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Communicating climate action for a Just Transition

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Introduction

How we talk about climate and mobility matters—not just to raise awareness, but to drive behaviour change, ensure public buy-in, and build fairer, more inclusive, *just* cities. This was the central theme of [the latest POLIS Just Transition Webinar](#), which brought together four experts from across Europe and beyond to explore how communications strategies can support more equitable urban mobility.

While the urgency of climate action is clear, the communications strategies that underpin it remain underexplored, especially through a just transition lens. As POLIS expands its Just Transition work through the [Just Transition Taskforce](#), the [Just Transition webinars](#), EU projects such as [ELABORATOR](#), [SMALL](#), [RESKILLING](#), [UPPER](#), and more, and the pre-launch of the [latest issue](#) of the [Cities in motion magazine](#), this webinar marked a timely dive into the power of storytelling, language, and community engagement.

The webinar featured four expert speakers:

- **Maite Peris**, Q4A, former Communications Advisor, Barcelona City Council;
- **Andrea Rosso**, LINKS Foundation/JUST STREETS;
- **Mathias Schmid**, Nachhaltige Mobilität für Baden-Württemberg - NVBW;
- **Reena Mahajan**, Studio Divercity/StreetSmart.



Image 1: POLIS Just Transition Agenda



What Barcelona taught us

Maite Peris (Q4A, former Communications Advisor to the City of [Barcelona](#)) opened with hard-earned lessons from nearly 20 years in public engagement. From [Superblocks](#) to [school street closures](#) and the city's [first Low Emission Zone](#) (LEZ), Barcelona has undergone one of the most ambitious periods of transformation since the 1992 Olympics.



Image 2: Barcelona's Sant Antoni Superblock. Credits: Alain Rouiller/RdA-CH

But **change is never neutral**. 'Every mobility project creates conflict,' Peris stressed. 'We had a real window of opportunity, but social conflict was unavoidable.' She explained how overlapping reforms led to intense pressure on technical and communication teams alike.

While projects may be led by mobility teams, their impacts stretch far wider—into waste management, street maintenance, green infrastructure, and more. Funnily enough, during the Superblocks rollout, the greatest public resistance was not about traffic: it was about [relocating rubbish collection](#).



Peris then stressed the importance of identifying whether mobility is the core driver or part of a broader urban transformation. This helps shape **a coherent narrative** and ensures alignment with political and strategic goals.

Peris offered five practical rules:

1. **Start with advocacy, not promotion:** Ahead of Barcelona's LEZ, the city partnered with hospitals and local media to raise awareness about air pollution, laying the groundwork for acceptance.
2. **Let silence be strategic:** When backlash peaked around the Superblocks, the team paused external messaging to focus on quiet, local engagement. 'Silence can be a strategy,' she said.
3. **Tailor the message:** Businesses, parents, cyclists—each group needs a different frame. A one-size-fits-all narrative does not work.
4. **Communicate with the project calendar:** Do not wait until implementation to start messaging—communicate before, during, and after to keep people informed and aligned.
5. **Think outside the budget:** Peris highlighted the value of partnerships and creativity by working across silos with stakeholders such as repair shops, inspection stations, and tax authorities to disseminate information.

Her bottom line: communications should never be an afterthought, but a science, and communication specialists should be embedded from the outset, not just in high-profile projects.



Words matter

Andrea Rosso (LINKS Foundation/JUST STREETS) shifted the focus to language itself, looking at how everyday terms and headlines shape who feels included or excluded in mobility debates.

Rosso's work in the EU-funded [JUST STREETS project](#) explores how words influence norms. His team analysed 28 interviews, dozens of campaigns, and the language used across Europe. The findings? **Language is not neutral.**

Take a standard traffic sign: 'ROAD CLOSED'. But one may as well ask: 'CLOSED' to whom? Often, a road is only closed to cars, with walkers and cyclists still welcome: nonetheless, this is not always obvious. For this reason, JUST STREET cities like [Braga](#) and [Cugir](#) now specify that streets are open to people rather than closed to traffic, a simple reframing that radically shifts perception.



Image 3: An inclusive 'Road open to...' sign in Newcastle upon Tyne. Credits: Hazel Plater



Even safety campaigns can misfire. One UK tabloid described cyclists as '[Lycra yobs](#)'—a dehumanising stereotype. Another headline from The Guardian asked: '[Why are cars killing more pedestrians?](#)', a framing that blames objects rather than drivers.

By contrast, a [traffic safety campaign by Highways England](#) simply read: 'My dad works here'. Rosso praised this for putting emotion and human connection at the centre. 'We need to shift from risk statistics to real people,' he said.

This theme of **framing**—whether harmful or helpful—was echoed in Brussels, where two Ministry of Mobility campaigns offered contrasting lessons.

The first, [Bike for Brussels](#), depicted cyclists as monsters or animals—something that was surely meant humorously, but that reinforced the idea of cyclists as outsiders. It also focused narrowly on environmental benefits, missing other key motivators like health, affordability, or safety.



Image 4: 'Bike for Brussels' and 'Les Pieds'

In contrast, [Les Pieds](#)® ('feet' in French) campaign marketed walking as a fictional tech innovation: 100% natural, free, locally produced, and rechargeable via public benches. Playful and data-backed—[60% of trips in Brussels are under 5 km](#)—it helped reframe walking as a smart, primary mode of transport.

Rosso also broke down **audience-specific messaging**:



- **Children** respond to visuals and playful language like 'cool' or 'free' and are ideal co-creators for campaign materials.
- **Older adults** should be depicted cycling confidently and independently, and patronising or 'helper' tones should not be used.
- **People with disabilities** deserve recognition of their full mobility spectrum. Moreover, messaging should avoid implying that cycling is universally accessible.
- **Women** should not be told to 'stay safe': instead, campaigns must shift the burden of change to systems and environments.
- **LGBTQIA+ communities** may feel unsafe around police presence. More often than not, safer streets mean better lighting and infrastructure for them, not more surveillance.

Rosso's central message: 'Use people-first language; say 'people who bike', not 'cyclists'. Language builds identity, and identity shapes inclusion.'

Shifting perceptions

Mathias Schmid (NVBW – Baden-Württemberg) presented a regional case study from Germany's car region, [Baden-Württemberg](#). Pushing low-carbon transport here requires navigating deep cultural ties to driving.

In 2025, the region passed a [new climate and traffic law](#) that, for the first time, recognised communication as a policy pillar. Within



this frame, Baden-Württemberg already has a dedicated communications support unit for cities and agencies.

The team identified several recurring challenges:

- No clear messaging templates
- Weak capacity to address misinformation (as in 'fake news')
- Limited understanding of how to craft differentiated, empathetic messages
- Discomfort mixing political messaging with behavioural nudges

To help, they introduced **fictional personas** like Tina, a 35-year-old single mother who supports climate action in theory but feels personally burdened when parking is removed or road space is reduced. Her concerns are real, not ideological, and helped planners empathise.

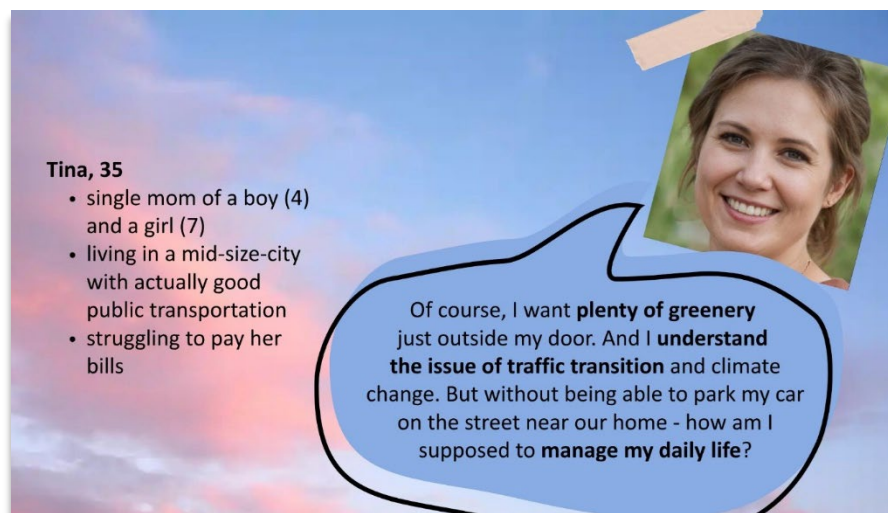


Image 5: Tina, the fictional persona created by the Communication Unit Traffic Transition BW

Parking reform, Schmid noted, is the 'problem from hell'. It brings direct costs to individuals, while the benefits are long-term



and abstract. To guide local governments, the team promotes three principles:

1. **Honesty:** Admit the trade-offs.
2. **Fairness:** Frame changes as rebalancing space, not punishing drivers.
3. **Stability:** Roll out changes predictably and with clarity.

‘A good mobility transition,’ Schmid concluded, ‘should feel calm and steady, not like a crisis.’

Cartoons and codes

Reena Mahajan (Studio Divercity/StreetSmart), an architect and urban planner from India and now based in France, offered a deeply personal take on mobility communication, rooted in her experience as a new parent in Montevideo, Uruguay.

Her campaign began with a single photo: a stroller blocked by cars on a sidewalk. Frustrated, she shared the image online with a short caption—no hashtags, no branding. The emotional honesty resonated widely. As the responses grew, she began **sketching cartoons** from café tables while her child napped nearby, translating frustration into **advocacy**.



Image 6: Mahajan's first post that launched her activism in Montevideo



Her posts documented the **quiet violence of urban car dominance**: pavement parking, hostile crossings, and disappearing public space. She soon launched the hashtag and campaign [#MontevideoPacificada](#) (a plea to calm the city), using art and humour to spark a conversation that had previously felt invisible.

Mahajan stressed that streets are not just technical spaces but emotional ones. Her visuals reframed everyday nuisances, like speeding near schools or obstructed crossings, not as minor design flaws but as systemic injustices.

One of her core concepts was the **'car culture pyramid'**, showing how minor infractions (wide streets, aggressive ads) build the foundation for serious harms (traffic deaths, climate damage). She argued that urban communications too often blame the victim—asking cyclists to wear helmets or pedestrians to dress brightly—while ignoring the policy and design choices that put them at risk.

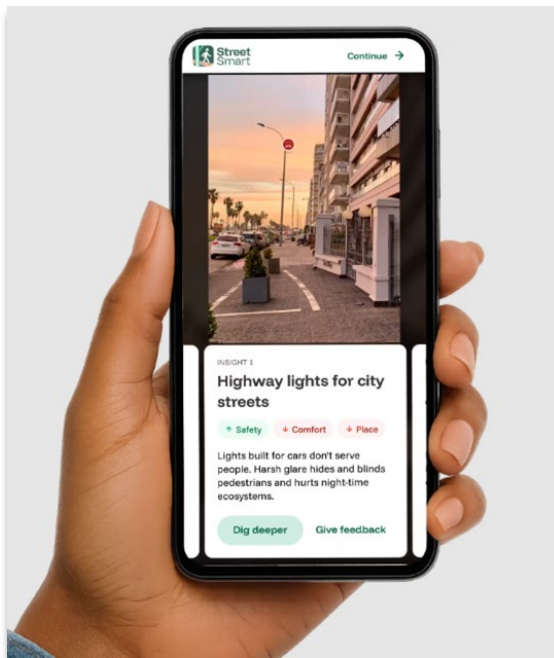


Image 7: StreetSmart app

To move from awareness to action, Mahajan co-developed [StreetSmart](#), a civic tech app that lets residents upload photos of their streets and receive instant feedback through emojis on comfort, livability, and safety. The goal? **Democratise street evaluation** and help communities speak back



to power with evidence and empathy.

StreetSmart serves three purposes:

1. **Education** – helping people 'see' urban design issues
2. **Engagement** – inviting public input and lived experiences
3. **Data collection** – providing qualitative insights for planners and practitioners

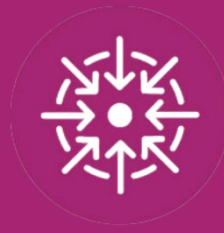
Mahajan concluded with a call for a revised mobility hierarchy, one that puts **nature** at the top. 'Nature supports pedestrians, who support cities,' she said. 'We need to shift from efficiency to care.'

Towards a new urban narrative

Successful mobility transitions depend as much on communication as on concrete. Whether through inclusive language, digital tools, emotional storytelling, or strategic silence, each speaker highlighted that **narrative shapes impact**.

Mobility reforms will always provoke debate, but how we frame them can make the difference between resistance and support. As POLIS and its members continue to advance low-carbon, people-first mobility, the tools, insights, and strategies shared in this webinar offer a new way forward: one rooted in empathy, visibility, and voice.





About the Just Transition Taskforce

From digitisation to active travel, logistics to electromobility- and beyond, the Just Transition Taskforce raises discussions on how to place affordability, inclusivity, and accessibility at the heart of all urban mobility policies.

Its aim is to integrate POLIS' Just Transition Agenda across all of

all of the organisation's activities, putting citizens first and ensuring that the mobility transition we strive towards is one that has everyone on board.

Find out more on the [POLIS website](#).

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