

# URBAN ECOSYSTEMS & NATURE RESTORATION LEADERS' FORUM: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Restoring Urban Biodiversity: Creating Nature-Integrated, Equitable and Accessible Cities

Restoring nature in urban environments requires transformative change in how nature is supported and integrated into cities and towns. This summary synthesises insights from 60 participants representing 52 organisations, who emphasised the importance of nature-positive urban planning, the need for equal access to high quality natural and biodiverse environments and the role of nature as being key to human wellbeing. The challenge is creating the enabling conditions for this transformation. Strong policy frameworks, sustained leadership, adequate funding, public education, participatory implementation, robust monitoring, and enhanced professional capacity are all required. The vision that emerged from the conversations on the day is one of accessible green and blue spaces woven throughout urban fabric, where nature supports thriving communities, climate adaptation, public health, and resilient ecosystems that benefit all residents.

## Integrate Nature Throughout Urban Environments

Creating biodiverse urban environments requires embedding nature into every aspect of urban development. This approach emerged as the primary priority across all groups of participants.

Suggested actions included:

- Require all new residential, commercial and public developments to integrate measures that enhance nature and biodiversity. Developments must meet new Biodiversity Net Gain and net zero objectives.
- Integrate nature through the urban fabric by increasing communal green spaces/gardens, green roofs/façades, native planting, nesting boxes, sustainable urban drainage systems, community orchards and pocket gardens.
- Map and further develop green-blue networks by linking parks, rivers, canals, street trees, and pocket habitats to create more effective ecological corridors. Enable safe wildlife movement by incorporating hedgerows, dark spaces, and routes for both day- and night-active species.
- Increase green and blue spaces to promote nature refuges and shared human-nature areas, supporting biodiversity while providing multi-use amenities.

## Reclaim Space from Cars for People and Nature

Reducing car dependency emerged across all tables as essential for creating space for biodiversity, improving air quality, and enabling active lifestyles. This will require fundamental shifts in transport infrastructure and urban design priorities. Suggestions from the discussions included:

- Shift urban transport away from car dominance, reclaiming road and parking space to prioritise people, biodiversity, and low-carbon mobility. Repurpose car-dominated infrastructure for green corridors, biodiverse planting, and expanded pedestrian and cycling routes.
- Provide high-quality, diverse, affordable, and comfortable public transport that makes car-free living more viable. Support low-carbon road and water vehicles including electric and hydrogen options with charging infrastructure.
- Implement 15-minute city planning principles to support access to ecological spaces that are reachable within a 15-minute walk.

## Design Permeable, Climate-Resilient Sponge Cities

Climate adaptation through nature-based solutions requires replacing hard surfaces with permeable infrastructure that manages water flow, supports biodiversity, and builds urban resilience. Stakeholders recommended the following:

- Increase permeable infrastructure through development regulations, monitoring, and subsidies for restoration, to create 'sponge cities', replacing hard surfaces with pocket parks, rain gardens, green corridors, native meadows, living walls, and dry-stone walls to absorb rainfall, reduce flooding, and support wildlife.
- Advance climate-resilient urban development by incorporating adaptation measures into all planning decisions. Use urban greening to moderate temperatures such as cooling through tree canopy cover and green infrastructure, and build resilience to extreme weather events while maintaining ecological function.

## Create Enabling Conditions for Transformation

### - Establish Strong Policy, Leadership, and Planning Frameworks

Urban biodiversity restoration requires coherent policy, sustained political commitment, and effective planning frameworks. In order to establish coherent planning frameworks stakeholders suggested:

- The NRP be embedded in legislation and policy frameworks to ensure restoration efforts outlive political terms, government changes, and shifting priorities.
- Create long-term commitment through statutory obligations, binding targets, and accountability mechanisms that maintain momentum regardless of electoral cycles.
- Review and align existing policies to create coherence across government agencies, and local authorities. Identify gaps, conflicts, and opportunities for better integration. Develop new policies where existing frameworks are inadequate, ensuring consistency across planning, transport, housing, water management, and climate action.
- Demonstrate sustained political leadership at national and local levels through clear directives, adequate staffing, and visible support for transformative action.

### - Provide Adequate and Sustained Funding

Appropriate resourcing emerged across all consultation tables as critical for restoration success.

Recommendations included:

- Allocate sufficient finance to nature restoration with sustained multi-year funding to support long-term restoration goals in place of short-term projects. Ring-fence funds.
- Use economic analysis to make the investment case, highlighting links between nature restoration, ecosystem services, climate adaptation savings, and local job creation. Clarify the costs of inaction through environmental accounting methods.

### - **Build Public Awareness and Education Across All Sectors**

Broad coordinated action must be underpinned by awareness, knowledge, and skills. Education and public engagement emerged as essential for building support and enabling participation.

- Ensure citizens of all ages and backgrounds understand the importance of urban green and blue spaces, habitat features, and their role in wellbeing and ecological health. Support residents, businesses, and households to take practical action such as creating biodiverse spaces, native planting, reducing pesticide use, and citizen science. Provide resources, workshops, and demonstration projects that show what individuals and communities can do.
- Integrate nature education across all education levels from primary to third level. Include experiential learning, outdoor education, and practical conservation activities that connect learners with local ecosystems. Engage the community and agencies as partners in restoration.
- Address skills deficits among professionals overseeing urban restoration through workforce training and other measures, including adequate compensation.
- Develop a new generation of professionals equipped to support NRP implementation through third-level programmes in ecology, architecture, planning and related fields.

### - **Enable Participatory Implementation and Partnership Working**

Genuine stakeholder engagement and collaborative implementation emerged as essential for achieving outcomes. This necessitates models that respect community knowledge, involve diverse actors in decision-making, and build shared ownership.

- Involve a full range of stakeholders meaningfully in plan development, decision-making, and implementation in ways that value lived experience and local knowledge. Foster inclusive processes that build trust and shared direction among all groups.
- Establish partnership structures for collaborative implementation including co-management arrangements, community stewardship programmes, and multi-stakeholder forums.
- Support community-led initiatives through accessible funding, technical assistance, and capacity building. Provide facilitation and coordination support to prevent volunteer fatigue and sustain engagement.

### - **Establish Robust Monitoring, Quality Standards, and Enforcement**

Effective restoration depends on comprehensive monitoring, credible quality standards, and consistent enforcement. These systems build accountability, track progress, prevent greenwashing, and ensure restoration delivers genuine ecological benefits.

- Establish monitoring systems that track both ecological targets/outcomes and social impact, measuring biodiversity indicators, habitat quality, tree canopy cover, green space accessibility, air and water quality, flood resilience, and community wellbeing. Ensure monitoring is systematic, sustained, and uses consistent methodologies to enable analysis.

- Create publicly accessible data through a centralised, federated platform that collates data from diverse sources, supports evidence-based decision-making and builds transparency.
- Implement quality standards and anti-greenwashing measures that set clear criteria for Biodiversity Net Gain, implementation of nature-based solutions, and ecological restoration.
- Enable public reporting systems that allow residents to report environmental incidents, maintenance issues, and biodiversity concerns. Create transparent mechanisms for addressing reports, investigating problems, and communicating outcomes to build trust and enable community participation in oversight.

## Centre Equality, Accessibility, and Wellbeing

Equity must be woven through all restoration efforts. This principle is fundamental to ensuring urban nature benefits all people and communities.

- Embed equality and accessibility principles across housing, green and blue spaces, and transport networks to ensure all communities and abilities benefit equitably. Address socio-economic barriers by prioritising access for deprived areas, providing mixed-income and cooperative housing options, and ensuring affordable equitable public transport.
- Design spaces, housing, and transport to accommodate people with disabilities and the ageing population, actively removing physical, sensory, and social barriers. Ensure green and blue spaces are universally accessible with appropriate paths, seating, facilities, and signage that enable participation across all mobility and sensory abilities.
- Ensure all residents can see and access nature through nearby, barrier-free green and blue spaces. Provide high quality biodiverse green space within walking distance of every home with opportunities for direct engagement with nature in daily life.
- Recognise and promote the health and quality of life benefits of urban nature, including physical and mental wellbeing, stress reduction, social connection, and climate comfort. Design restoration to enhance public health outcomes, create spaces for recreation and reflection, and build community resilience through nature connection.

The vision is for urban environments where restoration and thriving communities coexist, where residents of all backgrounds enjoy access to abundant biodiverse nature, and where stakeholders collaborate toward shared ecological goals. This requires moving beyond fragmented, sector-specific approaches toward integrated systems thinking that recognises the interdependence of ecological health, climate resilience, social equity, and economic vitality. Success depends on sustained leadership, coherent policy, adequate resourcing, participatory implementation, robust monitoring, public awareness, professional capacity, and strong quality standards working together as a coordinated system. With genuine collaboration, long-term commitment, and attention to these enabling conditions, Ireland can position itself as a leader in urban restoration, demonstrating that nature-rich cities and thriving communities are not competing priorities, but complementary goals achieved through collective action toward biodiversity restoration and a good life for all.