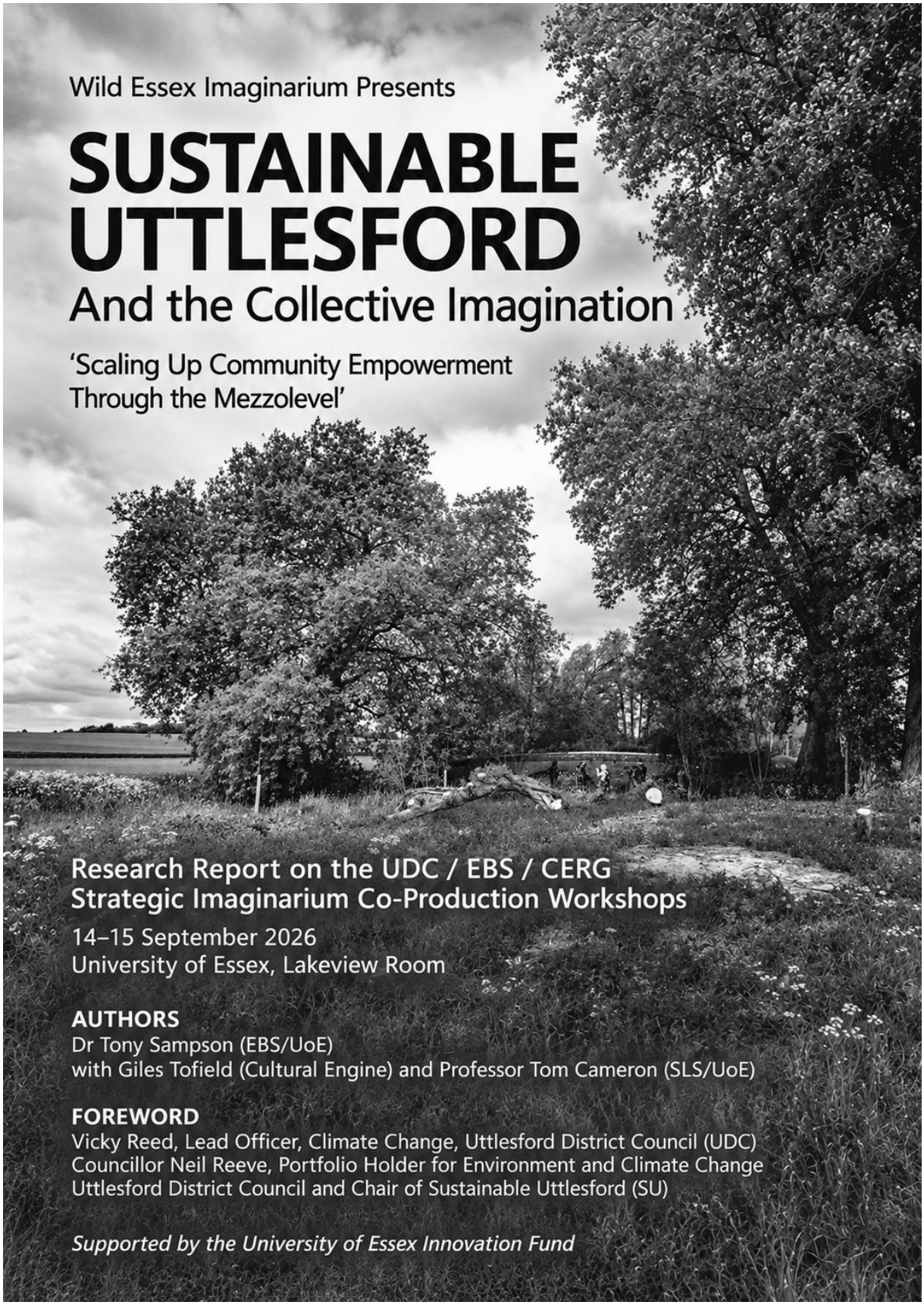

Wild Essex Imaginarium Presents
SUSTAINABLE UTTLESFORD
And the Collective Imagination
'Scaling Up Community Empowerment Through the Mezzolevel'
Research Report on the UDC / EBS / CERG Strategic Imaginarium Co-Production Workshops
14–15 September 2026
University of Essex, Lakeview Room
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FOREWORD
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Councillor Neil Reeve, Portfolio Holder for Environment and Climate Change Uttlesford District Council and Chair of Sustainable Uttlesford (SU)
Supported by the University of Essex Innovation Fund



Figure 1: Photo by Andy Baz Haynes

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Foreword

Vicky Reed (Uttlesford District Council)

Councillor Neil Reeve (Uttlesford District Council and Sustainable Uttlesford)

Uttlesford is a thriving rural district in north-west Essex, encompassing four historic market towns and around 100 villages and hamlets. Situated between London and Cambridge and home to London Stansted Airport, it combines a robust economy with beautiful landscapes, rich heritage and vibrant communities. Uttlesford is a place where nature, enterprise and innovation flourish together. Yet, like communities across the country, we face significant challenges associated with climate change, biodiversity loss, energy security and the need to build resilience in an increasingly uncertain world.

Meeting these challenges requires more than policy alone. It requires collaboration, innovation and the active participation of people and organisations across the district. Above all, it requires strong partnerships that can connect strategic ambitions with practical action and empower local people to help shape the future of the places they care about.

Since its establishment through the support of Uttlesford District Council and the Zero Carbon Communities programme, Sustainable Uttlesford has become an important catalyst for sustainability action across the district. Through community engagement, partnership building and project development, it has evolved from a funded initiative into a respected network working towards a shared vision of a more sustainable and resilient Uttlesford.

This report marks an important milestone in that journey.

Drawing on a series of workshops involving representatives from the public, private, voluntary, academic and community sectors, it reflects on achievements to date while exploring the future role that Sustainable Uttlesford can play in a rapidly changing environmental, social and institutional landscape.

A central message emerging from the report is the importance of community leadership. Lasting change happens when local people are empowered to shape their futures and when organisations can connect ideas, resources and opportunities. The report identifies a growing role for Sustainable Uttlesford in the vital space between policy and community action. Here, it can help translate ambition into delivery, connecting residents, community groups, parish councils, businesses, educational institutions and public bodies around shared goals.

The workshops also highlighted that sustainability is not simply a technical challenge. It is deeply connected to people's relationships with the places they inhabit. Strong emotional connections to landscapes, villages, towns and ecosystems can inspire stewardship, participation and long-term commitment. Uttlesford's landscapes and communities are therefore not only assets to be protected, but foundations upon which a thriving future can be built.

Another powerful theme was the role of collective imagination. Communities are more likely to act when they can share positive visions of the future. Imagination helps people move beyond reacting to challenges and towards creating places that are more resilient and more connected with nature. Storytelling, creativity and participation therefore have an important role in building confidence, agency and optimism alongside practical action.

This report arrives at a time of significant change within local government, environmental policy and funding arrangements. While such transitions bring challenges, they also create opportunities to strengthen partnerships, rethink existing models and develop new approaches capable of delivering lasting impact. The recommendations set out a framework through which Sustainable Uttlesford can continue to evolve as an independent, resilient and influential organisation supporting nature recovery, climate action and community wellbeing across the district.

We are encouraged by the ambition, creativity and commitment reflected throughout this report and thank all those who contributed their time, expertise and insight to the workshops and to the wider work of Sustainable Uttlesford. Together, through partnership, imagination and a shared commitment to place, we have an opportunity to build a more resilient, sustainable and nature-rich Uttlesford for current and future generations.

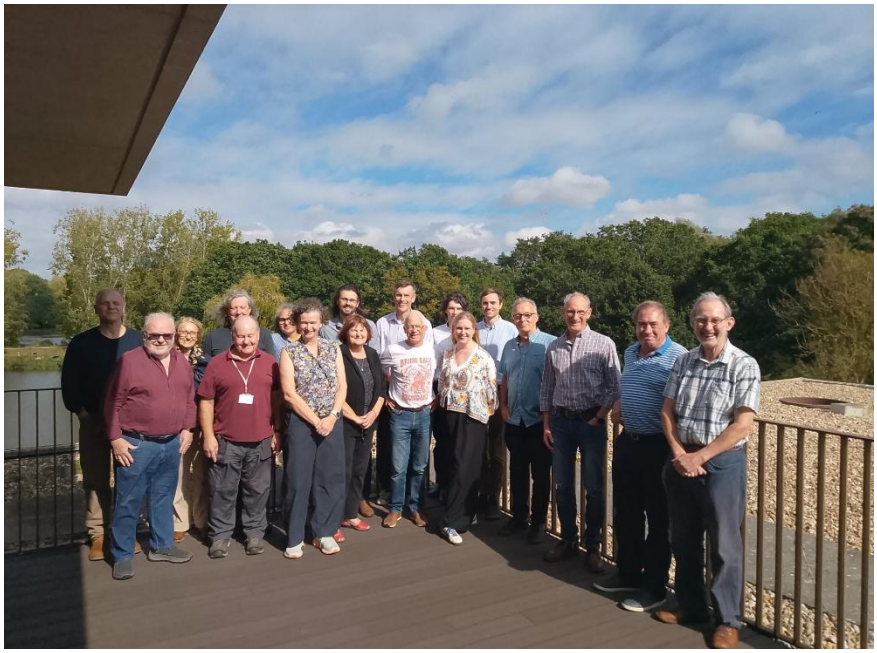


Figure 2: Workshop Photo

1. Executive Summary

Strategic Conclusions and Recommendations

Supported by the University of Essex's Innovation Fund, the Sustainable Uttlesford (SU) strategic workshops brought together regional partners from Uttlesford District Council (UDC), Sustainable Uttlesford, the University of Essex Business School (EBS), the Cultural Engine Research Group (CERG) and the University of Essex's School of Life Sciences, alongside contributors from Essex County Council and Essex Wildlife Trust (see Appendix One for a full list of participants).

Held over two days, the workshops examined how Sustainable Uttlesford can move beyond its current UDC seed-funded phase towards a more independent, sustainable and strategically connected organisation. Discussions were structured around four interconnected questions:

1. Can you imagine the future of Sustainable Uttlesford?
2. How should Sustainable Uttlesford be organised and funded?
3. What distinctive role can Sustainable Uttlesford play in biodiversity and nature recovery?
4. How can Sustainable Uttlesford build the partnerships, participation and community reach necessary to deliver its ambitions?

Based on EBS and CERG research, a central proposition running through the workshops was that Sustainable Uttlesford can operate effectively at the **mezzo-level**: the space between high-level policy and strategy on the one hand, and the hyper-local activities of communities, organisations and individual citizens on the other. The mezzo-level is understood here not simply as an organisational tier, but as an organisational principle for connecting local imagination, policy, resources and expertise to realise community empowerment.

The workshops therefore explored how Sustainable Uttlesford might become an enabling infrastructure for local sustainability action: creating the conditions through which locally generated ideas can become viable projects; translating policy into practical opportunities; connecting communities with resources and expertise; and building partnerships across institutional boundaries.

The two-day process generated a framework of short-term and medium-term actions intended to secure the long-term sustainability of Sustainable Uttlesford itself, while also laying the foundations for supporting wider nature recovery, community energy and low-carbon initiatives across the district.

Key Findings

A high degree of consensus emerged across all four workshops that Sustainable Uttlesford has reached an important transition point in its development. Originally established through support from Uttlesford District Council and catalysed through the Zero Carbon

Communities Fund, SU has successfully built credibility, developed strong partnerships and achieved growing recognition across the district.

However, participants recognised that changing governance arrangements, evolving public policy priorities and increasing funding uncertainty now require the organisation to evolve from a largely volunteer-led and council-supported initiative into a more independent, resilient and strategically capable organisation.

Across all discussions, a common conclusion emerged: Sustainable Uttlesford's greatest value may not lie in directly delivering projects itself, but in acting as an enabling organisation operating at the mezzo-level between policy and community action.

The workshops therefore proposed that Sustainable Uttlesford should increasingly position itself as:

A District-Wide Enabling Infrastructure for Sustainability, Nature Recovery and Community Resilience

In practical terms, this means creating the conditions through which residents, community groups, parish councils, schools, businesses, landowners and public organisations can access the resources, expertise, funding, evidence and partnerships required to deliver meaningful local action.

Participants repeatedly identified a gap between strategic ambitions and local delivery. National biodiversity targets, Local Nature Recovery Strategies, net-zero commitments and climate resilience frameworks all depend upon implementation at local levels. Equally, community organisations often possess significant commitment, local knowledge and enthusiasm but lack the capacity, funding, technical support and strategic connectivity necessary to translate aspirations into sustained action.

The workshops suggest that Sustainable Uttlesford is uniquely positioned to occupy this intermediary role. Rather than duplicating the work of existing organisations, SU can provide coordination, translation, amplification and support across the wider sustainability ecosystem.

Building Organisational Resilience

One of the strongest themes emerging from the workshops was the need for greater organisational resilience. Local government reorganisation, financial pressures on public institutions, evolving responsibilities within Essex County Council and changing national funding arrangements all point towards a future in which communities and local partnerships will require greater independence and capacity.

Importantly, participants viewed independence not as separation from public bodies, but as organisational maturity. A resilient Sustainable Uttlesford would remain a trusted partner of local authorities, universities, environmental organisations and community groups while developing its own governance, identity and funding base.

The workshops therefore supported the development of an organisational model characterised by:

- Independent governance.
- Strong strategic partnerships.
- Professional staffing and leadership capacity.
- Volunteer participation and community ownership.
- Multiple income and funding streams.
- Robust monitoring, learning and evidence systems.
- Strong communications and engagement capabilities.

Participants consistently identified dedicated staff capacity as the single most important requirement for the next phase of development. While governance structures and legal models remain important, the transition will depend largely upon SU's ability to secure the people, skills and resources required to lead organisational development, partnership building and programme delivery.

Nature Recovery, Climate Action and Community Wellbeing

The biodiversity workshops identified a significant opportunity for Sustainable Uttlesford to become a leading local partner in delivering the Essex Local Nature Recovery Strategy. Participants envisaged a role focused less on direct ecological delivery and more on connecting communities, supporting parish-level action, facilitating citizen science, improving local nature literacy and helping translate strategic environmental objectives into measurable local outcomes.

A notable feature of the discussions was the extent to which environmental action was linked to broader social and economic outcomes. Climate action, biodiversity recovery, community energy and environmental stewardship were consistently viewed not as isolated objectives, but as contributors to healthier communities, stronger local economies, improved wellbeing, enhanced civic participation and greater resilience.

Imagination, Culture and Emotional Connection to Place

The workshops also highlighted the importance of imagination, storytelling and emotional connection to place as essential components of sustainable development.

Participants argued that successful environmental action requires more than technical solutions and policy frameworks. Communities must be able to imagine positive futures for the places they inhabit and develop meaningful connections with those futures. A recurring theme throughout the discussions was that belonging, identity and stewardship are critical foundations for long-term environmental action.

Emerging initiatives such as the River's Return documentary theme of collective imagination, demonstrate how creativity, culture and emotional engagement can help communities participate more effectively in shaping the future of their landscapes and settlements. In this sense, cultural activity was understood not as an optional addition to

sustainability work, but as part of the infrastructure through which sustainable futures can be created.

The Five Functions of Sustainable Uttlesford

Taken together, the workshops suggest that Sustainable Uttlesford's future role can be understood through five interconnected functions:

Connect

Bring together communities, parish councils, businesses, landowners, schools, public bodies, funders and specialist organisations to build relationships, partnerships and opportunities.

Enable

Provide access to funding, expertise, advice, training, evidence and organisational support that enables others to deliver projects and programmes.

Amplify

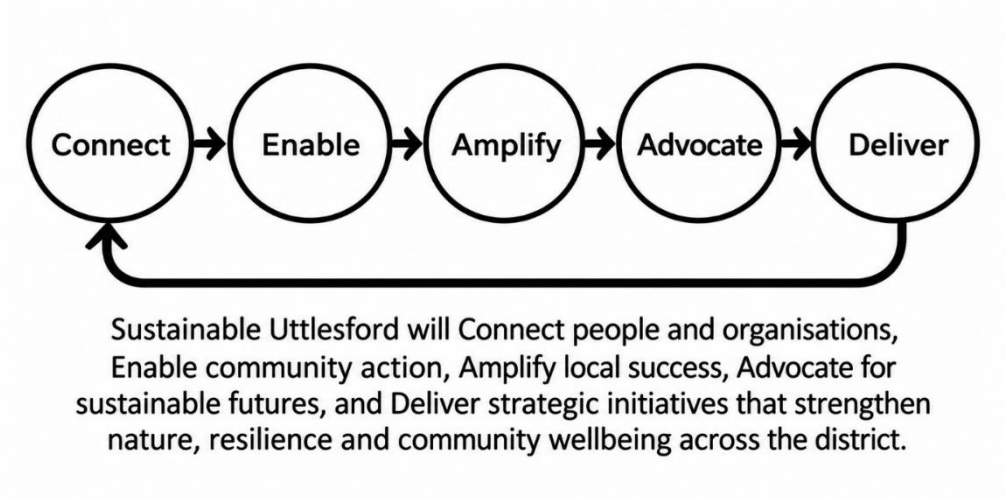
Celebrate, communicate and strengthen existing activity, increasing visibility, sharing learning and promoting local leadership across the district.

Advocate

Act as a trusted voice for nature recovery, climate action and community resilience, helping shape policy, attract resources and represent community interests.

Deliver

Lead projects and programmes where SU can add distinctive value through coordination, engagement, innovation, partnership management and evidence generation.



Strategic Conclusion

The principal conclusion of this report is that Sustainable Uttlesford should move confidently towards becoming an independent, professionally supported and strategically connected mezzo-level organisation.

Its primary role should be to act as enabling infrastructure for sustainability, nature recovery and community resilience across the district, helping bridge the gap between policy ambitions and local action while fostering stronger partnerships, wider participation and greater community capacity.

If successfully developed, Sustainable Uttlesford has the potential to become a recognised district-wide platform for community-led sustainability action and a leading example of how local leadership, collective imagination, emotional connection to place and cross-sector collaboration can be combined to deliver meaningful environmental, social and economic outcomes.

The challenge for the next twelve months is not to define additional ambitions, but to establish the governance arrangements, partnerships, organisational capacity and funding mechanisms required to translate existing ambitions into long-term and measurable impact.

2. Background and Purpose

Sustainable Uttlesford has emerged within a wider landscape of climate, biodiversity, community energy and local sustainability initiatives, with impetus provided through Uttlesford District Council's Zero Carbon Communities Fund. The current constitution states:

> *The core purpose of SU will be to encourage, motivate and support the village, town and other local community sustainability groups, through providing them with expertise, advice, financial and other support, as available, thus improving their capacity to interact positively with their local communities, in the pursuit of our common sustainability objectives. It is likely that the purpose will evolve, as SU operates and matures… to contribute to Uttlesford District Council's aim to reach net-zero carbon emissions by 2030 and to protecting and enhancing our local biodiversity.*[1]

The September workshops were designed to consider reflection on this purpose, and how to evolve to a new strategic and operational context.

[1] Sustainable Uttlesford original constitution document.

The central challenge was therefore not simply to identify additional projects, but to ask participants to imagine what *organisational infrastructure* is required to enable Sustainable Uttlesford to operate at greater scale and with greater independence.

This requires consideration of imagination-led vision, which then leads to the consideration of identity, governance, funding, biodiversity, monitoring, communications, stakeholder relationships and community participation as parts of a connected system for the Uttlesford District.

3. Introduction: Framing the Mezzolevel

The workshops opened with a discussion of the mezzolevel as an organisational principle, introduced by Dr Tony Sampson (EBS/CERG) and Giles Tofield (CERG).

The concept responds to a recurring problem in the delivery of environmental policy. Policy is often formulated at a relatively high level, while implementation is often (although not always) delivered through highly localised (hyper-local) community activity. There can be therefore a missing or *underdeveloped* space between policy ambition and community action.

Rather than simply acting as another delivery organisation, SU can play a pivotal intermediary role in what can be understood as the *mezzolevel*.

Sustainable Uttlesford has the potential to occupy a Mezzolevel space. The Mezzo provides a means of connecting the strategic scale of local and national policy with the hyper-local scale at which people actually experience and act upon environmental change.

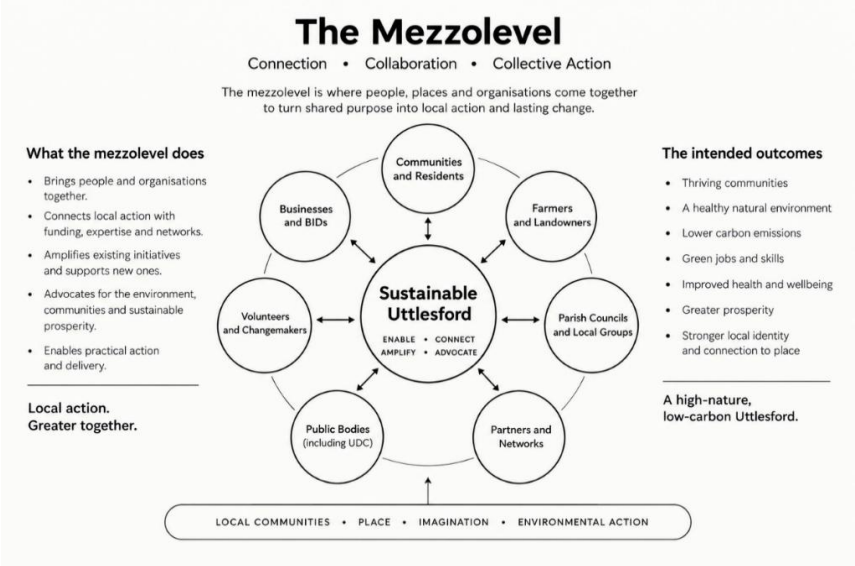


Figure 3: Mezzo Diagram

3.1 Emotional Geography

The workshop approach to community empowerment at the mezzolevel also draws on EBS and CERG's research on *emotional geographies*. This current work with SU highlights how people's emotional attachment to, knowledge of and care for local places can support and leverage collective participation and action. This is reflected in the workshops' emphasis on place, pride, local knowledge and meaningful participation as foundations for nature recovery.[2] It is also reflected in the UDC funded documentary film Rivers Return.[3]

[2] Sampson, T. (2025), "Leveraging emotional geographies".
[3] Information about the film on UDC website https://www.uttlesford.gov.uk/article/10268/Behind-the-scenes-of-River-s-Return-New-documentary-showcases-community-action-for-Uttlesford-s-rivers



*Figure 4: Rivers Return Poster: Photo by **Andy Baz Haynes***

3.2 Imagination as enabling infrastructure

The workshop further situated the development of an organisational model within a broader discussion of imagination as infrastructure. In a world of demanding workloads, where time and capacity to imagine are increasingly squeezed out, the ability to envision alternative futures can itself become a scarce resource. As Elise Boulding observes: "if one is mentally out of breath all the time from dealing with the present, there is no energy left for imagining the future."[4]

However, as Rutger Bregman argues, the "inability to imagine a world in which things are different is evidence only of a poor imagination, not of the impossibility of change."[5]

Similar to Rob Hopkins' concept we see imagination as providing "enabling infrastructures" - a practical bridge between imagination and implementation.[6] Therefore, we contend that the challenge for public bodies and partner organisations is not simply to encourage communities to imagine different futures, but to provide the tools, policies, support and funding that enable those futures to be pursued.

For Sustainable Uttlesford, this framing suggests a potentially distinctive role: turning collective imagination into organisational, social and environmental capacity and empowering local action.

[4] Elise Boulding cited on https://www.bbc.co.uk/future/article/20190109-the-perils-of-short-termism-civilisations-greatest-threat
[5] Bregman, R. (2017) *Utopia for Realists: And How We Can Get There*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing
[6] Hopkins, R., 2025. *How to Fall in Love with the Future: A Time Traveller's Guide to Changing the World*. London: Chelsea Green Publishing

4. Current State: Net Zero & Community Energy: Chaired by Vicky Reed (UDC) and Tom Day, Head of Energy and Low Carbon (ECC).

This contextual session provided focused snapshots of where we are now – key policy drivers, local opportunities, and how SU fits into the wider community energy landscape.

The discussion situated Sustainable Uttlesford within the wider community energy and net-zero landscape, identifying:

4.1 Discussion Summary

UDC Perspective

Vicky Reed noted the importance of the current UDC position and its continuing role in providing a *local voice and institutional support* for sustainability initiatives.

UDC declared a climate emergency in July 2019 and followed this up by setting aside £1m to support local initiatives through the Zero Carbon Communities Fund.

The discussion also considered the implications of the recently 'paused' process of Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) proposals. This has introduced a degree of political and institutional uncertainty around the future configuration of local government and the responsibilities of individual authorities.

However, this uncertainty does not remove the urgency of action on climate and biodiversity. The Net Zero and Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) agendas provide continuing policy drivers, with important regional and national frameworks remaining in place.

Against this background, the discussion emphasised the importance of maintaining momentum and continuing to work to a six-month timeframe, rather than allowing wider political uncertainty to delay organisational development.

Essex County Council Perspective

Tom Day (Head of Energy and Low Carbon) outlined the contrasting opportunities and pressures facing Essex County Council (ECC).

Over the last few years ECC has developed a successful programme of support for communities, particularly around net zero, retrofit and community energy. This provides an established foundation of expertise and experience from which local initiatives such as Sustainable Uttlesford can potentially benefit.

There is also growing national support for community-owned power and energy generation, creating potential opportunities for locally owned energy projects. However, the political context at ECC has changed significantly. The shift in political control and the resulting requirement to make substantial savings/cuts has placed pressure on the council's net-zero programme. A reported £3 million reduction in net-zero spending is contributing to a wider restructuring of the service. ECC have also announced they are withdrawing support from the Essex Climate Action Commission. This raises questions about the future availability of direct ECC support and the implications of an ECC exit and transition to a new system. The current plan is for a new Essex-focused community organisation to be established (supported by remaining ECC funds) that can support local coordination, advice, guidance and collaboration.

A central question emerging from the discussion was: What does the community energy landscape look like if ECC is no longer able to provide the same level of support? One response is the development of a more distributed hub model for community energy projects, in which local organisations and initiatives can connect with one another, share expertise and access alternative sources of support. The recently announced funding from GB Energy to support local community energy projects (‘people’s power’) provides an immediate opportunity.

4.2 Implications for Sustainable Uttlesford

The discussion revealed a parallel between need to create a new system in relation to the changing ECC situation and Sustainable Uttlesford's own organisational development. SU is considering how it can develop beyond its initial UDC-supported phase and establish a more independent and sustainable organisational model. The situation creates an opportunity to consider *new forms of distributed capacity.* This reinforces the potential value of Sustainable Uttlesford as a mezzolevel organisation: connecting communities, public bodies, funding opportunities, technical expertise and projects without being wholly dependent upon any one institutional actor.

The changing landscape therefore strengthens the case for SU to develop:

- stronger relationships across local and regional institutions, and sufficient organisational capacity to operate independently, retaining productive relationships with UDC, ECC, other strategic organisations
- greater community oversight, interest, participation (and ownership where relevant)
- a hub or network function for community energy and sustainability initiatives
- a diversified funding model
- links to emerging national programmes such as GB Energy and the ability to support local groups to take action and secure funding

It is also important for SU to prepare effectively for devolution across Greater Essex and a potential renewed local government reorganisation programme, ensuring that advocacy for continued investment in Uttlesford, recognition of progress made through UDC and at a hyper-local level, and support/coordination for local groups and organisations in engaging effectively with new structures and systems.

Key Implication

The immediate challenge is to use the next six months to prepare for a potentially more fragmented institutional landscape.

The strategic question for Sustainable Uttlesford is consequently not simply how to replace lost public-sector support, but how to build an organisation capable of connecting the resources, expertise and opportunities that remain distributed across the system (both locally and Essex-wide).

5. Workshop 1: Vision, Structure and the Roadmap to Standalone Organisation

Long-Term Vision

The first workshop began by asking participants to imagine a long-term vision for Sustainable Uttlesford (SU) and the contribution it could make to a more sustainable and resilient district. The discussion connected *nature, community, energy, jobs, skills and prosperity*, recognising that environmental action has economic, social, health and community benefits as well as ecological ones.

Key areas identified included:

- The value of low carbon energy programmes to the community
- The Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) as an important strategic framework.
- Building a network of local groups.
- Advocacy and communications.
- Access to nature for communities.
- The relationship between prosperity and health.
- The potential role of a facilitator connecting leaders with those doing the work.
- An "elastic" geographical boundary, initially focused on Uttlesford but capable of growing beyond the district.
- The potential involvement of businesses.

There was a strong emphasis on understanding environmental action as something that can contribute to *community prosperity, health, skills and employment*, rather than treating environmental sustainability as a separate (i.e. environmental/nature and low carbon action as nice-to-have but peripheral to core strategic concerns).

5.1 Enabling Infrastructure

A central idea was that SU could provide *"enabling infrastructure"* for local environmental action.

This could involve:

- Advocating, supporting, leading, guiding and driving activity. "**finding the wood, not buying the wood**" (this concept efficiently summarises the consensus – help to locate the funding, capacity, support, resources and ensure they get to where they are needed – not necessarily always directly into SU)
- Sourcing/bringing funding into the district.
- Helping direct funding towards local activity.
- Delivering projects where appropriate (more engagement, promotional, cultural etc. rather than direct action on the ground)
- Connecting residents, business owners and landowners to support collective understanding and action
- Engaging farmers and supporting action on the LNRS (recognising that agriculture is the majority of land use in the district)
- Providing interpretation and storytelling to inspire activity
- Convening landowners

- Helping Parish Councils meet LNRS objectives.
- Developing the “Big Green Festival” concept as a way of connecting environmental activity to the wider community (and using culture as a connector)

The emerging proposition was for: *an independent advocate, lead and support organisation for communities – ‘champions of climate action’*

The workshop also raised the question of *revenue generation*, recognising that an independent organisation would need to consider how it could generate sufficient income to sustain its activities.

5.2 Independence and Purpose

There was a clear aspiration for SU to become *independent of the local authority*, while continuing to work closely with public bodies and other partners.

The organisation's purpose was understood broadly in terms of:

“Economic + social + environmental sustainability.”

A draft vision statement developed during the workshop was:

“An independent advocate for a high nature, low carbon district to help communities achieve economic, social & environmental sustainability and resilience.”

This provides a concise expression of the wider ambition: an independent organisation capable of supporting communities while connecting environmental action to economic and social wellbeing.

5.3 Functions and Activities

Participants identified a broad range of potential “*conduit*” functions for SU:

- Educate.
- Advocate.
- Aggregate, for example by bringing funds together to enabling bigger impact

- Implement.
- Convene/represent.
- Act as a *conduit* for funds (providing routes to funding)
- Support campaigns.
- Support infrastructure projects.
- Enable capital projects.
- Provide local solutions.
- Provide tools.
- Provide guidance.

The distinction between *campaigns and infrastructure projects* was also raised, suggesting that SU's role may need to encompass both awareness and advocacy as well as practical delivery (of funding programmes for example).

5.4 Values

Three simple values were identified:

- Be open.
- Be welcoming.
- Be positive.

These values were linked to the wider ambition to make participation accessible and inclusive rather than creating another organisation that speaks primarily to people already engaged with environmental issues (often older/retired and more affluent).

5.5 Long-Term Vision: Communication and Climate Action

A substantial part of the discussion focused on communication and the need to develop a compelling public vision.

The organisation could:

- Communicate inspiring environmental visions.
- Use the right message for different demographics.
- Develop and platform *champions of climate action.*

- Empower organisations, groups, individuals and Parish Councils.
- Work towards 30 by 30 targets (coordinating and facilitating collective action)
- Adopt a multi-project approach (oversight of action across the district)
- Improve environmental consciousness and action.
- Act as a driver/source of environmental activity.
- Make the right language choices to widen appeal and improve message landing.
- Provide a counterpoint to negative narratives around climate and nature.
- Improve people's knowledge through small actions.
- Connect environmental action with passion and emotion for local activity
- Develop a sense of collective responsibility.
- Connect environmental action to improvement in mental and physical health outcomes.
- Connect actions with their consequences (demonstrating impact of extractive practices and pollution etc.)
- Connect environmental and low carbon action to more resilient communities (particularly recognising the many rural communities across the district).
- Encourage people to care about where they live.

The workshop therefore viewed communication not simply as publicity, but as a mechanism for changing how people understand environmental issues and their own capacity to act.

5.6 Community and Purpose

The workshop emphasised the importance of the relationship between *individuals* and *community.*

Participants identified:

- Inclusivity and giving people permission to be involved.
- Authenticity.
- Volunteer opportunities drawing on a variety of skills.
- Space for imagination and reflection.
- The possibility of SU becoming a *champion of climate action* in place of the existing UDC-led system (which is subject to political change).
- Developing SU's own financial self-sufficiency.

- The need to *“burst / break the bubble”* and reach beyond existing environmental networks.
- A clear purpose and story capable of securing funding.
- Recognition that activity will be limited by the clarity of this purpose and the resources available.

The discussion also asked: **How do we understand climate change?**

This highlighted the need to recognise different levels of environmental knowledge and to develop communications that can engage people without assuming prior understanding.

Participants also wanted to widen stakeholder voices, potentially including:

- The Business Improvement District (BID) and other business systems in Saffron Walden
- Individual businesses.
- Landowners
- Stakeholders represented within the organisation's own structure.

5.7 Draft Purpose

A draft purpose statement developed during the workshop was:

“Our purpose is to champion climate action to combat the climate crisis, and to support groups and individuals in our area to do likewise.”

A further formulation focused on the organisation's enabling function:

“We stimulate, convene and amplify local communities to be more environmentally sustainable.”

This was accompanied by three practical propositions:

- We fund and help fund community initiatives.
- We provide easy-to-understand support, advice and shared experience.
- We act as an advocate and conduit to a wider network of organisations to support local groups.

A more developed formulation subsequently proposed was:

"We bring people together, support community action, and amplify local initiatives that improve the environment. We help groups access funding, navigate regulations, share knowledge, and connect with wider networks. Our role is to enable local communities to take effective action and create lasting positive change."

5.8 The Enabling Role

The workshop repeatedly returned to the idea that "enable" should be the key word defining SU's role.

Potential activities included:

- Changing mindsets.
- Convening local groups.
- Amplifying what is already happening.
- Enabling local groups to access opportunities (such as grants)
- Helping groups navigate administration, bureaucracy and regulations.
- Supporting an emotional attachment to place, rather than pursuing an **"ulterior"** agenda.

The principle was:

Local is key.

Rather than duplicating existing organisations or initiatives, SU could *connect* and *amplify* what is already happening.

5.9 Activism and Advocacy

The workshop also considered a more active role for SU.

Potential functions included:

- Stimulating.
- Convening.
- Amplifying.
- Providing grants, finance and funding support.
- Advocacy.
- Supporting “micro-progress.”
- Promoting sustainability.

Participants suggested that:

If we had more “bandwidth”, we should be doing advocacy/activism.

This produced an emerging pathway:

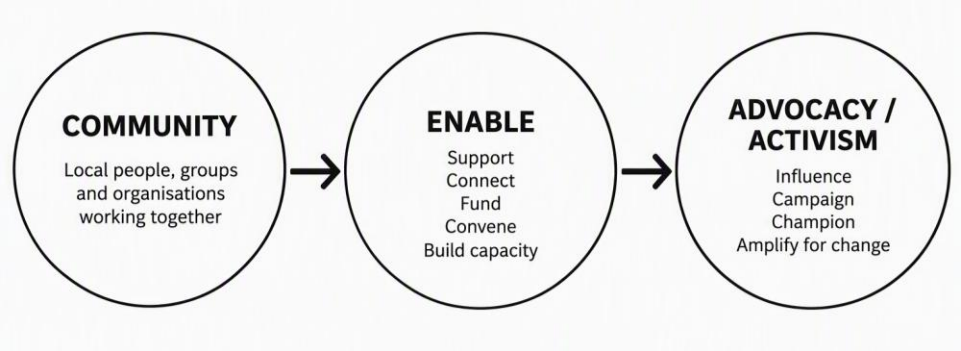


Figure 5: Pathway to Advocacy/Activism

The possibility was also raised of SU becoming a *consultee for planning and/or regulatory consultation.* However, participants recognised that in the current context, this could be difficult for a volunteer-led organisation to sustain (although the current context is not the ambition for SU).

5.10 Future Direction and Organisational Capacity

The discussion therefore raised an important organisational question: *what capacity is required to fulfil the vision?*

Questions included:

- If not UDC, who leads SU?
- Can the organisation remain volunteer-led?
- What leadership is required?

- What happens when SU needs to move beyond its current capacity?
- How can it become financially self-sufficient?

The ambition for an independent organisation consequently needs to be considered alongside its capacity to employ people, develop partnerships, secure funding and undertake advocacy.

5.11 Generational Engagement

The workshop identified a particular challenge around participation across generations.

The question was not simply: *How do we reach young people?*

But also: *How do we engage people in their 30s-40s-50s and people with families*

The wider ambition was therefore to develop forms of engagement appropriate to different generations and demographics rather than relying on a single established environmental audience.

5.12 Language

The workshop identified the need for new wording. This was part of the wider concern about ensuring that environmental language is understandable, inclusive and capable of reaching audiences beyond existing political rhetoric and the (sometimes) esoteric language of existing environmental networks.

The choice of language was therefore understood as strategically important: the right words can widen appeal and improve how environmental messages land.

Given the current context, participants questioned whether “Net Zero” is now the wrong term to use and/or be associated with? Rather, terms such as ‘community resilience’, ‘local energy’, ‘energy resilience’ could be utilised as less easy to ‘politicise’. The discussion reflected that it is unlikely communities and politicians would disagree with strengthening local resilience. ‘Resilience’ can mean the ability for communities to be more resilient in relation to energy and to be better able to withstand the impacts of drought or severe weather. It could mean ‘economic’ – opportunities for greater ownership/stake in local energy, or opportunities for local business. It could also mean more local food production systems, or improved nature areas that support community wellbeing (as well as climate resilience).

5.11 Wider Environmental and Social Benefits

The workshop connected environmental action to:

- Mental health.
- Physical health.
- Community wellbeing.
- Prosperity.
- Skills.
- Jobs.
- Energy.
- Nature.
- Local identity.
- Collective responsibility.

The ambition was therefore broader than simply reducing carbon emissions. It was to develop a high-nature, low-carbon district in which environmental action contributes to a healthier, more prosperous and more connected community.

5.12 Emotional Attachment to Place

Resonating with CERG's concept of emotional geography, an important part of the discussion concerned the *emotional relationship between people and place*.

The workshop identified:

- Passion and emotion.
- Love of place.
- Care about where you live.
- Connection between self and community.
- Emotional attachment to place.
- Collective responsibility.

This suggests that environmental engagement should not rely solely on information or policy compliance. SU could also help people develop stronger relationships with the places in

which they live, work and participate, and this could stimulate more local action and participation.

5.13 Imagination and Reflection

The workshop also identified the need for *space for imagination and reflection.*

This is significant because the emerging role for SU is not simply to deliver existing environmental programmes. It also involves creating the conditions in which communities can collectively imagine different possibilities for their places, develop shared visions and identify practical routes towards them.

5.14 Overall Workshop Proposition

Taken together, the Workshop 1 suggestions point towards an organisation that would be:

Independent, open, welcoming and positive; locally rooted but geographically "elastic"; capable of advocating, convening, educating, aggregating and enabling; and able to connect environmental action with community prosperity, health, skills and employment.

Its distinctive role would be to *enable rather than simply deliver*: connecting residents, community groups, Parish Councils, businesses, farmers and landowners with funding, expertise, policy frameworks and wider networks.

The emerging proposition can therefore be expressed as a conduit:

Connect/Enable/Amplify/Advocate/Deliver

with *local communities, place, imagination and environmental action* at the centre.

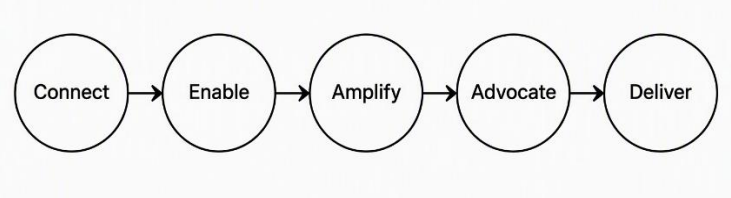


Figure 6: CEAAD

The workshop ultimately moved towards a conception of SU as an *independent enabling infrastructure for environmental action*: an organisation that builds on the great work already underway across the district, and capable of turning community imagination and emotional connection into further collective capacity, practical projects and sustained community action.

6.0 Workshop 2: Business Planning and Funding Strategy

Workshop 2 considered the implications of creating an organisation that is fully independent from Uttlesford District Council.

The key question was:

What organisational structure best supports the agreed vision and strategic identity?

This includes consideration of:

- governance
- legal structure
- decision-making
- staffing
- volunteer involvement
- committee/board structures
- institutional relationships
- accountability
- communications
- the capacity to receive and deploy different forms of funding.

The organisational question is therefore inseparable from the strategic question. The structure should follow the role SU is seeking to play.

6.1 Organisational Structure and Capacity

A recurring issue was *capacity*. The organisation needs to establish who is responsible for doing what, and there was recognition that relying solely on existing voluntary capacity may

not provide sufficient resource to undertake the necessary organisational, communications and funding work.

The workshop considered a range of possible operating models:

- A predominantly committee-based organisation.
- A small core team of paid staff.
- Paid staff supported by volunteers.
- A wider network model (with some paid capacity to support)
- A hybrid model combining professional capacity, volunteers and partner organisations.

The central issue was therefore not simply the choice of legal structure, but whether SU has sufficient *capacity to convert strategy into action.*

There was particular recognition that the transition itself requires dedicated capacity. Participants suggested that the emerging organisation may require one or two salaried staff (full or part time) during its first six months, particularly to coordinate delivery, develop partnerships, manage funding applications and establish the new organisation.

This creates an important sequencing issue: *Funding is required before the new structure and staffing arrangements can be fully realised, while sufficient organisational capacity is needed to secure that funding.*

The possibility of establishing an *early funded role* specifically to address this problem was therefore identified.

The second workshop moved from organisational aspiration towards implementation. If the first discussion considered *what SU could become*, the second addressed the practical question:

How can collective imagination (the vision) *become a deliverable, sustainable and fundable plan?*

The discussion therefore began to translate the emerging vision of SU as an independent enabling organisation into a practical organisational roadmap.

Two linked planning horizons were identified:

1. The immediate six-month period from September 2026.
2. The first six months following establishment of an independent organisation.

This distinction was considered important because the immediate period is primarily about *consolidation*, *transition*, *planning* and *securing resources*, while the subsequent period would focus increasingly on *establishing the new organisation and delivering its programme of work.*

6.2 Immediate Six-Month Plan: September 2026 onwards

The first six months should provide a period of consolidation, planning and preparation. Participants identified the need to establish clear objectives and priorities while retaining sufficient flexibility to respond to changing political, policy and funding conditions.

Key priorities include:

- **Define clear objectives and priorities** for the immediate period, including what needs to be delivered, by whom and within what timeframe.
- **Review the current organisational structure**, including the effectiveness of existing committee arrangements and how these might need to evolve.
- **Review current work, management and capacity**, identifying what is already working successfully and where additional resources or expertise are required.
- **Build flexibility into business planning**, particularly in response to political and policy uncertainty and potential changes in local government arrangements.
- **Develop a communications and public-facing plan**, ensuring that the organisation has a clear external identity, message and engagement approach.
- Establish a strong **listening function**, enabling the organisation to understand community needs, concerns and opportunities.
- **Build on existing successes**, identifying projects, relationships and activities that provide evidence of SU's value and can support future funding applications.
- Consider the appropriate future legal structure, including a **Community Interest Company (CIC)** or **Community Benefit Society (CBS)**.
- Develop a **funding contingency**, recognising that future organisational development cannot depend upon a single funding stream.

- Identify potential funding sources and begin to **apply for and secure funding** for both organisational development and specific projects.
- Develop and finalise necessary **governance and organisational policies**.
- Establish an appropriate **leadership team** and clarify responsibilities.
- Map and strengthen key **partnership relationships**, including the continuing role of UDC as a potential resource and partner.
- Develop an **engagement strategy** for communities, partners and stakeholders.
- Establish how **success will be measured**, including meaningful indicators of engagement, delivery, environmental impact, organisational development and community benefit.
- Develop a timetable for the **migration from the existing committee towards an SU board**, if a new legal structure is adopted.

The discussion recognised that the new organisation would need to retain a strong *listening function*. This reflects the enabling role identified above: SU should not simply communicate its own agenda, but listen to communities, understand what is already happening, identify gaps and connect people to appropriate resources.

6.3 Business Planning

The development of a business plan was seen as the mechanism for bringing together the different elements of the emerging organisation.

The plan needs to establish:

- What SU is trying to achieve.
- What its immediate priorities are.
- What activities it will undertake.
- What organisational structure is required.
- What staffing and expertise are required.
- What funding is needed.
- Where that funding could come from.
- What partnerships are required.
- How communications and engagement will work.
- How success will be measured.
- What the transition timetable should be (from existing to new)

The business plan should therefore not be treated simply as a funding document. It should provide a *shared organisational framework* linking vision, capacity, resources, governance, delivery and impact. The audience will need to be internal (i.e. the exiting committee and relevant UDC staff), and strategic (UDC primarily as well as local organisations, town/parish councils and others who will need to be convinced of the opportunities for SU to make a difference on the ground).

6.4 Transition to an Independent Organisation

If/when SU moves towards an independent organisational model, the first six months following establishment would focus on moving from planning into operational delivery.

Potential priorities include:

- Securing additional seed funding.
- Recruiting the initial staff team.
- Formally transitioning from the existing committee to a new CIC or CBS board, if that route is adopted.
- Agreeing a clear timeframe for the transition, potentially within the first six months.
- Implementing the business plan.
- Establishing appropriate operational systems.
- Developing further projects and partnerships.
- Exploring another film and/or major public-facing project.
- Establishing a sustainable longer-term funding base.

The organisation would also need a practical operating infrastructure. Participants identified the need to consider a physical location or workspace, alongside IT and digital infrastructure such as Zoom and other collaborative working tools. This is consistent with the earlier workshop 1 proposition that SU should become enabling infrastructure for others: it will itself require sufficient infrastructure to perform that role.

6.5 Funding Strategy

The workshop emphasised the importance of developing a *diversified funding model* rather than relying upon a single public-sector source. This was considered particularly important if SU is to become more independent, resilient and capable of sustaining activity over the longer term.

Potential sources discussed included:

- Public-sector funding.
- Community funding.
- Heritage and cultural funding.
- Philanthropic and charitable funding.
- Sponsorship.
- Community shares.
- Commercial and consultancy activity.
- Green energy programmes.
- Project-specific grants.
- Earned income.

Specific opportunities identified during the discussion included:

- Zero Carbon Communities Fund (UDC initial investment in SU)
- Esmée Fairbairn.
- John Muir Trust.
- Wolfson.
- National Lottery Community Fund.
- National Lottery Heritage Fund.
- Parish and Town Councils, including biodiversity duty and neighbourhood-plan opportunities (i.e. SU could provide advice and secure funding to do so – or secure grant funding to support this role)
- Subscriptions.
- One-off donation approaches.
- Commercial and consultancy opportunities.
- Rural Services Network.
- University funding and partnerships (like the current Innovation Partnership with UoE)
- Private-sector ESG (Environmental, Socal and Governance) funding.

Potential *in-kind support and partnership resources* were also identified, including relationships with organisations such as Groundwork East, Community Energy South,

Greater South East Net Zero Hub, Ground Control (supported the LNRS) and other relevant networks.

The workshop also considered opportunities around *community energy,* including community shares, advisory services, solar and heat-pump initiatives and the potential for surplus from community energy activity to support wider community objectives.

Within nature recovery, potential sources included community funds, heritage funding, sponsorship and donations, advisory services and emerging opportunities associated with habitat banks.

The overall funding question was therefore:

What combination of grants, earned income, sponsorship and community investment could provide SU with a sustainable organisational model?

6.6 Funding and Organisational Timing

The workshop recognised that there is limited value in designing an ambitious organisational structure without establishing the resources necessary to deliver it.

The emerging 10 step sequence was therefore:

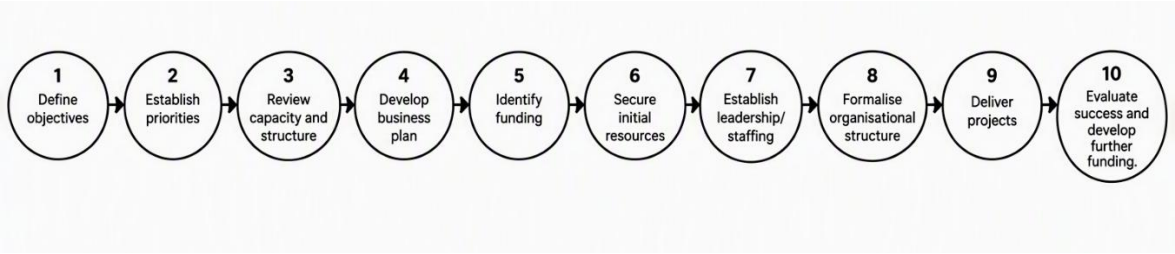


Figure 7: Ten Steps

This sequence reinforces the relationship between establishing the emerging *vision and organisational role,* and identifying the *resources, structures and processes needed to make that vision operational*.

The timing is particularly significant because SU may need to have funding secured *as early as May 2027* to support the next stage of organisational development and delivery.

This raises a central planning question: *Is there sufficient time and capacity between September 2026 and May 2027 to undertake the necessary organisational, funding and governance work?*

The answer will depend in part on who can take responsibility for each element and whether interim capacity can be funded.

6.7 Working Group and Next Steps

There was support for establishing a focused *working group/core team to develop the business plan and lead initial funding applications*. This would provide the practical bridge between the workshop's strategic ambitions and the establishment of a viable organisation.

Its initial responsibilities could include:

1. Agreeing the immediate six-month objectives.
2. Developing the business plan.
3. Reviewing organisational and legal options.
4. Defining leadership and staffing requirements.
5. Mapping potential funding sources.
6. Preparing priority funding applications.
7. Developing the communications and engagement plan.
8. Establishing measures of success.
9. Clarifying relationships with UDC and other partners.
10. Developing a timetable for transition to a new board and organisational structure.

The group would also need to review existing frameworks and determine what should be retained, revised or replaced as SU develops its new organisational identity. This includes reviewing existing work and management arrangements, communications with members and groups, terms of reference and governance procedures, and the infrastructure required to support future activity.

6.8 Immediate and Longer-Term Infrastructure

The workshop identified a number of practical requirements for the transition period:

- IT and digital infrastructure.
- Office or meeting space.
- Communications systems.
- Website and newsletter arrangements.
- Events and public engagement.
- Appropriate policies and governance procedures.
- Professional support where required.
- New meeting arrangements and potentially a different organisational base.
- A new Zoom/Teams host and collaborative infrastructure.
- Working groups for business planning and funding.
- Continued use of appropriate UDC resources during transition.

There was also discussion of developing new relationships with organisations and networks including *Cambridge Zero and other environmental collaborations,* recognising the value of learning from comparable organisations and building wider networks.

6.9 Existing Delivery and Building on Success

The emerging organisation should not start from zero. Participants identified the importance of:

- Securing existing member buy-in.
- Continuing business-as-usual activity.
- Building on the Big Green Festival and other established initiatives.
- Requesting regular updates from existing groups and projects.
- Demonstrating existing delivery.
- Making use of the organisation's approximately *50 active partners in the district.*
- Maintaining and strengthening existing relationships.
- Using existing successes as evidence of organisational value.

This provides an important bridge between the existing SU and the proposed independent organisation. The transition should retain what works while creating the capacity to expand.

6.10 Overall Direction

The workshop established a progression from *vision to organisational capacity.*

The workshop identified SU's potential role as an *independent, enabling and connective organisation*, rooted in local communities and place, but capable of connecting local knowledge, imagination, resources and action to wider policy, funding and institutional networks.

The workshop identified what is required to make that role sustainable:

- clear objectives
- organisational capacity
- leadership
- funding
- governance
- infrastructure
- partnerships
- communications
- measures of success.

The central challenge emerging from the workshop is therefore one of *capacity and sequencing*. SU has an opportunity to build on existing achievements, relationships and community credibility, but the transition to a more independent and sustainable organisation requires:

- dedicated leadership
- staff capacity
- funding and governance

The immediate priority is consequently to create a realistic six-month plan that establishes:

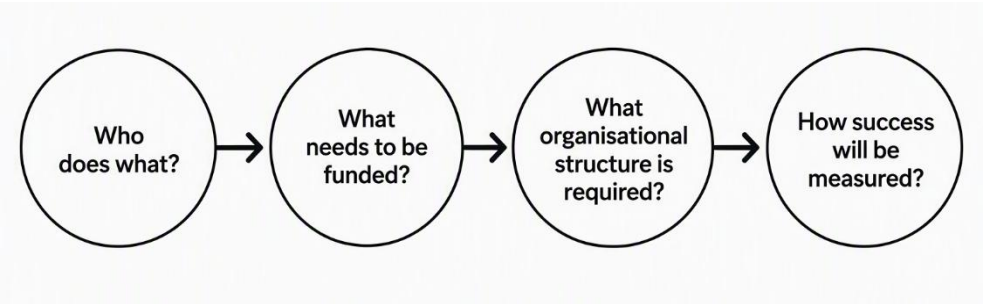


Figure 8: 0-6 month Plan

At the same time, the organisation needs to retain the qualities identified in the previous workshop:

- Locality
- Openness
- Participation
- Imagination
- Emotional connection to place
- Capacity to enable rather than simply deliver.

In this sense, the business-planning process is itself part of the emerging mezzolevel organisational model. It provides the practical connective layer between individual and community aspirations on the one hand, and larger institutional, policy and funding structures on the other. The task is to turn *collective imagination* into the organisational capacity through which local ideas can become funded, coordinated and measurable action.

6.11 Key Actions: 0–6 Months and 6–12 Months – See Appendix Two: 0-6 month/6-12 month time/action/task table



Figure 9: 0-6 months

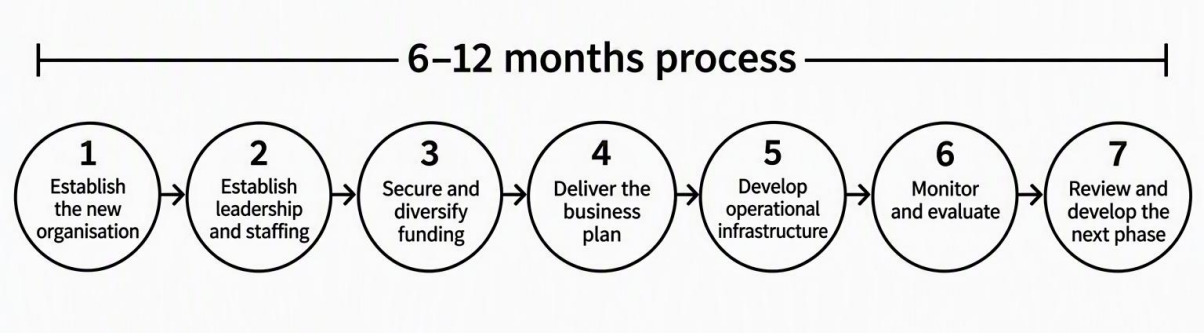


Figure 10: 6-12 months

6.12 Overall Sequence – See Appendix Three for Priority/Focus/Objective table

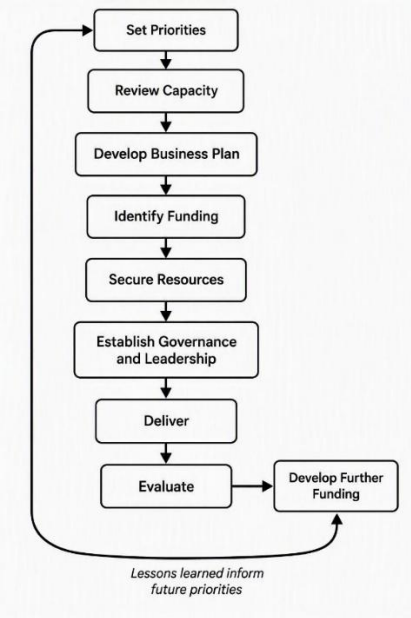


Figure 11: Sequence overview

7. Imaginarium Evening Event



*Figure 12: Rivers Return Posters - Photo by **Andy Baz Haynes***

The first day concluded with an Imaginarium film screening, panel discussion and reception.

The session, chaired by Dr. Tony Sampson (EBS, CERG) brought together Vicky Reed (UDC), Counciler Neil Reeve (SU), and Giles Tofield (CERG) together with filmmakers Lu Camish and Ben C. Mills.

The event extended the workshop's discussion of imagination beyond organisational planning, exploring how cultural activity can create spaces in which communities consider alternative environmental and social futures. This project started with Wild Essex Imaginarium Symposium hosted by EBS and CERG (September 2025) which provided a practical illustration of the broader proposition that *imagination can function as part of sustainability infrastructure*, rather than being treated as an optional cultural addition to environmental activity.

The film has been selected for the Rural Action and River Summit Film Festivals and received a nomination (top four) for the UN Sustainable Development Goal-aligned Big Syn International Film Festival.

7.1 Imaginarium Concept

The Imaginarium programme was initiated by CERG as a concept that focuses primarily on cultural practice and imagination as enabling infrastructure to empower new systems of collaboration and community engagement in nature recovery (although other forms of community action have also be explored). The Imaginarium seeks to be a mezzolevel point of assemblage between macro and strategic organisations and micro-level communities and groups. Cultural practice can support this, inspiring people to engage and better understand the many issues relating to climate change and nature recovery. Ultimately the ambition is to grow the Imaginarium concept (6 events delivered to date including during the Big Green Festival in Saffron Walden), enabling it to become a commons for good where individuals and organisations can contribute and learn, and where trust can grow and cooperation and self-organisation can flourish.



Figure 13: Wild Essex Imaginarium hosted by EBS Sept 25th 2025

8. Workshop 3: Biodiversity, LNRS Delivery and Monitoring

The second day began with a workshop facilitated by Professor Tom Cameron (University of Essex, Life Sciences) and Elias Watson (Essex County Council/LNRP) aimed at defining SU's role in nature recovery and building the evidence base

Its central question was: *What distinctive role can Sustainable Uttlesford play in nature recovery, and how can this role be evidenced?*

8.1 Understanding the Essex LNRS

The session started with the strategic context of the Essex Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS), presented by Elias Watson from Essex County Council (LNRP, ECC).

The Essex LNRS is a statutory strategy introduced through the Environment Act 2021 to guide nature recovery across England. Developed collaboratively with local authorities, environmental organisations, farmers, landowners and communities, the strategy provides a shared framework for restoring biodiversity and enhancing ecological networks across Greater Essex.

The LNRS identifies key priorities for nature recovery, maps existing areas of ecological importance, highlights future opportunities for habitat creation and enhancement, and establishes measures needed to achieve long-term recovery. Significant components include habitat and species priorities, the State of Nature assessment, and mapping of Areas Prioritised for Biodiversity alongside strategic opportunities for future action. These resources provide an evidence base that organisations such as Sustainable Uttlesford can use to align local initiatives with county-wide biodiversity objectives. The LNRS therefore offers more than a policy document. It provides a spatial and strategic framework that can help Sustainable Uttlesford identify where it can add value, support partners, mobilise communities and contribute to measurable improvements in biodiversity across the district.

8.2 From Strategy to Action

Building on this strategic foundation, Professor Tom Cameron invited participants to consider what nature recovery means in practice for Sustainable Uttlesford. The first session began by exploring *ambitions and priorities*. Participants were encouraged to reflect on the species, habitats, landscapes, educational opportunities or community initiatives they are most passionate about, and how these aspirations fit within the wider objectives of the LNRS.

The second session examined *Sustainable Uttlesford's role in delivering nature recovery*. Participants considered how SU can inspire, facilitate and empower local action; the barriers likely to be encountered; and the resources, partnerships and support required to overcome them. Particular attention was given to the relationship between county-level policy aims and their implementation at mezzo and hyper-local scales.

The third session focused on *monitoring and the role of scientific citizens*. Effective biodiversity recovery depends not only on action but also on evidence. Participants were asked to explore existing monitoring activity, opportunities to increase public participation in biodiversity recording, and how data can be collected, shared and used strategically to support conservation outcomes and inform decision making.

Finally, the workshop considered questions of *leadership, ownership and coordination*. Sustainable Uttlesford's future contribution to nature recovery will depend on clear responsibilities, effective communication and support for those willing to lead. Participants discussed leadership roles relating to biodiversity strategy, monitoring and public engagement, while considering what organisational support is needed to sustain action over the longer term.

Together, these sessions were designed to move the discussion from understanding the Essex LNRS to identifying the specific role Sustainable Uttlesford can play in helping to deliver nature recovery across the district, supported by strong partnerships, robust evidence and effective local leadership.

8.3 Ambition

Participants were first asked what they wanted to achieve.

Possible ambitions included:

- championing particular species
- recruiting biodiversity champions
- improving habitat quality
- creating more connected habitats
- improving access to nature
- increasing participation and environmental education
- protecting particular areas or zones
- supporting Suitable Alternative Natural Green Space (SANGS)
- contributing to recovery of farmland bird populations.

The purpose was to move from general support for biodiversity towards clearer statements of ambition.

8.4 Participant Responses to Ambition

Participants articulated a wide and ambitious range of goals. Key themes included:

- **Species and Habitats:** A focus on chalk flora, farmland birds, and a "beaver-infused landscape" which could be reference to a focus on recovering functional wetlands. There was a strong desire to "maximise connected habitat corridors" encompassing rivers, woodlands and hedgerows, to "join our red and blue areas" in the LNRS, and to create a "northern loop to the Big Green Internet concept", linking Hatfield Forest and Easton Park. Another key ambition was to "understand which tree species will

have the best chances to thrive and support the widest range of biodiversity." In future Essex climates.

- **Rivers and Water:** A significant cluster of ambitions centred on water, including "rivers rehab", "restoration, buffering of rivers and chalk streams", and "reducing pollution". One participant stated, "Availability of clean water is fundamental to life!" A specific proposal was to "develop local river action groups along every river in Uttlesford with a coordination hub within SU."
- **Participation and Education:** A major goal was to "help communities to learn about their local habitats... and monitoring", and to "create a sense of pride in the protection and development of our natural habitat that is a call to action." There was a specific focus on youth, with suggestions to "create a youth council climate group" and "raise awareness of local opportunities for young people."
- **Data and Strategy:** Ambitions included a "SU annual bio blitz", agreeing on "one place to collect all the data", and creating a district-wide tree strategy. A key strategic aim was to "participate with UDC in creating the Uttlesford LNRS action plan, and its annual plan."

Overall, there is a clear ambition for investment in habitat restoration and creation, and facilitating more action at scale by supporting the emergence of new habitat champions and community groups across Uttlesford. It is possible to focus more on target species that may emerge in time, which could be another useful tool for SU to leverage support and motivation for positive conservation action, e.g. Brown Trout for fishers, Corn Bunting for Farming communities

8.5 From policy to local action

The second session examined how SU might facilitate nature recovery across different scales. The challenge is to translate policy frameworks into action that makes sense at the mezzolevel and hyper-local level.

Questions included:

- Who is SU trying to inspire, facilitate or empower?
- What barriers are likely to prevent action?
- What resources and expertise are required?
- What support can the Local Nature Partnership, Essex County Council or UDC provide?
- How can Local Nature Recovery Strategies become usable tools for communities?

This suggests an important potential role for SU as a translator and intermediary between environmental policy and community action.

8.6 Participant Responses to Policy/Local Action

Participants identified a clear role for SU as an enabler.

- **Who to Empower?:** The core engagement audience was seen as the "older generation". However, a key ambition was to "inspire future leaders", including younger generations, landowners and farm clusters.
- **Role of SU:** SU's function was described as helping local people achieve their own goals. Key verbs included:
    - **Enable:** "Sharing experience", "Connect people", "Find them", "Connect to each other and to experts."
    - **Amplify:** "Amplify, not reinvent/duplicate (signpost)." The message should be "Help us help you."
    - **Translate:** "Communicate the needs of LNRS to local groups" and help Parish Councils deliver biodiversity actions. A proposed flagship action was "Creating Green Corridors".
    - **Barriers:** Participants identified significant hurdles, including "Inertia", "NIMBYism", a "lack of in-house understanding of LNRS", and "Capacity within SU" and "Capacity of farmers". A major barrier was "Communication across... different levels + types of nature literacy."
    - **Support Needed:** External support was seen as crucial, including "ECC officer time", "UDC", and needing a "structure to build a relationship" with the LNP. Specific expertise was requested, such as "EWT or UoE advice/guidance" and "Field trip case studies."

8.7 Scientific citizens and monitoring

The third session considered monitoring and evidence.

The workshop asked:

- What monitoring is already taking place?
- Who is currently collecting biodiversity data?
- Is existing monitoring strategic?
- How can participation in monitoring become more accessible and attractive?
- Where should data be shared?
- How can citizen science contribute to SU's wider strategy?

Platforms such as iNaturalist and iRecord were discussed as possible components of a broader citizen-science approach. This choice needs to align with where EFC take records from.

The underlying issue is not simply collecting more data, but ensuring that monitoring contributes to a coherent evidence-base capable of informing action and demonstrating impact.

8.8 Participant Responses to Scientific Citizens and Monitoring

The discussion revealed a complex data landscape and a need for strategic clarity.

- **Current State:** Monitoring was described as "Currently localised". Participants noted that UDC planners "only look at Essex Field Club (NPPF)", there is "No records centre in Essex",[7] and there is a general "Lack of co-ordination / central collection."
- **SU's Role:** A key question was "Is data SU's role?" The emerging consensus was that SU's role is not necessarily to be the primary data collector, but to "Enable local groups/residents to collect data", "Refine data so it can be used", "Analyse data", and "Report findings back."
- **Making it Popular:** To increase participation, monitoring needed to be "Fun", "Ask people to take part", and "Show it has had national impact" (e.g., inclusion in Natural England reports). Using schools and youth engagement was seen as key.
- **Strategic Development:** The goal was to "Become strategic". This involved establishing a baseline first ("Aim for x% of Parish Councils to have a baseline"), understanding what data already exists, and exploring "Cross-county data/objective sharing."
- **Data Management:** There was a need to clarify "How will SU facilitate data storage, backup and mapping?" with "Universities" suggested as a potential partner for training and oversight. A key proposal was to use the "RCCE Parish Initiative" to "train and engage Parish Councils" in self-baselining.

8.9 Leadership and support

The final session examined leadership.

Participants considered who should lead on:

- biodiversity strategy;

[7] There is a lack of awareness of EFC / Essex Recorders Partnership, associated bodies and their activity and purpose is a very important point that EFC are keen to overcome, especially as they are the records centre for Essex. Tom Cameron notes: Biodiversity recording and conservation management in Essex primarily handled through a network of key organizations working together to record wildlife sightings, access ecological datasets, or review local conservation policies, these entities coordinate their data as follows:

- **The Essex Recorders Partnership (Local Record Centre):** Run primarily by the Essex Field Club, this is the definitive repository for biological and geological data in the county. Their Datasearch Service houses over **7.6 million records** spanning more than 22,000 species. It aggregates data from county recorders, specialist groups, and local wildlife trusts to provide formal ecological reports required for planning applications and desk studies. [1, 2, 3]
- **Essex Wildlife Trust (EWT):** Focuses heavily on active on-site habitat monitoring and community engagement. EWT hosts **Nature Counts**, an online submission platform built on open-source Indicia software. The public can use it to submit casual or list wildlife sightings. Verified records from Nature Counts feed into the broader National Biodiversity Network (NBN Atlas) to support national research and local nature recovery strategies. [1, 2, 3]
- **Essex County Council (ECC):** Directs local environmental policy, planning validation frameworks, and public strategies. ECC utilizes data from the Essex Recorders Partnership to implement the **Essex Biodiversity Validation Checklist** for developers. They also maintain long-term initiatives outlined in documents like their Corporate Biodiversity Plan and Report to meet local statutory environmental duties. [1, 2]

- monitoring;
- public communications;
- communications with public bodies; and
- coordination across partners.

The discussion also introduced the distinction between leaders and first followers, raising a practical question about how SU can create the conditions for distributed leadership rather than relying upon a single individual or small group.

8.10 Participant Responses to Leadership and Support

This session focused on the practical organisational requirements for SU to fulfil its role.

- **Biodiversity Leadership:** A critical gap was identified: "No biodiversity lead as haven't found right person." The ideal was a "paid role, even if part-time", combining "Monitoring and communication skills". A key suggestion was to "find a recently retired person from our local Natural England" or "Identify local natural history society to approach." SU could also consider hosting student interns or placements every year perhaps with some small financial commitment rather than a full salary.
- **Monitoring Leadership:** A staged approach was proposed: "Start with disseminating existing data resources... Build on this. Eventually a monitoring lead."
- **Communications Leadership:** Current comms are a shared effort between a committee member and UDC. There is a clear need for a "migration plan" covering "Website + newsletter."
- **Organisational Support:** The overwhelming conclusion was "Yes, we need leadership support." This included a "FTE person to run SU after migration from UDC", support with recruitment, and an "Extension of the BD support agreement."
- **Roles and Responsibilities:** A crucial need was identified for a "map of roles for: BNG, BD, LNRS." This would help clarify that "UDC has a leadership role to deliver BD for the district", while SU's role is to "Facilitate baselining" and "Prioritise Work Breakdown Structure for hyper-local areas." The overarching goal was to "Build nature literacy and improve data collection and sharing pathways."

8.11. Summary and Key Actions

Taken together, the four sessions moved from *ambition and policy translation through to evidence, monitoring and organisational support*. Across the discussions, participants identified a need for Sustainable Uttlesford to help *connect* existing local activity, expertise and resources, while avoiding unnecessary duplication of existing organisations and initiatives.

Four broad areas emerged as priorities for further development.

8.12 Establish biodiversity ambitions and priorities

The workshops identified a wide range of biodiversity ambitions, including habitat connectivity, chalk flora, farmland birds, rivers and chalk streams, tree species, youth engagement and access to nature.

Key actions:

- Identify and prioritise key habitats and areas, and consider more work to identify key species of interest.
- Explore opportunities to maximise connected habitat corridors.
- Develop priorities for rivers, chalk streams and water quality.
- Consider an annual SU biodiversity event or "bio blitz".
- Explore a district-wide tree strategy.
- Identify opportunities for youth engagement and environmental education.
- Contribute to the development of the Uttlesford LNRS action plan and annual plan.

8.13 Translate LNRS and biodiversity policy into local action

The discussions highlighted the need to connect environmental policy with the activities of Parish Councils, landowners, farmers, local groups and communities. Participants identified SU as having a potential enabling, amplifying and translating role.

Key actions:

- Clarify who SU is seeking to inspire, facilitate and empower.
- Develop stronger connections between SU, UDC, ECC and the LNP.
- Support Parish Councils in delivering biodiversity actions.
- Communicate the needs of LNRs to local groups.
- Connect local groups and residents with relevant expertise.
- Identify barriers to action, including capacity, inertia, NIMBYism and different levels of nature literacy.
- Explore the proposed Green Corridor work.
- Develop relationships with relevant organisations and identify useful case studies and field trips.

8.14 Develop monitoring, data and citizen science

Participants identified a fragmented monitoring landscape and a need for better coordination, baseline information, data sharing and communication of findings. The emphasis was on enabling local groups and residents to participate while developing more strategic approaches to data.

Key actions:

- Establish what biodiversity data already exists.

- Develop a baseline approach, including consideration of Parish Council baselines.
- Encouraging/requiring/facilitating existing members and groups to share their existing and future biodiversity data with EFC
- Enable local groups and residents to collect biodiversity data.
- Explore the use of iNaturalist, iRecord and other existing platforms including the app EFC draws from.
- Establish clearer arrangements for data storage, backup, mapping and sharing.
- Explore university support for data management and analysis.
- Investigate cross-county data and objective sharing.
- Explore the RCCE Parish Initiative as a means of training and engaging Parish Councils.
- Develop ways of making monitoring accessible and engaging.
- Report findings and demonstrate wider impacts of local monitoring.

8.15 Establish leadership, roles and organisational support

The final session identified leadership and capacity as important requirements for taking forward the biodiversity and monitoring agenda. Participants identified particular gaps in biodiversity leadership, monitoring, communications and overall organisational support.

Key actions:

- Identify a biodiversity lead, potentially through a paid part-time role.
- Seek an individual with both monitoring and communication skills.
- Explore local Natural England, natural history society and other potential sources of expertise.
- Initially disseminate existing data resources before developing a dedicated monitoring role.
- Develop a communications migration plan covering the website and newsletter.
- Establish the organisational support required for SU following migration from UDC.
- Consider recruitment support and an extension of the B2 support agreement.
- Develop a clear map of roles and responsibilities covering BNG, biodiversity and LNRS.
- Clarify the respective roles of UDC and SU, including UDC's leadership role in district biodiversity delivery and SU's potential role in facilitating baselining and prioritising workstreams for hyper-local areas.
- Build nature literacy and improve data collection and sharing pathways.

9.0 Workshop 4: Mezzo Partnerships, Engagement and Stakeholder Strategy

The biodiversity workshops returned discussion to the *mezzo-level role of Sustainable Uttlesford:* connecting local knowledge, community activity, institutional resources and specialist expertise without seeking to replace existing organisations or initiatives. The

discussions around biodiversity, LNRS delivery, monitoring and leadership therefore provide a practical basis for developing a more systematic approach to *mezzo partnerships and engagement*.

The next stage should be to identify the key stakeholders, organisations, networks and communities that SU needs to connect with; clarify what each can contribute and what support they require; and establish the relationships, communication pathways and shared priorities needed to turn these connections into practical action.

Facilitated by Dr. Tony Sampson and Giles Tofield, the final workshop considered how Sustainable Uttlesford can broaden its reach and build long-term relationships. Future work on a *Mezzo Partnerships, Engagement and Stakeholder Strategy* could therefore focus on:

- mapping key stakeholders and existing networks
- identifying gaps, overlaps and opportunities for collaboration
- clarifying the respective roles of SU, UDC, ECC, LNP, Parish Councils and other partners
- developing mechanisms for connecting local groups with expertise and resources
- establishing priorities for engagement and partnership development
- identifying how these relationships can support delivery, monitoring, evidence and future funding

In this sense, the workshops provide the foundation for moving from *mezzolevel thinking to a practical partnership infrastructure* for Sustainable Uttlesford.

9.1. Operating at the Mezzolevel

The central question was: *How can SU build the partnerships, relationships and forms of engagement necessary to operate effectively at the mezzolevel?*

This involved considering who SU needs to work with, what it needs to communicate, how participation can be broadened, and where there are gaps in current capacity and leadership.

9.2 Stakeholder ecosystem

The first task is to identify SU's key stakeholders and clarify:

Who is SU trying to reach, and what is it asking of them?

SU's potential stakeholder environment is broad and includes organisations operating at different scales and with different interests. These include:

- communities/neighbourhoods
- parish and town councils
- UDC
- Essex County Council
- schools

- youth groups
- voluntary organisations
- environmental groups
- businesses
- funders
- cultural organisations and creative practitioners
- heritage organisations
- universities
- local practitioners
- wider public-sector and policy networks

The significance of the mezzolevel is that SU would not be seeking to replace these organisations or duplicate their existing activity. Its potential role is instead to *connect activity, knowledge, resources and relationships that currently sit across different parts of the local system.*[8] This requires a clearer understanding of what each stakeholder can contribute and what they might require from SU. Stakeholder mapping therefore needs to move beyond a directory of organisations towards an understanding of relationships, responsibilities, opportunities and potential forms of collaboration.

SU need to establish clearer answers to questions such as:

- Who are the key stakeholders?
- What relationship does SU need with each?
- What does SU want from them?
- What can SU offer in return?
- Which relationships already exist?
- Where are the gaps?
- Which relationships require immediate attention?
- Who should take responsibility for maintaining them?

This provides a potential basis for a future *stakeholder and partnership strategy,* with relationships considered as an active part of SU's organisational infrastructure rather than as an additional communications exercise.

9.3 Communications and engagement

SU need to consider what recent Big Green Festival and related event activities revealed about communication and participation.

- What worked?
- Which audiences were reached?
- Which audiences were missing?
- What should SU communicate?
- What are its key messages?
- Which platforms are appropriate?

[8] Note: this could be something that e.g., OnePlanet might help record and visualise.

- How should communications differ between communities, funders, public bodies and partners?

The emphasis was on understanding communications as part of the organisation's wider engagement function. Events can provide important opportunities to bring people together, but their value also depends on what happens afterwards: whether relationships are maintained, whether participants remain connected, and whether activity contributes to longer-term organisational objectives. This suggests a need for greater clarity about SU's *core messages and audiences*, with communications adapted to different stakeholder groups rather than relying on a single approach.

For communities, the emphasis may be on participation, relevance and opportunities to get involved. For funders and public bodies, communications may need to demonstrate outcomes, capacity and wider strategic value. For delivery partners and practitioners, the emphasis may be on opportunities for collaboration, shared resources and practical activity.

The workshop therefore positioned communications as part of the mezzolevel function of SU: *connecting people and organisations around shared concerns, making activity visible, and creating the conditions for further participation and collaboration.*

9.4 Broadening participation

Particular attention was given to the need to broaden SU's demographic and community reach.

Potential priority groups included:

- young people
- schools
- underrepresented communities
- local practitioner groups
- communities not currently engaged with sustainability activity.

The discussion recognised that broadening participation is not simply a matter of increasing attendance at individual events. It requires a better understanding of which communities are currently engaged, which are absent, and what forms of engagement might be meaningful and accessible to them.

Schools and young people were identified as an important area for further development. More sustained relationships with schools and youth groups could provide opportunities to connect sustainability activity with education, local places and future generations.

A possible *focus group with local practitioners* was also identified as a means of developing a more sustained understanding of local needs and opportunities. This could provide a mechanism for listening to practitioners who are already working across the district and identifying where SU could add value by connecting existing activity, expertise and resources.

The wider question is therefore how SU can move from *engaging people with individual events towards developing longer-term relationships with communities and local practitioners.*

9.5 Strategic capacity and areas of responsibility

The discussion also highlighted the importance of clarity over who leads particular areas of activity. In particular, questions were raised around biodiversity strategy, monitoring and communications.

A potential *paid part-time Biodiversity Strategy Lead* was discussed, combining responsibility for monitoring with communications. This reflected the need for dedicated capacity if SU is expected to coordinate biodiversity activity, communicate its significance and connect local work with wider frameworks such as biodiversity net gain (BNG), biodiversity duties (BD) and the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS).[9]

The discussion also identified the need for leadership support, a possible full-time equivalent (FTE) position following UDC migration, and a clear communications migration plan. Responsibilities for BNG, BD and LNRS would also need to be clarified. These issues reinforce the wider organisational point emerging from the workshops: partnership and engagement cannot be separated entirely from *capacity, leadership and responsibility*. If SU is to operate effectively at the mezzolevel, there needs to be sufficient organisational capacity to maintain relationships, coordinate information, communicate activity and follow through on opportunities.

9.6 Towards a mezzo partnership strategy

Taken together, the discussion suggested that SU's future partnership strategy should develop around four connected tasks:

1. **Map the stakeholder ecosystem** – identify the organisations, communities and networks that SU needs to connect with and understand the relationships between them.
2. **Clarify the purpose of each relationship** – establish what SU is seeking from different stakeholders, what it can offer, and where responsibilities should sit.
3. **Develop sustained engagement** – use events, communications, practitioner networks, schools and community activity as routes into longer-term relationships rather than treating them as isolated interventions.
4. **Build the capacity to maintain those relationships** – establish clear leadership, responsibilities, communications capacity and appropriate specialist roles where gaps have been identified.

[9] A question arises concerning how much does this overlap with UDC's Biodiversity Duty? Should UDC be doing this work itself, or can it fund an independent SU to do this on its behalf?

In this sense, the mezzolevel is not simply another organisational tier. It describes a *way of working across existing organisations and communities*, creating connections between local knowledge, community activity, institutional resources and specialist expertise. The future challenge for SU is to turn these connections into a practical partnership infrastructure capable of supporting delivery, participation, evidence gathering and further funding.

The concluding discussion therefore brought the four workshops back to the central purpose of the exercise: *to determine how SU can move from collective ambition towards an organisation capable of connecting, coordinating and enabling action across Uttlesford.*

Appendices

Appendix One: Sustainable Uttlesford Workshops Attendees

- Ben C. Mills (Cinematographer and Director of Photography, The Documentary Company)
- Lois Bowser (UDC Planning)
- Bob Burlton (Sustainable Stansted & Uttlesford, Peacock Community Energy)
- Lu Camish (Producer and Director, The Documentary Company)
- Professor Tom Cameron (University of Essex, Life Sciences)
- Chris Dodge (SU + Peacock CE)
- Bianca Donald (UDC / SU)
- Tom Day (ECC)
- Edward Gildea (Uttlesford Green Party / Greenspace Access Group)
- Nicky Joshua (RCCE)
- Sarah Levin (UDC Economic Development Manager)
- John Lockton (SU + Sustainable Hadstock)
- James Lumbard (UDC)
- Richard Pavitt (UDC)
- Counciler Neil Reeve (SU, UDC Member)
- Vicky Reed (UDC)
- Andy Schmiedecke (UDC)
- Margaret Shaw (SU Eagles)
- Richard Sidebottom (Pant Valley Riverwatch)
- Dr. Tony Sampson (EBS)
- John Starr (UDC)
- Darren Tansley (EWT)
- Giles Tofield (CERG)
- Elias Watson (ECC)

Appendix Two: 0-6 month/6-12 month action/task table

Timescale	Key action	Main tasks / outputs
0–6 months	**Set priorities**	Agree immediate objectives, priorities, responsibilities and timescales.
0–6 months	**Review organisation and capacity**	Review current structure, committee arrangements, skills, workload and resource gaps.
0-6 months	**Recruit interim staffing capacity**	Role to take a lead (with support from existing UDC capacity and committee) on the 0-6 month programme (and lead in to next 6 months and beyond)
0–6 months	**Establish business-planning group**	Create a small core team responsible for developing the business plan and driving transition.
0–6 months	**Develop the business plan**	Bring together vision, activities, organisational structure, staffing, infrastructure, partnerships, funding and measures of success.
0–6 months	**Agree future organisational model**	Assess CIC/CBS and other options; develop governance and transition arrangements.
0–6 months	**Develop funding strategy**	Map potential funders and income streams; prioritise applications and develop a funding pipeline towards May 2027.
0–6 months	**Build the evidence base**	Document existing projects, successes, partnerships and community benefit to support future funding and demonstrate value.
0–6 months	**Strengthen partnerships and engagement**	Map key relationships, clarify the future role of UDC and develop community and stakeholder engagement.
0–6 months	**Develop communications and listening function**	Establish key messages, communications channels and mechanisms for understanding community needs and opportunities.
0–6 months	**Plan infrastructure and transition**	Identify IT, workspace, communications, governance and professional-support requirements and establish a transition timetable.
6–12 months	**Establish the new organisation**	Complete legal and governance arrangements and transition from the existing committee to the new organisational structure.
6–12 months	**Establish leadership and staffing**	Recruit priority staff (where necessary) and establish clear roles, responsibilities and operational systems (learning from initial 6 months)
6–12 months	**Secure and diversify funding**	Continue funding applications and develop grants, sponsorship, consultancy, community investment and other appropriate income streams.

Timescale	Key action	Main tasks / outputs
6–12 months	**Deliver the business plan**	Implement priority projects, partnerships, events and public-facing activity.
6–12 months	**Develop operational infrastructure**	Establish appropriate workspace, digital systems, communications and financial/administrative processes.
6–12 months	**Monitor and evaluate**	Measure engagement, delivery, environmental impact, community benefit and organisational development.
6–12 months	**Review and develop the next phase**	Use evidence from the first year to refine priorities, strengthen partnerships and develop longer-term funding.

Appendix Three: Priority/Focus/LTO

Priority	Immediate focus	Longer-term objective
1. Vision & Identity	Agree SU's future purpose and strategic identity	Establish a clear organisational proposition
2. Governance & Structure	Develop options for independent organisation	Establish appropriate governance and operating model
3. Funding & Business Planning	Map funding opportunities and immediate actions	Develop diversified and sustainable income
4. Biodiversity & Evidence	Establish biodiversity priorities and monitoring approach	Build evidence-led nature recovery activity
5. Partnerships & Engagement	Map stakeholders and prioritise relationships	Build a durable local sustainability network
6. Communications & Imagination	Develop key messages and engagement activity	Establish SU as an enabling infrastructure for local action