

# Placecast Episode 13 - Planting Trees You'll Never Sit Under: Why Nature Recovery Is Central to Regional Development

With Jane Wills and Jack Reed

## Transcript

### **Nicola Headlam:**

Welcome to Placecast, a Local Policy Innovation Partnership Hub production based at the University of Birmingham. Placecast is essential listening for those keen to explore the ins and outs of knowledge mobilisation for influence in central and local government. Based on the view that it is only through animating the power of place-based leadership, that the wicked problems of 2026 can become more manageable.

Whether you are a researcher, citizen scientists, an activist, a professional working within the public sector, a civil servant, politician, analyst or entrepreneur, we think that it is through the networks that are that solutions can be assembled, tested and the learnings shared. Before we go again and that universities can act as the repositories and observatories of these efforts. We're based in City-REDI routed in the LPIP programme funded by the ESRC and Innovate UK.

This podcast aims to highlight knowledge and evidence based ways of working and strategies, and the strategies needed to make a real impact on the decisions that shape our society. Our guests are changemakers from across the UK, with stories about the ways in which influence can be achieved. We focus in particular on some of the connective tissue within and between sectors for clues as to how to animate, place based leadership, as innovating is a team sport best done in the open.

Please contact us with feedback on the episodes, or if you would like to be a guest or have strong views on the processes of advocacy, lobbying, public campaigning and more. Unpacking how research and evidence connect with neighbourhood, local, city-regional and national missions. My guests today are Professor Jane Wills and Jack Reed. So I'm going to hand over to Jack to tell us about their project. Over to you Jack.

### **Jack Reed:**

So the project is called Nature Recovery and Regional Development. So yeah, I've been on this project for two years now as a postdoc. I'm a research fellow at the University of Exeter. My my PhD was actually in education of all things, and I was looking at how young people connect to nature through social media spaces and then what happens when you take those young people to the Lake District National Park and take part in a residential outdoor learning program?

So I've always been very interested in nature. And this post-doc project, when it came up around nature recovery was a very, very natural fit. So I feel at home, which is good.

**Nicola Headlam:**

Excellent. And Jane, you would have been the Director of the Institute. What specifically and attracted you about this project?

**Jane Wills:**

Well, I was lucky enough to be working in Cornwall when the council there launched something called Britain's Leading Edge (BLE), which is a network of local authorities in the rural periphery, places that always get forgotten.

And what Cornwall Council did is really very it was a big innovation in a way, was to build a network of local councils round the network and find what was common and special about those areas, and it became really evident that nature recovery and the green environment, was critical to those places. So that became a policy agenda.

So I was a in that beginning and then was able to find ESRC funding to support their work. And we've worked with them in partnership ever since. And is the leading edge. Does it hang together as a network still on various other topics? It does, there's a website, Britain's leading Edge, and there's been a couple of manifesto launches around the things that unite those areas.

Obviously green economy. We've mentioned the green transition, renewables, but also the aging population and how areas struggle with populations that are getting older. So there is quite a lot of common ground. And the idea was to lobby national government to put a spotlight on these areas, a bit like the kind of cities we have attracted, and city regions have attracted a lot more political attention, and the rural has been neglected.

So really trying to kind of push the rural agenda in, in the national policy space.

**Nicola Headlam:**

And there was a really good summary of this work on an Academy of Social Sciences blog, which I was reading and it says ignored as they might be. It's 27.5% of the landmass. I mean, it's crazy really, isn't it? How socialised our policy is?

**Jack Reed:**

Absolutely. And it's also when you think about all of the services that these rural places offer cities. And I think that's something that's so often overlooked, whether it be water security or food security, energy as well is often situated in these rural places. And so really, the Academy of Social Sciences paper was trying to make that case that actually the rural does provide all of these services that are so essential to economy and so essential to urban living, but in policy settings is often so, so overlooked, unfortunately.

**Nicola Headlam:**

Well, I think to sort of taken for granted, as you say, you know, sitting in Manchester today, we're really going to feel it if that reservoir 100 miles north suddenly ceases to be, you know, it is the way that it's very interconnected. And I guess also quite a lot of the rural agenda as far as I've seen it lately.

One of the LPIP projects is based in rural Wales, but then they also have the boost of it being a real big agenda in Wales. I guess the the periphery within England have got a specific I mean, you know, said in other places that the subnational governance of England is rather more like a binfire than anything else. But if the English agenda, insofar as it works in the subnational space, you have the kind of core cities. So I guess I can feel it would be a real disparity then in terms of rural areas, so.

**Jack Reed:**

Yeah, and I think also with with what Britain's leading edge is kind of offered us is also a kind of in for, for policy that is English focused, especially around local nature recovery strategies. So all 48 upper tier local authorities in England have been preparing something called their Local Nature Recovery Strategy, or LNRS, as I refer to it from, from here on.

**Jack Reed:**

And these are kind of spatial strategies that enable this kind of hyper local level for people to understand and policymakers to understand what can be done to help nature at those micro levels. And it's quite an exciting time because all of these local nature recovery strategies are now coming online. Cornwall's published theirs, for example, there's one in the West of England.

The Isle of Wight have published theirs too. And my suspicion is, is that by the new year most will be out, which is really exciting. But this is a very much an English policy. So, there are no LNRS's in Wales, Northern Ireland, Scotland. So, that's also driven our focus on the kind of English context, I guess.

**Nicola Headlam:**

Excellent. And how does this work, Jane? Connect into the, you know, engaged in the LPIP a long time before there even was an LPIP. How did that lead you to engage with the LPIP?

**Jane Wills:**

I think I was doing a presentation at a conference on exactly this issue, the sort of neglected periphery, but also the neglected nature recovery agenda and the intersection of nature recovery with economy, because that's seen as very unlikely bed fellows.

But in actual fact, there's lots of overlaps for regional development and economic development through nature recovery and building nature into that strategy. And I think Anne Green heard me talk about this at a conference and then nobbled me to be a part of the LPIP Hub, which has been a great experience. And I think I sort of wave the flag for the green spaces and natural environment at the LPIP, which understandably, because of our population distribution, is largely urban focussed, and city-regional focussed. And so it's nice to have a kind of rural flag in the LPIP process.

**Nicola Headlam:**

I think that's right. And I think also whether the resource follows or not, but it does feel like, you know, you can kind of understand like big city needs an observatory in the way that City-REDI has been in Birmingham. But I guess once you've got a much more distributed geography, it's what does that look like in terms of how do you feed intelligence needs is such a big but different area.

To my first question is on the power of place. So you we've talked about Britain's leading edge and it's you know it's a quarter of of England but very different places. From your perspective, what's the potential for your work on nature recovery reaching maturity and becoming fully embedded? Jack you've mentioned these recovery strategies will cover every corner of England and what could change as a result.

And then what might the size of that prize be?

**Jack Reed:**

Yeah. Nice question. So well what could change as a result? I think it's important to say. But as we sit here today, the delivery funding for Local Nature Recovery Strategies hasn't come through. So we are going to have these fantastic policies. And unfortunately it looks like they might not be funded at the moment.

So what could change is very much up for debate, I think. And what we're finding is that there's a lot of mobilisation at the kind of community level at this kind of bottom up level around taking these local nature recovery strategies and kind of running with them and delivering stuff that's very much at that kind of local village level almost in some in some ways.

And in particular, what we found is that parish councils are kind of mobilising around these nature recovery strategies. So we'd love to talk a little bit more about that, as we go on, because we're about to publish a paper with the British Academy around place-sensitive nature recovery and parish councils. But I think there's also something here that kind of comes out of the Britain's Leading Edge report really. So BLE have just about 2200 parishes, across the area. There's 10,000 parishes in England. But what we're also finding is that these leading edge authorities, the at the upper tier authorities, have around 31% less budgets than the English national average. So quite underfunded as well, which is really interesting. And you mentioned reservoir capacity earlier. These 12 authorities that we're working with have 32% of the reservoir capacity for the whole of England.

They are nationally important for water security. Being in Manchester. Your water will be coming from Thurrock Mia reservoir today. Yeah, that's likely where it's coming from up in the Lake

District, along with the country's largest aquifer. And imagine if that reservoir ran dry. Now that would be really, really significant. So I think that what what the report does is actually recognise, well, these places are underfunded.

There's a lot of local level governance that's really, really important. But they are nationally important also for nature, food, water. And so on. What is the size of the prize? Well, I think really quite significant actually, and this kind of links us quite nicely into the English devolution and Community Empowerment Bill. That's just going through Westminster at the moment.

And this kind of narrative or idea of purchasing assets, of community value. And what's interesting is that when it first was presented to Parliament, the those assets of community value were very much focussed on kind of urban centres. So things like libraries or shops on high streets, and there wasn't actually anything there for nature, which is kind of interesting, because what we're finding is that certain parishes are able to fundraise, able to purchase land, protect it for nature.

And so I think the prize, especially in the current policy context, could be quite large, especially around empowering local communities to take local actions for nature. I think that that really is the crux of of what we've been finding with the Nature Recovery Project so far.

**Nicola Headlam:**

Brilliant. And I guess what you're describing is having to sort of wiggle some policies in order to make sense in the context of the things that you think are also so needed.

**Jack Reed:**

Absolutely. And I guess it also so when I was thinking about this question, I was thinking, well, yes, it's about the size of the prize, but it's also about the quality of that prize. To what extent are these local communities empowered to take action for nature? And I think we are beginning to see a bit of a dial shift there towards empowering those local communities.

But it always comes back to funding and money, and that isn't there right now. So I think that's the that's the key to unlocking this.

**Nicola Headlam:**

Can you describe something specific that's worked well in this space that you found in your research? And then what were the characteristics of the story? Was it about the people involved and the politics?

You said that you find the policy environment needs, wrangling a little bit. Is it about being on the ground for a long time or, you know what, what specifically is going to work well?

**Jack Reed:**

Yeah. So so one of the BLE areas that we're working with is Shropshire. And in Shropshire there's something really fascinating happening around these parish council structures.

I mentioned this, this British Academy paper that we're having published, and it's going to be titled "Pioneering place-sensitive nature recovery at the hyper local scale, a multi-tier, multidirectional governance approach". So really encourage people to maybe pause at this point, go and have a quick glance at the abstract and then come back. So what we've found is that there are 180 or so parish councils in Shropshire, and the majority of them are mobilising around these local nature recovery strategies and thinking about ways that they can, first of all, contribute to that strategy.

But then second of all, of course, protects nature that is local to them. And so they're kind of taking it one step further and are creating a kind of parish level, community led nature recovery strategy for each parish. And some of these parishes are really tiny, you know, kind of a couple of hundred people. And they could have their own nature recovery strategy, which is really quite exciting.

And this has been very, very collaborative from the outset. So we're working actually with a parish meeting which is even smaller than a parish council, really, really tiny. And they've got a little parish hall. And what they did was put a map up in the parish hall and invited residents to come in and label where they think nature could be recovered.

And of course, that also links to people's gardens. It links to road verges, it links to even just little junctions and, you know, little triangles of land in and amongst a road junction. And before they knew it, they had this, this kind of community-led approach towards recovering nature. And that also means that people feel like they have a stake in this.

They feel that they can really take action. And that certainly is something that we're seeing come through quite strongly. In terms of the kind of resources that's been been really important there. This comes back down to people fundamentally. It comes back to when we're describing some of these people as kind of community entrepreneurs in some way. So there's one person in particular, Janet Cob who is the, the, parish clerk of Edgerton Parish meeting, and she has been instrumental in driving this and setting it up, and not just within her parish meeting, but taking this way further across Shropshire.

And I even had somebody drop into my inbox last week from North Yorkshire, saying that they were from a parish council wants to do something similar, and that Janet had put us in touch. And it's those kinds of entrepreneurs at the local level that really do drive some of these things.

**Nicola Headlam:**

So my background is in planning, you know, spatial planning and town and country planning. One of the problems that we always have with such approaches, community level community appraisal, which are sort of, you know, well-established ways of of planning places, is that some people just get really turned off by the kind of planning system, and it's all sort of a bit abstract. And it sounds like this is really concrete because of the nature aspect. It can really animate people.

**Jack Reed:**

I think you're right. And I think there's also a bit of a rejection to these kind of top down approaches to understanding nature. And I think certainly for the parishes, when they've come to realise that unfortunately, there might not be any follow on funding to deliver the local nature recovery strategy. They sort of said, well, all right, then, we'll do it ourselves.

And kind of really cutting through some of those issues. I mean, of course funding is still required, but I think it really is this kind of well, actually, we could we think we can do a better job in some way. And that's kind of quite, quite empowering for these local communities.

**Nicola Headlam:**

And I think that's right. Like it's so often, when you talk about people and their relationship with their places and where they live, you're right.

Let's say my husband works in green space here in Stockport, south Manchester. They didn't spend a lot of time working grot spots and things like that because an unloved, small bit of a place, it really can change how you feel about your whole place. It's, you know, as you say, verge by verge, you know, lay-by by lay-by. It makes it really tangible, doesn't it, for people.

**Jack Reed:**

Absolutely. And if I can share a very brief personal story. So I, I, I didn't go to school. I was taught at home by my parents in the Forest of Dean in Gloucestershire, so very, very rural. And our back gate opened straight into the woods. And so the majority of my education wasn't spent sitting doing maths and English and whatever else it was, going out into the woods and connecting with that place.

And a couple of weeks ago, I went and revisited some of the trees that I used to sit under as a ten year old. And for me, that sort of sense of belonging and connection, I think was really, really strong. And then I went up and visited my my grandfather, my grandad Jim, and he's been in the Forest of Dean his entire life.

And he was born about 20m away from where he now lives. And there's these oak trees just the other side of the road. And we got talking about the oak trees and he said, yeah, yeah, I remember when they were ten feet tall. And now, of course, they're fully, you know, fully grown oaks that have been there for a very long time.

And as, as he was describing this, this love and this connection to his place, I was thinking back to these parish councillors and these local residents in Shropshire and thinking, well, of course they understand this place. Of course they are connected and it makes it all the more powerful, doesn't it? I think when you can tap into that local knowledge and that local enthusiasm and really that's what we've discovered, I think, with the Shropshire case, is that, it's those things that are underpinning nature recovery, which I quite like.

**Nicola Headlam:**

Then they say that, definition of leadership is to plant trees, that you're not going to sit under.

**Jack Reed:**

Exactly it. Right. That's exactly it.

**Nicola Headlam:**

Amazing.

**Nicola Headlam:**

Whilst we're talking, you know, but one verge or one tree, have you been able to widen your horizons to look at international lessons that we can import or steal? Certainly in terms of micro and hyperlocal governance. We saw it, didn't we, at COP 30, how far kind of, you know, indigenous people coming to the conference and using local stories and very, you know, presenting that that immediate challenges and obviously that's the you know, that's indigenous people working at the international scale. Can you think of any good international lessons and on nature recovery?

**Jack Reed:**

Yeah. Wasn't that indigenous work incredible at COP? It's just fantastic. And we don't really have anything on the kind of indigenous side of things. But what we do have is that we, we've been looking a little bit around what's happening in the European Union.

And in particular, this more recent law that was passed last year called the Nature Restoration Regulation, which is very, very interesting, encourage listeners to go and take a look. So it's the first continent-wide comprehensive law of its kind anywhere in the world. And something that I've been very interested in is actually how this relates to marine ecosystems.

So we're talking a lot about terrestrial ecosystems with nature recovery. And in England's nature recovery policies is very much focussed on, on land, more so than on the sea. And what's interesting with the EU side of things is that they very much are pulling out this kind of marine component as well, which of course links so strongly to rural communities for fishing and so on.

So there's this kind of idea of marine restoration linking quite closely with local coastal community regeneration. So there's some nice links there that I think the EU are doing quite well. We've also been looking a little bit at some of the literature around some of the more kind of economic factors that are featuring here, and we found a fascinating paper from Ben Dore et al.

In fact, there were a couple of papers published in 2015, and they found that in the US context, for every \$1 million invested in nature restoration, nature restoration, that can create up to 33 jobs, which is just fantastic. And I think in terms of thinking about rural regeneration, providing these kind of new forms of economy that can stimulate, these kind of local attachments that we've been talking about, it strikes us that actually, nature recovery is a really interesting and good way of doing that, because, as I said, right at the start with the BLE Report, these places

are so rich in natural capital, but we also need people to live there, to work and to help protect these spaces. And so I think that US paper is really fundamental in understanding that there's an opportunity here economically as much as there is about this idea around, sort of you know, place regeneration and place connection, I guess.

**Nicola Headlam:**

I mean, that's an extraordinary. Jane, one of the, privileges of, of being a professor is occasionally that you get to pull back and look at the international picture.

Is there any international lessons that you'd like to import or steal from anywhere else?

**Jane Wills:**

I'm not sure about international lessons, but the Ben Dore work is very striking, because there's a tendency to think that nature is a nice to have, whereas when you really look at what they're doing on the ground, it's profound for our economy. So it means protecting reserves, tree planting, looking after the land margins around our waterways.

A whole lot of kind of physical jobs that are really, really undervalued. But just tree management, for instance, is quite complicated job and we need to train people up. So some of the international lessons were about how you make an economy that really focuses on nature and nature's recovery, rather than sort of putting it in the silo and say, oh, it's a nice to have.

And when we're a wealthier economy or when we've solved poverty, we're going to think about nature because we're never going to get to that point. We have to almost reverse things and think the green environment underpins our whole economy. We are biological organisms and we need oxygen and good quality food and good water to actually live. Our own bodies are full of organisms that keep us alive.

So the gut microbiome is exploded as an area of science, and that's about other organisms that make us human. And so we would really neglect that if biological approach at our peril and our way, our agenda is about that. The the hyper, you know, the global massive reserves, key species, biodiversity hotspots, but it's also the absolutely the micro at the same time.

So that one organism, a lactobacillus in the human gut is really, really important. And and human beings being what we are, a very destructive. And we've spent the 20th century destroying lots of the natural environment, the big trees, the oceans, but also the organisms in our own bodies. And I think the 21st century, in a way, is kind of coming to terms with what we've done to that green environment outside and inside, as a and rethinking our models and the way we live so that we take nature much more seriously.

**Nicola Headlam:**

I mean, there is sort of an irony, isn't there? Whenever you tell the story of why a place is prosperous, you always start with, well, there was a supply of water, and then you just read it and thinking again, you know, when we tell the story of how Manchester kind of rose, fell, rose again and all the rest of it is it's woven through, but somehow it gets obscured.

We now tell a story about innovation, all the rest of it. But then again, if you're not thinking about when you use ChatGPT, it's a water debt. You know, we're so, blinkered, I suppose, aren't we, in terms of how we assemble a story about place.

**Jane Wills:**

Yeah And in many ways, it's sort of basic human geography that we would go back to school level geography, as you say, and think, well, why did Manchester grow or why did Norwich grow?

And they were sort of centres in terms of their natural economies. So the wool industry or timber or beaver pelts or whatever it was, it was a link between human beings and their environment that explain the growth of those places. Jack and I have just been working on a paper for regional studies, which should be out next week, we hope.

Looking at the BLE areas and where this intersection between nature recovery and the economy comes. And it's interesting that's in those natural economies. Think about the areas we're talking, stuff like farming and food, which we overlook. Again, at our peril. I mean, if we can't secure our own food supply, we're in serious trouble. Fishing, forestry, which remains incredibly important, not least for supplies, for furniture and so on.

But also now increasingly for offsetting, the impacts of, greenhouse gas emissions and so on. And then the marine economy is really critical, not just fishing, but also the kind of offshore and of course, tourism. A lot of tourism, which is really important to, to parts of the country depends on the quality of the green environment.

So in a way, we haven't got that far away from our natural environment, but we've just sort of neglected it, and we have prioritised it in our public debate.

**Nicola Headlam:**

I mean, what you could see more, what could be more 2025 than that dreadful story coming out of, the A34 the dump. You know, it just feels so, so characteristic of how shortsighted we've become.

And, you know, the, you know, the people are going every day now and, you know, poking this terrible waste area and waiting for the rain to come in. It's to leech into the Cherwell, into the you know, it's just it seems like such a allegory for how far, far we've gone wrong in a way.

**Jack Reed:**

Absolutely. There was a really interesting paper published by Myles Richardson from the University of Derby a couple of months ago.

That looked at our nature connectedness since the 1800s and found that we are 200% or so less connected to nature now than we were back then. And that really is kind of it, isn't it, that if you don't connect to these places and spaces, well, how on earth are you ever going to come to care for them?

I think that that is really, really fundamental.

**Nicola Headlam:**

And then it's back to, you know, we need to find ways that are regenerative rather than just extractive.

**Jack Reed:**

Absolutely. And I think quite a lot about the kind of the storytelling component that you were just mentioning, Nic. And how do we tell stories? Well, stories are so rooted in intergenerational interaction.

And that story about my granddad's oak trees, for example, is intergenerational. And I think that maybe that's also something that we're missing in some ways. How do we help younger people understand the stories of those that have gone before? And I think nature is a really nice forum to do that, because we all have stories of nature, especially older people.

So the intergenerational component is so important, I think.

**Nicola Headlam:**

But then and again, sorry to sound is like such a downer, but also that part of the world, the main story has been about those dreadful chicken farms, you know, it baffles me how we've managed to get into a position where the natural, the obvious asset of the river Wye was just being used as a as a dump again, you know?

**Jack Reed:**

Absolutely. And from my granddad's garden you could throw a stone and it would almost land in the River Wye. Like that's, that's how close it is to that part of the world. And I remember as a child in the early 2000, swimming in the River Wye, and there were fish. And if you were to go down there now, you wouldn't want to swim in the River Wye, and there would be very limited fish.

And I mean, it's almost getting on to be an ecologically dead, isn't it? Unfortunately. And that is absolutely because of the chicken litter. But we're also working with Herefordshire and Shropshire as part of the nature, recovery and regional development project. And looking at things like nutrient mitigation credits and those kinds of things. And that also helping to unlock certain elements of the economy through housebuilding and those kinds of areas.

So absolutely, a terrible, terrible story, and we need to change it very quickly. But there are opportunities. Those opportunities exist. The economic model is there to do it. It's just doing it. And fingers crossed, if you were to interview us again in ten years' time, maybe the story would be a bit different.

**Nicola Headlam:**

I will be back in ten years' time.

So we've, we've established, you know, the critical importance of your work. What are you working on next?

**Jack Reed:**

Yeah. It's exciting. And so we have a lot of data. So we we're a qualitative project and we've been doing loads of interviews with Britain's leading edge officers, directors, etc.. Also national stakeholders. And so we have nearly 1 million words of data, which is quite significant and has caused some headaches.

But our fantastic post-doc colleague, Georgina Treloar has been working through that and we're nearly there. So the analysis is kind of coming to a conclusion, which is great. So we're now thinking about writing up findings, which is really exciting. So I'm currently writing a paper on epistemology or the nature of knowledge and the role of place-based knowledges within governance frameworks. Which so often prioritise more kind of ecological or economic knowledge rationality.

So I'm just thinking a little bit about that. So more sort of philosophical I suppose. Georgina is working on a paper at the moment around multi-tier and multidirectional governance for nature recovery. So that's also happening. But we're also developing some really nice case studies. So we've got all of this data, but we now want to get out onto the ground and see and speak to people who are actually dealing with this day in, day out.

So I think one really interesting one is around actually local authorities and nature markets, which is something that's kind of coming up quite a lot. So especially in places like Cornwall and the two upper tier local authorities in Cumbria, there's a lot going on around securing a kind of nature market to help unlock development, but also to help channel investment and finance into these local authorities as well.

So a lot more to do there to understand some of the mechanisms required to unlock some of these funding levers. So yeah, a lot going on and grappling with an awful lot of data.

**Nicola Headlam:**

God a million words, gave me a bit of a heart palpitation. I don't know about you.

Jane, where do you think the agenda needs to turn next again? Maybe sort of pulling out slightly. What? What do you think is the most and the most important things?

**Jane Wills:**

Well, it's been striking to me because I've been in this now, this project for quite a few years. How disruptive really the national political environment has been, because we had one set of policies brought in by the previous government, and then we really had a kind of year of uncertainty with the new government coming in and re-thinking a lot of those things.

So one of the critical things was what's happened to farmers. They were given certain guarantees around the environmental land management scheme, so that they were encouraged to farm with nature in mind. And then the new government can just rip that up. And that's been very sobering for me, because if we think about all our local authorities, they're having consultation with landowners around what can be done to to reinvigorate nature in their patch.

Farmers are absolutely critical to that. They own and manage most of our land, and they've had no certainty about their land management, livelihoods, security for the future.

**Nicola Headlam:**

Well, quite the opposite. I mean, they've become radicalised in many ways against.

Yeah. And there's been no thought for them really, because Labour is a very, understandably, urban, industrial focussed party.

**Jane Wills:**

Its roots are in cities. And I sort of feel that the BLEs has become more important in a way, because the rural voice and the farmers voice has been lost at national level.

**Nicola Headlam:**

In the same way that we tell a story about place because of its natural assets, you know, essentially the rural, urban kind of power. There is the argument that we've never really come to terms with the fact that our geography ended up tilting to being urban and industrial in terms of land ownership.

So, yeah, it's it's it's fascinating that the fact that it's still such a raw edge. And again, I mean, what kind of species would, you know decide that we've got it's got to maturity and then or a different group is is going to take over, so it really is law of the jungle almost. You know that that the policy changes is sort of absurd.

Can you tell me something that about the people I mean, we're moving to talk about, good brokerage. So brokerage in, you know, understanding is often not, you know, people that manage knowledge on behalf of other people. So I guess the sort of BLE organisation, how has that come together? Was it volunteeristic? It certainly wasn't. You know, top down, was it?

And what how how have those brokers come together?

**Jane Wills:**

Well, it was an initiative by Cornwall Council, as I say, to kind of raise the voice of these areas in national policy discussions. But it's being very much ad hoc added on to the policy officers workload and interestingly, my point, dismayed about national politics changing, local politics, of course, changes too.

And so the the recent local government elections have kind of distorted some of that, that trajectory, in a way, for understandable reasons. New parties come in, they want to change things. So there's a kind of striking gap, I suppose, between what Jack's talking about, where people plant a tree and they want their grandchildren to see it grow, to invest in nature and are incredibly short political cycles of, you know, five years at the most, with this constant change which makes it credibly difficult to manage a natural environment which needs decades of investment and thought and care.

And the stewardship is an interesting question, because engaging local people is probably the best way to really steward our environment, because, say, farmers, fishers, local people do care of they're not going anywhere they care about. They want their children's children to care about it. So we've got this kind of interesting debate, really, about how do you foster that long-term intergenerational stewardship alongside our political cycles that are so short-term and very disruptive.

So I don't think I've got any answers to that, but it's raised in a really significant way.

**Nicola Headlam:**

And I suppose be the sort of new and the Elgar's sort of rural configurations and the place, I mean, part of it is, is there enough places for policy officers from similar authorities to have a little bit of slack to work together on kind of the what the things that are coming up?

I suppose that would be one of the...

**Jane Wills:**

[Inaudible] It's a group in the LGA, so they are registered. There's a special interest group. So that's probably helped with that working.

**Nicola Headlam:**

I mean it's gosh it's so important. I mean for all of the sort of fostering of different kind of yeah the special interests, SIGOMA, the special interest groups, it really does ferment sort of because I you know any time that you ever get like government officers together, nobody ever is singing in isolation.

There's always me too. Me too. Yes. Yes. That's same with the same with the same with our communities. Same with our politicians. Same same same. It's so key, isn't it? So, I guess just a small thumbs up that the LGA is an eternally good broker, which we kind of always ignore. Jack, can you you've mentioned already parish councillors doing God's work.

Can you think of specific people who are really good brokers?

**Jack Reed:**

Yeah. So I think actually a more of a kind of organisational level. We've been doing a bit of work with the Community Land Trust (CLT) who have been really, really good. And in particular, the CEO, Tom Chance, as a broker, I think is just fantastic. And really what we're seeing is, is this organisation kind of brokering relationships between landowners and local communities.

So what the CLT does is set up or help local communities purchase land for community use. And that could be through things like community housing that could be around protecting nature. So there's a certain number now around each recovery really creating places for communities. And Tom is just fantastic at helping those processes unfold. And I think now there are over 550 or 600 CLTs across the country.

So something that's really coming up a lot. And then also I think there's there's lessons here around brokerage, around local nature recovery strategies. And Cornwall have really stood out as being able to kind of broker this, these ideas between policy and landowners or local communities as well. So the person who's been leading a lot of that work is Pip Hoskins at Cornwall Council.

And I spoke a little bit earlier about these kind of ideas of community entrepreneurs. So I'd say that Pip is probably a policy entrepreneur in some way, taking these policies from the top down and applying them into the kind of Cornish setting, but doing a really, really nice job of making that accessible and applicable at those hyperlocal levels, whether that be farmers, fishers, you know, whoever it might be, there are too many people in to name, really lots of people doing this. But Tom and Pip do stand out. I would say.

#### **Nicola Headlam:**

I've just been writing a thing, about 50 years of special policy and, yet to convince me that the main set of behaviours that you need are improvisation to make any system work, you need to be able to take what is a political or a policy kind of framework, and then what we know we call entrepreneurship, because that's the only way we can value someone that does, you know, pulls it all together and makes the best in scope at scale, pulling around you the powers that you need and the resources that you need and the goodwill that you need in order to make things happen. So dotted with good brokers now again, in all sorts of thinking, good brokers need good place leaders to kind of dock into in order to make change happen. I mean, Jane and you certainly expressed frustration with how fast the political cycle kind of strands good work. Can you think of place leaders who are either elected or emerge in a in other ways?

#### **Jack Reed:**

I'd like to come back to Janet Cobb, actually. So we were doing some interviews back early last year, 2024. With some people from Shropshire Council. And we got into these ideas with parishes and whatnot, and they said, you must speak to Janet. So I thought, right, okay. So I sent an email to Janet and got an email back very, very quickly.

And we sat down and had a chat about parishes, nature recovery and Shropshire. And straight away the energy was just wonderful. And you got this sense that this was a person who, by hook or by crook, was going to make this work. You know, this, this. There was no choice around failure. This, this was going to happen. And there's been quite a few different, conferences that

I've been put on in Shropshire that I've been invited to go up and and talk to, and it's just been wonderful.

Having around 100 parish councillors often, in a room together for a day, all talking about nature recovery. And Janet is very much the catalyst for those things. Of course, there are other people around her as well, who are doing a lot of work, but really it's, it's Janet that's that stood out. And so the British Academy paper for example, has worked with Janet a lot around the parishes.

She managed to have a read through and offer advice to us. And just the time given has been wonderful. And I think maybe the most exciting thing is that, as I mentioned earlier, when I seeing this energy from Janet spill out to Shropshire and to other places, so North Yorkshire is a really obvious one. I know there's also things happening on the Isle of Wight with parishes, and it does feel like it's the place leaders, who have the time and the energy and the capacity, I guess, to get involved and to recognise that failure is not an option.

And I think when we come to nature recovery and this biodiversity crisis, of course failure's not an option. And yeah, it's Janet that puts a smile on my face with these things. So it's yeah, very, very exciting.

**Nicola Headlam:**

And I guess it always comes down in the end making permission for yourself to to act and to be, you know, there's no there's no different handbook that's been given to Janet than has been given to any other person interested in perishing or interested in hyperlocal, you know, neighbourhood work. And it is partly, you know, she's made permission for herself to operate in that way, I guess.

**Jack Reed:**

Absolutely. And also, I think you know, I think the relationship that Janet has with the local authority is, well, we're going to do this regardless. Come along with us. We want to take you with us. But if you don't, we're still going to do it anyway. And that's quite a nice approach. You know, that really is this this kind of feeling of, well, this is happening and and that really is very exciting. So yeah, the Shropshire case study is really very, very interesting, so.

**Nicola Headlam:**

Very rich.

**Jack Reed:**

Encourage people to read it.

**Nicola Headlam:**

Anybody leap to mind for you, Jane?

**Jane Wills:**

Well I've been struck in the importance of establishing relationships for the long-term. So in Cornwall, Jack mentioned Pip Hoskins, who's the local authority officer, but the council also has this local nature partnership.

The argument was that that would then match the local economic and enterprise partnership. So you had an LEP and the LNP and so very, very early on. So are talking over a decade now, the council did have the vision to mobilise its nature networks alongside its economic networks. And I think that's what's really helping here because it's been embedded for a long time.

There's those platforms and brokerages in both communities. So the Chamber of Commerce and the kind of economic end is networked, and they're increasingly interested in nature. And then the Nature Partnership is a very strong group which involves the Wildlife Trusts and some of the Marine Protection Area kind of people. And they've been working together and they know each other and it's a community that's, that's a very civil community.

People do know each other and are here for the long term. So I think I've been struck by that, and that these local institutions really do matter to making things happen. So Jack's talked a lot about parishes, and they're often overlooked because they're voluntary organisations in many ways. But they are a structure and they provide a vehicle for people to do things for the long term.

And that's been really positive. I think the other thing about parishes, if they can bring that precept to the table, so they do have the scope to raise a bit of money or they could apply for charitable funding, as they've done in Shropshire. So I think we need structures with the capacity to raise their own bits of money and to provide platforms to build relationships that really then can take the mission into the next generation as well. That's been very striking.

**Nicola Headlam:**

Gosh. So that was a real work out around all the areas of your research. So just a bit of foolishness to finish. I am going to allow you both a wave of my place-based innovation magic wand. You have to be careful with it. It can grant a wish. You have absolute power to do one of these things, but you must use your powers to make a tangible change to a specific place.

Your change will be specific, measurable, actionable, recordable, and transferable. Smart magic is hard to get hold of for the moment and is subject to a 20% reducing multi-year budget settlement. You may have a 10 million pound project fund, half an hour with the cabinet and a slide deck. I guess with that you also get a bit of mind control.

They have to listen to you. Editorial control of the front page of a tabloid, a clause to insert into a bill, a simple message that you might be able to send viral on social media and on TikTok. Anyone as an advocate for this work or and this is one for the real nerds. The answer? The answer to something that has bothered you forever.

So Jane, first he will wave the place-based magic wand.

**Jane Wills:**

Well, Jack and I, discussed this earlier, and we were very much keen on a kind of national nature strategy which would involve our young people. And I'm going to pass over to Jack to answer my question.

**Nicola Headlam:**

Very, very collegial. But the magic is too powerful for one hand only, Jack, here it is.

**Jack Reed:**

Oh, goodness. Okay, this is no pressure. Right? So we were thinking so back in 2020 and, and through a few years after that, there was these ideas emerging around this National Nature Service, which was going to be a forum to enable young people to kind of develop the skills needed to contribute to the nature recovery economy, basically. And that kind of this collapsed from what we can see, certainly doesn't appear to exist anymore, which is a real shame.

So really, I think that if I could wave my magic wand, it would be around some kind of outdoor or environmental education provision that is baked into the national curriculum as standards, that helps prepare young people to be able to contribute to our nature recovery economies that are currently being developed. This also links quite nicely into the curriculum review that's happening, in the Department for Education at the moment.

And also and it's kind of flying under the radar, but there is also an Outdoor Education Bill going through Westminster, which is just so exciting and unfortunately just doesn't get the traction and attention that it requires

**Nicola Headlam:**

Is that that's around forest schooling and all that kind of thing.

**Jack Reed:**

Well, a little bit, but also around providing young people with opportunity to take part in residential outdoor learning.

Which links back very strongly to my PhD, actually. But making sure that every young person from age 12 to 16 has the opportunity to go and experience these places, places like the Lake District or Snowdonia or Eryri National Park, as it's called these days. And so making sure that young people have opportunity to access nature, I think, is where we need to start.

And we know that young people are so engaged in this and want to take part and want to contribute. Well, let's give them the skills to do so.

**Nicola Headlam:**

Say, how about then? So we're going to have a clause in that bill, the Outward Bound bill, which somehow makes the the clause becomes bigger than the bill and makes it, both compulsory and funded forever.

**Jack Reed:**

Well wouldn't that just be fabulous? I would love it.

**Nicola Headlam:**

It's a very good use of the place-based magic wand. Thank you so much for joining us. We set out to mine insights from experts. That's the pair of you. Real world case studies. So the Shropshire case and Britain's Leading Edge. And think about some practical tips career advice.

Not sure about that. And to spotlight solutions as well as wave the place-based innovation magic wand. And we have thank you.

**Jack Reed:**

And thank you.