



PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF THE HEALTH RISKS OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND PRIORITIES FOR ACTION

SUMMARY FOR STUDY PARTICIPANTS

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Why we did this research

- The government is committed to tackling climate change and to ensuring a healthy future for people in the UK.
- In democratic societies, action by the government needs to be in line with people's concerns and priorities.
- However, little is known about people's concerns and priorities. Our research begins to fill this gap.

What we did

- We conducted online surveys with people aged 18 years and older living across the UK (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales). They were asked a set of questions and invited to pick a response from a list of answers that was closest to their view and experiences. These surveys were carried out across 2021 and early 2022, and included over 10,000 people.
- We also undertook interviews with people aged 15 years and over living in different parts of England. To do this, we contacted community groups that then sent out study information to their members. In the interviews, people were able to express their views about climate change and how they felt it may impact on people's health and talk about their experiences in detail that is not possible in an online survey. Interviews were undertaken in 2021 and 41 people took part.

What we found out about public perceptions of climate change and health

- Most people are concerned about climate change. In our UK-wide surveys, concern did not decline during the COVID-19 pandemic and its restrictions on people's everyday lives.
- In the UK-wide surveys, most people (61%) perceived climate change to be already having an impact on people's health in the UK. However, in the project's interview study, some participants expressed uncertainty about whether climate change was having health impacts. A common view was that climate change was affecting people's health in other parts of the world, but its impacts had yet to reach the UK. Different people also found the term 'health impacts' to mean different things to them.
- In both the surveys and the interview study, those with experience of climate-related events such as floods and air pollution, personally or in their local area, were often more likely to be concerned about climate change and to perceive it as already affecting the health of people in the UK.

What we found out about people's priorities for action by the government

- Air pollution and flooding were identified as the major priorities for national and local government to address in order to protect people's health from climate change.

- Again, experience mattered. Those with experience of air pollution and flooding were more likely to select them as the top priorities for government action.
- In the interview study, participants explained that they wanted the government to address events that either had a devastating impact on lots of people or were events that they felt could be solved (e.g. floods could be better managed, and air pollution could be reduced).

In conclusion...

- Most people in the UK public are concerned about climate change.
- In the online surveys, most people perceived climate change to be affecting the health of people in the UK. In the interview study, people also discussed other impacts, for example impacts on nature and wildlife.
- Most people have clear priorities for government action. They know what they would like the government to focus on to protect people's health from climate change.

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The views expressed in this summary report are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the NHS, the National Institute for Health and Social Care Research, the Department of Health and Social Care or its arm's length bodies, and other Government Departments.

Ethics

Ethical approval for the study was received from the Health Sciences Research Governance Committee, University of York on 11 September 2020 (ref: HSRGC/2020/409/C).

Front cover photos

Car pollution (milehightraveler)
York floods (Matt Cornock)
Heatwave (rawpixel.com)