

How narrative workshops informed a national climate change campaign



**SUMMARY OF A REPORT
FOR THE CLIMATE COALITION**
April 2014

www.climateoutreach.org

“COIN's research has been crucial in helping organisations understand how we should be talking about climate change. The in-depth and insightful results of this work helped us develop what seemed an impossibility: messaging which will celebrate the diverse range of groups working on climate change campaigns whilst showing we're all working together. More crucially the insights from COIN will ensure we can engage and activate a broad audience on climate change.”

Fiona Dear
Coordinator, The Climate Coalition

At COIN we know that the facts don't speak for themselves.

Informed by a decade on the frontline of research and development into climate communications, we recognise that organisations often struggle to communicate and engage with the public on climate change and sustainability. In this report we outline an example of our practical and transformative work.

Our team of expert consultants and facilitators works closely with influencers and leaders across government, civil society and sustainable business to remodel their climate communication strategies based on an analysis of internal needs and external audiences. Using our unique, values-based approach, we deepen and broaden climate communications while bringing cohesion, vision and high ambition to internal processes.

In addition to our Consultancy and Facilitation Services we provide a series of Training Workshops.

www.climateoutreach.org.uk

@climateoutreach

Climate Outreach Information Network



or **01865 403334** to find out more



Climate Outreach and Information Network (COIN) is a charity established in 2004 motivated by a vision of a low carbon future that includes everyone. We have established a reputation as leading specialists on climate change communication.

Executive Summary

The Climate Coalition,¹ a network of 100 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other civil society organisations, commissioned COIN to explore audience responses to proposed messaging for a two-year national campaign. The campaign aims to influence the major political decisions determining the UK and Europe's response to climate change in the crucial period 2014-16. With a focus on reactivating traditional supporters and engaging new, harder to reach audiences, messaging needed to appeal to a diversity of groups and be flexible enough for use by a broad coalition.

Four lead messages and one narrative were tested with four target audiences – small 'c' conservatives, trade union members, 'community optimists' and representatives of NGOs - in London, Oxford, Cardiff and Bristol during January 2014. The narratives were evaluated using COIN's unique Narrative Workshop methodology. This employs facilitated discussion and a values-based approach to climate change communication based on the latest peer-reviewed and practitioner-led research. Participants first discuss their shared values and sense of identity, their hopes for the future and their aspirations. The topic of climate change is then introduced through this lens in order to explore how a group's values and worldviews affect their attitudes and beliefs about climate change.

Following this process, COIN was able to make firm recommendations on positive messages and narratives to explore further, as well as those to avoid. In contrast to the Climate Coalition's original expectations, the most popular frame to emerge focused on 'the things we care about which are threatened by climate change'. Coupling this with tangible and surprising examples proved to be the most powerful framing across all audiences. Analysis also revealed a positive preference across groups for hearing diverse opinions about climate change. Traditional environmentalist language and imagery were identified negatively. Similarly, narratives that appealed to the concept of a concerned majority or framing around gambling were less favoured.

Informed by COIN's findings and subsequent recommendations the Climate Coalition developed and will base their campaign around the message: **For the Love of ---- let's do something about climate change**. Each member organisation will be able to tailor this frame to their own audience. Examples of how this might be used by supporter communications include: For the love of warm homes and dry feet; For the love of our global neighbours; For the Love of Somerset, the Arctic and the Great Barrier Reef; For the love of country walks and Britain's beautiful seasons; For the love of all the things we care about, we're taking climate change seriously. The campaign will use this narrative to showcase the diverse, personal and unexpected motivations for taking action to avert climate change, as well as all the things we stand to lose without action. As a coalition, it will highlight the huge variety of reasons why people are campaigning together on climate change.

¹ Formerly the Stop Climate Chaos Coalition

Core Recommendations

- Use the ‘things we love frame’ as the lead message. But focus on the here and now as much as possible, and prioritise tangible, practical examples over future, abstract concerns. The idea that everyone is passionate about something was universally endorsed.
- Avoid ‘environmentalist’ rhetoric and imagery, and instead show ‘ordinary people’ doing ‘practical, common sense’ things to tackle climate change. Then link these everyday issues to the ‘big picture’.
- There was agreement across the groups on the importance of avoiding waste. This could represent good common ground for engaging different audiences.
- Avoid appeals to the ‘concerned majority’ as people see it as exclusive and untruthful and don’t like being ‘spoken for’.
- People are positive towards diverse opinions and views: this presents an opportunity to target multiple audiences simultaneously, by including multiple ‘voices’ in campaigns.
- The idea of ‘gambling’ with the future provoked a mixed response – it could backfire, as it suggested the possibility of positive outcomes.
- There is a need to acknowledge that people are under pressure and that for many, jobs and financial concerns come first – but that people are not inherently selfish (whatever the media say) and will act in other people’s best interest when they can.
- Core values across all four audiences include empathy, open-mindedness, and honesty. These are ‘self-transcending values’ which underpin positive engagement with climate change and environmental issues.
- Finally, the Climate Coalition should not be overly concerned that their messages will ‘alienate’ their core audience (whatever messages are chosen). The NGO and community optimists groups have preferences, but would respond positively to almost any appeal to action, and seem to intuitively understand that campaigns need not be centrally aimed at ‘them’. They see the key challenge as engaging others not motivating themselves.

FINDINGS BY AUDIENCE

Small 'c' conservatives

What they care about

Core, stated values for this audience included kindness, empathy, trustworthiness, and open-mindedness. Rebuilding the strength of the economy was a high priority. Climate change was not spontaneously mentioned as a pressing issue. Consuming more than necessary was considered a bad thing; striving and 'working hard for yourself' a good thing. Independent and local shops were viewed as examples of positive green impact.

The media were identified as a negative influence on society: *"95% of people in our community/in the country would look after a stranded child. It's the media's fault for putting out the badness. The media has a lot to answer for as regards to how we generally think on a day to day basis."*

Views on climate change

This audience showed the highest levels of scepticism about climate change although it was by no means universal. Only one participant indicated that they thought climate change was not occurring: more common was doubt about the extent to which human activity was contributing. Importantly this was not necessarily a barrier to supporting action.

Avoiding wastefulness and taking 'common sense' actions (that would save money or avoid waste) were viewed positively. Solutions that were tangible and practical were favoured (e.g., not polluting unnecessarily, fuel efficiency):

"It's a very strong conservative value, not being wasteful. Climate change is too large an issue. It needs to be brought down into practical tangible things that people can do something about." "Nobody wants to pollute for pollution's sake"

Media and green group 'propaganda' was a regular theme, but coupled with a sense that climate change needs tackling whoever is responsible:

"I don't really care who's causing it, who's responsible. I care from a practical point of view. What can we do to stop it? Nobody likes the sight of a coal power station... I'm not fussed about the argument I just want to know what we can do as a whole to just improve things for the future." "Even if something is natural, it doesn't mean you can't do something about it to limit the effects."

The government and big business are not seen as the enemy. There are mixed views on energy companies, but a strong distrust of both environmentalists (Greenpeace; Green Party etc) and what is perceived as their preachy campaigns, and to some extent scientists (and by extension their messages on consensus):

“We’re reliant on what we read, on what scientists tell us and scientists and politicians in the past have proved to be the most unholy and unreliable bunch of liars out there.”

What works

Messages that speak to avoiding wastefulness, practical ‘common sense’ actions (minus the emotional rhetoric) and the need to tackle climate change ‘whatever the cause’ are likely to work well with this audience. There was strong, almost universal support for concrete outcomes to proposed government action on climate change: *“You can’t argue against imploring any government to support clean energy, warm homes and a better standard of living”* (although it was noted that warm homes could be misinterpreted as turning the temperature up). This is an important finding for this audience: although some of the rhetoric in the messaging was perceived as hackneyed, clichéd and alienating, concrete, tangible outcomes are positively supported.

There was a strong dislike for frames around gambling with the future which were seen as alarmist:

“Is me buying a petrol car gambling with our future? Is that the point of statements like these when they come out? Am I made to feel like that when I leave a light on? I don’t think that’s helpful at all.”

The insinuation that there is a ‘majority’ that is right, concerned and demands action was dismissed outright by this audience:

“Looks to me like somebody else is saying that, somebody else is ‘we’... the preaching, evangelical, pseudo-scientists who are telling me that they’re concerned... I’m not part of that.”

The sense that vested interests were at play was seen as obvious left-wing propaganda and did not resonate well with conservative values that are neither anti-business nor anti-profit.

Trade Unions

What they care about

Honesty, respect, fairness, reducing inequality, tolerance and integrity were all important values. They cited respect for anyone who holds views (even if different to their own) with honesty and conviction. Like conservatives and community optimists, the media were viewed as a barrier to people expressing their 'real' views and values: *"90% of people are inherently good and caring, but some people just spend too much time reading the Daily Mail"*

There were widespread anti-capitalist views in this target group and a strong sense that collective action needs to be empowered and control taken back for working people.

Views on climate change

All participants were very concerned about climate change and there was no scepticism about its causes. However, there is a very real conflict for many members between their day-to-day priorities (and fear about what impact the environmental agenda might have for their jobs) and supporting strong climate change action:

"People feel that this problem isn't going to impact too much in my lifetime. All this talk of future generations but even people with kids... this feeling that because I can't really see or feel it now...there is the short-termism that people have as well as politicians. They have immediate interests to get by at a time when wages are declining, the pressures on them. I've got too much on my plate anyway."

There was concern that climate change tended to be framed as being about individual behaviours (and people struggling for money don't see what more they could do). It should be shifted to major political actions that can be achieved with a refocus from the future to the present: *"There has been a major failure of imagination."* There was a sense of frustration that a lot of the answers are 'out there' and 'common sense' (electric cars etc) but not being implemented. Common sense tallies with conservatives. Avoiding waste was identified as a common sense, practical issue that most people can engage with. Getting people to understand how much food, energy and resources are wasted is a way of getting people interested.

Like the NGO and Community Optimists group, they often considered the problem of how to talk about climate change in the third person (i.e. how to engage *others* as they were already engaged).

What works

Participants challenged whether the idea of majority consensus would be perceived as inclusive or whether in fact these assertions didn't ring true (all the more important coming from Unions where the central organising principle is solidarity). This audience moderately disliked the gambling frame, but mainly because it did not take people from 'acceptance' to 'action' and might be too mild a term. Fossil fuel companies and governments were the ones perceived as doing the gambling, but there was also a sense that everyone is gambling by not taking it seriously.

This group were very positive towards the idea of fighting for the 'things we love' but felt it needed to be related to the concerns of ordinary people – sports (football pitches flooded!), gardening, farming or homes being damaged through coastal erosion – and creating links between these and the global element. They were positive towards 'clean energy,' and 'warm homes'.

There was a general feeling that a 'concerned majority' and 'amazing work' cannot simply be wished into existence, and that a 'better standard of living' might be seen as 'more consumption' or was too vague to be meaningful. This group accepted the premise that vested interests (government and industry) are the key problem – most take it as a given. But there was a sense that most people are quite disengaged from active political participation so pitting 'us' against the bad guys in power might fall on deaf ears. Finally, there was a sense that the messaging felt 'apolitical' (and that this was a bad thing).

Community Optimists

What they care about

Understanding, openness, being non-judgmental, empathy, and honesty were core values. The media were viewed as divisive and poisonous, painting a picture of the nation that is untrue and pitting people against each other. They were overtly anti-capitalist on occasion (and frequently critical of the government). However, many actively campaign for much stronger government action on climate change. There is a great deal of overlap in this constituency with climate change campaigners.

Views on climate change

All participants were fairly or very concerned about climate change and there was no scepticism among this audience. Scientists are generally trusted among this group, as are

campaigning organisations and environmentalists (although not without a degree of cynicism and one eye on what other people will think):

“Still feels like an issue that is owned by the Green Party, which is alienating the general population...it’s a political idea rather than a human experience and responsibility. In terms of trying to generate conversations in the workplace, people think I’m coming from a political angle, which makes people feel a little bit threatened. It’s low key eye-rolling: here comes the green parade.”

They frequently take a ‘third person’ perspective on climate change and ask ‘what would others’ think?’ They have a strong sense that making the right choice should be easier for people – but that at present this is difficult. This chimes with conservatives views on doing things in the interest of common sense. There was an awareness that if only some people act it is pointless. I will if you will is still a dominant theme – although they are more than willing to act if others will. There is also a sense of helplessness that the problem is too overwhelming and abstract: *“It makes me feel very, very small. That’s why I don’t want to hear about it because you’re not going to tell me anything that I can do about.”*

What works

There was broad agreement that the gambling sentiment was not a strong enough term and that it could be misconstrued as ‘a risk worth taking’. The ‘things we love’ framing was seen as inclusive and uniting but only when linked to specific images and concepts, such as children, growing food and animals. This group suggested asking people what they cared about so that it was less of a slogan and more of a dialogue. *“You could ask people to name something they care about and then show them the impact that climate change will have on it.”*

Warm homes and a better quality of life were considered positive. Despite clearly being part of the core target audience for climate change campaigns, there was a sense that the rhetoric needed to be less abstract and hand-wavy (e.g., ‘we’ve done some amazing work’) and to focus more on real life examples of real people embedded in groups and networks that ordinary people could identify with:

“I would identify more with the ‘we’ if there was a picture of people who you didn’t identify as environmentalists, who just looked quite ordinary. I think that would be really interesting.”

There was a general dislike of the majority framing, which was considered untrue and potentially divisive if you’re not in the ‘we’ camp. There was strong agreement that those in

power – and fossil fuel companies in particular – block action on mitigation but on further reflection it was decided that ‘everyone’ is implicated in the use of fossil fuels:

“We are profiting in a way because I can get to work quicker, so I’m profiting time-wise and money-wise...this is why I don’t like ‘us and them’ language, it allows us to say it’s their fault not ours.”

Finally, this group instinctively viewed their role as thinking on behalf of other people who had not yet engaged with climate change. This group is unlikely to be ‘put off’ by appeals that do not explicitly engage their values, as they already engage strongly with the issue and understand the need to widen out the appeal of climate change.

NGOs

What they care about

Core, stated values for this audience included empathy, kindness, generosity, honesty, being non-judgemental and open-mindedness. Protecting the environment and addressing the growing gap between the rich and poor were spontaneously identified as high priority issues. While there was a strong emphasis on the responsibility of governments, corporations and even a ‘world government’ to tackle these issues, individual responsibility and ‘the power of the people’ was seen as a critical component. There was some mistrust of politicians and a sense that government and big business colluded. Concern for vulnerable groups such as youth, the elderly and populations in developing countries were pronounced. An appreciation of nature, being outdoors and identifying with a sense of place, were common themes.

Views on climate change

Climate change was a ‘front and centre’ issue for the majority, with only three people expressing mild uncertainty about the cause and the severity of effects. All linked extreme weather events to climate change with several suggesting that people will only act if they are personally affected. Climate change was seen as a weak, passive term: “I feel it almost lets people off the hook if you call it climate change. It’s just like, the climate is changing and I can’t do anything about it”. There was a strong sense that ‘people’ don’t care about the issue, which was variously attributed to over-exposure in the media, the overwhelming nature of the issue, people being wrapped up in their own immediate concerns or too rich to care. It was felt any campaign needed to target disengaged people.

The disproportionate impact of climate change on people in less developed countries and future generations was a central concern. However, stressing the fact that climate change is happening here and now was seen as critically important: *“It’s something that needs to happen now as well as in the future because you can’t leave it until the last minute”.*

Interestingly, several people identified the need to portray climate change in a new light as a ‘people’s issue’ rather than a ‘scientific’ or ‘socialist’ issue, which tended to alienate or ‘put people off’. The politicisation of climate change was seen as a big problem with participants admitting that it was mainly a topic they talked about with like-minded people. Negativity was seen as a big ‘NO, NO’ in campaign terms: *“No-one gets inspired by negativity.” “I always find if you’re going to try and talk to someone about an issue, try and help with a solution as well.”*

What works

This group had a balanced critique of the current situation – a strong sense that people should exercise their power, both through the ballot box and on the streets, with criticism of the government and some anti-capitalist feeling.

While there was broad agreement with the gambling sentiment it was regarded by all as too weak and suggesting a 50/50 chance. Negative phrasing was seen as encouraging fear and defeatism and the use of the future was criticised for suggesting that climate change is not happening now.

‘Things we love’ was seen as a personal and positive frame:

“You’ll find something that means a lot to you and that suddenly makes it not a concept that’s over there but suddenly this is me and my world and I need to do something about it.”

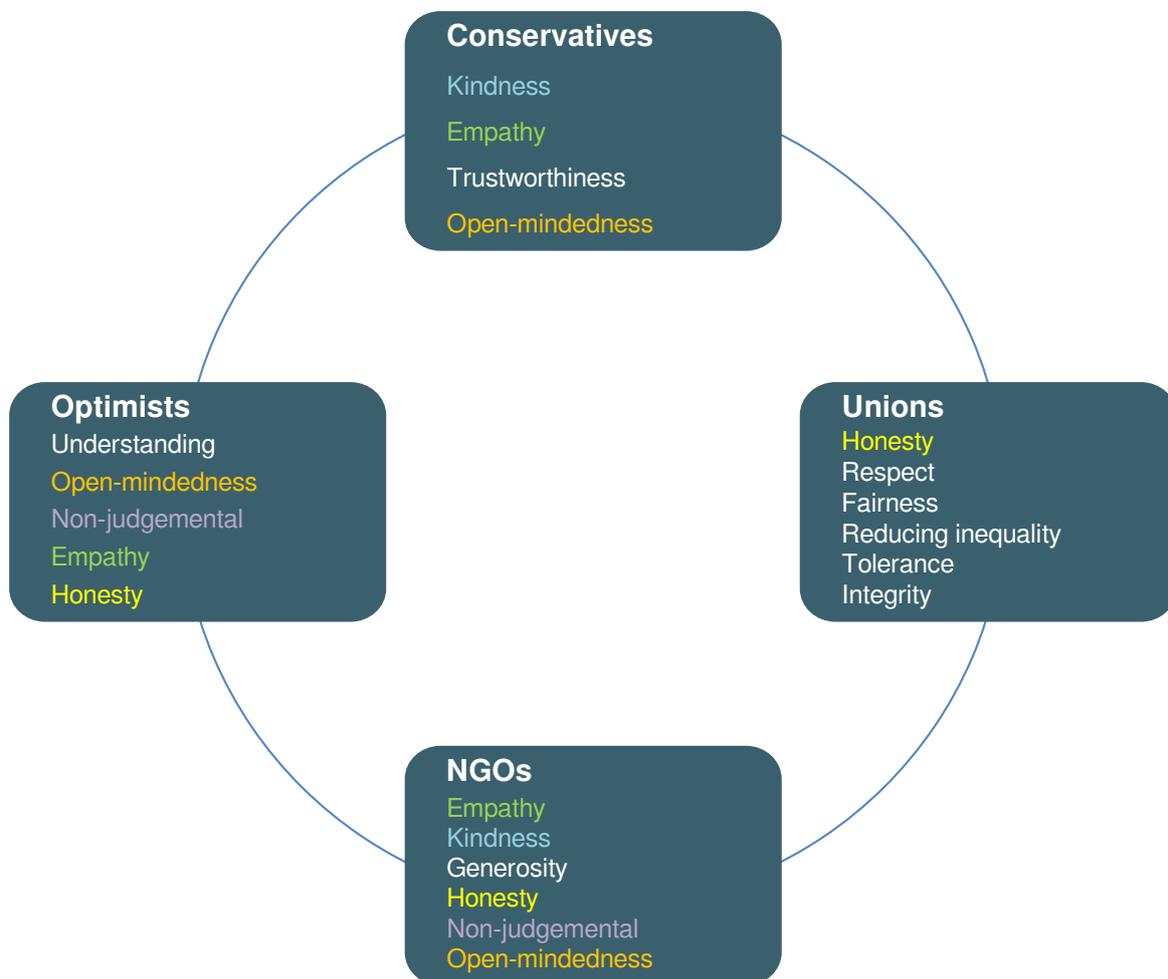
However, it was generally agreed that the phrase needed to be given local and temporal resonance:

“Just take a photo of the floods that happened. Something where you immediately know what’s going on but it doesn’t seem so far out in the future that people lose touch with it.”

This group took objection to any sense of complacency. The idea that the majority cared or were acting on climate change, that amazing work had been achieved or that it was now the government’s turn to act were all rejected

While 'clean energy' and 'warm homes' were generally liked, half of sample saw a 'better standard of living' as problematic: *"To me most people would interpret a better standard of living as meaning they had more money, a bigger house and more cars, in general"*. Alternatives included a 'better standard of life' or a 'fair standard of living for all'.

Most people saw it as fair to target vested interests - with commodity and consumer goods companies seen as the main culprits but warned against oversimplifying by taking the onus off individual consumers and ignoring progressive businesses. Participants repeatedly highlighted the need to include calls to action in any messaging.



Key messages across all groups

Things to avoid

- Underpinning many of the participants' critical views and opinions was one common concern: that they do not like being 'preached at' and that climate change campaigns are 'preachy'. This was strongest amongst conservatives but also present in the community optimists and NGOs. There was also widespread cynicism towards what was perceived as 'environmentalist' language and imagery (polar bears/melting ice/'save the planet'/'single biggest threat we face'). It is so strongly tagged with negative connotations of identity that it very quickly excludes anyone who is not a climate change campaigner. A general recommendation is therefore to avoid (or at least not foreground) this sort of rhetoric and imagery. Even people who identify with it understand that the vast majority do not.
- Easily the least popular message was the 'majority' frame. 'We are the majority', 'we all know' and 'we're all concerned' were resoundingly rejected (across audiences) as being 'exclusive', presumptuous, and lacking in truthfulness. Presuming to speak on behalf of people was perceived as irritating by many – people wanted to feel part of a conversation not on the receiving end of (as they saw it) 'a rant'. And the already committed audiences – NGOs and community optimists – felt there simply was not a concerned majority to be part of.

Ambivalent responses

- The gambling frame fell between people who thought it was too emotive and those who thought it was too weak. There was also not a strong sense (even among the groups who liked it) that it moved people from acceptance to action.
- Conservatives are sceptical about the extent to which human activity is to blame for climate change, but they mostly do not doubt it is occurring. Importantly, they tend to support a range of responses (especially centred on avoiding waste and adaptation) whether or not human behaviour is the cause of climate change. They did not necessarily trust the idea of a scientific consensus.
- The vested interests frame was liked by the NGO, community optimist and trades union audiences, but strongly disliked by conservatives. On further reflection most groups felt the 'us vs them' phrase was unhelpful and that 'everyone' was implicated in energy use. There is a risk this frame could backfire if people do not perceive an obvious 'bad guy'.

- Opposition towards the government was not supported by conservatives, or by some community optimists, who felt that some positive work was being done and who wanted to push them to go further not push them away. Even the energy companies were not universally viewed as the ‘enemy’. However, the media were spontaneously identified in all groups as having a poisonous effect on society, making people appear more selfish than they really are (not directly relevant to climate change but a possible ‘bad guy’).

Positive territory to explore further

- The Climate Coalition should not be overly concerned that their messages will ‘alienate’ their core audience (whatever messages are chosen). The NGO and community optimists groups have preferences, but would respond positively to almost any appeal to action, and seem to intuitively understand that campaigns need not be centrally aimed at ‘them’. They see the key challenge as engaging others not motivating themselves.
- The most popular message – and the only one that broadly worked for conservatives – was the ‘things we love’ frame, but only if coupled with very practical, tangible examples (unplayable football pitches/flooded homes/avoiding car journeys to be healthier/coastal erosion/local countryside), not vague and abstract concepts (wildlife/prosperity/better lives). These conditions were identified across the audience groups. Everyone liked the idea of being passionate about something. Asking people what they care about rather than *telling* them could be one way of ‘personalising’ this frame for a wide range of people. Trade unions, community optimists & conservatives all said they valued different opinions to their own so long as they were held with honesty and integrity. This presents a potential opportunity for ‘competing visions’ of ‘things we love’ that all point towards the same overall theme: supporting actions to tackle climate change.
- All audiences expressed a preference for talking about the ‘here and now’ instead of the future. All audiences were positive towards the idea of warm homes and clean energy.
- Avoiding waste was a key common thread between disparate groups (community optimists and conservatives both claimed it as a core value).
- Several groups suggested seeing readily identifiable real people doing real things and representing diverse communities would be a persuasive strategy.