



CUMBRIAN WHITE-TAILED EAGLE PROJECT

Social Consultation Report



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SOCIAL CONSULTATION REPORT

2026

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

White-tailed eagles (*Haliaeetus albicilla*, also known as 'sea eagles') were once widespread across the British Isles, but numbers declined due to disturbance, harm and killing leading to their loss from the United Kingdom in 1918. These eagles were once found in Cumbria, with the last recorded breeding attempt near Haweswater in 1787¹. Reintroductions started in the 1970s and have since reinstated subpopulations in Ireland, Isle of Wight and Scotland. These reintroductions provide a helpful model for re-establishment of white-tailed eagles in Cumbria. A reintroduced population in Cumbria would act as a stepping stone population within a wider British Isles network and would be expected to result in ecological, economic and social benefits.

Under national and international guidelines^{2,3}, the ecological impact together with practical and social feasibility must be thoroughly examined for any proposed reintroduction. [Our ecological research](#)⁴ has shown that Cumbria and the surrounding areas (the 'project region') has suitable habitat for white-tailed eagles as well as plenty of food, and that reintroduced birds would be able to grow into a healthy population. Wider ecological assessments and heritage impact assessments are ongoing (**see 'Project summary' section below**).

An in-depth **social consultation** was undertaken by the project to fully understand the community attitudes and values, motivations and expectations of a white-tailed eagle reintroduction. Over a 14-month period, the project shared the results of the ecological research with stakeholder individuals, groups and communities local to this area and listened to people's opinions through a range of approaches, including via questionnaires and through participatory processes such as community workshops and focus groups.

Over **24,800** people were engaged and consulted in the social consultation process. 2,392 people completed the individual questionnaire, with **1,938 of these respondents living in the project region**. Our results show that overall, there is a high level of support (**78%**) for, and positive attitudes, towards a white-tailed eagle reintroduction amongst individuals within the project region.

The results from the questionnaire show that those working in farming and landowning along with several groups, including rural respondents and those working in environment and conservation, and hunting, shooting and game sectors were overrepresented in the consultation. Therefore, the voices of these groups were well reflected in the results.

Shared information shows livestock seldom feature in white-tailed eagle diet across its global range⁵. This is supported by monitoring of white-tailed eagle reintroduction to the Republic of Ireland and the south of England, neither of which have recorded any livestock taken to date. The project anticipates a white-tailed eagle diet to consist of mostly estuarine fish and waterfowl⁶ in the Cumbrian landscape. However, livestock predation is known to have occurred in Scotland and raises concerns in the sheep farming community. If this were to occur in



Cumbria a key stakeholder group who could potentially be negatively impacted are sheep farmers. Over **285** individuals identifying with farming and landowning interests were engaged in the social consultation through farming focus groups, farmer interviews and the individual questionnaire. Should the project proceed, informed by input from consultees to date, these concerns identify a sector that will need continued specific focus.

Meetings with key stakeholder organisations, such as farming, fishing, forestry, business and the community, were held to listen to, acknowledge and respect both enthusiasm and concerns towards a white-tailed eagle reintroduction in Cumbria. This Social Engagement and Consultation Report presents the social consultation findings. The next step is to collect and collate organisational views from stakeholder groups through a stakeholder questionnaire.



PROJECT SUMMARY

The [Threatened Species Recovery Actions \(TSRA\) 2025](#)⁷ are the output of a national partnership project focusing on England's threatened species and are key to the delivery of the 2042 Extinction Risk target in The Environmental Targets (Biodiversity)(England) Regulations 2023. The TSRA has identified white-tailed eagles as one of the species in England that are most in need of recovery⁵. Regionally, the white-tailed eagle is one of the 21 prioritised species identified in the [Lake District National Park Partnership Nature Recovery Delivery Plan](#)⁸ for restoration, reinforcement, or reintroduction. Also, white-tailed eagles were identified as a species that are considered to be potential candidates for reintroduction in the short to medium term in the [Cumbria Local Nature Recovery Strategy](#)⁹. Furthermore, the draft [North Pennines National Landscape Management Plan](#)¹⁰ states 'Re-establish White-tailed eagle into Cumbria, using an evidence-led and collaborative approach' as an outcome.

The **Cumbrian White-Tailed Eagle Project** is led by The Lifescape Project charity and supported by a steering group including the University of Cumbria, Cumbria Wildlife Trust, RSPB, the Wildland Research Institute, Lake District National Park Authority, the National Trust, and local estate owners and managers. The steering group would support a reintroduction if the conditions are right – if there is an area in Cumbria where white-tailed eagles can live, if it's practically possible, and if local people are accepting of the bird back in the landscape.

The possibility of white-tailed eagles returning to Cumbria was first investigated in 2022 with [a pre-feasibility study led by the University of Cumbria](#)¹¹. This work suggested that there are suitable areas within Cumbria for white-tailed eagles to live. To understand whether reintroduced white-tailed eagles would establish a population in the long term, over 100 years, a computer modelling method known as [population viability analysis](#)¹² was used. This research shows that any reintroduction plan for white-tailed eagles in Cumbria should aim to release a minimum of 66 birds over five years to be confident that a population will survive in the long term.

To determine if there is sufficient food in Cumbria to support white-tailed eagles, the project reviewed studies of this bird's diet in Europe and then compared findings from the [diet review](#)⁵ to the species records for Cumbria. This work suggested that there is plenty of wild food for the birds to eat, with many of the key prey species present in the county.

As reported here, an in-depth **social consultation** was undertaken by the project to fully understand the community attitudes and values, motivations and expectations of a white-tailed eagle reintroduction. Over a 14-month period, the project shared the results of the ecological research with stakeholder groups and communities local to this area and listened to people's opinions through a range of approaches, including via questionnaires and through participatory processes such as community workshops and focus groups.

Over **24,800** people were engaged and consulted in the social consultation process. 2,392 people completed the individual questionnaire, with **1,937 of these respondents living in the project region**. Our results show that overall, there is a high level of support (**78%** - see figure 1) and positive attitudes towards a white-tailed eagle reintroduction amongst individuals within the project region.

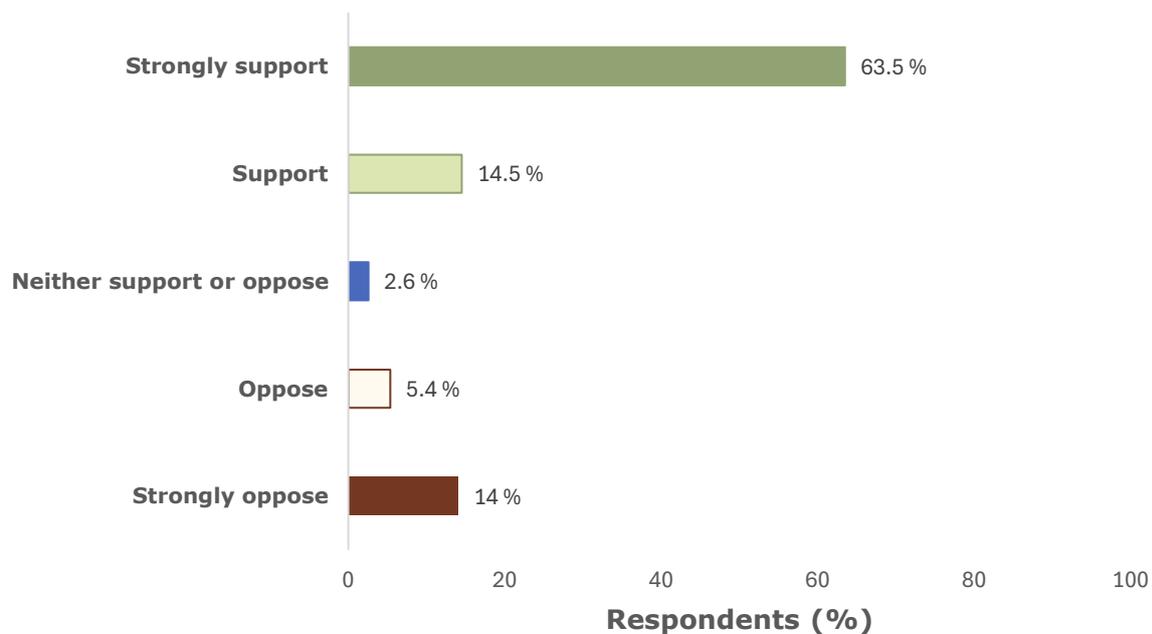


Figure 1. The level of support from questionnaire respondents living, working or visiting Cumbria (n = 1,937).

The results show that several groups, corresponding to those potentially most affected were overrepresented in the sample, including rural respondents and those working in farming and landowning, environment and conservation, and hunting, shooting and game sectors. Over **285** individuals identifying with farming and landowning interests were engaged in the social consultation through farming focus groups, farmer interviews and the individual questionnaire. Meetings with key stakeholder organisations, such as farming, fishing, forestry, business and the community, were held to listen to, acknowledge and respect both enthusiasm and concerns towards a white-tailed eagle reintroduction in Cumbria. This scientific Social Engagement and Consultation Report presents the social consultation findings. The next step is to collect and collate organisational views from stakeholder groups.

A shadow **Habitats Regulations Assessment** is underway to identify any potential impacts on protected features of designated European sites. This work will be followed by a wider ecological assessment reviewing potential impacts on other species of conservation importance present in Cumbria.



As the most suitable habitat for a release is within the Lake District National Park, which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the project is also undertaking a **Heritage Impact Assessment**. This work will identify any potential impacts white-tailed eagles could have on attributes that led to the site designation, such as its cultural and aesthetic value.

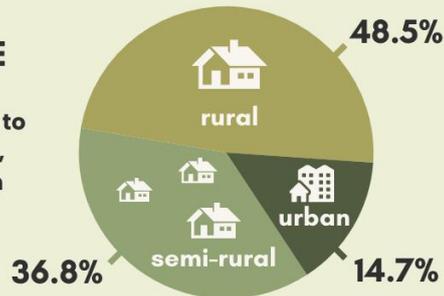
The project is working on further practical aspects such as **identifying a suitable source population** and **mapping out a translocation pathway**, working closely with other projects to learn from experience. Part of this work is identifying any potential risks to the white-tailed eagle themselves. This is being investigated through a **Disease Risk Assessment** which is being undertaken by experienced wildlife veterinarians.

INFOGRAPHIC



SHOULD WHITE-TAILED EAGLES BE RETURNED TO CUMBRIA?

1,938 PEOPLE from the project region responded to the questionnaire, with most living in rural areas



Over 24,800 people were engaged and consulted



Over 285 people identifying with farming and landowning interests were consulted



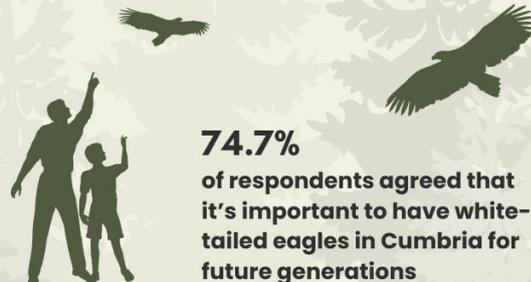
78%

of respondents from the project region support a reintroduction of white-tailed eagles to the Cumbrian landscape

Research has shown that white-tailed eagles released into Cumbria would grow into a healthy population



Studies show that there is plenty of wild food for the birds to eat



74.7% of respondents agreed that it's important to have white-tailed eagles in Cumbria for future generations





CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
PROJECT SUMMARY	5
INFOGRAPHIC	8
1. DEFINITIONS	11
2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION.....	12
3. OBJECTIVES	14
4. SOCIAL ACCEPTIBILITY CRITERIA.....	15
5. WHERE WAS IT LOCATED?	16
6. WHO WAS INVOLVED?	17
7. WHAT DID IT INVOLVE?	17
7.1. Online webinars.....	19
7.2. Drop-in events	20
7.3. Community workshops	20
7.4. Farming focus groups	21
7.5. Farming interviews	22
7.6. Individual questionnaire.....	22
7.7. Stakeholder questionnaire	23
7.8. Stakeholder meetings.....	23
8. HOW WERE THE DATA EXPLORED?	24
9. KEY FINDINGS.....	24
9.1. Demographics of questionnaire respondents	25
9.2. Level of support.....	27
9.3. Knowledge	29
9.4. Attitudes towards white-tailed eagle reintroduction	29
9.5. Community workshops	31
9.6. Farming focus groups	34
9.7. Farming interviews	36
9.8. Summary of engagement	38



10.	DISCUSSION	39
11.	NEXT STEPS	41
12.	ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	41
13.	REFERENCES	42
14.	APPENDIX 1	47
15.	APPENDIX 2	48



1. DEFINITIONS

Community: refers to both a community of place (a community of people who are bound together because of where they reside, work, and visit), and community of interest (a community of people who share a common interest or passion).

Ecological research: explores the relationship between living organisms and the environment.

Inferential statistics: further statistical analysis to make predictions and draw conclusions from the data.

IUCN: International Union for the Conservation of Nature.

n: number of responses in a dataset.

Project region: The habitat patch where white-tailed eagles are predicted to live covers Cumbria and the surrounding areas.

Quantitative data: information that can be counted or measured and results in numerical data.

Qualitative data: non-numerical information, such as text, audio or visual data, that provides rich, descriptive insights into subjective feelings and lived experiences.

Social consultation: process of seeking and considering the views of stakeholders, including individuals, groups, or organisations, on a specific issue or proposal to inform decision-making.

Representative sample: a subset of a larger group that accurately reflects the selected characteristics of that entire group.

Respondent: a person who supplied information for a questionnaire.

Social engagement: methods the project used to provide information about the white-tailed eagle.

Stakeholders: Person or group with an interest in white-tailed eagle reintroduction.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The **Cumbrian White-Tailed Eagle Project (CWTEP)** has been exploring the possibility of bringing white-tailed eagles back to the Cumbrian landscape. The CWTEP is led by The Lifescape Project charity and supported by a steering group including the University of Cumbria, Cumbria Wildlife Trust, RSPB, the Wildland Research Institute, Lake District National Park Authority, the National Trust, and local estate owners and managers. The white-tailed eagle is one of the 21 prioritised species identified in the [Lake District National Park Partnership Nature Recovery Delivery Plan](#)⁸ for restoration, reinforcement, or reintroduction. Also, white-tailed eagles were identified as a species that are considered to be potential candidates for reintroduction in the short to medium term in the [Cumbria Local Nature Recovery Strategy](#)⁹. Furthermore, the draft [North Pennines National Landscape Management Plan](#)¹⁰ states 'Re-establish White-tailed eagle into Cumbria, using an evidence-led and collaborative approach' as an outcome.

With a wingspan of up to 2.5 metres, white-tailed eagles (**see figure 2**), sometimes called sea eagles, are Britain's largest native bird of prey. They are generalist predators and scavengers feeding on birds, fish, and mammals. They inhabit a range of marine and freshwater habitats across Europe, parts of Central Asia and Siberia¹.



Figure 2. A flying white-tailed eagle.

White-tailed eagles were once widespread across the British Isles, but numbers declined due to disturbance, harm and killing leading to their loss from the United Kingdom in 1918. These eagles were once found in Cumbria, with the last recorded breeding attempt near Haweswater in 1787¹. These birds were a native species and present in Cumbria until relatively recently, with William Wordsworth (Lake District Poet 1770-1850) referring to white-tailed eagles throughout his work¹³. Additionally, cultural associations to white-tailed eagles are reflected in placenames within Cumbria, such as Arlecdon, Eagle Crag and Herneshaw^{14,15}.

White-tailed eagles have since been reintroduced to Scotland and the Isle of Wight, as well as Ireland. There are now breeding populations across north and west Scotland and west Ireland, and in 2023 a white-tailed eagle chick was born in southern England for the first time in 243 years. Two more white-tailed eagle chicks successfully left their nests in 2024 and [a further three chicks have fledged from two nests in 2025](#)¹⁶. With the white-tailed eagle reintroduction projects completed or ongoing, there is much expertise in the United Kingdom and Ireland



that our project is learning from and building on. However, the birds are long-lived, slow breeders with small brood sizes and limited expansion between generations; re-establishment across the British Isles will take many decades without further reintroduction and reinforcement.

An initial look into the possibility of returning these eagles to Cumbria was undertaken in 2022 with [a pre-feasibility study led by the University of Cumbria](#)¹¹. This work suggested that there is suitable habitat in Cumbria for white-tailed eagles to live and identified next steps to fully assess if a reintroduction is feasible.

To understand whether reintroduced white-tailed eagles would survive in the long term, over 100 years, a computer modelling method known as [population viability analysis](#)¹² was undertaken. This method predicts whether a population will be successful after its reintroduction into a landscape. It estimates population size and growth, likelihood of extinction and genetic diversity (required for healthy animal populations) into the future. It was found that when 66 birds are released over five years, there is only an 8.1% chance of the population going extinct over 100 years, and the Cumbrian population will be more likely to grow to around 134 individuals. This research identifies that any reintroduction plan for white-tailed eagles in Cumbria should aim to release a minimum of 66 birds over five years to be confident that a population will survive in the long term.

To determine if there is sufficient food in Cumbria to support white-tailed eagles, the project reviewed studies of this bird's diet in Europe and found records of at least 114 bird species, 52 fish species, and 30 mammal species being consumed, with fish and birds making the most important contribution to diet followed by mammals. The project then compared findings from the [diet review](#)⁵ to the species records for Cumbria. The coast and inland waterbodies attract large numbers of non-breeding and resident waterbirds. Tens of thousands of geese, ducks, waders, and gulls are recorded each year¹⁷. Several key marine and freshwater fish species have also been recorded in the county. European rabbit and brown hare are both widespread across Cumbria and likely to be taken as live prey, whereas deer would be consumed as carrion. This work suggests that there is plenty of wild food for the birds to eat, with many of the key prey species present in the county. Studies show livestock seldom feature in white-tailed eagle diet across its global range⁵. This is supported by monitoring of white-tailed eagle reintroduction to the Republic of Ireland and the south of England, neither of which have recorded any livestock taken to date. The project anticipates a white-tailed eagle diet to consist of mostly estuarine fish and waterfowl⁶ in the Cumbrian landscape. However, livestock predation is known in Scotland and raises concerns in the sheep farming community. If this were to occur in Cumbria a key stakeholder group who could potentially be negatively impacted are sheep farmers.

The project is also considering how white-tailed eagles would interact with other habitats and species. A shadow Habitats Regulations Assessment is underway and will identify any potential impacts on protected features of designated European



sites. This work will be followed by a wider ecological assessment reviewing potential impacts on other species and habitats of conservation importance present in Cumbria. Both these assessments will allow the project to determine if white-tailed eagles could have a significant impact on these important species and may suggest ways to mitigate any negative interactions.

As the most suitable habitat for a release is within the Lake District National Park, which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the project is also undertaking a Heritage Impact Assessment. This work will identify any potential impacts white-tailed eagles could have on attributes that led to the designation, such as its cultural and aesthetic value.

The project is also working on more practical aspects such as identifying a suitable source population and mapping out a translocation pathway, working closely with other projects to learn from experience. Part of this work is identifying any potential risks to the white-tailed eagles themselves. This is being investigated through a Disease Risk Assessment which has been commissioned to wildlife veterinarians with the expertise to undertake such an assessment.

Alongside these ecological and practical assessments, the project has looked in more depth at what people think about having the species back in the landscape and this is the purpose of the social consultation.

3. OBJECTIVES

The overall objectives of the CWTEP social engagement and consultation were fourfold:

- (1)** to provide information on, and to reconnect local communities with, a native species that may have become unknown to them,
- (2)** to provide opportunities for voices to be heard,
- (3)** to gain an in-depth understanding of community attitudes and values of a white-tailed eagle reintroduction in Cumbria, and
- (4)** to engage with people most likely to be impacted, or perceived to be impacted, by a white-tailed eagle reintroduction proposal through collaborating and developing aspects of the reintroduction plan.



4. SOCIAL ACCEPTABILITY CRITERIA

Social acceptability is rarely defined in academic literature due to its complex nature and how its definition changes based on the surrounding situation or circumstances¹⁸. In this context, social acceptability is one of the components that the project will use to decide whether to proceed with a reintroduction of white-tailed eagles in Cumbria.

Following review of the literature and through expert discussion, the project proposes **THREE** key social criteria which must all be met for the project to progress to the next stage of reintroduction:

1. Majority support of a white-tailed eagle reintroduction.

There is majority support for a white-tailed eagle reintroduction from respondents living in Cumbria and the surrounding areas (quantified from data within the individual questionnaire).

2. The issues raised by stakeholders can be addressed.

The issues raised by stakeholders can be addressed by the project (assessed from the qualitative data from community workshops, farmer discussion groups and farmer interviews).

3. The relevant reintroduction guidelines have been met.

The relevant reintroduction guidelines have been met in relation to social engagement and consultation as set out in:

[Reintroductions and other conservation translocations: code and guidance for England](#)²

[IUCN Guidelines for Reintroductions and other Conservation Translocations](#)³

5. WHERE WAS IT LOCATED?

Cumbria is a location of strategic importance for white-tailed eagles, sitting between Scottish, Irish, and southern English populations which have already been reintroduced, and acting as a potential connection between each of them. [Our research](#)⁴ found that Cumbria has suitable habitat for these eagles as well as plenty of food, and that reintroduced birds would be able to grow into a healthy population. Areas of southern Cumbria have ideal areas for white-tailed eagles to live (**see figure 3** - shown in yellow on this map) as well as areas in North Lancashire, with woodlands providing breeding sites, productive lakes and coastlines providing food. This area also has the lowest risk from infrastructure such as wind turbines. As this area is likely to be the focus for a future white-tailed eagle population and residents of these areas will be most likely to encounter eagles, it was the defined location of our consultation (**see figure 3** – outlined by the yellow circle on this map).

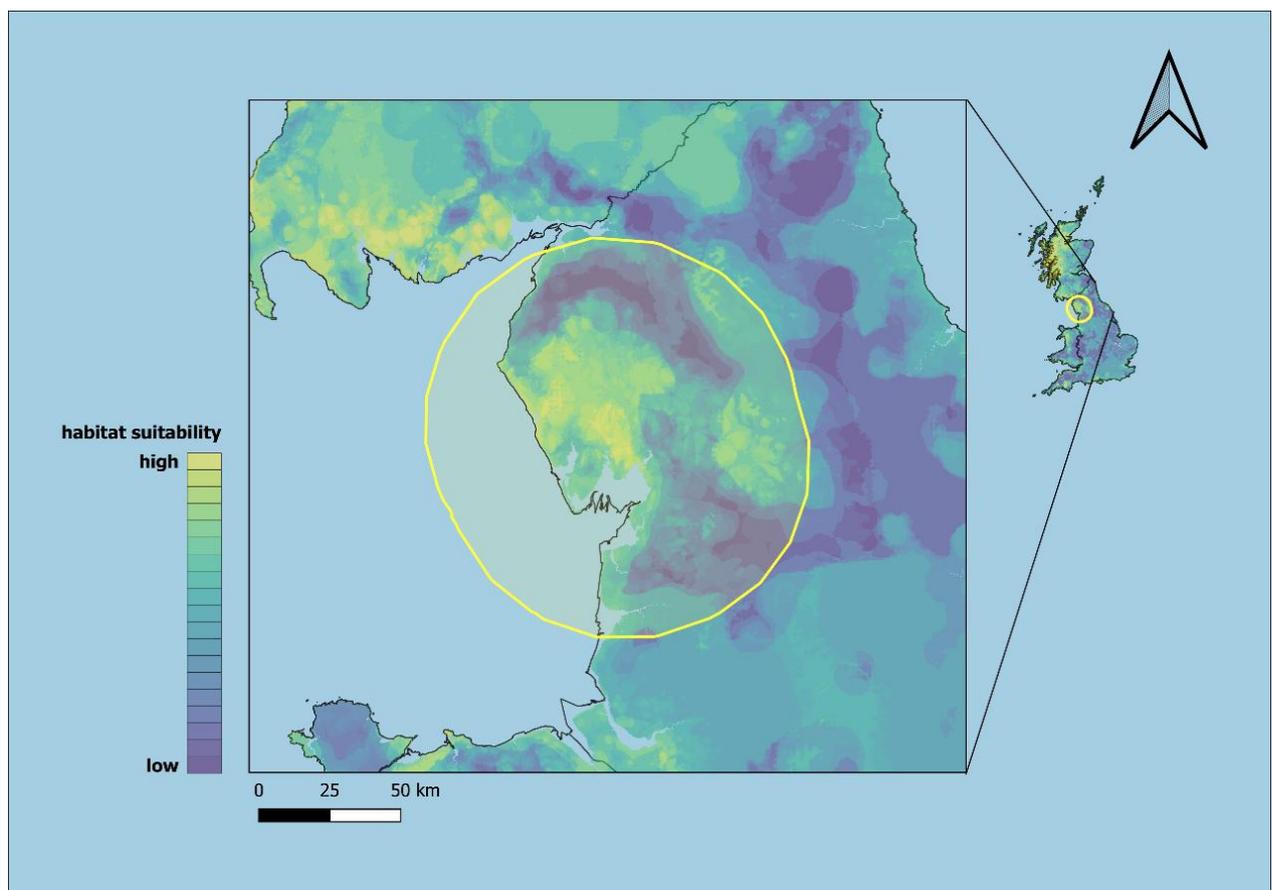


Figure 3. A map to show the suitable habitat for white-tailed eagles in Cumbria. Areas ideal for white-tailed eagles are in yellow. The yellow circle outlines the area of focus for the social engagement and consultation.



6. WHO WAS INVOLVED?

A virtual stakeholder mapping exercise was organised and attended by individuals who had local knowledge of the area or knowledge of the species. During the exercise, the following tasks were completed: defining stakeholder group categories, completing an interest-influence matrix, defining engagement methods, and developing a stakeholder list.

Through this exercise, an overview of peer-reviewed published literature and stakeholder mapping exercise the following groups were identified:

1. Local communities
2. Environment and conservation
3. Farming and landowning including wind turbines
4. Forestry
5. Hunting / shooting / game / angling / fishing (including commercial)
6. Parents / pet owners
7. Underrepresented groups
8. Heritage, tourism and recreation
9. The scientific community
10. Regulatory bodies

7. WHAT DID IT INVOLVE?

The social consultation methods outlined below were reviewed by an ethics committee (Reference LPREC25/03/24). The documentation for the ethics committee review included detailed methods for data collation and planned analytical approaches. The research outputs of this work could include submission of manuscripts for peer-reviewed publication in scientific journals. Data storage complied with the Data Protection Act 2018.

Before the full-scale social engagement and consultation methods were implemented, each method was subjected to a pilot study process, where a smaller, preliminary study was conducted to highlight any adjustments needed within the technique. Methods were planned to be as accessible as possible to a range of individuals (**see table 1**). For example, questionnaires could be completed online or in paper form, and interviews were held at a time and location most suitable for the interviewee. Where data was collected, participants were provided with an information sheet and were asked to complete a consent form. Debrief sheets were provided at the end of the social engagement activity or in a follow-up email. All data was anonymised.



Table 1. The Cumbrian White-Tailed Eagle Project’s social engagement and consultation timing of interactions. The ‘green’ colour represents when the social activity had occurred.

Social activity	2024			2025									2026						
	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Press release	Green																		
Online webinars	Green		Green																
Drop-in events	Green	Green	Green																
Community workshops	Green																		
Farming focus groups					Green														
Farmer interviews															Green				
Individual questionnaire	Green																		
Stakeholder questionnaire																			Green
Stakeholder meetings	Green																		
Monthly newsletter																			Green

The social engagement and consultation activities were open to all and included online webinars, two film showings of [‘The Eagle with the Sunlit Eye,’](#) panel discussions, opportunity to meet a white-tailed eagle, five drop-in events, community workshops, farming focus groups, farmer interviews, individual questionnaire, stakeholder questionnaire and stakeholder meetings. These activities were advertised through traditional media, the radio, direct contact with 818 stakeholder groups for them to share with members, social media and a leaflet drop reaching 21,676 people.

7.1. Online webinars

Two webinars were held by the CWTEP, which were recorded and uploaded to [YouTube](#), and are available for everyone to watch. The purpose of these webinars was to engage Cumbrian residents with the species and provide information on the species' behaviour and ecology, as well as the process of a white-tailed eagle reintroduction.

1. [White-tailed sea eagle reintroductions by Duncan Halley and Alv Ottar Folkestad](#)



Figure 4. Digital poster used to advertise the webinar 'white-tailed sea eagle reintroductions' by Duncan Halley and Alv Ottar Folkestad in September 2024.

This webinar marked the first public event in the CWTEP's social engagement and consultation (**see figure 4**). This online webinar, hosted on Tuesday 17th September 2024 included a presentation by Duncan Halley who explores the history and process of white-tailed eagle reintroduction Europe. Duncan was joined by Alv Ottar Folkestad, who discussed living with white-tailed eagles from a sheep farmer's perspective. The presentations were followed by a question and answer session.

Duncan Halley is a senior research scientist from the Norwegian Institute for Nature Research. Duncan has been working with white-tailed eagles for over 30 years, and his work has heavily contributed to their restoration across Europe. Alv Ottar Folkestad

is a Norwegian sheep farmer who lives and works alongside white-tailed eagles and is also involved with white-tailed eagle research in Norway. Alv was previously the chairman and one of the board members of the Norwegian wild sheep association, has led the Norwegian white-tailed eagle project since 1975 and was heavily involved with the Scottish reintroduction of white-tailed eagles.

2. [White-tailed Sea Eagle reintroduction to Ireland: restoration of a large avian apex predator by Allan Mee](#)

This webinar, hosted on Tuesday 5th November 2024, included a presentation by Dr Allan Mee, an ornithologist and raptor specialist with over 40 years' experience, who has been involved with white-tailed eagle reintroductions in Ireland since 2007 (**see figure 5**). The presentations were followed by a question and answer session.



Figure 5. Digital poster used to advertise the webinar 'white-tailed sea eagle reintroduction to Ireland' by Allan Mee in November 2024.

7.2. Drop-in events

Between September and November 2024, five drop-in events were held across Cumbria and North Lancashire (**see figure 6**). The purpose of these drop-in sessions was to provide information on the white-tailed eagle as a species. Visitors spent time engaging with the information boards, books, information sheets and engagement materials. Visitors could ask project staff any questions they may have had. Once the visitors had engaged with the information on white-tailed eagles, visitors were encouraged to complete the questionnaire.



Figure 6. Both physical copies and digital posters advertising the in-person and drop-in events were distributed.

7.3. Community workshops

In September 2024, two community workshops were held at the University of Cumbria in Ambleside for individuals living in the project region and that signed up prior to the event. The purpose of these community workshops was to provide information on the white-tailed eagle as a species, to provide opportunities for voices to be heard, and to gain an in-depth understanding of community attitudes and values of a white-tailed eagle reintroduction in Cumbria. The community workshops included a presentation, a group discussion and a group participatory task (**see figure 7**).

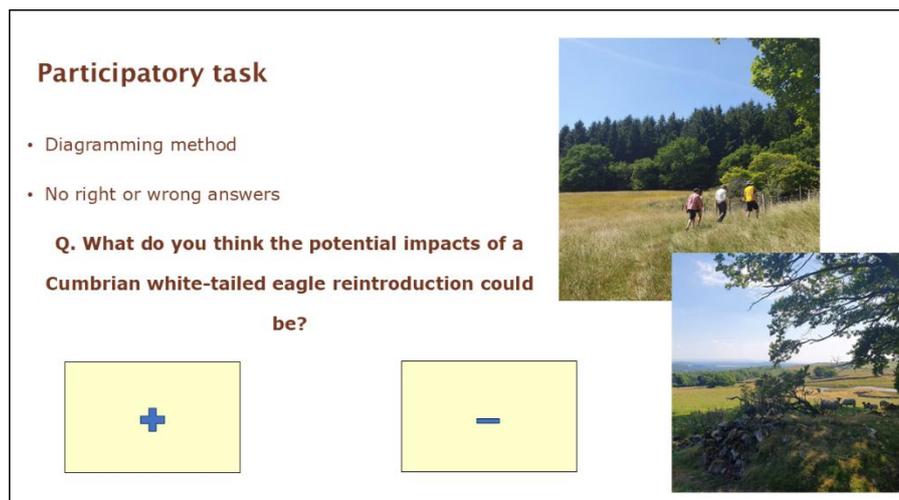


Figure 7. Presentation slide used to direct the participatory task within the community workshops held in September 2024.

7.4. Farming focus groups

Farming focus groups were held online and in-person, specifically for individuals from the farming community. The purpose of these sessions was to discuss the white-tailed eagle as a species, the project in more depth and to hear the questions and concerns of attendees. Cumbrian livestock farmers were invited to the focus group sessions through contacts from the Lake District National Park Authority and overall, a total of 20 farming individuals attended. In January 2025, four farming focus group sessions were held. Each farming focus group session lasted between 90 and 120 minutes and included a 30-minute presentation and a discussion on attendee thoughts on a white-tailed eagle reintroduction in Cumbria.

These sessions were audio recorded. The audio recorded files were uploaded on the computer and inputted into an Artificial Intelligence (AI) transcription software. This produced a document containing the words spoken verbally in the focus groups in a written format. This document was then manually checked by a human to ensure the written words match the spoken word. These words, or 'qualitative' data, were then analysed using a six-phase framework called thematic analysis¹⁹. Once the thematic analysis had been undertaken, the preliminary results were discussed in semi-structured interviews with farmers in November 2025. The steps describing the farming focus group and semi-structured interview process are captured in **figure 8 below**.

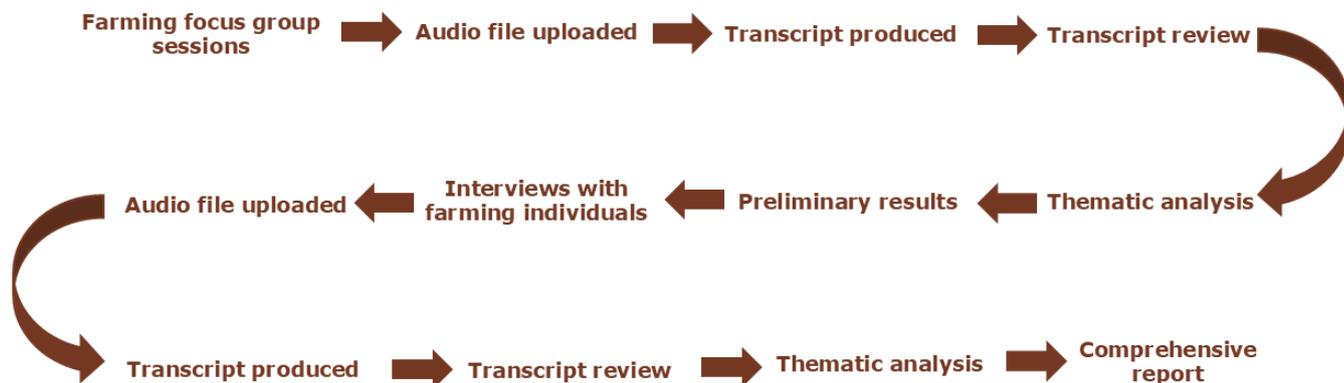


Figure 8. The step by step process from collecting data in the farming focus group sessions to the final stage of a completed comprehensive report.

7.5. Farming interviews

Semi-structured interviews are an internationally used method and have been used across a range of research disciplines, from the medical profession, agriculture and ecology and conservation²⁰. Semi-structured interviews collect detailed information in a style that is somewhat conversational, used to delve deeply into a topic and to understand thoroughly the answers provided²⁰.

Farming focus group attendees were invited to participate in an interview and overall, a total of eleven interviews with self-selected farmers were conducted in November 2025. An interview topic guide was developed prior to the interviews. Eight of the interviewees had attended the farming focus group sessions in January 2025, and three interviewees had not attended. All interviewees were presented with the output from the farming discussion groups (**see appendix 1**). All participants received an information sheet and informed consent was gained before an interview commenced. The semi-structured interviews were audio recorded. Data collection ceased when subsequent interviews failed to yield new themes or patterns²¹. The audio files from the interviews were transcribed verbatim (word for word) using AI software. Once the interviews were transcribed into words, the qualitative (verbal and written) data was analysed using thematic analysis¹⁹ and an interpretivist approach taken, which focuses on understanding the meaning behind people's interview responses instead of measuring numerical data^{22,23}.

7.6. Individual questionnaire

The individual questionnaire was distributed over a 13-month period (between September 2024 and October 2025). The purpose of the questionnaire was to help the project to understand attitudes and values, and the anticipated impacts of a potential white-tailed eagle reintroduction in Cumbria. The questionnaire consisted of 18 questions, including both open and closed-ended questions²⁴. These



questions were split into two sections on information about yourself, and attitudes towards white-tailed eagles.

The first section 'about you' collected demographic data from respondents. The demographics of respondents were collected and explored to determine the representation of society within the sample of regional questionnaire respondents. Previous research has also shown that certain demographic characteristics can be associated with attitudes towards species reintroductions²⁵. The second section 'attitudes towards white-tailed eagles' asked knowledge questions about white-tailed eagle ecology, levels of support towards a white-tailed eagle reintroduction and asked respondents how much they agreed with attitudinal statements. Previous research has shown that although knowledge solely does not impact attitudes, it can be a component that influences attitudes towards wildlife²⁶. Attitudinal statements were developed using the ABC model of attitudes, which describes attitudes developed by three components: affective, behaviour and cognitive²⁷.

The questionnaire could be completed online or through a physical paper copy. To encourage Cumbrian residents to complete the individual questionnaire, leaflets were posted to 21,676 households within the habitat patch.

7.7. Stakeholder questionnaire

A stakeholder questionnaire will be distributed online for six weeks between February and March 2026. The stakeholder questionnaire will be distributed via email to the stakeholder distribution list and the questionnaire link has been uploaded on the website page, and on social media platforms. The purpose of the stakeholder questionnaire is to collect organisational views on a reintroduction of white-tailed eagles in Cumbria.

7.8. Stakeholder meetings

Stakeholder meetings were held between September 2025 and will be ongoing until March 2026. A list of >800 collective stakeholders were invited to organise a virtual meeting via email to further discuss the CWTEP. The stakeholder meetings consisted of a presentation on white-tailed eagles as a species and more information about the CWTEP. This was followed by a question and answer session. No data was collected in these meetings.



8. HOW WERE THE DATA EXPLORED?

Qualitative (verbal and written) data collected from the farming focus groups and semi-structured interviews were analysed using thematic analysis¹⁹. This is where the results are identified from within the data and are not restricted by pre-determined questions. This analysis shows meaningful patterns or themes and offers insights into interviewees' perspectives and experiences. To increase transparency and trust²⁸, AI thematic analysis was undertaken on the farming focus group and farmer interview data. AI thematic analysis is the integration of AI software, such as ChatGPT, into the six phase framework^{19,29,30}. Human intervention is an essential requirement within this approach to refine each step in the process and refine research integrity³⁰.

The written data collected from the community workshops were analysed using a summative content analysis, where frequency of words were counted followed by interpretation of the underlying meaning^{31,32}.

Statistical analysis was performed on the quantitative (numerical) data collected from the individual questionnaire³³. These tests summarised the data and supported the creation of graphs to visualise the data collected. For further detail on the statistical analysis, please contact a member of the CWTEP team.

9. KEY FINDINGS

2,392 individual questionnaires completed, with **1,938** respondents living in the project region.

78% of respondents from the project region support the reintroduction of white-tailed eagles in the Cumbrian landscape.

Overall, **24,800** individuals engaged through the CWTEP's social engagement and consultation programme (**see table 9**).

Two online webinars with a total of **335** views.

Five drop-in events with a total of **249** attendees.

9.1. Demographics of questionnaire respondents

The individual questionnaire collated data on the demographics of the respondent including age, gender, ethnicity, rurality and education (**see table 2**). The 1,938 sample were respondents who self-identified in living, visiting or working in the project region and the respondent's postcode sat within the social engagement and consultation project region (**see figure 3**). The demographics of respondents were explored to determine the representation of society within the sample of regional questionnaire respondents.

Table 2. Demographics of regional questionnaire respondents (n= 1,938). Respondents had a 'Prefer not to say' option and answers to this response are removed from the table. Differences in sample sizes ('n') per demographic category can be observed where respondents did not share data.

Demographic	Demographic level	Respondents (%)*	Demographic	Demographic level	Respondents (%)*
Age (n=1,920)	25 years of age or younger	4.7	Gender (n= 1,896)	Woman	46.5
	26 – 45 years old	22.9		Man	53.1
	46 – 65 years old	43.3		Non-binary	0.4
	66 – 85 years old	28.4		Describe in another way	0.1
	86 years of age and older	0.7			
Ethnicity (n= 1,859)	Asian, or Asian British	0.2	Rurality (n= 1,931)	Rural	48.5
	Black, Black British, Caribbean or African	0.1		Semi-rural	36.8
	Mixed or multiple	0.7		Urban	14.7
	White	99.0	Education (n= 1,847)	No qualifications	1.8
	Other	0.1		Qualifications below degree level	28.4
			Qualifications at and above degree level	69.8	

The demographic data was compared with that at a national level as the appropriate average regional statistics are **not available in a consistent format across all the categories**. When compared to the national average statistics³⁴, both age groups of 46 – 65 (43.3%) and 66-85 (28.4%) were overrepresented (25.4%, 15.7% respectively). Respondents aged 25 years or younger, 26 – 45 years old and 86 years and older are underrepresented when compared with national statistics (30.2%, 26.6% and 2.1% respectively). The ethnicity of most

respondents was white (99.0%), which is an overrepresentation when compared to the national average data³⁰ (76%). Most respondents selected 'men' (53.1%) for their gender, which is an overrepresentation (49.0%).

The majority of questionnaire respondents lived in rural areas (48.5%), followed by those living in semi-rural areas (36.8%), and urban areas (14.7%). The rural population within the UK is approximately 15.0% and therefore suggests that there is an overrepresentation of this demographic within the respondent group.

Most respondents had qualifications at and above degree level (69.8%), while 28.4% of respondents had qualifications below degree level and 1.8% of respondents had no qualifications. The average percentage of working adults within the UK with qualifications at and above degree level is 37.0% and therefore, there was an overrepresentation of this demographic group within the data. The national average percentage of working adults in the UK with qualifications below degree level is 59.0% and those with no qualifications are approximately 13.0% and therefore, there was an underrepresentation of these demographic groups.

Biases within the employment sector were explored using respondent answers to 'Which of the following groups best describes your main area of interest?' (see **table 3**). Respondents were asked this question to understand which stakeholder category they most identify themselves with. To explore the representation of 'area of interest' amongst the questionnaire respondents, 'employment sector' is most comparable.

Table 3. Representation of 'areas of interest' or employment sector best describing respondents living in Cumbria and the surrounding areas (n = 1,894).

Area of interest	Proportion of questionnaire respondents within area of interest (%)	Typical proportion of employment sector nationally (%)	Under (-) or over (+) representation of respondent group compared to typical national proportions (given as sample % / national %)
Environment and conservation	46.2	5.5 ³⁴	+ 8.4
Farming and landowning	13.0	1.4 ³⁴	+ 9.3
Forestry	0.6	0.2 ³⁵	+3
Heritage, tourism, and recreation	6.9	4.9 ³⁶	+ 1.4
Hunting, shooting and game, fishing and angling	2.5	0.3 ³⁷	+ 8.4
Other	13.4	59	- 0.2
The scientific community	9.4	28.7 ³⁸	-0.3



There is an overrepresentation of respondents with areas of interest in environment and conservation; farming and landowning; forestry; heritage, tourism and recreation; and hunting, shooting and game. There is an underrepresentation of respondents with an area of interest in 'other' and also in the scientific community.

In summary, respondents aged 46-65, aged 66-85, of white ethnicity, from a rural background and those who identify with environment and conservation; farming and landowning; forestry; heritage, tourism and recreation; and hunting, shooting and game sectors were overrepresented within the regional questionnaire responses. The respondent group would ideally be more representative in age and ethnicity but the voice of interest groups with a range of opinions is well captured as is the rural voice. Stratified subsampling of respondent data is a method that allows voices to be heard proportionately. When investigating the levels of support towards a white-tailed eagle reintroduction in Cumbria, the data were subsampled to ensure fair representation of demographic groups (**see table 4**).

9.2. Level of support

The level of support for a white-tailed eagle reintroduction into Cumbria was explored through the answers to the question: '*How do you feel about a reintroduction of white-tailed eagles in Cumbria?*' The answers were collected in a Likert-scale of 'Strongly oppose, Oppose, Neither support or oppose, Support or Strongly support'. The first half of the respondent's postcode was collected to allow for data from those living in the project region to be analysed separately.

As the questionnaire was open to anyone, the people who responded may not accurately represent the wider regional or national population. To overcome this, levels of support towards a white-tailed eagle reintroduction in Cumbria were explored using all the questionnaire responses, responses from the project region respondents and a representative subsample of the project region respondents based on gender, age and education (**see table 4**). The representative subsample was based on these three demographic categories as these factors were available for comparison³⁴.



Table 4. Levels of support (%) within sample or sub samples of questionnaire data, number of responses, % (Strongly oppose, oppose, neither support or oppose, support or strongly support) and overall % level of support.

Type of respondent sample	Number of responses	Level of support for white-tailed eagle reintroduction to project region (%)*					Overall level of support
		Strongly oppose	Oppose	Neither support or oppose	Support	Strongly support	
1 All questionnaire respondents	2,392	12.9	5	2.4	13.6	66.2	79.8
2 Project region respondents	1,937	14	5.4	2.6	14.5	63.5	78
3 Representative subsample of project region respondents**	1,805	16.2	4.3	2.4	14.4	62.6	77

*Results may not equate to 100% exactly due to value rounded to 1 decimal place.

**Representative subsample of project region respondents is based on gender, age and education framed on project region demographics³⁴.

79.8% of all questionnaire respondents support a white-tailed eagle reintroduction into Cumbria.

78% of respondents living and/or working in the project region support a white-tailed eagle reintroduction into Cumbria (**see figure 1**).

77% of a representative subsample of the project region respondents based on gender, age and education.

Further statistical tests indicated that there were significant differences in levels of support across the 'areas of interest.' Levels of support amongst respondents who identified with a 'hunting, shooting, game, angling or fishing' interest (n=48) were significantly more opposed to the reintroduction of white-tailed eagles than 'heritage, tourism and recreation,' 'the scientific community' and 'environment and conservation.'

Those who identified with a 'farming and landowning' (n=247) as their area of interest were significantly more opposed than those who identified with 'hunting, shooting, game, angling and fishing,' , as 'members of a local community group,' with 'heritage, tourism and recreation,' with 'the scientific community,' 'environment and conservation' and 'forestry.'

Farming focus groups and farmer interviews were held to gain an in-depth understanding and explore the reasons that levels of support amongst respondents who identified with 'farming and landowning' (n=247) as their area

of interest were significantly more opposed to a white-tailed eagle reintroduction (**see sections 9.6 & 9.7**).

In summary, the results from the individual questionnaire found that there are high levels of support (**78%**) of a white-tailed eagle reintroduction into Cumbria (**see table 5**). This is the value that most comprehensively captures views from the project region, despite it overrepresenting the stakeholder groups that were least supportive.

9.3. Knowledge



Figure 9. Image of a white-tailed eagle used in the individual questionnaire. Author credit: Tony – tickspics.com.

Questionnaire respondents were asked questions relating to white-tailed eagles and their ecology. When questionnaire respondents were asked 'What do white-tailed eagles mostly eat?' 98.7% of respondents correctly answered 'Birds, fish, and mammals.' 94.3% of questionnaire respondents correctly identified the image of the white-tailed eagle (**see figure 9**). Questionnaire respondents were then asked, 'Where do white-tailed eagles mostly live?' and 91.9% of respondents correctly answered, 'coastal areas and near water bodies.' 80.5% of respondents correctly answered, 'How many eggs are usually laid by white-tailed eagles

per year?' (1 – 3 eggs) and 57.9% correctly answered 'How long can white-tailed eagles live for?' (over 20 years of age). There was excellent attendance at the information events for the project (**see appendix 2**), however many more people than this also answered the questionnaire (n=2,392). Despite only 12.1% of project region respondents having taken part in activities providing information relating to white-tailed eagles and the Project, there was generally a high level of correct answers to the knowledge questions about the species.

9.4. Attitudes towards white-tailed eagle reintroduction

In the individual questionnaire, respondents were asked questions about their attitudes towards white-tailed eagles and white-tailed eagle reintroduction. Statements posed to respondents in the questionnaire reflected the three main components of attitude: affective, behaviour and cognitive²³ components. Respondents were asked how much they agreed with each attitude statement (**see table 5**).

Table 5. Percentage (%) of all questionnaire respondents (n=1,938) who agreed with each attitude statement towards white-tailed eagles and white-tailed eagle reintroduction using Likert scale strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree or disagree, agree, strongly agree.

Please state how much you agree with the following statements.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
It is important that animals that became extinct under the influence of humans are reintroduced into Britain. <i>median = 4 (IQR 2)</i>	7.6	7.3	11.6	29.4	44.1
A reintroduction of white-tailed eagles to Cumbria would bring joy to the people that matter to me. <i>median = 5 (IQR 2)</i>	12.4	5.3	9.0	22.2	51.0
It is important to have white-tailed eagles in Cumbria for future generations of people. <i>median = 5 (IQR 2)</i>	12.0	6.2	7.1	23.7	51.0
It is important to have white-tailed eagles in Cumbria for the health of the landscape. <i>median = 4 (IQR 2)</i>	13.0	6.7	11.8	26.5	42.1
Tourism opportunities will arise from a white-tailed eagle reintroduction in Cumbria. <i>median = 4 (IQR 2)</i>	7.0	4.3	14.4	31.5	42.7
It would be excellent to see a white-tailed eagle. <i>median = 5 (IQR 1)</i>	9.6	3.4	5.3	11.5	70.3
I would feel negatively if white-tailed eagles were reintroduced into Cumbria. <i>median = 1 (IQR 1)</i>	68.9	10.4	3.5	6.5	10.6
I would be concerned for the impacts on livestock farmers from a white-tailed eagle reintroduction. <i>median = 2 (IQR 3)</i>	27.9	24.8	19.3	11.8	16.2
I would avoid an area where I know white-tailed eagles might be. <i>median = 1 (IQR 1)</i>	63.8	15.5	12.3	3.3	5.1
I would attend an information session on white-tailed eagles. <i>median = 4 (IQR 2)</i>	2.4	3.7	19.5	44.3	30.2

Most respondents agreed that 'It would be excellent to see a white-tailed eagle' (81.8%), 'It is important to have white-tailed eagles in Cumbria for future generations of people' (74.7%), 'I would attend an information session on white-



tailed eagles' (74.5%), 'Tourism opportunities will arise from a white-tailed eagle reintroduction in Cumbria' (74.2%), 'It is important that animals that became extinct under the influence of humans are reintroduced into Britain' (73.5%), 'A reintroduction of white-tailed eagles to Cumbria would bring joy to the people that matter to me (73.2%), and 'It is important to have white-tailed eagles in Cumbria for the health of the landscape' (68.6%).

Nearly a third of respondents agreed that 'I would be concerned for the impacts on livestock farmers from a white-tailed eagle reintroduction (28%). A smaller proportion felt they would 'feel negatively if white-tailed eagles were reintroduced into Cumbria' (17.1%) and 'I would avoid an area where I know white-tailed eagles might be' (8.4%).

9.5. Community workshops

The community workshop discussion and participatory task was focused on the research question: '*What do you think the potential impacts of a Cumbrian white-tailed eagle reintroduction could be?*' Using a summative approach to qualitative content analysis, quantification of the use of certain words within the written data was undertaken.

The most frequently used words, or phrases, identified concerning positive impacts of a white-tailed eagle reintroduction in Cumbria included (number in brackets refer to frequency of word within the data): conservation (7), biodiversity (4), seeing the eagle (4), ecosystem (3), economy (3), tourism (3), awareness (2), hope (2) and proud (2).

The most frequently used words, or phrases, identified concerning the negative impacts of a white-tailed eagle reintroduction in Cumbria included: impact (4), already struggling species (2), food competition (2), engage (2), poaching (2) and tourism (2).

Interpretation of the data focused on the impacts of a white-tailed eagle reintroduction in Cumbria (**see tables 6 & 7**). Two main themes identified within the negative impacts of a white-tailed eagle reintroduction into Cumbria were '*Already struggling species*' and '*Tensions between stakeholders*' (**see table 6**).

The main theme of '*Already struggling species*' referred to the impact of white-tailed eagles on other species in the landscape with already declining population numbers.

'*Tensions between stakeholders*' included categories '*Coexistence*' and '*People*' and referred to negative feelings developing between stakeholder groups with different opinions on white-tailed eagles returning to the Cumbrian landscape.

Table 6. Example of the derived codes, categories and themes from the written data collected in the community workshops on the negative impacts of a white-tailed eagle reintroduction into Cumbria.

Code	Category	Theme
Impact on other wildlife	Ecological	Already struggling species
Competition for resources		
Prey on species of conservation concern		
Illegal poaching	Coexistence	Tensions between stakeholders
Livestock predation		
Community disagreements	People	

The two main themes identified within the positive impacts of a white-tailed eagle reintroduction into Cumbria were '*Increase biodiversity*' and '*Hope for the future of Britain's biodiversity*' (**see table 7**).

The main theme '*Increase biodiversity*' referred to the ecological benefits provided by white-tailed eagles returning to the landscape.

The second main theme within the positive impacts of a white-tailed eagle reintroduction into Cumbria was '*Hope for the future of Britain's biodiversity*,' which encompassed categories including '*Intrinsic value*' and '*Positive emotions*' and highlighted that a white-tailed eagle reintroduction in Cumbria would assist in the overall improvement of the biodiversity in Britain.

Table 7. Example of the derived codes, categories and themes from the written data collected in the community workshops on the positive impacts of a white-tailed eagle reintroduction into Cumbria.

Code	Category	Theme
Increase biodiversity	Ecological	Increase biodiversity
Natural control of prey		
Maintain freshwater ecosystems		
To see them fly over	Intrinsic value	Hope for the future of Britain's biodiversity
Inspire younger people		
Proud to live in the Lake District	Positive emotions	
Hope that we may be able to improve biodiversity in the UK		

9.6. Farming focus groups

Four main themes were identified within the farming focus group data (see section 7.4): 1. Protect what’s already struggling; 2. Threats to livelihoods and lambing; 3. Decisions without us and; 4. Who benefits? Not us (see figure 10; appendix 1).

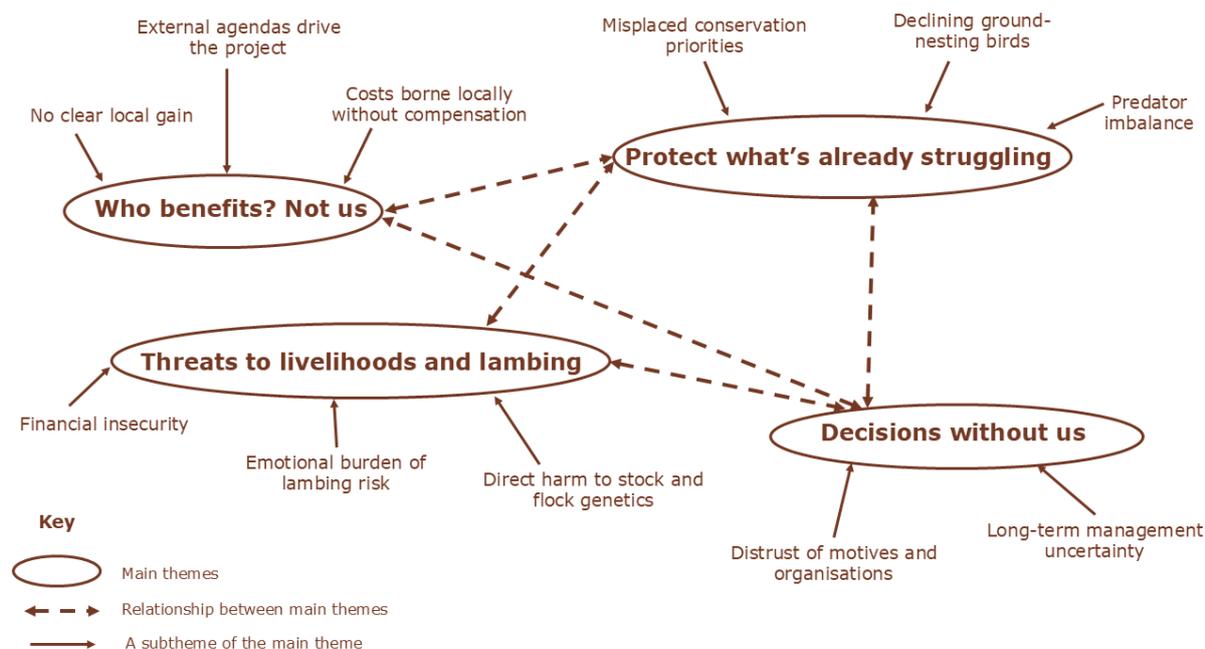


Figure 10. A thematic map showing main themes, subthemes of the main themes and the relationships between main themes from the farming focus group sessions in January 2025.

'Protect what's already struggling' was a main theme referring to existing species still present in Britain which are already under survival pressure, particularly ground-nesting birds such as curlews, skylarks and lapwings. Three subthemes under this main theme included 'Declining ground-nesting birds,' 'Predator imbalance' and 'Misplaced conservation priorities.' For example, 'Declining ground-nesting birds' was a subtheme that encompassed the feeling by attendees that population numbers of ground-nesting birds were declining. For example, one attendee stated that:

We'd always loads of curlews... now we hardly ever see them... It's going to be nearly impossible for skylarks to survive.

This attendee explained that visual observations of ground-nesting birds in the landscape were few and indicated the decline of these particular bird species. Attendees questioned why top carnivores were being reintroduced and why the focus was not on species already living and struggling to survive in the Cumbrian landscape. In summary, attendees felt that reintroducing a top predator was seen as misdirected when foundational ecosystem components are failing. The eagle was framed as an added threat to vulnerable native wildlife.



The '*Threats to livelihoods and lambing*' main theme encompassed how a white-tailed eagle reintroduction is intertwined with emotional and economic risk to the farming community, sheep flock survival, lamb losses, breeding stock damage and the emotional toll on farmers. Three subthemes under this main theme included '*Direct harm to stock and flock genetics*,' '*Financial insecurity*' and '*Emotional burden of lambing risk*.' For example, individuals highlighted the '*Emotional burden of lambing risk*' a white-tailed eagle reintroduction would bring with these birds back in the landscape. As one attendee stated that,

We're going to suffer because we're gonna, we're gonna have the stress of a sea eagle above us and when we are lambing.

This attendee felt that the presence of a white-tailed eagle reintroduction would bring a mental burden. Overall, attendees felt that predators were perceived as a force that destabilises farm systems and household wellbeing.

Another main theme was '*Decisions without us*' referred to farmers feeling marginalised in decision-making processes, perceiving that reintroduction is predetermined and that those most affected were informed last. Two subthemes under this main theme included '*Long-term management uncertainty*' and '*Distrust of motives and organisations*.' For example, the subtheme '*Long-term management uncertainty*' referred to attendees feeling unclear of the process of the white-tailed eagle social engagement and consultation, for example, '*Is there an exit strategy?*' Overall, attendees indicated a strong scepticism about long-term management, accountability, and organisational motives.

The final main theme '*Who benefits? Not us*' referred to attendees questioning if there would be benefits locally — economically, ecologically, or socially — delivered by a white-tailed eagle reintroduction. Three subthemes that sit under this main theme include '*External agendas drive the project*,' '*Costs borne locally without compensation*' and '*No clear local gain*.' For example, the subtheme '*No clear local gain*' indicated that attendees could not identify any benefits from the white-tailed eagle back in the Cumbrian landscape. One attendee asked, '*What gives us the benefit of bringing this eagle back?*' This attendee suggested that any species returning to the landscape should provide a benefit. Overall, the project is seen as driven by external agendas, with local communities bearing the costs without sharing any visible gains.

The main themes identified in the farming focus groups are intertwined (**see figure 10**), for example, the main themes '*Threats to livelihoods and lambing*' and '*Who benefits? Not us*' are related to each other. The relationship between these two themes stem from a perceived lack of benefits provided by white-tailed eagles returning to the landscape.

These results from the farming focus groups held in January 2025 were then presented to farmers who attended the sessions to ask for their feedback and whether all the main points associated with a white-tailed eagle reintroduction had been captured.

9.7. Farming interviews

Eleven individuals farming in the Cumbrian landscape were interviewed in November 2025. The data was explored to understand the interviewees responses to ‘*What are your thoughts on the interim farming focus group results?*’ (see **Appendix 1** for interim farming focus group results). Overall, farmer interviewees felt that the interim farming focus group output had captured the key concerns raised in the sessions held in January 2025. Four main themes were identified in the data when exploring ‘*What are your thoughts on the interim farming focus group results?*’: livelihood risks, livelihood protection, focus group bias and local benefits (see **table 8**).

Table 8. Output from the AI Thematic analysis to explore the qualitative data collected in the eleven farmer interviews.

Main theme	Description	Subtheme(s)	Example(s)
Livelihood Risks	Captures farmers’ concerns about direct threats to livestock from wildlife, along with practical and legal challenges involved in protecting their livelihoods.	Predation risk Practical protection measures	<i>"Little Herdwick lambs on the fells...they won't be able to cope."</i>
Livelihood protection	Captures practical and procedural difficulties farmers face in safeguarding livestock or engaging with project requirements, including verification and compliance burdens.	Reporting burdens Management complexity	<i>"How do we protect our sheep without having to go through proving it, sitting up all night."</i>
Focus group bias	Captures farmers’ perceptions that the interim focus group outputs were biased, unbalanced, or incomplete. Farmers expressed concern that the perspectives of the whole farming community might not be fully represented.	Negative framing of results Omission of alternative views	<i>"They all read very negatively as a synopsis of output...reasons to introduce don't seem to be included."</i> <i>"Still provides only one side of a views, others might be missed."</i>
Local benefits	Captures both tangible project successes and anticipated benefits for local communities, stakeholders, or the environment.	Environmental outcomes Social and economic gains	<i>"Invite people to come and look at eagles or showing off this incredible landscape. There's clearly going to be some kind of local gain."</i>



The main themes of 'livelihood risks' and 'livelihood protection' highlights the farmers' concern of livestock predation by white-tailed eagles and supports the farming focus group interim results in relation to concern around 'threats to livelihoods and lambing.' Some interviewees felt that the farmer focus group results were biased towards negative perspectives, reflected in the main themes of 'focus group bias' and 'local benefits' (**see table 9**). When asked intermediate thoughts on the output, one interviewee stated that,

Find it a bit depressing, really...And we've become so, like, sterile and, yeah, it's just like we're not tough enough to deal with, accept there are other problems, you know, like, potential problems. And, you know, we live in supposedly wild country. We should be expecting to see wildlife.

This interviewee suggested the output from the farming focus group felt biased towards negative views and did not represent all Cumbrian farmer views on the reintroduction of white-tailed eagles. To support this further, another interviewee stated that,

I had hoped there'd be more balance within some of this, that they all read as reasons not to reintroduce. I think there are reasons to introduce, but they don't seem to be included at all here.

As highlighted by this farmer interviewee, the farming focus group results are biased towards opposing a white-tailed eagle reintroduction and do not consider benefits that this species could bring. This finding indicated the range of views across the farming community. Another interviewee stated that,

I'd be willing to let them come or to release them and see what happens. But like I said, I think it's really, really vital to have your exit strategy.

As suggested by this interviewee, some farmers are not opposed to the return of white-tailed eagles but hold concerns around the management of the eagles.

In summary, the farmer interviewees confirmed the farming focus group output captured the key concerns from the attendees. The main themes identified in the interview data emphasise the livestock predation concern. However, not all interviewees felt that the output represented the whole farming community views accurately or captured the heterogeneity of views from this stakeholder group. Through the individual questionnaire, farming focus group sessions and the farmer interviews, the project captured an understanding of the range and strength of views from the farming community. Interviewees from the farming community were asked, 'If the project were to progress to a reintroduction, what support methods could be provided by the project to mitigate those impacted by white-tailed eagles?' Any progression to a reintroduction of white-tailed eagles would integrate the answers to this question, as well as concerns raised by the hunting, shooting, game, angling and fishing interest, into a coexistence management plan.



9.8. Summary of engagement

For a summary of the social engagement and consultation activities undertaken by the CWTEP, **see table 9.**

Table 9. The Cumbrian White-Tailed Eagle Project summary of social engagement and consultation completion until January 2025.

Activity	Purpose	Target audience	Total numbers attended	Completed?
Online webinars	To provide information on the white-tailed eagles as a species.	Open to all.	347	Yes
Drop-in events	To provide information on the white-tailed eagles as a species.	Open to all.	249	Yes
Community workshops	To provide information on the white-tailed eagles as a species.	Open to all.	27	Yes
Farming discussion groups	To provide information on the white-tailed eagles as a species, discuss the CWTE project and views of attendees.	Farming individuals.	20	Yes
Farmer interviews	To understand and address any concerns through respectful discussion and then work together to find suitable options and mitigation if required.	Farming individuals.	11	Yes
Leaflet drop	To explore attitudes towards a WTE reintroduction in Cumbria, and the potential benefits and costs.	Cumbrian residents.	21,676	Yes
Individual questionnaire	To explore attitudes towards a WTE reintroduction in Cumbria, and the potential benefits and costs.	Open to all.	2,392 (1,938 respondents from project region)	Yes
Monthly newsletter sign ups	To provide information on the white-tailed eagles as a species and discuss the CWTE project.	Open to all.	78	Yes
Total of individual stakeholders engaged			24,800	
Stakeholder questionnaire	To explore organisational views towards a WTE reintroduction in Cumbria and feedback on key management aspects of a reintroduction.	Stakeholder organisations.	TBC	February / March 2026
Stakeholder meetings	To provide information on the white-tailed eagles as a species, discuss the CWTE project.	Stakeholder organisations.	TBC	February / March 2026
Total of collective stakeholders engaged			TBC	



10. DISCUSSION

Overall, there is a high level of support for, and positive attitudes towards, a white-tailed eagle reintroduction into Cumbria. The Cumbrian White-Tailed Eagle Project set out to achieve four objectives within the engagement and consultation process (**see section 3**).

The first objective was to provide information on, and to reconnect local communities with a native species that may have become unknown to them. A range of engagement events providing information on white-tailed eagles including online webinars, film showings, drop-in sessions, a webpage, and social media posts were organised and resulted in engagement of over 24,800 residents living in Cumbria and surrounding areas (**see table 10**).

The second and third objectives set out to provide opportunities for voices to be heard and gain an in-depth understanding of community attitudes and values of a white-tailed eagle reintroduction in Cumbria. Analysis of the individual questionnaire data shows that there is a high level of support (**78% - see table 5**) amongst project region respondents. This result includes over-representation of the voice of those potentially more negatively or positively impacted. With the representation adjusted to reflect demographics data biases of age, gender, and education, the level of support remains similar at 77%. This high level of support for a wildlife reintroduction is similar to the levels of support expressed for other reintroduction projects in the UK, such as for the reintroduction of white-tailed eagles on the Isle of Wight³⁹, pine martens in the Forest of Dean⁴⁰, and pine martens in southwest England⁴¹ (**see appendix 2**). Although there is clear support for a reintroduction of white-tailed eagles to Cumbria, project plans should include measures to mitigate risk of possible impact of a white-tailed eagle reintroduction on stakeholder groups.

Positive views are reflected by respondent's answers to the attitudinal statements based on the components of attitudes (**see table 6**): affective, behavioural and cognitive²³. For example, most respondents agreed that it would be excellent to see a white-tailed eagle (81.8% - affective component), that it's important to have white-tailed eagles in Cumbria for future generations (74.7% - cognitive component), and that respondents would attend an information session on white-tailed eagles (74.5% - behavioural component). Attitudes are likely to predict levels of support towards a species reintroduction⁴² and the high proportion of respondents expressing positive attitudes to white-tailed eagle reintroduction indeed align with the overall level of support (78%). Longitudinal surveys to monitor changes in attitudes would be included into a project plan.

The fourth objective was to engage with people most likely to be impacted, or perceived to be impacted, by a white-tailed eagle reintroduction proposal through collaborating and developing aspects of the reintroduction plan. Studies show livestock seldom feature in white-tailed eagle diet across its global range⁵. This is supported by monitoring of white-tailed eagle reintroduction to the Republic of



Ireland and the south of England. The project anticipates a white-tailed eagle diet to consist of mostly estuarine fish and waterfowl⁶ in the Cumbrian landscape. However, livestock predation is known to have occurred in Scotland and raises concerns in the sheep farming community. If this were to occur in Cumbria a key stakeholder group who could potentially be negatively impacted are sheep farmers.

The questionnaire data suggested that individuals identifying with the farming and landowning interest were significantly more opposed than other interest groups. To explore the reasons for this, farming focus group sessions were held in January 2025, and four main themes were identified from the data: 'protect what's already struggling', 'threats to livelihoods and lambing', 'decisions without us' and, 'who benefits? Not us.' The main themes identified in the qualitative data suggest that opposition to a white-tailed eagle reintroduction may stem from the perceived economic and emotional threat to livelihoods and lambing. Similar to recent literature⁴³, some farmers felt that a white-tailed eagle reintroduction is part of a wider conservation agenda not compatible with farmer livelihoods and felt that benefits to the agricultural sector needed clarity. A potential reintroduction project should incorporate farmer feedback into management plans to mitigate potential negative impacts and maximize potential benefits by white-tailed eagles.

AI thematic analysis was undertaken on the farming focus group data, and the output was brought to farming individuals through a semi-structured interview format. Overall, the farming interviewees felt that the farming focus group output captured the key concerns discussed within the sessions. The main themes 'livelihood risks' and 'livelihood protection' (**see table 9**) from the farmer interviews mimic the main theme identified from the farming focus groups 'threats to livelihoods and lambing' (**see appendix 1**). This result indicates a strength in the concern associated with livestock predation by white-tailed eagles. However, the main themes 'focus group bias' and 'local benefits' (**see table 9**) suggest that not all farmers felt that the farming focus group results were representative of the whole farming community. Some interviewees felt that the results from the farming focus groups (**see appendix 1**) were biased towards negative views from the farming community and did not include local benefits, such as environmental, social, and economic outcomes, that white-tailed eagles would bring to the Cumbrian landscape. Despite the lack of benefits of a reintroduction identified in the farming focus group output, the questionnaire data indicates the majority of respondents agree the birds would bring positive outcomes and benefits. For example, respondents felt that white-tailed eagles would bring tourism opportunities (74.2%), bring positive emotions to people (73.2%) and assist with the health of the Cumbrian landscape (68.6%). People live alongside white-tailed eagles across the bird's range in Europe and Asia⁴¹. In countries, such as Norway, Serbia, Croatia, Germany and Poland, a range of benefits from the presence of white-tailed eagles are observed including community engagement and economic opportunities⁴⁴.



Over 24,800 individuals were engaged and consulted with throughout the CWTEP's social consultation. The data from this process indicates the level of support and attitudes toward a white-tailed eagle reintroduction are strongly positive, with 78% of project region respondents supporting a reintroduction of white-tailed eagles into Cumbria and 74.7% of respondents agreeing that it is important to have white-tailed eagles in Cumbria for future generations.

11. NEXT STEPS

Overall, the level of support and attitudes toward a white-tailed eagle reintroduction are strongly positive. The project is now exploring stakeholder organisational views and the key considerations that the project should consider if progressing to the reintroduction of white-tailed eagles in the Cumbrian landscape; and co-designing, with the farming community, a 'coexistence management plan' to manage concerns about possible negative impacts.

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14. APPENDIX 1

The output from the AI thematic analysis that explored the data collected in the four farming focus group session in January 2025.

Theme	Definition	Subtheme	Exemplar quotes
Protect what's already struggling	Participants emphasise that existing local species — especially ground-nesting birds like curlews and skylarks — are already under pressure. Reintroducing a top predator is seen as misdirected when foundational ecosystem components are failing. The eagle is framed as an added threat to vulnerable native wildlife.	Declining ground-nesting birds	"We'd always loads of curlews... now we hardly ever see them... It's going to be nearly impossible for skylarks to survive."
		Predator imbalance	"We definitely don't need any more predators... can't control the ones we've got."
		Misplaced conservation priorities	"Why are you concentrating on animals at the top of the apex and not on the bottom?"
Threats to livelihoods and lambing	Reintroduction is tied directly to economic risk and flock survival, with concerns about lamb losses, breeding stock damage, and emotional toll on farmers. Predators are perceived not just as wildlife but as a force that destabilises farm systems and household wellbeing.	Direct harm to stock and flock genetics	"They will get the lambs... you're taking their breeding stock."
		Financial insecurity	"Why bring a problem to 60% of the people that are farming the land here?"
		Emotional burden of lambing risk	"We're going to suffer because we're gonna, we're gonna have the stress of a sea eagle above us and when we are lambing."
Decisions without us	Farmers feel marginalised in decision-making processes, perceiving that reintroduction is predetermined and that those most affected were informed last. There is strong scepticism about long-term management, accountability, and organisational motives.	Long-term management uncertainty	"Is there an exit strategy?"
		Distrust of motives and organisations	"I'm a little bit suspicious of that."
Who benefits? Not us	Participants question whether reintroduction delivers tangible benefits locally -economically, ecologically, or socially. The project is seen as driven by external agendas, with local communities bearing the costs without sharing any visible gains.	External agendas drive the project	"We are usually the bottom of the pile."
		Costs borne locally without compensation	"Can you imagine the stress you're under?"
		No clear local gain	"What gives us the benefit of bringing this eagle back?"

15. APPENDIX 2

Species recovery projects undertaken in the UK, examples of their social consultation activities, quantitative level of support and date activities undertaken. Please note the examples below are illustrative and not exhaustive.

Species Recovery project	Exemplar selection of social consultation activities	Quantitative level of support	Date
White-tailed eagle – Isle of Wight*	Online questionnaire (n=1,962) 3 drop-in sessions (n=131)	>90%	November 2018 – November 2022
Pine marten – south Cumbria **	Questionnaire – online and door-to-door (n=126) Engagement events including face-to-face focus groups, online presentations and workshops, and stakeholder meetings (n = 24)	> 69 %	February 2020 – February 2022
Pine marten – Forest of Dean***	Interviews and discussion with key stakeholders (n=19) Public opinion questionnaire in the Forest of Dean (n=265 residents)	71 %	January – February 2018
Pine marten - southwest England****	Over 20 talks with Q&A Face-to-face workshops (n=105) 2 drop-in sessions (n=60) 8 stakeholder workshops (n=105) Q-method stakeholder study (n=29) Public questionnaire (n=812 residents)	84.6%	April 2022 to July 2023

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