

# Communicating Climate Change Clearly



# Introduction

Climate change is all around us - both in our environment and in the media. For a long time we have focused on solutions and ideas but none of these things matter unless they are implemented. A solution is not a solution if people don't know about it, regardless of how good it is.

This plain English guide aims to break down the barriers around communicating climate change and help you understand how to do it well.

## Why Communicate About Climate Change?

On a societal level, climate change is one of the most pressing issues facing society today, and the UK and Scotland have strict targets around climate change that require things to change. Many of these changes are easy but some are more difficult and require us all to change. Current estimates say 2/3 of emissions reductions need to come from reducing consumption, an issue that affects all of us, with a further 1/3 from system changes like infrastructure. Even the systems changes require communication – directly with decision makers in politics and business, and with the public who influence them.

Universities and Colleges have a responsibility to take action on climate change, but also to widen awareness of it within their staff and student communities. This is intended to directly reduce their impact on the world but also to influence how they live their wider lives, and their future career choices. This awareness should come both through the curriculum and from communications from the institution about the actions they are taking to reduce the institutional carbon footprint or support the community to reduce their individual footprints.

**This guide will explore 6 points to consider in your internal and external institutional communications – and in any personal communications about climate change too.**

# Prioritise Clarity

Jargon – avoid it or explain it.

There are so many terms and acronyms used in climate change that is hard for people working in this area to keep track - so almost impossible for those outside! People often feel embarrassed to ask what things mean, afraid it is a sign of ignorance.

Avoid this entirely by either not using complicated jargon or, where unavoidable, explain it.

## Example 1: “The UN COP26 is in Glasgow in 2021”.

A lot of people working in climate change have no idea that COP is an acronym, much less what it means (Conference of the Parties, which is unclear even when explained).

You can easily avoid this altogether with:

**“The United Nations Climate Change Conference is in Glasgow in 2021”**

Both mean the same thing but the second is understood by more people.



“Buzzword jargon buzzword, hyperbole buzzword  
buzzword, trite rhyming platitude... Yep, looks good.”

Avoid the temptation to show off what you know with fancy terms and jargon. The aim of communications is not to show off but to engage with others.

## Example 2:

### “The UK has a Net Zero target of 2050”.

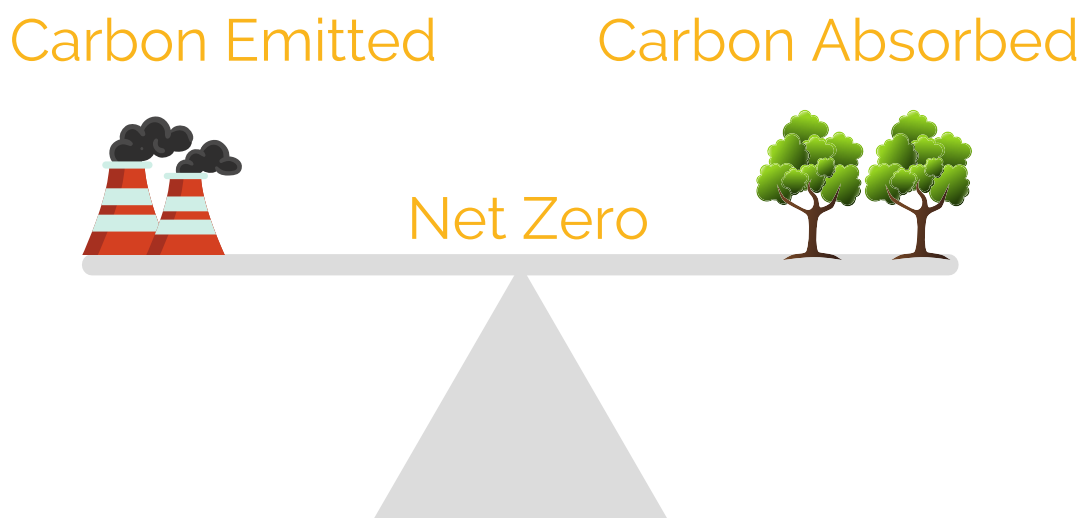
If you know about climate change policy then this makes sense. However, [64% of people](#) in the UK don't know what the term “[Net Zero](#)” means, and if you leave it like this they will either still not know or will Google it and be confronted with hundreds of meanings. Don't make your audience Google your work! Terms like this are in the news and in law and thus cannot be avoided so be sure to explain what they mean to increase your audience's understanding in the long run.

You can beat necessary jargon in different ways, you could add a footnote, link to a website, blog or video or link to another social media post. Hyperlinking the words to an explanation is usually the easiest way in online communications.

For example: “The UK has a [Net Zero](#) target of 2050”

Or

“The UK has a [Net Zero](#) target of 2050 - this means by 2050 we must balance the amount of greenhouse gas produced and the amount removed from the atmosphere.”



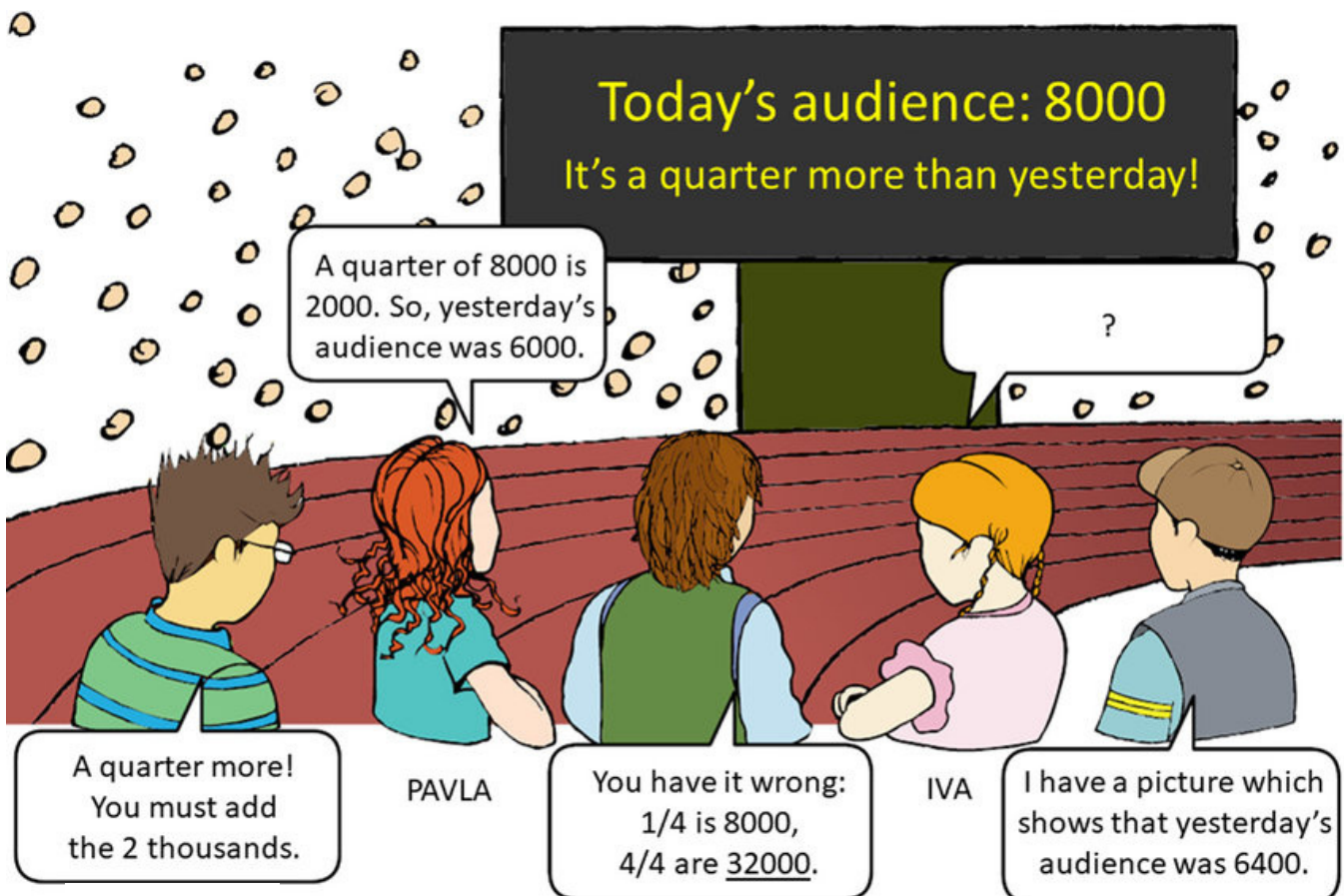
Great creative with how you display information, the more complicated a subject, the more it needs a simple way to be understood. This is an extremely simple graphic that took under a minute to create but gets the point over effectively.

## Your Words Matter

It's great to push for progress and try to advance issues and understanding, but we must ensure people are not left behind. Language is key in keeping getting people involved.

Clarity is important in messaging too – messaging can be unclear even when it is well known. Everyone has seen recycling signs but recycling is poorly understood due to many signs being misleading, contradictory or different to what is written on product packaging. Ensure that you know what you are trying to say, and be consistent and clear. Avoid vague phrases and things that are ambiguous like the example below.

If in doubt, give a draft to someone with little prior involvement with an initiative or understanding of an issue to read over to check if they understand.



Don't give people the opportunity to misunderstand, be clear!

Graphic: Dabell et al.  
2008

# Consider Your Audience

This is a classic communications message but vitally important. Consider the three key points below.

## Who are you speaking to and how can you reach them?

Students hearing about climate change may be more interested in the longer term – job skills, house prices and the impact on their lives. If you are speaking to senior management in an institution then maybe they are more interested in how to change their buildings to avoid damage from the impacts of climate change ([very common already](#)), how to align with government targets or get more renewable energy to save money. Academics may care more about the research, the ethics and keeping teaching up to date, but are often overworked so need the issues to align with their current area of work.

External networks and influences can help here – use existing networks to spread your message. Groups like EAUC-Scotland are always happy to share and communicate messages they receive from others. Don't be scared to ask!



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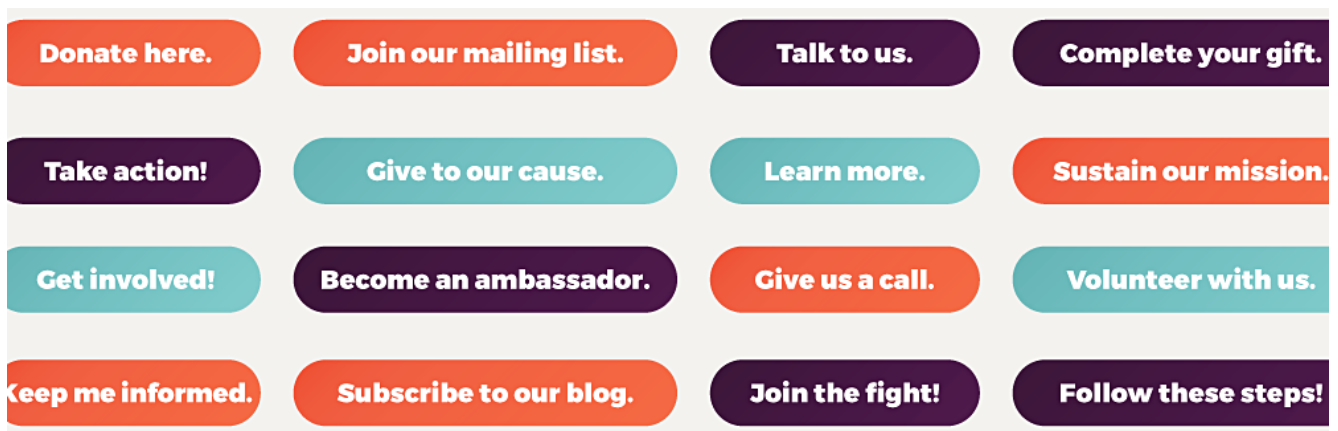
You are never targeting the entire world,  
Break down the audience into a smaller group.

## What do you want them to do?

Be clear about this, both in your own head and in what you communicate. Sometimes it feels like you communicate just to inform, but if you can use language to make your audience feel like they are part of the change, and ideally provide opportunities or suggestions for them to get involved, then your communications will have much more impact.

Remember, not all impacts will be immediately apparent. If you are communicating that you need volunteers for a sustainability committee you will see pretty soon if people respond positively. However, most people's understanding and commitment to action on climate change will change slowly over a long period of time, and any communication which helps them on this path is beneficial.

Ensure your newsletters or website communications have clear buttons that people can click for more information. Some good examples are shown below!



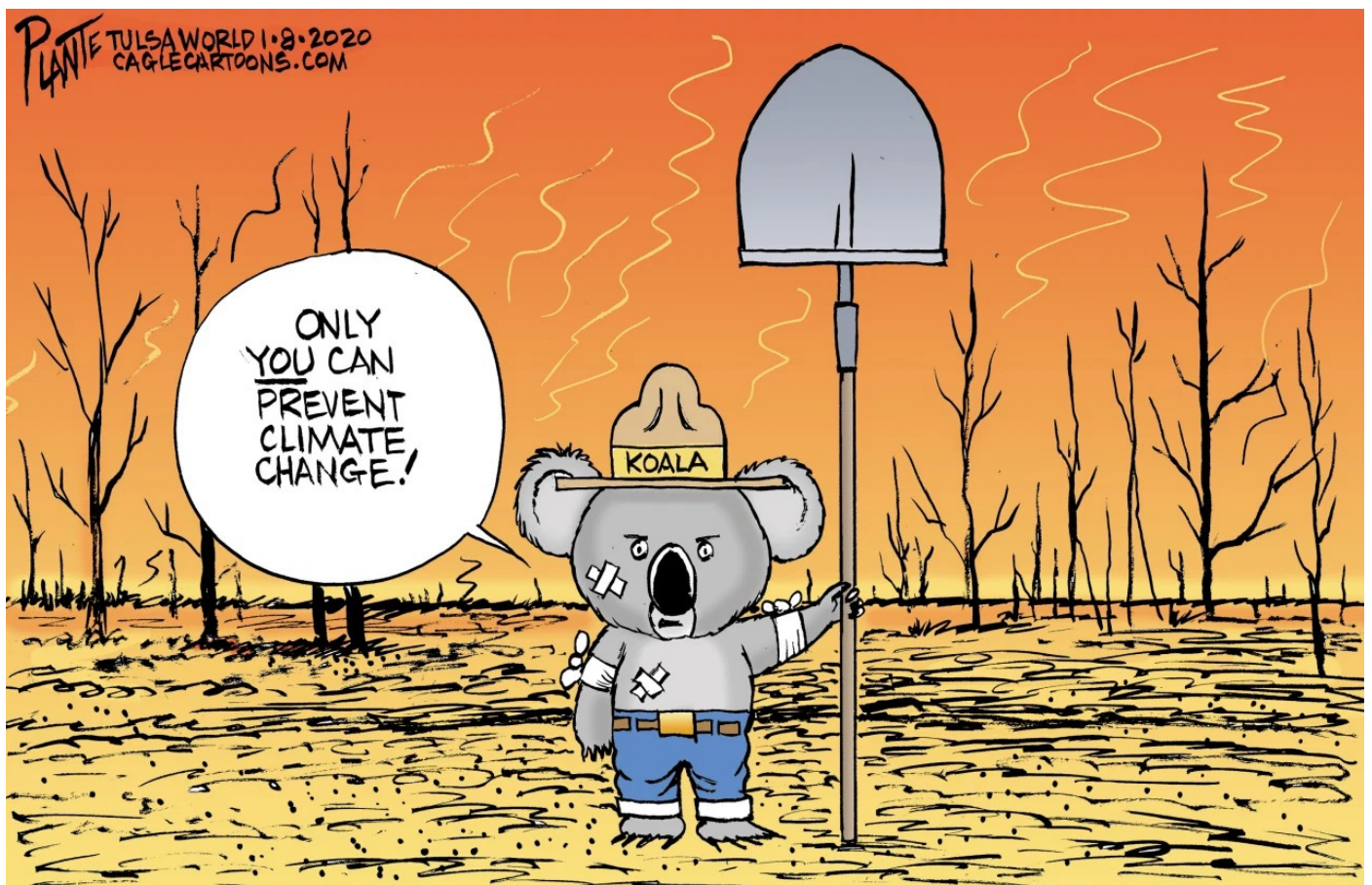
Use positive calls to action to get people involved!

## What do your audience care about?

One good method is to blend issues and use non environmental drivers to link climate change to issues people care about. For example, you can link vegan meals to cost saving, to growing your own food (and biodiversity), to carbon emissions savings, to learning about other cultures, or just to trying new recipes. Some people will care more about cooking than carbon emissions, and your role is to reach people in the best way for them.

You can do similar things with other issues too. Carbon emissions are not that interesting to many, find what they care about and try to relate. Wildlife, food and money are issues that most people find it easy to care about.

Weak communications assume that other people think like the author does, or tries to make them completely switch their priorities. Some people would rather hear about pandas and trees than carbon emissions and agriculture. This is fine, you don't have to convince them to prioritise your issue, just show how interests overlap and make it clear that all these issues are interrelated.

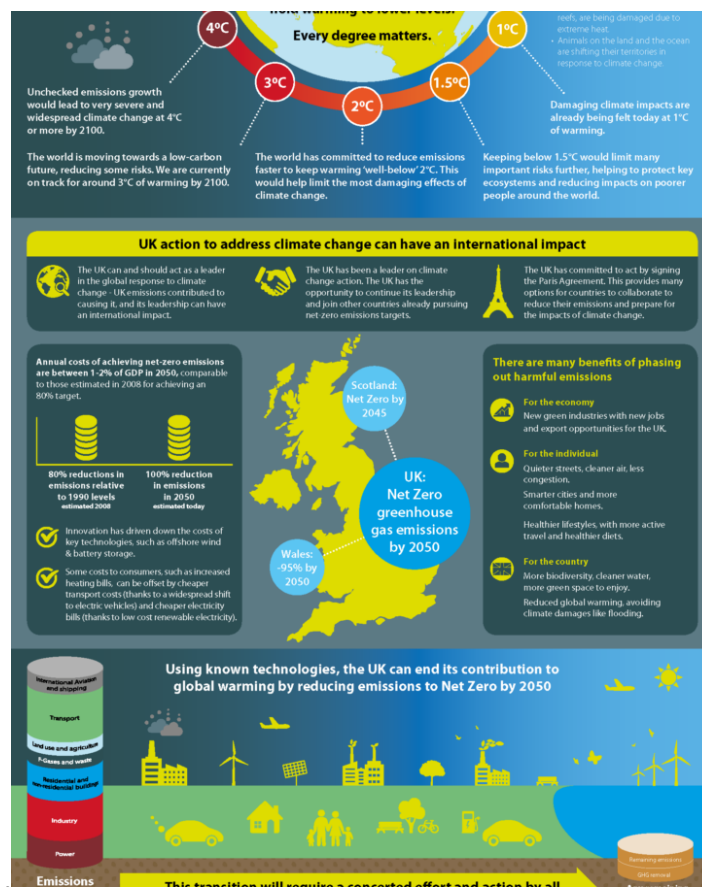


Find the things people care about and talk to them on their terms



# Delivery Methods

The [Committee on Climate Change published a 448 report](#) on climate change recently. The readership of the entire report will be very low, but they accompanied it with an infographic, a series of webinars, and a social media campaign with various quotes and extracts. These bite-sized communications will contain details which will grab the attention of new people, who will then go to the main report to read the relevant chapter or paragraph. Using a variety of methods is essential when communicating about complex issues.



Infographics and videos are great ways to share content but ensure everything is uploaded for those who miss it live! (Source: CCCUK)

Many sustainability teams have their own webpages, but putting something on your website can only be considered as making it accessible to your audience, rather than proper communication. Don't rely on people finding things. If you have a full report or details of current or previous work then making that easily accessible on your webpages will allow audience members to easily follow up on anything they find particularly interesting – but you need to actively tell them what they can find there.

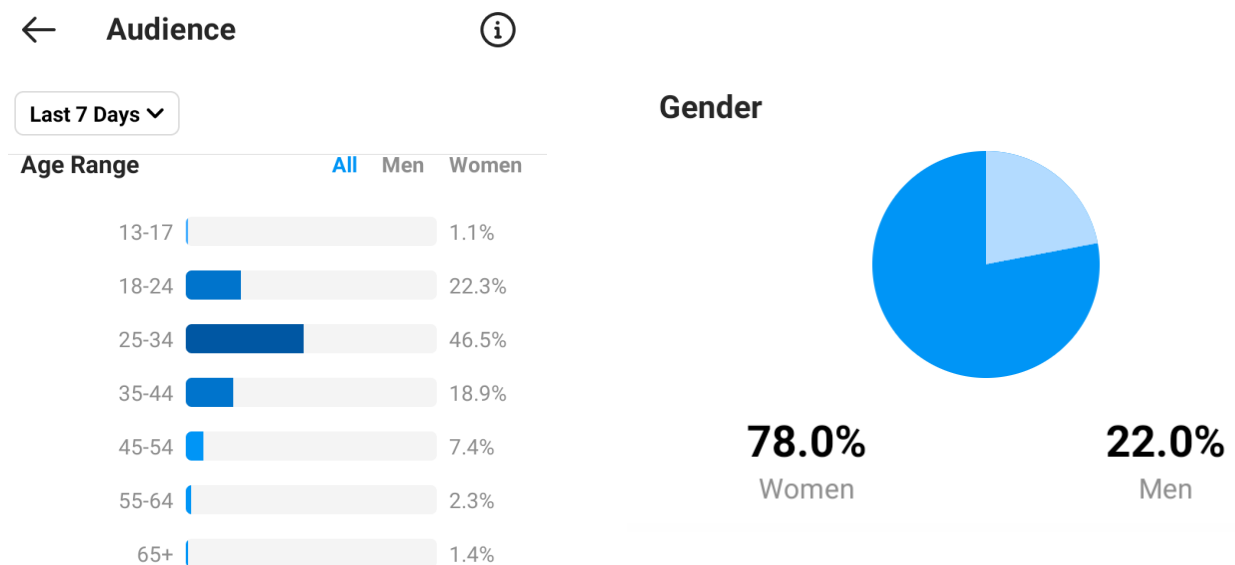
Below we explore some key delivery methods you might want to consider to communicate. These can be used to communicate smaller messages or hook people into larger pieces of work you have done.

# Media Types

Make your social media posts stick out with photos, infographics and videos. Almost 80% of online content is videos, with the vast majority being under 90 seconds long. Making a simple video or animation will significantly boost engagement and understanding, but be sure to include subtitles as most videos are watched on mute. Would you rather watch a 60 second video or read 30 pages? You won't be able to share 100% of information this way but you will reach more people and share some key points quickly and easily.

Think about your platform too. Twitter tends to have a slightly older audience with fewer students but more professional organisations and senior staff. Facebook is great for students, as is Instagram or TikTok if your content works in this way. There is no one solution so try multiple ones at a time and be creative. It may seem like more effort but you can reuse the same videos and images, just with varied text. Vary the posts too, use a video one day and then a picture or infographic the next to keep things fresh and ensure people don't scroll by thinking they already know it.

Look at your analytics in your social media profiles and see what the numbers say. For example, it is quite common to see sustainability accounts on Instagram with an 75%+ female following, with influencers also mainly being female. Think about your own numbers and what this shows about your audience. How can you expand this audience? Look at what posts get the most views, this could indicate the subjects your audience likes.



Look at who your current audience is, either pitch to them or look to expand if you want a wider reach.

# Newsletters

If you have a newsletter there are a few things you need to consider:

- Is your audience broad enough?
- Do they include people you want to tell your message to?
- Do you need to communicate elsewhere too?

If you don't have a newsletter or your readership is too narrow for a particular message, then consider what other newsletters or regular communications go out in your institution (or your partners) and how you can get your message within them. Remember, you need to consider how to align your message with what the audience of that communication stream care about to increase your chance of success.

# Signs and Posters

Don't forget the real world. Not everything is online and there is still value in well placed posters or signs explaining what things are. This works particularly well with wildlife gardens, new projects and things that have recently changed in some way. Posters do tend to have a short lifespan before being ignored so be sure to not overuse them.



This is a great example of a useful, permanent sign from the University of Bristol wildlife meadow.

## Whichever method you use:

- Remember that you and your audience are all people. You don't have to speak like a corporate machine – tell stories and ask questions like you would if you were talking to someone in real life! Share personal experiences and be authentic.
- Keep in mind that large amounts solid of text are not appealing to most people
- Make sure your audience have a way to contact you to find out more or get involved

	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	Tik Tok
Audience	+Young People -Professionals	+Professionals and Businesses -Young People	+Young People and Businesses -Professionals	+Young People -All others
Style	Informal	Informal-Semi Formal	Informal	Casual
Media	+Text and Events -Anything business related	+Events, videos and graphics -Text	+Videos, Text and graphics -Events	+Videos -Events and Text

A rough guide to who is using which platform and what the strengths and weaknesses of each are.

# Consider Training and Upskilling Your Audience

Communication and understanding work hand in hand, and it is easier to communicate with people if you know they have undertaken a certain course or know certain terms like "Greenhouse Gas".

Some institutions support staff and students to take a training course such as Carbon Literacy. Accredited by the [Carbon Literacy Project](#), this is a two-day course that (in Scotland) is subsidised by the SFC for EAUC-Scotland to deliver. Trained staff and students are better equipped to support sustainability progress in their institution, and have accredited training to put on their CV.

As an alternative example, the University of St Andrews has introduced a [short, mandatory course](#) that all students must complete when they start their course.

Learning new skills doesn't need to be this formal though – asking students to watch a documentary or read a blog can also help them gain a new understanding or appreciation of an issue. This can be linked to their subject, for example beauty students could learn about palm oil in cosmetics, food students about plant based diets, and economics students about net zero spending plans. Someone with an interest in sustainability may know of these examples, but it's unlikely that many beauty students will immediately connect shampoo with deforestation.



[This 2018 Iceland TV advert](#) did a great job raising the issue of palm oil shampoo and deforestation.

# A Call To Action

Some people much prefer action to learning the facts. Organise an event and have a communications message with a proper call to action.

For example, people love wildlife and getting a group together to make a wildlife corridor, hedgehog friendly campus, butterfly garden or planting trees can be a really good way to get a group together. People will see the difference and talk about what has happened and who was involved.

You are unlikely to struggle to get people involved, but remember to engage through pre-existing groups too. Your institution may already have an outdoor or wildlife society, and local Wildlife Trusts will be willing to lend support with online campaigns and pre made advertising materials. You can take part in existing events such as [BioBlitz](#), [Garden Birdwatch](#), [Big Butterfly Count](#) and link in with local community groups too.

You can do similar things with other campaigns around walking, cycling, vegan food etc. People learn in different ways and it is important to “do” something as some people learn best in this way and feel proud of making a material difference to the world around them!



Credit: Shah Selbe

**HAVE YOUR SAY:  
WILDLABS TECH  
COMMUNITY SURVEY  
2020**

**WILDLABS.NET**  
[ The conservation technology network ]

 **Colorado State University**

This is a very clear example of a call to action for a specific project at a University

# Be Positive, Balanced and Honest

There can be a lot of negativity around climate change which can feel overwhelming. We do need to be honest and to change quickly, but change is best when it comes through understanding and awareness. Fear, panic and demands are not good motivators.

Levels of [Climate Anxiety](#) are already at an all time high. People are afraid of the future, in part due to some scaremongering headlines and news stories. Celebrate success, look for opportunities to be creative and highlight what works.

## Example 3:

**“You must go vegan immediately to prevent catastrophic damage and runaway climate change”**

There are three major issues here. This message conveys a sense of urgency, but also tells people what they “must do” to prevent a catastrophe which feels quite threatening and scary. It targets the reader – “you must”, rather than “we” – which doesn't convey a sense of togetherness or collaboration. Finally, it provides an ultimatum - if going vegan seems too big a step then they may just dismiss this completely and ignore your whole message.

Alternatively you could say:

“A plant-based diet can help combat climate change”



And sometimes a clear and simple graphic can be all you need..

This message is very similar but gives people an option and the ability to help. Giving people facts and choices is more effective than demanding they do something. If you give people choices and evidence they are more likely to pick the best option than if you tell them what to do. Your audience are humans and none of us purely logical, you know the issues but they may not, or might not place the same importance on them, and need some time to think it through.

Think of the psychology – none of us like [being told what to do](#), or that we are wrong. It doesn't matter what your message is, a negative delivery will result in fewer people listening. Finally, this message suggests people can progress along the journey to veganism without having to take it in one leap by adopting a more plant based diet. You can also link to other issues such as health benefits, growing your own food and biodiversity.

## PLANT-BASED DIETS & HEALTH



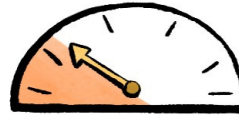
a vegetarian diet lowers your risk of heart disease by

**20%**

vegetarians tend to live an average of

**8 YEARS**

longer than non-vegetarians



the average cholesterol level of a vegetarian is

**161**

compared to 210 in non-vegetarians

vegetarians have a lower risk of death related to cancers, heart problems, & obesity.

men:

**50%**   
reduced

women:

**30%**   
reduced

source: foodielovesfitness.co

Infographics can be a great way to communicate.  
Just be sure not to add too much text!



# Complaining

There are times to complain about issues and give constructive feedback though, and you should clearly and calmly express your views. Angry responses are often ignored and people won't want to discuss issues further with someone they feel threatened by, or who completely dismisses their own views. If you are on the receiving end of this sort of messaging, feel free to end the conversation and tell people that you aren't comfortable discussing something in this way.

However, be careful who you complain to. It may feel great to vent on social media and tag the offending people or company, but the person on their communications team reading it will not be the person who made the decision. Think about the person reading your message and how they will feel. Be polite and you have a better chance that they will pass your message on and act on it.

A bad complaint can backfire and benefit the one being attacked. In 2020 Yorkshire Tea were unfairly attacked on Twitter and their responses won fans and support around the world. Remember that all accounts have someone managing them and think about if you would say these things in person. As the receiver, always be polite and take the high ground as with the example below.

Clearly laid out points may well change the mind of someone who had not thought things through fully, be optimistic about people's openness to change.



Replying to @

Hi Sue. At the weekend you criticised us for something we didn't do, and now you're criticising us for something we didn't say.

From one human being to another, would be OK for you to stop now?

Replying to

Sue, you're shouting at tea.

Please do look after yourself and try to be kind to others. We're going to mute you now.

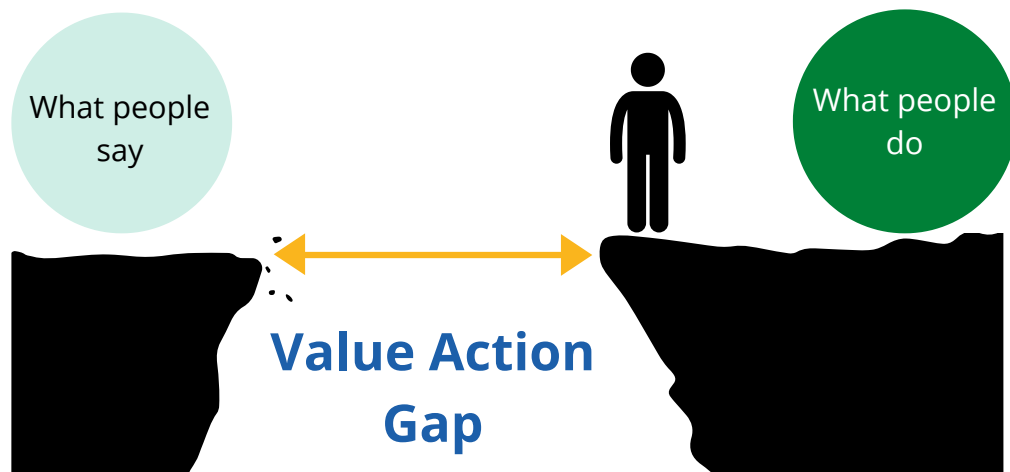
Always take the high ground and be polite on social media!

# Will Good Communication Solve Everything?

Sadly not.

The actions in this guide will help your communications be more successful, but they will not work for everyone. Some people are focused on other priorities or will not be willing to acknowledge how climate change will affect their lives.

However, even if people know and care about important issues, there are also times when our actions don't align with our values, also known as the [value-action gap](#). Simply put, the value action gap is the difference between what we know we should do and what we actually do. The best way to counter this is to try and take small steps, don't move from eating meat 7 times a week to being a vegan overnight and don't urge others to change that drastically. Encourage change and improvement and recognise that people might give up if a change is too large and difficult.



Keep communicating, even with those who you know already understand, and break down their opportunities to take action into more manageable actions. Could you run a bike-to-work breakfast to encourage people to cycle to work once? Could you better highlight the plant-based options in the cafeteria? If people try a new behaviour and enjoy it they are more likely to adopt it in the longer term.

# Key Takeaways

## Be clear

Don't use jargon and keep it simple to be understood by all.

## Who are you speaking to?

Think about who your audience is and what they want to hear about. Don't make them work to understand your message.

## Use a variety of forms and platforms

Use all the tools you have. Graphics, videos, text and animations can all be used on different platforms in a clear and coordinated effort to engage. Work with other networks, like EAUC-Scotland, to help share your content!

## Help them learn

In general you don't want to give your audience homework but there are occasions when people want to learn more and are interested. Offer opportunities to upskill them and share easy to digest content with them.

## Involve people

Give your audience a way to get involved in projects and activities.

## Be authentic, tell stories and try to be positive

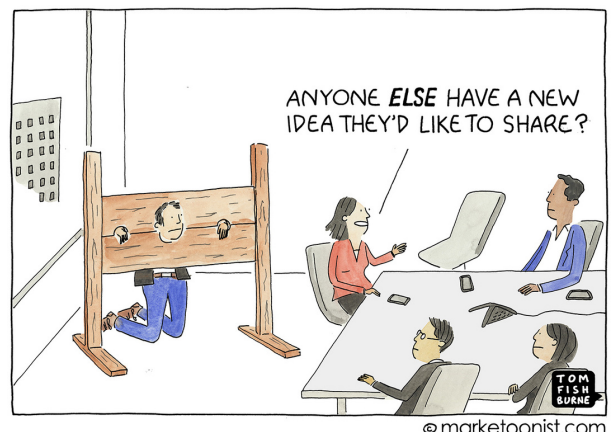
Good communication comes from personal storytelling, involve people with stories to tell and share their real-life experiences.

## Listen and be kind

Communication is not just putting out a message, it's about responding to people and adjusting. Audiences and communication styles change so always be open to trying something new.

## It's a journey

Communication is a journey for both the audience and the communicator. Climate change is a big issue that will require short, medium and long term messaging.



Be open minded to new ideas!

# More Information

For more information on communicating climate change or for any sustainability advice relating to the university and college sector please get in touch with EAUC-Scotland.

You can do so directly by emailing us at [Scotland@EAUC.org.uk](mailto:Scotland@EAUC.org.uk) and you can stay up to date by following us on Twitter [@EAUCScotland](https://twitter.com/EAUCScotland)

EAUC-Scotland also has a general mailing list you can join and has dedicated mailing lists and events in the following areas:

- Energy and Water
- Sustainable Construction
- Health and Wellbeing
- Travel and Transport
- Education for Sustainable Development
- Community Engagement
- Student Leaders
- Sustainable Procurement
- Waste Management

If you wish to join a specific group or the general list please contact us to be added. To see future events and training opportunities please check the events page on our website.

