



# Let's Talk: the evidence for the power of conversations to bring about social change

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## Foreword

**‘People need to be heard before they will listen’, says the writer Amanda Ripley. We couldn’t agree more.**

This idea is the beating heart of our Let’s Talk Climate programme, which has inspired people all over the country to start conversations about climate change in their communities – from members of the Women’s Institute to supporters of The Wildlife Trusts, campaigners from Parents for Future and local climate action groups.

We know conversations like these can bring people together, bridge divides, and inspire action – but the biggest question is, can they move the political needle? That’s what we asked Luisa Melloh, a leading researcher on public engagement on climate change and the author of this report, to help us find out.

Her findings are clear: conversations, held skilfully, are a powerful campaign tool, and one that has been overlooked by too many people for too long.

It’s time to look seriously as campaigners and organisers at how we equip people with the skills, confidence, and support they need to start talking about what matters to them in their communities, whether that’s climate, the cost of living, housing, or migration.

This report gets into the nuts and bolts of how and why conversations change hearts and minds. It’s full of practical knowledge you can apply to your own campaigns and context.

The good news is that anyone can learn how to hold an impactful conversation. The vital skills Luisa identifies in the report – things like active listening, finding common ground and storytelling – are ones that all of us can hone and develop.

As you’ll read, these skills are powerful and transformational – and as we face big challenges that depend on us coming together, the need for them has never been greater.

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## Summary of key insights

This report presents and evaluates the evidence there is to show that conversation-based approaches affect social change and identifies the conditions under which they do. It draws on both peer-reviewed empirical research and practical case studies from a range of social and environmental issues in which conversation-based approaches have been employed with the aim of changing hearts, minds and actions. As such, it is intended as a practitioners' guide that provides an accessible understanding of what works and offers actionable insights for what makes conversations a powerful part of bringing about social change.

These kinds of conversations do not happen by accident – all have certain characteristics in common. We distil six key 'ingredients' that make for highly effective conversations and are necessary for change to occur in both conversation partners:

1. **Non-judgemental raising of an issue:** Asking non-leading, open questions about how people came to hold their views allows people to critically reflect on them.
2. **High-quality listening:** Really being listened to helps people to feel psychologically safe and lower their guard, thus inviting more self-reflection and openness to changing their mind.
3. **Consensus-building and finding common ground:** Focusing on shared views or experiences helps to build trust and can lead to people becoming more aligned in their thinking.
4. **Values alignment:** Listening out for markers of other people's values and framing one's message in line with those values makes conversations more persuasive.
5. **Opportunity to exchange views, storytelling and perspective-getting:** Exchanging experiences and engaging with new perspectives through stories can powerfully change people's attitudes towards those they perceive as 'not like them'.
6. **Efficacy-building and commitment-making:** Conversations that include discussing concrete options for action and making commitments to act are more likely to result in behaviour change.

High-quality conversations that combine these ingredients cause change in people by activating a cluster of different mechanisms, which interact with one another and ultimately lead a person to change their attitudes or behaviours. The psychological and social mechanisms that make up this 'chain of impact' include both interpersonal (intimacy, responsiveness, norms) and intrapersonal (self-insight, humility, ambivalence) dimensions that enable change to occur.

Conversation-based approaches are effective at influencing attitudes and behaviours for various topics among widely different groups of people. That said, there are some person-level attributes that make these changes more likely and which, for the most part, can be intentionally nurtured. For example, messages tend to be more effective when they don't

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directly contradict the conversation partner's core values, when both conversationalists approach the interaction with curiosity and positive anticipation, and when views on the particular issue at hand aren't already highly entrenched or held with extreme conviction.

As this report shows, conversations are already being used very effectively to change hearts and minds. However, more empirical evidence is needed to better isolate and measure the different elements of conversations that lead to change and how these interact, as well as testing the applicability and durability of findings thus far across different issue areas and sociopolitical contexts.

# Introduction: to have and to hold

In English one of the main verbs we use in connection with conversations is to hold with the other commonly used verb being to have, of course. The nuance between 'We held a conversation' and 'I had a conversation with them' might appear subtle but in reality conveys something more profound: for people to truly engage in, and potentially even be transformed by a conversation, it needs to be treated as valuable in its own right as a thing that is being carefully cultivated and jointly carried by both conversationalists. We have all held these kinds of conversations with family, friends, colleagues and even complete strangers but even though they might have been unexpected they don't just happen. Conversations that enact change within and between people take time, care and skill. And whilst, in principle, available to everyone these things are increasingly hard to come by.

At the time of writing this report the most commonly-used word to describe the country is '[broken](#)'. The UK is experiencing unprecedented levels of distrust in its political leaders and institutions; people feel pummelled by a cost of living crisis that some fear '[will never end](#)'; they are frustrated by neglect of their high streets and green spaces; and weary from the inability of the system to adequately respond to geopolitical, climate and health and care crises. Right-wing movements and figures are exploiting people's frustrations and real struggles for their own gain, actively stoking resentment and hate by turning people against each other, and undermining trust within our communities.

So what might the humble conversation have to offer in the face of this? As this report shows, potentially quite a lot. As civil society organisations are increasingly recognising the importance of place-based and community organising strategies, we wanted to collate the evidence to demonstrate that conversation-based approaches drive social change and tease out the conditions under which they do.

As such, this report is aimed at social and environmental movement community organisers, strategists, funders and anyone applying conversations as part of their theories of change. It presents practitioners with robust research for what works, identifies replicable elements for success and inspires replication through illustrative examples from campaigns in the UK and beyond.

This report offers a rapid review of the peer-reviewed literature on conversation-based approaches and brings them together with practical examples of how they are currently being employed in practice. We set out with this guiding question: as part of broader campaign strategies to drive social change, how effective are conversations in shifting attitudes or norms, raising issue salience and influencing voting behaviours? We first present a brief overview of the empirical evidence that exists to show that conversations lead to change, before delving in more depth into the ingredients, mechanisms and person-level attributes that make for more effective conversations. We then acknowledge the current limitations of the evidence base and identify where more research is needed, before offering a conclusion and suggested ways forward.

### What do we mean by 'conversation-based approaches'?

We use the terms 'conversation-based approaches' or, simply, 'conversations' for brevity throughout this report. These describe a wide array of communication between two or more people. Across the academic literature and campaign examples, this intentionally broad term spans everything from 1-2-1 unstructured or intentionally paired conversations to facilitated group discussions and 'deep canvassing' (see more on this in the ['Necessary conversation ingredients'](#) section). They all have in common that they allow for a genuine exchange between people, as opposed to one-way or broadcast communication, and offer space for people to think and express their views. Most of the conversation-based approaches covered in this report are face-to-face but that is more a result of the evidence reviewed than a conscious exclusion of online or video calls.

## Conversations affect change

Empirical evidence shows that conversation-based approaches lead to social change, defined in our research question as a change in attitudes or norms, issue salience or importance and voting-related behaviours. The strength of the evidence for effects in these three areas is varied, however.

On **attitudes and norms**, high-quality conversations have been shown to: clearly reduce exclusionary attitudes towards transgender people and undocumented migrants in the US<sup>1</sup>; significantly lower Islamophobic prejudice in Australia<sup>2</sup>; increase support for anti-carceral policies in the US<sup>3</sup>; and lead to higher belief in the scientific consensus on climate change<sup>4</sup>. The evidence suggests that conversations are more likely to shift attitudes or norms among people who were previously ambivalent or opposed to the issue in question or whose values are positively inclined to the message (see more on this in the '[Conducive person-level attributes](#)' section). Conversation effects tend to be larger when the issue is not highly polarised or politically entrenched but, as the examples listed above show, conversations have still been shown to change people's minds on more contentious issues too (see more on this in the '[Necessary conversation ingredients](#)' section).

Going beyond attitudes and norms, the evidence also points to conversations influencing both **behavioural intentions and actual behaviours**. For example, using deep canvassing with moral reframing has been shown to increase pro-abortion actions in the US<sup>5</sup> and short conversations about sustainability that create psychological safety and feature strong commitment-making have led to more sustainable actions<sup>6</sup> (see more on these mechanisms in the '[The chain of impact](#)' section).

When it comes to influencing vote choice at the national level the best estimate for the effect of conversations is likely zero<sup>7</sup>. However, canvassing has been shown to affect vote share in some contexts such as lower level elections and in different political systems.

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- <sup>1</sup> Joshua L. Kalla and David E. Broockman, "Reducing Exclusionary Attitudes through Interpersonal Conversation: Evidence from Three Field Experiments," working paper, 2020, [https://escholarship.org/content/qt4d77v7n9/qt4d77v7n9\\_noSplash\\_03917c43604e2e8ea95ba4fdb5c0754d.pdf](https://escholarship.org/content/qt4d77v7n9/qt4d77v7n9_noSplash_03917c43604e2e8ea95ba4fdb5c0754d.pdf).
- <sup>2</sup> Kathryn Benier et al., "Reducing Islamophobia through Conversation: A Randomized Control Trial," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 87, no. 4 (2024): 461–478.
- <sup>3</sup> Kristen Brock-Petroshius, "Race Talk to Change Carceral Attitudes: A Field Experiment on Deep Canvass Organizing," *Social Service Review* 98, no. 4 (2024): 585–623.
- <sup>4</sup> Matthew H. Goldberg et al., "Discussing Global Warming Leads to Greater Acceptance of Climate Science," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 116, no. 30 (2019): 14804–14805.
- <sup>5</sup> Joshua L. Kalla, Adam S. Levine, and David E. Broockman, "Personalizing Moral Reframing in Interpersonal Conversation: A Field Experiment," *Journal of Politics* 84, no. 2 (2022): 1239–1243.
- <sup>6</sup> Kristin F. Hurst, Nicole D. Sintov, and Grant E. Donnelly, "Increasing Sustainable Behavior through Conversation," *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 86 (2023): 101948.
- <sup>7</sup> Joshua L. Kalla and David E. Broockman, "The Minimal Persuasive Effects of Campaign Contact in General Elections: Evidence from 49 Field Experiments," *American Political Science Review* 112, no. 1 (2018): 148–166.

### 3. Conversations affect change

In the French 2012 presidential elections party political canvassing for Francois Hollande significantly increased his vote share by 2.8–3.2 percentage points at the national election scale<sup>8</sup>.

The evidence for conversations influencing vote turnout is stronger though the findings are, again, very context-specific. In the 2016 US presidential election canvassing activity led to a 2.5 percentage point increase in turnout, whereas across Europe turnout effects are much smaller at 0.78 percentage points<sup>9/10</sup>.

At present, the evidence on conversations driving issue salience or importance is promising but still too scarce to draw firm conclusions. One study in the US showed that canvassing increases the issue salience of birth control among people who are either pro-choice or who support the current status-quo<sup>11</sup>. Another canvassing experiment on campaign finance reform, conducted in New York, found that canvassing against campaign finance reform increased personal salience of the issue for those who were in support of it<sup>12</sup>. One explanation for this might be increased policy threat, which activates a backlash response that sharply raises personal importance of an otherwise latent issue for a short period of time. The 'Limitations of the evidence base' section expands on further research needs in this area.

So, in summary, conversations work – but their true power can only be understood in context, rather than in isolation. The clear picture that emerges from bringing together evidence from these disparate fields of research shows that conversations are fundamental to creating the enabling conditions, both within and between people, that are necessary for change to take place. How and why that happens is the focus of the next section.

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<sup>8</sup> Vincent Pons, "Will a Five-Minute Discussion Change Your Mind? A Countrywide Experiment on Voter Choice in France," *American Economic Review* 108, no. 6 (2018): 1322–1363.

<sup>9</sup> Kalla and Broockman, "Minimal Persuasive Effects."

<sup>10</sup> Yosef Bhatti et al., "Is Door-to-Door Canvassing Effective in Europe? Evidence from a Meta-Study across Six European Countries," *British Journal of Political Science* 49, no. 1 (2019): 279–290.

<sup>11</sup> Kevin Arceneaux and Robin Kolodny, "The Effect of Grassroots Campaigning on Issue Preferences and Issue Salience," *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 19, no. 3 (2009): 235–249.

<sup>12</sup> Costas Panagopoulos et al., "Pounding the Pavement: Field Experimental Evidence From a Persuasion Canvassing Study on Campaign Finance Reform Attitudes" *Social Science Quarterly* 107, no. 2 (2026): e70134.

# How change happens: the necessary ingredients, mechanisms and person-level attributes

## Necessary conversation 'ingredients'

Conversations that are effective at shifting attitudes, norms and behaviours all contain certain elements, or ingredients, that make it more likely for people to build genuine connection and consider and respond to what is being said. The evidence reviewed for this report identifies six distinct ingredients that make for effective conversations:

### 1. Non-judgemental raising of an issue

An important part of effective canvassing conversations is the initial elicitation of the issue at hand in a non-judgemental way by asking questions to understand how the conversation participant thinks about the issue and what they are basing their opinions on. Evidence from a cross-national conversation experiment among young people who strongly disagreed with each other<sup>13</sup> and a US abortion canvassing campaign<sup>14</sup> shows that asking curious and non-leading questions encourages people not just to openly share their views but also to consciously reflect on them. This kind of open-ended questioning is also a prerequisite for other elements in this list such as finding common ground and values alignment.

### 2. High-quality listening

Several studies underscore the importance of high-quality listening which can be defined as "a conscious, yet equally intuitive, whole-hearted intention and effort to understand and genuinely respect a speaker through mutual communicative expression"<sup>15</sup>. Really being listened to makes people more likely to practice high-quality listening themselves and it increases psychological safety and self-insight that enables attitude change or softening, including for discussions of contentious issues<sup>16</sup>. In this context, it is the quality of listening that makes all the difference. Self-reflection generated through high-quality listening compared to 'regular' listening has been shown to reduce prejudice towards groups about

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<sup>13</sup> Fateha K. Tia Moin, "Conversations That Facilitate Change: The Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Effects of High-Quality Listening" (PhD diss., University of Reading, 2025).

<sup>14</sup> Kalla, Levine, and Broockman, "Personalizing Moral Reframing."

<sup>15</sup> Moin, "Conversations That Facilitate Change", p. 17.

<sup>16</sup> Kenneth G. DeMarree et al., "Listening and attitude change," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 53 (2023): 101641.

whom people hold unfavourable views<sup>17</sup> and can even improve outgroup attitudes being held by both the speaker and the listener<sup>18</sup>.

### 3. Consensus-building and finding common ground

Finding common ground between conversation partners builds trust and intimacy and is also related to how much people think alike and how enjoyable conversations are perceived to be. One study<sup>19</sup> finds that group discussions aimed at finding consensus lead to neural alignment of group members not just during the discussion but also reliably afterwards when viewing material completely unrelated to the topic of the previous discussion, as measured by fMRI hyperscanning. Another study,<sup>20</sup> using the same technology to examine conversation patterns among strangers and friends, finds that strangers' conversations tend to converge more toward common ground whereas friends tend to explore new conversation topics more often. Furthermore, the more conversations among strangers resemble conversations with friends, the more enjoyable people tend to find them. Shared common ground is thus the basis on which relationships can further evolve, new information can be shared, and diverging views can be incorporated as relationships deepen.

### 4. Values alignment

Conversations are more persuasive when their messaging aligns with the other person's values and worldview. Kalla, Levine and Broockman<sup>21</sup> show that deep, attentive conversations that include personal moral reframing – defined as listening out for the conversation partner's core moral values and then expressing a message in a way that aligns with those values – are more effective at changing attitudes and intention to act than conversations that rely on arguments alone. Values-based messaging also lies at the heart of the [Britain Talks Climate](#) toolkit that has been successfully used to engage different segments of the British public on climate and nature, by starting from their values and core beliefs.

### 5. Opportunity to exchange views, storytelling and perspective-getting

Good conversations give all participants the opportunity to share their views and invite others to see the issue at hand from their point of view through sharing their own perspectives. Kalla and Broockman<sup>22</sup> demonstrate the importance of exchanging views and sharing stories. Their studies find that including non-judgemental exchange of

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<sup>17</sup> Guy Itzhakov et al., "Can high quality listening predict lower speakers' prejudiced attitudes?," *Journal of experimental social psychology* 91 (2020): 104022.

<sup>18</sup> Joshua L. Kalla and David E. Broockman, "Voter Outreach Campaigns Can Reduce Affective Polarization among Implementing Political Activists: Evidence from Inside Three Campaigns," *American Political Science Review* 116, no. 4 (2022): 1516–1522.

<sup>19</sup> Beau Sievers et al., "Consensus-Building Conversation Leads to Neural Alignment," *Nature Communications* 15, no.1 (2024): 3936.

<sup>20</sup> Sebastian P. H. Speer et al., "Hyperscanning shows friends explore and strangers converge in conversation," *Nature Communications* 15, no. 1 (2024): 7781.

<sup>21</sup> Kalla, Levine, and Broockman, "Personalizing Moral Reframing."

<sup>22</sup> Kalla and Broockman, "Reducing Exclusionary Attitudes."

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narratives as part of canvassing conversations reliably shifted attitudes towards migrants and trans people for at least four months, whereas canvassing conversations that solely relied on arguments didn't. When it comes to storytelling, the most effective way to reliably reduce prejudice towards outgroups is through the perspective-getting element of it: being willing to genuinely listen to another person's experience. Perspective-getting is shown to outperform other storytelling elements that focus on expressing one's own experience (perspective-giving) and being asked to imagine oneself in someone else's shoes (perspective-taking). This highlights the importance of simple exposure to a different perspective in driving attitude change<sup>23</sup>.

### 6. Efficacy-building and commitment-making

Conversations with the aim of influencing attitudes and behaviours benefit from building efficacy. This can be done by cultivating the feeling that someone can make a difference, identifying actions that are available to them and encouraging a public commitment to making a change. Hurst, Sintov and Donnelly<sup>24</sup> find that having a conversation about sustainability before making a commitment to taking collective sustainable action influences sustainable behaviour much more strongly than only having a conversation or only making a commitment to change one's behaviour. Similarly, Fine<sup>25</sup> shows that conversations on their own can increase climate knowledge and concern, lead to higher intentions to take action and leave people feeling more able to act but crucially, don't automatically result in more action actually being taken. Conversations that lead to more collective action therefore need to include concrete, specific and available options for conversation partners to take.

### What this looks like in practice

**Deep canvassing** is a community organising approach developed by Dave Fleischer at the Los Angeles LGBT Center's Leadership Lab in response to California banning same-sex marriage in 2008. The team specifically sought out opponents of equal marriage to understand why they had voted against it. They **raised the issue in a non-judgemental way**, asked curious questions and practiced **high-quality listening** to understand people's **values** and give them the opportunity to consider whether their political opinions were in line with those values. Compared to traditional canvassing, which follows a closed script and is aimed at persuasion through information provision, deep canvassing aims to change minds specifically through establishing real connection by **telling personal stories** and asking people to **share their perspectives**. This emotional, rather than rational, approach has been shown to durably shift attitudes (see 'Conversations affect change' section) and has been replicated on various issues and in a range of countries.

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<sup>23</sup> Joshua L. Kalla and David E. Broockman, "Which Narrative Strategies Durably Reduce Prejudice? Evidence from Field and Survey Experiments Supporting the Efficacy of Perspective-Getting," *American Journal of Political Science* 67, no. 1 (2023): 185–204.

<sup>24</sup> Hurst, Sintov, and Donnelly, "Increasing Sustainable Behavior."

<sup>25</sup> Julia C. Fine, "Refining Relational Climate Conversations to Promote Collective Action," *npj Climate Action* 3, no. 1 (2024): 10.

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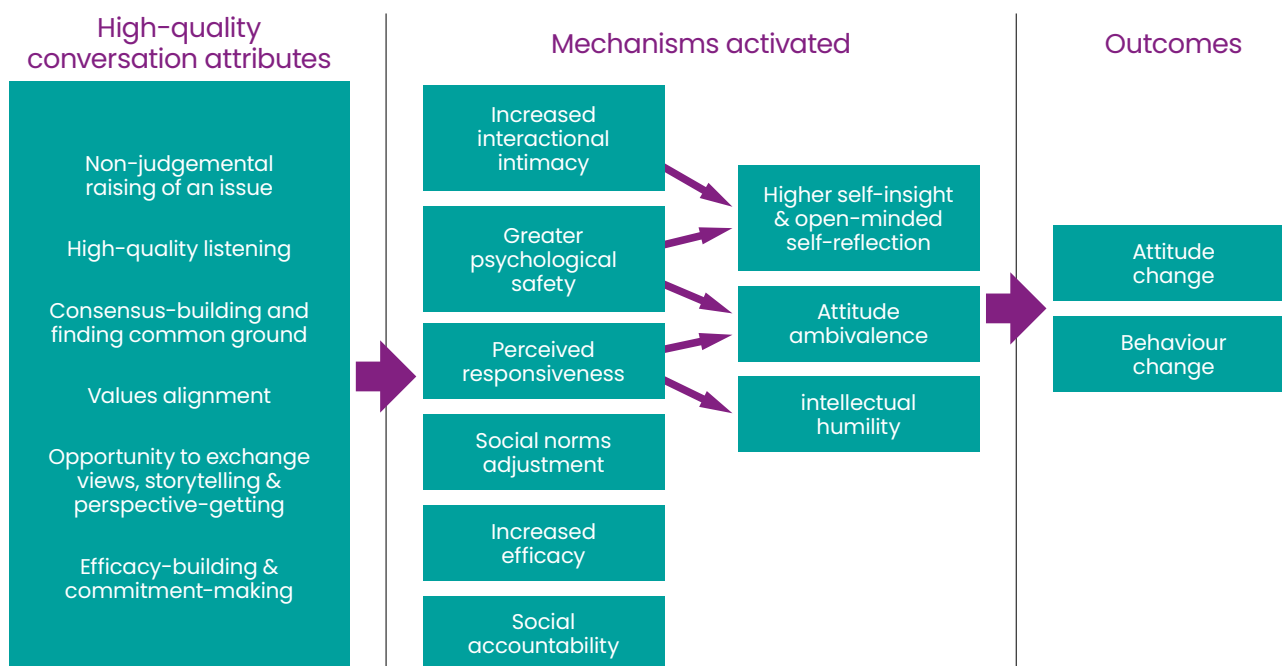
**Time to Change** was a national programme run in partnership by Mind and Rethink Mental Illness between 2007 and 2021 to reduce mental health-related stigma and discrimination in England. To combat the silence and 'non-versation' surrounding the issue, the campaign was focused on getting people to speak out about mental health and have face-to-face conversations where people with lived experience could **tell their stories** in planned, safe and effective ways. These social contact events featured 7,000 trained lived experience 'champions' who went out to have conversations at farmers markets, cultural festivals and events, in workplaces and schools with the aim of reducing stigma and prejudice through **finding common ground** and facilitating **perspective-getting** between people with and without experience of mental health problems. Thanks to rigorous accompanying evaluation by Kings College London, the campaign was able to show that public attitudes improved by 12.7% between 2008 and 2021 and people using mental health services reported 15% less discrimination between 2008 and 2014.

### Further reading

| Source                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Key insight related to this section                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
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| Ettinger, J., McGivern, A., Spiegel, M.P. et al. Breaking the climate spiral of silence: lessons from a COP26 climate conversations campaign. <i>Climatic Change</i> 176, 22 (2023). <a href="https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-023-03493-5">https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-023-03493-5</a>                                                | Drawing on lessons from a COP26 climate conversations engagement campaign, the authors identify several effective elements of climate conversations: shared values identification, active listening, open-ended questions, storytelling, tailoring to personal interests, establishing trust and respect, two-way exchange and agency/efficacy.                                                                                 |
| Kalla, J.L. and Broockman, D.E. (2023), Which Narrative Strategies Durably Reduce Prejudice? Evidence from Field and Survey Experiments Supporting the Efficacy of Perspective-Getting. <i>American Journal of Political Science</i> , 67: 185-204. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12657">https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12657</a> | Based on three canvassing field experiments and a survey experiment, the authors demonstrate that perspective-getting (listening to an outgroup member's story) reliably reduces prejudice towards undocumented migrants and transgender people in the US. Other elements of storytelling, such as perspective-taking and vicarious perspective-giving, do not add to the effectiveness of conversations influencing attitudes. |
| Sievers, B., Welker, C., Hasson, U. et al. Consensus-building conversation leads to neural alignment. <i>Nat Commun</i> 15, 3936 (2024). <a href="https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-023-43253-8">https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-023-43253-8</a>                                                                                            | This empirical study uses fMRI scans to show that conversations can result not just in public compliance due to social desirability but private belief change, too. Results show that group members who had a consensus-building conversation do not just become neurally aligned during the process but are also more similar in how their brains process future experiences outside the group setting.                        |

### The chain of impact

While the ingredients laid out in the previous section explain what makes conversations effective, in order to truly replicate these enabling conditions, we also need to understand the mechanisms of how they bring about change. As this section shows, conversations don't directly enact change but their effects are mediated through a 'chain of impact' that traces the route to change.



It's important to note that not all conversations need to include all of the six attributes in order to be effective. However, the more these attributes feature in conversation-based approaches the more of the following mechanisms they are likely to activate which increases the likelihood of bringing about attitudinal and behavioural changes.

High-quality conversations lead to attitude and behaviour change by activating different mechanisms that facilitate these changes. Moin<sup>26</sup> shows that high-quality listening, in particular, leads to increased interactional intimacy, which causes higher self-insight which in turn leads to attitude change. Interestingly, their experiments demonstrate that attitude change is not explained by reduced defensiveness, thus stressing that conversations aimed at encouraging positive emotions are more effective than those trying to suppress negative ones.

DeMarree et al.<sup>27</sup> find that high-quality listening increases **psychological safety** and more **open-minded self-reflection** which in turn encourages **attitude ambivalence** – defined as the conviction with which views on a topic are being held. Attitude ambivalence is also encouraged through **perceived responsiveness** i.e. a conversationalist feeling heard and

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<sup>26</sup> Moin, "Conversations That Facilitate Change."

<sup>27</sup> DeMarree et al., "Attitudes in an Interpersonal Context."

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understood by the other person<sup>28</sup>. This effect of high-quality conversations also activates the mechanism of **intellectual humility**, which can be defined as remaining open to the idea that one might be wrong about a topic and is willing to process new information to adjust one's views.

High-quality conversations also change attitudes and behaviours through **social norm adjustment** within speakers, both in terms of injunctive norms (what people should do) and descriptive norms (what we see people actually do). This happens through breaking the 'spiral of silence'<sup>29</sup> that inhibits people from sharing their opinions and views that they believe to be in the minority. This gap between people's own beliefs and what they assume others believe, also known as pluralistic ignorance, is a particularly well-documented mechanism in the field of climate change: several studies<sup>30</sup> show that discussing climate with friends and family and learning about the scientific consensus on climate change (what they describe as an 'influential fact') leads to attitude change as well as further downstream discussion about the topic, a notable behaviour change.

Efficacy-building conversations are an effective way to bring about behaviour change because they break down low self and collective efficacy beliefs, which have been shown to be a major barrier to initiating change<sup>31</sup>. Geiger et al.<sup>32</sup> show that receiving instrumental and emotional support from others leads to a higher intention to take climate action by fostering 'action hope', a positive future-oriented feeling when thinking about personally taking action. This, combined with **increased efficacy**, combats fatalism and is a motivating requirement for change, especially in the absence of external coercion factors.

Another important point to note is that mechanisms, just like the six elements of high-quality conversations, also interact with each other. For example, Hurst et al.<sup>33</sup> show that more sustainable action is mediated by greater psychological safety in sustainability conversations between strangers which lead to stronger commitment-making and thus more social **accountability**. This supports the idea that it's easier to publicly commit to change and strive to fulfil that commitment honestly if one knows that failing to uphold that commitment won't result in a threat to the self, such as social exclusion.

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<sup>28</sup> Guy Itzchakov, Harry T. Reis, and Kimberly Rios, "Perceiving Others as Responsive Lessens Prejudice: The Mediating Roles of Intellectual Humility and Attitude Ambivalence," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 110 (2024): 104554.

<sup>29</sup> Jörg Matthes, Johannes Knoll, and Christian Von Sikorski, "The 'Spiral of Silence' Revisited: A Meta-Analysis on the Relationship between Perceptions of Opinion Support and Political Opinion Expression," *Communication Research* 45, no. 1 (2018): 3-33.

<sup>30</sup> Goldberg et al., "Discussing Global Warming."

<sup>31</sup> Robert Gifford, "The Dragons of Inaction: Psychological Barriers That Limit Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation," *American Psychologist* 66, no. 4 (2011): 290.

<sup>32</sup> Nathaniel Geiger, Janet K. Swim, and John Fraser, "With a little help from My Friends: Social Support, hope and climate change engagement," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 64, no. 1 (2025): e12837.

<sup>33</sup> Hurst, Sintov, and Donnelly, "Increasing Sustainable Behavior."

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In summary, high-quality conversations create the psychological predispositions within people and the social conditions between people that are necessary for change to happen. In doing so they create the safety, assurance and acceptance needed to allow people to sit with the discomfort that is a prerequisite for learning and change to take place. In other words, a person has to feel safe and accepted as a person with value in their own right before they can open their minds to the possibility of changing their assumptions and behaviours.

### What this looks like in practice

**Who is your neighbour?** is a charity from South Yorkshire that holds facilitated, small group conversations with communities who do not feel heard in their personal experience of challenges in their local area, whether related to things like industrial decline or the integration of newcomers into the community. WiYN's approach is focused on intra-community relationship-building and enabling people to have honest and constructive conversations with others who they know in some capacity, be it as neighbours or as part of a local club, community group or place of worship. Maintaining a non-judgemental attitude, demonstrating empathy and asking curious questions builds trust and **psychological safety** among other in-group members. This encourages **self-insight** and **open-minded self-reflection** and increased **attitude ambivalence**. Often, group discussions include what [John Paul Lederach](#) calls 'succinct moments' which show reflection has taken place and experiences of shared humanity across differences have surfaced. WiYN does not aim to persuade or change minds towards particular positions but to create the conditions in which curiosity, understanding and empathy can be felt and expressed. As a result of the conversation, participants generally report feeling heard and understood and often express desire for a follow-up conversation.

**Climate for Change (C4C)** was founded in Australia in 2015 with the aim of engaging the majority of Australians who were concerned about climate change but didn't know what to do about it. In 2022, the programme was also adapted to the Scottish context by Scottish Communities Climate Action Network (SCCAN). Climate for Change combines a conversation-based approach with a 'tupperware' party model and trains volunteers to invite family, friends and acquaintances into their homes, or another trusted space, to have a group discussion about climate. C4C relies on hosts to gather groups of friends, neighbours, or colleagues for a C4C conversation locally. Each conversation is facilitated by a trained volunteer facilitator from SCCAN who was assigned to and worked with a host. This leads to **social norms adjustment** in making visible the care, concern and willingness there actually is to take action on climate, thus normalising pro-climate attitudes and behaviours in the participants' social networks and increasing the opportunity to build collective **efficacy**. Each session also aims to generate **commitment-making** and result in at least one more of the guests agreeing to replicate the session in their home and invite their own network, thus creating **social accountability** and a ripple effect.

## 4. How change happens

### Further reading

| Source                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Key insight related to this section                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Moin, F. K. T. (2025) Conversations that facilitate change: the interpersonal & intrapersonal effects of high-quality listening. PhD thesis, University of Reading. doi: 10.48683/1926.00123657                                                                                                            | This PhD thesis examines the role high-quality listening plays in attitude and personal change on both conversation partners in the context of contentious topics with strangers. Based on several experimental studies, the author concludes that receiving high-quality listening leads to increased interactional intimacy, higher self-insight and openness to reconsider one's attitudes.                 |
| Itzchakov, Guy, Harry T. Reis, and Kimberly Rios. "Perceiving others as responsive lessens prejudice: The mediating roles of intellectual humility and attitude ambivalence." <i>Journal of Experimental Social Psychology</i> 110 (2024): 104554.                                                         | This paper finds that perceived responsiveness (feeling heard, understood and cared for by another person) reduces prejudice towards outgroups in a conversation. Rather than through persuasion, this happens through increasing the speaker's intellectual humility (the idea that one's assumptions might be wrong) and attitude ambivalence (holding more nuanced views towards the outgroup in question). |
| M.H. Goldberg, S. van der Linden, E. Mailbach, & A. Leiserowitz, Discussing global warming leads to greater acceptance of climate science, <i>Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U.S.A.</i> 116 (30) 14804-14805, <a href="https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1906589116">https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1906589116</a> (2019) | This study looks at whether how often people talk about climate change with family and friends affects belief in scientific consensus on climate and vice versa. They find that there is a positive climate feedback loop between having climate conversations and believing in the scientific consensus, the latter of which directly predicts climate beliefs and worry.                                     |

### Conducive person-level attributes

The final piece of the puzzle that determines whether conversations succeed or falter is, of course, the variation of the very people holding them. First off, it's important to establish that conversationalists do not need to share certain demographic characteristics or attitudes in order for conversations to be able to affect change<sup>34</sup>. A canvassing experiment on abortion finds that canvassers who hadn't had an abortion were at least as effective in having conversations as those who had, and in some cases even more persuasive<sup>35</sup>. Whilst a potentially counter-intuitive finding, this demonstrates that the act of storytelling – whether that is one's own or someone else's story – is an important part of high-quality conversations because it enables perspective-getting and effortful reflection, not because people have to personally embody a particular identity. That said, conversations tend to be more effective when the key message does not directly contradict the other person's core values, as the effective use of personal moral reframing in this same study shows<sup>36</sup>.

#### REFERENCES

<sup>34</sup> David E. Broockman et al., "Shared Demographic Characteristics Do Not Reliably Facilitate Persuasion in Interpersonal Conversations: Evidence from Eight Experiments," *British Journal of Political Science* 54, no. 4 (2024): 1477–1485.

<sup>35</sup> Kalla, Levine, and Broockman, "Personalizing Moral Reframing."

<sup>36</sup> Kalla, Levine, and Broockman, "Personalizing Moral Reframing."

## 4. How change happens

Conversation outcomes also depend on the motivation and willingness to have a conversation with someone who might have a different opinion in the first place. Openness and positive anticipation are more important for effective conversations than the nature of the relationship between conversation partners, as effects have been proven between strangers, friends or family. On the flipside, negative motivation, ulterior motives or having an 'agenda' are also key factors that have been found to stand in the way of trust between people<sup>37</sup>. In a study on 2014 municipal elections in Italy, Cantoni and Pons<sup>38</sup> compare the effect of canvassing by political candidates themselves to canvassing by party volunteers. They find that volunteer canvassers increase vote turnout but candidate canvassers do not. This mistrust, resulting from self-promoting conversations, highlights the importance of conversationalists modelling open-mindedness and self-reflection to genuinely connect with another person.

Conversations tend to be more effective for people who previously held ambivalent or lightly opposed stances to an issue and don't tend to increase support for a cause among those already supportive. In a canvassing experiment promoting access to birth control, Arceneaux and Kolodny<sup>39</sup> find that for those already holding values in favour of abortion rights, or at least not actively opposing abortion, canvassing is successful in influencing attitudes on birth control. This supports the strategy that conversation-based interventions tend to be more effective among '[The Persuadables](#)' or sometimes called 'the movable middle', with proponents or opponents on either end of the scale showing little change. In the French case, Pons<sup>40</sup> hypothesises that the increased vote share for Hollande from canvassing was, in part, due to many of the targeted households having never been purposefully canvassed before, demonstrating that having conversations at all with people who had never been exposed to political conversations of this kind influences attitudes and behaviours.

Lastly, it's important to note that the effects of conversations can be measured both ways: they not only influence the attitudes and behaviours of the person being engaged in conversation, or being listened to, but also those of the conversation initiator. For example, Kalla and Broockman<sup>41</sup> show that people who have been trained in high-quality conversations to conduct door-to-door canvassing on immigration and the 2020 US presidential election show reduced affective polarisation towards people with opposing viewpoints afterwards, likely as a result of perspective-getting.

### REFERENCES

<sup>37</sup> Climate Outreach, "Beyond 'Trusted Messengers': New Insights on Trust and Influence in Climate Communications" (2024), <https://climateoutreach.org/britain-talks-climate/climate-big-picture-2024/trust-and-influence/>.

<sup>38</sup> Enrico Cantoni and Vincent Pons, "Do interactions with candidates increase voter support and participation? Experimental evidence from Italy," *Economics & Politics* 33, no. 2 (2021): 379–402.

<sup>39</sup> Arceneaux and Kolodny, "Effect of Grassroots Campaigning."

<sup>40</sup> Pons, "Will a Five-Minute Discussion Change Your Mind?"

<sup>41</sup> Kalla and Broockman, "Voter Outreach Campaigns."

## 4. How change happens

As this section shows, high-quality conversations do not just have an impact on some people but are a powerful tool to change hearts and minds in general. In fact, several of the studies that tested conversation-based interventions reviewed for this report included an element of listening training which was then applied during the experiments<sup>42/43</sup>. Therefore, rather than being fixed, person-level attributes that are conducive to having effective conversations should be seen as attitudes and skills that can be cultivated, shared and nurtured.

### What this looks like in practice

**The Belong Network** is a non-governmental organisation and network of partners based in Manchester that works across the UK for a more connected and less divided society. Some of their work focuses on engaging local councils and community sector organisations in 'honest conversations', designed as confidential, small-scale, facilitated discussions around community tensions in their local area. These structured meetings are based on social contact theory and intentionally bring together people with **different viewpoints** for the opportunity to voice their feelings and share their **personal experiences and stories**, which encourages perspective-getting and more open-minded reflection of values, feelings and intentions. As participants are there by invitation, the approach relies on **motivation and willingness to have a conversation** with someone who might not share one's values or views, in the name of finding productive ways forward and (re)building community cohesion.

**Neighbours United** ran a deep canvassing campaign (2020–2022) to increase support for government action on climate in Trail, British Columbia, a small city built around a large lead-zinc smelter. To bring about the desired attitude shift and wider collective behaviour change, Neighbours United invested heavily in **deep canvassing skills training**. The training was part of the canvassers' experience throughout the campaign in order to review, learn from and build on successful and failed conversations. Canvassers were asked to model vulnerability and share their own stories to find common ground and really build connection, thus investing more in trust than persuasion. As a result, 84.6% of canvassing volunteers reported feeling more equipped to have discussions about polarising issues with people holding different viewpoints and described seeing themselves as **allies of their conversation partners**, rather than adversaries. This shift in attitudes on the canvassers' side demonstrates how **they themselves were changed** as a result of high-quality conversations, not just the people they sought out. Whilst causality is difficult to prove, in April 2022, the Trail city council voted unanimously to aim to transition to 100% renewable energy by 2050 and set out to develop a transition plan within one year.

#### REFERENCES

<sup>42</sup> Moin, "Conversations That Facilitate Change."

<sup>43</sup> Kalla and Broockman, "Voter Outreach Campaigns."

## 4. How change happens

### Further reading

| Source                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Key insight related to this section                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Broockman DE, Kalla JL, Ottone N, Santoro E, Weiss A. Shared Demographic Characteristics Do Not Reliably Facilitate Persuasion in Interpersonal Conversations: Evidence from Eight Experiments. <i>British Journal of Political Science</i> . 2024;54(4):1477-1485. doi:10.1017/S0007123424000279                                  | Drawing on eight experiments covering four different issue areas, the authors investigate whether sharing demographic characteristics between conversation partners affects persuasion. Contrary to their expectations, they find that shared gender, race or age characteristics do not increase the persuasive power of a message, as the level of effortful thinking involved in high-quality interactions already causes people to thoroughly consider the content of the message. |
| Kevin Arceneaux & Robin Kolodny (2009) The Effect of Grassroots Campaigning on Issue Preferences and Issue Salience, <i>Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties</i> , 19:3, 235-249, DOI: 10.1080/17457280903072916                                                                                                       | The study uses a large-scale randomised field experiment to examine whether people can be persuaded to change their opinions on the historically controversial issue of birth control. It concludes that in-person canvassing can raise the salience of not highly polarised or crystallised issues and significantly influence attitudes of people for whom the message doesn't contradict their core values.                                                                         |
| Climate Outreach, "Beyond 'trusted messengers' – new insights on trust & influence in climate communications" (2024) <a href="https://climateoutreach.org/britain-talks-climate/climate-big-picture-2024/trust-and-influence/">https://climateoutreach.org/britain-talks-climate/climate-big-picture-2024/trust-and-influence/</a> | Part of Climate Outreach's Britain Talks Climate toolkit, this research report lays out the ways in which trust is built and lost with different segments of the UK public. It identifies passion, credibility and empathy as three key elements communicators need to demonstrate to establish trust with people and provides examples for how this can be done in the context of talking about climate change.                                                                       |

# Limitations of the evidence base and what else we need to know about the impact of conversations

## A. Conversation effects are inherently difficult to isolate and measure

One of the most intuitive limitations of studying the impact of conversations through empirical methods is the fact that individual elements of conversations can often not be cleanly isolated and thus clearly measured. For example, Kalla, Levine and Broockman note that their abortion canvassing experiment design does not allow them to conclusively isolate the 'active ingredient' that made conversations effective: conversations that included reframing an issue in line with the other person's values were shown to be more persuasive but this effect was intertwined with other relational aspects that were employed as part of high-quality conversations, such as curiosity, deep listening, warmth<sup>44</sup>. Even scripted conversations with the same interlocutor and in the same setting will interact with different research participants each time. Additionally, the studies reviewed for this report did not measure the effectiveness of different messengers against each other. What's more, the intended outcomes of conversations are highly study-specific though this is an inherent characteristic of studying conversations. We need more studies to examine the effects of individual elements which, taken together, can paint a fuller picture of what conversations can and can't achieve when it comes to social change.

### REFERENCES

<sup>44</sup> Kalla, Levine, and Broockman, "Personalizing Moral Reframing."

### B. The “fuzziness” of what constitutes a conversation heightens the importance of context-specific approaches

We have kept the boundaries of conversation-based approaches deliberately broad for the purpose of this review but in reality these combine many very different practices, different levels of intimacy between conversation partners, a range of issues and asks, and varying timeframes at which attitudinal or behavioural changes were measured. While the nuances of this have been laid out in the previous sections, it's important to note that these elements have so far not been rigorously tested against each other. More evidence is needed to understand how different ingredients and mechanisms in conversations interact and which ones carry relatively more or less importance for various topics or in different contexts. More than being a limitation, however, this context specificity highlights the importance of adapting conversation-based approaches not just to specific issues but also to the social, economic and political context in question<sup>45</sup>. This is especially the case as the majority of studies are based on US-context and translating results directly to European or UK contexts and across varying voting systems requires caution<sup>46</sup>.

### C. Applicability of conversation effectiveness across different issue areas

Furthermore, we don't know to what extent conversational effects relating to one social or environmental issue translate to another. Whilst the breadth of issues covered in this rapid review – from LGBTQ rights to abortion, from Islamophobia to climate change – and the confirming patterns of ingredients and mechanisms suggest that what constitutes high-quality conversations remains mostly the same, different issues present their own challenges. Whilst conversations about climate change might struggle to include perspective-getting, canvassing for carceral policy change might suffer from low perceived efficacy. Non-judgemental raising of an issue might be difficult when topics are already highly polarised, such as immigration, whereas low-salience issues, such as electoral reform, might show high in-principle support that might not translate into policy support or behaviour change<sup>47</sup>. More impact evaluations, case studies and peer learning of how high-quality conversations are being used for campaigning on various issues are thus necessary to verify and nuance the cross-cutting applicability of these approaches in practice.

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#### REFERENCES

<sup>45</sup> Joshua Ettinger et al., “Breaking the Climate Spiral of Silence: Lessons from a COP26 Climate Conversations Campaign,” *Climatic Change* 176, no. 3 (2023): 22.

<sup>46</sup> Bhatti et al., “Is Door-to-Door Canvassing Effective in Europe?”

<sup>47</sup> Panagopoulos et al., “Canvassing and Issue Salience.”

### D. The challenge of translating experimental results into real-life changes and a note on effect decay

Whilst the empirical evidence reviewed is robust and shows us that conversations do enact change, translating experimental results and different effect sizes of attitude or salience change into real terms is more difficult. What does a 10 percentage point increase in a Likert scale in issue attitude after meaningful conversations look like for a person? How does it translate into observable behaviours at scale? These are questions that practical research will have to answer.

A related limitation of the natural or quasi experiments reviewed for this report is that most studies don't measure long term effects. The few that do often find a decay in effectiveness of interventions after six or nine months, especially when it comes to reducing affective polarisation. There is so far limited evidence to show that these effects last over longer periods of time or for more contentious topics<sup>48</sup>. The finding that a single interaction often falls short of bringing about large, sustained attitudinal or behavioural change is not surprising but emphasises the importance of ensuring that conversation-based approaches are part of wider campaign strategies and sustained engagement on an issue. This in turn would suggest that conversation-based approaches are more likely to be effective in cases where they can be replicated at the local level – by targeting people who are not complete strangers and with higher probability to meet again to continue the conversation – or folded into organised or institutional structures that offer other kinds of activities and engagement to counteract conversation effect decay over time.

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#### REFERENCES

<sup>48</sup> Erik Santoro and David E. Broockman, "The promise and pitfalls of cross-partisan conversations for reducing affective polarization: Evidence from randomized experiments," *Science Advances* 8, no. 25 (2022): eabn5515.

# Conclusion and the role of conversations in wider campaign strategies

Good, carefully and skilfully held conversations are not 'just talk' or 'being nice'. They are transformative embodiments of psychosocial and behavioural science at work.

We have seen that conversation-based approaches are effective at bringing about social change by shifting attitudes, norms and behaviours in many different contexts and across various social and environmental issue areas. These types of high-quality conversations all share certain elements that make them so transformative: raising of issues in a non-judgemental way, practising high-quality listening, finding common ground and building consensus, seeking values alignment, providing an opportunity to exchange views, telling stories and get new perspectives, and building efficacy and encouraging commitment. These elements activate mechanisms that create safety, assurance and acceptance in both conversationalists, which allow them to sit with the discomfort necessary for attitudinal, normative and behavioural learning and change to take place. Whilst certain attitudinal predispositions, like not holding extremely cemented convictions on an issue and willingness to discuss issues with people who have opposing views, are conducive to changing hearts and minds, high-quality conversation skills can be cultivated and used by and with almost anyone.

We have laid out a few of the limitations and shortcomings of the current evidence base for conclusively proving that conversations are necessary to enact social change but it is worth considering that proving the inverse hypothesis is possibly even more difficult – that social change could happen without conversations. A core element of human connection and community organising, so fundamentally bound up with these processes, is unlikely to never not be part of creating social change, even if our ways of measuring it will likely remain imperfect.

There is still more research needed to understand the exact and context-specific conditions under which conversations enact change but, as this report has shown, they unmistakably do. It's high time social and environmental movements – and, by extension, those who fund them – recognised the crucial role conversations play in bringing about social change as part of wider campaign strategies. Yes, we have to walk the talk but, if we want to change hearts and minds along the way, we have to keep talking whilst walking.

# Appendix: Methodology note

The research underlying this report is based on a rapid evidence review of peer-reviewed publications as well as four interviews with practitioners and project impact, learning and evaluation reports to triangulate research findings with real-world expertise.

The technical research question that guided this rapid evidence review was as follows:

- What empirical evidence exists and how robust is it to show that conversation-based approaches, as one component of multi-tactic campaign strategies to deliver social change, contribute to changes in (i) attitudes/norms (ii) issue salience/importance, and (iii) voting-related behaviours (turnout and/or vote choice/share or intention)?

To find relevant peer-reviewed literature to answer this question, a Boolean search on Google scholar was conducted using the following terms:

- ("interpersonal communication" OR "interpersonal conversation" OR "peer discussion" OR "political discussion" OR "deep canvassing") AND ("social norms" OR "normative influence" OR "social influence" OR "attitude change" OR "issue salience") AND ("voting" OR "political participation" OR "civic engagement") AND (experiment OR "field experiment" OR "survey experiment" OR "panel survey")
- ("interpersonal communication" OR "interpersonal conversation" OR "peer discussion" OR "political discussion" OR "deep canvassing") AND ("social norms" OR "normative influence" OR "social influence" OR "attitude change" OR "issue salience") AND ("voting" OR "political participation" OR "civic engagement") AND (experiment OR "field experiment" OR "survey experiment" OR "panel survey") AND ("Europe" OR "European" OR "European Union" OR "EU" OR "United Kingdom" OR "UK" OR "Great Britain" OR "British")

The abstracts of the studies that emerged from this search were reviewed up to the 10th Google scholar page of results to determine their relevance for this rapid review. For papers that appeared particularly relevant, the abstracts of other studies citing them were also reviewed up to the 3rd page of results. This search methodology resulted in a long list of 50 studies with potential relevance for this report. The search was not restricted to a certain date range but results skewed more recent. The abstracts of papers on that long list were then ranked in terms of importance based on empirical strength and to cover a range of different conversation-based approaches, types of social or environmental issues examined in the research and countries in which the study took place. After the ranking, the 20 most relevant papers from that long list were entered into the [evidence register](#) and reviewed in more depth for this report. During the writing process, several studies from the original long list were consulted to substantiate the conclusions being drawn, but these were not reviewed in depth.

For the case studies, four semi-structured interviews were conducted with expert practitioners who have experience using conversation-based approaches in their work:

- Sue Baker OBE – Changing Minds Globally, previously at Mind
- Kaska Hempel – Scottish Communities Climate Action Network
- Mike Waite – Belong Network, Programmes Team
- Who is Your Neighbour?

Conducted roughly half-way through the rapid evidence review, these interviews were used to shape the direction of the second half of the review and contextualise the desk research findings. As part of that, some of the studies that had initially been included in the 20 publications for review were subsequently substituted for those more relevant to the practitioner examples.

This methodology, whilst suited to the rapid review nature of this report, has limitations. Due to the narrow scope of the report, this should not be seen as a systematic review or meta-analysis of the literature on the effectiveness of conversation-based approaches. Using Google Scholar to surface relevant literature carries that search engine's inherent result biases towards highly cited work. Lastly, as noted in many literature reviews, publication bias favouring studies that show statistically significant results must also be considered in this context.

# About the author and Acknowledgements

## About the author

Luisa Melloh is a social scientist with a background in sustainable development and migration studies. She currently works as a freelance researcher for Climate Barometer and is a climate conversations training facilitator with Larger Us. Her research focuses on public attitudes on climate and nature, using polling, focus group and narrative research to drive engagement with these topics. Previously, she worked as a researcher at Climate Outreach, managed research programmes at the University of Oxford's European Studies Centre and worked on migration policy at the GIZ.

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