

The virus and the climate: Winning consent for Net Zero

BRIEFING PAPER

July 2020

SMF

Social Market
Foundation

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This paper summarises the key political questions facing policymakers as they seek to understand the public's views on climate change and decarbonisation policies in the wake of COVID-19.

KEY POINTS

- Explicit comparisons between the efforts made to mitigate COVID-19 and those required to reduce carbon emissions are unlikely to win public support and may prove harmful to the Net Zero agenda.
- Instead of appealing to the public's willingness to endure more economic and social discomfort to deliver environmental objectives, policymakers should emphasise the benefits that could arise from decarbonisation, especially for household finances.
- The importance of clear, simple and repeated messaging must be given more recognition in formulating and delivering climate policy.
- "Green recovery" policies should prioritise small-scale, quick-impact decarbonisation work, especially the decarbonisation of homes.

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This briefing paper is based on a roundtable event held by the Social Market Foundation in June 2020, as part of the *Towards Net Zero* project we are undertaking in partnership with ScottishPower. The event, held under the Chatham House rule, brought together senior policymakers and experts in climate policy and public opinion. The names of those who attended are private, but participants included members of the Government and frontbenchers from Opposition parties. While this paper anonymously reports some of the views expressed by roundtable participants, the conclusions and recommendations made here are those of the SMF authors alone.

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SUMMARY

Reaching Net Zero requires policymakers to win and maintain voters' support and informed consent. COVID-19 and its subsequent economic recovery presents the opportunity to reshape the political argument for garnering long-term public buy-in for decarbonisation.

Evidence suggests that green policies will only command robust consent if voters believe that it will deliver them direct financial benefits. The electorate is under great economic strain, with many facing reductions in income and the threat of unemployment. Consequently, the Net Zero agenda and anything that promises a "green recovery" should centre on helping household finances recover, by saving money for British households. Although public awareness of and concern about climate issues has grown in recent years, there remains little convincing evidence that such concerns have been accompanied by a new willingness to endure significant economic disruption or hardship to mitigate climate change.

Political leaders should resist the temptation to draw parallels between the threat of COVID-19 and the threat of climate change. Instead of presenting the Net Zero agenda as an act of harm prevention, policymakers should frame decarbonisation as an opportunity to be seized - and one that can help mitigate the economic harms of the pandemic, not repeat them.

The tendency among some climate activists to conflate climate change with COVID-19 is problematic - where the former is abstract and distant, the latter is tangible and immediate. Loss aversion has been a powerful tool in the virus mitigation strategy because the danger the virus poses is both personal and visible. The public have been compassionately shocked into adhering to necessary measures, for the time being. This approach has already been shown to be less effective at winning consent for climate action. The losses threatened by a changing climate are often distant in both time and geography. Consequently, the public are less motivated to sustain the long-term action that is necessary for Net Zero.

Furthermore, lockdown interventions were largely successful due to the clarity and simplicity with which they were communicated. Three short phrases compelled a nation to "stay at home - protect the NHS - save lives". Comparatively, climate change remains a complex issue requiring sustained, multi-faceted action from the global collective. Policymakers and political leaders should consider how clear, simple messaging could be developed and deployed to achieve sustained, informed consent for Net Zero.

Introduction

The decarbonisation of the UK economy is necessary, desirable and potentially of great economic benefit. But which of these reasons resonates most with the public and compels them to act in accordance with achieving this goal?

It is just over a year since the UK became the first major economy to put in place a legal obligation to bring all greenhouse gas emissions to Net Zero by 2050. Yet research shows most voters don't know what the term means in relation to carbon emissions: in the most recent Public Attitudes Tracker poll for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the proportion of people who had any awareness of "Net Zero" was 35%.¹ And the number who understand the measures that will be needed to achieve this goal is likely to be smaller still. Hitting Net Zero is not feasible without widespread public support and informed consent. It will be up to policymakers and political leaders to convey the message of climate action in a way that garners long-term public buy-in.

The coronavirus crisis has presented an opportunity to rethink how we approach and achieve Net Zero. On 19th May 2020, the Social Market Foundation hosted a roundtable with politicians, policymakers and climate policy experts to discuss how the coronavirus pandemic will affect public views on climate change and decarbonisation policies. The roundtable had four specific aims:

1. Identify the most salient political arguments for implementing green (Net Zero) policies in the recovery from the COVID-19 crisis.
2. Understand the extent to which COVID-19 impacts the relationship between the public and the state regarding intervention, expectations and priorities.
3. Identify the crossover – if any – of the COVID-19 crisis and climate change.
4. Explore how the post-COVID-19 economic crisis will interact with the public's appetite for climate policy.

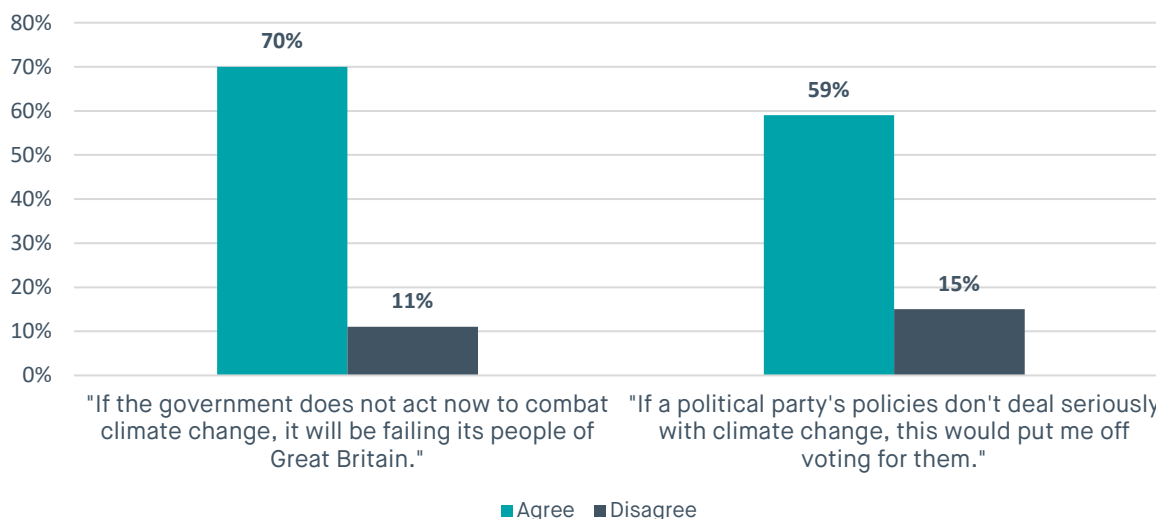
This report summarises the key themes that emerged from the SMF roundtable.

- First, we evaluate the current state of public opinion on climate change and climate action. This draws on polling conducted by Ipsos-MORI of 2,000 adults from 21st February to 6th March 2020 and from 16th to 19th April 2020, as well as previous polling.
- Second, we explore the relationship between COVID-19 and climate change to identify any similarities or differences between the two crises.
- Third, we consider the political case for a green recovery, highlighting the economic benefit to consumers / voters.
- Finally, we address the role of local government in the implementation of green policies.

Public opinion

Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, public desire for greater government action on climate change was high. According to Ipsos-MORI, the majority of Britons (70%) agreed that the government would be failing its people if it did not act now to combat climate change. Similarly, just 15% of Britons disagreed that they would be put off voting for a political party that doesn't deal seriously with climate change.

Figure 1: Public attitudes on climate action prior to COVID-19



Source: Ipsos MORI

Note: Figures do not total 100%. 2000 online adults in Great Britain aged 16-74: Fieldwork dates: 21st February to 6th March 2020.

However, despite a global rise in climate anxiety over the last six years, the public have been slow to shift their behaviour in limiting their own contributions.² Nearly half (49%) of Britons are willing to make personal sacrifices to reduce their carbon contribution by saving energy in their home (turn off lights etc.). This is up just four percentage points from 2014, as Figure 2 illustrates below.ⁱ While there is voter support for climate action, we suggest that for a significant number of voters, behaviour has not and will not change without a substantial policy intervention.

ⁱ 10504 online adults aged 16-74 across 12 countries: Fieldwork dates: 21st February to 6th March 2020, 26th September to 10th October 2014.

Figure 2: Public attitudes on energy efficient behaviour, % certain to/very likely/fairly likely

Source: Ipsos MORI

Note: 10504 online adults aged 16-74 across 12 countries: Fieldwork dates: 21st February to 6th March 2020, 26th September to 10th October 2014.

While the majority (66%) of Britons agree that climate change is just as important as COVID-19 in the long-term, 46% believe the government should focus on the post-COVID-19 economic recovery even if it means taking actions that are bad for the environment.ⁱⁱ

At the roundtable, participants discussed whether voters will now tolerate much more extensive state intervention to combat climate change than policymakers previously thought. This question sparked a number of conversations amongst contributors which this report considers.

First, consider the role of leadership. The impact of COVID-19 in part demonstrates the real and political risks of delayed action. Our contributors discussed the reality that a failure to take precautionary climate action will cause more social, health and economic crises in future. Nevertheless, politicians are largely concerned with public support for such action and the consequential politics of implementing unpopular policies.

Our contributors debated whether politicians lead or follow public opinion. On the one hand, participants discussed the extent to which there is an attitude of "latent consent" amongst the electorate that allows government to take significant climate action without

ⁱⁱ 2000 online adults in Great Britain aged 16-74: Fieldwork dates: 16th to 19th April.

first seeking public support. Anecdotal evidence from contributors suggests that public opinion on climate-related policies has changed over time – what was once undesirable is now established and even celebrated. One contributor observed that:

“There is a space for government to act – the reason we have a congestion charge in London is because [...] the Mayor [Ken Livingstone] just did it despite public opinion being opposed to it. Having done it, and it broadly working, he got re-elected with 55% of the vote.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Further, some contributors expressed the opinion that time does not always allow for public consent to catch up with a situation before necessary action.

On the other hand, contributors noted that it is problematic to presume that public support for climate action expressed in opinion polling is equal to the informed consent needed for interventions in the late-stage energy transition. As noted previously, it is likely that less than one third of Britons are aware of and understand the measures needed to meet Net Zero. It is imperative that political leaders clearly communicate the ideas and approach needed for authentic, sustained public buy-in. This report presents the most salient political arguments for including green policies in the COVID-19 economic stimulus package with public support.

Similarities and differences between the virus and the climate

Relationship

This section explores whether a pandemic and a changing climate are – and are seen to be – similar things. McKinsey analysts have noted that pandemics and climate risk share many of the same attributes, suggesting that both are... “

- *Systemic, in that their direct manifestations and their knock-on effects propagate fast across an interconnected world. ...*
- *Nonstationary, in that past probabilities and distributions of occurrences are rapidly shifting and proving to be inadequate or insufficient for future projections*
- *Nonlinear, in that their socioeconomic impact grows disproportionately and even catastrophically once certain thresholds are breached...*
- *Risk multipliers, in that they highlight and exacerbate hitherto untested vulnerabilities inherent in the financial and healthcare systems and the real economy.*
- *Regressive, in that they affect disproportionately the most vulnerable populations and subpopulations of the world.*
- *Predictable, in that neither can be considered as a black swan...”³*

Our contributors were quick to note that both pandemics and climate change cause large-scale disruption that require heavy state intervention and behavioural change. However, the nature of their externalities differs vastly. Where COVID-19 is tangible and immediate, climate change is largely invisible and distant in both time and geography.

ⁱⁱⁱ The London congestion charge was introduced in February 2003. Livingstone won re-election in May 2004.

Complexity

In most cases, the public has willingly accepted significant curbs on personal liberty for the altruistic mission of protecting others and institutions that serve others (primarily the NHS) from COVID-19. Some climate activists have suggested that this selfless behaviour bodes well for climate change, where collective action could mitigate climate risks in other countries and generations. However, our contributors broadly disagreed, echoing Mark Carney's 'tragedy of the horizon'. One contributor observed that:

"...with COVID-19, really quickly we made it obvious that by passing within a metre of someone, you might [infect] someone and damage all of society. [...] Climate change is almost opposite – we all cause damage through all of our economic activities that emit carbon, but it will take many years, and no one can say with certainty what [action] directly causes what [consequence] or where."

Both the state and the public understand the risk and externalities of a pandemic much more clearly and easily than they do climate change. This has made pricing and accepting the cost of virus mitigation simpler. Largely, the COVID-19 mitigation strategy was initially reduced to three short, memorable phrases – "Stay at home – protect the NHS – save lives" – which the public broadly and willingly followed. Our contributors debated whether it was possible to reduce the complex concept of climate change to a similar phrase:

"...people find it difficult to grapple with the definitive meaning of 'climate change' and 'sustainability' [...] – it's nonlinear. We need clear, easy asks. We need to take this huge issue [...] and simplify it into small tangible asks to engage consumers with."

While evidence shows there is public support for climate action, the concept is too abstract and indirect in its consequences – in most cases, the weather in the UK is mild and the effects of climate instability and air pollution are yet to impact tangibly on human welfare. This does not evoke a comparable call to action as the threat of infecting our loved ones, especially the elderly.

Sustainability

The lockdown has been hugely disruptive and disastrous for many – however, the short-termism of the pandemic (relative to climate change) is in part driving the public through the difficult but necessary interventions. By contrast, the action needed to sustain the decarbonisation of the economy needs to be structural, long-term and resilient – it cannot depend on compassion alone. Francois Gemenne of the Hugo Institute, an IPCC 'lead author' argues that the virus-climate comparison is a category error:

"Above all, climate change is not a "crisis": it is an irreversible transformation. There will be no going back to normal, no vaccine. There is a need for structural measures, not short-term ones."⁴

One contributor echoed this point, stating climate action "is not about compelling people, but encouraging them to take active choices". Political leaders and policymakers need sustained and systemic public buy-in for climate action and should therefore avoid drawing parallels with lockdown when making the case for a green recovery.

Hardship

Our contributors also largely agreed that conflating lockdown with climate change policies is not only problematic but also dangerous in that it might erode existing public support

for climate action. Lockdown caused hardship and unhappiness for many. Asking them to repeat such an experience for another purpose would be misguided and risk a backlash against climate policies in future. One contributor argued that:

“...taking action on climate change is a positive social and economic thing – linking it directly to something that is so disastrous and that inhibited people’s freedoms doesn’t feel like a positive way of compelling people in the later stage of the energy transition to take the [...] steps that are necessary.”

The COVID-19 lockdown has caused widespread job and income losses. Consequently, there is a desire to recover the economy by any means necessary – previous recessions have reflected this desire, for example through a significant rise in emissions during economic recoveries. It is imperative that political leaders recognise and dispel this fear that a green stimulus package will cause voters more economic pain. This is explored further below.

Resilience

While contributors broadly agreed that the two issues of COVID-19 and climate change should not be conflated, many also noted a shared consequence that was central to both: the need for resilience. One contributor observed that, *“the pandemic has highlighted structural weaknesses in the economy which need to be rebuilt better”*. As resilience rivals efficiency as a goal of business, it should be a goal for British homes too. The pandemic and its resulting recession have provided an opportunity to shape the economic recovery through a green stimulus. Green energy policies are resilient – by generating our own power and reducing our homes’ dependence on the grid, we make both ourselves and our economy more resilient to future crises.

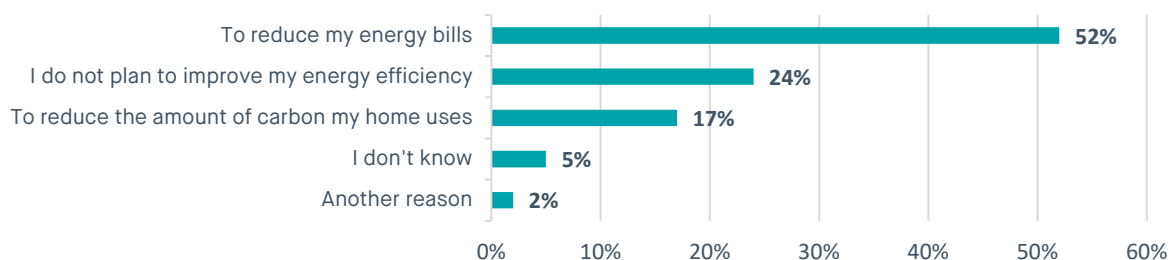
Economic Concerns

Trade-offs

There is widespread public agreement that climate change is a significant concern: two out of three Britons agree climate change is just as important as COVID-19. However, despite growing levels of anxiety, it is unlikely that individuals will change their own behaviour to limit their carbon emissions. When asked if (and why) they plan to take steps to improve the energy efficiency of their home in the next 12 months, 52% of people said to save money; 17% said to reduce their carbon emissions; and 24% would not do anything at all.

Figure 3: Public motivations for energy efficient behaviour

"If you plan to take steps to improve the energy efficiency of your home in the next 12 months, what is the main reason why you plan to do this?"



Source: Ipsos MORI

Note: Adults aged 16+ living in Scotland, surveyed online between 9th September to 18th September 2019.

One roundtable participant stated that *“change will happen quickly once the [technologies] that are low carbon are better and cheaper than the ones that are high carbon”*. Only when financial interests are fully aligned with environmental interests will we see structural changes to consumer behaviour in favour of green energy.

Another contributor provided anecdotal evidence: *“people say ‘I always buy the green alternative’, but it turns out they are buying the cheapest option so long as it’s green”*. Other contributors discussed how consumer inaction is in part the result of a wide-held public view that government and big business should pay for green energy, not individuals.

The majority (58%) of Britons agree that the Government should prioritise climate change in the economic recovery from COVID-19. However, when asked to make a choice between the two, only 43% believe government should not take actions that are bad for the environment when prioritising the economy. There appears to be a significant public conviction that climate action will cost consumers more. However, this is not necessarily the case going forwards for many green technologies such as electric vehicles (EVs) and renewables. One contributor argued:

“... this is different from 2008 – there is an implied trade-off between climate action and the economy but a lot of [green policies] are not an economic cost. Energy efficiency saves you money, renewables are cheaper than fossil fuels. EVs will be cheaper on the price tag and refuelling by 2022/23. This should be a natural part of a stimulus package and should not be a trade off as it was after 2008.”

Stimulus package

Contributors spoke enthusiastically about the opportunity to bolster the economic stimulus package with ‘shovel-ready’ green policies *“that don’t involve huge questions about personal consumption and behaviour”*. For example, green infrastructure investment will likely be labour-intensive (addressing current high rates of unemployment) and could stimulate domestic supply-chains. Small-scale decarbonisation projects such as retrofitting homes with low-carbon systems (including some as simple as better insulation) are likely to have high multiplier effects, support employment and, perhaps most importantly, be delivered at speed once policymakers commit funds to supporting them. Echoing this point, one contributor highlighted: *“the choice between jobs and the environment is no longer the truth”*.

Throughout lockdown, as with previous recessions, carbon emissions have fallen as economic and physical activity has slumped. However, trends suggest emissions will likely rise significantly as economic activity recovers. Already, reports highlight that air pollution in China has returned to pre-COVID-19 levels.⁵ Policymakers seeking to win consent for a green recovery from COVID-19 need to demonstrate – quickly – that Net Zero policies are, above all else, economically beneficial. While major infrastructure projects are necessary and deserving of support, smaller projects, especially around decarbonising homes, are likely to offer quicker economic and political wins, and so should be pursued as a matter of priority. If Net Zero policies can be shown to mean jobs for people who would be otherwise unemployed and domestic improvements that reduce energy consumption and thus household costs during the next winter, the rhetoric of a “green recovery” will mean something to voters. On that platform, policymakers could build a sustained political argument that decarbonisation can deliver economic benefits to help offset the losses of the pandemic.

Local government

Achieving Net Zero will need a multifaceted approach from all levels of government. However, there are both opportunities and risks associated with devolved climate action. Contributors discussed the extent to which local government has the political and fiscal power to deliver the necessary change.

On the one hand, effective climate action may require greater powers than devolution currently allows. One contributor reflected this sentiment, “*local government is ready to act, we have a consensus, we have the will [...] but we don’t have time to write a bid*”. Many local authorities have made commitments to Net Zero targets, largely in response to directed climate activism. There is a risk that without the ability to deliver promised change, local representatives could damage the electorate’s faith in climate action, local leadership and even democratic legitimacy. One contributor expressed similar concerns:

“...at the moment there is a lot of enthusiasm expressing itself [at local government level]. [...] We need to ensure that doesn’t turn into a delegitimation of the movement if local authorities are unable to make good on [their plans].”

On the other hand, some councils may not be aware of the extent to which their existing powers can contribute to decarbonising local economies. In this case, policymakers should look to increase strategic engagement between the national Net Zero agenda and local leaders.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Explicit comparisons between the efforts made to mitigate COVID-19 and those required to reduce carbon emissions are unlikely to win public support and may prove harmful to the Net Zero agenda.**

Voters were willing to accept significant curbs and hardship in response to the coronavirus because it presented a clear and immediate danger. Where they perceive the effects of climate change as abstract and remote, appeals to impose hardship of a magnitude similar to that caused by lockdown are unlikely to persuade. Rhetoric demanding households endure more disruption on a similar scale may alienate some voters and undermine consent for decarbonisation policies.

2. **Instead of appealing to the public's willingness to endure more economic and social discomfort to deliver environmental objectives, policymakers should emphasise the benefits that could arise from decarbonisation, especially for household finances.**

Britain, like most developed economies, now faces a painful economic downturn that will reduce the living standards of many voters. The perception that the green agenda will cost them more money would be harmful to the Net Zero agenda. Instead, the scope for decarbonisation to generate employment and household savings should be emphasised. Priority should be given to developing policies that crystallise such savings for households adopting low-carbon adaptations.

3. **The importance of clear, simple and repeated messaging must be given more recognition in formulating and delivering climate policy.**

The decarbonisation agenda is complex and often badly communicated. The term "Net Zero" is poorly understood and should have no place in official public-facing communications. The power of short slogans that are used repeatedly should be employed to support climate policy. Our suggestion is "Greener is cheaper".

4. **"Green recovery" policies should prioritise small-scale, quick-impact decarbonisation work, especially the decarbonisation of homes.**

If Net Zero policies can be shown to mean jobs for people who would otherwise be unemployed and domestic improvements that reduce energy consumption and thus household costs during the next winter, the rhetoric of a "green recovery" will mean something to voters. On that platform, policymakers could build a sustained political argument that decarbonisation can deliver economic benefits to help offset the losses of the pandemic.

ENDNOTES

¹https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/884028/BEIS_PAT_W33_-_Key_findings_Final_.pdf

² Ipsos Mori Issues Index

³ <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/sustainability/our-insights/addressing-climate-change-in-a-post-pandemic-world>

⁴ <https://twitter.com/Gemenne/status/1242743420994621449?s=20>

⁵ <https://energyandcleanair.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/China-air-pollution-rebound-final.pdf>