



# YOUTH IN A CHANGING CLIMATE

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As a young person, climate change is an important topic for me. We are facing a crisis along with everyone in the world. I feel we have to try to fix the previous generation's mistakes and make a better future for not only us but also generations to come, along with supporting our wildlife and animals. I personally feel very strongly about our animal species becoming extinct and the destroying of their habitats due to climate change.

I feel this report is a very accurate representation on how young people are feeling in this current crisis. I agree that young people should be getting educated on this at an early age preferably in schools so they have the best start. I feel there needs to be more information about climate change and ways people can make a difference. For example, simple changes people can make in their daily lives that if enough people did would make a difference.

People in power need to understand how this is affecting young people – they see their futures as non-existent and feel their voices are not heard. They do not feel like they are taken seriously enough when this crisis is affecting them more than ever.



**> Paige Gallone,  
Groundwork North  
East & Cumbria Youth  
of Today Board**

Climate change is a global crisis felt by not only humans, but several other species that make up our natural environment. Humans are heavily reliant on natural resources, some of which have been exploited and almost entirely depleted, causing irreversible changes to our complex eco-systems.

The findings presented within this report demonstrate that an overwhelming proportion of young people believe the school curriculum did not teach them enough about climate change and nature, a matter which almost all young people felt is important to them. This report shows how urgently our government needs to act on the net-zero target to protect our futures.

Covid-19 has proven that we are capable of making drastic changes to our lives when faced with adversity.

I believe that same level of urgency is needed from people and our government to collectively tackle climate change.

This begins with reaching a common ground on the climate crisis – we must shift the way we perceive nature and understand that everything within our natural environment is inextricably interconnected, therefore must be protected.

The government and large companies must take corporate responsibility by adopting a framework which cares for nature, as well as humans, and by taking the necessary actions to decrease emissions. Responsibility to take action should not fall entirely at the hands of young people. We hope this report serves as a reminder of the importance of taking climate action collectively and involving young people in decisions which impact their lives the most.

Young people want to be listened to – they are our future leaders and deserve to be heard.



**> Radya Syed, report  
co-author & Kickstart  
policy & research trainee  
at Groundwork UK**



# Executive Summary

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**Climate change affects us on a global scale**, but its negative impacts are also increasingly evident in our local communities. Young people are worried about climate change and are becoming increasingly aware of how it will affect their futures. Following the recent lockdowns, some young people have had the opportunity and felt the need to learn more about the climate and nature emergencies.

Being inclusive and giving young people a voice in decisions that affect their futures is important to Groundwork. We believe it is imperative to understand how young people feel about the global threats attached to climate change so that we can help turn their anxiety into action.

This report explores the perspectives of young people between the ages 16 and 25 in the UK on climate change and discusses barriers which prevent young people from taking climate action. The report was produced by Groundwork UK following focus groups and an online survey of 500 young people.

## Key findings:

- > Young people do not need convincing about the threat posed by climate change: almost all young people feel that tackling climate change is important to them personally.
- > Young people are less confident in their knowledge about climate change: most feel that they did not learn enough about climate change in school, with documentaries and social media more likely to be their primary source of knowledge.
- > Most young people want to be involved in climate action and feel that knowing more about local environmental activity would help them to do so.
- > The pandemic created a greater opportunity for some young people to explore nature and learn about climate change independently and by connecting with groups online, but also made it more difficult for some other young people to engage because of worries about work and health.





- Some young people still feel excluded by climate and environmental movements and struggle to find examples of people like them who are involved in climate action.
- Young people want to see positive changes in their communities come out of climate action, including better public transport, better access to nature, and opportunities for green careers.
- Young people think they are not being taken seriously enough in decision making by local authorities and the government and want to see more action from those in power.

## Recommendations:

We are calling for **four changes** to help young people engage with climate and the environment, and to build the greener futures they want:

1. **More opportunities to learn about climate change, the environment, and green careers**
2. **A more diverse and inclusive environmental sector**
3. **Young people's aspirations for a greener future to be at the heart of efforts to 'level up' communities**
4. **A greater say for young people in making decisions about getting to net zero**

Further detail on ways to achieve each of these recommendations is set out in the final section of the report.

# Section 1: Introduction

**Climate change is causing significant impacts on the environment, ecosystems, and the economy across the world.** Increasing greenhouse gas emissions have exacerbated the impacts of climate change at an alarming rate.

The lives of people all over the world are fundamentally changing as a result, leaving young people and children experiencing the most devastating effects. The socio-economic, cultural and environmental foundations of their lives will be impacted, as will access to education and threats to their mental and physical health<sup>1</sup>.

Young activists and advocates are increasingly getting involved in climate change discussions with policy makers.

<sup>1</sup>Skovdal, M. & Benwell, M.C. (2021), 'Young people's everyday climate crisis activism: new terrains for research, analysis and action', *Children's Geographies* 19(3), pp.259-266

The School Strikes for Climate started with one inspirational young woman in Stockholm and spread to over 150 countries all over the world. However, not all young people are involved in climate activism to the same degree. Although 77% of 16- to 24-year-olds describe themselves as very or fairly concerned about climate change<sup>2</sup>, among some young people there remains a perception that the environmental movement is 'not for them'.

Groundwork is a federation of charities mobilising practical action on the environment and poverty throughout the UK. We work with young people with different backgrounds and life experiences in a whole range of ways. Some young people come to us through our environmental programmes, and others encounter us through our youth employment programmes or our youth work. We want to ensure that the perspectives of all young people are heard and valued as the UK navigates its path to net zero carbon emissions.

This report explores the perspectives of young people living in the UK, aged 16-25, on climate change and the barriers which prevent young people from being involved in environmental action in the ways they want to be. It highlights what positive changes young people say they want to see made in their local area.

The report is based on three focus groups with young people, recruited through Groundwork's programmes and youth networks, and an online survey of 500 young people conducted between July and September 2021.

<sup>2</sup>BEIS – Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (2021), 'Official Statistics: BEIS Public Attitudes Tracker: Wave 37', Gov.UK [online]. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/beis-public-attitudes-tracker-wave-37>



# What is climate change?

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**Climate change is the long-term shift in weather conditions which affect our planet.** It is a phenomenon that has shaped the physical characteristics of Earth over millennia. However, the over-consumption of fossil fuels since the Industrial Revolution means that we are now experiencing rapid changes to the climate caused by human activity – known as anthropogenic climate change. Overuse of fossil fuels has drastically altered the composition of naturally occurring gases in the atmosphere which has caused global warming and speeded up the process of climate change.

Climate change is characterised by changing weather conditions caused by increased sea surface and atmospheric temperature. This causes:

- Increased frequency of extreme weather events such as droughts, flooding and hurricanes.
- Coastal erosion and destruction.
- Flooded landmasses below sea-level.
- Species extinction or near extinction.
- Change in crop growing seasons.

The impacts of anthropogenic climate change are widespread. However, people who experience poverty in the global south are disproportionately affected. The impacts of climate change are also unequal in the UK, often impacting first and worst on people who have the least power and who contribute least to pollution. This means that climate change is an important social justice issue.

# Threatened futures

Young people are key stakeholders in the decisions taken in response to the climate crisis, because what we do now will affect the conditions they live with in the future. **Some of the threats faced by future generations include food shortages, increased risk of disease, contamination and scarcity of water supply, and polluted air.**

Experts have concluded with 'very high confidence' that climate change is already contributing to disease outbreaks and premature death, a fact that will significantly affect mortality and the health of future generations<sup>3</sup>. It is estimated that present-day changes to air composition are responsible for 470,000 premature respiratory deaths and 2.1 million cardiopulmonary diseases and lung cancers every year<sup>4</sup>.

Global warming increases the risk of heat-stress, which particularly affects children and young people. There can also be less obvious outcomes of changing weather: evidence shows that hot temperatures can lead to an increase in aggression and violent behaviour<sup>5</sup>.

The potential impacts of climate change set out above are very serious and frightening, and it is easy to feel overwhelmed by the risks and the scale of change needed. In a cross European survey of people aged under 35, 90% believed that climate change will negatively affect the lives of young people<sup>6</sup>.

In a separate survey of UK schoolchildren between the ages of 13 and 18, 77% said that thinking about climate change makes them anxious<sup>7</sup>. Experiencing natural disasters is known to have adverse effects on mental health. In a study of UK residents affected by displacement caused by flooding, it was observed that the prevalence of mental health disorders was higher among residents who were displaced in comparison to those who experienced flooding but were not displaced<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>3</sup>Hansen, J., Kharecha, P., Sato, M., Ackerman, F., Hearty, P.J., Hoegh-Guldberg, O., Hsu, S.L., Krueger, F., Parmesan, C., Rahmstorf, S. and Rockstrom, J., (2011), 'Scientific case for avoiding dangerous climate change to protect young people and nature', arXiv preprint arXiv:1110.1365.

<sup>4</sup>Silva, R.A., West, J.J., Zhang, Y., Anenberg, S.C., Lamarque, J.F., Shindell, D.T., Collins, W.J., Dalsoren, S., Faluvegi, G., Folberth, G. and Horowitz, L.W., (2013). Global premature mortality due to anthropogenic outdoor air pollution and the contribution of past climate change. Environmental Research Letters, 8(3), p.034005.

<sup>5</sup>Miles-Novelo, A. and Anderson, C.A., (2019). Climate change and psychology: Effects of rapid global warming on violence and aggression. Current Climate Change Reports, 5(1), pp.36-46.

<sup>6</sup>Climate Outreach (2021), 'Young Europeans say we need system change to tackle climate change – but most don't know what 'climate justice' means', Climate Outreach [online]. Available at: <https://climateoutreach.org/young-people-europe-climate-justice-spark/>

<sup>7</sup>Global Action Plan (2020), 'Transform Our World Press release: Turning anxiety into action'. Available at: <https://www.globalactionplan.org.uk/news/transform-our-world-press-release/turning-anxiety-into-action>

<sup>8</sup>Munro, A., Kovats, R.S., Rubin, G.J., Waite, T.D., Bone, A., Armstrong, B., Beck, C.R., Amlôt, R., Leonardi, G. and Oliver, I., (2017). Effect of evacuation and displacement on the association between flooding and mental health outcomes: a cross-sectional analysis of UK survey data. The Lancet Planetary Health, 1(4), pp.e134-e141.







Addressing climate change now may help to prevent the worsening of extreme weather events such as heat waves, floods, wildfires, and droughts –which will disproportionately affect poorer countries and communities. Decarbonisation has the potential to prevent further deaths and biodiversity loss and to bring about improvements in our quality of life. The potential benefits of decarbonisation include improved physical health through sustainable transport, greater wellbeing because of being more connected with nature, and more resilient local economies through the creation of ‘green jobs’.

Climate change mitigation is a step towards protecting our ecosystem services, economy and livelihoods which are otherwise threatened. However, we also need to invest in climate change adaptation – ensuring our villages, towns and cities are protected from the disruptive impacts of climate change that are already ‘locked in’.

# Youth activism

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Despite the threats, **many young people are responding to the climate crisis with energy and creativity.** In 2019, young people made national headlines through the School Strikes for Climate, with demonstrations held in towns and cities across the UK as well as internationally.

The protests were inspired by the then 15-year-old climate activist Greta Thunberg, who rose to prominence after her first appearance at the UN's climate change summit in 2018. Her activism led to the climate strike movement Fridays for Future becoming an international movement involving millions of activists joining protests and strikes. The aim of the strikes was to urge governments to act on the climate crisis immediately.

The Covid-19 pandemic put a stop to physical school strikes and demonstrations – but some young people continued to organise and advocate online, taking part in digital strikes and raising awareness of key climate issues.

The efforts of young climate protesters played a part in motivating UK parliamentarians to declare a climate emergency in May 2019 and similar motions were passed by devolved parliaments and local councils across the UK<sup>9</sup>. Young activists were able to meet with members of the IPCC and parliament, and this activism undoubtedly helped shape the response of policymakers.

<sup>9</sup>UK Parliament (1 May 2019), "The most important issue of our time," Opposition calls to declare climate emergency, UK Parliament [online]. Available at: <https://www.parliament.uk/business/news/2019/may/mps-debate-the-environment-and-climate-change>



# Inclusivity



Despite the positive successes achieved by young activists, **there have been continued concerns expressed about the diversity and inclusivity of the environment sector**, referring both to campaigners and people working in environmental professions. This matters because it risks meaning that environmental messages do not reach some audiences and that some people feel excluded from climate related activities.

Lack of diversity in the environmental workforce can put some young people off pursuing careers in the environment sector. A 2017 report found that 97% of environmental professionals and 94% of workers involved in horticulture or landscape design identify as White British<sup>10</sup>.

Previous studies have found that students from ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely to say that they are discouraged by this. These students are also less likely than their peers to have experience of engaging with nature or of the environment sector. When asked what they think should be done to address this, students suggested raising awareness of 'green jobs' at all levels of education and offering more opportunities for young people to be exposed to environmental work<sup>11</sup>.

Prior to the pandemic, there had been several high-profile climate demonstrations – led by the School Strikers and groups like Extinction Rebellion – which had increased the level of attention afforded to climate change in the media.

However, there was a perceived lack of diversity among activists in some of the most high-profile groups, which made some young people feel that the movement was not for them. Research conducted by Aston University found that activists who took part in Extinction Rebellion protests were 'typically highly-educated and middle-class': a third of the protesters in London 2019 had postgraduate degrees and two-thirds identified themselves as middle-class<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>10</sup>Norrie, R. (2017), 'The Two Sides of Diversity: Which are the most ethnically diverse occupations?', Policy Exchange [online]. Available at: <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/The-two-sides-of-diversity-2.pdf>

<sup>11</sup>National Union of Students (NUS) (2018), 'Race, inclusivity and environmental sustainability: A scoping study', Sustainability Exchange [online]. Available at: [https://www.sustainabilityexchange.ac.uk/files/20181206\\_nus\\_race\\_inclusivity\\_and\\_environmental\\_sustainability\\_report.pdf](https://www.sustainabilityexchange.ac.uk/files/20181206_nus_race_inclusivity_and_environmental_sustainability_report.pdf)

<sup>12</sup>Saunders, C, Doherty, B., Hayes, G. (2020), 'A New Climate Movement? Extinction Rebellion's Activists in Profile', Centre for Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity [online]. Available at: <https://cusp.ac.uk/themes/p/xr-study/>





THERE IS  
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# Opportunities



Of course, while climate change presents a risk to young people's futures, **the shift to a low carbon economy also presents some opportunities for young people to live and work in a different way.** As well as exploring their feelings about climate change, we wanted to ask young people what they want from a greener future.

One of the opportunities for young people in the fight against climate change is the chance to forge a 'green' career. In 2018 there were 185,000 full-time workers in England's low-carbon and renewable energy economy – and it is estimated that this could rise to almost 700,00 by 2030 and over 1.18 million by 2050<sup>13</sup>. Of course, all industries will need to decarbonise for the UK to meet its goal of net zero carbon emissions by 2050, meaning that understanding climate change and protecting the environment should be core competencies of every job.

Other benefits that could potentially be achieved through addressing climate change include better public transport, less air pollution, a thriving natural environment, warmer homes, and access to healthier, locally grown food and sustainable products.

The next section of this report will explore all these themes with young people, finding out what they think about climate change and biodiversity loss, how they want to be involved in environmental action, and what they want from a greener future.

<sup>13</sup>Local Government Association (2018), Local green jobs – accelerating a sustainable recovery. Available at: <https://www.local.gov.uk/local-green-jobs-accelerating-sustainable-economic-recovery>



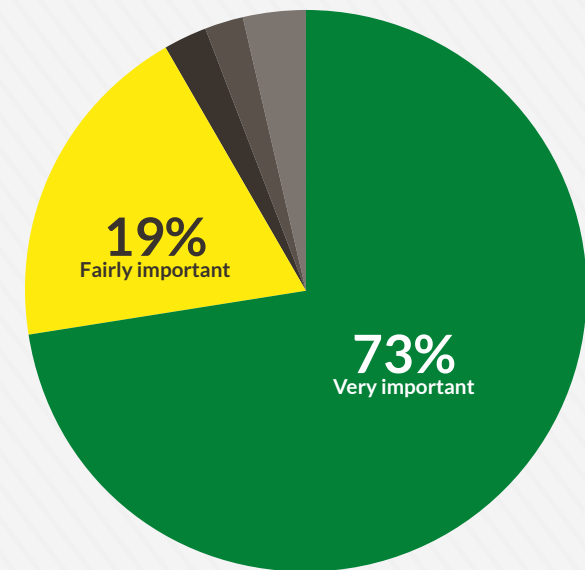


CHANGING PLACES  
CHANGING LIVES

## Section 2: What did young people tell us?

Young people from all walks of life think that climate change is a significant issue. **92% of the young people in our survey said that tackling climate change and protecting the environment is important to them personally.**

How important is tackling climate change and protecting the environment to you personally?



- > 2% Neither important nor unimportant
- > 2% Not very important
- > 3% Not important at all





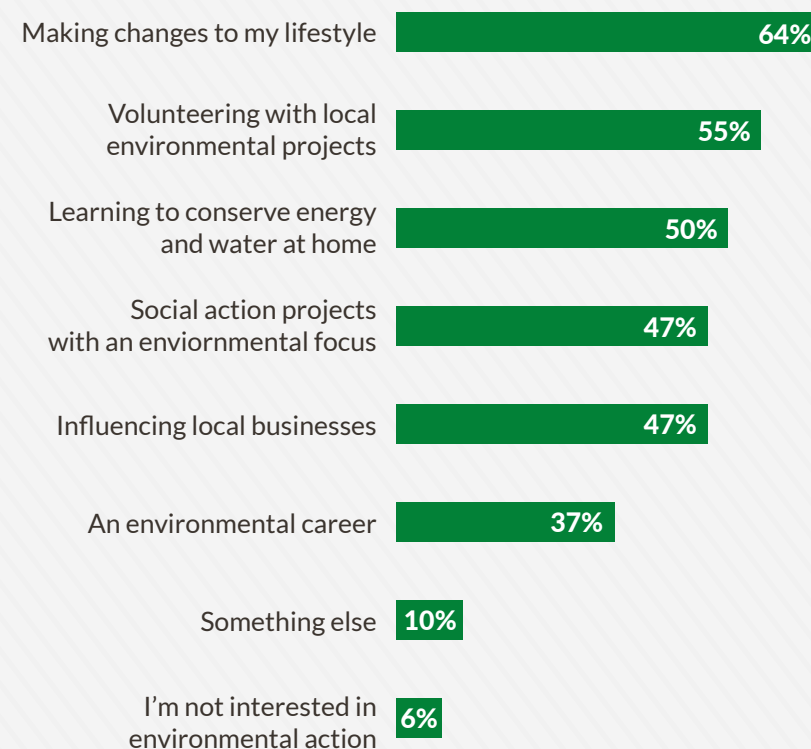
Young people were less confident about their knowledge about climate change: 56% said that they knew ‘a lot’ about climate change. However, even among those that said that they only knew ‘a little’, over 90% said that tackling climate change was important to them personally.

Many young people made links between their personal experiences and what they know about the effects of climate change. Some of the young people who took part in our focus groups were already noticing changes in the weather affecting their lives and hobbies in the UK. They spoke about how flooding had become more frequent in their local areas and noticed that the weather was more unpredictable, identifying climate change as a probable cause of this. One young person noted that there had been snow on the pitch for the Champions League semi-final between Manchester City and Paris Saint Germain which took place in May, remarking that **“that’s not normal!”**. However, some young people told us that, although they feel climate change is important, there are other, more immediate challenges which occupy their thoughts day-to-day. Some of the young people we spoke to described climate change as **“a background issue”** and told us that **“work and mental health are more important to me”**.

Around half of the young people we surveyed had been involved in climate action in the past and just 13% said they were not interested in getting involved in climate or environmental action in the future.

When asked what type of environmental action they would like to be involved in, the most popular answers were making changes to their lifestyle (64%) and volunteering with local environmental projects (55%).

## What kind of environmental action are you interested in?



# Lifestyle changes

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The survey results show that **young people are ready and willing to make changes to their lives to combat climate change and improve the environment.** However, the focus group discussions betrayed some disillusionment about the impact of individual actions given the scale of the challenge:

**“Everyone recycles but lots of problems come from big companies... it makes you wonder what washing a tin out really does, what can we actually do?”**

Feeling that anything they do personally is not going to have a big enough impact can be disempowering for young people, making them feel that they don't have control over their future.

In the focus groups, it was striking how often recycling was the first environmental action that came to mind for young people. This association may reflect the number of public education campaigns around recycling, compared to relatively low levels of environmental education in schools. However, it suggests that many young people have a limited view of the changes that need to be made to combat climate change and the possibilities those changes present.

Young people did reference other lifestyle changes that they had made or would consider making to live a more sustainable lifestyle. Half of young people in our survey said they wanted to learn more about how to conserve energy and water at home.

Some of the young people we spoke to had changed their diet due to concern about the environment by eating less meat or, in some cases, going vegan. Others spoke about trying to reduce their consumption through buying clothes second-hand, using public transport and avoiding flying.

Of course, a young person's individual contribution to climate change is often relatively small – they generally have less disposable income and less decision-making power than older adults. While acknowledging that collective changes could be powerful, many of the young people we spoke to said that they wanted to see more done by people with the resources and positions to make a bigger difference, such as politicians and business leaders.



# Activism

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Many of the young people we spoke to felt that lobbying the government was among the most important things they could do to contribute to tackling climate and environmental issues. However, many of them felt that young people were not being taken seriously by policy makers.

**“Young people have cultivated an image of urgency and empowerment – adults and people in power don’t seem to take us onboard or engage with us regularly. They don’t listen to us or involve us in decision making and policies.”**

There was a sense of disheartenment among some young people who felt that their voices are not heard by people in authority. In our survey, less than one in five agreed that “young people are listened to when decisions about climate change and the environment are made”.

**“Young people are just fed up - they want to be listened to. There’s fantastic action from the younger generation but adults and people in authority are not looking out for us or acknowledging us.”**

Some young people told us that the pandemic had made climate activism more accessible to them. For young people living in rural areas or smaller towns, the move to online organising has helped them to connect with groups and get involved in ways they wouldn’t have been able to beforehand.





# Local volunteering

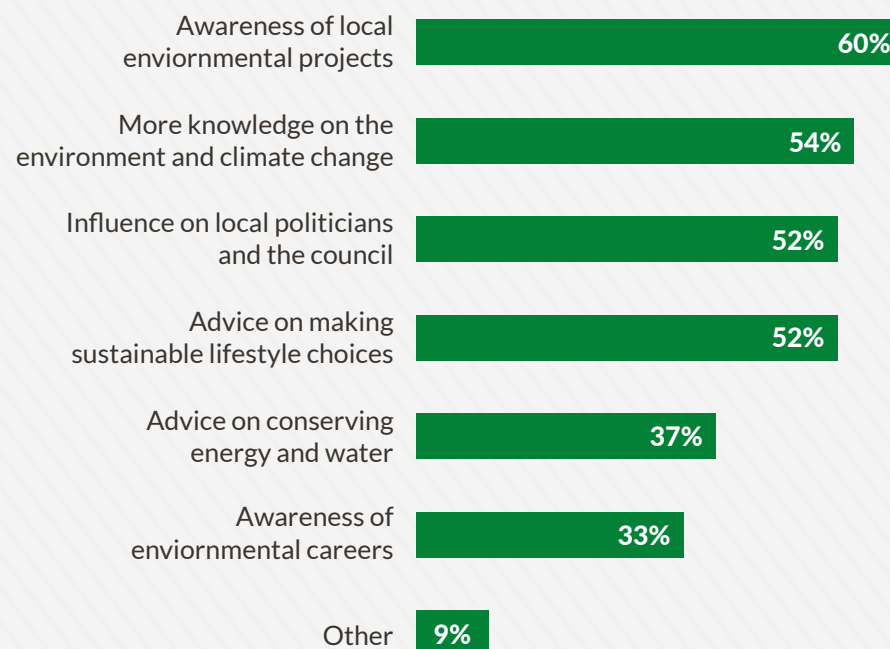
Young people are enthusiastic about the idea of getting involved with environmental action in their local areas – 55% of the young people surveyed said they were interested in environmental volunteering and 47% were interested in environmental social action – but many weren't sure how to go about it.

Many of the young people we spoke to said they were not aware of what environmental activities were happening locally to them or how to get involved. For example, although many local authorities are developing climate action plans, the young people we spoke to knew very little about what decisions were being made in their area and how they could have a say. Some young people felt that a lack of awareness meant they were unable to take part in community projects and climate campaigns taking place such as Fridays for Future, with one citing:

**“I would like to take part in campaigns and protests – our school didn't tell us it was an option to go. It wasn't advertised as much as it should have been - so if I wanted to go there was never the opportunity... I wish there were more chances to campaign locally and not just in major hubs.”**

Being involved in local action can also help to combat the 'eco anxiety' that some young people experience. While activism can often take a long time to produce tangible change, young people can see the impact of community activities more quickly, helping to keep them motivated and optimistic.

## Which support do young people want?

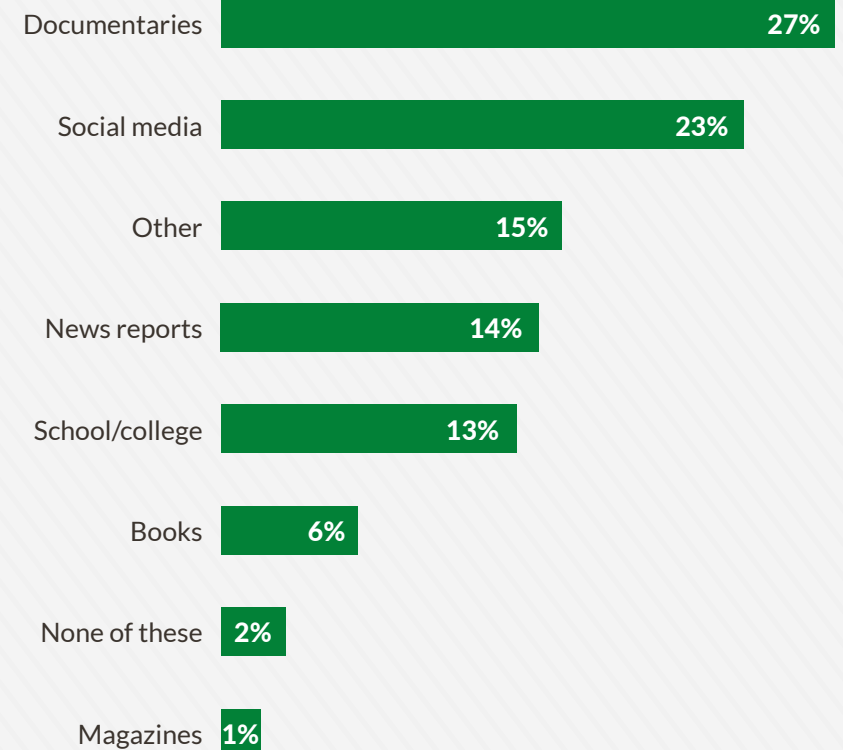


# Where do young people get their information about climate change?

The more knowledge young people have about climate change, the more they will feel empowered to act. We wanted to know where young people got their information from about the climate and nature emergencies and what impact this might have on the way they respond.



Which of these sources taught you the most about climate change and the environment?



## Documentaries

Documentaries were the most important source of information for 27% of the young people who took part in our survey, challenging the idea that young people always prefer to get information in shorter formats. The popularity of nature documentaries by influential figures like David Attenborough may have played a role in encouraging young people to think about the environment and seek out similar content. The availability of documentaries on a wide range of subjects on streaming platforms such as Netflix means that it has never been easier for young people to access information on environmental issues.

Some of the young people in our focus groups spoke about watching documentaries on climate change and the environment at home during lockdown, and how this had spurred them to get involved in campaign groups.

## Social media

Social media content continues to shape the perspectives of young people on a wide range of issues and is often the source of information that young people rely on to keep updated with world matters. 23% of young people said that social media was the information source that taught them the most about climate change.

Popular social media influencers also have an influence on young people's perspectives by making certain topics visible and relevant to their followers. Social media movements tend to have a limited lifespan as topics trend across platforms, but some young people continue to use their platforms for activism.

The rise in popularity of social media platforms means that youth-led discussions about climate change can reach a wide audience and in turn influence attitudes, behaviours, and consumer habits.

## Other sources

News reports (14%), books (6%) and magazines (1%) were less likely to be the primary information sources for the young people who took part in our survey. This implies a preference for visual media, an important lesson for environmental organisations looking to engage with young people.

Of the young people that selected 'other', the majority cited university, their own research, or personal contacts with people who were interested in climate change.

## School and college

66% of the young people who responded to our survey said they didn't learn enough about climate change at school. School or college was the primary source of information on climate change and the environment for just 13% of young people. The young people we spoke to emphasised that the limited space for learning about climate change and the environment in the school curriculum meant that young people did not learn enough about the topic. Many felt that they had only been taught about climate change for the purpose of an exam and had not learned enough about how it might affect them or the social and political decisions connected to it.

**“When it comes to remembering and thinking about climate change, we're not getting this passion and influence because we don't get extra marks for that in an exam. I think there should be a dedicated curriculum for climate change specifically so people will be more engaged in the topic and feel a sense of urgency towards it rather than putting it in a science course.”**

**“There's a limited curriculum when you're younger – I think that's where you can teach the passion. Because there's obviously not going to be any tests, it's going to be the time to teach them about the environment and thinking sustainably and how to make energy without harming the planet.”**

# Is environmentalism for me?

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Many of the young people we spoke to **said that they didn't see people like them reflected in the environmental movement.** Young people expressed concern about whether their perspectives were reflected in some of the highest profile campaign groups.

**"A lot of people involved in climate change are the same sort of people – for example Extinction Rebellion, it is sort of typical middle-class people, white British middle-class. There's lack of diversity... because it doesn't look representative it puts other people off from being involved."**

We asked a group of young people from the North East of England whether they knew anyone who they would describe as 'very green'. Many of them struggled to think of people in their own social circle and some of them associated being involved in doing things for the environment with a more old-fashioned world view:

**"My grandad was an old hippy so he's into that stuff, he's the only person I know who's super green."**

As well as feeling excluded by some protest groups, young people can also feel disenfranchised by a lack of affordable environmental choices for them as consumers:

**"...our individual behaviour can be counted as climate action – using less plastic, using more sustainable things. I think one of the barriers in that case could be economic factors. Because of course [fast fashion] is not eco-friendly but it's cheaper and not everybody can afford to go to places that make things more sustainably and ethically... at the moment, being sustainable is more of a status thing."**





# The impact of the pandemic

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We asked young people whether experiencing the Covid-19 pandemic had changed the way they felt about climate change and the environment.

Some young people made direct links between the pandemic and humans' relationship with the natural world, worrying that the climate crisis and other environmental threats would make a similar event more likely in the future.

**"It has made me realise that public health and the environment are very much interlinked, it has shown me that we need to stop encroaching on nature as the more we invade nature and live closer to it, there is a higher chance we may catch new diseases which we don't have an understanding of which could cause more pandemics."**

Many people spoke about having an increased awareness of the importance of nature and local green spaces. As one young person told us:

**"I feel like people have connected more with green spaces if they had some during the pandemic because that's the only place they could have gone. I think we need to keep that connection going because it improves mental health, general health and makes people more passionate about the environment."**

Most respondents felt a closer connection with nature and felt that the lockdown gave them the opportunity to learn more about climate change and the environment. For some, this had also made them more concerned about inequality in access to nature. Groundwork's recent *Out of Bounds* report found that, although local parks and green spaces had been a lifeline for some people during the pandemic, others missed out on the benefits either because of insufficient local provision, complex barriers making it difficult for them to access nature or feeling unwelcome or unsafe in natural spaces<sup>14</sup>.

Some young people were concerned about some negative habits which had developed during the pandemic, for example, reliance on single-use plastics for hygiene reasons and a big increase in online shopping. They noted that there had been some positive changes, such as fewer people flying, but weren't confident that these changes would be sustained in the long term.

<sup>14</sup>Groundwork (2021), *Out of Bounds: equity in access to urban nature*. Available at: [www.groundwork.org.uk/OutOfBounds](http://www.groundwork.org.uk/OutOfBounds)







Some young people expressed that lockdown gave them the opportunity to explore their interests because they were less constrained by the school curriculum. The pandemic also gave some young people the opportunity to get involved in climate action that they wouldn't have had before. The reliance on technology to stay connected with people and places meant some were more likely to participate in environmental activities and campaigns.

**"I think the pandemic has made climate action more accessible. Everything is now online which means anyone can join...The fact that everything is online means that we can welcome more people that might have cared about the environment before but didn't have the chance to say it or discuss it."**

**"I think the pandemic has opened up more of a chance to make a change. It's normal to meet someone in South Africa or Northern Ireland to campaign more on a global level. In terms of action that's very good, I myself have never met any members in person before it's all been online."**

However, for others the stresses of the pandemic had left them with less capacity to think about the environment. For young people who were shielding or who lost family members to Covid-19, this was naturally at the forefront of their minds. The economic impacts of the pandemic also hit many young people hard and it is unsurprising that this was the priority for many young people:

**"Covid is an immediate problem so it's at the forefront of our minds, then the economy and money is a key concern for lots of people now."**

For some young people, the pandemic experience had made them more optimistic about the possibility of change. For example, one young person felt that the pandemic enabled young people to have a better understanding of how government decisions affect their lives and thought that awareness of ministers and politicians could increase young people's engagement with climate action:

**"There's been a big focus on politics. Everyone knows who Boris Johnson is, everyone knows who the chief medical officer is. The more young people that get to understand the framework of government and politics – the more they get to engage them and write to them and email them... they can make change – that's what politics is – it's about influencing, debating and making change."**

Other young people pointed out that the pandemic had required us all to make changes to our lives overnight, proving that the sort of changes that the climate crisis requires of us are achievable:

**"The pandemic has shown us that huge changes to our daily lives on a collective scale are possible in response to a global emergency. We need to respond to climate change in the same way."**

# Imagining positive futures

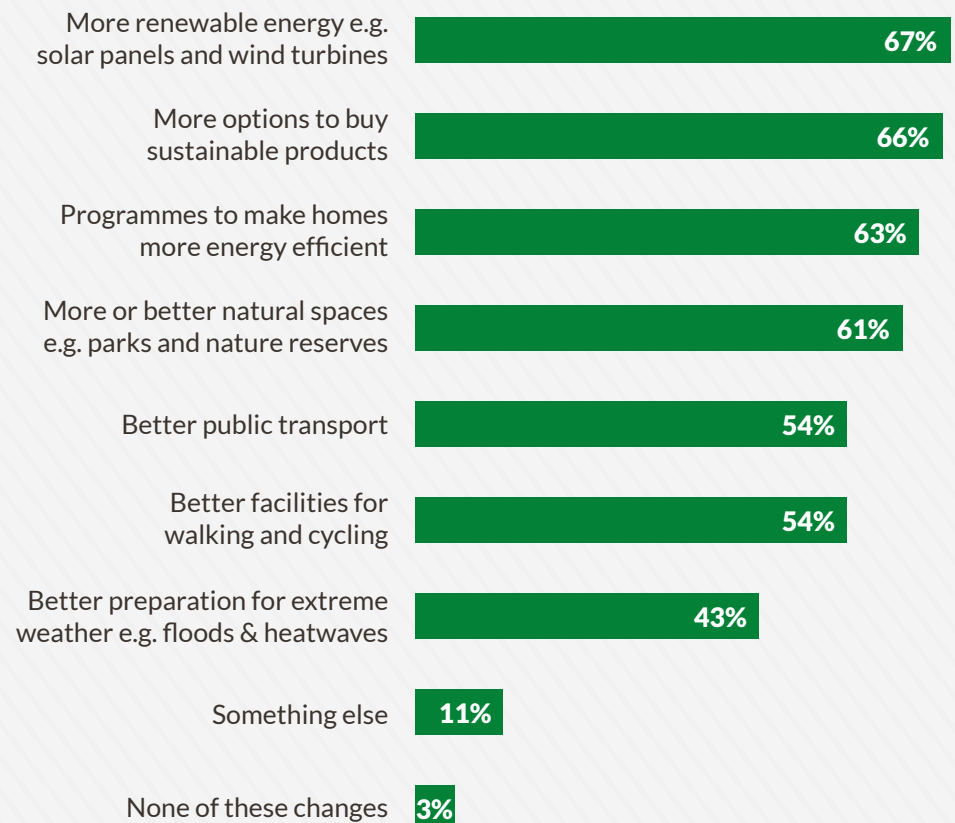
When talking about climate change, it can be easy to focus on the threats it presents to young people's futures. Thinking about positive futures and the opportunities that the transition to net zero presents can often feel more difficult.

We asked young people what changes they would like to see in their local areas as a result of climate action and found that there was a significant appetite for change among the young people we surveyed and spoke to.

In the focus groups, young people were keen to emphasise the links between climate change and social justice, recognising climate action as an opportunity to solve other problems at the same time.

**“People need to realise that climate action doesn't just solve climate issue but solves huge inequality within different aspects of life. For example: food wastage, millions of people in UK are struggling to eat, yet we waste over millions of tonnes of food every year. By solving that, we'll be saving planet, resources and food and people struggling to eat. More the general inequality aspects rather than just saving planet but about solving other inequalities too.”**

## What changes would you like to see in your local area to make it more environmentally friendly?





## Public transport

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Better public transport was a priority for many of the young people we spoke to – something that would make a real difference to their lives as well as reducing carbon emissions. Some of the young people in our focus groups lived in former mining villages in County Durham and were frustrated with being reliant on patchy and infrequent buses or lifts from their parents if they couldn't afford their own cars.

**"I don't think more public transport could ever be a bad thing!"**

In cities, bike rental schemes and better infrastructure for walking and cycling were popular ideas to help young people get around quickly and easily on a budget.

## Investment in green spaces

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Young people reiterated the importance of having good quality natural spaces close to where they live. They felt that investment in parks and green spaces can increase interest in nature and the environment within the community as well as bringing a wide range of benefits to health, social connections, and the local economy. Making sure that access to nature is fair across society was a priority for many of the young people we spoke to.

## Green initiatives and options

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Many young people wanted to see a future where it didn't cost extra to be 'green' and where more people were thinking about and protecting the planet.

**"The biggest change I'd like to see is more people taking action on climate change and willing to be responsible and have more knowledge. Another thing – breaking the stigma. I feel like there's a stigma against climate change. For example, some of my mates throw bottles to the ground and I go 'hang on a minute – why don't you recycle that?' and they go 'it's not cool.'"**

**"People complain about wind turbines being an eyesore, same with solar panels which I see on lots of the newer buildings, but I like seeing them and think they look cool."**

## Green careers

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Many young people were optimistic and enthusiastic about the possibility of new green jobs being created in their local areas:

**"I think of new industry, new ways to move like electric cars, wind power, things like that. My grandad was a miner and my grandma worked in a factory, so classic 1950s North East jobs. I feel like the jobs**

**of the future will be very different from what they knew and they wouldn't know what they were, but I don't feel like they're inaccessible for me and our children will be doing very different jobs in the future."**

Many of the young people we spoke to said that the prospect of contributing to reduced carbon emissions or nature recovery through their working lives appealed – but it could be difficult to know where to find these roles or what career paths were available.

**"Online there's not much awareness of green jobs and not much on the internet about where to look for them. Also volunteer activities – it was difficult to find them because we're not told where to find them."**

Lack of careers advice means that young people are often unaware of employment opportunities including green jobs, limiting the diversity of new entrants to the sector.



## Section 3: What next?

These conversations demonstrate that **young people do not need to be convinced of the importance of acting on the climate change and nature emergencies.** Young people are all too aware of the scale of the threat and want to be part of the solution. However, they also want to see adults and people in positions of power playing their part.

For organisations like Groundwork, these conversations have highlighted the need to spend more time talking to young people about what they want from a low carbon future. Too often climate communication focuses on the negative consequences of not acting on climate change or the things people will need to 'give up'. Spending more time exploring the opportunities that could be presented by the transition to a low-carbon society will help to engage more young people in influencing decisions and taking practical action to build a better future.

They also highlight the need to ensure that the environmental movement is more inclusive.

Environmental organisations and activist groups need to show that they are welcoming for people from diverse walks of life, with different perspectives to bring. The sector needs to do more to ensure that there are accessible pathways into volunteering, activism, and employment so that young people can build their skills and realise their ambitions while contributing to the work that needs to be done.

**So, what can we do to make sure that every young person has a say in how we reduce our carbon emissions and put nature into recovery?**



## > 1. More opportunities to learn about climate change, the environment, and green careers:

- Climate and nature should be a golden thread running through the school curriculum, with opportunities for young people to understand the science, the social and economic impacts, and the choices we need to make to reach net zero.
- We need to create more opportunities for young people to learn about the careers available in the low carbon and environmental sectors at school, college, and in higher education settings.



## Case study: climate education in schools

In 2021, Groundwork has been working with Net Zero Leiston and Alde Valley Academy to develop a climate change action plan project with the school, as part of the town's ambition to create a pathway to net zero.

The project began by engaging pupils in years 7, 8 and 9 to find out what environmental issues they were most concerned about. Groundwork then undertook a detailed on-site environmental review, identifying big and small changes that could reduce the school's carbon footprint. The findings were shared in an assembly and pupils volunteered to become Green Guardians, taking an active part in tackling climate change by making the school more sustainable.

17 enthusiastic pupils volunteered to become Green Guardians and have been working closely with Groundwork and Net Zero Leiston to make changes around the school and raise awareness of sustainability.

**“We only have one planet and want the school to improve. We are particularly concerned about the lack of recycling”** – Group of Year 7 Students.





## > 2. A more diverse and inclusive environmental sector

- Environmental organisations must speed up their work to increase the diversity of their workforces and volunteers, addressing barriers to entry for young people from under-represented groups.
- We should create and subsidise more entry-level positions in the environment sector to enable young people from more diverse backgrounds to access low-carbon jobs and grow the industries that will be needed in the future. As a step towards this, the government should use the model developed for the Kickstart programme to fund environmentally focused year-long job placements for young people – as proposed by those piloting a National Nature Service.



## Case study: first steps into green careers

Groundwork's Green Teams engage young people in developing green spaces for communities and climate, all while gaining invaluable work experience and self-esteem.

Green Team training is done on-the-job, with the teams doing real work to make the communities where they operate greener and better. Team members also get additional help and support that reflects their individual needs, such as mentoring, qualifications and guidance.

Most trainees are under the age of 25 and many have left school with few or no qualifications. The hands-on and outdoor nature of the scheme suits many trainees who often tell us that they did not do well in the school classroom. It is also common for trainees to face multiple barriers getting into work, including mental or physical health issues, or other challenges, such as growing up in care.

For many, Green Teams serves as the first step into a horticultural career. However, it can also be valuable as a stepping stone onto other opportunities. All participants are left with a greater appreciation of the importance of protecting and improving their local environments.

**“Sparking curiosity and excitement about the natural world in young people is an incremental part of placing more value in nature and thus a big step in the successful management of the climate emergency.”**

– Lauren Griffiths, Green Team participant, 19.





### > 3. Young people's aspirations for a greener future to be at the heart of efforts to 'level up' communities

- Government funding programmes to regenerate disadvantaged areas and revitalise town centres should prioritise initiatives that promote a positive vision of low carbon communities with more public transport, energy efficient homes, good quality green jobs and access to nature at their heart.
- The newly titled Department of Levelling Up, Housing & Communities needs to align its efforts with the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs' plans for nature recovery to address the inequality in access to nature experienced by many young people.
- Our economic recovery strategy should prioritise support for environmental enterprises, creating jobs in local communities and giving young people more control over their consumer choices.

### Case study: climate friendly food

Food production and consumption is responsible for 26% of global greenhouse gas emissions. The Food Wave project provides young people a platform to take action in Manchester through direct street and community engagement with the general public and promote a change in their food consumption behaviour.

Groundwork and partners worked with young people to understand the importance of climate-friendly and pro-environment food consumption. The 'street action' programme young people delivered between July and September 2021 encouraged Manchester citizens to change their food consumption behaviour and actively promoted the shift towards ecological and inclusive urban food systems.

**"I'm active in my local climate action group and volunteering for this event has helped me to develop the carbon supermarket concept as a way to engage with our own local community at our future events. I also enjoyed meeting and discussing ideas with like-minded people in person, especially after a year of Zoom meetings!"** – Jon Curry, Foodwave participant.

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## > 4. A greater say for young people in making decisions about getting to net zero

- A Wellbeing of Future Generations Act should be introduced for the whole of the UK, building on the model in place in Wales. This would require decision-makers to think about the long-term impact of their decisions and to work with communities and young people to address multi-generational problems like poverty, health inequalities and climate change.

- We need to increase the availability of publicly funded youth work to equip young people to participate fully in their communities and increase their confidence and capability to influence decision-making about the environment.

## Case study: young people as green leaders

Groundwork's national Green Leaders programme provides free mentoring to help young people design their own community projects. Individuals with a passion for the environment can learn the skills needed to inspire others to take action to protect their local green spaces.

Young people are supported to design, create and start their own campaigns, events or action groups to improve their local green spaces. Whether creating nature guides, rewilding a patch of unwanted space, or planting trees to combat pollution – Green Leaders makes change happen.

Rachel, a participant in Groundwork's Green Leaders programme who hadn't previously been interested in environmental issues, reflected that the course had changed her point of view<sup>15</sup>:

**"I wasn't too bothered [but] it does make a massive impact. It made me understand a lot more about the environment, [how to] change one thing to make such a massive impact."**

<sup>15</sup>Eadson, W, Sanderson, E., Devany, C., Gore, T. & Ramsden, S. (2019), 'Green Leaders programme evaluation: summary report', Groundwork [online]. Available at: <https://www.groundwork.org.uk/about-groundwork/reports/our-bright-future-green-leaders-summary-report/>









## GROUNDWORK YOUTH IN A CHANGING CLIMATE

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