

Hold This Space

Project evaluation

common
vision



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CARES

FORCE_{of}
NATURE

About Common Vision

Common Vision is an independent think tank working to change the narrative around our shared future. We use community listening, deliberative dialogue, and public imagination approaches to unite people around long-term intergenerational goals. Our mission is to inspire collaborative action and catalyse collective agency through positive ideas.

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1. Executive summary

Over the course of nine months between July 2021 and March 2022, Common Vision, Force of Nature, and Climate Cares worked with a team of young people and climate scientists, to co-design an engagement project which supports young people to identify and share their emotional response to climate change, imagine a better future, and understand the positive actions they can take to improve personal wellbeing and address the climate crisis. Environmental science and the experiences of scientists were woven throughout the engagement work.

Please note that the working name for the project was 'Our Stories, Our Systems'. In March 2022 this was rebranded to 'Hold This Space'.

The project aims to help young people address difficult feelings around the climate crisis by examining and challenging some of the negative narratives which permeate and influence public understanding of climate change; encouraging participants to draw links between emotions and how they shape individual actions; and sharing positive stories which make links between environmental science and wider structural and systemic shifts needed to address climate change.

The project worked towards two main outputs. First, the co-design and development of a **mobile website** which takes users through the three stages of a journey described below. Second, a **'five-day Community Challenge'** encompassing online engagement events and activities which took participants through this journey in an interactive format.

The three-step journey was co-produced with young people and climate scientists, using insights from behavioural science, psychology, and neuroscience:

- **Reflect** - users are guided to explore their personal feelings and understand what has influenced their emotions about climate change. On the website, this is done through dynamic content like listening to an audio file of someone else articulate their emotions, followed by interactive reflective exercises.

- **Imagine** – users are taken through a process of imagining the future and learning about the scientific developments and innovations that could make that future a reality.
- **Connect** - users are prompted to think of the ways that they already engage in climate action in the present day, and are encouraged to view their actions as part of a collective achievement.

In working towards the above main outputs, we conducted extensive engagement, research, co-design, and consultation work. This included desk research on narrative change and developing a prototype narrative framework. We also convened two co-design sessions with young people and scientists, and a regular advisory group made up of psychology, communications, and climate action experts. We supplemented this with a series of individual interviews with climate scientists and young people.

In summary, across the project we engaged:

- Almost 100 people were directly **engaged in developing the resource**, including 32 young people aged under 30, 31 advisory group members (several of whom were also aged under 30), and 21 climate scientists. They inputted through two co-design workshops, rolling feedback, and four advisory sessions.
- 342 people took part in the **five-day Stories for Hope Community Challenge**, an online journey exploring what drives different emotional responses to climate change, and the practical ways we can build hope about the future. 81% of participants who responded to our evaluation said taking part had made them more likely to take action to help the environment, and to reflect on their emotional responses to environmental issues. Over half said it had made them more likely to join a group or community around environmental issues.
- **The Hold This Space website** received over 600 visitors in the first three days of launch and has received significant interest and engagement from sector stakeholders with a range of funding, research, policy, engagement, and education remits.

- Our **communications and publicity campaign** reached tens of thousands of people. We have been directly in touch with over 700 relevant stakeholders, receiving various invites to speak about the project findings at conferences, high-level policy engagement, and keen interest from the youth sector.

This evaluation report details the success of this engagement, our organisations' learnings from the project, and insights we believe would be useful to others working to deepen public engagement with the climate crisis and environmental science. Highlights include:

- **Learnings for public engagement project design:** One of the strengths of the project was the diversity of its participants, and the different types of knowledge and expertise we brought to the table, including lived experience. Holding together these different stands of expertise – from climate research, to psychology, to youth engagement, to narrative design, to public engagement and policy – was challenging, but resulted in richer outputs than could have been envisaged at the start of the project.
- **Learnings for co-design:** The process of co-design can be employed on a sliding scale with many trade-offs. At the lighter-touch end of the scale, expectations amongst both the participants and the project team should be managed carefully around what is appropriate and useful for different expert, user or 'beneficiary' groups to consider and be involved in.
- **Learnings for engagement with young people:** Having a clear value proposition is important to get young people involved and retain their participation. Many young people have a strong desire to learn and listen, hear from others, not just share their own story. Young people engage online on a practical basis in a very different way to older people, for instance keeping cameras off, or preferring to share privately rather than on public channels.
- **Learning for scientists and science communicators:** Talking about emotion and feelings is an important route to engaging people. It humanises stories of research and directly counteracts the idea that climate science can be overly technical and only fear-inducing. By embracing a spectrum of emotions, climate researchers can engage with people on a personal level rather than perpetuating an 'expert-to-layperson' relationship. Moreover, talking about

research as a part of systemic change towards a better future is a powerful tool. This means putting research in the context of what sort of society could be achieved if the work is successful.

More widely, we believe the project has demonstrated the potential of using a 'minds and hearts' approach to engaging young people with climate change. We hope more practitioners take up this approach by:

- **Making the link between personal values and science:** Speaking from a position of personal values can help scientists build on the trust they hold amongst the population, reminding them that scientists are not just experts on climate science, but also individual people who care deeply about the future of our shared home.
- **Positioning science as part of the 'Great Turning' taking place:** Without downplaying the urgency and scale of the climate crisis, scientists should focus our attention on the positive steps that need to be taken - and in many places are already being taken - to lead to the regenerative future which we need in order to flourish. Use language related to health to help the public understand that although we have harmed the planet, we can also heal it.
- **Employing hope-based communications strategies:** Climate science communication to date has been successful in terms of raising the alarm about our heating planet. Now, the task at hand is to show how addressing climate change is possible, and how environmental harm can be prevented through tangible and proportionate solutions.

2. About the project team

Project partners

- **Common Vision** is an independent think tank with a mission to unite people around long-term intergenerational goals and catalyse collaborative action and collective agency. Common Vision has a strong track record facilitating policy dialogue, civic leadership, and public engagement opportunities for young people.
- **Force of Nature** is a youth non-profit mobilising mindsets for climate action. Force of Nature supports leaders across business, education, and policy to center young people in delivering intergenerational climate solutions.
- **Climate Cares** is a team of researchers, designers, policymakers, and educators aiming to understand and support mental health in the current climate and ecological crises. Climate Cares is a collaboration between the Institute of Global Health Innovation and the Grantham Institute at Imperial College London.

The range of expertise on the immediate project team was crucial to the development of the project. Each partner had specific skills and strengths they brought to the table. Common Vision has expertise in managing engagement projects, distilling complex topics to a range of audiences, and have access to an established direct network of young people. Climate Cares holds impressive knowledge and relationships in the climate psychology space. Force of Nature contributed a wealth of insights on the topic of eco-anxiety and effective ways of engaging young people.

Individual project team members

- **Caroline Macfarland** is the Founder and Director of Common Vision. She has held a number of executive and board-level roles encompassing strategic communications, policy design and stakeholder engagement in the public and charity sectors. She has a keen interest in creative approaches to young people's engagement in policymaking and public life and has led various Common Vision projects in this area.

- **Matilda Agace** is Senior Research and Engagement Manager at Common Vision. Matilda specialises in participatory research approaches with young people, and work about local communities. In this role she has worked with a broad network of community organisations, funders, and young people, to amplify the power of lived experience within policymaking and civic life.
- **Sacha Wright** is the Research and Curriculum Coordinator at Force of Nature. Sacha works alongside researchers, psychologists, youth activists and climate experts to deliver the most impactful and genuine services to young people contending with climate distress. Sacha's passion lies in dismantling inequality in the climate health space and ensuring impactful and inclusive solutions.
- **Phoebe Hanson** is a climate and social activist, youth advocate and the Operations Director at Force of Nature. As a young working-class woman, Phoebe's mission is to empower the youth and ensure those historically excluded have a seat at the table. She has worked alongside the world's leading authorities on sustainability and within the ever-growing network of young people, educators, businesses, and policymakers working to create a better world.
- **Dr Emma Lawrance** is the Mental Health Innovations Fellow at the Institute of Global Health Innovation (IGHI), Imperial College London. She leads the IGHI-Grantham Institute program, Climate Cares, working with researchers, designers and policy experts to better understand and respond to the interconnections between climate change and mental health.
- **Pip Batey** is the Interaction and Communication Designer at the Helix Center, and co-founder of Climate Cares, an Institute of Global Health Innovation and Grantham Institute multidisciplinary programme, which aims to understand and support mental health in our changing climate. She is currently working on a range of human-centred projects across IGHI and NHS partners.
- **Ruth Taylor** is a narrative strategist and Common Vision Research Associate. She specialises in the intersection between deep narratives and human values. She also works at the Common Cause Foundation, is a trustee for People and Planet, and writes the fortnightly newsletter In Other Words.

Additionally, we drew on team support from **Octophin Digital**, a London-based digital agency working primarily within the wildlife conservation, arts and charity sectors, and **Plan B** visual design experts. Administrative support was contributed by other members of the Common Vision team.

3. Project key messages

The scoping report on narrative change produced in Stage One of the project was integral to shaping the project ambitions and framework. We identified the following additional objectives for the project.

Narratives to overcome

- **Other people don't care about climate change.** A narrative that is expressed through continual stories about the (in)actions of governments and ordinary citizens. It can quickly lead to feeling that you are alone in your concerns for the environment, or that you are somehow different to those around you.
- **Only individuals' small daily actions can save the planet.** A narrative which places the utmost importance on the singular actions of individuals to fight climate change, like recycling or reducing energy use. This narrative detracts from the importance of larger structural change and collective agency and makes us feel shame and guilt that the actions we do take are not enough to address the scale of the challenge.
- **It is already too late to avert the crisis.** A fatalistic narrative that the scale of the climate crisis is too big and too grave to fix, fuelling self-limiting beliefs about the insignificance of our own actions or the power of others.
- **Narratives/ assumptions about eco-anxiety itself.** That young people are fragile 'snowflakes' and passive victims of climate change. It is vital to not pathologise (label as a mental illness) the powerful emotions experienced by young people which can be a healthy response if young people are given the tools to cope and convert their feelings into climate action.

Key messages/new narratives

- **Human beings are not inherently self-interested.** A wealth of social psychological research has shown that most people do in fact share values such as equality, community, and care for the environment.¹²
- **We all have a part to play in systems change.** Despite the barriers which exist to change, people in different places and from different walks of life are taking individual and collective action at a grassroots level, and these actions will complement and drive larger shifts in our economic and political systems.
- **We already have the ability, connectivity, technologies and motivation to make a difference.** This not only means we can work together to address the climate crisis, but we can also reverse the impacts of climate change and biodiversity loss.
- **Eco-anxiety is normal and necessary.** When we think about the climate crisis, many of us experience negative emotions, including worry, fear, anger, grief, despair, guilt, and shame. Though they can have a profound effect on our personal wellbeing, and inhibit us from taking climate action, these feelings are perfectly rational and practical given the size and scale of the crisis. By helping young people understand the drivers of their eco-emotions, provide a supportive and meaningful outlet to process and express these feelings, and show that change is possible through stories of hope and scientific evidence, we believe we can tip the balance from inertia towards action.

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1 Common Cause Foundation (2016), Perceptions Matter, https://value-sandframes.org/resources/CCF_survey_perceptions_matter_summary.pdf

2 Thijs Bouman and Linda Steg (2020), Engaging City Residents in Climate Action: Addressing the Personal and Group Value-Base Behind Residents' Climate Actions, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339782307_Engaging_City_Residents_in_Climate_Action_Addressing_the_Personal_and_Group_Value-Base_Behind_Residents'_Climate_Actions

4. Project development

The project design was ambitious for a nine-month timeframe, with multiple stages of consultation, development, testing, and roll-out.

Key insights, challenges and learning

- **Iterative working and project timescales.** Originally conceived as a 'double diamond' process, some constraints on time scales (see below) meant that the project design was flattened down. We went through a longer stage of project set-up, refining the concept, outcomes, and design brief than planned. The website build had to be conducted alongside the live engagement events, meaning the website content could not be tested and refined through live engagement events as planned. Ultimately, we were able to be agile and flexible to the amended timescales, but this meant the later stages of the project were more intense for all involved.
- **Decision making, partner working and co-design.** A tension through the project was how to make decisions as the project partners, while accounting for extended co-design and advisory group input. Sometimes we were stuck in an 'ask the co-design loop', with a principled wish to defer decision making, rather than acting on our existing expertise. This meant that the website content and functionality took longer to develop than needed.
- **Scoping research.** The project required that we did an initial stage of desk research to inform project design. This proved to be a very valuable piece of work that we referred back to across the project lifespan, shaping how we designed the engagement and website to be structured around narrative change techniques. Eco-anxiety research is a dense area, with competing schools of thought, so even the partners with extensive experience in this area were potentially only representing one approach. The desk research was a useful way to get the whole team up to speed, draw out the insights of partners in a structured way, and provide a robust grounding to work with these topics responsibly.
- **Engagement around COP26.** Engagement around COP26 was initially planned to be the linchpin of the project's design and launch. Unforeseen delays to the delivery of the project meant engagement around COP26 had to change. Instead of running public engagement events in the run up to the conference, all project partners engaged at COP26 but in a different way. While it was never the plan to deliver in Glasgow itself, all three of the project partners visited Glasgow during COP26 and noted that creative, experimental, science-led public engagement was in short supply at the conference, and a project like this could be very valuable for setting a future standard of creative practice.

5. Project design and stakeholder collaboration

Advisory group (climate activists, communications specialists, science experts, mental health practitioners and youth representatives)

As part of the project, we convened four advisory meetings, in **September and October 2021**, and **February and March 2022**. The advisory group was made up of 31 active members, who attended at least one meeting each.

Representation: Individuals were invited in a professional capacity on the basis of five areas of expertise:

- **22%** were from climate civil society organisations
- **13%** were from youth organizations or had expertise in youth engagement
- **16%** were experts with a climate science, environmental science or energy transitions background
- **20%** were eco-anxiety or climate and mental health experts, including behavioral specialists
- **29%** were climate communications and storytelling specialists

Through the representation of young people, youth engagement experts and Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) scientists on the group, we ensured that youth voice and NERC scientific expertise were embedded throughout the project. However, early in the project we made the decision to only include young people who would be comfortable representing their views on a professional level, in contrast to the co-design group members who were asked to participate on a personal basis.

Role: Across different meetings the advisory group was asked to give feedback on the project framework, the narrative research, the user experience, and the impact strategy. Furthermore, advisors helped us reach new and diverse audiences outside of our existing networks, for instance The Wildlife Trust helped us share invites to the co-design group with young people across the country connected to each of their hubs.

Methods: The group was asked to give expert insight and feedback on the project both at the meetings, but we also encouraged remote engagement between meetings. In some cases, advisors offered additional time and expertise, for example we conducted a one-hour interview with Dr Kris De Meyer shared to discuss his work on the relationship between action and emotion. Several advisory group members were also invited to speak at the engagement events, including marine biologist Professor Steve Simpson, and youth climate leader Katie Hodgetts.

Key insights, challenges, and learning

- **Interdisciplinarity is important.** One of the strengths of the advisory group was the diversity of its participants, and the different types of knowledge and expertise they brought to the table. This helped the project's rigor and focus, as we gained insights from many different sectors and perspectives. Our approach was to engage all expertise on an equal level, for instance by always having mixed break-out groups. However, we wonder if we could have created space for more expert input by segmenting members (e.g., having breakouts for youth organisations and psychologists separately) and intentionally asking members to contribute in that capacity.
- **Age and expertise.** We made a decision to invite young people on the advisory group to contribute in their professional capacity, representing organisations and campaigns, rather than acting as 'youth voice'. We believe this helped build equity in the group between advisors of different ages. However, this did mean that we lacked input from people aged under-20, a theme that ran across co-design and engagement where most young people participating were 20+.

- **Preparation and scope of input.** Defining the exact role of the advisory group, beyond a sounding board and accountability mechanism, and how it differed from the co-design group was important and took some time to refine in the project. Whilst full briefings were given at the start of every meeting, our learning is to provide more information in advance, and clearly define the scope and remit of the group.

Co-design group (young people and NERC researchers)

The co-design group brought together the two key stakeholder groups in the project: young people and NERC scientists. Its purpose was to guide the overall project as part of a two-way conversation between the project team, and the groups who would benefit from the project.

Representation: Overall, 53 people were involved in the project co-design sessions.

- **60%** of co-designers were young people aged under-30
- **40%** were adult NERC-funded researchers

Role: We held two co-design sessions for the project.

- In session one (September 2021) we facilitated an interactive discussion with participants on the project's **value proposition** i.e., what a compelling offer for both young people and NERC scientists would look like.
- In session two (February 2022) we asked participants to test the proposed **user journey** of the website and engagement activities; provide feedback on the project visual identity; and describe how they would like to interact with the live engagement elements.

Methods: Co-design always operates on a sliding scale. There are usually trade-offs in terms of the resources allocated to the co-design (the deeper the engagement, the more training and support co-designers need), and the breadth of people involved (high commitment, few people vs. low commitment, many people). We designed our co-design approach to allow light-touch participation from a range of different participants.

Key insights, challenges, and learning

- **Scope of co-design input.** Given the predefined outputs of this project - a series of engagement events and the development of a website - we were mindful of asking for input on questions which the participants would be able to meaningfully engage with on the basis of personal experiences. For example, we asked for feedback on the proposed user journey of the website rather than key design choices which were more appropriate to ask of the web developers.
- **Framing of questions and exercises.** We found that asking the group to make narrower decisions were more effective than open-ended questions, for example "If you were to attend this event would you prefer the interactive format to be A. B. or C." rather than "What would your ideal event look like?" This meant that for the second co-design group we asked much narrower questions and received more actionable input and design steers.
- **Mixed-age co-design.** Both young people and researchers were invited to input into co-design in the same way. For both audiences this was a driver of engagement, wanting to exchange ideas and understanding with a different demographics. However, it did necessitate confident and proactive facilitation to ensure that different working styles were accommodated.
- **Value of co-design.** Overall, we found great value in having co-design as part of the process. Specific elements were steered by co-design input, including: the journey of the site (shifting from 'Me', 'Us', 'Now', a framework based on narrative change theory but was found to be too abstract by co-designers, to 'Feel', 'Imagine', 'Connect'); project visual identity; project name; pacing and structure of the 'Stories for Hope' challenge; and much more. Without this input the digital tool and engagement events would have been much weaker.

Individual interviews with NERC researchers

We conducted interviews with NERC researchers for two purposes, a) to inform or generate content for the website; and b) to deliver both the supplier and researcher training requirement in the contract (in which we as the supplier develop our climate science knowledge, and researchers develop their storytelling abilities through carefully designed questions).

Representation: Researchers were invited to participate via a mailshot from NERC. We received 58 expressions of interest from researchers around the UK, from doctoral students to professors, covering 30 different universities and research institutes. Their research spanned the breadth of NERC's remit, from soil science to volcanology, science-based archaeology to atmospheric science. As well as inviting researchers to participate in the co-design sessions, we assembled a long list of researchers for interview, and then selected a shortlist based on having a diverse range of scientific interests, career journeys and demographics (including equality and diversity) represented.

Role: The interview process was designed to be an interesting public engagement experience in its own right for researchers - a different way of talking about their work and their personal motivations and emotions. Many of the researchers commented that this was a new experience for them.

Methods: We sent the researchers a discussion guide in advance of the interview, and then conducted the interview on a semi-structured basis. The original plan was to edit the interview footage into a sound file for use on the website. Following the interviews, we amended the plan so that Common Vision produced a 'script' based on the insights from the interviews, which researchers then re-recorded.

Key insights, challenges and learning

- **Research appetite and excitement** for the project was huge, and many more researchers applied to be involved than we originally expected. Innovative, youth-focused, and emotionally intelligent public engagement is clearly an area of interest for climate researchers. Furthermore, many researchers described their own experiences of eco-anxiety, or that of their children and family, as a driver behind their participation, and more could be done to support environmental researchers address these difficult emotions in their own working lives.

- **Talking about emotions, values, and feelings is tricky.** Many – but certainly not all - researchers we interviewed initially found it hard to reflect on emotions encountered during their work, especially as it is not an area they are usually asked to address in public engagement. With careful prompting and listening most researchers discovered new emotions through reflection. Public engagement training in universities could consider how they build these competencies at an early stage in career development.
- **Speaking about the future can also be tricky.** Again, many researchers found it a challenge to place the outcomes of their research within a picture of a hopeful and sustainable future, or how their work is materially contributing to the climate transition as a whole. This is certainly not because their work isn't powerful, but researchers have an epistemological insecurity about over-stepping the bounds of the provable and getting anywhere close to speculation. Again, through careful prompting most researchers could place their work in the bigger picture, but considering the importance of building powerful visions of possible and just environmental future, could this competency be built at an earlier stage in career development?
- **Telling the story of action.** Through the co-design process and advice from Dr Kris de Meyer, we found that it is the stories of action which are most powerful to listeners. Young people learn from, and are inspired by, the actions others are taking, and are more likely to take action themselves if they feel like they are part of a collective change. Therefore, our interview framework with researchers asked them to tell us the story and process of the research – their fieldwork, who they work with, what they experience - as well as the outcome. All environmental researchers have powerful stories that should be told to leverage wider community action.

6. Project engagement and activation

The project had two core engagement outputs: first, a live engagement series called Stories for Hope which combined online self-directed reflection and imagination activities, with live masterclass events; and second, the interactive digital platform 'Hold This Space'.

Stories for Hope Community Challenge/ live engagement events (young people, NERC researchers and the general public)

We had originally envisaged that the live engagement events would be discursive forums where participants would take part in early-stage prototype activities which would shape and inform the design of the website. However, we had to adapt this to respond to changing timescales. Instead, they became a way of testing the website content framework, mirroring the same user journey (Reflect/ Imagine/ Act).

In March 2022 we hosted the **five-day Stories for Hope Community Challenge**, an online journey exploring what drives different emotional responses to climate change, and the practical ways we can build hope about the future.

Representation: Overall, 342 people took part in the Challenge, joining events or taking part in the online activities. Of those who shared their age on sign up, two thirds were aged 25 or under. Adult participants largely came from our stakeholder groups, being environmental scientists, youth workers, or climate activists.

Methods: Activities in the Stories for Hope challenge encompassed:

- **Daily emails** with prompts for self-reflection, talking points, and creative activities;
- Three **live lunchtime masterclasses** held online during the week, featuring Q&As with experts in environmental science, psychology, neuroscience, climate activism and narrative change;
- **Conversations on social media**, via the hashtag #StoriesforHope on Instagram and Twitter.

Participants did not have to take part in all of these activities and were encouraged to pick the ones which appealed to their interests and time availability. We designed the activities to accommodate a time commitment ranging from 10-30 minutes per day.

Who took part?

66 participants completed the pre-start survey. They self-reported:

- A proactive approach to finding out about climate change (**86%** proactively looked up climate impacts in last six months)
- Most described feeling interested (**77%**), overwhelmed (**66%**), or powerless (**56%**) when reading about climate science, with only **28%** feeling hopeful
- Most were already taking climate action, or part of a climate group, **39%** said they would describe themselves as climate activists

In terms of demographics:

- The vast majority (**84%**) were female
- **Half** were in education, and **half** were working
- **Three quarters** were white, **8%** were Asian, **3%** black, **3%** mixed race, and **8%** other ethnicity
- **21%** had a mental health condition, and **5%** were disabled

What was achieved?

As a pilot, the approach to the Challenge was experimental. Overall, participants described positive outcomes, although we speculate that some of these outcomes could be stronger if the events were to take place in-person and /or over a longer period of time.

- **54%** said they would recommend engaging to a friend, family member or co-worker
- **45%** said they learnt something new during the week
- **27%** had a conversation with someone in real life because of the activities and prompts
- **27%** said it had affected their mindset, outlook, or behaviour in a positive way

Connecting with emotions

- **81%** said taking part had made them think more about the reasons behind their emotional responses to environmental issues
- **61%** said they were now more likely to talk to others about their feelings about environmental issues

Connecting with others

- **61%** said they were now more likely to discuss environmental issues with a group or community they already engage with
- **54%** said taking part had made them more likely to join a group or community around environmental issues

Motivating action

- **82%** said taking part had made them more likely to take action to help the environment
- **52%** said it had made more likely to look for information on climate change

In terms of format, we experienced a low drop off from participants of colour, disabled participants and those with mental illnesses, suggesting that the activities were inclusive and accessible. One disabled participant said: "the activities were very flexible and clear, great for those with neurodiversity".

"I signed up to join a group of like-minded individuals to discuss the climate crisis and understand more of what I can do as an individual as well as the group action that should be occurring"

"[I want to] be able to reflect and understand the feelings I have towards climate change and how I can use them as motivation."

"[I am taking part to develop] deeper connection and understanding of how climate change affects my emotional wellbeing and that of others. Introduction to scientific advances. "

"[I signed up to] help me better understand how to navigate my climate anxiety and ways to move into hope more often instead of despair."

Key insights and learnings:

- **There was a trade-off between high-level, personalised engagement, and safe working with young people.** For example, we considered hosting a closed WhatsApp group for participants to discuss their ideas and form relationships with each other, which our research showed was an important foundation to sustained climate action. However, we found this would have breached data protection measures as we would have not been able to moderate discussions and ensure participant safety, especially when mixing under-18 and over-18 participants. Instead we opted for anonymous interaction via Mentimeter at the events, and encouraged public discussion on social media. This had an impact on the level of engagement, described below.
- **Successful social media engagement is predicated on having an existing active social media community and not be preferable for younger audiences.** When working with young people it is commonly assumed that they are keen to share and create social media content. However, through

the five-day challenge, we found that this isn't so simple, and many younger audiences are reluctant to share their views and ideas publicly. Many more sent us images or responses to share anonymously on their behalf. This could have been down to the personal nature of discussions about emotions. It also is likely due to the project being new, without an established audience/community and therefore unable to create a 'critical mass' of posts and responses online, which is needed to create a small-scale viral effect.

- **The masterclasses were high-quality, insightful events, but limited in terms of interactivity.** They attracted a range of young people from different backgrounds as well as some older attendees who were educators or science communicators by background. For data protection and safeguarding reasons, we were conservative with the interactive nature of the events (for example we did not host breakout rooms because we were not sure whether under-18s would be comfortable in small groups with adults). Instead, we introduced an interactive element to the event via Mentimeter. This worked well as a tool not only for live interaction purposes, but also to generate visual outputs which we integrated with the wider communications around the Challenge.
- **We experienced a gradual drop-off in participation across the week,** with participant numbers peaking in the first event, and more people completing the pre-start survey than the final survey. Feedback from advisors, co-designers, and participants suggests that the pace could have been prohibitive. If we re-ran the challenge we would consider ways to reduce the intensity, such as by running it over a longer period.
- **Reaching beyond the already-engaged.** Almost all participants were already knowledgeable about climate science and engaged in climate action. This likely reflects our outreach through our partnership's existing networks, and networks of advisory organisations in the climate space. It would be interesting to test this model in different contexts, for instance running the same activities with non-climate groups and testing how outcomes differ.
- **The motivation to speak to others, take action, and join a community** were all strong self-reported outcomes of the Challenge. This suggests that the process of self-reflection, imagination, and understanding the behavioral science behind climate action can unlock motivation, ambition, and commitment for young people. The strength of community-orientated outcomes like speaking to a friend also suggest that self-reflection makes participants more confident in not only describing their feelings, but in talking about climate change itself.

Hold This Space digital platform (young people, NERC researchers and the general public)

Launched in Spring 2022, Hold This Space is a self-guided website which helps users to reflect on their emotional response to climate change, imagine a better future, and understand the actions they can take to address the climate crisis.

During our co-design sessions, young people suggested the desire for an immersive 'journey' to explore emotions. Expert advice from project partners and advisors refined the scope, narrative, and format of the activities themselves.

Representation: The website features audio stories from nine climate scientists and six young people. In the first two days of launch, the website had over 600 visitors and substantial social media coverage, with shares from UN Climate Change High-Level Champions, Grantham Institute, global youth climate activists, national youth NGOs, and several climate scientists.

Methods: The site has a scrolling narrative structure, taking users on an immersive written and audio journey to navigate their feelings about climate. The journey has three 'pathways', each of which generate a shareable output.

- **The 'Feel' pathway** introduces users to some different emotions associated with climate change and prompts them to reflect on how you feel. Users can send themselves a snapshot of their climate emotion on that day, and share a 'flashcard' with more information about one of 12 eco-emotions.
- **The 'Imagine' pathway** aims to build a picture of a more hopeful future based on developments in climate science. Users can listen to one of seven future scenarios, inspired by the work of climate scientists today, spanning a future with healthy oceans, to a future with green infrastructure. Users can then generate a 'postcard from 2050' describing the transition to that future, based on their responses to multi-choice questions about co-benefits, values, and emotions.
- **The 'Connect' pathway** helps users think about how your feelings and ambitions for the future fits within a bigger picture of collective climate

action. They can listen to four clips of people describing their relationship to climate action, and create their 'manifesto of collective action' by answering multi-choice questions of climate stories, actions, outcomes, and communities.

Users can complete the journey in order, and multiple times. Resources are given in the sidebar, along with a description of the project aims and partnership.

Hold this Space communications campaign (Sector stakeholders, general public)

To launch the digital platform, Common Vision and partners designed and delivered a communications and outreach campaign. This campaign sought to direct traffic to the website, and influence science, civil society, and public engagement stakeholders to consider an emotions and narrative led approach to engaging young people with climate change.

Stakeholder groups: Our team identified and segmented several stakeholder groups to target with the communications campaign: scientific institutions and climate research leaders; policymakers and influencers; public engagement practitioners; professional and chartered institutes; funders of science, youth and mental health projects; climate change NGOs; and youth people's organisations.

Methods: Our multi-channel approach consisted of:

- **Press release and news stories:** Common Vision prepared and circulated a press release for the launch, circulated to 140 press contacts. In addition, Imperial College London published a [news story](#) on their website.
- **Direct stakeholder emails:** We directly contacted 770 key stakeholders from the groups above. This has resulted in almost 40 follow-up conversations.
- **Project participant emails:** Further to the new stakeholder research, we contacted all 211 project participants (advisors, young people, co-designers, scientists, and others), sharing details leading up to and following the launch.

- **Social media campaign:** Common Vision and partners led an active social media publicity campaign across Twitter and Instagram. Our tweets used external hooks, as well as evergreen website content, and project key messages to engage with public audiences.

Stakeholder engagement outcomes:

- **Sharing and amplifying through stakeholder networks:** Many stakeholders shared Hold This Space through their networks. This has included the Royal Society of Biology; the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement; Arts and Humanities Research Council; climate NGO Global Action Plan, The Wildlife Trusts's £33million youth climate engagement fund 'Our Bright Future'; youth-led network Youth4Nature; and the National Youth Agency. This means that Hold This Space has gained visibility outside of our own networks, and been shared directly with grassroots youth workers, young climate activists, and community leaders.
- **Signposting as a permanent resource:** Several organisations have also signposted Hold This Space as a permanent resource on their website, giving the website sustainable visibility beyond the funding period. This includes mental health organisation [Kokoro Change](#); the [Mental Health and Climate Change Alliance](#); climate engagement project [Eco-anxious Stories](#); and the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations' ([ACEVO](#)) climate resources hub.
- **Inclusion in teaching and curriculums:** We have been in contact with several academics who have told us they will use Hold This Space as part of their teaching, across a range of subjects including accounting and finance, geography and marketing. Common Vision has also been invited to run a guest seminar for UK Food Systems Centre for Doctoral Training Partnership.
- **Policy reach:** Prior to launch we were invited to present to over 100 BEIS staff members connected to the Clean Heat Directorate about Hold This Space. Following launch, we were also informed that Hold This Space was shared directly with members of the Education Select Committee.
- **Speaking and external publishing opportunities:** We have been invited to speak about Hold This Space at several conferences on mental health, youth engagement and climate communications, and invited to write blogs for trade and campaigning organisations.

Social media engagement outcomes:

- During the **first two weeks after launch**, Common Vision posted 47 tweets about Hold This Space, gaining 12,500 impressions, 67 likes, and 60 retweets. Partners and project stakeholders were also actively involved, with Force of Nature and Institute of Global Health Innovation also leading active campaigns. We received supportive tweets and shared from UN Climate Change high-level Champions, Transform our World, Global Action Plan, ACEVO, and many featured scientists. We created tailored content for Loneliness Awareness Week and World Oceans Day.
- From **week three (27th June) to the end of July**, Common Vision tweeted 104 times about Hold This Space, gaining 19,100 impressions, 161 likes, and 95 retweets. Our social media content around the UK heat wave and UN Oceans Conference received particularly high engagement.

Key insights and learnings:

- There is a **growing field of practice** around climate engagement, emotions and wellbeing. The interest in this project speaks to the potential to strengthen and scale this field, especially to reach beyond the already-engaged public, and start scaling up some of the approaches which are being developed at small scales around the world.
- **Direct stakeholder engagement** is vital to expanding the reach and influence of public engagement projects beyond direct participants. For this you cannot rely on social media alone. Our most successful outreach was through direct emails.
- Whilst there are **many opportunities to pursue** to expand the influence of Hold This Space, the work falls outside of our grant window and project funding. Partners are actively considering how to ensure a sustainable legacy of this project, but this work is being undertaken without funding.

7. Delivery against original objectives

NERC outlined the following objectives for the project:

- Relationships built between supplier and NERC researchers and target audience group
- Audience feels hopeful and report a reduction in eco anxiety
- Audience empowered to use environmental science research in their daily decision making
- NERC researchers have increased skills and ability to engage digitally
- Increased awareness of NERC contribution to research surrounding climate change and climate change mitigation
- Target audience have undertaken a new, innovative digital experience, engaging then with NERC research

NERC also outlined the following impact goals:

- Audience starts and/or continue to use environmental science research in their daily decision making and actively seek new information
- NERC researchers have used their increased confidence and ability to conduct more /better quality digital engagement (beyond this project)
- Target audience continue to feel hopeful and reduction in eco-anxiety

This evaluation document was compiled before the website was launched and tested. Therefore, we cannot yet firmly evaluate the impact on young people and scientist audiences. Additionally, people's emotions change over time and there would need to be more longitudinal research beyond the course of this project to understand the deeper impacts of participation.

Reflecting on the project team's observations, we can say that:

- **Strong relationships were built between the supplier team, NERC researchers and the target audience group.** Over the past nine months we've grown a vibrant network around the project and formed new connections between diverse participants including the supplier team, young people, and the NERC researchers. As the lead partner Common Vision has grown our networks in the science communications community and strengthened our partnerships with the rest of the supplier team. A number of the advisory and co-design participants engaged repeatedly with the project and went over and above the prescribed role, speaking publicly at events and giving remote feedback outside of meetings.
- **Amongst the project participants, there is increased awareness of NERC's role and research.** At the advisory meetings, co-design sessions and at the live engagement events, NERC scientists spoke compellingly about their work. NERC's role in the project was signposted at all the events as a formality but it was the involvement of the scientists that brought this to life.
- **NERC researchers have built confidence through the opportunity to engage in a different way.** Many of our interviewees noted that talking about their emotions was an unfamiliar experience. The majority were unpracticed in discussing how their work might relate to systemic change and an envisioned future and were more comfortable with discussing the immediate outputs of their work. This was with the exception of a small number of scientists who were clearly experienced science communicators. What this shows is that it is not unreasonable to encourage scientists to discuss their own emotions as part of their work, and to position their work as part of a bigger picture of change. However, they need prompting and practice to do so confidently.

In addition, we would note the following achievements:

- **The project has raised awareness of how emotions can form part of effective climate communications.** The scoping paper, written by communications specialist Ruth Taylor, was well-received by the advisory group and has increased understanding of science communications best practice amongst both the project team and our stakeholders. The sophistication of the outputs has increased as a result, for instance shifting away from the language of eco-anxiety, to account for a full spread of eco-emotions, and avoiding the framing of eco-anxiety as something that needs to be fixed.
- **The project has raised awareness of narrative change approaches.** The project aims to enable young people to take climate action and apply climate science in their daily lives, therefore changing their behavior. Through the project we have deepened our understanding of the complex links between emotion and action and have consciously developed narratives that enable action. For instance, framing a sustainable world as an achievable choice, individual climate action as an important part of a wider picture, and fostering a sense of community and collective responsibility.

8. Learnings for future projects

Learnings for co-design and partnership working

- The process of co-design can be employed on a sliding scale with many trade-offs. Projects that involve deeper co-design need to work with a smaller group of people, over a longer time scale, with more frequent (likely paid) involvement to be effective at making informed decisions. At the lighter-touch end of the scale, expectations amongst both the participants and the project team should be managed carefully around what is appropriate and useful for co-designers to consider and be involved in. It is often demotivating for participants to be asked to feed in on concepts or processes which they are unfamiliar with or disinterested in.
- Successful partner relationships take time to develop and should be accounted and budgeted for directly. In projects that require specialist partners, projects should involve a first few months of relationship and trust-building trust activities. While the most significant insights from the project partners were a result of sustained conversations over time, challenges to successful partnership working in this project mostly occurred in situations when tasks couldn't be cleanly delegated for one partner to execute, but remained collaborative, meaning Common Vision as lead partner ultimately had to retain ownership for seeing most aspects of the project over the line.

Learning for engagement with young people

- 15-25 years old is a huge age range, and it is hard to target the upper and lower end at once. Whilst we had a number of people at the younger end of the age range contributing to the co-design process, most masterclass participants in the Stories for Hope challenge were 20+. This age range has very different schedules, engagement styles, and communities. Therefore, we would advise creating distinct products for school-age, and post-education young people.

- Young people engage on a practical basis in a very different way to older people. Often on Zoom calls young people sit with cameras off, participate via the chat, and can be reticent to share their views. Teachers and tutors have been experimenting with ways to improve this, and it mostly involves building confidence through sustained group work, in small groups, over time.
- Having a clear value proposition is important to get young people involved and retain their participation. Clearly defining what they will get out of it and why they would want to participate is important. Young people want to learn from experts and each other, and learning is often an important driver for participation. We found that the added value for many of our young participants was not about discussing their emotions, but learning from experts in climate psychology, for example.
- Social media engagement can't be taken as a given, and young people don't always want to engage in public-facing discussions online. During the Stories for Hope Challenge, young people were actively engaged in the online events, the (anonymous) Mentimeter polls and responded to emails, but very few responded to prompts to share their thoughts on Twitter and Instagram.

Learning for scientists and science communicators

- Talking about emotion and feelings is an important route to engaging people. It humanises stories of research and directly counteracts the idea that climate science can be overly technical and often fear-inducing. By embracing a spectrum of emotions, climate researchers can engage with people on a personal level rather than perpetuating an 'expert-to-layperson' relationship.
- Talking about research as a part of systemic change towards a better future is a powerful tool. This means moving beyond specific research findings or innovations and articulating the co-benefits of this work and what sort of society could be achieved if the work is successful and scaled up.
- There are a number of narrative methods and techniques that can be harnessed to engage people with science. These are summarised as a series of top tips in our report, Hold This Space: ***A minds and hearts approach to engaging young people with climate change.***

Using narrative approaches to engage people with climate science

From: [Hold This Space: A minds and hearts approach to engaging young people with climate change.](#)

- **Making the link between personal values and science:** A public narrative approach could help climate and environmental scientists to speak more authentically about the work they do and why they do it. Polling has consistently shown that many people in the UK trust scientists. Speaking from a position of personal values can help to build on that trust amongst the population, reminding them that scientists are not just experts on climate science, but also individual people who care deeply about the future of our shared home.
- **Science as part of the 'Great Turning':** Instead of highlighting all the ways that climate change is currently causing huge risks to people and the planet, the 'Great Turning' narrative focuses on transformation and healing. This is not to say that we downplay the urgency and scale of the climate crisis, but that we focus our attention on the positive steps that need to be taken - and in many places are already being taken - to lead to the regenerative future which we need in order to flourish. A number of climate scientists and communicators are already seizing opportunities to link the idea of climate health with conversations about human health, highlighting the 'co-benefits' of improved environmental conditions. Climate scientists can use active language related to health, such as healing, reviving, treating and curing to help bring to life the 'Great Turning' narrative through their work and help the public understand that although we have harmed the planet, we can also heal it.
- **Science and Hope-based communications:** Climate science communication to date has been successful in terms of raising the alarm about our heating planet. Now, the task at hand is to show how tackling climate change is challenging, but possible. When discussing any climate challenge, scientists should also emphasise how they can be curtailed or prevented through reference to tangible and proportionate solutions.

9. Hold This Space legacy and development

[Hold This Space](#) remains live as a website which young people and other interested stakeholders can use to navigate their emotions about climate change and connect to hope through climate science. NERC will continue to monitor usage and signpost the website beyond the project period.

Common Vision is currently exploring how best to take forward learnings from the project and build on the foundations laid by Hold This Space. In particular we are considering how the 'Stories of Hope' five-day challenge model could be rolled out in partnership with community and youth groups in different settings, adapting and developing the format to work with diverse audience groups, including those who don't already identify with the climate movement.

Beyond the project period we will also keep making the case that to address the climate crisis, we first need to solve this crisis of public engagement and agency. We hope Hold This Space shows one model of how tapping into the power of emotion, imagination and hope – as well as the power of science and innovation – can help unlock the new wave of collective climate action the world needs.

About NERC - the Natural Environment Research Council

The Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) is the driving force of investment in environmental science in the UK. NERC advances the frontier of environmental science by commissioning new research, infrastructure and training that delivers valuable scientific breakthroughs. NERC's public engagement focuses on delivering excellent public engagement with environmental science research.



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