



European Perceptions of Climate Change (EPCC)

Six Recommendations for Public Engagement

March 2017



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About the EPCC project

The European Perceptions of Climate Change Project (EPCC) is coordinated by Cardiff University and forms part of the Joint Programme Initiative 'Connecting Climate Knowledge for Europe' (see JPI-Climate www.jpi-climate.eu), a research programme uniting National Research Councils across Europe. Inter-disciplinary teams from the UK, Germany, France and Norway are individually funded to collaborate in the design and analysis of a major comparative survey of climate and energy beliefs amongst the public in these four participating nations.

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About Climate Outreach

[Climate Outreach](#) (formerly COIN) are one of Europe's leading experts on climate change communication, bridging the gap between research and practice. Our charity is focused on building cross-societal acceptance of the need to tackle climate change. We have over 12 years of experience helping our partners find their climate voice - talking and thinking about climate change in ways that reflect their individual values, interests and ways of seeing the world. We work with a wide range of partners including central, regional and local governments, charities, business, faith organisations and youth groups.

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Introduction

The European Perceptions of Climate Change project (EPCC) provides insights into public attitudes towards climate change and energy transitions across France, Germany, Norway and the United Kingdom. In an initial report, the project detailed the [socio-political context](#)¹ relevant to understanding perceptions of climate change in each of these nations. A [second report](#)² summarises the key findings from an international representative survey of approximately 1000 people in each of the four participating countries. The EPCC project offers a rich source of information on how the public in four major European countries think about climate change and the different elements of a sustainable energy transition.

Here, in this document, we offer a series of six recommendations for public engagement that follow from the key findings of the EPCC survey. We also situate these findings within the wider literature on public engagement with energy and climate change. This short report is aimed at communications professionals, campaigners, and other practitioners, and contains practical recommendations for more effective public engagement.



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1 European Perceptions of Climate Change (EPCC): Socio-political profiles to inform a cross-national survey in France, Germany, Norway and the UK

2 European Perceptions of Climate Change (EPCC): Topline findings of a survey conducted in four European countries in 2016

Recommendation 1

Climate change is getting closer to home for many Europeans: Connect with people's experiences and expectations around extreme weather

Across all four countries, a majority of people feel that climate change is happening (or will happen soon), with strong agreement that climate change will affect people 'like them'. Levels of scepticism about climate change are low.

- ➔ This represents a significant opportunity to engage citizens in conversations that connect with changes in the climate that they perceive to already be taking place.

As other research on public attitudes has shown¹, people are increasingly 'joining the dots' between periods of extreme weather and climate change. The EPCC survey found that the national impacts people most associate with climate change are storms, floods and unpredictable weather.

- ➔ Talking about these sorts of events helps to tie in with the associations already in people's minds when it comes to climate change.
- ➔ Asking people whether they have experienced any changes in the weather (and if they think the climate is changing) offers a platform for climate conversations. Illustrating some of the expected – and less expected – domestic impacts of climate change provides a window of opportunity to talk about climate change and build support for policies in response to climate impacts (see Recommendation 2).

Previous work in the UK context² has recommended that engagement around extreme weather events must be conducted sensitively or it may 'backfire' (with communities potentially objecting to conversations about climate change when other concerns may be more pressing). The EPCC survey found that local governments are generally well-trusted on energy and climate change (in France and Germany in particular). Local authorities may be well-placed to empathise with communities experiencing local climate impacts, and develop locally-appropriate policies in response to a changing climate.

1 Demski, C., Capstick, S., Pidgeon, N., Sposato, R., and Spence, A. (2017) Experience of extreme weather affects climate change mitigation and adaptation responses, *Climatic Change*, 140 (2), 149-164.

2 <http://climateoutreach.org/resources/communicating-flood-risks-in-a-changing-climate>

Recommendation 2

Adaptation policies are uncontroversial: Build on this to talk about different types of climate measures

Compared to mitigation policies that involved paying more for energy, or taxing fossil fuels, adaptation measures by contrast get strong support from individuals across all four countries. Members of the public may be more ready to engage in conversation about adaptation measures, such as building flood defences, than certain mitigation measures which they may see as overly expensive.

People's support for adaptation measures extends – perhaps surprisingly – to international policies, with low opposition to providing developing countries with financial assistance to help them deal with extreme weather. However, it is important to recognise that not all mitigation measures are unpopular as the EPCC survey also shows that support for the Paris Agreement is high in all four nations.

(Note that 'mitigation' and 'adaptation' are technical terms that may not be familiar to the public – see Recommendation 6.)

- ➔ Starting climate conversations with uncontroversial adaptation measures may open up space to talk about other policies, but using the language of adaptation: encouraging preparedness, building resilience and taking sensible steps to respond to a changing environment.

Previous research³ in the US has shown that people across the political spectrum endorse ideas like these, whilst some mitigation policies can be polarising.⁴

The EPCC findings suggest that talking about policies for adaptation and climate-preparedness will be an effective way of engaging with people in all four surveyed countries, and may be a useful bridge to some of the more global aspects of climate change (e.g. high support for an international agreement).

- ➔ Ideally, trusted 'peer' messengers should engage communities around extreme weather, and communications should empower people to respond and adapt to future climate risks – focusing on preparedness and support rather than 'getting back to normal' (which may be unrealistic).

3 <http://www.climateaccess.org/preparation-frame>

4 Bain, P.C., Hornsey, M.J., Bongiorno, R. & Jeffries, C. (2012). Promoting pro-environmental action in climate change deniers. *Nature Climate Change*, 2(4), 1–4.

Recommendation 3

Support for renewable energy is consistently high: Emphasise the social consensus on climate change to build a sense of momentum

People in all four countries view renewable energy sources including solar, onshore and offshore wind power very positively, while only a minority are positive towards coal and oil.

This clear preference for renewable energy sources is consistent with many other recent polls, and shows a strong social consensus around renewable energy at an international level. Previous studies have shown that although local communities may have a range of objections to where renewable energy technologies are 'sited', this is not a straightforward 'NIMBY' (Not In My Back Yard) reaction, and often reflects legitimate concerns about lack of local involvement in planning decisions.⁵

- ➡ It is important to emphasise the positive social consensus around renewables, because levels of support among the general population (in the UK at least) are consistently underestimated.⁶ While most people are favourable towards renewables, they don't think other people are.

The EPCC survey shows that support for renewables is high across Europe.

- ➡ Emphasising this level of agreement is an important way of dispelling misconceptions around others' views, helping to build momentum for a low carbon transition.

5 Devine-Wright, P. (2012). Explaining "NIMBY" Objections to a Power Line: The Role of Personal, Place Attachment and Project-Related Factors. *Environment and Behaviour*, 6, 761-781.

6 <https://www.theguardian.com/science/political-science/2016/oct/20/the-uk-public-love-wind-power-and-they-dont-even-know-it>

Recommendation 4

Identities and priority concerns differ across nations: Work 'with the grain' to make climate communication regionally relevant

There are some clear differences between public attitudes in the four nations.

- ➔ Understanding these differences will ensure communications with different audiences across Europe are as effective as possible.

Even though scepticism is not common in any country, climate change is low on people's list of priorities in all nations except Norway.

- ➔ Taking account of the leading issues in a given country (e.g. unemployment in France) and linking a message about energy and climate change positively to this issue (e.g. new jobs in the renewable energy sector) is one way to make climate communication regionally relevant.

There are different 'emotional profiles' in each country, with French and German participants reporting higher levels of 'outrage' about climate change, and an equal balance between hope and fear in the UK. Norwegians rated all the emotions listed in the survey at low levels.

- ➔ Taking account of these emotional profiles is important – in the UK, for example, this could mean coupling a fear-based message with a constructive, solution-oriented action. An overly-emotive appeal in Norway is unlikely to connect with many people.

There are also differences in how 'green' people see themselves to be, or describe their country as being. Norwegian and French participants are more likely than German or British to agree that being environmental friendly is an important part of their national identity. Most people in the French and Norwegian surveys agree that as a nation, their country could make a difference when it comes to climate change, but this belief is much lower in Germany.

- ➔ Building on these distinct national identities and developing messages that support (rather than threaten) them will help ensure effective engagement.

Recommendation 5

People are already moving in response to climate change, but the connection is not yet well understood: Cautiously and constructively make the link between climate change and migration

There *are* connections between climate change and the movement of people. However these connections are not always obvious, and identifying a group of people whose movement is mainly caused by climate change (let alone estimating their numbers) is difficult.

- ➔ For these reasons and more, talking about the link between climate change and migration in a factually accurate way is challenging, and the topic should be approached cautiously.

The EPCC survey shows that a majority of people in all four countries dispute the link between climate change and the current refugee crisis in Europe. In Norway, a small majority of survey respondents think that climate change will lead to more migration to their country in the future, but this belief is not common in the other three countries.

- ➔ This means that there is an opportunity to introduce the idea of a link between climate change and migration in communication, which may make the abstract notion of climate change more tangible. But it is important to make clear in any public engagement around this issue that climate change is more likely to reinforce existing trends of short distance, internal movement than create new movements from developing countries to European countries.⁷

There is no merit in *avoiding* talking about climate change and migration. In the UK and Germany, immigration and the movement of refugees are spontaneously mentioned in the EPCC survey as the most important issues respectively.

- ➔ But communicators should be very conscious of the potential to inflame existing tensions around the movement of people, which are currently running high across Europe.

An individual's decision to move always has a number of causes. Economic, political and social factors all influence someone's decision to stay or move. The impacts of climate change could be an additional factor among these others. Climate change may also play a role in changing some of these other influences. There will always be multiple 'push' and 'pull' factors, so identifying climate change as the sole driver for someone's movement is very difficult.

7 <http://climatemigration.org.uk/syria-and-climate-change-did-the-media-get-it-right>

Recommendation 6

Awareness of some commonly-used policy and campaigning terms is low across the four surveyed nations: Avoid policy jargon

Despite the attention and controversy surrounding ‘fracking’ (hydraulic fracturing for gas), relatively high numbers of people in the EPCC survey do not know what it is. A question on ‘divestment’ was dropped from the final version of the survey, when it became clear that (even with a definition) very few people understood what it meant.

- ➔ Even commonly-used policy and campaigning jargon may be poorly understood, so it should be explained, or avoided if there is a more straightforward term or phrase to use.

People may not recognise technical terms like ‘fracking’, ‘divestment’, ‘mitigation’ and ‘adaptation’, but still be interested in the implications and consequences of climate policies. As the EPCC survey shows, people associate a range of issues (e.g. floods and unpredictable weather) with climate change, and their support for certain policies (renewables and preparing for future climate risks) is high.

- ➔ Telling human stories about what climate change means for people’s lives is better than using technical terms to describe policies they may not be familiar with.