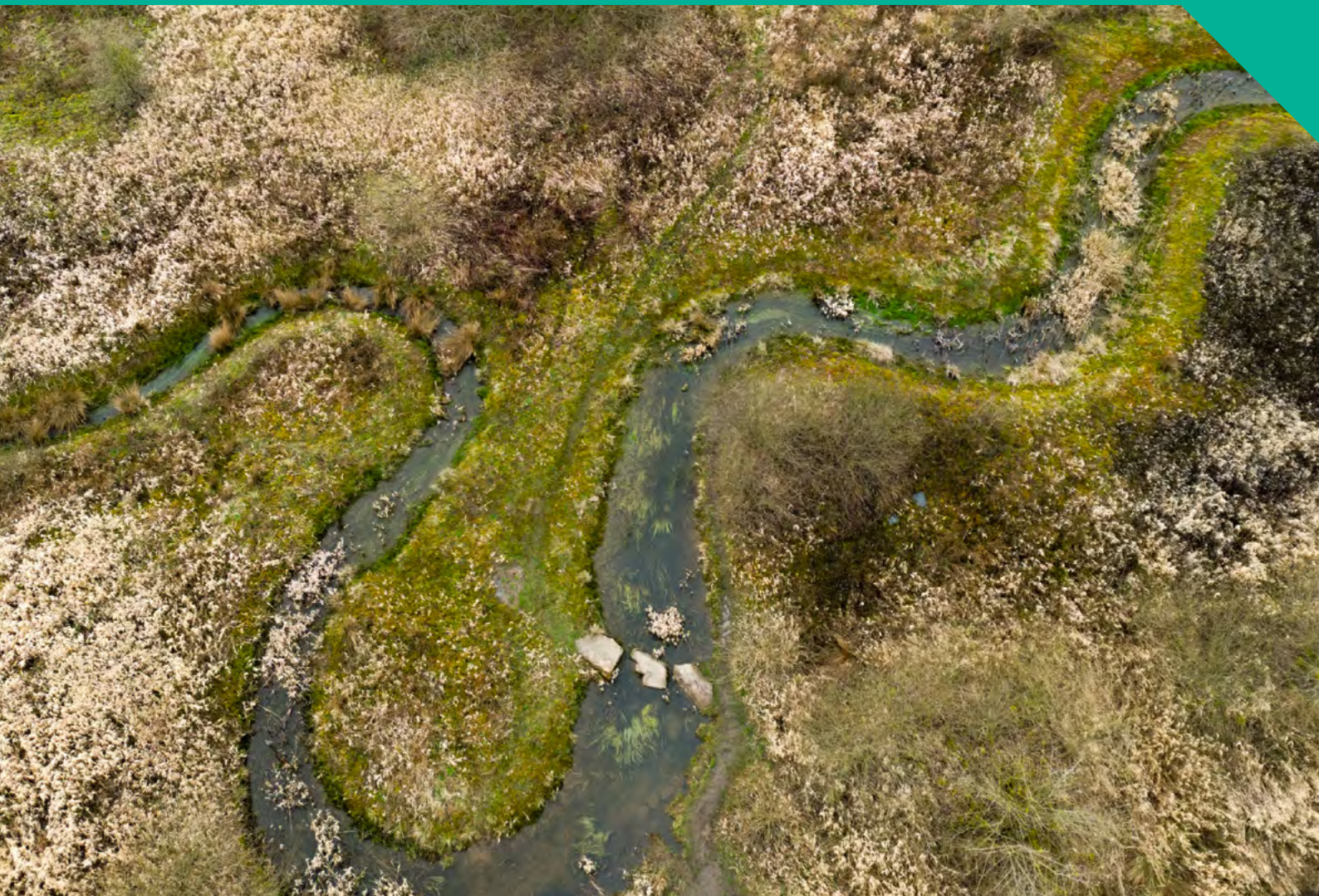




Nature-based solutions to flooding and extreme weather

A guide to community-led approaches, for local and combined authorities

May 2026





Contents

Summary	3
<hr/>	
Context	6
<hr/>	
The challenge	6
Community Nature-based Solutions	7
Barriers to delivery	8
The value of community NbS	9
<hr/>	
Sheffield: Riverlution build skills and flood protection	9
Wigan: country park scheme prevents major flood damage	10
Recommendations	11
<hr/>	
1. Assign clear political and officer leadership	11
2. Harness the power of Local Nature Recovery Strategies	13
3. Establish sustained, flexible finance	15
4. Invest in local skills and nature literacy	17
5. Make maintenance a core part of infrastructure delivery	19
6. Integrate proportionate monitoring and evaluation	21
7. Develop shared regional governance for community NbS	23
The bigger picture	25
<hr/>	
Recommendations for national government	25
Conclusion: the case for collaboration	26
About Ashden and Resilient Roots	26



Summary

Every year, climate change puts UK communities at greater risk from flooding and extreme weather. The Environment Agency projects [one in four properties in England](#) will be at flood risk by mid-century, and under high emissions scenarios researchers estimate [heat-related deaths](#) could increase more than fifty-fold by the 2070s. [Domestic flood insurance claims](#) rose 38 per cent in 2025 alone, with the average payout hitting £30,000 - and the trend is accelerating.

Nature-based Solutions (NbS) create or restore natural landscapes to tackle this threat. Common solutions include planting trees, reviving rivers and controlling water with natural barriers and channels. These approaches are a proven and powerful defence against flooding, heatwaves and other climate dangers, and have widespread support across voters and political parties.

Projects initiated, co-designed or actively stewarded by local people – known as ‘community NbS’ – are more likely to be embraced by residents. They can also unlock a wide range of benefits, from new skills to increased physical activity. They may be nurtured by public funding, but can also attract co-investment from local businesses and insurers with a direct financial stake in reduced flood risk. Major insurers such as Aviva have already begun supporting community flood resilience initiatives, recognising the long-term savings on avoided claims.



Liverpool's Urban GreenUp programme has created 40 solutions across the city. Credit: Gareth Jones/Ashden.



This Ashden briefing shares key insights for local and combined authorities. These will help leaders and officers work with communities to deliver effective and inclusive NbS. The briefing features case studies of successful schemes, and suggested actions for authorities of any size or setting. It draws on learning from Ashden's Resilient Roots programme – a multi-year initiative helping more than 75 councils and community groups create impact with NbS.

Community NbS are delivering significant results across the UK. In Wigan, a restored wetland protected 81 homes from flooding during the 2025 New Year storms, preventing an estimated £2.6 million of damage. In Brighton, a street-level drainage scheme has delivered flood protection worth an estimated £20,000 per property.

And the benefits are not only financial. In Liverpool, a rain garden system that captures 86% of runoff water from a residential street has also driven a nine-fold increase in pollinating insects. Communities support and participate in NbS because these projects deliver multiple benefits at once: from flood protection, cooler streets and cleaner air to thriving wildlife and better mental health. Hard infrastructure remains an essential defence against the increasingly dangerous climate impacts communities face. But they are a powerful, underused complement to conventional engineering, one popular with local people.

If local government changes the way it organises and funds adaptation projects, and supports the people doing this work, it can enable a significant growth in community-led NbS schemes.



*Natural obstacles have been used to slow the flow of water at Bickershaw Country Park in Wigan.
Credit: Jon Spaul/Ashden.*



Four in five UK voters say the country is unprepared for climate impacts. Failure to adapt to extreme weather is no longer just an environmental issue, but a direct threat to communities' trust in government. This brief sets out seven practical things local and combined authorities can do in response. Actions that will see their initial cost repaid by long term savings.

Nurturing community NbS: seven recommendations for local and combined authorities

- 1. Assign visible political champions and officer-level NbS co-ordinators.** Empower them with cross-departmental authority, and publish approval routes for community projects.
- 2. Use Local Nature Recovery Strategies to nurture community NbS.** Map opportunity zones and give local groups clear guidance and a simple registration process to take part in strategy delivery.
- 3. Establish sustained, flexible funding pots of between £5,000 and £30,000.** Make this funding accessible with light-touch application processes and rolling deadlines. Explore co-investment from local businesses and insurers. Prioritise support for communities most in need.
- 4. Invest in local skills and nature literacy.** Fund accessible training, resource local environment record centres, and build learning lab models.
- 5. Make maintenance a core part of every project.** At inception, ring-fence long-term stewardship budgets and insist on a costed maintenance plan.
- 6. Adopt tiered, proportionate monitoring.** Use simple, standardised metrics for small projects, and deeper evaluation for flagship schemes.
- 7. Build shared regional governance.** Invest in the intermediary organisations and cross-sector partnerships that connect community NbS to health, housing and nature agendas.



Context

The challenge

The UK is experiencing the accelerating consequences of climate breakdown. In 2023-24, winter storms caused widespread damage; the 2022 heatwaves brought unprecedented heat-related deaths and wildfires. The public are not blind to this danger: recent research by IPPR and polling from Persuasion UK finds that four in five UK voters believe the country is not prepared for the impacts of climate change. Against that backdrop of public concern, governments that fail to adapt to extreme weather face a direct threat to their political credibility and to communities' trust in those who govern them.

Average UK wildlife abundance has declined by 19% since the 1970s. Climate change and biodiversity loss are mutually reinforcing - degraded ecosystems are less resilient to extreme weather, and extreme weather further degrades ecosystems.

Local and combined authorities exist at the sharp end of both crises. They are statutory risk management authorities for surface water flooding. And under the Environment Act 2021, they have strengthened duties to conserve and enhance biodiversity, prepare Local Nature Recovery Strategies, and ensure at least 10% biodiversity net gain from new development. These obligations have arrived at a time of acute pressure on local government budgets, capacity, and political bandwidth – and with the biggest reform of local government in a generation underway.



Sheffield's River Don. In 2007, flooding in the Yorkshire city caused two deaths and millions of pounds of damage. Credit: Jon Spaul/Ashden.



Community Nature-based Solutions

Nature-based solutions (NbS) are actions that protect, sustainably manage and restore ecosystems to address societal challenges, while providing human wellbeing and biodiversity benefits. This brief focuses specifically on community NbS that address inland flooding and urban heat. Coastal communities face distinct risks – including sea-level rise – demanding different NbS.

Community NbS are initiated, co-designed or actively stewarded by local communities. They are typically delivered at neighbourhood or river sub-catchment scale – creating impact around a single street, green space, or the local stretch of a watercourse. They are most impactful when co-ordinated across a wider area alongside institutional partners.

National government has a key role in enabling community NbS. But local and combined authorities currently offer the greatest opportunities to launch and grow these interventions.

Three characteristics distinguish community NbS from large-scale or infrastructure-led NbS:

- **Participatory governance.** Communities are meaningfully involved in design and delivery.
- **Community agency.** Local groups hold a genuine steering role.
- **Social embedding.** Interventions are rooted in the knowledge and relationships of a specific place.

The [British Academy's 2025 series on place-sensitive nature recovery](#) highlights that co-production and local ownership are both the defining strength and the central governance challenge of hyper-local nature recovery approaches.

Common examples of community Nature-based Solutions

Sustainable urban drainage schemes	Natural flood management	Urban greening	Habitat restoration
Rain gardens	Leaky dams (natural barriers that slow flowing water)	Tree planting	River restoration
Swales	Floodplain reconnection	Green roofs	Wetland creation
Planted basins	Riparian planting (waterside vegetation)	Wildflower meadows	Hedgerow planting



These solutions can simultaneously deliver measurable flood risk reduction, urban cooling, carbon sequestration, biodiversity gains and health improvements for local people. But their performance is sensitive to siting, design, maintenance, and monitoring. While the evidence base for them is growing, it is currently smaller than for hard engineering.

Individual community NbS interventions are most effective when coordinated across a wide area, alongside conventional engineering and land management by the Environment Agency and catchment partnerships. Community groups deliver the neighbourhood-level components; local and combined authorities connect them to create catchment-level impact.

Barriers to delivery

Ashden's work supporting community NbS has revealed that local motivation is rarely the limiting factor in their success. Instead, schemes are held back by inadequate national policy, and governance barriers at the local and regional level. They are also limited by a lack of appropriate funding and finance for adaptation, and insufficient provision of skills and maintenance support.

Crucially, less affluent communities are systematically under-represented in existing funding programmes; a pattern that is at risk of replication unless equity is actively designed into new measures to support community NbS.

The organisations we work with have reported five consistent, interlinked structural barriers. Each directly informs the recommendations in this briefing. They are:

- Funding complexity – finance is fragmented, inflexible and short-term, while processes and amounts offered favour larger applicants.
- Lack of finance for maintenance budgets.
- Permission paralysis – even small, low-risk interventions trigger onerous survey requirements. Council approval processes are complex and unclear.
- Lack of technical support, and over-reliance on volunteers.
- Unequal access to expertise, funding and political support in different places.



The value of community NbS

Community Nbs deliver wide-ranging benefits, including financial savings. Two schemes in Northern England show the power of well-designed work to create measurable social impact, and prevent costly damage.

Sheffield: Riverlution build skills and flood protection

Riverlution show the power of community NbS to deliver protection from extreme weather, alongside impressive social impact.

This community interest company protects and restores waterways across Yorkshire, North Lincolnshire and beyond, while making sure skills and qualifications flow to local people. Its Stewardship Partnerships bring together local businesses, local authorities, schools and young people, resident and community groups, faith groups and public bodies. These coalitions are an innovative example of public-private financing, central to Riverlution's success.

The organisation has removed over 100 tonnes of waste and litter from rivers and waterways, delivers more than 2,700 hours of, free to participants, training each year and last financial year created more than £2million of social value.

Flood-threatened businesses and public bodies with legal flood duties pay Riverlution to manage local rivers, and riparian habitats, and it is also contracted to provide



*Riverlution's work means a broader range of young people can access environmental careers and qualifications.
Credit: Jon Spaul/Ashden.*



accredited training. Riverlution uses income from these activities to fund free training for disadvantaged groups, particularly young people.

People not in education, employment or training, or those seeking to change careers or re-skill can join a free six-month skills scheme. This gives them foundational knowledge, experience working on real projects, and recognised qualifications. There's also support for CV writing and interview advice. And the organisation runs tailored schemes for trainees with special educational needs and disabilities.

Wigan: country park scheme prevents major flood damage

In Wigan, a collaboration between the Council and the Lancashire Wildlife Trust has transformed an old colliery at Bickershaw Country Park into a thriving site for nature that also protects homes from flooding.

Six kilometres of the straightened watercourse was 're-wiggled' – slowing the flow of water – and reconnected to its original floodplain. Leaky dams were installed, and new wetland features created.

Eighty-one homes in Westleigh, downstream of Bickershaw, were unaffected by the New Year floods of 2024/25 – which caused significant damage elsewhere in Wigan. The resulting financial saving has been estimated at £2.6 million: an example of how NbS, cheap to implement compared to hard concrete solutions, can yield huge benefits.

The transformation at Bickershaw has opened up opportunities for people to re-engage with nature on their doorstep; a new volunteer group now carries out regular maintenance and species monitoring. The inspiring success at Bickershaw is now informing Wigan Council's roll out of NbS in other locations.



Bickershaw Country Park is on the site of a disused colliery - closed in 1992. Credit: Jon Spaul/Ashden.



Recommendations

1 Assign clear political and officer leadership

Delivery of small community NbS schemes can often stall because approval routes are felt to be long, unclear and overly complex, with no single person in local government in a position to co-ordinate across departments. These factors can create a disproportionately difficult process. Without clear internal navigation and visible political sponsorship, momentum is lost.

Formal designation may not be the right approach everywhere. Where informal political leadership already exists, it is often more practical to evolve existing departmental roles, instead of creating new posts. Roles should deliver cross-departmental co-ordination, transparent delivery routes, and genuine political engagement – regardless of organisational structures.

The London Councils' *London Leading* report finds that senior leadership and cross-council working are the two most effective levers for embedding climate resilience. Crucially, political champions must be genuinely committed, not figureheads, with access to specialist technical expertise. Poorly engaged or advised champions can make things harder for communities, by creating expectations beyond the authority's capacity and capability.

Brighton & Hove: cross-sector leadership delivers protection worth £20,000 per property

Brighton & Hove is one of the ten English areas most threatened by surface water flooding, with over 30,000 properties at risk. In response, Brighton & Hove City Council piloted a Sustainable Urban Drainage Scheme (SUDS) at Carden Avenue, a residential





road often affected by heavy rainfall. The scheme was conceived and supervised by Robert Bray Associates.

Rather than using artificial materials like concrete, the council created shallow planted basins in grass verges, alongside swales designed to collect and store water. Residents enjoyed better mental health, and a high-level desktop assessment estimated that this kind of flood protection could save around £20,000 per property in avoided damage. The scheme has also boosted biodiversity and made the neighbourhood more attractive.

Innovative governance powered the scheme's success. From the start, Brighton convened residents with a cross-departmental group drawing on the authority's planning, flood risk, highways, parks and regeneration teams. The group also featured external experts including Southern Water, The Aquifer Partnership, and the University of Brighton. The council's principal planning officer and sustainability team ensured all stakeholders were working towards a clear goal, and held accountability for delivery.

Another key factor was supportive local councillors who acted as visible ambassadors. Getting public figures known to the community engaged can be invaluable when addressing resident concerns. Residents and key organisations participated meaningfully from the start; clarity over roles and responsibilities made sure concerns and opinions were heard and acted on.

Next steps for authorities

Assign visible political champions for community NbS. Designate officer-level NbS co-ordinators with cross-departmental authority and access to training and specialist expertise (or evolving existing roles where this is more appropriate).

These co-ordinators should:

- Act as a single point of contact for community proposals, providing a named officer, contact details and published office hours.
- Convene cross-departmental working groups. These should draw in planning, highways, flood risk, biodiversity, and parks teams from the outset of the project.

More broadly, the authority should:

- Publish clear, proportionate approval routes and typical timelines for small projects that are under £10,000 or 0.1 hectares, and do not require full ecological surveys.
- Maintain a transparent community NbS pipeline showing what local projects are in development, their timelines, and where communities can contribute. In doing so, the council should not over-promise the financial support available to community groups.
- Invest in training for elected members, to build cross-party understanding of community NbS and sustain institutional knowledge across political cycles.



2 Harness the power of Local Nature Recovery Strategies

Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) are one of the strongest levers under regional control. Under the Environment Act 2021, every Responsible Authority must produce an LNRS. However, the [Office for Environmental Protection's 2025 review of LNRS](#) found that while local ambition is broadly strong, gaps in delivery clarity and long-term funding risk have made strategies aspirational rather than actionable. This variation is already visible: LNRS pipelines are emerging in some areas, including [Liverpool City Region](#) and [Hertfordshire](#). But resourcing is insufficient for the mapping and community engagement that real delivery requires.

[British Academy research](#) identifies the Shropshire parish council model as a replicable blueprint for 'civic environmentalism', one that others could adopt. In this model, hyper-local plans co-produced by communities connect upward to the regional LNRS.

Greater Manchester: linking hyper-local interventions

Moston Brook runs 3.7 miles between Oldham and north-east Manchester. Once one of Greater Manchester's most polluted waterways, sections were buried underground, scarred by landfill and industrial use. Today, it is a living green corridor – administered by Manchester City Council and Oldham Borough Council.

The area is a mosaic of mature broadleaf woodland and scrub, open grassland, marsh and wetland. It's criss-crossed by footpaths and accessible walking routes.

Local partners have worked together to create small, practical and connected interventions: six 'leaky dams' slowing peak flows, hedgerows, wildflower meadows, mini basins, and fully draining footpaths that act as linear SuDS.





The transformation didn't come from a single capital scheme, but a series of small and highly targeted projects.

The work has involved the two local authorities, the Lancashire Wildlife Trust, charity Groundwork and stewardship by a local volunteer group – supported by a council countryside officer. Citizen science generates data, and residents use and enjoy the green corridor daily.

Next steps for authorities

- Map and publish 'micro-NbS opportunity zones'. These should identify specific suitable sites, considering areas of green space deficit and climate vulnerability. Make maps publicly accessible via interactive platforms.
- Formally recognise community NbS as contributing to delivery of your LNRS. Create a straightforward process for community groups to register projects against LNRS priorities, giving grassroots action legitimacy and visibility.
- Publish simple guidance on how local groups can align proposals to your LNRS. This should include one-page templates showing what information is needed, what counts as LNRS-aligned, minimum quality standards, and typical approval timescales.
- Name clear LNRS delivery contacts. Publish names, contact details, and office hours for officers who can advise community groups on alignment and next steps.



3 Establish sustained, flexible finance

There is a structural gap in local adaptation finance. Community NbS proposals – such as restoring a wet verge, planting a hedgerow buffer, or creating a pocket rain garden – rarely require major capital, but frequently sit in an awkward middle ground. They are too small for strategic infrastructure funding, too technical to rely purely on volunteers, and too informal for complex procurement systems.

The Agile Initiative recommends blended finance, multiple-benefit stacking and light-touch application processes designed for community organisations. Any new fund should explicitly prioritise communities with the greatest green space deficit and climate vulnerability, and link allocation to LNRS priority areas, to connect local investment to regional strategic frameworks.

Greater Manchester: Green Spaces Fund offers small grants and advisor support

Greater Manchester Environment Trust (GMET) is managed by Lancashire Wildlife Trust in partnership with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority. It blends public, private and philanthropic investment into a single environmental impact charity. The trust's impact includes the successful scheme at Bickershaw Country Park, Wigan, profiled earlier in this report.

GMET also manages The Green Spaces Fund, which provides small and medium-sized grants, including funding for informal or early-stage groups. It offers dedicated borough-based advisors to guide applicants and strengthen delivery plans. After six funding rounds, 122 projects have been supported, over £3.5 million distributed, and more than 100,000 residents involved in creating or improving green space.





Feedback to Ashden highlights that even the Green Spaces Fund's application process can be challenging for the smallest groups - a prompt to ensure any new fund is designed with accessibility as a primary criterion. The model of funding advisors embedded in boroughs was widely seen as a highly effective mechanism.

Next steps for authorities

- Establish sustained, flexible community NbS finance – offering grants between £5,000 and £30,000.
- Blend funding streams: draw on adaptation, flood risk, biodiversity, health, and active travel budgets where appropriate, and link fund allocation to LNRS priority areas.
- Pursue public-private co-investment: engage local businesses and flood risk insurers as funding partners. Insurers such as Aviva have begun supporting community flood resilience initiatives, recognising the long-term savings on avoided claims. Combined authorities are well-placed to broker these relationships at scale.
- Design proportionate application processes and create light-touch processes for grants under £10,000. Offer four-week decision windows, quarterly rolling deadlines, and no requirement for incorporation (allowing partnership with anchor organisations).
- Prioritise equity: explicitly target communities with the greatest green space deficit, and the greatest vulnerability to climate impacts.
- Recycle Section 106 and Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) contributions. Both are routes to funding community NbS. Allow developers to discharge up to 30% of obligations through partnerships with community groups delivering nearby community NbS. Provide template agreements to reduce legal costs.
- Provide light-touch advisory support: fund locally based advisors to guide groups through feasibility, design, and permissions before formal application.



4 Invest in local skills and nature literacy

Community energy and goodwill are no substitutes for delivery capacity. Community groups working on NbS often have to learn skills such as hydrology, habitat management, and ecological monitoring 'on the job'. This builds ownership - but also creates fragility. Community NbS require technical competence: from understanding flow paths and selecting native species, to designing leaky dams and monitoring biodiversity outcomes. Delivering community NbS is not only a funding challenge. Building skills is essential too.

Training should be led by organisations that understand local accessibility needs. Existing initiatives (e.g. [Local Environment Record Centres](#), the [Mersey Forest Ideas Lab](#), and the Planning Advisory Service work on biodiversity duties) should be properly resourced rather than reinvented.

Cumbria: skills vital for river restoration

In the Duddon Valley, spanning Cumberland and Westmorland & Furness, three small local organisations have joined with South Cumbria Rivers Trust to restore river habitats and strengthen the resilience of local landscapes. The Duddon Catchment Partnership has built leaky dams, managed non-native species, planted river-side trees and hedgerows, carried out wildlife surveys and established baseline water-quality monitoring - in a landscape with little historic ecological data. Testing by the Environment Agency in the area is also diminishing due to budget pressures.

Initial council funding only covered capital, with no budget for specialist experts. Volunteers stepped into the gap - studying, training, gaining practical skills, and conducting citizen science.





The partnership shows what local capacity can achieve when motivated communities step forward. But relying only on unpaid volunteer time is unsustainable. Volunteers should be able to access formal upskilling and be supported by local authorities.

Next steps for authorities

- Fund locally led, accessible training programmes. These should include accredited courses in Sustainable Urban Drainage Scheme (SUDS) design, habitat management, leaky dam construction, biodiversity monitoring, and tree planting. Training should be accessible and reach community volunteers and local authority officers.
- Resource Local Environment Record Centres as knowledge hubs. Give sustainable core funding to these county-level bodies that hold local biodiversity data and baselines, and support citizen science networks and community NbS monitoring.
- Establish 'learning labs': settings where council ecologists, engineers and planners work alongside community practitioners on real projects. [The Mersey Forest](#) is already developing this model.
- Develop youth green-skills pathways for young people. Link them to apprenticeship frameworks and further education providers, building long-term local capacity.



5 Make maintenance a core part of infrastructure delivery

The political appeal of new infrastructure often outshines the quieter reality of upkeep. But ongoing maintenance is essential as rain gardens and drainage channels clog, and pollinator habitats need seasonal management. Without planned stewardship, performance declines and public trust erodes. The impact of capital funding is highly visible; one reason that revenue for maintenance is harder to sustain. Even so, without the latter, adaptation assets underperform.

Maintenance is a consistent challenge across community NbS work. Maintenance budgets must extend beyond five years - habitats often take that long to establish, meaning standard budget periods expire just as benefits materialise. Framing stewardship as 'nurturing spaces' rather than 'maintaining' them can sustain community motivation and political support.

Liverpool: local charities keep GreenUp interventions alive

Liverpool's award-winning, EU-funded Urban GreenUP programme has installed over 40 NbS across the city centre. At Upper Pitt Street, a rain garden captures 86% of runoff during heavy rainfall and has driven an 857% increase in pollinating insects. Other measurable impacts include a fall in pollution from particulate matter, a 20% reduction in Nitrogen Dioxide, and cooler recorded temperatures.

These outcomes persist because Faiths4Change, a long-standing local charity, assumed long-term stewardship of the solutions. Nearby, GoodGym volunteers run regular maintenance sessions at a pollinator site. Maintenance became embedded within community networks rather than treated as an afterthought.





Next steps for authorities

- Ring-fence long-term maintenance budgets, ensuring no community NbS project is approved without a costed maintenance plan and identified funding source. Support maintenance for a minimum of five years, ideally ten, to allow habitats to be established.
- Create hybrid stewardship models: contract local charities, social enterprises, or community businesses, and equip them to co-ordinate and support volunteer stewardship.
- Use Section 106 and BNG contributions to fund upkeep. Allow developers to discharge obligations through long-term maintenance endowments for community NbS, as well as capital installation.
- Reframe the political narrative: link maintenance to lowering flood risks - a politically salient issue.



6 Integrate proportionate monitoring and evaluation

Hard engineering is often prioritised over community NbS in budget discussions. This is partly because the benefits of community NbS – such as reduced flood peaks, cooler streets, improved mental health, and biodiversity gains – are diffuse. Credible data about their impact can change this picture. However, excessive monitoring requirements can overwhelm small projects and deter participation. Monitoring should also be embedded within LNRS reporting, to avoid duplication and build cumulative regional evidence.

Liverpool: careful monitoring reveals extraordinary results

Liverpool's Urban GreenUP project embedded monitoring and evaluation from the outset. Across the interventions installed across the city - from green walls to floating islands and rain gardens - the programme tracked metrics such as water and air quality, shading and cooling, carbon storage, biodiversity and increases in active travel.

The results were compelling: at one site there was a 7.2°C reduction in surface air temperature. Other impacts include the diversion of more than 5.2 million litres of water from sewers; 32.8 tonnes of carbon dioxide sequestered; and tens of thousands of residents gaining improved access to green space.

Monitoring and evaluation is crucial. Not only to confirm that solutions are delivering their promised impact, but also to help build the business case for future interventions - recognising the full socioeconomic, health and resilience value they bring.





Next steps for authorities

Authorities should adopt tiered, proportionate monitoring frameworks scaled to project size and objective.

- For small projects (under £10,000) use simple, standardised metrics (such as trees planted, or volunteer hours contributed). Rely on photo documentation and community testimony. There is no need for specialist ecological surveys.
- For medium projects (£10,000–£50,000) add basic performance indicators such as rainfall infiltration rates, species counts, and resident satisfaction surveys. Provide template monitoring forms and community training.
- For flagship schemes (over £50,000) invest in deeper evaluation of co-benefits. This could examine flood risk reduction, cooling, air quality, biodiversity, health outcomes, or carbon sequestration. Fund specialist equipment and external evaluation partners.
- Integrate with LNRS monitoring: community NbS data should feed into LNRS reporting wherever possible, reducing duplication and building cumulative regional evidence.
- Contribute to, and learn from, a national evidence library. Build on [IGNITION](#), the [NbS Knowledge Hub](#) and [Urban GreenUP](#) monitoring work. Doing so will enable cross-regional learning and reduce duplication.



7 Develop shared regional governance for community NbS

Community NbS sits at the intersection of climate adaptation, public health, nature recovery, urban design, and social wellbeing. Yet governance structures compartmentalise these agendas; meaning impact across all areas is rarely measured, valued, or funded together. This is not only true within local authorities – the same issue affects the relationships *between* institutions. This limits the power of local and combined authorities to build cross-sector partnerships, and make sure NbS are recognised, resourced and scaled across organisational boundaries.

Intermediary organisations that sit between councils and communities - convening multiple partners around shared LNR outcomes – have a vital role to play. [British Academy research on the Shropshire LNR model](#) shows that sustained nature recovery depends on organisations such as associations of local councils and community land trusts. These network horizontally across community groups, landowners and institutions, while connecting upward to the authority's strategic frameworks. Local and combined authorities should actively resource and work through these bodies, rather than seeking to manage all cross-sector relationships directly.

Durable cross-sector governance of this kind requires sustained relational investment. It must be built slowly and cannot be contracted out. Local government reorganisation creates real risk of knowledge loss and relationship breakdown, making continuity of relationships as important as continuity of funding.

Greater Manchester: Sow the City nurture cross-sector action

In Greater Manchester, social enterprise Sow the City reframed nature-based solutions as vital infrastructure for local health and resilience, rather than a 'nice-to-have'. Working with NHS trusts across the region, the organisation transformed nine hospital





sites with greening projects that mitigate heat stress, support biodiversity, and improve wellbeing.

It also authored the [NHS Green Space & Biodiversity Toolkit](#), a practical guide that breaks down the costs, processes, and benefits of interventions such as wildflower meadows, tree planting, and green walls. By positioning these interventions as health infrastructure - hospitals and care homes are extremely prone to overheating during heatwaves - Sow the City unlocked cross-sector buy-in, funding routes and institutional investment that would otherwise have been inaccessible.

Cross-sector partnerships like those built by Sow the City create new chances to roll out community NbS by foregrounding their health benefits. As climate impacts will have significant detrimental effects on health, adaptation is essential for protecting individual and collective wellbeing.

Next steps for authorities

Councils should establish long-term, place-based partnerships that align multiple sectors around clearly defined resilience outcomes:

- Map the intermediary organisations already operating in your area - catchment partnerships, food partnerships, community land trusts, and local councils associations - and identify which have the relationships and capacity to convene cross-sector action on community NbS. Where possible, direct existing resources towards their core convening capacity rather than treating it as a byproduct of their other work.
- Develop joint structures with NHS integrated care boards, housing associations, and water companies through shared delivery frameworks or memoranda of understanding. These relationships take years to build, require continuity of personnel, and should be treated as a long-term investment in resilience infrastructure rather than a discretionary activity.
- Embed community NbS in Local Plans and Spatial Development Strategies - the statutory frameworks that govern land use, development decisions and strategic investment - linking them to the local Land Use Framework and Green Infrastructure strategies. This gives community NbS formal standing in planning decisions and investment priorities that relational governance alone cannot provide.



The bigger picture

Recommendations for national government

Central government has an essential role to play in supporting community NbS. Key actions for national policymakers include:

- Ensuring multi-year local government funding for nature and adaptation - delivering sustained, ring-fenced, non-competitive allocations. This support is the single biggest enabler of the staffing, coordination, and maintenance required for effective community NbS.
- Mainstreaming community NbS in the National Adaptation Programme (NAP). The programme can nurture the growth of NbS nationwide by driving cross-departmental coordination, reformed procurement, and a national monitoring framework. These solutions can make an important contribution, alongside hard infrastructure, to addressing the UK's highest-priority climate risks. The NAP should reflect this.
- Integrated Settlements that deliver for communities. Mayoral Combined Authorities receiving Integrated Settlements are now responsible for overseeing LNRS - but the published functional responsibilities say nothing about community participation, equity, or neighbourhood-scale delivery. Government should require Mayoral Combined Authorities to set out how their Environment and Climate Change Settlement investment will support community-led NbS, as part of LNRS implementation.
- Creating conditions for public-private investment in community NbS. Government should work with the insurance sector to develop scalable models for corporate co-investment in community flood resilience. Insurers have a direct financial interest in reduced flood risk - [Aviva's community flood resilience work](#) and the Flood Re [Build Back Better](#) scheme show that private capital can complement public funding. Government should establish a standard co-investment framework and signal clearly in the National Adaptation Programme that private finance has a role in scaling community NbS.
- A national quality framework for community NbS. A shared definition of 'good' schemes - covering design, equity, monitoring, and evaluation - would enable consistent delivery, help build a national evidence base, and make the case for sustained investment.



Conclusion: the case for collaboration

The communities featured in this brief are already planting trees, restoring rivers and greening streets - because it works, and because they can see the risks of inaction on their doorstep. The barriers documented here are not inevitable; they are policy choices, and local and combined authorities have the power to unblock them.

Three kinds of collaboration make the difference. The first is with communities themselves: recognising local knowledge and commitment as assets, and creating the inclusive, accessible processes that allow them to translate enthusiasm into delivery. The second is within authorities: breaking down the departmental silos that fragment approval routes, budgets and expertise, and ensuring that political leadership is genuine rather than ceremonial. The third is across institutions: building the long-term partnerships with health trusts, housing associations, water companies and intermediary organisations. The power of these partnerships to resource and scale solutions is far greater than that of any single body.

None of this happens quickly, and none of it can be contracted out. The authorities that deliver most are those that invest in relationships and trust before they need them. Those that can quickly call on officers who know their local community groups, political champions who understand the evidence, and cross-sector partnerships built during calmer times.

Community NbS will not close the adaptation gap on their own. But for any authority serious about climate resilience, they are too powerful, too popular, and too cost-effective to ignore.

About Ashden and Resilient Roots

Ashden showcases outstanding climate solutions, and accelerates systemic change that unleashes their transformative potential. Our awards and programmes create impact in the UK and Global South.

Our Resilient Roots programme, funded by Lund Trust, gives councils and community groups free support to deliver effective NbS. This support includes workshops, events, and mentoring. Our support is practical, accessible and designed to help a wide range of groups and authorities – whatever their experience with NbS.

This policy brief draws directly on learning from the programme, and the experiences of our Resilient Roots partners. We thank our funder and partners, and particularly our roundtable contributors: The Town and Country Planning Association; Groundwork; Merseyside Environmental Advisory Service; East Herts District Council; Liverpool City Council; and Cumbria Nature Partnership.



W: [ashden.org](https://www.ashden.org)

T: 020 7410 0330 E: info@ashden.org

Ashden, The Peak, 3rd Floor, 5 Wilton Road, London, SW1V 1AP

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