

Engaging local knowledges for UK peatland restoration

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About the research

Restoring significant areas of lowland peatlands is [integral to the UK's net-zero strategy](#). In England alone, greenhouse gas emissions from lowland peat soil degradation are around [8.5 million tonnes carbon dioxide equivalent annually](#). Raising water tables to restore these peatlands could potentially reduce total UK emissions by approximately 2%.

Many lowland peatlands have long histories of drainage and productive agriculture. Restoration therefore demands careful consideration of socio-cultural and economic questions.

Without significantly increased public funding, scaling up peatland restoration will require private finance, to be derived for example by selling biodiversity net gain (BNG) or carbon credits to organisations looking to offset their own environmental impacts.

These so-called "nature credit" markets, however, typically privilege standardised approaches to restoration, leaving little room for local landowner knowledges or concerns.

As part of the '[Peatscapes](#)' project, the 'Living Levels, Shared Futures' forum gathered representatives of conservation organisations, government advisory bodies, water management boards, local community members and farmers themselves in the Somerset Levels—a key region where agriculture co-exists with deep lowland peat.

As this report outlines, the forum identified several concrete routes to better recognise and engage agricultural landowners and local communities. These groups are valuable knowledge holders with diverse expertise, which will be critical to scaling up peatland restoration sustainably.

Right: The 'Living Levels, Shared Futures' forum, staged in the village of Burtle in March 2026.

Policy Recommendations

1. **Public engagement should be ongoing and deliberative** – geared towards enriching conversations about what kinds of peatland restoration are viable and which restoration goals are most valued by local communities, rather than aiming to secure consent for predetermined restoration programmes.
2. **Restoration schemes should identify and utilise more local expertise** (e.g. about soils, governance, water management and local ecologies). This will increase the social legitimacy of restoration and foster greater sensitivity towards the place-specific conditions and contexts within which restoration occurs.
3. **Local communities and organisations should be granted a leading role in designing and implementing restoration**, recognising that ongoing maintenance of restoration benefits is critically reliant upon local-level cooperation and negotiation, as well as ongoing funding.
4. **Funding and finance schemes should include input from local landowners and communities** from an early stage, rather than seeking to 'sell' a specific economic vision designed in advance.
5. **New guidelines defining 'successful' peatland restoration should involve farmers and local communities**, embracing diverse perspectives both global and local.



Key findings

The 'Living Levels, Shared Futures' forum formed part of the wider, Leverhulme Trust-funded 'Peatscapes' project, which examined knowledge controversies surrounding efforts to scale up peatland restoration in the UK and Europe. The project combined policy analysis, expert interviews, site visits and walking interviews, focusing in particular on the Somerset Levels and the East Anglian Fens, leading to several key findings:

- Landscape-scale restoration of lowland peatlands cannot be achieved through a one-off package of hydrological or social transformations. Instead, restoration must be sustained through long-term funding alongside ongoing social and institutional work.
- Lowland peatland restoration cannot immediately reverse the damage wrought by historical drainage. Moreover, many aspects of the ecosystems which have developed alongside land-use practices contributing to peatland degradation are today valued in their own right. These must therefore be factored into restoration visions.
- A gradual, compromise-based approach to peatland restoration may be more effective than insisting on the complete overhaul of existing land use practices.
- Emphasising only the climate impacts of peat extraction or agriculture is likely to be counter-productive. Such practices are typically foundational elements of community identity and cultural heritage—communities should be allowed to take pride in these pasts, regardless of their views on desirable landscape futures.



A lowland peatland landscape in the Somerset Levels. Image by Aneurin Merrill-Glover

Further information

This briefing draws on findings from the 'Living Levels, Shared Futures' forum, funded by the University of Bristol Policy Support Fund, as well as the wider 'Peatscapes' project, funded by the [Leverhulme Trust](#) (RPG-2022-345).

Findings from wider work are available in a research article led by Dr. Aneurin Merrill-Glover – '[Undrainage: The Hydrological Dilemmas of Peatlands Restoration in the United Kingdom](#)' – published by Oxford University Press in 2026.

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