



## Behavior Change Communications

By Michael Shank, CNCA Communications Director

*This article may be used as a resource to help guide your communications, campaigns or community engagement activities. It is based on the social impact research of [ideas42.org](https://ideas42.org) and connects key psychological principles of applied behavioral science to the climate and sustainability work of CNCA member cities.*

In order to quickly move cities towards carbon neutrality, one social science game changer that needs to be scaled up is behavior change communications. Few of the more technical game changers – enumerated in [CNCA's](#) report – will be possible unless public and political will is mustered, mobilized and maintained.

This article delves into 12 behavioral science-based principles to consider when rolling out sustainability initiatives in cities. These principles are well-known to the fields of sociology, psychology and behavioral economics (and explained succinctly by [ideas42](https://ideas42.org)) and will be helpful in thinking through how we apply them to our work.

These 12 principles offer useful guidance in the rolling out of any of our game-changing strategies. With each principle, we'll take a look at how a CNCA city's climate and sustainability initiatives are relevant and how they're organized and communicated to the public. Let's begin.

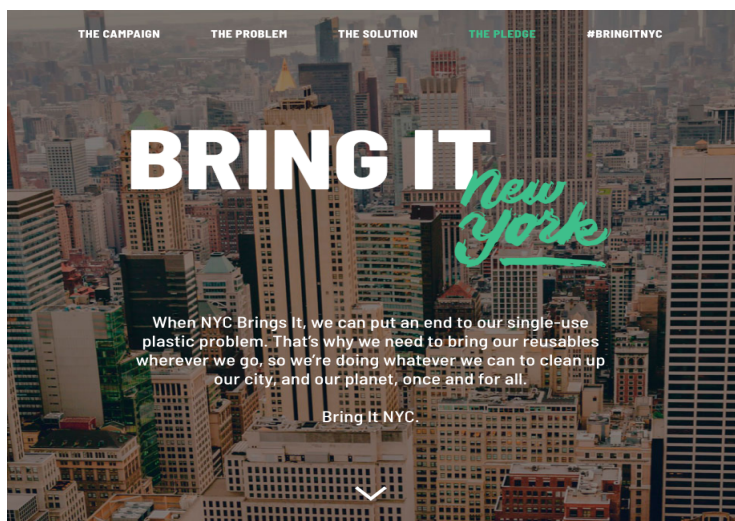
# #1 Choice Overload



It's not uncommon to find CNCA member websites advocating for myriad actions and initiatives, because the work is massive in scope. Whether it's big building retrofits, green energy installs, public transit improvements, waste management, bike lane build-outs, or household weatherization, there's so

much that needs to be pursued *now*. But is there a way to deliver this to users that doesn't cause choice overload? And is there a way to deliver it, as [ideas42](#) put it, that decreases the number of choices presented and increases the meaningful differences between them? What if CNCA members' climate webpages offer a featured action of the month? And we encourage users to take that *one* action during that *one* month. And all of our communications center around that one action. And then, the next month, we roll out a new action that we want residents to take. Residents who are ahead of the curve can always explore more actions: the website could have in the background (off to the side) an easy-to-navigate catalogue of the 12 actions (that run concurrently with the calendar year) that all residents can take to help the city and homes/communities be greener, more efficient and healthier.

Exercise: Take a quick look at your city's communication materials to see if a user might feel choice overload and, as a result, feel too overwhelmed to take action. How could you simplify so that users are directed to one or two priority actions that they can take now?



Example: New York City's "[Bring It](#)" campaign has a singular ask - to bring reusables wherever one goes - and the entire website is devoted to that ask. It avoids choice overload by prioritizing and featuring only one ask, one activity, in this campaign. You can see on their website that even the navigation bar is avoiding choice overload, identifying one problem and one solution. It's empowering for people to get involved in singular campaigns like this; the completion of the task feels more fulfilling when there's not a laundry list of tasks that follow.

## #2 Cognitive Depletion and Decision Fatigue



There's plenty of research in the social science field on how fatigue makes for bad decision-making. Considering this when we reach out to the community to build public and political will, are we cognizant of when and where they might be fatigued (and thus less equipped to support our climate initiatives)? And when we're hosting events, are we bringing food so that we're enabling the community of decision-makers to be well-equipped to get on board a sustainability decision?

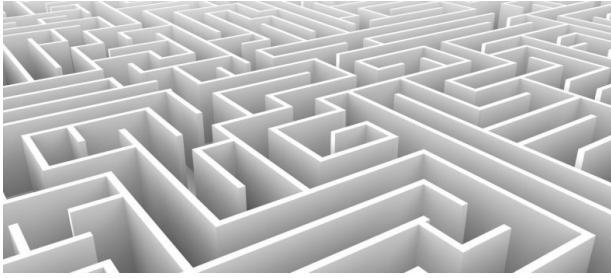
Mindful, also, of how our communities are often underserved in their ability to receive and maintain proper nutrition, how are we managing this food insecurity and working with other city departments to help ensure that the community has what they need? This is a great example of how social and environmental sustainability are interconnected and how we must work together to ensure the community has the resources they need to make the healthiest decisions they can.

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*Example: Partnering with restaurants, bars and beverage companies can help with cognitive depletion and decision fatigue as Yokohama did here in their partnership with Starbucks for the "[Nothing is Charming](#)" campaign. The campaign was held inside Starbucks coffee houses to raise awareness about the benefits of using less electricity.*

## #3 Hassle Factors



How do we make green choices easy for our community? If we want them to ride the bus more, bike more, eat more plant-based foods, waste less, weatherize more, and buy heat pumps and solar power, how do we make it hassle-free or close to hassle-free?

Can we make it more enjoyable, more affordable, or more accessible? People might be more willing to undertake the effort and expense needed if they're doing it in friendly company, with free food, while having a fun time. If we can't reduce the hassle any further (and let's do everything we can to make it hassle-free), let's at least make it fun, family-friendly, with free food.

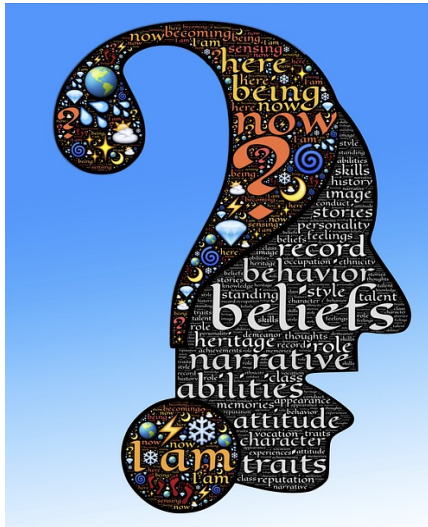
Exercise: Let's vet our sustainability initiatives to see how hassle-free it is for a representative resident of the community. Are there ways that we can make any of these processes slightly less cumbersome? Recognizing that some of these green initiatives are heavy lifts, are there ways in which we can offset some of the hassle with positive reinforcement?



*Example: Helsinki is making it easy for residents to discard waste with these convenient [vacuum-sucking disposal systems](#). Not only does it make waste disposal near hassle-free for the resident, it's also fun to do and avoids hassle-heavy trash bins that often fill up quickly and spill over.*



## #4 Identity



Since not everyone considers themselves an environmentalist, how do we tap into and resonate with other identities that might be attracted to our climate policies? When we think of the myriad ways in which our communities self-identify, what are the principles that matter to them? Parents, for example, would have, as part of their identity as guardians, a desire to keep their children safe from harm and to provide for their household. In that one sentence, we've covered health, security and economics. Are we mindful of this when messaging and mobilizing our climate initiatives? And in the words of [ideas42](#), how do we “prime positive identities to encourage socially beneficial actions”?

Exercise: If you were to do a scan or audit of your climate communication vehicles (printed materials, speeches, websites, social media, etc.), how are you being mindful of your community's many identities and how are you tailoring your message to be respectful of and resonate with these worldviews? Ultimately, we want everyone to see our work and connect with it. That means we'll want any and all of our behavior change-related communications to be sensitive to and respectful of the identities that are coming to our events, our websites and our action requests. Let's make sure they see themselves in our work.



*Example: Vancouver taps into city/resident identity and city/resident pride with their “greenest city” framing here. This identity framing appeals to people’s – and the city’s – competitive spirit and desire to be first.*

## #5 Limited Attention



When our communities don't immediately respond to our climate requests it's not because they're not interested. Perhaps they only heard it once from us, perhaps they never heard it at all, or perhaps other priorities took their attention at the time. Mindful of our own limited attention spans, and being cognizant of all that's taking priority in residents' lives, how do we make it easy for them to hear from us by repeating and reiterating our

work through every possible channel that might reach them? Are we simultaneously using radio, television, billboards, community newspapers and newsletters, local associations and advocacy organizations, religious halls, phone and email, text and other ways to communicate with the public?

While this may sound time-intensive (and it is), it'll be necessary if we want to truly engage the community and transform the policy. Surrogates and liaisons can be helpful here, as we don't have all the inroads and we don't always have the credibility as communicators that more local leaders might, so employ others if/when possible. But we have to reach our audience often.

Exercise: Take an audit of the frequency of your city's communications. How and when are you repeating and reiterating and is it resonating? And if not, let's pre-test and focus-group these messages to ensure that it's the right wording and the right messenger for the right identities.



*Example: San Francisco's [recycling page](#) understands the limited attention span of internet users by directing the eyes to the desired action. They use white space (also known as negative space) to turn the user's attention to the desired actions.*

## #6 Loss Aversion



People have an intrinsic disdain for loss. We get attached. And we hold onto that attachment – be it emotional, relational, physical or spiritual. So, how do we communicate our climate work in such a way that it's mindful of the public's proclivity for avoiding loss? When we think about what people care about – quality of life, standard of living, ego, money, health, and physical security – are we articulating our work in such a way that

is mindful of what they don't want to lose?

Habitat or species loss quickly translates here, as does the quality of life lost, the money lost, the health lost and the security lost from fossil fuels, global heating, and extreme weather. But can we also build new attachment to the kind of world we're trying to build? For example, after a city turns a few previously road-trafficked blocks into a pedestrian-only zone, full of beautiful park amenities, and encourages active public engagement in that new space, it's much more likely that the public will become attached to this new reality and want to replicate the experience elsewhere.

How do we show that life is better in this new greener world? There's a lot of natural, intrinsic fear in letting go of the known fossil-fueled experience. One way to offset this fear is to provide experiences for people to build new attachment to the new reality that we're trying to create. Most people who have a personal experience and bond with something that's impacted by global heating – a polar bear, a vulnerable community, a seaside view – are more likely to do everything they can to protect it. In our messaging and mobilizing, let's give them something specific to protect.



### Here are Oslo's hidden wild-swimming gems

Yes, we love to swim in Oslo in the summer! And we love it most of all when we have a secluded sunbathing spot all to ourselves. Luckily there are several places where this is a distinct possibility.

Example: [Oslo's climate website](#) talks first about hidden swimming gems as a way of discussing the importance of protecting water quality. The webpage doubles down on the emotional attachment so that the user will then want to avoid the loss (of these swimming gems) that could result from poor water quality.

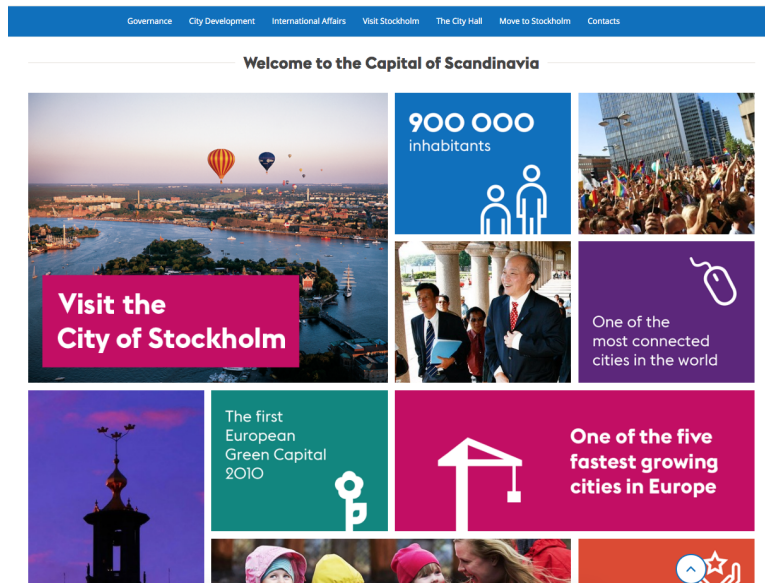
## #7 Primacy Bias



There is a bias towards information that's presented first, versus information that's less visible. How does that bias impact how we message climate, then? Is it presented in a highly visible way on our websites and do we have social media channels specifically devoted to our climate and sustainability work (to send a message to the public that this is a priority)? Are our mayors and city staff leading with the climate message or are they placing it last on a list?

Exercise: Mindful of primacy bias, it's worth scanning city communication vehicles to see if climate is presented prominently and if not, is that negotiable at all within the city? How can we inch up the city's climate offerings so

that, from a behavior change communications perspective, we're on the top, not the bottom, of any city list?



*Example: See how Stockholm presents itself to the world in this picture. On the landing page, it prioritizes its green leadership as one of its key selling points, alongside “most connected” and “fastest growing”. This sends the message to the world that being a “green capital” is an enduring priority and selling point for Stockholm.*



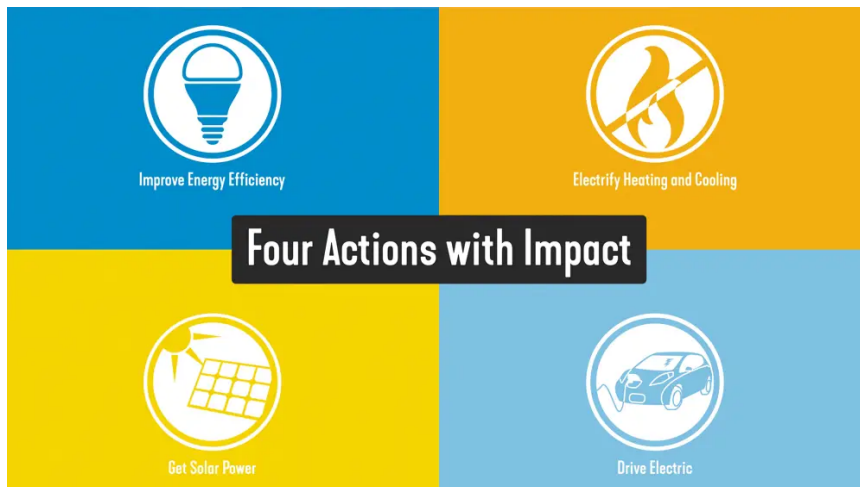
## #8 Procrastination



Everyone procrastinates on something at some point in their day/week/month, which is why any far off “2050” framing for our climate initiatives is potentially problematic. Even 2040 or 2030 seems far off. People will wait until the last minute to do whatever it is we’re asking them to do. It’s why it’s problematic for us to talk about future impacts; it merely reinforces the proclivity to procrastinate. We need to talk about impacts that are happening here and now. We need to

offer easy, bite-sized steps that anyone can take now. And we need public-friendly short-term climate goals and deadlines to balance our plethora of long-term climate goals.

People are more likely to take action now if it’s easy now, they can see the difference now, and the goals are relevant now. We need to refocus our communications and public engagement on the 2020 and 2025 realities so that people’s penchant for procrastination is countered by near-term realities and possibilities.



*Example: Boulder’s “Four Actions with Impact” aims to get people moving now with simple actions they can take now. [The videos](#) show normal residents taking simple actions in four areas. This helps the user feel like it can be done, that it’s pragmatic and possible, and helps prevent the procrastination that often comes with climate action due to feelings of overwhelm or inefficacy.*

## #9 Social Norms



We all know the power of social norming. Approval matters. We all know the study that shows that if your neighbor has solar panels, you're more likely to get solar panels. And if your neighbor is saving money on their utility bill, due to some energy efficiency measures, you're more likely to pursue the same or better savings by taking similar action. Given this, how can we use our city communication vehicles to show that a movement is happening in our cities and that our public and private sectors are changing the game? How are we reflecting back

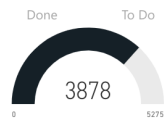
community actions so that residents and building owners see their peers taking action across the city and are motivated to do what others are doing?

We recognize that it'll take time to present a picture of what the new (green) social norm is within the community. Reflecting back the green actions happening within the community not only works from a social norming perspective, but in the field of climate action, where people can feel like their individual action won't make a big difference, this reflecting back can also lift people up emotionally, provide inspiration and hope, and counteract defeatism.

### People

People Leaderboard - Current Points			People Leaderboard - Forecast Points		
Name	Company	Points	Name	Company	Points
Jacqui W	HSBC	71	Annie T	Lendlease	68
Alem H	HSBC	69	chandni M	AMP Capital	68
Derrick F	KPMG	69	Ema L	Domain	68
George R	*My company is not listed	69	Enrique C	AMP	68
Kenneth L	KPMG	69	Josh M	FareHarbor	68
Maja M	*I just want to compete on...	69	Kate B	Domain	68
Nerida L	Westpac	69	Khalid A	WeWork @ 100 Harris	68
ANIVESH S	Westpac	68	Kristy B	Better Way Real Estate	68
Josh M	FareHarbor	68			
Total		983	Total		1920

3878 1397



People Power

Status ● Done ● To Do



### Activities

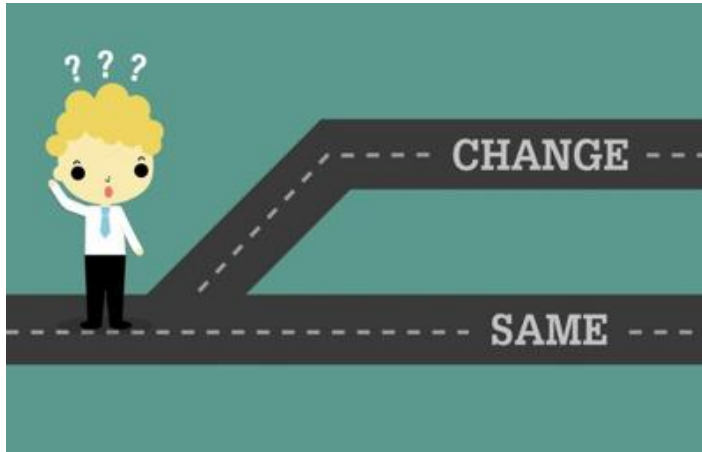
Building Activities

Status ● Done ● To Do



Example: Sydney, in its partnership with the [Better Buildings Cup](#), is working to create social norms for greener living and greener buildings. By creating competitions that track waste and energy management and then mirror back the results and the winners on their media channels, this effort is conveying to the public that many people are doing this and, thus, so should you. Their sites show lots of activity in this space, show people having fun, and show plenty of diversity (in action taken and persons taking action) so that the user feels represented in this space.

## #10 Status Quo Bias



Default settings are powerful. We like routine. If a status quo has been established, we're less likely, in general, to deviate from that. So, how does this principle impact our city-based, climate-focused behavior change communications?

Let's reach people within their routine, versus asking them to find us, which is often outside of their routine. Let's meet them with our messages and messengers and go to where their

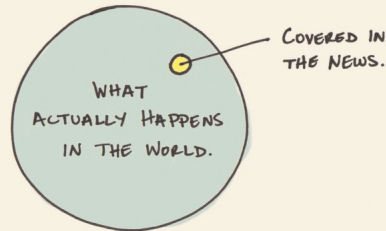
routines take them. Let's set up default settings that are more sustainable, with opt-out versus opt-in options (since the former produces significantly higher participation rates than the latter). And let's take this further so that the new status quo is increasingly sustainable.



Example: This [Portland partnership](#) presents "ideas for making simple changes in everyday choices". No big leaps here. It's about living more and saving more. This is something people can stomach and it understands people's proclivity for keeping the status quo. It gets a foot in the behavioral door with small bite-sized steps.

# #11 The Availability Heuristic

## THE AVAILABILITY HEURISTIC

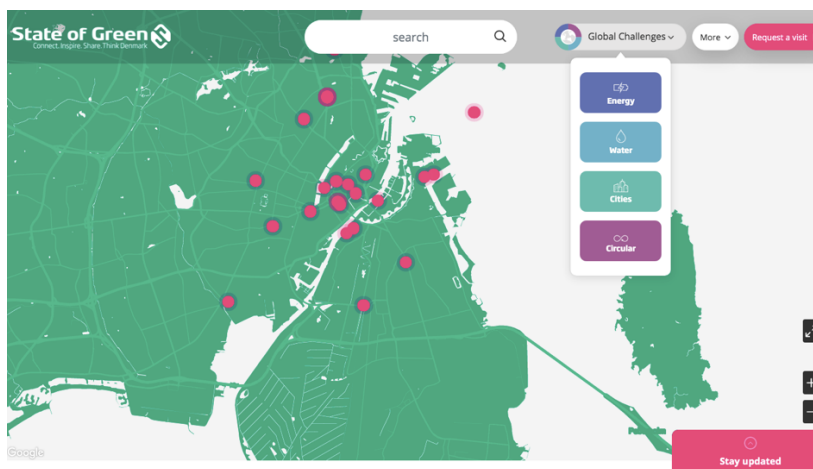


Our publics may think they've never experienced a climate impact before, or if they have there's only been a few events, not many. This is due, in part, to the fact that the press and often policymakers aren't contextualizing extreme weather events within a global warming reality. The availability of our climate memory, and how easily things come to mind where the climate dots are connected, is limited. This is a problem

because, as [ideas42](#) put it, "we judge probabilities based on how easily examples come to mind."

How are we chronicling for our communities, then, the repeated climate impacts so that the public is able to calculate more realistic probabilities because examples are more readily available to them? Can we use our media channels to document the climate impacts so that people have a more realistic assessment of probability? Similarly, how are we repeatedly showcasing solutions so that people have constant and common examples of the kind of behavior we're encouraging? So that when they think of "going green", there are plenty of highly public examples that come to mind.

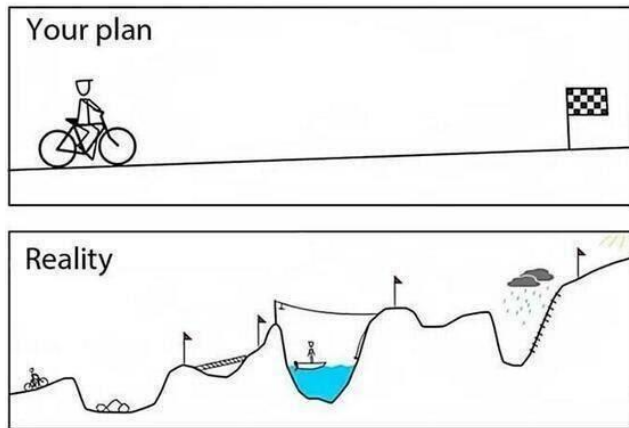
The more we individually and organizationally message this – so that the public is seeing the city mayor and staff going green, too, in what they eat, drive, fly, wear and power – the more the public has available examples for mental and memory recall.



*Example: Copenhagen's partnership with "[State of Green](#)" to showcase the green initiatives happening across the city helps the user feel that there's a lot happening. This site is presenting back to the community all of the activity in the climate space so that there's ample available evidence and data for resident learning and discovering.*



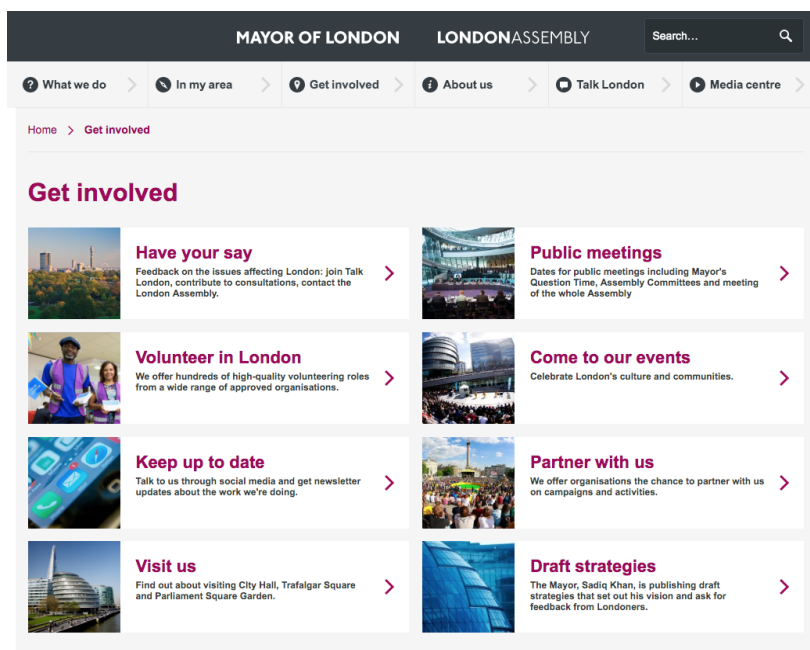
## #12 The Planning Fallacy



Humans rarely account for and allocate sufficient time for a given task. We're overly optimistic about how much time it will take to accomplish a specific task. This has huge implications for any of our sustainability targets and timelines for 2030, 2040 and 2050. And why it's essential to be very clear about how much time these tasks will take. Reorient the deadlines so that it's an easier estimable planning period for the public (since we aren't often planning other tasks in 20 or 30 year timeframes). Admittedly, since

city-scaled game-changing will take time, we want to be both clear about the necessary planning and positive about our ability to accomplish the task so that the public isn't overwhelmed by the amount of time needed.

Give examples of similar time requirements (associated with other behaviors in their lives) so that any green initiative we're requesting has a salient comparison. By helping our communities know how much planning is required to make the necessary shifts, we help set expectations. And doing it in shorter increments (versus 2050 timeframes) may be helpful in making sure those expectations are realistic, the short-term planning is reported and made public, and everyone is witnessing what's involved.



*Example: London provides ample options, which appeals to citizens of all sorts. It gives multiple time-sensitive and time-specific actions so that people can participate based on the time they have available to them. And we know that once we get them involved in one thing, they're more likely to take action in other areas.*

## Next Steps

We encourage you to check out [ideas42](#)'s full explanation of these 12 principles (they've got all of the study/research links for further sourcing). We've hyperlinked each page here for quick retrieval of each section.

1. [Choice Overload](#)
2. [Cognitive Depletion & Decision Fatigue](#)
3. [Hassle Factors](#)
4. [Identity](#)
5. [Limited Attention](#)
6. [Loss Aversion](#)
7. [Primacy Bias](#)
8. [Procrastination](#)
9. [Social Norms](#)
10. [Status Quo Bias](#)
11. [The Availability Heuristic](#)
12. [The Planning Fallacy](#)

Some, or all of it, will likely be very familiar to you and, hopefully, a helpful reminder as we work to improve our behavior change communications. If you want support in brainstorming how any of these 12 principles are relevant to your city, please [reach out](#) to me. I'm happy to help here. Thanks!

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***Find out more and read additional articles about CNCA's Game Changers Initiative [here](#).***