



Tracking public attitudes to the environment and climate change: A view from the UK's Department for Energy Security and Net Zero

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Twelfth Meeting of the Expert Group on Environment and Climate Change Statistics

Session 5: Country experience with climate questions for censuses and surveys

September 24th 2025



Objectives

1. Provide an overview of the DESNZ Public Attitudes Tracker (PAT)
2. Outline strengths, challenges and opportunities when tracking attitudes to the climate and associated topics on energy
3. Share reflections on developing climate questions for the PAT survey

What is the Public Attitudes Tracker (PAT)?



UK household survey tracking public attitudes to climate change and energy policy areas (sample size = 3,000-4,000):

- *Net Zero, climate change, energy bills, heating, renewable infrastructure, nuclear, etc.*



Used to monitor trends in attitudes, awareness and behaviours, and to understand differences between different groups.



Uses a stratified random probability 'push to web' design, nationally representative at the UK level.



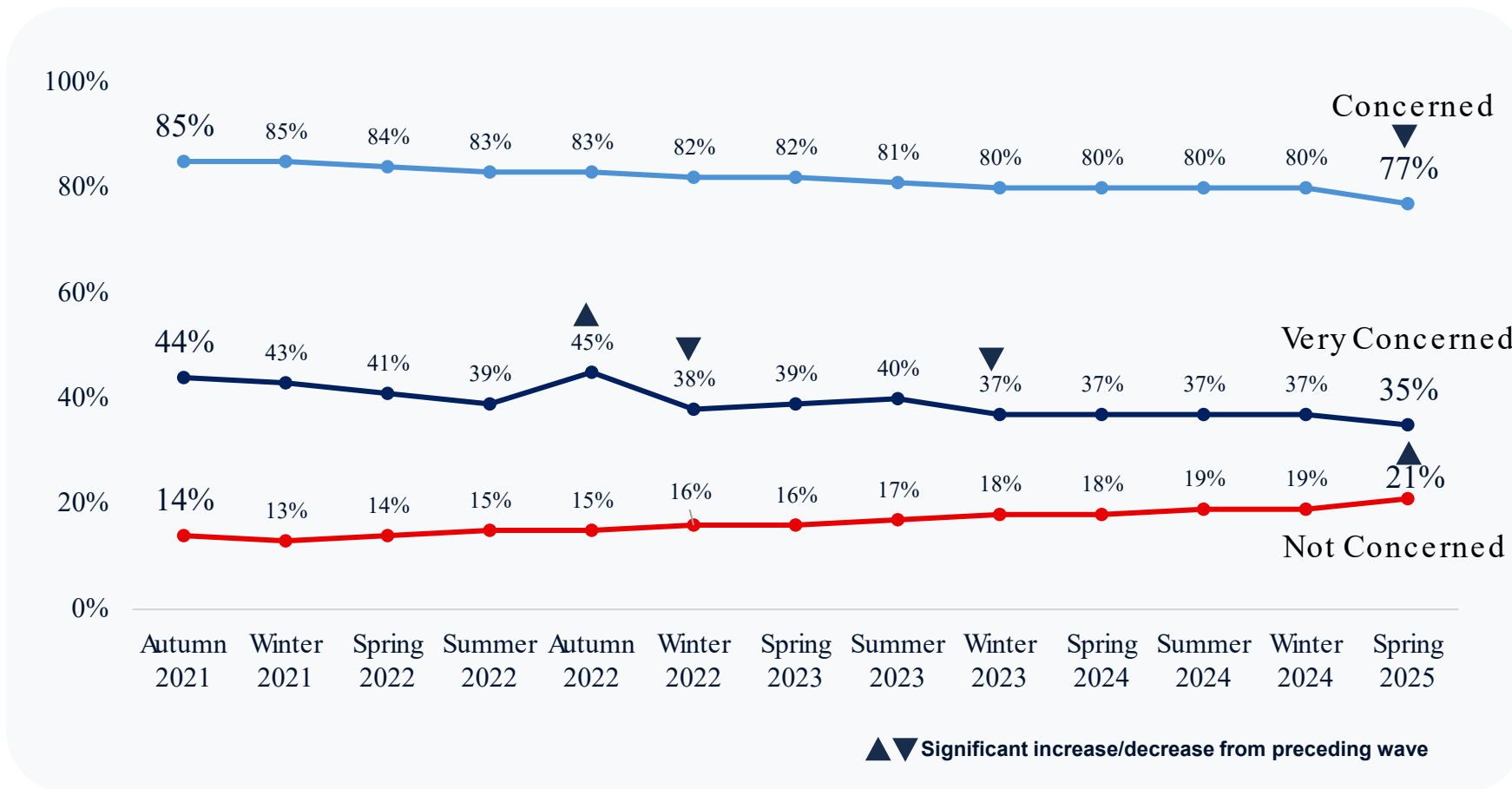
Runs three times a year with field work taking place in winter, spring and summer.



Official statistics published on [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk) and used to inform policy, comms and analysis.

Concern for climate change in the UK is high at 77%

How concerned, if at all, are you about climate change, sometimes referred to as ‘global warming’?

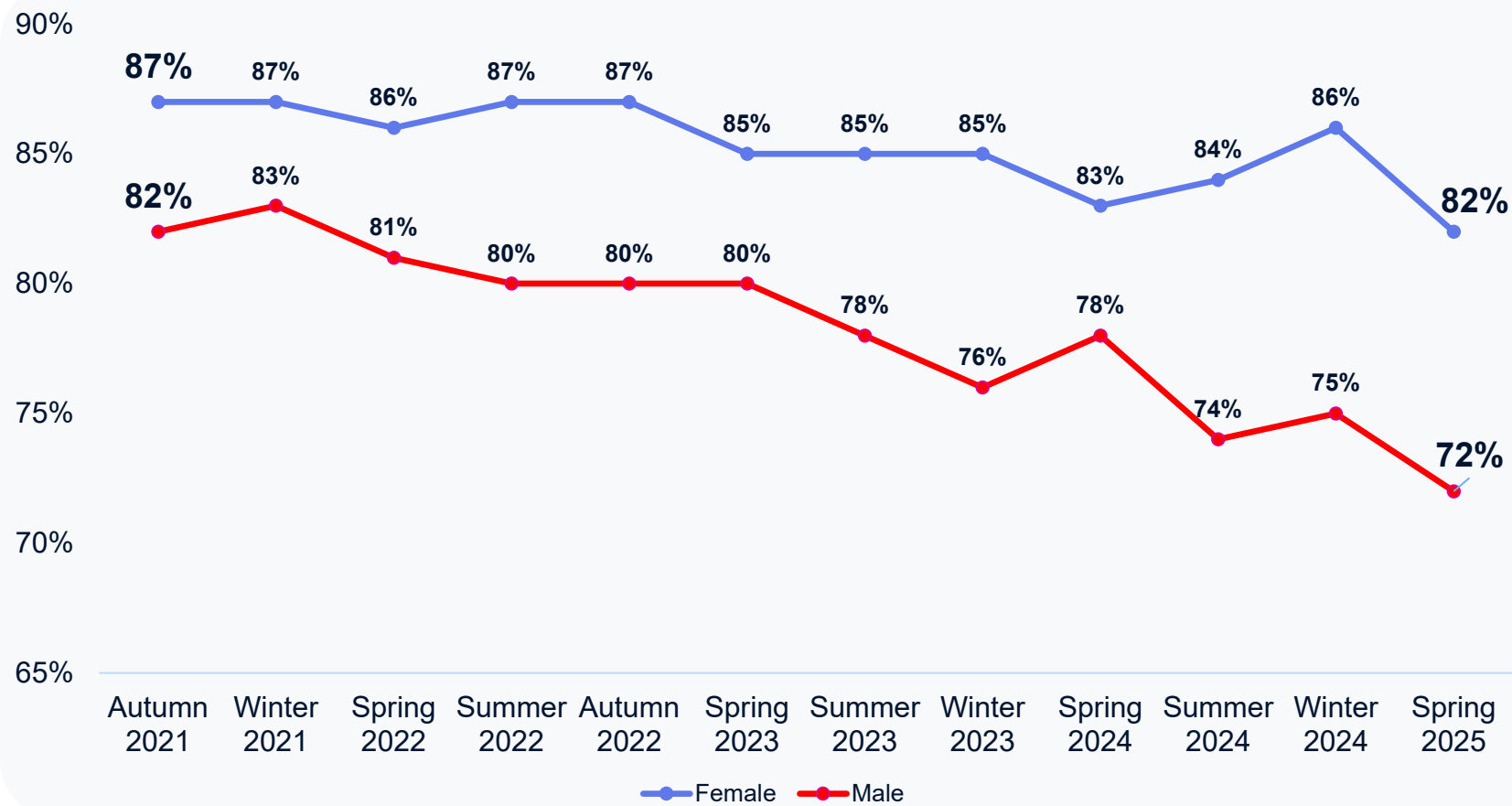


- Concern has fallen slightly compared to the higher levels observed at the start of this time series (85% in Autumn 2021).

4 *Nb. (i) X-axis contains irregular intervals due to the survey moving from a quarterly to triannual design in Summer 2023, (ii) See slide notes for full question wording and sample information*

Climate change concern: the gap between men and women has increased

Climate change concern by gender



- In Autumn 2021, 87% of women and 82% of men were concerned about climate change (5 percentage point difference).
- In Spring 2025, 82% of women and 72% of men said they were concerned (10 percentage point difference).

5 *Nb. (i) Y axis bounds have been adjusted (65%-90%) to clearly visualise the change over time, (ii) the gender question contains a 'self-describe' and 'prefer not to say' response option, which have been omitted due to low counts but are included in the overall findings.*

The good, the tricky and the opportunity

The good



Tracking attitudes

By using a robust methodology and keeping questions and ordering as consistent as possible, we're able to track changes over time.

Subgroup analysis

Useful subgroup analysis is facilitated by collecting demographic and attitudinal data with appropriate base sizes.

The tricky



Question Complexity

Climate change and related topics can be difficult to cover in a survey.

Triangulating data

Different sources with different sampling approaches and question wording can lead to contradictory findings.

The opportunity



Data linkage

Linking attitudinal data with other key data sources (e.g. with property and energy consumption data).

Comparing survey data

Improving our ability to make international comparisons, e.g. through harmonised questions and increased knowledge sharing.

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Challenges when designing new ‘climate’ questions

The main challenges encountered when designing climate and energy questions are:

1. Novelty of the topic being covered and the level of understanding

Potential for confusion/conflation of concepts.

Generic responses can be given – even if the participant hasn’t heard about the technology/concept they may say they support it if it’s deemed to help the environment.

Even with an appropriate definition and context, too many novel topics in a survey can increase respondent burden and impact completion rates and data quality.

2. The complexity of the topic and how much information can be given in a survey format

Limited on the amount of information that can be provided in a survey format.

The information provided could lead to different responses, this needs to be done carefully to avoid bias.

Including information may help introduce a complex topic, however people can anchor their response on a familiar word/concept and not fully digest all information provided.



Challenges when designing new ‘climate’ questions

1. Novel topic example:

Grid-scale battery energy storage systems (BESS) are large rechargeable batteries that enable renewable energy from solar and wind to be stored and released into the electricity grid when needed.

From what you know, or have heard about battery energy storage sites for storing energy in the UK, do you support or oppose its use?

- During cognitive testing interviews, participants knew very little about this technology and asked for more information on what this would look like, the size, cost, impacts on the environment, etc.
- One participant conflated this with electric vehicle charging and others suggested the storage sites would ‘produce and store its own energy’, indicating low understanding.
- We concluded that either more information would need to be provided (although this would increase cognitive burden) or this should be explored using qualitative research methods.



Challenges when designing new ‘climate’ questions

2. Complex topic example:

We ask a battery of questions on renewable energy including the level of support for the construction of an onshore windfarm in the local area, e.g.:

Now imagine that there are plans for an onshore wind farm to be constructed in your local area. How happy or unhappy would you be about this? If you already have this in your local area, answer on the basis of how you feel about this now?

- Attitudes towards this issue depend on the type of information included in the question. For example, attitudes may change if information on the location of development, size and number of turbines, impacts on the landscape, cost, and construction disruption were included.
- However, providing this level of information in a survey would be very difficult and would be dependent on specific proposals, hence why we kept this as a high-level question.
- Therefore, while this question provides useful information on general attitudes to wind farms in the local area, additional research (e.g. qualitative research, engagement at the local level) would be required to provide comprehensive evidence on this topic.



Concluding remarks...

- Cognitive testing is key in climate question design, particularly when questions cover novel or complex topics.
- Mixed methods are required to comprehensively address climate attitude evidence gaps:
 - This may include data linkage and triangulation with other data sets.
- Is there a role for a core set of climate questions to be used internationally to enable better data comparability?

Please contact me if you have any questions or wish to discuss further: Mike.Hall@energysecurity.gov.uk