



Towards a UK public engagement strategy on climate change



About the UPPER coalition

UPPER is the working name for a coalition of organisations working with the support of Ministers to unlock the potential of public engagement to reach net zero. The coalition is composed of the following organisations: Ashden, Climate Outreach, Involve, and the Climate Citizens Research Group at Lancaster University. These were originally convened by independent consultant Andrew Barnett.

This is one of two reports released by the UPPER coalition in September 2023. This report was led by Climate Outreach; it calls for the UK government to put in place a comprehensive public engagement strategy and outlines vital components for such a strategy to succeed. Involve led on an accompanying report, *'What role for government? A practical guide to the types, roles and spaces of public engagement on climate'*, which provides practical guidance to those developing public engagement strategies and frameworks, for governments and more widely.

This work was kindly funded by Barrow Cadbury Trust and John Ellerman Foundation.



John Ellerman
Foundation

Climate Outreach is focused on widening and deepening public engagement with climate change. Through our research, practical guides and consultancy services, we help organisations engage diverse audiences beyond the green bubble. We work with government, international bodies, media, business and NGOs. climateoutreach.org

Involve is the UK's leading public participation charity, with a mission to put people at the heart of decision making. We deliver, train, support and provide strategic advice on public engagement in decision making. We work with organisations across the public-, private-, and third- sectors. involve.org.uk

Ashden is a climate solutions charity accelerating transformative climate innovations and building a more just world. We amplify the stories of low carbon innovations through the annual Ashden Awards, and in the UK we bring together local authorities, clean energy and retrofit companies to help decarbonise local regions. ashden.org

The Climate Citizens research group at Lancaster University aims to change how people engage with the creation of climate policy. We want to transform climate policy from something that happens to people, to something that happens with people. climatecitizens.org.uk

Andrew Barnett is a social reformer focusing on cultivating new ideas and developing collaborations to benefit underserved citizens. He has spearheaded numerous ventures including the Campaign to End Loneliness, harnessing people-centred innovation and deploying expertise in governance, strategy, and communications.

Project team for this report

Authors

Rachael Orr, CEO, Climate Outreach

David Powell, Senior Engagement Advisor, Climate Outreach

Editing & Production

Léane de Laigue, Communications Lead, Climate Outreach

Elise de Laigue, Designer, Explore Communications - www.explorecommunications.ca

Acknowledgements

Sarah Allan, Director of Capacity Building and Standards, Involve

Andrew Barnett, Independent Consultant

Simon Brammer, Head of Cities, Ashden

Professor Rebecca Willis, Professor in Energy and Climate Governance, Lancaster University

Dr Amiera Sawas, Chief Research & Engagement Officer, Climate Outreach

Cite as: Orr, R. and Powell, D. (2023) *Towards a UK public engagement strategy on climate change*. Oxford: Climate Outreach.

Cover: Planting trees on a community farm. Photo: SolStock/iStock

SEPTEMBER 2023

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Public engagement and climate change

The UK government has world-leading ambitions to reach net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. But time is running short to meet this target. The UK public is concerned about climate change, and there is widespread support for our net zero ambitions. But people currently don't see what action they need to take to help us get there. And we are not engaging with people to help shape ambitious policies. This means these policies are in danger of working poorly - requiring costly adjustments, going against public concerns about 'fairness',¹ and suffering from public backlash.

We believe that a **key missing piece of the puzzle** is sustained, ongoing public engagement and education. Reaching net zero will mean changes for everyone in our daily lives, and public engagement is the way to positively involve everyone in the journey.



Summary asks

1 A nationwide strategy

The government should develop and implement a **comprehensive, nationwide strategy for public engagement with climate change**, as recommended in Chris Skidmore's Net Zero Review.² This strategy should be led by the Secretary of State for the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ). The strategy must:

- ▶ Invest significantly in engagement at national, regional, local and community levels, across the spectrum of public engagement.
- ▶ Be co-designed by a diverse range of people and groups, encompassing local authorities, businesses, public bodies, civil society organisations and community groups.
- ▶ Commit to testing and learning new and different approaches over time. Its insights and learnings should be discussed at an annual public engagement summit, co-hosted by the government, the Local Government Association and the voluntary sector.

2 Impact measurement

Alongside the strategy, the government should convene a **standing working group of cross-disciplinary experts to measure the impact of this work** and understand whether it is translating into meaningful and enduring behaviour change and supporting the development of an ambitious, successful and fair policy agenda.

3 Sector-specific strategies

The Department for Energy Security and Net Zero should work with other departments, in particular the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and the Department for Transport, to **develop sector-specific public education and engagement strategies for these harder to decarbonise areas**.

4 A leadership role in international cooperation

The government should play a **leadership role in international cooperation on public engagement**, via the Action for Climate Empowerment (ACE) framework, which comes under Article 12 of the Paris Agreement.

Why a public engagement strategy?

A focus on our role as citizens can create a virtuous circle between on the one hand government policy that enables behaviour change at scale, and on the other, engaging hearts and minds to increase demand for that policy. It also allows the development of policy that works the first time round, and for all sections of society.

Without an informed and engaged public, our world-leading net zero goals **risk either being downgraded to placate a vocal and unrepresentative minority of the population, or not delivered as planned**. The UK's global reputation for leadership on climate change is at risk – and the economic benefits that come with it – if the government does not prioritise engaging the public to accelerate the path to net zero.

The UK government has adopted some policies, including support for specific sectors of the economy, that will help the country meet its net zero commitments. But much remains to be done.

Climate action and net zero is **no longer a partisan agenda** – people from diverse political backgrounds express concern about climate change and environmental degradation. But if we don't start engaging people meaningfully, divisive attempts to pull climate into the space of 'culture wars' and prevent action may succeed. Backlash has been mobilised in a number of countries to prevent progress on energy transition goals (Switzerland, Germany, Australia) and it worked because disengaged people became fearful and frustrated about what the future meant for them. Bringing people in is the best way to mitigate their fears so that they feel agency and can see themselves in the story of the transition. It is vital that we invite people to help shape our ambitious policies – as opposed to them feeling that policy is just 'done to them'.

We know that values, worldviews and identity form a central part in how individuals and groups think and feel about climate as an issue and how net zero will affect their daily lives. This is particularly true where behaviour change meets **climate-critical but culturally loaded issues** like whether and how we travel, and what we eat.

We also know that there are **big differences in how easy it is for various groups of people to change their behaviour** – differences in the travel infrastructure that exists in communities, differences in the ability to pay where the cost of making 'green choices' is higher or front-loaded, or differences in short-term personal and family pressures that are inevitably put before considering the impact of climate change on our longer term well-being. Without engaging these people in policy development and implementation, policies are unlikely to work for them. We know a lot and there is more to learn – an ambitious public engagement strategy is the crucial next step in our learning.

Defining public engagement

Definition

When we talk about public engagement, we mean ‘full spectrum’ public engagement that has **six elements, tools, or disciplines**:

- **climate change education**
- **public awareness**
- **training**
- **public participation (including in decision-making)**
- **public access to information**
- **international cooperation on these issues**

For definitional purposes, we recommend using the internationally adopted **Action on Climate Empowerment (ACE) framework** which includes the six elements above. ACE is a term adopted by the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change to denote work under Article 6 of the Convention and Article 12 of the Paris Agreement, which the UK government has signed up to.

Here are **three reasons we recommend using this definition of public engagement**:

- The overarching goal of ACE is to **empower all members of society** to engage in climate action. The government has signed up to this, and made very welcome pledges on it at COP26 in Glasgow.
- We have a problem with the terminology. Quite simply, **public engagement can mean different things to different people** and especially the professionals themselves. For example, teachers can think it means educating people. Advisers, like those at Citizens Advice for example, can think it means guiding citizens through government regulation to get a good deal for an individual or household. Behavioural scientists think it’s all about ‘nudge’. Many politicians we have spoken to think of marketing or even campaigning.
- We **need all the tools or disciplines included in the ACE definition** if we are to engage the public effectively as we know we must. Public engagement is not a single thing and, if it is, it is a field and a fragmented one. Some professionals not only instinctively favour the tools they are more familiar with, they are also sometimes uncomfortable with other tools. They warm to the evidence – the science of behaviour change, or of social communication, for example – but feel suspicious about public participation in decision-making, for example. We need to overcome bias and fragmentation by thinking holistically about public engagement in all its manifestations (not just the bits we like or excluding the ones we don’t).

Unlike many other areas of public policy where public engagement is not defined, for climate change it is. The six principles for effectively raising public awareness of climate change are accessible, understandable, relevant, credible, trustworthy, inclusive, and empowering.

Developing a comprehensive public engagement strategy on climate change

We are calling for the government to **put in place a comprehensive public engagement strategy**, as called for by the Climate Change Committee³ and Chris Skidmore's Net Zero Review. The strategy should be **properly resourced** and have ambitious yet deliverable objectives.

The strategy should also **set goals for what an engaged public thinks and feels about climate change** by 2030. We propose that these should be:

- A manifest, widespread 'common sense' concern about climate change as a *phenomenon that the government should act upon*.
- A widely held view that *'I want to and feel able to do my bit'* in the key areas where both behaviour and systemic change are needed, such as transport, diet and energy use.
- A widespread feeling, including amongst marginalised groups, that *'I can influence decisions about tackling climate change in my local area'* and that *'I have a say in what government does about climate change.'*

The public engagement strategy should recognise the dynamic relationship between individual, organisational and government action, and draw on the tools and learnings of social science to deliver effective engagement.



Five vital components for a nationwide public engagement strategy to succeed

Vocal, committed and enabling leadership from central government

Public engagement should be a core function of the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, joined up with policy, regulation and financing. We recommend all areas of the Department's vital, ambitious policy development should have effective, inclusive public engagement embedded within them.

Responsibility for delivering on the strategy's public engagement objectives should sit at **Secretary of State level**, and be named as a core purpose of the Department. It should be **properly funded** through a combination of government and private investment as well as philanthropic contributions.

Parts of the strategy should be delivered centrally. For example, one component of the strategy should be to consider central, high profile advertising campaigns. The evidence⁴ says that some frames and stories about climate change are more likely to positively resonate across all parts of the UK. Where there are top-down advertising or engagement campaigns, it's critical that evidence like this is used to inform how to represent climate change as a tangible and lived concern.

Central government's role is not however just about engagement that it leads itself – it must also enable and facilitate high quality, inclusive public engagement by others at national, regional and local level.

Co-design of the strategy

Setting the strategy should be an **ambitious co-designed project** which brings together specialists in all types of public engagement, representatives of marginalised groups, and people from private, public and third sector organisations.

We believe there is a critical role for communities, charities, local government and businesses to be involved in the co-design and delivery of nationwide public engagement, which should take place in communities, workplaces and everywhere in between.

The strategy should set out a framework that makes clear what the national government will do and provide and by when, including by working with others. This should include the steps it will take to enable and facilitate high quality action at a regional and local level, but it should not seek to determine the content of regional and local strategies – these should be tailored to place and context.

Regional coordination and local delivery

We suggest that the co-designed strategy be **coordinated regionally by local authorities**, who should receive the resources to do so. Regional level coordination across sectors – public, private and voluntary – and strong partnership-working will be vital in deciding who should deliver different parts of the strategy. But **a lot of the delivery will be local**, led by community groups and others who already hold a wealth of information about what works for the communities they work with.

Resources should be spread around the country, making funding, best practice and a centralised knowledge and sense-making function available to groups, businesses, local authorities, faith groups and anyone else committed to engaging their community on climate change in the way they know best.

There are already a number of inspiring examples⁵ of this work to build on. See the case studies section at the end of this document – we’ve also included two of them below.

Case studies

- ▶ **Camden Think & Do**⁷ is a great example of genuine co-designing and collaboration. Ashden is working with them to extract and share their learning across multiple local authority networks. Camden Council has been closely involved with designing Think & Do’s programmes, which the council funds, but the programmes are very much owned by Think & Do and the communities they work with.
- ▶ **Kendal’s Climate Jury**¹⁰ led to the implementation of a range of the jury’s recommendations on areas including energy generation, transport and food. It also had significant positive impact on participation in climate issues locally, including the creation of a permanent Eco Hub (a one-stop shop for accessible information about climate change), the Zero Carbon Kendal website, and a network of 256 community volunteers who have since helped the council with activities as varied as its solar audit and communications activities.

Testing and learning

In developing and delivering the strategy, we should recognise **there is no one engagement approach that will work for everyone**. The strategy should build on the considerable expertise that already exists around different types of engagement. For example, the evidence from Climate Outreach, the Centre for Climate and Social Transformations (CAST)⁶ and others can point to **consistent core principles of how to engage hearts and minds on the climate challenge**: making it real and tangible to people’s lived experience; the importance of emotions over statistics, and human stories over abstract technical science; and the centrality of trust in authentic messengers.

Similarly, international best practice of public engagement in decision-making highlights the importance of well-defined, meaningful and accessible engagement, tailored to those it is intended to reach. The government should build on this knowledge to empower a learning approach: investing in, supporting and collating a nationwide engagement effort to champion and magnify ‘what works for public engagement’.

We should look to **seed a thousand local public engagement projects, in a spirit of learning, with funding available quickly**. We should also invest centrally in tracking what’s happening and understanding the change it is having on perceptions, normalisation, and action. To achieve this, we recommend the government develop a bespoke fund, also backed by philanthropists and business, to pilot key initiatives.

Measuring success

The government will need to know whether the strategy is ‘working’. An important, relatively straightforward step is to invest in **detailed, longitudinal surveys of the UK population(s)** to measure both their reported awareness of climate change and climate mitigation actions, and also to correlate this to evidence from other domains, i.e. increased demand for ‘low carbon’ products from retailers.

In addition, it should convene a standing working group of cross-disciplinary experts to measure whether public engagement with issues such as climate change is actually happening, and that it is translating into meaningful and enduring behaviour change. It will be important to understand how different interventions from government or other actors can be linked to change in the real world.

The government should also convene an **annual summit, co-hosted by the voluntary sector**, to discuss the impact and learnings from their public engagement work.

Two further vital roles for central government

Sector-specific approaches

The government will also need sector-specific approaches for engaging **different communities and audiences around particular issues** where behaviour change is a core part of delivering climate-critical mitigation, in particular around the key issues explored by CAST: travel, diet, consumption, and heat. Engagement approaches in these areas must start from people's values and the social and economic infrastructure that surrounds them, and be infused with social science expertise. Public engagement in decision-making in these areas will also be key, not least to the development of policy that is both fair and perceived to be fair.

The Department for Energy Security and Net Zero should work with other departments, in particular the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and the Department for Transport, to develop sector-specific public education and engagement strategies for these hard to decarbonise areas.

International cooperation

Climate change is a global challenge and international cooperation is therefore critical to our success. The government should champion the importance of international cooperation and leadership on public engagement at global meetings and summits.

Conclusion

Delivering on our net zero ambitions is crucial for the future of the UK, and the world. But time is running short to meet this target. The UK is in danger of being left behind more ambitious climate leadership in other countries. And we are already seeing signs that if people don't feel engaged and involved in the design and delivery of ambitious climate policies, they can reject them.

To deliver the change to our lives and our economy at the scale our net zero targets demand, public engagement is vital. Our ambitions on informing, educating and empowering citizens of this country need to match our policy ambitions. Through a bold commitment to public engagement and an innovative, co-designed approach to delivering it, we believe our net zero ambitions can be realised. But we need people power to deliver them. The time to start driving this is now.



Case studies and stories

- **Camden Think & Do**⁷ is a great example of genuine co-designing and collaboration. Ashden is working with them to extract and share their learning across multiple local authority networks. Camden Council has been closely involved with designing Think & Do's programmes, which the council funds, but the programmes are very much owned by Think & Do and the communities they work with.
- **Hackney Council**⁸ has done some great work with communities to boost access to green spaces.
- **Hull City Council**⁹ has worked hard to identify and work with communities to design and implement measures that allow residents' needs to be built into the local flood defence project.
- **Kendal's Climate Jury**¹⁰ led to the implementation of a range of the jury's recommendations on areas including energy generation, transport and food. It also had significant positive impact on participation in climate issues locally, including the creation of a permanent Eco Hub (a one-stop shop for accessible information about climate change), the Zero Carbon Kendal website, and a network of 256 community volunteers who have since helped the council with activities as varied as its solar audit and communications activities.
- **Adur & Worthing Councils** held a Climate Assembly¹¹ which resulted in changing their climate plan to include the assembly's recommendations and the work of others, engaging with over 200 external organisations. The assembly has also provided impetus for action to happen swiftly, and led to a review of aspects of the councils' communications.
- **The Local Climate Engagement Programme**¹² has trialled approaches to building skills in public engagement in climate decision-making with 21 local authorities across England. Its forthcoming case studies also show the value of smaller scale initiatives to engage members of the public in climate and nature decision-making, countering the current overemphasis on climate assemblies.

Endnotes and sources

Endnotes

1. For example, Climate Assembly UK rated *'Fairness within the UK, including for the most vulnerable (affordability, jobs, UK regions, incentives and rewards) in actions, not just words'* as the second most important principle that should underpin the steps the UK takes to reach net zero emissions. The assembly returned to this theme throughout its more detailed recommendations. <https://www.climateassembly.uk/recommendations/index.html>
2. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/net-zero-review-uk-could-do-more-to-reap-economic-benefits-of-green-growth>
3. See <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/2021-progress-report-to-parliament/>
4. See <https://climateoutreach.org/britain-talks-climate/practice/reviewing-britains-seven-segments/>
5. See <https://cobenefits-toolkit.ashden.org/>
6. See <https://cast.ac.uk/>
7. See <https://www.thinkanddocamden.org.uk/>
8. See <https://ashden.org/news/hackney-council-boosts-access-to-green-spaces-for-less-wealthy-residents/>
9. See <https://ashden.org/news/hull-city-council-works-with-residents-to-create-flood-defences/>
10. See <https://sharedfuturecic.org.uk/kendal-climate-change-jury-whats-happened-2-years-on>
11. See <https://www.demsoc.org/projects/adur-worthing-climate-assembly>
12. See <https://involve.org.uk/our-work/our-projects/embedding-good-practice/how-can-local-authorities-engage-public-climate-0>

Other sources

- <https://climateoutreach.org/reports/ipcc-public-engagement-1-5c/>
- <https://climateoutreach.org/lords-briefing-behaviour-change-net-zero-public-engagement/>
- <https://climateoutreach.org/key-role-public-engagement-delivering-net-zero-written-evidence/>
- <https://gulbenkian.pt/uk-branch/publications/public-engagement-for-climate-change-a-literature-review/>
- <https://climateoutreach.org/reports/ace-legal-obligation/>
- <https://climatecitizens.org.uk/>

