



What people really think about the environment

an analysis of public opinion

We are living with the effects of what has been called the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s.¹ One in twelve in the UK is now out of a job² and the costs of basic necessities such as food and energy are rising.³ In the face of such economic challenges, there is a perception that the public no longer cares about climate change, or living more sustainably.

The argument that environmental goals are at odds with what ordinary people want is gaining ground. Media coverage perpetuates this tale, pitting hardworking families against green policies with misleading headlines such as “Green taxes could force one in four into fuel poverty.”⁴

However, the reality of public opinion on environmental issues is more positive and more complex. Although it has declined somewhat,⁵ support for action on climate change remains strong, and austerity has made saving energy and cutting waste more normal and important.⁶ Most people want their lifestyles to be both green and affordable: the challenge for government is to devise policies that make this possible.

Concern about climate change

There's no question that, when asked to choose which issue is most important, more people now say "the economy" and fewer say "environmental issues" than before the financial crisis. At its January 2007 peak, 19 per cent of the population rated the environment as the most important issue facing the country.⁷ In the face of the economic downturn, this has slid to below four per cent.⁸ Given the dramatic nature of the economic crisis, the direct effects felt by many, and the sustained media focus, it is hardly surprising that, when asked to choose one issue, people choose this. But, as Paul Flattery, managing partner at trend analysts Trajectory has said, "this doesn't mean that people don't care" about the environment and climate change.

In fact, in 2010, 71 per cent of people were still very concerned or fairly concerned about climate change, and two thirds believe that it poses risks to people in Britain.⁹ And the number of people who think climate change is a 'very serious' problem has begun to rise again from 43 per cent in 2010 to 49 per cent in 2011.¹⁰ When asked about the greatest problems facing the world (rather than just Britain) people in the UK are more concerned about climate change than the economy. Forty four per cent of respondents to a 2011

Eurobarometer survey said that climate change was the single biggest problem facing the world, while 39 per cent said the economic situation.¹¹ This represents a shift from 2008 (when 57 per cent said climate change and 24 per cent the economy), but shows that UK citizens still view climate change as the greater global priority.¹²

However, framing the question in terms of absolutes and asking people to choose which single issue matters most will always provide overly simplistic answers. Asking people to rate the importance of the economy vs environment is likely to underplay the seriousness of environmental challenges. In reality, they are indivisible, as a successful economy is fundamentally dependent on a healthy environment for raw materials, resources such as water, and a stable climate.

Green behaviour is on the rise

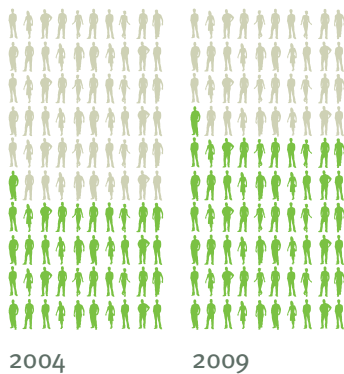
In terms of UK policy decisions, abstract concern about climate change is not as relevant as people's feelings about solutions. When it comes to green behaviours, we can see that interest and action is growing.

The number of people in the UK claiming to take energy efficiency measures has steadily increased in recent years, from 41 per cent in 2004 to 61 per cent in 2009.¹³ DECC figures show that the number of homes with loft insulation thicker than 125mm increased from 9.5 million in April 2007 to 13.4 million in July 2011, largely due to DIY and professional installations in existing homes.¹⁴

After a nationwide series of deliberative forums about micro-renewables and energy efficiency in 2009, Ipsos MORI concluded that "Householders are excited by the new technologies, considering them technologies of the future and, in general terms, a 'no brainer'".¹⁵ There is also enthusiasm for a shift in the way we pay for energy, with 61 per cent of UK respondents to a 2011 Eurobarometer survey agreeing with the statement that "taxation should be based more on the way we use energy."¹⁶

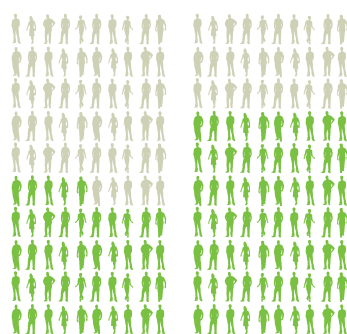
Recycling has become normal practice in the last decade thanks to a mixture of better infrastructure and education (driven by the landfill tax and EU directives). Forty per cent of household waste in England is now recycled.¹⁷ In 2004, 45 per cent of English householders classed themselves as "committed recyclers"; by 2011 this had risen to 70 per cent.¹⁸

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Energy and water

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idea of wasting food.²⁰ The volume of food waste thrown away decreased by 13 per cent between 2006-07 and 2010, saving consumers at least £2.5 billion a year.²¹ There is also an appetite for better food recycling services from councils: three-quarters of people surveyed by

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Friends of the Earth in 2011 believed that all councils should provide separate food waste collections.²²

The main thing stopping more householders from recycling leftover food is a lack of relevant bins and collection service, which was cited by a fifth of respondents to a 2011 YouGov poll.²³

British consumers are also buying more green products. Expenditure on “green goods and services” has grown by 18 per cent between 2007 and 2009, despite the economic downturn, according to The Co-operative’s 2010

ethical consumerism report.²⁴ In 2011 The Co-operative found an increase in what they describe as ‘green home expenditure’ of 13.9 per cent between 2009 and 2010, and ‘eco-travel and transport’ rose by 17.8 per cent in the same period.²⁵

Not just a luxury

It would be wrong to assume that it is just the middle classes who care about sustainability and are taking these green actions. In fact, in an Asda survey, their customers on the lowest incomes, from socio-economic categories D and E, were the most likely of all groups to say they ‘care very much indeed’ about being green.²⁶

Many sustainable behaviours have become normal even in households that are struggling financially. The Asda survey respondents on lower incomes were as likely as the wealthiest groups to say that using less energy and water at home was “normal” or “intelligent”, with 67 per cent holding this view. Lower income customers were also as likely as their wealthier counterparts to say that it is “intelligent” to drive a greener car and avoid flying on holiday (20 per cent and ten per cent respectively).²⁷

This interest in sustainable living from people who are less well-off clearly derives, to some extent, from an interest in saving money. Many behaviours that have a lower impact on the planet also make less of a dent in people’s finances. As the Asda report says “Austerity Britain hasn’t pushed green issues off the agenda, instead it’s made saving energy and cutting waste...the new normal.”

But this is not the only motivation. Wanting to ‘do the right thing’ is the main reason that Asda customers gave for buying green products, across all income brackets.²⁸ On average 79 per cent said this was their primary motivation. And this feel good factor is most powerful for lower income households (83 per cent).

Interest in green living also extends to the half of the population who belong to socio-economic categories C1 (lower end white collar workers) and C2 (skilled manual workers). They are only marginally less interested in sustainable living than their poorer and wealthier counterparts.²⁹ This is important politically as, according to *The Economist*, this “misinterpreted middle” is crucial to deciding elections.³⁰

Rising energy bills

The sharp increase in energy costs in 2011, caused mainly by rising gas prices,³¹ created a new focal point for the debate around public opinion of environmental measures, with some media outlets including the *Daily Mail* incorrectly blaming green levies for the rise.³²

However, respondents to Asda’s customer survey weren’t taken in by this coverage; only five per cent held new renewable energy and energy efficiency measures responsible for rising bills. The majority of respondents (56 per cent) said they thought energy companies were just charging more, and 29 per cent blamed the rises in global gas, oil and coal prices.³³



Solar energy
74 per cent of adults think government should use more solar energy than at present³⁴

Moreover, a recent YouGov survey commissioned by *The Sunday Times* showed that there was overwhelming support for renewable technologies; 74 per cent of adults think government should use more solar energy than at present, and 60 per cent of respondents said government is right to subsidise wind energy.³⁴

Leadership and the role of government

It's clear that the public cares about environmental issues and has begun to take action, but people do not think that they can solve climate change and other environmental problems alone. They expect government and businesses to take the lead and to reciprocate. In 2010, 32 per cent of people thought national governments should be mainly responsible for taking action on climate change, followed by the international community (30 per cent) and then companies (16 per cent). Only ten per cent said they thought individuals and their families should be mainly responsible.³⁵

Ipsos MORI conducted deliberative interviews about energy use in nine communities around the UK in 2009.³⁶ One of the main conclusions was that people wanted government leadership and direction to put individual actions in context and to make progress coherent and fair. According to the report, "a majority of participants" wanted the government to explain why a shift in energy use is needed in clear simple terms, set out "concrete goals for society and a deadline", and "explain how government, businesses and individuals will all need to participate." This ties into research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation which found that "While no-one especially liked the idea of regulation [to reduce carbon emissions] in

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itself, there was nevertheless a strong feeling that if households were going to make efforts or sacrifices in order to reduce consumption then everyone should be required to do so."³⁷

Research also suggests that government has a central role in setting out the positive future that green behaviours can help to build. Studies have repeatedly shown that people are more motivated by the prospect of a positive

low carbon future, than by thinking about an unwieldy, distant problem.³⁸ This is because "climate change is still psychologically quite distant for people in both geographic and temporal terms" says Professor Nick Pidgeon, director of the Understanding Risk Research Group at Cardiff University. He also suggests that people may "have become a bit bored at hearing about climate change all of the time",³⁹ echoing the findings of an IPPR report which argues that apocalyptic scenarios, coupled with a lack of visible change in the environment, can cause 'climate change fatigue'.⁴⁰

Concrete steps towards a sustainable future, on the other hand, are seen as more interesting⁴¹ suggesting that government policy should aim to show that green policies are helping to build a positive future, as well as dealing with a challenge.

Policy makers can take different approaches to supporting green behaviour. They can incentivise certain actions, or discourage them by making them more difficult or more expensive, or they can ban them altogether. A recent global survey by Ipsos MORI examined public attitudes to behaviour change measures across four issues: smoking, eating unhealthy foods, pensions and living in a sustainable way. It found that global public support for incentivising certain behaviours or providing information to encourage them was high (87 per cent and 92 per cent respectively) as might be expected, and varied little between countries. More surprisingly, the survey found that support for interventionist measures, such as banning certain behaviours altogether, was also relatively high. Support stood at 62 per cent globally and 49 per cent in the UK.⁴² Overall, research shows that enabling people to make changes by making them easy is one of the most effective things government can do to secure behaviour change.⁴³



Leadership
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Green consumers

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Research suggests that consumers also support decisive intervention by business to help them make greener choices. When asked about buying greener products, 50 per cent of respondents to Asda’s sustainability survey said they would be willing to accept less choice if it would help the environment, and if products were the same quality and everyday low prices.⁴⁴ Forty eight per cent said that in future they want all products made greener so they don’t have to choose.

A public mandate

The evidence shows that public concern about climate change, and the desire to live more sustainably, remains strong. It is weathering the economic storm, rather than being obliterated by it.

Moreover, people of all income brackets report an interest in sustainable living, demonstrating that it is not an exclusively middle class pursuit. There is a high degree of support for green economic policies such as investment in renewables, and respondents to

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Asda’s survey, at least, have not been taken in by tabloid alarmism blaming these policies for rising energy bills.

So, at a time when the roadblocks to environmental progress might seem more immovable than ever before, opinion polls are an unlikely source of optimism that show continued public support for environmental action at an individual, national and global level. Government and business leaders should

respond to this, providing the ambition and leadership that the public is looking for.

Opinion polls and surveys also show that people are largely willing for, and actually expect, government and businesses to take a bigger role in moving them towards green living. Specifically, they expect government to set out a vision of a sustainable future that their policies will help to build, and to help citizens to play their part by making greener choices easier.

However, it is not clear that government policies are responding to these messages. As a result, they risk failure. The forthcoming Green Deal energy efficiency scheme and the smart meter roll out present a once in a generation opportunity to talk to everyone in the country about their energy use. A variety of groups are urging the government to provide a narrative that will make these opportunities relevant to householders and their everyday lives, in line with the big picture which, the evidence shows, the public is looking for. But it is not yet

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clear whether the comprehensive communications strategy necessary to make these initiatives a success will be delivered.

The other clear message from public opinion is that government needs to help people make green choices. But the government’s Green Deal proposals, as they currently stand, will do little to make energy efficiency home improvements easy. Although it will provide a financial mechanism to

overcome the upfront cost barriers, it will rely on people seeking out information themselves and choosing to be involved. The pro-activity this requires creates a risk of failure, as people will not necessarily see the Green Deal as something that helps them to make green choices.

For businesses, the evidence shows that they have a mandate to take their customers on a journey in which some of the complex choices involved in ‘buying green’ are made for

them. People across the socio-economic spectrum still care about being green, and they want businesses to do some of the legwork for them.

Businesses and the government spend significant amounts of time and money attempting to determine the public appetite for their ideas. Even this brief look at the realities of public opinion highlights the continuing public desire for environmental progress. It lends strength to calls for ambitious solutions and highlights the need to listen to what people say about what would successfully engage them. As a recent Ipsos MORI report argues, leaders need to “combine subtlety with courage” when it comes to changing behaviour.⁴⁵ The evidence brought together here should reassure leaders that the public does care, it should give them further courage to bring about change and provide them with valuable insight about the subtleties of an approach that will secure lasting change.

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Registered charity no 1045395
Company limited by guarantee
(England and Wales) no 3037633

What people really think about the environment: an analysis of public opinion

ISBN 978-1-905869-55-8

This **Green Alliance policy insight** is supported by our Green Living consortium

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Author: Sylvia Rowley, with additional input from Faye Scott.

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