More United Than You'd Think: Public Opinion on the Environment in Towns and Cities in the UK
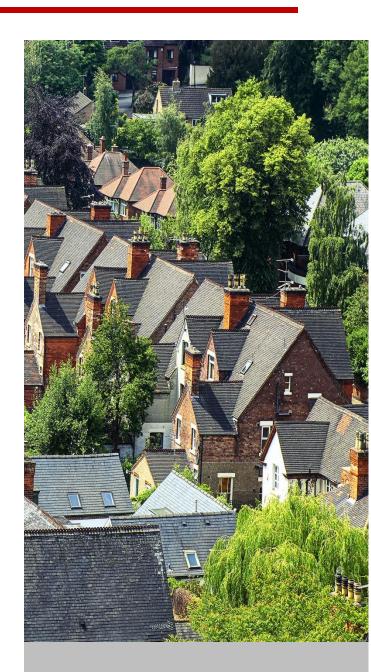
Centre For Towns

Contents

Executive Summary

- This study by the Centre for Towns for the European Climate Foundation finds that despite a growing electoral divide between towns and cities, there are many areas of broad consensus on environmental issues and even signs the divide may be shrinking. Some points of difference remain, however, and will require a policy agenda that seeks to build support on environmental issues through recognising the distinct priorities, day-to-day experiences and values of people residing in different areas.

- Key findings of our report include:

  - Analysis by **Centre for Towns** of survey data from the **British Election Study** between February 2014 and December 2019 suggests that over the past five years there has been a significant rise in public support for environmental protection - with an increase of nearly 20 per cent in the proportion of people saying measures to protect the environment have not gone far enough (this now stands at 60% overall).

    - Notably, the gap between citizens who live in core cities and towns has nearly halved over this period - indicating that the environment is a growing concern everywhere, and especially in towns and more rural areas.

    - Concern about the environment has risen similarly for voters in 'Red Wall' seats - where 55% of people think that measures to protect the environment have not gone far enough (and just 11% believe they have gone too far). This points to a broad consensus and direction of travel regarding the importance of tackling environmental issues such as climate change.

  - A survey conducted by **YouGov** for the **Centre for Towns** finds that people in villages, communities and small towns are just as likely to say protecting the environment is important to them personally as people in core cities (94% of each saying it is very or fairly important to them). Pro-environmental values and behaviour is not just the domain of liberal city-dwellers, it is as popular in smaller towns and rural areas.

    There are slight differences of opinion between people living in rural and small towns and those in major cities on some of the specific measures that might be used to tackle climate change.

    - There is broad public support for a Green New Deal, across all types of place: at least two-thirds of the public are behind the idea of investment in green jobs and energy to address climate change.

- People in core cities are *less likely* to support limiting the number of times people can fly each year (with 40% support) than people from more rural areas – villages (45%) and communities (46%), and *more likely* compared to small towns (39%), medium towns (32%), and large towns (36%).

- People in villages, communities and small towns are less likely to support higher taxes on car users or ending the sale and use of petrol and diesel vehicles (with 32% support on average compared to 44% for residents of major cities).

- These relatively small differences of opinion seemingly reflect lifestyle differences between places, specifically usage of and access to modes of public and private transport.

Our findings on differences on specific policy measures point to the importance of promoting understanding between towns and cities that emphasises shared concerns and values, at the same time as being sensitive to the uneven ways in which some environmental measures may impact people in different areas (for example with rural communities being significantly more dependent on car use for travel). It is important that the national policy agenda on the environment becomes more place-sensitive, to retain the broad public backing it currently enjoys.

Note on the Centre for Towns methodology: villages refer to places with fewer than 5,000 residents; communities refer to places with between 5,000 and 10,000 residents; small towns refer to places with between 10,000 and 30,000 residents; medium towns refer to places with a population of between 30,000 and 75,000 people; large towns refer to places with a population above 75,000 that are not a core city; core cities are defined according to Pike et al. (2016): Birmingham, Bristol, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Leeds, Liverpool, London, Manchester, Newcastle-upon-Tyne Nottingham, Sheffield.

Foreword

Climate change is the challenge of our age. Alongside floods, droughts, fires and mass displacement, climate change has the potential to upend our economic recovery and threatens the planet we live on. Why then has so little progress been made?

The answer may have something to do with a belief among politicians that defending the environment does not rank highly in the electorate's list of priorities, or worse, that the "green stuff" is deeply unpopular in areas like the "Red Wall" which is now a major preoccupation for British politicians.

This report turns these assumptions on their head. The environment has risen rapidly up the public's list of priorities in recent years, with climate change chief amongst them. Across our towns, villages and cities there is a shared passion for our environment. Despite frequent suggestions to the contrary, environmentalism is not the preserve of our "woke" cities – it matters to us all.

We hope this report will be both a call to arms and a wake-up call for those politicians and journalists who make stereotypical, wrongheaded assumptions about the views of people in our towns and cities, finding divisions where none exist. There is a broad coalition to be built across the towns, villages and cities of our country if we have the vision to see it.

The report shows a public ambition that outstrips that of their politicians. They are pragmatic, seeing action on the environment and economic growth as complementary. And they are ambitious, believing Britain can play a leading role in tackling climate change, regardless of global action or inaction.

There is a warning for campaigners in here too. The consensus breaks down in one area: transport. Campaigns that fail to take into account the reality of life in towns where buses are scarce and alternatives are lacking may prove counter-productive. Being radical is no substitute for being relevant.

But the report's message is ultimately hopeful. Messengers like David Attenborough have the ability to unite where others divide, while the strong support across towns, villages and cities for organisations like the National Trust suggests that conservation and heritage is the ground on which a pro-environmental agenda can be built.

After years in which we have found multiple ways to tear ourselves apart, what better place to find common ground than the future of our planet?

Lisa Nandy, MP for Wigan and co-founder of the Centre for Towns

About the Centre For Towns

The Centre For Towns is an independent non-partisan organisation dedicated to providing research and analysis on a range of issues affecting our towns. Whilst cities receive a good deal of attention, we believe that there should be equal attention paid to the viability and prosperity of our towns.

The Centre For Towns has created its own place boundaries. There are no official town boundaries provided by the Office for National Statistics, meaning the boundaries we created are unique to the Centre For Towns. They do not correspond with local authority boundaries for instance, since we know there are many separate towns within single local authorities. Our database provides the boundaries of each individual town and uses lookup files to append existing data to them in order to create town databases on a range of subjects.

The Centre For Towns has further used these town boundaries to create two distinct place typologies; the first based on the size of urban settlement (Table 1 below) and the second based on the particular characteristics of those places (Table 2 below). The Centre For Towns database contains thousands of places across the whole of the country, all of which fall under the first typology, and many of which fall under the second typology.

Village	Place with a population of less than 5,000 people
Community	Place with a population of between 5,000 and 10,000 people
Small town	Place with a population between 10,000 and 30,000 people
Medium town	Place with a population between 30,000 and 75,000 people
Large town	Place with a population above 75,000 people but not a Core City
Core City	One of twelve Core Cities[1] identified by Pike at al. (2016)

Table 1. The Centre for Towns typology of place based on population size

University town	Town with a university and at least 5% of the population as students
Market town	Hub towns as defined by Defra
New town	Designated new town status post-war
Ex-industrial town	Town under the remit of the Industrial Communities Alliance[2]
Commuter town	Town with over 10,000 people within commuting distance of Core Cities
Coastal town	Town with over 10,000 people and a substantial coastline

Table 2. The Centre for Towns typology of place based on characteristics of place

[1] Birmingham, Bristol, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Leeds, Liverpool, London, Manchester, Newcastle-upon-Tyne Nottingham, Sheffield

[2] Christina Beatty and Steve Fothergill. (2018). 'The contemporary labour market in Britain's older industrial towns.' *Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University Working Paper*, p. 7.

About the European Climate Foundation

The European Climate Foundation is dedicated to responding to the global climate crisis by creating a net-zero greenhouse gas emissions society. We harness the power of effective philanthropy to support the climate community in shaping public debate and forging bold solutions. Together with hundreds of partner organisations we are at the forefront of a global movement to ensure a liveable planet for future generations.

About the Author

Will Jennings is Co-Director of the Centre for Towns and Professor of Political Science and Public Policy at the University of Southampton.

About the Data

Thanks to YouGov for conducting the national survey that underpins the bulk of this report and to the British Election Study team for their online panel tracking public opinion in Britain between 2014 and 2020. Thanks also to Ipsos MORI for their longstanding survey series on the 'most important problem' facing the country.

1. Public attitudes on the environment and climate change in towns

The Brexit vote and the 2017 and 2019 general elections exposed a growing divide in British politics and society. That divide is between places that have prospered under the globalised knowledge economy (predominantly major cities) and those on the periphery (towns and rural areas). While the UK's 'core' cities – places like London, Manchester and Bristol – voted to Remain, most towns voted to Leave. In 2019, the Conservatives demolished Labour's "Red Wall" seats in many former industrial towns that had consistently voted for the party for over fifty years. This continued a long-term trend that crystallized in 2017,[3] whereby Labour made large gains in cities and university towns, winning constituencies such as Kensington and Chelsea, while the Conservatives secured substantial swings in former industrial towns, coastal areas and other more peripheral places, taking seats like Mansfield and Walsall North against the national tide.[4]

Similar patterns are found in other countries too. Across Western Europe, voters in cities have been turning increasingly to green parties (as the traditional centre-right and centre-left have gradually lost support among their traditional electorates) while the radical right has made gains in peripheral former industrial and rural areas. In the recent 2020 US presidential election, Joe Biden won through attracting an increasing share of college-educated voters in cities and outlying suburbs, continuing a trend that has seen Democratic Party strongholds increasingly concentrated in densely populated urban areas in America. The Republican Party and Donald Trump, on the other hand, continued to make electoral inroads across rural and small-town America, building on the pattern of voting in 2016.

These trends reflect a fundamental shift in the dominant attitudinal and geographical cleavages of democratic politics in advanced industrial societies. They also present a potential challenge for building popular support for pro-environmental policies and climate change mitigation.

These political divisions map onto patterns of the relative decline of places – driven by long-term processes of social and economic change. Deindustrialisation, economic agglomeration, the expansion of higher education and immigration have all contributed to a fundamental fracturing in the demography of towns and cities in Britain – whereby major cities are becoming younger, more ethnically diverse, more educated and better able to exploit opportunities afforded them by creative, knowledge and digital sectors (even when substantial parts of their population are in precarious work). At the same time the populations

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[3] See Furlong 2019.
[4] See Jennings and Stoker 2017; 2019.

of towns are aging, less diverse, and possess lower levels of skills and education. Coastal and post-industrial towns in particular suffer from high rates of deprivation and health problems, as well as lower levels of social mobility. Other peripheral towns and rural areas are similarly at the front-line of the unforgiving forces of economic change.

These divergent demographic trajectories underpin differences in values and identities: on average, people who live in towns in England tend to be more socially conservative, relatively uncomfortable with social change and are more likely to identify as English, while city-dwellers tend to be more socially liberal on issues such as same-sex marriage or immigration and more plural in their sense of identity.

This emerging 'open-closed' or 'liberal-cosmopolitan' dimension of politics – and its geographical expression – has substantial potential relevance for the future of the environmental agenda, and climate change mitigation specifically. Because pro-environmental attitudes and concern about climate change tend to be associated with more socially liberal, 'cosmopolitan' values in general, it is possible these issues may become a focus of political conflict as this new dimension of politics comes to dominate.

We know relatively little, however, about the attitudes of people in towns towards green issues, the environment, countryside and the climate in particular. It may be that environmental concerns take a particular local form (relating to their area), in contrast to more global concerns of city-dwellers (relating to climate change as an existential concern). Or it could be that differences of opinion relate to the pace of change, the radicalism of policy options or the methods of activism adopted by campaigners. Might it be possible to build a broad environmental consensus that overcomes the new political divides that are reshaping contemporary politics? Who are the spokespeople or movements that would be trusted in delivering green messages?

We do not believe that people in towns do not care about the environment, but their concerns may take distinct forms of expression (such as the quality of local environment and green public space) and remain uncomfortable with certain aspects of climate activism.

There is an urgent need, therefore, to provide a clear evidence base on how attitudes towards the environment and climate change differ by place in the UK, and provide insights into the sorts of message or frame that are effective in securing support for individual and government measures aimed at addressing climate change.

The aim of this report is to understand public attitudes towards the environment, and climate change specifically, in towns in the UK and how they contrast with major cities and other areas. Through this, we hope to identify the foundations of public opinion that might support a consensus on how to approach the urgent policy action required to address environmental issues, and specifically climate change. We also hope to push back against the stereotyping

of the attitudes towards the environment of many people in towns across the UK, and the needless pursuit of 'culture war' politics that seeks to divide people.

This study by the Centre for Towns for the European Climate Foundation finds that despite a growing electoral divide between towns and cities, there are many areas of broad consensus on environmental issues and even signs that the divide between voters on green issues may be shrinking. Some points of difference remain, however, and will require a policy agenda that seeks to build support on environmental issues through recognising the distinct priorities, day-to-day experiences and values of people residing in different areas.

2. Trends in public attitudes on the environment

It is important to put any analysis of public attitudes on the environment in longer-term context. Measured in the long-running Ipsos MORI survey series on the 'most important issue' facing Britain today, concern about the environment and pollution peaked at 25% in February 2020 (the highest rating since July 1990) shortly before the COVID-19 crisis hit and pushed all other issues into the background.[5] This meant that, for a quarter of the population, the environment was considered one of the most important issues facing the country. Before then, the issue had been steadily rising in importance since the Coalition Government came to office in 2010. There is substantial evidence, then, that the environment has potential to significantly occupy the attention of the British public.

What do you see as the most/other important issues facing Britain today?
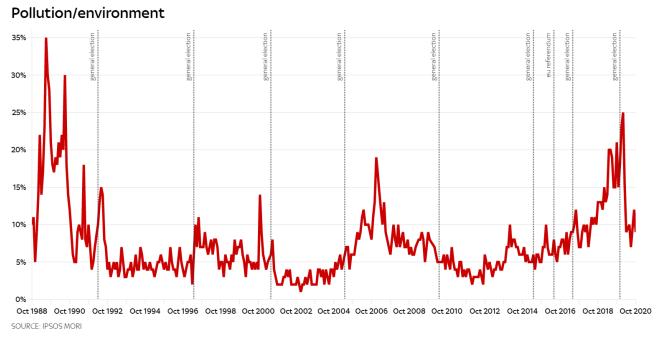
Pollution/environment

SOURCE: IPSOS MORI

Figure 1. Most important issue, Ipsos MORI, 1998 to 2020

While the *importance* of environmental issues to the public (relative to other issues) offers a good bellwether of how much pressure policymakers face in the making of environmental

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[5] Ipsos MORI ask "What would you say is the most important issue facing Britain today? What do you see as other important issues facing Britain today?" with multiple responses allowed for the *most/other important issue index*.

policy, it is also possible to consider how the public's support for environmental protection has changed over recent years.

Since 2014, the British Election Study (BES) Internet Panel has regularly surveyed the public on whether measures to protect the environment have gone too far or not far enough. We are able to use the constituency identifiers in the survey to categorise those respondents residing in cities or towns according to the Centre for Towns typology (plotted in Figure 2). The BES data covers the period between February 2014 and December 2019, and suggests that over the past five years there has been a significant rise in demand for environmental protection – with an increase of nearly 20 percentage points in the proportion of people saying measures to protect the environment have *not gone far enough*. Overall, this number stood at 60% of people during the 2019 general election campaign (with the fieldwork conducted November to December 2019).

During this period, the gap between citizens who live in core cities and towns has nearly halved – indicating that the environment is a growing concern in all types of place.
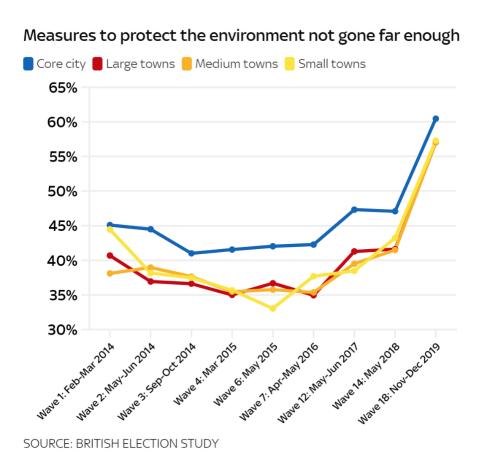

Figure 2. Support for environmental protection in towns and cities

Concern about the environment has risen similarly for voters in what became known as 'Red Wall' seats in the run-up to the 2019 general election.[6] These constituencies were traditionally held by the Labour Party, tending to vote for the party to a level above what would typically be expected by demographics alone (which typically had voted for Brexit in substantial number), but then comprehensively voted Conservative in December 2019.

In Red Wall constituencies, a majority – some 55% – of people think that measures to protect the environment have not gone far enough, and just 11% believe they have gone too far (see Figure 3). This level of environmental concern is only just below the national average. Popular caricatures of the Red Wall are misleading as regards their relative support for the environment – usually presented as mainly the concern of cosmopolitan, socially liberal, city-dwellers. This points to a broad consensus and direction of travel regarding the importance of tackling environmental issues such as climate change. While towns and cities appear to be on different electoral tracks, the environment need not be an issue that divides places.

SOURCE: CENTRE FOR TOWNS/BRITISH ELECTION STUDY

Figure 3. Support for environmental protection in the 'Red Wall' vs the national average

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[6] James Kanagasooriam, 14 August 2019, https://twitter.com/JamesKanag/status/1161639282450321409.

3. Public attitudes on the environment in towns and cities

This data from the British Election Study internet panel provides us with valuable insights on the trajectory of public opinion on the environment in broad terms, but it is important to consider how attitudes on specific questions relating to the environment and environmental policy vary according to place.

To investigate this, the Centre for Towns commissioned a nationally representative survey by YouGov on a wide range of questions relating to the environment and climate change. These questions included items on general concern about the issue, belief in climate change, feelings of personal responsibility on protecting the environment, and how trade-offs between the environment and the economy are viewed. Alongside this, we asked a number of more specific items on pro-environmental behaviours and policies – and how people perceived supporters and opponents of doing more to tackle climate change.

The survey of 1,721 UK adults was conducted online by YouGov between 25th and 29th June 2020. While the COVID-19 pandemic continued to dominate public and political attention at the time, the environment still figured highly, with 26% of people naming it as one of *up to three* most important issues facing the country. Health topped the list at 56%, followed by the economy at 55%, and Brexit at 40%, with the environment in fourth place.

Alongside standard demographic measures (age, gender, social grade, region, education) and political variables (2016 EU referendum vote, 2019 general election vote and current voting intention), respondents were matched by their location to the categories of places developed by the Centre for Towns. Those are, from smallest to largest settlement: village, community, small town, medium town, large town and core city. This enables us to compare relative differences in attitudes towards the environment and climate change *according to place*. Indeed, it enables us to resolve the question posed earlier: whether the electoral divides that we have seen open up between towns and cities are similarly observed in attitudes on the environment, and whether this might present a major obstacle to the willingness or ability of policymakers to address environmental issues.

Geography matters not just because it can shape the environmental concerns of individuals – for example, via transport access and usage, other lifestyle habits that influence environmental impacts, proximity to countryside, and exposure to pollution, waste and other hazards – but also because in the UK's first-past-the-post parliamentary system it determines where parties are looking to build support. To win general elections, parties need to find policies that bridge the often divergent views of major urban centres and more peripheral places – that is, smaller towns and rural areas.

The importance of the environment as an issue

How important is the environment as an issue to people? We start by comparing responses to the question "Which of the following do you think are the most important issues facing the country at this time?" where respondents were able to select up to three options from the following list: health, the economy, Britain leaving the EU, the environment, immigration and asylum, crime, education, housing, welfare benefits, defence and security, pensions, tax, family life and childcare, and transport. Here we see a u-shaped pattern across different types of place: people in villages are almost as likely as those in core cities to name the environment as a major issue facing the country. People from small towns, on the other hand, are 12 percentage points less likely (20%) to pick the environment than people in core cities (32%). People from medium-sized towns are 10 percentage points less likely. This is illustrated in Figure 4.

When asked specifically to name the *most important environmental issue* (see Figure 5), 'climate change' was the second ranked issue, with 60% of respondents naming it as one of four most important issues, narrowly behind 'the growing amount of waste we produce' (on 61%). The high level of public concern about waste is notable, and may reflect the aftermath of Sir David Attenborough's Blue Planet series in 2018, which highlighted the highly damaging environmental impact of plastic pollution.

In terms of place, there is strikingly little variation according to the degree of urban density (see Figure 6). The number of people mentioning climate change as the most important environmental issue was 61% in villages, communities and small towns, 62% in medium towns and 64% in core cities. The only exception to this pattern was the slightly lower 52% in large towns – where respondents tended to pick fewer issues in general (and 'don't know' responses were twice as high as in any other type of place at 13%).

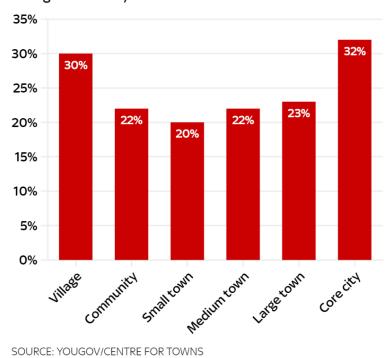**The environment as one of the "most important issues" facing the country...**

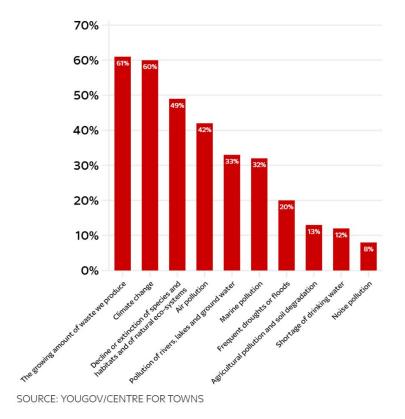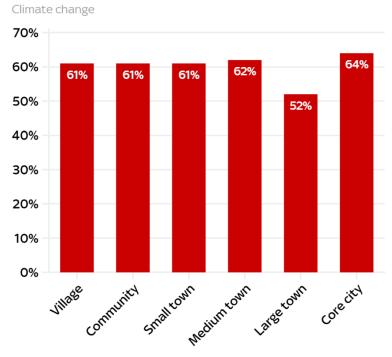**Figure 4.** Most important issue facing the country, by place

Figure 5. Most important environmental issue

Most important environmental issue...

Climate change

SOURCE: YOUGOV/CENTRE FOR TOWNS

Figure 6. Climate change as the most important environmental issue, by place

Measures of the 'most important issue' do not always reveal the underlying salience of issues – as an issue can be important to voters, but at the same time be 'crowded-out' by high levels of attention to other issues. This is especially true during major crises like COVID-19 or economic shocks, which tend to dominate public attention.

It is helpful, then, to ask people how important the environment is to them personally – without forcing the choice between multiple issues. When we do this, we find that people in villages, communities and small towns are just as likely to say protecting the environment is important to them as people in core cities (see Figure 7). Notably, slightly more people in villages (48%) and small towns (45%) say that it is 'very important' to them, compared to people from core cities (44%). Such a finding highlights how pro-environmentalism is not just the domain of the cosmopolitan, liberal caricature of city-dwellers, but is popular in smaller towns and rural areas.[7] As in our discussion of British Election Study survey data, talk of a deep and

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[7] When people are asked 'to what extent do you feel a personal responsibility to try *to reduce climate change*?' (on a scale where 0 is equal to 'not at all' and 10 is equal to 'a great deal'), some 63% said they felt a personal responsibility to try to reduce climate change (responding 6 or above on the 11-point scale). This number was highest in core cities (71%), followed by villages (70%), small towns (68%), communities (62%), medium towns (61%) and large towns (57%).

unbridgeable divide between towns and cities over support for environmental protection is highly misleading.
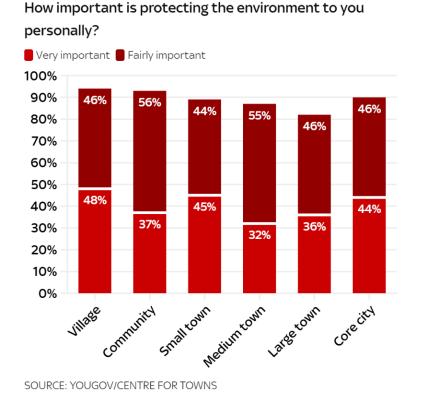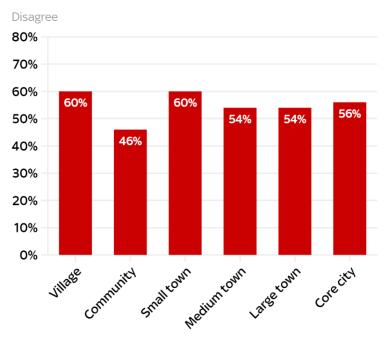
How important is protecting the environment to you personally?

■ Very important ■ Fairly important

Place	Fairly important	Very important
Village	46%	48%
Community	56%	37%
Small town	44%	45%
Medium town	55%	32%
Large town	46%	36%
Core city	46%	44%

SOURCE: YOUGOV/CENTRE FOR TOWNS

Figure 7. Personal importance of the environment as an issue, by place

We find similar results when asking about how people are influenced in their willingness to help the environment by the behaviour of others (see Figure 8). In most places, people disagree with the proposition that 'it's not worth me doing things to help the environment if others don't do the same'. Some 60% of the residents of villages and small towns disagree with this view, compared to 56% of city-dwellers. There is little variation between places in the degree to which environmental support is diminished by perception that others are not doing their bit.

At the same time, people don't appear inclined to attempt to influence others. Just 37% of respondents agreed with the statement that 'I try and persuade people I know to be more environmentally-friendly', and just 30% reported often talking to friends and family about the things they can do to help the environment.

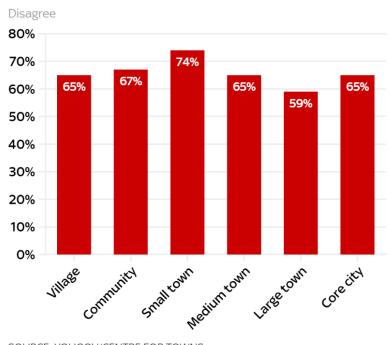**It's not worth me doing things to help the environment if others don't do the same...**

Disagree

SOURCE: YOUGOV/CENTRE FOR TOWNS

Figure 8. Impact on environmental behaviour of others on own behaviour, by place

We similarly find that people do not believe their concern about climate change is tempered by its effects being concentrated in the future. Accordingly, around two-thirds of people in villages, towns and cities disagree with the statement 'the effects of climate change are too far in the future to really worry me'. Some 74% of people in medium-sized towns disagreed, compared to 65% in villages, medium-sized towns and core cities (see Figure 9). The figure was somewhat lower in large towns (59%), but still a majority view. It seems, then, that people do not view climate change as a problem for future generations – and this is true across different types of place.

Together, these results highlight the substantial level of concern about environmental issues across towns and cities in the UK. There is no clear pattern whereby densely populated core cities (typically home to younger, more diverse, educated and socially liberal populations) are substantially more preoccupied with the environment than more peripheral towns and rural areas (despite their older and more socially conservative populations). The differences that can be observed are slight (and often within the margin of error of the estimates for different subsamples of the survey).

The effects of climate change are too far in the future to really worry me...

Disagree

	Village	Community	Small town	Medium town	Large town	Core city
	65%	67%	74%	65%	59%	65%

SOURCE: YOUGOV/CENTRE FOR TOWNS

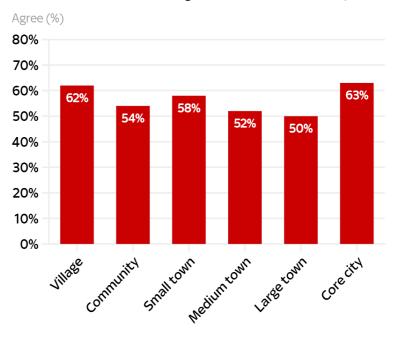**Figure 9.** The effects of climate change are too far in the future to really worry me, by place

Support for action on the environment and climate change

In the survey we measure more directly support for taking action on the environment and climate change. We first consider public support for action in broad terms, and then in relation to specific proposals that have been put forward in policy debates.

The results show support for giving the environment priority over the economy, and that Britain should not reduce its efforts regardless of the steps being taken by other countries. When given a choice between the options of protecting the environment versus economic growth and creating jobs, a majority of people supported the former (see Figure 10). Support is highest in core cities (where 63% of people agree), but nearly as high in villages (62%) and small towns (58%). It is slightly lower in medium and large towns (52% and 50% respectively), although still substantially favoured over the economy. This highlights the political logic for environmental action being made integral to future government strategies for economic growth.

The public are also not defeatists as regards the global coordination of action. By a ratio of 2:1, respondents disagreed with the view 'it's not worth Britain trying to combat climate change because other countries will just council out what we do' (see Figure 11). Disagreement was highest in small towns (62%), followed by core cities (59%), villages (57%) and medium towns (54%). As such, there is little evidence that economic considerations and the challenges of global action are significantly more prevalent in certain places than others.

Protecting the environment should be given priority, even if it causes slower economic growth and some loss of jobs

Agree (%)

SOURCE: YOUGOV/CENTRE FOR TOWNS

Figure 10. Environmental protection vs. economic growth and jobs, by place

It's not worth Britain trying to combat climate change, because other countries will just cancel out what we do...
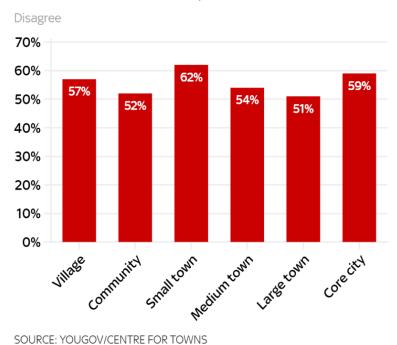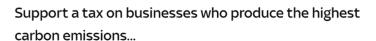
Disagree

SOURCE: YOUGOV/CENTRE FOR TOWNS

Figure 11. Views on climate change and other countries, by place

Support for specific measures to tackle climate change

Let us consider further public support for actions that have been discussed as ways to reduce carbon emissions and mitigate climate change. We find consistently high levels of support for a tax on carbon emissions by business across different types of places (see Figure 12). Indeed, support is marginally higher in villages and small towns (88%) than in core cities (84%).

We similarly find that around four-in-five people support greater use of solar and wind power to reduce reliance on coal, oil and gas (see Figure 13). Responses differ little between towns and cities – with between 78% and 86% support across the different place types. These measures enjoy considerable public backing – at least when posed in the context of a survey.

There are similarly consistent levels of support across towns and cities for government funding of home insulation and requirements for new homes (see Figure 14) or buildings to be environmentally-friendly (see Figure 15), with 77% and 85% support overall, respectively.
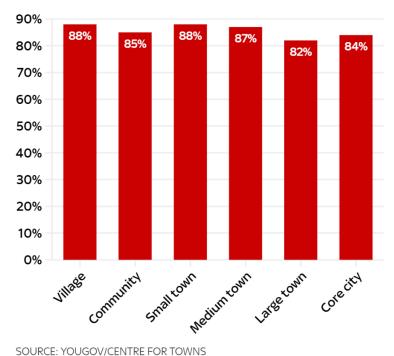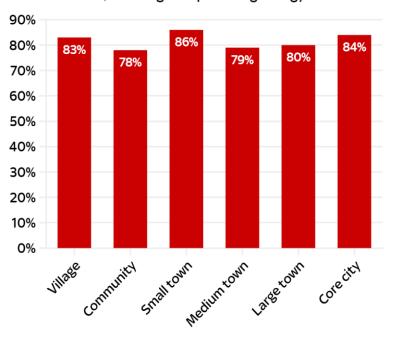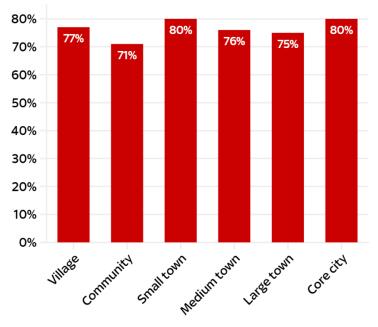
Support a tax on businesses who produce the highest carbon emissions...

SOURCE: YOUGOV/CENTRE FOR TOWNS

Figure 12. Support for a carbon tax, by place

Support more solar and wind power generation to reduce the use of coal, oil and gas in providing energy...

Village	Community	Small town	Medium town	Large town	Core city
83%	78%	86%	79%	80%	84%

Figure 13. Support for alternative energies, by place

Support government money to insulate all homes to reduce demand for energy...

Village	Community	Small town	Medium town	Large town	Core city
77%	71%	80%	76%	75%	80%

Figure 14. Support for home insulation, by place

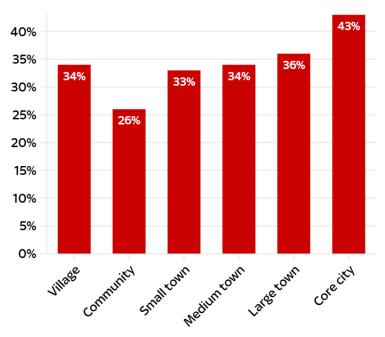**Support all new homes or buildings to be environmentally-friendly, backed by law...**

	Village	Community	Small town	Medium town	Large town	Core city
	88%	85%	88%	87%	82%	84%

Figure 15. Support for environmental building requirements, by place

Our survey does reveal slight differences of opinion between people living in rural and small towns and those in major cities on some specific measures. Support is considerably lower for ending the sale and use of all petrol and diesel vehicles outside the UK's major cities, although there is not majority support in any place (see Figure 16). Some 33% of people from small towns, 34% from medium towns, and 36% of people from large towns support such a measure, compared to 43% in core cities. Similarly, there is much higher agreement with the statement that 'for the sake of the environment, car users should pay higher taxes' in core cities than in any other type of settlement (see Figure 17). This again is a minority view (with 29% of people agreeing overall), and the difference is between around two-in-five in core cities expressing agreement with this view compared to one-in-four in towns. These differences are wholly understandable given the greater reliance of people on cars for transport in towns, relative to the greater connectivity afforded by public transport in major cities.

This is borne out by views on bus usage. In the survey, we asked whether people agreed with the view 'I would only travel by bus if I had no other choice' (see Figure 18). There was strong support for this view in small (51%), medium (49%) and large (46%) towns, and notably less in core cities (37%). This very likely reflects the differential level of access to bus services people enjoy in towns and cities. It is important to recognise that, in the domain of transport, support for pro-environmental measures in part hinges upon access to alternative modes of service and network.
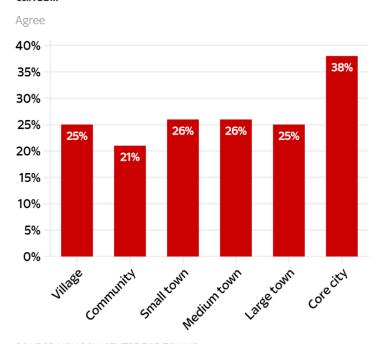
Support ending the sale and use of all petrol or diesel vehicles...

SOURCE: YOUGOV/CENTRE FOR TOWNS

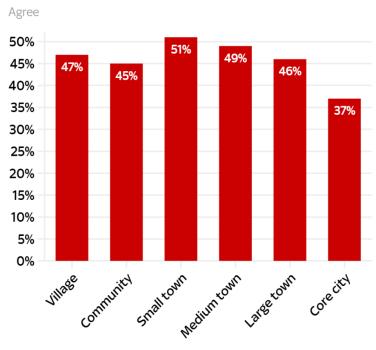**Figure 16.** Support for ending sale of petrol cars, by place

For the sake of the environment, car users should pay higher taxes...

Agree

SOURCE: YOUGOV/CENTRE FOR TOWNS

Figure 17. Support for making car users pay, by place

I would only travel by bus if I had no other choice...
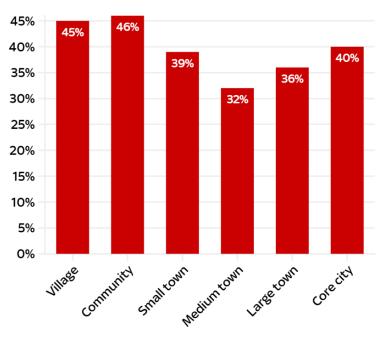
Agree

Figure 18. Views on bus usage, by place

In the survey we also asked 'Thinking about your own behaviour, which of these, if any, do you deliberately try to do in order to minimise your environmental impact?'. Some 48% of people in core cities selected 'Choose a more environmentally-friendly way of travelling (walk, bicycle, public transport, electric car)' as an option, compared to 30% in small towns, 29% in medium towns and 32% in large towns. It is clear, then, that the transport infrastructure that people have immediate access to shapes their pro-environmental behaviour.

We also see differences of view between places in relation to air travel, although with some interesting variations. Just under two-in-five people endorse the idea of limiting the number of times people can fly each year (see Figure 19). This number is somewhat higher in villages (45%) and communities (46%), and lower in core cities (40%), large towns (36%), medium towns (32%) and small towns (39%).

There is a similar pattern for the view that 'people who fly should bear the cost of the environmental damage that air travel causes' (see Figure 20). The highest levels of support are again found in villages and communities (63% and 57%, respectively), followed by core cities (56%) and large towns (52%). Together these findings suggest that pro-environmental coalitions would do well to mobilise coalitions of support for policy responses that bridge rural areas and smaller towns to core cities. There is no clear town-city divide on how the environmental costs of air travel should be managed.
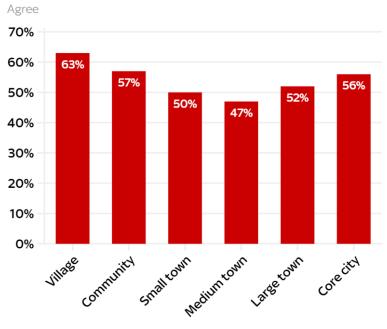
Support limiting the number of times people can fly each year...

Figure 19. Support for limiting flying, by place

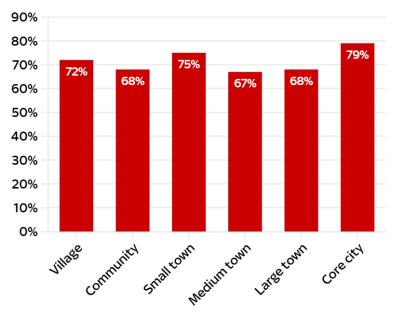**People who fly should bear the cost of the environmental damage that air travel causes...**

Agree

Figure 20. Support for taxing those who fly, by place

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Across all areas we see support for a 'Green New Deal' that would 'address climate change by investing government money in green jobs and energy efficient infrastructure' (see Figure 21). This is highest in core cities (at 79%), but only slightly above small towns (75%). Across all settlement sizes, at least two-thirds of the public are behind the idea of investment in green jobs and energy to address climate change. While we have seen some divergences of opinion between towns and cities, there is substantial evidence of a pro-environmental consensus, with support in particular for a policy agenda that is based on investment in green jobs, green energy and taxing carbon-emitting industries.

SOURCE: YOUGOV/CENTRE FOR TOWNS

Figure 21. Support for a 'Green New Deal', by place

Who are trusted as messengers on the environment?

The final area of our investigation concerned levels of public trust in different environmental actors. Who is perceived to represent the pro-environmental movement is important, in order for a broad coalition of support to be built across society, encompassing towns and cities, as well as other notable fault lines of British politics: Leave and Remain, graduates and non-graduates, older and younger generations, and Conservative and Labour supporters.

To investigate this question, we first asked 'how much confidence' people have in a number of organisations. The proportion of the public saying they have 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' of confidence in environmental organisations is 60% overall. This is substantially higher than the number for the civil service (40%), the government (29%), parliament (24%), major companies (21%), the press (16%) and political parties (13%).

28

Trust in environmental organisations varies somewhat between place types (see Figure 22). This is slightly higher in core cities (63%) than in small (59%), medium (55%) or large (59%) towns, although this is hardly a vast gulf, reflecting substantial levels of public confidence in environmental organisations overall – though with room for growth too.

We also asked people to what extent they trusted what a number of organisations or actors 'have to say about the environment'. Our interest here is whether there are certain messengers who are more able to appeal to a wider cross-section of society, and specifically to bridge any gaps in outlook between towns and cities. In our study, trust in what the Green Party has to say about the environment (see Figure 23) is highest in core cities (where 59% say they trust it 'a lot' or 'a little'), but also high in villages (56%) and small towns (55%). Rather lower levels of trust in the Green Party are observed in medium (43%) and large towns (41%).

A similar pattern is observed in relation to what the campaigning organisation Greenpeace has to say about the environment (see Figure 24). The overall level of public trust is higher for Greenpeace (59% trust 'a lot' or 'a little') than the Green Party (51%), which is noteworthy given the organisations origins as a radical protest group. We again see a slight u-shape in the pattern of geographical support for the organisation, with the highest levels of trust found in core cities (66%) and villages (65%), and the lowest found in medium (52%) and large (54%) towns.
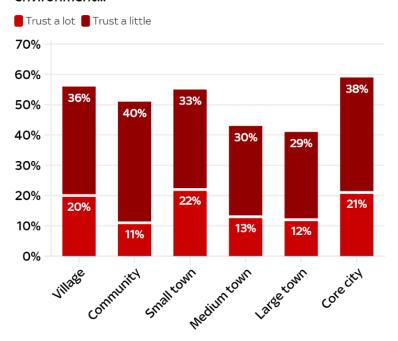
Confidence in environmental organisations

A great deal/quite a lot (%)

SOURCE: YOUGOV/CENTRE FOR TOWNS

Figure 22. Trust in environmental organisations, by place

Trust what the Green Party has to say about the environment...

■ Trust a lot ■ Trust a little

SOURCE: YOUGOV/CENTRE FOR TOWNS

Figure 23. Trust in the Green Party, by place

Trust what Greenpeace has to say about the environment...

■ Trust a lot ■ Trust a little

SOURCE: YOUGOV/CENTRE FOR TOWNS

Figure 24. Trust in Greenpeace, by place

We do not see the same divide for broadcaster and naturalist Sir David Attenborough (see Figure 25) – with consistently high levels of public trust, close to 90% in villages, communities, towns and core cities. Lowest levels of trust are found in large towns but remain an impressive 79%. In all settlement types, a majority of people say they trust what Attenborough has to say about the environment *a lot*. Our survey finds that public trust in the National Trust is only marginally lower than Attenborough, at 78% nationally (with a low of 74% in medium and large towns, 78% in core cities, and 80% in villages). These figures reveal the depth of public support for the particular messengers on the natural world and our national heritage.

There is a contrasting pattern of public trust for the global environmental movement Extinction Rebellion founded in 2018, which has frequently made waves and grabbed headlines with its high-profile public stunts, but has been a polarising force, to say the least. Overall, its level of trust (26% trust 'a lot' or 'a little') is far lower than for all other actors we included in our survey (see Figure 26). Greenpeace, itself once controversial and polarising, registered a trust rating more than twice as high (59%). Interestingly, highest levels of trust in what Extinction Rebellion has to say about the environment are observed in villages (34%) and core cities (33%). The lowest levels of trust are found in communities (19%), small (21%) and medium (20%) towns.

Regardless of these differences by place, our survey suggests that Extinction Rebellion is not yet a trusted messenger with the public. When asked specifically about the movement's campaigning methods, just 16% of the public express support for them.

SOURCE: YOUGOV/CENTRE FOR TOWNS

Figure 25. Trust in Sir David Attenborough on the environment, by place

Trust what Extinction Rebellion has to say about the environment...
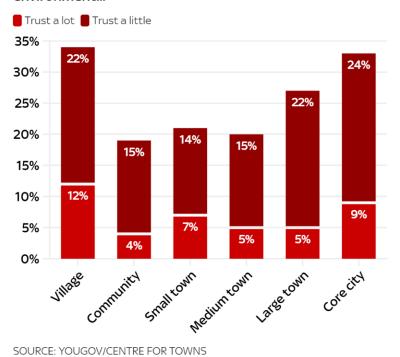
SOURCE: YOUGOV/CENTRE FOR TOWNS

Figure 26. Trust in Extinction Rebellion on the environment, by place

4. Conclusions

Overall, our report reveals a number of key dimensions regarding the state of public opinion on the environment, and the extent to which divides between cities and towns present a challenge to securing public consensus on the issue. We reveal that there is little difference between places in the view that measures to protect the environment have not gone far enough. There is a broad consensus across towns and cities where people view protecting the environment as important to them personally. Pro-environmental values and behaviours are not just the domain of liberal city-dwellers.

The evidence also suggests that taking action on the environment is of increasing importance to people across towns and cities, as well as in the fabled 'Red Wall' from which the Conservatives built their sizeable parliamentary majority in December 2019. Indeed, the gap between towns and cities has nearly halved over this period on whether more needs to be done protecting the environment – revealing growing concern everywhere, and especially in towns and more rural areas.

The importance of the environment as an issue does differ in notable ways, with a u-shaped pattern across different types of place, whereby people in villages are almost as likely as those in cities to name the environment as a major issue facing the country.

We also find few differences by place according to whether environmental support is diminished by the perception that others are not doing their bit or a belief that the effects of climate change are too far in the future to cause concern. As such, concern about the environment is a view that cuts across villages, towns and cities.

In terms of what is to be done, there is a broad consensus across towns and cities that protecting the environment should be prioritised over economic growth – and rejection of the view that inaction by other countries should influence our attempts to combat climate change. There is also seemingly a high level of public support for tax on businesses who produce the highest carbon emissions. Of course, any government might be cautious over whether such support would evaporate when put into effect. Towns and cities also broadly favour alternative energies.

Notably, we find a high level of support for a Green New Deal across all types of place: at least two-thirds of the public are behind the idea of investment in green jobs and energy to address climate change.

Measures aimed at road users tend to receive more support in major cities, whereas those aimed at flying tend to be favoured both by those in rural areas, followed by city-dwellers, and least favoured by those in towns. These relatively small differences of opinion seemingly

reflect lifestyle differences between places, in the differential access to and usage of different modes of public and private transport.

Our findings point to the importance of promoting understanding between towns and cities that emphasises shared environmental concerns and values, at the same time as being sensitive to the uneven ways in which some environmental measures may impact the lives of people in different areas (for example with rural communities being significantly more dependent on car use for travel). We need policy measures to tackle climate change to be more place-sensitive, in order to retain the broad support that the pro-environmental agenda enjoys.

Our report also sheds important light on which actors or organisations the public trust to deliver messages on the environment. Environmental organisations are broadly trusted, certainly far more than big business, government, parliament or political parties. Confidence in those organisations is slightly higher in rural areas and cities, but the differences according to place are modest. There is interestingly more of a divide between towns and cities in how trusted the Green Party and Greenpeace are on the environment - with lowest levels of trust consistently found in medium and large towns. Of all the actors noted in our survey, broadcaster Sir David Attenborough secures the highest level of public trust, and Extinction Rebellion the lowest. There is clearly space, however, for a wider array of trusted messengers on the environment that tap into the wider societal consensus that we have identified in this report.

5. References

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6. Appendix

Red Wall parliamentary constituencies

Ashfield

Barrow and Furness

Bassetlaw

Birmingham, Northfield

Bishop Auckland

Blackpool South

Blyth Valley

Bolsover

Bolton North East

Bridgend

Burnley

Bury North

Bury South

Clwyd South

Colne Valley

Crewe and Nantwich

Darlington

Delyn

Derby North

Dewsbury

Don Valley

Dudley North

North West Durham

Gedling

Great Grimsby

Heywood and Middleton

High Peak

Hyndburn

Keighley

Leigh

Lincoln

Newcastle-under-Lyme

Penistone and Stocksbridge

Redcar

Rother Valley

Scunthorpe

Sedgefield

Stockton South

Stoke-on-Trent Central

Stoke-on-Trent North

Vale of Clwyd

Wakefield

Warrington South

West Bromwich East

West Bromwich West

Wolverhampton North East

Wolverhampton South West

Workington

Wrexham

Ynys Môn

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