But, what do I say?

For years I had a sense that I wanted to be more involved in my community and more engaged with local change. But I was busy with a full time job and a little kid, so I just kinda muddled through, volunteering here and there, contributing to consultations that I saw Facebook posts about, and occasionally thinking “gosh, I wish my views were better represented at the decision making table!”

Gradually, I dipped my toes a little further into engaging with local issues and making my voice heard. Inspired by How to Save a Planet, I did a Climate Action Venn diagram, and found that one of my sweet spots was writing and advocating on local transport issues. Our family had recently purchased a cargo bike, in an effort to replace many of our short, local, car trips. We loved riding, but as a not-so-confident biker, there were many areas where I felt really nervous, especially with my daughter on the back. The most involved member of a local cycling advocacy group was moving away, and I took on the role of revitalising that network.

“The community sometimes have low expectations of what the Council can and should do. We should have great parks, libraries and swimming pools and sports facilities that are genuinely accessible for residents and it is not too much to expect that we invest in this core infrastructure.”

  - Fleur Fitzsimons, second term councillor, Wellington City Council

Maybe you know your sweet spot and are already involved locally. Or maybe you have an idea of your focus area, but need a nudge to take action. (If that’s the case, here’s that nudge!) But if you’re like me—a bit unsure of where to start—I have some ideas for getting started:

- Complete your own community action venn diagram to help find your sweet spot.
- Think about what the ideal place to live would look like for you, and find the gaps between the current and the ideal.
- Ask your kids, family, friends, neighbours, colleagues, and community groups what they’re worried about and start brainstorming where you could help.
- Join us in the Parents for Climate Aotearoa Facebook group and share your worries. I guarantee you that there are others who share similar concerns and a discussion can help you figure out the direction that’s right for you.
But even with an idea of my sweet spot and some idea of what I wanted to share, every time I thought about speaking up, impostor syndrome would sneak in. "But you're not an expert or a good bike rider! Why are you responsible for this? Why would they listen to you? You're just one person, what can you achieve? Can't someone else do it?"

In a world where there is so much noise and information, I think lots of us feel this way. But gradually, I started to shift my mindset. I don’t know everything, but I know what I care about. I have ideas that could be part of positive change. I’m a member of the community that our councils are there to represent. I know from experience that it’s really hard to consider the views of people that stay quiet. And with this mindset shift, I started to move from “Why me?” to “Why not me?”
“I think it is empowering to take people on the journey with us and get them excited about the opportunities in our city rather than push things on them. I don’t think we have perfected this yet.”
- Carmen Houlahan, first term councillor, Dunedin City Council

There are a lot of really genuine and systemic issues that might be a part of the why not. Council decision making processes are inaccessible, even for committed people. Submissions and decisions are usually made at long meetings, which are during the day and don’t fit well with work and childcare commitments. There’s often not much notice of when something will be discussed. The formality of the process can feel intimidating, especially if you don’t have experience with meeting processes and public speaking. It can be hard to find the information if you don’t know what you’re searching for… The barriers are real.

The result of these systemic issues is that certain demographics are over-represented in council engagement and feedback. And this can be another mental barrier. It’s hard to put yourself out there publicly, and even harder when you don’t see other people like you doing it. But at the same time, the imbalance in representation makes it all the more important that we add our voices.

“I think councils need to do more to provide community organisations, especially in the climate and environment space, with the resources to engage fully with councils and actually to help councils do the practical work that councils need to do when it comes to restoration of ecosystems and projects to reduce emissions for example. The best expertise comes from the people who are doing the work.”
- Thomas Nash, first term councillor, Greater Wellington Regional Council

Most councillors and officers genuinely want to improve their processes to hear from different people—they just don’t know how to reach those people. One thing we could all do to help is to start by speaking up about the barriers to speaking up… Because, one thing I’ve found is that once I put my hand up to give feedback, I keep finding out about more and more opportunities to do so. As you take those small steps and start to speak up, you’ll find your voice.

One of the most powerful things we can do to make change is to talk about what we’re doing and why. You don’t need formal meetings and processes to talk about change in your community. You don’t need to go out of your way to find people to talk to. You don’t need to be an expert. You just need to care and to be yourself. I promise, that’s enough.