



Five principles for good public engagement: How to get people involved in the climate conversation

Key messages:

- Public engagement is essential in reaching net zero. It increases public support for and co-operation with climate initiatives and leads to better policy.
- Public engagement should help people to feel informed, willing and able to act in line with net zero goals and take part in decision making processes.
- Public engagement should be a collaborative, two-way process and include provision of the physical, systemic support people need to live low-carbon lifestyles.
- ‘Good’ public engagement should take a people-centred approach; adopt fair and inclusive processes; be guided by strong leadership; engage at the right time and in the right way; and include ongoing evaluation and monitoring.



Introduction

This briefing is aimed at politicians, policymakers and practitioners working to engage people with climate action and sustainable behaviour change. It draws on CAST's extensive evidence base, as well as wider research.

Why do public engagement?

Around two-thirds of emissions reductions will require some form of societal or behaviour change¹. This includes people making individual lifestyle changes and supporting the adoption of new technologies and systems.

Building public support for societal change is therefore essential in reaching net zero. This is especially true for behaviours surrounding what we eat, what we buy, how we travel and how we heat and cool our homes, which are difficult to change due to being linked to people's values, identities and cultures.

An effective public engagement strategy on climate change can increase acceptance of, support for and co-operation with climate initiatives. As a result, people are more likely to adopt low-carbon behaviours and the **UK will have a greater chance of reaching net zero in a rapid, equitable and cost-effective way.**

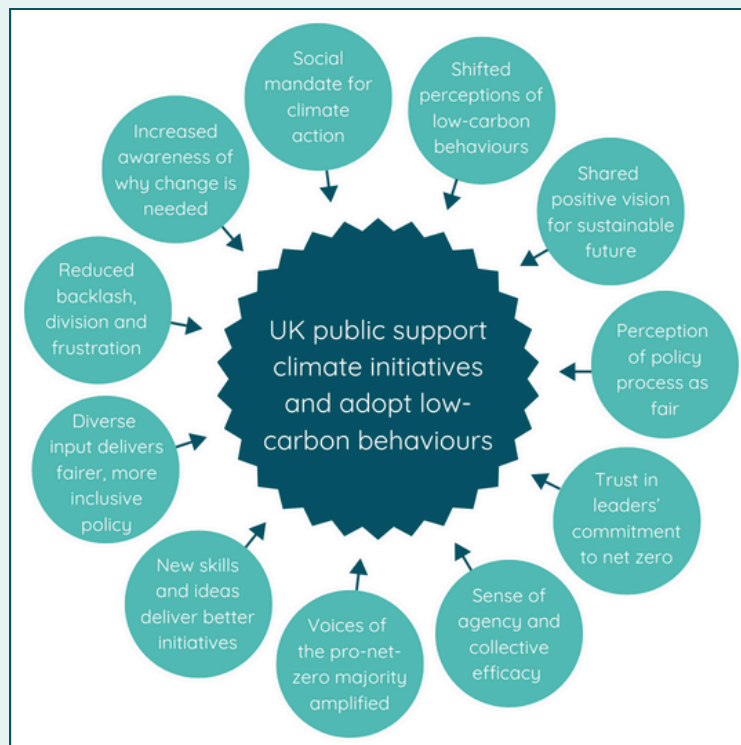


Figure 1: How public engagement on climate change can help the UK reach net zero

¹The Committee on Climate Change (2019). [Net Zero - The UK's contribution to stopping global warming](#). Figure 5.6.

Background

What is public engagement?

Public engagement on climate change is about involving people in the **action** and **decision making** needed to meet net zero.



Figure 2: How an engaged public should feel

Public engagement strategies often focus on education and awareness-raising. But alone, these are relatively ineffective ways of getting people to adopt low-carbon behaviours or support climate policies.

Public engagement is about more than providing information. It should involve a **range of activities**, including those that enable **two-way dialogue** between decision makers and the public, and those that provide people with the **physical and systemic support** they need to live low-carbon lives.



Figure 3: Examples of activities that could be part of a public engagement strategy

Five principles for good public engagement

'Good' public engagement should...

1) Take a people-centred approach

This means recognising the important role that individuals and communities play in reaching net zero. People should feel part of the change – it needs to happen with them, not to them.

Consider the different ways people interact with net zero: Use a diverse range of public engagement methods to involve people across sectors (e.g. business, manufacturing, agriculture, healthcare); across scales (e.g. national, regional, local/community); and in their different societal roles (e.g. consumer, citizen, parent, employee, fan).

Encourage collaboration and build community: Support local and citizen-led activities already taking place, take part in joint projects with other organisations, and reach out to groups otherwise disconnected from their local community. For example, promoting and funding community food programmes (that encourage diets involving local, seasonal produce and reduced food waste) could make such initiatives more accessible to low-income households.

Ensure people feel listened to: Engage people early in the decision making process so they can shape policy outcomes. Communicate transparently and keep people updated on progress.

2) Adopt fair and inclusive processes

This means ensuring people from all walks of life are involved and feel able to take action and share their views. To achieve net zero, climate initiatives must work for everyone.

Be aware of social demographics: Specifically, how they affect individuals' experiences of climate change and abilities to engage. Tailor public engagement activities to the audience and make an extra effort to include groups who are marginalised (e.g. young people), most vulnerable to climate change (e.g. coastal communities) and most affected by climate policy (e.g. workers in carbon intensive industries). For example, Scotland's public engagement strategy on climate change – 'Net Zero Nation' – states that the nation's key climate communications will be available in large print, Easy Read and British Sign Language, to improve accessibility.

Consider how the engagement approach affects participation: Open consultations (e.g. on local planning decisions) can be useful but are likely to mostly attract people who already have knowledge and power. It's important to also include more participatory approaches that enable different forms of engagement and are accessible to more representative and/or diverse groups of people. For example, deliberative processes (e.g. citizens' assemblies and digital participation) facilitate a more in-depth, informed discussion between the public and decision makers. Additionally, 'bottom-up' approaches (e.g. grassroots initiatives, community groups and social movements), which are initiated by citizens, allow people to express their views on their own terms.

Respond to 'discourses of delay' and people's concerns: Narratives such as 'climate action is too expensive' or 'I'll only act if everyone else does' are used to justify delayed or inadequate action. They fuel the 'culture wars' and create a backlash against climate policies. These narratives are often rooted in concerns about unfairness. Effective public engagement provides space for these concerns to be aired and addresses them early and meaningfully, for example by involving affected communities in the development of potentially controversial policies (e.g. ultra-low emission zones).

Provide physical support to help people overcome systemic barriers: People will adopt low-carbon behaviours when they are the easy, convenient, cheap, normalised choice. Therefore, as well as providing information and opportunities for discussion, public engagement strategies on climate change should provide relevant infrastructure, funding, incentives and regulations.

3) Be guided by strong leadership

This means being ambitious, accountable, clear and consistent. Strong leadership builds trust, legitimises change and unifies people towards a shared ambition.

Develop a clear and positive vision of the future: It should be desirable yet feasible and translate abstract climate goals into concrete outcomes. Decision makers should co-design the vision with diverse people across the country and communicate it on a long-term basis in a coordinated and consistent way.

Lead by example: The signalling effect of leaders can be tremendous. People in positions of power should act in line with their policies and promote their own low-carbon behaviours. This generates a sense that all people are committed to climate goals, building trust and boosting collective efficacy. It also normalises low-carbon behaviour, a powerful way of encouraging environmental action. Exemplifying green behaviours is one of the five actions central to Wales' public engagement strategy on climate change – 'Climate Action Wales'.

Provide proper resources and support: Successful climate initiatives require adequate funding, information, training, infrastructure, promotion and coordination. Decision makers should provide these resources via top-down, centralised processes, but also by enabling smaller-scale external initiatives.

4) Engage at the right time and in the right way

This means paying attention to the wider context. 'Good' public engagement should try to meet people where they're at.

Consider timing and external factors: Align initiatives with big events (e.g. global climate conferences) to create a national conversation and with moments at which people are particularly open to change (e.g. when moving jobs or cities).

Start the climate conversation around everyday concerns: Climate change is not the only issue on people's minds and climate action is perceived more favourably if it delivers non-environmental (e.g. financial or health-related) benefits. Effective public engagement should understand people's needs and enable people to co-develop climate policies that address these needs. Rolling out climate initiatives in 'policy bundles' alongside other social and economic reforms is particularly effective – for example, America's 2022 Inflation Reduction Act provided funding to boost clean energy and reduce healthcare costs.

Pay attention to communication: Climate change is a unique problem with unique communication considerations. For example, practitioners should link climate issues to communal values; tell stories about people, rather than only relaying facts and figures; and use trusted messengers such as scientists, healthcare professionals and individuals with whom the target audience can identify. Bristol City Council produced climate action story videos showing a diverse range of Bristolians doing things they enjoy which are also beneficial for the climate, for use in climate campaigns.

5) Include ongoing evaluation and monitoring

This means learning from successes and failures. There are more or less in-depth ways of doing this, but the key takeaway is to review and improve your engagement strategy over time.

Develop clear goals: What are you trying to achieve? What is the purpose of doing public engagement? Goals should be ambitious but deliverable and take into account available resources. For example, Scotland's ['Net Zero Nation'](#) strategy sets out clear objectives that are woven through the document, guiding the strategy's actions and initiatives.

Co-design a strategy aligned with your goals: Plan interventions that will help you achieve your goals. Get input from a diverse range of people, including experts, businesses, local authorities, community groups, and marginalised and vulnerable individuals.

Track progress: Measure and assess indicators of success. It can be difficult to directly attribute outcomes to public engagement activities so making indicators as specific as possible can be helpful. Scotland's ['Net Zero Nation'](#) has some useful ideas regarding monitoring and evaluation. Practitioners should also share their learnings with other organisations to enhance collective understanding of public engagement on climate change.

Example

Example: A low-carbon transport initiative was introduced in a town. Based on feedback from town hall meetings, cycle lanes were improved and some parking spaces in the town centre were replaced with pedestrian zones. A communications campaign updated residents on the changes and explained the climate and health impacts of car travel. A hotline was also set up so that people could ask questions and provide feedback. Some indicators that could be measured are shown below.

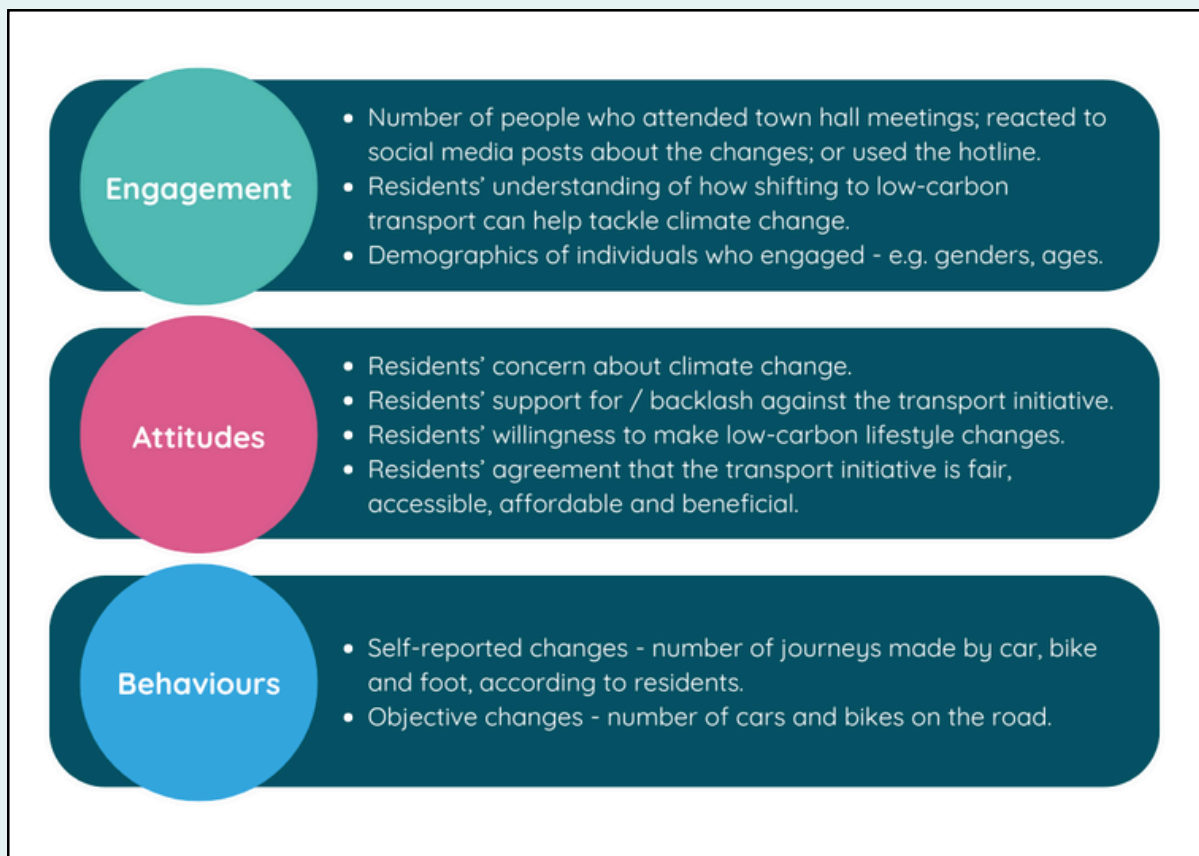


Figure 4: Examples of indicators that could be measured to assess public engagement around a new low-carbon transport initiative

Further reading

Rationale behind public engagement on climate change:

- Chilvers, J., Pallett, H., & Hargreaves, T. (2017). Public engagement with energy: Broadening evidence, policy and practice. UK Energy Research Centre, London.
- Demski, C. (2021). Net zero public engagement and participation: A research note.
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- Verfuërth, C., Demski, C., Capstick, S., Whitmarsh, L., & Poortinga, W. (2023). A people-centred approach is needed to meet net zero goals. *Journal of the British Academy*, 11(s4): 97–124. <https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/011s4.097>

Principles for good public engagement on climate change:

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- Verfuërth, C., Jones, G. and Roberts, L. (2023). Workshops to discuss the future of tree planting with Welsh farmers. Cardiff: Welsh Government.

Further reading

Climate communications:

- Corner, A. & Clarke, J. (2016). [Talking climate: From research to practice in public engagement](#). Springer.
- Corner, A., Shaw, C. and Clarke, J. (2018). [Principles for effective communication and public engagement on climate change: A handbook for IPCC authors](#). A Handbook for IPCC authors.

Public engagement strategies on climate change:

- Scotland: [Net Zero Nation](#)
- Wales: [Climate Action Wales](#)
- Bristol: [Climate action on engagement, culture, and inclusion](#)

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CAST is a global hub for understanding the systemic and society-wide transformations that are required to address climate change.

We research and develop the social transformations needed to produce a low-carbon and sustainable society; at the core of our work is a fundamental question of enormous social significance: How can we as a society live differently – and better – in ways that meet the urgent need for rapid and far-reaching emission reductions?

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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