# Government Communication about Climate Change: Survey Results

The Sustainable Development Commission is currently developing recommendations on government communications on climate change. As part of this process it recently conducted an on-line survey of members of the Sustainable Development Commission Panel about their experience of and views on government communications in this area. This is a report of the feedback from that survey.

## What is the Sustainable Development Commission Panel?

The Panel is made up of approximately 675 people who are experienced in fields vital for a more sustainable society. A breakdown of members' expertise is shown in Chart 1 below.

Chart 1: Profile of Panel
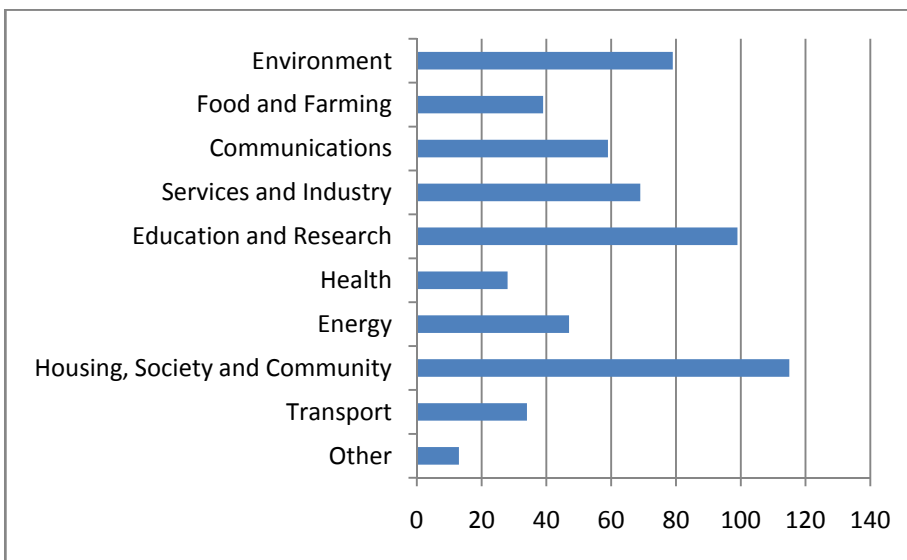
A large proportion of Panel members are from the public sector (42%) though significant minorities also come from the private (29%) and third sector (29%) as shown in Chart 2.

Chart 2: Panel members by sector

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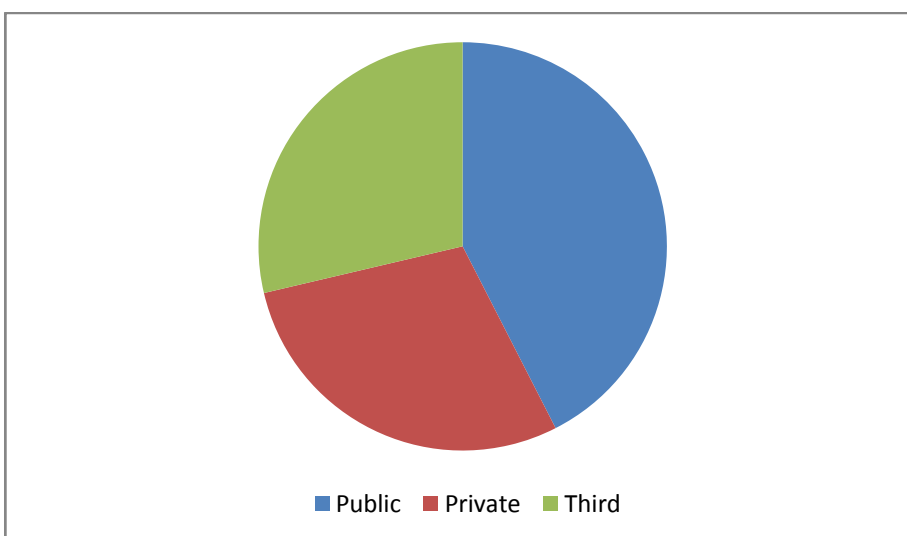
Survey details

Panel members were emailed on Friday 20th March 2009 and invited to complete the current survey by 30th March. 133 completed the survey giving a response rate of 20%. A summary of the results question by question is given below.

1. What do you think the government's message on climate change is? How would you summarise it? (132 responses)

Government's message is confusing or contradictory
One of the most common themes in responses was that the government's message was confusing or contradictory (25%).[1] Within this theme, two distinct points were made: first that the government's communications themselves lacked clarity (8%), and second that there are contradictions in policy, or that words and deeds do not appear to match (17%), resulting in a confusing or contradictory message.

Everyone needs to take action
Most respondents were able to describe a government message however. The largest group (27%) saw the message as mainly about the need for everyone to take action. For one sub-group (15%) the message is quite neutral as to whom is being addressed, or is explicitly that we must *all* take action.

For another sub-group (12%) the emphasis is very much on individuals' action, with a suggestion from some (8%) that the government's emphasis is on relatively small actions.

For a much smaller group (3%) the main impression was that the government was not calling for much action at all.

How important a problem is this?
A significant group (12%) of respondents' main impression was not that the message was contradictory but that it had a big 'but' in it: 'climate change is serious but...' The 'but' may be perceived to be there because the economy or other issues appear to be priorities (8%), because protecting existing lifestyles is seen to take precedence (2%), or because the government is seen to be deliberately delaying (2%).

A smaller group (7%) felt the government was saying that tackling climate change was a very serious problem, and 6% also felt the government was saying that major solutions were needed – in either global or national terms.

Is there a positive plan?
9% of respondents' main view of government's message was that it was positive in this respect. 5% thought the government's message was pri marily about specific targets, international action and long term strategy. 2% thought the government communicated the economic value of taking action and 2% thought the government communicated its desire to be a world leader in combating climate change.

By contrast 6% felt above all that no clear sense of a plan was communicated, even if some of them recognised that there were targets.

2. Would you say, on this basis, that tackling climate change is one of the government's top three priorities? (123 responses)

12.8% said yes and 87.2% said no.

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[1] Most respondents made one point but a few made two: there were 118 respondents to this question and 126 points. There was a similar pattern in the answers to other questions. The percentage is the proportion of respondents who raised that point.

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3. What do you feel *are* the government's top three priorities? (132 responses)

The economy featured overwhelmingly in respondents top three government priorities. Energy and climate change (including energy security) came mid table behind public services, getting re-elected and national security.

Chart 3: What do you feel are the government's top three priorities?
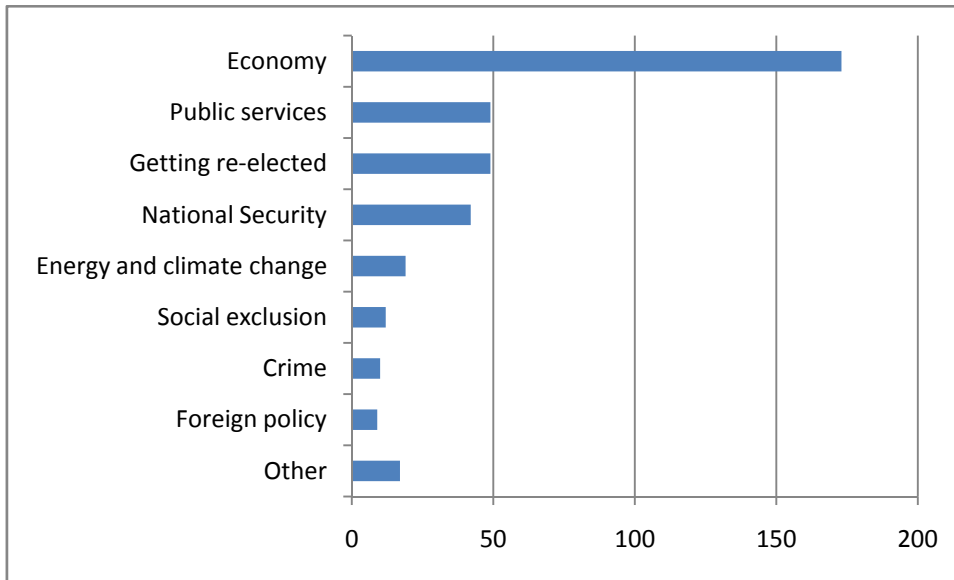
4. If you do not get the feeling climate change is a top three priority for the government, how would it have to describe the problem (as opposed to its solutions) to make you feel it was? (118 Responses)

Only a minority of respondents (49%) focused on how the government might describe the problem, the rest either saying they should declare it a priority or focusing on the solutions or descriptions of solutions that would make them feel it was a priority for government. We deal with those who did focus on description of the problem first.

A relatively small group (5%) thought government should be clearer about the nature of the problem to signal its seriousness. A similar sized group (6%) thought the government should also send very strong messages about the potential consequences of no action.

A larger group (13%) thought the problem should be related to people's lives and to other issues if they were to believe it was a top priority. 8% of respondents thought that the problem should be seen as leading us to a sustainable society and new paradigm, whether expressed in terms of a vision, or a new economic paradigm. 2% respondents just said more communication was needed.

Make clear it is a priority!
A further 12% of respondents say that the government should make clear it is a priority - and say or imply 'act accordingly' Many respondents (46%) thought that describing the problem as opposed to its solutions would not signal that it was a priority. The solutions were what mattered. In view of that some 6% felt a clear, strong description of the solutions was important.

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13% focused on the importance of an integrated and coherent policy programme, and embedding the priority in a wide range of policies across government. 9% did not have this specific focus, and simply referred to significant policy initiatives and gestures signalling changed priorities.

A further 21 respondents – 18% - said explicitly that the way the government described the problem was either adequate or was irrelevant to whether they felt the government took the issue seriously; what mattered was action.

5. Do you feel the government has a coherent and effective plan for tackling the problem? (131 responses)

6.3% said yes and 93.9% said no.

6. If you are unconvinced, what kind of short message from the government (as opposed to detailed policy statements) would make you more inclined to believe it has a coherent and effective plan (122 responses)

Not surprisingly a significant minority of respondents (25%) stated that government action was more important than government messages but most respondents did say what they thought the content of a message should be.

The largest single group (20%) suggested that people would be convinced by symbolic policy decisions such as green taxes or through halting policy decisions that contradict the move to a low carbon economy such as Kingsnorth and Heathrow (11%).

11% suggested emphasising the economic angle of the plan while 7% suggested a clear statement along the lines 'climate change is the most important issue we face and the government will do everything it needs to do to tackle it'. Similarly 7% emphasised the importance of clearly demonstrating the plan in a coherent and logical format such as 'we are doing x, y and z, this will achieve a, b and c, by year Q'.

Respondents also gave advice on the delivery of the message including emphasising the importance of using evidence (2%), approaching the public with greater honesty (2%), coordinating messages (3%), providing regular reminders of the scale of the problem (2%), and adopting a cross-party line (4%)

7. Do you feel government is consistent in the messages it sends? (130 responses)

The Panel were asked whether the government was consistent in its climate change messages; the vast majority (85%) felt that it wasn't. For most respondents the contradiction lay between the rhetoric of tackling climate change and the government's promotion of the high carbon economy such as coal and aviation and celebrating the fall in oil prices. Actions therefore appear to have an important impact on how the message is perceived.

8. Climate change is a global problem requiring global solutions. How does this affect the way you think the government should convey its plan? (125 responses)

The majority call for UK action first
A common thread brought up by 54% of the respondents was the importance of acting at home first. A large minority stated that the global context provided no excuse for inaction at home and that global changes started locally (20%). Others took a more international perspective seeing the global dimension as providing a real opportunity for the UK to take on a global leadership role (8%) and for setting an example to the rest of the world through its domestic policy (16%). Several also stated that in time that leadership role could convey additional benefits to the country (2%).

A minority see the importance of international agreement

25% of respondents saw the international community as being the starting point for any action, not least because of the UK's close integration within it (2%). Respondents stated that this could be through international agreements and obligations (2%), taking a more integrated approach to solutions through global 'plans' (10%) and engaging and lobbying key countries such as China and America (10%).

Government message

A number of respondents (18%) focused on the government's actual message. They emphasised the importance of highlighting the impact of climate change and placing that impact within a global context (7%) and linking government actions to those impacts (5%). A small minority voiced scepticism that the government had any plan at all (2%).

9. Some aspects of the policies needed could be unpopular. But what are the positive aspects of climate change policy as far as you are concerned? (127 responses)

Within the survey respondents highlighted a variety of (and usually multiple) positive aspects to climate change policy.

Short and medium term economic benefits

A large proportion of respondents stated the potential for short and medium term economic gains from climate change policy including job creation and new business opportunities (21%). This was closely allied to benefits gained from new cost savings and reductions in waste (20%) and lower fuel poverty (6%).

Long term changes to society

Respondents also saw tackling climate change as an opportunity to create a new society and economy. The positive outcomes associated with this included: improved quality of life (21%) improved health (15%), a greater sense of common purpose (15%) and citizenship (6%), a new localism (14%), a better environment overall (11%), improved security and resilience (10%), improved social equity (8%) and long term stability (2%). Underpinning these changes would be a need to re-think our values (9%) with a small minority even suggesting a no growth economy (2%).

Specific benefits

A smaller number of respondents mentioned a range of specific benefits, including more effective resource management (micro-generation and household energy independence -2%), a better built environment (2%), and tax reform (2%).

Respondents also saw climate change policy as resulting in our giving proper consideration to future generations (14%) and ensuring the long term survival of the species (5%).

Positive achievements

Outcomes aside, some respondents commented on some of the more positive aspects to date including the government's achievements so far (6%) such as the Climate Change Act and the growth and potential of renewables. Only two respondents stated that there were no positive gains to be made from climate change policy.

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10. Do you feel the government communicates these credibly? (125 responses)

When asked whether the government communicated these positive aspects effectively or not the vast majority (89.3%) said no. The reasons given by respondents for this lack of credibility included the government's message being fractured (11%), undermined by a lack of action (10%) and its fear of electoral defeat and media backlash (8%). That being said there were some positive comments with one respondent stating that there were 'quite good campaigns on TV' and another that 'Miliband makes it [positive aspects] clear in his speeches'.

11. Do you find the link between tackling climate change and getting out of the recession credible? (129 responses)

The majority (66%) felt there was a link though for varied reasons. 18% (of all respondents) described the link in similar terms to the 'Green New Deal' or 'Low Carbon Recovery', 6% agreed in principal that there was a link but stated that the devil would be in the detail with others (6%) going further, seeing the recession as an opportunity to fundamentally reshape the UK's economic model. A small minority (6%) saw the recession as having a positive impact by reducing consumption and therefore greenhouse gas emissions.

A medium sized minority (26%) found no link between tackling climate change and getting out of the recession and a further 10% demonstrate a mixed attitude, supporting elements of that sentiment.

12. What can government say to reinforce the link between tackling climate change and getting out of the recession? (122 responses)

The most common view (expressed by 20% of respondents) was that government should demonstrate the link through action rather than rhetoric. 4% stated that the government should publicise its existing actions more effectively.

19% felt the government could highlight the economic benefits of tackling climate change such as increased efficiency savings and new growth in low carbon sectors (19%). Another minority (16%) suggested a more radical approach: the government needed to state that the economy would not return to the 'business as usual' economic model which was said to have got the country into its current financial and ecological crisis. 3% recommended emphasising the cost of inaction.

Further points raised by respondents included the importance of honesty and using plain english when communicating with the public (4%) and having a coherent vision of what a sustainable life and economy might look like (3%).

13. In the end effective policy will require the support of people, as citizens and consumers. How do you feel government should appeal for that support (if at all)? (124 responses)

Respondents approached this question from a number of different angles including: suggesting methods on how to engage with the public (32%), specific messages that might appeal (40%) and using actions to demonstrate the commitment and intent of the government (18%).

On engaging with the public, 10% of respondents emphasised the importance of backing local initiatives that are making a difference on the ground, 8% the importance of advertising to raise awareness, 6% the importance of honesty, with the government clearly presenting the latest evidence on the problem and 5% the importance of humility, and of allowing the public to inform the solutions to give them a sense of ownership. 3% highlighted giving practical support to consumers wishing to change their lifestyles .

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On specific messages, some advocated a collectivist approach (24%), suggesting the emergence of a new set of community focused values (6%), or the importance of highlighting the negative impacts of inaction, especially on future generations (13%) or even communicating that the country was on a war footing (5%).

Those who saw the need for a more individualist message (16%) suggested stressing the economic and financial benefits of climate change policy such as energy savings (11%) and selling a compelling vision of a sustainable world that linked in with people's aspirations (5%).

Those who felt that government *action* was needed to demonstrate commitment and intent suggested that politicians (5%) and the government as a whole (4%) should set an example through their own estate, investment programme and expenses claims. They also stated that a cross party consensus on the most effective means of moving forward would give a strong message on how serious the problem was (3%). A number of respondents also stated that given the seriousness of the situation, the government should proceed with action regardless of whether the public was fully behind it at the time (5%).

Only 6% felt that they was no need to gain further public support, 3% because it already had the backing of the general public to make the changes necessary and 3% because they didn't feel it was the government's role.

14. Do you have any other thoughts on what is needed? (92 responses)

A number of respondents had further thoughts on what was needed. One of the more common themes was the need for leadership (mentioned by 9%). A selection of ad verbatim comments are included below:

> *Some guts.*

> *Leadership, vision, experiments in new ways of living. Cabinet ministers using planes less, using bicycles more. Telling citizens that fossil fuelled capitalism and its associated lifestyles are not sustainable and that there is a need for new economic thinking and new positive understandings of the good lives possible within a carbon constrained and climate changed world, i.e. that lives in a low-carbon economy can be as good if not better in significant respects that our current economic model.*

> *Leadership and commitment*

> *Climate change is so huge an issue that it needs the absolute support and commitment of government, industry, commerce and the general public. What is needed is a path that leads to action against climate change being commonplace and routine, not exceptional and laudable.*

> *Much more sense of urgency!*

> *A BIG campaign. Sustained. Humility from the government. It needs to listen. And not talk down to people.*

> *At this late stage only legislation will have a chance.*

> *Fresh conversations outside professional silos - more face to face engagement between all walks of life.*

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