

AFTER THE LOCKDOWN?

New lessons for building climate change engagement in the UK



This report was financed by CAST UEA through the CAST Impact Fund, via its allocation of Research England's Higher Education Innovation Funding (HEIF). This Fund aims to support knowledge-based interactions between higher education providers and the wider world, which results in benefits to the economy and society.

CAST

CAST (the Centre for Climate Change and Social Transformations) is a global hub for understanding the role of people in shaping a positive low-carbon future. We work to understand and accelerate the systemic and society-wide changes needed to address climate change. CAST is a consortium of five UK universities and charity Climate Outreach, and our work is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).



Climate Outreach

Climate Outreach is a team of social scientists and communication specialists passionate about building a social mandate for climate action. Through our research, practical guides and consultancy services, we help organisations communicate about climate change in ways that resonate with the values of their audiences. We have over 15 years of experience widening and deepening public engagement with climate change, working with a wide range of international partners including government, international bodies, academic institutions, charities, businesses, faith organisations and youth groups.

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Acknowledgements

The research team would like to thank **Dr Adam Corner**, Programmes and Research Director with Climate Outreach, for support and contributions throughout the development of this work, from the writing of the original proposal to providing feedback on earlier drafts of this report. The advice and guidance from the advisory board (**Prof Lorraine Whitmarsh**, **Dr Adam Corner**, **Prof Wouter Poortinga**, **Dr Irene Lorenzoni**, **Dr Jordan Harold**, **Briony Latter** and **Dr Caroline Verfuert**) has proved invaluable. We are grateful to **Prof Andy Jordan** and the team at University of East Anglia for making the project possible through the CAST Impact Fund.

Cite as: Shaw, C. and Wang, S. (2021) After the lockdown? New lessons for building climate change engagement in the UK. Oxford: Climate Outreach.

Cover photo: Young women in Chinatown during the Covid-19 pandemic. London, August 2020. © PjrNews/Alamy

APRIL 2021

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Executive summary

In December 2020 Climate Outreach, as part of the Centre for Climate Change and Social Transformations (CAST), conducted a nationally representative survey of the UK population to investigate what Covid-19 means for climate engagement in 2021: what can we learn from the shared experiences of the last 12 months, and how can public engagement on climate change build on these experiences?

Effective engagement needs to speak to people's values, rather than just focusing on facts and figures.¹ This survey used the Britain Talks Climate² model to [segment the respondents into one of seven groups](#). This enabled us to explore how gaining an understanding of these groups' differing and common values can be used to maximise the effectiveness of climate engagement strategies, as well as to signpost what messages have appeal across the UK population.

An important result, which underpins interpretation of the rest of the findings, is that concern about climate change remains high, with only Covid-19 being of greater concern to respondents. It may well be that, with awareness of and concern about climate change remaining high even in the face of crises such as Covid-19, we can anticipate support and desire for climate action to be one of the main issues for the UK public in 2021 and beyond, once the lockdowns are behind us.

Clear patterns from the survey results emerged, showing that the respondents:

- feel the world is out of balance with nature
- value policy action that will ensure a clean and healthy environment
- agree that Covid-19 has shown that we all share the same planet and our lives are interconnected
- display strong support for the idea that ordinary people working together can make a difference to the world
- want climate policies to help people be economically secure

The survey respondents saw Covid-19 and climate change as issues requiring different types of policy responses. There were three main differences in perspectives on the two issues:

- support for restrictions on individual freedom was high for Covid-19, but lower for climate change
- people reported a higher sense of personal responsibility and agency regarding the spread of Covid-19 than they did for actions to mitigate climate change
- there was greater trust in the government on the effectiveness of their actions to limit climate change compared to their actions in response to Covid-19

These observed differences may be the result of several factors. For one, the survey was conducted in December 2020, when, in the UK government's own words, the virus was 'out of control';³ and the UK was facing another lockdown. This may have undermined confidence in the government. Secondly, strong social norms around the need to isolate in order to limit the spread of Covid-19 were established quite early on. The perception that Covid-19 restrictions would be shorter-lived than those needed for climate change is also likely a factor.

We have distilled the key findings from the survey into eight actionable recommendations for practitioners looking to engage the UK public on climate change in the current context. These are discussed in detail below. As a general cross-cutting principle, practitioners should note that people don't naturally connect climate change and Covid-19. Covid-19 and associated lockdowns have been a negative experience for many, and so great care should be taken in connecting the two issues, so as not to appear to be exploiting the situation.

8 RECOMMENDATIONS

- ① **Talk about climate change as a sign of a world out of balance.**
- ② **Root discussions of climate policy in the economic circumstances and everyday concerns of people's lives.**
- ③ **Stress the need for both individual and government action.**
- ④ **Use communal language, and speak in terms of 'we' in order to build a sense of collective agency with regard to addressing climate change.**
- ⑤ **Provide information about the actions people can take to reduce their contribution to climate change.**
- ⑥ **Stress the co-benefits of climate action, such as a clean and healthy environment and a restoration of the natural world.**
- ⑦ **Where possible, get to know the values of your audience and speak directly to those values, as some messaging is deeply divisive.**
- ⑧ **Use COP26 as an opportunity to demonstrate UK leadership on climate change as part of global efforts to protect our common future.**

Understanding climate change perceptions in light of Covid-19

The need for urgent action on climate change has not been diminished by the Covid-19 pandemic, but this has dramatically altered the context in which public engagement on climate change takes place. Covid-19 has had an unprecedented impact from a health and economic perspective but also a social impact on populations around the world, with consequences that are yet to become fully clear for education, diverse sectors of the economy and freedom of movement. So, in the wake of this cataclysmic event – a new societal risk that has been constructed and mediated through media, political and social media narratives – and as the UK comes out of its third national lockdown, it is important to understand what impact the lived experience of Covid-19 has had on attitudes to climate change, and how the communication of climate change can best speak to those experiences.

An adapted 50th birthday party celebration during the Covid-19 lockdown, UK 2020. Photo: John Birdsall/Alamy



Analysing the results using the Britain Talks Climate segments

These recommendations are drawn from the results of a survey of 1,500 UK residents carried out in December 2020. The purpose of the survey was to compare attitudes to the trade offs required to reduce the risks of Covid-19 and climate change respectively. The survey also included two 'test' narratives: one exploring respondents' sense of agency, the other exploring the potential for health messaging to connect experiences of Covid-19 and climate change (see Appendix 1 for details of the methodology and descriptive statistics, and Appendix 2 for the two narratives). Respondents were asked to highlight which phrases they most strongly liked and disliked, and to explain the reasons for their choices.

The quotes included in the recommendations below are attributed to the relevant Britain Talks Climate segments. [Britain Talks Climate](#) is an evidence-based toolkit that groups the population into seven different segments based on people's core beliefs, and identifies effective ways to engage across the whole of British society. Based on stakeholder consultation and research – a 10,385-person survey plus focus groups, in-depth interviews and message testing – it goes beyond simple, uni-dimensional accounts of public opinion (e.g. left versus right, leave versus remain, north versus south) to uncover seven more nuanced and complex segments in Britain. Figure 1 below summarises the values, aspirations and concerns of the seven Britain Talks Climate segments.

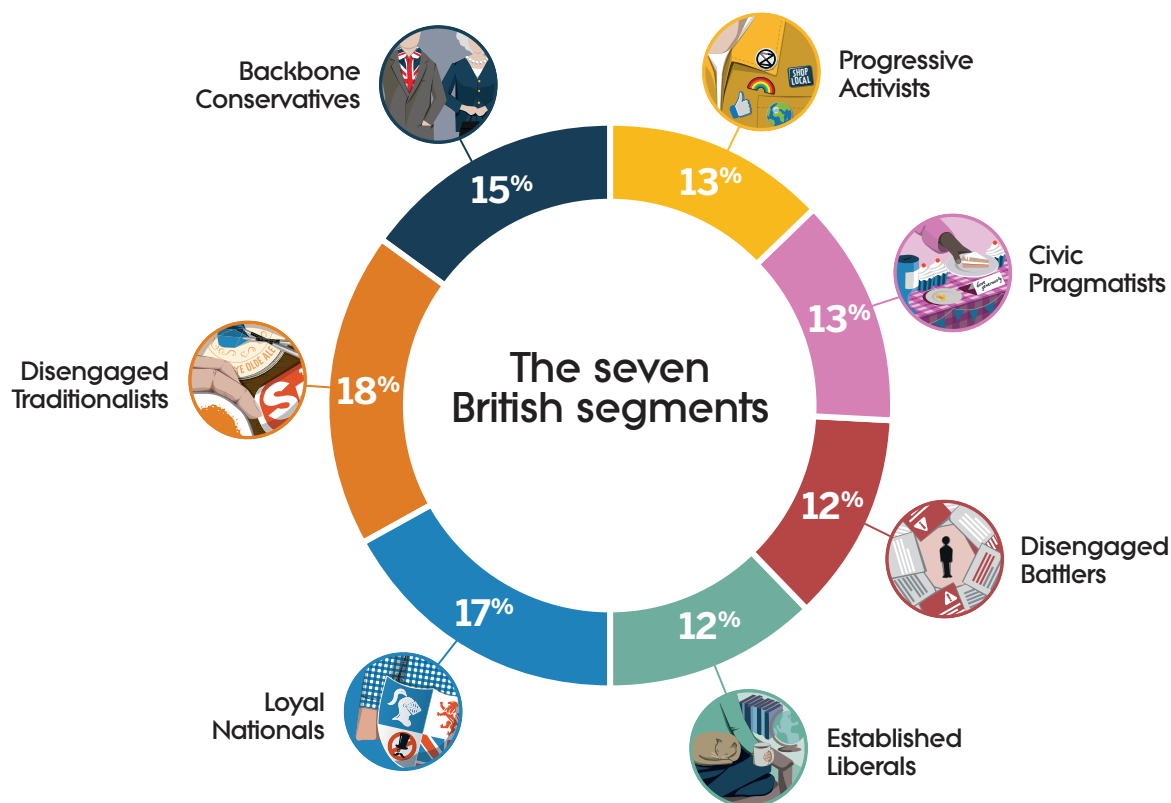


Figure 1. Values, aspirations and concerns of the seven segments of the British population, as identified through the recent Britain Talks Climate research.

Eight recommendations for post-lockdown climate change engagement

1

Talk about climate change as a sign of a world out of balance

Given a list of concerns to rank, the survey respondents listed their top concerns as Covid-19, the destruction of nature, and climate change, in that order (see Figure 2 below). The respondents also talked fondly of their experience during the first lockdown of the clean air and sound of birdsong.

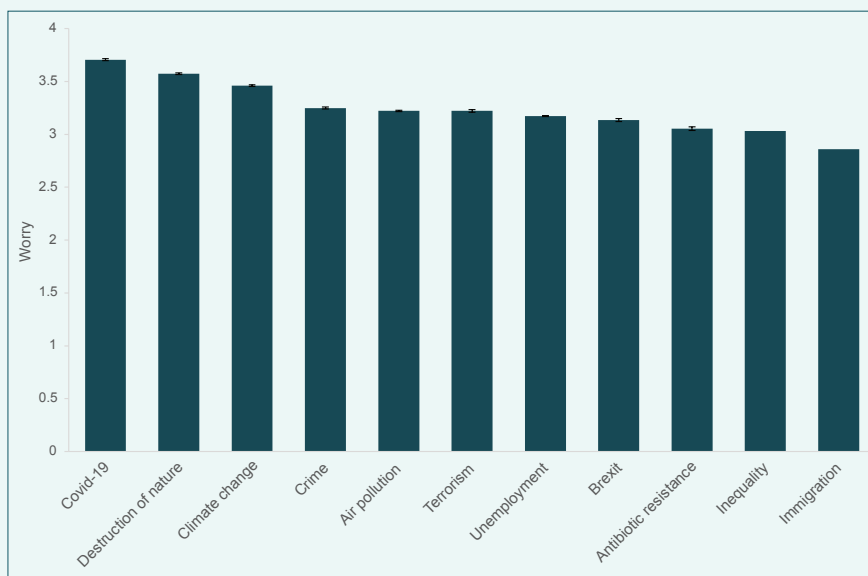


Figure 2. Worry about societal issues – survey respondents' ranking of concerns. (5 = highest level of concern, 1 = lowest). Error bars indicate standard error.

Issues such as climate change, pollution and the degradation of the natural environment, alongside crises such as Covid-19, feed into anxieties about a world that is out of balance. The balance frame is increasingly to the fore in the public sphere in the UK (as shown by its recent use by Boris Johnson⁴ and David Attenborough), and resonates strongly with the public.

In the survey we tested the statement: **"We have to bring our world back into balance... by respecting our planet."**

The Britain Talks Climate segments that are often the least receptive to more typically environmentalist climate change messaging proved receptive to this statement:

"Everyone should always be respecting the planet, we are only borrowing it from our children" – Disengaged Traditionalist

"Earth is our home and we need to look after it for our sake and save it for future generations" – Loyal National

"Back to balance is a good, meaningful phrase" – Backbone Conservative

2

Root discussions of climate policy in the economic circumstances and everyday concerns of people's lives

There is often a tendency in climate communications to talk about climate change in distant terms – say, emissions targets in 2050, or global long-term trends in sea level rise. The reality is that many people will experience climate change not just in terms of changes in the weather, but through the policy interventions that will govern issues of personal autonomy – what kind of car they can drive, the boiler in their house, etc. In addition, talk of the need to reduce emissions can evoke anxiety about people's future quality of life, their financial security and the opportunities for their children to grow and flourish. **Coming out of lockdown, climate communication should connect the actions needed to reduce climate risks with those everyday concerns, and show how those policies address those preoccupations.**

While the majority of respondents agreed with the statement “We now know it is possible and desirable to live less polluting lives”, they did not want this to be achieved at the expense of their standard of living. **Concerns about work, the economy and practical day to day issues remain high on people's agenda and climate communications must show how policy will contribute to solving those problems.** This is particularly important as the Covid-19 crisis highlights pre-existing issues of carbon and income inequality.⁵

In the survey we tested the claim that Covid-19 has shown us the importance of “not making life all about money.”

Responses to the survey revealed that such claims are divisive:

“The economy is very important” – Backbone Conservative

“Life is all about money, we cannot survive without money” – Loyal National

“Easy to say for rich people that have sufficient enough money to live and care about such things as climate change” – Disengaged Traditionalist

“A lot of people won't see it like this, and money is what makes the world go round. There needs to be a way to have both at the same time” – Established Liberal

Receiving a socially-distanced supermarket grocery delivery, Essex, June 2020. Photo: Justin Kase/Alamy



3

Stress the need for both individual and government action

The survey respondents reported a higher sense of personal agency with regard to Covid-19 compared to climate change. People were also much more willing to support limits on their personal freedom to reduce Covid-19 risk than they were to reduce climate risk. By contrast, people were more likely to support climate policies that “limit activity of businesses” and provide “financial support for individuals” than similar policies for Covid-19 (see Table 1 below). The results of the survey show higher trust in government with respect to limiting climate change than for limiting the spread of Covid-19.

The reasons for the differences shown in Table 1 were not addressed in the survey. Possible explanations are differences in media coverage of the two issues, with Covid-19 driving an overnight shift in the UK culture to a high emotional register, what one might almost describe as a well choreographed ‘theatre’ of crisis communication, alongside a clear and repeated connection being made between personal actions and health risks. Research in Norway has shown support may be higher for restrictions aimed at limiting Covid-19 compared to climate change (in this case air travel) because support is high if measures are expected to be effective and short-lasting.⁶ Hence the difference in attitudes to limits on personal freedom revealed in this survey may also be the result of the different timescales over which such restrictions would apply: the assumption being they would be much more long term, or even permanent, for climate change.

Rather than putting the onus on either individuals or private and government institutions, climate messaging should recognise the role that both large institutions and individuals have to play in meeting the UK’s climate targets, and this messaging should provide the UK public with information about the changes they can make in order to have a positive impact on climate change and the natural environment (see also Recommendation 5).

Limiting the spread of Covid-19	Limiting climate change
Low trust in government High government responsibility	Medium trust in government High government responsibility
High personal efficacy High personal responsibility	Low personal efficacy Low personal responsibility
High support for limiting individual activities to stop spread	Low support for limiting individual activities to stop climate change

Table 1. Differences between Covid-19 and climate change policy support in the UK

4

Use communal language, and speak in terms of 'we' in order to build a sense of collective agency with regard to addressing climate change

The survey respondents responded positively to the claim that Covid-19 has shown that ordinary people working together can make a difference. **So using examples and case studies of where people working collectively has made a difference to people's impact on climate change and the environment offers the possibility of capitalising on the sense of 'us' being the ones who make a difference.**

Previous research has demonstrated that holding communal values strongly predicts pro-environmental behaviour.⁷ The results of this survey demonstrate that, for the respondents, trust was felt towards people like themselves, their peers. The importance of trusted messengers in effective climate communication is a recurrent theme in social science research. These results do not necessarily mean there is no trust in scientists or other experts, but rather a belief that ordinary people, acting together to do the right thing, can be agents of change for the better.

A volunteer community gardening team follow Covid-19 safe working measures while looking after a plot outside the Botanical Gardens in Southport, Merseyside, May 2020. Photo: MediaWorldImages/Alamy



5

Provide information about the actions people can take to reduce their contribution to climate change

One obvious difference between Covid-19 and climate communication which may be reinforcing a different sense of agency between the two issues has been the very clear, consistent and repeated messages about what actions are needed to make a difference to the spread of Covid-19. In contrast to the 'action' focus of Covid-19 messaging, climate change is often articulated in the news through a globalising frame, with the issue presented in terms of calving icebergs, burning forests and large-scale events – which for UK audiences can seem to be far away and beyond their control.

Research has identified a big difference between what people imagine are the behaviours driving climate change and the reality.⁸ As noted in Chapter 6 of the United Nations Environment Programme's Emissions Gap report, providing accurate and relevant information on what people can do to reduce their impact on the climate can be useful in supporting behaviour change.⁹ **While social and contextual factors are important, it is also necessary to clearly identify areas of most impactful change – which behaviours are impactful, and which ones are not.**

Laying thermafleece loft insulation as a household-level energy efficiency measure. Photo: Ashden



6

Stress the co-benefits of climate action, such as a clean and healthy environment and a restoration of the natural world

Connections between Covid-19 and climate are not frontmost in the minds of the UK public. Efforts to connect climate with Covid-19 should be handled carefully, given the negativity of the Covid-19 and lockdown experience for the majority of the public.

Health is a concept which can bridge the two issues. Communicating the health-related co-benefits of climate policy – such as cleaner air and a healthier natural environment – has often proved a productive strategy.

In the survey we tested the statement: “The lockdown brought about an almost overnight improvement in air quality. This transformation has shown us all the value of a clean and healthy environment.”

Example participant responses to this statement include the following:

“Reminds us of a better world many years ago when we were young” – Backbone Conservative

“It is a good idea to make good use of a bad situation to create a cleaner country” – Loyal National

“I do like this as it is a positive narrative for going forward” – Disengaged Battler

“This is what we need and I would be more than happy when the world becomes a better place to live” – Established Liberal

“It is something everyone should strive for” – Civic Pragmatist

“We caught a glimpse of how things could be, which was wonderful. Things changed overnight, which means things can continue to change for the better.” – Progressive Activist

People take to the access roads around Whitelee Windfarm, on the south side of Glasgow city, to get some exercise and still maintain social distancing. Whitelee Windfarm is the biggest windfarm in Europe, with 215 turbines. Photo: Findlay/Alamy



7

Where possible, get to know the values of your audience and speak directly to those values, as some messaging is deeply divisive

Covid-19 does not appear to be denting people's capacity to worry about climate change. But **support for ambitious climate policy action cannot be taken for granted**. We encountered (not for the first time) distrust about provocative statements among some respondents.

The expression 'climate emergency' proved divisive. While it was much more positively received by Civic Pragmatists and Progressive Activists, some respondents felt that it was not the top priority, and questioned the comparison being made between the risks posed by Covid-19 and climate change.

In the survey we tested the phrase: **"Climate emergency."**

Example participant responses to this wording:

"True but I think many people have become fatigued and are more worried about day to day feeding the family than the bigger issues" – Civic Pragmatist

"I feel this language will turn some off the message given its relation to Extinction Rebellion" – Disengaged Traditionalist

Messages around Covid-19 showing the benefits of making do with less, and living a simpler life, played well with segments such as Progressive Activists, but for many Backbone Conservatives it was a complete turn off:

"It's how I would like the world to be. I always walk and cycle and don't use a car. I would love everyone to be doing this" – Progressive Activist

"I like nothing else about this ghastly statement of wokeness" – Backbone Conservative

The statement: **"Air pollution is the biggest environmental threat"** proved to be perceived as another contentious claim. While some respondents recognised the importance of the issue, others were less convinced:

"It is insidious and invisible so is easy to dismiss but does real devastating harm" – Progressive Activist

"I do not believe this for a minute" – Backbone Conservative

"Air pollution is nowhere near as bad nowadays than when I was young" – Disengaged Traditionalist

"Is this really a proven fact? It might be a contributing factor of course..." – Established Liberal

Use COP26 as an opportunity to demonstrate UK leadership on climate change as part of global efforts to protect our common future

In a year when the UK is hosting COP26 there is an opportunity to show UK leadership on climate change: not in terms of the UK going it alone, but working as part of global efforts to protect our common future. People have been front and centre of the Covid-19 story in a way that hasn't been the case with climate change, which has had a stronger focus on science and technology, and on climate change as an overwhelming force of nature. With respondents identifying positively with the sense of humanity's shared fate, the research shows the potential that humanising the climate policy narrative may have for building a sense of agency, by telling a story people can see themselves in as part of a globally connected and interdependent world.

In the survey we tested the statement: **"The global impact of coronavirus is a reminder of how we are all on this planet together."**

Example participant responses to this statement include the following:

"It shows we are all in this together" – Backbone Conservative

"So true, nobody can be safe: rich or poor, in any country" – Loyal National

"We all should care about the planet because it is a home for all of us" – Disengaged Battler

"Nationalism only divides people, this brings people together" – Established Liberal

"It feels very inclusive of all human beings" – Civic Pragmatists

"We are all the same vulnerable animal regardless of class, race or anything else"
– Progressive Activist

The Chancellor Rishi Sunak co-hosts the first UK G7 Finance Meeting remotely, with central bankers and finance ministers from the G7 nations. Photo: HM Treasury/CC BY-NC-ND 2.0



Conclusion

The survey results reinforce findings from other recent surveys that climate change concern is high and likely to remain high. But that doesn't mean climate change has displaced the other worries and issues people face, especially the day to day worries of work, family and health. Those communicating or engaging the public on climate-related policy can most effectively do so by including clear descriptions of how climate policy aligns with those concerns by creating new jobs, a cleaner environment and a more secure future. Balance is a key phrase here. **Climate policy should be spoken about as a route out of extremes, crisis and environmental damage, towards a more balanced, stable and predictable future.**

The survey also reveals that there are other themes besides balance that unite the public: for example, the sense of a shared fate on our one planet, that ordinary people doing the right thing matters, and a desire for a clean and healthy environment. But there were also significant differences in reactions to some messages across the seven Britain Talks Climate segments. For example, Backbone Conservatives and Disengaged Traditionalists were the most likely to reject the term 'climate emergency' and were highly dismissive of messages suggesting that Covid-19 has shown us that some things are more important than money. **Post-lockdown climate messaging strategies should be designed with a clear understanding of who you are trying to reach.**

Covid-19 and climate change are not naturally connected in people's minds. This toolkit has highlighted how reported experiences of Covid-19 can inform climate change messaging. This is not the same as claiming the two issues should be explicitly linked.

The future remains a very uncertain place but, assuming a year from now Covid-19 restrictions have all been lifted, we recommend testing these narratives again to see if these recommendations stand the test of time.

Appendix 1: Methodology and descriptive statistics

Methodology

The primary research instrument for this project was a nationally representative survey carried out in December 2020. The following steps were taken to shape the design and content of the survey.

An advisory board – made up of academics from the Centre for Climate Change and Social Transformations – was convened and met three times: at the project inception, to review the survey design and to discuss the survey findings.

Informal interviews were held with people who could speak on behalf of how different audiences in the UK had experienced Covid-19 (ethnic minorities, LGBTQ and youth and the elderly).

Two online one-hour focus groups (four people in each) were conducted, to sensitise the research team on how Covid-19 had affected the public's sense of agency and their attitudes to the trade-offs being asked of people between personal freedom, the economy and Covid-19 risk.

Demographic details of the survey respondents and Britain Talks Climate segmentation results are provided below.

Descriptive statistics

Population stats for age, gender and region are from the UK Statistics Authority [2019](#).

N = 1,518

Gender

- Sample: 52.3% female <1% prefer not to say or prefer to be described another way
47.2% male
- Population: 49.4% female
50.6% male

Age distribution

Age range	N	% of sample	Population (18+ only)
18–24	103	6.7%	10.7%
25–49	579	38.1%	41.4%
50–64	457	30.1%	24.3%
65+	369	24.3%	23.5%
Prefer not to say	10	<1%	--

Regional distribution

Region	N	% of sample	% of population
East Anglia	126	8.3%	9%
East Midlands	102	6.7%	7%
London	212	14.0%	13%
North East	58	3.8%	4%
Northern Ireland	39	2.6%	3%
North West	156	10.3%	11%
Scotland	214	14.1%	8%
South East	189	12.5%	14%
South West	107	7.0%	8%
Wales	69	4.5%	5%
West Midlands	126	8.3%	9%
Yorkshire and Humberside	120	7.9%	8%

Ethnicity

- Sample: 85.2% identify as White
14.8% do not identify as White
- UK population: 14% do not identify as White

Appendix 2: Test narratives

The narratives were developed in collaboration with the project advisory board. The narrative components draw on language being used by environmental NGOs in their campaigns to connect climate change and Covid-19.

AGENCY

The global impact of coronavirus is a reminder of how we are all on this planet together. As governments and people around the world have acted to contain the virus, we have seen how ordinary people doing the right thing by observing the lockdown and social distancing can make a difference to the world. During lockdown, we have learnt how to make do with less, to drive less, travel less, and appreciate the green spaces on our doorstep. We have been rewarded with more birdsong and cleaner air in our cities, towns, and neighbourhoods. Together, our actions can either continue to cause congestion, pollution, and loss of the natural landscape, or we can work together to protect the environment. If we can have such a direct effect on the spread of coronavirus, think what we could achieve together to reduce pollution and help address climate change. The climate emergency hasn't gone away and big change is needed this decade. We have to bring our world back into balance, by not making life all about money, but also respecting our planet. Let's apply what we have learnt to take action on climate change.

HEALTH

Coronavirus has shown us how vulnerable we are to changes in the environment. In its response to the pandemic, the government prioritised public health over short-term economic interests. We have observed the lockdown rules because we know it is the right thing to do to protect the health and well being of others. Air pollution is the biggest environmental threat to health in the UK, and we now know it is possible and desirable to live less polluting lives. The lockdown brought about an almost overnight improvement in air quality. This transformation has shown us all the value of a clean and healthy environment. We should use this experience to build a cleaner greener country. A rapid shift to clean and lower energy use can bring jobs, a wide range of health benefits, cleaner air and a more stable climate. We should use the experiences of the last six months to reduce our impact on the climate in the longer term. This means less pollution and the chance to create a safer future for us all.

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