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WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT INFRASTRUCTURE (but how?)

A guide for infrastructure leaders, strategists and communications professionals

Ipsos MORI Transport and Infrastructure
Acknowledgements

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Why we need to talk about infrastructure
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“I’m not against change, but I just don’t think we should do it“.

This was how a participant in a discussion group in 2017 expressed his objection to a large, national infrastructure project. His comment, and his sensitivities about social norms, typifies a certain world view that sits in juxtaposition to this one from the same series of discussions;

“If you look at Japan, they are living in the future. We are so behind. [To others in the group] If you look at it that way, we wouldn’t have any roads. I am happy that my country can afford to build that…Other countries have good infrastructure…This is a great country, and we shouldn’t be behind.“

These different emotions, variations on a theme of change and ‘change anxiety’, are the context to a pivotal moment for our country’s infrastructure. Our infrastructure needs an upgrade, desperately in some cases, but it has something of an image problem that must be addressed if it is to unify rather than divide the country

Thanks to the National Infrastructure Commission, the UK has its first ever National Infrastructure Assessment (NIA), a long-term view of our infrastructure needs and priorities. The NIA was informed by an endeavour to “…listen not just to the views of Government and industry, but also to those of the public”. The Assessment also drew on social research by Ipsos MORI involving discussions around the country, in cities, large and small towns, coastal resorts and rural villages, as well as two surveys. According to the Commission’s CEO Phil Graham, this exercise “genuinely challenged our thinking...”

This paper draws on our research for the Commission, but is grounded in work we have done for a decade dating back to a project we undertook for the CBI several years ago. This culminated in Building Trust: Making the public case for infrastructure which concluded:

“We need the public’s support to build world class infrastructure... our inability to garner grassroots support for major projects threatens the construction and upgrading of vitally important national infrastructure.”

Since then, we have seen growing awareness in the engineering and policy-making communities of the importance of engaging with the public and key stakeholders, of telling a better story about infrastructure and improving the impact and legacy of the immensely impressive projects they are designing and delivering.
We have been inspired by the research we have done for strategic infrastructure leaders – like the Commission and the CBI – as well as market and social research for many other clients to curate our thoughts about infrastructure, offering advice about how to listen and talk to citizens and consumers. We have learnt a lot from designing and conducting research to inform the story around projects large and small, local and national. We have conducted over 100 discussion groups and about 20 surveys over the past few years, building a large evidence base.

We present some pointers about how to build productive dialogue around infrastructure, identifying five main learning points which we think cut across infrastructure conversations – whether engaging with communities affected by construction or more generally with taxpayers and stakeholders, or running targeted communications campaigns.

1. **Make it meaningful to people**
2. **Make the case for the new**
3. **Define (and reflect) your audience**
4. **Listen and lead**
5. **Consider the message - and the messenger**
How we need to talk about infrastructure
1. Make it meaningful to people

Infrastructure certainly matters to people, but the terminology used is often so vague or laden with jargon that it becomes meaningless. People do not immediately distinguish between social and economic infrastructure in the same way as the experts; public services like healthcare and education are considered alongside housing, transport, and communications. We have also found a blurred line between services and infrastructure; people remember how they are treated by a train operator on a journey and conflate this with the rail infrastructure (the track and stations) they use.

The public use biological comparisons, sometimes talking of arteries and tissue (see example quotes below). We employed this metaphor ourselves when engaging with people about the future of cities for Innovate UK, describing future cities and their infrastructure as an integrated system like the human body. Naturally, people more readily conceive of infrastructure in terms of what than why; for example, a transport project is more readily about transporting people from A to B, less so a catalyst for redesigning place, achieving connectivity or enhancing social mobility.

“It’s like the human body... the blood supply is infrastructure. If you’ve got a good infrastructure, you’ve got a better, fitter body.”

“It’s the skeleton of support that allows society to function as it does.”

There is a need to make infrastructure tangible, whether the strategy or individual projects; what’s the benefit, the impact, the legacy? Perhaps one problem for infrastructure is that the most tangible feature is invariably the cost and timescales. These seem to be the default for coverage in the media and projects can be judged almost exclusively on this basis. 2018 brought news of Crossrail cost and timetable over-runs and even the delays to Spurs’ new stadium (following Wembley’s woes) will seep into cultural memory. This is harmful in terms of the public’s goodwill towards these particular projects but also the projects that will follow.

When talking about specific infrastructure projects, we find that the questions people have tend to focus on what? and why? but also, crucially, who is this for? They also ask: who will benefit? and what’s in it for me? with this being shaped by whether people can see themselves and people like them using it.

To do this, you need to make it real. People find it hard to think about the future, so it is important to get creative and move people on from here and now. This applies to us social researchers too; we did this effectively during our research for the National Infrastructure Commission by using different futures and engaging people in weighing up
principles for decision-making rather than getting lost in, for example, a technical manual for hydrogen heating. And in a project about future cities for Innovate UK we presented street-scene scenarios of what futures might look like – teasing out priorities and preferences to avoid getting lost in the detail (see Case study #2 below):

When talking of the future and presenting different visions and scenarios, it is important to recognise the uncertainties inherent in looking ahead. We often find people questioning ‘but how do you know?’, and more cynically, ‘They would say that, wouldn’t they’. Evidence matters but so does the vision; appealing emotionally as well as rationally is more likely to succeed.

Avoid jargon and linguistic barriers to engagement, starting with the term ‘infrastructure’ which needs deconstructing. When we asked the public across 29 countries to rate infrastructure we got substantially lower levels of positivity in each country than the average across ten sectors (asked individually). The implication of this is that while the infrastructure story – the big picture – needs telling, the term can be off-putting. It is, at best, vague and general. At worst, it is seen as abstract or even tactically evasive, meaning that campaigns should be built around particular projects and the benefits they will bring.
Case study #1:

One infrastructure project we supported was unsure about how to communicate its plans for minimising damage to the environment and investing in conservation and legacy-building. Previous research had shown this to be an important driver of opinion about the project both within affected local communities and the wider public. We used qualitative research to road-test potential stories. This immediately spotted language and concepts which were meaningless or confusing to people.

Case study #2:

In a deliberative research project on the future of cities for Innovate UK, we presented future scenarios as stimulus at day-long dialogue workshops. This involved bringing together six systems (energy, food, health, transport, waste and water) into integrated future urban scenarios. To keep this meaningful and engaging, we presented the scenarios via verbal description and visually through street scenes. The research generated insights into public priorities and the kinds of technologies and futures that would be publicly acceptable.
2. Make the case for the new

A key challenge is the natural inclination of Britons towards a cautious, pragmatic approach towards infrastructure and improving it; why not just ‘make do and mend’? This is not unique to public sentiment; for example, the expansion of Heathrow has been discussed by politicians, engineers and experts for decades, and finding a solution to heavy traffic on the A303 going past Stonehenge has been similarly protracted.

This is partly due to question marks around why – the premise and motivations behind change. The problems we need infrastructure to solve are not always evident to people and may lie beneath the surface and hidden from view; quite literally, in the case of ageing underground water supply pipes and sewerage systems.

Take housing. In the 1950s, slums and an inadequate amount and quality of supply were very visible issues to people and politicians. This on the ground evidence that investment was needed, helped to herald a programme of mass housebuilding. Today’s crisis relates more to affordability and sustainability, catering for households which have not yet been formed. It is only through a concerted effort to build the tangibility and relevance of the housing crisis that it has cut through; the campaign has included the use of ‘Generation Rent’, the ‘Bank of Mum and Dad’ and ‘Yes to Homes’ to widen concern and calls to action.

Perhaps exceptionally, road congestion and railway capacity and reliability are recognised by the public as problems requiring action – in contrast, we find little sense that the ‘lights are about to go out’ on energy and utilities. But these are not without challenges. People want to see investment made in the familiar, things they already use: ‘I want the train I normally catch to run on-time…not a new route’ and ‘fix the roads we’ve got…rather than build more’ are common refrains. Unsurprisingly, it is easier to identify how something you know could be improved than it is to support a fresh idea, particularly when unconvinced that options improving what we have already got have really been considered.

Conservatism and a preference for fixing rather than building is also motivated by loss aversion, a tendency to put a higher value on what is lost than what can be gained. Loss here also encompasses a concern about the ‘sunk cost’– as a country we have invested in it previously so why give up on it? – plus an associated worry about waste and opportunity cost and, sometimes, the damage to Britain’s ‘green and pleasant land’.

Public opinion is not entirely negative towards new infrastructure though, and there are some positives too. For example, there is an appetite to keep up with the rest of the world and to ‘start’ building again. A common observation is “we don’t build anything anymore“ – which applies to manufacturing but also construction, and that we don’t do infrastructure at all well (this is, though, not unique to Britain as our Global Infrastructure Index series
of surveys has shown). But when timescales are measured in decades or lifetimes, it may not feel like we really are building again or addressing needs. Infrastructure needs to work hard to make the case for the new. Making infrastructure more tangible, more personally relevant will help, but you need to do more than paint a picture.

It is also important to be realistic about short-term impacts on public sentiment; the likelihood is that the case for the new must be made frequently and forcefully. Phil Goodwin summarised a cycle of acceptability with respect to road pricing, but the same could be said of infrastructure; the risk is that support ‘peaks’ at the conceptual stage, then falls off and doesn’t fully recover⁶. He also talks about “sufficient steadiness of purpose to keep moving”; the implication is that engagement should happen early and then continue as the project progresses.
Case study #3:

In one project, we showed a promotional film produced by our client which told the story of a regeneration project involving substantial investment in infrastructure. The film provoked powerful reactions and its use was effective in sparking discussion – and unearthing insights – about both the project in general and the film (the story) in particular. Its presentation of ‘new’ evoked confidence in the vision but also concerns about a ‘corporate’ focus at the expense of ‘community’ and ‘character’.

Case study #4:

We ran a survey for a planning authority presenting different cases for and against the building of new homes. This moved from gauging ‘in principle’ support and opposition to collecting respondents’ views in respect of specific propositions. It allowed us to quantify the ‘swing’ towards and away from support, identifying the key features of productive future narratives and communication.

We used a streamlined version of the same survey at an event with stakeholders. The findings we shared emboldened elected representatives to be less cautious and fearful of public opinion they had previously expected to be ‘nimby’.
3. Define (and reflect) your audience

Whom do you want to listen to? And speak to? When and how? Defining your target audience - your community - is central to having the right conversation about infrastructure. It is vital to tailor the format, tone and place depending on whom you are talking to. And while they are important and a statutory requirement, consultations should not be seen as the only, and certainly not the most effective way of finding out what the public think.

Consultations are useful – and of course, represent a legal necessity in many cases – but fulfil a particular function. It seems that a lot of store is placed on the results almost regardless of how many responses are received (and the number can vary enormously). While they can be helpful in unearthing alternatives and new approaches that might not have been considered, they are limited to revealing the views of those most engaged at that moment in time and who are motivated to respond. By comparison, social research allows greater breadth and depth of coverage.

The views expressed by those who respond to a consultation are much more polarised, and often more negative, than those of a representative survey or any carefully designed social research intended to look at a range of views rather than relying entirely on self-selecting contributors. For example, for a local council in the South of England we found net support of +8 for new housing supply among those who responded to a consultation but +29 among those who had helped develop a community or neighbourhood plan (and +22 among the population as a whole).
We have found a typically less engaged section of the public who will give their views if asked, but only if asked (and sometimes only if asked repeatedly and with a financial incentive!). When we reach them and can have conversations about infrastructure, we need to remember that people have two overlapping and competing frames of thought on these issues; as the *citizen* – weighing up local and national priorities and what is good (or not) for society – and the *consumer* – what’s in it for me? Importantly, it is not a case of playing to one, or pitting them off against each other, rather, it should be citizen *and* consumer; making sure the conversation covers and talks to both elements.

We have found some reticence in engaging with the public among those sensitive to criticism and complaint. While Bill Gates’ advice about the insight you can glean from speaking to your worst critic holds as much for infrastructure as it does for products and brands, it is important to avoid over-focusing on those stridently (or silently) opposed to your project, particularly in an era when social media amplifies outrage. They should not be ignored, but securing pluralism in the conversation is important.

The public are part of a wider network of influence on a given issue; in reality, much of the conversation about a particular infrastructure project happens beyond the direct control of those charged with delivering it. Understanding this ecosystem of stakeholders, and how they influence each other, is also important to consider and a first step towards building strong connections and influencing these dynamics. While the reputation of the company or organisation at the heart of delivery matters, it is the project and its associated issues that connects these groups.
Addressing the concerns of communities and those affected by infrastructure (new and old) including “vocal locals” is the right thing to do – ethically and in terms of good business and reputation – but we should be mindful of the silent majority in order to put perspectives in perspective. This is one of the most important applications of undertaking social research; it reaches the parts other engagement cannot reach and is a lens showing ‘ground truth’ realities.

As we have already described, consultations and social research are likely to pick up difference types of people. We should also consider local communities - the largest projects will impact on neighbourhoods and communities - as well as civic leaders, businesses, politicians, the workforce, supply chain and more besides. The importance of this is evident in surveys we have run in recent years - where, for example, airports and broadband are further up towards the top of Captains of Industry’s infrastructure wish list, they lower down in the public’s pecking order.

We are often asked how to triangulate or ‘weight’ different sources of opinion and input on infrastructure priorities and policies. There is no straightforward formula for this; sources are different, each with limitations and applications, and judgement calls are required. Consider for example the respective merits of a short but statistically reliable interview with 1,000 members of affected communities compared with deliberative workshops lasting several hours. Which is best? Answer; they are better together, and we ought to use individual sources to corroborate and challenge others.
Case study #5:

One client tracked awareness, knowledge and sentiment about its project, but wanted to delve deeper into the nature of support and opposition. Consequently, survey research has been supplemented by qualitative research to unpick attitudes. This insight programme has been enhanced by use of a dedicated segmentation study which has built a more granular and holistic picture of six different groups, allowing managers to apply learnings to the design and delivery of campaigns and narratives.

Case study #6:

We ran an annual programme of research for a regional infrastructure project involving a variety of stakeholder audiences. This included key stakeholder audiences; local authorities, users of the helpdesk service, businesses and residents in locations affected by construction, and transport journalists. This allowed our client to assess the effectiveness of its stakeholder engagement strategy over time, to identify points of difference between different groups, and ensure that it was responding effectively to any concerns related to the project.
4. Listen and lead

Good engagement follows and leads public opinion. Infrastructure leaders need to be confident of a thorough understanding of this if they are to build ‘cultural relevance’.

In a political environment, misreading culture can hinder infrastructure. A few years ago the LGA found that councils were reporting public opposition as the biggest block to building new homes. At the same time though, ‘nimbyism’ (not in my back yard) is an over-simplistic caricature of public opinion. Also damaging is listening too late and feeding a tendency towards cynical thinking that “they have already made their minds up about this”. The Institute for Government advises early and effective engagement - especially with affected communities - to build legitimacy and reduce the risk of challenge and delays.

Culture is complex and multi-layered; one of our clients describes the research we do for him as akin to “peeling an onion”, getting down to the individual layers of social, sectoral and project cultures. There are opportunities and threats within each of these. For example, within the outer ‘social’ layer, we find Britons increasingly sensitive to division and inequality, and likely to see promises and pledges through a sceptical filter. At sector level, there is a strong sense that ‘something must be done’ about the railways and housing supply.

Cultures at sector and project level can be impacted by events; reported tremors near to fracking sites have added to controversy, while the delay to flights before Christmas caused by drones may yet sensitise the public to the management of air space and airports in positive or negative ways.

Infrastructure ought to keep up with culture and policy. As an example, the National Infrastructure Commission was emboldened by the public appetite to promote, standardise and simplify the recycling of plastics (the Commissions’ recommendations fed directly into the Government’s resources and waste strategy). Our research also found the protection of natural assets to be a key priority for infrastructure of all types, considered by the public to be an essential part of future-proofing the UK.

Infrastructure leaders need to weather storms, but also to make the weather where possible. As a sector and as a set of individual projects, infrastructure should be culturally and locally relevant, appealing to people emotionally as well as rationally (and striking the right balance between these). For example, is there scope to change the conversation about divided Britain? Or to “put a flag on it” and demonstrate how people, and the country, can be proud of what’s being built? Or help address public anxiety about generational inequity? How about shifting infrastructure from being a largely economic proposition into something more social? This might help to build its
relevance especially as we find that many people don’t understand how the economy works and catalytic benefits and boosts to GDP are less tangible to them than new jobs and apprenticeships.

There are, however, other occasions when taking the emotion out of conversations about infrastructure can help. Can you reframe, or at least supplement, the story about the ‘big build’ and mitigate anxiety about environmental damage and disruption? There have been several examples of infrastructure projects leveraging archaeology and ecology to move the narrative away from a story about losing the past (and present) to one about securing future benefits. In making the case for expansion, airports have presented case studies of benefits to entrepreneurial SME businessmen and women alongside stories about national impacts.

Tackling information gaps and misperceptions is also important. For several years Ipsos MORI has highlighted the ‘perils of perception’ and the challenges these pose for policymakers and communicators. For infrastructure this can be quite basic – for example providing maps, better visualisations of impacts, and facts to counter gossip and hearsay – but also more fundamental. For example, we have found that, in Britain, as elsewhere, the public overestimates the amount of energy used that comes from renewable sources, potentially creating a climate of complacency. And importantly for the infrastructure sector as a whole, Britons wildly overestimate how much the country is already built on; they mostly support the Green Belt without really knowing what it is.

Following our global study for the Global Infrastructure Investors Association, Ipsos colleagues in Italy and Australia were quick to point out that their countries do not have nuclear plants (we collected ratings of nuclear infrastructure among ten sectors across 29 countries). In Italy, 47% still felt able to answer and rated nuclear infrastructure negatively. While it is possible that some Italians are negative because of the absence of a nuclear infrastructure, a more likely scenario is that a degree of confirmation bias is at play. In a similar vein, is broadband in Italy really inferior to that of Peru and Malaysia?
Case study #7:

When working for a water company we established a potential barrier to engagement with their customers was the term ‘customer’ itself. While satisfied with the service they received, for some, the term seemed at odds with cultural expectations; in contrast to other monopolistic markets, people did not feel at all empowered or involved. We found that ‘customer’ implies a different, more active and collaborative type of contract and a degree of choice. Instead, most were happy for the company to “just get on with it”, while expecting improvement in terms of asset-management, reducing bursts and leaks.

Case study #8:

A client wanted to develop a structured set of guidelines, rooted in the needs of the customer/user, for project managers to use during key infrastructure projects. The projects involved construction of new infrastructure and modernising existing infrastructure with some disruption to users.

We used a range of methods reflecting the different stages of the projects – for example, discussion groups with customers and local communities about what they wanted from consultation and communications, mystery shopping and accompanied journeys to explore experience and understand service levels during construction works, and ‘pop-up’ online communities of users and residents for instant feedback.
5. Consider the message – and the messenger

A key success factor for any reputational campaign is to understand the conversation and culture around the topic, measuring and exploring what people know, and what they get right and wrong.

Armed with a better appreciation of the culture around a project, and the rational and emotional drivers driving this, infrastructure leaders will be better placed to construct messages and narratives. The focus of these will vary according to projects and audiences. However, our research points to an overriding imperative; the importance of selling the why, not just the what14.

Almost three-quarters of Britons agree that investing in infrastructure is vital to the country’s future economic growth. Six in ten do not believe enough is being done to meet our infrastructure needs and people have a dim view about their country’s record on infrastructure. The lack of tangibility of many benefits, plus the very long timetables involved and the slow realisation of benefits, means that projects are judged, sometimes exclusively, by whether they are achieved on time and on budget – that is, the story drifts into what, not why.

The insights into culture and perception gaps we have described should neither serve as a catalyst for spinning numbers nor a “myth-busting” exercise, not least because a lack of public trust in the Government (of any shade) and information from the ‘authorities’ is very evident in the research we do. Again, emotion is a key driver and messages should talk to concerns and hopes, not just people as ‘rational actors’.

Conversations need credibility. Our research tells us that it is important that messages acknowledge costs and losses. People are sensitive to ‘spin’ (real or perceived) and value honesty. Infrastructure projects always come at a cost; financially and in terms of disruption and adverse impact. According to McKinsey, more than 98% of construction projects worth over $1bn are late or over budget15.

There is some uncertainty about budgets that the sector continues to struggle to address (in the same way perhaps that the polling industry has not effectively communicated margins of error during elections16). The Institute for Government identify the risks of “ambitious delivery timetables” and “falsely precise early forecasts”17, and yet there are several good reasons to be clear on uncertainty and the need for readjustment; for example, the National Audit Office revealed, in September 2018, that the cost of buying land for HS2 has tripled over the past six years18.

Who should be talking about infrastructure, explaining its complexity? It would be tempting to say engineers should be the spokespeople for infrastructure since the latest Ipsos MORI Veracity Index placed them at the top end of trusted professions in Britain19.
Despite what some have said recently, people do trust experts, but infrastructure also needs the democratic accountability and reach of politicians, and it is telling that populists such as the Five Star Movement in Italy are increasingly weaponising the issue of infrastructure against ‘elite’ governments (using arguments about inequity and environmental damage) while China is using the Belt and Road Initiative as a way of exerting soft power.

In Britain we have found people wary of *agendas*, saying they are sick of hearing from “the suits” and “the angrys” i.e. politicians and protestors. Instead, they want a more nuanced and constructive discussion of pros and cons. People are wary of vested interests. Businesses have a legitimate say, but they are not seen as neutral on priorities and options. People value the roles of central and local government in setting strategic priorities, and neutral experts in developing the ideas to deliver them:
These same considerations apply to engagement and listening. In some cases, it makes sense for this to be done by infrastructure leaders, but in others it helps to have an independent third party do the talking so that they can do the listening, being in the room to hear what people have to say without needing to make the case and defend positions. This might also apply to consultations about major infrastructure that can come across as fait-accompli, getting projects off to a bad start rather than fostering a reputation for listening.

Could infrastructure learn from science, a similarly technical, objective endeavour but one which seeks to engage with the public and, similarly, dealing with tricky political (and ethical) dimensions, to tell a story about what it contributes? Organisations like ScienceWise are funded to manage engagement and consultation, fulfilling a similar function to the Commision Nationale du Débat Public (CNDP) in France which has been identified by the Institute for Government as something which might help diffuse local opposition.\(^{20}\)
What next?
Building up and out from strong foundations

“Asking the public for their views on infrastructure can be a frustrating experience” according to the Institute for Government21. Certainly, it is not always straightforward, but it can be illuminating and inspiring.

The five points we have presented give structure to our thoughts and experiences based on hundreds of conversations about infrastructure with the public. Wherever you are or whatever you are talking about, insight is the foundation of strong, effective narratives.

Like everything else, infrastructure needs selling. People are busy, distracted, and not always entirely rational. Cutting through this means understanding and differentiating between the signal and the noise. This is required for each infrastructure project - bespoke research to scope bespoke conversations and story-telling - but also at a strategic, national level.

It is time to talk about infrastructure but to listen too. This will help to build better conversations and better outcomes.
Ipsos MORI
Transport and Infrastructure

We work with transport and infrastructure leaders to provide community, customer, and stakeholder insights to support infrastructure design, delivery, marketing, corporate reputation and impact evaluation.

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We cover all sectors including aviation, digital, energy, housing, transport and utilities, using multiple methods and innovative approaches to collect insights and support improvement.

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