



Climate Change and Biodiversity: Connecting voters with politicians

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"Every little thing we can do matters."

Alice

"I want my children's generation to grow up knowing we did everything in our power."

Niki



"I commit to keep highlighting the plight of our biodiversity." Charlie

"There is nothing more important."

Benjamin



Executive Summary

The Commitment and Hope for the Future share the objective of accelerating UK government action on climate change and biodiversity loss. As part of their ongoing collaboration as partners, in late 2020 and early 2021, they undertook a joint research project to test and improve their models of political engagement. This was centred around interviews with MPs, members of the devolved parliaments and Councillors.

Politicians responded positively to The Commitment's approach, describing it as 'unique' and 'refreshing'. This is because:

- It requires significant effort from citizens, demonstrating strong conviction.
- It gives a voice directly to individual citizens, often with considerable emotive and narrative power.
- It is powerful in numerical terms: a Commitment from one voter reflects a significant number of other voters who share the same thinking.

Hope For the Future was seen as providing a crucial platform for effective citizen engagement that is grounded in knowledge and local voices. The intimate meetings with voters were seen as an exciting opportunity to delve into the local perspective on environmental issues, and their preparatory training was viewed as useful.

It was clear from the research that both organisations offer an important connection between voters and politicians.

Key findings for The Commitment:

- ✗ Politicians are readily engaged and interested
- ✗ The Commitment is clearly differentiated from petitions and similar campaigning tools
- ✗ Politicians are clear that one Commitment represents significantly more votes
- ✗ The personal statements and images in Commitments are powerful
- ✗ Most politicians are interested in the demographics of Commitments

Key findings for Hope for the Future:

- ✗ Politicians value local and personal correspondence
- ✗ Building mutually meaningful relationships with politicians, through finding common ground, is an effective approach to engagement
- ✗ Approaching politicians with specific requests is much more likely to lead to action than raising general concerns
- ✗ Face-to-face contact with politicians leaves a lasting impression and allows for a more in-depth discussion
- ✗ HFTF's training and support provides a better experience for constituents and MPs, leading to improved outcomes

Key findings for both organisations:

- ✗ Relating issues of climate and biodiversity to other salient issues is important for politicians
- ✗ Proposing realistic asks and goals to politicians improves citizens' engagement with them
- ✗ Direct communication from voters is key in getting politicians' attention

Introduction

The Commitment

The Commitment gives citizens something simple and powerful to do to put climate change and biodiversity loss higher up the political agenda. Its culture is positive, collaborative, forward-looking and strictly non-aligned with any political party or position. There is no suggestion that citizens should vote in a particular way: depending on their voting history, attitudes and local conditions they might vote for any party.

In making The Commitment, citizens declare that they will put the health of the planet at the heart of their decision when they vote, and they explain why they are doing this, often adding images to their words. Citizens' Commitments are then aggregated and taken to their local politicians to demonstrate the strength of demand for change (see Figure 1). The Commitment works outside of Westminster as well as within, engaging with MPs, members of the devolved administrations, mayors and councillors. All these levels of government have significant power over the drivers of climate change and biodiversity loss.

Anyone making The Commitment is invited, optionally, to give more information about themselves: their age, gender, ethnicity, level of education and voting habits. Together with social media profiling, this demonstrates wide support across the whole of society.

The Commitment works directly with politicians, rather than through the institutions of government. By showing them that there are significant numbers of votes to win or lose on the issues of climate and biodiversity, it appeals directly to politicians' strongest motivator: winning elections so that they can bring about change.

The Commitment does not recommend policy or comment on specific local or national issues, nor does it suggest to citizens that they change the way they vote. The intention is to put the climate and nature higher up the political agenda as a whole, for all politicians. As with any other major political issue, for example the NHS or the economy, voters generally express their overall concern, leave the details of policy to politicians, and later judge the results.

We believe that The Commitment is well timed. For the first time, there is sufficient and rising demand for decisive action on climate change and biodiversity loss. The Commitment's role is to demonstrate that demand to politicians.

Figure 1: How The Commitment works



Introduction

Hope for the Future

Hope for the Future (HFTF) is a leading specialist in training citizens to work with politicians on climate change. HFTF's vision is to see politicians of all political persuasions joining together with each other and with communities across the UK to take decisive action on climate change.

Many campaigners and constituents say that they simply do not know what they can ask their MP to do, how to speak with MPs of differing political values, or who else they can contact who has the capacity to influence climate progress in their area. In response to this need, HFTF offers tailored training, and one-to-one support to constituents to work with their political representatives on the climate and biodiversity crises. HFTF's support guides constituents through the whole process, from sending their initial letter to seeing their MP or Councillor take concrete action.

Grounded in first-hand experience gathered since their creation in 2013 and advice from MPs themselves, HFTF's approach draws from a range of disciplines including conflict resolution, counselling, influencing theory and climate communications. Knowing that effective communication is the key to change, HFTF supports people to build relationships with their elected representatives with the aim of sparking the systemic change needed to meet the increasing urgency of the climate crisis. HFTF has a proven track record of engaging with MPs from across the political spectrum on the issue of climate change, and since becoming a charity in 2017, has trained over 4,000 people and engaged over 150 MPs and 17 councils.

HFTF's project work with schools and youth, faith groups, and a cross-section of society enables them to support a range of demographics to meet their MP. For many people, stumbling blocks for engaging their MP include time constraints, with MP surgeries often on Friday daytimes when so many adults are at work, and the time pressures involved in researching topics and policy areas. The support offered by HFTF's team including research, letter writing and MP meeting support is valuable for increasing the accessibility of MP engagement. However, there is still a long way to go and HFTF will continue to increase the accessibility of their work for all demographics.

HFTF is committed to building a more diverse and inclusive climate movement, and works hard to break down the barriers many people face to taking action. They are proud to work with individuals from a diverse range of backgrounds and experiences, regardless of their race, gender, sexuality, faith, and whether they are differently-abled or with neurodiversities. They believe that everyone should have the opportunity to have their voices heard on the issues that matter most to them.



Context

Political action

Politicians in the UK now generally accept the seriousness of climate change and biodiversity loss. Climate emergencies have been declared by the governments of the UK, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and by 300 out of 404 local councils in the UK. The Dasgupta Review (Dasgupta, 2021) argues that urgent action to protect and restore nature is required to ensure a sustainable economy. Failure to act brings us further down our current path of undermining the very foundations of our prosperity, resulting in deeper inequalities and suffering within our own species and others.

While more is being done, action has not kept pace with targets and rhetoric. In this research project, The Commitment and HFTF explored how their models of engagement could encourage politicians to do more.

In Too Hot to Handle (2020), Rebecca Willis argues that politicians generally underestimate the strength of public opinion on climate change and that deeper engagement is essential in tackling the climate crisis. It is widely recognised that climate change is as much of a social issue as it is a technical one (Chilvers et al., 2017; The Committee on Climate Change, 2020). However, politicians generally fail to involve citizens in climate action, which leads to citizens feeling unheard, disillusioned and disempowered (Wang et al., 2020).

An opportunity to create greater engagement on climate change with new forms of political participation.

Converting an understanding of an issue into vocal support and action is not straightforward. Willis (2020) highlights the persisting fallacy in the scientific and policy making communities that scientific evidence will inevitably translate into political action. Multiple studies have found that people do not respond to such evidence in a linear way: their interaction with facts is complex. Emotive narratives have been shown to lead to environmental action more than facts and figures.

In Political Participation and Voting Relevant to Climate Change (2017), Emily Vraga shows that political participation on issues of climate change, most notably in voting, are relatively rare among the public, particularly when compared with personal action. Vraga argues that there is an opportunity to create greater engagement on climate change with new forms of political participation. The methods pursued by The Commitment and HFTF take advantage of such opportunities.

This research shows how The Commitment and HFTF can effectively enhance political engagement with citizens. It provides valuable insights into ways that our political strategies can be improved and developed, while reinforcing the vital role that other organisations play within the broader environmental movement.

This research

Objectives

As a young organisation, this research is important in developing and shaping The Commitment's political strategy as we start to put the theory into practice. For HFTF, this research validates and solidifies the methods already in place and helps inform future political engagement. We hope this research will be of interest to other organisations, shedding light on how politicians are motivated to act in tackling climate change and biodiversity loss and what role organisations throughout the environment sector can have in encouraging them to do more.

Methodology

This research was based on 26 interviews with incumbent MPs, Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs), Members of the Welsh Senedd (MSs), Members of the House of Lords and Councillors from England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, all of whom were invited to answer the same set of questions (Appendix 1). The roles of the interviewees are shown in Chart 1. We obtained our sample through approaching politicians a) without any introduction b) who we already knew and c) following recommendations or introductions from interviewees. Unsurprisingly, the politicians who agreed to speak to us were generally already engaged with environmental issues. Leading up to the May 2021 elections, The Commitment had conversations with a further 15 politicians, both incumbents and candidates. Where these were relevant to the main research questions, we incorporated them into this report. We aimed to interview politicians from a range of different political parties to get a broad sample, and succeeded in doing so (Chart 2).

Chart 1: Roles of interviewees

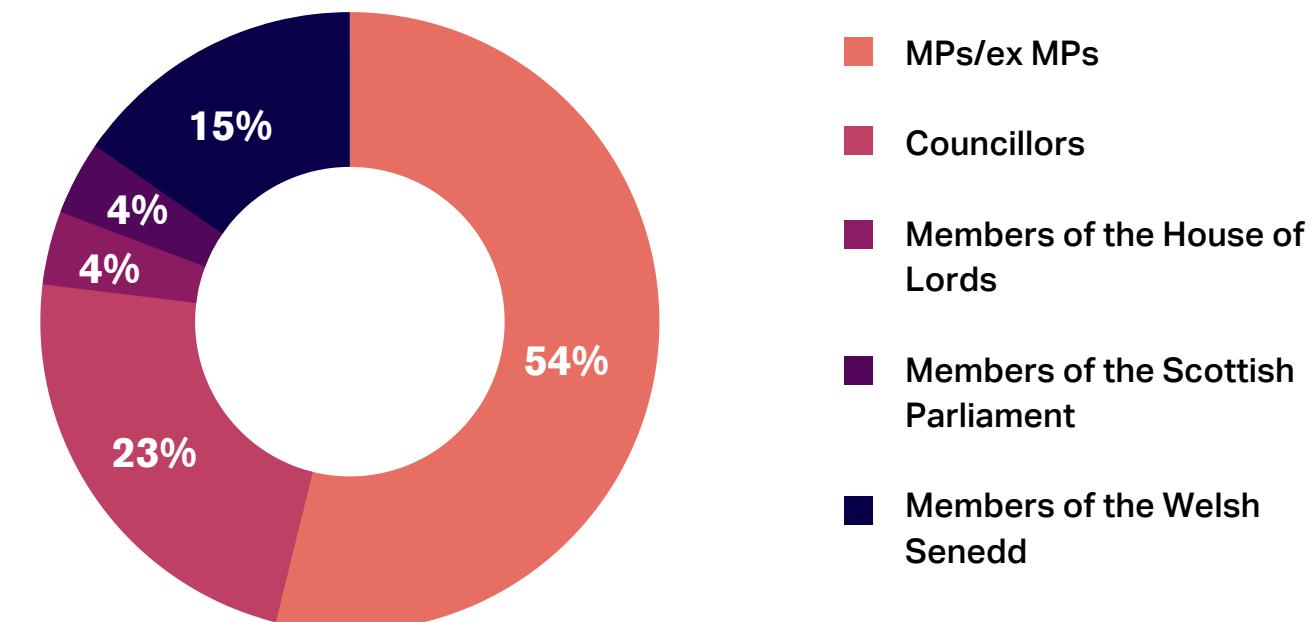
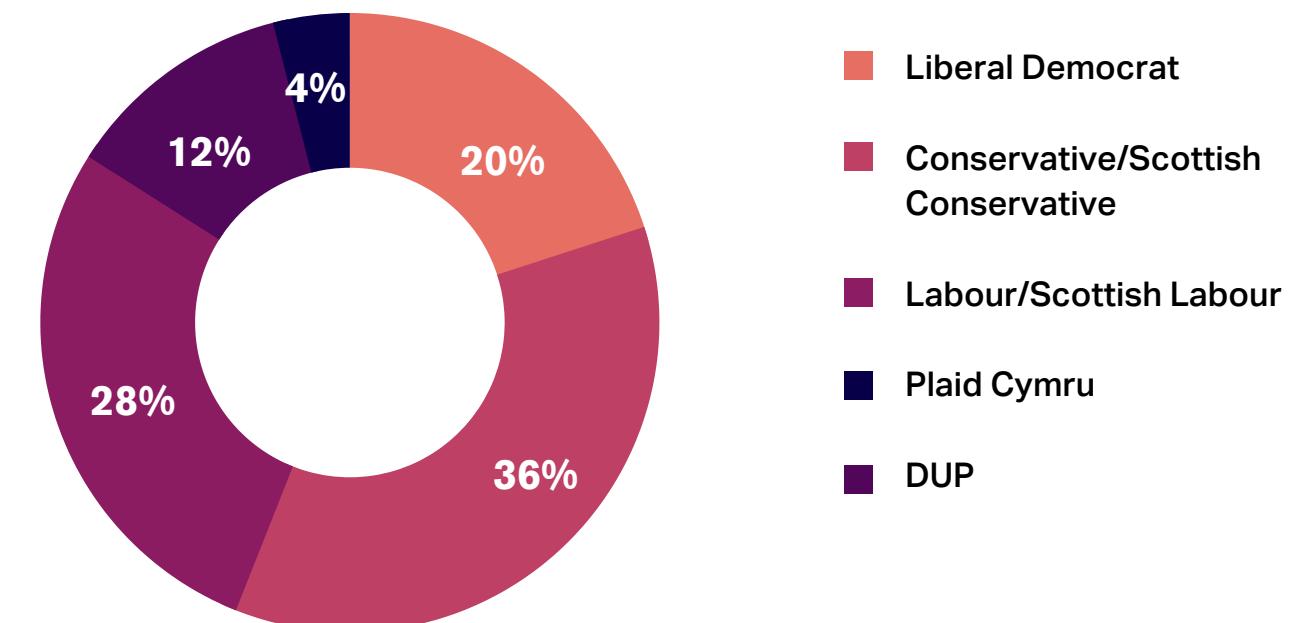


Chart 2: Political parties of interviewees



The Commitment's approach

Since its inception in 2018, The Commitment has moved through the phases of concept development, research and pilot. After testing and evolving the concept among citizens, The Commitment tested engagement with politicians.

Alongside this research, The Commitment conducted trials in the May 2021 Elections. Together they have informed the development of The Commitment's political strategy.

The following sections cover these main themes:

- Politicians' responses were positive
- The Commitment is clearly differentiated from petitions
- One Commitment represents significantly more votes
- Personal messages in Commitments are powerful
- The demographics of Commitments are interesting

Putting party politics aside



The Commitment's approach

Politicians' responses were positive

Although none of the politicians we contacted had previously heard of The Commitment, 26 of the 89 (29%) politicians we emailed were willing to speak to us for interviews lasting, on average, about 45 minutes.

Politicians reacted positively. They generally said that they were struck by the uniqueness of the method and found the positive, non-adversarial approach refreshing. Many of them focused on the way Commitments express the personal thoughts and feelings of their voters, rather than the views of organisations.

"Reaching out to politicians via constituents is exactly right...make it as individual as possible."
Ex-MP

"Where politicians really love it is if you give them good ammunition to crusade on something that the public want them to crusade on."
Member of the House of Lords



The Commitment's approach

The Commitment is clearly differentiated from petitions

In general, we found that politicians see petitions and other automated or semi-automated approaches negatively. Petitions demand little effort. They are seen as imposing a uniformity of opinion on signatories; opinions from organisations pursuing their own agendas rather than from voters. When they receive petitions, MPs who receive the most consistently said that they either ignored them or responded by sending standard replies.

One of the central questions of the research was whether politicians saw The Commitment as another form of petition or as the personal expression of voters' opinions. The response was universal: there was a clear distinction. There was general recognition that significant effort was needed to make The Commitment and that each was unique (see Figure 2). One Scottish MP said "We get so much on email, the volumes are completely off the scale...the key word here is meaningful. It needs to be meaningful for both sides."

Overall, politicians felt that The Commitment's method was effective, providing a useful link between them and their voters in developing policy and action. Many of them saw this as a new and refreshing approach to political engagement, distinct from traditional lobbying, and were interested to see how we progressed.

"I hate petitions. I don't think I'm alone here. Most of them go in the junk box." MP

"The key word here is meaningful. It needs to be meaningful for both sides." MSP

Figure 2: The uniqueness of a Commitment (section of the '[Make your Commitment](#)' form).

Your Commitment *

- I commit to putting the health of the planet at the heart of my decision when I vote.

A personal message

Please tell us why you are making The Commitment. This is personal to you and you can do it in any way you like. You might want to describe how you feel about the health of the planet or what changes you want to see, or give another reason why you care. You can also upload something e.g. photos/artwork/videos/music. Be as creative as you like.

Write something *

Upload something

Upload your file

The Commitment's approach

One Commitment represents significantly more votes

Politicians fell into four broad categories when asked how many Commitments would get their attention (Chart 3). First, those who gave a number (42%). Second, those who said that they did not need a high number: they would be more influenced by the personal messages and explanations (42%). Third, those who said the number would depend on the size of the majority in a political area (8%). And finally, those who did not answer the question (8%).

"If you went with 50 or 100 it would be incredibly powerful. Bespoke messages make MPs really pay attention, even if opposed to the issue. And if you say that you'll be watching how they speak, vote etc, they will pay even more attention. If only 3-4 people went to the local ward councillor surgeries they would be forced to do something." MP

Excluding two outliers (3 and 1,000), the numbers given by politicians were remarkably consistent, all falling within a range of 30 and 100 regardless of the size of local electorates or majorities. Out of 11 politicians who either gave a number or emphasised the importance of numbers, 5 gave the number of 50 or below, while 4 said that around 100 Commitments would get their attention.

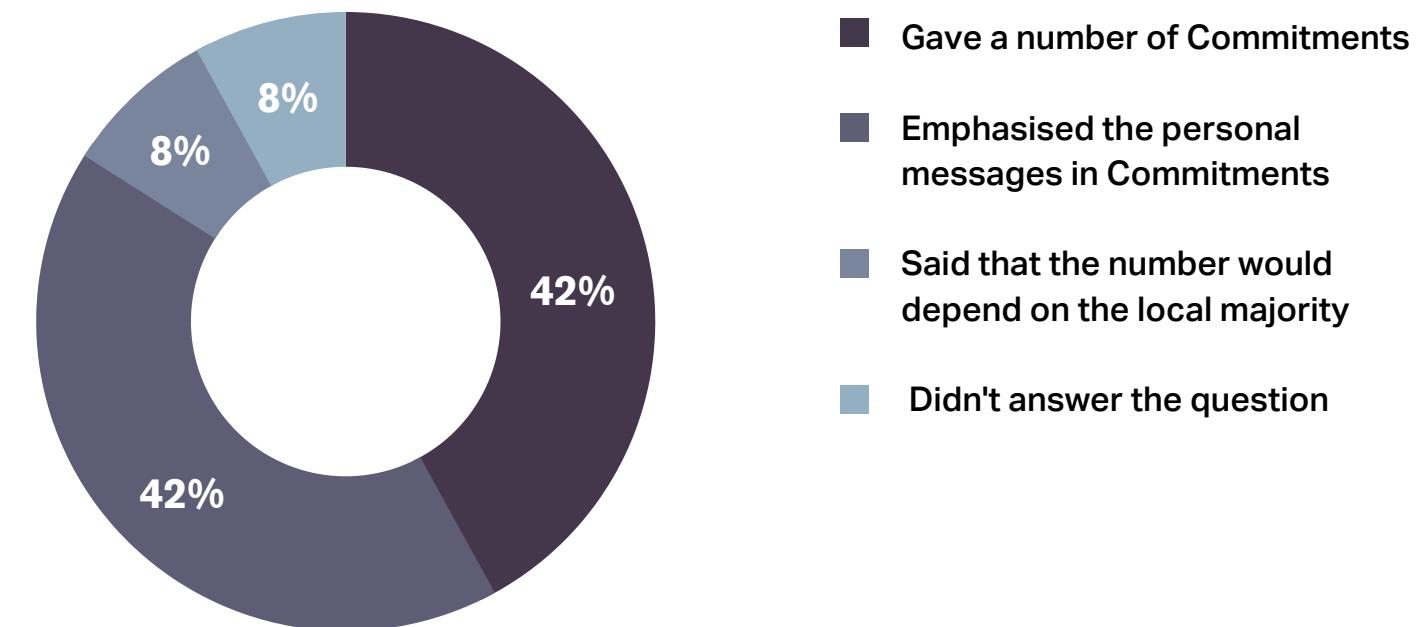
One MP said that they would need around 10% of their constituents while another simply said numbers are important in quantifying the amount of interest. This was the most surprising and encouraging finding from our research: we had expected the numbers to be far higher.

"You don't ignore numbers. It helps quantify volume of interest." MP

In our conversations with politicians leading up to the May 2021 elections, our results were similar. One MSP told us that if they got six emails on the same subject they would take it seriously. When we showed a mayoral candidate in the West Midlands 253 Commitments, they told us that we were well above the threshold for gaining attention on a topic. There are 1.96 million registered voters in the West Midlands Combined Authority.

Chart 3: Getting politicians' attention

Q: How many people in your (ward, constituency etc) would it take to get your attention?



The Commitment's approach

Through supplementary questions, we were able to explain these low numbers through an 'iceberg effect'. Apart from mass campaigns using petitions or similar approaches, politicians receive few personal emails, messages through social media, or letters. When they do, they often come from a small group of people who communicate regularly or they are on subjects outside their control. One genuine personal communication from a voter is taken as indicative of many more people who are thinking, and will vote, in the same way.

Personal messages in Commitments are powerful

In general, we were struck by the lack of analysis in politicians' responses - often far more emotive and less driven by electoral arithmetic than we had expected. This was particularly reflected in the group that said it would be influenced by voters' personal statements rather than numbers of Commitments.

One Councillor said "Personal stories are always the most persuasive. If it's a good story, one is enough. It's the power of the story". Similar sentiments were expressed by others. One MP warned "I would be really careful about going down the numerical route", while another said "50 emails don't count as 50 if they are templates". Clearly, voters' personal words and images are central to The Commitment's engagement of politicians.

"If it's a good story one, is enough. It's the power of the story." Councillor



Cory, Marlow & Thea

"My travels have made me grateful for what I have; the green spaces that surround me, the clean air that I breathe and a society in which I can encourage my children to always be curious about the wide world and how precious it is. I am making The Commitment to help protect the future of the planet and help educate my children to make the right choices that we and previous generations didn't. This is their future." Cory

The Commitment's approach

The demographics of Commitments are interesting

One of the central objectives of The Commitment is to demonstrate support across the whole of society for more government action on climate change and biodiversity loss. We know that this support exists from our [research](#), our work in social media and in collecting demographics from people who make The Commitment. Our role is to communicate it to politicians.

Interviewees generally emphasised that they were led by the voices of those they represent. One MP told us that MPs will generally listen and respond to their constituents on these issues because "an MP wants to be a hero". One Councillor spoke about citizens' calls for a Climate Emergency. He was surprised by how much knowledge people had and mentioned that the council had to "up their game quickly" in response. He went on to say "until I understand what their feelings are, I can't change things." In addition, one MP said that he rarely hears from BAME communities, which are often disproportionately affected by climate change.

"Until I understand what their feelings are I can't change things." Councillor



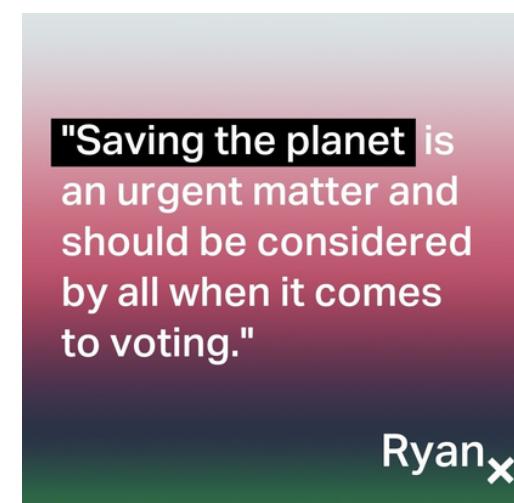
"We must stop climate breakdown and put climate justice first."

Mya-Rose



"To show the government that these issues matter to us all."

Irene



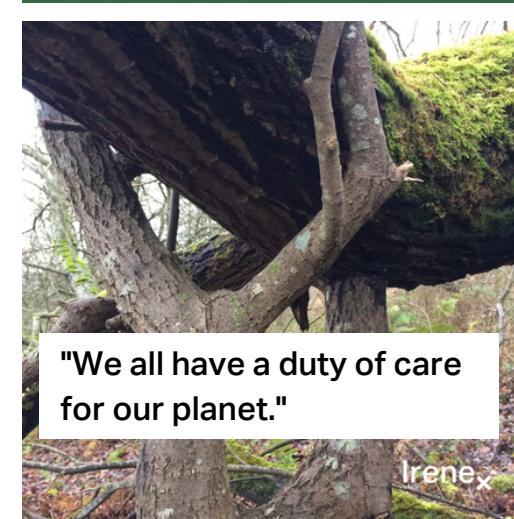
"Saving the planet is an urgent matter and should be considered by all when it comes to voting."

Ryan



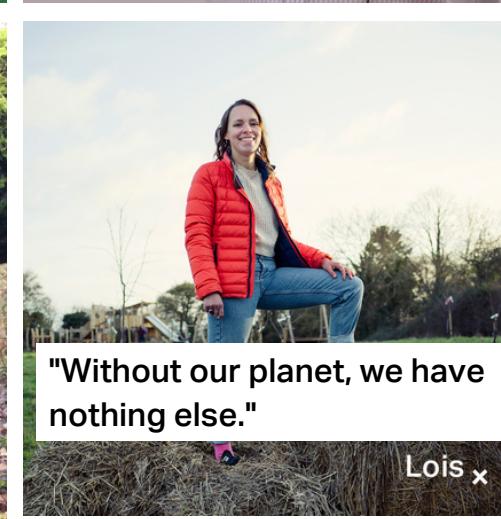
"I will always vote for politicians who I believe will act on environmental issues."

Mark



"We all have a duty of care for our planet."

Irene



"Without our planet, we have nothing else."

Lois

Note: these are short extracts from Commitment statements, see The Commitment's website or social media to read the full versions.

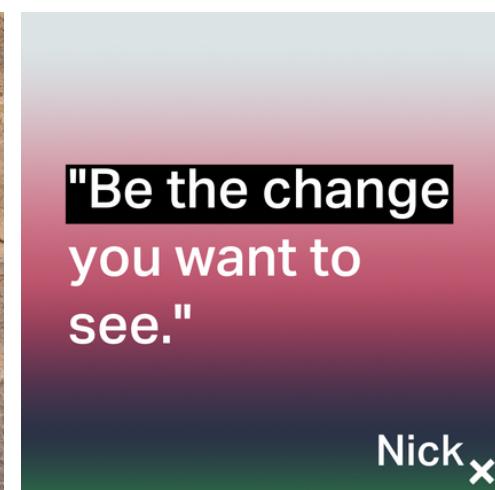
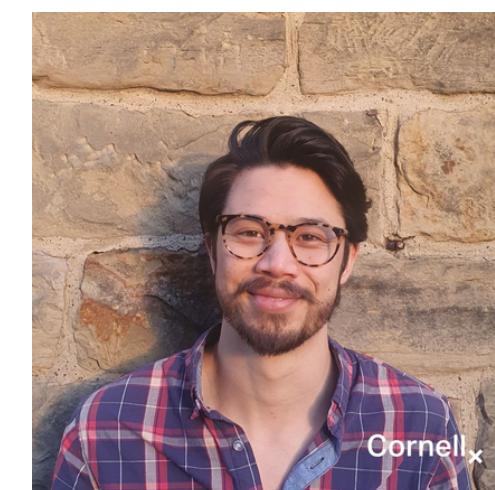
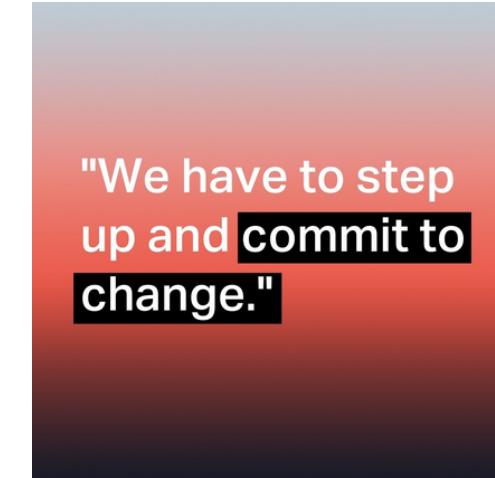
The Commitment's approach

Climate Outreach has divided the UK population into seven segments, defined by their values and everyday concerns. For example, Disengaged Traditionalists recognise environmental risks but are not convinced there is a need for action, while Progressive Activists despair at the lack of action for climate justice, which they believe should be central to all government decisions (Climate Outreach, Britain talks Climate, 2020).

Based on this analysis, we have targeted all the segments through social media advertising campaigns. This clearly shows that concern about climate change and biodiversity loss is widespread across society, with a high level of engagement, for example, from those with generally conservative values and attitudes. These findings are reinforced by a large quantitative study by The Commitment, which showed that Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups have a greater level of participation in climate change activities and a stronger belief in government action than the rest of the UK population.

This is a point of central importance. Many politicians identify environmental concern with the people they generally see: a small and vocal group of privileged, white, middle class voters. One ex-MP spoke about how there was a particular type of person who usually contacts him, he said "if it's the usual people who have contacted you before, it is unlikely to be massively transformative".

"If it's the usual people who have contact you before, it's unlikely to be massively transformative." Ex MP



Note: these are short extracts from Commitment statements, see The Commitment's website or social media to read the full versions.

The Commitment's approach

We collect information, on an optional basis, on the demographics of citizens who make The Commitment, 56% of whom have responded. This includes age, gender, ethnicity, level of education and voting history. This is valuable in assessing our reach across society. We assumed that it would also be valuable to politicians.

75% of politicians said that demographic data and voting history would be of interest to them (Chart 4). The most common feedback was that this would demonstrate a wide-ranging consensus for action. Of particular interest was previous voting behaviour; one MP said "Then I would be thinking: how could I convert them?"

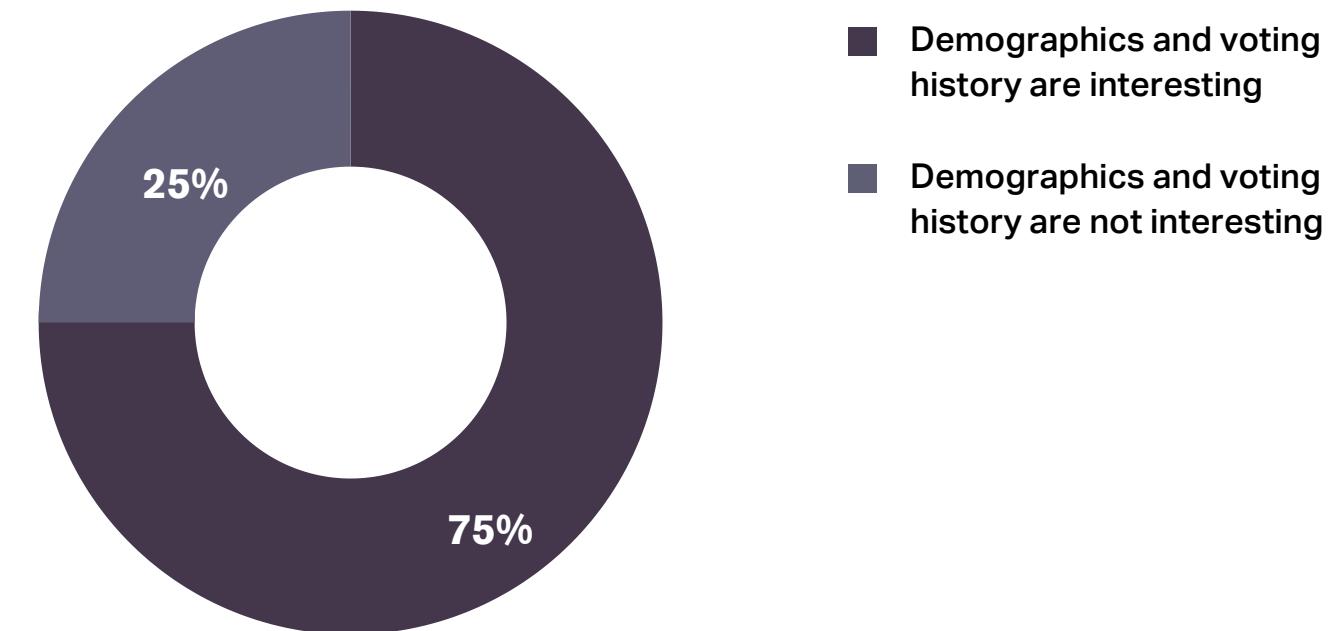
When taking this information to politicians in our conversations leading up to the May 2021 elections, the response to receiving demographic information was also very positive. In contrast with the interview respondents, these politicians were generally more concerned to retain voters who had previously voted for their party than to convert those who had not.

"I am a data junkie. Anything you can tell me is interesting." MSP

We were surprised by the minority of interview respondents who expressed little interest in demographics, including voting habits, as these are clearly useful when assessing the electoral significance of Commitments. These politicians said that this information did not matter to them because they represented everyone in their political area, regardless of who they were or how they voted. It seems likely that while they were keen to emphasise their concern for their voters, they were reluctant to admit any self-interest.

Chart 4: Politicians' interest in demographics

Q: How important would it be for you to see analysis by a.) How they voted at the last election and b.) Other factors (age, class, ethnicity etc)?



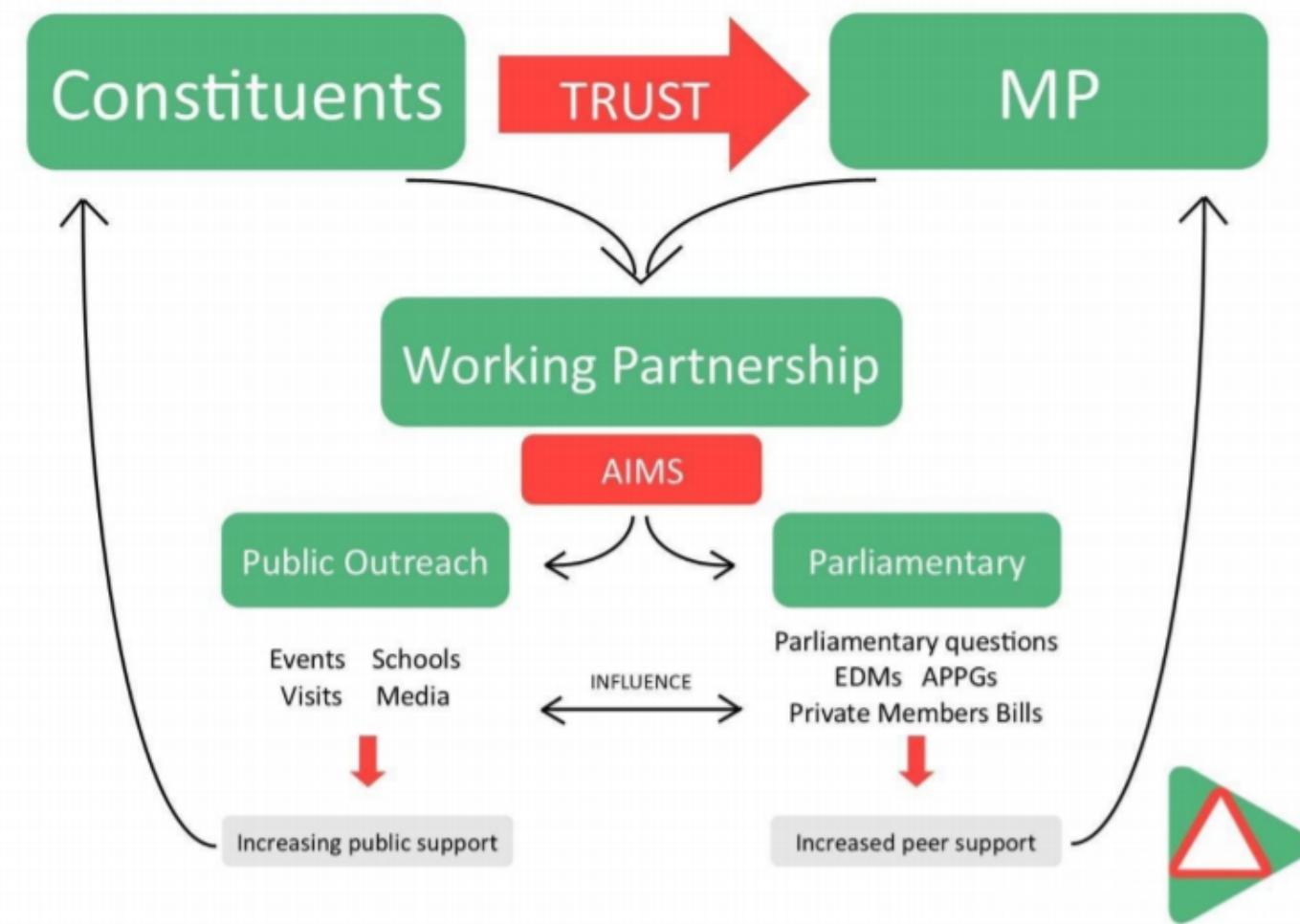
Hope for the Future's approach

Hope for the Future has undertaken numerous exercises to test the strength of their approach since it was founded in 2013. HFTF's approach, developed alongside politicians themselves, has been put to the test with MPs across political parties and through multiple different cohorts of MPs. This research was another opportunity to test the effectiveness of our approach, and has served to reinforce the value of the relationship-based approach we have developed, which puts people and places at the heart of conversations on climate change (see Figure 3).

The below summarises some of the main themes which emerged from this research, which include:

- Personalisation is Key
- Finding Common Ground
- Make it Local
- SMART Asks
- The Value of Face to Face Contact
- HFTF's Training
- HFTF's Facilitator Role

Figure 3: Hope for the Future's Theory of Change



Hope for the Future's approach

Personalisation is key

In order for constituents to engage effectively with MPs and councillors, we conduct in-depth research into each MP's background, political history, interests, areas of influence and the constituency they represent. This not only gives constituents an opportunity to understand the context in which they are raising issues with their MP but also encourages them to see their MP as a person rather than an embodiment of their office.

Personalising MPs goes beyond initial research. We encourage constituents to engage with their MP positively and personally, by writing their own letters as opposed to using pre-written templates and stock letters. We also emphasise the importance of thanking MPs for their time and any actions delivered in all of their correspondence.

The research proved that politicians valued these kinds of interactions. Several politicians emphasised the importance of sending personalised correspondence. MPs' offices and regional representatives have limited capacity and are more likely to put time into responding fully to letters that are not drawn from mass-templates. Equally, some politicians said that passion for a subject, authentic stories and asks grounded in the constituency were more persuasive to them. Another politician cautioned that, while personal stories were impactful, constituents should ground them with facts and analysis and avoid a "preachy" tone.

"Personally written correspondence will get attention." MS

Part of our approach to constituent support involves developing their understanding of politicians' constraints. These can range from the limits of formal powers of MPs, devolved representatives or councillors, to constraints that come from within political party structures.

When reflecting on these constraints, many of the politicians said that voters had some misconceptions or a lack of understanding about what they as a politician could and could not do. While this was regarded as understandable, one politician said it was frustrating to be asked to complete actions that were beyond their remit.

"Very few constituents understand where responsibility lies with politicians." MS

However, another politician said that, in their experience voters understand that there are limits to the power and influence of individual politicians and that voters tended to set achievable asks.

The importance of empathising with MPs and understanding the human behind the political figures was highlighted during the research, reinforcing the centrality of empathy of HFTF's training. Similarly, the importance of questioning MPs to understand their motivations and points of view is a vital tool for relationship building and unmasking the person behind the politics.

Hope for the Future's approach

Finding common ground

A central element of HFTF's approach to supporting political engagement is using common ground between constituents and politicians as a foundation of relationship building (see Figure 4). By researching an MP and personalising their approach, constituents can find ways to relate to their MP and understand their MP's interests, values and beliefs. This helps them to realise areas of common ground and have a constructive meeting with their MP.

This approach was reinforced by the research. Several politicians said that a civil and constructive approach was a more effective means of engagement than hostility and bad faith. One emphasised the importance of mutually meaningful relationships, whereas others spoke about how confrontation interactions were demotivating. One ex-MP said "What I should emphasise for people communicating with their elected representative; be pleasant!".

Make it local

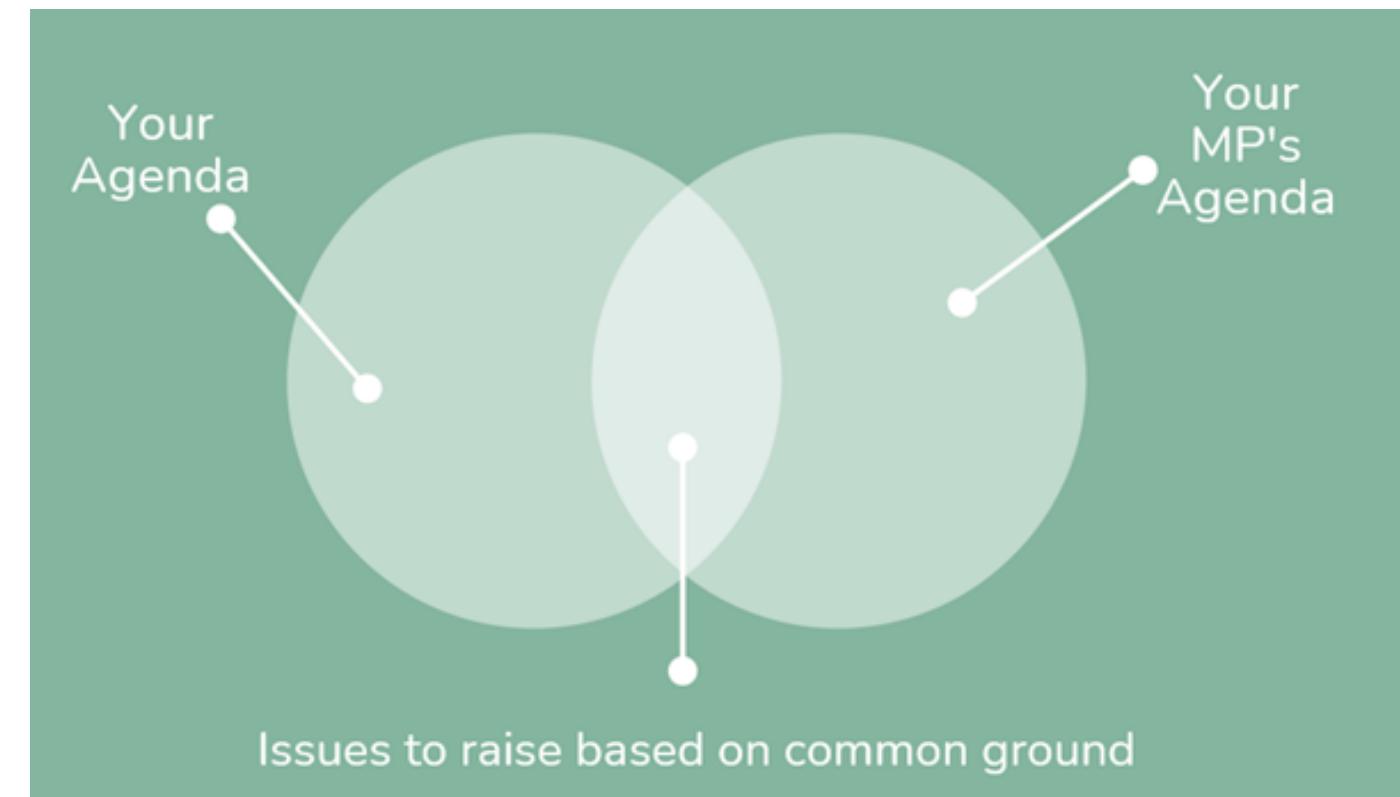
MPs have a certain geographical remit, and it can be difficult for them to understand how global issues such as climate change relate to their role as a constituency MP. Ultimately, an MP's role is to represent their local constituency in Parliament. Their career as an MP depends on gaining - and maintaining - the votes of their constituents. It is, therefore, a priority for most MPs to ensure any action they take is grounded in local issues that affect their constituents. The importance of this can vary from MP to MP depending on their values and the size of their majority.

"Ground the ask in my constituency. An MP wants to be a hero." Ex MP

The importance of grounding asks in the local area was highlighted during the research, as well as MPs' values of public service. HFTF supports constituents to understand whether their MP would respond well to locally focused asks or if they are more amenable to national or international issues.

HFTF's approach, grounded in relationship building, helps to put a face to the issue of climate change and its co-benefits, showing the mandate for action from the grassroots.

Figure 4: Issues to raise based on common ground



Hope for the Future's approach

SMART asks

In HFTF's training, they explain that MPs are generalists, meaning that, in general they know a very small amount about a wide range of issues. This was backed up by one MP, who said "MPs know a little about everything. We must develop expertise in a number of areas."

In response to their busy schedule and the variety of their workloads, HFTF works with constituents to develop 'SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Timely) asks'. 'SMART asks' are something an MP can do on a constituent's behalf.

The research reinforced the value of this approach. Several MPs said that specific requests were much more likely to lead to action than raising general concerns. For some MPs, this was because it set out a clear path for action on an issue. Others mentioned the time constraints MPs operate under and how clear asks enabled them to get to the heart of issues more quickly. Others said that they showed the constituent had given some thought to the issue and that they were interested in finding solutions, not difficulties. Another MP raised the importance of tailoring asks so that they are achievable for the politician in question.

"Have a clear ask! The most frustrating experience of being lobbied is when constituents want to express concern on an issue and want to know that you understand their concern, without having a clear sense of what you can do to help them." MP



Hope for the Future's approach

The value of face-to-face contact

HFTF's approach emphasises the value of face-to-face meetings with MPs, as they are a more effective method of opening up a dialogue and fostering a sense of collaboration than written communication. This was endorsed by politicians who said that face-to-face contact leaves a lasting impression and allows for a more in depth discussion than is possible through other mediums such as email or social media.

HFTF's training

Through training, HFTF seeks to address the power imbalance that can exist between constituents and their MPs. MPs are well practiced in having constituent meetings, whereas constituents may only meet their MP very occasionally. Furthermore, constituents may not have a comprehensive understanding of the way that Parliament works, or the remit of what their MP can do, as discussed in the section on SMART asks.

Therefore, HFTF's constituent training received a positive response due to its purpose of making MP meetings as effective as possible. One politician said "training is essential because people can feel nervous or intimidated". The training aims to make the experience better for both the constituent and the MP, leading to greater outcomes.



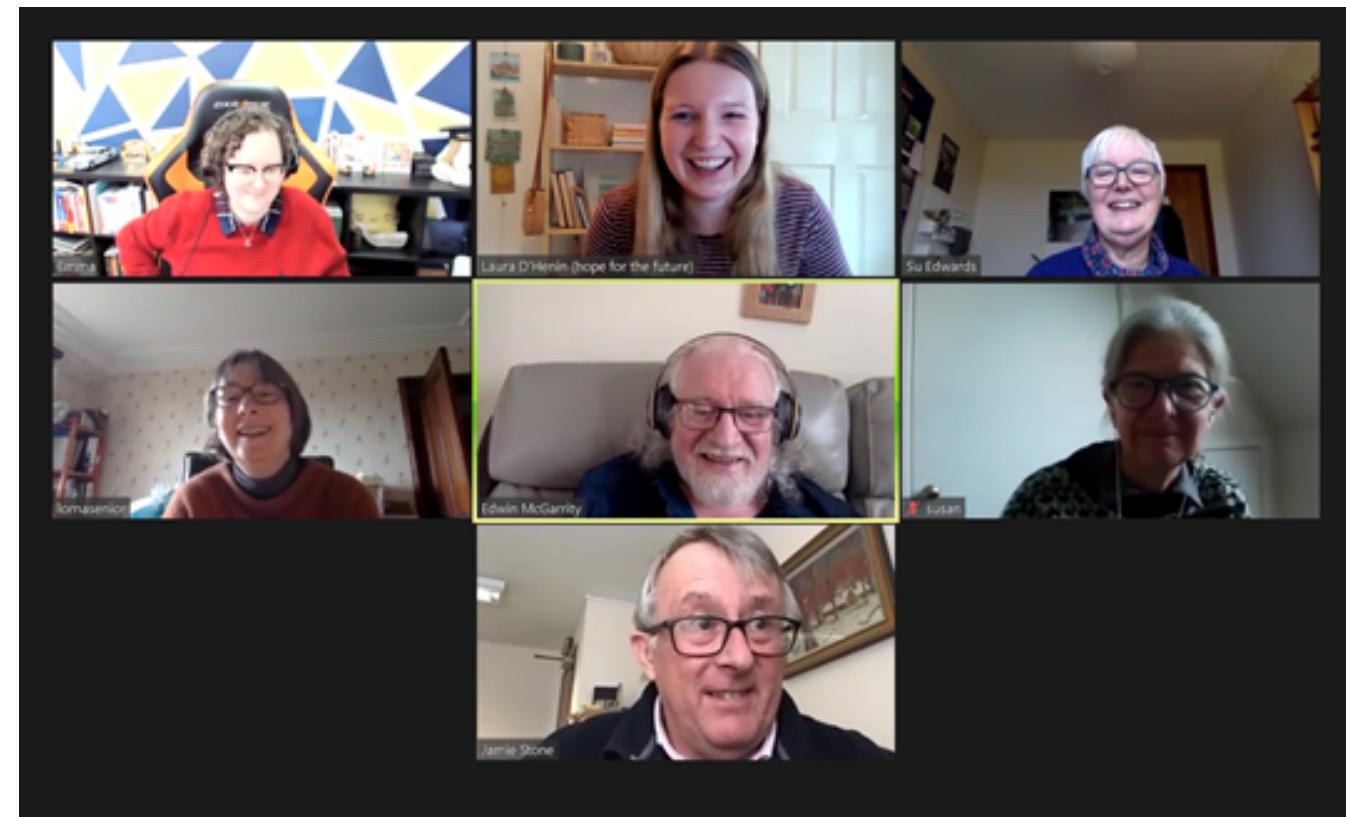
Hope for the Future's approach

The facilitator role

If requested by constituents, HFTF can provide a facilitator to MP meetings. The presence of a HFTF staff member can help to lessen nerves, help the meeting to run smoothly by acting as a chair or facilitator, and reduce the burden on constituents who may be meeting their MP for the first time.

The research found that HFTF's role in any meeting where they are present needs to be communicated well in order to avoid negative perceptions from the politicians present. One politician said that they would be suspicious of a third party attending a meeting and would therefore treat the meeting as if it were with a pressure group and not a constituent. Another said that they would need to be assured of the intent of a facilitator to make sure that the constituent was genuinely representing their own views and not the agenda of an external organisation. However, one politician spoke positively about the meeting that they had with a HFTF staff member present, emphasising the effectiveness of the approach.

This clearly demonstrates the importance of HFTF in assuring politicians that the meeting is centred around the voter and their opinions, and that their presence merely provides a facilitating role.



Findings relevant to both organisations

Relationship with other issues

In our interviews, the relationship of climate change and biodiversity to other issues was an important point of discussion. When asked about their interest in environmental issues in relation to other issues, there was a consensus amongst politicians that such issues should be seen as interlinked with, for example, the economy or health.

One MP spoke about the economic burden of not taking action on climate change, while other politicians spoke about its central role in impacting the health, wellbeing and job security of their constituents. The context in which they viewed these issues was sometimes related to the issues that were most affecting the area they represented. One Councillor, for instance, mentioned that many issues raised by people in their area are related to flooding and sea level rise because it is a coastal flood prone area.

Unsurprisingly, party and geography were strong determinants of politicians' framing of climate change and biodiversity loss. For example, Conservative politicians in rural areas were likely to focus on sustainable agriculture and protecting the natural beauty of the landscape. By contrast, Labour politicians in urban areas were likely to be concerned with climate justice issues such as equal access to improved transport infrastructure and reducing air pollution.

"I would like to see more green spaces and pedestrian areas within Dumbarton." Yvonne x



"On a local level, I'm concerned at the poor health index in my area and believe more could be done locally to improve this by reducing air/noise/light pollution. Any party looking at how these issues affect health would get my vote."

Helen x

"The government needs to move quickly to enable a safe, just and planned transition into a zero-carbon economy focussed on wellbeing rather than growth." Tanguy x



"Climate change is the most important issue to deal with right now above all else, including Covid and the economy." Paula x

Findings relevant to both organisations

Political process and powers

Limitations on powers and the restrictions in political processes were highlighted as key constraints on politicians' ability to take action on climate and biodiversity. One MP, for example, said that there is "lots of support for net zero but certain departments are dragging their heels".

Interviewees also described voters' common overestimation of their powers; this was particularly prevalent in politicians from devolved administrations and councillors. Similarly, there was often confusion about where powers lie; "Mostly people don't know what the council can do and what it can't". MPs are constrained more by their position within parliament as, for example, backbenchers or members of the opposition. One MP spoke of his frustration in speaking to constituents: "We often get asked things that as the opposition it is impossible for us to do".

More direct contact with politicians facilitated in particular by HFTF is valuable in giving voters a greater awareness of the powers held by their politicians and the form of government (UK, devolved, council) of which they are members. HFTF's training offers constituents the chance to understand the powers of their MP, despite their position within parliament. The SMART asks which HFTF assists constituents in crafting for their MPs are responsive to an MP's political position and powers within Parliament and locally.

"The public often want things we can't deliver." Councillor



Define SMART Agenda

1	2	3	4	5
Completely Opposed	More against than for	Neutral/ Neither for nor against	More for than against	In total agreement
Pass your letter to the relevant Minister	Submit a written question	Attend a fundraising event or visit with the community	Set up meeting for you with the relevant Minister	Propose an adjournment or Westminster Hall debate

Appendix

The interviews

As a first step, The Commitment and HFTF worked together to identify a set of core questions that would be asked of all politicians. Using our networks and research we then identified politicians whom we thought would be particularly interesting to interview. Once we had secured an interview, we conducted more detailed research on the politician. In total we approached 119 politicians and secured 26 interviews.

We conducted the interviews using the following script. They were conducted by two people, generally one from The Commitment and one from HFTF. In a few cases a third person attended as an observer or note taker.

All interviews were immediately followed by a debrief to discuss the key themes. The interviews were then coded into relevant themes for analysis. Powerful quotes from the interviews were extracted with these themes to be used in this report.

Interview script

(Preliminaries: introductions, points of common interest or connection etc)

1. As you know our focus is on climate change and biodiversity loss. How important are these issues for you in relation to other major issues such as the economy, local health services and education?
2. How concerned do you think your constituents/voters in (area) are about climate change and biodiversity?
 - a. What gets your attention the most? (Email, protests, phone calls, etc)
 - b. How broad a spectrum of society do they represent? How representative of your local area are they?
 - i. Is there a typical profile of a concerned resident?
 - ii. How often do you see people of a different demographic?

When your constituents engage with you on these subjects:

- c. How well informed are they?
- d. How much do they recognise your concerns and the constraints you, the [council/parliament/government] and your party are under?

3. (Hope for the Future staff) I work for Hope for the Future on this project. I'm just going to let you know about our work:

We support voters to communicate the urgency of climate change to their local representatives. We seek out citizens who are concerned about climate and environmental issues but haven't communicated this effectively. We deliver training which includes background information of the representative they're meeting, a series of 'asks' which are within their power to achieve and how to effectively communicate with politicians. A member of HFTF staff then helps facilitate the meeting.

a. What do you think of this approach?

- i. What do you think is good about this approach?
- ii. What do you think are its potential drawbacks?

b. How comfortable would you be with a non-constituent (e.g. a member of HFTF staff supporting constituents) facilitating a meeting?

c. When they come to the meeting, what is helpful? To bring? To know?

d. Impact of demographics? numbers?

4. (The Commitment staff) I work for The Commitment on this project. I'm just going to let you know about our work:

The Commitment is made by UK citizens and has two elements.

The first is a formal commitment to put a healthy planet at the heart of their decision when they vote in local and national elections. The second is to explain, in their own words or images/video/song, why they have done this. After extensive research we are now in the pilot phase, beginning to collect Commitments and preparing to take them to politicians. This research is to refine our approach.

a. How might this influence you?

- i. How significant would it be that they explained their personal reasons for making The Commitment?

b. What would give it the greatest impact? [then prompts]

- i. How many people in your (ward, constituency etc) would it take to get your attention?
- ii. How important would it be for you to see analysis by:
 - 1. How they voted at the last election
 - 2. Other factors (age, class, ethnicity etc)?

5. We have been connected to you via...

- a. We're talking to politicians of all parties and at all levels of government. Who do you know who might be interested in talking to us? (politicians in your party; in other parties; councillors; members of the devolved assemblies; members of House of Lords).

6. Do you have any questions for us? [optional question]

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The Commitment x



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www.thecommitment.uk

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