



**Wilton
Park**

**Report:
From Declaration to delivery:
towards a more resilient urban
Commonwealth**

Thursday 16 July 2026

**Organised in
collaboration with**
Commonwealth Sustainable
Cities Initiative (CSCI)



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The Commonwealth Sustainable Cities Initiative (CSCI) is a collaboration between the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU), the Commonwealth Association of Architects (CAA), the Commonwealth Association of Planners (CAP), the Commonwealth Engineers Council (CEC) and the Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF), working in collaboration with the Government of Rwanda and The King's Foundation.

This event was an opportunity to share the outcomes of the Commonwealth Sustainable Cities Coalition pilot findings with UK-based Commonwealth High Commissioners, to map how those findings relate to member states' priorities, and to explore practical ways of better leveraging the Commonwealth's comparative advantage in advancing implementation of the CHOGM 2022 Declaration on Sustainable Urbanisation.

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Introduction

By 2050, almost 50% of global urban population growth is expected to occur within Commonwealth cities, doubling from 1 billion to 2 billion inhabitants. With cities generating 80% of global GDP and 70% of global carbon emissions, the successful planning, resourcing and development of sustainable urbanisation is paramount, not only for mitigating climate-related risks, which disproportionately affect Commonwealth states, but for the economic and physical wellbeing of communities on the ground. Sustainable urbanisation, then, is not a ‘side issue for the Commonwealth’, but central to delivery, resilience and strategic planning within it.

Although this need was reflected in the Declaration on Sustainable Urbanisation¹, adopted at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) 2022 in Rwanda, the Commonwealth must move from declaration to delivery ahead of CHOGM 2026 in Antigua and Barbuda. Consequently, following a Wilton Park dialogue in 2025², the Commonwealth Sustainable Cities Coalition³ (CSCC) pilot programme was created to assess and address key challenges hindering a sustainable approach to urbanisation across the Commonwealth, and to identify good practice, innovation and policy priorities to strengthen sustainable and resilient urban development.

Wilton Park, in collaboration with CSCI, convened representatives from twelve High Commissions in the UK, representing countries across Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Europe and the Pacific, alongside representatives from non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the private sector and other members of the CSCC. The countries represented were Antigua and Barbuda; the Republic of Fiji; the Co-operative Republic of Guyana; the Republic of India; the Republic of Malta; the Independent State of Papua New Guinea; the Republic of Rwanda; the Republic of Seychelles; the United Republic of Tanzania; the Republic of Uganda; the Republic of Zambia; and the United Kingdom. The Commonwealth Secretariat was also represented. The group was tasked with using the programme’s findings to discuss the key challenges facing Commonwealth states, potential solutions, and possible priorities to take to CHOGM 2026.

¹ https://issuu.com/comarchitect.org/docs/declaration_on_sustainable_urbanisation?fr=xKAE9_zMzMw

² <https://www.wiltonpark.org.uk/event/advancing-sustainable-urbanisation-working-with-commonwealth-countries-to-build-a-transformative-coalition/>

³ <https://commonwealthsustainablecities.org/csc/>

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Despite diverse country contexts, it was recognised that many of these challenges are shared, and CHOGM 2026 offers a unique opportunity for the Commonwealth to collectively move from declaration to delivery. The pilot programme also highlights avenues to scale, fund and sustain change; CSCI and the CSCC should therefore continue and strengthen this work, including by institutionalising their relationship with the Commonwealth Secretariat.

Building on this support, a pre-CHOGM Wilton Park event will be held in Guyana in October 2026 to shape the future of the CSCC as a flagship Commonwealth partnership capable of delivering tangible outcomes for member states and communities across the Commonwealth, strengthening collaboration across sectors and levels of government, and helping to identify opportunities for mobilising investment.

Key takeaways from the discussion included:

- That sustainable urbanisation, and the 2022 Commonwealth Declaration on Sustainable Urbanisation should remain a central priority for CHOGM 2026 and beyond, recognising the centrality of these issues to delivery of the Commonwealth Strategic Plan.
- That political buy-in for Sustainable Urbanisation from national leaders will be a key determiner of this agenda's uptake at CHOGM 2026 and beyond.
- That Commonwealth networks, including CSCI and its component networks, offer a unique collective resource, seen as useful by many states as they develop solutions and expand capacity in response to the challenges they face.
- That the Commonwealth also offers a potential collective voice for strengthening engagement with investors and lenders.

The CSCC pilot programme

The CSCC pilot programme was a multi-level, multi-sector, cross-discipline initiative supporting Commonwealth cities to address barriers to inclusive, climate-resilient and well-governed urban futures. It was centred on four thematic Action Groups, housing systems, integrated planning, urban finance, and skills and competencies, through which states could deliver scalable, actionable progress on sustainable urbanisation.

Work across these groups evidenced the fact that the main barriers to sustainable urbanisation are systemic. Housing, planning, finance and skills function as a single

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ecosystem, with misalignment in one having a significant impact on the others and on their effectiveness.

The Integrated Urban Planning Action Group, led by the Commonwealth Association of Planners with The King's Foundation, focused on secondary cities, where much of the Commonwealth's urban growth is concentrated and where the resources to plan for it are most limited. Its key finding was that cities are expanding physically far faster than their populations, with sprawl consuming farmland, destroying ecosystems and locking in unsustainable land use for generations, and with spatial plans often disconnected from infrastructure delivery. In response, the group piloted the Rapid Planning Toolkit, developed by The King's Foundation in collaboration with Commonwealth partners, in Belize City: a three-day participatory process through which government, technical agencies and communities agreed a City Charter and a twenty-year growth plan, a replicable model designed for precisely the secondary cities where growth is most acute.

The Housing Action Group, led by the Commonwealth Association of Architects, highlighted that the Commonwealth sits at the centre of the global housing challenge, with 35–45% of the world's 1.1 billion slum dwellers living in Commonwealth countries. A comparative analysis across India, Kenya and Fiji, three very different contexts, revealed remarkably similar challenges: 60–80% of housing delivery is incremental and household-led, yet policy and finance remain oriented towards formal supply, leaving the majority beyond effective support, while rental housing is largely informal and public programmes are unable to keep pace. The group's findings suggest reframing the problem: from a housing shortage to a mismatch between systems and delivery pathways; from eliminating informality to enabling and upgrading it; from expanding mortgage markets to diversifying finance for incremental building; from tightening regulation to adapting it for affordability and scalability; and from a focus on ownership to recognising rental as a core housing system. The group also collated more than a dozen scalable case studies of good practice, from in-situ slum upgrading at scale under Odisha's Jaga Mission to participatory land readjustment delivering affordable, climate-resilient housing in Mpazi, Kigali, and locally sourced, cyclone-resilient bamboo construction in Fiji.

The Urban Finance Group, led by the Commonwealth Local Government Forum, convened a broad range of stakeholders and examined own source revenue across 18 Commonwealth member states, focusing on private financing and multilateral development banks (MDBs) in local infrastructure, alongside the challenges

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communities face in accessing climate finance. Its published findings concluded that the finance gap is a multi-level challenge, not just for cities, but for country systems as a whole.

The Expert Group on Skills and Competencies, led by the Association of Commonwealth Universities, brought together university members to examine the cross-cutting skills challenges facing higher education institutions as they attempt to navigate this change. This complemented the pilot programme's wider work, which highlighted the shortage of professional planning capacity in secondary cities, many of which are growing more rapidly than larger cities. One Kenyan university provided a particularly useful case study. While it identified many of the same challenges as the wider programme, it also emphasised the importance of developing sustainable training and capacity-building pathways within devolved governance systems, highlighting the need not only to address current workforce gaps, but also to anticipate future skills requirements, including the emergence of new professions and the implications of technological change. This underlined the value of universities working with governments and cities to develop curricula that, alongside traditional professions such as planning, embed emerging ones such as urban finance, and the use of data and new technology.

The pilot programme demonstrates the success of multi-level approaches, highlighting that many solutions demand not new work, but that existing work is done differently, underscoring the value of the coalition-based approach embodied by CSCI and demonstrated by the CSCC. There also remains potential for formal Commonwealth institutions to expand their capacity building and implementation support, something to explore in preparation for CHOGM 2026.

Country perspectives

Many varied issues were raised during this Wilton Park dialogue, reflecting the scale and complexity of the challenge. However, responses converged around three distinct themes – political buy-in, urban finance and knowledge sharing and technology, with the impacts of climate change and natural disasters cutting across all three.

Examples from Rwanda and Zambia emphasised that climate change and natural hazards are now a defining constraint on urbanisation. Flooding, landslides, drought and extreme heat are reshaping where and how cities can safely grow, placing new demands on planning systems that are already stretched: hazard mapping, resilient

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design standards and the relocation or upgrading of settlements on exposed land. The cost implications are equally significant. Building to a climate-resilient standard raises upfront capital costs, while repeated disaster recovery diverts budgets from planned investment, and the burden falls hardest on states with the least fiscal space and the weakest access to affordable finance. Treating climate resilience as integral to urban planning and investment decisions, rather than as a separate agenda, was seen as essential.

Political buy-in

Urbanisation is a political process as much as a technical one. Despite agreement that technical issues are important, most projects were thought to fail for non-technical reasons, such as political buy-in and policy continuity.

Consequently, ownership of projects at a national level was seen as crucial, which the Commonwealth could do much to encourage. The pilot programme provided evidence that can be built on for delivery; a next step is to foster the political leadership needed to see these technical solutions through.

Continuity in commitments was another acute challenge highlighted. In Fiji, the proportion of people living in informal settlements has fluctuated greatly with each new government and, with elections upcoming, uncertainty remains over future commitment to this work. In contrast, an informal settlement in Kigali was successfully redeveloped through smaller, incremental policies implemented over many years, evidence that significant change is possible where governments commit to objectives across several years and, potentially, several election cycles.

Throughout any planning process, communities must remain at its heart, considering their interests and involving them in project plans, objectives and timelines. Such cooperation not only makes projects possible, as in Fiji, where as much as one fifth of the urban population in informal housing observes traditional landownership practices, but can also strengthen implementation: if a project falters, communities can petition authorities over neglected timelines.

Many barriers to delivery are systemic, however, and constituents may blame governments for failings that are more complex. Here, the Commonwealth's role is best understood as that of an enabler rather than an intervener: providing support, capacity and trusted evidence so that leaders and officials are better able to manage the urbanisation process, explain its challenges and build community buy-in.

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Beyond local engagement, taking this agenda through the Commonwealth ministerial process is seen as key to progressing it. With the 2022 Declaration already providing the commitment to sustainable urbanisation, CHOGM 2026 presents an opportunity to make this a priority for the next ten years. Such a commitment will require national leaders to take ownership of this agenda, and would also enable the demonstration of results, evaluation and learning, and accountability, rather than simply moving from one agenda to another.

The Commonwealth could also function as a mechanism for collective bargaining. Asked ‘what can the Commonwealth do that no one country can do on its own?’, participants cited its negotiating power with financial institutions, investors and lenders. With access to favourable finance a significant challenge for many member states, the Commonwealth’s collective voice, deployed at the right level, can leverage better terms, as with past bargaining with MDBs in the context of the Climate Finance Vulnerability Index (ClIF), which Jamaica has triggered.

Urban finance

Some participants felt strong project planning would lead to financing. There was also strong agreement that traditional sources of finance are shrinking, and that mobilising new sources of finance and partnerships is key.

As many Commonwealth states are non-AAA credit rated, they are penalised within current financing structures, including private loans and lenders of last resort, making project delivery fundamentally harder. Some lenders also remain concerned about these states’ high levels of urbanisation-related debt. With rural-to-urban migration set to place further pressure on cities, planning and the funding for it must be actively managed. Approaches differ: Uganda’s Parish Development Model, for example, provides strategic investments to farmers, as part of urbanisation projects, to moderate migration, while other cities, including in Uganda, have invested heavily in receiving migrants and integrating them into urban communities. Both sides of this debate were reflected in the discussion.

Although the Commonwealth could work to negotiate a settlement like ClIF, there should also be greater collaboration between member states, and with the Secretariat and the CSCC, to advocate for new solutions and fairer sources of finance, including legal instruments that enable better access to finance, help develop bankable projects, and targeted engagement with pension funds and sovereign wealth funds.

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Accessing finance is a challenge for local communities as well as states. Many cannot pursue sustainable urbanisation projects or use homes in informal settlements as collateral for loans; some states have changed the status of such settlements so communities could borrow. Antigua and Barbuda's Sustainable Island Resource Framework (SIRF) Fund similarly provides low-cost, non-collateral support to households and small businesses experiencing extreme drought and can subsidise hurricane shutters and rainwater harvesting.

Unplanned developments also often lack the means to adhere to planning and building standards, compromising safety and deterring private investors. As the financing gap for sustainable urbanisation is too large for public funds alone (likely requiring at least \$4 trillion), private investment must be harnessed. Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) were repeatedly raised as an avenue to explore. The award-winning Bristol City Leap PPP, for instance, intends to distribute £2.8 million to community projects as part of accelerating Bristol's transition to carbon neutrality, though it required five years of negotiation and planning. Long-term planning and legal certainty are therefore crucial for meaningful private engagement, with enforceable standards, such as the OECD UNDP Impact Standards for Financing Sustainable Development, playing an important role in signalling credibility.

Standards also reflect learning, what has worked and what has not, and so offer a mode of knowledge sharing: a significant opportunity for Commonwealth states.

Knowledge sharing and technology

Of all the capabilities the Commonwealth could offer member states, knowledge sharing was the most cited. It was widely acknowledged that, despite often quite different contexts, many of the challenges facing member states are similar.

Housing featured more prominently than during the 2025 Wilton Park dialogue, with many member states facing comparable housing crises, partly explained by similar issues associated with built environment legislation and unregulated urban expansion. The Commonwealth could be an ideal platform for exchanging knowledge, experience and ideas on an issue that so widely affects its members, and its capability for issue-specific exchange and partnership was also seen as advantageous geographically: the Commonwealth is unique in its South-South partnerships, and in how it connects Pacific, Asian, African, Caribbean and European states, something to continue to build on.

Underpinning much of the housing and planning challenge is land. Participants pointed to the difficulty of securing land for affordable housing and infrastructure, to overlapping statutory and customary systems of tenure, and to incomplete or out-of-date land registration. Insecure or contested ownership slows planning approvals, deters investment, prevents households from using property as collateral, and makes the upgrading of informal settlements harder to deliver, as in Fiji, where a significant share of the urban population in informal housing observes traditional landownership practices. Land tenure reform, better land records and clearer planning frameworks are therefore prerequisites for much of the wider agenda, and an area where Commonwealth states have directly comparable experience to share.

In line with the pilot programme's findings, the need for holistic, multi-level approaches was repeatedly mentioned, largely relating to governmental mechanisms, financial flows, and capacity building. Departmental siloes, and disconnection between national and local governments, are common: communication bottlenecks have impacted project delivery in Kenya, while Zambia introduced a new ministry to ensure green economy and environmental issues inform everything the government does. Noting that cities are often not legally able to access funds from donors or the private sector directly, despite being responsible for delivery, Zambia has also expanded initiatives such as the Constituency Development Fund in support of its decentralisation agenda and community-driven development.

Before the technology agenda, participants returned to a more fundamental constraint: data. Decisions about urbanisation are frequently taken without reliable, current or comparable information on population growth, land use, informal settlements, service coverage, infrastructure condition or municipal revenue. Where data does exist, it is often held in departmental siloes, collected on incompatible bases, or not made available to the local authorities that need it most. The challenge is therefore threefold – access to data, its management, and, crucially, its use in decision making – and it is here that emerging technologies offer the clearest early value, provided the underlying data foundations, standards and capacity to interpret them are in place.

Alongside human capacity building, such as Fiji's partnership with the Commonwealth Association of Architects to address the professional skills gap facing its national building cohort, the use of emerging technologies was explored. Where capacity is stretched or extracted by demanding tasks that pull the strongest staff away from other work, AI tools can shrink the time needed to make calculations, compile data,

prepare contracts and filter project proposals; an AI mechanism is being developed to reduce the time it takes cities to find and access investment finance, drawing on Bristol's experience of securing funds for the LEAP project.

With the meaningful use of quantum technology in planning contexts now being explored, member states can help drive its development: quantum engineers need states' knowledge to develop effective country-specific algorithms, and case studies to capture investment, meaning Commonwealth states can directly shape how this technology evolves.

As skills are shared asymmetrically across the Commonwealth, a common resource of expertise could be established for any member state to call upon, rather than each state expanding all its training and personnel separately. Greater emphasis on inter-Commonwealth trade and investment would also encourage private financing and strengthen the sharing of resources and expertise.

Conclusion

This one-day Wilton Park dialogue sent a clear message: sustainable urbanisation, and the 2022 Commonwealth Declaration on Sustainable Urbanisation should remain a priority in the lead up to CHOGM 2026. There was a strong desire to continue the move from declaration to implementation, which the CSCC pilot programme has done much to outline and guide, and CSCI should continue its work with member states in this regard.

The pilot programme outlines the need for multi-level, multi-sector approaches to largely systemic challenges. Action would be strengthened by better access to lessons learned elsewhere in the Commonwealth, and here CSCI and its component networks provide a unique resource, seen as useful by many states as they develop solutions and expand capacity.

The need to secure political buy-in from national leaders was clearly expressed, as this is a key determiner of the agenda's uptake at CHOGM 2026. Long-term political commitments could also encourage greater private investment, seen as key to addressing the current financing gap, with the Commonwealth offering a potential collective voice for strengthening engagement with investors.

While individual country actions are necessary, success can be strengthened by integrating and scaling them to address systemic barriers comprehensively. A pre-

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CHOGM Wilton Park dialogue with CSCI partners will therefore be held in Georgetown, Guyana, with the support of the Government of Guyana, to bring the agenda forward ahead of and at CHOGM in Antigua and Barbuda.

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Afterword from CSCI: challenges, solutions and priorities for CHOGM 2026

Ahead of CHOGM 2026 the **CSCI should develop an implementation plan** drawing on the outcomes of the CSCC and engagement with member states, High Commissioners and other partners. The plan will:

- 1 Frame the trajectory of urbanisation and the complex challenges and opportunities for the Commonwealth
- 2 Propose actions to better leverage the Commonwealth and its networks to implement the commitments of the Commonwealth Declaration on Sustainable Urbanisation
- 3 Explore a collective Commonwealth approach to strengthening partnerships with the private sector to facilitate urban investment capacity and opportunities across the Commonwealth. This will aim to connect investment opportunities, as well as employment and business opportunities in cities, contributing to the Commonwealth's trade and investment agenda.

Based on the discussions at Wilton Park, the following outline some key points of discussion taken away by CSCI.

Priorities for CHOGM 2026

- Building on the 2022 Commonwealth Declaration on Sustainable Urbanisation, CHOGM 2026 should commit to an active CSCC process and to a ten-year implementation plan for sustainable urbanisation.
- The agenda should be taken forward through the Commonwealth ministerial process, with national leaders taking ownership to drive it forward.

Some of the greatest challenges facing member states

- Housing crises, particularly restricted availability and a lack of affordable housing.
- Rapid and unplanned urban sprawl, compounded by a shortage of professional planning and resource mobilisation capacity, particularly in secondary cities.
- Access to adequate or favourable finance at the city level in order to implement change.
- Departmental siloes and lack of alignment between local and national governments.

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- Insufficient or out-of-date training courses for professional skills, which make appropriate planning and delivery significantly harder.
- Uncertainty around whether incoming governments will continue commitments to long-term programmes.
- The impact of climate change and natural hazards on urbanisation, with consequences for both planning systems and the cost of delivery.
- Insecure land tenure, contested ownership and incomplete land records, which constrain housing delivery, planning and access to finance.
- Limited access to, and management and use of, reliable data to inform decision making on urbanisation.

The Commonwealth's role in potential solutions

- The formal institutionalisation of an entity, such as CSCI, for pushing this agenda, and the formalisation of the relationship between CSCI and the Secretariat.
- Leveraging the Commonwealth network to strengthen knowledge, skills and resource sharing between member states.
- Utilising this network as a collective to strengthen engagement with lenders, as was achieved with the Vulnerability Index.
- Expanding the Commonwealth's supportive work with member states, including legislative solutions to their challenges and greater engagement with communities.

Wilton Park is a discreet think-space designed for experts and policy-makers to engage in genuine dialogue with a network of diverse voices, in order to address the most pressing challenges of our time.

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