

# CAST BRIEFING 41 - September 2025



## How to make community sustainability initiatives a success: Insights from a low-carbon travel project in Manchester

### Key messages:

- Community climate action initiatives, such as those designed to change travel behaviours, can bring a wide range of benefits to a local area and its people. However, these initiatives can also face challenges and **need to be thoughtfully managed** to ensure local engagement.
- Groups rolling out community climate action initiatives should **engage with the local authority as early as possible**. This can help to accelerate action on the ground – for example, if investment is needed for infrastructure.
- Initiative organisers **should set clear and realistic expectations for what the project can achieve**, considering available resources such as funding, time and skills. Individuals involved in the initiative may have to manage tensions between their personal passion and commitment to a project versus the time they can realistically spend on it within their paid roles.
- An initiative's initial design should **include an 'exit strategy'** – a plan to ensure its benefits will continue if or when funding ends. For example, a low-carbon travel initiative might provide the local community with the knowledge and material resources they need to continue walking, cycling and taking public transport for years to come.



Centre for **Climate Change**  
and **Social Transformations**

CAST is a global hub for understanding the crucial role that people play in fighting climate change. The CAST team is based across five UK institutions, including the University of Bath (our centre hub), the University of Manchester, the University of East Anglia and Cardiff University, as well as the charity Climate Outreach.

# Introduction

*This briefing is intended for people involved in community-based and community-led climate action projects, as well as researchers and policy actors working on low-carbon travel.*

There are various community climate initiatives that focus on changing travel behaviours. For example, 'low emissions neighbourhoods' create new routes, public spaces or infrastructure that prioritise walking, cycling and use of electric vehicles, while 'school streets' restrict motorised vehicles around schools during drop off and pick up times to promote safer and active travel. Such initiatives play an important role in improving air quality, reducing carbon emissions, and creating spaces for local climate action. However, they often face challenges such as limited participation and funding, which can reduce their impact.

To explore how local climate action can be strengthened, researchers from the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research and the Centre for Climate Change and Social Transformations (CAST) joined and learnt lessons from Our Streets Chorlton (OSC), a community-led initiative in Manchester that aims to co-create solutions for reducing car use on short journeys.

## Background

With its 18-month funding grant from the National Lottery, OSC worked in partnership with several local organisations – including Amity, CAST, Greater Manchester Moving, Groundwork, Open Data Manchester, Sustrans, WalkRide Greater Manchester, and Yellow Jigsaw – to develop and implement a programme of activities that enabled the local community to experience and reimagine their streets being car-free. For example, OSC held open streets events and school streets closures; set up temporary parklets; supported community data champions to monitor traffic and local air quality; gathered evidence through surveys; and coached volunteers in initiating environmental action.

Through these tangible activities, OSC helped build local networks; co-learned with local residents, including about the community's needs and expectations; and amplified seldom-heard voices (e.g. children, older people, non-car owners). However, when OSC's initial funding ended in 2023, its activities came to an end. This briefing paper captures reflections from OSC on how the longevity of similar community climate action initiatives can be supported with limited resources.

## Methods

We conducted interviews with 11 members of the OSC partnership. Interviewees shared lessons learnt from being involved in the project and reflections on the project's impact (on themselves as advocates, on the local community, and on the shift towards sustainable travel more broadly).

We then presented key interview findings in a workshop attended by all other OSC partners. This encouraged us to engage in a reflective discussion to better understand where support for community climate action groups could be strengthened.

In this briefing, we present insights from both the interviews and the workshop.

## Findings

Three key findings emerged – to achieve goals and attain success even with limited resources, community climate initiatives should:

1. Build strong strategic partnerships, including with the local authority
2. Recognise resource limits and set realistic expectations
3. Design an 'exit strategy' for longevity

### Build strong strategic partnerships

The partnerships and networks that OSC built were widely complimented. OSC members were proud to have engaged with the community “from the ground up, rather than top down” as this enabled them to grow their social networks and deepen existing relationships.

OSC felt that they could have engaged with the local council earlier in the project, rather than working in parallel. However, interviewees also pointed out that this type of relationship-building can take a lot of time, effort and resources, so it would have been easier with additional funding. (Read [OSC's recommendations to the National Lottery](#)).

"We could have made some real change and worked on [the project] together rather than saying [to the city council] [...] 'you need to do something about [encouraging active travel]'. "

"I do think when you're talking about active travel, there are two sides: behaviour change and infrastructure side - and we can't do this without local authority help [...] Start with partnership and local authority but maintaining that independence for bottom-up community engagement, funding for 5 years - that's the dream."

The experiences of [similar city- and community-level sustainability initiatives](#) demonstrate how strong and strategic partnerships have helped align goals between councils and community groups, navigate governance structures and mobilise resources.

## Recognise resource limits and set realistic expectations

Interviewees joined OSC at different times and brought different experiences and areas of expertise. Many of them took on multiple roles and wore 'different hats' depending on what the project needed.

Sometimes tasks needed to be performed that were beyond their initially planned deliverables. However, the project did not always have the time and resources to support these tasks. Therefore, some OSC members had to decide whether they were willing to do additional unpaid work.

"The personal me [would] say, I can do as much as possible for a small amount of money as possible."

"Whereas I knew that [...] as representatives of an organisation [...] I found it uncomfortable [because I] have a view about the overheads of my organisation and what impact that has on how much we can do for a certain amount of money in terms of the outcomes."

OSC partners concluded that it is important to be clear early on about what a project and its members can and cannot do. If members need to perform 'implicit roles' or deliver additional tasks, these should be accounted for and included in staff budgets.



## Design an exit strategy

OSC partners shared enthusiasm for the project and belief in community power, climate action, and low-carbon travel. They were proud of what they had achieved and optimistic that they could continue to work together even though the project had officially finished.

When reflecting on how to sustain the movement without further funding, some interviewees suggested crowdfunding and forming enterprises. Others felt that an 'exit strategy' should have been planned into the project from the outset.

"We could've asked the question at the beginning ... what's left when the project is finished?"

An exit strategy could include activities – such as knowledge sharing and provision of material resources – which empower and enable the community to cycle, walk or take public transportation when/if a project ends.

Partners reflected that making OSC 'redundant' or 'not needing to exist', instead of continuing in the same form, may be the indicator of success, as it would mean that active and low-carbon travel had become normalised.



# Further reading

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Underpinning CAST's research is a question of immense significance: how can we transform society in order to live better and address climate change?



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