



What role for government?

A practical guide to the types, roles
and spaces of public engagement on climate



September 2023

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 Involve and provides practical guidance to those developing public engagement strategies and frameworks, for governments and more widely. The [accompanying 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.

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**John Ellerman
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Involve is the UK's leading public participation charity, with a mission to put people at the heart of decision making. We deliver, train and support public engagement in decision making, including providing strategic advice and guidance. We work with governments, parliaments, public sector bodies, businesses, civil society organisations and others. involve.org.uk

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

Ashden Climate Solutions is a climate change charity with a mission to accelerate transformative climate solutions and build 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 and the communities they serve to deliver a faster and fairer transition. 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 between corporates, NGOs, and governments to benefit underserved citizens. He has spearheaded numerous ventures, including the Campaign to End Loneliness, harnessing people-centred innovation and leveraging expertise in governance, strategy, and communications.

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1. Introduction

This guide is intended to solve a very practical problem. There are now a wide range of organisations, academics and officials across levels of government working on public engagement on climate. There is also increasing recognition of the range of benefits that this engagement can bring, including from governments themselves.¹ These benefits range from increasing take-up of climate-friendly policies², to achieving a more trusted policy process with better policy outcomes.³

However conversations between governments and those working in public engagement still too often involve people talking at cross-purposes. The term ‘public engagement’ is so broad, it can be unclear if people mean communications, public engagement in decision making, or initiatives aimed at changing people’s habits and lifestyles, for example.

This confusion creates challenges for governments at all levels. For less well-resourced governments, it leaves officials needing to spend their limited capacity working out which types of public engagement different resources refer to, and how they fit together. Larger governments are comparatively less stretched in terms of capacity, but in more need of frameworks that set out how different policy professions can best work together. The lack of clarity about what ‘public engagement’ means also makes it harder for officials to ask for and receive the advice they are seeking.

This guide starts to bring together thinking from the different fields of public engagement. It is intended as a practical reference for civil servants and officials at all levels of government charged with developing public engagement strategies and frameworks on climate. It will be equally useful to a range of other actors including those advising governments, and organisations beyond government who are seeking to define their own role in public engagement on climate issues.

Summary of key points:

- A government conducts public engagement when it undertakes an activity the main aim of which is to gain the attention or input of members of the public, in their personal capacity, for a specific purpose.
- Climate change is unusual as a policy area in having its own internationally agreed framework for public engagement, Action for Climate Empowerment (ACE), to which the UK government has signed up. The ACE framework is useful in beginning to describe the range of policy levers and activities that governments may use to achieve their climate engagement goals, and is compatible with non-climate-specific definitions of engagement such as the one used in this

¹ For example, the [UK Government’s Net Zero Strategy](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/671417/uk-net-zero-strategy-2025.pdf) promises that the government “will deliver public engagement on net zero to: a. Communicate a vision of a net zero 2050, build a sense of collective action, improve understanding of the role different actors play in reaching net zero, and how and when choices can be made; b. Ensure there is trusted advice and support for people and businesses to make green choices; c. Mobilise a range of actors and stakeholders to increase and amplify their communication and action on net zero and green choices; and d. Give people opportunities to participate in and shape our plans for reaching net zero, thereby improving policy design, buy-in and uptake of policies.” The Scottish Government has published its own public engagement strategy on net zero: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/net-zero-nation-public-engagement-strategy-climate-change/pages/2/>

² See, for example, the case studies here: <https://www.centreforpublicimpact.org/assets/documents/cpi-cqf-public-engagement-climate-change-case-studies.pdf>

³ <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/the-role-of-deliberative-public-engagement-in-climate-policy-development-university-of-lancaster/>

guide. However when putting together a public engagement strategy for climate, it can be more useful to define different types of public engagement by their purpose.

- There are four broad and overlapping categories of public engagement on climate, defined by their purpose:
 - Category 1: Engagement to increase understanding, raise awareness or contribute to normalising climate-friendly actions
 - Category 2: Engagement that directly asks for, or supports, climate-friendly actions, including changes to habits and lifestyles
 - Category 3: Engagement that invites or supports people to shape decision making
 - Category 4: Engagement with an advocacy aim

An effective public engagement strategy should include all of categories one to three, delivering a 'full spectrum' of engagement. It may also include category four.

- Much is already known about what works in terms of public engagement and governments should build in the significant knowledge and expertise that already exists.
- Governments, communities, individuals and organisations outside of government can all undertake all of the first three categories of public engagement. One way for governments to begin to make sense of this range of activity is by looking at the different spaces in which it takes place. Governments have roles to play in each of these spaces, but what that role is varies.
- Broadly there are six different roles that governments can play in relation to public engagement on climate: driver, collaborator, facilitator, influencer, multiplier and receiver. .
- Governments will often gain substantially from collaborating and partnering with others on the engagement that they lead, not least where others are closer to communities and already hold trusted relationships with them. Many governments are also significant employers; there is much they can do to engage their workforce, as well as the wider public.
- Government public engagement strategies should prioritise areas where governments can add most value to engagement that is already happening. There are a number of steps that governments can take to help them assess what these are.

2. What is public engagement?

A government conducts public engagement when it undertakes an activity the main aim of which is to gain the attention or input of members of the public, in their personal capacity, for a specific purpose. The government may want that attention or input for a short period of time (for people to read a newsletter, reply to a tweet, or look at a poster) or for a longer amount of time (for people to take part in a consultation, or volunteer). The purpose of the engagement can vary widely; for example, it could be to inform people, to persuade them, or to ask for their thoughts and ideas. Public engagement on climate change can thus take many forms, which is why typologies of engagement can be so helpful (see Section 3 below).

While it is useful to consider what public engagement is, it is equally useful to be clear about what it is not. Governments can take many actions that are important – indeed essential – to addressing climate change that are not public engagement. Here we outline three that are sometimes incorrectly conflated with it.

1. **Changes governments make or mandate to public infrastructure, services, and facilities to encourage climate-friendly lifestyles and habits.** For example, if governments want people to cycle more then they may introduce (more) cycle lanes, increase bike storage and help improve access to shower facilities at or near workplaces. These actions may be essential to the aim of increasing cycling, but their primary purpose is to make cycling safer, more attractive and easier; it is not about gaining the public's attention or input. What would be public engagement is an information campaign to let people know about the new cycling facilities or, at an earlier stage, engagement aimed at getting input from members of the public to help government understand what is stopping people cycling and what sorts of changes it could make to help.
2. **Changes governments make to their own buildings, operations and internal policies to cut emissions and adapt to climate change.** Governments making these changes can play an important role in influencing others: for example, it models desired changes, can help socialise people to them, and makes it clear that government is not asking individuals to change without taking action itself. The primary purpose of these actions is, however, about reducing emissions or adapting to climate change. It is therefore not public engagement in and of itself. What would be public engagement, for example, are communications activities aimed at letting members of the public know about the changes.
3. **Work governments do to mandate, encourage or influence third-, public- or private- sector organisations to adopt climate-friendly measures.** For example, governments may make changes to the law, provide guidance and information, or lead / be part of campaigns, meetings or buddying schemes aimed at convincing or supporting other organisations to take climate-friendly steps. The main purpose of some of these activities is to gain the attention or input of individuals, but in their professional capacity and about organisational change, rather in their personal capacity about their personal lives. For these reasons these activities are usually seen as about organisational-, rather than public- engagement.

While these activities are not in and of themselves public engagement, they are relevant to public engagement strategies. Governments should consider when changes in policy, infrastructure and services are likely to happen so that they can time public engagement to maximum effect. Some governments may also choose to combine organisational and public engagement into one strategy, particularly if they are looking to work with organisations as part of their public engagement efforts. We return to this idea below.

Box 1: Public engagement and communications

A potentially controversial part of the definition of public engagement in this paper, is the inclusion of communications as a type of public engagement. For some people and organisations, communications and public engagement are not the same thing. They would argue that one-way communication is not public engagement, whilst two-way communication is. The difference can be subtle. If a government tweets out content, but does not intend to read or respond to any replies then that would be one-way communication. If it does read and respond

to any replies then that would be one-way communication. If it does read and respond to the replies then that is two-way. In practice for most governments, one-way and two-way communications will involve the same teams, be included in the same strategies, and (should) be part of one joined-up approach. This guide therefore includes both in its definition of public engagement.

4. Types of public engagement on climate

Climate change is unusual as a policy area in having its own internationally agreed framework for public engagement.⁴ The overarching goal of Action for Climate Empowerment (ACE), under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, is to:

“Empower all members of society to engage in climate action through the six ACE elements – climate change education and public awareness, training, public participation, public access to information, and international cooperation on these issues.”⁵

This framework is compatible with non-climate-specific definitions of public engagement, such as the one used in this guide. It is also useful in beginning to describe the range of policy levers and activities that governments may use to achieve their climate engagement goals.

When putting together a public engagement strategy, however, it can be more useful to define different types of public engagement by their purpose. By purpose we mean what government wants to achieve as a result of the engagement. We find it helpful to categorise engagement in this way because it provides governments with clear aims around which they can collaborate internally and externally, and allows for better evaluation and learning.

There is no single definitive typology of public engagement on climate by purpose. Here we draw on a number of similar typologies.⁶ These suggest that there are four broad and overlapping categories of climate engagement.

⁴ Action for Climate Empowerment (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.

⁵ <https://unfccc.int/ace>

⁶ For example, see the work of the Centre for Public Impact (CPI) here on prominent ways of understanding public engagement in the climate space: <https://www.centreforpublicimpact.org/assets/documents/cpi-cgf-public-engagement-net-zero-lit-review.pdf>

Category 1: Engagement to increase understanding, raise awareness or contribute to normalising climate-friendly changes

The broadest possible definition of this category⁷ includes any engagement that is not directly asking people to act. This could include, for example, providing people with information about:

- **Climate change:** what it is, its causes and impacts, and the solutions needed to address it;
- **The co-benefits of climate change:** what the problems are, what the solutions are, and how they relate to climate change;
- **What government is doing to tackle climate change:** its vision, policies, and changes to its own buildings and operations;
- **What other organisations and individuals are doing to tackle climate change:** highlighting the steps and changes made by others.

This category of engagement can help win hearts and minds, making people more likely to take climate-friendly steps and to accept climate-friendly policies - but it is not directly asking people to act.

Box 2: Britain Talks Climate

Britain Talks Climate is an evidence-based toolkit designed to support any organisation that wants to engage members of the public in Britain on climate change. It groups the population into seven different segments based on people's core beliefs. For each segment, it provides advice on areas from understanding their values and how to connect with them, to trusted messengers and most read news sources. Its contents are relevant to all categories of engagement, particularly categories one, two and four. The Britain Talks Climate toolkit came from a collaboration between Climate Outreach, the European Climate Foundation, More in Common and YouGov. You can find the toolkit at:

<https://climateoutreach.org/reports/britain-talks-climate/>

Category 2: Engagement that directly asks for, or supports, climate-friendly actions, including changes to habits and lifestyles.

The narrowest possible definition of this category⁸ includes just engagement where people are either being asked explicitly to take climate-friendly action, or where they are being provided with the information necessary to take that action. These activities may include elements of category one engagement, but go beyond them to ask people explicitly to make a change.

Examples of engagement under category two include, for example:

⁷ It is also possible to use a narrower definition of Category 1 engagement and broader definition of Category 2. For example, the Scottish Government's two relevant strategic objectives for its 'Climate change – Net Zero Nation: public engagement strategy' are: 1. Understand – communicating climate change: People are aware of the action that all of Scotland is taking to tackle climate change and understand how it relates to their lives. 2. Act – encouraging action: Taking action on climate change is normalised and encouraged in households, communities and places across Scotland. Actions under 'Understand' include communications around Scotland's climate ambitions and policies, consistent messaging about the impacts of climate change, and collaboration with key delivery organisations to ensure information reaches key audiences. Actions under 'Act' include work with trusted messengers to promote climate literacy, embedding climate change within formal education, and using the potential of the arts, creativity and heritage to inspire and empower culture change. See <https://www.gov.scot/publications/net-zero-nation-public-engagement-strategy-climate-change/pages/2/>

⁸See footnote 5 above.

- **Campaigns and initiatives aimed at changing people’s habits and decisions:** for example, meat-free Mondays, leave the car at home days, and climate passport-based campaigns;
- **The provision of guidance or information resources to help people make climate-friendly changes:** for example, tours of eco show homes; online or offline information packs; a webpage or leaflets about a local solar buying scheme; helplines or advice services.

Category two activities are likely to be less effective if they are not combined with the other categories of engagement. For example, The Centre for Climate and Social Transformations noted this on the relationship between category one and category two engagement:

“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.”⁹

Similarly, research for the Climate Change Committee concluded that category three engagement can “increase the chance that policy will succeed”, helping to “deliver better policy; increase trust in the policy process; diffuse conflict and resolve arguments; develop policy in novel areas; test support for policies; and give policymakers confidence to act.”¹⁰

Box 3: Food: Too Good to Waste (FTGTW)

“Around 40 percent of food consumed in the U.S. is wasted, leading to increased greenhouse gas emissions and economic losses. From 2012 to 2014, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the West Coast Climate and Materials Management Forum launched a pilot food waste reduction program for households called Food: Too Good To Waste. Seventeen local community organisations across fifteen communities in the U.S. used ‘Community-Based Social Marketing’ campaigns to push for changes in behaviour related to food waste.” The pilots consistently resulted in “[h]ousehold reductions of up to 60% of edible food and 15-25 % of overall food waste.”

This case study is an edited extract from [this report](#) by the Centre for Public Impact.

Category 3: Engagement that invites or supports people to shape decision making

This category covers engagement that invites or supports people to help shape how their community,¹¹ area, region, devolved nation, or the UK more broadly, reaches net zero and adapts to the effects of climate change. From a government’s perspective it can include, for example:

- **Governments proactively asking members of the public for input** to help shape relevant government agendas, strategies, policies, services or other decisions: this could involve a

⁹ See for example <https://cast.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/CAST-briefing-01-Engaging-the-public-on-low-carbon-lifestyle-change-min.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/the-role-of-deliberative-public-engagement-in-climate-policy-development-university-of-lancaster/>

¹¹ This includes communities of interest, not just place-based communities.

wealth of different methods including, for example, formal consultations, surveys, pop-up stands, deliberative workshops, co-design, community organising, or citizens' assemblies.¹²

- **How governments react to engagement with them driven by others** through formal channels (e.g. government petitions systems, contacting politicians, complaints) and informal channels (e.g. demonstrations);
- **Governments working with communities or community groups to help them shape their areas themselves**, using techniques such as Asset Based Community Development¹³, or through partnerships with organisations who use these techniques.

As well as having the benefits already described above, category three engagement can ultimately lead to cost savings, by allowing governments to get policy right first time.¹⁴ It is also critical to a fair transition, ensuring that measures to mitigate, and adapt to, climate change work for all communities and do not exacerbate existing inequalities.¹⁵

Box 4: Public engagement in climate decision making

Governments in the UK are increasingly inviting members of the public to help shape their climate decision making, at UK-wide, devolved and local levels. Examples from the work of Involve and others include the [Sciencewise adaptation dialogue](#) (UK-wide), [Scotland's climate assembly](#) (devolved), these [twenty-two case studies](#) and the [Local Climate Engagement programme](#) (local).

One local area that was particularly effective in realising the benefits of category three engagement was Kendal. The [Kendal Climate Change Citizens' Jury](#) brought together twenty residents, reflective of the local population, to examine the question 'What should Kendal do about climate change?'. The council has also seen [additional benefits](#) from the Jury's work. These have included securing funding for a permanent Eco-Hub (a one-stop shop for accessible information about climate change) and a commitment from a higher tier of government to a 20mph scheme. Perhaps even more eye-catchingly the Jury has led directly to the establishment of a network of 256 community volunteers who have now helped the council with a range of tasks, including their solar audit. The Jury was run by Shared Future CIC. For more information see [here](#) and [here](#).

¹² **Pop up stands** are stalls or similar temporary installations in public spaces (e.g. outside shops). The aim is to ask members of the public to take part (e.g. by voting, adding thoughts to a post-it wall, filling in a survey) for a short amount of time as they go about their daily lives. **Deliberative workshops** are events where members of the public discuss an issue with one another before seeking to reach shared conclusions (e.g. on priority problems or solutions, their feedback on policy options, and so on). Their recommendations are then used to inform governments' work. **Co-design** refers to a process where officials partner with members of the public throughout a policy development or service design process, from problem definition, to solution development and sometimes through to delivery. **Community organising** is about bringing people together and supporting them to identify and take action around their common concerns. **Citizens' assemblies** are events that bring together a group of people who between them reflect the wider population in terms of their demographics and sometimes also their attitudes and behaviours. This group hear balanced information on the issue(s) governments are asking them to consider, before weighing up that information, alongside their own views and experiences, to reach shared conclusions.

¹³ **Asset Based Community Development** (ABCD) is an approach to sustainable community development, that supports communities to drive development themselves, by recognising and using the capacity, skills, assets, knowledge, connections and potential they already have.

¹⁴<https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/publications/our-thinking/public-engagement-and-net-zero-how-government-should-involve>

¹⁵<https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/publications/our-thinking/public-engagement-and-net-zero-how-government-should-involve>

Category 4: Engagement with an advocacy aim

NGOs in particular often engage members of the public to help win climate-friendly changes to the policies or actions of others. This may include asking people to, for example, sign petitions, share their stories, write letters or attend demonstrations. Members of the public should know that this is the purpose of any activities when taking part. Governments are perhaps unlikely to include this category of engagement in their public engagement strategies, although a government could include it if it saw fit. For this reason, it is not considered further in this paper.

Returning to engagement categories one-three, it is possible to make a number of further observations about them. Six points worth drawing out in relation to them are:

They are usually most effective when used in conjunction with one another, and public engagement strategies on climate should include all of them.

Different levels of government will have different levers and resources available to them, and so will be able to pursue each category of engagement to different extents and in different ways. To take category one engagement as an example: most levels of government will have some capacity for communications and public information activities; some will hold additional relevant briefs, for example around formal education and arts, culture and heritage. Each government will need to tailor the scope and scale of its strategy accordingly.

Much is already known about what works in terms of public engagement, be that about messages, messengers¹⁶ and imagery¹⁷ or how to conduct public engagement in decision making¹⁸. Governments can draw on existing expertise rather than starting from scratch.

A public engagement strategy on climate is not just about climate-framed initiatives. Depending on the intended audience, engagement may well best be framed around what are often called the 'co-benefits' of climate action, such as warm homes, clean air, access to nature, and local jobs. It may include some climate messaging, but this doesn't have to be front and centre¹⁹.

Governments are often significant employers. Their public engagement strategies should include how they will engage their workforce, not just how they will reach the wider public.

Government is not the only actor that can undertake public engagement on climate. There are a wealth of third-, public- and private- sector organisations, communities and individuals already engaging members of the public across all three engagement categories. There are many more who could help in future. One key task for government is to work out what its role should be in relation to these actors. This is the question we turn to now.

5. The spaces of public engagement

Governments do not develop or implement public engagement strategies on climate in a vacuum. There is already a plethora of public engagement activities taking place at local, devolved, national and sometimes regional levels. Some of these activities are initiatives driven by governments. Others will be driven by individuals, communities or organisations outside of government. All four of these

¹⁶ See for example, <https://climateoutreach.org/reports/britain-talks-climate/>

¹⁷ See for example, <https://climateoutreach.org/programmes/visuals-and-media/>

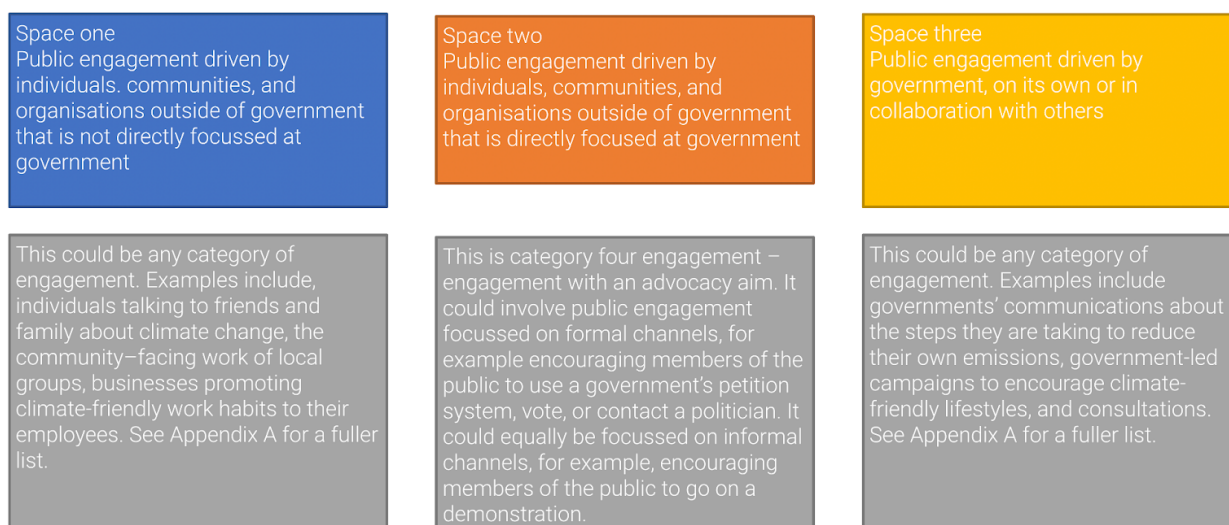
¹⁸ See for example, <https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/knowledge-base>

¹⁹ See, <https://climateoutreach.org/reports/britain-talks-climate/> for the theory, or <https://www.ourzeroselby.org.uk> for a real-life example

actors – governments, organisations outside of government, individuals and communities – can lead all three categories of engagement (see Appendix One).

One way for governments to begin to make sense of this range of activity is by looking at the different spaces in which it takes place. From governments' perspective, they can often look like this:

Figure One: The spaces of public engagement on climate



Governments have key roles to play across all of these spaces, but their roles in relation to each of them will differ (see Section 6). One theory that provides a key perspective on what some of these roles might be is the powercube.²⁰ It also provides a second way to think about public engagement spaces.

The powercube is a tool to analyse how power affects members of the public's action and participation. It talks about three types of spaces:

- **Closed spaces** refer to decisions that are made with little or no public consultation or involvement - for example, where a government makes decisions about aspects of climate policies or strategies without inviting members of the public to help shape them. These spaces are not included in Figure One above, but lie outside of it to the righthand side;
- **Invited spaces** refer to opportunities created by governments or other authorities for people to help shape decisions – for example, where governments ask (i.e. 'invite') people to respond to a consultation, or take part in a codesign²¹ process. If it is government doing the inviting, then this falls within the righthand box of Figure One above;
- **Claimed spaces** are spaces for participation created by members of the public for themselves, often because they are relatively excluded from, or powerless in, decision making. They include, for example, community- and campaign- groups. From the perspective of a climate engagement strategy, some of these groups will be directly campaigning on, or taking action around, climate issues. Some (the same or different groups) will have grown from the communities of place or interest likely to be disproportionately negatively affected by climate

²⁰ See <https://www.powercube.net/analyse-power/what-is-the-powercube/>

²¹ See footnote 9 for a definition of codesign.

change and/or the steps taken to address it. Claimed spaces often initially sit within the left-hand or middle boxes of Figure One above.

Spaces are not static. A closed space may be opened-up to become an invited space. An invited space may be created by a community group starting to use its own fora to engage with government. The different types of spaces can also exist inside one another. For example, a claimed space may have a closed space within it, if a small number of individuals make all the decisions about how it is run. A common challenge for governments can be determining how representative of a community the leaders of a claimed space really are, particularly if they are asking them to input into government decision making in lieu of wider public engagement.

While these points are valuable, it is another aspect of the powercube analysis that is perhaps most important for climate engagement strategies - its observation that who holds a space is critical to who participates in it. Governments need climate engagement to reach across the whole population to ensure that the country successfully mitigates and adapts to the effects of climate change, and crucially, that it does so fairly²². Claimed spaces can provide safe, accessible and attractive spaces for communities with little trust in governments. This often includes the communities who stand to be disproportionately affected by climate change and/or the steps taken to address it. Such community and campaign groups also help to provide trusted messages and messengers on climate issues for these groups.

The work of claimed spaces is both valuable in and of itself, and also impacts on the success of invited spaces. Community groups and others can make valuable partners for councils in reaching communities who would not otherwise engage with them. The skills and experiences that people gain in claimed spaces can also lead them to go on to participate in invited spaces, when they previously wouldn't have considered it. While the same is true the other way round (i.e. people who participate first in invited spaces may then join claimed spaces), it is the communities most vulnerable to climate change and in the transition who are most likely to participate in a claimed space first.

Claimed spaces then are vital to governments, and governments can play roles both in supporting them to thrive and in collaborating with them. It is to these roles, and the others that governments can play in public engagement on climate, that we now turn.

Box 5: Black Environment Network

The [Black Environment Network](#) is working towards a vision of full multicultural environmental participation, local and global. It offers:

- Training with regard to the principles and context of reaching out and engaging with ethnic minority groups;
- Transformative diversity training, aimed at a deeper understanding of the historical context against which ethnic minority engagement takes place;
- A resource bank of good practice case studies, articles, publications and reports;
- Consultancy and advice.

²²Public engagement on climate consistently shows that members of the public see 'fairness', broadly defined, as critical to a transition that they would support. See, for example, <https://www.climateassembly.uk/recommendations/index.html>

6. The role of government in public engagement

So far we have seen that there are four categories of public engagement on climate, at least three of which governments should include in their climate engagement strategies. We have also recognised that it is not just governments that can engage the public on climate issues: organisations outside of government, communities, and individuals can, and do, also lead all three categories of engagement. Finally, we looked at the spaces of public engagement on climate as one way to begin to think about how the activities of all these different actors fit together. We said that governments have a role play in all of the spaces, but what exactly is it?

Governments can play at least six different, and overlapping, roles in public engagement on climate:

- **Driver:** governments can instigate, commission, mandate and lead engagement initiatives;
- **Collaborator:** governments can collaborate and partner with others, on initiatives that start inside or outside of government;
- **Facilitator:** governments can support claimed spaces and engagement led by others to thrive, for example through connecting, supporting and funding initiatives, and providing resources, guidance and skills;
- **Influencer:** governments can influence others to engage and to engage well, for example through convening, incentivising, and modelling and sharing good practice;
- **Framework provider:** governments can provide overarching engagement strategies (see Box 6) that allow its own engagement and that of others to add up to more than the sum of its parts. It can do this by itself or in collaboration with others. It can also select climate policies that in and of themselves support engagement, for example around community energy;
- **Receiver:** governments receive requests, ideas, feedback and demands from others, around engagement initiatives and as part of them. How and if governments respond to these approaches can affect whether people participate in future and whether engagement initiatives led by others succeed.

Broadly, these six roles relate to the spaces of public engagement on climate as shown in the figure at the top of the next page. The diagram holds true across the different categories of engagement.

Box 6: Towards a UK public engagement strategy on climate change

[‘Towards a UK public engagement strategy on climate change’](#) is the companion report to this guide. In it, the UPPER coalition argues that the UK government should work with others to co-design and implement a comprehensive, nationwide strategy for public engagement with climate change. The creation of the strategy itself would involve the UK government driving (instigating), collaborating (codesigning) and influencing (convening) other organisations. The strategy itself would act as a multiplier.

The UK government would also play different roles in the implementation of the strategy. For example, the report argues that the UK government should consider centrally delivered high profile advertising campaigns (driving), whilst also envisaging that much of the coordination and delivery of the strategy will be local. The government has a key role to play as a facilitator in relation to regional and local coordination and delivery of the strategy.

Figure Two: The roles governments can play in different climate engagement spaces

Roles	Space one Public engagement driven by individuals, communities, and organisations outside of government that is not directly focussed at government	Space two Public engagement driven by individuals, communities, and organisations outside of government that is directly focussed at government	Space three Public engagement driven by government, on its own or in collaboration with others
Driver	No	Governments are unlikely to drive or to support directly advocacy aimed at themselves, although they could play a number of roles in advocacy aimed at other levels of government.	Yes
Collaborator	Yes		Yes, including with other levels of government
Facilitator	Yes		Yes, in terms of internal colleagues, and other levels of government*
Influencer	Yes		Yes, in terms of internal colleagues, and other levels of government
Framework provider	Yes		Yes, in terms of internal colleagues, and other levels of government
Receiver	Yes – e.g. requests for advice and support	Yes – e.g. as the recipient of petitions	Yes – e.g. as the recipient of consultation responses

*Governments can also help by recompensing organisations and individuals for their involvement in government-led public engagement initiatives

A successful public engagement strategy on climate will see a government play different roles at different times and on different policy areas, responding to what is most needed and what it can best provide. Section 7 looks at how governments can prioritise their activities and create strategies suited to their powers, contexts and resources.

Before moving on to that, however, it is useful to acknowledge that governments can also play less positive roles in relation to public engagement on climate. For example: council processes and officers can be more or less helpful to community groups seeking permissions, advice or support; higher tiers of government can provide funding to lower tiers of government on timelines that prevent engagement on how it is spent; a lack of policy certainty from higher tiers of government can inhibit engagement planning at a local level. All tiers of government should aim to remove blocks to engagement, as well as playing enabling roles.

Box 7: Working with community partners

The Ashden Foundation’s [guide for UK councils](#) on delivering climate action with community partners includes practical tips and guidance on:

- How to identify and involve community partners;
- How to build trust and collaboration;
- How to develop and implement community-led projects.

It also features a wide range of case studies, including the work of Brent Council. In Brent, 82% of residents follow a faith so the council set up a Brent Faith Climate Action Group to “harness the influence of faith communities and bring them into the conversation on climate action.” The group is made up of faith leaders and their work has included initiatives to engage their congregations and the wider community, including a community cookbook, templates for places of workshop to promote greener behaviours and ways of living, and a photography exhibition. More details can be found at the link above.

Box 8: Engaging rural communities in Warwick and Stratford

In 2022-2023, Involve worked with Warwick and Stratford District Councils and the West Midlands Association of Local Councils (WALC) to deliver work with two aims, to:

- Support the development of community-led rural visioning and action, and
- Enhance the District Councils' understanding of rural climate issues to inform their climate change action planning and provide support that enables rural community-led climate futures to thrive.

The programme recognised the partnership working required to reach across dispersed rural communities. It therefore included training and shadowing opportunities, as well as the public engagement itself, in order to establish an ongoing infrastructure of public engagement support for Parish Councils and others in the area.

Involve's work in Warwick and Stratford was part of the Local Just Transitions Project (with [Forum for the Future](#)) and [Local Climate Engagement Programme](#) (with [Climate Outreach](#), [Shared Future CIC](#), [Demsoc](#) and [UK100](#)).

7. Creating a public engagement strategy on climate

A key question for governments when creating a public engagement strategy on climate is what mix of activities to prioritise. In other words, what roles is the government going to play across the different categories and spaces of public engagement – and the different policy areas – at different times.

The answer will vary for each individual government. Externally, they have their own geographies, populations, and civil society sectors. Internally, they face opportunities and barriers – for example, around skills, capacity, resources, and officer- and political- buy-in. What powers governments hold also, of course, varies.

That said, our work with governments of different levels across the UK suggests that there are a number of common steps that can offer useful starting points. The steps are iterative, and governments at different levels will necessarily do them in varying levels of depth and in different ways.

- **Gather information about policy dates and timelines:** What is happening in the short-medium term on climate change that public engagement could help with? What teams are involved?
- **Map what is happening and identify the gaps:** Who is already engaging members of the public on climate issues internally and externally, who are they engaging, and on what?;
- **Explore how it's going:** What do people internally and externally see as the strengths and weaknesses of the governments' approach, and what do they think it could most usefully do going forward?;
- **Think about buy-in:** What level of political- and officer- buy-in or opposition exists around the different categories of engagement and the roles the government could play? Is this uniform

across different policy areas? What are the hooks and levers internally to create change, if needed?

- **Get clear on the purpose:** What is the strategy trying to achieve? The three categories of engagement in this paper provide a useful starting point, and footnote five provides an example of how a government has turned similar thinking into strategic engagement goals. In setting these objectives, governments will also want to think about their commitments to a fair transition and the engagement needed to create it.
- **Be proactive about inequalities:** What steps is the government going to take to make sure its engagement is accessible and relevant to those experiencing structural inequalities?
- **Assess skills, capacity and resourcing:** What skills, capacity and resources exist in-house on the different categories of public engagement? What steps could be taken to add to or improve these, if needed? Are there existing programmes, strategies or budgets that the work could hook into, rather than it requiring entirely new resource? What is available externally?
- **Identify who could help (although this may come later):** Which internal teams and external organisations hold trusted relationships with the people the government needs to reach.

Exploring these areas should help governments identify how they can have most impact and add greatest value to the public engagement on climate that is already taking place.

3. Conclusion

Governments are key actors in public engagement on climate. Their climate engagement strategies should span all three relevant categories of engagement. And they should take account of the range of roles governments can play in the spaces in which climate engagement takes place. The good news for governments is that they are not on their own. Organisations outside of government, communities and individuals can, and do, also lead all three categories of public engagement. An effective public engagement strategy on climate looks at how to enable, and collaborate with, these other actors, not just at the engagement that governments lead themselves.

Appendix One: Examples of what the different categories of climate engagement can look like for individuals, communities, organisations outside of government and government

The purpose of this table is to illustrate what the different categories of climate engagement can look like for individuals, communities, organisations outside of government and governments themselves. It does not show how these different actors can work together. Collaboration between different types of actor and between actors of the same type is very important for public engagement on climate. Almost all of the examples in this table could be developed and delivered in partnership.

Actor	Examples of what the different categories of engagement can look like
Individuals and communities	<p>Individuals and communities can undertake all three categories of public engagement, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Category one – understanding, awareness and normalising action: They may talk about climate change or related issues – including changes they are making in their own lives or groups – to friends, family, colleagues, community members, or other communities. They may also set-up or play an active role in community groups, or volunteer for relevant initiatives. • Category two – asks for or supports climate-friendly action: They may try to persuade friends, family, colleagues, community members, or other communities. to make climate-friendly changes in their lives . Again, they may also set-up or play an active role in community groups, or volunteer for relevant initiatives. • Category three – invites or supports people to shape decision making: They may set up or play an active role in community groups that develop community-led initiatives related to climate. They may encourage or support people to take part in campaigning and advocacy activities, or to respond to government requests for input.
Public-, private- and third- sector organisations outside of government	<p>Organisations can undertake all three categories of public engagement, in relation to both their employees and the wider public. What this looks like will depend on factors such as the type and size of the organisation, but examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Category one – understanding, awareness and normalising action: sharing information about the steps the organisation is taking to address climate change; leading, passing on, or promoting educational or awareness raising resources, activities or campaigns; • Category two – asks for or supports climate-friendly action: promoting climate-friendly changes in work habits; running or taking part in wider campaigns or initiatives to encourage climate-friendly lifestyles and habits, developing place-based or interest group specific initiatives to encourage climate-friendly habits; developing, signposting to or passing on information; • Category three – invites or supports people to shape decision making: engaging their employees and/or the wider public to help them decide what steps to take to tackle climate change; developing community-led initiatives around climate issues; supporting or organising the people they work with to lobby government or others..

Actor

Examples of what the different categories of engagement can look like

Government

Governments can undertake all three categories of public engagement, in proportion to their relative size, resources and powers. They often think about their role in public engagement as purely about engaging the wider public. However governments are often (with the exception of Town and Parish Councils) significant employers; there is much they can do to engage their workforce. Examples of public engagement activities might include:

- **Category one – understanding, awareness and normalising action:** sharing information about the steps they are taking in terms of their own buildings, operations and practices to tackle climate change; communicating the policies they are putting in place to help address climate change; mandating or running educational initiatives;
- **Category two – asks for or supports climate-friendly action:** running wider campaigns or initiatives to encourage climate-friendly lifestyles and habits, developing place-based or interest group specific initiatives; developing, signposting to or passing on information;
- **Category three – invites or supports people to shape decision making:** seeking input from members of the public and employees to help shape relevant strategies, policies, services and decisions; developing community-led initiatives focused on place-based or interest group specific change.