

Telling local stories: New routes of climate change and nature communication in Bristol

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About the research

Awareness of environmental issues, calls to action, and changing behaviour patterns are growing. [86% of Bristol citizens express concern about climate change](#), and concern remains high across age and ethnicity, and the city's 34 council wards. Residents are [willing to see change](#) and this concern [is driving many to take action](#).

Yet, whilst we may celebrate big dramatic shifts in behaviour, many everyday changes and actions often go unrecorded. Showcasing these everyday actions could encourage others to make similar changes, and those who are not to seek support to do so. This may also help some to see how their individual actions can be part of a broader societal shift that influences policy change.

People tend to think in stories that are rooted in a shared sense of place, culture, and history. Such [stories can influence pro-environmental action](#) by inspiring fellow citizens to emulate them. Yet, they may also inhibit such change. The significant roles of [social norms](#), [anxiety](#), and [trust](#) in broader forms of collective action are well understood, but a greater understanding is needed of how locally-grounded stories might promote change.

This briefing summarises insights from a round-table event with Bristol-based policymakers and academics in May 2021. This explored three testimonies collected for this project of local people taking action on climate change, the role their stories might have in future environmental communication in Bristol, and potential communication channels.



Policy implications

- *Place-based visions of the future:* Communities should be supported to co-create locally-tailored visions of what positive environmental futures look like to them. Communications should also be tailored to take the history, demographics, culture, and priorities of communities into account. Greater attention should be paid to the different levels of resources available to different communities - elevating those actions that individuals in those communities have access to and might see as possible.
- *Celebrating achievable actions that might be everyday but are by no means 'small':* Action already happening, even if out of the spotlight, should be celebrated alongside more dramatic changes. The power of individual stories can be enhanced by noting that such actions are part of a wider pattern of change (i.e. being done by x% of the population) See further information for tools.
- *Capitalising on transition periods in lives for environmental actions:* Showcasing the environmental actions recently adopted by others experiencing similar life transitions via targeted communications (eg council tax registration) would encourage others and reach those who remain unaware.
- *Expand and build on existing initiatives in Bristol:* The expansion of the [Bristol Climate Heroes](#) website and initiatives such as [Conversations In Nature](#) will be productive in celebrating the everyday actions that are achievable, tangible actions for many. Presenting future climate and nature heroes in a map form would foreground climate stories within different communities and contexts.
- *More research into communications needed:* Such as how these stories can best be shared in direct, personal and small group channels, rather than one-to-many (broadcast) channels.

Key findings

- *Open up environmental messaging to those who are currently under-represented.* While [climate concern remains high even in wards characterised as of higher deprivation across Bristol](#), the resources that people have to support actions vary and many high-profile actions are out of reach (i.e. installing solar panels requiring high up-front costs).
- *Emphasise that climate and environmental action is positive.* Celebrating positive everyday stories counters how environmental actions have been pitched in negative terms of responsibility and/or guilt. Celebrating stories of motivations and actions can offer a positive vision of what is possible and the [benefits](#) (i.e. [growing your own food can improve health and well-being](#)).
- *Recognise that 'utopia' is different for different people.* Visions of utopia are not likely to be universally held. Opened-up climate communication will appreciate the various backgrounds, values, and futures of individuals and communities. What might inspire change for one person or neighbourhood may not for another.
- *Present people with stories where they can see themselves as protagonists.* this is a key route to tailoring locally-focused communication and foregrounding climate stories in everyday actions. It is often easy to find stories of dramatic lifestyle shifts – cutting out meat and dairy, for example. Yet, the scale of such change may put others off. Celebrating how Bristolians' everyday actions, like taking the bus, sharing food, or putting out the recycling every week can collectively lead to broader changes will allow many to see themselves as key actors.
- *Target individual messaging at key life transition moments.* Citizens' stories may have an even greater impact at points where peoples' habits are changing or being disrupted, such as leaving education, or moving home.

Further information

This project was funded by the Brigstow Institute. Further information on this project can be found [here](#).

Sources that can help highlight individual stories as a wider pattern of change:

Bristol: [Quality of Life survey](#)

National: [BEIS public attitudes tracker](#)

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