

Engaging the public on climate risks and adaptation

A briefing for UK communicators



This report builds on the findings of the RESiL RISK survey report, 'British Public Perceptions of Climate Risk, Adaptation Options and Resilience (RESiL RISK)'.

About Climate Outreach

Climate Outreach is a team of social scientists and communication specialists working to widen and deepen public engagement with climate change. Through our research, practical guides and consultancy services, our charity helps organisations communicate about climate change in ways that resonate with the values of their audiences and builds the social mandate for climate action. We have more than 15 years' experience working with a wide range of international partners including central, regional and local governments, international bodies, academic institutions, charities, businesses, faith organisations and youth groups.

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About the RESiL RISK project

This project is part of the UK Climate Resilience joint programme. The programme draws together UK climate research and expertise to deliver robust, multi- and inter-disciplinary climate risk and adaptation solutions research to ensure the UK is resilient to climate variability and change. The Climate Resilience programme is part of the Strategic Priorities Fund (SPF) delivered by UK Research & Innovation (UKRI) to drive an increase in high quality multi- and interdisciplinary research and innovation. The programme is led by the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) jointly with UK Met Office, and also includes the Engineering & Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC), the Economic & Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

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Executive summary

Building on the key findings from a new survey of the British public's opinion on climate change (**British Public Perceptions of Climate Risk, Adaptation Options and Resilience (RESiL RISK)**), this briefing outlines a set of seven recommendations for communicators and practitioners working to engage the public on climate risks and adaptation.

As a critical decade for curbing global greenhouse gas emissions gets underway, the climate is already changing, affecting UK citizens and communities in a range of increasingly visible ways.¹ Perhaps understandably, policies and targets for curbing carbon emissions (mitigation) receive more attention from politicians and the media than strategies for building resilience to the impacts of climate change (adaptation). But adaptation policies are now becoming increasingly important in shaping the UK's response to climate change.

Like policies on mitigation, efforts to adapt to climate risks and build resilience will not succeed unless they are based on an understanding of public attitudes around climate risks and strategies for reducing our vulnerability to them.² In addition to the technical, environmental and economic factors underlying decisions about future adaptation options, supportive public opinion – obtaining a social mandate – is crucial. And engagement with individuals and communities (whether these are campaigners, civil society groups or policy makers) on climate risks and adaptation must be grounded in the growing body of social science evidence around the effective communication of climate change and climate risks.³

The findings from the RESiL RISK project, a collaboration between Cardiff University and Climate Outreach, shine a light on current British attitudes towards climate risks and adaptation policies. The following recommendations draw on key findings from the survey, and position them alongside the wider evidence base on climate change communication. They are designed to ensure that adaptation is a central part of the reinvigorated public conversation on climate change, and that engagement around extreme weather and climate impacts is as effective and attuned to public opinion as possible:

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Climate change concern is at an all-time high, and adaptation policies are supported across the political spectrum** - these are important starting points for public engagement
2. **Climate impacts are increasingly salient, with a surge in concern around extreme heat** - this opens up a new front for engaging the public
3. **Climate change is getting 'closer to home'** - show how climate risks are relevant to people's lives by relating them to widely-shared values, and build efficacy by making the link to constructive solutions
4. **Framing messages** - concerns about mitigation and adaptation reinforce each other and are perceived as two sides of the same coin
5. **Health risks, wellbeing and adaptation** - make the connection and frame messages in this way, but don't assume much existing knowledge
6. **Climate conversations need to go beyond discussions of emissions targets** - a 'just transition' applies to adaptation as well
7. **From concern to commitment** - deepening public engagement on climate change is the challenge ahead

The research and recommendations outlined in this briefing point to three key conclusions.

➡ Firstly, it is crucial to draw on up-to-date social science research (like the RESiL RISK findings), and to build bridges between researchers and practitioners in this area. Without a close link between research and practice, public engagement strategies won't be as effective as they should be. Regular in-depth assessments and analyses of public perceptions of climate risks and adaptation options are an important way of ensuring that public engagement practice is as informed as possible by social science.

➡ Secondly, using the recommendations in this report – and the growing body of climate communication research in other practitioner resources⁴ – can help to deepen public engagement. Connecting climate impacts to widely shared values, framing messages around familiar risks, and using shared experiences of extreme heat and flooding as 'common ground' for climate conversations are all evidence-based ways of furthering public engagement with climate risks and resilience.

➡ And lastly, it is important that the recommendations in this report not only inform the work of communications professionals, but make their way into the planning and preparation strategies of local and national policy makers and first-responders who – especially as regards extreme weather and climate risks – are the 'frontline' for public engagement.

Seven recommendations

for communicators
and practitioners
working to engage
the public on climate
risks and adaptation

1

Climate change concern is at an all-time high, and adaptation policies are supported across the political spectrum - these are important starting points for public engagement

The RESiL RISK survey findings confirm and underscore what a raft of polls have pointed towards over the last 12 months: that concern about climate change has reached new heights in Britain (a trend mirrored internationally).⁵ Strikingly, climate change was second only to 'Brexit' in the RESiL RISK survey as an issue of national importance for the future, and levels of worry about climate change have **doubled** in the last four years. Scepticism about climate change was found to be very low, with more than 85% of the survey respondents agreeing that climate change is driven by human activity.

A cluster of influences are likely to have led to the elevated salience of climate change, including recent media reporting of extreme weather impact events across the UK, Europe and other places in the world. The research took place during the ongoing protests by the 'Fridays for Future' school strike movement, and just after high-profile activity by the Extinction Rebellion group. These are striking examples of concerned publics taking direct political action, many of them for the very first time. The momentum that has built around the idea of treating climate change as a 'climate emergency' is itself a response to the ratcheting up of the urgency in scientific and political discourses.⁶



Adaptation policies, such as improving building regulations, are often as popular as policies to reduce carbon emissions. Here, houses in Moss Side, Manchester are renovated incorporating adaptive features as part of an award-winning development. Photo: [Alex Pepperhill](#) (CC BY-ND 2.0)

Arguably underpinning it all – as the RESiL RISK findings suggest – is a growing acknowledgement, awareness and experience of the speed and scale of climate impacts, domestically and abroad (see the discussion of Recommendation 2).

One thing that is clear from the new survey data is that adaptation policies are often as popular as policies to reduce carbon emissions – and levels of support hold up across the political spectrum.

From tightening up building regulations, to extending nature reserves, and including the use of public money for reducing the UK's susceptibility to climate risks, many adaptation policies were approved of by more than 75% of the survey respondents. Although right-leaning individuals were less likely to 'strongly support' climate policies (mitigation and adaptation), there was no sense of political polarisation. **Compared to some mitigation policies – for example, higher taxation on fossil fuels – adaptation policies attracted very little controversy.**

These are important starting points for public engagement on adaptation, and suggest that messages about climate adaptation may not be as polarising as messages about mitigation have sometimes been. The (perhaps surprisingly) high level of support for adaptation policies is also a communication tool in itself, providing reassurance for policy makers and practitioners as adaptation policy programmes begin to gather pace. And as Recommendation 4 makes clear, mitigation and adaptation messages can reinforce each other.

2

Climate impacts are increasingly salient, with a surge in concern around extreme heat - this opens up a new front for public engagement

It is received wisdom that British summers are always ruined by rain. Few (historically) have complained that summers have been too warm. And these caricatures of the British weather among journalists and the public are backed up by survey data: people have traditionally expressed limited concern about heatwaves or drought,⁷ and there has typically been a clear distinction between perceived importance of the risks of too much water (floods, heavy rain and storms) versus not having enough water.⁸

Concern about flooding remains high. But one of the standout findings from the RESiL RISK survey is a remarkable rise in concern about the risks from heat and a lack of rain. More than 70% of respondents thought that heatwaves would be more common by mid-century and report being concerned about this. The same question in 2013 found only 42% were concerned about future heatwaves – a significant rise in risk perceptions.

After record-breaking spikes in summer temperatures in the UK and across Europe, perceptions of heat events are changing. **This is a powerful signal that turbo-charged temperatures, indicative of a changing climate, are shifting the risk signatures of different weather events in the public mind.**

Personal experience does seem to be key to the elevated risk perceptions around heat events. Whilst only one in five people said that they had directly experienced flooding in their own home (or knew someone who had), a substantial majority of 70% reported that they, or someone close to them, had experienced discomfort during a heatwave. And more respondents thought they were at risk of heat-stress than thought they were at risk from flooding.



Following successive summers with heatwave conditions in the British Isles, there has been a remarkable rise in concern amongst the British public about the risks from heat and a lack of rain. The 2018 heatwave led to record-breaking temperatures, widespread drought, hosepipe bans, crop failures and a number of wildfires. Photo: © TimothyLarge/Alamy Live News

Certainly, these are categorically different types of events, but the RESiL RISK survey suggests that the new salience of heat events is being driven by first-hand experiences, which means that a new front for public engagement has potentially opened up. **With such large numbers of people sharing similar experiences around heatwaves, there is a common currency to draw on in communications that wasn't there before.**

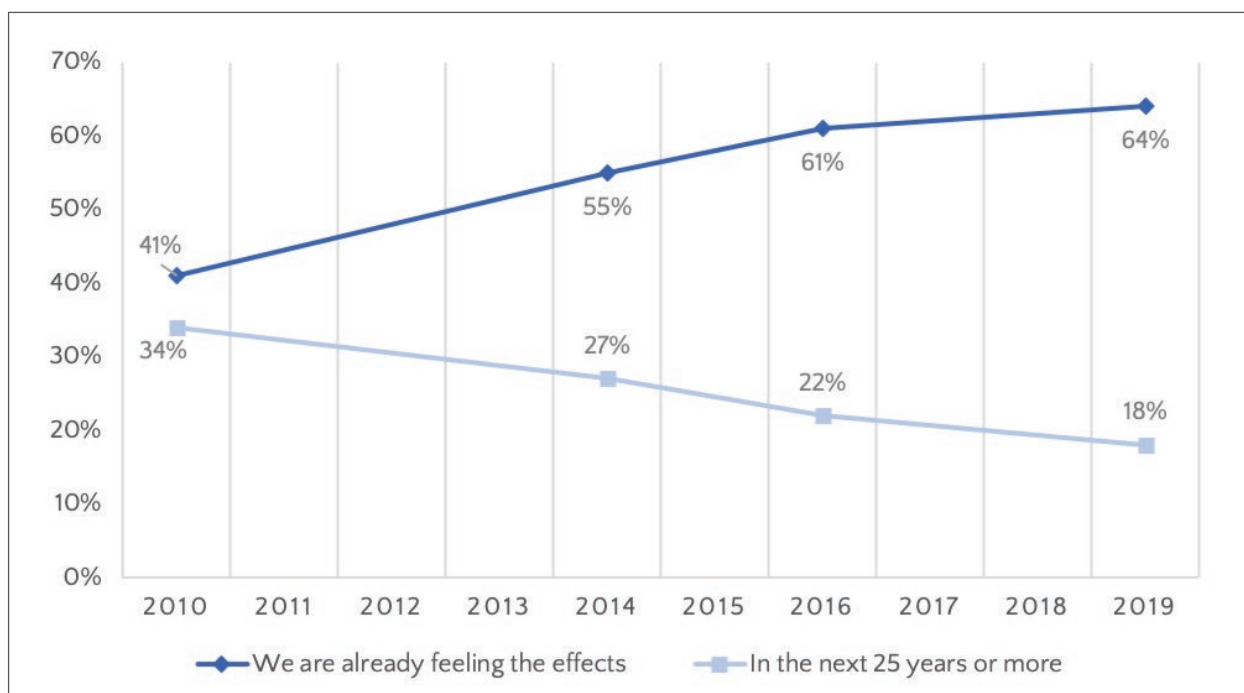
Climate conversations around extreme heat - how to effectively make the link

- » Use the shared experience of heat-stress as an uncontroversial reference point for conversations on climate change.
- » Make links and draw parallels between people's individual experiences in the UK and those of affected communities elsewhere – the European heatwave is part of the same warming trend that has turbo-charged Californian and Australian wildfires.
- » Use people's experiences and recollections to underscore how 'sensitive' our weather is to small changes in average temperatures. When summer temperatures are a few degrees higher, it affects the health of elderly people and young children very quickly.
- » As the RESiL RISK survey data shows (see Recommendation 4), most people see adaptation and mitigation policies as two sides of the same coin – so shared experiences around climate impacts are a chance to raise not only adaptation measures, but policies and actions to cut carbon too.
- » Increasingly, scientists are able to quickly and confidently assess the extent to which extreme weather events can be 'attributed' to climate change¹⁰ – so it is justified from a scientific perspective to (carefully) make the link between extreme heat and the changing climate.
- » Be careful though not to suggest that 'every summer will be hotter than the last'. There may not be a life-threatening heatwave every summer – but the chance of them happening gets higher each year that we don't curb our carbon emissions.
- » If creating visual resources (e.g. slides, social media content), be careful to avoid 'classic' heatwave imagery (where everyone looks like they are having fun in the sun) and instead seek out images that show the human impacts of heat-stress and drought.

3

Climate change is getting 'closer to home' - show how climate risks are relevant to people's lives by relating them to widely-shared values, and build efficacy by making the link to constructive solutions

For a long time, one of the biggest barriers to public engagement with climate change was the so-called 'psychological distance' of the issue.¹¹ With any number of more immediate concerns to focus on, it was easy for people in countries like the UK to perceive the risks of climate change as 'not here, not now, and not likely to happen to me'. As the graph below shows, the findings of the RESiL RISK survey suggest that this situation may now be shifting, as climate impacts grow in salience and campaigns once again dial-up the sense of urgency.



When, if at all, do you think we will be feeling the effects of climate change?
Question 7 (Cardiff, Understanding Risk Research Group Surveys)^{*}

* Graph reproduced from RESiL RISK survey findings report. Steentjes, 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: Cardiff University. Available at <http://orca.cf.ac.uk/129452/>

There are still major differences in the level of risk that members of the British public attribute to themselves (and their families), the country as a whole, and the wider world – with the greatest risk perceived to be faced by those furthest away from themselves. But the survey data shows a trend towards greater acknowledgement of the risk faced by individuals in the here-and-now.

Over the past year, the term ‘climate emergency’ has gained traction quickly, in part due to high-profile protests by groups like Extinction Rebellion. In the RESiL RISK survey, a majority of 60% supported the national declaration of a ‘climate emergency’ as a response to climate change, suggesting that this more urgent and emotive language – now being adopted editorially by some leading global media¹² – resonates with a majority of the British public.

Whilst this is a positive step (because the risks are real, and growing), wider research points to the importance of coupling messages about threats from climate impacts with constructive, efficacy-building suggestions for how people can respond to these risks.¹³

The RESiL RISK survey suggests that a majority of the country agrees that ‘if people work together’, local adaptation actions are an effective response to climate change. But survey respondents on the left of the political spectrum had less faith that the UK can prepare itself for the impacts of climate change (perhaps relating to higher overall levels of concern about how serious climate risks are). **So pointing to practical examples that people can relate to, and building efficacy, is a critical element of engaging around adaptation.**

Communications can avoid the sense of powerlessness or loss that can come from reflecting on the risks of a changing climate by recording and celebrating examples of strong preparation by communities affected by climate impacts, providing clear guidance about practical steps households or organisations can take to build resilience, and actively involving people in the shaping of a positive vision of the future, in line with their values.



A majority in the UK agree that ‘if people work together’, local adaptation actions are an effective response to climate change. Communications can avoid the sense of powerlessness that can come from reflecting on the risks of a changing climate by recording and celebrating examples of strong preparation by communities affected by climate impacts. Photo: [Jon Whitton](#) (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

The box below builds on Climate Outreach work developed over more than five years, testing and developing language to engage across the political spectrum.¹⁴ Widely-shared values that adaptation messages can build on to reach a broad audience might include:

Values for engaging on adaptation

- » **Necessity** – with growing acknowledgement of the need to treat climate change as an ‘emergency’ comes a realisation that some impacts are now unavoidable and must be dealt with through preparation and adaptation.
- » **Pragmatism** (when there is a problem you deal with it) – preparedness is a key term to focus on when communicating adaptation policies.
- » **Maintaining continuity** (making planned changes to deal with climate impacts, rather than climate impacts forcing change on us) – this includes validating existing values, skills and community cohesion as the basis for a response to new challenges.
- » **Restoring ‘balance’** – the changing climate is a sign that we’re out of synch with nature and balance must be restored.
- » **Belief in the idea of intergenerational duty** – ‘We owe it to our children to make tough choices now’.
- » **Maintaining a ‘good life’** – protecting ourselves against the health risks from climate impacts improves our wellbeing.

4

Framing messages - concerns about mitigation and adaptation reinforce each other and are perceived as two sides of the same coin

For many years there were fears among campaigners that engaging the public on adaptation would distract from the urgency of reducing emissions, or would reduce people's motivation to cut carbon if they 'knew they could adapt'.¹⁵ Sometimes referred to as 'mitigation deterrence', this concern has arguably held back the communication of climate risks and adaptation policies.

But whilst curbing emissions remains as critically urgent as ever, the rapidly changing climate poses new threats even as UK carbon emissions are stabilised and reduced.

At a policy level, adaptation is gradually being given more prominence, with initiatives like the Global Commission on Adaptation (GCA) providing the sort of global policy impetus that has long been commonplace for mitigation measures. But communication around adaptation arguably needs to catch up (Recommendation 1).



For many years there were fears that engaging the public on adaptation would distract from the urgency of reducing emissions. This research shows that communication with the public on climate change can blur the lines between mitigation and adaptation policies without fear that this will confuse the message. Photo: Stephen Yang / The Solutions Project (CC BY 2.0)

The RESiL RISK survey data shows clearly that adaptation policies are widely supported. Wider research suggests that a general concern for climate change is associated with the endorsement of both mitigation and adaptation strategies. And when asked directly whether the UK government should prioritise adaptation or mitigation, the most popular answer (around half of the survey respondents) was that **both should be of equal focus**.

Communication with the public on climate change can blur the lines between mitigation and adaptation policies without fear that this will confuse the message.

The terms ‘mitigation’ and ‘adaptation’ were purposefully not used in the RESiL RISK study at all, with participants instead told about policies that would prepare the country for worsening climate impacts (adaptation), or how to avoid further warming (mitigation). Most people who are not subject-specialists are unlikely to make a clear distinction between mitigation and adaptation, so **avoiding these technical terms and using more colloquial language is recommended**.

In fact, the relationship between support for mitigation and adaptation policies was something that was explored in some detail in the RESiL RISK survey. The study tested whether providing information about adaptation policies would reduce people’s support for key mitigation policies – i.e. whether there was any evidence of ‘mitigation deterrence’. For most key measures, such as declaring a climate emergency or support for the UN climate conferences, there was little or no evidence of ‘mitigation deterrence’.

Despite finding little evidence of actual ‘mitigation deterrence’, people were worried that others were susceptible to this risk. A majority of survey respondents felt that ‘other people’ (including politicians) would be less motivated to address the causes of climate change if the UK was well prepared for its impacts. This disconnect between what people actually think and what they infer others are thinking about adaptation **underscores the importance of emphasising positive social norms and shared beliefs on adaptation so that people don’t reach the wrong conclusions about others’ views**.

5

Health risks, wellbeing and adaptation - make the connection and frame messages in this way, but don't assume much existing knowledge

Many studies have pointed to the potential value of emphasising the health risks from climate impacts and the health benefits of low-carbon policies.¹⁶ In recent years, health practitioners have played an increasingly central role in sounding the alarm about climate change, with initiatives like the Lancet Planetary Health Commission making clear that many of the impacts of climate change are experienced by individuals and communities as threats to their physical and mental health.¹⁷

The RESiL RISK survey findings underscore the importance of framing messages about climate impacts in relation to health risks and human wellbeing.

When asked to assign a set of 20 (hypothetical) tokens across a list of more than a dozen 'priorities' for adaptation policies, the **health and well-being of UK citizens**, the **well-being of vulnerable groups (e.g. the elderly and the very young)** and the **smooth running of social and emergency services** were the top three choices. In comparison, maintaining uninterrupted energy supplies and a transport infrastructure came lower on the list. This suggests that **protection against health risks, and maintaining a good standard of wellbeing, is central to the British public's understanding of what adaptation policies should be achieving.**



Air pollution is an increasingly recognised risk to health in the UK - campaigners shown here demanded clean air in a zone in Edinburgh which failed to meet Scottish Air Quality Safety Standards. Photo: MAVERICK PHOTO AGENCY (CC BY 2.0)

This does not mean that resilience of infrastructure is unimportant to people – when it fails the impacts can be very visible and extensive – but rather that health and wellbeing provide an intuitive starting point for conversations about adaptation.

This also suggests that when constructing campaign messages, the health impacts of climate change and the health benefits conferred by adaptation policies are likely to resonate with the British public. The social consensus around the importance of protecting public health from the effects of a changing climate revealed in the RESiL RISK survey adds to the evidence that **health is a salient consideration across diverse audiences when engaging with climate change.**

Whilst messages that make clear links between a changing climate and health risks are likely to be well-received, it's also important to recognise that there is a low level of understanding and awareness about what exactly the health impacts of climate change are.¹⁸ So communication around the health impacts of climate change (and health benefits of climate policies) should not assume that public audiences are already aware of the links, and instead should clearly 'join the dots' in public-facing messages.

Joining the dots on climate change and health in the UK¹⁹

- » **The young and the elderly are at risk from extreme heat** – recent heatwaves have led to a spike in deaths in the UK and Europe. Heatstroke and dehydration are key risks to be aware of.
- » **Air pollution** is an increasingly recognised risk to health in the UK, and is worsened by periods of intense heat in urban areas.
- » **Flooding** can significantly impact on mental health and so measures to build household resilience against flooding can pay off, not only in terms of the clean-up bill, but also for wellbeing.
- » **Household insulation brings health benefits** – reducing draughty homes and damp walls is a health gain for many (including some of the poorest households in the UK).
- » **Joining the dots visually is important too** – although images of air pollution are likely to be well-understood, images depicting the health consequences of other climate impacts (heat, flooding etc) are not yet salient in the public mind. Gradually building this visual narrative around the health impacts of climate change is an important step to furthering public engagement.



Climate conversations need to go beyond discussions of emissions targets – a ‘just transition’ applies to adaptation as well

Conversations about climate change are increasingly being recognised as crucial for accelerating progress on decarbonisation, with a surge of energy around ‘Citizens’ Assemblies’ and other deliberative approaches.²⁰ Revitalised by (amongst other things) the demands of the various social movements engaging with climate change across the globe in 2019, this crucial element of public engagement – the importance of ‘talking climate’²¹ – is enjoying a new level of recognition.

But it is crucial that adaptation is a part of the turn towards citizen dialogue.

As the RESiL RISK survey data shows, climate impacts are increasingly salient and adaptation policies are widely favoured (see Recommendation 1). In many important ways, adaptation is ‘tangible’ and ‘situated’ in a way that many aspects of mitigation are not. Communities are affected by climate impacts in a way that they are (typically) not by rising carbon emissions, although obviously the two are closely linked. Adaptation policy decisions are all about trade-offs in values and prioritising resources, which means the topic is extremely well suited to public dialogue. And it is crucial that a range of voices are heard, as economically deprived communities are often the most at risk from climate impacts too.²²

But the surge of interest in citizen dialogue has not yet focused in a meaningful way on climate risks and adaptation, and there remains a reluctance among some campaigners to engage on adaptation, when curbing emissions is so urgent (see Recommendation 4). So there is a major opportunity (not yet being seized) to **begin and maintain a vibrant public conversation around the ways in which climate change is already shaping the country, and our communities, by including adaptation in the climate conversations being led by local authorities and national governments.**

Citizen dialogue is also the right place to explore and factor in considerations of **values** like **fairness and equity**, which are (or should be) central to decision making around adaptation policies. Although the concept of a ‘**just transition**’ (the idea that communities most impacted by decarbonisation must be involved in decisions about low-carbon transitions, and treated fairly) has gained currency in recent years, the focus has typically been on mitigation rather than adaptation. But as the discussion of Recommendation 5 shows, the British public places a high priority on protecting vulnerable populations from climate impacts – so ‘**just adaptation**’ should also be a focus for campaigners.

7

From concern to commitment - deepening public engagement on climate change

2019 was an incredible year for public engagement with climate change (in the UK and further afield), and as the RESiL RISK findings clearly show, there are some significant shifts taking place around levels of concern and the urgency with which people view the climate crisis.

2020 can in theory be an even bigger year for public engagement, bookended by two unprecedented events: a national citizens' assembly at the start of the year, and the next UN climate conference, in Glasgow, at the end of it. A key focus for communicators and campaigners will be maintaining the momentum: activists with longer memories will recall the dip in campaign energy and public interest that followed the 2009 UN climate conference, which was widely judged to be a policy disaster.

The RESiL RISK survey data gives some strong hints as to where communicators should focus their attention, to not only maintain momentum but also deepen public perceptions, such that people move from demonstrating concern to committed engagement. While there is encouraging movement around levels of concern, responses to other questions in the RESiL RISK survey suggest that on several core foundations of beliefs there has been less in the way of movement.

It is well-established that what drives public attitudes towards climate change is not primarily people's knowledge of the science of climate change (although conveying the scientific consensus around the issue is important²³); rather, people's values, their sense of identity, and their political/cultural worldviews are more fundamental influences on how people engage with climate change.²⁴

But compared to a previous survey by the RESiL RISK team in 2016,²⁵ some key measures of 'environmental identity' have not shifted in a positive direction. The number of people agreeing with the statement '*Being environmentally friendly is an important part of who I am*' actually declined during this period.

And although there is evidence that the British public is now increasingly experiencing climate change as an 'emotional' issue (with key emotions such as 'fear' and 'guilt' being felt by more people than in 2016), there has been no movement in the number of people agreeing that they have 'moral concerns' about climate change.

All of this points to an important conclusion: although perceptions of climate risks are moving in the right direction, it is not necessarily the case that public engagement with climate change has yet deepened into something that resonates at the level of people's core values and identity.

There is still plenty of work to do in terms of maintaining and deepening public engagement with climate change.

Conclusion

So what does this mean for engaging on climate impacts and adaptation?

➡ Firstly, it is crucial to draw on up-to-date social science research (like the RESiL RISK findings), and to build bridges between researchers and practitioners in this area. Without a close link between research and practice, public engagement strategies won't be as effective as they should be. Regular in-depth assessments and analyses of public perceptions of climate risks and adaptation options are an important way of ensuring that public engagement practice is as informed as possible by social science.

➡ Secondly, using the recommendations in this report – and the growing body of climate communication research in other practitioner resources²⁶ – can help to deepen public engagement. Connecting climate impacts to widely shared values, framing messages around familiar risks, and using shared experiences of extreme heat and flooding as 'common ground' for climate conversations are all evidence-based ways of furthering public engagement with climate risks and resilience.

➡ And lastly, it is important that the recommendations in this report not only inform the work of communications professionals, but make their way into the planning and preparation strategies of local and national policy makers and first-responders who – especially as regards extreme weather and climate risks – are the 'frontline' for public engagement.

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