

**FABIAN  
SOCIETY**

**FEPS**  
FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN  
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES



# TALKING GREEN

PUBLIC REACTIONS TO KEY CLIMATE  
CHANGE TERMS

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# Acknowledgements

This paper is part of the Talking Green and implementing an inclusive Just Transition model – The People’s Transition project. This project is a collaboration between the Fabian Society, FEPS and TASC that seeks to find answers to the questions of how progressive parties should talk about green issues and how participation in a just transition can be ensured. We are also particularly grateful to European Climate Foundation (ECF) for their financial support and for partnering with us on this project. Specific thanks to go Charlotte Billingham (formerly of FEPS), Saïd El Khadraoui, David Rinaldi and Andreas Dimmelmeier at FEPS, Sean McCabe at TASC, Steve Akehurst at GSCC and Jessica Nicholls at the ECF. We would also like to thank our colleagues Andrew Harrop, Kate Murray and Emma Burnell. Finally, special thanks to Anthony Wells and Patrick English at YouGov for their extensive and highly valued advice and work on the polling.

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# INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

‘Net zero’, ‘green industrial revolution’ and ‘green jobs’ – the climate change discussion has developed its own vocabulary, especially when discussing the economic benefits of taking action. Politicians, the media and campaigners often refer to ‘net zero’ – which means ensuring a balance between the gases going into the atmosphere and those being taken out. Campaigners and political parties have also linked the need to take action on climate change with the need to regenerate post-industrial communities, or to protect workers in polluting industries, as part of a so-called ‘just transition’. They use phrases such as ‘green industrial revolution’ and ‘green jobs’ to make the case.

However, the current language raises a number of issues. These terms are not always understood by the majority of people. Many of them are quite new or abstract, or co-opted terms which have very different associations in another, more common context: ‘industrial revolution’ for example.

It is more important than ever to get this right. To meet our climate change targets, people will have to make changes to the way they live. This could come at a financial cost, cause inconvenience and require lifestyle changes. It should go without saying, therefore, that politicians, the media and campaigners urgently need to make sure they are using words and phrases that connect with the people who will be affected.<sup>i</sup>

This project, Talking Green, aims to find better ways to talk about climate change. We are especially focused on the economic regeneration aspects of the ‘just transition’ - an area which is especially politically salient because of the government’s ‘levelling up’ agenda and is a big topic of debate on the left too.<sup>ii</sup>

To do this, we developed a survey in consultation with our advisory group and a range of experts and stakeholders. The Fabian Society and FEPS then commissioned YouGov to survey 5,005 people across Great Britain. The

survey was carried out online and sent to members of YouGov's panel. Fieldwork was undertaken between 1<sup>st</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> October 2021.

We asked a wide and comprehensive range of questions related to climate change and tested messages using the methodologies of: MaxDiff (asking people to pick their most and least convincing messages); and split testing, also known as 'A/B' testing (exposing different, representative groups of people to different paragraphs to see which changes their view most). We also asked for people's free text reactions to key phrases, and analysed these manually for their general sentiment – some people simply gave their association (for example 'climate') while others had overtly negative or positive responses, which we separated out.

This short briefing summarises a small section of the findings from that opinion survey. It forms part of a wider project which is a partnership between FEPS, the Fabian Society and TASC.<sup>iii</sup> Our final report will be published later in 2021, and will include more findings from this poll as well as an extensive review of the literature.

This briefing focuses on people's reactions to the key words politicians and campaigners use. It should be noted that respondents were answering these questions as part of a wider survey, following other questions related to climate change, and so will have had the subject at the top of their minds and been more 'primed' than most to give answers related to this agenda.

# 1. VIEWS ON CLIMATE CHANGE

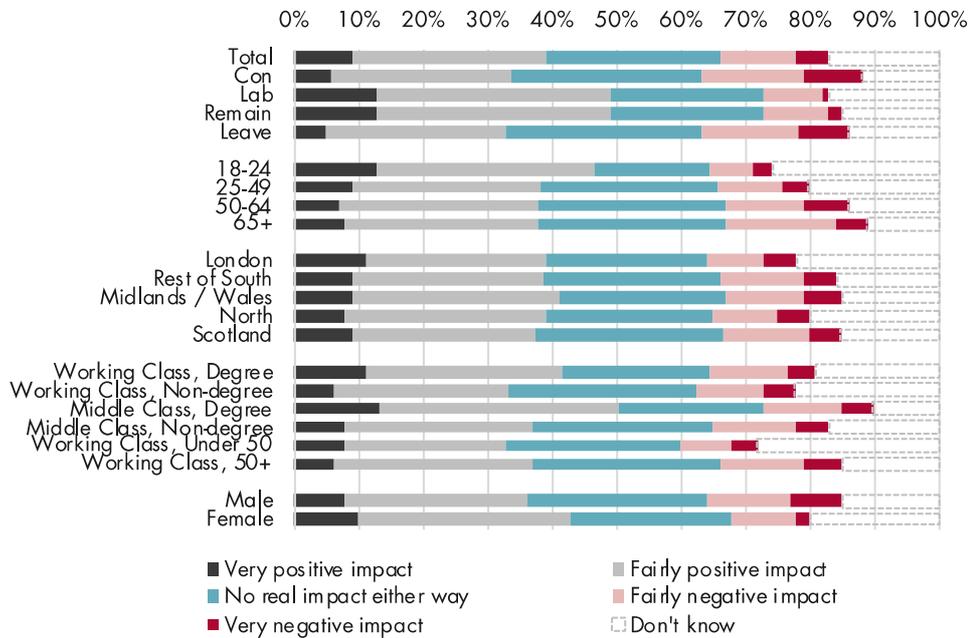
The British public is generally convinced that climate change is a problem. Previous evidence and surveys have found that more than 60 per cent were either 'extremely' or 'very worried' about climate change, while an additional quarter of the population were 'somewhat' worried.<sup>iv</sup> The public have also shown they recognise that climate change is a problem now, not a distant challenge.<sup>v</sup> And there is demand for government leadership: 82 per cent assign a high degree of responsibility for achieving net zero to the national government.<sup>vi</sup> These findings are relatively consistent across many opinion surveys.

## **More people expect climate action to have a positive impact, than a negative impact, on them and their families**

Our findings add to this picture. We asked whether people expected action on climate change to have a positive or negative impact on them and their family (figure 1). We found that very few people expected a negative impact, with more than double instead expecting a positive impact:

- 17 per cent expected a negative impact, including only 5 per cent who expected a very negative impact. This was notably higher among Conservative voters (25 per cent) and Leave voters (23 per cent) and voters aged 65+ (22 per cent) though in each case more people expected a positive impact than expected a negative impact. Only 10 per cent of 18-24 year olds and 10 per cent of Labour voters expected a negative impact.
- 39 per cent expected a positive impact, including 9 per cent who expected a very positive impact. This was notably higher among Labour voters (49 per cent), Remain voters (49 per cent), 18 to 24-year-olds (47 per cent), and those who held degrees – whether middle class (50 per cent) or working class (41 per cent).<sup>vii</sup>

**FIGURE 1: IF THE GOVERNMENT, BUSINESSES AND HOUSEHOLDS MAKE SIGNIFICANT CHANGES OVER THE NEXT 10 YEARS TO REDUCE CARBON EMISSIONS IN THE UK, WHAT IMPACT, IF ANY, DO YOU THINK THESE POLICIES WOULD HAVE ON YOU AND YOUR FAMILY?**



N=5,005

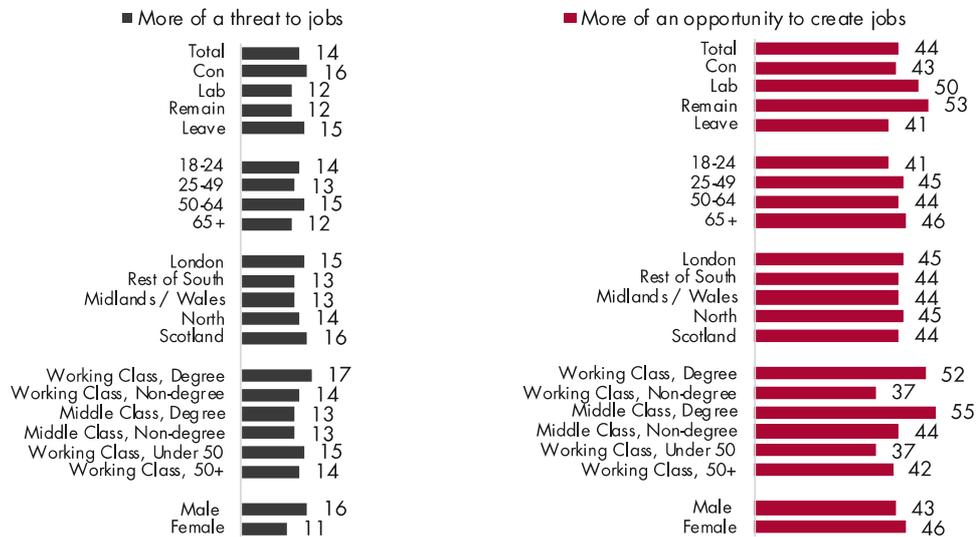
### **More people saw climate change as an opportunity to create jobs, than as a threat to jobs**

People were more likely to see climate change as an opportunity to create jobs than as a threat to jobs (figure 2). This was true to a greater or lesser extent across political affiliation, age, region and education:

- 44 per cent thought it was more of an opportunity to create jobs. This view received especially high support from middle-class people with degrees (55 per cent) as well as from working-class people with degrees (52 per cent), Remain voters (53 per cent) and Labour voters (50 per cent).
- Working-class people without degrees (37 per cent) and working-class people under 50 (37 per cent) were less optimistic, but no more likely to think climate change was a threat to jobs.

These findings indicate that there is general support for climate action across all groups, but with a few caveats: their support is not overwhelming; there are variations between demographic and political groups; and many people have yet to make up their mind.

**FIGURE 2: IN YOUR OPINION, DO YOU THINK CLIMATE CHANGE IS MORE OF A THREAT TO PEOPLE'S JOBS, OR AN OPPORTUNITY TO CREATE JOBS?**



N=5,005

## 2. MESSAGES

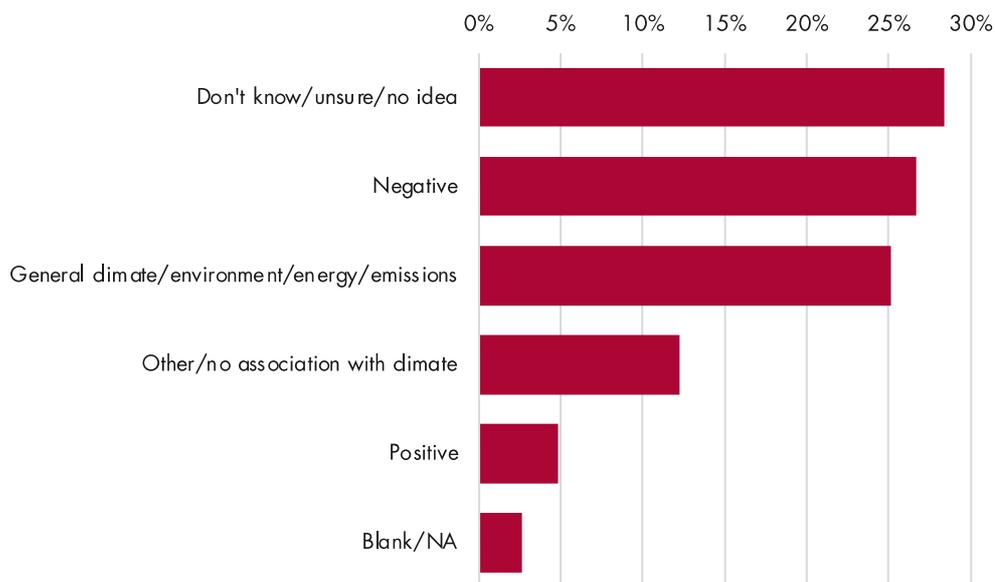
### 1. 'Net zero' is often misunderstood

We asked more 1,693 people what word or phrase comes to mind when they think of 'net zero'. Other surveys have found that this term is often misunderstood or not understood at all.<sup>viii</sup> This was not a test of people's knowledge, but of what they associate with the term and their immediate reaction to it.

Of the people surveyed:

- 28 per cent had reactions such as 'don't know', 'no idea' or 'not sure', while a further 12 per cent associated it with something else.
- 27 per cent had a negative reaction, with responses such as 'load of cobblers', 'low grade management speak' as well as 'impossible' or 'utopian'.
- 25 per cent responded, at least in general terms, that it was something to do with climate change, of which 19 per cent (of all respondents) referred specifically to emissions. A further 5 per cent of respondents responded positively but in a more general sense.

FIGURE 3: WHAT WORD OR PHRASE COMES TO MIND WHEN YOU THINK OF 'NET ZERO'?



N=1,693

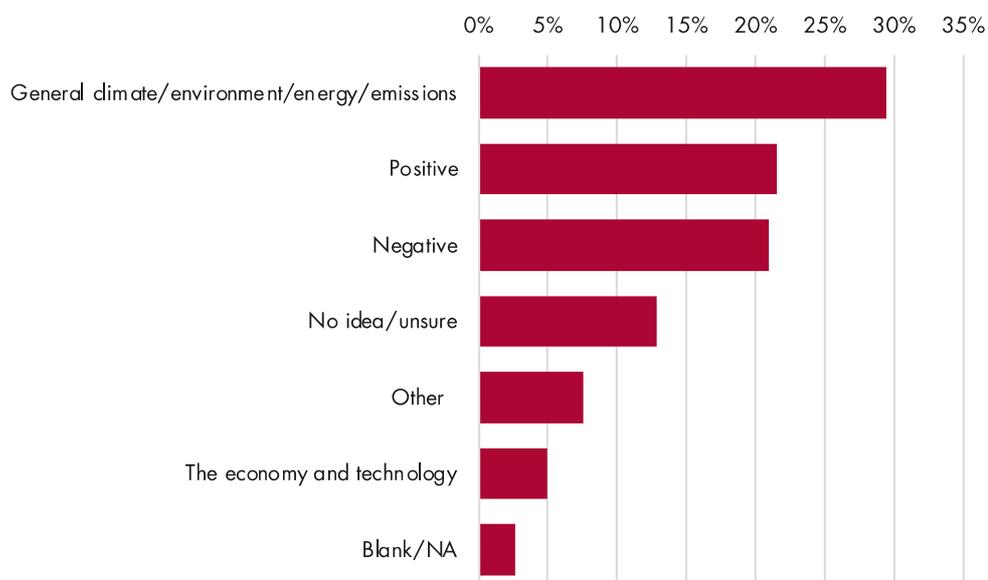
## 2. 'Green jobs' are well received by some but there is significant confusion and scepticism

We asked another group of 1,680 people what word or phrase comes to mind when they think of 'green jobs'. This is a term commonly used by activists to refer to a wide range of jobs – for some it is 'green technologies', and for others it can also refer to jobs in health and social care.

Of the people surveyed:

- 29 per cent responded generally that it was to do with climate change, emissions or the environment.
- 22 per cent had a generally positive response, such as 'hopeful', 'essential', 'promising', or 'the future' and a further 5 per cent associated it with the economy, technology or jobs in a positive sense.
- 21 per cent had some form of negative reaction – with responses such as 'expensive', 'unrealistic', 'baloney', 'propaganda' or 'jargon'.

FIGURE 4: WHAT WORD OR PHRASE COMES TO MIND WHEN YOU THINK OF 'GREEN JOBS'?



N=1,680

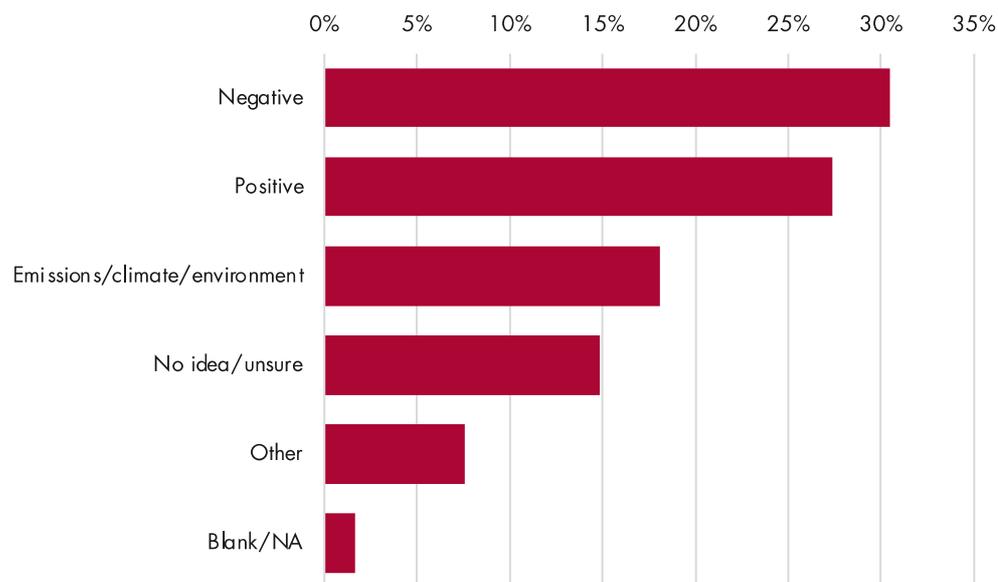
### 3. A 'green industrial revolution' had a significant negative response

We asked a further 1,632 people what word or phrase comes to mind when they think of 'green industrial revolution'. This is a term commonly used by both the Labour party and the Conservative party to make the case for economic regeneration, usually in green technologies such as windfarms and gigafactories, although definitions vary quite significantly.

Of the people surveyed:

- 30 per cent had a negative reaction, or expressed scepticism, concerns about waste or cost, and views that it was jargon or rhetoric: 'Haha, you live in cuckoo land', 'rubbish', 'wishful thinking' for example.
- 27 per cent had a generally positive response, including those who responded 'future', 'progress' and 'change' and terms like 'innovation' or 'technology'.
- 18 per cent associated it generally with emissions, climate or the environment.
- 15 per cent weren't sure what it meant, and there was a range of 'other' responses, which show associations aren't always in line with expectations: 'Kermit the frog working in a factory', for example.

FIGURE 5: WHAT WORD OR PHRASE COMES TO MIND WHEN YOU THINK OF 'GREEN INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION'?



N=1,632

## 4. 'We owe it to our children...' makes the strongest case for action on climate change

Economic opportunities clearly aren't the only benefit of acting to tackle climate change. There are numerous benefits to taking such action, the most obvious one being to prevent climate change itself.

We asked our sample of 5,005 people which of eight messages they found most and least convincing, when thinking about the opportunities presented by tackling climate change. As figure 6 below shows:

- 'We owe our children a better future but if we don't act, they will pay the price' was overwhelmingly the favourite, with more than a third (35 per cent) of people selecting it as the most convincing of eight the messages. We analysed responses by education and NRS social grade (a common proxy for social class) and it was the favourite or close second favourite, argument of almost all groups.
- 'Big corporations don't play by the rules, and get away with emissions while the rest of us pay the price' was also relatively persuasive, with 30 per cent selecting this as the most convincing argument. More Labour voters, 18 to 24-year-olds and people with higher qualifications found this the most convincing message, while those aged 65+ and Conservative voters were less likely to find this convincing, and more likely to find it the least convincing message.
- 'We need to reduce our dependence on foreign countries for energy' was also relatively persuasive for many, with 28 per cent selecting this as the most convincing. This was picked as the most convincing by 30 per cent of working-class people without a degree and 28 per cent of middle-class people without a degree. In this context it should be noted that this poll was carried out during a time when energy prices were particularly salient.
- 'A green industrial revolution will create 400,000 new jobs over the next decade and radically transform society' was overwhelmingly the least favourite argument across all combinations of social grade and degree. Only 13 per cent selected this as most convincing message, while 45 per cent selected it as their least convincing message. It was especially unpopular among working-class people aged 50+, older people generally, Leave voters and Conservative voters. The only group who found this relatively persuasive were 18

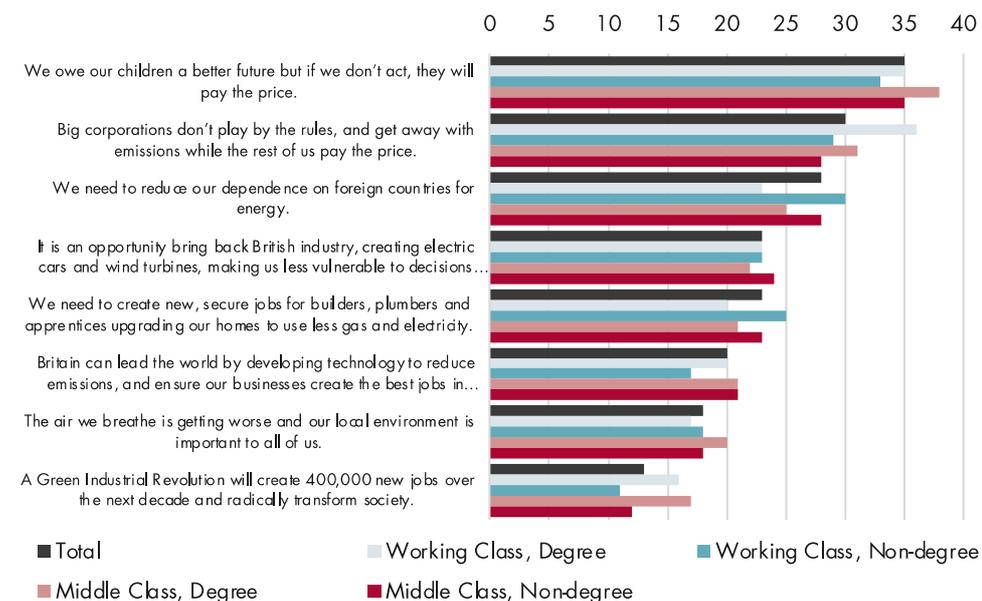
to 24-year-olds, and even then, slightly more found it least convincing (25 per cent) than most convincing (24 per cent). Even Green party voters (who might be expected to support such a message) were rarely persuaded.

Politicians feel an understandable desire to link climate change with job creation. The more convincing 'jobs' or economic based arguments were:

- 'We need to create new, secure jobs for builders, plumbers and apprentices upgrading our homes to use less gas and electricity' – 23 per cent found this the most persuasive, and 18 per cent found this the least persuasive.
- 'It is an opportunity to bring back British industry, creating electric cars and wind turbines, making us less vulnerable to decisions made overseas' – 23 per cent of people found this the most convincing, although around the same proportion found this the least convincing, at 24 per cent. Conservative voters (31 per cent), Leave voters (29 per cent), and over-65s (26 per cent) were more likely to find this message most convincing.

This also indicates that values are more powerful than grand claims about job creation: 'fairness' tended to be popular; as did self-reliance.

**FIGURE 6: BELOW ARE A SELECTION OF THINGS PEOPLE HAVE SAID ABOUT THE OPPORTUNITIES PRESENTED BY TACKLING CLIMATE CHANGE. PLEASE LOOK AT THESE ARGUMENTS AND PICK THE ONE THAT YOU FIND THE MOST AND THE LEAST CONVINCING**



N=5,005

# CONCLUSIONS AND COMMENT

Politicians, the media and activists must improve the way they talk about climate change. There is general support for the government to take action on climate change and people do see the opportunity to create jobs – though this view isn't overwhelming and opinions do vary between demographic and political groups.

But these findings confirm that some of the terms used most often in this debate do not connect with the public in the way they are intended to: these words often provoke negative reactions and understandable confusion.

The country is entering a difficult period, and tackling the challenges we face will be even harder if we are not even talking the same language, or if politicians are not making the most convincing case for action.

As a starting point, politicians, the media and activists should:

- Refer to 'net zero' using clearer, more commonly understood words and, where there is no alternative but to use this term, elaborate on what it means.
- Talk about specific jobs and their quality, rather than leading on the fact that they are 'green' – as this seems to provoke scepticism and has far more of an association with the climate agenda than regeneration. This defeats the purpose of making the economic case.
- Resist the urge to ramp up the rhetoric by referring to the 'green industrial revolution', or large numbers of jobs, which provokes a significant negative and sceptical response from the public. Many do not think it makes a convincing case.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>i</sup> Polls apart? Mapping the politics of net zero, Tim Lord, Brett Meyer and Ian Mulheim. Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 2021.
- <sup>ii</sup> The TUC in 2019 set out a number of key principles for a just transition: a clear and funded path to a low-carbon economy; workers must be at the heart of delivering these plans; every worker should have access to funding to improve their skills; and, new jobs must be good jobs.
- <sup>iii</sup> Who have undertaken related work in Ireland
- <sup>iv</sup> Britain talks climate: A toolkit for engaging the British public on climate change, Dr Susie Wang, Dr Adam Corner & Jessie Nicholls. Climate Outreach, 2020.
- <sup>v</sup> Climate snapshot 2019: A survey of UK attitudes towards climate change and its impacts. Client Earth, 2019.
- <sup>vi</sup> Going greener? Public attitudes to net zero, Anvar Sarygulov. Bright Blue, 2020.
- <sup>vii</sup> We use NRS social grade as a proxy, imperfect as it is.
- <sup>viii</sup> BEIS public attitudes tracker, March 2021, wave 37. Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, May 2021.