

Climate Change: UK citizens don't trust the Government to act

The purpose of The Commitment (www.thecommitment.uk) is to accelerate government action on climate change and biodiversity loss. UK citizens make:

1. a declaration that the climate and natural world will be key factors when they vote;
2. an appeal to their MP and head of local government to ensure that government, as a first step, meets the climate and biodiversity targets it has already been set;
3. a personal statement explaining why they are making The Commitment.

Politicians do not generally believe they have a mandate to take radical measures on the climate and the natural world. By taking Commitments to citizens' MPs and heads of local government, we will demonstrate that there is strong, diverse and popular demand for bold action.

The Commitment was established in April 2019 and is in development. After a period of wide consultation, we commissioned quantitative research to test the appetite of UK citizens for action on climate change. This was covered in our report - Climate Change: UK citizens want the Government to do more.¹ The research showed, among other things, that Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups have a greater level of participation in climate change activities and a stronger belief in government action than white British respondents. More generally, 37% of the 3,403 UK citizens who took part would only vote for a party they believed was genuinely committed to reducing climate change.

Research Paper Cx2

¹The Commitment (2019)
Climate Change: UK
Citizens want the
Government to do more.

- ✘ There is a clear appetite for Government led action on the climate and nature with an acceptance that something needs to be done.
- ✘ There is widespread mistrust of politicians and the political system.
- ✘ There is space for different forms of activism; The Commitment offers a “happy middle ground between petitions and protest” (focus group participant).
- ✘ Immediate local issues dominate people’s voting decisions. Brexit, the NHS and knife crime all stood out in the focus groups.

The quantitative survey was followed by the qualitative research which is the subject of this report. In January 2020 we began to test the model on the ground in the London constituency of Holborn & St Pancras. This pilot will be reviewed and evaluated in a third report.

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The Commitment is a project of Caplor Horizons, a UK charity which works with other charities to improve their effectiveness and ensure their sustainable future (www.caplorhorizons.org).

Executive Summary 08

Background 12

Methodology 16

Section One — Thoughts on climate change 18

An inconsistency in response towards climate change 19

Is there a lack of unified understanding on the causes of climate change? 20

What are people already doing? 21

Is climate change relevant to the UK? 22

Can UK politicians provide the solution? 23

Section Two — Next steps for The Commitment 26

Introduction 27

Climate change is not seen as an immediate problem 28

Holding politicians to account 29

Differentiation from a petition 31

The Commitment Declaration 32

Executive Summary

In October 2019, The Commitment commissioned Humankind Research to facilitate three London-based focus groups with a total of 18 UK citizens from across the political spectrum, all of whom were concerned about climate change (see methodology). This was our first piece of qualitative research; we plan to conduct regular focus group research, building on earlier findings and our experiences in the field.

The aim of the focus groups was to add depth to the earlier quantitative research by identifying key public concerns and potential challenges in relation to climate change and to test the concept of The Commitment. This qualitative research has informed The Commitment further on how to appeal to those looking for new and effective ways to tackle climate change.

A mandate for political action on climate change is lacking on a constituency level and this is referred to by MPs who are accused of not doing enough.² The aim of The Commitment is to provide a mandate in a personal and powerful way, reigniting citizens' democratic engagement and encouraging politicians to act. The purpose of the research and development stage is to test different methods of engaging citizens with The Commitment.

Key findings:

- ✘ The focus group findings showed a strong agreement that the Government has the primary responsibility to take action on climate change.
- ✘ Small individual acts were undertaken by some but most saw personal changes, like not flying or not eating meat, as inconsequential and not fair on them as consumers.
- ✘ There was an implicit expectation of government leading from above, on the principle of 5p plastic bags.
- ✘ There were inconsistencies between participants' stated concern when they were recruited, and their motivation to act when they were asked to consider changes in their own lives.
- ✘ One participant celebrated The Commitment's position as "a happy middle ground between petitions and protests".

² Willis, R. (2018) Building the political mandate for climate action.

Key issues

The focus groups proved helpful in revealing both the issues for The Commitment to address, in relation to the context of climate change and politics in general, and the specific obstacles faced by The Commitment itself. The key points raised are summarised below:

- ✗ **Widespread mistrust of politicians and disillusionment with the political system due to perceived past betrayals, e.g. tuition fees, the Iraq war and Brexit.**

The Commitment will address this by working with politicians and the public simultaneously, facilitating a bridge of communication by strongly amplifying citizens' individual concerns. The success or failure of local politicians to act will be monitored by The Commitment.

- ✗ **A strong sense that the UK is already doing enough, and unable to impact the world's biggest polluters; local and immediate issues such as knife crime, the NHS and Brexit, were seen as more relevant.**

Central to the Committee on Climate Change's 2019 progress report was the declaration that, 'despite well-intentioned ambition the UK has fallen behind in progress to tackle and prepare for climate change'.³ The Commitment will focus its energy on giving a voice to citizens who already recognise the seriousness of climate change and the degradation of the natural world.

- ✗ **A lack of coherence in the understanding of climate change, illustrated, for example, by numerous references to plastic pollution.**

The purpose of The Commitment is not to educate people on climate change or biodiversity loss. Instead, it will provide links through its website to an extensive set of local, national and global information. There will be an informative digital map, signposting citizens to local climate-focused groups and organisations and showing where people have made The Commitment. The website will direct users to national and global information on climate change and the local and national policies that might be adopted in response. Citizens will also be able to access information on the action their local politicians are taking.

- ✗ **The Commitment declaration that participants were shown did not resonate with the majority (see p.24-25).**

The main concerns in each group related to the non-specificity of committing to 'changes and disruption' and to a hesitancy towards switching party allegiances when voting. These findings have informed the pilot under way in the constituency of Holborn & St Pancras.

³ Committee on Climate Change (2019) Reducing UK emissions: 2019 Progress Report to Parliament.

Background

2019 saw a rise in public consciousness, concern and action relating to climate change, driven largely by protests and increased media coverage. Some of the manifestos from the recent General Election have also marked a progressive shift in the political realm. Though the focus groups were conducted just before the December 12th General Election was announced, politics were high on the agenda for most, as the Brexit process ground to a halt and an election loomed.

Levels of public awareness and engagement on climate change were quantified by The Commitment's first piece of research, providing the specific context for the qualitative study. This revealed a significant appetite amongst the UK public for Government-led action on climate change with an acceptance of inevitable future changes to the way people live. Crucially, 37% agreed with the statement "I will only vote for a party that I believe is genuinely committed to reducing climate change".

The insights from the quantitative research were used in designing the qualitative study. The focus groups provided another perspective on the public appetite for government action on climate change.

Despite the presence of key barriers surrounding citizens' engagement with both UK politics and climate change, there is clear evidence that The Commitment can play a useful part in tackling these issues.

There is an opportunity to broaden The Commitment's appeal through the addition of specific targets for politicians and the use of less emotive language in the declaration. This process of listening, reflecting and acting on public concerns is central to The Commitment's citizen-led approach and will continue to inform the process moving forwards.

Methodology

Three focus groups were held with six people in each. Participants were recruited who agreed with the statement: “climate change is a man-made problem, it’s an emergency/crisis that will irreversibly damage the planet and government, companies and people need to act together to take radical steps”. Although The Commitment aims to tackle both climate change and biodiversity loss, the focus group discussions revolved around the former to remain consistent with the quantitative report.

The sessions each lasted just under two hours and were split into two sections: the first focusing on people’s general views on climate change and the second gauging the response towards the concept of The Commitment itself.

In the second section, participants were given a description of The Commitment followed by the draft declaration [p.24]. The structure of the focus groups was fluid, reacting to the topics brought up by individuals and exploring both the positive and negative responses in both sections.

Table 1: Focus Group Structure

6 participants in each group
3 female and 3 male in each group

| | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|---|
| Target Group | Educated liberal | Lower income liberal | Centre right |
| Age | 18—35 | 30—55 | 30—55 |
| Family Status | No children | Children under 16 | Children under 16 |
| SEC | ABC1 | C1C2 | ABC1 |
| Political Affinity | Labour / Lib Dems / Green | Labour / Lib Dems / Green | Conservative |
| Ethnicity | BAME quote of 2 | BAME quote of 2 | Natural fallout of ethnic background |
| Gender | Mixed gender | Mixed gender | Mixed gender |
| Location | London | London | London |

An inconsistency in response towards climate change

The focus groups explored language generally used around climate change. Having agreed when they were recruited that climate change was an “emergency/crisis that will irreversibly damage the planet”, participants in all the groups expressed negativity towards the phrase climate emergency. There was a preference for the more traditional term of climate change, the former being seen as too “preachy”.

This inconsistency was compounded in the second section of the focus groups as most participants were reluctant to take “radical steps” to combat climate change.

It was striking how the response towards action on climate change shifted depending on how personal the question became.

“That upsets me a lot, when I see pictures of animals with plastic. That’s something we can control.”

Centre Right
group participant

A lack of unified understanding on the causes of climate change

While there were references to temperature changes and rising sea levels, when participants were asked specifically about the causes of climate change, plastic pollution was a prominent topic in each group. This reflected heightened media coverage and the physical presence of plastics in everyday life. Although the impact of plastic is primarily on biodiversity it was associated directly with climate change. Plastic pollution was the primary concern in the centre right group while the other two groups showed greater awareness of the primary drivers of climate change.

It is clear that the public understanding of climate change can be confused and people’s concerns are directed at different issues when describing the human impact on the climate and natural world.

What are people already doing?

A number of participants described the changes they were making in their personal behaviour. One had made significant changes to her life by ceasing to eat meat, shopping second hand, not using plastic bottles and not ordering takeaway food. More than one person from the centre right group described the positive changes being made in their workplaces, such as the removal of plastic straws and upcycling products. Multiple participants in the lower income liberal group referred to the improvements they had made to their heating systems to increase efficiency.

In general, most people had already made small changes in their lives, often motivated by another primary driver or benefit. There was an implicit expectation of government taking action from above, and as being primarily responsible for change.

“I worry about it but I wouldn’t go to something like XR. I take a more pragmatic approach, like buying a hybrid car.”

Educated Liberal

Is climate change relevant to the UK?

When asked about the relevance of climate change within the UK, both the liberal groups acknowledged it as an important issue alongside Brexit, the NHS and the economy.

There was a general consensus in the centre right group that the UK is unable to impact the world's biggest polluters (China and India were frequently referred to) and that Britain is doing more than other countries. Climate change was thus acknowledged as an international issue with more immediate domestic issues taking priority within the UK.

Despite the increased media coverage and the recent rise in public consciousness, there is still a clear need for climate change to move up the public agenda.

Can UK politicians provide the solution?

Though all groups agreed that climate change is an important issue, there was scepticism about what might be achieved by government. This reflected widespread mistrust of politicians and the political system in general. Participants were in agreement that government action was necessary, but there was a lot of scepticism over the likelihood of it happening.

A central issue for most participants was the view that the political system is 'broken'. One person cited losing trust in the party their family had always voted for whilst another felt let down by the number of promises broken by politicians.

Overall, there was clear evidence of the need to re-engage citizens with the positive elements of democracy.

We and our children are seriously threatened by the damage we are doing to the climate and nature.

For this and future generations, I am determined to see urgent action from politicians to stabilise the climate and help nature recover.

I commit to accepting changes and disruption to the way I live when government acts.

I commit to voting in all elections for the people who I believe will deliver most for the climate and nature.

The Commitment **x**

Materials presented in focus groups

Facing page: Declaration

Below: Description

The Commitment exists to speed up government-led action on the climate and nature in order to secure a safe and thriving future. The focus will be entirely on government action. It will not be The Commitment's objective to ask people to change their personal behaviour.

We will work in constituencies throughout the UK asking people from all walks of life to commit to:

- a) voting for candidates who are prioritising government action on climate change and biodiversity loss
- b) accepting changes and disruption to their own life when policy changes

People will also make a personal online statement explaining why they have declared their Commitment. Commitments and personal statements will be sent to local MPs showing them they have a mandate to take bold action from UK citizens

To help people make good on their voting Commitment we will provide an impartial assessment of party policies, without making specific recommendations.

Section Two — Next steps for The Commitment

This section describes the main issues raised by focus group participants and the opportunities The Commitment has to broaden its appeal by addressing them.

All participants saw climate change as one of the top issues globally and two out of three groups placed it amongst the most important issues currently faced by the UK. Two of the eighteen participants (11%) would follow this up by making The Commitment. Arguably, this is a high proportion when applied to a constituency electorate and citizens' Commitments potential impact on an election.

It is equally important to note that politicians will be looking both at the numbers of people making The Commitment and at the power of the declarations they make, setting up a tension between recruiting as many citizens as possible and wanting The Commitment to carry as much weight as possible.

There is also the consideration that Commitment numbers are likely to rise over time as the issues of climate change and biodiversity loss become more urgent and visible.

“The best part is that it’s not about asking for change in personal behaviour but instead putting pressure on government, because that’s most effective.”

Educated Liberal

Key issues

Climate change is not seen as an immediate problem

- ✘ Many UK voters are currently prioritising local issues over climate change, which is seen as a less immediate and relatable problem.

The Commitment is primarily concerned with citizens who already see climate change and biodiversity loss as immediate threats. This group is expected to rise considerably in the coming months and years.

Holding politicians to account

- ✘ All three groups believed that the process required too much effort from the individual and demanded very little from politicians.

This reflected a lack of clarity in the materials given to participants. The purpose of The Commitment is to speed up government action by demonstrating citizens' willingness for change. It starts with citizens and, if successful, encourages politicians to take bolder and more radical action. We are considering the targets The Commitment should put in place to assess progress made by politicians. For example, the Committee on Climate Change provides climate targets for the UK. We plan to ask politicians to start by meeting the targets they have already been set. There was strong support in the educated liberal group for The Commitment to hold government to account on yearly targets.

"I'd be more comfortable saying I'd vote for someone who made the commitment: make the parties make the commitment."

Educated Liberal

- ✘ **In all the focus groups there was little faith in the effectiveness of petitions, while no participants felt comfortable around the topic of protest. Some explicitly criticised groups such as Extinction Rebellion while others showed support for their message but were unwilling to protest themselves.**

It will be important to demonstrate how The Commitment is more powerful than a petition while remaining entirely within the law. By amplifying individual voices through personal statements and by aggregating commitments to vote for climate action, The Commitment will present a mandate to politicians in a personal and powerful way.

A distinctive feature of The Commitment is that it is based locally, working with MPs and leaders of local government. The rising number of commitments over time will lead to policy changes and more action between elections as MPs and councillors respond to increasing public demand.

The Commitment Declaration — Key Issues

In each group there was a drop off in interest when participants were presented with the draft declaration that they would have to sign.

The extracts highlighted in bold italic are those which were deemed most problematic and are discussed in the following sections:

We and our children are *seriously threatened* by the damage we are doing to the climate and nature.

For this and future generations, I am determined to see urgent action from politicians to stabilise the climate and help nature recover.

I commit to accepting changes and disruption to the way I live when government acts.

I commit to voting in *all* elections *for the people* who I believe will deliver most for the climate and nature.

An overly forceful and emotive tone

- ✘ **The opening paragraph was seen as “fear-mongering” by some participants and it did not appeal to most.**

This draft declaration was deliberately framed in a way to gauge the public response towards the seriousness of climate change. The response towards this clearly showed that the language used was too hyperbolic, negatively impacting The Commitment’s appeal.

The Commitment Declaration — Key Issues

Do I have to change who I vote for?

- ✘ A big stumbling block was the idea of switching allegiances to different parties when voting.

It will be made clear that The Commitment does not require the individual to change which party they vote for. Most important is that political candidates see how many constituents are focused on the climate and natural world when making their vote. If The Commitment is successful, the policies of all parties will improve.

The personal statement that accompanies the declaration allows citizens to explain their motivation for making The Commitment. These explanations will be diverse, covering the opinions of different people voting for different parties. The goal is to impact all politicians to ensure climate change is taken seriously across the board.

Uncertainty over accepting changes and disruption

- ✘ Participants were unwilling to accept the uncertainty over how citizens' lives might be affected if government took more action, objecting to the lack of specificity in the draft commitment declaration.

There was agreement that the policy changes required should be clearly presented to offer transparency on the potential disruption to the public.

The wording '*I commit to accepting changes and disruption to the way I live*' was experimented with in the focus groups. The response has helped inform three new draft declarations that are currently being tested in the ongoing constituency trials.

"I think people will see that and think what are the changes going to be? It doesn't say how big those changes will be."

Educated Liberal

Acknowledgements

Particular thanks are due to Humankind Research, who designed the research and facilitated the focus groups pro bono. We would also like to thank Professor Sharon Turnbull for her advice and support throughout the process.

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Registered charity
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number 08901760



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