

Institute for Public Policy Research



# THE CLIMATE COMMONS

HOW COMMUNITIES CAN THRIVE IN A CLIMATE CHANGING WORLD

“ *There is no reason to believe that bureaucrats and politicians, no matter how well meaning, are better at solving problems than the people on the spot, who have the strongest incentive to get the solution right*

*Elinor Ostrom*

**Jonathan Webb, Lucy Stone,  
Luke Murphy and Jack Hunter**

March 2021

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IPPR, the Institute for Public Policy Research, is the UK's leading progressive think tank. We are an independent charitable organisation with our main offices in London. IPPR North, IPPR's dedicated think tank for the North of England, operates out of offices in Manchester and Newcastle, and IPPR Scotland, our dedicated think tank for Scotland, is based in Edinburgh.

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This paper was first published in March 2021. © IPPR 2021

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The IPPR Environmental Justice Commission (EJC) is a landmark initiative building on IPPR's award winning work on environmental breakdown and its Commission for Economic Justice. The commission is co-chaired by Hilary Benn, Caroline Lucas and Laura Sandys, and they are joined by commissioners drawn from business, activism, academia, civil society, and trade unionism.

The central aim of the commission is to present an ambitious, positive vision shaped around people's experiences and needs, and develop a plan of action that integrates policy both to address the climate and environmental emergencies and to deliver economic and social justice.

The commission's final report will be published in 2021.  
Find out more at: <https://www.ippr.org/environment-and-justice>

## **NOTE**

This briefing is presented as a submission to the IPPR Environmental Justice Commission in order to stimulate vital public debate. The arguments and the proposals made are those of the authors only. Commissioners serve in an individual capacity, and no report of or for the Commission should be taken as representing the views of the organisations with which they are affiliated.

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### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The authors would like to thank the stakeholders and community leaders who kindly provided insights and evidence this report. Without their pioneering work, this report would not be possible. Our thanks also to Local Trust for generously supporting this work and to IPPR's publications team for their design of this report.

### **THANKS**

IPPR is extremely grateful to Local Trust for their support for this piece of work. Their support should not be taken as agreement with the content of this or other commission publications.

**Local Trust**

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## Citation

If you are using this document in your own writing, our preferred citation is:  
Webb J, Stone L, Murphy L and Hunter J (2021) *The climate commons: How communities can thrive in a climate changing world*, IPPR. <http://www.ippr.org/research/publications/the-climate-commons>

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# SUMMARY

**The climate crisis, and the response to it, present opportunities for communities in the UK as well as threats.** The threats that communities face range from the impacts of the climate crisis itself (flooding, heatwaves) to the impacts of the economic transition (jobs, industries), as well as the need to make changes within neighbourhoods and local areas to reduce carbon emissions and meet the challenges of the transition. But, managed well, **the transition to a greener economy offers the opportunity to reshape local areas in a way that improves health and wellbeing, tackles inequalities and improves quality of life.**

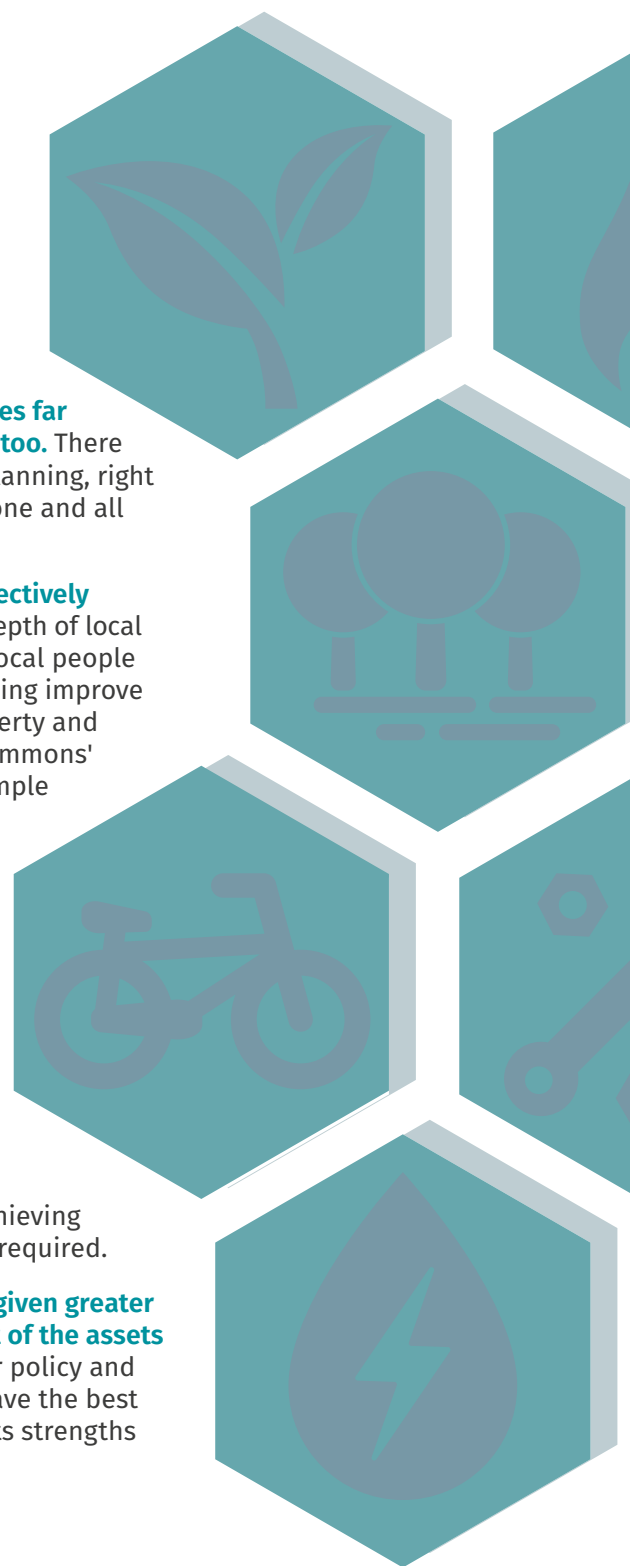
**The next wave of decarbonisation will impact people and communities far more than it has to date and so must necessarily involve them more too.** There will be changes to industry, food, land use, transport, housing and planning, right across every aspect of the economy and society, in a way that everyone and all communities will see and feel.

**Communities across the country are already making progress in collectively addressing the climate crisis.** Our report highlights the breadth and depth of local community innovation that is happening across the country, where local people are coming together to create shared low carbon assets and in so doing improve their health, wellbeing and local neighbourhood, while reducing poverty and increasing local control. This is what we describe as 'local climate commons' – local stewardship of resources, created and owned locally, for example community owned wind or solar, community land trusts creating affordable low carbon homes and local food cooperatives.

**Climate action is often not the primary goal for many successful community-led initiatives – emissions reductions are often a co-benefit.** Local climate commons are increasing community wealth, agency and regeneration, creating thriving places while also addressing the climate crisis.

**At present, we are neither making the most of the opportunities available nor managing the unequal negative impacts of the climate crisis and the transition.** Policy responses are too dependent on top-down interventions to manage the mitigation and adaptation efforts, on market solutions, or are too reliant on achieving individual behaviour change, when it is a collective response that is required.

**For communities to thrive in a climate changing world they must be given greater ownership and agency not just over the process of the transition but of the assets and benefits that arise from it.** Such an approach will result in better policy and fairer outcomes, as it is communities, and their local leaders, who have the best understanding of their local areas – the geography, the assets, and its strengths and weaknesses.



## KEY FINDINGS

If local communities are to be successful and thrive in a climate changing world, this report finds that a number of barriers must be overcome, and crucial issues recognised.

- **A vision for action:** Successful cases of community action are able to articulate a strong vision for how their projects deliver direct benefits to the community rather than just focussing on addressing the climate crisis alone.
- **Local framing drives engagement:** Community initiatives are more likely to be successful when they resonate with or help create common community identities and align with perceived shared interests.
- **Inclusion and diversity:** Ensuring the objectives of climate justice deliver social and racial justice helps broaden participation and ensure community action delivers for all members of the community.
- **Volunteer engagement:** Where community-level climate action relies on voluntary time, success centres on the ability to foster inclusive voluntary engagement.
- **External, professional support:** Professional support, to guide a community group through the complex, technical planning hurdles is a key enabling factor to success.
- **Funding support:** Funding is often critical to success, but it must be invested in people as well as the projects at a community level, led by local needs and available over the long term.
- **The importance of networks:** Projects which facilitate relationships between people and different organisations within a community are more effective.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**1. We recommend a major 'paradigm shift' for a new approach to tackling the climate crisis by facilitating 'local climate commons' and putting communities at the heart of addressing the climate crisis.**

'Local climate commons' is the self-governance of green economy resources and assets by communities – for instance, community-owned/managed renewable energy, district heating, food and forests. By facilitating local climate commons we can accelerate progress towards addressing the climate crisis while also spreading common ownership and community wealth building; improving place; building local agency and empowerment; increasing social resilience; and increasing the political mandate for addressing the climate crisis.

To achieve this, three key things are required.

*1. Widespread devolution of power and resources.*

- **We recommend a new approach to, and programme of, devolution in England, comprised of bold reforms at all levels of government.**
- **We recommend that the devolution process should be inclusive of communities.** This should include:
  - legislating for community rights
  - a community right to own or manage
  - the creation of a Community Wealth Fund.



## *2. Setting ambitions for climate action and the community.*

- **We recommend that the UK government should set a series of goals to significantly increase the proportion of community-owned green economy assets in England.**

## *3. Policies to drive community climate action and build community-owned green assets.*

- **We recommend that the UK government should launch a single Thriving Places Fund for England which would provide money to communities to undertake ambitious climate action.**
- **We recommend that existing funding mechanisms should contain provisions to ensure any investments are climate and nature proofed.**
- **We recommend that the government should use its planning reforms as an opportunity to prioritise applications for community-led land use.**
- **We recommend that local authorities should more actively involve community groups in devising climate action plans.**

## **2. We recommend a ‘mindset shift’ in how local communities approach climate action.**

We propose that communities be encouraged and supported to shift their mindsets and recognise their activities as climate action; then help them to build on that action to further support the transition and fulfil their primary goals such as creating community wealth, addressing poverty and building resilience.

- **We recommend that communities develop new plans for action that emphasise inclusion, community cohesion and collective action as their key modus operandi for addressing climate breakdown, as opposed to individual action.**
- **We recommend that philanthropic funders invest in people over time, with trust-based funding.**
- **We recommend that philanthropic funders create a pooled fund for community climate commons.**

# 1. INTRODUCTION

From flooding to rising temperatures, the climate crisis is increasingly a lived reality for many communities. In the extreme, whole communities risk being lost to rising sea levels;<sup>1</sup> others are subject to regular, uncontrollable flooding. Meanwhile, in rural communities farmers face huge crop losses as the UK continues to break temperature records and experience weather extremes (Met Office 2020).

Yet until now, much of the progress made in addressing the climate crisis has taken place practically invisible to most of the public as national policy changes to shift the energy sector are made in the background. But if the UK is to meet its goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050, the changes now required will affect people's everyday lives, which will require policy changes to be made in the foreground. Right across every aspect of the economy and society there will be changes to industry, food, land use, transport, housing and planning in a way that everyone and all communities will see and feel (Evans et al 2020, WWF 2019).

Communities are faced with having to transition on three fronts:

- to the direct environmental impacts as well as the indirect political, economic and social impacts of the climate crisis
- to the impacts that will arise from the economic transition in response to the climate crisis
- to the changes required in neighbourhoods and lifestyles to meet these challenges.

How we adapt to these processes of profound change will have a significant impact on whether communities are able to not just withstand the impacts but to also thrive in a climate changing world. One only has to look to the industrial shifts of the UK's past to understand how a poorly managed transition can have long-lasting impacts (Emden and Murphy 2019).

Although the transition to net zero is unlikely to be entirely smooth, managed well it could secure huge benefits across the UK, including improvements in health, inequality and quality of life – especially to lower-income communities who bear the brunt of the multiple impacts, and yet contribute least to the problem (IPPR 2020).

In this report, we examine how communities are responding in the face of the climate crisis and assess how they might not only survive but thrive, especially in those areas that face other significant economic and social challenges. We spotlight how local people are 'commoning' – the process of coming together to create shared low carbon assets. We analyse how taking such an approach to addressing the climate crisis might achieve better outcomes than the current default – one directed from Westminster and Whitehall, with little or no involvement of communities.

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<sup>1</sup> Such as Fairbourne in Wales – see for example <https://theecologist.org/2020/mar/05/welsh-village-be-decommissioned-due-floods>

The policy response to Covid-19 provides the most recent evidence of centralised decision-making which has left many concluding that it would have been far more effective had it been led locally (Whannel 2020, Kaye and Morgan 2021). From the level of furlough and job retention schemes, to the support and loans on offer to businesses, to the nature and form of the health restrictions – each has affected communities in different ways depending on their circumstances and level of resilience.

## 1.1 WHAT IS A COMMUNITY?

Communities are, of course, not just defined by the people that happen to live within a defined location. Communities are inherently relational, and so we recognise that a focus on ‘community’ comes with its own set of assumptions about access and participation (Berkeley 2020).

Within one neighbourhood there may be many groupings of relationships with different perceptions and definitions of what constitutes ‘their community’. Communities are continually created and recreated, evolving as people change and move, and are made through the relationships of living and collaborating in close proximity.

Recent research has shown that people associate community with the interwoven relationships, norms and institutions of a local place (Tanner et al 2020). It is this local, place-based, definition of community that is the focus of this report.

Where we refer to ‘community-led’ projects we are alluding to those projects which may draw on support from the voluntary, private and public sectors but are crucially created, led or owned by people living locally. This ranges from small voluntary groups to more ambitious social enterprises. It does not include local authority-led programmes, although many have partnerships or alliances with local authorities.

## 1.2 OUR APPROACH

This report was commissioned by the Local Trust charity, which was established to support local areas with a unique approach to funding to promote thriving places. By devolving decision-making power and grant funding to communities, Local Trust’s work aims to empower communities to shape their own vision of a thriving place.

Funded by a National Lottery community fund, Local Trust’s Big Local programme provides long-term (10–15-year) funding to communities and allows them to shape their own priorities and path towards creating a more empowered, resilient, dynamic and asset-rich community. The report looks at the challenges and opportunities for Big Local areas, and other communities in the UK, in responding to the climate crisis.

We conducted a literature review, a series of interviews with experts and funders, and explored in more detail three case studies. We also drew upon a Local Trust survey that explored the activities Big Local areas are currently undertaking to tackle climate change and where climate change sits in terms of local priorities. In reviewing the existing literature, our analysis focusses on lessons learned from local, community-level responses to climate, the enabling factors and the support currently available.

## 2. HOW ARE COMMUNITIES ADDRESSING THE CLIMATE CRISIS?

There is no single place to see the whole picture of community action on climate in the UK. In 2011 there was a Low Carbon Communities Network with a map of community action, but that has since been discontinued.<sup>2</sup> A recent initiative, Carbon Copy, is mapping some of the local climate action taking place in the UK, but it is not yet comprehensive.<sup>3</sup>

The lack of information on the scale of community action is partly due to it being overlooked over the past decade. Indeed, over that time there has been a shift away from community climate action with policies eroded or undermined, and little funding being directed towards communities. Scotland has had a Climate Challenge Fund to support community-based sustainability initiatives in operation for over 10 years (Scottish Government 2019), but the UK government has no equivalent programme in place.

As part of the research for this report, we interviewed a range of philanthropic funders who described how community action on climate is overlooked because of the perception that it is too small scale to have any significant impact. Many funders struggled to identify good examples of community-led climate initiatives and acknowledged they had limited information about the impact any such schemes might be having.

The lack of information about the scope of activity taking place at the local level can also be attributed to the huge variety of motivations, terminology, scope and scale. This makes it hard to generalise and aggregate.

### 2.1 PIECING TOGETHER THE PUZZLE OF COMMUNITY CLIMATE ACTION

Despite these difficulties, this report pieces together a summary of the huge variety of activity taking place locally. We found there was a wide range, from the very small-scale voluntary groups focussed on one specific issue (for example reducing food waste) to the very large-scale solar farms built on a community ownership model.

Our research found there to be a range of models for community-led action. Some are not constituted as organisations, simply operating as voluntary groups, while others are established social businesses. While some projects make a very small contribution to reducing carbon emissions, there are some large initiatives that are having a transformative impact – both types are termed as ‘community’ initiatives.

Crucially, we found that if the focus is simply on communities that are explicitly and deliberately addressing the ‘climate crisis’, a much narrower range of activities are identifiable than if we look at initiatives taking place at a community level that

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2 For more about the Low Carbon Communities Network see <https://semble.org/project/low-carbon-communities-network-lccn/>

3 For more about the Carbon Copy initiative see <https://carboncopy.eco/>

increase resilience to climate impacts or contribute to the transition to net zero, without this being the key driver.

We have not included local council activities or publicly funded bodies, and we have focussed on physical projects that create direct climate benefits or impacts rather than campaigns for policy change. There is often a relationship between practical action and advocacy and campaign groups, but our focus in this report is to understand the role of practical action taking place at a local level.

We have summarised the various areas of community climate action that we identified in our research, noting that as place-based initiatives they rarely have a single focus and often encompass multiple social and environmental goals.

**FIGURE 2.1**

**An outline of the different forms of community action**



Source: Authors' own analysis

### **Community energy**

Community-owned renewable energy takes multiple forms from cooperatives to community interest societies and community benefit societies. These clean energy projects are typically owned by local people through share offers, cooperative membership and led by the local community, with member voting rights, board representation and a community fund. These are not voluntary initiatives; although many may volunteer their time towards the projects, they are registered businesses and have paid employees.

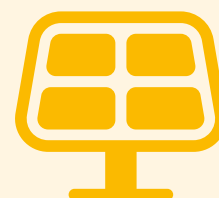
The sector extends from small-scale solar rooftop projects to large, commercial-scale wind or solar farm developments. Community Energy England estimates there to be 300 community energy organisations in England, employing 263 full-time equivalent staff, and having installed 246.9MW of new electricity generation as well as renewable heating, energy efficiency, battery storage and electric transport initiatives (Robinson and Stephen 2020).

Community-owned energy projects aren't just controlled and approved by local residents, they also share profits with local residents and often a community fund. Community energy organisations also provide renewable heating projects – for homes, across whole districts, and for schools – and energy efficiency and fuel poverty initiatives.

The model typically starts with a local community energy group conducting a feasibility assessment (either pro bono or with a grant fund) and then raising the funding for purchasing and installing the renewable energy technology through local share offers (often starting from £100 to ensure wide local participation).<sup>4</sup> The renewable energy is then located on a site with an arrangement agreed between the local community energy organisation and the landlord, with a Power Purchase Agreement and surplus sold to the grid.

### **BURNHAM AND WESTON ENERGY COMMUNITY INTEREST COMPANY (CIC)**

One of the UK's largest community solar facilities, at 9.3MW, Burnham and Weston Energy was established by raising £4 million in a local bond offer. It is situated on a farm near Weston-Super-Mare and sheep continue to graze around the solar panels. The project, owned by local shareholders, is generating £1.2 million for the community over the 25 years of its lifetime. Burnham and Weston CIC manages the project, with a board of local people. During the Covid-19 lockdown the board created an emergency fund for local residents and businesses impacted by the pandemic.<sup>5</sup>



### **Community-supported agriculture**

Community-supported agriculture typically takes the form of farms that are set up in partnership or directly by a community, many of which are owned or invested in by the local community. This can take the form of community members becoming shareholders, but also includes local people volunteering labour. Community-supported agriculture (CSA) changes the relationship between the producer and the local consumers to one of shared endeavour, sharing the risks and the rewards. Community-supported agriculture offers local communities access to the land, a higher number of local jobs compared to the typical agriculture sector employment rates, access to affordable, local organic food, and higher productivity and a more stable income for farmers (Saltmarsh et al 2011).

Community-supported agriculture has low carbon principles at its heart, either in the form of organic farms or farms that are sustainably managed for community benefit. These types of food production do not contribute to the climate crisis in the way typical industrial food production does through pesticide use, heavy machinery use, packaging and transport. It is also affordable and accessible for local people and can provide access to green space, health benefits, and knowledge sharing (ibid).

There are around 100 CSA farms in the UK,<sup>6</sup> fewer than in other countries where it is a more established part of the farming landscape: in 2011 in France, for example, there were more than 2,000 CSAs and in the US more than 12,000 (ibid).

<sup>4</sup> For more information on ethical investments in community energy see <https://www.ethex.org.uk/LCH2021>

<sup>5</sup> For more information see <http://www.burnhamandwestonenergy.co.uk/>

<sup>6</sup> For more information about community-supported agriculture see <https://communitysupportedagriculture.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/CSA-AT-A-GLANCE-2019.pdf>

### FORDHALL FARM

The UK's first community owned farm has been growing food without pesticides for 60 years and runs leisure and education initiatives for local residents.<sup>7</sup>



### GROWING COMMUNITIES

Working on a different model, Growing Communities is an affordable organic vegetable box company in Hackney that sources from a patchwork of urban farms, organising a farmers market, and providing jobs and local training.<sup>8</sup>



### Community allotments and gardens

Community allotments and gardens typically involve landowners creating community growing spaces or residents taking over abandoned land plots to collectively grow food. The Social Farms and Gardens charity estimates there to be 1,000 community gardens and 200 city and school farms in the UK.<sup>9</sup> These can be in urban or rural areas, and range in size, from a derelict back alleyway between houses in Belfast turned into a communal, green space with allotments and benches, to larger-scale projects such as a two-acre community field in Cornwall growing organic food and hosting schools and playgroups.

### THE WOLVES LANE HORTICULTURE CENTRE

This centre in the Wood Green area of London has acquired a former plant nursery to create a food growing and education space as a community enterprise. With support from Ubele,<sup>10</sup> the goal is to create sustainable, healthy food that is also accessible to everyone through education and events.<sup>11</sup>



### SOUTH LIVERPOOL URBAN GARDEN

The Mersey Forest initiative, is a network of community woodlands, creating an extended 'Northern Forest'.<sup>12</sup> The network brought together volunteers in Liverpool to help transform derelict land in an industrial village into a community garden for growing food and providing a place of respite and community gathering for local residents.



7 For more information see <https://www.fordhallfarm.com/>

8 For more information see <https://www.growingcommunities.org/key-principles>

9 See <https://www.farmgarden.org.uk/our-work>

10 Ubele is an African-diaspora-led social enterprise, supporting sustainable community enterprises. See <https://www.ubele.org/>

11 For more information see <https://www.wolveslane.org/have-your-say-about-the-future-of-the-wolves-lane-centre>

12 For more information see <https://www.merseyforest.org.uk/about/plan/> and <https://thenorthernforest.org.uk/>

### Community land trusts and low carbon homes

Communities are coming together and building environmentally sustainable and affordable housing, collectively. There are lots of different ways to do this, and community land trusts (CLTs) are becoming one of the main models. Land trusts are set up by local people, who buy or are gifted land, and use this land to create affordable housing. Land trusts are a rapidly growing movement with 263 already incorporated and a total of 300 including new groups forming. Over 900 CLT homes have been built to date with 16,000 community-led homes in the pipeline.<sup>13</sup>

There is no data on the proportion of community land trust homes that are low carbon, but according to the National CLT Network<sup>14</sup> a large proportion are built either on 'Passivhaus' principles (a sustainable building standard that requires homes to be designed with little to no energy for heating or cooling<sup>15</sup>) or with low carbon material and high energy efficient standards. These projects are focussed on addressing the need for affordable housing, and lock in affordability in perpetuity for the community under the local trust management. Some include self-build and many will source labour for construction locally.

#### THE GOODWIN DEVELOPMENT TRUST

Residents in a council estate in Hull created the trust which has renovated 60 abandoned homes and created family homes to Passivhaus standards together with a water recycling system, and is developing 40 more social homes.<sup>16</sup>



#### SWAFFHAM PRIOR COMMUNITY LAND TRUST

Swaffham Prior CLT is moving a whole village from oil-heating to a renewable energy system. This rural village of 300 homes is dependent on very expensive oil heating that currently contributes to the climate crisis. The local land trust has secured planning permission for a district renewable heating system which will provide every home in the community with affordable renewable heating.<sup>17</sup>



### Community-led safe streets and travel initiatives

Communities are coming together to create their own electric car clubs, install EV charging points, and organise cycling and walking initiatives. Community Energy England reported 30 new community transport schemes under way by community energy organisations diversifying from energy generation (Robinson and Stephen 2020). This includes community-owned electric vehicle charge points, such as TrydaNi in Wales, providing a network of charging points across communities through Wales, paid for by a share offer.

Play Streets and Active Streets are community-led initiatives aiming to create car-free streets for children to play and others to feel safer walking and cycling. This is

13 For more information about community land trusts see <http://www.communitylandtrusts.org.uk/what-is-a-clt/about-clts>

14 The National CLT Network is the official charity supporting community land trusts in England and Wales. See more here: <http://www.communitylandtrusts.org.uk/>

15 For more on the Passivhaus standards see for example [https://www.passivhaustrust.org.uk/what\\_is\\_passivhaus.php](https://www.passivhaustrust.org.uk/what_is_passivhaus.php)

16 For more information see <https://www.communityledhomes.org.uk/success-stories/goodwin-development-trust>

17 For more information see <https://heatingswaffhamprior.co.uk/2020/12/01/ukbreakthrough/>



a key enabling condition to support the shift away from carbon-emitting vehicles towards alternatives such as walking and cycling – for health benefits as much as climate benefits.

### GWENT ENERGY COMMUNITY INTEREST COMPANY (CIC)

Gwent Energy is a family-run community interest company (CIC) based in South Wales. Up to 2019, the organisation had supported over 30 local community groups to install solar PV, electric vehicle charging, and battery storage for community and domestic customers.<sup>18</sup>



### ACTIVE COMMUNITIES

In Birmingham, a community benefit society is providing cycle training to encourage more cycling in six areas of high deprivation. The Active Wellbeing Society (AWS) trains bike owners in cycle repairs, and is taking a whole-systems approach with the aim of shifting power to communities, making them more resilient and better connected. By training communities to be able to cycle and repair bikes, AWS is providing an affordable way to travel that provides the independence of a vehicle without the cost of a car.<sup>19</sup>



### Circular economy initiatives

There is a range of community-led initiatives designed to save money for residents, while reducing waste, from swap shops and libraries of things (reuse), local recycling enterprises and repair cafés. These projects are often run by volunteers and cut climate impacts by reducing the number of new products manufactured, transported and consumed, and by reducing the burden of landfill and waste.

### REPAIR CAFÉS

Repair cafés offer free meeting space, tools and materials to help people make repairs to items such as clothes, furniture and electrical appliances. There are approximately 147 repair cafés across the UK, with an increasing number popping up in specific locations, supported by a repair café network.<sup>20</sup> For example, in Derbyshire alone, there are six community-led repair cafés across the local authority area. The motivations for setting up or participating in a repair café comes as much from saving money as from saving the amount of waste going to landfill.



18 For more information see <https://gwentenergycic.org/>

19 For more information see <https://theaws.co.uk/active-communities/>

20 For more information see <https://www.repaircafe.org/en/about/>

### Community climate resilience and adaptation

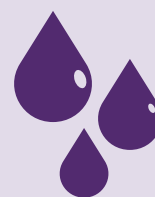
Many of the initiatives described above – community food growing and local energy generation – are building community resilience to the changing climate, but there are notable gaps. There are few community-led initiatives to address heatwaves or water scarcity (Twigger-Ross et al 2015), with the main area of community-led climate resilience being in flooding prevention.

Managing flood risk involves a number of authorities such as the Environment Agency, local authorities, drainage boards and local flood authorities; however, with constrained public budgets there are widely differing approaches.<sup>21</sup> In 2017, the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) provided £1 million to encourage community-led natural flood protection schemes (DEFRA 2017).

These include civil society-led, local river catchment schemes, nature-based schemes such as tree planting, and community early warning systems to ensure safe evacuation. The new strategy from the Environment Agency (2020) also sets out plans to work with communities more closely, in partnership, to build more climate-resilient places and to help communities build back quicker and better after any events such as flooding.

#### SLOWING THE FLOW AT PICKERING

In Pickering, Yorkshire, faced with the cost of funding a large concrete dam which was beyond the local authority budget, local residents came together to implement a series of nature-based measures including ‘leaky dams’ and planting trees to slow and absorb flood water. This has successfully reduced the flood risk in Pickering from 25 per cent to 4 per cent.<sup>22</sup>



### Rewilding and community-owned woodland

Communities coming together to buy or lease woodland to manage, reforest or rewild and manage woodland, under collective ownership, is a more obvious form of reclaiming the commons. From a climate perspective, these initiatives are creating a carbon sink, as well as green space for the local residents, improving health and wellbeing, and often providing climate adaptation benefits such as increased resilience to flooding for example (Woodland Trust 2011).

#### LANGHOLM MOOR COMMUNITY BUYOUT

A community land buyout in Scotland successfully raised £3.8 million to purchase 5,000 acres of land from one of the largest landowners in Scotland, the Duke of Buccleuch. The community trust plans to turn the land, Langholm Moor, into a community-run nature reserve to address climate change. It will restore peatland and woodland, which will create carbon sinks and reduce carbon emission contributions from peatland erosion. In addition, the initiative plans to include small-scale renewable energy generation and support for community regeneration.<sup>23</sup>



21 This has included the Catchment Based Approach (CaBA) which is an inclusive, civil society-led initiative that works in partnership with government, local authorities, water companies, businesses and more to maximise the natural value of our environment. For more information see <https://catchmentbasedapproach.org/about/>

22 For more information see <https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/research/slowing-the-flow-at-pickering/#:~:text=A%20strong%20partnership%20has%20delivered%20a%20more%20sustainable,any%20year%20to%20a%20less%20than%204%25%20chance>

23 For more information see <https://www.langholminitiative.org.uk/langholm-moor>

### FRIENDS OF CHOPWELL WOOD, ROWLANDS GILL, TYNE AND WEAR

The group was established in 1991 to campaign for Woodland Park status to guard against possible sell off of this 360-hectare Forestry Commission (FC) wood on the edge of Gateshead. While FC supports the group, the Friends of Chopwell Wood also raises money for some management works within the wood. It contributes to the Forest Design Plan, develops educational resources and encourages sensitive use of the wood. Over the years the group has paid for conservation work, path repairs and drainage improvements, access facilities, sculptures, litter clearance, and forest festivals, history and heritage works.<sup>24</sup>



### URBAN ROOTS

Malls Mire woods, on the Southside of Glasgow, was a neglected site for fly-tipping that has been transformed into a thriving woodland and community gardens to grow vegetables and fruit, which hosts school clubs and holiday programmes. Urban Roots, a community-led charity, and the local community run the gardens and Malls Mire Community Woodland, with a focus on access for all and health and wellbeing.<sup>25</sup>



## 2.2 HOW ARE BIG LOCAL AREAS RESPONDING TO THE CLIMATE CRISIS?

The Big Local programme, delivered by Local Trust, is a radically different model for funding communities, one that is resident-led, flexible and long term. It was set up in 2012 by the National Lottery with a vision of empowered, resilient, dynamic, asset-rich communities making their own decisions on what is best for their area.<sup>26</sup> The programme awards 150 local neighbourhoods across England £1.15 million each to spend over a period of 10 to 15 years. Local residents form a Big Local partnership board, consult their community, put together plans and then work to deliver them. Local Trust provides support through a network of community development specialists ('reps') and a programme of learning, networking and partnership opportunities. Our survey of Big Local areas (below) gives some insight into the ways in which communities choose to engage with the climate agenda when they are provided with the necessary power, resources and autonomy.

The average population of a Big Local area is just under 8,000 people. They are areas that have been overlooked for funding and resources in the past and may face issues including the decline of local industry, high levels of unemployment, or a pressing need for new support services or activities. But there is no typical Big Local area – they range from postwar developments on the edge of conurbations, such as Westfield in Sheffield, to market towns and rural areas such as Three Parishes in Shropshire, and from remote coastal communities like Withernsea in Yorkshire, to densely populated inner-city neighbourhoods such as Somers Town near St Pancras in central London. The work that Big Local partnerships do is just

24 For more information see <https://www.friendsofchopwellwood.org.uk/>

25 For more information about Urban Roots see <https://www.urbanroots.org.uk/>

26 For more information about the Big Local programme see <https://localtrust.org.uk/big-local/about-big-local/>

as diverse, entirely determined by local residents and representing an incredible range of activities that correspond to local priorities and contexts.

Of the 150 Big Local areas, a relatively small number – just six – mention the climate crisis explicitly in their strategic plans. However, to understand the nature of climate action taking place and how climate action is understood in these communities, we undertook a survey of Big Local areas.

We found through this survey and conversations with individual projects that the climate crisis is often understood as a high-level, geopolitical issue discussed in Westminster and the United Nations, disconnected from local priorities. As one Big Local rep put it, “people in Big Local areas have more pressing and immediate priorities such as poverty, crime and health.” While another said, “That’s a massive topic and they probably feel that at the moment they will deliver if they feed people and tackle debt. We have talked about solar panels on the community centre but that’s more about reducing utility costs.”

Partnership members also reported that they lacked access to the knowledge and skills needed to take on the climate crisis and operate complicated and technical projects like community energy.

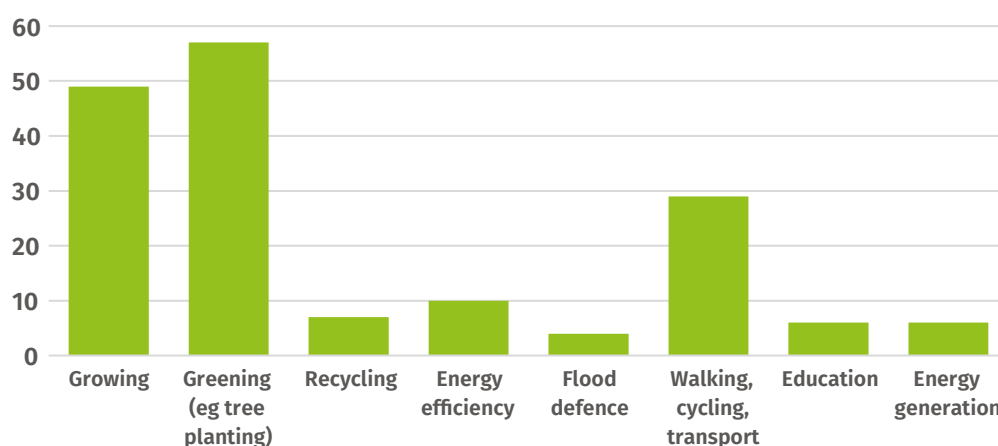
However, more than half of the 150 Big Local areas have prioritised the local environment in their plans, comprising activities such as litter-picking, maintaining green space or recycling, making the environment the fourth most common priority across the programme (after community engagement, programme management and working with young people).

And a closer look at the range of activities shows a huge amount that, while not explicitly linked to the climate crisis, could be described as building resilience against the direct and indirect impacts of the climate crisis, or reducing carbon emissions, as figure 2.2 demonstrates. As one Big Local rep said, “most of the motivation for this activity is for community development rather than climate change. But it’s sometimes hard to separate the two.”

**FIGURE 2.2**

**Many Big Local activities are building resilience against the direct and indirect impacts of the climate crisis**

*Type of climate action being undertaken by Big Locals*



Source: Authors’ survey of Big Locals

Over the past year, Big Local partnerships have participated in several events exploring the climate crisis and providing input into the Environmental Justice Commission. These events have attracted a lot of interest, demonstrating a desire to understand and engage with the issue. Following one such event, one attendee from Blackpool Revue Big Local wrote:

***“The climate crisis presents huge challenges for the communities in England that are already in survival mode, with research highlighting that extreme weather and changes to the economy could exacerbate existing inequalities ... For Big Local residents, making a link between how solutions can also improve your quality of life, or save money is vital, for the responses to the climate crisis to feel inclusive.”***

Local Trust 2020a

The attendees at that event co-wrote a letter to the Environmental Justice Commission, which demonstrates concern about local communities being further marginalised by responses to the climate crisis, and a desire to help shape those responses.

*Twenty-four communities from across the United Kingdom have come together to discuss the climate change crisis and we are concerned about the impact this will have on deprived communities.*

*At present these communities are in ‘survival mode’, struggling and left behind due to austerity measures, and we want to ensure that these communities do not incur further damage through climate change policy as it develops. We want to connect the climate crisis to helping them make improvements in their lives through a language they understand. These communities have the lowest carbon footprint yet are at high risk of being damaged by potential policy developments, we do not want to see the poverty gap grow through climate crisis provision.*

*Many of us are already delivering projects in our areas focussing on creating positive changes and we think that you need to tap into our experience and expertise in community led decision making. You have an ideal opportunity to work with us to begin righting previous wrongs, but this approach does not come without some financial support.*

*We have links to 150 unique areas that have all been tackling indicators of mass deprivation in their communities, with varying degrees of success. Through this program we have identified that one size does not fit all, and that approach must be applied to your climate change solutions, and we look forward to sharing our stories, solutions and ideas to create sustainable and credible change.*

***Yours sincerely,  
Big Local Representatives***

Source: Local Trust 2020a

## BIG LOCAL STORIES

Greenmoor Big Local, Bradford, is supporting residents to save energy in their homes and in doing so reducing their energy bills, through their partnership with the Big Energy Savings Network. The group also runs a healthy living centre connected to a community farm with 40 allotments, spreading awareness of food miles and healthy eating.

Marsh and Micklefield Big Local, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire, works with a community ranger to improve people's connection to the local natural environment including woodlands and rivers, and has a particular focus on pollinators such as bees and other insects. The group is also involved in litter-picks and tree-planting and was the first Big Local partnership to declare a climate emergency.

North Cleethorpes Big Local, Lincolnshire, frequently organises clean-ups of the beaches and estuaries in the area, and has created a cycle hub out of a redundant building near Cleethorpes train station, where people can park, hire and repair cycles.

Our Sale West Big Local, Greater Manchester, is developing a new community hub which will be built to carbon neutral standards, and is planning a climate change conference for local schools.

Source: Information provided by Local Trust

## CASE STUDY 1: AMBITION LAWRENCE WESTON

Located in North West Bristol, Ambition Lawrence Weston (ALW) is a community-led organisation that works with and on behalf of Lawrence Weston Big Local (LWBL). Together, the resident-led groups have been “doing a lot on climate, but only by accident” undertaking a range of energy efficiency and energy generation measures. For this community, a priority is the need to alleviate poverty, and fuel poverty in particular, in a place where 70 per cent of residents say that they struggle to pay heating and electricity bills.

Working with partners Bristol Energy Network, they have delivered the Cold Homes Energy Efficiency Survey Experts (C.H.E.E.S.E) project. The project employs thermal imaging to spot weaknesses in the energy efficiency of homes, and local traders then fix the draughty windows and insulate the lofts, charging a fee to those who can afford it. As a consequence, a number of fuel-poor households have been able to improve the energy efficiency of their homes and reduce their energy costs.

ALW and LWBL are also working to make Lawrence Weston an energy-generating community. In 2015, the groups were approached by Bristol Energy Co-op (BEC) with a proposal to develop a solar energy farm at the edge of the Lawrence Weston estate, keen to secure local support and investment to realise the project. Financed partly with Big Local funding, ALW invested in the scheme and negotiated a 25-year agreement with BEC to yield 50 per cent of the profits. The income from the solar farm supports ALW and LWBL to achieve their overall objectives, such as alleviating poverty and making the area an even better place to live.

Following this successful initiative, and with support from Bristol Energy Network, ALW and LWBL has sought to build a 4.5MW, 150-metre-high onshore wind turbine to further expand its community energy production.

Ambition Community Energy (ACE) has been formed as a community interest company to secure funding for and manage the project. The wind turbine project will be based on land owned by Bristol City Council, with the turbine itself owned and operated by ACE and other partners. Planning for the project has been approved locally and by the environment secretary. ACE has received a £500,000 capital grant from the West of England Combined Authority and is seeking £5.2 million in additional funding for the project through grants and other social investment.

The financing of the project remains a significant challenge, but one that ACE is optimistic it will meet. The turbine will generate enough electricity to power 3,850 homes and bring in an income for the community of between £50,000 and £400,000 a year, depending on borrowing costs, in addition to making CO2 savings of 1,965 tonnes a year. There are also plans for an on-site Energy Learning Zone for schools and communities to learn about renewable energy.

### Impact

The activity taking place in Lawrence Weston has been motivated entirely by the need to alleviate poverty and support community development in the local neighbourhood. The potential reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, and the contribution to net zero targets, are significant but were incidental for the people involved. However, the energy and fuel poverty projects have brought ALW into conversations and helped to develop relationships and partnerships that would otherwise not have been possible.

Mark Pepper, development manager at Ambition Lawrence Weston, believes that the community climate action projects taking place will enable them to work in a “more collaborative way”, whereby:

***“We understand each other better, where we are better informed about the consequences of our intended actions ... and that we in areas like mine need to deliver sustainable climate change action at a local, and city-wide level, while also reducing the inequality gap and social injustice that we currently suffer.”***

Source: Information provided by Ambition Lawrence Weston and Local Trust

### 3.

## THE IMPACTS OF COMMUNITY-LED INITIATIVES

Community-led action can be transformative, triggering system change and accelerating the transition to net zero. Aside from the contribution to net zero targets, there are a range of social and economic outcomes from community-led action.

Our case studies, and the wider evidence we review throughout this report, demonstrate seven of the most important outcomes achieved through community action. Some of these are more directly related to addressing the climate crisis (contribution to net zero and increasing the political mandate) and others are more closely linked with community development.

However, it is important to note just how interlinked these outcomes are. For instance, improving place may, for some, largely be linked to community development, but the improvement of place involves tree-planting and creating green spaces which also help to address the climate crisis and restore nature:

- contribution to net zero targets
- common ownership and community wealth building
- improving place, increasing community health and wellbeing
- increasing agency and empowering communities to act
- increasing community resilience
- building local momentum and acceptability
- building the national political mandate.

### 3.1 CONTRIBUTION TO NET ZERO TARGETS

In the absence of robust carbon reduction data and a means to aggregate all community climate initiatives, assessing their contribution to national carbon reduction targets is difficult. Furthermore, many initiatives described in the previous chapter, or even the networks that are supporting communities, do not focus on measuring, or formally evaluating, the climate impact of their activities. Instead, their measures of success are health, resilience, community engagement and inclusion, addressing poverty or access to nature.

Community groups that do try to show their climate impact often struggle to measure and demonstrate their carbon reduction contribution (Nesta 2010). This was cited as a reason by many funders we spoke to for the low levels of investment in community-led climate initiatives.

Where community climate initiatives have been able to measure their carbon reduction the results are mixed. For instance, a European research initiative, ECOLISE, showed that if all EU citizens had active participation in community-led initiatives this would lead to potential emissions reductions of up to 73 per cent (ECOLISE 2019). In the UK, a study of low carbon community groups in 2014 showed reductions in greenhouse gas emissions of up to 32 per cent in one year (Hobson et al 2014).



However, another UK government programme, which awarded funding to 22 low carbon communities from 2010–12, reported disappointing impacts with only small carbon reductions and minimal wider impacts (DECC 2012). The negative perceptions created by this programme has had a lasting consequence and was often cited in our interviews with funders as the reason for little funding being provided for community-led climate action. This is despite the evaluation of the programme determining that its poor design was the key reason behind its disappointing impact.

### **FUNDING BEST PRACTICE: COMMUNITIES LIVING SUSTAINABLY**

A National Lottery-funded Communities Living Sustainably programme provides a good example of how, with the support of an external funder, communities can be enabled to tackle climate breakdown. This programme funded several community action projects ranging from energy efficiency to food sustainability. The project's community assessment tool demonstrated that communities could learn in partnership and, by the end of the monitoring period, communities felt they had progressed towards meeting their sustainability objectives as well as improving wellbeing. The National Lottery Community Fund has recently launched a new community climate action fund – the Climate Action Fund – which funds communities to reduce their carbon emissions.<sup>27</sup>

One area where the contribution of community programmes is a little clearer is in energy. Community Energy England has estimated that 65,200 tonnes of carbon savings were made in 2019 from the generation of renewable energy (and heating and other activities by community energy projects) (Robinson and Stephen 2020). However, the total community-owned renewable energy capacity as of 2019 is less than 1 per cent (264.9 MW) of the national renewables' capacity suggesting a much greater contribution could be made alongside the other benefits of community-based energy (see section 3.2). The contribution of community energy in Scotland is higher, where there are 750 community energy projects with a generating capacity of nearly three times of that in England (713 MW) (Grillanda and Khanal 2020). In Germany, one-third of their renewable energy is under cooperative models of ownership.

### **3.2 COMMON OWNERSHIP AND COMMUNITY WEALTH BUILDING**

Community ownership or management of common assets can help generate community wealth, increase participation and local control over the process, and reduce emissions and accelerate the net zero transition (Hopkins 2010, Ostrom 1990). One organisation supporting community ownership described their process:

***"We start by looking at the asset base already available. Empty buildings, abandoned land, rooftops, and how that can create an income. This is about reducing disadvantages and deprivation not about being eco."***

Source: Authors' interview with community organisation

27 For more information see <https://bigblog.org.uk/category/funding-programmes/communities-living-sustainably/>

As described in chapter 2, we found examples of common ownership of resources ranging from community-owned coastal marine reserves,<sup>28</sup> forests, farms, peatland restoration, to renewable energy and low carbon housing. It was clear through our research interviews that the primary motivation for those involved was typically not to reduce carbon emissions, but related to issues of affordability, access, control and resilience.

For example, community land trusts are focussed on building more affordable housing, but it is often low carbon, which helps to create both environmental and socially sustainable places (Hefferman and De Wilde 2020). As a representative of the Heeley Trust told us:

***"We are developing a thriving community asset base: taking derelict and neglected spaces to learn and thrive and creating a network of green spaces. Community ownership of assets is crucial – it gives power, permanence and responsibility."***

Stakeholders we spoke to highlight how community energy projects are often set up to ensure that local communities are more energy resilient, to guarantee that local energy is generated from renewable resources and to generate a local income. Community energy organisations raise finance through share offers because they offer a healthy return on the investment and create a community income (Seyfang et al 2014). Such investment need not be the preserve of the wealthy households or affluent communities with investment being as small as £50.

Commercial renewable energy projects, by contrast, take the wealth created through the local asset (the land) out of the community and turn it into private wealth. In our interviews we heard how in Devon, the county council is forming a joint partnership with a collective of community renewable energy enterprises to develop many commercial-scale renewable projects, creating a sizeable source of income for further local decarbonisation projects. Other community energy projects are installing solar on the rooftops of schools, helping to reduce schools' energy bills and helping to educate the children about climate.

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28 See for example the Community of Arran Seabed Trust (COAST): <https://www.arrancoast.com/mission/#:-:text=Our%20mission%20%2D%20COAST&text=COAST's%20mission%20is%20to%20protect,Arran%2C%20the%20Clyde%20and%20Scotland.&text=improve%20the%20local%20marine%20environment,decisions%20that%20affect%20their%20seas>

## CASE STUDY 2: PLYMOUTH ENERGY COMMUNITY

Plymouth Energy Community (PEC) was established by local residents to tackle the climate crisis and the high levels of fuel poverty in Plymouth. PEC operates through a mix of community share funding, grants and external loans, with any profits flowing back into the community. They undertake a wide variety of projects intended to fulfil their mission to increase local ownership and influence over local energy systems, tackle fuel poverty and reduce carbon emissions.

PEC has evolved to run a variety of projects, including affordable or free insulation and boiler schemes, energy advice delivered through house visits, a volunteering and training programme, as well as installing and managing renewable energy generation schemes in Plymouth for the benefit of the community through their sister organisation PEC Renewables.

In 2015, for example, PEC worked with Four Greens Community Trust to help turn derelict land into a community asset. PEC raised funds to build a 4.1MW community-owned solar farm on local brownfield land that would reduce fuel poverty by generating enough clean energy to meet the annual needs of 1,000 homes. The costs of the loan were partly paid back through a community share offer that raised £1 million.

Changes to government policy and the scrapping of feed-in tariffs have made it harder to develop a business case for energy generation, meaning that PEC has had to adapt and be flexible. This includes greater focus on energy efficiency and fuel poverty work, funded through partnerships with energy providers and grants from charitable foundations. They are also developing a new idea to build and retrofit community-owned affordable, zero-carbon homes.

### Impact

In 2019, PEC helped over 2,800 households, including 816 who received one-to-one support. This resulted in an estimated financial saving of £465,000 for households. In addition, PEC projects produced 6,128MWh of clean energy (PEC 2019). The community-led aspect of PEC's work is crucial to its success. PEC is a trusted local brand, and invests in training for their energy advisors to ensure that they are best placed to work with vulnerable people, including suicide awareness, mental health, refugee awareness, and so on.

Plymouth City Council, which is a leading 'co-operative council',<sup>29</sup> played a key role in the early days of PEC. The labour-run council had pledged to set up an energy co-op in their manifesto and supported its foundation as a community benefit society, helped recruit 100 founder members, and developed a business plan.

Several staff members have job-share arrangements between PEC and the local council and there is a strong ongoing partnership between the two. However, the organisation operates independently, with a membership of more than 1,600 individuals. This arrangement is mutually beneficial – as an established organisation, PEC is now able to demonstrate impact and insight that benefits the council and helps it to meet its strategic goals. PEC is now a trusted delivery partner, providing expertise and credibility to inform the council's wider work on climate and fuel poverty.

Source: Authors' interview with Plymouth Energy Community

29 For more information see the Co-operative Council's Innovation Network: <https://www.councils.coop/about-us/>

### 3.3 IMPROVING PLACE, INCREASING COMMUNITY HEALTH AND WELLBEING

*"Everyone has a pride of place. A focus on place brings everyone together, not just the greenies."*

Authors' interview with a funder

Community action often starts with residents' desire to improve their neighbourhood – to transform their place. As we have seen in chapter 2 this is visible across a range of domains including transport, energy, housing, green space and goods.

Low-income neighbourhoods have less access to green space, greater air pollution and more dangerous roads (Pye et al 2006). For this reason, community action to transform place is not just about reducing emissions, it is fundamentally about improving health, safety and quality of life. This is a key finding from our Big Local survey. Many of these groups were engaging in activities that were contributing to reducing emissions, but this was not the motivating factor – it was about addressing health, poverty and wellbeing issues.

Community action projects can start to fundamentally reshape the streets and neighbourhoods that people call home in positive ways, that are led by the residents rather than imposed on them. This in turn can unlock further forms of community action to transform place, such as the construction of new low carbon homes or the retrofit of existing homes (Aldred 2019). The communities that come together to create green space, turn derelict land into food growing or community orchards, or create car-free, safe play streets, do more than just reduce emissions and pollution. They create a sense of mutual support, increase social capital, and reduce anxiety and loneliness (Groundwork 2020).

The evidence available shows that these community projects help build social cohesion and vitality in the community, boosting mental and physical wellbeing and catalysing communities to take further action (Firth et al 2011, Guitart et al 2012, Piggott-McKellar et al 2019). Evidence from psychiatry professionals shows that improving the wellbeing of the most vulnerable communities depends on shifting the wider social environment, not individual behaviours, with greater social connectedness and social capital.

Larger-scale initiatives such as community land trusts are empowering communities to transform the places they live. While these initiatives can be effective, they often require initial understanding and resources within a community for action to begin (Nesta 2018). This is a key barrier that needs to be overcome to enable further community action, as we explore later in this report.

### 3.4 INCREASING AGENCY AND EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES TO ACT

Our research suggests that responding to climate change as a community can empower communities to do more, stimulating more ambitious action. There are multiple aspects to empowering communities, ranging from ensuring they have the resources they need to take action, to putting in place the decision-making structures that put local people at the heart of the response to climate change (Boswell et al 2012).

Empowered communities see the results of their initiatives first-hand and then expand both their ambition and capacity to act. The end result is community action that is not just reactive to the climate crisis in terms of adaptation, it is also action that is proactive in terms of mitigation (Berger et al 2014).

Research also suggests that this kind of community empowerment can also help scale community action, by ensuring that more top-down decisions connected to planning and infrastructure, for example, are connected to local needs (Archer et al 2014).

Giving communities a greater say on how they respond to climate change allows them to not only produce strategies that are anchored in the concerns and objectives of their local community – it also creates local movements for change, which can lead to more ambitious action on climate change (Beery et al 2019).

There are wider benefits that follow too. Research has shown control and agency to be important factors in determining mental and physical health, community empowerment and social cohesion (Ponsford et al 2015). The promotion of greater altruism and development of social support that follows this kind of community empowerment could also be an essential buffer for climate anxiety and ensuring that communities feel a sense of being able to not just survive but thrive in a climate changing world (Taylor 2020).

There is also evidence to suggest that the wide-ranging social and economic benefits from local action can catalyse engagement on climate change in a much broader demographic than is achieved from campaigning that is focused on a national level.

### **CASE STUDY 3: REPOWERING LONDON**

Repowering London is a not-for-profit social enterprise that empowers local communities to fund, install and manage their own renewable energy projects.

Repowering supports people to set up community benefit societies, in which local people can purchase shares to fund renewable energy projects and have control over the decision-making process. The funds raised through the shares allows the society to buy and install renewable energy assets (such as solar panels) on community buildings including social housing. Shareholders receive a competitive return on their investment at 3–4 per cent per annum. After meeting core costs and investor returns, any remaining revenue is put into a community fund, with funding decisions made by people living locally.

Community engagement is an integral part of what Repowering does. The organisation works with people on some of the most deprived inner-city neighbourhoods in London, to find out what they want to achieve and empower them to achieve it. This includes weekly meetings to engage the community, a paid internship programme for 16–21-year-olds, an energy efficiency programme to tackle fuel poverty, and mentoring for local people to take ownership of their community energy project. In this way it educates and empowers people to take action themselves and gives them a stake in a local asset. This added socioeconomic value is significant and a key part of why funders and partners (including local councils) are prepared to support their work.

Not only that, but by working closely with communities, and by offering them a tangible stake in renewable energy projects that can have direct benefits to their local area, Repowering's projects can play an important role in public education and behaviour change with regards to climate action.

#### **Impact**

To date, Repowering has established six energy generation projects in partnership with the London Boroughs of Lambeth, Hackney and Kensington, and Chelsea, with further projects in development in Kensington and Chelsea, Lambeth and the City of London. Working with residents in each area, Repowering has installed 532kWp of solar capacity, reduced carbon emissions by an estimated 114 tonnes per year and provided 123 paid internships to local young people. Repowering projects will also generate over £150,000 for local communities to spend. During the Covid-19 pandemic, a community

fund belonging to Brixton Energy Solar, a Repowering project, was able to support a local community centre, and a soup kitchen that provided 4,944 meals to 71 families.

### Challenges and obstacles

The inner-city neighbourhoods in which Repowering operates present some unique challenges for renewable energy generation. Because space is at a premium, projects require a significant amount of work to get started because of the need to speak to lots of different site owners. A highly transient population, which can often coalesce around different communities, can make community engagement more difficult. And working in areas of high deprivation can mean that it is harder to raise funds via community shares. As a consequence, each project takes a very long time to develop.

The policy environment has made it much harder for community energy organisations to develop a business case for projects on social housing that could deliver a return on investment and build a community fund. Changes to the feed-in tariff, as well as the removal of tax relief for community energy projects, meant that Repowering has needed to shift approach to ensure projects stay financially viable. This has meant working with community anchor organisations such as schools, rather than with those in social housing. Even so, the tight margins involved mean that such projects find it extremely hard to generate sufficient returns to develop a community fund.

Each project depends upon effective partnership working with the local authority. Successful arrangements were likely to be those where the following are in place.

- Strategic buy-in at a leadership level. The declaration of a climate emergency was identified as a useful ‘hook’, likewise the support from the mayor’s office for local and decentralised clean energy initiatives. The work of organisations such as Repowering has been identified as a way to embed climate justice within wider climate strategies, given the wider benefits of a community-led and community-owned approach for tackling fuel poverty, upskilling young people and investing in deprived areas.
- A designated council employee (or team) to act as gatekeeper and guide, and to negotiate the use of public assets. This naturally requires resource from within the council to fund long-term climate action, which is being made more difficult by the scale of budget pressures on council finances.
- Start-up funding was available. For example, the London Community Energy Fund (MoL 2020) has been able to offer grants of up to £15,000, to support technical, feasibility studies for community energy projects. At a borough level, Carbon Offset Funds are a potential source of revenue to fund this type of activity.

Source: Authors’ interview with representatives from Repowering London

## 3.5 INCREASING COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

Resilience is not just about ensuring communities can respond to the impacts of climate change such as increased flooding, it is also about ensuring communities are better able to respond proactively to a whole range of challenges as we transition away from a high carbon economy to net zero (Matthews and Pratt 2012).

Some have highlighted the need to talk about community resilience and resourcefulness, the former often being defined in relation to a passive ‘make-do’

approach in responding to events rather than communities having the proactive capacity to create solutions to events (Local Trust 2020b). Here we define resilience as a combination of the two.

Initiating projects that respond to climate change can develop community institutions and practices that make communities more resilient to other economic and social changes that may be felt within local communities, as well as making them more sustainable for future generations (Twigger-Ross et al 2015).

Community resilience will be tested by a range of issues, from the need to respond to the immediate consequences of the climate crisis and environmental breakdown, to the desire to ensure communities survive and thrive for future generations (ARUP 2015).

Community resilience has been put to the test all over the UK due to the direct health impacts of Covid-19 as well as the considerable economic and social consequences. Recent reports have evidenced the lack of resilience that has been exposed across the UK by the pandemic (NLGN 2020). However, areas with high levels of community enterprise have been shown to have fared better during lockdown, and community businesses were able to quickly adapt to the evolving challenges (Power to Change 2020). Moreover, research by Local Trust has conversely shown that so-called 'left behind' neighbourhoods that lacked social infrastructure were less able to respond well to the crisis (Local Trust 2020c).

As the impacts of the climate crisis grow and are increasingly felt, community enterprises will no doubt need to adapt their existing services and provide new services to help communities acclimatise and thrive. Ensuring more goods are produced and consumed within communities, as well as ensuring communities can better resource themselves, can be an important part of strengthening resilience. For example, community food production and local markets can ensure access to fresh, sustainably produced food that is not impacted by disruptions to global supply chains (Walker 2018).

By promoting ambitious action that provides communities with community-controlled assets, communities can obtain the resources they need to improve resilience and respond to the climate crisis. This improved ability to respond and adapt ultimately allows communities to become thriving places that are more able to shape their own response to local challenges by having the skills, assets and knowledge they need to tackle both the climate crisis and wider socioeconomic problems within the community.

### **3.6 BUILDING LOCAL MOMENTUM AND ACCEPTABILITY**

Community participation in the development of low carbon infrastructure can help speed up the transition by overcoming issues of public opposition. Large-scale renewable deployment such as wind turbines or large solar arrays, when developed by a community group, can increase the chance of planning success and local acceptability.

Indeed, there is evidence to show that where there has been poor local community participation or ownership in large-scale renewable energy projects, this is a key factor in the slow delivery of renewables. For example, in Denmark and Germany when there were policies ('feed-in tariffs') and rules in support of community ownership of wind turbines this coincided with a sharp increase in development of onshore wind. When policy changed in favour of competitive auctions (more favourable to large, private developers) with no community participation, the installation of new wind dropped to its lowest levels in 2019 (Joshi 2020). The same story has played out in the UK with a de facto planning ban on onshore wind even

for community-owned projects, and this followed a brief period when a number of community-owned wind turbine developments were growing apace.

Community-led initiatives can also increase the acceptability of certain projects. For example, 10 per cent of community-led housing schemes have been able to develop housing on land previously blocked by local opposition. For instance, Christow Community Land Trust built homes to Passivhaus standards on Dartmoor National Park – which was quite a feat as generally plans would have seen much opposition on the site of a national park. The community-led aspect was a key factor in this development being approved.<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, piloting of new technologies or climate solutions is particularly powerful at a local level because it is peer to peer, and horizontal, which has been shown to be more effective than from an outside agency or top-down delivery telling communities what to do (Climate Outreach 2020). For example, we know that ‘solar contagion’ happens – when one or two people put solar panels on their roof, it significantly increases the chance of neighbours then going on to follow suit (Plumer 2016).

### 3.7 BUILDING THE NATIONAL POLITICAL MANDATE

One of the most significant contributions of community-led action in addressing the climate crisis could lie in how it is able to widen the political mandate for action. Research by Rebecca Willis shows UK politicians across the political spectrum have a high level of awareness and concern about the climate crisis and understand that the UK population also has a high level of concern and desire for political action (Willis 2020). Nevertheless, politicians feel there is a significant gap between public support for action on the climate crisis and support for specific policies and interventions. Politicians, at a local and national level, describe how little they hear from their constituents on climate solutions and policies, and this is a major barrier to policy progress.

Community-led climate action delivers locally appropriate and acceptable responses to the climate crisis, and so in turn is able to generate further local public awareness, engagement and action (ECOLISE 2019). Many community-led initiatives go on to build on their initial projects with more extensive climate action. For example, Transition Towns often start with a few small projects which then lead to more ambitious enterprises such as community-led housing or energy generation.

Community-owned initiatives, such as community wind farms, tend to have higher levels of public support than those led by commercial companies (Warren and McFadyen 2010). Similar approaches could help speed the transition in the future as well, where many local planning decisions about the location of solar and wind farms and new housing developments will be required as well as formal and informal consent for reorganised transport systems, and farming and land use practices.

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30 For more information see the National Community Land Trust website <http://www.communitylandtrusts.org.uk/what-is-a-clt/success-stories/rural-clts/christow-clt>



# 4. OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO ENABLE GREATER COMMUNITY-LED CLIMATE ACTION

No formal permission is required for people to come together locally to improve their neighbourhoods and address the climate crisis. For example, the Transition Towns movement has grown since 2005 as communities come together to plan how to transition away from fossil fuels towards more sustainable models – from a single town, Kinsale, in Ireland in 2005<sup>31</sup> to 307 initiatives across the UK and more than 1,000 in 50 countries.<sup>32</sup> Yet there are clearly factors that enable or hamper successful progress.

## 4.1 LOCAL FRAMING DRIVES ENGAGEMENT

How the climate crisis is framed plays a particularly important role in shaping how and whether communities respond (Jennings et al 2019). People are far more likely to engage if the climate crisis is framed as a local opportunity to reorganise communities and their local economies (Twigger-Ross et al 2015, Lockwood 2011). People are also more likely to see the wider social benefits derived from adaptation and mitigation activities when it is communicated in its local context (ibid).

Community initiatives that respond to the climate crisis are far more likely to be successful when they resonate with or help create common community identities and subsequently align with perceived shared interests (Simon et al 2020). For example, a sense of common purpose and concern for viable energy futures often acts as the catalyst for community energy schemes (O’Riordan 2016, Capener 2014). Appealing to people’s sense of community rather than appealing to the climate emergency is often more effective.<sup>33</sup>

As we have seen in the wide-ranging examples of community action, the relationship between concerns about the climate crisis and other social and economic interests are intertwined. Some see action to tackle climate breakdown as necessary to preserve and advance wider social and economic interests that community groups foster, whereas others are only concerned about social issues, with climate benefits being a happy side-benefit.

This linking of wider community interests with climate action is particularly visible in climate activities that take an integrated approach to developing community economies, such as repair café networks and community food markets/hubs (Charter and Keiller 2016, Sustain 2009). In these cases, the economic benefit of these activities becomes linked with their positive environmental impact in a mutually reinforcing manner (Pesch et al 2019).

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31 For more information on the first Transition Town see <http://www.askaboutireland.ie/enfo/irelands-environment/the-built-environment/grrening-our-cities/transition-initiative/>

32 For more information on Transition Towns see <https://transitionnetwork.org/>

33 See the National Lottery’s Climate Action Fund webpage: <https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/funding/programmes/climate-action-fund>

Analysis of the strength of the social fabric of community shows how critical this is for inequality and economic decline, Overall, there has been a broad-based, long-term decline in the strength of local communities, but this is unevenly spread (Tanner et al 2020). Although a weak local community – due to poor local infrastructure, economic value and civic institutions – may be a barrier to community-led initiatives, we have seen how community projects can also foster and strengthen the social fabric of a community.

#### 4.2 INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY

Climate breakdown disproportionality affects Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities – for instance they are more likely to be living in deprived neighbourhoods which are disproportionately impacted by air pollution – and so their participation is pivotal to ensure climate action delivers social justice for those who most need it (IPPR 2020, Friends of the Earth 2017). Ensuring that the objectives of climate justice deliver social justice and subsequently racial justice also helps broaden participation and ensure community action delivers for all members of the community (Sealey-Huggins 2018).

Black Lives Matter (BLM) has been highlighting the interconnectedness of the climate crisis and racial justice for some time – in 2016 BLM UK occupied a London airport runway as a climate protest (Hornak 2016). In 2020 Black Lives Matter expanded its presence and influence, and helped reignite the climate and race debate. Unfortunately, although public concern about the climate crisis is at an all-time high, there still seems to be a very low understanding among the British public of the unequal impacts that it has on BAME communities (Climate Outreach 2020).

The climate movement has historically struggled to be inclusive, and until recently used to be a largely privileged, white movement (Sieghert 2020) although this is rapidly changing with a more diverse youth climate movement changing the dynamics (Ibrahim 2019). However, community action is quite different from activism and campaign movements, and may well be more diverse. One funder told us that “community organisations reflect the area they serve. Localism doesn’t have to be intolerant. It can in fact increase social cohesion and create greater tolerance.”

We heard more generally through our interviews how community climate action is often perceived as an activity taking place in more well-off neighbourhoods and suffers from a lack of diversity. It is a perception that is hard to prove either way due to a lack of data, although evidence from case studies and surveys of one of the most developed community-led action groups – Transition Towns – suggests that in the past it has not been engaging with a demographically representative mix of participants (Grossman and Creamer 2017).

Having analysed a range of local climate initiatives, we found that those that are clearly aimed at, and communicated as, addressing the climate crisis specifically struggled to be more inclusive and representative. But we found that many of the community initiatives that were reducing emissions as a co-benefit rather than as a primary goal tended to be more diverse and representative. Through our interviews we found that this is related to motivation, time and capacity and priorities. When the focus is on immediate and pressing needs – such as improving health and food poverty (but they are also contributing to reducing carbon emissions) – there are very high levels of engagement across a broader range of demographics.

Moreover, there is also evidence to show that community energy groups are just as prevalent in more deprived communities as they are in more affluent communities, but there are a greater number of installed energy projects in the south of England and Scotland than in the north of England (Robinson and Stephen 2020, Grillanda and Khanal 2020). Community businesses are also more diverse than their

commercial counterparts. Thirty-five per cent of social enterprises are led by BAME directors and 30 per cent by women, compared to 5 per cent of SMEs and 7 per cent of top FTSE companies being led by BAME directors (Social Enterprise UK 2017).

### **INTEGRATING RACIAL JUSTICE WITH CLIMATE ACTION TO ENCOURAGE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

The Green and Black Ambassadors programme is a Bristol-based network that was established to facilitate involvement of people from a BAME background in climate-related activities within the city. This network provides access to the environmental movement, trains BAME people to become environmental leaders, and addresses the traditional dominance of white and affluent people as key decision-makers and volunteers within the climate movement.

The programme was developed following research that provided insight into the barriers people from Bristol's African-Caribbean community faced in engaging with environmental sustainability in the city. Some of the key barriers for BAME groups identified were cost, resources, fear of being culturally misunderstood and a lack of opportunities for involvement beyond the city.

This programme provides an example of how more inclusive community participation might be fostered and the diversity of voluntary movements expanded to reflect the composition of entire communities and not just a select few who have the time and resources to more fully engage with and organise action in response to the climate crisis.

Source: Green and Black Ambassadors 2019

## **4.3 VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT**

Nearly all community initiatives rely on voluntary time in some way, although for some this is the core capacity and for others it is supplementary to paid staff.

When community projects have a dependency on voluntary contributions this can exclude more diverse participation. The need for money, time and an existing understanding around climate issues often means that climate action is defined by class, with better-off individuals and communities more likely to take an interest in and respond to the climate crisis at the community level (Philo and Happer 2013).

Where community-level climate action relies on voluntary time, success centres on the ability to foster inclusive voluntary engagement. One way to achieve this is to ensure that community action groups can be connected to networks that promote inclusion in volunteering, such as the Ethnic Minority Environmental Network (Stevens 2019).

On the other hand, voluntary contributions can be a way to foster high levels of participation and ownership (Nesta 2018). Indeed, given the scale of community action and the fact it is often carried out by volunteers and is not professionalised, a volunteering ethos is often integral to its success.

## **4.4 EXTERNAL, PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT**

Where local initiatives are volunteer dependent, this in itself isn't a barrier if they are supported by independent professional experts. For example, community energy organisations are typically run by a voluntary board of local residents but may outsource technical and feasibility work and financing to consultants

or intermediary support organisations. This professional support, to guide a community group through the complex, technical planning hurdles was found to be a key enabling factor to success (WPI Economics 2020).

Some communities may have professional expertise within their voluntary members, but where this is missing, being able to employ external experts is crucial to the sustainability of the project. This external support requires funding, often grant funding, which is an enabler but also a barrier if a community finds it hard to obtain. Some areas are seen, rightly or wrongly, as particularly technical – such as energy and housing. Moreover, our interviews highlighted issues around perception and awareness, with some groups lacking confidence, not knowing where to start, or how to engage practically.

#### 4.5 FUNDING SUPPORT

Community initiatives often rely on grant funding support once they move into the stage of trying to implement more ambitious projects – for example, developments that require planning permission. Grant funding for feasibility funding, where community groups need professional input, have been critical to the success of larger-scale community initiatives, for example in renewable energy and housing.

We heard in our interviews and found in other research that funding can be difficult to come by without adequate knowledge of available funding grants or government-backed schemes (Creamer 2015). Where funding is available, funding programmes are often designed in ways that pit communities against each other to compete for limited funding, and it often ends up being the communities with the greatest capacity to apply or present themselves that secure funding. In addition, funding is largely short term, often for one year or two at the most, which is challenging for community initiatives that require a longer-term view. Many grants are focussed on supporting specific activities rather than on enabling communities to invest in long-term systemic change.

There is a range of models for raising capital for community-owned green assets. Many require an initial grant for the pre-planning feasibility stages, but then most are able to raise capital through share offers, bonds or loans (for commercial-scale renewables for example). Local authorities can play a role here. Funding partnerships between community groups and local authorities can be mutually beneficial. Joint ventures between, for example, a community energy organisation or a community land trust and a local authority can take the financial burden away from a council while also ensuring greater local support for a project the authority might otherwise struggle to gain support for (Billington et al 2019). Ensuring that all types of communities, including more deprived areas, are given the support to access such funding will be crucial to ensuring that they are also able to make the most of these opportunities.

#### COMMUNITY MUNICIPAL INVESTMENT IN WEST BERKSHIRE

West Berkshire council launched the UK's first Community Climate Municipal Investment, a bond issued by the council to the public to create sources of income for infrastructure projects (renewable energy) and raised £1 million in three months in 2020.<sup>34</sup>

34 For more information see <https://info.westberks.gov.uk/index.aspx?articleid=37060>

## 4.6 A VISION FOR ACTION

The most successful cases of community action we found were able to articulate a strong vision for how projects would not only tackle the climate and nature crisis, but also help deliver wider benefits to the community. This requires developing a clear vision and purpose for community action. For example, a community climate project in New Earswick, York, placed a strong focus on educating communities and helping them develop a vision for action, because funders had recognised how integral this was for catalysing further community action (Climate Just 2017).<sup>35</sup>

Recent innovations, such as climate assemblies and citizens juries can help communities to develop their vision for action. These types of deliberative engagements are also valuable for creating social mandate for climate action (Howarth et al 2020).

Currently, however, these deliberative interventions tend to be one-off, and are dependent on a local authority to commission them. There remains little support from other actors, such as national and local government to empower communities to articulate their vision for climate action. A lack of vision of what a low carbon future might look like and communities' place within it has held back groups not just in the UK but globally (Shellenberger and Nordhaus 2009).

### *The importance of networks*

Evidence from the Scottish Climate Challenge Fund, which supports community climate initiatives, showed how projects that facilitated relationships between different organisations within a community were more effective. Networks of community initiatives, that create spaces for sharing knowledge and ideas, are another key enabling factor. The following are just two examples from a range of networks we found that have been established to provide support to community groups.

- **Transition Town Network:** growing since 2005, having started in the UK and now a global network, sharing examples, tools and support to communities wanting to transition away from fossil fuels towards a 'caring economy'. This network (at time of writing) has 307 communities engaged in the UK alone.<sup>36</sup>
- **Friends of the Earth local Climate Action groups:** established in 2019 to support communities wishing to take action on climate, there are now over 200 groups. Their main focus is on lobbying their local authority for greater climate action.

### *A constraining policy context*

The national overarching policy framework tends to constrain community action across the UK. The Localism Act 2011 has enhanced the powers of local communities in England to shape neighbourhood plans, allowing them to have a greater say over the structure and form of their community (Brisley et al 2012). So far more than 2,500 neighbourhoods have sought to make plans, with just under 1,000 completing the process to date (Locality 2020).

However, these plans are still contingent on some level of local government support and so do not fully enable independent community action, nor does it provide communities with the resources they need to undertake ambitious action set out in the plans. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a far greater proportion of the plans are being developed in more affluent areas with a much lower concentration in areas with high deprivation (Parker et al 2020). This supports the evidence throughout this report regarding the need to provide support to communities that currently lack capacity or social infrastructure to take advantage of such policies.

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35 For more information on New Earswick see <https://www.jrht.org.uk/community/new-earswick-york> and about the community climate project see <https://www.sei.org/publications/practical-action-to-build-community-resilience-the-good-life-initiative-in-new-earswick/>

36 For more information see <https://transitioninitiative.org/search-initiatives/?country=gb>

There is also significant variation within the UK. For example, the Welsh government has tried to connect the climate crisis with other aspects of social and economic impact that can help communities thrive through its Wellbeing of Future Generations Wales Act 2015 (Weatherup et al 2016). However, this approach is largely enacted through the office of the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales and envisages communities responding through support from public services in Wales rather than supporting a community-led approach (ibid).

At the local level, increasingly constrained budgets (driven by national government policy) have also meant that local authorities and other public bodies have been selling off public assets at an accelerated rate, from playing fields, community centres, civic buildings and county farms (affordable leasing for first-time farmers) (Davies et al 2019). Communities are rarely given the chance to bring these resources and infrastructure under common ownership, with poor transparency over the bidding process and little information communicated to the community.

Enabling governance frameworks – such as a general power of wellbeing for example – allow communities to innovate, respond proactively to events and generally act with greater confidence (Young Foundation 2010). This is particularly crucial for community action when it comes to responding to cataclysmic community events, such as coastal erosion, where communities themselves cannot take the action they need without adequate resources and support from government (Zsomboky et al 2011).

Often enabling policy environments work most effectively when both national and local government policy frameworks are joined up. For example, efforts to adapt to extreme weather events and the creation of Local Resilience Forums to respond to events such as flooding have improved effectiveness when community flood planning integrates local knowledge with support from local government. This pooling of resources and local knowledge is underpinned by government support and provides communities with the resources they need to adapt to flooding (McEwen and Jones 2012, McEwen et al 2018).

Previous climate policies have been shown to enable community action, although these have largely operated on a sectoral basis. For example, the Feed-in Tariffs policy, which provided a financial incentive for the uptake of small-scale and low-carbon energy generation, helped accelerate the growth of community energy initiatives across the UK and create shared visions for a low carbon future (though too often profits went to investors outside of the local communities) (Van der Schoor and Scholtens 2015). This policy overcame the financial and legal barriers that communities typically face when looking to generate community energy (Seyfang et al 2014). The scheme, however, was decommissioned in 2019 while the community energy sector was growing rapidly, leading to a sudden slowdown and the cancellation of many planned community energy developments (Community Energy England 2019).

# 5.

## THE CLIMATE COMMONS: HOW COMMUNITIES CAN THRIVE IN A CLIMATE CHANGING WORLD

### 5.1 A NEW STORY ON CLIMATE ACTION – WITH COMMUNITY AT ITS HEART

'Community' is a much-misunderstood concept in the context of climate change. Understanding its potential could unlock an accelerating, transformative approach to addressing climate change – one that has just transition principles at its core.

The role of communities in addressing such a huge, global, systemic issue has been largely dismissed as nice but ineffective, leading to little funding or policy support. Previous attempts to support 'community climate action' have mostly focussed on mobilising people to reduce carbon emissions at a local level, which have tended to have patchy success and limited appeal. Exhorting communities, especially in low-income neighbourhoods where they are most exposed to the risk and least responsible for the problem, will always have limited success.

Nevertheless, we have found that there is already a flourishing of transformative community action taking place, quite under the radar, and against the odds in an economic and political environment that is indifferent at best and hostile at worst. This is local, place-based activity that often doesn't even describe itself as 'climate activity' since that is not the key motivator.

Such transformative community initiatives are already taking local control over green economy assets as acts of 'commoning', referring to Elinor Ostrom's<sup>37</sup> framework of local, self-governance of common pool resources (Ostrom 1990). Local people coming together to create shared low carbon assets – renewable energy, housing, woodland and food cultivation – are commoning in order to improve their health, wellbeing and neighbourhood, and to reduce poverty and increase local control. Reducing carbon emissions is a co-benefit. These local climate commons are increasing community wealth and agency, and are creating thriving places while addressing the climate crisis.

How community action on climate is talked about, therefore, needs to change – though this applies right across society and includes, in particular, the climate and environment movement. This report has demonstrated that we will never get full engagement across society, particularly in less affluent places, by talking about what communities can do to help address the climate crisis alone.

Instead, the focus should be on how communities can be empowered to have greater participation and ownership of the transition to net zero. This would be a powerful way to implement a just transition to net zero, one that is locally tailored and locally driven. It is also a means not just to mitigate economic risk for already

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<sup>37</sup> Ostrom was the first woman to win the Nobel Prize for Economics. She overturned conventional economic theory by showing that communities across the world in very different contexts were able to self-organise to manage collective resources without the need for government intervention.

excluded communities, but to deliver the fundamental change to our economy needed for net zero and climate resilience, while also addressing inequality. Levelling up and combatting the climate crisis can be one and the same thing – and both can and should be delivered through community-led action.

## **5.2 A VISION FOR COMMUNITIES THRIVING IN A CLIMATE CHANGING WORLD**

Given meaningful control over how they transition to net zero, communities seize the opportunity to improve their local areas. Empowered, dynamic and resilient, and increasingly asset-rich, all communities – not just the affluent – are making their own decisions on what is best for their area.

By reducing poverty and improving their collective wellbeing and quality of life, communities are also addressing the climate crisis. They create new, good-quality local jobs in retrofitting houses, installing heat pumps and renewable energy, and in food and localised production. Local authorities partner and support community ownership as the main model for green economy assets development, improving their financial sustainability.

Revenue from locally owned and shared wind and solar farms and district renewable heating are used to eliminate fuel poverty and fund electric transport and food schemes. In urban areas, walking and cycling have proliferated, while the space taken up by private cars is increasingly replaced by greater public green space, almost eliminating the air pollution health problems. Rural communities become better connected with electric transport and broadband. Local tree-planting in urban and rural areas has seen the creation of community orchards, improving health and access to nature; and a network of community farms are providing cheap, seasonal food security.



## 6.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

To realise our vision where communities are thriving in a climate changing world, we believe two fundamental shifts are required.

- 1. We recommend a major ‘paradigm shift’ in the UK’s approach to addressing the climate crisis.** Such a shift needs to be adopted from top to bottom – by UK and devolved governments, city regions, local authorities and at community level. This shift must enable greater participation in the net zero transition, one in which people and local communities have greater control and share of the benefits. We propose achieving this by facilitating ‘local climate commons’ and putting communities at the heart of addressing the climate crisis. This is how communities will thrive in a climate changing world.
- 2. We recommend a ‘mindset shift’ for local communities and community groups.** This report has demonstrated that local communities across the country are already taking action to address the climate crisis, but it is often not the main focus of their activities. We propose that communities be encouraged and supported to shift their mindsets and recognise their activities as climate action; then help them to build on that action to further support the transition and fulfil their primary goals such as creating community wealth, addressing poverty and building resilience.

### 6.1 DELIVERING THE ‘PARADIGM SHIFT’ IN PRACTICE

To bring about this shift and enable local communities to shape the future zero-carbon economy, so that it is socially and economically just, they need the power, resources and skills to take effective action.

To deliver this, we argue that three key things are required:

- widespread devolution of power and resources
- setting ambitions for climate action and the community
- policies to drive community climate action and build community-owned green assets.

#### *Devolution of power*

The UK is one of the most centralised countries in Europe (Raikes 2020). Delivering the paradigm shift, enabling communities to take their own actions in addressing the climate crisis, will require a fundamental rethink about where power lies in England and the government’s current approach to devolution.

This is not about putting responsibility for reducing carbon emissions on local communities, many of which have little control over the high carbon systems they are locked into. Rather, this is about enabling communities to have a greater role in shaping the transition, tailored to the local context, and maximising the job and wealth creation potential through community ownership models. The government should incorporate the following proposals within its devolution white paper which is expected later this year.

**We recommend a new approach to, and programme of, devolution in England, comprised of bold reforms at all levels of government – from the national, to the regional, subregional, and local tiers.**

Such a programme has been described in more detail by others (Raikes 2020) but would involve:

- an end to the deal-making process of devolution and the **rollout of an inclusive devolution process for all of England**, including the creation of a Convention on Devolution in England
- **the devolution of fiscal powers**, reversing austerity and refounding fiscal devolution on progressive principles
- **the development of a locally led regional tier of government** by devolving powers to regions that complement those of combined authorities and develop regional institutions at a scale appropriate for England's economic geography
- **devolve economic powers to city regions and non-metropolitan areas** – support subregional reform into more accountable structures.

**We recommend that the devolution process should be inclusive of communities.**

This should include:

- **Legislating for community rights**, as others have argued (Kaye 2020), giving communities the right to organise and have their decisions respected. Others have argued that this could take the form of legislating for Community Improvement Districts (CIDs) inspired by Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) (Tanner et al 2020).
- **A community right to own or manage**. The current Community Right to Bid allows communities the chance to bid on any building that has previously been deemed of 'community value' once it comes up for sale. This policy should be extended to give communities more time – six months is not very long for communities to gather support and large volumes of finance – and extended to cover a larger definition of 'community value'. Local authorities could include all public assets – land and buildings – in their definition of community value, giving communities a chance to bid on any of these assets put up for sale by local authorities.
- **The creation of a Community Wealth Fund**, to support hyper-local investment, the strengthening of civil society in localities across England, and supporting community decision-making (Local Trust 2018, Kaye 2020).

### **Setting ambitions for climate action and the community**

A new inclusive process for devolution will be essential to delivering the paradigm shift. However, setting national ambitions will be important to driving the direction of policy.

**We recommend that the UK government should set a series of goals to significantly increase the proportion of community-owned green economy assets in England.**

This could include, for example:

- a target for one-third of new onshore renewables to be under community ownership – analysis shows the community energy sector has the potential to grow by up to 20 times larger than its current size by 2030 (WPI Economics 2020), which has already been made possible in Germany and Scotland
- targets for community ownership of other green economy resources such as community tree-planting, renewable heating, agriculture and transport.

Any such goals and plans should be closely aligned, and will help to achieve, the UK government's other goals – to level up regions and address poverty and inequality – as well as accelerate action on the climate crisis by creating greater public engagement and a broader political mandate for change.

### ***Policies to drive community climate action and build community-owned green assets***

While communities themselves can initiate, develop and manage climate action within their community, policy action should create a more enabling environment to facilitate more ambitious action.

There must also be greater recognition of the transformative potential for community ownership in the green economy in the context of climate change plans, policies and campaigns.

### ***Recommendations for UK government***

**We recommend that the UK government should launch a single 'Thriving Places Fund' for England which would provide money to communities to undertake ambitious climate action.**

Such a fund should be set up with the following features:

- funding of approximately £2.5 billion over the course of a decade should be made available to support community climate action
- the funding should be available in the form of grants or loans to support pilot or exemplar projects – this could include, for example, supporting a deprived community in a project to build local ownership of energy-generating assets
- funding should not be provided with the sole focus of reducing emissions – projects that address poverty, reduce pollution or improve health outcomes have a co-benefit of advancing action on climate
- funding should be available for technical support (such as navigating planning procedures) to help address barriers around expertise that often holds back community action, and to promote training and skills in the low carbon economy – this can help connect the fund with other investments made to decarbonise the economy
- a technical support unit should be created within central government for a network of practitioners and supporting organisations to support communities who access the fund, combining expertise in climate and nature policies and community development.

**We recommend that existing funding mechanisms such as the Stronger Towns Fund, the Levelling-Up Fund and Shared Prosperity Fund should all contain provisions to ensure any investments are climate and nature proofed.**

Many community initiatives are held back by a planning process that is designed to preference commercial ownership models. A planning proposal for a community-owned wind turbine actually has a greater burden of proof than the commercial equivalent.

**We recommend that the government should use its planning reforms as an opportunity to prioritise applications for community-led land use. This could include community-owned wind turbines or sustainable housing, with both the permissions process expedited for community groups and the cost of acquiring land reduced.**

### *Recommendations for city regions and local government*

Local government has a significant role to play in stimulating local community action – for example, utilising council-owned land and property for joint ventures with community businesses. The experts in community wealth building we spoke to describe how proactive local councils utilising anchor institutions to promote inclusive local growth are better able to unlock climate action.

**We recommend that local authorities should more actively involve community groups in devising climate action plans.**

This could involve:

- **undertaking climate deliberation processes on an ongoing basis**, rather than as a one off, such as citizens juries or panels bringing together a representative group of local citizens and community groups
- **local authorities shifting from implementing climate plans on behalf of communities, to creating the infrastructure that enables them to shape and steward the resources and the transition** – this could involve greater planning support for community-run developments and priority bidding for community groups for land or buildings, which can help harness the enthusiasm, local knowledge and support of the community, while ensuring local government retains its legal oversight; in each climate action plan a clear role for the community and local citizens and a vision for low carbon transformation that creates thriving places should be clearly outlined.
- **providing accessible guides for community development towards net zero** – such guides could include information on how to access funding, support networks and resources, and community rights.

**We recommend that local authorities establish joint ventures with community enterprises to develop community-owned green assets.**

Local authorities could form joint ventures with community enterprises where the community takes over the community asset to be able to develop it with renewable energy developments, sustainable housing or local food-growing initiatives. The local authority can provide the asset transfer and intellectual and technical support, along with bonds, while the community enterprise can raise the finance from share offers and loans.

## **6.2 ENABLING THE ‘MINDSET SHIFT’ IN PRACTICE**

To support a mindset shift in local communities with regard to climate action we propose recommendations for communities themselves but also wider civil society and philanthropic funders.

### *Recommendations for local communities*

Our research shows how the most innovative and transformative instances of community action involve collective management or ownership. To date, however, much of the focus for climate action at a community level has been on individuals’ behaviours and the need to change this behaviour. Communities have an opportunity to take control over the net zero transition that is under way, shape their neighbourhoods and increase their stake within communities.

**We recommend that communities develop new plans for action that emphasise inclusion, community cohesion and collective action as their key modus operandi for addressing climate breakdown, as opposed to individual action.**

This will be crucial for framing climate action as a positive opportunity for transformation and for encouraging wider community participation in community action.

### ***Recommendations for wider civil society***

There are already a range of networks for climate action that communities can join, many of which we have identified in this report. But there is no overall network that connects up the different sectoral networks. By joining these networks, communities can share knowledge and practical guidance on climate action and help each other thrive in the age of climate breakdown. These networks should more proactively reach out to more disadvantaged communities who might not know about their existence and support. The various networks we have identified could better connect to each other to create a powerful sectoral voice.

**We recommend that the various sectoral networks seek to work together to build a larger sectoral voice going beyond their own sector-specific contributions such as in the energy or housing sectors.**

### ***Recommendations for philanthropic organisations***

Community-led initiatives, by their nature, often take time, as they require building up trust and relationships and creating space for participation. Local Trust has shown the value of trust-based philanthropy which invests over longer time periods than is typical and allows the community to take decisions and guide their expenditure, rather than on funders' expectations.

**We recommend that philanthropic funders invest in people over time, with trust-based funding.**

Funders should provide community grants over longer time periods than usual project cycles and invest in people and organisations rather than projects. There are lessons to be learned from the Big Local programme which provides funding in a similar way over periods of 10 to 15 years.

**We recommend that philanthropic funders create a pooled fund for community climate commons.**

Most grant funds are designed in ways that communities have to bid against each other, which requires considerable experience or resource to invest in putting proposals together. We recommend that funders consider pooling their funding together – rather than generating a multitude of programmes that communities need to navigate – and invest in network building and technical support.

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