

Moving net zero from **why** to **how**

A guide to help officers in local authorities
have the best next conversation.

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Delivered by

**STRONGER
STORIES**



“Be brave enough to start a conversation that matters”

Margaret Wheatley

People are already telling themselves a story about net zero. The goal is to offer a better one, which shows how net zero innovation delivers what we want today, not just what we need tomorrow.

This guide helps you make the next net zero conversation easier and more relevant to residents, colleagues or stakeholders. It's designed for time-poor but committed officers who want to explore new ways to engage others, without needing to be professional communicators.

It doesn't tell you what to say; it helps you think differently about how you say it.

Contents

This guide is structured around three principles you can follow to make the biggest difference in your best, next conversation:

- 1. Find what is important to people**
- 2. Show how net zero can help them**
- 3. Use language that makes change easier to talk about**

These three practical steps are then adapted to three different time frames, depending whether your conversation is in one day, one week or one month.

Each section layers deeper insight and practical actions on top of what's described in the one before it. So, if you've got one month, start first with one day and one week.

It also ripples outwards in terms of audiences:

- from those first conversations on the front line
- to ongoing dialogue with surrounding colleagues and teams
- through to engaging other stakeholders in the system

Going beyond the essential guidance, there are links throughout to resources that will develop your insights, skills and next steps.

This includes practical materials developed for local authority officers by other partners of Innovate UK's Net Zero Living Programme.

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If you get stuck or have feedback, please email:

hownotwhy@strongerstories.org

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Christian Inglis
Head of Urban Systems, Innovate UK

Local narratives are key to the adoption of innovation

Which is why every conversation matters

Local authorities are under pressure. They are being asked to meet urgent local needs, manage rising costs, and deliver long-term change, often with limited capacity and intense public scrutiny.

In this context, the Net Zero Living Programme was designed to bring local authorities together with businesses, community groups and investors, to find new ways to make places better to live, work and do business in. What became clear early on is that success depended as much on narrative as on technology, finance or process.

At a national level, the UK's net zero innovation story focuses on why investing in innovation to solve society's biggest challenges also delivers extraordinary social and commercial value.

It shows how place-based markets can unlock new growth, from the skills and jobs of the future

economy to the next generation of global UK businesses that will lead it.

But locally, net zero innovation stories work well when they connect with what people care about most in the places they belong to. Through the Net Zero Living Programme, when people could see how innovation helped solve real local problems and deliver tangible benefits, adoption happened at pace. Where progress stalled, it was because net zero was more often framed as the goal; responsible for extending timeframes and creating perceived trade-offs around cost, priorities and fairness.

This insight of positioning net zero locally as the how, not the why, is critical. When national ambition and local relevance align in this way, it becomes easier to show how innovation

improves everyday life while also meeting long-term climate goals. That creates more complete and credible engagement with the public, building understanding, confidence and support over time.

That is why local authority officers sit at the heart of this opportunity. You are the translators between national ambition and local reality, and between long-term goals and everyday outcomes.

This guide draws on learnings from the Net Zero Living Programme and is offered as practical support for those of you in that role and the immediate communication challenges you face. Which is why it is focused on helping you have the best next conversation about how adopting net zero innovation can improve places and the lives of the people who live in them, today.





Guy Pattison
Senior Partner, Stronger Stories

Conversations are a catalyst

Helping us learn what matters, find common ground and strengthen our reasons to collaborate

In a time of rapid social change, you can't be sure who your next conversation will be with, where it will start, or which direction it will go in. But you can be ready to make it a positive and productive one.

Most resistance to net zero does not come from opposition to the outcome. It comes from the stories people are already telling themselves about what change will mean for their place and their priorities. When net zero is framed as the "why", it can collide with other deeply held concerns about cost, disruption, fairness and risk, making it easier to reject.

This isn't because people don't care. It's because humans are storytelling animals. We use stories to make sense of the world, work with others, and feel in control of our lives. So when people hear "things need to change", that sense of control is immediately tested.

Our attention narrows and we instinctively scan for what might be lost: security, belonging, comfort, status, identity.

In evolutionary terms, this response is deeply ingrained. Our bodies and brains react to perceived change as they do to danger, like the feeling of something moving in the woods or being confronted by a bear. When that alarm system switches on, we default to defending what we have and relying on familiar explanations. We may push back, disengage, go quiet, or agree outwardly while withdrawing inwardly. This is a normal human response to uncertainty.

And in today's context of rising costs, stretched services, and a sense in many places that progress is slipping backwards, net zero is easily filed under "more risk, less control".

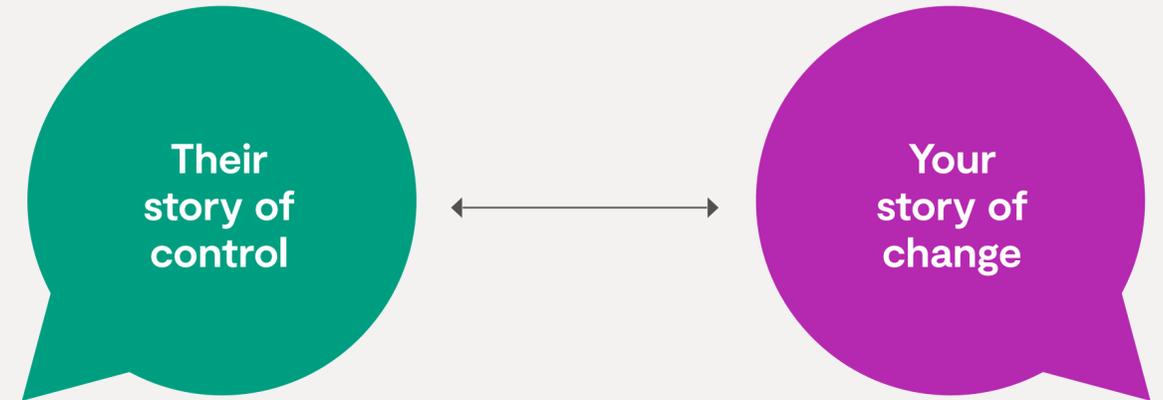
But the story changes when net zero innovation is framed as

the "how". As a practical way of delivering what people already want and need: warmer homes, cheaper bills, healthier streets and stronger local economies. When people can see how change helps them protect what they value most, trust begins to grow. When those choices also help them live their values day to day, support deepens further.

This guide exists to help make that shift. It focuses on how to have your best next conversation, offering three principles and practical ways to apply them, grounded in real experience.

Above all, it is designed to build confidence. Confidence that you don't need to persuade people from scratch, only to offer a better story than the one they are already telling themselves. Confidence that evidence and empathy work best together. And confidence to use your role as a storyteller for the place you love and belong to.

Rejected story of change



Better story that replaces the one people are telling themselves



Read more

[People fear losses more than they value gain](#)

[Simple definition of our natural Fight, Flight, Freeze, Fawn responses and visual guide of our autonomic nervous system](#)

One day

One week

One month

How to have the best, next conversation in...

One day

“A real conversation always contains an invitation. You are inviting another person to reveal herself or himself to you, to tell you who they are or what they want”

David Whyte



Thinking primarily about residents and everyday realities

We know it's easier to engage people when our story strengthens theirs. So, regardless of what you want to share, the conversation should start with them and what they need and value the most.

With 24 hours, your goal is to develop a core idea that does this and to design a conversation around it.

Principle 1: Find what's important to people

The experiences and evidence from the Net Zero Living Programme are a reminder that we all share the same basic expectations and ambitions:

- we expect to live longer, healthier, happier lives and
- we all want what's best for the places we belong to.

We also share many of the same basic needs:

- safe, warm, affordable homes
- opportunities for secure work or stable income
- respect for and pride in the place we live.

But what this looks like and how we achieve it is different for each of us, based on our values.

"I'm totally up for the council using solar panels, batteries and heat pumps to help cut bills and fuel poverty. These are tech upgrades that are designed to reduce emissions and make homes more comfortable for everyone. We need more decisions on longer term investments that deliver for the climate and give people quick wins too".

Dominant values: protecting the environment, trying new ideas and looking after people close by. (See next page for values clusters: Universalism, Self-direction and Benevolence).

"I'm cautious about swapping my tried and tested gas boiler straight away. I'm fed up with expensive and unpredictable bills but at least I've got a system that's reliable and I know how it works. I'll consider a switch but only when others have and I can see that it truly makes a difference".

Dominant values: wanting to feel safe, keep things that have worked in the past and stick to doing what most people do. (See next page for values clusters: Security, Tradition and Conformity).

Values are enduring, desirable goals that serve as guiding principles in our lives and moderate our behaviours.

Our values transcend specific issues or situations. But they are activated by them. What we feel about an issue or situation is a result of how our values are positively or negatively activated.

And because they influence how we hear and assess the information we receive, values should also be at the heart of how we choose to share information.

The Schwartz Values Map

The map organises 10 universal basic values.

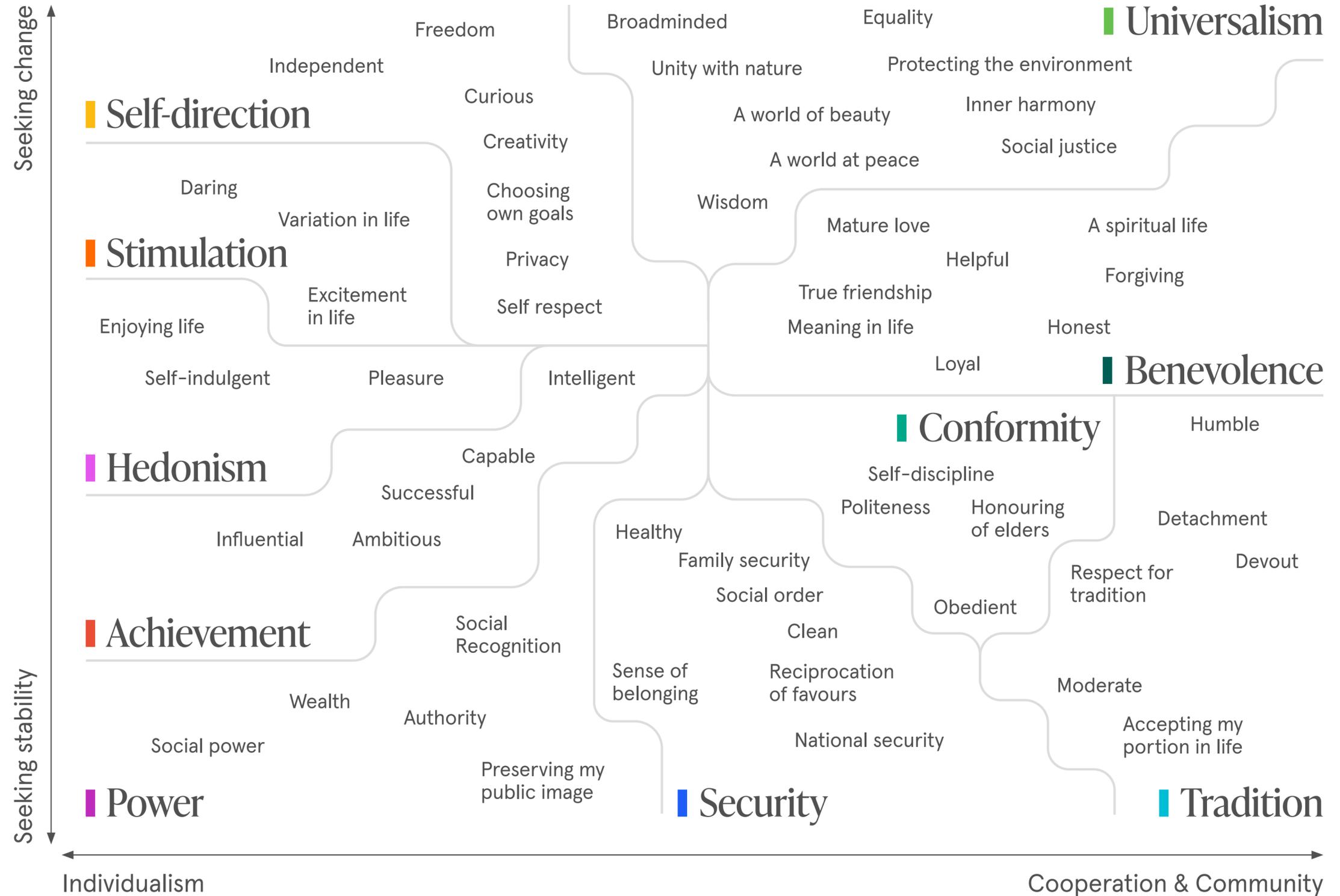
Values in the top half of the map typically express growth, gain and change motivations.

Values in the lower half typically express anxiety-based motivations associated with preventing loss, protecting against threat and seeking stability.

Values on the right of the map are characterised by a social focus and an emphasis on the interests of others.

Values on the left tend to have a more personal focus and represent motivations to pursue your own interests.

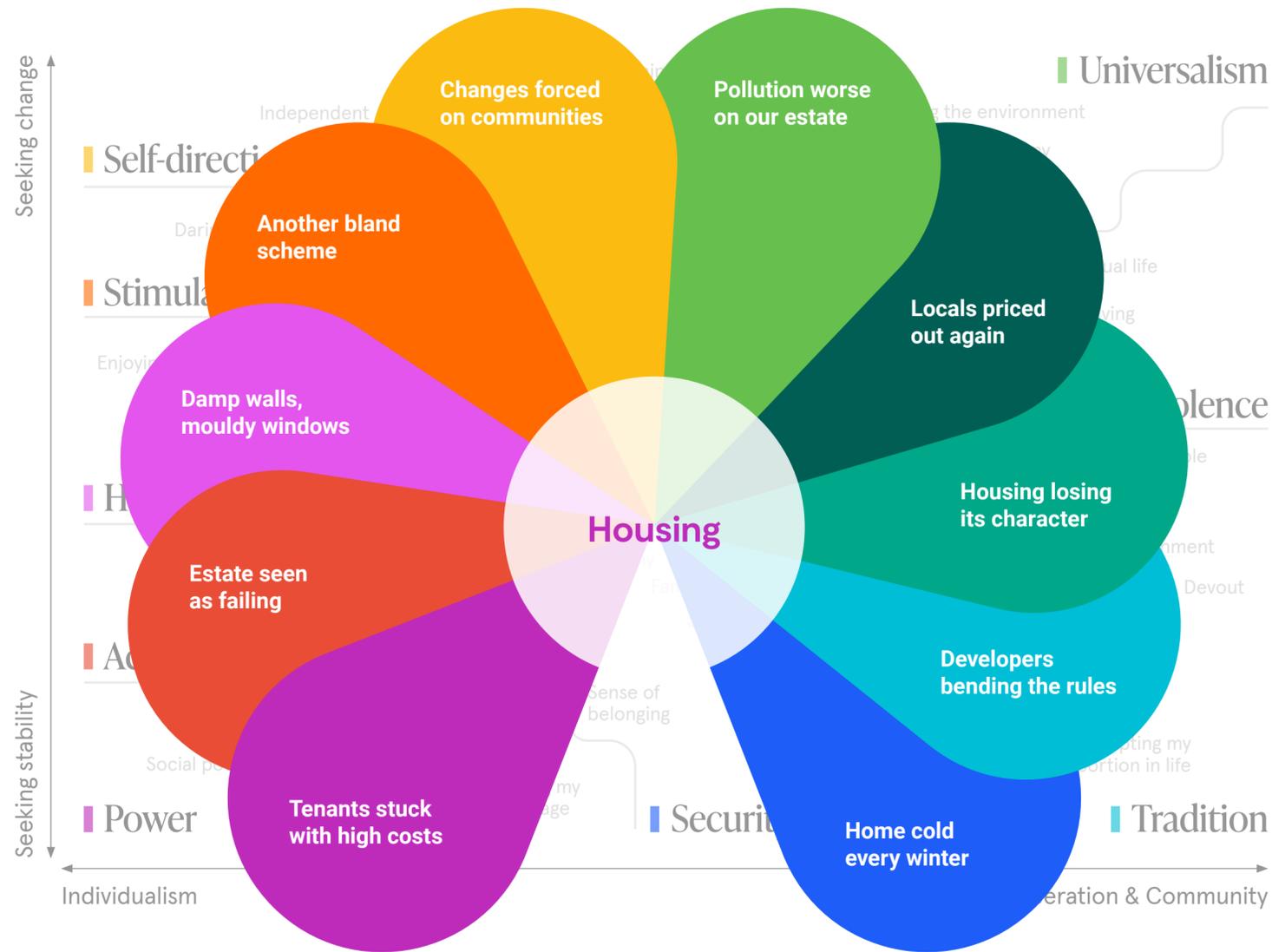
We each hold a small number of values with varying degrees of importance. For the following tasks it's worth thinking of the one, two or even three highest priority values your audience has linked to the topic of your conversation.



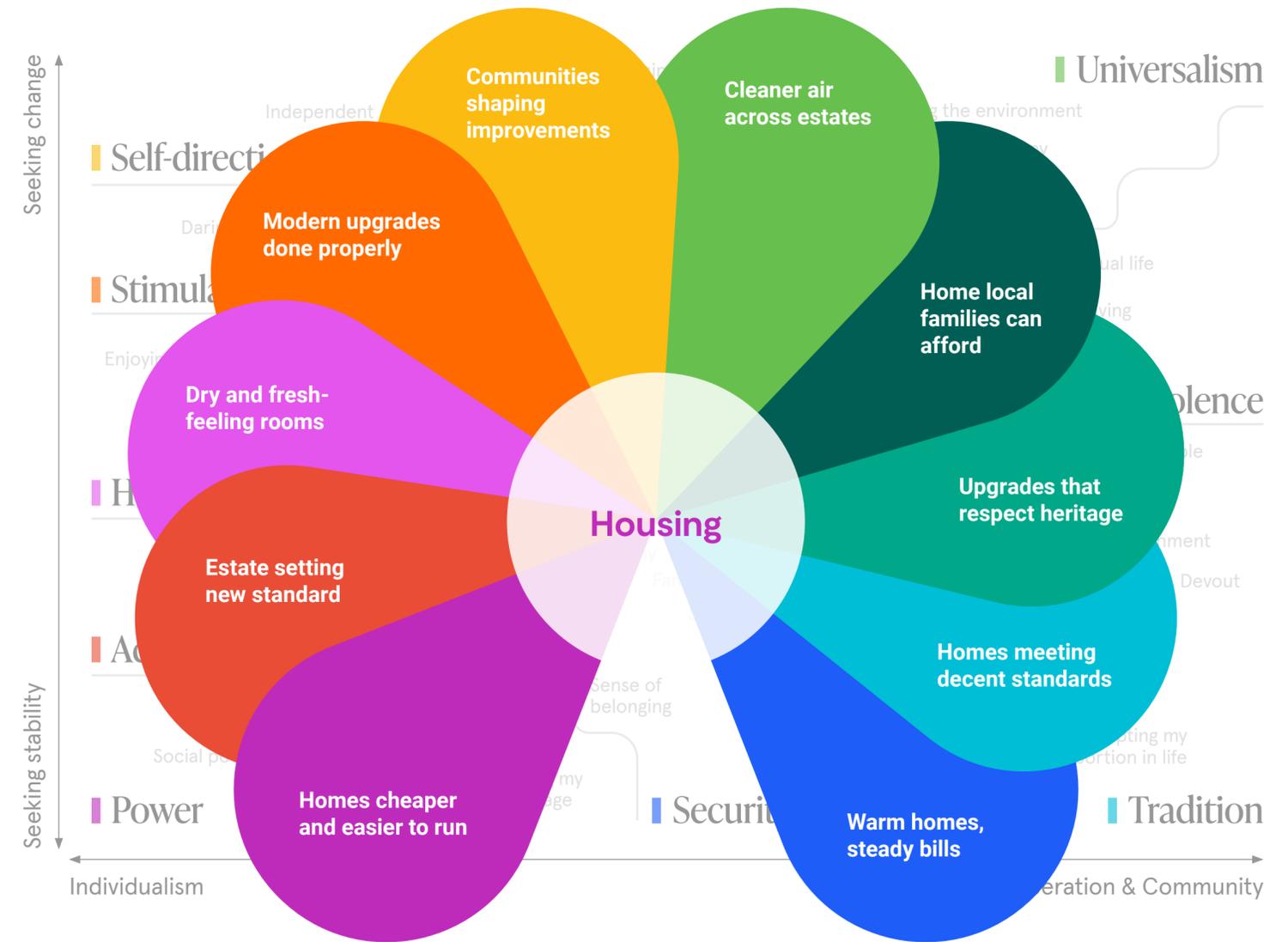
An example of values-based narratives in housing

Here we've taken the example of housing to show you how the stories you tell yourself may be activating different values to those of your stakeholders. Identifying the difference is key to how you then shift your storytelling to meet them where they are at.

Values activated by threat can trigger feelings of fear, loss, blame and create resistance



Values activated by opportunity can trigger feelings of security, care, pride and control



Over to you

More broadly, now think about the best, next conversation you want to have around net zero. Consider what your stakeholders value and need the most.

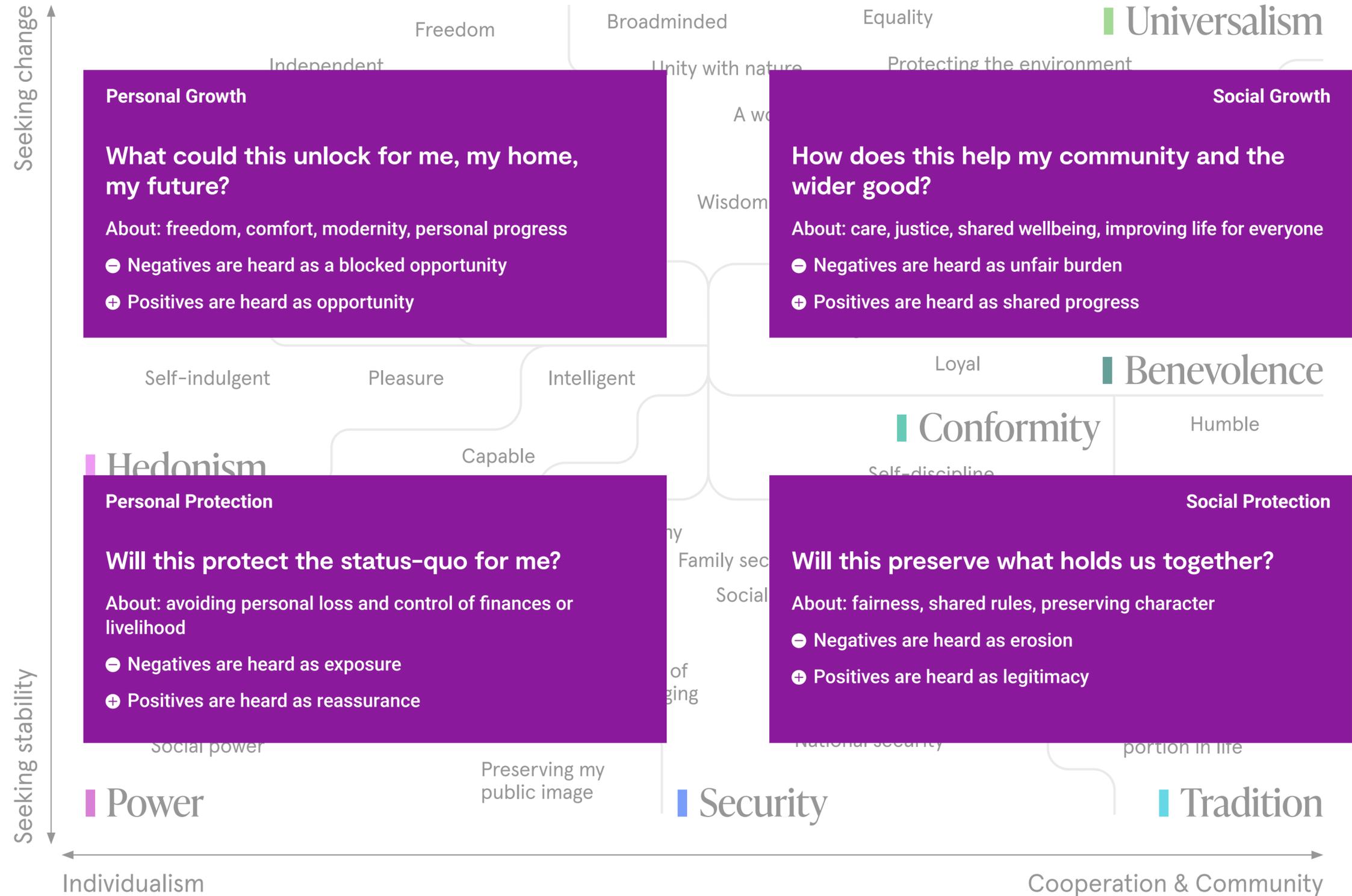
We've created a simplified Values Map to help you do this.

Task 1

Ask yourself:

- who are you engaging?
- what are their values?
- which box do their highest priority values sit in?

Note there are no 'good' or 'bad', preferable or less preferable values.



Principle 2: Show how net zero innovation can help them



☑ Task 2

Describe how this situation can be changed

Step one: Find the core idea that is being heard negatively.

Look for the issue-values combination that is creating anger, fear, confusion, betrayal, despair, anxiety, guilt, envy.

Then make a note on how it might be heard positively by describing how adopting net zero innovation can help resolve these issues and negative experiences to:

- help them feel that they are able to live their values and achieve their goals
- move them to emotions such as surprise, curiosity, connection, relief, empathy, gratitude

And finally, show how this all fits into our common goal of building healthier lives in better places.

Here's what that might be for the person with values of Security, Tradition and Conformity who wants to feel safe, keep things that have worked in the past, and stick to doing what most people do:

“This plan is being backed by people who want to tackle cold, damp and mouldy homes as quickly as possible, while making energy bills more predictable and steady for the long term. It’s been rolled out street by street so we can all get used to a new normal. Ultimately this is about protecting people in our community and keeping our homes strong and secure.”

Did you know?

Showing change in this way echoes a very ancient and basic story pattern that has been used for thousands of generations and which we're wired to respond to:

- 👤 Hero
- ⚡ Conflict
- ✨ Resolution

We find information shared in this way more engaging and memorable. And you can use it to springboard into deeper and richer exchange.

Principle 3: Use language that makes change appealing and easy to understand

To bring your core idea to life in this simple hero-conflict-resolution pattern, make sure you use everyday words and short sentences. Whether you're writing or talking.

Climate and net zero language is usually full of jargon. With the wrong audiences, this is alienating and can create unhelpful anxiety around a topic. It can also be antagonistic.

“Usually, we recommend writing for a maximum reading age of nine, even if you are writing for a specialist audience”

GOV.UK

“The definition of genius is taking the complex and making it simple”

Albert Einstein



✔ Task 3

Creating an elevator pitch

Here are some structures you can use:



Who we help

The problem they have and how we help them solve it

Most of the families or small businesses we help feel stuck with bills that feel like a gamble. If you're burning fuel on site, you're exposed to price swings and a system that's hard to fine-tune. We help modernise that with cleaner electric heating, smarter controls, and upgrades that mean the building uses energy properly. This leaves people with warmer rooms; fewer surprise and costs they can plan for.



The immediate problem

Our inspiration for solving it and how the world looks for them when it's solved

Right now, retrofits feel expensive, confusing and risky. We're here because you shouldn't need to be an expert to make your home comfortable. We give people a clear plan and trusted help, so the house runs better, your investment pays off, and you can get on with life.



What we do

What we do and why, who we help, and how we make things better

We work with towns and small businesses that are being squeezed by rising costs. The twin challenge is wasted energy and money leaving the local area. We help cut waste and power places in smarter ways, so local shops and business owners keep more of what they earn, and neighbourhoods feel healthier and more resilient.

✔ Task 4

Find a case story that fits

One of the easiest and most effective ways to do this, is to share one or two real-life examples where change has happened.

In the 24 hours you have to find and refine one, choose a case story that appeals to the issues and values your audience cares about.

Also consider how well it:

- brings your core idea to life in a more memorable and compelling way
- humanises not just the problem but the journey of change
- helps your audience imagine doing something differently and successfully

Another useful way to share this idea is through an elevator pitch, which we'll look at in [One Week](#).



Quick recap

Who are you engaging? What are their values? What are they hearing when their values are threatened? What are they hearing when their values are positively activated? What is your case study? What is your elevator pitch? Can a 9-year-old understand it?

Improve your ability to do this by preparing one or two elevator-style pitches using your hero, conflict and resolution insights in different combinations.

Quick tips

- How well do you recognise your own values? Work back from the things that give your life shape and help you feel in control. Can you do the same exercise for your audience?
- Asking a relevant and open-ended question in your elevator pitch can make it easier to start or steer a conversation. This could be about the problem (“Did you know...?”) and how it connects to the solution (“and what if we could...?”).

Quick inspiration

- Find relevant examples from the stories of [50 places, funded as part of the Net Zero Living Programme](#), who’ve adopted different types of net zero innovation and made a positive difference to the lives of people who live and work there.
- Read stories about the [experiences of people near you](#) who are shaping and driving a different future through their adoption of new technologies and behaviours.

Quick guidance

- Read our [five minute primer](#) on the power of values.
- More detailed [insight into basic human values](#), how they motivate us and how to use them.
- Get some [tips on keeping it simple](#) from the GOV.UK best practice guidance.

One day

One week

One month

How to have the best, next conversation in...

One week

“What we are saying does make sense. What’s often hard to see is that what the other person is saying also makes sense”

Shelia Heen



Thinking primarily about colleagues and team

The tasks and examples in this section expand to encompass the next layer of stakeholders within the local authority orbit.

Again, these next layers of our audiences are already telling themselves lots of stories about how to meet place-based needs, the role of innovation, and the goal of growth.

But now, with a week to prepare, we can spend more time thinking about what makes our audience feel heroic.

The goal is to share a journey that makes them feel in control, not just of change, but of **who they want to be and who they want to become.**

Principle 1: Find what's important to people

Our conversations are better when we connect with people as humans first and we avoid reducing them and the things we talk about to the boundaries of their job titles.

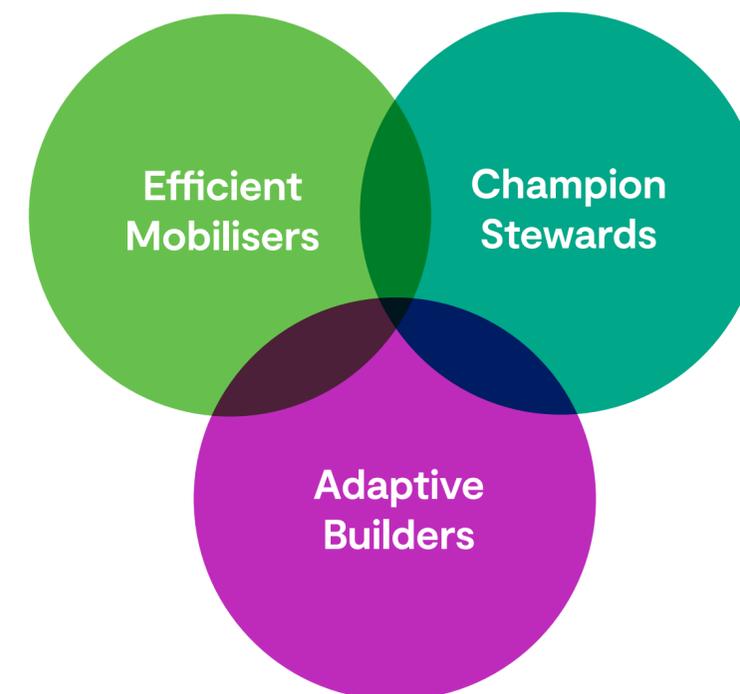
While it's tempting to group people by job titles, roles or responsibilities, we know that messages designed this way are less likely to have impact. This is because the appeal of those messages is immediately limited to a person's responsibilities and functions. As a result, it's easy to find yourself merely addressing and informing people, getting stuck in messaging silos and repeating the same old script about what's possible or not.

Instead, you want to emotionally engage people. You want to appeal to people's deeper motivations, so they see themselves as part of a larger story, living their values and becoming who they want to be. A powerful place to start is simple identity roles like provider, protector, problem-solver, carer, craftsperson, community-builder, local patriot, steward of public money.

This approach is especially useful when you may not know someone personally and are unable to easily identify their values. For example, presenting to a room.

Audience persona from the Net Zero Living Programme

By looking at local authorities taking part in Innovate UK's Net Zero Living Programme, and using values and identity roles, we have identified three common personas:



● Efficient Mobilisers

Common across senior government officials, departmental programme leads and civil servants, chief finance officers, from corporates, local authorities, and NGOs, company executives, large scale infrastructure investors, investment officers, foundation directors, ESG leads, planners.

Values-based persona

Core driver is efficiency and control, often anchored in a sense of achievement, responsibility, and fairness. They are guardians of public value and/or custodians of private investment. They draw power from mobilising resources and are driven by smart decisions. They prioritise financial sustainability and return on investment and value foresight.

Dominant values: Power, Achievement, Security

● Champion Stewards

Common across local authority officers, mayors, councillors, heads of civic engagement, urban planners, NGO directors, community leaders and coordinators, social entrepreneurs, charities.

Values-based persona

People who connect systems and citizens. Bridge builders. Leads with what matters locally. They are driven by integrity of process including inclusion and fairness. They look at the whole picture of transition, trusting in the collective and community intelligence. They are translators of civic needs and what communities value most.

Dominant values: Universalism, Benevolence, Tradition

● Adaptive Builders

Common across programme and project managers in energy, infrastructure, housing and local development, technical specialists, innovation leads, and chief executives of start-up companies and small to medium enterprises.

Values-based persona

They have a pragmatic approach to getting what can be done, for improving local resilience and quality of life, now. Their ecosystem mindset seeks low-friction environments and pathways. They believe that people and places thrive when empowered to act and that the best way to meet long-term needs is earning trust by building things that work.

Dominant values: Self-Direction, Benevolence, Stimulation

Principle 2: Show how net zero innovation can help them

Our goal is to place your stakeholder within a net zero how story in a way that emotionally engages their sense of self.

So, with your insight into who they want to be, ask yourself:

1. What situations would threaten this individual's or group's sense of self, which they would seek to avoid? What situations make them feel undermined or out of control? What keeps them up at night?
2. What situations would enhance this person's or group's sense of self, which they would seek to achieve? What situations make them feel effective and credible? What gives them pride?

This is called identity stress.

This is called identity growth.

Think about real conversations you've had in the past. Also, use the example situations and phrases that signal identity stress and growth on the following page.

✔ Task 1

Creating a persona

Is your stakeholder an Efficient Mobiliser, Champion Steward or Adaptive Builder?

If not,

- how would you describe their identity-role in a couple of words?
- and what are their values? Use the Schwartz Values Map on [page 8](#)

Write a short persona that captures their values and identity driven behaviours.

You might also find inspiration in these [further personas and scenarios](#) that were encountered in the Net Zero Living Programme.



Conversations that reduce stress and create positivity

Example situations that show how personal stress or opportunities for growth can occur or be created for each of three values-based personas. And example phrases that illustrate how to alleviate the stress or enhance the opportunity for growth.

● Efficient Mobilisers

Phrases that can reduce identity stress

“We can structure this so you retain oversight of the key levers.”

“We can phase this so there are no surprises.”

“This positions you as the architect of a long-term fix, not a short-term patch.”

“We’re already spending the money. This just makes it work harder.”

“Upfront investment, but will lower operating costs and fewer emergency fixes.”

Phrases that can activate identity growth

“You’re in a unique position to align policy, capital and cross system delivery in a way others can’t.”

“This is how we secure durable savings rather than temporary wins.”

“It protects affordability for residents and stability for the authority.”

“There are trade-offs, but they’re manageable and we can map them clearly.”

“This gives you better visibility of risk rather than less.”

● Champion Stewards

Phrases that can reduce identity stress

“This builds on what’s already strong about this place.”

“We can design this so residents shape how it works here.”

“Nothing about this has to be done to people, it can all be done with them.”

“This is a way of making sure communities and neighbourhoods benefit first.”

“We can prioritise areas that have missed out before.”

Phrases that can activate identity growth

“You’d be helping residents shape their own future.”

“This is about giving people more agency over their homes and bills.”

“It’s innovation that works for everyone, not just early adopters.”

“This could become a shared story of what we know this city stands for.”

“If done well, this rebuilds trust because people can see and feel it.”

● Adaptive Builders

Phrases that can reduce identity stress

“Let’s pilot it and prove it works rather than over-designing.”

“Let’s only commit to what we can deliver in the next 12 months.”

“We can set clear milestones and show progress quickly.”

“The bigger risk is standing still.”

“This gives local businesses and residents certainty.”

Phrases that can activate identity growth

“You could unlock this region’s next wave of growth.”

“This is about making the area more liveable and investable.”

“There are good ideas waiting and this gives them a route through.”

“We can create a coalition of doers rather than another working group.”

“Let’s make it real, then scale.”

✔ Task 2

Build out the conversation structure

Once you've crafted your own values-based persona and mapped out some scenarios that represent risk or growth opportunities for them when they want to be seen at their best, you can now build out the structure of your planned conversation.

This model (in the far right box) expands the basic "Hero, Conflict, Resolution" journey into something closer to a proven structure for a persuasive conversation.

You can use this model to continue to develop your case stories from One Day—either by reflecting the whole conversational structure or by using their richness to go deeper into part of it. For example:

- illustrating the problem worth solving and juxtaposing both the implications of either doing nothing and losing, or doing something and being successful
- evidencing what you've already done to show and prove how you can help again

Elevator pitch example

For example, an expansion of the third elevator pitch in One Day might be:

If you're running a small business or involved in a town centre, you've probably felt how tight things have become. Costs keep rising, especially energy, and it can feel like money is just leaking out of the local area. Have you ever looked at your bills and thought, where is all of this actually going?

The problem isn't just high prices; it's also wasted energy and systems that were never designed to be efficient or resilient. When buildings waste power, local

businesses needlessly lose money and erode their margins.

If nothing changes, that squeeze will just keep getting worse. But when energy is used smarter, businesses keep more of what they earn, costs become easier to manage, and money stays circulating locally. What would it mean for your business, or our town, if that money stayed closer to home?

That's where we come in. We help communities and small businesses cut waste and power communities in smarter ways, upgrading buildings and local systems

so they cost less to run and work better long-term.

We focus on practical changes that actually stack up and pay back, financially and locally, not continuing to use old technologies or complicated schemes.

The first step is simply understanding where energy and money are being lost right now, and what's realistically worth fixing first.



Make this about them, build empathy



Describe the problem worth solving



Implications of doing nothing and falling behind



Demonstrate HOW you can help, now



Answer WHY you



Suggest WHAT first steps

Principle 3: Use language that makes change appealing and easy to understand

Our choice of language influences how people think and feel.

The timing and placement of language within the structure of a conversation matters too.

Two important examples are:

- how you describe groups and places
- whether you lead with the problem or the solution

Define people by their aspirations, capabilities and contributions

It's important to centre people's real experiences, which hopefully you're able to do in their own words.

When you need to speak on behalf of others, it's important to take care to avoid defining people and places by the problems they face. No person or community wants to feel inadequate, powerless or stigmatised.

A simple way to do this is to start by defining people by their ambition and achievements before mentioning their challenges.

Likewise, it is more effective to frame the entire conversation about creating better places together and less about fixing broken systems of places.

You can do this and still have a conversation that:

- is full of facts and evidence
- uses conflict and jeopardy for gaining and directing attention
- responds to and creates emotions

You're just doing this with a consideration for language that helps place people inside a story of change that makes them feel positively in control.

That's the emotional bridge between why change matters and buying into the processes of change using net zero innovation.

Inspirational sources of wisdom that can also build your know-how

If you're interested in finding personas that represent the general public, then use the excellently researched and presented [Seven Segments](#) by More in Common.

Learn more about the responsibilities, interests and needs of people working in local authorities who took part in the Net Zero Living Programme. The [Creating Better Places Handbook](#) introduces 'how' local innovation can improve lives and unlock growth in ten key areas.

Resource Pack 4 in the Creating Better Places series shares ideas for best practice in handling political and institutional change as a chance to reset priorities, strengthen governance and build on what works.

Read more about the principle of [Asset Framing](#) and the power of defining people by their aspirations, capabilities and contributions.

One day

One week

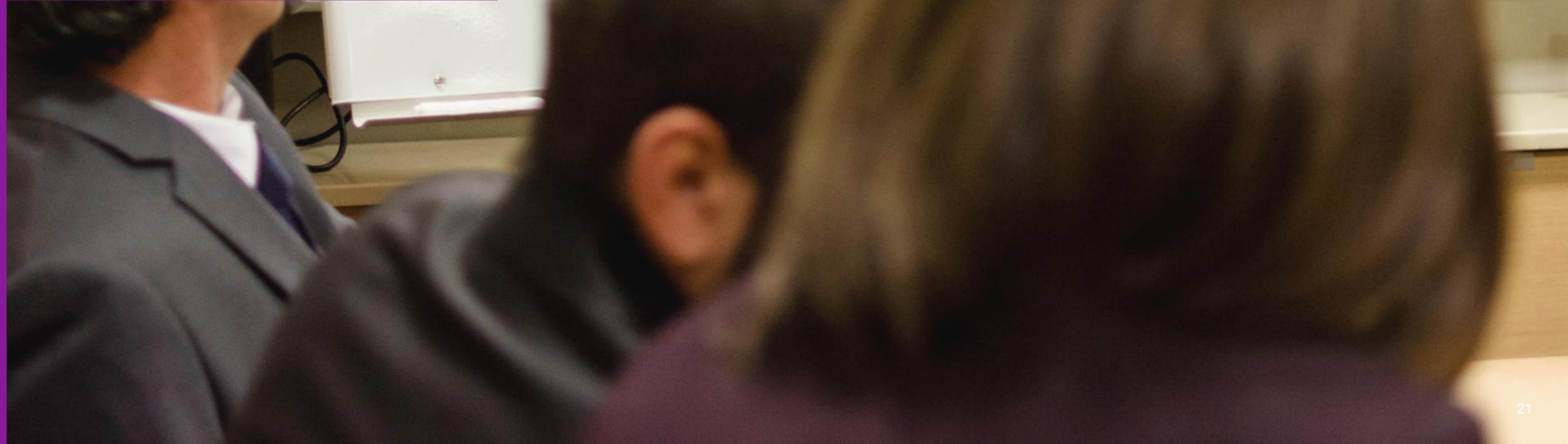
One month

How to have the best, next conversation in...

One month

“The true spirit of dialogue is not to conquer, but to understand”

David Bohm



Thinking primarily about stakeholders in the system

Wherever you show up for a conversation and whatever your goal, we want people to feel that you're the right person, at the right time, with the right story.

With more time to prepare, you can bring together what you've learned in [One Day](#) and [One Week](#):

- start with your audience and the stories they're already telling themselves, especially those that define them in terms of their aspirations and capabilities
- show empathy for the urgent problems that threaten what they value the most
- aim to make them feel in control of using or deploying net zero innovation, not just as a way to solve problems but to be who they want to become

Then develop it into a more structured journey of change story, with:

- a richer detail of what their key challenges are why you have what it takes to help them successfully overcome those challenges
- emotional hooks and language reinforcing the attractiveness of a logical pathway, from problem to solution

The goal is to create a conversation that resonates with partners who pride themselves on rational decision-making but, like all of us, are emotional and irrational decision makers too.

Principle 1: How to find what's important to people

A quick bit of research will go a long way in helping you make a best first impression. Especially with potential partners that are adjacent to or outside the world of local authority.

☑ Task 1

Build out the conversation structure

A straightforward exercise is to check in with an organisation's or programme's mission statement, "north star metric" or strategic priorities. All of these will help to give you a good sense of their current goals and the high-level challenges.

Select three where decarbonisation can help both solve the challenge and turn it into a new opportunity.

Why three challenges?

1. It's easy to remember
2. It's a small and satisfying pattern
3. It feels actionable



Which three challenges?

1. Those that have the clearest relevance to a problem that you can help solve
2. Those that invite exploration of how you can solve them
3. Those that cover the human, technical and financial areas of interest

Challenges were found in the Net Zero Living Programme

Let's explore what makes high-level challenges difficult to overcome. These are common (but not exhaustive) themes found in the Net Zero Living Programme:

Technical challenges

Can we actually do this?

Immature technologies

Systems interdependence

Infrastructure lock-in

Supply chain engagement

Data quality and gaps

Human challenges

Will people support or adopt this?

Behavioural dependency

Equity and fairness

Capability and skills gaps

Trust and credibility risks

Insights into unmet needs

Financial challenges

Does the money work?

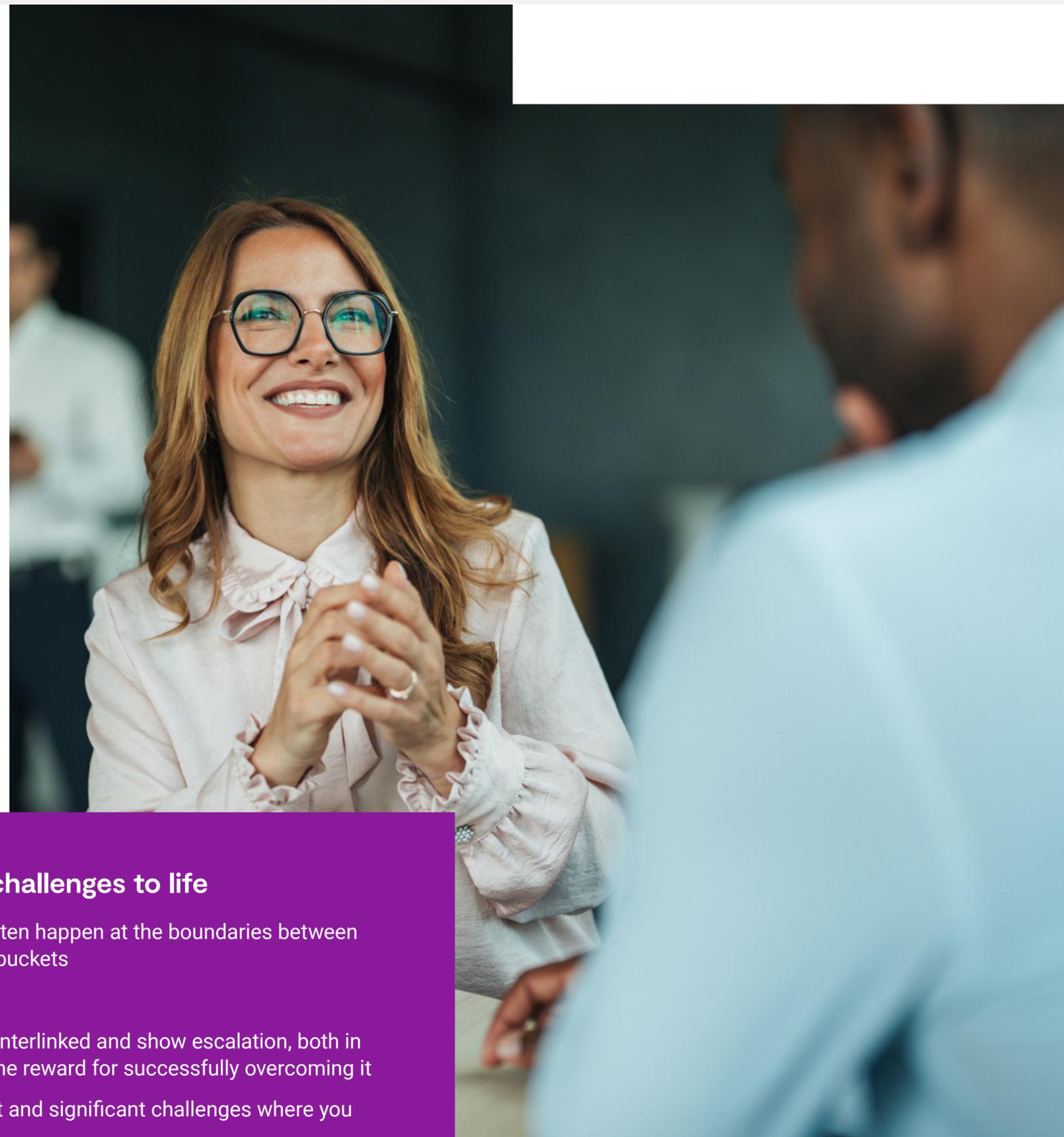
High upfront capital costs

Unclear or misaligned incentives

First mover disadvantage

Cost pass-through limits

Policy uncertainty on subsidies



Top tips for bringing your challenges to life

- The most compelling challenges often happen at the boundaries between the technical, human and financial buckets
- Write them as problem statements
- Choose the three that are logically interlinked and show escalation, both in the difficulty of the challenge and the reward for successfully overcoming it

Remember, you are looking for urgent and significant challenges where you can play a role in solving them.



Principle 2: Show how net zero innovation can help them

Change is hard. Which is why we need to work together.

What we observed throughout the Net Zero Living Programme is that help comes from local authorities' unique position to reduce risk, accelerate learning, and unlock action. This often shows up as:

Power to convene. For example, from co-ordination across internal silos to external parties

Permission and legitimacy. For example, from mandate or endorsement to community relations

Real world conditions to innovate in. For example, from housing stock to diverse communities

Proof and trusted insights. For example, from access to data to lived experience

Pathways to scale. For example, from pilots to new local markets

Interconnected services and benefits. For example, from social care to education

Breadth of benefits. For example, from cost efficiencies to mental and physical health

Read more

Learn how places across the UK are overcoming challenges and driving growth amongst their communities through our series of [impact stories](#) and rich library of [reports and insights](#).

Net zero as the how, not the why

Be clear about the challenges faced and be confident in how we meet them.

We want to use our conversations to show how net zero innovation can secure and strengthen places, so people have more opportunities to live their best lives.

To do this, you need to also raise your status as mentor or ally for the stakeholder facing those key challenges.



✔ Task 2

Think of your value in the fullest terms

What are all the different ways that people benefit because of your help in tackling a challenge? What do they learn, experience, gain? How do they change?



✔ Task 3

Create greater confidence through shared belief

Partners need more than just practical and tangible reasons to work together. Here's your chance as a mentor or ally to also create the belief they need that this might actually work.

To build that belief, you need to see your conversation as a way to help people look afresh and feel energised, which you can do by also offering them:

-  a new reason why the time is right to act
-  an easy first step
-  the conviction that what's really needed is a mindset shift or transformation in single attitude or behaviour

These three elements represent classic building blocks in storytelling that help raise the emotional stakes of change.

The reason why the time to act is now:

- new information that grabs our attention
- can have a both a pull and push effect, inspiring and forcing us into change
- for example, why seize this moment to do something differently

An easy first step:

- symbolic but real commitment of time, reputation or resources
- signal of everyone's willingness to work differently
- for example, an agreement to test, learn or share

The mindset, belief or behaviour that stands in the way of change:

- not about blaming others or creating enemies but to focus energy
- may be belief in a system logic that's keeping people trapped, such as business as usual, short-termism, or fragmentation
- needs to be described in terms of how it shows up locally, in people's daily lives.

“One good conversation can shift the direction of the change forever”

Linda Lam

Use the power of storytelling to align your stakeholders

While we each have our own frontlines and next conversations to preoccupy us, we all see how net zero innovation can help places all around the UK thrive while solving our most urgent problems today.

Stories are one of the most powerful and instinctive ways we have for exchanging information about what works. The reasons for using storytelling in your system-stakeholder conversations include:

- we're persuaded by relatable, inspiring experiences more than rational arguments
- a mindset shift, as a result of changing the story we tell ourselves, is a fundamental lever of change

- evidence of change shows up in stories long before it appears in data
- when stories of change emerge from many places and people, momentum builds
- when our stories align, our impact grows

But the landscape for storytelling is tougher: more noise, fragmented channels, echo chambers, shorter attention spans, polarisation, and less trust. To reach a tipping point, we need better messengers, repeated signals, and stories that pull in the same direction.

Together, we can tell thousands of better stories to shift the narrative.

✔ Task 4

Find the story to use in your conversation

Use the framework to capture the key ideas, that you've refined through the one-day, one-week, and one-month tasks.

Use these building blocks or story beats to infuse your ideas into your current storytelling, from conversations and posts to programmes and reports.

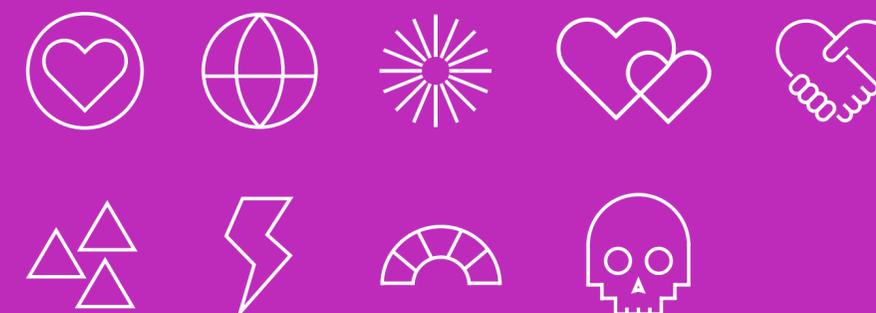
Use it to keep developing, testing, sharing and evolving your 'net zero as HOW' conversations and stories.

Can you use it to co-create a bigger, shared story of change with partners and across systems and places, which permeates every conversation?

The building blocks for a story of change

The icons used throughout this playbook represent the building blocks or story beats behind the most powerful stories of change, from Star Wars and Harry Potter to NASA and the NHS.

The framework brings those elements together. So you can see how it works, on the next page is an example of the building blocks underpinning the keystone story for the Net Zero Living Programme, and used to guide and align how it communicates.



A blank story framework is in the appendix for you to use to create your own story of change. Visit the [Stronger Stories website](#) to learn more about it.

Building block

Why it matters

The key idea for creating better places

Why it works

**Everyday Heroes**

Values driven group or individual to be inspired to do something different

We're a social species; people are interested in people. When our audience shares or relates to the values of these heroes, it creates empathy and means our audience cares how the story turns out

Seeking to use the new waves of innovation to transform local systems and services to make places better

This is an attitude that is held and recognised by likeminded individuals, from local authorities to businesses and communities. And any values can be the source of motivation

**Ordinary World**

The everyday that is becoming increasingly frustrating for our heroes to live in

This deepens further when we feel and share our heroes' frustration, and this makes us believe why they would take on the challenge of doing things differently.

Places sliding backwards, increase in place-based threats, gaps between national policy and local delivery, harder for investment

Easy to adapt to the personal and local experience of different people and places. Something people feel and can see and describe

**Compelling Villain**

An attention-grabbing manifestation of the behaviour that stands in the way of change

A compelling villain raises the stakes, grabs the audience's attention, and makes change really matter. Our audience should want to see this villain defeated as much as the heroes do

Not taking the opportunity and being left behind

However it manifests for people and places, it represents a moral failure that everyone will agree needs to be avoided, escaped or defeated

**Call to Adventure**

The trigger for change

People care about what sparks others to act, and what might compel someone to embark on a journey of change.

Innovation mandate for local authorities to discover "how"

Innovate UK recognises local authorities are key to unlocking business growth and are given permission to approach the adoption of net zero innovation differently

**Crossing the Threshold**

The first step on a journey of change and the point of no return

It is always easier to root for people who are committed to change. The step towards change can be small but it needs to be significant, with no going back.

Commitment to tackle non-technological barriers and to share with other places

Upfront acknowledgment by all participants that this Programme's approach to change starts with a shift in mindset and relationships

**Mentors, Allies and Gifts**

The givers of wisdom and help that is needed for our heroes to make change happen successfully

Our audience will judge the likelihood of success through the company our heroes keep. Support from mentors and allies will help the audience believe our heroes can do things differently.

Bring together the business and local authority journeys to commercialisation for place-based innovation

Innovate UK is a reason to believe in making change happen because of its convening power and insights into the commercialisation of innovation within place-based systems

**Three Challenges**

Three difficult but confidence-building hurdles to be overcome. Represent the biggest risks and rewards.

Change is hard. Our audience will want to know what challenges our heroes face, how they overcome them, and what they learn from each experience. It makes the story more believable and more likely to mobilise our audience themselves into action.

1. Optimisation of the opportunity on all sides. For example, capacity, agency, plans
2. Identification of what's happening to inform and accelerate adoption
3. Formalisation and commercialisation of what's worked, ready to scale

Show a simple pathway for HOW net zero innovation can be adopted, through the three steps of discovering, articulating and scaling

This allows a deep dive into any topic, from community engagement to shaping investible portfolios or accessing new markets

**Better World**

The positive change and difference the heroes have made for others and themselves.

Our audience wants to see how our heroes have changed themselves, and how the world around them is now better. In our story we need to prove why the journey itself is worthwhile.

Growth of UK businesses unlocked through new local authority market making, increasing prosperity, security and optimism in all places

Can be tailored to the individual journey each place wishes to undergo and represent the national growth mission and next generation of UK businesses that can lead the future global economy

Principle 3: Use language that makes change appealing and easy to understand

Even in today's complex world, the greatest influences on our narrative-hungry, pattern-seeking brains are still the rags to riches, quest, rebirth or other stories that we've told for thousands of generations.

These patterns represent different types of journeys where we feel familiar with the characters, energy and outcomes. And the right language is a short cut for us to tune in, align our expectations and get excited.

Task 5

Identify the type of journey partners would like to be part of. By doing so, you'll find the natural language that will appeal to them.

Use this table to get you started...



For a 'rebirth' journey

Film reference:
Groundhog Day or The Shawshank Redemption

Do people feel ashamed or stuck? Do we need a reset to begin again?

Engaging language is about renewal, clarity and seeing things differently, letting go and second chances



For an 'overcoming the monster' journey

Film reference:
Jaws or Jurassic Park

Do people feel threatened? Do we need to take down the overdog?

Engaging language is about underdogs, moral clarity, no longer accepting, standing up to and protection



For a 'rags to riches' journey

Film reference:
Slumdog Millionaire or Rocky

Do people feel powerless or underestimated? Do we need to build something better?

Engaging language is about being overlooked, limited resources, willingness, agency, momentum and earning progress



For a 'quest' journey

Film reference:
The Lord of the Rings or Finding Nemo

Do people need meaning and direction? Do we unite around a compelling vision of the future?

Engaging language is about purpose, mission and commitment, change is hard, but the destination matters



For a 'voyage and return' journey

Film reference:
Back to the Future or Cast Away

Do people need reassurance and proof? Do we learn through experiences together?

Engaging language is about curiosity, lowering the stakes, experimentation and discovery, sharing insight and wisdom

Top tip

If you describe or draft your case stories with a story type in mind, you'll naturally use language that adds to their power and potency. And the advantage of paying attention to your language throughout your whole conversation is your ability to stir emotions, fire up imaginations and be memorable.

Final thought on the power of listening

We're encouraging you to reflect on what you've heard in previous conversations to help prepare for your next one. But you can also develop your active listening skills to be better able to respond in the moment.

Conversations, like stories, are often non-linear, living and messy things. But that allows you the chance to stop and explore, loop back around or follow the flow. The language other people use is a great way to learn what people really feel and want to feel.

You may hear new ideas, new challenges or things you didn't want to know but you may have to be prepared to accept them if you are to find an agreed way forward.

**“When people talk,
listen completely.
Most people never listen”**

Ernest Hemingway



Further reading

[Origins of Design Thinking at IDEO and why we need to consider the human, financial and technical elements together](#)

Introduction to Otto Scharmer's four levels of listening to help you open your mind, heart and willingness for better conversations:

[3 min read and 8 min video](#)

Taking conversations and relationships in the community to the next level? Read [Regen's Insights Report on empowering communities, sharing learnings from the Net Zero Living Programme](#). From early, meaningful engagement in local decision making and helping people navigate complex choices, to spreading the wealth through community led action.

Appendix



Everyday heroes

The group or individual to be inspired to do things differently



Ordinary world

The everyday world which is increasingly frustrating for our hero to live in



Better world

The positive change to the hero and the difference the hero has made



Crossing the threshold

The first step and point of no return



Mentors and gifts

Giver of wisdom and support



Call to adventure

The trigger for change which could be the pull of inspiration or the push of necessity



Allies and gifts

The people and help that is needed for change to happen



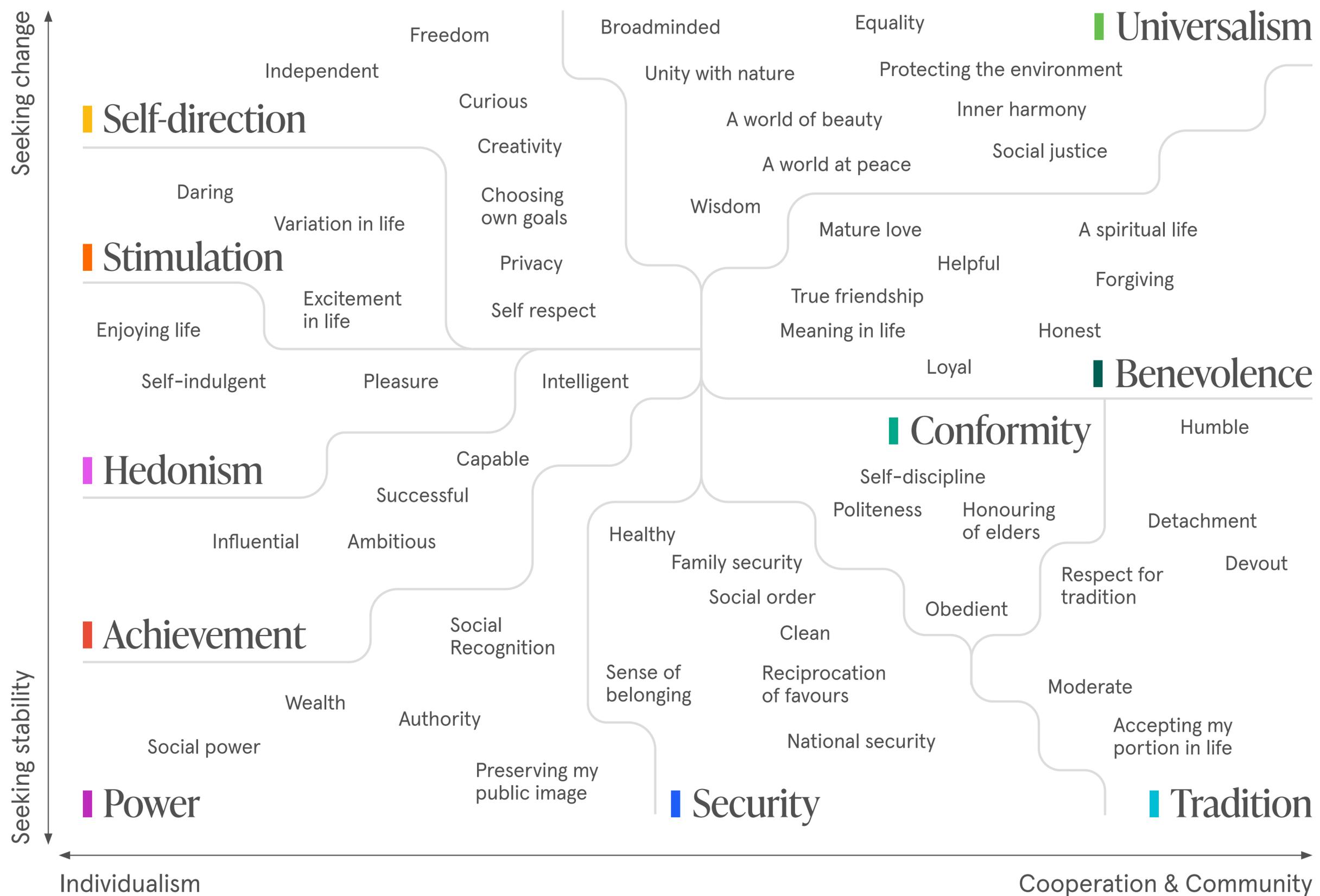
Compelling villain

An attention-grabbing manifestation of the selfish behaviour that stands in the way of change



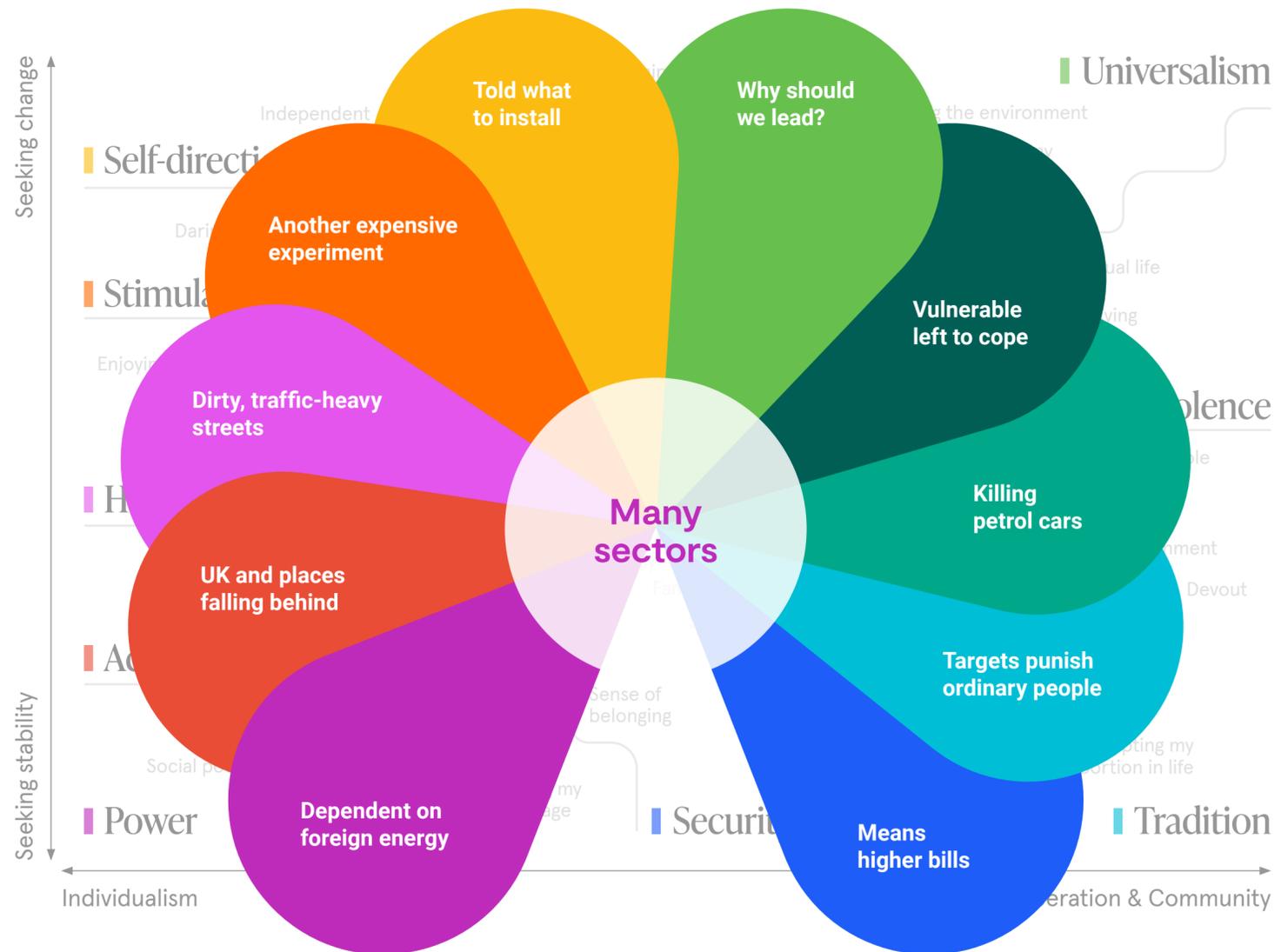
Three challenges

Three difficult but confidence-building hurdles to be overcome

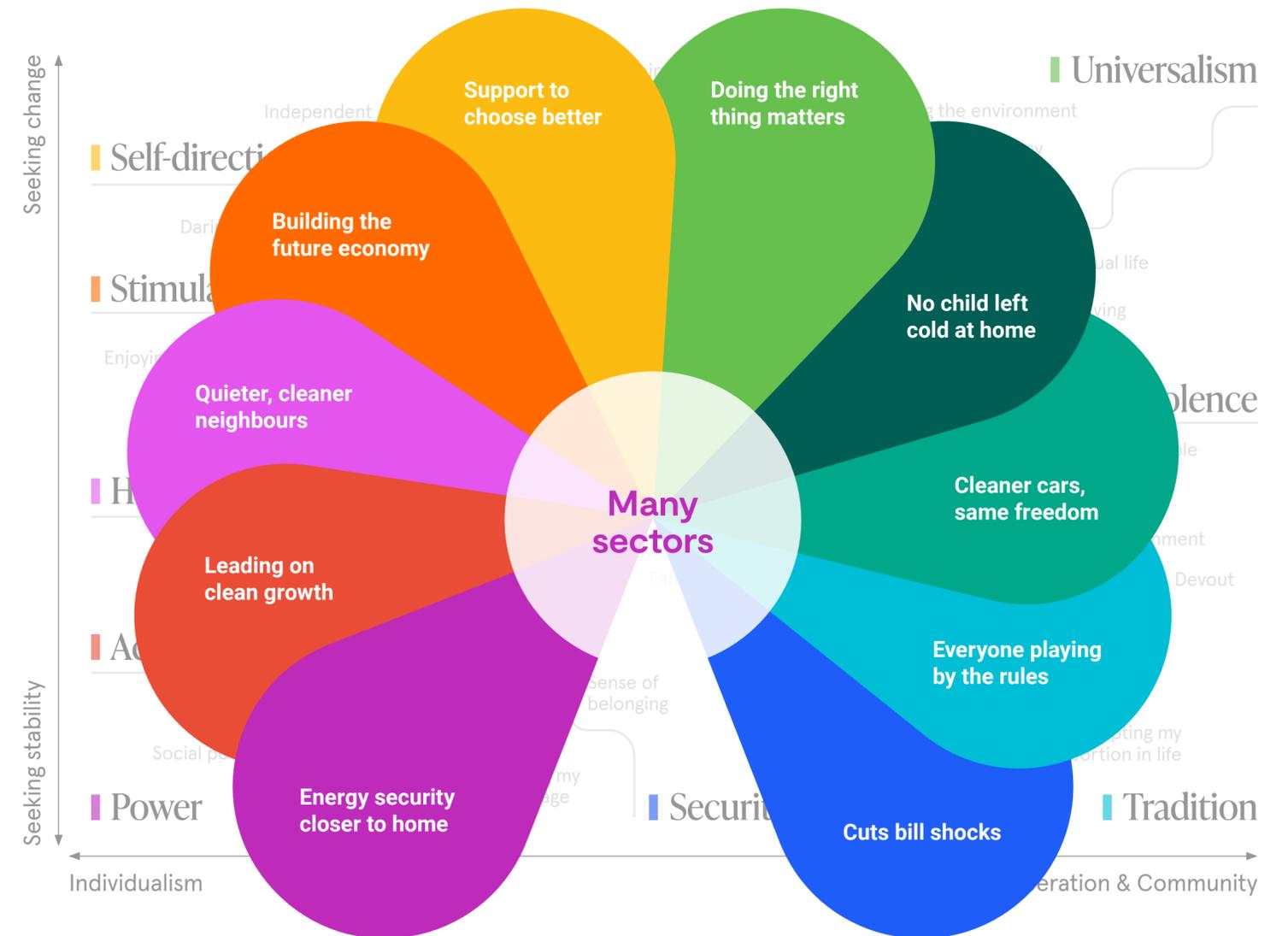


Values-based narrative across many sectors

Values activated by threat can trigger feelings of fear, loss, blame and create resistance



Values activated by opportunity can trigger feelings of security, care, pride and control



“Connect on your similarities, and benefit from your differences”

Valdis Krebs

Delivered by

**STRONGER
STORIES**

About the Net Zero Living Programme

Innovate UK's £60 million Net Zero Living Programme is helping local authorities and businesses work together to deliver new solutions that improve local services and open markets for economic growth.

Places across the UK are seizing the opportunities that come with decarbonisation to create warmer homes, cheaper local energy, new skills, and more secure work for their communities. But often, while the technology is available, places face barriers in areas such as resources, investment, planning and buy-in.

The 52 local authorities taking part in the Programme have generated a wealth of experience on overcoming systemic barriers to net zero solutions. This guide draws on their experience and is designed to help all local authorities facing similar challenges.

About Stronger Stories

Stronger Stories works at the intersection of storytelling and change. We explore how narratives shape belief, trust and collective action. And how leaders can create the conditions for better stories to emerge when their world shifts. Our work draws on the science of storytelling and real-world case studies to help organisations navigate change with greater clarity and agency.

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Innovate UK does not endorse the content of this report and the document does not reflect the opinions or views of Innovate UK or its affiliate organisations.

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