

Enabling Community Leaders to Communicate About Climate Change

Case Study

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Engage
Enthuse
Educate
Empower



The challenge

Climate change affects all of us and is increasingly recognised as having an impact on day-to-day activities at a regional and local level.

Whilst the topic is more high profile in the media than it was 10 years ago, there remains considerable misinformation and actions are often not at the forefront of people's minds on a day-to-day basis. People who approach the

Royal Meteorological Society (RMets) for help with communicating about climate change or leading action often cite a lack of perceived expertise or confidence.



Why we took on the challenge

As the leading independent expert in weather and climate, the goal of RMetS is to raise awareness of climate change, how it affects the weather we experience and the impact it has on our daily lives. We have been training organisations and professionals on climate change for many years, including broadcast meteorologists, journalists and news editors, and communication professionals. This training usually includes three modules – climate science, policy and actions and climate communication – and is designed to give communicators the knowledge and confidence to talk to audiences about climate change, helping to tackle misinformation.

Behavioural change theory suggests that the actions of those closest to us are a key factor in producing change. An approach with elements of upstream (i.e. guidance, legislation, government and organisation imperatives) and downstream (individual and collective grass-roots action) measures is also more likely to be effective in producing behaviour change¹ at scale. Community groups are where upstream and downstream

elements can combine, acting as or providing access to trusted sources of information for local communities². Equipping community leaders to talk about climate change and taking action is therefore key to improving climate literacy across the UK.

At RMetS, we knew we would need to adapt our training for this new purpose. A reduction in content was the most obvious change due to different lengths of session, but we also needed to heed our own instructions to make the training relevant to our new audience. We conducted focus groups to explore which content was most likely to be relevant and helpful. As a result, we realised we also needed to take a completely different approach to packaging that content, namely focusing on high impact weather events that feel immediately relevant to people across the UK and that we know are made more likely by climate change (extreme heat events, sea-level rise and intense rainfall).

1. Choices for climate action: A review of the multiple roles individuals play, Sam Hampton and Lorraine Whitmarsh (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.oneear.2023.08.006>

2. <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/blog-posts/how-community-leaders-restore-social-trust-key-takeaways-from-the-leaders-of-weave-the-social-fabric-project/>



What we did

We set out to reach 140 UK community leaders – these being defined as individuals who represent and speak for their community (e.g. Scout/Guide leaders, faith leaders, leaders of community groups/volunteering organisations and teachers). To allocate spaces, all those who registered interest in the training were asked to provide the name of their community group, their role within the community group and the number of people within the community group. Following focus group feedback, the training sessions were initially structured by UK region (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), but this attracted a limited number of registrations and so, after delivering the first session, we changed all future sessions to having a whole UK focus and saw sign-ups increase. By the end of the project, we had delivered six virtual training sessions (see Table 1) on communicating climate change to 116 UK community leaders. All attendees received a copy of the training slides, as well as our ‘Climate Change FAQs’ digital resource.

Session	Attendees
11 October (England)	9
13 October (All regions)	9
16 November (All regions)	17
8 December (All regions)	26
11 January (All regions)	29
26 January (All regions)	26
Total attendees	116

Table 1: Attendees on our community leaders sessions

It is worth highlighting that over 220 individuals registered interest in our training, of which at least one third did not identify as a community leader or failed to respond to subsequent communications requesting additional registration information. This demonstrates the appetite that exists for such training on communicating climate change amongst other audiences in the UK.

What we achieved –

Effectiveness in equipping community leaders

We asked our participants to complete evaluation surveys one month and six months after their session. The one-month survey asked about the session itself and how they had already used or planned to use the session. The six-month survey looked at “stickiness” of learning but focused more on behaviour change and impact of the sessions on the participants and on their organisations and activities. Our response rate was 44% for the one-month survey and 51% for the six-month survey (see Table 2) which was higher than we might have expected from previous experience. We are particularly proud that the response rate was sustained between one and six-months post session.

Session	Number of responses	
	1 month survey	6 month survey
11 October (England)	7	7
13 October (All regions)	6	4
16 November (All regions)	7	9
8 December (All regions)	13	13
11 January (All regions)	14	16
26 January (All regions)	4	10
Total responses	51	59

Table 2: Survey response rates by session

At one month

100% of respondents said that they had learnt something new from the training.

35% of survey respondents said they were already using the learnings from their training session,

whilst 61% were planning to use the learnings in the future.

Over 90% rated the relevance of topics covered as excellent or good, whilst over 85% rated the balance of information similarly.

One month survey quotes included:

“ ‘I have shared the learning with other members of staff within our organisation and have applied for a funding bid focusing on gardening for climate change and raising awareness of impacts of climate change with our local community.’

“ ‘I included some elements in an education workshop, which helped to make me feel confident in showing real impacts of climate change at a UK level.’

“ ‘I have felt less anxious about talking to people about climate change.’

“ ‘We are hosting a Queer Climate Justice event in Edinburgh in February, an inspiring day of workshops, talks and discussions exploring the intersection of queer identities and the impact of climate change.’

At six months

Utilisation of information or ideas

81% of the survey respondents have used information or ideas from the session in the six months since they attended.

52% have used information from across all parts of the session, with another 28% using either climate science or communication information.

35% of respondents have used their learning in holding informal conversations about climate change, and another 35% have used it to aid design or delivery of lessons or sessions about climate change (see Figure 1). 20% of respondents reported an increase in individual or collective activism, ranging from making different lifestyle choices or sharing climate change information on social media, to attending protests and rallies or joining volunteer groups. Audiences reached by our participants include young people and children, LGBTQ+ communities, schools and teachers, climate action groups, religion-based professionals, the Women’s Institute and Parish and County Councils.

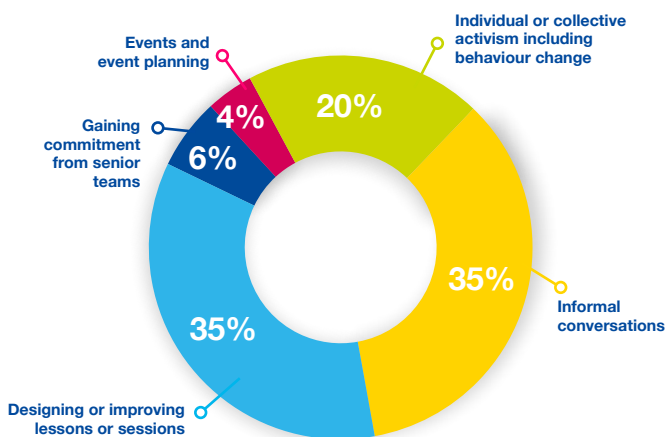


Figure 1: Ways in which learning and information from the session has been used in the six months since the session (thematic analysis of free text responses).

Impact

65% of survey respondents assessed the impact of their increased expertise/confidence/awareness on the groups that they work with as “noticeable” or “significant” (see Figure 2). Where impact had so far been more limited, this was generally due to a lack of time or a lack of opportunity in their role, and occasionally lack of engagement from the group in question.

How would you describe the impact this has had on your community group or on the group’s activities so far?

Answered: 48 Skipped: 11

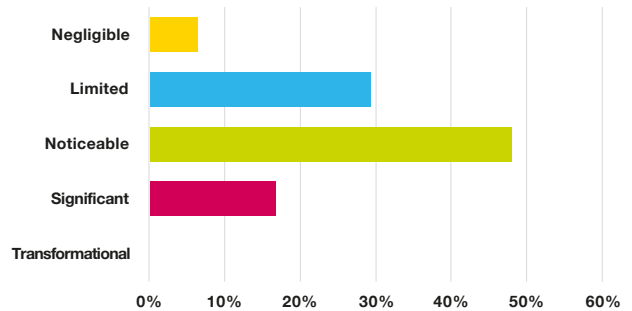


Figure 2: Participants’ assessment of the impact of their actions following attending our session on the community group or community in which they operate.

Examples of impact include:

“We had 700 people through our doors at an engagement event, held on the back of a significant regular art focused community event (our session suggested combining with events held by different groups). 80 people signed up to our local environmental group and work from the event has gone into a local museum.”

“Students are beginning to buy in to the greater issues associated with climate change and becoming more considered about the way media report the issue.”

“The group is considerably more active and running many more carbon reduction events.”

“It inspired a new piece of drama that young people used to educate their peers.”

“The Board are much more aware of environmental issues and the need to lead on addressing them to our members.”

There is also evidence of emerging leadership from some of the session participants:

“I have assumed a leadership role as a ward organiser for the Scottish Greens and organise/advertise Green events engaging the local population.”

“I was able to make a significant contribution to a discussion about class and climate action.”

“My Board of Directors has committed to producing an environmental strategy and to developing training in environmental issues for our members.”

“As a library service we feel better informed and more confident to run sessions about the climate.”

“I’m the climate change lead at the local Women’s Institute but climate change does not seem to be a priority for the group. I have therefore stepped down and joined the local Council group of volunteers to seek green space and ways of conserving it at present.”

“We are planning a BSA (British Science Association) funded project this year around the effect of climate change/emergency and we have used the information to inform our project planning.”

The impact of the sessions is also going beyond the participant’s closest community:

“I’ve met with ZeroCarbon Guildford and as a result Surrey County Council has produced a climate change toolkit for our Parish to help inform decision making. I am discussing climate change with other Parish Councils in our area.”

“I knitted a climate stripes scarf for myself as a discussion starter. I also knitted a scarf each for two Church of England Bishops which they wore to The Big One rally in London in April - lots of comments and attention received as a result.”

Information and idea “stickiness”

The topics and ideas most frequently “sticking” in participants memories were:

“small actions can have a big impact”

“tips on how to have conversations about climate change”

“most impactful actions”

“significant rainfall and its impacts”

“useful graphics and images”

“analogies for explaining the difference between weather and climate”



What we learned and what we would do differently

Balance of content

There was a mix of views on which parts (science, actions, communication) of the content people found most helpful. However, on balance, people would have liked more practical examples about engaging people in conversation. Therefore, we would likely condense the science aspects and provide more examples. Despite the focus groups emphasising their desire for highly localised information and contextual sessions, we found sign-up for the regional sessions was lower than for a “UK-wide” focus. In the future we would focus all sessions on all regions of the UK.

We would also improve external communications on the level of experience expected to attend the course (none/basic) as we had a few attendees who were highly skilled and had different expectations.

Style of session / level of interaction

In some of the sessions, the chat was very active, and people had a lot of useful experience to share. Several participants felt they would have liked

more opportunity to find out about each other and discuss ideas. We would love to have a more interactive session, however this needs to be balanced with the length of time we are able to ask people to commit. If we ran this again we would do some or all of:

- Reduce the number of spaces per session and increase the total number of training sessions to allow for more discussion amongst attendees.
- Add more interactive elements but keep the session 90-minutes long by condensing the science.
- Run a follow up discussion session where attendees can share learnings and experiences of engaging their communities on climate change.

Many of the sessions with the best engagement were run in the evenings (as people attending were associated with volunteer roles). As presenters, we recognised that we needed to protect our energy levels during the day in order to be able to commit to the evening training session – this needs to be considered when planning future sessions.

Key points for delivering climate change communication training to community leaders

- The “train the trainer” approach is an effective way to expand the number of people feeling competent and confident in discussing climate change in their communities. This included some participants who felt able to take on a more of a leadership role as a result.
- This type of approach can result in actions and behaviour change, and influence in and beyond the participants’ immediate communities.
- Include a co-design/co-creation element with representatives of potential attendees to ensure the focus will engage specific audiences and avoid making assumptions about interest and relevance.
- Be very clear about who should attend in terms of the roles they might hold or groups they might be working with, and about the expected level of expertise/experience in climate change (low/none).
- If planning to conduct evaluation surveys, be sure to clearly outline the surveys in all communications and emphasise the importance of collecting every individual’s perspective and the role that plays in the training (particularly if running a follow-up discussion).
- Plan for small cohorts (10-15 maximum) to allow discussion and peer learning and to build a community.
- Focus on a few examples of the impact of climate change on a variety of communities and use these to deliver basic science information rather than leading with the science.
- Opt for virtual training sessions to make training widely accessible.
- Ideally have at least two presenters for a 90-minute session, and someone to monitor and answer questions in the chat channel.
- Understand the community group/s and where and how they access information to ensure effective promotion of training sessions to the target audience. Be prepared to utilise new communication channels and leverage relationships with partners if engagement with this audience is new.