



Are we engaged?

UN Climate Talks and the UK public

Project Team

Lead author: Dr Christopher Shaw, Researcher, Climate Outreach; Associate of the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research and Visiting Fellow at the Sussex Energy Group

Contributing authors: Dr Adam Corner, Research Director, Climate Outreach; Honorary Research Fellow in the School of Psychology, Cardiff University; **Jamie Clarke**, Executive Director, Climate Outreach

Olga Roberts, Project Coordinator, Climate Outreach

About Climate Outreach

[Climate Outreach](#) (formerly COIN) is a charity focused on building cross-societal acceptance of the need to tackle climate change. We have over 10 years of experience helping our partners to talk and think about climate change in ways that reflect their individual values, interests and ways of seeing the world. We work with a wide range of partners including central, regional and local governments, charities, trades unions, business and faith organisations.

The Old Music Hall, 106-108 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1JE, UK

+44 (0) 1865 403 334
info@climateoutreach.org
www.climateoutreach.org

 [@ClimateOutreach](https://twitter.com/ClimateOutreach)
 [Climate Outreach](https://www.facebook.com/ClimateOutreach)
 [Climate Outreach](https://www.linkedin.com/company/climate-outreach)

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University of
BRISTOL

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Design: Elise de Laigue (elise@explorecommunications.ca), Oliver Cowan (www.olivercowan.co.uk)

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What does the UK public think about the UN climate negotiations and how can we ensure climate change doesn't once again slip off the media and public agenda, as it did so dramatically after the Copenhagen negotiations in 2009?

This Climate Outreach report details what a sample of the public understand about the upcoming Paris Climate Summit. These findings represent the only social research in the UK focused specifically on public engagement with this issue at this crucial political juncture.

The findings are the result of in-depth, facilitated discussion groups Climate Outreach conducted with members of the public across the UK in September 2015. It was clear that although awareness of what the UN climate negotiations are trying to achieve is low, people are quick to engage with the issue once broached. Furthermore, when they realise what is at stake, they have strong views about decisions being taken on their behalf.

The report offers recommendations for capitalising on this potential for engagement to ensure that - whatever the outcome of the talks - climate change remains high on the public agenda beyond the 2015 negotiations.

1. Throughout the research there was a clear and consistent sense that the public are a key untapped resource in the negotiations, and should not be ignored

- When people hear there is a process which could limit climate change - a process that they can influence - their resignation turns to hope, and apathy becomes a desire to act and be involved
- Research has shown that the correct strategies can help build public understanding of, and engagement with, these issues

2. People are worried about climate change and want governments to reach strong and binding agreements

- There is a desire for more information about what is at stake in Paris
- Building greater public understanding offers the potential to generate public support for the goals of international climate policy

3. People want to see a deal reached that is fair

- People instinctively understand that climate change is about the fair use and distribution of resources
- People will normally engage positively with policies and outcomes that genuinely embody the principle of fairness¹

4. People believe a secure and ambitious agreement requires government to lead in a coalition with politicians, the public and business

- No one institution is trusted to police an international agreement
- An agreement people can trust will require strong leadership from governments in partnership with business and the public

5. People need information they can trust in order to have faith in the UN negotiations

- The actions promised by governments must be feasible and tangible - vague phrases such as 'internationally agreed limits' are not convincing
- People want to know how the goals of any agreement will be delivered and how signatories will be held to account

What the public say: results from the workshops

People are worried about climate change but feel powerless

Our findings supported the results of other research, showing broad acceptance that the climate was already changing.² People cited both their own direct experience (early flowering of daffodils, shifts in the seasons) and reports on the news as evidence of this change. Concern about climate change was often associated with feelings of resignation and powerlessness.

It's so scary to think if this is happening now what will be happening in a few years time?

- Edinburgh

It's not that I'm not afraid of global warming, I know that it's very much there, but it's difficult to know what to say about it.

- Bristol

There doesn't seem to be any answer.

- Cardiff

There is very low awareness of the Paris conference and what it is trying to achieve

The majority of participants had no knowledge of the upcoming Paris negotiations. Of the handful of people who reported some awareness there was no recognition of why the talks were particularly urgent. No-one could relate the Paris talks to the idea of avoiding dangerous climate change or the '2 degree limit'.

They just always seem to be having conferences.

- Bristol

Haven't they been talking about climate change for years?

- Cardiff

I've read about it. I just look at it and think, well, as long as they deal with it it will be alright.

- Edinburgh

The public want a greater role in shaping climate policy – but this will require a major commitment to public engagement around climate change

Whilst the majority of participants thought the public have a part to play in shaping climate policy, there was a range of opinion about what form this participation should take.

It is up to us to elect governments to do something about it.

- Bristol

I think it is the people who can force the governments. I definitely think that. So at these conferences there should be more outside people than government there, to throw their arguments at the government.

- Cardiff

People banding together can exert the kind of pressure on industry that governments should but are not.

- Bristol

Governments have a responsibility to act on climate change but aren't trusted yet

A general distrust of the political establishment³ was tempered by a common recognition that ultimately only governments have the ability to coordinate an effective international response to climate change, a finding which echoes other survey results showing the public are looking to the government for leadership on climate change.⁴

The only people who can deal with it are governments because there has to be a global agreement. That can only be done through governments.

- Cardiff

It will need a carrot and stick approach to get things done and governments are the only ones who can do that.

- Cardiff

Governments should all work together to a common end shouldn't they? They should be supporting each other.

- Bristol

There is a desire for clear and trustworthy information about climate change

Many participants felt the uncertainties surrounding climate projections and carbon accounting would make it difficult to build an effective agreement. They were looking for information they could trust; right and wrong answers.

That's the problem, there's no information about what is working, what's not working. There really is no information at all.

- Edinburgh

It tells you what they would like to do but it doesn't give you any nuts and bolts about how they are going to achieve it.

- Cardiff

I would prefer to see specifics. Results. I want black and white.

- Edinburgh

Businesses weren't trusted to take the lead in this process

There was a sense that the role of the public was to ensure governments acted in the public interest, and hence ensure negotiations were not hijacked by business interests.

In the end, governments need to regulate industry.

- Edinburgh

The moment you get business dictating climate change, it's a can of worms. Same with the NHS, profit became the most important thing, not the welfare of the patient and so corners get cut. It would be the same here I would think.

- Cardiff

The market got us into this mess and now they're trying to let the market dig us out.

- Bristol

A lack of detail about the UN agreements leads to widespread cynicism about the ability of nations to agree and police a legally binding limit

Participants were puzzled at the claims being made that it would be possible to agree and effectively police an international agreement. No existing institution was considered capable of policing large superpowers.

So how would they police this? They could go and sign something, whoever, Russia, us, the US, so called superpowers, iron out the criteria and say right, great, we'll all sign that then, how they going to police it?

- Cardiff

I just think it's a bit naive.

- Bristol

A legally binding agreement would be fabulous but at an international scale I can't see it being practical.

- Edinburgh

Participants expressed concern that the agreements are likely to be too vague

People were not trusting of any agreement that was vague on details. It was not thought technically feasible to trace, measure and monitor emissions accurately enough to be able to know whether or not a country was sticking to its side of the agreement.

What's the data, how do they know to keep it within 2 degrees? What would they do, how do they limit it? You've got to have details on it.

- Bristol

You don't know if it is accurate or it's just a ball park figure.

- Edinburgh

How are they going to work out who is causing the most pollution?

- Cardiff

Participants wanted an agreement that puts fairness at the heart of international climate policy

Whoever it was negotiating, and whatever agreement was reached, the majority expressed a wish to see such agreements enshrine a sense of fairness and justice both towards those countries most at risk of climate change and future generations.

It's our responsibility to do something more than anyone else's, the industrial revolution started here.

- Bristol

Whoever has made the most mess should do the most tidying up.

- Bristol

We have the opportunity to enjoy what we have and we've gobbled it up and passed it on as a legacy to our grandchildren and so on and so forth. It's a disgrace.

- Edinburgh

Conclusion

This briefing paper provides a snapshot of UK public opinion on the upcoming UN talks in Paris following conversations with a sample of people broadly representative of key demographic trends. The results demonstrate that current strategies for communicating the substance and significance of these talks to the public have largely failed but when asked there is clearly a latent demand from the public to know more. And when people are informed they are animated by the process.

This research shows that:

1. In the workshops a brief overview of the UN negotiations saw the sense of powerlessness people feel about climate change replaced by a sense of hope – they see these talks as a chance for governments to do something about climate change.
2. People want more details about how agreements are going to be implemented and policed.
3. There is a strong appetite amongst the public for more information about these talks – what's at stake and what is being agreed.

The public's desire to see the talks succeed remains a neglected resource. An effective communications strategy, in the lead up to Paris and beyond, can help bring this untapped potential into play. Building this engagement, and giving the public channels through which they can bring their opinion to bear on negotiators, offers the opportunity to create a step change in the ambition of the negotiations, and ensure we continue to build on the progress made to date.



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Methodology

Recruitment: 11 participants were recruited for each workshop and were selected on the basis of the following criteria.

Gender	5/6 women; 5/6 men
Age	19-24: 2 people; 25-54: 5 people; 55-64: 1 person; 65+: 2 people
Income	At least one earner more than £45k; At least one less than £20k
Ethnicity	White: 8 people; Non-white: 2 people
Concern	50% not concerned about climate change; 50% concerned
Politics	A mixture of right and left leaning

We selected for a 50/50 split on concern about climate change, though opinion polls indicate 66% of the UK public are 'fairly' or 'very concerned' about climate change (DECC: 2015).⁵ Each workshop lasted two and a half hours. The workshop was split into three parts: firstly a discussion about participants' values, general views and aspirations for the future; secondly their views on climate change (including a three minute tutorial on why a two degrees Celsius rise over the pre-industrial average has been identified as a 'dangerous' limit to climate change); and finally a detailed discussion of four statements or 'policy narratives', each describing a possible outcome from the Paris negotiations.

The four policy narratives discussed in the workshops centre on four distinct themes, spanning a range of ideological perspectives:

1. Governments are our best hope of getting a deal on 2 degrees (focused on the idea that the public should put its trust in politicians to come up with a binding deal to limit warming to 2 degrees Celsius - with intergovernmental agreement the only way to achieve this).
2. Too much government is the problem (arguing that solving climate change was best left to business, as the drivers of innovation and cost-effective solutions; and that government regulation only obstructed this).
3. We can't wait for governments, we need people power (suggesting neither business nor government could be trusted to deliver a satisfactory deal, and that what needed to emerge from Paris was a global grassroots movement calling for radical climate change policies).
4. We can't solve climate change without building a fairer world (claiming there could be no solution that wasn't grounded in a just and fair distribution of costs and responsibilities).

Endnotes

¹ E.G. Parkhill, K.A., Demski, C., Butler, C., Spence, A. and Pidgeon, N.F. (2013) *Transforming the UK Energy System: Public Values, Attitudes and Acceptability - Synthesis Report* (UKERC: London).

² Capstick, S. B., Demski, C. C., Sposato, R. G., Pidgeon, N. F., Spence, A. and Corner, A. (2015). *Public perception of climate change in Britain following the winter 2013/2014 flooding*.

³ A majority of participants reported higher levels of engagement with politics following the Scottish referendum and the Labour leadership campaign.

⁴ Pidgeon, N.F. (2012). Public understanding of, and attitudes to, climate change: UK and international perspectives and policy. *Climate Policy* 12(Sup01):S85-S106.

⁵ DECC Public Attitudes Tracker - Wave 14 (2015). Available from https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/450674/PAT_Summary_Wave_14.pdf