MEIKLEJOHN

Inclusive Communications Toolkit

Background Report: Interviews and Literature Review

April 2025

Executive Summary

This background report is part of a broader project, conducted by Meiklejohn Consulting for the City of Melbourne, to develop an inclusive communications toolkit.

The purpose of the toolkit is to provide guidance and support for City of Melbourne staff to convey the risks associated with extreme weather events, and actions to be undertaken to ameliorate these risks, to identified vulnerable communities within the municipality.

The content of the background report includes outcomes from interviews conducted with representatives of vulnerable communities, and a review of academic and grey literature. Interviewees were asked about the audiences they represented and interacted with, how these audiences experienced extreme weather events, what were the best communications channels and what was likely to be the most effective content to drive action. Similar questions were applied to the literature review.

The key findings of the interviews and literature review were:

Style

- Written text content should be in simple, plain English and provide clear direction of what to do during an extreme weather event
- Content should also be available in languages reflective of multicultural communities – however, communications should also take into account literacy within that language, and
- Images should be clear and linked to an outcome (e.g. feeling safe) and integrated with directive text.

Communications Channels

- While all channels of communication should be employed, some are more likely to be effective with particular audiences. These include:
    - face-to-face or direct contact from trusted sources for homeless and some multicultural communities (neighbourhood houses are a strong resource),
    - trusted social media networks (e.g. WhatsApp, Weibo) for some multicultural communities and international students, and
    - posters and other printed materials from trusted sources at specific geographic locations (e.g. neighbourhood houses).
- Regularly evaluate the impact of communications and be open to adapting strategies based on feedback and lessons learned.

Content

- Communications should foster a sense of efficacy, empowering individuals and communities to act effectively in protecting themselves before and during extreme weather events.
- Messaging should be tailored to the specific response level being encouraged to ensure that the communication is relevant and impactful.
- Emphasising the threat of extreme weather events should be limited (as it can paralyse action) and linked to hopeful, achievable solutions.
- Suggested actions should build from local understandings and knowledge – if possible, involve community members in the co-production of climate communications and actions.
- Highlighting what others are doing and addressing concerns about autonomy can enhance engagement.
- Storytelling rooted in local knowledge and understanding can be a powerful driver of action.
- Communications must be mindful of cultural norms, values, and traditions when engaging with diverse communities.
- Framing climate change impacts as health issues can increase concern and motivate adaptive responses. This approach can make the issue more relatable and urgent for individuals.
- Communication should seek to build broader community resilience, ideally in conjunction with other engagement, through an understanding of shared values within the community.

1. Audiences

1.1. Primary Audiences

The following audiences have been identified by the City of Melbourne as the primary targets of an Inclusive Communications Toolkit. It must be noted that communications should also take account of the intersectionality of individuals that may exist within these different audiences.

1.1.1. Neighbourhood Houses

The neighbourhood houses in the City of Melbourne serve local communities in Carlton, North Melbourne and Kensington. These communities are diverse and culturally rich communities with a high proportion of residents accessing services, living in public housing.

The neighbourhood houses play a dual role as both a channel of communication (especially through posters and word-of-mouth).

Immigrant communities include Chinese, Vietnamese, Arabic and Horn of Africa (Somali, Ethiopian, Eritrean). Important to note differences on communications culture between more established migrant communities (e.g. Chinese and Vietnamese) and more recent arrivals (e.g. Horn of Africa).

African Australian families have high levels of trust in the neighbourhood house, while elderly Chinese may be more mistrustful, initially.

Trust with all communities can be built up through long-term engagement. The use of community concierges during the COVID pandemic helped bridge the gap between residents and governments, making communication more effective and relatable.

Communication needs to be linked to practical solutions, such as providing cool spaces at neighbourhood houses for relief during heatwaves. Provision of cooler spaces also addresses social isolation, as many participants live alone and benefit from the social interaction provided by the service.

Newly arrived migrants tend face additional challenges. such as language barriers and limited digital skills. In these cases, children often act as interlocuters – points to a need for simple, plain English used in written communications (and simple, direct visuals), backed by face-to-face communications.

Existing services provided by neighbourhood houses, such as English language classes, community connections programs, cultural liaison, knitting and gardening programs, and individual support, offer opportunities for communications about extreme weather events.

WhatsApp and WeChat are the best digital communication tools for reaching community members, especially older Chinese residents who use WeChat confidently.

Important to have larger, accessible text size in communications, recommending at least size 14, with size 16 being preferable. This ensures that materials are readable for all community members.

1.1.2. International Students

International students represent a wide range of backgrounds, predominantly from countries across Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Europe and South America.

The main climate threat to international students is prolonged exposure to heat and sun. While many students may come from hot climates, they are often unprepared for the high UV rate of the Australian sun.

Students are often working in gig economy jobs, such as delivery riders, which expose them to extreme weather, notably heatwaves and intense storms.

Students are generally young and technically literate. They are dependent upon social networks and social media they have often brought with them from their home country (e.g. Weibo for Chinese speakers).

International students are usually highly literate in their own language but may be less literate in English. Simple, plain English is preferred as a form of text engagement.

Word of mouth communications from other students is a key form of engagement as well as through channels established specifically for international students, such as on-campus orientation sessions and venues, such as The Couch, on Bourke Street.

1.1.3. People with Disabilities

Communication must be accessible and provided in multiple formats to cater to different needs, such as visual and auditory formats.

Ensuring that emergency information is available in multiple accessible formats (e.g., sign language, braille, easy-to-read) is crucial for inclusivity.

Information should be clear about what to do in extreme weather events. Employ If-Then framing to develop actions (e.g. If tomorrow is going to be hot, Then seek shelter in a cool place).

Individuals with disabilities should have personal evacuation plans and their communities (e.g. workplace, neighbourhood) need to be proactive in ensuring that everyone is aware of what to do during emergencies (including displaying personal respect). Communications content should reflect this.

There is a need for ongoing dialogue and collaboration among people with disabilities, organisations, and government bodies to create a safer and more accessible environment for everyone, particularly during extreme weather events.

1.1.4. Homeless and Public Housing

Homeless people are classed as a 'hard to reach' audience for structured communications, as their engagement with mass communications channels (including social media) can be spotty. This is caused by higher priorities to meet their basic needs, more frequent movement and technical challenges (e.g. needing to charge a phone).

Homeless engagement often occurs through trusted agencies, including those funded by the City of Melbourne. These may include directly relevant bodies, such as welfare organisations, as well as indirect bodies, such as libraries.

Victoria Police are an effective frontline communications channel for homeless people, checking on their welfare.

Additionally, community members, such as shopkeepers, play a crucial role in disseminating information verbally. They provide support and information about resources like water, shelter, and meals during extreme weather events.

Communications around climate events (most commonly heatwaves) tends to be direct and personal. Staff from agencies will call individuals to warn them and encourage them to take action.

1.2. Secondary Audiences

Secondary audiences are those audiences that are sub-audiences within the primary audiences. They are included here as they have characteristics that should be considered in the development of any communications.

1.2.1. Young People

Young people should be empowered to take action and contribute positively to the safety and resilience of their communities. This includes understanding local hazards, demonstrating protective skills, and participating in community actions.

In multicultural communities, young people may play a role as translators for their parents. In this circumstance, they will act as a channel of communication as well as needing to understand their own position with regard to climate threats.

This dual role is an additional burden for these young people, but it can also act as a form of empowerment if they can gain improved climate resilience.

More generally, young people can feel overwhelmed by climate anxiety; for these people extreme weather events may appear to be a manifestation of that anxiety (World Health Organization 2024). Again, knowledge and ability to act can help them overcome inaction caused by climate anxiety.

While social media (notably, Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok) are popular forms of communication for young

people, practitioners should note that this audience is unlikely to naturally gravitate towards council-based communications.

Opportunities to engage young people in the development of their communications should be pursued. These would ideally occur through existing engagement structures.

1.2.2. Seniors

Seniors face a higher degree of risk from climate events, such as heatwaves and flooding, the latter due to decreased mobility.

Engaging seniors can create additional benefits beyond the intended outcome, such as increased social connection and personal development (Cook et al. 2022).

Seniors will generally engage with more traditional forms of mass media, such as newspapers, radio and television. More recent cohorts of seniors may access this media in digital form.

Meaningful communication and engagement can lead to broader impacts, such as improved digital literacy, discussions with family members about disaster preparedness, and strengthened community connections.

2. Content

2.1. Efficacy

Efficacy is the ability of an individual to achieve a desired result (e.g. stay cool and safe on hot days). It recognises that not all people begin their actions from the same starting point and so may need different solutions to achieve their objective. Efficacy beliefs (self-efficacy, response efficacy, and collective efficacy) can have a substantial impact upon whether people undertake climate adaptation behaviours (Mcloughlin 2021).

Communication strategies should focus on enhancing individuals' self-efficacy, response efficacy, and collective efficacy. This means **helping people feel confident in their ability to take adaptive actions and believe that these actions will be effective**. For example, non-threatening communication approaches (i.e. not overemphasising threat levels), visuals, and collaborative engagement can enhance people's efficacy beliefs and facilitate adaptive responses.

Efficacy messages should be tailored to the specific response level being encouraged, whether it's personal, policy-related, or broader social actions. **Awareness by itself does not produce resilience**. This helps ensure that the communication is inclusive, relevant and impactful.

Individuals can take proactive measures within their communities and personal lives, including sharing knowledge and skills, modifying their home to be more resilient to some impacts and developing and regularly updating personal and community disaster response plans (Oliver et al. 2023).

2.2. Language

Primary communications (whether written, audio or visually supportive) should be compiled in **simple, plain English**. Messages should be clear, relatable, and easy to understand.

As noted, the level of English proficiency varies between audiences, pointing to a need for simple, clear language directing people what to do (GenWest 2022).

While written materials can be translated into immigrant languages, **practitioners should not assume that the target audiences will have a high degree of literacy in their own home language**.

2.3. Local Knowledge

Actions should reflect local knowledge and expertise and be tailored to the specific context and needs of the community to build resilience at both individual and community levels (Keating et al. 2022).

This can include receiving feedback on and re-shaping communications targeting local populations as well as more participatory solutions, including local efforts to identify climate risks and plan interventions, such as flood defences or developing ‘keep cool’ solutions for heatwaves. **This helps align efforts with what matters most to residents.**

Practitioners should be mindful of cultural norms, values, and traditions when engaging with diverse communities.

2.4. Storytelling

Storytelling should be harnessed to inspire people to take action. **Stories should be grounded in local, relatable experience ("people like me") and be linked to clear actions to undertake** (C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group 2024).

The stories themselves don't need to spell out the actions; rather, they should show that by following recommended guidance and taking action the person at the centre of the story ended up safe from the particular extreme weather event.

2.5. Health

Framing climate change impacts as health issues can increase concern and motivate adaptive responses. This approach can make the issue more relatable and urgent for individuals, rather than as an additional burden.

Health professionals can assist in accessing hard-to-reach groups who are unlikely to engage with governments.

Doctors, nurses, and other health workers are well-positioned to communicate the health impacts of climate change and advocate for solutions (World Health Organization 2024). These trusted figures need to be equipped with the right information and messaging to communicate climate risks effectively.

Health professionals should use clear, accessible language and repeat messages often to help audiences understand the connection between climate and health.

2.6. Climate Change

New narratives and frames for climate change impact communication should emphasise hope, optimism, and human agency. **Rather than focusing solely on threats, providing actionable solutions helps reduce fear and encourage positive change.**

Fear-based messaging is generally ineffective, with some audiences rejecting or ignoring it due to its alarmist tone (World Health Organization 2024). More effective strategies include value-based campaigns, social mobilisation, and actions that empower communities to participate in climate solutions.

Scientific terms and complex statistics can alienate audiences; instead, personal stories and relatable examples are more effective.

3. Communication Channels

3.1. Selection of Channels

Practitioners should use a variety of communications methods to reach different audiences.

Approaches should be tailored to meet the preferences of the target communities and could include in-person meetings, online platforms, surveys, workshops, and social media.

From the interviews, the following communications channels and forms of communication are suggested:

Audience	Channel	Form
Homeless	Homeless / Housing Agencies Victoria Police Shopkeepers	Trusted Source Direct Contact
International Students	Universities Support Organisations (e.g. The Couch)	Social Media (WhatsApp, Weibo)
People with Disabilities	General Media	TV / Radio / Newspaper Social Media (WhatsApp, Facebook)
Carlton	Neighbourhood House Public Housing	Trusted Source Direct Contact Social Media (WhatsApp, Weibo) Posters
Kensington	Neighbourhood House Public Housing	Trusted Source Direct Contact Social Media (WhatsApp, Weibo) Posters

North Melbourne	Neighbourhood House Public Housing	Trusted Source Direct Contact Social Media (WhatsApp, Weibo) Posters

It should be noted that within the primary audiences, reception through different communications channels will vary and that practitioners should not rely on just one channel and form.

3.2. Working with Community

The diverse perspectives and ideas from community members can lead to innovative and cost-effective solutions for climate challenges. Collaborative efforts can result in more sustainable and impactful outcomes.

This suggests the **need for a shift from unidirectional communications to one in which the target community or audience is empowered** by providing training and resources to enhance their capacity to conduct their own forms of communications and resilience building.

In addition to pre-event communications, practitioners should seek to undertake participatory approaches to build community leadership capabilities for disaster resilience, including developing a network for knowledge sharing and collaboration among communities (Cornes et al. 2019).

Within these networks, people identified as **connectors, with strong links to and within the target audience, should be supported to foster pro-resilience values**, build community cohesion, and promote a comprehensive response.

Councils should develop plans that communicate the specific disaster risks in a community, that should include disaster preparation, the role of services in the event of a climate event, and how to access support in the aftermath of an event.

3.3. Evaluation

Regularly evaluate the impact of engagement efforts and be open to adapting strategies based on feedback and lessons learned (C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group 2024).

Cities need to track the effectiveness of their communication efforts using metrics such as media reach, audience engagement, and community feedback.

Organisations should evaluate their mission, social media presence, coordination with stakeholders, and overall capacity for social media activities before launching campaigns.

Clear, measurable objectives should be established, focusing on the problem to be addressed and how social media can contribute to behaviour change.

Identifying whose behaviours need to change, researching their motivations, barriers, and influences, and tailoring messages accordingly.

Prioritising actions that have the highest impact, are most likely to be adopted, and align with the organisation's goals.

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