

Climate Action Leeds



Climate resilience and community-led action

Learning from eight neighbourhood
climate hubs in Leeds

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Introduction

Over five years between 2020–2025, residents in eight Leeds areas gathered locally to dream about changes that they could make in their communities. It was part of a citywide movement called Climate Action Leeds to create a ‘zero carbon, nature friendly, socially just Leeds by the 2030s’. There were forerunners in the city’s communities already working in this way (Headingley, Roundhay, Otley) and the purpose was to build capacity in further locations across Leeds’ varied demographics.

Development workers from Together for Peace (T4P) found individuals with a passion to act locally in response to the climate crisis, and slowly residents stepped forward. Activists, teachers, academics, community leaders, students, retirees, elected representatives, people working in all sectors and people unable to work – many of whom were new to climate action – formed small groups to steer their local response.

Each area had a Hub Worker (15 hours per week) and an annual budget for three years of £8,000 for project activities agreed by their Steering Group; all enabled with five years’ funding from the National Lottery Climate Action Fund.

So what did they achieve, what did we learn from it and how might that be useful to people interested or involved in climate action, elsewhere in Leeds and beyond?

To find out, we did group learning sessions in each area, led by a researcher from the University of Leeds. These involved over 50 people who had led activities in their local community, the vast majority of whom were unpaid. We wanted to understand what a difference the investment and collective action had made both to them and their local area.

Background

T4P set out to work ‘intensively in eight neighbourhoods selected from a set of six archetypes to ensure we address a range of different areas in terms of income, housing, levels of individual carbon footprints and current levels of involvement in tackling the climate emergency’. [1] Of the eight wards the hubs were located in, five have areas within the bottom 10% of deprivation nationally (i.e. most deprived) and three have areas within the top 10% of deprivation nationally (i.e. the least deprived). [2]

In designing the project we acknowledged at the start that each community was (to some extent) likely to require a unique approach. We committed to being as flexible as possible within the budget, and guided by working collaboratively, to ensure that the development was genuinely community led and owned. [3]

Our bid proposed that hubs develop as both ongoing physical places and as pop-up/mobile spaces. We quickly discovered that the emphasis local residents placed on their engagement was activity rather than education. They did not deny or ignore climate change, but for the most part they were less motivated by a desire to tell people about the ‘climate emergency’, and more motivated to develop new local activities which supported positive climate and nature-friendly action. So that’s what we supported them to do.

‘I have a deep-seated belief that collective action is how change happens.’

On the Climate Action Leeds website you can find a [newspaper](#) [4] which celebrates some of the achievements right across the programme during the five years. Lovely news stories of people in communities working together on a whole variety of initiatives like collective composting, Walk to School Week, repair cafes, new gardens and green spaces, transformed bin yards, community-owned energy and much more. Alongside this is an [evaluation report](#) [5] that offers insights into the successes, challenges and learning across the whole partnership over the five years.

This short report sits together with these other two documents, sharing particular insights from the people in communities who volunteered their time and talents to make it all possible. We asked them lots of different questions about:

- their inspiration and motivation,
- their successes and challenges,

- what they hadn't been able to achieve,
- what they had learned, and
- what they'd recommend others do differently.

Several reports could be written on the data we gathered over the 20 or so hours!

We have chosen to write up what we learned about 'climate resilience' or 'climate resourcefulness' from what they shared. We did this to enhance our understanding of the longer-term impact and value of what had been achieved through the programme. We hope this goes a small way towards honouring the time, dedication and skills that people contributed and to offer a 'lived experience' perspective to the ongoing wider pursuit of understanding how resilience is developed in communities.

Climate resourcefulness

Climate resourcefulness [6] is a development of the concept of climate resilience. Climate resilience is about a community's ability to 'resist, absorb, accommodate to and recover from the effects of a hazard' created by the impact of climate change. [7,8] Climate resourcefulness, 'unlike resilience, is proactive rather than reactive. Neither is it a static endpoint to be reached, but rather a process'. [9] From our data we discovered that, through supporting local climate action, we had catalysed a proactive process of developing resourcefulness in communities by which 'communities [had] the proactive capacity to create solutions to events'. [10]

Indeed, unbeknownst to us at the time, an Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) North report published in March 2021 [11] (just as Climate Action Leeds was beginning) recommended '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' and that 'funders invest in people over time, with trust-based funding'. Our report captures some insights into our experience of doing just that – releasing funding into communities for residents to have agency to make decisions over what should take place, where and when, with the volunteers and resources available.

'[We were] creating a strong, vibrant and sustainable group (it was less about climate change).'

Climate resourcefulness focuses on four themes:

1. Problematizing exploitation and inequality – is it fair?
2. Capacity building
3. Co-producing tradition-rooted knowledge and identity
4. Collective self-legitimation and confidence-building

Elements of all four can be seen in the process of developing resident-led community climate action in Leeds between 2020–2025. Working across six archetypes, preference was given to areas experiencing deprivation (as explained on page 1), people were supported to achieve their dreams and visions for their communities, action was based on the knowledge and understanding of people living in the locality and they had agency to work together towards agreed goals.

Climate resilience as a concept can be value-free and include individualistic strategies and ways forward that don't include equity or even equality in their approach. In contrast, climate resourcefulness emphasises the importance of fairness in the development of resilience and working in an engaging and relational way.

Alongside tracking signs or examples of resourcefulness, we also considered how volunteers were describing change, what they found energising, life-giving or joyful and how they spoke about doing climate work while simultaneously holding emotional weight, things such as finding hope, feeling disappointed and facing frustration.

Six elements of resourcefulness emerged, and this report is structured around these six themes:

1. Structural resourcefulness
2. Emotional resourcefulness
3. Ecological resourcefulness
4. Social or relational resourcefulness
5. Political resourcefulness
6. Learning, adaptation and temporal resourcefulness



1. Structural resourcefulness – Creating flexible structures to support change

‘We’re just at the beginning, who knows where we’ll be in 10 years time, people will see that change works.’

There were many systems, practices, and resources, both tangible and intangible, that enabled the community hubs to function well – and that hindered the smooth running of the hubs when they weren’t in place or working optimally. It included how people were supported, how communication flowed, how creative and financial assets were used, and how organisational structures distributed responsibility and sustained momentum. These structures were often invisible, but they held people and processes together and were the foundations that undergirded and enabled all other forms of resourcefulness to flourish.

At the core of the hubs was the building of relationships between people, which involved valuing, supporting and resourcing people, taking care of them and recognising them as the greatest asset to the potential success of the hub, both paid workers and volunteers. T4P’s focus was always on supporting local residents to work together to achieve their ambitions. An integral part of both the Development Worker and Hub Worker roles was to support participants and encourage connection, relationship building and nurture friendships, which would have the co-benefit of ensuring projects’ viability over the longer term should paid support cease

Good communications between people, both within the hub and to promote its activities, were important for hubs in developing and running well. They enabled people to stay informed, coordinate activities, attract new participants and reflect together. There were some lovely examples where storytelling enhanced outreach, including events such as a storytelling workshop hosted in Armley and the summer solstice gathering at the community allotment in Seacroft, where people shared poetry, music and reflections, through to videos showcasing particular projects.

Different communications were needed in different communities. In some they found that ‘the “Emergency” narrative can put people off’ and elsewhere they found they did ‘a lot of things without putting “eco” front and centre – [instead there was] a warm invitation to do what’s already wanted’. In others, helping people to understand the ‘why’ behind the action was important, whether it be small gestures like using eco-glitter tattoos at community events, through to intercepting food and saving it from landfill, or choosing to cycle to school instead of driving.

The strapline 'Save Money Save the Planet' proved a huge hit in Beeston, with residents taking small measures to reduce their household costs and carbon emissions at the same time. Joining in with other campaigns such as Clean Air Day or Big Green Week was a useful hook, as was developing a local iteration of an already-known brand, such as the Repair Cafe or Incredible Edible. Adapting communications and activities to see what people locally wanted to engage with meant that some things 'stuck', whilst others were tried and stopped. Throughout, good communications had an impact on smooth running internally within the hub and on participation levels in activities. Creativity and innovation were essential to enabling flexible, adaptive responses, opening up new ways of doing or understanding the work, and getting people engaged.

Undergirding the communications was the need within hubs to develop clear and robust organisational practices, including routines, systems and processes to help guide action and build consistency. These allowed people to plug in, take responsibility, and build momentum. This balance of setting up systems, structures and clear communications, whilst also wanting to get on and act, was a fine one.

Different people within hubs wanted to go at different paces; many were focused on practical action while others wanted to step back from activity and spend time envisioning, planning and establishing clear procedures first. Some were focused on their own ideas, others were keen to consult with local people and find out what they felt was needed locally; some had fixed project plans which they sought to deliver, others wanted to be responsive and creative to things as they arose. Indeed, these dichotomies were actually part of a whole rainbow of activities, all of which were required.

Exposure to ideas/frameworks from outside strengthened delivery in some areas, such as Doughnut Economics [12] providing a lens in Otley through which all activity was presented. Working out how to evidence impact and developing systems to collect useful information to secure further support was a challenge to prioritise. Bringing in structure and systems from outside felt prescriptive, but on reflection would have saved effort and some duplication and helped to optimise resources. Seeking to keep everyone engaged and involved was a delicate business and probably one that no one felt was done completely satisfactorily anywhere!

The initial three-year funding for each hub provided a good level of personnel and financial resourcing with which new initiatives were catalysed. Having a budget to

invest in activities meant that hubs could innovate and trial projects, continue investing in those that were successful, and stop funding those that weren't. This start-up funding helped to lever in other money from local funding pots, such as Community Committees, city, town and parish councils, and from local businesses. For the first three years, there was a level of consistency and reliability which really enabled initiatives to take off.

In all areas there was ambition amongst volunteers for activity to outlive the initial Lottery funding cycle. However, it depended on the local landscape as to how best this could be achieved. In the four areas most affected by deprivation, where resilient Third Sector organisations were already embedded, it made sense to continue action within their remits to ensure longer-term viability. In the four areas which included a mixed-income demographic including areas of affluence, there are huge ambitions and a strong desire to establish as independent organisations and continue to build on what they have achieved. But there is not the same level of local Third Sector infrastructure to support this.

Some of the offshoot initiatives catalysed or supported by hubs, such as Alwoodley Community Energy and Otley Common, set up independently as Community Benefit Society's (CBS) to have the potential to issue local share offers. In Otley, the national funding initiative We have the Power (<https://wehavethepower.org/>) supported a local group of organisations with the quick purchase of nearby woodland for the community.

‘[I’m] confident we’ll continue this; [we’ve] made connections that last.’

However, it is not proving easy to secure ongoing funding to match the level of ambition. Developing the ongoing financial resilience of these hubs was, and continues to be, a huge challenge within a relatively short timeframe. In the steering groups, many were juggling multiple priorities within the three years, including: registering as legal entities, setting up financial systems, becoming trustees (many for the first time), developing policies, agreeing strategy, securing continuation funding, all the while wanting to be active on projects.

Funders are typically focused on areas affected by deprivation, and diversifying income streams to include income generation and local donations is essential but challenging at a time when many are experiencing pressures on their household budget due to the increased cost of living. Working together across hubs to apply for opportunities has produced some signs of hope, but requires capacity to identify opportunities and support the cross-collaboration.

In the midst of all this, the time, energy and commitment given by volunteers cannot be underestimated and without it, there would be absolutely no possibility of sustainability. Indeed, in common with many community projects, they have been, and will continue to be, each hub's biggest asset.

2. Emotional resourcefulness – Personal wellbeing through action and connection

‘[It’s] easy to feel overwhelmed and depressed – [this group] makes me feel so much better and makes me want to do more.’

Our focus groups were alive with individuals sharing stories, anecdotes and reflections which revealed that being involved with the climate hub had a positive impact on their own wellbeing. People shared their feelings of hope, increased confidence and emotional grounding. They spoke of safety, support and being able to take risks emotionally: ‘[It’s] safe within the project to share challenges and get support; that’s not a given everywhere’, (which allowed for growth, bravery, asking for help and rest). They also shared the need to process difficulty (in their own feelings such as hopelessness or in their relationships with others). All of this created an environment in which individuals were emotionally resourced to sustain both their individual and collective engagement.

‘Passion, energy, hope, pride, self-confidence, thriving, care, gratitude, feeling worthwhile, commitment, empowering, fun’ were words that were used to describe how people felt about their community and/or being involved in the climate hub.

‘I developed climate confidence to become more of an advocate and proud to talk about it.’

They spoke of enjoying experiencing new opportunities which sparked interest or motivation and led to fresh perspectives. In Garforth, where they set up monthly

repair cafes and clothes swaps, a participant described feeling ‘encouraged and relieved to have something community-based to get involved in’. In Beeston, where they organised an annual Green Film Festival, they reflected that doing activities together ‘brings solidarity rather than judgement and guilt’.

Believing that their individual and collective actions are contributing to meaningful change, however small, and helping to address the climate crisis, meant people felt like they were making a difference. Which made a difference to them. And of course they are making a wider difference too. From running monthly drop ins, to hosting workshops, to devising local nature-recovery plans and transforming bin yards into permaculture-inspired multi use spaces, through acting together people found they became more hopeful.

There were also other factors motivating engagement, which rose to the surface in other aspects of resourcefulness, such as: commitment to their local community and

a desire to connect with others locally; catching people at the right time when they have capacity and are looking for an opportunity; people having agency to

make decisions about what to do and where to spend money (not simply volunteer to achieve someone else's ideas and plans, though that was an option too); people seeing it as a continuation of their personal journey with environmental and social justice; and wanting to raise awareness and share skills anticipating that in the future 'people who can grow will be the people who can eat'.

'It's nice to have support, but not micro-management.'

It wasn't a naive optimism, but the activation of 'active hope', to quote the late Joanna Macy. [13] The discovery that by focusing on individuals' well being and that of the local neighbourhood, this was an effective way of encouraging and supporting people to take action which is good for the climate. And because much of what happened took place outside – planting trees, developing new gardens, community composting, walking and cycling – people experienced the well-documented tangible benefits to both their physical and mental health from being active and enjoying green spaces.

In times where the phrases 'climate emergency' and 'climate crisis' encourage urgency, allowing for a pace of work that felt sustainable, unhurried and supportive of personal well-being was appreciated. At their best, the hubs were a space where mental health challenges were acknowledged; where people could (consciously or subconsciously) process difficult emotions such as pain, anxiety and stress, and transform them into purpose; where people experienced solidarity and no longer felt so isolated or alone, despite some feeling daunted by the scale of the climate crisis and the enormity of the response that's needed.

'[It's] safe within the project to share challenges and get support (not a given, it's important).'

The hubs were also a place where tensions surfaced, conflict occurred and where relationships ruptured. The reverberations of national and global crises were felt and some were at risk of burnout because of their commitment to making a difference. Some common characteristics which contributed towards creating a culture in which people felt supported and experienced a level of safety were: running activities which provided a gentle introduction to the hub; feeling a sense of belonging, making friends and developing trust with others; experiencing agency – both to act and to step back from action; external support and resourcing, be it from the T4P development worker or from local professionals. One person said they experienced 'freedom to share what's not going well and ask for advice', another said: '[The] shared 'worry' makes it much more enjoyable.'

However, conflict was also present and challenging to work through – there were times when it was done successfully, and others not. Where it was, it was predicated on the quality of relationships and mutual respect. As the climate crisis continues individuals within communities will need to navigate their way through increasingly complex and difficult change.

3. Ecological resourcefulness – Nourishing places

‘ [Transforming] a crap piece of land into something giving’

People specifically chose to get involved with the climate hubs (although of course some were involved in other local initiatives too). This was partly because of the hubs’ focus on responding to the twin contexts of biodiversity decline and climate change. Some people were strongly motivated by a desire to act locally in response to the climate crisis, for others it was much more about appreciating their local area, access to nature and green space, and wanting to caretake them. They all shared a desire to make a difference, in both public and private spaces, for both the natural world and the humans dwelling there, for both the community and individuals living in it.

The opportunity for people to create new green spaces, to improve existing ones and to learn more about their local environment was a common feature within the hubs. Being involved in action which created visible ecological change, whether nourishing existing natural spaces such as parks and woodlands or transforming redundant and in some cases long-neglected land through new community gardens in Garforth, Otley, and Seacroft, made a tangible difference to the local natural environment – and won awards in the process, such as the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust Wildlife Friendly Gardens award to Garforth Community Garden [14] and the Leeds City Council Environment Award to Seacroft Forest Garden.

To view a short video about Seacroft Forest Garden, click here:
<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x8vaeki>

Cross pollination of ideas between hubs – and indeed trailblazers elsewhere – has led to some areas trialling projects that other areas pioneered and then at times working together to create a larger strategic impact.

In Otley, local ecologists and environmental enthusiasts launched the city’s first Nature Recovery Strategy, pioneered by local residents. Alwoodley’s team visited Otley to learn about their efforts, both ecological and political, and about their approach, which led to further conversations with Horsforth’s team. Both Horsforth Climate Action and Alwoodley 2030 had already been mobilising residents to log natural things of interest they noticed as they went about their communities. 117 observers took part in Horsforth and over 12 months 671 species were uploaded to the iNaturalist app, including a rare Southern Hawker dragonfly and a long-legged

hedgehog! In Alwoodley, 608 observers made 1735 observations, documenting 678 common and threatened species. Together Horsforth and Alwoodley joined up on events about Nature Recovery and shared ideas and resources with each other, adapting them to their local contexts.

Inspired to follow in Otley's footsteps, with these robust data sets they are now poised to work with an ecologist to contribute to local plans for protecting biodiversity. And all three areas are working together with researchers at the University of Leeds on a project developing local engagement to create new wildlife corridors and understand more about local understanding of climate resilience at the same time. It is an example of how the interaction between hubs amplified the pace, community engagement and long term strategic impact of their local initiatives.

Activities supported private gardens as well as public spaces to become more wildlife friendly with small but meaningful steps, especially when all joined together in an area, such as promoting relaxed grass mowing, building a small pond, sowing wildflower seed and planting fruit trees. Open Gardens Days were an opportunity to share these small steps, show what a difference can be made, and encourage others to do the same.

Inspiration and cooperation wasn't limited to nature-friendly activities. It was important for groups to share their tools, templates and learning where available, to minimise reinventing the wheel. An Energy Saving Handbook trail-blazed by Our Future Beeston was adapted locally in four other areas to support residents to make small changes in their homes to reduce bills and carbon. This initiative, and many others, supported residents to take action which benefitted them and had a positive impact on the climate.

This included promoting ambitious large-scale changes such as the installation of solar panels or retrofitting a property, through to developing an online Library of Things where residents can share tools with each other, and Repair Cafes where residents help to fix items for other locals, saving items from landfill. From the monthly Clothes Swap in Garforth, or the intercepting of food waste in Armley and Otley, through to the Uniform Exchange in Beeston and Little London, new initiatives began that made a difference to individuals and had the co-benefit of reducing consumption and therefore carbon emissions. This shows how developing ecological resourcefulness is both about local and global land, echoing the premise of Doughnut Economics. Within our localities there are both local ecological and global ecological actions that can be taken. [15]

'It is a win/win: with the cost of living crisis, it makes a real-life difference to people now and in the future.'

The 100 Nature Friendly Gardens Club pioneered in Alwoodley handed out seasonal kits to help people make their gardens more attractive to wildlife. The first seasonal bundle included hedgehog food, a bird box and wildflower seeds.

The Club was pioneered by a local resident who 'had been thinking about how to engage the community in climate-friendly activity without people worrying that it would cost too much or take up precious time'.

She said: 'I was also conscious that people can feel overwhelmed by the doom and gloom of climate change and not think they can make a difference. I really felt we could do something whereby lots of little things can make a big difference and if we can connect more as a community in the process, how amazing would that be?'

This led to a Whatsapp group to connect people, a pond workshop, a 100 fruit trees campaign, an Open Nature Friendly Gardens Day and a Wildlife Corridors project.

4. Social or relational resourcefulness – Being connected with others

‘Activity brings solidarity rather than judgement and guilt.’

From the outer towns of Otley and Garforth, through to the inner-city areas of Armley, Beeston and Little London, from Otley feeling ‘lovely, like a “big hug”’ through to Little London where it ‘feels like family’, the residents who got involved in their local climate hub enjoy living where they live. They described their communities as places where they feel safe and connected both to other people and amenities they appreciate – be it the city centre, transport links, local shops and organisations or access to green spaces.

In some areas there was a thriving Third Sector for these new groups to work alongside and a strong pre-existing sense of community. In others there was less community-wide engagement outside of recreational and faith activities, and the new group enabled people to ‘find like-minded people [in the] community who feel the same way’ and ‘helped to create community in the area’.

Engaging with the climate hub was an opportunity for people to discover others living locally, build relationships with them and develop trust. The experience of welcome, friendship and belonging was foundational to the development of social and relational resourcefulness within the community hubs. People enjoyed connecting around their shared values.

They enjoyed opportunities to experience connection across diversity (age, ethnicity, income). They appreciated finding others who embodied hope when they were struggling to feel hopeful.

In some communities, significant numbers of people with experience, skills and, crucially, capacity became involved, which was a huge contributing factor to the development of a well-connected and resourceful hub. In all areas there were more ideas than capacity and it was a challenge to recruit enough participants, something that is familiar sector-wide, particularly post pandemic. [16]

A host of reasons were cited for this, such as: the existing number of local initiatives that people were already involved with; competing for time and energy with other priorities; and particularly in areas affected by deprivation, people were struggling with the cost of living so ‘climate action can feel like top of Maslow’s hierarchy, and people here are at the bottom’. In these places, residents set up activities that met people’s immediate needs for food and company, such as running a Community Pantry, Hot Food Cafe or Craftivist group. From this, relationships were built and people could be introduced to the relevance of ‘climate’

action for their everyday lives.

People described being energised by doing things together and taking action – large or small – that contributes to addressing the climate crisis in a meaningful way. Participating in this collective action or collaboration fostered both a sense of unity and shared purpose. People had a sense of working together towards a common goal, which contributed to growing and sustaining a movement. And they describe a mutual and reciprocal experience, where they knew that ‘someone else will step forward if I have to step back’ and that it was ‘safe within the project to share challenges and get support (not a given, it’s important)’. They liked ‘working as part of a whole, with others’ where people contributed their bit towards a project, and where they ‘realised that more people support [positive action for the climate] than we think, people who’ve not had confidence to make a difference – [so we’ve] gathered momentum’. The small steps that people made together built this momentum and created a belief that bigger change is possible.

‘[It’s been] worthwhile; our action creates action in others.’

People valued forming new relationships and networks with other organisations both within and outside of their community too. Building connections enabled hubs to work together with other local groups and organisations to be greater than the sum of their parts, achieving new successes for the community, such as the ward-wide Walk to School Week across three hubs or the community buy-out of Weston Woods in Otley. In some communities local ward and town councillors were firm allies, local Third Sector forums led to support from other organisations and there was a sense of pulling together to work for the good of the community. At times hubs brought additional capacity to pre-existing activities, such as the campaign to save Little London Mound from residential development by planting trees and hosting community picnics, or by supporting local green space ‘Friends of’ groups to network and bring in new volunteers.

In some areas they found opportunities to connect with local businesses and faith communities, like fitting solar panels on local community buildings, gaining sponsorship for a project or doing fun outreach like apple juicing and seed swapping at local events. Outside of the immediate community, new connections ranged from networking with other local hubs and groups, to gaining organisational expertise to deliver projects – such as Hyde Park Source supporting the development of Seacroft Forest Garden, or Global Learning Leeds offering climate curriculum training to primary school teachers in Otley, Garforth and Horsforth – from new relationships with officers in Leeds City Council to working with national organisations like Living Streets.

‘We’re just at the beginning, who knows where we’ll be in 10 years time, people will see that change works.’

Following the early success of their new Repair Cafe, Horsforth Climate Action established 'HCA Saturdays' to run alongside the cafe. These gave space for local people to engage in the things that were of interest to them and their children.

Each Saturday had a different theme, and was a way of offering climate-friendly activities and promoting topics that were relevant to the local community. Over the months this included green gardening, energy-saving, cycle-promoting activity days a post-Christmas 'reduce, reuse, regift' event and a colourful, interactive 'The Sea Starts Here' exhibition with the local Plastic Free North West Leeds group.

More than 1,500 people came along to the Horsforth Green Festival which took place in the local park and involved a whole host of eco-friendly fun activities. To find out more visit <https://horsforthclimateaction.org>

5. Political resourcefulness – Building and influencing power

‘We have been able to do things people thought we couldn’t do.’

The opportunity to gather together, share ideas, make decisions, allocate funding and work together to get new initiatives off the ground was an empowering experience. At times it felt ‘scattergun’ and at other times hubs demonstrated a strategic capacity to act, collaborate, and communicate in ways that honoured local values (both explicit to the group or implicit to the local identity), resisted extractive agendas, and bridged the gap between community needs and broader climate goals.

replicating tried and tested initiatives that had proved successful elsewhere in the city or country – while others were particular to the local context.

People enjoyed the opportunity to align activities with their own personal values, and the collective values of the group (as they became agreed). They liked investing their time to contribute to things that they care about, and that they felt can make a difference. At times these value-led actions rippled out to

‘People within our community making decisions for our community.’

Being able to assert agency, make autonomous decisions and influence decisions made by others was recognised as something that felt different for many of those involved in the hubs. Not having ‘top-down’ targets was appreciated, balanced with ‘having support, but not micro-management’. Resisting external agendas that weren’t consistent with agendas aspired to by residents was hugely empowering, as was the opportunity to make choices about how to deliver climate work in a locally appropriate way. Across hubs there were some similarities between choices that were made – at times

influence others, by both empowering individuals to lead and building small but significant collective power in the community.

In turn, as people observed this happening, it encouraged them to continue, seeing that their actions were creating impact. Through the hubs, residents advocated for their areas and got to describe them from the inside, thus resisting external labels, countering negative or inaccurate perceptions of their area and thereby overcoming stigma. For those involved, feeling seen, valued, and acknowledged by others for

‘It’s been nice to have autonomy and freedom to do what’s best for your area.’

their efforts, identity, or contributions to climate work was a rewarding experience, and recognition from those outside the community was particularly validating.

Whilst many people engaged in the hubs from a sense of personal conviction or desire to act in response to climate change, many others got involved in response to their own needs – for company, to reduce costs, or to support their mental health and wellbeing. Involving people in climate-related activities in ways that were relevant and resonated for them was a key to mobilising more volunteers and participants, demonstrating how what is good for an individual is good for the neighbourhood and for the planet. Climate-positive action was people-positive action. Helping people to understand the connections between their own needs and the impact their action was having more broadly was done well at times, and at others efforts to make these links needed to be stronger.

‘There has been a change of public perception of the area – [it’s] good to share this with others.’

It was clear that in order for some ideas to flourish, strategic collaboration was essential. Investing in developing networks, connecting with the right people and raising awareness of the hub’s activities was a time-consuming and yet necessary priority, but one there was not always enough time for. Hubs were sometimes confronted with different ‘language’ (jargon), different priorities and different understandings of what might be beneficial locally from the institutions they were seeking to collaborate with. However, for some things to progress it was clear that every level of the system would be needed for change to occur. To this end, several of the hubs experienced the reality that receiving support, resources, or permission from those in positions of authority helped to make their efforts more possible or impactful. And conversely, at times hubs were able to bring influence, so rather than professionals imposing external agendas that didn’t resonate with locals, strategies were shifted to meet residents’ priorities.

‘[We’ve] got a recognised brand which is being lauded.’

Indeed, hubs found opportunities to influence systems of power whilst also sometimes being confounded by them. Institutions (such as Town or City Council, local councillors and indeed within the wider Climate Action Leeds programme) were found to both make and impede opportunities in communities – the person who flexed the system a little in order to give an idea space to breathe (such as the officer in Housing Leeds who opened the way for the Forest Garden in Seacroft to be developed) contrasts with a lack of clear communications or the intransigence of some rules which meant that initiatives that have flourished elsewhere in the country (such as Trees for Streets or wildflower planting) struggled to take root and grow.

‘[There is] no magic bullet – we need system change and change at the grassroots.’

6. Learning, adaptation and temporal resourcefulness – Foundations for the future

‘We learn from one another...everyone has grown, we’re different, it’s impacted our lives.’

Grassroots work can at once progress really quickly and feel as slow as wading through treacle. Sitting in the tension of these different experiences of pace was part of the learning for hubs as they engaged with others, whether in their community or in the wider city. Growing through experience, adapting to their context and sustaining engagement over time is how they developed their resourcefulness, with it showing up not just in big moments, but in small decisions, everyday learning, and steady commitment.

As each hub’s identity built and they became confident in their ideas and the sorts of initiatives they wanted to develop, they drew in resources from each other and from other local Third Sector organisations with expertise.

Armley Climate Action supported Roadblock with its latest cycle-powered sound system, which was then used at the Horsforth Green Festival; Eco-Friendly Garforth bought thermal imaging cameras which were then used by Horsforth Climate Action and Alwoodley 2030 to undertake audits of property locally; Our Future Beeston trialled a bin yard transformation that was then rolled out in Little London and Woodhouse Climate Action, and which have then gone on to be rolled out more widely as part of the Community Streets initiative. [17]

They learned and shared new skills more widely too, for example running the Pocket to Planet course with local arts organisation Space 2, leading fruit tree grafting workshops with Leeds-based social enterprise Fruitworks and taking part in the citywide compost collective coordinated by Foodwise.

‘Hosting workshops on climate activism, sharing ideas, getting new insights, connecting with people, learning from each other’.

Getting involved in the hubs was an opportunity for people to try new things, learn skills and gain practical knowledge. Through initiatives like Incredible Edible or Nature Friendly Gardening clubs, people learnt practical skills and knowledge about how to grow food or make their gardens more wildlife friendly. Through weekly growing sessions, seasonal gardening bundles, skills workshops and WhatsApp groups, people

had a variety of ways that they could learn and it offered those with relevant skills and experience the opportunity to share them. People discovered skills they didn't know they had and got to learn new ones, such as how to weave willow, write newspaper articles, speak in public and use Canva!

As well as hands-on projects there were also fun awareness-raising initiatives, such as apple juicing locally harvested apples in lots of communities, hosting Alwoodley's first wassail to 'wish good harvests for the land and year ahead', lighting up Seacroft's first Light Night on the Forest Garden, or having a fruit and vegetable headdress parade as part of Horsforth's first Green Festival. These initiatives were opportunities for people to experience the hubs for the first time and start to build connections through which new volunteers might get involved.

'There's always a way round an obstacle – just got to find it.'

Alongside designated opportunities to reflect together and review that were built into the hubs' regular pattern, participants also reflected spontaneously as to what worked, what didn't, and how they or the group grew through the experience. At times groups expressed disappointment with their progress, describing the slow pace of change, not knowing if what they were doing was making a difference. There was dismay with the challenge of recruiting regular volunteers and the time-consuming experience of seeking to build connections with other community

institutions, such as schools, where teachers are already so stretched.

There were glorious quick wins, but much of the work bore witness to the reality that meaningful change takes time, patience and slow pacing. There were some projects that just didn't take off despite a lot of planning and investment. Just one example is the trees for streets campaigns that were run in Alwoodley and Seacroft. There were so many barriers that despite huge efforts in both communities, few new trees were planted on streets, but groups learned a lot about the city council departments and barriers to working effectively with communities. They also found work-arounds!

In Seacroft they negotiated an agreement with the council to plant trees on a large swathe of local green space, with local residents adopting a tree to take care of in

memory of a loved one. In Alwoodley they ran a 100 fruit trees campaign, with people planting in their gardens rather than on public land. This demonstrates the balance of complexity and simplicity, at once being 'nowhere near the solution' and yet at the same time persevering in the belief that 'from small acorns grow mighty trees'.

Hubs demonstrated incredible tenacity, sticking together and progressing their plans, overcoming hurdles and recognising that 'real long-term change requires stability' and more resources than were

available to achieve their ambitions, but working out what could be achieved with the resources they did have and achieving progress nonetheless. Space for collective noticing of change that had taken place was important for building up and sustaining future action – acknowledging foundations on which more could be developed and encouraging each other by reflecting back what one person appreciated about another person's efforts.

The hubs started out with a mandate to enable people in each area to rise to the moment of the climate emergency and take local action. Most hubs didn't know how the role of the hub would take shape and evolve after initiating this local action. In fact, both Alwoodley and Otley included 2030 in the name of their hubs, expressing a sense of urgent, time-bound action that didn't necessarily imply plans to continue operating beyond this critical decade. At the end of their three years' funding it was tricky to balance seeking to secure ongoing funding with having to plan in case no more funding was forthcoming. It required incredible tenacity from both groups and paid staff alike to sit in this tension. Paid staff continued in their

roles despite not knowing if they would continue beyond the funding period and groups pursued a dual strategy of planning ahead as a volunteer group both with and without the capacity of a paid project worker. At times this also involved volunteers reorienting their efforts into working on the governance of their group, rather than on their primary interests such as organising events and growing vegetables! However, this willingness to invest in the legal structure, policies, financial management and so on indicates that people were committed to acting with the long term in mind. Their involvement in the hub had given them an opportunity to initiate something through which they were laying foundations for the future.

In six of the eight areas, hub activity has continued past the lifespan of the Climate Action Leeds funding. In four, Charitable Incorporated Organisations have been (or are being) set up; in two others, people continue to work relationally to build on developments during their hub's lifetime. In the two areas where the hubs have ceased, there is a well-established Third Sector network through which new climate focused activities have developed, such as an Active Travel hub and a Repair Cafe.

**'We put huge expectations on ourselves
– trying to achieve the unachievable.'**

One of the hub chairs reflected on her experience of being involved: 'I joined the local Climate Action hub from the start. I was particularly interested in how we made engagement as inclusive and welcoming as possible. I became a member of the Steering Group – but then the Chair stepped down and there was no obvious successor.

Someone needed to step up and I was determined to ensure that all the great work that had been done should continue. Having worked with communities for many years I had plenty of experience in working with many individuals in a variety of situations.

However, chairing meetings, writing policy, getting my head around governance and talking to large numbers of people in one room were new to me – all new useful, and unexpected, skills!

My confidence has grown as a result. Of course, none of this would have been possible without the other Steering Group members and volunteers.'

Concluding comments

‘Confident we’ll continue this; [we’ve] made connections that last.’

There are a host of ongoing activities initiated and supported by the hubs that are worth noting and celebrating, including:

- A year’s onward funding for three communities to work with the University of Leeds on Nature Recovery plans and the impact engagement in these has on residents’ perceptions of climate resilience
- Establishing a Community Benefit Society to support community energy generation across the city (see Clean Energy Leeds at <https://alwoodleycommunityenergy.co.uk/>)
- The development of three new community gardens
- Setting up community composting in eight communities (three in partnership with Foodwise Leeds)
- Supporting the start up of five new Repair Cafes
- Successful running of Walk to School week across three communities two years in a row (having begun in Alwoodley) with the potential to scale up in wards across the city
- The Community Streets programme renovating bin yards on inner city streets across three wards
- An Active Travel hub being established with financial support from West Yorkshire Combined Authority

What unfolded across the eight neighbourhoods between 2020 and 2025 was far more than a series of projects. It was the steady, determined cultivation of climate resourcefulness: a lived, relational, emotionally grounded and locally rooted process through which residents discovered their own capacity to act, to adapt and to imagine differently. What began as an invitation to take part in climate-friendly activity became, in many places, a catalyst for deeper shifts in confidence, connection and collective agency.

A consistent thread running through every hub was the centrality of relationships. People repeatedly described how welcome, friendship and belonging were not simply pleasant by-products of the work but the conditions that made it possible. Social and relational resourcefulness emerged as the foundation on which everything else

rested. When people felt safe, valued and connected, they were more willing to try new things, take risks, share skills and persevere when challenges arose. As one participant put it, 'activity brings solidarity rather than judgement and guilt'. This solidarity was the seed from which positive collective action grew.

Emotional resourcefulness also proved essential. The hubs created spaces where people could acknowledge climate anxiety, disappointment or frustration, and still find hope, humour and purpose. The ability to process difficulty collectively, rather than alone, helped sustain engagement over time. Some spoke of feeling energised, grounded and more confident – discovering that taking small, meaningful actions locally made the wider crisis feel less overwhelming.

They learnt new skills, adapted to their context, and recognised that meaningful change requires patience, persistence and the ability to hold both urgency and sustainability in tension.

Political and structural resourcefulness developed as residents gained confidence to make decisions, influence local systems and build organisational foundations for the future.

The experience of having agency – to choose priorities, allocate resources and shape local narratives – was empowering. At the same time, the challenges of governance, funding and capacity highlighted the importance of long-term investment in people, relationships and infrastructure.

'Knowing the work will continue – seeds we've sown have fallen on fertile ground.'

Ecological resourcefulness was expressed in the transformation of place – through new green spaces, improved habitats, shared learning about growing and biodiversity, and practical steps that reduced waste and carbon. These visible changes mattered. They helped people see that their actions were making a difference, and they strengthened the connection between caring for the local environment and caring for one another.

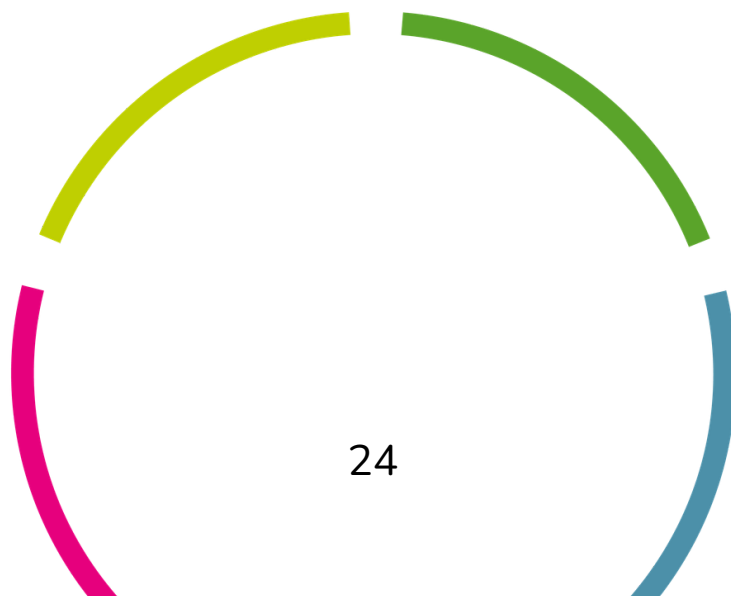
Learning, adaptation and temporal resourcefulness were evident in the hubs' willingness to experiment, reflect and evolve. Progress was often slow, sometimes messy, and at times disappointing. Yet people kept going.

The hubs also revealed the fragility of community-led work. Sustaining momentum remains a significant challenge, beyond initial funding and in areas where there are fewer resources. Volunteers carry a heavy load, and the emotional labour of climate action – especially in the face of conflict, burnout or wider societal pressures – cannot be underestimated. Going at the right pace for the people is a must.

The network of hubs and projects that was nurtured by T4P is now hosted by Voluntary Action Leeds. Together with Imagine Leeds, the city centre hub (which was not part of this review, as it is quite different in concept and outworking) they

have secured a further three years' funding from The National Lottery Reaching Communities Fund to develop the central hub location and network local climate action activities across the city.

What exists in all eight communities now is different from what was there before the programme began. Relationships and structures have changed; in some places what was initiated clearly continues, in others it feels dormant, or like a seed has been planted that may once again germinate. In each place change has happened and, with whatever comes next, it will be working within a context that has evolved and developed. Thus, even when at times it can feel like starting over, it is beginning again from a new place, building on the learning that has composted from what has come before. The hubs have laid foundations – practical, relational and imaginative – on which future climate action in Leeds can continue to grow.



Endnotes

- [1] The six archetypes: 1930s social housing estates with a mainly white working class population, inner city ethnically diverse low income areas, leafy better off suburban communities, poorer rural ex-industrial small towns, de-industrialised low income areas in the city, better off towns on the edge of the city.
- [2] Areas with the number of Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs) in the bottom 10% of deprivation nationally: Seacroft (12), Armley (7), Beeston (5), Alwoodley (2), Little London and Woodhouse (2). Areas with the number of LSOAs in the top 10% of deprivation nationally: Horsforth (5), Alwoodley (3), Garforth (1). Using 2019 statistics, most recent official data at the time of publishing.
- [3] Source: bid to The National Lottery
- [4] <https://www.climateactionleeds.org.uk/post/read-all-about-it-newspaper-covers-story-of-cal-so-far>
- [5] <https://www.climateactionleeds.org.uk/general-clean-1>
- [6] MacKinnon D and Derickson K D (2012) From resilience to resourcefulness: A critique of resilience policy and activism. *Progress in Human Geography* 37(2):253–270
- [7] <https://ukgbc.org/our-work/topics/resilience-roadmap/climate-resilience-definitions/>
- [8] Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2015
<https://climatejust.org.uk/sites/default/files/16.%20resilience-to-climate-change-full.pdf>
- [9] Darby, S (2016), Dynamic Resistance: Third-Sector Processes for Transforming Neoliberalization. *Antipode* Vol. 48 No. 4:977–999
- [10] The climate commons: How communities can thrive in a climate changing world, 2021 <https://www.ippr.org/articles/the-climate-commons>: 29
- [11] Ibid: 7
- [12] For an introduction to Doughnut Economics in Leeds watch the short film here: <https://www.climateactionleeds.org.uk/leedsdoughnut>
- [13] <https://www.activehope.info/>
- [14] See <https://www.ywt.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-03/WGA%20Case%20study%20-%20Eco%20Friendly%20Garforth.pdf>
- [15] <https://doughnuteconomics.org/tools/doughnut-unrolled-dimensions-of-the-four-lenses>
- [16] See State of the Third Sector in Leeds report (2025), <https://forumcentral.org.uk/state-of-the-sector/>
- [17] (<https://www.communitystreetsleeds.org/>)

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This report was written by Sue Hoey, Climate Action Leeds co-lead at T4P.

Dr Stella Darby from the School of Geography at the University of Leeds joined T4P to co-design & deliver the data collection and analysis. This brought welcome expertise, rigour and independence in hosting focus groups in communities.

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