



THE CENTRE FOR CLIMATE CHANGE AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATIONS

ENGAGING THE PUBLIC ON LOW-CARBON LIFESTYLE CHANGE

This briefing is designed as a resource for teams engaged in local and regional planning for climate change mitigation and adaptation, environmental sustainability and resilience, and individual and community health.

Key points

Many behaviours are deeply woven into people's everyday lives. Multiple policy levers need to be used to enable people to make and sustain low-carbon lifestyle change

Values and identity are crucial for lifestyle change: people need to believe the changes are important for themselves, their families and the wider community

There can be a mismatch between people's beliefs about what is effective, and the things that will actually make a difference. Policies should focus on the behaviours with the greatest potential for emissions reductions.

CAST is a global hub for understanding the social science of climate action.

The Centre's hub is based at Cardiff University. Additional core partners include University of East Anglia, University of Manchester, University of York and the charity Climate Outreach.

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Where does the evidence come from?

Evidence on lifestyle change comes from two key areas. Firstly, there are many studies of behaviours that damage people's health, like eating an unhealthy diet, being physically inactive, and smoking - and many health-damaging behaviours are also damaging the environment and contributing to climate change¹. In addition, there is now a growing body of research on how to effectively engage members of the public in low-carbon behaviours and lifestyles². It is critical that behaviours are not thought of in isolation but as embedded in the wider lifestyles that people live. Communication about specific behaviours will have a limited impact unless there is an overarching communication strategy that 'joins the dots' between climate impacts, and the wide range of climate 'solutions' (including behavioural changes) that society can deploy over the coming decades.

The CAST centre takes exactly this kind of holistic approach to understanding and catalysing the social transformations required to decarbonise rapidly, and will contribute new evidence on four key challenging areas: food and diet; the heating/cooling of buildings; transport and travel; and material consumption.

What does the evidence tell us?

Many behaviours are deeply woven into people's everyday lives - getting the timing right is crucial to disrupt habits.

Much of what we do is repeated without conscious thought³. We rarely question how we travel, what we eat or how we heat our homes; they are simply part of what we do to sustain our daily lives. These habitual patterns of behaviour are embedded in the physical infrastructure that surrounds us: for example, in travel infrastructure, in urban design and in domestic energy systems and appliances⁴. Many interventions are not strong enough to disrupt these ingrained habits; but growing evidence shows that interventions timed to when habits are disrupted (e.g., relocation, retirement, starting a family) are more effective than when applied during more stable times⁵.

Comprehensive and system-wide approaches are more effective than providing 'information' about changing specific behaviours: the example of tobacco control and smoking reduction.

System-wide approaches recognise that people's lifestyles have multiple causes and require multi-pronged approaches^{6,7,8}. For example in the field of tobacco control, the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) takes a 'systems approach' to tobacco use, with articles in the convention covering corporate behaviour as well as actions by national and local governments, public agencies (environmental, health etc.) and the public⁹. The familiar strategies of media campaigns emphasising the link between smoking and health have been part of a comprehensive approach that includes smoke-free policies, price/tax increases and bans on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship¹⁰.

Applying these policy levers together has enabled a social shift, with concerns about passive smoking driving the discourse towards shared responsibilities.

In achieving this shift, peer-to-peer educational initiatives sat alongside more traditional 'top down' advertising campaigns^{11,12}. A range of multi-level (individual, social and structural) interventions have been required, including restrictions on the commercial sector¹, alongside a public-facing communications and engagement infrastructure maintained by campaigners, statutory bodies and government agencies over many decades. Changes in individual smoking behaviours were accompanied by shifts in social norms, and a growing recognition (now widespread) of the issue as transcending self-interest, interpreted as being a question of shared responsibility for collective health outcomes.

Values and identity are crucial for lifestyle change: behaviours are about more than just financial incentives.

Appreciating and respecting people's values, including their attachment to their families and communities, is increasingly recognised as central to addressing 'bigger-than-self' problems like climate change⁶. Behavioural changes need to be about more than just money if they are to add to a shift in lowcarbon lifestyles. People's values (guiding principles in their lives), and their sense of identity (how they define themselves) are crucial to how they engage with climate change. The reasons and motivations behind changes in behaviour really matter¹³. When an action is perceived to be driven by a sense of conviction ('I want to do this'), rather than the result of coercion ('I'm being told I should do this'), 'spillover' to other behaviours is more likely to occur. The point is not that people don't care about how low-carbon choices will impact on their wallet (they do), but that this is not enough to sustain a low-carbon lifestyle. There is evidence that economic measures can actually undermine behavioural spillover – through the 'rebound effect', low carbon choices in one situation may be cancelled out by high-carbon choices in another, where the financial incentives are absent⁵.

Changing (and harnessing) social norms through 'climate conversations' and leadership.

Conversations about climate change—a space for people to reflect on their own and others' views and lifestyle choices - are crucial¹⁴. Peer-to-peer engagement helps not only to dispel negative misperceptions around others' views, but to reassure people that low-carbon lifestyles are not a wasted effort (because more people care than they might have realised, or are already taking actions in their own lives). Creating spaces (physical or online) where positive social norms can be shared is crucial for lifestyle change among individuals. Social norms are also changed through influential figures who demonstrate the benefits and practicalities of lowcarbon lifestyles. These low-carbon champions may be high-profile figures, such as celebrities, but may also be community or business leaders who 'walk the talk' and inspire others to act¹⁵.

Build 'efficacy' by telling an authentically positive story.

Telling an authentically positive story^{11,15} about lowcarbon lifestyles is important, highlighting the many and varied genuine 'co-benefits' to low-carbon choices (e.g. for people's health, wellbeing, or for community cohesion). If behaviour change campaigns undermine people's sense of control and freedom over their own lives, they are likely to backfire. Building a sense of 'efficacy' (people's belief that they can personally make a difference) is essential¹⁶.

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Focus on the behaviours that really matter.

Low-carbon lifestyles are comprised of dozens of different actions and choices. But not all low-carbon behaviours are equal—some have much bigger impacts than others—and not all potential audiences are equal either. Carbon emissions increase sharply with income: the top 10% of emitters are responsible for close to half of all emissions; and much of this difference is underpinned by household income¹⁷.

Research shows clearly that there can be a mismatch between people's beliefs about what is effective, and the things that will actually make a difference. But the kinds of high-impact changes that (most) people can make to their lives include switching to a plant-based diet, flying less and avoiding personal car use, campaigning and political engagement for decarbonisation, switching to renewable energy providers, and reducing heating/cooling demands. Policies take time to work. Focusing on interim measures can provide an indication of whether changes are happening and are in the desired direction. An intervention may appear ineffective because it has been evaluated in the wrong way (e.g. using outcome measures rather than intermediate measures) and over the wrong timescale (too soon)⁸.

Evidence is rarely perfect.

With the speed of climate change outpacing the time frames of science (where a large-scale evaluation can take years to undertake and longer still to yield definitive results), there is increasing recognition that we need to work with what we know. With policy-makers asking urgent questions about how to achieve lifestyle change, providing imperfect and approximate answers now is better than waiting for perfect and precise answers at a point in the future when it is too late to act¹⁸.