



# The Cost Of Confusion:

**Climate disinformation's  
impact on public perception,  
corporate trust, and  
policy support in the UK**



# Table of contents

- Introduction
- Key findings
- Perceptions of climate change and the key concepts
- Perceptions on climate impacts
  - a) Perceptions of climate impacts on the economy
  - b) Perceptions of climate impact on environmental and social issues
  - c) Perceptions of climate impacts on their life
- Perceptions of climate disinformation
  - a) Perceptions of climate disinformation
  - b) Trust in brands on climate change
- Perceptions of false narratives
- Conclusion

# Introduction

Disinformation wreaks havoc on our information ecosystem, hindering climate action and policy while further widening societal and political divides. As climate policy gains momentum and threatens the profits and influence of entrenched interests, the opposition intensifies disinformation campaigns targeting policymakers, swaying persuadable voters, and exploiting vulnerable populations. These coordinated efforts obstruct climate action and undermine public trust in scientific consensus, jeopardising the integrity of democratic processes and hindering progress towards a sustainable future. Understanding public perceptions on climate change is crucial for fostering informed decision-making and driving effective action amidst this landscape of disinformation. Recognising this, dentsu, in partnership with the Conscious Advertising Network (CAN), commissioned research to gauge public perception of climate change, including testing climate disinformation myths, and understanding consumer expectations towards brands when it comes to sustainability.

A comprehensive survey of 1,012 adults with a theoretical margin of error of 3.1% was conducted by Toluna in December 2023. Some of these questions replicate [polling that was conducted in 2022](#) by CAN and Climate Action Against Disinformation (CAAD).

The survey employed a multi-faceted approach to gather data on perspectives on sustainability. It explored not only the types of misinformation people believe about climate change, such as the denial of its existence or the downplaying of human contributions, but also delved into where people encounter this disinformation, whether through social media, news outlets, or personal interactions. Furthermore, the research examined how consumers react to brands that spread mis or disinformation, including potential boycotts or loss of trust, and analysed the broader impact of disinformation on public opinion, policy support, and social cohesion. To gain a nuanced understanding of the issue, the survey collected detailed information about respondents' social and demographic characteristics, including gender, age, educational background, income level, parental status, employment status, social grade, and geographic location.

The results of this comprehensive study paint a complex and nuanced picture of public perceptions of climate change in the UK. While a majority of the British public acknowledges the human impact on climate change, a significant portion underestimates its extent, particularly among older demographics and those with lower socioeconomic status. This indicates a need for targeted communication strategies to bridge the gap between scientific consensus and public understanding, emphasising the urgency and severity of the climate crisis in a way that resonates with these specific groups.

Public concern over climate change impacts is high across the board, with a strong belief that it's already affecting various aspects of life, including the economy, health, migration, and food security. However, perceived personal impacts on local communities, quality of life, job security, and health are less pronounced, suggesting a disconnect between global awareness and personal experience. This highlights the importance of communicating the tangible consequences of climate change on a local and individual level, demonstrating how it directly impacts people's daily lives and livelihoods.

Perhaps most alarmingly, the research reveals the prevalence of false narratives about climate change in the UK. Many Britons hold misconceptions about the affordability of achieving net zero emissions, the impact of climate policies on poverty and unemployment, and the urgency of decarbonisation. These beliefs, often fueled by disinformation campaigns, are more prevalent among certain demographics, such as older people, those in lower socioeconomic groups, and those living outside England. This underscores the need for communication initiatives and efforts to counter these narratives and ensure accurate information reaches those most susceptible to misinformation.

Moreover, the research reveals a concerning trend: trust in brands to accurately portray their climate commitments and avoid greenwashing is low, with many consumers expressing scepticism towards corporate messaging on sustainability. This has significant implications for companies operating in the UK, as it suggests that their efforts to communicate their sustainability initiatives may be falling on deaf ears or even backfiring.

These findings highlight the urgent need for targeted interventions to counter climate disinformation and promote accurate information. By undermining the ability, profitability, and legitimacy of disinformation sources and amplifiers, climate disinformation can be systematically dismantled to achieve information integrity on climate change.

The results also clearly underscore that it is imperative for brands to recognise that association with climate disinformation not only undermines their credibility and reputation but also jeopardises their long-term viability in a world increasingly focused on sustainability. By actively distancing themselves from disinformation and ensuring their advertising practices align with climate science, companies can contribute to a more informed public discourse, bolster consumer trust, and safeguard their own future in a changing economic and environmental landscape.

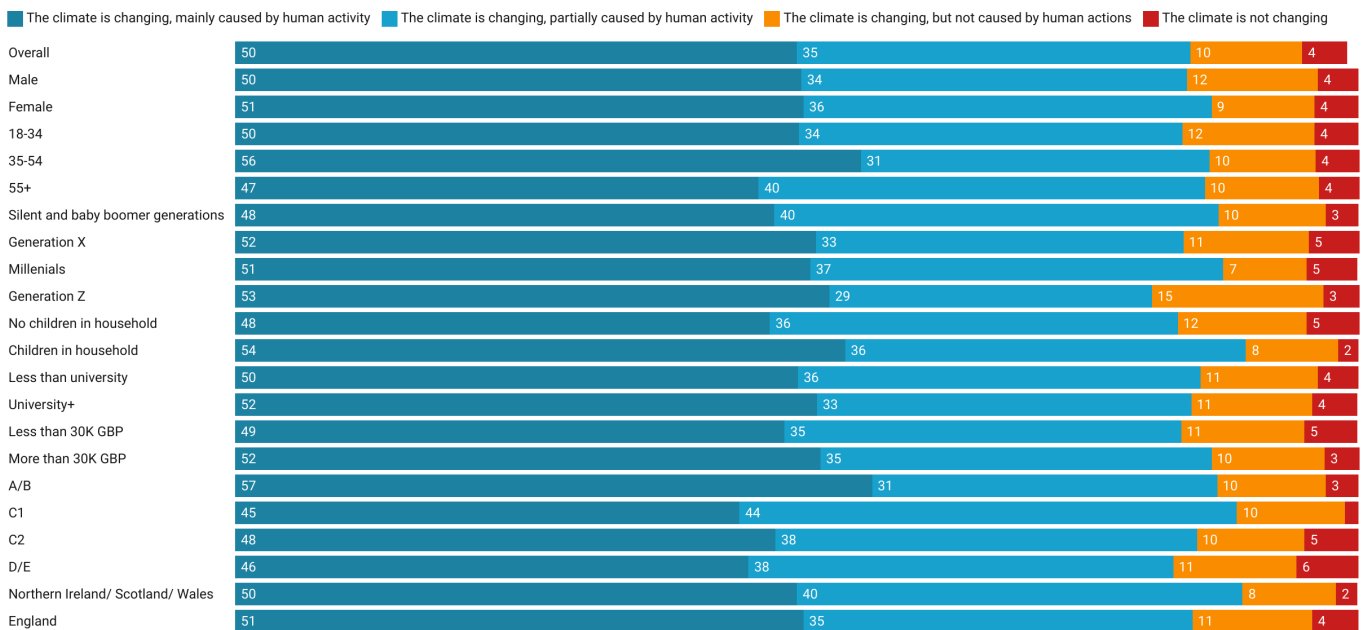
# Key findings

- **High concern over impacts:** 69% of the public believes that climate change is affecting the global economy, with similar levels of concern for the UK economy (65%) and cost of living (67%).
- **Disconnect between global and personal impact:** while 66% believe climate change affects human health, only 41% report it affecting their personal physical health.
- **Mixed understanding of human impact:** while 85% of the British public recognises the human impact on climate change, 35% of these individuals also believe the impact is only partial, indicating a nuanced understanding of the issue. Only 50% of respondents believed that the 'climate is changing, mainly caused by humans', this is [down from 54% in polling conducted in 2022](#).
- **Shifting perspectives on net zero and costs:** [in polling conducted in 2022](#), only 25% of UK respondents said that we 'cannot afford to get to net zero emissions by 2050'. This figure is now at 40%.
- **Prevalence of false narratives:** 40% believe the UK cannot afford net zero emissions by 2050, and 44% think the electricity grid cannot handle increased electric vehicles.
- **Vulnerability to disinformation:** only 56% of the public understands both the phrase "net zero" and the concept of "greenhouse gas emissions," leaving 44% vulnerable to climate disinformation.
- **Low trust in brands:** 88% do not fully trust brands to follow the science on climate change all the time, and 91% do not fully trust them to accurately portray their climate commitments.
- **Social media as primary source of disinformation:** 40% of respondents identify social media as the primary source of climate disinformation.
- **Impact on consumer behaviour:** 45% would stop supporting a brand known to fund climate disinformation, and 22% would stop supporting the platform.
- **Demographic variations:** older people (55+) are more likely to believe false narratives about climate change, while younger people (18-34) are less likely.
- **Need for targeted communication:** only slightly over half the public (56%) feels they understand specific climate change concepts, highlighting the need for improved communication and education.
- **Importance of local and personal relevance:** while 74% believe climate change affects food and water security, only 48% believe it affects their quality of life, emphasising the need to connect global issues to personal experiences.

# Perceptions of climate change and the key concepts

When it comes to the overall belief in anthropogenic climate change, 85% of the UK public recognises the human impact on climate change, however, only 50% believe that humans are the main cause of climate change. This is in spite of the fact that [the vast majority of actively publishing climate scientists – 97% – agree that humans are causing global warming and climate change](#). Only 10% report that climate change is the result of a natural process, and 4% believe that climate change is not happening. When the above data is broken down, people between the ages of 35 and 54, those with children in their households, and people of A/B social grade are more likely to accurately believe that climate change is primarily driven by human activity.

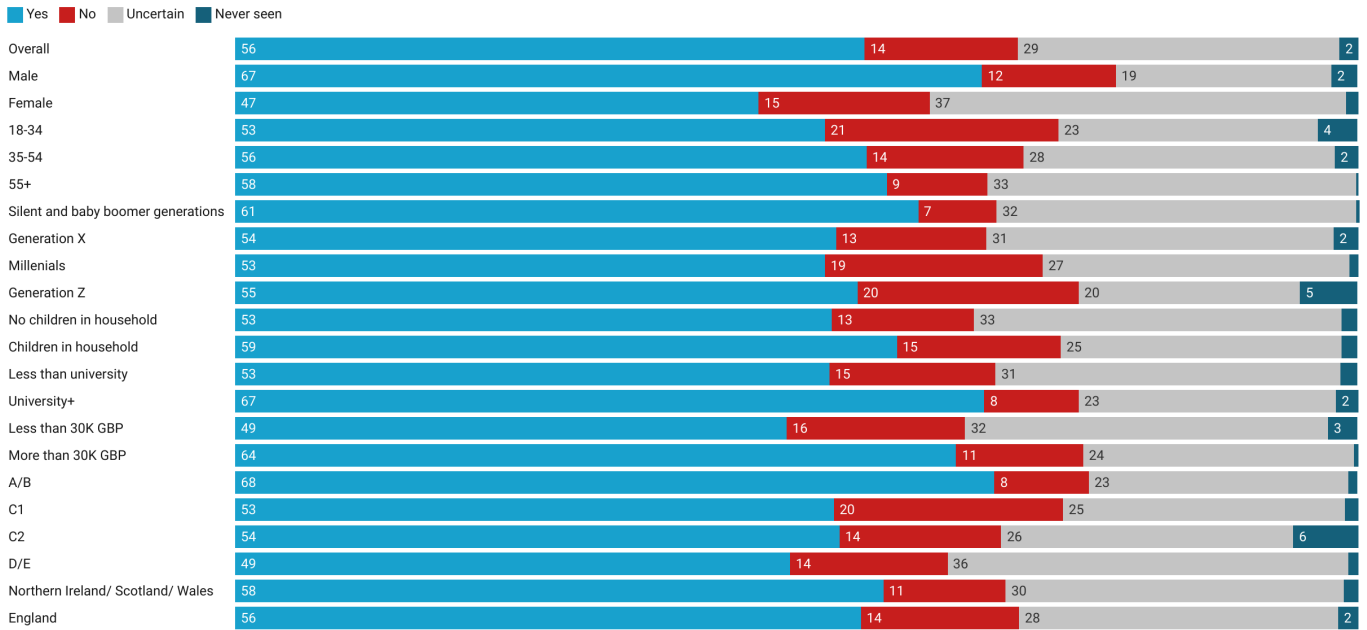
## Do you believe... (%)



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The survey also asked how much they think they know about the concept and root causes of climate change. Only slightly over half the public feels that they understand the specific concepts of net zero and greenhouse gases. Only 56% of the public reports that they both understand the phrase net zero (the solution to climate change) and what greenhouse gas emissions (the cause of climate change) are.

**Do you understand what the phrases net zero or reducing Greenhouse Gas Emissions (GHG) mean? (%)**



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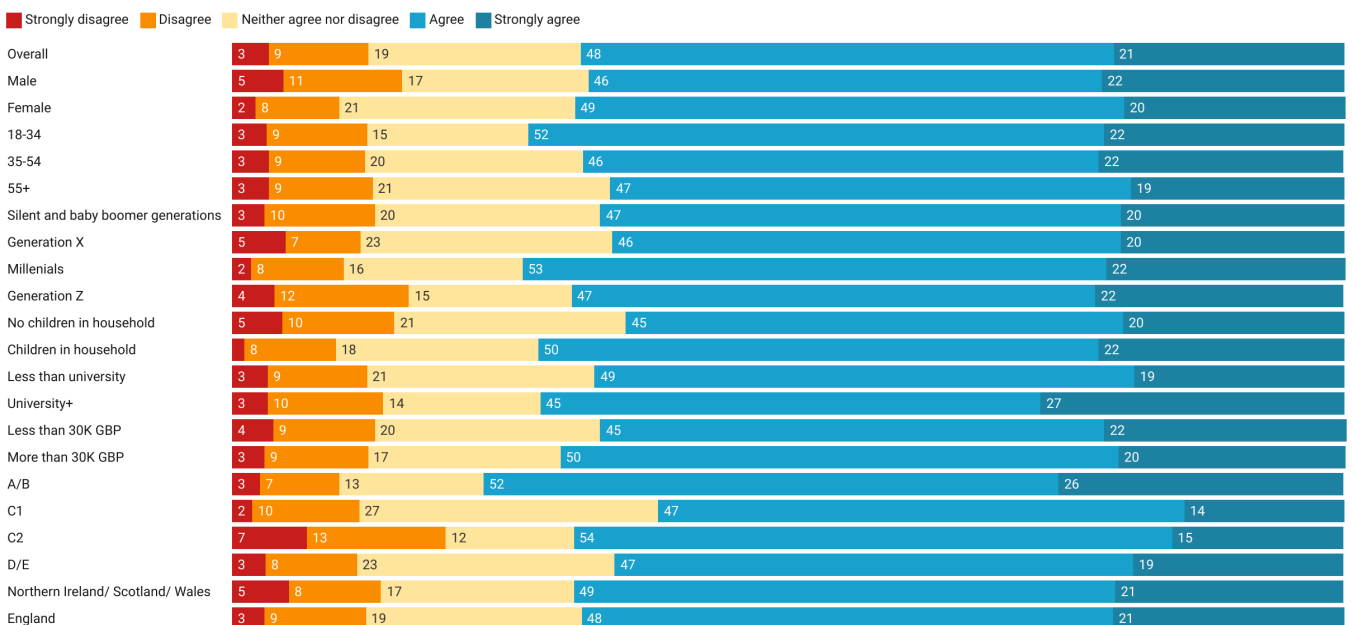
# Perceptions of climate impacts

The study also asked a wide-ranging set of questions on whether climate change was having different impacts on a varied set of issues. The data suggests that people already tend to think that climate change is impacting the world.

# Perceptions of climate impacts on the economy

The public was asked whether the state of the environment and climate was affecting the global economy. The data indicates that 69% of the public agrees with this sentiment. The belief is more common among people 18-35 years old, Millennials, people with children in the household, those with university education, and those of A/B and C2 social grade.

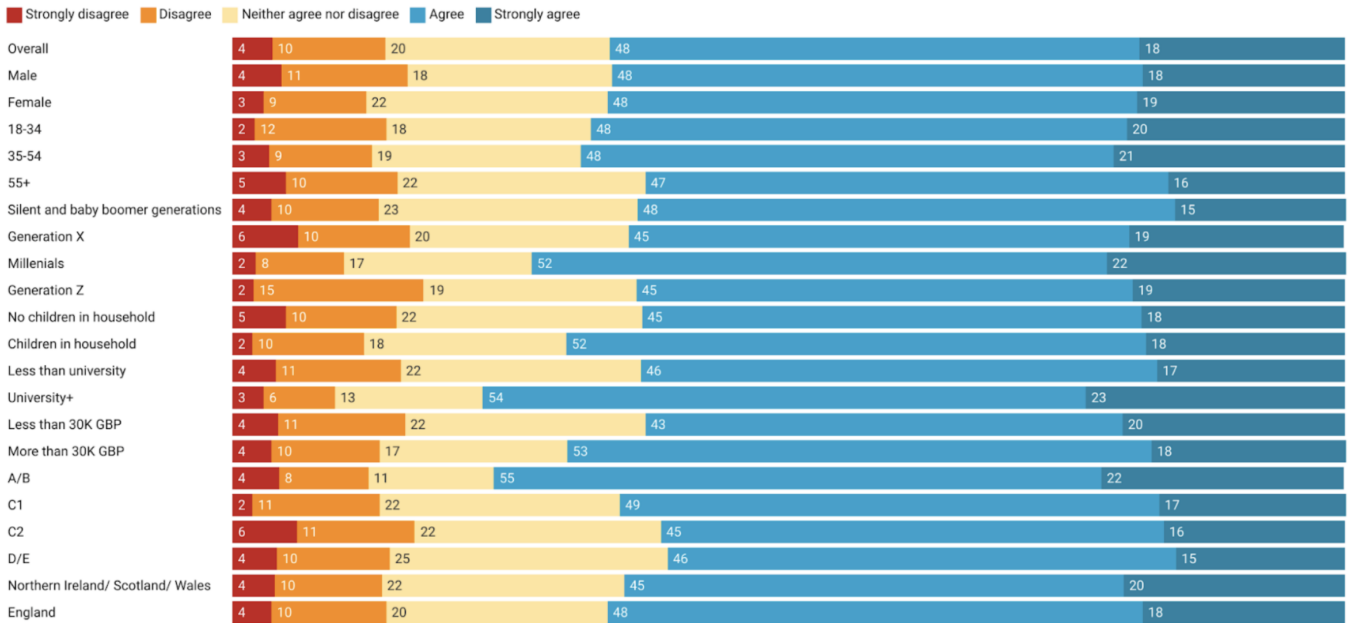
**To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? - The state of the environment and climate is affecting the global economy (%)**



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In total, nearly two thirds (64%) of the public agreed with the idea that the environment and climate is affecting economic security. This idea was more common among Millennials, people with children in their household, those with university education, and people of A/B social grade.

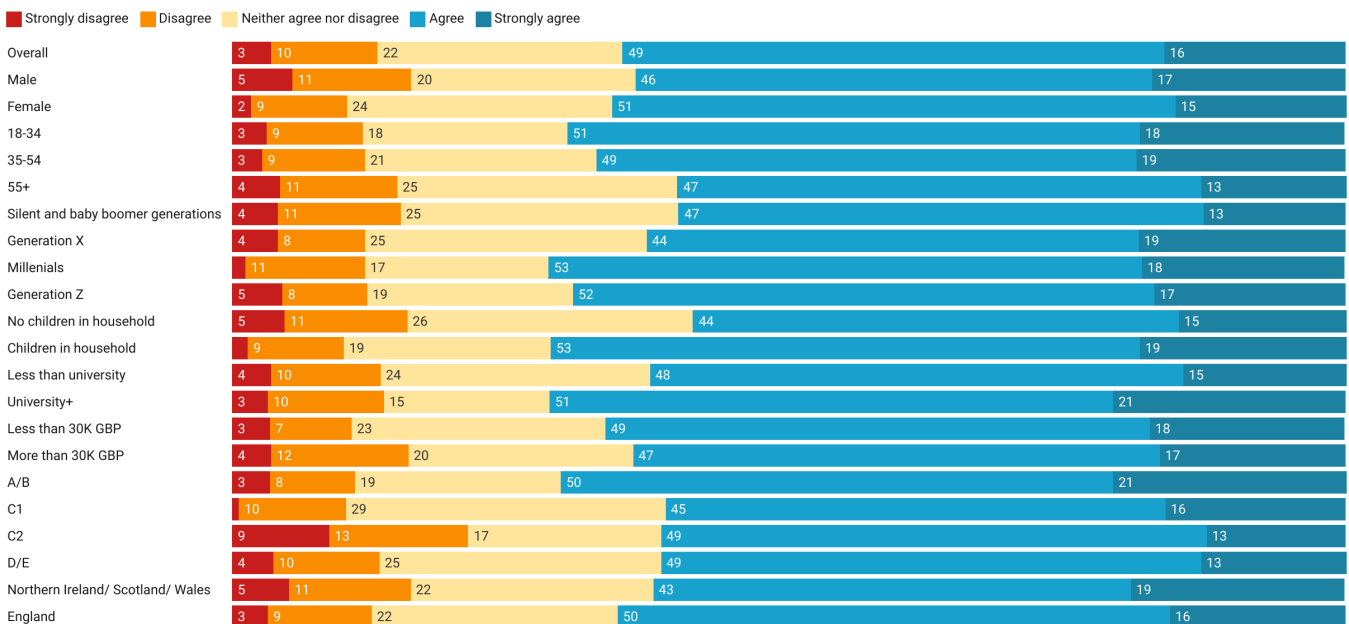
To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? The state of the environment and climate is affecting economic security (%)



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Around two thirds of the public (65%) agree that the state of the environment and climate is affecting the UK's economy. This belief is more common among younger people, Millennials and Gen Z, those with children in their homes, people with university degrees, and those of A/B social grade.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? - The state of the environment and climate is affecting the UK economy (%)

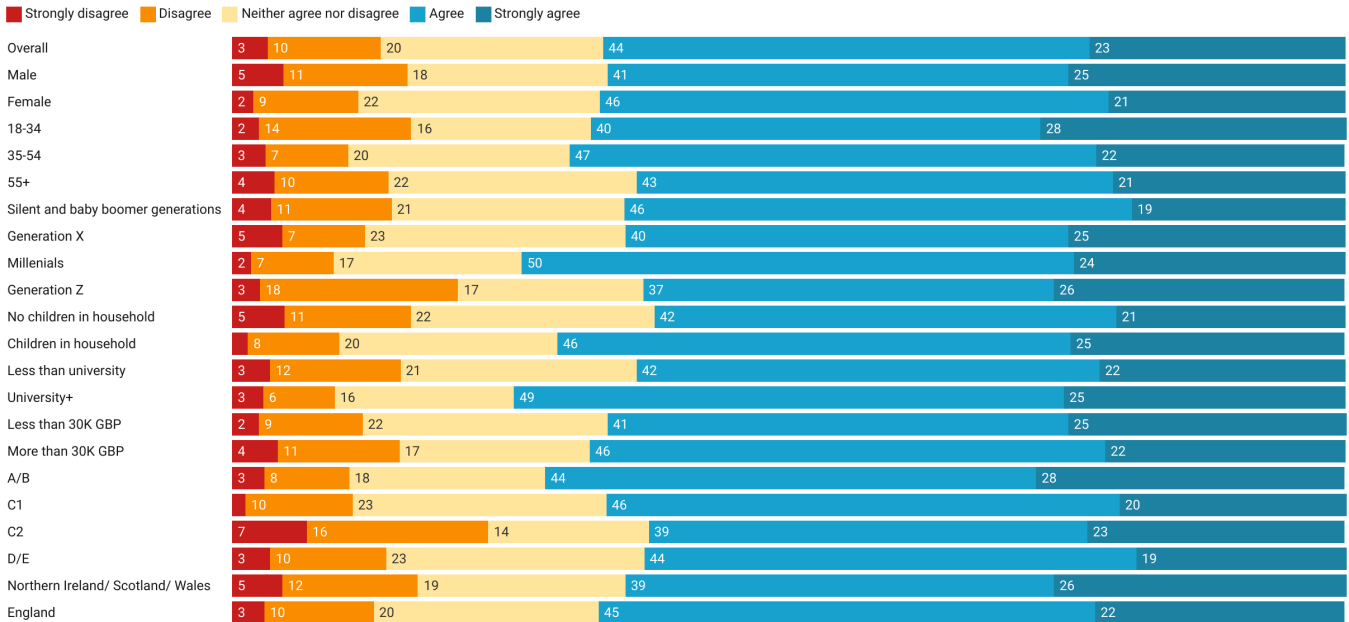


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Two thirds of the British public (67%) agree with the statement that the state of the environment and climate is affecting cost of living. This is more common among younger people, Millennials, people with children in their household, those with university degrees, and people of A/B social grade.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? - The state of the environment and climate is affecting cost of living (%)

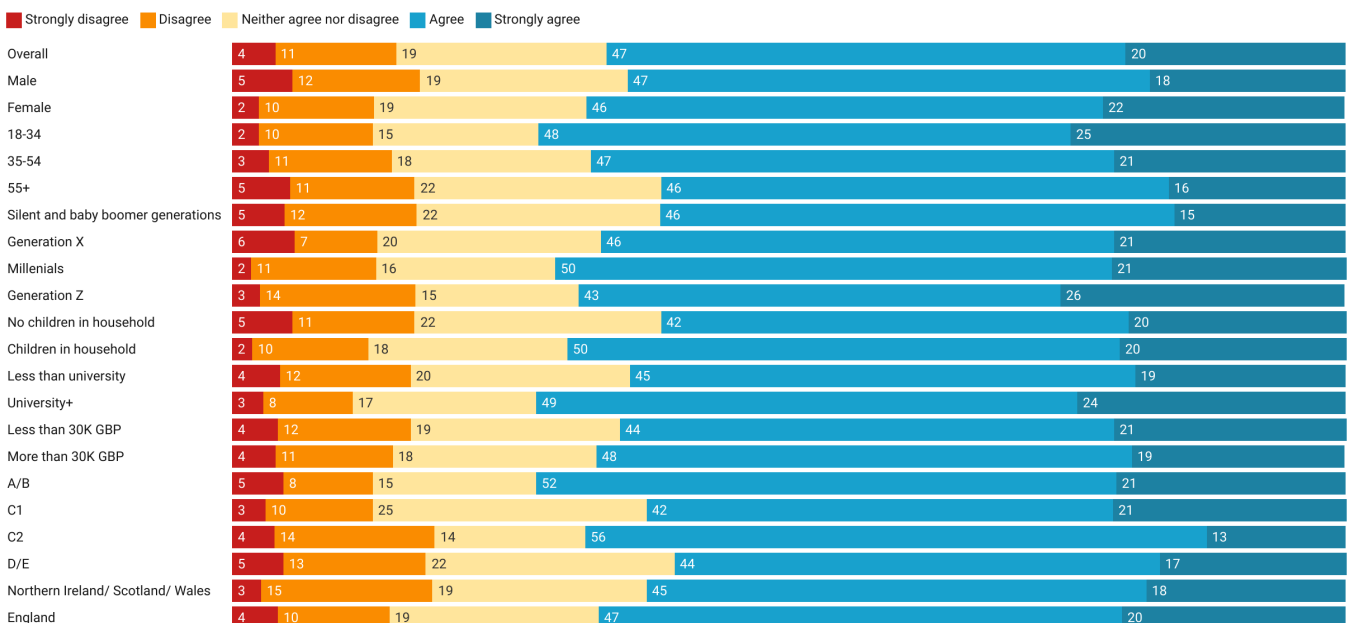


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# Perceptions of climate impacts on environmental and social issues

The next statement the study asked about was whether the state of the environment and climate is affecting human physical and mental health. Approximately two thirds of the public (66%) agree that this impact is present. This belief is more common among younger people, people with children in their household, those with university education, those of A/B and C2 social grade.

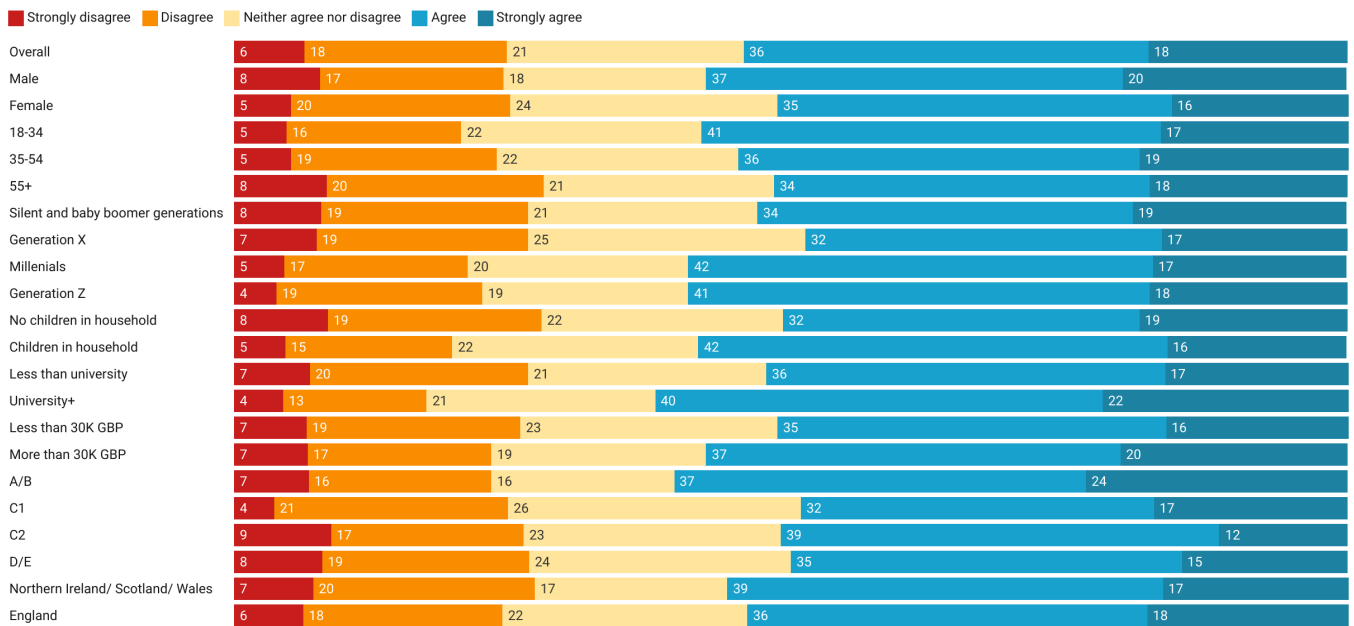
To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? The state of the environment and climate is affecting human physical and mental health (%)



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The next question asked whether the state of the environment and climate was affecting migration and the refugee crisis. Half (54%) agreed with this sentiment, compared with 24% who disagreed with it. Agreement was relatively high among men, young people, Millennials and Gen Z, those with children in their household, the university educated, those with higher incomes, and A/B social grade.

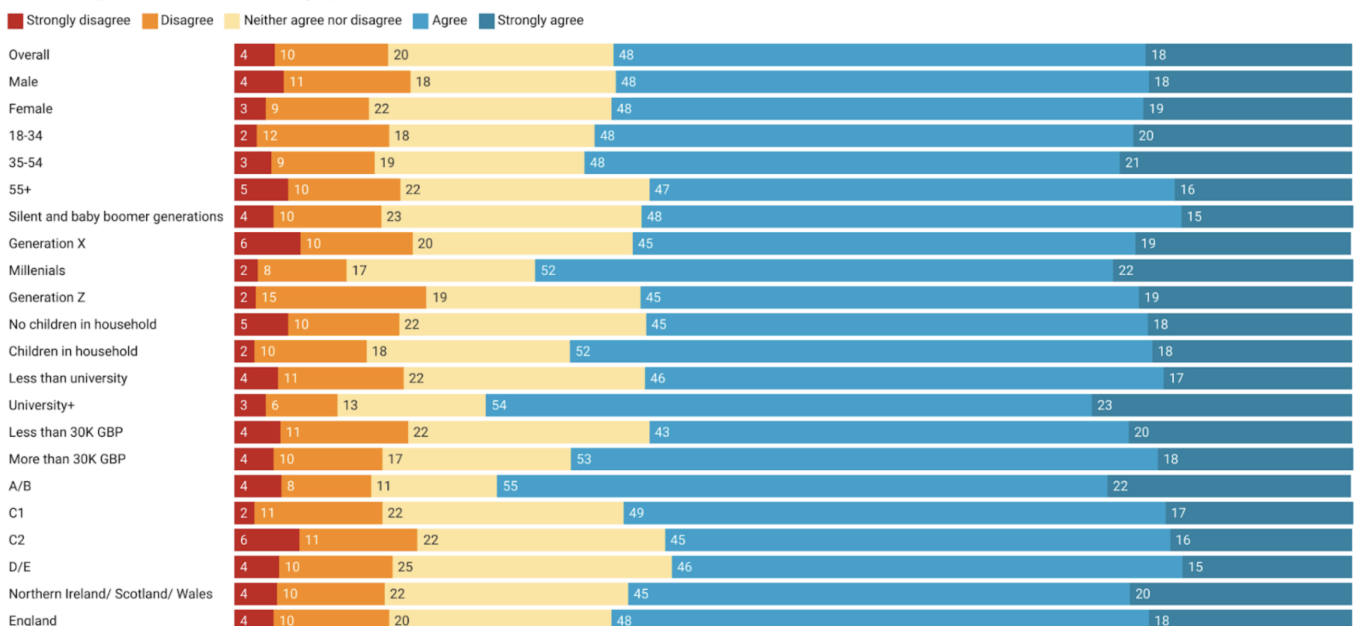
**To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? - The state of the environment and climate is affecting migration and the refugee crisis (%)**



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Roughly three quarters of the public (74%) report that the state of the environment and climate is affecting food and water security. This belief is more common among Millennials, people with children in the household, among those with university education, above 30K GBP of income, and those of A/B social grade.

**To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? The state of the environment and climate is affecting economic security (%)**



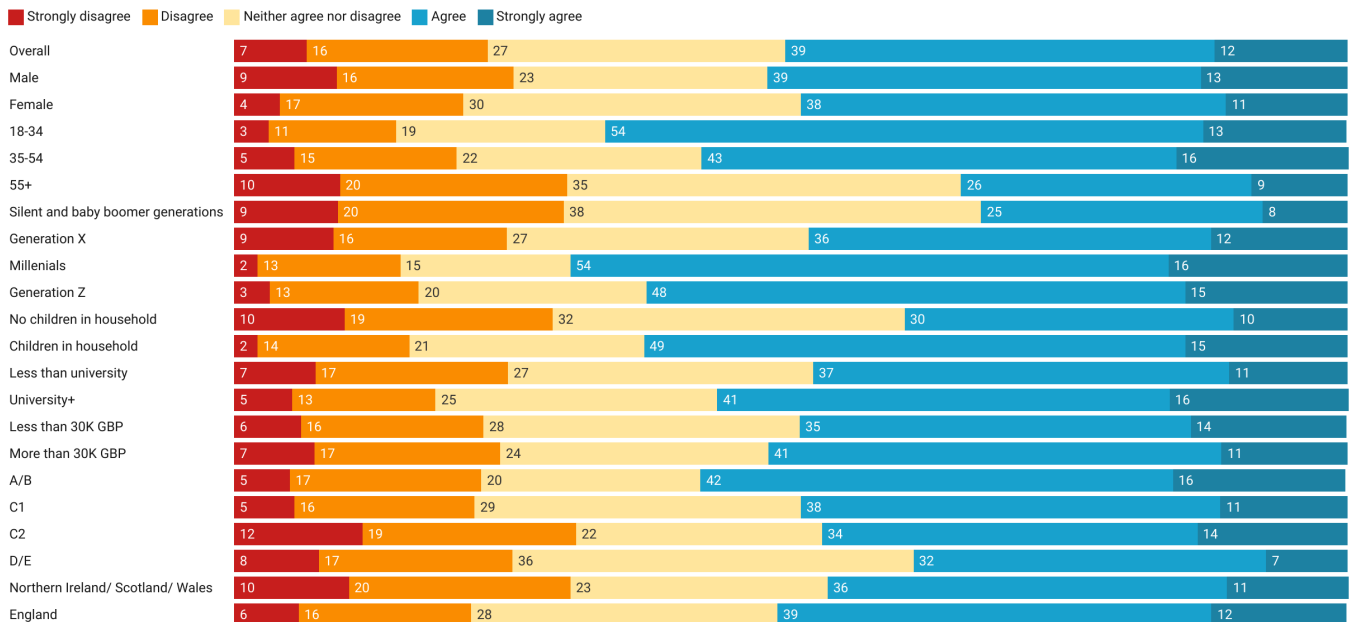
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# Perceptions of climate impacts on their life

The survey also asked whether they experienced the climate impacts on various issues in their lives. We see fewer people tend to think that climate change affects their local community and their personal life.

Half the public (51%) agree with the idea that the state of the environment and climate is affecting their local community. This is substantially more common among younger people, Millennials and Gen Z, and people with children in their household. It is also more common among university graduates and people of A/B social grade.

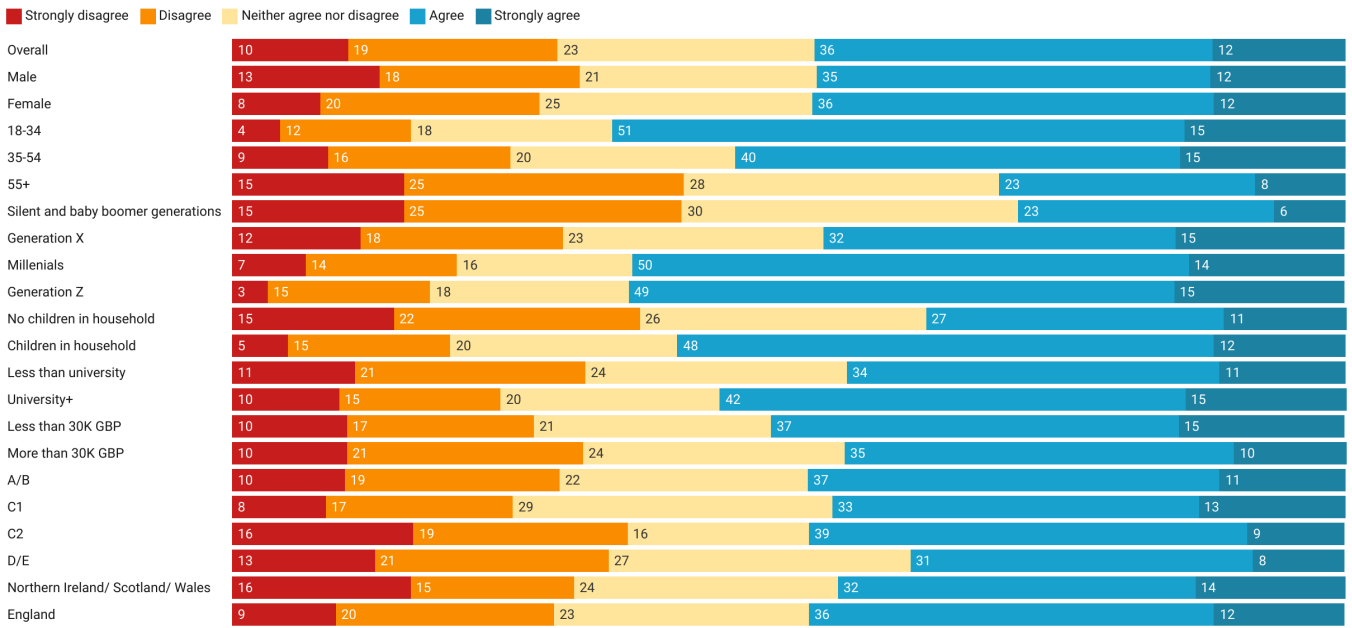
To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? - The state of the environment and climate is affecting my local community (%)



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Approximately half (48%) of the public believes that the state of the environment and climate is affecting their quality of life. This belief is more common among younger people, Millennials, Gen Z, people with children in their household, and those with university degrees.

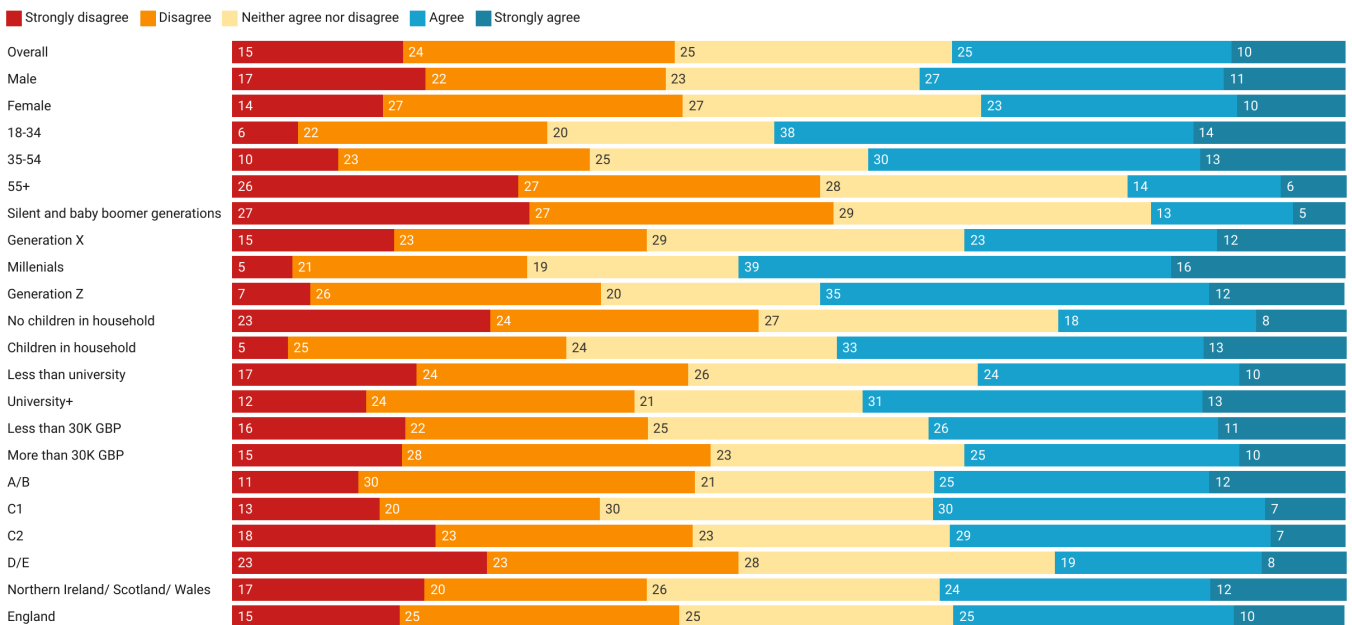
**To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? - The state of the environment and climate is affecting my quality of life (%)**



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**Overall, 35% of the public agrees that the state of the environment and climate is affecting their job/financial security. This view is more common among younger people, Millennials and Gen Z, people with children in the household, and those with university degrees.**

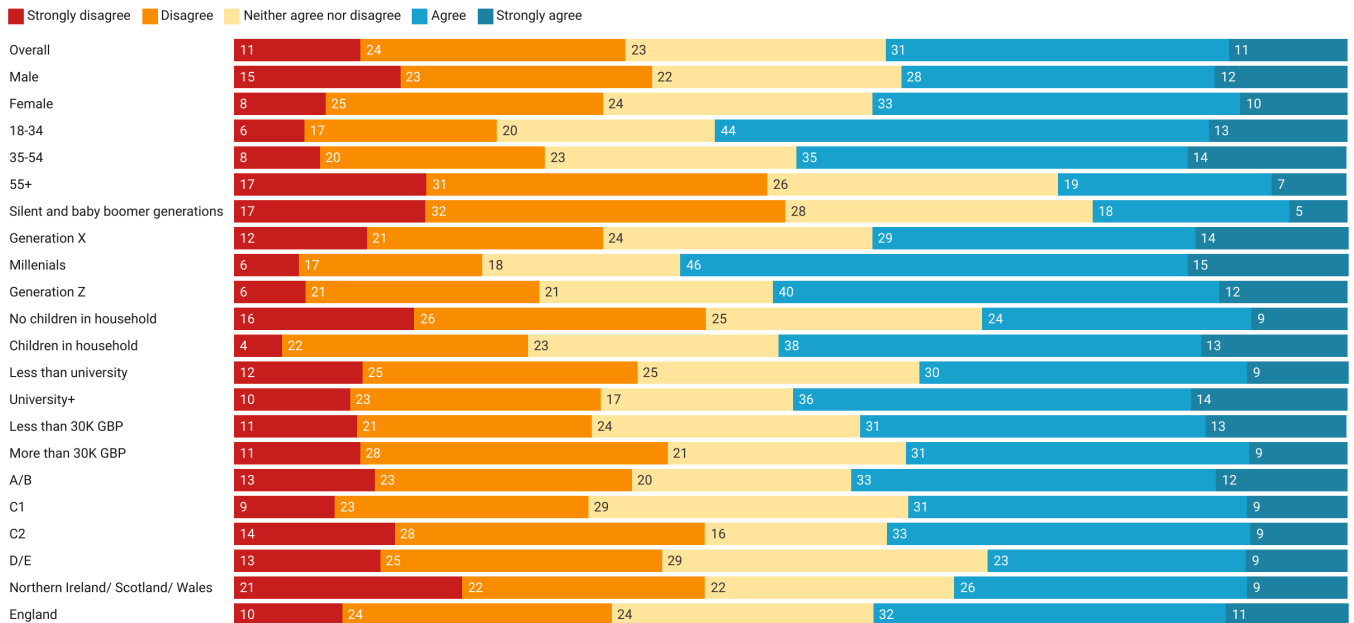
**To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? - The state of the environment and climate is affecting my job/financial security (%)**



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**In total, 41% report that the state of the environment and climate is affecting their physical health. This is more common among younger people, Millennials and Gen Z, people with children in their household, and those with university degrees.**

**To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? - The state of the environment and climate is affecting my physical health (%)**



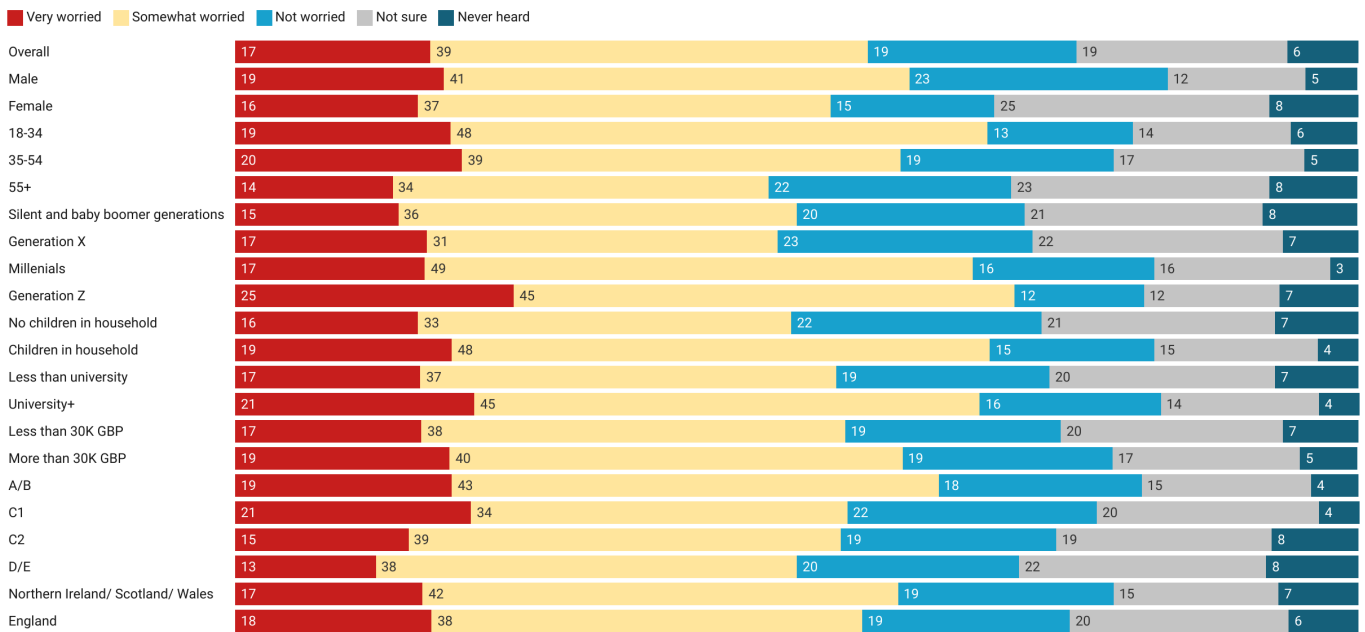
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# Perceptions of climate disinformation

The survey also asked respondents about whether they are concerned about climate disinformation, where they are most concerned about seeing climate change disinformation, whether climate change disinformation has contributed to confusion and scepticism about climate change, and what actions they would take in response to a brand engaging in climate disinformation. The data suggests the most concern about disinformation is in social media, that a majority believe disinformation has led to confusion, and most would take some form of action against a brand that engaged in disinformation.

The survey asked respondents how worried they were about climate disinformation or misinformation. Overall 17% were very worried, 39% somewhat worried, and 19% not worried. A further 19% were uncertain, and 6% had not heard of the concept. Gen Z was particularly likely to be very worried about climate disinformation and misinformation.

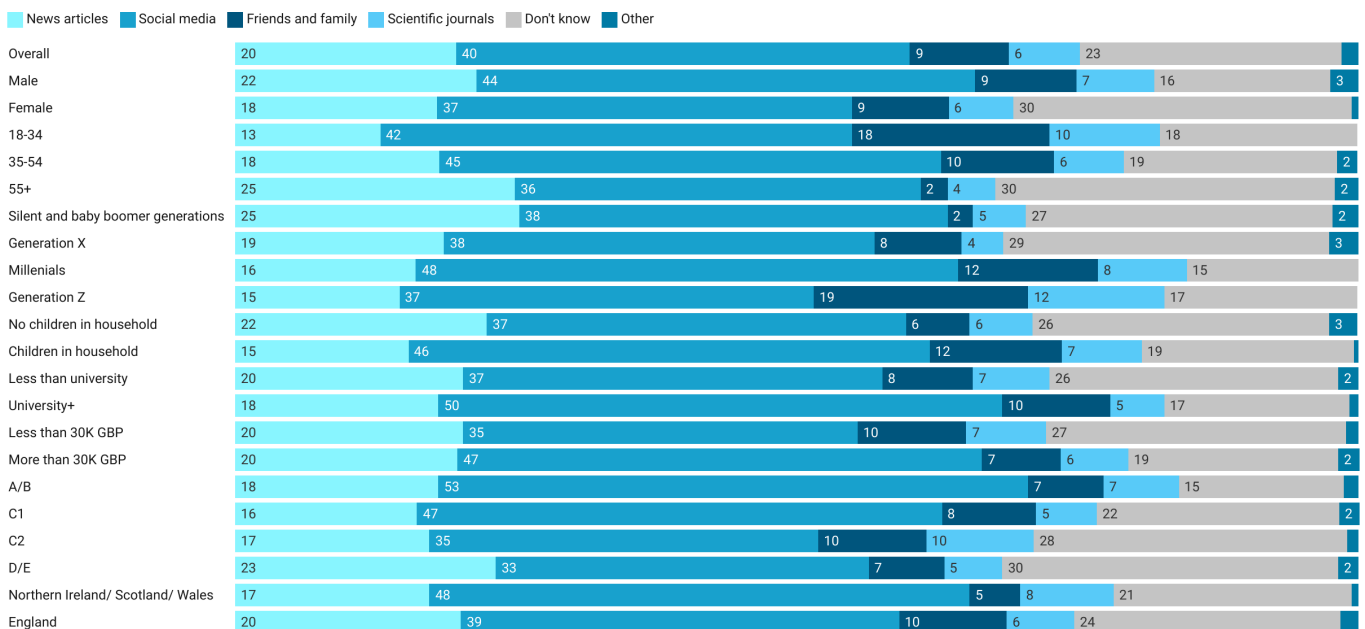
## How worried are you about the impacts of climate disinformation or misinformation? (%)



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When asked where they are most concerned about seeing climate disinformation, the most common response was social media, which 40% of respondents named. This was followed by news articles (20%), family and friends (9%), and in scientific journals (6%). Another 23% reported uncertainty.

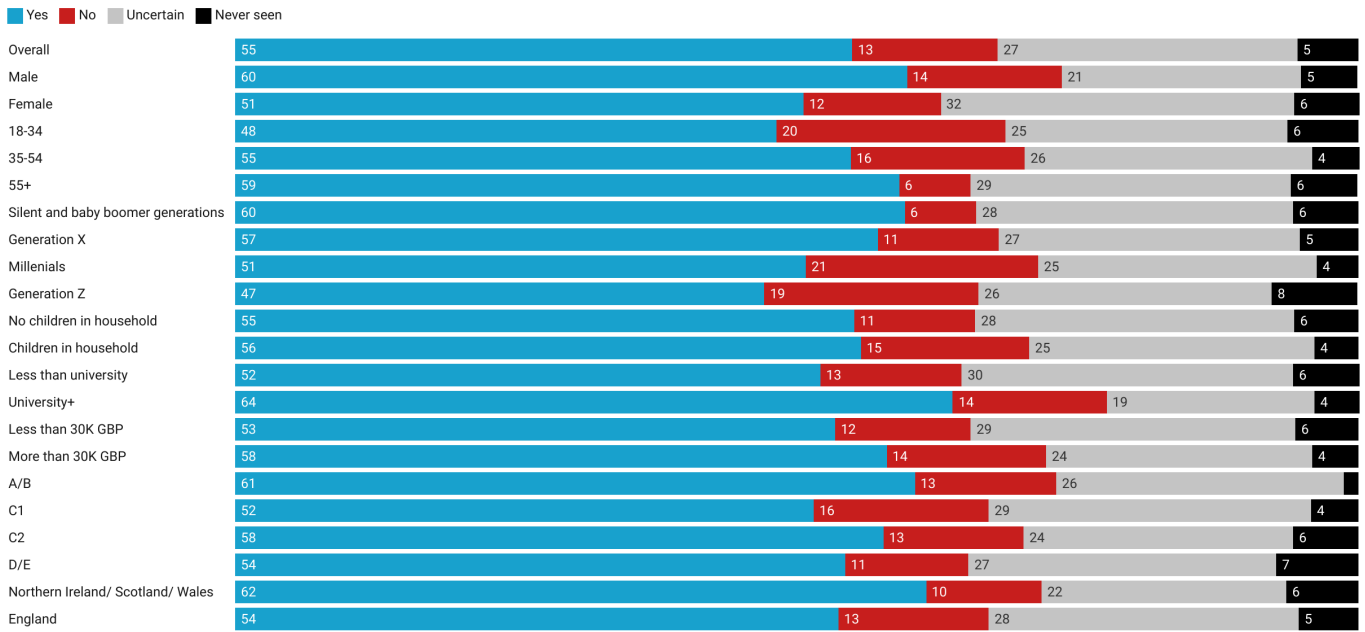
## Where are you most concerned that you see climate disinformation? (%)



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A majority of the public (55%) believes that climate disinformation has contributed to confusion or scepticism about climate change. Only 13% reported that they do not believe this to be the case. A further 27% reported that they were uncertain, and 5% reported having never seen climate disinformation.

## Do you think climate disinformation has contributed to confusion or scepticism about climate change? (%)

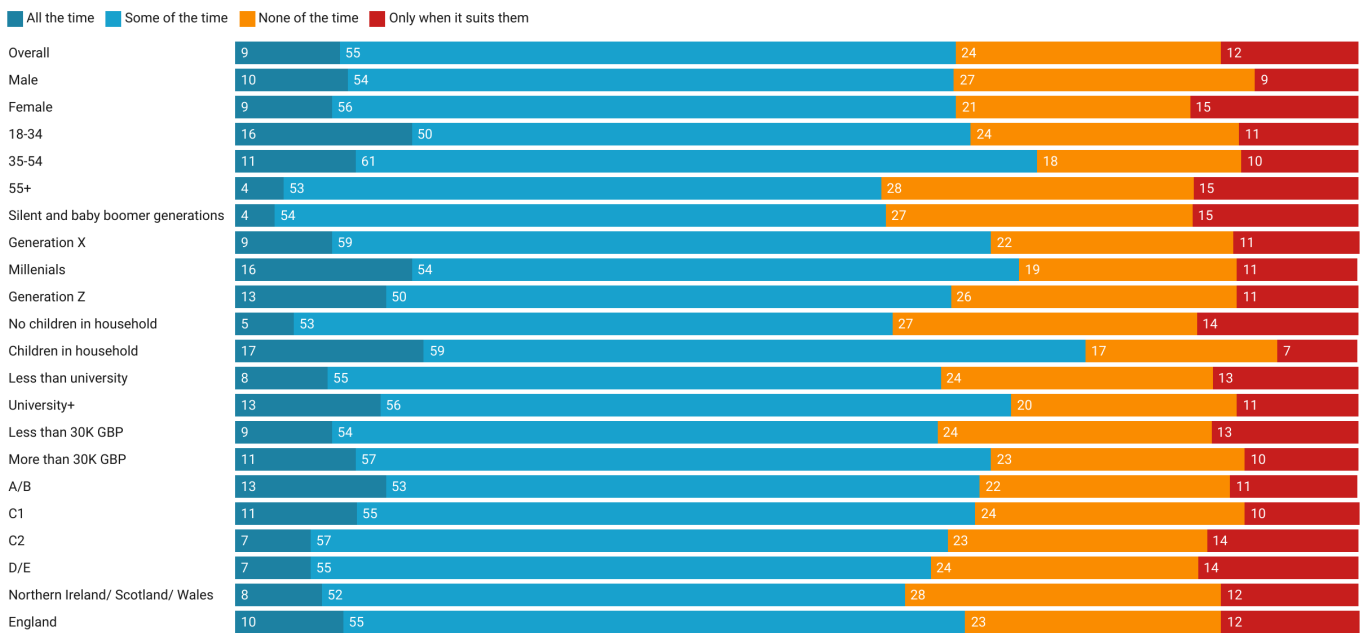


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# Trust in brands on climate change

The public was also asked whether they trusted brands to accurately portray their climate commitments and to avoid greenwashing. Only 9% of the public reported they trusted brands to do so all the time. Another 24% reported that brands would do so none of the time, and 12% only when it suits them. The remaining 55% reported they trusted brands to do so some of the time.

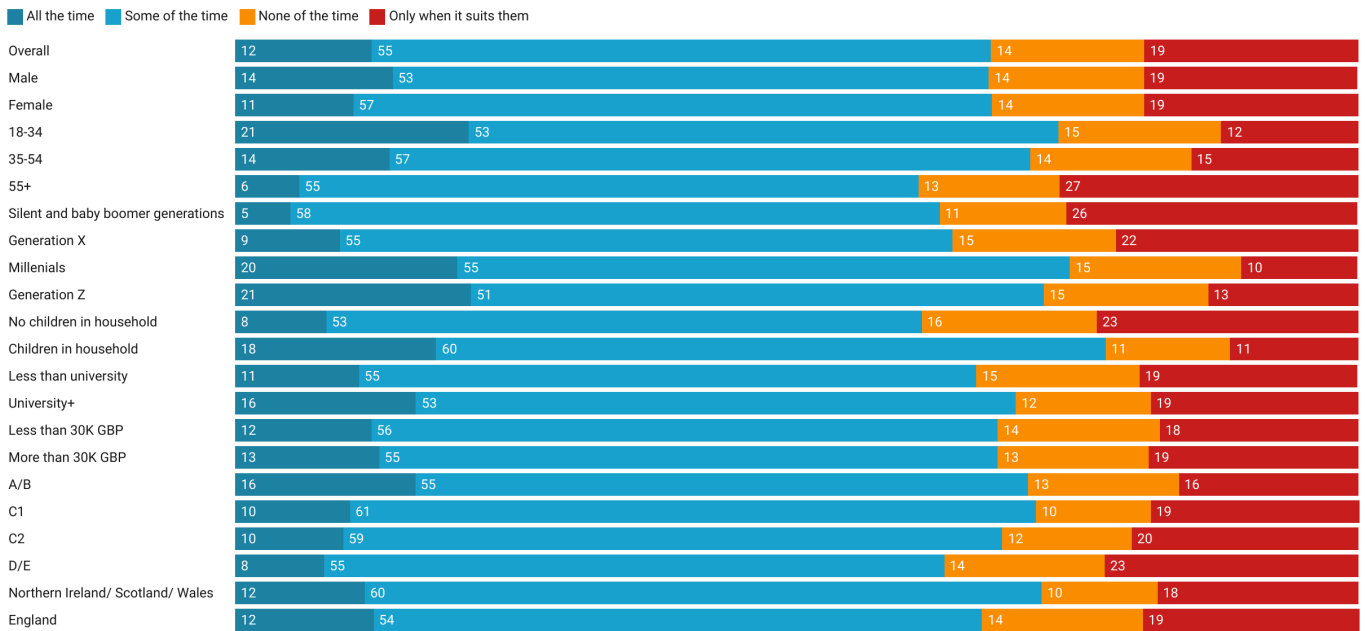
## Do you trust brands to accurately portray their climate commitments and avoid greenwashing? (%)



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The study also explored how much people trust brands to follow the science on climate change. The results suggest that only 12% report they trust brands to do so all the time. Another 14% reported they trusted brands none of the time and 19% only when it suits them. The remaining 55% reported that they trust brands to follow the science some of the time. The belief that brands can be trusted all the time was more common among younger people, Millennials and Gen Z, among people with children in the household, and those with university degrees.

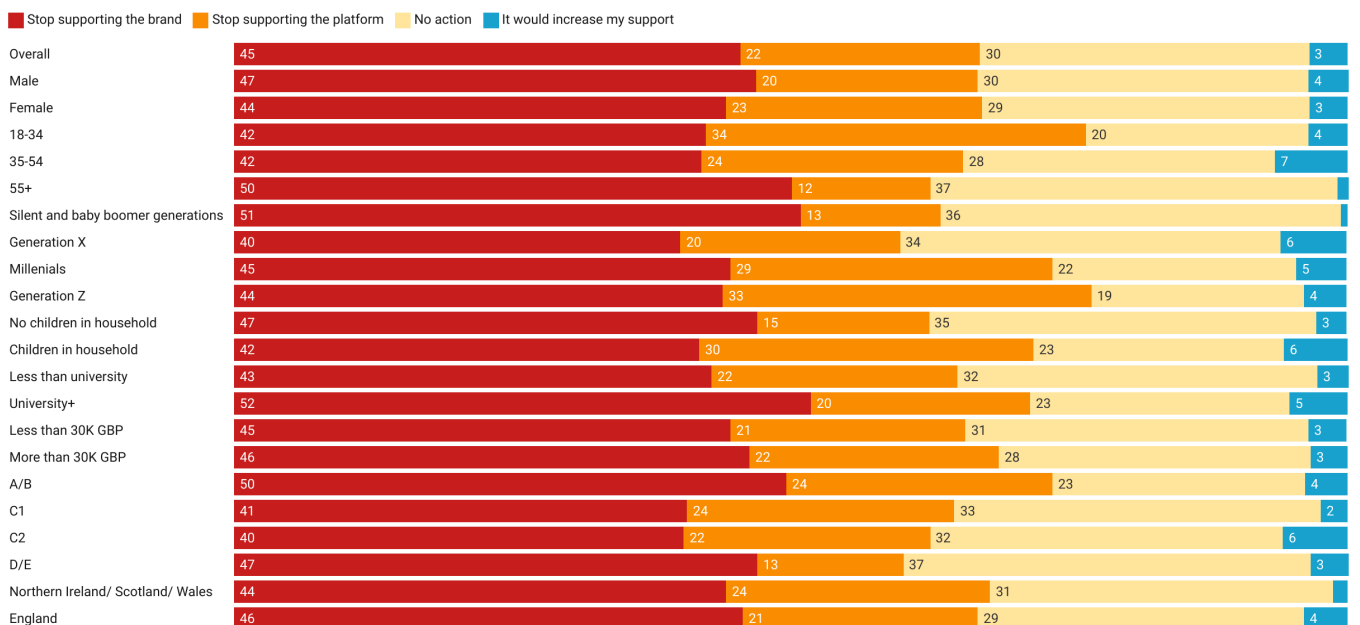
**How much do you trust brands to follow the science when it comes to combatting the climate crisis? (%)**



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Finally, the survey asked what actions someone would take if they knew brands were either deliberately or accidentally funding climate disinformation through advertising. Nearly half the public (45%) said they would stop supporting the brand. A further 22% reported that they would stop supporting the platform. Only 30% reported that they would take no action, and 3% reported that it would increase their support for the brand.

**What actions would you take if you knew brands would either deliberately or accidentally funding climate disinformation through advertising? (%)**



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# Perceptions on false narratives ●

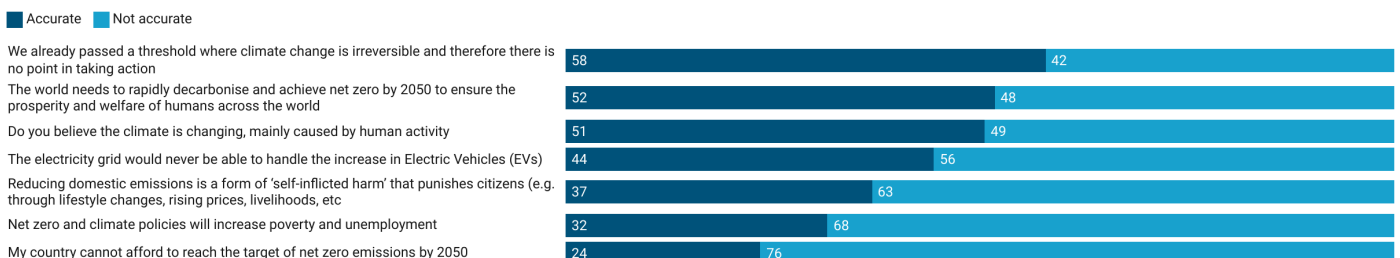
The British public were asked whether the following statements were true or false:

- Do you believe: a) The climate is changing, mainly caused by human activity; b) The climate is changing, partially caused by human activity; c) The climate is changing, but not caused by human actions; or d) The climate is not changing.
- My country cannot afford to reach the target of net zero emissions by 2050
- Net zero and climate policies will increase poverty and unemployment
- The world needs to rapidly decarbonise and achieve net zero by 2050 to ensure the prosperity and welfare of humans across the world
- Reducing domestic emissions is a form of ‘self-inflicted harm’ that punishes citizens (e.g. through lifestyle changes, rising prices, livelihoods, etc.)
- We already passed a threshold where climate change is irreversible and therefore there is no point in taking action
- The electricity grid would never be able to handle the increase in electric vehicles (EVs)

The response options for the above questions included 'true', 'false', 'don't know', and 'never seen', for all questions aside from the first question, where the corresponding response options are provided.

The chart below provides the share of the British public who can accurately determine whether or not the above statements are true or false. The most common belief which the public can accurately identify is that we have not already passed a threshold where climate change is irreversible and therefore there is a reason to take action, with 58% of the British public correctly stating that the opposite is false. By contrast, only 24% of the British public are accurately informed of the fact that the country can afford to reach the target of net zero emissions by 2050.

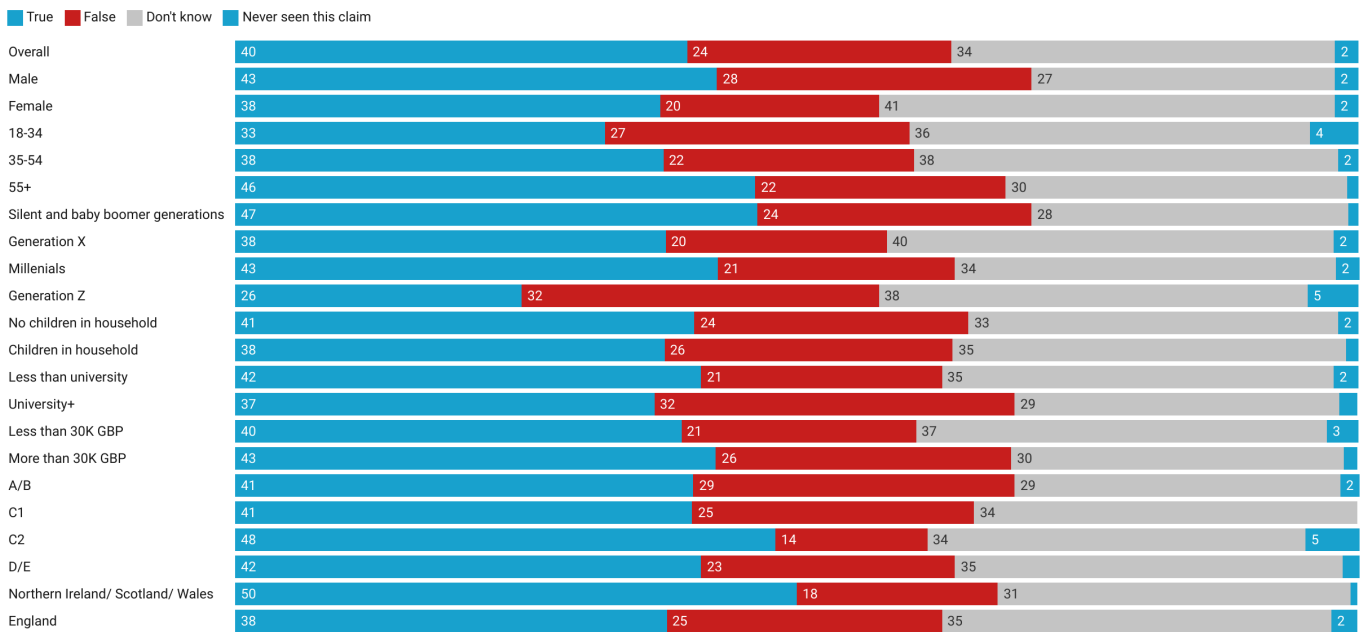
**Share of the public with accurate views on common pieces of climate disinformation (% not accurate includes inaccurate views, uncertainty, and having never seen the statement)**



Created with Datawrapper

The next piece of disinformation which the study asked about was whether the country could not afford to reach the target of net zero emissions by 2050. In total, 40% of the British public believes this statement to be true, and only 24% accurately identified the statement as false. A further third of the British population was uncertain about the issue. Older people, those in the C2 social grade, and people outside England are more likely to believe this to be the case.

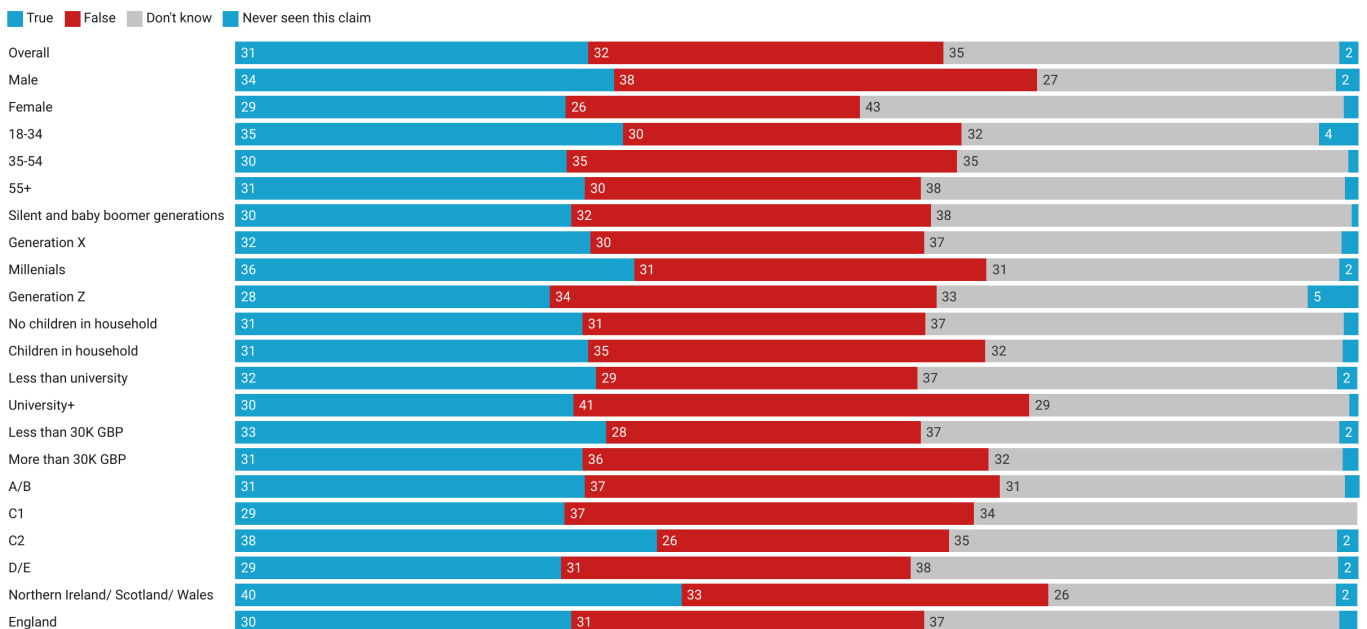
**My country cannot afford to reach the target of net zero emissions by 2050 (%)**



Created with Datawrapper

The false belief that net zero and climate policies will increase poverty and unemployment is believed by roughly one third (31%) of the British public. A further third (32%) accurately believes this is false, and the final third (35%) is uncertain about this. This disinformation belief is more common among people in the C2 social grade and among those outside England.

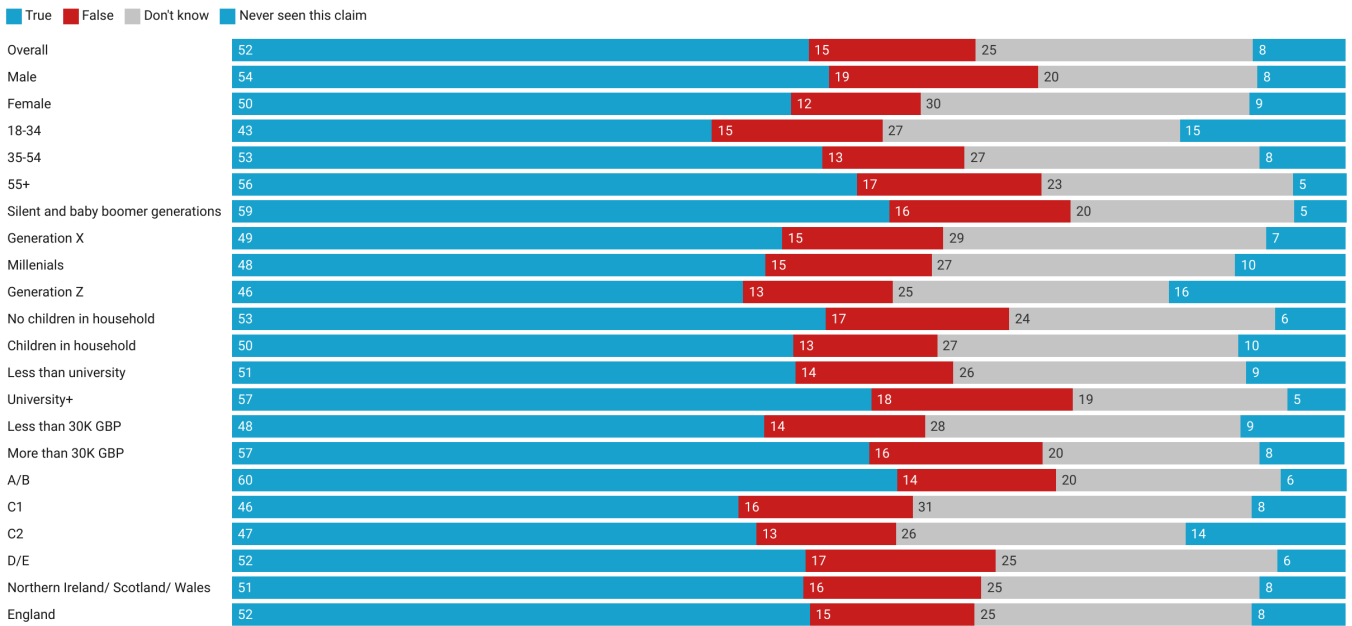
**Net zero and climate policies will increase poverty and unemployment (%)**



Created with Datawrapper

Overall, 15% of the British public believes that the idea that the world needs to rapidly decarbonise and achieve net zero by 2050 to ensure the prosperity of and welfare of humans across the world is false. By contrast, half the British public accurately believe this statement to be true. A further quarter of the public are uncertain on this issue. Younger people (18-34) are less likely to believe this statement to be true and relatively more uncertain than older age groups.

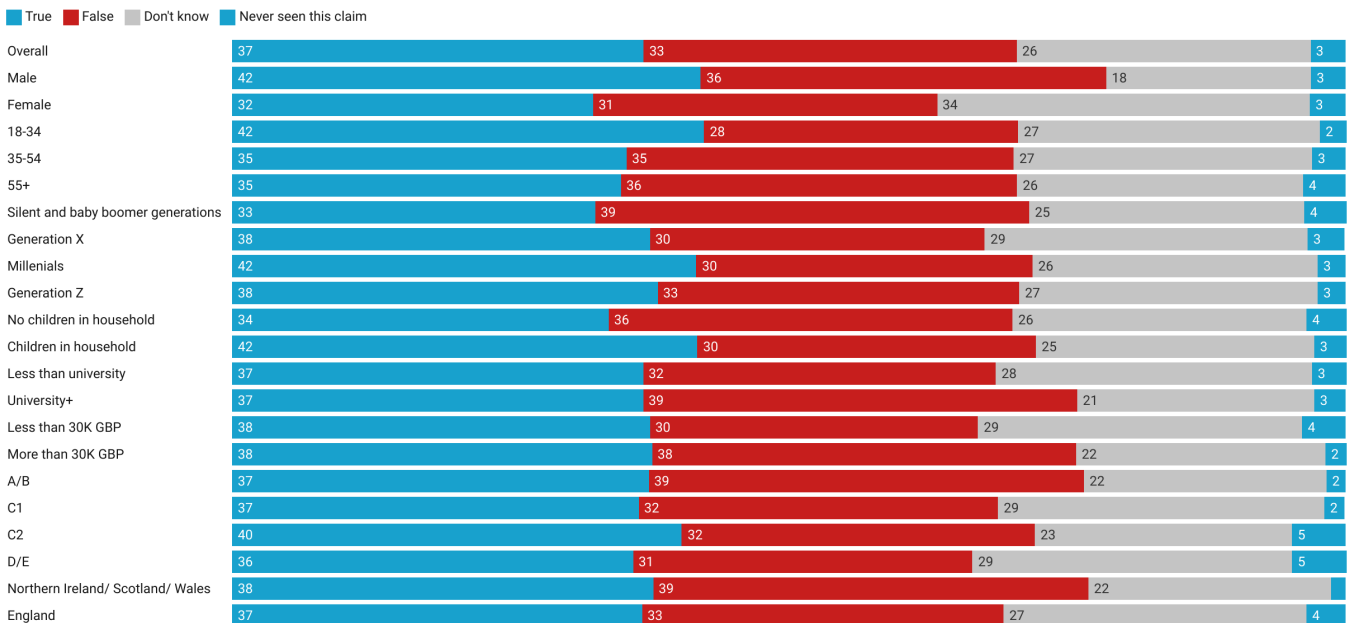
**The world needs to rapidly decarbonise and achieve net zero by 2050 to ensure the prosperity and welfare of humans across the world (%)**



Created with Datawrapper

In total, 37% of the public believes in the disinformation that reducing emissions is a form of self-inflicted harm that punishes its citizens. A third of the public believes this to be false, and a quarter (26%) is uncertain whether this is true or false. The belief is relatively more common among men than women, younger people than older people, and those with children in their household.

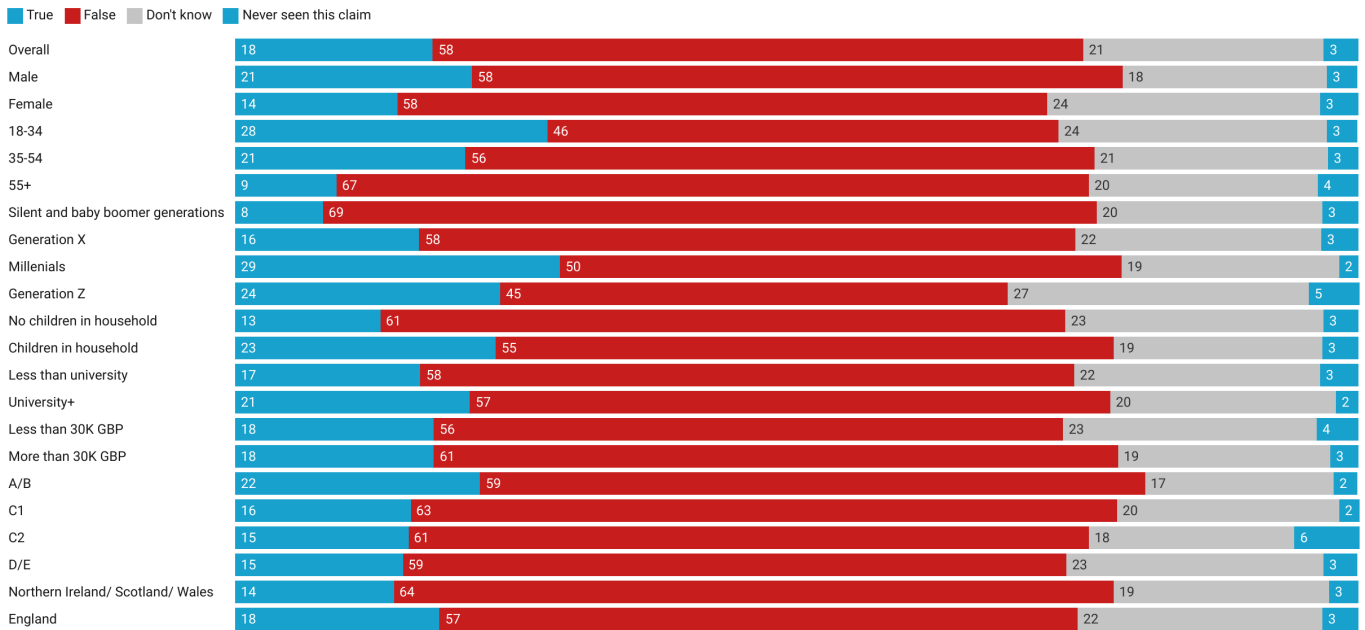
**Reducing domestic emissions is a form of 'self-inflicted harm' that punishes citizens (e.g. through lifestyle changes, rising prices, livelihoods, etc) (%)**



Created with Datawrapper

When it comes to the point that taking action is pointless, because climate change has passed a threshold wherein it is irreversible, the data suggest that 18% of Britons believe in this piece of disinformation. This belief is relatively more common among men, younger people, Millennials, people with children in their household, and people of A/B social grade.

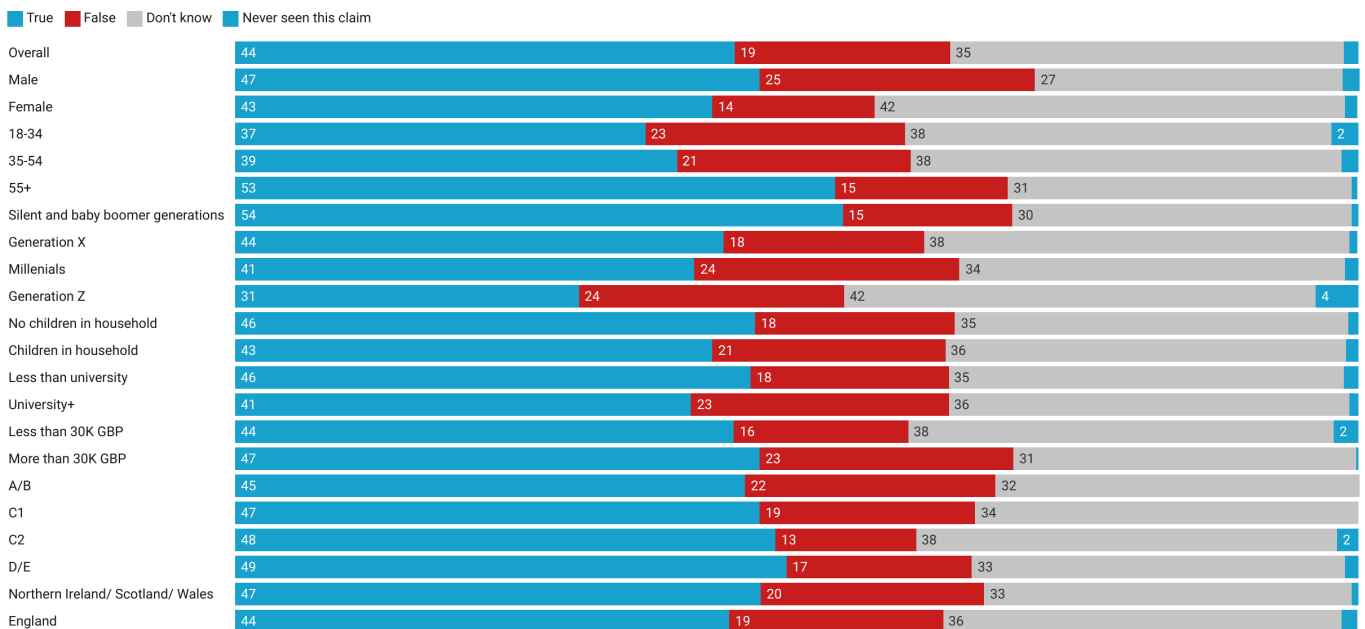
**We already passed a threshold where climate change is irreversible and therefore there is no point in taking action (%)**



Created with Datawrapper

The idea that the electricity grid would never be able to handle the increase in electric vehicles is held by 44% of the UK public. In contrast, only 19% are aware that this statement is false. A further third (35%) are uncertain of whether this is the case or not. Older people (55+) are particularly likely to believe this piece of disinformation.

**The electricity grid would never be able to handle the increase in Electric Vehicles (EVs) (%)**

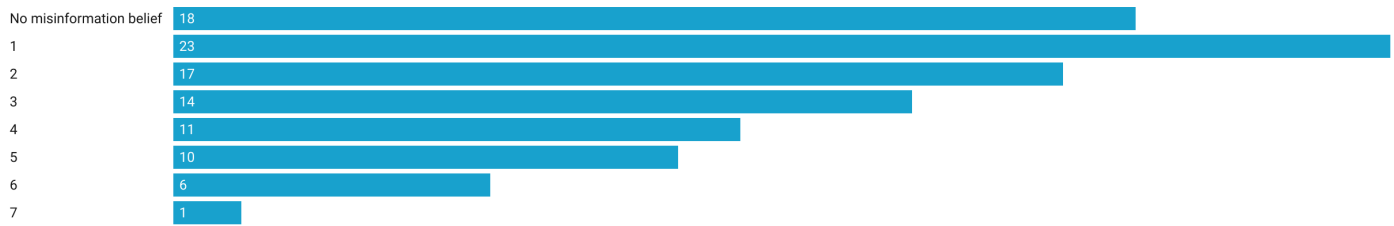


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To summarise the above data, the number of disinformation beliefs that each survey respondent reported believing in was counted, with the possible number varying from zero to seven.

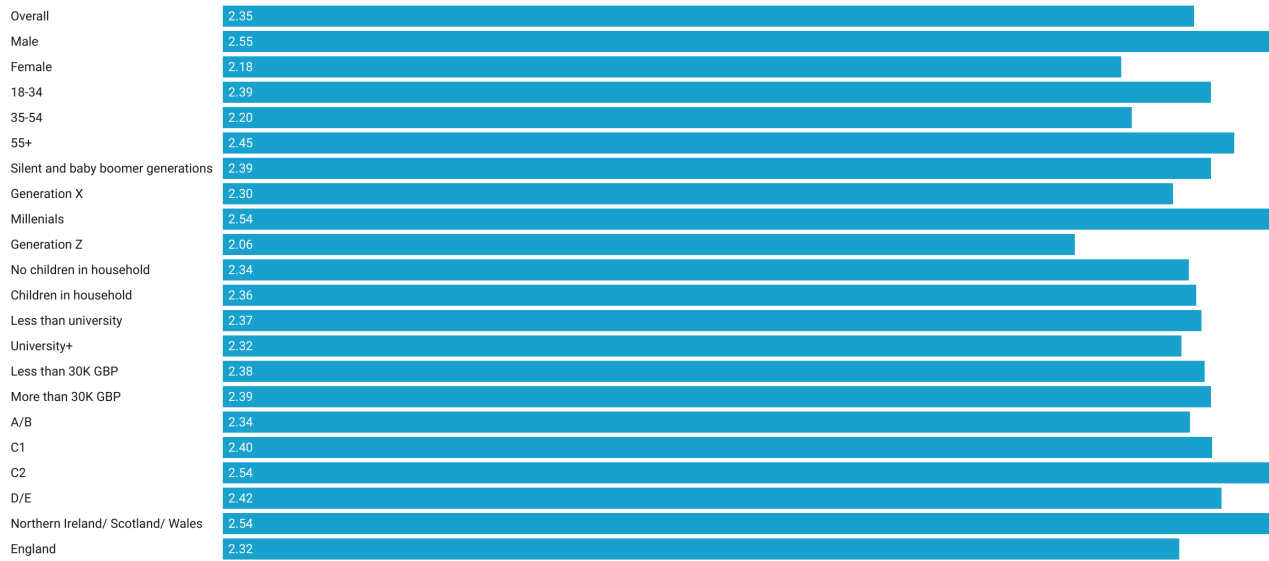
Overall, 82% of the British public believes in at least one of the above pieces of disinformation, and the average British person believes in 2.4 of the seven pieces of information asked about on the survey. Men, Millennials, people in the C2 social grade, and those outside England believe in more of the above pieces of disinformation on average.

## How many pieces of the above disinformation does the British public believe? (%)



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## How many pieces of the above disinformation does the British public believe? (Average number of items believed)



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# Conclusion

The research findings presented in this report underscore the complex and multifaceted nature of public perceptions on climate change in the UK. While there is widespread recognition of the human impact on climate change, a significant portion of the population underestimates its extent or holds misconceptions about its causes and consequences. This vulnerability to disinformation is exacerbated by a lack of understanding of key climate concepts and a reliance on potentially unreliable sources of information, such as social media.

The prevalence of false narratives about the economic and social impacts of climate action, as well as the efficacy of measures like net zero emissions, is particularly concerning. These misconceptions, often fueled by disinformation campaigns, can hinder public support for climate policies and undermine the urgency of addressing the climate crisis.

However, the study also reveals a high level of public concern about the impacts of climate change on various aspects of life, including the economy, health, migration, and food security. This concern, coupled with a growing distrust of brands that engage in or enable the spread of climate disinformation, presents an opportunity for businesses and policymakers to engage with the public in a more transparent and responsible manner.

Addressing the challenges posed by climate disinformation requires a multi-faceted approach. This includes investing in education and communication initiatives to improve public understanding of climate science and policy, promoting media literacy and critical thinking skills, and holding social media platforms, media owners, and advertisers accountable for the spread of misinformation.

For businesses, the message is clear: aligning with climate science and distancing themselves from disinformation is not only an ethical imperative but also a strategic necessity. Consumers are increasingly demanding transparency and accountability from brands, and those that fail to meet these expectations risk losing consumer trust and market share. By prioritising accurate and responsible communication about climate change, businesses can contribute to a more informed and engaged public discourse, while also safeguarding their own long-term interests in a world grappling with the urgent challenges of climate change.

# About Conscious Advertising Network

- **CAN is a UK-based international coalition of over 180 advertisers, agencies, tech providers and civil society groups.**
- **We're breaking the economic link between advertising and the harmful content that divides communities, excludes diverse voices, exploits children, and undermines scientific consensus.**
- **CAN is working with media owners and tech platforms alongside members to implement climate misinformation policies aligned to the Conscious Advertising Network Climate & Sustainability manifesto. This has helped lead to climate misinformation policies developed by Google, Pinterest, Meta and Tik Tok.**
- **To join CAN, please visit <https://www.consciousadnetwork.com/> or email [hello@consciousadnetwork.org](mailto:hello@consciousadnetwork.org)**

