Public Views and the climate crisis. A preliminary analysis of results from a new survey[1]

1. Background

Public views relating to climate change are often seen as puzzling: why are people not more driven to act in light of the unfolding climate crisis? Some researchers answer this question by suggesting that human psychology distances us from the scale of the problem we face, others argue that our norms of living mean that we 'look away' (eg. Norgaard 2006), whilst policy makers often identify an 'attitude-behaviour gap'. The idea of behaviour change has been influential in policy efforts to incentivise people to be more climate friendly.

Alternative approaches to understanding this question reveal that people's views and actions are less puzzling when we better understand the contexts in which they are embedded. For example, everyday patterns of living are shaped by how our energy systems work, how food is produced and distributed, and how society and economy are organised more generally (eg. Shove 2014). These contexts <u>oblige</u> us to act in particular ways, or at least make certain ways of living much easier and less costly than others. Just by doing everyday and necessary things like heating our homes, buying food, travelling around our city, we all contribute to carbon emissions and environmental damage. Trying to do things differently can cost us time, money and effort, or can sit in tension with other commitments and relationships. From this perspective, it is these deeper contexts which drive everyday behaviours and which should be a focus for policy makers.

In our research we wish to better understand how people see and think about context, complexity and climate change. We aim to answer some important but under-researched questions:

- How do people think about climate change and see it as linking, or not, to their day to day practices? Do they see inconsistencies between their everyday practices and their ideas about 'what should be? How do they experience this?

- Who do people think should act, and in what ways? For example, how do they see – and weigh up - individual actions and behaviours, the role of business and government and society wide changes?

- How do they view possibilities for different ways of doing things?

2. The research

We ran an online survey in the autumn of 2020, distributed to people who live, work and/or study in Leeds. With the support of Leeds City Council, the survey link was sent to an opt-in list from previous climate survey research and a Citizens' Panel list and we also drew on an array of diverse networks, education, third sector and other organisations and community groupings across the city. The survey was completed by 1676 respondents. We sought a

wide socio-demographic spread and breadth in the perceived relevance of climate change. The achieved sample over-represents degree-qualified and 'climate concerned' citizens compared to city and national averages, however, we mainly focus on the substantive content of responses to open ended questions and diversity across the sample. We will report later on our qualitative follow-up research conducted in the summer of 2021. The present summary is based on the survey data and provides an illustrative insight into the wealth of data we collected.

3. Survey findings

These are some indicative findings from the survey data. The evidence shows:

- Widespread concern about climate change, for example:
    - 72% of respondents think about climate change most weeks or most days
    - 59% of respondents say they discuss climate change issues at least every month;
- Widespread agreement with the need to significantly cut carbon emissions:
    - 78% agreed with the statement "As a society we should ensure significant cuts to carbon emissions (eg. taxing frequent air travel, limiting city centre car use, converting to renewables)";
- A nuanced engagement with the complexities of everyday climate-relevant activities and decisions;
- A strong sense of how context shapes people's ideas about what to do, and preferred policy options in given situations;
- A wide range of ideas about how individual and collective action are linked, and their role in driving environmentally positive change;
- A widely held belief in the need for system-level changes, and the crucial roles of national government, local authorities and businesses.

The survey contained several open ended questions inviting people to share their thinking and reasoning, and hundreds of thousands of words of text were provided in response. We briefly illustrate some examples below.

Individual actions and societal contexts

We collected a wealth of evidence on how people see an inter-connectedness across levels of action from the individual to the societal. Respondents did not tend to separate out 'individual' and 'society' but see them as connected, and in complex ways. We asked respondents about their carbon footprint and, as relevant, if and how wider changes would enable them to reduce it. Many pointed to the way personal actions are inseparable from wider contexts. For example:

> *.. the amount of carbon I'm responsible for is dwarfed in comparison to industry and those who commute by plane every week, for example. There needs to be structural changes to encourage wider change - it feels a bit pointless me doing the things I do when there's no onus on business etc. to do their bit too. I still do it, but it does feel a little like a drop in the ocean*

> [We need] Decarbonisation of the grid, subsidies for retrofit and generation, vastly improved public transport, far tighter legislation and a carbon tax, supermarkets making it easier to be greener.

> *At the moment the pressure is all on individuals to make changes - which are often costlier or more inconvenient. policy change would push change faster, and there needs to be a carrot and stick approach and it needs to be radical.*

When commitments pull in different directions

Our survey collected a large amount of data on people's *reasoning* about the best course of action to address emissions-relevant everyday dilemmas. We presented brief storylines for respondents to consider, for example in one such scenario or 'vignette' we asked about 'Vicky', a young woman who has been invited on an overseas package holiday with her friends. Vicky is concerned about climate change and does not want to fly. Participants were given some more information and asked what they thought Vicky should do (eg. '*go with her friends*', '*make other plans*') and why. The data showed that:

- Vicky was not seen as an autonomous decision maker and, typically, people's advice about what she should do described how she might best balance her climate beliefs, relationships and commitments to her friends. There was also widespread empathy for Vicky and acknowledgement of how challenging this balancing act can be.
- People held a range of complex and varied ideas about what it means to "do the right thing" and how this can be negotiated.
- In determining the right course of action, respondents weighed up a range of issues including: the importance of maintaining relationships, the potential for Vicky to influence her friends and the significance - or not- of individual actions. Some challenged the framing of the question in favour of aviation industry regulation.

Example responses illustrate some ways in which Vicky's decision would reflect her commitments to her friends as well as her climate beliefs. They also hint at a range of ideas about how individual actions might – or might not – relate to social change. For example:

> *I think it is important that Vicky expresses her views (and I hope her friends will listen to and respect them), however, if her friends chose to continue the original plan I don't think Vicky opting out will have much impact on climate*

> *Young people can't be expected to sacrifice everything - friendships included. Hopefully, she & her friends will decide to make this an exception and limit the number of flights they take.*

> *Although this is a tricky social and emotional decision, I still think Vicky should stand by her concerns and not give in to peer pressure … If more people had this view and took this action then it would help reduce emissions, contribute to social change, and reduce profit of the aviation industry.*

> *While flights are still happening and holidays are available, Vicky should not feel guilt for travelling. She is not individually responsible for the whole aviation industry. Grander systematic changes need to happen to show the general public that flying is "bad" before individuals feel guilty*

Coalitions for climate-relevant interventions?

Another vignette described a local authority wanting to tackle air pollution in a town centre and exploring policy options. Of four options, the dominant preference, at 59%, was to pedestrianize and ban non-essential cars, whilst 17% preferred a voluntary approach (for example working with employers to reduce congestion). People commonly assumed the 'anywhere' town was in fact Leeds and spoke passionately about the importance of improved public transport as well as congestion, accessibility, economic sustainability, flourishing spaces (local and town centre), well-being and fairness. Furthermore, even those respondents who had expressed a preference for a voluntary approach to tackling emissions generally were, here, as likely to support an interventionist approach as a voluntary one. We see this as exemplifying ways in which contextual factors and diverse concerns coalesce around climate-relevant interventions. We are interested, too, in thinking beyond more climate friendly ways of 'doing the same things' and turn to this next.

Radical changes in everyday contexts

In the survey people were asked to respond to the question: *The pandemic has caused significant changes in how people live their everyday lives. Are there any changes that you have experienced, or seen, which you would like to keep?* Respondents commonly described profound changes, most especially relating to work and commuting and a connectedness to locale. These changes were often seen as a model of possibility for doing things differently.

> *Home working has its own limitations, stresses and pressures, (I do feel more isolated and often quite lonely, and work is in my head AND in my home, which I do not like) but I still prefer it. When lock-down was at its height, the air was cleaner, everything was so much quieter and more relaxed …I saw much more wildlife quite close to where I live… .. .it has been wonderful to see how many people really began to appreciate nature..*

> *Working from home instead of commuting to an office has been the single most beneficial thing for me. ..I am not bound by an outmoded sense of the 9-to-5. The extra time and lower stress are without doubt the best aspect of the changes and I hope to keep them in place*

> *I'd love to keep more of the "live local" seen during the pandemic - use of local shops, discourage "mega malls" . Even in my urban location the peace and recovery of nature was a joy*

4. In summary

This findings document can only be indicative of our extensive data. Rather than see a puzzle in what people do not do – or describe it in terms of an attitude-behaviour gap - we argue the importance of more fully understanding the nuanced ways in which the public experience and engage with contexts of complexity and constraint. Across our survey data we see a more profound public appetite for tackling the climate crisis, doing things differently and for action across all levels than is evident in conventional approaches.