

# CAST BRIEFING 18 - October 2023



## Motivating low-carbon behaviours in the workforce - Insights from Cornwall Council

### Key findings:

#### Workforce readiness

- Staff concern for climate change is high across council directorates.
- Staff are keen on carbon literacy training and more information on actions they could take.

#### Opportunities and barriers

- Knowledge gaps prevent meaningful action as staff overestimate the impact of potential actions.
- Willingness to make change is high for low-impact behaviours but much lower for high-carbon impact behaviours.
- Changes in working practices since COVID-19 provide some entry points to encourage low-carbon behaviour.

#### Staff engagement and behaviour change

- Staff agreed that policies to influence behaviour should be fair and incentivise, not penalise.
- Strong engagement and co-design can drive change; tracking progress is also important.
- Effective behaviour change involves targeting high-impact behaviours, combining measures (education, incentives, etc.), using tailored approaches and consistent and positive messaging, and leveraging moments when habits are disrupted.



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 intended as a resource for local authorities and other organisations wanting to encourage low-carbon behaviours in their workforce to help meet internal carbon reduction targets.

More than 80% of local authorities in the UK have declared a climate emergency and Cornwall is leading the way - aiming to be the first UK region to reach net zero carbon. As a major local employer, Cornwall Council (CC) recognises the importance of “getting their own house in order” in parallel to asking the public to do the same.

They commissioned CAST to: (1) measure and track workforce readiness for low-carbon behaviours including post-COVID effects; (2) identify low-carbon behaviour change opportunities and barriers; and (3) design a staff engagement and behaviour change strategy to increase low-carbon behaviours over the next one to three years.

Many of the findings and interventions outlined in this briefing could be applied to staff engagement and behaviour change in other local authorities and organisations.

## Research methods

We used qualitative and quantitative data collection methods including:

- **Desk research** literature review on engagement with climate action
- Two online staff **surveys** in summer 2021 (n=731) and 2022 (n=483) distributed to all CC directorates on climate attitudes and action
- 18 online staff **interviews** (summer 2021) to explore climate action drivers and barriers
- Six online **focus groups** (n=20, summer 2022) with high mileage employees to explore ways of reducing car use



To understand workforce readiness and barriers and opportunities for behavioural change, we asked questions on the impact of COVID-19 on low-carbon behaviours, employee attitudes, knowledge, change willingness and policy support towards low-carbon interventions. Key findings are summarised here:

## Staff attitudes and knowledge

Staff are extremely concerned about climate change (65% believe it is extremely urgent, and 27% very urgent) and most strongly agree the council should show leadership on climate. However, they are unclear about concrete steps either they or the council should be taking to reduce emissions. We found staff, in common with the UK public, tend to under-estimate the impact of eating meat and overestimate the role of recycling (see Steentjes in further reading list).

## Behaviour change willingness

We found high levels of change willingness particularly for behaviours which have already been widely adopted such as reducing waste and saving energy. Employees are least willing to change behaviours related to travel mode (Figure 1). The difficulty of travel mode shift partly reflects the need for some staff to use a car to provide in-person support (e.g., Children’s Services), but also structural barriers such lack of public transport, cycle infrastructure or car share services.

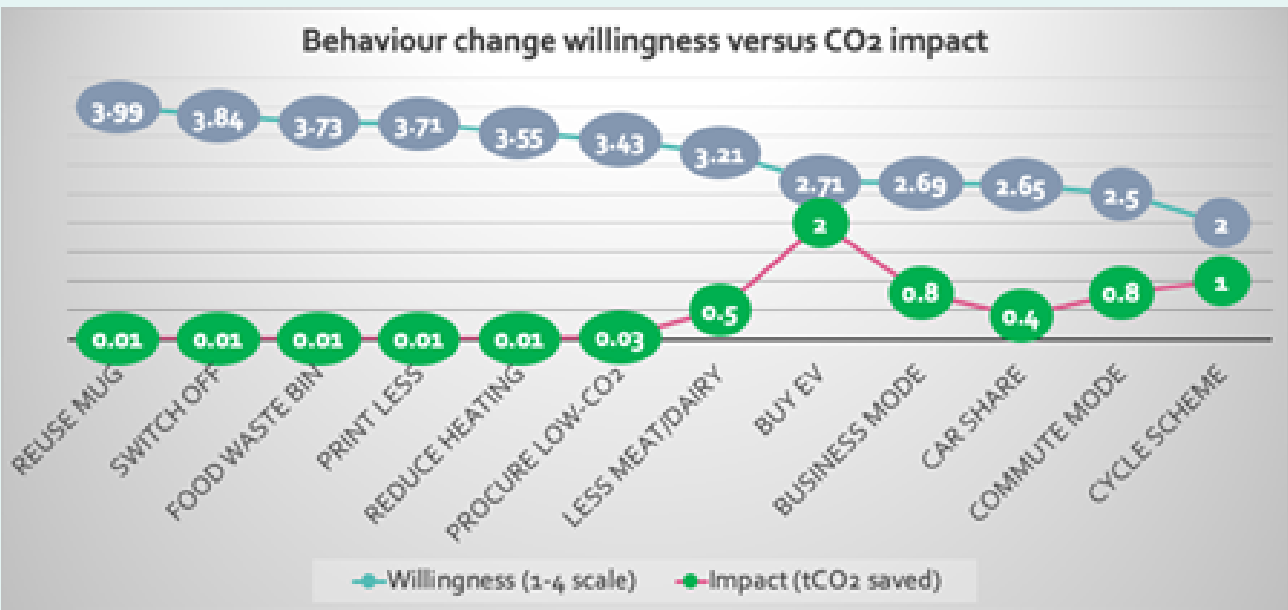


Figure 1: Behaviour change willingness versus CO<sub>2</sub> Impact



## COVID-19 impacts

We found COVID-19 acted as a ‘moment of change’ to trigger or augment various home working, low-carbon behaviours such as printing less and saving more energy; new habits which now need to be locked into hybrid working. However, since COVID-19 restrictions were lifted, travel emissions have grown: car and plane use increased between 2021 and 2022 (Figure 2). The research highlights that employees need more support to shift to low-carbon travel.

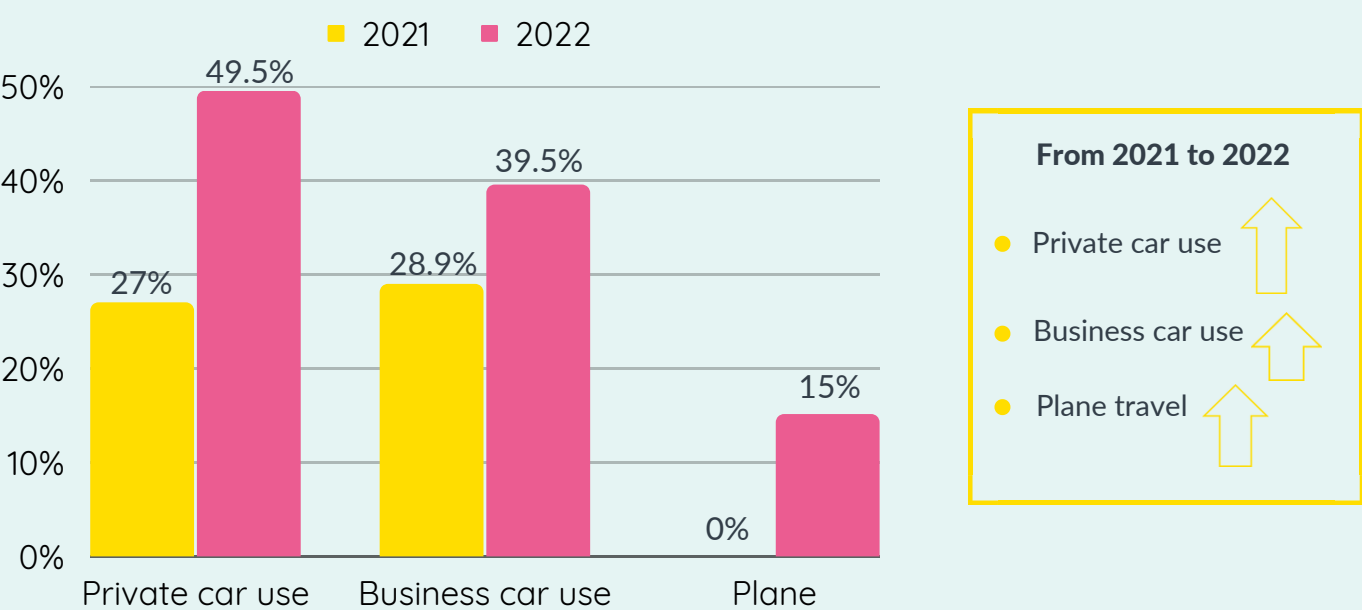


Figure 2: Changes in staff business travel mode choice from 2021 to 2022

## Policy support

Our 2022 survey tested staff support for a range of potential staff climate policies. We found strong support for the introduction of staff carbon literacy training and sustainable procurement processes. Support for flying restrictions for work was moderate but there was little support for an outright work flight ban. Feelings were divided on the possibility of restricting meat provision in work canteens. The insights drawn from qualitative data from interviews and workshops show that policies are more likely to be accepted if they are co-designed with staff, are perceived to be fair, and incentivise rather than penalise.

# Recommendations

Based on these findings and our literature review, we make the following recommendations to inform a staff engagement and behaviour change strategy.

## Engagement

- Co-design policy interventions with staff, e.g., use workshops to design strategy or specific interventions such as a Green Travel Plan or menu redesign.
- Use regular ongoing staff engagement (drop-ins, discussion fora) to identify staff barriers and opportunities.
- Provide consistent and positive messaging to highlight co-benefits of changing behaviours (e.g., health, cost saving of eating less meat)
- Establish green champions to motivate and support teams.

## Education

- Offer carbon literacy training to build on existing staff knowledge on impacts and benefits of different behaviours, and advice on how to change.
- Use moments of change where new habits are forming (new staff inductions, office relocations) to give information on, and incentives for, low-carbon workplace behaviours.

## Physical and institutional

- Trial ways to incentivise, enable, and lock in positive changes e.g., low CO2 menus, reduced workplace parking, active travel incentives with improved safe routes and facilities, electric vehicle sacrifice scheme.

## Evaluation

- Use surveys and objective measures to learn from doing.
- Track progress to provide positive feedback loop to staff.
- Collect data on both informational and physical interventions to compare impacts and value for money.

From our literature review, we identified key principles for designing behaviour change interventions (see Figure 3).

# References and further reading

## Principles for behavioural interventions

- (a) Co-design interventions** with Council staff to identify priorities, motivators for, and barriers to changing staff behaviour;
- (b) Target high-impact behaviours**, notably in travel, energy, and diet;
- (c) Use a combination of measures** to remove behavioural barriers (information, social approaches, financial dis/incentives, nudges, infrastructure change);
- (d) Tailor approaches to different needs values and contexts** (e.g recognise car use may be required for some roles; that some may already be volunteering in communities;
- (e) Use consistent and positive messaging** to build a sense of agency, highlight co-benefits (e.g health benefits of sustainable diets), and show progress to achieving emission reductions;
- (f) Target interventions to when habits are disrupted** (e.g relocation, new job)

*Figure 3: Guiding principles for designing behavioural interventions*

### References/ Further reading:

- Whitmarsh, L., (2020). Tracking the effect of COVID-19 on low-carbon behaviours and attitudes to climate change: results from wave 2 of the CAST COVID-19 Survey. CAST Briefing Paper 05. <https://cast.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/CAST-Briefing-05.pdf>
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- Buchs, M. et al. (2020). Engaging staff in carbon reduction: an evaluation of Carbon Literacy training <https://www.leedsclimate.org.uk/engaging-staff-carbon-reduction-evaluation-carbon-literacy-training>
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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?

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