

The Future Ready Service

April 2026

FINAL REPORT



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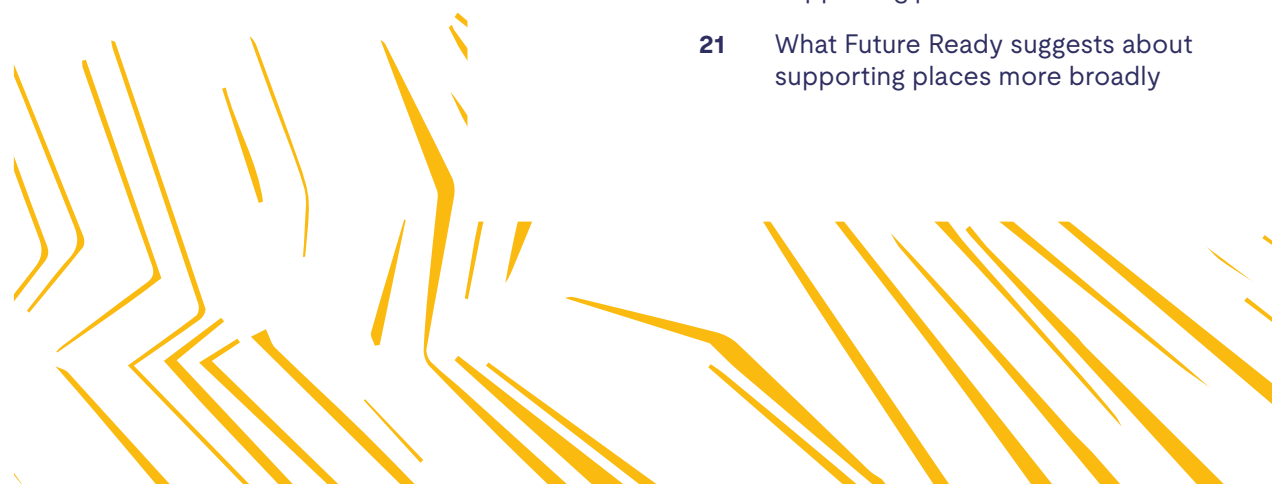
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Introduction



Preface

Innovate UK commissioned this final report on the Future Ready service as part of the Net Zero Living Programme.

This final report was prepared by Urban Foresight, with We Are Liminal and Forum for the Future. It explains what was offered to participating places, what each activity was intended to achieve, what participants reported changed in practice, and what this means for future programme design.

It is written for local authorities, with relevance to programme funders, policymakers, regulators and investors interested in how place-based support can help local authorities create better local outcomes for people, businesses and local economies.

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of Innovate UK.



Why support for delivery matters

Councils, communities and businesses want prosperous and resilient places.

Net zero action can support these goals, but delivery is complex, often fragmented and held back by:

- Stretched capacity
- Unclear roles
- Short-term funding
- Limited data capability
- Barriers in engagement, finance, planning, policy and business engagement
- A persistent gap between strategy and delivery.

Overcoming these barriers requires sustained focus, practical support and funded participation in capacity-building activity.



What this report covers

This report draws on participant experience, evaluation evidence and delivery intelligence from Future Ready. It is not an impact evaluation of individual funded projects.

Part 1: The Future Ready service

What was offered, what it was for, what it achieved, and what this suggests for future support.

Part 2: Key learnings for helping places deliver

What the programme learned about overcoming non-technological barriers and improving local outcomes.



Creating better places

Climate action is not a separate agenda. When embedded well, decarbonisation can improve everyday outcomes for residents and support place-based renewal and resilient economic growth.

The main blockers are often non-technological. They sit at the intersection of governance, finance, behaviour and local politics, and are rarely solved by technical solutions alone.

Future Ready created a structured environment where places could work through this complexity together.



“

Local authorities are key to achieving net zero. Around a third of the UK’s carbon emissions are dependent on sectors that are directly shaped or influenced by local authority practice, policy or partnerships.”

Innovate UK [Net Zero Living Programme](#)

PART 1

The Future Ready Service



The Future Ready Service

A capacity-building service to help places move from strategy to delivery.

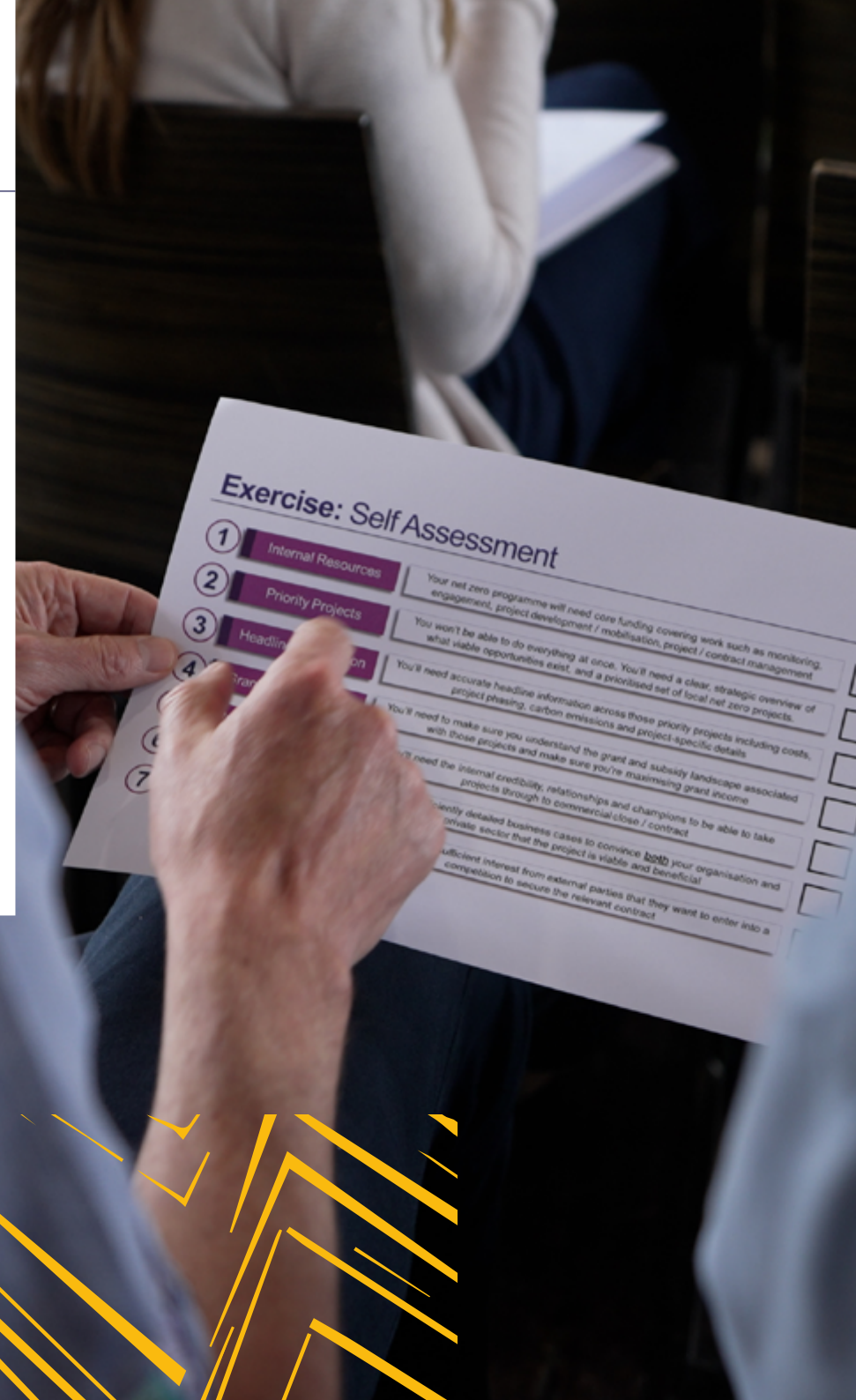
Future Ready was delivered as part of Innovate UK's Net Zero Living Programme. It was designed to help places adopt social, cultural, policy and technical innovation in ways that support local prosperity.

It supported three cohorts of local authority officers delivering Pathfinder Demonstrator, Pathfinder Place and Fast Follower projects, as well as lead project delivery partners.

- **Main delivery period:** September 2023 to June 2025
- **Extension activity:** Some activity continued to March 2026

The support model combined mentoring, knowledge exchange, peer learning, system change training, structured reflection and expert technical support targeted at non-technological barriers to project development and delivery.

Urban Foresight with We Are Liminal and Forum for the Future worked alongside a team of expert delivery partners which provided participants with technical expertise and assistance to overcome non-technological barriers to decarbonisation – visioning and community engagement, finance, net zero planning, policy and regulation, data and data skills, and business engagement.

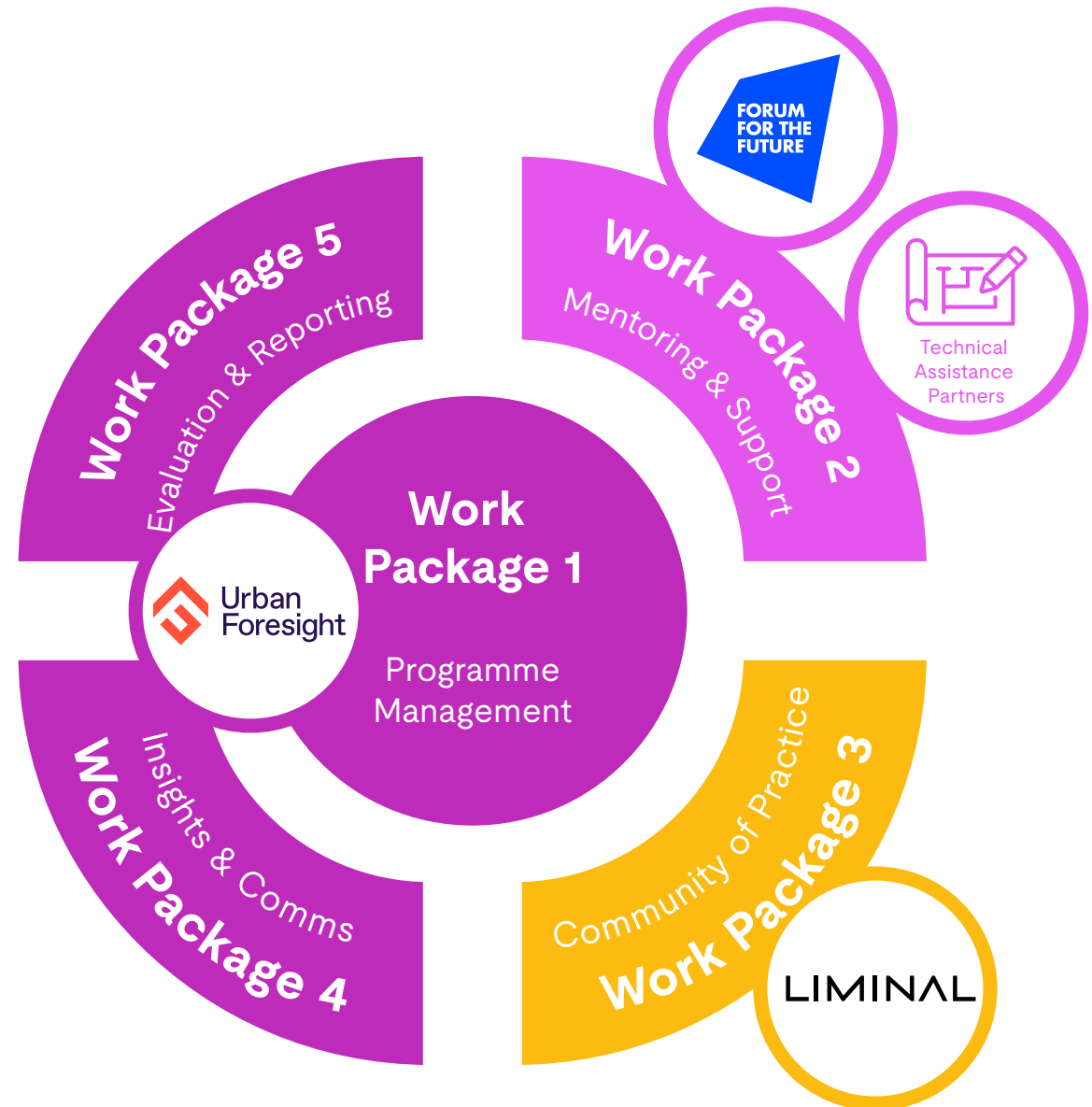


The delivery model

Future Ready was designed as an integrated model, not a set of separate activities.

Mentoring, peer learning, technical assistance, insights and action learning were intended to reinforce one another.

These activities helped participants learn from each other and from experts to build knowledge, skills and practice for delivery, reduce duplication and move more quickly towards outcomes.



The Future Ready service theory of change

| | Activities | Outputs |
|------------------------|---|---|
| Programme | Programme management, quality assurance and integration | Effective delivery of Future Ready functions and services |
| Academy | Mentoring and educational / training that inspires, informs and builds capacity | Knowledge, skills and practice baseline, mentoring, technical assistance, training / learning resources |
| Community | Engage cohorts through online / in- person events for knowledge exchange, connection, collaboration, peer support | Collaboration, peer-to-peer learning, inter- and intracohort problem solving, mechanisms for legacy |
| Insights | Capture, collate, analyse and disseminate programme learning, knowledge exchange | Insight and learning assets that enable and guide local authorities around net zero transition |
| Action learning | Monitor and convene active cycle of reflection and action for improvement | Agile and evidenced-based support model |

Outcomes and impact

| | Outcomes | Impact |
|-------------------------------------|---|---|
| Places in Future Ready | Critical knowledge base, skills and experience to accelerate local net zero Community outcomes, job creation | Cross sector collaboration, net zero project delivery impacts, solutions to net zero barriers |
| Places outside Future Ready | Recognition and adoption of high impact programme learnings and best practice nation-wide | Local authorities address and remove non-technical barriers to net zero transition, nation-wide |
| UKRI and other change-makers | Data and insights readily available and accessible, informing solutions to barriers, policy change and decision- making for net zero benefits | Step change in policy and programmes for place-based net zero strategy and delivery with (inter)national recognition and (inter)national collaborations |

Outcome objectives

The service aimed to achieve impact across different levels.



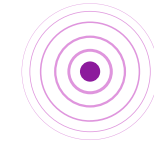
INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

We want to see change in knowledge, skills and practice of participating cohort individuals



PROJECT / PLACE LEVEL

We want to see participating local authorities and places progressing to achieve better local outcomes



INNOVATE UK NET ZERO SYSTEM LEVEL

We want to see wider influence and change beyond the Future Ready programme boundaries.

| Outcome and impact key performance indicators | INDIVIDUAL LEVEL | PROJECT / PLACE LEVEL | INNOVATE UK NET ZERO SYSTEM LEVEL |
|---|--|---|---|
| | <p>Change in knowledge, skills and practice.</p> <p>Knowledge applied</p> <p>Changes in behaviour</p> <p>Agency and confidence</p> | <p>Accelerating progress.</p> <p>Community and network effects.</p> <p>Rank of Future Ready elements</p> | <p>Ripples beyond Future Ready.</p> <p>Community and network effects.</p> <p>Communication, engagement and outreach</p> |
| Activities | <p>Community of practice meetups and gatherings, mentoring, system change training, project 'hacking', technical assistance training</p> | <p>Community of practice meetups and gatherings, peer-to-peer knowledge exchange and policy working groups, 'hackathon' place-specific technical assistance, insights</p> | <p>Community platform</p> <p>Annual events</p> <p>Technical assistance</p> <p>Shared tools and resources</p> |
| Assessment | <p>Knowledge, skills and practice assessment</p> <p>Mentor and other feedback loops, insight check-ins</p> | <p>Equality, diversity and inclusion survey</p> <p>Quarterly evaluation, insights focus groups</p> | <p>Outreach tracking</p> <p>Final evaluation</p> |

Delivery objectives

Different parts of the service were designed to do different jobs.

Together they helped participants learn from each other and from technical experts and apply that learning to live delivery challenges.

Community of practice

Building an active and engaged community of practice was essential to the success of the Programme.

Led by Liminal, a strong community helped sustain change and innovation over the long term.



Mentoring and technical assistance

Tailored mentoring and support helped participants reach their potential.

Forum for the Future led this workpackage, using their expertise in systems thinking and mentoring to build capacity alongside support provided directly by technical assistance partners.



Insights and communications

A critical element in supporting and developing a cohesive net zero innovation ecosystem and embedding knowledge and learning in ways that built capacity and capability.



Evaluation and action learning

Continuous improvement ensured by in-flight evaluation of effectiveness of activities and responses to weaknesses and challenges, learning from successes, and adapting to suit the needs of places.



What was achieved

Future Ready operation at scale across the cohort.

~400 members of the community



9
quarterly gatherings



29
monthly meetups



41
technical expert sessions



88%
satisfaction



80%
of places at in-person events

420
hours of one-to-one mentoring



327
platform members
(as of June 2025)



Figures shown here are cumulative delivery totals unless otherwise stated.

What participants valued most

Participants valued practical, relationship support.

The strongest feedback was consistent:

- In-person gatherings were the most valued activity
- Mentoring was highly valued
- Small-group discussion and live problem-solving became more important over time
- Peer learning and trusted exchange were more useful than high-volume content alone.

Participants placed the highest value on formats that combined peer exchange, trusted relationships and practical problem-solving.

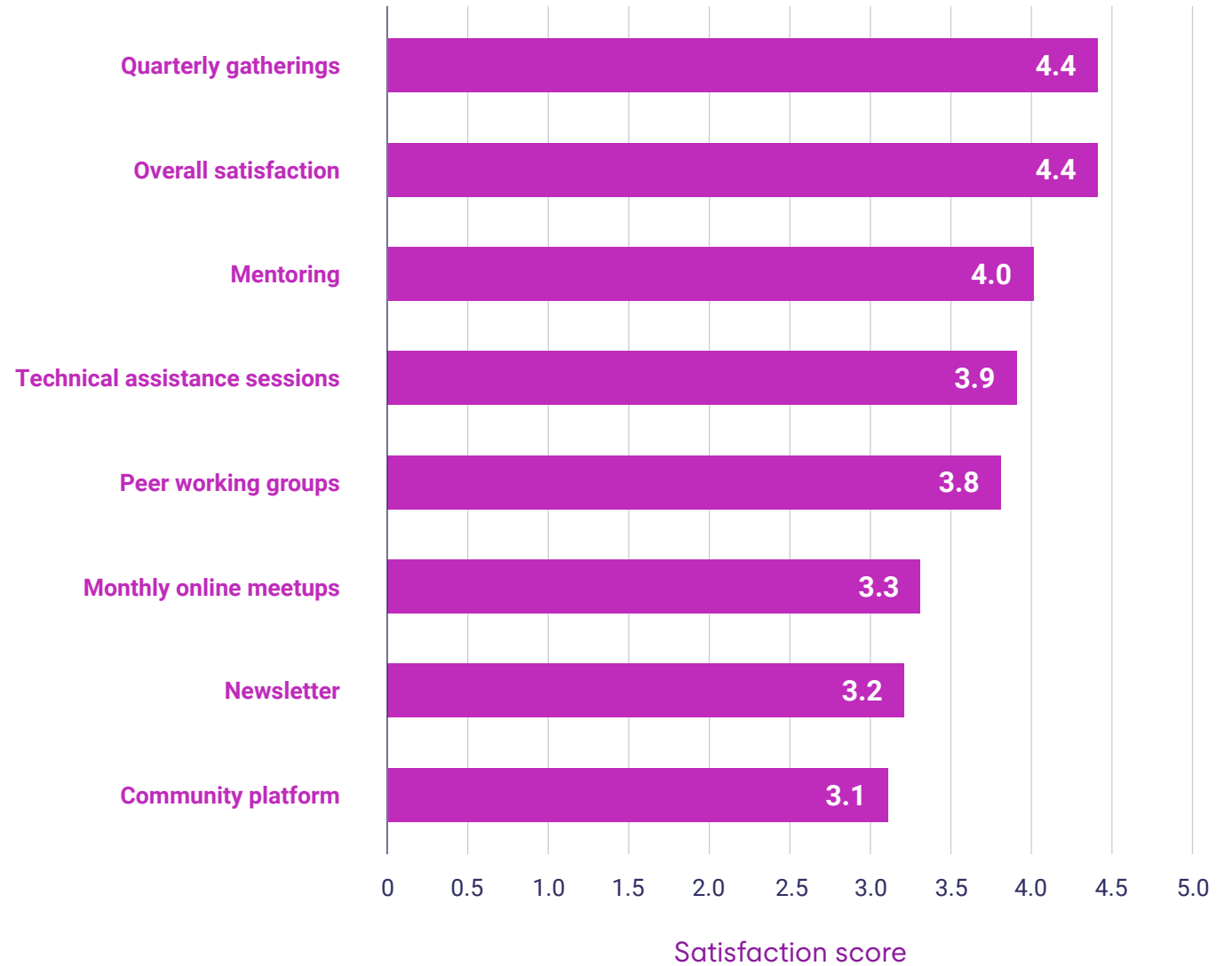
More content-led or passive formats were useful but rated lower.



How participants used the support

Support worked best when it helped officers apply learning to real delivery challenges.

Participants valued the service most when it gave them practical ideas, trusted peers and space to test approaches in context.



What Future Ready achieved in practice

The strongest reported effects were confidence, capability, collaboration and early changes in practice.

Future Ready helped officers apply learning to live delivery challenges and improve the conditions for delivery.



What participants valued

What participants said

Learning from other local authorities.

“ The most impactful has been the many opportunities that the [Net Zero Living Programme] community has had to come together to share experiences to work through challenges.”

Applying learning from Future Ready in day-to-day work.

“ Seeing how other places tackled similar barriers gave us a huge shortcut in our work.”

Increased confidence to influence, lead and act.

“ Seeing other councils’ examples gave me the language and confidence to convince internal colleagues.”

Projects or partnerships that would not have happened otherwise.

“ This work attracted attention both within and beyond my organisation.”

New collaborative links through the Programme.

“ I’ve been surprised by the willingness of places quite far away from each other to collaborate and help out where they can.”

“ Everyone is happy to share ideas and learning. Other local authorities share the same challenges and opportunities to work together.”

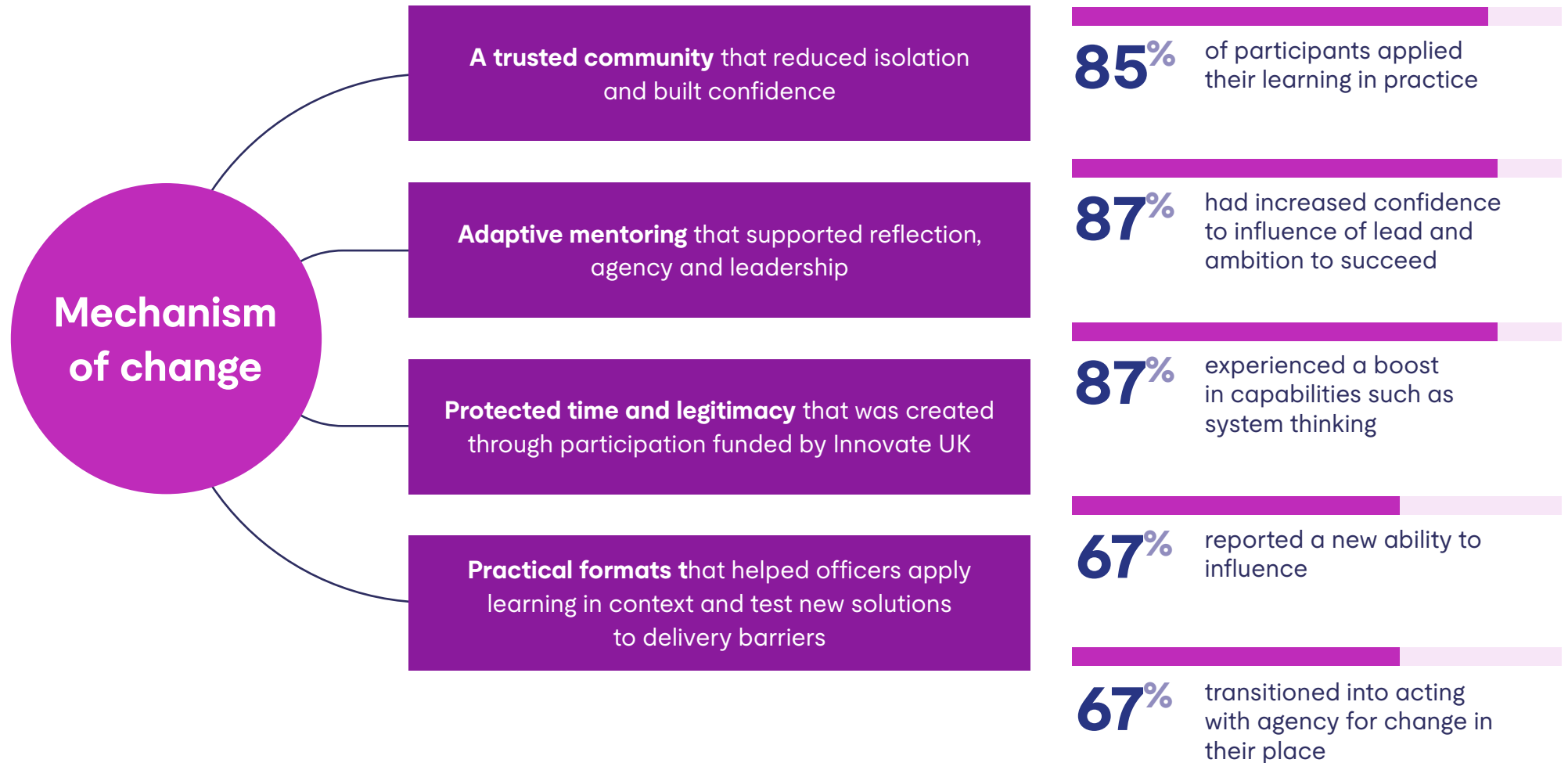
Emerging governance or investment structures with potential to endure beyond the Programme.

“ The most impactful thing is learning as a local authority how to speak the language of investors, to help attract funding for net zero projects.”

“ Establishing a regional climate investment plan and pipeline of projects will be a game-changing impact.”

Why the delivery model worked

Future Ready was distinctive because it combined repeated contact, trusted relationships and support tied to project delivery in real time.



Supporting places

What future programmes should stop, start and continue.

■ Stop

- Treating peer learning as secondary to expert input
- Spreading content across too many channels
- Bringing specialist support in too late in the Programme
- Assuming project officers alone can bring about change inside councils

▶ Start

- Designing support and external communications earlier in programme delivery
- Reaching wider internal and external audiences
- Producing more short, reusable tools for replication and scale
- Building in programme legacy planning and light-touch outcome tracking

▶▶ Continue

- Funding in-person convening and structured peer exchange
- Mentoring and training that build knowledge, skills, confidence and agency
- Small group applied formats linked to delivery questions in real time
- Action learning that helps activities adapt to changing circumstances

What Future Ready suggests about supporting places more broadly

Future Ready showed that support is part of how places deliver, not an optional add-on to project funding.

Its strongest value was in helping participants work through live delivery challenges with peers and partners they trusted.

Part 2 turns to the wider lessons about what helps places make progress, what remains difficult and where future support is still needed



PART 2

Key learnings to help places deliver



What the insight work package showed

The focus groups helped move from project-specific issues to shared learning about how to deliver more effectively.



Six recurring themes

The same issues appeared repeatedly across places in the Programme.

THEME #1

**Net zero as
the ‘how’**

THEME #2

**Governance
and leadership**

THEME #3

**Cross-departmental
and cross-
organisational
collaboration**

THEME #4

**Internal capacity
and supply chain
workforce capability**

THEME #5

**Data, tools and
shared infrastructure**

THEME #6

**Project pipelines,
practical models and
market confidence**

Theme #1

Net zero as the “how”

Places moved faster when net zero was used as the route to better local outcomes rather than the sole objective for delivery.

What the evidence showed

- Clearer pipelines gave internal teams more confidence about what came next
- Stronger sequencing and practical delivery models reduced uncertainty
- Better visibility helped partners, funders and markets see where they could add value

Implication

- Places made more progress when delivery was linked to strategy and backed up by a feasible delivery model

Theme #2

Governance and leadership matter

Projects moved faster when governance and leadership were part of delivery, not something to solve later.

What the evidence showed

- Progress slowed where governance was fragmented
- Unclear decision routes weakened momentum
- Strong examples treated leadership and delivery architecture as enabling conditions from the outset

Implication

- Projects made stronger progress when roles, decisions and accountability were designed into delivery from the start

Theme #3

Collaboration across council teams and delivery partners

Progress depended on stronger cross-departmental and cross-organisational collaboration.

What the evidence showed

- Places moved further when climate work was connected to finance, procurement, planning, housing and legal teams
- Collaboration reduced duplication and improved alignment
- Councils were more effective when acting as convenors and stewards across a place

Implication

- Collaboration was not an added benefit; it was how delivery happened

Theme #4

Capacity and capability

Internal capacity and wider workforce capability were major constraints to progress.

What the evidence showed

- Barriers were rarely only technical
- Confidence, organisational learning and cross-functional capability mattered
- Places struggled where delivery depended on capabilities not yet embedded in councils or their project partners

Implication

- Support worked best when it built capability across teams, not only expertise in individuals

Theme #5

Data, tools and shared infrastructure

Better use of data, tools and shared infrastructure helped strengthen decisions and continuity.

What the evidence showed

- Places did not need more data for its own sake
- Tools added most value where they supported prioritisation, coordination and action
- Shared infrastructure was useful when it helped teams align plans and maintain continuity through change

Implication

- The priority is not more information; it is making it usable across teams and decisions

Theme #6

Project pipelines, practical models and market confidence

Delivery improved when places could turn broad ambitions into visible pipelines, practical models and clearer asks of partners, funders and markets.

What the evidence showed

- Clearer pipelines gave internal teams more confidence about what came next
- Stronger sequencing and practical delivery models reduced uncertainty
- Better visibility helped partners, funders and markets see where they could add value

Implication

- Pipelines became more useful when they showed a credible route from ambition to delivery, including what needed to happen next, who needed to be involved, and what support or investment was required

What worked across places

Progress was strongest where the right delivery conditions were in place.

The most effective support reduced uncertainty and helped places move from broad ambition to practical action.

What worked well:

- Framing net zero through local priorities and co-benefits
- Practical support linked to live delivery questions
- Stronger internal alignment across council functions
- Trusted collaboration across teams and partners
- Visible routes from plans to implementation.



What has remained difficult across places

The hardest barriers to overcome were not just technical, they were organisational.

The main constraint was often not knowing what to do, but organising the conditions needed to do it.

Persistent challenges included:

- Unclear decision routes and fragmented ownership
- Stretched teams, staff turnover and short-term funding
- Limited reach beyond directly engaged officers
- Weak supply chains and unclear market signals
- Difficulty turning plans into funded, governed and operational projects.



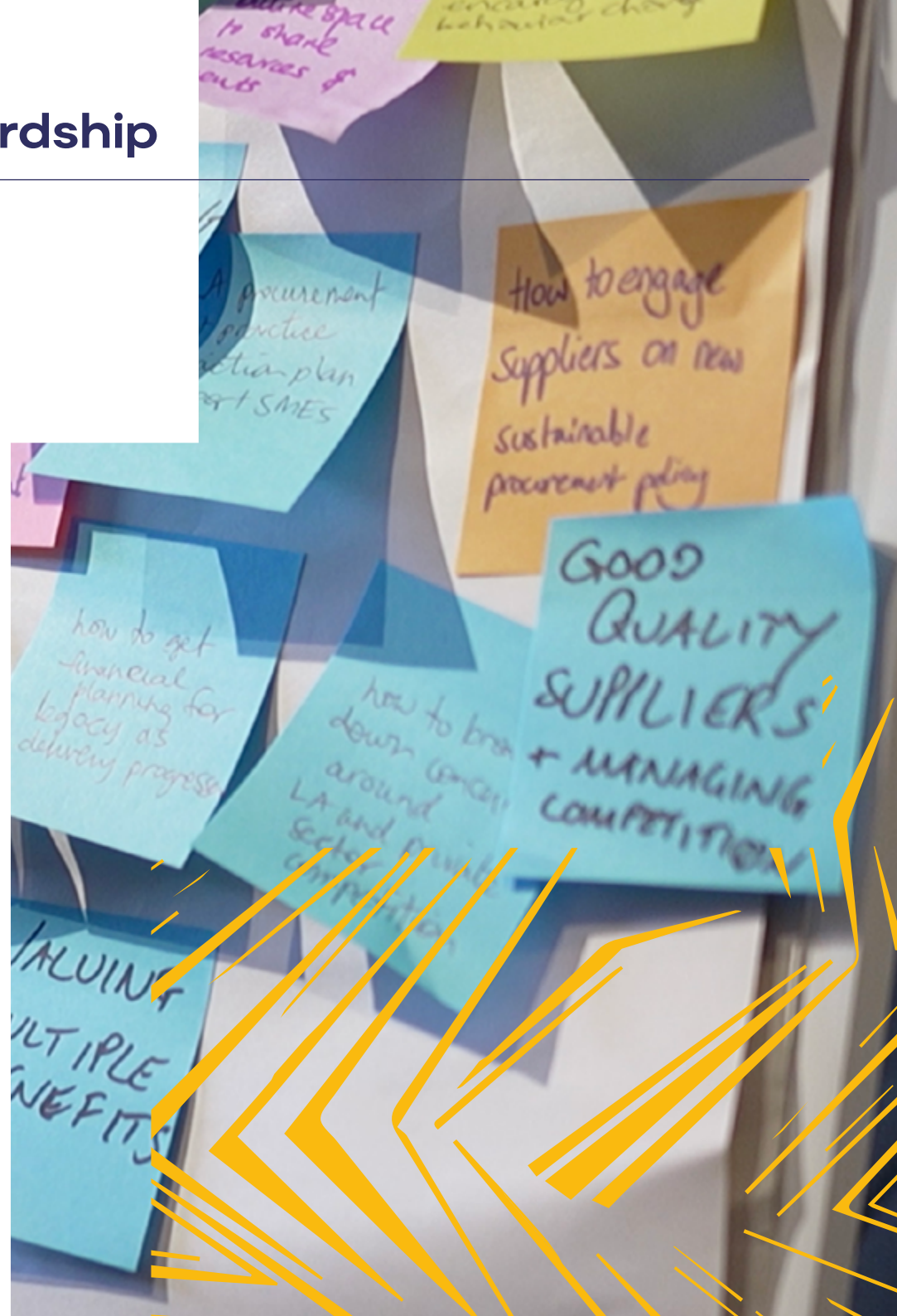
The move towards system stewardship

As Future Ready evolved, more participants described a shift beyond isolated project delivery towards a broader stewardship role.

The main constraint was often not knowing what to do, but organising the conditions needed to do it.

This included:

- Aligning and convening stakeholders
- Enabling collaboration across a place
- Creating the conditions for longer-term change
- Sustaining momentum beyond individual project milestones.



Where innovation is still needed

The next phase of innovation is likely to matter most where it improves delivery conditions.

These opportunities matter because they help local authorities reduce friction in delivery, strengthen internal and external alignment and create more reliable routes from local priorities to implementation.

Test new and different citizen visioning and engagement approaches, especially ones that empower people longer-term

Adopt flexible corporate architecture that broadens ownership across council services

Change how delivery is planned, organised and coordinated to create visible, prioritised pipeline of projects with clear ownership, governance, timing and coherence

Collaborate with businesses to link skills demand to workforce development and stimulate the skills training market

Make information usable across teams and through organisational change using data tools and platforms and build shared infrastructure for better decision-making

Design place-based support that targets live delivery challenges, combines practical tools with trusted relationships, and gives time and confidence for the application of learning and permission to fail

Key levers for future programmes

Five enablers stand out.

Progress depended less on any single intervention than on whether places could create these conditions together.



What this means for future programmes

Support is most effective when it strengthens delivery conditions, not simply activity levels.

Future place-based support is more likely to translate learning into delivery improvements when it:

- Invests in capability and convening, not just projects
- Codifies and embeds learning into delivery systems
- Makes peer support part of delivery infrastructure
- Bridges the gap between pilots and delivery-ready propositions
- Designs for inclusion, continuity and changing local conditions.



Reflections

Future Ready shows that support is part of how places deliver, not an optional add-on to project funding.

Local authorities made faster and more durable progress when they had practical support, protected time, trusted peers and space to work through live delivery challenges.

Future support will have greatest value where it helps places reduce friction, strengthen capability and create more reliable routes from local ambition to implementation.



How this report relates to other Net Zero Living Programme assets

This report sits alongside a wider set of Net Zero Living Programme publications.

The Future Ready Annual Reports for 2024 and 2025 captured learning as it emerged during delivery.

They show which issues persisted across cohorts, where support had to adapt, and which barriers and opportunities proved most significant in practice.

Other service outputs, including reports on mentoring, technical assistance, peer exchange and action learning, played different roles. Some surfaced problems. Some helped participants work through challenges. Some translated learning into reusable formats.

Together, they helped places test ideas, reduce duplication, and build a more practical understanding of what helps move from ambition into delivery.

This final report has a different role. It does not replace the wider library of programme outputs or repeat their detailed guidance.

Its purpose is to draw together the strongest cross-cutting lessons from the Future Ready service and wider support offer, and to show what they imply for future programme design.



Where to find out more

Creating Better Places: Practical learnings from Innovate UK's Net Zero Living Programme.

Find out more about practical learning from the Programme:

- The Creating Better Places handbook series
- Perspectives from places
- Other programme outputs and resources

Net Zero Living Programme resources are available via [Innovate UK Business Connect](#) and [Net Zero Go](#).

Scan or click the QR code for further information.



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urbanforesight.com

