

DELIVERING LOCAL PRIORITIES

**Framing climate, values and
action in local authority
communications**



August 2025

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Local Authority Communications Toolkit

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Summary - At a glance

The climate and political context is changing—and so is how we talk about it. Even the most practical, well-planned projects can face resistance, misunderstanding or delay. This toolkit won't give you instant wins, but it will help you speak with clarity, purpose and confidence—especially in challenging conversations.

1. Focus on what matters to them

People respond more to *values* than to facts. Before drafting any message, ask:

What does my audience care about—safety? savings? control? pride in place?

Use shared values as your entry point:

- Security → “Protecting what matters”
- Fairness → “Keeping costs under control for everyone”
- Health → “Warmer homes, cleaner air, fewer sick days”
- Jobs → “Local work that lasts”

2. Deliver outcomes, not ideology

Whether it's energy, housing or transport, people want to know *what this means for them*. Avoid jargon. Frame work as smart investment in community wellbeing. Don't lead with 'climate'—lead with local benefits.

Example language swaps

Instead of...	Say this ...
Net Zero strategy	Investing in clean local energy to control bills and supply
Green jobs	Local jobs that last
Climate targets	Upgrading infrastructure so it works for the next 20 years
Behaviour change	Helping residents save money and stay healthy
Biodiversity gains	Protecting local green spaces and cleaner air

3. Build trust over time

People don't shift views after one poster or policy. Progress takes consistent, values-based communication—paired with practical delivery and visible results. Show up often. Listen more. Use plain English; and always come back to what matters to them.

Key message: Communicate clearly, deliver locally, and connect through shared values.

1. Introduction

This guide supports colleagues in communicating the aims and benefits of their work clearly—particularly in a time of increased public scrutiny, complex cultural dynamics and stretched local resources.

Whether working on energy, housing, waste or skills, the language we use affects how decisions land. It's not just about what we do—it's about how it's understood.

This toolkit is designed to help you:

- Connect work to outcomes people care about: lower bills, stronger services, better communities.
- Reduce friction in conversations with colleagues, Councillors and the public.
- Communicate with clarity, empathy and relevance—without diluting the substance.

It recognises that we're working in a difficult landscape. This guide won't solve that overnight, but it can help you stay calm, grounded and strategic when things get tricky.

We're not trying to convert people or win arguments. We're trying to find common ground and keep vital work moving forward. You don't have to change minds—you just have to keep showing up and communicating clearly.

This is about making sure the work we already do—improving homes, cutting waste, supporting local businesses, protecting services—is communicated in a way that resonates with decision-makers and residents alike.

In some cases, terminology like “Net Zero” or “climate resilience” may be misunderstood or seen as contentious. This toolkit offers alternative ways to talk about the same essential work—using clear, relatable language that focuses on outcomes, trust and relevance.

It provides examples, visuals and templates to support your messaging—whether you're briefing councillors, writing strategy papers or designing a poster. Use what works, adapt what doesn't, and share your own swaps as you go.

Effective, inclusive communication helps protect and progress your work in a challenging environment. This toolkit is here to support you as you do just that.



2. Keep turning up: building trust takes time

This toolkit offers tools to help you communicate more effectively—but they aren't silver bullets. Changing minds takes time. Most people don't shift their views after one email or meeting. The key is consistency. You're not trying to convert anyone—you're trying to find common ground.

Building resilience in challenging times

Working in sustainability and public service has always required resilience. In today's climate—both political and environmental—it can feel harder than ever. Policies shift, public opinion divides and many professionals are experiencing climate fatigue or eco-anxiety.

You're not alone and you are making a difference.

Studies show that collaborative, values-based communication helps build trust and momentum—even in challenging environmentsⁱ and that changing messaging from issues to action help to connect and build agencyⁱⁱ. Progress isn't always visible; sometimes just keeping a project alive or finding a shared priority is a win. Resilience means staying connected—to your team, your values and the communities you serve.

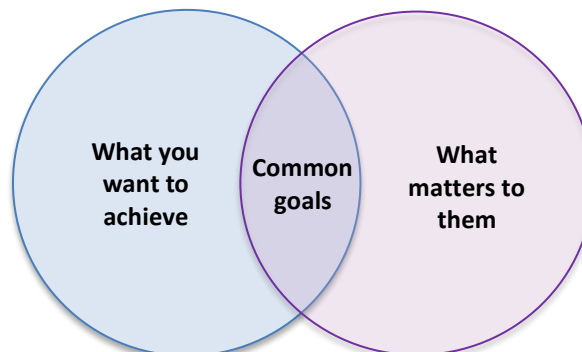
The final section of this toolkit signposts that can help you stay grounded and hopeful.

What this looks like in practice:



No one has an epiphany after one meeting, but steady, respectful communication can gradually move conversations forward.

Start where your goals overlap:



3. Understanding your audience

Messaging works best when it aligns with values

Values are our internal compass. Unlike passing opinions, they tend to be stable and deeply tied to our identity. They shape what we notice, believe and act on—often without us realising. Jonathan Haidt's Moral Foundations Theory identifies six key areas of moral concern: Care, Fairness, Loyalty, Authority, Sanctity, and Liberty. These foundations influence our moral judgments and behaviours and vary between individuals or cultures.

Psychological researchⁱⁱⁱ confirms that values are powerful drivers of behaviour, especially when messaging reflects a person's worldview. This means that even clear, fact-based climate messaging can fall flat if it doesn't connect with what the listener already cares about.

Britain is not polarised—it's segmented

[More on Common's](#) found that most people are not entrenched in political extremes. Instead, the public can be grouped into value-based segments that influence how they respond to messages across a wide range of topics. While trends in voting or trust may differ, shared values often emerge—especially on practical priorities like health, safety, pride in place and economic stability.

Despite polarisation in the media, a recent study^{iv} found that across the political spectrum, people expressed concern about climate impacts — especially when issues were framed through values they identified with. Shared goals like health, safety, security and national pride often emerged, even when motivations differed. A 2024 study^v tested patriotic (“supporting our country's future”) and system-aligned messages and found they significantly increased pro-climate engagement among traditionally sceptical audiences, whilst tailored messaging and trusted messengers shift attitudes even among staunch sceptics in the US^{vi}.

Take renewable energy: a progressive might support it to reduce carbon emissions, whilst a conservative might see it as a way to strengthen national energy independence. Both value the outcome — but arrive there via different routes. This is not about spin. It's about strategic framing—helping people see climate action as something that delivers on their own goals.

Values-based messaging

The research shows that we make more progress by building on people's values, not pushing against them. Sustainability campaigns are more effective when they connect with people's cultural identity and emotional priorities, not just environmental facts^{vii}. Stories resonate most when they reflect who we are — not who someone else wants us to be^{viii}.

DO:

- Start with shared concerns (e.g. cost of living, local jobs, community pride)
- Focus on outcomes (e.g. warmer homes, cleaner air)
- Use plain English
- Frame it as practical delivery, not abstract change

AVOID:

- Jargon (e.g. “net zero”, “decarbonise”)
- Ideological labels (“green agenda”, “climate crisis”)
- Pitting values against each other (e.g. jobs *versus* environment)

Examples

“We’re here to talk about practical steps that make sense locally. Project A helps households save money, businesses stay competitive and communities prepare for the pressures we *all* see coming—whether it's rising costs, global instability or local disruption.”

“It's about cutting waste, building resilience and backing British skills and innovation. Whether you call it economic planning, future-proofing or just common sense—it’s a chance to lead, not lag.”

- ✓ Focuses on universal outcomes: cost savings, control, pride
- ✓ Avoids tribal terms
- ✓ Leaves room for political alignment across the spectrum

Finding shared goals

Value	Example audience	Core concerns	Suggested message
National pride	Conservatives/ Reform led wards	Energy security Local jobs	British-made energy
Freedom and choice		Autonomy, anti-red tape	More control over our bills
Family and safety	Labour led wards	Health, resilience	Cleaner air and water for us all
Financial fairness		Cost of living Public services	Wasting less, saving more
Community care	Lib Dem wards	Local ownership Fairness	Stronger communities, future resilience <i>and</i> innovative local solutions

3b. What the public care about

Public support for climate action is strong and often underestimated.

Over 80% of UK adults say they are very or fairly concerned about climate change^{ix}, whilst 61% believe it will affect their lives^x. The majority of voters^{xi}, support policies to tackle climate change. Yet this support is underestimated by the public and MPs. this support is not always visible to decision-makers. Recent polling shows that whilst 70% of the public support climate action^{xii} (including Reform UK voters^{xiii}), only 49% of MPs recognise this support.

Simply making this support visible boosts public engagement. The *gateway belief model* shows that when people understand there is widespread consensus—among scientists, the public or their peers—they are more likely to support policies and take action themselves.

UK-Wide Polling Insights

According to the Office for National Statistics Opinions and Lifestyle Survey conducted in May 2024, the most commonly reported important issues facing the UK were:

- Cost of living: 87%
- NHS: 85%
- The economy: 68%
- Climate change and the environment: 61%
- Crime: 59%
- Housing: 58%
- Immigration: 54%
- International conflict: 50%
- Education: 46%

What matters most to *your* community?

4. Understanding manufactured doubt & disinformation

The Problem

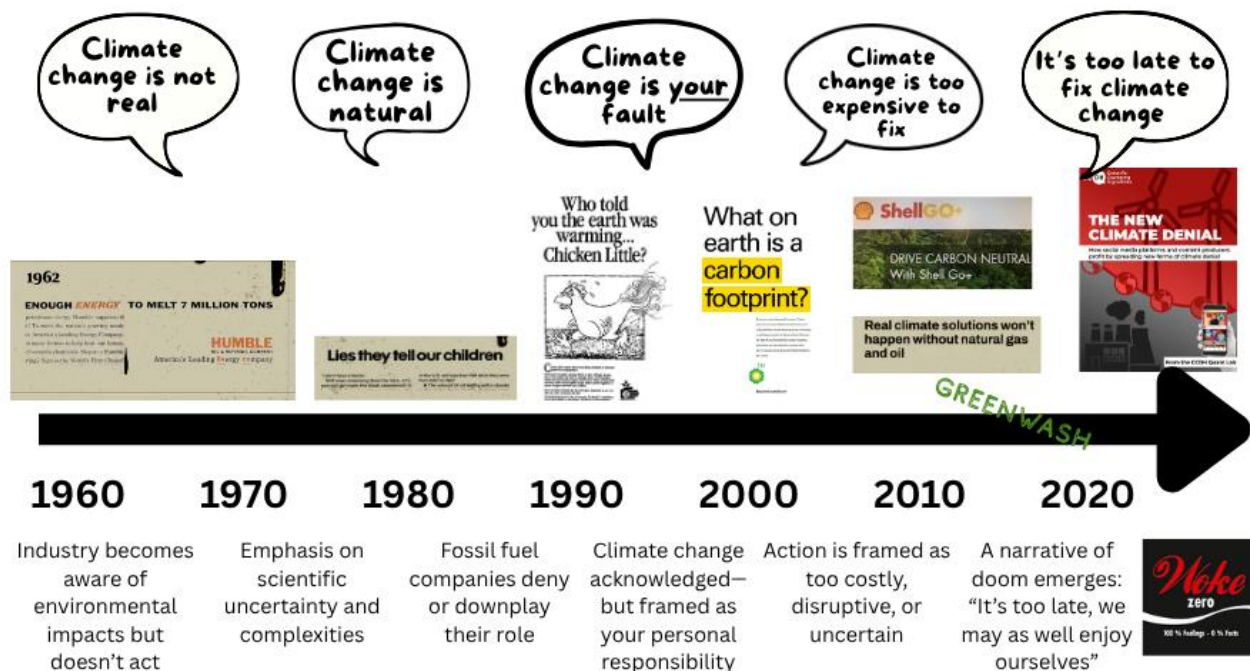
For over 60 years, fossil fuel companies have shaped public perceptions—delaying action even as their own research confirmed climate risks. In the 1980s, Shell and Exxon privately warned of global warming, while publicly casting doubt and lobbying against regulation. These strategies continue today through greenwashing, lobbying, and targeted media^{xiv}.

Common tactics:

- **Misleading advertising:** Promoting fossil fuels as “clean” whilst continuing to lobby^{xv} for gas or oppose stricter regulation
- **Lobbying & funding:** Over \$1 billion^{xvi} has been spent since the Paris Agreement to weaken climate policy.
- **Shaping narratives:** Partnerships with media and influencers promote misinformation^{xvii} and political discourse, echoing tactics used by the tobacco industry.
- **Delay through distraction:** Focus on small doubts or trade-offs to stall progress.

These tactics have made phrases like “green agenda” politically charged, even when the work delivers clear local benefits.

Timeline of climate misinformation



Advice

- Use neutral, practical language: e.g. “protecting services”, “updating infrastructure”.
- Don't repeat misinformation—focus on tangible outcomes and trusted evidence.
- If challenged, acknowledge complexity and return to what matters locally.

5. Framing your messaging

Why take time to define tone and language?

- **Saves time** – Clear language avoids rewrites and helps messages land the first time.
- **Builds trust** – Avoid jargon and acronyms that alienate. Simple language keeps audiences on side.
- **Creates consistency** – Especially helpful when multiple teams or partners communicate the same work.

Tone of voice principles

Your tone of voice reflects your intent. It builds credibility and makes complex issues easier to understand.

1. **Active and positive:** Use dynamic, forward-looking language. Focus on solutions and what's possible.
2. **Clear and empathetic:** Be authoritative but approachable. Avoid technical language and speak plainly.
3. **Practical and outcome-focused:** Offer useful steps. Share examples that show the real-world impact of your work.
4. **Connect to everyday life:** Frame sustainability goals through things people care about—security, comfort, savings.
5. **Inclusive and respectful:** Don't assume prior knowledge. Make sure your messaging works for all audiences.

Language guidelines

- Use plain English – short words, short sentences.
- Write in the present or future tense.
- Headings should be clear and helpful (“How it works”, not “Information”).
- Avoid weak verbs like “get” or “do” (e.g. say “Join the scheme”, not “Get involved”).

Replace jargon with everyday terms

Translating sustainability jargon

Tailor your terms to your audience. For example:

Technical Term	Everyday Alternative
Net Zero	Cutting waste and pollution
Biodiversity	Protecting wildlife and green space
Decarbonisation	Using cleaner energy

Use 'real' people in everyday situations and dynamic local images, not solar panels or generic graphics.

Refer to the [Plain English Campaign](#) or [Climate Outreach](#) for tested alternatives.

Visuals matter too

Research shows UK audiences respond better to relatable, positive imagery than dramatic global visuals. Visit [Climate Visuals](#) for examples based on public testing.

What works:

- **People-centred:** Real people doing everyday things.
- **Local context:** Leicestershire homes, parks, high streets—not distant disasters.
- **Solution-focused:** Show what's improving, not just what's wrong.
- **Before & after:** Green spaces replacing littered ones, warm homes with solar panels.

6. Addressing common concerns

If talking about climate or sustainability sounds like taking a political position, colleagues can focus on the goal to deliver effective local services that respond to current and future pressures. For example, terms like *Net Zero* or *Scope 3 emissions* are often unclear and refer more to the process than the outcome or action. Swapping them for plain English (e.g. cheaper energy, cutting waste or improving local services) helps everyone understand the goals.

Recommended approach:

Emphasise that the Council is focused on practical steps that protect public health, maintain local infrastructure and make good use of public funds, regardless of national politics.

Instead of saying...	Say ...
To meet our Net Zero commitments...	Protect residents from rising risks and keep services affordable
This is part of our climate strategy	Our resilience and efficiency plan
Climate goals	Long-term service reliability
We're investing in green infrastructure	We're focusing on local priorities and long-term value
Jargon e.g. 'Net Zero', 'biodiversity', 'energy scopes'	We're maintaining roads/ homes/ services work for residents now and in future

Why this works

1. It matches the public mood.

Over 80% of UK adults support action to cut carbon^{xviii}—even if they don't always use environmental language themselves. Quiet support is underestimated by politicians and often stronger than expected. Using clear, benefit-led language avoids unnecessary resistance.

2. It focuses on outcomes, not opinions

Benefit-led communication (resilience, reliability, cost control) is more effective than values signalling or ideological framing—especially with sceptical or cross-party audiences^{xix}.

3. It addresses concerns about cost and credibility

Linking climate-friendly projects to familiar public issues—like potholes, fuel bills, or waste—shows they're not new commitments, just smarter ways to meet existing ones.

Concern: Council Spend

Climate-related projects can sometimes be seen as abstract, ideological, or expensive. But when framed clearly, they're understood as practical investments—upgrading local services, cutting waste, and reducing long-term costs. Reframing these initiatives as part of core service delivery increases support across political perspectives^{xx}.

Examples of confident framing:

1. Energy infrastructure – investing locally, not in imported gas
2. Retrofit homes – cut household bills, reduce damp, lower NHS visits
3. Electric fleet – reduce fuel costs, cut noise and air pollution
4. Waste strategy – fewer missed bin complaints, lower disposal costs

Note: Some councils have shifted spending entirely toward flood defences or emergency adaptation. While these are important, they treat the symptoms, not the cause. True preparedness means both protecting people now and reducing the pressures driving those risks in the first place.

National stats to support your case (*ideally find local ones*)

- Insulating a home saves households around £300–£400 annually^{xxi}
- Better-insulated homes save about £220 per year on energy bills^{xxii} and can reduce NHS costs^{xxiii}.
- Health and energy savings together generate payback within 8–9 years^{xxiv}.

Original Phrase	Reframed Version
Climate emergency	A cost-of-living and safety issue we can fix locally
Sustainable transport	Affordable, reliable ways to get around
Green economy	Local jobs that last
Energy transition	Switching to stable, British-made energy
Just transition	Fair change that protects workers and cuts costs
Scope 3 emissions	Waste and energy use across supply chains
Resilience planning	Keeping services running through future shocks

Concern: This feels like telling people what to do

If public campaigns (e.g. around travel, waste, or food) sound like moralising, frame these as support, not instruction. Focus on choice, control and savings. Use phrases like:

- We're providing tools and choices
- This gives residents more control over their energy use and household costs
- This helps people make informed decisions that work for them

Avoid:

- This campaign will change behaviour
- We're teaching people to...

Instead of: Travel behaviour change
Try: Improving local transport options.

Why this works

- **Freedom and fairness land better than obligation:** More in Common's 2023–24^{xxv} research finds that conservative-leaning audiences are especially sensitive to *freedom of choice, fairness and personal responsibility*.
- **Empowerment outperforms education:** People respond better to *tips they can use* than to being taught^{xxvi}. Position your campaign as *enabling*, not *instructing*^{xxvii}.
- **Democratic legitimacy matters:** Messages that emphasise choice, transparency and practical support maintain trust across political lines^{xxviii}.

Instead of saying...	Try saying...
This behaviour change campaign...	We're offering options so residents can cut bills or stay well independently.
We're educating residents about their footprint.	We're sharing tips that are working for others in the community.

7. Quick reference sheets

These one-page guides pull out the most useful tools from the full communications toolkit. They are designed for officers and partners who need clear, practical prompts during meetings, briefings or campaign planning.

Each sheet focuses on a different aspect of confident communication:

Action messages – swaps that highlight the resident benefit of every initiative

Addressing common concerns – quick ways to acknowledge, explain and reassure

Example text swaps – alternative phrasing to keep language clear and relatable

Jargon alternatives – everyday words that land better than technical or ideological terms

You can download and share them individually or use them together as a quick-reference pack.

ⁱ Goldberg, M. H., van der Linden, S., Leiserowitz, A., & Maibach, E. (2020). Perceived social consensus can reduce ideological biases on climate change. *Environment and Behavior*, 52(5), 495–517. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013916519853302>

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ⁱⁱⁱ Hanel, Paul & Foad, Colin & Maio, Gregory. (2021). Attitudes and Values. 10.1093/acrefore/9780190236557.013.248.

^{iv} Farzan Karimi-Malekabadi, Sonya Sachdeva, Morteza Dehghani, A value-based topography of climate change beliefs and behaviors, *PNAS Nexus*, Volume 4, Issue 2, February 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pnasnexus/pgae590>

^v Katherine A. Mason, Madalina Vlasceanu, John T. Jost. Effects of system-sanctioned framing on climate awareness and environmental action in the United States and beyond. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 2024; 121 (38) DOI: [10.1073/pnas.2405973121](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2405973121)

^{vi} Goldberg, M.H., Gustafson, A., Rosenthal, S.A. et al. Shifting Republican views on climate change through targeted advertising. *Nat. Clim. Chang.* **11**, 573–577 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-021-01070-1>

^{vii} Kostis, P.C.; Kafka, K.I. Examining the Interplay of Climate Change, Cultural Dynamics, and Sustainable Development: A Global Perspective. *Sustainability* **2023**, *15*, 13652. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su151813652>

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^{xi} <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/apr/22/activate-climate-silent-majority-support-supercharge-action>

^{xii} <https://mailchi.mp/bccd59b8b75b/test-welcome-to-the-climate-barometer-newsletter-12750410>

^{xiii} https://eciui.net/media/press-releases/2025/local-election-poll-majority-of-reform-voters-back-climate-targets?utm_content=buffer91fdd&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer

^{xiv} <https://www.newyorker.com/news/annals-of-a-warming-planet/the-un-climate-panel-tries-to-cut-through-the-smog>

^{xv} <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/influencemap-releases-report-showing-major-oil-companies-investment-into-misleading-climate-related-branding-lobbying/>

^{xvi} <https://influencemap.org/report/How-Big-Oil-Continues-to-Oppose-the-Paris-Agreement-38212275958aa21196dae3b76220bddc>

^{xvii} <https://influencemap.org/briefing/Fossil-Fuel-Climate-Advocacy-Update-March-2024-27599>

^{xviii} ECIU (2024). *Climate Barometer: UK public attitudes to climate action.*

^{xix} Lock, I. & Davidson, S. (2024). [Argumentation strategies in lobbying: toward a typology.](#) *Journal of Communication Management*, 28(2), 345–364.

^{xx} Imperial College London (PCAN Co-benefits), 2023.
CAST Centre (2020–2023), Behavioural Framing & Climate Engagement Reports.

^{xxi} <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/families-to-save-hundreds-through-1-billion-insulation-scheme>

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^{xxiii} Building Research Establishment (BRE) – “Tackling cold homes would save the NHS £540 mn per year” (March 2023)

^{xxiv} <https://bregroup.com/documents/d/bre-group/english-housing-survey-energy-report-2020-21>

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^{xxviii} Lock, I. and Davidson, S. (2024). *Argumentation strategies in lobbying: toward a typology.* *Journal of Communication Management*, 28(2), 345–364.

- [What are climate misinformation and disinformation and what is their impact?](#) LSE
- [The Forgotten Oil Ads That Told Us Climate Change Was Nothing](#) (The Guardian, 2021)
- [Shell and Exxon's Secret 1980s Climate Warnings](#) (The Guardian, 2018)
- [Exxon's Oil Industry Peers Knew About Climate Dangers in the 1970s](#) (New York Times, 2017)
- BP's promotion of the "carbon footprint" concept is widely cited in climate communication literature (e.g. *Carbon footprint: a misleading guide to climate action*).
- [Big Oil's Big History of Blocking Climate Action](#) (InfluenceMap Report, 2024)
- [New forms of climate denial spreading on social media](#) (BBC, 2023)
- [The New Climate Denial](#) (Center for Countering Digital Hate, 2023)