

Ethnicity and UK climate perceptions: Why we need greater diversity in engagement and research



Photo Credit: The Active Well-Being Society (formerly Big Birmingham Bikes) / Ashden

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Climate
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Executive summary

This report brings together preliminary insights on how people of colour in Britain experience, perceive and engage with climate change and climate policy. It outlines why UK climate discourse must better consider the perspectives of different ethnicities and recommends actions that researchers, research funders, insights commissioners and campaigners can take.

Summary

- **People of colour in the UK are disproportionately affected by climate change impacts**, but there is a paucity of research with people of colour around their experience of and engagement with climate change. ‘Nationally representative’ survey samples either don’t contain appropriate quotas for people of colour or do not report them. Even if nationally representative sample sizes are met, the numbers tend to be too low to make meaningful comparisons.
- **The UK climate sector is very unrepresentative in terms of ethnic diversity**, with only around 1 in 20 people working in environmental charities identifying as a person of colour, and campaigns often failing to reach diverse audiences. The voices and perspectives of people of colour should be central to the UK climate discourse, but too often they are not, whether through a lack of representation in opinion data, or a lack of representation in the climate sector itself.
- This report provides **initial observations on the ways in which people of colour in Britain may experience, perceive and engage with climate change**. It draws on data from a CAST opinion survey conducted in 2023 and from the Spotlight research project.
- Compared to white respondents, **people of colour were more likely to say they have experienced climate impacts personally**. They were also **more likely to be concerned about climate change and see it as a serious, urgent threat**. There are also significantly higher climate anxiety levels for people of colour compared to white respondents. As vulnerability to negative climate emotions has implications for mental health and wellbeing, there is a need to better understand the experiences of people of colour, and facilitate wider access to culturally competent support and engagement.

Executive summary

- At the same time, **people of colour reported feeling greater efficacy and hope** and expressed **greater levels of support for several climate change policies** (such as ‘reducing road space for cars and increasing space for cycling and walking’), than white respondents. This mirrors wider [research](#) about the importance of linking climate worry to constructive coping strategies and underscores the importance of diversifying the climate sector, bringing to the fore the experiences of people of colour in climate change engagement.
- **These observations are valuable but the current evidence base is very limited.** Sample sizes don’t allow, for example, robust comparisons to be made between different minority ethnic and racial groups, and this limits their application in campaign and engagement strategies. We therefore **call for a more dedicated focus on the climate views and experiences of people of colour in the UK.** Researchers, research funders, insights commissioners and campaigners have the power to make a positive impact through:
 - 1) **Research funders & insights commissioners:** allocating and distributing budgets to permit truly representative samples, with sufficiently large sample sizes for all ethnicities, and to obtain such samples routinely.
 - 2) **Researchers:** prioritising work which describes a much more nuanced and richer picture of public opinion on climate change, allowing strategists and campaigners to design communications and engagement materials more effectively.
 - 3) **The climate movement:** being better able to meet moral and ethical imperatives for inclusion, address its lack of diversity, and ensure that the stories told about the green transition are truly representative of British society.

A note on terminology:

We recognise that language around ethnicity and race is constantly evolving and there are valid shortcomings and critiques of different terms. Throughout this report, we use the term ‘people of colour’ while simultaneously recognising that no term is without problems, and the use of such ‘catch-all’ terms can in themselves obscure diversity.

Our use of terminology follows recent publications (such as the [‘Spotlight’](#) report). Other terminology may be used on occasion to ensure consistency with secondary resources and data.

Introduction: Ethnicity and climate change

Climate change is a global problem. However, contributions towards and experiences of the impacts of climate change are not distributed equally across the world. The disparity between the highest and lowest per capita emissions is stark: at a global level, the top one percent of emitters are responsible for more carbon emissions than the poorest 66%, and have a carbon footprint over 1000 times greater than the bottom one percent.

According to the IPCC, nearly half of the global population – between 3.3 and 3.6 billion people – live in areas that are highly vulnerable to climate change, with factors like migration, growing inequality and urbanisation exposing more and more people to climate risks. These vulnerabilities are exacerbated by inequity and marginalisation linked to a range of intersecting factors. These include gender, income, disability, religion, sexuality and age, as well as ethnicity and race.

Where wealthier, predominantly white communities, can escape the impacts of the environmental emergency, low-income communities and people of colour, otherwise known as the ‘multiracial working class’, often cannot. Furthermore, the history of climate change is inextricably bound up with the extraction of resources that has often been achieved through colonial systems and structures.

As summarised by Dr Halima Begum, the CEO of Runnymede Trust: “People of colour are most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, whilst being least responsible for environmental degradation and carbon emissions.”



People of colour in Britain are more vulnerable to climate impacts

Race and ethnicity do not only create climate inequalities at an international level. Also at the national level, within the UK, people of colour are disproportionately affected by climate and environmental impacts.

For example, people of colour experience greater direct exposure to heat and flood risks, as well as related compounding risks such as increased air pollution, poorer river quality, and closer proximity to polluted industrial sites in urban areas.

People of colour are also less likely to have easy and open access to good quality, safe green spaces. An independent review commissioned by the Government found that many British people (of all ethnicities) saw the countryside as a 'white environment'.

Black and ethnic minority families in England also tend to experience higher rates of fuel poverty than their neighbours. In the two years to March 2021, an average of 12.6% of white households experienced fuel poverty compared to 19.1% of Black and ethnic minority households.

Black and ethnic minority households are also more than twice as likely to be living in deep poverty compared with white households. Black adults, in particular, show a considerably greater likelihood of being vulnerable to financial shocks than the average UK adult. Therefore, people of colour are not only structurally predisposed to disproportionate climate change impacts but also have reduced means to withstand climate impacts.

And finally, while people of colour in the UK tend to live in areas more vulnerable to climate impacts, these more vulnerable areas typically also have considerably lower carbon footprints than the UK average.

Given that people of colour are more exposed to climate risks than white individuals in Britain, do they experience, perceive and engage with climate change differently? This question is yet to be answered.

People of colour are under-represented in climate discourse

The perspectives of people of colour receive minimal attention in UK climate discourse, due to lack of representation in research and professional roles in the climate sector.

In the regular surveys of public climate change perceptions conducted in the UK by commercial polling companies, ethnicity is typically not used to determine the representativeness of samples or even reported. If a poll does obtain a representative sample according to ethnicity, the total sample size (often 1,000-2,000 people) may well be too small to make meaningful comparisons between different ethnic groups.

Additionally, as emphatically demonstrated in the recent Race Report 2023, the UK climate sector is unrepresentative in terms of ethnic diversity. While around 18% of people in England and Wales identify as 'non-white', only around 1 in 20 people (5%) working in environmental charities identify as belonging to an ethnic minority.

A recent study conducted in Bristol showed that in discussions about the transition to net zero, men and women of colour spoke 1% and 2% of the time respectively, while white men spoke 64% of the time and white women spoke 33% of the time.

There are many initiatives led by people of colour focused on diversifying the ethnicities represented in climate discourse (e.g. the Climate Reframe network), and there is starting to be recognition and awareness within the climate sector of its lack of diversity.

However, there is a need for much bolder and disruptive change and to build a movement that is truly representative of British society. To do so, we need a much richer evidence base on how people of colour experience, perceive and engage with climate change in the UK.

What does the existing data tell us?

The only large-scale survey research to date that focuses solely on people of colour in Britain and their experiences of climate change is [the Spotlight project](#). This analysis shows that awareness and reported experience of climate change is very high:

- 92% of people of colour believe that climate change is happening, and a further 84% believe that climate change is partly or entirely caused by human activity.
- 83% are concerned about climate change and 85% are 'really worried' about the impact of climate change in 'places other than the UK'.
- 61% report experiencing impacts of climate change, such as flooding and health impacts from extreme heat.

These statistics are broadly in line with those found in polling of the wider British public. For instance, polling from the same year shows similar levels of [concern](#) (84%) and [belief that the climate is changing](#) (82-85%) in the general population. That said, polling of the general public shows lower concern about the threat of climate change *outside* the UK, with only [68% of respondents in CAST polling](#) saying that climate change posed a 'very' or 'extremely' serious threat to people in developing countries.

This report presents a rapid scoping review on the topic of ethnic diversity and climate change perspectives, with insights from the Spotlight project and the CAST climate views survey.

More detail on the datasets:

1) CAST climate views survey – This cross-cultural survey, repeated yearly since 2020, asks members of the public about their actions, beliefs and opinions in relation to a range of climate issues. Wave 4, collected in October and November 2023, included a UK national sample (with quotas for gender, age, region and socioeconomic status) plus a booster sample of ethnic minority UK residents. Ahead of analysis, valid responses from the national and booster samples were combined into a single dataset (N = 1298), where 60% were white British (n = 784) and 32% were people of colour (n = 410, comprising UK residents who identified as Asian/Asian British; Black/Black British; or Mixed – e.g. White & Asian, White & Black). Due to the limitation of small sample sizes for some ethnic groups in the dataset (e.g. Asian/Asian British; Black/Black British), respondents were combined into two larger groups – ‘People of colour’ and ‘White’ respondents (comprising white British respondents, specifically) – which formed the basis of the present analysis (the combined number of respondents from these two groups was n=1194). While the present data only allowed for these very high-level comparisons, we recognise that people of colour in the UK are not a homogenous group and such a grouping may hide differences between diverse ethnic groups. Significant differences reported are based on t-tests, where the confidence level was 99.5%. Further information about the CAST survey methodology is provided [online](#).

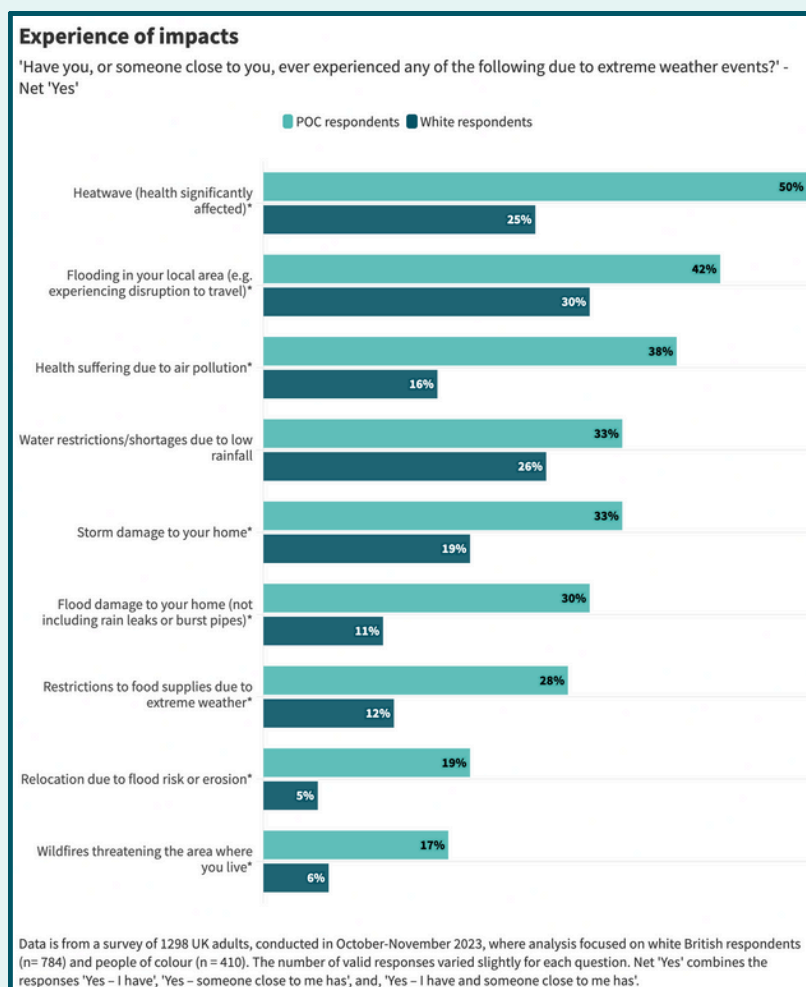
2) Spotlight: How people of colour experience and engage with climate change in Britain – UK residents identifying as people of colour aged 18 years or over (N = 1,008) participated in an online survey in March 2022. Respondents were from a broad range of ethnicities, with the two largest groups being Asian/Asian British (50%) and Black/Black British (30%). Additional data analysis was provided for this CAST report by Dr Charles Ogunbode (University of Nottingham), who led the original work with Dr Jeremy Kidwell (University of Birmingham). The [original project report](#), as well as [information on the survey instrument and underlying data](#), are available online.

Breakdowns of the key sample characteristics (including ethnicity) of each data set, are provided in the appendix.

Social, economic, health and environmental issues are interconnected. For example, through disproportionately high mortality rates among people of colour, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the grave consequences of socio-economic and environmental inequalities created by entrenched structural racism and discrimination. Climate communication initiatives should highlight these interconnections to contextualise climate change within concerns that are already a priority for British people of colour.

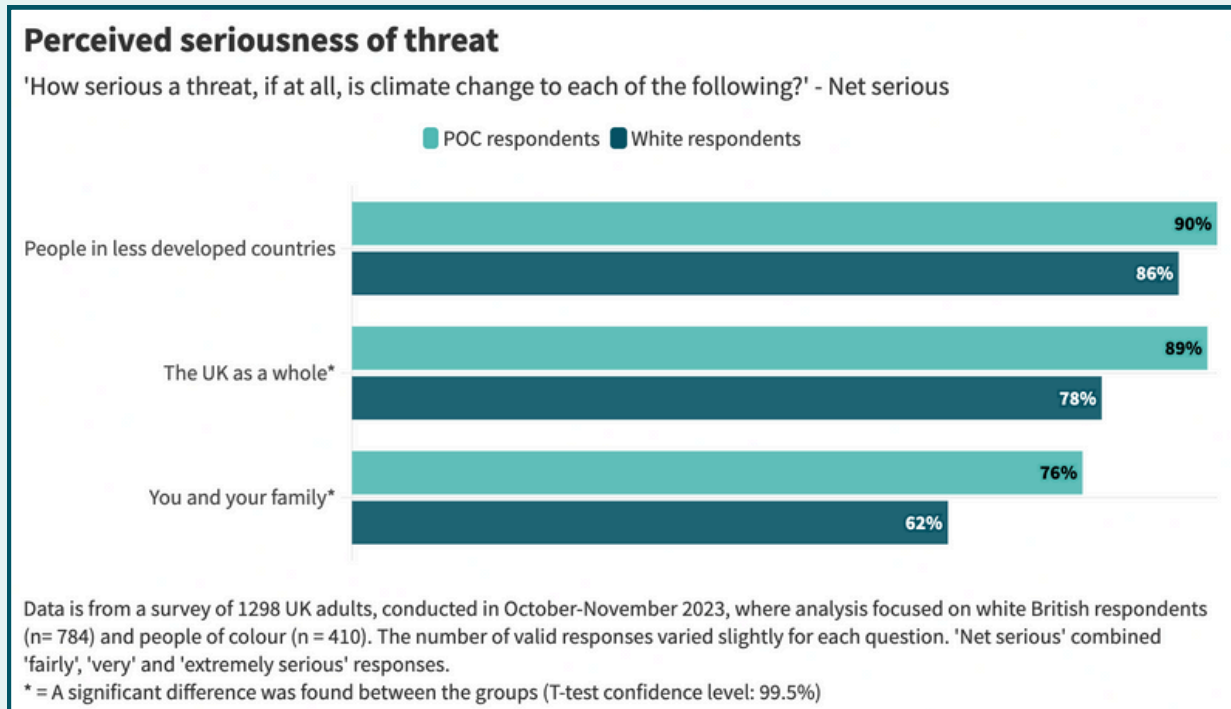
People of colour report experiencing more climate impacts, urgency and anxiety

People of colour in the CAST survey reported significantly greater **personal experiences of climate impacts**. Compared to white respondents, significantly more people of colour said that they, or someone close to them, had experienced flood and storm damage to their homes, flooding in local areas (e.g. experiencing disruption to travel), relocation due to flood risk or erosion, water restrictions/shortages due to low rainfall, heatwaves (where their health was significantly affected), wildfires threatening the area where they live, restrictions to food supplies due to extreme weather, and their health suffering due to air pollution.



Graphic 2: Data on 'experience of impacts' from a survey of 1298 UK adults, conducted in October-November 2023, where analysis focused on white British respondents (n= 784) and people of colour (n = 410).

People of colour in our analysis also perceived climate impacts as more serious and urgent. The CAST survey asked respondents “How **serious** a threat do you think climate change poses towards the following...?”. Compared with white respondents, a higher proportion of people of colour reported perceiving serious impacts towards ‘[them] and [their] family’ (76%), ‘the country as a whole’ (89%) and ‘people in less developed countries’ (90%).



Graphic 3: Data on ‘perceived seriousness of threat’ from a survey of 1298 UK adults, conducted in October-November 2023, where analysis focused on white British respondents (n= 784) and people of colour (n = 410).

A substantial number of people of colour (61%) said dealing with climate change requires a high or extremely high level of **urgency**¹ and reported significantly higher levels of **fear** (when prompted, 36% of people of colour selected this emotion to describe their feelings about climate change, compared to 28% of white respondents).

Relatedly, there are higher levels of **climate anxiety** amongst people of colour, with significant differences found between people of colour and white respondents for almost all questions about their patterns of worry. More than a third of people of colour (36%) said that concerns about climate change “*undermine [their] ability to work to [their] potential*”², much higher than the 11% of white respondents who said the same. And significantly lower numbers of people of colour (39%, versus 61% of white respondents) said climate change “*never*” affects their ability to concentrate.

While exploratory, these insights broadly aligned with analysis from the Spotlight project. 92% of Spotlight survey respondents said that climate change is happening, 83% were fairly or very worried about climate change, and most (61%) reported having experienced negative impacts from climate change, such as heatwaves, erratic weather and flooding. In both analyses, the most commonly reported experience concerned the health impacts of heat waves.

As vulnerability to negative climate emotions has implications for mental health and wellbeing, there is a need to better understand the experiences of people of colour and facilitate wider access to culturally competent support and engagement.

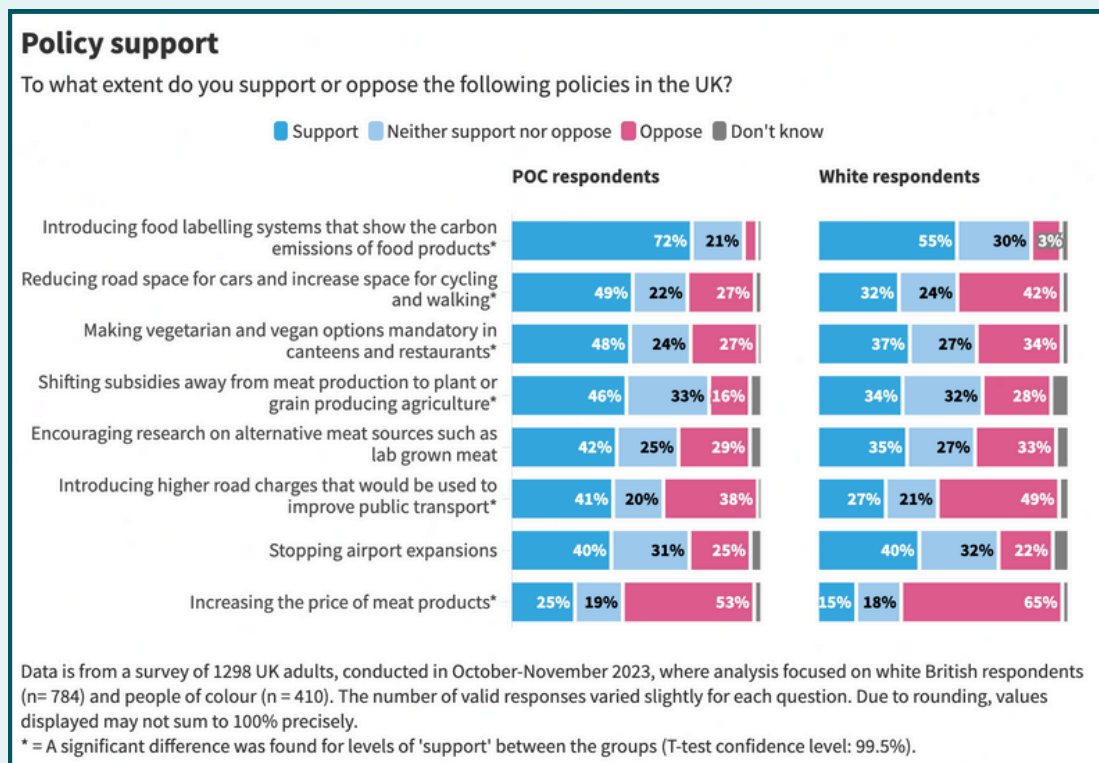
¹ Please note that the only significant difference found in terms of 'net urgency' scores was between Black/Black British (68%, n=93) and white British (54%, n=418).

² Data concerns respondents who reported feeling this 'sometimes', 'often' or 'always'.

People of colour report higher support for some climate policies

Net **support for climate policies** in the CAST survey was significantly higher for people of colour. This included greater support for adding carbon footprint labels to food products, reducing road space for cars and increasing space for walking and cycling, and making vegetarian and vegan options mandatory in canteens and restaurants – as well as policies that increased costs for households and consumers, such as increasing the price of meat products and introducing road charges to fund better public transport.

However, support was lower overall (and opposition notably higher) for policies that increased costs for households and consumers, such as increasing the price of meat products and introducing road charges to fund better public transport, compared to other policies – for both people of colour and white respondents.



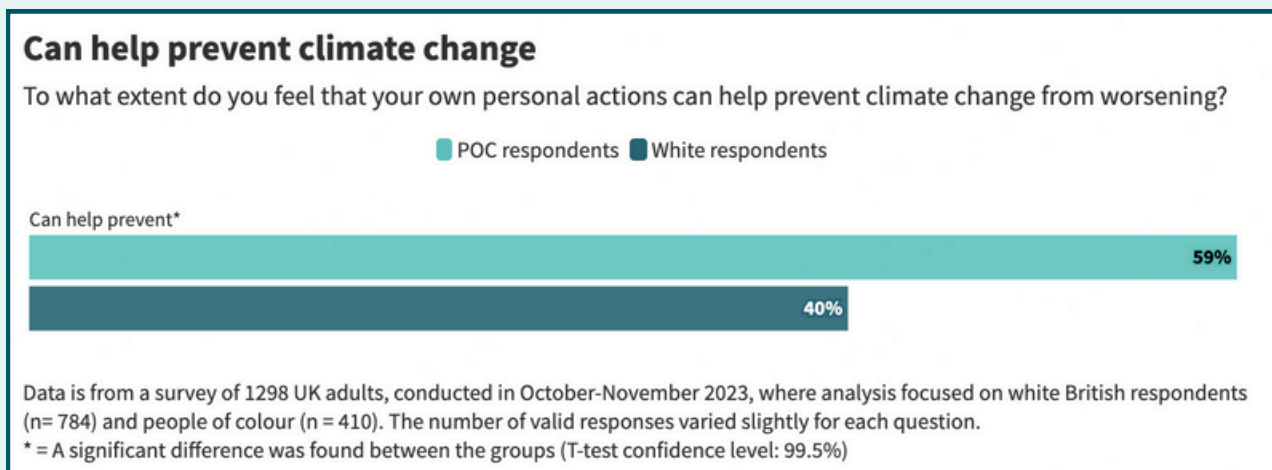
Graphic 4: Data on 'policy support' from a survey of 1298 UK adults, conducted in October-November 2023, where analysis focused on white British respondents (n= 784) and people of colour (n = 410).

These insights align with the Spotlight project, which also found strong support for several climate policies but lower support for policies involving personal financial costs. Measures to incentivise low-carbon transport and renewable energy had particularly high levels of support (over 80%) in the Spotlight analysis. However, there was much lower support for measures that would add to personal household costs, such as increasing the price of electricity to curb consumption (37%).

People of colour report greater efficacy and hope

Despite reporting higher concern, anxiety and more frequent experiences of climate change impacts, people of colour reported significantly higher levels of **hope** – 44% reported feeling very/quite hopeful, compared to 21% of white respondents.

Perceptions of **efficacy** (the belief that our actions, individually or together, can make a difference) were higher in people of colour. In terms of **personal efficacy**, a majority (59%) of people of colour believed their personal actions *can* help tackle climate change, compared to 40% of white respondents. This included 21% of people of colour who felt their actions can help ‘a great deal’, compared to just 9% of white respondents who said this.



Graphic 5: Data on how people feel that their own personal actions ‘can help prevent climate change’ from a survey of 1298 UK adults, conducted in October-November 2023, where analysis focused on white British respondents (n= 784) and people of colour (n = 410).

Collective efficacy was also higher in people of colour. The percentage of respondents who felt it would be ‘impactful’ if everybody performed certain low-carbon behaviours was higher among people of colour regarding using low-carbon heating/cooling systems (46%, versus 33% of white respondents) and driving electric cars (31%, versus 19% of white respondents). Very few people of colour (4%) said that ‘none of these’ actions will have an impact on climate change, compared to 10% of white respondents.

This combination of higher anxiety and worry, alongside higher efficacy and hope, in people of colour may corroborate research exploring the constructive role of worry, especially if it can be linked with tangible pathways to action. Negative climate emotions in the right context can be a form of coping, with efficacy beliefs functioning as an adaptive response. In other words, people of colour may experience negative emotions about climate change which then may guide constructive and empowered responses.

Somewhat surprisingly, given the unequal representation of people of colour in climate discussions and decision-making, people of colour were more likely than white respondents to feel that they **“have a say”** when it comes to acting on climate change: 64% of white respondents agreed with the statement: *“People like me don’t have a say about what to do about climate change”*, compared to 52% of people of colour.

Questions about political representation paint a similar, though bleaker, picture. Significantly more people of colour (29%) than white respondents (16%) agreed that *“My opinions about climate change matter to politicians”*, while 16% of people of colour and 5% of white respondents agreed that *“current climate change policies in [the UK] address the goals that are important to me”*.

Importantly, despite levels of political representation and ‘voice’ in climate matters appearing higher for people of colour compared to white respondents, the wider takeaway is that most people feel they do not have a say and that politicians and policies don’t account for their opinion about climate change.

Conclusions & recommendations: Why and how to better consider ethnicity in UK climate insights

The analyses in this report highlight a range of ways in which people of colour experience, perceive and engage with climate change. Specifically, compared to white respondents, people of colour participating in this research reported greater personal experience of climate impacts; perceived climate impacts as more serious and urgent; reported greater levels of climate anxiety, but also greater levels of hope, efficacy and 'voice' in climate discourse; and displayed higher support for some climate policies.

These observations are valuable, but the evidence base is still limited. It is not possible to draw firm conclusions from this research. Therefore, the report highlights the need to develop a better and more detailed understanding of how the diversity of the British public experiences, perceives and engages with climate change. Specifically, the authors call for climate research that employs larger, more ethnically representative samples, disaggregates the views of different ethnicities and dives deeper into the perspectives of different ethnic groups. The authors also acknowledge the need for better representation of people of colour in climate institutions and conversations.

Better understanding the links between ethnicity and climate experiences, perceptions and engagement matters for at least three reasons:

First, there is a well-established and widely recognised moral and ethical imperative for inclusion that manifests in the diversity, equality and inclusion strategies of most British institutions and sectors. The climate sector is no different, and in fact has further to go than most sectors. To address climate change wholly and inclusively, the climate sector needs to understand and reflect the perspectives of people of colour as central (and climate policies need to reflect this too). That includes ensuring a fuller representation of people of colour in data and insights, as well as in institutions. Knowing more about how people of colour engage with climate change is crucial for building a truly representative climate movement.

Second, the limited evidence base on how people of colour engage with climate change restricts the 'ownership' of the transition story in wider society. This preliminary analysis suggests that people of colour are more likely to be worried and anxious about climate change, and more likely to support many climate policies, than white individuals in Britain. Therefore, people of colour are a potentially highly engaged group, motivated to do more on climate change and achieve 'just' climate outcomes; but if they are systematically excluded from the climate story, then the breadth of society that can contribute to a fair, green transition is limited.

Third, climate communication and engagement strategies are more effective when they understand the perspectives of different British ethnic groups. White British audiences should not be the 'default' for climate campaigns, but that can easily become the case if important dimensions such as ethnicity, as well as other intersecting identities, are ignored or homogenised in the data.

Three sets of recommendations for specific audiences are outlined below.

Recommendations

RESEARCH FUNDERS AND INSIGHTS COMMISSIONERS:

- Ensure that funding for opinion research reflects the **costs of collecting samples that are fully representative of ethnicity in the UK**, to accommodate sizeable samples of minority ethnic and racial groups and allow meaningful comparisons to be made.
- **Fund work led by diverse organisations and researchers** and projects that focus on the climate change perceptions and experiences of different communities of colour within the UK. In this way, funders can positively impact the 'culture' of commissioning by giving more support and acknowledgement to research that deepens understanding of how people of colour engage with climate change in the UK.
- **Prioritise data-commissioning budgets for polling companies that commit to providing more representative ethnicity samples**, to positively influence polling companies by providing clear expectations around sampling on ethnicity.

RESEARCHERS WITHIN UNIVERSITIES AND INSIGHTS SPECIALISTS WORKING OUTSIDE OF ACADEMIA:

- At a minimum, ensure that ethnicity is among the variables included when recruiting a sample that aims to be 'nationally representative'. **Quotas need to match national statistics of at least the major ethnic groups** within the UK and ensure that sample sizes are large enough to enable a meaningful analysis. Where possible, sample sizes should be increased to allow for more meaningful inclusion of participants across all ethnic groups. Support can also be given to 'deep dive' projects using qualitative, quantitative and participatory or co-produced methods to explore specific communities' experiences.
- **Consider more consciously the ways in which ethnicity could impact your research design, findings and conclusions, and communicate its importance to research funders and polling companies/survey panel suppliers.** Ensure a diverse and inclusive range of response options is provided in any demographic questions about ethnicity and provide open-ended text entry so respondents can add further information if they wish to.
- **Consider the subtleties and sensitivities of looking at ethnicity differences** in your analyses – the most revealing research questions will be sensitive to regional and socio-economic context, as well as other intersecting identities (and not be limited to 'white vs people of colour' comparisons).

CAMPAIGNERS AND CAMPAIGN STRATEGISTS IN THE CLIMATE MOVEMENT:

- **Develop campaigns and tell stories that reflect how British people of colour experience, perceive and engage with climate change** – for example, by partnering with or amplifying the work of organisations and individuals from different communities.
- **Work with insights commissioners** to build a more ethnically diverse and inclusive body of research around different people's experiences of climate change.
- **Make efforts to ensure your own organisation is inclusive and diverse** so that all ethnicities feel welcome and represented in the climate movement. This may involve actively reaching out to under-represented groups and supporting their participation.

Further reading

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1 - Sample characteristics

	CAST Wave 4	Spotlight
<i>Sample</i>	Online sample combining national sample (with quotas for gender, age, region and socioeconomic status) and booster sample of British people of colour (N= 1298), collected November 2023. For the analysis, we focused on a sub-sample of the dataset (n=1194) comprising people of colour in the UK (n=410) and white British respondents (n=784).	Online sample of people of colour in the UK aged 18 years or over (N = 1,008) recruited to participate in the final survey in March 2022.
<i>Ethnicity</i>	<p>Ethnicity breakdown for the total sample (N=1298):</p> <p>Asian/ Asian British - 15% Black/ Black British - 11% Mixed (e.g. White & Asian, White & Black) - 5% White British - 60% White Irish/ White Other - 5% Other - 3% Prefer not to say - 0%</p> <p>Total people of colour (Asian/Asian British, Black/Black British, and Mixed (e.g. White & Asian, White & Black)) - 32% (n=410)</p>	<p>Asian - 50.2% Indian - 16.8% Pakistani - 14.1% Chinese - 7.1% Bangladeshi - 5.1% Other - 7.1% Black - 29.7% African - 20.5% Caribbean - 8.5% Other - 0.7% Mixed - 15.9% White and Black Caribbean - 6.3% White and Asian - 4.4% White and Black African - 2.5% White and Arab - 0.4% Other - 2.3% Middle Eastern or Arab - 2.3% Latinx or Hispanic - 1.1% Other - 0.9%</p>

(Table continued on next page)

Appendix

<p><i>Gender</i></p>	<p>Total Sample: Female - 53% Male - 47%</p> <p>People of colour: Female - 55% Male - 44%</p>	<p>Female - 51.4% Male - 46.8%</p>
<p><i>Age</i></p>	<p>Total sample: 18-24 - 9% 25-34 - 16% 35-44 - 26% 45-54 - 12% 55-64 - 16% 65+ - 20% Prefer not to say - <1%</p> <p>People of colour: 18-24 - 16% 25-34 - 29% 35-44 - 30% 45-54 - 13% 55-64 - 9% 65+ - 3%</p>	<p>18 - 29 - 43.9% 30 - 39 - 29.3% 40+ - 25.9%</p>

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CAST is a global hub for understanding the systemic and society-wide transformations that are required to address climate change.

We research and develop the social transformations needed to produce a low-carbon and sustainable society; at the core of our work is a fundamental question of enormous social significance: How can we as a society live differently – and better – in ways that meet the urgent need for rapid and far-reaching emission reductions?

Based at the University of Bath, our additional core partners are Cardiff University, University of East Anglia, University of York, University of Manchester and the charity Climate Outreach.

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