



# West of England Nature Partnership

## Growing Economy with Ecology: Nature in the West of England Local Growth Plan

### Executive Summary

The West of England has the opportunity to lead the UK's transition to a nature-positive economy – and the Local Growth Plan is the place to set that direction. This is a major opportunity to build resilience, unlock innovation and investment, and shape a region that is more productive, liveable and globally competitive.

Nature is not a constraint – it is an asset. It underpins public health, reduces climate and infrastructure risk, supports productivity, and enhances quality of place. When embedded in the growth agenda, nature strengthens housing delivery, improves transport resilience, and boosts workforce skills – helping address systemic pressures rather than adding to them.

The West of England is already well placed to lead. It was the first region in England to publish a Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) and has strong delivery partnerships, reinforced by high levels of public support for nature. The region is also emerging as a national hub for nature-based innovation – particularly in finance, data and AI-enabled tools. But other regions are moving fast. To stay ahead, nature must be embedded in the systems and structures of economic development.

To deliver a nature-positive economy, the West of England Combined Authority should:

- **Set a clear strategic direction**  
Establish a nature-positive economy as a core principle in the Growth Plan – treating nature as a foundational asset alongside energy, housing and transport, and positioning the West of England to lead the future green economy.
- **Embed nature in core growth systems**  
Align the LNRS with the Spatial Development Strategy, Local Plans and infrastructure frameworks – ensuring nature is treated as critical infrastructure to reduce costs, delays and public opposition, while improving liveability and long-term resilience.
- **Invest in delivery capacity and enabling infrastructure**  
Scale up ecological expertise, shared monitoring tools and delivery partnerships – the institutional systems that enable nature to be embedded across planning, investment and economic development.
- **Align skills and innovation with nature-positive growth**  
Grow a skilled green workforce, champion the region's strengths in nature-based business, and support SMEs and investable propositions that deliver for nature, people and place.

Strategic leadership means investing in the region's assets – natural and institutional. If the West of England wants to remain at the forefront, it must lead visibly: embedding nature in how we grow, and ensuring growth delivers for people, place and planet.

## 1. Growth is Powered by Nature

The natural environment underpins every part of the economy — from health and housing to transport, productivity and place. Yet it is rarely treated as core infrastructure. This must change.

The Office for National Statistics values England's natural capital at £1.4 trillion, with annual service flows worth £35 billion — more than any single manufacturing sector.<sup>1</sup> However, this value is under threat: research from Oxford University finds that environmental degradation could reduce UK GDP by 12% by 2050 — a greater economic shock than Covid-19 or the financial crisis.<sup>2</sup>

The inverse is also true: restoring nature supports long-term prosperity. A major review for Greater Manchester Combined Authority found that green infrastructure:<sup>3</sup>

- Increases workplace productivity by 15% and cuts sick leave by up to 23%;
- Raises business footfall by 30–50% and spending by 10–50%;
- Reduces peak rainfall runoff by up to 80%, while cooling urban areas by up to 11°C.

These are not marginal benefits — they are core enablers of resilient, high-performing places, particularly in the face of increasingly extreme weather conditions.

As Sir Partha Dasgupta concluded in the HM Treasury-commissioned *Review on the Economics of Biodiversity*, long-term prosperity depends on integrating nature into economic decision-making — recognising it as a critical system, like energy, housing or transport.<sup>4</sup> This shift is already underway nationally (see Section 4).

This reframing is also essential for tackling inequality. In the West of England, urban overheating, air pollution and limited access to green space disproportionately affect lower-income communities. Recent Tree Equity Score mapping highlights stark disparities in canopy cover across the region (Fig. 1).<sup>5</sup> Embedding nature into growth planning helps address these inequalities — boosting health and productivity, and ensuring opportunity is more fairly shared.

The risks of inaction are clear: lost economic value, rising infrastructure costs, and declining public trust. Embedding nature visibly in the region's growth model is not just the right thing to do — it is a smart investment. Nature-rich places are more liveable, more resilient, and more competitive. If the Growth Plan is to unlock long-term prosperity, nature must be treated not as a constraint — but as an asset.

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<sup>1</sup> **Office for National Statistics (2023).** *England natural capital accounts: 2023*. Available at:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/bulletins/englandnaturalcapitalaccounts/2023>

<sup>2</sup> **Oxford University, Environmental Change Institute (2024).** *Nature degradation could cause 12% loss to UK GDP*. Available at: <https://www.eci.ox.ac.uk/news/nature-degradation-could-cause-12-loss-uk-gdp>

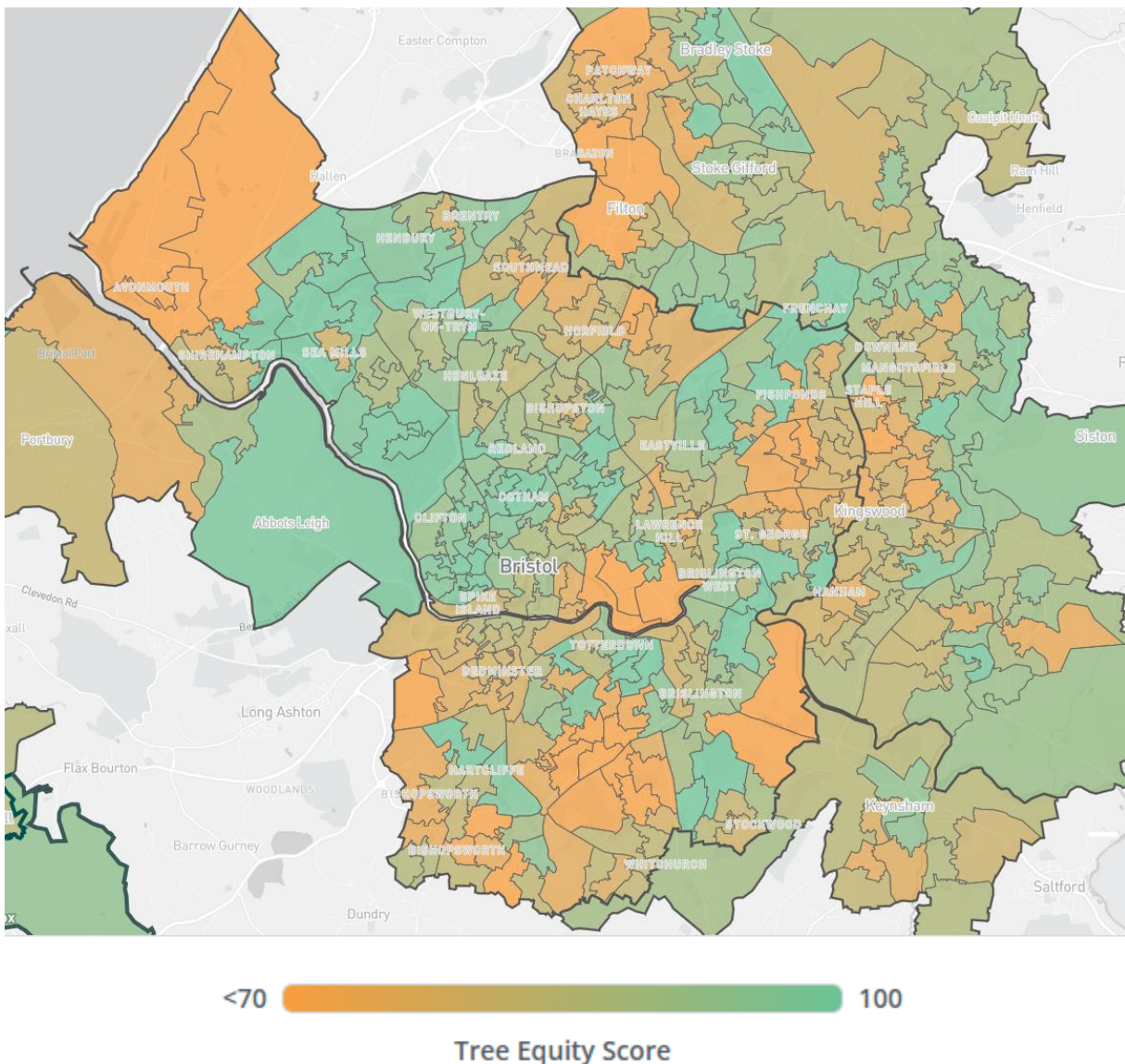
<sup>3</sup> **Greater Manchester Combined Authority (2020).** *The IGNITION Project*. Available at:

<https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/what-we-do/environment/natural-environment/ignition/>

<sup>4</sup> **Dasgupta, P. (2021).** *The Economics of Biodiversity: The Dasgupta Review – Final Report*. UK Government.

Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/final-report-the-economics-of-biodiversity-the-dasgupta-review>

<sup>5</sup> **Tree Equity Score UK (2024).** *Tree Equity Score Map*. Available at: <https://uk.treeequityscore.org/map>



**Fig. 1.** Snapshot of Tree Equity Score UK map for Bristol.<sup>4</sup> Lower tree equity scores correspond with areas with high Indices of Multiple Deprivation.

## 2. Leading by Nature: A Region Built to Deliver

The West of England is uniquely positioned to lead the UK's transition to a nature-positive economy. Its distinctive geography, collaborative culture, and growing strengths in nature-based innovation form a strong foundation — backed by public demand and a delivery system already in motion.

But other regions are moving fast. Nature North, for example, has set out a strategic plan positioning nature as one of five transformative “gamechangers” to drive UK growth — backed by

combined authorities, local leaders and major institutions across the North.<sup>6</sup> The West of England has a clear opportunity to stay at the leading edge: demonstrating visible delivery, influencing national policy, and unlocking investment by continuing to lead – and collaborate – at pace.

## 2.1 Strong Foundations

The West of England has shown early and visible leadership on nature – as the first region to publish a Local Nature Recovery Strategy, and home to the first UK city to declare an Ecological Emergency (Bristol, 2020). The region is also pioneering nature-based approaches to health, inclusion and wellbeing, including through national pilots in Green Social Prescribing.<sup>7</sup> Community-driven initiatives, such as Really Wild Lockleaze, are embedding nature into local placemaking – demonstrating how ecological recovery can be shaped by and for residents.

Nature is not just supported by the public – it is *demand*ed. Green space consistently ranks as one of West of England residents' most valued local assets, and over half of Bristol residents are already taking action for nature.<sup>8, 9, 10</sup> This level of public appetite brings both opportunity and risk: without visible progress, local trust and consent for growth may erode. But when nature is integrated meaningfully, it helps build healthier communities, unlocks participation, and strengthens political and social licence to grow.

This is also a region where delivery is already happening at scale – not just through policy, but through practical, on-the-ground action:

Since 2021, WENP partners have:<sup>11</sup>

- Planted over 230,000 trees
- Restored 857 hectares of habitat
- Improved 45 kilometres of river
- Mobilised over 5,000 volunteers, including schools and community groups

Building on this track record, the region is developing ten strategic programmes and a suite of investable, landscape-scale propositions aligned with the LNRS. These link directly to key growth zones and offer practical routes to deliver co-benefits for flood resilience, biodiversity, climate, health and skills.

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<sup>6</sup> **Nature North (2025).** *Investing in Nature for the North: A Strategic Plan for a Nature Positive Regional Economy.* Available at: <https://www.naturenorth.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Nature-North-Investing-In-Nature-For-The-North.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> **National Academy for Social Prescribing (2023).** *Green Social Prescribing: Unlocking the Power of Nature to Improve Mental Health.* Available at: <https://socialprescribingacademy.org.uk/resources/green-social-prescribing-unlocking-the-power-of-nature-to-improve-mental-health/>

<sup>8</sup> **Bath and North East Somerset Council (2023).** *VoiceBox 32: Residents' Panel Survey Report.* Available at: [https://www.bathnes.gov.uk/sites/default/files/BANES\\_Voicebox32\\_Report.pdf](https://www.bathnes.gov.uk/sites/default/files/BANES_Voicebox32_Report.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> **Bristol City Council (2025).** *Quality of Life Survey 2024/25: Final Report.* Available at: <https://www.bristol.gov.uk/files/documents/9607-quality-of-life-2024-to-25-final-report/file>

<sup>10</sup> **Southern Brooks (2024).** *South Gloucestershire Community Survey.* Available on request.

<sup>11</sup> Figures collated from Avon Needs Trees, Avon Wildlife Trust, Bristol Avon Rivers Trust and Forest of Avon Trust.

## 2.2 Unique Assets

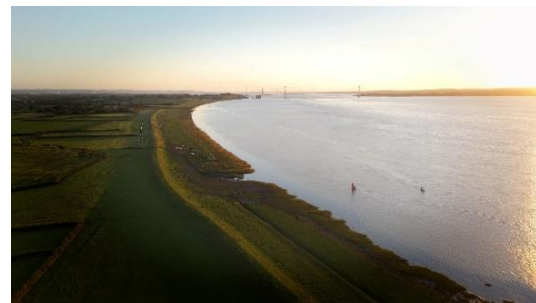
Few UK regions offer such close proximity between internationally significant landscapes and high-performing urban centres. This closeness between people and nature is a strategic advantage – boosting health, productivity, and resilience.

With Bristol and Bath geographically constrained, enabling future growth means planning carefully to integrate green and blue infrastructure like rivers, parks, wetlands and trees into the urban fabric, while safeguarding the surrounding ecosystems that sustain urban life – providing clean water, mitigating flood risk, and giving people access to beautiful landscapes for recreation and relaxation.

Over 70% of the region is farmland. While not a national agricultural powerhouse, this working landscape delivers essential services to the cities. It holds strong potential for multifunctional land use, combining food production with nature recovery, climate adaptation and public health. With the right incentives, farmers and land managers can be key partners in delivering sustainable, inclusive growth.

Some of the West of England's key natural assets include:

- **Severn Estuary** – An internationally important habitat for migratory birds, a major trade corridor, and a clean energy opportunity, particularly for tidal power.
- **Avon Gorge** – A nationally recognised landscape and Site of Special Scientific Interest, home to rare and endemic species, straddled by the Clifton Suspension bridge – symbolising the region's fusion of nature and cultural identity.
- **National Landscapes** – The region sits between **the Mendip Hills and the Cotswolds** – both culturally and ecologically significant. The West of England has a unique opportunity to improve connectivity between them, enhancing climate resilience for species and habitats while also unlocking long-term economic value through nature-based tourism and improved public access.
- **Western Forest** – Looking ahead to the UK's first new National Forest in a generation, it will connect habitats and people, create green jobs, attract investment and establish a powerful regional USP.



Severn Estuary (© Richard da Costa)

Together, these assets make the West of England a highly ecologically and economically integrated region – where natural infrastructure, if properly supported, can underpin a more resilient, productive and liveable future.



River Avon, Avon Gorge and Clifton Suspension Bridge (© Gary Newman)

## 2.3 Innovation and Enterprise

The West of England is fast becoming a national hub for nature-based innovation – combining academic excellence, entrepreneurial ambition, and public-private collaboration to pioneer solutions that connect capital to nature recovery.

- **Pioneering Nature Finance**

The region is testing some of the UK's most advanced models for unlocking private and blended investment in nature across the public, private and third sectors:

- **EnTrade**, working with **YTL** and **Arup**, runs world-leading high-integrity markets that combine biodiversity net gain, nutrient neutrality and carbon. **Belmont Estate** and **Lower Chew Forest** are pioneering models for the sale of nature credits at large scale.
- South Gloucestershire's **ICaN** programme and the West of England Combined Authority's **Spacehive** platform are aligning ESG and social value contributions from corporates with local nature and climate priorities – creating replicable models for locally directed investment.
- **Triodos Bank**, headquartered in Bristol, is one of Europe's leading sustainable banks and a frontrunner in financing the transition to a nature-positive economy.

- **Research, conservation and data innovation**

The region's institutions are shaping national and global thinking on nature recovery, environmental modelling, and data-informed planning:

- **UWE's Centre for Sustainable Planning** co-developed the Building with Nature standards, helping embed green infrastructure into mainstream development practice.
- The **University of Bristol** and **University of Bath** bring global research expertise in biodiversity monitoring, water resilience, and nature-positive design. Together, they also lead the new **Brunel Centre** – a cross-disciplinary hub for data science and policy innovation that offers a timely opportunity to embed ecological intelligence into regional growth decisions.
- The **Bristol Zoo Project** is evolving into a centre of excellence for UK and international conservation – combining science, ecological restoration, and community education in a new world-class facility.

- **A growing nature-based enterprise sector**

Nature-based businesses across the West of England are helping organisations understand, manage, and improve their relationship with nature – generating economic value while driving environmental outcomes.

- **Regional firms are advancing a diverse and fast-growing sector:** including AI-enabled biodiversity monitoring, ecological consultancy, regenerative land management, biodiversity enhancing technologies and tools for corporate environmental impact reporting and disclosure. These capabilities align strongly with emerging TNFD-aligned markets and growing corporate demand for nature-positive solutions (see section 4).

- **The region is also a global powerhouse in natural history filmmaking and storytelling.** Its world-class creative industries are increasingly supporting public engagement, behaviour change, and values-led business.

Together, these strengths position the West of England as a live testbed for the future green economy — where nature-positive innovation is being developed, deployed and scaled to deliver real-world outcomes for people, nature and place.

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### 3. National Momentum, Regional Opportunity

The national landscape is shifting fast — with nature now recognised as an economic and strategic priority across government, industry and civil society. The West of England is well aligned with this direction and positioned to lead the way.

#### 3.1 National policy is shifting

Government explicitly recognises that a healthy natural environment is a prerequisite of long-term growth. In June 2025, a Call for Evidence was issued on expanding the role of the private sector in nature recovery.<sup>12</sup> It sets a clear ambition to unlock more private and blended investment in nature to enable sustainable, resilient growth. It stresses the importance of locally led coordination, investable propositions, and robust enabling systems, aligning with the West of England's strategic direction and underscores the need to scale delivery-readiness and investment capability now.

#### 3.2 Infrastructure is adapting

Major infrastructure clients are increasingly treating nature as infrastructure in its own right — not just something to protect, but to design with. Members of the Rebuilding Nature alliance, including National Highways, Network Rail, National Grid, Mace, WSP and the Infrastructure Client Group, have described nature as “the newest member of the infrastructure family”.<sup>13</sup> With major new and upgraded infrastructure planned to drive growth, the West of England has a generational opportunity to embed this thinking — from design and financing through to delivery and maintenance. In September 2026, the region will host the Infrastructure and Ecology Network Europe conference, an opportunity to showcase internationally how nature can be integrated into infrastructure at every level.

#### 3.3 Investment is accelerating

UK impact investment reached £76.8 billion in assets under management in 2023, growing by over 10% annually — far outpacing mainstream asset management growth which is flat or declining.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> **Defra (2025).** *Expanding the role of the private sector in nature recovery: Call for Evidence.* Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/calls-for-evidence/expanding-the-role-of-the-private-sector-in-nature-recovery>

<sup>13</sup> **Rebuilding Nature (2025).** *Rebuilding Nature launch event.* Available at: <https://rebuildingnature.com/rebuilding-nature-launch-event/>

<sup>14</sup> **Impact Investing Institute (2024).** *The UK impact investing market size, scope and potential.* Available at: <https://www.impactinvest.org.uk/resources/publications/the-uk-impact-investing-market-size-scope-and-potential>

Meanwhile, nature markets such as biodiversity net gain, carbon, and nutrient trading are opening new routes to investment.

### 3.4 Business is evolving

UK companies are increasingly aligning with environmental and social goals. Business leaders are now as likely to prioritise tackling societal challenges as delivering shareholder returns — and putting people and planet at the heart of business could boost UK GDP by £149 billion annually.<sup>15, 16</sup>

The nature sector is no longer niche. New analysis from BloombergNEF and the Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosures (TNFD) shows that UK nature-based industries already generate £2.2 billion in annual revenue, support over 21,000 jobs, and have raised £2.8 billion in private investment.<sup>17</sup> These businesses span restoration, biodiversity services, nature tech and finance — sectors driven by TNFD-aligned disclosures, rising investor demand, and growing awareness of nature-related risks.

Major UK firms are responding. Over 500 companies have adopted the TNFD framework, and 26 leading UK firms — including Aviva, Sainsbury's and NatWest — have endorsed the Nature Positive Transition Pathways.<sup>18, 19</sup> A new report by Bristol-based firm Ecologi reinforces this business case, highlighting how companies are turning climate and nature action into competitive advantage through enhanced brand value, resilience and growth (Fig. 2).<sup>20</sup>



**Fig 2.** Results from a comprehensive survey of 1400 business leaders conducted by Ecologi and Blue Earth showed strong support for nature restoration projects to deliver positive business results

<sup>15</sup> **The British Academy (2020).** Survey highlights appetite for a new definition of corporate purpose among UK businesses. Available at: <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/news/survey-highlights-appetite-new-definition-corporate-purpose-among-uk-businesses/>

<sup>16</sup> **Demos (2023).** The Purpose Dividend: The economic case for a new definition of corporate purpose. Available at: <https://demos.co.uk/research/the-purpose-dividend/>

<sup>17</sup> **BloombergNEF and TNFD (2025).** The Growing Role of Nature-Related Business in the UK Economy. Available at: <https://tnfd.global/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/The-Growing-Role-of-Nature-Related-Business-in-the-UK-Economy.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> **BusinessGreen (2025).** New plan to save UK nature taking shape – business at board level. Available at: <https://www.businessgreen.com/opinion/4515176/plan-save-uk-nature-taking-shape-businesses-board>

<sup>19</sup> **TNFD (2025).** TNFD Adopters List. Available at: <https://tnfd.global/engage/tnfd-adopters-list/>

<sup>20</sup> **Ecologi (2025).** The Leadership Advantage: How UK Businesses Are Turning Climate Action into Growth. Available at: <https://ecologi.com/resources/blog/the-leadership-advantage-how-uk-businesses-are-turning-climate-action-into-growth>

## 4. A Roadmap for Nature-Positive Growth

To unlock a resilient, inclusive and competitive future for the region, the Growth Plan should commit to building a nature-positive economy — embedding nature into the systems, investments and decisions that shape regional growth. This is not just about doing more for nature; it's about securing the long-term success of housing, infrastructure, skills and economic development.

### 4.1 Set a Clear Strategic Direction

**Commit to a nature-positive economy as a core principle in the Local Growth Plan.**

This positions nature as a foundational asset — on par with energy, transport and housing — and signals that the West of England will lead in a future economy where sustainability, resilience and quality of place drive competitiveness.

### 4.2 Embed Nature in Core Growth Systems

**Align the LNRS with the Spatial Development Strategy, Local Plans and infrastructure frameworks.**

Nature should be treated as critical infrastructure alongside housing, energy and transport. Failing to embed it will increase costs, delays and public opposition — through flood risk, degraded places and declining public trust. By contrast, integrating nature reduces infrastructure risk, improves liveability and enhances public health — enabling, not constraining, sustainable growth.

This alignment will also reduce policy friction and contested decisions by providing a shared strategic narrative and clear spatial logic.

### 4.3 Invest in Delivery Capacity and Enabling Infrastructure

**Strengthen the region's delivery systems to move at pace and scale.**

- Expand ecological and environmental economic expertise across WECA and UAs — particularly for BNG, spatial planning and emerging nature markets.
- Upscale shared monitoring, data and valuation tools to embed natural capital in decision-making.
- Support regional partnerships and institutional infrastructure — the long-term capability that enables delivery, not just individual projects.

These systems are essential for unlocking private and blended finance, building public confidence, and maintaining the region's national leadership.

### 4.4 Align Skills and Innovation with Nature-Positive Growth

**Connect economic, innovation and workforce strategies with the growing nature-based economy.**

- Invest in skills pathways for land managers, ecologists, engineers and environmental entrepreneurs.
- Position the region's innovation assets — including finance, AI and data — as strategic enablers of a thriving green economy.
- Support LNRS-aligned investment propositions and nature-based SMEs that can deliver co-benefits for jobs, health, resilience and productivity.