



## Public worry about climate change and energy security in the cost-of-living crisis

### Key messages:

- CAST's annual survey reveals that worry about climate change remains high in the UK, whilst worry about the COVID-19 pandemic has been replaced by worry about energy prices and the cost-of-living crisis.
- Worry about energy security, including energy affordability, reliability and import dependence, has increased substantially from 2016 to 2022.
- Most people are supportive of policies that reduce carbon emissions and heating costs, such as phasing out the sale of gas boilers, improving building regulations, and subsidies for insulation. This support has stayed stable over the 2020-2022 period.
- People's willingness to invest in substantial renovations to improve insulation has reduced slightly since 2020, but in today's context many more are now willing to reduce how much they heat their homes and are intending to keep their homes at lower temperatures this winter.
- People worried about the cost-of-living crisis are also: more worried about climate change, more willing to reduce how much they heat their homes, and more supportive of policies to improve energy efficiency of homes.
- The results show that despite the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis on households' financial security, support for action on climate change remains high. And people who feel financially unstable are not less supportive of climate action than those who feel financially stable.



# Introduction

Demand reduction is key to meeting climate goals, as both the IPCC's 6th Assessment report [1] and a recent House of Lords inquiry into behaviour change for net zero have argued [2]. So far, however, there has been relatively little government commitment to encourage low-carbon lifestyle change [3]. Previous CAST research has shown that the UK public is worried about climate change and willing to engage in low carbon behaviours but is looking for leadership and support from government and business [4]. Recent



years have also seen a series of crises that have competed for government and public attention. The COVID-19 pandemic created substantial interruptions to everyday life, leading to long-term changes in social interactions, consumer behaviours and economic processes. As we started to emerge from the pandemic, in 2022, the UK plunged into an energy and economic crisis, in part driven by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and driving large increases in energy prices, inflation, and mortgage rates.

In this briefing we summarise key findings from the annual CAST survey that speaks to UK public perspectives on these issues. The survey provides insights into how worried the public are about a range of interconnected issues: climate change, COVID-19, the cost-of-living crisis, energy affordability and security. It delves into whether household financial worries are related to energy saving behaviours and support for related climate policies.

## Method and sample:

The data is derived from a series of annual online surveys conducted by CAST. Data for the first three waves were collected between 29<sup>th</sup> September - 26<sup>th</sup> October 2020 (n=1,893), 28<sup>th</sup> August - 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2021 (n=1,001), and 5<sup>th</sup> September - 6<sup>th</sup> October 2022 (n=1,087). The samples were representative of the UK population with regards to gender, age, region and socio-economic status.

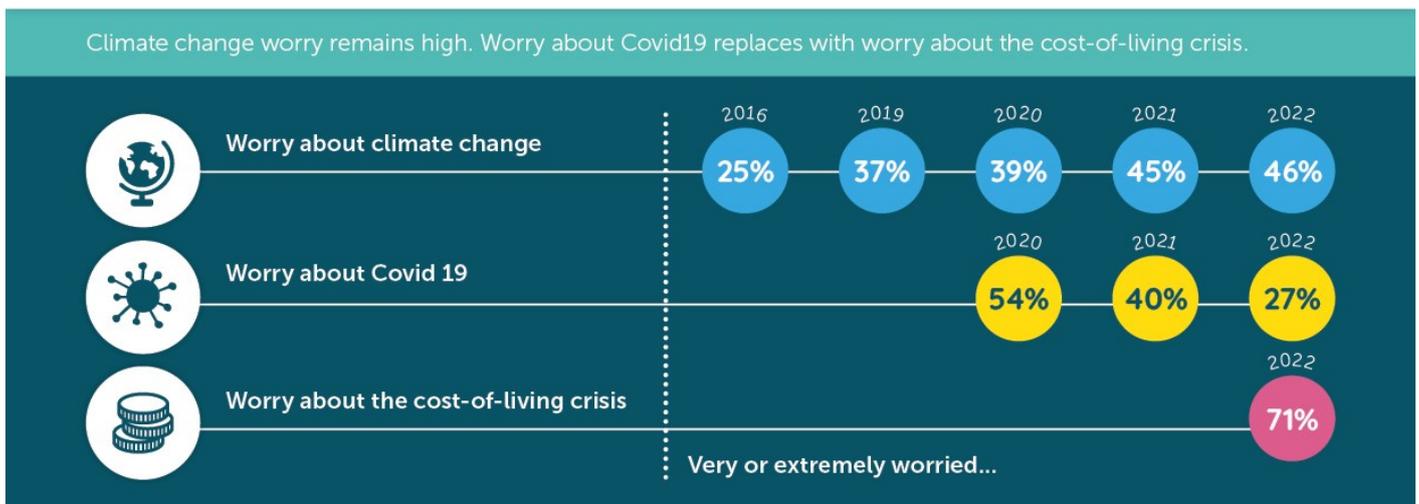
Post stratification weights are applied to strengthen representativeness. Data for the 2016 European Social Survey [5] were collected in the UK between 1<sup>st</sup> September 2016 and 20<sup>th</sup> March 2017 using probability sampling (n=1,959). Post-stratification weights are used to take account of unequal probabilities of selection, sampling and non-response error. For precise question wording or questions about the findings, please contact the authors at [cd2076@bath.ac.uk](mailto:cd2076@bath.ac.uk).

## Worry about climate change, COVID-19 and the cost-of-living crisis

Worry about climate change has increased steadily since 2016, and our most recent survey confirms this trend. While only a quarter of respondents (25%) were very or extremely worried about climate change in 2016, this rose to 37% in 2019 [6] and 39% in 2020. The upward trend appears unaffected by the COVID-19 and cost-of-living crises - the number of people saying they are very or extremely worried about climate change has continued to increase, to 45% and 46% in 2021 and 2022.

As can be expected, worry about COVID-19 was the highest at the start of the pandemic in 2020, with 54% of respondents saying that they were very or extremely worried about coronavirus. Since then, worry about COVID-19 has fallen sharply to 40% and 27% in 2021 and 2022.

The UK and many other countries around the world are now experiencing an unprecedented energy and general cost-of-living crisis, and as a result worry about the cost-of-living has replaced worry about the COVID-19 pandemic: 71% say they are very or extremely worried about this.



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## Worry about energy affordability and security

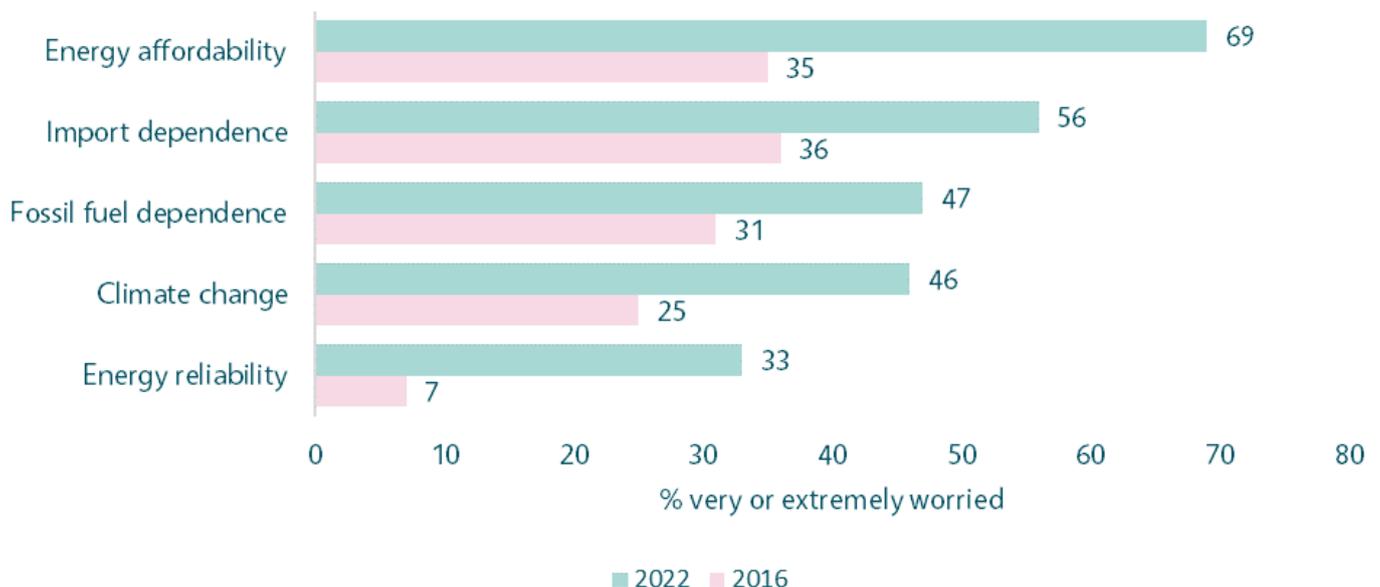
The 2016 European Social Survey was one of the first surveys to systematically examine public perceptions of energy affordability and security [7]. We repeated these questions in the 2022 CAST survey to establish whether, and by how much, perceptions have changed in the context of the current energy crisis.

The percentage of people very or extremely worried about energy security has increased substantially from 2016 to 2022. Worry about the affordability of energy is the highest of all energy security concerns and has also increased the most, from 35% in 2016 to 69% in 2022. This means that now more than two out of three people are very or extremely worried about energy being too expensive for many people in the UK.

Worry about the UK being too dependent on energy imports from other countries increased from 36% in 2016 to 56% in 2022 and worry about the reliability of energy supplies (e.g., power cuts) increased from a very low 7% in 2016 to 33% in 2022. This increase in energy security concerns is not unexpected given the current media attention on [disruptions to gas imports to Europe as a result of the Russian war in Ukraine](#). Worry about the UK being too dependent on fossil fuels changed the least between 2016 and 2022, but still saw a large rise from 31% to 47%.

Figure 1 shows that the relative ranking of the different energy security concerns remained the same, with people being the most worried about the affordability of energy, followed by import dependence and climate change/fossil fuel dependence. People are still the least worried about the reliability of energy supplies, even if this dimension saw a strong increase over the past six years.

It is noticeable that, while worry about power cuts (i.e., energy reliability) was very low in 2016 (below 10%), now a third of respondents are very or extremely worried about this. Worry about power cuts may have increased further since the data collection was completed in September 2022, given that news stories have subsequently emerged on the UK National Grid's worst-case scenario, which included plans for [staggered power cuts across Britain this winter](#).

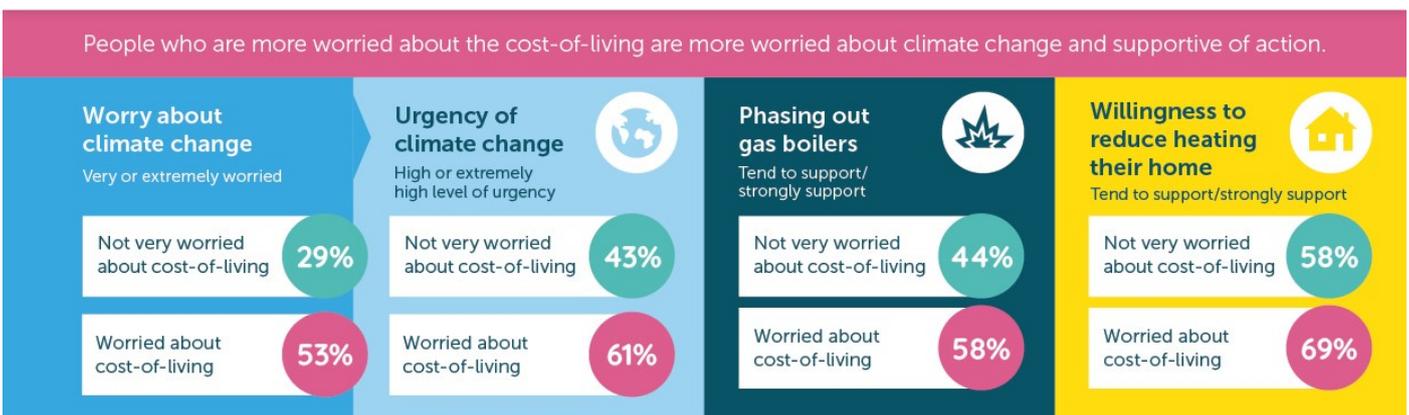


**Figure 1.** Percentage of respondents very or extremely worried about climate change and energy security in 2016 and 2022.

## Energy saving behaviours and support for climate policy

Comparisons of the 2020 and 2022 CAST survey responses suggests that the cost-of-living crisis and associated financial worries have not dented people’s worry about climate change nor their support for climate change policies. As reported above, worry about climate change has actually increased. In addition, support for policies that can reduce carbon emissions and heating costs at the same time has been remarkably stable over the last few years, with high levels of support for phasing out sales of gas/coal boilers (55% and 54%), building regulations (67% and 71%) and subsidies for insulation (77% and 80%) in both 2020 and 2022.

People’s willingness to save energy saw some interesting changes: while people are slightly less willing to invest in substantial renovations to improve the insulation of their homes in 2022 (45%) than in 2020 (49%), many more are willing to reduce how much they heat their homes in 2022 (66%) compared to 2020 (50%). In line with these results, we found a significant increase in people who are now considering keeping their homes at lower temperatures in the winter (68%, compared to 43% in 2020).



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The 2022 survey also shows that people who are worried about the cost-of-living tend to be more worried about climate change (53%) and more likely to believe that it needs to be addressed with a high level of urgency (61%) as compared to people who are not worried about the cost of living (29% and 43% respectively). In addition, we find that people who are more worried about the cost of living are also more:

- willing to reduce their heating than those who are less worried about the cost of living (69% vs 58%)
- supportive of phasing out gas boilers (58% vs 44%), improving building regulations (75% vs 62%) and subsidies for home insulations (93% vs 72%).

## Household financial vulnerability and support for climate policies

The 2022 CAST survey included a number of questions about the cost-of-living crisis and household finances. Just under half of the survey respondents (48%) reported feeling financially stable, which is a decrease from 56% just a year earlier. The number of people who struggle to pay their bills on time only saw a small increase from 20% in 2021 to 24% in 2022. It can be expected that this number will grow as inflation and steep energy price increases start to bite over the coming winter months.

It is clear from other questions that the cost-of-living crisis is already impacting households' finances. A large majority (83%) report that their costs have gone up over the last six months (44% report that costs have gone up a little and 39% report they have gone up a lot), and more than half (54%) would at least have some difficulties coping if their household received a large and unexpected bill.

It could be assumed that people are less likely to support climate change policies in times when they feel less financially secure. However, our survey suggests that that is not the case. People who feel financially unstable are not less supportive of climate action than those who feel financially stable, although they are less willing to invest in substantial home renovations (35% vs 50%), most likely for financial reasons.



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## Conclusions and recommendations

Concerns about energy security and the cost of living are at an all-time high, as energy prices, inflation, and mortgage rates have soared in the UK. Results from the most recent CAST survey however show that concern about climate change concerns amongst the British public remains high and unaffected by concerns about other issues, such as COVID-19 or the cost-of-living crisis.

**Recommendation: Policymakers should not assume that the cost-of-living crisis has deprioritised the climate crisis in the public's mind. Climate change is still one of the greatest concerns for the British public and should continue to be at the heart of the government agenda. People desire action – but need government to take the lead.**

While concerns about energy security, affordability and dependency have increased substantially, this has not affected people's support for energy-related climate change policies. People who are concerned about the cost-of-living increasing and/or feel financially vulnerable are not less supportive of action on climate change than those who are less concerned or financially vulnerable. They even show higher levels of support for policies that can reduce carbon emissions and heating costs at the same time.

**Recommendation: Framing Net Zero policy options as addressing BOTH energy security and climate are likely to resonate the most with people and therefore more likely to be accepted. These dual benefits of energy demand reduction provide strong impetus for rapid and widely-supported action in this area. The government should invest in clear communications and engagement with diverse public groups on the co-benefits of climate action and energy security.**

The results further suggest that the cost-of-living crisis has led to changes in people's willingness to save energy. Many more are now expressing a willingness to reduce how much they heat their homes, and report that they intend to keep their home at a lower temperature in the winter. In particular, those who are concerned about the cost of living and/or feel financially vulnerable are more willing to reduce their heating. However, they are less willing to invest in substantial home renovations - most likely for financial reasons. It may therefore not be surprising that worries about the cost of living are linked to higher support for subsidies for home insulation.

**Recommendation: Provide support for households who are not able to afford the investments needed to improve the efficiency of their homes. This support will not only help to achieve UK's Net Zero targets, but it will also contribute to individual and national energy security, and make energy bills affordable in the long term.**

## References

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## CAST is a global hub for understanding the role of people in shaping a positive low-carbon future.

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 the University of Bath, our additional core partners are Cardiff University, University of East Anglia, University of Manchester, University of York and the charity Climate Outreach.

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