Community Climate & Nature Action

UWE Bristol University of the West of England

Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership

Research overview

Evidence for community-policy engagement in the Community Climate & Nature Action project

Harris, G., De Vito, L., Fogg Rogers, L., Cockbill, L., Corbett, C. (2026).

COMMUNITY FUND

This overview summarises initial insights from the Community Climate & Nature Action (CCNA) Phase 3 project, bringing together policymakers for a Regional Roundtable at the outset of the three year programme in January 2026. Since Autumn 2020, the CCNA project has supported a growing movement for community-led climate and nature action - co-creating local action plans, developing a network of community leaders, and delivering practical, place-based projects that have generated tangible benefits for local people. This work, coordinated by Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership and funded by the National Lottery, has established an effective and inclusive model that is now being expanded across the West of England.

The session brought together national, regional, and local stakeholders to examine how community participation in climate and nature action can be strengthened across the West of England. Building on a review of evidence on polycentric governance - where responsibility and decision-making are shared across multiple actors and levels rather than held in a single centre - participants explored how councils currently engage communities, where representation gaps persist, and how community-generated ideas can more effectively influence policy.

Across the roundtable, a clear message emerged: the region has extensive engagement activity - particularly in Bristol, reflecting 5 years of CCNA investment - but lacks a coherent, systemwide pathway and ecosystem that enables communities to meaningfully shape climate and nature decision-making. Participants strongly validated the evidence themes presented, particularly the need for adequate lifecycle capacity, long-term relationships, trusted anchor organisations, and accessible routes for community input to reach statutory frameworks such as Local Plans. Participants also noted that this same engagement infrastructure will be critical for strengthening climate resilience across the region, shaping the foundations of the West of England's next chapter of adaptation and transformation.

Engagement is active but uneven, often concentrated in places with strong infrastructure and resources while under-representing rural communities, marginalised groups, and young people. Councils rely heavily on project-based consultations that rarely 'close the loop' to report on outcomes, contributing to declining trust and consultation fatigue. Engagement is further constrained by fragmented internal structures, short-term funding cycles, and a lack of statutory levers that embed participation within broader governance systems.

Participants identified several region-wide opportunities: developing a shared participation and governance baseline; aligning community climate and nature plans with Local Plans and other statutory processes;

strengthening the role and resourcing of community-based initiatives; expanding deliberative and creative methods to broaden legitimacy; and establishing clearer, more transparent routes for community generated ideas to influence decision-making.

These insights form the foundation for the next stage of CCNA Phase 3, which will focus on building a coherent regional framework for community participation - one that is consistent, inclusive, mission-aligned, and supported by both soft and hard governance levers.

Reflections on the evidence themes

The UWE Bristol team proposed ten evidence informed themes for polycentric climate and nature governance:

1. **Co-production requires capacity, relationships and evaluation**
   Effective collaboration depends on long-term investment in people, skills, time and reflective practice that strengthens trust and shared understanding.

2. **Participation without power-sharing risks backlash**
   Communities need to see how their contributions influence decisions, otherwise engagement erodes trust and generates resistance.

3. **Distributing capacity builds resilience**
   Spreading responsibility across councils, trusted local organisations and communities reduces fragility and strengthens the system's ability to sustain action over time.

4. **Blending soft and hard regulation strengthens governance**
   Guidance, missions and voluntary frameworks need clear statutory anchors to ensure consistency, accountability, and delivery.

5. **Trusted local partners act as essential system connectors**
   Community organisations and networks bridge institutional gaps, enable engagement with marginalised groups and provide continuity where councils have limited reach.

6. **Mission oriented programmes enable long-term collaboration**
   Shared missions create alignment across different levels of government and actors, supporting coordinated experimentation and sustained partnership.

7. **Inter-urban networks spread ideas but rely on local feasibility**
   Regional and global networks help disseminate learning, but successful adoption depends on local powers, resources, and political context.

8. **Deliberation, scenarios, and narrative tools build legitimacy** Representative and creative engagement approaches help broaden participation, foster understanding, and strengthen trust in climate and nature decisions.

9. **Success criteria should be co-defined and adaptive** Measures of progress must evolve with relationships, learning and changing community priorities, rather than relying solely on fixed metrics.

10. **Feedback loops and accountability strengthen trust and system learning** Demonstrating how community insights influence decisions - and providing timely, transparent feedback - reinforces legitimacy, builds confidence in governance processes and supports ongoing collective learning.

Participants ratified these themes as reflective of current local realities. Three insights stood out:

- **Capacity and continuity** are foundational to effective co-production. Limited officer capacity, facilitation skills and time for relationship-building often lead to shallow engagement and costly backlash when early collaboration is weak.
- **Trusted local organisations carry much of the relational load** but are under-resourced. These community actors are often the only ones able to reach marginalised groups and translate policy language into lived reality, but their funding and mandates are inconsistent.
- **Soft expectations** dominate over hard statutory levers. Without formal duties or clear requirements, participation is easy to de-prioritise and community-generated ideas struggle to influence statutory processes such as Local Plans.

Participants also noted declining public trust, narratives of division, weak feedback loops, and the need for greater clarity on what is genuinely open to co-production. Many welcomed the theme framework as providing a shared language to articulate longstanding challenges.

Current policy engagement practices across the West of England

The West of England governance structures include Bristol City Council, Bath and North East Somerset Council, North Somerset Council, South Gloucestershire Council, and the West of England Mayoral Combined Authority (WEMCA). Participants reflected on how councils engage communities, who participates, and where engagement is concentrated across the region. Engagement is extensive and often innovative, but remains uneven, fragmented, and heavily dependent on existing networks and capacity.

Across the four local authorities and WEMCA, participants described a wide spectrum of engagement approaches, ranging from digital channels and statutory consultations, to creative outreach and long-standing community partnerships. Councils use websites, social media, newsletters, and online consultations; roadshows, inquiry days, drop-ins, local plan events, climate hubs and community conversations; thematic groups such as food networks, parks forums, repair coalitions, energy networks; youth-focused programmes; and a wide range of community-connector-led activities delivered by trusted organisations. Formal mechanisms such as committee meetings, scrutiny processes, citizens' panels, and Local Plan consultations continue to play an important role, though they tend to reach familiar audiences.

Despite this breadth, discussions revealed consistent regional patterns. Engagement is broad but fragmented, unevenly distributed, and rarely connected to a coherent governance pathway. Most activity is project-based and short-term, reflecting funding cycles and statutory deadlines rather than a shared regional strategy. As a result, engagement depends heavily on individual officer capacity, existing relationships, the visibility of well-established community partners and, in some cases, political sensitivities around particular groups or spaces.

The cumulative effect is a system that is busy but not coordinated: engagement is extensive, often innovative, yet not always strategic or cumulative. Communities may have multiple ways to interact with councils, but the lack of continuity, integration and cross-departmental alignment means these efforts struggle to build the long-term trust and influence needed for community climate and nature action to feed into strategic policymaking.

> **"The result is a system that is busy but not coordinated, where policy engagement is extensive but not always strategic or cumulative."**
>
> Roundtable participant

Who participates - and who does not

Across councils, a consistent pattern emerged: engagement on climate and nature issues is dominated by a relatively narrow and familiar group of residents, typically those already active in civic life, connected to established climate networks, or living in areas with strong community infrastructure. While general topics such as transport or waste draw broader participation, climate-specific engagement tends to exclude many people. Young adults, renters, families under time pressure, rural communities (including farmers), Disabled residents, people on low incomes, and racialised or minoritised groups all remain under-represented. Even in wealthier neighbourhoods - where residents often rely on their own resources and information - direct engagement is low, though these communities can exert significant influence when they choose to mobilise. Participants stressed that these disparities reflect deeper structural barriers and trust deficits rather than shortcomings in engagement formats. Reaching those who are currently missing will require long-term relationship building, community connectors who can bridge institutional divides, and participatory methods that go beyond traditional consultation approaches, building on existing examples of inclusive practice - such as Bristol's Climate & Disability programme within CCNA - which has supported the UK's first community-led climate action plan developed with, by and for a community of disabled people.

> **"most outreach and funding is prioritised away from the wealthy areas, but we're certainly going to hear from those areas and the issues they deem important."**
>
> Roundtable participant





Spatial patterns of engagement

The cross-council mapping exercise made clear that engagement on climate and nature issues is geographically uneven across the West of England. Patterns were consistent across all four local authorities:

- Engagement clusters in places with strong civic infrastructure - particularly Bristol, where long-standing place-based investment and the presence of an independent climate and nature partnership (Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership) have supported more sustained engagement - alongside areas with active community organisations, regeneration programmes, or established local partnerships.
- Rural and peri-urban areas show fewer touchpoints, reflecting weaker infrastructure, lower trust in formal engagement, and fewer local bridging organisations able to maintain a presence.
- Wealthier neighbourhoods engage indirectly but still influence outcomes, often contributing less through formal processes but mobilising strongly on issues affecting their locality.

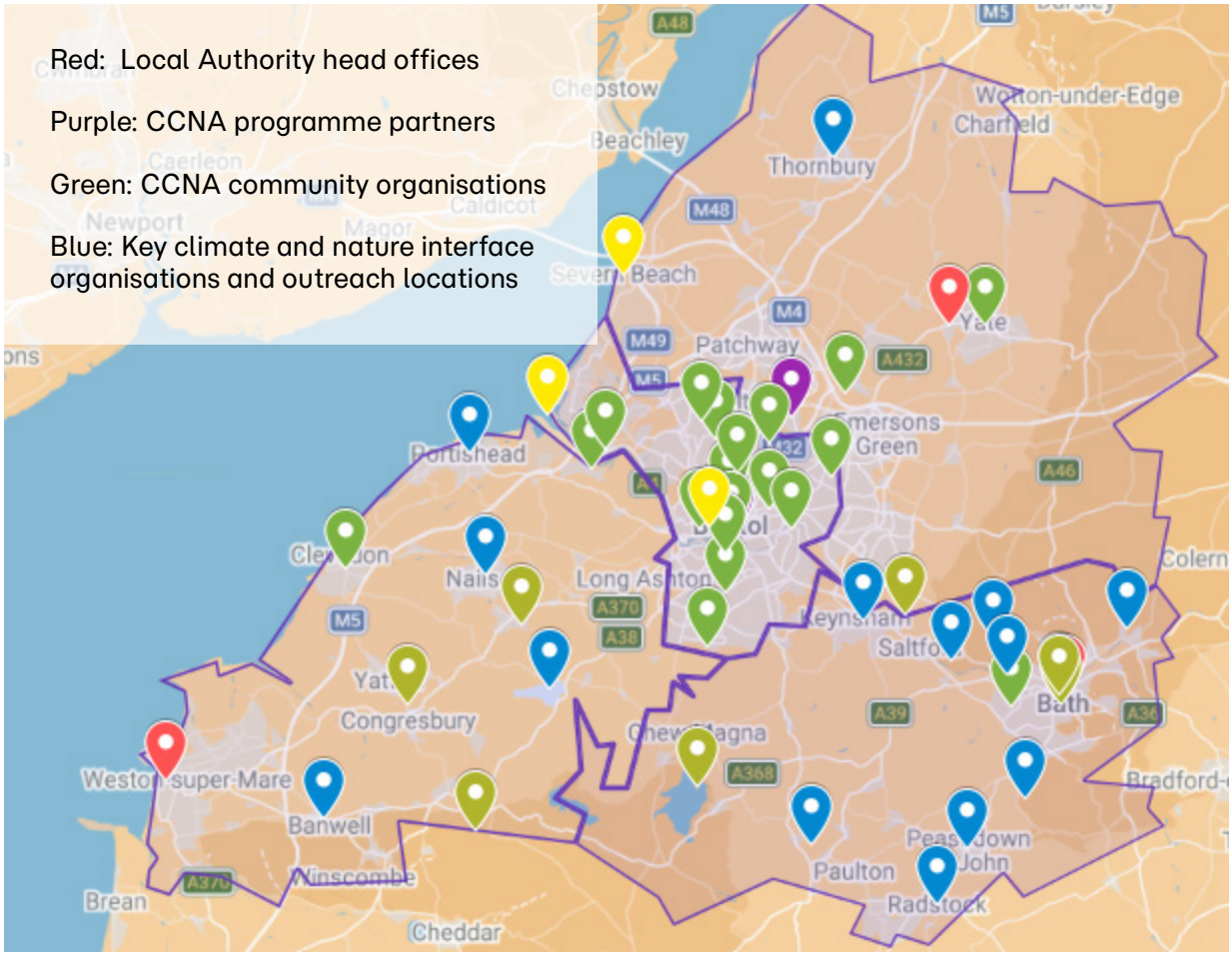


Diagram: Spatial distribution of fixed climate and nature engagement points.

- Much engagement in Bristol occurs via trusted local actors such as anchor organisations or demographic-specific groups, raising questions about visibility, accountability, and who is effectively speaking for communities.

Participants also noted that climate and nature issues are often absorbed into wider conversations on transport, waste, or regeneration, which can dilute their visibility. When combined with consultation-fatigue and limited feedback loops, this contributes to uneven coverage across the region.

Together, the mapping results underline the need for a shared regional engagement baseline - a tool to identify gaps, avoid duplication, and strengthen long-term relational infrastructure where it is currently weakest.

Routes to policy influence

Participants explored how a co-created community climate or nature plan might currently influence council policy. Policymakers reported multiple informal routes - contacting councillors, emailing climate teams, contributing to neighbourhood plans or responding to Local Plan consultations - but no clear or reliable pathway exists across any authority. The CCNA Community Leadership Panel was highlighted as an emerging mechanism for strengthening links between community priorities and policy discussions; however, participants noted that such approaches are not yet embedded as formal routes within council decision-making.

Influence is often dependent on individual officers, councillors, or community-facing partners who can champion proposals, meaning ideas can be lost when people move roles or capacity is stretched.





Neighbourhood plans were recognised as legitimate statutory tools but required significant resources that many communities lack.

Across councils, barriers were consistent: minimal funding for climate and nature work; staff capacity too limited to review community plans; uncertainty about who to contact; and internal silos that impede cross-departmental collaboration. These factors lead to frustration and a sense among communities that their ideas "go nowhere".

Policymakers identified opportunities to strengthen routes to influence through clearer points of entry, improved signposting, small funding pots for early-stage work, better internal coordination, and stronger support for local bridging organisations. Upcoming statutory cycles - including Local Plan reviews and the Local Nature Recovery Strategy - were highlighted as important windows if communities were supported early.

Overall, the review emphasised the need for a more structured, transparent and supported pathway that enables mutual influence between community-generated plans and local and regional decision-making - a core area of work for CCNA Phase 3.



Implications for strengthening community climate and nature governance

The insights highlight a region that is rich in engagement activity but lacks the system conditions needed for community participation to influence climate and nature decision-making consistently and meaningfully. Four implications stand out for the next stage of CCNA Phase 3.

1. **Participation needs to shift from project-based activity to system-level practice**
   Engagement across the West of England is extensive, but it is organised around projects, funding cycles and statutory consultations rather than a shared regional framework. This makes participation **reactive, fragmented, and hard to sustain**, particularly for communities with less capacity or trust. Participants noted that the region's devolved governance arrangements - through the Combined Authority - offer an opportunity to intentionally coordinate participation at a system level, aligning local authority activity around shared standards, priorities and pathways. A move toward coordinated regional approaches would allow councils and partners to reduce duplication and consultation fatigue, build long-term relationships in under-served areas, and ensure communities experience a coherent system rather than isolated interactions.

> **"A truly collaborative approach can't just be project based."**
>
> Roundtable participant

2. **Community perspectives can only shape decisions when connected to statutory processes**
   Community generated ideas often remain outside the formal governance system unless they happen to align with active strategies or individual officer priorities. Participants stressed that **Local Plans, statutory strategies and formal decision routes** are where long-term influence actually occurs. Strengthening the linkage between community climate and nature plans and statutory processes is therefore essential for: enhancing legitimacy and procedural fairness; reducing backlash caused by unmet expectations; and ensuring that community insights inform long-term spatial and environmental decisions.

3. **Trusted local actors, officers, and communities need stable, long-term relational infrastructure**
   Across councils, relational work is carried out by a small number of overstretched officers, trusted community organisations, and thematic groups. These relationships are **fragile**, heavily dependent on individual people, and vulnerable to turnover or funding gaps. Strengthening regional governance requires: long-term investment in community connectors and anchor organisations; organisational - not just individual - capacity for facilitation and partnership working; and clarity and shared expectations about trusted local actors' roles, risks and accountability. Without this, engagement will remain uneven, and representation gaps will persist.

> **"it's hard to represent a community and have that weight on you."**
>
> Roundtable participant

4. **Legitimacy and inclusion depend on broadening who participates and how**
   Mapping exercises made clear that the same groups dominate climate and nature engagement, while many residents - including young people, renters, rural communities, Disabled residents, wealthier neighbourhoods, and minoritised groups - are under-represented. To widen legitimacy, councils and partners will need to adopt more deliberative, creative and community-centred approaches that: invite participation from people who do not engage in traditional consultations; reduce barriers linked to time, trust, and confidence; create shared understanding across diverse viewpoints; and reflect how different communities experience climate and nature impacts. These methods can complement statutory engagement and help build a more representative regional discourse.

> **"true empowerment is only gained if participants gain a sense of 'you can shape something."**
>
> Roundtable participant

Community Climate & Nature Action

Working together

Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership

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