



## How can climate change secondary education respond to the needs of young people?

### Key messages:

- **Young people recognise the urgency of the climate crisis and the need for societal action, but they lack agency.**
  - Climate education should equip all pupils with the knowledge and confidence to take meaningful climate action in their personal, civic, and professional lives.
- **Young people hold misconceptions about the impact of some climate-related actions.**
  - Climate education should correct misconceptions, ensuring students can make informed decisions about climate action now and in the future.
- **Older pupils are more sceptical about others' willingness to act and are less hopeful about the future, compared to younger pupils.**
  - Climate education should be embedded across the secondary curriculum. It should include real-world examples of action being taken by individuals, communities, businesses, and the Government to show that responsibility is shared and that meaningful change is possible.



# Introduction

*This briefing is intended as a resource for policymakers and practitioners working in education.*

Effective climate change education is essential in ensuring the public is engaged with the net zero transition, now and in the future. Young people understand the severity of the climate crisis and the need for urgent action to tackle it. They are well placed to be champions of sustainability, and many may take up green jobs in the future.

Climate education in secondary schools can not only support the development of young people's environmental knowledge and skills but also protect their resilience and mental health by providing a sense of agency and empowerment. This is important as evidence shows young people are susceptible to negative climate-related emotions.

Climate change education across the UK has been criticised for being too narrow in scope, for focusing on technological responses, and for excluding younger age groups. However, an independent review of curriculum and assessment is currently being conducted. This provides policymakers and practitioners the perfect opportunity to ensure climate education meets the needs of young people.

According to the Department for Education, the national curriculum should ensure that “young people leave compulsory education ready for life and work”. To achieve this aim in the context of the climate crisis, climate change education should go beyond abstract, scientific content and relate to young people's everyday lives. It should give young people the confidence to take meaningful action now, engage them with what climate change means for their future careers, and imbue them with the knowledge and skills they need to engage with climate change as citizens.

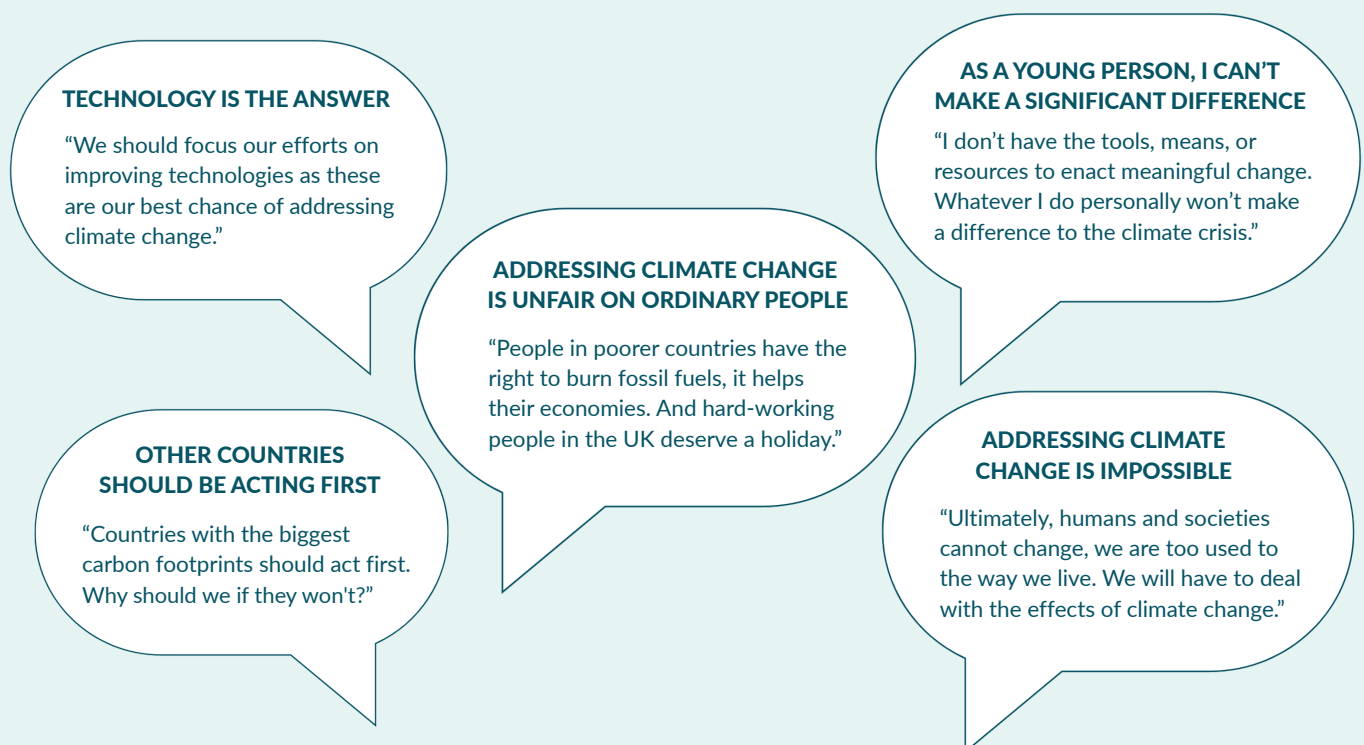
# About the research

Researchers from the Centre for Climate Change and Social Transformations (CAST) and environmental charity [Another Way](#) wanted to discover what secondary school pupils think about climate action, including which specific individual actions they think are most impactful and easiest to take. We held ten workshops in three secondary schools in England – one urban school in the North West for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), one rural school in the North West, and one peri-urban school in the South West. Approximately 400 students aged 11 to 18 took part.

Each workshop had two parts:

**1) Discussion of ‘discourses of delay’** – We presented students with five narratives that imply climate action is unnecessary or won’t be effective. Four of these have been identified in [previous research](#) and may [undermine public support](#) for taking climate action. We added the fifth narrative about the ability of young people, specifically, to make a difference. We asked the students to share their thoughts on these statements, explaining whether they agreed or disagreed and why.

**2) Responses to individual climate actions** – In small groups, students ranked 16 climate-related actions in terms of how impactful they are and how easy they are to take. There were four actions in each of four behavioural areas: travel, material consumption, advocacy, and diet.



**Figure 1: The five narratives presented to students**

# About the research



**Figure 2: The 16 climate-related actions presented to students**

\*Although not strictly an 'action', we included 'carbon taxes' in the material consumption grouping and explained that this would involve people paying more for high-emission products.

## Discourses of delay

- Although few students wholly agreed with any of the narratives, the overall tendency was toward disagreement; there was widespread appreciation that they rang at least partially true, and that they could discourage people from acting if widely subscribed to.
- Students recognised that tackling climate change involves technological, economic, and infrastructural change **and** action taken by individuals. However, many felt that young people had a limited ability to make a difference.
- Students expressed concerns about responses to climate change being fair and equitable, particularly regarding people with lower incomes in the UK and those living in low-income countries. Students felt that those most able to act should take more responsibility.
- Powerful but unwilling others – governments, businesses, or older generations – were frequently cited as an impediment to action on climate change.

“If everyone thought we couldn’t do anything, then nothing would ever happen.”  
(North West rural school, Y12)

“I think that some people want to change their ways and more young people want to change, but there are also people who don't want to, who have more power.”  
(North West rural school, Y13)

“Young people can’t do as much as older people, but still can. Everyone can, even young people, but it’s all relative.” (South West school, Y7)

“Everyone is aware of the problem, but people are choosing to do nothing as it means giving up luxuries. You can address it, but it is hard to make people change their opinions.”  
(South West school, Y7-10 group)

# Findings

“All countries are responsible; the UK started the whole thing. We need to move away from fossil fuels, but they make people loads of money.”  
(North West urban school, Y8-10 group)

“Technology can help, but it’s really about humans.” (South West school, Y12)

## Individual climate actions

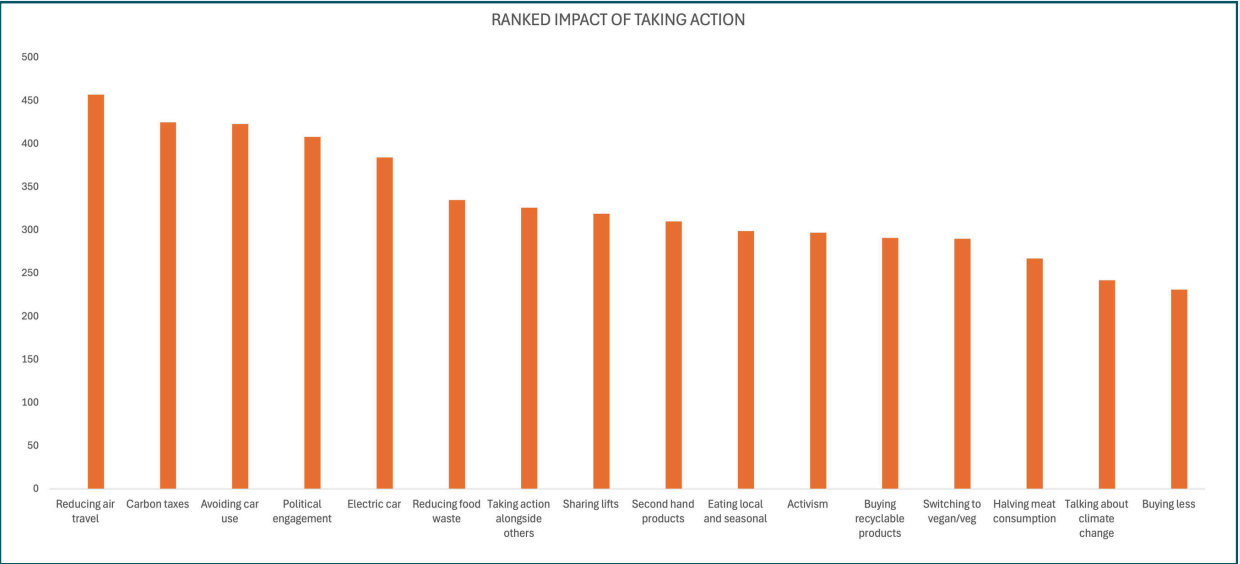


Figure 3: The 16 actions ranked in terms of their impact

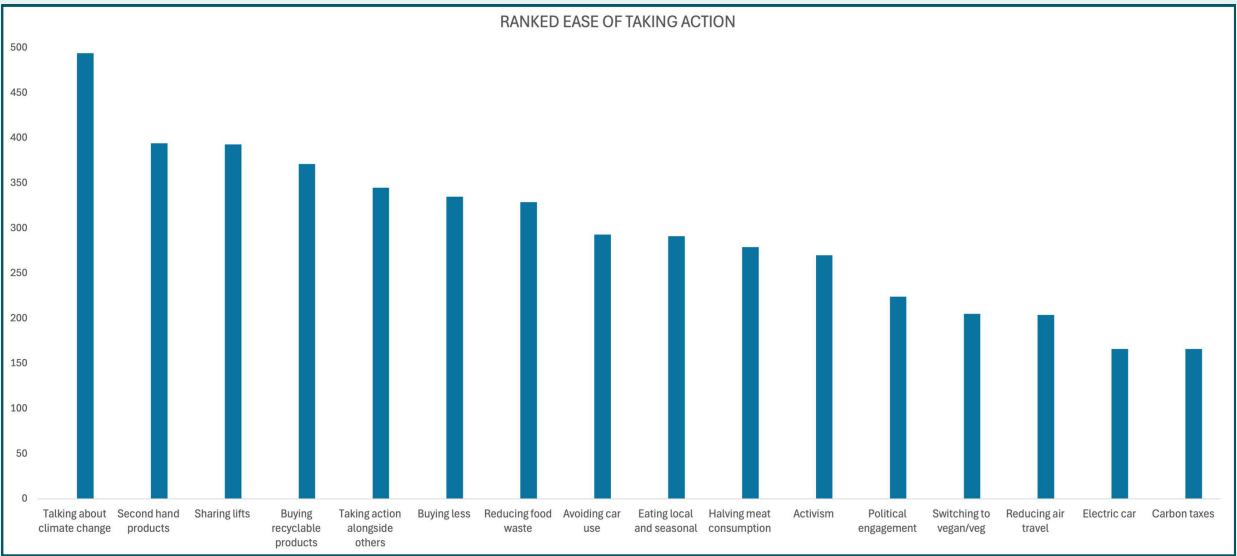


Figure 4: The 16 actions ranked in terms of how easy they are for students to take



# Findings

- Students identified impactful actions such as reducing air travel and car use. They also recognised political engagement as an effective climate action.
- Perhaps unsurprisingly, the actions students ranked as more impactful (e.g. reducing air travel, carbon taxes, political engagement), they also ranked as more difficult to carry out, and vice versa.
- Like adults, students underestimated the impact of making dietary changes. This is a domain over which young people may have relatively more autonomy (compared to other climate actions).

## Conclusions and recommendations

If the UK national curriculum is to be amended following review, policymakers and practitioners should ensure that climate change secondary education is integrated across age groups and subjects and made relevant to pupils' lives and needs.

### **Climate change secondary education should:**

- Highlight the roles that individuals and society must play in tackling climate change.
- Support young people to understand and acquire skills for green careers.
- Empower students by teaching them about the wide range of climate actions available to them and the relative impact of these actions.
- Show young people that others in society are taking meaningful action on climate change, so that they feel that responsibility is being shared by all.
- Give young people the space and time to discuss their worries about climate change so that they feel listened to and understood.

# Further reading

- Cherry, C., Verfuërth, C., & Demiski, C. (2024). Discourses of climate inaction undermine public support for 1.5 °C lifestyles. *Global Environmental Change* 87: 102875
- Hickman, C., et al. (2021). Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: a global survey. *The Lancet Planetary Health*, Volume 5, Issue 12, e863-e873
- Lamb, W., et al. (2020). Discourses of climate delay. *Global Sustainability*, 3, p. e17
- Lee, K. (2023). How ways to address the climate crisis are presented in UK national curricula. Comparisons, implications, and recommendations across the four nations. Retrieved from: <https://www.bath.ac.uk/publications/how-ways-to-address-the-climate-crisis-are-presented-in-uk-national-curricula/>

## **Suggested citation:**

Suggested citation: Lee, K., & Bray, A. (2025). How can climate change secondary education respond to the needs of young people? Available at: <https://cast.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/the-centre-for-climate-change-and-social-transformations-cast-briefing-36-how-can-climate-change-secondary-education-respond-to-the-needs-of-young-people.pdf>



# CAST is a global hub for understanding the crucial role that people play in fighting climate change.

We are a cross-institutional research centre with world-leading expertise in environmental psychology, behaviour change, public engagement, policy, governance, education, communications and more.

Underpinning CAST's research is a question of immense significance: how can we transform society in order to live better and address climate change?



Read more on our website at [cast.ac.uk](https://cast.ac.uk)



Follow us on LinkedIn [@cast-centre](#)



Follow us on BlueSky [@cast-centre.bsky.social](#)

CAST is funded by the  
Economic and Social  
Research Council.



Economic  
and Social  
Research Council

