

UK Divest campaign guide: lobbying your local councillors

This guide provides an overview of [Hope for the Future](#)'s relationship-based lobbying approach, tools, tips and techniques for how to communicate with your local councillors about divestment.

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1. Background to Hope for the Future's relationship-based approach

Many people believe that talking to a politician is set to go the way we see interviews on the news: confrontational, adversarial and non-productive.

As campaigners, if we go into a conversation with this idea we will most likely be met with defensive behaviours like:

- Holding the party line
- Controlling the conversation
- Inattention
- Refusing concrete answers
- Sweet talking
- Feigning surprise or powerlessness

But as campaigners we too can show defensive behaviours like:

- Showing irritation
- Honing in on a controversial issue
- Attacking a party
- Treating them as a means to an end
- Being dismissive or cynical
- Controlling the conversation

When we display these behaviours, we close off the opportunity for a productive conversation. What we actually want is for the councillor to feel differently by the end of our conversation, and we want to be able to empathise with them.

It's important to be mindful of the fact that if we attack the party, we are attacking their belief system and this is not productive. We also need to be conscious of our tone and body language.

To empathise with your local councillor remember:

- They do an under acknowledged job and suffer with heavy time constraints
- Their allowance is equivalent to around 2 days per week
- They are often constrained by the party line
- They may have a poor perception of campaigners before you meet
- They often have another job and their personal life to manage

Make sure you go into any meetings or communications aware of this context.

2. Researching your local councillors

“Designing a presentation without your audience in mind is like writing a love letter and addressing it to ‘to whom it may concern’” - Ken Haemer

The aim of researching your councillors is to try to understand where they are coming from and what motivates them as a person.

Key things to look out for include:

- Councillor background (e.g. personal and professional background)
- Party
- Community context
- Areas of interest and common ground

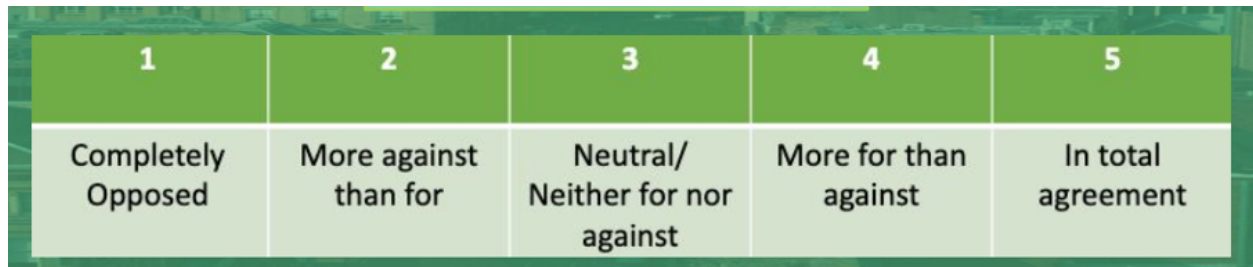
You can use a mix of council websites, local news, social media and Wikipedia to find out some of this information; a quick look around will do. For instance, you could look at their social media to see what issues they’ve supported in previous elections, or see what they do for a day job. For example, if the councillor is a primary school teacher, this may inform their belief system and what they care about.

If you can’t decide which councillors to contact, then those on the pension fund committee – especially those who might be new to the position – are a good place to start. Check out our [introduction to the Local Government Pension Scheme](#) for an overview on who makes decisions about the fund’s investments.

3. Meeting your councillors where they are at

Councillors are overwhelmed with constant communications from council staff and constituents. The majority of what they receive is superficial, making it all too easy for them to ignore. To make progress with our councillors, we have to try to stand out from the crowd of emails. It is really important to make your initial contact as personal as possible, following from the 'Researching your councillors' section above and section 10 'Methods for engaging your councillor' below for more details.

When it comes to understanding what will speak to a specific councillor, we need to think about where they sit on this sliding scale in terms of how they might feel about divestment:



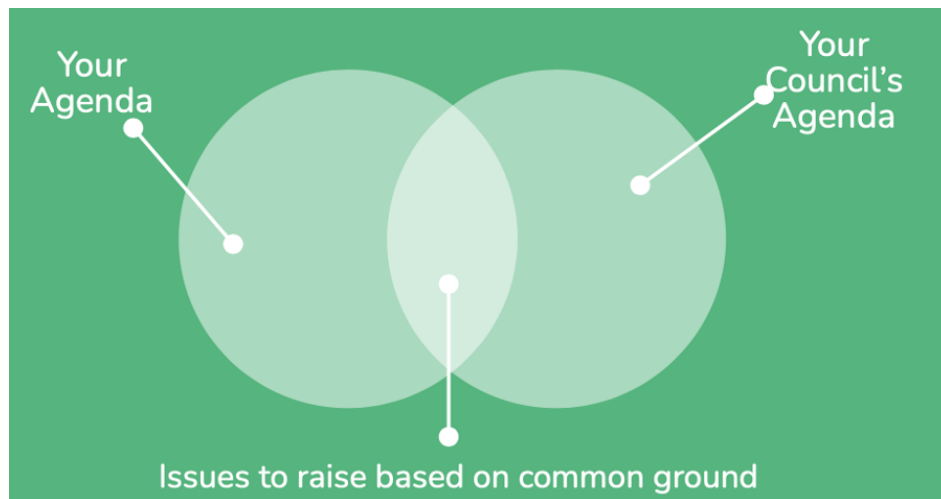
1	2	3	4	5
Completely Opposed	More against than for	Neutral/ Neither for nor against	More for than against	In total agreement

It's really important to meet them where they are (or where you *think* they are based on your research), otherwise you risk alienating them altogether. With climate issues so urgent and important, this approach may feel frustrating at first - but understanding and empathising with decision-makers rather than going straight in with your ultimate campaign goal is crucial to making progress and bringing people on a journey with you.

For example, if a councillor believes that the pension fund should pursue the 'engagement' approach rather than divesting, you could reply saying that you see how that makes sense and you can even admit you thought that too. But then you could ask them to consider what their position would be if there was no precedent for LGPS funds securing any meaningful successes as a result of engaging with fossil fuel companies.

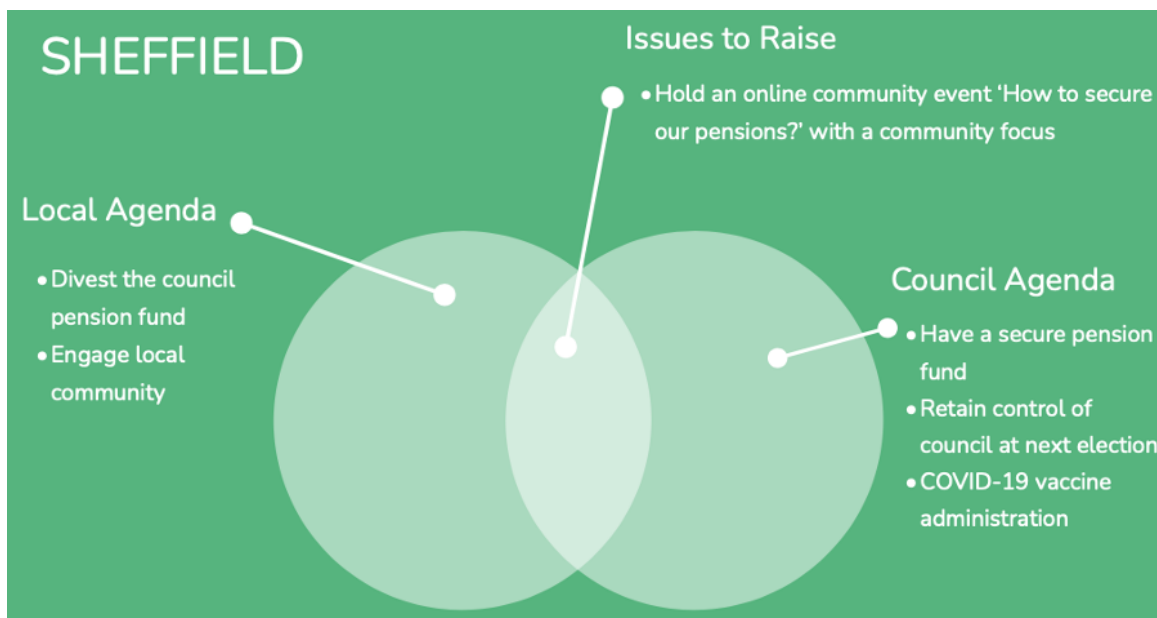
4. Finding common ground

Don't forget that even if you feel you are (politically) a million miles away from whoever you are talking to, something you will both have in common is your local area and wanting the best for your community.



By raising issues based on common ground, you can demonstrate that you are willing to work with them and have a reciprocal relationship.

The example from Sheffield below illustrates a way to find common ground. In this context, holding a community event to discuss pensions and divestment comes as the result of finding common ground with a councillor:



In this example, the way you “frame” the event is important. Rather than proposing an event featuring prominent divestment campaigners called “Why we need to divest now”, you could frame it as an event on “Securing local pensions”, with a range of local speakers (which can still include the climate/financial experts you were hoping to feature).

This is likely to prevent them from not being willing to attend at all and should ensure they are more open to hearing your perspective while there. By framing it as a community event, you can also show that the wider community is interested and move away from any perception that this is a niche issue.

5. Defining your SMART agenda

In this section, we will be covering how to develop a “SMART ask” that you can go into any meeting or email exchange with. This is the clear outcome that you want to get out of the interaction with your councillor.

SMART stands for:

- Specific
- Measurable
- Achievable
- Relevant
- Timely

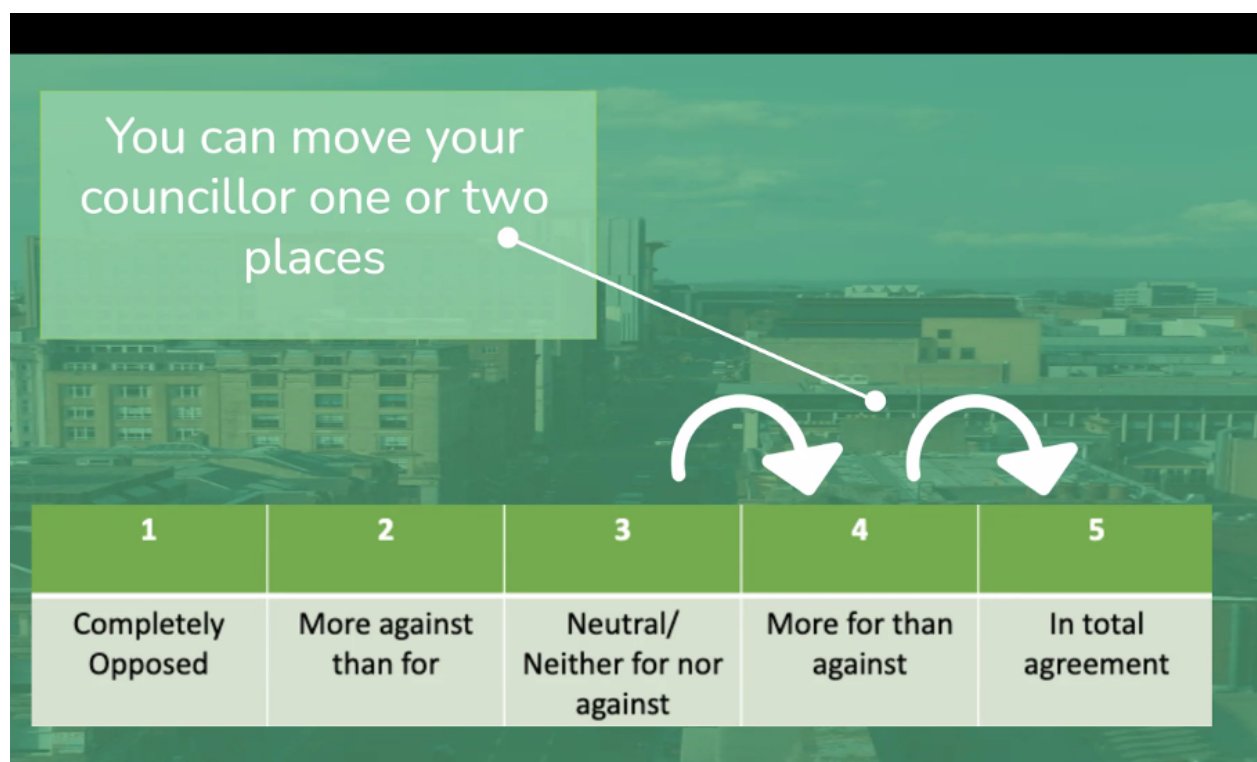
Understanding where the councillor is on our sliding scale, from ‘completely opposed’ to ‘in total agreement’, will be crucial in helping you decide what your ask should be.

Define SMART Agenda				
1	2	3	4	5
Completely Opposed	More against than for	Neutral/ Neither for nor against	More for than against	In total agreement
Pass on a letter to the pension fund committee	Meet with us to discuss how to protect our pension	Attend event about the facts and benefits of divestment	Release a blog in support of pension divestment	Pass a motion to divest the pension fund
↓	↓	↓	↓	↓

For a councillor at 3 or above, you can aim to get them involved directly in your campaign, whereas for a councillor closer to 1 or 2 on the scale, you may want to present an opportunity to have a further discussion with your group, ask them to pass on a message on your behalf, or ask for their opinion on an article, report or video that you think may speak to them.

Regardless of where they are on the scale, you should aim to meet them face-to-face if you can. You might be told that it's not a vote-winning issue, but the more you can show that you and others in the community care about divestment, the more likely they are to be swayed.

When going into the meeting or call, it's important to be conscious and realistic about how far you think you can move them along the scale within the one meeting. Research has shown that no one will jump from a 1 to a 4 after one meeting, no matter how well you present your case.



Moving them two places is the most you can expect to achieve in one meeting. For some people, you may need to engage with them over weeks, months or even years to move them in any substantial way. While this may feel slow, it's worthwhile remembering that moving someone from 1 to 3 on climate can have an important impact: while they may never become your biggest advocate, this may prevent them from actively voting *against* climate measures.

Remember: what's crucial is that your ask meets the councillor where they are at. If they are only a 1 or 2 on the scale, asking them to put forward a motion in support of divestment will probably not get you the results you want.

Some examples of the types of things you can ask your councillor to do might include:

- Reading three articles on fossil fuel divestment
- Speaking to three other councillors about divestment, and asking if they will support the campaign
- Releasing a blog in support of divestment
- Becoming a member of the pension fund committee
- Talking to the chair of the pension fund committee, or the officers who support the committee
- Securing more information on pension fund holdings
- Signing up to a public divestment pledge (including taking a photo with the pledge, or positing a message of support on social media)
- Speaking at an event organised by your group
- Attending one of your group's campaign meetings
- Submitting a formal question to the pension fund committee, or to full council
- Supporting a council motion
- Proposing a council motion
- Inviting your group to present to the pension fund committee

Always remember to make sure that the ask is SMART:

- Your ask should be both measurable *and* specific enough that you'll be able to readily know whether the councillor has met the ask or not - including by a clear timeframe that you will have specified. This is the difference between "Can you have a read about fossil fuel divestment?", and "Can you read this short briefing about fossil fuel divestment and get back to me with half an A4 page of your key takeaways, ahead of our meeting next Wednesday?"

6. Framing your ask

Framing refers to the choices we make in what we say, how we say it, what we emphasise, and what we leave unsaid, and how these choices shape the way people think, feel, and act.¹ The way we frame an issue affects whether or not people see the issue as important, whether we think of it as a private, personal problem or a shared social concern, and the kinds of solutions we support.

It's important to strategically frame our SMART ask, in order to make it feel relevant and compelling to the councillor, and to (hopefully) elicit the response we desire from them.

Questions you may want to consider are:

- Is it popular?
- Is it in line with their values?
- Are they equipped for it?
- Is it grounded in the local?
- Is it SMART?

¹ See Frameworks Institute's [Five Questions about Framing](#).

- Is it meeting them where they are at?

Asks are at their most effective when framed in a way that is emotive and evokes people's values and beliefs. In this case, this might be presenting divestment in the light of global and local health, or as the basis for reinvestment in your community. Even with those you think probably agree with you, it's important to frame the issue through this human lens.

In addition to a values-based framing approach, you can also use framing to emphasise the co-benefits of divestment. This tactic encourages the councillor to see the issue as important and beneficial to *their* agenda, as well as yours.

Different frames that can be used to highlight the co-benefits of divestment might include:

- Easy, powerful and impactful way for the council to show action and local leadership on climate beyond declaring a climate emergency
- Positive effect on air quality and public health, potential for reduced healthcare costs
- Protecting biodiversity
- Stability and financial prudence: divestment protects pensions in the long-term and may even have greater returns for the fund
- A reinvestment opportunity: councils never have sufficient funding and there is a big chunk they are investing in fossil fuels that could be used to finance social housing or community energy projects
- Re-investment in the green economy could create local jobs
- Political or electoral: divestment is popular with the public – across all parties²
- Supports, rather than contradicts, the council's existing climate action agenda (e.g. cycle lanes, air pollution targets)
- [21 times](#) more effective than switching to a renewable energy provider, substituting all air travel with rail travel and adopting a vegetarian diet combined³

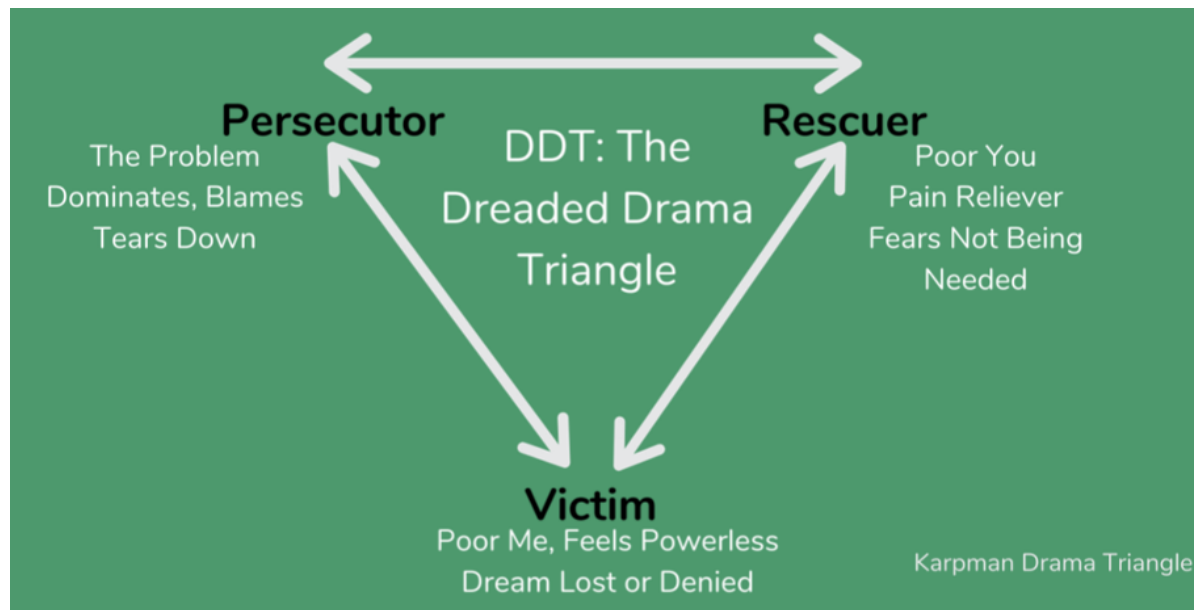
² Recent [YouGov polling](#) found that the vast majority of people do not agree that LGPS pensions should be invested in fossil fuels. Find the full results by party, age, geographic area and others [here](#).

³ Although this statistic is useful, we'd warn against sharing the source of it with councillors. Make My Money Matter are explicitly [not](#) a pro-divestment organisation. They are more interested in 'starting a conversation' and could just distract from getting a divestment commitment. They also do not provide a source or methodology for this calculation.

7. Healthy and unhealthy conversation dynamics

Whether we are conducting our communications through in-person meetings, online meetings, over the phone or by email, it's important to be conscious of the way we conduct ourselves and how we position ourselves in the communication.

The Dreaded Drama Triangle

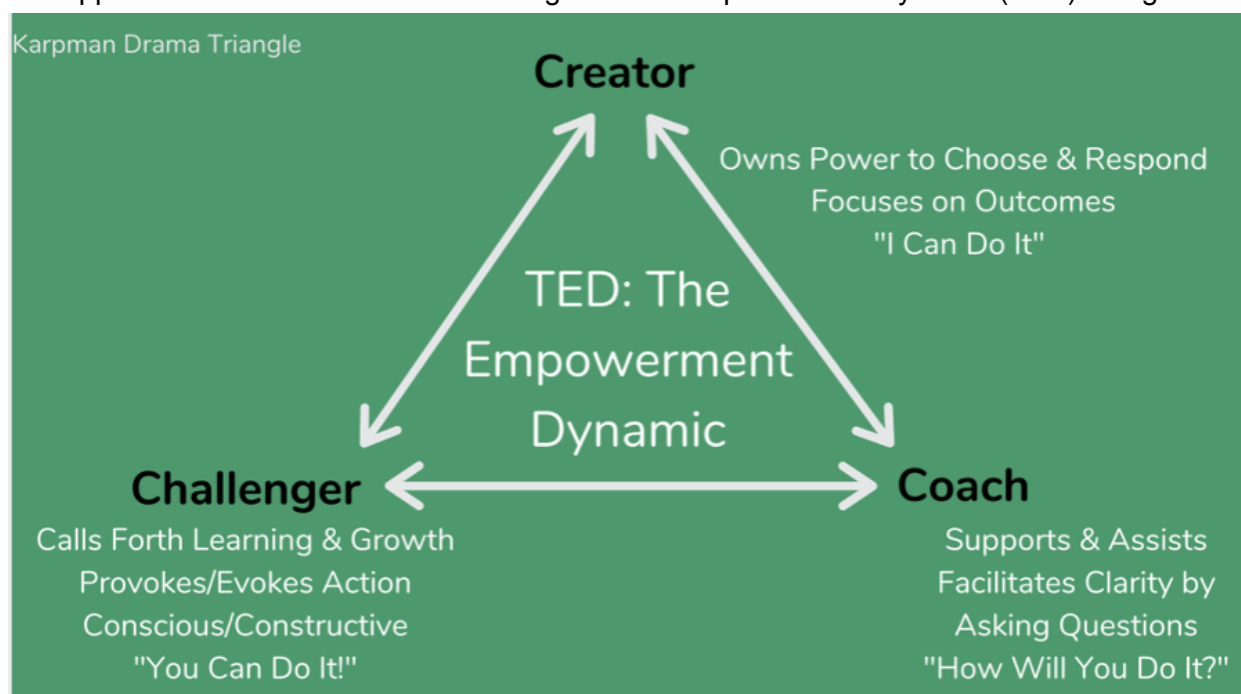


The “Dreaded Drama Triangle” is a psychological theory premised by Dr. Stephen Karpman in the late 1960s. The DDT describes the roles that people take up in poorly-managed situations, which lead to disempowerment for everyone involved. In the DDT, the individuals involved focus on what they don’t want or don’t like, and tend to see the others in the dynamic as problems to react to. In our interactions with councillors, we want to avoid this dynamic at all costs.

As campaigners, we may feel as though we are the victim. As a result, we position decision-makers and those in power (such as local councillors) as our persecutors. Although it may seem odd to you, your councillor is also likely to see themselves as a victim and you or your campaign group as their persecutor. Appreciating that the councillor may see you this way, and doing what you can to not feed into this dynamic, will help ensure a more productive conversation.

Borrowing once again from the field of psychology, another way of looking at this is through the lens of an “adult-to-child” relationship. This is a dynamic in which one party feels dominated or patronised. Once again, our goal is to move beyond this to a constructive adult-to-adult dynamic. One way to initiate this is to ask your councillor how they feel about divestment and listening to what they have to say, as opposed to assuming you know more than they do.

The opposite to the Dreaded Drama Triangle is The Empowerment Dynamic (TED) triangle:



The roles in the TED triangle are passion-based and outcomes focused. The key to moving from DDT to TED is asking questions.

The 'coach' role asks the kind of questions you'd ask your friend if they said they wanted to sail around the world alone. You wouldn't dismiss them, but you'd be honest and open to their answers, challenging them to think through how they will succeed at this. For your councillor, this may be asking questions like 'how are you going to reach the 2030 climate target you have set for the council?' and 'what do you think is preventing the council from meeting these goals?'.

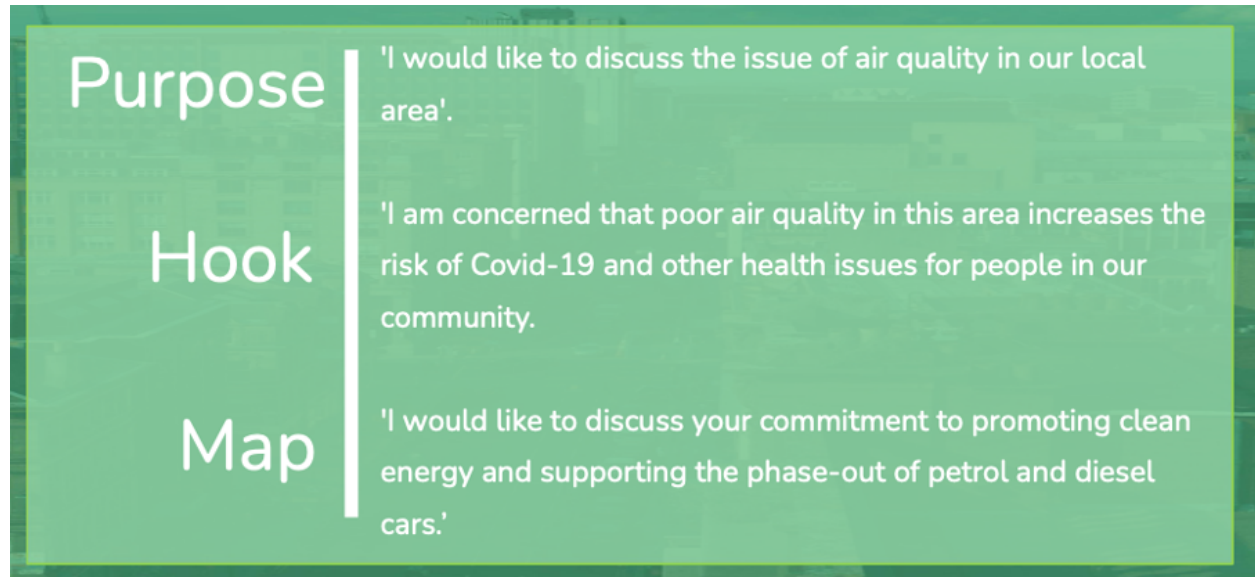
The 'challenger' uses productive rather than destructive framing. You can ask 'why did you vote for X and not Y?' or say that, 'from my position, you do have the power to pass a divestment motion like other councils that have'. Councillors often don't perceive themselves to be in control of many issues they are asked about. But with the right question framed in the right way, we can show them that they have more power and influence than they may think.

The 'creator' asks the question: "what do I want?". The creator's responses are based on thoughtful evaluation of the situation and then choosing appropriate steps toward an outcome, with a focus on working towards desired outcomes instead of reacting to a problem. In our context, this might look like framing our asks through the lens of a positive vision of the local community and the opportunities it could lead to, as opposed to presenting divestment as a necessary means of correcting the council's harmful behaviour.

8. Conversation techniques

In this section, we are going to introduce four practical techniques that can be used to progress your conversations with councillors and encourage a healthy dynamic.

a. Introduce your topic



The purpose in this example is simple: 'air quality'. For your campaign, it may be the council's investments in fossil fuels, or more broadly, our local community's commitment to addressing the climate crisis.

The hook is why they should care. Here you could say that the group is holding an event for local residents, and that as your local councillor they should care because local democracy and listening to your constituents is important in a healthy democracy. Another example could be a discussion about the fund's shareholder engagement approach. You could say: 'I would like to look at the idea of engagement with fossil fuel companies in a bit more detail. I am concerned that this approach is not having the effect we both desire.'

The map is what you want to cover in the conversation. This is particularly important: by laying out the parameters of the conversation early on it will be easier to steer them back to the issue you've come to discuss if they begin to ramble or take an irrelevant tangent. You can do so by saying 'I know your time is valuable and limited, and I don't want to keep you too long.' To continue on the above example of highlighting the problems with an engagement approach, the map could be something like: 'I would like to discuss with you the possibility of setting review points for determining if the fund wishes to continue with the policy of engagement.'

b. Asking questions



Using this technique is not about exposing a gap in the councillor's knowledge. Instead, you want to get them to think about the issue for themselves and logically come to their own conclusion that divestment is the 'commonsense' solution to the concerns you've raised.

For 'facts', you can ask closed, easily answerable questions. For example:

- "Are there any current plans for divestment?"
- "Who is responsible for setting this policy?"
- "When do you think the commitment will be made?"
- "What is currently preventing the council from making a divestment commitment?"

While these types of questions are useful for gathering background information, on their own they will not be able to persuade the councillor. Even if they agree with us, we have to motivate them to want to do something.

To do this we look to 'meaning'. You can ask questions like the one in the example above to try and find common ground with your councillor.

Finally, 'values' questions are how you find out if and where there is crossover in what you want to happen (i.e. your ask/s) and the changes that they want to see as a councillor. While you may feel that you are unlikely to share many mutual concerns with your councillor, every councillor will say that they are passionate about doing what's best for their area, so tap into that. We

nearly always have more shared values than differences: these can range from a desire for climate justice to both being in favour of doing the 'commonsense' or financially prudent thing.

Remember: facts, meaning and value is a step-by-step process. Build up to the more interesting open 'value' questions first, once you've warmed up with facts and meaning questions.

c. Building rapport



Building a good rapport with your councillor can be an important tactic in cases where the councillor is willing to engage in conversation with you, but is perhaps not as far along as you'd like them to be on the 1-5 scale.

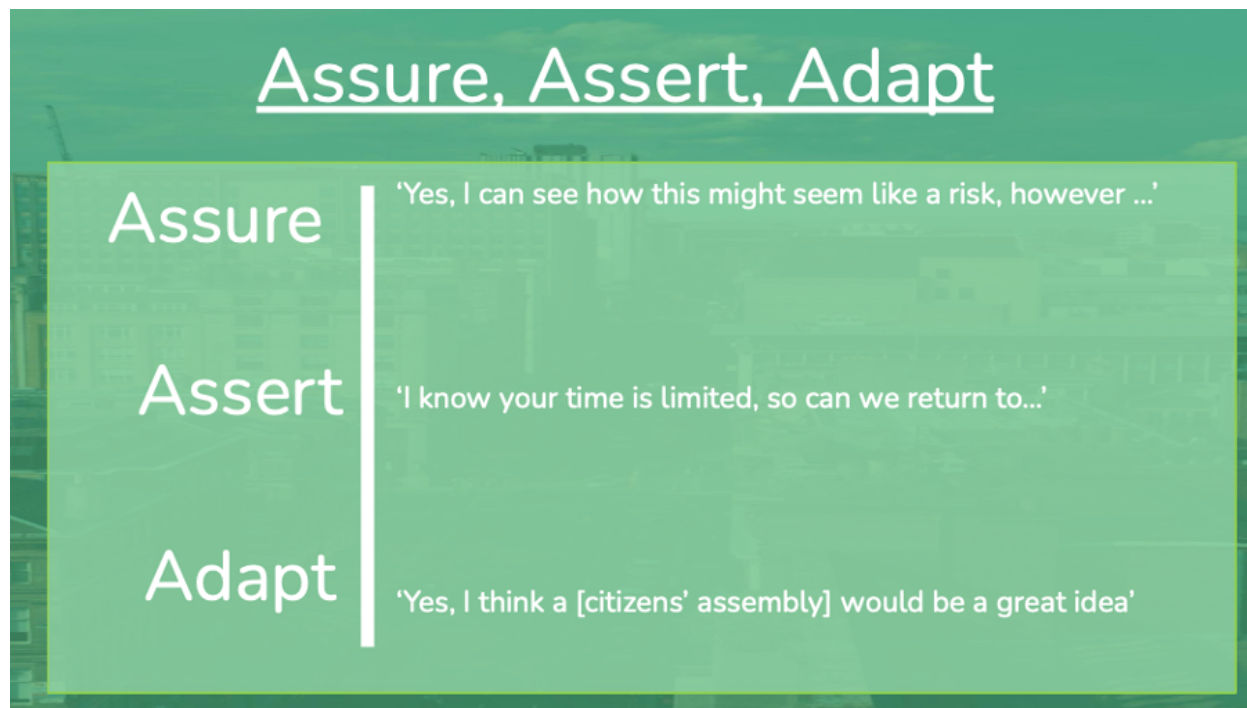
'Building' can be used to nudge your councillor along a bit, while still acknowledging their point of view. In this technique, you can take on the "challenger" role from the TED triangle outlined previously.

'Testing' is about making sure you understand each other and gauging whether you're on the same page. One example of something you could say is: "From what I understand, we both agree that cutting ties with fossil fuel companies is important, but you aren't sure how it's possible for our pensions to do that."

'Summarising' is about repeating the key things you have agreed on, and outlining any actions that need to be followed-up as a result. By committing yourself to something you'll take on outside of the meeting, you are also able to show that you're committed to the issue and willing to put in the work. For instance, you could volunteer to research some examples of other

councils that have divested and reinvested, or commit to booking a room to hold your open meeting in.

d. Assure, assert, adapt



The first stage of this technique, 'Assure', is important for making sure the councillor isn't made to feel stupid or wrong for having reservations, or not immediately being on the same page as you. Using this technique allows you to acknowledge why someone might think a certain way, without either reaffirming an incorrect assumption, and offering an alternative explanation without getting their back up.

'Assert' refers to bringing the conversation back around to your issue. This can be done by re-emphasising how important divestment is for the community.

'Adapt' is the hardest but possibly the most important of the three. Instead of simply dismissing new suggestions or ideas your councillor puts forward, support and encourage these with a "yes and..." approach. This means that you can support the councillor's idea while encouraging them to support your suggestion too. If the idea is really out of line with what you're trying to achieve, you can still do this by saying something like: "that is a great idea for the future, but I'm not certain we should spend time on it now. Instead we could spend more time on ..."

After your call or meeting, always remember to follow up with an email saying thank you. Councillors rarely receive these kinds of messages, so are likely to appreciate the gesture. This could be a very positive step for your future relationship.

If you feel there is a question you can't answer immediately in a meeting, simply write it down and say that you'll get an answer back to them when you send your follow-up email.

It can be hard to condense all of the information on divestment down into a digestible format for councillors, so we recommend sharing this [short briefing](#), which covers all of the key issues. You can also create your own materials for councillors, for instance, this [two-sider](#) produced by Divest East Sussex.

9. Exercise: Assure, Assert, Adapt role play

With a few members of your campaign group, practice using the “assure, assert, adapt” technique in a role play.

You can use the attached example responses (for a [campaigner](#) or [councillor](#)), or make up your own.

Instructions:

1. The campaigner goes first with a divestment statement/ask.
2. Then, the person role playing the councillor responds.
3. The campaigner then needs to respond to the councillor using either the Assure, Assert or Adapt conversation technique - pick what feels appropriate given the discussion!
4. Keep practising and let the conversation flow back and forth between yourself and the councillor, as you would do in a real meeting with a councillor.
5. Swap over and have a go at taking on the other role.

Assure, Assert, Adapt

Assure	Not making councillors feel silly for have certain reservations, e.g. 'Yes, I can see how this might seem like a risk, however ...'
Assert	Being assertive when necessary, e.g. 'I know your time is limited, so can we return to...'
Adapt	Responding flexible to certain dead ends or curve balls, e.g. 'Yes, I think a [citizens' assembly] would be a great idea'

10. Methods for engaging your councillors

When contacting a councillor for the first time, make sure to set a positive tone for your future interactions together and personalise your message so that it stands out from the crowd:

- Write a letter or email introducing yourself with a clear ask (e.g. to attend an event or a meeting with your group).
- Include something personal about yourself. You don't need to give them your life story, but you could mention how long you have lived in the area or why you joined your local group.
- Ask an open-ended question, such as: "What are you hoping to achieve this year?" This suggests that you are interested in actually hearing their response, rather than just seeing them as a means to an end. It also provides a good talking point for when you eventually meet.
- If you are getting in touch recently after a local election:
 - Congratulate them on their win, even if you didn't support their party.
 - Be mindful of whether this is their first time being elected or they are returning to a position they previously held.
 - If possible, congratulate them on a part of the campaign that you were impressed with. For example, if the candidate was supporting the Labour for a Green New Deal campaign, add in a line on how it's great to see them championing climate issues.
- Think about how you would like to have your follow-up meeting: in person at a surgery or over Zoom.

11. Get in touch

Hope for the Future can provide tailored support to you or your group if you have any further questions on issues like:

- Writing letters to your councillors
- Developing your framing
- Focusing your asks
- Preparing for meetings with your councillors
- Facilitating meetings with councillors

✉ authority2act@hfff.org.uk

🌐 www.hfff.org.uk

For any queries relating to fossil fuel divestment, such as how to join or start a local group, please get in touch with UK Divest:

✉ ukdivest@gmail.com

🌐 www.divest.org.uk