

CAST BRIEFING 26 - April 2024



Public perceptions of climate change and policy action in the UK, China, Sweden and Brazil from 2020 – 2023

Key findings:

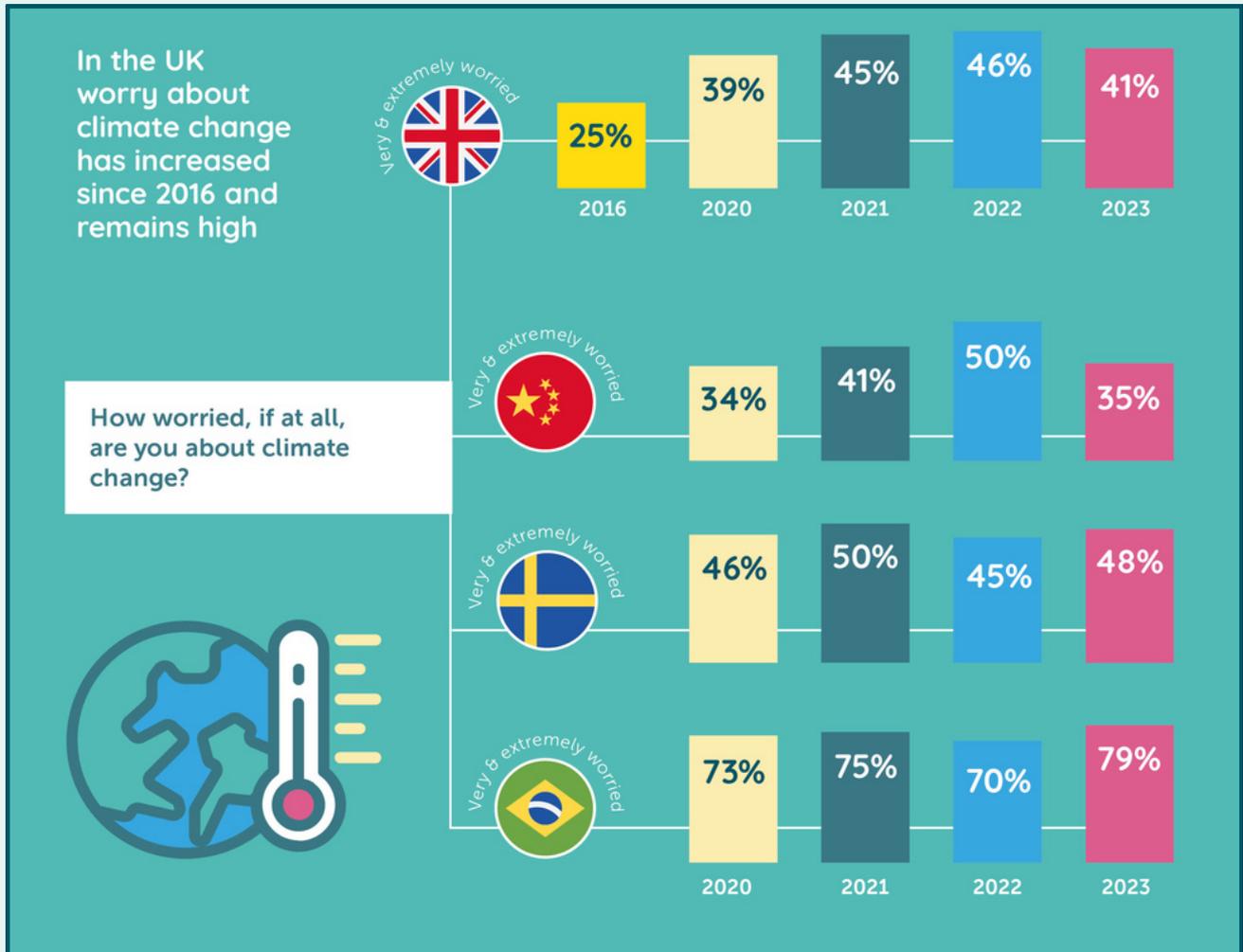
- The majority of people surveyed in all four countries believe climate change should be addressed with a high or extremely high level of urgency.
- Majorities in all surveyed countries continue to agree that we need to drastically change the way we live and how society operates, to address climate change.
- Over the last four years, people in the UK have increasingly reported that we are already feeling the effects of climate change. In 2023, more than one in ten reported having their health significantly affected by heatwaves.
- Willingness to make the necessary lifestyle changes to help address climate change has increased in the UK between 2020-2023.
- Support for the Paris Agreement remains high across all surveyed countries. However, many do not think governments will meet the international target to keep global temperature rises below 2°C.
- Trust in the UK government to address climate change remains low and less than 5% of respondents believe the UK is prepared to deal with the negative impacts of climate change.



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

CAST is a global hub for understanding the systemic and society-wide transformations that are required to address climate change. Based at the University of Bath, our additional core partners are Cardiff University, the University of East Anglia, the University of York, the University of Manchester and the charity Climate Outreach.

Introduction



Graphic 1: Infographic showcasing how worried participants are about climate change in the four surveyed countries

This briefing is intended as a resource for specialists, researchers, policymakers, and others interested in public perceptions of climate change in the UK, China, Sweden and Brazil.

Background

The last four years have been shaped by global recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis, and several extreme weather events. We are already facing the impacts of climate change, with 2022 and 2023 being the warmest years on record in the UK since 1884¹. This briefing presents findings from the latest CAST survey (2023), as well as looking back at previous CAST surveys (2020, 2021, 2022), identifying how public perceptions of climate change and support for low carbon lifestyle changes have changed (or not) over that tumultuous time.

Methods and Sample

The results presented in this briefing are from a series of annual online surveys conducted as part of the first phase of the CAST centre. Data was collected in 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023, in the UK, China, Sweden, and Brazil. The surveys covered a wide range of topics including climate change perceptions, support for climate related behaviours, and support for climate change net zero policies. The sample size was approximately 1,000 in each country for each wave, and each sample was representative of the populations of the four countries with regard to gender, age, region and socioeconomic status. Post stratification weights were used to ensure the data accurately represents the proportions of different demographic groups within each of the four countries.

Country	Wave 1 (Sept – Nov 2020)	Wave 2 (Aug – Sept 2021)	Wave 3 (Sept – Oct 2022)	Wave 4 (Oct – Nov 2023)
UK	n = 1,001	n = 1,001	n = 1,087	n = 1,000
China	n = 829	n = 1,001	n = 1,087	n = 1,005
Sweden	n = 1,000	n = 1,023	n = 1,087	n = 1,000
Brazil	n = 1,002	n = 1,011	n = 1,088	n = 1,000

Table 1: Sample sizes of the CAST surveys

Climate Change Perceptions

Worry about climate change in the UK has increased substantially from 2016 to 2020 and has remained high since. The most recent CAST survey results show that 41% of UK respondents are very or extremely worried about climate change, compared to 25% in 2016². Worry is similarly high in Sweden (48%) and China (35%), and is almost twice as high in Brazil (79%).

Urgency: Respondents across all four countries continue to agree that climate change needs to be addressed with a high or extremely high level of urgency (UK = 56%, China = 54%, Sweden = 51%, Brazil = 82%), with Brazil standing out with highest levels of worry and urgency.

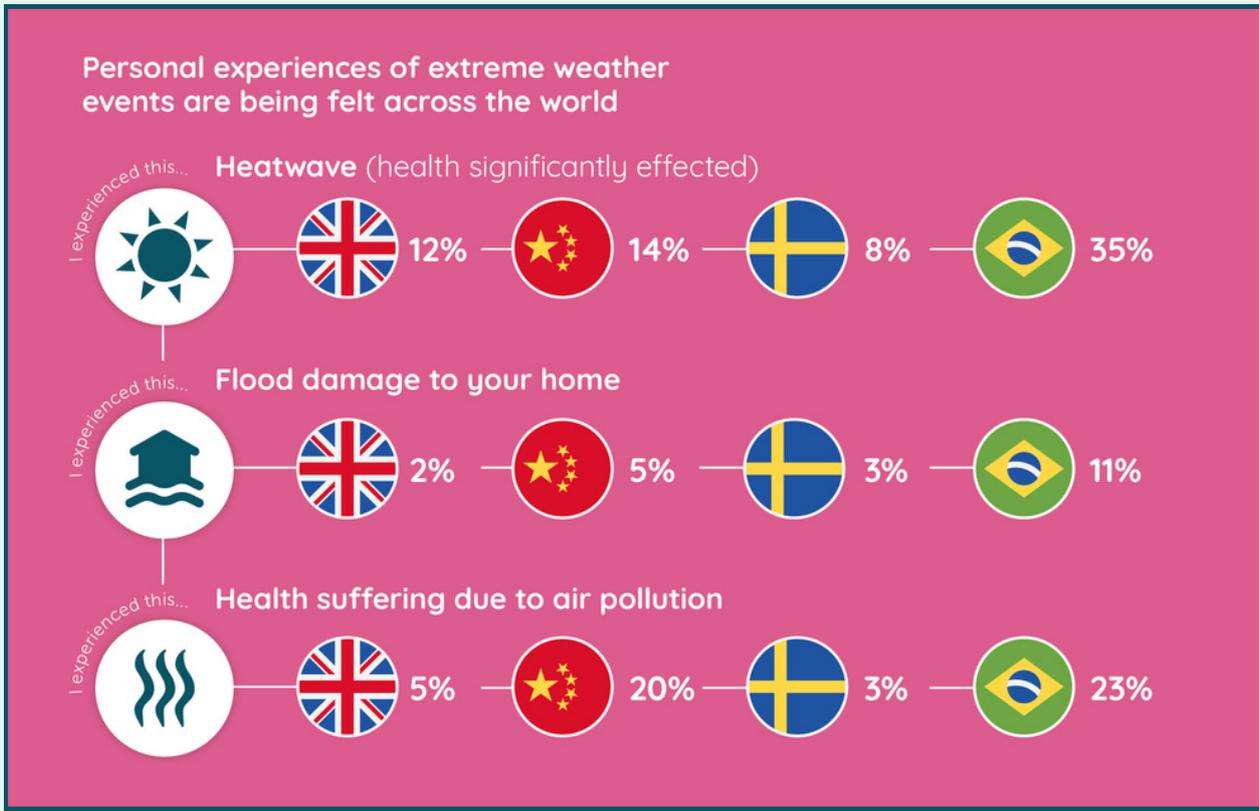
The effects of climate change continue to be felt across the world, with a majority of respondents in each country believing that we are already feeling the effects of climate change (UK = 73%, China = 61%, Sweden = 65%, Brazil = 87%). The number of UK respondents who believe we are already feeling the effects of climate change has steadily increased over the years since 2010, when only 41% reported that we are already feeling the effects of climate change³. This change in public perception could be due to the recent increase in extreme weather events and heatwaves in the UK¹.

Differences

The latest CAST data showed twice as many respondents from Brazil reporting having their health significantly affected by heatwaves and experiencing flooding of their home, as compared to China, the UK and Sweden (see Graphic 2).

Respondents reporting that their health has suffered from air pollution was also substantially higher in Brazil and China than in the UK and Sweden. This may be an explanation as to why there are higher levels of worry and urgency about climate change in Brazil relative to the other three countries.

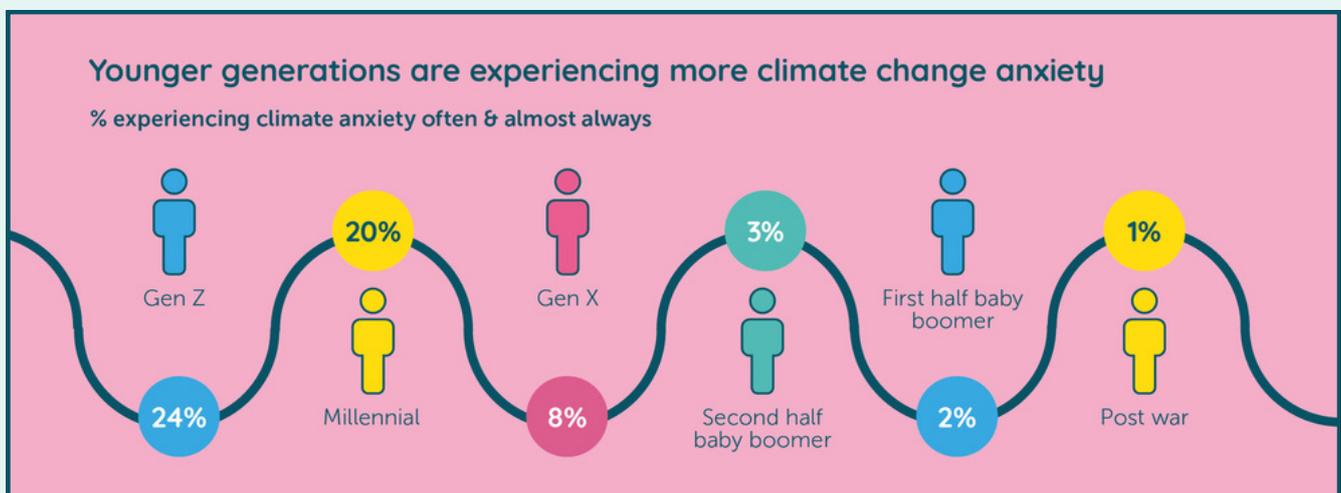
Findings



Graphic 2: Infographic on how personal experiences of extreme weather events are being felt across the world

Younger generations

Climate change appears to be having a greater psychological impact on younger generations⁴. Specifically, higher levels of climate anxiety, referring to increased emotional, mental or physical distress triggered by dangerous shifts in the climate system⁵, are found among younger age groups (see Graphic 3 for UK findings below).



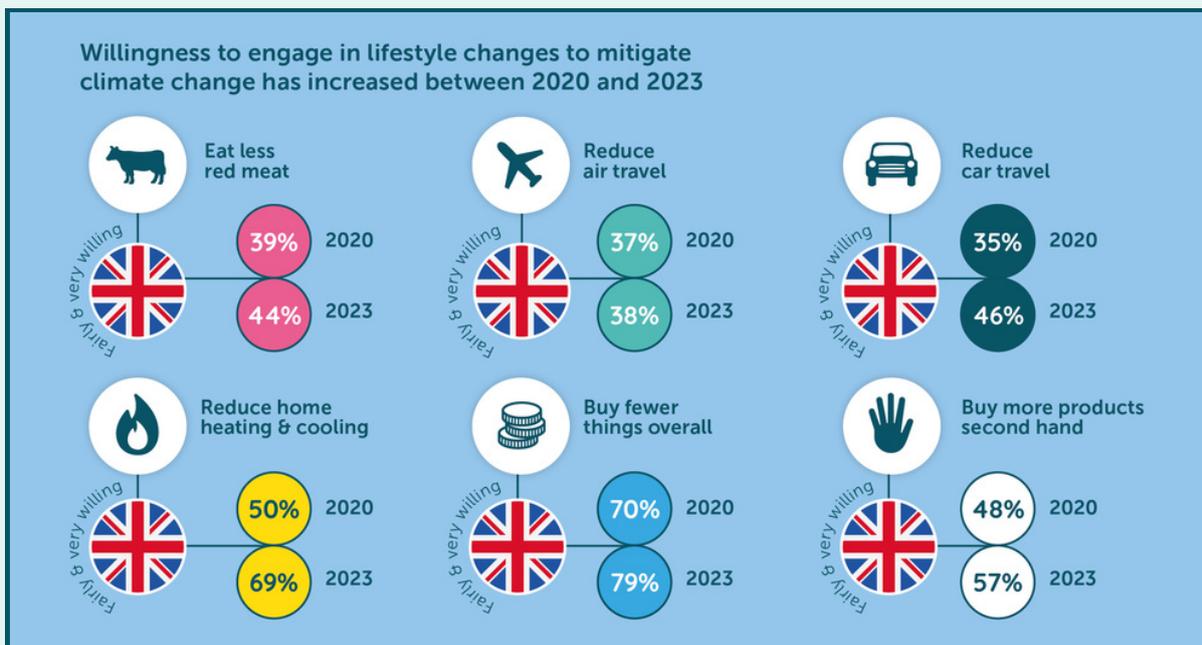
Graphic 3: Infographic showing different generations experiencing climate change anxiety

Support for climate related behaviours

Changing how society works: A clear majority of respondents in each country agree that, in order to tackle climate change, we as a society need to drastically change the way we live and how society operates (UK = 69%, China = 71%, Sweden = 61% and Brazil = 82%). This demonstrates a widespread understanding that net zero targets cannot be reached without changing current lifestyles.

Lifestyle changes: Respondents support lifestyle changes in relation to diet, transport, heating and material consumption. Over two thirds in all countries believe that we probably or definitely should reduce home heating and cooling (UK = 85%, China = 86%, Sweden = 71%, Brazil = 85%). People also believe that we should limit air travel (UK = 78%, China = 71%, Sweden = 78%, Brazil = 61%) and only slightly fewer believe that we should reduce the amount of products we buy (UK = 78%, China = 61%, Sweden = 80%, Brazil = 78%). Fewer think that we should reduce meat consumption, but this is still seen as necessary for climate action by more than half of all national samples (UK = 58%, China = 61%, Sweden = 58%, Brazil = 57%).

Survey results further show that at least a third of people are willing to make necessary lifestyle changes themselves to mitigate climate change (see Graphic 4). Willingness to make each of these lifestyle changes has increased in the UK since 2020, with the biggest increase in willingness to reduce home heating/cooling (+19%) and travel by car (+11%). Willingness to make these lifestyle changes is similarly high in China, Sweden and Brazil.

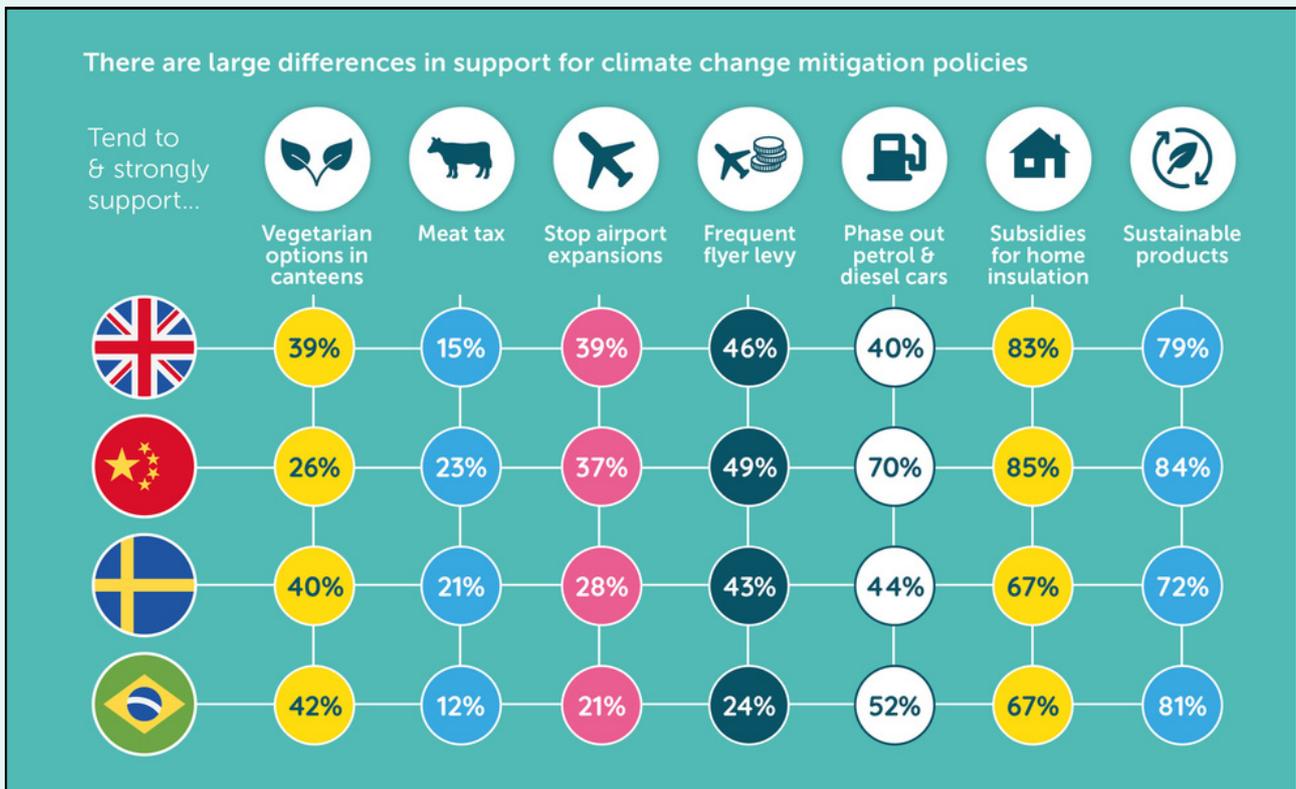


Graphic 4: Infographic on participants' willingness to engage in lifestyle changes to mitigate climate change

Support for climate change net zero policies

There are large differences in support for climate change mitigation policies (see Graphic 5). The lowest level of support in all four countries is for a policy to increase the price of meat products. Support for such a policy is much lower than for a policy to make vegetarian and vegan options mandatory in canteens.

Across all countries, higher levels of support are found for regulations to make products reusable, repairable and recyclable and providing subsidies for home insulation. Policies aimed at ensuring products are sustainable or circular, and improving home energy efficiency, are therefore perhaps among the most promising in terms of gaining public acceptability.



Graphic 5: Infographic showcasing the differences in support for climate change mitigation policies

Support for the Paris Agreement has remained high in all four surveyed countries since 2020. The latest CAST survey data shows that the Paris Agreement is supported by two thirds of respondents in the UK (70%), Sweden (67%), China (76%) and Brazil (65%). Support for Citizens' Assemblies is more variable, with lower levels of support in the UK (48%) and Sweden (31%) than in Brazil (77%) and China (74%).

Findings

Despite high levels of support for international agreements, respondents think it is unlikely that countries will be able to meet the international agreement and global temperature rises will be kept below 2 degrees (UK = 57%, China = 16%, Sweden = 59%, Brazil = 51%).

Responsibility for acting: When asked who is mainly responsible for reducing emissions that are causing climate change, the proportion of UK respondents who choose the government increased by 11% since 2020 (from 32% to 43%). However, only one in four (25%) UK respondents trust the UK government to address climate change and only 3% think the UK is prepared to deal with the negative impacts of climate change.



Graphic 6: Infographic on how prepared participants believe the UK is to deal with the negative impacts of climate change

Summary and recommendations

Over the last four years, the UK has seen some of the highest temperatures on record since 1884¹. These events are mirrored in the survey data, which shows increased worry about climate change and the realisation that we are already feeling the effects of climate change.

Rising worry about climate change in the UK has been met with an increased willingness to make necessary lifestyle changes in the areas of diet, heating, travel and material consumption. There are however differences in support for climate change mitigation policies. Support is particularly high for the policies of subsidising home insulation and regulations to require products to be more reusable, repairable and recyclable. Introducing policies in the areas of heating and material consumption (e.g., increasing the lifespan of products) therefore may be promising for helping people reduce their carbon emissions. Regulations should focus on making sustainable choices more available and accessible to consumers, to ease the societal transition towards a low carbon future. Taxes (e.g., on meat) are likely to receive less support. By providing the right options for members of the public, policies in all areas of heating, travel, diet and material consumption can help shift society towards net zero.

While the government is increasingly seen as being mainly responsible for addressing climate change in the UK, there is a noticeable lack of trust that the government will act on this responsibility. Therefore, it is crucial for the government to demonstrate a genuine commitment to deal with climate change. Citizens in the UK may also benefit from greater encouragement to support and engage in collective decision-making through citizen-assemblies, to enable more collective action against climate change and through the co-development of effective climate change policies.

While the four surveyed countries showed similarities in opinions, Brazil had the highest levels of worry and urgency about climate change, in addition to greater personal experience of extreme weather events. This reflects that climate change is being felt differently across the world and needs to be addressed accordingly.

Further reading

References/Further reading:

- ¹Met Office. (2024). 2023 was the second warmest year on record for UK. Met Office. <https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/about-us/press-office/news/weather-and-climate/2023/2023-was-second-warmest-year-on-record-for-uk>
- ²Poortinga, W., Fisher, S., Bohm, G., Steg, L., Whitmarsh, L., & Ogunbode, C. (2018). European attitudes to climate change and energy. Topline results from Round 8 of the European Social Survey. European Social Survey ERIC. <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/115674/>
- ³Steentjes, K., Demski, C., Seabrook, A., Corner, A. & Pidgeon, N. (2020). British Public Perceptions of Climate Risk, Adaptation Options and Resilience (RESiL RISK): Topline findings of a GB survey conducted in October 2019. Cardiff University. <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/129452>
- ⁴Poortinga, W., Demski, C., & Steentjes, K. (2023). Generational differences in climate-related beliefs, risk perceptions and emotions in the UK. *Communications Earth & Environment*, 4(1), 229. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43247-023-00870-x>
- ⁵Dodds, J. (2021). The psychology of climate anxiety. *BJPsych Bulletin*, 45(4), 222–226. <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjb.2021.18>

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CAST is a global hub for understanding the systemic and society-wide transformations that are required to address climate change.

We research and develop the social transformations needed to produce a low-carbon and sustainable society; at the core of our work is a fundamental question of enormous social significance: How can we as a society live differently – and better – in ways that meet the urgent need for rapid and far-reaching emission reductions?

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