Government
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Putting people at the centre of UK climate adaptation & resilience

Executive summary

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ACCESS
Advancing Capacity for Climate and Environment Social Science



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Executive Summary

This executive summary for policymakers presents the key findings and policy considerations of the ACCESS Task Force on Adaptation and Resilience, which was supported and co-chaired by the Government Office for Science. The full report is available here. This summary and the main report are based on a synthesis of published social science evidence, a range of expert inputs, and two workshops. These do not reflect UK government policy or official positions.

The impacts of climate change are already being felt in the UK. Changing temperatures, seasonal shifts and increased frequency and severity of extreme events — such as storms, drought and wildfires — are exacerbating and compounding existing risks to society, environment, and economy. These impacts are not experienced evenly. Some people are more vulnerable and less able to adapt than others due to their social situation, income, access to support and where they live.

The evidence from social science research points to the value of taking a people-centred approach to climate adaptation. This is a way of designing and delivering adaptation policy that considers human wellbeing, agency, and lived experience, recognising that adaptation is not simply a technical or engineering problem but an ongoing social process that will need to adjust and respond to changing climate and societies. While technical solutions like physical infrastructure are essential, they are most effective when combined with an understanding of how people experience, respond to and shape change. Integrating people-centred approaches into policymaking can strengthen the design of adaptation and resilience measures, options and responses by providing a richer understanding of people's views, needs, public support and uptake, mindful of existing risks and vulnerabilities.

The full report synthesises social science evidence for policymakers, alongside six case studies and a list of useful resources and practical tools. It aims to show that including social science insights and approaches at the start of the policymaking process, and during every stage of policy development, can enable improved design and delivery of adaptation policy.

Key insights and policy considerations

1. Effective adaptation depends on considering how people understand the problem and the solutions proposed, not just technical design

Technically sound adaptation interventions are not always taken up in practice. Whether people act depends on cost, effort, timing, trust (in those suggesting action, among others), social norms and whether they believe it will make a difference. As a result, policies that focus only on technical solutions may underdeliver.

For example: property-level flood defences may not be adopted due to concerns about aesthetics or house value, but seeing neighbours adopt these can increase uptake.

Policy considerations:

- Build adaptation policies around people's varied and complex needs. Use insights from social and behavioural sciences research, user engagement and evaluation evidence from the start of policy development and keep using them as policies are designed, tested, implemented and reviewed. This provides the opportunity to ensure adaptation measures reflect and respond to how people live, make decisions and experience climate risks.

- Design and test policy ideas early with people and communities, using methods such as focus groups or citizens assemblies, to see how people respond before committing to large-scale rollout.
- Work with trusted stakeholders (including from business and industry, local government, civil society or voluntary sector) to support collective action and make delivery more effective.

2. Adaptation requirements will change over time as people's exposure and vulnerability to climate hazards evolves

Adaptation needs to be considered as an ongoing process, responding and adjusting as climate hazards, exposure, risks, vulnerabilities and needs change over time, with plans and targets designed to evolve accordingly.

For example: overheating in homes is not only due to the characteristics of existing housing infrastructure; it also depends on how people use their homes and how they respond to hotter weather. These vary across social groups and over time, which in turn change exposure and vulnerability. For example, older and younger groups are more susceptible to heat stress. Therefore, combined solutions (adapting the building fabric of a house and the actions people take to protect themselves from heat) need to be regularly reviewed.

Policy considerations:

- Design adaptation policy, targets and interventions to be flexible and regularly reviewed, to ensure they remain relevant as climate, risks, evidence and circumstances continue to change.
- Include opportunities to learn, adjust and change direction over time so that delivery and support can be tailored to social and local needs.

3. Adaptation is more effective when tailored to different people and places

There is no single 'UK public'. People face different risks and have different abilities to respond, for example, depending on their income, housing, health and where they live. Their decisions are also shaped by trust in institutions, lived and past experiences, and whether they feel they can take effective action and have support required to do so. This means the same policy can work well for some groups or areas but have little impact in others. The most effective and durable solutions are those that reflect these differences and are designed around how people live and their ability to respond to change.

For example: some communities and groups are disproportionately exposed to heatwaves, including manual labourers, people in institutional settings (care homes, hospitals, prisons), urban communities, low-income households, renters (who may have less control over building improvements) and those who work outdoors. Suitable adaptations vary according to location, exposure, vulnerability and adaptive capacity of different groups.

Policy considerations:

- Assess who is at risk, who is vulnerable, who benefits, who bears the costs of the current and future situation, and potential options. Conduct these assessments transparently, acknowledging whose perspectives have been considered, how and why.
- Involve people with place-based knowledge and expertise to co-produce policy and projects. When adequately resourced and undertaken well, co-production can improve the policy process by incorporating wider perspectives and solutions options.

4. Joining up adaptation with other goals can lead to wider benefits

Well-designed adaptation can have co-benefits in other areas, for example, improving people's health, wellbeing and quality of life.

For example: urban greening can reduce heat-island effects while also sequestering carbon and improving wellbeing and air quality.

Policy considerations:

- When developing adaptation policies, assess their effect on other areas such as nature, health, and community wellbeing. Bring together expertise from social sciences, environmental science and public health to identify trade-offs, avoid unintended consequences and maximise shared benefits. Use broader and diverse measures of value when appraising adaptation investments, recognising that benefits extend beyond avoided losses to include economic, social and environmental gains such as improved health and wellbeing from flood prevention.

5. Assess adaptation policies for unintended and unequal impacts

Adaptation actions can have unintended consequences that often manifest as risk shifting rather than reduction. They can also lock-in of vulnerability for future generations, or reinforce of inequality. This can be referred to as maladaptation. Maladaptation is more likely when interventions focus on a single hazard, short timeframes or narrow metrics, without accounting for trade-offs, distributional effects and wider system impacts.

For example: use of air conditioning can increase urban temperatures in cities through waste heat, disproportionately affecting those unable to access cooler spaces, resulting in disruption to work, daily routines and health impacts.

Policy considerations:

- Check for unintended effects when designing and implementing policies, using tools like stakeholder engagement, impact assessment, systems mapping and others to take into account connections across systems and complexity. For example, consider whether an adaptation intervention could increase emissions, worsen inequalities, damage nature, shift risk to another group or place, or lock in a lower quality long-term outcome.
- Track and review policy outcomes (such as reduced vulnerability or other co-benefits), and monitor how policies are delivered to ensure fairness, accessibility, accountability, learning, and public trust.

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