

CAST BRIEFING 34 - December 2024



Leading by example with low-carbon behaviours: how politicians, celebrities and business leaders can stimulate behaviour change and increase trust

Key messages:

- Politicians, celebrities and business leaders who lead by example with high-impact low-carbon behaviours* increase public willingness to adopt these behaviours.
- High-carbon behaviour from leaders can undermine trust and reduce public willingness to act on climate change.
- Leaders who lead by example are more popular and are perceived as more serious about climate change, more trustworthy and more credible.
- There is a strong public desire for leaders to act first and ‘most’ when it comes to low-carbon behaviour.
- If leading by example is to be effective, the context, detail and communication of the low-carbon behaviour are important.

**Note: High-impact low-carbon behaviours are: flying less, eating less meat, driving an electric car, improving home efficiency, using public transport and adopting active modes of travel.*



Centre for **Climate Change**
and **Social Transformations**

CAST is a global hub for understanding the systemic and society-wide transformations that are required to address climate change. Based at the University of Bath, our additional core partners are Cardiff University, the University of East Anglia, the University of York, the University of Manchester and the charity Climate Outreach.

Introduction

This briefing is aimed at politicians, policymakers, celebrities, company bosses and leaders of all kinds. “Leaders” are defined as people with high status and influence due to their job, reputation or fame.

Rapid, society-wide changes in behaviour are needed to help avert the worst effects of the climate crisis. In the UK, the [Climate Change Committee \(CCC\)](#) says 60% of emissions reductions will involve behaviour changes.

Some of the [most impactful behaviour changes](#) are: flying less, eating less meat, driving electric cars, improving home energy efficiency, using public transport and adopting active modes of travel (e.g. walking, cycling). However, these choices have proved elusive at scale and are rarely encouraged or modelled by high-status individuals (“leaders”), despite established knowledge about the influence of leaders as role models.

Leading by example is well understood as a fundamental part of leadership, and repeated research shows that the public wants to see climate leadership from governments, institutions and individuals.

This briefing note summarises recent research on the effects of leading by example by high-status individuals: politicians, celebrities and business leaders. These leaders are likely to have lifestyles that produce far [greater-than-average emissions](#), raising issues of fairness in relation to who should change behaviour first, and by how much. Fairness is repeatedly [shown to be crucial](#) if climate policies and social change are to be accepted by the public.

How leading by example works

If key people in social networks signal the desirability of new behaviours by modelling such behaviours, [social norms can change](#). Behaviours that signal genuine belief and commitment to a cause can [increase a leader’s credibility](#) and encourage others to adopt the same behaviours. Identity can be key to this: people are more likely to emulate leaders they identify with. Leader credibility is likely to be crucial to achieving the social transformations required to address the climate crisis.

Research summary

To explore the effects of low-carbon leading by example, we conducted focus groups, leader interviews, a survey experiment, and a survey of people who stopped flying because of climate change. The following table summarises the research.

Study	Method	Headline findings
1	Four focus groups with UK citizens Participants discussed fictional and real examples of low- or high-carbon behaviours from politicians, celebrities, business leaders and local community leaders.	People want leaders to act in line with climate ambitions. People believe that seeing leaders adopt low-carbon behaviours could influence their own behaviour.
2	Interviews with 19 UK Members of Parliament (MPs) MPs shared their views on being role models and leading by example with low-carbon behaviours.	MPs are wary of several challenges regarding low-carbon leading by example. They are reluctant to go against moral and social norms.
3	Survey experiment Participants responded to politicians and celebrities who do or don't lead by example with low-carbon behaviours.	People respond positively to leaders demonstrating low-carbon behaviours. Leading by example encourages others to act and increases trust.
4	Survey of people who gave up flying for a year Participants answered questions about who influenced them to stop flying for a year and why.	Leaders' behaviour can influence people's choices around flying. Positive and negative emotions increase people's motivation to fly less.

Table 1: Research methods and headline findings

Findings

Here, we explore the research findings in more detail.

The public wants leadership

There is a strong **appetite for leadership** among the UK public. In other words, citizens want to see leaders leading by example with low-carbon behaviour. Of the 1267 respondents to our survey experiment:

- **86% agreed** that “Politicians, business leaders and celebrities should set an example by making lifestyle changes first”, with only 4% disagreeing.
- **90% agreed** that “People with the biggest carbon footprints should make the biggest lifestyle changes to tackle climate change”, and only 3% disagreed.
- **This appetite for leadership was also found in the focus groups.** People expressed a strong aversion to leader behaviour that appears to contradict their message on climate change – for instance, helicopter or private jet travel to climate meetings where practical low-carbon alternatives exist. These findings contribute to a growing body of research that shows the public wants clear and consistent leadership on climate change from institutions and individuals.

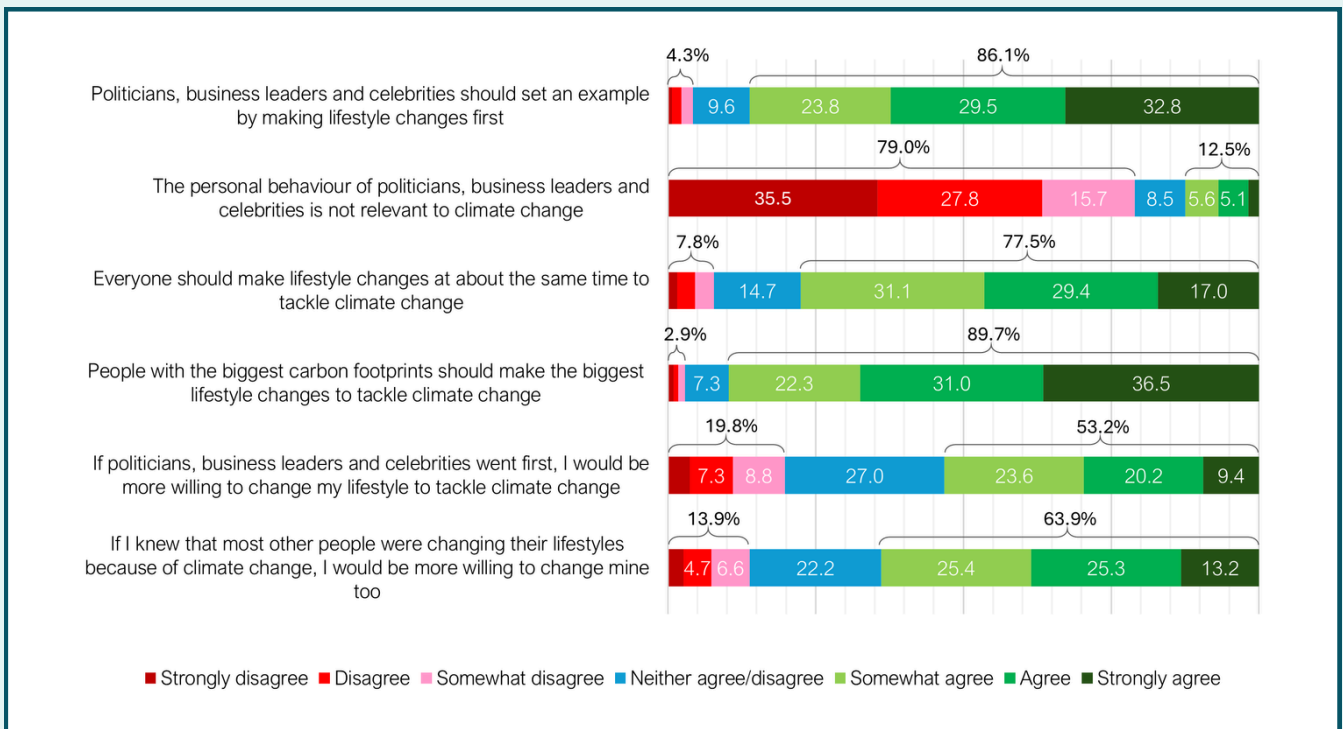


Figure 1: The public's appetite for leadership

Leading by example increases public willingness to adopt low-carbon behaviours

When a leader was seen leading by example in our **survey experiment**, people expressed a significantly greater willingness to adopt low-carbon behaviours. People on both the left and right of the political spectrum responded positively to low-carbon leading by example.

In the **focus groups** participants generally approved of leaders who were taking low-carbon action, as long as the leaders were using their wider sphere of influence as well – i.e. not *just* taking low-carbon action but also pushing for change within their organisation or networks. Some 62% of respondents said they could be influenced by an MP who stopped flying, 37% by a company director who adopted a plant-based diet, 32% by a celebrity who limited their family to just one child, and 81% by a local community leader who lived car-free.

Providing evidence of real-world influence, our **flight-free survey** revealed that respondents had made a commitment to fly less after seeing people they know do the same. The influence was significantly greater if the person they knew who was flying less was a leader (e.g. politician, celebrity, scientist) rather than a close associate (e.g. a friend, family member or colleague). Leaders also had greater influence on people for whom climate change is a new concern.

Low-carbon leading by example greatly improves leader credibility

Our **survey experiment** found that leaders who lead by example are rated significantly more favourably on all leadership criteria, compared to leaders who do not lead by example. Leaders who demonstrated high-impact low-carbon behaviours were believed to be more credible, trustworthy, knowledgeable, ethical, likeable and popular. Whereas leaders who did not lead by example scored negatively on trustworthiness, being inspirational and making moral and ethical decisions.

Participants in our focus groups expressed similarly positive perceptions of leaders who are leading by example. Equally, the flight-free survey found that commitment, clarity and passion were the leadership traits most commonly identified in leaders who were flying less. Notably, people reported positive emotions (hope, inspiration) and negative emotions (guilt, pressure, feeling judged) in response to leaders and close associates who set a behavioural example by flying less. These positive and negative emotions both correlated with higher levels of being influenced to change behaviour.

Findings

In addition, leaders prompted stronger emotional responses than close associates. These results indicate that negative as well as positive feelings are associated with increased motivation to adopt low-carbon behaviour.

These findings have significance beyond simply encouraging low-carbon behaviour change because leaders in politics and business need to be trusted and credible if they are to usher in the large social and economic changes required to tackle climate change. The research indicates that leading by example may be an important contributor to such trust and credibility.



Figure 2: Perceptions of leaders who do and do not lead by example

Low-carbon leading by example may not be as easy as it sounds

While leading by example has the potential to encourage pro-climate action in others, the context, detail and communication of leaders' behaviours are important. For example, people will not just consider whether a leader's behaviour aligns with what they say about climate change, but also whether the behaviour fits with wider social norms and whether the leader is perceived as "one of us" or "one of them".

Our **interviews with MPs** revealed that many believe leading by example is important in principle but is problematic when it comes to low-carbon behaviour. While some MPs do deliberately model sustainable behaviours to maintain credibility as climate advocates, they tend to do this quietly for fear of negative reactions from the media, political rivals, and constituents. MPs say modelling low-carbon behaviour may be perceived as a threat to individual freedoms, such as flying for holidays. It also risks disapproval from local business interests related to high-carbon activities, such as car manufacturers or the airline industry. Even pro-climate MPs tend to frame low-carbon behaviour as "extreme", and position themselves in contrast to this extreme, thus perpetuating social and moral norms of high-carbon behaviour.

Our interviews showed that leaders are often unaware of, or downplay, the influence they can have on others' behaviour. Relatedly, evidence from the **focus groups** suggests that leaders may underestimate the approval that can result from leading by example, although they are correct to believe that their behaviour will be intensely scrutinised.



Recommendations for leaders

1) Be clear that behaviour change is only part of the solution. The public understands that systemic changes are required to tackle climate change and disapproves of primary responsibility being laid at the feet of individuals. Therefore, leading by example with personal behaviour change should be framed as a *contribution* to climate mitigation rather than the primary solution.

2) Adopt behaviours that substantially reduce your total carbon footprint. This helps to prevent a single low-carbon behaviour (e.g. eating less meat) from being dismissed by observers as an easy token gesture that is undermined by other high-carbon behaviours (e.g. SUV or private jet use).

3) When asked, clearly communicate the carbon-saving effects of your behaviour changes. This can inform others who may not possess full knowledge about appropriate pro-climate behaviours. By waiting to be asked about low-carbon behaviours, leaders can avoid the impression that they are “preaching”.

4) Be consistent over time. People are highly attuned to publicity stunts and opportunism from leaders. This means low-carbon leading by example needs to be a long-term commitment.

5) Acknowledge other people’s situational and temporal realities. Leaders are likely to have more behavioural options available than other people, and more scope to reduce emissions immediately. By explicitly acknowledging this, leaders can avoid negative reactions based on perceptions of inequality and privilege.

6) Use your full sphere of influence. For instance, politicians should be campaigning and legislating. Company directors should be making pro-climate changes in their organisations. This signals that the leader is serious and committed and lessens the chances of their personal action being dismissed as “virtue signalling”.

7) Be thick-skinned and persistent. Public and media scrutiny can be harsh, and a leader who adopts high-impact low-carbon behaviours that challenge social norms will prompt positive *and* negative reactions. However, even after some initial cynical reactions, the public generally approves of such leadership.

8) Lead by example together. Leading by example with low-carbon behaviours is more likely to be effective if multiple leaders representing different groups are seen to do it, as this helps to normalise such behaviour.

Further reading

- Nielsen, K.S., Nicholas, K.A., Creutzig, F., Dietz, T. and Stern, P.C. 2021. The role of high-socioeconomic-status people in locking in or rapidly reducing energy-driven greenhouse gas emissions. *Nature Energy*, pp. 1–6. doi: 10.1038/s41560-021-00900-y.
- Tankard, M.E. and Paluck, E.L. 2016. Norm Perception as a Vehicle for Social Change: Vehicle for Social Change. *Social Issues and Policy Review* 10(1), pp. 181–211. doi: 10.1111/sipr.12022.
- Westlake, S. 2022. *The power of leading by example with high-impact low-carbon behaviour: emulation, trust, credibility, justice*. PhD, Cardiff University. Available at: <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/159995/>.
- Westlake, S., Demski, C. and Pidgeon, N. 2024a. Leading by example from high-status individuals: exploring a crucial missing link in climate change mitigation. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 11(1), p. 1292. doi: 10.1057/s41599-024-03787-8.
- Westlake, S., Demski, C. and Pidgeon, N. 2024b. “We can’t be too saintly”: Why members of parliament in the United Kingdom are reluctant to lead by example with low-carbon behaviour. *Energy Research & Social Science* 117, p. 103717. doi: 10.1016/j.erss.2024.103717.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Professor Nick Pidgeon, Cardiff University, for his contributions to the research. Steve Westlake was supported by an ESRC postdoctoral fellowship (Grant ES/Y008162/1).

Suggested citation:

Westlake, S. & Demski, C. Leading by example with low-carbon behaviours: how politicians, celebrities and business leaders can stimulate behaviour change and increase trust. CAST Briefing 34.

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.



Follow us on X/Twitter @[CAST_Centre](https://twitter.com/CAST_Centre)



Follow us on LinkedIn @[cast-centre](https://www.linkedin.com/company/cast-centre)



Read more on our website at cast.ac.uk

CAST is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council



Economic and Social Research Council



UNIVERSITY OF BATH



UNIVERSITY of York

