



Environmental
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Rights of Nature in a Changing Local Government Landscape

A summary of research carried out by 10 universities within the Environmental Law Foundation's policy clinic network during the 2025/26 academic year. These included the Universities of Birmingham, Bristol, Law, Leeds, Leicester, Nottingham Trent, Sheffield Hallam, Southampton, Sussex, and Warwick.

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Introduction

A growing number of local councils across England have passed motions recognising or supporting the Rights of Nature (RoN), particularly in relation to rivers. But the local government landscape in which many of these initiatives have developed is about to change significantly.

Against this backdrop, students from universities across the Environmental Law Foundation's policy clinic network have been examining what changes to local government could mean for the future development of Rights of Nature in England.

The question is particularly timely. The Government's programme of devolution and local government reorganisation will significantly alter both the structure and geographical scale of local government. Some existing councils will disappear, new unitary authorities will be created, and Strategic Authorities will take responsibility for important areas including strategic planning, economic development, environment and climate change.

For Rights of Nature, these changes present both challenges and opportunities. Existing Rights of Nature motions, charters, frameworks and other commitments could be lost through reorganisation.

At the same time, new regional structures could provide opportunities to embed Rights of Nature principles more deeply within governance frameworks.

Drawing on research undertaken across ELF's university network, this report explores these risks and opportunities and sets out recommendations for how councils and communities can help ensure that the progress made to date in recognising the Rights of Nature is not lost as England's system of local government changes.

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What changes to local government are taking place?

The Government's 2024 White Paper set out plans to extend devolution across England alongside a significant programme of local government reorganisation.

In areas currently operating a two-tier system, proposals can be brought forward to replace existing county and district councils with new unitary authorities. Rather than responsibilities being divided between two levels of local government, a single unitary authority will perform these functions.

Alongside this, a new system of regional Strategic Authorities is being established: Foundation Strategic Authorities, Mayoral Strategic Authorities and Established Mayoral Strategic Authorities. These bring together a number of councils. Existing non-mayoral Combined Authorities and Combined County Authorities will automatically become Foundation Strategic Authorities, while Mayoral Strategic Authorities will have access to greater devolved powers across seven areas including environment and climate change.

The longer-term ambition is for Strategic Authorities to move towards the Established Mayoral model.

Changes to the planning system are also at play. The Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025 introduces Spatial Development Strategies (SDS), which will be produced by strategic planning authorities and will help shape development and infrastructure across their areas.

For Rights of Nature, the significance of these reforms is not simply that local government boundaries are changing. They change where decisions affecting nature are made, the geographical scale at which they are made and the institutions that communities will need to influence. This creates both new opportunities for Rights of Nature and significant risks for the progress already made.



What opportunities do local government reforms create?

1. Stronger regional leadership for Rights of Nature

Mayoral Strategic Authorities could provide an opportunity to strengthen and scale Rights of Nature across a much larger geographical area.

Many of those elected to new Strategic Authorities are likely to be existing local government representatives. Where they have already been involved in Rights of Nature work, this could help provide continuity and carry existing knowledge and support into the new structures.

Mayors will also be able to appoint people to assist with their functions, including in relation to environment and climate change. This could create opportunities for dedicated environmental leadership. For example, through an Environment and Climate Change Commissioner, Nature Commissioner or Guardian with a remit to champion nature recovery and ecological governance.

More broadly, the regional scale of Strategic Authorities could allow Rights of Nature principles to influence policy beyond individual council boundaries.

A supportive mayor could provide political leadership across the region, while new governance structures, such as a Nature Recovery and Ecological Governance Board, could provide a mechanism for embedding these principles more systematically into regional decision-making.

2. Local Nature Recovery Strategies

Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) could provide one of the clearest opportunities to translate Rights of Nature principles into practical environmental policy. Strategic Authorities will play a leading role in preparing and publishing LNRS. These spatial strategies are designed to support nature recovery by identifying priority habitats, ecological networks and areas suitable for environmental improvement. This creates an opportunity to express Rights of Nature principles through solid ecological objectives.

The geographical scale is important. Rivers, catchments, biodiversity corridors and other ecological networks frequently cross district boundaries. LNRS could therefore provide a route for applying Rights of Nature principles across an entire ecosystem.



3. Spatial Development Strategies

Spatial Development Strategies (SDS) provide another potential route for Rights of Nature principles to influence policy. Strategic planning authorities will be required to prepare an SDS for their area, and these strategies must take account of relevant LNRS. This creates an important connection between nature recovery and decisions about the future pattern of development across a region.

For Rights of Nature, this could provide an opportunity to influence the frameworks through which development decisions are actually made.

There may also be opportunities to embed relevant Rights of Nature principles in Local Plans as these are revised within the new strategic planning framework. Doing so could help translate political recognition of Rights of Nature into policies with direct bearing on decision-making.

4. Regional Governance

The shift towards regional governance could create opportunities for Rights of Nature. Natural systems rarely correspond neatly to local authority boundaries. Rivers flow through multiple council areas, habitats form part of wider ecological networks and environmental decisions in one place can have consequences elsewhere.

Strategic Authorities could therefore provide a more appropriate geographical scale for some forms of ecological governance. They could enable stakeholders to collaborate around shared rivers, landscapes and ecosystems. New regional funding streams could also create opportunities to support environmental initiatives across a wider area.

5. Building political support for Rights of Nature

Much will depend on the political priorities of those leading the new authorities. Where mayors and Strategic Authorities support ambitious approaches to environmental protection, the new structures could provide opportunities to take Rights of Nature principles from relatively local initiatives to a much larger geographical scale.

The move to larger authorities could also change how communities and environmental organisations seek to influence policy. Groups working across a Strategic Authority area may have opportunities to build wider alliances, while town and parish councils (which are not affected by the changes) could become important links between local communities and larger regional bodies. There are already existing landowner-led and regional civic projects operating outside formal local government structures and these types of projects could play an increasing role in developing environmental initiatives across administrative boundaries.



What challenges do local government reforms create?

1. Protecting existing Rights of Nature commitments, frameworks and charters

One of the most immediate risks identified by the research is what happens to existing Rights of Nature initiatives when a council is abolished.

Local government restructuring takes place through Structural Change Orders. During the transition, a “shadow authority” is established to prepare for the new unitary authority. On “vesting day”, the existing council is abolished and ceases to exist as a legal entity.

This matters for councils that have already adopted Rights of Nature motions. Non-binding political resolutions and symbolic declarations do not generally transfer automatically to the new authority. Unless a Rights of Nature commitment has been translated into a legally operative instrument, such as through planning policy, there is a risk that it will not survive reorganisation.

Where Rights of Nature principles have been incorporated into ongoing programmes or statutory strategies, there is a greater prospect of continuity through the transfer

of functions and liabilities. Statutory plans will generally remain in place until they are replaced, whereas non-statutory commitments have no continuing binding authority unless the successor authority chooses to reaffirm them.

Reorganisation could therefore create a real point of vulnerability for the progress already made on Rights of Nature at the local level. Councils and communities cannot assume that an existing motion, framework or charter will simply carry across into the new authority.

2. Ensuring local voices are heard within larger authorities

The Government’s reforms seek to strengthen strategic local leadership by moving more decision-making to larger authorities. These larger unitary and Strategic Authorities will also have broader agendas, potentially fewer elected representatives relative to the populations they serve, and responsibility for a much wider range of communities.

This could make it harder for small community groups campaigning around a particular river, habitat or ecosystem to influence decision-makers.



3. Keeping nature central amid competing priorities

Strategic Authorities will be responsible not only for the environment but also for economic growth, housing, regeneration, infrastructure and transport.

There is therefore a risk that nature recovery becomes one consideration competing against a series of other strategic priorities, particularly where economic growth and infrastructure delivery dominate regional policy.

New environmental mechanisms could support nature recovery, but much will depend on how they are implemented. The requirement for Spatial Development Strategies to take account of relevant Local Nature Recovery Strategies, for example, creates an important connection between planning and nature recovery, but does not necessarily ensure that environmental considerations will prevail where priorities conflict.

Similarly, market-based mechanisms such as Environmental Delivery Plans may sit uneasily with Rights of Nature principles if ecological impacts are primarily treated in financial terms as something that can be balanced or compensated for elsewhere.

4. Protecting opportunities for community participation

The reforms could also affect the ability of communities to participate in decisions affecting their local environment. For Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects, certain pre-application duties relating to consultation with local communities have been removed. This could reduce formal opportunities for communities to influence major infrastructure proposals before decisions are taken.

For Rights of Nature, this matters because many initiatives have developed through local communities advocating on behalf of particular rivers, habitats and landscapes. Any reduction in opportunities for those communities to participate could make it harder for local environmental concerns and ecological knowledge to influence decision-making.

5. Preserving space for local innovation

Much of the development of Rights of Nature in the UK has come from and communities being willing to experiment with new approaches. Larger authorities may place greater emphasis on consistency across their areas. While this could allow successful approaches to be scaled, it could also make locally specific Rights of Nature initiatives harder to develop or sustain. There is a risk that reorganisation reduces opportunities for experimentation.



Recommendations for communities and councillors

1. Embed Rights of Nature in the new council structures

Councils that have already adopted Rights of Nature motions or charters should review how those commitments are currently reflected in their policies, plans and programmes.

Where Rights of Nature recognition exists only as a political motion or other non-binding commitment, councils should consider whether its principles can be incorporated into relevant environmental strategies, Local Plans or decision-making frameworks before reorganisation takes effect.

The shadow-authority period provides an important window of opportunity. As new authorities develop their constitutions, governance arrangements and strategic priorities, existing Rights of Nature commitments, frameworks and charters should be clearly documented and, where possible, strengthened and embedded into existing policy. They can then be actively put before the incoming authority for adoption or reaffirmation, rather than relying on them to transfer automatically through reorganisation.

New authorities could also consider assigning cabinet-level and officer responsibility for nature recovery and ecological governance, establishing cross-departmental working arrangements, and using scrutiny mechanisms to monitor environmental commitments.

2. Apply a Rights of Nature lens to Environmental Delivery Plans

Environmental Delivery Plans should be subject to robust scrutiny to ensure that ecological impacts are properly understood and not underestimated. A Rights of Nature perspective could strengthen this process by encouraging decision-makers to consider ecosystems as entities whose long-term ecological integrity needs to be protected, rather than viewing environmental harm simply as something to be balanced against the benefits of development.

Where levy contributions are intended to fund environmental improvements, guidance should encourage those improvements to be implemented before, or alongside, development wherever possible.

3. Use Local Nature Recovery Strategies to turn principles into action

Authorities should use Local Nature Recovery Strategies as an opportunity to translate Rights of Nature principles into measurable ecological priorities. Formal stakeholder partnerships could strengthen collaboration between authorities, communities and environmental organisations and help ensure that local ecological knowledge informs the strategy.

Clear and measurable objectives will also be important if Rights of Nature principles are to influence practical environmental outcomes rather than remain primarily symbolic.

4. Integrate Rights of Nature into environmental governance

Rights of Nature is likely to have greater long-term influence if its principles are integrated into mainstream environmental and planning structures rather than operating entirely through parallel initiatives. The revision of Local Plans provides one opportunity to incorporate these principles more firmly into policy.

There may also be scope to explore independent governance models for particular ecosystems.

The research identified corporate guardianship bodies for rivers and ecosystems, potentially established as Community Interest Companies, as one model that could operate independently of government and private interests.

5. Build understanding and support for Rights of Nature

Political and public support will ultimately be important if Rights of Nature is to influence the new system. Clear information about Rights of Nature, supported by examples from the UK and internationally, could help demonstrate to policymakers how these approaches can work in practice.

Community groups across Strategic Authority areas could also build networks to share knowledge and advocate collectively, while partnerships with schools, universities and civil society organisations could broaden understanding and support.

There may also be opportunities to engage candidates standing for election to new authorities and encourage them to make commitments relating to Rights of Nature and ecological governance.

Conclusion

Local government reform could mark an important turning point for Rights of Nature in England. There is a real risk that existing motions, frameworks and charters could be lost as councils are abolished and replaced. Councils and communities should therefore act now to embed existing commitments more firmly into policy and carry them into the new authorities.

At the same time, the reforms create opportunities to take Rights of Nature further. New mayoral leadership, nature recovery strategies and governance across larger geographical areas could help embed Rights of Nature principles more deeply into decision-making. The challenge will be to seize these opportunities while preserving the local innovation and community involvement that have driven the movement to date.

