

How to influence political decision-makers: Making the case for nature-based solutions

Top tips for making the case for nature-based solutions

1. Identify the decision-makers
2. Understand the context
3. Get the language right
4. Strike while the iron is hot
5. Recognise the limits to influencing decision-makers

1. Identify the decision-makers

Unsurprisingly, we usually focus our attention on the politicians in power as we assume it is they who are making the decisions that shape the programmes and initiatives that affect our current work (and funding) in the immediate future. To an extent this is true as they have the discretion and mandate to initiate new programmes to address issues on which they were elected. But politicians at the city or municipal level are not often able to make deep-seated change quickly, unless it is aligned with a major shift of policies and priorities at the regional or national level. The primary responsibility of the political leaders of cities of municipalities is to implement policies that result in a shift in direction (rather than radical reform) and to manage and maintain the public services that already exist.

Existing Mayors or leaders can be valuable allies in promoting the messages that shift mind-sets and cultures, but it is their advisors, influencers within their own political parties, and local government officers within their city or municipal governments who will be deciding the policies and programmes of the future. Influencing these 'behind the scenes' people through participation in policy forums, shaping outputs from 'think-tanks', and engaging the next generation of politicians at the local level is the key to long-term political influence.

2. Understand the context

Who are the decision makers?

Ultimately it is elected politicians who take the decisions that create or change policy and establish new programmes and projects. But to reach this point there are other key players in the decision-making process which we should also be influencing:

- Politicians are the decision-takers
Their primary consideration will be "Do nature-based solutions deliver my manifesto commitments?"
- Policy makers and 'think tanks' are decision-framers
Their primary consideration will be "How can nature-based solutions be integrated with other strategic policy objectives?"
- Professional organisations, businesses and institutions are decision-shapers
Their primary consideration will be "Do nature-based solutions complement or conflict with my area of interest or expertise."
- Public are decision-supporters or decision-objectors
Their primary consideration will be "Do nature-based solutions improve or worsen my quality of life or the issues which I care about?"

We all make decisions based on our emotions, values, identity and the information which we are presented. Political decision-makers are no different, other than they will normally be expected to 'toe the party line' on matters of important policy. We need to recognise this. As an individual they may be fully on board with our agenda and objectives, but as part of a decision-making team they will often need to compromise in order to meet other legitimate and often equally important political objectives. It's important to understand that their decisions, like our own decisions, are not formed just by values and emotions; they are shaped by the constraints of political alliances, budgets, contracts and the media-stories of the day. Political decision-makers are often making hard-choices – it's why we elect them to deal with tricky issues on our behalf. We should hold them to account if they make the 'wrong' decision from our point of view, but also recognise that our objectives are not always their most pressing concern.

3. Get the language right

Nature-based solutions and green infrastructure are terms derived from a language used by policy-makers. They are a useful vocabulary for policy-makers and academics as they are factual descriptions of function and purpose for those in the know. But we forget that for many who aren't engaged in our particular policy area the term 'nature-based solution' could be a reference to an alternative form of medical treatment or something to do with organic farming and green infrastructure could, and is, applied to the renewable energy network. Worse still we often revert to acronyms and the meaning of nature-based solutions becomes even more obscure.

Focus on what nature-based solutions does, not what it is. Decision-makers need to understand the benefits of investing in nature-based solutions in terms of how it can directly improve the quality of life of their residents, particularly those who elected them. They may have a personal interest in the particular types of wildlife that the nature-based solutions might support or the technical aspects of the nature-based solutions, but these are not usually the aspects of nature-based solutions which will make the most compelling case for investment when competing against funding for other vital public services.

It is also important to tap into the language of the decision-makers themselves. The language they use in their campaigning or political manifestos which they and their political advisors have judged will resonate with the public. Not only is imitation the best form of flattery, but by co-opting their language into your narrative, they may well appropriate your messages into their statements or policy announcements.

Use the right terminology

The right terminology is important for politicians to enable them to promote policy in a way that does not allow opponents to exploit to stoke controversy or opposition. Language that implies restrictions or appeals only to a particular way of thinking should be used for particular audiences only. Examples of terms and the audiences they engage include:

- Green infrastructure: engages planners, urban designers and engineers
- Nature-based solutions: engages ecologists and environmentalists
- Natural capital: engages economists and investors
- Urban Greening and Liveable Neighbourhoods: engages citizens and can communicate policies aimed at making cities "Greener, healthier and more resilient"

4. Strike whilst the iron is hot

Although influencing policy is usually a slow-burn endeavour there will be opportunities when decision-makers are going to be much more receptive to thinking about and embracing new solutions. Unfortunately, these opportunities usually arise on the back of an unfortunate event or a glaring failure of policy. These provide important moments to highlight alternative approaches and raise public awareness of both the failure and the solutions.

But this needs to be done with the appropriate tact and timing. Casting blame or highlighting inadequacies during a time when people may be suffering physical or economic hardship is not the right time to engage decision-makers in discussing the pros and cons of a new policy or programme. Instead take the time to gather the human and socio-economic impact of the event or policy failure and use these stories in your ongoing process of influencing decision-makers in order to humanise the arguments for change and localise the solutions.

5. Recognise the limits to influencing decision-makers

Creating greener, healthier and more resilient cities through use of nature-based solutions is a policy gaining widespread support across a broad spectrum of different political viewpoints. However, as explained in top tip 2 the delivery of nature-based solutions may be outweighed by other priorities depending on the particular socio-economic circumstances when a politician takes control of a city or municipal administration.

It is also important to recognise that different political perspectives will determine how the implementation of nature-based solutions is delivered. Some politicians will see nature-based solutions as a necessary public investment whereas others will want the planning system and other policy levers to encourage private investment in nature-based solutions. Whilst we may have our own views on the balance between public or private delivery of nature-based solutions, as policy makers and influencers we have to recognise that politicians will respond best to ideas and solutions that are in tune with their core political beliefs.

Of course, some politicians may come to power, or hold the balance of power, who have views that are completely at odds with the principles and objectives of nature-based solutions. If that should be the case remember the advice in Top Tip 1, spend your time and resources influencing those parts of the decision-making process who are most likely to be able to affect policy change in the future. If the environmental movement is right about the likely profound consequences of climate change and biodiversity loss the circumstances for having to deliver nature-based solutions at scale will soon become apparent to all but the most unbending political viewpoints.

FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES:

- [Understanding our political nature: how to put knowledge and reason at the heart of political decision making.](#)
- [Framing nature toolkit. A guide to how words can help wildlife.](#)
- [Building the political mandate for climate action.](#)

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