



# How place-based citizen engagement can shape a positive, decarbonised future for the UK

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involve



Quantum

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# Foreword

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Over the last two years, we have been working with local authorities and local residents to make net zero deliver for their places. Based on an inspiring vision from Innovate UK that people need to be at the heart of a decarbonised future, we set out to create innovative approaches that are both cost effective and meaningful.

**In this report**, we share a wealth of insights and knowledge that will help us respond to the climate crisis in ways that mean something to people and communities.

We began with a premise that instead of starting with climate, which is technical and top down, we need to start with place. Through a series of citizen visioning conversations, we asked people what they love about where they live, what the future risks are and what they want to change.

We then explored energy, climate, adaptation and getting to net zero in that context.

We generated visions and recommendations that bore out our premise that giving people a say in the future of their place also delivers on our climate goals.

Our key learning is to start where people are - to start with the place they live, to ask them what they want and need that net zero can deliver.

Through different forms of public deliberation and participation, we have supported 28 local authorities to be more citizen led. We have seen local people from the Outer Hebrides to Portsmouth create thoughtful, practical recommendations from setting up local one-stop shops for retrofit, to strategies for rolling out District Heat Networks. Our approaches have provided real value to the Councils, shaping their strategies and project plans, at a depth that consultation fails to deliver. They have increased residents' knowledge and confidence of the action that needs to be taken.

We have also shown that there is a cost to not doing this well. This is not an optional extra, it is a critical part of the transformation of our energy system going forward. The cost of good engagement is easily offset by the expense of defending decisions or not being able to implement at scale. This is especially true with the minimal viable processes we have created that generate effective recommendations with the public at relatively low cost.

People in the UK are still supportive of action on climate change, and they want a stake in that action. We have demonstrated the imperative and the practice to do this through dynamic conversations in communities. We have to work with the energy, intelligence, local insight and buy-in of everyone in the UK to get to net zero. This report shows a way to doing that which gives people power over these decisions and creates hope for the future.

# Executive Summary

Making real strides towards achieving the UK's 2050 net zero target requires households and businesses to change how they live, work, and travel. Climate action to reduce emissions and increase our resilience and energy security will be planned at the regional and local level, with local authorities planning and delivering much of this transition

This needs to be citizen-led to ensure that both climate policy and action reflects citizens' perspectives, priorities, and lived experience; local authorities must engage with their residents to increase the likelihood of support and take up.



# Executive Summary

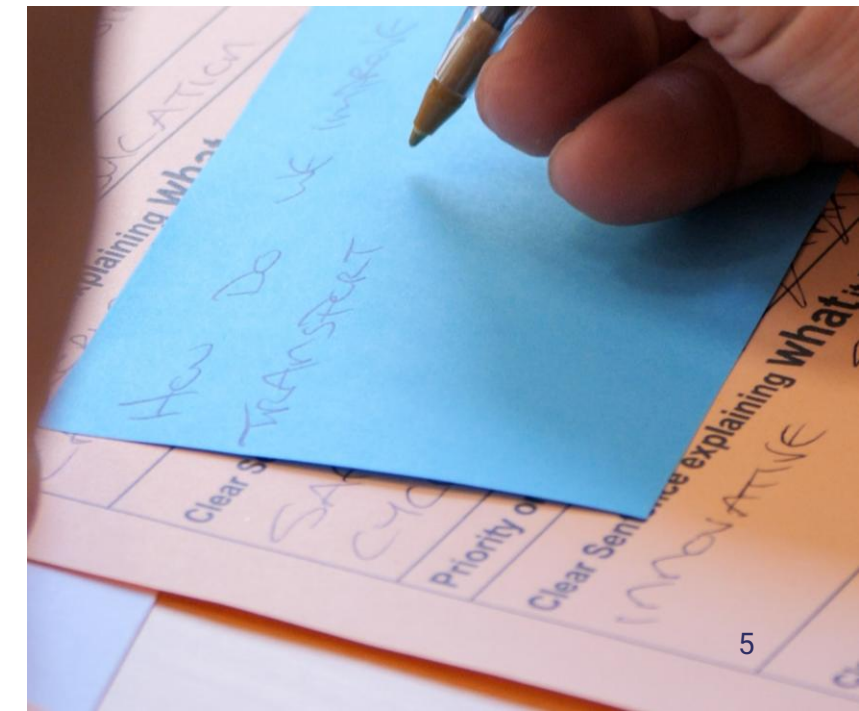
Local authorities are key to engaging local people and are well positioned as enablers and conveners of local action due to their remit of services and responsibilities. However, they face capacity and capability barriers the impact their ability to engage with the public to support this transition.

Thriving Places is part of Innovate UK's Net Zero Living programme, which provides support to local authorities, partners, and communities to overcome non-technological systemic barriers to the scaling and adoption of net zero solutions. We present key learnings and recommendations from the Citizen Engagement strand of the Net Zero Living programme, specifically climate-related citizen engagement and visioning support provided to local authorities.

## The key objectives of the research were to explore:

1. How this programme has supported the development of more participatory approaches to local decision-making by local authorities (what has and hasn't worked).
2. How an increased focus on participatory engagement has helped/will help local authorities and other key actors progress towards net zero.
3. How local citizen engagement can accelerate progress towards climate change goals.

The citizen engagement strand has been led by Involve with consortium partners Forum for the Future, Ipsos, and Quantum Strategy and Technology. This report is the fourth and final report generated by the consortium with others providing a review of net zero trends and citizen engagement in local authorities, a 'how to' guide for citizen engagement and an investigation of how costs can be incurred from not engaging in a participatory way (see Appendix A).



# Key messages

How did providing dedicated support and training help local authorities make changes in net zero engagement?

## **Participatory engagement strengthens legitimacy to act, and can improve quality, impact, and accelerate the delivery of climate targets.**

Recommendations from participatory approaches validated existing intentions, reduced internal risk aversion, and enabled recommendations to be lifted straight into scheme design and projects when linked with imminent decisions.

## **Local authorities built practical experience and confidence in running in-depth, participatory engagement.**

For many authorities this was their first exposure to participatory methods. Independent design and facilitation showed what 'good' looks like, reduced anxiety about disagreement, and modelled accessible practice. Officers reported a stronger understanding of when, with whom, and how to engage on complex issues.

## **Authorities heard from a more diverse mix of their communities than in typical consultations.**

Sortition-based recruitment and targeted outreach, Living Wage payments, robust onboarding, accessibility adjustments, and skilled facilitation brought in people who are often absent from statutory processes. Officers consistently described participant groups as more diverse and more reflective of their populations or target audiences than with their usual engagement approaches.

## **Linking engagement to live strategies and decisions improved traction.**

Most processes were connected to in-progress strategies, plans, or programmes (for example, net zero and adaptation plans, Local Plans, transport strategies, retrofit and heat networks). Where the scope and decision points were clear, citizen recommendations could be applied directly in design and delivery or used to validate and accelerate existing plans.

## **Participants' experiences were positive and constructive.**

Survey data showed understanding of the purpose of engagement increased from 84% to 94%, and knowledge of what the local authority was doing on net zero rose from 44% to 64%. Emotions shifted towards feeling informed, empowered, and hopeful. Many participants wanted to stay involved, some reported making changes in their own lives.

## **Place-based approaches unlocked constructive participation, with latent citizen support for action on climate change being strong and activated by engagement processes.**

Starting with what people value about their area and how it could be improved helped mitigate the potentially divisive topic of climate change. This approach helped produce locally grounded recommendations that participants saw as fair and practical. These recommendations also generally aligned with reducing emissions and building resilience. Participants supported locally framed, tangible benefits (cheaper energy, warmer homes, safer travel routes) regardless of whether they were concerned about climate change.

**However, follow-through was uneven, with constraints on staff time, unclear ownership of recommendations, and siloed responsibilities slowing or diluting influence.**

Overall, most (71%) participants agreed they felt confident that their contributions would be used. There was a large amount of variation between local authorities, with confidence tending to be conditional based on if senior leaders were visibly involved and routes to action were clear.

Despite training and hands-on learning, building lasting capacity in individual local authorities is challenging; skills often sat with a small number of officers and were vulnerable to turnover and competing priorities. Structural issues, such as tight budgets, short-term funding and complex remits, continued to constrain long-term impact and the embedding of participatory practice.

How can citizen engagement accelerate progress on climate change in the future?

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We found that citizen engagement offers the opportunity for a practical, repeatable model for high-quality engagement that can de-risk choices, widen support, and speed-up delivery when applied consistently.

**Our evidence shows that using innovative methods to engage citizens can unlock different outcomes for local authorities than more standard approaches to engagement.**

Participatory approaches can build citizen support for local authority decisions, particularly where they trust their perspectives and recommendations - grounded in lived experiences - have been considered. This is particularly the case for complex, contested issues, which standard approaches to engagement may not have time to fully explore with citizens in a structured way.

In turn, local authorities can build a better, more in-depth understanding of the priorities and views of people in their local area, and explore new, different ways of doing things and making decisions. This can help improve decision-making and, in future, avoid unplanned costs through unexpected requirements for officer time to defend unpopular decisions, or reputational damage caused by these.

**Key learnings for local authorities are:**

- **Start with place to broaden participation and focus on practical local improvements.** This approach makes engagement more accessible and still yields recommendations that align with climate goals.
- **Tie engagement to live decisions with clear scopes.** Tightly linking to imminent strategies or projects produces implementable outputs and makes it easier to show how public input is used.
- **Prepare for change before starting.** Name owners for recommendations, map internal and external actors early, schedule decision points, and set out how to respond and report back. Planning for this needs to happen early and proactively to allow for flexibility to ensure recommendations have a place to land. This is particularly important where remits are complex across different government departments and organisations. Visible governance and simple tracking keep momentum and trust.
- **Invest proportionately while building internal capability.** Not every decision requires large-scale processes, but proportionate, well-designed engagement, supported by independent facilitation where helpful, should be treated as core delivery, not a 'nice to have'. High quality engagement is worth investing in, and the costs of not engaging on complex issues can be higher later if genuine and timely citizen engagement to understand the public's priorities is not conducted.

- **Recognise and activate latent public support.** Many residents back tangible local benefits (warmer homes, safer transport routes, cheaper energy) regardless of their views on climate change, but confidence depends on visible follow through. Broadening who is in the room can help move actors at the local authority level from advisors to co-owners of action.
- **Link climate action to local economic opportunity.** Citizens consistently called for higher and enforced standards, local suppliers and jobs, youth skills pathways, and accessible one-stop advice. Designing programmes to grow local capability can align climate goals with thriving local economies.

**While structural barriers to in-depth engagement in local authorities remain, our evidence highlights opportunities for local authorities in future.**

Persistent, structural barriers remain and are likely to impact local authorities' ability to take advantage of these opportunities.

These barriers include local authorities having tight budgets with short, fragmented funding windows, making it hard to resource early, ongoing, in-depth engagement and to sustain follow through once programme support ends. In addition, local authority officers can often lack the capacity and resource to conduct the types of engagement processes carried out during this programme. This can lead to episodic engagement.

To take advantage of opportunities, local authorities, other local actors, and national government need to work together to build sufficient resources for citizen engagement into budgets for developing plans and strategies.



## Participatory engagement broadens who has a say.

Local authorities frequently highlighted that targeted recruitment and accessible design widened participation beyond the limited group who take part in statutory engagement.

Methods to achieve this included:

- Recruitment methods targeting either specific groups who were less often engaged (e.g. young people in Warrington), or a sample reflective of the local population.
- Conversation starter methods – where participants would take learnings from the engagement and discuss them with members of the community – broadened the reach for participation beyond those who were directly engaged.

This allows local authorities to incorporate more diverse lived experiences and different perspectives into decision-making, while empowering the voices who are heard less often.

## These methods grow public knowledge, confidence, and willingness to stay involved in local government decisions.

After engagement events, participants reported improved understanding of local authority actions and priorities, felt more informed, empowered and hopeful, and asked for more opportunities to take part in the decisions being made at a local level. Local authorities highlighted that this level of continued desire to be engaged was new for them, going beyond what they saw with statutory consultations, and helps to build a more engaged citizenry.

Ultimately, our findings evidence that participatory engagement improves decision-making by grounding it in the perspectives and experiences of the public. It can also reduce future costs and policy failures through generating tailored, actionable policies that the public trust more. Crucially, these processes ultimately demonstrated that citizen voices can be effectively integrated into climate decision-making when properly supported and help to support net zero transitions.

## Pathways for participatory engagement to accelerate progress on net zero:



De-risking contested choices for local authorities, leading to increased political confidence to proceed.



Helping to create cross-council buy-in, creating greater impact of citizen voices.



Producing recommendations and outputs which are tied to decision points, enabling faster integration into strategies and programmes.



Generating a clear vision of the enabling conditions that a wide range of citizens want and need, such as accessible information and pipelines for green skills, which can in turn lead to a higher uptake of low-carbon decisions. This can also build trust in local authorities' decisions.

# 1. Introduction

In 2019, the UK became the first major economy in the world to pass a binding legal target to reach net zero emissions by 2050.<sup>1</sup> Achieving this commitment requires the active participation of all sectors of society. To date, there has been significant progress in reducing emissions through changes in sectors such as electricity generation and industry.<sup>2</sup>

Achieving climate goals requires equally ambitious action across all sectors. Notably, half of the necessary emissions reductions required will depend on individuals and businesses adopting low-carbon solutions, decisions that will be made at local and individual levels.<sup>3</sup>



# Overview of the Net Zero Living programme

Innovate UK launched the £60 million place-based programme, Net Zero Living,<sup>4</sup> in October 2022, recognising the scale of transformation required to achieve the net zero target.

Despite progress being made at a local level on climate action, there remain significant barriers on citizen and business engagement, net zero planning, policy, and regulation, and data and finance.

The programme examined these barriers and applied them across systems (including housing, transport, and energy systems), with Innovate UK then structuring the funded local authorities into three pots:

## Pathfinder Demonstrators:

larger scale projects demonstrating how to overcome specific barriers, such as scaling sustainable retrofit approaches.

## Pathfinders:

places that were already on their journey, and who had some understanding of the barriers in place.

## Fast Followers:

local authorities who were ambitious but were likely to have been further behind on progress than other local authorities.

This report explores the work conducted in the Citizen Engagement strand of the Future Ready workstream, which aimed to create a community of practice, delivered mentoring, and gathered shared insight on supporting local authorities in the transition to net zero.



This report analyses evidence gathered as part of this strand of Innovate UK's Net Zero Living programme. The research assessed delivery of the objectives, derived from the goals of the overall programme:

**1.** How this programme has supported the development of more participatory approaches to local decision-making by local authorities (what has and hasn't worked).

**2.** How an increased focus on participatory engagement has helped/will help local authorities progress towards net zero.

**3.** How local citizen engagement can accelerate progress on climate change goals more widely.

The key mechanism assessed in this report is whether and how providing dedicated one-to-one support and targeted training can change how local authorities engage, influence ways of working and decision-making, and help progress towards net zero.



In this report, the support provided to local authorities is referred to as 'participatory engagement processes' (or projects) throughout. Often, these are referred to as 'in-depth' engagement, referring to public participation that aligns with involving, collaborating with, or empowering the public.

# What is meant by engagement?

Public engagement is a core element of how local and national government functions and supports democratic policy making, constituting a key part of local authorities' decision-making and design processes.

Engagement can have many different purposes and take various forms. At its core, engagement with citizens, no matter how in-depth, is how local authorities communicate with the public and involve them in decisions.

Public engagement exists at different levels, as shown in the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2)'s Spectrum of Public Engagement.<sup>5</sup> On this spectrum, local authorities' standard approaches to engagement often fall within either "Inform" or "Consult".

Figure 1: IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation

		Increasing impact on the decision				
		Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Public participation goals		To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solutions.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
Promise to the public		We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

Informing and consulting are important elements of engagement, and are often a statutory necessity, but for complex, contested issues like climate action these methods can struggle to build durable support and understanding for policy. As set out in the associated report on the Costs of Not Engaging (see **Appendix A**), relying on informing and consultation alone can reduce trust and result in increased opposition to proposed policies and strategies. In contrast, approaches that involve, collaborate with, and empower the public promise more impact on decision-making, and have different outcomes. These are the approaches that this work focused on and can be described as participatory and deliberative engagement.



# Citizen engagement and visioning

Involve and consortium partners worked with 28 local authorities, supporting them to engage and involve citizens, communities, and other key actors to create a clear direction for their place.

Ultimately, this should enhance their understanding and confidence on how best to engage the public in the long term. The local authorities being engaged as part of this stream are called the 'Fast Follower' local authorities.<sup>6</sup> The project lead (typically from Involve or Forum for the Future) consulted with the Net Zero Innovation Officer (NZIO) in the local authority and other local authority officers.

Based on an iterative process, these actors collectively selected an offer for support that best met the local authority's needs (see **Appendix A** for more information). Following this, the project was executed in collaboration between the NZIO, other local authority officers and the project lead.

The below summarises these methods. For more information, including the number of Fast Follower local authorities that adopted each method please see **Appendix A**.

## Citizen visioning:

A full visioning and engagement programme that starts with citizens, involves wider community actors, and delivers a full vision for net zero in the place, and recommendations for how to get there.

## Conversation starters:

Creative engagement with a wide selection of the local community. Core participants were trained as 'conversation starters' and supported to discuss identified issues with others in the community. They acted as citizen researchers and brought back findings to the core group who together formed recommendations for their place.

## Streamlined, flexible advice and delivery:

Structured, tailored advice from visioning and engagement experts. This was flexible, based on the needs of the local authority.



# Citizen engagement review

As Involve's consortium project leads delivered this support, Ipsos collected evidence on how far this support helped address the barriers to citizen engagement in local authorities throughout the programme.

The evidence in this report is from the following activities, carried out by Ipsos in conjunction with Involve (see **Appendix B** for further information, and **Appendix C-E** for individual analyses).

- Desk review of published evidence to inform the wider context of local authorities, climate change, and citizen engagement.
- Reflective workshops facilitated by Ipsos with Involve staff who managed projects with local authorities (project leads). These took place during the delivery of projects, and explored what was going well.

- Reflective interviews facilitated by Involve with project leads after the completion of projects, reflecting on the overall effectiveness of programme delivery.
- Self-assessment forms, completed by local authority officers, to explore how far in their engagement journey they were before engagement processes started.
- Insights sessions (or workshops) with local authority officers and the Involve project team, facilitated by Ipsos. These took place after individual processes completed and involved local authority officers, reflecting on how their specific engagement went. They were only completed by citizen visioning and conversation starter local authorities.
- Participant survey responses from citizen visioning and conversation starters. These were gathered before and after engagement processes.
- Analysis of the recommendations generated by citizens and outlined in project reports following the end of engagements.
- Local authority survey to gather reflections from local authorities supported by strategic advice and capacity building.

# Analysis and development of key learnings and recommendations

The evidence has been analysed using inductive reasoning, where researchers focused on the patterns and observations in the data and developed broader interpretations and theories based on what was identified across the different sources.

The mechanism being examined in this report is that providing dedicated, support and specific training for local authorities can facilitate changes in how local authorities engage communities, influencing ways of working, decision-making, and goals.

Following this, the report explores the implications for local authorities in the future, based on learnings and insights from this programme. For more information on the work of this consortium please see **Appendix A**, and for information on the methods of evidence gathering, see **Appendix B**.



## 2. Local authority context

Local authorities are at the sharp end of delivering climate action.

A third of emissions reductions needed for the Climate Change Committee's (CCC) Seventh Carbon Budget rely on household decisions around heating, road travel, flying, and diet.<sup>7</sup>

In 2020, the CCC estimated that local authorities are directly responsible for 2-5% of local emissions but can influence a third of an area's emissions through place-shaping, partnerships, leadership and engagement.<sup>8</sup>



National policies aiming to tackle carbon reduction and improve resilience to the impacts of climate change are felt and enacted at the local level. Ambitions of net zero, climate resilience, and biodiversity will succeed or fail locally – both in terms of delivery and public support.

There is substantial ambition in local government to act on climate change. In 2025, 87% of councils had a climate action plan.<sup>9</sup> However, delivery against these has been uneven, and there remain obstacles to local authorities delivering both net zero<sup>10</sup> and resilient communities. One of the key challenges are growing concern about the implications of net zero and increasing ambivalence to climate change as other issues occupy the public's consciousness.<sup>11</sup> Despite 79% of people saying they are concerned about climate change, 61% are worried that the transition to net zero will increase their living costs<sup>12</sup> and the proportion of the public who say the UK either does not need to reach net zero by 2050 or does not need a target at all rose from 9% in 2021 to 26% in 2025.<sup>13</sup> In Ipsos' January 2026 Issues Index, climate change was not in the public's top ten concerns, and had not been since 2024.<sup>14</sup>




Effective engagement with the public on climate change, its impacts, and how it can be tackled is vitally important, to build support for climate action and to develop policies that have traction with citizens leading to action.

This has been acknowledged in the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero's (DESNZ) strategy on participation: Energising Britain.<sup>15</sup> Doing so can help build the public's and businesses' understanding of and confidence in the policies, mechanisms, and tools they can use. This includes low carbon technologies, like heat pumps and electric vehicles, or behaviour changes they can make to reduce their carbon footprint, like reducing meat consumption and flying less.<sup>16</sup> Engagement can also help to build trust in the decisions being made and help develop policies that are deliverable. Importantly, effective engagement can also help citizens understand the opportunities that climate action brings such as creating local jobs, sustaining local supply chains and enabling healthier lifestyles.




Evidence from this research, specifically desk research and practice-based experience, was used to identify the barriers and opportunities that local authorities face in engaging the public on climate change. These are set out in the following table.



Table 2: **Barriers and opportunities faced by local authorities in engaging the public on climate change**

Barrier	Description	Potential opportunity
 <b>Financial constraints</b>	Local authorities face budget cuts and fragmented, competitive funding, limiting capacity for engagement beyond statutory requirements (typically informing and consulting processes), unless separately funded.	Citizen involvement can help to identify feasible, locally tailored and cost-efficient interventions, reducing the need for expensive persuasion or enforcement (see the Cost of Not Engaging report).
 <b>Low trust and scepticism</b>	Public can doubt that engagement will lead to action, undermining trust and reducing willingness to participate. This can often be based on previous experiences of engagement. Officers may also be hesitant to conduct participatory engagement as they think this level of distrust will continue.	<p>Participatory engagement strengthens trust, creates a durable mandate for climate action and supports more ambitious policy choices, or provides confidence in existing plans.</p> <p>Place-based futures work helps people imagine positive change, mobilise around shared visions and connect climate action to local identity and aspirations.</p>
 <b>Unclear expectations</b>	Central government has not clearly defined what local authorities are expected to deliver on net zero, creating uncertainty that undermines planning, expectation-setting and meaningful engagement.	Engagement frameworks can help local authorities clarify strategic aims, decision pathways and internal ownership, improving coherence across departments. The UK Government also recently published a public participation strategy on net zero (Energising Britain), which sets out how the government will make policy responsive to people's needs, and provide information for people to access benefits. This national strategy may provide a framework for local authorities to follow. Engagement processes can also help clarify what citizens expect from local authorities and other actors.

Barrier	Description	Potential opportunity
 <b>Embedded inequalities</b>	<p>Statutory engagement can often only reach a single ‘public’, overlooking diverse lived experiences and risking exclusion of marginalised groups or designing policies that exacerbate inequality.</p>	<p>Participatory engagement has a long history of focusing on ensuring a diversity of voices are heard. Ensuring accessibility, recruitment approaches that emphasise a reflective sample, and an understanding of the audiences that can be more challenging to engage can help overcome this.</p>
 <b>Cost-of-living pressures</b>	<p>Economic insecurity reduces people’s capacity to engage or prioritise climate action, making climate issues feel secondary to immediate financial pressures.</p>	<p>Starting with where people are is an important principle. Ensuring that participatory engagement processes are accessible and affordable for participants to attend can help overcome this barrier in the moment. The outcomes from engagements, built on lived experiences, can help inform local government on how best to meet peoples’ needs through tackling climate change.</p> <p>Engagement can also help ensure that climate action is fair, inclusive, and responsive to those most affected, strengthening the legitimacy of action and reducing unequal impacts.</p>

Barrier	Description	Potential opportunity
 <b>Limited integration into decision-making</b>	<p>Engagement often lacks influence on policy, with weak feedback loops creating public scepticism and perceptions of tokenism. This can be caused by a lack of internal engagement within the local authority, or by a lack of time invested in embedding the engagement process into upcoming opportunities across departments.</p>	<p>Participatory engagement provides insight into local values, constraints and priorities, enabling more feasible, acceptable and effective climate policies, programme design and ongoing reassurance to provide confidence for elected members.</p> <p>Early participatory engagement can also help anticipate opposition, avoid costly policy failure, and reduce reputational risk. Planning early for impact can help ensure that outcomes from engagement change policy, particularly through mapping paths to influence and relevant actors.</p>
 <b>Limited time, skills and organisational capacity</b>	<p>Local authority officers can lack the specialist skills, time and resources required for high-quality, inclusive, deliberative engagement.</p>	<p>Specialist skills can be gained through training programmes, sharing learning and increasing the quality of available toolkits and resources for local authorities. Building a community of practice in local authorities can also help to overcome this.</p>
 <b>One-off, fragmented engagement</b>	<p>Engagement is often episodic rather than continuous, limiting learning, momentum and long-term impacts. This impacts public potential for action and engagement skills not being practiced, over time.</p>	<p>Ongoing dialogue strengthens policy design, builds relationships and embeds engagement as a normal part of local governance. Continuous, iterative engagement builds skills and capacity within the council and is seen as valuable and planned in from the start; while capacity and trust grows in communities that see the impact of their opinions create positive change in their areas.</p>

# 3. Project insights

This section explores the effectiveness of the programme in achieving its objectives and supporting local authorities to address the barriers highlighted in Table 2.

The key mechanism being assessed here is whether providing **dedicated support and specific training to local authorities can facilitate changes in how local authorities engage communities, influencing ways of working, decision-making and goals.**



**This has been assessed in the following ways:**

**1.** How this programme supported the development of more participatory approaches to local decision-making.

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**2.** How participatory engagement helped or will help local authorities progress towards net zero.

We explore this using evidence gathered throughout this programme to assess:

- what went well and what was challenging.
- what this means for local authorities' citizen engagement on climate change in the future.

The section ends with a summary of how the barriers outlined in **Table 2** have been addressed through this programme.



# Dedicated support and specific training to local authorities

Providing this support aimed to help local authorities be more innovative in their approaches to citizen engagement, and to address barriers including financial constraints; limited time, skills, organisational capacity and integration of engagement into decision-making; and to enable different actors (including citizens and businesses) to contribute to decision-making in their local area.

To hear about the processes from the people who took part, you can watch published videos from some of the processes here:

- [Gateshead](#)
- [Blackpool](#)
- [Derry and Strabane](#)
- [Overview](#)



# Summary of what went well, and what went less well:

## What went well:

- We found the programme helped build practical experience and confidence of in-depth engagement in Fast Follower local authorities.
- Local authorities engaging citizens were able to hear from groups and members of their community who may have been absent from statutory consultations.
- Local authorities had largely tied engagement processes to inform live strategies and decisions.
- The engagement processes were a positive experience for participants, who reported feeling informed, empowered, and hopeful after engagement processes finished.
- We found that focusing on place over climate action proved effective in generating locally grounded outputs and recommendations, activating latent support for climate change-related policies.

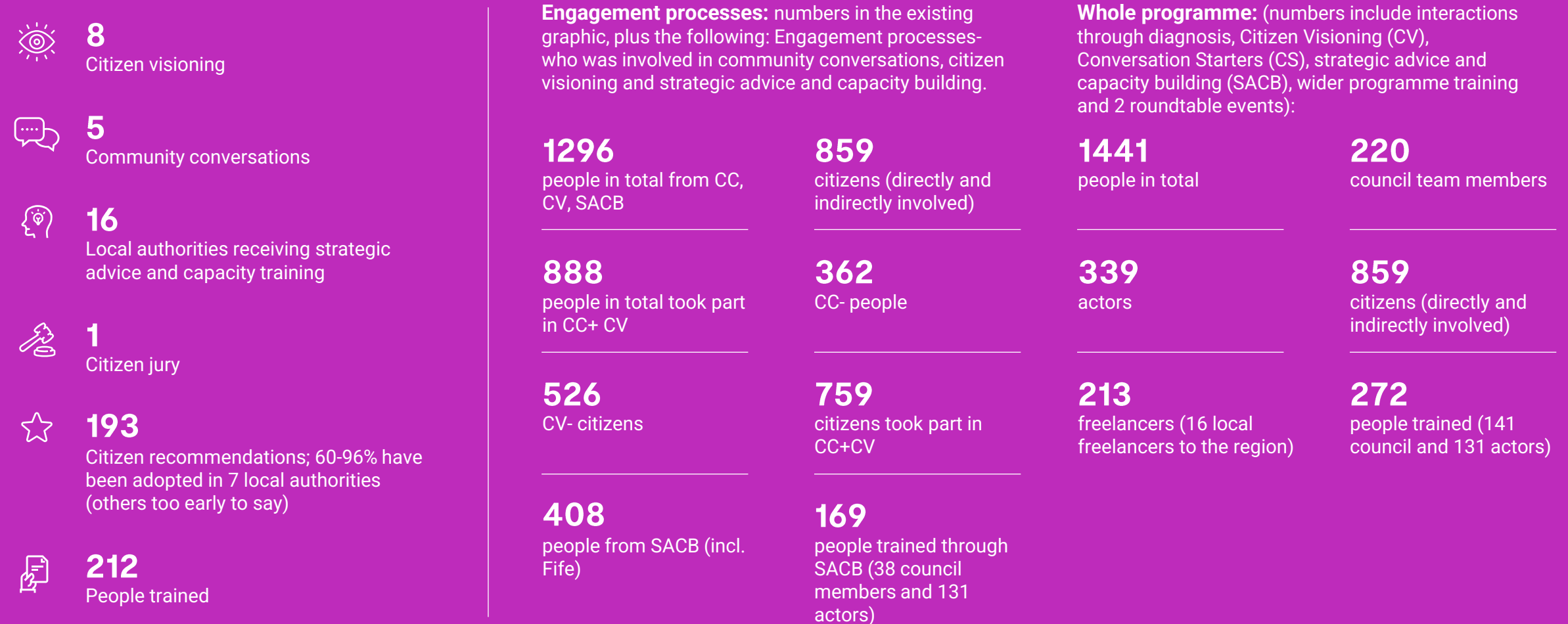
## What was more challenging:

- Some local authorities experienced challenges in achieving consistent follow-through.
- Participant confidence in long-term delivery of recommendations was mixed, both before and after engagement.
- The programme faced challenges in achieving sustainable capacity building, despite providing training and practical experience.
- We found that structural constraints, including siloed working in local authorities across departments and difficulty with funding and capacity for similar engagements in the future, emerged as persistent barriers to long-term impact and continued citizen engagement being embedded into decision-making.
- Many authorities were committed to ongoing engagement, but this was contingent on funding and support – with officers seeing internal budgets as challenging to shift, and local authorities uncertain about finding external funding opportunities.

## How support has or will help local authorities progress towards net zero:

- Our findings demonstrate progress with commitments to net zero through strategic alignment and validation of local authority plans. Engagement processes providing more in-depth and trusted engagement with members of the public, generating buy-in and support for existing plans, and providing pathways for impact on new ideas.
- The programme generated actionable recommendations effectively when engagements had clear remits that linked to live decisions.
- We found that engagement processes successfully built citizens' understanding of net zero challenges and local authority actions, communicating about these more effectively than one-off statutory processes would have been able to.
- Our findings ultimately demonstrate that citizen voices can be effectively integrated into climate decision-making when properly supported, validating local authority approaches and building public understanding and support for net zero transitions.
- Our evidence shows that participatory engagements have different outcomes than informing or consulting approaches.

Figure 2: This programme in numbers



## What went well?

### The programme helped build practical experience and confidence in in-depth engagement in Fast Follower local authorities.

For many local authorities, this programme was their first experience of participatory engagement.

In self-assessment forms, local authorities often indicated that their previous experience of citizen participatory engagement was either ad hoc or extremely limited. A small number of authorities had conducted previous deliberative work (for example, Wakefield Council's The Big Conversation in 2021-2<sup>17</sup> and Blackpool's Climate Assembly in 2021<sup>18</sup>), but these were typically not part of a broader programme of participatory engagement.

Local authority officers reported feeling the programme had helped develop their understanding and knowledge of in-depth, participatory engagement.

**“We’re required by government to do public engagement, but we aren’t able to as much as we would like or as in-depth as we would like, though we do a lot of public consultation. But this [Net Zero Living] offered us something quite unique.”**

Northumberland County Council



- During insight sessions, local authority officers in areas that ran citizen visioning and conversation starter processes reflected that these projects gave them practical experience and more confidence in delivering engagement in future. Local authorities frequently highlighted during insight sessions that independent design and facilitation were particularly valuable, allowing officers to see what ‘good’ looked like and reducing fear around conflict as processes were being managed independently. For example, in Broxtowe Borough Council, local authority officers reported that the Involve team were able to manage conflicting views of participants effectively.
- During interviews, strategic advice and capacity building local authorities noted that the research, support, and training provided by their project leads increased their knowledge base on what they needed to do to engage relevant actors in the future. For example, Mid South West Partnership, who received training modules, reported that these had given them greater confidence moving forward with engagement plans.

**Local authorities were able to hear from groups and members of their community who may have been absent from statutory consultations.**

Statutory consultations do not always reach diverse groups of people<sup>19</sup>, meaning the voices traditionally heard by local authorities are often not reflective of the communities and groups living in their areas. In self-assessment frameworks, local authority officers described either wanting to engage groups that were reflective of their local population, including groups typically not reached by statutory consultation, or wanting to involve those who were usually less likely to engage. For example, Warrington Borough Council targeted engagement towards young people. Local authorities receiving strategic advice were often wanting to understand how to better engage groups like farmers and other business actors.

During insight sessions, local authority officers consistently reported that participant groups for citizen visioning and conversation starters were broadly reflective of the local population, or well-matched to the defined target audience they sought to engage. Local authority officers consistently said these groups were more diverse than those who usually responded to consultations.

**“It was nice to get that mix of people that wouldn’t necessarily have engaged with us before they took part [...], so perhaps we’re getting the harder to reach people as well, because that’s always a challenge for us.”**

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council

### They cited the use of the following as instrumental in reducing barriers to participation:

- Effective recruitment, with project leads most often said they used sortition recruitment supplemented by community outreach where needed. Some projects used alternative approaches which were more time intensive and challenging, such as on-the-street recruitment or using social media, which were reported as less effective.
- Paying people for their time at a Living Wage level.
- In-depth onboarding.
- Flexible adjustments to ensure accessibility.
- Skilled and sensitive process design.
- Independent facilitation.

These methods yielded strong results in local authorities who were engaging the public, with most officers in insight sessions reporting that the resulting participant groups were diverse, reflective of the local area or the group they wanted to speak to and included demographics and perspectives they did not normally hear from. For example, Wakefield Council reflected that the engagement brought in perspectives from across different wards and demographics, revealing area-based differences they would not have seen in routine engagement.

### Independent design and facilitation of sessions enabled participants to have in-depth, complex discussions.

Local authorities regularly praised the role of independent facilitators and engagement practitioner experts as part of these processes. They highlighted that innovative tools such as graphic facilitation, creative outputs, and clear, plain English participant materials helped enable participants to engage with topics with which they may have been unfamiliar (for example, local plans or heat networks).

Local authorities also highlighted the crucial role played by having independent facilitators in place, able to guide conversations while giving a space for participants to share their opinions.



### Local authorities had largely connected engagement processes to live strategies and decisions.

These included:

- Net zero and adaptation plan development or refreshes.
- District or Local Plans.
- Transport strategies.
- The development of specific programmes of work on retrofit and heat networks.

Linking these processes to developing plans created a clear route for immediate influence, particularly as the teams working on the citizen engagement were also often those developing the relevant strategies, enabling a clear path for embedding citizens' recommendations into these. In many areas, local authorities reported in insight sessions that these wider strategies and plans were in progress and were confident that citizens' recommendations would sit alongside other sources of data to influence the direction of strategies. Some reported strengthening this through creating governance 'hooks' to sustain traction, such as naming action owners, adding standing items to boards or commissions, presenting to Cabinets, and building trackers to monitor progress.

Figure 2: Example pathways for impact from local authorities

**Dorset Council** translated participant outputs into "Key building blocks" for its adaptation strategy for flooding and used its advisory group to review draft recommendations and provide further insights into the processes it would take for these to function.

**Wakefield Council** had recommendations that were framed as ideas for tangible projects allowing direct insertion into the District Plan and catalysing wider collaboration (including the communities team and partners such as the Woodland Trust and a Cycling Forum).

**Forest of Dean District Council** consolidated recommendations with other inputs in a single tracker to inform the Climate and Nature Emergency Strategy refresh, committed to updating participants within three months, and prepared briefings for senior stakeholders. 90% of these recommendations are in progress or have been delivered, re-shaping the council's approach.



**We found that engagement processes were a positive experience for participants, who reported feeling informed, empowered, and hopeful after engagement processes finished.**

Across the pre- and post-engagement surveys (see Appendix E), participants reported an overwhelmingly positive experience and said they left feeling informed, understanding the purpose of engagements, and having a better understanding of what their local authority is doing to tackle climate change. Across the surveys, dominant sentiments shifted from **'excited'**, **'curious'**, and **'nervous'** before the processes began, to **'informed'**, **'empowered'**, and **'hopeful'** post-engagement, with **'caution'** also reflected where participants were uncertain about follow-through on recommendations.<sup>20</sup>

Other indications of positive experiences included:

- The proportion who agreed that they understood the purpose of the engagement increased from 84% (before the event) to 94% (after).<sup>21</sup>
- The proportion who agreed they knew what their local authority was doing to meet net zero also increased over time (44% to 64%).
- Participants regularly reported that the sessions were well-explained and informative.

Participants also reported in these surveys experiencing good facilitation, constructive conversations with people they would not normally meet, and agreed they felt able to speak openly and share ideas. This was the case even when their views did not align with the majority. For example, one participant who reported feeling less concerned about climate change also said that:

**“I am grateful that I was given the opportunity to participate, and I am grateful to the Involve team and local authority council] for allowing me to air my alternative views and opinions.”**

Participant in a citizen visioning project

### The focus on place over climate action proved effective in generating locally grounded outputs and recommendations.

At the outset of the programme, Involve pursued a place-based approach when engaging citizens. This meant the design of workshops focused on the shared understanding of participants, their experiences, and feelings about their place and how they felt it could be improved. Involve project leads noted in insight sessions and reflective workshops that specifically focusing on those aspects, rather than explicitly on climate action, helped to reduce polarisation and helped participants converge on practical improvements. In particular, several project leads described participants who were unwilling to accept the science of climate change but supported place-based changes agreed upon by the group due to the focus on improving their local area.

This method allowed conversations to explore principles of making a more resilient, sustainable place in a holistic way. It was described by project leads as being most effective when tied in with innovative approaches like futures and visioning methods, combined with participants being able to practically experience the topic being discussed. For example, visiting sites where low carbon technologies had been installed in Newham.

Project leads noted that the place-based approach often resulted in recommendations that aligned with climate targets even when engagements were not directly focused on climate change. This view was reinforced through analysis of citizens' recommendations. For example, in Blaenau Gwent, where the focus was on transport, many citizen recommended solutions aligned with net zero agendas, including less car reliance and greater active travel and public transport accessibility. The analysis of recommendations also suggested that participants engaged well with the scope and context of discussions, with draft recommendations refined through feedback on feasibility, council responsibilities and delivery constraints, resulting in final recommendations aligning with areas such as active travel, reduced car reliance, and wider net zero objectives.

Furthermore, local authority officers noted that the recommendations produced by citizens were not always new ideas but could validate their existing plans. In turn, during insight sessions officers said that this could translate into a greater license to act. For example, in Forest of Dean the local authority officers explained that the citizens' outputs from their citizen visioning process gave them confidence to proceed with plans they had previously held back due to uncertainty about the public support.

# What was more challenging?

## Despite these successes and some pathways to impact, evidence indicated challenges in local authorities achieving consistent follow-through.<sup>22</sup>

The integration of recommendations varied considerably. Some local authority officers have reported when revisited that the majority (60-90%) of their recommendations either have been delivered or are in progress; others reported being less certain about what pathways to impact were possible for them. In insight sessions, local authority officers often highlighted the following factors influencing this:

- Ensuring there is sufficient staff time and resource allocated to follow-through, including having a clear commitment from staff that recommendations will be considered and, where possible, integrated into strategies and plans.
- Establishing clear response pathways, formalising these where possible.
- Maintaining relationships after the process has finished with participants and other actors who were engaged.

- Setting and adhering to clear timelines for responding to recommendations.
- The complexities of local government and the remit of different departments.

Despite linking engagement processes to strategies and plans, in insight sessions local authority officers were less certain if the impact of recommendations would continue in the long-term. This was often due to a mixture of the factors listed above: limited resource meant that local authority officers who worked on the engagement could sometimes be the only officers owning the recommendations and ensuring citizen's voices were heard more widely. In some cases, officers said there was simply not enough staff time and resource allocated to the engagement beyond the funding provided as part of this programme.

Carrying recommendations forward could also be frustrated by the complexity of local government's remit, with officers in insight sessions emphasising that there was rarely a single, owned route (or owner) to action. For instance, this was seen in Derry City & Strabane, where multiple strands of activity owned by different departments within the Sustainability Commission slowed the process of integrating recommendations. This local authority also reported that they were struggling to recontact participants due to GDPR requirements as part of this programme.

This challenge was particularly acute in local authorities where recommendations fell outside of the scope for the engagement unexpectedly – such as in Blackpool Council, where citizens' recommendations were broader than anticipated, focusing not just on transport, but also housing standards and awareness building.



This was also highlighted in reflective workshops with project leads, who noted that local authority officers often lacked the requisite flexibility to ensure that recommendations outside of their remit would still be considered (i.e. if they needed to be picked up by a different team or department).

In strategic advice local authorities, other challenges were raised, including outputs often providing clarity on issues local authorities had but not illuminating pathways to improved engagement in the future.

Local authority teams and Involve leads stressed that without embedded processes, including recommendation tracking, scheduled reviews, engagement with elected officials, and clear links between decision-making and engagement processes, projects risked becoming one-off snapshots of public opinion rather than part of an ongoing conversation. This could also be linked to the discrete and time-limited nature of the funding provided as part of this programme; it could enable local authorities to shift their ways of working when they had the immediate means to do so, but once this stopped, many found it challenging to continue.

**“It’s an ongoing issue for us with the nature of how we’re funded to do this work [...]. We would love to have some kind of impact funding that allows us to continue to support participants to stay involved, and making sure these recommendations really land and have an impact.”**

Local authority officer in Derry City & Strabane Council

### Participant confidence in long-term delivery of recommendations was mixed across all local authorities.

Overall, the majority (71%) of participants across all local authorities agreed they felt confident their recommendations would be considered after engagement, decreasing from 75% pre-engagement.<sup>23</sup> Project leads reflected that this small decrease could be attributed to participants learning about the complexity of the issues and the boundaries of local authority direct influence. Importantly, specific local authorities had far greater variation.

- In Three Rivers there was a conspicuous decrease (from 92% to 70% between pre- and post-engagement), but in Gateshead the opposite happened, with the proportion agreeing they felt confident increasing from 76% to 93%.
- In some areas, confidence was low from the start: for instance, in Derry City & Strabane, only half of participants agreed both pre- and post-engagement that they felt confident their recommendations would be carried out.

- Changes were not always driven by an increase in the proportion disagreeing: in many local authorities, this was due to the proportion saying they neither agreed nor disagreed increasing, suggesting that for many participants, their degree of certainty had declined over the course of the process.

Evidence from project insight sessions, when paired with participant responses from individual local authorities, suggests that participants' confidence depended on the extent to which they felt routes to influence were clearly defined. There was a consistent trend that in local authorities where self-assessment forms and insight sessions described visible routes to action, the proportion of participants who felt confident increased or remained high, such as in Blaenau Gwent, Gateshead, and Wakefield.

In local authorities where pathways were potentially opaque or there was less visible senior buy-in (e.g. attendance at sessions) saw confidence fall or remain lower.

**“I think one thing that really added to participants' experience and their trust in the process was how present the council were throughout [...]. People could see that and they could see how much you valued their time and the effort they were putting into the process.”**

Project lead for Wakefield Council

### **The programme faced challenges in achieving sustainable capacity building, despite providing training and practical experience.**

Local authorities were positive about how the programme had improved their understanding of participatory engagement as a whole but they often expressed concerns that these skills depended on specific staff remaining in post with sufficient resources to upskill colleagues. Not every officer in each local authority received this training while it was available, meaning gaps remain in the reach of training and capacity building conducted as part of this programme.

### **Structural constraints emerged as persistent barriers to long-term impact and continued citizen engagement being embedded into decision-making.**

Many local authorities said in insight sessions that they had an appetite to repeat or extend engagement beyond the Net Zero Living programme. Several highlighted they were using this work to seed longer-term mechanisms to further embed citizen engagement in decision-making.

For example, Derry City & Strabane District Council intended to build a Citizen Engagement Programme under the umbrella of the Council's Sustainability Commission. Similarly, Newham Council planned to embed climate within a wider resident engagement programme.

However, others indicated that future participatory engagement work could only be ad hoc as they lacked the additional resource to run similar engagements in future. Across local authorities, officers said they wanted support on when to engage, with whom and for what decisions, alongside practical templates for engagement. Insight sessions with local authorities and separately with Involve project leads indicated that despite learning from these engagement events, local authorities remain uncertain on embedding engagement in the future.

The consortium's wider work on the Cost of Not Engaging (**see Appendix A**) suggests that this is for two reasons:

- In-depth engagement is often seen as a 'nice to have', or a form of engagement that is not prioritised or embedded into local authority budgets (the Cost of Not Engaging also outlines the approximate costs of different engagement approaches).
- The current local government landscape makes it challenging to justify the investment in external, independent support to help with in-depth engagement, which was felt by local authority officers to add value through introducing independence and expertise.

## Additional research: The wider value of citizen engagement

As part of this work, we heard that local authorities could experience challenges making the case for citizen engagement. To support this, we did two additional pieces of work – the Cost of Not Engaging and how participation and deliberation can support greater community cohesion.

We found that the cost of not engaging in a meaningful way was considerable. Five illustrative case studies showed that additional and unplanned costs arise when engagement is one way. These costs range from officer time on FOI requisitions, to legal costs, to having to redesign a programme due to lack of public uptake.

Whilst participatory engagement can be more expensive upfront, the value it brings is considerable, and the cost of not doing so can be a lot more in the long run both financially and reputationally.

We also found that, when engaged in a participatory way, many of the public's recommendations would support economic growth and job opportunities if actioned.

For more information on the Cost of Not Engaging, please see the report [here](#).

How citizen engagement and particularly participation and deliberation contribute to the critical question of social cohesion is more difficult to ascertain. Whilst we have many anecdotal reports that people feel more connected to people who they would not normally interact with through the engagements we ran as part of this project, there is a lack of research that provides substantial evidence of this. We reviewed the available evidence against the British Academy's four elements of social cohesion<sup>24</sup> and found the following:

### **Identity and belonging (medium evidence):**

Participation reduces 'affective polarisation' (emotional distance) and fosters 'dual identities', allowing people to find common ground without erasing their differences.

### **Cultural memory (low evidence):**

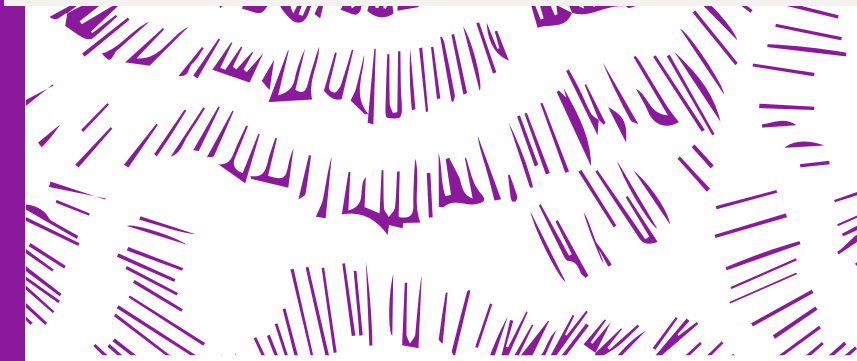
Promising but under-researched. It helps communities collectively reshape their relationship to local history and 'endow space with symbolic meaning'.

### **Care for the future (medium-to-strong evidence):**

Deliberation effectively encourages 'future-regarding' thinking, making people more willing to consider the interests of subsequent generations.

### **Social economy (medium evidence):**

Participatory Budgeting (PB) builds social capital and can significantly decrease populist attitudes by narrowing the 'democratic deficit' between the public and the state.



This shows that care for the future and reducing the emotional distance between people through **identify and belonging** add real value to communities. It suggests that participation can act as a vital tool for social repair alongside other social and economic activities. We also found that participation is an 'antidote' to division only when executed with precise design; otherwise, it risks failing to deliver meaningful bonds. This is promising but more research is needed.

# How support helped, or will help, local authorities progress towards net zero

This section analyses the evidence to understand how far participatory engagement helped local authorities progress in their net zero (or other climate change-related) targets.

## Our evidence shows that participatory engagements have different outcomes than informing or consulting approaches.

Local authorities often reflected that this approach to engagement had different outcomes to their usual in the following ways:

- Participant recommendations and perspectives created validation for local authorities' approaches, and permission to act based on citizen support.
- These approaches enabled wider citizen participation than informing or consultation alone, ensuring a larger range of perspectives and lived experiences were contributed to decisions.

- Participatory engagement can translate complex topics into relatable, actionable issues that citizens can take the time to understand, consider, and conclude on.

## We found that the programme had clear contributions to net zero progress through strategic alignment and validation of local authority plans.

Engagement processes provided more in-depth and trusted engagement with members of the public, helping to facilitate buy-in and support for existing plans and providing pathways for impact with new ideas.

- Recommendations from engagements often aligned with climate targets, even when engagements were not explicitly focused on climate change itself, such as in Blaenau Gwent where transport-focused discussions yielded recommendations that supported low-carbon transport goals.

- Citizen-backed principles and recommendations gave local authorities greater confidence to proceed with existing plans. For example, in Wakefield they found that participants' recommendations aligned with numerous net zero projects already underway, with the Advisory Group (established as part of the project) noting that citizen involvement gave projects more legitimacy, renewed focus, and confirmation they were moving in the right direction.



### We found that actionable recommendations were generated most effectively when engagements had clear remits that linked to live decisions.

Across all engagements, 193 citizen-led recommendations were collectively developed and agreed. Most recommendations had been actioned amongst the five local authorities followed up by Involve. Across the local authorities, recommendations emphasised fairness, feasibility, and citizens' desire for ongoing community involvement, transparent communications, practical advice, and the enforcement of higher standards.

Projects with more focused scopes on retrofit, heat networks, and transport consistently produced more actionable outputs. For example, the local authority officers in Wakefield Council reported that their mid-course shift from asking citizens to generate general recommendations to specific projects greatly improved the applicability of outputs to their District Plan, showing how greater focus can make outputs more actionable. In contrast, broader topics of discussion could yield less salient recommendations.

### The engagement processes successfully built citizens' understanding of net zero challenges and local authority actions.

Participants' knowledge of local authority net zero activities increased from 44% to 64% overall between pre- and post-engagement, and project leads reflected that the place-based approach allowed climate issues to be contextualised within lived experiences rather than appearing as abstract concepts. In reflective workshops, project leads noted that the framing around place and future visioning helped participants explore hopes and goals for their place, while removing them from immediate financial concerns.

Survey responses from participants also indicated that the processes may have created more actively engaged citizens. Most participants expressed a desire for continued involvement, to see their recommendations carried out, and in a few cases to help make changes in their own lives based on what they learned.

**“I plan to develop energy conservation measures for my home. I will take more notice of the conservation-themed meetings in the area.”**

Participant from a citizen visioning process



**Many authorities were committed to ongoing engagement, but this was contingent on additional funding and support.**

The current local government landscape makes it challenging to justify investment in independent facilitation, despite officers acknowledging its value. Without embedded processes for recommendation tracking and scheduled reviews, authorities risk these engagements becoming isolated events rather than part of the sustained conversation necessary for achieving net zero.

**The programme ultimately demonstrated that citizen voices can be effectively integrated into climate decision-making when properly supported.**

These processes also validate local authority approaches and help build public understanding and support for net zero transitions. However, structural constraints including limited funding, constrained capacity, and ambiguity around recommendation ownership continue to limit both the long-term impact of current engagements and the replication of these participatory approaches essential for achieving net zero goals.



# 4. How citizen engagement can accelerate progress on climate change goals

This chapter explores what this programme has shown about the importance of local engagement in the transition to net zero and moving towards a more resilient UK, responding to the Net Zero Living programme's intention to help local authorities seize the opportunities that come with decarbonisation and tackling climate change.



The work that has been conducted as part of this programme does not exist in isolation, and the learnings from Citizen Engagement projects are relevant to all local authorities across the UK. This chapter presents key messages for local authorities and governments, outlining how the insights from this programme can be relevant to wider audiences.

The chapter first focuses on how supporting local authorities to engage citizens can help build scalable and replicable policies and strategies, before exploring how citizen engagement can accelerate the transition to a net zero and more resilient future.



# Summary of how the findings apply to other local authorities:

## How can we scale what works?

- Place-first framing unlocks constructive participation and is a more effective basis for engagement than net zero, climate, or co-benefits.
- Local authorities must be prepared in advance to ensure citizen engagement is high quality and impactful.
- Local authorities should invest in citizen engagement whilst building internal capacity and skills, particularly utilizing independent expertise to help design and facilitate engagement processes.

## How can citizen engagement accelerate the transition to a net zero and more resilient future?

- Citizen engagement on climate change can provide more permission to act and accelerate delivery than typical statutory engagement.
- Latent citizen support for action on climate change is strong, and participatory engagement processes can activate it.
- Local economic opportunities are central to citizens' visions in the future.
- Not all local authorities are well-equipped for citizen engagement on climate change, posing a threat to the UK meeting its goals.
- Our findings point to several pathways for how citizen engagement can accelerate the transition, including: de-risking contested choices for local authorities; producing outputs that are ready-made for integration into strategies and programmes; a clear vision for what citizens need to enable further action (for example, accessible information and local economies focused on green-skills).

## What opportunities are there?

- Embedding participatory engagement into decision-making can reduce future costs and policy failures through generating tailored, actionable policies that the public trust more.
- Proactive engagement planning, clarifying roles, and integrating relevant stakeholders can enhance the credibility of participatory engagement processes for the public.
- Engagement processes with inclusivity at their core can ensure local authorities are hearing from a larger variety of voices.
- Anchoring engagements in local benefits, make it more likely that future uptake is easier and fairer, based on clear local needs and desires.
- Converting public support into action is possible by linking engagements to decisions and publishing responses to inputs with defined ownership.
- Effective training can mean expanding engagement skills beyond experienced staff.
- Ongoing engagement can be normalised through integrating simple, routine public updates into strategic frameworks.

# How can we scale what works?

## Place-first framing unlocks constructive participation and is a more effective basis for engagement than net zero, climate, or co-benefits.

We found in this programme that place-based framing represents a more accessible and effective starting point for citizen engagement than beginning with net zero or climate action. Involved project leads reflected that this approach enabled conversations to focus on citizens' shared experiences and aspects of their community they valued, rather than potentially polarising narratives on climate change and net zero. Crucially, their recommendations often supported a net zero agenda as well.

This framing meant participants could connect issues to their day-to-day lives instead of grappling with the massive scale and scope of climate change. In turn, participants valued being engaged and seeing their recommendations considered, which increased their faith in local decision-making and understanding of local authority actions.

Even when exact recommendations proved unfeasible, the underlying principles could provide authorities with guidance for citizens' future vision for their place. Where recommendations were challenging to embed due to siloed working across local authority departments, this created evidence for the need to shift ways of working towards more effective and connected approaches.

For strategic advice authorities, reflective interviews revealed that effective engagement requires tailoring to relevant actors. While citizens responded to place-based framing, businesses required sector-specific tailoring of language and methods. Similarly, Devon's engagement found that Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) found one-to-one support more accessible than webinars that would require significant time sacrifice illustrating the importance of understanding and responding to different stakeholder needs.

**“I feel empowered by the process that our work will be taken seriously by the local council and that the suggestions and action plans could make a positive impact on our town.”**

Participant in a citizen visioning process

### Local authorities must be prepared in advance to ensure citizen engagement is high quality and impactful.

Our findings demonstrated that local authorities who identified internal and external actors to facilitate clear pathways for impact found it easier to establish 'landing places' for recommendations and visions once engagement processes finished. This preparation meant the processes had buy-in from senior actors from the start, including attendance and contribution at citizen gatherings from local authority actors, and made follow through and feedback processes possible.

Local authority officers in insight sessions reflected that visible presence of senior officers increased participants' confidence that their recommendations would be progressed. They also highlighted that this was positive as it exposed senior officers and other actors to participants' priorities and perspectives first-hand.

Local authorities typically aimed to secure the involvement of key actors either formally through Advisory Boards or informally through conversations and advocacy for the process. However, several (such as Newham and Blackpool) said in insight sessions that they were surprised by the additional time needed to engage colleagues across departments before and after events. This extended to wider actors, with local authorities recognising that some local government bodies lack full powers across emission areas like public transport, such as district authorities or those in Northern Ireland. Local authorities that received strategic advice emphasized in reflective interviews that consolidating existing data and mapping relevant actors early proved essential for aligning understanding and fully preparing for engagement.





### Local authorities should invest in citizen engagement whilst building internal capacity and skills.

The Innovate UK funding provided additional resource beyond normal levels, enabling Fast Follower local authorities to conduct high-quality citizen engagement. We found that this funding allowed project teams to invest in recruitment, skilled facilitation and participant support to ensure accessible processes, producing more diverse participation than typical consultations. Local authority officers praised that this expert support allowed them to create a supportive environment where participants could learn about and discuss complex topics through clear presentations and well-guided discussions.

However, local authorities emphasised in insight sessions and reflective interviews that such additional funding and expertise is not always readily available, noting constraints from tight funding windows and limited existing resources. As identified in the Costs of Not Engaging report (see **Appendix A**), participatory engagement is often seen as a 'nice to have' in budgeting decisions, making its cost challenging to justify.

Nevertheless, the importance of public engagement on climate change remains clear, as designing without citizen involvement makes it near impossible to ensure the transition to a low-carbon, resilient UK will work for them. Local authority budgets remain tight, but the Costs of Not Engaging report indicates that failing to engage on complex, contested issues can generate higher costs through unexpected additional resource needs, from officer time defending decisions, to the cost of reversing decisions, to reputational damage. Additionally, the Value in Public Participation report (also completed as part of this programme) highlights that recommendations generated through citizen engagement processes could, if implemented, support local economic growth, despite engagement processes rarely asking about economic impacts.

Not every engagement must match the scale of Net Zero Living projects; instead, the priority should be building internal capability in local authorities so they can select the approach that best works for them and apply high-quality measures that are proportionate to the issue being investigated. Local authorities, in conjunction with central government and other actors, should therefore resource skilled high quality citizen engagement as an essential component of decision-making processes.

# How can citizen engagement accelerate the transition to a net zero and more resilient future?

## Citizen engagement on climate change can provide more permission to act and accelerate delivery.

Our findings suggest that participatory engagement proves more effective than other public engagement methods (such as informing and consulting) in providing local authorities with greater permission to act and helping accelerate programme delivery, particularly when tied to live decisions on complex issues. Local authority officers reflected in insight sessions that in-depth engagement had different outcomes from typical public engagement, both in how recommendations emerged and how they could use them.

Key to this is not just the questions being asked, but who is being engaged. We found that participatory approaches reached beyond the 'usual voices', and surfaced evidence on citizen's lived experiences and priorities.

Officers reported that participatory processes identified experiences, values, and priorities they would not otherwise have heard, strengthening openness, accountability and transparency, which allowed decisions to better reflect communities who would be directly impacted by them. For example, two local authorities described deliberately seeking out participants who were 'furthest away from the conversation', rather than those already interested in discussing climate change, saying this intentional recruitment approach allowed them to engage voices who otherwise would not have contributed to climate change conversations.

Additionally, outputs grounded in local people's experiences, values, and priorities confirmed positive direction of travel for local authorities, sometimes reinforcing their existing plans, and created a firmer basis for officers to advocate for progress. Several authorities described this as encouraging in an otherwise risk averse and slow-moving environment.

**“Permission feels like a bit of a weird word to say but being able to design [the vision] together so that we could support the creativity and seeing how that really stuck and worked with participants, to be able to understand what they're doing is still grounded in their stories and in their experiences, which was really nice.”**

Local authority officer from Northumberland County Council

### Latent citizen support for action on climate change is strong, and engagement processes can activate it.

We found that even participants reporting less concern about climate change consistently supported recommendations agreed during engagement processes, with many wanting to stay involved in follow-up. Involve project leads reflected that giving people space and time to learn, weigh trade-offs, and shape proposals meant many participants left desiring to see recommendations carried out. For the transition, this can help build the social license needed for near-term delivery while laying groundwork for potentially harder future asks.

Many participants translated this into saying they wanted to keep in touch and track the progress of their recommendations. Some authorities embedded this institutionally: as in Three Rivers, where several participants attended a subsequent citizen environment forum.

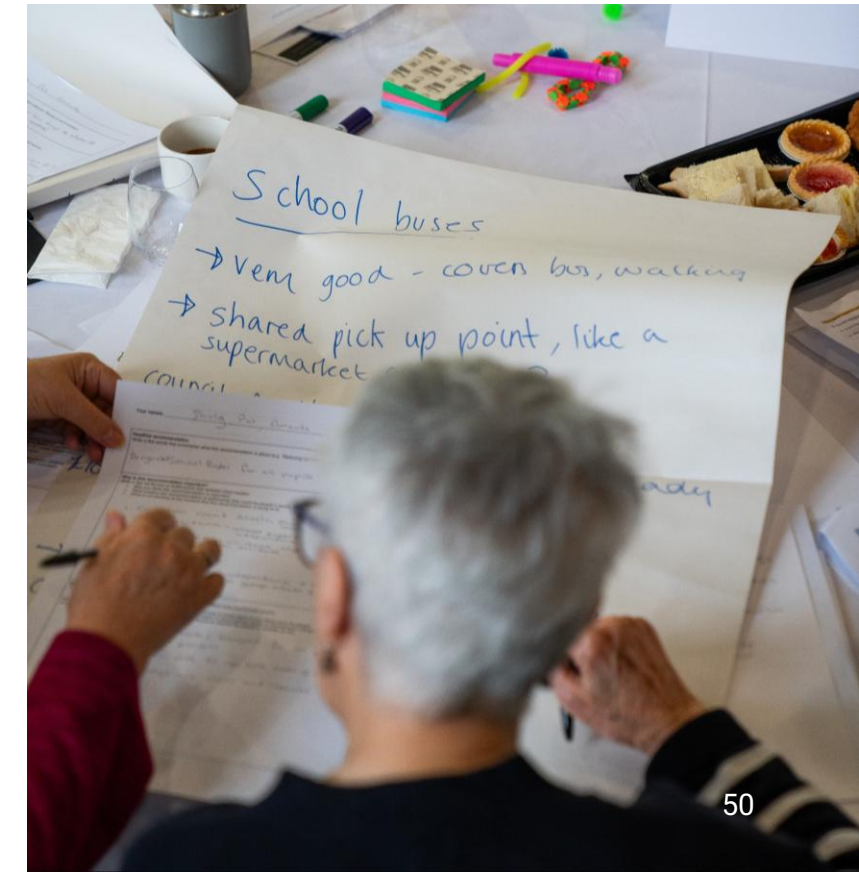
In some cases, individual participants reported making changes, including one in Wakefield setting up a clothes exchange and another creating a wildflower area. Crucially for the transition, this enthusiasm was not reduced by participants' level of climate concern, with even less concerned individuals supporting recommendations and speaking positively about the process. Across the 193 recommendations generated from the processes, participants consistently said they wanted to see:

- More community engagement and involvement from councils, and more accessible information and advice.
- Protection for nature and the environment.
- Skills development, prioritising young people and education.
- Systems-focused recommendations.

However, this latent support could be tempered by less confidence about whether authorities would act. Confidence that contributions would be used was mixed across individual local authorities, despite increases in understanding and knowledge about local authority actions. Authorities must therefore make routes to action visible, ensure accountability in responding to inputs, and update citizens so participants can see how their input is being used and integrated.

**“[In my local area I want to see] More open dialogue and seeing the changes we have planned.”**

Participant from a citizen visioning process



### Local economic opportunities are central to citizens' visions in the future.

Across processes, we found that citizens consistently linked climate action to local economic renewal. Participants emphasised setting and enforcing higher standards in new developments and existing homes, often coupled with calls to prioritise local suppliers and jobs. Youth employment, skills, and careers featured prominently, with several groups proposing training pathways into 'green' jobs or industries. Participants frequently requested practical, locally accessible advice and services as gateways to uptake positive climate action and opportunities to build local capability. For example, over half of recommendations would directly strengthen the local retrofit or clean heat ecosystem, a prerequisite for scaling uptake of low-carbon technology.

This pattern appeared in place-specific priorities and recommendations, with participants moving from vague intentions to detailed asks around retrofit grants, clear quality standards, one-stop shops for advice and support, and technologies such as ground source heat pumps, consistently framed with equity and access considerations. Across engagements, recommendations were articulated in terms of local benefits and growth rather than the wider economy, though implementation would likely yield broader economic benefits.

Recommendations typically associated with creating thriving local economies, generating jobs for local people and businesses, often linked directly to building low carbon or more resilient economies

Taken together, recommendations generated by citizens suggest the economic opportunity of the transition needs to be supported by local conditions that enable low-carbon living. These include local authorities providing trusted advice, enforcing higher standards for buildings and homes, and upskilling so there is a pool of capable, local suppliers and pipelines for further skills development. For local authorities, the implication is designing transition programmes to intentionally grow local capability: aligning procurement and standards with social value such as local suppliers and apprenticeships, establishing accessible advice, and linking delivery to youth skills and training. Framed this way, climate action can reinforce thriving local economies while progressing climate mitigation and adaptation. Analysis conducted by Forum indicates that the 193 recommendations from the processes aligned with supporting a thriving local economy, as detailed in **Figure 3**.

Further details on participants' recommendations across the processes can be found in **Appendix D**.



Figure 3: Value in public participation

### A thriving local economy depends on five types (of capital):

the natural world,

the people within it,

the communities that connect them,

the infrastructure that enables them,

and the financial systems that link it all together.

But capital alone isn't enough – the way decisions get made about it matters too.

Through thirteen Citizens Engagements, residents helped shape 193 recommendations for how we can grow sustainably.

### Here's what they said:



### The majority of recommendations

support enabling conditions for long-term economic activity



### Public participation supports capital creation.\*

\*(against the 5 capitals model)

74%  
of all recommendations create capital directly

51%  
of all recommendations create social and manufactured capital



### 70% of all recommendations would create jobs

(if implemented)

30%  
Clean Energy jobs

58%  
jobs critical to a just transition



### 23% could create opportunities for private business

### Not all local authorities are well-equipped for citizen engagement on climate change, posing a threat to the UK meeting its goals.

We found throughout this programme that local authorities, Involve project leads and some participants highlighted institutional and structural barriers to embedding participatory engagement in decision-making. Most local authorities faced barriers that limited both engagement delivery and recommendation follow-through outside programmes like Net Zero Living, with officers emphasising resource, capability, and experience as key constraints.

Lack of engagement experience could mean they were hesitant to engage, due to unfamiliarity with how and when to engage; concern about managing disagreement; and beliefs that policies must be fully formed before involving citizens, which would reduce genuine influence. During and after engagement, limited resources, unclear ownership of actions, and siloed local governance structures impeded follow-through of recommendations.

These barriers create a cycle making it challenging to carry out participatory engagement at all. As structural barriers faced by local authorities, they require structural changes.

Our findings suggest that creating shared supporting infrastructure can enable authorities to access a network of organisations and draw on expertise for specific needs rather than procuring services ad hoc. This does not obviate the need for authorities to embed skills and knowledge internally, but it may present a cost-efficient way to ensure consistent positive public engagement.

### Pathways for participatory engagement to accelerate progress on net zero:



De-risking contested choices for local authorities, leading to increased political confidence to proceed.



Helping to create cross-council buy-in, creating greater impact of citizen voices.



Producing recommendations and outputs which are tied to decision points, enabling faster integration into strategies and programmes.



Generating a clear vision of the enabling conditions that a wide range of citizens want and need, such as accessible information and pipelines for green skills, which can in turn lead to a higher uptake of low-carbon decisions. This can also build trust in local authorities' decisions.

# What opportunities are there?

We have shown in this report how the impact citizen engagement can be deepened at the local level, to help accelerate the transition to a well-supported, well-understood and relevant low-carbon future. The programme has demonstrated that using innovative methods can produce different, better results than business as usual approaches of engaging the public.

Our evidence demonstrates that there is both willingness and ability to deliver impactful citizen engagement on climate change and other complex topics. While barriers remain, in **Table 3** we explore how these findings from this programme may help overcome them in future.



Table 3: Learning about overcoming barriers and capturing opportunities

Opportunities for local authorities	How far were barriers addressed in the programme?	How can barriers be addressed in future?
<p>The programme's evidence can be used to make the case for integrating in-depth engagement into decision-making even when finances are tight, as doing so can reduce the risk of later costs and policy failure through producing more tailored, actionable policies that the public may trust more (as highlighted in the Costs of Not Engaging).</p> <p>The processes used represented a minimal viable product for full engagement. Local authorities can also share and reuse the tools and templates developed through this programme via peer networks to lower the cost and effort of future engagements.</p>	<p>Financial constraints and fragmented funding can limit capacity for sustained, in-depth engagement.</p> <p>The programme showed that with funding and independent, expert support, authorities could run high-quality, inclusive engagement that was clearly linked to decisions. However, whilst capacity was built, longer-term change was limited because activity still depended on short-term funding, with follow-through becoming uncertain in some places once programme support ended.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Make the benefits case for participatory engagement early – including avoiding future costs and policy failures through improved decision-making.</li> <li>○ Plan and budget for engagement as a core part of delivery, selecting methods proportionately to the decision being made.</li> <li>○ Use shared tools, templates, and peer support to cut set-up costs.</li> <li>○ Draw on independent expertise to de-risk complex topics, while investing in building internal capacity.</li> </ul>

### Opportunities for local authorities

The programme evidenced that barriers to understanding local authority roles and responsibilities is pervasive but can be overcome with careful planning and making it clear in engagement processes what the local authority can and cannot control. Simple arrangements such as naming owners and agreeing next steps for recommendations proactively, instead of after the engagement process, was effective, as was engaging relevant actors to ensure the engagement process has wide reach and buy-in across local authorities. Ensuring these actors, in particular senior local authority officers or elected officials, are visible to citizens in the process can also increase buy-in from these officers themselves.

The evidence from this programme showed that the inclusive practices undertaken worked, including targeted recruitment, accessibility adjustments, and ensuring participants are paid for their time. Local authorities can keep relationships alive at low cost through periodic updates or occasional reconvening and draw on shared templates and short case studies from this programme to embed these approaches – for example, into local authorities' Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) policies.

Purposive sampling can also ensure that the engagement work local authorities carry out reaches more than just a single 'public' and provides a more representative reflection of the perspectives and lived experiences of their citizens.

### How far were barriers addressed in the programme?

It is unclear what local government is expected to deliver on net zero. This uncertainty can undermine planning, expectation setting, and meaningful engagement.

We have found that focusing on place and linking activities to upcoming decisions helped clarify what was in local control, what depended on partners, and what was outside of the scope, making routes to action clearer. Even so, complex remits and siloed structures still make it harder to carry recommendations through to action.

Statutory engagement often reaches a single 'public' and therefore does not always reflect the full range of perspectives and lived experiences of people who live in their area.

We have found through this programme that inclusive recruitment, participant payments, accessibility adjustments, and neutral facilitation broadened participation beyond the "usual voices" during the programme (see Section 3 for further detail).

### How can barriers be addressed in future?

- Start with place and define what is within local control.
  - Map internal and external actors early (including those beyond the council's direct remit).
  - Name owners and agree follow-on processes before engagement begins.
  - Secure visible and senior buy-in.
- 
- Use appropriate recruitment with targeted outreach to reach under-represented groups.
  - Pay participants Living Wage thank you payments, and cover expenses to facilitate participation.
  - Ensure that accessibility of sessions is planned for, including robust onboarding and accessible materials and venues.
  - Use independent, skilled facilitation.
  - Maintain relationships with participants after engagement, to inform them of outcomes.

### Opportunities for local authorities

There is an opportunity to keep engagement accessible and relevant by continuing to frame discussions around local benefits and by budgeting for modest participant support where appropriate. Local authorities can also link climate programmes to conditions people asked for, such as trusted one-stop advice, enforceable standards, and local skills pathway. This makes it more likely that participation and uptake are easier and fairer in future for participants and citizens more widely.

Local authorities can turn public support into delivery by adopting simple, repeatable follow-through steps that have been evidenced to work in this programme, such as: link engagement to upcoming decisions; publish short responses to recommendations with named owners and next steps; establish clear relationships and buy-in with internal actors early; schedule public updates; and ensure consent to keep participants informed.

Using advisory groups or panels of local organisations can also help create shared ownership and clearer routes to action.

### How far were barriers addressed in the programme?

Economic insecurity reduces peoples' capacity to prioritise climate action, making climate issues feel secondary to immediate financial pressures.

Place-based framing and using methods to improve accessibility of events (such as Living Wage level payments and holding workings at times when people were available) improved the accessibility of the topic and workshops themselves, ensuring no one was out of pocket.

Engagement can lack influence on policy, with weak feedback loops creating public scepticism.

Where engagement was tightly scoped and linked to upcoming decisions, with clear ownership and visible involvement of senior leaders, recommendations went further and confidence held up.

### How can barriers be addressed in future?

- Frame discussions around tangible local benefits (e.g. warmer homes, safer/cheaper travel).
- Design sessions to minimize participant sacrifice, including providing incentive payments and scheduling workshops when more people are free, aiming to ease participant burden.
- Design for affordability and fairness in the delivery of programmes and in recruitment.
- Tie engagements to live strategies with defined decision points.
- Publish concise responses to recommendations with named owners and timelines.
- Establish advisory groups to share ownership and sustain momentum of recommendations.
- Schedule public updates to show progress.
- Ensure visible senior involvement throughout.

### Opportunities for local authorities

This programme indicated the skills and organisation capacity to engage can often be limited to the staff who had previously done it, instead of being institutional knowledge. The evidence showed that where opportunities to learn were provided, these were valuable to local authority staff, suggesting the importance of these continuing in the future, for example through the resources developed as this programme being shared more widely across council teams.

There is an opportunity to make ongoing engagement part of normal delivery by planning simple from the start: brief public updates, concise tracking of recommendations, and occasional reconvening through existing forums. Building these practices into strategies and programmes now can maintain relationships, support learning, and keep future decisions aligned with citizen priorities. In addition, having clear objectives and the ability to evaluate success against these can also strengthen the case for future engagement.

### How far were barriers addressed in the programme?

Limited time, skills, and organisational capacity to deliver high-quality and inclusive deliberative engagement.

Independent design and facilitation, plus targeted training, increased officer confidence and improved quality during the programme. However, skills remained concentrated in a small group of officers and vulnerable to turnover and competing demands, so constraint exists beyond the programme.

Engagement is often episodic rather than continuous, limiting learning, momentum, and long-term impacts. This effects public potential for action as well as internal local authority capacity.

Some authorities used the programme to start longer-term mechanisms. The programme evidenced the benefits of participatory engagement, even if the resources to make it systematic were uncertain.

### How can barriers be addressed in future?

- Provide targeted training and mentoring, sharing reusable tools and templates across teams.
- Build a cross-council community of practice, where possible, to spread capability.
- Commission independent design and facilitation for complex, contested topics.
- Match method-scale to the decision and aim to treat engagement as a core element of delivery.

- Embed simple routines (such as recommendation trackers or brief public updates) into strategies and programmes where engagement has occurred.
- Set clear objectives and evaluate against them to build the case for continuity of participatory engagement.
- Plan early for post-process follow-through.
- Use peer networks to sustain practice and reduce set-up time and cost.

# 5. What have we learned?

Based on the findings detailed in this report, we have identified the following learnings on how to best support local authorities to enable citizens to have a greater role in shaping the transition to a net zero and resilient UK at a local level.

These are categorised against the key groups responsible for taking forward these learnings: **policymakers, local authorities, and engagement practitioners.**



# What are the benefits of a participatory approach?

## **Participatory engagement can build legitimacy and trust for decisions.**

Local authorities reflected that participatory approaches were more effective at building trust than traditional informing and consulting. In turn, citizens' recommendations, based on informed deliberation, could help legitimise local authorities' direction of travel and be folded into live decisions – whether these are strategic or relating to a specific programme or issue.

## **Participatory engagement ensures a wider public is represented in conversations.**

Local authorities frequently reflected that these engagement processes, with targeted recruitment and efforts to make participation accessible, brought in people who are often absent from statutory consultations. This enabled local authorities to hear from citizens with more diverse lived experiences and perspectives than those who typically engaged with statutory consultations, including those who were less interested in or did not believe in climate change.

## **With participatory engagement, the public's knowledge, confidence, and perspectives grow.**

Throughout engagements in this programme, we found that participants reported gaining a better understanding of local authority actions and priorities, and emotions shifting towards feeling informed, empowered, and hopeful. Participants frequently said they wanted to see more participatory approaches being carried out, valuing the time and attention paid to individual perspectives, and focus on lived experiences.

## **Participatory engagement can improve decision-making and trust, mitigating future, unexpected costs.**

Evidence from the Costs of Not Engaging report indicates that one-way engagement (i.e. informing) can lead to unplanned costs (such as officer time, legal, challenge, re-design and reputational damage), as the public do not feel adequately represented or consulted on decisions, or feel that decisions do not align with what they want or need in their local area.

Participatory engagement, whereby the public can engage with the council and have a genuine say in decisions, can help avoid this by designing and influencing decisions to align with what they need.

## **Participatory engagement helps reframe complex, contested issues in terms of citizens' own experiences, increasing buy-in and reducing polarisation.**

The topics local authorities were discussing with the public were complex (ranging from climate adaptation, to heat networks, to local plans). Participatory engagement, with careful design, facilitation, and framing issues in terms of the local area, allowed participants to connect with these complex topics and engage in tangible, practical ways they wanted to see their area improve. We saw this in the fact that even when participants were less worried about climate change, they still supported the processes and the recommendations that came out of them, evidencing how place and shared experiences can be used to overcome otherwise polarising perspectives.

# Learnings for policymakers and central government funders

## Starting with where people are and what they value and need builds productive conversations.

Engagement that began with local priorities and lived experience, rather than starting from climate change or net zero, tended to produce practical recommendations that were more supported by citizens, and helped to reduce polarisation.

## Clarifying roles and responsibilities of local authorities on delivering net zero and other climate action improves follow-through.

Where roles on what local authorities are expected to deliver on net zero and adaptation and where national action or partnership is required is clear, routes to action were smoother.

## Provide a local to national escalator.

Local processes often identify needs for policy change at a regional or national level. The Energising Britain strategy can provide a route for local recommendations to be addressed and amplified, removing potential duplication, while enabling two-way collaboration between national and local government.

## Embed and fund long-term engagement as core to delivery to avoid ad hoc engagement.

If early and ongoing engagement is resourced, with funding being allocated early to facilitate in-depth engagement consistently and as standard, participation can become routine. Embedding citizen engagement can help reduce reliance on short-term or fragmented funding, and in turn can support better policymaking. Longer-term funding should help to embed sufficient follow-up and sustained engagement.

## Support shared learning and support across local authorities.

The evidence indicated that access to reusable tools, templates, and commissioning advice through peer networks or hubs could lower setup time and costs and could support more consistent quality. This, for example, could take the form of a peer network or hub so local authorities can access reusable tools and templates and commissioning advice for independent support.<sup>25</sup> This could help local authorities to continue to upskill and build capability within their own organisations, and uphold standards for good engagement.



# Learnings for local authorities

## Start from place and link to live decisions.

If discussions are framed around local priorities and the shared experiences and goals of participants, and tied to specific, upcoming decisions or strategies, this can help to broaden participation, reduce polarisation, and produce more actionable outputs

## Prepare for impact before beginning.

Early preparation in this programme helped to ensure the intended influence of engagement processes (i.e. introducing citizen's voices in decision-making) is realised. This can include identifying named owners for recommendations early on, preparing other departments for potential recommendations, agreeing how and when decisions will consider inputs, creating simple tracking of recommendations, and scheduling public updates to maintain public trust – for example, publishing responses to recommendations within twelve weeks.

## Involve the right actors early helps to ensure impact.

Bringing relevant organisations into the process from the outset helped in this programme to ensure that recommendations had clear places to land and shared responsibility for follow-through. and momentum can be sustained.

This includes ensuring that actors outside the direct remit of the engagement process are aware of engagement processes, so that recommendations that fall outside of the scope can still be considered. For example, transport bodies even if the project focuses on housing. This also applies to ensuring there is visible buy-in from senior stakeholders in local authorities. Making sure relevant actors attend sessions where possible can help build participant confidence in the processes.

## Ensure participation is inclusive and practical.

Targeted outreach, Living Wage payments, robust onboarding, and accessibility adjustments brought in voices beyond the “usual” and supported fairer policy. Without these measures, participation could skew towards already engaged groups.

### **Skilled, independent practitioners can be used alongside growing internal capacity.**

In-depth engagements require a level of independence to ensure they are unbiased. When used, independent support can allow for high quality, balanced discussions, and practitioners can provide advice and guidance on designing in-depth processes.

In turn, they can help build organisational knowledge and understanding on what a good engagement process entails.

### **Engage strategically, keeping engagement activities proportionate, connected and cost aware.**

Funding is a key barrier. Taking a strategic approach where in-depth engagement is matched to the scale and complexity of the decision optimises investment. This can also help ensure local authorities do not take a one-size fits all approach, exploring what method works best for participants and the questions at hand. An engagement strategy also enables connection with other places, such as Pride in Place. Shared tools and templates also reduce the costs and set-up time.

### **Ensuring light-touch continuity with citizens can build and maintain trust.**

This may take the form of responses to recommendations, keeping participants updated, and potentially reconvening through existing forums so relationships



# Learnings for engagement practitioners

## Lead with place and make engagement processes tangible for participants.

This programme has evidenced that focusing on citizens' experiences of their area, and using practical tasks or site visits, can help participants converge on workable proposals and remain engaged throughout processes. It is also important to design processes so that they fast track to the areas of trade off and potential disagreements and ensure progress is made in these areas.

## Tie design of participatory engagement processes to a clear decision and scope.

By ensuring that a key element of co-creating processes with local authorities is tying them to a live decision, strategy development, or a clear scope can help ensure pathways to impact are clear from the outset. Doing so can include identifying what is within and outside of local authorities' control, and where other actors may need to be involved in the process to ensure recommendations could be progressed or fed into wider decision-making processes.

## Keep methods proportionate and ensure that local authorities have sight of tools to support them after processes are completed.

Advise local authorities on the best approach and size of process to best meet their needs and support them after the process finishes by providing information and tools on quality standards, follow-through, and future engagement so they can sustain practice.



# Endnotes

1. <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/the-seventh-carbon-budget/>
2. <https://www.theccc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Local-Authorities-and-the-Sixth-Carbon-Budget.pdf>
3. <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/the-role-of-deliberative-public-engagement-in-climate-policy-development-university-of-lancaster/>
4. [https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.iap2.org/resource/resmgr/pillars/iap2\\_spectrum\\_2024.pdf](https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.iap2.org/resource/resmgr/pillars/iap2_spectrum_2024.pdf)
5. <https://iuk-business-connect.org.uk/news/fast-followers-accelerate-towards-net-zero/>
6. <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/the-seventh-carbon-budget/>
7. <https://www.theccc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Local-Authorities-and-the-Sixth-Carbon-Budget.pdf>
8. [https://climateemergency.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/CEUK\\_report\\_2025\\_final\\_DIGITAL.pdf](https://climateemergency.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/CEUK_report_2025_final_DIGITAL.pdf)
9. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jul/07/politicians-net-zero-public-research-climate-crisis>
10. <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/uks-sense-of-urgency-on-net-zero-and-support-for-climate-policies-falls-sharply-study-finds>
11. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/desnz-public-attitudes-tracker-summer-2025/desnz-public-attitudes-tracker-net-zero-and-climate-change-summer-2025-uk>
12. <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/uks-sense-of-urgency-on-net-zero-and-support-for-climate-policies-falls-sharply-study-finds>
13. [https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2026-02/Ipsos%20Issues%20Index\\_Jan26\\_v1\\_PUBLIC.pdf](https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2026-02/Ipsos%20Issues%20Index_Jan26_v1_PUBLIC.pdf)
14. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/energising-britain-your-voice-in-our-clean-energy-superpower-mission/energising-britain-your-voice-in-our-clean-energy-superpower-mission-accessible-webpage>
15. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2023-0122/>
16. Please note that data is reported in aggregate across the different engagements throughout this chapter, unless a specific example or case study is being presented. Where local authorities are referred to in this chapter, this is referring to the Fast Follower local authorities who were part of the Net Zero Living programme, unless otherwise specified.
17. <https://www.wakefield.gov.uk/our-people-and-communities/partnership-working/the-big-conversation-2022>
18. <https://participedia.net/case/blackpool-climate-assembly>
19. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/community-life-survey-202324-annual-publication/community-life-survey-202324-civic-engagement-and-social-action#civic-consultation>

# Endnotes

20. Sortition is an approach using civic lottery and is recognised as the gold standard recruitment methodology for deliberative processes. In practice, this means letters are sent to random postcodes in a sampling area, with recipients asked to register to join the assembly; after this, respondents are selected for the process based on demographic, geographic and/or attitudinal to create a group that are broadly reflective of these desired characteristics. More information can be found here:  
<https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/knowledge-base/what/sortition>
21. These responses were not chosen from a list of pre-defined options but were recorded verbatim by participants.
22. Prior to the event, participants will have received information as part of onboarding to outline what the purpose of the engagement was.
23. This refers to the process by which local authorities 'follow through' on the promises made as part of engaging the public. For citizen visioning and conversation starters, this would focus on processing the recommendations, reviewing them in relevant groups across the local authority and integrating them into strategies and plans where possible. Crucially, this also entails providing information to participants on progress and ultimate outcomes from their recommendations.
24. It should be noted that the percentages reported here and elsewhere in the report are not statistically significant or robust. As outlined in Appendix E, the base sizes for the participant surveys changed between pre- and post-engagement, and the way data was collected means the research team cannot ascertain if individual participants changed their answers between the pre and post stages.
25. These definitions have been drawn from the following:  
<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/285/cohesive-societies-scoping-concepts-amended.pdf> and  
<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/296/Cohesive-societies-literature-review.pdf>.
26. Some of these already exist. For example, the Local Community Engagement Resources Hub and Involve Foundation's resources on their website can help to support local authorities.  
<https://lce.org.uk/> ;  
<https://www.involve.org.uk/resources>
27. <https://iuk-business-connect.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Local-Authority-self-assessment-questionnaire-01-26.pdf>

# Appendix

The following Appendix details the Citizen Engagement consortium, the partners' roles, and the Fast Follower local authorities.

You can find further details in Appendices B – F [here](#).

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**Appendix B:** Methods of evidence collection

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**Appendix C:** Summary of self-assessment forms

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**Appendix D:** Analysis of participant recommendations

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**Appendix E:** Participant surveys

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**Appendix F:** Strategic advice and capacity building local authority reflections

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## Appendix A: About the Community Empowerment Consortium and roles

The Net Zero Living programme, funded by Innovate UK, enabled specialist training and assistance to local authorities and businesses across the UK. To provide these services, Innovate UK commissioned a number of organisations. This Appendix provides information on the consortium who delivered the **Citizen Engagement** strand of work, led by the Involve Foundation.

### The consortium comprised the following partners:

- The Involve Foundation (Involve)
- Forum for the Future (Forum)
- Ipsos UK
- Quantum Strategy and Technology Ltd.

The consortium partners were selected due to diverse expertise in visioning, citizen engagement, and supporting local authorities on the journey to net zero.

### Consortium roles in delivery

Throughout the delivery of this programme, there were distinct strands of work that consortium partners contributed towards. These work-strands and the partners who directly contributed are outlined in the following.

### Net Zero Academy: Training and upskilling modules

#### Involve | Forum for the Future

In this work strand Involve and Forum worked together to develop four training modules based on different elements of the 'citizen visioning' process being run with the Fast Follower local authorities in small groups. The topics for these sessions were suggested at the proposal stage, and developed in conjunction with Innovate UK, Involve, and Forum-based on the needs of local authorities.

The training focused on the following modules:

- **Module 1:** Foundations of citizen engagement.
- **Module 2:** Citizen visioning in practice.
- **Module 3:** Introducing a framework for engagement on net zero to help identify strengths, gaps, and priority actions for citizen engagement approach.
- **Module 4:** Learning from citizen visioning and engagement.

There was also space for additional training and upskilling modules, as needed.

### Dedicated support for Fast Followers

#### Involve | Forum for the Future | Quantum Strategy and Technology

*With Ipsos collecting insights in collaboration with those delivering this strand.*

Consortium partners offered Fast Follower local authorities an engagement support option based on their diagnosed needs. This process progressed as follows:

- The project lead (typically from Involve or Forum) would consult with the local authority leads and NZIOs to understand their context, progress to date on public engagement, and their priorities with the citizen engagement and visioning project.
- Over a series of diagnostic meetings, the project lead and local authority officers would develop an understanding of the local authority needs and how best to meet these.
- This was an iterative process, after which the project lead recommended an engagement approach (see Table 4), discussed possibilities with the local authority, and agreed next steps.

This diagnostic process informed which support option was provided/

Table 4: **Engagement options**

Method	Local context and the offer	Outcome
<p><b>Citizen visioning</b> 8 local authorities</p>	<p><b>Local context:</b> The local authority will have climate projects in delivery, but a need for support with coordination and vision across the place; and increasing citizen buy-in and setting the agenda.</p> <p><b>The offer:</b> A group of local people, reflective of the population, come together over three to four sessions to develop a vision, weigh up routes forward, and agree a set of recommendations.</p>	<p>A shared vision for the place that responds to local needs and priorities, with buy-in from wider actors.</p> <p>A set of actionable recommendations written by citizens in response to a specific question.</p>
<p><b>Conversation starters</b> 5 local authorities</p>	<p><b>Local context:</b> The local authority wants to engage those most impacted by climate change and gather communities together.</p> <p><b>The offer:</b> Training local residents as ‘conversation starters’ to speak with family, friends, and neighbours about their priorities for the future, in the context of climate change.</p>	<p>A deep understanding of the local community’s priorities and needs to inform decision-makers.</p> <p>A vision and a set of actionable recommendations written by citizens.</p>
<p><b>Strategic advice and capacity building</b> 16 local authorities</p>	<p><b>Local context:</b> The local authority either has done ad hoc engagement that needs to be embedded; has done little engagement and needs a plan; or needs support on a specific engagement challenge.</p> <p><b>The offer:</b> Flexible advice and support on existing engagement plans, including co-design, internal training and mentoring to build project engagement strategies and plans.</p>	<p>Increased capacity across the local authority to effectively plan engagement that gives citizens more ownership of climate change-related decisions.</p>

Citizen visioning and conversation starters entailed the Involve or Forum-led teams undertaking a full engagement process with the local authorities, with the intention of these informing plans, strategy, or programmes of work that the local authorities were exploring at the time. Insights from this strand of work make up the bulk of the findings from this report, particularly in **Chapter 3**.

### Insights generation and consolidation

**Involve | Forum for the Future |  
Quantum Strategy and Technology**

*All other consortium partners contributed to this strand, either through providing insights or reviewing reporting outputs to ensure alignment with the other strands.*

Throughout the process, consortium partners Ipsos collected evidence from the teams working on other strands of work. This produced data across different strands and across the project lifecycle, which was analysed and distilled into the four reports described below. The reports were developed by Ipsos with support and sign-off from Involve and were reviewed by all partners.

#### **Report 1: Desk-based review on net zero trends and citizen engagement in local authorities**

This first report reviewed policies, documents, and datasets to provide the research team with local context across the UK, including exploring the national context and key barriers to the acceleration of net zero. This research was used to develop resources for Fast Follower local authorities, forming the basis of a first report and a self-assessment questionnaire. This questionnaire has also been published separately and was the topic of training Module 3.<sup>26</sup>

#### **Report 2: A how-to-guide for citizen engagement**

A toolkit-style report to support local authorities to develop and run place-based engagement on net zero and other climate-related topics. The guide provides practical advice on set up, design, and delivery of engagement with citizens, including tips, checklists, and case studies to inspire and support the process.

#### **Report 3: The costs of not engaging**

Participatory engagement entails upfront costs which local authorities often see as a key barrier to delivering citizen engagement. This report explores whether these upfront costs are outweighed by the costs that can arise when public participation does not inform local decision-making. Using composite case studies, the report identifies the points, during and after the engagement process, where costs arose that were unexpected or unplanned, and suggests how participatory public engagement can help avoid these costs.

#### **Report 4: Key messages from Citizen engagement and visioning (this report)**

This final report brings together the insights generated across the programme of work to explore how far it has supported the development of more participatory approaches to local decision-making, and how an increased focus on participatory engagement has helped/will help local authorities progress towards net zero. This report was produced using insights from Ipsos, analysis conducted by Quantum, and the key messages which were informed by Involve and Forum colleagues.

## Fast Follower local authorities

The below table provides a summary of the Fast Follower local authorities and the method of support they received.

Table 5: **Fast Follower local authorities**

Local authority	Method of engagement
Belfast	Strategic advice and capacity building
Birmingham	Strategic advice and capacity building
Blackpool	Conversation starter
Blaenau Gwent	Citizen visioning
Broxtowe Borough Council Borough Council	Citizen visioning
Calderdale	Strategic advice and capacity building
Cardiff Council	Strategic advice and capacity building
Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (Outer Hebrides)	Strategic advice and capacity building
Derry City & Strabane	Conversation starter
Devon	Strategic advice and capacity building
Dorset	Citizen visioning
Fife	Conversation starter
Forest of Dean	Citizen visioning
Gateshead	Citizen visioning
Lambeth	Strategic advice and capacity building
Liverpool	Strategic advice and capacity building

Local authority	Method of engagement
London Borough Of Haringey	Strategic advice and capacity building
Mid and East Antrim	Strategic advice and capacity building
Mid South West (Armagh City Banbridge & Craigavon)	Strategic advice and capacity building
Newham	Citizen visioning
Norfolk - Great Yarmouth	Strategic advice and capacity building
Northumberland	Citizen visioning
Portsmouth	Strategic advice and capacity building
South Oxfordshire	Strategic advice and capacity building
St Albans	Strategic advice and capacity building
Three Rivers	Conversation starter
Wakefield	Citizen visioning
Warrington	Conversation starter
Westminster	Strategic advice and capacity building

## Appendix B: Methods of evidence collection

Table 6: Description of the methods of evidence collection used

Description of evidence	Method of gathering this evidence	Who was involved in evidence?	Details on data collection
<b>Wider context of local authorities, climate change, and citizen engagement.</b>	Desk review of published evidence.	Ipsos, Involve, and Quantum.	N/A
<b>Reflections from Involve staff who managed projects (project leads) with local authorities during project delivery.</b>	Reflective workshops facilitated by Ipsos, conducted online.	Involve project leads and local authority officers were interviewed who conducted citizen visioning and conversation starter projects.	Held quarterly, 4x completed with all leads attending at least once.
<b>Reflections from project leads after project delivery, reflecting broadly on the effectiveness of the programme overall.</b>	Reflective workshops and interviews facilitated by Involve, conducted online.	Involve interviewed other Involve project leads.	1x workshop held, followed by 4x interviews with remaining colleagues.
<b>Local authority self-assessment, exploring how far in their engagement journey they were according to an overall framework. Completed before engagement processes started (summarised in Appendix C).</b>	Self-assessment form, completed by local authority officers, completed via a form.	Local authority officers involved in engagement processes.	Number completed and returned: 11

Description of evidence	Method of gathering this evidence	Who was involved in evidence?	Details on data collection
<p><b>Insight sessions with local authority officers and Involve project leads after engagement processes completed</b> (summarised in Appendix C).</p>	<p>Workshop with local authority officers and Involve project team, facilitated by Ipsos.</p>	<p>Involve project leads and local authority officers were interviewed who conducted citizen visioning and conversation starter projects.</p>	<p>Number completed: 11</p>
<p><b>Recommendations generated by citizens during their engagement processes</b> (summarised in Appendix D).</p>	<p>Analysis of the recommendations from project reports following the end of engagements.</p>	<p>Analysis of common topics and themes identified in the recommendations and visions of completed reports from citizen visioning and conversation starter processes.</p>	<p>Number of project reports included in analysis: 13</p>
<p><b>Participant reflections on engagement processes they contributed towards, gathered both before and after engagement processes</b> (summarised in Appendix E).</p>	<p>A survey completed by participants at citizen visioning and conversation starter processes.</p>	<p>Participants completing citizen visioning and conversation starter processes (and one strategic advice).</p>	<p>Number completed and returned: 13</p>
<p><b>Local authority survey to gather reflections from local authorities who were supported by strategic advice and capacity building</b> (summarised in Appendix F).</p>	<p>A form completed by local authorities following the completion of their engagement process.</p>	<p>Involve project leads and local authority officers being supported through strategic advice and capacity building.</p>	<p>Number completed and returned: 6</p>

## Limitations of the data

**Strategic advice local authorities:** This report presents findings from the citizen empowerment strand, with a primary focus on local authorities that used conversation starter and citizen visioning approaches. Conversation starter and citizen visioning projects were prioritised within the budget available as they most directly addressed the barriers identified in earlier in the programme.

There were challenges during data collection for strategic advice projects as the developed tools did not always meet the more varied nature of strategic advice. An adapted impact assessment was created in response to these challenges. In addition, local authorities that elected for strategic advice often took more time to establish what flexible support and advice they wanted as they were still refining its scope, which led to further challenges around data collection during the timeframe.

**Participant survey responses:** Participant survey responses provide insight into participant perspectives and how these more broadly changed across the engagement processes. They are presented in aggregate and should not be taken as statistically significant or as individually tracked changes because of their small sample size, the shifts in numbers of respondents between pre- and post-engagement, and they were not individually tracked across the process. It is therefore not possible to track whether an individual participant's views on the process or net zero changed after an engagement, although the data in general suggests that changes in views did occur.

## What did we learn about the barriers facing local authorities on climate change

The following table examines progress made on the barriers outlined in **Chapter 2**, and summarises what went well and what did not work based on evidence gathered.

Table 7: What we learned about the barriers facing local authorities on climate engagement

Barrier identified in context	What we learned about the barriers	
<p><b>Financial constraints:</b> Local authorities face severe budget cuts and fragmented, competitive funding. They have limited capacity for sustained engagement beyond statutory requirements, unless separately funded.</p>	<p>The funding and support provided through Innovate UK's programme showed that, when funding is available, local authorities can effectively utilise in-depth engagement. Some local authorities made good progress in working towards having engagement strategies and integrating in-depth engagement into their regular practices.</p>	<p>However, for many financial constraints remain a significant barrier and impacted how far they felt able to ensure the continued influence of citizen recommendations.</p>
<p><b>Unclear roles and responsibilities:</b> It is unclear what local government is expected to deliver on net zero, creating uncertainty that undermines planning, expectation-setting, and meaningful engagement.</p>	<p>Evidence gathered as part of this programme indicated that local authorities are largely trying to define their own goals to reach net zero through developing local strategies and plans to achieve this.</p>	<p>This is despite some complexities remaining, such as where national efforts may be required to meet local priorities on, for example, infrastructure.</p>
<p><b>Embedded inequalities:</b> Statutory engagement often reaches a single 'public' and therefore does not always reflect the full range of perspectives and lived experiences of the people who live in their area.</p>	<p>Evidence from self-assessment forms and insight sessions suggests that local authorities completed their processes having heard more diverse voices than they normally would, and with more understanding of how to engage these groups in future. This was enabled through support offered by Involve project leads and the programme of training provided. In participant survey responses, most agreed that they would like to remain</p>	<p>involved in future, suggesting that the engagement processes themselves helped to create more actively engaged citizens.</p> <p>However, beyond these engagement processes, there is limited evidence that local authorities will change how they engage the public largely due to funding concerns.</p>

## Barrier identified in context

## What we learned about the barriers

**Cost-of-living pressures:** Economic insecurity reduces people's capacity to engage or prioritise climate action, making climate issues feel secondary to immediate financial pressures.

Evidence from the programme overall suggests that this barrier was addressed in the context of engagement in the several ways:

- Practically, providing participants with Living Wage payments ensured the processes were accessible, to enable those facing cost-of-living pressures to participate.
- By framing future visioning and scenarios around place and what could be done to improve their lived reality, participants could explore climate perspectives contextualised by their understanding of their local environment and shared experiences.

- The recommendations from these processes also provide a clear steer to Fast Follower local authorities, developing strategies and plans on how to combat climate change (mitigation or adaptation) in their local area. These can be taken forward and translated into future programmes and ways of working that may help overcome these pressures in future.

**Limited integration into decision-making:** Engagement can lack influence on policy, with weak feedback loops creating public scepticism and perceptions of tokenism.

Evidence from self-assessment forms and insight sessions indicates that local authorities intended for engagement processes to have a clear impact on their decision-making. However, the integration of recommendations into policymaking more widely was not always achieved.

Some local authorities reported being able to fully consider recommendations from citizens, but others reported difficulties in overcoming siloed ownership of different elements and ensuring that feedback loops with participants would be closed in future due to staff capacity and resourcing.

## Barrier identified in context

## What we learned about the barriers

**Resourcing constraints:** Limited time, skills and organisational capacity to deliver high-quality and inclusive deliberative engagement.

This work-strand of the overall programme had the goal of improving the skills of local authorities to deliver high quality citizen engagement, and the funding and support provided intended to overcome time and organisational capacity barriers.

- Local authorities in insight sessions reported having more understanding of in-depth participatory engagement, after received training and observing how to run an engagement process well. However, they sometimes shared concerns that skills with engagement hinged on the local authority officers involved in this programme remaining in their post and having sufficient resource to upskill colleagues.

As highlighted when discussing financial constraints, ongoing challenges remain regarding the time and organisational capacity required to deliver high quality, inclusive deliberative engagement. Only some local authorities indicated the intention of continuing to do so through developing engagement strategies. Others reported that their ability to have time and capacity to engage similarly in the future depended on the availability of external funding.

**One-off, fragmented engagement:** Engagement is often episodic rather than continuous, limiting learning, momentum, and long-term impacts. This effects public potential for action as well as internal local authority capacity.

As noted previously in this table, evidence from this programme suggests that some local authorities have made progress on overcoming this barrier, using their engagement processes to springboard future more in-depth engagement with citizens that goes beyond or replaces statutory requirements.

However, others were less certain and had fewer ambitions for future engagement. As noted previously, these local authorities highlighted financial and capacity constraints that meant it would be challenging for them to embed in-depth engagement into their processes without a specific funding stream enabling this.

## Appendix C: Summary of self-assessment forms

This Appendix summarises analysis of the self-assessment forms<sup>27</sup> completed by Fast Follower local authorities. It largely focuses on summarising how these local authorities overall rated their readiness and progress on their journey of engagement.

The Appendix also includes analysis of how local authorities who completed both the self-assessment form and insight sessions with Ipsos saw changes from before and after the engagements. This considers changes in strategies for climate change and participatory engagement, and plans for how engagement will be integrated into decision-making. Below is a summary of the aggregated responses to each question in the self-assessment framework.

### Summary of local authority self-assessment of progress on engagement

The following table provides a summary for how local authorities responded to the self-assessment framework. The table provides a rating for the overall, average level of readiness or progress towards participatory engagement on the themes explored in the framework. These ratings are:

- **Low:** All or most local authorities did not describe progress towards this theme, describing themselves as either not having plans or approaches in place, these being a work in progress, or being unevenly integrated across their organisation.
- **Medium:** Most local authorities described themselves in the middle of readiness on this theme, working towards having plans or having some consistency in integration.
- **High:** Most or all local authorities described having clear plans or strategies in place for this theme, describing clear pathways and strong integration.
- **High variability:** This is used when local authority responses are mixed or there was a lot of variation in their responses, without a consistent trend coming through.

The rankings are derived primarily from the points at which local authorities put themselves on the scale in the form (either a scale of 1-5, or a three-point scale of 'No', 'Work in Progress', or 'Yes'). These rankings are also informed by analysis of what local authorities have described, too – for example, when there is variation in the answers provided, but local authorities descriptions paint a picture of greater similarity, this has been reflected in the readiness rating.

Table 8: Summary of self-assessment framework

Theme from self-assessment framework	Average readiness score	Justification
<b>Context and strategy</b>		
Strategies or plans for net zero/climate change, and extent to which these are integrated into decision-making	<b>High</b>	<p>Most local authorities already have agreed strategies or plans in place, with the majority reporting at least some integration into decision-making. A small number reported stronger integration, but most said integration was partial or uneven across services. Some requirements were embedded in most local authorities (for example, climate considerations in capital bids or committee papers), but local authorities often reflected that there was limited clarity on how much these influence decisions or the metrics that are used to judge sustainability. The plans that were described included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Most often targets to reach net zero or carbon neutrality by a set date, with some also reporting operating under a Climate Emergency.</li> <li>○ A few local authorities also reported currently developing climate adaptation-related strategies and plans.</li> </ul>
Strategy or plans for citizen engagement	<b>Medium</b>	<p>Strategies or plans for citizen engagement were less consistently in place than climate strategies. Several authorities described either ad hoc or approaches that focused on individual interventions instead of a consistent conversation. A few said they were developing more formal strategies. Amongst those who said they had clearer strategies, some were focused primarily on</p> <p>informing or consulting rather than more participatory approaches, while others were planning to formalise or establish a direction for plans through the projects being run as part of Net Zero Living. The ranking here is for 'medium' as, despite variation in the responses provided, the descriptions local authorities provided.</p>

Theme from self-assessment framework	Average readiness score	Justification
<b>Clarity of purpose and scope</b>		
Clearly defined goals for citizen engagement they are doing	<b>High variability</b>	<p>Several local authorities reported having clear, measurable goals in place at a project level, even where a whole-council framework was still evolving.</p> <p>More commonly, local authorities placed themselves at the mid-level, with goals that were articulated (e.g. what the engagement process was feeding into) and partially measurable, but not yet fully embedded and often lacking a clear pathway for impact.</p> <p>A smaller number said they were at earlier stages, with basic or broad goals that were not yet fully aligned or measurable.</p>
Identification of relevant community actors and organisations/community groups who need to be involved in citizen engagement	<b>High</b>	<p>Most local authorities had identified key groups and had mechanisms in place to reach them through this engagement project. This was focused on the engagement project as part of Net Zero Living: general approaches more widely across the authority were less well-established.</p> <p>For those who said they were working on this, they typically said they were looking how best to engage audiences rather than uncertainty on who to engage.</p>
Is there independent advice and/or facilitation in place?	<b>High variability</b>	<p>The variability here was due to some local authorities interpreting the question differently than others. Some, who said they did have independent facilitation in place, were responding based on the project they were working on with Involve.</p> <p>Others reported 'No' or that it was a work in progress, referring instead to their independent capacity outside of the programme being limited or still being developed.</p>

Theme from self-assessment framework	Average readiness score	Justification	
<b>Responsiveness, accountability, and commitment to act</b>			
Plans for how local authority will respond to citizen input	<b>High variability, but leaning towards lower readiness</b>	Local authorities often placed themselves in the mid-range when responding to the self-assessment matrix, but the actual plans in place varied significantly. Some local authorities described basic plans, either at early stages of development or responses were planned to be on a case-by-case basis.	Others had more detailed plans to respond to citizens input, but described them as either basic, not flexible enough to respond to citizens' input fully, or likely to be inconsistent across the local authority.
Development of accountability mechanisms to report on progress months (6 months/1 year later)	<b>High variability</b>	A small number reported having robust accountability mechanisms, with several having defined timelines for establishing them, and others had not started planning.	The mechanisms cited included formal performance frameworks, scheduled governance reporting, and programme monitoring cycles.
<b>Transparency, equity and inclusion</b>			
How planned citizen engagements will ensure clarity and transparency with participants	<b>High</b>	Local authorities emphasised setting clear expectations about scope, decision-making powers, and how in-put would be used after the processes. The approaches described ensuring they were clear with participants about which department would own actions, and what was in the local authority's power to do;	using plain language to ensure clarity with participants; and providing sufficient information to participants ahead of the workshops themselves. Most also felt this was integral to the citizen engagement approach.
Has the local authority considered and implemented measures to ensure accessibility and inclusion?	<b>High</b>	None of the local authorities reported not having considered this, with most either having implemented or being in the process of doing so. Measures included inclusive recruitment and event design, considerations around accessibility and	inclusion in the processes (including consideration given to care needs, accessibility needs, and the cost to participate), and alignment with the local authorities' EDI commitments.

Theme from self-assessment framework	Average readiness score	Justification
<b>Adequate time and resources for engagement</b>		
Sufficient resources dedicated to engagement	<b>Medium</b>	<p>Most local authorities described having funding for engagement, if funded directly. For future engagement activities, local authorities typically described themselves as exploring their options – for example, two said they were looking at additional funding options – but highlighted that the project with the Net Zero Programme had been enabled by the programme.</p>
Do you have support structures in place, like resource libraries, networks, and communities of practice to support citizen engagement?	<b>High variability</b>	<p>Local authorities were mixed on the availability of these. A few had comprehensive structures in place, and several more said they were working on developing support structures in future. These included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Shared support structures through the Net Zero Living programme, as part of the Citizen Engagement Working Group.</li> <li>○ Exploring how the council's citizen engagement resource can be developed when considering what resources can be delivered.</li> </ul> <p>Support from a local authority's communication team to provide the support required, with resource assets being internally focused to create a library of information.</p>

## Changes pre- and post-engagement

The following summarises analysis of what had changed for local authorities who had completed both the self-assessment framework and took part in an insight session with Ipsos.

### Did strategies for net zero and/or engagement become more integrated with decision-making?

Most local authorities described fairly good integration of net zero and other climate change-related policies or strategies, even if not those they intended to inform through the processes being funded.

For engagement plans, progress was more mixed. Integration of plans for citizen engagement improved where engagement processes were explicitly tied to live strategies or plan refreshes. Several local authorities reported moving from intentions of integrating further, to drawing clearer links between citizen inputs and specific plans. Dorset, Wakefield, Three Rivers, Forest of Dean, and Warrington all reported that engagement outputs would feed directly into their intended strategies.

In local authorities that described more complex systems or having tighter constraints on capacity or resource, officers described progress as more limited or issue-specific. For example, Newham aimed to use findings to inform retrofit and a resident engagement plan, but acknowledged uneven practice across the services, while Blaenau Gwent planned short-term integration into transport work, but faced challenges working across multiple teams and partners.

### Did the local authority develop clearer pathways for impact?

Local authorities who described implementing governance processes and plans for follow-through more often described clearer pathways than those who did not. Governance and plans for follow-through included naming review points for progress on citizens' recommendations, presenting outputs from processes to existing boards, forums and cabinets, planning public responses and updates, and staying connected with participants.

Elsewhere, pathways were emerging but were still uncertain, with local authorities often describing their capacity and resource to execute these impacts as constrained.

In particular, local authorities such as Newham and Blaenau Gwent described pathways to make sure recommendations were heard by relevant actors (often those outside of the teams in the local authority delivering the work), but limited capacity, resource, or scope for the officers to ensure the recommendations were enacted or considered in policymaking.

### Inclusion and diversity

Local authorities all described intending to recruit a diverse group of participants, reflective of their local population, or reflective of the specific groups they were looking to engage (for example, young people or ethnic minorities). In insight sessions, this had been achieved in most local authorities. Most project leads described achieving a range of participants from different backgrounds, with local authority officers often reflecting that those who attended the processes were different to those who normally engaged with the council. This positive feedback came despite some difficulties in recruitment methods – for example, difficulties in using in small areas, and difficulties using

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30. <https://iuk-business-connect.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Local-Authority-self-assessment-questionnaire-01-26.pdf>

## Appendix D: Analysis of participant recommendations

In each of the engagement processes conducted as part of this programme, participants produced recommendations based on their conversations. The following provides an analysis of these recommendations across the programme. This analysis has been synthesised and helped to inform the findings and recommendations included in the main body of this report. The analysis was conducted based on the available final reports in February 2026.

### What was said in the recommendations?

The process of arriving at final recommendations involved developing a long list, then deliberating and voting on priorities. Priority recommendations were developed in detail, with details being bespoke to the needs of the local authority but often including information like why this is important to the participants, next action steps, measures of success, and how to communicate around the recommendation. Across all processes, there were consistent themes in these recommendations.

#### Community engagement and involvement:

- Citizens, having been engaged in decision-making, often wanted to see this continue. A consistent recommendation was for there to be ongoing community engagement and involvement in decision-making, including those with lived experience in a topic or area. In many local authorities this did not mean repeating a similar process again: citizens more often wanted to see this engagement occurring consistently and by informed citizens. For example, in Blackpool, participants wanted residents with lived experience to be actively involved in decision-making in steering groups across departments, to help develop an overall plan for community engagement and climate adaptation.
- Citizens also often wanted more accessible, transparent, regular, and accountable information from councils on their programmes and what they were doing.

- Citizens frequently wanted there to be more active information provided to communities and residents on what they can do to take action and collaborate to combat issues like climate change.
- Perhaps reflecting the mix of ages that processes were able to engage, some processes included recommendations on providing more inter-generational activities and opportunities.

#### *Example recommendations:*

People with lived experience to be actively involved in decision-making within steering groups for different departments to build and develop an overall plan for community engagement and environmental changes.  
– **Blackpool**

Involve communities from the start in all planning processes, empower them and take their ideas seriously. – **Derry City & Strabane**

Enhanced community support and resilience by facilitating shared community resources via community councils/groups. – **Northumberland**

### Accessible information and advice

(related to previous topic):

- Reflecting the finding that most citizens did not feel they knew much about what their local authorities were doing, participants often recommended local authorities provide clearer communications and publicity.
- Citizens also wanted communications to be more honest and transparent. For example, citizens in Derry City & Strabane had recommendations for the council to be more open about the environmental costs of data centres in future.
- Citizens wanted more information to be available on the topics they had learned about. As outlined in **Appendix E**, participants often left sessions feeling more informed than they had been before, and this experience was reflected in wanting local authorities to be able to inform more citizens. For example, in Calderdale, citizens included a recommendation for there to be an awareness campaign to encourage and assist residents on their retrofit journey.

- Participants wanted to see information provision, and sometimes awareness campaigns, that were tailored to the gaps in knowledge and the circumstances of those local authorities were looking to engage. For example, providing tailored information on topics like retrofit or green energy for particular housing archetypes, public and demand-responsive buses, or cycling and active travel.

#### *Example recommendations:*

**Community Environment Toolkit: A digital hub to help people start and share community-led environmental projects. – Wakefield**

**More transparent information and decision-making processes. When a decision is made, it should be accompanied by a clear timeframe and action plan with named people who are responsible e.g. when motions are passed at council, the public should be informed of what will happen next. – Derry City & Strabane**

### Setting high standards and enforcement:

In many local authorities, citizens wanted to see higher standards set for those carrying out climate change-related works, with local authorities being able to better enforce these standards. This theme was particularly prominent in local authorities where the engagement focused on retrofit and homes.

- Citizens wanted local authorities to set high quality standards on energy performance and sustainability in new developments.
- They wanted to see standards on energy performance and retrofit being enforced, both in new and existing homes, and in the rental sector.

#### *Example recommendations:*

**Establish a local retrofit standard to guarantee the availability of a high quality, equitable, circular, local supply chain. – Calderdale**

**Improve the quality of existing homes. Introduce minimum standards related to climate change to renovate and retrofit all existing houses, supported by measures that are affordable. – Calderdale**

### Nature and environmental protection:

This theme was often raised as part of other topics of conversation despite not being the explicit focus of many engagement processes.

- Citizens showed strong support for new and existing green spaces, and nature restoration and protection in their local areas. Better visibility and protection of, and access to, green spaces was often tied to citizens' vision of improving their local area. The incorporation of young people into this vision was also often reflected as important, with citizens wanting there to be more education for children on nature, and for children to have more frequent exposure to it.
- Citizens wanted to see opportunities to create more green spaces being taken wherever they arose. Across the local authorities, this could range from recommending the incorporation of community gardens and protecting natural areas into plans, to de-paving some paving stones and creating micro-forests.
- Recommendations were not limited to green spaces being created but also specified wanting existing nature in local areas to be protected. For example, in Dorset recommendations included homes helping to protect nature being part of the vision for a Dorset ready for climate change.

- Nature and green space emerged as priority recommendations even in engagements that were very specifically focused on topics like energy and heat.
- A few local areas also had recommendations on the importance of protecting water and access to it, largely based on water as a resource, not recreationally.

#### *Example recommendations:*

Dorset has diverse and thriving ecosystems.  
– Dorset

Work together to have great green and public spaces. – Gateshead

Utilising back alleys and public spaces for community gardens, wildlife corridors, and relaxing areas to help mental health.  
– Blackpool

### Skills development, young people and education:

- Several local authorities developed recommendations with a focus on youth or school climate education. For example, in Derry City & Strabane, citizens wanted to see climate education being integrated across the school curriculum and not isolated into one subject. In Three Rivers, citizens recommended there should be school trips to different locations to help inform students about climate change.

- In some local authorities, citizens also wanted to see local people – particularly young people – supported in improving their skills for green jobs. For instance, Warrington had two recommendations relating to this: one on creating job opportunities for regeneration of the Mersey River, and another on promoting green jobs for local people.

#### *Example recommendations:*

Provide careers workshops targeting bringing employment in green careers. – Three Rivers

Green jobs: Promote new jobs for locals to benefit the neighbourhood. – Warrington

### Inclusiveness, equality, access, and affordability:

Recommendations on how to make services and future changes more accessible and affordable for households often arose from participants.

- Inclusion and access to services was a consistent theme running through most of the sets of recommendations. Examples included access to public transport for those with disabilities or those not living in population centres; and accessibility of housing energy efficiency schemes.

- Citizens were also often strongly focused on the affordability of the transition to net zero in particular, and also often highlighted that there were opportunities for this transition to save households money. Citizens highlighted the opportunities offered by investing in improvements to services early. They also, however, often said there needed to be greater effort in increasing the affordability of being 'green' and for considerations around affordability to play an active role in decision-making.
- Affordability on topics outside of climate change directly was also prominent in recommendations – for example, in Blackpool there was a recommendation centred on ensuring housing was adequate, affordable and suitable for everyone.
- In a few local authorities there were also recommendations centred on the fair distribution of opportunities and infrastructure between those in local areas who may use it. For example, in Derry City & Strabane, this was particularly referenced in terms of the location of onshore wind farms being fairly distributed geographically.

#### *Example recommendations:*

Support advice for residents about energy-efficient, affordable homes. More people have energy efficient and sustainable housing that helps lower energy bills. – **Wakefield**

Make public transport more affordable: Reduce the cost of both long and short bus journeys. Look at option for free or subsidised travel, including targeted support for certain groups. – **Derry City & Strabane**

#### **Systems-based recommendations:**

- Recommendations were comprehensive and often systems-focused, even where the question posed was focused or narrow. Citizens rarely shifted their recommendations to fit into the silos and departments that make up local authorities and local government, instead taking a whole-place approach to their recommendations.
- Participants in these processes saw houses as homes, reflected in the wording of recommendations, regardless of whether they were discussing mitigation or adaptation measures. Across the recommendations, there was a clear desire for homes to be safe from overheating or flooding, and affordable to heat in a sustainable way. They saw it as the responsibility of local government and those working skilled green jobs to help get homes to that point affordably.

- Recommendations, while in workshops were tailored to the local area being discussed, often shared similar themes and sentiment as in other areas. In particular, the importance of education, systems-based changes to help households make decisions and what changes they can, and the importance of making greener choices more accessible were all frequent underlying themes across recommendations.

#### *Example recommendations:*

Ensure green space provision in new builds, ensuring that new housing developments include accessible green spaces. These spaces provide health benefits and help mitigate flood risks, while supporting biodiversity. – **Derry City & Strabane**

Prioritise infrastructure and services, shaped by community consultation, to build resilient and accessible neighbourhoods. – **Northumberland**

# Appendix E:

## Participant surveys

### Summary of participant feedback surveys

This Appendix presents analysis of the feedback surveys completed by participants before and after engagement. It outlines changes in participants' understanding of the engagement process, their worries about climate change, the impacts they hoped the engagement would achieve, and their feelings about the engagement process.<sup>27</sup>

#### Q1. Understanding the process

Participants were presented with six statements and asked to respond using a five-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree (see **Table 8**).

For most of these statements, there was an increase in the proportion of participants responding they strongly or tended to agree. There was a particularly noticeable increase in the proportion saying they understood the purpose of the citizen engagement, as well as an increase in the proportion who said they knew what their local authority was doing to combat climate change. There was a slight decrease in the proportion who said they were confident that their contributions to the process would be used by decision-makers.

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27. Not every participant in each survey answered every question (e.g. "I feel my views were listened to"). The %s have been calculated based on the overall base size of the participants responding to the survey as a whole, instead of based on the number responding to each question (i.e. pre-engagement proportions have been calculated based on 178 participants total). The base sizes for individual local authorities were low, so findings cannot be said to be statistically significant.

Table 13: Participant responses to the statements in Question 1

		I understand the purpose of this citizen engagement project.	I am confident that my contributions to this process will be used by local authority decision-makers.	I know what my local authority is doing to combat climate change/meet net zero	The information provided during engagement activities was clear and easy to understand	I was able to openly express my ideas and thoughts	I feel my views were listened to
<b>Pre-engagement %s</b> <b>Base: 178</b>	Strongly/tend to agree (net)	84% n=150	75% n=133	40% n=71	Not asked pre-engagement	Not asked pre-engagement	Not asked pre-engagement
	Strongly/tend to disagree (net)	4% n=8	2% n=3	25% n=45	Not asked pre-engagement	Not asked pre-engagement	Not asked pre-engagement
	Neither agree nor disagree	11% n=20	24% n=42	35% n=62	Not asked pre-engagement	Not asked pre-engagement	Not asked pre-engagement
<b>Post-engagement %s</b> <b>Base: 157</b>	Strongly/tend to agree (net)	94% n=147	71% n=111	49% n=77	48% n=75	40% n=63	32% n=51
	Strongly/tend to disagree (net)	3% n=5	10% n=16	11% n=17	2% n=3	1% n=1	0% n=0
	Neither agree nor disagree	3% n=5	19% n=30	17% n=27	1% n=2	2% n=3	0% n=0

**Purpose of citizen engagement:** Participants largely understood the purpose of the citizen engagement process from the onset, with baseline agreement already quite high, and further rising in post-engagement feedback. Those who either strongly or tended to agree increased from 84% to 94% between pre- and post-engagement (150/178 and 147/157 respectively).

- 6 local authorities had 100% agreeing post engagement.
- Three Rivers had lower agreement both pre- and post-engagement (just over half agreeing pre-engagement, and 80% agreeing post).

**Confidence about whether local authority decision-makers will use contributions:** This was mixed. Confidence declined slightly on average across all local authorities, but some saw increases in agreement, and then others saw steep declines, reflecting different engagement processes having different outcomes.

- At pre-engagement stage, many of the 'lower' responses were 'neither' – indicating uncertainty instead of an outright lack of confidence. Derry City & Strabane were low agreement at pre-engagement (50%), and this further dropped to 42% post-engagement. This was substantially lower than other engagements, with Forest of Dean (61%) and Blackpool (64%) also recording low agreement.

- Post-engagement, the proportions who disagreed and the proportion who said 'neither' increased.
- In Three Rivers, there was a large decline of 22pp from 92% agreeing pre-engagement and 70% agreeing post-engagement. It should be noted that Three Rivers was one of the few engagements that had the same numbers of participants responding pre- and post (18)). Similarly large declines were noted in Warrington (-20pp), Broxtowe Borough Council Borough Council (-19pp) and Forest of Dean (-11pp).
- By contrast, some areas recorded increases in confidence about how their contributions in engagement will be used by local authorities. In Gateshead, agreement had increased by 17pp to 93%, while Blaenau Gwent and Calderdale also saw increases in agreement by 11pp and 13pp.

**Awareness of local authority actions to combat climate change:** Awareness began low to middling, with 42% agreeing at pre-engagement (71 out of 178 respondents). Among the 8 local authorities that asked this after engagement, the proportion increased from 44% (55 out of 124 respondents) to 64% (77 out of 121 respondents), a +19pp gain overall. Despite this uplift, several local authorities still had large 'neither' shares post-engagement. This could indicate uncertainty rather than distinct lack of knowledge.

- Participants in the Blaenau Gwent engagement reported the largest improvements (+60pp), followed by Blackpool (+39pp), and Gateshead (+35pp). Northumberland (+16pp), Three Rivers (+13pp), and Warrington (+13pp) rose more modestly.
- Derry City & Strabane (-3pp) decreased slightly; Forest of Dean showed no change in awareness post-engagement.

## Q2. How worried, if at all, are you about climate change?

In this question, respondents responded to the question “How worried, if at all, are you about climate change?” using a five-point scale ranging from ‘very worried’ to ‘not at all worried’ (see the table below for a summary of responses).

Table 14: **Concern about climate change**

	Pre-engagement (178)	Post-engagement (157)
<b>Very worried</b>	47% n=84	44% n=69
<b>Slightly worried</b>	39% n=69	32% n=50
<b>Not very worried</b>	42% n=17	9% n=14
<b>Not at all worried</b>	35% n=6	0% n=0

**Concern about climate change:** There was a slight decrease in those saying they were very/slightly worried about climate change between pre and post engagement, although there was not a corresponding increase in those not very/not at all concerned. Headline worry was very high and essentially remained unchanged overall. Across all local authorities combined, 86% were very/slightly worried pre-engagement (153 out of 176 respondents), and 87% (136 out of 156 respondents) were very/slightly worried post engagement too. The intensity of worry increased – the share of ‘very worried’ rose from 47% (84 out of 176 respondents) pre to 55% post (86 out of 156 respondents) post, indicating concern became stronger even as total worry remained stable.

**Concern about climate change and views on the engagement:** Those less concerned about climate change were not more likely to be negative about the engagement, and, where data is available, were positive about visions/recommendations and wanted to see them carried out.

- Gateshead and Blaenau Gwent combined very high worry about climate change with strong post-scores on understanding the purpose of engagement and confidence that contributions would be used. This suggests concern did not translate into fatalism where response pathways and clarity were strong.
- High worry but low confidence/knowledge was visible in Derry City & Strabane and Forest of Dean.
- Local authorities where participants were overall less worried sometimes aligned with weaker confidence, with Warrington showing declines in worry, alongside drops in understanding and confidence that contributions would be used.
- In Broxtowe Borough Council the proportion who were worried and who understood increased, but confidence that contributions will be used fell by 19pp. This divergence suggests clarity about the process did not fully translate into belief in influence.
- Places with large gains in 'I know what my local authority is doing' (e.g. Gateshead, Blaenau Gwent, and Blackpool) remained highly worried.

### Q3. What impacts are you hoping to see from this engagement project? Both for you/your household, and for your local area.

In this question, participants were asked “What impacts are you hoping to see from this engagement project?” Both for you/your household, and for your local area with their responses written in an open text field.

**Impacts for their local area:** Most requests were focused on infrastructure and place, including better public transport and active travel, cleaner streets and improved waste/recycling services, more green spaces/trees and biodiversity, flood mitigation where relevant, and visible council action with accountability. Where planning/land-use were relevant (Northumberland, Derry City & Strabane), participants emphasised development control, protection of landscapes, and clearer, fairer decision-making.

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Overall, many participants were constructive and solutions-focused, particularly where the topic was tightly scoped and practical (Gateshead, Calderdale and Blaenau Gwent in particular). Negative or sceptical sentiment was concerned where people felt decisions were more remote, contested, or contradictory. Pre-engagement responses were often more general ('be greener' or 'more awareness'), while post-engagement responses were typically more specific in local authorities with focused topics. In several local authorities with broader remits, responses often remained fairly general, although still constructive. Specific examples of these are included on the next page.

### **Positive and constructive comments**

- Gateshead: Many participants explicitly said their perspective changed; they cited new knowledge (e.g. heat networks) and asked for concrete delivery (cheaper, cleaner energy; retrofit; maintained green spaces). Several said they felt more confident their views count.
- Calderdale: Multiple “Yes, changed” responses; people moved from “vague” to highly specific retrofit asks (grants, quality standards, OSS, GSHPs), with equity and access repeatedly emphasised.
- Broxtowe Borough Council: Strong practical focus on flood preparedness and response; several “quite/very confident” that recommendations will be used; recognition of multi-agency roles and a call for transparency and accountability.
- Blackpool: Optimism about greener spaces, cleaner streets, housing quality, and co-production with the council.
- Responses in most places became more specific post-engagement, as understanding improved. In Gateshead and Calderdale, for example, participants moved decisively from wanting to learn to naming delivery mechanisms they wanted to see; Blaenau Gwent’s recommendations sharpened to public transport solutions; and Broxtowe Borough Council solidified around flood measures and emergency coordination.

### **Negative and sceptical sentiments (noting that overall sentiment was positive)**

- Sentiment was more often negative or sceptical where confidence that contributions would be used was weak, and the impacts participants wanted to see often emphasised legitimacy and accountability. This could be seen in Derry City & Strabane, Forest of Dean (where there was mixed confidence and calls for openness and ‘visible’ action), and Three Rivers (where confidence fell post-engagement). Areas with lower climate worry or climate-policy scepticism showed more emphasis on planning control and preserving local character than decarbonisation measures per se.
- Derry City & Strabane: Strongly expressed frustration, powerlessness, and distrust; detailed demands for protections (AONB, peatlands), independent assessments, and rights-based decision-making; several “not sure there will be any” impact.
- Northumberland: Responses focused less on climate specific actions, and more on ‘common sense’, practical approaches (“do not waste resources on net zero,” “less windfarms”), including preserving farmland/green fields, and stronger planning controls; some constructive asks too (safer walking, grants for solar, better recycling).

- Forest of Dean: Mixed tone; many practical asks but some scepticism (“there will not be any”), and repeated calls for clearer council communication and visible action.
- Wakefield: Specific local ideas alongside concerns about “hard to reach” groups and budget constraints; several expressed low confidence in follow-through.

### **Q4. How are you feeling about the engagement?**

In this question, participants were asked “how are you feeling about the engagement?”, with their responses written in an open text field. These pre- and post-engagement responses are summarised below:

- Pre-engagement: Excited, curious, nervous. Most were keen to take part and learn, but some were unsure what to expect or whether it would make a difference.
- Post-engagement: Informed, hopeful, empowered. Across most engagements, participants felt more knowledgeable about the issues and process, more optimistic, and that their views had been heard. A recurring fourth word was cautious, reflecting doubts about follow-through in several places.

Where the topic was concrete and delivery-focused, post feelings were strongest. For example:

- Gateshead (energy/heat networks) and Calderdale (retrofit) showed clear movement from learning to feeling informed, empowered, and valued; several explicitly said their perspective had changed and confidence grew.
- Broxtowe Borough Council Borough Council (flooding) and Blaenau Gwent (transport) also showed a shift from curiosity/apprehension to engaged and hopeful, although both retained a minority of sceptical notes about council follow-through.
- In Three Rivers, participants were enthusiastic about the process and outputs, but repeatedly voiced doubt about the council's ability or remit to implement their recommendations.

Table 15: **Specific changes across local authorities**

<b>Blaenau Gwent</b>	From excited/unsure to listened/empowered/positive, with a visible minority were uncertain about whether recommendations would be taken forward.
<b>Broxtowe Borough Council Borough Council</b>	From open-minded but sceptical to informed/empowered/hopeful; some residual concern and “wait and see”.
<b>Blackpool</b>	Predominantly positive/hopeful/engaged pre; limited post data here, but other responses suggest continued constructive tone.
<b>Gateshead</b>	From heard/positive to empowered/informed/proud; a few caveats about no guarantees.
<b>Calderdale</b>	From enthusiastic/cautiously optimistic to informed/empowered/motivated; realism about resource constraints and scale.
<b>Forest of Dean</b>	This was not asked pre-engagement; post mainly “listened/respected/hopeful”, with facilitation format/accessibility critiques from a few.
<b>Northumberland</b>	From mixed (including one sceptical voice) to informed/hopeful/honoured; requests for better representation noted.
<b>Three Rivers</b>	From excited/hopeful to proud/hopeful but doubtful about council influence and pace.
<b>Wakefield</b>	From excited/nervous to informed/hopeful; emphasis on expanding reach/education.
<b>Warrington</b>	From excited/nervous, to educated/hopeful/motivated; consistently positive.
<b>Derry City &amp; Strabane</b>	From hopeful/engaged but apprehensive to split feelings; many disappointed/unheard, concerns about only paying “lip service”, alongside some empowered/hopeful comments.

**There was also notable alignment between how participants responded to quantitative questions:**

- The significant post-engagement increase in understanding the engagement process was mirrored by participants frequently citing feeling more informed, clear, or educated in Gateshead, Calderdale, Northumberland and others. Where purpose became near-universal, post-engagement feelings emphasised being informed and enabled.
- The mixed picture in the quantitative responses in terms of confidence in how contributions will be used by local authority decision-makers is reflected clearly in this question. Local authorities with higher post-engagement confidence (Gateshead, Blaenau Gwent) reflected feelings of being 'listened, empowered, valued'. Local authorities that fell or stayed low in confidence (Derry City & Strabane, Forest of Dean, and Three Rivers to a degree) contained "doubtful, lip service, not convinced" language despite otherwise positive process feedback.
- Where knowledge of local authority action improved markedly (Gateshead, Blaenau Gwent, Blackpool), participants explicitly reported being "more knowledgeable" post-engagement, and that reinforced hopeful/empowered feelings even when climate worry stayed high.
- Climate worry: In local authorities where worry intensified or remained very high (Broxtowe Borough Council, Derry City & Strabane, Blackpool), feelings were a mix of concern paired with empowerment (where delivery routes were credible) or frustration (where legitimacy/agency issues dominated).

## Appendix F: Strategic advice and capacity building local authority reflections

### Summary of local authority strategic advice and capacity building reflections

This Appendix summarises the reflections from local authorities who supported by Involve and Forum for the Future on strategic advice and capacity building. Variability in strategic advice projects demanded a different approach to reflective data collection than the citizen visioning and conversation starter projects. These local authorities completed a form in collaboration with the consortium project lead reflecting on the process they had undertaken. It should be noted that 6 out of 16 strategic advice local authorities completed these forms.

### Purpose and methods used

The purpose of strategic advice and capacity building projects outlined in the forms varied, but all local authorities intended for the project to inform the development of frameworks to engage publics or specific groups of actors on climate-related issues. For example, in Devon the project was intended to inform how the local authority could effectively engage businesses on climate resilience and severe weather preparedness, to inform the development of their regional adaptation plan.

### Existing climate change and engagement strategies or plans

Most local authorities reported having already established plans and strategies on climate, environment, or net zero. Most described fairly sophisticated efforts in their councils, involving senior officers and embedded into the local authority infrastructure, regarding different elements of climate change, including climate resilience, biodiversity, and net zero.

In contrast, engagement strategies or plans were less progressed, with the exception of Devon where the local authority officer highlighted Engaging Devon as an overall strategy for the area. Portsmouth City Council described needing in future to think more widely (in a place-based way) rather than per initiative with engaging citizens on climate change, and thinking about engagement as ongoing, iterative conversations. Others were either unsure, did not answer, or described a coordinated strategy for information and communications, but rarely with citizens and not focused on in-depth engagement.

### Reflections on the strategic advice and capacity building project

**What went well:** Local authorities reflected that their strategic advice projects overall provided clarity on who needed to be involved in future engagement processes, the immediate next steps, and how they could present their objectives in a clear way in future. Capacity building sessions in the Mid South West also helped to create shared engagement principles and clearer processes, giving officers confidence to challenge their assumptions on how they needed to engage the public.

Local authorities also reflected that the independent, pragmatic support provided by the project leads, including scoping workshops, interviews, and desk research, produced credible, succinct outputs that local authorities could use internally and with partners.

**What went less well:** Local authorities reflected that framing and scope of the strategic advice project to those they wished to engage mattered. For instance, in Devon, framing the project as 'Citizen Engagement' did not fit, and caused friction in their target actors (SMEs) as the project was aimed at understanding business needs, but recognised that most businesses in the area are SMEs.

Some local authorities also reflected that reaching beyond the 'usual voices' was hard without existing networks. In both South Oxfordshire and Devon, the process reinforced their knowledge of challenges engaging particular sectors of business (in South Oxfordshire this was farmers; in Devon this was the insurance sector).

**What local authorities had done as a result:** For all the local authorities who completed the forms, the project was useful to prioritise next steps, set up subgroups, and identified avenues to widen voices. In Devon, Lambeth, and Mid South West, officers were enabled to shift priorities to better inform strategy development. Most local authorities also reported that officers were upskilled, particularly in Mid South West where training modules were provided by the consortium project team as part of project delivery.