

An abstract network diagram consisting of numerous nodes (represented by circles of varying sizes and colors, including blue, grey, and white) connected by thin, light blue lines. The nodes are distributed across the entire frame, with a higher density in the lower half. The lines create a complex web of connections, suggesting a global or interconnected network.

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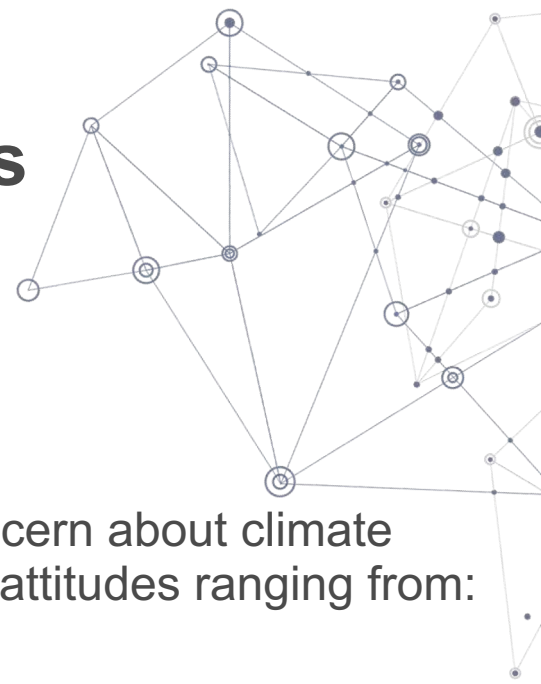
— Insight & Strategy —

Cutting through the greenwash: climate communications in 2022

28 April 2022



1. Unpacking high levels of concern: proximity, urgency and salience



- Consistently high levels of stated concern about climate change (75%+) mask highly variable attitudes ranging from:
- Passive concern:
 - An important issue to consider for the long term, more common among older people
- Passionate urgency
 - We need to act now before it's too late, more common among younger people
- Historically flooding has been the most proximate effect of climate change for UK citizens, but the energy crisis is making new connections for people

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/data-sets/dataonpublicattitudestotheenvironmentandtheimpactofclimatechange/greatbritain>
<https://cast.ac.uk/publicperceptiondashboard/>

2. Net Zero what? Filling the vacuum, not being blown off course

- It's a similar story for Net Zero – a strong majority support the 2050 target (78%), but very few understand what it actually means (9% say they know a lot)
- The risk in this situation is that the term becomes contested and misused, and ultimately mistrusted
- While there have been concerns about this support being disrupted by more pressing issues like energy and living costs, so far this isn't borne out in the available data
- That said, fairness and protecting the vulnerable is a strong priority for citizens who expect proactive policy making

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/996575/Climate_change_and_net_zero_public_awareness_and_perceptions_summary_report.pdf
<https://www.ukonward.com/reports/taking-the-temperature/>





3. Where are we heading: the need for a positive vision



- In our Net Zero Diaries project we provided citizens with info about current policy, and repeatedly heard that it wasn't inspiring enough
- When it came to manifestos Diarists preferred bold, positive and more radical proposals that described 'somewhere people would want to live'
- They also told us they wanted to see real leadership and ownership from government, with a sense currently that nobody 'owns' the strategy
- And a more positive framing (when backed up by effective policy to protect the vulnerable) can steer debate away from a false dichotomy of Net Zero vs living standards

<https://britainthinks.com/what-does-net-zero-mean-to-citizens-today/>

Framing the issues

Climate change is:

- An urgent and current issue for the UK
- An issue we will all make changes to help address
- An issue on which everyone's voice is powerful and necessary

Net Zero is:

- An opportunity not a sacrifice, for everyone in the UK
- Measurable, achievable with a clear outcome
- About key policy areas, as part of a coherent whole



4. What works: knowledge gaps



- Striking and consistent finding is that concern, and effort aren't translating into impact because there is such poor awareness of what works
 - Recycling and plastic packaging are the most frequently cited, along with local food, but are actually some of the least effective
 - And these perceptions are highly sticky, even in our NZD work over several months people still make the local = good assumption
- There are some other common misconceptions: phase out schemes are poorly understood, for example, as are the comparisons between different transport modes

<https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/earth-day-2022-more-to-do-to-persuade-public-to-make-high-impact-environmentally-friendly-changes>

5. Open doors: areas of consensus and high acceptance

- Transport:
 - Desire for more public transport
 - Electric vehicles are very widely accepted now, but concerns remain about costs
- Food:
 - Measurable shifts in diet show messages are slowly landing, perceived barriers are cost and knowledge,
- Energy:
 - Renewables are seen as the way forward, but knowledge is low and scepticism high
 - Real enthusiasm for more local solutions

6. Tricky conversations: challenging topics

- Transport:
 - Flying – real reluctance to lose the privilege of a holiday a year
 - “Giving up” the car
- Food:
 - Strong stated objections from a minority in principle, actual barriers are more about habit and social norms
- Energy:
 - Energy efficiency measures and low carbon heating are desirable but not at current prices
 - Strong influence of ‘failed’ schemes

7. The new normal: benchmarking and social influence

- Incredibly influential perceptions of what normal is e.g. an overseas trip every year (unless everyone you know has two in which case that's normal)
- Benchmarking your own behaviour against others – we all think we're above average
- Extremely high sensitivity to hypocrisy e.g. Boris flying back to London from COP26
- Still some strong associations with climate action and protest (which is divisive) and hair shirt lifestyles (which sound miserable)
- All points to importance of creating new, positive social norms

e.g. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/behavioural-public-policy/article/abs/how-social-norms-are-often-a-barrier-to-addressing-climate-change-but-can-be-part-of-the-solution/90BCDC030D23B9CE5078FB025EEBECCB>



Changing behaviour

Do more....

- Focus on the positive: opportunities and co-benefits
- Normalise, normalise, normalise – it's not unusual to be green
- Look out for common misconceptions, consistent and repeated messaging is needed
- Target your audiences carefully, what is a turn on for some can be a turn off for others

8. Whose responsibility is it anyway: government, individuals and business

- The public believe that too much responsibility has been put on individuals to tackle the climate crisis.
- Government is seen as having the most responsibility for and potential to effect change, but they're also widely regarded as having a poor track record, even when they are launching bold policy
- The public see a significant role for business, but have low expectations, particularly of bigger organisations that are seen to be strongly profit-maximizing

<https://britainthinks.com/what-does-net-zero-mean-to-citizens-today/>

9. Suspicious minds: overcoming cynicism about motives

- When it comes to government, there's real concern from citizens that climate change will be a political hot potato, delaying action
"I think it will just be a vote-winner where politicians say, 'We can do things without impacting people's lives', when, in reality, harder decisions need to be made."
- And for business there is a parallel concern that companies will use Net Zero as a marketing gimmick or premium label without doing the work
"There do seem to be a lot of companies that are claiming to be carbon neutral now. It's very difficult to tell if that's greenwashing or not."



10. More isn't always more: understanding vs optimism

- When we increased understanding of the challenges of reaching Net Zero, particularly the systemic change needed, we also saw increased levels of pessimism among our NZD participants
- This played out in some specific cases e.g. initial enthusiasm about COP26 tailed off as they released there had been 25 previous COPs
- And also at the small scale – some of our Diarists had tried to start conversations with peers and been disappointed about how hard it was
- Again, importance of positive messages, creating agency and showing progress to avoid fatalism is key



Responsibility and hope

- The public want a lot from government and business, but their expectations are low, so the stakes are high
- Consistency of message, backed up with real evidence of action is crucial
- Comms can reduce agency if they make the climate challenge seem too large, too remote, or not for people like me. Building up agency is about showing what people like me are already doing.

Questions?