



Coronavirus and Climate Change in the United Kingdom: Perceptions, Policies and Trade-Offs

This briefing note is intended as a resource for academics, decision makers and other stakeholders who are working with transformation-related concepts.

Key points

- COVID-19 and climate change are both global issues that have wide-reaching and serious consequences for human health, the economy, and social outcomes for populations around the world.
- We conducted a nationally-representative survey (n=1,518) in November and December 2020 to explore public perceptions and policy preferences using a novel approach to understand the trade-offs people are willing to make to address these two issues.
- At the time of the second outbreak in the UK, coronavirus was the top concern for residents of the UK, but concern about climate change remained high. The coronavirus crisis does not appear to have dented people's capacity to worry about biodiversity and climate change.
- People ascribe high levels of responsibility to the government to deal with both issues. However there is a higher (but middling) level of trust in the UK government to take effective action on climate change than on coronavirus.
- People feel less personally responsible, think their own personal actions are less efficacious, and express lower levels of support for (in particular) individual-level policies for climate change than for coronavirus.
- People in the UK feel a higher sense of personal responsibility, express more support for restrictions on personal freedom and express higher willingness to make trade-offs with the economy with coronavirus compared to climate change.



Introduction

The coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak led to unprecedented government and individual action to contain the virus and a prolonged period during which the UK public were involved in ongoing discussions about trade-offs between hazard reduction, economic impacts and personal freedoms. The social, psychological and economic consequences of decisions made to contain the virus will reverberate far beyond the period of the actual pandemic. Experiences with the pandemic may have impacted the way the public think and feel about other global cross-national risks, such as climate change, as similar trade-offs have to be made to mitigate those. Similarly, responses to coronavirus may have shifted public notions of the role of government and individual responsibility in dealing with systemic risks.

How does the public understand and engage with climate change in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak? Risk psychology suggests that psychologically distant concerns (e.g., climate change) may be suppressed when other more immediate concerns (coronavirus) take precedence due to limited cognitive and emotional resources. This is known as the 'finite pool of worry' hypothesis.¹ Further questions relate to whether policies and practices adopted during the outbreak could translate to climate change and other risks, and in what way experiences have impacted people's willingness to consider government intervention and/or restrictions to personal freedom and economic impacts.

In this briefing paper, we present the topline findings of a survey conducted as part of a project on effective climate change communication in the age of coronavirus. The survey was designed to quantitatively test two narratives about climate change with a representative sample of the UK public. These were developed, specifically, to engage a wide range of people with climate change (results described elsewhere²), to explore differences and similarities in public perceptions of the two topics, and to elicit attitudes to the trade-offs required to reduce the risks of coronavirus and climate change. Here we report on the main findings relating to worry about societal issues, perceived (personal and government) responsibility, perceived efficacy (ability to do something about it), trust, policy support, and public views on trade-offs between hazard reduction, economic impact and personal freedom.

Methods and Sample

A nationally-representative survey (n=1,518) was conducted between November and December 2020 on public perceptions of coronavirus and climate change. The survey built on previous research by systematically comparing perceptions of (personal and government) responsibility, efficacy and trust, as well as support for policies to address the two issues. The survey also used a novel approach to understand the trade-offs between hazards reduction, economic impact and personal freedom people are willing to make. Data were collected online from 19 November to 12 December 2020 by DJS Research, a market research company. The sample consisted of 48% male and 51% female respondents. 10% were 18-24, 42% were 25-49, 25% were 50-64, and 23% were 65 years of age or over. Fourteen percent (14%) of the sample was from a Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) background.

Worry about societal issues

We asked respondents how worried they are about a range of health, environmental, economic and security issues, including coronavirus and climate change. As can be seen in Figure 1, below, respondents were the most worried about coronavirus:

- 58% of respondents said that they are very or extremely worried about it (only 13% said that they were not at all/not very worried about coronavirus).
- This was closely followed by “destruction of nature, wildlife and biodiversity” (51%) and climate change (48%), with 14% and 20%, respectively, saying they are not at all/not very worried about the issues.
- About two out of five (41%) expressed being very or extremely worried about unemployment, although 28% said that they are not at all/not very worried about it.
- Just over one third expressed being very or extremely worried about crime (37%), terrorism (38%) and air pollution (37%), with 21%, 23% and 22% saying they are not at all/not very worried about these respective issues.
- Respondents expressed the least concern about immigration, inequality and antibiotic resistance, with just under one-third (31%) saying that they are very or extremely worried about these issues. A large number of respondents (42%) said that they were not at all/not very worried about immigration; 33% and 29% said this for inequality and antibiotic resistance, respectively.

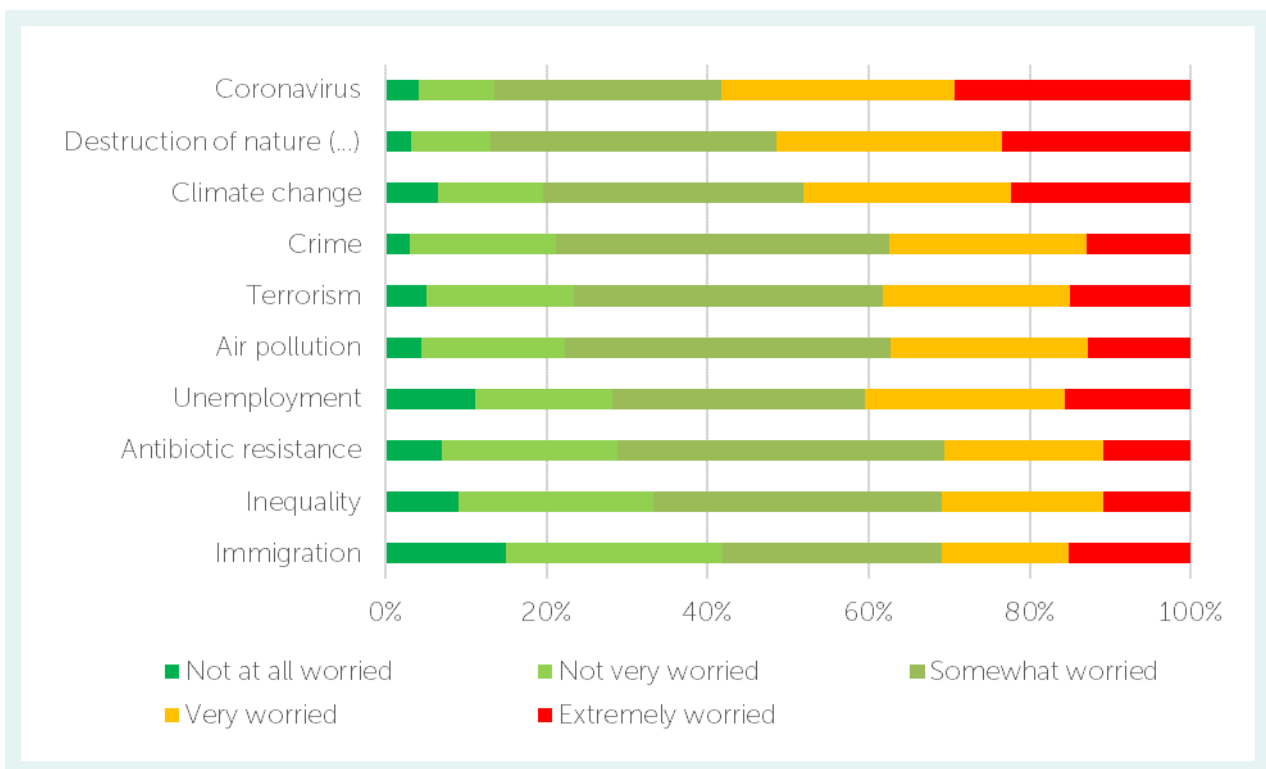


Figure 1. Worry about societal issues.

Perceived responsibility

Both coronavirus and climate change are systemic risks that can only be contained by sustained action from individuals and institutions alike. The extent to which people are willing to take action and/or support different types of policies is likely to be dependent upon who they consider responsible for managing the risks.

Respondents were therefore asked whether they feel it is their own personal responsibility and whether they think it is the government's responsibility to try to contain coronavirus and climate change. Respondents could use a 11-point end-labelled scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 10 (a great deal) to answer the four questions.

Figure 2 shows the results from the analyses. It shows the following:

- Respondents think that both the government and they themselves personally have a responsibility to stop coronavirus from spreading.
- They also ascribe a high level of responsibility to the government to try to reduce the risk of climate change. However, they feel less personally responsible to do so. The score was however still higher than the scale midpoint of 5, suggesting that people still feel responsible to address climate change, but to a lesser extent than for coronavirus.

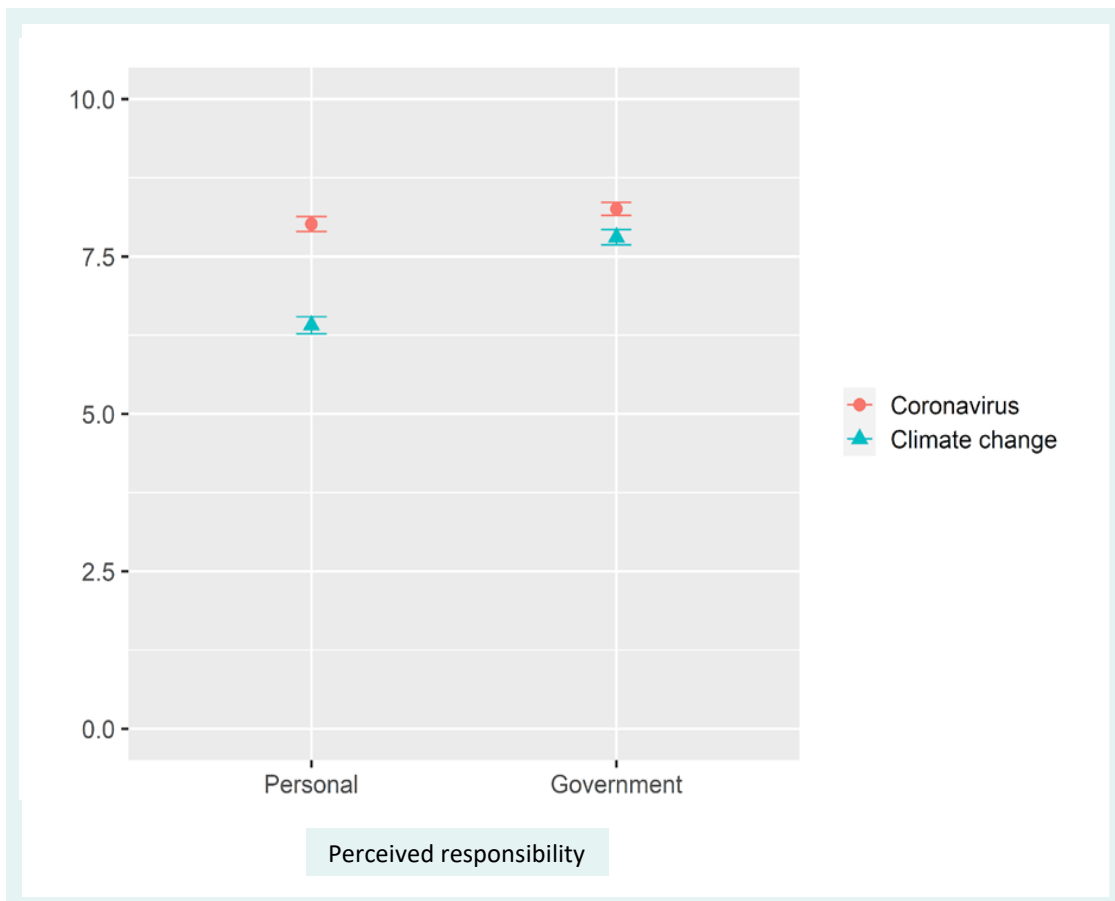


Figure 2. Perceived personal and government responsibility to prevent coronavirus from spreading/climate change from worsening.

Perceived efficacy and trust

Respondents were further asked whether they feel their own personal actions can help prevent coronavirus from spreading and climate change from worsening, respectively; and whether they trust the UK government to take effective action to prevent coronavirus from spreading and climate change from worsening, respectively. Respondents could use a 11-point end-labelled scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 10 (a great deal) to answer the four questions. The results, laid out in Figure 3, show:

- Respondents trust the government slightly more in relation to climate change than in relation to coronavirus. However, average trust scores are relatively low for both issues.
- Respondents think their own personal actions are highly effective in preventing coronavirus from spreading, but less so in preventing climate change from worsening.
- Overall, the results show that trust in government is low for both coronavirus and climate change. There are however large differences in terms of the perceived effectiveness of personal actions. In particular, respondents are less likely to think that their own personal actions are effective in addressing climate change.

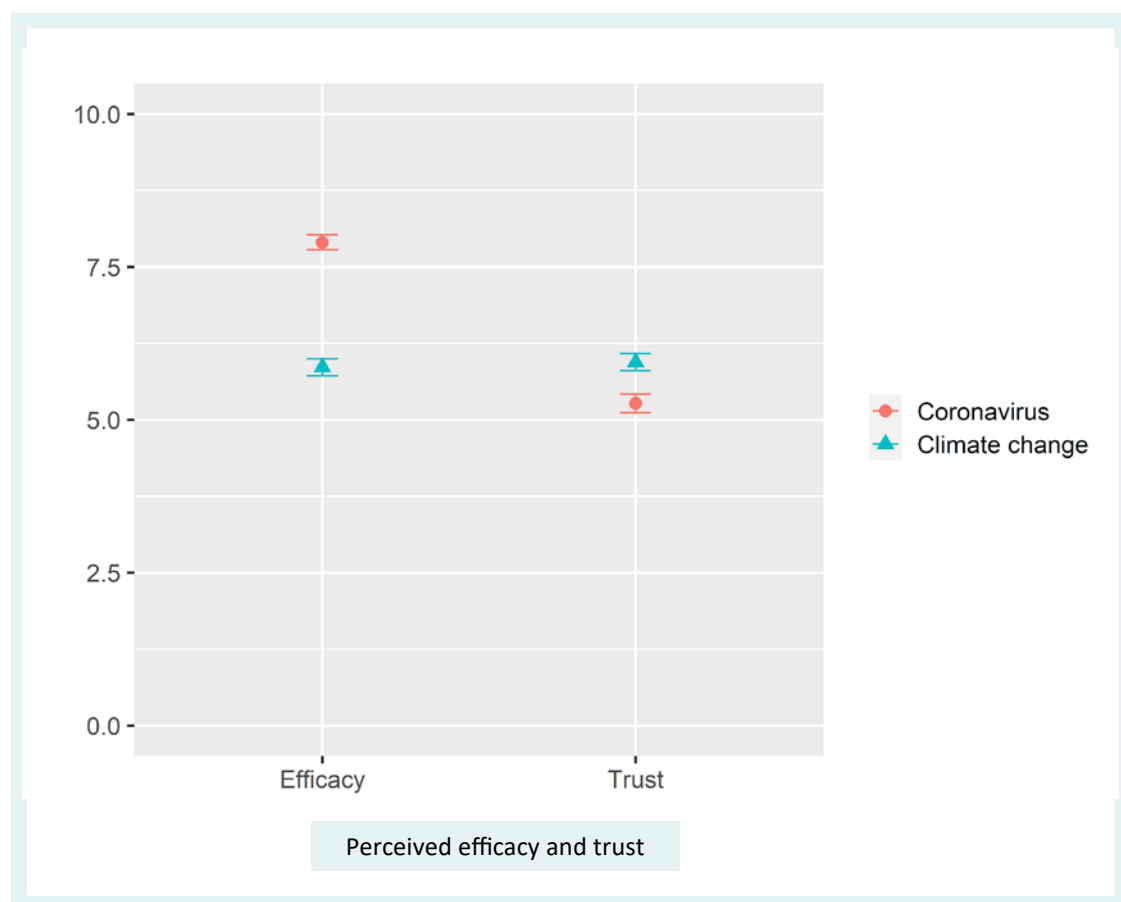


Figure 3. Perceived effectiveness of personal actions (efficacy) and trust in UK government to take effective action to prevent coronavirus from spreading/climate change from worsening.

Policy support

Respondents were asked to what extent they support or oppose a range of policies that could be used to contain coronavirus and climate change. The different policy options covered information provision, financial incentives (fines and incentives), and limiting activity through regulation; targeting individuals and businesses, respectively. Respondents could use a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly oppose) to 5 (strongly support), with 3 as the scale midpoint (neither support nor oppose). The policies were phrased in such a way that direct comparisons could be made between coronavirus and climate change.

Policies included:

- (1a) Limiting the activity of individuals (e.g., banning unnecessary air travel)
- (1b) Limiting the activity of businesses (e.g., closing non-essential/high-polluting businesses)
- (2a) Fining individuals who don't uphold regulations
- (2b) Fining businesses that don't uphold regulations
- (3a) Financial incentives encouraging individuals to follow regulations
- (3b) Financial support for businesses and households to deal with the costs policies
- (4a) Providing information to individuals about what they can do
- (4b) Providing information to businesses about what they can do.

Figure 4 shows that all policy items were above the midpoint, and thus that, on average, none of the suggested policies were 'opposed' by the respondents. Results (see Figure 4) show that:

- **The highest levels of support are for providing information about what individuals and businesses can do to contain coronavirus and climate change.** Support for information provision is high for both coronavirus or climate change, or for individuals or businesses alike.
- **Support for financial support was slightly lower**, especially for encouraging individuals to follow coronavirus and climate change regulations, respectively.
- **The lowest levels of support are for limiting individual activity and fining individuals who do not uphold regulation, but only in the case of climate change.**
- **When it comes to coronavirus, respondents express a high level of support for limiting the activity of individuals to prevent it spreading.** However, respondents express less support for limiting the activity of individuals to prevent climate change from worsening. Support for fining individuals who do not uphold coronavirus regulations is higher than for fining individuals who do not uphold climate change regulations.
- **Notably, however, there does not appear to be strong opposition to what are perhaps**

rather radical policies to prevent climate change from worsening.

- The differences between coronavirus and climate change policy support are not as pronounced for policies that affect businesses. For example, respondents expressed a relatively high level of support for fining businesses that do not uphold coronavirus and climate change regulations, and support for limiting the activity of businesses is not as pronounced between the two issues.

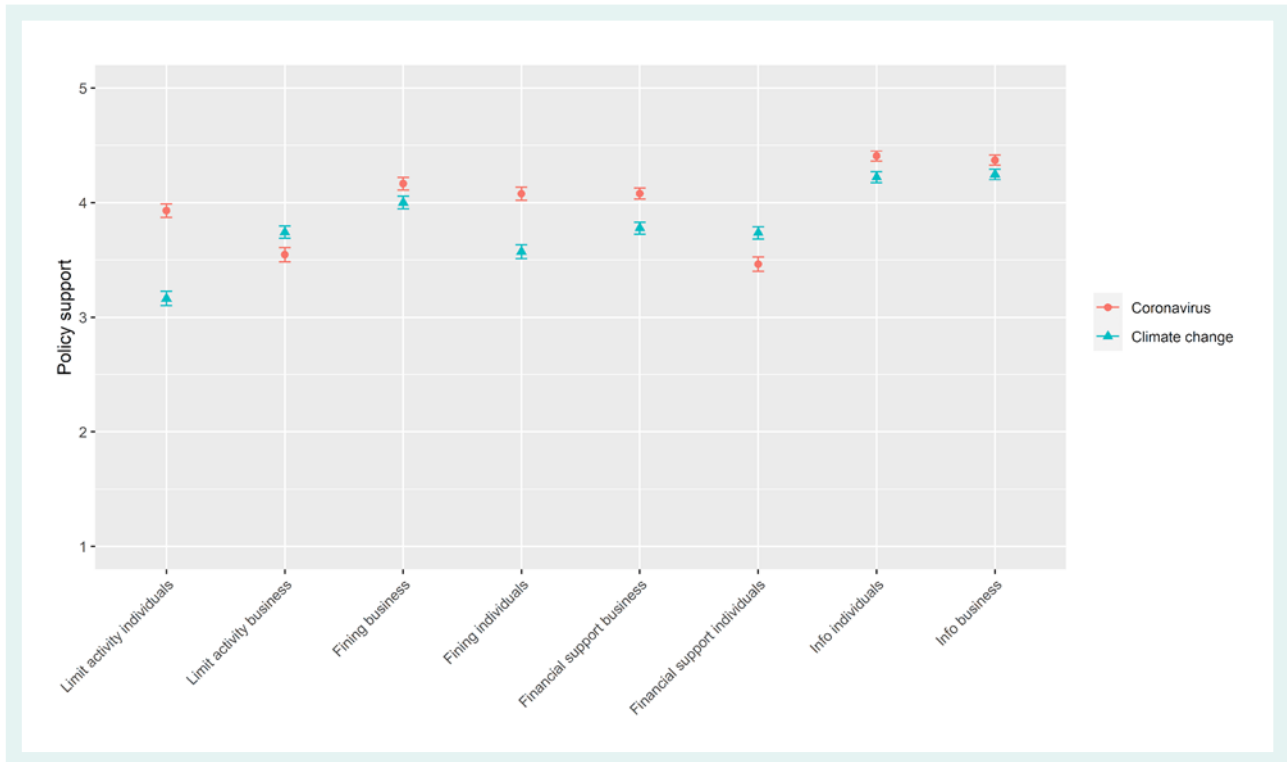


Figure 4. Support for measures to prevent coronavirus from spreading/climate change from worsening.

Trade-offs

The coronavirus pandemic saw unprecedented action by governments around the world, with public health being prioritised over short-term economic interests. Similarly, there was unprecedented coordinated individual action, with people accepting restrictions to their own personal freedom to help stop the spread of the virus, often over extended periods of time.

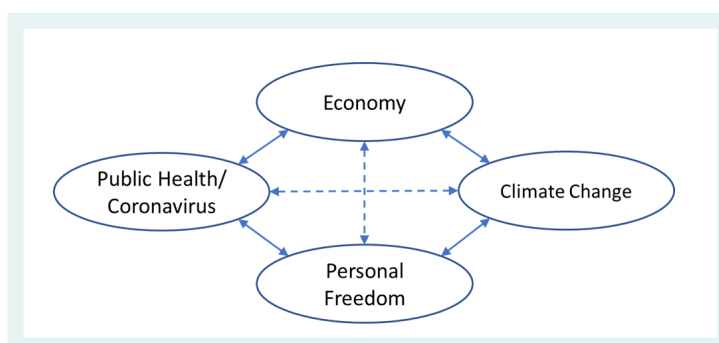


Figure 5. Conceptual model

Our survey used a novel approach to understand the trade-offs that people are willing to make to address coronavirus and climate change. It contained twelve questions in which respondents were asked to choose between two opposing statements that explicitly contrast coronavirus, climate change, the economy and personal freedom (see Figure 5). For example, respondents were asked whether they agreed more with the statement “It is better to accept the risk of a slower economic recovery than to live with the consequences of climate change” or with the statement “It is better to accept the risk of climate change than to live with the consequences of a slower economic recovery”. They could respond using a 4-point scale that was coded as -1.5 and -0.5 (more agreement with the first statement) and +0.5 and +1.5 (more agreement with the second statement). The responses to the twelve items were then combined using multilevel modelling to examine how trade-offs between the different issues were made.

Table 1. Trade-offs between coronavirus/public health, climate change, the economy and personal freedom.

	Coronavirus/Public Health	Climate Change	Economy
Personal Freedom	0.65 (0.02) ^{***}	0.29 (0.01) ^{***}	0.20 (0.02) ^{***}
Economy	0.45 (0.01) ^{***}	0.09 (0.01) ^{***}	---
Climate change	0.36 (0.02) ^{***}	---	-0.09 (0.02) ^{***}
Coronavirus/ Public Health	---	-0.36 (0.02) ^{***}	-0.45 (0.01) ^{***}

Note: ^{***} $p < 0.001$

Table 1 shows the results from the trade-off analyses, with scores ranging from -1.5 to +1.5. A positive score indicates a trade-off in favour of the issue listed in the table column, whereas a negative score indicates a trade-off in favour of the issue listed in the table row. The results provide the following insights:

- Respondents are willing to support limits to their freedom to reduce the risk of coronavirus.
- They are also willing to support limits to their personal freedom to reduce the risk of climate change, if to a lesser extent.
- Respondents further appear willing to accept risks to the economy to address coronavirus. However, they are less willing to make the same trade-off for climate

change, with climate change only being marginally favoured over the economy.

- Other trade-offs considered were between coronavirus and climate change (and between the economy and personal freedom).

Summary of findings

The survey shows that there are a number of similarities between coronavirus and climate change. However, major differences exist regarding individual action. Whereas people ascribe high levels of responsibility to the government to deal with the two issues, they feel less personally responsible to try to limit climate change. This is also reflected in the perceived effectiveness of personal action: whereas people think that their own personal actions are highly effective in preventing coronavirus from spreading, they are less likely to think that they can help to prevent climate change. There is slightly greater trust in the government to take effective action on climate change as compared to coronavirus, although, overall, trust in government is middling at most for the two issues.

Differences in policy support for containing coronavirus and climate change also appear to relate to those focusing on individuals. The lowest levels of support are for limiting individual activity and fining individuals who do not uphold regulation, but then only for climate change. While there is support for these policies to prevent the coronavirus from spreading, they are less willing to support them to reduce climate risk. Our study further confirms that people are willing to make substantial trade-off with the economy and personal freedom in order to contain the coronavirus. In line with the results for policy support, however, there is lower willingness to make similar trade-offs with the economy and personal freedom for climate change.

The findings suggest that experiences of responding to the coronavirus pandemic cannot directly be transposed to the issue of climate change. Responses to climate change require different framings, policies and approaches.

Recommendations

In addressing coronavirus the UK government strengthened its social contract with the public by engaging directly and regularly with people, through consistent and clear communications about what it could and was doing and what citizens could do themselves. Decisionmakers emphasised clear, concrete actions that individuals could take to help contain the pandemic. A strong emphasis was put on personal responsibility, which included abiding by government-mandated lockdowns to prevent the spread.³

This social contract approach worked well in containing the pandemic – in particular at the initial stages - with the government taking stringent action and agreeing to pay the wages of

millions of people who were unable to work as a result.⁴⁵ The UK public responded by complying to those restrictive measures well beyond what was expected. The government also took the opportunity to build public awareness about the cascading, systemic, risks of such a health crisis on things like government infrastructure, capacity and economics.

The UK government has taken a different approach with climate change which has failed to meaningfully engage the British public. Nevertheless, as these results show, there remain opportunities for the government to engage people on climate action. Compared to coronavirus, people's sense of individual responsibility for climate change is typically very low.⁶ We saw in the research that people expect the government to take the lead on addressing climate change. They want to know what they can do, what businesses can do, and they trust the government to inform them.

In line with the UNEP report on the critical role of low-carbon lifestyles in addressing climate change⁷, we suggest that policymakers, civil society and the media:

- **Make public engagement on climate change a real priority, by developing strategies to help people understand why individual actions are important.**
- **Emphasise the relationship between personal behaviour and wider system change** through targeted communications that inspire agency and a sense of personal efficacy in the fight against climate change

The results also tell us that the British public are more supportive of regulating businesses than individuals, to ensure we have an effective climate response – as long as the economic impacts are contained. Respondents indicated that should be coupled with greater guidance to businesses about what they can do to take action on climate change. This suggests that the public would broadly support policies and regulations to ensure businesses are adapting effectively alongside individuals. Therefore, we recommend as a first step:

- **More concerted action from government in messaging clear guidance to businesses** about what they can do in their day-to-day operations to respond to climate change.
- **A greater emphasis on exploring potential policies and regulations for business** that would have public support.

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