UK Public Support for Net Zero Policies

This briefing is intended as a useful resource for practitioners and researchers who are interested in public climate change opinions and societal responses to climate change.

Key points

- New research by the Climate Engagement Partnership shows that, in the run-up to the historic COP26 summit in Glasgow, there is a clear sense of urgency among the UK public about the need to reach net zero.
- There is widespread support for a range of net zero policies which mean far-reaching changes to how we travel, what we eat, what we buy and how we heat our homes.
- However, public support for the net zero policies drops if the policy has financial or lifestyle cost implications for individuals personally.
- To avoid public backlash when policies are implemented, there is a need for further engagement with the public to raise awareness of the societal transformations needed to reach net zero, their benefits (for society, the economy and individual wellbeing) and of the costs of inaction.
- There is also a need for net zero policies to be designed in ways that reduce rather than exacerbate inequality.

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

Ipsos MORI

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This is a critical year for policy action on climate change. The COP26 UN climate talks taking place in Glasgow in November 2021 are expected to commit countries to enhanced ambition since the 'Paris agreement' was made, at COP21 in 2015. This agreement guides almost 200 countries to lower their emissions pathways, stemming global warming to under 2 degrees over pre-industrial levels, but at COP26 the mechanisms for implementing this (the 'rulebook') must be finalised and greater steps towards an, enhanced, 1.5 degrees target must be made. Latest scientific assessments by the IPCC highlight that, unless we take transformative action now, the devastating floods, and fires we have seen recently around the world will become far more frequent and severe in the coming years[1]. We have little over eight years in which we **need to cut the UK's emissions by 78%** if we are to reach our global targets and avoid the most dangerous impacts of climate.

At the individual level, keeping global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees C above pre-industrial levels means reducing the average UK carbon footprint from 8.5 tonnes CO_2 to 2.5 tonnes by 2030[2]. In practical terms, this means **immediate and radical changes to lifestyles**, for example driving and flying less, cutting down on red meat and dairy, using less energy and being less wasteful. The UK cannot reach its target without such lifestyle changes; they form a fundamental part of the Net Zero target, yet not enough attention and investment has been made to support this transition. Ambitious policies, underpinned by infrastructure and investment, are required to support and enable these behavioural changes, including economic, regulatory, and educational measures[3].

In August 2021, the *Climate Engagement Partnership* – a **new collaboration between Ipsos MORI and CAST** – polled a representative sample of 5,665 UK adults aged 16 or older for their perceptions of climate change and attitudes to various net zero policies[4]. The study offers detailed insights into how the public feel about climate change, how it should be tackled, and whether these views vary among different groups. This briefing paper summarises the headline findings[5].

Perceptions of Climate Change and Net Zero

Concern about climate change and awareness of its effects are at an all-time high. More than eight in ten (83%) say they are worried about climate change (with 45% being very or extremely worried), and a significant majority (68%) say the UK is already feeling climate change impacts. This seems to be a progression in concern when compared to prior studies in the UK: for example, in 2020, 39% were very/extremely worried, and in 2016 25% were very/extremely worried[6]. **Awareness that the UK has a policy target for net zero is also high**: 79% say they have heard of the 2050 target, and more than half feel this target is not ambitious enough. Over half (54%) say that the UK needs to reduce its carbon emissions to net zero earlier than 2050, while 33% say 2050 is a sensible target.

Despite this widespread sense of urgency, **public understanding of what they, and the Government, will need to do to reduce the UK's carbon emissions is relatively low.** Just 13% feel they know a lot about what people like themself need to do to reduce the UK's carbon emissions; while 55% say they know a little bit, and a quarter (24%) don't know what action they need to take. Public understanding of what the UK Government will need to do is even lower. Fewer than 1 in 10 (9%) feel they know a lot

about what the UK Government will need to do to reduce carbon emissions; while more (52%) say they know a little bit, and a third (31%) say they don't know what action is needed.

Consistent with previous findings[7], the survey shows that people understand **transport, energy and consumption** are important priorities for climate action, but rank the importance of **dietary change** much lower (Figure 1). When asked which areas are important for government and businesses to take action, around 7 in 10 (69%) identified 'how we travel' as the most important to reduce carbon emissions, followed by 'how we use energy in our homes' (64% selected this) and, 'how we consume goods and services' was ranked third (59%). 'Our diets and food systems' was selected by only 30% as the most important area for government and businesses to take action. The same areas were identified as the most important for individuals to take action ('how we travel', 'how we consume goods and services' and ' how we use energy in our homes' were selected by 65%, 65% and 61% respectively). The public see consumption and dietary change as a more important area for individuals than for government and businesses to take action. The findings suggest **reasonable levels of carbon literacy amongst the public,** as these views largely match expert assessments of which behaviour changes are most effective for reducing carbon footprints[8], although the importance of dietary change for climate mitigation continues to be underestimated by the public.

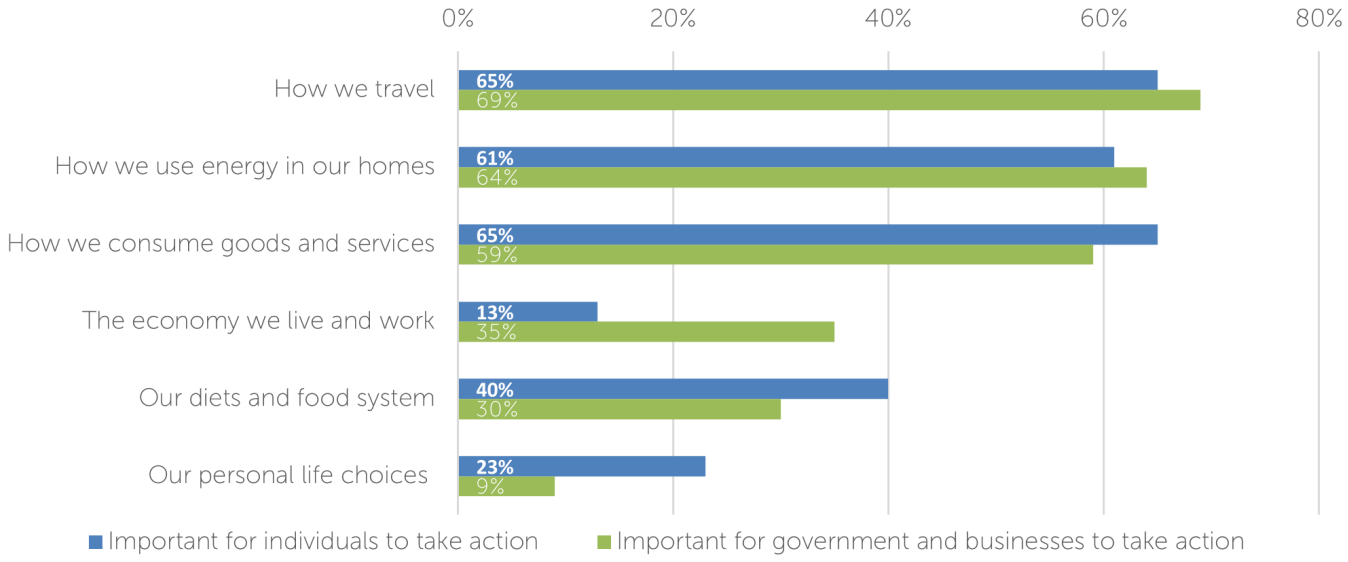

Figure 1. Perceived importance of different net zero actions: 'In which, if any, of the following areas do you think it is most important for [government and businesses/ individuals] to take action to reduce carbon emissions?'

Support for Net Zero Policies

The survey further explored responses to eight net zero policies, all of which have implications for individual choices and lifestyles. These policies relate to how we travel (low-carbon neighbourhoods, electric vehicle subsidies, frequent flyer levies), what we eat (increasing vegetarian/vegan options, higher taxes on meat and dairy), what we buy (changing product prices to reflect how environmentally friendly products are), and how we heat our homes (phasing out the sale of gas and coal boilers). One policy

was on green finance (access to sustainable pension funds). In each case, a short description of the policy was provided before respondents were asked to what extent they support or oppose it.

The **policy with the most support overall was frequent flyer levies** (68% supported this, and 16% opposed it), while there was also high support for changing product prices to reflect how environmentally friendly products are, phasing out the sale of gas boilers, and electric vehicle subsidies (Figure 2). The policy with the **lowest support overall was higher taxes on meat and dairy** (47% supported this while 32% opposed it). Support for policies, overall, is lower amongst people identifying as Conservative voters, and those on lower incomes.

The higher support for transport, energy and consumption policies compared to those for food and diet may reflect the lack of awareness for carbon emissions associated with our diets and food systems (see above). Indeed, previous research shows that *perceived effectiveness* is an important predictor of policy support: people tend to support policies they believe will work to address problems[9]. At the same time, evidence shows that *perceived fairness* is an important predictor of policy support, which may explain the high levels of support for frequent flyer levies. If people implicitly **associate the frequent flyer levy with the 'polluter pays'** principle (i.e., people who fly more should pay more), or recognise that frequent flyers are those on the highest incomes and thus can afford to pay more[10], then this may explain the high level of support. Our previous research shows that, although there is more support than opposition for dietary change[11], support is lower than for other net zero policies, particularly for reducing dairy consumption[12]. While this may be due to lower awareness of the need to change diets to address climate change, this may also be because any new tax tends not to be popular since it implies increased costs to individuals and may disproportionally affect the less well-off.

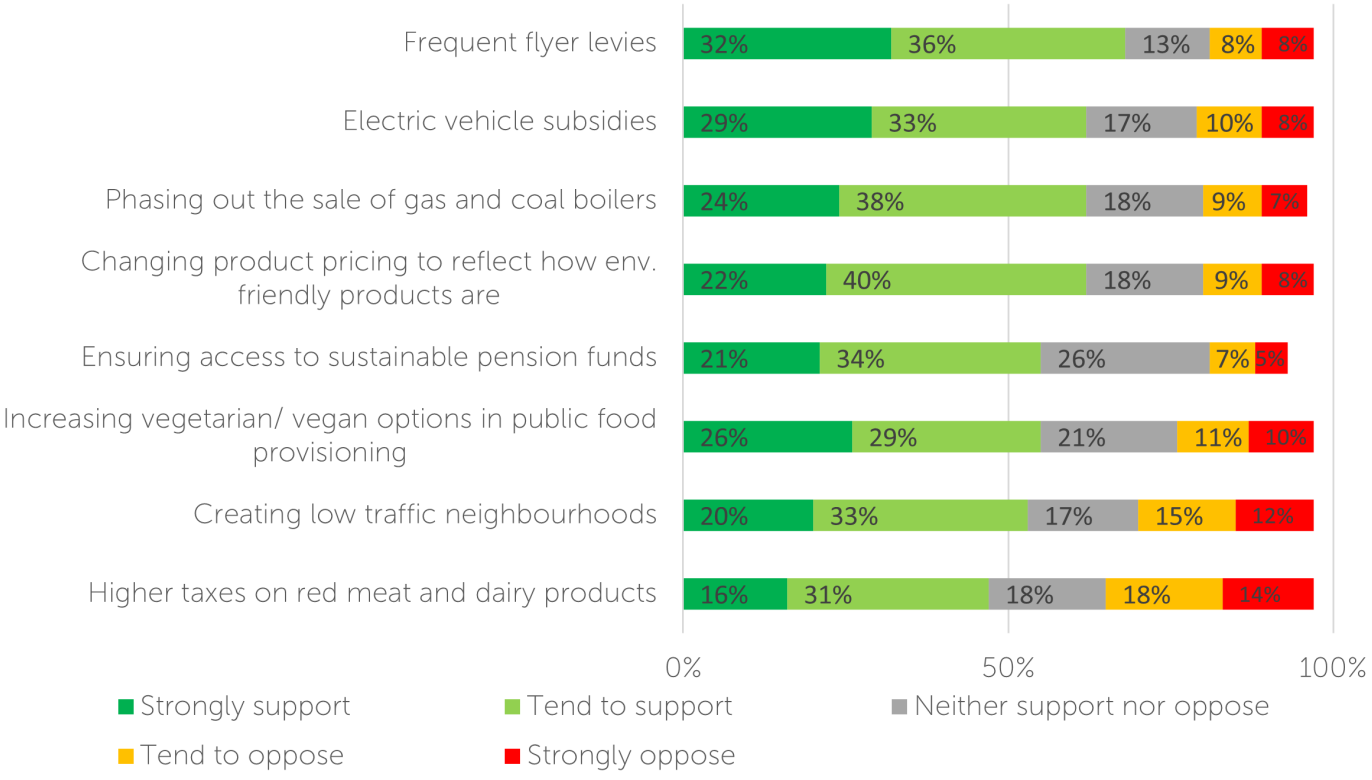

Figure 2. Policy support: 'To what extent do you support or oppose this?'

It is notable that **support for net zero policies is lower when respondents are asked to consider possible personal lifestyle and cost implications** (Figure 3). Support drops most if the policy means paying more tax or higher prices. For example, while 68% of respondents support frequent flyer levies generally, this support drops to only 35% if it meant they themselves were not able to fly abroad very often and it drops to 32% if it meant they had to pay more to take a flight. Similarly, for low-traffic neighbourhoods, while 53% of the respondents support the policy generally, this drops to 36% if this policy meant they themselves were not able to drive in certain areas, and to 18% if this policy meant that they themselves had to pay more council tax. The reduction in policy support is smaller for higher taxes on red meat and dairy when considering trade-offs, probably because the policy itself (i.e. a tax) already implies a cost to the individual. In the case of three policies – **low-traffic neighbourhoods, increasing plant-based options in public provisioning, ensuring access to sustainable pension funds** – majority policy support turns into majority opposition, when considering financial costs to the individual. These findings build on previous research which shows perceived personal cost predicts policy support, and a general tendency to prefer 'pull' (supportive) measures over 'push' (restrictive) ones[13].

On the other hand, one policy – changing product pricing to reflect environmental impacts – is the exception to the rule, and remains popular with most people, even when costs are spelled out. This may be because the policy involves *redistribution* of costs and benefits – rather than simply increased costs. That is, high-carbon products will cost more, but low-carbon products will cost less. This may imply both a fairer and less restrictive policy – it only penalises bad behaviour (again, the polluter pays), but by **making low-carbon products cheaper**, people can choose to avoid paying more (or even save

Figure 3. Policy support when considering implications for personal lifestyle and finances

Summary & Conclusions

Public concern for climate action is high

These findings provide further evidence of increasing public concern about climate change, and broad public backing for bold net zero policies by the UK government. It shows that there is good awareness of and support for the UK Government's target for reducing UK carbon emissions to 'net zero' by 2050, and the need to take action in the areas of transport, consumption and household energy.

Knowledge gaps remain

In line with previous research[6], the study found that there is less awareness of the need for dietary change to reduce carbon emissions. Despite high levels of awareness of policy direction, around a quarter of the public say they don't know what action they can take to reduce their carbon footprint.

There is public backing for net zero policies

The research further shows high public support for a wide range of net zero polices, with particularly strong support for frequent flyer levies, changing product prices to reflect environmental impact, phasing out the sale of gas boilers, and electric vehicle subsidies. The only policy with lower than 50% support was higher taxes on meat and dairy products. In all cases, there was more support than opposition to the policies.

Policy support is linked to perceived fairness, personal cost, and effectiveness

The importance of fairness, perceived effectiveness, and personal cost are known predictors of policy support and this study adds to that evidence by showing how policy support is affected by highlighting some of the potential drawbacks and may be linked to understanding of effective action. The public concerns and barriers for supporting net zero policies we find here are similar to those identified in recent deliberative contexts (e.g., climate assemblies)[14]. The findings expose that support is lower when there are trade-offs to be made with personal lifestyles and finances. Support for policies dropped substantially if it means that that it restricts people's own behaviour and in particular if they have to pay more themselves. Similarly, policy support is lower amongst low-income groups.

Governments must communicate the changes required, and highlight wider benefits these could bring

The current findings highlight a need for further communication with the public to raise awareness of the societal transformation needed for net zero and of the costs of inaction to avoid backlash when policies are implemented. At the same time, however, it is critical that climate action is designed to achieve wider benefits that improve society, economy, and individual wellbeing, and that these 'co-benefits' from climate action are effectively communicated to the public.

Net zero measures must be both effective and fair

It is also critical that policy measures are designed to be both effective and fair, which will also increase public support. This is particularly important where there are concerns about the financial costs associated with net zero policies and the lower policy support amongst low-income householders. At a time of considerable financial pressure on UK households, net zero policies need to be designed in ways that reduce rather than exacerbate inequality.

Public engagement is critical for building support for changes

Policy-makers should be transparent about the widespread changes to behaviour that are required as part of the transition to net zero, but can bring the public with them if they continue to engage with the public, exploit and communicate co-benefits, and design policies that are fair and effective.

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