

Resilient Roch:

A relationship-first approach to community flood resilience

The Resilient Roch project is a flood and climate resilience initiative in Rochdale, helping households, especially those in vulnerable or disadvantaged areas, become more resilient to flooding.

The project works through trusted local organisations and intermediaries to engage diverse, marginalised residents often overlooked by standard consultations.

By embedding sustained, relationship-first engagement within the local authority, it demonstrates that locally rooted delivery is essential to achieving equitable and lasting climate resilience in disadvantaged communities.

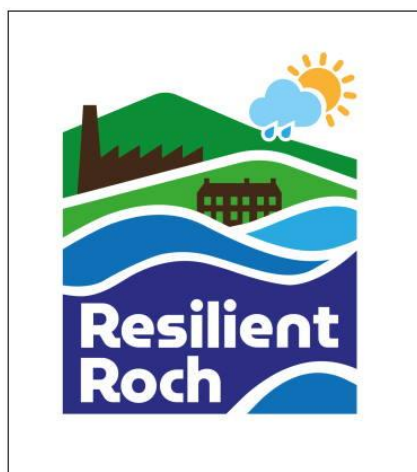


Figure 1: Resilient Roch logo to help create a public-facing identity for the project



Figure 2: Screenshot from animation created by Holy Trinity Church of England Primary School / Harry Wheeler Film and Photography

Resilient Roch

Resilient Roch is one of 25 projects across England funded by the Flood and Coastal Innovation Programme (FCIP). The Programme emphasises innovation in flood risk management, including:

- Combining different resilience actions to increase their impact.
- Trialling new resilience and adaptation activities.
- Identifying new ways of working and overcoming barriers.
- Identifying and disseminating best practice.

Resilient Roch, led by Rochdale Borough Council (RBC) with the National Flood Forum (NFF) and a wider stakeholder group, has multiple strands including the installation and maintenance of property flood resilience, work to enhance financial resilience (through

insurance initiatives), natural flood risk management and the installation of backyard sustainable urban drainage systems.

The project is being delivered alongside a wider [EA led scheme](#) (supported by Rochdale Borough Council) to alleviate flood risk from the River Roch and key tributaries. Teams from the two projects are collaborating to ensure that messaging for residents is coordinated and consistent, and to achieve more effective community and stakeholder outreach.

Improving flood and climate literacy and community resilience is vital for creating more resilient societies. But engagement can be hindered by socio-economic pressures, fragmented local networks, and competing public service demands. [Flooding disproportionately affects disadvantaged communities](#), and in Rochdale this risk is compounded by poor housing and wider socio-economic challenges, as noted in the [Rochdale Flood Poverty Report](#). While many long-term residents understand their flood risk, high-turnover areas such as Wardleworth often include newer or previously unaffected residents who remain unaware until they experience flooding themselves. Some residents can at the same time face other barriers, including lower levels of language proficiency, providing a further obstacle to engagement.

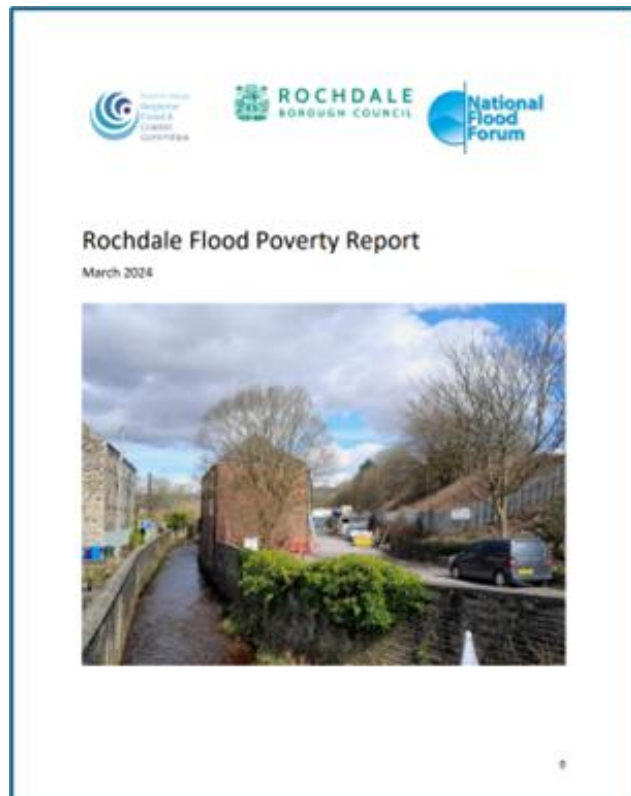


Figure 3: Rochdale Flood Poverty Report

Strengthening resilience therefore requires more than physical defences; it demands recognising underlying, contextual issues including social justice and economic stability. This underlines the need for tailored, community-based approaches that support effective participation and long-term adaptation.

Resilient Roch – An approach to community engagement

Effective community engagement underpins every element of Resilient Roch, from installing property-level flood measures and delivering school outreach to working with social housing providers, landowners, voluntary organisations and the Environment Agency. It is a dynamic, multi-layered process led by staff across different settings, built on clear communication, active listening and collaboration to drive meaningful community action.

Rochdale

Rochdale is located northeast of Manchester within the Greater Manchester city-region. With a population of 224,000 (Census, 2021), it encompasses a mix of urban and rural communities. The Borough includes the town of Rochdale and smaller outlying towns such as Heywood, Middleton and Littleborough, each with distinct local identities.

Rochdale, like many former mill towns, has a diverse ethnic mix. The extent and character of this diversity vary markedly across the Borough, though inner-urban neighbourhoods such as Wardleworth are particularly ethnically diverse (Table 1; Figure 4).

	Wardleworth MSOA (Rochdale 008)	Littleborough MSOA (Rochdale 001)	Rochdale Borough	NW England	England & Wales
IMD Ranking (2025)¹	Decile 1 (Most deprived)	Decile 3	Decile 1		
Population identifying as White British²	23%	97%	74%	81%	82%
Population with English as first/main language in household³	57%	97%	88%	93%	91%

Table 1: Index of Multiple Deprivation summary table

History of flooding

Several areas of Rochdale, including Wardleworth and Littleborough, have a long history of flooding, in part derived from their Industrial-Revolution-era development along river corridors. Residents continue to face risks from both fluvial and pluvial (surface-water) flooding, often a combination of the two. This has sometimes been exacerbated by increased urbanisation, and is set to intensify further with climate change.

Between 1991 and 2021, Rochdale experienced several major flood events, most notably in 1991, 1995, 2008, and during Storm Eva in December 2015. The latter was particularly severe, causing major personal, community and financial disruption. Over 400 properties in Rochdale and Littleborough were flooded. Town centre businesses also suffered extensive damage and disruption.

In response, over 370 property flood resilience (PFR) grants were issued funded by Defra and supplemented with contributions from local authority funds to support PFR installations and provide recovery support to residents experiencing hardship and small businesses. Grants were delivered by Rochdale Borough Council with support from the Council's Lead Local Flood Authority, and housing, health, and welfare teams. Less extensive property flooding also occurred in 2017, 2019 and early 2020. Additionally, whilst there have been flood warnings, such as during Storm Christoph in January 2021, there have been no significant flood incidents since 2020.

¹ House of Commons Library <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10526/>

² 2021 Census

³ 2021 Census

Extreme rainfall resulting in heightened river levels, whether flooding occurs or not, generates anxiety and concern for many residents. Such anxiety at times of heavy rain or forecast storms was evident in affected communities after Storm Eva. Yet, at the same time, if Flood Alerts are triggered over-cautiously, there is a risk that people become complacent, ignore warnings, and fail to respond when a flood does occur.

Understanding the wider contexts of vulnerability is a vital consideration when designing effective flood risk management interventions and support. The Rochdale Flood Poverty Report, funded by the North West Regional Flood and Coast Committee (NWRFCC) (Figure 3), offers a detailed analysis of flood risk, vulnerability, and resilience in Wardleworth and Littleborough. It introduces the concept of 'flood poverty' to describe the compounded challenges of flood risk, socio-economic deprivation and broader issues relating to housing.

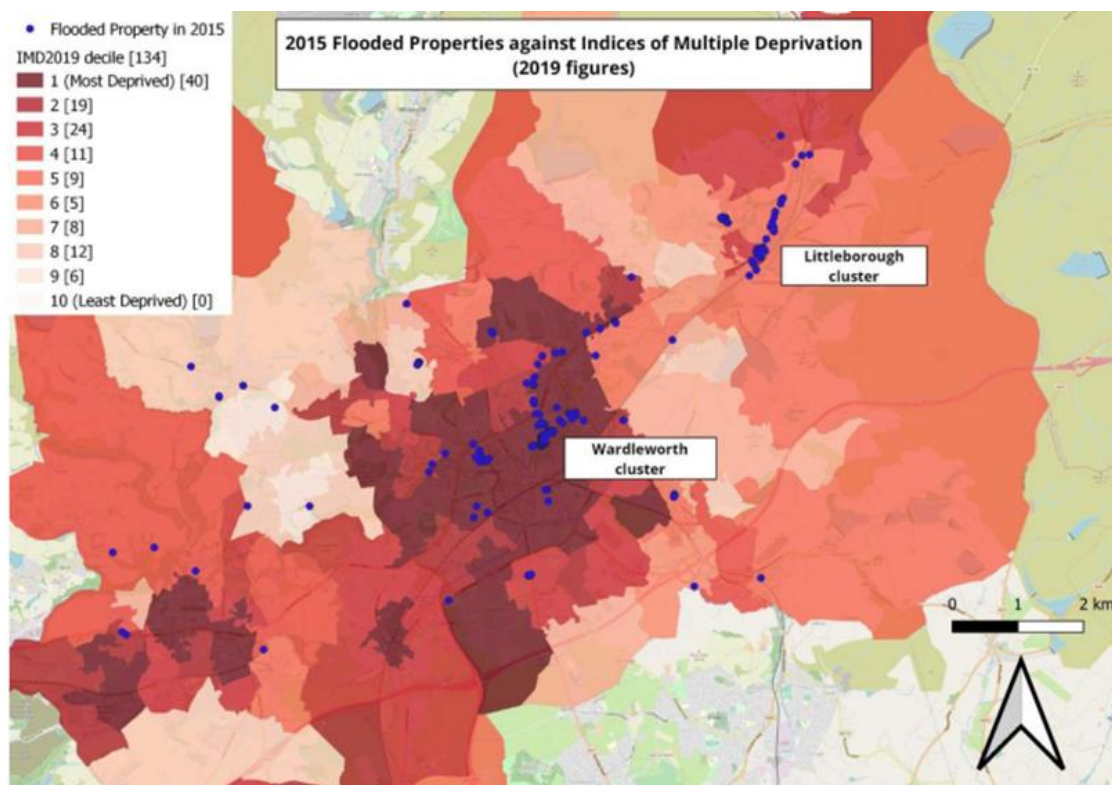


Figure 4: Indices of Multiple Deprivation against 2015 flooded properties as published in the [Rochdale Flood Poverty Project report](#).

Key findings of the report show structural patterns of flood disadvantage: low-income households face higher risk, flood literacy is uneven among residents and frontline staff, insurance uptake remains low and – in some instances - institutional mistrust limits engagement. Together, these factors show how social vulnerability, information gaps and weak institutional relationships compound risk. The report calls for socially just, place-based interventions, to design and deliver interventions that are responsive to the lived realities, concerns and contexts of targeted communities and the places they inhabit. These need to reflect the complexities of working with vulnerable, diverse communities and, where possible, to tackle the systemic conditions shaping their exposure to flood risk and to their capacity to respond.

Challenges of community engagement

Rochdale comprises a mosaic of often amorphous 'micro-communities' shaped by cultural, religious, linguistic and socio-economic diversity. Stakeholders - tenants, landlords, businesses, NGOs, and local agencies - have varied relationships with flood risk, often influenced by insurance access, housing conditions and flood type.

Reaching vulnerable and often overlooked groups, such as older people, non-English speakers, and those who are socially or digitally excluded, is particularly challenging. Standard engagement methods often fail, as cultural norms, language barriers and generational divides require more creative, localised approaches.

Insights from resident interviews and the Resilient Roch team show that people are more likely to engage when meetings are led by trusted community figures, when there is a clear personal benefit, and when any long-standing institutional distrust is acknowledged. Expectations of the local authority also vary widely. Meanwhile, some community groups have less reach than they appear from 'the outside'. While many *could* act as trusted intermediaries, some speak to limited constituencies and often require significant support.

Long-standing role of the National Flood Forum in Rochdale

Against this context, the National Flood Forum's role as an independent, trusted intermediary or broker has been crucial to the success of Resilient Roch. Since the Flood Resilience Community Pathfinder (2013-15) their role has been crucial in setting the context for trusted engagement, and to negate the need for a 'cold start' for the engagement in support of the objectives of the Resilient Roch project.

When planning engagement activities for Resilient Roch, the team applied these insights to ensure that, as far as possible, systemic and local barriers were recognised and addressed. This resulted in an inclusive, tailored and co-produced approach designed to better support individuals and underserved groups.

Previous engagement work in Rochdale

Rochdale has a strong track record in community-led flood resilience. Between 2013 and 2015, the Defra-funded Flood Resilience [Community Pathfinder](#) (RBC and the NFF) established a foundation for sustained collaboration to raise awareness, build capacity, and catalyse action in high-risk areas. The project addressed low flood literacy and barriers to engaging marginalised communities. Since then, efforts have continued through natural flood risk management and property flood resilience projects. This has been supported by a dedicated NFF staff member working through the Lead Local Flood Authority (LLFA), complemented by intensive engagement and resource from [Rochdale's Strategic Housing Programme](#). This engagement work is also a key priority within the Rochdale Borough [Strategy for Flood Risk Management](#) and [Climate Change Strategy](#).

Resilient Roch – community engagement

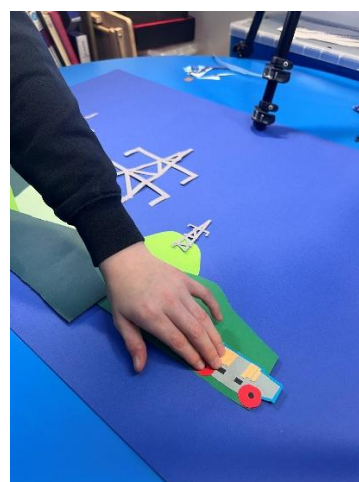
Our approach to engagement in the Resilient Roch Project

Engagement is the driving force behind Resilient Roch, enabling effective integration and cross-sector collaboration. This reflects years of sustained investment in flood resilience and community: Rochdale Borough Council and the National Flood Forum have worked together since 2013 to build and maintain community relationships. Given how engagement is central to delivering the aims of Resilient Roch, interventions were designed to be targeted, place-sensitive, and delivered through trusted intermediaries.

The Resilient Roch project demanded wide-ranging community engagement focused on building flood resilience in high-risk areas. The team adopted a holistic model of literacy and resilience that integrates physical, social and economic dimensions of the project.

The approach moved beyond traditional, one-off (i.e. discrete) flood-risk communication. Trust and community advocacy were built through consistent, low-pressure engagement. This entailed attending a wide range of community events (not limited to flood-related gatherings), offering relationship-building talks, listening to community concerns, ensuring accessibility, and working closely with local leaders. This has been driven largely by an NFF officer embedded in the Resilient Roch team, who has built trust by acting as an independent intermediary or ‘honest broker’.

Key activities included supporting local Flood Action Groups in Wardleworth and Littleborough, facilitating multi-agency collaboration and the continuation of support for citizen science through natural flood management monitoring. The project prioritised inclusive outreach, with translated presentations and workshops for marginalised groups, door-to-door engagement and individual (bespoke) engagement for non-English-speaking households. Additionally, public events, school sessions, and creative initiatives helped raise awareness across diverse demographics.



Figures 5 and 6: Primary school children participated in an animation workshop organised by the Resilient Roch team

Table 2 (below) provides some examples of the community engagement undertaken by officers across the project (RBC and NFF officers).

Supporting community engagement and flood action groups
- Groups were supported to develop Flood Action Plans (FAPs) (for example, in identifying local flood risks). - Joint site visits with the Environment Agency (EA) and Rochdale Borough Council (RBC) helped communities understand flood mitigation efforts and voice concerns. - Littleborough Flood Action Group continued natural flood management monitoring (extending the work of the River Roch Catchment Slow the Flow Natural Flood Management Project), including collecting and sharing data from catchment monitoring equipment with the University of Manchester to support ongoing NFM research. - Flood Action Groups were supported in their representation of community views. They were encouraged to ask informed questions and were supported in working with agencies through multi-agency meetings with stakeholders including RBC, the EA, and United Utilities.
Public events & community / civil society outreach
- Interactive stalls, posters and activities were used to engage families on flood awareness, water conservation, and climate resilience at a variety of community events (for example at RBC's Feel Good Family Picnic, Festival of Ideas and Earth Day events, run as part of RBC's wider climate programme). - Littleborough's Flood Action Group's NFM monitoring was showcased at public events such as the Science Extravaganza. - Talks and presentations to other RBC staff to help integrate flooding resilience with other elements of the council's work. - Planting sessions were delivered with project partners at Olive Standring Court, an assisted living facility, where rainwater planters had been installed through the project to promote sustainable rainwater management.
Bespoke engagement with marginalised groups
- Presentations to groups including the Rochdale Women's Welfare Association (RWWA) helped raise flood awareness and insurance literacy, with the assistance of participants where translation was required for Urdu and Bengali. - Climate Conversations workshops with the Bangladeshi Association and the Kashmiri Youth Project facilitated dialogue on climate change and flood risk to already established men's and women's community groups at these centres. Community participants were able to translate where needed, assisting inclusivity. The project team did not find translation to be a problem because the project involved the community. Some of these workshops also included working with Groundwork on behalf of Electricity North-West to encourage sign up for their "at risk register" that prioritises vulnerable people in power cuts, as these can often be a side-effect of flooding. - Door-to-door outreach was used to promote property surveys and property level resilience and/or energy saving measure installations.
Youth engagement
- Project officers developed resources and delivered lessons on flood risk and climate change to primary school students. - Project officers attended local school careers fairs to engage with young people and promote understanding of flood risk, climate change, and career opportunities. - Planting sessions were delivered with project partners at schools where rainwater planters had been installed through the project to promote sustainable rainwater management. - Sessions were held with Beavers and Cubs (Scouts Association) groups to engage young people on flood preparation and the danger of flood waters.
Support for wider flood resilience

- A key element of Resilient Roch entailed the installation and maintenance of property flood resilience (PFR) measures in properties across Wardleworth and Littleborough. Pro-active contact and support was provided to hesitant residents to help address concerns, clarify contractual terms and conditions, and ultimately to enhance property flood resilience uptake.
- Beyond encouraging engagement with surveys and PFR installations, project staff assisted with post-installation audits, providing support for contractors and residents, acting as a facilitator between the two.
- Officers provided support through follow-up visits and phone calls with non-English speaking residents and their family and friends, who were used as translators to ensure residents understood maintenance and usage of PFR measures.
- The NFF officer also attended some “Weathering Well” sessions at the local leisure centres that provide sessions for older people to look after their health and well-being. These workshops also included working with Groundwork on behalf of Electricity North-West to encourage sign up for their “at risk register” that prioritises vulnerable people in power cuts.

Education, dissemination & legacy

- E-learning training materials are being developed. These aim to improve flood literacy among council staff and residents as well as informing local contractors about property flood resilience measures.
- Educational sessions that were run with local primary schools included the students helping to create stop-motion videos about flooding (Figures 5, 6, 7 & 8).
- A Community Champions volunteer programme (Resilience Rangers) is being developed. The aim is to build community capacity and enable Community Champions to share knowledge and encourage flood resilience initiatives within their local community.
- A Youth Flood Programme is being developed to embed flood resilience within local schools and engage young people in understanding flood risk and community resilience.
- A weather station was installed at Holy Trinity Primary School, helping young people understand local weather conditions, climate change, and their links to flood risk.

Table 2: Indicative examples of community engagement undertaken through Resilient Roch (with support from an NFF project officer).

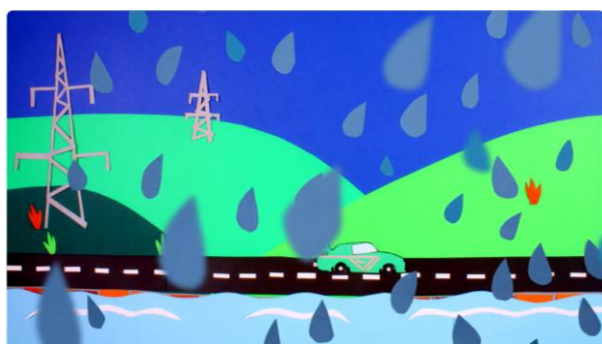


Figure 7: Holy Trinity Church of England Primary School / Harry Wheeler Film & Photography



Figure 8: Hamer Community Primary School / Harry Wheeler Film & Photography

Engagement is a core part of the project for all team members. For instance, officers working directly with households during property-level works have assumed a more holistic approach to literacy and resilience, discussing insurance, providing householder packs, and attending post-installation audits. The project has also found that working through organisations already connected to specific communities was highly effective. This led to “training the engager” workshops for groups such as Groundwork, Rochdale Council’s Housing Team,

and installation contractors on how to – for instance – signpost residents to insurance advice.

The project also emphasises that flood resilience depends as much on housing condition and maintenance as on PFR measures; without good upkeep, physical protection can be ineffective. This is addressed throughout the PFR process, though further work with landlords and others will be needed to embed the value of maintenance and resilient repair. This might include the provision of resilient repair and care training for landlords, trades, housing managers etc.

Key insights from Resilient Roch's approach to engagement

The Resilient Roch approach extended beyond what is regarded as traditional flood-risk engagement. Detailed, long-term, embedded work has been central to the project and underpins every aspect of delivery. The project's outcomes would not have been possible without it. The remainder of the document details key lessons learnt from the community engagement conducted across the course of Resilient Roch, as identified by team members through reflective accounts, interviews and workshops.

Engagement must be sensitive to people, places and contexts

Flood risk management and climate adaptation in Rochdale are shaped by complex demographic, socio-economic and cultural factors. The project recognises the borough's rich diversity and the need for culturally sensitive, locally tailored engagement that reflects variations in flood risk, deprivation, housing conditions and existing resilience measures. People were generally more willing to engage when there was a clear personal benefit. It also accounts for differing levels of stakeholder literacy. For instance, insurance campaigns may not resonate in predominantly rented areas, just as messaging for social housing tenants is ineffective where few residents live in such housing.

Reflecting on the overall strategy, a project officer said that key skills included an ability to speak to people and build links, but also the need to remain pragmatic. In an interview they said, "You need to recognise that you're never going to reach everyone. You're trying to hit those key community groups that people rely on". They added that very often engagement strategies are modelled on communities with already strong social and economic capital. However, in low-income areas, shift work and zero-hour contracts are common, meaning people are less likely to know their availability a few weeks in advance. This can make organising community meetings and multi-agency meetings a challenge.

Building local intelligence

Sourcing local intelligence has been a key part of the engagement strategy in Rochdale, particularly in areas where residents are disconnected or disengaged from formal channels. By building detailed understandings of community dynamics, concerns, and informal networks, Resilient Roch tailored its approach and identified opportunities for meaningful connection and support.

Engagement also entailed dealing with issues that extended beyond flood risk management, both to build rapport and trust and to address underlying sources of vulnerability. On several occasions across the project, team members signposted residents to other council services, such as Housing Standards for unacceptable rental conditions, Adult Care for vulnerable adults or safeguarding concerns, or to the Eco Team to check eligibility for energy efficiency

measures. Officers were thus able to inform the community about the services that the council provides and demonstrate immediate benefits from engagement.

Officers reported that regular, personal contact from the Resilient Roch team built confidence and, they suggested, helped residents feel the PFR scheme was being delivered *with* residents rather than *to* them. That said, a minority of residents either declined to engage or requested measures beyond the project's scope. Overall, however, project officers felt that the team's tailored engagement and internal information-sharing enabled them to handle sensitive situations and unrealistic expectations with tact and clarity.

Inclusive engagement - beyond the 'usual suspects'

Rochdale comprises of close-knit – but distinct – sub-communities. Though supporting internal cohesion, it can be challenging to locate shared platforms where the whole community converges. Turnout to wider community events can therefore be low as residents tend to prefer events with familiar organisations.

Effective communication requires specific, inclusive approaches that reach those facing language barriers, social isolation, or health challenges, while also fostering broader community awareness and a stronger connection to the River Roch. Events were planned with care - considering venues, speakers, and agendas - to ensure accessibility. It was also reported that there was pressure on the availability of community centres and venues, limiting the range and scope of engagement activities that could be offered to the community.

Future engagement must go beyond current high-risk groups. Future exposure may shift and standard metrics can miss vulnerable households, particularly in areas such as Littleborough where it is assumed that people are less vulnerable given that it does not rank as severely on indices such as the Index of Deprivation.

There is clear potential to do this. An example from a community outreach event was householders at the top of a hill, not personally affected by flooding, asking if them having backyard SuDS options would help their neighbours at the bottom of the hill by slowing the rate of water. Where interventions are low cost and non-intrusive, there is an appetite for collective good.

Engaging across diverse communities

There were challenges with engaging across language and cultural barriers for the implementation of the PFR scheme. English is not the first language for some residents, and there are multiple cultural norms across communities that can challenge typical engagement methods. One-size-fits-all communication approaches can be ineffective or even counterproductive. The engagement officer noted that in some communities, household dynamics meant people had different roles. Ownership of properties also factored in, in that the legal owner, the person who was making day to day decisions about the property, and the person living there, might be three different individuals.

The Resilient Roch team found that residents usually had family support; older generations that historically would struggle with the language now had the support of younger generations whose first language was English. This might mean relatively young children translating and, even where there was fluency enough to get across information, being certain that the decision-maker properly understood what they were agreeing to could be a

challenge. Members of community organisations assisted with translation for events and engagement for the PFR scheme on an ad hoc basis.

In most cases the local authority did not translate documents, but this facility was available if needed, and the RBC website has a translation function. General information about the project and contact details for the team were posted online allowing people to use web browser translation applications, however the team were aware that relying on website translation alone could exacerbate digital exclusion. Project members recognised that relying on generic translated materials would not ensure accuracy, relevance to a resident's language or dialect, or understanding of the information. Instead of assuming what language barriers existed, they engaged through in-person visits and phone calls – either directly or, where needed, with support from family members or neighbours who could translate. They also used tools like Google Translate during site visits. Because PFR discussions often involve technical terms that do not translate easily, real-time translation allowed these concepts to be explained clearly, resolved issues more quickly, and ensured every household received and understood the information they needed.

Building long term relations

Resilient Roch team members built strong relationships with residents by providing consistent updates and support throughout the project, including through engagement with climate action events (Figures 9 & 10). Regular phone calls, letters and emails reassured people at each stage, for example, by explaining which contractors would visit next. This single, reliable point of contact was especially valued by residents who felt vulnerable or uncertain.

The engagement officer explained that Rochdale's approach prioritised "presence over pressure" and to "move beyond box-ticking" (interview, Autumn, 2025). This meant focusing on visibility, organic relationship-building and open communication, rather than developing formal arrangements too early. In practice, this "relationship-first model" relied on informal conversations and group discussions designed to listen and learn rather than instruct. Trust was central to this process:

"There is a lot of trust there. They're putting trust in me to listen to their concerns and take them seriously. And I'm putting trust in them to engage with what I'm saying and to take it in."

The engagement officer highlighted the need to ensure that established leadership voices do not dominate, and that there are meaningful opportunities for wider community participation and new, evolving approaches.

These dynamics highlight the importance of inclusive, process-oriented engagement strategies that prioritise long-term sustainability over short-term deliverables. Practically, by regularly attending community events and engaging informally over long periods, the engagement officer built one-on-one connections, particularly with individuals who may be interested in more structured involvement in the future. This approach has helped establish understanding and laid the groundwork for deeper engagement over time.



**Figures 9 & 10: Resilient Roch stand and activity at ‘The Herds’ community engagement event
*Countering community resistance***

Engagement hesitancy was common, with many expecting external agencies to manage flood events directly, a perception sometimes shaped by limited understanding of how flood response systems work. In particular, some community members were reluctant to assume responsibility for flood risk management, including resilience measures installed in their properties. This sometimes led to frustration, especially where support felt uneven. Moreover, landlords often lived elsewhere, and property ownership could be opaque, leaving them difficult to engage.

Apathy can be common, but often masks issues of trust with authority, a lack of confidence or indications of other priorities in peoples’ lives. Tenants, for example, may be struggling with very basic housing problems, or may only be living in an area for a very short time, not long enough to feel part of a community. Local concerns frequently took precedence, and many residents feared new development would worsen flooding, despite evidence that well-planned schemes can reduce risk.

“Many residents are in rented accommodation for short periods of time, which can reduce interest in the long-term outcomes for the area. It also means flood memory is low and awareness of our work in the area is limited.”

Correspondence, community development officer

Officers reported that Rochdale also faced a paradoxical problem that some residents had a very high level of trust in the council, but that this led to a sense of expectation and reliance. The historic tendency of the council to engage in activities above and beyond its statutory requirements, particularly before 2010, and its broadly effective response to the Boxing Day floods in 2015 meant that some residents took the view that flood prevention was the council’s job. In worst case scenarios, one officer reflected, there was a perception that the council would bail them out, so personal resilience measures were not necessary. Similarly, the council’s previous understandable willingness to do works not only on its own legacy

housing stock, since transferred to Rochdale Boroughwide Housing, but on private homes, has in some cases risked creating a dependency.

These dynamics underline the need for clearer accountability, better public education, and more inclusive, responsive engagement to strengthen local flood resilience. Yet the community engagement officer reported that residents and small businesses sometimes distrusted formal authorities, or had a lack of confidence in their capacity, preferring to work with familiar, local organisations and individuals. The community engagement officer also feared that over-reliance on a handful of individuals could place too much pressure on them from an emotional perspective.

Importance of an honest broker

The engagement officer noted that some residents had low trust in institutions, making them hesitant to engage with anything perceived as official or bureaucratic. Low confidence and limited experience dealing with officials exacerbated this, shaping the engagement approach and – vitally – underscoring the value of an **honest broker**. This role was critical in connecting communities, businesses, and risk management authorities, particularly with marginalised groups or where trust in local authorities is weak. In Rochdale, the NFF fulfilled this position. As a third sector partner, the NFF built mutual trust and improved relationships that were sometimes initially complex and strained, and that require ongoing, time-intensive efforts to develop and sustain.

An RBC officer summarised the approach in an interview: “Many authorities hesitate to engage communities regularly due to resource constraints and the potential for adversarial interactions. Flooding often leads to blame, residents pointing fingers at the council or the Environment Agency. But the NFF played an “honest broker” role, mediating between us and the community. This helped foster more constructive dialogue and collaboration.”

Whilst the project was widely promoted and discussed with residents by council staff, having a prominent link to the NFF allowed for further community support and communications from a less formal angle. In areas where engagement officers operate at arm’s length from the local authority, they can have “more freedom to act independently” and “shape their own initiatives” (Interview, Community Engagement Officer). The role also permitted RBC to take a more exclusive focus on flooding related issues, without other issues distracting and diverting council officers’ attention (Interview, RBC project officer).

The Resilient Roch brand was used to bring together all major flood-risk work in the project area, including the Environment Agency’s River Roch Scheme. It provided a single, coherent narrative and positioned the team to speak confidently about the full approach to flooding. The brand also improved public recognition, created a dedicated focus on flood resilience, and helped build more personal relationships between residents and the small project team.

Integration within the local authority

The project benefitted from the NFF engagement officer’s role as an ‘honest broker’. Yet such autonomy can limit institutional backing, access to council resources, and the credibility that comes with being part of the local authority, factors essential for building trust and delivering effective engagement. Integrating the officer within the Council team therefore combined the strengths of both organisations, helping to alleviate some of these limitations.

Although the engagement officer was employed by the NFF, practically, they worked within the local authority. There, they formed part of a multi-stakeholder team consisting of the LLFA, Housing and NFF with links to the climate team, highways and drainage and communications. The officer drew upon the expertise, resources and capacity across these teams. They had a local authority pass, had full access to local authority facilities, and had an RBC e-mail address. This formal recognition enhanced the effectiveness of community-facing roles, enabling faster response times, improved coordination, and greater trust from both residents and council staff. From the perspective of residents, non-flooding issues that were of high personal importance could be readily signposted to within the local authority.

Compared with more conventional arrangements, where community engagement officers are appointed as external consultants, often on short-term, task-specific contracts, the integration of the officer within RBC enabled a significantly deeper level of collaboration. Embedded within the local authority and regarded by staff as a colleague, the officer delivered more responsive and efficient community outreach, ensured consistent follow-up on enquiries and ultimately supported more sustained and effective joint working. This highlights the value of moving beyond discrete, contractual roles toward more embedded, trust-based models of engagement.

Reflecting on their integration with the local authority, the community engagement officer said: “It was really useful. I became more integrated with the council. I knew exactly what they were doing, and I could help with things. I could do things that council officers were doing... I could get out to the community quicker. Being able to access the local authority office was great for following up on enquiries. They saw me as a colleague.”

Interview, Community Engagement Officer

Integration with broader agendas

For many residents, flooding symbolises wider systemic neglect. Widening the scope of participation in flood-resilience efforts requires recognising that flood concerns are often bound with issues such as unadopted roads or blocked drains. Even when issues seem unrelated, residents perceive them as connected, and therefore as priorities. As the community engagement officer noted, “People who are worried about flooding are also worried about other things that might cause flooding.”

Enhancing cross-sector understanding is vital for developing a more integrated and responsive approach to flood preparedness (Figure 11). A broader engagement strategy ensures that flood risk is viewed not in isolation but as part of wider discussions about community wellbeing and infrastructure. To achieve this, flood and climate literacy must extend beyond residents to the professionals who routinely support vulnerable groups, including housing officers and voluntary-sector workers. Project officers also emphasised the need to help people understand their own personal flood resilience responsibility and ownership.

An RBC officer reflected on the integrated working arrangements referred to earlier. They said that knowledge of how the Council and Environment Agency worked as Risk Management Authorities within wider functional organisations represented good

transferable practice and knowledge for future projects. For instance, these arrangements were vital in understanding how flood and climate resilience relates to wider cross-cutting agendas (e.g. housing, social care, education and regeneration). It is also notable that this improved the integration of flood literacy across broader climate literacy efforts, aligned with Rochdale's Climate Emergency declaration and strategy.

There are challenges to this. During recovery from Storm Eva and the rollout of Defra PFR grants, the council provided extra funding and coordinated contractor access and inspections. Yet this level of involvement raises policy concerns: continued reliance on local authorities for post-flood recovery risks creating unrealistic public expectations and is unlikely to be sustainable. Local authorities lead recovery, but they cannot shoulder it alone.

Building partnerships with community anchor organisations

Engaging Rochdale's civil society and volunteer networks offers an important route to communities that mainstream services often struggle to reach, especially in flood-prone areas. Organisations such as Groundwork, Citizens Advice, and local community centres were keen to support Resilient Roch and already hold trusted relationships and sector-specific expertise, making them strong partners for flood-literacy and engagement work. However, challenges around recruitment, retention, and inclusivity underline the need for strategic collaboration, co-produced (mutual) objectives, and robust governance to secure long-term impact.

Leveraging local knowledge and trusted intermediaries is essential for building credibility and trust. Effective partnerships depend on identifying the right organisations, developing genuine relationships, and creating practical initiatives such as training and information packages. Many stakeholders, particularly in the private housing sector, have limited awareness of flood risk, making clear communication and sustained engagement crucial. Working with groups such as the Rochdale Women's Welfare Association, the Bangladeshi Association, and the Rochdale Council of Mosques has opened access to communities through respected local channels.

The project sought to embed engagement within existing community structures and aligning around shared goals. This approach has helped overcome fragmentation and resource constraints, strengthening flood resilience across Rochdale. As one practitioner observed, successful partnership-building is not about issuing directives:

“It's not about just telling them what I want from them. It's about building long-term relationships... We're not telling them what to do. We're having conversations.”

It was recognised by project officers that there was a great need to develop legacy strategies to ensure effective engagement in the context of dynamic communities. The focus here, said one project officer involved in the evaluation, is to integrate good practice as 'business as usual', embedding flood and climate resilience engagement across appropriate sectoral workstreams and investments within the Council and across other neighbourhood stakeholders.



Figure 11: Resilient Roch staff gave a talk to employees from other departments of RBC at the Town Hall to raise awareness of flooding and the project

Legacy of the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted community cohesion in Rochdale, leading to increased isolation and the breakdown of traditional engagement channels. As social mixing was prohibited, engagement with community centres declined, volunteer networks experienced high turnover and breaks in continuity, and some residents, particularly those not active on social media, became disconnected from sources of information and support. This deepened the divide between digitally connected individuals and those who rely on face-to-face communication, leaving the latter often unaware of flood preparedness resources.

These post-pandemic contexts have reshaped how residents engage with their communities. Many now rely on hyper-local networks and avoid mixed community venues presenting both challenges, but also opportunities, for targeted engagement. Volunteers have emphasised the growing importance of one-to-one outreach, though they also highlight the strain on overstretched community groups, some of whom do not see flood risk as part of their remit. These insights underscore the need to work through trusted local networks and intermediaries, using language-sensitive and informal communication strategies to deliver inclusive and effective flood resilience messaging.

Reflexive community engagement

The Resilient Roch community engagement officer was asked to reflect on their role. They were acutely aware that those they consulted with came from very different backgrounds to theirs, demanding a shift away from traditional 'teaching and telling' methods of communication, in favour of more inclusive and responsive approaches. The officer acknowledged the role could be challenging, particularly on when it was difficult to focus meetings on flood resilience issues because there was a perception that the officer

represented the council with communities seeking to leverage wider issues into discussions. The engagement officer also reported a divergence between the training they had received and the role they performed in Rochdale. While the training was appropriate for most contexts, it did not always align with RBC's preferred approach, particularly regarding the embedding of the NFF officer within the local authority. This highlights the need for more flexible, place-specific approaches rather than a one-size-fits-all model.

"Although we are a charity and often benefit from being independent, in my experience I have often been perceived in a similar way to the council. However, this barrier is often removed when the resident has heard of the NFF working in the area or their friends or neighbours have interacted with us positively."

Community engagement officer

Challenges with impact, monitoring & evaluation

Success should be measured not only by immediate outputs but by evaluating the development of long-term relationships in which community members gradually take on leadership roles and advocate for their own needs. Sustaining these efforts over time is crucial, demanding supporting existing community groups, building capacity for engagement with local authorities, and ensuring that communities are empowered to act independently. However, capturing the value of these processes can be challenging, especially when traditional evaluation frameworks focus on tangible outputs rather than relational progress. Consequently, frustration often arises around asset-based approaches that overlook the importance of trust-building and informal leadership development.

Final word

This case study demonstrates that effective flood and climate resilience is built through sustained, relationship-led engagement rather than short-term, transactional interventions. In Rochdale, the team prioritised a 'relationship-first' approach. Taking time to understand local priorities, histories and capacities enabled flood literacy to be meaningfully integrated within wider climate literacy efforts. The team integrated this with the Council's Climate Emergency declaration and strategic ambitions. Crucially, this demonstrates that resilience is most effective when embedded in everyday, often informal, conversations about place, wellbeing and opportunity, rather than treated as a standalone technical issue. While this approach requires time, trust and sustained investment, it offers a more durable foundation for engagement in dynamic and diverse communities.

The Resilient Roch project has truly fostered innovation through its holistic approach to improving the living conditions of residents in the target areas. By ensuring that the engagement approach matched local circumstances, and by building trust and recognition within communities, the project adapted its methods to best suit the needs of local people.

Tracey Garrett, Chief Executive, National Flood Forum

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