



New evidence of a strong public mandate for climate change adaptation in the UK

Published by the Priestley Centre's
Climate Evidence Unit

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September 2024

The UK is already being affected by climate change with more flooding and heatwaves impacting lives and livelihoods. These trends will continue in the near term and, without rapid decarbonisation, could significantly increase in the long term. Preparing for the unavoidable impacts of climate change, known as climate change adaptation, is critical.

Our analysis shows that there is now a strong public mandate for much more, and much faster, adaptation policy, investment and action.

The UK's current adaptation plans and policies are inadequate.¹

We call on the UK government to immediately step up and accelerate preparations for the impacts of climate change, both now and in the future.

A public mandate for climate adaptation

1. The UK public thinks climate change is a priority issue for the country
2. The UK public says they are already experiencing disruption due to climate change
3. The UK public wants to see strong leadership from central government
4. The UK public thinks that climate change will further impact food, water, and human health in the near future
5. The UK public wants adaptation actions to prioritise basic wellbeing for all

Climate change adaptation: the process of adjustment to actual or expected climate change and its effects, in order to moderate harm or exploit beneficial opportunities²

Risks of climate change to the UK: The need to adapt

UK infrastructure, biodiversity, public health, and food and water supplies are already being impacted by climate change.³

As a result of past and present global emissions, some further warming, and the impacts that will bring, are now 'locked in'. Adaptation can limit the likelihood and severity of harm caused by climate impacts, alongside actions to rapidly reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Every five years central government publishes a National Adaptation Programme which sets out how it will respond to climate risks. But adaptation is still currently a secondary consideration to mitigation, and existing adaptation policies lack ambition and urgency.⁴ Government efforts to prepare the country are failing to meet the scale and speed required.⁵

Evidence of new public perceptions

This policy brief draws on evidence from a nationally representative survey of 1,192 members of the UK public conducted in May 2023.⁶ The survey gives a comprehensive view of what respondents think about climate change impacts and adaptation policies and actions.

Considering the global events that have taken place in the past few years - the COVID-19 pandemic, the outbreak of war in Europe, political instability in the UK and overseas, the cost of living crisis and a record breaking 40°C heatwave in 2022 - this survey provides an up to date understanding of people's perceptions about climate change risks the country faces.

It is important to note that in the 18 months since this data was collected, the UK has continued to experience extreme weather impacts, most notably an unusually wet 2023-4 winter and spring, the severity of which was increased by underlying climate change,⁷ with the media narrative particularly focusing on the negative impact to farmers and food production.⁸ It is credible to suggest that this will have further increased people's concerns about climate change and their support for greater adaptation action.

1. The UK public thinks climate change is a priority issue for the country

A 2013 survey showed that the UK public thought of climate change as mostly a concern for other countries or for future generations.⁹ However, this is no longer the case.

○ In 2023, 79% thought climate change

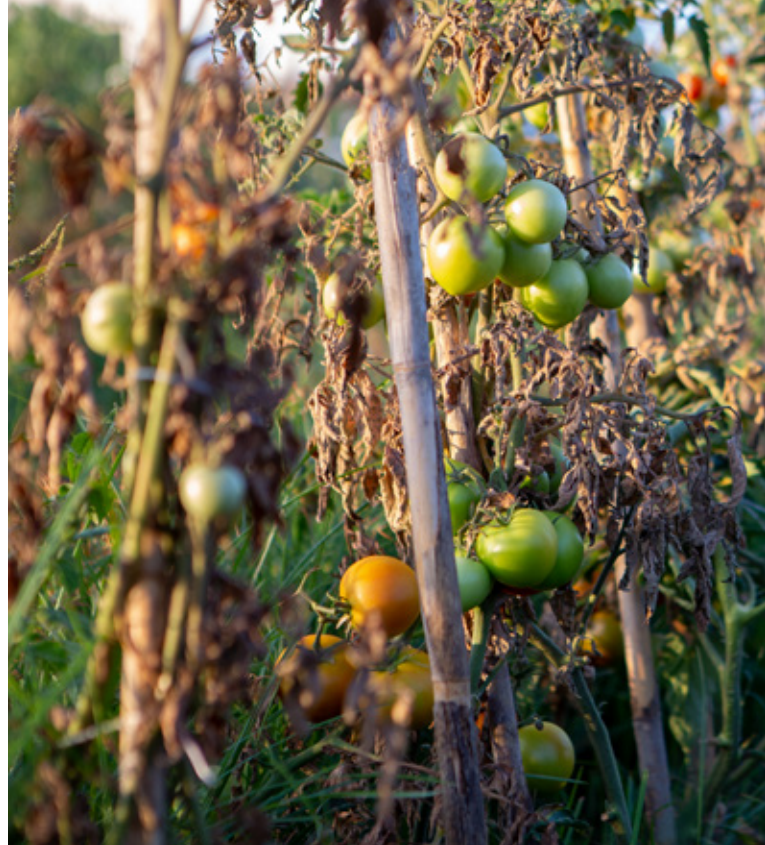
was a fairly, very or extremely serious threat to the UK with 60% thinking the same in relation to themselves and their family.

- The survey results showed that after economic and health issues, climate change is ranked as one of the top issues facing the UK, with 20% including it in their top 3 priorities for 'today' and 32% including it in their top 3 priorities for 'the future'. This is a significant change since the same question was asked in 2013 and the results were 5% and 9% respectively.

2. The UK public says they are already experiencing disruption due to climate change

From record breaking temperatures exceeding 40°C in 2022, to prolonged wet and stormy weather in 2024, extreme weather is already damaging people's homes and impacting health and wellbeing.¹⁰ Although the UK has experienced heatwaves before, the likelihood of the country experiencing a comparably hot summer has increased significantly since then due to climate change.¹¹

- Over 50% reported experiencing discomfort during a heatwave with 28% reporting heat-related health impacts.
- Nearly 1 in 10 said they had experienced flood damage to their home.
- 69% thought that the UK is already feeling the impacts of climate change.



3. The UK public wants to see strong leadership from central government

Effectively and equitably adapting to climate change is a complex challenge. The actions needed are determined by the hazard, location and socio-economic context. While much adaptation will happen locally and in regions, leadership is required to provide a vision and framework.¹²

○ 91% of the survey respondents

thought that the UK government have some responsibility in preparing the country for the impacts of a changing climate, with other groups, including local authorities, national agencies such as the Environment Agency and NHS, and business and industry, also perceived as having roles to play.

- When asked who is most responsible, 69% said the UK government.



4. The UK public thinks that climate change will further impact food, water, and human health in the near future

The UK will become warmer and wetter in the coming decades. By 2050, heatwaves like that seen in 2018 are expected to happen every other year.¹³ Winter storms will bring stronger winds and heavier rainfall, posing severe threats to buildings, transport, food, and health.¹⁴

- Over 75% agreed that it was fairly or very likely that the UK would experience increases in food prices due to poor harvests, water shortages, coastal erosion and loss of wildlife by 2050.
- More than two thirds of respondents also expected the UK to experience more serious health impacts, increased damage to homes, disruption to public services and supply chains, new pests and diseases, and wildfires.

5. The UK public wants adaptation actions to prioritise basic wellbeing for all

Climate change impacts such as heatwaves and flooding are a major threat to physical and mental health. Those people who are most exposed, e.g. living on the coasts or most socio-economically vulnerable, are at greatest risk and often have the least means to respond.¹⁵

○ **70% of respondents thought**

the UK should be addressing climate change with a high or extremely high level of urgency.

- Most respondents were more concerned about and prioritized types of adaptation actions related to affordable food, water availability and health and wellbeing.

A call to action

In light of this compelling new evidence policymakers are encouraged to draw upon the expertise of climate adaptation researchers, practitioners and advisors. In particular, we point to work by the UK Climate Change Committee, National Infrastructure Commission, Institute for Government, and UK Parliament. The Climate Evidence Unit will develop subsequent publications that explore recommendations for policy, investment, and action in response to this public mandate.

Notes and references

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The Climate Evidence Unit is supported by Research England funding.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.48785/100/282>

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