

The British Academy

Language and narrative that resonate and mobilise

An evidence paper for the
British Academy's Where
We Live Next programme

Introduction

This paper provides supporting evidence for **language**, which was identified as important to a place-sensitive approach in the accompanying policy report, '[A place-sensitive approach to environmental sustainability](#)'.

Here we delve into and provide context on language across four main points, which demonstrate that language is crucial for understanding and addressing issues of environmental sustainability, shaping how we perceive, discuss and act upon this challenge. For readers interested in the broader features of a place-sensitive approach, you can find further evidence on [Knowledge](#), [Participation](#) and [Partnerships](#) in our [evidence hub](#).

Regional identities, cultural heritage and histories

When people talk about environmental challenges, this is likely informed by their local context and own experiences. There is value in harnessing regional stories in formulating policy discourse that connects to people's hearts as much as their minds.

In the programme's regional workshops, participants linked their vision of a sustainable future to their local identity and pride in place. For example, stakeholders used phrases such as having a 'northern attitude', an 'entrepreneurial spirit' or 'sense of humour' to illustrate what, for them, were key character traits of their communities, demonstrating their collective spirit, agency and capacity for sustainability innovation.

The ethnic and cultural diversity of communities also influences how issues are understood and articulated. A case study of the Somali community in Manchester illustrated how residents were engaging in pro-environmental practices (e.g., conserving water and energy, minimising food waste and buying products with minimal packaging), without being familiar with or understanding the word 'sustainability', which has no direct translation in Somali.¹ The activities normally regarded as promoting 'sustainability' were discussed using language associated with health and responsibility in the context of Islamic beliefs. This suggests the need for more co-designed messaging with native speakers of a diversity of languages, if sustainability is to be more widely understood and mobilised.

Policymakers may be missing opportunities to align environmental sustainability policy discourse with one that connects with people's place-based identities and cultural heritage. There is value in identifying place-based, cultural and religious networks and organisations to help break down barriers to communication. This can help tailor messages, develop narratives and connect ideas in ways to ensure policy resonance with a diversity of people and places.

Framings for people and places

There are opportunities for policymakers to think about how issues are framed, helping to ground complex and often abstract policy challenges, making them more tangible and relatable for people.

Attempts are already being made to highlight the multiple benefits that arise from environmental interventions. This is particularly prevalent in the energy policy domain, where much of the discourse is technical and uninspiring, but people are more easily engaged in relation to topics such as rising energy bills, the cost-of-living and discourse on their health and well-being.^{2,3}

The importance of framing was similarly raised in our own regional engagement workshops. Terms such as 'decarbonisation' or 'Net Zero' were often discussed in tandem with a need for 'justice' and 'fairness'. Discussions about housing policy incorporate the desire for homes that are 'warm', 'affordable' and

¹ MacGregor, S., Walker, C., Katz-Gerro, T., Abdisamad, S. & Abdulrahman, S. (2019), [Challenging Assumptions. Enabling Inclusivity: A report on research about environmental sustainability with Somali residents of Moss Side](#), The University of Manchester Sustainable Consumption Institute.

² Poortinga W., Whitmarsh L., Steentjes K., Gray E., Thompson S. & Brisley R. (2023), [Factors and framing effects in support for net zero policies in the United Kingdom](#), *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14:1287188.

³ Verfuerth, C. Demski, C. & Whitmarsh, L. (2024), [People at the Heart of Climate Transformations. Key messages from five years of social science research on climate change](#), Centre for Climate Change and Social Transformations.

‘practical’, and a clear focus on ‘homes’ rather than ‘housing’. Broader research has reached similar conclusions: emphasising that ‘people do not talk about retrofitting their homes or “greening” them but talk about renovations and upgrades.’⁴ In relation to nature recovery space, local authorities are similarly adopting appropriate language when speaking with farmers and landowners. This includes deliberately not using the term ‘nature recovery’, which can alienate, but instead talking more broadly about how interventions like tree planting provide wider benefits to the community as well as the business.⁵

Re-framing policy discussions can help shift narratives, such that people integrate the vision into their own ambitions for change. This emerged as particularly important in relation to the ‘green jobs’ of the future. Reframing narratives can open the door to opportunities available to citizens, including career pathways in both technical and more generalist roles.

Policymakers could pay greater attention to how issues and policy interventions are framed, which will be particularly valuable when trying to appeal to people and places that are resistant to or ambivalent about change.

Clarity, consistency and accessible language

Policymakers often lack clarity and consistency of language in government communications and planning.

A case study commissioned by the British Academy ‘[Planning for Future Generations](#)’ analysed language and terminology used in local government planning documents, including local plans, core strategies, development management policies, waste and minerals plans, flood risk management strategies, neighbourhood plans and planning decisions across local authorities.⁶ Findings show that the terms ‘sustainability’ and ‘sustainable development’, although frequently mentioned, often lack a workable definition that clearly stipulates their scope and remit, resulting in reduced ability by local governments to implement informed action.

Analysis of these documents found that local authorities in urban areas currently adopt short time horizons, most accounting only for the next fifteen years, less than the span of a generation. It is important to consider embedding language in policy documents that does not just communicate short-term goals but also communicates the importance and value of delivering policies that serve the needs of generations to come.⁷

To avoid these inconsistencies in language trickling down to local contexts and thus in local planning documents, a more coherent national policy framework is needed to enable local authorities to give due consideration to the interests of future generations in their plans. National government can steer local planning authorities by either suggesting or mandating a longer time horizon or including an ‘anchor’ timeframe of a minimum of twenty-five years.

Greater clarity and accessibility of language are vital when it comes to schemes and initiatives to deliver net zero. An analysis of the Greater London Authority’s Warmer Homes Grant Programme, which is intended to fund and install energy efficiency measures within homes, found that eligible participants expressed issues with clear, accessible information and use of technical language. This limited the ability of participants to make decisions about what could or should be installed in their homes.⁸ Frustrations about language and difficulty in understanding created negative perceptions that damaged the scheme’s reputation, risking lowering trust and participation in the scheme itself.

Policymakers should focus on developing a set of consistent messages, and clear information on terminologies (e.g., glossaries) that can be adopted by national, regional and local government. This can prove valuable in providing greater public clarity and building trust in policy agendas, helping to reduce confusion, contradictions or misunderstandings.

⁴ UCL Policy Lab & Joseph Roundtree Foundation (2024), [Ordinary Hope: A mission to Rebuild](#), p. 52; Henwood, K., Pidgeon, N., Shirani, F., O’Sullivan, K. & Hale, R. (2023), [Living Well in Low Carbon Homes Project Report](#), University of Cardiff.

⁵ Treloar, G., Reed, J., Wills, J., Willett, J., Bateman, I. & Osborne, J. (2025), [Nature Recovery and Regional Development: A summary report for Britain’s Leading Edge](#), The University of Exeter.

⁶ Lifshitz, Y. (2024), [Planning for Future Generations](#), A case study report for The British Academy.

⁷ Lifshitz, Y. (2024), [Planning for Future Generations](#), A case study report for The British Academy.

⁸ Betteridge, K., Faria-Calafate, F. & Schlee-Johnson, S. (2024), [Warmer Homes: How can grant subsidy schemes improve engagement with participants](#), A case study for The British Academy.

Hopeful and compelling storytelling

Language is critical to providing a coherent and appealing vision of a more sustainable future for both people and planet. However, policy discourse can feel technocratic with an instrumentalist approach, often focused on behaviour change. This approach has helped inform the public about sustainability issues, but it has proven less successful in promoting the broader ethical, social and behavioural shifts that need to take place.

Creative and imaginative acts within social and cultural spaces can identify and engage with the language and narratives that resonate in that place.⁹ Fiction, theatre and other imaginative practices grounded in the arts and humanities play a critical role in thinking through how our relationships with the environment are represented and understood, harnessing the imagination to consider metaphorical, ethical and material responses to sustainable futures.¹⁰

Policymakers should consider adopting hopeful language and optimistic narratives that showcase more positive visions, with the aim of providing people with a greater sense of agency and clarity about the different routes towards achieving a sustainable future. Policymakers can further deploy language and narratives that promote both national and local leadership, ensuring that people are understood as agents of change.

⁹ Wills, A. (2022), 'Shifting the narrative: exploring the role of arts interventions in supporting communities in working across sectors to achieve place-based climate action', British Academy: Summary of research findings.

¹⁰ Yusoff, K. & Gabrys, J. (2011), *Climate Change and the Imagination*, Royal Geographical Society.

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