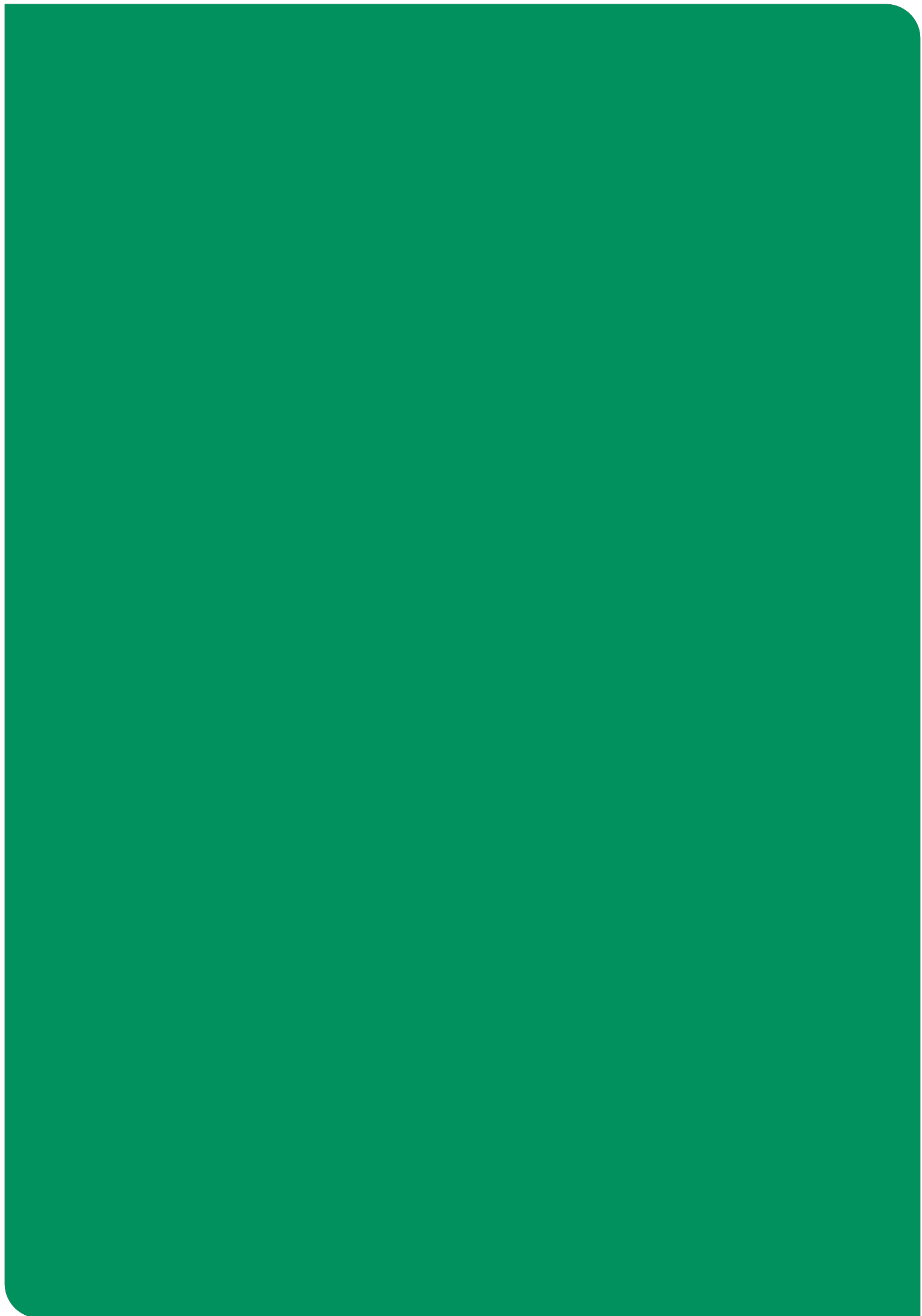




## Social feasibility study: reintroduction of the European wildcat to Kielder Forest





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Research Report

Dr Mike Dunn and Greg Counsell

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# Executive summary

This Research Report explores the opinions of key stakeholders and local residents on the possibility of a reintroduction of the European wildcat to Kielder Forest. Such reintroductions and reinforcements can serve as important tools for species recovery, but the progression of these projects should be subject to feasibility studies. This social feasibility study follows a first-stage scoping study, completed in 2023, which indicated that sufficient knowledge and data was available to progress to this second stage.

The study comprised three components: a stakeholder mapping exercise, key stakeholder interviews, and a public attitudes survey. The first of these aimed to identify stakeholders (at both local and regional levels) who may be impacted by the presence of European wildcats in Kielder Forest. Such impacts could be on the stakeholders' personal interests or organisational activities. In total, 197 individuals and organisations were identified throughout the project, representing a range of interests, including: conservation, land-based businesses, the tourism sector, and local governance.

From the stakeholders identified in the mapping exercise, a number were selected to take part in key stakeholder interviews, which sought to assess their/their organisation's:

- stake and interest relative to a wildcat reintroduction
- knowledge and attitude on reintroductions in general
- knowledge of the European wildcat
- perceived impacts (positive and negative) of wildcats being reintroduced into Kielder Forest (for themselves and others)
- level of support for a reintroduction
- thoughts on how aspects of the project should be governed were it to proceed.

Each interviewee was given the opportunity to recommend further individuals and organisations for inclusion in the key stakeholder interviews and a total of 26 participants (representing 23 organisations) were interviewed. The recorded interviews were semi-structured, following a simple interview protocol ([Appendix A](#)), and were analysed thematically following transcription.

In total, 450 responses were gathered from the public attitudes survey, which targeted residents living within a 20-mile radius of Kielder village. The survey was made up of closed response questions and rating scales, enabling respondents to complete it within 20 minutes, and its themes were similar to those addressed in the key stakeholder interviews.

Residents taking part in the survey were generally less knowledgeable about the European wildcat than the interviewed stakeholders; only 28% of respondents were able to correctly identify a European wildcat from a selection of images. Wildcat knowledge among the stakeholders, however, was normally distributed, with most stakeholders having an intermediate level of knowledge (and fewer having low or high levels of knowledge) around wildcats' diet, behaviour, ecology, and appearance.

From both the key stakeholder interviews and the public attitudes survey, we found that stakeholders and residents were broadly positive or neutral about a European wildcat reintroduction into Kielder Forest. However, this support was often conditional, with both stakeholders and residents seeking certain assurances were a reintroduction project to go ahead. Some of the key areas we found where assurances and mitigation measures were sought by stakeholders and residents are:

- socioeconomic risk posed by a wildcat reintroduction (such as risk to livestock)
- suitability of the habitat, and prey species availability (including concern for ground nesting birds, raptors, red squirrels, and recently reintroduced water voles)
- welfare of the wildcats themselves and risk of both persecution and hybridisation with domestic and feral cats
- importance of continued and meaningful engagement and communication between the project team, stakeholders, and the community.

Following the results from this social feasibility study, we recommend that, if the reintroduction project is to progress, a priority should be to raise knowledge levels around European wildcat, both in terms of the benefits they provide and the potential risks. It is also important that stakeholder and community engagement

progresses with a clear strategy to mitigate each of the commonly held concerns, as well as providing opportunities for those who oppose the reintroduction to meaningfully engage with the project. This type of communication would be best served if delivered by a local who is embedded within the community (e.g. a local forester) rather than an expert who is unfamiliar with the local area.

## Background

Forestry England's Forest Wilding Programme aims to deliver pioneering, long-term landscape-scale nature recovery, including the restoration of wildlife habitats and the natural processes that shape them. A key strand of this work is species recovery, including species reinforcement and reintroduction. One such project involves exploring the potential reintroduction of European wildcat to Kielder Forest. A first stage scoping study for a Kielder wildcat reintroduction project was completed in 2023, the results of which indicated sufficient knowledge and data availability to justify proceeding to a second stage social feasibility study, and a third stage biological and ecological feasibility study.

Forest Research, the research agency of the Forestry Commission, was commissioned to conduct the social feasibility study, which comprised three components: a stakeholder mapping exercise, key stakeholder interviews, and a public attitudes survey. This work was conducted between December 2023 and April 2024.

## Methodology

The stakeholder mapping exercise sought to identify and collate local and regional stakeholders whose personal interests or organisational activities might be expected to be impacted by the presence of wildcats in and around Kielder Forest. Such interests included conservation, land-based businesses, the tourism sector, and local governance. Using web-based research, input from the wider project team, and snowballing, details of 197 individuals and organisations were collated over the course of the project.

In the first instance, prospective key stakeholder interviewees were drawn from the stakeholder mapping exercise, with individuals prioritised based on the influence (e.g. their specific role and any role in representing a relevant sector/community) and potential impact (e.g. the size of their or their members' landholding). Care was taken to ensure that a range of stakeholders representing the various interests were approached, and each was given the opportunity to suggest additional individuals and organisations who they deemed important to include in the study.

Individuals were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview (see [Appendix A](#)) which sought to assess their/their organisation's:

- stake and interest relative to a wildcat reintroduction
- knowledge and attitude of reintroductions in general
- knowledge of the European wildcat
- perceived impacts (positive and negative) of wildcats being reintroduced into Kielder Forest (for themselves and others)
- level of support for a reintroduction
- thoughts on how aspects of the project should be governed were it to proceed.

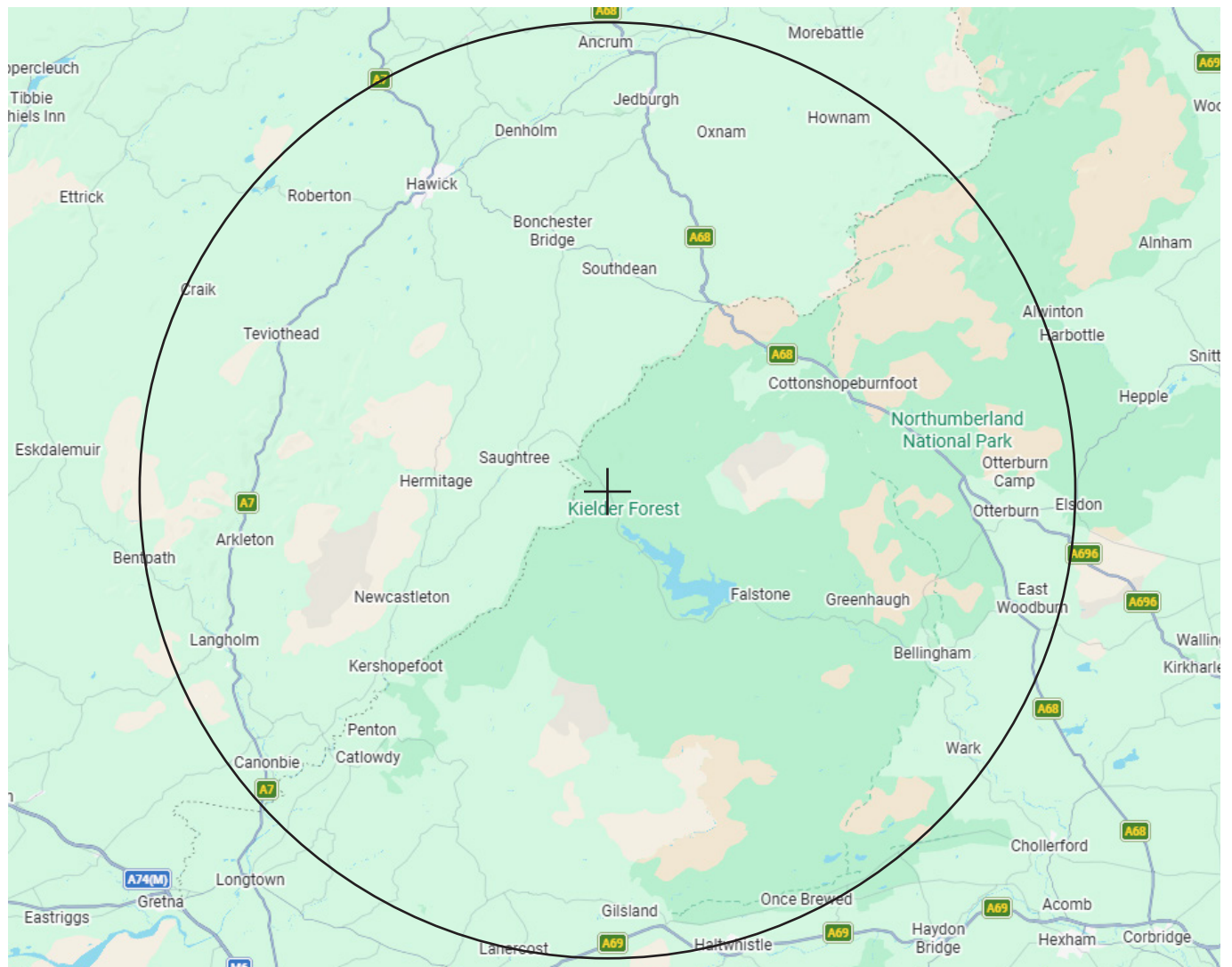
In all, 26 individuals representing 23 organisations participated in an interview, whether online, via telephone, or in-person. Of these stakeholders, 10 represented conservation organisations: these included local wildlife groups and both county- and national-level organisations/agencies, and representatives from counties and home nations neighbouring Northumberland (i.e. Cumbria and Scotland). Nine stakeholders represented land-based businesses such as farming, gamekeeping, and water management. Representatives from the tourism industry (n = 2), local governance (n = 4), and one local resident made up the remaining stakeholders. While equal numbers of stakeholders from both the tourism and local governance sectors were invited, several deemed themselves unable to take part at this point; for example, Kielder Parish Council considered it too early to comment at this stage but did not rule out providing feedback if the project develops. Each interview typically lasted 40–60 minutes and was

recorded using a Dictaphone. Recordings were then transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic coding in NVivo using a framework mirroring the interview themes.

The public survey was designed to elicit attitudes and knowledge of the area's population. Question themes in the survey were akin to those featured in the key stakeholder interview framework. However, the data collected was largely quantitative, reflecting the rating scales and closed response options necessary to allow respondents to complete the survey in 20 minutes (see [Appendix C](#)). Eligibility for participation in the survey was restricted to those residing within 20 miles of the village of Kielder, which includes parts of the Scottish Borders (Figure 1).

Based on the population data from the proposed study area, it was deemed necessary to receive a minimum of 377 survey completions to allow for robust statistical analysis (95% confidence level,  $\pm 5\%$  margin of error). In total, 450 completions were achieved in March 2024 through collaboration with a third-party panel company (OnePoll). These respondents adequately represented the demographics of the area's population as determined in reference to the local census data. Data collection involved a Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) approach whereby respondents were guided through the survey over the phone by the researcher, who entered responses into an electronic system. The resulting data was provided in .csv format and analysed in R by Forest Research's scientists.

**Figure 1** Map showing sampling area for public survey respondents. Shaded circle represents a 20-mile radius from Kielder village



# Results

## Key stakeholder interviews

### Attitudes to reintroductions

Stakeholder attitudes to the general notion of reintroductions proved to be nuanced. In the majority of cases, respondents expressed that their attitude would be case specific, depending on the species under consideration and the perceived impacts they would have on the area's ecology or the stakeholder's own interests.

*I suppose it depends on the species. So one of our sites in the Lake District, they're working on a particular flower, and it tends not to be controversial. So, in that sense, obviously, most people generally are supportive. But when it comes to species like the beaver, where there are a lot of impacts that can occur, I think there are areas that would be deemed unsuitable for a direct restoration or reintroduction of the species.*

*As long as it doesn't affect the way the farm runs then we're not really fussed like to be honest with you.*

### Knowledge of wildcats

Stakeholders' knowledge of wildcats was classed as high, intermediate, or low based on their awareness of the animal's physical characteristics, preferred habitat, diet, range, population size, and native status.

*I just know they are somewhere between a domestic cat and a large cat and that's pretty much all that I know. That and the fact that they are I think carnivores rather than omnivores so their predating would be primarily the mammals that are living in the woods, and I think primarily deer. That's about the extent of my knowledge I'm afraid. – (low knowledge)*

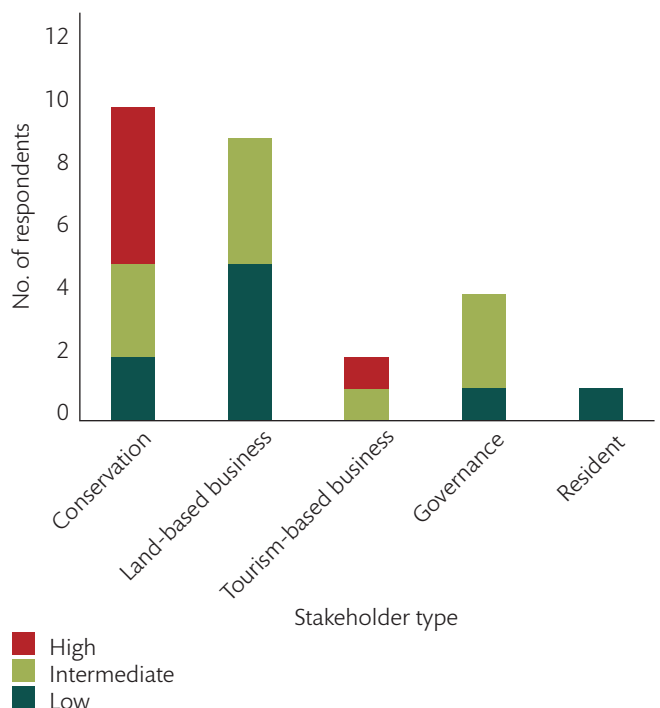
*Diet-wise it's kind of small mammals predominantly, sort of voles, shrews, and possibly rabbits, kind of that type and possibly a few birds. I guess they tend to keep themselves fairly tucked away out of public view [...] I don't know about*

*territories or how they would move around the landscape though. – (intermediate knowledge)*

*I set up a wildcat warriors group with a primary school to teach the kids about the wildcat. So I'm a bit of a wildcat nerd, I suppose. But that ecology, I think it's important for people to understand that they are different to the domestic cats in the way that they hunt, in the way that they breed [...] – (high knowledge)*

Overall, the level of knowledge was found to be normally distributed, with most interviewees having an intermediate level of knowledge (n = 13), and fewer having low (n = 8) or high knowledge (n = 6). Those stakeholders working in the conservation sector (or otherwise representing conservation interests) tended to demonstrate higher knowledge than other stakeholder types. Conversely, those representing governance bodies such as parish councils and local authorities, and those representing land-based businesses such as farming, forestry, and private estates tended to have a relatively low level of knowledge (Figure 2).

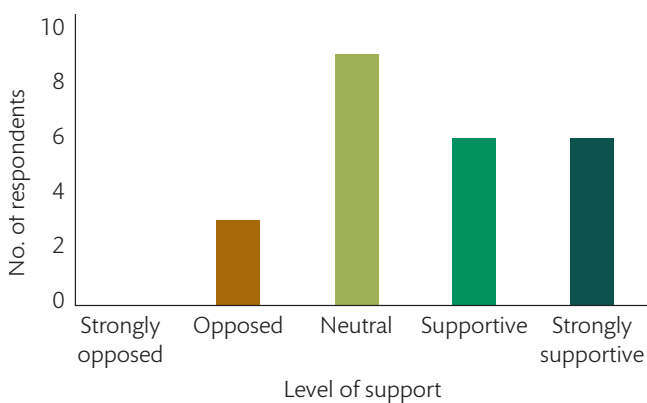
**Figure 2** Key stakeholder knowledge of wildcats by stakeholder type, classified as high, intermediate, or low



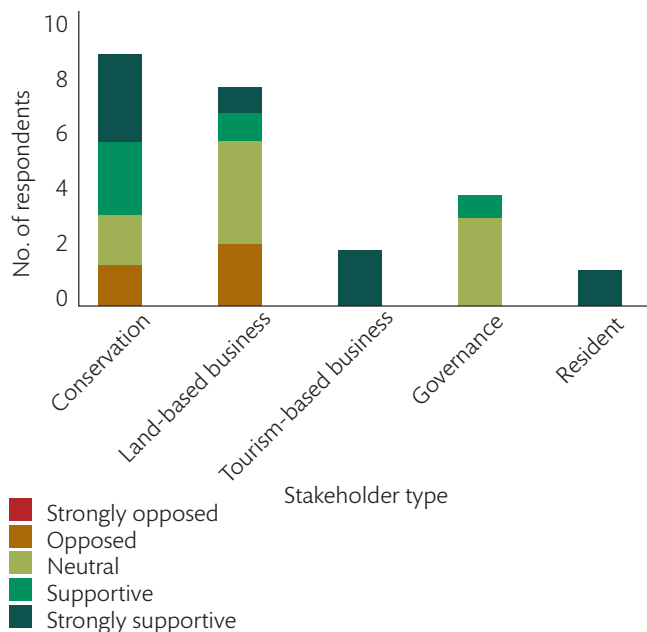
## Support for a reintroduction

The majority of stakeholders interviewed tended to be neutral or supportive of the idea of reintroducing wildcats into Kielder Forest. In fact, only three individuals expressed opposition to the notion, with none being strongly opposed (Figure 3). Two stakeholders chose not to answer this question, preferring to wait until more information was available before deciding on their level of support. Of those opposed, two interviewees were classed as having low knowledge of the species, and the other intermediate knowledge. However, there was otherwise no discernible pattern in level of support and level of knowledge of wildcats. In terms of stakeholder type, those opposed represented land-based businesses (n = 2) and conservation interests (n = 1) (Figure 4).

**Figure 3** Key stakeholder support for the reintroduction of wildcats into Kielder Forest



**Figure 4** Support for the reintroduction of wildcats into Kielder Forest among different types of key stakeholders



## Perceived concerns

A number of participants expressed concern about returning wildcats to an area they had already been extirpated from, and the potential impacts for the area's rare species which are already subject to local conservation efforts. For some, a reintroduction of wildcats is perceived as contrary to these efforts, sparking fears that the progress made to date could be reversed and future ambitions undermined.

*That's the principal concern of the red squirrel groups, that we've now got very rare, scattered populations of red squirrels [...] the final nail in the coffin could be the reintroduction of a strong, robust predator.*

*If we spend all this time and effort in this landscape recovery releasing water voles, they're going to be an ideal dinner for them, aren't they?*

*I guess they could affect pine marten both in terms of competing for prey and I guess a wildcat could maybe even take a pine marten.*

Concerns were similarly raised in relation to potential impacts of wildcats on a number of bird species, particularly raptors and ground nesting species, some of which were flagged as red list species. These concerns extended to predation of live birds, as well as their nests, during the breeding season.

*We're hoping to reintroduce the black grouse as well and it's hard to get them to settle in new areas, and if the wildcat is there it's not going to help them. We haven't got a massive population of curlews here [wildcat is] going to be something new out there that's going to take them as well. It's not good in my eyes.*

*The number of curlews nesting in these areas is not huge, whereas you've got the smaller passerine birds, skylarks, meadow pipits, etc., etc. You know, that would just be really impossible to physically protect all those nests.*

*If they are good climbers then that poses a threat to some of the nesting species like goshawks... like some of the raptors that are in the forest.*

There was also concern about possible implications for sheep farmers. Although one respondent acknowledged that they were uncertain whether predation of lambs was likely to occur owing to their lack of familiarity with wildcats, it nevertheless registered as an important concern which would ultimately come to determine their acceptance (or lack of) in regard to a possible reintroduction.

*The money maybe they would give us for a lamb being taken just doesn't really matter to us, because we'd rather have the live lamb than have money for it really. So, aye it would definitely make us unsupportive if that started happening. [...] If one lamb goes then it's a definite "no".*

In addition to concerns relating to the potential impacts of wildcats, several respondents expressed concern for the welfare of the wildcats themselves, were they to be released. For example, there were concerns that the habitat, environment, or land use may be in some way unsuitable for wildcats and thus limit their ability to survive or thrive in the area.

*There's a time and a place for everything but if that apex predator or whatever has died out there's a reason why it's died out, there's a reason why it no longer fits into the landscape and if it doesn't fit into that landscape any more then why would you consider reintroducing it?*

*I'm wondering about the suitability of the habitat for wildcats in it being Sitka plantation.*

*The other thing that's always a concern about wildcat is they're extremely good at getting run over on roads unfortunately.*

*I think the wildcat would struggle with feeding round here because there's not a great deal of rabbit.*

Several others expressed concern about the risk of persecution wildcats might face, in spite of the species' protected status.

*You really need to release them in an area where there's no predator control, because you can't trust gamekeepers not to shoot a cat when they see a cat.*

The issue of hybridisation was also raised, both in terms of threatening the purity of the wildcat population and in impacting domestic cats. However, some stakeholders did not feel that there were sufficient domestic or feral cats in the area for such interactions to occur.

*Obviously the hybridisation with domestic cats; you've got to get all that thing under control before you get them out [...] I'm presuming that there may be a direct impact between domestic cats and these cats as well, so there could be people being scared that their pet may be affected.*

## Perceived benefits

Almost all of the comments tied to supportive opinions referenced the idea that a reintroduction of wildcats would represent an increase in biodiversity and a step towards restoring the ecosystem to a more natural state.

*It was a species that [was] there. It's part of that ecosystem that would've been in the forest. So immediately, I start thinking, yeah, it is quite a positive thing to think about.*

*Bringing back, maybe not an apex predator, but a mesopredator at least, is probably a useful thing to do.*

Relatedly, the knowledge that wildcats were once again present in the area was considered beneficial to some stakeholders, even if there may be scant opportunity to see and interact with the individuals.

*I think the wider public, including myself, I think I'd quite like to see the introduction of sort of animals that were once native around here.*

In addition, a small number of comments were made in respect of the potential economic benefits wildcats could bring to the area, particularly as a result of ecotourism.

*I looked at the pub's website just now and they're promoting the wildlife and I think that's one of the things. You know, money is an amazing thing isn't it? So, if I can get more people into my cottage or into my pub, what can we offer them? They're booking mountain bikes for trails and wildlife [...] so of course, it can be added to the list and nothing more than a bonus.*

## Neutral attitudes

Those who expressed a neutral attitude to the idea of a wildcat reintroduction could be broadly distinguished as a) those perceiving a mix of positive and negative impacts, and b) those who felt they lacked the necessary knowledge about the species, its requirements, or its impacts to be able to adopt a supportive or opposing stance.

*Of course they're contributing to the overall ecological biodiversity [but] it will potentially interfere with harvesting operations.*

*There definitely could be positive and negative [impacts]. As far as [organisation redacted], [we] won't come down on either way until information's seen and taken into account all of the issues.*

*I read that they keep, possibly keep down rabbit populations. I'm not clear whether that's a good thing or a bad thing in Kielder.*

To many of those expressing a neutral attitude, provision of additional information would therefore be extremely influential in shaping future attitudes towards a wildcat reintroduction. To some degree, the types of information required for more informed attitudes to manifest, and for concerns to be alleviated, is being collated through the concurrent biological and ecological feasibility study (e.g. prey availability and habitat suitability). Furthermore, a number of respondents flagged that there are lessons to be learned from the activities of an ongoing wildcat reintroduction taking place in Scotland.

*It's learning from colleagues across the border in Scotland where they have wildcat and where they conduct forest operations with those in mind.*

*It would be wise for everybody to watch what happens with that Scottish project before anybody moves on anything else [...] They spent a long time getting to that point, and it's a very well-funded project. So yeah, learn from experience before jumping in, which is always a good way to go if you've got that example that's out there.*

In addition to evidence drawn from past or current sources, there were also requests that were a reintroduction to go ahead in Kielder Forest, information should continue to be accrued; for example, as a result of monitoring individual wildcats using GPS collars. In doing so, it was suggested that that the wildcats' welfare, behaviour, and impacts could be tracked over time. Such requests parallel calls for a dedicated team with the scientific expertise and resources to be able to commit to making objective decisions and retaining involvement in the process for as long as necessary.

## Assurances

Prior to a reintroduction being considered further, some stakeholders emphasised a need to account for human-induced threats to wildcats, most commonly in relation to direct persecution. Specifically, it was suggested that support or acceptance from those who may be inclined towards persecution should be assured, and that failure to accomplish this would unduly endanger individual wildcats as well as any attempt to establish a population.

*You do not want to end up in a situation where you've got these very valuable animals in terms of you spent ages breeding up, you've gone through disease risk analysis, and everything else that you've put in place and then they go and get persecuted.*

*If we don't get agreement from those who are going to wish to persecute the animal when it comes back then we are potentially just putting an animal back into an environment which is then going to be the butt of a concerted effort to get rid of it again and that isn't a good conservation principle on which to base it.*

An assessment of local cat populations and the use of a Trap-Neuter-Vaccinate-Release (TNVR) programme – as employed in Scotland – to account for the risk of hybridisation also emerged as an important consideration for some of those most knowledgeable about wildcats.

*[...] the hybridisation with domestic cats, you've got to get all that thing under control before you get them out.*

Finally, several respondents expressed concern that support for the reintroduction of wildcats into the area might be used to justify the reintroduction of other species without further consultation, with lynx being the most frequently cited species. For this reason, it is important to reassure local stakeholders that any support for wildcat will be considered in isolation rather than being conflated with support for other species.

*It's just if the likes of the Lynx Trust got a hold, whether they'd put wildcat on, the Lynx [Trust] would get a hold of the idea of thinking "well if they reintroduce them, we'd like to reintroduce Lynx as well", that's another worry.*

## Governance

Stakeholders of all types were united in advocating for continued and wide-reaching engagement in the consultation process, including engagement with those who have initially expressed a neutral sentiment towards the idea of a wildcat reintroduction. In addition, a number of groups and organisations were suggested for further engagement, including the National Farmers' Union of Scotland and local parish councils (some of whom had declined an invitation to participate in this preliminary stage of development, but did not rule out further involvement if and when the project develops). Engagement with cat owners was not explicitly undertaken in this study due to the difficulty in identifying these individuals, but given the potential interactions between wildcats and domestic (and feral) cats, these stakeholders should be consulted if a reintroduction were to be considered further.

Based on the responses of the interviewed stakeholders, further consultation should shed light on the aforementioned uncertainties surrounding wildcat behaviour and the area's suitability, but would also acknowledge and account for the stakeholders' concerns. There were calls for knowledge gaps to be addressed by a well-informed scientific committee able to provide objective information, but also a suggestion that this information might be more trusted if coming from somebody embedded in the community.

*I think it needs to come from community members that it might be foresters who live in the area who are briefed on this rather than an expert parachuted in.*

The means of engagement, as with any reintroduction, are likely to be varied in format and opportunities to input. Some respondents with prior involvement in reintroductions noted that in-person discussions (e.g. village hall meetings) should be supplemented with an online approach whereby individuals have the opportunity to input without risk of being drowned out or intimidated by more vocal individuals. However, for those expressing the strongest opposition or largest concerns, more intimate engagement may be necessary to build the requisite level of trust and provide the assurance that their voices are being taken into account.

*It's that one-to-one interaction where I've seen the most benefit there. And yeah, having the facts, not necessarily the personal anecdotes, but having the facts and lots of papers and things on hand ready does seem to work.*

Involvement of stakeholders in a committee or working group was further suggested as a means of ensuring that all views would be accounted for, though some felt that this may result in an impasse which could necessitate some form of decision-making protocol being put in place.

*Farmers feel that there's a lot of things being done to them. And to be part of the process, then that makes a whole world of difference because then you're talking about you're building trust.*

*It would be great if, through engagement, you were able to carry people and get to that point where there could be real co-design. But I think equally it would be important to be prepared for the fact that it may be a matter of inform and engage, but ultimately a decision would have to be made, whether to go ahead or not, knowing that going ahead is not going to be popular within certain communities.*

Finally, one stakeholder experienced in working on conservation projects detailed the possibility of involving (and supporting) volunteers who are often vital to the success of such projects.

*If you want volunteers to be part of it, it's probably coordinating the transport. So actually our volunteers tend to come from Hexham and Wark, and further south, so you're still having to resource the travel if you want people to get involved, I would've thought.*

## Results from the Public Attitudes Survey

### Sample characteristics

The achieved sample was 450 responses from within a 20-mile radius of Kielder village. The demographic make-up of the sample is summarised in Table 1. Many of the respondents had current or past occupations related to tourism and the land-based sector (Table 2). Respondents were able to select more than one response and, in most instances, multiple occupations were selected. Exploratory factor analysis revealed no significant correlation between occupations selected. 9% of respondents did not belong to any of the major environmental, heritage, or rural business organisations (Table 3).

**Table 1** Characteristics of the public survey sample by age and gender (n = 450)

Demographic categories	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Age (years)</b>		
18–24	72	16%
25–34	103	23%
35–44	79	18%
45–54	110	24%
55–64	68	15%
65+	18	4%
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	253	56%
Female	197	44%
Other	0	0%

**Table 2** Characteristics of the public survey sample by current and previous occupation (n = 450)

Are you working, or have you worked, in any of the following sectors?	Frequency	Percentage
Local tourism	187	42%
Estate management	157	35%
Gamekeeping	148	33%
Nature conservation	137	30%
Forestry or arboriculture	151	34%
Poultry or egg production, including game birds	129	29%
Sheep farming/shepherding	147	33%
Other forms of agriculture, such as a farmer or farming contractor	125	28%
None of these	60	13%

**Table 3** Characteristics of the public survey sample by membership of environmental, heritage, and countryside organisations (n = 450)

Do you belong to any of the following types of organisations?	Frequency	Percentage
A woodland or forestry membership network	144	32%
An environmental or conservation membership network	159	35%
A heritage membership network	161	36%
A nature-based membership network	145	32%
A rural business membership network	166	37%
None of these	40	9%

**Table 4** Public identification of European wildcat (n = 450)

Which of the following images, if any, do you think depict a European wildcat?	Frequency	Percentage
Lynx	108	24%
European wildcat	124	28%
Domestic cat	114	25%
Pine marten	109	24%
Bengal cat	174	39%
None of them	23	5%

## Knowledge of wildcats

The data in Table 4 shows that 28% of respondents in the Kielder area were able to correctly identify a European wildcat from a selection of images. Respondents were able to select multiple images, and around half of those correctly identifying a European wildcat also incorrectly identified other images (e.g. lynx, domestic cat) as depicting a European wildcat.

When asked to select true statements about European wildcat, 66% of respondents did not select the correct answer. Specifically, one-third (34%) of respondents correctly believed that wildcats are native to Great Britain and benefit from legal protection, with 34% believing that wildcats have no legal protection, and 31% believing that wildcats are non-native to Great Britain (Table 5).

## Perceived impacts of a European wildcat reintroduction

The data in Figure 5 shows how the public view the potential impact of European wildcats on a range of factors. As a general trend, respondents believed a reintroduction would either have a neutral impact, or a positive impact; only 22% of respondents believed that a reintroduction would be extremely positive for the welfare of the individual cats. 22% believed the impact would be extremely positive for gamekeepers and poultry farmers, while a combined 35% believed it would be negative or extremely negative. A sense of local pride was identified as a potential positive impact by 24% of respondents. Public safety, such as risk of disease, was considered an extremely negative impact of reintroduction by 20% of the respondents.

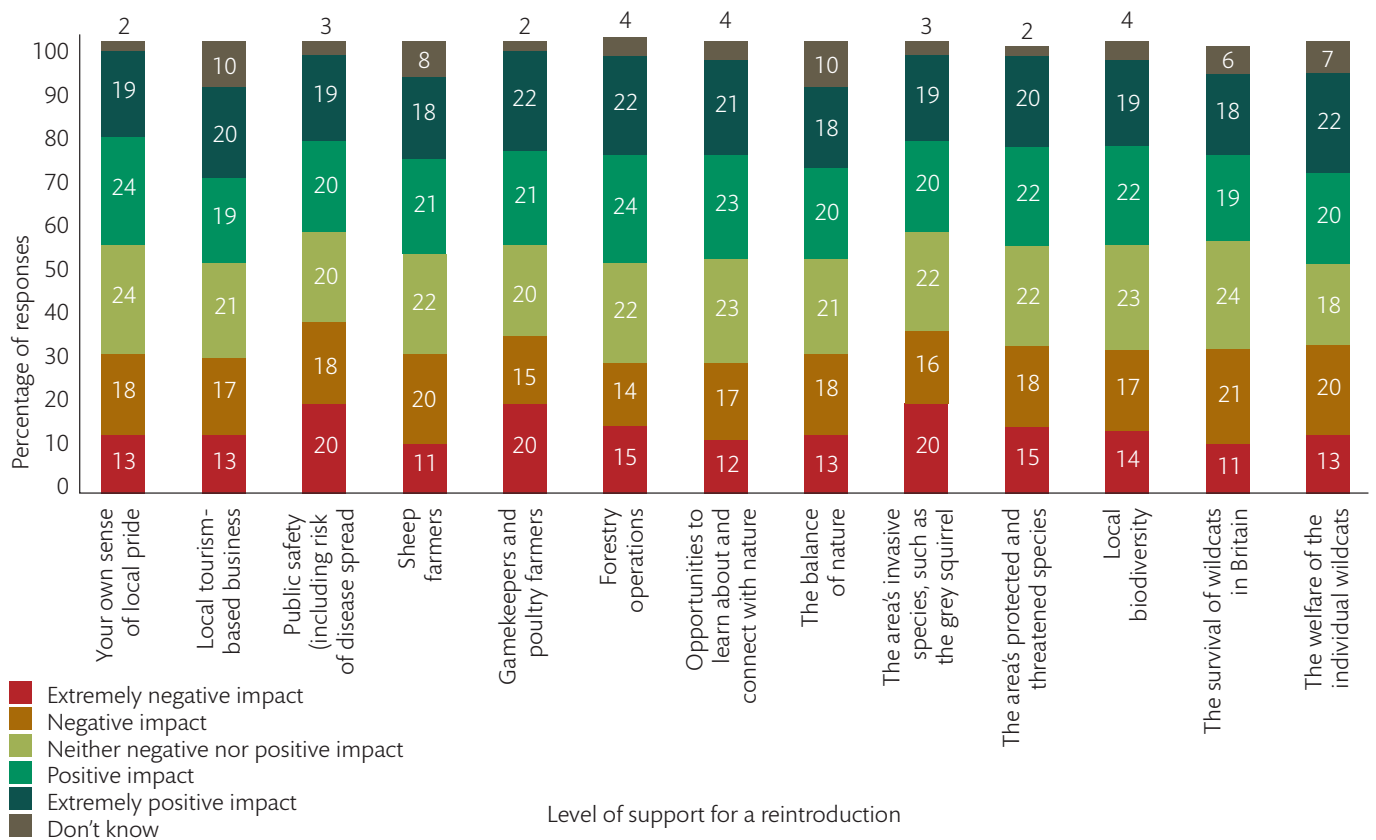
**Table 5** Public knowledge of European wildcats and their status

Which, if any, of the following statements about European wildcats do you understand to be true?	Frequency	Percentage
European wildcats are native to Great Britain and benefit from legal protection	151	34%
European wildcats are a non-native species, largely confined to Wales and Scotland	141	31%
European wildcats have no legal protection and are on the brink of extinction in Great Britain	152	34%
European wildcats were once threatened in Great Britain but populations have now grown to a self-sustaining level thanks to a successful breeding program	137	30%
None of these are true	153	34%

Figure 6 shows respondents' overall perception of having European wildcats in Kielder Forest. Over half of the respondents believed that having wildcats present in Kielder would have extremely positive (30%) or positive (25%) impact, while 24% believed that it would have neither positive nor negative impact. Fewer respondents believed that the reintroduction would have a negative (13%) or extremely negative (8%) impact.

Ordinal logistic regression was used to model the relationship between perceived impacts and a number of other factors. Respondents' ability to correctly identify a European wildcat correlated with their perception of impact (Table 4): those who incorrectly selected the image of a Bengal cat (CI-95% = 0.51 to 1.29, SE 0.2,  $p < 0.001$ ) or a pine marten (CI-95% = 0.45 to 1.32, SE 0.22,  $p < 0.001$ ) were likely to perceive more positive impacts versus those who did not select these images. Respondents identifying as female were likely to predict a less positive impact than those identifying as male (CI-95% = -0.75 to -0.07, SE 0.17,  $p = 0.017$ ). Respondents' age did not predict response.

**Figure 5** Responses to the question 'If European wildcats became present in Kielder Forest, what impact do you think this would have on the following?' Stacked bars represent percentage of public survey respondents.



We were unable to model the impact of occupation due to the high proportion of respondents listing multiple occupations, although members of rural business networks (including: Country Land and Business Association, National Farmers' Union, National Gamekeepers' Association, Scottish Land & Estates) were less likely to give a positive response than those who were not members of such networks (CI-95% = -0.91 to -0.2, SE 0.18,  $p < 0.01$ ). Neither time spent working in Kielder, nor leisure time in Kielder had any relationship with perception of potential impact of a reintroduction.

### Public support and the need for assurances

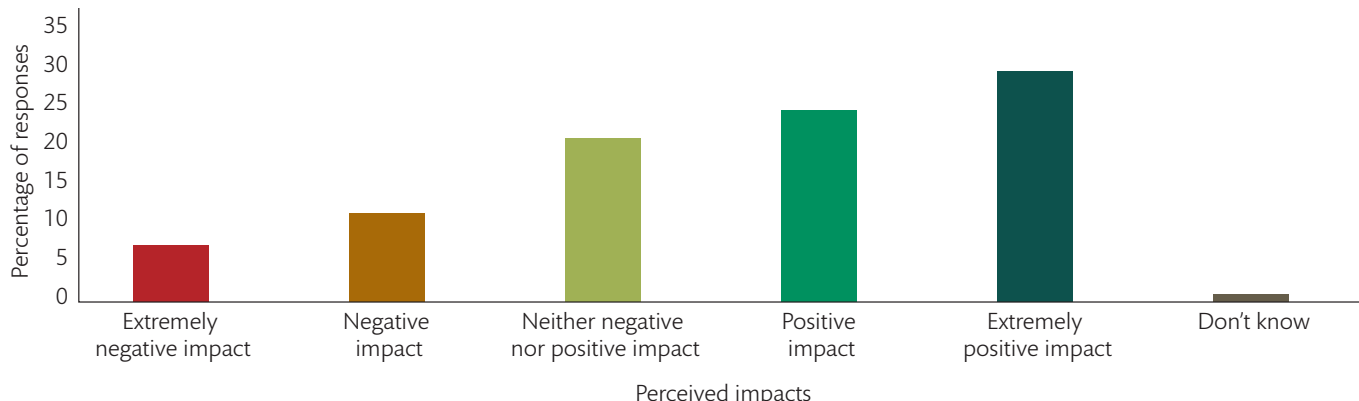
The data in Figure 7 shows the levels of public support for the reintroduction of wildcat in Kielder Forest. Over a quarter of respondents (27%) were strongly supportive, while the largest group (32%) were largely supportive but would require assurances. A further 16% were largely opposed but would be willing to reconsider with certain assurances. Only 4% of the respondents were strongly opposed and unwilling to reconsider their position.

Levels of public support varied between postcode areas, as those respondents with Newcastle area postcodes had a lower likelihood of offering support than those in neighbouring postcode areas (CI-95% = -1.75 to -0.17, SE 0.4,  $p < 0.05$ ) (Figure 8).

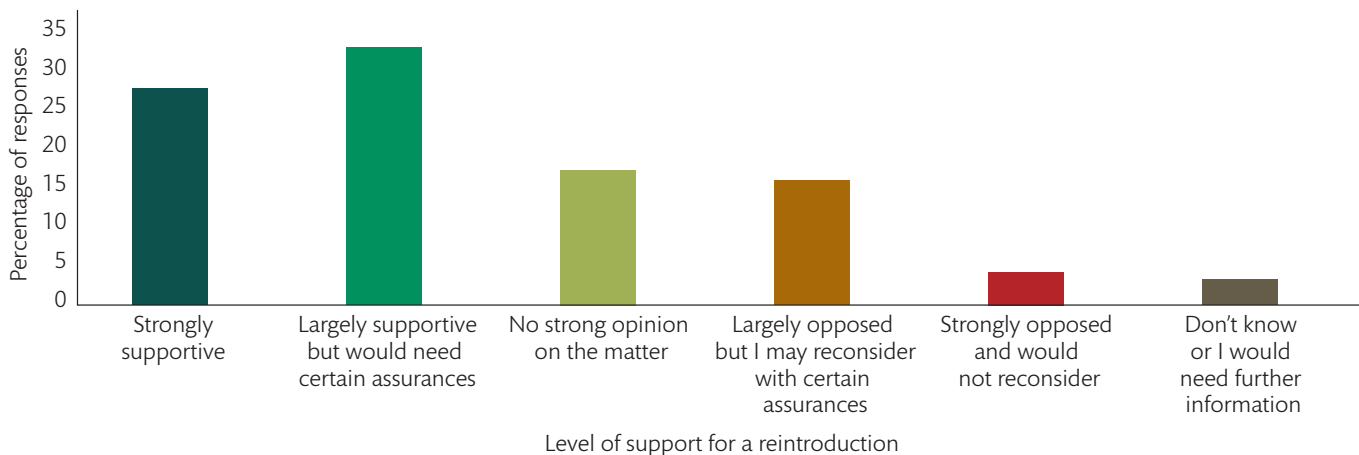
Neither respondents' age, gender, nor time spent in Kielder (working or leisure) related to their level of support. Members of a woodland or forestry network were less likely to offer strong support for reintroduction than those who were not members (CI-95% = -0.95 to -0.24, SE 0.18,  $p < 0.01$ ). No other types of membership appeared to correlate with responses. It was not possible to model the impact of occupation due to the high proportion of respondents listing multiple occupations.

Respondents' ability to correctly identify a European wildcat correlated with their level of support (Table 4), as those who incorrectly selected the image of a Bengal cat were likely to offer higher levels of support than those who did not select this image (CI-95% = -0.84 to -0.16, SE 0.17,  $p = 0.004$ ).

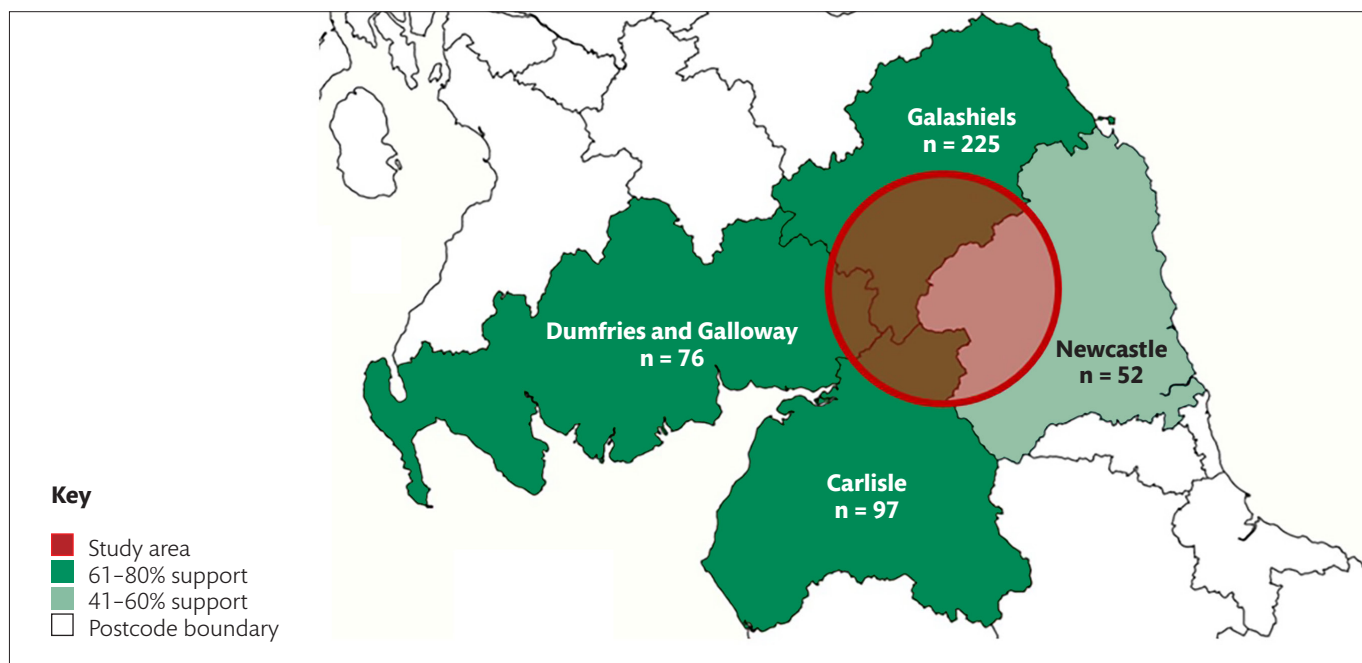
**Figure 6** Responses to the question, 'Overall, how positive, or negative do you feel the impact of having European wildcats present in Kielder Forest would be?'



**Figure 7** Public support for European wildcat reintroduction in Kielder Forest



**Figure 8** Level of support for reintroduction of European wildcat in Kielder Forest, represented as the percentage of respondents who were either 'Strongly supportive' or 'Largely supportive, but I would need certain assurances' in each postcode area.

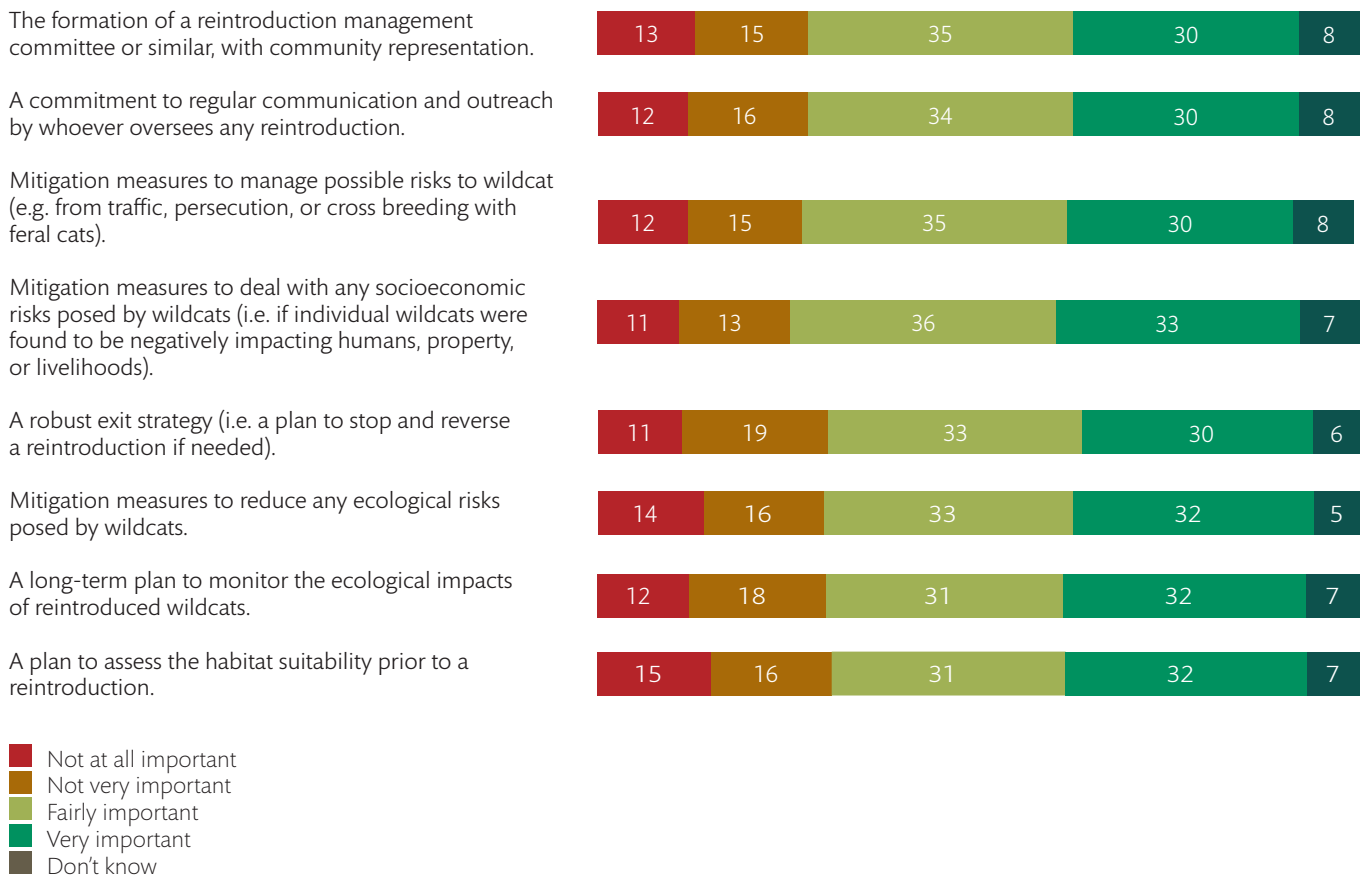


When presented with a series of true and false statements about European wildcat in Great Britain (Table 5), respondents who believed that ‘European wildcats were once threatened in Britain but populations have now grown to a self-sustaining level thanks to a successful breeding program’ were likely to offer higher levels of support for reintroduction, versus those who did not believe this statement (CI-95% = -1.25 to -0.41, SE 0.21,  $p < 0.001$ ). Agreement with other statements offered no predictive power around support for reintroduction.

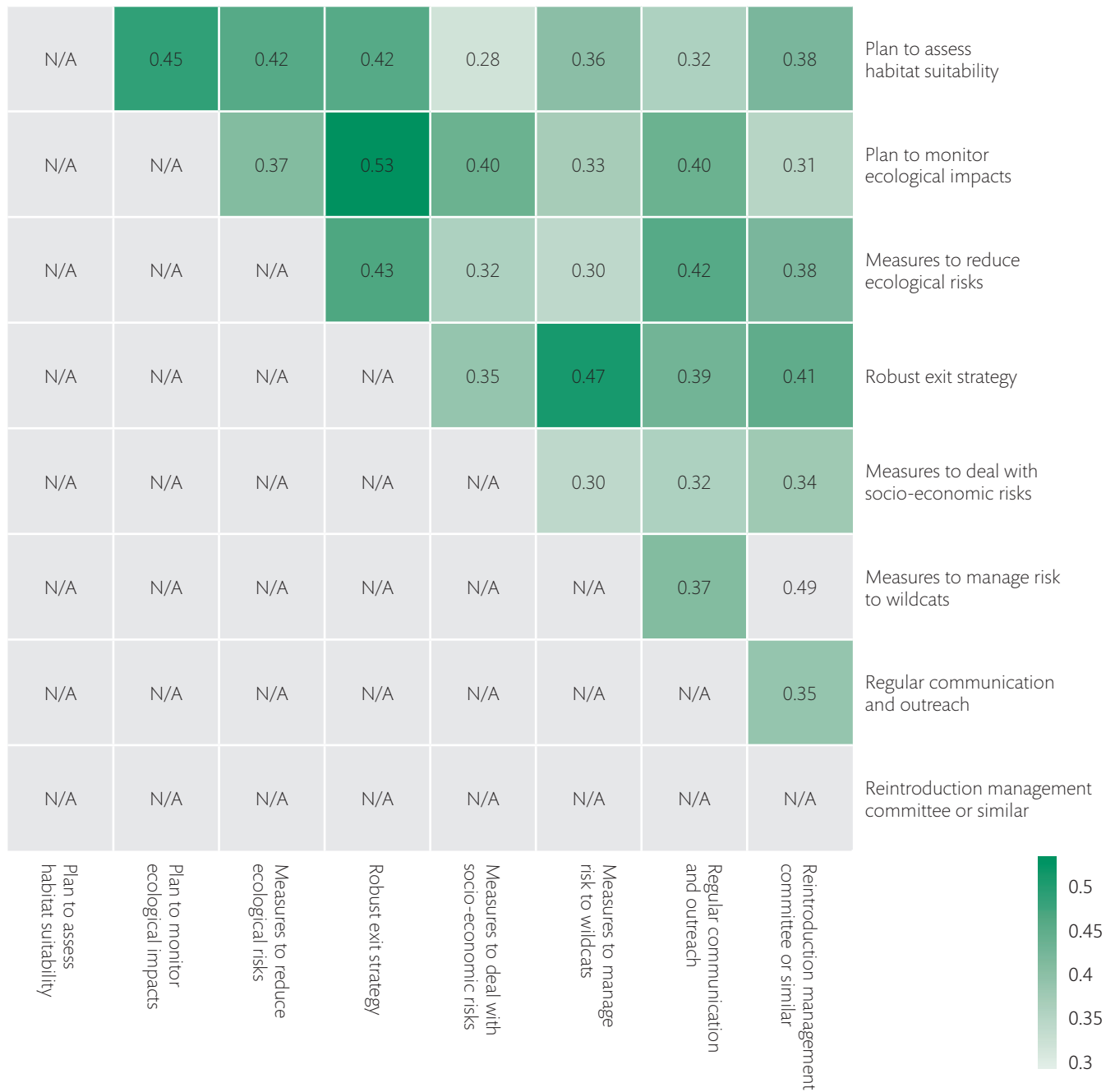
A spearman test for correlation shows (Figure 10) that respondents who deemed a robust exit strategy to be important were also likely to consider it important to monitor ecological impacts ( $r = .53$ ). Those respondents who were concerned with the risks to wildcat were likely to support the formation of a reintroduction management committee ( $r = .49$ ). Respondents demonstrating higher levels of consideration to socioeconomic risks were less likely to consider the suitability of habitat ( $r = .28$ ) or possible risks to the wildcat ( $r = .30$ ).

Figure 9 shows that the public generally considers the range of suggested assurances to be important when considering their support of such a reintroduction, with over 60% of respondents considering each mitigation measure to be fairly or very important. Habitat suitability (32%) and long-term ecological modelling (32%) were deemed very important, while mitigation for socioeconomic risk was deemed fairly important (36%) or very important (33%).

**Figure 9** Responses to the question, ‘How important would the following conditions be in ensuring or increasing your support towards a possible European wildcat reintroduction into Kielder Forest?’ Stacked bars represent percentage of respondents.



**Figure 10** Correlation matrix showing respondents perceived importance of potential mitigation conditions. Darker colours indicate stronger correlation; numbers indicate Spearman's correlation coefficient.



# Conclusions

This research investigated the opinions, perceptions, attitudes, and knowledge of key stakeholders with interest in the reintroduction of European wildcat into Kielder Forest, as well as the residents within 20 miles of Kielder village. Such views are necessary in informing development of any species translocation or reintroduction project. As a general finding, stakeholders and residents expressed a supportive or neutral view on the potential reintroduction, with only a small number expressing opposition. However, the support elicited was often conditional. The majority of stakeholders and the majority of residents suggested that their level of support was contingent on certain assurances and mitigation measures. Prominent among these were:

- mitigation measures to deal with any socioeconomic risk posed by the wildcat, particularly around rural livelihoods, such as livestock farming and gamekeeping
- assurances around the suitability of the habitat and prey species availability; several key stakeholders expressed concern for other species in the area such as ground nesting birds, raptors, red squirrels, and the recently reintroduced water voles
- concerns raised around the welfare of the wildcats themselves, with assurance sought around mitigation measures against persecution and hybridisation with domestic and feral cats
- the importance of meaningful engagement and ongoing communication between the project team, the stakeholders, and the community, with several key stakeholders expressing a need for clarity around the specific approach and proposed project governance.

The evidence also provided a measure of current knowledge of the European wildcat, with key stakeholders demonstrating a normally distributed range of understanding around the diet, behaviour, ecology, and appearance of the European wildcat, while residents generally demonstrated low levels of such knowledge, as well as limited awareness of the species' legal and historical status in England.

The perceptions of potential benefits of a wildcat reintroduction were largely consistent between key stakeholders and the area's residents. Prominent benefits offered were:

- improved biodiversity and the restoration of natural processes
- potential economic boosts through increased tourism opportunities and greater opportunities to connect with nature
- a sense of local pride and inherent value of wildcat being present.

Broadly, this research demonstrates that:

- there is generally conditional support for the reintroduction of European wildcat into Kielder Forest
- if the reintroduction project is to progress further, a priority will be delivering an effective communication strategy to raise the level of knowledge around European wildcat, noting what benefits wildcats provide while communicating any potential risks. This would perhaps best be delivered by a local, embedded within the community (e.g. a local forester) rather than an expert who is 'parachuted in'
- if the reintroduction project is to progress further, stakeholder and community engagement must include evidenced approaches, a clear strategy to mitigate each of the commonly held concerns, and opportunities for those in opposition or with concerns to meaningfully engage with the project.

# Appendix A: Interview guide for key stakeholders

## Aim of interview

Forest Research has been commissioned by Forestry England to conduct social research to investigate key stakeholders' attitudes, both positive and negative, associated with the idea of reintroducing European wildcats to Kielder Forest.

At this stage, no decisions have been made on the reintroduction of wildcat in Kielder so the findings of this study, along with those of a concurrent biological and ecological feasibility study, will help inform Forestry England's decisions at this site. Those taking part in this research are being given the opportunity to feed into this process.

## Recording the interview

Our method looks for digital recordings to be transcribed. Seek permission to record the interview.

## Gaining consent

Ask the interviewee to fill in the consent form before starting. Outline that the interview will take approximately 30–40 minutes, that they do not need to answer questions if they don't want to, and that they are free to stop the interview at any time.

## Questions

### About the person and their interest (i.e. stake)

- What is your professional role/job/business/interest in the feasibility study?
- Could you summarise your experience, if any, in conservation/wildlife/ecology – what has this involved? (e.g. studies, employment, volunteer experience, etc.)

- Do you belong to any:
  - professional organisations or membership networks related to your business
  - wildlife conservation organisations/networks
  - organisations or networks connected with the countryside and land use?
- How are you connected to the Kielder area in your personal and professional life?

*[Note for interviewer: probe for some detail, i.e. where, how long, interaction with local communities, whether operating in Kielder in addition to other areas.]*

- Clarify landholding (ownership/management) with the use of a map (either before interview, in this section, or advise that we'd like to follow up post-interview)

### Knowledge of reintroductions (in general)

- What do you know about species reintroductions and translocations (e.g. what do you understand the terms to mean, purpose, examples, successes, failures, involvement of self and others)?
- What is your general attitude to reintroductions?

*[Note for interviewer: probe for detail, i.e. in what circumstances, if ever, should they be used/avoided? Is it more acceptable for some species than others?]*

### Knowledge of European wildcat

- What do you know about European wildcat?

*[Note for interviewer: prompts around taxonomy/genetics, size, behaviour, diet, population status (protected) and range, nativeness.]*

- Where does your knowledge come from?
- Where or to whom would you look for the best, most reliable information about European wildcats? Why?

## European wildcat in Kielder Forest

- What do you think would be the main implications of having European wildcats present in Kielder Forest?

*[Note for interviewer: probe for risks and potential impacts.]*

- Could you foresee any scenarios or situations where European wildcats could pose particular challenges, or be of particular benefit...
  - A. for yourself and your organisation
  - B. for others
  - C. for forestry, grazing, recreation (if not covered above)?

*[Probe for location-specific/geographic considerations, annotations on map.]*

- What considerations do you think need to be accounted for to overcome challenges or ensure benefits...
  - A. for people
  - B. for the wildcats?

*[Probe for people-wildlife interactions as well as wider ecological context (e.g. funding, staffing, resources, opposition, climate and habitat suitability, prey availability, mortality including persecution, hybridisation, etc.).]*

- Do you have any insight into other people's (i.e. other stakeholders, the local community) attitudes towards European wildcats, or reintroductions in general?
  - What factors do you think influence those attitudes? (are governance, species impacts, knowledge levels or other factors important?)

- If European wildcats were reintroduced, to what extent, if any, do you think stakeholder perceptions and attitudes should influence management decisions? If applicable, in what way?
  - How would you see this happening, ideally?
  - Do you think stakeholders understand the different options (what level of expert input is needed)?
  - Are there certain stakeholders/interest groups whose views you think are particularly important?

## Likely support for reintroduction

- On a scale of 1 to 5, how would you describe your own attitude towards the idea of European wildcats being reintroduced into Kielder Forest? 1) Strongly opposed, 3) neutral, 5) strongly supportive
- And what are the main reasons underpinning your stance?
- Are there any assurances that could be put in place to enhance your support/reduce your opposition towards a proposed reintroduction? If so, what would these look like in practical terms, and who should they involve?

## Closing

- Would you like to make any further comments in relation to anything we've discussed?
- Are there any other individuals or groups who you think it is important to invite to participate in this study?

# Appendix B: NVivo coding framework

Code name
<b>Attitudes on proposed project</b>
Attitudes to process
Consultation
Knowledge or information deficit
Mitigation and assurances
<b>Attitudes to reintroductions</b>
Case specific
Knowledge or information deficit
Negative
Neutral
Positive
<b>Attitudes to wildcats in Kielder</b>
Knowledge or information deficit
Negative
Neutral
Positive
<b>Implication of wildcats in Kielder</b>
Economic benefits
Economic costs
Ecosystem benefits
Ecosystem disbenefits
Negative human impacts on wildcats
Negative wildcat impacts on humans
Positive human impacts on wildcats
Positive wildcat impacts on humans
<b>Knowledge of wildcats</b>
High
Medium
Low
Source

# Appendix C: Public attitudes survey

Forestry England and Forest Research (the research agency of the Forestry Commission) are carrying out social research to explore how people feel about the potential reintroduction of European wildcat into Kielder Forest. This research is being conducted alongside a biological and ecological feasibility study. No decisions have yet been made around the reintroduction of European wildcat into Kielder Forest, and the results of this research will help to inform any future decisions.

The survey includes questions on what you already know about reintroductions, what you know about European wildcat, and any possible benefits and challenges that might result in and around Kielder Forest. The survey is likely to take 15–20 minutes to complete.

## Your information

The information collected will be used to produce written reports and publications and these may be shared with partner organisations or placed in the public domain. Nothing you say will be attributed to you, and your details will be anonymised in any outputs produced.

## Consent

Before beginning the survey, please read through the following statements and tick the box to confirm that you understand and agree with the points:

1. I understand that my participation is voluntary.
2. I understand I can leave the survey at any stage without having to give a reason and any responses I have completed will not be used.
3. I understand that my responses will be confidential, which means my answers will not be shared outside the research team and I give permission for these individuals to have access to this data.
4. I understand that data will be anonymised; meaning the research team will not identify individuals or organisations who have taken part in the survey.
5. I understand that OnePoll are carrying out the survey on behalf of Forest Research.
6. I understand that the information collected will be treated, stored, and analysed in line with the requirements of the Data Protection Act (2018) and Forest Research's Code of Ethics, which can be found here: [https://cdn.forestresearch.gov.uk/2022/04/SERG\\_Statement\\_of\\_Research\\_Ethics\\_2020.pdf](https://cdn.forestresearch.gov.uk/2022/04/SERG_Statement_of_Research_Ethics_2020.pdf)

Please confirm you have understood and consent to participate [Y/N]

## Section 1 Demographics

### Qualifier: Do you live within the study area?

[OnePoll to otherwise verify with respondent.]

**Q1** How long have you lived in the area?  
[# of years, max 115]

**Q2** Can you confirm the first part of your postcode?  
[first 3 or 4 digits]

**Q3** Which age bracket do you belong to?  
[select one]

- a) Under 18 years [If yes, exit survey]
- b) 18–24 years
- c) 25–34 years
- d) 35–44 years
- e) 45–54 years
- f) 55–64 years
- g) 65+
- h) Prefer not to say

**Q4** Which of the following best describes your gender? [select 1]

- a) Male
- b) Female
- c) Other
- d) Prefer not to say

## Section 2

### Connection to the area and nature

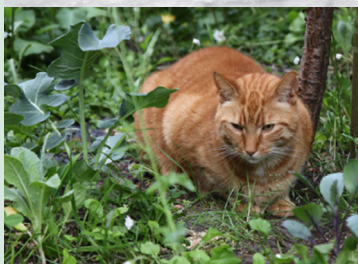
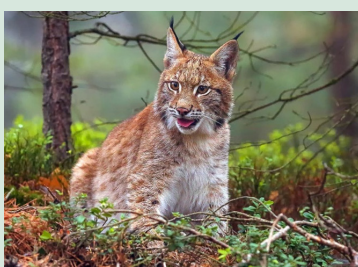
- Q5** Regarding your occupation, are you working, or have you worked, in any of the following? [select all that apply]
- a) Local tourism
  - b) Estate management
  - c) Gamekeeping
  - d) Nature conservation
  - e) Forestry or arboriculture
  - f) Poultry or egg production, including game birds
  - g) Sheep farming/shepherding
  - h) Other forms of agriculture, as a farmer or farming contractor
- Q6** Do you belong to any of the following types of organisations? [select all that apply]
- a) A Woodland or Forestry membership network (Woodland Trust, Forestry England, Small Woods Association, Community Woodlands Association, Institute of Chartered Foresters, Royal Forestry Society, Royal Scottish Forestry Society, or similar)
  - b) An environmental or conservation membership network (RSPB, Bat Conservation Trust, Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, BASC, local or regional Wildlife Trust, or similar)
  - c) A heritage membership network (National Trust, The Heritage Alliance, or similar)
  - d) A nature-based membership network (The Ramblers, Royal Horticultural Society, RSPCA, or similar)
  - e) A rural business membership network (Country Land and Business Association, National Farmers Union, National Gamekeepers Association, Scottish Land & Estates, or similar)
- Q7** In a typical week, approximately how many hours do you spend outdoors in the study area, for both work and recreation [0–168 hours]
- Q8** What do you most value about the area? [Select up to 3]
- a) The opportunities for recreation
  - b) The landscape aesthetics (how it looks)
  - c) The employment opportunities
  - d) The sense of community
  - e) The ecology and wildlife
  - f) The history
  - g) The educational/learning opportunities (self/others)
  - h) The sense of well being
- Q9** Are you open to lost native species being reintroduced to the north of England and/or Scottish Borders? [Select 1]
- a) Yes
  - b) No
  - c) Maybe
  - d) I don't know
- Q10** Which factors would most influence you to support/oppose future reintroductions of native species in the north of England and/or Scottish Borders? [Select up to 3]
- a) The likelihood that the species would thrive and establish a self-sustaining population
  - b) The size and stability of its population elsewhere (e.g. whether it is globally common or rare)
  - c) The length of time since it was lost from the proposed reintroduction area
  - d) The distance to an existing population
  - e) The likely impact on livelihoods (positive or negative)
  - f) The likely impact on other species in the ecosystem
  - g) The risk to human safety, including risk of disease spread
  - h) The risk to pets and/or domestic animals, incl. risk of disease spread
  - i) The ease of reversing a reintroduction if problems arose
  - j) My belief that reintroductions are 'meddling with nature'
  - k) The possibility of reverting to a more natural ecological state
  - l) The attitudes of others I trust
  - m) Other (please specify):

## Section 3

### Knowledge of wildcats

**Q11** Which of the following images, if any, do you think depict a European wildcat?  
[Select all that apply]

- a) Eurasian Lynx
- b) European wildcat
- c) Domestic cat
- d) Pine marten
- e) Bengal cat



**Q12** Which of the following statements about European wildcats do you understand to be true?  
[Select all that apply]

- a) European wildcats are native to Britain and benefit from legal protection
- b) European wildcats are a non-native species, largely confined to Wales and Scotland
- c) European wildcats have no legal protection and are on the brink of extinction in Britain
- d) European wildcats were once threatened in Britain but populations have now grown to a self-sustaining level thanks to a successful breeding program

**Q13** How do you consider your knowledge of each of the following... [In each case, please select from 'No knowledge', 'Limited knowledge', 'Moderate knowledge', 'Good knowledge', 'In-depth knowledge'].

- a) Wildlife that can be found in Britain
- b) European wildcats and their ecology
- c) Animal reintroductions
- d) Wildlife that can be found in the Northern England and the Scottish Borders
- e) European wildcat reintroductions

[Only B is correct]

## Section 4

### Attitudes towards a reintroduction

**Q14** If European wildcats became present in Kielder Forest, what impact do you think this would have on the following... [In each case, select one from 5-point Likert scale ranging from extremely positive impact to extremely negative impact, or 'don't know'].

- a) The welfare of the individual wildcats, relative to a breeding facility
- b) The survival of wildcats in Britain
- c) Local biodiversity
- d) The area's protected and threatened species
- e) The area's invasive species, such as the grey squirrel
- f) The balance of nature
- g) Opportunities to learn about and connect with nature
- h) Forestry operations
- i) Gamekeepers
- j) Poultry farmers
- k) Sheep farmers
- l) Public safety (including risk of disease spread)
- m) Local tourism-based businesses
- n) Your own sense of local pride

**Q15** On balance, how positive or negative do you feel it would be to have European wildcats present in Kielder Forest [Select one from 5-point Likert scale ranging from extremely positive to extremely negative, and 'don't know']

*In some cases, conservationists may consider reintroducing species to re-establish or bolster a population where it was once more common. This may be to support the functional restoration of an ecosystem, and in turn benefit people. Reintroduction is typically considered when the species is unlikely to naturally recolonise into the area in the near future, either because current populations have become too small, are too far away, or because there are barriers in the landscape (e.g. mountain ranges, waterbodies, transport networks, urban areas).*

**Q16** How supportive/opposed would you be of a proposal to reintroduce European wildcats into Kielder Forest? [Select one]

- a) Strongly supportive
- b) Largely supportive, but I would need certain assurances
- c) No strong opinion on the matter
- d) Largely opposed, but I may reconsider with certain assurances
- e) Strongly opposed and would not reconsider (skip to Q18)
- f) Don't know or I would need further information

**Q17** How important would the following conditions be in ensuring or increasing your support towards a possible European wildcat reintroduction into Kielder Forest? [In each case, select one from 5-point Likert scale ranging from extremely important to not at all important, or 'don't know'].

- a) A plan to assess the habitat suitability prior a reintroduction
- b) A long-term plan to monitor the ecological impacts of reintroduced wildcats
- c) Mitigation measures to reduce any ecological risks posed by wildcats
- d) A robust exit strategy, i.e. a plan to stop and reverse a reintroduction if needed
- e) Mitigation measures to deal with any socioeconomic risks posed by wildcats, i.e. if individual wildcats were found to be negatively impacting humans, property, or livelihoods
- f) Mitigation measures to manage possible risks to wildcats, e.g. from traffic, persecution, or cross breeding with feral cats
- g) A commitment to regular communication and outreach by whoever oversees any reintroduction
- h) The establishment of stakeholder forums to input into how any reintroduction should be managed
- i) The formation of a reintroduction management committee or similar, with community representation

**Q17b** Are there any other assurances you would need if you were to support a proposed reintroduction of European wildcats into Kielder Forest? [open-ended response]

**Q18** Do you wish to make any other comments about European wildcats or a possible reintroduction into Kielder Forest? [open-ended response]

*For more information on this topic please visit the IUCN Cat Specialist Group resource: <https://www.catsg.org/>*



This report examines the social feasibility of reintroducing the European wildcat to Kielder Forest, Northumberland. Drawing on key stakeholder interviews and public survey data, it identifies generally supportive but conditional attitudes, key concerns, and perceived benefits, providing evidence to inform future decisions on the recovery of the species.