



production
and consumption
transformations centre

Public engagement with climate and net zero policies

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About the centre

The Production and Consumption Transformations Centre (PACT) brings together researchers, policymakers, businesses and civil society to understand the wider economic, social and political systems that drive emissions.

By developing practical, evidence-based solutions, the centre supports a transition that not only cuts emissions, but also protects jobs, shares costs and benefits fairly, and builds a more resilient, sustainable economy

About the report

Although public concern about climate change is high, policymakers often underestimate support for climate action, creating a perception gap that can hinder progress. PACT seeks to close this gap by providing evidence on public attitudes and improving public engagement in policymaking. By strengthening social intelligence and embedding climate action within policies that improve everyday life, PACT's research supports more effective policymaking and faster progress towards climate goals.

This briefing reviews public opinion on climate change and net zero, recent developments in public engagement, and sets an agenda for future research.

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Introduction

An aerial photograph of a complex highway interchange in a city. The interchange features multiple levels of overpasses and ramps, with numerous cars visible on the roads. Large green spaces with trees, some showing autumn foliage, are interspersed between the road sections. In the bottom right corner, a residential area with buildings and red-tiled roofs is visible.

People are concerned about climate change and want government to act. However, politicians and policymakers often underestimate this support, creating a significant "perception gap". This means there is greater public backing for climate policies than is commonly assumed. To succeed, policies must be carefully designed around people's lived experiences and priorities. Integrating climate action into policy areas that improve everyday life, such as homes, transport and food, can strengthen climate awareness, agency and support for change.

PACT helps to overcome this perception gap by providing policymakers with robust and nuanced evidence on public attitudes, experiences and priorities. Our research aims to support government to develop and implement techniques which improve public engagement with policy making.

By bringing social intelligence into policy design, PACT can help unlock underused policy opportunities for emissions reduction while addressing concerns such as the cost of living and quality of life. This can support a more rapid transformation of production and consumption systems aligned with climate ambitions. This briefing summarises public attitudes to climate change and net zero, reviews recent developments in public engagement, and then sets out a future agenda for PACT.

Research on public attitudes to climate action can be summarised as follows:

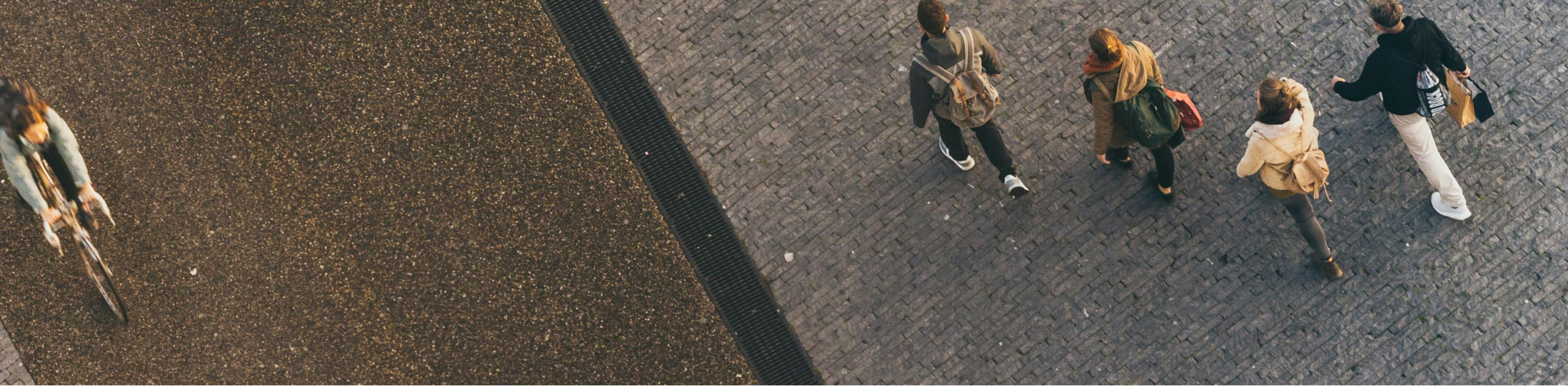
- **Overall concern:** A large majority of the UK public are concerned about climate change and broadly support government action to tackle it. However, support is declining which poses a challenge to future policy – something which could be addressed by improved public participation.
- **Conditional support for policies:** This generalised support does not translate directly into support for specific policies. Support depends on factors such as perceived fairness, transparency, as well as distribution of costs, risks, benefits, and responsibilities.
- **Attitudes to government:** Support for climate action and net zero policies are strongly linked to trust in government, and confidence in government's ability to address the issue. This requires clear, sustained leadership.
- **The perception gap:** Politicians, policymakers and the public all consistently underestimate levels of both public and political support for climate action.
- **Differences between groups:** There are significant differences between people, based on political views, geography, and other social and cultural factors. These differences need to be understood better to deliver effective policy.





Public engagement in policymaking can be summarised as follows:

- **Understanding public opinion:** There are a range of ways in which public opinion is gathered in policymaking, from formal (consultations, surveys, polling, social research) to informal (via media or stakeholders).
- **Communicating to people:** Governments also communicate to people, through public information campaigns, communication strategies, policies and other means.
- **Democratic innovations:** Recent years have seen an increase in democratic innovations for climate, including deliberative processes like Citizens' Panels, Juries and Assemblies, which allow a more comprehensive understanding of public views, and can help to build trust in government. Examples of deliberative public engagement include Climate Assembly UK, the Climate Change Committee's Citizens' Panels, and the two-year EDRC Citizens' Panel, as well as many local initiatives.
- **Embedding:** Despite advances in engagement techniques, the results of social research and public engagement processes are not embedded in policymaking in a consistent way. However, this has been greatly reflected in the recent "rewiring the state" statement by the cabinet office, opening the way to greater embedded participative policy making.



Given this picture, PACT should seek to:

01

Address the perception gap of
policymakers

02

Strengthen government leadership on
climate action

03

Support improved integration
between social science research and
policy making



1. Public attitudes to climate action

An aerial photograph of a city street, showing a multi-lane road with cars, surrounded by trees with autumn foliage and buildings. The image is used as a background for the text.

1.1 Overall concern

A large majority of people in the UK are concerned about climate change and support government action. In late 2025, 77% of the UK public said they were concerned about climate change, 68% supported government action to tackle it and only 12% opposed it (DESNZ, 2025a). 64% of people said they supported the target of net zero by 2050 if not earlier, with only 11% opposed to a target altogether, and more people said they would favour a political party that takes strong action on climate change over one which would slow action down (King's College London, 2026).

Although concern and support for the net zero 2050 target have declined slightly in recent years, they still command strong majority backing (DESNZ, 2025a). This decline could make future climate and energy policymaking more challenging, especially if public participation is not directly embedded in policy design. Therefore, clear and transparent communication about the benefits and impacts of climate policies will be important in maintaining public support.

Business leaders also remain committed to decarbonisation, but they report that policy uncertainty is inhibiting investment, and that there is a need to reframe the climate conversation (BSI, 2026).

Part of the recent decline in support for net zero can be explained by increasingly fragmented political and media narratives around climate and net zero (McDaniel et al., 2026). This may be driving a slower, less pronounced change in public attitudes. Despite criticism of net zero targets from Conservative and Reform spokespeople, a majority of Conservative voters support the 2050 target, and a majority of Reform voters support having a net zero target, with over a quarter seeing 2050 as a sensible target date (King's College London, 2026). Meanwhile, newspaper editorials have become more critical of climate action. In 2025, for the first time, they were more likely to oppose climate action than support it. (Massey-Chase et al., 2026). Media and political messaging is also likely, intentionally or otherwise, to have confused lack of public understanding with lack of support - those least supportive of net zero are also the least likely to understand what it means (Climate Barometer, 2025a).

Overall support for climate action remains high, but this does not mean it is a priority for most people. Climate is perceived as a less pressing issue for most citizens than things like the cost of living or health and wellbeing. Even where support for net zero is high, climate policy salience remains low for most people (Crawley et al., 2020), and for the minority opposed to net zero, it ranks relatively low compared to other policy concerns. (Tanase et al., 2025).

1.2 Conditional support for policies

Continued high overall levels of concern about climate and support for climate action do not necessarily translate into support for individual climate policies. Polling shows a decline in support for certain climate-related policies such as low-traffic neighbourhoods and environmental food taxes in recent years (King's College London, 2026). Deliberative “mini-publics” (DMPs) with groups of citizens that are representative of the general public show consistent and high levels of support for others such as improving active travel and public transport options, ensuring new developments are compatible with net zero, improving financial support and access to information and advice for home retrofitting, investing in EV charging infrastructure, improving public communications and education on climate, and making the climate crisis central to all planning and policy decisions (Climate Citizens, 2025; Yuille et al., 2026).

The set of graphics presented here are taken from research led by Climate Citizens (Climate Citizens, 2025) on the results of over 30 DMPs across the UK, showing the different levels of support for various net zero policies.

Conditions for support of specific policies include the perceived costs of the policy; its fairness including distribution of costs, risks and benefits; the level of freedom of choice retained by individuals and households; whether the policy delivers co-benefits such as health or nature improvements; and whether implementation of the policy is sufficiently supported by the government, for example, for home energy efficiency schemes (Parkhill et al., 2013; Verfuëth, C. et al., 2024). In addition, when the public is engaged in decisions about development of policies, support tends to increase (Liu et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2022).



Figure 1: Public support for specific net zero policies from UK DMPs (Climate Citizens, 2025).

People evaluate policies according to whether they feel these conditions have been met. It is therefore difficult to predict support for policies through ‘snapshot’ research such as polling on attitudes to specific technologies or policies, in isolation. Deliberative discussions (see section 2.1 below) can help, by enabling policymakers to understand the motivations and reasons behind support for or resistance to specific policy proposals. They give a sense of the conditions that would need to be put in place to overcome barriers and increase support (Ainscough and Willis, 2024). At the same time, studying the reception of and feedback effects from existing policies can highlight how policy design, framing and interactions with the wider policy context impacts the public perception of certain policies.

As this briefing shows, people’s support for climate policies depends on a broad range of factors. People should not be considered just as ‘consumers’, i.e. economic actors motivated primarily by financial costs and benefits – this is just one part of the puzzle (Willis, 2022). Neither can the problem be seen as an information gap, which can be overcome by information and education. These so-called ‘deficit models’ of the public, which treat public resistance to, disagreement with, or scepticism of expert or governmental positions as ignorant or irrational, or simply lacking information are unhelpful and self-limiting (Cook and Melo Zurita, 2019; European Environment Agency, 2023).



1.3 Attitudes to government

Another important condition for public support for climate action is clear, consistent and sustained government leadership. 68% of UK citizens support government action on climate change, with 65% saying that it is important for the UK to be a global leader in tackling climate change (DESNZ, 2025a).

Support for action on climate is strongly connected to levels of trust in government, and to government clearly and transparently setting out a trajectory and consistent policy support to deliver it (Rosenbloom et al., 2019; Kulin and Johansson Sevä, 2021; Kitt et al., 2021). Deliberative processes consistently demonstrate that people are willing to support climate action and make changes to their own lives, if supported by government action that makes those changes accessible to people (Verfuerth, C. et al., 2024) for example, in how people heat their homes, travel around or what they buy and eat.

Although people want leadership from government, at the same time they lack confidence in the institutions of government, particularly on their ability to deliver (Ainscough et al., 2024; Massey-Chase et al., 2026; Office for statistics Regulations, 2026). Only 2% of people believe that the UK government can achieve net zero by 2050. There are more people who believe that government should be doing more to reduce emissions than people who think it should do less, or are getting it about right, combined (Smith, 2025). Public support is closely tied to trust in government. Consistent leadership on climate through policy, communication and engagement strengthens support, while inconsistent leadership can weaken it.



1.4 The perception gap

Research consistently shows a ‘perception gap’ between actual public support for climate action and how much support politicians and the public believe exists. Evidence from the UK and Belgium shows that MPs underestimate public support, and the support of other MP’s, for net zero and related climate policies (Massey-Chase et al., 2026 and Walgrave and Soontjens, 2026).

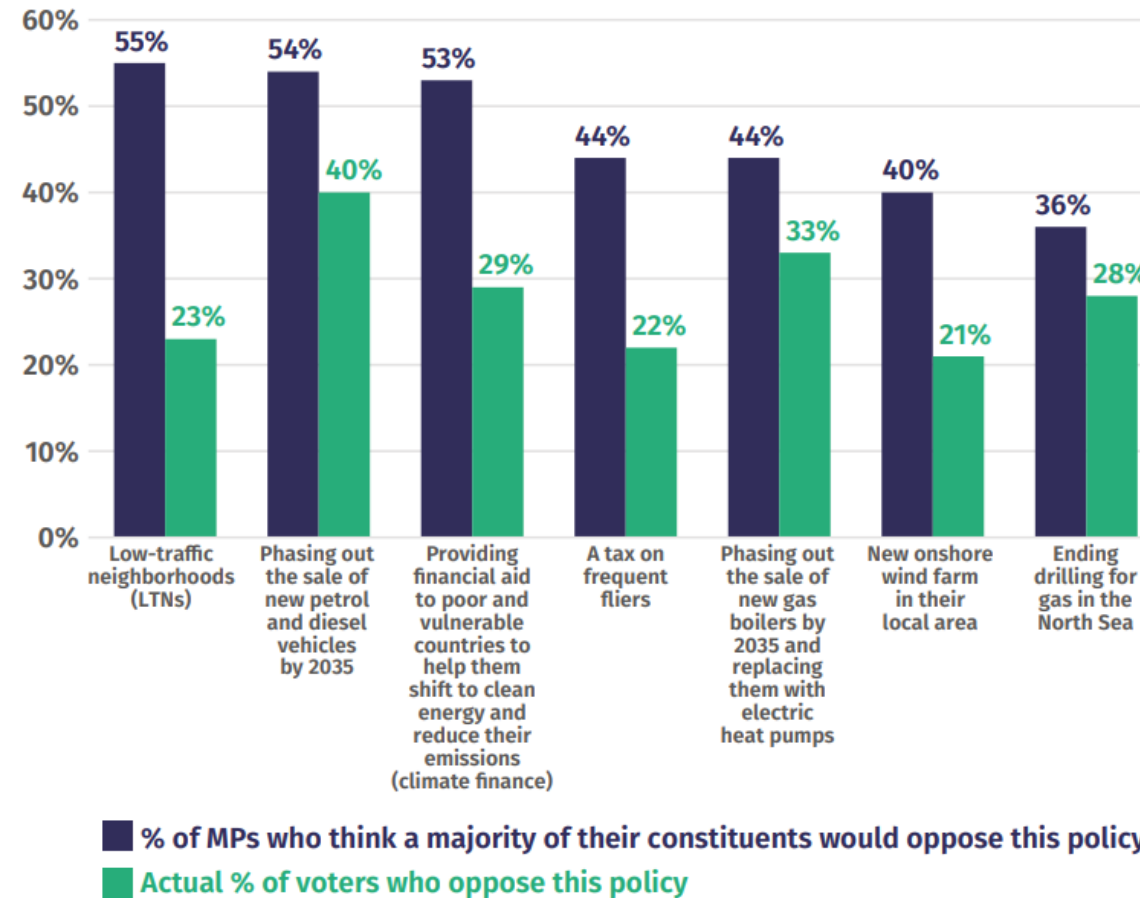
The public underestimates both public and political support for net zero (Westlake and Willis, 2023; Climate Barometer, 2025b). This is illustrated in Massey et al., (2026, p.13), based on new polling by YouGov on actual and perceived levels of opposition to specific climate policies. The misperception of public support can act as a brake on government action. Notably, MPs often underestimate the willingness and support of the British public to accept the financial impact of climate policies (Tanase et al., 2025).

As discussed in section 1.1, whilst public support for climate action is strong it is not a top priority for most people. As a result, there is limited public pressure on politicians to act more quickly. However, this creates a significant political opportunity: politicians can pursue ambitious climate policies with relatively low political risk, particularly when policies can be designed and communicated in ways that address higher priority concerns such as the cost of living, health, energy security and economic growth.



MPs assume higher than actual opposition on climate policies

Policies MPs think voters will oppose vs actual percentage of voters who oppose this policy



Source: Persuasion UK 2025

Note: Surveys of MPs and the public conducted by YouGov for Climate Barometer in October 2025.

Sample size for MPs=103-120 per wave, weighed to be representative of Parliament on party, region and cohort. Sample size for GB adults=2,636.

Figure 2: MPs assume higher than actual opposition on climate policies, as per Massey-Chase et al., (2026), p13.

1.5 Differences between groups

As discussed in section 1.1, overall support for climate action and net zero remains relatively high across the population. However, there are clear differences between different sections of the public. Research by Climate Outreach divides the UK into 7 groups that engage with climate action in different ways based on differing values, core beliefs, and worldviews. Research suggests that few people are firmly for or against climate policies. Most are open to policies that reflect their wider concerns, values and lived experiences (Climate Outreach, 2025b).

According to recent polling, most of the UK population are neither climate change sceptics nor activists, but instead sit within the 'silent majority', suggesting an openness to climate policy providing it is designed, developed and communicated with broader public needs and concerns in mind (King's College London, 2026). This finding is backed by our own recent research that shows majority support for a wide range of climate policies across a diverse group of citizens, provided certain conditions are met, with very limited unconditional rejection or support (Yuille et al., 2026).



Combining these sources of evidence, three broad groupings can be identified across the population as a whole:

- **Active climate concern:** These citizens consistently factor climate concerns into their political and consumer choices and are strong supporters of net zero policies. They represent around 10-20% of the population.

- **Passive climate concern:** The majority (60-80%) are concerned about climate change but do not prioritise it in daily decisions. They support net zero subject to conditions and provided government leads the transition.

- **Opposition to net zero:** Around 10-20% of people oppose net zero policies and are unlikely to be persuaded by messaging, though they may support related benefits such as energy security, warmer homes and cleaner air.

These three broad groupings are derived from a summary of many different evidence sources (Climate Outreach, 2025a; Yuille et al., 2026). They do not allow for the more sophisticated segmentation that individual studies offer, but they show a very clear picture that most of the population show passive climate concern, and would support carefully designed climate policies, if government leads the way.

Often drowned out by opponents to net zero and those who show the most active climate concern, the group that most needs to be engaged in policy design is those with **passive concern** about climate change. Although highly diverse, they share common concerns about fairness and consistently call for stronger government leadership and greater public involvement in climate and energy policymaking.

Deliberative research is a powerful vehicle for understanding the nuanced views amongst the British public. These groups are reflected in previous work undertaken by the PACT researchers as shown in the infographic below, which presents early results of citizen panels conducted in the Greater Manchester area between 2024 and 2026.

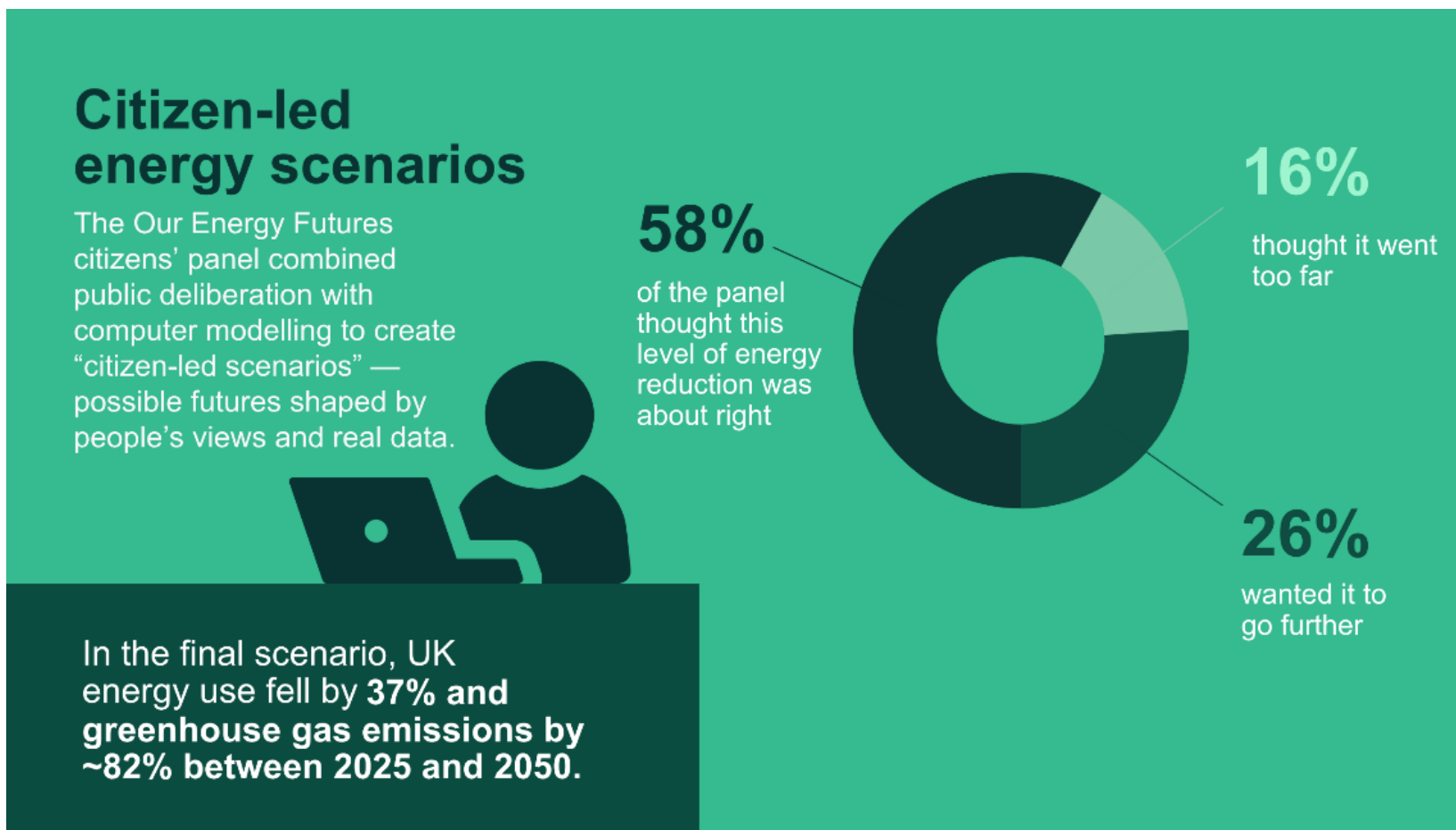
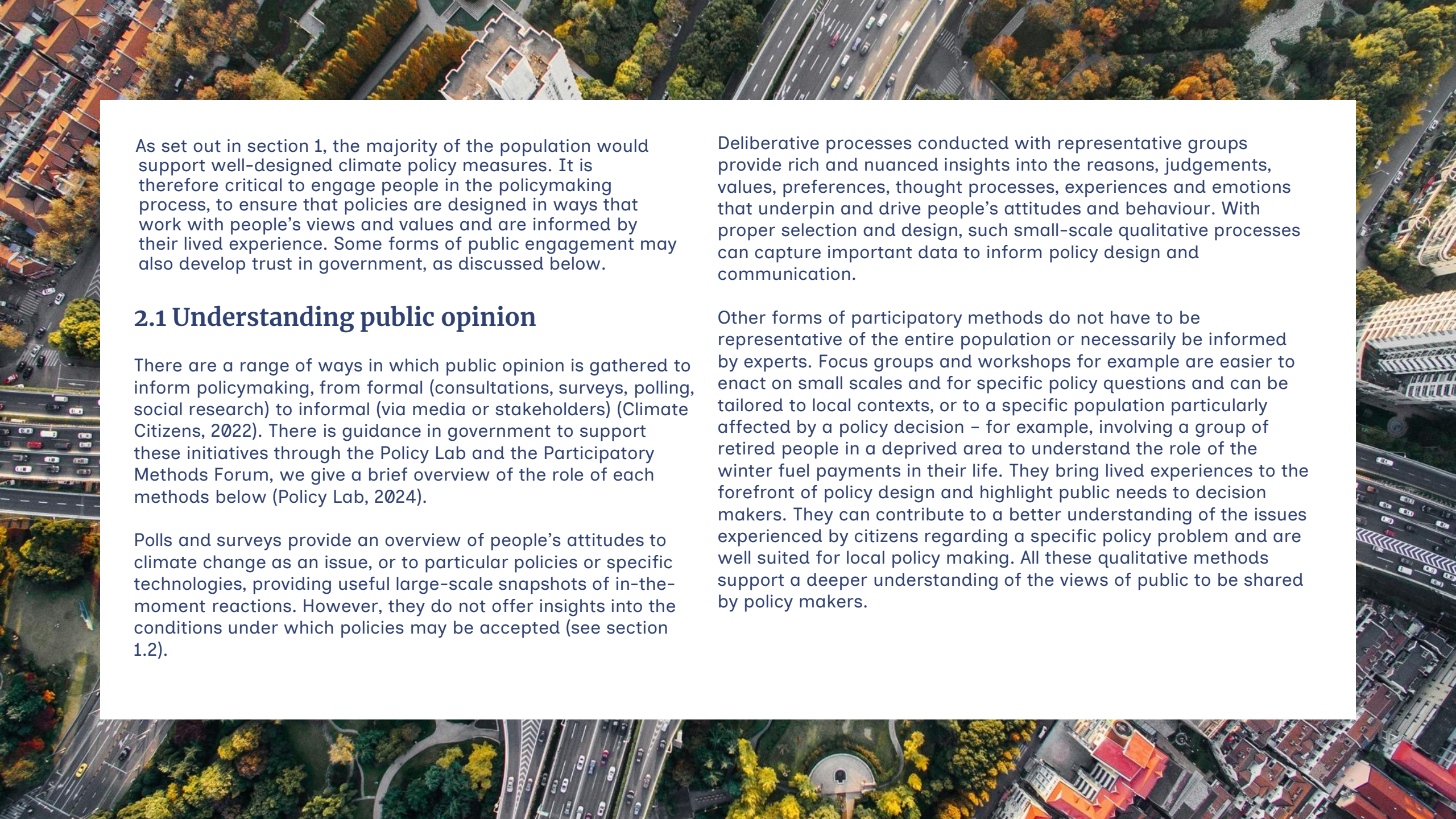


Figure 3: Infographic of early results of the EDRC citizen led energy scenario (Yuille et al., 2026).



2. Public engagement with policymaking

An aerial photograph of a city street, showing a multi-lane road with cars, surrounded by trees with autumn foliage and buildings. The image is used as a background for the text.

As set out in section 1, the majority of the population would support well-designed climate policy measures. It is therefore critical to engage people in the policymaking process, to ensure that policies are designed in ways that work with people's views and values and are informed by their lived experience. Some forms of public engagement may also develop trust in government, as discussed below.

2.1 Understanding public opinion

There are a range of ways in which public opinion is gathered to inform policymaking, from formal (consultations, surveys, polling, social research) to informal (via media or stakeholders) (Climate Citizens, 2022). There is guidance in government to support these initiatives through the Policy Lab and the Participatory Methods Forum, we give a brief overview of the role of each methods below (Policy Lab, 2024).

Polls and surveys provide an overview of people's attitudes to climate change as an issue, or to particular policies or specific technologies, providing useful large-scale snapshots of in-the-moment reactions. However, they do not offer insights into the conditions under which policies may be accepted (see section 1.2).

Deliberative processes conducted with representative groups provide rich and nuanced insights into the reasons, judgements, values, preferences, thought processes, experiences and emotions that underpin and drive people's attitudes and behaviour. With proper selection and design, such small-scale qualitative processes can capture important data to inform policy design and communication.

Other forms of participatory methods do not have to be representative of the entire population or necessarily be informed by experts. Focus groups and workshops for example are easier to enact on small scales and for specific policy questions and can be tailored to local contexts, or to a specific population particularly affected by a policy decision – for example, involving a group of retired people in a deprived area to understand the role of the winter fuel payments in their life. They bring lived experiences to the forefront of policy design and highlight public needs to decision makers. They can contribute to a better understanding of the issues experienced by citizens regarding a specific policy problem and are well suited for local policy making. All these qualitative methods support a deeper understanding of the views of public to be shared by policy makers.

Formal policy consultations are in theory open to all. In practice, however, those individuals and organisations with a specific interest in the subject, including a vested interest, and those that are more well-resourced, are more likely to respond. People with passive climate concern (see Section 1.5) are less likely to be represented in consultation processes, despite the importance of understanding the conditions under which they would support climate policies. The government has acknowledged this in their recent statement, *Rewiring the State*, noting:

'We agreed to replace the current model of consultation by default with new and modern forms of public participation. This includes considering where performative statutory duties to consult can be revoked and how we can more actively bring the public into the policy-making process instead. This recognises that local leaders are better equipped to link public opinion and civil society to policy making' (UK Cabinet Office, 2026).

Informal evidence, such as media, communications with stakeholders, or politicians' dialogue with constituents, may yield some useful information but are likely to be subject to a 'perception gap' bias (see section 1.4).

2.2 Communicating to people

Governments can also communicate to people, through public information campaigns, strategic communication, policies, and other means. As discussed in section 1.4, people want to see leadership from government, and clear communications can help with this (Climate Citizens, 2025; Yuille et al., 2026). However, it is a well-established finding that information, education and encouragement do not, in themselves, result in greater support or uptake of behaviours (Nisa et al., 2019). Rather, communications and campaigns should be seen as a necessary but not sufficient ingredient in climate strategies.



2.3 Democratic innovations

Voting provides only a limited measure of public opinion, while democratic innovations enable more meaningful citizen participation. In recent years, there has been a rise in Citizens' Panels, Juries and Assemblies, in particular (OECD, 2020). These processes, sometimes called deliberative mini-publics (DMPs), involve convening a representative group of citizens, who learn about the issues, talk to each other and to stakeholders, and develop conclusions and recommendations (Gerber et al., 2018; Willis, 2022; Willis et al., 2024).

These processes allow a more nuanced dialogue with citizens, including an exploration of what people expect of government, and what conditions they place on policy support – all of which are critical factors, as set out in Section 1. They enable participants to reflect on evidence and debate and draw conclusions based on diverse perspectives, interests and experiences, taking account of the complexity and compromises needed to address 'wicked problems' like climate change.

Substantively, this enables better and more robust policy to be made by engaging in depth with a diversity of often unheard views and the factors that drive them; procedurally, it can strengthen the integrity of the policymaking process; ethically, it is generally considered simply the right thing to do to for people who will be affected by policy to have a hand in shaping it; and instrumentally, it is considered to increase public trust and confidence, boosting social acceptance and perceived legitimacy for policymaking (Yuille and Willis, 2025). For example, rather than simply reporting whether people favour particular policy outcomes (e.g. limiting growth in aviation) or measures (e.g. frequent flyer levies), deliberative approaches enable an exploration of why support or opposition exists, and how policy could be designed and communicated to acknowledge, address or mitigate concerns in ways that resonate with people's lived experience.

These processes help to guide climate strategy. There is also evidence to suggest that they build policy legitimacy, if the wider public is engaged and they are well-communicated (Pilet et al., 2023).





2.4 Examples of deliberative public engagement

There have now been examples of deliberative public engagement at a range of scales, including:

- **Climate Assembly UK**, a national Citizens' Assembly commissioned by six select committees of the UK Parliament (Climate Assembly UK, 2020);
- **The Climate Change Committee's Citizens' Panels**, which contributed evidence to the Committee's report on the Seventh Carbon Budget (Bailey et al., 2024), and their Well-Adapted UK report (Climate Change Committee, 2026);
- Over thirty **local climate assemblies and juries**, contributing to local climate strategies (Climate Citizens, 2025);
- **A two-year citizens' panel** convened by the Energy Demand Research Centre to develop quantified, citizen-informed pathways to meet net zero, with a focus on energy demand (Yuille et al., 2026);
- **A GO Science process** combining policymaker-led futures scenarios with public dialogue on their realism and impacts (Sharmina et al., 2025);
- The forthcoming **Youth Panel** convened by DESNZ, as announced in the Public Participation Strategy, Energizing Britain (DESNZ, 2025b)
- Civil society led initiatives, such as **the People's Plan for Nature** (People's Plan for Nature, 2023).

Similar initiatives are used widely across different policy areas and by different governments, as a 2022 review showed (Climate Citizens, 2022).

2.5 Embedding

Despite advances in engagement techniques, and recognition of the value of these techniques via processes such as those listed above, the results of social research and public engagement processes are not embedded in policymaking in a consistent way. Internationally, there is a well-reported lack of follow-up from commissioners of deliberative processes in acting on their findings (Boswell et al., 2023). Recommendations tend to be presented as desirable, without consideration of how they might come to be implemented in the context of existing political structures.

The next step is then to consider ways to embed public participation initiatives within net zero policy making at the local and national level. This will require a deeper understanding of where the barriers to implementation are still present, beyond the perception gap highlighted above, facilitated by a deeper understanding of the everyday workings of net zero policy making. This would support the transformation of production systems and consumption patterns to reach net zero in the UK by enabling the development of more robust policy with higher levels of public support and trust, and greater perceived legitimacy (Farrow and Ainscough, 2026).





3. The agenda for PACT

Given the evidence on public engagement with climate and net zero policies, PACT will:

- **Seek to address the gap** between policymakers' perceptions of public support for climate action and the evidence from social research.
- **Aim to strengthen government leadership on climate action** by improving understanding of public views, values and motivations; developing methods to better embed public engagement more effectively in policy design; and supporting policymakers to develop policies informed by richer evidence on people's experiences and attitudes. This work supports the Rewiring the State and Energising Britain initiatives.
- **Support the improved the integration of existing and new social science research into policy analysis**, including energy systems modelling, for example in the housing and travel sectors

Through this work, PACT can help shape net zero policies that respond to public concern about climate change while building a stronger mandate for ambitious future action.





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