



THE CENTRE FOR CLIMATE CHANGE AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATIONS

TRACKING THE EFFECT OF COVID-19 ON LOW-CARBON BEHAVIOURS AND ATTITUDES TO CLIMATE CHANGE

Results from wave 2 of the CAST COVID-19 Survey

This is part of a series of CAST Briefing Papers which are intended as an accessible resource for researchers and practitioners working on societal responses to climate change.

KEY POINTS

- A second wave of survey data in October 2020 shows an evolution in the UK public's behaviours and attitudes since May 2020.
- As COVID restrictions relaxed, consumption and food waste have increased. Yet most avoided going on holiday this year.
- Home working has only slightly reduced, while online grocery shopping levels remain high. Many still plan to increase what they do online after COVID compared to before it, and to reduce public transport use and flying.
- Climate change concern remains almost as high as concern about COVID-19, and there is even stronger support for measures to tackle climate change (e.g., reducing meat consumption and flying) than earlier this year. Support for many climate policies are even higher than support for COVID-19 restrictions.



Centre for **Climate Change**
and **Social Transformations**

CAST is a global hub for understanding the role of people in shaping a positive low-carbon future. Based at Cardiff University, our additional core partners are University of Bath, University of East Anglia, University of Manchester, University of York and the charity Climate Outreach.

Introduction

Measures to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic may be the most significant disruption to lifestyles in living memory, and could provide a unique opportunity to break unsustainable habits and foster lower-carbon patterns of behaviour. In [our previous survey conducted in late May 2020](#) (during the UK's first lockdown period) we found that lockdown had reduced carbon footprints, for example through people buying and travelling much less, saving energy and water, cutting food waste, and engaging in more creative hobbies. We also found climate change concern, which had risen sharply in 2019, had not been dented by COVID-19; and that support for climate action had actually increased since 2019.

We wanted to know whether these encouraging changes were maintained beyond the first lockdown as people started to return to work and other activities. So, we conducted a second wave of data collection with the same representative sample of the UK public in late October 2020 in order to explore how behaviours and attitudes with respect to climate change had evolved since COVID restrictions were relaxed. We outline here initial findings from this follow-up survey, and briefly discuss their implications for societal response to climate change.

METHODS AND SAMPLE

In total, 1338 useable responses were received, representing 88% of the wave 1 sample (collected late May 2020). Data was collected between 23rd October and 28th November (96% responses were prior to the English second lockdown, which started 5th November). Sample details: 46.3% is male; 53% female; and 0.7% other. Mean age is 47.1 years (range 18-85). One third are not currently employed or on furlough; and 14.8% have a disability.

Behaviour

Consumption has increased since May, in some cases almost as high as pre-COVID levels. For example, 72.7% bought clothing or footwear recently versus only 37.5% in May (and 90.9% pre-COVID); and 62.3% spend money on eating out or takeaways recently; compared to 55.5% in May (and 85.4% pre-COVID). For major purchases, consumption over the last three months has been similar to pre-COVID levels: 13.3% recently bought furniture (vs. 5% in May and 10% pre-COVID), 16.9% a mobile phone/tablet (up from 8.5% in May, but 17.5% pre-COVID), 12.3% a TV/computer (6.9% in May, but 14.2% pre-COVID), 10.3% a large appliance (vs. 4.6% in May, but 10.7% pre-COVID), and 5.7% recently bought a car.

Food waste has also started to creep back up. Now, 89.3% say they throw away at least some food; compared to 84% in May (and 92.1% pre-COVID). While most people are still saving energy at home, the frequency has also dropped since May: 20.6% 'always' switch off unused lights and appliances now versus 26.6% in May (and 20.8% pre-COVID).

Fewer people are currently working entirely at home (30.7%) compared to in May (36.2%) though far more than pre-COVID (11.4%); but the same proportion are continuing to do their grocery shopping online now (27% versus 28% in May, up from 13% pre-COVID).

Most (70.9%) did not take a holiday since the COVID outbreak, with those who did mostly holidaying in the UK (21.2%). For most, the decision not to holiday (78.3%) or the choice of destination (66.6%) was influenced by COVID.

Intentions

As we found in May, many plan to increase what they do online after COVID compared to before it, and also to reduce public transport use and flying (Figure 1). However, compared to May, fewer now compared to earlier this year plan to cut down on flying (36% now, versus 47% in May) and public transport use (42% now versus 52% in May) perhaps reflecting reduced concern about COVID-19 (see below).

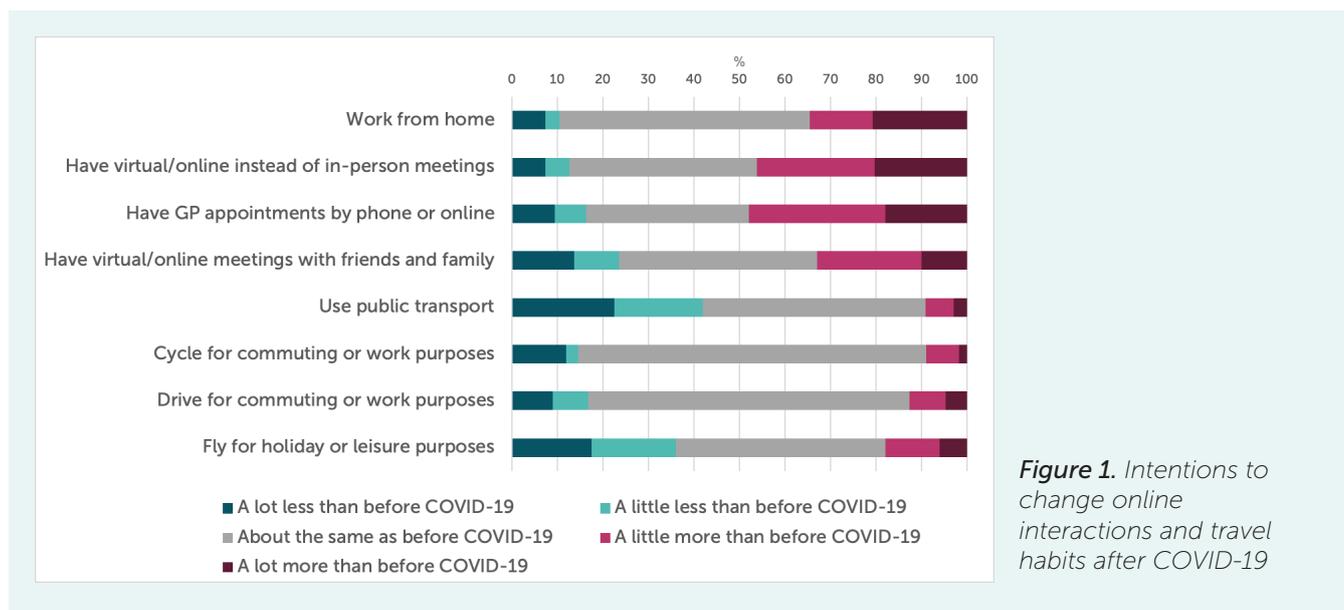


Figure 1. Intentions to change online interactions and travel habits after COVID-19

When asked what they are most looking forward to once COVID restrictions are completely removed, common responses referred to seeing friends (25%) and family (25%), and going on holiday (15%).

Although more (57.5%) indicated their quality of life now is worse now compared to pre-COVID, than indicated it was better (18%) or about the same (24.4%) – still the majority identified aspects of their lifestyle that have changed since COVID that they would like to maintain (e.g., working from home, cooking/reading more).

Climate change attitudes

Concerns about environmental issues including climate change are almost as high as concern about COVID-19 (Figure 2). Concern about both climate change and COVID has dropped slightly since May: 46.2% are now extremely/very worried about climate change (vs. 52.7% in May), and 52% now extremely/very worried about COVID-19 (versus 59.1% in May). Brexit concern has risen slightly: 33.3% are now extremely/very worried about it, compared to 30.2% in May.

Yet, the same proportion (73.9%) now as in May (74.1%) agree addressing climate change requires an extremely high or high level of urgency (figure 3). Support for measures to tackle climate change also remains high (Figure 3): 70.2% now agree we should definitely/probably reduce meat products in our diets (versus 67.1% in May); and 83.3% now agree we should definitely/probably limit flying (vs. 84.5% in May).

The current survey also measured support for other climate change measures (Figure 4), and most show strong support: while only 54.2% agree we should definitely/probably reduce dairy products in diets, this rises to 75.4% agreement for switching from gas to low-carbon central heating systems; 91.2% agreement that we should walk, cycle, or use public transport more instead of using cars; and 95.1% agreement for buying energy-efficient products and appliances. This compares to 73.1% who strongly/slightly support the COVID restrictions put in place by UK/devolved government.

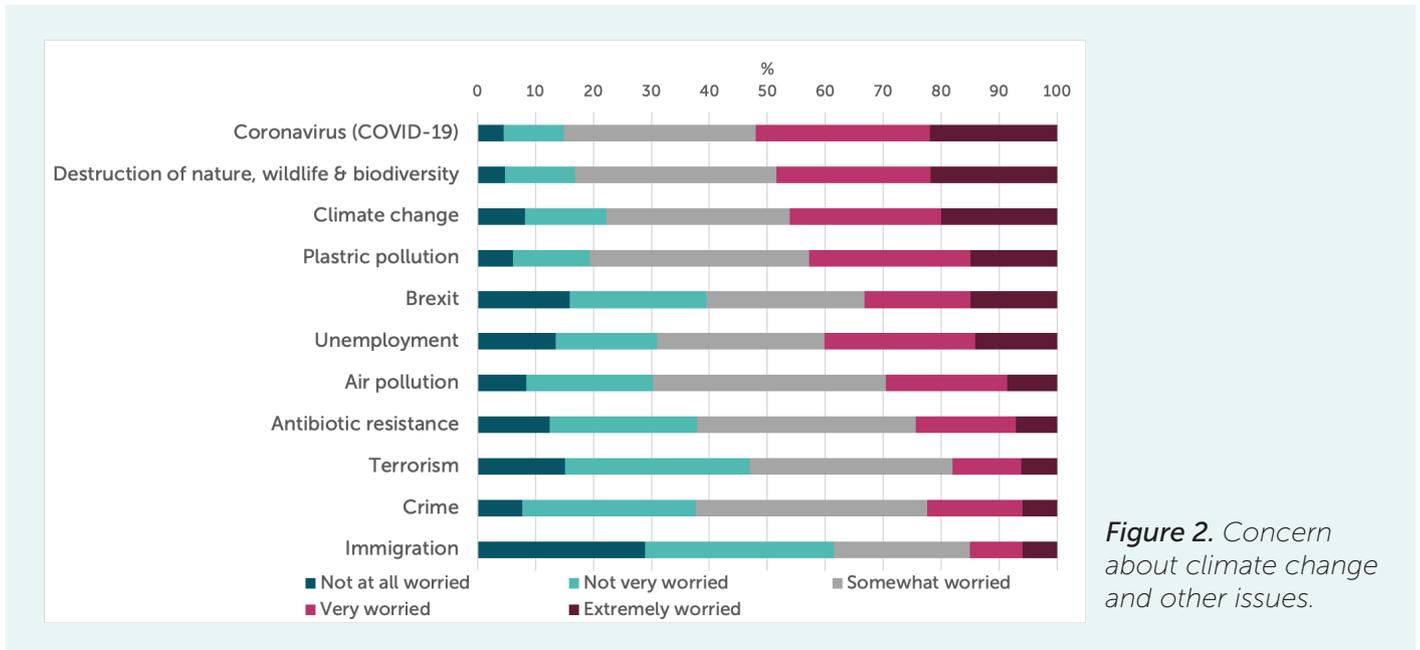


Figure 2. Concern about climate change and other issues.

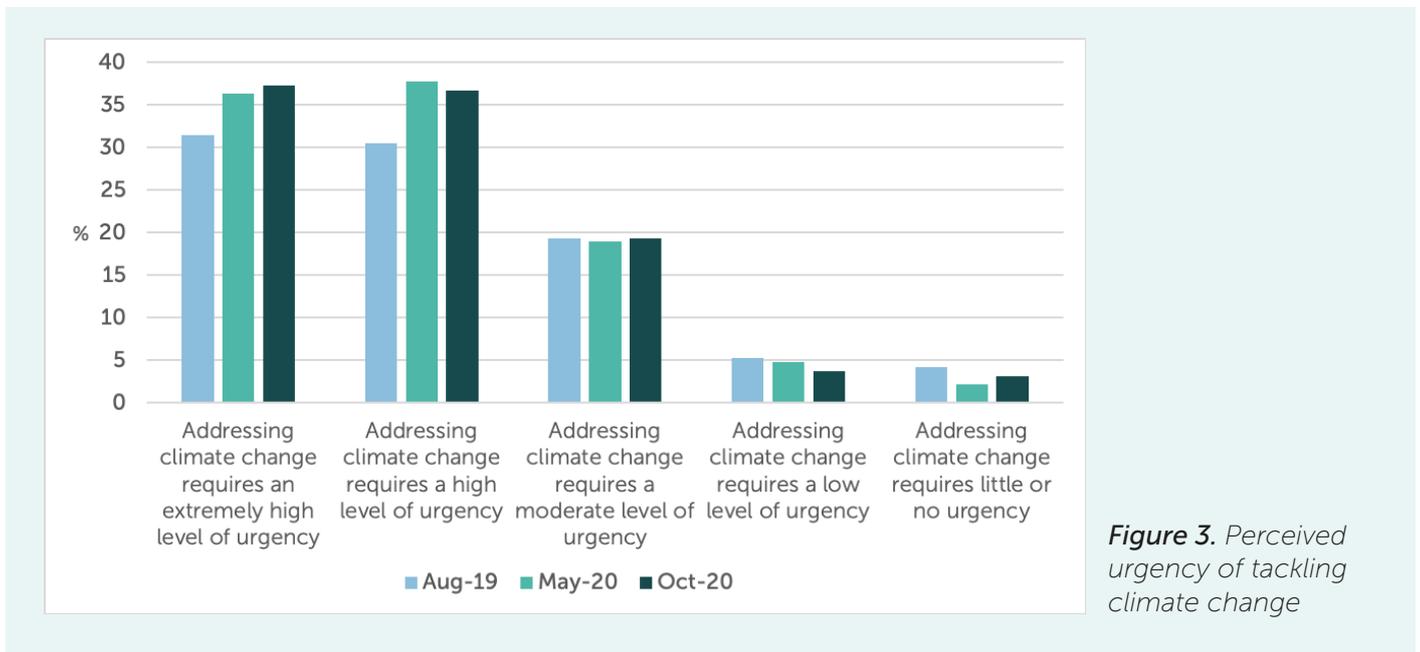


Figure 3. Perceived urgency of tackling climate change

Summary and conclusions

Following our first survey in May 2020, our second survey of the UK public tracking the impact of COVID-19 on low-carbon habits and climate change attitudes found that, as COVID restrictions relaxed, consumption and food waste increased; yet few went on holiday this year. Home working only slightly reduced, while online grocery shopping levels remained high.

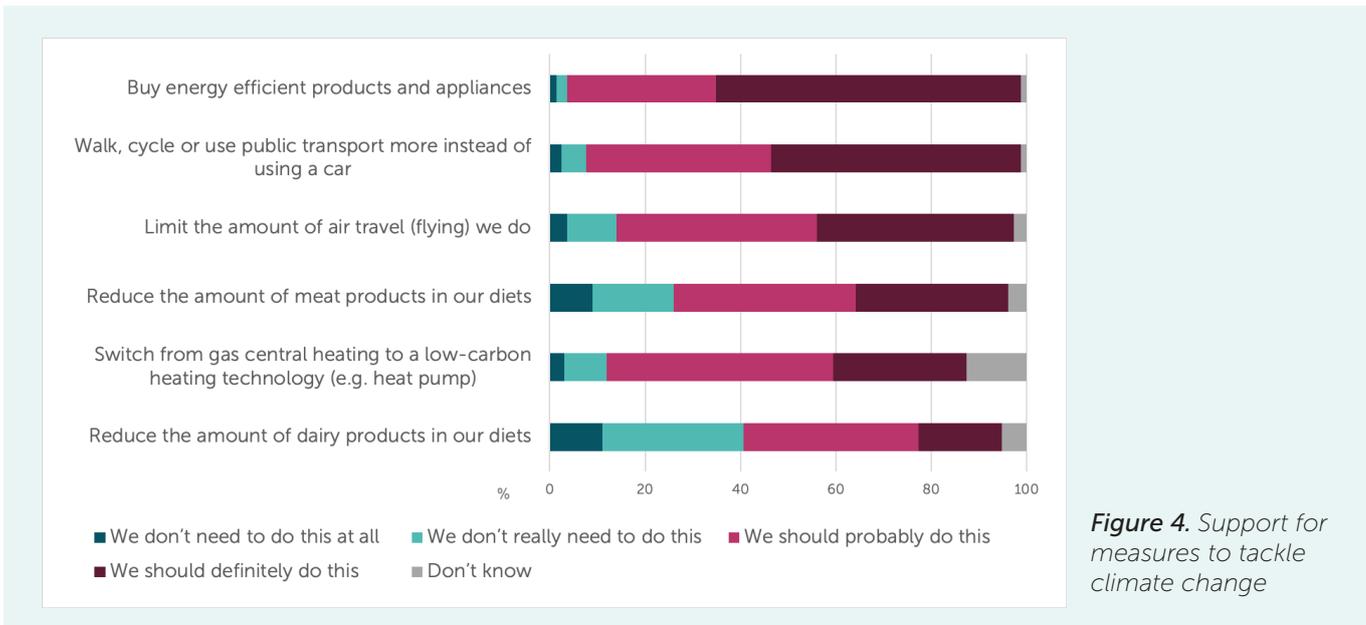


Figure 4. Support for measures to tackle climate change

Many still plan to increase what they do online after COVID-19, compared to before it, and to reduce public transport use and flying. Climate change concern remains almost as high as concern about COVID-19, and there is even stronger support for measures to tackle climate change (e.g., reducing meat consumption and flying) than earlier this year. Support for many climate policies are even higher than support for COVID-19 restrictions.

Taken together, these findings suggest that while some of the earlier lockdown habits that served to cut people’s carbon footprints (e.g., reduced consumption) have not endured, others have – notably working from home and shopping online. Many also want to continue doing more virtually than they used to and to travel less. It remains to be seen whether these intentions translate into durable behaviour change once COVID-19 restrictions are completely removed in 2021, and we will follow up with a third survey in spring/summer 2021 to examine this. As we discussed in our previous briefing paper, various policy measures are required to enable and encourage low-carbon habits to be maintained. Still, the very strong, and growing, support for ambitious climate change measures is encouraging for embedding these nascent low-carbon habits for the long-term, but also changing lifestyles more broadly to ultimately help achieve the UK’s net zero target.

Suggested citation: Whitmarsh, L., (2020). Tracking the effect of COVID-19 on low-carbon behaviours and attitudes to climate change: results from wave 2 of the CAST COVID-19 Survey. CAST Briefing Paper 05.

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We explore and communicate the tangible benefits of rapid climate action, asking how we can live in ways that are fairer, happier, and healthier while also radically cutting our carbon emissions. Based at Cardiff University, our additional core partners are University of Bath, University of East Anglia, University of Manchester, University of York and the charity Climate Outreach.

CAST is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council

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