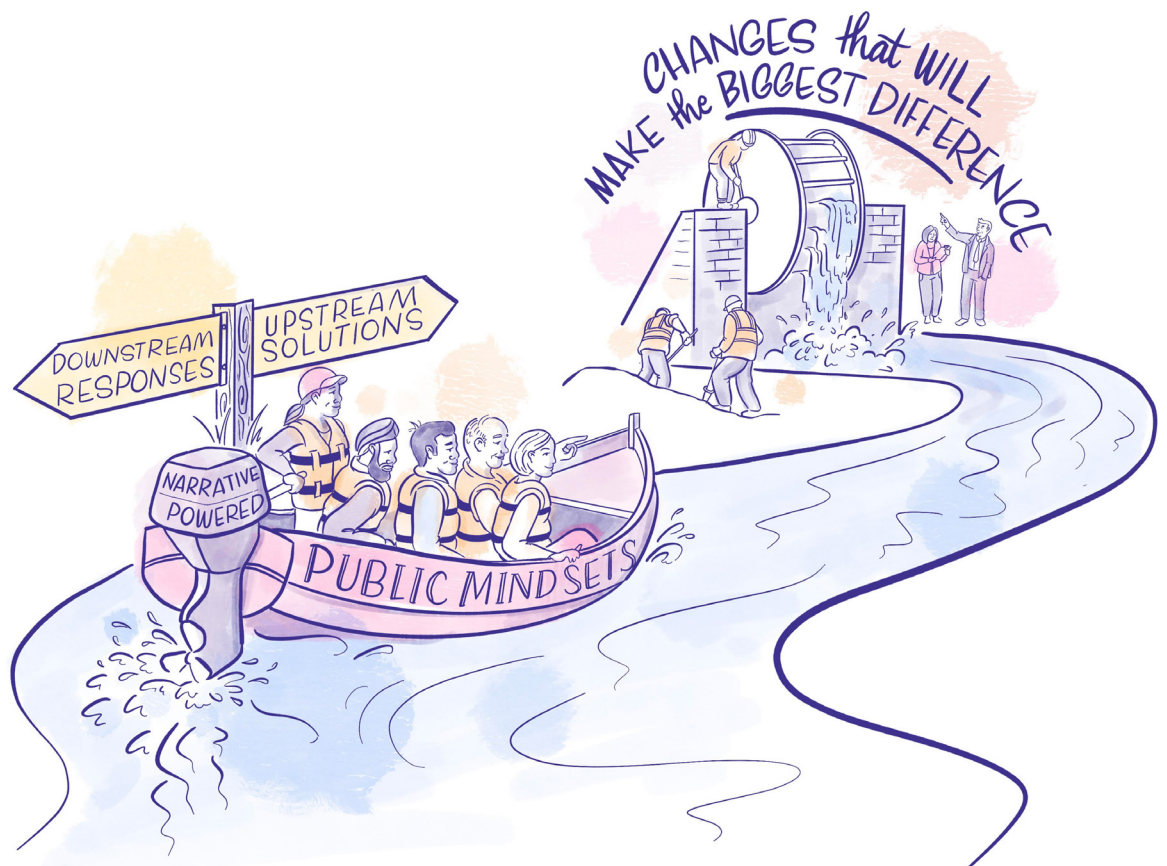


How to talk about government and its work for the long-term public good



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In a nutshell — if you only have five minutes

How you talk about government work will influence people’s willingness to support the work local and central government does for our long-term wellbeing, and to get more involved in democracy. If you want people to back important decisions that’ll make the biggest difference to the long-term public good, use the recommendations in this guide.

This page gives you six quick tips — read the whole guide for more advice and examples.

Start talking about creating and building public good

Public good is a useful term to use when you’re talking about the work of government. It’s also good to talk about people in government as community builders for public good. Consider also using a ‘public structures’¹ metaphor to help explain the breadth of work local and central government does to improve everybody’s lives over the long term. This metaphor helps people think about the things they don’t see, and the broad spectrum of government work. People can picture both physical structures and abstract systems like events, housing and transport as public structures.

Start talking about the future that your work is helping build for people

Lead your communications with a concrete vision for the future you are helping to create for everyone. Presenting a hopeful vision makes people feel that the vision is achievable. Your vision must accurately reflect your work and you should show the concrete steps you’re taking to make the vision a reality. Leading with a vision is better than leading with problems, which can trigger fatalistic thinking.

Start talking about building the infrastructure for care, connection, and contribution

Talk about building structures and systems that support care, connection and contribution of people. Relating your work to these values reminds people what motivates them and how the work of people in government reflects these values. Most people in our communities want:

- the opportunity to connect with each other and with a place or places
- to be able to care and be cared for
- ways to contribute to who we are as communities and as a country.

¹Auburn A, Grady J, Brown A. “Public Structures as a Simplifying Model for Government. 2005 Oct 13 <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/public-structures-as-a-simplifying-model-for-government/>

Stop using transactional consumer-based language

Avoid talking about citizens as ‘customers’, ‘ratepayers’ or ‘consumers’. These words feed into narratives associated with individualistic thinking and short-term transactional relationships, and they exclude many people who people in government work on behalf of. Instead, talk about ‘community members’ or ‘citizens’.

Stop focusing your communication at people who consistently oppose long-term planning

Avoid directing your communication at people who consistently and vocally oppose long-term changes that will make the biggest difference to people’s lives. Instead, understand and respond to the needs of people who are currently most harmed or excluded, and to those ordinary people who need to better understand the reasons for long-term planning and decision making.

Stop talking about government in the abstract

Avoid talking about the work of government in abstract ways in which people are not visible. Instead, emphasise and name the people in government who are making practical decisions, motivated by care for people and planning for the long-term public good.



People are more likely to support government work for the long-term public good if we talk about it differently

Our long-term wellbeing relies on people in government making good decisions about complex issues for the public good. It relies on public support for necessary change. We're at a time when significant change is needed in the ways we work, learn, live, and travel to make the biggest difference to our long-term wellbeing. People in government are having to make these changes.

How we talk about decision-making in local and central government influences whether people want to and can support these decisions that make the biggest difference to the long-term public good.

This short guide offers new ways to talk about local and central government work to help deepen people's understanding of government work and get more people involved.

New narratives can influence what people think and do

Decisions by people in government rely on people supporting changes that could make the biggest difference to people's lives. Decision makers need to talk about change in a way that takes account of:

- the information and narratives people are already exposed to
- how people currently think and reason about big issues — their shared mindsets
- how people process new information that may counter their current understanding of an issue — fast thinking.

Shared mindsets are taken-for-granted patterns in how we think about the world — deeply held beliefs and assumptions across a culture that influence how we think, what we do, and how we talk about things. Shared mindsets especially shape our willingness to support change.

Narratives both reflect and influence our mindsets. They are patterns of meaning in our talk that tie together our different stories. Narratives are like the golden thread — common meanings within our stories that reflect shared ways of thinking and reasoning.

The theory and research underlying this guide focuses on the power of communication and the importance of helpful narratives to influence shared mindsets — how we think and talk about the world, and what influence this has on concrete political and social change.

To help people in the community understand the complex issues that people in government increasingly have to think about, we need to know how people currently think about those issues, problems and solutions. People’s shared mindsets can get in the way of them understanding necessary change if those mindsets don’t reflect an accurate understanding.

We also need to understand the narratives that hold these mindsets in place and reframe the issue with new narratives that can shift people’s mindsets. The science of narratives helps do that.



Unhelpful mindsets and narratives about the role of government — people think in individual and fatalistic ways

Existing research highlights two particular, unhelpful ways people have about thinking about the role of government.

- Individualistic mindsets
- Fatalistic mindsets

Many people think that the role of government is about providing individual services to people who pay taxes, maximising short-term financial efficiency, and passing on cost savings in the form of lower rates and taxes.

Type of unhelpful mindset	Unhelpful narratives that reflect this mindset	What does it sound like?	Why is it unhelpful?
Individualistic	<p>People favour their own individual needs over the needs of their community.</p> <p>People see themselves as consumers of government services rather than citizens or community members.</p>	<p>I'm a customer and I expect value for money.</p> <p>Rates, roads and rubbish!</p> <p>I shouldn't have to pay taxes and rates for things I don't use.</p> <p>People need to work harder and solve their own problems.</p>	<p>Individualistic thinking stops people seeing the collective long-term public good that governments are working for.</p> <p>People can't understand the interconnectedness and nuances of social and environmental issues.</p>
Fatalistic	<p>People see government as useless, full of waste, and inefficient.</p> <p>People associate government with financial or moral corruption and incompetence, and perceive mistakes as intentional, rather than the result of human error.</p>	<p>The council is useless and dysfunctional.</p> <p>It's a waste of money.</p> <p>Government services are bloated, inefficient, or corrupt.</p> <p>Nothing can be done. It is what it is.</p>	<p>People are disempowered, distrustful, and ignore opportunities to take part in democracy.</p> <p>People are unable to see the possibility of a brighter future for all people and the planet.</p>

People in government work for the public good

We need more people to recognise the mission of government to work for the long-term public good. It's more than possible to achieve this. People in councils and government are clear that they work for the long-term wellbeing of people. This work includes changes that will make the biggest difference to everyone's wellbeing, including changes to do with housing, climate change, and transport.

People across different types of government — local, regional, and central — are made up of people who care about their towns, cities, and regions, and the people in them and their futures. People in government do a huge range of work that shapes people's everyday lives in positive ways.

But citizens don't always see or appreciate this work. Because of dominant unhelpful narratives and fast-thinking brains, people can have a shallow understanding of the work people in government do and can be fatalistic about the ability of people in government to create public good.

People in the public need to better understand the work that people in governments do, and why they do it. Effective narratives can help. Better narratives, leading to better understanding, can help improve and expand the public good work of people in governments, especially work focused on the big challenges we face together.

How to talk about government so more people understand and support this work for the public good

To help citizens feel engaged and well-informed, your communications should do these things.

1. Use your more helpful narrative in each story you tell about your work.
2. Encourage people to think of people in government as community builders for the public good.
3. Use the language of care, connection, and contribution in communications about your work.
4. Lead with your core motivations — responsible management and pragmatic decision making for the long term.
5. Stop talking about customers or ratepayers.
6. Lead communications with a compelling, concrete vision for the public good².
7. Use a ‘public structures’ metaphor to explain the work of people in government.
8. Emphasise the people who work for and within governments.
9. Broaden who you listen to, respond to, and talk with.
10. Tell people how you listen and make decisions for the public good.

1

Use your more helpful narrative in each story you tell about your work

Effective narratives are those that help people think more deeply or in different ways about the work of government so that people can understand and support decisions for the long-term public good. Effective narratives can help shift those unhelpful mindsets that can get in the way of people’s understanding and support.

Focus on your narrative about your work and the role of people in government. What do you want people to understand about the work people in governments do, who they do it for, and why? How can you reflect this in all your communications? The stories you tell in each communication will reflect and tie together your own narrative.

When you tell your own story in each communication, use easy-to-understand explanations, with helpful metaphors. Clear explanations can link relevant facts and fill gaps in people’s understanding. This will help to deepen people’s thinking of the work governments do, and the way this work benefits everyone.

² ‘The public good’ is a tested phrase that is useful for showing what people value, regardless of their politics or background. From www.australiaremade.org/public-good

Remember that you're telling your story with your narrative, and not responding to someone else's.

TELL YOUR STORY.



An example of using your narrative to tell your story

If responding to people saying that new public infrastructure is a waste of ratepayers' money, don't talk about how people in council are spending the money wisely to mitigate climate change. Instead, remember the narrative you want to use and talk about the public good that the council is creating for generations to come by building a city resilient to climate change now.

2

Encourage people to think of people in government as community builders for the public good

More helpful ways to frame the role of government can deepen people's thinking and get them to engage more in local, regional, and central democracy. When people think helpfully about government, they recognise the public good benefits of government actions.

Research suggests two ways to frame the role of government that can deepen thinking.

Government as a collective public conscience

This sounds like: government acts with society's best interests at heart, making pragmatic, considered decisions, and planning for future generations. Government is a steward and a protector. In New Zealand, the role of Treaty Partner would also fall under this frame.

Government as a community builder

This sounds like: government fosters community, finds a consensus between diverse groups, and tries to keep as many people happy as possible. Government prioritises the common public good.

3

Use the language of care, connection, and contribution in communications about your work³

Talk about how you are building the infrastructure of care, connection, and contribution for public good as much as possible in your communication. Most people in our communities want:

- the opportunity to connect with each other and with a place or places
- to be able to care and be cared for
- ways to contribute to who we are as communities and as a country.

People want connection

No matter where people live, their age, or their cultural identity, people want to connect and belong to community and to place — and they want this for others. As well as the physical infrastructure of connection like public transport, roads, and good internet, people want better spaces and places that bring them together.

Talk about opportunities for, and the value of, connection in the services and things available for citizens. For example, how a new skating programme has given young people a sense of belonging.



³ Rooney M Dr, Spencer L. Reclaiming our Purpose: It's Time to Talk About the Public Good. 2022 March https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ae6de517c932736b15f2cc7/t/624bedfb0b949a0d50abb147/1649143305012/Public%2BGood%2BReport%2BOnline%2B-%2BApril%2B2022.pdf&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1658368657425935&usg=AOvVaw2fCLDsK_V-myYouYvH36TrL

People want to be cared for and to care for other people and things

Everyone needs to be able to give and receive care at different times and in different ways. Both the physical infrastructure of care, such as childcare centres or housing, and the support infrastructure needed, such as staffing ratios, community services, and the time to care for children or family, are just as important to people. Use the language of care to talk about all these things that government work is helping create.

For example, social housing tenants not only receive the care of a safe home, they actively want to care for the places they live in. The government organisation looking after social housing cares about building better, brighter homes, communities, and lives. They state their values are about putting people at the heart of what they do to make a positive difference in people's lives.

People want to contribute

People want to contribute. Voting in elections, doing paid or voluntary work, and paying taxes are a type of formal contribution. People also want to be heard and respected, be able to contribute to decision making on different issues and bodies, be able to write submissions and attend hearings, and have the time and opportunity to take part.

Show people how they can contribute, and make it as easy as possible with genuine and human-friendly ways to take part. Take care with the questions that you ask people. Make sure questions are about things they can genuinely contribute to, instead of asking things only experts can answer or have already been decided for the wider public good. For example, instead of 'should we reduce the number of cars in cities?', you could ask, 'how challenging is it to get around without a car, and what do you need to make it easier?'

Show people how you have listened and acted, and what their contribution has led to. They may not get the specific outcome they wanted, but understanding why you reached the decision you did and how their contribution informed it, is important. Refer also to point 10.

4

Lead with your core motivations — responsible management and pragmatic decision making for the long term

For many people working in government, their core motivations are to be responsible and to make responsible decisions about caring for people and the planet in the long term. They want to make pragmatic decisions that are shown to work to create public good over the long term. It's important to talk about and lead with these values — they are 'your why' and people in the public can connect with them. You can link these motivations with communications about building the infrastructure of care, connection, and contribution.

An example message about responsible, pragmatic decisions

“It’s important that all of us take responsible steps to manage the issues our city and region experiences. As your fellow community members working in local government, we think carefully about our problems and keep future generations in mind while looking for the best solutions. We take a practical approach to plan for our city, while relying on common sense and evidence. Even if it takes a bit more time or money, managing challenges responsibly and balancing everyone’s needs — including the needs of future community members — is the right thing for us to do.”

5 Stop talking about ‘customers’ or ‘ratepayers’

Don’t talk about people as customers or ratepayers. And avoid referring to ‘what people get for their money’, for their taxes or rates, or ‘how we spend your taxes or rates’.

This consumer-based language brings to the surface a transactional mindset about the role of government, which is unhelpful when you’re trying to get people to understand the long-term public good role you have. This language also frames people as individuals, and that public services need to have a direct and individual pay-off in proportion to people’s contribution. It hides the collective purpose of government and the long-term planning function and public good aspect of government work. And talking about ‘ratepayers’ and ‘taxpayers’ removes people who don’t own homes from the conversation.

An example of avoiding the terms ratepayers or customers

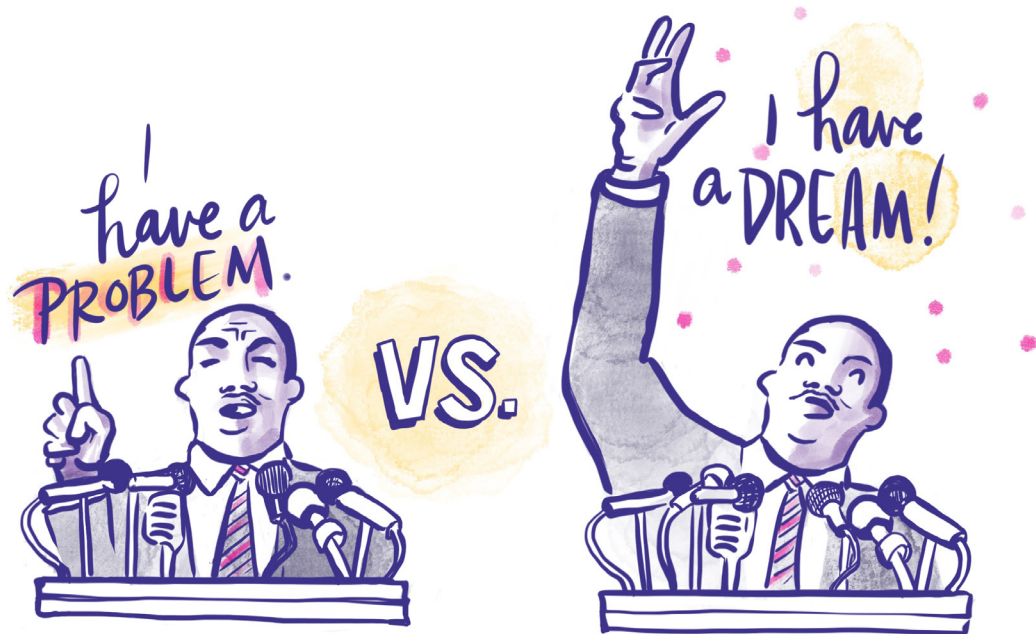
Instead of talking about ‘what you get for your rates’, talk about how public structures like education or libraries are a public good that all citizens benefit from.

6 Lead communications with a compelling, concrete vision for the public good

Start your communications with a concrete vision for the future that you are helping to create for everyone for your town, city, or region. Show how people’s everyday lives will be different in concrete, specific ways.

Presenting a vision makes people feel optimistic and that the vision is achievable. But your vision must accurately reflect your work. And you should show and explain the concrete steps being taken to make the vision a reality.

A vision at the start is crucial because beginning communications with a problem disengages people. And since many people currently misunderstand the mission of government, it’s vital to get this right.



An example of leading with a vision

“Our city thrives when all of us living here thrive. We all need a stable, warm home close to work or school, streets where children can move around independently, lots of transport options, and places close to home where we can have fun and take time out. That’s why people in local government work with their fellow citizens to keep everyone’s needs in mind when making decisions. Because when all our people have a home, easy transport options, and lots of places to connect with others, we all benefit.”

Remember to also include a strong closing statement about actions that you’re taking to make this vision a reality. Without the actions, a vision does not feel substantive for people.

7

Use a ‘public structures’ metaphor to explain the work of people in government

Use a ‘public structures’⁴ metaphor to help explain the breadth of work that government does for the collective ‘us’ that improves everybody’s lives. In focus groups, participants said this metaphor made them think about the things that they don’t see, and the broad spectrum of government work. Participants pictured both physical structures and abstract systems like events, housing, and transport as public structures.

An example of the ‘public structures’ metaphor

“Lots of things in our city make our lives better. These are our public structures, which people at the council are responsible for building and maintaining. They can be things

⁴ Auburn A, Grady J, Brown A. “Public Structures as a Simplifying Model for Government. 2005 Oct 13 <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/public-structures-as-a-simplifying-model-for-government/>

we see all the time, like our streets, public pools, or parks and playgrounds. Or things we don't see, like food safety inspections in cafés and restaurants, and support for our community groups. Even the processes people at the council use to operate and improve our city are public structures.

It takes time to build the public structures we need. It also takes careful planning to ensure we have the public structures we need for the future. Together with people at the local council, our citizens help shape the public structures that will shape the lives of future citizens."

If you can also show the people in your local government who run and look after these public structures, your communication will be even more powerful.

8

Emphasise the people who work for and within governments

Highlight the people who work in government in your communication and emphasise that the value of care drives much of their work.

People like people, and people like people who are like themselves. When people see other people motivated by the values of care and contribution, that helps bring those values to the surface when they think about government.

In focus groups, people often brought to mind positive memories of interacting with a person in a council. This is a welcome reminder that these feelings are present and most people are willing to think about council work in an open-minded way.

Examples of showing council workers who care and are working for the public good

Teuila is part of our growing team making the council's climate action plan happen. She cares deeply about making sure our vision of a net zero carbon future becomes reality.

Our lifeguards care about your family's wellbeing, and work hard to take care of us all in and around our pools.

In our housing team, Moana helps connect building owners with families of workers in essential public service roles like teachers and nurses. He loves that his work helps families find a place where they can care for each other and belong.

9

Broaden who you listen to, respond to, and talk with

Think about three main groups of people in your community:

- people who are already persuaded, actively engaged, and support your work
- people who are opposed to your work or the principles behind the changes you are making, and who are unlikely to be persuaded
- people who don't have a fixed view, haven't thought about things, or who have mixed or competing views — your persuadables. Most people are in this group.

Focus on finding effective ways to communicate with people who are open to understanding

Effective communication should focus on people who are open to understanding your work better and it should also motivate your supporters to share helpful narratives about government. Broaden your communication so you can reach the largest group of potentially persuadable people. Remember, people who are open to understanding have a range of political viewpoints and need to be connected with.

Avoid negating the opinions of noisy opponents

Don't waste time negating untrue, unhelpful narratives and stories about your work. For example, telling people why people in council spend your taxes in responsible ways to counter claims that people are being wasteful with ratepayer money will simply bring to mind the narratives you're trying to move away from. Negating can look like outright mythbusting or simply spending a lot of time focusing on this oppositional message to prove it wrong.

People using unhelpful narratives are often loud, but usually the minority. If you try to negate or counter unhelpful and untrue narratives, this way of thinking and talking gets amplified. Instead, focus your communications on those people in the middle who don't yet have strong opinions about an issue, and tell your own story.

DON'T MYTH-BUST.



Don't measure the effectiveness of your communications by how firmly opposed people respond. Narratives and stories unpopular with people who are fixed in their opposing views can be some of the most powerful.

Think about whether people are true opponents or critics of aspects of what you're trying to do. People may criticise certain decisions or the speed of change, but still support or can be persuaded to support your vision for a better world. Encourage critics to use helpful narratives within their stories, so you may have different stories but you're still moving in the same direction.

10**Tell people how you listen and make decisions for the public good**

Talk to people about your process for listening to them and how you make decisions from there. People in focus groups suggested that they would like to be talked to less frequently, but more meaningfully, about what matters. They'd like to see clear reasoning for how councils and people in policy prioritise particular needs, and see more urgent action on urgent matters.

In the research, successful messages were grounded in the values of responsible management and pragmatism. They were also written from the perspective of a council staff member describing their approach to making decisions. Most people feel councils should make decisions this way, but people don't always believe that they do.

Make sure you match words with your actions. Framing and messaging won't solve a trust issue if you act in ways that people find untrustworthy, for example, if you exclude people or don't work to find ways to engage them.

About the insights in this guide

In developing insights for this guide we:

- reviewed existing research on public mindsets and narratives about governments
- asked people who worked in government in Aotearoa what they wanted people to understand about their work
- looked at what people say about government in public conversation
- explored how some people working in government currently communicate about the things the government wants people to understand
- asked ordinary people who don't already feel strongly about the work of government what they think about the work of local and central government.

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