

# IS THERE A ROLE FOR THE PUBLIC IN DELIVERING THE UK CLIMATE CHANGE ACT TARGETS?

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Current policies are widely seen as inadequate for delivering the UK Climate Change Act targets. But would the public be supportive of policies for making the necessary reductions in emissions and if so what policies would be acceptable to the public to achieve this?

In 2015 The Environmental Change Institute at the University of Oxford and the Fleming Policy Centre ran a series of consultations with a range of stakeholders to find out the answers to these questions. We discovered that institutional representatives did not believe climate change is a salient issue for the UK public. Therefore it was assumed that any attempt to introduce radical policy changes would likely be resisted by the public and wider society. There was no broad support, by institutions or the public we spoke to, for giving the UK public greater involvement in emission reductions. This was seen as a role for governments, working with international partners to build strong agreements.

### Key findings

- Whilst there is general antipathy to policies that seek to 'engage' people, nevertheless one of the key criteria for a desirable policy is seen to be public opinion/acceptability.
- There is a mismatch between what is seen as equitable and 'preferred', and what is seen as feasible. What people feel is 'possible' is not necessarily what is seen to be most desirable.
- There was not great enthusiasm for trying to get the public more involved
- There was no indication that the public would support the UK acting alone to radically reduce emissions
- No single policy proposal was thought capable of closing the emissions gap
- Building trust in the ability to properly measure our carbon emissions from goods and services remains a challenge

### Recommendations

Efforts to build public support for more ambitious climate policies will require:

- A broad and ongoing public dialogue about climate change
- Clear messages about how UK efforts are contributing to a broader international effort
- Transparency about how processes will be policed and monitored to prevent fraud and abuse
- Public understanding of the choices society faces in addressing climate change to be raised and for more complex options to be made understandable
- Trust built in the government's ability to accurately administer optimal solutions and prevent policies being hijacked by vested interests
- A national commitment to fairness in the process

“ *But none of these can work with the public; the public needs to be kept sweet as it were while the government properly deals with what is an emergency.* ”

London workshop

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

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The UK has targets to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases by 80% by 2050. The pathway to meeting this overall target has been broken down into a series of carbon budgets. In order to stay on track to meet this target the fourth carbon budget requires the UK to cut emissions by 31% from 2013 to 2025<sup>1</sup>. There is a significant gap between the actions required to meet these targets and what politicians have committed to. It has long been thought that achieving ambitious emissions reductions will require building public awareness of climate risk and acceptance of the changes needed to mitigate that risk<sup>2</sup>. Yet there is no evidence, at a time of declining public interest in climate change, whether decision-makers and opinion-formers consider winning hearts and minds a central objective of policy approaches to climate change, or how they view the trade-offs between public engagement and other important goals of climate policy.

Researchers from the Environmental Change Institute at the University of Oxford teamed up with the Fleming Policy Centre, to find out what key stakeholders think the role of the public is in meeting UK carbon reduction targets. Between March and June 2015 we ran a series of consultations and surveys with more than fifty representatives from the civil service, environmental NGOs, industry and government. We asked expert stakeholders what they thought of the feasibility and attractiveness of a policy that encompassed high levels of public engagement (Tradable Energy Quotas). We then asked a range of institutional stakeholders to compare four different broadly feasible policies for meeting UK climate targets and how they thought the public would respond to the policies:

- **Command-and-Control:** Government imposes supply-side and demand-side measures to meet the fourth carbon budget, in line with the calculations laid out in the Zero Carbon Britain report of 2013.<sup>3</sup>
- **Carbon Tax:** Rising tax on emissions rising linearly to £66/tCO<sub>2</sub>e in 2025.<sup>4</sup>
- **Cap-and-Dividend:** Market-based trading system with a tightening hard cap on emissions; all allowances auctioned; revenue split evenly between citizens on a per-capita basis via cash payment.<sup>5</sup>
- **TEQs:** available energy rationed per citizen and allowances subtracted from each citizen's account at the point of fuel or electricity purchase; citizens able to trade emissions.<sup>6</sup>

“ *The question here then is having laid out several scenarios is the public acceptability for adopting them and the politicians are the thing that make them publicly acceptable or not.* ”

Bristol workshop

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<sup>1</sup> UK Committee on Climate Change. <http://www.theccc.org.uk/tackling-climate-change/the-legal-landscape/global-action-on-climate-change/>

<sup>2</sup> Whitmarsh L, O'Neill S and Lorenzoni I. (2011). *Engaging the Public with Climate Change: Behaviour Change and Communication*. London: Earthscan (2011).

<sup>3</sup> Zero Carbon Britain (2013). *Rethinking the future* <http://zerocarbonbritain.org/zcb-latest-report>

<sup>4</sup> Hope, C. (2011) How high should carbon taxes be? *Cambridge Judge Business School Working Paper No. 9/2011*

<sup>5</sup> Kunkel, C. M., & Kammen, D. M. (2011). Design and implementation of carbon cap and dividend policies. *Energy Policy*, 39(1), 477-486.

<sup>6</sup> Chamberlin, S; Maxey, L and Hurth, V (2015). Reconciling scientific reality with realpolitik: moving beyond carbon pricing to TEQs – an integrated, economy-wide emissions cap. *Carbon Management*, Vol 5 (4), 411-427

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## 2. RESULTS

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We interviewed 11 expert stakeholders from government, business and NGOs. We asked them if they thought a personal carbon trading scheme like TEQs was the answer to delivering radical emission cuts in the short term. They replied:

- Climate change is not on the public radar at the moment and so the public would not understand why they were being asked to ration their energy use.
- Climate change is bad politics so it was not likely that there would be political leadership on implementing a radical policy such as TEQs.
- Most felt it would be possible to meet the UK Climate Change Act without the need for significant behaviour change from the public.

Next, we ran three workshops in Bristol, Brighton and London to ask attendees to compare the four policy options. Two cross-cutting themes emerged regarding the desirability and efficacy of policy scenarios: 1) economic and political feasibility; 2) public acceptability and equity. All the proposals were seen as lacking economic and political feasibility by virtue of being proposed as a unilateral strategy for the UK. Discussion often returned to recognition of the central role of governments in pushing through agreements to limit emissions, but getting agreement at both a national and international level for a command and control framework was seen as unlikely, and was also seen as potentially unacceptable to the UK public. The difficulty of being able to demonstrate to the public that it was possible to accurately account for the carbon equated with particular goods or activities, or that governments could be trusted to implement anything but a basic system, meant it was felt there would be little public faith in any of the four proposals.

Finally, the participants were asked to rank the four policy proposals against two questions: ‘Which policy will be most assured at meeting the fourth carbon budget?’ and ‘Which policy do you prefer?’ Cap and Dividend was thought to be the most assured category. When people were asked which option they preferred, the most popular policy options were TEQs and Carbon Tax.

“ *So much is being produced in China. It’s very difficult to know where the embedded carbon is, how much carbon there is. I don’t think we know.* ”  
Brighton workshop

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### 3. CONCLUSION

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Across both the workshops and the interviews, the public were not widely viewed as having a determining role in delivering the fourth carbon budget. It was felt that meeting the budget could only happen within a broader international agreement which does not necessarily involve the general public. People are not seen as active partners in this process, but for some they are rather viewed like a wasp's nest, an entity that must not be aggrieved or upset. The goal of effective climate policy is not to poke sticks into the nest of public opinion.

The findings from both the workshops and the interviews revealed that the desire for increased public engagement in emissions reductions is not necessarily a shared objective. Many stakeholders seemed more inclined to avoid talking about climate change altogether. The approaches sought

by the stakeholders seemed to be a response to the messiness of political contestation. An interesting paradox emerged: whilst there is general antipathy to policies that seek to 'engage' people, one of the key criteria for a desirable policy is seen to be public opinion/acceptability. Furthermore, there is a mismatch between what is seen as equitable and 'preferred', and what is seen as feasible. Therefore these findings indicate that what is seen to be possible is not necessarily what is seen to be most desirable.

### ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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This report was written by Dr Christopher Shaw (University of Oxford), Emily Cox (University of Sussex), Dr Victoria Hurth (Plymouth University), Tom Pashby (Fleming Policy Centre) and Shaun Chamberlin (Fleming Policy Centre)

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“ *The actors who make change happen are the governments, business, or civil society; one pushing the other to make something happen. That just isn't there on climate change. Everyone kind of wants business as usual whether they're willing to admit it or not.* ”

London workshop