

climate X change
ASSEMBLY 2026

ACCELERATING
CLIMATE ACTION

Collaboration, communication, trust and courage were the watchwords of the ClimateXChange Assembly 2026. When we invited climate-focused researchers, public and third sector leaders and Scottish Government policy makers to our event in February, we challenged attendees to hold bold conversations focused on how we can accelerate climate action in Scotland. Multiple themes emerged from those conversations, but these four concepts were a consistent refrain from the stage and the tables at Dynamic Earth in Edinburgh.

We subtitled our event Accelerating Climate Action. The aim was to explore how we use our knowledge, research and evidence to initiate, scale up and advance climate initiatives. Scotland has ambitious climate targets and plans yet progress on cutting emissions and adapting to the changing climate has been slow.



An Open Space approach

To explore different ways to increase the pace and scale of climate action, we wanted to try something different. So, working with event facilitators 64 Million Artists, we structured the day as an Open Space. The Open Space model is a methodology where participants create their own agenda of parallel discussions on the day around a central question. It is designed to allow a group of people to tackle complex, urgent issues in a creative and engaging way.

This was the central question anchoring our session:

How can we collectively step up climate action in Scotland – working together across public, private and third sectors, academia, communities, and individuals?

In Open Space everyone is welcome to suggest a topic and host a discussion. Once the session is underway, participants are welcome to move between different discussions as they choose. Moving between discussions is actively encouraged in Open Space with the guidance that if you are neither learning nor contributing to the discussion you're in then you should move on. The methodology is designed to make the best use of the interests, skills and experience of participants.

A yellow banner with a wavy, ribbon-like shape. The text on the banner is written in a mix of black and red fonts. The main text reads "HOW can WE COLLECTIVELY STEP UP CLIMATE ACTION in SCOTLAND" in black, with "in SCOTLAND" in red. Below this, it says "working together across public, private & third sectors, academia," in black. At the bottom right, it says "Community & individuals" in black, with "Community" on one line and "individuals" on the line below.

To kick-start the Open Space process and provide some examples of possible conversations, we had identified six experts to host an Open Space discussion based on their specialism and interest. They were:

- Elliot Ross, Executive Director, Just Transition Commission: **“What practical processes would help deliver accurate early warning on critical social and economic risks arising from emissions reduction measures? How can we move from a reactive approach to a strategic, anticipatory one?”**
- Dr. Mark Wilkinson, Co-Director of Climate-Positive Farming Initiative, James Hutton Institute: **“How can Scottish upland land managers and farm businesses achieve net-zero emissions and protect natural assets without compromising their financial viability?”**
- Tuisku (Snow) Kolu, Public Policy Advisor, British Academy: **“Can we disagree better? How can national and local governments sustain public support during periods of polarisation and contestation on climate action?”**
- Tara Schmidt, Executive Director of Transition Finance Scotland, Sustainable Finance Advisor (CERG): **“What funding, coordination, technical assistance and capacity building is needed to help local authorities and regional agencies turn climate ideas into investible project pipelines?”**
- George Tarvit, Director, Sustainable Scotland Network: **“Central Planning versus Systems Thinking – what forms of leadership, collaboration and coordination are needed to turn national climate plans into local climate delivery at scale and pace?”**
- Jeff Pyrah, Senior Planner (Forward Planning), Cairngorms National Park Authority: **“Planning power: how can a card game inform policy? Creating planning policy to address the climate emergency in the Cairngorms National Park.”**



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Following short provocations from these six hosts, we invited the remainder of the Assembly’s 100 or so participants to suggest additional topics that they saw as critical for inclusion. In total, 14 further questions were offered, spanning a broad spectrum of approaches to accelerating climate action in Scotland. They were:

1. **“How do we tackle underlying causes to avoid false trade-offs?”**
2. **“How can we incorporate climate change mitigation and adaptation into all policies?”**
3. **“What are some blue-sky scenarios for Scotland’s climate action/change futures?”**
4. **“If climate action has to win public trust in the next two years, what should the Scottish Govt. prioritise?”**
5. **“What science data knowledge partnerships can accelerate climate action?”**
6. **“How do we make big decisions based on incomplete evidence - accelerating uptake and impacts of science and research?”**
7. **“How do we campaign to step up climate action when we are being beaten by bad faith actors who are better funded and highly sophisticated? How do we plan and execute contested campaigns?”**
8. **“How can communities be active participants in the delivery of climate/transition solutions?”**
9. **“Climate risk and resilience for the future energy system - how, what, when?”**
10. **“What are the hurdles to attracting private sector investments in Scottish climate projects?”**
11. **“What is multi-functional land use and how do we get it?”**
12. **“How can we do more to support Small Island Developing States on the frontlines in a socially sustainable manner?”**
13. **“What public pedagogies are needed to counterbalance an immersive media environment that actively produces ignorance of complexity?”**
14. **“How should historic and existing buildings have a central pole in the mitigation of climate change?”**



Such a diverse range of conversations naturally produced myriad reflections, insights, ideas – and further questions. Nonetheless, overlapping and interacting themes emerged that, for the participants who joined us, straddle the issues of how we cut emissions and adapt to a changing climate. Those we have included in this report are in no way an exhaustive list of the rich discussions from the day.

Collaboration at national, regional and local level

The need for collaboration was brought up in several conversations, often centred on bringing people and communities into the conversations, and involve them in actions, that affect them.

“Climate action happens in places – that means collaboration at national, regional and local level.”

Assembly participant

Participants felt:

- A place-based, person-centred approach would help create a shared sense of ownership of both problems and solutions, helping to build buy-in for action to be taken
- The structural barriers that prevent local authorities and communities from building partnerships need to be removed
- Local communities have strong visions for what they want – they should be active participants in the delivery of climate solutions

The discussion that asked how communities can be active participants in the delivery of climate solutions, highlighted the need for “deliberative democratic processes to help communities connect, design, plan and deliver” climate action on their own terms. Participants also pointed to Climate Action Hubs as doing work to facilitate this already and called for more support for local organisations.

The issues were identified as recurring challenges for climate policy and attendees called for more targeted engagement at community level and research into effective methods of place-based climate action.



Sharing knowledge and data

A lack of collaboration across disciplines and sectors was identified as hindering climate action. Attendees across the discussion tables said that better sharing of learning, knowledge and expertise would help close the gap between the intentions of climate policy and effective action.

Examples included:

- More data sharing among key partners involved in climate action and decision making, particularly around critical infrastructure for power, water and transport
- Ensuring regular contact and knowledge exchange between academia and policymakers in government – including a call for policymakers to champion experts’ contributions as part of the policy process
- Sharing experience and learning from evidence-based decision making other policy spheres, such as in medicine and in public health, where behaviour change has been successful
- Climate data and evidence needs to be delivered and communicated across the whole of government and be part of inter-departmental collaboration.

Those taking part in the discussion on data sharing highlighted living labs as an example of collaborative and novel ways to share data – as well as creating trusted demonstrators of what works (or doesn’t). Participants also highlighted initiatives such as the Climate Ready Infrastructure Scotland Forum as opportunities to foster science and data partnerships.



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Communicating a future that people can see themselves in

Multiple discussions during the Open Space centred on how to garner better public support for climate action. For a lot of attendees and panellists, the solution lies in better communication.

The need to reframe how we talk about climate action was brought up repeatedly, with participants suggesting we need to focus on how the changes we make will improve people's lives. The need to change framing and narrative included a call to combat the negative messaging and misinformation from bad actors and critical media. It was suggested, not just in terms of championing positive messages, but that climate action needs to be presented as the most straightforward, obvious thing to do.

“Stop talking about climate change and start talking about making people's lives better.”

Assembly participant

There were also calls for more inspiring messaging from the Scottish Government to rally the public – instilling passion to build a better Scotland rather than deficit framing. As one participant put it, “communicating a future that people can see themselves in.” However, in doing so government and other public sector bodies must be honest about what needs to happen without over-promising and to ensuring consistent messaging across departments.

Uncertainty and imperfection

A common theme was also that it is important to communicate the idea that getting something partly right is better than paralysis. Participants felt it was particularly important to consider how to frame imperfect climate solutions.

**“ BUILD STUFF
that HELPS PEOPLE ”**
↳ DOESN'T NEED to be a CLIMATE PROBLEM to
have a CLIMATE SOLUTION

This notion is linked to another discussion, focused on how to make decisions based on incomplete evidence, which also considered the challenges around communicating uncertainty. Medicine and health care was highlighted as an evidence-based discipline which successfully quantifies and communicates uncertainty in its policy development. Both conversations highlighted the need to create an environment where trying and failing, and uncertainty around both evidence and outcome, are discussed openly with the public and in the media.

Connect to issues that matter to people



Building trust and championing trusted voices

Creating collaborations and communicating for better public support overlap with the need to build trust. Several conversations concluded the need to increase trust between the public and government is crucial to galvanise action. Attendees highlighted that honest communications and collaborating better with the people and communities affected by climate action – making their voices and concerns heard – is important to build trust in government and in climate policies .

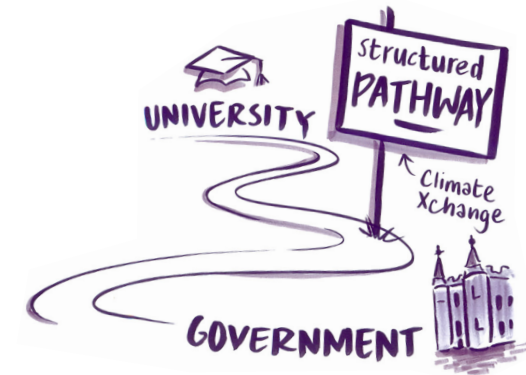
“Trust is built on respect – people are experts in their own lives – we need to listen and change what we do and how we say things.”

Assembly panellist

Several conversations – both the Open Space and subsequent panel discussion – highlighted the importance of finding people and organisation that already have trust. Attendees felt trusted voices would be instrumental in combatting negative messages and helping to build support for climate action.

As one of our panellists put it: “Farmers don’t trust scientists and the government but they trust other farmers.” They also highlighted the value of peer-to-peer learning and amplifying demonstrations of successful early climate action.

This sentiment of learning from early adopters was echoed in conversations around how to inspire action in households. Another panellist said: “People exist in networks of trusts, trusting neighbour who has converted to heat pump more than a social media message, for example.”



Having – and inspiring – courage to take action

The idea of courage came up in several Open Space discussions and few words were uttered more often by the sense-making panel. This reflects the challenge to be bold that we put to attendees ahead of the Assembly.

The courage to be unpopular was discussed during the Open Space sessions with one of the conversations focused on ways we can learn to disagree better in climate policy. Participants in this discussion called for policymakers to be more willing to “ruffle some feathers” and move away from the need for total consensus before action is taken while engaging openly with sceptics.

Tasked with making sense of the 20 different conversations held during the morning, afternoon panellists quickly drew connections between the calls for collaboration, communication and trust, and the need for courage.

One of our panellists, pointed out courage is linked to trust, suggesting we need to build trust with people and communities in order to inspire the courage needed to make difficult choices together.

“If we keep doing what we’ve always done, we’ll always get what we’ve always got. Can we have the courage to do what we know is the right thing?”

Assembly panellist

There was also a call for more courage from our political leaders, with one expert saying Scotland often has the political will and the power – but not the courage – to take action. Adding, that it is inevitable that some interventions will be unpopular, but we will need to do them anyway.

Courage is necessary in the response to the complexity of cutting greenhouse gas emissions and supporting Scotland to adapt in a fair and just way.

Evidence for action

Adopting the Open Space format and embracing the ‘messiness’ of 20 concurrent conversations was part of ClimateXChange’s response to that complexity. We wanted to leverage the individual and collective expertise and knowledge of attendees across multiple issues, but also their creativity. The aim was help us all to advance change, in our many different roles in creating a sustainable future for Scotland.

As Scotland’s centre of expertise on climate change, ClimateXChange commissions research and analysis to support the Scottish Government as it develops policies on reducing emissions, adapting to the impacts of climate change and enabling a just transition to net zero. As well as responding to policymakers’ questions and requests for evidence, we identify upcoming evidence needs.

This latter role relies on our ability to bring together a room (or rooms) full of passionate and knowledgeable researchers, sector experts and policymakers willing to commit their time, share their experience and engage in bold conversations.



The need for evidence gathering to further the case for climate action was central to many discussions on the day and we are developing future research based on some specific topics, e.g. options for systematic uncertainty analysis.

“We are facing both extraordinary opportunities, as well as unprecedented challenges, as we navigate the transition to an electrified future, improve our environment, and build effective societal resilience. The role of high-quality evidence to support effective decision-making will be more important than ever.”

Andy Kerr, Director-General Net Zero, Scottish Government

Now what?

The response to the event from attendees was overwhelmingly positive and the enthusiasm with which people participated was essential to success of the day’s conversations. And those conversations will continue.

Before we closed the Aassembly we gifted every person a blank postcard and asked them to write themselves a message, including one pledge about what they are going to do from here and one reminder to themselves about the day. These messages have been posted to every participant’s home and we hope they help to keep the momentum from the event going.

A month after our event, the finalised Climate Change Plan: 2026–2040 was published by the Scottish Government. Many of the ambitious proposals set out will need to be thoroughly evidenced before those plans can become action. ClimateXChange will continue to invite bold conversations to collectively step up climate action in Scotland, informed by research and expertise.



Thank you

We would like to thank all those who joined us on the day and contributed their knowledge and insights.

In particular, we would like to thank everyone who suggested a topic for the Open Space and our afternoon panellists.

We are also very grateful to the team at 64 Million Artists with whom we collaborated on this event. Thank you for helping us to create an open, interactive and engaging experience that led to truly meaningful conversations and ideas.



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