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## Ethical approval

Ethical approval for the study was received from the Health Sciences Research Governance Committee, University of York (ref: HSRGC/2023/566/A).

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## Front cover design

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## At a glance

**What we found out.** *We confirmed that people's health is not among the public's top concerns about climate change or among their major priorities for climate policies to address. We added to this finding by establishing that children's health was also not among the public's major concerns and policy priorities. The patterns of concerns and priorities again did not change when we compared a focus on 'children' and 'children's physical health and mental wellbeing'.*

*Additionally, we found important differences in the climate change concerns and policy preferences of parents and non-parents. Parents were more concerned about climate change, including its impacts on children and future generations. However, as among non-parents, their major concerns and policy priorities related to essential resources like food and water, and to animals and nature.*

*Finally, we found a strong public preference for climate policies that protect future lives. This preference was particularly marked among parents.*

**Why we did this study.** A large majority of UK adults are concerned about climate change, and its health impacts are increasing. Highlighting these health impacts is often advocated as a way of harnessing public concern about climate change and building support for climate policies.

However, our earlier PH-PRU project found little evidence that the public were particularly concerned about the health impacts of climate change or that they identified health as a priority for climate policies. Instead, other impacts of climate change were among their major concerns, including its impacts on the resources on

which everyone relies like food and water and on animals and nature. Similarly, participants selected essential resources as the single most important focus for policy, followed by animals and nature. Children also featured among their concerns and priorities.

This short project investigates (i) the potential for a focus on children and child health and (ii) the climate change concerns and policy priorities of parents.

**What we did.** We undertook further analyses of surveys (Oct/Nov 2023 and Apr 2024) conducted as part of our earlier project. We also carried out a new survey (Aug 2024). The three surveys were representative of the UK population, with a total sample of 4043 adults aged ≥18.

The surveys were informed by community-based public involvement which ran throughout the two projects. Additionally for this project, we undertook a scoping review of qualitative studies of parents' concerns about climate change

**What are the implications?** Public engagement in climate change and support for climate policies are a prerequisite for effective action on climate change. This short project suggests that a focus on health – with or without a focus on children – is not the most effective way of engaging the public in climate change and building public support for climate policies.

It also points to the potential of harnessing parents' concerns about climate change and their strong preferences for policies that bring benefits to children and future-generations. Parents make up the majority of the UK adult population, a constituency that could provide a springboard for turning public concerns about climate change into policy action.

## Background

Most adults are concerned about climate change. In our 2024 survey, the proportion was 79% (44% 'fairly concerned'; 35% 'very concerned') [9]. Focusing on the health impacts of climate change (i.e., a 'health framing' of climate change) is advocated as a way of harnessing this widespread public concern about climate change and building support for climate policies [4, 10]. See Box 1 for a definition of 'framing'.

However, in our earlier PH-PRU project [9], concerns about impacts on people's health and wellbeing were ranked below other concerns about climate change. Health was considered less important (it had lower 'issue salience') than other issues such as essential resources like food and water, and animals and nature. See Box 1 for a definition of 'issue salience'.

Impacts on health were also less likely to be identified as a priority for climate policies; again, resources like food and water, and animals and nature were identified as the key issues for climate policies to address [9].

In addition, our earlier project found that impacts on children ranked highly when framed in personal terms (impacts on 'the children in my family'). A personal framing of other impacts (e.g., on 'my own health and wellbeing', on 'the animals and nature around me') did not increase their public salience. Concern about climate change's impacts on children did not exhibit a social gradient (e.g., by education and financial circumstances); however, it was higher among parents.

### **Box 1: key terms**

**FRAMING:** describes the process of foregrounding particular aspects of a complex issue (a process integral to communicating complex issues). Alternative ways of understanding the issue are inevitably obscured (left out the frame).

**ISSUE SALIENCE:** how important an individual considers an issue to be. Increased salience has been found to be associated with greater engagement in action to address it (e.g., support for policies).

The evidence from our earlier project raised two questions:

*(i) would a health framing have greater public salience if it focused on children's health?*

*(ii) do parents have different patterns of concern about climate change and different priorities for policy?*

While little attention has been paid to parents, their perspectives on climate change and climate policy offer important insights for policy. Firstly, parents represent a large subgroup of the UK population: their perceptions therefore matter. Most adults in the UK become parents, and non-parents are typically younger adults, the majority of whom are likely to become parents as they move through adulthood [11]. In our 2023 and 2024 UK surveys of adults aged ≥18 years, 55% were parents (and 28% of parents had grandchildren). In our surveys, the social profile (gender, ethnic identity, education, housing tenure) of parents was in line with the wider adult population.

Secondly, parents have responsibilities for promoting and protecting the wellbeing of children [12]. Childhood is a period of heightened vulnerability to the health effects of climate change [5, 13] and, with the speed and scale of climate change increasing rapidly, it will take a much greater toll on the health of younger cohorts than on today's adults [6, 14]. Inter-generational inequalities in climate change exposures and impacts are therefore set to become an increasingly important dimension of public health [7, 15].

Temporal effects are also built into climate policies: the transition to Net Zero rests on public support for near-term changes to secure longer-term benefits [16]. But very little is known about the public's 'inter-generational time preferences' with respect to climate policies [1, 2] - i.e., their preferences for policies that benefit their or future generations. Even less is known about potential differences between parents and non-parents in these preferences.

## Aims

This 4-month project has two aims. It investigates:

(i) *the public salience of a child health framing.*

We explore whether the patterns of public concerns about climate change and public priorities for climate policies vary if children's health, rather than health, is included among the areas of potential concern and policy priority.

We also compare the patterns of public concern and policy priorities when the focus is on children rather than children's health.

(ii) *whether parental status is a predictor of climate change concern and support for climate policies, including ones that protect future generations.*

We explore whether patterns of climate change concern and policy priorities vary between parents and non-parents, and whether parents are more likely than non-parents to prefer climate policies that protect future generations.

# Methods

The project was informed by our earlier PH-PRU project [9], our community-based public involvement [17] and a scoping review of qualitative studies of parents’ concerns about climate change [18].

Building on these inputs, we drew on data from three UK-wide surveys of adults aged ≥18 (Table 1). We set quotas to match the UK population for age group, gender, ethnic group, educational attainment, and region/country of residence. Additionally, the surveys included a question on parental status: ‘Are you the parent/guardian of a child/children (including those over the age of 18)?’.

Table 1: surveys informing the project

| Survey | Date         | Sample size | Frames tested  | Aim(s)  |
|--------|--------------|-------------|--|---------|
| 1      | Oct/Nov 2023 | 2016        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Health</li> <li>Children</li> </ul>   | (ii)    |
| 2      | Mar 2024     | 1004        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Health</li> <li>Children</li> <li>Intergenerational time preferences</li> </ul>       | (ii)    |
| 3      | Aug 2024     | 1023        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Child health</li> <li>Children</li> <li>Intergenerational time preferences</li> </ul> | (i, ii) |

A summary of the surveys’ content is provided in Boxes 2, 3 and 4.

## Box 2: Climate change concerns and policy priorities

### Questions across all three surveys

Survey participants were asked about:

- climate change concern, based on the DESNZ Public Attitudes Tracker survey [3].
- their concerns about different impacts of climate change; impacts were ones highlighted by climate and health scientists [4-8]. For those identifying more than one impact, they noted the impact of greatest concern.
- their priorities for climate policies (‘If you had a say in making plans to deal with climate change, which of the following would you most want to focus on?’); options included impacts of high public concern.

See Appendix for details

## Box 3: Public salience of different framings

In surveys 1 and 2: climate change concerns and priorities for policy included ‘health and wellbeing’ and ‘children’.

In survey 3: climate change concerns and priorities for policy included ‘children’ and ‘children’s physical health and mental wellbeing’. Participants were randomised to receive questions about concerns and priorities which referred to either ‘children’ or ‘children’s physical health and mental wellbeing’,

Across all three surveys: other impacts of concerns and other potential policy priorities included the resources on which everyone relies (e.g. food and water), animals and nature, jobs and living standards and those struggling to make ends meet.

See Appendix for details

## Box 4: Inter-generational time preferences

Surveys 2 and 3 included a question on inter-generational time preferences; the question was based on earlier studies [1, 2].

*Thinking still about climate plans, the government is considering three plans that will save many lives in the UK, but the amount of lives may differ across generations. Each plan would start next year, would be in place for 30 years, and cost the same amount - but only one can be afforded.*

### **POLICY A would save:**

- 3 million lives in your generation
- 2 million lives in your children’s generation
- 1 million lives in your grandchildren’s generation

### **POLICY B would save:**

- 0 lives in your generation
- 3 million lives in your children’s generation
- 3 million lives in your grandchildren’s generation

### **POLICY C would save:**

- 1 million lives in your generation
- 2 million lives in your children’s generation
- 3 million lives in your grandchildren’s generation

### **Which, if any, of the above would you prefer?**

- Policy A
- Policy B
- Policy C
- I’m not interested in any of these

The surveys were designed by the project team and participants were recruited via the Qualtrics survey platform. A double-consent process was used: agreeing to being enrolled on the survey platform and then giving consent to participate in the survey. The surveys were approved by the Department of Health Sciences' Research Governance Committee.

For the analyses, we began by investigating bivariate associations before progressing to multivariate analyses (logistic regression), where we used standard statistical methods [19] to produce the final models. All multivariate analyses took account of sociodemographic factors: gender, age group, educational attainment (ISCED) and parental status.

# Findings

## Finding 1: Varying the health and children framings of climate change and climate policies does not change the patterns of public concerns about climate change and their priorities for climate policy

Surveys 1 and 2 included 'health and wellbeing' and 'children' among potential concerns about climate change concerns and priorities for climate policy.

### Findings from Surveys 1 and 2:

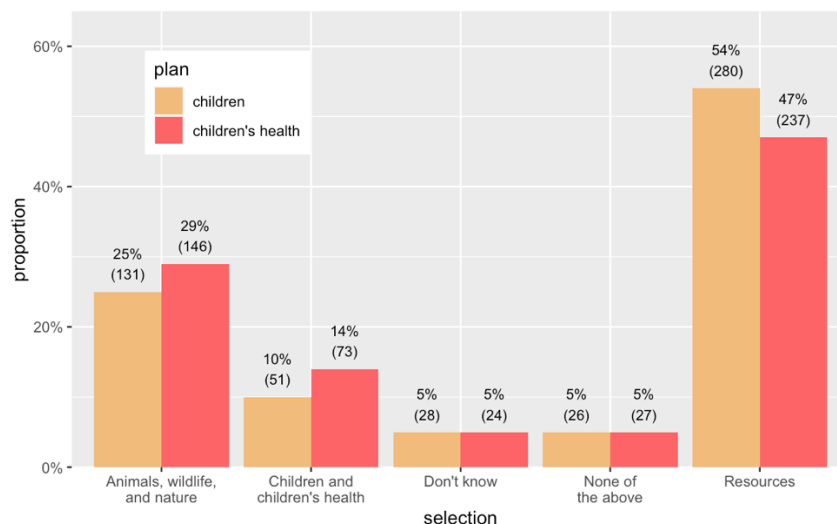
- climate change concerns: the proportions selecting 'children' and 'health and wellbeing' as their single most important concern were 17% and 11% respectively. Survey 1.
- priorities for climate policy: 14% selected 'health and wellbeing' and 13% selected 'children' as their top priority for policy. Survey 2.

Survey 3 did not include 'health and wellbeing'. In its place, concerns and priorities included either 'children' (for 50% of participants) or 'children's physical health and mental wellbeing' (for the other 50% of participants).

### Findings from Survey 3:

- climate change concerns: the proportion selecting children and 'children's physical health and mental wellbeing' as their single most important concern were 10% and 14% respectively.
- priorities for climate policy: 10% selected 'children' and 14% selected 'children's physical health and mental wellbeing' as their top priority for policy (See Figure 1).
- the inclusion of either 'children' or 'children's physical health and mental wellbeing' did not significantly change the pattern of priorities for climate policies.
- while the proportion selecting children's health was higher than the proportion selecting children, the inclusion of children or children's health as potential policy priorities did not significantly change the overall pattern of choices.
- as in Surveys 1 and 2, the greatest public concerns about climate change related to its impacts on the resources everyone relies on, like food and water, and on animals and nature. Similarly, as in Surveys 1 and 2, the public's priorities for policies were ones that addressed the effects of climate change on essential resources and on animals and nature.

**Figure 1: Climate change plans: 'If you had to choose one of the sets of plans below, which would you most like the government to focus on? Please select one'.**



**Finding 2: parental status is an important predictor of climate change concern and of support for climate policies, including ones that protect future generations.**

Findings:

- Parents are significantly more concerned than non-parents about climate change than non-parents ( $p < 0.05$ ; analyses took account of other sociodemographic factors). Surveys 1 and 2.
- Parents are significantly more concerned than non-parents about the impact of climate change on children and future generations ( $p < 0.05$ ; analyses took account of other sociodemographic factors). Survey 3.
- Parents are significantly more likely to select children/children’s health as their top priority for climate policies ( $p < 0.001$ ; analyses took account of other sociodemographic factors). However, as among non-parents, the two most frequently selected priorities for climate policies were essential resources like food

and water, and animals and nature. Survey 3.

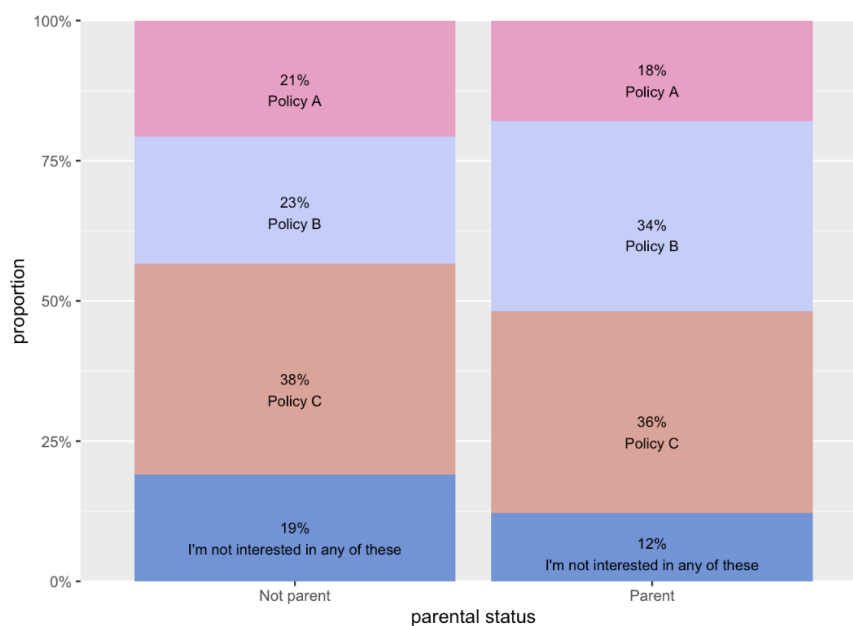
- Among both parents and non-parents, there is a strong preference for climate policies that protect future generations. A large majority (65%) of survey participants selected policies from which their generation benefited least (so selected Policy B or Policy C).
- However, parents exhibited a significantly greater preference for Policy B (Box 4 and Box 5 below). Under this policy scenario, benefits for their generation would be entirely foregone and, instead, benefits would be deferred to their children’s and grandchildren’s generations ( $p < 0.05$ ; analyses took account of other sociodemographic factors). See Figure 2. Surveys 2 and 3.

**Box 5: Policy B**

Policy B would save:

- 0 lives in your generation
- 3 million lives in your children's generation
- 3 million lives in your grandchildren's generation

**Figure 2: Intergenerational time preferences for climate change policies (n=2027)**



## Study limitations

Firstly, like much of the evidence on public perspectives on climate change, our study is based on online surveys.

With respect to policy preferences, our project gives insight into how participants responded to a range of options presented in a survey – rather than what they would do if presented with real policy proposals. However, as noted in the Treasury’s Green Book on policy appraisal, people’s stated preferences are often the only source of guidance for policy making [20].

Secondly, for this short project, and for the one on which it built [9], there was no qualitative study through which participants could express their views in their own words and in greater depth.

Aware of this gap, we undertook a scoping review of qualitative studies of parental perspectives on climate change. The review found a dearth of qualitative studies of the general population. The participants in the studies were disproportionately drawn from those actively engaged in climate change issues. In studies providing socio-demographic information, most participants were socially advantaged.

What is lacking is qualitative evidence relating to the broader population. This is an urgent gap to fill. The quantitative evidence from our project points to parents’ strong preference for policies with deferred benefits. Understanding these intergenerational time preferences could provide a critical resource for climate policies, including ones with a public health focus, where the costs are carried by today’s adults to protect the wellbeing of those living in the future.

Thirdly, the surveys focus on adults aged  $\geq 18$  years. Young people over the age of 16 were consulted through the public involvement arm of our research. However, children and young people under the age of 18 were not directly represented in the study.

## Implications of the findings

The public's engagement in climate change and their support for climate action are recognised to be prerequisites for achieving the government's ambitious climate change goals [16].

The findings of this PH-PRU project have two implications for health and climate policies that seek to engage the public.

Firstly, the findings indicate that a focus on health – with or without a focus on children – is unlikely to be the most effective way of engaging the public in climate change or building public support for climate action.

It confirms that neither health nor child health ranked as highly as other concerns people have about climate change. Additionally, neither were among the issues that people identified as priorities for action. The picture was similar for a focus on children; other concerns and priorities took precedence. Instead, across the two projects, we found that people's concerns about climate change and their priorities for climate policies focused on essential resources like food and water and on the wider natural environment (animals and nature).

Secondly, the project points to the potential for the health and climate change policy community to engage with parents. Parents report heightened concerns about climate change and express strong preferences for policies that bring benefits to children and future generations. Currently, the parental voice is represented via voluntary sector engagement in climate change [21-23]. But, to our knowledge, parental perspectives have yet to be systematically invited and integrated into the evidence

base of climate policy, including into the delivery of Net Zero.

Our study provides compelling evidence to do so. While most participants in our surveys reported concerns about climate change and about its impacts on children, the proportions were larger among parents than non-parents. Parents also lead the public in supporting future-facing climate policies, with distinctive intergenerational time preferences that favour children and future generations over the current generation of adults.

Parents are a large sub-group of the adult population. In our representative surveys of adults aged  $\geq 18$ , the majority of participants were parents - and over one in four parents had grandchildren – and their social profile was in line with the wider adult population.

In the UK systems of governance in which children have little direct influence [24-26], parents also represent the interests of today's children and tomorrow's adults [27].

Engaging with this constituency at local and national level could provide a springboard for turning public concerns about climate change into policy action.

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## Appendix

### Questions from survey 1.

How concerned, if at all, are you about climate change?

- Very concerned
- Fairly concerned
- Not very concerned
- Not at all concerned
- Don't know

**EITHER: When you think about what might happen as a result of climate change, which of the following concern you the most? You can pick up to three.**

- How it might affect people's health and wellbeing
- How it might affect animals and nature
- How it might affect people's livelihoods and standard of living
- How it might affect the resources (e.g., food, water) we all rely on
- How it might affect migration (people having to move)
- How it might affect social unrest and tension
- How it might affect transport and travel
- How it might affect people's homes
- How it might affect children
- How it might unfairly affect people who are more vulnerable
- Other, please specify
- None of the above
- Don't know

**OR: When you think about what might happen as a result of climate change, which of the following concern you the most? You can pick up to three.**

- How it might affect my health and wellbeing
- How it might affect the animals and nature around me
- How it might affect my livelihood and standard of living
- How it might affect the resources (e.g., food, water) I rely on
- How it might affect migration (people having to move) in my local area
- How it might affect social unrest and tensions in my local area
- How it might affect transport and how I travel
- How it might affect my home
- How it might affect the children in my family
- How it might unfairly affect people I know who are more vulnerable
- Other, please specify
- None of the above
- Don't know

## Questions from survey 2.

To begin with, how concerned, if at all, are you about climate change?

- Very concerned
- Fairly concerned
- Not very concerned
- Not at all concerned
- Don't know

If you had a say in making plans to deal with climate change, which of the following would you most want to focus on? Please take the time to rank each of these from 1 (largest focus) to 6 (least focus), filling each box with your choice of number.

- People's jobs and living standards
- Health and wellbeing
- Children
- The animals and nature around us
- The resources we rely on (e.g., food, water)
- Those who are struggling to make ends meet

**\*Thinking still about climate plans, the government is considering three plans that will save many lives in the UK, but the amount of lives may differ across generations. Each plan would start next year, would be in place for 30 years, and cost the same amount - but only one can be afforded.**

**POLICY A** would save:

- 3 million lives in your generation
- 2 million lives in your children's generation
- 1 million lives in your grandchildren's generation

**POLICY B** would save:

- 0 lives in your generation
- 3 million lives in your children's generation
- 3 million lives in your grandchildren's generation

**POLICY C** would save:

- 1 million lives in your generation
- 2 million lives in your children's generation
- 3 million lives in your grandchildren's generation

**Which, if any, of the above would you prefer?**

- Policy A
- Policy B
- Policy C
- I'm not interested in any of these

\*Question also asked in Survey 3

### Questions from survey 3

**EITHER: If you had to choose one of the sets of plans below, which would you most like the government to focus on? Please select one.**

- Plans to deal with the effects of climate change on children's physical health and mental wellbeing
- Plans to deal with the effects of climate change on animals, wildlife, and nature
- Plans to deal with the effects of climate change on the resources which everyone relies on, like food and water
- None of the above
- Don't know
- 

**OR: If you had to choose one of the sets of plans below, which would you most like the government to focus on? Please select one.**

- Plans to deal with the effects of climate change on children
- Plans to deal with the effects of climate change on animals, wildlife, and nature
- Plans to deal with the effects of climate change on the resources which everyone relies on, like food and water
- None of the above
- Don't know

**How concerned, if at all, are you about climate change for children?**

- Very concerned
- Fairly concerned
- Not very concerned
- Not at all concerned
- Don't know

**When you think about climate change, do any of the following concern you for children and future generations? Please tick all that apply.**

- The effect of climate change on their job opportunities and quality of life
- The effect of climate change on their physical health and mental wellbeing
- The effect of climate change on the resources they rely on, like food and water
- The effect of climate change on the animals, wildlife, and nature around them
- The effect of climate change on unfairness and inequality in society
- The effect of climate change on increasing natural disasters and extreme weather events
- The effect of climate change on leisure activities and holidays
- Other, please specify
- None of the above
- Don't know