

## UK PERCEPTIONS OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND LIFESTYLE CHANGES

*Results from CAST's wave 1 survey on public perceptions of climate change and the four areas of diet, transport, heating and consumption*

*This briefing and associated infographics are 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

- People's concern about climate change remains high.
- Most people support efforts to reduce air travel and overall material consumption, but express less support for efforts to reduce meat consumption.
- People are willing to consider changes to their own lifestyles relating to diet, transport, heating and material consumption.
- There is strong support for citizens' opinions to directly feed into political decisions about climate change, e.g. through citizens' assemblies.
- People underestimate the role of greenhouse gas emissions from food and material consumption.
- We identified some widespread beliefs that could be barriers to lifestyle changes, such as positive emotions associated with consumption of products and meat.



## Introduction

With international commitments in place to limit climate change to 1.5C, national governments have started to set out plans for how they aim to achieve the required reduction of greenhouse gas emissions within the next 30 to 60 years<sup>1</sup>. For the UK, any plans for achieving these reductions will require substantial lifestyle changes across all levels of society.

The CAST research centre focuses on four challenging areas of UK greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions that have proven difficult to change but have among the highest potential for emission reductions: what we eat, how we travel, what we buy, and how we heat our homes<sup>2</sup>.

This briefing paper presents results from the first wave of a multi-annual survey on public perceptions of climate change and attitudes and behaviours related to the four areas of diet, transport, consumption and heating.

More specifically, the report presents findings on public concern about climate change and perceived necessity to make lifestyle changes; as well as on what people perceive to be the most effective and most urgent actions needed to address climate change. Existing efforts to address climate change have often neglected strategies or behaviours that are associated with the highest emissions<sup>3</sup>. On an individual level, people themselves also tend to focus on lower impact lifestyle changes<sup>4</sup>.

Attitudes and behaviours related to the four areas of diet, transport, consumption and heating are assessed by questions on existing habits; different beliefs and motives for current and lower emission lifestyles, including perceived barriers to change; people's willingness to change their lifestyle; and how supportive they are of possible strategies to reduce GHG emissions in the four areas.

## Climate concern and perceived necessity to address lifestyle changes

Polling from the UK shows that climate change concern has been rising over the past few years (BEIS, 2019; Ipsos Mori Political Monitor, 2019). In line with this, our survey found that almost two out of five (39%) were very or extremely worried about climate change, up from 25% four years ago and 37% one year ago. Results further show that only 7% of the UK population are not concerned about climate change at all.

Survey findings also indicate that a majority of the UK population recognise the urgency with which climate change needs to be addressed. More than half (52%) of respondents say that addressing climate change requires a 'high' or 'extremely high' level of urgency. Around one in eight (14%) say that only a 'low level' or 'little or no' urgency is needed to address climate change.

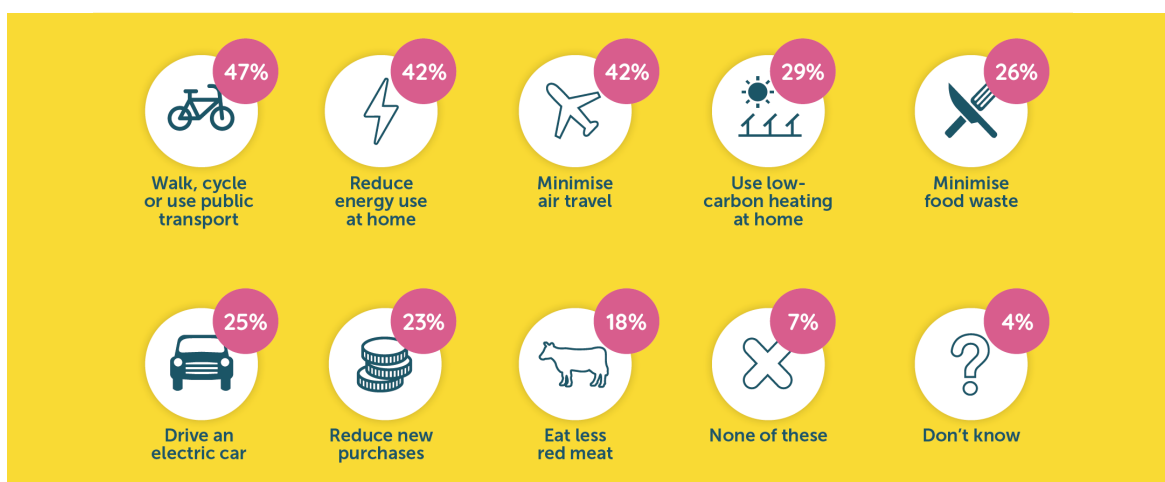
## METHOD AND SAMPLE

Data for this online survey were collected between 29th September and 26th October 2020 from 982 respondents across the UK through. The (quota) sample was representative of the British population with regards to gender, age, region, and socioeconomic status. Post stratification weights were applied.

The survey was also administered in parallel to representative samples in China, Sweden and Brazil (each with a sample of about n=1,000). The international survey results are not presented in this briefing. This survey forms the first of a series of annual surveys on these topics in the UK, UK, China, Sweden and Brazil.

Respondents were asked to pick three actions (from a list of eight) which they thought would have the biggest impact on climate change if everybody in the UK implemented these changes. Results show that people thought that minimising air travel (42%), reducing energy use at home (42%), and walking, cycling or using public transport (47%) were the most effective strategies. Eating less red meat (18%) and reducing the amount of new things we buy (23%) were picked by less than a quarter of respondents. These results seem to indicate that people tend to underestimate the role of emissions from meat consumption or purchase decisions.

Survey respondents were subsequently asked what we should do to limit climate change. Almost half (47%) think that we should definitely reduce the amount of energy we use, and a further 39% think that we probably should do this. A similar proportion (43%) thinks that we should definitely reduce the amount of flying we do, with a further 39% thinking that we probably should do this. Reducing consumption was also considered as something that a large proportion of respondents (39%) think we should definitely do.



**If everybody in the UK did the following, which would have the biggest impact on tackling climate change?** *Respondents picked up to three.*

Reducing the amount of meat in our diets was not supported as much as the other three strategies, with around one in four (24%) saying we should definitely do this, and a further 36% saying that we probably should do this. Small minorities of between 5% and 11% think that we do not need to take these actions at all. Support for reducing air travel (43%) has increased considerably since 2019, when only 28% of survey respondents thought that we should definitely adopt that strategy. Support for reducing meat consumption has stayed the same since 2019 (21% in 2019, 24% in 2020).

	We don't need to do this at all	We don't really need to do this	We should probably do this	We should definitely do this	Don't know
Reduce the amount of energy we use in our homes	5%	6%	39%	47%	4%
Limit the amount of air travel (flying) we do	6%	8%	39%	43%	4%
Reduce our overall level of consumption (the amount of things we buy)	7%	9%	40%	39%	5%
Reduce the amount of meat in our diets	11%	21%	36%	24%	8%

## Citizens' Assembly

In spring 2020, a representative group of UK citizens deliberated upon and made recommendations about how the UK should address climate change. Climate Assembly UK was commissioned by the UK House of Commons to make practical and policy-relevant recommendations about how the UK can reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050. In our survey, we asked respondents about their support for politicians allowing citizens' opinions about climate change to directly feed into policy making (e.g. through citizens' assemblies). Results show that almost half of respondents (45%) were supportive of political decision processes similar to a Citizens' Assembly to help shape policies on climate change. Almost the same number of people (42%) had no opinion, and only 13% were against this.

## Diet: Meat consumption and vegetarianism

Carbon emissions associated with dietary choices make up a quarter of emissions in the UK. These emissions could be reduced considerably if people would follow a more plant-based diet with less meat, especially red meat which has the highest carbon footprint of all food groups. Few respondents to our survey report being completely vegetarian or vegan (4% and 2% respectively), but 20% say they never eat red meat. Most respondents to the survey report eating white meat (such as chicken or pork) at least twice a week (72%), with a small majority (57%) consuming dairy products every day.

Values and norms, such as positive associations with existing high-carbon lifestyles and negative associations with new lower-carbon lifestyles, can reduce people's willingness to change. Results from our survey show that around half of our sample feel that eating meat is an important part of their identity (46%), and that they do not consider themselves the type of person to become vegetarian (52%).

Overall, almost two out of five (39%) said that they are willing to eat less meat or meat products in the future. Slightly fewer respondents (34%) said that they are unwilling to do so. Results show that women are more willing to reduce their meat intake (44%) than men (34%). As a strategy to reduce meat consumption, simply reducing the use of meat products in one's existing diet was the most popular (56%) option among the respondents of our survey. Replacing meat products with fish and non-meat alternatives was considered by 41% and 30% of our sample, respectively.

Eat as before but reduce the use of meat products	56%
Replace meat products with fish	41%
Replace meat products with non-meat alternatives (e.g. tofu, veggie burger)	30%
Replace meat products with fish	10%

Responses to the question: *If you were to reduce your meat consumption, how would you most likely do that?*

Respondents were asked how much they support or oppose a range of policies that aim to reduce diet-related climate change emissions. Results show that food labelling systems that visualise carbon emissions associated with products were very popular with 55% supporting this strategy. The most unpopular policy was to increase the price of meat (22% support, 52% oppose).

## Transport: Car use and air travel

Transport is one of the biggest sectors to contribute to UK's GHG emissions, which are mainly due to the use of petrol and diesel for road transport<sup>2</sup>. Emissions from international air travel are usually not included in national emission calculations, but cannot be neglected when aiming to reduce global emissions. Emissions from aviation and shipping contribute to 2.5% of global GHG emissions, and have increased over recent years<sup>1</sup>.

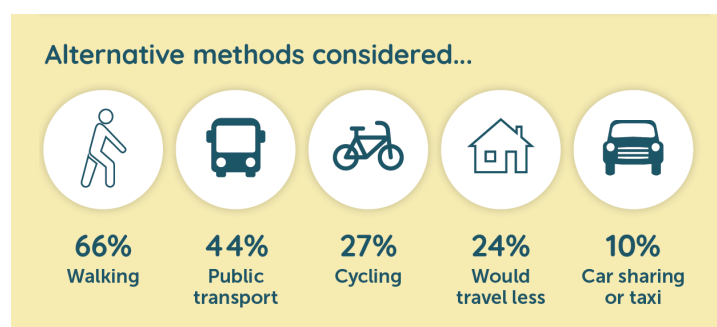
Given the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and the restrictions on long distance travel, reported behaviours and public views on air travel need to be interpreted with caution. Two thirds of our sample (75%) reported that they would have taken more flights in the last 12 months if the pandemic had not happened.

A majority (69%) reported owning a car and said that they travel by car at least once a week (74%). Around two out of five (40%) said they travel by car at least four times a week, of which 11% said they travel by car every day of the week.



Car ownership can be associated with affective responses that go beyond the practical use of owning and driving a car. We explored potential motives for owning a car and found that very few respondents (16%) feel that their car defines who they are, with a majority (62%) disagreeing with the statement. Furthermore, results show that only a minority of people (22%) felt that a car provide them with social status and prestige (48% disagree). These results seem to indicate that the emotional or social motives to buy a car are of limited importance for most people in the UK. However, it should be noted that these motives can still play a role unconsciously<sup>12</sup>.

The practical motivations to own a car seem to be more prominent, as indicated by the majority (79%) saying that car journeys are more convenient than using social transport. Results show that there are great differences in the willingness to reduce personal car use. Around one in three (35%) said they are willing to reduce how much they travel by car, and a similar number (33%) said they are unwilling to do so. People who indicated that they are willing to reduce their personal car use were subsequently asked what alternative modes of transport they would consider. Walking was mentioned as the most popular alternative to car use (66%), followed by public transport (44%) and cycling (27%). A quarter of respondents would consider travelling less (24%). Car sharing or using taxis was the least popular alternative replacement for driving (10%).



When asking about specific policies to reduce travel-related emissions, almost half of survey respondents expressed support for stopping airport expansions (45%) and phasing out petrol and diesel cars in favour of electric cars (46%). Introducing higher road charges that would be used to improve public transport were supported by 36%, but opposed by 33%.

## Consumption

Emissions from consumption are often not included in territorial greenhouse gas emissions, as many products people buy in the UK are produced overseas. It is estimated that around a third of all UK's carbon emissions comes from emissions embodied in imported products<sup>13</sup>.

The survey asked respondents a number of questions about their beliefs and motives around material consumption. About half (47%) of people enjoy buying and owning new things, and a third (33%) said they would happier if they could afford to buy more things. Results further show that 20% like a lot of luxury in their lives, and 13% feel an expectation to always buy the latest product.

Results of our survey show that a large majority (70%) expressed some willingness to reduce their overall consumption, with very few (8%) unwilling to reduce their overall consumption. Almost half (49%) said they would be willing to buy more products second hand, but a quarter expressing a clear unwillingness towards second-hand products (27%).

The idea of renting products instead of buying them is not very popular amongst respondents. Only 13% were willing to rent products from companies instead of owning them; and most respondents (69%) expressed an unwillingness to do so.

When presented with a number of specific policies to reduce greenhouse gas-emissions related to material consumption, a large majority (75%) said they support regulations that require products to be more reusable, repairable and recyclable. Fewer people (55%) expressed support for product pricing to reflect how environmentally friendly products are (e.g. having lower prices for low emission products).

## Heating

Residential homes make up around 15% of UK carbon emissions, which are mainly due to the use of gas for heating (CCC, 2020; Department for Business & Strategy, 2021). Indeed, a large majority of our survey respondents reported to heat their home with gas (70%), with fewer saying that they use electric (6%) or oil (4%) to heat their home.

The survey contained questions about potential barriers to making changes to home heating systems or usage. A large majority (71%) of respondents said that they don't know very much about low-carbon heating or cooling systems. A similar number of people (70%) agreed that changing their heating system would be a hassle. With regards to the way heating is used in the home, most respondents (51%) agreed that the use of heating and cooling in their home is restricted by how much it costs.

Many respondents to our survey (44%) were willing to change to a low-carbon heating or cooling system, such as district heating, a heat pump or solar system, with very few (15%) expressing an unwillingness to make such a change. Half of respondents (50%) said that they are willing to reduce how much they heat their home, with 20% saying that they are unwilling to do so. Homeowners were also asked to indicate whether they would be willing to invest in substantial renovations to improve the insulation of your house; 49% said they are willing to do so, whilst 22% said that they are not.

When presented with a range of specific policies to reduce carbon emission associated with home heating, a large majority of 77% said they support subsidies to help people insulate their homes. Around two-thirds (67%) indicated they support building regulations to force developers to install low carbon heating and cooling systems in new homes.

## Conclusions

Our survey confirms that COVID-19 has not dented concern about climate change, which remains high amongst the UK public. While there is good understanding of the role of transport and home energy use in contributing to climate change, there is less awareness of the role of material and food consumption. Nevertheless, most people agree we should cut our air travel, energy use, and consumption to tackle climate change<sup>14</sup>.

Survey results further provide important insights into people's own lifestyle choices and beliefs associated with diet, transport, consumption and heating. While many people express a willingness to adopt behaviours such as a reduction of meat consumption or limiting car travel, we also identified potential barriers to change.

Most people expressed that eating meat is important to them and that they do not identify with vegetarianism. For the area of consumption, our results also identified positive associations with the existing, high GHG lifestyle choices, such as the widespread expectations of happiness when purchasing of new products. With regards to car use and ownership, the results suggest that for most people practical considerations are more important than social and symbolic ones.

A potential issue was identified concerning home heating systems, as most people report to not know much at all about low carbon heating or cooling systems. Policies to reduce GHG emissions from the areas of diet, transport, consumption and heating are generally met with strong support, except financial ones that increase the price of meat.

These findings are consistent with other findings showing strong public support for tackling climate change, in the year which the UK hosts UN climate talks (COP26). We will build on these current insights with our annual survey, international comparisons and additional, smaller surveys to track public views on climate change and the four areas of diet, travel, consumption and heating over the coming months and years.

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[A full infographic of findings from Wave 1 of the survey can be found here.](#)

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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 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.

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