

Community Leadership Panel Insights Report



Summary



The Community Leadership Panel on Climate Change and Just Transition, offers a scalable, place-based model that empowers communities to actively shape strategic initiatives from the early stages of planning.

Composed of representative community leaders (who are compensated for their time), the panel convenes regularly to review project, policy and strategy proposals on a city or regional level, serving as a 'critical friend' in the decision-making process. By moving beyond passive, late-stage consultations that offer limited influence, the panel plays a decisive role, fostering a trusted and transparent relationship between civil society and the city authorities. This, in turn, leads to more just and inclusive policies that avoid creating unintended barriers and/or compounding existing inequities in the local context.

The panel is a new model of community influence and leadership, developed by Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership with support from Praxis Research as part of the National Lottery funded Community Climate Action Project. The panel complements other climate expert groups in the city such as the Bristol Advisory Committee on Climate Change, by bringing a just transition lens to strategic thinking and planning around climate and nature.

The panel is an important part of the wider Community Climate and Nature Action Model, a place-based approach for a just transition. The model harnesses existing social and community infrastructure to support both community and climate resilience. It recognises community and voluntary sector expertise and positions communities as key agents of change.

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Introduction

The Community Leadership Panel on Climate and Just Transition (the panel) brings together diverse community insights and lived experience, advocating for the priorities of Bristol communities.

This range of perspectives can help shape, inform and advocate for community benefit and bring valuable expertise to strategic citywide initiatives.

The panel advocates for the needs of those with less agency, ensuring that the city delivers a just transition. The panel model and methodology has been refined over the last three years (2022-25) through development funding from the National Lottery, and with the expert support of citizen democracy specialists Praxis.

The panel is made up of a pool of panellists with varied experience, supported by advisors from Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership, Bristol City Council and Centre for Sustainable Energy and informed by Praxis. Panellists are community leaders from across the city who regularly engage with their communities. Many panellists have also coproduced community climate action plans with their communities and so have robust and nuanced insights into the priorities of their communities, bringing a level of legitimacy and representation to the panel.

Panellists are experts of their communities and their lived experience and therefore are paid a professional panellist rate for the time and the expertise they bring to panel sessions.



Aims of the panel

The Bristol panel aimed to develop a repeatable place-based model of community leadership on just transition which:

- applies a just transition lens to strategic climate and nature initiatives by being a trusted critical friend
- improves new projects or policies, ensuring they are shaped and informed by a broad range of perspectives and lived experiences
- provides a useful sounding board through a professional and confidential process
- reviews strategic and citywide / regional projects and policies early in their development to effectively inform and influence from a community, equity and climate justice perspective
- highlights potential areas of citizen resistance/concern, helping to mitigate potential project risks at an early stage
- creates a mechanism which convenes diverse and representative community leaders, who are informed by ongoing community engagement and community climate action plan priorities





In addition the panel can:

- provide comprehensive recommendations reports following a panel session to guide future action
- constructively support, inform and broaden existing or planned stakeholder engagement
- support specific organisational aims around corporate social responsibility, social value, and environmental, social and governance (ESG).

Utilising the expertise of the panel at a timely point in the development of projects and policies, enables the panel to genuinely shape and inform in a robust but supportive way. This ensures community perspectives are effectively embedded at an early stage of the process.

Why is the panel needed



The transition to net zero could be a once in a generation opportunity to also address systemic inequity, leading to a just transition.



The panel is a tangible mechanism for implementing just transition principles and community climate action plan priorities.



The panel moves beyond communities being passive or reactive consultees late on in project or policy development.



Addresses risks of the transition to net zero creating (possibly unintended) new barriers and / or compounding existing inequity.



The panel is a professional and structured process which builds trust and effective collaboration and dialogue between communities, the council and key city stakeholders.



Diverse insights are often lacking from the development of climate and nature policies, which can result in lack of representation and risk of projects being less fit for purpose.



The panel process



Throughout the project the panel met quarterly. The panel process for each project reviewed consisted of five stages over a three-month period. Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership performed the role of panel convenor, facilitator and secretariat.

1. Selection of project/policy to be reviewed

- Expression of interest form process with review and shortlisting if required. On several occasions, the panel made a proactive approach to significant city projects with an invitation to present to the panel.

2. Pre-panel preparation

- Once the project for review has been selected, panel facilitators have a short meeting with panel presenters who also complete a pre panel questionnaire which is circulated to panellists a week in advance of the panel.
- Panellists read pre panel questionnaire and any key documents or background reading.
- A bespoke Miro board is created to curate contributions from panellists and advisors before, during and after the panel session.
- A short online pre panel session is held with panellists, to identify any initial reflections and key questions or concerns ahead of the panel session.



3. Panel session

- Panel sessions are hosted in person in a central, accessible venue.
- A panellist only preparation session is held before presenters arrive.
- A joint session with presenters and panellists which includes:
 - A short presentation from presenters, highlighting areas they would most like panel input on.
 - A round of clarifying questions from panellists.
 - Time for discussion between panellists and presenters.
 - Initial in-person comments from panellists to presenter.
- A closed session follows, during which panellists discuss and prioritise key recommendations for the report.
- A shared Miro board is used throughout to capture notes and recommendations from all panellists and advisors.

4. Development of recommendations report

- Panellists have time to add further thoughts and recommendations to the shared Miro board.
- The secretariat collates draft recommendations reports for review and sign off by panellists and advisors.
- A final recommendations report is circulated to presenters, usually two weeks after the panel session.

5. Panel feedback and follow up

- Presenters complete a short feedback form one month and six months after the panel session to track the impact of the recommendations report and help refine the panel process.
- If appropriate (depending on levels of confidentiality) a short external update on the project presented is shared.
- Further panel sessions are encouraged if appropriate depending on the scale and timeframe of the project initially presented.

'I would absolutely recommend the panel and have done so to colleagues. It is a very efficient community engagement process with such a wide-ranging group of panellists. The report is really comprehensive and went beyond expectations.'

-Sam Willetts, NHS

'Diverse community insights are critical to ensuring climate and nature strategies are well informed and fit for purpose. Their absence can result in unintended negative consequences which compound existing inequalities and risk citizen backlash. Bristol is committed to a just transition to net zero and the community leadership panel helps ensure social justice is a priority in how the city takes climate and nature action.'

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



Benefits of the panel approach



The panel developed the confidence of panellists around their own expertise, and gave city decision-makers and professionals a tangible entity to approach when seeking in-depth and personalised community expertise on just transition. The strong 'container' of the panel means that those who came seeking public opinion or tips on community engagement and communication, were met with a framing that panellists are experts, whose time and insights should be valued.



Photo credit: ShamPhat Photography

Some specific benefits of the panel model:

- Helps demonstrate the value of embedding community expertise into city decision-making.
- Creates a trusted, well-framed space where diverse lived experiences are positioned as legitimate expertise, influencing projects and building confidence among panellists.
- Embeds just transition principles at an early stage in project and policy development.
- Strategic climate and nature projects and policies are better informed by diverse insights and lived experiences at an early stage.

- Has legitimacy as panel is informed by the priorities in community climate action plans which have been codeveloped through inclusive community engagement.
- Strategic projects and policies are more fit-for-purpose and less likely to experience citizen or community backlash or polarised debate.
- Reduces risk of new unintended additional barriers, for example amongst the Disabled community.
- Develops trusted connections and dialogue between community leaders, strategic climate leaders, and the council.

'The panel is made up of a knowledgeable, insightful group of people. It's not often you're lucky enough to get genuine feedback from a collective representing so much of our city in one room.'

-James Sterling, Bristol City Leap



Challenges of the panel model



The panel's work in Bristol highlighted persistent paradoxes—between representation and advocacy, between influence and authority, and between professional and community modes of engagement—these can't be neatly resolved. Rather than seeing these tensions as flaws, we suggest they are a source of the panel's distinctiveness and potential for innovation.

Sustaining and evolving the panel requires continued investment, honest reflection, and openness to experiment, so that its contribution to climate action and just transition can deepen and continue.

Building legitimacy and demand for the panel hasn't always been easy and framing community insights as valuable expertise has been challenging for some city stakeholders.

The cost per panel session is relatively high due to equitably remunerating panel members, but this cost needs to be weighed up with it being an efficient means of getting detailed feedback.

'Increasing democracy and participation in a world where elite power is the norm will always be challenging. Panellists have frequently questioned the ability of the panel to 'have teeth' or whether they are sufficiently 'representative' of the wider community. These are good questions we will keep coming back to, but we don't want the perfect to be the enemy of the good. The panel is clearly having a material impact on many of the projects which have consulted it.'

-Emilia Melville, Praxis

We have reflected on several questions relating to the cost of the panel:

- If presenters paid the full cost of the panel, would they value the expertise more highly?
- What would it take to start normalising community expertise as something that should be factored into strategic budgets?
- The panel is cheaper than in depth co-production - but in some cases co-production is what's really needed.



Photo credit: Heart of BS13



Photo credit: Ambition Lawrence Weston



Photo credit: Eastside Community Trust

Tips for developing a panel in your area

Lessons from Bristol's panel development have the potential to inform the creation of similar panel structures in other places, adapting the model to local contexts, while retaining its core commitment to genuinely valuing community expertise.

- 💡 Renumerate panel members adequately for their time and expertise. This is essential to ensure diverse perspectives are included. The panel model aims to address underrepresentation in city decision-making.
- 💡 Provide a thorough induction process for panel members to deepen their knowledge and understanding of local strategy, governance and decision-making structures.
- 💡 Consider the potential sources of power or leverage for the panel. Is there any policy context which could push developers or policy makers to pay particular attention to community insights? In Bristol, the Just Transition Declaration endorsed by Bristol City Council, helped to catalyse leverage.
- 💡 Clearly articulate why decision makers will benefit from presenting to a panel, so they find their own reasons to value community expertise.
- 💡 Create sufficient 'safety' for presenters to feel they can be honest and share initial ideas at an early stage in the process, and be able to take panel feedback on constructively rather than react defensively. A professional panel process and degree of confidentiality can help support this.
- 💡 Observe current decision-making structures and advisory bodies in the local area, including government and non-government. Reach out to these and discuss the idea and need for a panel, and how it might fit within the existing structures and processes.

- 💡 Advocate for the panel model. To create such a structure, someone needs to believe in it enough to gather support and resources and bring it into being.
- 💡 Find a secretariat / host organisation for the panel. Someone needs to take on the administrative responsibility of facilitating the panel. This includes advocacy of the panel with key local stakeholders. The panel will be most likely to succeed if it has a home in an established organisation that ideally is independent of the local authority. Independence enables panellists to remain impartial when local authority items come to the panel.
- 💡 Keep reflecting on the legitimacy of the panel and keep seeking to expand the representation of the panel. Consider communities of place, demography and of shared lived experience.



Photo credit: ShamPhat Photography

Projects reviewed by the panel



Bristol City Council on the Local Plan review which includes policies for deciding planning applications in Bristol.

Bristol City Leap on the Community Energy Fund which provides grants and loans to Bristol's community energy sector.

Bristol City Council on the Keep Bristol Cool Framework, a local management plan to address urban heat risks.

West of England Combined Authority on the West of England Local Nature Recovery Strategy, which identifies priorities for nature recovery in the region, and potential measures to deliver them.

Bristol City Council, Abundance Investment, Bristol and Bath Regional Capital and Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership on the Net Zero Investment Co-Innovation Lab, which aims to attract investment for climate and nature friendly projects.

Bristol City Council, Homes England and the West of England Combined Authority on Bristol Temple Quarter, a large city-centre regeneration.

Integrated Care System, NHS Bristol, North Somerset, South Gloucestershire on the Healthier Together Green Plan Refresh, a strategy to ensure NHS services collectively plan health and care services that meet the needs of the local population.

Bristol City Council - on the One City Climate Action Plan Priorities.

Bristol City Council on the Avon Flood Resilience Strategy.



The Bristol Community Leadership panel consists of:

Panellists (Community Climate Action Project core partners):

- Emily Fifield – Eastside Community Trust
- Kirsty Tait – Heart of BS13
- Donna Sealey – Ambition Lawrence Weston
- Jah Cabellero – ACH
- Melissa Blackburn - Lockleaze Neighbourhood Trust
- Emma Geen – Climate & Disability Associate
- Suzanne Wilson (left 2024)
- Camille Degois (left 2023)
- Vic Wakefield-Jarrett (2023-2024)

Associate panel members

- Ian Quaife- Bristol Older People's Forum
- Ruth Nortey – Climate and Disability Forum
- Priyanca D'Souza – Climate and Disability Forum
- Natalie Hyacinth – Eastside Community Trust's Leadership Programme
- Rosina Al Shaater

Panel advisors

- Mark Leach – Bristol City Council
- Harriet Sansom – Centre for Sustainable Energy
- Amy Harrison – Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership
- Emilia Melville – Praxis (Panel evaluation)

Panel secretariat

- Rachel Mohun - Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership

'I think the panel is conceptually a really important part of our climate governance.'

- Alex Minshull, Sustainable City and Climate Change Manager, Bristol City Council

What next



The next phase of the Community Climate and Nature Action Project (2025-28) will include the creation of a Community Leadership Panel on Just Transition for the wider West of England region. This will be informed by insights from the development of the Bristol panel from 2022-25 and supported by the expertise of Praxis.

Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership are exploring collaborations to support the continuation of the Bristol panel in addition to the new West of England panel. If you are interested in commissioning or supporting the Bristol panel in the future, please get in touch.

Contact details :

contact@bristolclimatenature.org
www.bristolclimatenature.org

Stay in touch



The Community Climate Action Project is coordinated by Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership and funded by the National Lottery's Climate Action Fund.

This insights report was developed by Amy Harrison, Head of Community Partnerships, with input from Emilia Melville, Praxis.



