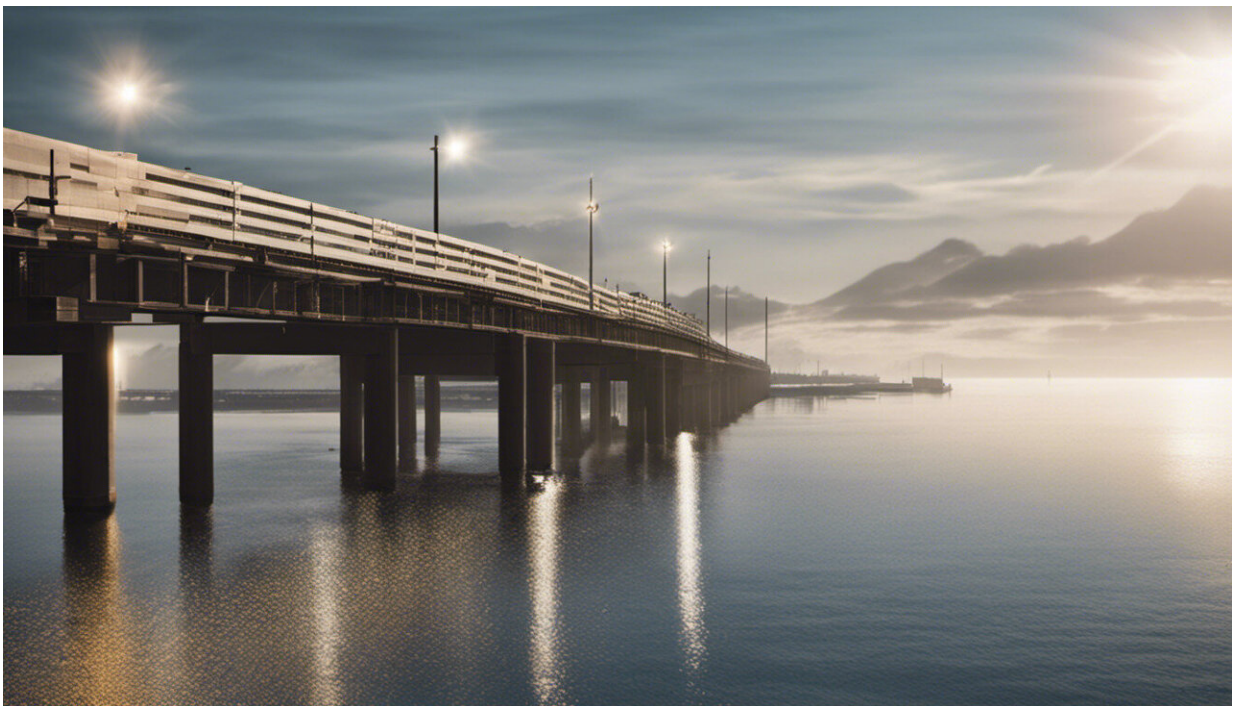


# Net zero: Direct costs of climate policies aren't a major barrier to public support, research reveals

August 5 2023, by Lorraine Whitmarsh, Caroline Verfuert and Steve Westlake

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Amid headlines of wildfires raging across Europe and Africa and flooding in China, the UK government took the bewildering choice to expand fossil fuel extraction.

Prime minister Rishi Sunak declared that more than 100 new oil and gas drilling licenses would be granted for the North Sea in 2023, sparking [widespread criticism](#) and incredulity from [climate experts](#), business leaders and some within his own party. The latest announcement follows other indications that the UK government is reviewing its [climate commitments](#), spurred by a byelection victory that was won in part by opposing London's ultra-low emission zone (Ulez).

Much of this backsliding relies on dubious logic: that the economic costs of green policies, and how they affect people's lives, make them damaging for the UK and will always lose votes. As researchers who study [public attitudes](#) towards such policies, we are quite sure these arguments from the government don't hold water.

First, inaction on climate change costs more than action, as established nearly two decades ago in the landmark [Stern review](#). The economic case has only strengthened since, with this year's [Skidmore review](#) making clear the considerable opportunities for the UK in a net zero transition, including the potential creation of almost half a million green jobs.

Second, the government's reluctance to intervene in people's lives with climate policies does not reflect [public opinion](#). There is actually UK-wide support for net zero policies—including those that would involve lifestyle changes. Crucially, the public [wants and needs](#) the government to show clear and consistent leadership on climate change.

## **Behavior changes are essential**

Scientific assessments, including the latest [report](#) by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and analyses by the UK's statutory advisers on [climate policy](#), the [Climate Change Committee](#), show that new technologies alone will not be sufficient for the country to hit its carbon targets.

Most measures to reach net zero require people to make at least some changes to their daily routines, including limiting car use, eating less red meat and dairy, buying electric vehicles and heat pumps, and reducing waste. Likewise, businesses will need to change their behavior too.

While the scale of the necessary lifestyle changes is [not well understood](#) by the public, people are willing to play their part in a net zero transition. Polling shows [public concern](#) about climate change has remained high throughout [the pandemic](#) and the [cost of living crisis](#). Most people worldwide [agree](#) that changes to our behavior are necessary to tackle climate change.

Our research also shows that the UK public is broadly on board with net zero, including measures that would involve [lifestyle changes](#). With the market research company Ipsos, we polled more than 5,000 people across the UK on their attitudes to a range of net zero policies. Our findings indicated high levels of public support (in both [2021](#) and [2022](#)) for most of them, with support strongest for frequent flyer levies, changing product prices to reflect environmental impacts, phasing out gas boilers, and electric vehicle subsidies.

## **How to maintain public support**

It's true that support drops when people are asked to consider the costs of climate policies. For example, while 68% support the general idea of charging frequent flyers more for each additional flight they take in a year, when the financial costs to the individual are spelled out, support falls to 32% (and opposition rises from 16% to 33%).

This is perhaps no surprise. Previous research showed that even mentioning a very modest cost can make people less likely to support a policy, [including climate measures](#).

On the other hand, emphasizing the [effectiveness](#) or wider benefits of climate policies can increase support for them. [One study](#) conducted across 24 countries showed that highlighting additional benefits, such as cleaner air or stronger social cohesion, increased a person's motivation to take action on [climate change](#).

Even more important for [public acceptance](#) is how fair a [policy](#) is seen to be, as revealed both by [our research](#) and other [studies](#). Indeed, fairness was a key topic in the Ulez debate during the Uxbridge byelection, where drivers of older vehicles were seen by some as being unfairly penalized and inadequately supported, for instance through scrappage schemes.

The fact that [fairness](#) can mean different things to different people highlights the need for the government to [engage with the public](#) when designing climate policies. Deliberative processes such as [climate assemblies](#) can help with this.

There are other [important factors](#). [Workshops](#) we held across the UK showed that public support for net zero policies remains high as long as people feel they still have personal choice, their freedoms are protected, and they trust those who are implementing the policies. We found only very restrictive policies are opposed, such as mandating meat-free diets, no flying or a car-free lifestyle.

## **Win-win policies**

The fluidity of [public support](#) for climate action highlights the importance of a clear vision and consistent leadership from the government. Instead of rolling over at the first hint of controversy, political leaders should present a vision of a sustainable future that everyone can work towards, involving a stable climate, cleaner air, and [healthier lifestyles](#). Licensing new oil and gas drilling obviously runs

counter to this.

While the UK government may shy away from promoting [climate](#)-friendly behavior changes because they equate them with sacrifice, in fact, people with [low-carbon lifestyles tend to be happier](#) than those [who consume more](#). And at a time of economic hardship, the UK government could focus efforts on measures that at once reduce energy bills and also cut emissions—for example, through [support](#) for home insulation.

Making behavior change policies convenient and affordable [requires governments to intervene](#) with regulations and incentives. A clearly communicated vision to keep the public on board, and a [program of public engagement](#) that creates an honest, society-wide dialog on net zero and a sense of collective effort, is essential to their success.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Net zero: Direct costs of climate policies aren't a major barrier to public support, research reveals (2023, August 5) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-08-net-climate-policies-major-barrier.html>

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