**Net Zero and the cost of living crisis:**

**Public engagement and climate communication**

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1. **Introduction**

The aim of our small pilot project[[1]](#footnote-1) was to explore public views of the cost of living crisis and climate policies. Reducing greenhouse gas emissions, improved energy security and household cost savings can go hand in hand, for example through home insulation programmes and increasing renewables, but some commentators and politicians argue that the way to improve security and reduce costs is through increased UK fossil fuel extraction[[2]](#footnote-2). We therefore wanted to explore how the public interpret and engage with different messages regarding cost-of-living increases and Net Zero transitions by examining:

* citizens’ views of climate policies in relation to the current cost of living crisis and rising energy costs;
* citizens’ evaluations of political campaign materials which present diverse accounts of how and when to act on climate.

We explicitly sought to talk with citizens who are less heard in debates about Net Zero transitions, that is, from economically disadvantaged, and from disabled and minority ethnic groups. Such groups are at the sharp edge of the cost-of-living crisis. We targeted our sampling strategy accordingly, focusing on networks and organisations across Leeds and Halifax.[[3]](#footnote-3) To explore people’s views we ran 3 online discussion groups (both daytime and evening), each with eight people attending and each lasting around 90 minutes. Participants received a gift voucher as a thank you for their participation. Ethical approval was gained from the University of Leeds. In the groups we used two sets of prompts for discussion, focusing firstly on locality as a context for thinking about climate policies (section 2 below) and secondly on the wider national context (section 3 below). We conclude in section 4 by offering key messages for climate engagement and communication.

1. **Locality, connectedness and transparency**

After introducing the session we started with a storyline inviting people to say what they thought the protagonist in the story should do. The storyline (described in Appendix 1) was devised as an ‘icebreaker’ and as a way to explore participants’ ideas about climate related policies in a local context. In it a person is deciding whether to invest some money in a local authority project which will benefit the environment and local people by producing local renewable energy and insulating council housing. This fictional project is similar to climate bond schemes that are in place across a number of local authority areas in England, although not currently in Leeds. We describe the key themes that emerged from the discussion. Most people suggested that it was a good idea to invest in the local council project to support social and environmental goals although there were caveats and variations on this. We organize the main areas of discussion into themes below.

***The linked social and environmental value of the projects***

Participants identified a link between the social and environmental benefits of the scheme, seeing value in both, for example:

*I think that investing in environmental things is quite often gonna have quite a big social impact... [insulation] cut hundreds of pounds a year off my bill. Like it is a drastic difference. So I think a lot of environmental things are gonna help people.*

***The value of acting locally and making a tangible difference***

Some felt that the meaningful connection to the projects would be especially important, echoing part of the logic where similar local schemes have been implemented:

*one of the really nice things about investing locally is you could be like, ‘I did that’, cause you could walk past a house that’s a council house and be like, ‘that’s what I did, I put money in that and that’s happened there’.*

For several participants, doing something locally and feeling connected to the outcome would give it a tangible quality, which they liked. Additionally, transparency and knowing what their money ‘is doing’ was important.

***Individual and household financial decision making in the context of financial need***

There was quite a lot of discussion about levels of risk and return in choosing where the protagonist in the storyline should invest the money. Our interest here is not how climate bonds work in practice but rather in using our storyline to draw out ‘what matters’ in people’s everyday lives. Whilst many thought that the storyline character should invest in the local authority project, some older participants who had particularly mentioned their everyday struggles were inclined to not want to move the money anywhere unfamiliar, preferring to keep it in a bank or ‘to the side’ ready to pay for unexpected bills. For example:

*I would like to put it in the bank, whatever I get (for) interest because everything is going up, all the prices… electric, gas, everything and the petrol, everything is going up. If I needed it in an emergency I can use that money for myself.*

These sentiments appeared driven in part by experiences of immediate need but, generally, participants liked the idea of supporting the local authority project with its beneficial social and environmental outcomes.

***Role of local government and local resourcing***

There was also discussion about the need for sufficient local authority resourcing without needing to raise money from residents:

*...for the council to have to go cap in hand to their rate payers and say, ‘Can you help us?’, the answer is, ‘Well, no, that should be coming from the government, from our taxes’.*

This view linked to wider discussion about inequities and unfairness, which we take up in the next section.

Overall, the discussion prompted by the storyline offered a useful lens on participants’ views relating to green investment, locality, the value of relative transparency in local government and the importance of a sense of connectedness enabled through local forms of engagement and action.

1. **Costs of living and climate: reflections on national policy directions**

The second phase of the group discussions focused on *national* level issues regarding policies around Net Zero and energy costs. Participants watched two video clips (the links and discussion prompts are described in Appendix 2). The first video showed Nigel Farage criticizing Net Zero policies as incompatible with ordinary people’s needs to reduce household costs. The second video was a Green Party short describing climate policies and energy savings as mutually supportive through the example of home insulation. Discussion followed each one, and we asked questions about their content and about their presentational styles. We draw out the main themes of the discussions that ensued.

***Tackling the cost of living and climate crisis: together or apart?***

Many participants saw tackling the cost-of-living crisis as consistent with implementing climate friendly policies. A participant who had a heat-related disability requiring her to stay warm pointed to this consistency whilst also describing how high her energy bills had risen, despite having a well-insulated flat:

*Yeah I don’t think you ever really have to choose between like two things like that.* *I mean one a’ the biggest things that we’re dealing with is cost of living rising at the moment is like massive hikes in energy bills* [points to her small flat and notes her exorbitant heating costs] *- that’s insane! It’s so insulated.*

Others reflected on the complementarity of tackling the cost of living and the climate crisis with reference to broad policy directions, for example:

*I think if, as a nation, we’re working towards systems like renewable energy and making our own manufacturing base [around] the equipment for wind farms or solar panels and all stuff like that, if we’re actually producing that ourselves and giving people a job to help to produce things like that, and then creating a way of us generating cheaper energy that’s renewable … that’s got to be a way to go [but..] I think in order to help people now, more immediate... things need to be put in place.*

Participants did not feel that Net Zero climate policies would increase household bills and saw tackling climate change and tackling rising costs as compatible. Unsurprisingly, however, several participants emphasized the urgency of the cost of living crisis, feeling that it eclipsed other concerns:

*…anybody that’s struggling with their energy, that’s living in poverty, they’d love to care about [Green Party priorities]. They don’t, they care about putting food in their kids’ mouths, making sure they’re clothed.*

*‘Cause .. a lot of people, or an increasing number of people live hand to mouth, day-to-day, don’t they, and they’re not really thinking about, well, what could I do now that would be good for my grandkids when they grow up*.

Discussion of costs of living and of energy was frequently framed with reference to inequality which we take up next.

***Questions of fairness and inequality***

Participants were widely critical of economic inequalities, describing frustration at the rising costs of living and the gap between the rich and powerful and ordinary people. These issues were a theme within the videos which, along with our prompts, obviously shaped the discussion (see Appendix 2). Nevertheless, we note these issues often dominated discussion and were the most ‘live’ issue for many participants. Some were critical of energy companies’ profits, for example making a link to the government’s (then) willingness to raise the energy price cap:

*I’m not sure if there was an actual justification or the Government were just giving money to their pals that work in energy companies.*

Another participant’s comments reflected the wider sentiment:

*...they’ve now obviously had that windfall tax [*on oil and gas companies*] introduced which was very delayed and they should have done it way earlier than they did. And .. it shows the fact that like, that businesses were able to make huge amounts of profit during times of crisis and stuff like that.*

Several participants discussed the cost-of-living crisis directly in relation to profits and the gap between haves and have-nots:

*…so many policies always hit the poor first, whether you’re in a low lying country in the South Pacific or whether you’re in a rich country like Britain, it’s always the poor that get hit first, so I think, I think alongside any kind of policies on lowering emissions is we have to consider the bigger picture in terms of wealth and that wealth is the problem, that it’s not shared equally amongst people.*

*…to me, it’s fine to say we’ll insulate, it’s fine to say we’ll use renewables, but the thing... we have to be saying, I think, is the reason that our bills are going up is not just because of world circumstances, because, it’s because shareholders are raking in huge profits.*

This evidence illustrates how people do not ‘box off’ different social issues, identifying complex interconnections across issues which matter to them.

***Voice***

Inequalities were described not only in terms of poverty and the cost of living crisis but also through a perceived lack of voice within national level politics. This concern was articulated most strongly in a group with a number of older minority ethnic participants although it was an ethnic majority concern too. Participants described their sense that ordinary people are not being heard, their everyday needs and circumstances not recognized:

*As usual I do agree that Westminster is out of touch with the people [respondents nod]. You know, they’re very high earners. You know, they don’t see the, the people who are at the lower end a’ the scale. And, you know, it’s, as usual they are bleeding the poor and the rich are getting richer.*

Accounts of particular experiences, for example in health and education, fleshed out a linked sense of systems not sufficiently recognizing needs in particular areas, for example:

*I taught in a, in a city school and they would say like, you know, ‘80% of your children should be at the, at the level, they should all be at that age’. And you’re saying, ‘well come and look at the children, look at their backgrounds, look at their…they’re carrying so much baggage into schools they haven’t got, they’ve not been fed, they’ve not been looked after’. It’s just so heartbreaking.*

***Trust, mistrust and transparency***

Unsurprisingly given the timing of the research there were references to topical ‘Partygate’. More generally, questions of trust were linked to ‘whose interests’ were being promoted:

*I can tell you who I wouldn’t trust. I wouldn’t trust anyone who has any interest, by interest I mean money, in, in selling us stuff, because what is causing an environmental crisis is over-consumption and over-production..., and there are a lot of people, a large minority of people who earn a lot of money from that.*

Trust was given to those seen to have more ‘objective’ or grounded knowledge or without vested financial interests:

*And there’s one sort of person I know I could trust about environmental issues and that was someone who already lived on the land, and that’s like, you know, farming communities.*

*Well, from celebrities that I’d trust, it’d be Greta Thunberg and David Attenborough, people like that who don’t have any, I don’t think they’ve got any financial interest.*

Participants valued transparency and an ability to judge for themselves based on evidence:

*Kind of on the trustworthiness… if… they’re being interviewed in the news and they’re like, ‘my job is a sustainability expert at this particular organization’ and then I can google the organization and go, ‘great they do good work’ [respondents nod]...*

***Lay understandings and persuasive communication***

We lastly discussed the presentational style of the videos. Many participants were aware of the persuasive instruments deployed in the videos, such as emotional appeals:

*And I have a slight sort of, like people who tend to do things that are kind of emotive and are very emotive in the way that they talk, I’m a little bit more resistant to trust because I’m like I feel like you’re trying to like bring me into your direction.*

Some participants mistrusted not only emotional appeals but also questioned how ‘facts’ and figures are used in argument, with statistics used to ‘say anything’, or suggested such evidence does not resonate with them:

*…they need to really come down to earth and listen to the public who are struggling. It’s no good putting figures on tv and saying, ‘oh this, this percentage or this percentage’. It doesn’t mean anything to people.*

There was a linked sense among participants that getting messages across about climate issues needed to build on meaningful dialogue with people to get them to re-engage with politics*.* Despite the rather wide-ranging discussions which we facilitated through this pilot research, the evidence points to the interconnections that people draw across social issues which matter to them and illustrates the perceived value of engagement and inclusion in developing principles for Net Zero transition.

1. **Key messages for climate engagement and communication**

***Themes from the discussions:***

1. People do not ‘put issues into boxes’ but see climate and cost of living concerns as overlapping and, notably, linked to wider issues to do with the urgency of tackling social unfairness, transparency and the importance of listening to and reflecting the desires of ‘ordinary’ people, especially those struggling in the current crisis.
2. Implementing climate friendly policies and tackling the cost of living crisis are not seen as contradictory; for example people did not see tackling climate issues as ‘too expensive’, but the need for immediate action on rising living costs was paramount.
3. People felt that not only unbiased information but also substantive dialogue is missing in public life. They generally welcomed debate and deliberation on issues but did not feel that politicians were listening to them. Specifically, people don’t feel consulted on the big issues like climate change.
4. Whilst people felt distant from national government, they were somewhat more positive about local government and valued what they saw as greater transparency. They especially valued ‘connectedness’ – links to tangible local differences or outcomes that they could see with their own eyes.

***How should climate communications be focused?***

1. People want and need help now, even if they appreciate the need for thinking ahead, so climate communications should focus on short-term gains while not losing sight of longer-term strategic priorities. They should address climate action and immediate cost-of-living issues with ‘win-win’ solutions.
2. People are critical of ‘performances’ of politics and value expertise and transparency of evidence but also the ability to connect this evidence to their own experience. Climate communications should shy away from emotive language and aim at full transparency to establish truthfulness. Scientific and policy evidence on climate change needs to connect to ‘what matters’ at the level of people’s everyday practices and experience, especially as they relate to:
   1. their local area and the felt value and tangibility of local action and outcome;
   2. support in managing and improving everyday living;
   3. collective and community values, such as protecting the vulnerable and ensuring that marginalized voices are heard.
3. The pervasive concern of people not feeling listened to should be addressed through the forms that climate communications take, not just their content, ensuring that public communications are two-way. Listening to the public’s views on what to address as well as how to campaign on climate would be an effective engagement strategy in itself. People need to feel heard and engagement strategies need to give a voice to those who feel marginalised. Follow-up communication is important so people see that their views are taken into account. However, finding the right format for such conversations might be challenging and demands resources in order to reach those people who feel particularly disengaged.

**Appendix A**

The following vignette (storyline), used to prompt early discussion in the groups, was shared on screen and read to participants a couple of times, and discussion followed on:

*A local council is inviting people to invest their money in projects which help the environment and local people. The projects include producing local renewable energy and insulating council housing. Savings will be shared with the council house tenants. People who invest money know that their investment is safe and that it will support local people. They will get a modest level of interest on their money.*

*Jenny has been left £2000 in a will and wants to invest the money somewhere. She is wondering whether to invest it in this local council initiative or put it somewhere she can get a higher rate of interest on her money.*

* What would you like her to do? Why?
* What sorts of things are important here?

Extra prompts:

* Are there other environment projects you think that the local council should support?
* In the local council initiative Jenny would know exactly where her money is invested. Do you think that matters?

**Appendix 2**

This was our script for prompting discussion following each of the video clips shared with participants:

After watching each video, we’ll discuss what you think together. You may well have different views. We’re keen to listen to different views and understand what really matters to you. We’ll spend about 10 minutes on this and then go on to the next video.

Nigel Farage: (10 min)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9sc5MYUBmKQ> (-> 1.51) and Show a second time

Discussion prompts:

1. Do you think Farage raises issues that are important to people? Does he listen to what citizens want? What would important issues be? [lived experience; cost of living vs climate change; listening]

2. Do you agree about needing more control as a citizen? About having policy imposed on you? [Political participation (referendum); anti-establishment (out of touch)]

3. Is it the right kind of political participation that he is suggesting (public debate, referendum)? Why? [Political participation; public sovereignty]

4. He says that we can’t tackle the cost-of-living crisis and climate change at the same time. Do you agree? [Climate delay; pragmatism vs idealism; cost of living vs climate change]

Green party: (10 min)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vn9WyJDA420> (->1.28) and Show a second time

Discussion prompts:

1. Do you think the video raises issues that are important to people? Do they listen to what citizens want (and what is the difference to Farage in this respect?)? What would important issues be? [lived experience; cost of living vs climate change; listening]

2. The speaker here says that big business is profiting while ordinary people have no say, and that government is making excuses for big business. Do you agree? [political participation/agency; ideology/neo-liberalism]

3. Do you agree that we can tackle the cost of living crisis and climate change at the same time? [pragmatism vs idealism; cost of living vs climate change]

1. The project was supported by the University of Leeds Research and Innovation Services Net Zero Challenge Workshop follow-on funding. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. At the time of writing the UK government has just lifted the moratorium on fracking for shale gas. We conducted the discussion groups from 30/6 to 4/7 2022, some days before Boris Johnson resigned as Prime Minister. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. We promoted the research across particular organisations and networks but then simply recruited those who opted in, up to the cap on discussion group numbers. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)