

THE NET ZERO DIARIES

A citizen perspective
on tackling the climate
emergency

SUMMARY REPORT





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“Net Zero becomes a cross-party politics issue. Unless they unite and decide on a vision and take the issue out of the political realm, I think it will just be a vote-winner where politicians say, ‘We can do things without impacting people’s lives’, when, in reality, harder decisions need to be made.”

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“If the message is put out there in a positive way, here are the advantages, the change in thinking, all about perspective then I think that’ll get us a long way. In a lot of online petitions, the language is angry and attacking, I fall into that myself. It hasn’t occurred to me to reach out to [government] and say we’d love you to make the bold changes, please help us.”

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Introducing the Net Zero Diaries

The Net Zero Diaries was a five-month conversation between 40 citizens about climate change. These citizens were selected to represent a wide range of different backgrounds from across the UK and began with different views and experiences of climate action. Over the five months, they were provided with information, access to expert testimony, and time to reflect. They discussed the net zero strategies they wanted to see, what the UK and the world were doing at COP26; and commented on climate policy developments as they happened.

The Net Zero Diaries was designed to provide much-needed evidence about people's views on how to tackle the climate crisis. Much of the focus in policymaking and academic research has been on the role of individuals as consumers whose behaviour contributes to carbon emissions. We wanted to take a broader view and engage individuals as both consumers and citizens. We explored both individual actions, and the wider infrastructure and systems that govern economic and social life, and either support or impede the transition to net zero.

For the UK to move quickly and effectively towards net zero there is a pressing need to develop a better understanding of how the relationships between people, government, and business can be navigated. We need to find out not just about people's likes and dislikes, or the decisions they might make as consumers. We don't want to know only what they might think, or what they might buy; we also need to know why. We need to know how people's decisions, views, values and motivations are influenced by others – other people, governments, businesses, other actors. Building this far more nuanced picture is essential to understanding how to craft a net zero transformation that UK citizens can get behind.

THE APPROACH



Survey data can provide headline figures about people's support for different technologies or policies, but they rarely tell us about how people arrived at their answers, or how they weigh up different factors to reach a viewpoint. To get the full picture we also need qualitative and deliberative research which probes the judgements behind headline survey figures, and which makes people's reasoning or deliberation explicit rather than implicit. This evidence is vital in designing future policies and strategies that people support and to help build a 'social mandate' for climate action.

Deliberative research places a strong emphasis on considered judgement based on good evidence and free and fair collective discussion. Deliberative research, like the Net Zero Diaries, brings people together to undertake a structured discussion with a focus on ensuring meaningful participation. Input from expert speakers and other information and sources allows participants to provide informed opinions on complex topics.

Who were the Diarists?

We recruited 40 people to the Diaries, clustered around Leeds, Glasgow and Oxford, with a range of ages, ethnicities, and living situations. We wanted to hear from people with a range of different perspectives on climate change, so recruited some people who had previously taken part in a climate engagement process (like a citizens assembly), some who were already taking action in their own lives to reduce their carbon footprints, and others with no prior experience or particular interest. Across the group our Diarists had similar levels of concern about climate change to a representative sample of the UK.

Wave 1: Individuals and net zero

In the first wave, September 2021, Diarists were asked about their knowledge of and views on net zero, as well as their own behaviours. We provided information to help Diarists better understand the concept of net zero, starting by introducing what net zero is and three major sectors (food, energy and transport) that contribute to emissions, presented by academics in each field.

Wave 2: Government and net zero

Responding to findings in the first wave, and given the timing in early October 2021 (around the time of political party conferences), the second wave focused on exploring the role of government in the net zero transition, as well as the topic of fairness, on a domestic, international, and intergenerational basis. We included speakers from NGOs and think tanks to stimulate discussion.

Wave 3: Business and net zero

The third wave (November 2021) delved into the outcomes of COP26, including financial commitments made at the conference and the perspectives of the different nations represented. The rest of this wave focussed on Diarist expectations of business, with a range of businesses invited to share their plans for net zero.

Wave 4: Bringing it all together

In the final wave, held January 2022 and in the context of the growing cost of living and energy crises, Diarists reflected on their collective journey, coming to a considered view on what they thought government, businesses and individuals need to do to achieve net zero.

WHOSE RESPONSIBILITY
IS IT ANYWAY?



"I'm not exactly sure what net zero means, I guess it's for everyone to do their bit by 2050, that's how I see it."

- General public

From concern and small scale changes, but limited initial knowledge...

At the start of the process almost all Diarists expressed concern about climate change, but few had much understanding of the term net zero. Many Diarists had already made small changes at home in an attempt to either reduce their energy bills, live a more climate-friendly lifestyle or simply fit in with the wider movement of society towards greener ways of living. The consequence of this enthusiasm, consistent with other research, was that the changes people were making tended to low-cost, accessible, and convenient with little impact on daily life, rather than having the largest impact on emissions. At the national level most Diarists had quite vague ideas about what needed to happen to reach net zero, or whether initiatives that have already been implemented were effective.

To strong desire for change from government and business

“If there were government rules/funding/incentives for public and private sectors, and the public to be emitting less carbon there would be a change for the better.”

- General public

By the end of the Net Zero Diaries, after more than 30 hours of engagement over 5 months, Diarists had developed a sophisticated understanding of and opinions about net zero. One of the Diarists' key beliefs at the start of the Net Zero Diaries process was that too much responsibility for combatting climate change has been attributed to individuals without the necessary support from governments or businesses. As they learned more about the challenges of reaching Net Zero Diarists often felt that this confirmed their suspicions about business and government prioritising profits and power over climate action. And those that were more engaged felt frustrated by the lack of action from those believed to have the power to effect real change. Diarists at the end of the process often felt less optimistic about the UK's chance of reaching net zero without a real step change from government and business.

At the same time however, Diarists left the process with a clear sense of what they wanted to see from government, business and individuals to reach net zero. At the beginning of the project, almost 3 in 4 Diarists believed that the UK government had both the most responsibility for tackling climate change as well as the highest potential to effect change in real terms. By the end they told us that this meant government and businesses leading by example, supporting individuals to take action within a clear framework of effective and measurable steps. They were looking for positive visions of a net zero future that could inspire and compel action, from those seen to have the most responsibility and power.



WHAT DO UK CITIZENS
EXPECT FROM...
GOVERNMENT

There is a real challenge for government to become the strong, positive force for climate action that Diarists want. At the moment they feel performance on climate has been insufficient, and lack trust that government will act in the best interests of communities across the UK or of the planet overall. Diarists consistently labelled the UK government as the key force in the net zero transition, and saw a lack of action from government leading to inaction from business and individuals too. Diarists were concerned that the UK political system is too cautious to take meaningful action, for fear of alienating voters. **In fact, Diarists frequently told us that they would personally support politicians taking stronger action.**

“I now strongly believe that we need the decisions being made on climate change to be taken out of ours and politicians’ hands, possibly being given over to a team that sits above or at least outside the level of government.”

- Engaged citizen

How our Diarists’ feel about government

- Climate change has been overly politicized and is used as a bargaining chip, either via overcommitments to attract support, or reluctance to take tough decisions and risk losing it. They feel that politics has got in the way of genuinely prioritising and implementing the most effective measures.
- A strong concern that government will remain mired in party interests and divisions, and as a result will be unable to move past differences to effect real and necessary change in upcoming years via cross-party collaboration.
- Within government itself they feel there a lack of connection between different departments, and of a coherent strategy across different sectors.
- A perception that government strategies so far to tackle climate change have not been monitored regularly, that goals have not been met, and there is an overall lack of transparency or communication about the country’s progress in the net zero journey.
- An absence of clear signposting for individuals or companies to play their part in the net zero transition, seen as a failure of government to set the agenda that means large scale shifts in behaviour aren’t happening.



UN CLIMATE CHANGE CONFERENCE UK 2021

For government to play the role expected of it, Diarists feel a change in both culture and approach is needed. Diarists want to see government taking the goal of reaching net zero more seriously. This means clearly demonstrating and communicating its commitment to the public, and taking a more collaborative leadership approach to the transition.

"I still do not fully understand how we will get to net zero by 2030 or even 2050 within the UK. There are so many pledges and promises by government, but are they sustainable in terms of the cost?"

- General public

What our Diarists' want from government

- A unified approach to net zero, with the whole system – including all levels of government across the entirety of the UK – pulling in the same direction
- Collaborative working relationships between departments and devolved nations to share the responsibility and costs of the transition fairly and practically - for example avoiding policies which work towards one goal while hindering another
- Collaboration across political parties, taking climate change off the table as a political football and making it a cross-party priority
- Collaboration between government and business, with government coordinating action and helping different sectors work towards the same goal
- Shared commitments between government and citizens, with each doing their bit (but government going first)
- Strong leadership from an explicit group or individual in government to 'prove' that the net zero transition really is a priority
- Incentivising the public to make climate friendly choices, and putting in place the infrastructure and policy environment to make climate-friendly products and services accessible and affordable for all.

WHAT DO UK CITIZENS
EXPECT FROM...

BUSINESS

“Is it possible to still make profit and not be good, as a business? I had a burning question, it’s a difficult one.”

- General public

As with government, most Diarists started the process with a degree of scepticism about the intentions of businesses with regards to climate change. They felt that the main challenge would always be the desire to maximise profits, which would negate efforts by others to put pressure on business to decarbonise.

This scepticism was particularly strong when applied to larger businesses. Diarists found it much easier to imagine smaller, purpose-led companies act in the interests of the planet, even though they had less responsibility for and scope to effect change.

But as with government, Diarists developed a more nuanced view over the course of the project, moving from a quite pessimistic view of business to a sense that radical change is difficult but not impossible. They started to describe a role for business as a champion for net zero in the consumer sphere, enabling more sustainable choices and walking the walk behind the scenes. They felt strongly that businesses with a purpose beyond profit would be most successful in making the shift to net zero, and were willing to support those who committed to the path.

How our Diarists’ feel about business

- Big businesses, particularly those which are multinational, are seen as some of the main contributors to climate change through their carbon emissions and environmentally unfriendly business practices.
- Diarists struggle to see how large carbon-reliant companies would be able to shift away from profit maximisation towards a more balanced set of objectives and feel that most businesses will not be amenable to this.
- When they did hear about action from big business Diarists were often sceptical, and highly alert to greenwashing as a strategy to appear sustainable. This presents a real challenge for businesses who are taking action to communicate their intentions and actions.
- Diarists feel the government needs to play an active role in influencing business decisions. By the end of the process participants were able to identify specific areas they believed government needed to intervene – including stopping fossil fuel subsidies

Diarists judge businesses less harshly than government, because expectations are lower, but there is a limit to what Diarists are willing to **accept, and trust and faith can be fragile.**



“It’s good but a lot of companies bend the rules with these things. For example, something can say less sugar but still have loads of sugar. So they can bend the rules to make things look eco-friendly when they’re not”

- Engaged citizen

Diarists want to see companies taking all elements of sustainability into account, with a responsibility to focus on controlling carbon footprints from source to sales, as well as to enable and encourage consumers to change their behaviour.

What Diarists want to see in a sustainable business

- Maintain credible and authentic purpose beyond profit. Diarists were keen to see businesses working towards an environmental or social purpose rather than maximising profits, and were strongly in favour of businesses taking greater responsibility in the local areas they operate in.
- Have a clear plan to create a demonstrable impact. Businesses should be able to show both their short and long-term visions for how they are planning to be carbon neutral, or even carbon negative, in the future.
- Develop propositions that are beneficial for all. Diarists would happily buy into businesses that make their sustainable products or services simple and accessible without alienating or negatively impacting vulnerable groups.
- Consider end-to-end impact. They also feel that businesses need to take responsibility for their supply chains, and not just pass the buck on environmental sustainability.
- Enable and encourage consumers to change their behaviour. This would provide another way for companies to be trusted as a climate friendly business. But this trust is fragile and needs to be rooted in action.

WHAT DO UK CITIZENS
EXPECT FROM...

INDIVIDUALS

“If there were government rules/funding/incentives for public and private sectors, and the public to be emitting less carbon there would be a change for the better.”

- General public

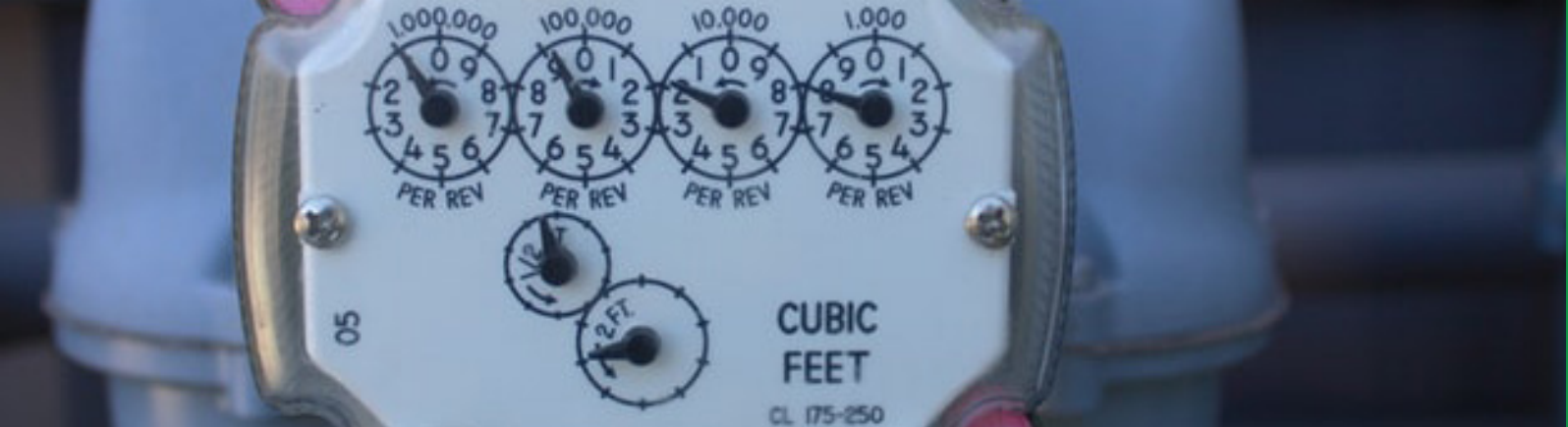
With increased knowledge of the scale of the challenge to reach net zero, Diarists' commitment to individual action increased. They express greater determination to make changes in their own lives and feel slightly more optimistic about the potential for collective action. However, this increased awareness doesn't eliminate the concern that individual behaviour has little impact unless done on a truly wide scale, and individuals are ultimately seen as having less capacity and less responsibility to take action against climate change than Government and businesses.

There were mixed views on the need for stronger penalties or restrictions on unsustainable individual behaviour, Diarists often felt this was necessary in principle, there was less agreement on individual measures and strong concern about the impact on vulnerable citizens. Most preferred measures that incentivised individuals to make more positive choices. The most engaged Diarists there was concern about focus on individual behaviour instead of reducing systemic barriers and achieving structural change.

How Diarists see individual actions

- Diarists prefer incentives that encourage individuals to make sustainable choices or adopt sustainable behaviours, with a focus on making climate-friendly action easier and more cost-effective than alternatives.
- Diarists are divided on powerful civic actions and protesting with some seeing it as an effective form of collective action and pressure, and others expressing concern over triggering opposition through controversial approaches.
- Diarists believe that 'everyone will be winners' by the end of a just transition, however they are also heavily influenced by the narrative that the transition to net zero is going to require weighty sacrifices and be costly in the short term. They felt it was important that this message was countered by government where it isn't true, and action taken to protect vulnerable individuals when it is.
- Diarists find it easy to revert to a more individualistic viewpoint when faced with current trade-offs and any potential impact on quality of life as a result of such changes - especially those who are less engaged.

The shift towards a stronger feeling of individual responsibility among Diarists themselves wasn't always accompanied by confidence that others could make the same journey without significant interventions from government and businesses.



Diarists see the need for interventions – particularly from government – to act as a ‘leveller’ by helping those who are unable to act with grants and support, whilst penalising those who can act but refuse to. However, there is a great deal of ambivalence among Diarists about how the application of this principle:

- Perceptions of ‘normal’ have a strong influence on views about what can and can’t be reasonably expected of individuals. Where Diarists felt they were being asked to go above and beyond the norm they became reluctant, for example when it came to flying they tended to see one foreign holiday a year as the minimum that ‘normal’ people should expect.
- Diarists also tended to believe that penalties are less effective than incentives
- And they were much more likely to support policies to penalise organisations than individuals.

“Really impressed with the protest groups and people willing to stick their necks on the line for what they believe in.”

- Engaged citizen

As the understanding of the three main actors grew – government, businesses and individuals – Diarists began to attribute less responsibility to individuals and more to businesses. This came with greater belief in the power that businesses have to drive sustainable consumer choices, and a higher expectation for them to do so.

There is a strong feeling amongst Diarists that they would like to make climate friendly consumer choices in most aspects of their lives. However, they do not feel that businesses are currently providing adequate opportunities to do so, nor do they believe that current solutions are as effective as they could be.

Early in the research, many participants thought too much emphasis was placed on individual action. As the research progressed, participants began to identify the support from government they expect in order to reduce their own emissions. This included better access to information and affordable low carbon options for travel, shopping, and home energy use.

A CITIZEN STRATEGY FOR NET ZERO

At the end of the 5-month project we asked our Diarist's what the key components of a Net Zero strategy for the UK should be. Their top picks were:

Transport

- Phasing out of new petrol/diesel vehicles with rapid development of electric charging infrastructure
- Improving the public transport system across the country
- Improving the environment for pedestrians and cyclists
- Businesses encouraged to use sustainable freight
- Urgent investment in sustainable aviation technology

"I believe the diesel and petrol car [aspect of the Government's NZS] is a really good one because it gives a really realistic timeframe of transitioning. Because the worst thing we could do for vehicles at the moment would be to dump all of our engines and move to electric cars."

- Engaged citizen

Energy

- A rapid move towards sustainable energy, including local community schemes
- Avoiding energy waste with smart meters in every home
- Energy audits for homes to create a retrofit plan for each household, with support to fund improvements
- All new builds to meet the highest standards of energy efficiency
- Action on energy prices, subsidies where needed for those on low incomes

Food

- Affordability – using subsidies and taxation to make it cheaper to eat greener, reducing meat consumption by making plant based choices affordable
 - Pushing supermarkets and big companies to find alternatives to packaging, supporting small businesses to do the same
 - Reducing food waste and managing surplus, by education and innovation
 - Education that makes the link between health and sustainability,
 - Introduce carbon labelling on all food
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LESSONS FOR FUTURE CLIMATE CONVERSATIONS

Deliberative methods are designed to provide individuals with the time and information they need to consider a complex or unfamiliar topic in greater detail than they would in their everyday lives. The most effective deliberative approaches involve two way communication: while participants learn from the experts, the experts also learn from the participants about the citizen perspective on their area of expertise. For the Net Zero Diaries we brought in experts from as wide a range of backgrounds and expertise as possible, from academics to activists.

Based on their own experience of the net zero Diarist process, the Diarists are - perhaps unsurprisingly - strongly in favour of implementing more mechanisms for informing, educating and consulting the public on the path to net zero. At the end of the process there was a strong sense, amongst Diarists across the board, of feeling empowered and equipped to take part in the net zero debate and there was a consensus that access to these types of processes should be available more widely.



Through the diaries we heard a number of repeated narratives, which can help us understand how attitudes to net zero are formed, and how communications can be made most effective.

“During the project the most influential impact on my opinions on climate change has been the other participants and this has inspired me to get more involved in a local community food growing project and be more aware of the impact of any purchases I make.”

- General public

- Discussions of fairness were some of the most common across the project, with Diarists strongly focused on the need to protect the most vulnerable in the UK, and future generations. In contrast, while international fairness was seen as important when raised by experts, it rarely formed a significant part of most discussions.
- Visions of the future were another common theme of discussion. Diarists told us that they felt central government was failing to provide a coherent and positive vision for a net zero UK. When this gap was most apparent, for example in the context of food, participants often reverted to a rose-tinted view of the past, in which simpler and more local products are sustainable and consumerism is less rampant.
- Everyone doing their bit was one of the most common phrases we heard, and was a strongly positive message. Through the project the meaning of this phrase evolved for Diarists, from a simple message about individuals taking small actions, to a more sophisticated picture of a society with all actors pulling in the same direction.
- Benchmarking behaviours against is perceived as ‘normal’, such as the number of flights per year people should be allowed to take and what constitutes a ‘normal’ diet, were also very common and influential. Shifting what is considered ‘normal’ has the long-term potential to make carbon reduction behaviours more achievable and common-place in the future.

Throughout the Net Zero Diaries process it became clear what made experts engaging for Diarists in terms of format and style. They valued arguments presented in layperson’s terms, ideally as part of a framework, with clear guidelines and implications, easily relatable and brought to life with tangible example.

We wrapped up the diaries by asking our participants what engagement they would like to see in future, and the vast majority told us they want more people to have the opportunity they had, to consider the issues with evidence, and room to share their views. This could be anything from ‘official’ or organised processes, to conversations with friends, either way our Diarists showed a desire to play an active part of the future of Net Zero.

