

COMMUNICATING A BETTER FUTURE

A guide to communicating
about climate, transport
and energy.



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Talking climate and transport

1. MAKE IT CLEAR WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE PROBLEM



Excluding the cause makes problems look inevitable and unsolvable.

⊗ Don't Say:

- Global temperatures have risen
- Biodiversity loss
- Fares have gone up

✓ Do Say:

- Greedy fossil fuel companies are driving damaging climate change
- Industrial food production is destroying wildlife
- Bus companies are overcharging

2. USE TERMS THAT MAKE THE HARM CLEAR



When we hide the damage, we hide the problem.

It's a "corporate greed crisis" not a "cost of living crisis"

It's not "fuel poverty" – "people can't afford to heat their homes".

3. DROP THE JARGON



The public don't understand *Net Zero, Just Transition or energy efficiency* in the same way you do. Use clearer language, such as *new greener economy and reducing energy waste*.

4. STICK TO YOUR OWN MESSAGE

Don't repeat the opposition. Even when you attempt to challenge a statement you can accidentally reinforce the negative connections in people's minds.



⊗ Don't Say:

"the problem is not migrants"
"achieving Net Zero is not too expensive"

✓ Do Say:

"the problem is billionaires"
"the path to a greener future is clear"

5. MOTIVATE WITH POSITIVE VALUES



Our supporters care about people and the environment but being reminded of that is motivating to them. We don't do it enough. Use phrases like:

"Most people across Scotland want a better future for people and planet"

"No matter where we are from, no matter what our background we all deserve to have a comfortable warm home"

Introduction

This guide is here to help you communicate more effectively about Climate, Energy and Transport. However, the principles set out in this toolkit could easily apply to any issue you work on.

Why Now?

The Far Right has increased its reach and influence in recent years, and we must meet the challenge. To do so we must make our voices louder and clearer, not respond to the agenda they set out for us. They have been successful in contaminating phrases like “Net Zero” and “15 Minute Cities” and unfairly placed people seeking refuge in the frame for all our problems.

There is a clear popular counter narrative, that billionaires and corporations are hoarding wealth, avoiding paying their fair share of tax and exerting undue influence on our politicians. This guide seeks to help you be clear about the real causes of the problems and use terms that are clearly understood by our audience.

Who is it for?

Anyone who wants to communicate more effectively. Even if your role is not about speaking to supporters or the public, the way you communicate matters. The way you talk to other colleagues creates the template for what is normal. If we always use language that makes bad things seem less damaging it can influence how we look at fixing those problems.

How to use it

That’s up to you, but we would suggest not trying to do everything at once, look at what most immediately makes sense for you and start from there.

Let’s begin...

MIND

THE TRAPS

MIND THE TRAPS

Key tips for improving
your communications

THE CHAMELEON TRAP

(or the Sanitising trap)

[Text taken from "we all make mistakes" by Framing Matters]

Why a chameleon?

Chameleons change colour to match their surroundings, hiding themselves in plain sight. Sometimes the language we use hides the harm being done and makes bad things sound acceptable.



What's the trap?

The Chameleon trap is when we use jargon, coded language or euphemisms to make something bad or damaging seem less harmful. If we are trying to stop something bad happening, why make it sound better?

For example, why would a group campaigning on international issues ever use a term like 'collateral damage'? It is a term created by the US military to make killing civilians sound more acceptable. Better to call it 'killing civilians', because that's what it is!

Sometimes the alternative is longer, but that doesn't matter. The shorter version is only helpful if it makes people feel something.

In practice

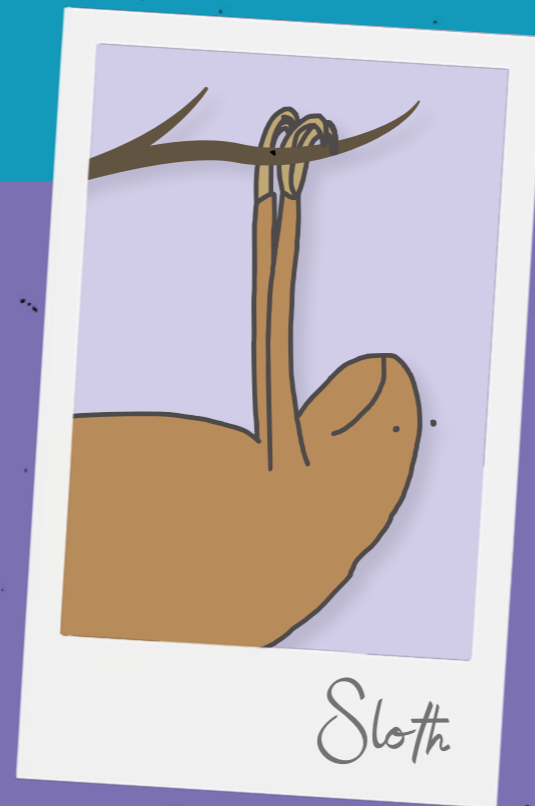
THE CHAMELEON TRAP	WHAT IT MEANS	ALTERNATIVES (what we need the public to know about it)
Fuel poverty	Can't afford heating	Unable to heat your house
Energy price crisis	Can't afford heating due to profiteering of companies	Energy company greed
Carbon capture technology	Its untested and doesn't work - we should include this in the name	Unproven carbon capture technology
Emissions	Makes it sound less of problem due to neutral, inevitable language	Pollution
Intensifying inequality	Making the gap between rich and poor bigger, money hoarding	Wealth hoarding
Cost of living	Prices going up	Price gouging Cost of greed
Climate rollbacks	Destructive environmental policies	Destroying environmental protections
1.5 degrees or any degrees	Destabilizing of the climate Making the earth uninhabitable	Dangerously heating the planet
Deforestation	Cutting down trees	Destroying forests
Extractive industries	Destructive dirty industries	Damaging industries Dirty damaging industries
Privatised	While the concept of private ownership of once publicly-owned services is well understood and has useful negative associations - It can make the profit component less obvious.	Run for private profit In the hands of greedy corporate interests.

THE SLOTH TRAP (or the Passive trap)

[Text taken from "we all make mistakes" by Framing Matters]

Why a sloth?

Sloths are slow animals not known for their 'get-up-and-go'. Here we are using them to describe messages that fail to identify why things happen, phrases that are inactive like a sloth.



What's the trap?

Many people working in the charity sector use a passive third-person voice in communications. This language has been adopted to sound rational and scientific, but it robs our stories of emotion and makes them less likely to connect with and motivate people.

In practice

✗ So, for example, we shouldn't say:

"Bus services are unreliable and fares are spiralling"

Leaving out the cause of these problems makes them appear normal and inevitable, this makes people feel fatalistic and unable to doing anything about the problem.



So instead, we should say:

"The bus companies' lack of investment and greed have cut the number of buses making them unreliable"

Always say who is responsible if you want change to happen. Don't worry if it takes more words, it is most important that your audience understand the situation.

✗ DON'T SAY	✓ DO SAY
The public health crisis	Tax avoidance and privatisation have led to a public health crisis
Energy crisis UK's broken energy system	An unfair energy system built on private profit and benefitting fossil fuel companies
Stagnating wages	Under paying workers while executives hoard wealth
Loss of wildlife/biodiversity loss/habitat fragmentation	Destruction of wildlife by X
The government is "unambitious"	The policies are inadequate, will not provide the necessary change

THE PARROT TRAP

(or the Repetition trap)

[Text taken from "we all make mistakes" by Framing Matters]

Why a parrot?

Parrots are famous for repeating or 'parroting' back what's said to them. Repeating your opposition is likely to harm your cause.



What's the trap?

When trying to argue against something we often end up accidentally reinforcing the idea in people's heads.

President Nixon famously said, "I am not a crook".

By saying this, he reinforced the idea for millions of Americans, that he was, indeed, a crook. By using the word 'crook', he parroted the language of his opponents and reinforced the negative association in people's minds between him and the concept of a 'crook'. Even in the act of challenging the idea, he accidentally repeated the damaging claim.

Had he read this toolkit, he might have instead said something like "I'm an honest man". And he would have been better off for it!

As George Lakoff has long argued, repeating something you want to challenge just ends up reinforcing the unhelpful idea in people's heads.

Avoid "Myth busters" as these just reinforce the myth you are trying to bust. State the fact but don't spend time reinforcing the lie.

In practice

PHRASE WE SHOULDN'T "PARROT"	ALTERNATIVES
The Future is Not F*cked	A better future is possible
We can't wait for better buses	Better buses are on the way
Buses are a lifeline, not a luxury	Buses are a lifeline
We're not all equally responsible for climate change	Billionaires and greedy corporations are most responsible for climate change

THE RAT TRAP

(or the Assumption trap)

[Text taken from "we all make mistakes" by Framing Matters]

Why a rat?

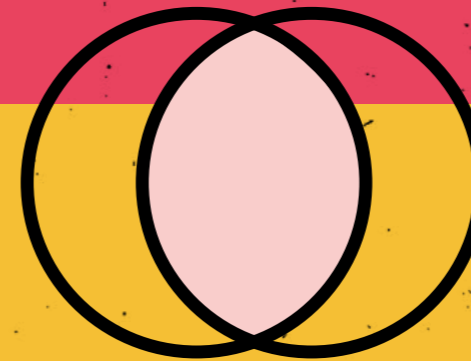
While most people might have negative feelings about rats, seeing them as vermin that carry disease, there are also many people who love rats, seeing them as clean, intelligent, and keeping them as pets. To assume everyone hates rats is wrong, yet we make assumptions about our audiences all the time, assuming they share our understanding and associations with words. This can lead us to be ineffective in our communications.



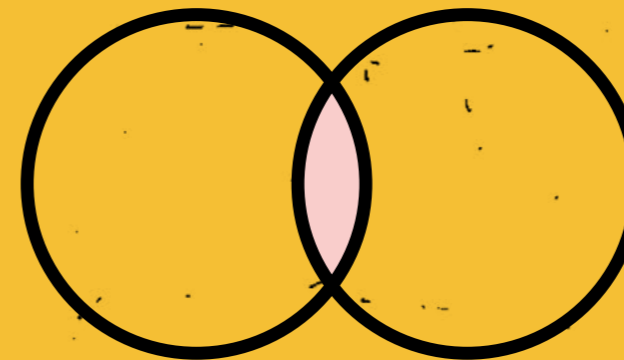
What's the trap?

This trap is about assuming that our audience has the same associations with a word or phrase that we do.

In many cases a rat trap will be technical jargon you use. Imagine each of these circles represents an individual's associations they have with a word.



When we have a lot in common with our audience - we have a lot of shared associations with a word.



When we are using words that are work jargon that our audience don't understand then we have little overlap.

We want to try and always use words that our audience understand in a similar way to us.

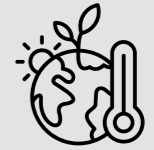
When spending all our time with others working on the same issue, we are trapped in a cage of our own language, using terms that we all understand in a similar way but do not mean the same to those outside it. This is known in psychology as the "curse of knowledge", the more we know about something the more we are likely to assume that other people do as well.

In practice

THE RAT TRAP	WHAT IT MEANS	ALTERNATIVES (what we need the public to know about it)
Just transition	Changing the energy system from fossil fuels to renewables in a way that is fair to workers and communities	Ensuring the move away from fossil fuels is fair to workers
Active travel	Walking and cycling	Walking and cycling
Decarbonising heating	Making heating fossil free	Making heating greener Making heating more environmentally friendly
Climate justice	Broadly about fairly distributing the burden of actions to those that caused the problem and supporting those disproportionately impacted.	Fair approach to climate change Helping those impacted the most by climate change
Fuel poverty	People being unable to heat their homes	People being unable to heat their homes
Retrofit	Make old housing more energy efficient	Making old houses warmer
Energy inefficient homes	Cold home	Draughty home Cold home
Energy Poverty	Being unable to afford electricity	Being unable to afford electricity
Net zero	The greenhouse gases going into the atmosphere are balanced by removal out of the atmosphere.	Stopping climate change getting worse
Climate resilient	Able to cope with climate impacts	More able to cope with climate impacts. (The 'More' is important otherwise it looks like climate change can be coped with)

TALKING...

Climate



Transport

New energy systems



Warmer homes





1. Make the "We" as big as possible

Make the "we" as big as possible without being everyone, we want our movement to be open to all. The reason we don't say "everyone" is because it is not true, there are a very small number of self-interested billionaires who are against us, but also because it is nice to identify with, and be part of a group. So, we might say:

"No matter what our background, most of us want a fairer world and a greener energy system"

2. Highlight the problem but give a clear solution and don't overdo threat

Phrases like this are very common in our communications.

"These figures paint a grim picture of worsening climate breakdown"

We should never shy away from the problem we face; it is just the way it is presented that matters.

When we set out the problem, it must have a clear cause and we must also provide solutions. It is also good to point to previous positive actions that have been taken to show future actions are possible.

"While figures paint a grim picture of climate breakdown caused by greedy fossil fuel companies, we know another future is possible. Scotland has been able to produce up to 100% of its electricity needs using green energy, so the UK as a whole needs to follow"

3. Use the facts to support your story, not the other way around

The facts don't change people minds, if they did then large-scale action on climate change would already be happening. It's the way we present the evidence that matters. We must tell compelling stories that connect with people and give them hope that change is possible (see [making our message heard](#) section). "1.5 degrees" might mean something to you but it does not have the same associations and relevance to your audience.

4. Avoid Crisis and War Framing

No more Crisis

While framing the issue as urgent or as a crisis might highlight its importance, it is unlikely to motivate people. It foregrounds the problem to such an extent it is **more likely to make people feel overwhelmed and fatalistic** – especially if the crisis framing is constantly repeated but is met with no obvious action or actions that are not proportionate.

It is also **less likely to make people want a fair transition** and instead go for whatever action is presented, as in a crisis action is needed whatever the cost.

No more War

Using the war metaphor immediately pitches one side against the other. We need to think who is the war with? Will we win by defeating them or do we need them to do something to help us? We can only use this if we are sure we want our opponents to stay as opponents.

Similarly to a crisis framing it is also **less likely to make people want a fair transition** and instead go for whatever action is presented, as in a war action is needed whatever the cost.

5. Treat economic arguments with extreme care

We often adopt economic arguments in a bid to be taken seriously but this may just be reinforcing an unhelpful idea of what serious change looks like. Three reasons an economic case might not be the correct approach, all to do with the unhelpful beliefs and narratives this helps to accidentally reinforce:

1. It reinforces the unhelpful narrative that **growth and the economy is the only thing that matters** – when both these things are driving climate change.
2. Reliance on an economic case can help to undermine the narrative that **there is a moral case for action on climate** as it implies that money and economics are more important.

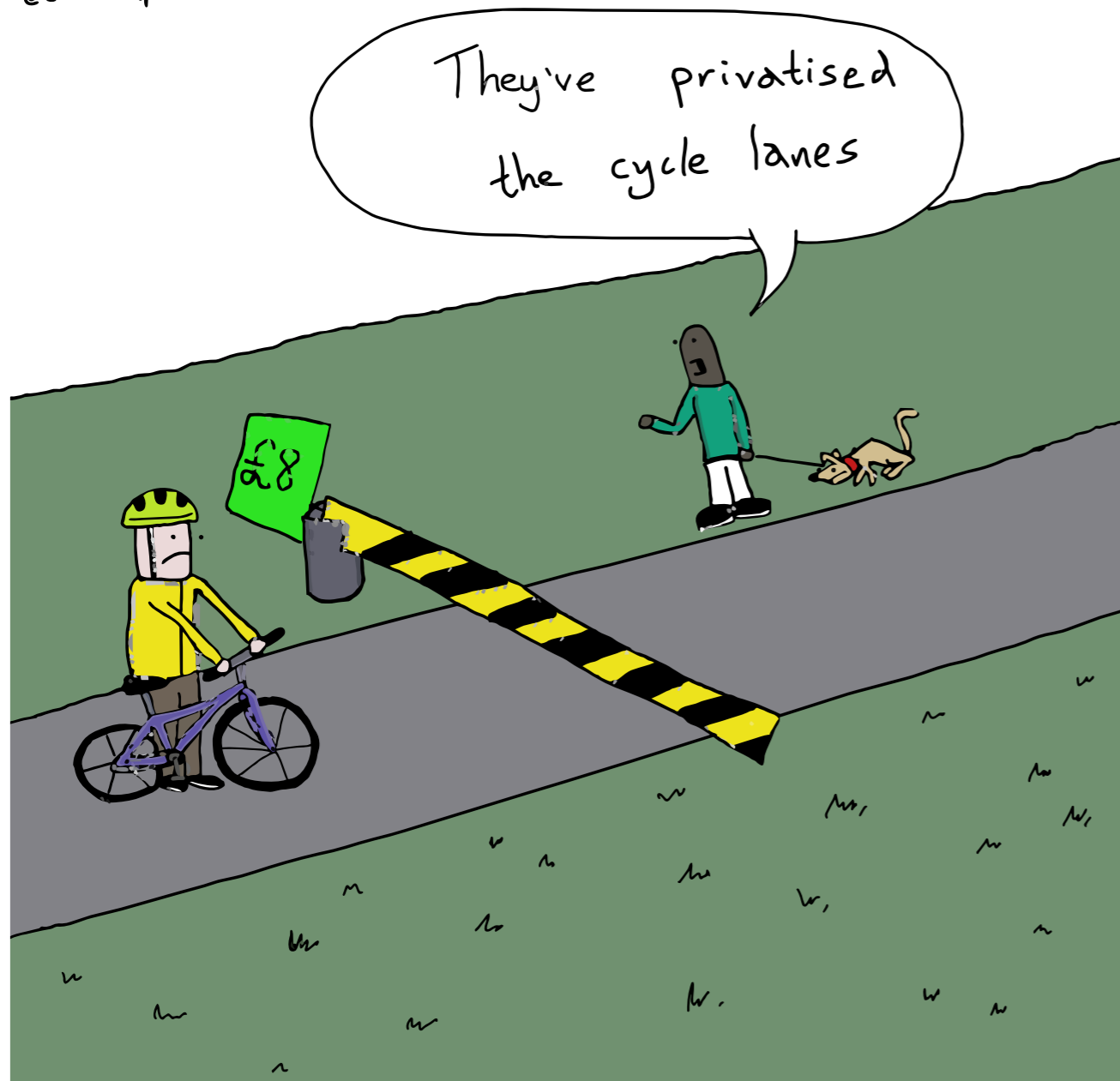
3. It implies whatever creates more jobs should be the policy, which also reinforces the wrongful narrative that **policy is made on a rational basis and that decision makers are simply responding to facts** rather than through the influence of billionaires and corporations. This also reinforces the idea that the current political system is functioning correctly.





Talking... **TRANSPORT**

@cartoonralph



1. Point out the role of big companies in destroying public transport services

The Sloth trap ([see previous section](#)) is a key issue when talking about transport.

We shouldn't talk about "unreliable timetables" and "cuts to services" without being very clear about the cause.

When we leave the cause and active role out of a communication, we make the problem look unsolvable and inevitable, like an unstoppable act of God.

*Across Scotland, communities are struggling with **bus services that are too infrequent, don't go where passengers need them to and feel unsafe or inaccessible.***

Introducing those profiting from the situation makes the communication better but needs to be done with care.

*"Privatisation has created a fragmented, fragile system where in most parts of Scotland private companies **are making millions from overpriced, unreliable services.**"*

Here even though a company is introduced as the cause it looks like they are simply capitalising from a system that already exists rather than they have had an active role in creating. Instead, we need to make their active role very clear:

*"Privatisation has created a fragmented, fragile system where in most parts of Scotland private companies are making millions **by price gouging customers and cutting back services that many people rely on.**"*

2. Prices are not "increasing" they are being "put up"

A second key Sloth trap in Transport communications is around pricing.

Like the timetable issue when we talk about fares passively – "train prices are going up again" – it seems inevitable and hard to stop. "**Bus and train companies are driving up fares for massive profits.**"

“Massive profits” indicates more emphatically they are taking out more than they are putting in.

3. Talk about people not passengers and cyclists

Whenever we give people a label, if we don't fit that label ourselves, we feel like those people are not like us and find it hard to empathise with them. Wherever possible we should take the opportunity to bring people into the picture.

Instead of “passengers” say “people taking the bus or train”, instead of saying “cyclists” say “people who cycle”.

4. Clearly divide private and public transport

Emissions from all transport are often clumped together as a single sector and this often leads us to talking about transport in general. Wherever possible we should separate the public from the private. Rather than talking about motorists or drivers it might be worth considering talking about “private transport”. This also allows you to talk about taxis and car use collectively.

5. Public services are for everyone

While it is good to highlight that some groups rely more on public transport, it is also good to highlight the benefits to all of us. We want to make sure that we highlight the benefits to the whole community as well as the most vulnerable.

So rather than saying something like *Buses provide a lifeline service for the most vulnerable.*

Instead say:

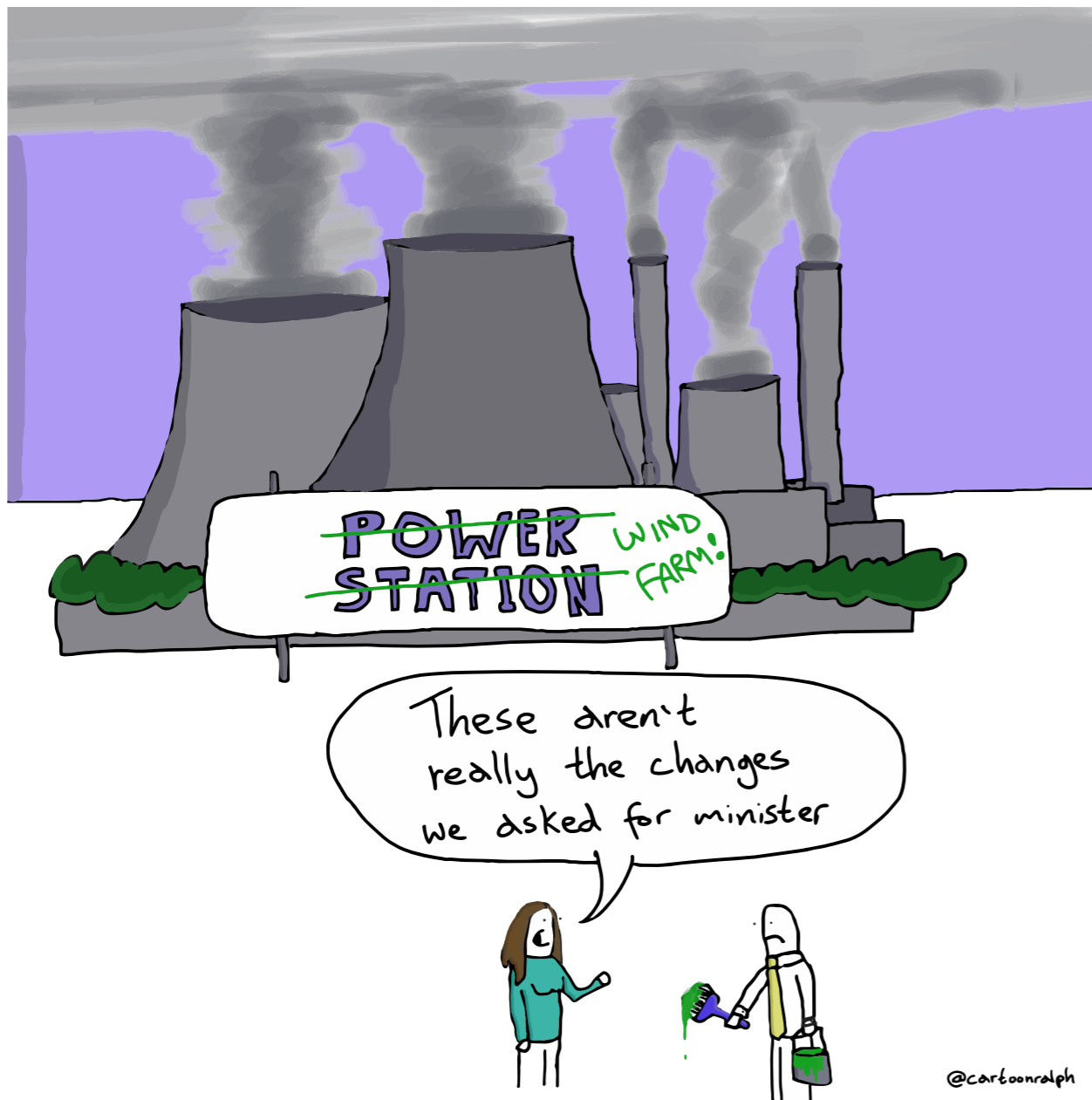
Buses provide a lifeline service for communities across Scotland from all sorts of backgrounds and ages, including the most vulnerable.





Talking...

NEW ENERGY SYSTEMS



1. Transition to a new term

While the concept of a Just Transition might mean more than just green jobs, it is not that clear to those who aren't in the know. Why use a term you need to constantly explain? ([see the rat trap](#)) Its vagueness allows fossil fuel companies to demand to keep on drilling in the name of a "just transition!" Think clearly about what aspects your audience need to know about and choose something that focuses on that.

"we need to create reliable, unionised jobs in renewables as we move away from oil and gas industries"

"the shift away from oil and gas is an opportunity to create and provide energy that is more affordable and run to benefit the public"

2. Leave policy specifics out of public messages

Think carefully about what the audience need to know and why. What can they reasonably be expected to take in from a single communication and what do you want them to do because of reading it? Give people opportunities to find out more if they want to but keep things as simple as possible.

Whenever possible, check the communication with someone outside your circle to make sure it is clear and understandable.

3. Be careful when using the term jobs

People have strong positive associations with jobs, they are always at the front of the political agenda, so it is hard for people to distinguish between good and bad jobs as the word job has many positive associations (especially in media and politics). Say job and the phrase "you are lucky to have a job" springs to mind. So, think about how we are using the term, if we are being critical maybe a term like "employment" might be more useful. If we are talking about new opportunities, then "jobs" might be appropriate.



Furthermore, getting into a discussion about employment is likely to frame the debate in economic terms and is likely to overshadow the moral case for climate action (as seen in the [climate section](#)).

4. Be clear about what the goal is

Not only is the term “*Just Transition*” confusing, what it describes is unclear and seems to vary depending on who says it. While it may be complex, the important part is clearly setting out what it is the public need to know.

5. Use an alternative for net zero

The opposition has made a concerted effort to contaminate the term Net Zero. Giving it such negative associations that it is toxic. Its true meaning and its benefits were never really understood by the public, this was partly why it was easier to make toxic. As the term is both hard to understand and contaminated with unhelpful negative associations it is better to avoid completely.



Talking...

WARMER HOMES



@cartoonralph



WARMER HOMES

COMMUNICATING
A BETTER FUTURE

1. It's about people

It's not just about the inefficient housing, it is about the impacts on the people who live there.

It's not about "fuel poverty", it is about "people who can't afford to heat their homes".

Don't say "vulnerable tenants", say "people forced into renting expensive and draughty homes".

2. Talk about waste not efficiency

Most people don't talk about energy efficiency; they talk about their homes being cold or draughty.

People also see waste as a bad thing, homes, new or old should not be wasting energy.

Don't talk about efficiency or insulation, talk about avoiding energy waste or stopping leaks or draughts.

3. Highlight who is profiting

Put energy companies, fossil fuel companies and house builders at the centre of the picture (another example of the [Sloth trap](#)).

Don't Say: Soaring energy bills / energy crisis / cost of living crisis

Energy bills are not rising on their own, it is due to the greed of energy companies and an outdated pricing system based on fossil fuels that the government could change.

Big house building companies have pressured government to keep housing standards as low as possible, letting them build new homes that waste energy.

4. "Homes" not "housing"

Not only is it more emotive to say "home" it is also how most people talk about where they live.



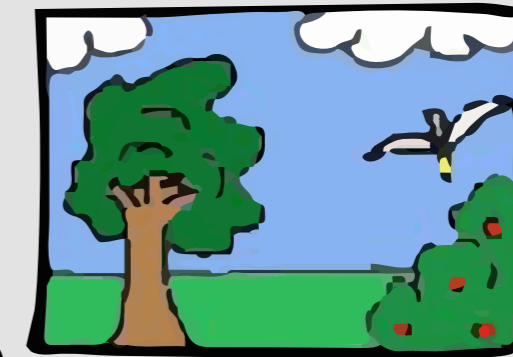
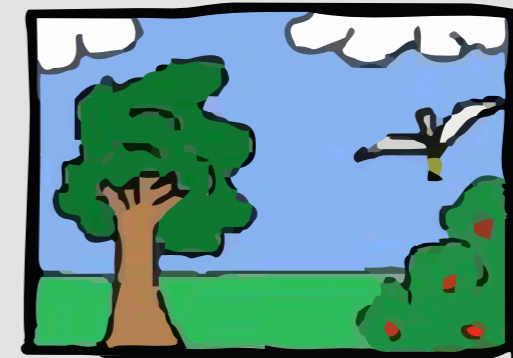
5. Talk up the importance and fairness of good homes for all

Most people believe that everyone has a right to live in a warm, comfortable home. We should talk about this both in terms of fairness and necessity in a functioning society.



IMAGE USE

Wow, your new HDTV is amazing!



It's a window

Image use

Images are as important as words. They can convey concepts in a way that writing can't, but we need to think through the implications of the images we use in the same way we do with other communications.

General Tips:

- Use photos representing the communities you are working with – make your campaigns look open and diverse.
- Always ask, what does this image add?
- Don't overdo threat as this can drive fatalism – especially with climate disaster imagery. If you are highlighting a problem, ask why? What are you asking from the audience? And how could you represent the solution visually?

Before selecting an image, ask:

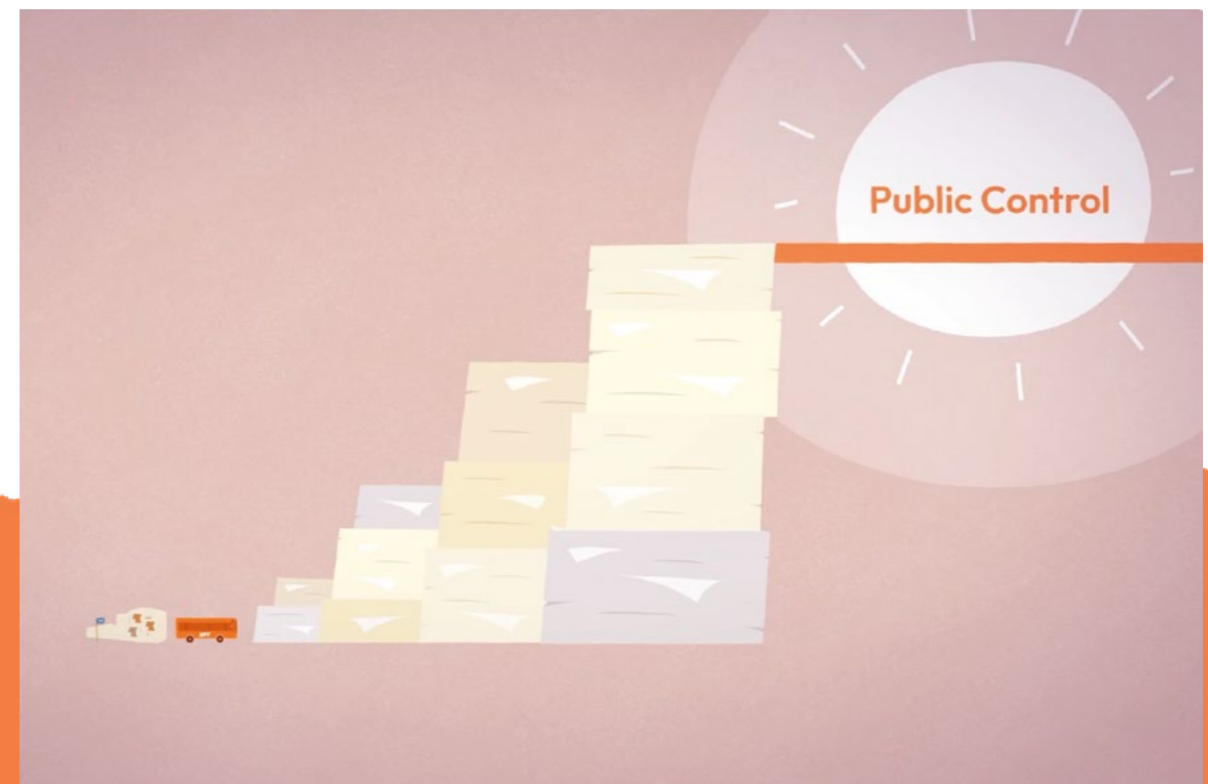
- How does the image reinforce the message?
- Does it provide a metaphor for how change happens? Is it helpful?
- Without the text, what does the image bring to mind?

Don't just rely on photos

- Sometimes it is very hard to make a photo fit the topic you are communicating. Sometimes illustrations are more powerful as they can convey visuals that are impossible for a photo.
- Steer clear from using the same graphic or illustration repeatedly as this makes everything look the same and reduces impact. This is often the case when policy or law is being communicated as it is hard to find images that work.
- When nothing seems to fit at least use icons (there are many copyright free resources online) rather than no imagery at all

A nice example of visually representing the bureaucracy stopping bus renationalisation in Scotland as used by the Better Buses for Strathclyde campaign.

Image from [Why are we still waiting for Better Buses?](#) campaign by Better Buses for Strathclyde (Illustration/animation by Sooz Reilly)



~~Responding to the far right~~

MAKING OUR MESSAGE HEARD



The previous 20 years...



Responding to the far right

It is clear we need to respond to the rise of the Far Right. But framing the challenge in this way is unhelpful, too often the Left have been on the back foot attempting to respond to the opposition, but the strongest response is to get on the front foot and tell our own story. The challenge is not how we respond to our opponents but instead how do we get our story heard.

Set the Agenda

We need to set the agenda wherever possible, to do this we have to get our story straight and increase our reach.

1. Set out your story:

To tell our story well we need to establish the building blocks. [ASO communications](#) set out a good template, the following is an adapted version of this approach.

- Start with Values
- Problem
- Solution

› Start with Values

Start by reminding people that most people care about people and the planet.



Make the “we” as broad as possible, but not **EVERYONE** because that is not the case. Example: *no matter who you are or where you come from most of us care our planet and the people living on it.*

› Set out the problem and the cause

A problem with a CLEAR CAUSE and SOMEONE RESPONSIBLE for that problem.



[See the Sloth trap](#) and [Chameleon traps](#)

Example: Get as active as possible – don’t say: *global temperatures have risen, instead say fossil fuel companies are driving climate change.*

› **Give a solution with examples of action**

Balance the problem with a clear and proportionate solution and point to previous successes to make future ones look more likely.



Example: *We need real action on climate, the renewables programme in Scotland has shown that powering a greener future is possible.*

2. Motivate – your base

Too often we focus on our opposition and their message rather concentrating on our base.

Even when responding to our opponents, our messages to our base must be the focus.

› **Who is our base?**

Firstly, our base is not “US”, it is not campaigners and activists – instead we are looking at the portion of the population that is already sympathetic to what we are trying to achieve. They want action on climate change but don’t necessarily understand what a “just transition” is. So much of the jargon creeps into our work as we assume that we are part of our base ([see RAT trap](#)).



The theory is if we have a message that motivates our base, it will also activate the large group in the moveable middle closest to them. Our message needs to speak to our base not our opponents.

Use values that motivate and inspire – like care for the environment, collective action and being able to choose your own goals.

Use the recommendations set out in the poster on the first page to connect with your base.

- Make it clear who is responsible for the problem
- Use terms that make the harm clear
- Drop the jargon
- Stick to your own message
- Motivate with positive values

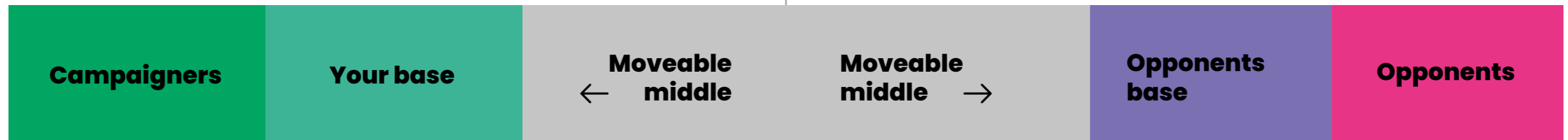


› **Make your voice louder**

Coordinate with others, make your voice louder than just your group or organisation:

- Connect with allies, strengthen existing relationships and ensure you are communicating complimentary things even if they aren’t identical.
- Make new connections with those who care about your issue but are outside your usual circle – Find groups or people in the affected communities that are taking action.
- Think about messengers who are already well trusted or connecting with people you want to reach.

Think about the platforms and channels you use to better control your message and reach people where they are.



The closer to your base

the more aligned they are

Understanding when to respond

There may be instances where we feel we need to respond to the communications of our opponents, when a false narrative is getting traction or a group is being unfairly scapegoated.

Responding to opponents

1. Ignore or minimise the opponents' messages
2. Don't repeat
3. Pivot – to the real issue and spotlight those responsible

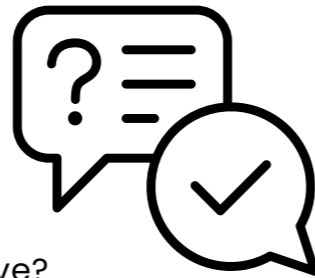
1. Ignore or minimise the opponents' messages

When we see misinformation or hateful speech our first instinct is often to respond and refute it. However, when we do this, we can accidentally amplify the message.

This is sometimes easier to say than do.

› **Should we respond?**

- How far has the communication spread – who has seen it? Who is sharing it? It is reaching beyond their base?
- Why is a response needed – what will it achieve? Are we sure we won't accidentally give it oxygen?
- Are we the right people to respond – who else might respond, are they better placed to do so?
- Ask what we can realistically add – what is the best and worst possible outcomes of responding? How likely are these scenarios?
- What is this taking time away from?



2. Don't repeat

If you feel that you have no choice but to respond, then make sure you do not PARROT the opposition (see [Parrot Section](#)). Make sure you do not repeat the disinformation or unhelpful message of your opponent even when refuting it.

3. Pivot – to the real issue and spotlight those responsible

Make the issue what you want to talk about.



Too often we can get bogged down in the detail as we know the opposition is not reflecting the reality of the situation. A prime example of this and an issue to be avoided wherever possible is "Energy Security". It is almost never used as an honest argument, new oil drilling in the UK will be sold on the global market, so does little to benefit energy prices here. However, this takes considerable explanation and gets us bogged down in a discussion where we are in a position of nuance and they can say something simple and clear (but incorrect). In these instances we need to pivot to our key point.

When they say energy security, we say – energy security is only an issue because we have failed to invest enough in clean renewable energy, by increasing investment in green energy we can meet our own energy needs.

When they attack people migrating, they are trying to distract us from the real problem, billionaires cheating us out of tax money and undermining our schools and hospitals.



Outro

Improving your communications takes time and trying to apply everything in this guide at once won't be possible. Choose something that makes sense and works for you and start from there.

Building a movement to win big changes takes patience and thoughtful communication, as we bring more people into the cause and demonstrate that we care about the same things.

Putting into practice

1. Find a sounding board

Find some people outside your group, that have non-expert knowledge on the subject. Test your communications on them, never tell them the intention of the communication and keep context and background to a minimum. Only then will you get truly useful feedback on what you have created.

Don't say "what I have been trying to do is XYZ", do say "you might get the following as a leaflet handed to you on the street".

2. Build it into your meetings

Have a section on framing and communications in your meetings even if it's only 5 or 10 minutes, because bringing the focus to your words and phrasing will help.

3. Geek out with a buddy

Find someone as enthused about this stuff as you are, it will help you get more out of it. Together you can get into specifics, discuss alternatives and build skills together.





www.foe.scot
www.framing-matters.co.uk