

When he's not busy with his desk job, Dr Andrea Berardi is often found mucking out hen houses and taming unruly allotments. He is also one half of a novel partnership team between an academic institution and a local council.

In 2022, the senior environmental lecturer from the Open University partnered up with Spelthorne Borough Council to try and bring the community into the council's carbon cutting plans.

Together, the partners set wheels in motion for an ambitious food-growing project – one that is repurposing derelict land behind the train station in the town of Staines.

Spelthorne's is a challenge faced by many areas across the country: how to get residents truly invested in the council's climate change initiatives.

"We are not going to get to net zero without taking communities with us," reflected Spelthorne's then Climate Change Officer, Jilly Mowbray.

Yet they were acutely aware of cases where well-intentioned measures had not delivered the desired impact and had even sparked backlash from some members of the public.

Thankfully, the council had a powerful ally – a local climate action group – who could help them reach out to different groups in the community. It was that group, Talking Tree, that introduced council officers to Dr Berardi, whose professional expertise includes facilitating grassroots sustainability acts.

Together, the council-community-academic trio entered a capacity-building, grant-funded scheme called

A growth mindset

Cutting carbon and nurturing community



Freya Roberts is Project Manager at University College London's Climate Action Unit

the Net Zero Innovation Programme, run by the LGA a group of climate-action experts from University College London (UCL). The unit designs and delivers workshops to equip people with skills for partnership working.

Given the importance of getting the community's buy-in, the Spelthorne partnership decided to move away from top-down policy-making. Instead, its approach was to integrate the local community into the decision-making process from the outset.

It planned a scheme where local people suggest, evaluate and take the lead on implementing climate actions.

The 'Community-led Climate Initiative' began in January 2023 with a series of workshops. These partnered up around 40 members of the public with people from the council, including its climate change officer, biodiversity

officer, and a senior council leader.

By seating these individuals together at tables, side by side, the initiative enabled the individuals to exchange ideas over a cup of tea.

A major success was that participants were able to come up with desirable and realistic actions: ones that met the public's wants, but that were also feasible for the council to help deliver.

"Having council officers in spaces where they could engage directly was really crucial – it meant residents could appreciate the limits of what the authority could do," noted Mowbray.

The structured workshops, which were professionally facilitated, surfaced several target areas where the community wanted to see improvements. This included food growing, rewilding, rainwater harvesting, reducing air pollution, and increasing active travel.

Participants then agreed on a first, achievable action for the Spelthorne initiative. "We want to do something that will be an initiator; something that will attract more interest", said one local resident at the workshops. "We can do one thing and, if that works, do the next – it's not all or nothing in terms of size or time," responded another.

That one, first achievable action was to develop a community space beside the train tracks in Staines. The group was given access to a plot of derelict land by South Western Railway. The builders' merchants chain Jewsons gifted the initiative timber to construct planters, and volunteers from the group 'Incredible Edible Spelthorne' turned up to prepare the ground for cultivation.

Since then, plenty more action has followed.

The initiative has expanded its food-growing and wildflower and tree-planting activities into





two local schools. It has also been supporting community members to influence Spelthorne Borough Council's policies and actions, and established a network of volunteers to protect, improve and promote green spaces all across Spelthorne.

Beyond the obvious perks of residents having access to a new green space, free food and a sense of community, the initiative yielded other wider benefits.

For example, it provided the council with knowledge about the sorts of initiatives that had broad public support. This, in turn, meant the community was helping to shape future decision-making.

Additionally, for the council, it helped it deploy limited resources as effectively as possible.

The project's partners identified several ingredients to their success, including:

- **neutral, convenient meeting places** – Talking Tree, based on Staines high street, provided the

community and councils with a neutral, welcoming physical space to hold workshops.

- **access to the community** – the extensive networks and relationships of trust that Talking Tree had already cultivated in the local community helped maximise engagement.
- **a role for younger people** – six young people were trained to film and document the community deliberations. Their involvement helped the council engage across generations (and, as a co-benefit, created outputs to share with policy-makers).
- **covering the costs** – some of the grant funding the Spelthorne project received was set aside to cover participant expenses, helping ensure people on lower incomes were not excluded.

i See www.ucl.ac.uk/climate-action-unit to find out more about the work of **UCL's Climate Action Unit**

Resources for councils

Local leaders can improve their knowledge of climate change and wider environmental sustainability issues at an LGA sustainability masterclass on 16 July. This virtual event will hear about the new carbon literacy accredited training courses that the LGA has been delivering to local authority councillors and members from across England. See www.local.gov.uk/events to book your place.

The LGA's new Sustainability Hub has a number of resources to help councils reach their carbon-reduction and adaptation targets (see www.local.gov.uk/sustainability-hub).

From the hub, you can also subscribe to the LGA's sustainability bulletin, view our searchable database of sustainability and climate change case studies, and join the climate emergency knowledge hub – where councils and partners who have declared a climate emergency, or made any other type of commitment to reduce carbon and improve the environment, share information and experiences.

These support resources are delivered by the LGA, funded by and in partnership with the Crown Commercial Service.

Q&A with Dr Andrea Berardi, The Open University

What advice would you give to other regions wanting to do something similar?

Our approach is easily replicable in other areas if the right attitude and facilitation skills are available. We were successful because all the parties involved were genuine in their intent to listen to community members. But the most important ingredient was that we had an established community hub with excellent community networks. It gave participants confidence that they would be listened to and that someone would continue to champion whatever emerged from the project in the long term.

Every project encounters challenges: tell us about one and how you tackled it?

We initially had to manage a few participants who were using the workshop to air their frustrations with the council. We made it clear that we wanted a cultural shift in the relationship that Spelthorne Borough Council has with its residents. Rather than thinking of the council as a place you go to complain, we instead made clear we wanted it to be seen as a place to go to make things happen through community initiatives.

What factors helped your partnership function well?

Fundamentally, I think the individuals from each organisation just got on very well together. It was a group of genuinely nice, positive, can-do kind of people. Regular meetings gave us momentum and helped us to develop a team spirit – which really sustained us, given the amount of community engagement required to make this project a success.