

Capacity Building Programme Insights Report



Summary

In 2022 six diverse local community organisations co-produced Bristol's first community climate action plans with their communities. Building on this foundation, Community Climate Action Project's capacity building programme aimed to support a further 12 organisations to work with their local communities to co-produce climate action plans and to take action on climate and nature.

Impact

- 17 community climate action plans created
- Over 5000 local people fed into community priorities and actions for the plans over the course of 5 years, with roughly 1250 people inputting into the new plans developed in 2024 and roughly 850 in 2025
- Over 100 stakeholders involved in the peer roundtables and attending the launch of the plans
- The 5 organisations who launched their plans in 2024 leveraged over £240,000 in additional funding to take forward priorities, as well as a number of initiatives being started up with limited or no funding by community members or as part of existing funded work

Benefits include

- ⚙ Improves understanding of the issues communities face, and how issues are interrelated.
- ⚙ Unites communities around a positive vision for the future and provides a map to get there.
- ⚙ Raises profile of community organisations and opens doors to new funding.
- ⚙ Creates another pathway to deliver social justice and health and wellbeing work.
- ⚙ Provides an evidence base of community priorities that can be used to support regional efforts and bring real benefit to people's lives.
- ⚙ Builds local resilience to the effects of climate change and developing grass roots support for climate action.
- ⚙ Enables more inclusive engagement with citizens about environmental issues.

Top tips

- 💡 Community engagement takes time, and it is difficult to be representative of everyone in a community. Ensure community organisations are well-resourced to do this work.
- 💡 Make space for peer learning and creating connections between community groups and other stakeholders.
- 💡 Support and strengthen the mentoring relationship between community organisations.
- 💡 Ensure capacity building workshops are spacious and prioritise peer learning.
- 💡 Identify specific support needs as well as areas of expertise at the start of the programme.
- 💡 Taking an asset-based community development approach to this work is key.
- 💡 Work with organisations and groups who have knowledge and experience of engaging their community.
- 💡 The plans provide a foundation, the activation phase is key to helping communities make their priorities a reality and identify support.

"A place-based approach to action on climate and nature, building up the power of communities and creating an enabling local environment, is a more inclusive, more equitable way of doing things, that will deliver tangible outcomes. I'm glad to see Bristol once again showing leadership on this front."

Kerry McCarthy, MP for Bristol East and Minister for Climate, Department for Energy Security and Net Zero



Read on for more detail➤

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Introduction

Over the last five years the Community Climate Action Project has been pioneering bold and fair community-led climate action. In 2022 six diverse local community organisations co-produced the city's first community climate action plans with their communities.

Building on this foundation, Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership launched the "learning and mentoring programme", which aimed to support a further 12 organisations to work with their local communities to co-produce climate action plans and to take action on climate and nature.

Participation in the programme included a bursary, as well as a series of workshops, peer mentoring and resources, culminating in a final output of their community climate action plan. Following the launch of the plan, there was an activation phase where light touch support and connection was facilitated to look for ways to make priorities and actions identified in the plans a reality.



This programme was designed to build capacity by recognising community expertise, supporting, and equipping diverse local 'non climate specialist' community organisations to develop knowledge, confidence and resilience in relation to climate and nature issues.

The process of creating a community climate action plan also supports community organisations' position as key social influencers and stakeholders and enables them and their communities to identify risks and opportunities that a transition to net zero presents. It also creates potential to bring climate investment into community-based organisations, building more resilient social infrastructure.

This report aims to set out some of the reflective learnings from the programme, and ways that it could be replicated in other places.



Process

Recruitment

Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership, Bristol City Council and Centre for Sustainable Energy collaborated to develop a recruitment process that aimed to be inclusive and accessible, and included a variety of ways that groups could learn more and apply.

Priority was given to groups who are underrepresented in decision making on climate and nature, and organisations with experience in co-production or community engagement. Prior experience of working on climate and nature issues was not required but an interest and commitment to these issues was important.

A range of community organisations were intentionally recruited to represent a diverse range of communities of place, demography and lived experience.

Themed workshops and peer learning

Seven in-person workshops were held over a period of eight months covering a range of themes including:

- Strategic climate and nature context of Bristol
- Introduction to carbon footprinting
- Communicating about climate
- Designing community engagement



- Energy
- Homes and buildings
- Inclusion and disability
- Adaptation and resilience
- Nature
- Transport
- Green jobs and skills
- Food
- Waste and resources



Workshop sessions were delivered by experts on each theme, as well as community partners with relevant project delivery experience. Making more space for peer learning and sharing was a key way that the programme evolved over the three years.

In addition to themes listed above, for future iterations we would recommend building in sessions on climate justice and just transition as well as potentially more support around engagement design and research methods.

Mentoring

Each community group was matched with a mentor from the first cohort of community partners who developed community climate action plans in 2022. Different groups used their mentors to greater and lesser degrees, with some having regular meet ups to discuss challenges or get support while others didn't make use of the mentor offer.



Plan development surgery

An in-depth workshop was held to connect the groups currently working on their plans with all previous cohorts. This was an opportunity to receive guidance on the process for developing their plan, identifying carbon and social benefits, taking an asset based approach to priorities and action and to hear wisdoms and learnings from those who had already gone through the process.



Community engagement

Most groups set out their engagement plans three months into the programme, with the majority of engagement activity scheduled over a seven month period. Key engagement activities included surveys, in person workshops and stalls, and the development of a steering group to inform engagement planning and refine priorities. However different groups took different approaches based on their own expertise and understanding of their communities and there was no one size fits all approach to engagement.

Many of the groups used creative engagement methods which was key to getting more people interested in taking part. You can find out more about the use of creativity in order to engage people on issues relating to climate and nature in [our climate and creativity insights report](#).



Case study

Hillfields Community Garden: Participatory model

“At the heart of our community plan was a co-production process to ensure that our community priorities were genuinely reflective of the needs and aspirations of Hillfields residents. We used a participatory model to help guide our work "Nothing about us without us". We involved diverse voices from across Hillfields in the design and delivery of this project, to empower local people to lead conversations.



We trained volunteers in community facilitation skills so that the experience of the community was enjoyable, celebratory, and positive. A project like this hadn't happened in Hillfields before and we wanted to create safe spaces for people to dream big and make plans for change in Hillfields. After all, these local experts know our community the best.

An important starting point for developing this plan has been taking time to listen and really understand where local people 'are at' in their lives. We used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods through surveys, focus groups, open community meetings, and one-on-one interviews to build this plan.”

Sarah Rogers, Hillfields Community Garden

Strategic enabling

A key element of the programme was connecting community groups with people working at a strategic level in the city. Three months before launching the plans, we coordinated a peer review roundtable. This enabled community groups to share their priorities and actions with people who could provide insight on what was realistic, connect groups with existing initiatives, and provide feedback on how to best achieve impact.

Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership's role as an independent place-based climate action network, as well as Bristol City Council's role as a core partner on the project and the fact that there is a thriving climate and nature scene in Bristol, were key assets for creating strategic connections and linking groups with key enablers to support taking forward actions from their plans.

"The roundtable events were particularly engaging—they felt like a kind of speed-dating for knowledge and were a great way to quickly build connections, put faces to names, and gather useful contacts."

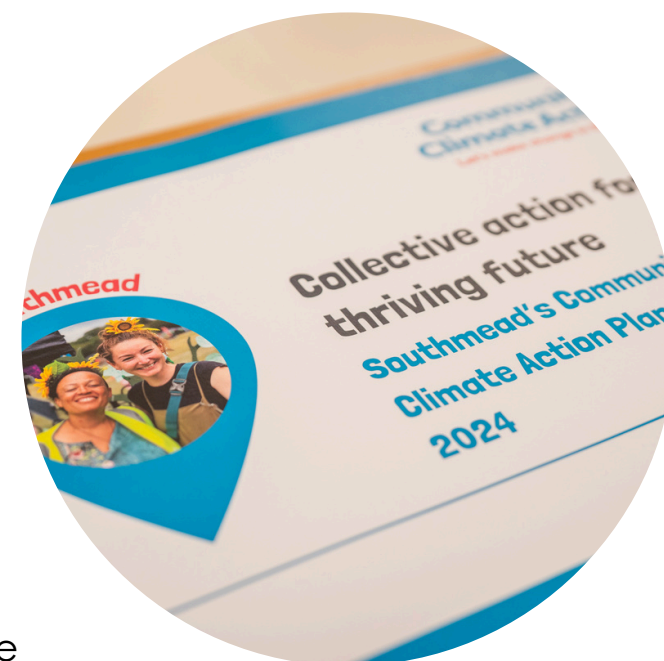
-Kirsty Tait, Heart of BS13



Plan production and launch

A plan template was used by all groups to develop their plans, with seven key themes identified during the first phase of the project, and subsequently expanded in 2025 to also include adaptation & resilience as an eighth theme.

Each community produced full/strategic version and an accessible community summary version of their plans, which were launched at a strategic citywide event as well as their own local community events.



Plan activation phase

The development of plans was just the first step in a journey to communities taking action on climate and nature and being able to play a role as leaders in this area.

As part of the programme, two activation workshops were held to keep the network connected with one another and share advice and progress. In addition, Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership worked with Bristol City Council to identify potential opportunities for community groups to collaborate together or with city partners to get funding or find other ways to make priorities a reality.





Who was involved

The following 11 community groups took part in the capacity building programme and developed community climate action plans:

Place-based communities

- Bricks Bristol, working with Brislington residents
- Knowle West Media Centre / Knowle West Alliance, working with residents of Knowle West and Filwood
- Southmead Development Trust, working with Southmead residents
- Windmill Hill City Farm, working with residents of Bedminster
- Hillfields Community Garden, working with Hillfields residents
- Hotwells & Cliftonwood Community Association, working with residents of Hotwells, Cliftonwood and Harbourside
- Shirehampton Action, working with Shirehampton residents

Demographic communities*

- Rising Arts Agency, working with underrepresented creatives aged 18-30
- One Green Kitchen, working with women over 40 from marginalised communities
- Bristol Older People's Forum, working with people age 55+

Communities of interest

- Gloucestershire County Cricket Club and The Next Test, working with members and fans of cricket in the region

The second cohort of community groups were all place-based organisations, often with over ten employees. The exception to this was Hillfields Community Garden, who were entirely volunteer run when they started on the programme.

*For example: young people, people from particular global majority backgrounds, LGBTQIA+ people, older people, women, etc.



The third cohort of community groups were a mixture of demographic communities, communities of interest and place-based organisations. This was a proactive decision to include more groups that represent demographic communities and communities of interest from across the city, recognising that this had been missing from the second cohort. The majority of groups in the third cohort were much smaller, with no more than five employees.

The programme was supported by project partners Bristol City Council and Centre for Sustainable Energy, as well as community partners who fed into particular sessions and acted as mentors.

[Read their community climate action plans](#)



Impact



17 community climate action plans created by a diverse range of community organisations.

Over 5000 local people fed into community priorities and actions for the plans over the course of 5 years, with roughly 1250 people inputting into the new plans developed in 2024 and roughly 850 in 2025.

Over 100 stakeholders involved in the peer roundtables and attending the launch of the plans.

The 5 organisations who launched their plans in 2024 leveraged over **£240,000 in additional funding to take forward priorities** (most significantly in relation to energy).

All 5 organisations who launched their plans in 2024 went on to develop project proposals for an innovative Community Investment Prospectus for the city, which was launched in May 2025.

“Over the course of its first two phases, the Community Climate Action Project has become a cornerstone in Bristol’s response to the climate and nature crises – meaningfully creating space for communities to have a voice and play a key role in their delivery. It has been hugely powerful to see anchor community organisations, and their communities, engaging positively in climate action and mapping out concrete local plans.”

-Helen Martin, Bristol Energy Cooperative



Many communities have already started taking action on priorities identified in their plans. These include:



Local people improving existing green spaces, community gardens, tree planting and working towards setting up a nature reserve.



Community organisations installing solar, batteries, and LED lighting on community buildings and looking at options such as whole street retrofit and other exciting energy projects.



Local people putting on events within their communities relating to climate, food, nature connection, travel, reuse and other themes from their plans.



Community groups collaborating to form a place-based climate hub.

Many groups have been taking forward these priorities without significant additional funding, and there remains a need for more diverse funding streams and support to be available for community groups to take forward the priorities identified in their plans.

Key benefits



Undertaking climate and nature engagement improves understanding of the issues communities face, how things are interrelated and how to communicate with your community.

Unites community around positive vision for the future, with a strong sense of priorities of your community, a mandate to take positive action, and a route map to begin implementation of that vision.

Provides a supportive network as well as professional development for staff.

Raises profile of community organisation and opens doors to new funding (including for staff roles), partnerships and support.

Helps position community organisations as respected climate leaders in the city.

Enables the views of a diverse range of citizens to inform strategic climate conversations and decision-making.

Creates another pathway to deliver social justice and health and wellbeing work because these issues are all connected.

Ensures that climate priorities are integrated within organisational priorities and community vision.

Increases shared knowledge in communities about climate change, including the local challenges in addressing this critical issue, as well as the opportunities.

The plans provide an evidence base of community priorities that can be used to determine strategic direction, influence regional efforts, open new opportunities and attract resources to turn these plans into action – bringing real benefit to people's lives.

Builds local resilience to the effects of climate change and developing grass roots support for climate action.

Enables more inclusive engagement with citizens about environmental issues and ensuring climate action at a city scale does not exacerbate existing inequalities.

Embeds a just transition.

Community climate action plans provide a social mandate on behalf of communities for local authorities and agencies aiming to support regional transitions to respond. This mandate can be delivered with additional funding and complementary programmes that align with and support activation of plans, building on the energy and momentum generated through the engagement work.

"The community climate action network of organisations supported by Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership is essential for keeping us all connected and informed of opportunities, training, funding and policy changes. This influences what we do on the ground – the top down. The network helps us see the bigger picture of our work and champions community climate action in Bristol and how we can look at further funding together to continue this important work."



-Annali Grimes, Knowle West Media Centre

Top tips



Community organisations need to be well-resourced to do this work: consider building in more funding, capacity and time for organisations to do this work well. Smaller groups need additional funding and capacity to enable them to take part of the programme.

Developing a community climate action plan can help communities start on the journey of developing solutions and taking action on climate and nature, recognising the interconnectedness between issues affecting the climate and issues affecting people's everyday lives.

Community engagement takes time, and it is difficult to be representative of everyone in a community. Increasing the amount of financial resource and time available to groups to deliver effective engagement could help with this.

Creating connections between community groups working across the city is hugely valuable, as are the connections made with other organisations and stakeholders working on the issues being explored through the plans. Make space for peer learning and dialogue to ensure those connections are made.

The process of developing a co-produced plan seems to work best when it is led by a single community organisation who knows their community and has experience of engaging in their communities and understand co-production and asset-based approaches.

A reflection from assigned mentors is that there may be ways to strengthen or support the mentoring relationship, ensuring that it forms a core part of people's experience rather than an optional "add-on" by setting up early meetings to build the relationship and having regular check-ins booked in. Matching together communities that shared similarities (either in terms of proximity, demographic, interest etc.) was the most successful approach.

Capacity building workshops need to prioritise peer learning and need to be spacious to support effective engagement with thematic experts and an opportunity to form a bond as a cohort and learn from one another.

Making an assessment at the start of the programme to identify specific support needs and also areas of expertise that could be shared with one another or supported by a mentor is important, given the range of skills and experience being brought by different community groups. There is not going to be an ideal one size fits all approach.

Taking an asset-based community development approach to this work is key in terms of identifying what is strong in communities and seeing communities as agents of change on issues that they are concerned about. It can also help with ensuring that priorities and actions are at different levels including things that communities have power to change.

Not all groups are at a stage where developing a community climate action plan is right for them and, even when they are, not all communities want to lead on delivery of every priority their community identifies. The plans provide a foundation for identifying, prioritising and negotiating who can do what to enable each community to participate as fully as possible in the region's transition to net zero and nature recovery.



What next

The capacity building programme is an important element of the wider Community Climate and Nature Action Model developed by Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership. The model has been refined within the social and political context of the diverse city of Bristol over the last five years. Going forward we will be delivering the capacity building programme with more and different communities across the wider West of England region.

Our aim in creating both the capacity building programme for communities and the wider project model, was to develop learning and resources which could be shared and replicated in other places, with adaptation to varying local contexts.

We aim to share more in-depth insights and learning through online surgeries and via our consultancy offer going forward, so please get in touch if you'd like to learn more about the Community Climate and Nature Action Model.

Contact details :

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Stay in touch



'The Community Climate Action project aligns well with the council's Just Transition approach, including both how we engage with citizens about environmental issues and ensuring climate action at a city scale does not exacerbate existing inequalities rather reducing them. The project has had direct, positive impacts on community engagement and empowerment as well as practical climate and nature action in Bristol.'

-Martin Fodor, Chair of Environment and Sustainability Committee, Bristol City Council

'Community infrastructure exists everywhere, and community organisations are experts of their place, community and lived experience. It's essential that we harness the wisdom and potential of the UK's community infrastructure to catalyse widespread climate and nature action, which both involves, and improves the quality of life of local people.'

**-Amy Harrison, Head of Community Partnerships,
Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership**

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This insights report was developed by Rachel Mohun, with contributions from community partners and the wider Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership team.



