

Innovate
UK



In association with:

the connectives

Making local climate action possible

A toolkit for local authorities to
engage with businesses on actions
benefitting people and planet.





This toolkit has been funded by Innovate UK as part of the Net Zero Living programme.

Innovate UK's Net Zero Living programme is supporting 52 local authorities across the UK to embrace innovation to unlock structural and systemic barriers to net zero delivery at the local level.



“ Climate change is happening here and now. The need to act has never been more urgent. But meaningful action depends on people: on trust, relationships, and connection. Local authorities are on the front line of this work. This toolkit brings together evidence and real-world insight to help build lasting, inclusive partnerships between businesses and local authorities. We hope it can help drive meaningful, lasting climate action.”

Rachael Orr, CEO, Climate Outreach



“ To achieve net zero and create resilient and prosperous places, everybody needs to play their part. Local Authorities play a key role in facilitating relationships within their places and have a vital part to play in helping businesses to take their own actions. Building these strong relationships and understanding will lead to the growth of resilient, sustainable and profitable local businesses.”

Kara Cartwright, Innovation Lead – Clean Growth, Innovate UK



Building better connections with businesses

Businesses play a vital role in helping local areas reach their net zero goals, ensuring better lives for people today and tomorrow.

Yet many local authorities struggle to engage them in ways that are meaningful and long-lasting. Barriers such as cost pressures and limited capacity—especially for smaller businesses—can get in the way of building trust and collaboration. And given that local authorities’ direct emissions account for just 2–5% of area-wide emissions, their ability to influence the wider system—particularly local businesses—is critical to driving climate action.

This toolkit is designed to help local authorities build the trust-based relationships that make climate action possible.

It offers:



Evidence-based recommendations for earning and sustaining trust with local businesses



Insights from peer learning, based on participatory workshops with councils across the UK



Practical tools and values-led messaging guidance to support more consistent, credible, and human engagement

Use it to strengthen your approach so your business engagement efforts aren’t just well-intentioned, but also purposeful and built to last.



How this toolkit was developed

Recognising that local authorities play a vital role in influencing wider system change, particularly through local businesses, this toolkit was commissioned by Innovate UK Business Connect as part of the Net Zero Living Programme to help councils build stronger, trust-based collaborations with businesses in delivering net zero locally.

Climate Outreach and **The Connectives** co-designed a bespoke workshop and toolkit, drawing on Climate Outreach's research as outlined in [Beyond 'trusted messengers': New insights on trust & influence in climate communications](#), and shaped by the experiences and reflections of local authority officers who took part in two participatory workshops.

The two workshops were delivered with 14 local authority participants in each. This group size was deliberately chosen to create a highly participative environment, allowing time for peer exchange, hands-on exercises, and open discussion.

What made the workshops and subsequent toolkit distinctive is its focus on values-led engagement –moving beyond transactions and compliance to explore how trust is built through **purpose, empathy, and integrity.**

For many participants, this approach felt unfamiliar, and at times, uncomfortable. But by leaning into that discomfort, we opened up more honest, reflective conversations about what really matters in building lasting relationships with local businesses.




This toolkit is grounded in those reflections.



In this toolkit

Engaging businesses on climate change, net zero and a sustainable future requires a strategic, trust-based approach—one that recognises the diverse priorities, concerns, and levels of engagement across the business community.

This toolkit is designed to support local authority officers working on climate engagement by providing practical tools, peer insights, and real-world examples to help build stronger, values-led relationships with businesses. It also offers:

-  **Practical guidance for being purpose-led and outcomes-driven**
-  **Insights on building trust through values-led engagement**
-  **Suggested messaging you can adapt and experiment within your own context**

To support more meaningful and lasting connections, this toolkit focuses on the following three core recommendations:

**Recommendation #1
Demonstrate your Purpose**

**Recommendation #2
Demonstrate your Empathy**

**Recommendation #3
Demonstrate your Integrity**

Recommendation #1

Demonstrate your clear purpose for building better connections with businesses on climate action

Do your business stakeholders know why you really exist? In what ways can you demonstrate your purpose clearly? Many businesses are wary of engagement that feels like a sales pitch.

To establish trust, local authorities must:



Be transparent about motives

Emphasising that climate action is about partnership, not enforcement.



Actively listen to business concerns

Ensuring engagement is a dialogue, not just a top-down message.



Be present and consistent

Long-term relationship-building matters more than short-term wins.



Insights captured from the workshops



As part of exploring **Recommendation #1: Demonstrate your clear purpose for building better connections with businesses on net zero**, participants reflected on what this actually means in their local context.

This led to deeper discussions on the role of trust in business engagement, and how your purpose is shaped by the outcomes you're trying to achieve. Together, we developed two practical tools to support local authorities in applying these insights in their own work:



Why should businesses trust local authorities?



Developing your purpose with outcomes in mind

These tools are grounded in both research and participant reflections, and are designed to help you build more purposeful, trust-based connections with local businesses.

Why should businesses trust local authorities?



Theory behind the recommendation



Because behind every council are many people who care deeply—who believe in the power of local action and want to make a difference. Trust starts when that commitment is visible.



Rather than acting solely as regulators, councils should position themselves as facilitators who listen, connect, and support.



Businesses—especially smaller ones—respond best to sincere, reliable people who understand their pressures.



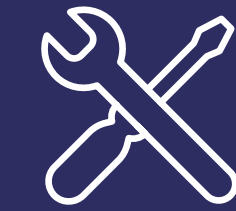
Prioritise long-term, personal engagement over one-off “parachute” initiatives.



Businesses trust each other too. Local authorities can create space for them to share challenges and solutions, and let local success stories lead the way.



Developing your engagement narrative with outcomes in mind



Tool

These actions were developed during the workshops to help local authorities stay purpose-led while keeping business engagement practical and outcome-focused.



To drive real change, climate action must feel relevant, worthwhile, and achievable.



Businesses are more likely to engage when they feel ownership of the process. Co-designing local net zero initiatives ensures relevance and buy-in.



Rather than overwhelming businesses with complex carbon footprint assessments, start with the most achievable action that shows visible impact and builds confidence. Tailor support to sector-specific needs.



Success isn't just about hitting targets; it's about action taken, partnerships built, and sustained collaboration. Stay connected and keep momentum going through regular check-ins and providing ongoing support.



Simplify access to funding and provide clear, guided steps—especially for small businesses that often lack the resources to navigate funding applications.

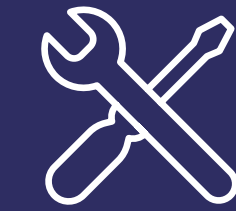


Start by finding your allies.



Start by reaching out to your allies and champions. These trusted partners can help activate high-trust supporters and reach businesses through peer networks and shared success stories.

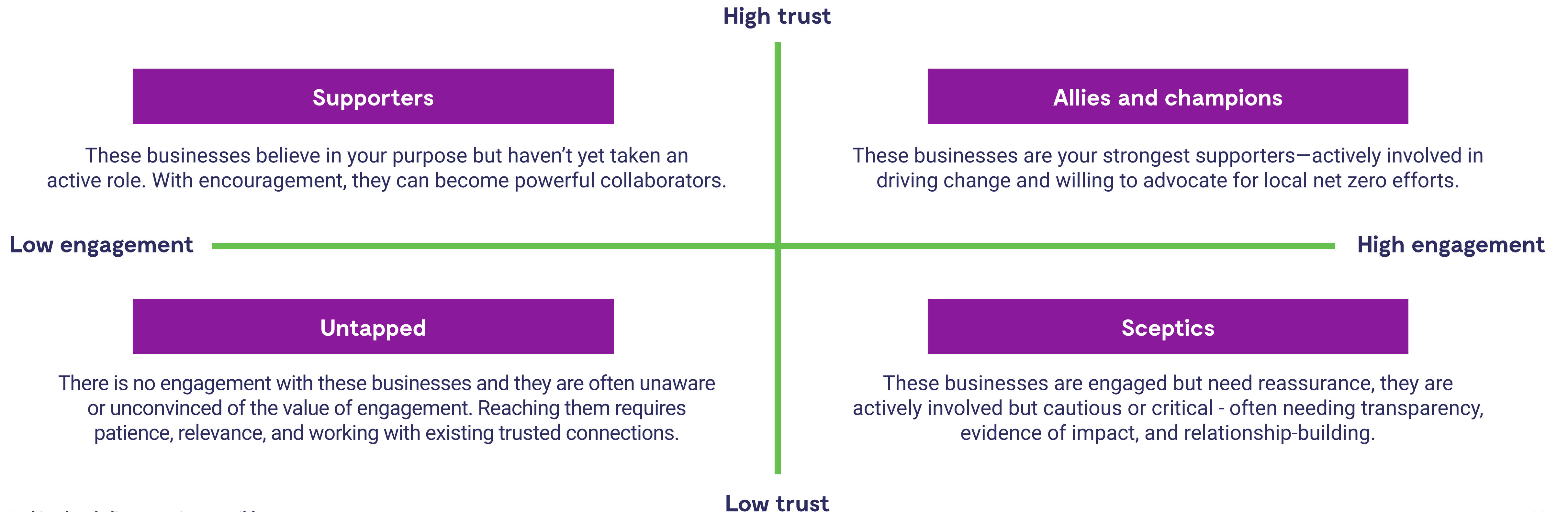
Trust and engagement map



Tool

This tool was developed during the workshops to help local authorities map where their local businesses currently sit in terms of trust and engagement. Use it to identify who your allies and champions are, then tailor your approach to other groups.

This map can help you prioritise outreach, build momentum, and deepen relationships over time.



Business engagement case study

Problem

Lambeth Council found that broad, generalised outreach to businesses on climate action wasn't working. Engagement was limited, and many businesses struggled to see how climate initiatives related to their day-to-day challenges.

Approach

The council shifted to a more strategic, values-led model that aligned climate action with business priorities and realities. They prioritised:

- **Collaboration through connection**
Building trust through relationships
- **Anchor institutions**
Partnering with local influencers including housing associations and developers to scale participation

Goal

Create a collaborative business community to accelerate local climate action.

Delivery

- Launched an online collaboration platform to support ongoing engagement and reduce event fatigue
- Introduced sector-specific “fireside” events to encourage practical, challenge-led conversations

Key takeaways

- ➔ **Lead with shared values and relevance**
- ➔ **Build networks before action**
- ➔ **Engage key influencers to reach wider business audiences**



Case study



Recommendation #2

Demonstrate your empathy for the real challenges and opportunities facing businesses

Businesses vary in their capacity and motivation for climate action—so a one-size-fits-all approach won't work.

They also need to know they're not carrying the burden alone. Climate action must feel achievable and fair.

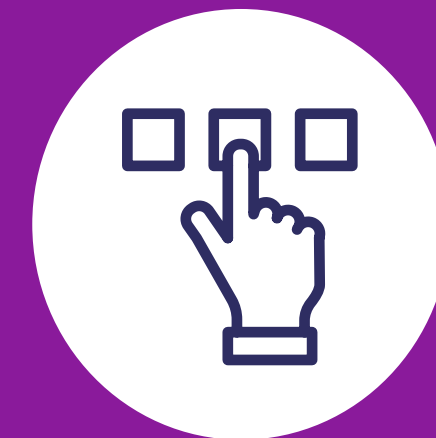
Local authorities can:



Acknowledge sector-specific challenges and provide realistic, actionable guidance



Frame climate action in ways that align with business values—like efficiency, risk management, or job security



Offer flexible ways to engage—from peer learning to one-on-one support

When businesses feel heard, they're far more likely to get involved.



Insights captured from the workshops



As part of exploring **Recommendation #2: Demonstrate your empathy for the real challenges and opportunities facing businesses**, participants reflected on what empathy looks like in the context of business engagement. Many shared that understanding business pressures, like limited time, staffing, and costs, was already a familiar part of their work. But exploring the values that drive business leaders, what truly matters to them, felt like a different challenge, and at times outside their comfort zone. This led to deeper discussions about how to build trust by connecting with those deeper motivations. Based on these reflections and supporting research, we developed two tools to support a more values-led, empathetic approach to engagement:



Connect with what truly matters to business leaders



Addressing common business concerns



Connect with what truly matters to business leaders

Trust is the foundation of effective business engagement—but building trust takes more than incentives or compliance.

If climate action is only framed around cost savings, businesses will only act when it's profitable. To drive lasting change, local authorities must connect with what truly matters to business leaders—like resilience, workforce wellbeing, and long-term impact.

Move beyond transactions to values-led conversations.

Ask businesses

..... What do you care about?

..... What does sustainability mean to you?

..... What support would help you take meaningful steps?

When businesses see climate action not just as a financial decision, but as part of who they are and what they stand for, local authorities can deepen relationships, foster shared purpose, and support lasting change.



Tool

Taking a values-led approach to climate conversations with businesses



Theory behind the recommendation

Small business leaders are driven by values like practicality, resilience, responsibility, and legacy.

Our [Using values to promote sustainable ways of doing business](#) report identifies key values demonstrated by business leaders from small and medium enterprises (SMEs):



Common sense & efficiency

Cutting waste and costs



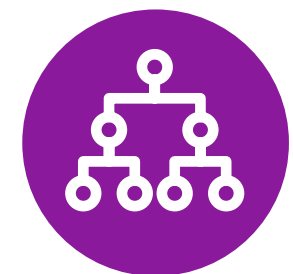
Stability & independence

Reducing exposure to energy and supply risks



Responsibility to staff & longevity

Future-proofing the business



Duty to future generations

Leaving a positive legacy

Making local climate action possible

Our research demonstrates that businesses already have a positive attitude towards efficiency and waste reduction. Rather than framing climate action as a burden, local authorities can present it as a natural extension of what many businesses already care about.

Here are suggested messages tailored to these values—offered as inspiration for more relevant, trust-building engagement with local businesses.

While further research is needed to test their effectiveness, the goal is to inspire you to take a values-led approach when engaging with local businesses. By doing so, you can create stronger connections and build trust, making your net zero initiatives more relevant and impactful.





Addressing common business concerns



Tool

Business concern

Suggested message that demonstrates your purpose and empathy



Achieving net zero is too expensive

As your local authority, we understand the real pressures businesses face right now. We believe net zero doesn't have to mean expensive overhauls. It's about practical steps –like cutting waste and improving efficiency–that save money and build trust with your customers. We're here to work with you on realistic, tailored solutions that make sense for your business and support the wider community.



There are too many regulations which are complicated to follow

We know net zero can feel like just another layer of complexity. As your local authority, we understand the pressures you're under –keeping your business running, supporting your team, and planning for the future. This isn't about more red tape. It's about strengthening your business –making it more resilient, efficient, and ready for what's ahead. We're here with practical support, not just policy–to help you take smart, manageable steps toward a more sustainable future.



Our customers don't care about net zero

We know your focus is on what matters most to your customers–price, quality, convenience. Sustainability can feel like a 'nice-to-have'. But more and more, businesses that lead on it are gaining trust, loyalty, and a competitive edge. This isn't about choosing between purpose and profit–it's about using sustainability to strengthen both. As your local authority. We're here to help make sure your climate efforts support your business, not add to the pressure.

Recommendation #3

Demonstrate your integrity by being clear and consistent on your support offer

For many businesses, taking climate action can feel overwhelming or out of reach. Demonstrating integrity means being honest about what support you can offer, setting clear expectations, and showing up consistently, especially when the path to action feels unclear or complex.



Keeping engagement clear, practical, and jargon-free

Trust relies on consistency—even when the council is undergoing change. During the workshops, participants noted that one-off business support projects often undermine trust—what businesses really need is consistent engagement and long-term partnership.



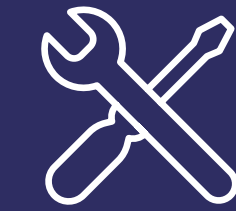
Providing hands-on support to navigate funding and policies

Be honest about what you can and can't offer. Set clear expectations, share your own climate journey, and position your role as a facilitator—connecting businesses to the right people, resources, and opportunities.





10 questions for developing a values-led business engagement plan



Tool

Use these questions to help shape a more intentional and consistent approach to business engagement –one that builds trust over time by aligning your purpose with the realities, values, and needs of local businesses.

1 Who are you engaging?

What sectors, sizes, or locations? Who are the key decision-makers?

2 What challenges do they face?

What pressures shape their day-to-day? How do they perceive net zero?

3 What do they value?

What drives them—profit, reputation, staff, stability? How will you uncover these values?

4 How can net zero resonate?

What framing aligns with their goals? What case studies or stories will land?

5 What barriers exist?

Time, cost, complexity? How can you help reduce or remove these?

6 Who do they trust?

Peers, networks, industry bodies? How can they support your message?

7 What methods will work best?

Events, one-to-one support, digital, peer learning? Where do partnerships help?

8 How will you build trust over time?

What keeps engagement going? How will you follow up and recognise progress?

9 Who could you collaborate with?

Chambers, trade groups, anchor businesses? What value can they add?

10 How will you learn and adapt?

What does success look like? How will you gather and act on feedback?



Conclusion

Building connection, not transaction

Building better connections between local authorities and businesses is essential to creating a healthier, more sustainable future. But true connection doesn't come from transactions—it's built through trusted relationships, grounded in purpose, empathy, and integrity as well as a shared commitment to something bigger than short-term gains.

Through these workshops, we had the privilege of sharing Climate Outreach's research insights and exploring what trust and values-based engagement really mean in practice. Just as importantly, we learned from the rich experience of participants—from the challenges they face to the creative, grounded ways they're already working to engage businesses in their communities.

What emerged was clear: effective business engagement isn't about policies and compliance. It's about listening, aligning with what matters to people, and supporting businesses as partners. Small businesses are the backbone of our local economies—and they respond best when we speak to what they value: stability, responsibility, and the legacy they'll leave behind.

We hope this toolkit helps you deepen your understanding and strengthen your approach. And we wish you the very best on your ongoing journey to build better, trust-based connections with businesses on climate action and a just, sustainable future.

“ This wasn't just another training session—it was a chance to rethink business engagement through a human lens.”

Workshop attendee





Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the committed local authorities who participated through the Net Zero Living Programme. Your openness, reflections, and insights were central to shaping this toolkit.

This workshop and toolkit were developed in partnership by Climate Outreach and The Connectives.



Climate Outreach works with people and organisations to help create new climate stories. Each year, we partner with charities, governments, and businesses to navigate difficult climate conversations and unlock more ambitious climate action.

All images used in this toolkit are from the Climate Visuals library. Climate Visuals is the world's only evidence-based programme for climate change photography. It offers an image library, guidance, and research on what makes climate imagery impactful.

Toolkit design by Graft Creative Ltd.



The Connectives is a purpose-led consultancy helping organisations drive positive social and environmental change. They bring people together to tackle complex challenges through inclusive facilitation, strategic insight, and collaborative problem-solving.



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