

# What are people's views and concerns about health and climate change?

## Executive summary

**Climate change is placing the health of current and future populations at risk. But little is known public perceptions of its health impacts and their priorities for action by government. An appreciation of people's moral values is also important in informing the direction of policy - but again little is known about people's values in relation to climate change.**

A project funded by the NIHR Public Health-Policy Research Unit is addressing these issues<sup>1</sup>. This Executive Summary provides headline findings from two pilot surveys carried out between December 2020 and February 2021. The surveys were UK-wide, with quotas set to match the UK population with respect to gender, age group, ethnic group, educational attainment and UK country/English region. As well as information on participants' social background and circumstances, we asked about their experiences of exposures like flooding, air pollution and heatwave in the previous 12 months. We also asked about their views on a set of value statements about climate change. The statements were informed by evidence that a cluster of common values are found across cultures and societies<sup>2</sup>, including ones related to fairness and care embedded in the 2015 UN Paris Agreement<sup>3</sup>.

The following sections below look in turn at people's concerns about climate change, their perceptions of its health impacts and their priorities for the government to address to protect people's health. The analyses take account of people's background and circumstances as well as their experience of climate-related exposures and events. Factors that remained significant are noted. Section 4 explores the patterns of agreement with the value statements about climate change, noting associations with climate change concern.

FUNDED BY

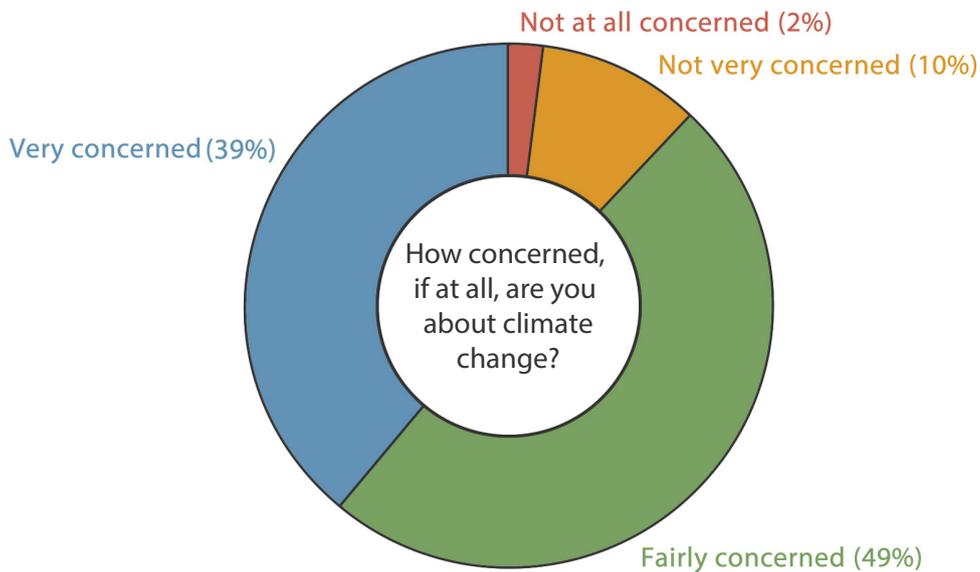
**NIHR** | National Institute  
for Health Research

Public Health Policy Research Unit  
[www.ph-pru.online](http://www.ph-pru.online)

## 1. People's concerns about climate change

A large majority (88%) were concerned about climate change: 49% were 'fairly concerned' and 39% were 'very concerned' (Figure 1). Being older and having a higher level of educational attainment were associated with being very concerned. However, the most significant factor was the experience of a climate-related exposure in the last 12 months (flooding to one's home/local area, heatwave that affected one's health and air pollution/poor air quality in the local area).

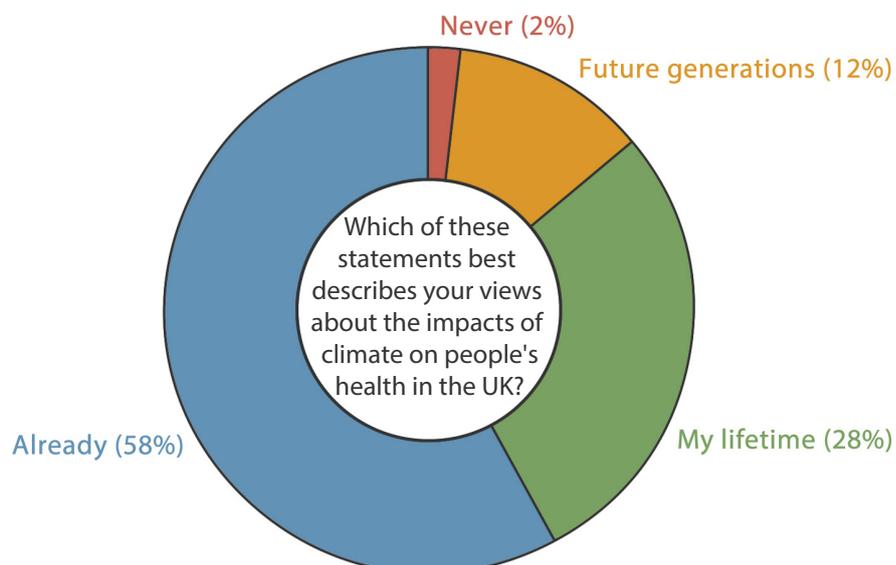
Figure 1: Concern about climate change



## 2. Perceptions of the health impacts of climate change

The majority (58%) considered that climate change was already having an impact on people's health in the UK; a further 28% considered that such impacts would occur within their lifetime (Figure 2). Those experiencing no climate-related exposures in the previous 12 months were less likely to consider climate change was already having a health impact, while those experiencing air pollution in their local area had twice the odds of perceiving climate change to be already affecting people's health.

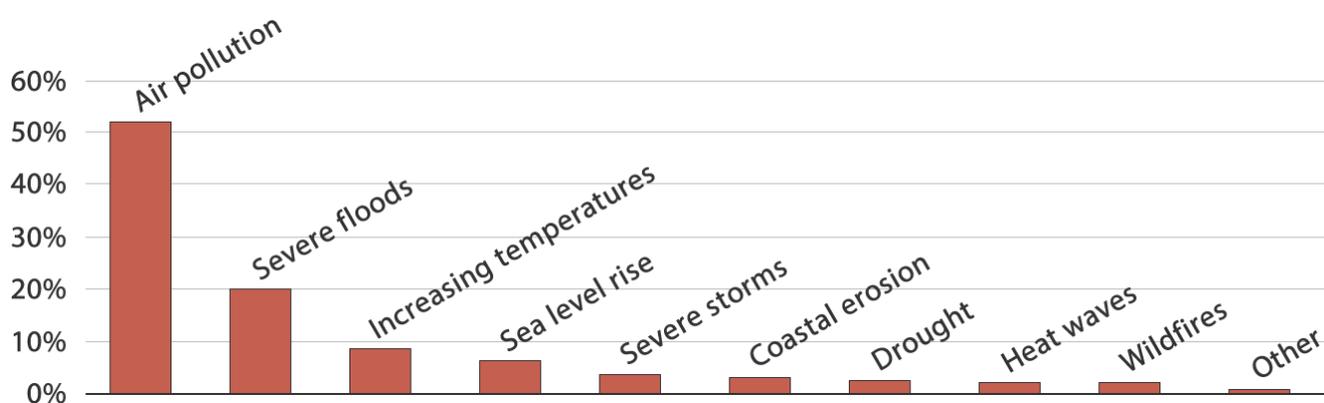
Figure 2: Views of the health impacts of climate change



### 3. Which climate-related exposures do the public consider the most important for the government to address?

Survey participants were asked about changes in the climate that concerned them with respect to impacts on people’s health in the UK. Excluding those who had no concerns, participants were then asked which was the most important in their view for the government to address in order to protect people’s health. Over half (52%) identified air pollution; a further 20% selected severe floods (Figure 3 ). Other climate-related exposures, including heatwaves, were selected by less than one in ten participants. Women, participants living in an urban setting and those who were not parents were more likely to select air pollution as their priority. The experience of air pollution in one’s local area doubled the odds of identifying air pollution as the priority.

Figure 3: Most important change in the climate for the government to address to protect people’s health  
...which, in your view, would be the most important for the government to address  
in order to protect people's health? (single response)



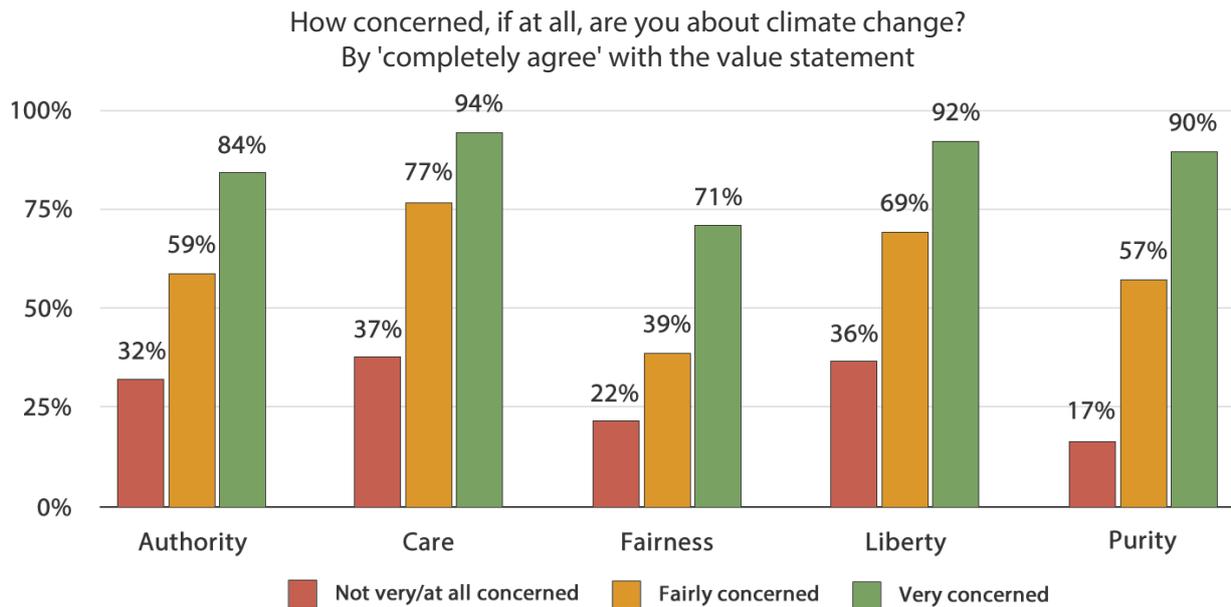
### 4. People's moral values and climate change

In our exploratory analysis, those who were ‘very concerned’ about climate change appeared open to a moral framing of climate change (Figure 4). The large majority (over 90%) were in complete agreement with value statements relating to care (‘we should take of the planet for the sake of today’s children and future generations’), liberty (‘everyone should have the freedom to live on a planet that isn’t damaged and polluted’) and purity (‘climate change is damaging nature and upsetting the balance between the planet and its people’). Over 70% were in complete agreement with statements relating to authority (‘we should respect the shared natural heritage we have inherited from past generations’) and fairness (‘it is not fair that poorer countries are suffering most from the harmful impacts of climate change’).

Among those ‘fairly concerned’ about climate change, the proportions in complete agreement with the value statements were lower. Nonetheless, the majority completely agreed with the statements relating to care, liberty, authority and purity; for the fairness statement, 39% were in complete agreement.

A different picture emerged for those not concerned (‘not very concerned’/‘not at all concerned’) about climate change. None of the value statements provided in the survey had majority appeal. The proportions in complete agreement were highest for statements linked to care (37%), liberty (36%) and authority (32%).

Figure 4: Complete agreement with the value statement by climate change concern



## Next steps and conclusions

Building on the pilot surveys, we will refine our questions on perceptions of health, climate change and priorities for action by government in preparation for the main surveys later in 2021. We will also be widening the scope of questions on moral values and climate change.

While the Executive Summary provides initial insights only, some provisional conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, there is an absence of clear social gradients in people's perceptions and priorities. Instead, what stands out is the importance of people's experiences. The most significant predictor of climate change concern was reporting an environmental exposure in the last 12 months; with respect to perceiving climate change to be already affecting people's health, personal experience was again key. Its importance was also evident in people's views of the exposures that were the most important for government to address to protect people's health. This suggests that our perspectives on climate change and health are closely tied to our experiences of environmental stressors, like air pollution and flooding, for which there is increasing evidence of adverse health effects.

Secondly, our analysis of moral values and climate change suggests that those who are very or fairly concerned about climate change respond to a moral framing of climate change to a greater extent than those who are not concerned. Among those very concerned, all the value statements elicited high levels of agreement. Among those not very or not at all concerned about climate change, framing climate change in moral terms appeared to have little resonance.

*Funding acknowledgement: This report is independent research carried out by the Public Health Policy Unit (PH-PRU), commissioned and funded by the National Institute for Health Research Policy Research Programme. The views expressed in the report are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the NHS, the National Institute for Health Research, the Department of Health and Social Care or its arm's length bodies, and other Government Departments.*

The report has been prepared by Hilary Graham, Alex Harrison and Pete Lampard on behalf of the project team

<sup>1</sup>Public perceptions of the health risks of climate change and priorities for action'. [www.phpru.online/projects](http://www.phpru.online/projects)

<sup>2</sup>Haidt, J., *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. 2012, Vintage: New York.

<sup>3</sup>UNFCCC. The Paris Agreement. 2015; <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/the-paris-agreement>.