



“But we’re a meat-eating family”: Engaging environmentally concerned but politically distrustful groups on reducing meat and dairy

Key messages:

- **Using climate change as the main message to encourage dietary changes may not be effective.** Participants related more to messages around reducing food waste, community food growing, and improving health and wellbeing.
- **Our food and dietary choices are associated with certain personal and cultural values.** Family traditions and cultural roots in particular are strongly linked to people’s decisions to eat meat and dairy. From our workshops and interviews, some of our participants were uncomfortable with the idea of cutting out meat from their diets completely.
- **Participants trusted people like them most of all, rather than outsiders, on meat and dairy.** With this group, we found a low level of trust in ‘elites’ (e.g., politicians, academics).
- **Terms such as ‘plant-based alternatives’ or ‘sustainable diets’ did not widely resonate.** These were referred to as ‘middle class’, and participants felt like these terms do not acknowledge food cultures that already rely on vegetables. Using more straightforward language (e.g., ‘eat more vegetables’) was more acceptable.



Introduction

This briefing is intended for practitioners, researchers, and community organisations working on encouraging low-carbon lifestyle changes related to food and diet, particularly with audiences who are more likely to identify as working class.

The widespread adoption of a low-carbon diet is important to meet emissions reduction targets and limit global temperature increases to 1.5 C. However, food and diet remains one of the most challenging sectors to decarbonise. This is due in part to intensive practices associated with [agricultural production](#), increasing demand for food, and [behavioural change challenges](#) related to consumption.

[Research has shown](#) that eating less red meat and dairy are realistic actions that could collectively reduce emissions significantly. In the UK however, [only 20% of the public perceive this action to be effective](#) in limiting climate change.

[Recent data from CAST](#) shows that people do not intend to switch to vegetarian-only (21%) and vegan-only (11%) diets. There is however significant potential to reduce meat eating. Hubbub polling from April 2024 (forthcoming) shows 89% of people eat meat weekly or more, and 50% of people say they're willing to reduce meat. Only 27% say they have no plans to/don't want to reduce the amount of meat they eat.

However, large parts of society feel that mainstream climate messaging does not resonate; they feel alienated by what they perceive to be the elitist language and perspectives that characterise the prevailing discourse (See [Climate Outreach's Britain Talks Climate](#)).

To understand how these less-engaged voices can be heard and encouraged to shift to a low-carbon diet, Climate Outreach (CO) worked with researchers from the Centre for Climate Change and Social Transformations (CAST) and the environmental charity Hubbub to test food and diet-related messages. Through a six-month engagement in Moston, Manchester, we worked with residents who care about climate change and their community but are not typically involved or represented in climate conversations. The audience was targeted to be broadly representative of the audience segments called '[Loyal Nationals](#)': an older segment that tends to lean left economically but right socially, and is highly distrustful of elites and the direction in which the country is heading.

More details about the project and the audience we worked with can be found in this project's [case study](#).

Methods

Moston residents who completed Hubbub's initial baseline survey were invited to participate in the project; 73% identified as White British; 22% as non-white, and 5% preferred not to disclose. Activities were conducted from July to December 2023 and were divided into three phases:

- **In-person workshop** – Using [Climate Outreach's narrative workshop methodology](#), six members of the Moston community took part in a facilitated discussion. Its aim was to explore how their values, aspirations, identity, and views on the environment relate to their food and dietary choices. Four main messages or narratives were tested: adopting plant-based diets, reducing food waste, cooking more plant-based food, and growing food.
- **Online engagement** – Members of the Moston community were invited to join a dedicated six-week Facebook group, set up and run by Hubbub from July to August 2023. This attracted 96 members (as of September 2023) who engaged at different levels (20 key contributors, 30 only voted in polls but did not engage in posts, and the rest were largely inactive). They were encouraged to discuss topics around food and diet via a series of challenges and online competitions for prizes. Hubbub used findings from the in-person workshop to design their communications content and engagement activities.
- **Reflection interviews** – To triangulate insights from the workshop and Facebook engagement, interviews were conducted by CAST with three community members. This explored people's experiences of participating in the group as well as their wider views on the environment, climate change, and food and diet.

Our findings shed some light on which messages, language, and ‘communication hooks’ about food and dairy were most likely to appeal to audiences like Loyal Nationals and increase their willingness to take action, as outlined below:

Meanings associated with food

We found that when people talked about food, they often did so with reference to their own family traditions. The notion of food as a means of bringing people together was common across the various cultures represented in the group. At the workshop, some participants raised emotive stories about how food connects them to their heritage, and how cooking for neighbours allowed them to integrate in their community. Others reminisced about how they learned to cook from their parents.

Because food and dietary choices are strongly tied to traditions and values, they can be resistant to change. For some participants, this led to a strong rejection of the notion of cutting out meat. As one interviewee said:

“But we're a meat-eating family. So it's something that I would find that hard to get out of my diet. [...] it doesn't interest me, not keeping meat in my diet.”

A similar trend was observed with online participants. When asked to share a dish that makes them think of someone special, six out of ten posted recipes with meat, with some sharing photos of cooking with their family.

Recognising these social and moral meanings associated with food, especially where identity and belongingness are strong markers, can help to drive changes in eating behaviours.

Trusted messengers

After voicing scepticism that their local politicians tell the truth about environmental issues, one interviewee adds that they would only trust researchers and scientists if they could see the original research for themselves.

When asked if they would trust a news report on mainstream media, another participant emphasised valuing information from their community more than other platforms:

“If you’d asked me that, like three, [or] four years ago, I would have said yes, I believe it. But now... I get my news from lots of different platforms. So I don't just watch the BBC, I watch other worldwide news and really finding out [myself] and getting reports from just normal people who are on social media and seeing what is actually happening. That’s where I get information and the news as well, really [...]

You know, when you’re scrolling through TikTok, and you see people from their own country. And you know they're doing local news in their community. They're living it, aren't they? [...] I've always said that for policing, you should live in the community that you police. Maybe [it's because]... you’d care for it more. And maybe that's the same kind of thing, you know? If you're going to bring something in, are you living in that community? Are you doing what you're asking us to do? Are you being a role model? Are you doing it yourself? That’s the people that I trust.”

For those who participated online, Hubbub reported that posts by other community members in the group had better engagement (i.e., more interactions) than those by admin or in leadership roles (e.g., Community Development Manager). This is similar to online poll results showing that members were more interested in learning from other local people in the group.

It is widely acknowledged in [literature](#) that [familiarity within communities](#) can enable people to learn effectively from each other as they tend to be embedded in similar networks of influence, context, culture, and practices. Engaging community members in a process of [social learning](#) can therefore be instrumental in making a step change – beyond awareness raising and information provision – to encourage the adoption of low-carbon food choices.

Choice of words

Distrust also extends to the use of language. Terms like 'sustainable', 'wellbeing' and 'plant-based' were identified by workshop participants as 'middle class', 'buzzwords' or 'condescending'. They expressed a preference for straightforward terms such as 'vegetarian' and a more direct message such as 'eat more vegetables'.

Their arguments further reflect that the words currently used to market low-carbon diet options have been associated with privilege – as they are often more expensive – and for some, "whiteness". This was uncomfortable for some participants.

"This is where the cultural thing comes in ... for me [Pakistani heritage], we eat a lot of vegetables, it will be easy for me ... but now it has become a 'middle-class' thing. It comes down to cost."

"I hate plant-based food ... they are expensive."

Promoting plant-based diets can therefore be alienating for lower income households, where affordability matters (e.g., choosing tinned vegetables over fresh produce) or for cultures who already consume vegetables.

Message framing

Participants were worried about climate change and the environmental changes they were seeing. However, during the interviews, participants only generally spoke of climate change as one of many environmental issues to be concerned about including air pollution, flooding, increasingly frequent natural disasters, ocean pollution and seasonal changes. The narrative workshop showed that people related more positively to messages centred on potential co-benefits (e.g. improved health, reducing waste, community food growing) rather than those framed around direct climate benefits. Hubbub reported that in the Facebook group, a common theme of discussion was about healthy eating. When members were asked to post recipes of vegetarian or vegan dishes, they talked mainly about the ease of preparation and taste; impact on climate or sustainability was not discussed. These findings suggest that framing messages around climate change directly would not be very effective as it is not, in itself, a strong catalyst for action among this group.

Conclusion

Talking about the environmental costs of meat consumption (e.g., climate framing) is commonly used in behavioural interventions on food and diet. However, results from our project emphasise that care must be taken especially to understand the audience, including what they value and who they trust. These findings resonate with other CAST work suggesting that climate change by itself is often not a key motivation for changing or transforming behaviours, but rather potential co-benefits and fulfilling social needs.



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Based at the University of Bath, our additional core partners are Cardiff University, University of East Anglia, University of York, University of Manchester and the charity Climate Outreach.



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