

Securing Climate and Nature Recovery on new councils' agendas

The Surrey Climate Commission 2026 Annual Gathering, held on 30 April, considered the following questions:

How can we get climate and nature recovery on councillors' agenda? How can we upscale impact?

Results

Summary

Workshop participants identified several interconnected strategies for embedding climate and nature recovery into local councillors' agendas. Key themes centred on building relationships and structured engagement with elected representatives — through workshops, pledges, citizen panels, and umbrella coalitions — while framing climate action around issues citizens already care about: health, food costs, energy bills, and community wellbeing. Scaling impact was seen as dependent on connecting existing local groups into a unified voice, leveraging national campaigns locally, and using trusted touchpoints like waste collection as entry points for broader conversations. Education featured prominently across food, transport, and circular economy themes, with a strong emphasis on shifting cultural norms rather than just recycling habits.

Analysis

1. Engaging Councillors Directly

Participants placed significant emphasis on structured, sustained engagement with elected representatives rather than one-off lobbying. Practical suggestions included:

- **Workshops for new councillors** to build understanding of technical detail, metrics, local initiatives, and key stakeholders (particularly in transport and the circular economy)

- **Pledge campaigns** such as *Our Future Surrey* as a concrete commitment mechanism
- **Citizen panels and assemblies** as democratic structures to introduce sceptical representatives to new perspectives
- **Framing asks to match councillors' existing interests** — e.g. health, safety, affordability — rather than leading with climate language

The underlying insight here is relational: participants stressed empathy, understanding councillors' constraints, and "being nice" as prerequisites for creating genuine buy-in. Long-term relationships, standing panels, and regular communication structures were seen as more effective than episodic pressure.

2. Building a Unified Coalition

A recurring concern was fragmentation — local groups operating in silos without collective influence. Suggested solutions included:

- **Engaging umbrella organisations** such as Surrey Community Action, Surrey Wildlife Trust, Surrey Hills Society, the Surrey Nature Partnership, and student volunteering hubs
- **Connecting groups around shared interests** and common themes to demonstrate breadth of public support
- **Using the Surrey Climate Commission and community film screenings** as convening mechanisms
- **Leveraging Neighbourhood Area Committees** as existing democratic infrastructure

The logic is clear: councillors respond more readily to a broad, coordinated constituency than to individual voices. Participants wanted to use *Our Future Surrey* as an overarching framework to unify disparate groups under a single agenda.

3. Food Systems

Food generated some of the richest discussion, touching on culture, legislation, education, and community:

- **Cultural shift** was seen as central — moving away from ultra-processed food, fast food, and high meat consumption towards plant-based, seasonal, and locally grown food

- **Legislation** was called for in areas such as junk food advertising restrictions and mandatory plant-based options in hospitals and schools
 - **Community cooking and growing** — including schemes like JOYFUL GREENs in Godalming and urban farms — were highlighted as grassroots ways to change norms and build skills
 - **Barriers acknowledged** included cost of living, lack of cooking skills and time, media influence, and the dominance of fast food in public spaces
 - **Fair food pricing** and education at all ages were seen as essential enablers
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4. Waste and the Circular Economy

Participants were notably sophisticated in their framing of waste, pushing well beyond recycling:

- The **7-8 Rs hierarchy** (rethink, refuse, reduce, reuse, repair, repurpose, recycle, rot) was cited as a more meaningful framework than recycling alone
 - **Producer responsibility** — creating incentives for manufacturers to eliminate non-recyclable packaging — was seen as a policy priority
 - The **permaculture framing of waste as a misplaced resource** resonated, linking to circular economy principles
 - **Decoupling GDP from material consumption** was raised as a systemic challenge
 - Practical ideas included home composting, farm-to-food-bank schemes, supermarket food waste legislation (following France's example), and better fly-tipping enforcement
 - **Waste collection as a councillor touchpoint** was highlighted as an underused engagement opportunity
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5. Transport

Transport responses focused heavily on communication and knowledge-sharing:

- **Workshops and expert invitations** (e.g. from TfL) to help representatives understand what is working elsewhere
- **Resident associations and local groups** risk being lost in larger bureaucratic structures — direct engagement with councillors framed around their interests was recommended

- **Storytelling and real experiences** — such as the Midlands housing retrofit scheme — were seen as more persuasive than data alone
 - **Citizens panels** as a route to open new lines of communication with initially sceptical stakeholders
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6. Energy

- **Group-scale initiatives** — such as solar-together schemes or shared batteries and heat pumps — were preferred over house-by-house approaches, which are slow and inequitable
 - **Clean air and woodburning stove campaigns** were cited as examples of effective local mobilisation
 - Councillors should be kept informed via **newsletters and positive example-sharing**
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7. Cross-Cutting Themes

Several themes cut across all topic areas:

- **Co-benefits framing:** health, affordability, and community cohesion were consistently identified as more resonant entry points than climate language alone
- **Education at all levels:** from school meals to community cooking to councillor briefings
- **Joyful, community-centred approaches** rather than doom-framing
- **Learning from elsewhere:** other countries, cities, and sectors were seen as rich sources of transferable practice
- **Norm change as the ultimate goal:** many responses pointed beyond individual behaviour to the cultural and structural conditions that make sustainable choices easy, affordable, and desirable