

Beyond the 'Greenlash': Rethinking public engagement for 2025

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Acknowledgments

In May 2025, a meeting was convened to discuss the interim results of a research project (*Unpacking the 'Greenlash': The role of misinformation in opposition to Net Zero*).¹

This commentary draws on ideas that were discussed in that meeting. The conversation was inspired by the presentation of the research,² but broadened out into a shared recognition that too many of our go-to climate communication strategies don't seem to meet the moment.³ We would like to extend thanks to the meeting participants listed below. Any errors in this commentary lie with the lead authors.

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¹ Led by Dr Lluís de Nadal Alsina (Lecturer in Media, Culture and Society, Glasgow University), with Dr Marija Verner, (Yale University) and Dr Christopher Shaw (independent researcher). Funded by the Carnegie Trust, the research examines the role of misinformation in resistance to the Net Zero agenda in the UK, and aims to uncover prevalent misinformation narratives within online groups opposing climate policy based on an analysis of two large Facebook groups opposing low-carbon transport policies. Please contact Lluís de Nadal Alsina for more information about the research (EMAIL)

² A separate forthcoming publication captures the aspects of the conversation focused on the research itself.

³ Plenty of good work and careful thinking exists on public engagement, from Climate Outreach, Climate Citizens, Involve, and many more besides (https://climateoutreach.org/engagement_blueprint/). A long overdue public engagement strategy from the UK government is in development. Strategists and funders are starting to ask why we don't have more of the public engagement activities that we need <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/fostering-deep-security-climate-leadership-new-era-bernice-lee-o-be-r9kfe/?trackingId=Rr6eXZGoRFeCVmlOd7lZow%3D%3D>

The changing landscape for public engagement on climate change

Concern about climate change remains high, despite *everything* the last five years have thrown at us.⁴ But concern is not shared evenly across the political spectrum: among Reform UK supporters, only one in three accept that climate change is caused by human activity, and most believe the threat is exaggerated.⁵ Although a narrow majority favour climate policies, support is far weaker than among the general population.⁶ The same pattern holds across Europe, where supporters of similar right wing populist parties are typically much less supportive of climate action.⁷

A further barrier is the impact of personal cost (real or perceived) on public support. Most people support 'net zero in principle', but they start to pull away when financial or lifestyle costs are emphasised.⁸ Perceived fairness in who bears the cost can be decisive.

The problem is not that people don't care enough about climate change. But 'caring' is not enough.

An acute and lengthy cost of living crisis has taken its toll. People are struggling financially, and growing more wary of what green policies might cost them. This anxiety has created space for arguments that frame climate action as a trade-off between net zero and making ends meet.

In this climate, political opportunism thrives. One-time champions of net zero now see a chance to win over sceptical voters by turning against it, arguing people won't stomach paying for the green transition, so we should be dialling

⁴ Department for Energy Security and Net Zero. (2025, 3 July). DESNZ Public Attitudes Tracker: Net zero and climate change [Official statistics]. GOV.UK.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/desnzs-public-attitudes-tracker-spring-2025/desnzs-public-attitudes-tracker-net-zero-and-climate-change-spring-2025-uk>

⁵ YouGov. (2024, 19 November). What do Reform UK voters believe on climate change? YouGov.

<https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/50971-what-do-reform-uk-voters-believe-on-climate-change>

⁶ ECIU. (2025, May 2). Local election poll – majority of Reform voters back climate targets [Press release]. Energy & Climate Intelligence Unit.

<https://eciu.net/media/press-releases/2025/local-election-poll-majority-of-reform-voters-back-climate-targets>

⁷ Kulin, J. & Johansson Sevä, I. (2024). Rightwing populist attitudes and public support for climate policies in Western Europe: Widening the scope using the European Social Survey. *PLOS Climate*, 3(10), e0000443.

⁸ Poortinga, W., Whitmarsh, L., Steentjes, K., Gray, E., Thompson, S., & Brisley, R. (2023). Factors and framing effects in support for net zero policies in the United Kingdom. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, 1287188.

back our ambition. The long-standing political consensus on climate in the UK has unravelled.

And on the ground, the cracks are starting to show. Communities around the many 'place-based' (climate code for 'local') green policies that are the focus of so much contestation, feel unheard and betrayed. Barely contained anger is simmering over where renewable energy projects are pushed through without local buy-in; opposition to low traffic neighbourhoods is stoked and weaponised by networks hiding in the (digital and real-life) shadows.

Trust in the establishment has frayed, and green policies (and the institutions promoting them) are increasingly viewed as part of this establishment.

As is obvious from the daily news cycle, we live in a time of misinformation, decaying trust in institutions, acute economic worries and political voices gaining ground by promising to speak for the left-behind.

If we ask (or can easily be *positioned* as asking) people to choose between 'preventing the end of the world' and 'getting to the end of the month' then paycheck reality, and the lure of misinformation will win every time.

Living a fulfilling, healthy, affordable life has become harder over the past decade for many millions of people. What does 'public engagement on climate change' mean and need to look like in this context?

It's easy enough to diagnose the problem. So where next?

Public engagement on green policies needs some new strings to its bow if it is to make sense in the current political moment.

The pivot required is not louder or more visible messaging, but **louder and more visible action (taken 'with' not 'for') people to make their lives better.**

This positioning of public engagement is not about local benefits or more secure jobs as a 'co benefit' of climate policies, but **the other way around**: working with and in communities to materially improve the conditions of people's lives via green policies.

A BIG pivot to community engagement

The wide range of activities that get called 'deliberative engagement'⁹ are a crucial starting point, but offer only a glimpse of what time spent in and with communities can achieve. They are the formal tip-of-the-iceberg. The public engagement we urgently need more of now is more informal, more like the tried and tested principles of 'community organising'.

There are dozens of networks who are perfectly placed to do this work well¹⁰, and a long tradition of using co-creation and community organising to address otherwise intractable problems¹¹.

There are existing groups and networks using principles of community organising to build climate engagement specifically¹², and doing good work. But relative to the groups working in and around the media, or seeking to influence policy makers, they have next to no resources to do it - and they remain on the edges of the climate movement for this reason.

We don't have time to repeat the same mistakes

A common argument against these approaches is that we 'don't have the time.' Community organising does require time, and resources - but it's an investment that pays off.

What we *don't* have the time for is political opportunism capitalising on/taking advantage of people's grievances, or backlash cycles triggered by concerns about inequality in climate policies.

What we *do* have time for is to make the transition make sense & work and for it to do right by people. Investment in our social fabric is what people are crying out for. They want to feel part of the society around them, but by their problems being taken seriously not as a way of rubber-stamping things that were going to happen in one way or another.

They want to feel heard.

⁹ People linked by where they live, who have some sense of local identity and belonging, hashing out the pros and cons of green policies together

¹⁰ E.g. <https://pledgeball.org/>; <https://www.citizensuk.org/>; some of the examples in this report https://climateoutreach.org/engagement_blueprint/

¹¹ <https://www.citizensuk.org/>; <https://www.newcitizenproject.com/what-we-do>

¹² E.g. <https://www.gndrising.org/>; <https://organizeeurope.org/>

The battle against misinformation is about more than words

Public engagement strategies are predominantly still built on an idea - a communication 'chain' to transmit messages that promotes policies which are agreed and shaped elsewhere - that is out-of-step and out-of-sync with the way in which online discourse develops around in-situ green policies, where opposition is increasingly found.

The answer to *misinformation* is not simply more accurate information, but also to understand and where possible address the upstream grievances - chief among them the feeling of being let down, ignored, betrayed or 'unheard'. The danger is blaming everything on misinformation and not recognising the very real grievances people have about their daily lives and the failures of policy.

So how we think about and position public 'opposition' has to evolve. Climate activists have to own it and stand with it, not run from the cost complaints or position people as NIMBYs or 'blockers.'

Discussions about perceived fairness are now long past their sell-by date: either we are visibly, loudly doing something about the perceived (real) unfairness or 'we're the bad guys.'

This is still a form of strategic communication. But it is communication into policy makers on behalf of the public, not communication out to the public on behalf of the transition. The fairer the policy is in the first place (fair = people done right by) the less that strategic communications are required at the end of the policy pipeline anyway.

Green policies aren't experienced in a vacuum. Fixing the social/economic problems people face as the *priority* not the side-product gives a platform for green policies to get a fair hearing.

Trust must be earned

Trust and credibility is only going to be built by really leaning into the frustration people feel.

Saying 'things are bad, people aren't happy' isn't our usual language for talking up the transition. But we have to find common cause before we can offer

credible pathways forwards. And at the moment the common cause is how frustrated people are with the status quo.

Crucially, we don't need 'new voices' to find this common cause - the influencers we are seeking are hiding in plain sight.

The never-ending quest for 'new voices' presumes the existence of an undiscovered category of trusted person, when in fact the most critical vectors of communication (especially around anything local/place-based) are 'each other.'

Either campaigners (community organisers) dive into that reality and show people how we're doing right by them, or we're tinkering around the edges while the 'other side' sets up shop.¹³

Doing right by people

And as well as getting the practical Terms & Conditions right, we need to keep bringing things back to 'the big why'. *Why* are we doing all of these things, in such a hurry, and why is doing them on balance better than what we lose if we don't get this right?

If we don't get this right - right by people and communities - we risk more than just a local backlash. A form of 'radicalisation pathway' opens up for some people who previously were pro climate, but whose opposition to local green policies has been weaponised into a much more general anti-net zero perspective.

What starts as people saying to those promoting green policies 'we want to be heard', ends with them saying 'we no longer want to hear anything from you at all.'

¹³ <https://togetherdeclaration.org/>