Area Team)
Cardinal, Isabelle	Natural England	Principal Specialist, Social Scientist
Coke, Alexia	Natural England	Senior Specialist, Social Science
Hinds, Paul	Natural England	Principal Adviser
Holmes, Andrew	Natural England	Senior Specialist, Social Science
Lorentzon, Anna	Environment Agency	Principal Social Scientist

Scarr, Toni	Environment Agency	Head of Ecology and Geomorphology
Sharman, Jemma	Natural England	Principal Specialist, Local Governance
Smith, Gregg	Natural England	Principal Adviser – Biodiversity Net Gain
White, Nicholas	Natural England	Principal Adviser – Biodiversity Net Gain
Willis, Cheryl	Natural England	Deputy Director, Science & Evidence
Easton, Molly	Natural England	Senior Adviser - supporting the LNRS for Surrey

Appendix 2: Literature Review

Search Terms

The following search terms were used in different permutations and combinations.

Social accountability	Environmental
Community	Forest management
Nature-based recovery	Ecological
Citizen assembly	Community-based
Citizen science	Conservation
Monitoring	Participatory
Budgeting	Natural
Resource management	Management
Co-production	Citizens jury
England	U.K
Europe	Latin America
Asia	North America
Africa	Local
Forest	Wildlife
Biodiversity	Net gain
Engagement	Community scorecard
Community report card	Sustainable
Stewardship	Place-based

Restoring	Habitat
Public engagement	Protection
Water	Climate change
Mitigation	Energy
Net zero	Restoration

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