



How can politicians avoid a net-zero backlash? The role of public engagement: a briefing for policy makers and communicators

Key messages:

- **This is a critical moment in the climate transition.** Successive governments have not effectively involved people in discussions about climate change and net zero. Active consent is essential.
- **There's broad support for climate action and an expectation that the government should do more, even in a cost-of-living crisis.** Concern is much more widespread than many people (and MPs) think. Understanding this is important as is reassuring people that it's normal to care about climate change.
- **People must perceive net zero policies as fair.** Fairness means different things to different people, related to trust and how we see our role in the world.
- **Everyday grievances should not be dismissed.** What feels like small 'fires' can quickly engulf overall ambitions. Listening is essential, and swift action is needed to amend policy or communications.
- **Care is needed not to stoke this new front in the 'culture war'.** Communicators should understand when they may not be trusted, and when wading into a heated debate may not help.
- **Public engagement is critical.** This means trusted communications that resonate with people's values and aspirations, gives them hope and agency, and to feel it's normal to care about and act on climate.



This is a briefing from [Climate Outreach](#) and the [Centre for Climate and Social Transformations](#) (CAST). It aims to advise politicians and advocacy groups on the role of public engagement in reducing any net-zero 'backlash'.

It draws on both our organisations' extensive evidence base into how to build and maintain active public engagement with the net zero transition and was further informed by discussions at an expert policy roundtable in October 2023.¹

This is a critical moment in the climate transition

If we are serious about making net zero happen, we need to get serious about public engagement.

Emission reductions until now have mainly occurred in areas without widespread public awareness, such as phasing out coal generation. Governments have not informed and involved people in discussions about climate change on a large scale. While there is high concern about climate change, there remains limited knowledge about the practical implications of 'net zero.' The [term itself is poorly understood](#). People do not widely understand how they can 'do their bit' as climate change often seems [far away and beyond their control](#).

Net zero will affect many aspects of our lives: our homes, what we eat, how we travel, our jobs, and our communities. The transition to a low-emission society is a task like no other. Active public support is not optional. The Climate Change Committee estimates that 62% of the emissions cuts to come by 2050 require some form of individual action.

The good news: four in five of us care about climate change

Highlighting the breath of existing support can help create a sense that caring about and taking action on climate change is normal.

People are supportive of taking action to combat climate change and expect the government to do more. This support remains strong [even in the cost-of-living crisis](#): people back policies that not only reduce carbon emissions but also lower heating costs, and financially vulnerable individuals are no less supportive of the government acting on climate change than others. A majority of the public believes that the [UK should be a leader in global climate action](#) and that the UK should 'get on with it', regardless of what other countries do.

¹The policy roundtable was held on 25 October 2023. The discussion was held under Chatham House rules. This briefing has captured many of the main points raised, but CAST/Climate Outreach take full responsibility for the briefing's final recommendations, and it should not be seen as necessarily representative of the views of all participants.

But we aren't confident that the people around us care. We are all highly influenced by our perception of how others around us think and feel. Only one in five of us (20%) think it's too late or too difficult to prevent a climate change emergency, but we think that half of the public in general (49%) believe this is the case. MPs should note their constituents may be much more (quietly) supportive of action than they often think.

This support could soften if net zero policies aren't widely felt to be fair

Policies must be fair, particularly for those on the lowest incomes or with the lowest carbon footprint. The role of engagement is to understand what this means for people, and communications needs to create a wide sense that policies are fair.

For policies to be accepted, they need to be felt to be fair in practice. The UK's Climate Assembly rated fairness as the second most important principle that should guide net zero action (behind informing and educating everyone).

Different understandings of fairness are influenced by values, personal circumstances, capacity to act, and beliefs about right and wrong. This is complex and charged terrain and unsympathetic communications may backfire, creating a sense of not being cared about - for example, targeting renters or those in social housing with the same communications on insulation as those who own their own homes.



Two types of fairness are particularly important:

- **Costs and distributional fairness:** The public is particularly sensitive to costs at this time of a cost-of-living crisis, and in general the cost of living is a far more salient issue electorally than the environment or climate change. In general, however, most people believe that those most responsible for emissions should take the most action, and those with lower incomes should receive financial support to 'do their bit'. People widely believe it is unfair for high-income households to receive government grants for energy-efficient changes to their homes.
- **Procedural fairness:** UK audiences express low political trust, and net zero is part of this. When people talk about fairness and 'playing fair' they are often referring not to the outcome reached, but to the fairness of the process itself. This includes involving people who will be affected in decision-making about policy design and implementation. This includes involving people who will be affected in decision-making about policy design and implementation. People currently have little sense of procedural fairness in climate policy and greater consultation on the specifics of how to get to net zero is crucial.

There are other important aspects of fairness for the transition, including localised concerns about infrastructure such as solar farms or pylons being built nearby. These may become an increasingly important factor in local resistance, as new grid transmission is rolled out over the coming years.

This complexity underscores the need for careful, empathetic communication and engagement based on the concerns and values of different target audiences (see below).

We need bold leadership to stay the course on the net zero transition, but everyday grievances should not be dismissed

Advocates and politicians should be careful not to inflame attempts to drag net zero into the 'culture war' as a result of untrusted or untargeted communications.

It's not possible to deliver net zero while keeping everyone happy: trade-offs will inevitably be made, and some pockets of resistance will be inevitable. In general, however, what may feel only like 'small fires' should not be ignored. The Gilets Jaunes protest in France started as a relatively small protest amongst French farmers against the imposition of a new fuel tax but spread fast and became a symbol of much wider anti-government sentiment. Net zero advocates should

build a common cause with organisations seeking to secure a fair transition for workers and low-income communities, such as trade unions and fuel poverty groups.

Trust in 'elites' is low, and if the idea holds that net zero is pitched against the interests of working people, it will lose. Poorly targeted or untrusted communications could well make things worse. According to [one study](#), opponents of climate action are deliberately weaponising particular environmental or climate policies as part of a wider assault on the net zero agenda. Politicians and other communicators should understand their audience and whether they are likely to be trusted, and where possible 'pass the mic' to people who are perceived as authentic by different audiences.

Public engagement is critical

There are two core elements to effective public engagement: better communication, and meaningful involvement.

Communication needs to be tailored to intended audiences, and based on [evidence about what works, and with whom](#).

Good communication:

- **Connects positively to our everyday lives, hopes, values and aspirations** - not feeling distant, technocratic or a threat to our way of life.
- **Draws out tangible 'co-benefits'**, such as warmer homes, protecting nature, or the health of our children. It's important to speak to the present day, not 2050, making these benefits tangible [in the here and now](#).
- **Makes climate concern and action feel normal and something we are all part of, particularly for 'people like me'**. Trusted messengers are a vital part of effective communications: people who can authentically represent the lives and values of the audience they want to reach.
- **Gives us active hope and helps us feel that we want to 'do our bit'** - not disempowered, angry, or doomed. The strength of someone's moral commitment to environmental action is the single strongest predictor of [support for Low Emission Zones \(LEZs\)](#).
- **Explains, and raises awareness**. [Awareness of the exact policies](#) that might be implemented and the behaviour changes that need to occur seems to be lacking. For example, [knowledge of heat pumps](#) remains very low among the UK public, especially among non-homeowners.

Meaningful involvement brings people into the climate conversation, and helps shape the wider policies needed to make it easier, cheaper and fairer for people to do their bit. Citizens assemblies at the national or local level are one way of involving people, but there are many other innovative ways of finding out people's views on how net zero policy should work - such as NESTA's Strategy Room tool.

There may be some worries that involving people feels like slowing down when we don't have time. However, force through policies without building a base of support and they risk triggering public backlashes with long-lasting consequences. Public involvement can highlight diverse views and sentiments that may otherwise be missed, and help people feel they have had a say - provided that they feel that their views have actually been taken into account.

Governments and local authorities should deliver and resource an ambitious climate engagement strategy

The government should develop, resource and implement a comprehensive, nationwide strategy for public engagement with climate change, as recommended in Chris Skidmore's Net Zero Review and by the House of Lords' Environment and Climate Change Committee.

Public engagement is not optional for building the sustained and active mandate needed for the years ahead. It should:

- Invest significantly in engagement at national, regional, local and community levels, across both communication and involvement.
- Be co-designed by a diverse range of people and groups, including local authorities, businesses, public bodies, civil society organisations and community groups.
- Commit to testing and learning new and different approaches over time.

For more, see 'Towards a UK public engagement strategy on climate change', September 2023 - a report by the UPPER Coalition (Climate Outreach, Involve, Ashden. and the Climate Citizens Research Group at Lancaster University).

Further reading

References/Further reading:

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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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