

Spatial Nature Planning (SNaP) Forum 2026

Summary Report

*Fostering a community for biodiversity-inclusive
spatial planning*

DICE
University of Kent



E3
Sharing
Space for
Nature



UK Research
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Table of Contents

1. Background.....	3
2. Key Findings	4
2.1. Presentations	4
2.2. Breakout groups	6
3. SNaP community priority actions,outcomes and next steps.....	8
3.1. SNaP Steering Committee	8
3.2. Priority A: Creating National Framework for Spatial Planning	9
3.3. Priority B: Engagement and Capacity in Systematic Conservation Planning ..	9
3.4. Priority C: Improving Data Quality and Access.....	10

1. Background

The SNaP Forum 2026 was held on 24th March 2026 and was hosted by the Durrell Institute of Conservation and Ecology (DICE), supported by the [E3 Sharing Space for Nature](#) initiative funded by Research England. The main aim of the forum was to bring together members of the SNaP Community of Practice, which was established during the first SNaP forum in 2025 to continue discussions on the importance and potential pathways of better integrating systematic conservation planning approaches (SCP) within land and sea use planning in England.

Although the forum was originally scheduled to take place in Canterbury over three days mirroring the 2025 forum, it was scaled down to an online event due to a local health crisis (meningitis outbreak within East Kent). The online forum consisted of two plenary talks, followed by six presentations from both local and international conservation planning practitioners, and two breakout discussions.

The forum was attended by over 90 participants representing diverse sectors such as academia, government, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and the private sector.

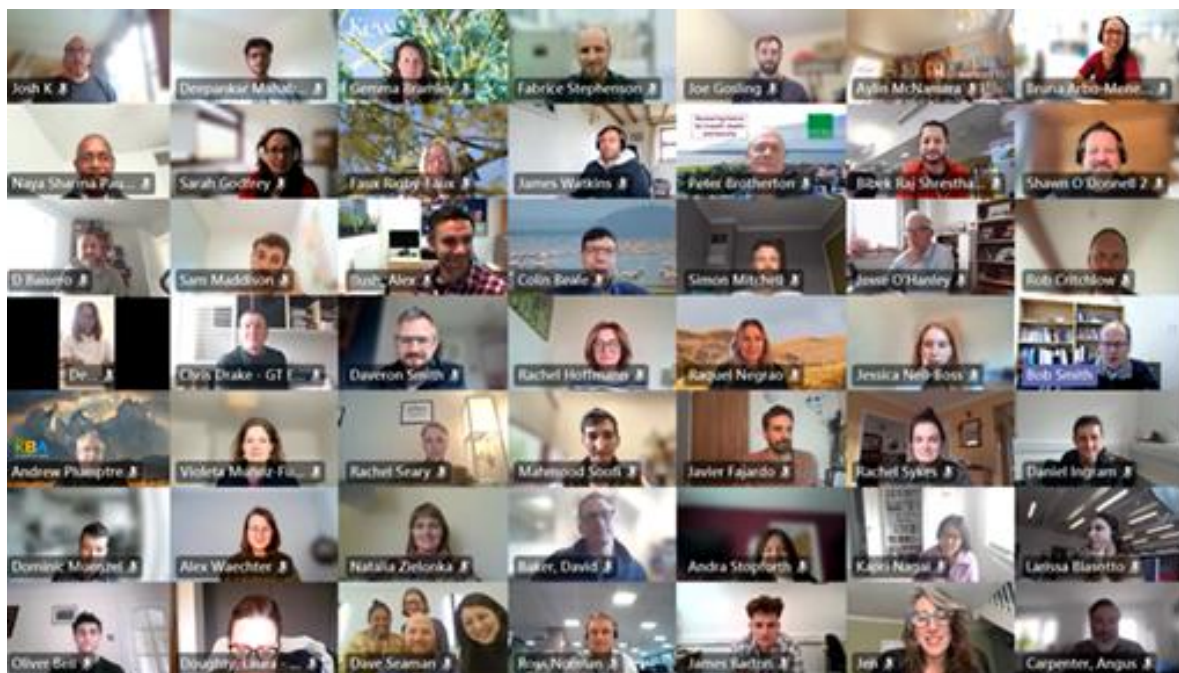


Figure 1 SNaP Forum 2026 participants

2. Key Findings

2.1. Presentations

2.1.1. Plenary

The event opened with remarks from [Bob Smith](#) (DICE, University of Kent), who introduced SCP as a decision-science approach used globally to support conservation planning. By combining ecological evidence with socio-economic data and stakeholder inputs, SCP helps to identify where actions can most effectively deliver target outcomes. He introduced the [SNaP Community](#), which aims to foster cross-sectoral collaboration to ensure SCP can meaningfully support policy and practice in England.

In the keynote address, [Pete Brotherton](#), Director of Science at Natural England, set out the evolving legal and policy context. He highlighted a shift from focusing on protecting species and sites towards more strategic, landscape-scale approaches. This includes the introduction of Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) in the Environment Act 2021, Environmental Delivery Plans in the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025, and the publication of England's first Land Use Framework just days before the Forum.

Recordings of the above talks can be found [here](#).

2.1.2. Applying SCP within England

Karen Faux (Natural England) provided an overview of the challenges and opportunities for delivering landscape-scale nature recovery in Kent. She highlighted the county's LNRS as a central framework in an increasingly complex spatial planning landscape. Kent benefits from strong partnerships, active landscape initiatives, and an improving evidence base, but challenges remain in strengthening spatial data and integrating frameworks.

From the south-west, David Baker (University of Exeter) presented the application of the Ebrel spatial prioritisation model to support the development of Cornwall's LNRS. Grounded in SCP principles, the tool helps identify priority areas for habitat creation where multiple options exist, enabling more transparent decision-making. The tool has relevance in supporting more complex scenarios, where the options for possible nature recovery actions, species and habitats involved maybe greater.

The final presentation, delivered by James Barton (DICE, University of Kent), explored how spatial analysis can support large-scale investment in nature across England. By combining habitat transition potential with estimates of revenue from existing financial mechanisms, this work identified "Nature Investment Zones" with strong potential for generating financial investment and ecological outcomes across 13 bioregions.

Recordings of the above talks can be found [here](#).

The presentations highlighted the increasing relevance of spatial planning within England, and the benefits SCP can have within the country.

- More broadly, SCP underpins the core intentions of England's Land Use Framework that aims to balance competing land use needs.
- Specifically, SCP could provide a standardised process for developing and implementing LNRs, spatial targeting and prioritisation of the Environment Land Management scheme, Sustainable Farming Incentive and water planning schemes.
- It enables the more robust integration of ecological and socioeconomic priorities, stakeholder interests and capacities as well as financial and resource constraints into planning.
- SCP also provides a flexible and adaptive mechanism that is responsive to evolving land- and sea-use patterns and policy agendas within the country.

2.1.3. Applying SCP internationally

Jen McGowan (Nature Matters) showcased how tools such as Marxan have been applied to real-world planning challenges across diverse contexts. From zoning of timber production landscapes in the United States to informing marine spatial planning for debt restructuring in Barbados, a consistent theme was the ability of SCP approaches to combine evidence-based analysis with participatory decision-making. This is increasingly important as countries work towards global biodiversity targets with a whole-of-society approach.

Fabrice Stephenson (Newcastle University) then presented a case study from New Zealand, demonstrating how SCP can support marine planning even with data limitations. By integrating statistical modelling, the project generated spatial datasets representing ecological communities and bioregions. Collaboration with the Department of Conservation enabled validation of model outputs, with their integration into spatial prioritisation showing how strategic additions to existing protected areas could deliver substantial gains in ecological representation.

The session concluded with Dominic Muenzel (DICE, University of Kent), who explored the future of social forestry in Indonesia. This applied spatial prioritisation in Prioritizr to identify areas where forest restoration, biodiversity conservation and poverty alleviation could be jointly maximised. By testing different weightings across these objectives, the analysis highlighted trade-offs and synergies, with outputs shared through an online app.

Recordings of the above talks can be found [here](#).

The presentations highlighted the diverse and advanced applications of SCP within different countries, ecosystems and socioecological contexts.

SCP provides an efficient and evidence-based approach to integrating the interests of diverse stakeholders to achieve multiple objectives including nature protection, poverty alleviation, nature resource use and economic viability within multifunctional landscapes and seascapes.

2.2. Breakout groups

The breakout groups were facilitated to allow participants to discuss existing challenges and opportunities relevant to implementing SCP within England and across other countries. Summary insights from the two breakout discussions and key themes discussed across both are outlined below.

2.2.1. Breakout group 1: Relevance of SCP within England

LNRSs were recognised as an important nature recovery policy tool that can be implemented effectively with the use of SCP. However, the importance of making the outcomes of LNRS mapping processes future proof (through dynamic tools) and bridging the gap between mapped outcomes and implementation (through adequate resourcing, funding and cross-sectoral partnerships) was emphasised. Additionally, harmonising LNRSs across counties with each other, as well as broader land use strategies (Land Use Framework, Biodiversity Net Gain, Environmental Delivery Plans and Nature Restoration Fund etc) and nature recovery plans were also identified as priorities. Overall, the group highlighted the need for better data, resourcing, cross-sectoral engagement and capacity building to make SCP more accessible and effective.

2.2.2. Breakout group 2: Relevance of SCP Internationally

Two key themes emerged in relevance to making SCP at the international level more effective, efficient and equitable. First, the need for increased engagement, particularly with Indigenous Peoples and local communities, was highlighted. The role academic partners and non-governmental actors have in bridging the gap between state actors and local people was emphasised. Relevant to this, giving adequate weight to the interests, priorities and input from diverse stakeholder groups was also discussed. Second, approaches to addressing data deficiencies, particularly in countries with limited capacity to collect and maintain datasets, was recognised. Overall, SCP was identified as a critical tool for achieving national priorities as well as targets within the Global Biodiversity Framework.

2.2.3. Key themes and needs that emerged across the discussions

Lack of adequate and good quality data and evidence

Having comprehensive data is fundamental for the effective implementation of SCP. Lack of representative data could lead to some data having a disproportionate influence on spatial planning outcomes. This is relevant to both unbalanced data availability

across geographical spaces (e.g. in a national level SCP project, only a few sub-national planning units having good data can skew the overall results of SCP analysis), and sectors (e.g. lack of biodiversity data can be misinterpreted as lack of biodiversity, which could make sites vulnerable for large-scale industrial activities). This highlights the need for:

- (i) More comprehensive data collection, particularly in relation to underrepresented taxonomic groups such as plants. Data collection efforts should also be informed by what type of data is most useful for spatial planning efforts.
- (ii) Giving appropriate weights to different data and evidence types and sources. A standardise method to enable this could be beneficial.
- (iii) Using existing global datasets (e.g. important plant areas, world's ecoregions etc.), satellite data, or proxy indicators as alternatives when local-level data is unavailable.

Challenges in evenly representing diverse stakeholder interests

A diverse and broad group of actors should be consulted during spatial planning efforts, particularly within multifunctional landscapes. This is vital to achieving positive biodiversity-inclusive spatial planning outcomes that are both effective for nature and equitable for people. However, this can be limited by constraints in resources and capacity. Particularly, engaging in equal capacity with government stakeholders and Indigenous Peoples and local communities can emerge as a challenge. However, examples of successful engagement with diverse stakeholder groups for SCP efforts was evidenced in some countries such as Mexico, Brazil and South Africa.

This highlights the need for:

- (i) Capitalising on partnerships with NGOs and universities as bridging organisations to engage more effectively with diverse stakeholders.
- (ii) Integrating more human dimensions into spatial planning models, not just as risks or costs, but opportunities to achieve inclusive conservation (e.g. areas with high ecotourism potential can be used to identify potential sites for OECM recognition).

Inconsistent support from decision-makers

Government support is vital for carrying out national-level spatial planning efforts that have implementation relevance. However, the inconsistent support from decision-makers leads to inadequate allocation of funding and resources. This highlights the need for:

- (i) Increasing awareness amongst policymakers and government actors of the value of spatial planning efforts to link biodiversity goals with other national priorities such as food security, climate resilience and national security as evidenced by England's [Biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and national security report](#), [Land Use Framework](#) and the [Kunming Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework](#).

Need for dynamic and user-friendly approaches

Rapidly evolving land and sea use patterns, different rates of uptake of spatial plans, emergence of new data and implementation constraints means that spatial plans need to be updated regularly if they are to remain relevant. Spatial planning can also be subject to error based on the availability and quality of the input data, with these issues sometimes only becoming clear during implementation. This highlights the need for:

- (i) More dynamic approaches that are responsive to changing realities and ongoing evaluation of project outcomes. Tools that can be used to implement these approaches efficiently while also considering issues of data privacy.

At the same time, existing SCP approaches are viewed as being too complicated by some stakeholders. This highlights the need for:

- (ii) Capacity and relationship building amongst stakeholders to make SCP approaches more accessible.
- (iii) Increased awareness building and experience sharing on completed SCP implementation projects.

3. SNaP community priority actions, outcomes and next steps

The following sections provide brief updates against priority actions set following the SNaP forum 2025, updates to the actions following the SNaP Forum 2026 and next steps

3.1. SNaP Steering Committee

The SNaP Steering Committee was set up following the SNaP Forum 2025. It includes representatives from diverse backgrounds including the government sector, non-governmental organisations and academia. The Steering Committee will continue to play an integral role in guiding the actions of the SNaP community.

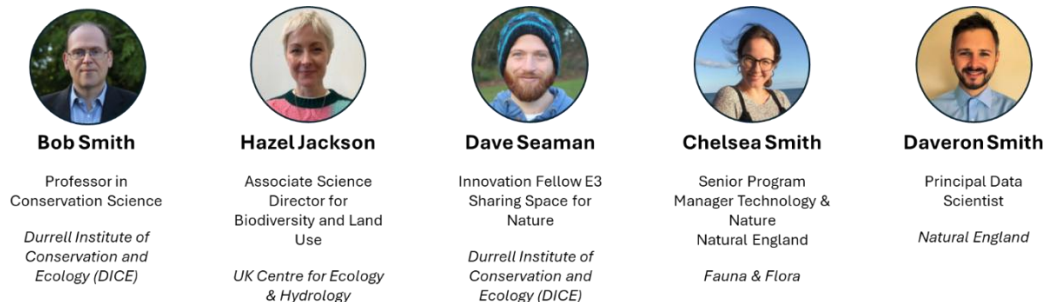


Figure 2 Current members of the SNaP Steering Committee

3.2. Priority A: Creating National Framework for Spatial Planning

England has a range of national targets related to nature recovery. However, there is often little guidance on how these should be implemented at the local level. Consequently, this can mean that targets are not realistic or relevant in the environmental, social and economic context of every region, leading to inefficiencies in local scale nature recovery planning and implementation. A National Spatial Planning Framework will serve as a useful tool for undertaking planning at both the national and local level against national priorities and targets.

Key actions:

- Produce an updated priority species list for spatial planning in England/UK.
- Collate a list of all priority biodiversity features based on existing datasets.
- Produce conservation and restoration targets for each feature.
- Develop appropriate cost metrics for inclusion in spatial prioritisation.

Update: As a part of a PhD project at DICE by Jessica Neil-Boss on “Understanding and optimising local nature recovery networks in England”, progress has been made on developing a priority species list for Kent.

Next steps: Following the completion of the above work, it is planned to apply the same methodology to scale up the species list to England. A workshop will be hosted at the SNaP forum 2027 to discuss the other actions under this priority (outline conservation features, understand targets and cost metrics)

3.3. Priority B: Engagement and Capacity in Systematic Conservation Planning

Increasing engagement and capacity in SCP, communicating SCP to non-technical audiences, particularly policymakers is a key requirement for its effective uptake within England.

Key actions:

- Conduct stakeholder and policy mapping to identify relevance of SCP within England
- Develop policy brief outlining relevance of SCP to England
- Increase visibility of the SNaP community through online activations (e.g. Webinars, LinkedIn etc.)
- Increase engagement with SNaP community members through dedicated SNaP community website and information portal

Update: The inception of the SNaP community has led to the establishment of relationships and networks among academics, NGO and government partners. These have resulted in insightful discussions and initiatives that have facilitated the use of SCP

within England's planning processes. Additionally, members will host a training workshop and informal meeting to continue discussions amongst the academic community at the British Ecological Society (BES) meeting in December 2027.

Next steps: Further awareness and engagement is required, particularly with government actors who are key to ensure the integration of SCP within nationally and sub-nationally critical planning and policy development activities.

In order to achieve this, the SNaP community will focus on three key actions in the coming year.

1. Complete stakeholder and policy mapping
2. Develop a policy brief that outlines the relevance of SCP within England
3. Host webinars and other online engagement events

3.4. Priority C: Improving Data Quality and Access

A key barrier for effective SCP is the significant gap in data quality and access. Insufficient engagement with local record centres and biodiversity experts contribute to these data challenges. This lack of consistency, noted as leading to inaccurate distribution maps, ultimately undermines the quality of land use decisions.

Key actions:

- Complete a data gap analysis and quality assessment.
- Developing approaches that fill these gaps.
- Engage with local biodiversity record centres.

Update: As a first step to addressing this priority, actors from local biodiversity record centres were invited to the SNaP Forum 2026.

Next steps: Actions under this priority will be more comprehensively addressed following the SNaP forum 2027, with the workshops under Priority A informing the choice of actions.