Joint Oireachtas Committee on Environment and Climate Action
Meeting on Media and Communications
Opening Statement, Professor Pete Lunn, Behavioural Research Unit, ESRI

Many thanks to the Committee for the opportunity to present evidence on the communication issues surrounding climate action. As the head of the ESRI's Behavioural Research Unit, I see my primary role here as supplying information on the evidence base that might be used to improve communication about climate policy.

I want to start by making two observations. The first is that the policy challenge we face here is unique. The reduction in emissions planned to tackle climate change envisages societal level change of a scope and speed that is unprecedented. As well as the changes to how we generate and use energy that have recently received so much attention, the plan is to change how we travel, how our communities are laid out, what we eat, how firms produce, what we build and how our land is used. There is no other policy area like it.

Second, when it comes to meeting this challenge, while it is natural that we turn to the social and behavioural sciences for help in getting the public to engage with climate action, I think there are yawning gaps in the available research evidence. This claim, coming as it does from a behavioural science researcher, requires some explanation.

Much research has been done on public opinion on and attitudes to climate change, including whether the public believes that humans are causing climate change and whether they support certain mitigation policies. Work has been done too on barriers to individual behaviour change and interventions to promote pro-environmental behaviour, such as purchasing more expensive but more efficient appliances, walking or cycling instead of taking the car, or taking the time to recycle household waste properly.

What is lacking, however, is an evidence base on whether and how people will accept proposed changes to the systems and communities that surround them. Most importantly, these include changes to taxes and pricing structures, but also changes to the use of road space, the available food to eat, our landscapes, the way to run a car, traditional farming practices, the ease of long-distance travel, the way to heat a home, and doubtless more. In short, public policy is asking people not only to change many of their daily habits and individual decisions, but also to accept rapid changes to the world around them that, in the past, have tended to occur only over decades, generally as a result of technological advances.

In my view, we lack evidence on when and how people will and will not embrace societal change on this scale.

One well-established finding of behavioural science is that, as a general rule, unless they are suffering, people prefer not to change. In the scientific literature, this is called "status quo bias". It should be noted that this is a profoundly sensible human behaviour. Individuals have learned to trust longstanding systems and to be wary of people who trumpet some better way. Just as democracy is a mechanism for distributing power to prevent damage

caused by narcissistic or despotic leaders (mostly, but not always, with success), status quo bias is a mechanism of instinctive resistance that individuals and communities use to prevent damage to their way of life.

We can already see resistance to many of the changes required for strong climate action, such as opposition to active travel initiatives, carbon taxes on energy, greener farming practices, pedestrianisation, wind turbines, road pricing, or restrictions on turf-cutting. The themes are often similar. Opponents of climate policy will say "we know we have to cut emissions, we just don't want to do it like this", or "there hasn't been enough consultation", or "why is it always us who gets picked on?".

As well as status quo bias, this last refrain speaks to people's instinctive understanding that the response to climate change should be collective. None of us wants to be the one making a sacrifice unless we can see that others are making sacrifices too. Even where a specific change has medium- or long-term benefits, accepting the upheaval and uncertainty inherent in change feels like a sacrifice that should be shared.

The solution to the collective action problem posed by climate change is also different from most other collective action problems, such as the public response to the recent pandemic. In that case, although the effects were not equally felt, everyone was essentially asked to make the same sacrifices for the public good. With climate action, the required change is different for different people, depending on where they live, how they make their living and what activities they undertake. This constitutes an example of what I mean by gaps in research: as far as my team can see, no one has yet researched how to boost cooperation in collective action problems that require disparate actions. We have just begun to do so.

Nevertheless, there are helpful research findings available to us now. For one thing, in Ireland, we are fortunate not to be plagued by climate change denial. The very large majority of people in Ireland believe in human-caused climate change. A large majority are also worried about it and want more to be done, especially by government. This is true of people young and old, living in both urban and rural communities. In other words, the research shows that fundamental attitudes are not the problem. Getting public buy-in for climate action is not about winning hearts and minds with regard to the seriousness of the problem – that battle is already won. Rather, it is about getting people to engage with and embrace the specific changes needed to cut emissions.

Importantly, our research suggests that this cannot be left to individual choice. The public is skilled at recognising when a behaviour is good or bad for the environment, but we find that people are not at all good at understanding which specific actions are most beneficial. The calculation of carbon footprints is far too complicated to guide individual behaviour. System change in the form of taxes and subsidies, rules and regulations, and changes to public infrastructure are essential. The main challenge is not to get individuals to change to greener behaviour, but rather to change to greener systems that individuals can support and engage with.

For the population to accept such changes, the evidence suggests that belief in the effectiveness of a specific change matters; people want to know that it will make a

difference. This means that demonstration may be an important element of getting people to change. Where one community has successfully changed its land use, started a community energy scheme or embraced active travel, we need to find ways to communicate that success to other communities, to demonstrate how the change can be beneficial. Where taxation shifts supply and demand, people need to see successful greener technologies in action, as well as traditional but polluting technologies in decline. Our research has recorded public support for the principle that the polluter pays, but this may not translate to support for specific policies. Demonstrations of the benefits, as well as costs, of enforcing this principle will be needed.

There are interesting questions about the role of the media here. As a former journalist, I know how much easier it is to tell, and sell, a story of failure than a story of success.

To conclude, while we have some useful evidence about how best to communicate the need for change and to support collective action – evidence that we can use better – the task is great and our evidence base is not yet good enough to meet the communication challenge presented by climate change. Of course, it is hardly surprising to hear a researcher say that we can use evidence better and that we desperately need more research, but that makes it no less true.

Pete Lunn, 28th November 2022.