



## Localising and democratising goal-based governance for sustainability

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### ABSTRACT

Accelerating social and environmental change raises pressing questions about how existing institutions can be reformed to mount a more effective response. In this context, goal-based governance has been widely adopted in order to mobilise existing bodies to agree shared goals and develop common purpose. Increasingly employed in sustainability governance at the international scale, goal-based governance concerns setting pan-organisational goals and mobilising to deliver them. There is growing recognition that this approach needs to be downscaled to the local level in ways that can increase democratic engagement in order to realise significant change. This paper examines the opportunities and challenges involved in doing this in Cornwall, UK. We draw on collaborative research with representatives from statutory organisations as well as civic and civil society to highlight: (1) the significance of institutional structures, culture and relationships; (2) the need to adopt innovative participatory methods to engage and enlist civic and civil society organisations in goal-setting; and (3) the importance of ensuring delivery. The paper explores the extent to which local institutions can engage in goal-based and collaborative governance to respond to the challenges of sustainability in ways that reflect specific geo-political and cultural contexts as well as responding to international demands for greater sustainability. The findings provide insights that have relevance for other contexts as local leaders experiment to better recognise, reflect and respond to the social, ecological and political challenges of our time.

### 1. Introduction

Accelerating social and environmental change in the era of the Anthropocene has generated renewed discussion about what sustainability means and how it might be achieved. Despite continual scientific alarm, our existing institutions, political structures and governance arrangements have failed to respond effectively to the challenges of reducing and reversing anthropogenic impacts on our climate, ecological and geochemical systems (Steffen et al., 2006; Castree, 2014). Consequently, there is growing recognition of the need to reconfigure our political institutions to govern for more sustainable outcomes, to respect planetary boundaries and respond more adequately to inter-generational and geographical injustice (Dryzek and Pickering, 2018). In this context, academics have debated whether systematic reform of our existing institutions will be sufficient to mount a more adequate response (Dryzek and Pickering 2019; Biermann et al., 2012, 2022b). In this paper we consider goal-based governance as one such reform. We consider the implications of this approach for local governance

institutions and practices, and the opportunities it proffers for achieving greater participation in setting and delivering goals.

Goal-based governance aims to guide behaviour by cultivating a shared vision to strengthen collective aspirations, with a focus on well-defined and achievable targets (Young, 2017). A goal-based approach seeks to complement rule-based or compliance-orientated governance (Biermann et al., 2017), using specific goals to appeal to a broad constituency of institutions, and thereby coordinating and mobilising a wide range of actors. As Kanie et al., (2019, 1746) explain: “The theory of change is that once stakeholders sign up, they set priorities, aggregate resources, create the necessary institutions or adapt existing ones, and galvanise people and institutions to pursue the goals”. Goal-based governance is intended to be more adaptable and to stimulate deeper and wider change than previous approaches (Biermann et al., 2017; Young, 2017). This depends upon galvanising ‘action coherence’ in divergent spaces and across spatial scales, incorporating heterogeneous actors and organisations (Kanie et al., 2019; Young, 2017).

Though goal-setting is not new nor exclusive to environmental

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governance concerns (Kanie et al., 2017; Ruggie, 1996), the United Nations' (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which form the central mechanism for delivering the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, have demonstrated the power of goal-setting and related action at the pan-national scale (Kumar et al., 2016) in a more concerted way than other goal-based approaches (e.g., Kuyper et al., 2018). Reflecting the impact of the SDGs, this focus on goal-setting as a route to sustainability governance tends to be framed in planetary terms, leading to models such as Rockström et al. (2009) planetary boundaries and the later incorporation of social criteria to develop an argument for 'doughnut economics' (Raworth, 2017). However, while such global goals are normative and necessarily ambitious, they face major challenges with implementation and translation across scales. For example, Biermann et al. (2022b) note that the impact of the SDGs has been largely discursive, with little concrete evidence of changes in relation to new legislation or resource allocation. Furthermore, a number of the globally-oriented SDGs can *only* be realised by regional and local authorities and there is great geographical variability in the capacity and willingness of such bodies to take on this challenge (Biermann et al., 2022a). Although the subnational scale is recognised as an important space of action, there is little consideration about how cross-scalar action coherence might be achieved (Biermann et al., 2022a) and in this regard, there is a pressing need for much greater attention to be paid to downscaling global goal-based sustainability governance to re-insert locally-appropriate vision, engagement and action (Turner and Wills, 2022).

This paper addresses the localisation of goal-based governance for sustainability to examine how global goals can be translated to become locally-meaningful priorities, around which local institutions can be mobilised to collaborate and act. Such endeavours require decisions about which organisations and individuals should be involved in this process of downscaling and determining goals, and how different audiences can be effectively engaged in deliberating over goals and collaborating for change. In this regard, local goal-based governance also raises important questions about democratising the processes of government and governance, by which we mean widening the range and characteristics of people and organisations participating in decision-making, the co-construction of goals and delivering change.

In this paper, we report on collaborative research to explore the adoption and development of goal-based governance for sustainability at a sub-national scale by focusing on innovation underway in the county of Cornwall, UK. Cornwall Council has demonstrated an appetite to localise and democratise goal-based governance in an ambitious plan to enhance sustainability over the next 30 years. The Cornwall Plan explicitly draws on the global visions advocated via the SDGs and 'doughnut economics' (Raworth, 2017) to identify locally-appropriate goals for galvanising positive change. We have collaborated on action research projects to find ways to do this most effectively, with a focus on developing ways to engage a broader group of actors in the process of setting goals and delivering change than is normally the case. This research sought to answer three major questions:

- 1) How can statutory institutions localise visions and plans for goal-based sustainability governance in Cornwall?
- 2) How can civic and civil society leaders be more engaged in the process and outcomes of local goal-based sustainability governance?
- 3) What can the Cornish case tell us about the wider opportunities and challenges of localising and democratising goal-based governance for sustainability?

In what follows we review the existing literature with a particular focus on goal-based governance for sustainability, considering questions of scale and public participation. We then introduce our collaborative research activity before presenting our findings and highlighting their wider significance for local governance institutions, practices and outcomes.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Localising goal-based governance for sustainability

To date, goal-based governance for sustainability has been most obviously developed by the UN and associated transnational platforms, expert organisations and global knowledge infrastructures that have championed deliberation and action at the international scale (Beck et al., 2017; Biermann et al., 2022a). These platforms have framed environmental challenges and their solutions – like sustainable development – as global concerns that reinforce the need for and legitimacy of international expert organisations (Borie et al., 2021; Hulme, 2010; Taylor and Buttel, 1992). However, this tends to occlude local actors and the need to incorporate a wider diversity of stakeholders and innovators to realise change (Beck et al., 2017; Chilvers and Kearnes, 2015). In addition, the emphasis on global visions for sustainability can restrict their appeal, unintentionally excluding local communities and institutions (Annan-Aggrey, 2022) and risking local detachment and despondency (Biermann and Siebenhüner, 2009). Cultivating an epistemological and ontological detachment between the 'global' and the 'local' can limit imagination and reduce public participation in any possible change (Gibson-Graham, 2002). Consequently, global goal-based governance for sustainability can support transitions to more sustainable futures only so far as it is effectively downscaled and implemented in meaningful ways to realise local change.

Researchers have already begun to investigate how to implement goal-based governance for sustainability at the subnational scale, primarily focused on cities (Fox and Macleod, 2021; Guerra et al., 2019; Masuda et al., 2021; Perry et al., 2021; Sterling et al., 2020; Valencia et al., 2019). Cities are often thought to be at the forefront of endeavours to realise sustainability because they have sufficient local density of institutional and community capacity to galvanise change (Bulkeley et al., 2011; Frantzeskaki et al., 2017; Isaksson and Hagbert, 2020; Wittmayer and Loorbach, 2016). Furthermore, the governance arrangements developed in cities often focus on encouraging closer links, dialogue and action between civic and civil society organisations (CCSO) and local government (Annan-Aggrey et al., 2022). These partnerships can enhance local enthusiasm and capacity to embark on sustainability initiatives. They also encourage the learning and reflexivity required to work effectively in tackling local challenges (Wittmayer et al., 2016). However, the capacity to collaborate, mobilise and effect change is highly variable (Steiner and Farmer, 2018; Turner et al., 2021). The differentiated power, resources and capacity of local government (Reddy, 2016; Guerra et al., 2019) relative to CCSOs (Loorbach et al., 2020), as well as tensions between organisations, can also restrict local engagement in goal-based governance.

Importantly, the focus on cities has not been matched by attention to smaller and more rural settlements that are more geo-politically distant from central authority and can be less able or willing to enact local change (Echebarria et al., 2018; Valencia et al., 2019). Local circumstances necessarily shape the durability and effectiveness of any initiatives or innovations for transitions (Gustafsson and Mignon, 2020). Smaller and/or rural areas are more likely to experience political marginalisation, lower levels of funding, and greater socio-economic deprivation (Corfe, 2017), whilst also often being the places most susceptible to socio-ecological change (Woolgrove et al., 2021). Furthermore, the geographical distribution of power via official political structures often stymies the scope for local initiatives (Wills, 2019). However, there is also great promise in engaging CCSOs that can be important in rural areas where state provision is weaker (Wills, 2023). By necessity, these organisations have often had to meet local needs where populations are dispersed, and resources are stretched very thin.

### 2.2. Democratising goal-based governance

Global approaches to goal-setting have often led to abstract

overarching goals that do not easily offer coherent pathways to local partnership, collaboration and action (Young, 2017). For example, while the SDGs were developed with stakeholder participation, they were agreed and ratified by UN member states via complicated negotiations and trade-offs over the final decisions. The resulting set of global goals is politically acceptable but may be difficult to realise at the sub-national scale, especially if they do not align with the particular challenges and interests of local and regional governance institutions (Fox and Macleod, 2021; Hartley, 2020). Similarly, global models such as the planetary boundaries framework, which identify expert-defined biophysical limits that should not be transgressed, have been criticised for failing to acknowledge and account for diverse local values, priorities, and risk tolerances (Bierman and Kim, 2020). To counter top-down, technocratic approaches, scholars and activists have advocated the deployment of deliberative interventions to enhance a sense of ownership, responsibility and accountability for social and environmental change (Mason, 2008), and to allow local people and institutions to determine goals that are appropriate and achievable in context (Elstub, 2018). In this regard, people have been grappling with how to make goal-based governance more democratic, both in relation to the engagement of multi-scalar institutions to which leaders are elected as well as fostering greater public participation. This 'double-layered' engagement through representative and participatory democratic structures and initiatives is particularly salient at a local and regional scale as people are more likely to know their elected representatives and to be embedded in the social networks that make it easier to engage in consultation and decision-making (Wills, 2016).

Champions of deliberative democracy recognise that the diversity of popular expertise and capacity should be mobilised to assist in responding to the complex, uncertain and widespread nature of socio-ecological challenges (Baber and Bartlett, 2018; Dryzek and Pickering, 2018; Pickering et al., 2022). There is considerable promise in the use of public assemblies, citizens' forums and commissions to engage a wider constituency (Creasy et al., 2021; Howarth et al., 2020, 2021) but there also needs to be greater attention paid to applying the recommendations of these events (King and Wilson, 2022). There is a further risk that the powerful role of public authorities and experts in determining the funding, agenda and decision-making process involved means such assemblies and related civic engagement activities can underscore technocratic power and decision-making (Cherry et al., 2021; Chilvers et al., 2021b; Devaney et al., 2020). There is a significant danger that the outcome is (or can appear to be) determined in advance reinforcing widespread scepticism about the extent to which citizens are fully represented, equipped and enabled to make meaningful decisions that will effect local change (Mert, 2019; Sandover et al., 2021). This reflects broader concerns that consultation is designed to reinforce the already dominant view (Machin, 2012; Wilson, Swyngedouw, 2014; Swyngedouw, 2011).

Thus, while institutionally led goal-based governance requires some form of public engagement to determine the best goals and outcomes for any community, there is, as yet, no sure-fire way to manage the divergent interests that exist between and within statutory institutions and multiple publics. There is no 'one way' to ensure democratic engagement and as in other settings, public engagement varies from formalised consultation through to deeper 'citizen power' comprising local control (Arnstein, 1969; Wills, 2016). Many of the interventions developed to respond to socio-ecological challenges have invited participants to engage via a process of sortition (a process of invitation by random sampling of the relevant population), but there is a case to be made for adopting a more targeted approach whereby community organisations are invited to the table on their own terms. Attempts to gain 'representative' balance in decision-making can obscure the merits of engaging with groups that are already developing innovative activity with self-organised energy and capacity for change (Collins et al., 2022a).

Indeed, Chilvers and Kearnes (2016) have argued that public

engagement and participation is necessarily emergent, and relationally co-produced and embedded within local contexts. In this vein, there will already be diverse forms of sustainability action developing in any locality and there is a role for representative government and associated statutory organisations to help unite disjointed collectives of activity, share experiences and innovation, and generate more power to achieve local change. As such, there is great value in mobilising existing CCSOs to work together around collective concerns (Wills, 2012, 2016). However, while democratising goal-based governance requires CCSOs to have the opportunity to participate in bottom-up goal-setting, this also needs to shape the policies and practices of representative and statutory organisations. This requires a 'double-layered' process to mobilise CCSOs alongside the infrastructure of the local state to increase collective capacity to deliver meaningful change. All too often, CCSOs find themselves in opposition to the local state (including both elected and appointed officials) or they are consulted only after significant decisions are made (Harrison and Mort, 1998). In contrast, our project was designed to explore how we could make local goal-based governance more effective through participatory and representative organisations working together. We sought to build on established techniques in community organising to connect CCSOs with the statutory political structures that have the status, funding and capacity to support and deepen action around any agreed local goals. We experimented with a double-layered approach to goal-setting that aimed to be more inclusive and thereby more democratic, through the engagement of both participatory and representative organisations working together for change.

### 3. A collaborative approach to developing goal-based governance for sustainability in Cornwall, UK

The county of Cornwall provides an ideal location for exploring governance issues in rural and peripheral locations since it is a peninsula situated at the far south western edge of England. Furthermore, its economy has long depended upon the environment in relation to farming, fishing, mining and tourism, highlighting the importance of the natural environment for employment and community.

The Environment and Sustainability Institute (ESI), Cornwall, has longstanding research relationships with Cornwall Council and other local statutory bodies. Since 2019, we have been developing a strand of collaborative research to help rethink governance policy and practice to foster greater sustainability and public participation (Fig. 1). Our collaborative research, guided by both the Council's ambition to localise global visions of sustainable development and the academic research interests of the ESI, has included an exploration of how doughnut economics (Raworth, 2017) can be used in envisioning and progressing change in the region (Turner et al., 2020; Turner and Wills, 2022), as well as the importance of the hyper-local scale in understanding and addressing spatial unevenness in sustainability challenges (Turner et al., 2021). This collaborative activity has contributed to the Cornwall and

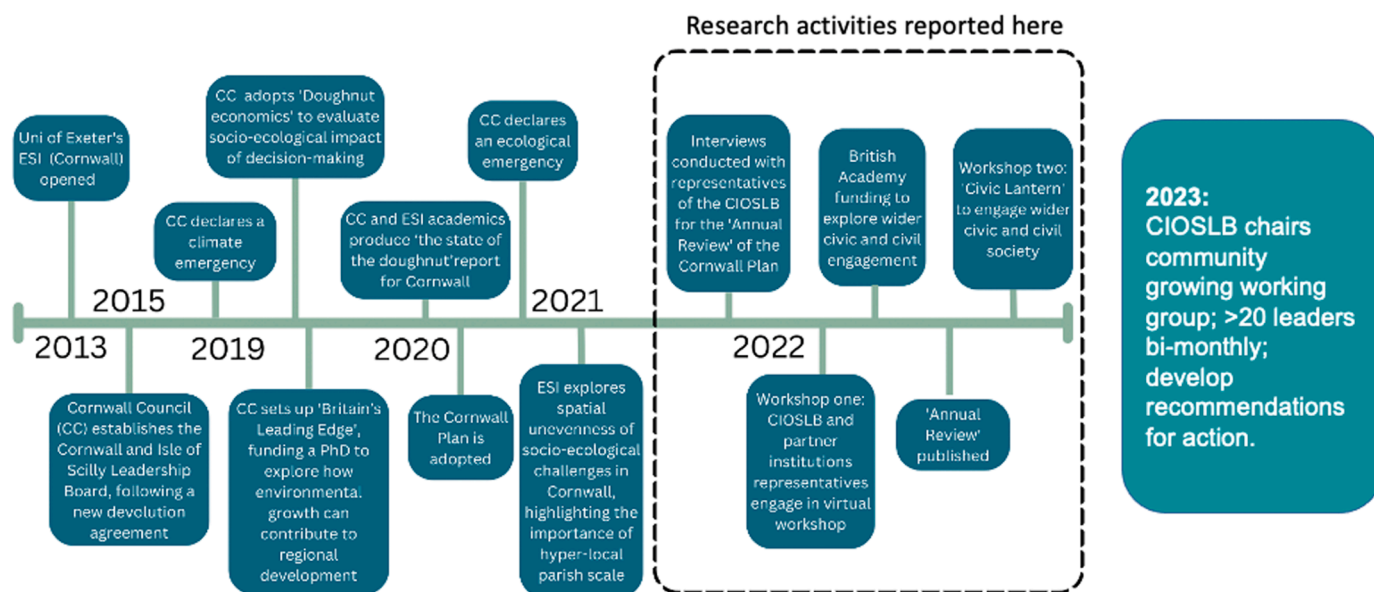


Fig. 1. Timeline summarising the research collaboration between the ESI, Cornwall Council (CC) and statutory partners from 2013 to 2022.

Isles of Scilly Leadership Board's (CIOSLB) broad goal to become more sustainable over the next thirty years, with an action plan, published as 'The Cornwall Plan 2020–2050' (hereafter 'the Plan'). The Plan was formulated following a public consultation process called 'The Cornwall We Want' run by Cornwall Council during 2020 and it was formally adopted by all the organisations represented on the CIOSLB in December 2020.<sup>1</sup> The Plan embodies local institutions' efforts to downscale and operationalise global visions of sustainability, drawing on a localised model of doughnut economics and mapping relevant social and environmental domains onto the UN SDGs. From this, the Plan develops six transitions that will be pursued to ensure that Cornwall becomes more socially and environmentally sustainable by 2050 (Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly Leadership Board CIOSLB, 2020).

We were invited to contribute to the first Annual Review of the Cornwall Plan in 2021, for which we interviewed representatives from the CIOSLB to explore their opinions about the Plan, its strengths and weaknesses, and potential challenges for delivery. The purpose of this was to enhance understanding of how statutory institutions localise broader sustainability goals, developing a vision that is both locally-appropriate and sufficiently appealing to galvanise action across and within each organisation. Our work was combined with an overview of trends conducted by the strategy team at Cornwall Council and jointly presented as the first 'Annual Review' of the Plan at the CIOSLB in March 2022 (Collins et al., 2022a). The Board's discussion highlighted the need for broader and deeper engagement with the local community to realise

the goals of the Plan. This reflected the perceived need to 'democratise' local sustainability governance ambitions, by widening participation, in order to avoid top-down goal setting, generate momentum and engage local CCSOs which have the capacity for action. As a result, we secured additional funding (from the British Academy) and collaborated with 10 leading representatives from CCSOs and a professional facilitator to form a steering group and organise a workshop called the 'Civic Lantern'. This was designed to identify relevant activity that was already underway in Cornwall and to agree two short-term socio-ecological goals that could be widely supported and delivered by CCSOs and the CIOSLB working together. We conceived the Lantern as a collaborative experimental action research project to explore how to localise and democratise goal-based governance for a more sustainable world.

Here we focus on our work for the Annual Review conducted between October 2021 and June 2022 (inside the dotted line in Fig. 1) which included semi-structured interviews with CIOSLB representatives, an online workshop to discuss the findings, and the Civic Lantern event.

### 3.1. Reflecting on the challenges of localised goal-based governance

In late 2021, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 individuals (in 23 interviews) involved in the conception and delivery of the Cornwall Plan. We used open-ended questions to explore respondents' knowledge of the Plan, perceived roles and responsibilities in its development and delivery, and key challenges to implementation. Respondents included council representatives (n = 11) working in areas including economic growth, nature recovery, and education and children's services; elected and appointed council leaders (n = 3); and external partners (n = 9) engaged in health, economy, business, environment, voluntary action, police and local councils.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai software before being carefully checked against the audio files. Data were subject to thematic analysis, and an inductive approach was used through which codes were initially generated by identifying themes from the data (Auerbach and Silverstein, 2003; Miles et al., 1994). These codes were then refined to illuminate the key themes emerging from the research and matched against our three research questions. In our research findings, quotations are attributed to respondents in relation to their membership in one of the three groups involved: Council Officers (CO1 to CO11), Council Leaders (CL1 to CL3) and Partner Organisations (PO1

<sup>1</sup> The CIOSLB brings together the elected leaders and executive officers of the key statutory organisations in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. They work together in a formal capacity to progress and address challenges facing the region. Their membership comprises Leader of Cornwall Council (Chair), Deputy Leader of Cornwall Council, \* Chairman of the Council of the Isles of Scilly, \* Vice-Chairman of the Council of the Isles of Scilly, \* Leader of the largest opposition group on Cornwall Council, \* Devon and Cornwall Police and Crime Commissioner, \* Representation of Cornwall's Members of Parliament (x 1), \* Chair of Cornwall's Association of Local Councils, \* Chair of the Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Local Enterprise Partnership, Chair of the Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Local Nature Partnership, Cornwall Council Portfolio holder for Adults as the representative of the Cornwall Health and Well-being Board, \* Deputy Chair of Kernow Clinical Commissioning Group, President of the Chamber of Commerce, Independent Chair of the Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Health and Care Partnership Senate (\* denotes they are democratically elected).

to PO9). Though the latter group involved three interviews that included two respondents, we captured each interview as one transcript and attributed the material accordingly.

Findings from the initial interviews fed into an online workshop, held in January 2022, with 27 CIOSLB representatives to discuss and examine key challenges and solutions to delivering the Plan. Workshop participants included both individuals who had been interviewed and other CIOSLB members who had not previously been engaged. The workshop comprised two plenary sessions and two facilitated small group discussion sessions, alongside a presentation by a representative from the Bristol One City office who described their approach to engaging local leaders and citizens in making progress towards sustainability goals. Workshop participants discussed developing a similar approach in Cornwall and this was put to the formal meeting of the CIOSLB, as part of the Annual Review of the Cornwall Plan, held in March 2022. Notes were taken during the discussions and a graphic artist captured the debate in real time, producing images used in disseminating the research (Collins et al., 2022b).

### 3.2. Engaging civic and civil society to further democratise goal-setting for sustainable development

After the online workshop with the CIOSLB, the ESI team were encouraged to design and facilitate an in-person workshop to deliver Cornwall's ambition to more fully engage CCSOs in the goals and delivery of the Plan. We worked with an independent facilitator, supported by a small steering group, to co-organise and curate the event. The title of the workshop, the 'Civic Lantern' was conceived by the facilitator to signal our invitation to local leaders to 'shine a light' on the way they were already responding to pressing social and ecological issues in Cornwall. Rather than setting the agenda in advance of the event, as is often the case (Chilvers et al., 2021a), we invited leaders to come and share their experiences, and then collectively agree on two actions that could be taken by the whole community in tandem with the CIOSLB, over the following year.

We invited a suite of actors previously not engaged with the Plan but with experience in mobilising and organising for greater social and ecological sustainability in Cornwall to the event. We aimed to bring these leaders together to discuss, deliberate and vote on two goals that they could unite around and collaborate over to help deliver the ambitions laid out in the Plan. We invited 183 people, had confirmations from 83 and attendance from 42. Attendees represented organisations interested in a range of cross-cutting issues including: social concerns (e.g. food poverty, intergenerational connections) (n = 16); nature and biodiversity (e.g. tree planting and wildlife conservation) (n = 5); environmental sustainability (e.g. waste and recycling, climate action) (n = 3); energy (e.g. renewable and community energy) (n = 2); youth organisations (e.g. scouts) (n = 2); local government (e.g. parish councils) (n = 6); faith organisations (e.g. churches) (n = 2); and action research (e.g. academics involved in community organisations) (n = 6).

A pre-event survey circulated to participants aimed to document the activities they were already engaged in, and their priorities for the year ahead, in order to inform workshop discussions. During the event, a series of facilitated activities led participants through a process of: identifying ideas under a series of seven themes, informed by the pre-event survey but with scope to add additional ideas; turning these ideas into more concrete actions; deliberating about the potential impact and achievability of the proposed actions; turning proposed actions into material goals for the year ahead; and voting on the top two goals to be taken forward. This process produced data via the pre-event survey (n = 34) that was augmented by input from attendees on the day, in addition to a list of the proposed actions and a set of 44 goals that emerged during the event. In our results section below we present summaries of this information and have collectively reflected on the process, its outcomes and subsequent activity.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. How can statutory institutions localise visions and plans for goal-based sustainability governance in Cornwall?

Findings from our qualitative analysis highlighted three themes central to local institutions' experience of downscaling global sustainability governance frameworks: the importance of convening partnerships; the need for short-term action and delivery; and the desire for wider engagement with CCSOs.

#### 4.1.1. Convening partnerships around local visions and plans for sustainability

Interview respondents saw the Plan as a positive opportunity to agree on common goals and begin to galvanise action around a shared vision of sustainable development. Aligning the diverse strategies of different organisations to one set of goals was seen as critical to embarking on deeper cross-sectoral collaboration, fostering shared responsibilities and reducing duplicated efforts. The conversations undertaken to develop the Plan, reinforced by the experience of working together to respond to COVID-19, had further highlighted the importance of working together. As CO1 explained: "*Cornwall Council's responsibility is an enabling, coordinating, supporting function. Cornwall Council can't deliver the Cornwall Plan [on] its own, and more importantly, it shouldn't*". CL3 further added that their work to develop the Plan was about realising the Council's "*ambitions to be a convenor of partnerships for Cornwall*". The Plan was seen as a platform for fostering unity around a shared vision with common purpose to work towards a downscaled version of Raworth's (2017) global model of 'doughnut economics', in alignment with the SDGs.

By articulating a shared vision through the Plan, some participants felt that they were better able to operate out of their institutional silos, to start thinking more collectively or at least cohesively, and to respond more effectively to the social and ecological challenges of the region in a more integrated way. Respondents argued that the process of producing the Plan had highlighted the interconnections between organisational interests, such that for example, "*health isn't just about your local GP and your local hospital*" (PO1) but also depended upon access to jobs, housing and community. In this regard, the Plan was accompanied by the strapline 'together we can', highlighting the importance of working together. Organisations were finding synergies between their core purposes that also contributed to the broader goals in the Plan. Furthermore, the very presence of the CIOSLB and the experience of meeting together, particularly during COVID, helped to stimulate the development of a super-ordinate identity, sometimes referred to as 'Team Cornwall', to which people could affiliate beyond their particular institutional affiliations, cohering over common concerns as documented in the goals laid out in the Plan.

Some respondents suggested that a novel aspect of the Plan was the shift towards a more place-based approach to setting priorities that would last beyond the political cycle and the inevitable change in direction. However, many respondents also felt that delivering the Plan required greater powers for decision-making at the local level, anticipating further agreements with national government over local devolution. As one Council officer explained: "*the devolution ask is really important to help us deliver the Cornwall Plan*" (CO9). There were also doubts expressed about the extent to which organisations and individuals were aware of the Plan. Indeed, even some of the CIOSLB members we interviewed had very limited awareness of the detail of the Plan, with one saying: "*I haven't read it! I think I know what the headlines are, but I haven't yet had the time or the forums in which I've had to look at it*" (PO3). This indicates the relative newness and fragility of this approach, even amongst the representatives who have adopted the Plan and are charged with its delivery over the next 30 years.

#### 4.1.2. The need for short-term action and delivery

The ambitious high-level goals in the Plan were often perceived as being too vague, with little guidance on how they might be achieved in practice. Interview data exposed considerable concern about how to turn the agreed ambitions (e.g. for ‘a creative carbon zero economy’) into practical action. As one respondent put it: “*It’s a very long-term plan with some very high-level statements, but it doesn’t offer you much in the here and now*” (PO6). Some respondents identified the need to convert the long-term goals into realistic short-term goals and to revisit these iteratively to ensure they meet society’s needs in a changing world, with one Council officer telling us: “*It’s difficult to predict what will be important in 2050*” (CO2). Furthermore, a lack of detail about who would deliver action against each of the goals led to some confusion among respondents about their roles and responsibilities. This was compounded by a perceived surfeit of strategic visions and goals, and a lack of clarity about how they relate to each other, with one Council officer remarking that: “*I wish somebody would just tell us the hierarchy of strategic planning*” (CO9). Critically, these perspectives reflect the challenge of downscaling global sustainability goals. Broad, global ambitions are widely applicable in theory but are difficult to translate into meaningful and relevant action on the ground. In this regard, there were concerns that the Plan would fail to connect adequately with local organisations, action and outcomes, and this became a key motivator for democratising the Plan, its goals and action to deliver it.

#### 4.1.3. Wider engagement with existing community organisations

While the consultation processes conducted during the development of the Plan were perceived as being wide-reaching, some felt it could have been a lengthier process so that the Plan was truly co-designed with a wider community. Many respondents also felt that delivering the Plan would require a closer connection to community-level action. This was best expressed by a respondent (CO3) who argued that the Plan needed to be a ‘*living document*’ that reflected a sense of stewardship around their shared ambitions to deliver the Plan. This further highlighted the need to step beyond the structures of the Leadership Board to reach out to the wider community: “*the biggest challenge is the fact that it hasn’t been granularized as a vision where every citizen can play their part*” (PO9). The plenary discussion came back to these points and explored how to raise awareness and galvanise action around the goals of the Plan by involving a wider range of actors who were already involved in the kinds of work that the Plan set out to achieve. A presentation from the Bristol One City office – which had embarked on a similar sustainability and governance plan – helped to open up this discussion to think about how to engage a wider constituency in the process, informing the growing ambition to further democratise the localisation of goal-based governance in Cornwall through widening participation in the co-construction of goals.

In sum, our interviews demonstrated that statutory institutions can struggle to find ways to downscale global sustainability goals. The findings suggest that global goals need to be made locally applicable through deliberations to coalesce and galvanise a breadth of organisations and local leaders committed to local goal-based governance, incorporating short-term action as well as ambitions for the long term.

#### 4.2. How can civic and civil society leaders be more engaged in the process and outcomes of local goal-based sustainability governance?

In order to recruit and engage a broad group of local actors in this work, the ‘Civic Lantern’ event was organised. The aim was to engage CCSOs in a participatory and deliberative process to agree on short-term goals that could be prioritised through statutory institutions and community leaders working together to realise the broader goals of the Plan. Here, we describe what was done, highlight our learning from the event and reflect on its implications for democratising local goal-based governance for sustainability.

#### 4.2.1. Goal-setting

Although the Civic Lantern began by outlining the broad goals of the Cornwall Plan and its antecedents in doughnut economics, the focus of the activity was determined by the work already being done by CCSOs on the ground. Our survey sent in advance allowed us to identify seven broad areas of activity which were the basis for further discussion during the event. These comprised: biodiversity; farming, food and nutrition; housing; community; energy; waste and circular economy; employment, skills and wages (Table 1).

As many as 74 actions were considered under these broad themes before being reformulated into 44 goals that were thought to be both feasible and appealing to a broad constituency. To do this, each group was asked to organise their post-it notes of priority actions against a double-axis according to their ‘impact and feasibility’. Post-it notes were added or consolidated when needed and at the end of this activity, the post-it notes not deemed high impact and high feasibility were removed. Attendees were also advised that actions associated with statutory bodies or individuals, rather than collaborative community action, should be excluded or reworded to reflect an action that communities could help to deliver. These processes allowed people to identify priority actions to be turned into goals for collective action. As an example, the action to support community energy projects was turned into a goal for ‘every parish to develop community energy’.<sup>2</sup> The participants produced 44 goals that were then put forward for the final vote (see Table 2 for the top 10 goals). Through a participatory voting process, the group arrived at two priority goals that could be realised by CCSOs and statutory organisations working together which were to: (1) Give land and support to every community to have a sustainable growing scheme; and for (2) Communities to map under-utilised properties so that local people can be housed.

#### 4.2.2. Taking goals forward

The CIOSLB discussed the top two goals at their meeting the following week, in June 2022. In relation to the first goal, on sustainable growing schemes, a member of the CIOSLB from the Local Nature Partnership was asked to chair a working group that included representatives from Sustainable Food Cornwall (SFC) who were already

**Table 1**  
Identified themes organised into seven priority areas with illustrative actions, as identified by survey respondents.

Theme	Description of priority areas and suggested action points
Housing	Policy and action to tackle the housing crisis in Cornwall.
Employment, skills and wages	Action designed to improve job opportunities, in terms of diversity and quality, and to increase the provision of training for skills development.
Community	Ideas around community-based projects that tackle social and environmental issues but primarily designed to strengthen intergenerational community links.
Circular economy and waste	Opportunities to enhance recycling facilities and projects to enhance the circular economy.
Health/wellbeing	Action to improve healthcare provision including strengthening links between health and social care.
Biodiversity and water	Enhancing biodiversity in Cornwall across all habitats and improving freshwater quality.
Farming, food and nutrition	Action around the production of food, supply chains and enhancing nutrient provision across Cornwall to address inequality.
Energy	Action to improve energy use at community and business level and encourage renewable energy through projects.

<sup>2</sup> See ‘A Civic Lantern to engage civic and civil society in goal-setting for sustainability in Cornwall: A research report’ for complete details of event, pre-event survey and results and full list of 74 actions and goals considered. Accessible here: <https://www.exeter.ac.uk/media/universityofexeter/esi/pdfs/CivicLanternReport.pdf>.

**Table 2**  
Top 10 goals voted on by participants at the civic lantern.

Rank	Goal	Theme
1	Give land and support to every community to have a sustainable growing scheme.	Farming, food and nutrition
2	Communities to map under-utilised properties so that local people can be housed.	Housing
3	Implement a real living wage, fairer hours and contracts across Cornwall.	Employment, skills and wages
4	Create a repair café with a tool library in every town.	Circular economy and waste
5	Ensure each community knows how to access free/surplus food to tackle food poverty.	Farming, food and nutrition
6	Achieve plastic free status in every town.	Circular economy and waste
7	Take action to increase hedgehog populations in every parish and town.	Biodiversity and water
8	Civic organisations to share consistent information on how to set up community energy projects.	Energy
9	Intergenerational life skills course for every community (budgeting, mending etc.)	Circular economy and waste
10	Every parish to develop a community renewable energy action plan.	Energy

working with community supported growing projects in Cornwall. Furthermore, leaders from SFC were already in relationship with colleagues from the ESI to recruit a knowledge exchange fellow to research new food systems in Cornwall. This serendipitous development provided the capacity to support the working group and attract other key leaders, to map existing growing projects, explore the ingredients of their success, and develop recommendations about how willing communities could secure the necessary support to develop a local growing scheme. A short report was presented back to the CIOSLB in June 2023 (a year after the Lantern event) with proposals for further action in the subsequent year. In contrast, there has been no tangible progress on the second goal. Although housing is recognised as a major concern by CCSOs, and the Council and partners, it has not been possible to identify anyone on the CIOSLB to champion additional action or mobilise extra resources to support community action and deliver the goal.

Our research has highlighted the need to think carefully and creatively about the process of democratising goal-based governance. While the energy of civic and civil society proved invaluable in identifying goals for joint action, the support of statutory bodies and others was then required to help resource and scale up the work in what we earlier called a ‘double-layered’ process. In the Cornish case, allocating responsibility for action under each of the top two Civic Lantern goals and identifying how this might be pursued has proved more challenging than anticipated. Even in the case of our first goal, to support sustainable growing schemes, we have been able to work with a group of active CCSOs and develop proposals that have been well-received and supported by the CIOSLB, but effective delivery will require ongoing leadership and resources. There is a risk that without this ongoing support, the process of public engagement raises expectations that are then thwarted through the slow pace of change and the challenges of delivery. Democratising goal-based governance cannot be done lightly – and there are similar risks attached to other initiatives such as citizen assemblies and juries where engagement is not swiftly followed by material change. We have demonstrated that CCSO leaders can be engaged if given the space to participate in decision-making about goal-setting and subsequent efforts to develop proposals for action and the means to deliver. However, if the planned outcomes are not realised, then there is a risk of disempowerment and less enthusiasm for future engagement that will have deleterious consequences for socio-ecological change.

## 5. Discussion: Reflecting on the challenges and opportunities of localising and democratising goal-based governance for sustainability

The Cornwall Plan provides an example of local statutory institutions recognising and responding directly to socio-ecological challenges by adopting a locally-appropriate approach to goal-based governance. Furthermore, through the Civic Lantern, CCSOs were successfully engaged in determining two priority goals for which the wider community could mobilise to realise more sustainable development. Here we reflect on what this project has taught us about the opportunities and challenges of developing local and more democratic goal-based governance for sustainability, with a particular focus on rural locations.

### 5.1. Localising goal-based governance

Our action research has highlighted the role of institutional collaboration and partnership in localising goal-based governance. The existence of the CIOSLB, that is unique to Cornwall, and its role in supporting a devolution agreement and more recently, in responding to the COVID-19 emergency, provided an institutional vehicle to create, monitor and deliver the shared vision and plan for Cornwall. This proved very important in facilitating place-focused leadership and providing a platform from which to reach out to each other as well as civic and civil society (Echebarria et al., 2018; Horlings et al., 2018). The Civic Lantern event similarly tapped into pre-existing structures, networks and social capital, to widen the reach of the Plan and its mission. We were able to work with a representative group of local leaders to mobilise community activists to attend the event and agree their top goals. This required additional funding and facilitation, and delivering action will be critical to maintaining credibility amongst CCSOs.

The notion of ‘Team Cornwall’ emerged strongly in our interviews, reflecting wider debates about the power of super-ordinate identifications to cement bridges across institutional and political silos (Wetherell, 2009; Wills, 2009). Without the institutional architecture and collaborative culture we found in Cornish governance bodies, attempting goal-based governance would not have been possible. However, such institutional infrastructure proved essential but not sufficient to realising successful goal-based governance, and our research also highlighted the importance of developing and agreeing on a shared vision that can galvanise collaborative action amongst disparate and even competing organisations and actors (Young, 2017).

The Civic Lantern’s decision-making process also highlighted the challenges of identifying practical goals that can confront more structural concerns. For community and public engagement to be sustainable in the long-term, choosing goals against which material progress can be achieved and communicated to participants is critically important. Yet, there is also a need to identify goals that can make a significant and lasting impact. This often requires support from statutory bodies, in obtaining resources or having sufficient power to make important decisions (Steiner and Farmer, 2018; Treisman, 2007), and it is significant that our first goal proved easier to progress than the second. Although neither is easily done, supporting sustainable community food production is more easily attainable through community collaboration than the structural challenges involved in tackling empty homes and homelessness (reflected in our second goal).

Moreover, it is clear that successful goal-based governance requires more attention to be paid to delivery in order to demonstrate the value of this approach, achieve action and secure ongoing engagement from CCSOs. In our experience, it has been important to try and maintain progress towards delivery even if that involves our team mediating between all the parties involved (see also Wittmayer and Schöpke, 2014). Establishing a process to encourage continued and ongoing interaction and participation between CCSOs and the organisations represented on the CIOSLB would help to ensure dynamic, reflexive and collaborative action towards the goals of the Plan. Annan-Aggrey et al. (2022) have

similarly found this in Ghana where their work to sustain the engagement and mobilisation of communities for collaborative work to realise shared sustainability goals has required ongoing relationship building and mediation between different organisational interests and actors.

In sum, our research suggests that localised goal-based governance has been added to business-as-usual approaches, and this has proved to be a strength as well as a weakness. While statutory and CCSO actors in Cornwall have found new ways of working together, they have done this in ways that complement existing organisational structures, cultures and purposes. Furthermore, change has proved to be slow and incremental rather than radical, and while this may contribute to deeper and broader change over time (Bours et al., 2022; Patterson et al., 2017), it requires remarkable stamina and additional resources to secure significant change. We have had to remain involved in the process of progressing our first goal and additional resources from the university have helped to support the ongoing work.

### 5.2. Democratising goal-based governance for sustainability

It is important to reflect on the extent to which Cornwall's experiment with localising goal-based governance was able to engage a broader constituency than is normally done. The Plan was developed by the council and its partners, comprising the elected and statutory bodies working for the people of Cornwall, and this was enhanced by working with local CCSOs and grassroots actors at the Civic Lantern event. The rural context both hindered and assisted this work. It proved challenging to attract CCSO leaders from the peripheral regions of Cornwall that are difficult to reach and poorly-served by transport links. However, Cornwall's history and economy have also fostered local pride and a culture of self-help that supports a particularly vibrant civil society sector. There are strong links between civil society groups and civic leaders that can help get things done. People willingly gave up their time to attend the Lantern and share their ideas. This might have been more challenging in an urban location with a huge travel-to-work area, where people may be less committed to the fortunes of place.

As detailed above, we incorporated elements of both representative and participatory democracy without claiming that this kind of collaboration can ever be wholly democratic. Indeed, it is often thought that engaging a wider set of stakeholders, or including the public in planning and decision-making can lead to more democratically robust visions of desirable change (Horlings et al., 2021), but there is no certainty that better and more inclusive decisions will be made. In our case, we wanted to explore new ways of engaging CCSOs in shaping goal-based governance and ensuring that the Plan became a 'living document' to unlock significant change. As such, it made sense to reach out to already-organised groups and leaders in order to build on what was already being done. Our efforts in this regard could have been expanded to include local businesses that are often highly influential in the local community (Isaksson and Hagbert, 2020) and could be important in realising change, especially in rural locations.

While communities need support and mechanisms to be encouraged and empowered to work alongside - and not 'below' - statutory bodies, it is clear that we don't yet have the two-way relationships or associated cultures of 'double-layered' governance to mainstream this approach. There is still some tension between the 'officials' and the 'grassroots', and our research team played an important role in mediating between the two, facilitating information exchange, and brokering the relationships that are critical to progressing shared goals. This echoes experience elsewhere as university academics often act as lynchpins for ongoing exchange, particularly if funding is secured to support this, for example through ad-hoc or formalised civic-university agreements (Collins et al., 2022a; Fox and Macleod, 2021; Goddard et al., 2016; Harney and Wills, 2017). Additionally, the process of organising the Civic Lantern highlighted the scale of investment required in terms of time, energy and resources to build an audience, organise an exciting event, and then follow up with delivery. This is challenging, if not

impossible, without access to funding and/or local leadership to take on this work.

Responding successfully to sustainability challenges raises major questions about the extent to which under-resourced and overstretched local governments can be supported, mobilised, and empowered to help deliver change (Jordan et al., 2015) as well as trial new and diverse forms of democratic participation. We have shown that inter-institutional collaboration and community engagement can be important, widening the collective vision and capacity for action. Nonetheless, it is imperative to remain cognisant of strong divergences in local opinion about such activity and there is a pressing need to try and ensure the broadest possible reach in determining any goals and associated action for change. There is a risk that practitioners focus on public engagement and participation models that reflect their existing commitments and only invite the CCSO leaders who are already involved in the kind of proactive, beneficial socio-ecological work of which they approve (Hammond et al., 2020), and it is very hard to avoid this bias in practice. Furthermore, there is a very real risk that governance bodies and researchers conduct consultation or engagement exercises that remain unrelated to practice. This is likely to fuel apathy and disengagement and our case has highlighted the need for long-term commitment to delivering change.

## 6. Conclusion

Our collaborative research has outlined how goal-based governance can be a mechanism to 'cohere action' across spatial scales and organisational divides, bringing people together around agreed common goals to meet sustainability challenges at the local scale. This has the potential to ensure that socio-ecological transitions reflect the particularities of people and place but it depends on the institutional infrastructure, associated culture and relationships that support collaborative vision setting, monitoring progress and mobilising action across traditional silos and hierarchies. Investing in this approach takes time, energy and resources. It needs to be supported by senior managers and acculturated into organisational practices in statutory bodies as well as CCSOs. Specific attention needs to be paid to engaging CCSOs and local leaders in the work of setting and delivering goals, and this requires further investment in long-term relationship building and engagement practices with a focus on delivery as well as debate. Widening the range of voices, institutions and actors involved in goal-based governance can connect local action to the development of broader visions for, and participation in, change, moving away from the technocratic approaches commonly associated with expert-led deliberative democracy for sustainable development. However, firming up a commitment to ongoing collaboration for action beyond participation in goal-setting is critical if we are to realise significant change. The Cornish example proffered insight into some of the challenges that still need to be tackled, but it also provided a model that could be scaled up and adopted in other locations. Given that inclusive local goal-based governance is a significant frontier in realising socio-ecological transformation, our case highlights the challenges to be faced in doing this well, in ways that reflect the particularities of place and existing organisation.

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## CRediT authorship contribution statement

RT, RM, CC and JW contributed to the initial interviews and online workshop. EHA, RT, CC, JW contributed to the in-person workshop. CC and EHA conducted the qualitative analyses. EHA led the literature



review and drafting of the initial manuscript. All authors contributed to the drafting, writing and critical analysis in the manuscript.

### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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